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# **Imagining the End of Capitalism: Utopia and the Commons in Contemporary Literature**

Raphael Kabo

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at Birkbeck, University of London

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This thesis represents the original research of the author.

Raphael Kabo

6 December 2019

## Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of utopian spaces as a form of opposition to capitalism in contemporary literature and poetry. The spatial focus of the thesis is the *commons* — a form of spatial, social, and political organisation which, I argue, has been undergoing a decade-long resurgence in literature as well as activist theory and practice. At the same time as commons are witnessing renewed interest, I position the previous decade as defined by interlinked capitalist crises of inequality, political representation, mobility, and climate change, which expose a growing section of the planetary population to precarity.

The thesis distinguishes a corpus of texts from the wider field of contemporary political and speculative literature, identifying these texts as *commons utopias*. Commons utopias are united by a set of valuable features: they build on the forms of earlier utopian literature, particularly the ‘critical utopias’ of the 1960s-70s; actively oppose contemporary capitalism; depict the crises of the present alongside the utopian spaces which emerge within it; and make use of a *commons poetics*, a toolkit of literary techniques which captures the politics, subjectivities, and spatialities of oppositional utopian commons.

The thesis assembles and examines five commons utopias: the poetry collection *That Winter the Wolf Came* by Juliana Spahr (2015); and the novels *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017), *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson (2017), *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch (2017), and *Walkaway* by Cory Doctorow (2017). I also examine the film *Snowpiercer*, directed by Bong Joon-ho (2013), as a proto-utopian text which illustrates contemporary modalities of precariousness and crisis.

I hope that this study succeeds in identifying and critiquing a valuable recent tendency in contemporary literature and poetics; in contributing to ongoing debates in the field of utopian studies; and in furthering the productive relationship between utopianism and oppositional political theory.

## Acknowledgements

There is no better way to open a study on the commons than by evoking a commons of my own. To paraphrase Sophie Lewis, herself quoting others: all authorship is co-authorship, and all writing is shared, collective labour.<sup>1</sup>

I am grateful first and foremost to my supervisor Dr Caroline Edwards for originally pointing me towards the horizon of utopia, for supporting and enlightening me at every stage in what, at times, felt like a hopeless and interminable process, and for passionately embracing every mutation of my project. I am equally grateful to Professor Martin Paul Eve for stepping in as a tireless and enthusiastic second supervisor with a fresh critical eye.

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1. Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 26-7.

collective imagining, creation, and reflection. Thank you to David, Ibtisam, and Elena for making space for me in your utopian community. Thank you to friends far away and deeply missed: Zoë, Marls, Dominica, Jenna, Georgia, Nate, Chiara, and Christobel. Thank you to Anthony Shepherd and the rest of the administrative, support, and union staff at Birkbeck University, without whose mostly invisible labour none of us would produce anything of value. Thank you to Rebecca Sugar, Grace Petrie, Sons of Kemet, the Mountain Goats, and Selena Gomez — a thesis without dancing is not one worth writing.

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For my mother, Elena Govor, who found her utopia



We can travel, if there are openings into other worlds, but we can only live in our own. [...] we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere.

Phillip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*<sup>1</sup>

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1. Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2000), p. 382.

## Introduction

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

Fredric Jameson, 'Future City'<sup>1</sup>

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art — the art of words.

Ursula K. Le Guin, speech at the 2014 National Book Awards<sup>2</sup>

This thesis explores a specific form of opposition to capitalism in contemporary literature and poetry.<sup>3</sup> In the following chapters, I identify a group of recent texts which rise to Fredric Jameson's challenge in the above epigraph, actively imagining the end of capitalism in a fully realised representational mode which integrates the social, political, economic, and cultural manifestations of this opposition. Vitally, these texts venture beyond negation, going on to represent innovative forms of social and political organisation after capitalism in their fictional worlds. The central anti-capitalist imaginary employed in these texts

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1. Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21 (2003), 65-79 (p. 76). The 'someone' is likely Jameson being humble.
  2. Transcript and video of the speech: Parker Higgins, "'We Will Need Writers Who Can Remember Freedom': Ursula K Le Guin at the National Book Awards", *Parker Higgins Dot Net*, 2014 <<https://parkerhiggins.net/2014/11/will-need-writers-can-remember-freedom-ursula-k-le-guin-national-book-awards/>> [accessed 9 September 2019].
  3. This study is underpinned by two centuries of foundational work in Marxist and utopian theory. It understands *capitalism*, with David Harvey, as "any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic and dominant in providing and shaping the material, social and intellectual bases for social life", concentrating on the ways in which texts render visible specific modalities of this overarching system: *inequality, enclosure, precarity, exclusion, and ongoingness*. For the key texts upon which this thesis builds, see: Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London and New York: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), I, III; David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2014), p. 7; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014); Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso, 2015); John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2008).

is the commons, a form of social and political organisation widespread in pre-capitalist Great Britain, Ireland, and Europe. Despite the almost total eradication of commons in Europe by capitalist forces in the sixteenth century and their subsequent four-century-long demonisation in Western liberal and neoliberal economic theory, this ancient idea has been making a comeback in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> In literature, I will argue, this comeback has manifested in two ways: (1) an invigorated attention to the simultaneously productive and negating possibilities of *utopia* — a refusal of the capitalist reality of the present coupled with a committed representation of new realities which emerge from within it; and (2) a newly politicised use of literary tactics of collectivity, connection, and multiplicity, which I identify in this thesis as a *commons poetics*. I describe as *commons utopias* the small group of texts, published in the last decade, which make extensive use of these two aspects.

I will explore the history of the bitterly contested term ‘utopia’ in Chapter One, but here I shall distinguish between ‘(literary) utopias’ and ‘(literary) utopianism’. The term ‘utopia’ was coined by English lawyer, statesman and philosopher Thomas More in his 1516 novel *Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth, and the New Island of Utopia*, and was deliberately chosen as a pun signifying both “no place” and “good place”, based on the similarity of the Greek words εὖ- (‘eu’, good) and οὐ- (‘ou’, not). Every realisation of utopia since More’s time has thus teased at the boundaries between reality and imagination, existence and absence, flourishing and loss. Most generally, we can define utopia as *a space considered by its producer(s) to be significantly better than the space within which it was produced* — either a lived space born of social and political processes, such as a commons or an intentional utopian community, or a represented space found in literature, poetry, drama, and film.

‘Utopianism’, on the other hand, indexes an impulse absent a spatial referent: hope; desire; and human dreams of joy, fulfilment, and flourishing. A number of contemporary theorists have written on the value of minor, ciphered, and concealed utopian impulses in

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4. As I shall elaborate in Chapter One, commons have been part of human culture since at least the era of the Roman Empire. A leading example of their twentieth-century demonisation is economist Garret Hardin’s 1968 essay ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, which claims that “[a]s the human population has increased, the commons has had to be abandoned in one aspect or another”. In a recent critical review, George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici find that “[f]or all the attacks on them, commons have not ceased to exist”, remaining powerful sites of anti-capitalist activity. See: Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science*, 162.3859 (1968), 1243–48, p. 1248; George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, ‘Commons against and beyond Capitalism’, *Community Development Journal*, 49.S1 (2014), i92–105, p. i95.

contemporary literature and culture. My project differs from their work in that, although I fully agree with Mark Featherstone's description of so-called "minor utopias" as "a socio-ecological vision of the phenomenological relations between self, other, and world sensitive to suffering, limitation, finitude, and vulnerability", and Caroline Edwards' claim that such texts "bring formal innovation to bear upon a reconceived sense of social engagement in the twenty-first century", I identify my grouping of texts as *literary utopias*, part of a firmly established tradition I introduce in the following section, which is primarily invested in reading utopias as spaces.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as do critics including Edwards, Featherstone, and David M. Bell, I will argue that a critical understanding of utopian impulses and the anti-utopian contemporary capitalist totality is necessary to map out the utopian spatialities in this set of texts. This is particularly true of novels such as *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch (2017) and the poetry collection *That Winter the Wolf Came* by Juliana Spahr (2015), which do not present themselves as explicitly utopian texts, yet emerge out of a tradition of utopian thought and engage with contemporary capitalism in an oppositional mode. The utopian spaces in these texts often appear undeveloped, incomplete, and provisional because in the last decade, the form of literary utopia has shifted to reveal a concern with precarity and provisionality. I will address this transformation in the following section.

### Literary context: utopian literature from 1516 to the present

In this thesis, I propose that the commons utopias of the period following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) are qualitatively distinct from the utopian literature which has preceded and influenced them. This section introduces these influences: the three major tendencies of *generic* (15th-19th centuries), *critical* (1960s-1970s), and *dialectical* (1980s-2000s) utopias.

While the origins of utopia in Western literature can be traced as far back as the ideal societies — one philosophical, one religious — inscribed in Plato's *Republic* (circa 380 BCE) and Augustine's *City of God* (426 CE), a conception of utopia as *a more desirable*

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5. Mark Featherstone, *Planet Utopia: Utopia, Dystopia, and Globalisation* (Taylor & Francis, 2017), p. 143; Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 3.

*social system located in a particular time and place* appeared with the publication of More's *Utopia* (1516). It is no coincidence that the beginning of the sixteenth century also heralded the transition from an agricultural, feudal society reliant on serfdom into a recognisable capitalist modernity premised on new social relations, class distinctions, and modes of production — what Marshall Berman has famously described as “an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are”.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of Western imperial powers into the New World, the ongoing effects of enclosure in England, the development of early modern industrial technologies, and the liberating intellectual atmosphere and humanist philosophical thought of the Renaissance not only established capitalism as the prevailing mode of social and economic organisation in Europe and her colonies, but provided, for the first time in history, the material conditions necessary for the development of a totalising, rationalistic conception of society conditioned by human rather than spiritual laws. As Louis Marin argues, “[u]topian discourse ... can only appear at that moment in history when the capitalist mode of production is constituted, since it is only at that particular moment that the real conditions of possibility of theoretical or scientific universality are obtained for social life”.<sup>7</sup> Phillip Wegner comes to a similar conclusion: “the modern genre of the narrative utopia emerges full-blown in the early sixteenth century ... the long revolution of creative destruction and recomposition of the social body that we have now come to understand as a central dimension of the experience of modernity”.<sup>8</sup> Literary utopias and capitalist modernity are part of the same tendency towards humanism, fulfilment, progress, totality, and universalism in human history.

Literary utopias have undergone a number of changes in structure, textual form, and subject matter concomitant with an ever-increasing global rate of change. The first recognisable works of utopian literature in the modern era — which I call *generic utopias*

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6. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 15. See also: Federici, pp. 21-131.

7. Louis Marin, ‘Theses on Ideology and Utopia’, trans. by Fredric Jameson, *Minnesota Review*, 6.1 (2011), 71-75 (p. 74). See also: Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), pp. 18-37.

8. Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 10.

in this work in reference to their common identification as the utopian *genre* of literature — set their utopias on islands or in fantastic cities, visited by intrepid explorers. These exotic and distant locations housed fully developed and painstakingly depicted societies conceived of as improvements on those of their authors, complete with experimental political and legal systems, new sources of wealth, and fantastic technological advances, all born of the heightened sense of human potential defining the modern period. *Utopia* is, of course, the foundational text of this genre and its best-known example; other works include Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), and sections of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

Nineteenth-century utopias adopted the same framework — a visitor from the real world travels to a utopian world before returning to relate their extraordinary adventures — but moved the utopian world into the future. These texts, sometimes called '(e)uchronias' to distinguish them from spatial voyages, were grounded in newly developing attitudes to progress, history, and time; developments in science and technology; and unprecedented political upheavals including the French and American Revolutions and socialist and Marxist political discourse. As Fátima Vieira writes, these temporal utopias were products "of the new logic of the Enlightenment", through which history, in particular, was "envisaged as a process of infinite improvement".<sup>9</sup> With the transformational agent of history entering the texts, "utopian novels more regularly provided accounts of the required transition from the present to utopia".<sup>10</sup> The last decades of the nineteenth century were the golden age of generic utopias, with hundreds appearing in print and inspiring influential political reform movements and the foundation of real-world utopian intentional communities.<sup>11</sup> Three defining texts of this period are Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William

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9. Fátima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3–27 (pp. 9, 10); for more on uchronias, see: Peter Fitting, 'Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 135–53 (p. 138).

10. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. by Raffaella Baccolini (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 6.

11. For a comprehensive overview of nineteenth-century utopianism, see: Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886–1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984); Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia, Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870–1900* (London: Haymarket Books, 2009); Kenneth M. Roemer, 'Paradise Transformed: Varieties of Nineteenth-Century Utopias', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 79–106.

Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905).<sup>12</sup>

The first half of the twentieth century saw a sharp decline in the popularity of literary utopias and utopianism, brought on by the disintegration of the authority of the colonial powers, the World Wars, the Great Depression, failures in the social project of the Soviet Union, the emergence of literary modernism, and disillusionment with the humanist ideals of Enlightenment philosophy. I examine some of these factors in Chapter One. However, the 1970s heralded a new wave of literary utopias, conceptualised by Tom Moylan as *critical utopias*. These texts, of which the best-known examples, by way of Moylan's historicising work, are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (1976), were immanent to the major oppositional movements of the 1960s and 70s: second wave feminism; the Civil Rights Movement; the Vietnam War protests; and the global student and worker demonstrations of 1968. As Moylan writes, their authors returned to an "Enlightenment sense of *critique* — that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the historical situation".<sup>13</sup> To quote Moylan's definition:

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.<sup>14</sup>

Critical utopias rendered the concept of utopia provisional and porous, offering to their readers multiple competing better worlds rather than a single ideal world. In these texts,

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12. Roemer, p. 93.

13. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 10. Drawing on the work of Louis Marin, Moylan describes this process of instrumentalised critique — seen also in the texts I examine — as "forcing open a consideration of what is not yet and creating a space as yet unoccupied by a transforming theory and practice that would lead to fundamental social change. Utopian figuration anticipates the historical moment which its critique of current reality urges". See: Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 39; Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2005).

14. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 10.



for the first time, the utopian explorer often travelled *between* utopias and dystopias, or between the real world and multiple alternative worlds.<sup>15</sup> In the process, the utopian imaginary was rendered as increasingly plausible and achievable; for the first time, too, these texts offered a range of realistically grounded processes, strategies, and tactics for oppositional action, which could be employed in the present to transition it towards a utopian imaginary. As indicated by Bell, these texts, for the first time, made as much use of the ‘no’ of utopia as the ‘good’: “an externally directed ‘no’ to the world as it exists; and an internally directed ‘no’ warning utopians that they cannot rest on their laurels, that there is no once-and-for-all establishment of the ‘good place’”.<sup>16</sup> Like the generic utopias, however, critical utopias continued to locate their utopian worlds in spaces or times *separate* from the realist present; this alterity was primarily a consequence of their emergence within the booming mid-century science fiction (sf) tradition, which offered a panoply of wildly imaginative worlds to its readers.<sup>17</sup>

Moylan’s intervention in utopian theory — the delineation of a new grouping of utopian works — is particularly valuable to this project for two reasons. Firstly, as I do, Moylan reads political activism and utopian literary production as closely related historical processes. Secondly, as Peter Fitting contends, the texts Moylan chose to group as a linked literary tendency had “appeared without too much fanfare among a flood of other sf novels in a more general renewal of the genre” and were not at the time noted for being exceptionally utopian. Moylan’s periodising and systematising study had as much of an effect on the authoritative return of utopianism to critical and literary theory as did the primary texts themselves: “*Demand* was an attempt at situating these works in the utopian tradition by explaining their meaning as utopias as much as by arguing, for those of us who had dismissed that tradition, that the utopian tradition was essential in the

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15. The term ‘dystopia’ in this thesis refers to spaces worse than those of their producers, whose terrors are narratively represented in a systemic, comprehensive mode. See: Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000); Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, *Utopian Studies*, 5.1 (1994), 1–37.

16. David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 135. See also: Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 205–08.

17. On the sf boom of the 1940s–1970s, see: Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 287–382.



present conjuncture”.<sup>18</sup> This thesis is motivated by similar aims: at a time when dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives dominate the bestseller lists, newspapers, and policy documents, I aim to excavate, assemble, and critically analyse a set of texts which should be conceptualised as a new and vital tendency in utopian literature and in speculative literature as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

The period between the social liberation struggles of the 1960s-70s and the 2008 GFC was “marked by anti-utopian deprivation rather than utopian achievement” in the shape of globalisation, neoliberalisation, postmodernism, technocracy, and financialisation.<sup>20</sup> To these processes we can add, from the early 2000s onwards, the expansion of border regimes as a consequence of the War on Terror, the rise of asymmetrical warfare, increasing precarity for global populations (to which I return in Chapter Two), and the effects of anthropogenic climate change. As Vieira puts it, in this recent period “the vision of a completely different future, based on the annihilation of the present ... was replaced by a focus on a slower but effective change of the present”.<sup>21</sup>

Fredric Jameson has devoted a substantial part of his ongoing philosophical project to this period in utopian literature, the key textual fruits of which I name *dialectical utopias*. Key utopian texts of this time are Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Three Californias* trilogy (1984-1990) and *Mars* trilogy (1992-1996) and Octavia Butler’s unfinished *Parable* trilogy (1993, 1998). Jameson argues that utopian literature of this period is no longer involved in representing fully developed utopian worlds, but is instead structured by “all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place”, a dialectical approach oscillating between multiple utopian impulses. This shift has occurred because our location deep within the

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18. Peter Fitting, ‘Demand the Impossible and the Imagination of a Utopian Alternative’, in Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, pp. 232–35 (p. 235).

19. The decade’s best-selling dystopias and post-apocalyptic novels explore anxieties around sexual violence and female empowerment, climate change, pandemics, the media, and political alienation. Key examples include *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2006); *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Suzanne Collins, 2008-10); *Station Eleven* (Emily St. John Mandel, 2014); *The Power* (Naomi Alderman, 2016); and *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series (from 2017). Climate change dystopias will be discussed in Chapter Five. For contextualising critique, see: *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*, ed. by Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz (New York: Routledge, 2013); Diletta De Cristofaro, *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

20. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 3.

21. Vieira, p. 22.

late capitalist totality — the sum total of systems, structures, and ontologies which form the present — prevents us from being able to properly imagine a utopian totality. The function of utopian literature now “lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but ... [in revealing] the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined”.<sup>22</sup> On the basis of this simultaneously positive and negative assertion, Jameson deploys his now infamous phrase, that it is easier in the present to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In dialectical utopian texts, the multiple competing worlds common to the critical utopias are reduced again to a single world, but rather than presenting this world as an ideal and authoritative vision of society, these works use it as the setting for a range of utopian debates and experiments, highlighting, at the same time, the political stagnation of a present which has no sense of progress and no end in sight.<sup>23</sup>

Most critical histories of utopian literature end here, not only because the hold of neoliberal late capitalism over the globe remains undiminished and unshaken, even after its first major setback in the shape of the GFC, but also because Jameson’s theorisation of utopia, like Moylan’s before him, appears so comprehensive that it may seem there is little left to say on the topic. However, most of the essays collected in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) were written in late 90s and early 2000s. Almost fifteen years have passed since then, and while in 2004 Jameson could have confidently stated that at present “there is not the slightest prospect of reform, let alone revolution, in real life”, the same could not be said of the decade which has followed.<sup>24</sup>

In this thesis I gather together five texts under the rubric of *commons utopias*. These texts are distinguished from generic and critical utopias by being set in the late capitalist totality or in imaginary worlds which are very closely related to or extrapolated from it,

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22. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 216–17, 86; Fredric Jameson, ‘The Politics of Utopia’, *New Left Review*, 2004, 35–54 (p. 46). On totality, see: Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

23. A notable additional literary tradition of this period is what Moylan describes as the “critical dystopia”, examples of which “expose the horror of the present moment”, yet “adopt a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon”. Such texts are dialectical in that they “interrogate and supersede the limits of 1980s micropolitics and post-structuralism (especially as they lead into or legitimate accommodation with the status quo)”; they differ from dialectical utopias in that their fictional worlds tend to be negatively, rather than positively asserted. See: Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 196, 195.

24. Jameson, ‘The Politics of Utopia’, p. 44.

proving Jameson's point that one of the key features of capitalism in the early twenty-first century is our newfound inability to imagine qualitatively different worlds. However, they are distinguished from dialectical utopias by representing fully realised utopian spatialities brought to life through radical political activity. Commons utopias are thus chiefly concerned with depicting the process of creating and inhabiting utopian spaces as an opposition to the capitalist present — often through anti-capitalist strategies of spatial production, namely commoning.

These texts are uniquely of the contemporary moment because they index a refusal to depict utopias as situated in the future or located on a distantly removed world. Instead, the utopian imaginaries of this group of authors occur within spatialities (socially constituted spaces) and temporalities (socially constituted times) which are very similar to the present of the early twenty-first century, often distinguished from our reality by a single and pointedly deployed instance of alterity: the appearance of fantastic portals in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017); a 50-foot rise in the sea level in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017); or the invention of technologically aided immortality in Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017).<sup>25</sup> Only Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017) depicts a barely recognisable future world, and yet, by her own admission, is written in response to a social and political context defined by the election of US President Donald Trump, the climate crisis, and stagnation in the utopian hopes of feminist movements.<sup>26</sup> While the settings of these novels can be post-apocalyptic and alien, the gestures, discourses, and desires of their characters are invariably of the present.

In selecting these four novels, alongside Juliana Spahr's 2015 poetry collection *That Winter the Wolf Came*, as my primary corpus, I was guided by wider tendencies in contemporary Anglophone literature. Spahr's collection is situated most firmly in the realist contemporary present, belonging to a diffuse movement in American poetry whose members have responded to recent crises of democracy and equality with calls for

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25. The notion of spatiality and temporality as *socially constituted* draws on a tradition of critique beginning with Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889). I discuss phenomenological insights into temporality and the spatial turn in social sciences in Chapters One, Two, and Three.

26. Kelly Thompson, 'Breaking the Binaries: A Conversation with Lidia Yuknavitch', *The Rumpus*, 2017 <<https://therumpus.net/2017/04/breaking-the-binaries-a-conversation-with-lidia-yuknavitch/>> [accessed 21 August 2019].

collective activism and a desire to imagine the future otherwise. To this group belong Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which responds to the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement; Wendy Trevino's *Cruel Fiction* (2018), which dwells on migrant struggles on the US border; and Stephen Collis's *Dispatches from the Occupation* (2012) and *To the Barricades* (2013), which focus on the Occupy Movement and recent riots. I have focused on Spahr's most recent poetry collection because it tackles not only the politics and legacy of post-GFC occupation movements, but also moves beyond these to recall historical struggles against capitalism and imagine future ones. As with the rest of Spahr's writing, the collection also works to decentre anthropocentric perceptions of human exceptionalism and to remind us of our complex place in a multitude of planetary ecosystems and other commons. In these ways, *That Winter the Wolf Came* both thematically and formally responds to many of the thesis's key arguments.

The four novels in my corpus each respond to particular themes raised in Spahr's work. All are examples of speculative literature, although in terms of their literary reception, categorisation, and style, they range from Booker-nominated literary fiction (*Exit West*) to pulp sf (*Walkaway*). The variety of new literary tendencies and genres with which they have been associated signals a broad concern in recent decades with acknowledging, opposing, and ultimately resolving the ongoing political, social, and environmental crises of the capitalist present. Among these tendencies, some of which I will examine in later chapters, are *climate change fiction* or *cli-fi*, *dystopian literature*, *precarity literature*, *migrant literature*, and *solarpunk*. As such, these novels cannot yet be said to belong to or form a singular genre, although active online discussion around the accreting genres of hopepunk and solarpunk, too recent to examine in this thesis, may yet see commons utopias emerge as a category of these genres, or as a salient genre of their own.<sup>27</sup>

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27. I define 'genre', after Jameson, as a community of readers in discursive relationship with cultural producers. See: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 92; Jeremy Rosen, 'Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction', *Post45*, 2018 <<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2018/08/literary-fiction-and-the-genres-of-genre-fiction/>> [accessed 6 July 2019]. For early commentary on solarpunk and hopepunk, see: Rhys Williams, 'Solarpunk: Against a Shitty Future', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/solarpunk-against-a-shitty-future/>> [accessed 6 July 2019]; Elvia Wilk, 'Is Ornamenting Solar Panels a Crime?', *E-Flux*, 2018 <<https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/positions/191258/is-ornamenting-solar-panels-a-crime/>> [accessed 6 July 2019]; Aja Romano, 'In the Era of Trump and Apocalyptic Change, Hopepunk Is Weaponizing Optimism', *Vox*, 2018 <<https://www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/>>

The novels were selected from among their peers for two key reasons. Firstly, each of these writers has stated in interviews or essays that they are invested in using speculative fiction to imagine alternative futures — I identify both a self-reflexive relationship with text and readership communities and a passionate, critical didacticism as two key features of commons utopianism. Spahr, Doctorow and Robinson have specifically argued that their texts are intended to be *anti-capitalist*, and the ways in which these political statements are borne out is of interest to me. Secondly, while a number of related texts engage with crises of the present, in particular *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), *The Fifth Season* (N. K. Jemisin, 2016), and *The End We Start From* (Megan Hunter, 2017) with climate change, *A Closed and Common Orbit* (Becky Chambers, 2016) with neoliberal precarity, and *Dear Cyborgs* (Eugene Lim, 2017) with oppositional politics, the novels I have selected specifically depict commons as an alternative or a solution to such crises. Each of this latter group of texts is, undoubtedly, worth examining in detail for the alternative social and political structures they offer as solutions to the same global problems. In Chapter Two I position the 2013 film *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho) in precisely this way, as a text which prefigures, yet ultimately rejects, many of the tactics under discussion in this thesis.

While each text in my corpus has been identified for its opposition to capitalism in the present, its utopian anticipation of an alternative future accessible from this present, and its concern with collectivity and commoning, with very few exceptions, these texts have not been read *together* as part of the same cultural and political tendency. In this, I hope my thesis can offer worthwhile and critical analysis of the ways in which these texts can be conceived of together, as commons utopias.

### **Historical context: four interlinked contemporary crises**

Commons utopias emerge in the wake of the 2008 GFC. Although the GFC is the historical anchor for these works and the understandings of utopia and capitalism they embody, it forms the social and political background to these texts, not their primary subject. Instead, the commons utopias centre three key events, which I identify in Chapter Two as *crises*, which occurred to various extents as a consequence of the GFC: the 2011 Occupy

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[what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark.com](http://what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark.com) [accessed 6 July 2019].

Movement, the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, and the intensification of the climate crisis.<sup>28</sup>

### 2007-2008: *The Global Financial Crisis*

The GFC started in 2007 as a set of highly complex and interconnected events within the global finance system, and came to a close by 2012 with the destabilisation of the Euro, although its effects remain visible across a variety of social and economic indicators in the present day. Crucially, much of the crisis can be attributed to the desire for a certain way of life among inhabitants of both developed and developing countries, founded on greater wealth, personal success and fulfilment, and a reduction of individual precariousness.<sup>29</sup> The GFC was, furthermore, not a historically unique event, but part of a wider cycle of instabilities and vulnerabilities in the global capitalist financial system. Noting that “[c]risis is always plural, always *crises*, as one contradiction is displaced and returns as another”, Joshua Clover traces the origins of the GFC to at least the 1973 recession: “signal and terminal crises bracket a single prolonged event”.<sup>30</sup>

The social consequences of the crisis have been widespread and long-lasting. The UN and the World Bank reported that the GFC was the “worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s”, leading to a steep rise in global unemployment and precarious employment, an increase in extreme poverty, and a record-breaking rise in world hunger, particularly in the Global South.<sup>31</sup> Austerity measures implemented by a number of developed nations, notably Greece and Spain, to combat the effects of the

28. The causal links between these crises have been well-attested in the critical literature. See: Jérôme E. Roos and Leonidas Oikonomakis, ‘They Don’t Represent Us! The Global Resonance of the Real Democracy Movement from the Indignados to Occupy’, in *Spreading Protest: Social Movements in Times of Crisis*, ed. by Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni (ECPR Press, 2014), 117–36, p. 122; Leo Lucassen, ‘Peeling an Onion: The “Refugee Crisis” from a Historical Perspective’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41.3 (2018), 383–410; Kyla Tienhaara, ‘A Tale of Two Crises: What the Global Financial Crisis Means for the Global Environmental Crisis’, *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 20.3 (2010), 197–208.

29. This summary is derived from findings in: *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, ed. by Craig J. Calhoun and Georgi M. Derluguian (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Andrew W. Lo, ‘Reading About the Financial Crisis: A Twenty-One-Book Review’, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50.1 (2012), 151–78; Anthony Elson, *The Global Financial Crisis in Retrospect* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

30. Joshua Clover, ‘Value | Theory | Crisis’, *PMLA*, 127.1 (2012), 107–14 (p. 113).

31. United Nations, *The Global Social Crisis: Report on the World Social Situation 2011* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2011) <<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2011/rwss2011.pdf>>, p. iii [accessed 24 November 2019]; Inci Otker-Robe and Anca Maria Podpiera, *The Social Impact of Financial Crises* (World Bank, 2013) <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/16912/WPS6703.pdf>>, p. 10 [accessed 24 November 2019].



GFC on their government debt have made “the recovery more uncertain and fragile” for the populations of these nations.<sup>32</sup> Overall, the GFC affected the global population in a highly unequal and differential manner: even the cautious World Bank report agrees that “the poor tend to get a bigger share of the pain than the prosperity” during periods of global economic volatility.<sup>33</sup> A report by the Economic Policy Institute found that in the GFC, the richest fifth of American households increased their wealth “by 2.2 percentage points to 87.2% [of total wealth], while the remaining four-fifths gave up those 2.2 percentage points and held onto just 12.8% of all wealth”. These inequalities are always intersectional: while “the median net worth of black households was \$2,200 in 2009, the lowest ever recorded; the median among white households was \$97,900”.<sup>34</sup> The differential distribution of forms of ontological, material, and symbolic precariousness engendered by the GFC provides vital context for the subsequent crises of the contemporary period.<sup>35</sup>

### 2011: *The Year of the Protester*

Naming “The Protester” as Person of the Year for 2011, *Time* magazine’s Rick Stengel wrote that “the word protest has appeared in newspapers and online exponentially more this past year than at any other time in history”. Under the banner of “protest”, Stengel includes the events collectively known in English-speaking nations as the Arab Spring; the Spanish *Indignados* movement; the Greek ‘movement of the squares’; the Occupy Movement; anti-government protests in Russia; and anti-drug cartel protests in Mexico.<sup>36</sup> All but the last two movements share a set of similarities: their material forms were based around the mass, long-term occupation of public urban space; they called for fundamental

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32. United Nations, pp. 3–4.

33. Otker-Robe and Podpiera, pp. 21, 6.

34. Sylvia A. Allegretto, *The State of Working America’s Wealth, 2011* (Economic Policy Institute, 2011) <[https://www.prosperitynow.org/files/resources/002c5fc0fda0ae9cce\\_aem6idhp5.pdf](https://www.prosperitynow.org/files/resources/002c5fc0fda0ae9cce_aem6idhp5.pdf)> [accessed 24 November 2019].

35. For critical studies on uneven and combined capitalist development, originally a term from the work of Leon Trotsky, see: Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. by Max Eastman (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008); David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006); *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, ed. by Sharae Deckard and others (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

36. Rick Stengel, ‘Person of the Year Introduction’, *Time*, 2011 <[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745\\_2102139\\_2102380,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102139_2102380,00.html)> [accessed 3 December 2019].

transformations in social and political agency, representation, and justice; they looked beyond class- and identity- based forms of collaboration in favour of a mass identity based on affiliation with wider social demands and desires; finally, individual instantiations of these protests, as well as the movements as a whole, employed forms of governance based on common ownership, direct democracy, and horizontalist power.<sup>37</sup>

The key differences between the social movements across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-2012 and the Global North movements were: the latter movements experienced far less active state repression, while the Middle Eastern movements faced overwhelming state-sponsored violence; the central targets of the latter movements were precarity, unemployment, austerity, and inequality, all of which were direct effects of the GFC, while the Middle Eastern movements protested not only material inequality, but also repressive and totalitarian state power, a lack of personal, social, and cultural freedoms, and youth political disaffiliation; the final difference lay in the fact that while participants of the latter movements formed a wealth inequality-focused mass identity which has become known, after Occupy, as “the 99%”, the participants of the Middle Eastern movements tended to identify themselves along national lines, as the revolutions in which they were participating were of a fundamentally nation-reforming nature.<sup>38</sup> Of all these manifestations of dissent and resistance, Occupy Wall Street, and the Occupy Movement to which it was a precursor, have, in the Global North, extended the greatest influence on public opinion of contemporary resistance, strategies and methodologies for subsequent resistance movements, and literary and cultural work. The paradigm-shifting nature of the Occupy Movement within the late capitalist contemporary totality has been noted by

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37. These findings are drawn from: *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*, ed. by Astra Taylor (London: Verso, 2011); Sarah Van Gelder, ‘Introduction’, in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. by Sarah Van Gelder (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011), pp. 1–12; Craig Calhoun, ‘Occupy Wall Street in Perspective’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64.1 (2013), 26–38; W. J. T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt, and Michael T. Taussig, *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); *Occupying Political Science*, ed. by Emily Welty and others (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

38. See: Donatella Della Porta, ‘Mobilizing Against the Crisis, Mobilizing for “Another Democracy”: Comparing Two Global Waves of Protest’, *Interface*, 4.1 (2012), 274–77; Ronald Walter Greene and Kevin Douglas Kuswa, ‘“From the Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow”: Regional Accents and the Rhetorical Cartography of Power’, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 42.3 (2012), 271–88; John L. Hammond, ‘The Significance of Space in Occupy Wall Street’, *Interface*, 5.2 (2013), 499–524.



both its supporters and detractors and shall be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three.

### *2015: The Syrian refugee crisis*

In Syria, the aforementioned popular unrest of 2010-11 developed into a civil war against President Bashar al-Assad; as of 2015, according to a report by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, the war had claimed the lives of around 470,000, internally displaced 6.36 million, and thrown almost 70% of the population into extreme precarity.<sup>39</sup> A similar number of Syria's inhabitants have fled to nations including the EU, precipitating what, by 2015, was being described as a refugee crisis. At the height of the crisis, the total number of Syrian refugees surpassed 6 million; around a million Syrian refugees have applied for asylum in Europe, with around half a million refugees arriving in Europe by sea routes in 2015.<sup>40</sup> Images of the Calais Jungle refugee camp in France, migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean — over 15,000 of whom have drowned between 2014 and 2017 — and refugee relief efforts confronted the world in 2014-2017.<sup>41</sup> This ongoing situation, argues the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has made the Syrian refugee crisis “the largest and fastest evolving displacement crisis in the world”, with “women, children, the elderly and the disabled who live without shelter” considered most at risk of differential precariousness and endangerment.<sup>42</sup> Among the near-daily loss of life and destruction of livelihood engendered by the Syrian refugee crisis, there are moments of hope — large numbers of refugees who have reached Europe have been settled in new communities, despite the ongoing rise of right-wing, anti-immigrant political factions within the EU. Nevertheless, along with the less destructive, yet equally complex and interconnected crises of the preceding ten years, the Syrian refugee crisis, as it enters its

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39. Rabie Nasser and others, *Confronting Fragmentation: Impact of Syrian Crisis Report* (Damascus: Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2016) <<http://scpr-syria.org/publications/policy-reports/confronting-fragmentation/>>, pp. 61, 44 [accessed 24 November 2019].

40. Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis, *2017 Progress Report* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2017) <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14381>> [accessed 24 November 2019]; Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis, *2015 Annual Report* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015) <<http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/3RP-2015-Annual-Report.pdf>> [accessed 24 November 2019].

41. UNHCR, *Dead and Missing at Sea in the Mediterranean*, 2017 <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/61706>> [accessed 24 November 2019].

42. UNHCR, *End of Year Report 2015*, (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015) <<http://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/11/UNHCR-End-of-Year-2015-En.pdf>>, p. 39 [accessed 24 November 2019].

ninth year, has become one of the defining features of the social, political, and cultural landscape of the present. I will return to the ongoing impacts of the crisis and its wider political resonances in Chapter Four.

### 2018: *The climate crisis*

The final crisis which has defined the past decade has been a long time coming. As of 2018, the long-term and increasingly unpredictable effects of anthropogenic global warming, resource extraction, deforestation and rainforest fires, the acidification of planetary water supplies, and the introduction of plastic to marine environments, all of which are attributable to the expansion of capitalist economies since the Industrial Revolution, have taken on the form of a widespread social and political crisis with already measurable destructive and unpreventable effects upon planetary ecosystems and global human populations.<sup>43</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report (2014) outlines the effects of anthropogenic climate change unequivocally: "[c]limate change will amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems. Risks are unevenly distributed and are generally greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development".<sup>44</sup> While awareness of these concerns has been steadily building over the last quarter-century, they have received unprecedented public attention in 2018, being rendered in the specific language of *crisis*, by a linked set of events: the publication of the IPCC Report on the effects of a 1.5°C rise in global temperatures, the activism of Greta Thunberg and the School Strikes for Climate, and the actions of the Extinction Rebellion movement. As the IPCC report concludes, even if worldwide carbon output were to immediately cease, "[w]arming from anthropogenic emissions from the pre-industrial period to the present will persist for centuries to millennia and will continue

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43. See: Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2015); Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016). On the emergence of the term 'Anthropocene' to describe this period of history, see: Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, 'The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature', *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment*, 36.8 (2007), 614–21.

44. Rajendra K. Pachauri and others, *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report* (Geneva: IPCC, 2014) <[https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/AR5\\_SYR\\_FINAL\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf)> [accessed 24 November 2019].

to cause further long-term changes in the climate system, such as sea level rise”.<sup>45</sup>

Of all three crises outlined here, the climate crisis is guaranteed to have the most damaging and fundamental effects over the longest period of time on the largest sector of the global population. Even best-case IPCC models of global warming mitigation scenarios, which limit further warming to 0.5°C by 2100 and are not realisable under current global policy, forecast rising sea levels, floods, population displacement, heatwaves, the drawing down of water tables, and coral reef dieback; while “[h]uman well-being remains overall similar to that in 2020” under these best-case models, “poor and disadvantaged groups continue to experience high climate risks to their livelihoods and wellbeing”. The more likely scenarios offer an anti-utopian imaginary: “[m]igration, forced displacement, and loss of identity are extensive [...] health and well-being of people generally decrease from 2020, while the levels of poverty and disadvantage increase considerably”.<sup>46</sup> Given the severity of the climate crisis and the inadequacy of capitalist solutions to its consequences, especially on disadvantaged communities, it is unsurprising that of the five contemporary utopian texts examined in this thesis, it is the central focus of three and appears in a major contextual role in the other two.

The final section of the introduction provides a précis of the closely linked theoretical concepts which underpin this thesis: the *ongoing future* and a *commons poetics*.

## Theoretical approach

Commons utopias are self-aware, intentional, manifestary, radically political, and didactic. Writing from the shores of a precarious present defined by ongoing crisis, these texts direct their readers towards a horizon of radical alterity — a world in which capitalism is absent, or its authority is greatly diminished, and where the commons are the central socio-political structuring form. In the words of Nicholas Thoburn, the imaginaries of such texts are not imposed upon activist struggles, but emerge “from struggles, from critical relationship to their torment, and with such torment ... must remain ever articulated”.<sup>47</sup> In looking

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45. Valérie Masson-Delmotte and others, *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (Geneva: IPCC, 2018) <<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>> [accessed 24 November 2019].

46. Masson-Delmotte and others, pp. 279, 230.

47. Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 215.

towards this activist horizon, commons utopias highlight a profound distinction between two conceptions of *the future* active in the current moment. As has been highlighted by a swathe of Marxist critics since the late 1980s, especially Harvey, Jameson, Mark Fisher, Lauren Berlant, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, and the Laboria Cuboniks collective, the future is *absent* under capitalism: the capitalist ideology which organises and delivers the present promises only a repetitive, cyclical future practically indistinguishable from the present, offering no fundamental sense of progress, no paradigm-shifting social transformations, and no genuinely alternative political possibilities.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, commons utopias written from within this present represent concrete political tactics for generating a different future, opposed to the tactics of capitalist teleology.

The differences between these two conceptions of the future are also borne out in debates within contemporary Marxist theory, which forms one of the bases of the methodology of this study. As I shall discuss in Chapters Two and Three, while traditional Western Marxist approaches adopt a teleological attitude to historical progress which sees communism as the eventual developmental stage of an educated proletarian movement, ‘new Marxist’ approaches, in concert with readings of the future as altogether absent, see the need for tactics of communisation and collectivity to develop in the present, opposing capitalism from within. In aligning the methodology of this study with these new approaches, I wish to make clear that the conclusions of an ‘accelerationist’ Marxism — *i.e.* only further expansion within the circuits of capitalism, rather than a wholesale refusal of its logics, can overcome the inequalities inherent to its design — are fundamentally inapplicable to a theorisation of commons utopias.<sup>49</sup>

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48. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Jameson, ‘Future City’; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Laboria Cuboniks, ‘Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation’, 2015 <<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/>> [accessed 20 October 2019]; Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016). Many of these theorisations are indebted to Jacques Derrida’s dual conception of the future as *le future* and *l’avenir*. *Le future* is the form of the future under contemporary capitalism: “predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable”. *L’avenir* is a messianic, “totally unpredictable” future, a radical break with the present — close to the utopian future of which Jameson writes, but *not* the same as the utopian future evoked in this thesis, which refuses both the programme of capitalism *and* the necessity of a total break. See: Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida* (Zeitgeist Films, 2002).

49. On accelerationist Marxism, see: Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, ‘#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’, in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and

Indeed, in foreclosing on a sense of post-capitalist futures as attainable or even desirable, late capitalist systems of knowledge and power force subjects, who do desire and demand such futures, to construct them with radical tools derived from beyond these systems.<sup>50</sup> By making the future indistinguishable from the present, capitalism itself, albeit inadvertently, creates possible conditions for alternative and oppositional futures to emerge from within its totality. This puts pay to Jameson's contention that the value of contemporary utopian thinking and writing is restricted purely to discovering what is missing in contemporary totality, and has little to do with concrete political transformation — an argument I develop at length in Chapter Five. *Contra* Jameson, I argue that desires, hopes, and manifestations of the future function as tools for socio-political transformation in a present where the very notion of the future is under threat.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to the second, oppositional form of the future in the contemporary period as the *ongoing future*, extending this term from Berlant's theorisation of the contemporary as an *ongoing present* which I present in Chapter Three. My theorisation of the ongoing future borrows from the work of anarchist theory, particularly in the field of *prefiguration*. A prefigurative ethics "challenges the claim that the reconstitution of society can only begin after the complete overthrow of existing social arrangements". Instead, taking up Martin Buber's argument that an anarchist politics "must create here and now the space *now* possible for the thing for which we are striving, so that it may come to fulfilment *then*", prefiguration contends that "action in the present must embody its goals for the future".<sup>51</sup> Prefigurative action combines practical tactics for the transformation of everyday conditions in the present — direct action, strike, mutual aid, solidarity, consciousness raising, occupation, and squatting — with the utopian dreaming and imagining which negate the negation of the future under capitalist realism. Thus, a

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Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), pp. 347–63. For a valuable contextualising critique, see: David Cunningham, 'A Marxist Heresy? Accelerationism and Its Discontents', *Radical Philosophy*, 191 (2015), 29–38.

50. This argument will be extended in the thesis from the work of Berlant, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Isabell Lorey (see n. 1). For instance, Lorey writes: "In uncertain, flexibilized and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectivations arise that do not entirely correspond to the neoliberal logic of valorization, and which may resist and refuse it". See: Lorey, p. 104.

51. Carissa Honeywell, 'Utopianism and Anarchism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12.3 (2007), 239–54 (pp. 242, 244). Buber's words, quoted in Honeywell, refer to the anarchist philosophy of Peter Kropotkin. See: Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 13.

prefigurative politics not only strives to create a better society in the present but ensures that the future will be a welcoming space for that society.

Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish capture this sense of temporal continuity in the term “radical imagination”, the collectively produced set of narratives, hopes, and cognitive resources produced within anti-capitalist movements:

On the surface level, the radical imagination is the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It’s about bringing those possible futures ‘back’ to *work* on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today.<sup>52</sup>

Writing on the Occupy Movement, Julian Brigstocke identifies “foreclosure; obduracy; prefiguration; and future generations” as four tactics promoting an “attunement to forms of temporality that recover a sense of the future as unknown, incalculable, but insisting within alternative practices in the present”.<sup>53</sup> The process of *recovery* highlighted by these critics is a key feature of the ongoing future, which mediates between present struggles and future imaginaries, bringing them into conversation and contact with each other, and is thus ongoing in the sense that the connections it initiates reverberate, resonate, and echo from the present into the future and back again. Another way of describing the combining power of the ongoing future is by using the terms I introduced at the beginning of this introduction — utopian spatiality and the utopian impulse. This prefigurative method takes seriously the sense of hope and desire for an alternative future inherent in the utopian impulse, making use of this impulse to create structures of social, economic, and political reproduction which ensure its transformation, through constant struggle, into concrete utopian spatialities — what Ernst Bloch productively characterises as “concrete utopia” in opposition to the “dreaminess” and “immaturity” of unrealised “abstract utopia”. Life in the mode of the ongoing future embraces what Ernst Bloch names *anticipatory*

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52. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014), p. 3.

53. Julian Brigstocke, ‘Occupy the Future’, in *Space, Power and the Commons: The Struggle for Alternative Futures*, ed. by Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan, and Julian Brigstocke (London: Routledge, 2016), 150–65 (p. 150).



*consciousness* — the transformation of future-directed affects of hope, longing and desire into a concrete, realisable set of political tools and social methodologies for escaping the ontological and conceptual limitations of the present.<sup>54</sup> Bloch's work will be a touchstone to which I shall return throughout this thesis. Prefigurative action, the radical imagination, and anticipatory consciousness emerge as concrete, specific, socially mediated tactics which help anti-capitalist agents read the future as ongoing, rather than foreclosed.

Commons utopias make use of a formal, aesthetic, and narrative toolkit — what I call a *commons poetics* — to represent ongoing futures. In terms of narrative content, the commons poetics is concerned primarily with stories of the commons: their emergence in periods of precarity and crisis; their resistance to capitalist enclosure; and the utopian forms of collective life which take place within them. As I shall show, these commons are very diverse even across the small corpus within this project, ranging from traditional spatial forms created by collectives of people pooling resources and labour, to mobile commons wherein modes of movement are shared, to metaphysical commons where what is shared is immortality, hope, or the sense of the future itself. Formally and aesthetically, the commons poetics is defined by techniques of connection and collectivity: intertextuality, which situates the textual voices of the real-world present in imaginary future worlds; textual play with sentence structure and length, which renders a mode of ongoingness and continuity at the level of discourse; the use of multiple protagonists and multiple narratorial viewpoints, including non-human and non-living actors such as animals, ecosystems, and the weather; and self-conscious, reflexive reference to storytelling and communication as holding the power to transform social and political relations.<sup>55</sup>

## Structure

The first two chapters of the thesis are a theoretical interrogation of the spatial, temporal, and political location within which the works it examines were written. Chapter One opens

54. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), I, pp. 146, 45.

55. There are notable similarities between commons poetics and the textual strategies of postmodernist fiction. The former differs from the latter in the manifestary, didactic presentation of its political content, and its commitment to representing and influencing concrete activism. As Linda Hutcheon argues, while postmodernism is undoubtedly political, its concern with self-awareness, partiality, and irony primarily generate a politics of representation rather than oppositional action. See: Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-4.

with an interrogation of the multiple competing articulations of utopia and utopianism in contemporary theoretical discourse, arguing for an understanding of utopia which is methodological, provisional, reflexive, and above all alive to the possibilities of utopia as a spatiality which can be inhabited in a concrete and oppositional mode. The chapter's second section introduces the concept of the commons in economic, social, and spatial theory, before arguing for a closer unity between a methodological and reflexive utopianism and a collectively produced spatiality.

Chapter Two argues that the ideological, political, and social structures which have governed the Global North in the last decade are dependent on two allied processes deployed by late capitalism: the increasing atomisation and precarisation of individual lives, and the disavowal of the future as a cognitive or imaginative space for articulating alternative or resistant forms of life. Understood as a procession of ordinary and ongoing crises, the late capitalist contemporary period appears to have trapped its populations in a helpless cycle of increasing vulnerability and exposure. However, the concept of crisis itself, as the chapter argues, evinces a glimmer of hope — as we shall see through the chapter's reading of Bong Joon-ho's proto-utopian film *Snowpiercer* (2013). As temporalities of surplus and excess, periods of crisis inculcate utopian possibilities and alternatives beyond the capitalist system.

The next four chapters are close readings of four commons utopias, situating the theoretical frameworks and historical and literary contexts developed in the former chapters in a concrete analysis of literary form and style. Chapter Three focuses on the work of contemporary American poet Juliana Spahr to develop two foundational theoretical concepts which guide the argument to follow — the ongoing future and commons poetics. The ongoing future, which has been briefly discussed above, is a temporal modality which refuses to see the future as foreclosed, but instead understands it as holding an oppositional, prefigurative conversation with the present. Analysing the work of Juliana Spahr as written in the mode of the ongoing future, I argue that it is a valuable example of a commons poetics, generating common utopian futures from within the enclosures of the capitalist present.

Chapter Four focuses on American-British-Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West*, in which we witness a world very similar to the contemporary present — defined by border regimes, military violence, and nation-state governmentality — slowly



transform into a mobile commons of free movement guided by a post-state, no-borders planetary ethics.

In Chapter Five, I read Kim Stanley Robinson's 2017 novel *New York 2140* through and against the work of his mentor and friend Fredric Jameson, arguing that the world of extreme sea level rises, social turmoil, and hyperactive capitalism he depicts is not only an analogue of our own contemporary period, but teaches its readers tactics for building a commons generated within and moving beyond disaster.

In Chapter Six, I look at two 2017 novels: *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch and *Walkaway* by Cory Doctorow. These texts represent a utopian commons at a more metaphysical scale than their cousins, dealing with the potential of immortality beyond capitalist control. In very different ways, Yuknavitch and Doctorow's novels offer imaginaries of utopian worlds which bear similarities to our present, but within which the totalising grasp of capitalism has waned to the extent that human lives, deaths, and rebirths no longer serve the interests of capital, but become collective, communal, and queer.

In the following chapters, I aim to develop a critique of the destructive and frighteningly unimaginative world towards which late capitalism is directing our planet and all its inhabitants, but to also highlight the paramount importance and profound value of the production, cultivation, and consumption of utopian imaginaries, especially in times when they appear at their most unrealisable. I hope to transmit my admiration for the optimism and tenacity of the authors whom I have chosen and the political commitment of the works I am critiquing. This thesis was written over a three-year period in which the news at times seemed mockingly anti-utopian. The texts I studied were beacons of unwavering brightness during this time, and in the following chapters I hope to show their capacity to inspire, to motivate, and to educate their readers on the always unfinished road to a better future.

## Chapter One

### Redefining Utopia: Utopian critical theory and utopian spatiality

Must redefine utopia. It isn't the perfect end-product of our wishes, define it so and it deserves the scorn of those who sneer when they hear the word. No. Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever. Compare it to the present course of history. If you can.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter introduces the two fields of utopian and spatial theory, arguing for an understanding of both as a joint theoretical framework. In the first section, I examine anti- and pro-utopian discourses from the mid-twentieth century to the present day to justify the theoretical value of utopianism and address what I understand to be a fundamental shortcoming in utopian theory: a lack of focus upon the spaces and places of utopia. In the second section I outline theoretical developments in spatial theory following the spatial turn of the 1970s-80s. Considering the theoretical interventions of David Harvey and Doreen Massey, in whose work utopia emerges as a spatial and political form, I conclude by introducing the concept of the *commons*, positioning it as an emblematic utopian spatiality of the contemporary moment.

#### The decline of utopianism

Over the course of the twentieth century, both the Marxist and the liberal capitalist theoretical traditions have considered utopia as a uniquely dangerous idea, to the extent that 'utopian' is now readily perceived as a disparaging rather than a revolutionary term.<sup>2</sup> Few other recurrent topics in cultural studies inspire such impassioned opinions as whether

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1. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2013), p. 95.

2. As a typical example, see: Michael Shermer, 'Utopia Is a Dangerous Ideal: We Should Aim for "Protopia"', *Aeon*, 2018 <<https://aeon.co/ideas/utopia-is-a-dangerous-ideal-we-should-aim-for-protopia>> [accessed 5 November 2019].

the representation and enactment of utopia has a place in cultural production, or whether society should insulate itself from this idea. This first section will chart the development of utopian theory from the nineteenth century to the present to help understand this polarisation.

In the Introduction, I outlined the concomitant development of capitalism and the idea of utopia in the sixteenth century. By the time generic utopian literature reached its zenith in the nineteenth century, however, the vast majority was openly socialist or communist.<sup>3</sup> This fundamental break between capitalism and utopianism occurred in two stages. First was the development of socialist theories of social organisation, production, and reproduction in the second half of the nineteenth century, which contended that the dominant liberal-capitalist construction of social and economic relations was, for the great majority of people, far from a perfect society. Zygmunt Bauman identifies the emergence of such utopian socialism firstly in “the establishment of political equality as a means and a first step to the incorporation of the totality of individual life into a community of equal men”, and secondly in a reactionary attitude to the rapid pace of progress under nineteenth-century capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Utopian socialists of the early and mid-nineteenth century — Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Étienne Cabet, and Robert Owen — basing their work on contemporaneous scientific conceptions of social behaviour and progress, produced blueprint theories for improvements in social life which were often anti-capitalist, but which ended up at odds with subsequent Marxist socialism. Marx famously decried utopian socialism in favour of “scientific socialism” in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), claiming that utopian socialists, who “improvise systems and go in search of a regenerating science”, create utopian blueprints from above, putting the ends before the means of social progress. Scientific socialists, argued Marx, began their study from below with the material conditions of the proletariat, at which stage “the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines”.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, utopianism thus became increasingly alienated from both capitalist thought (which perceived it as predominantly socialist), and from Marxist thought (which perceived it as unallied with

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3. See: Beaumont, *Utopia, Ltd.*

4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), pp. 43, 46–47.

5. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), p. 56.

the tenets of historical materialism).

After the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Cold War, dominant political rhetoric in the USA, UK, and Western Europe critiqued Marxism-Leninism itself as utopian in that it violently enforced a blueprint for an allegedly perfect society without taking into account the realities and limitations of human social behaviour, with disastrous consequences. In the capitalist nations, the second half of the twentieth century saw the widespread implementation of *neoliberalism*, a political ideology which underpinned contemporary forms of capitalist production, to which I will return in Chapter Two. In brief, according to its key theorists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, social and economic relations under neoliberal capitalism were organically generated by market forces and the accumulative tendencies of human behaviour rather than systematising blueprints.<sup>6</sup> In 1999, capturing the mood of conservative neoliberalism, Margaret Thatcher wrote: “[f]or conservatives engaged in practical politics, utopia is something to be suspected and resisted”.<sup>7</sup> Ruth Levitas summarises this dominant anti-utopian position as “fear of totalitarianism, scepticism of totality, and loss of faith in the proletariat as an agent of radical change ... predicated on the anti-utopian climate of the Cold War and on a deeper cultural pessimism”.<sup>8</sup> Russell Jacoby identifies as factors “the collapse of the communist states beginning in 1989; the widespread belief that nothing distinguishes utopians and totalitarians; and ... an incremental impoverishment of what might be called Western imagination”.<sup>9</sup> This charge of “impoverishment” encompasses the popularity of dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives I noted in the Introduction and the loss of faith in political agency which I discuss in Chapter Two, both influenced by the four central crises of the past decade I also noted in the Introduction. This sense of crisis and precariousness challenges the belief that utopia may still be desirable in the twenty-first century.

The battle for the continuing relevance and value of utopia hinges on claims about the

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6. See: Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2001).
  7. Margaret Thatcher, ‘Resisting the Utopian Impulse’, *Hudson Institute*, 1999 <<https://www.hudson.org/research/1266-resisting-the-utopian-impulse>> [accessed 13 November 2017].
  8. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 15.
  9. Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 5.

role of perfection in this field. Sargent writes that for anti-utopian thinkers, “the Utopian society must be perfect and *therefore* unrealizable”; Levitas adds that these theorists understand utopia as “an impossible quest for perfection whose political consequences are almost necessarily totalitarian”. The idea that “utopia posits a static, perfect and harmonious whole, at odds with the complexity of the real world” has persisted in mainstream discourse for five hundred years.<sup>10</sup> The following section examines the work of three key anti-utopian theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Karl Popper, John Gray, and Krishan Kumar.

### Anti-utopianism

Mainstream anti-utopian criticism makes three claims:

1. Utopias are blueprints for perfect societies;
2. Attempts to replicate such blueprints in the real world necessitate violence and totalitarianism, or on a smaller scale — an intentional community rather than a national programme — some form of cult-like coercive power structure;
3. Since utopias can only achieve perfection via imperfect means, they are dangerous, seductive, and flawed enterprises.

Two interlinked schools of thought — liberal humanism and conservative rational liberalism — provide the dominant anti-utopian theories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

An anti-utopian position within liberal humanist thought developed during the Second World War among a group of mostly Jewish philosophers including Popper, Isaiah Berlin, and Hannah Arendt. Jacoby notes that these thinkers, “drawn to a vaguely utopian Marxism and then repelled by a palpably brutal Stalinism, ... advanced a critique of a larger totalitarian ideology”. In their writings, as I have indicated above, “[t]otalitarianism became the catchall for utopianism as well as Marxism, Nazism, and nationalism”.<sup>11</sup>

Of these post-war liberal theorists, Popper has proven particularly influential. In *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), Popper critiques utopianism from a liberal humanist and a rationalist perspective. He castigates “Utopian engineering”, which seeks

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10. Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, p. 6; Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 7.

11. Jacoby, p. xiii.

an “ultimate political aim, or the Ideal State”, opposing it to “piecemeal engineering”, which is methodological and reflexive: “the piecemeal engineer will ... adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good”.<sup>12</sup> Piecemeal engineering is democratic, humanistic, flexible, self-reflexive, and most importantly, is based upon a process of inductive and progressive reasoning; Utopian engineering is totalising, monolithic, ignores the methodologies of induction and reason, cannot evolve, “demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and ... therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship” and, most dangerous of all, claims to be rational.<sup>13</sup> It is characterised, lastly, by a dangerous radical aestheticism, “the desire to build a world which is not only a little better and more rational than ours, but which is free from all its ugliness: not a crazy quilt, an old garment badly patched, but an entirely new gown, a really beautiful new world”.<sup>14</sup>

Popper’s stance against utopianism is based on a liberal humanist critique of Marxism, attesting that the latter is “a radically historicist approach which implies that we cannot alter the course of history”.<sup>15</sup> Popper argues that, in his rejection of socialist utopianism, Marx rejects “*all* social engineering”, denouncing “the faith in a rational planning of social institutions as altogether unrealistic, since society must grow according to the laws of history and not according to our rational plans”.<sup>16</sup> Popper’s stance against utopianism is therefore not only rationalist in its defence of consensus-based social development, but liberal humanist in its rejection of totalising historical narratives. This position has been taken up by a range of thinkers since the end of the Cold War, of whom Kumar, whose work is discussed below, is most closely aligned to utopian literary theory. A second, and separate, school of anti-utopian thought is exemplified by Gray.

Gray’s book *Black Mass* (2007) takes a strongly liberal realist (or pragmatic) approach to utopianism. Gray understands utopian thinking as a belief in human perfectibility and capacity for societal transformation, which has, over the course of history, moved away

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12. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 157–58.

13. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, pp. 159–60.

14. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 165.

15. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 157.

16. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 164.

from the fringes of religious systems, becoming a dominant political force on the Left and, with the subsequent rise of neoliberalism, on the Right: “[f]or the utopian mind the defects of every known society ... are marks of universal repression — which, however, will soon be ended”.<sup>17</sup> Gray agrees with Popper here — both philosophers see utopian methodology as a totalising quest for perfection based on unrealistic premises and a false understanding of the real world. Gray however differs in his understanding of human nature, not only taking the position that humans are wholly imperfectible, but claiming humanity as a collective has no intrinsic motivating impulses: “there can be no such thing as the history of humanity, only the lives of particular humans. If we speak of the history of the species at all, it is only to signify the unknowable sum of these lives”.<sup>18</sup>

For Gray, the “basic unreality” of utopian thought therefore lies in its pursuit of “a condition of harmony”, ignoring the “universal feature[s] of human life” which are conflict, egoism, and the incompatibility of individual desires. Thus, “[a]ll the dreams of a society from which coercion and power have been for ever removed — Marxist or anarchist, liberal or technocratic — are utopian in the strong sense that they can never be achieved because they break down on the enduring contradictions of human needs”.<sup>19</sup> Gray develops this radically anti-humanist position to the point that, as Levitas remarks, he “dismisses the whole of Western culture, including the Enlightenment, liberal humanism, the idea of human progress and the idea of universal human rights as incipiently utopian; all are teleological and all imply the perfectibility of humanity”.<sup>20</sup> While Popper and Gray differ in their understanding of human nature, the uniting contention at the heart of their arguments is that utopianism is the pursuit of a perfect society, and utopias are the result of the implementation of blueprints for the construction of such a society.

Kumar occupies the theoretical threshold between utopianism and anti-utopianism, arguing that utopia, while positive, is no longer locatable in the present social and political climate. Kumar understands utopianism as a social theory which diagnoses “the ills of the present society” and makes the perfectionist claim that while “the present is intolerable”,

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17. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 21.

18. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2003), p. 48.

19. Gray, *Black Mass*, p. 20.

20. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 10; see also: Gray, *Black Mass*, pp. 203-204.



it is possible to change it “not simply for the better for the best”.<sup>21</sup> This position, reinforced by his unfounded contention that the perfect nature of utopia is the “one thing that students of utopia agree on”, relies on a formulation of utopianism which recalls Popper’s: a worthwhile project of “reason and scientific organisation” which considers human nature “as perfectible, given the right kind of social environment”.<sup>22</sup> Kumar couples this argument with a position dismissing the majority of contemporary utopian writing, such as Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, and claiming that the remainder has lost its political impact.<sup>23</sup>

While Gray celebrates the dissolution of grand narratives as a potential cure for utopian thinking, Kumar directs the finger of blame for the alleged paucity of contemporary utopian writing at diminishing national cohesion, growing social fragmentation, and a rise in identitarian politics in the West:

There may be other reasons why the science-fiction, feminist, and ecological forms of the literary utopia appear so weak, so incapable of setting the social or political agenda. One surely has to do with the radical fragmentation of readerships and audiences today. [...] These no longer, in most respects, have a common *national* constituency but appeal to and involve particular groups, segregated by age, sex, class, and sometimes race.<sup>24</sup>

Based on these conclusions, Kumar proclaims the “death” of utopia both as a formally effective literary genre and as a politically effective social theory, framed by nostalgia for the utopias of a golden *fin de siècle* past, epitomised by the works of Bellamy, Morris, and Wells mentioned in the Introduction. Recent attempts are lambasted as “ungainly and highly unattractive forms”.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to argue with Kumar’s conclusion on his own terms. Given a definition of utopias as blueprints for social perfection, it is undoubtedly the case that such texts no longer enjoy the political cachet or the literary popularity they could claim at the turn of the twentieth century. However, as Bell makes clear, “[t]he reduction of utopia(ism) to this

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21. Krishan Kumar, ‘The Ends of Utopia’, *New Literary History*, 41.3 (2010), 549–69 (p. 556).

22. Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 48; Kumar, ‘The Ends of Utopia’, pp. 559, 556.

23. Kumar, ‘The Ends of Utopia’, pp. 549–50.

24. Kumar, ‘The Ends of Utopia’, p. 553.

25. Kumar, ‘The Ends of Utopia’, pp. 554, 564.



understanding has been widely critiqued — and often rejected — in the field of utopian studies”.<sup>26</sup> Basing his criticism on a vast bibliography of utopian literature, Sargent comes to a similar conclusion: “there are in fact very few eutopias that present societies that the author believes to be perfect ... Without the use of the word *perfect*, part of the logic of the anti-utopian argument disappears”.<sup>27</sup> The following section will argue that contemporary utopian cultural and critical production is, indeed, wholly engaged in the production of what Kumar describes as “ungainly and highly unattractive forms”. These are methodological utopias guided by a desire to create better forms of life within the present, which, much like Popper, reject blueprint utopian projects and embrace the reflexive, responsive dynamism of “piecemeal engineering”. I distinguish them clearly from work such as Kumar’s, which is occasionally mis-sold as utopian: because it rearticulates Popper’s definition of utopianism as a methodology for blueprinting a perfect society but takes only literature as its object of study, it avoids the charges that such activity leads to terror and violence. This position is particularly dangerous because it suggests that methodological utopias are themselves anti-utopian since they do not aim for perfection, and thus sees blueprint utopianism not only as the only true form of utopianism, but also as having no application to the real world. Thus, unlike the work of the theorists presented below, it fails to advance the debate concerning the form and function of utopianism in the real world in any meaningful way.

### Contemporary utopianism

Contemporary utopian scholars, with few exceptions, make no claims regarding the perfection or perfectibility of either human nature or human society. Indeed, much contemporary utopian theory, agreeing with Popper and even Gray, argues that totalising blueprints for societies — especially those of the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and the Third Reich — have led to terror, violence, and destruction in the real world. Capturing the broad view of the field, Levitas argues that utopian thinking “is not about devising and imposing a blueprint”, but far rather “entails holistic thinking about the connections

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26. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 76.

27. Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, pp. 9–10; see also: Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘Utopian Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography from 1516 to the Present’ (The Pennsylvania State University Libraries, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.18113/P8WC77>>.

between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way”, which allows utopian thinkers to “develop alternative possible scenarios for the future and open these up to public debate and democratic decision — insisting always on the provisionality, reflexivity and contingency of what we are able to imagine”.<sup>28</sup>

Three major strands of thought can be identified in the output of contemporary utopian theory. Basing my work in part on the work of Bell in *Rethinking Utopia* (2017), I argue that these strands can be distinguished by the level of engagement each has with the spatial form of utopia. In order of diminishing critical distance from utopian spatiality, these tendencies understand utopia:

1. As *estrangement, desire, surplus, or hope* operating primarily at the level of affect;
2. As a *method or critical tool* operating primarily at the level of hermeneutics;
3. As a *prefigurative process* operating primarily at the level of practice and political struggle.

The following three subsections will introduce key thinkers and provide an overview of the movements in each. Two corollaries must be noted in relation to this systematisation. Firstly, no utopian thinker, of whom I am aware, narrows their work in a single of these strands, and many range across all three, particularly Bloch in his impact on the field of utopian theory. Secondly, while all three strands provide indispensable formulations of *utopianism*, none attain a theoretical understanding of *utopia* (that is, utopian space) which is political, flexible, and critically grounded.

### *Utopian affects*

The strand of utopian studies furthest from utopian spatiality argues that utopia (here referring *not* to spaces) emerges from affective relations: joy, estrangement, desire, and hope. These relations are dialogic and dynamic, emerging from “*joint action*” and encounter.<sup>29</sup> In affective interpretations, utopia takes the form of an affective surplus or intensity which augments or conditions the subject’s capacity to act in a utopian way: a way that expands the capacities and abilities of individual bodies.<sup>30</sup> Affect theory is a theory

28. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. 18–19.

29. Nigel Thrift, ‘The Still Point: Resistance, Expressive Embodiment and Dance’, in *Geographies of Resistance*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steven Pile (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 124–51 (pp. 126–29).

30. See: Brian Massumi, ‘Notes on the Translation’, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis:

of transcendence and surplus; as Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write, “both affect and its theorisation ... always exceed the context of their emergence, as the excess of ongoing process”.<sup>31</sup> Utopian affects can be understood as a form of “optimism” in the sense described by Berlant, to whose work I return in Chapter Two: “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene”.<sup>32</sup>

Affect theory has produced a range of explicitly utopian work. For Ben Anderson, the process of “becoming hopeful” is not a “simple act of transcendence in favour of a good elsewhere or elsewhen”, but rather a concrete act “of establishing new relations that disclose a point of contingency within a present space-time”.<sup>33</sup> Bell, basing his theory on the work of Sara Ahmed, argues that the utopian relation produces “joy ... the embodied experience of increasing capacities to affect and be affected”.<sup>34</sup> An affective utopia comprises the networks of relations generated between subjects who hope for better lives.

Another strain of utopian critical thought bases itself not upon affect theory, but upon similar articulations of the self and the other as connected through networks of relations. Levitas reminds her readers of the history of utopianism as a search for transcendence: “[i]f utopia is understood as the expression of the desire for a better way of being, then it is perhaps a (sometimes) secularized version of the spiritual quest to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect with each other”.<sup>35</sup> The desire for understanding, transcendence, and an enlarged sphere of affects and relations is key to what Bloch describes as *Heimat*, a term which literally translates as ‘homeland’. Levitas’s translation is more sympathetic to Bloch’s conceptual aim and avoids the implication that *Heimat* is a physical space: “a quest for wholeness, for being at home in the world”.<sup>36</sup> Chapter Four will

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University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. xvi–xix (p. xvi).

31. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ‘An Inventory of Shimmers’, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–28 (p. 5). I will return to surplus and excess in Chapters Two and Three.

32. Berlant, pp. 1–2.

33. Ben Anderson, ‘Becoming and Being Hopeful: Towards a Theory of Affect’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24.5 (2006), 733–52 (p. 744).

34. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 98.

35. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. 11–12.

36. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 12.

further interrogate *Heimat* in relation to Hamid's novel *Exit West*.

Bloch is the philosophical figure to whom contemporary utopian thought is most indebted. His work on utopia and utopianism, beginning with his first book *Geist der Utopie* (written 1915-16, published 1918, translated into English in 2000 as *The Spirit of Utopia*) and culminating in his three-volume *magnum opus* *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (written 1938-1947, published 1954-59, translated into English in 1986 as *The Principle of Hope*), is both far-ranging and frequently difficult to interpret, given that Bloch writes in an Expressionist, fluid, intertextual style full of "formal innovation" and "aphoristic fragmentation", far removed from structural criticism.<sup>37</sup> This will necessarily be a very brief survey of his work, though further discussions of it will appear throughout this thesis. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Bloch's work is the distinction he draws between *abstract* and *concrete utopia*, already noted in the Introduction. In the formulation presented by Levitas, "[a]bstract utopia is fantastic and compensatory", a form of "wishful thinking" which "involves not so much a transformed future, but a future where the world remains as it is except for the dreamer's changed place in it — perhaps by a large win in a lottery". Concrete utopia, on the other hand, "is anticipatory rather than compensatory"; it is prefigurative of a "real possible future, and involves not merely wishful but will-full thinking", simultaneously anticipating a utopian future and effecting the changes necessary to make such a future occur in the dreamer's own world.<sup>38</sup>

Bloch is at heart a cultural critic, and his philosophical project is concerned with uncovering and realising forms of concrete utopianism in culture. This project rests on three arguments. Firstly, he claims that individual subjects are not complete in and of themselves, but instead dream, desire, and hope to find completion and wholeness (*Heimat*). Secondly, Bloch is deeply interested in the *Vor-Schein* (anticipatory illumination) embedded in "daydreams, fairy tales and myths, popular culture, literature, theater, and all forms of art, political and social utopias, philosophy, and religion".<sup>39</sup> Anticipatory illumination reveals to the audiences of cultural works different and diverse forms of concrete social life

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37. Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, p. 26.

38. Ruth Levitas, 'Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia', *Utopian Studies*, 1.2 (1990), 13-26 (pp. 14-15). See also: Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 146.

39. Douglas Kellner, 'Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique', in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 80-95 (p. 81).

beyond those presented by capitalism and totalitarianism. Bloch's third argument is that anticipatory illumination is encoded in cultural work by a form of thinking, influenced by his reading of Freud, which he calls *Noch-Nicht-Bewusst* (the not-yet-conscious), understood by Jack Zipes as the "psychical representation of what has not-yet-become in our time and its world", found "primarily in daydreams, where individuals have presentiments of what they lack, what they need, what they want, and what they hope to find".<sup>40</sup> For Bloch, utopia is a psychological, affective relation of *Uberschuss* (surplus) encoded in cultural output by human hopes and desires, which orients the not-yet-fulfilled subject towards the horizon of the *Novum* (the new) in the present, creating concrete utopia. As Levitas writes, Bloch reads utopia as a "transcending without transcendence", that is, "not removal from or beyond the world, but its immanent and imminent transformation" in the present time and space.<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary thinkers have borrowed extensively from the work of Bloch in formulating their own utopian positions. In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz employs the Blochian framework of hope illuminating a concrete form of future utopia as "both a critical affect and a methodology" to examine a hope-oriented form of queerness:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. [...] We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. [...] we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.<sup>42</sup>

Although Muñoz does make reference to "new worlds", utopianism in his project is a Blochian, temporal form which unsettles and complicates the passage of historical time: "[t]he utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity".<sup>43</sup> Challenging anti-relational queer theories which read queerness as defined by sexual identity, Muñoz argues that queerness is a collective identity which is "primarily about

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40. Jack Zipes, 'Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, by Ernst Bloch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. xi–xliii (p. xxxi).

41. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 194.

42. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 1, 4.

43. Muñoz, p. 7.

futurity and hope”, and is thus visible “only in the horizon”.<sup>44</sup> Queerness as utopianism thus becomes itself a subjective and cultural surplus, a temporal form which is affective, in constant flux, and politically oppositional, with the potential to stave off “the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology” on popular culture.<sup>45</sup> Following Bloch’s project of analysing a vast range of cultural forms ranging from the bourgeois to the lowbrow, Muñoz’s volume explores queer utopian illuminations in a variety of twentieth-century cultural fields including art, performance, cross-dressing, dance, and kitsch and camp aesthetics.<sup>46</sup> While I am only touching on it here, I will return to Muñoz’s work in Chapter Six.

Like Bloch and Muñoz, Lucy Sargisson, in her examinations of feminist utopianism and, more recently, twenty-first century utopianism, highlights transgression and excess as the defining features of the (chiefly temporal) process of utopianism, also introducing the concept of *estrangement* which she derives from the work of science fiction theorist Darko Suvin, who is discussed below. In *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1997), Sargisson reads feminist theory of the late twentieth century as rejecting closure and destabilizing traditional narratives of sex and gender, seeing it as “a new approach to utopianism that replaces the old ‘standard’ with something more flexible, more interesting and more appropriate” to the contemporary period.<sup>47</sup> For Sargisson, such theory is a container for transformative thinking, prompting readers to consider the strange, the queer, and the unfamiliar: “[u]topian thought creates a space, previously non-existent and still ‘unreal’, in which radically different speculation can take place, and in which totally new ways of being can be envisaged. In this space transformative thinking can take place, and paradigmatic shifts in approach can be undertaken”.<sup>48</sup>

In *Fool’s Gold?* (2012), building on the work of Suvin, Sargisson locates estrangement as “an integral part of utopianism”, highlighting the ways in which utopian affects need not always be positive to be productive: “to estrange is to place a person or thing ‘outside’ (of one’s affections, from a place, from perception). ... Estrangement, then, involves distance,

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44. Muñoz, p. 11.

45. Muñoz, p. 22.

46. Caroline Edwards, ‘Uncovering the “Gold-Bearing Rubble”: Ernst Bloch’s Literary Criticism’, in *Utopianism, Modernism, and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 182–203 (p. 192).

47. Lucy Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 64.

48. Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, p. 63.

loss and strangeness and often evokes a negative relationship”. Like Bloch, Sargisson argues that “utopia(n) fictions in particular) always exist outside of our experience”, and yet “are rooted somehow in the here-and-now”, making their estranging qualities also productive. As does Moylan, she adds that utopianism estranges not only its readers, but the genre of utopia itself, “disrupting it, stretching it and creating something new from its remains”.<sup>49</sup> Through her discursive work, Sargisson plays with the boundary between the impossibility of utopia and its productive potential, concluding: “[u]topias will always fail, then. They need to. They are no places. But they are important because they function to show us that radical thinking needs to be attempted; they deny that there are no alternatives”.<sup>50</sup> As I have indicated in the Introduction, this resonates with the dominant pro-utopian theorisation of utopia as unable to enact material change upon the present; nevertheless, Sargisson’s understanding of utopianism as a negative as well as a positive force is indicative of the wide theoretical space occupied by affective theorisations of utopia — from Bloch’s messianic writings to the recent theorisations of utopia as an intimate relation of optimism and joy.

### *Utopian hermeneutics*

A second stream of utopian theorists understand utopia as a critical method or tool with which we can interrogate our world. I position this group of theorists to act as an interface between those discussed above and the politically grounded theorists presented below. The final words in Robinson’s epigraph to this chapter, “[c]ompare it to the present course of history”, ask his readers to think of utopia as a hermeneutic tool with which human history and its future can both be explored. Robinson encourages us to think of utopia itself as a method — a set of instructions (though variable, unpredictable, and subjective) for achieving a better world, by identifying what can be made more utopian in the present.

In staking this claim, hermeneutic utopianism rejects a blueprint approach to utopia, arguing that an approach based on abstract visions of social life which does not consider the methods required to reach such visions, while tempting, teaches us little about the present and the ways in which it can be improved. As the term ‘hermeneutic’ suggests, much work

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49. Lucy Sargisson, *Fool’s Gold?: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 18, 19, 16, 21.

50. Sargisson, *Fool’s Gold?*, p. 39.



in this field revolves around textual utopias, though in Bloch's work, as indicated above, the definition of 'narrative' is very wide. As Levitas writes, "[t]he boundaries of literary genres are porous, and literature, poetry and song are, like art and music, amenable to exploration through the hermeneutic utopian method", as are "travellers' tales, political programmes or works of political theory". While the imaginaries of such texts may "posit a process of transition, evolutionary or revolutionary", they are primarily hermeneutic: "whether they are placed elsewhere or in the future, they are always substantially about the present".<sup>51</sup>

In *Utopia as Method* (2013), Levitas argues that the utopian method begins with an "expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living", then works to "explore culture ... for ... its utopian aspects, its expression of longing or fulfilment", before extending to concrete plans for actual transformation in "the social and structural domain".<sup>52</sup> The utopian method in this sense is an "education of desire", a term Levitas derives from the work of Miguel Abensour: it helps subjects understand what they are missing and wanting in the real world, then provides ways to enact these desires; it disrupts the "taken-for-granted nature of the present" and creates a (wholly metaphorical) "space in which the reader may, temporarily, experience an alternative configuration of needs, wants and satisfactions".<sup>53</sup> Drawing upon this disruptive potential, Levitas makes reference to "a growing literature on mundane or everyday utopianism, where alternative or oppositional social practices create new, or at least slightly different, social institutions".<sup>54</sup>

The field of everyday utopianism has been especially enriched by the work of Davina Cooper, who engages with social and cultural practices that have a utopian function, such as public nudism, queer bathhouses, and alternative pedagogical institutions. As with other hermeneutic theorists, Cooper sees such everyday utopias as a critical tool: "[b]y creating a world at a (temporal or spatial) distance from their own, utopian creators defamiliarize the world they know and inhabit; in the process they enable taken-for-granted aspects to be questioned and rethought".<sup>55</sup> For Cooper, as for Levitas, the estrangement function of

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51. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. xiv.

52. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. xii–xiii, 5.

53. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 4.

54. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. xiii.

55. Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 5.

utopianism defamiliarises its material in order to educate. As with Levitas, Cooper links her conceptualisation of utopianism to transcendental affective relations, highlighting the importance in everyday utopian practices of “the ineffable, of what cannot or simply is not said, and so is expressed, experienced, and known in other ways. [...] sensation and affect are important sources of knowledge”.<sup>56</sup> The realisation of utopia in the real world thus arrives from a hermeneutic method which is defamiliarising and affective, offering the possibility of new forms of connection.

As we have seen, Sargisson theorises the estrangement function of utopianism as an affective, temporal excess, and Levitas and Cooper link it through the hermeneutic method to the transformative affect of desire. Darko Suvin, the progenitor of estrangement theory in literary studies, renders this concept somewhat differently. Since the publication of Suvin’s landmark study *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), the sf genre in academic critical theory has been largely defined by the presence of the *novum*. Suvin adopted this term from the work of Bloch, redefining it as “a totalising phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” — totalising in the sense that, by its presence, “the whole tale can be analytically grasped”.<sup>57</sup> The estrangement caused by the *novum* is, in Suvin’s understanding, coupled with the presence of “scientific cognition as the sign or correlative of a method (way, approach, atmosphere, sensibility) identical to that of a modern philosophy of science”, without however necessitating a focus on “ostensible scientific *content* or scientific data”.<sup>58</sup> This distinction allows Suvin to distinguish between the *cognitive* estrangement of sf, which “uses imagination as a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality”, and the purely ideological or aesthetic estrangement of fantasy, given that fantasy in Suvin’s view is “a genre committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment ... a subliteration of mystification”<sup>59</sup> — in other words, of affect. For Suvin, therefore, estrangement is not an affective surplus, but an historical-materialist framework for a totalising cognitive (re) apprehension of reality. Literary utopia, which Suvin parses as “the *sociopolitical subgenre* of

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56. Cooper, pp. 40, 45.

57. Suvin, p. 80.

58. Suvin, p. 81.

59. Suvin, pp. 20–21.

*science fiction*”, is thus understood as “a heuristic device for perfectibility”, a hermeneutic dialectic whose efficacy is dependent on the totalised estrangement of a textual reader: “utopia ... cannot be realized or not realized — it can only be applied. That application is, however, as important as it has been claimed that the realization of utopia is: without it man is truly alienated or one-dimensional”.<sup>60</sup> Suvin’s reference to alienation comes via Marx, who argues that the alienation of the labouring class is one of the primary functions of capitalism, a claim to which I shall return throughout the thesis. Alienation — the division of ourselves from the products of our labour, our communities, and ultimately our species being — is perhaps utopia’s key opponent.<sup>61</sup>

A number of works of utopian theory are located on the borderline between a utopian hermeneutic which is purely cognitive or affective, and a utopian hermeneutic which is concerned with concrete social and political transformation — a form addressed in the following subsection. In *Utopia in the Age of Globalisation* (2013), Robert T. Tally Jr. rejects both spatial and temporal blueprint conceptions of utopia, offering instead an understanding of utopia as a “means of mapping the world” which uncovers the landscape of the contemporary social, political, and cultural system:

utopia in the present configuration can only be a method by which one can attempt to apprehend the system itself. [...] The utopian practice is not, therefore, epistemological, offering a means of *knowing* the world, but literary, allowing us to tell stories in different ways as means of representing ourselves and the world in the present time and space.<sup>62</sup>

Tally’s project is particularly valuable to this study for three reasons. Firstly, he separates an epistemological utopian method (which is generally concerned with critique) from a creative and productive utopian method, “the persistent attempt to imagine alternatives to the present state of affairs while remaining assiduously of the world”. Secondly, he insists on the reflexivity of such a method and its constant engagement with the real world: “a utopian map of the world system, if possible at all, would necessarily be provisional,

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60. Suvin, pp. 61, 52.

61. See: Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1988), pp. 70–81.

62. Robert T. Tally Jr., *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World-System* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. ix–x.

temporary, and subject to constant revision”. Lastly, he celebrates the value of the imagination in prefiguring utopian realities, writing that “new spaces of liberty may ... be glimpsed, and perhaps created”, in the “purposive act of reading literature, of taking products of the imagination seriously”.<sup>63</sup> Tally is also a key thinker in the field of geocritical literary studies, which examines texts through their representations of spaces, and extends from spatial theory in a similar fashion to my considerations on the commons poetics, which I introduce in the second half of this chapter.<sup>64</sup>

Moylan’s study *Demand the Impossible* (1986) —somewhat like Suvin’s *Metamorphoses*— is a historical-materialist, textual-critical project with close links to Marxist thought. Moylan’s concept of the *critical utopia*, a category of 1960s-70s texts which “reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream”, has been influential in the field of utopian studies, as I argue in the Introduction. Like other hermeneutic utopian forms, critical utopias are critically positioned, dwelling “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”, but are also reflexively critical: they “focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognisable and dynamic alternatives”.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, Moylan argues that critical utopias are fundamentally linked to minoritarian (particularly Left-oriented) struggle, providing a model “that could be carried over to utopian practices within the realm of lived experience, in communities or in political movements, in the use of modes of self-criticism that would work against the growth of an elite leadership and the blocking of grassroots democratic decisionmaking”.<sup>66</sup> In arguing for the political value of critical utopias and, in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2014), their cousins the critical dystopias, Moylan places himself somewhat at odds with the sociological mode of hermeneutic utopianism. Levitas contends, pessimistically, that “the political impetus and intent of the critical utopia” depends “on the conditions of cultural reproduction”, and is not “necessarily matched by political effectiveness”.<sup>67</sup> Moylan’s

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63. Tally, pp. xiii, 95, 97, 100.

64. See: *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

65. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, pp. 10–11.

66. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, pp. 83–84.

67. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 111.

insistence on the real, lived imbrication of text and political transformation places him instead on the verge of the final stream of utopian thought: utopia as lived political practice.

### *Utopian practices*

The third and final strand of utopian studies understands utopia as a real-world form: a set of practices which produce or prefigure utopian ways of life. Prefigurative politics, which I indicated in the Introduction as a key theoretical touchstone in this thesis, are defined by Uri Gordon as “a commitment to define and realise anarchist social relations within the activities and collective structures of the revolutionary movement itself”.<sup>68</sup> Such practices are almost invariably radically oppositional to the political and social *status quo*. The spirit of prefigurative utopian practice is captured in Robinson’s epigraph to this chapter by the words “[s]truggle forever” — to live in a prefigurative way is to wage a constant battle against the powerful coalition of anti-utopian forces. This struggle is never-ending, as Bell makes clear, “because new forms of living and relating will develop; and because new forms of domination will arise”.<sup>69</sup> Prefiguration is perhaps best captured by the often misattributed and modified quote (a paraphrasing of a line from the poem ‘Civil Elegies’ by Canadian poet Dennis Lee) which encourages its readers to “live like it’s the first days of a better nation” — a line taken up extensively in Cory Doctorow’s novel *Walkaway*, which I read in Chapter Six.<sup>70</sup>

Drawing on her study of everyday utopias, Cooper understands prefigurative practices as “a utopia in formation, where undertaking what appears to be novel ... provides a way of experiencing, demonstrating, and bringing into being its more developed (even institutionalized) future reality”.<sup>71</sup> In a similar conceptual vein, alert to the lived reality of utopian struggle, Levitas twins prefigurative practices, which she understands as “the attempt not just to imagine, but to make, the world otherwise”, with “interstitial utopias: spaces where a better life can be built even in the face of the dominance of market and

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68. Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 35.

69. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 93.

70. The variant “Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation”, via the author Alasdair Gray, is inscribed on the walls of the Scottish Parliament building. The original lines in ‘Civil Elegies’ reads: “And best of all is finding a place to be / in the early days of a better civilization.”

71. Cooper, p. 82.

state”.<sup>72</sup> Warning, however, that “[r]eal utopias ... only inform alternative futures when imagined as part of a wider whole”, Levitas links truly transformative prefigurative practice to a holistic sociological utopianism: “the method of simultaneously critiquing the present, exploring alternatives, imagining ourselves otherwise and experimenting with prefigurative practices”.<sup>73</sup> Levitas argues that constant failure is immanent in the prefiguration of utopia, not only as an inevitable consequence of eternal struggle, but also as a function of the constant reinvention and rearticulation absent from closed forms of utopianism:

For whatever contested images of a better future emerge, they will, if regarded as predictions or as demands, necessarily ‘fail’ — partly because of the limits of our imagination, partly because of the limits of our power. Even as they fail, they operate as a critique of the present and a reconstitution of the future. Utopia must be continually reinvented as one crucial tool in the making of the future.<sup>74</sup>

The reinvention of utopia to guarantee a better future is the most radically transformative form of utopian prefiguration, and recalls Moylan’s insistence on the unsettled, reflexive form of critical utopias, which are already and always oriented towards reshaping utopia itself.

A more cautious but equally politically engaged approach to the construction of utopia is presented by Harvey in *Spaces of Hope* (2008). Harvey sketches the development of a “spatiotemporal utopianism”, which encompasses both temporal process and spatial form.<sup>75</sup> Harvey is unusual among the major utopian theorists in embracing the real-world possibility of a spatial utopian imaginary. Warning us, however, that “[t]he dialectic is ‘either/or’ not ‘both/and’”, Harvey bases his quest on the argument that “to materialize a space is to engage with closure (however temporary) which is an authoritarian act”, and that real-world utopian space must, therefore, find ways to flourish in an enclosed framework. Harvey further links the desire for openness with abstract utopian wishing, “an agonistic romanticism of perpetually unfulfilled longing and desire”.<sup>76</sup> The solution Harvey proposes is a framework wherein utopia, too, becomes authoritative and enclosing — where the temporality of utopian social process exercises an architectural authority over

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72. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. xiii, 165.

73. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. 147, 219.

74. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 220.

75. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 182, 189.

76. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, pp. 196, 182–183.

the materiality of spatial form.<sup>77</sup> As Harvey puts it, the “supposedly endlessly open and benevolent qualities of some utopian social process ... have to crystallize into a spatially-ordered and institutionalized material world somewhere and somehow. ... Materialized Utopias of process cannot escape the question of closure or the encrusted accumulations of traditions, institutional inertias, and the like, which they themselves produce”.<sup>78</sup> It is on this cynical, and perhaps realist, note that Harvey leaves his conception of utopia.

Harvey’s cautious theorisation — where he is willing to theorise a spatial utopianism but unwilling to see this spatiality as signifying anything beyond closure and limitation — is indicative of the widespread attitude towards spatiality in the contemporary utopian theoretical field. As I have noted above, each of the three leading approaches to utopia in contemporary utopian theory (utopia as affective relation; as hermeneutic; and as prefigurative practice diminishes or negates the other half of ‘utopia’, its *topos*. As can be gleaned from Harvey’s conclusions, in seeking to oppose anti-utopian allegations of the totalitarianism and authoritarianism inherent to utopian projects, contemporary utopian theory decries the potential of utopia as a material spatiality. Ironically, in so doing, these theorists forgo an opportunity to conceptualise space not as closure, but as equally methodological, reflexive, and open.

Such conceptual possibilities are traced in the most recent utopian scholarship, particularly Bell’s *Rethinking Utopia* (2017). Critically interrogating Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We* (1921) and Ilya Kabakov’s installation ‘The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment’ (1985), Bell argues that the putatively utopian escapes in these works “do not create place”. Rather, trapped in “an oppressive place — a tiny apartment, a state that restricts freedom of movement — [The Man] succumbs to topophobia: the fear of place. Only (outer) space — that which permits movement (against place’s stasis) is acceptable for him”. In a similar articulation, while escape “may well provide succour for the Mephi who are struggling against OneState at the close of *We*”, Bell concludes that “this is at one step removed from utopianism: these escapes may reject closure and inspire attempts to create better place *but are not attempts to create better place themselves. Rather, they are born*

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77. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 196.

78. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 185.



*of a profound distrust of place*".<sup>79</sup> This topophobic politics is captured by Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey when they describe hope as alienating, displacing its own realization into another, unreachable space: "a product of limited or in Deleuzian terms 'cramped' space ... expressing the internalization of *the limits of the space within desire*". They contrast this normative mode of hope with the "propulsive hope" of "utopian energy", which "turns cramped spaces into smooth spaces ... an escapism which stops short of escape". Crucially, this escapism does not stop short of escape because it embraces the utopian potentialities of place, but because it creates "smooth space in the present" — *smooth space* is the Deleuzian term for the rhizomatic "horizonless milieu that is a [...] steppe, desert, or sea", the space of nomadism and flight which creates and fills space, contrasted with the *striated space* of borders, walls, and structures.<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, Bell argues for a utopianism which refuses to escape and chooses instead to oppose head-on the discontinuities, inequalities, and precarities of the present: "[t]his, I suggest, should lead us to consider the present — and not the future — as the proper terrain of struggle for a utopian politics. [...] a utopianism that operates first and foremost *within* the here-and-now but which, in doing so, creates the future as an open, yet-to-be-determined space unfolding from the here-and-now".<sup>81</sup> Crucially, in embracing the potential for space in the present, Bell's conceptual utopianism is equally open to the creation of alternative futures.

Whichever conceptual approach it favours, much of contemporary utopian theory embraces the politics of topophobia, articulating place as a homogenising, static container which the heterogeneous, dynamic multiplicity of utopian hermeneutics, surplus, or practice must confront and resist. However, as I argue in this thesis, recent utopian works are intensely focused on the utopian potential of spaces as part of an extensive engagement with anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian politics. A theoretical framework suitable for analysing such contemporary utopian literature must, I argue, engage with the field of

79. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, pp. 4–5, emphasis added.

80. Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey, 'Utopias Without Transcendence? Post-Left Anarchy, Immediacy and Utopian Energy', in *Globalization and Utopia*, ed. by Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 156–75 (pp. 173–4), emphasis added; see also: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 379.

81. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 11.

spatial theory. The following section of this chapter will introduce the key movements in contemporary spatial theory and the ways in which these theories utilise the concept of the *commons*.

### Utopian space and utopian politics

In the Introduction I offered a definition of utopia as *a space considered by its producer(s) to be significantly better than the space within which it was produced*. I noted that such spaces can be real-world spaces whose inhabitants strive to improve their material forms, and also represented spaces which exist only within the confines of utopian narratives. In this section I will broaden this definition: I will begin by noting that Henri Lefebvre, in *La production de l'espace* (1974, translated into English in 1991 as *The Production of Space*) understood space as a trialectic social product of necessarily interlinked components. These three components are:

1. *Spatial practice* or *perceived space*, socially conditioned real-world modes of inhabiting, moving within, and experiencing space: “the physical and material flows, transfers, and interactions that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction”;<sup>82</sup>
2. *Representations of space* or *conceived space* (verbally and diagrammatically coded imaginaries of space produced by “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” which, for both Edward E. Soja and Phillip E. Wegner, is “also the primary space of utopian thought and vision” and “the domain of ... narrative utopias”;<sup>83</sup>
3. *Spaces of representation* or *lived space*, which overlay and trialectically discourse with the other two forms of space.<sup>84</sup>

82. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 218.

83. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 38; Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 67; Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, p. 15.

84. Fundamental to Lefebvre's theorisation of space is the argument, derived from Marx's historical-materialist theory of *modes of production*, that space is *socially produced*: “the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the space itself”. See: Lefebvre, p. 129; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

Lefebvre purposefully overloads this last category with signification and paradoxical explanation — it is a form of space which is real and imagined at the same time. In his generous expansion on Lefebvre’s philosophical project, Soja describes lived spaces as “*a strategic location* from which to encompass, understand, and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously”. Such spaces include spaces of power, ideology, politics, and “resistance to the dominant order”, becoming “the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation”.<sup>85</sup> Lived spaces thus encompass all conceptions of space which bring its material (perceived) form and its planned (conceived) form into conflict. Lefebvre writes:

Social space [...] contains potentialities — of works and of reappropriation — existing to begin with in the artistic sphere but responding above all to the demands of a body ‘transported’ outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space (either the space of a counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially utopian alternative to actually existing ‘real’ space).<sup>86</sup>

Crucially, this initially potential, “artistic” space becomes real through the activity of political resistance and, in becoming real, transforms real space. Harvey describes this third space as *imagined* space. This term which is particularly productive because it suggests — remembering the position of negotiation this form of space has between planned and material space — that in imagined space, transformations can be imagined, developed, and ultimately deployed upon the material.<sup>87</sup> It is in this sense that I refer to the utopian worlds of the texts in this thesis as *imaginaries* — not in the traditional sociological definition of the “social imaginary” but the narrow definition offered by Harvey via Lefebvre, of spaces which are both real and imagined. A reformulation closer in spirit to Lefebvre’s would perhaps be ‘spaces of re-presentation’ — the repeated, and ever-changing, presenting of spaces back to those who produce them.

Where Soja and Wegner locate utopian literature generally in the realm of conceived space, I argue that contemporary utopian literature, through its valuable imaginary of utopian spaces produced and inhabited in opposition to the capitalist present, is situated in lived or re-presented space. Contemporary utopias not only represent alternative spaces,

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85. Soja, p. 68.

86. Lefebvre, p. 349.

87. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 219–220.

but aim to imagine them concretely and fully into being by educating, inspiring, and energising their readers to transform their own present — or at the very least, they strive to depict worlds which are simultaneously real and imagined, familiar to contemporary readers yet alive with new possibilities and radical difference. Moreover, such utopias are necessarily political. Social space is produced by, and reproduces, political structures — both professional, institutional ones and oppositional, revolutionary ones.<sup>88</sup> Lefebvre's project works to distinguish between the spatial activities of the two, and in this way interfaces with the work of other political theorists including Jacques Rancière and Hardt and Negri. These thinkers argue that *true* politics is not the enforcement of state power through laws and consensus, but the struggle for recognition and equal existence by those who are excluded from society — processes of opposition and resistance. For Rancière, it is only in dissent, in demands for the adjustment of the line between who is included and who is excluded from the production of society (such as workers, women, people of colour, the homeless, migrants), in “an intervention in the visible and sayable”, that politics takes place. All other forms of social order should be understood as “the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body and of the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts”, that is, the policing and maintenance of the social *status quo*.<sup>89</sup> Hardt and Negri characterise politics similarly, as the generation of a political subject through dissent: “a discourse that links political decision making to the construction of bodies in struggle”.<sup>90</sup> For Rancière, as for Lefebvre, politics is fundamentally spatial, consisting of the creation of political spaces for “the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it”.<sup>91</sup> Real, oppositional politics is thus a key mode of imagining, producing, inhabiting, and defending space. We can reformulate the contemporary form of utopia in productively political terms: *the imagination, production, and inhabiting of a space oppositional to the space within which it was produced*.

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88. Lefebvre, pp. 415–16.

89. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 42.

90. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 61.

91. Rancière, p. 37.

As the location of politics, space is also the only location of what Soja describes as “real and concrete” social relations, echoing Bloch’s concept of concrete utopia:

The message is clear, but few on the Left have been willing to accept its powerful connotations: that all social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially “inscribed” — that is, *concretely represented* — in the social production of social space. Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing “in” space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. *There is no unspatialized social reality.*<sup>92</sup>

Extended into the field of utopian theory, the consequences of Soja and Lefebvre’s interventions are clear: the social relations of a “real and concrete” utopianism — a material, socially produced utopia in the present — can exist only as an integral and immanent function of its spatial realisation. Thus, utopia, if it is to be conceptualised oppositionally to its anti-utopian critics and to capitalism itself, must be conceptualised spatially.

### *The production of utopian space*

The last three decades have seen a spatial turn in critical theory and the human sciences, building upon the work of earlier theorists including Lefebvre, Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau. This theoretical field elevated “space from its traditional status as a backdrop to the study of time into a central arena in which ideas are constructed, conflicts negotiated, and processes unfold” — a transformation derived from the “central discovery” that “space is a social construction, made by human beings, and deeply political and ideological in content”.<sup>93</sup> The work of Marxist and feminist social geographers since the 1980s has been particularly valuable for mapping the political struggles, inequalities, social stratifications, and power structures which produce, condition, and maintain space in particular modes. Harvey, whose work on utopia I have introduced above, has

92. Soja, p. 46.

93. Barney Warf, ‘Spatial Turn’, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. by Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), pp. 1–3. See also: Charles W. J. Withers, ‘Place and the “Spatial Turn” in Geography and in History’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70.4 (2009), 637–58; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Michel Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1998), II, 175–85; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

highlighted the relationship between capitalism's control of *space* and the appearance and development of individual *places*. Local, intimate, and non-capitalist activity performed in places, argues Harvey, "cannot be understood outside of the space relations" that support those places; equally, capitalism's activities of production and circulation cannot be "understood independently of what goes on in particular places".<sup>94</sup>

Harvey's conception of the space-place relationship is ultimately hierarchical and based on historical-materialist principles, privileging the hyper-connected, unlimited zone of space within which temporal processes (such as production and circulation) occur, over the more local zone of place, where differences and unique qualities emerge. Harvey argues that anti-capitalist oppositional movements "should somehow build upon" the progressive achievements of capitalism "and seek to transform it into an unalienated experience. The network of places constructed through the logic of capitalist development [i.e. space] ... has to be transformed and used for progressive purposes rather than be rejected or destroyed".<sup>95</sup> Progressive social relations must therefore transform the alienated relations of capitalist development into new, unalienated relations — in other words, in order to alter a place, its temporal processes must be adjusted, rather than its immanent relational qualities.

Expanding on Marxist theories of the control and production of spaces, Massey argues in *For Space* (2005) for a more dynamic, interrelational, discontinuous, rhizomatic understanding of space as "a simultaneity of stories-so-far". Massey's is a conception of space as *narrative* — an anthological, editorial, palimpsestic social practice; the processes, histories, and events of the temporal are absolutely crucial to such a practice, but do not define its quality. This conception of space not as a neutral or undeveloped field within which the unique local instantiations of place are relationally produced, but as the product and producer of multiple interrelated representations and experiences is based on three arguments: first, that "we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted throughout interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny"; second, that space is "the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of

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94. David Harvey, 'From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity', in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. by John Bird and others (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), pp. 2–29 (p. 14).

95. Harvey, 'From Space to Place and Back Again', p. 13.

contemporaneous plurality; ... as the sphere ... of coexisting heterogeneity”; third, that space is “always under construction, ... a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out”, and is thus “always in the process of being made”.<sup>96</sup>

These three spatial modes of interrelationality, multiplicity, and ongoingness cannot be understood unless they are coupled with a nonlinear, heterogeneous, and relational understanding of time. As a consequence, Massey rejects two dominant configurations of the concept of space, which rely on two different configurations of time. The first is a modernist, essentialist understanding where difference is “constituted primarily through isolation and separation ... First the differences between places exist, and then those different places come into contact”. This spatial configuration relies on the convening of “spatial difference” into “temporal sequence”, that is, “[d]ifferent ‘places’ were interpreted as different stages in a single temporal development”, a turning of the world’s geography into “the world’s (single) history” which is “implicit in many versions of modernist politics, from liberal progressive to some Marxist”. The second formulation of space is the postmodern, globalised understanding which argues that time has defeated or destroyed space, creating a “single global present”, because social processes ranging from communication to finance to travel are becoming increasingly instantaneous. Massey describes the transition from modernism to postmodernism in spatial theory as a “move straight through from a billiard-ball world of essentialised places to a claustrophobic holism in which everything everywhere is already connected to everywhere else”, which once again “leaves no opening for an active politics”.<sup>97</sup>

In staking out this framework, Massey demands a spatial theory to which the political is immanent. For Massey, *space* is always *space/time*, and is therefore never fixed, always reacting to and produced by political events. Unlike Harvey, who contends that relational politics reduce the potentialities of *space* by transforming it into differentiated, mediated *place*, Massey’s radical understanding of space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far moves to avoid the binary paradigm entirely, by indicating “the dubiousness of that duality

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96. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 9.

97. Massey, *For Space*, pp. 68, 76, 77.



— so popular and so persistent — between space and place”.<sup>98</sup> *Place* cannot therefore be mapped onto the ‘local’, the ‘concrete’, or the ‘emotive’ — artificial dualisms which rely on an equivalent mapping of *space* onto the ‘global’, the ‘abstract’, and the ‘rational’:

An understanding of the world in terms of relationality, a world in which the local and the global are ‘mutually constituted’, renders untenable these kinds of separation. The ‘lived reality of our daily lives’ is utterly dispersed, unlocalised, in its sources and its repercussions.<sup>99</sup>

This alternative formulation is aware of the issues addressed by Harvey in his theorisation of place as produced by class and capital relations, but also considers many other negotiations and trajectories of place construction, including colonialism, gender, race, and technology. As Massey writes in *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), “[t]here is a lot more determining how we experience space than what ‘capital’ gets up to”.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, for Massey, the difference between space and place is not one of representation or mediation, but of articulation. ‘Space’ is the sum total of all the interrelations produced across a variety of physical and virtual domains; ‘place’ is therefore a form of storytelling, a site-based performance which may be produced and understood by one person or by millions, which articulates, edits, and speaks a particular, unique narrative of those total interrelations.<sup>101</sup>

This radical theory, which understands the difference between space and place not as hierarchical, but as ‘articulational’, is crucial for the exploration of a prefigurative, place-making, inhabited utopia — one which, in the words of Bell, must be “materialised ... without succumbing to closure”.<sup>102</sup> Bell apprehends this articulation of prefiguration in a mode echoing Levitas’ assertion that “Utopia must be continually reinvented” if it is to be employed as a “tool in the making of the future”.<sup>103</sup>

This utopianism is a form of prefigurative utopianism, but it is doubly/infinately so, for it is not prefigurative of any final form but rather of further prefiguration. We might paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of immanence to state that it

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98. Massey, *For Space*, p. 68.

99. Massey, *For Space*, pp. 184–5.

100. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 148.

101. See especially: Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, p. 198.

102. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 98.

103. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 220.

is ‘prefigurative only to itself, and leaves nothing to which it could be prefigurative’.

Such utopianism has no ‘Ultimum,’ no secret ‘end of history’ towards which it inexorably unfolds. It will never reach a state of beatic redemption. [...] it is a process of place-making, rather than an attempt to flee from place. It makes its flight create.<sup>104</sup>

Utopian place is thus certainly not a totalitarian blueprint for specific forms of happiness or perfection, but it is also not a constant struggle between the potentialities of utopian process and the (separate, distinct) closures immanent within the more traditional notion of place. Rather, it is produced *through the interrelation of place-making processes* that, as Bell has it, “*make place through their taking place*”.<sup>105</sup> In utopia, the temporal appears as a process of creative utopian flight, and as an anticipatory illumination which reveals the contours of a concrete utopianism in the future. In both these ways, utopian temporality constitutes, and is constituted by, the spatial. As Bell argues, utopia(n place) is a process constantly “unfolding from the present”<sup>106</sup> into a radically unknowable future. It is always (re)articulating a spatio-temporal place-moment which is utopia, but which could never and will never be completely articulated. Utopia, in this radical form, is undoubtedly a place — and is therefore anything but static, closed, or complete.

### *Commons as utopian places*

Massey’s conception of place as an articulation of lived narratives and processes can be applied to a variety of real-world places: among many examples in her work, Massey memorably examines the ‘place’ of a railway journey from London to Milton Keynes.<sup>107</sup> Following Massey, in this study I treat the term ‘the commons’ as a co-articulation of four interrelated modes:

1. *Spatial mode*: commons are physical spaces, created by human interrelations, distinguished by particular recurrent architectonic features, among which are a focus on accessibility, sharing, collective labour and communal flourishing, permeability

104. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 123. The key Deleuzian concept of *immanence* referenced by Bell emerges in opposition to transcendence; Deleuze argues that creation, transformation, and destruction all occur (immanently) within systems, rather than charting a beyond, outside, or after in relation to them. See: Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 253–6.

105. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 98.

106. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 123.

107. Massey, *For Space*, pp. 118–20.

and mutability of borders, and a decentralised internal structure.

2. *Ontological mode*: commons are generated by, and in turn (re)generate, acts of *commoning*. These are behaviours and modalities of individual and collective being which are, in the words of Massimo De Angelis, “participatory and non-hierarchical, motivated by ... the affective, material, immaterial, and cultural (re)production of the commoners and their relations”.<sup>108</sup> Commoning as a form of social reproduction is distinct from other forms of being together, such as the atomised and precarised form demanded by neoliberal late capitalism.
3. *Political-economic mode*: due to the fundamental differences between commons systems and the dominant late capitalist systems within which most commons, often even if they are exilic communities, are enmeshed, these structures articulate a political position in relation to capitalist political ideologies and narratives. As I shall show throughout this thesis, commons are often taken up as a spatial strategy of opposition, resistance, and activism.
4. *Temporal mode*: while commons exist in the present, they are very rarely focused only on the matter of survival in the present; rather, the processes of commoning and resistance which happen within them are directed towards a futural horizon, which is total and utopian, in part because commons politically seek to resist or escape the systems which surround them, and therefore offer alternative systems as ontological horizons.

In summary, commons are a *spatial, ontological, political-economic, and temporal system characterised by structures, narratives, activities, and ideologies of collective being*, of being in common.

Since its appearance in the fourteenth century referring to a particular form of space, the term ‘the commons’ has attracted a range of meanings, becoming more evocative and more fluid. Before the enacting of enclosure practices in Britain from the sixteenth century onwards, first by individual landowners and subsequently by acts of Parliament, the commons were areas of rural land set aside for crops, grazing, or gathering by inhabitants

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108. Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed Books, 2017), p. 120.

of nearby villages, or ‘commoners’. These commons were, largely, communally owned, or otherwise without legal owners and were communally managed, and were a vital resource for the livelihood of villagers in pre-Industrial Britain. The processes of enclosure saw almost all of these commons destroyed, fenced in, or otherwise placed into the hands of private owners, and communal access to them lastingly revoked — a long-term crisis event which many historians understand to be one of the central avenues for the expansion and consolidation of early industrial capitalist power in Britain and subsequently across Europe and the Global North.<sup>109</sup> With their commons enclosed, commoners could no longer support themselves on their rural land and were forced to seek work in urban centres, providing a necessary workforce for factories. Meanwhile, the commons themselves were increasingly converted, in England, into sheep pastures, which provided wool for an expanding global market. Thus, for Karl Marx, the process of enclosure was one of the central means by which the agrarian feudal economy was finally transformed into an industrial capitalist economy: “the systematic theft of communal property was of great assistance, alongside the theft of the state domains, ... in ‘setting free’ the agricultural population as a proletariat for the needs of industry”.<sup>110</sup> While agricultural and water commons continue to exist worldwide, particularly in the Global South, and especially in regards to the management of specific resource infrastructures, such as fisheries, irrigation systems, and pasture, enclosure has dominated the global history of modernity, being actively employed in the European colonial expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continuing to this day under the guise of neoliberal globalisation and mass privatisation.<sup>111</sup>

This historical understanding of the commons is central to the work and theory of economists including Garret Hardin, whose infamous phrase “tragedy of the commons” refers to the overuse and degradation of commons resources, and Elinor Ostrom, who challenged Hardin’s conception of the commons, arguing that managed and regulated

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109. For definitional work on the history of the commons, see: Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Vintage, 1966); J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760-1832* (Gloucester: Sutton, 1987); Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

110. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 878.

111. Elinor Ostrom addresses a wide range of functioning contemporary commons in her work, see: Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also: Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane, and Alex Vasudevan, ‘Rethinking Enclosure: Space, Subjectivity and the Commons’, *Antipode*, 44.4 (2012), 1247–67.

commons, which make up the majority of lasting commons, are far less likely to suffer from exploitation and overuse.<sup>112</sup> Hardin himself subsequently conceded that “the weightiest mistake in my synthesizing paper was the omission of the modifying adjective ‘unmanaged’”.<sup>113</sup> In the economic theoretical work of Ostrom, Hardin, and others, the commons are understood as “a particular form of property ownership”, within which are embedded two distinct terms: “common-pool property” and “common-pool resources”.<sup>114</sup> Common-pool resources which are necessary to or desired by humans, such as the air, water, fish, and trees, are rarely possible to sustainably manage without some form of property right which creates rules and relations between the resources and the resource users. While there are many forms of property rights, including limited-access private property, which create and uphold such relations, commons are a form of common-pool property, “based on collective rather than state or private ownership ... unowned and accessed by all or owned by a community and managed collectively”. In certain cases, “commons may even be privately owned but open to use by commoners”, which qualifies them as common-pool property as long as the access rights are upheld.<sup>115</sup> Some commons are open to all with the appropriate equipment, like the air, for which all one needs is a pair of lungs, or solar energy, for which one needs a solar panel, while others are “limited-access”, usable only by a more restricted group, like a single village or an association, and membership in the group is often controlled.<sup>116</sup>

This particular theorisation of the commons — a predominantly material spatial construction, delimited (by boundaries) from the non-common space around it, which necessitates certain legal, economic, and social agreements to guarantee its continued existence — could be called the *traditional* view of commons. Contemporary theorists in a variety of fields have complicated this notion to various degrees. Commons historians like Derek Wall concentrate almost solely on the commons as a spatial resource and property right. By example, although Wall mentions the open source software movement, copyleft

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112. Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’; Ostrom.

113. Garrett Hardin, ‘Extensions of “The Tragedy of the Commons”’, *Science*, 280.5364 (1998), 682–83.

114. Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), pp. 2, 5.

115. Wall, p. 6.

116. Wall, pp. 6–7.

licensing, hip-hop sampling, and a few other examples, he does not attempt to widen the parameters of his theoretical scope to relocate these examples in a space which could productively include spatial, immaterial, genetic, and other commons without attempting to apply traditional commons theory to these incompatible forms.<sup>117</sup> Wall does, however, mention Massimo De Angelis, who has recently proposed a conception of the commons far more in line with Massey's productive understanding of space.

For De Angelis in *Omnia Sunt Communia* (2017), the commons is a tripartite system consisting of a networked interplay of people, resources, and activity — “a plurality of people (a community) sharing resources and governing them and their own relations and (re)production processes through horizontal doing in common, commoning”. The clear definition and delineation of these three elements from each other makes De Angelis's work on the commons particularly valuable. These elements are: a pool or pools of material or immaterial resources (the *commonwealth*); a *community* of commoners willing to provide material or immaterial labour; and the critical process called *commoning*, which ties the commonwealth to the community and vice versa. For De Angelis, the term *commoning* “captures the labour and interaction that are necessary to reproduce the commons system”:<sup>118</sup>

Commoning is the form of social doing (social labour) occurring within the domain of the commons, and thus is characterised by modes of production, distribution and governance of the commons that are participatory and non-hierarchical, motivated by the values of the commons (re)production, of the (re)production of commoners' commonwealth and of the affective, material, immaterial and cultural (re)production of the commoners and their relations.<sup>119</sup>

De Angelis's work has further value because, unlike more traditional work on the commons, it is explicitly political. De Angelis writes on “the commons turn”, the “alignment of social movements to the commons”, whether this involves the direct defence of an existing commons such as Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013) or “the use of the commons as an organisational model of struggle”, such as in the case of the Occupy Movement.<sup>120</sup> Unlike

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117. Wall, pp. 98–99.

118. De Angelis, pp. 10, 119, 122.

119. De Angelis, p. 120.

120. De Angelis, p. 10.

Wall, who writes that “commons are not (as some seem to suggest) a utopian alternative to systems based on private property”,<sup>121</sup> De Angelis aligns himself explicitly with Marxist theory of revolution. He argues that commons, as a fundamentally anti-capitalist form of social existence (as has been demonstrated by their centuries-long expropriation by capitalism), when they are oriented towards a networked expansion of commoning processes across social, political, and ecological fields, “represent a meaningful challenge to capitalist processes and statist’s neoliberal policies”.<sup>122</sup> The systematic and political expansion of a definition of commons in the work of De Angelis and other recent theorists has allowed us to understand a far wider range of systems as contemporary commons, insofar that all of these systems share the aspects of commonwealth, community, and commoning. In Chapter Three I will position poetry and literature as commons; in Chapters Four and Five will look at commoning in urban spaces; and in Chapter Six suggest that even immortality can be understood as a commons.

For De Angelis, the most utopian function of the commons is the way in which it promotes and maintains radical modes of social reproduction — the Marxist term for the processes and structures which create and support labouring bodies, including domestic life, childcare, education, healthcare, and sex work. Social reproduction commons hold a profoundly future-oriented, utopian potential:

Although commons exist in the here and now, their further development and interlacing would also enable us to respond to the inevitable crisis of capital and climate disaster in ways that amplify commons autonomy vis-à-vis capital and the top-down logic of states. One broad group of commons activities, I think, needs to have a privileged role to play [...] that is, all those activities that serve the immediate purpose of reproducing life, both of human beings and of nature.<sup>123</sup>

De Angelis thus differs from the traditional view of commoning in three key areas, each of which is championed by a particular school of commons theorists, but which are rarely argued for together. Firstly, he understands commons as a *system* consisting of a community, a pool of common resources, and practices and strategies of commoning;

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121. Wall, p. 3.

122. De Angelis, pp. 11–12.

123. De Angelis, p. 13.



secondly, he understands commons as an anti-capitalist mode of social reproduction; and thirdly, because he understands commons as systems, he locates them within a set of interlinked environments, both material and immaterial — the ground from which the commons system grows.

This theorisation expands significantly, and usefully, on the more traditional understanding of the commons solely as “a territorially defined space”.<sup>124</sup> As Dawney, Kirwan, and Brigstocke argue, a contemporary politics of the commons “needs to expand the sites, spaces and temporalities of practices of commoning, just as practices of enclosure are constantly finding new objects of commodification”.<sup>125</sup> Moving away from a space called ‘the commons’ to a process or practice called ‘commoning’ allows for the inclusion of intangible, temporal, knowledge-based, and non-anthropocentric forms under the general form of commoning. As I have argued in this chapter, the foregrounding of commoning as a process — as with the foregrounding of any process — does not do away with a conception of the commons as the *site* of an iterative, spatially oriented process which could be termed ‘prefigurative utopian inhabiting’ or ‘commoning’. Indeed, we can paraphrase Massey by asserting that instead of thinking of the commons as “areas with boundaries around”, we could imagine them as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understanding are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself”.<sup>126</sup> Commons, like all places, are articulations of particular social processes (in this case, commoning processes) at a particular moment in time, embedded within, but also reciprocally generative of, wider environments. This, in turn, allows the discourse on commons to turn away from an understanding of the commons as a space at constant risk of “the spectre of its enclosure”,<sup>127</sup> and towards understanding the commons as an oppositional spatio-temporal structure which itself challenges enclosure practices. This lays the foundation for a further theorisation of the commons as a utopian

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124. Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan, and Julian Brigstocke, ‘Introduction: The Promise of the Commons’, in *Space, Power and the Commons: The Struggle for Alternative Futures*, ed. by Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan, and Julian Brigstocke (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–27 (p. 19).

125. Dawney, Kirwan, and Brigstocke, pp. 19–21.

126. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, p. 198.

127. Dawney, Kirwan, and Brigstocke, p. 21.

site, and for commoning as an explicitly utopian process.

In the Introduction I noted the work of Haiven, who works at the intersection of utopian and commons theory, in relation to the concept of the radical imagination. Employing a typology similar to De Angelis's, Haiven argues that the commons comprise three factors: *actuality*, the material and social makeup of really existing commons systems; *ethos*, the values and dispositions upon which processes of commoning are based; and *horizon*, "the conjecture of a future society based on ... our present-day lived experience and on the hopes, dreams, aspirations, and goals that emerge from our practices".<sup>128</sup> Haiven's tripartite theorisation is very similar to Lefebvre's conception of perceived, conceived, and lived space, and to Massey's idea of articulated space, wherein these three categories are blended into a single flowing system. The development of the horizon of the commons, for Haiven, is manifestly utopian, restating the concept of 'bringing back' I explained in the Introduction:

The horizon of the common in this sense is not so much our capacity to perfectly map a future society, but our ability to hold the future open. More accurately, it is our ability to travel, through collective acts of the imagination, into the future and 'bring back' the resources to enable us to struggle in the present. [...] We exercise this utopian imagination not to envision an end-point of our struggle, but as a way to bring into greater clarity the structures and patterns of our *present day* society and organizations.<sup>129</sup>

Haiven puts it most elegantly in another paper: "There will never be a common *common enough*".<sup>130</sup>

The horizon of the commons thus has three functions. Firstly, it constructs the desires and plans of a commons in the present and creates a narrative of their achievements, building upon what Haiven characterises as an archive of "commoning memory ... an always already unfinished process of recalling the past as a means toward solidarity".<sup>131</sup> Secondly, in the present, the commons horizon allows commons to delineate themselves

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128. Max Haiven, 'Commons as Actuality, Ethos, and Horizon', in *Educational Commons in Theory and Practice: Global Pedagogy and Politics*, ed. by Alexander J. Means, Derek Ford, and Graham B. Slater (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 23–38 (p. 30).

129. Haiven, 'Commons as Actuality, Ethos, and Horizon', p. 32.

130. Max Haiven, 'Are Your Children Old Enough to Learn About May '68?: Recalling the Radical Event, Refracting Utopia, and Commoning Memory', *Cultural Critique*, 78.1 (2011), 60–87 (p. 83).

131. Haiven, 'Are Your Children Old Enough to Learn About May '68?', p. 83.

clearly, via narrative and ethos, from capitalist forms of social and material reproduction. Thirdly, the commons horizon is utopian, imagining an ever more common future towards which commons direct their productive energies. To definitively reach this horizon, as Bell argues, is to court the closure of imagination and possibility. Instead, commoning practices, as concrete utopian methodologies in the ongoing future, are a form of utopian prefiguration which prefigure only further prefiguration: further commoning and further productive inhabiting of utopian space which aims for, but never attains, the commons which is common enough.

## **Conclusion**

In mapping out the contemporary debates around utopia, spatial theory, and the commons, this chapter has moved through a century of transformations in the ways we live, relate to our societies and environments, and desire better worlds. Rejecting the idea of utopia as a perfect space created by a top-down authority, I have shown that contemporary utopian theory is developed by a diverse and critical field of theorists ranging from a variety of theoretical schools — affect theory, sociology, literary theory, queer theory, Marxist political theory, and geocriticism chief among these. Although few major utopian theorists have engaged fully with the parameters of utopian spatiality, recent work has suggested that space in utopia can be methodological, politically engaged, and imaginative — and the commons are an example of one such utopian space. If this chapter can be conceived of as an extended discussion on contemporary forms of spatiality — in particular, on the commons as the most oppositional and utopian of such forms — the next chapter will address the temporality of the present period: a time of precarity, crisis, surplus, and utopian potential which emerges as a challenge to these forms.

## Chapter Two

### Escaping the Present: Precarity and surplus in a time of crisis

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” *is* the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Thus Strindberg (in *To Damascus?*): hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter reads the decade from 2008 to 2019 as an *ongoing present*: a lasting, formless time of precarity and everyday crisis. Basing my argument on the work of Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and Isabell Lorey, I read the multiplicity of contemporary crises in the ongoing present as a *surplus* — of precarity, riot, capitalist production, populations, and cultural forms — which opens unexpected fissures in the seemingly impregnable surface of neoliberal late capitalism for commons utopias to emerge. In charting this argument, I draw on a Marxist analysis of the 2013 film *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho), a proto-utopian text which helps us to think through the character of the ongoing present. The theoretical work of this chapter clarifies my analysis of commons poetics in the chapters to follow, primarily through a strategy of negation. By examining where *Snowpiercer* falls short of utopia, I reveal the commons poetics which other texts must implement to produce what I have identified in the previous chapter as commons utopias: spaces which are collectively produced, politically engaged with the present, and prefigure utopian futures, dismantling the capitalist present from within rather than escaping it completely.

#### The ongoing present

This thesis and Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) share a discursive project — to conceive of “a contemporary moment from within that moment”.<sup>2</sup> Berlant christens this moment the

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1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 473.

2. Berlant, p. 4.

“ongoing present”, an affective, phenomenological sense of the *now* along with gestures and refractions of “near pasts and near futures”, which she derives and adapts from Alain Badiou’s and Gilles Deleuze’s theories of the present and the event.<sup>3</sup> As for Badiou, Berlant’s ongoing present is affective insofar as it is experienced by its inhabitants; it “makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back”.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Badiou’s *event*, which shocks and motivates its subjects into radically self-aware action, the ongoing present lacks an ethical imperative and thus cannot be meaningfully complete; its key discursive registers are volatility, precariousness, emergence, and everydayness.<sup>5</sup> The ongoing present is a useful concept because it gestures towards the formless time of “the recent, the now, and the next” within which humans continue to survive and adapt to a constant stream of changing situations which never appear to amount to something that could be coherently understood as an ‘era’ or ‘age’, a “stretched out ‘now’ that is at once intimate and estranged”.<sup>6</sup> ‘Historical time’, on the other hand, is understood as if it were possible to stand outside it and observe it as an arrow moving forward, constructed from individual, distinctive events leading to the present moment. The ongoing present is a “stretch of time that is being sensed and shaped”, rather than *determined* or *produced*, unlike the historical present, which is materially-historically conditioned by overarching forces, whether in the guise of the actions of influential individuals; Hegel’s *Geist*; or Marxist class struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Bodies experience the ongoing present as a glitch, impasse, or loop. A *glitch* — such as a stutter on a video tape, a momentary forgetting, or the way in which a body or political class is forced to adapt to everyday crisis — is an interruption amidst the transition of time, a felt encounter with the sense of being outside historical progression, which brings our

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3. Berlant, p. 5, n. 9.

4. Berlant, p. 4.

5. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: A&C Black, 2007).

6. Berlant, pp. 5, 15.

7. Berlant, p. 199. For a critique of concepts of the present and its relation to modernity, see: Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002). For more on historical time, see: Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 253–64; Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Laurent Olivier, ‘The Past of the Present. Archaeological Memory and Time’, *Archaeological Dialogues*, 10.2 (2004), 204–13.

attention to the inconsistencies and inequalities of the present.<sup>8</sup> Berlant writes in a similar mode of the *impasse*, a destabilising and unstructuring “delay that demands activity” within the normal passage of time:

The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation.<sup>9</sup>

Crucial in these lines is Berlant’s insistence that the *impasse* or glitch, which traps us within the present and stretches it out so it never transforms into a historical time, also provides a venue for oppositional political action, paradoxically allowing individual subjects to shape and manipulate the present in ways which the grand narrative sweep of historical time does not permit them to do.

Berlant draws the temporal contours of the ongoing present from the early 1990s to 2011, when *Cruel Optimism* was published, and I extend its temporal scope to the present of 2016–2019 during which I wrote this thesis. The social, political, and affective contours of the ongoing present are derived from several interconnected historical tendencies. In brief, these are: the consolidation of post-Fordist, immaterial labour as the dominant labour form in the global economy; the replacement of liberal forms of governance via discipline and surveillance with neoliberal modes of control and self-precarisation;<sup>10</sup> and the collapse, particularly in the Global North, of faith in the narratives of the “good life ... upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” alongside the meritocracy which upheld it, “the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something”.<sup>11</sup> The latter two of the transformations will be familiar from my exploration, in the previous chapter, of the collapse of faith in utopia since the 1980s. Lastly, as I have indicated in the Introduction, the effects

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8. Berlant, p. 198.

9. Berlant, p. 199.

10. These transitions will be discussed below. On new forms of governmentality under neoliberalism, see especially: Nicholas Gane, ‘The Governmentalities of Neoliberalism: Panopticism, Post-Panopticism and Beyond’, *The Sociological Review*, 60.4 (2012), 611–34.

11. Berlant, p. 3.

of anthropogenic climate change are also beginning to exert a deleterious effect on global social security, political stability, and belief in better modes of life. At the individual scale, the effects of climate change take on an appearance Hunter Lovins refers to as “global weirding” — a play on words which captures the increasingly unpredictable, untimely, and alien behaviour of the planet’s hitherto comprehensible climate system.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these transformations reveal the ongoing present as a time dominated and conditioned by precariousness, vulnerability, endangerment, and contingency, disassociated from the temporal and spatial frameworks which had historically contained its inhabitants, and exposing them instead to a radical instability which permeates all levels of life.

*Neoliberalism* is the key historical development whose effects on producing and maintaining the ongoing present are charted in *Cruel Optimism*. As I have noted in Chapter One, the complex and interconnected set of ideological, economic, political, and social relations included within this umbrella term, developed in the 1970s, expanded globally in the 80s and 90s and, in the decade since the GFC, has become a key part of contemporary everyday life, particularly in the Global North. Berlant associates this economic and political force with other developments stemming from evolutions in the modes of capitalist production, distribution, and labour over the last forty years, describing this collection of linked systems in powerful and barely guarded terms:

[T]he volatile here and now of that porous domain of hyperexploitive entrepreneurial atomism that has been variously dubbed globalization, liberal sovereignty, late capitalism, post-Fordism, or neoliberalism. It is a scene of mass but not collective activity. It is a scene in which the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life. Communities, when they exist, are at best fragile and contingent.<sup>13</sup>

12. For a very early use of ‘global weirding’, see: Raver, Anne, ‘Bananas in the Backyard’, *The New York Times*, 2002 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/07/garden/nature-bananas-in-the-backyard.html>> [accessed 2 February 2018]. For subsequent responses, see: John Waldman, ‘With Temperatures Rising, Here Comes “Global Weirding”’, *Yale Environment 360*, 2009 <[http://e360.yale.edu/features/with\\_temperatures\\_rising\\_here\\_comes\\_global\\_weirding](http://e360.yale.edu/features/with_temperatures_rising_here_comes_global_weirding)> [accessed 13 January 2018]; Thomas L. Friedman, ‘Global Weirding Is Here’, *The New York Times*, 2010 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/opinion/17friedman.html>> [accessed 13 January 2018]; John Sweeney, ‘Signs of Postnormal Times’, *East-West Affairs: A Quarterly Journal of North-South Relations in Postnormal Times*, 1.3/4 (2013), 5–12.

13. Berlant, p. 165.



Berlant's definition of neoliberalism indexes a number of features which I shall examine in this and later chapters: the alienation of subjects from each other and their communities; the biopolitical management and instrumentalisation of economic and social inequality; and the imbrication of these practices within even the most intimate and fundamental forms of contemporary life.

Perhaps because of its deep integration into the lifeworld, neoliberalism has become a so-called "rascal concept" deployed by critics who are "often divided over issues of definition, origin and provenance".<sup>14</sup> More traditional definitions have focused on its economic and political features. Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade".<sup>15</sup> In Will Davies's reading, neoliberalism alienates individuals and communities from any sense of control over their own lives and the workings of their political systems, under the auspices of replacing these democratic systems with 'common sense' economic relations: "the central defining characteristic of all neoliberal critique is its hostility to the ambiguity of political discourse, and a commitment to the explicitness and transparency of quantitative, economic indicators, of which the market price system is the model. Neoliberalism is the *pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics*".<sup>16</sup> More sociologically oriented theorists, such as Berlant, have begun to highlight the ways in which this political philosophy also serves as a vector for the transmission of specific forms of life, relation, reproduction, and tradition. Wendy Brown focuses on the ways in which neoliberalism transforms previously social relations into economic ones, becoming "a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*". The project of *homo oeconomicus* is "to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit

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14. Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, 'Reanimating Neoliberalism: Process Geographies of Neoliberalisation', *Social Anthropology*, 20.2 (2012), 177–85 (p. 178).

15. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

16. William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2017), pp. 5–6.

rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence”.<sup>17</sup> These theorists all agree that the neoliberal actor is forced to continually self-promote, self-manage, and self-improve, while becoming increasingly alienated from their communities and the political discourses of the social worlds in which they live.

Neoliberalism is, in this sense, a vector for the insertion of capitalist alienation not only into the worker/labour and worker/worker relations, but into the core relation between the human being and their way of life. Those who fail to self-invest under neoliberal control are swept through the cracks of the capitalist social order and are ultimately exposed to death, an argument I shall return to in Chapter Six. Everybody else must live in a constant state of low-level, everyday crisis and precariousness, unable to generate those social frameworks required to collectively and fundamentally improve their material circumstances — existing only in the glitch or impasse which characterises the lived experience of the ongoing present. As a result, I argue, a key consequence of the global institution of an increasingly total and impregnable neoliberal system has been the ascendancy of *precarity* to a central role in the socio-political sphere.

As neoliberal precarity has become a dominant factor of lived experience, a range of critical work has examined an emergent *literature of precarity* in novels, film, graphic novels, comics, and poetry.<sup>18</sup> Sieglinde Lemke opens a large-scale study of poverty and precarity in American culture with the claim that, since 2008, “Americans have increasingly confronted the (structural) inequalities that have grown with globalization”, particularly in relation to the perceived failure of the narrative of the American Dream to enact lasting transformation for the majority of Americans.<sup>19</sup> The next section will turn to another fictional representation of precarity, which eschews the focus on individual subjectivities and realist aesthetics noted by Lemke and others, but which instead deploys an imaginary of neoliberal precarity as a totalising system taken to its lurid, apocalyptic extremes.

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17. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 30, 31–32.

18. See especially: *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014); Sieglinde Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Liam Connell, *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Tony Hughes-d'Aeth and Golnar Nabizadeh, 'Fiction in the Age of Risk', *Textual Practice*, 31.3 (2017), 439–42.

19. Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty, and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, p. 1.

### ***Snowpiercer*: the ongoing present in extremis**

The 2013 film *Snowpiercer*, directed by Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho, written by Bong and Kelly Masterson, was widely heralded, upon its release, as a rare Hollywood blockbuster which functioned as an allegory for, and critique of, the workings of contemporary neoliberal capitalism in an era of ongoing crisis.<sup>20</sup> The film's post-apocalyptic imaginary is constructed from the grim interplay of the four central crises of the past decade I have identified in the Introduction (the GFC; the crisis of growing precarity, representational democracy, and financial volatility which, in part, precipitated the "Year of the Protester"; the Syrian refugee crisis; and the climate crisis). This use of a wide-ranging contemporary historical context, alongside the film's allegorical political commentary on late capitalism's conditioning of spatiality (as violently segmented and bordered by capitalist relations) and temporality (as a glitching, inescapable ongoing present), identify *Snowpiercer* as a paradigmatic social and political critique of the last decade. Its premise is absurd and its tone swings wildly between campy schlock horror and grim social realism. Yet, despite these inconsistencies, *Snowpiercer* functions as a remarkable warning about the future capitalism has in store for the planet.

The crisis of representational democracy in *Snowpiercer* is epitomised by the revolution which underpins the film's plot; Bong himself has explicitly commented that his film is "similar to Occupy Wall Street in terms of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent".<sup>21</sup> The climate crisis conditions and delimits the film's imaginary world: for all but its final shot, *Snowpiercer* is set within the eponymous train, which has, for eighteen years, travelled on an year-long, cyclical journey around the Earth, rendered wholly frozen and inhospitable by the runaway effect of chemicals dispersed into the atmosphere to reverse the effects of global warming. Were the train to stop moving, the remnants of humanity living inside

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20. See: Richard Lawson, 'Snowpiercer Is the Must-See of the Summer', *Vanity Fair*, 2014 <<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/06/snowpiercer-review>> [accessed 6 November 2019]; John Semley, 'Snowpiercer: Keeps Its Message Straight Forward', *The Globe and Mail*, 2014 <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/snowpiercer-keeps-its-message-straight-forward/article19665190/>> [accessed 6 November 2019]; Peter Frase, 'Smash the Engine', *Jacobin*, 2014 <<https://jacobinmag.com/2014/07/smash-the-engine>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

21. Neda Ulaby, 'In "Snowpiercer," A Never-Ending Train Ride and A Society Badly Off Track', *NPR*, 2014 <<http://www.npr.org/2014/06/29/326154752/in-snowpiercer-a-never-ending-train-ride-and-a-society-badly-off-track>> [accessed 13 November 2016].

would freeze to death. Lastly, refugee narratives inform the film's backstory: not only does *Snowpiercer* bear a population of climate refugees who are permanently on the move, but recollections by its inhabitants of the beginning of its journey bring to mind historical images of desperate refugees boarding trains to escape wars and other disasters, alongside far darker images of Jews and other *Untermensch* being taken to concentration camps:

CURTIS: You ever been to the Tail Section? Do you even know what went on back there?

No? Chaos. Total fucking chaos when we boarded. [...] More than a thousand people in an empty iron box with no water, no bread, nothing. Can you imagine? No, you can't.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 1.** This image of the *Snowpiercer*'s annual track, signposted with a sequence of American and international holidays, highlights the fact that the train's journey is temporal as much as it is spatial, containing within its cyclical route the entirety of the ongoing present.

In the sense that *Snowpiercer* does function as an allegory for capitalism, the particular *form* of capitalism it depicts is specifically that of the late contemporary ongoing present, complete with modes of neo-colonial domination of the Global South by the Global North. The train is spatially divided. The rearmost carriages house a captive population, whose members are racially diverse and, in many cases, physically disabled, living in extreme poverty and surviving on handouts of protein bars, and whose children are occasionally kidnapped and taken by force to the front by the train's military personnel. Their captivity is enforced

22. Bong Joon-ho, *Snowpiercer* (The Weinstein Company, 2013).

by the Snowpiercer's mysterious owner, the soft-spoken, white, middle-aged Wilford, who tends to the Engine at the front of the train. Just behind the Engine is a small section of machinery — the Engine is so efficient that the traditional industrial working class required to manage it has almost disappeared. The next carriages consist of the idle bourgeoisie and the spaces of care, entertainment and leisure provided for them — childcare, saunas, salons, and raves — within which seemingly content service workers provide affective and immaterial labour. The middle carriages contain the train's infrastructural needs — hydroponic farms, butcheries, and insect processing machines.<sup>23</sup> While the rear section may at first appear to be “freeloaders” who contribute no value to the Snowpiercer, as they are described by the front section authorities, we soon learn that the labour they produce is *reproductive* — their kidnapped children are literally and grotesquely instrumentalised to replace worn down mechanical components in the Engine. As Fred Lee and Steven Manicaster perceptively highlight, this dystopian aspect of the train's world-system is particularly evocative of neocolonial labour relations under late capitalism:

Global North/West post-industrial economies (represented by service workers in the head section of the train) find their conditions of possibility in Global South underdeveloped economies (represented by child slaves from the tail section) [...] In ways evocative of our worldsystem, the train system instrumentalizes subaltern bare life to support the dominant's post-industrial lifeways.<sup>24</sup>

The Snowpiercer, then, as Wilford remarks, is a “closed ecological system”, a perfect functioning model, in miniature, of the social and political frameworks of the contemporary world, protected by a thick steel shell from humanity's double folly of causing global warming and then attempting to reverse it. Within the Snowpiercer, the crises of the past decades never happened and, with a few minor adjustments, life goes on for the remains of humanity in much the same way as it did — for each section in its own way — prior to society's collapse.

As the film's narrative unfolds, the population of the rear rise up and take over the train

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23. The film's interlinking of food and overpopulation harks back to previous dystopian sf texts such as *The Wanting Seed* (Anthony Burgess, 1962), *Logan's Run* (dir. Michael Anderson, 1976), and *Cloud Atlas* (David Mitchell, 2004), but especially *Soylent Green* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1973) and its sensationalised revelation that the eponymous foodstuff is made of people (*Snowpiercer's* protein bars are made of insects, but cannibalism is a central theme in the film).
24. Fred Lee and Steven Manicaster, ‘Not All Are Aboard: Decolonizing Exodus in Joon-Ho Bong's *Snowpiercer*’, *New Political Science*, 40.2 (2018), 211–26 (pp. 6, 8–9).



carriage by carriage. They are led by the charismatic revolutionary Curtis and by their Marxist belief that if “we control the engine, we control the world”. The revolutionaries are helped in their endeavour by two liberated prisoners: Namgoong Minsoo, the designer of the security doors which have kept the rear passengers from successfully seizing control of the train, and his half-Korean, half-Inuit daughter Yona. When Curtis, Namgoong, and Yona finally arrive at the Engine, Curtis meets Wilford, who explains that the closed ecosystem of the train only functions by undergoing routine orchestrated revolutions which keep population growth in check, guaranteeing life for all onboard.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Namgoong reveals that he had been helping the revolutionaries not in an attempt to depose Wilford, but so he could blow open the train’s door to the outside world and escape with Yona. The explosion derails the train and kills all in the front carriage — and presumably the entire train — except for Yona and the African American child Tim. Together, Yona and Tim walk into the snowy landscape, where they see a polar bear, the first wild animal in the film. The final shot lingers upon its gaze.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 2.** A composite of the final shots of *Snowpiercer*.

25. This tactic has much in common with those traced by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*, wherein neoliberal power, since the 1970s, has capitalised on crisis and instability to cement itself in spaces from which it was previously exempt. See: Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

26. The film’s story is based on the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, 1982), from whose Cold War-era storyline it significantly differs — in the original, the snowball Earth is the result of a nuclear winter, and rather than attempting to seize control of the train’s engine, the revolutionaries seek to disconnect the rear cars from the Engine, thus gaining absolute freedom from the system which oppresses them — but at risk of freezing to death.

This ending — violent, surreal, anti-colonial, and post-human — has divided critical opinion. A number of critics have dismissed *Snowpiercer*'s vision of opposition and revolution as lacking in utopian impulse and falling short of a true representation of class struggle, promoting a destructive escape in preference to either reform or traditional class-based revolution.<sup>27</sup> In these readings, *Snowpiercer*'s oppositional energy is wasted, not only because the entire revolt is revealed to have been orchestrated by the capitalist class, but also because the train's destruction suggests that the only way to escape the contemporary capitalist crisis is by annihilating society wholesale. In this negation of revolution, the film sharply underscores Jameson's anti-utopian contention that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.<sup>28</sup> *Snowpiercer*'s utopian impulse becomes more apparent, however, when the train's restive rear section population are seen outside the traditional, nineteenth-century framework of class struggle. Some critics have come to this conclusion in a partial form; for instance, Aaron Bady notes that the rear section population are "so obviously extraneous to the operation of the train that they cannot stand for an exploited proletariat in the classical sense. They do not seem to provide anything with their labor, because they do not seem to labor".<sup>29</sup> Bady's critique falls short in two ways; firstly, as I have argued above, the rear section *do* labour in the sense of producing child slaves, although it is accurate to say that classical Marxist theory itself fails to recognise social reproduction as a key component of labour.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, while they rightly cannot be understood as an exploited proletariat, they exemplify a newly emerging social category which has been called the *precarariat*. The following section reads this group as the defining subject category of the ongoing present — in our real world as well as that of *Snowpiercer*.

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27. Matthew Snyder, 'Snowpiercer: Speak, Memory, Occupy', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2014 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/snowpiercer-speak-memory-occupy/#!>> [accessed 13 November 2016]; Aaron Bady, 'A Snowpiercer Thinkpiece, Not to Be Taken Too Seriously, but for Very Serious Reasons', *The New Inquiry*, 2014 <<http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/a-snowpiercer-thinkpiece-not-to-be-taken-too-seriously-but-for-very-serious-reasons-or-the-worst-revenge-is-a-living-will/>> [accessed 13 November 2016].

28. Jameson, 'Future City', p. 76.

29. Bady.

30. For a contemporary critique of the role of social reproduction labour in classical Marxist theory, see: *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. by Tithi Bhattacharya and Liselotte Vogel (London: Pluto Press, 2017).



### From precariousness to precarity and precarisation

The etymological source of the word ‘precarious’ is the Latin word *prex*, also the root of the English word ‘pray’, and in its earliest formation it can therefore be translated as ‘held or obtained solely by prayer or entreaty’. As a legal term in Early Modern English, the meaning of ‘precarious’ was broadened to mean “vulnerable to the will or decision of others”, and in contemporary language has become synonymous with concepts such as “exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable”.<sup>31</sup> Much like the word ‘utopian’, then, ‘precarious’ can mean two very different things. In the negative meaning, a life which is precarious is vulnerable and at risk; in the neutral meaning, it is simply contingent on the choices of others — whatever those may be. For a life or an existence to be contingent — and thus to exist within a network or set of interrelationships — does not mean that it is necessarily at risk. As early as 1755, Samuel Johnson complained: “No word is more unskilfully used than this with its derivatives. It is used for *uncertain* in all its senses; but it only means uncertain, as dependent on others”.<sup>32</sup> As Johnson notes, the existence of a contingent life is endangered *only* if the other ontological relations which condition its existence are endangering. This chapter will return to the root of ‘precarious’, understanding it to mean ‘contingent’, but will do so while exploring precisely which conditions and processes of contemporary life have made the words ‘contingent’ and ‘endangered’ come together to appear synonymous within the matrix of the word’s second meaning.

The topics of precariousness and precarity have, over the last decade, gained significant ground in contemporary popular and academic discourse. Major 2000s social justice movements, particularly the Global Justice Movement and the EuroMayDay network, have employed the language of precarity to challenge increasingly unstable working and living conditions for widespread sectors of the global population, particularly those workers performing the affective and immaterial labour so prized by neoliberal late capitalism.<sup>33</sup> In response to these and other evocations of anti-precarity, Guy Standing

31. ‘Precarious’, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2018 <<https://oed.com/view/Entry/149548>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

32. Samuel Johnson, ‘A Dictionary of the English Language’, 2019 <[http://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/?page\\_id=7070&i=1549](http://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/?page_id=7070&i=1549)> [accessed 3 December 2019].

33. ‘Affective labour’ in this context refers to labour which requires the instrumentalisation of emotions, care, intimacy; ‘immaterial labour’ encompasses forms of labour in post-Fordist economies which produce information, content, organisation, and cognition rather than

has introduced the term “precariat”, which references the proletariat previously enslaved by Fordist capitalism, but draws together into one category those labourers who find themselves situationally precarious, irrespective of class, racial, gender, or other identitarian characteristics. Standing argues that members of the precariat — like the “freeloaders” of the *Snowpiercer*’s rear section — are united by a number of features: they survive through “insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment or labour-force withdrawal” and gain income solely through wages (the rear section population, in fact, are not allowed to work at all); have a supplicatory relationship with state power wherein they are “criticized, pitied, demonized, sanctioned or penalized in turn”; perform a large amount of unpaid labour; lack labour-derived identities; have a very low potential for social mobility (in the case of *Snowpiercer*, any mobility); are often overqualified for the very basic labour they perform; are forced to leave themselves exposed to crises and adverse events; and lastly, are victim to ‘poverty traps’, wherein the labour and time they must expend to find employment far outstrip the benefits employment would bring.<sup>34</sup>

While anti-precarity movements work to oppose and survive *precarity*, the category of *precariousness* is of a different order, and the distinction between the two is crucial to understanding forms of life in the ongoing present. Butler has been investigating precariousness since the early 2000s, originally using the language of ‘livability’ and ‘vulnerability’. In *Precarious Life* (2004), she writes: “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies ... Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing

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traditional material goods. See: Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Immaterial Labour’, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 133–47. For more on these terms, especially the feminist critique of the subsumption of the former under the latter despite their marked distinctions, see: Kathi Weeks, ‘Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics’, *Ephemera*, 7.1 (2007), 233–49; Angela McRobbie, ‘Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime’, *New Formations*, 70.4 (2011), 60–76. For genealogies of precarity movements since the 1980s, see: *The New Social Division: Making and Unmaking Precariousness*, ed. by Donatella della Porta and others (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, ‘Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25.7–8 (2008), 51–72; Maribel Casas-Cortés, ‘A Genealogy of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and Out of the Workplace’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 26.2 (2014), 206–26.

34. Guy Standing, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); see also: Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure”.<sup>35</sup> Butler further unpacks this line of thought in *Frames of War* (2009), which opens with an exhortation: “if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging” — certainly not a narrow scope upon which to base a body of inquiry.<sup>36</sup> Here and throughout her philosophical work, Butler understands precariousness as an immanent precondition of the existence of a living body: *all that is alive is precarious*. Furthermore, she ties it closely to her use of the terms ‘vulnerability’ and ‘interdependency’. Precariousness — injurability, vulnerability, exposure — is never an individual condition, but is always plural, social, and shared. Butler articulates this most clearly in *Frames of War*, where precariousness is defined as “living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other”. Rather than “relations of love or even of care”, precariousness constitutes “obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who ‘we’ are”. These obligations and networks are intrinsically political: “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces [...] The more or less existential conception of ‘precariousness’ is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of ‘precarity’”.<sup>37</sup> We can conclude that while *precariousness*, for Butler, is an ontological condition, *precarity* is a political structure, the result of a set of interconnected relations which have, since the modern period, supplemented the original, immanent conditioning of human lives.

In *State of Insecurity* (2015), Isabell Lorey significantly extends Butler’s philosophy of precariousness. Lorey reads this term, like Butler, as a “socio-ontological dimension of lives and bodies”, but places it within a framework which relates it clearly to the “category of order” called *precarity* and the “modes of governing since the formation of

35. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 20.

36. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 2.

37. Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 13-14, 3.

industrial capitalist conditions” called *precarisation*. Lorey defines precariousness as “a condition inherent to both human and non-human being” which is “not simply individual or something that exists ‘in itself’ in the philosophical sense; it is always relational and therefore shared *with* other precarious lives”.<sup>38</sup> The *relational* nature of precariousness is crucial to Lorey’s philosophical project. For Lorey, precariousness is “a multiply insecure constituting of bodies, which is always socially conditioned. As that which is shared, which is at once divisive and connective, precariousness denotes a *relational difference*, a *shared differentness*”.<sup>39</sup>

Lorey’s use of ‘shared’ does not imply that a living body experiences equally any of the modes or conditions which other bodies experience. Rather, precariousness itself is *universal* and *interrelational*: universal in the sense that it is immanent to the condition of being alive; interrelational because it is networks of relations, rather than individual beings, which give it shape. In this way, precariousness presents as a point of contact and interface between different individual lives, and thus as the foundation for the development of a commons utopianism. Ontologically speaking, the key product of a developed recognition of precariousness is that it prevents the reductive ontological formation of an individual subject as ‘complete’ — the individual is necessarily commoned and distributed because they are precarious. This conception of the individual productively does away with the socio-political narrative which argues that what makes lives vulnerable is (1) undesirable in a better formation of society; and (2) possible to eradicate entirely though external systems as international aid, the welfare state, neoliberal self-fashioning, or the newly popular concept of universal basic income.<sup>40</sup> As Lorey reminds us, “[t]he assumption that life, because it is precarious and endangered, because it is exposed to an existential vulnerability, must be or even could be legally or otherwise entirely protected and secured, is nothing other than a fantasy of omnipotence. ... All security retains the precarious; all protection and all care maintain vulnerability; nothing guarantees invulnerability”.<sup>41</sup>

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38. Isabell Lorey, pp. 11-13, 15.

39. Lorey, p. 19.

40. On universal basic income, see: *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research*, ed. by Karl Widerquist (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Guy Standing, *Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen* (London: Pelican, 2017).

41. Lorey, p. 20.

From this understanding of precariousness, Lorey extends a definition of *precarity*, again based upon Butler's offering in *Frames of War*. Lorey articulates precarity as the root of "different political, social, and legal" formations of *othering* — the construction of an Other. While precariousness brings living beings closer together in their apprehension of one another by highlighting the *interrelations* that their differences make, precarity highlights the *distinctions* between living beings by applying external hierarchies and determinations to these interrelations. Thus, writes Lorey, precarity is "an individuating hierarchisation of forms of individual life and ways of being-with others". Precarity assesses, hierarchizes, and classifies lives (*individual* instances of precariousness), by dominating the *relations* which compose them (the conditions of those lives, the experience of "being-with others").<sup>42</sup> The order imposed by precarity positions the individual, rather than the network, as the source of endangerment and vulnerability. This reconfiguration of relations sets the scene for existing forms of power and control to create those relations of inequality which underpin contemporary governmentality, the separation of populations into 'us' and 'them': "Domination turns existential precariousness into an anxiety towards others who cause harm, who have to be preventively fended off, and not infrequently even destroyed, in order to protect those who are threatened".<sup>43</sup> To return to the opening of this section, such hierarchisation of certain precarious subjects as more valuable and worthy of protection than others has given rise to the amalgamation of 'vulnerable' and 'contingent' under the umbrella of the term 'precarious'.

Lorey's reading of precariousness and precarity is realised with particular force in *Snowpiercer*. The train and everyone on board is equally precarious at a basic, material level — only a thick steel shell and the Engine's constant movement protect them from certain death, a reality gruesomely demonstrated when a rebellious rear sectioner's arm is thrust outside the train as punishment, where it quickly freezes solid and is then smashed to pieces with a hammer. However, the literal segmentation of the rear section from the rest of the

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42. For a discussion on the political and social condition of 'being-with' as a form of 'mutual exposure', which influences some of Lorey's thinking, see: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

43. Lorey, p. 21. The term *governmentality* was coined by Michel Foucault, and refers to the ways in which governments create, condition, and manage their subjects so that they may be more efficiently governed. See: Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. by Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

train with impregnable security doors allows the train's more privileged inhabitants to feel less precarious by extension. In this quite literal way the rear section, completely contingent as they are on the food produced for them and delivered at regular intervals by soldiers, are far more exposed to vulnerability, while the front section gain a sense of security through this process of othering. This system, of course, is based on a lie revealed by Curtis's revolution: the rear section population are in fact crucial to the perfect, closed balance of the train's heating, water delivery and food production systems and other infrastructure — without their regular supply of children, these carefully balanced systems would collapse. The exclusion of these members of ostensibly just societies echoes Rancière's writing on "the part who have no part", those within society who have no say in its political function:

Whoever has no part — the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat — cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing. [...] it is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all, that the community exists as a political community [...] The people are not one class among others. They are the class of the wrong that harms the community and establishes it as a 'community' of the just and the unjust.<sup>44</sup>

As Lee and Manicasteri argue, reading the film's narrative through Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial position, "[j]ust as the West — on Fanon's analysis — disavows how its 'well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses' of the Rest, the head section disavows how its immaterial labors depends upon material labors of the tail section".<sup>45</sup> The principle works both ways: were the rear section to be allowed to enjoy the spoils of the greenhouses, butcheries, and aquariums beyond their doors, the train's food supplies would rapidly run out. Thus, the front section fear and revile the members of the rear section because they are differentially classed as workshy, useless "freeloaders", but their very existence, trapped in the precarious conditions of the rear section, is what guarantees the entire system's ongoing survival.

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44. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). As I have noted in Chapter One, Rancière's use of the term 'political' is specifically overdetermined to signify that form of state order imposed and maintained by the police.

45. Lee and Manicasteri, p. 6; see also: Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 53.



Following the active weakening of the welfare state throughout the 80s and 90s, this form of order — inequality via exclusion and precarity — has been superseded by a new form of order, *precarisation*. Under this social-existential arrangement, writes Lorey, “existential precariousness can no longer be entirely shifted through the construction of dangerous others and warded off as precarity; instead it is actualised in the individualised governmental precarization of those who are normalised under neoliberal conditions”.<sup>46</sup> As the protections which had been briefly offered by the welfare state to its most vulnerable subjects fall away, “[t]here is no longer a centre or a middle that could be imagined as a society stable enough to take in those pushed to the margins”.<sup>47</sup> Rather, precarious conditions of working and living have “long since arrived in the so-called middle of society”, and have thus “become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing”.<sup>48</sup> Berlant argues this point throughout *Cruel Optimism* — and it is no accident that Berlant’s and Lorey’s studies were written in the years following the socio-economic fallout of the GFC, one of the lasting results of which was the widespread adoption of austerity policies by governments in the Global North: “At a moment of fierce contestation between the interests of workers and capital, it is now possible to bracket or to claim as archaic long-standing debates about what it means for individuals, the masses, and the state to live democracy by asserting that *everyone now lives capitalism in proximity to risk*, threat, and ongoing anxiety at the situation that something autonomous called ‘life’ seems to present equally, everywhere”.<sup>49</sup> The subjects of precarisation are no longer distinguishable or hierarchisable along traditional lines and modes, even intersectional ones. They are increasingly all of us: the traditional working class; the managerial cadre; industrial and factory workers in the Global South; ‘millennial’ youth; unlucky Baby Boomers; students; academics; the unemployed; the flexibly employed; those on zero-hour contracts; those living from pay check to pay check; lifelong renters and mortgagors; creative freelancers; care and affective labourers; sex workers; the dispossessed; blue-collar workers; administrators and bureaucrats; in short, all those who no longer see a clear direction for the rest of their lives, but only series of unfolding choices, each one opening up the possibility of

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46. Lorey, p. 15.

47. Lorey, p. 61.

48. Lorey, p. 63.

49. Berlant, p. 203, emphasis added.



risk, contingency, and vulnerability.

In the following pages, I outline a Marxist methodology oppositional to this negative reality, which draws on two core strands of Marxist thought: (1) traditional Western Marxism; and (2) ‘new Marxist’ work by radical theorists of the past two decades, which features a renewed attention to communisation and an analytical, value-theoretical approach to capitalist mechanics.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in the study, particularly in Chapters One and Three, I refer to work in the school of autonomist Marxism exemplified by Hardt and Negri and Paolo Virno. These three streams have notable incommensurabilities and it is not the goal of this project to attempt their wholesale synthesis. However, it is hoped that a dialectical reading of key Marxist concepts from these areas will clarify some aspects of the study’s utopian project *vis-à-vis* social transformation and radical politics.

### Marxist approaches to contemporary crisis

The previous section has illustrated that precarisation is a state-sponsored perpetuation of both direct and indirect modalities of violence upon the collective, shared experience of being-with, turned upon entire populations at a time in global history when the resources and technical skills necessary to provide a stable and constructively contingent form of life to a majority of living beings have, for the first time, become realistically attainable. To describe this situation as a ‘crisis’ seems only too appropriate, and indeed the term has seen increasing use in popular discourse. The Google Ngram Viewer, which charts the frequency of a term’s use in a large textual corpus over time, shows that usage of ‘crisis’ has increased twofold over the last century. The corpus only runs to 2008, but the Google Trends tool, which applies similar heuristics to Google search queries, shows a spike in searches containing the word in 2008 and 2011.<sup>51</sup>

50. On the latter, see in particular: The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); Endnotes, ‘Communisation and Value-Form Theory’, *Endnotes*, 2 (2010), 68–105; Rob Wilkie, ‘Introduction: After the Law of Value Is “Blown Apart”: Labor as Value in the Contemporary’, *Minnesota Review*, 87.1 (2016), 110–15.

51. ‘Crisis’, in *Google Ngram Viewer* <[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=crisis&year\\_start=1900&year\\_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=crisis&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3)> [accessed 24 November 2019]; ‘Crisis’, in *Google Trends* <<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=GB&q=crisis>> [accessed 24 November 2019]. While valuable, the results of Google’s corpus analysis tools are not empirically verifiable, due to the closed-source nature of the corpus, lack of weighting to account for bias, and inaccuracies in text recognition software. See: Eitan Adam Pechenick, Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds, ‘Characterizing the

In the ongoing present, it is useful to distinguish between two modalities of crisis: (1) crisis as a *hermeneutic* which can be employed to read the course of history as structured and conditioned by multiple recurring *instances* of crisis; and (2) crisis as the *lived experience* of ongoing life under capitalism. As I shall outline below, both modalities have seen their most fulsome theorisation within Marxist theory over the last hundred and fifty years, and these theorisations make evident a number of vital distinctions in Marxist approaches to the subjects and targets of oppositional action.

The development of the first meaning of crisis — crisis as a hermeneutic — is traced by Reinhart Koselleck from the Greek word *κρίνω* ('krino', to separate), where it referred to "strict alternatives that permitted no further revision: success or failure, right or wrong, life or death". Already in this early usage, argues Koselleck, "knowledge of uncertainty and the compulsion toward foresight were part of almost every mention of crisis in order to prevent disaster or to search for salvation" — crisis not only referred to a moment of choice, but acted as a hermeneutic for learning about how best to make social and political choices in general. The next evolution of crisis, writes Koselleck, was its eighteenth-century theoretical transition into a "fundamental historico-philosophical concept on the basis of which the claim is made that the entire course of history can be interpreted out of its diagnosis of time", which allows the interpreter of crisis to acquire "a knowledge of the entire past and a prognosis of the future".<sup>52</sup> This hermeneutic approach to crisis is, in Amin Samman's terms, a form of world-building via historicisation, similar to the construction of historical time which I have noted above: "The crisis idea can therefore be understood as a tool for imagining history; it is a means by which the theorist can impose pattern and rhythm onto an otherwise chaotic onslaught of events".<sup>53</sup> This approach is familiar from traditional Western Marxist theory and is exemplified in Marx's own writings. Throughout Marx's work on crisis, as Willem Schinkel argues, "capitalism is conceived as a crisis-phenomenon that, as we may currently witness, promulgates itself through the medium

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Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inferences of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution', *PLOS ONE*, 10.10 (2015), 1–24.

52. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, pp. 236–39.

53. Amin Samman, 'Crisis Theory and the Historical Imagination', *Review of International Political Economy*, 22.5 (2015), 966–95 (p. 6).

of crisis”.<sup>54</sup> The same cyclical crisis which fuels capitalist expansion, and which will be examined in the section on surplus below, is also responsible for cyclical social crises of reproduction and livability. For Marx, capitalism’s inculcation of its own crises sets the stage for the development of an expanding, well-equipped, and well-educated proletariat who would eventually be ready to overthrow capitalism in a class revolution.<sup>55</sup> This point, among others, is one on which a number of contemporary Marxist theorists differ from the traditional view. ‘New Marxist’ approaches tend to agree with Berlant’s view in reading the future as absent under capitalism rather than as a harbinger of a programmatic revolutionary change: “[m]odernity becomes what it is in Marx: ever promulgated by crisis, only this time without *telos* — an eternal recurrence of the same, of crisis”.<sup>56</sup>

A contemporary reading of crisis as an atelic, everyday occurrence is especially clear in *Cruel Optimism*: “across diverse geopolitical and biopolitical locations, the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another”.<sup>57</sup> This extended crisis, which Berlant refers to elsewhere as “systemic” or “ordinary” crisis, has become the key conditioning format of the ongoing present, a precarious impasse devoid of a future;<sup>58</sup> crisis is *ordinary* in this sense because with the majority of the world’s population living in urban or peri-urban environments, where the need to deal with overwhelming and troubling affects becomes a constant activity, trauma and emergency no longer hold the same affective register in the ongoing present as they did during early-twentieth-century modernity. Thus, writes Berlant, “[c]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded

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54. Willem Schinkel, ‘The Image of Crisis: Walter Benjamin and the Interpretation of “Crisis” in Modernity’, *Thesis Eleven*, 127.1 (2015), 36–51 (p. 37).

55. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels memorably write: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable”. The economic underpinning of this theory is most evident in the *Grundrisse*: “The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises, spasms”. See: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Communist Manifesto*, ed. by James Farr, trans. by Terrell Carver (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 237–60 (p. 246); Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 749. See also: Makoto Itoh, ‘The Formation of Marx’s Theory of Crisis’, *Science & Society*, 42.2 (1978), 129–55; Simon Clarke, *Marx’s Theory of Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

56. Schinkel, p. 38. See also those theorists I discuss in the Introduction, particularly Fisher.

57. Berlant, p. 7.

58. Berlant, pp. 9, 10.

in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming ... In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown".<sup>59</sup>

Berlant's treatment of crisis is evoked in Brent Ryan Bellamy's piece on Steven Amsterdam's novel *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2009). Discussing the mode of apocalypse in the novel as an inscrutable but ongoing force, Bellamy writes:

In each case, the absent process itself — the apocalypse — pushes the plot not towards the next step in a narrative sequence, but replaces one crisis — intense rains and flooding — with another — groups of displaced refugees. In each instance the narrator comes to terms with the new situation, only to be cast out once more into a new crisis.<sup>60</sup>

Crisis ordinariness — everyday life shaped by crisis — is a structure and a process rather than a historical moment, a conditioning form for the countless navigations and movements that subjects make within the messy, precarious timespace of the ongoing present. Unlike the traditional Marxist reading of crisis, crisis ordinariness cannot function as a hermeneutic with which to read history from an external location — it is too intimate, involved, and immanent in ongoing life. For much the same reason, neither can crisis ordinariness be understood as an event which pulls a collective (or class) subject outside of the flow of history, allowing it to change the conditions of its existence in the shape of revolutionary action.

Alongside such approaches to history and crisis, this study is committed to thinking against the totalising historical break as a necessary agent of radical change and, in chapters Five and Six, beyond the destructive arrogance of positioning the (needless to say, white and male) human individual as the central category of being. At the same time, it is interested in the affirmation of disalienated human labour, dialectical imagining, and class struggle which undergird traditional Marxism. A joint engagement with these positions suggests that the affirmative theorisation of a collective, more-than-human subject prefiguratively engaged with utopian imaginings of the future and wholly opposed to the furtherance of capitalist crisis-as-a-way-of-life may be one way to break through the impasse of the present.

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59. Berlant, p. 10.

60. Brent Ryan Bellamy, 'Figuring Terminal Crisis in Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*', *Mediations*, 28.1 (2014), 19–34 (pp. 24–25).

It is useful to note that, at the same time as new Marxist theorists reject the programmatic, teleological direction of Leninist Marxism and its subsequent evolutions — what Joshua Clover describes as “the association of Marx’s analytic framework with a Leninist account of political strategy [...] centred around proletarian organization toward the revolutionary party” — they draw heavily on the analytical bedrock of Marxism, memorably described by Bloch as the “cold” stream, a term to which I return in Chapter Three.<sup>61</sup> Clover’s book *Riot. Strike. Riot.* (2016), which reads strike and riot through a historical materialist, value-theoretical perspective, historically positions riot through precisely such a “cold” hermeneutic of crisis, opening with the words:

A theory of riot is a theory of crisis. [...] riot can only be grasped as having an internal and structural significance, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, insofar as we can discover the historical motion that provides its form and substance. [...] the riot as a particular form of struggle illuminates the character of crisis, makes it newly thinkable, and provides a prospect from which to view its unfolding.<sup>62</sup>

Where Clover aims for a “*properly materialist theorization of the riot*” — riot positioned as part of communist struggles over production, circulation, and labour value — this project seeks to do the same for utopian commons, albeit by beginning with their literary representations and seeking a way back to lived politics.<sup>63</sup> Both projects, thus, work to develop “the dialectical twining of lived struggles with the compulsions of capital’s self-moving motion, understood as a real movement of social existence”.<sup>64</sup> The following section returns to those crises I outlined in the Introduction, reading them as a historical materialist basis for the study’s subsequent theorisations of utopia emerging through crisis.

### **The surpluses of ordinary crisis**

In the Introduction and in this chapter, I have proposed a reading of the previous decade as defined and produced by four crises. If these crises are so definitional in setting out the contours of the ongoing present, the question may well be posed: in what way can they be

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61. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.: the New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 4; Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 209.

62. Clover, p. 1.

63. Clover, p. 6.

64. Clover, p. 21.

thought of as *ordinary*? The effects of the GFC are still acutely felt, particularly for those populations made differentially precarious by the social topography of uneven capitalist development. The Middle East has experienced several civil wars resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, the military overthrow of a number of governments, and the forced displacement of millions of people — a refugee crisis which has the potential to change the social and political face of the Middle East and Europe. The 2011 global protest movements have become part of a genealogy of ongoing organisational and strategic forms of resistance against neoliberal capitalism and for representation and inclusion, directly influencing movements including the Black rights movement Black Lives Matter, the anti-US government and indigenous rights protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the ongoing anti-government protests in Hong Kong.<sup>65</sup> Ashley Dawson reminds us that “[u]rbanization and climate change are the two great products” of the “dysfunctional system” of late capitalism, and the resulting climate extremes “will affect all of humanity, albeit unevenly”.<sup>66</sup> In a word, these crises have been a *trauma* inflicted upon global history. To suggest that they are simply part of the ongoing, ordinary movement of the present temporality seems not only to diminish their global influence, but to call into question the definition of the ongoing present as unexceptional and post-historical. This issue returns us to Berlant’s work on crisis and trauma.

In setting out the parameters of the everyday experiences of the ongoing present as constant crisis, Berlant does not suggest that the ordinariness of crisis diminishes its power to create exceptional and catastrophic situations with which the subjects of the ongoing present are memorably and affectively confronted. Rather, she takes issue with the

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65. Despite similarities between the Occupy Movement, Black Lives Matter, and Indigenous protest camps, all these movements have their own specific internal logics, and critics have noted the ways in which the latter two movements move beyond the often limiting rhetoric of Occupy while taking up its oppositional energies. Occupy Wall Street was especially critiqued for its lack of recognition of Indigenous land rights on the lands its camp was occupying, and its ignorance of the history of slavery which helped found Wall Street itself. Black Lives Matter and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests have highlighted the salient fact that any effective anti-capitalist oppositional movement must also be decolonial. See: Adam J. Barker, ‘Already Occupied: Indigenous Peoples, Settler Colonialism and the Occupy Movements in North America’, *Social Movement Studies*, 11.3-4 (2012), 327-34; Minkah Makalani, ‘Black Lives Matter and the Limits of Formal Black Politics’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116.3 (2017), 529-52; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, ‘Anarchy on and Off the Air’, *Cinema Journal*, 57.4 (2018), 127-32.

66. Ashley Dawson, *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 10.



theoretical narratives of trauma theory which are dominant in critical discourse, and which position trauma as “the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on”. Understanding trauma, after Cathy Caruth, as a force which inhibits the subject’s ability to work through catastrophic situations and instead forces them to experience discontinuity, “exceptional shock and data loss”, Berlant argues that theorisations of trauma implicitly consider non-catastrophic situations as sites where subjects are able to “archive the intensities neatly and efficiently with an eye toward easy access”.<sup>67</sup> Berlant instead sees trauma as a particularly severe intensity within the overall gamut of precarity defining the ongoing present. When the ordinary becomes a register of crisis, the “traumatic event”, rather than trauma itself, is positioned as one of a number of possible events occurring within crisis ordinariness, and rather than implying that those who experience it cannot proceed with their lives, delivers modes of survival, improvisation, and continuation.<sup>68</sup>

A reading of the four global crises of the past decade as *traumatic events* allows us to investigate responses of collective survival which make “experiencing the historical present ... possible”, and to examine the immanent development of a “crisis-shaped subjectivity amid the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation”.<sup>69</sup> The subject shaped by ongoing traumatic events is, like the ongoing present itself, unhooked from the passage of historical time, yet holds an intimate relationship with temporality. Berlant writes that the atemporalities, remembrances, whiplashes, and other anomalies which form in response to a traumatic event are a “surplus of signification”, something she contends that Caruth herself claims in her book *Unclaimed Experience*.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, Caruth does not use the word “surplus” at all, instead referring to trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena”.<sup>71</sup> While Caruth does indeed point to the concept of surplus, albeit without

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67. Berlant, p. 10.

68. Berlant, pp. 81–82.

69. Berlant, pp. 81, 54.

70. Berlant, p. 81.

71. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns



naming it as such, Berlant's conscious use of the term creates an opening which I now use to move from a discussion of the subjective experience-formation of crisis ordinariness to a discussion of the key subjects of crisis ordinariness who, I contend, are themselves *surplus*.

The concept of *surplus* — the over-determination and over-signification of a subject, system, or situation; a relationship of excess and abundance between an object and the operational requirements of the environments within which it is set — has been theoretically employed in a number of diverse fields. The two most significant determinations of surplus for the purposes of this work come from the Marxist theory of the labour-capital relation, and from Bloch's work on aesthetic and cultural surplus. For Marx, surplus comes in two forms. The first is *surplus value*, which is simply the value created as a result of the difference between a worker's labour power and the amount of labour time for which they are paid; a more productive worker paid for a set number of hours of work would perform more labour over the same amount of time than a less productive worker, and it is this variance in extra work which produces profit for the capitalist as surplus value.<sup>72</sup> The second form of surplus in Marxist theory — the one more significant to this discussion — is the *relative surplus population*, also called the industrial reserve army. This section of the population under capitalism encompasses all those workers who are unemployed, under-employed, and unable to be employed — those who are surplus to the requirements of capitalism. While an unemployed surplus population may appear to be the enemy of a functioning capitalist system, Marx's insight was in revealing that it is capitalism itself which generates, conditions, and maintains this surplus, at which juncture the reference to it as a reserve army is made sensible. The clearest explication is in Volume I of *Capital*:

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, develop also the labour power at its disposal. [...] But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in

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Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 91.

72. Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 429–38.

inverse ratio to its torment of labour. The more extensive, finally, the lazarus layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism.

*This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*<sup>73</sup>

Marx captures in this passage what Melinda Cooper describes as an “insoluble tension” for capital: “in order to maximize its own process of self-accumulation, capital needs to mobilize and promote the creative forces of human life, yet at the same time the imperatives of surplus-value extortion mean that it is constantly trying to undermine these very forces”.<sup>74</sup> The fundamental operation of capitalism is to drive the cost of labour down (by fostering the conditions which would create more workers), while driving the amount of profit gleaned from labour up (by forcing workers to work more for less pay, thereby making their existences more precarious); it does so via “the structural maintenance of a certain level of unemployment” which keeps wages in line “with the needs of accumulation”.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, as the collective Endnotes argues: “This surplus population need not find itself completely ‘outside’ capitalist social relations. Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work. They are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty-production and services”.<sup>76</sup> In other words, to be able to keep its labour costs down and its surplus value high, capitalism keeps a sector of the population unemployed, and thus willing to work for very low wages, which also prevents more secure and better-paid workers bargaining power in a wage context. The precarious integration of surplus populations in the ongoing present into expanding service and circulation economies, along with the shrinking of the manual and industrial labour market in the Global North, signals that surplus populations are not only a condition of, but themselves condition the form of, contemporary capitalism.

This discussion turns to the identity of surplus populations because the expansion and growth of such populations is the direct result of crisis under capitalism. As capital seeks to maximise profits by shifting labour markets to the Global South and increasingly

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73. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 798.

74. Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), p. 60.

75. Endnotes, ‘Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital’, *Endnotes*, 2 (2010), 20–51 (p. 29).

76. Endnotes, p. 30, n. 15.

automating remaining labour in the Global North — in the wealthiest nations, even affective labour is no longer exempt from automation — the relative surplus population in the Global North increases. Paradoxically, as Clover makes clear, although the capitalist system increases its wealth and efficiency, crises of production in the Global North thus become more pointed, stemming not from a “shortage of money but its surplus”:

Accrued profit lies fallow, unable to convert itself into capital, for there is no longer any seductive reason to invest in further production. The factories go quiet. Seeking wages elsewhere, displaced workers discover that labor-saving automation has generalized itself across the various lines. Now unused labor piles up cheek by jowl with unused capacity. This is the production of nonproduction.<sup>77</sup>

It is also the fundamental relation of crisis ordinariness. A growing surplus population has been effectively displaced from the labour market, but is still forced to play capitalism’s precarious game of survival in the ongoing present, being repeatedly reminded that fealty to desire and accumulation is paramount to the attainment of a “good life” at the same time as all hope of attaining such a life becomes obviously and wholly impossible.

The paradoxes which determine the formation of surplus populations in the Global North cannot sustain themselves infinitely. The result is continuous and grinding crisis in the material, ideological, and affective spheres: displacement, protest, violence, and riot. To quote a particularly powerful passage from Clover at some length:

The first relation between riot and crisis is that of surplus. This seems already a paradox, as both crisis and riot are commonly understood to arise from dearth, shortfall, deprivation. At the same time, riot is itself the experience of surplus. Surplus danger, surplus information, surplus military gear. Surplus emotion. [...] The crucial surplus in the moment of riot is simply that of participants, of population. The moment when the partisans of riot exceed the police capacity for management, when the cops make their first retreat, is the moment when the riot becomes fully itself, slides loose from the grim continuity of daily life. The ceaseless social regulation that had seemed ideological and ambient and abstract is in this moment of surplus disclosed as a practical matter, open to social contest.

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77. Clover, pp. 25–26.

All these surpluses correspond to larger social transformations from which these experiences of affective and practical surplus are inextricable. These transformations are the material restructurings that respond to and constitute capitalist crisis, and which feature surpluses of both capital and population as core features. And it is these that propose riot as a necessary form of struggle. [...] The new era of riots has roots in Watts, Newark, Detroit; it passes through Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Los Angeles in 1992, arriving in the global present of São Paulo, Gezi Park, San Lázaro. The protorevolutionary riot of Tahrir Square, the nearly permanent riot of Exarcheia, the reactionary turn of Euromaidan. In the twilit core: Clichy-sous-Bois, Tottenham, Oakland, Ferguson, Baltimore. Too many to count.<sup>78</sup>

Clover's definition of surplus populations as riot populations is powerful because of its geographical breadth and political scope — under late capitalism, violence becomes the only discursive, political, and economic strategy made available to the dispossessed. Riot is not — indeed, will not be permitted by capitalism to be — a catastrophic or apocalyptic event; far rather it is, in Berlant's terms, “a logic of adjustment within the historical scene” to the slow death and differential violence of ordinary crisis.<sup>79</sup> Riot, as Clover later summarises, is not the end of capitalism so much as the “modality through which surplus is lived”; the relationship between capitalism and riot is thus as reciprocal as the relationship between capitalism and surplus. At the same time as riots endanger capitalism, manifesting as constant crises which threaten to overwhelm its logics of accumulation and circulation, the crises of capitalism in the ongoing present (climate crisis, economic crisis, mobility crisis, and inequality crisis) also threaten the surplus itself, which are “treated as riot at all times — incipient, in progress, in exhaustion — not out of error but out of recognition”.<sup>80</sup> Appropriately, in *Snowpiercer*, the surplus population of the rear section are kept locked behind security doors, violently attacked by soldiers, and kept continually at the point of starvation because Wilford understands that any other treatment would see them riot and attempt an overthrow of the system. It is Wilford's genius which is able to incorporate even their eventual riots into the workings of the train's ecosystems, much as the Cameron

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78. Clover, pp. 1–3.

79. Berlant, p. 10.

80. Clover, p. 170.

government in the UK used the 2011 August riots to increase policing powers and justify the delivery of unusually harsh sentences to the rioters.<sup>81</sup> Only the anarchist Namgoong's bid for absolute liberty and radical, permanent transformation scupper Wilford's well-laid plans.

A reading of contemporary Marxist approaches solidifies this study's theoretical position on the modalities of the particular anti-capitalist action with which it engages. In particular, Clover's theorisation of riot refutes the imputation of "a kind of consciousness to this latent form of conflict with capital".<sup>82</sup> In this analytical reading, as in *Snowpiercer*, riot and capital both are unexceptional parts of the ongoing present — a systemic response to structural adjustments. It is the argument of this study that utopian commons, on the other hand, are not latent mechanical motions, but are conscious and didactic invocations of alterity emerging through the narrativisation of the ongoing present and future, and are thus aligned more closely with what Clover briefly sketches out in his final chapter as "the commune", a subject to which contemporary Marxist groups such as Endnotes and the Invisible Committee extend particular consideration.

For Clover, the commune is a new "tactic of social reproduction" and "collective action" beyond both capitalism and programmatic communism.<sup>83</sup> For Endnotes, in a reading of Marx's later work, communes appear as prefigurative transitions to collective life absent of a revolutionary break: "the point is that communes could take on capitalist innovations, without proletarianising".<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, Endnotes describe "communisation" as "a rejection of the view of revolution as an event where workers take power followed by a period of transition", but as a movement of "immediate communist measures (such as the free distribution of goods) both for their own merit, and as a way of destroying the material basis of the counter-revolution", ultimately aiming to eradicate "all capitalist categories: exchange, money, commodities, the existence of separate enterprises, the state and — most fundamentally — wage labour and the working class itself".<sup>85</sup> The Invisible Committee's call for "an insurrectional surge" against capitalism is premised on the "multiplication of

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81. On the 2011 UK riots, see: Clive Bloom, *Riot City: Protest and Rebellion in the Capital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Andrew Wallace, 'The English Riots of 2011: Summoning Community, Depoliticising the City', *City*, 18.1 (2014), 10–24.

82. Clover, p. 30.

83. Clover, pp. 191, 187.

84. Endnotes, 'Afterword: The Idea of the Workers' Movement', *Endnotes*, 4, 168–92 (p. 187).

85. Endnotes, 'Communisation and Value-Form Theory', p. 75.

communes, their coming into contact and forming of ties”, a communising tactic which extends from relations of friendship and rejects extant organisational structures in favour of survival tactics that wait “neither for the numbers nor the means to get organized, and even less for the ‘right moment’ — which never arrives”.<sup>86</sup> Literary evocations of utopian commons, akin to communes and communising tactics, are based on a materialist analysis of what exists to prefigure new forms of life in the present. They represent struggles which make space and then remain within it. The targets of their opposition, while generally capitalist in nature, tend to be specific, perhaps because these commons themselves emerge most readily in liminal spaces, lacunae, and peripheries where capital does not exert absolute control — the migrant camps of *Exit West*, the disaster commons of *New York 2140*, and the Canadian wilderness of *Walkaway*, among others. Yet from these spaces of relative freedom, through forms of representation and imagination, the utopian commons of these texts return to the centres of capital to challenge their logics and institute new forms of mass collective being.

To transition in our discussion from the subjects of the ongoing present to the cultural constructions they create and consume — cultural constructions which allow surplus populations to slide “loose from the grim continuity of daily life” — we must turn to the more canonical, albeit innovative, Marxism of Bloch, which provides a further formulation and determination of the theory of surplus. For Bloch, a multitude of cultural products, from dances to fairy tales, function as sources of an anticipatory illumination (*Vor-Schein*), which reveals to consumers the specific forms of social and political rearrangements necessary to construct a concrete utopia and to distinguish it from the illusions and false appearances of ideology and abstract utopianism. A cultural work can only be a source of anticipatory illumination, however, if it contains a cultural surplus (*Uberschuss*): “all anticipation must prove itself to the Utopian function, the latter seizing all possible surplus content of the anticipation”.<sup>87</sup> The cultural surplus, for Bloch, encompasses those aspects of a work which surpass ideology as well as the cultural, social, and historical contexts within which the work is formed, and ultimately reveal the future-oriented and utopian

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86. The Invisible Committee, pp. 102, 117.

87. Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 111; see also Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 150.

hopes, desires, and wishes of its creators. In the words of Zipes, the cultural surplus is “the objectification of shared human values and possibilities that provide us with the hope that we can realize what we sense we are missing in life”.<sup>88</sup> Cultural surplus is fundamentally future-oriented; as Douglas Kellner writes, it “preserves unsatisfied desires and human wishes for a better world and because these wishes are usually not fulfilled they contain contents which remain relevant to a future society which may be able to satisfy these wishes and needs”.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, cultural surplus is intimately connected to the development of class consciousness and the utopian form of revolution:

The ideologies, as the dominant ideas of an era, are the ideas of the ruling class, as Marx noted so strikingly. But since the ruling class is also alienated from itself, the projection of a world without alienation that compensates and surpasses the present, aside from representing the usual interests and welfare of the bourgeois class, was valid for humanity in general and was incorporated into the ideologies that mean culture for the bourgeoisie. It is obvious that this function stimulated the revolutionary ideologies of the rising classes almost entirely.<sup>90</sup>

As Kellner summarises, “the ascending class criticizes the previous order and projects a wealth of proposals for social change” within its cultural surplus.<sup>91</sup> This is opposition cast in terms of cultural production — a surplus of critical hope embedded in cultural content.

To return, then, to *Snowpiercer*, which Gerry Canavan has characterised as a “critique of necrofuturist visions of the future” that encourages its audiences to “open the mind to new possibilities for alternative futures”.<sup>92</sup> Read in this way, Bong’s film is an oppositional work alive with an anticipatory illumination which emerges from within the discontents and demands of its numerous surpluses: excessive violence, camp aesthetics, grotesque

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88. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 156; Jack Zipes, ‘Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination’, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, by Ernst Bloch (MIT Press, 1988), pp. xi–xliii (p. xxxvi).

89. Kellner, p. 85; see also: Muñoz, p. 7.

90. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, p. 111.

91. Kellner, p. 85.

92. Gerry Canavan, “‘If the Engine Ever Stops, We’d All Die’: *Snowpiercer* and Necrofuturism”, *Paradoxa*, 26 (2014), 41–66 (p. 1). Canavan draws the idea of necrofuturism, “the endlessly rehearsed landscape of death and disaster that dominates contemporary visions of the coming decades”, from Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee’s concept of necrocapitalism, which in turn is derived from Achille Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, to which I will return in Chapters Four and Six. See: Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, ‘Necrocapitalism’, *Organization Studies*, 29.12 (2008), 1541–63; Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 11–40.



wealth, unimaginable poverty, and a final, world-destroying explosion. Two modalities of surplus stand out in particular throughout the film. The first of these is, as I have remarked, the surplus population of the rear section precariat, a post-Fordist “consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to its torment of labour” — labour which has, of course, been transformed by the demands of neoliberal late capitalism from menial physical work into reproductive slavery. The second surplus in *Snowpiercer* is the revolution itself, a destructive, forward-moving energy which not only opposes the constrained possibilities of life permitted within the neoliberal shell of the train, but ultimately opposes even the possibility of spatial production, inhabiting, return, or recuperation for all but two of its inhabitants.

While it would be short-sighted to read *Snowpiercer* as an *anti*-utopian text, its final scenes, set on a snow-covered mountainside backgrounded by the flaming wreckage of the old society, highlight a tension between the film’s utopian impulses and their realisation which is never resolved. In particular, the cultural products created by the rear section population as a way to hope, remember, and dream beyond their material conditions — the sketches made to memorialise the children kidnapped by Wilford; the story of the Inuit woman, a “maid in the Front Guest Section”, who lead an escape of rebels from the train before quickly succumbing to the cold; and the memory of past revolts kept alive for the younger generation by the oldster Guillem — are all destroyed, along with those who produced them, in this final scene.

Nonetheless, the film’s exploration of its many surpluses, set against a backdrop of precarising capitalism in miniature, index a renewed cultural interest in utopia in the wake of the GFC and the Occupy Movement, making it a valuable text when contextualised in relation to the commons utopias I examine in the rest of this thesis. *Snowpiercer* is hermeneutic in that it maps and models the form of contemporary neoliberal late capitalism, reducing it to its smallest space — a single train — in its desire to capture it fully. Unlike the following texts, however, it does not depict a fully realised *concrete* utopian spatiality: a commons, an intentional community, or even a utopian enclave. It does not illustrate the tactics its viewers could adopt to prefiguratively survive and flourish within the enclosures of late capitalism. It certainly does not make use of the modality of the ongoing future.

In fact, as should by now be apparent, its temporal and spatial form is an emblematic ongoing present: a spatiotemporal loop encompassing the entire planet in which the entire remaining human population is helplessly exposed to vulnerability, precarity, and death; an anthropogenic impasse of snow, steel, and apocalypse which has, for eighteen years, failed to inscribe any sort of lasting historical narrative beyond that of everyday survival. The film's imaginary is primarily one of ongoing crisis, precarity, and political and oppositional failure, illuminated by flashes of a partially obscured utopian potential — what Ernst Bloch evocatively called the “gold-bearing rubble” of a non-contemporaneous present/past, described by Edwards as “a past that *lives on within the present*, which is ‘non-past’ because its utopian ambitions remain unachieved; as well as a present that is suffused with *Vor-Schein*”.<sup>93</sup>

The film's final scenes — the destruction of the train, the death of all the main characters, and the escape of two non-white children into a world potentially populated by non-human life — reveal an alternative utopian impulse at work in the film, running counter to the more traditional abstract utopianism of hope and survival we see in the rear section's lives and revolt. This alternative utopianism is also abstract, but gestures enigmatically at a concrete utopian world which remains tantalisingly out of view, a sense reinforced by the final scene's close shots of the children's amazed faces and of Yona's boot as it crunches into the snow, a nostalgic echo of an earlier utopianism in the shape of the Apollo Lunar Program. In these shots, Bong implies that the post-colonial subjects of Yona and Tim will be able to survive in the icy landscape because only they possess the utopian energy — completely new and experimental — necessary to create a new way of life. While their utopian place-making is allegorical, a utopian impulse indexes not a literal set of conditions for life, but the ability to imagine beyond such conditions. As sf theorist Rhys Williams writes of contemporary utopian sf: “These are not factual intimations of a better world but illuminations of the way we imagine this one. ... we should find cognition in the elements of a text that promise to undo the normative frames within which we are

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93. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 116; Caroline Edwards, ‘Uncovering the “Gold-Bearing Rubble”: Ernst Bloch's Literary Criticism’, in *Utopianism, Modernism, and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 182–203 (p. 184).

accustomed to reimagine our reality”.<sup>94</sup> For Canavan:

The point of the film is not to work out the inner logic of some possible future but rather to disrupt our guilty comfort and our comforting guilt about the actually-existing system we all know is terrible but think we cannot oppose, only wring our hands about and be more beautiful than. It is likewise a refusal of any fantasy that the necrocapitalist system could be saved, reformed, redeemed, or made just with new leadership (even our own), in favor of an encounter with an alternative future of truly radical alterity and freedom (a future of life rather than death, which stares back at us through the eyes of the polar bear at the end of the film).<sup>95</sup>

Ultimately, *Snowpiercer* offers us not a commons utopia, but a *precarious* one — a destructive, permanent, and uncertain escape into an alien and radically unknowable totality which exists beyond not only the hegemonic governmentality of the train, but also beyond the histories, narratives, and structures which motivated and inspired its population’s oppositional struggle. In this, Bong’s film is very much of a time after the GFC yet before the appearance of any major activist movements which sought to oppose capitalism *in situ*; later texts, as we shall see in the following chapters, seek to create and inhabit utopian places rather than to escape them and start again.

## Conclusion

As a proto-utopian artefact of the post-GFC era, *Snowpiercer* reminds us that at the same time as riot is absorbed into the capitalist system, it offers brief flashes of hope, opportunities opening out to “a new habitation of history” created by the traumatising event.<sup>96</sup> Riot in and of itself, as an affective and emotional surplus dissociated from the workings of ‘sensible’ politics by state power, as a surplus of bodies which cannot do anything but exist, as a surplus of retributive state violence and dispossession, does not provide an opening towards such a new habitation. But the bodily, affective, emotional, and material surpluses of surplus populations, when mediated through the cultural surpluses of contemporary

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94. Rhys Williams, ‘Recognizing Cognition: On Suvin, Miéville, and the Utopian Impulse in the Contemporary Fantastic’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 41.3 (2014), 617–33 (p. 628).

95. Canavan, p. 20.

96. Berlant, p. 81.

cultural forms, gesture powerfully and longingly towards “the noise of a new politics” which sees the intimate socialites of surplus “as ordinary, vitalizing, interesting, absorbing, personal, playful, and curious”.<sup>97</sup> In the cultural surplus of surplus populations, new modes and forms reveal themselves, already performing work to reinvent “from the scene of survival, new idioms of the political”, and indeed, of the utopian; as Berlant claims in an unexpectedly utopian move, these are new forms “of belonging itself, which requires debating what the baselines of survival should be in the near future, which is, now, the future we are making”.<sup>98</sup>

Max Haiven, taking up Bloch’s sense of anticipatory utopianism, describes the space of “radical collective action” created by protest, riot, and revolution as:

an alternative environment or a laboratory in which, for a moment, something approximating utopia can flash into existence, imprinting our imaginations and thereafter haunting our vision of the world. It is this haunting “double exposure,” the tenacious dissonance within us between the world-we-experience and the world-we-know-could-be, that is at the heart of the radical event’s irrenouncible but impossible demand for representation.<sup>99</sup>

From the space made by the endless crises of the ongoing present, the work of survival, of “staying with the trouble” within the systems where surplus populations are permanently enmeshed, becomes also the work of future-building, of the representation of possibility, of anticipatory illumination, and of a utopian impulse.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, the end of *Snowpiercer* clearly highlights the fragility of such abstract impulses — unable to fully realise a concrete utopian existence in and against the ongoing present, such riot imaginaries fail to imagine lasting forms of utopian flourishing and destroy their worlds in a bid to escape them. In this sense they run counter to the concept of utopian spatiality articulated in Chapter One by Bell as “a process of place-making, rather than an attempt

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97. Berlant, p. 262.

98. Berlant, p. 262.

99. Max Haiven, ‘Are Your Children Old Enough to Learn About May ’68?’, pp. 73–74.

100. This phrase is taken from Donna Haraway’s call for precarious multi-species symbiosis and “sympoiesis” on a precarious planet, to which I will return in Chapter Six. See: Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

to flee from place”.<sup>101</sup> The following chapter will extend the discussion begun here on the ongoing present to offer a reading of the *ongoing future*, the temporality of a contemporary temporal, textual, multispecies, and activist commons, in the work of poet and essayist Juliana Spahr. Spahr’s utopian cultural production is born of and influenced by riot and the other surpluses of the ongoing present, but makes use of a commons poetics, seeking to imagine and create lasting oppositional and recuperative commons within the present, rather than to destroy the present itself.

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101. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 123.

## Chapter Three

### Commons Beyond Capitalism: *That Winter the Wolf Came*

They said to themselves that in *A Picturesque Story About the Border Between Two Cities* they would write something about what it meant to be poets in this time, this time of wars and economic inequality and environmental collapse [...]. They hoped that if they thought hard enough, they might be able to figure out some possible new configurations for political art and action. They wanted to think about the connections among place and time and writing as more than just an artistic problem, and also about how a site can be a complex cipher of the unstable relationships that define the present crises and their living within them.

Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, *An Army of Lovers*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will build on the work of Chapters One and Two, which have presented respective arguments on commons as a utopian spatiality, and on the present as a temporal impasse which opens out onto the possibility of transformation by surplus, riot, and political opposition.<sup>2</sup> Where the ongoing present is generated in the spaces of neoliberal capitalism, such as the segmenting and alienating carriages of the *Snowpiercer*, in this chapter I position the spatiality of the commons as generating another kind of temporality, the *ongoing future*. The chapter opens with an overview of the ongoing future as a temporal construction which returns the future into social and political life. *Commons poetics* are figured as a textual toolkit used by texts which aim to return the future to the present in this particular way. These arguments will be developed through a reading of the political and poetic practice of contemporary American poet, essayist, and critic Juliana Spahr, positioning her work in these fields as engaged with commons in a number of modes: linguistic and literary; economic, social, and political; and temporal. Spahr's 2015 poetry collection *That Winter the Wolf Came* embraces a commons poetics and a politics of collectivity, beginning by drawing together

1. Juliana Spahr and David Buuck, *An Army of Lovers* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2013), p. 13.

2. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of a version of this chapter submitted to *Textual Practice* for a number of useful comments on its structure.

isolated and precarious subjects in anti-capitalist struggle and ending with a celebration of future-directed joy in the moment of riot. The temporal and textual framework I develop here through my analysis of Spahr's poetry will be valuable for reading commons utopian texts in the next three chapters of my thesis.

### Modalities of the contemporary: from ongoing present to ongoing future

I have conceptualised the present in the previous chapter as a time of loops, glitches, impasses, minor crises, and exhaustive repetitions; untethered from the historical past, yet alienated from alternative futures. In this chapter, I move from a theorisation of the *present* to one of the *contemporary*. The *present* in its phenomenological sense is that moment which is constantly happening now, and which holds a bi-directional relationship with the past wherein "the past only lives in the present" (because the present is the only temporal location where those that are alive to remember the past can be), yet "is constantly a construct of the past" (because the present constantly aims to uncover its own origin in the past, as a way of structuring itself).<sup>3</sup> The present is of a separate order from the *contemporary*, which is not a universal phenomenological figure, but a historical and periodising structure, understood best as "a series of points that are isolated from the assumed continuity of time and all placed under the same temporal heading".<sup>4</sup> A contemporary period can, significantly, be delineated from anywhere in the progression of time. The term 'the contemporary', without periodic qualifiers, is therefore particularly interesting — it implies a *periodisation of the present*, a delimiting of a time which is constantly ongoing, and therefore demands, seemingly paradoxically, that this time be witnessed from an outside position while continuing to be lived from within.

This reading of the contemporary as a time which is related to, yet also does not quite

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3. William Watkin, 'The Time of Indifference: Mandelstam's Age, Badiou's Event, and Agamben's Contemporary', *CounterText*, 2.1 (2016), 85–99 (p. 93). This reading is the legacy of an anti-Augustinian, Heideggerian *critical* appraisal of the current moment as a confluence of present, past, and future constructed via human understanding of the world. For Heidegger, "'the past' has a remarkable double meaning; the past belongs irretrievably to an earlier time; it belonged to the events of that time; and in spite of that, it can still be present-at-hand 'now'". Through human understanding, the future "can be brought closer in a making-present, and in such a way that the Present can thus conform itself to what is encountered within the horizon of awaiting and retaining". See: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 2013), pp. 416, 430, 411.

4. Watkin, p. 86.



adhere to, historical time, is based on Giorgio Agamben's theorisation in his essay 'What is the Contemporary?' (2009). In this piece, Agamben provides a reading of 'the contemporary' (in the sense of the human subject of a particular series of events) which is radically at odds with the traditional understanding of the contemporary as aligned with the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time".<sup>5</sup> For Agamben, those who are contemporary, "who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands". Agamben is at pains to elucidate that, by suggesting the contemporary subject experiences "noncoincidence" with their time, this subject is not a nostalgic who dreams of living in a falsified, romantic vision of the past; rather, they adhere to their own time, but keep "a distance from it" — a relationship which allows them to understand the present in a more critical way than those who inhabit their time wholly and uncritically. In particular, through a reading of Osip Mandelstam's 1922 poem 'Vek' ('The Century' or 'The Age'), Agamben presents this contemporary subject not only as located in a liminal present, an "ungraspable threshold between a 'not yet' and a 'no more'", but also as the "fracture" between the past and the present, and therefore as the only one able to ascertain and mend this fracture.<sup>6</sup> Agamben suggests that repairing the fracture in time, which can only be effected from the privileged subject position of 'the contemporary', continually separates events which have already occurred into "no more", and pushes events to come into a "not yet". The contemporary, while located at a critical remove from the present, is — like Benjamin's famous reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* — forced to experience events in a never-ending, oncoming stream of trauma and shock:

The present is nothing other than this unlived element in everything that is lived.

That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live.

The attention to this "unlived" is the life of the contemporary.<sup>7</sup>

Even as the contemporary performs a kind of "archaeology" upon the present, "dividing

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5. 'Contemporary', in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2018 <https://oed.com/view/Entry/40115> [accessed 11 November 2019].

6. Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?', in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 40–54 (pp. 40, 41, 42, 48).

7. Agamben, p. 51; see also: Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', pp. 257–58.

and interpolating time” and thus “transforming it and putting it in relation with other times”, the contemporary is also thrust out of truly sensing the passage of time.<sup>8</sup> The position of the contemporary subject is thus paradoxically helpless even as it is the only truly *critical* position to take in relation to the present.

It is illuminating to read Agamben’s theorisation of the contemporary alongside Berlant’s. When Berlant writes of the ongoing present, she understands this temporal mode not as a period which could be part of the contemporary, but *only as itself*, an *ongoing present*, a drawn-out version of the moment of the present which traps its subjects wholly within itself, offering no historical distance, no critical access, and no closure. The ‘subject’ of the ongoing present is somewhat akin to ‘the contemporary’ of Agamben’s reading, who experiences the present as a series of decontextualised traumas — but, unlike in Agamben’s theorisation, for Berlant there is no escape, because there can be no totalised rupture or fracture in the ongoing present which generates, and is generated by, the contemporary. It is as if the contemporary is missing entirely from Berlant’s theorisation of the present, and Berlant strongly suggests this by her rejection of Agamben’s category of trauma.<sup>9</sup> As I have addressed in Chapter Two, for Berlant the crises of the ongoing present are repetitive, ongoing, and systemic, and therefore cannot be associated with the total and catastrophic ontological rupture implied by the traumatic event. Her subjects — the variously precarious subjects of the ongoing present — truly live in the present, experiencing its endless minor contingencies, threats, and instabilities fully and comprehensively. For Berlant, the only location from which to critically read the present is from *within* this precarious loop.

In rejecting the concept of the contemporary as the critical fracture which can both break and interpret time, Berlant avoids privileging the philosophical rationality of the male human creative subject as the fulcrum upon which history turns, a subject in whom Agamben shows a clear interest. His “second definition” of contemporariness casts the contemporary as “he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness”, and is thus “able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present”, a poetic phrasing he never fully explicates.<sup>10</sup> To abandon these textural

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8. Agamben, p. 51.

9. Berlant, p. 9.

10. Agamben, p. 44.

additions which Agamben imposes upon his rendering of the contemporary, and to return to a purely phenomenological reading of his original definition, is to engage with a powerful conception of the contemporary as *generated by* a certain subject, rather than *generative of* this subject, and thus of temporality more broadly as a socially constituted phenomenon, much as spatiality has been described in Chapter One — constantly created and adjusted from within itself by time-making processes, rather than as a framework of historical occurrences imposed by an outside force. However, this time-making subject cannot, in the precarious present, when increasing populations sense their lives as a progression of never-ending minor crises, be akin to Agamben's privileged visionary, who is "rare" and possessed of "courage", and is therefore at a remove from those surrounding him.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I argue that the subject who (or rather, which) can critically read and apprehend the present is the heterogeneous and interrelated *commons*. As I argued in Chapter One, the commons is not a single subject, but a complex assemblage of multiple subjects who exist collectively while remaining individual — a subject closely aligned with what Hardt and Negri refer to as the "multitude ... an open and expansive network ... that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common".<sup>12</sup>

Positioning the commons as the subject of the contemporary allows us to escape the ontological entrapment concomitant with the temporal construction of the ongoing present. The commons returns the idea of a critical contemporary to the present time without necessitating the narrow theorisation of a *particular* contemporary subject. As I have indicated in the preceding chapters and argue below, unlike individuals atomised from communal relations by neoliberal capitalism, commons are complex networks comprised of memorialising archives, oppositional ethics, and utopian horizons which work together to organise and empower oppositional modes of activity. Their members thus have access to what Agamben calls the "not yet" of the future — a phrasing he likely borrows from, or which in any case echoes, Bloch's concept of the not-yet-conscious, "something new that is dawning up, that has never been conscious before", the latent utopian drive and

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11. Agamben, p. 46.

12. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. xii-xiv.

anticipation hidden within all future-oriented human endeavour.<sup>13</sup> This “not yet” is also reminiscent of Bloch’s closely associated idea of anticipatory consciousness, the yearning towards *Noch-Nicht-Bewusste*, which Douglas Kellner parses as an integral facet of Bloch’s general scheme of temporality:

For Bloch, history is a repository of possibilities that are living options for future action, therefore what could have been can still be. The present moment is thus constituted in part by *latency* and *tendency*: the unrealized potentialities that are latent in the present, and the signs and foreshadowings that indicate the tendency of the direction and movement of the present into the future. *This three-dimensional temporality must be grasped and activated by an anticipatory consciousness that at once perceives the unrealized emancipatory potential in the past, the latencies and tendencies of the present, and the realizable hopes of the future.*<sup>14</sup>

Of particular value to this discussion is what Kellner describes as “realizable hopes”, a reference to what Bloch figures as the generative, utopian combination of the “warm” and “cold” streams of Marxism — the former indexing the hopeful, comradely, and empathetic utopianism which must be mixed with the latter stream of social and economic analysis.<sup>15</sup> What Kellner does not highlight in this particular passage is that, for Bloch, anticipatory consciousness can create a concrete utopia *in the here and now*, seeding options for present as much as for future action and ensuring a “transcending without transcendence”.<sup>16</sup> As Bloch indignantly writes: “as if Marxism were a world beyond, full of crazy rapture, and not very intensely *this world itself*, in piercing analysis of its impulses, in controlling anticipation of its possible good fruits”.<sup>17</sup> Arguing that “[r]eason cannot blossom without hope, hope cannot speak without reason, both in Marxist unity”, Bloch reads the “exact anticipation” of “concrete utopia” as a kind of prefigurative planning, by way of which, as if in preparation for an approaching arrival of a powerful figure, “quarters are arranged for the future” within the present.<sup>18</sup>

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13. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 11.

14. Kellner, p. 81, emphasis added.

15. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 209.

16. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 210.

17. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, III, p. 1366, emphasis added.

18. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, III, pp. 1367, 1368. Bloch’s temporal philosophy intimates a relationship between the idea of the future and the arrival of the Messiah, a key figure in the Jewish

What Bloch's work consistently gestures towards, and what I describe here, is a form of reading and creating wholly existent within the inescapable reality of the ongoing present and, at the same time, constantly working to escape the strictures of this present and to anticipate, prefigure, and ultimately inhabit a better future. In deference to Berlant's incisive portrayal of the present global condition and yet in critical opposition to her pessimistic outlook on the possibility of the transformation of this world, I name this temporal construction the *ongoing future*. Building on Bloch's schema of anticipatory consciousness, I define the ongoing future as comprising an integration of *realism*, *imagination*, and *prefiguration*.

The ongoing future is a *realist* temporal construction in that it recognises that at present, despite the political instability and turbulence of the last decade, there is no possibility of the enactment of a major, incontrovertible, planetary shift in the world-system which would see the current systems rapidly fall and new, potentially unimaginable ones take their place. Primarily this is because the present is a time of precarity, in particular for activist movements working to challenge inequality, alienation, and precarity. There no longer exists a solid social and political footing — whether in the shape of class identity, the union movement, widespread public support for communist politics, or the welfare state — for oppositional movements upon which to base themselves to see vast social changes enacted in a short space of time, as is envisaged by Derrida in his Messianic notion of *l'avenir*, and by Jameson in his concept of the totalising utopian break, both discussed in the Introduction. The ongoing future is thus also *imaginative* — rather than seeing the future as a world accessible only through total transformation of the present, it sees it as an easily accessible utopian playground for experimentation with imagination, hope, strategies for collective flourishing, and concrete tactics for social change. Finally, the ongoing future is *prefigurative* in its opposition to the present conditions of everyday life. Making use of the future as a source of creative surplus and a world of utopian energy, textual (and

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eschatological tradition. For Benjamin, as for Bloch, Messianic time is the time of a utopian transformation of which in the present we can only see “chips”: glimpses and flashes. Rather than signifying the end of history, as in the Christian tradition, Messianic time for Agamben is “the time that is left between time and its ending”. Bloch's prefigurative temporality is likewise a utopian *anticipation* of the future. See: Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 263; Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Time That Is Left’, *Epoché*, 7.1 (2002), 1–14 (p. 2).

more broadly, cultural) work in the modality of the ongoing future brings these energies constantly back to work on the present, prefiguring social, political, and economic systems which may exist in the future by generating them concretely in the here and now — or as Bloch has it, “arranging quarters for the future”.

Such prefigurative generation is not limited to the domain of cultural labour, which is the focus of this thesis. Actual, real-world enactments of utopian prefigurative energy ranging from commons and protest camps to citizens’ assemblies and activist squats, are an important inspiration and primary research source for a number of the writers I look at, in particular Spahr, Robinson, and Doctorow.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, this textual prefiguration of realist utopian hope in the present does not mean that such texts are set exclusively in the present, nor that they are exclusively realist in a literary sense, merely that they are *written* in the present, and frequently employ realist verisimilitude. As we shall see in this and the following chapters, these texts hold a discursive, intertextual, ana/proleptic relationship with the present, often drawing on the present in their depictions of the future, or equally making their presents appear as futures.

In these three ways, the ongoing future recognises the marked precarity of bodies and hopes in the present, opposes the systemic conditions which inculcate this precarity, and generates concrete tactics for overcoming it and producing new structures and tactics for worldly flourishing. As is hopefully already clear, commons are chief among these structures. As I have noted in the Introduction, *commons poetics* are best apprehended as a toolkit of aesthetic, narrative, structural, and formal techniques whose use unites a set of texts oriented towards the ongoing future. The ongoing future can thus be characterised as the *temporal* mode generated by a commons poetics, just as commons are the *spatial*

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19. Among Spahr’s key subjects, in her words, are “the various moments of disruption that have defined the bay area in the last ten years. From the Oscar Grant riots to Occupy Oakland”. Robinson says of the world of *New York 2140*: “[i]t’s not quite the Occupy Movement but it’s following the strands of the 2008 crash, the Occupy Movement, ... the disaster that we’re in”. Doctorow says of the improvisational, self-reflexive activism of *Walkaway*: “you see it reflected in things like Occupy [and] the rise of far-right movements”. See: Jos Charles, ‘Interview with Juliana Spahr’, *Entropy*, 2015 <<https://entropymag.org/interview-with-juliana-spahr/>> [accessed 1 April 2018]; Samuel Montgomery-Blinn, ‘Cory Doctorow’s Walkaway Puts an Optimistic Spin on the Disaster Novel’, *INDY Week*, 2017 <<https://indyweek.com/api/content/3685cf90-f513-5397-836e-cec801702fe8/>> [accessed 24 November 2019]; Paul Ford, ‘A Conversation About *New York 2140*’, *Track Changes* <<https://postlight.com/trackchanges/podcast/talking-with-kim-stanley-robinson-about-his-global-warming-epic-new-york-2140>> [accessed 24 November 2019].

location of a commons poetics. Moving onwards from these theoretical conclusions, the next section will turn to the work of a contemporary writer who has been closely associated with a variety of commons, anti-capitalist politics, and dreams of ongoing futures for the last two decades.

### Commons poetics in the work of Juliana Spahr

Juliana Spahr is a contemporary American writer best known as a poet, although, like her frequent collaborators Joshua Clover and Jasper Bernes, she is equally a literary and political critic, essayist, editor, and activist. Alongside Clover and Bernes, she is the co-founder of Commune Editions, a small poetry press, and is involved with *Commune*, a radical political magazine. Spahr's work and political activity is thus located at the nexus of a number of fields relevant to the project of this thesis — anti-capitalist politics, contemporary literary theory, and poetry. Spahr's poetry collection *That Winter the Wolf Came* is important for the critical narrative of this thesis because it is directly linked to the two subjects of the preceding chapters: the contemporary as a time of ongoing crisis, particularly in the period from 2008 onwards; and a reading of the spatial and social-reproductive strategies of contemporary commons as dependent on utopian processes of inhabiting and place-making. This collection deliberately foregrounds the relationship between capitalism, oppositional politics, and the collective subjects who enact these politics. Spahr's key subjects are the 2010 BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill disaster, the largest marine oil spill in the history of petroleum extraction and among the most damaging anthropogenic environmental disasters in history;<sup>20</sup> Occupy Oakland, the Oakland, California offshoot of the global 2011-12 Occupy Movement, which was distinguished by opposition to police brutality and alliance with a general strike that shut down the Port of Oakland in November 2011; the experience of motherhood; and the complexity and fragility of the planet's non-human ecosystems.

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20. In a review of the literature on the *Deepwater Horizon* spill's ecological effects, Beyer et. al. conclude that the spill "constituted an ecosystem-level injury", with the oil proving "toxic to a wide range of organisms; including plankton, invertebrates, fish, birds, and sea mammals, causing a wide array of adverse effects such as reduced growth, disease, impaired reproduction, impaired physiological health, and mortality". See: Jonny Beyer and others, 'Environmental Effects of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: A Review', *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 110.1 (2016), 28–51 (p. 45).



Many of these subjects, in earlier incarnations and with different inflections, have been key thematic strands of Spahr's critical and poetic work since the 1990s. At this time, Spahr emerged from under the wing of the Language school of poetry, having previously studied under poets including Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein.<sup>21</sup> As a member of the generation Lynn Keller characterises as 'post-Language', Spahr uses a large repertoire of formal and performance devices in her poetry, particularly narrative, lyric, apostrophe, extensive lists, repetition, incantation, and refrain. While some of these techniques embrace the linguistic and political avant-gardism of the Language school, others — such as her use of lyric and narrative — move beyond it. Spahr's work also tends away from the Language school thematically; her collections *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* (2005) and *Well Then There Now* (2011) reveal her interest in ecopoetics, and therefore in the politics of relationality and collectivity more broadly. These tactical and thematic innovations generate a poetics Meliz Ergin characterises as "combining formal experimentation with the desire to *mean* ethicopolitically".<sup>22</sup>

Spahr's association with ecopoetics merits particular note in view of their relation to the subject of the commons. One of the foundational sources of the term 'ecopoetics' is the eponymous journal, founded in 2001 by Jonathan Skinner. In the inaugural issue, Skinner writes: "'Eco' here signals—no more, no less—the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. 'Poetics' is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making".<sup>23</sup> Writing in the midst of a subsequent influx of interest in this field, Kate Rigby defines ecopoetics as "the incorporation of an environmental perspective into the study of poetics, and into the reading and writing of (mainly) literary works" — a perspective particular for its marked consideration of "how what we make — especially, but not exclusively, with words — might in turn help sustain ... other-than-human poietic practices and autopoietic processes", such as the flourishing of other species and ecological

21. Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 7. The poetry movement is also sometimes styled 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E', after the magazine of the same name.

22. Meliz Ergin, *The Ecopoetics of Entanglement in Contemporary Turkish and American Literatures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 95.

23. Jonathan Skinner, 'Editor's Statement', *Ecopoetics*, 1 (2001), 5–8 (p. 7); see also: Juliana Spahr, *Well Then There Now* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2011), p. 71.

systems.<sup>24</sup> Both the ethical (pro-environmental) and the political (anti-capitalist) concerns of ecopoetics are clearly signposted here.

Like ecopoetics, commons poetics can be conceived of as a “house making”, albeit in a different mode and with a different distribution of subjects in its “house”. Both are concerned with collectivity and community, including networks of human and non-human species, which are essential for the functioning of all commons. Both are notable for their production through a wide variety of frequently experimental formal techniques.<sup>25</sup> Their differences lie in the greater attention given to human actors — particularly oppositional ones — within commons poetics, while ecopoetics is focused on the non-human to a marked extent. Furthermore, where ecopoetics is primarily concerned with bringing attention to the ecological and political crises of the present, commons poetics is concerned with the better systems which can be designed to escape these crises by using the imaginative potential of an ongoing future, and works to depict spaces for human and non-human flourishing. Given this close association between the two forms, it is unsurprising that Spahr collapses the languages of the eco and the common throughout her work.

### *Commons in poetics*

Throughout the last two decades, Spahr has continually revisited a question of which kinds of commons are generated by poetic textual practices, and the political consequences of adopting such practices. In her 2001 critical book *Everybody's Autonomy*, Spahr states that she is “interested in works that encourage communal readings” and which look at “the relation between reading and identity in order to comment on the nature of collectivity”, including communal moments “of partial or qualified identification; moments when one realizes and respects unlikeness; moments when one connects with other readers (instead of characters)”.<sup>26</sup> In her essay ‘Poetry in a Time of Crisis’, written shortly after the 9/11 attacks, she refashions this argument, demanding an alternative to the introspective,

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24. Kate Rigby, ‘Ecopoetics’, in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, ed. by Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 79–81 (p. 79).

25. See, for instance, Spahr’s own formal experimentation in her ecopoetic collection *Well Then There Now*.

26. Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), p. 5.

deeply personal poetry which was, at that time, permeating the public sphere:

In this time of crisis, as in others, it is philosophies of connection that help me think things through. In this time of crisis, as in others, I need models of intimacy that are full of acquaintance and publics; that are declarations of collective culture and connective agency. And I need those models to also leave room for individuals, to respect their multiple “onlys”.<sup>27</sup>

In this piece, the model of intimacy Spahr gestures towards is pain, and its ability to form “political, public communities in which no one is absent”. Her collection *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* comprises two long poems — one written after 9/11 and the other between the end of 2002 and the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In these poems, Spahr deploys precisely such political “philosophies of connection”, which are filled with pain and anguish, intimacy, individual subjectivity, “collective culture and connective agency”. The collection ends with an uncomfortable, exacting recognition that even the most seemingly intimate and personal forms of human relations are, in this contemporary moment, penetrated by the agents and languages of military imperial capitalism:

When I rest my head upon yours breasts, I rest upon the *USS Kitty Hawk* and the *USS Harry S. Truman* and the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*.

Guided missile frigates, attack submarines, oilers, and amphibious transport/dock ships follow us into bed.

Fast combat support ships, landing crafts, air cushioned, all of us with all of that.<sup>28</sup>

Writing in response to these lines, Heather Milne has argued that Spahr’s work can be read as a critical examination of the “affects and complicities of global intimacy in the context of war, mediatization, and advanced capitalism”, which shows “how even the most intimate spaces we share with our beloveds are inflected with global politics and how, in turn, global politics can function as complicated sites of intimacy”.<sup>29</sup> In *That Winter the Wolf Came*, as we shall see, Spahr’s focus shifts away from the uneasy commons which exist as a result of

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27. Juliana Spahr, ‘Poetry in a Time of Crisis’, *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 189 (2002).

28. Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 74–75.

29. Heather Milne, ‘Dearly Beloveds: The Politics of Intimacy in Juliana Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 47.2 (2014), 203–18 (pp. 216, 217).

the military-industrial complex and towards the equally uneasy commons which exist as a result of contemporary petrocapi-talism. In both collections, the reminder is the same: we do not always choose the exact shapes of the commons we form, and we must create an oppositional politics in spite of and beyond them.

In a 2009 piece titled ‘The 90s’, Spahr turns to the corpus of poetry, incorporating languages other than English, written and published in the US during the 1990s. Spahr describes these literatures as forming a multilingual “literary commons, one complicated in interesting ways by an awareness of imperialism’s shared and yet unequal histories”, whose writers aimed towards a “universalism with room for particularity” in their use of language and languages.<sup>30</sup> Spahr indexes many of these poetic and political concerns in the poetry of Korean American poet Myung Mi Kim, particularly her 2002 collection *Commons*, where Kim writes: “What is English now, in the face of mass global migrations, ecological degradations, shifts and upheavals in identifications of gender and labor?”.<sup>31</sup> After 9/11, Spahr contends, this multilingual commons and its implication that “we need, at moments, the languages of others”, begins to disintegrate under the effects of “a wilful attempt to reclaim the poetic commons in the name of a nationalist literature in standard English”.<sup>32</sup> Where this piece, and Spahr’s 2001 collection *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*, deal with the oppositional possibilities and colonial complicities of using the languages of others, *That Winter the Wolf Came* broadens these concerns, examining what it might mean to incorporate the behaviour and existence of non-human species into poetry — and the anthropocentric complicities which permeate this undertaking.

The corpus of multilingual 90s poetry Spahr identifies in ‘The 90s’ receives expanded treatment in her 2018 book *Du Bois’s Telegram*, where it is situated within a larger historical context alongside avant-garde modernism and movement poetry. Here, Spahr appears increasingly ambivalent about the potential for oppositional political poetry to effect or seriously relate to real-world political change. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is also here that Spahr expresses with great clarity both the political possibilities of poetry, and the realities of the processes which suppress and deny these possibilities. Political literatures exist, she

30. Juliana Spahr, ‘The ’90s’, *Boundary 2*, 36.3 (2009), 159–182 (pp. 179, 173).

31. Myung Mi Kim, *Commons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 110.

32. Spahr, ‘The ’90s’, pp. 178, 179.

argues, “because there are writers who want to fulfil Lorde’s claim that poetry ‘forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action’”. But despite these literatures’ “utopian and revolutionary hopes”, she chronicles the invariable ways in which they atrophy “into something that makes good Adorno’s claim that ‘this is not a time for political works of art’”.<sup>33</sup> Returning to this argument in her conclusion, she writes:

It is unclear to me how literature might be reclaimed from these institutions short of revolution. [...] Revolution though. There is some historical precedence that it is revolution that frees cultural production from the institutions that constantly work to contain it. [...] We are for sure not there, yet. But one can always hope.<sup>34</sup>

Spahr carries this seed of hope quietly through her critical work, but in her poetry it sprouts up into a larger assembly of organisms. It is through and within this deferred and often intangible hope that Spahr, alongside Clover and Bernes, writes in a recent interview that their poetry “might play a role something like the riot dogs of Athens, a companion to struggles and manifestations whose contribution is ultimately minor, providing inspiration, maybe distracting the enemy now and then but unable to do much to alter the balance of forces”.<sup>35</sup> In another interview, they express this metaphor as “describing our own modesty with regard to political effects but also our sense that we imagine the press [Commune Editions, which published *That Winter the Wolf Came*] as a part of something larger, something that can be truly transformative”.<sup>36</sup> It is the “truly transformative” element in Spahr’s poetry which my reading below sets out to explore — an element which is plural, collective, common.

### *What is a commons poetics?*

*That Winter the Wolf Came* generates an oppositional poetics which assembles and

33. Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram*, p. 15.

34. Spahr, *Du Bois’s Telegram*, pp. 193–194.

35. Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr, ‘Self-Abolition of the Poet (Part 3)’, *Jacket2*, 2014 <<http://jacket2.org/commentary/self-abolition-poet-part-3>> [accessed 12 June 2019].

36. Stephen Voyce, “Poetry and Other Antagonisms”: An Interview with Commune Editions’, *The Iowa Review*, 47.1 (2017) <<https://iowareview.org/from-the-issue/volume-47-issue-1-%E2%80%94-spring-2017/%E2%80%99Poetry-and-other-antagonisms%E2%80%9D-interview-commune>> [accessed 12 June 2019].

recuperates a collective political subject for the purposes of anti-capitalist struggle. I call this poetics a commons poetics because of three features which not only define Spahr's recent poetic work, but appear, to lesser and greater extents, in each of the texts I have selected in this thesis. Firstly, "commons" refers back to Spahr's use of the word to index literatures which "think about what it means to have the words of others in one's own mouth".<sup>37</sup> In this sense, 'commons poetics' refers to a *linguistic* and *literary commons*, the intertextual coexistence of multiple literatures and languages. As has already been noted, in *That Winter the Wolf Came* the "words" Spahr takes into her mouth are the modes of being of non-human others, alongside the histories of past resistances. Secondly, *commons* refers to the ways Spahr's work is extensively involved in questions of collectivity and community; poetic representations of spatial, social, economic, and ecological commons allow Spahr to express novel ways of collective being.

Stephen Collis hones in on these first two aspects of commons poetics in his essay 'Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons', describing "poetry's *compositional practice*" as "*at its essence ... a commoning of linguistic and creative resources*". Collis reminds us, in particular, that the "stories of poetry's common practice" — from multiple authorship to collaborative writing to Percy Shelley's evocation of "that great poem, which all poets like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind have built up since the beginning of the world" — are as old as records of poetry itself. Collis further highlights the resistance of poetic practice to the concept of the singular author and inimitable style, despite capital's attempts to "force it to stand only for the personal and the subjective" rather than the common and the collective. Collis argues that when it escapes the demands of capital, the "putative commons" of poetry exists "along the margins of productive life where it fruits seemingly without purpose or exchange value".<sup>38</sup> Beyond this, I would add, commons-focused poetry's combination of common compositional practice/poetics and, through such formal techniques, its ability to convincingly represent a collective and oppositional

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37. Spahr, 'The '90s', p. 181.

38. Stephen Collis, 'Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons', *Forum on Public Domain*, 2014 <<https://www.yumpu.com/s/GaMgC9QgHE9Qvofj>> [accessed 12 June 2019]. For an alternative published version of this text, with certain differences from the one available exclusively online, see: Stephen Collis, 'Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons', in *The Commons* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014), pp. 127–36.



thematics, makes it the ideal home for a utopian, oppositional politics. Not just inimical to capital, a commons poetics actively troubles capital's political hegemony.

These two readings of commons have been widely taken up in critical responses to Spahr's poetry. A number of critics have variously figured Spahr's poetics as an "ecopoetics", a "posthumanist poetics", or an "anthropogenic poetics".<sup>39</sup> These definitions share a recognition of Spahr's concern with politically charged questions of connection, collectivity, and community — that is, of commons and commoning — across disparate ontological domains and ecological boundaries. Kimberly Lamm unites a number of these strands, writing that Spahr's poetry is "full of outward, inclusive turns", always containing "a call to collectivities that are resistant and responsible, open to the alterity of the planet and the ethical impossibilities it demands", which act as a corrective and a form of resistance to "globalization's violently enforced homogenization".<sup>40</sup> Lamm and other critics highlight, ultimately, the ways in which intimate and public collectivities can no longer be conceived of as distinct in a contemporary moment conditioned by neoliberal capitalism.

The third sense in which I refer to Spahr's commons poetics is drawn directly from oppositional political theory: as I have argued in Chapter One and above, commons draw energy from, and prefigure, an anti-capitalist ongoing future. This argument has been picked up by anti-capitalist philosophy over the last decades. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri describe "the common" as the underlying sense of collective power which allows the subject of the multitude to "communicate and act together", arguing that this "communication, collaboration, and cooperation" are "not only based on the common, but *they in turn produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship*".<sup>41</sup> The *multitude*, a term introduced by Hardt and Negri and taken up as a rallying term by anti-precarity movements, describes the acting subject of anti-capitalist politics in the landscape of post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberal economic strategy. Born of late capitalist processes,

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39. Dianne Chisholm, 'Juliana Spahr's Ecopoetics: Ecologies and Politics of the Refrain', *Contemporary Literature*, 55.1 (2014), 118–47; Tana Jean Welch, 'Entangled Species: The Inclusive Posthumanist Ecopoetics of Juliana Spahr', *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 6.1 (2014); Margaret Ronda, 'Anthropogenic Poetics', *The Minnesota Review*, 83 (2014), 102–11; Ergin.

40. Kimberly Lamm, 'All Together/Now: Writing the Space of Collectivities in the Poetry of Juliana Spahr', in *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics*, ed. by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), pp. 133–50 (pp. 134, 146).

41. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. xv, emphasis added.



in particular globalization, the hollowing out of class identity, and the growth of the information economy, the multitude is a collective subject situated beyond class and other identitarian categories, “composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity — different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires ... a multiplicity of all these singular differences”.<sup>42</sup> It is unlikely that Hardt and Negri knew how closely Spahr had prefigured their words only a few years earlier in ‘Poetry in a Time of Crisis’, where she had called for connective models which “leave room for individuals”. Describing the multitude as a “network” as well as a subject, Hardt and Negri argue that “a distributed network such as the Internet is a good initial image or model for the multitude because, first, the various nodes remain different but are all connected in the Web, and, second, the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and new relationships can always be added”.<sup>43</sup> Another good model with similar configurations, as Hardt and Negri acknowledge in their use of the term “the common”, are commons. Writing over a decade ago, Hardt and Negri note that they prefer the term “the common” to “the commons” because the latter term “refers to pre-capitalist-shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of private property”.<sup>44</sup> As this thesis demonstrates, these spaces are now returning with great energy, in both literary work and in urban and immaterial spaces across the world.

More recently, De Angelis has argued that the process of commoning — of producing commons — “is flow-like in its praxis: like a bike chain it continues to rotate, to iterate, to start anew a new cycle [...] (re)producing resources and commoners, and in turn (re)producing the commons at new levels and in new forms”.<sup>45</sup> Collis adds, poetically, of the blackberry thicket’s relationship with the imaginary: “[i]t holds forth a possible world, and thus opens the door for the vision of other possible worlds”.<sup>46</sup> To talk of commons is to talk simultaneously of the futures that commons produce through their prefigurative (re)production. Through the term ‘prefigurative’, to expand on my argument in the Introduction

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42. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. xiv.

43. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. xv.

44. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. xv. See also: pp. 189-90, p. 197.

45. De Angelis, pp. 203-4.

46. Collis, ‘Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons’.

and Chapter One, I index the ways that commons present sustaining, alternative forms of living together as if these forms are already normalised and commonplace in the present. Picking up on the same wellspring of prefigurative utopian energy, Levitas has read Occupy Wall Street as a utopian “prefiguration of the good society”.<sup>47</sup> The poetics, or modes of making, of both real-world commons and the texts which represent them demand to be understood as utopian; they seek to imagine and prefiguratively make an ongoing future which is more common than the present within which they operate.

Spahr’s “emergent, precarious” commons emerge over and over again in the nine linked pieces of *That Winter the Wolf Came*, set against a contemporary “terrain of anxiety, precarity, and trauma”, yet (re)producing themselves through thematics of collective political action and formal techniques which highlight intertwined collectivity.<sup>48</sup> Chief among these techniques and thematics is lyric. While the long tradition of lyric has traditionally been seen as the enemy of Language poetry’s political avant-gardism, Lynn Keller has argued that Spahr’s politics and her allegiances to Language poetry allow her to “engage strategically with lyric”, revitalising its “ancient ability to affirm communal values as she stages her resistance to destructive global politics”.<sup>49</sup> The lyricism of *That Winter the Wolf Came* is encoded not only in structure and form, but in compositional practices and content matter. Almost every poem in the collection alludes to, intertextually borrows from, or is thematically built upon a song. Spahr’s concern for lyric at a fundamental and frequently literal level — for musicians, for lyrics, for the structures and the performances of songs, for the ways in which we listen to them — goes to the heart of her text. Spahr has been singled out for the way she uses chant and repetition in her performance of her poetry and, in this light, her preoccupation with lyric and its performance is unsurprising.<sup>50</sup> The connections which link Spahr’s investment in lyric with her concern for collectivity run

47. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 205.

48. Maureen N. McLane, ‘Projects, Poetries, Chorotopes: On Anne Boyer, Bhanu Kapil, and Juliana Spahr’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/projects-poetries-chorotopes-anne-boyer-bhanu-kapil-juliana-spahr/>> [accessed 5 April 2018].

49. Lynn Keller, “‘Post-Language Lyric’: The Example of Juliana Spahr”, *Chicago Review*, 55.3/4 (2010), 74–83 (p. 83). On the vexed relationship between Language and lyric poetry, see: Rei Terada, ‘After the Critique of Lyric’, *PMLA*, 123.1 (2008), 195–200 <<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.1.195>>; Jennifer Ashton, ‘Sincerity and the Second Person: Lyric After Language Poetry’, *Interval(le)s*, II.2–III.1 (2008/2009), 94–108.

50. Ergin, pp. 103–5.

even deeper. In a prefacing note to ‘Poem written from November 30 2002 to March 27 2003’ in *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*, she writes:

September 11 shifted my thinking in this way. [...] I felt I had to think about what I was connected with, and what I was complicit with, as I lived off the fat of the military-industrial complex on a small island. [...] This feeling made lyric — with its attention to connection, with its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar — suddenly somewhat poignant, somewhat apt, even somewhat more useful than I usually find it.<sup>51</sup>

Spahr’s focus on lyric in *That Winter the Wolf Came* tackles the same desire for “dwelling on the beloved and on the afar”, in terms of physical distance across the planet as well as the irreconcilable distance from the perceptual and epistemological worlds of non-human beings. To understand Spahr’s commons poetics, it is imperative that we understand the use of the lyric within and across the pieces of *That Winter the Wolf Came* — the ways in which, as form and subject, it unites and collects, assembles and organises.

### ‘If You Were a Bluebird’: multi-species commons

The poem ‘If You Were a Bluebird’ takes its title from a 1989 Emmylou Harris cover of a 1977 song by Butch Hancock and Joe Ely.<sup>52</sup> The song is a sentimental lyric, whose narrator describes the subject of their love as a series of creatures and objects: a crying bluebird, a raindrop calling home, a train stop, a hotel. Spahr writes: “[d]oes it matter if it doesn’t entirely make sense and yet is still entirely a love song, one about being there for someone no matter what they are and no matter what they might do?”<sup>53</sup> The poem interrogates this question further, employing a commons poetics to strip back the song’s sentimentality and hone in on the question of what it means to love someone “no matter what they are and no matter what they might do” — not by forgiving someone for their bad behaviour, but in a more fundamental, ecological sense of foregrounding care and responsibility for a plurality of non-human subjects. As Siobhan Phillips writes in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “[i]n her poems, love does not resist the world beyond;

51. Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, p. 13.

52. Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr, ‘Book Notes - Joshua Clover, Jasper Bernes, and Juliana Spahr (Commune Editions)’, *Largehearted Boy*, 2015 <[http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2015/09/book\\_notes\\_josh\\_28.html](http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2015/09/book_notes_josh_28.html)> [accessed 12 June 2019].

53. Bernes, Clover, and Spahr, ‘Book Notes’.

love lets it in. Politics demands feeling rather than denuding it”.<sup>54</sup>

Bringing her readers’ attention to her frequent use of lists, Spahr begins the poem with the words: “Began with a list”. This list, and the two following, are each set out on the bottom half of a page, demarcated from the surrounding text by white space. The first list, like the two that follow, consists of three animals: “A bird. Reed cormorant. | Added a fish and a monkey. Hingemouth. White throated monkey”. These animals are described in exacting anatomical detail; then they are linked to each other, not through any specific behaviour, but with the lines “Added the phrase the principle of relation | Because it was with the principle of relation that the Niger Delta came to teem”. Here, we discover that these animals all live in one complex ecosystem — the next lines focus on the ways in which their behaviours relate them to each other and their larger ecosystem. The hingemouth “swims”; the “silvery wings, longish tail, and short head crest of the reed cormorant dives down to considerable depths in the Delta ... bringing slow-moving mormyrids and chichlids to the surface”; the white-throated monkey “bangs objects against the ground, throws sticks”.<sup>55</sup> Surely, these lines seem to say, the “principle of relation” is the recognition that nothing is *not* related — that relation permeates all subjects and spaces. The “principle of relation” returns in the next two lists, uniting a Eurasian spoonbill, a crab and a fish in the Kuwait Bay, and a pelican, a dolphin and a rednose snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. In these opening sections, however, the three ecosystems are visually separated through their layout on their respective pages — the only ‘relation’ between them is *assumed* through Spahr’s repetition of an identical formal structure. What is furthermore significant about these sections are the ways in which Spahr makes the formal features of her commons poetics plainly visible, even formulaic (“Began with a list”, “Added because”), bringing her readers’ attention to her construction of poetic meaning not by argument and inference, but by the formal techniques of the “new sentence”, parataxis and free association common in Language poetry.<sup>56</sup> It is no

54. Siobhan Phillips, ‘A Catalogue of Us with All: Juliana Spahr’s “Well Then There Now”’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2011 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-catalogue-of-us-with-all-juliana-spahrs-well-then-there-now/>> [accessed 12 June 2019].

55. Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came* (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2015), p. 29.

56. Bob Perelman writes of the “new sentence” of Language poetry: “a new sentence is more or less ordinary but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance. New sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or

large leap to draw a connection between these *formal* techniques of relation, and the *subjective* and *symbolic* parataxis which allows Spahr to assemble, in a single poem, something of the unconveyable complexity of a planetary multi-species commons.

The next section of the poem again begins halfway down a page, but is continuous until the poem's end. Here, a human subject is introduced, along with the concept of language which appears to distinguish this subject from those which came before: "I am waiting. | Said this out loud". But this subject rapidly becomes a "we": "Said we are waiting. | Some of us are waiting". The "we", in turn, becomes something more organised and less diffuse: "Waiting to be infiltrating the land. | And waiting for the assembly of animals. | Waiting to be complete".<sup>57</sup> In these short, repetitive lines, the individuated webs of relation which open the poem become more general — figured now as assemblies of fish, animals, and birds — but also become weaponised against an as-of-yet undefined threat. The threat is revealed in these lines, each of which recontextualises the word 'gathering':

Wanting to be coming to be possibility gathering.

As it happened with blood cockle gathering when the women went to gather blood

cockles and the cockles were covered in oil.

And then began another sort of gathering.

Gathering so as to be seizing.

Seizing a boat.

Dividing into groups.

Occupying airstrips, helicopter pads, oil storage areas, docks.<sup>58</sup>

The meaning of "gathering" here transforms from a symbolic gathering of possibility into a form of labour practised by women who are, like the animals, integrated closely with the ecologies within which they exist. Then, in response to an oil spill, begins an oppositional, activist gathering and occupation. The commons poetics threaded through this poem allow Spahr to hold together and assemble, in language and narrative, a plural diversity of different assemblies — of animals, fish, birds, and humans.

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connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences". See: Bob Perelman, 'Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice', *American Literature*, 65.2 (1993), 313–24 (p. 313).

57. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, pp. 32–33.

58. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 34.

The commons Spahr formulates is not a commons in the historical sense against which Hardt and Negri caution, nor in the later sense derived from economic theory, particularly from the work of Elinor Ostrom into “common-pool resources” — what Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan and Julian Brigstocke describe as “spatially delimited natural resources that may be appropriated for use by different communities and incorporated into different economic logics”, although, of course, the relationship between the blood cockle gatherers and the seafront is precisely such an economic relationship.<sup>59</sup> Moving beyond these definitions, Spahr evokes a commons at the level of structure and poetic form. The separated lists with which ‘If You Were a Bluebird’ opens are unravelled and united by its rolling, unstoppable, chant-like conclusion, which reveals a similar “universalism with room for particularity” to the one Spahr had indexed in 90s multilingual poetry. Here, rather than holding the words of others on her tongue, Spahr holds the histories and behaviours of others, including “[t]he women and the women-identified of 1789 and 1871 and 1917 and 1918 and 1929 and 1969”, who assemble “[f]rom four hundred one day to four thousand the next”, but unites them also with “the white-throated monkey”, an animal which likewise assembles in groups for collective survival: “five or six at the beginnings, then more gathering up to thirty”.<sup>60</sup> Only the poet’s innovative use of language is able to assemble these diverse multitudes as a single “possibility gathering”, looking beyond the constraints of an anthropocentric focus which distinguishes the survival of animals from the survival of humans in the face of petrocapiatlist disaster.

‘If You Were a Bluebird’ ends, as it began, with a list:

But not stopping then.

Gathering like the silt too.

Traveling through the circuits that already exist.

Traveling with the ease of oil tankers.

From Banias in Syria, Tripoli, Ceyhan in Turkey.

Through the Neutral Zone to the terminals at Mena Saud and Ras Al Khafji.

Through Umm Said.

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59. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*; Dawney, Kirwan, and Brigstocke, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

60. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 34.

Through Das Island and Jebel dhanna.

Arjuna, Balongan, and Cinta, and Widuri.<sup>61</sup>

This listing of some of the oil ports, fields, and refineries which underpin contemporary petroculture foregrounds our sense of oil as hidden and, simultaneously, inseparable from the ways in which we live and relate to the ecosystems around us — the dichotomy that Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden refer to when they write that “[o]il is not entirely visible to us as a commodity, a fuel, a resource, or a political and economic agent, yet it is also not invisible ... it is foundational and ever present, yet it is also secreted away”.<sup>62</sup> These names are alien and unfamiliar outside the professional vocabulary of the petroleum industry, and come from languages other than English. At the same time, the economies of developed and developing nations rely wholesale on the labour and extraction which occurs in these places. Following the section of the poem which assembles human and non-human beings in a history of anti-petrocapitalist resistance, this section suggests that oil, too, must be reckoned with as part of this history — and as part of its future, the “possibility gathering” which does not stop once it reaches the circuits of oil production, but gathers and travels, staking an oppositional claim on an expanding global sphere indexed by these place names. Spahr draws our attention in these concluding lines to the circuits of petrocapitalist production and circulation, which, like the US military-industrial complex in her earlier work, penetrate and envelop even the most radical and transformative forms of anti-capitalist opposition. The lists which begin and end the poem underscore this message when we realise that the ecosystems with which Spahr begins — the Niger Delta, Kuwait Bay, and the Gulf of Mexico — are home to some of the world’s largest active oil fields and have been the sites of the world’s worst oil disasters.

The utopian hope glimmering in this poem lies in the final, surprising relation Spahr makes between the “ten thousands” of “women and women-identified” who rise to challenge capitalism, and the networks of petrocapitalist circulation. Revolutionary subjects, in these lines, are seen “Traveling through the circuits that already exist. | Traveling with the ease of oil tankers”. The anti-capitalist challenge here is double — suggesting

61. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 35.

62. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, ‘Introduction’, in *Oil Culture*, ed. by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. xvii–xxxiii (p. xvii).



firstly, as do the Invisible Committee in equally poetic language, that contemporary forms of anti-capitalist resistance must, like capitalism itself, involve movement and circulation across increasingly complex networks: “it’s not about *possessing* territory [...] it’s a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation, and of solidarities to the point that the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to all authority”.<sup>63</sup> As the list of oil ports suggests, these solidarities must be anti-border and anti-colonial at the same time as they are anti-capitalist. Secondly, Spahr’s conclusion draws on those tactics of late Marxist communisation introduced in Chapter Two, which move away from the desire for a totalising historical break and embrace forms of revolutionary life within the capitalist present. This final list suggests, then, that there is an opportunity for revolution within the totality of capitalism — that the master’s tools, *contra* Lorde, might yet have a role in dismantling the master’s house. Beyond this, the poem’s commons poetics speak to a sense of care and responsibility immanent and implicit in the notion of being common, evoked through the desire of a plurality of subjects who are all “Wanting the principle of relation. [...] Wanting to be together”. However, ‘If You Were a Bluebird’, which is more apostrophic than narrative in structure, does not extend past our petrocapiatlist present to fully realise and represent an ongoing future. To explore how Spahr creates such futures we must turn to other poems in *That Winter the Wolf Came*.

### **‘Transitory, Momentary’ and ‘It’s All Good, It’s All Fucked’: (anti-)capitalist assemblages**

In ‘Transitory, Momentary’, the opening poem of *That Winter the Wolf Came*, Spahr creates a symbolic common space for a number of concerns which are threaded through the rest of the collection. A narrative prose poem filling up four pages with an unbroken column of text, ‘Transitory, Momentary’ defies the sense of sequentially ordered time, common to narrative poetry, by moving through a disordered collection of subjects, histories, and futures.<sup>64</sup> The formal tactics on display here are similar to those of ‘If You Were a

63. The Invisible Committee, p. 108.

64. As Seymour Chatman notes, it is not sequentiality *per se* which defines narrative, but contingency, of which there is plenty in ‘Transitory, Momentary’. See: Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 45–48.

Bluebird': using parataxis and association at the level of "new sentences", Spahr collects and unites individuated subjects into a common subject, a poetic commons. Her sentences travel through a variety of locations, subjects, and times, and move fluidly between distinct, specialised, seemingly irreconcilable vocabularies: explications on animal ethology and the economics of the global oil trade sit alongside the narrative of a protest occupation being taken over by the police, the formal analysis of an unnamed pop song, and a lyrical, sentimental reflection on the life of the song's singer. The poem's conclusion offers us an account of the kinds of political tactics which could be used by a plural subject in opposition to planetary capitalism — but it is also a partial account, hopeful yet cautious, uncertain of its own possibilities.

The poem opens with the lyrical, ecopoetic line "The Brent geese fly in long low wavering lines on their migrations", before proleptically introducing Spahr's own voice: "What I have to offer here is nothing revolutionary". Indeed, the migration patterns of Brent geese, while impressive, are not revolutionary, but Spahr prefigures the political content of the poem, and the way that the Brent geese link to it, by continuing: "It is just an observation, just a small observation, that sometimes art can hold the oil wars and all that they mean and might yet mean within".<sup>65</sup> With the phrase "oil wars", Spahr captures the unbroken line which links her earlier work on the US military complex with her current focus on petrocapi-talism — these are two aspects of the same global capitalist hegemony. This moment of ironic meiosis ("just a small observation"), pivoting on the vast understatement of "just", signals to the reader that *That Winter the Wolf Came* attempts to rise to the challenge of capturing the totality ("all they mean") of late neoliberal petrocapi-talism, its present as well as all its possible futures ("might yet mean"), while foregrounding the absolute impossibility of this task. It is a task made easier, however, through the generation of a collective subject which includes the Brent geese; they are one of many paths towards oil, one of the key symbols which fuel this collection. As the poem's narrative continues, Spahr offers one of her tonally neutral, yet deeply affecting observations: "When this oil company named their oil fields off the coast of Scotland, they chose the names of water

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65. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 11.

birds in alphabetical order: Auk, Brent, Cormorant, Dunlin, Eider, Fulmar and so on”.<sup>66</sup> In this she exemplifies the strategies by which capitalism generates a simulacra of the natural world it destroys, in this instance in the epistemic sense of naming its production facilities after the wild seabirds who die in their millions after oil spill disasters.<sup>67</sup>

The subjects Spahr names in their particularity, and those she leaves unnamed, are also of importance here: while the seabirds killed by oil disasters are named, the oil company, in this poem and elsewhere in the collection, is nameless. Naming is an expression of power — both power *over* the thing named, and the extension of power *to* the named thing to act in a particular way indexed by the name. Spahr’s tactics and politics of naming transfer power, and the reader’s attention, to non-human lives which are frequently disregarded, in part due to their anonymity; in her memoir *The Transformation* (2007), she reminds us that “[f]lora and fauna grow next to and around each other without names. Humans add the annotation”.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, in losing their names, specific companies, and later specific parks, protest actions, occupied buildings, and instances of police violence become general and anonymous, which allows them to stand in for universal processes of precarisation, opposition, and violence in the ongoing present. Spahr employs the same tactic in one of her best-known poems, ‘Unnamed Dragonfly Species’, where the names of specific endangered species, melting glaciers, and islands at risk of being submerged by rising sea waters are contrasted with an anonymised narrative, in which the protagonists live on “an island in the Pacific and ... an island in the Atlantic”:

**Least Bittern** One had a smallish city and one had one of the largest cities in the world. **Least Tern** One was six hundred square miles and one was twenty-six square miles. **Leatherback Sea Turtle** Both were likely to feel the effects of the rising ocean although many of the residents of both were pretending that what was happening to the nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Tokelau Islands did not really foretell anything relevant to them at all.<sup>69</sup>

Oil’s semiotic and epistemic fluidity has long been noted by petrocultural critics; Barrett

66. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 13.

67. On capitalism’s generation of simulacra of the world it plunders for raw materials, see: Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, pp. 69–84.

68. Juliana Spahr, *The Transformation* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2007), p. 13.

69. Spahr, *Well Then There Now*, p. 84.

and Worden describe it as simultaneously “material, mystical, historical, geological, and agential”.<sup>70</sup> In ‘Transitory, Momentary’, this anonymous, generalising agent unites not only the geese, but also the oil company building which will be built in the occupied park; the singer of the pop song travelling through a landscape of Californian oil fields; and thus his song, which “reflects and refracts the oil in ways both relevant and trivial”.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, oil links to this plural subject a symbolic assembly of “the many that are pulled from intimacies by oil’s circulations”, a group of people sharing few ties of traditional political solidarity, united only by their shared experience of the aforementioned “epiphanic song” which spills “out and over them”:

The truckers, the sailors and deckhands, the assembly line workers, those who maintain the pipelines, those who drive support in the caravans that escort the tankers, the fertilizers, the thousands of interlocking plastic parts, the workers who move two hundred miles and live in a dorm near a factory, alone, those on the ships who spend fifty weeks circulating with the oil unable to talk to each other because of no shared language [...].<sup>72</sup>

The subject of the clause “thousands of interlocking plastic parts” is ambiguous — it is unclear whether the workers are simply “escorting” the parts along with “the tankers, the fertilizers”, or whether this classic image of the factory machine has become metonymic for “the workers who move two hundred miles and live in a dorm near a factory, alone”. The workers, like the plastic parts, are immanent within the circuits of capital. They are both produced by, and help produce, the commodity of oil. In this way, and perhaps *only* in this way, can they be understood as an assemblage — an assemblage which, in this poem, atomises, anonymises, and alienates them even as they become part of it. Rather than indexing a moment of resistance to petrocapiatalism, Spahr’s purpose here is to heighten and sharpen an awareness of subaltern subjects at the mercy of its logics.

The evocation of these workers strikes a particularly bleak note in *That Winter the Wolf Came*, because they are unable to become part of the aforementioned oppositional multitude. For Paolo Virno, one of the fundamental features of the multitude is its relation

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70. Barrett and Worden, p. xvii.

71. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 14.

72. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 14.

to post-Fordist forms of work, and thus to communication:

The *sharing* of linguistic and cognitive habits is the constituent element of the post-Fordist process of labor. [...] This preliminary *sharing* in one way characterizes the ‘many,’ seen as being ‘many,’ the multitude; in another way, it is itself the base of today’s production.<sup>73</sup>

Post-Fordist workers, in the centrality of communication to their labour, are already part of a knowledge commons, and thus have more immediate access to other forms of oppositional commons. In contrast with these workers, Spahr’s labourers are still trapped in the circuits of Fordist capitalism — they have no recourse to the “*sharing* of linguistic and cognitive habits”, and even if they did, these would not be enough to liberate them from the circuits of petrocapiatalism.

The “epiphany” Spahr offers us in this poem is as diminished as the range of oppositional action offered to this group: “It might be that there is nothing to epiphany if it does not hint at the moment of sweaty relation larger than the intimate”.<sup>74</sup> What kind of epiphany can emerge from uniting these workers with nothing more than a “song about minor loss”, worlds apart from the focused, weaponised “[c]hanting of threatening songs” by the “women and women-identified” in ‘If You Were a Bluebird’? Margaret Ronda incisively writes that Spahr’s work deals in “thematics of collective intimacy”, challenging “the logics of neoliberal privatization that divert attention from collective commitments towards individual interests and private encounters”, but here, Spahr demands a “moment of sweaty relation” *beyond* the intimate.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps she gestures with these lines at the physical labour the workers perform. Perhaps the answer lies in the lines which follow, paratactically, immediately on from them:

Before the police come, before the building, in the middle of one night, a group of people form a line leading to the entrance of the park. [...] All pass bricks, one by one, down the line so as to make a pile. [...] The pile gets bigger and bigger. It is waist high. Then chest high. Some get out of the line and climb on the pile, hold both their

73. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 22, 41.

74. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 14.

75. Margaret Ronda, ‘Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene’, *Post45*, 2013 <<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2013/06/mourning-and-melancholia-in-the-anthropocene/>> [accessed 5 April 2018].

hands in the air because they know now is the transitory, momentary triumph and it should be felt. Others continue passing brick after brick, from one hand to another hand, arms extended, torsos at moments also going back and forth with the bricks.<sup>76</sup>

What kind of time does Spahr evoke in this narrative? With the twice repeated “before”, the latter instance of which refers to a building which we already know “right now, [...] is not there”, and the ahistorical “in the middle of *one night*”, we get the sense this occupation is happening outside time, neither quite in the past nor the present. The use of “before” in combination with the historical present tense, in particular, creates a space of analepsis where the past becomes unmoored and extends into the now of the rest of the poem. In the poem’s “right now” — perhaps the 2011 of Occupy Oakland which, like the rest of the Occupy movement, was ultimately policed out of material existence — the police “know [...] that they will win”. In the “moment of sweaty relation”, however, the occupiers build a barricade which might keep the flow of history itself out.<sup>77</sup> The barricade is material, physical, reckoned in terms of the bodies that are making it (“waist high”, “chest high”) and built also from the movements and physical articulations of its builders (“arms extended, torsos ... going back and forth with the bricks”).

Even here, Spahr diminishes the revolutionary potential of oppositional action: this act of barricade building is only a “transitory, momentary triumph”. As witnesses of a long history of rebellion, Spahr and her readers know that most anti-capitalist “moments” do not result in victory for the activists; the physical labour and materiality of barricade building merely hints at victory, stopping short of opening out beyond these specific subjects. Instead, by way of conclusion, Spahr offers us the following lines:

Then they gather behind it, waiting. Back there, someone might possibly be singing to a child, singing the epiphanic song that alludes to losing the moment of tongue on clit or cock over and over because the child cannot be comforted, because the singer knows only loss. [...] they had agreed to be with shadows when they had the child. They had gambled in a sense on a question of sustaining. They had agreed to exist from now on with a shadow. A shadow of love and a shadow of the burning of the oil

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76. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 14.

77. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 12.

fields that has already happened and is yet to come and yet must come and a million other shadows that might possibly disappear in the light at that moment. (14-15)

Physically, erotically, intimately, these lines return us to a difficult and unceasing present, turning away from minor “epiphany” and towards a “question of sustaining”, perhaps a question to which “the principle of relation” could serve as one answer. At the same time, these lyrical lines, which could be an inward turn from Spahr herself (the thematics of motherhood are another fruitful aspect of *That Winter the Wolf Came* which I do not have space to examine in this thesis) are revolutionary in a way that the rest of the poem cannot be. Here, the singer/parent looks out from a shadowy present into a temporal slippage. The phrase “has already happened and is yet to come and yet must come” offers us the possibility of a utopian ongoing future, but also the sense of events being out of the subject’s control, reminiscent of modes of life in the ongoing present. But within this fuzzy temporality, Spahr’s subject sees the truly revolutionary, albeit terrible, “burning of the oil fields”, paratactically situated next to “love” — which recalls the immanent love Spahr writes of in ‘If You Were a Bluebird’. That oil fields have burnt before in nations targeted by US neo-imperialism does not mean that petrocaptalist systems as a whole cannot burn away in a revolutionary moment (“the light”) which moves the planet beyond that particular economic relation. ‘Transitory, Momentary’ ultimately offers a lyrical hope that the “sweaty relation” of real-world, communal, oppositional action, occurring not in a generalised future, but in “that moment”, might yet be able to oppose the petrocaptalist present and its bleak futures.

The phrase “transitory, momentary” returns as a haunting in a later poem in the collection, ‘It’s All Good, It’s All Fucked’, as does the hopeful, fearful, anticipatory longing for revolution which comes at the end of ‘Transitory, Momentary’. Another long prose poem, ‘It’s All Good, It’s All Fucked’ brings the reader into a confessional, erotic retelling of the narrator’s symbolic love affair and breakup with the “cloudy and confused meme” of “Non-Revolution”. Using this term, Spahr codes the riots, occupations, protests, and actions of the Occupy movement and its brethren in late 2011 — anti-capitalist oppositional activity which never spills into the full-scale revolution Spahr wishes for in *Du Bois’s Telegram* (“We are for sure not there, yet. But one can always hope”). The second half of



the poem forms a reflection — part essay, part memoir — on the Occupy movement's collapse, especially among its most passionate supporters, and its transformation from “Non-Revolution with its minor insurrections to social center”, signalling a defanging of the movement's riotous energy by its absorption into the sphere of local government and community services.<sup>78</sup> Spahr recognises that, had the movement continued to grow and Non-Revolution “became Revolution, I knew that would be hard. That was an entirely different lover, one I was not sure I was ready for and yet longed for so much”.<sup>79</sup>

In the midst of her reflection, Spahr turns to the long history of riot for succour and, in doing so, highlights the surpluses — of bodies, emotion, danger, and power, but also of creative energy, concrete tactics, and transformational utopian anticipation — which go hand-in-hand with riot and protest, towards which I gestured in Chapter Two:

The moment in realist painting of the riot when the perspective switches from the soldiers' point of view to that of the crowd and the people in the crowd are individuals flowing over and out of the space in the painting and the dog is barking causing a horse to rear up and the soldiers in the crowd are at risk, isolated from the rest of the soldiers who are off there far in the distance, and one of the rioters in the crowd has a spy glass trained on these soldiers so they are far off and the crowd seems to be having fun, even the dog joining in, things tumbling. The crowd in this moment. Complicated, but still joyous, transitory, momentary, experiencing this one moment of freedom [...].<sup>80</sup>

Spahr's long sentence here, which breaks only to condense into the even larger image of “[t]he crowd in this moment”, works to present the material presence of the riot as a surplus, pushing at the limits of the language, and as an embodiment of multitude. In these lines, a felt recognition of the crowd's “one moment of freedom” — an affective surplus — is significant despite the general failure of their revolutionary project in this particular temporal context.

Indeed, much as Spahr identifies the people comprising the multitude as a *bodily* excess, as “individuals flowing over and out the space in the painting”, Hardt and Negri

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78. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 73.

79. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 73.

80. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, pp. 70–71.

write of the “flesh of the multitude” as “an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value” — a reading which returns us to the theorisation of surplus subjects in Chapter Two, while moving beyond an orthodox Communist reading of the Party-organised surplus by incorporating an autonomist sense of late capitalist labouring subject(s) as always in the process of revolutionary labour. In Hardt and Negri’s Marxist corporeal poetics, this multitudinous flesh is ultimately “maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body”.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, as Sylvère Lotringer incisively notes in a critique of Hardt and Virno’s theories of the multitude, programmatic theories of anti-capitalist action are destined to continue failing in the face of an increasingly fluid capitalism, and thus revolutionary forces must seek a communalist combat, “meant to strengthen some forces present in capital, and join them with other forces in order to form a new communist ensemble ... a cartography of virtualities made possible by post-Fordism, elements in contemporary life that could eventually be mobilized”. As Lotringer evocatively demands we discover, after Spinoza: “What is a body *capable of*?”.<sup>82</sup>

In Spahr’s work, then, the focus remains on corporeal capability — “sweaty relation” — and the desire for new forms of temporal relation. The return of the words “transitory, momentary” stretch history by linking the crowd of “the space in the painting” to the crowd of the contemporary occupation — creating a commons of protest across the gulf of time — even as the occupation is already known to have failed, subtly putting the lie to the idea that the consequences of oppositional activity are limited to their own present. Rather, these two “transitory, momentary” events are situated as part of a long tradition of anti-capitalist resistance, and this, in turn, offers the possibility of there being an ongoing future where the same transitory, momentary utopian energy will again be put to work. As I wrote in Chapter One, Haiven has described this relationship between the past, present, and future of activism as “commoning memory”, a process that sees the past as a commons:

A radical approach to memory, one that both recalls the utopian flash of the past and yearns for its impossible future, can instigate a relentless optimism toward the labor

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81. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 192.

82. Sylvère Lotringer, ‘Foreword: We, the Multitude’, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, by Paolo Virno (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 7–19 (pp. 16–17).

of social justice. Commoning memory is a form of co-memorialization that takes as its challenge not the accurate representation of previous events but the rekindling of the spark of past utopianisms in the present.<sup>83</sup>

The final poem I will consider in this chapter takes the anticipatory illumination of these two poems and extends it concretely into such an ongoing future.

### **‘Turnt’: temporal commons**

The last piece in *That Winter the Wolf Came*, ‘Turnt’, is a love poem. Its loose, free verse structure of jumbled long and short lines and fragmentary sentences suggest that the first-person narrator is turning back towards the reader, telling them the story of how “it” — Occupy Oakland’s protests, riots, and parties in the autumn and winter of 2011 — went down. Spahr’s ebullient, confiding tone is reinforced by occasional second-person asides — “[y]ou can hear it sometimes. It often has a soundtrack. Sometimes it has drum and bass. Sometimes just joy” — which welcome the reader into this revitalised activist history.<sup>84</sup> Beyond that one line, ‘Turnt’ does not appear to have a close connection to song. However, the African-American English term ‘turnt’ which gives the poem its title originates in late 2000s hip-hop, where it refers to a state of excitement, wildness, or intoxication, often in a collective, united mode, as in Snoop Dogg’s 2009 song ‘1800’:

1800, I’m blunted, fa cert’  
Geekin’ on ya hoes, everybody here turnt  
[...]  
Hey! My niggas turnt up, I’m a beast bitch  
West coast, I’m on the east bitch<sup>85</sup>

Brittney C. Cooper reads ‘turnt’ in Black American culture as a maximal state of excess and power, an oppositional refusal to ‘turn down’: “Crunk Feminism is feminism all the way turnt up! Feminism that is off the charts. Feminism that is lived out loud. Feminism that demands to be heard”.<sup>86</sup> As an oppositional politics, turning up — becoming turnt —

83. Haiven, ‘Are Your Children Old Enough to Learn About May ’68?’, p. 83.

84. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 81.

85. Snoop Dogg, *1800*, *Malice n Wonderland* (Doggy Style Records, 2009).

86. Brittney C. Cooper, ‘An Ontology of CRUNK: Theorizing (the) Turn Up’, *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 2014 <<http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/04/29/an-ontology-of-crunk->

is a collective activity which produces forms of common expression. In language which echoes Bloch's utopianism, Cooper writes:

Turn up is both a moment and a call, both a verb and a noun. It is both anticipatory and complete. It is thrice incantation, invitation, and inculcation. To Live. To Move. To Have – as in to possess – one's being. [...] It points to an alternative register of expression, that turns out up to be the most authentic register, because it is who we be, when we are being for ourselves and for us, and not for nobody else, especially them.<sup>87</sup>

For Spahr, becoming "turnt" blurs the lines between individual and collective oppositional activity, in her case against the Oakland police: "At first we didn't mask up. We were poets. | Then slowly one by one we did. | As we got turnt. | As I got turnt I mean".<sup>88</sup> As 'Turnt' progresses, the "we" broadens to encompass "everyone I have ever texted I love you to" — a plural subject united, again, by the lyrical, yet radically open quality of love and political expression in the contemporary moment.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout 'Turnt', Occupy Oakland's commons of protest, riot, music, and the feelings of joy and defiance they engender become a source of collective power and agency which extends beyond the space and time of oppositional action itself.<sup>90</sup> This sense of ongoing oppositional possibility is reinforced in the poem's opening and closing stanzas. Spahr begins:

Sometimes it feels like it's over and it's not.

Sometimes it feels like it has just begun and it's over.<sup>91</sup>

Spahr never specifies the "it" of these lines those following; contextually, it is clear that she is referring to night-time protests but, in their position at the start of the poem, the lines could also refer to something far more general: the idea of collective oppositional action as a whole, generating radical temporal slippages between the past and the future. The final lines of the poem offer an even more profound sense of revolutionary temporal slippage:

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theorizing-the-turn-up/> [accessed 28 November 2019].

87. Cooper, 'An Ontology of CRUNK'; see also: Regina Duthely, 'Black Feminist Hip-Hop Rhetorics and the Digital Public Sphere', *Changing English*, 24.2 (2017), 202–12.

88. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 82.

89. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 85.

90. For recent critical writing on the fundamental role of joy in activism, see: Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (London: Verso, 2018); adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism* (Chico: AK Press, 2019).

91. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 81.

I took all the names of this poem and never wrote them in.

There is no electronic record of them.

I found a list of the most popular baby names for various countries in 2015, the year in which I am writing this poem. I made a list, one male and one female from each list.

Then I alphabetized it. And I put these names in this poem one by one. I got to O.

But Olivia, Saanvi, Santiago, Seoyeon, Sofia, Yui, and Zeynep, I love you too.<sup>92</sup>

The remixing of primarily non-Anglophone baby names into the subjects of a revolutionary collective is a delightful subversion of the bourgeois subjectivity which upholds the individual child at the cost of the social and political systems of frequently unpaid neo-colonial labour which provide it with care; likewise, the fact that there is “no electronic record” of Spahr’s radical collaborators protects them, like their masks, from the powers of the surveillance state. This list is also reminiscent of the many such lists which fill Spahr’s poetry, reminding me of the listing of endangered species in ‘Unnamed Dragonfly Species’. Spahr has said of her listing tactics in poems like the latter:

I like the list. I like lists because they are inclusive. You can keep sticking things into them. And they don’t require categorization. So each item in the list can be as important as the others. I especially like the list as lament. As a sort of recognizing or call out of what is becoming lost. In these poems with lists of plants and animals in them I am thinking of poetry as a place for storing information. I am thinking of the age old uses of the list poem as a way of keeping knowledge that needs to be kept.

It could thus be tempting to claim that in ‘Turnt’, Spahr is writing a utopian, decolonial paean — a lyrical lament — for the future children of the world who, like the non-human beings in ‘Unnamed Dragonfly Species’, intervene in the organic flow of her narrative to remind us of their own existence and the danger of their “becoming lost” to the strategies of capitalism. However, the linear fashion in which her readers encounter this poem complicates this reading. Rather than front-loading these apostrophic lines to set the tone for the rest of the poem, Spahr essentially tricks us by revealing her hand only at the end. The names are not bolded or otherwise distinguished from the rest of the story; in fact, Spahr goes out of her way to merge them seamlessly into her narrative, doubling or echoing

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92. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 87.

certain names when the narrative refers to the same person, pseudonymising her subjects, but refusing to fully anonymise them.

The real power of these lines, then, is that they function as a kind of time machine: although we originally read this poem as describing the events of 2011, our discovery that none of the subjects Spahr names were even born in 2011 prompts a moment of cognitive estrangement.<sup>93</sup> Because it contains only the names of children born in 2015, this poem actually narrates the events of a resistance occupation which might be happening in years to come — a corrective and recuperatory (de)colonisation of a hopeless future with alternative possibilities for political opposition. As Cooper indicates, being turned up is “both a present and future state of being”, both “anticipatory and complete”.<sup>94</sup> When we re-read the poem with a new awareness of Spahr’s estranging strategy, the process works in reverse, suggesting that work to oppose capitalism in the present is always a fight for the existence of ongoing futures which *could* contain this turned collective of revolutionary names, and the love which generates them.

## Conclusion

Writing alongside Bernes and Clover, Spahr notes that, in their poetic and critical work, they have to “think” the subjects of “poetry and concrete social or political struggle ... together at every turn, because they are entangled whether we want them to be or not”. To write such poetry, the collective argue, is to write poetry which is oppositional, responsive, and mutable, which “might change in the future, even slip out of its current shell” as a result of the “unfolding of social antagonisms”.<sup>95</sup> On one hand, these words index an understandable hope for formally experimental and politically challenging poetry to move beyond the outskirts of literary culture where it currently resides — the post-capitalist poetic commons Stephen Collis associates with the blackberry thicket, energetic and unruly yet largely absent from the centre of public discourse. On the other hand, these words also gesture powerfully and longingly at another kind of commons — a utopian ongoing

93. As I have noted in Chapter One, Suvin introduced the term “cognitive estrangement” to refer to the effect that an sf text has on its readers. See: Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, pp. 3-10.

94. Cooper, ‘An Ontology of CRUNK’.

95. Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr, ‘Spring and All, Farewell to Jackets’, *Jacket2*, 2014 <<http://jacket2.org/commentary/spring-and-all-farewell-jackets>> [accessed 1 April 2018].

future where all the precarious and damaging relations formed under late capitalism can be challenged, rearticulated, and transformed.

*That Winter the Wolf Came* is a powerful example of this form of textual anticipation and temporal construction, the ongoing future. Through my readings of Spahr's work, in this chapter I have argued that commons poetics, the toolbox of textual and critical techniques which work to depict an ongoing future, hold out the possibility — however occasionally faint and minor it may seem — that the ongoing present of late capitalism is not just escapable, but can be transformed into a world of common flourishing and anticipatory, imaginative power. In the sense that capitalism can be conceived of as *telic* — that it can have an end — the ongoing future is the time in which that end will ultimately take place.

The texts I will be looking at in the following three chapters pick up this sense of the future as not already written, and of certain activity in the present as engaged in a conversation with oppositional pasts and imaginative futures; they are concerned primarily with change, process, and transformation — with a multitude of journeys, both literal and social-structural, out of the precarious impasse of the here and now and towards a sense of common possibility, a multitude of commons utopias. In various ways and with differing intents, these texts respond to the demands of an anonymous collective of activists associated with Occupy Oakland, who write, in a reflection on their movement:

Another wave of struggle and unrest will undoubtedly explode in our streets and plazas sooner or later. Our task in the meantime is to cultivate fierce and creative forms of cooperating, caring for each other, and fighting together that can help us smash through the fundamental limits of contemporary revolt when the time is right.<sup>96</sup>

Like Spahr, the authors in the following chapters make use of a diverse field of textual tactics and depict, defend, and occasionally destroy commons and collectives in a variety of timespaces which blur the distinctions between the precarious present and the many futures which are ready to emerge from it. In doing so, they work to create a time which is “right” to smash through the fundamental limits of the contemporary — an ongoing future.

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96. Some Oakland Antagonists, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Oakland Commune’, *CrimethInc.*, 2013 <<https://crimethinc.com/2013/09/10/after-the-crest-part-ii-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-oakland-commune>> [accessed 24 May 2018].



## Chapter Four

### Utopias Beyond Borders: *Exit West*

But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no-one has yet been: *Heimat*.

Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter discusses British Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West*.<sup>2</sup> This short book has been described by Viet Thanh Nguyen as motivated by a "gentle optimism" and a "refusal to descend into dystopia" despite the often bleak and precarious world it depicts. For Thanh-Nguyen, it elicits "empathy and identification to imagine a *better world*" which is also, crucially, a "*possible world*" — a world which, I will argue, is a commons utopia.<sup>3</sup> The discussion will initially locate *Exit West* in the historical context of a decade of refugee crises and hard-line border regimes, before exploring the key examples of commons poetics in the novel and introducing the "planetary ethics" these poetics maintain. The second half of the chapter explores the novel's gradual transition from a realistic near-present to a planetary utopian commons which redefines the concepts of migrancy, homeland, and belonging. This post-capitalist *mobile commons*, and the commons poetics necessary to capture it, are the central focus of this chapter.

#### The historical and political context of *Exit West*

As I have outlined in the Introduction, the Syrian refugee crisis — visually immortalised by the 2015 photograph of the body of the child Alan Kurdi lying on a Turkish beach — has

1. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, III, p. 1376; translation by: Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, p. 7.

2. I would like to thank Dominica Duckworth and Tom Dillon for their invaluable advice on this chapter.

3. Viet Thanh Nguyen, 'March's Book Club Pick: "Exit West," by Mohsin Hamid', *The New York Times*, 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/exit-west-mohsin-hamid.html>> [accessed 7 September 2019], emphasis added.

been recognised as one of the defining crises of the previous decade.<sup>4</sup> Although the flow of refugees from Syria is on the wane, new refugee crises have emerged since 2015, and the same factors — militarised border regimes, dangerous sea routes, badly equipped human traffickers, and a lack of resources in (often unwilling) host nations — continue to play a part in exacerbating their effects. In 2018, approximately 140,000 refugees made their way to Europe across the Mediterranean, with 27% of those coming from Guinea, Morocco, Mali and Syria; another 2277 died in the attempt.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, the Mexico-US border became the site of a new migrant crisis generated by the hard-line border policies of the Trump administration and by demographic changes in the makeup of the refugees: from a majority of single men looking for work to a surge of families seeking asylum. As a result, numerous children have been separated from their families and subjected to unsanitary, traumatic, and at times deadly conditions in detention centres. In June 2019, a photograph eerily reminiscent of the image of Alan Kurdi, of a dead asylum seeker and his 23-month-old daughter drowned in the Rio Grande river, circulated online and in international press.<sup>6</sup>

Two significant features emerge in analyses of these refugee crises: their exceptional deadliness and their relationship to capitalist economic systems. In a recent study of migrant movement into Europe, Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen argue that while such refugee crises emerge from “economic inequalities, low income, structural unemployment, and protracted conflicts” in their countries of origin, their deadliness is the result of European border policies which they accurately describe as *necropolitical*: “at least since the 1990s the illegalization of Mediterranean migration has made that space

4. On the cultural diffusion of this photograph, see: Mette Mortensen, ‘Constructing, Confirming, and Contesting Icons: The Alan Kurdi Imagery Appropriated by #humanitywashedashore, Ai Weiwei, and Charlie Hebdo’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 39.8 (2017), 1142–61.

5. UNHCR, *Refugees & Migrants Arrivals to Europe in 2018 (Mediterranean)* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2018) <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68006>> [accessed 22 August 2019]. David Miller defines a border regime as “the set of rules and procedures that apply to those who are trying to enter the state’s territory, encompassing a number of questions such as who is given legal permission to enter, what procedures are applied to those whose admission status is as yet undetermined, and what happens to people who are present in the territory without having rights of residence — for instance asylum-seekers and illegal migrants”. See: David Miller, ‘Border Regimes and Human Rights’, *The Law & Ethics of Human Rights*, 7.1 (2013), 1–23 (pp. 1–2).

6. Reis Thebault, Luis Velarde, and Abigail Hauslochner, ‘The Father and Daughter Who Drowned at the Border Were Desperate for a Better Life, Family Says’, *Washington Post*, 2019 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/06/26/father-daughter-who-drowned-border-dove-into-river-desperation/>> [accessed 25 November 2019].

one of the most lethal zones of the world — in terms of irregular border crossing — and has claimed scores of lives [...] The illegalization of the migrants and their insistence on crossing have turned the Mediterranean into a maritime graveyard”.<sup>7</sup> The concept of *necropolitics*, articulated by Achille Mbembe, indexes the state’s exercise of sovereignty specifically through killing, bringing close to death, and letting die.<sup>8</sup> One of Mbembe’s examples of necropolitics in the “age of global mobility” highlights the mobility not of populations, but of sovereign state borders, which increasingly appear not as monolithic entities but as patchworks of “overlapping and incomplete rights to rule ... in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound”.<sup>9</sup> Applying Mbembe’s considerations to the Mediterranean situation, where war is waged not against state armies but against the racialised threat of the migrant-cum-terrorist, we can argue that “the new technologies of destruction” — here recast as the EU refusal to rescue migrants at sea — “are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the ‘massacre’”.<sup>10</sup>

*Exit West* is written *contra* the border regime and the Western liberal conception of the sovereign nation state — what Benedict Anderson has evocatively called the “imagined community” — but it is also written, albeit less explicitly, *contra* capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Agustín and Jørgensen, as quoted above, locate the basis for migration crises in the demands of the capitalist labour market and its absence. As Hannah Cross argues, capitalism, migration, and the border regime must be considered and opposed together: “the character of global capitalism and the persistence of capital accumulation ... binds the causes and consequences of migration with the process of working across borders”.<sup>12</sup> Sandro

7. Óscar García Agustín and Martin Bak Jørgensen, *Solidarity and the ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Europe* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 6–7.

8. Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 11–40 (p. 14).

9. Mbembe, p. 31.

10. Mbembe, p. 34.

11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016); see also Eric Hobsbawm’s magisterial historical inquiry: Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). I do not enter here into further analysis of the development of the concept of the nation state; instead, in relation to *Exit West*, I expand on the demise of the border regime and what comes after.

12. Hannah Cross, *Migrants, Borders and Global Capitalism: West African Labour Mobility and EU Borders* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 16.

Mezzadra, even more forcefully, declares: “there is no capitalism without migration ... with the regime that attempts to control or tame the mobility of labour playing a strategic role in the constitution of capitalism and class relations”.<sup>13</sup> *Exit West* is — as befits its title — a repudiation of the governmental, cultural, and political project of the West and its reliance on capitalist economies, neoliberal governmentality, and necropolitical border regimes to uphold its sovereignty. Nadia and Saeed, the novel’s central protagonists, first appear employed in prototypical post-Fordist workplaces: an advertising agency and an insurance agency. They abandon these jobs when they flee their country, but *Exit West* ultimately presents a far broader social and political imaginary than can be encompassed solely in the rejection of the labour relations of late capitalism. *Exit West* is a utopian novel concerned with migrancy, exodus, and the desire and refusal to return home; it is therefore particularly inviting to read its mobile commons through the lens of Bloch’s concept of *Heimat*, a utopian reimagining of the idea of homeland as a radically anti-nationalist and anti-capitalist “place on earth of arrived-at Being, of world as homeness, homeness as world”.<sup>14</sup> The following section will explore Hamid’s use of the subject of the migrant and a narrative model developed through the crossing and destruction of borders to depict a utopian spatiality whose inhabitants are unalienated and at home in “the world as homeness” — the world reimagined as a utopian commons of resources, socialities, and mobilities.

### **Exit West’s commons poetics**

*Exit West* is Mohsin Hamid’s fourth novel, and like his previous novels *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), it is impelled by what Paul Gilroy describes as “planetary humanism”. This term indexes an ethics “capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability to the wrongs we visit upon each other”, and thus, as extrapolates Mai Al-Nakib, can “uncover the ‘planetary’ of the globe, by allowing those who have been at the receiving end of violence decided

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13. Sandro Mezzadra, ‘The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles’, in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, ed. by Vicki Squire (London: Routledge, 2010), 121-142 (p. 125).

14. Bloch, III, p. 1311.

upon elsewhere — in palaces, white houses, and parliaments — to face the aftermath of those decisions first-hand”.<sup>15</sup> The narrative begins in a plausibly realist near-present where fantastic doors start to appear around the globe — reality-defying black portals “that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country” without the need for transport, border controls, passports, visas, or any of the other instruments and technologies associated with mobility in the contemporary world.<sup>16</sup> These doors allow the young lovers Nadia and Saeed, along with millions of others, to escape their unnamed country for the nations of the Global North. Hence the novel’s title can reference an exit *to* the West. However, as Nadia and Saeed make their way in search of better and less precarious lives, the Global North, and in the end the whole planet, changes with them — revealing the title’s other implication, an exit *of* the West from its position of neo-colonial planetary dominance. This decolonial imaginary, which has featured in all of Hamid’s novels to date, is complemented by techniques of formal and narrative experimentation which compel his readers, like his characters, to adopt new positions and locations from which to make sense of these new planetary formations.<sup>17</sup> *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes the form of a dramatic monologue delivered by the Pakistani-born character Changez to an American listener who never speaks. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising* is also narrated in the second person, encouraging the reader either to take on the perspective of the anonymous South Asian protagonist or to absorb the advice of the pulp self-help literature which stylistically influences the novel. Furthermore, the novel’s occasional perspectival shifts to the distant, all-seeing position of a drone or satellite help reveal “the systems above the systems, and [show] that the self is just a tiny node within a vast constellation of networks”.<sup>18</sup>

*Exit West* is formally inventive in ways which distinguish it from Hamid’s previous

15. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 4; Mai Al-Nakib, ‘Finding Common Cause: A Planetary Ethics of “What Could Happen If”’, *Interventions*, 2019, 1–18 (p. 10).

16. Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 69.

17. *Decoloniality* is a praxis for unlinking power, knowledge, and progress from colonial and neocolonial logics of globalization, neoliberalism, Eurocentricity, and modernity, originating as a theoretical form in the twenty-first century within Latin American contexts. See: Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

18. Claire Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 218.

work. Rather than playing with narrative perspective, the key experiment in this novel — the mysterious doors — plays with narrative structure and form. The style of the text is flowing and lyrical, characterised by parataxis and very long sentences, and is interspersed with occasional authorial comments and asides, as if the doors are creating passages not only between nations, but between individual sentences and between the author and his world. These winding sentences produce a commons poetics at a formal level — like Spahr’s use of parataxis, the unusual length of Hamid’s sentences, each one comprising a series of paratactically located clauses, suggests a refusal to give up on the utopian desires of the novel’s characters, indexing not only their movement from space to space, but also their sense of the contemporary moment as an ongoing future, connected and conversant with an alternative future. For instance, early in the novel we read this sentence:

As they hurried home, Saeed and Nadia looked at the night sky, at the forcefulness of the stars and the moon’s pockmarked brightness in the absence of electric lighting and in the reduced pollution from fuel-starved and hence sparse traffic, and wondered where the door to which they had purchased access might take them, someplace in the mountains or on the plains or by the seaside, and they saw an emaciated man lying on the street who had recently expired, either from hunger or illness, for he did not appear wounded, and in their apartment they told Saeed’s father the potential good news but he was oddly silent in response, and they waited for him to say something, and in the end all he said was, “Let us hope.”<sup>19</sup>

In this sentence, Hamid switches from the human subjects of Saeed and Nadia to the “forcefulness of the stars and the moon’s pockmarked brightness”, a world which is inaccessible and thus somewhat alien and frightening in its alterity, before returning to the city in which the characters live, which is disintegrating around them, and in danger of becoming unfamiliar by merging with the silence (“sparse traffic”) and darkness (“absence of electric lighting”) of the night sky. Next, via the contrivance of the door, Hamid rushes us from the city to imagined far-away worlds, before returning us to the city, this time highlighting the disintegration not only of its infrastructure but its social elements through the image of the “recently expired” man, whose death is so removed from the

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19. Hamid, p. 85.



escapist imaginings of Nadia and Saeed that he barely registers in their consciousness. Lastly, however, Hamid reflects on the universality of human beings, a theme to which he devotes much of *Exit West*, through the introduction of Saeed's father and the network of interpersonal relations he embodies. The final utopian words, "Let us hope", extend not only to the three characters, but because of the scope of the sentence which precedes them, also include the dead man, the city, the planet beyond, and even the universe within which this universal "us" exists. Saeed's father's hope is common and inclusive, even in the darkest of times, because it extends beyond the limitations of their situation.

The core narrative of *Exit West* is that of Nadia and Saeed, the novel's only named characters. With their names, as Claire Chambers incisively notes, Hamid "engages in onomastic play", with Nadia signifying North and Saeed South, while the novel's title supplies East ('Exit') alongside the West.<sup>20</sup> Nadia is an independent atheist and feminist, who listens to Western music and wears a religious cloak only to avoid the unwanted attentions of men, while Saeed is more reserved, traditionalist, community-minded, and broadly adherent to his (implicitly Islamic) faith; their association with the compass points thus to some extent "aligns with generalizations about the global north and ... south".<sup>21</sup> The two meet and fall in love in a purposefully unidentified city in the opening weeks of a civil war; as the war worsens and begins to tear apart their city, claiming the life of Saeed's mother, the young couple decide to flee their city through one of the recently manifested doors.<sup>22</sup>

The *dispositif* of the doors connects *Exit West* to the sub-genre of portal fantasy, notable examples of which include *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (C. S. Lewis, 1950) and *The Subtle Knife* (Philip Pullman, 1997). Farah Mendelsohn indicates that the portal fantasy is a genre of "entry, transition, and negotiation" which is closest in form to the "classic utopian" tale; such fantasies see the protagonist enter a mysterious world and "lead us gradually to the point where the protagonist knows his or her world enough

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20. Chambers, p. 216.

21. Chambers, p. 216.

22. Although Hamid is at pains throughout his novel, and in subsequent public commentary, that the city's identity remain unspecified, its Islamic culture, the civil war narrative, and the novel's focus on migration all associate it readily in the reader's mind with Damascus or with Hamid's native Lahore, where he moved in 2009 after many years living in London. See: Cressida Leyshon, 'Mohsin Hamid on the Migrants in All of Us', *The New Yorker*, 2016 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-mohsin-hamid-2016-11-14>> [accessed 28 January 2019].



to change it and to enter into that world's destiny".<sup>23</sup> As in portal fantasies, which Hamid deliberately evokes in *Exit West* ("the nearby blackness [of the door] unsettled him, and reminded him of something, of a feeling, of a feeling he associated with children's books"), the migrants' travels through the doors ultimately changes their world;<sup>24</sup> in an important departure from these stories, the world into which they travel is not a fantastic world separate from ours, but the real world itself, captured in a lengthy, turbulent, apocalyptic but ultimately utopian period of transition and transformation.

Buying passage through one such fantastic door and out of their city, Nadia and Saeed leave what remains of their families behind and become migrants, emerging in a refugee camp on the Mediterranean island of Mykonos. They continue hopping through doors, living for a time in a migrant squat in Kensington, London, from where they are eventually resettled to a ring of new migrant settlements around the city; they finally end up in a vast migrant town in Marin County, overlooking San Francisco. With their relationship beginning to disintegrate not long after it began, here they decide to go their separate ways, meeting again only years later in the novel's final chapter. Nadia and Saeed's narrative is intercut throughout the novel with vignettes which highlight the global reach of the doors and, by extension, the universal desire of the planet's population to be mobile. Among these stories, a black man emerges in a bedroom in Sydney; two Filipina women appear in Tokyo; a woman in Vienna standing in solidarity with the migrants is attacked by an anti-migrant mob; a man in Amsterdam begins a relationship with a Brazilian man who appears in his gardening shed; and a Tamil family appearing on a beach in Dubai are swiftly taken in by the authorities. In the penultimate vignette, an elderly woman in Palo Alto reflects that "now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English", suggesting that the novel's modality of radical mobility has become planetary, totalising, and habitual.<sup>25</sup>

The structure of *Exit West* reflects the gradual transformation of planetary life we see taking place in this narrative. Hamid divides the slim novel into twelve chapters, but

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23. Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

24. Hamid, p. 127.

25. Hamid, p. 209.

the plot naturally falls into three sections of five, three, and four chapters respectively. Each section is defined by a journey Nadia and Saeed undertake through a portal and introduces new spatialities, mobilities, subjectivities, and relationships. The first section takes Nadia and Saeed from their homeland to Mykonos. Here, spatiality is constricted and entrapping; the central form of movement is escape; Nadia and Saeed are defined by their families and their old lives in their country; and love seems to be a source of utopian possibilities. In the second section, Nadia and Saeed travel from Mykonos to London. This section is defined by liminality, moving between various spaces, but never settling in any one; Nadia and Saeed's relationship and subjectivities also become transitional and fluid. In the final section, set in Marin, a form of *Heimat* is realised. The spaces in this section open out and become liberating, secure, and full of radical possibilities; Nadia and Saeed separate and find new people with whom they create rewarding relationships beyond their original comfort zones; and battles over movement recede in importance as the entire planet embraces the reality of limitless mobility and the end of borders and states that it implies.

Furthermore, each section of the novel is defined by a particular relationship with, spatial imaginary of, and aesthetics relating to *home*. This focus on the necessity of creating home wherever one chooses to settle, however temporarily, defines *Exit West* as a novel with a particularly contemporary understanding of utopia. As in generic utopias from More onwards, utopian spaces in *Exit West* have to be reached by travel; unlike in earlier texts, they are neither spatially nor temporally separated, but exist within the present and are produced through movement. Therefore, unlike in earlier utopian literary texts, utopia here is not a space for temporary visitation, but a process — a utopian method — of utopian inhabiting, reminiscent of the prefigurative methodologies I discussed in Chapter One. Nadia and Saeed's home(s) are created and recreated multiple times in the novel, each time reflecting particular socio-spatial structures and modalities which define the site-specific activity of inhabiting a space. Not only is each new home which Nadia and Saeed make different from those which came before, but each of these homes is more common, more heterogeneous, and more open to the influences and imaginaries of a multitude of others. By the conclusion of *Exit West*, home — and thus utopia — becomes not a container for the incubation and safeguarding of a particular form of social structure, but a reactive and

reflexive space, generated by a variety of social forms.

The following sections of this chapter will examine each of the three divisions of *Exit West* I have identified in turn, focusing on the spatialities, subjectivities, and logics of home in each section to index the novel's gradual transition from a bleak and violent near present to the early days of a global utopian society informed by Hamid's planetary ethics. The final section of the chapter will expand on the theoretical concept of the mobile commons in close relation to the novel's third section.

### The City to Mykonos: Enclosure and escape

The first section of *Exit West* is the most stylistically consistent of the three. The narrative largely plays with the frameworks of two well-worn literary forms: the love story and postcolonial migrant literature, described by Rosemary Marangoly George as “contemporary literary writing in which the politics and experience of location (or rather of ‘dislocation’) are the central narratives”, and more recently articulated by Rosemarie Buikema as “a sub-genre within postmodern writing and postmodern times in which the theme of dislocation and homelessness is articulated in a variety of forms”.<sup>26</sup> The novel makes its claim to these two forms — and marks out its unsettled commitment to both — in its opening sentence: “In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her”.<sup>27</sup> The multiple diversions from absolute truth and complete surety in this sentence — indexed by the syntactical glitching of “but still ... or at least not yet ... and did not” — carry through the rest of the novel, which tells its story cautiously, leaving plenty of space for alternative decisions and multiple coexisting realities. Chambers describes this distinctive style as comprising “textual doublings ... part of [Hamid's] creation of ontological undecidability”.<sup>28</sup>

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26. George names this the “Immigrant genre”. Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 171; Rosemarie Buikema, ‘A Poetics of Home: On Narrative Voice and the Deconstruction of Home in Migrant Literature’, in *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, ed. by Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 177–87 (p. 177).

27. Hamid, p. 1.

28. Chambers, p. 228.

This possibility-multiplying discursive style emerges from the ‘anything is possible’ first blush of love narrative, as well as from the appearance of the doors, to which oblique references appear from the first chapter. At the same time, the style is challenged by numerous narrative and textual tactics which work to create a sense of entrapment, desperation, and constriction. The first mention of the doors, for example, is a vignette set in a flat in a gentrified suburb of Sydney, where a closet door in the bedroom of a sleeping white woman has become a portal:

The door to her closet was open. Her room was bathed in the glow of her computer charger and wireless router, but the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness — the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging.

He too was dark, with dark skin and dark, woolly hair. He wriggled with great effort, his hands gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide. His neck followed his head, tendons straining, and then his chest, his half-unbuttoned, sweaty, gray-and-brown shirt. Suddenly he paused in his exertions. He looked around the room. He looked at the sleeping woman, the shut bedroom door, the open window. He rallied himself again, fighting mightily to come in, but in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat. But there were no hands around this man’s throat. He wished only not to be heard.<sup>29</sup>

This introduction to the logics and narrative tactics of the doors is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it plays with racialised preconceptions of the predatory or aggressive black man — both the migrant and the door through which he climbs are “dark, darker than night”, and the door itself is, in ironic reference to Joseph Conrad, “the heart of darkness”. The white woman is subtly implied to be a willing participant in the structural racism which would locate a black man in this “heart”, particularly in her arrival in this house only after “the gentrification of this neighborhood had run as far as it had now run”. Later in this vignette, which repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the woman’s bare

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29. Hamid, pp. 6-7.

skin and sleeping vulnerability, Hamid again writes back to the racialised, colonial image of the ‘native’, using the self-reflexive and vacillating style noted above: “His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly. Or perhaps not so terribly”.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of the racialised Other as threat is further complicated by the focus on this particular man’s fear and vulnerability, highlighted by language of constriction and entrapment. His merely human actions (“wriggled”, “gripping”, “straining”, “rallied”, “fighting”, “struggling”) are contrasted with deadly forces far more powerful than the human: “gravity”, “the rush of a monstrous tide”, “hands clenched around his throat”. This introduction to the doors does as much to highlight the endangerment, entrapment, and precarity common to the migrant condition as it does to represent the limitless spatial possibilities evinced by the mysterious portals. As we find out in later vignettes, and in Nadia and Saeed’s story, simply travelling through a door by no means guarantees an escape from the numerous threats the migrant faces. In deploying the doors, Hamid makes clear that fluidity, decentralisation, and multiplicity are hallmarks not only of the dislocated, homeless, and ontologically uncertain migrant, but also of the border regime and the forms of Western governmentality which promulgate it.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time as the doors begin to open new possibilities for people in peril around the globe, generating a groundswell of migrancy and, for “world leaders”, a “major global crisis”, Hamid refutes and subverts conceptions of the migrant condition as liberating or desirable for those without resources and options.<sup>32</sup> Before the doors begin to open, the refugees who fill Nadia and Saeed’s country are described as looking out at the city “with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn’t move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying”.<sup>33</sup> Migrancy here is presented not as mobility

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30. Hamid, p. 7; cf. *Heart of Darkness*: “He held his head rigid, face forward; but his eyes rolled, he kept on lifting and setting down his feet gently, his mouth foamed a little”; Chambers connects this reference with similar representations of the dangerous and desperate black man in “Raj fiction” of the British Imperial presence on the Indian subcontinent. See: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 55; Chambers, p. 241.

31. On the “increasingly mobile and fluid character of borders ... an expansive policing and surveillance apparatus that reaches beyond physical borderlines”, see: Bethan Loftus, ‘Border Regimes and the Sociology of Policing’, *Policing and Society*, 25.1 (2015), 115–25 (p. 117); Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

32. Hamid, p. 83.

33. Hamid, p. 23.

but as a foreclosure of options — what Berlant describes as the glitch or the impasse.<sup>34</sup> This position subverts the romanticised concept of the migrant (or ‘nomad’) frequently adopted in contemporary Western culture, which is susceptible, as Caren Kaplan contends:

to intensive theoretical appropriation because of a close fit between the mythologized elements of migration (independence, alternative organisation to nation-states, lack of opportunity to accumulate much surplus, etc.) and Euro-American modernist privileging of solitude and the celebration of the specific locations associated with nomads: deserts and open spaces far from industrialisation and metropolitan cultural influences.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, as Natasha King warns us from within her research and experience of contemporary anti-border and migrant rights movements, “[e]scape from the state is in most cases an unintended, unpleasant and temporary side effect of/for people on the move and rarely seen as valuable ... the excluded don’t value their exclusion. Why should they? They’re no one’s idea of ‘making it’”.<sup>36</sup> Hamid’s nuanced politics of subjectivity force his readers, along with Nadia, Saeed, and his planetary imaginary as a whole, to remain ontologically uncertain, restless, and open to the profound changes which will define the narrative to come.

Saeed and Nadia’s differing attitudes to nation and family in the first section of *Exit West* is reflected in their attitudes to their homes. For Saeed, who lives with his parents, home is a safe and comforting space of family, domesticity, ritual, memory, and routine; for Nadia, who lives alone, home is a space of freedom, escape, and independence from her family’s strict religious life and the country’s society more broadly. The two also differ in the ways they see their homes as receptacles and generators of history and memory. The description of Saeed’s house not only evokes the narrative of his parents’ own love, but connects to global histories of colonisation and empire: “[t]heir small flat was in a once handsome building, with an ornate though now crumbling facade that dated back to the colonial era”.<sup>37</sup> Saeed’s family, their house, and the force of memory more generally is captured in the telescope which stands in their living room: “given to Saeed’s father by his father, and Saeed’s father had given it in turn to Saeed, but since Saeed still lived at home,

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34. Berlant, p. 198.

35. Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 90.

36. King, p. 131.

37. Hamid, p. 9.

this meant the telescope continued to sit where it always sat”, underneath a clipper ship in a bottle which again links the house to the city’s colonial history, while also foreshadowing Nadia and Saeed’s migrancy.<sup>38</sup> Looking through the telescope at the stars on clear nights, the family engage in what Saeed’s father calls “time travel”, seeing objects “whose light, often, had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born”.<sup>39</sup>

Nadia’s apartment, on the other hand, is historically polyvalent, looking both into the past and towards a technologised future. It sits in the middle of a market which had “grown past and around it”, with a shop on the ground floor selling electrical generators; her living room is bathed “in the soft and shimmying glow of a large, animated neon sign that towered nearby in the service of a zero-calorie carbonated beverage”. The noir-esque aesthetics of this space, developed through the bustling and anonymising market and the neon sign, are accentuated by Nadia and Saeed’s various schemes and disguises to hide Saeed’s presence from Nadia’s religious landlady, by their experimentation with drugs, and especially by Nadia’s collection of soul, jazz, and bossa nova records. Like the telescope, her record player is a time machine, but where the telescope takes its family of viewers to a universal pre-human past, free from political affiliations, Nadia’s selection of a record “by a long-dead woman who was once an icon of a style that in her American homeland was quite justifiably called soul” haunts her apartment with a far more recent history of racial struggle and oppositional politics. Ultimately, where Saeed relies on prior histories — of his parents’ lives, of his city, and of the universe — to construct his sense of home, Nadia’s sense of home is more oppositional and self-directed.

These first two homes in the novel are insulated and insular: intimate minor utopias which seem initially to provide their inhabitants with everything they need to live their lives as they wish to — security, comfort, memory, and social and romantic ties.<sup>40</sup> However, as the novel’s first section vacillates uncertainly between constriction and openness, these homes become porous and mutable, although not in the ways their inhabitants wish. While rumours of the doors make people “gaze at their own doors a little differently”, the city’s

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38. Hamid, p. 13.

39. Hamid, p. 14.

40. These intimate utopias allied with Cooper’s everyday utopias — minor, local spaces for experimentation with new forms of sociality. See: Cooper, pp. 167-172.



inhabitants' relationship to windows also changes: they become sites of danger through which bullets can pass, or which can become shrapnel in a bomb blast, and so they are boarded up, removed, or sealed. The security, surety, and comfort of the home is thus warped and transformed, with normal doors becoming objects "with a subtle power to mock" their viewers for dreaming of escape, while windows transform into dark and threatening portals of death.<sup>41</sup> Given the rapid evolution of Nadia and Saeed's relationship, which occurs in inverse proportion to the enclosing and entrapping deterioration of their city (from a relatively liberal metropolis complete with mobile internet access, drug dealers, post-Fordist capitalist workplaces, and anonymous gay sex in parks to a dystopian zone of curfews, bombings, terror, civil war, and gruesome public executions), their desire to escape their country and their homes quickly becomes an all-consuming need. As they plan to leave through a door to which they have bought access, Saeed, "in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger", sees their exodus as "deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home", while the more independent and restless Nadia is afraid only of becoming dependent in their flight, "at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin".<sup>42</sup> In the second section of the novel, we quickly learn that both of these fears are justified.

### **Mykonos to London: Liminality**

The second section of *Exit West* sees Nadia and Saeed follow the common route of migrants travelling to Europe from the Middle East, arriving in a refugee camp on the Greek island of Mykonos, before escaping again to a near-future, apocalyptic vision of London on the brink of mass anti-migrant violence. The section concludes with their relocation to a new ring of migrant settlements beyond the city's suburbs, and is suffused with the gradual deterioration of their relationship and Saeed's discovery that his father has died. Where *Exit West* opened with a sense of possibility oppositional to violence and enclosure, the Mykonos-London section draws the divides between possibility and its denial more sharply. The boundary is literalised the depiction of a near-future London split — by the

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41. Hamid, p. 70.

42. Hamid, p. 90.

disconnection of electricity in the area given over to the migrants — into a “light London” where “people dined in elegant restaurants and rode in shiny black cabs, or at least went to work in offices and shops and were free to journey about as they pleased” and a “dark London” where “rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed”.<sup>43</sup> The designation of the latter half as “dark” is as much to do with the skin colour of the incoming migrants as it is with the loss of electricity. The two Londons are separated by a heavily militarised and technologised border which succeeds in preventing the movement of migrants where national borders have not. Nadia’s fears of rodent-like entrapment are confirmed by the presence of military robots and drones along this border, which frighten her “because they suggested an unstoppable efficiency, an inhuman power, and evoked the kind of dread that a small mammal feels before a predator of an altogether different order, like a rodent before a snake”.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time as this new border encloses the migrants and curtails their abilities to find new and better lives, this middle section of the novel is *liminal*. It functions not only as a structural, textual threshold between the minor utopias of the opening chapters and the common, socially transformative utopia of the final chapters, but also as a narrative threshold for Hamid’s characters’ understanding of themselves, each other, and the world around them. This key second section lays the groundwork for the transformation of the concept of home we see in the first section — a zone of structure, stability, immobility, rigidity, history, and memorialisation, bitterly contested by warring factions prepared to almost completely destroy it for a chance to shape its future according to particular sets of beliefs — into a mutable *Heimat* in the Blochian sense, which emerges out of the radical mobility and fluidity of structures, beliefs, and systems. The liminality in this chapter emerges in two distinct modes — a networked commons of *liminal spaces*, and the emergence of *liminal subjects* who inhabit these spaces.

The social and cultural significance of liminality has been analysed by the anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner’s work is far-reaching, encompassing liminal structures among groups including kinship-based tribes in Ghana, Franciscan monasteries,

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43. Hamid, p. 142.

44. Hamid, p. 151.

and 1960s hippie happenings. Among many such groups, Turner argues, liminal spaces and times are occasional and fleeting, and exist in the midst of more typical, ordered spaces and times during periods of social transformation, such as the ascension of a new chieftain, an initiation ceremony, or a music festival. During such periods, social structures and the hierarchies and differences they engender disappear, forcing the lowly and the powerful to occupy undifferentiated positions before normality is once again restored to the social system: “social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality”.<sup>45</sup> Turner calls this moment of social integration and equality of status *communitas* (in preference to, but analogous with, the term ‘community’, which he defines as “an area of common living”): “a recognition ... of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties”.<sup>46</sup> To be in a state of *communitas* is to embrace a “homogenous, unstructured” model of society “whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species”.<sup>47</sup>

As I have argued in Chapter One, space is socially produced, and is not merely a static container for social processes. It is thus clear that relations of *communitas* produce common and liminal spaces: commons; thresholds; passages; bridges; doorways; the impossible spaces of dreams; and open spaces of equality such as public squares. Some of those examined by Turner include the open, tent-strewn fields of the music festival, the cloisters of the Franciscan monastery, and the cave or common house of the initiation rite. Beyond their role as portals mediating movement, in the novel’s second section the doors also generate and define interstitial, liminal spaces. Every step through one such portal is, after all, a literal step across a threshold. Subha Mukherji reminds us that “[t]he idea of the threshold is politically eloquent, and has had immediate and urgent application in our times in the sphere of geopolitical boundaries, their intransigencies as well as fluidities”.<sup>48</sup> Thresholds, such as those of state borders and the doors, can be controlled by dominant state

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45. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 97.

46. Turner, p. 96.

47. Turner, p. 132.

48. Subha Mukherji, ‘Introduction’, in *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, ed. by Subha Mukherji (London: Anthem Press, 2011), pp. xvii–xxviii (p. xxiii).

powers, subjected to strategies of ordering, enclosure and normalisation, or alternatively, occupied and refigured by oppositional forces. Hence, on Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed soon discover that “the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured”.<sup>49</sup> Such control of the doors is reminiscent of the control which states currently wield over their borders, but the sheer quantity of doors in *Exit West* makes them impossible to regulate, and soon the stakes of the issue shift from the possibility of controlling these thresholds to the possibility of inhabiting thresholds, existing in the liminal spaces the doors create without committing to either of the worlds into which they lead: “[w]ithout borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory ... the nation was like ... a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving”.<sup>50</sup>

Stavros Stavrides sees porous threshold spaces in cities — such as public squares and parks — as sites of “[e]mergent new forms of resistance” which can “shape urban space in order to create new social bonds and build forms of collective struggle and survival”.<sup>51</sup> As the social movements of 2010-11 have shown, squares, large roundabouts, and parks — in their physical characteristics such as openness, accessibility, and brightness, and in the multitude of uses, forms of inhabiting, and passages which take place in them — are natural locations for utopian, anti-capitalist forms of life premised upon sharing, equality, accessibility, collectivity, and heterogeneity. Such “[s]paces-as-thresholds” have the potential to transform an enclosed and privatised city into a distributed network of commons.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on research into occupation protests in Greece in the last decade, Stavrides argues that urban spaces can only remain thresholds, without becoming enclosed or themselves enclosing other spaces, by “always being open to ‘newcomers’”, by becoming “‘infectious’, osmotic and capable of expanding egalitarian values and practices outside their boundaries”.<sup>53</sup> This form of threshold inhabiting not only ensures that the threshold

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49. Hamid, p. 101.

50. Hamid, p. 155-6. Spahr uses the same metaphor of skin as a porous boundary in *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*.

51. Stavros Stavrides, ‘Common Space as Threshold Space: Urban Commoning in Struggles to Re-Appropriate Public Space’, *FOOTPRINT*, 16 (2015), 9-19 (p. 10).

52. Stavrides, ‘Common Space as Threshold Space’, p. 11.

53. Stavrides, ‘Common Space as Threshold Space’, p. 13.

remains as open as possible to new ideas and imaginaries, but expands the threshold space further into the zones around it.

In *Exit West*, the doors, and the powerful and radical possibilities for the transformation of movement that their existence implies, exert a utopian potential to transform contemporary urban spaces from an archipelago of privatised enclaves into “an open network of passages” allowing the sharing of reciprocal social and affective flows and relations.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in London “houses and parks and disused lots ... unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea ... and similarly the great expanses of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens” fill with a million migrants.<sup>55</sup> Although these areas are described by newspapers — in another racialised metaphorical use of darkness — as “the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation”, for the migrants themselves they become spaces of solidarity and collective power, albeit enclosed and threatened ones: “Outside the house much was random and chaotic, but inside, perhaps, a degree of order could be built. Maybe even a community”.<sup>56</sup>

Liminality is not only a spatial process, but generates “liminal personae” or “threshold people” — subjects who exist, however briefly, within a social and often physical space of transition, marginality and collectivity.<sup>57</sup> Turner observes, on the basis of anthropological studies, that such people are frequently represented as “possessing nothing”; have “no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role”; are “passive or humble ... and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint”; exhibit “bisexuality”; and “tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism” among themselves as long as they remain in the liminal space. The liminal spaces they inhabit are “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness”, among other metamorphic and transitional states.<sup>58</sup> The doors in Hamid’s novel are liminal spaces, and the migrants are threshold people, in modes which run powerfully with the grain of this theorisation of liminality and its subject positions. When Nadia first steps through a door, the moment of passage is described as “both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced

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54. Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016), pp. 3, 7.

55. Hamid, p. 126.

56. Hamid, pp. 126, 129.

57. Turner, p. 95.

58. Turner, p. 95.

a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it”.<sup>59</sup> Other examples of liminal subjectivity in the novel connect dreams and sexual identity. One of the novel’s narrative strands focuses on the development of Nadia’s bisexuality; in a dream she has in London she returns “back through the door to the Greek isle” and again sees “the girl from Mykonos”; when she wakes, she “felt her body alive, or alarmed, regardless changed”.<sup>60</sup> As Turner indicates, dreams and the subconscious desires they often seem to reveal are profoundly liminal states, and a dreamed return back into the threshold zone of the doors opens a space for Nadia’s identity to embrace the positive, subversive possibilities of liminal subjectivity.

The migrants’ experiences moving through the doors is, furthermore, liminal in a more profound and all-consuming way, becoming the key to creating an entirely new set of ways for relating to the rapidly changing world around them. This liminality is a kind of “staying with the trouble”, Haraway’s phrase for the learning of the necessary capabilities for survival and resilience in a time which threatens to overwhelm our ability to respond to unpredictable crises. Haraway calls for those caught in a time of Anthropocene crisis — which she calls the “Capitalocene” to redirect blame at the most significant cause of human impact on the planet — to “make kin in lines of inventive connection”, a “material semiotics” which is “always situated” in the interlinked spaces of the present, yet demands liminal modes of being with others “in unexpected collaborations and combinations”.<sup>61</sup> Although Haraway’s focus is on the creation of multi-species, more-than-human worlds for becoming responsive and responsible, and Hamid writes mostly of human crises and practices of survival, they share an interest in liminality. Nadia and Saeed’s time in London, waiting for the nativist forces to stage an attack on the migrant encampments, is profoundly liminal:

a resignation shot through with moments of tension, with tension ebbing and flowing, and when the tension receded there was calm, the calm that is called the calm before the storm, but is in reality the foundation of a human life, waiting there for us between the steps of our march to our mortality, when we are compelled to pause and not act but be.<sup>62</sup>

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59. Hamid, p. 98.

60. Hamid, pp. 169–70.

61. Haraway, pp. 47, 2, 4.

62. Hamid, p. 136.

Or, as Haraway puts it: “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as moral critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings”.<sup>63</sup> The liminal space of “dark London” is composed of squats and small communities, some racially and culturally diverse and others replicating the divisions of nation-states; food banks and volunteer medical centres; calls for prayer and blasts of pop music; and moments of communion and understanding between human and more-than-human worlds, such as when Nadia and Saeed are inspired to mend their relationship by the strange vision of an urban fox. The migrants feel in control of their present circumstances and future possibilities because these spaces are liminal, forcing new strategies for being and becoming which are precarious but nevertheless rewarding in the connections they help make. Nadia captures this mood when she reflects that “a new time was here”, comparing this time to the feeling of “the wind in her face on a hot day when she rode her motorcycle and lifted the visor of her helmet and embraced the dust and the pollution and the little bugs that sometimes went into your mouth and made you recoil and even spit, but after spitting grin, and grin with a wildness”.<sup>64</sup> Passages like these refuse to describe the radical mobility evoked in *Exit West* as an escape towards a distant future existence disconnected from the present, but keep it grounded and tied to the “dust and pollution and the little bugs that sometimes went into your mouth”: the relationships, spaces, and affects of a troubled present.

The nature of the home and of domestic spaces more generally also undergoes a transformation in the Mykonos-London section of the novel. As George indicates, the genre of (im)migrant literature is defined, on the one hand, by an antipathy to nostalgia, nationalism, homesickness, and other forms of desire for home, and on the other hand by “excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material”. As a material object, luggage (or its marked absence) in such novels can be either a toolkit for survival or an unwanted hindrance which slows the migrant down. Spiritually, luggage denotes the memory of past lives and cultural and national histories, which can either empower

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63. Haraway, p. 1.

64. Hamid, pp. 156–57.



the migrant as a constantly recreated “bag of tricks that tells the textured tale of who the immigrant is and where s/he belongs”, or signify an impossible “yearning for the authentic home” lost to the past or inaccessible in the future.<sup>65</sup> Nadia and Saeed’s luggage when they leave their city is generic and efficiently packed, yet carries a sense of their desire for home in their attempt not to abandon every vestige of the small domestic utopias they had constructed: “smallish backpacks ... each full to bursting, like a turtle imprisoned in too tight a shell”. A turtle’s shell, of course, is the only home it will ever know, but the mode of migrancy demands that the original home is transformed and reconfigured — as Susheila Nasta elegantly puts it, “[h]ome, it has been said, is not necessarily where one *belongs* but the place where one *starts* from”. Migration is often motivated, Nasta adds, by “a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it”.<sup>66</sup> While Nadia takes nothing sentimental with her, Saeed doubles down on the domestic metaphor by bringing along with him an even more compressed sense of home: a single physical photograph of his parents and “a memory stick containing his family album”. Upon arrival in Mykonos, the couple swap parts of their homely luggage for the necessary items of migrant life: “some water, food, a blanket, a larger backpack, a little tent that folded away into a light, easily portable pouch, and electric power and local numbers for their phones”. Setting up their “temporary home” for their first night as migrants, Nadia feels as if she is “playing house, as she had with her sister as a child”.<sup>67</sup> In this initial period of transition, Nadia and Saeed — and their ideas of home — appear to hover, temporary and evanescent, on the threshold between their old world and a new and uncertain future.

Upon their arrival in London, Nadia and Saeed begin to build a more solid concept of home, initially helped by the fact that, for the first time in months, they find themselves in a solid structure, an unoccupied mansion in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea squatted by over fifty migrants:

To have a room to themselves — four walls, a window, a door with a lock — seemed incredible good fortune, and Nadia was tempted to unpack, but she knew they

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65. George, pp. 171, 174–76.

66. Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 1, 7.

67. Hamid, p. 102.

needed to be ready to leave at any moment, and so she took out of their backpack only items that were absolutely required. For his part Saeed removed the photo of his parents that he kept hidden in his clothing and placed it on a bookshelf, where it stood, creased, gazing upon them and transforming this narrow bedroom, at least partially, temporarily, into a home.<sup>68</sup>

While their London room is, materially speaking, far less temporary than the tent on Mykonos, the temporary and partial nature of this space *as home* is testament to the liminal conditions in which the couple find themselves. The mutable, threshold nature of their home is reflected on a larger scale in the changing nature of the British homeland. With millions of migrants suddenly on the move across the world, subverting the *dispositif* of the border regime and the Global North's neo-imperial conception of itself as the centre of rational liberal governmentality, the news on the television is apocalyptic and full of liminal spatialities: "full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart".<sup>69</sup>

Nasta contends that "the notion of 'home', with all the political, ideological and symbolic baggage that it still implies, was one which formed an integral part of the naturalized rhetoric of Britain as Empire and has lingered on in the nationalistic grammar of Britain as post-imperial nation"; in the plausibly realistic world of *Exit West*, this monolithic assurance of "authority *over* and [...] means of authority *within*" the British nation begins to transform into a threshold zone of compromise, negotiation, and openness.<sup>70</sup> The protagonists thus contemplate that the retreat of "native" British forces from a planned assault on dark London is because "they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process".<sup>71</sup> Another implied reason are the deaths of two hundred migrants squatting in a cinema which burns down during the first wave of

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68. Hamid, p. 120.

69. Hamid, p. 155.

70. Nasta, p. 1.

71. Hamid, p. 164.

attacks. *Exit West* came out only months after the June 2017 destruction by fire of the Grenfell Tower council estate in the same borough of Kensington and Chelsea where Nadia and Saeed make their temporary home; the government response to the deaths in Grenfell of seventy-two people, most from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, contrasts tellingly with the positioning, in *Exit West*, of the cinema fire as the impetus for a profound and utopian shift in official attitudes towards the migrants. As of late 2019, some families from Grenfell and the surrounding estates who were forced to move out of their homes remain in temporary accommodation.<sup>72</sup> In *Exit West*, the UK begins to resettle the migrants and integrate them into the evolving “fabric of the nation” within months, commissioning a vast project of public works and construction and promising each family a small amount of land.<sup>73</sup>

In *Exit West*, when it is not conflict which transforms the shape of Britain, it is the migrants themselves. A foreman on Saeed’s work team becomes “the key to understanding their new home, its people and manners and ways and habits ... though of course their very presence here meant that its people and manners and ways and habits were undergoing considerable change”.<sup>74</sup> Hamid’s decolonial revisioning of the British nation and its people works not from the periphery of Empire, but enters its heart, a form of “encroachment into European space — the inversion of European imperial expansion”.<sup>75</sup> However, the traditional anxiety Nasia Anam indexes in colonial texts, where the imperial “metropole” becomes a “potential site of conquest and thus colonization” in reverse, does not come to pass.<sup>76</sup> When Nadia and Saeed move into a literal threshold settlement built in London’s edgelands, they find that while “conflict did not vanish overnight ... overall, for most people, in Britain at least, existence went on in tolerable safety”.<sup>77</sup> This section, set in the “London Halo”, is suffused with a sense of perseverance, patience, and mutual discovery

72. Julia Gregory, ‘8 Grenfell Families Are Still Living in Temporary Homes 27 Months On’, *My London*, 2019 <<https://www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/8-grenfell-families-still-living-17131649>> [accessed 26 November 2019].

73. However, see Chambers’ connection of the ‘40 square metres and a pipe’ each migrant family is promised with the ‘40 acres and a mule’ promised to African-American slaves after abolition; in comparison with the fate of the freed slaves, the space given to the migrants is truly paltry. See: Chambers, p. 239.

74. Hamid, p. 74.

75. Nasia Anam, ‘The Migrant as Colonist: Dystopia and Apocalypse in the Literature of Mass Migration’, *ASAP/Journal*, 3.3 (2018), 653–77 (p. 673).

76. Anam, p. 662.

77. Hamid, p. 168.

as the migrants begin to become friends with the “natives” of Britain.

At the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, the planet’s political and social systems are completely and irreparably transformed. Hamid’s ontologically indecisive style allows for multiple types of change to coexist in the same world and at the same scale — the changes in Nadia and Saeed’s relationship as they fall out of love; the emergence of camaraderie and solidarity between different migrants as well as migrants and natives; and large-scale political changes, such as the institution of a “time tax” which ensures that “a portion of the income and toil of those who had recently arrived on the island would go to those who had been there for decades”.<sup>78</sup> As Anam writes, in these and the following chapters, the apocalyptic in *Exit West* “becomes quotidian, arbitrary, *manageable*”; this inversion occurs because the novel is written from the perspective of migrants “who have already witnessed an apocalyptic civilizational transformation in the home-lands from which they escaped”. The migrants are used to crisis as an ongoing and everyday part of life, making them exemplary subjects of the ongoing present as presented in Chapters Two and Three. The critical transformation in the world order, therefore, “amounts to no more than another trial to withstand”.<sup>79</sup> In this section, *Exit West* emerges as a novel not of apocalypse and its consequences, but of everyday precarity and the tactics that can be learned and shared to survive it; unlike *Snowpiercer* and texts I investigate in further chapters, particularly *New York 2140* and *The Book of Joan*, *Exit West* features no moment of apocalyptic break which distinguishes the present from the future. Anam concludes that the “distinct advantage of inhabiting the subject-position of the migrant in a time of enormous societal transformation” lies in the fact that, in *Exit West*, “the subjectivity of the migrant becomes one of infinite elasticity and adaptability in a time of global tumult — a truly utopian idea indeed”.<sup>80</sup> This emergent utopianism, based on a humanist planetary ethics and on the appearance of common spaces of solidarity, support, and mutual understanding — squats, migrant housing, work crews, and welfare centres — is only made possible by the liminal spatialities and subjectivities which structure the Mykonos-London section of the novel.

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78. Hamid, p. 168.

79. Anam, p. 674.

80. Anam, pp. 675–76.

### London to Marin: Heimat

The last section of *Exit West* sees the development of an oppositional political subjectivity emerging from the liminal foundations laid down in the preceding chapters. Nadia and Saeed's final destination, Marin, is itself liminal, built in the urban edgeland between Sausalito and the Californian countryside, and comprises cooperatives, temporary structures, and open spaces for dancing and performance.<sup>81</sup> The population of Marin is likewise liminal, comprising thousands of migrants from all around the world. It is here — with the size of Marin finally providing the distance that Nadia and Saeed need to uncouple from their dying relationship — that Nadia feels able to fully explore her attraction to women, while Saeed, as I shall argue below, is able to articulate an unorthodox position in regards to faith which incorporates his Muslim heritage with the Christian teachings of an African American preacher.

Marin's liminality is further evidenced by the ways in which the city's residents employ technology. Because of its proximity to the high-tech Bay Area, Marin is interwoven with a tightly integrated mesh of technology which, in its modalities and uses, is oppositional to the technologies of bordering and control that Nadia and Saeed saw employed in Britain. The technological developments in Marin do not come from the late capitalist technological companies which dominate the Bay Area, but are innovated by Marin residents and oppose the consumerist drive of Silicon Valley. Much technology is geared towards attenuating the basic precariousness of daily life so that it would be "not quite as rough, nor quite as cut off, as otherwise it might have been": upon arriving Nadia and Saeed find strong "wireless data signals", and obtain "a solar panel and battery set with a universal outlet, which accepted plugs from all around the world, and a rainwater collector fashioned from synthetic fabric and a bucket, and dew collectors that fit inside plastic bottles".<sup>82</sup>

A more profound social transformation comes in the shape of a slightly futuristic biometric voting key which some of the residents of Marin are hoping will be the first step

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81. On the use of edgelands in contemporary literature, see: Raphael Kabo, 'Towards a Taxonomy of Edgelands Literature', *Alluvium*, 2015 <<https://www.alluvium-journal.org/2015/06/26/towards-a-taxonomy-of-edgelands-literature/>> [accessed 26 November 2019].

82. Hamid, p. 191.

in the foundation of a new, directly democratic political system, “a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from”. This device is described as looking “like a thimble”, and its power lies in its simplicity:

She was so happy, and he asked her why, and she said that this could be the key to the plebiscite, that it made it possible to tell one person from another and ensure they could vote only once, and it was being manufactured in vast numbers, at a cost so small as to be almost nothing, and he held it on his palm and discovered to his surprise that it was no heavier than a feather.<sup>83</sup>

The science fictional thimble’s lightness stands in for the avowed simplicity of the regional assembly, which would be an open commons by design: a system always accessible to newcomers, incapable of denying any of its members a say in their own future. It is also a local prefiguration of the bottom-up, distributed, anti-borders socio-political formation which the doors are creating across the world. To Saeed, who has lived his whole life under the control of authoritarian systems, mass surveillance, and ideological violence, technology appears understandably a weighty thing, used to crush people rather than empower them, and the lightness of the thimble in his eyes also stands for the freedoms it implies. This thimble is the first clear sign that the global adoption of migration, and the newly developing technologies which can provide security, identity, and purpose to this migration, signals the end of borders, and thus of nation-states and the subject position of the citizen. This new, distributed, directly democratic politics individuates people (“it made it possible to tell one person from another”), but does so with the goal of creating “greater justice”, rather than alienation for the purpose of capitalist exploitation.

Politically, the concept of the “regional assembly” fought for by the residents of Marin is reminiscent of anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin’s concept of confederal autonomous municipalities, in which the state is replaced “by a confederal network of municipal assemblies; the corporate economy reduced to a truly political economy in which municipalities, interacting with each other economically as well as politically, will

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83. Hamid, pp. 219–20.

resolve their material problems as citizen bodies in open assemblies”.<sup>84</sup> The utopian use of technology here also goes some way towards solving the problem identified by Harvey in Bookchin’s concept — that inequality would nevertheless exist at a *material* level between different regions. For Harvey, the only way to solve problems of the necessary “redistribution of wealth between municipalities ... is either by democratic consensus (which, we know from historical experience, is unlikely to be voluntarily and informally arrived at) or by citizens as democratic subjects with powers of decision at different levels within a structure of hierarchical governance”.<sup>85</sup> The biometric voting key may resolve problems of inertia and complexity encountered in the actual enactment, “voluntarily and informally”, of democratic decision making.

The doors are crucial to the success of systems such as these, because the freedom of movement they offer allows subjects to travel from a region to one which better suits them, or to travel permanently around the world, making a home in movement. As Ian Chambers writes, while “travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary”, and “intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming”, the subject identity evoked in the experience of migrancy is very different:

Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming — completing the story, domesticating the detour — becomes an impossibility.<sup>86</sup>

The new social and political subjectivities which are slowly and experimentally being worked out in Marin — subjectivities which embrace the doors not as a form of transport alone, nor even as a necessary way to flee a host of precarious presents, but as a way to expand and continue expanding a *mobile commons* of eternal transit and mutability — foster precisely this deferral of completion and domestication.

In the final months of the novel’s narrative, the movements of the protagonists change

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84. Murray Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), p. 286.

85. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 152.

86. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.



from globe-spanning traversals in search of safety from violence and repression to far more minor, localised adjustments to a new and increasingly secure and liberated life. Nadia's feelings when she is invited to move into the cooperative are telling on this point: "the possibility struck Nadia with a shock of recognition, as though a door was opening up, a door in this case shaped like a room". For the first time since fleeing their country, Nadia is "reminded of her apartment in the city of her birth, which she had loved, reminded of what it was like to live there alone ... this room came to feel to her like home".<sup>87</sup> Nadia's desire for a space in "the city" where she can be "alone" is a desire for unalienated wholeness — the sense of being complete as a person integrated into, yet individuated within, a community. The community which surrounds, protects, and supports Nadia in her search for a new home is represented most obviously by the cooperative, whose workers become friendly with her after she fearlessly stands up to an armed robber: "several people on her shifts began chatting with her a lot more after that. She felt she was beginning to belong".<sup>88</sup> Nadia's community also includes the entire city of Marin which, in the next paragraph, is synecdochally invoked to represent Nadia's growing contentment and security:

The locality around Marin seemed to be rousing itself from a profound and collective low in those days. It has been said that depression is a failure to imagine a plausible desirable future for oneself, and, not just in Marin, but in the whole region, in the Bay Area, and in many other places too, places both near and far, the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief.<sup>89</sup>

In these especially utopian paragraphs and those preceding them, *Exit West* makes use of an imaginary which I argue is closely linked with Bloch's concept of *Heimat*.

Bloch deploys the term *Heimat* as a counter to the complex network of associations with which this term is loaded in German culture, particularly after the rise of Nationalist

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87. Hamid, p. 215.

88. Hamid, p. 214.

89. Hamid, p. 215-16.

Socialism in the 1930s. Anton Kaes reads the concept of *Heimat* in Germany in the twentieth century as a nostalgic imaginary of an Arcadian homeland, one which is both lost and comfortingly familiar: “the site of one’s lost childhood, of family, of identity ... the possibility of secure human relations, unalienated, precapitalist labour, and the romantic harmony between country dweller and nature ... everything that is not distant and foreign”.<sup>90</sup> In a wide-ranging study on *Heimat*, Friederike Eigler describes the term as “a manifestation of the loss of metaphysical rootedness”, which emerged in the late eighteenth century as an “affective attachment”, but became steadily more ideologically weighted over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>91</sup> Jamie Owen Daniel notes that the sense of a “familiar and ‘homey’ past” with which *Heimat* was supposed to reconcile the German nation was, as such pasts often are, “mostly imagined”.<sup>92</sup> Nazi ideology made great use of this simultaneous unreality and familiarity to rationalise ethnic cleansing and the expansion of the German state across Europe; as a kind of ‘moveable home’, the imaginary of *Heimat* meant that it was possible for ethnic Germans to “live anywhere, and still be home in Germany” — and thus necessitated the existence of Germany everywhere.<sup>93</sup>

Bloch’s use of *Heimat* adopts the term’s associations with a lost world; its fluidity, mutability, and mobility; its affective and metaphysical nature; and its specific connections with childhood. Rather than looking *backwards* to a past which never existed, however, Bloch connects *Heimat* with the *future* horizon of a process of concrete utopian realisation. Although his use of the term in *The Principle of Hope* is typically non-systematic, this sense is especially apparent in the epigraph to this chapter, with which Bloch closes the final volume of *Principle*. As Daniel writes, for Bloch, *Heimat* refers “to an *anticipated* state of reconciliation with conditions of possibility that do not as yet exist, and indeed *will not* exist until present conditions have been radically reconceptualized so that they can be transformed into something as yet impossible to define” — a concrete utopia in the

90. Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 165.

91. Friederike Eigler, *Heimat, Space, Narrative: Toward a Transnational Approach to Flight and Expulsion* (Rochester: Camden House, 2014), pp. 2, 13.

92. Jamie Owen Daniel, ‘Reclaiming the “Terrain of Fantasy”: Speculations on Ernst Bloch, Memory, and the Resurgence of Nationalism’, in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. by Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 53–62 (p. 59).

93. Daniel, p. 59.

present.<sup>94</sup> Where Nazi ideology used the conceptual flexibility of *Heimat* to promote a reign of conquest and genocide in pursuit of the creation of a German homeland across Europe, Bloch sees *Heimat* as a spatially fluid homeland for every individual which can satisfy the core human desires for community, safety, non-alienation, and joy anywhere humans find themselves. Vincent Geoghegan makes the relation between *Heimat* and alienation particularly clear:

Since absence characterises humanity in class society, individuals are, in a sense, constantly in search of themselves. They are homeless. The not yet glimpsed by people is therefore a glimpse of coming home, but to a home that they have never yet occupied. [...] Coming home is not meant to suggest finality or closure; home is the arena in which humanity will flourish [...].<sup>95</sup>

In her analysis, Levitas brings out the anti-capitalist features of a planetary *Heimat*: “*Heimat* can be understood in relation to the existential components of [...] alienation from ‘species-being’: in the commodification of our relationships with others they become means to our ends rather than ends in themselves; and the treatment of ourselves as commodities distorts our humanity. *Heimat* is the expression of a desire for a settled resolution of this alienated condition [...] It is a quest for wholeness, for being at home in the world”.<sup>96</sup>

For the inhabitants of Marin, the creation of “plausible desirable futures” — spaces of comfort, stability, self-expression, and belonging, is originally made possible by the doors and the radical mobility they introduce into the world. However, once the doors have receded into the background of the new planetary order — after Nadia and Saeed’s final trip from the London Halo to Marin, they are only mentioned again once, in a vignette where an old woman chooses not to follow her daughter through them — it is not the doors themselves which continue changing the way humans relate to each other and themselves, but the realisation of a kind of *Heimat* in the present: “people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with”.<sup>97</sup> For Nadia, this *Heimat* comes in the literal shape of a room, but also in a romantic relationship with a woman who works at her cooperative; for Saeed, it

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94. Daniel, p. 59.

95. Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 41.

96. Levitas, p. 17. On Marx’s concept of species being, see: Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, pp. 75-84.

97. Hamid, pp. 215-16.

emerges through a romance with the daughter of a preacher, alongside a more nuanced and complex development of his relationship with religion. Prayer, for Saeed, in his homeland was about “being a particular sort of man, a gentleman, a gentle man, a man who stood for community and faith and kindness and decency, a man, in other words, like his father” — a connection with the traditions and memories of his family and nation as much as a wider sense of traditional masculinity.<sup>98</sup> In Marin, however, in the newly emerging *Heimat*, Saeed prays to connect to a planetary, universal, radical sense of non-alienated being:

Now, though, in Marin, Saeed prayed even more, several times a day, and he prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched, and he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who come after us and love us, and this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry and yet too often refuse to acknowledge in one another, and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death, to believe in humanity’s potential for building a better world, and so he prayed as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope [...].<sup>99</sup>

Although it is implicit in *Exit West* that Nadia and Saeed’s religion is Islam, Hamid’s conscious choice in not naming it as such allows the novel’s readers to read Saeed’s prayer as a universal, utopian hope for the realisation of a new world which can unite “every human being”. This key passage most clearly highlights the connection, which threads its way through *Exit West*, of homeland and parenthood. By the end of the novel, Nadia and Saeed are both orphans, but beyond the literal loss of their families, their travels have fundamentally orphaned them from a traditional, national sense of homeland and the desire to return to it. In a sense, every inhabitant of the novel’s new *Heimat* is a child who has lost the parent of their original homeland, and is now, sorrowfully yet hopefully, moving towards the horizon of a “better world”.

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98. Hamid, p. 200-201.

99. Hamid, p. 201-202.

### Marin: An emergent mobile commons

The concept of the *mobile commons* has been given a great deal of attention in recent critical work emerging in the wake of the worldwide mobility crises outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Discourses which oppose the border regime tend to understand migrancy not as a desperate, last-ditch response to precarity and destruction, but as an (albeit gruelling) exercise in *autonomy*, by recognising its “capacity to develop its own logics, its own motivation, its own trajectories that control comes later to respond to”.<sup>100</sup> Such migrant autonomy discourses avoid romanticising nomadism and study particular narratives of movement instead of forming generalisations about all those who migrate. Fundamentally, they see migrancy as an ongoing attempt at creating an autonomous, non-alienated everyday existence without recourse to a stable home or homeland — a *Heimat* built within mobility.

Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos define the mobile commons as a form of shared world-building and a set of demands for greater justice by those on the move “which creates new forms of life that sustain migrants’ ordinary movements”, in particular “daily social relations, connections and conditions that evade the control of mobility” such as border regimes and citizenship infrastructures.<sup>101</sup> For Papadopoulos and Tsianos, the five features of everyday life which distinguish the mobile commons are:

1. a “*knowledge of mobility*”, which Nadia and Saeed access during their time on Mykonos: “the news, the tumult in the world, the state of their country, the various routes and destinations migrants were taking and recommending to each other, the tricks one could gainfully employ, the dangers one needed at all costs to avoid”;
2. an “*infrastructure of connectivity*”, which in *Exit West* frequently appears in the shape of mobile phones, whose antennas “sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near”;
3. a “multiplicity of *informal economies*” which appear throughout the novel, from

100. Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis S. Tsianos, ‘After Citizenship: Autonomy of Migration, Organisational Ontology and Mobile Commons’, *Citizenship Studies*, 17.2 (2013), 178–96 (p. 184); this discourse is based on the Italian Marxist Autonomism movement of the 1960s, which understood class struggle as a willing choice by workers, rather than a *post hoc* response to oppression. See: Mario Tronti, ‘A New Type of Political Experiment: Lenin in England’, in *Workers and Capital* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 65–72.

101. Papadopoulos and Tsianos, p. 192.

agents who sell access to secret doors to black markets where one could buy or barter anything “from sweaters to mobile phones to antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs”;

4. “*communities of justice*”, extra-governmental organisations which protect the rights of migrants, represented in *Exit West* by people who wear the “migrant compassion badge, the black door within a red heart”;
5. “the *politics of care*”, which, as we have seen in the previous sections, suffuses Hamid’s novel, incorporating all of Papadopoulos and Tsianos’ examples of “mutual cooperation, friendships, favours that you never return, affective support, trust, care for other people’s relatives and children, transnational relations of care, the gift economy between mobile people”.<sup>102</sup>

The mobile commons has much in common with commons we have seen elsewhere in the thesis (Spahr’s barricades and riots and the rear section of the *Snowpiercer*) and those of the next two chapters: they create networks of care, support, and solidarity; they are oppositional to neoliberal alienation and precarisation; they are based on economies of sharing and collectivity; and they have the potential to prefigure new, utopian ways of life.

For Papadopoulos and Tsianos, mobile commons are an empowering yet also temporary arrangement of social and political networks, only operating while their ‘inhabitants’ are in the process of movement. This reading does not open out onto the idea of a mobile commons as a more permanent and expanding social system in the sense envisaged by Stavrides. Natasha King and Mimi Sheller offer separate expansions on this theorisation which more powerfully anchor the mobile commons’ potential of support and care in the greater mobility justice movement, and thus in the creation of lasting, mobile, commons-oriented political subjects. King reads the autonomy of migration as an escape from the sovereign power of the state, and argues that greater justice for those fleeing the power of border regimes can only be won through “collaborative community-building” occurring when “different kinds of people participate together in the mobile

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102. Papadopoulos and Tsianos, pp. 191–92; Hamid, pp. 103, 35, 101, 105; for more on the adoption of communication and information technologies by refugees, see: Melissa Wall, Madeline Otis Campbell, and Dana Janbek, ‘Syrian Refugees and Information Precarity’, *New Media & Society*, 19.2 (2017), 240–54; *Digital Lifeline?: ICTs for Refugees and Displaced Persons*, ed. by Carleen F. Maitland (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

commons”, including those people in positions of comparative privilege and power like activists and organisers, who can cross borders without threat of incarceration. Key to such participation is “taking action, collaboratively and meaningfully, with people who experience oppressions that we do not”.<sup>103</sup> In this way, the tactics and knowledges acquired by migrants can be brought into already existing commons of activist networks, squats, and community support organisations on both sides of borders. These wider commons become a site from which to oppose and circumvent border regimes and sovereign power state power through forms of ongoing struggle and solidarity.<sup>104</sup>

Mimi Sheller distinguishes between *mobility commons* and *mobile commons*, two faces of the same struggle linked through the concept of *mobility justice*. The mobility commons is oppositional to border regimes, and through this oppositionality, remains liminal: it “allows for people to exercise ... productive forms of autonomous social cooperation outside of capitalism, and beyond or beneath the limits of national borders, existing in the interstices”. The key resource shared within the mobility commons is “access to the cooperative social territories and shared infrastructures of movement (both material and immaterial) — i.e., the pathways, ways, and means of moving, sharing, and communicating”.<sup>105</sup> The mobile commons, for Sheller, is a *form of movement* ethically practised in mobility commons:

A mobile commons is enacted within shared practices of movement, momentary gatherings, and fleeting assembly, for a time, in a place, without owning it, so long as one does not ruin it, lay waste to it, degrade it, or take it away from the use of others. This implies upholding principles of deliberative justice, procedural justice, reparative justice, and epistemic justice. It is a kind of mindful movement, shared with others, and based upon forms of solidarity, reciprocity, caring, trust, generosity, and stewardship. It is temporally oriented toward maintaining the intergenerational connections between past, present, and future in terms of how we move over the Earth — lightly, carefully, with concern for others, and especially through difficult

103. Natasha King, *No Borders: The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2016), pp. 36, 132.

104. For more on no-border struggles, see: Anne McNevin, ‘Doing What Citizens Do: Migrant Struggles at the Edges of Political Belonging’, *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community*, 6.2009 (2009), 67–77.

105. Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in the Age of Extremes* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 168–69.



efforts of translation and accompaniment across difference.<sup>106</sup>

Sheller's expansive theorisation, coupled with the work of King on the value of activist movements to mobility justice, develops mobile commons as a utopian instrument for effecting socio-political change on a planetary scale. As Sheller argues, the anchoring of human mobility in a politics of caring common existence allows activists to "move beyond the city street and to take on larger planetary mobility politics", and ultimately to challenge the potential "de-politicization of humanity, and the dystopian ending of communality" which, as I have argued, are the hallmarks and effects of unconstrained contemporary capitalism.<sup>107</sup> Texts such as *Exit West* have an important part to play in this oppositional movement: through the transmission of poetics, tactics, ethics, and politics of mobility justice and mobile commons, they can educate readers to move beyond capitalism and its border regimes.

## Conclusion

By the end of *Exit West*, the novel's imagined world has been transformed irreversibly — rather than comprising nation-states insulated by border regimes and linked by tightly controlled flows of labour and capital, it is diffuse, mutable, and diverse. States and borders become increasingly irrelevant; cities expand out from their centres to incorporate halos of new towns; and small localities and regions come under the management of directly democratic local assemblies. However, this fundamental change in global society is described not as an apocalyptic or catastrophic break with what came before, but through a commons poetics of collectivity and adjustment. The novel rejects any sense that this mobility commons will at any point disintegrate and be incorporated into a more structured social order. Rather anti-capitalist and decolonial modes of "solidarity, reciprocity, caring, trust, generosity, and stewardship" become the imagined world's dominant form of social organisation. *Exit West* calls for a new planetary ethics built on commons, mobility, and care for humans and non-humans — a system of justice which will neither tether the Global South closer to capitalism, nor exact violent revenge on the Global North for its colonial

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106. Sheller, pp. 169–70.

107. Sheller, pp. 167, 170.

histories, but surpass both of these short-term solutions to create a planetary commons which moves beyond borders and geographical inequalities, and towards a utopian world of limitless and ethical movement, endlessly under construction and revision.

The following chapter will examine one of the most explicitly utopian novels of the last decade — but unlike the fantastic world of *Exit West*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* is set in a world where portals do not magically appear to rapidly usher in a new way of being in the world. Rather, *New York 2140* takes the climatological, financial, and social crises of the present and extrapolates them into the not-so-distant future to show us what will happen if — as is unfortunately likely — our relations with each other, the other living beings which populate our planet, and the systems which allow us all to survive fails to change as quickly as is needed. Despite Robinson's critical outlook on the near future of the planet, his magisterial imaginary world, like Hamid's, is filled with defiantly anti-capitalist, planetary utopian commons.

## Chapter Five

### Utopias Beyond Disaster: *New York 2140*

The apocalypse is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed.

Various sources, updating a quote attributed to William Gibson<sup>1</sup>

The New York City of Kim Stanley Robinson's 2017 novel *New York 2140* is a near future metropolis defined, much as it is today, by runaway global warming, unregulated finance, economic inequality, sensationalised mass media, widespread precarity, and desperate refugees fleeing ongoing disaster.<sup>2</sup> A fifty-foot rise in the sea level has transformed lower Manhattan, once the capital of global finance, into an 'intertidal zone' of canals, partially drowned buildings, and skybridges. In one of the novel's repeated returns to the history and aesthetics of nineteenth-century New York, life in this liminal urban zone now resembles "earlier centuries of cheap squalid tenement reality, moldier than ever, the occupants risking their lives by the hour. Same as ever, but wetter".<sup>3</sup> Despite the novel's committed representation of the precarity, trauma, and destruction wrought by the capitalist profit motive's drive to irreversibly alter the planetary climatological and ecological balance, *New York 2140* has been widely described as "surprisingly utopian", "genuinely utopian", and "decidedly utopian".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, like all serious contemporary utopias, *New York 2140* is a blend of warning and hope, a novel about unevenly distributed capitalist disaster and the utopian commons which can emerge to oppose and attenuate it — commons formed of

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1. A Google search reveals uses of this phrase — riffing on Gibson's *bon mot* "the future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed" — going back at least as far as 2014. For a comprehensive investigation of the original quote's origins (Gibson probably did say it, but didn't write it down), see: Garson O'Toole, 'The Future Has Arrived — It's Just Not Evenly Distributed yet - Quote Investigator', *Quote Investigator*, 2012 <<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/01/24/future-has-arrived/>> [accessed 8 September 2019].
  2. I would like to thank the members of the London Science Fiction Research Community for illuminating discussions which helped develop the argument of this chapter, and the Society for Utopian Studies, who helped fund my travel to Berkeley where an earlier version of the chapter was presented.
  3. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (London: Orbit, 2017), p. 279.
  4. Joshua Rothman, 'Kim Stanley Robinson's Latest Novel Imagines Life in an Underwater New York', *The New Yorker*, 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/kim-stanley-robinsons-latest-novel-imagines-life-in-an-underwater-new-york>> [accessed 5 March 2019]; Gerry Canavan, 'Utopia in the Time of Trump', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2017 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/utopia-in-the-time-of-trump/>> [accessed 5 March 2019]; Brent Ryan Bellamy, 'Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis', *Science Fiction Studies*, 45.3 (2018), 417–19 (p. 418).

concrete spatial tactics, collective relations, and environmental engagements. This chapter will argue that, in ways engaged more deliberately and directly with contemporary utopian theory than many of the other texts examined in this thesis, *New York 2140* employs a commons poetics, inspired by the events of the GFC and contemporary anti-capitalist politics, not only to promote the idea of utopia as contingent, open, and diverse, but to challenge the idea that it must occur outside of or beyond our current world. Instead, like Spahr in *That Winter the Wolf the Came* and Hamid in *Exit West*, Robinson offers a vision of the future as working upon the present in utopian, hopeful, and oppositional ways — an ongoing future.

Kim Stanley Robinson has been described as America's most committed (and perhaps, as he himself ironically remarks, last) utopian writer.<sup>5</sup> Robinson wrote his doctorate on sf author Philip K. Dick under the supervision of Fredric Jameson in the 1980s, and Jameson's writings on utopianism have influenced Robinson's development of an analytical, rationalist, dialectic and reflexive project of passionate and hopeful utopian imagining over the following three decades. Each of the books of his *Three Californias* trilogy (1984, 1988, 1990) reimagines Robinson's home state, in turn, as a survivalist frontier in the aftermath of a nuclear war, a near future high-tech dystopia, and an ecological utopia, exhibiting Robinson's ability to manipulate genre and laying the groundwork for his interest in a process-oriented, dialogic, piecemeal utopianism which manifests even in the least utopian of worlds. Robinson takes this rejection of straightforward generic categories further in the sprawling *Mars* trilogy (1992, 1993, 1996), which chronicles the colonisation, terraforming, and revolutionary struggle for power on Mars over a period of almost two hundred years. The trilogy's ambitious temporal scope allows Robinson to fictionally bring to life multiple competing utopian imaginaries, but particularly the utopia of reasoned debate itself: "a kind of utopian community, cozy and bright and protected", where people "gave talks, asked questions, debated details of fact, discussed implications".<sup>6</sup>

Jameson has returned the favour of his utopian politics being realised, in fiction, by

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5. Robinson describes himself as America's 'last utopian' here: Adam Rogers, 'The Sci-Fi Novelist Who Writes Like the Past to Warn of the Future', *Wired*, 2018 <<https://www.wired.com/story/kim-stanley-robinson-red-moon/>> [accessed 4 March 2019].

6. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars* (London: Voyager, 2009), p. 269.

writing at length on Robinson's work in a number of the essays collected in *Archaeologies of the Future*, where, with specific reference to Robinson's *Mars* trilogy, he describes the utopian literature of the late twentieth century as "not the representation of Utopia, but rather the conflict of all possible Utopias".<sup>7</sup> In Jameson's extensive critiques of late twentieth-century utopian literature, including Robinson's work, he concludes that although such utopias hold a vital social, cultural, and aesthetic role in highlighting and critiquing the many contradictions of the late capitalist world system, they fail to exert the political function of opposing it or developing concrete proposals for transformation and escape. The real work of utopian representation thus becomes "to think the break itself", to meditate "on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right" — to ceaselessly debate, like the Martian settlers, about what utopia might include and exclude.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, as Jameson outlines, this meditation on utopia is only possible in a time of political paralysis, when "there is not the slightest prospect of reform, let alone revolution, in real life". As soon as "the system really seems in the process of losing its legitimacy ... the utopian imagination no longer has free play", with imaginative speculation giving way to serious political programmes for change. Thus, the function of utopia "lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future ... so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined".<sup>9</sup> Once the secrets of this entrapping system are revealed to us, we can begin the real, revolutionary work of transcending the current totality.<sup>10</sup> The argument that utopian thinking is a kind of dream which will always fade away as the revolutionary body wakes from its slumber returns us, in Jameson's work, to Robinson's writing. At the end of an essay on the *Mars* trilogy, Jameson writes: "utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the *imperative* to imagine them". Of the utopia of *Blue Mars*, the concluding volume of the trilogy, he claims:

7. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, pp. 216–17.

8. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 232.

9. Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review*, 25 (2004), 35–54 (p. 46).

10. Jameson's concept of the categorical break between the old and new totality draws extensively on the writings of György Lukács. See: Fredric Jameson, 'The Case for George Lukács', *Salmagundi*, 13 (1970), 3–35; György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

“we do not ever witness its evolution as a narrative event; *perhaps indeed we could not do so*”.<sup>11</sup>

*New York 2140* is best understood as a gentle yet assured critique and corrective of Jameson’s theory of utopia, a paradigmatic utopian text for a post-GFC, post-Occupy contemporary moment which is already, as I have shown in previous chapters, distinct from late twentieth-century totality. Indeed, David Sergeant argues that “the novel’s insistence on its relevance to the current moment ... can be read as a polite demurral from Jameson’s emphasis on the success through failure of utopian fiction”. This emphasis can be dangerously manipulated into “making our current stasis comfortable through the repeated, soothing assertion of the proximity of a change whose Eventual unforeseeability conveniently translates into the pointlessness of doing anything to try to bring it forward”.<sup>12</sup> I would further argue that *New York 2140* is not merely a departure from one analysis of utopian fiction, but a leading example of the new “formal tendency” in utopian fiction which I have been examining in this thesis, emerging within and moving beyond those tendencies centred by Jameson. At least in terms of its deliberately and self-consciously utopian form, its passionate didacticism, and its anti-capitalist politics, *New York 2140* may be the clearest example we yet have of a commons utopia. At the same time, Robinson’s project is not perfect: it is let down somewhat by gender essentialism, a merely incidental attentiveness to the Indigenous Lenape histories and resistance practices which are crucial to understanding the space of New York City, a narrow geographical and temporal focus and, at times, by Robinson’s almost overbearing fascination with the palimpsest of nineteenth and twentieth-century New York City writing which informs and illuminates it. *New York 2140* proves most effective in deploying a ruthless and far-ranging critique of late capitalist totality, while at the same time retaining a steely-eyed commitment to representing the possibility of utopian commons-building, not in spaces and times far removed from our present, but — paradoxically, as I shall argue below — in the very world we currently inhabit, educating and inspiring its readers with the hope that capitalism can be overthrown today.

This chapter will now turn to an analysis of the generic, formal, and narrative strategies

11. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 416, emphasis added.

12. David Sergeant, ‘The Genre of the Near Future: Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*’, *Genre*, 52.1 (2019), 1–23 (pp. 18–19).

Robinson employs in *New York 2140* to locate his text in a liminal space between the present (and the historical past which informs it) and two very different forms of the future — the *ongoing present* of late capitalism, as identified by Berlant, and an *ongoing future* of radical possibility offered by utopia, as I have theorised *contra* Berlant in Chapter Three. The second section of the chapter will analyse three specific localities in Robinson's novel which would likely be very familiar to any current inhabitant of New York City: the Met Life Tower on Madison Square; Central Park; and an underground club built inside the semi-flooded 33rd Street Subway station. Bringing together histories and futures, situating anti-capitalist forms of life and resistance in all these locations, Robinson uses a commons poetics to produce a contemporary utopia which seems, at times, close enough to reach.

### **The genres of *New York 2140***

As I have already indicated, *New York 2140* can be read as a leading example of a tendency in contemporary utopian literature to represent a utopia which is realist and familiar in its spatial form, yet socially, culturally and politically aligned beyond the capitalist relations which condition the contemporary world system — a realist space inhabited in a utopian mode. The novel's on-the-nose title echoes numerous science fiction texts including *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949), *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2009), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968), and, indeed, Robinson's own *2312* (2012), which both prefigures and futuristically extends many of the themes of *New York 2140*. The title, alongside its glitzy, futuristic cover, suggests to the reader that *New York 2140* is an sf novel. However, as I shall illustrate in the following subsections, the novel plays with a variety of genres: historical fiction, sf, and cli-fi.

### *Historical fiction*

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. illuminatingly points out that science fiction is concerned not with prophecy, but with verisimilitude; the main narrative strategy of the genre “has been to create convincing images of life in the future, through precise details and historical cause-and-effect relationships, recounted in the familiar voices of bourgeois subjects” — a narrative which seeks to account for “a *future past*”, historicising and narrativising a



period of time located somewhere between the presents of the reader and the text.<sup>13</sup> In opposition to this tradition, Robinson's use of verisimilitude and reference, the narrative past tense, and bourgeois subjects brings to life a *present past*, that is, the regular historical past with which any reader of historical and mimetic realist fiction will be immediately familiar. Sergeant contends that "the novel seems in many ways so close to our historical moment as to be almost indistinguishable from it"; in its proliferation of intertextual reference and callback, of which very little refers to the period of time between 2017 and 2140, "*New York 2140* thereby builds the impression of a thickly textured historical past feeding into a present that is not so much 2140 as 2017".<sup>14</sup> As Gerry Canavan drily notes: "the people of 2140 seem awfully well informed about nuts-and-bolts details of the 2008 financial crisis".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, beyond brief references to "the two that followed" the 2008 crisis, for which the latter "served as the model", the economic ontology of *New York 2140*, alongside its cultural and social history, are located squarely in the twentieth and early twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> As an example, in the novel's opening pages, the itinerant hackers Mutt and Jeff (named after the comedy duo of the eponymous twentieth-century American newspaper cartoon) argue about the failures of the financial system and the market, with one didactically announcing to the other: "We're in a mass extinction event, sea level rise, climate change, food panics ... the problem is capitalism".<sup>17</sup> In short order, Mutt and Jeff reference the WTO (World Trade Organisation), the G20, the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission), the computer scientist Ken Thompson, the mid-century fictional detective Nero Wolfe, and American poet Walt Whitman. Only when the text locates them in "the open-walled farm floor of the old Met Life tower, from which vantage point lower Manhattan lies flooded below them like a super-Venice" does the future come colliding back into the contemporary neoliberal present from which they appear to be talking.<sup>18</sup>

Robinson not only describes, but politically critiques this real-world history. *New York 2140* characterises the late capitalist present as ongoing, repetitive, cyclical, looping,

13. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 76.

14. Sergeant, p. 3.

15. Canavan, 'Utopia in the Age of Trump'.

16. Robinson, p. 207.

17. Robinson, pp. 4–5.

18. Robinson, p. 6.

and futureless, a position familiar from the arguments of Chapters Two and Three. The apocalyptic urban spatiality of New York in 2140 is thus also a representation of the most likely future which stems *from* our present, “showing the near future as stuck in a perpetual rerun of the 2008 crash and its aftermath”.<sup>19</sup> In the following passage, Sergeant quite clearly captures the parameters of this political and temporal conceit:

By telling the story of the present in the further future, the novel gives the former a dual nature. It is static, as is reflected in its continuation over a century into the future, and it is charged with forward motion, as is reflected in the novel’s account of societal change prior to and then through an economic crash. And in imbricating present and future, the novel prevents a paradigm-altering Event — technological or apocalyptic — from slipping in between them to offer a more convenient transition into a radically different future.<sup>20</sup>

Instead, *New York 2140* shows the next century painfully, precariously, and disastrously being lived through by populations familiarly trapped under the “stupid laws” of capitalism — namely the growth imperative, the ‘shock doctrine’, and the demand for competition.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond its relationship with the present, *New York 2140* adopts notable features of other genres. As I have already noted, it bears numerous hallmarks of eighteenth and nineteenth-century urban novels, social novels, and historical novels, particularly in its intertextual returns to authors including Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Henry James; its flaneuresque interest in the social history of particular streets and buildings; its large ensemble cast of characters gathered from various social classes and occupying various political and social positions; its pointed critiques of consumerist excess and inequality; its adulations of urban community and the social character of New Yorkers; and its grand, sweeping narrative scope. Two authors whose influence emerges with particular force here are Charles Dickens and Henry Fielding. Dickens’ literary world of colourful urban types and improbable occurrences, and keen eye for injustice, inequality, suffering, and sickness in the city haunt much of *New York 2140*; his spirit is particularly evident in the characters of Stefan and Roberto, the orphaned “water rats” who are taken

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19. Sergeant, p. 5.

20. Sergeant, p. 5.

21. Robinson, p. 5.

in by the Met Life co-operative. In a memorable scene, Stefan announces that, absent of parents, guardians, or foster parents, the boys are “free citizens of the intertidal”. While Stefan’s parents died “of the cholera” after they emigrated to New York from Russia — a melodramatic sequence of events which could have been lifted directly from a Dickens novel — Roberto dramatically claims that he “brought himself up”, subsisting on food fallen through the slats of the Skyline Marina from the tender age of nine months.<sup>22</sup> Almost unthinkable for a reader situated in a neoliberal world system of omniscient biopolitical governmentality, Stefan and Roberto have also fallen through the metaphorical cracks of New York: there is “no record for them” in the city. Far from depicting a new stage in an ongoing chain of historical progress, Robinson’s future world is a regression into Dickensian capriciousness, injustice, and disorder.

The legacy of Henry Fielding appears in the character of “the Citizen”, the opinionated, trenchant, didactic, and loquacious narrator of a number of chapters paced through the novel. Like the “overt narrators” of *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749), the Citizen speaks in a dramatization of Robinson’s authorial voice; he is helpfully omniscient, filling in important details about Robinson’s world; his chapters are addressed directly to the reader in the second person; he is ironic and holds strong convictions, “discriminating among and emphasizing certain values” in his own story.<sup>23</sup> Particularly amusing is his propensity to anticipate “arguments with narratees who might form ‘erroneous’ opinions”, exclaiming, for example, “Don’t be naïve!” when the narratee is in danger of enjoying a moment of unadulterated hope, and elsewhere saying “if you think you know how the world works, think again. You are deceived. You don’t know; you can’t see it, and the whole story has never been told to you. Sorry. Just the way it is”.<sup>24</sup> As we shall see below, it is crucial to the text’s function and structure that the Citizen narrator generates and argues with the narratee in this manner.

Looking beyond his role in the novel’s narrative itself, the Citizen’s tone and conduct position *New York 2140* in intertextual discourse with urban texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Even the novel’s overarching structure promotes its links to these

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22. Robinson, p. 424.

23. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 241.

24. Chatman, p. 241; Robinson, pp. 604, 318-19.

literary traditions: divided into eight parts named in humorous evocation of the sections of a historical or economic treatise ('The Tyranny of Sunk Costs', 'Liquidity Trap', 'The Comedy of the Commons', and so on), each part is broken into chapters which are named after, and comprise the first-person limited narrations of, individual characters in the cast — the Citizen's chapters, as we have seen, are the exception to this. This structure encourages a reading of the novel as an assemblage of a polyphony of voices which together reflect something of the otherwise inexpressible diversity and variety of the urban populace.

Sargent goes so far as to argue that *New York 2140* should be read as a logical extension of the historical novel genre, whose represented historical moment has been steadily approaching its own present since its emergence as a form, finally "pushed through the present and out into the other side".<sup>25</sup> However, Sargent's formalist structural critique of this novel fails to capture the generic fluidity of Robinson's commons poetics. While incorporating elements of the leading styles of eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, and returning continually to our present, *New York 2140* is also a utopian novel, as well as a science fiction text within the emerging 'cli-fi' genre — two generic tendencies to which I shall now turn.

### *Science fiction*

Leaving aside for the moment the novel's central structuring conceit of a 50-foot sea level rise, the major differences between the Earth of 2140 and the Earth of the late 2010s — AI-controlled airships, skyfaring villages, extremely tall skyscrapers constructed using carbon building materials, laser-aided women's-only underwater sumo wrestling rings, and widespread blockchain currency — belong so glaringly to a generic 'future' aesthetic commonplace in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century media that they only serve to highlight the multitude of ways in which, despite ostensibly being an sf novel about the future, *New York 2140* is far better apprehended as a realist historical novel set in an alternative present. This aligns it, within Robinson's wider body of work, far more closely

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25. Sergeant, p. 7; see also, quoted in Sergeant, Jameson on the historical novel: "only our imaginary futures are adequate to do justice to our present ... our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well". Not for nothing does Jameson dedicate this book to Robinson. See: Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 313.

with *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), which imagines an alternate history in which the Black Death almost entirely eradicated the population of Europe, than with his canonically science fictional *Mars* trilogy.

In modern media, the stereotypically ‘future’ aesthetic of ludicrously tall skyscrapers, airships, altered versions of regular sports, along with skintight costumes and neon lighting, all form part of a visual shorthand, valued by producers and audiences, for identifying a piece of media as set in the future. While the film *Metropolis* (1927, dir. Fritz Lang) may have cemented many of these aesthetic tropes, the majority of science fiction texts from the 1970s onwards have made use of this visual language. Influential works in this aesthetic include the work of director Hayao Miyazaki, in particular *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986); the city of Coruscant in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999, dir. George Lucas); *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott); *The Fifth Element*, (1997, dir. Luc Besson); *Cloud Atlas* (2012, dir. The Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer); and *Tomorrowland* (2015, dir. Brad Bird). Where Robinson has previously used this visual shorthand at face value to evoke a future temporality (cf. the airships in *The Years of Rice and Salt* and *Red Mars*), in *New York 2140* it is deployed reflexively to remind the novel’s readers that the very future they are encountering has been designed and imagined in the early twenty-first century and generated with extensive intertextual reference to the history of the nineteenth century. Even in its most futuristic aesthetics, *New York 2140* is politically, culturally, and narratively a novel about our past and present. Bringing this relationship to the fore in an intra-chapter epigraph, Robinson recalls an illustration from a 1908 guidebook to New York depicting a future city of airships, skyscrapers, and skybridges. American artist William Robinson Leigh’s painting ‘Visionary City’ of the same year adopts a similarly grandiose, monolithic aesthetic. These images — and their combination of the baroque and the futuristic — are particularly reminiscent of the New York of Luc Besson’s *The Fifth Element*.





**Figure 3.** Clockwise from top left: Harry Pettit, ‘King’s Dream of New York’ from *King’s Views of New York* (New York: Moses King, 1908); William Robinson Leigh, *Visionary City* (1908); Still from *The Fifth Element* (dir. Luc Besson, 1997).

To further underline this point, many science fictional elements in the novel are metaphorically related to past technologies. A particular style of “skyvillage” is named after a 1940s children’s book; the character Amelia’s airship was built “in Friedrichshafen” — the home of the original Zeppelin Company — “right before the turn of the century”, just like the original successful airship, the Zeppelin LZ 1, albeit two hundred years later;

furthermore, its long travelling career is described as reminiscent of “the tramp steamers of the latter part of the nineteenth century”.<sup>26</sup> Here and at many other moments, while remaining a work of science fiction, *New York 2140* returns to a past which has occurred before our own present to help create its oddly familiar vision of the future.

### *Cli-fi*

The final significant generic tendency from which *New York 2140* borrows is the genre of ‘cli-fi’, a portmanteau of ‘sci-fi’ and ‘climate fiction’, which describes a recent wave of highly successful texts, set in the near present or near future, and concerned with climate disasters occurring on a planetary scale. Some notable examples of this growing corpus are the novella *The End we Start From* (Megan Hunter, 2017), the films *Snowpiercer* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), and the novels *Oryx and Crake* (Margaret Atwood, 2003), *The Island Will Sink* (Briohny Doyle, 2013), *California* (Edan Lepucki, 2014), *The Water Knife* (Paolo Bacigalupi, 2015), *Black Wave* (Michelle Tea, 2015), *Gold Fame Citrus* (Claire Vaye Watkins, 2015), and *American War* (Omar El Akkad, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the worlds of many of these novels revolve around water — either its deadly lack or its destructive surplus.<sup>27</sup> Like these texts, *New York 2140* offers a vision of the Earth and its systems on the road to “[t]he Anthropocide, the Hydrocatastrophe, the Georevolution”, a human-engineered breakdown in the balance of the planet’s systems so as to preclude escape from extinction for the majority of its species.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, beating against the current of critical opinion on *New York 2140*, Ruth Levitas categorises the book as “a dystopia rather than a utopia” and justifies this position by writing that dystopias “share with utopias the method of depicting an alternative society, but constitute a warning of what may happen if we go on as we are, rather than a projection of a desired future”.<sup>29</sup>

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26. Robinson, pp. 285, 98.

27. A large critical field has already developed around climate change and ecological disaster fiction. The term ‘cli-fi’ was coined in 2008 by Dan Bloom. For wide-ranging reviews of the genre, see: Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, ‘Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre’, *Dissent*, 60.3 (2013), 58–61; Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

28. Robinson, p. 34.

29. Ruth Levitas, ‘Where There Is No Vision, the People Perish: A Utopian Ethic for a Transformed Future’, *CUSP*, 2017, 3–15 (p. 4).



Read in this way, *New York 2140* is an exemplary cli-fi text. As Rebecca Evans argues, the critical response to cli-fi has praised its “status as an entertaining yet *educational* genre by emphasizing its capacity for realistic (plausible, soberly related, and scientifically grounded) extrapolation into the future”.<sup>30</sup>

*New York 2140*’s relationship to dystopia is, nonetheless, undoubtedly more nuanced than Levitas makes out. Johns-Putra argues that as it is “more accurate to identify climate change as a *topic* found in many genres”, including dystopia, and because growing scientific consensus on the ongoing and emerging effects of climate change paints a distinctly un-rosy picture of the future, many texts in the recent groundswell of climate change fiction can be “categorized as dystopian ... or postapocalyptic”.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, while critics including Baccolini, Sargent, and Moylan have identified a trajectory of “critical dystopias” in speculative literature since the 1980s, Moylan goes to the heart of the distinction between (*critical*) *dystopia* as a genre on one hand and *literature with dystopian elements* on the other when he writes: “Formally and politically, therefore, the dystopian text refuses a functionalist or reformist perspective. In its purview, no single policy or practice can be isolated as the root problem, no single aberration can be privileged as the one to be fixed so that life in the enclosed status quo can easily resume”.<sup>32</sup> From its didactic first pages, and then through the expostulations of the opinionated Citizen narrator, *New York 2140* repeatedly and consistently fails this litmus test: the root cause of all the ills of its fictional world is capitalism; the close association of the future world with our present world suggests that these ills can already be resisted now; and finally, a system-overthrowing revolution is the obvious and ultimately achievable cure.

There is, furthermore, wide agreement among critics that the world of a dystopia must be depicted as measurably worse than the world of its author.<sup>33</sup> *New York 2140* fails

30. Rebecca Evans, ‘Fantastic Futures? Cli-Fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity’, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 4.2-3 (2017), 94–110 (p. 95).

31. Adeline Johns-Putra, ‘Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-Fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism’, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 7.2 (2016), 266–82 (p. 267), emphasis added.

32. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. xii; for an overview of the history of both contemporary dystopian literature and of the term ‘critical dystopia’, see: Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, ‘Dystopia and Histories’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–12.

33. See: Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, pp. 1–37; *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (London:

this test too, depicting instead a world which is both much worse *and* better than ours. Although the socially liberal cast of characters may have something to do with it, New York in 2140 appears relatively free from racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of overt discrimination; this point is underscored by the universal respect afforded to Gen Octaviasdottir, a Black female Inspector in the New York City Police Department.<sup>34</sup> Even Frank, by far the most bigoted member of the cast, quickly becomes more respectful and open-minded as he spends more time with the others, and eventually ends up falling in love with the radical leftist organiser ‘Red’ Charlotte Armstrong. Frank and Charlotte’s relationship is political as much as it is intimate — their union symbolises the formation of a new, utopian unity between the social revolutionary tactics proposed by Charlotte which, in the end, involve her exposing the criminal activity of the chairman of the Federal Reserve and calling for a national rent strike, and Frank’s intuitive understanding of neoliberal finance, which allows him to effectively manipulate the system from the inside, accelerating the effects of Charlotte’s activity. Other brazenly utopian elements in Robinson’s world are the planet’s wholesale switch to renewable energy and widespread adoption of carbon sequestration technologies — necessary transitions to stave off an even more extreme sea level rise, but not, arguably, *dystopian*. Such tactics work together to reclaim the terrain of a drowned world from the jaws of dystopia, reminding the novel’s audience that the material realities of disaster and crisis do not necessarily engender the affective responses of hopelessness, despair, nihilism and desolation.

These utopian elements emerge with particular force in the spatial production of lower Manhattan. In the years following the floods, abandoned by capital, the property left standing in the intertidal becomes practically free, and this new opportunity opens the door for “some kind of return of the commons”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the intertidal becomes a fertile ground

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Routledge, 2013).

34. Gen’s surname, ‘Octaviasdottir’ (or ‘Octavia’s daughter’, a standard Icelandic surname form), is likely a reference to Octavia E. Butler, a radical and utopian African American science fiction writer, known for the *Parable* series (1993, 1998).

35. Robinson, p. 119. Recent legal rulings in the UK and the US have supported the right for beaches and other intertidal areas to be categorised as commons. See: On the Commons, ‘Who Owns the Beach?’, *On the Commons*, 2005 <<http://www.onthecommons.org/who-owns-beach>> [accessed 28 February 2019]; David Hart, ‘Supreme Court - the Right to Be on the Beach’, *UK Human Rights Blog*, 2015 <<https://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2015/02/25/supreme-court-the-right-to-be-on-the-beach/>> [accessed 28 February 2019].

for the exploration of utopian tactics for communal life, which produce utopian spaces through their enactment. With light touch and imaginative scope, Robinson conjures a fifty-year history for Lower Manhattan which has certainly never happened in our world, and which is yet comprised of a dozen already existing alternatives to capitalism:

a proliferation of cooperatives, neighborhood associations, communes, squats, barter, alternative currencies, gift economies, solar usufruct, fishing village cultures, mondragons, unions, Davy's locker freemasonries, anarchist blather, and submarine technoculture, including aeration and aquafarming. Also sky living in skyvillages that used the drowned cities as mooring towers and festival exchange points; containerclippers and townships as floating islands; art-not-work, the city regarded as a giant collaborative artwork; blue greens, amphibiguity, heterogeneticity, horizontalization, deoligarchification; also free open universities, free trade schools, and free art schools.<sup>36</sup>

This truly utopian vision, any aspect of which could easily fill a novel of its own, tactically combines cultural and social transformations in the lacunae of capitalism (the fantastic conjuration of "skyvillages" as "festival exchange points"; the radical simplicity of "art-not-work"; the delightful portmanteau of "amphibiguity" working against the horror narratives of climate catastrophe) with political and economic developments which defend, condition, and extend their effects.

Understanding *New York 2140* as a text working between and within the genres of the historical novel, science fiction, cli-fi, and utopia allows us to trace the generic and formal strategies Robinson implements in his commons poetics. The commons evoked in *New York 2140* are not limited to the level of narrative, where the *spatial commons* of the Met Life Tower, Central Park, and the speakeasy Mezzrow's are, as we shall see, ably depicted. The novel is also a textual, *literary commons* in the mode evoked in Chapter Three by Spahr and Collis — produced by a multitude of authors, constantly contending with the idea of "what it means to have the words of others in one's own mouth", and among those "appropriation-heavy literatures of the turn of the twenty-first century [which] insist that the words of others are in our mouths all the time".<sup>37</sup> Robinson's characters continually

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36. Robinson, p. 209.

37. Spahr, 'The '90s', p. 181.

have the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on their tongues, not only because this helps us relate to their drowned world, but also because they cannot help but return, in their imaginings, to ours. As Gerry Canavan generously and powerfully argues:

I came to understand that this was not simply as-you-know-Bob overexposition; it was also a token of the immense trauma they and everyone in Future New York is still living through. What else would you think about, as you flew through a strange web of skybridges and ziplines crisscrossing the ruins of what used to be the greatest city in the world? Of course they talk and think often about how things used to be, back when the world was normal. They live with that temporal confusion every day.<sup>38</sup>

For Robinson's New Yorkers, the simultaneous nearness and inaccessibility of the past forces them to contend with centuries of trauma — both that of their own time, and that of past times eerily similar to theirs. As a result, the novel is also a *temporal commons*, a combination of pasts and futures into one continuous, reflexive, emergent narrative which, despite its violence to date, reinforces the potential of oppositional futural possibility itself. Casting our minds back to Max Haiven's words quoted in Chapter Three, he describes precisely this kind of collision of the past with the present and future in a shared, radical space as "*commoning memory* ... a form of co-memorialization that takes as its challenge not the accurate representation of previous events but the rekindling of the spark of past utopianisms in the present ... in order to provoke future radical events".<sup>39</sup> The interplay of the material, spatial commons Robinson describes; the highly intertextual narrative, which provides fertile ground for linking the past to the present and future; and the traumatic and utopian collusions which emerge as a result of this temporal liquidity are all contained in a commons poetics which is predicated on genre and structure. The thematic basis of this commons poetics are tactics of inhabiting, occupying, and resisting which allow the ongoing capitalist future of the centuries leading up to 2140 to be radically and profoundly overturned — and for an alternative utopian future, an ongoing future, to emerge in its place.

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38. Canavan, 'Utopia in the Age of Trump'.

39. Max Haiven, 'Are Your Children Old Enough to Learn About May '68?', p. 83.

### The spatialities of *New York 2140*

This section of the chapter closely examines particularly notable manifestations of those spatial, textual, and temporal commons I have gestured at in the section above, beginning with the text's narrational and emotional heart: the Met Life Tower.

#### *The Met Life Tower: an urban commons*

The narrative of *New York 2140* is divided between the stories of a large and diverse host of characters who live in the Met Life Tower on Madison Square, completed in 1909 to serve as the headquarters of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and, by 2140, transformed into a partially submerged housing co-operative. The Met Life Tower occupies a central location not only in the narrative, but also on the novel's front cover, emerging from between far taller buildings (see fig. 4, overleaf), and on the peninsula of Manhattan itself, sitting at the interchange point between the precarious, liminal zone of the very edge of the intertidal, where buildings regularly collapse into the oncoming tide, and the higher-altitude, drier streets to the north. As a result, the tower serves as the natural site of the novel's main commons, providing what Massimo de Angelis identifies as the three key aspects of a commons spatiality: shared resources (a large farm, a dining hall where residents work and eat, apartments, infrastructure, and communal areas for relaxation); a community of people; and forms of "doing in common, commoning", which are, however, put to the test when a significant percentage of the tower's residents consider dismantling the co-op management structure and selling up to a shadowy real estate speculator.<sup>40</sup>

The key reason for the Met Life Tower's prominence in the novel is, of course, the fact that its architects modelled it on the Campanile di San Marco in Venice, Italy — one of drowned New York's central aesthetic references. Another ironic resonance in the tower's centrality to the plot is the way in which it recalls the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, an outfit which presumably fared quite badly in the decades leading up to 2140. In many ways, however, the Met Life Tower continues to provide insurance for its residents: its state-of-the-art, futuristic waterproof diamond coating and the ceaseless maintenance work of its superintendent Vlade protect the tower from flooding, while the

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40. See: De Angelis, p. 10.

co-operative executive committee, under the leadership of Charlotte, work in the tower's best interests as it heads into an uncertain future. It is in these dull, everyday activities — maintenance, upkeep, management, debate — that the “doing in common” aspect of the Met Life commons emerges most clearly.



**Figure 4.** The cover illustration used for the Orbit edition of *New York 2140* (Stephan Martinieri, 2017)

Berlant has characterised activities such as maintenance, defence, and “compromised endurance” as a form of fantasy which will only ever allow us to “measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment”, not overcome it, in a way which echoes



Jameson's conclusions about utopia.<sup>41</sup> However, within the supporting structure — social, political, cultural, and even ecological — of the Met Life tower commons, these activities take on a clearly oppositional flavour, aligning together to engender a form of community-reinforcing, utopian activity. This provocation indexes a present and likely future where capitalism and the commons, ongoing apocalypse and oppositional utopia, are forced into coexistence by a world increasingly short on space and increasingly defined by catastrophe and devastation. From within this uncomfortable intermingling, however, commons can uncover paths to rewrite the dominant narratives of capitalism.

Recognising this intermingling, which forces commons to emerge in the “waste” and “detritus” of a capitalist world, de Angelis searches for the “communal constitution of struggles and the ability to reclaim and constitute commons in a condition of detritus”. His conclusion on how contemporary commons can work to escape these conditions could have easily been written about the antimonies of life lived on a flooded peninsula covered in the wreckage of the past three centuries:

The rewards are not just individualised payoffs [...] commons also reward through their staying together and learning from one another, through the forming of affective links to replace the tenuous, formal or alienated connections that exist in the neoliberal city always on the run.<sup>42</sup>

Charlotte evokes this anti-capitalist, affective mode of communal life when she declares, angrily and idealistically, to her fellow co-operative members: “Fuck money ... because everything is not fungible to everything else. Many things can't be bought. Money isn't time, it isn't security, it isn't health. You can't buy any of those things. You can't buy community or a sense of home”.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the novel's pivotal scenes, including a conference call between Frank, Charlotte, and the ecological activist and “cloud star” (reality TV show personality) Amelia Black, which emboldens Amelia to call upon her viewers to participate in a mass rent strike, occur in the tower's cooperatively worked dining hall. The spatiality of the hall emerges through the minor comforts and dramas of communal life. Amelia describes the “hundreds of people in

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41. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 48–49.

42. De Angelis, p. 235.

43. Robinson, p. 331.



the serving lines and crowded side by side at long tables, talking and eating” as “tadpoles in a pond”, which suggests both the watery reality of life in New York, and the sense of the Met Life as incubating a larval utopian community. Charlotte’s description is of a world of affable, functional chaos: “dining hall jammed, very loud, people sitting on the floor against the walls with trays on their laps, glasses on the floor beside them”. Frank complains that with all the cast’s newfound friends around one table, there are “just a couple too many people to be able to have a single conversation easily, not least because there were a few hundred more people in the big dining hall, and it was therefore noisy”; his day is ruined further by “a group in the corner ... playing Reich’s ‘Music for 18 Musicians’ by clacking a set of variously sized spoons and singing wordlessly”.<sup>44</sup> While this performance would certainly annoy Frank, as background music for the dining hall commons, ‘Music for 18 Musicians’ is aptly chosen. Jesse Budel writes that the minimalist piece, with its complex, semi-improvised mixture of repeating, emerging, and disappearing sounds creates “a communal environment, where both individual decision making and organised ensemble activity determine the complex sonic result”.<sup>45</sup> Robert Cowan echoes Budel, further describing the piece as “open-ended”;<sup>46</sup> it is potentially utopian in the sense of endless, reflexive, communal possibility which emerges from its sparse original instructions.

Enmeshed in countless other systems, urban and ecological, the commons of the Met Life simultaneously works to defend itself from enclosure by the grasping hands of capital, imagined as a powerful, shadowy “octopus” of companies vying to buy out all the property in the intertidal made newly valuable by the care and maintenance activities of their anti-capitalist inhabitants, and to collectively build power and seek solidarity with other organisations who share its ethos. Vlade, the building’s superintendent, is part of a “kind of club” with the maintenance crews of the other buildings of lower Manhattan, “all enmeshed with the mutual aid associations and cooperative groups that knitted together to make intertidal life its own society”. Charlotte, who has political sway in both the Lower Manhattan Mutual Aid Society, “a kind of umbrella for all the rest of the organizations in

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44. Robinson, pp. 43, 50, 133.

45. Jesse Budel, ‘Steve Reich’s “Music for 18 Musicians” as a Soundscape Composition’, *Directions of New Music*, 1.2 (2018), 1–15 (p. 10).

46. Robert Cowan, ‘Reich and Wittgenstein: Notes Towards a Synthesis’, *Tempo*, 127 (1986), 2–7 (p. 6).

the drowned zone” and the Householders’ Union, “some kind of public/private hybrid, a city agency or an NGO or something, there to help the renters, the paperless, the homeless, the water rats, the dispossessed”, becomes pivotal to the rapid expansion of the Met Life’s commoning power — the power to grow its own resources and members and become ever more common — at the conclusion of the novel.<sup>47</sup>

Max Haiven identifies this power-to-grow, latent in any commons, as the “commons horizon”, the strategic, calculated “conjecture of a future society based on our lived experience of the actuality of the commons and on the ethos of commoning”. Formed of venues where commons members can “meet, debate, strategize, agree to disagree, make inter-collective decisions, trade or barter, and party or plot”; narratives, memories, and histories which help unite members under a single story and build collective power; and finally, “a vision, however hazy, of a future society”, the commons horizon is the toolbox which inspires, focuses, engages, and grows a commons. Through imagining a commons horizon and working towards it in daily life, a commons is able to transcend the material limitations of its existence embedded within capitalism, and “make patient but urgent plans for revolutionary success”.<sup>48</sup> In *New York 2140*, the commons horizon hatched in the debates, victories, anxieties, and activities of the residents of the Met Life Tower ultimately extends to inspiring a major national rent strike which, in turn, incapacitates the global economy and precipitates an economic crisis. One of the results of this crisis is the institution of what Robinson terms a “Piketty Tax”, named after the concept, espoused by Thomas Piketty, of a tax on wealth and capital gains to radically decrease financial inequality.<sup>49</sup> A wealth tax is not the only anti-capitalist transformation enacted at the novel’s conclusion, where the Citizen lists “[u]niversal health care, free public education through college, a living wage, guaranteed full employment, a year of mandatory national service ... and please feel free to add your own favorites”.<sup>50</sup> While each of these social and political changes are aspects of variously Left and anti-capitalist economic theories, from

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47. Robinson, p. 27, 51.

48. Max Haiven, ‘Commons as Actuality, Ethos, and Horizon’, in *Educational Commons in Theory and Practice: Global Pedagogy and Politics*, ed. by Alexander J. Means, Derek Ford, and Graham B. Slater (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 23–38 (pp. 30–32).

49. See: Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

50. Robinson, pp. 603–4, emphasis added.

the welfare statist staples of universal health care and free public education to the more radical concept of universal conscription (proposed, among others, by Jameson), what is particularly utopian about this list is that the parameters of its evocation (“please feel free to add your own favorites”) generates another commons horizon — one which expands to include the novel’s audience.<sup>51</sup>

As in Robinson’s earlier novels, utopia is a never-concluded project born of debate; unlike in those novels, in *New York 2140* the reader is encouraged to make an active contribution to these debates, in deed as well as imagination. As the Citizen proclaims, “people in this era did do it. Individuals make history, but it’s also a collective thing, a wave that people ride in their time, a wave made of individual actions”.<sup>52</sup> Utopia for the intertidal co-operatives, then, is not simply a range of social changes directly opposed to the hegemony of capitalism, but one for which the ongoing critiques and contradictions of its publics are fundamental. As indicated earlier, it is the Citizen’s evocation and construction of the novel’s reader as an active narratee — a participant in the text, addressed in the second person and provided with space to form opinions and judgements — which allows this methodological, mutable, polyvalent utopianism to emerge so clearly at the novel’s conclusion.<sup>53</sup> Like the Met Life, the novel’s utopian imaginaries are themselves commons, bringing the reader into an active discourse with the possibility of alternative futures.

### *Farm, park, plaza: spaces of disaster*

At a critical turning point in the novel’s narrative, New York is battered by a disaster born of capitalism’s effect on the planet’s climate — a huge hurricane, exponentially exacerbated by warmer oceans and the sheer quantity of water now available near the coast. “Hurricane Fyodor” evokes Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed swathes of New Orleans in 2005, and Hurricane Sandy, which heavily damaged New York in 2012 and features in a

51. For Jameson on universal conscription, see: Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London: Verso, 2016); this book also features a short story by Robinson called ‘Mutt and Jeff Push the Button’, which would become, in expanded form, the first chapter of *New York 2140*.

52. Robinson, p. 603.

53. The textual strategy whereby the utopian text evokes its own addressee is a feature of utopian literature from More’s *Utopia* onwards, particularly Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Russ’s *The Female Man*, and Ursula Le Guin’s short story ‘The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas’ (1973).

number of other contemporary New York novels, including *10:04* by Ben Lerner (2014) and *MacArthur Park* by Andrew Durbin (2017). In both novels, as in *New York 2140*, the effects of the hurricane are not only material, but extend metaphorically, creating liminal subjectivities, generating new ways of life, and undoing old systems. Tied to these processes of undoing and restructuring, and drawing upon its destructive physical power, the hurricane becomes an agent which permanently transforms spaces — both their physical form and the processes of inhabiting which have a crucial role in maintaining and generating them.

The political resonances of all these transformations are brought to the fore in *New York 2140*. The destruction wrought by a hurricane, although seemingly total, is always unequally distributed across a spatial plane, causing far greater damage to weaker structures, open areas, and low-lying, flood-prone zones. More significantly still, this damage is unevenly distributed along *social* lines, particularly those of species, class, and ethnicity. As was evident in the case of Hurricane Katrina, which haunts Robinson's novel through numerous references, these effects are conditioned overwhelmingly by the calculated deployment of state resources to protect the wealthy from the perceived threat of the poor. Ashley Dawson contends that the damage caused by recent hurricanes like Katrina and Sandy “deepen the grooves of already-existing social inequality”, noting that this is only one example of precarious life in the “extreme city”. The “consummate example” of the “extreme city”, for Robinson as well as Dawson, is New York: “an urban space of stark economic inequality, the defining urban characteristic of our time, and one of the greatest threats to the sustainability of urban existence”. The “natural vulnerabilities” of extreme cities to climate chaos — adjacency to the coast, inability to produce enough food and water to sustain their population, and precarious infrastructure — are always “heightened by social injustice”. Dawson illustrates this point by noting that “poor people (who are predominantly black) tend to live in low-lying, flood-prone areas, while the city's wealthy (and mainly white) residents live in the most elevated (and safe) areas”.<sup>54</sup> In *New York 2140*, this differential vulnerability to external crisis is critically underscored by the constant presence of 50 extra feet of water.<sup>55</sup>

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54. Dawson, pp. 235, 6, 5, 10.

55. Robinson, p. 33.

In *10:04*, one of the key concerns of which is the quality of contemporary temporality, Ben Lerner's author/narrator watches as Hurricane Sandy swamps New York's suburbs in darkness while the skyscrapers of Manhattan remain lit, metaphorically pulling the financial district into the future and making it seem as if it is emerging from a "different era".<sup>56</sup> In Robinson's New York, the experiences of the residents of the Met Life Tower invert the effect of Lerner's spatially and temporally distancing narration, returning agency to individuals in the moment of disaster. Unlike the empty, alien Goldman Sachs tower, described by Lerner as "like the eyeshine of some animal", the Met Life is home to hundreds of people who own it and rely on it for their survival, integrated with a large, open-ended networks of humans, non-humans, and infrastructures. The power grid of future New York, we learn, is highly distributed and "robust", with buildings generating much of their own electricity using photovoltaic paint. Before Hurricane Fyodor hits, Vlade joins "a conference call with the local gridmaster", where the question is raised: "Who had what if they were the sole generators? Did anyone have enough to shove some juice back to the local node at the Twenty-ninth and Park station, which would then spread it around to those in need?".<sup>57</sup> With electricity shared through social networks of co-operatives, as well as through physical infrastructures, getting through a disaster becomes less a matter of survival and more one of ingenuity, trust, and patience.

But where the Met Life's natural strengths — a solid construction, good flood defences, and an engaged super — see it through the disaster practically unscathed, the same cannot be said for much of the rest of New York. In the aftermath of the hurricane, Robinson most clearly develops his utopian position on the behaviour of urban populations during disaster, and ultimately extends this position to argue that it is not natural disasters, but capitalism, which must be held responsible for the worst crises of the present and future.

New York's refugee crisis begins even before Hurricane Fyodor finishes passing the city. By nightfall, we learn that "Central Park was being used as a refugee camp, that many people now homeless were taking refuge in their big park". With the park's trees felled by the storm, and the newly barren space crowded with homeless, desperate people, makeshift

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56. Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 238.

57. Robinson, pp. 465, 456.

shelters, and campfires, the park reminds Charlotte of “a giant piece of prairie expanding out of the space where the park had used to be ... a sepia Hooverville photo”.<sup>58</sup> The connection with Hoovervilles is apposite — these shanty towns, named (ironically) after President Herbert Hoover, appeared across America in the 1930s as the Great Depression took its toll on working class populations; one of New York’s twenty Hoovervilles was built on a piece of land in Central Park which had been cleared for the construction of a lake, indefinitely delayed by the financial crisis. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar report that in the winter of 1932-33, 1.2 million Americans were homeless, with two thousand of those living in New York’s twenty shanty towns.<sup>59</sup> On a wave of sympathetic public opinion, housed and homeless New Yorkers did their best to peacefully coexist. The *New York Times* quoted one Central Park resident as saying “‘We work hard to keep it clean, because that is important’”, with the journalist adding: “They repair in the morning to comfort stations to shave and make themselves look presentable and keep their shacks as clean as they can”. On hearing the cases of some of these residents who had been arrested for vagrancy, a magistrate suspended their sentences and gave them each money from his own pocket; Rosenzweig and Blackmar write that he “took an indulgent view of men who had treated the public park as if it were a ‘common’ resource in the midst of an economic crisis deep enough to prompt many Americans to question the sanctity of private property rights”.<sup>60</sup> The commoning spatiality of the Central Park Hooverville was reinforced by a number of permanent structures, including a community hall called “Rockside Inn” or “The Manor”, built by unemployed bricklayers and serving as a communal hub, recreation centre, and location of the aforementioned “comfort stations”.

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58. Robinson, pp. 474, 499.

59. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 442.

60. Rosenzweig and Blackmar, p. 440.





**Figure 5.** The Hooverville in Central Park, New York City, 1933 (Photograph: Bettmann Archive)

Central Park's irreparable spatial transformation in 2140 thus recalls its twentieth-century past while forcing the residents of the future New York to inhabit it in a mode born of their uncertain and precarious present. It is reconfigured through the destruction of the hurricane, offering a rare chance for New Yorkers to make use of this space to construct new, radical forms of inhabiting — albeit ones born of desperation and survival. As Bell indicates for utopian literature focused on the creation of place through intra-actions of inhabiting, the new residents of Central Park — just like their 1930s analogues — begin to create a utopian commons, not by fleeing from an enclosed space to a new world, but by filling an existing space, already enclosed yet momentarily allowed to be metaphorically and literally 'open', with communal topographies, infrastructures, and modes of inhabiting. Bell's description of the quality of place on the planet Annares in *The Dispossessed* as "a dynamic form that plays an agential role in unfolding events" can also be applied to Central Park.<sup>61</sup> Rich in history, thereby generating metaphorical and political connections

61. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, p. 106.



across temporal gulfs, Central Park is a generator of, and is generated by, forms of utopian inhabiting, giving a new power to Robinson's description of the space as "*their* big park".<sup>62</sup>

The experiences of the homeless New Yorkers, both during the Great Depression and in 2140, are typical of the behaviour of urban populations during periods of crisis and disaster. Rather than turning to violence, disorder, or selfishness, precarious publics in real-world crises tend to collaborate, build communal infrastructures, and help rebuild the places in which they are forced to live. The field of disaster studies has convincingly shown that it is precisely in moments of full-scale disaster such as these that people form the strongest commoning bonds. The belief that the aftermath of a natural disaster is defined by panic, violence, animalistic and lawless behaviour and destruction has been perpetuated by a variety of cultural forms ranging from blockbuster action movies (for example, the Roland Emmerich films *The Day After Tomorrow* (2003) and *2012* (2009)) to news media reports. The American essayist Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), brings together a wide-ranging corpus of sociological case studies — including the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the 1989 and 1906 San Francisco earthquakes, the 9/11 attacks, and Hurricane Katrina — which strongly indicate that in the immediate wake of an unexpected disaster, survivors instead have an overriding tendency to behave altruistically and communally, rapidly self-organise, and sometimes even enjoy themselves, "if *enjoyment*", she writes, "is the right word for that sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life".<sup>63</sup> While disasters are objectively destructive occurrences, the witnesses whose testimonies Solnit presents repeat the sentiment that the immediate aftermath of disaster is a truly happy, fulfilling, and well-adjusted period for them and their communities.

Solnit draws extensively on the work of Charles Fritz, whose 1961 paper 'Disasters and Mental Health' was highly influential in the field of disaster studies. Fritz's own extensive case studies lead him to conclude that, while disasters are undoubtedly "occasions for profound human misery", nonetheless "most disasters produce a great increase in social solidarity among the stricken populace, and this newly created solidarity tends to reduce

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62. Robinson, p. 474, emphasis added.

63. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 5.

the incidence of most forms of personal and social pathology”.<sup>64</sup> When Charlotte walks around the park and sees a vision of the dispossessed and the homeless self-organising into collectives, she cannot help but romanticise it:

And the people. They were organized already into circles and groups, many into small bands of twenty or so, but there were quintets and couples and isolatoes too. Families, groups of friends, people from the same destroyed building. Thousands of them altogether, sitting on the ground or on concrete benches or on boxes, or the knobs of ancient stone sticking up out of the ground, the bones of the island offering seating now to its inhabitants. Lines of Walt Whitman’s glanced off her mind half-remembered, something about the streaming of faces across the Brooklyn Bridge, the suffering of the soldiers in the Civil War. The sense of Americans in trouble together.<sup>65</sup>

Charlotte appears to be misremembering the poem ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, which appears later in one of the novel’s epigraphs; in these lines Whitman gazes upon “the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home”, feeling himself “disintegrated yet part of the scheme” of a gathering of all humanity on the move, across a temporal commons of past, present, and future:

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd<sup>66</sup>

Whitman’s image of the crowd as both individual and collective is echoed not only by the crowds in Central Park, but by all the utopian multitudes I examine in this thesis, in particular Spahr’s oppositional crowds in *That Winter the Wolf Came*.<sup>67</sup>

Fritz and Solnit agree that the far more damaging disaster in twentieth and twenty-first-century society, in terms of “aggregate amount of death, destruction, pain, and

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64. Charles E. Fritz, *Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies* (Newark: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, 1996), p. 10.

65. Robinson, p. 500.

66. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader’s Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 160.

67. In particular, this image of the crowd reaffirms that in many contemporary texts, the crowd should be understood as a multitude, *contra* Hardt and Negri’s dismissal of it as a group of individuals who are ‘incoherent and recognize no common shared elements, their collection of differences remains inert and can easily appear as one indifferent aggregate’. See: Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 100.

privation” it has caused and continues to cause, is the disaster of “‘normal’ life”, or as Solnit puts it, “everyday life become a social disaster”.<sup>68</sup> Although their studies are written almost five decades apart, the two argue in harmony that the primary cause of the anxiety and precariousness felt in everyday life is “the very structure of our economy and society”, defined by “individualism, capitalism, and Social Darwinism”, alongside the “privatization of desire and imagination that tells us we are not each other’s keeper”;<sup>69</sup> Fritz similarly emphasises “social atomization and social alienation as the root causes of the social and psychological pathologies of everyday life”.<sup>70</sup> As I have argued in Chapter Two, these are all well-established consequences of the neoliberal drive to maximise the profit of capitalist enterprise by transforming all social ties into economic relations.

These conclusions clearly index the relationship between neoliberalism, sudden disaster, and the subjects who are affected by both. When neoliberalism is ascendant, subjects are individualised, alienated, and thrust from their communities and any sense of their own ability to enact meaningful political change. When neoliberalism wanes, the same subjects are able to come together and act in ways which are social, communal, collaborative, and productive. The repeated failures of capitalism to keep control in the face of a sufficiently disruptive disaster, however temporary, demonstrate the profound *fragility* of the neoliberal system — its very own precariousness — particularly in the sense of its inability to weather profound and unexpected shocks. However, awareness of neoliberalism’s fragility coupled with the recognition that neoliberal strategies of control disrupt cohesive social life and that the absence of those strategies allows social life to rapidly develop again, do not translate to a set of coherent or productive tactics for opposing neoliberalism. Such tactics would, to adopt Graham Jones’ phrase, be a “shock doctrine of the left”, helping anti-capitalist social and political movements to create “disaster utopias” of communal survival beyond capitalist control.<sup>71</sup>

In a recent essay, Out of the Woods collective take up Fritz and Solnit’s formulation of

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68. Fritz, p. 23; Solnit, p. 3.

69. Solnit, pp. 7, 9.

70. Fritz, p. 24.

71. Solnit, p. 16. Jones’ adaptation of Klein’s concept of the ‘shock doctrine’ within a Leftist social movement framework produces a powerful set of tactics for responding to crises in embodied, reactive, and emancipatory ways which can generate lasting social change. See: Graham Jones, *The Shock Doctrine of the Left* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

disaster as generating temporary communal solidarities, quickly producing and distributing the necessary means for material survival in the absence of the ‘normal’ systems of capitalist society. Crucially, while Solnit does gesture at the political-economic underpinning to her case studies, *Out of the Woods* give this idea their full attention, arguing: “we must go beyond Solnit’s empirical focus on what happens in response to *specific* disaster-events and grasp the character of the *capitalist disaster*”, which they describe with the familiar terms “ongoing” and “ordinary”.<sup>72</sup> Inspector Gen echoes these sentiments, contemplating that, while in the hurricane’s immediate aftermath the situation in New York had seemed “a true crisis”, it was rapidly becoming “just another fucking disaster”. Later, as if quoting Berlant, Gen worries that the situation in the park is unsustainable, “yet there was no obvious next step, and meanwhile the impasse was something everyone could see and feel, something they were living moment to moment, day to day”.<sup>73</sup> All these terms index a sense of the present in which there is no perception of an alternative to the alienations, deprivations, and precarities of what Jameson calls “the seamless Möbius strip of late capitalism”, in particular for populations who are already made precarious and exploitable along social lines including race, gender, and citizenship.<sup>74</sup>

*Out of the Woods* emphasise that, while those made precarious by neoliberal capitalism are always the ones most exposed to sudden disasters — a point echoed by Dawson in *Extreme Cities* — it need not be neoliberal capitalism which always returns, seemingly stronger, in disaster’s wake.<sup>75</sup> What *Out of the Woods* christen ‘disaster communism’ and Solnit calls ‘disaster utopia’ is the transformation of the impasse of everyday, ongoing struggles against “disaster-as-condition” into a new, oppositional, future-generating mode of social reproduction. The imaginary they evoke is truly utopian, in modes both aspirational and realistic:

The communism of disaster communism, then, is a transgressive and transformative mobilization without which the unfolding catastrophe of global warming cannot and will not be stopped. It is simultaneously an undoing of the manifold structural

72. *Out of the Woods*, ‘The Uses of Disaster’, *Commune*, 2018 <<https://communemag.com/the-uses-of-disaster/>> [accessed 23 October 2018].

73. Robinson, pp. 483, 509.

74. Jameson, ‘Future City’, p. 76.

75. See: Dawson, p. 10.

injustices which perpetuate and draw strength from disaster, and an enactment of the widespread collective capacity to endure and flourish on a rapidly changing planet. It is hugely ambitious, requiring redistribution of resources at several scales; reparations for colonialism and slavery; expropriation of private property for Indigenous peoples; and the abolition of fossil fuels, among other monumental projects.<sup>76</sup>

Out of the Woods see disaster communism as emerging from abundance — not a material abundance of commodities or security, but the “collective abundance” of self-perpetuating social relations — a commons — which is able to continue generating itself against and beyond neoliberalism, producing future forms of communal resistance and emancipation to meet and survive future disasters. This is not, to be clear, a celebration of disaster or an exhortation to perpetuate its effects, but a political recognition that, at a time of climate crisis, when sudden and unstoppable disaster becomes commonplace, better forms of communal existence than capitalism must emerge to support the largest possible planetary population.

Robinson reaches a similar conclusion in the same issue of *Commune*, writing: “[a]n adequate life provided for all living beings is something the planet can still do ... It won’t be easy to arrange, obviously, because it would be a total civilizational project, involving technologies, systems, and power dynamics; but it is possible”.<sup>77</sup> This utopian possibility — which Robinson applies firmly to our real world, rather than a future time — returns us to the paradox I raised at the beginning of this chapter. I have already noted that the aesthetics, generic form, relationship to the future, and intertextuality of *New York 2140* all direct the novel’s future world back to the present, exposing it to the reckoning of a contemporary readership. Another element in this commons poetics is the way in which Robinson draws upon and describes specific tactics for collective opposition to capitalism and for a life lived beyond it. While such tactics might seem to be reserved for future populations dealing with a world on the brink of apocalypse, Robinson’s commons poetics demand that we read them as didactic instructions, manifestos, and diktats meant for use by contemporary readers. Although the novel is written as a warning of a violent future,

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76. Out of the Woods.

77. Kim Stanley Robinson, ‘Dystopias Now’, *Commune*, 2018 <<https://communemag.com/dystopias-now/>> [accessed 4 March 2019].

these tactics, suggests Robinson, can just as easily transform the world of the present into a commons which need not survive planetary catastrophe before it begins to build a planetary anti-capitalist utopia. While *Out of the Woods* accede “we are not there yet” in terms of enacting such monumental and necessary projects, works of science fiction like Robinson’s can illuminate specific tactics of “not yet”, a hermeneutic form which recalls Bloch’s “anticipatory illumination”, allowing subjects to see different and diverse forms of concrete social life beyond those mooted by the ongoing present.<sup>78</sup> Through the anticipatory illumination provided to us in the shape of the Met Life Tower and its commons horizon, as readers we can make sense of the strategies required to begin building concrete utopias in the present.

The initial tactics of the police, emergency workers, and homeless residents of Central Park are straightforward tools for ensuring survival — building shelters, removing dead bodies from the water supply, processing and housing the homeless. But these activities are soon eclipsed by far more active and oppositional tactics. Angered by the New York City mayor’s refusal to divert more of the city’s resources to the refugees, the residents of Central Park riot and march to the dry zone uptown, where more than half of the apartments of the futuristic skyscrapers of the “Cloister Cluster” stand empty “because they’re owned by rich people from somewhere else”.<sup>79</sup> Before the riots, Charlotte had recommended that the mayor “declare an emergency and use all those rooms as refugee centers”, but is rebuffed; like *Exit West*, *New York 2140* came out in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, and Charlotte’s demand is reminiscent of arguments from Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn and others to house the refugees of Grenfell in the many “land banking” mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea.<sup>80</sup>

The aesthetics of the riot scenes are reminiscent of depictions of the 2011 UK riots, during which crowds of predominantly Black British people, many angered by a lack of police communication about the case of Mark Duggan, a Black man shot dead by police, looted shops and set fire to cars in the glass-fronted, high-end shopping streets of

78. Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 111. See also: Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 150.

79. Robinson, p. 500-501.

80. See for instance: Oscar Berglund, ‘Using Empty Luxury Homes to House Grenfell Tower Victims Is a No Brainer’, *The Conversation*, 2017 <<http://theconversation.com/using-empty-luxury-homes-to-house-grenfell-tower-victims-is-a-no-brainer-80025>> [accessed 4 March 2019].

London. As in these images, the crowds in *New York 2140* are distinguished by the timeless aesthetics of riot: bonfires, burning brands, Molotov cocktails, and the light of the full moon. In comparison, the skyscrapers towards which the rioters are moving are described in futuristic terms which pull them ever further into a seemingly inaccessible future: constructed from “new composite building materials ... invented for not-yet-happening space elevator cables”, they are “a purplish velvet black” in the moonlight, “possibly an effect of their photovoltaics”.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Robinson prevents mutual comprehension between the rioters and those protecting the skyscrapers through a well-worn literary technique, combining the individual rioters into a bestial mass subject and denying them the power of speech: “Faces white-eyed, openmouthed. People who didn’t appear to speak English or any other language. The noise incredible, a hair-raising roar punctuated by shrieks, but the noise wasn’t what was causing the furor, because no one was listening anyway”.<sup>82</sup> In a similar way, the playwright Gillian Slovo, commenting on her verbatim theatre play about the 2011 UK riots, describes the riots as “an incoherent and destructive cry, an anti-political cry of rage”;<sup>83</sup> this politically dismissive sentiment is echoed by philosopher Alain Badiou, who sees the riots as “violent, anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth”, making it impossible to clearly distinguish “between what pertains to a partially universalizable intention” of the rioters, “and what remains confined to a rage with no purpose other than the satisfaction of being able to crystallize and find hateful objects to destroy or consume”.<sup>84</sup> Slavoj Žižek takes these conclusions even further, arguing that it is impossible to conceive of the rioters as “an emerging revolutionary subject”, and concluding that the riots are far better understood as “a consumerist carnival of destruction, an expression of acquisitive desire violently enacted when unable to realize itself in the ‘proper’ way (by shopping)”.<sup>85</sup>

Although the rioters are rendered incomprehensible in the moment of the riot itself, the events of the concluding chapters of *New York 2140* are indebted to what is later called

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81. Robinson, pp. 35, 513.

82. Robinson, p. 512.

83. Matt Trueman, ‘Gillian Slovo: The Riots Act’, *The Stage*, 2011 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/2011/gillian-slovo-the-riots-act/>> [accessed 18 August 2016].

84. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 25.

85. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 59–60.



“the battle for the towers”, and the appearance of the rioters as a political subject worthy of commensurability emerges here. Inspector Gen and Charlotte, and thus metonymically the NYPD and the US Congress, act and speak in full support of their actions, beginning to form “a government of, by, and for the people”.<sup>86</sup> This political position is given credibility and focus because the rioters had been threatened by a private security firm who shot into the crowd to defend the super-skyscrapers. This private security firm reflects the violence of neoliberalism, while Inspector Gen and the reformed, pro-public NYPD’s defence of the crowd offers a vision of an urban commons working to actively defend itself, by any means necessary, from violent enclosure by capitalism. Although the rioters fail to immediately achieve their own goals and occupy the skyscrapers, their demands are not only comprehended and acted upon, but are specifically understood as an anti-capitalist, utopian yearning to escape the limitations of their precarious situation within the neoliberal city and permanently reinforce the communal forms of life they have begun to construct in Central Park.

At the end of the novel, we witness the consequences of combining the political tactics of riot and the occupation of public space with economic tactics including an absentee tax, a capital assets tax, and mandatory conversion of the super-skyscrapers into low-income housing. As the refugees are moved out of the park and into the skyscrapers — where each floor is able to house six hundred people — another spatial transformation occurs, this time of the skyscrapers themselves. As a solution to the need for increased sanitation infrastructure, the “dreadful”, “clean” lines of the skyscrapers are encrusted with external pipes — a messy industrial aesthetic which, while futuristic, traces its origins to the ‘used future’ aesthetic of sf films including *Dark Star* (1974, dir. John Carpenter) and *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott).<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, Frank oversees the building of communal low-income housing, constructed directly over the flooded ruins of the intertidal, using futuristic lightweight materials and floating platforms which move with the tides, “like eelgrass”.<sup>88</sup> In these scenes, the destruction of capitalism’s clean aesthetics and obsession

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86. Robinson, pp. 597, 503.

87. Robinson, p. 596. On the aesthetics of ‘used future’ worlds, see: Arthur Skweres, *McLuhan’s Galaxies: Science Fiction Film Aesthetics in Light of Marshall McLuhan’s Thought* (Cham: Springer International, 2019).

88. Robinson, p. 557.

with static upward growth heralds a social transformation. As with Central Park, these spatialities are reconfigured, becoming disaster utopias born of out oppositional new forms of life in common. The chaotic, if responsive, aesthetics of the emergency shelter and occupied park begin to transform into permanent infrastructures which not only support communal survival in a time of climate crisis, but also work to oppose and subvert the monolithic enclosure practices of capitalism.

### *Mezzrow's: the prefiguration of utopia*

The final central spatiality of *New York 2140* can be understood as providing a glimpse of life in an accreting utopia-in-the-making which can never be complete and which always seeks to follow its commons horizon towards an even more utopian reality. This space, named Mezzrow's, presumably after New York jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, is a venue built into the water-proofed ruins of the 33rd Street subway station, just blocks away from the Empire State Building. Located in the very depths of the intertidal, Mezzrow's is a space of liminality and "amphibiguity", home to lifestyles which are prefigurations of a utopian way of life even when threatened by the return of capitalist enclosure to the intertidal. Visiting the club to watch a female-only underwater sumo wrestling match, Gen notices that many in the crowd "were of indeterminate gender, wearing flamboyant water dress or undress. Lots of intergender in the intertidal; inter as such was a big thing now, amphibiguity a definite style, which like all styles liked to see and be seen. The big low chamber, now lit entirely by the pool lights, was in fact turning into quite a delanyden".<sup>89</sup> The reference is to the work of Samuel R. Delany, particularly his novel *Trouble on Triton* (1976), which imagines Neptune's moon Triton as a space of radical possibility for fluid gender and sexual self-expression. Like the "unlicensed sectors" of Triton, where no laws apply and which have "a definite and different feel", the spatial form of Mezzrow's reflects, and emerges out of, the forms of life which take place there.<sup>90</sup> A network of cosy tunnels, staircases, watery pools and chambers deep underground, Mezzrow's is an antidote to the wide canal streets and open spaces of the city above, permitting its inhabitants to engage

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89. Robinson, p. 183.

90. Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 8.

in more private, experimental, and intimate forms of life in relative safety.

In the final scene of the novel, the squatter hackers Mutt and Jeff and the reality TV star and airship pilot Amelia head to Mezzrow's to see a band who, in the form of their music and the diversity of their identities, represent and celebrate the very heterogeneity and fluidity which distinguishes this space:

Finally the young reed man stands up and gives the sax mouthpiece a lick, joins right in with the song already going. Okay, this is the star of the band. Immediately he is zooming around in the tune like a maniac. The other horn players instantly get better, the guitar players even more precise and intricate. The vocalists are grinning and shouting duets in harmony. It's like they've all just plugged into an electrical jack through their shoes. The young reed man sounds like he is maybe a klezmer star in his other bands, and it might not have been obvious before that klezmer fits so well with West African pop, but now it's very clear. He swoops up and down the scale, screeches across the supersonic, jams in a perfect driving rhythm with the others. It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing, but it does.<sup>91</sup>

Excited by this raw musical energy, Mutt, Jeff and Amelia, along with the rest of the audience, cannot help but dance:

Jeff is a dancing fool; there are so many rhythms in this music that he almost matches one. In fact it's pretty amazing he can miss all of them at once, but he can. And he is Nureyev compared to Amelia. Mutt can't stop laughing at the sight of his two friends' gyrations. Amelia is grinning at him. Very few gals dance so badly, she's got a knack. The guys can't help enjoying the sight of such a clumsy babe. Their friend, their dance partner!<sup>92</sup>

I have described Mezzrow's as 'loosely' representing a utopian society in particular because the key scenes in these chapters, including this night of improvised musical performance and wild dancing, are minor, intimate moments of shared human connection, rather than large-scale political narratives of utopian social restructuring. This scene, however, is among the most politically utopian in the book, because it is written using a commons

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91. Robinson, p. 612.

92. Robinson, p. 612.

poetics, demanding an understanding of politics which comes not from large-scale governmental systems, but from a commons, the unexpected and rewarding connections between utopian subjects in their desire to create meaningful ways of living together better.

The utopian potential of music has been attested by a number of utopian theorists. For Bloch, music was the most utopian of all cultural forms: “no art has so much surplus over the respective time and ideology in which it exists”, a surplus of what he evocatively calls “hope-material”.<sup>93</sup> While this utopian attitude to music-making is welcome, Bloch found that the most utopian musical forms were classical European ones, especially ballet, and detested jazz and its associated dance forms, writing that “[n]othing coarser, nastier, more stupid has ever been seen than the jazz-dances [...] with a corresponding howling which provides the so to speak musical accompaniment”.<sup>94</sup> The reflections of his contemporary Theodor Adorno suggest that both philosophers read 1930s jazz as a capitalistic, ideological consumer form bearing no connection to its roots in African American culture.<sup>95</sup> Arguing that the improvisational elements of jazz were “merely ornamental”, Adorno concludes that it subverts and degrades the very utopian promise of liberation which improvisational modern music is able to contain.<sup>96</sup> While a number of critics have attempted to contextualise Adorno’s comments, arguing that the jazz-style music Adorno would have heard was heavily filtered through a German milieu and was thus linked to the same musical traditions as fascist military and propaganda music, the critical consensus is that Adorno’s opinion on jazz is at best ill-informed and at worst racist, and we can assume that Bloch’s opinion emerges out of the same general tendency.<sup>97</sup>

Of more contemporary utopian critics, Levitas provides a welcome reading across the grain of Bloch’s critique, noting that in his work, music is not just utopian in its anticipation of a utopian world to come, but is prefigurative, evoking the world in the here and now: “through its capacity to communicate that which is not (yet) utterable, music is

93. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, III, p. 1063.

94. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, p. 394.

95. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Farewell to Jazz’, in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard D. Leppert, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 496–500 (p. 497).

96. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘On Jazz’, in *Essays on Music*, pp. 470–95 (p. 477).

97. See: Theodore A. Grayck, ‘Adorno, Jazz, and the Aesthetics of Popular Music’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 76.4 (1992), 526–42; J. Bradford Robinson, ‘The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno: Some Thoughts on Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany’, *Popular Music*, 13.1 (1994), 1–25; Robert W. Witkin, ‘Why Did Adorno “Hate” Jazz?’, *Sociological Theory*, 18.1 (2000), 145–70.

uniquely capable of conveying and *effecting* a better world; it invokes, as well as prefigures, that world”.<sup>98</sup> With this in mind, it seems apparent that Bloch’s misrepresentation of jazz stemmed from an unfortunate misreading of jazz dance as lacking in prefigurative utopian movement! Of musical performance, Levitas argues that “it is often the social practice of performance as much as the music itself that is ascribed prefigurative or transformative utopian qualities. The imputed relationship between the performers is an ideal form of non-conflictual human connection”.<sup>99</sup>

Among the handful of critics who explicitly link improvisational music to utopian social organisation, Bell’s work is particularly valuable, arguing that “*when people take part in collective musical improvisation they are practising an anarchist form of organization*”.<sup>100</sup> Describing improvisation, in this instance, as a set of communal practices within and beyond musical performance, rather than a particular musical style, Bell argues that improvisers must work to “constantly construct and repair their organization, lest it succumb to the dangers posed by exclusion, domination and habit. These must be decided upon in moments outside the group’s primary purpose (making music), meaning that the ‘utopia’ of improvisation is one that must be realized across time and between — as much as during — performances”.<sup>101</sup> In his later book, Bell links processes of improvisation directly to the commons, writing that the “intra-actions” of performing improvisational music are a form of commoning, and thus exemplify the generation of mutually beneficial *power-to* create something together (rather than the more traditional sense of *power-over* others in social relations):

power exists in encounters and, where these encounters are good, is mutually beneficial: the increase or enhancement of a body’s power to act *also* increasing its power to be acted upon, and vice versa [...]. This makes possible collective increases in power such that the increase or enhancement of an (in)dividual’s power to act also increases the power of other (in)dividuals to act; and thus of the collective body to act, creating what we might refer to as ‘power-with’: a power-in-common.<sup>102</sup>

98. Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, pp. 41–42.

99. Levitas, p. 55.

100. David M. Bell, ‘Improvisation as Anarchist Organization’, *Ephemera*, 14.4 (2014), 1009–30 (p. 1012).

101. Bell, ‘Improvisation as Anarchist Organization’, p. 1023.

102. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, pp. 107, 108. For a development of the distinction between *power-over*

This empowering commons is evoked when the klezmer player joins the others in the band, integrating his playing into their tunes rather than against or above them: “The other horn players instantly get better, the guitar players even more precise and intricate”. Mutt, Jeff, and Amelia become common in their absorption into the “big world” of the sweaty, heaving, dancing crowd, which renders them anonymous and safe to do as they wish and dance how they can, yet allows them to retain their hold on their individual identities: “Might be some of the people in the room recognize [Amelia], but no one lets on, and maybe they don’t. It’s a big world”.<sup>103</sup> On nights like these, the space of Mezzrow’s generates, and is regenerated by, a brief yet vital utopian community of joy and movement, harking back to Spahr’s “moment of sweaty relation larger than the intimate”.<sup>104</sup> This community is both momentary and lasting: momentary because it must be regenerated anew every night, which keeps its utopian potential firmly anchored on a commons horizon always just out of reach; and lasting because this constant process of improvisational regeneration prevents it from being enclosed and subsumed by capitalism. Seen in this light, the final lines of the novel are particularly utopian, offering a vision of the city as a diffuse, almost invisible network of such momentary utopias, gathering their publics in a expanding commons of music and dance: “‘And now, look at this, here we are right on top of the place, and it’s like they’re not even there!’ ... ‘Heck, there’s probably fifty bands like them playing tonight in this city. Dances like that going on right now, all over town.’”.<sup>105</sup>

This scene reinforces the conclusion that sweatiness, joy and fun are just as important to the long-term survival of disaster commons as material production and spatial security. As *Out of the Woods* remind us, the life of social reproduction in disaster commons “isn’t just mundane: groups organize parties, dancing lessons, and collective cooking sessions, so that communal horizons might open beyond despair”.<sup>106</sup> Sophie Lewis, a member of *Out of the Woods*, continues this refrain by arguing that “while situations necessitating ‘disaster communism’ are not exactly enviable, it is obvious that what people are producing

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and *power-to*, see: John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

103. Robinson, p. 612.

104. Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, p. 14.

105. Robinson, p. 613.

106. *Out of the Woods*.

in them is joy, rest, conviviality, art, eros; a life worth living against all odds”.<sup>107</sup> Turning, in its closing pages, to minor utopian acts of commoning and minor utopian spaces emerging from disaster, *New York 2140* argues that it is collective assemblies of individual subjects and their surprising capacity for hope against the odds, rather than overarching systems and ideologies, which are able to dance into a world beyond capitalism.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *New York 2140* is a novel about the possibility of achieving a fundamental and radical change in the form of the planet’s governing economic and political system. It achieves this goal by undermining the futurity of its own seemingly futuristic setting, underlining the fact that under the auspices of late capitalism, the future will remain economically, politically, and even culturally almost identical to our present — with the only real transformation being in how much more precarious and deadly the climate crisis will become, notwithstanding serious and wholesale global intervention. In *New York 2140*, this long overdue intervention comes in the shape of various tactics and spatial practices for living life outside capitalism, including the construction of housing co-operatives and commons; a rent and debt strike; unionisation; the occupation and repossession of empty apartments to provide emergency housing; riots whose political aims are taken up, rather than ignored, by governments and the police; and the sweaty joy of listening to music and dancing together. Robinson’s most significant achievement here is his commitment to representing and explicating such tactics as wholly realisable and achievable in the present, a process which constantly re-situates the utopia created by the novel back within the contemporary moment. *New York 2140*’s sense of the ongoing future thus operates in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, through its extension of the present into the future, it highlights the extreme and differentially experienced precarity that capitalist-generated climate crisis promises to the planet’s population. On the other hand, through its return of a revolutionary future of disaster and necessary collective survival back to the present, it highlights the possibility of enacting these oppositional tactics before the worst of the climate crisis takes place, in effect exhorting its readers to

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107. Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, p. 151.



start prefiguratively building common infrastructures and forms of social reproduction which are most resistant to climate crisis.

One important aspect of Robinson's novel has been raised only fleetingly in this chapter, primarily for reasons of theoretical focus; from Robinson's comments in a recent interview, it appears this issue is also among the more pressing in his own politics: "[w]orst of all, we are causing a lot of species to go extinct, and this is the really bad part, the part we can't fix later with landscape restoration and the creation of a just and sustainable civilization".<sup>108</sup> It is short-sighted, Robinson reminds us, to treat climate crisis as a primarily human disaster, because the beings who are most differentially exposed to the deleterious effects of anthropogenic global warming and habitat destruction are the planet's numerous keystone species who, unlike humans, support the balance of entire ecosystems and thus prevent mass extinctions. Utopian commons and disaster utopias are always and already more than human, both reliant upon, and helping support, through tactics of sustenance and maintenance, the ecosystems within which they are embedded. The next and final chapter of this thesis will turn to two novels where capitalist excess has truly ruined the planet and its ecosystems. In one of these novels in particular — Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* — we are shown in vivid detail the contours of a world which has become all but inhospitable for any but human life as a result of a deadly war between a capitalist desperate for absolute power and an anti-capitalist revolutionary willing to eradicate humanity in pursuit of her victory. In *Walkaway* by Cory Doctorow, which is largely set in the Canadian wilderness, the state of the planet is not nearly so grim, but both novels explore what kinds of utopias and commons humans can create when they are forced to — or desperate to — imagine worlds beyond the human, and even beyond death itself.

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108. Amy Brady, 'Kim Stanley Robinson: How Will New York Cope With Climate Change?', *Chicago Review of Books*, 2017 <<https://chireviewofbooks.com/2017/03/06/kim-stanley-robinson-how-will-new-york-cope-with-climate-change/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

## Chapter Six

### Utopias Beyond Death: *The Book of Joan* and *Walkaway*

The communal is the new wild, a place where the human ends and an inhuman or even an outhuman begins as a dream of ecstatic contact that we continue to seek out in life, in love, in dreams, in material objects, in the neutral, and in the skies. The question for now remains whether the human, in all its brutal, colonial, racist glory, can give way long enough to allow for other in/ and out/ human forms to emerge, evolve, appear, perhaps like a new planet in the night sky, twinkling, as Barthes might say, and transmitting new messages of an out/human future.

Jack Halberstam, 'In/Human — Out/Human'<sup>1</sup>

This chapter turns to commons which work against capitalism's final, and most insidious, hold over human nature — its control of life and death.<sup>2</sup> Where the previous chapters examined utopian forms of collective being beyond the border regime (*Exit West*); beyond the uneven distribution of disaster (*New York 2140*); and beyond petrocapiatalism (*That Winter the Wolf Came*); this chapter examines two 2017 texts — *Walkaway* by Cory Doctorow and *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch — which depict humanity in the process of building commons against death itself. These novels render the quest for immortality in explicitly anti-capitalist terms and depict it through a commons poetics. At the same time, they refuse a nostalgic return to a normatively reproductive pre-capitalist pastoralism, akin to the prelapsarian immortality of Adam and Eve; rather, their immortalities are born of futuristic technologies, non-human ecologies, and virtual worlds.<sup>3</sup> The characters who become immortal in these novels are able to escape the capitalist system through their newfound ability to transcend the normative human condition and become what Donna

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1. José Esteban Muñoz and others, 'Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2-3 (2015), 209–48 (p. 242).
  2. I would like to thank Katie Stone for her constructive advice on theoretical aspects of this chapter.
  3. On these features of Genesis, see: Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 23.

Haraway has labelled ‘cyborg’, and what Cary Wolfe and Rosi Braidotti would describe as ‘posthuman’ or ‘post-anthropocentric’: they become “creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted ... resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity ... oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence”.<sup>4</sup> In becoming immortal, these characters become post-human. Moreover, as I shall argue throughout this chapter, this post-human immortality is rendered as a *queer* way of life, experienced by a cast of queer subjects, alive to queer apprehensions of space and time, and situated in queer commons.

### Doctorow and Yuknavitch as utopian writers

While the apocalyptic settings, wild ontological transformations, and political revolutions of *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* seem to pose a significant challenge to the argument of this thesis — that utopian literature need not escape our present to create a better future — they remain, in a multitude of ways, extrapolations of the contemporary capitalist moment.

*Walkaway* is closely connected to the two central themes of the thesis: a recognition of the ongoing present as a time of crisis and precarity for surplus populations under late capitalism, and the emergence of commons-based utopian spaces out of the same. The novel is an unusual blend of an action-packed near-future sf pulp thriller and a series of dialogues on philosophical, economic, and sociological themes, charting the lives (and lengthy conversations) of a central cast of characters. These “walkaways” imagine and prefiguratively build alternative oppositional futures through acts of civil disobedience, refusal, occupation, migration, and riot. As a number of critics have argued, *Walkaway* falls short on the grounds of stylistic nuance, characterisation, and plotting — his main characters all speak in the same high-level technical register, as if the only people to escape capitalism are computer science graduates; they tend to exhibit little in the way of personality beyond a mechanical devotion to their revolutionary cause; and, as Jason Sheehan quips, the novel “sometimes reads like a series of philosophical set-pieces stitched together with drone fights and lots of sex”.<sup>5</sup> *Walkaway* makes up for these

4. Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 3–90 (p. 9).

5. Jason Sheehan, ‘In *Walkaway*, A Blueprint for A New, Weird (but Better) World’, *NPR*, 2017

shortcomings in its cohesive depiction of the role utopia and the commons could play for surplus populations under late capitalism, and in the originality of the anti-capitalist visions Doctorow dreams up. The novel is also valuable to the discourse of this thesis due to Doctorow's wide recognition as an activist and commentator in the fields of digital and Internet commons, open source software, copyright law, and the rights of government whistleblowers and pro-privacy hackers including Aaron Schwartz, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning. The concerns of Doctorow's sf writing closely parallel his activism — *Walkaway*, his tenth novel, returns to themes raised in his previous books, including opposition to government surveillance, the benefits of sharing technologies and ideas, and alternative social structures, often derived from the politics of the Burner (participatory attendees of the Burning Man festival and its global offshoots) and FOSS (Free and Open Source Software) communities.<sup>6</sup>

As many critics of *Walkaway* have noted, the near-future Canada in which the novel's narrative is set, like the New York of *New York 2140* and the world cities of *Exit West* is, at times, barely distinguishable from our own realist present.<sup>7</sup> This temporally ambiguous world, named 'default' by the novel's anti-capitalist protagonists, is depicted in the wake of a re-consolidation of power and prestige by the 1% — the extremely wealthy classes, now named the 'zottarich' or 'zottas' — after a period of climatological, economic, and social crises. As the novel opens, we are introduced to a world where "the climate spins out of control, the middle class diminishes to an infinitesimal speck, the very rich grab all the wealth and resources, traditional employment disappears, factories sit empty and hundreds of thousands opt out of society altogether".<sup>8</sup> Despite these profound planetary

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<<http://www.npr.org/2017/04/27/523587179/in-walkaway-a-blueprint-for-a-new-weird-but-better-world>> [accessed 23 July 2017]. For further critique, see: Redfern Jon Barrett, 'Walkaway by Cory Doctorow', *Strange Horizons*, 2017 <<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/walkaway-by-cory-doctorow/>> [accessed 18 October 2019].

6. Doctorow's best-known novel, *Little Brother* (2008), depicts an alternate present in which a high school hacker experiences the full force of the repressive US secret services in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, and joins forces with other teenagers to change the system from within. See: Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother* (London: Harper Voyager, 2008).
7. See: Sheehan; Rachel Lapidés, 'Cory Doctorow's Walkaway: Diagnosis through Science Fiction', *The Phoenix*, 2018 <<https://swarthmorephoenix.com/2018/10/04/cory-doctorows-walkaway-diagnosis-through-science-fiction/>> [accessed 30 November 2019].
8. Scott Timberg, 'Leave It to Cory Doctorow to Imagine a Post-Apocalyptic Utopia', *Los Angeles Times*, 2017 <<https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-cory-doctorow-20170525.htmlstory.html>> [accessed 18 October 2019].

transformations, default is less an original post-apocalyptic imaginary than the transition of the previously liberal and economically stable nations of the Global North into a political and economic reality which is closer to that of the extreme neoliberalism, precarious inequality, and political disenfranchisement of oil- and mineral-rich Middle East and African nations, where “[t]he masses are left to hustle for the dregs of what’s left in the ultimate dystopian version of the ‘gig’ economy”.<sup>9</sup>

Given the precarious bleakness of this world, it should come as little surprise that the utopian hope which inspires and focuses the oppositional and prefigurative work of the walkaways — the aforementioned thousands who have opted to walk away from capitalism and build a better life in the industrial wastelands of its abandoned rural fringes — is the development of immortality. This discovery functions as a final and absolute victory against the precarity of life in the ongoing present. As *Walkaway*’s long narrative unfolds, the scientists and engineers of the planet’s disparate walkaway communities come together to transform this dream into a material reality through the development of the sf technologies of mind uploading and body cloning. Most originally, as I shall argue below, the search for immortality is spearheaded and readily embraced by the cast of queer characters who people Doctorow’s novel.

*Walkaway* connects in several significant ways to Yuknavitch’s novel *The Book of Joan*. In particular, the two novels share a portrayal of the inequality, alienation, and violence of an extreme version of late capitalism which, nevertheless, bears close parallels to the real-world present; a vision of imaginary spaces of collective anti-capitalist opposition; an interest in the role queerness plays in utopia; and a particular focus on the consequences of immortality for the quest of human liberation. *The Book of Joan* may appear to be an unusual turn from Yuknavitch, who is best known as the author of the acclaimed memoir *The Chronology of Water* (2011), has written extensively on queer sexuality, mental health, misfit corporeality, and war, and is part of a loose collective of contemporary experimental literary writers including Kathy Acker, Chuck Palahnuik and Cheryl Strayed. *The Book of Joan* is preoccupied with different concerns from those of *Walkaway*: it employs an eloquent

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9. Sean Gallagher, ‘Cory Doctorow’s *Walkaway*: Hardware Hackers Face the Climate Apocalypse’, *Ars Technica*, 2017 <<https://arstechnica.co.uk/gaming/2017/04/cory-doctorow-walkaway-book-review/>> [accessed 19 August 2017].

and visceral style; there are only two central characters, the upper-class artist Christine and the rough-spoken ex-child soldier Joan, and both are developed as multifaceted, complex personalities. Yuknavitch's world-building, on the other hand, is delivered in broad strokes and pays less attention than *Walkaway* to systems-scale issues of politics and economics. Rather, *The Book of Joan* is an sf text committed not to narrative conflict and wide genre appeal, but to exploring issues of female bodily autonomy, queerness, patriarchal power, the role of narrative in oppositional action, and the place of the human in wider planetary ecological systems.

By far the most apocalyptic text in this thesis, *The Book of Joan* offers its readers a vision of an Earth well beyond the point of no return: "a spotted apocalyptic terrain ... [a] lifeless ball of dirt".<sup>10</sup> This barren wasteland is the result of a long climatological crisis and a phenomenally violent near-future war between Joan's armies of eco-revolutionaries and the despotic, eugenicist capitalist Jean de Men, which only concludes when Joan summons a super-human "apocalyptic body song" in an attempt to end the conflict once and for all: "the sky lit with fire, half from the weapons of his attack, half from her summoning of the earth and all its calderas".<sup>11</sup> Even in the aftermath of this apocalypse, life continues to cling on in underground caves and on board CIEL — de Men's orbital space station where the last remnants of humanity's upper classes are slowly living their way to species extinction after Joan's "geocatastrophe" precipitated a rapid mutation in which they lost their sexual and reproductive organs, hair, and skin coloration. With the population no longer able to conceive children or even have sex, de Men has embarked on a horrific programme of enforced insemination of female prisoners, which at the novel's outset has proven fruitless.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the nihilistic imaginary of Yuknavitch's post-apocalyptic setting, as Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione point out, her world, like that of *New York 2140*, *Exit West*, and *Walkaway*, is "extrapolative" of contemporary realities rather than wholly

10. Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Book of Joan* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2018), p. 115.

11. Yuknavitch, p. 112.

12. On the novel's release, reviewers noted its real-world realisation in populist leaders like Donald Trump — who, like de Men, established himself as an "opportunistic showman", "worshipped celebrity", and "billionaire" before coming to power. Yuknavitch notes: "I wasn't thinking about Trump every second of the day, but he was definitely in the stew in my head". See: Kelly Thompson, 'Breaking The Binaries: A Conversation With Lidia Yuknavitch', *The Rumpus*, 2017 <<https://therumpus.net/2017/04/breaking-the-binaries-a-conversation-with-lidia-yuknavitch/>> [accessed 21 August 2019].

divorced from them. Comparing *The Book of Joan* with another recent dystopia, Dave Egger's *The Circle* (2013), Seeger and Davison-Vecchione argue that in these novels:

social phenomena with which we are already familiar — industrial monopolies, data harvesting, digital surveillance, the manipulation of mass opinion, anthropogenic climate change, species extinction, right-wing populism, resource scarcity, and global inequality — are taken as the starting points for extrapolations to future or near-future scenarios which are both remote from our own moment yet unnervingly close to it at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

Seeger and Davison-Vecchione make it clear that Yuknavitch, like Doctorow, depicts an ongoing future — a future engaged in a continual conversation with the crises of the contemporary present. At the same time, these futures are not just relevant to our present, but bear a powerful anticipatory illumination of alternatives to that present. In his work on dystopian literature, Moylan cautions, via a reading of Suvin's work, that although “many compelling and powerful sf works” have generated futures “that expose current problems and warn of the dire consequences if such problems are not properly addressed”, such fictions can “be caught up in a narrowly technological accommodation with the status quo and back away from challenges to the fundamental premises or logics of a society”.<sup>14</sup> Despite being extrapolative, the worlds of *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* avoid the dangers of uncritical world-building through their utopian conclusions, which depict a technological, corporeal, and ontological transition beyond anything suggested by their initial dystopian settings.

The two authors are also similar in that their writing emerges from, and in turn generates, its own engaged readership. For Doctorow, this is a consequence of the social contract of popular fiction, which creates “a ‘place to belong’” for its readers, generating in comfortingly recognisable narrative “the utopian pull of a secure identity in an insecure world”;<sup>15</sup> Yuknavitch's work is often directly addressed to her readers as a collective subject: “I multiplied voices and mammalian bodies. Now it's us. We are the rest of you, reader”.<sup>16</sup>

13. Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione, ‘Dystopian Literature and the Sociological Imagination’, *Thesis Eleven*, 2019, pp. 1-19.

14. Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 44.

15. Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 10.

16. Yvonne Conza, ‘I Will Never Tire of Swimming Inside Language: The Millions Interviews Lidia



Furthermore, both are active online and have built up dedicated Internet cult followings which distinguish them as natives of a contemporary, networked moment: while Doctorow has widespread recognition among science fiction fans, technology bloggers, and web activists, Yuknavitch has an equally dedicated following among the readers, podcasters, and bloggers of autofiction, memoir, and feminist literary fiction. As a reviewer of *The Chronology of Water* writes, four years after the book's release, "'Viral' is a good meme for a memoir about the body, and seems appropriate for a small book published in 2011 [that] keeps popping up on blogs and social media feeds".<sup>17</sup> Doctorow, in recognition of his large community of readers, has written on the reciprocal relationship between genre sf writers and fan communities. In an article on his decision to release many of his novels under a permissive Creative Commons license, which allows free access and encourages adaptation, he writes that science fiction is "perhaps the most social of all literary genres", whose success is indebted to "organized fandom". He credits the sf genre's continuing success to the online nature of sf readership communities: "online norms of idle chatter, fannish organizing, publishing and leisure".<sup>18</sup> For both authors, the collective, the plural, and the common are vital resources for the development of their writing practice.

As do other texts I have examined in this thesis, the two novels deploy their ongoing futurism using the toolkit of a commons poetics, as I shall discuss below. They exhibit narrative techniques, such as analepsis, which unsettle temporal boundaries; depictions of commons spaces; large casts of characters and multiple narratorial viewpoints; and the presentation of storytelling and broadcasting themselves as material tools of collective opposition. As Hope Jennings indicates, *The Book of Joan* is characterised by "structural complexity [and] use of multiple temporalities, along with stylistic choices that often interweave graphically violent imagery and language with a corporeal poetics of queer/ed desires and posthuman subjectivities"; via these and other textual strategies, Yuknavitch deploys a utopian message of belief in "the profound materiality of stories and their ability,

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Yuknavitch', *The Millions*, 2017 <<https://themillions.com/2017/06/will-never-tire-swimming-inside-language-millions-interviews-lidia-yuknavitch.html>> [accessed 18 August 2019].

17. Valerie Stivers-Isakova, 'Review: Lidia Yuknavitch's the Chronology of Water — A Body Memoir Gone Viral', *HuffPost*, 2013 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-chronology-of-water\\_b\\_2681133](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-chronology-of-water_b_2681133)> [accessed 18 October 2019].

18. Cory Doctorow, 'Giving It Away', *Forbes*, 2006 <[http://forbes.com/2006/11/30/cory-doctorow-copyright-tech-media\\_cz\\_cd\\_books06\\_1201doctorow](http://forbes.com/2006/11/30/cory-doctorow-copyright-tech-media_cz_cd_books06_1201doctorow)> [accessed 18 October 2019].

for better or worse, to transform the world”.<sup>19</sup> Doctorow sets out the commons-oriented message of his novel himself, echoing the premise of Solnit’s *A Paradise Built In Hell*, one of the primary inspirations for *Walkaway*: “[o]ur disaster recovery is always fastest and smoothest when we work together ... the best science fiction does something much more interesting than prediction: It *inspires*. That science fiction tells us better nations are ours to build and lets us dream vividly of what it might be like to live in those nations”.<sup>20</sup> Key in Doctorow’s commons poetics, as the above and numerous other blog posts and thinkpieces quoted in this chapter reveal, is the paratextual gambit wherein the text is positioned not as the end of the discourse between author and reader, but its beginning. In authorial commentary on his own novel — in particular on the platforms where readers can, and do, leave comments and hold discussions — Doctorow creates an immaterial, paratextual commons which can in turn change and influence the meaning of its source common resource, the novel, for those readers who choose to engage with it.<sup>21</sup>

### Immortality in *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan*

Having established Doctorow and Yuknavitch’s stakes in the landscape of contemporary utopian literature, this section addresses the particular ways in which the utopian, inspiring imaginary of immortality is depicted in *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan*. Concepts of immortality have historically come in many guises, from medical work on life extension to the transference of material existence into a spiritual domain, and have been a perennial concern of utopian literature, since its earliest roots in the eschatological and afterlife narratives of almost all major religions.

As Leah Hadomi argues, few classical utopian texts place immortality at the centre of their utopias, perhaps because the dream of immortality is so remote as to be beyond

19. Hope Jennings, ‘Anthropocene Storytelling: Extinction, D/Evolution, and Posthuman Ethics in Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan*’, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 30.3 (2019), 191–210.

20. Cory Doctorow, ‘Coase’s Spectre’, *Crooked Timber*, 2017 <<http://crookedtimber.org/2017/05/10/coases-spectre/>> [accessed 19 October 2019]. On the influence of Solnit’s work on *Walkaway*, see: Mary Woodbury, ‘Interview with Cory Doctorow, *Walkaway*’, *Dragonfly: An Exploration of Eco-Fiction*, 2017 <<https://dragonfly.eco/interview-cory-doctorow-walkaway/>> [accessed 19 October 2019].

21. See, for instance, this series of responses: Henry Farrell, ‘Cory Doctorow Seminar’, *Crooked Timber*, 2017 <<http://crookedtimber.org/2017/05/10/cory-doctorow-seminar/>> [accessed 30 November 2019].

even the most anticipatory of illuminations: “Immortality tends instead to surface as a theme of escapist fantasy, beyond the bounds of the ideal, wished-for, or eventually possible world”.<sup>22</sup> The inhabitants of More’s island of Utopia avoid innovations on the issue by subscribing to some very familiar religious beliefs: “That the soul of man is immortal, and that God of His goodness has designed that it should be happy; and that He has, therefore, appointed rewards for good and virtuous actions, and punishments for vice, to be distributed after this life”.<sup>23</sup> Satirical play with the desire for everlasting life appears in the shape of the Struldbruggs of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). They cannot die but continue ageing; they are declared legally dead at the age of eighty and henceforth prohibited from owning property, to prevent them from eventually acquiring all the world’s land for themselves.<sup>24</sup> George Bernard Shaw’s four-part play cycle *Back to Methuselah* (premièred in 1922) charts humanity’s quest for longevity from the Garden of Eden to a far future, disembodied, spacebound state some thirty thousand years into our future, and is one of the earliest sf treatments of the subject, borrowing from contemporaneous scientific understandings of genetics and evolution. In the twentieth century, immortality in literature is primarily science fictional: cloning, mind uploads, artificial and cyborg bodies, distributed consciousnesses, cryonics, and longevity-inducing cocktails of drugs and chemicals.<sup>25</sup> Recent sf treatments of immortality have overwhelmingly highlighted the dangers of this gift falling into the hands of neoliberal capitalists. Notable among these are Doctorow’s own first novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003), Paolo Bacigalupi’s short story ‘The People of Sand and Slag’ (2004), and the films *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2008), *Lucy* (dir. Luc Besson, 2014) and *Jupiter Ascending* (dir. The Wachowskis, 2015), which all represent the relationship between immortality and capitalism as inextricable, mutually violent, destructive, pessimistic and, at times, dystopian.

The technologies and modalities of immortality in *Walkaway* and *The Book of*

22. Leah Hadomi, ‘Islands of the Living: Death and Dying in Utopian Fiction’, *Utopian Studies*, 6.1 (1995), 85–101 (p. 85).

23. More, *Utopia*, pp. 121.

24. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 198–200.

25. A comprehensive overview of immortality in sf literature is presented in: *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by George Edgar Slusser, Gary Westfahl, and Eric S. Rabkin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). For a recent review, see: Victor E. Grech, Clare Vassallo, and Ivan Callus, ‘Immortality and Infertility in Science Fiction: Who Wants to Live Forever?’, *SFRA Review*, 299 (2012), 5–10.

*Joan* emerge from the same early twenty-first-century cultural tendency I have been exploring in the preceding chapters. In *Walkaway* — the title of which, until Kim Stanley Robinson suggested that Doctorow change it, was *Utopia* — the technological basis of the immortality is the scanning and uploading of brains to a distributed online network.<sup>26</sup> Both the caricaturishly evil, capitalistic zottas and the diverse, radical walkaways are, as the novel's first act closes, working on a cure for human death. Notably, where the zottas desire immortality for precisely the reason that the Struldbruggs are denied its full potential — absolute power derived from the ownership of all the world's wealth and labour power — the walkaways want to make immortality open source and freely available for all, thus setting up the violent conflict which comes as the zottas desperately attempt to prevent this democratisation. For the walkaways, the geographically distributed, non-physical, informational immortality promised by the uploading of brains into BitTorrent-style peer-to-peer networks, “as unkillably immortal as data could be”, becomes not only a utopia, but a necessity: it is the only thing which can prevent their destruction at the hands of the zottas' private militias.<sup>27</sup>

The walkaways' drive for collective and universal immortality emerges as the mirror image of the zottas' self-serving immortality. Like Doctorow, the walkaways talk of commons, peer networks, radical equality, and open access. The “tragedy of the commons” is evoked as “[a] fairy tale about giving public assets to rich people to run as personal empires”. The character Limpopo believes that “[i]f you build systems that make people focus on mastery, cooperation, and better work, we'll have a beautiful inn full of happy people”; later, she states the walkaways' utopian dream is “making a world where greed is a perversion”.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the zottas — who, for the most part, are only represented in walkaway accounts — figure as an alienated group of “sociopaths who clawed their way to the top of default's pyramid of skulls”, each of whom is desperate to institute themselves and their family as “pharaohs”, “godlike immortals”, “Olympian

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26. Robinson also suggested the final title, and on Doctorow's part at least, it is (disappointingly!) not an homage to Le Guin's utopian short story ‘The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas’; see: Cory Doctorow, ‘Tweet’, *Twitter*, 2019 <<https://twitter.com/doctorow/status/1112455367428980736>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

27. Cory Doctorow, *Walkaway* (London: Head of Zeus, 2017), p. 171.

28. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, pp. 50, 108-9, 498.

masters”, and “permanent god-emperors”.<sup>29</sup> This argument, while hyperbolic, is also grounded in economic reality; as one character argues, as long as both a worker and “some hereditary global power-broker” have merely human lifespans, it is possible to convince the working classes that some modicum of equality exists in the capitalist system, but once immortality becomes universal, plentiful, and accessible, this new and radical form of equality outstrips any of the rewards offered by capitalist ideology: “When you think ... everyone you know might live forever — something happens”.<sup>30</sup>

The final, most decidedly utopian chapter of Doctorow’s novel portrays a more distantly future world where some of these simulated minds are then downloaded back into artificially created human bodies (“We’re growing the body quick as we can”), while others eschew bodies entirely and exist only in virtual space (“They’re offworld, most of the time. They entangle a lot, with each other and others”).<sup>31</sup> In these final transformations of the human, Doctorow combines two classic tropes — the brain upload and the clone body — to create a form of immortality entirely reliant on futuristic, albeit realistically presented, technological advances.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, *Walkaway* engages directly with the concept of ‘strong AI’, as much of the plot revolves around attempts to run uploaded minds inside digital simulations, increasingly blurring the boundaries between organic human consciousness and artificial intelligence.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to the technologically abetted immortality of *Walkaway*, the immortality of *The Book of Joan* is primarily genetic and ecological. The central immortal character is Joan of Dirt — a reborn Joan of Arc — who holds unique powers over the arbitration of life and death. She comes back to life when she is burnt at the stake; can heal the injured and bring the dead briefly back to life; and, as already mentioned, almost destroys all life on Earth in a bid to stop de Men. The moment in the novel tied explicitly to immortality

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29. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, pp. 140-1.

30. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 141.

31. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 503.

32. For notable sf treatments of cloning and consciousness upload for a variety of narrative ends, see: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Philip K. Dick, 1968); *Never Let Me Go* (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005); *To Live Forever* (Jack Vance, 1956); *Lord of Light* (Roger Zelazny, 1967); *Ancillary Justice* (Ann Leckie, 2013); and *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009).

33. Strong AI ‘minds’ are able to think like humans; weak AI ‘minds’ can only solve specific, narrow problems. Notable depictions include *2001: A Space Odyssey* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Neuromancer* (William Gibson, 1984), the *Culture* series (Iain M. Banks, 1987-2012).

occurs in the finale, where Joan merges, at a genetic level, with the planet itself. She is absorbed into the Earth's soil, creating a "mega catalyst of sorts" which restarts life on the planet in an entirely new biological "language":

the cradle of my pelvis disintegrating and rebecoming in new DNA strands, my femur, tibia, fibula, the phalanges of my feet and hands. [...] A different story, leading whoever is left toward something we've not yet imagined.<sup>34</sup>

In this absorption and molecular reconfiguration of Joan's life-giving energy, her immortality becomes irreversibly post-human, merging and broadening into a "relationship with all matter" which is impossible to quantify in relation to human life and death; indeed, Joan decries the description of this act as "suicide", describing it instead as "a new way to travel".<sup>35</sup> Joan's transformation is the natural culmination of Yuknavitch's discursive stance throughout the novel — mostly delivered through the narration of the artist Christine — that the anthropocentric obsession with human life and death, embodied by avaricious eugenicist de Men, is fundamentally at odds with a more-than-human understanding of all matter as part of ongoing articulations of energy in incredible forms: "You have to let go of the idea that you are a singular savior or destroyer. Everything is matter. Everything is moved by and through energy. Bodies are miniature renditions of the entire universe".<sup>36</sup> In this layering of multiple existences — human, non-human, and post-human — we see a new vision of the multitude, not as the subject of an anthropocentric politics, but one which is nevertheless political in Donna Haraway's sense of "cosmopolitics". Drawing this term from the work of Isabelle Stengers, Haraway writes: "The decisions and transformations so urgent in our times for learning again, or for the first time, how to become less deadly, more response-able, more attuned, more capable of surprise, more able to practice the arts of living and dying well in multispecies symbiosis, sympoiesis, and symanimogenesis on a damaged planet, must be made without guarantees or the expectation of harmony with *those who are not oneself — and not safely other, either*".<sup>37</sup> Yuknavitch's politics in *The Book of Joan* tackle these large-scale questions of what must become of the human if our species is

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34. Yuknavitch, p. 260.

35. Yuknavitch, p. 258.

36. Yuknavitch, p. 222.

37. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 98, emphasis added.



to flourish alongside, rather than despite, the planet's ecological systems.

The anti-anthropocentric immortality we witness in *The Book of Joan* extends a utopian imaginary well beyond the conceptual and ontological limits Doctorow reaches with mind uploading and cloning in *Walkaway*. Nevertheless, both novels index a relationship with life and death which is inimical to capitalist alienation and precarity and founded upon radical notions of commoning. In a recent exploration of contemporary utopian literature, Edwards explores the possibility of death itself as utopian, noting, however, that for subjects to do more than console themselves against death, “we would need to construct a historical agent capable of translating such hope into concrete actions directed towards struggling for the utopian future”, one which is “properly collective”.<sup>38</sup> In Edwards's study of texts where utopia appears in glimmers and echoes, these agents are the dead themselves, speaking from a temporal position outside of the narratives they haunt. In Bloch's Marxist utopian poetics, which underpin Edwards's study, a concrete utopia emerges only when the individual has gained class consciousness, and thus united their life to a wider ongoing anti-capitalist struggle, in which individual death moves the revolution ever closer to victory: “It is not an idea in the sense of abstract faith but concrete community of class consciousness, *the communist cause itself*, which holds the head up here, without delirium but with strength. And this certainty of class consciousness, cancelling out individual survival, is indeed a *Novum* against death”.<sup>39</sup> Examining immortality in Soviet culture, Christine Sypnowitch confirms Bloch's conclusions, contending that “the transcendence of death figures in the communist ideal” and citing Alexander Bogdanov's utopian sf novel *Red Star* (1908), in which “the mortality of particular individuals is superseded by the life of the community to which individuals are inextricably bound ... [Bogdanov writes:] ‘the whole lives in each and every one of us, in each tiny cell of the great organism, and each of us lives through the whole’”.<sup>40</sup> Bogdanov's words prefigure the post-human, non-anthropocentric philosophy Yuknavitch explores in *The Book of Joan* through Joan's genetic absorption into the planet's ecosystems. In both novels, a collective

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38. Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, p. 85.

39. Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, III, p. 1173.

40. Christine Sypnowitch, ‘Death in Utopia: Marxism and the Mortal Self’, in *The Social Self*, ed. by David Bakhurst and Christine Sypnowitch (London: SAGE, 1995), pp. 84–102 (pp. 84, 91, 90).



subjectivity emerges through immortality, or as a character in *Walkaway* quips, “I am become worlds, destroyer of death!”<sup>41</sup>

In the novels, the collective nature of immortality opposes the role that immortality — coded through inheritance, history, and commemorative ritual — has played in most human cultures for millennia. As philosopher Zygmunt Bauman writes, social death rituals “separate the moment of bodily death from that of *social* death, making the second independent of the other and endowing only the second, social, death with the status of finality”. Thus, while “immortality is ultimately a *social relation*”, it also becomes a relation of power exercised by the ruling class — who select members of their number to be immortalised as gods, spirits, or Great Men of history — over the labouring class, whose dead are forgotten and can never ascend to a collectively memorialised immortality: the “[p]olitical economy of immortality ... proves to be just another policy of stratification”. The subversive meditation Bauman offers as conclusion is that “[t]omorrow’s immortals must first get hold of today’s archives”.<sup>42</sup> The current obsession of the phenomenally rich with cryonics, medical advances in longevity, and quasi-religious transhumanist projects whose adherents hope to end up on the right side of a technological singularity and evolve beyond their material bodies, all suggest that, at present, immortality is firmly in the hands of the ruling class.<sup>43</sup> *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* — which, as we shall see below, both tackle aspects of post-human corporeality and existence in commons-based and anti-capitalist forms — reveal oppositional strategies for seizing or transforming the archive of humanity’s balance of forces.

### Life and death in queer theory

The preceding chapters have investigated a variety of worlds glimpsed on the way towards becoming utopias which are prefigurative, ongoing, and common. In Chapter One, I argued that the commons are never just delimited spaces, but are systems composing commonwealth (space), commoners (subjects), and commoning (process, impulse, and

41. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 181.

42. Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 52, 55, 53, 57; see also: pp. 58-59.

43. See: Joshua Raulerson, *Singularities: Technoculture, Transhumanism, and Science Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

utopian hope). While all three aspects are necessary, subjects — the inhabitants of utopia — provide the means by which resources and energy are combined to create a better world. Each of the texts I have so far examined elevates a particular subject position to a space of utopian potential: the multi-species multitude in *That Winter the Wolf Came* assembles against petrocapi-talism; the migrants of *Exit West* create a mobile commons; and the union organisers and passionate commoners of *New York 2140* find new ways to survive disaster. In *The Book of Joan* and *Walkaway*, queer subjects discover, defend, and embrace the utopian gift of immortality.

My examination of queerness in the novels indexes the term both in the narrow sense of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identity, and in the far broader sense articulated by a wide body of contemporary queer theorists — what Jack Halberstam, in particular, describes as a “queer ‘way of life’”. As Halberstam writes, this phrase denotes queerness “as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” detached from sexual identity.<sup>44</sup> Such queer life is, as Elizabeth Freeman highlights, not only liberating but is also born of loss, absence, and suffering, the “all-too-real limits presented by the stigmatization of AIDS, by violence against lesbians and gays, by the unbearable heaviness of the gender binary”. In this way, “queer becoming-collective-across-time and even the concept of futurity itself are predicated upon injury — separations, injuries, spatial displacements, preclusions, and other negative and negating forms of bodily experience”.<sup>45</sup> Both theorists attest that queer ways of life are caught in an anti-utopian relationship with capitalism. Neoliberal capitalism separates queer subjects into those who willingly participate in the economic sphere, and can therefore be usefully absorbed into the market, and those who wholly or partially refuse to exist within capitalism, and are perceived as dangerous, unreasonable, and threatening:

all kinds of people, especially in postmodernity, will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labour and production.

By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation: here we

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44. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 1.

45. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 11.

could consider ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed. Perhaps such people could productively be called ‘queer subjects’ in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) [...] and [...] work.<sup>46</sup>

Freeman’s turn of phrase — “becoming-collective-across-time” — suggests the ways in which contemporary queer subjects aim to exist beyond the same capitalist systems we have seen threatening the oppositional subjects of the previous chapters.

Halberstam and Freeman are among a number of theorists to employ queerness as a hermeneutic for historical and contemporary temporalities.<sup>47</sup> An understanding of ‘queer time’ is crucial to the argument of this chapter because — analogously to how the multitude opposes post-Fordist segmentation, migrancy can oppose border regimes, and commoned urban infrastructure can weather neoliberal predation — queerness, in its relationship with time, holds the potential to rewrite narratives of death. In queer narratives examined by Halberstam, Freeman, and Muñoz, the ability of queerness to work against death emerges from the ways it blurs past and future; transforms and organises bodies; and reveals glimmers of anticipatory utopias. As Muñoz writes in the luminous opening of *Cruising Utopia*:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.

The future is queerness’s domain.<sup>48</sup>

It is unsurprising that queer theorists have argued even for death to be potentially figured as a moment of queer, utopian escape from capitalism, in particular when such death is a rejection of the false happiness of normalizing capitalist temporality. Halberstam writes: “queer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis ... is also about the potentiality of

46. Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, p. 10; see also: Freeman, p. xvi.

47. For overviews, see: Carolyn Dinshaw and others, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13.2 (2007), 177–95; C. Freccero, ‘Queer Times’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106.3 (2007), 485–94; Valerie Traub, ‘The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies’, *PMLA*, 128.1 (2013), 21–39.

48. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 1.

a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing”, which allows queer subjects to imagine their futures according to logics beyond “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death”.<sup>49</sup> In a passage on the suicide of the American dancer Fred Herko, who leapt out of a window in a “perfect jeté” at the conclusion of a dance for his friend, Muñoz contends:

Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially antiutopian because it absolutely defines the end of potentiality. But to make “death art,” especially in the flamboyant manner that Herko did, is to move beyond death as finitude.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the powerful arguments of these thinkers on the ways in which the temporalities of queerness can circumvent the finality of death and the constrictions of capitalist life, they have much less to offer on the question of what immortality could potentially offer to anti-capitalist, queer life. And yet, as Bonnie Ruberg attests in an exploration of immortality, or “permalife”, in independent queer video games, “[f]or queer subjects today ... permanent living represents a particularly potent trope for expressing both hopes and concerns about contemporary queer life in the face of an uncertain future”.<sup>51</sup> The following two sections of the chapter will explore the ways in which *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* make use of tropes of immortality to challenge the power of capitalism in a queer, common, and utopian mode. I argue that ultimately, in these novels, immortality is figured as a way of queer life.

### Queer immortality

As Eleanor Drage indicates in an essay on ‘San Junipero’, an unexpectedly utopian episode of Charlie Brooker’s anthology television show *Black Mirror* (2011-), the virtual-reality resort town of San Junipero is a space where the characters Yorkie and Kelly can pursue a “non-reproductive and queer immortality” contrasted with the heteronormative “mortality, homophobia, and racial prejudice” of the real world.<sup>52</sup> The terminally ill Kelly and

49. Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, p. 2. Death is a central preoccupation for Halberstam in this book, which began as a project on the 1993 murder of the transgender teenager Brandon Teena.

50. Muñoz, p. 149.

51. Bonnie Ruberg, ‘Permalife: Video Games and the Queerness of Living’, *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 9.2 (2017), 159–73 (p. 161).

52. Eleanor Drage, ‘A Virtual Ever-After: Utopia, Race and Gender in *Black Mirror*’s “San Junipero”’, in *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*, ed. by Angela M. Cirucci and Barry Vacker (London: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 27–39 (pp. 32, 33).

quadriplegic, permanently hospitalised Yorkie find love, fulfilment, and escapist joy while their minds are plugged into San Junipero's data banks; in the time-travelling technicolour resort they become young, fit, and able-bodied, and can fully express and explore their sexualities for the first time. But the real utopianism of 'San Junipero', as Drage argues, lies in the episode's final scenes, when the lovers decide to undergo "state-controlled euthanasia" and are uploaded into San Junipero permanently, achieving "eternal romance in the cloud".<sup>53</sup>

As in 'San Junipero', the immortality effected by the characters of *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* is linked to their separation from the "straight time" of capitalist heteropatriarchy — what Halberstam describes above as the "conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing ... reproductive and familial time". Building on the work of Lee Edelman and Halberstam, 'straight' here signifies not only the linear time of normative heterosexual life (the drive to colonise the future by repeating oneself in one's own children), but also highlights the distinction between queer time and capitalist futurity as described by Berlant and others. Muñoz evokes a "queer hermeneutics" in opposition to straight time, which undoes its oppressive logics: "to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer ... to participate in a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity".<sup>54</sup> This repudiation of the primacy of the linear historicity of straight time allows us to read queer time as an alternative strategy of knowledge-making and a utopian future horizon. Indeed, where Muñoz describes a queer hermeneutics in the texts he examines, I argue for a queer commons poetics, which I analyse in relation to the two novels in the following subsections.

### *The Book of Joan*

A commons poetics of escape from and resistance to straight time is particularly evident in *The Book of Joan*, which overflows with queer forms of relationality. Joan and her companion Leone are in love, though neither acts on their mutual desire until the very end of the novel;

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53. Drage, p. 30.

54. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 26.

only in a posthumous letter does Joan write their love beyond the human, into the fabric of life on the planet and into the shape of the universe: “You deserve the word ‘love,’ spoken over and over again and untethered from prior lexicons, an erotic and unbound universe, the dead light of stars yet aching to stitch your name across the night sky, the ocean waters singing your body hymn to shore day into night into day”.<sup>55</sup> This love is queer not only because Joan and Leone are queer, but because it embodies a queering of language, space, and time. I have already noted the way in which Joan’s immortality is evinced through the absorption of her human body into the genetic codes of the post-apocalyptic planet, triggering a new start for life. In portraying this transformation, Yuknavitch “figures the (post)human body as heterogenous and always already entangled with other materially agentic organisms and environments”.<sup>56</sup> Joan’s love for Leone — who is also post-human, owing to the pig heart with which her defective heart was replaced — is another such entanglement; as Jennings argues, these post-human bodies also function “as a discursive site for resisting and contesting oppressive bio-practices by queering the very ‘nature’ of desire in order to destabilize heteronormative investments in reproductive futurity”.<sup>57</sup> Yuknavitch develops the oppositional power of these queer desires through the temporally fluid, interwoven structure of her novel, through forms of queer collective narration, and through the post-human, common spaces of underground caves in which a number of the novel’s pivotal scenes occur.

The first two of these aspects — a queer mode of temporal fluidity and the foregrounding of storytelling and narration as collective acts — are particularly apparent in those sections of the novel narrated by Christine, an artist onboard CIEL named after the proto-feminist Medieval author Christine de Pizan, and the author of the novel’s own “Book of Joan”.<sup>58</sup> Like the rest of CIEL’s population, Christine has lost her sexual and reproductive organs, alongside her skin pigmentation and hair. One of the results of this “[d]evolution” of the human species is the development of an art of laser-aided body scarification — the writing of literal, tactile stories on human skin. Those skin stories

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55. Yuknavitch, p. 265.

56. Jennings, p. 201.

57. Jennings, p. 201.

58. Yuknavitch, p. 105.

written by de Men are misogynistic romances of “egregious gender nostalgia” in which “for his women, happily ever after meant rape, death, insanity, prison, or marriage”.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, de Men bans all sexual expression onboard CIEL, in particular the sort of queered sexual activity — aided by fantastic mechanical devices and bawdy, hypersexual Shakespearean wordplay and poetry (“‘Christ! Come here this instant, you reeling-ripe dove-egg. Get here and lay me a kiss ... You tickle-brained harlot!’”) — which Christine engages in with her gay friend and lover Trinculo.<sup>60</sup> With no sexual organs to make use of, Christine and Trinculo queer the idea of sexual play itself by engaging in a cerebral, non-reproductive *narration* of liberatory sexual pleasure — “‘Mount the table and spread your legs, Christine. I’ll bore a new hole into your luscious otherworldly flesh’” — which opposes de Men’s obsessive desire to control all human bodies and their expressions.<sup>61</sup>

It is in one of these sexual performances that Trinculo reveals to Christine that Joan is still alive — a linguistic orgasm which shatters the line between physical and mental erogenous pleasure, and begins the novel’s central narrative:

He does not penetrate me, but as I clasp my legs around him, bear-hugging his torso and burying my face in the folds of his grafts, he whispers into my ear, raising every hair and fast-devolving erogenous cell to the surface of my body.

“She’s alive. Your dead icon? She’s alive.”<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, in opposition to the “habit of being” which the dominance of de Men’s anti-feminist narratives promulgates aboard CIEL, Christine begins to write a new kind of graft, different in two ways: firstly, it tells the story of Joan’s struggle against him and reveals that she still lives; secondly, it is not contained by a single body, but is spread across a collective of queer bodies who join Christine’s revolution. “Young. Smooth-skinned. Sexless, but filled with an astonishingly repressed agency they have no idea what to do with”, they form a queer commons:

I will collect, fragment, and displace individual lines from my epic body poem onto the bodies of others until we became an army of sorts [...] a resistance movement of

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59. Yuknavitch, pp. 150, 21.

60. Yuknavitch, pp. 25, 31.

61. Yuknavitch, p. 32.

62. Yuknavitch, p. 32.



flesh. The action will culminate in plural acts of physical violence so profound during our performance no one will ever forget the fact of flesh.<sup>63</sup>

As can be seen in these lines, the sections of the novel narrated by Christine evoke a queer time, leaping analeptically forward in time to describe and prefiguratively anticipate her utopian dreams of victory over de Men as well as proleptically returning from Christine's present into a retelling — sometimes in Christine's narrative voice, sometimes in Joan's, and sometimes in transcripts from Joan's interrogation — of Joan's childhood, the War, and her apparent death. As the novel unfolds, chapters centred on Joan herself — also narrated in the third person but in a diction far rougher and more practical than Christine's effusive "body poem" — reveal her life in the present on the surface of the Earth, until these multiple timelines and narrative strands collapse in the novel's violent dénouement. These textual strategies queer and fragment not only the internal temporality of the novel, in which de Men presents a singular, cohesive narrative of his rise to power as a mighty military leader and saviour of humanity, despite the best efforts of the genocidal eco-terrorist Joan, but also, as Jennings indicates, work "on a metaliterary level to disrupt readers' expectations of the novel as a straightforward apocalypse". Indeed, the narrative core of *The Book of Joan* is its queer post-apocalypticism — a radical demand for the recognition that some stories, such as the end of humanity's repeated attempts to control the planet, its species, and each other's bodies, hopes, and desires, require an apocalypse to be properly told.

While Christine and Trinculo wage their narrative and representational revolution against de Men on board CIEL, Joan and Leone hide from their enemies in a series of caves. The sexual and reproductive symbolism of caves and caverns is plentiful and productive, as is the queer interplay between cave and closet; Virginia Woolf articulated one of the finest examples of the latter when she wrote, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been. It is all half lights and profound shadows like those serpentine caves where one goes with a candle peering up and down, not knowing where one is stepping".<sup>64</sup> *The Book of Joan* rediscovers, revives, and reworks these serpentine caves

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63. Yuknavitch, p. 91.

64. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 109.

in a textual mode which is as post-human as it is queer. In Yuknavitch's post-apocalyptic world, caves are the last functioning ecosystems, containing all the planet's remaining species, including human beings, and the novel goes to considerable lengths to describe the complexity of life they contain. The Son Doong cave, a real-world cave in Vietnam, is described as a complete and intricate microcosm of the planet which once existed above it:

Here, beyond their little cave's entryway, stretched five miles of underground life thriving beyond imagination [...] a biodiversity so rich and secret it was nearly its own world. A jungle, a river, a lake; countless old and new species of plant and animal life; even some things in between that Joan was still studying. Fields of algae as large as foothills. Stalagmites as tall as old-growth redwoods. A whole verdant underworld defying the decay of the world above it. There were times Joan half expected a mammal to emerge from its waters, blinking and dripping, the new species taking its first steps onto land.<sup>65</sup>

The last lines foreshadow Joan's eventual subsumption into the planet in order to create a world of "new species", an act which also happens in a cave complex — the Sarawak Caves in Malaysia, which open out onto the sea. Joan chooses these caves as the site of her genetic transfer because of their "[b]iodiversity" — just as humans onboard CIEL have devolved, cave life has rapidly evolved, creating a post-human, multi-species, symbiotic commons of "fungi. Amoebas. Multicellular life-forms adapting and evolving at fantastic rates ... Sound. Light. Energy. ... *Living energy*".<sup>66</sup> Yuknavitch's description of this new cave life as "living energy" allies it, even before Joan has performed her rebirthing act, to Joan herself, who is described by another character with the neologism "engenderine", a mythological being "closer to matter and elements than to human".<sup>67</sup>

The caves are not only the site of a new, fantastic rebirth of life, which queers the boundaries between human, non-human, and a wider universe of energy and matter, but are also a space of queer time. Joan and Leone are the products of a childhood and young adulthood of unimaginable trauma, and the caves — spaces of relative safety, comfort, and intimacy — act as repositories for the vital memories and histories of their relationship:

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65. Yuknavitch, pp. 140-141.

66. Yuknavitch, pp. 148-9.

67. Yuknavitch, pp. 94, 192.

Joan's heart beats up in her chest for a long minute. She remembers: a month's respite from war she'd spent with Leone, near Australia. The neon blue and yellow backs and bellies of ribbon eels, sliding through ocean water, alongside them in an underwater cave pool. The two of them laughing.<sup>68</sup>

The ribbon eels, like Woolf's candlelit caverns, encode a cryptic queerness which is explicated for us by Yuknavitch, who seemingly interrupts her own novel in a direct, apostrophic address to the reader set in the historical present tense:

In the subterranean caves of Christmas Island, a variety of hermaphroditic and protandric species thrives. The ribbon eel is one of them [...] As they mature, they would swap genders. Eels that were born male grew into females that changed color and laid eggs. They could live twenty years this way, their gender entirely fluid.<sup>69</sup>

The memories of better pasts which the caves allow Joan to inhabit extend not only to Leone, but to her brother, with whom she shares a close bond: "If she feels anything about the word *brother*, it is here, in this space that smells of water and dirt and living things. Her memory remains loyal to all the times they played in the woods together as children. His death, then, should bring life back into the walls and ground and water". These lines — their narration in the third person, their omniscient yet intimate style, and their concern with memory and language — read like those parts of Joan's history which, earlier in the novel, had been narrated by Christine on her skin; this stylistic play highlights the commoning of temporality and memory which Yuknavitch deploys at this late stage in the novel.

On CIEL, queer subjectivity is developed further in the character of de Men himself, who, at the climax of the narrative, is revealed as a trans man. His grotesque history of violence against women, and the narration of this section of the narrative — in an omniscient mode but delimited by Christine's narratorial authority — means that his literal exposure as transgender is described in a hostile, unsympathetic, and even transphobic light. A number of textual tactics, including the switch of pronouns used to describe de Men from masculine to feminine, and the descriptions of him as "what is left of a woman", "the horrid corporeal truth of her", and "[w]rong mother. Woman

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68. Yuknavitch, pp. 155-6.

69. Yuknavitch, p. 156.

destroyed”, all make it difficult to read this revelation as anything other than a ciphered insinuation that de Men’s violence against female bodies is a consequence of a sense of dysphoric shame or anger at the failures of his body.<sup>70</sup> This stance, like the transphobic characterisation of Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991), equates transgender identity with extreme violence and psychopathy, promotes a reactionary and conservative gender essentialism, and prevents a critical interrogation of the sources and consequences of gendered violence under patriarchy.

This crypto-transphobic direction in *The Book of Joan* makes it necessary to examine de Men’s character further if the novel can truly function as a queer text. In particular, the eponymic and narrative association of Jean and Joan means that with de Men described as a failed woman and yet not a real man (“a bulbous sagging gash sutured over and over where... where life had perhaps happened in the past, or not, and worse, several dangling attempts at half-formed penises, sewn and abandoned, distended and limp”), Joan’s otherwise post-human, utopian characterisation is brought disappointingly down to the human level through the concomitant association of her virgin, cisgender body with a ‘proper’, pure, untainted femininity.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, while Joan is the immortal character of the novel, and the catalyst for the utopian transformation of life at its end, de Men’s twisted biopolitical experiments and necropolitical reign *also* gesture at a (failed) queer utopia — one which is, perhaps, more relational and human than Joan’s post-human absorption.

The ending of the novel, in particular, owes much to the anti-relational thesis in queer theory, stated comprehensively by Edelman in *No Future* (2004). For Edelman, a truly productive queer politics must distance itself completely from what he terms “reproductive futurity”, a regulation of political discourse fully in service to the allegorical “image of the Child” which abjects queer subjects from politics as a consequence of their non-generative sexual practices. Edelman polemically calls for queer theory to embrace the absolute negativity of rejecting reproductive futurity, demanding “a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such”.<sup>72</sup> Muñoz

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70. Yuknavitch, p. 250.

71. Yuknavitch, pp. 245-6.

72. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 11, 4.

describes Edelman's project thus:

Political hope fails queers because, like signification, it was not originally made for us. It resonates only on the level of reproductive futurity. Instead, Edelman recommends that queers give up hope and embrace a certain negation endemic to our abjection within the symbolic. What we get, in exchange for giving up on futurity, abandoning politics and hope, is a certain *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us.<sup>73</sup>

In its final chapters, *The Book of Joan* engages with this anti-relational position, generating its utopia not only out of the *jouissance* of new life, but out of a negation of humanity and its achievements. In her letter to Leone, Joan writes:

I've wondered hundreds of times, since we lost humanity as we knew it: Is this what animals feel? Plants? Before we colonize and brutalize them away from their relationship to all matter? Think about it: What need is there for scientific discovery, or intellectual or cultural apex, if humanity is gone?

See? That's not something to say aloud. There is no longer any reason to further a philosophy. There is only being.<sup>74</sup>

While hopeful, the conclusion of *The Book of Joan* — under the auspices of Joan as queer destroyer/creator — is not just post-human, but anti-human, forging a future which is entirely absent of the figure of the Child. In this reading, the brief consummation of Joan and Leone's mutual desire is polemically, rather than simply factually, non-generative: "Desire blooms between us, my ravaged body, hers. We will not conceive this way. Reproduction will become another kind of story".<sup>75</sup>

Jean de Men's attempt at moulding and generating futurity, however, does not mirror Joan's anti-human futurity. His numerous failed attempts at generating life, which range from the controlled breeding of plants and animals to artificial insemination, cloning, and the manufacture of artificial wombs, are likewise attempts to create a world beyond straight time and outside of normative reproductive futurity. Moreover, de Men's abiogenesis refuses to give up on relationality and connection, however twisted his aims may be; as Muñoz writes, a truly utopian queer futurity works *against* anti-relationality "by insisting

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73. Muñoz, p. 91.

74. Yuknavitch, p. 263.

75. Yuknavitch, p. 259.

on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity”.<sup>76</sup> I argue that de Men’s unforgivable crime is his inability to distinguish living humans — however changed they have become aboard CIEL — from machines and non-human technologies, and his refusal to elicit consent for the procedures he performed; his crime is not — though it is coded this way in the novel — his desire to create life with the aid of technology. Seen in this light, de Men’s Hieronymus Bosch-esque final moments can be read not as the ironic deliverance of his *hamartia*, but as a brief moment of queer relational utopianism at the end of the world:

Slowly at first and then with increasing velocity and form, at de Men’s feet, children begin to materialize from nothingness and rise. First just a few, then many, a hundred or more. Naked children. The wail that emerges from Jean de Men reverbs my jaw; her head rocks back; some as-yet unnamed emotion beyond measure. The children of all colors and ages swarm from the ground up, devouring, consuming, like a swarm of bees at a honeycomb, until I see nothing left of Jean de Men beneath the multitudinous wave.<sup>77</sup>

In this scene, the singular, allegorical image of the Child is replaced with a multitude of children who spring literally from CIEL’s metal ground, defying the limitations of biology and technology. It is notable that these surreal, post-human children are both diverse in ways that CIEL’s inhabitants are no longer (“all colors and ages”), and cross over into the non-human (“like a swarm of bees at a honeycomb”). They are the realisation of de Men’s dream of reproduction, and like Buffalo Bill’s trademark — leaving the cocoon of a death’s head moth lodged in his victims’ throats, a symbol of death and birth — become insect almost as soon as they are born. The tragedy of de Men, in his final moments, has commonality with that of Joan and Leone — he can briefly realise his desire to people the world with a diverse, post-human version of humanity only when it is far too late. I am sympathetic to Halberstam’s reading of Buffalo Bill, and by extension of the monstrous, psychopathic character of de Men as well: “What he constructs is a posthuman gender, a gender beyond the body, beyond the human, and a veritable carnage of identity ... the

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76. Muñoz, p. 11.

77. Yuknavitch, p. 252.

cause for Buffalo Bill's extreme violence against women lies not in his gender confusion or his sexual orientation but in his humanist presumption that his sex and his gender and his orientation must all match-up to a mythic norm of white heterosexual masculinity".<sup>78</sup> Just like Buffalo Bill, de Men ('of men') is crushed and twisted by the straight time of heteropatriarchal capitalism until he believes that only in the normative representation of himself — on the battlefield, on the screen, in the operating room — can he forge an immortal identity to survive Joan's queering of the universe. Just as Buffalo Bill "emblemizes the ways in which gender is always posthuman, always a sewing job which stitches identity into a body bag", de Men eventually, if briefly, is able to do the same with the tactics of reproduction, queering them and giving them a post-human, collective form.<sup>79</sup>

Although Joan's recreation of life, in contrast with de Men's, is portrayed in a wholly positive light, a truly queer, truly utopian immortality could be formed from the unification of these two queer strategies — a relational queerness which embraces the complexities of gender and species. Such a queerness does not reject the future of the human species outright but does reject the allegorical image of the Child, understanding children as utopian cyborgs: diverse, multitudinous, not limited either to the biological, the gendered, or even the corporeal, and transforming into post-human forms from the moment they spring from the floor of an orbital space colony. Such cyborg strategies of reproduction must, as Sophie Lewis demands, include "not only abortion, miscarriage, menstruation and pregnancy ... but also other life-enabling forms of holding and letting go that do not involve anatomical uteri, such as trans mothering, end-of-life care, adoption, foster care and other practices that provide for births, better deaths or survival".<sup>80</sup> In relation to *The Book of Joan*, I would add immortality to these: another aspect of a reproductive poetics which moves the (post-)human towards the horizon of a utopian commons.

### *Walkaway*

Where Joan and de Men fight for their separate strategies of a predominantly biological

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78. Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), p. 164.

79. Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 176.

80. Sophie Lewis, 'Cyborg Uterine Geography: Complicating "Care" and Social Reproduction', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 8.3 (2018), 300–316 (p. 302).



immortality, the immortality of *Walkaway* escapes the biological as soon as it can. The novel generates two quite separate utopias: the fluid, movable, distributed communities of Walkaway are a *material* process utopia, built upon and working to surpass the tyranny of practical concerns such as resource availability and scarcity, division of labour, social structure, and commons organisation. On the other hand, the simulation of human minds inside Walkaway's distributed digital networks is a response to *metaphysical* concerns regarding human nature and post-human ethics. The two utopian worlds, crucially, are interdependent and cannot exist without each other. While the virtual world of informational immortality is, in some ways, akin to the world of the *Black Mirror* episode 'San Junipero', its simulated minds do not enjoy an embodied virtual existence in an artificially generated physical space — rather, they exist in the real world, interacting with the still-living through screens, speakers and cameras, manipulating the simulations of their own minds in the way a programmer would manipulate a piece of code, and, in the beginning, acutely struggling with a sense of abject horror stemming from the absence of their bodies. In one of the novel's most disturbing passages, one such "sim" is kept running by computer scientists for valuable data analysis even as she loses her mind: "It's such a terrible feeling. Everything I've just said, it's bullshit. There's no continuity. I'm not me. I'm just me enough to know that I'm not me [...]'. [...] The computer made a noise Iceweasel had never heard. Weird. Unearthly. A scream".<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, unlike the high-tech, corporate "data-cemetery" of TCKR Systems where Kelly and Yorkie's brains are uploaded in 'San Junipero', *Walkaway*'s virtual world is itself fully imbricated in material and physical issues: the brain scans, "too bulky to fully mirror", have to be physically transported out of zones without network connectivity so they can be uploaded to the cloud; and the computers which run the simulations must themselves be packed down and set up whenever the walkaways need to move.<sup>82</sup> Doctorow does not shy away from tackling head-on the economic and material concerns which, as Drage points out, are generally elided in 'San Junipero' and much other virtual reality media: "would individuals trust a corporate giant with their ever-after? What

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81. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 148.

82. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 167.

kind of guarantee could TCKR systems offer that they would keep a person's soul for eternity? Could this ever be profitable for any enterprise, or has their society changed so completely that payment and profit are no longer a priority?".<sup>83</sup> Doctorow mocks the sleek aesthetics and improbable economics of other virtual reality texts when one of his characters contemplates that "[w]hether 'real' data centers were neat, ranked terraces of aerodynamic hardware, that's not how walkaways did them. The word went out across the region for compute-power. People came with whatever horsepower they had [...] the collection of motley devices, sprinkled around the tunnels, linked by tangles of fiber in pink rubber sheaths, delivered compute cycles that made *Dis leap* into consciousness".<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, where the bland facade of TCKR Systems stands in sharp contrast to the nostalgic, technicolour, queer world which its virtual simulations offer, the aesthetics of Doctorow's setting and the form of the metaphysical immortality which appears within it are closely linked, both emerging out of a sense of surplus. The economic position of the walkaways — figured as default's surplus populations, as I have characterised them in relation to neoliberal capitalism in Chapter Two — are the first mode of surplus in *Walkaway*: "Default has no use for us except as a competition for other non-zottas ... We are surplus to default's requirements".<sup>85</sup> The second form of surplus is with the surplus material waste of capitalism, which permits the walkaways to live a life of 'fully automated luxury communism' in the wilderness beyond urban spaces. The *onsen* baths, waste-recycling breweries, 3D medicine, clothing, and food printers, drones, zeppelins, and spatially distributed, high-bandwidth wireless networks which define walkaway communities, as well as the futuristic technologies which allow them to effortlessly pack up and move to new locations to avoid discovery or attack, are all predicated on the "endless surplus of sacrifice zones, superfund sites, no-man's-lands and dead cities" which default has produced.<sup>86</sup> The third and final mode of surplus returns us to Muñoz's queer utopianism via his conception of a *queer surplus*, which itself draws on Bloch's concept of cultural surplus I also discussed in Chapter Two.

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83. Drage, p. 31.

84. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 143.

85. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 286.

86. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 316. On 'fully automated luxury communism', see: Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), p. 12.

As Muñoz writes, the utopian function of the queer — particularly queer art — is “enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here”. This surplus is aesthetic, camp or ornamental, gaudy, chaotic, unpredictable, a “distortion” which is not simply an addition to the core of the work, but a vital part of it, a “stuttering particularity that shoves one off course, out of straight time”. The “not quite here”, represented in queer aesthetic surplus, is a future-oriented source of hope, vitality, and opposition to the “hopeless heteronormative maps of the present”; furthermore, it “exceeds the functionalism of capitalist flows” and “conveys other modes of being that do not conform to capitalist maps of the world”.<sup>87</sup>

The aesthetic surplus of Walkaway is incompatible with the productive demands of capitalism in its ornamentation, its queer communal luxury, and the sense of joy it engenders. It is defined by an aesthetics of what Doctorow’s characters describe as ‘refu-luxury’, which throws together the utilitarian technologies and practical aesthetics of UNHCR-derived communal living areas with the impractical, the imaginative, and the luxurious. One of the community’s zeppelins, named *Better Nation*, is adorned on its underside with “cargo hooks, sensor packages, and gay illustrations of androgynous space-people dancing against a backdrop of cosmic pocket-litter: ringed saturnesques and glittering nebulae”. Walkaway is a distributed network of refugee communities, but the aesthetic differences between the original UNHCR camps and those of Walkaway are important to the walkaways, hence the tone of pride in the character Limpopo’s description of the Belt & Braces: “there was a world of difference between dishing up M.R.E.s to climate refus and serving fancy dry-ice cocktails made from wet-printers and powdered alcohol. No refugee camp ever went through quite so many cocktail parasols and perfect-knot swizzle sticks”. As a result of this politics of luxury, Walkaway communities enjoy a life that the surplus populations of default could not imagine: “power, water, fresh hydroponics, and soft beds. Took about three hours a day each to keep the whole place running. Spent the rest of the time re-creating a Greek open-air school, teaching each other music and physics and realtime poetry”.<sup>88</sup>

Through this aesthetic commitment, Doctorow’s novel can be understood to obscure

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87. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 147.

88. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, pp. 90, 59, 76.

the hardships and traumas faced by refugees in the present, portraying an unsettled and homeless life as a fun adventure in living otherwise, in much the same way as *New York 2140* never fully commits to representing the true horror of flooding the planet's coastlines. However, like *Exit West*, Doctorow's novel is crucially utopian in its construction of a mobile commons, refusing to commit to describing the migrant condition as one constituted purely of suffering and, like Hamid's novel, is fuelled by a sense that the human of the future might just be — and *should* be — a human forever on the move. At the culmination of a conflict between the core group of walkaways and a new group who take over their community and institute a reputation economy, the character Limpopo simply calls on her friends to leave and build a new community elsewhere. To the incredulous coup leader, she says:

“We're called walkaways because we *walk away*. [...] We can live like it's the first days of a better world, not like it's the first pages of an Ayn Rand novel. Have this place, but you can't have us. We withdraw our company.”<sup>89</sup>

Gesturing well beyond Hamid's near-present utopia, however, *Walkaway* contends that the human of the future will travel beyond death itself.

This move beyond death — the fundamental utopian horizon of *Walkaway*'s commons poetics — is doubly queer. It is queer firstly in terms of the sexual and gender identities of those who become the original immortals of the novel — an anti-normative, anti-straight collective whose association with the end of death is both a repudiation, as in *The Book of Joan*, of a lived history of queer death, and a precondition of this immortality emerging in the first place. The zotta characters we meet in the novel are white, heterosexual, upper class men and their normative families, obsessed not only with holding on to wealth but with the allegorical figure of the Child as the insurance for this wealth's future existence. The central group of walkaways includes Natalie, a bisexual woman who has relationships with two women, Gretyl and Nadie; Seth, a black man in a relationship with Tam, a trans woman; and Limpopo, a Latina woman in a relationship with a white man. For all this, *Walkaway* is far from an unproblematically queer novel, and I side fully with Julia Powles in her assessment that despite the “laudable diversity of its characters”, the depictions of these characters in *Walkaway* is laden with a “weirdly conservative heteronormativity”,

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89. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 118.

apparent, for instance, in the fact that Tam is “rarely mentioned without anatomical commentary” and that Natalie and Gretyl’s love, “though compelling, fails to resist elaboration through the prism of a dysfunctional maternal relationship”.<sup>90</sup> Doctorow’s novel nonetheless puts forward the claim, like Yuknavitch, that these characters, in their oppositional diversity, require nothing less than immortality to survive and escape the violence, repression, apocalypse and trauma of straight time: precariousness; homelessness; climate crisis; and AI-targeted drone bombing. As Drage argues of the queer immortality utopia of ‘San Junipero’, “Kelly and Yorkie’s queer romance was not the coincidental winner of *Black Mirror*’s happy ending, but the *condition* for the appearance of that hopeful future: their queerness *is* the horizon for their second chance at life”.<sup>91</sup> Immortality in *Walkaway* is likewise not just a scientific breakthrough or an elegant solution to a complex programming puzzle, but also materially, metaphysically, and aesthetically an evocation of a queer surplus, and is thus the utopian promise of a safe, secure, communal and queer world beyond capitalist realism.

The surplus nature of *Walkaway*’s immortality is evident in a number of its aspects. After Dis, the original simulated mind, learns to keep herself in an ‘envelope’ of parameters which prevent her from having an existential crisis at the reality of her physical death, she engages with another form of surplus: “Being liberated from the vagaries of the flesh and being able to adjust her mind’s parameters so she stayed in an optimal working state turned Dis into a powerhouse researcher”.<sup>92</sup> This paradoxical combination of moderation (“the numbness, that’s the sim, it’s trying to keep you from going nonlinear. It’s damping your reactions”) and excess (“I’m going to knock the compute-time to execute a sim down by *two orders of magnitude*. We’re about to get a fuck-load more bots. As in, no one will ever have to die again”), leads, by the end of the novel, to a world whose inhabitants are on the way towards vanquishing not only death, precarity, and need, but also the limitations of the human body and physical brain, becoming in the process post-human.<sup>93</sup>

The post-human and the queer are natural bedfellows — both ontological modes are

90. Julia Powles, ‘Walking Away from Hard Problems’, *Crooked Timber*, 2017 <<http://crookedtimber.org/2017/05/04/walking-away-from-hard-problems/>> [accessed 20 August 2019].

91. Drage, p. 35.

92. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 143.

93. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, pp. 392, 158.

premised on the argument that the human, and life more broadly, must be constituted beyond the dominant humanist conception of the white cisgender man as the measure of humanity. In the critical work of Muñoz, Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, Mel Y. Chen, and others, the other subjectivities centred by the intersections of post-human and queer theory include women, people of colour, queers, monsters, cyborgs, and animals, along with liminal, fluid, and mobile categories and identities; more generally, queer theory and post-human theory reject individual experience as a framework for identity construction, placing the common, the collective, and the multitude at the focal point of such constructions.<sup>94</sup> Queerness is about the production and experience of identity through desire, and as Patricia MacCormack argues, the “creations of connections — life as relation not dividualation — is posthuman living. Desire is, put most simply, the need to create connections with other things, not to have or know but collapse the self with other(s). In this sense posthumanism is a form of queer desire, or queer ‘life’”.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the novel, when the walkaways are isolated, undergoing existential and moral crises, or feel hatred towards the people working to kill them, they remind each other as a kind of mantra that “our identities exist in combination with other people”, or that “[e]very human was a hyper-dense node of intense emotional and material investment”.<sup>96</sup> This wording is reminiscent of the way in which Lorey, via Butler, casts precariousness as “‘co-extensive’ at birth, since survival depends from the beginning on social networks, on sociality and the work of others”.<sup>97</sup> To employ Lorey’s model here, I argue that, when embedded in the socialities of Walkaway, the walkaways oppose and throw off the governmental precarisation through which the zottas manage their surplus populations, and instead construct a new commons within which intrinsic, existential precariousness is collectively managed. To illustrate this point with a plot twist

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94. For key interventions, see: Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, ‘Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2 (2015), 183–207.

95. Patricia MacCormack, ‘Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. by Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 111–26 (p. 113).

96. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, pp. 396, 161.

97. Lorey, p. 19.

worthy of the best didactic utopia, near the novel's conclusion, the walkaways take in the same coup leader from whom they had chosen to walk away, as a result of which Limpopo offers the following pearl of wisdom:

“I came back to help you because helping people is what you do, whether or not they’re in your thing, because that’s the best world to live in.”

“First days of a better nation,” he said, with a little sarcasm.<sup>98</sup>

In its final chapters *Walkaway* depicts the stage that Lorey describes as “the exodus of the many, a constituting, an organizing, of the manifold singularities”, which emerges specifically “in order to ‘return’ and fundamentally change the existing social relations”; in the world of the novel this “return” is depicted through the normalisation of walkaway as a form of political and social organisation.<sup>99</sup> Lorey writes that such an exodus can emerge through the “invention of common notions”, and *Walkaway*’s common notion, immortality, is one which renders even existential precariousness, the fact of human death, only one problem among the many solved in its utopia.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, this commonness is derived from, and re-inscribes, a queer collectivity. Through their gradual transition into a community of queer post-human immortals, the characters of *Walkaway* fully escape precarised straight time and the capitalist systems which maintain it, and transition into a post-precarious utopian horizon which only queerness can produce.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the utopian immortality of *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan* is relational and therefore collective in the way that queer thought can so powerfully be, especially when it breaks through a straight, capitalist form of time which threatens to normalise, atomise, and individuate its subjects, and instead seeks out queer ways of “becoming-collective-across-time”. Muñoz describes this form of relationality in a particularly captivating mode in one of his final pieces of writing before his death:

Queer thought is, in large part, about casting a picture of arduous modes of relationality that persist in the world despite stratifying demarcations and taxonomies of being,

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98. Doctorow, *Walkaway*, p. 351.

99. Lorey, p. 102.

100. Lorey, p. 102.



classifications that are bent on the siloing of particularity and on the denigrating of any expansive idea of the common and commonism. [...] The incommensurable thought project of inhumanity is the active self-attunement to life as varied and unsorted correspondences, collisions, intermeshings, and accords between people and nonhuman objects, things, formations, and clusterings.<sup>101</sup>

Unambiguously linking queerness to post-humanism, Muñoz here offers a template for a new way of understanding life in excess of the human. In *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan*, an actively anti-capitalist immortality, born out of revolutionary struggle and a demand for the recognition of immortality *as* a queer form of life, is figured as one of these “arduous modes of relationality that persist in the world”. Diverse to the end, the immortality of Joan and the walkaways — and briefly, corruptedly, even of de Men — is an immortality predicated upon “the common and commonism” in all its multiplicities.

These two novels are among the most explicit and ultimately totalising utopias I have examined in this thesis. Where Hamid’s and Robinson’s novels and Spahr’s poetry offer partial glimpses and hopeful, shining articulations of better worlds, Doctorow’s and Yuknavitch’s worlds are populated by recognisably human beings, alongside and often in collaboration with non-human ones. Hamid’s migrants, Spahr’s occupiers, and Robinson’s New Yorkers make use of technologies, tactics, and *dispositifs* which allow them to cross borders, travel through time, survive both natural and engineered disasters, and most importantly of all, imagine and create utopian commons in the lacunae of their capitalist totalities. For all this they remain merely, if rewardingly, human: always exposed to precariousness and needing the commons and collectivities they create all the more for this biological and ontological fragility. In *Walkaway* and *The Book of Joan*, this system is turned gloriously on its head — suddenly, it is the utopian dreamers, organisers, and creators who are immortal, and the previously total and unbroachable structure of capitalism itself seems shaky, precarious, and on the wane. What places these two novels firmly within the corpus of commons poetics texts that have emerged since 2008 is their unequivocal concern with utopia as a never-finished process, as a collective mode of being, and as a space which emerges from within capitalism to oppose it. To highlight this final point, at

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101. Muñoz and others, pp. 209-10.

the conclusion of *The Book of Joan*, the revolutionaries who had once permitted Jean de Men to come to power pilot CIEL into the sun, ending capitalism for good; near the end of *Walkaway*, the walkaways are joined by members of the very private police forces who had once worked to destroy them at the behest of default. It is these climactic transitions in political power, as much as the ontological revolution of immortality, which decide the fates of the old systems. In these novels, utopia does not happen outside capitalism — revolutionary action is at last able to tear capitalism asunder from within.

## Epilogue

This study has examined a set of post-2008 texts which, I have argued, challenge the logics and power of contemporary capitalism through the imagining of alternative social, political, and economic spaces for collective flourishing — a literary tendency I have described as *commons utopias*.

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, literary utopias have been, and remain, crucial tools for helping readers and audiences learn from the oppositional energies of past struggles, understand what is missing from the present, and imagine concrete alternatives which make this missing element a reality. Like many utopian texts which have opposed the dominant powers of their time, and in particular like the critical utopias of the 1960s and 70s which are their direct precursors in the utopian literary genre, these texts “have added to the ways in which we perceive the dissatisfaction of the present and tune into the pull of future possibilities”, and take their place in the “oppositional dialogue that informs contemporary radical politics”.<sup>1</sup> In this historical moment, the return of utopian figurations — even if that return is still piecemeal and uncoordinated — signals an irrepressible social desire to build a better society from within the shell of the old. The corpus of texts I have examined in this thesis is small, predominantly because of the specific combination of features for which I was searching: demonstrable commitment to anti-capitalist politics; a reading of the present not as foreclosed, but as engaged in an imaginative, prefigurative conversation with an ongoing future; and the use of commons not only at the level of narrative and theme, but also as a formal and aesthetic strategy. However, the wider genres and literary movements within which these texts circulate are repositories for other utopian and quasi-utopian imaginings: political, anticipatory, and innovative in their own valuable ways. Like the utopian worlds of Whileaway, Anarres, Mattapoisett, and Triton examined by Moylan in *Demand the Impossible*; like Robinson’s Mars and Octavia Butler’s Acorn; the worlds imagined in these novels and poems “help sustain us after long meetings and political defeats”, “provoke our imaginations as we work out new strategies to meet our needs and desires”, and “challenge us to play with alternatives and thereby break out of

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1. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, pp. 188, 190.

the ideological chains that have restricted our socialized imaginations”.<sup>2</sup>

Two key innovations distinguish the commons utopias I have been analysing in this thesis from the utopian literature which has served as precursor and inspiration for them, and from other contemporary writing which is political, speculative, or both. Firstly, as I have argued on the basis of concrete examples from each of the primary texts in this thesis, they locate oppositional and revolutionary energy specifically in *commons* predicated on equality, sharing, accessibility, oppositional energy, and future dreaming, rather than any other organisational structure such as the state, representative democracy, the vanguard party, or exilic intentional communities. The works do so through the use of a *commons poetics*, an aesthetic, formal, and thematic toolkit which evokes and depicts commons at a number of textual levels.

If we can broadly describe this first distinction as *spatial* — based on the arguments I have made in Chapter One, and throughout the thesis, that utopias and commons should be recognised primarily as spatial forms produced by a multitude of collective processes of inhabiting — the second distinction is fundamentally *temporal*. In many of the preceding chapters, particularly in Chapter Two, I have addressed the claim that under late capitalism, in what Berlant calls the ongoing present, the future does not have an unfamiliar, alternative, distinctive quality, but is simply *missing*, replaced with loops, glitches, and modes of continual survival born of precarity under late capitalism. In a dialogue with Adorno, Bloch evokes the profound utopianism of a line by playwright Bertold Brecht, “something’s missing”.<sup>3</sup> The utopian element missing from the present is nothing less than its future — the possibility that tomorrow will be different. As the protagonist Phil, played by Bill Murray, says in the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* (dir. Harold Ramis): “Well what if there is no tomorrow? There wasn’t one today”.

In this sense, the task of contemporary oppositional social movements and of the cultural works which emerge alongside them is to challenge the all-consuming spatial and temporal hegemony of capitalism by demanding, imagining, and engaging with alternative futures, and to do so *prefiguratively*, by pulling those futures back to do their radical work

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2. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 194.

3. Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 15.

on the present, and to return to it the sense of the future as an open space of potential and possibility once more. As Rebecca Solnit argues:

These other versions of what revolution means suggest that the goal is not so much to go on and create the world *as to live in that time of creation*, and with this the emphasis shifts from institutional power to the power of consciousness and the enactments of daily life, toward a revolution that does not institute its idea of perfection but opens up the freedom for each to participate in inventing the world. [...] The revolutionary days I have been outlining are days in which *hope is no longer fixed on the future: it becomes an electrifying force in the present*.<sup>4</sup>

The work of activists in the real world and of oppositional utopian literature is similar in that both work to electrify the present through representation, discourse, and imagination, as well as the labour of material social reproduction and resistance to dominant power in which activist movements engage: “activists reclaim the streets and occasionally seize a Bastille or topple a Berlin Wall, but the terrain of their action is usually immaterial, the realm of the symbolic, political discourse, collective imagination. They enter the conversation forcefully, but it remains a conversation”.<sup>5</sup> Commons utopias are a new, valuable, though not unexpected voice in this conversation, as new forms of predatory, precarising capitalism emerge in the wake of the GFC and the ascent of neoliberalism to increasing global dominance.

The vision I have painted here is certainly inspiring and evocative, suggestive of a cultural sense that the new utopian texts of the last decade hold a renewed focus on the “process of willed transformation” and “activism required for social revolution” which was last apparent in the critical utopias, signalling a return to the engaged, militant, passionately anti-hegemonic utopian discourses of the 1960s and 70s, after decades spent in the wilderness of political disillusionment, structural stagnation, and postmodernist hesitation.<sup>6</sup> And indeed, if this were the whole story, there would be no real need for this thesis; a simple updated critical bibliography would suffice to highlight new developments in the utopian literary

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4. Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), p. 95, emphasis added.

5. Solnit, p. 65.

6. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 195.

field. However, while activist movements work ceaselessly to bring about more just and more equal worlds accessible to all, the global situation is not nearly so hopeful; crucially, daily life for global human and non-human populations is more precarious now than it was in the 1960s and 70s. One of the key arguments I have made in this study is that late capitalism has damaged not only our ability to imagine the future otherwise, but has gravely endangered the potential for the flourishing — and perhaps even survival — of the planet's many interlinked species in the decades and centuries to come.

The state to which anthropogenic climate change — precipitated by successive advances in industrial and post-industrial capitalism over the last two hundred years — will bring the planet's climate, water cycle, and ecological systems in the future is extremely difficult to predict. Nevertheless, as the recent studies I presented in the Introduction and Chapter Two show, current rates of carbon dioxide emissions will undoubtedly have a catastrophic effect on the planet in the next century and beyond if not curbed. Recent investigative analysis has shown that a small number of corporations are responsible for the majority of these emissions.<sup>7</sup> The same tendencies are borne out in other areas, such as social equality and wealth distribution: while the effects of the GFC continue to be felt by low-income populations, the wealthiest individuals continue to amass ever greater percentages of the world's wealth. Likewise, while citizens of nations in the Global North are able to cross borders with ease, millions of others cannot escape the precarious conditions of their existences. The effects of climate change, inequality, environmental destruction, and austerity are felt more acutely — as dangers to life rather than precarities to be survived — by surplus populations, women, impoverished people, labourers in the Global South, people of colour, and disabled people; these effects are intersectional and mutually reinforcing. The worldwide rise of populist leaders, the resurgence of nationalist and fascist ideologies, and the emergence of threats to liberal institutions including democracy, the right to protest, and freedom of expression should be seen as concomitant responses, by those who hold power, to instability, precarity, and anxiety in the face of an increasingly uncertain future. Time to change the balance of forces in the world is running out, in a multitude of

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7. Paul Griffin, *CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017* (London: CDP, 2017) <<https://www.cdp.net/en/reports/downloads/2327>> [accessed 8 May 2020].

ways which had not been considered possible even thirty years ago.

In response to the precarity of the contemporary moment, this thesis has argued that, if anti-capitalist movements are to pose a serious and committed challenge to the forces of capitalism, the stories they tell about themselves and the better worlds they seek to create must be motivated by three factors: a commitment to realistically depict the present, a belief that the future can be different, and most importantly, a militant and radical hope. Hope, as Bloch reminds us, is a source both of radical energy and of vulnerability: “Hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naive optimism. The category of danger is always within it”.<sup>8</sup> Moylan echoes this sentiment when he contends, in his response to Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, that “[t]he future is never certain. Utopia is never fixed once and for all”.<sup>9</sup> Hope underscores commons utopias because, like the utopianism they portray, it is a reflexive and mutable process, a utopian act, which connects activist energy in the present to its consequences and possibilities in the future. The precariousness of life lived in hope demands the construction of resilient, caring institutions of mutual aid and collective solidarity. To return to the reflections of the Occupy Oakland activists we encountered in Chapter Three, hope serves as a hermeneutic for living in the world anticipated by all anti-capitalist struggles:

But the questions still remain: what would it mean to actually take care of each other and to collectively sustain and nurture an unstoppable insurrectionary struggle? How can we dismantle and negate the oppressive power relationships and toxic interpersonal dynamics we carry with us into liberated spaces? How can we make room for the myriad of revolts within the revolt that are necessary to upend all forms of domination?<sup>10</sup>

It is the suggestion of this study that a critical, oppositional hope is crucial for transforming these utopian anticipations into concrete realities. In the past years, such fragments of hope have been taken up in a variety of activist movements including but certainly not limited to Black Lives Matter, the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests, the school strikes against climate change inaction, anti-government protests in Hong Kong and across the Middle East, and actions against the US-Mexico border regime. Future texts will necessarily adopt the

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8. Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 16.

9. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 140.

10. Some Oakland Antagonists, “The Rise and Fall of the Oakland Commune”.



energies of these oppositional moments and weave stories out of and beyond them, because, as US politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently said in conversation with climate activist Greta Thunberg:

I learned that hope is not something that you have. Hope is something that you create, with your actions. Hope is something you have to manifest into the world, and once one person has hope, it can be contagious. Other people start acting in a way that has more hope.<sup>11</sup>

Hope is manifested in Robinson's flooded, defiant New York, in Doctorow's beautifully chaotic wilderness communes, in Yuknavitch's caves crawling with unimaginable new species, in Hamid's indefatigable migrant cities, and in Spahr's riotous barricades. These imaginary worlds offer us, as readers and activists, the material, spatial, and utopian manifestations of hope.

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11. Emma Brockes, 'When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Met Greta Thunberg: "Hope Is Contagious"', *The Guardian*, 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/29/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-met-greta-thunberg-hope-contagious-climate>> [accessed 19 November 2019].

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