THE POLITICS OF UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY BLACK LITERATURE

By

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This study demonstrates how the concept of utopia offers new insights into the convergence of art and politics in black literature. It is in part a response to Dohra Ahmad’s 2009 call to address the nearly “complete absence” of scholarship on the black literary utopia. It takes an interdisciplinary and transnational approach to elucidating how black authors used utopian and dystopian literary forms to work for social transformation during the last third of the twentieth century, and historicizes their relationship to the social, racial, and political realities of the “age of globalization.”

Chapter 1 introduces this project and develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for reading black utopian literature. To do so, it places the ideas of black studies scholars like Paul Gilroy, Frantz Fanon, and others in conversation with utopian studies scholars like Ruth Levitas, Fredric Jameson, and Ernst Bloch. Chapter 2 explores the dialectic of dystopia and utopia in the fiction of American author John A. Williams. It concentrates on the radical politics of two works from the turbulent 1960s: *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) and *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1967). A postscript notes the political shifts in the more sober later novels *Jacob’s Ladder* (1987) and *Clifford’s Blues* (1999). Chapter 3 offers utopian readings of Kenyan author
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novels *Petals of Blood* (1975), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and *Matigari* (1987). It argues that the drastic aesthetic transformations observable in Ngũgĩ’s “messianic” fiction are related to his utopian politics. Chapter 4 discusses Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997). It argues that these “healing narratives” represent a distinctive utopian sub-form, and that these novels attempt to revive the waning utopian desires of the 1960s while critiquing the problematic gender politics of that decade’s Black Freedom Movement. Chapter 5 concludes by speculating about the shape of black utopian literature after the millennium through readings of Nigerian-British author Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia* (2001), Jamaican-American author Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and American author Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006).
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Utopia may signify “nowhere,” but in black literature, utopia is everywhere. Paul Gilroy has repeatedly remarked that the racial conflicts of modernity have given rise to black cultures and countercultures motivated by powerful “utopian desires” (Atlantic 37). For Gilroy, these desires are readable throughout the pan-African cultural landscape in a myriad of communities, political movements, modes of identity and solidarity, and aesthetic forms of expression that all bespeak deep longings for a radically transfigured society. Although the discrete utopian praxes through which these desires take form can be widely divergent, utopia has nonetheless been at the very epicenter of countless efforts to achieve better ways of life. Utopian desires are discernible in pan-Africanist movements dating back to the 1700s. They fueled slave revolts, spurred the Haitian revolution of 1803, and propelled nineteenth century abolition movements. In the twentieth century, they were manifest in racial “uplift” projects, in Negritude, in anticolonial nationalisms, and in mid-century Black Freedom Movements. They are still palpable in local coalitions and alterglobalization movements. Yearnings for better forms of collectivity have forged affirmative and often subversive alternative communities in hush harbors, maroon enclaves, churches, universities, all-black towns, and liberation organizations. They have molded such cultural phenomena as the “transformed and transforming psychology” that radiated out of Harlem in the 1920s, the transnational “radical collectivity” catalyzed by the Black Arts Movement during the ‘60s and ‘70s, and the progressive transcontinental hip-hop culture that resisted the neo-conservatism of the ‘80s and early ‘90s. Echoing Black Arts proponents like Larry Neal, Gilroy insists that culture, politics, performativity, social action, and aesthetics are indivisible from one another, and he further contends that there is a “resolutely utopian politics” running through a long history, and a vast geography, of black aesthetic and expressive forms.
Whether this politics is militantly announced or carefully disguised, it is widely evident in music, philosophy, oral storytelling, and written literature.

This project focuses on literature by African American and African authors, and demonstrates how an emphasis on utopia offers new insights into the black literary tradition and its politics. To paraphrase Neal, it conceptualizes black utopian literature as a particular form of art *in* politics created to engage in the real-world art *of* liberatory politics. Utopian literature is an aesthetic vehicle in which desires for sociopolitical transformation have found some of their most powerful and enduring expressions. In it, the political and the aesthetic converge in pursuit of transforming the course of history and the contours of society, and historically, the communities depicted in literary utopias have influenced the shape of modern social organization. Utopia is indeed everywhere in black literature, which teems with writing that “resolutely refuses to accept the world that we have and cries out for a better one” (Bould, “Revolutionary” 76). It thus offers a rich archive in which to examine the politics of utopia at work, as well as the artistic forms through which these politics take shape. Works of black utopian literature can alter social consciousness by offering radical new perspectives on the world they desire to change, as well as compelling intimations of what a changed world might look like, particularly with respect to racial divisions and other systemic forms of hierarchy that affect local, national, and global communities.

This utopian archive, however, remains largely unexamined. Despite the fact that the utopianism in black literary politics “should be obvious from even the most cursory historical reflection,” until very recently there has been a nearly “complete absence” of scholarship in this area (Ahmad 5). In *Landscapes of Hope*, a first-of-its-kind 2009 study of anti-colonial utopianism in America, Dohra Ahmad contends that “the black literary utopia has yet evaded
serious study” (131). She is essentially correct. There exist only a handful of focused, full-length studies comparable in scope to Ahmad’s. The still-small corpus of essay-length works does not represent a coordinated effort, nor do these studies share an agreed-upon methodology.  

Historically, black literary and cultural studies have mostly eschewed the question of utopia. When it has been broached, it has remained largely a peripheral concern, when not dismissed entirely as hopeless idealism. Gilroy is the only major figure in black cultural studies who has written repeatedly and at length about utopia, and who has theorized a utopian hermeneutics for explicating the cultural politics of black liberation. Conversely, while the field of “utopian studies” has been developing theoretical models for reading utopias since it emerged from the social upheavals of the 1960s, there is little published utopian scholarship on literature by black authors with the notable exceptions of novels by Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Nalo Hopkinson. However, studies of their work tend to concern themselves foremost with its generic status as science fiction (sf) due to the fact that many utopian scholars, following Darko Suvin, approach the literary utopia as “the sociopolitical subgenre” of sf. Lyman Tower Sargent’s chapter on colonial and postcolonial utopias in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* is indicative of a developing strand of utopian scholarship that is turning its attention to literature outside the Anglo-American tradition, but this remains in its early stages.

Ahmad’s work thus represents a rare, productive combination of black cultural studies and utopian studies approaches, and she writes that she intends her book “in part as an opening gesture toward what [she hopes] will be many more investigations” (9). This project is, in part, a response to Ahmad’s gesture. Beyond merely filling a void, however, it is intended to make a small contribution to the opening of a *new* intellectual and political space between fields of study that have had little interchange with one another, a space that has the utopian potential to be
mutually productive and even transformatively enriching. This project, then, reflects a utopian desire to demonstrate how a focus on the concept of utopia can offer new insights into the intersection of politics and aesthetics in black literature, and, in turn, how black literature offers a wealth of resources that can enhance our understanding, and practice, of utopia.

The Scope and Shape of this Project

What follows is an attempt at further progress toward defining, theorizing, cataloging, historicizing, and above all, reading black utopian literature. No inquiry can be truly comprehensive of course, and this is particularly the case given the vast array of under-examined literary texts in play here. While Chapter 1 provides a general framework for reading black utopian literature, Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 offer extensive analyses of individual texts. Additionally, rather than offering a historical or comparative survey, this project inclines toward in-depth analyses and largely confines its attentions to a single period amid a rich history of utopian writing: the decades between the 1960s and the millennium. However, while these analyses are deeply concerned with texts’ historical context, they will also show how these texts employ political and aesthetic elements with roots in a long tradition of literary and cultural expression.

This introduction elaborates an operative definition of utopia, and develops the utopian theory that will be put to use in subsequent readings of specific literary works. Chapter 2 examines the dialectic of dystopia and utopia in four novels by American author John A. Williams: The Man Who Cried I Am (1967), Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light (1969), Jacob’s Ladder (1987), and Clifford’s Blues (1999). Its analysis of these texts tracks variations in Williams’s approach and tone in response to historical changes, and is particularly concerned with the relationships between these works and the political turmoil of the 1960s, as well as its aftermath. Chapter 3 offers utopian readings of Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s three
“postcolonial” novels: Petals of Blood (1975), Devil on the Cross (1982), and Matigari (1987). It argues that the drastic aesthetic transformations that occur across this succession of “messianic” utopian novels are deeply related to the problems of utopian representation. Further, it explores how these problems intertwine with those engendered by the novels’ world-historical context of post-1960s neocolonial Kenya. Chapter 4 explores three novels by African-American women: Alice Walker’s Meridian (1976), Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters (1980), and Toni Morrison’s Paradise (1997). These “healing narratives” represent a distinctive utopian sub-form. During the last quarter of the twentieth-century, these three novels attempt to revive, but also revise, the waning utopian desires of the 1960s, as well as the problematic gender politics of that decade’s Black Freedom Movement. Chapter 5 concludes by speculating about the shape of black utopian literature after the millennium through readings of Nigerian-British author Ben Okri’s In Arcadia (2001), Jamaican-American author Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely (2004), and American author Colson Whitehead’s Apex Hides the Hurt (2006). All of these readings are faithful to the individual texts, but they are not intended to stand alone. Rather, in combination with the theory elaborated in this introduction, it is hoped that these analyses will provide useful tools for further reading.

While the rationale for choosing these texts will ultimately best come into focus through the analyses of the texts themselves, it is worth a few comments at this point. Foremost, these texts have deep ties to a long history of black utopianism, a history that overflows any single “national” history or literature. While this collection of works cannot be said to be comprehensively “pan-African,” the choice of texts by authors from multiple nations reflects an approach that crosses national borders for a number of reasons. Not the least is a gesture toward a pan-African frame of reference. Additionally, this study is in sympathy with Apollo Amoko’s
“utopian desire to liberate the study of literature from the tyranny of . . . latitudes and longitudes” (*Postcolonialism* 26). However, this does not entail uprooting these texts from their historical, material, and cultural contexts—quite the contrary. The readings conducted here are locally situated and deeply historically embedded. Just as they avoid universalizing abstractions, they similarly avoid confining their approach strictly to abstracted “national” literary imaginaries. These choices are thus also in sympathy with what Paul Jay calls the “transnational turn” in literary studies, a shift “away from scholarly practices and critical paradigms rooted in the nation” as a figure of “home” and for “a shared human experience” (16). A transnational purview reflects a fidelity to the texts themselves, most of which explicitly thematize the very ways in which “literature is becoming increasingly difficult to understand without recognizing its relationship to a complicated web of transnational histories linked to the historical process of globalization” (Jay 26).

However, in order to avoid uncritically espousing a “rhetoric” of globalization “that disturbingly echoes that of global capitalism,” this project emphasizes the “dialectical relationship” between “particularity and totality” (Schueller 24; Jay 30). In doing so, it focuses on local conditions while also showing how individual texts dramatize the ways in which these conditions (even when the locality in question is imagined as a “nation”) are intercalated in racial, economic, social, and political conditions that traverse national and continental boundaries. Indeed, such a perspective in black literature can be traced back at least as far as *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), but it is ever more crucial in the context of late-capitalist globalization amidst which these texts were written and received, and amidst which they are being reconsidered here. Finally, and most significantly, this work agrees with the position that Gilroy has taken throughout his career: namely, that black culture “cannot be contained neatly
within national boundaries,” and that different “unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere” (“Diaspora” 154). Black utopianism has always had transnational dimensions. Just as “the international slave system” gave rise to “its antithesis in the form of transnational movements for self-emancipation,” the late-twentieth-century texts examined below represent localized calls for liberation that are informed by the transnational emancipatory politics of the 1960s and early ‘70s, and draw from a variety of cultural and political sources (Gilroy, “Diaspora” 158). Several of them advance utopian counterpolitics that acknowledge global interconnections for the specific purpose of militating against capitalist globalization itself.

This project’s transnational perspective thus also reflects the fact that globalization is both thematized in many of the literary texts discussed and exerts formative pressures on all of their utopian politics. The international opposition to slavery and colonialism speaks to the fact that an intrinsically racist modern capitalist “world-system” has existed for five centuries. However, without rehearsing “The Great Globalization Debate,” late-twentieth-century black utopian literature bears out the claims made by thinkers like Gilroy, W.E.B. Du Bois, Immanuel Wallerstein, Arjun Appadurai, Howard Winant, Bret Benjamin, Michael Denning, and Fredric Jameson, who argue that a radical restructuring of the world-system began around 1945. This restructuring was marked by an accelerating transition from international toward supranational or multinational systems of political economy, and became truly global after the end of the Cold War in 1989. The following are the characteristics of globalization most pertinent to this study:

- “Action at a distance (whereby the actions of social agents in one locale can come to have significant consequences for ‘distant others’).”
- “Time-space compression” in a “shrinking world” fostered by communications technologies.
• Permeable borders and “accelerating interdependence” among nations, societies, and economies.\textsuperscript{13}

• “Increasingly globalized” patterns of “migration,” a smoothing of space that nonetheless exists in tension with a stratified “new pattern of wealth and inequality.”\textsuperscript{14}

• A “spectacular expansion of transnational corporations,”\textsuperscript{15} and the ascendancy of supranational finance capital through “banks and international organizations (the IMF and the World Bank, for example),” which some have likened to an imperialist “invisible government” that usurps national sovereignties.\textsuperscript{16}

• A post-Bretton Woods shift from European colonial domination to a “system of U.S. global hegemony.”\textsuperscript{17}

• The absorption of “culture” by “capital” and the consolidation of a “mass culture” with a “global reach.”\textsuperscript{18}

Howard Winant argues that “globalization” is also “a re-racialization of the world” (New Politics 151). His contention is that “the period since World War II” has been a long and bumpy “transitional era,” in which “a new world racial system began to emerge” (Ghetto 291).

According to Winant, since the postwar “break,” racism “has largely been transformed from a system of domination to a system of hegemony,” but it “still distributes advantages and privileges,” “it still pervades the exercise of political power,” and “it has greatly increased its ability to incorporate opposition” (Ghetto 293, emphasis in original). Bret Benjamin further observes that the changing racial dynamics of the postwar years were influenced by a new set of “antagonisms” that “condition[ed] the parallel ascendance” of both a new economic order and a worldwide array of liberation movements (xiv). This period’s “global cultural turn” also occasioned new “problem[s] of literary politics,” some of which will be examined in the following pages (B. Benjamin 69, xxxii).

Globalization, culture, race, and utopia are bound up in an intricate relationship, and this project explores how authors have negotiated these intricacies in order to forge a contemporary black utopian literary politics. For the purpose of tracking these developments, it will prove
useful to divide the “age of globalization” into two distinct sub-periods, the second of which is our primary concern. Scholars in the fields of economics, African American studies, postcolonial studies, and utopian studies alike locate the dividing line that separates these periods somewhere between 1966 and 1968. This historical juncture witnessed an economic crisis in the world-system, the stalling of the American Civil Rights Movement, the collapse of African anticolonial nationalisms, and the ascension of new political radicalisms around the world.\(^{19}\)

The decision to concentrate on the historical period inaugurated by these events is also related in part to this project’s response to Ahmad’s invitation for further study. It “picks up” where her project “leaves off.” *Landscapes of Hope* covers one particular utopian “cycle.” After the early modern proliferation of utopian texts that began with Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and included Campanella’s *Civitas Solis* (1602) and Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* (1624), a second “flowering” of utopian literature began with Edward Bellamy’s watershed “developmentalist” utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888). Ahmad follows transnational developments and concentrates on developmentalism—the ideology of teleological social and technological “progress”—in several utopias, black and white, during rise and fall of high-colonialism between the 1880s and the beginning of World War II. However, subsequent to her reading of George Schuyler’s *Black Empire* (1936-1938), Ahmad makes a foray into the age of globalization in her discussion of *The Color Curtain* (1956), Richard Wright’s account of the 1955 Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia. Arnold Rampersad has argued that the Conference represents “the most concrete realization” of the “world of color” envisioned in W.E.B. Du Bois’s utopian novel *Dark Princess* (1928) (Ahmad 178). Yet at the same time, Ahmad contends that “what is really controlling the shape of Bandung is . . . various forms of neo-colonialism”; this reality, she observes, would cause the “anti-colonial dream” to emerge in later decades as “not utopia, but
corporate globalization, neo-colonial economic and cultural relations, and widespread acceptance of developmentalist values” (Ahmad 193-194). To be sure, the postwar “global expansion” of a developmentalist “Fordist-Keynesian economic paradigm” was able to “channel the seething rage and utopian longings of decolonization into forms more palatable to a world capitalist system” despite the warnings sounded by anticolonial intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (B. Benjamin 97, 55). The Bandung Conference thus already embodied the fissures and contradictions that would cause the end of one cycle of utopianism and the beginning of another. Numerous “Third World” independence movements were absorbed by a modern capitalist notion of “progress,” an ideology to which many liberal reformist leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement also subscribed. By 1968, it was clear that developmentalist utopianism had failed to deliver the transformed, egalitarian world it seemed to promise, and the tension between this reality and unfulfilled utopian desires fomented a new, more radical era. This utopianism found its way into new forms of literary expression.

The cycle that began in the 1960s and early ‘70s grew out of rapid, sweeping global changes during the span of a very few years. The literary works under consideration here were written by a generation of authors who witnessed, and in many cases participated in, tectonic sociopolitical shifts. While it reached its peak intensity during the “break” between 1966 and 1968, the period between 1960 and 1976 was marked by one of modern history’s great explosions of utopian energy. Black liberation movements frequently occupied the “vanguard” of the “change” driven by the period’s reinvigorated utopian desires, which also gave rise to the New Left, student movements, the women’s movement, and antiwar movements (Marable, Race 82). Fittingly, the period also inaugurated a third “flowering” of utopian literature that included an immense but under-recognized outpouring of “Black Power SF.” The new cycle of
black literary utopias that began during this moment has not ended, although we shall see that, especially after 1976, it has undergone a number of profound transformations in response to the unfolding of history.

Ultimately, the eruption of radicalism during the late ‘60s was short-lived, and even though it produced substantial and lasting sociopolitical achievements, it fell far short of its utopian goals. Jameson is one of many who argue that the process of globalization at once produced and assimilated the period’s utopian energies, which suffered the same fate as those of the previous cycle. He writes that the “forces of black and ‘minority,’ or Third World, movements everywhere, regionalisms . . . the student and women’s movements, as well as a host of struggles of other kinds” were caught in a “single process at work in First and Third Worlds, in global economy . . . a properly dialectical process, in which ‘liberation’ and domination are inextricably combined” (“Periodizing” 208, 207, emphasis in original). Ahmad and other utopian scholars agree that “free” market globalization “co-opts the language and imagery of liberation” such that “what looks like . . . solidarity actually serves to secure apparently limitless power for the globalizing forces of multinational industry” (Ahmad 198). Nevertheless, the cooptation of the 1960s’ utopian resurgence was by no means complete. Even in texts written decades later, the zeitgeist of the time, as well as its political desires, remains palpable in utopian and dystopian literature alike that responds to the successes and failures of that transformative era and its aftershocks. The political and aesthetic fluctuations observable in this literature speak most of all to the ways in which texts adapt to new historical developments while attempting to preserve, revive, or re-appropriate—but also reinvent—the political desires of the ‘60s in ways that focus on liberating transformations yet to come.
Of the many political trajectories examined here, there is a particularly readable tendency toward imagining ever-more “alter-global” challenges to the inequities of capitalist globalization and its new racial world-system. What emerges between 1967 and the millennium is a growing realization that “political communities can no longer be conceived, if they ever could with any degree of accuracy, as simply discrete worlds or as self-enclosed political spaces; they are enmeshed in complex structures of overlapping forces, relations, and networks” (Held & McGrew 41). This period thus witnesses a movement from failed utopian developmentalist reformism to a radical critique of the same, to a recognition of the need for revolutionary structural change, and finally toward a cognizance that utopian change, whether it is figured at the level of the individual body, a local community, a nation, or indeed the globe itself, requires linkages to a truly global collectivity.

Despite the atrophy that set in after the post-'60s political implosion that ended in 1976, and worsened after the alleged “End of the End of the End of Ideology” in 1989, the utopian legacy of the ‘60s has been carried forward in a literature with a protracting tendency to set two utopianisms in opposition to one another: globalization, the formidably powerful, seductive new form taken by the racially inequitable “false” utopia of modern liberal capitalism; and the desire for a utopian “alter-globalization,” for radical alternative, egalitarian communities that recognize planetary human interconnectedness, and which increasingly figure equality in ways that take into account not only race, but also nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls to mind Gilroy’s, Jameson’s, and Tom Moylan’s writings on utopia (more on this shortly) when she posits that the difference between philosophy and literature is that while the former “concatenates arguments,” the latter “figures the impossible” (Spivak 112). Bret Benjamin invokes Spivak in arguing that it is thus “little wonder” that utopian politics “find the
literary register so compelling” (166). Although it “would appear to be at odds with Spivak’s definition of literature,” he sums up her definition’s paradoxical “obverse” side using the slogan “Another World Is Possible” (B. Benjamin 166, emphasis added). While this phrase encapsulates the desire that has come to voice in literary utopias for centuries, the promise of another world acquires a different resonance during the late twentieth century.

Before moving on, it is worth making one final point. It concerns the absence from these pages of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Nalo Hopkinson, who have produced what are by far the most widely studied works of utopian fiction written by black authors. Delany’s Triton (1976), and Butler’s Parable of the Sower (1993) and Parable of the Talents (1998) played pivotal roles in Moylan’s theorizations of the “critical utopia” and the “critical dystopia,” two distinctive late-twentieth-century utopian genres to which this discussion will return. The journal Utopian Studies has even devoted a special issue to Butler’s work. Instead of piggybacking on this extensive body of excellent scholarship, this study turns toward new sources in the hopes of extending that scholarship’s reach and generating new insights. Utopian studies scholarship approaches Butler’s, Delany’s, and Hopkinson’s work within the generic penumbra of science fiction. To be sure, Mark Bould includes John A. Williams’s The Man Who Cried I Am and Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light in the extensive bibliography of under-acknowledged black “sf” he has recently introduced into the pages of Science Fiction Studies and Extrapolation. Several more of the works discussed here employ elements of sf or the fantastic, which have always shared a close kinship with utopia. However, there are benefits to looking beyond sf’s conventional boundaries. Bould argues that a multitude of black novels has been “omitted from the [mainstream] history of sf for a host of contingent reasons” (Bould “Revolutionary” 54). In a similar way, focusing too intently on sf has caused numerous utopian
texts to be overlooked, and in the spirit of recent attempts to extend utopian definitions and analyses to new literary objects, this project frequently looks beyond sf. Bould argues that if the texts he catalogs had been previously included, “we might now have a very different [sf] genre,” and this project is in sympathy with the productive and political intentions of his gesture of constructing an alternative “selective tradition.”

One the other hand, the black literary utopia often stretches, confounds, syncretizes, or signifies on genre conventions, and thus while Bould’s rhetorical goals are laudable, his strategic genre-dependent move is still somewhat reductive. Indeed, as far as black utopian novels are concerned, it may not be excessive to add a pan-African gloss to John Pfeiffer’s argument about black American fiction. Pfeiffer effectively inverts Suvin’s designation of utopia as the sociopolitical subgenre of sf when he claims that when it comes to “supply[ing] or reflect[ing] the altered content and perspective that social transformation requires. Science fiction sometimes does. Black American writing almost always has” (Lavender 187). At the very least, Pfeiffer’s argument suggests that black literature—sf or otherwise—is a promising place to search for utopia.

**Toward a Theory of Black Utopian Literature**

Although scholars are beginning to take up the subject, there exists no comprehensive theoretical framework for conceptualizing the politics and aesthetics of the black literary utopia. What follows draws from existing work in multiple fields of study in order to take steps toward developing one. In turn, this framework will be used to read literary texts. While it is important to bear in mind Ashis Nandy’s cautionary statement that “theories of salvation do not save. At best, they reshape our social consciousness,” this project insists that the role of theory, literature, and what Nandy more generally calls the “language” of utopia is indispensable to those who wish to change the world for the better (20). Because so much of the most intensive scholarship
on utopian literature falls under the aegis of utopian studies, the theory elaborated below incorporates the insights of utopian scholars such as Jameson, Levitas, Moylan, Phillip Wegner, and especially Ernst Bloch in order to build on the small body of work done on black utopian literature by Gilroy, Ahmad, Ralph Pordzik, Heike Raphael-Hernandez, and others. It also draws from scholarship in African American literary and cultural studies as well as postcolonial studies, scholarship that does not always explicitly address utopia, but which can nonetheless augment our comprehension of black utopian literature. The resulting theory articulates and expands upon spaces of overlap among these fields, and the ways in which their respective theoretical systems and perspectives supplement one another. The objective is not to impose one analytic on another, nor is it to create a “hybrid” theory. In fact, this work is intended to be scrupulous about preventing any one perspective from dominating, subsuming, or obscuring any other. Rather, it attempts to think dialogically in order to “implicate” sets of concepts with one another, to borrow Shoshana Felman’s term. That is, it will “act as a go-between” in order to “explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which . . . domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other[s]” (Felman 8-9, emphases original). Like Ingrid Thaler’s work on Black Atlantic speculative fictions, this theory will trace both “parallels and culturally specific differences” among the various fields of study it invokes. But in the mutually productive spirit of Felman’s notion of implication, an additional, perhaps utopian goal is to generate new perspectives that can be useful for multiple schools of inquiry (Thaler 5). Since the 1970s, utopian theorists have developed analytical tools for discerning the utopian desires at work in texts that do not always fit the categorical definition of “novels that depict a perfect society.” The ultimate objective of
this theory is to create a framework for reading black literature—in which there are hardly any depictions of perfect societies—in a similar way.

Tom Moylan’s brief reading of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* offers a glimpse of the productive potential of this kind of dialogic thinking. The ink was barely dry on Morrison’s 1997 novel when Moylan chose these words from the book as the epigraph for his introduction to *Utopian Studies*’ special issue on Fredric Jameson: “How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin the human imagination became trying to achieve it . . . How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy, and the strange?” Writing in a very different context, Morrison, like Ernst Bloch, speculates about an inborn human propensity to “utopianize.” For Moylan, *Paradise* fictionalizes a conceptualization of utopia that is deeply sympathetic with Jameson’s theoretical project: one that is less concerned with “apparently utopian spaces” or “a given utopian object” than with the “extensive, formal meditation on utopian desire in the face of history. . . . with the complexities of utopia itself” (Moylan, “Introduction” 1). Conversely, Moylan simultaneously demonstrates how Jameson’s utopian theory makes it possible to extract and crystallize the utopian impulse in Morrison’s novel, a text that is “not within the usual parameters of the literary utopia” (“Introduction” 1). The tragedies that befall the two utopian communities in *Paradise* have led critics and readers to interpret it as un-utopian or anti-utopian. Moylan, however, invokes Jameson’s theory to direct attention away from the communities represented in the novel toward the text’s meditation on the act of utopian imagining itself. He reveals why it is not paradoxical to argue that “representing” a “true” paradise is not *Paradise*’s true paradisiacal occupation at all. Moylan thus opens, albeit briefly, one of the more promising arguments to counter common conclusions about Morrison’s novel, and pursues an alternate line
of questioning that augurs more productive. While the essay’s epigraph achieves a nearly perfect chiasmus between utopian scholarship and an African American literary utopia, it also represents an exceedingly rare one.\textsuperscript{31}

Moylan’s short essay is a compelling performance of how utopian studies offers a powerful set of hermeneutical tools for illuminating the utopian impulse in texts that do not necessarily fall within utopian literature’s “usual” parameters. Further, Moylan adroitly demonstrates what Ahmad also recognizes: a utopian studies approach promises to be especially valuable for reading politically charged texts in the black literary tradition because it provides a means to read past the negative moment of critique in order to discern the positive, utopian figurations that take shape on their textual horizons. Particularly in dystopias, protest novels, and other such forms, these can become obscured either by the preponderance of negative content or, as in the case of \textit{Paradise}, the confusion created by an ambiguous ending. Raphael-Hernandez performs such an analysis when she employs Bloch to read Morrison’s \textit{Beloved}. She, too, demonstrates how utopian theory is useful when she reads the novel’s re-membrances of slavery and racialized terror in a way that grasps how these memories are invoked in order to gesture toward a “new community.” This community “has not turned into a perfect society and never will,” but Raphael-Hernandez reveals how the novel nevertheless bears within it “Blochian glimpses of the not-yet-become” that inspire hopeful “forward dreaming” in the “face [of] future challenges” (60, emphases original).\textsuperscript{32} As does Moylan, Raphael-Hernandez sets up a multidirectional dialog between black literature and utopian scholarship that proves as generative as it is uncommon. The theory outlined below is a small attempt to continue, and to enlarge this dialog.
Defining Utopia

Ruth Levitas opens *The Concept of Utopia* (1990) with the claim that utopia is a transcultural inclination toward the “construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality” (1). Levitas examines an extensive body of scholarly commentary on utopia that spans over a century, and in doing so, she intervenes in a constellation of “disagreements about the boundaries of utopia” (11). At the epicenter of these debates is a tension between the widespread tendency to understand—and often dismiss—utopia as a fantasy connoting a hopelessly idealistic “perfect” society, and various alternative understandings of utopia as a hopeful, useful, even indispensable force for social betterment. Arguments about the perceived boundaries between idealism and realism are but one of the numerous “border disputes” Levitas addresses. Others include “the line between the literary and the political”; rigid circumscriptions of utopia in terms of form, content, or function (these include debates about, for instance, “the inclusion or exclusion of satires and dystopias” in form-based taxonomies, or distinctions among functions such as “compensation, critique,” and transformative political “catalyst”); Karl Mannheim’s binary opposition between utopia and ideology; and ultimately, questions about what Bloch and others have posited as a boundary-transcending “fundamental human ‘tendency to utopianize’” (Levitas, *Concept* 11, 21, 34, 66, 34). Indeed, Jameson also takes it as an axiom that “all contemporary works of art . . . whether those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture . . . have as their underlying impulse—albeit in what is often [a] distorted and repressed unconscious form—our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived” (qtd. in Wegner, “Here or Nowhere” 114). Jameson’s comments speak to the deep “desire for a better way of being” that Gilroy also prioritizes, and ultimately, this desire is the common
element that lends Levitas’s book its thematic unity and political urgency (Levitas, *Concept* 198).

Somewhat paradoxically, Levitas undertakes her exhaustive and rigorous exegesis of utopia not in order to define utopian “boundaries” more precisely, but instead to arrive at a “definition” of utopia that is as broad as possible in order to accommodate the “inclusion within this domain of [a] wide variety of material and approaches” while also providing a basis “for identifying utopian elements expressed in different ways across the whole of human culture” (*Concept* 198). For Levitas, “utopian desire,” the single, elemental definition of utopia she is adamant about preserving, is most valuable as an (historicized) “analytic” for exploring utopia’s variegated manifestations, and for tracking changes in features such as form and content as they traverse time, space, and cultures. Thus, any attempt to contain this boundless desire is always already anti-utopian.

And yet despite the conceptual openness that utopia demands in order to avoid “undesirable repressive orthodoxy,” Levitas’s own thoroughness reflects an acknowledgement that such inclusiveness is menaced by ambiguities and undecidabilities that can be theoretically or politically incapacitating (Levitas, *Concept* 199). Although Levitas avoids arriving at a “conceptual convergence” that would fix—indeed fossilize—the concept of utopia once and for all, *The Concept of Utopia* concludes by reiterating the value of “conceptual clarity.” Levitas’s meticulous work offers an enlightening performance of her own insistence that “distinctions can and still should be made between different kinds of utopias on the basis of form, function, location, and content” in order to draw, however provisionally, the very sorts of conceptual boundaries that she so conscientiously avoids according to the exigencies of a given theoretical
or political project, and for Levitas, “the study of utopia” is itself a political undertaking inseparable from “the quest for utopia” itself (Concept 199).

Hence, it becomes clear why, for example, Jameson opens Archaeologies of the Future (2005) by drawing a definitional distinction, in this case between the systematic utopian social “blueprint” or “program” exemplified by Thomas More’s originary Utopia, and Bloch’s contrasting concept of an “omnipresent Utopian impulse,” which shapes “everything future-oriented in life and culture” and can be found in “everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment” (2-3, emphases added). Likewise, Phillip Wegner has categorically differentiated between the “utopian impulse” and the “specific genre of utopian literature,” the latter of which, he argues, performs unique spatial operations that have a special relationship to “the imaginative worlds of science fiction” and fundamentally shaped the modern nation-state (“Utopia” 79; Communities xv-xvi). Elsewhere, he has drawn a different conceptual boundary, one between the utopian literary genre and the more Levitasian notion of “utopia as a hermeneutic, that is, as an interpretive schema” (“Here or Nowhere” 113). These multiform theorizations not only speak to the reach of utopia’s conceptual domain. They also reflect the Levitasian notion that any discussion of utopia must first clearly delineate what utopia “is” and “is not.” Such delineations should be provisional and situation-specific—and should be acknowledged as such—but working definitional “axioms” can be useful as hermeneutical tools, which, instead of “restricting our interpretive freedoms . . . become productive of new and original interpretations of overly familiar works, for they force us as readers to push our analyses further, often with quite unexpected results” (Wegner, “Here or Nowhere” 114). There is thus a productive dialectic between the (strictly performative) “closure” of a given conceptual construction and the new understandings of utopia and utopian objects each unique concept is
capable of opening. Thinking utopia in this conditional yet performatively definitive way accords with Levitas’s caution that any definition of utopia, including her own, “can work only in conjunction with a generally greater degree of conceptual rigor in the identification of different kinds of utopia relevant to the different questions which, it is to be hoped, scholars will continue to ask” (Concept 199, emphasis added). True to her own thinking, Levitas reopens the question in the very act of closing it.

This project follows Gilroy and Levitas to build its theory around a definition of utopia as the desire for a better world. Gilroy and Levitas share a common point of connection with nearly all contemporary theorizations of utopia in Bloch’s pioneering work.34 Bloch sought to liberate a concept of utopia that was “unduly restricted, namely confined to novels of an ideal state,” and it was he who first prioritized the relationship between utopia and desire, separating the as-yet-unfulfilled desiderating utopian “impulse” from the actualized artifacts and modes of representation in which it finds expression (Bloch, Principle 14). In doing so, he formulated a number of ancillary concepts that have proven as productive as they have durable. Several of them are of interest here. The first volume of The Principle of Hope takes up the question of desire to posit an all-pervasive “utopian imagination” that finds its ultimate source in the familiar Freudian territory of wishes and daydreams. However, Bloch cautions his reader not to confuse his formulation with the “pure wishful thinking that has discredited utopia for centuries” (Principle 145). Rather, in demanding “some point of contact between dream and life,” Bloch accounts for political criticisms of the schools of psychology that privilege psychic drives entrenched in either the individual ego or biological theories of matter to the deletion of social factors such as race, class, or gender by infusing these notions of desire with historical and cultural concerns (Principle 10). Even the “primary need” of physiological hunger looks
different according to the changing ways in which needs are satisfied” as determined by the prevailing “mode of production and exchange” (Bloch *Principle* 69). Bloch thus counters the “justifiably pejorative” notion of utopia as the “emotionally reckless picturing” of an “abstract or unworldly” ideal by shifting its conceptual grounding toward a desire that finds its wellsprings in collective historic-cultural reality (*Principle* 12).

Bloch’s rethinking of utopia through his repositioning of *Eros* is further refined through his titular concept of “hope.” Bloch’s “principle” of hope heavily revises existing theories of consciousness and aesthetics, and thus opens intellectual spaces of possibility which have influenced decades of utopian scholarship. Due to the way in which “With the help of the super-ego, the ego draws . . . . on the experiences of prehistory stored up in the id,” Bloch concludes that “there is nothing new in the Freudian unconscious” (*Principle* 56, italics in original). Yet the ability to create the *new* is what makes possible the human capacity for hope, which, for Bloch, is the antithesis not of fear, but of the “old” contents of memory, as well as of the “closed, static concept of being” with which the traditional idea of utopia had theretofore been associated (*Principle* 12, 18). Turning away from the past and toward the future, Bloch theorizes an “anticipatory consciousness,” a “Not-Yet- Conscious” that “interacts and reciprocates with [the] Not-Yet-Become” in a historically becoming world (*Principle* 13). Anticipatory consciousness is imbricated with a hope that Bloch views not only as affective, but “more essentially . . . a *directing act of a cognitive kind*” (*Principle* 12, italics in original). An analytical approach that focuses on anticipatory consciousness and its “thoughts of future intention” can “serve to make comprehensible” the “depictions of the wished for, the anticipated better life” produced by the utopian imagination (*Principle* 12, 13). One is thus able to read, albeit always incompletely, the latent, future “new” (or “novum”) of the Not-Yet-Become as it is “processed out in the
progressive newness of history” and manifested on the utopian horizon of the old material present in history’s cultural productions (Principle 202). This notion of utopia as a future-horizon is nothing short of a dialectical inversion of previous conceptions of utopia as a “lost” past or a static, ahistorical present. This particular concept is crucial for reading black utopian literature.

The species of newness commensurate with the novum requires Bloch to differentiate between the “abstract” and the “concrete” utopia—a distinction that Raphael-Hernandez claims holds tremendous potential for reading traces of utopia in black literature. The abstract utopia connotes fanciful abstractions oriented toward the “mere” fulfillment of wishes in hopes of “tendentially” transcending “the entire external world” (Bloch, Principle 146). It is “purely fantastic, compensatory and escapist” (Levitas, Concept 89). Its wishes are, paradoxically, intractably bound up in the past or present even as these wishes represent a desire for a complete disengagement from them. The concrete utopia, on the other hand, engages with history and is oriented toward the future. It connotes the “transcendent without transcendence” in a way that is “only seemingly paradoxical” (Bloch, Principle 146, emphasis added). The radicality of the newness Bloch theorizes, when thought in combination with its very historical concreteness—whence its power as a “potentially counter-hegemonic” force—necessarily strains whatever system of representation is used to attempt to signify the concrete utopia (Moylan, Scraps 31). The difference between the abstract and the concrete utopia can be sufficiently captured in the difference between what Gilroy calls a “politics of fulfillment” and a “politics of transfiguration,” or between reform and revolution respectively (Atlantic 37). The desires it inflames are linked to the material conditions of the present only insofar as they correspond to a radically Other, not-yet-become future immanent in, but not of that present. The incipient
novum would be a reality “so radically transformed as to make unrecognizable the desires to which” concrete utopian “figures respond” (Wegner, Communities 21). This notion of the utopian “figure” should not be confused with any manifest, straightforward representation of a utopia. Rather, because of its trans-figural otherness, the concrete utopia involves what Gilroy describes as a struggle to “present the unpresentable” (Atlantic 38). Nevertheless, this very act of the utopian imagination carries intimations of a radically different world that is yet intrinsic to the world we know. The figure of utopia thus serves as an “anticipatory illumination” of an immanent transcendence not of but toward the “concrete-utopian horizon” of a future-in-the-present in which “the novum” will be “no longer alien in material terms” (Wegner, Communities 21; Bloch, Principle 144-146)

The dialectical relationship between the utopian desires from which the novum emerges only to recursively transmute them into something “unrecognizable” is crucial. Precisely because of this, one of the themes in utopian scholarship that Levitas is most resolute in reiterating is the claim made by Bloch, E.P. Thompson, and others that an indispensable function of utopia is the “education of desire” (Levitas, Concept 122-123). Likeminded thinkers argue that this “pedagogical” function of utopian politics, art, and literature has the power to give form to utopian desires, as well as to facilitate their recognition and comprehensibility. This in turn, can influence action, wherein lies the true transformative power—and the social necessity—of the anti-escapist concrete utopia.

In addition to defining utopia as the desire for a better world, this project defines utopian literature foremost as an aesthetic form—or a Jamesonian “ideology of form”—that functions to “educate” utopian desires. These definitions are, of course, quite general, and it is needful to calibrate them further. Indeed, while Bloch’s revolutionary “utopian hermeneutics” allow us to
recognize the utopian elements in almost every cultural product no matter how omnipresent and mundane, they also reveal the problems inherent in such generality—for, “when everything becomes an expression of utopian desire, to what degree does the category of utopia lose its usefulness?” (Wegner, Communities 19). Faced with this question, scholars have helped to define and refine both the category of utopia and the conditions of its usefulness. In keeping with this spirit, the sections that follow adumbrate some additional loose definitional boundaries via a set of concepts useful to the purpose at hand. It must be borne in mind, however, that an overly “strict definition of utopia would serve no useful purpose” either (Levitas, Concept 166).

That Dangerous Surplus

Closely related to Bloch’s theorization of the concrete utopia is his concept of a “utopian surplus” produced by utopia’s negotiation of incompatible ideological strictures that saturate, and the historico-cultural conditions that situate, a given system of representation. Moylan approaches this notion diachronically when he suggests that “in each victory of the human project there remains a specific type of hope which is not that of the present and which carries that victorious moment beyond itself, anticipating the next one” (qtd. in Raphael-Hernandez 16). Wegner offers an interpretation that is synchronic and diachronic at once when he conceives of it as a “surplus of meaning . . . that literally ‘overshoots’ the ideological context in which it is embedded” (Communities 18). In terms of representation, he likens this surplus to “Jacques Derrida’s more well-known concept of the supplement,” but he is quick to avoid reducing it to an ahistorical, purely textual phenomenon, arguing that “Bloch’s utopian surplus passes through and disrupts the closure of any historical present thereby opening it up to the possibilities of historical becoming” (Communities 18). Within the context of black cultural expression, Gilroy posits something similar in his notion of a “communication beyond words” that is yet capable of articulating “inferred and immanent political positions” (“Diaspora” 212, 198). This is most
potently embodied in what he theorizes as a supra-discursive “slave sublime,” wherein “the extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery dictate that we recognize the anti-discursive and extra-linguistic ramifications of power at work in shaping communicative acts” (Atlantic 57). The “anti-closure” indicated by this surplus—which, for reasons discussed below, should be “thought” in terms of history, ideology, signification, and narrative form, but not spatiality—may represent Bloch’s most radical divergence from the visions of Thomas More and his literary descendants. For Bloch, the “unfinished forward dream” of historical becoming is nurtured by “the great cultural works” that are “pushed” to their “limits” precisely through this “surplus over and above” the “mere ideology” of each respective “there and then,” and in this way, any work that “deserves the name utopia” functions as “a methodical organ for the new” (Principle 156-157, italics in original). The utopian surplus vehiculated by but uncontainable in utopian art performs this function by means of its status as the sort of “absent presence” or, in psychoanalytic terms, as a particular kind of “organizing lack,” around which occurs a “restructuring of desire” (Jameson, Archaeologies 8-9). Insofar as the utopian surplus is implicated in the education of desire, its social function is pedagogical; but it bears noting that by virtue of its supra-discursive nature, this cannot be thought of as a strictly didactic pedagogy, even in “didactic” utopias.

**The Question of Genre**

Although this project will not take a genre-studies approach, nor does it propose to formally define a genre of “Black Utopian Literature,” it will discuss the ways in which texts do utilize, appropriate, manipulate, combine, or subvert generic conventions they have every reason to assume are familiar. Utopia considered as a genre can be a thorny issue for black writers. Ahmad points out that the classical form of utopia is in many ways synonymous with imperialism: “classical utopias have been thoroughly imbricated in the ideologies of empire ever
since the inception of the genre. Two successive waves of utopian activity each relied upon a
central apparatus of colonial activity: exploration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and
developmentalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Ahmad 6). Pavla Veselá
observes that given the racial stereotypes or erasures in “traditional” utopias such as Bellamy’s
Looking Backward, Ignatius Donnelly’s Caesar’s Column (1891), and Charlotte Perkins
Gilman’s Herland (1915), “it is no surprise that the” relatively “few African-American utopias
written to date” engage with “the utopian genre itself” (272). Nevertheless, there is much to be
obtained from the insights of scholars who have taken a genre-studies approach to utopian
literature. An examination of some definitions established by utopian genre-studies can provide
the conceptual clarity on which Levitas insists while also providing tools for reading the critical
engagements with, manipulations of, or divergences from, the utopian genre that we shall indeed
encounter.

Utopian bibliographer and critic Lyman Tower Sargent has written extensively about the
usefulness of genre definitions even as he acknowledges their inescapable incompletions. It
augurs useful here to cull a few key definitions from Sargent’s encyclopedic inventories,
particularly his identification of three literary subgenres. Under the generic umbrella of utopian
literature, Sargent distinguishes between “eutopia” and “dystopia,” a complementary pair of
subforms that respectively describe a “good place” or a “bad place” in comparison to the implied
reader’s own. A second and finer distinction Sargent draws is between “dystopia” and “anti-
utopia.” While the former is dominated by negative images, Sargent uses the latter to indicate
“that large class of works . . . directed against utopia and utopian thought,” in other words,
literature that discourages social dreaming itself (Levitas, Concept 167).
Tom Moylan’s scholarship is known for describing two comparatively new subgenres of utopian literature—the “critical utopia” and the “critical dystopia”—and for generating meticulously detailed theoretical apparatuses to explain how these texts accomplish their cultural work. Moylan’s book Demand the Impossible (1986) theorizes the “critical utopia,” which, he argues, arose from the “revival of utopian writing” that occurred between 1968 and 1976 and substantively renovate the genre (Scraps 9). According to Moylan, these “new utopias” arose amidst a space of overlap between the developing genres of “new wave” science fiction and “experimental postmodern fiction” to become a political vehicle for the transformative social agendas of leftist counterculture, especially second-wave feminism (Scraps 31, 83, 10, 78). Thus, these texts not only represented what at the time was a novel literary form. They were also deeply immersed in the political fabric of their cultural moment, often more explicitly so than their literary forebears, thus embodying the “connections between the textual and the social” that are crucial to the utopia’s power as a catalyst for social change (Moylan, Scraps 82).39

Moylan’s use of the prefix “critical” indicates the characteristic metacognitive awareness that separates these utopias from their predecessors: he lifts this term from the lexica of “feminist and Maoist practices of ‘criticism-self-criticism’” and the critical reason of “critique” that the Frankfurt School opposed to “instrumental reason” (Scraps 83, emphasis in original). Although a “younger” genre, critical utopias are “wiser” than their literary ancestors, questioning not only the sociopolitical statuses quo of the “real” world, but their own fictional worlds as well. They thus avoid the perils of ideological closure that Bloch’s theory militates against. Another key difference between the critical utopias and their more traditional counterparts is that beyond the “absent presence” of a utopian surplus, the “self-reflexivity” these texts exhibit in response to twentieth-century “utopian” disasters (such as Nazism, Stalinism, and indeed, globalizing
capitalism) is evident in the ways that they incorporate “anti-closure” as a constituent element of form. This is observable in how the critical utopias’ representations of alternative societies altogether abandon earlier texts’ paradigm of an idealized, “single-minded,” and inflexible social “blueprint” of perfection and instead confront readers with a world in which “utopia itself is presented ambiguously as imperfect, subject to difficulties, inconsistencies, faults, [and] change” (Moylan, Scraps 83; Levitas, Concept 172). These texts thus “negated the negation of utopia by the forces of twentieth-century history: the subversive imaging of utopian society and the radical negativity of” the mid-twentieth century’s “dystopian perception” are “preserved,” while the “cooptation of utopia by modern structures” like German National Socialism “is destroyed” (Moylan, Demand 10). Yet for all this, the palpable political ardor of critical utopias like Joanna Russ’s The Female Man (1975), for instance, as well as the constitutive otherness of these texts’ imagined worlds, enable the critical utopia to exacerbate “the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it” in ways that inspire and educate utopian desires, and thus sustain these texts’ capacity as agents for social change (Moylan, Scraps 83). Further, by means of the self-reflexive narrative strategies inherited from postmodern “metafiction,” these utopias shift their emphases from the object-worlds imagined in the narrative to the creative act of socially interventional imagination itself, while at the same time, they make themselves “less open to charges of totalitarianism” (Levitas, Concept 173). Many of these texts incorporate “anti-closure” in the form of an open-ended narrative structure as well, rupturing the boundaries of both the intradiegetic utopian world and narrativity itself. They thus invite utopian imaginings that extend beyond themselves toward an extradiegetic utopian horizon and a social project that remains “to be continued.” In Moylan’s much-quoted phraseology, critical utopias thus “reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (Moylan, Demand 10).
Although Moylan’s theory of the critical utopia provides unusually powerful insights into the relationship between utopian form and function, the critical utopia is conceived foremost a literary genre. While its advent was “crucial to the survival of the utopian function,” this incarnation of the utopian literary form was (allegedly) an ephemeral one (Levitas, *Concept* 173). According to Moylan, the critical utopia faded away as the post-'68 utopian zeitgeist was ultimately suffocated by “the neo-conservative restoration occasioned by the administrations of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Helmut Kohl” in the early 1980s (Moylan, *Scraps* xiv). This event was doubly damaging because of Reagan’s redeployment of “the utopian figure of [John Winthrop’s] ‘city on the hill’ from colonial history to signify the society of harmony and enterprise that his new administration promised to establish” (Moylan, *Scraps* 183). Reagan thus effectively hijacked the tropes of utopia from what remained of 1960s Leftism and claimed them for the political Right. This gesture would be repeated in 1990 in George Bush’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly, in which Bush advanced a cosmetically retouched image of the Rightist utopia in the “figure of the millennium” as a cipher for a Post-Cold War “new world order of peace and prosperity” (Moylan, *Scraps* 183). Writing on the verge of this “conservative utopia’s” apogee, Levitas diagnoses a profoundly dystopian mood among those on the Left, for whom utopia is “draped in black” (Concept 200).

This pervasive dystopian mood led to a change in literary mode: with the tropes of utopia firmly in the hands of the Right, those who sought more progressive social transformation clothed the weakened utopian impulse to which they clung in what remained available, the garments of dystopia, in order to keep it alive, and to militate for a social order that was more authentically new. A new literary avatar, the “critical dystopia” emerged to express the desires of those who opposed the neo-conservative restoration and the global expansion of a triumphalist,
pseudo-utopian late capitalism. Amidst this new reality, the "critical position is necessarily dystopian" in that it must "negate the negation of [the negation of] the critical utopian moment" (Moylan, Scraps 187, 195, emphasis added). (It is worth noting, however, that while Moylan locates the genre’s provenance in the advent of the so-called Reagan Revolution, Raffaella Baccolini identifies similar dystopian strategies in texts dating back as far as the 1930s [Moylan, Scraps 188].) Here, Sargent’s distinction between the dystopia and the anti-utopia demonstrates its value. As the critical dystopias perform their cultural work, it is crucial to recall that even as these “maps of hell” confront us with dystopian images to “map” and thus “expose the horror of” the present, as well as to “warn” readers about possible futures, the negations they perform should not be confused with “anti-utopian pessimism” (Moylan, Scraps 196). Rather, they employ “new textual tricks” in order to “continue in the political and poetic spirit of the critical utopias” (196). Accordingly, these texts share formal features with their critical utopian predecessors, although their tonality and content are often vastly different.

Foremost, the critical dystopias resemble their critical utopian counterparts in that they “interrogate both society and their generic predecessors”—and, it should be added, themselves (Moylan, Scraps 188, emphasis in original). Moylan also argues that these texts share the critical utopias’ proclivity for utopian “anticlosure” by “setting up” and foregrounding “open endings,” and thus maintaining “the utopian impulse within the work” precisely by projecting it beyond the work (Scraps 189, emphasis in original). This characteristic “openness” is observable in other aspects of these dystopias, such as a tendency toward “genre blurring.” The general porosity of these texts renders them self-consciously “impure,” which makes them “more properly ‘multi-oppositional’” than the more unilateral conventional dystopias (Moylan, Scraps 189). There is thus a kinship between these texts’ “deconstruction of genre purity” and “the insights of post-
structuralist critiques,” with their “attack . . . against universalist assumptions, fixity and singularity” (Moylan, Scraps 189). In this way, critical dystopias privilege the acknowledgement of multiplicity and differences, and are congenial to notions of “hybridity and fluidity” (Moylan, Scraps 189). These sensibilities are also bound up in literary form in another sense in that, unlike classical dystopias such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We (1921), these texts reject “the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel,” but rather open “a space of . . . opposition for those groups (women and other ‘eccentric’ subjects whose subject position hegemonic discourse does not contemplate) for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained” (Moylan, Scraps 189).

While Moylan largely conserves the model of the critical dystopia originally sketched by Baccolini, along with its functions as a vehicle of protest and activist tool for marginalized voices and groups, he nonetheless departs from Baccolini’s conceptualization in other respects. Moylan reaffirms a totalizing analytic that has traditionally held a prominent position in utopian scholarship by claiming that critical dystopias “move even further along than Baccolini suggests, as they dialectically transcend even the moment of poststructuralist critique and identity-based micropolitics” (Scraps, 190). He argues that in creating their alternative worlds, critical dystopias “consider the entire political-economic system,” signaling a (re)turn toward macropolitical alliance politics—particularly among the marginalized—and to totalizing analysis (Scraps 189-190). Writing at the would-be dawn of Bush’s millennial world order, Moylan argues that in the face of a globalizing capitalism that absorbs all opposition and allows for “no outside” whatsoever, the critical dystopia stakes out a position which insists that any utopian politics must advance an equally totalizing response if there is to be any hope of transformation at all. In capturing the ways in which various vectors of social theory converge in the question of utopia,
Moylan’s argument crystalizes the millennial context from which it emerged, a “new historical conjuncture” in which utopia still has a crucial role to play (*Scraps* 190).

Moylan’s work on the “critical” utopian genres provides an excellent object lesson concerning how relentless historicization can produce profound insights into literary politics. However, his deep embedding of these texts in the history, politics, and theoretical trends of the 1960s through the ‘90s would seem effectively to *force* a specific content to be understood as an inseparable part of the critical utopian/dystopian assemblage as well. The rigidity of Moylan’s periodized genre-constructions implies that the intricate analytical machineries produced along with them may not be applied to other texts and contexts, and a key objective of this study is to do just this. In this vein, Veselá has recently conducted incisive rereadings of Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) and Schuyler’s *Black Empire*—texts that appeared decades before the 1960s—as critical utopias. Based on the critical engagement with utopian genre conventions found in these works, Veselá concludes that black literature was in fact where important “precursors of Tom Moylan’s critical utopia” appeared quite early on (Veselá 272). Wegner similarly opens Moylan’s periodization to demonstrate the productive potential of applying his insights to other contexts. Wegner argues that “elements of the ‘critical utopia’ are in fact already evident in works produced much earlier in the [twentieth] century,” and demonstrates how Alexander Bogdanov’s *Red Star* and Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (both 1908) in many ways “are” critical utopias in form and function, if not in content. These readings show that using formulations such as Moylan’s even in ways that work against some of their central propositions can, on the one hand, *produce* new understandings of individual texts, and on the other hand, reread the sweep of the past—including generic history itself—differently through the novel.
critical lens they make available, and thus capture what Walter Benjamin described as visions of history that appear in the lightning-flashes of the ever-transforming “now.”

In this spirit, this project will invoke the premises, claims, and details of individual theories of utopia while also taking a certain amount of license in transposing them to, or expanding upon them in, new contexts, perhaps in violation of certain of their tenets. This risk seems worth taking given the new readings that such an approach can produce. In a sense, this entire project represents such a departure given the paucity of scholarship on African American and postcolonial utopian literature. Nevertheless, the intent is to make an overture toward what will hopefully become an expansion of the extant scholarship without sacrificing the rigor that Levitas rightly prizes.

**The Production of Space**

To reiterate once more, this study is concerned with a literary ideology or politics of form, but only insofar as that form is understood in terms of its function as symbolic machinery for educating utopian desires. However, utopian literature will be defined here in terms of *one formal feature* that has been a generic staple since More: utopia is represented as a social *space* (even if that space is a “no-place”). If utopia is always a fictional representation of a “society described in considerable detail,” it is also true that utopian *sociality* has been inseparable from *spatiality* since the very “birth” of Utopia (Sargent, qtd. in Levitas 167).\(^43\) While the utopian texts we will encounter in the pages that follow scarcely adhere to the largely descriptive “travelogue” mode of narrative to which some of the stricter definitions of utopian literature confine the form, they nonetheless all thematize in some way the interrelationship between the social and the spatial, even if the “space” is a psychic one. Indeed, whether the “utopian” space is considered at the level of the individual mind, body (or mind-body), the local community, the nation, or the world, the utopian readings below approach these spaces as socio-spatial allegories.
of the kind that Jameson describes in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*: “on a global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery” for interrogating an entire social “system” (5). And indeed, in the age of globalization, the system figured in “a host of partial subjects” is ever-more-frequently the transnational “world-system” (Jameson, *Aesthetic* 5).

The fact that utopia and social space are not only interdependent, but mutually constitutive is brought to life in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Utopia comes into being via a “disjunctive act of territorial inclusion and exclusion” when King Utopos orders the digging of the great 15-mile-wide trench that transforms a promontory into an island unto itself, and “marks a border where there had previously existed only a distinct *frontier* between ‘neighboring peoples’” (Wegner, *Communities* 50, emphasis in original). Chapter 4 will discuss how Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* critiques this very feature of the classical utopia. Historically speaking, *Utopia* is coeval with modernity, and More’s text is an anticipatory vision of the modern nation-state: “a new form of communal identity, one defined first and foremost by *spatiality*” (Wegner, *Communities* 51). In turn, it is possible to read historically the ways in which the vision of spatio-cultural organization expressed in this new literary form performed a distinct socio-historical function by exerting a formative influence on “the constitution of the nation-state as an original spatial, social, and cultural form” (xvi). Indeed *Utopia* depicts an Andersonian “imagined community” in which individual and communal identity is bound to, and bound together by, geographical borders. Wegner observes, “while the spatial and cultural homogeneity” that characterizes the many cities of More’s island-nation “figures them as part of an abstract universal space,” it also becomes clear how “this same feature signals their unity, or shared *national* identity: for their very sameness marks their particularity, their fundamental
cultural *difference* from any other such spaces found outside the bounded nation” (Wegner, *Communities* 51, emphasis in original). Wegner’s reading of *Utopia* captures how the histories, collectivities, and subjectivities of modernity are thus constructed, interpreted, and *lived* through a deep investment in spatiality. Although Wegner maintains that the “spatial histories of modernity” (coeval as they are with what is most often euphemized as the Age of Exploration) have always unfolded in a worldwide matrix of identities and differences, he also observes that the changes in the ideation of “nationhood” during the twentieth century are “marked by a growing consciousness of the place of the nation-state in a global cultural and social space” (Wegner, *Communities* xvii). These changes are both figured and prefigured in some of the century’s prominent narrative utopias. This is especially true as “modernity enters into a new phase,” and utopias continue to function as spaces for staging new modes of collectivity and subjectivity as the process of globalization continues (Wegner, *Communities* xvii). The pages that follow discuss texts that negotiate a *trans*-national era of crisis for some of modernity’s most durable socio-spatial forms, and attempt to imagine alternatives to both existing and emerging communal spaces that leave much to be desired.

The conceptualization of space that will be assumed here is not that of an inert, “objective” Cartesian container into which a collection of “things” are emplaced in some three-dimensional arrangement. Instead, space is understood with an Althusserian inflection insofar as any society’s interpretation and lived experience of its own spatial “reality” is mediated by a historically embedded, ideologically influenced social imaginary. To elucidate how the utopian text functions as a medium, and mediator, of spatio-cultural imagination, Wegner invokes Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite schema of space. Lefebvre calls the three dialectically interconnected elements of this schema “spatial practices,” “representations of space,” and “spaces of
representation”; each of these is further allied to a specific cognitive category: “perceived space,” “conceived space,” and “lived space,” respectively. Wegner draws parallels between Lefebvre’s three-fold theory and the familiar Lacanian psychoanalytic triad of the “Real,” the “Symbolic,” and the “Imaginary” (in this order). Thus, the always as-yet-unreflected-upon category of “perceived” space is akin to the Lacanian Real in that it resists symbolization absolutely. Wegner identifies the second category, “conceived” representations of space, with the Symbolic, and aligns the third category with the “lived”-Imaginary also familiar from Althusser. The Symbolic dimension of space functions like a language insomuch as it “provides the mediating link between the spaces of the individual and those of the larger social and historical realities she inhabits” (Wegner, Communities 15). This Symbolic domain is the level on which “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” do their work by conceiving new representations of space (Lefebvre, qtd. in Wegner, Communities 14). It is also the domain of the literary utopia. In relation to space, the utopia functions as a “narrative laboratory” in which it is possible to conceive and experiment with new representations of space. Thinking utopia in terms of Lefebvre’s three-tiered schematization provides insight as to how the activity of utopography involves more than the pure description—and repetition—of cartography insomuch as new representations of space have the potential to reorganize how the world is imagined, and therefore, lived.

Just as Sargent defines utopia in socio-cultural terms as a discrete “society,” the geographically discrete “island” of Utopia is a figure for how in spatial terms, any utopia, no matter how small (and no matter how porous its boundaries may actually be) must in some way be “conceived” at the level of a complete social “world.” This function of imagining Other worlds is (only) one of several reasons why utopia has been associated with sf, and indeed,
utopian writing is a “terraforming” activity of sorts. To be a utopia, or to be a modern nation-state for that matter, “is to be a whole unto one’s-self, an insula, a world apart, an enclosed and bordered social, political, and cultural totality” (Wegner Communities 55). A useful concept for understanding how even those utopian spaces that exist within larger social structures are “on whatever scale totalities . . . symbolic of a world transformed,” is Jameson’s notion of the utopian “enclave,” a self-contained, “foreign body within the social” (Jameson, Archaeologies 16). Jane Tompkins’s widely known theorization of the domestic space as a utopian enclave demonstrates that a utopian totality can be exceedingly small, while it also provides an instructive performance of how the figuration of such a space in literature can catalyze a re-conception of another totality. In Tompkins’s argument, this totality is mid-nineteenth-century America. In “body utopias,” an individual human body can allegorize the total, self-contained “organism” that is the “body politic.” Even many “postmodern” utopias that privilege openness and multiplicity over closure and universality—the “convent” in Toni Morrison’s Paradise, the city of Bellona in Samuel R. Delany’s Dhalgren, and the “unlicensed sector” in Delany’s Triton come to mind—can be shown to engage in a struggle, albeit an utopian one, to represent a total openness, a discursive activity akin to the paradoxical “anti-totalizing . . . totalizations” that postmodern scholar Linda Hutcheon identifies in the early work of Foucault.

It is important to hold open a distinction between the utopia’s totalizing activity and the seemingly totalized nature of the spaces depicted in texts like More’s. Doing so will return our attention to another distinction: Bloch’s differentiation between the utopian program and the utopian impulse. The difference between “totalization” and “totalized” lies in the deep historicity of utopian activity, and common misunderstandings of this nuance are indicative of how, to invoke Jameson again, “we seem incapable of grasping diachronic change except through our
synchronic and systemic lenses; *history has always already happened already*” (Valences 389, emphasis added). However, despite the fact that representations of space like More’s programmatic blueprint are fixed or “totalized” at the level of the Symbolic, any given assemblage of symbols obtains its meaning from an Imaginary mediation of the Real which incessantly changes with the progression of history. At an even more fundamental level, utopian scholars have subordinated the utopian blueprint to the utopian impulse by enjoining readers not to confuse the spaces created by the chains of signifiers presented in the text with the extradiagnostic, *absent signified* that Louis Marin calls the utopian “figure”;⁴⁹ his term for the utopian “surplus”—the organizing lack or “void” at the center of historically contingent social desires—that is *not at all* of the Symbolic order, and which is the utopian text’s far more radical spatial production. In any given historical moment, this void is promptly filled with signifiers, and thus “fixed” by an “‘ideal’ representation” (Wegner, *Communities* 39). Because the “synchronic and systematic lens” is never “already” complete, this attempt at an ideal representation inevitably leaves behind a “surplus” of its own. Thus, “the final point of totalization . . . of the end of history, must always remain in front of us” (Wegner, *Communities* 39). For this reason, not only the critical utopias, but all utopias, even “blueprints” that take formal closure as their primary organizing principle, can function as “open-ended” texts for which the “narrative work” they undertake will be “potentially infinite” unless the end of history itself has been achieved (Wegner, *Communities* 54). Despite claims to the contrary, utopian texts, of course, insist that it has not.

**Figuring the Impossible**

The dialectic between Spivak’s definition of literature as a medium for figuring the impossible and the utopian “possibility” of an Other world has much to do with Marin’s concept of figuration. The utopian text’s production of a “figure within discourse [which] refers to that
which is not discourse” reflects the unique way in which utopian expression carries with it the “trace” of a “[utopic] practice that produced it but which dissimulates it by means of representations within which it is formed: social aspirations, imagined musings, political projects, and so on. These are various models whose criteria will always be the impossibility of their realization” (Marin xxi). Marin’s work is at the core of Jameson’s most notorious claim about utopia: namely, that the utopian text’s function has nothing to do with an “authentic” attempt to represent a future, better way of life. Such notions are naïvely “founded on the illusions of representation and of affirmative content” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 179). “On the contrary,” utopian literature’s “deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine utopia itself: and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners” (Jameson, “Progress” 289, emphasis added). And yet despite the fact that utopian texts “over and over again . . . dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future” by “body[ing] forth . . . apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished,” this is precisely where Jameson claims they “succeed by failure”: they serve as “unwitting and unwilling vehicles for a meditation” which, in attempting to represent radical Otherness, invariably find themselves “mired in the all-too-familiar,” and thereby direct our thinking toward the “contemplation of our own absolute limits” (Jameson, “Progress” 288-289). Jameson acknowledged in 2005 that this claim, made in 1982, can appear “depressingly self-defeating if not indeed positively defeatist” (*Archaeologies* 178). However, he insists that “this increasing inability to imagine a different future enhances rather than diminishes the appeal and also the function of utopia” (*Archaeologies* 232). The narrative utopia’s inability to imagine an
actualizable “good place” “becomes a strength” insomuch as it can yet “answer to the universal ideological conviction” of an increasingly globalized world-system “that that there is no alternative to the system” (Archaeologies 232). In arguing this, Jameson jettisons not only the idea, but also the value, of a representable eutopia altogether to claim instead that the evacuation of “utopia from political possibilities as well as from reality itself” remains invaluable in that its overt “meditation on the impossible” compels “us precisely to concentrate” on the necessity of a total, radical historical “break” from the system (Archaeologies 232, emphasis added). Thus, although utopian texts fall radically short “over and over again” in their struggle with the impossible task of imagining radical Otherness, they not only sustain and shape desire; they are “about” the future precisely because they direct our attention back to the present, for this is the terrain on which desires must be translated into actions in order for alternatives to emerge.

If Jameson’s characterization of utopia in this way is easily the most “troubling” of his contributions to utopian studies, it has nonetheless also proven most “fruitful.” It has led to sharper formulations of the two-fold function that scholars agree comprises the “narrative work” of the utopian text. Key to this function is the way in which the utopian “no-place” directs readers’ attention, and their desires, back to the terrain of the here and the now. (This is also true for the u-chronian “possible future” prioritized in Bloch’s work and represented in utopian sf.) Marin’s term “neutralization,” borrowed from A.J. Greimas, names this function. In using this term to describe the workings of the utopian textual machinery, Jameson contends that it is crucial to bear in mind its dual nature. Neutralization is not a “simple cancellation,” but a double-negation that entails a positive component of “production” (Jameson, Archaeologies 41). The systematic negation of the historical present that occurs in the utopian text (to which we will return) clears the space for neutralization’s second moment, the negation of this negation: the
production of the “figure,” *viz* the introduction of a *novum* that is immanent in the present, but cannot be presented in its regnant system of representation. Hence, the utopia’s manifest content inevitably “fails.” Jameson shifts the focus instead to the “practical” function of utopia understood in *formal* terms as a “neutralization structure” (*Archaeologies* 212). He argues that the “solution” to the “lapsarian” dilemma that affirmative representational content poses “will have to be a resolutely formalist one: which is to say an absolute formalism” (*Archaeologies* 212). In the absence of reliable content, “content emerges *itself from the form and is a projection of it.*”: “Form becomes content—in that overarching plan which is the imagination—while the formerly tainted” contradictions inherent in a given utopian expression’s ideological and representational content “sink to the level of decoration” (*Archaeologies* 212, emphases added).

This is precisely why understanding utopia as an aesthetic form that figures the impossible “makes a stronger case” for utopia, for it “liberates the utopian process from the ideological drag of its textual or social manifestations” (Moylan, *Scraps* 93). Moylan provides another lucid account of the figuration of the *novum* by way of what Marc Angenot theorizes as the “absent paradigms” of sf. Sf texts immerse readers in an *alternate* world *complete* with its own systemic internal logic and rules of “verisimilitude.” By virtue of the paradigmatic scale of these elements, which precludes their ability to fit into a narrative with any degree of fullness, a given text is forced to “impl[y] without attempting to show [this paradigm] extensively” (*Scraps* 51, emphasis in original). The reader of a “realist” novel may rely on the “real” paradigm of verisimilitude governed by her “real world” to interpret a text’s plot deductively from the general to the specific. However, texts that contain alternate worlds demand that readers reason inductively from the particular elements of the narrative to the generalized paradigm that structures them. This reorientation brings to light how “against all ’positive’ common sense, a
text is constituted and marked as much by what it excludes as by what it includes—and it excludes far more than it includes” (Angenot and Suvin 169, emphasis in original). In this way, these texts direct readers through their narratives toward a utopian horizon beyond them—toward a “social paradigm that is of but not directly delineated in the text” (Moylan, Scraps 50, emphasis in original). While the function of the “absent,” paradigmatic novum is implied in the text through its role as an alternate hegemony insomuch as it exerts a structuring influence on the text’s fictional social world, its extratextual function is a pedagogical one. It serves as the organizing “lack” in the utopian “restructuring of desire.”

Estrangement in Strange Lands

The “positive,” productive function of figuration is dialectically related to another, “negative” function of the utopian form: the critical negation of the status quo. This utopian “critique” is almost always linked to an “estrangement” from whatever the normative, commonsense worldview happens to be. Gilroy is one of a number of thinkers who argue that “the principled and methodical cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one’s own culture and history” is necessary to achieve a critical perspective toward the existing state of affairs (Melancholia 67). For Gilroy, estrangement is the crucial first moment that enables a further capacity to know the world differently, and to think and act more justly “not just in the face of otherness . . . but [also] in response to the xenophobia and violence that threaten to engulf, purify, or erase it” (Melancholia 67). “Something like it,” he writes, is a “routine feature” of postcoloniality, diaspora, tourism, globalization, and the contemporary communications revolution (Melancholia 67). Jameson links the “outsider’s gift for seeing over-familiar realities in a fresh and unaccustomed way” to the “utopian calling,” and indeed, his words suggest how the “fresh” perspective provided by a degree of estrangement is valuable in the critical
identification of the status quo’s “problems,” and in turn, in the arrival at novel solutions 
(Archeologies 11).

A crucial social function of the alternate worlds represented in utopian texts is what 
Suvin has called “cognitive estrangement.” As the reader is confronted with or immersed in the 
text’s alternate reality, her otherwise familiar, extratextual reality is denaturalized and rendered 
newly “strange.” This operation, akin to the “defamiliarization” of Russian formalism and 
Berthold Brecht’s more politicized concept of Verfahrenungseffekt,51 creates the cognitive 
distance necessary for a reader to critically interrogate her sociopolitical world and its 
shortcomings—“to see all normal happenings in a dubious light” (Suvin 6). Employing Bloch’s 
concept of the novum, Suvin theorizes the “narrative dominance or hegemony” in cognitively 
estranging literature of “an imaginative framework alternative to the . . . empirical environment” 
of an extratextual “zero world” (63, 8, italics in original; 11). The function of this alternative 
framework is to “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of” the zero world, which for 
Jameson is the world of “our own present” (Archeologies 286, emphasis in original). Jameson 
further argues that the “cognitive” dimension of this procedure, its status as an “epistemological 
function,” reflects utopian fiction’s “concreteness,” “thereby excluding the more oneiric flights 
of generic fantasy” (Jameson, Archeologies xiv, emphasis in original). Suvin insists on a similar 
materialism, and posits that what sets cognitively estranging fictions apart from other estranging 
genres is their totalizing—or to use Angenot’s Kuhnian term, paradigmatic—nature.52 Their 
islands, enclaves, cities, nations, worlds, planets, and universes, are indeed complete and 
internally-consistent worlds or cosmoses.

Jameson shows how estrangement, the “negative” first movement (or moment) of 
neutralization, essentially achieves an inversion of what Claude Levi-Strauss postulates as the
function of myth. Put simply, if the function of myth is to mediate between the opposing poles of a society’s internal contradictions via a synthesis that creates the appearance (or the lived-imaginary experience) of their resolution, then utopian neutralization ruptures this illusion, polarizes the contradictory elements, and brandishes them in a newly-readable way conducive to “cognitive mapping.” Through the estrangement achieved by the utopia’s fabrication of a “fictional point of exteriority” to the “apparent closure” of a given social present, “what takes on the appearance of a natural order of things in mythic discourse, the apparently immutable laws of individual and social behavior, is revealed in the utopia to be a product of historical and cultural contingency” (Wegner, *Communities* 37). The establishment of this externalized position—and cognition—“neutralizes” myth in this way while making it available for critique. In More’s *Utopia,* “the island of that name functions as a point-by-point negation or canceling of the historical England itself” (Jameson, “Islands” 85). This critical “canceling” of the existing social topography is necessary for the second, productive operation of “neutralization” to take place.

The related concepts of cognitive estrangement and mythoclasm are invaluable tools for reading the variety of estranging tropes and devices found in black utopian literature. As we shall see repeatedly, one of these texts’ most politically crucial operations is to “demythologize” the dominant world-view, its norms, and its “official” version of history. It is worth bearing in mind Gilroy’s observation that the “distancing” afforded by estrangement “can sound like a privilege and has sometimes been associated with the history of elites” (*Melancholia* 67). However, he writes that he is “not convinced that it is inevitably tainted by those associations,” and his reframing of the concept in terms of the “routine” realities of postcoloniality, intercultural communication, and migration countervails such a view (*Melancholia* 67).
The term “cognitive,” which should not be taken strictly to connote Western rationalism or “scientific” knowledge. Indeed, from the standpoints of some of the literary works examined here, the “world” posited by scientific rationalism (and by extension, the discourses and literatures that take this world as a given and serve to normalize it) is the myth to be challenged. In Chapter 6 of *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy discusses the Nazi Holocaust—which figures prominently in the work of John A. Williams—and punctuates how this event represents the convergence of an objectifying “scientific” rationalism and a dehumanizing racialism such that the distinction between them effectively vanishes. Gilroy’s work offers a useful reminder of the necessity of an openness to modes of cognition, “rationality,” and knowing that differ from the “logic” of scientistic reason (and indeed of globalization) in order to reach toward a transformative counter-“logic” through which to defamiliarize—or alternatively, to re-familiarize—and thus reconceive the world conceived by modern science. If science itself is construed as a *mythos*, it is necessary to consider the alternative “cognitions,” or even the alternative “rationalisms,” contained in the kinds of narratives that might be categorized, but should not be dismissed, as “myths” or “folktales.” Pordzik argues that postcolonial utopias often advance an “enabling cultural myth” to counteract the force of a predominating exclusionary myth, and such “myths” more often contain systematic, materialist counter-logics (*Quest* 57). Ahmad observes that Pauline Hopkins’s and W.E.B. Du Bois’s fiction turns to “spirituality, insanity, or fantasy as the occasion demands” to break the frame of the conventional novel which, in its effect of “naturalizing an official version of the ordinary,” becomes “a kind of negative utopia: a closed, fictionalized system whose portrayal ultimately serves to reinforce prevailing systems of inequality” (Ahmad 134). Additionally, as we shall see, many works draw
on non-Western traditions of storytelling that can be considered “folktales,” but should not be misconstrued as non-cognitive.

The “cognitive,” totalizing aspect of utopian estrangement allows texts to achieve the ontological rupture—an “ontolytic effect”—whereby the zero world’s “empirical reality” is presupposed in order that the implied reader may look “back from those novelties” presented in the fiction “in order to see it afresh from the new perspective” (Suvin 71, emphasis in original). For Suvin, the zero world is that of the implied author, but Jameson, Moylan, M. Keith Booker, and others prioritize the world of the reader. The kind of “ontolytic” tactics Suvin describes can be observed in Okri’s utopian novel, *The Famished Road* (1991), which is told from the first-person point of view of a child from the spirit world as he navigates a recognizably human world. In this text, the human world appears drastically altered by the fact that the child, Azaro, can see the other spirits who also inhabit it (although humans cannot). The “spirit”-child’s first-person point of view is the only filter the reader is given through which to interpret a fictionalized and estranged, yet familiarly “real” world that obstinately resists any attempt to force it into standard Western interpretive paradigms. In fact, the text summons attention toward the fact that this “forcing” is exactly what readers accustomed to conventional novels are trying to do. By positioning the spirit-child as the “authorial speaking subject,” the text unmoors its “implied author’s reality” from the world implied by scientific rationalism, thus radically destabilizing the implied empirical world both inside and outside the fiction. If, as Suvin argues, the implied author’s reality provides the reliable coordinates for deducing the logic of the novum by way of comparison, the narrative strategy of *The Famished Road* effectively (and totally) re-centers the historical world. This is doubly estranging for readers accustomed to the novelistic
conventions the text also estranges. They are forced to decipher its *novum ex nihilo* by piecing together the kaleidoscopic phenomenological overload of Azaro’s experiences.

The world that *functions* in Okri’s novel as the ontic historical world appears as what Suvin, whose main concern is sf, would call “magical or religious,” rather than conforming to the purportedly “neutral” world of Enlightenment reason (Suvin 19). However, Brenda Cooper has demonstrated the totalizing tendencies of “magical realism” and its fictional *worlds*, which can be considered “cognitive” estranging fictions as well.  

Indeed, as with any estranging *novum*, Okri’s *The Famished Road* does have its own absent paradigmatic hegemony, Suvin’s “overriding narrative *logic*,” that should not be misunderstood as anti-logical even if it is “illogical” or “un-reason-able” according to the formalized conventions of classical Reason (Suvin 70). To be sure, as with the “wealth of insights into the complicity of rationality with racial terror” Gilroy finds in Zygmunt Bauman’s study of the Holocaust, the “advantages of marginality as a hermeneutic standpoint” become clear in texts like Okri’s (*Atlantic* 213). In this latter sense, we shall see estrangement at work even in many self-consciously “realistic” and even “naturalistic” chronotopes created by authors whose perspective is fundamentally ex-centric to the dominant one. Especially in dystopias, this kind of estrangement is often leveraged in the service of utopian political critique, often, as in Okri’s case, through the estrangement of received modes of cognition itself.

**Reading Delany’s *Blake* as Black Utopian Literary Theory**

Martin R. Delany’s serialized novel *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859, 1861-62) is the “fourth [known] novel written by a black African and certainly a more radical work than the other[s]” (Gilroy, *Atlantic* 27). The novel appeared as the U.S. Civil War began, and tells the story of Henrico Blaucus (also known as Henry Holland and Henry Blake), a member of a well-to-do black Cuban family who is kidnapped and sold into slavery in the U.S. Henry escapes to
Canada but returns to the U.S. and traverses the entire South spreading a secret plan for violent mass revolt among an intercommunicating network of slaves on plantations throughout the region. After attempting to stage a mutiny on a transatlantic slave ship, he returns permanently to Cuba to lead a revolutionary movement that seeks to wrest the island from Spanish (and the threat of American) imperial rule and found a separate state. This state, Gilroy notes, would be discretely “non-white,” but in the revolutionary movement’s inclusion of women, a diverse population of like-minded militants, and white supporters whose very differences are “ironically facilitated by the transnational structure of the slave trade itself,” it resembles something like a “metacultural” coalition of the marginalized united against the hegemonic center (*Atlantic* 28).

Neither the Cuban revolution nor the American slave revolt is represented in the narrative, however, which breaks off on the very brink of a promised utopian transfiguration.57

*Blake* is the first known written work of African American and black anticolonial utopian fiction, but it draws on an already-rich lineage of black utopianism and utopian narrativity. In turn, this tradition is carried forward in a series of “revolutionary” utopias that includes *Imperium in Imperio*, *Black Empire*, and *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, as well as Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* (1936), Samuel Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), John A. Williams’s *Captain Blackman* (1972), and Chester Himes’s unfinished *Plan B* (1968-83, published posthumously in 1993).58 *Blake* reveals that it derives inspiration from stories of the slave revolts led by “black rebels” like “Nat Turner, Denmark Veezie [sic], and General Gabriel” (Delany 113). At one point, a group of rebellious maroons serve as “narrators” to recount “with delight” the “exploits” of these rebels, “the pretended deeds of whom were fabulous” (Delany 113, emphasis added). Here, in an almost metatextual moment, Delany’s own novel about a “fabulous” black rebel internally stages the process of its own narration—indeed, of the
fabulation of black utopian fiction itself. The scene is emblematic of how Blake frequently calls attention to both the conditions and methods of its construction, as well as its deconstruction of other texts. In addition to being a utopia in its own right, Delany’s novel thus offers a utopian Ur-text—or even a kind of theoretical text—for understanding some of the key themes, tropes, and features of the black literary utopia. Insomuch as Blake novelizes for the first time crucial features of an existing narrative tradition and anticipates—in terms of both form and content—many of the ways in which this tradition is manifested in later works of black utopian fiction, it offers a paradigm that illustrates the core operations of this literary practice. As such, the remainder of this theoretical discussion will repeatedly return to Delany’s novel as an exemplar of this tradition’s key textual features.

Ahmad has argued convincingly that Du Bois turned to utopian fiction because it proved far more conducive than expository prose to express the desire for the “impossible” that separated his vision of the future from Booker Washington’s compromised pragmatism. It is similarly significant that Delany, widely considered to be one of the fathers of Black Nationalism and a noted writer of political nonfiction, used utopian fiction as a vehicle for a radical alternative to the reformist politics of mainstream abolitionism. There are numerous utopian imaginings in the novel: the idea of “Africa becoming a great country”; the promise of a violent, uncompromising, coordinated slave revolt in the U.S. South; and its most elaborate vision, inspired by the Haitian revolution, which imagines seizing Cuba in order to establish a black utopian island (Delany 262). These localized utopias, however, are part of a larger and more significant utopian “cognitive mapping” that articulates a pan-African consciousness. While the pan-Atlantic cartographies seen in Delany are already clearly evident in Equiano’s slave narrative, Blake is significant for introducing a new and uncompromising revolutionary
fervor into black literature, as well as a transnational vision of militant solidarity. The negative critique in Delany’s fiction “makes an African-American experience visible within a hemispheric order of racial domination,” while in its positive phase “the version of black solidarity Blake advances . . . opposes narrow African American exceptionalism in the name of a truly pan-African, diasporic sensibility” (Gilroy, Atlantic 27). Just as More’s text “conceived” a representation of “national” space that colonized the globe and became the predominant sociopolitical-spatial form through which much of the world would come to be understood through the spatial imaginary of modern Europe, Blake projects a supranational counter-space that exposes and critically re-reads modernity’s self-representation. It also posits a different framework for imagining community, “nation,” and world. Gilroy’s reading of Blake in The Black Atlantic speaks to the estranging, consciousness-altering power of the utopia advanced in Delany’s text insomuch as it helped open the possibility for Gilroy’s own influential conceptualization of the “Black Atlantic.” Gilroy observes how the “the topography of the Black Atlantic world is incorporated into Delany’s tale,” and Gilroy’s language indicates how this deeply spatial novel’s numerous and peregrinating border-crossings engage in a process of world-ing (Atlantic 27). Delany’s insurgent remapping of the “world” of the slave trade in a way that at once transcends national boundaries yet also bounds itself within a focused set of political concerns and lived experiences remains relevant for those who, like Gilroy, continue to negotiate the “tension between cosmos and polis, global and local” in the contemporary moment (Gilroy, Melancholia xv).

**Genre/Counter-Genre**

*Blake* provides a set of coordinates from which to map the distinctive shape of the black literary utopia. It also offers an instructive performance of black utopias’ tendency to appropriate and transform generic conventions for their own political purposes. Gilroy argues that Henry’s
attempt at mutiny effectively stages “a middle passage in reverse” and thereby points toward how *Blake* accomplishes a number of important seeming-inversions (*Atlantic* 27). On closer inspection, however, these appear as genuine transformations that either look past, or surpass outright, simple negation or reversal. The novel’s subtitle, *The Huts of America*, is taken from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and marks the novel as a combative rejoinder to Stowe. Insomuch as it “wrenched apart [Stowe’s] racialist sentimentality” the text negates—indeed explodes—the (now) oft-maligned reformist, would-be beneficent social politics of Stowe’s sentimentalist narrative, which leaves intact and even reinforces prevailing ideologies of race and power. In *Blake*, readers are confronted with “the antithesis to Mrs. Stowe’s picture of a mulatto hero (Delany preferring a black protagonist), slave docility, [and] Christian endurance” in the person of Henry Blake (Miller xx). As the first representation of a strong black male protagonist in American fiction, the very inscription of Blake’s character is a weighty counter-generic intervention. *Blake* also adds a revolutionary energy, and methodically inflames the very real terror of widespread, violent revolt from within through its direct references to known conspiratorial black utopianism as manifested in extralegal enclaves of maroons and real historical slave revolts. The indirect (indeed, repressed) spectral fear conjured by Henry Blake’s secret plan, and the suppressed counter-history of rebellion that the novel foregrounds, bespeak the dramatic difference between Delany’s effort and Stowe’s. Through these differences, “we can see the ‘public transcript’ of the dominant group being probed, challenged, and rewritten in the ‘hidden transcript’ of [a] subordinated group” (Bould, “Revolutionary” 55). Ultimately, while Stowe’s text works to repair the national social fabric of the U.S., *Blake* is an attempt to rend the dominant Euro-American self-imaginary altogether and irreparably. In addition to “writing back,” as it were, to Stowe, Delany’s text also martials both Christian and
Enlightenment humanist rhetorics in order to turn them back on themselves, revealing their internal aporias while enlisting reconfigured versions of them in contradictory projects that leverage their rhetorical power—\textit{logos}, \textit{ethos}, and \textit{pathos}—to militate for a radically transformed state of affairs.  

Whereas Stowe’s novel works \textit{apolitically within} a normative social imaginary in which slavery appears in a strictly ethical light as a “peculiar” aberration that must be corrected, Delany’s text works \textit{politically against} the same imaginary, even as it, too, mobilizes the tropes of sentimental fiction and Christianity in an “estranging” way in order to make the normative appear \textit{totally aberrant}. Gilroy notes the way in which \textit{Blake} operates “only partly from within the conventions of an abolitionist literary genre” (\textit{Atlantic} 28). While slavery does appear in \textit{Blake} in the familiar “ethical light,” it is, in contravention of Stowe’s popularly received depiction of it, “primarily presented as an exploitative \textit{economic system} of an international nature” that “makes blackness a matter of \textit{politics} rather than a common cultural condition” (\textit{Atlantic} 28, 27, emphasis added). This attempt at wholesale demystification is of a kind with what Gilroy elsewhere conceives of as “the relationship between critical theory and the racialization of knowledge itself,” in that critical theory disrupts and exposes “the way in which racial politics has been obstructively invested with common sense” (\textit{Melancholia} 30-31). And indeed, the novel’s internal critiques—economic and generic—aim to render legible the “blind inadequacies” of the “paternalist theories” that justified and even naturalized slavery (Sundquist 196). Delany’s text wields tropes formerly consigned to affective genres that reassuringly rehearse received moralisms, but does so in order to disclose the underlying social conditions and political contradictions these moralisms function to obscure. \textit{Blake} thus undertakes a totalizing critique and re-presentation of the realities of racism. It also marshals the conventional
devices of sentimental abolitionist fiction for its own purposes while at the same time rupturing not only these conventions, but the conventional thinking they reinforce.

Blake’s approach to Christianity illuminates this genre-straining strategy of “complicit critique” even further. Another metatextual feature of the novel involves the way in which the reader sees the “fabulous,” quasi-messianic protagonist Henry Blake adopt Delany’s own “strictly instrumental orientation toward religion . . . as a valuable tool for the political project he sought to advance” (Gilroy, Atlantic 28). Delany, a former medical student, was a committed advocate and practitioner of instrumental reason, as is his novel’s protagonist, whom the reader witnesses taking received Christian dogma apart and reassembling it as a revolutionary manifesto. 64 On the one hand, especially in its early chapters, Henry Blake deploys stringent (and conspicuous) critical reasoning to vigorously deconstruct the coercive use of Christianity by white plantation owners to control slaves and encourage their passivity. This is exemplified by the mantra, “stand still and see salvation,” an injunction to the slaves to do nothing toward achieving freedom but rather to leave it to “God.” This mantra is repeatedly mocked in the text. In contrast to this “Christian endurance,” so prominent a theme in Stowe, Henry Blake urges the enslaved people in his growing conspiratorial network to take their salvation into their own hands and wage active “war on the whites” (Delany 290). However, the culturally powerful tropes of religion do not disappear from the novel in the process. Rather, as with the sentimentalist trappings with which Henry embroiders his baroque orations, Blake allows the reader to follow its deconstruction, reconstruction, and deployment of an evangelistic, more syncretic “religion” that can be made to work as a justification and motive force for revolution. The reader observes Henry Blake somewhat paradoxically unloose the lexicon of evangelical mysticism for these ends as he traverses the South “sowing the seeds of future devastation and
ruin to the master and redemption to the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt” (Delany 83). What emerges as Delany’s messianic protagonist takes salvation into his own hands is a contradictory refusal to stand still coupled with an injunction to “have better sense” than to attempt to unleash the destruction “at an improper time” (313). However, even as he declares his “war” in the name of a “God” that was and is likely to be interpreted as the Christian one, Henry’s version of “religion” is stripped of the distorting and divisive doctrinal baggage of the mainstream Christianity he rejects. His attainment (and willingness to accept) the status of a conjure-man during his visit to the Dismal Swamp indicates how Henry’s version of religion and its utopian figure of “salvation” are, like the multiethnic Cuba he envisions, predicated on equality and inclusion rather than exclusion and hierarchy. Henry’s initiation into conjuration is indicative of a syncretism with Africa-centric, non-Christian traditions as well as an incorporation of “magic” that we shall see again. Through Blake’s strategic redeployment of Christianity and refashioning of its rhetorical conventions, Delany mines the same cache of transcendent affective and ethical tropes as Stowe in order to inflame—but also educate—a quite different set of sociopolitical desires. But there is yet more utopian textual machinery at work in his utopia’s invocation of the otherworldly grammar of religion.

The Dialectic of Utopia and Apocalypse

Blake’s final (extant) sentence, “woe be unto those devils of whites, I say,” expresses a biblical, millennial expectancy that is typical of its more general clothing of the impending revolution in the rhetoric of chiliasm, a more extreme form of the Christian rhetoric the novel uses and abuses (Delany 292). Especially toward the end of the novel, millennial imagery is used to mark the place of utopia on the narrative’s unreachable horizon. On the one hand, Delany’s supplementation of “modern secular rationality” with an extra-rational mystical discourse when
the first becomes insufficient to achieve his text’s ends is indicative of the truism that “the
critique of modernity cannot be satisfactorily completed from within its own philosophical and
political norms” (Gilroy, Atlantic 56). Indeed, Gilroy argues that European, Enlightenment
Reason inherently is a dissimulated racist politics, and in positing a utopian aesthetic of “Black
Atlantic radicalism,” Gilroy argues that its aesthetic forms can and do deal “only secondarily in
the idea of a rationally pursued utopia” (Atlantic 56). In overlaying the anticipated event of its
pending political revolution with a messianic vocabulary of salvation, Delany’s text introduces a
figure which stands in for the absent, postrevolutionary paradigm of the not-yet-become, toward
which the narrative constantly builds but never reaches. In this way, Blake surpasses the negative
moment of critique to accomplish two objectives. First, the revolutionary utopian “momentum of
the book” is “supplied by” Henry’s messianic “zeal,” and second, a positive figure of a trans-
figured future is introduced without being betrayed to rational, novelistic representation (Gilroy,
Atlantic 26).

This chiliastic dimension, however utilitarian it may ultimately be, aligns Blake with one
of Gilroy’s “primary categories” of black utopianism: those utopian expressions from “slaves’
perspectives” that are “steeped in the idea of a revolutionary or eschatological apocalypse—the
Jubilee” (56, emphasis added). Jameson writes that an apocalyptic “moment” of what he calls
“world-reduction” is frequently introduced into utopian texts. For Jameson, a “destruction of the
idols and the sweeping away of an old world in violence and pain, is itself the precondition for
the reconstruction of something else”; for the truly new to come into being, some sort of space-
clearing event must achieve the necessary “blank slate” (Seeds 89). Interestingly, both Jameson
and Gilroy figure the “catastrophe of modernity” itself as this very sort of apocalyptic event,
which “in truest Weberian fashion dashes traditional structures and life-ways to pieces, sweeps
away the sacred . . . and leaves the world as a set of raw materials to be reconstructed rationally and in the service of profit and commerce” (Jameson, *Seeds* 84). The apocalyptic moment of the “Jubilee” thus signifies a cataclysm necessary to counteract the “catastrophe” that Walter Benjamin called “history,” and thus figures a negation-of-the-negation.

This dialectic of apocalypse and utopia is one of the most common tropes in all black utopian literature, and is the dominant mode of many of the texts discussed here. In keeping with the tendency toward genre manipulation, this apocalyptic form can draw from multiple cultural sources, and has multiple variants. In black American literature, this aesthetic relies heavily on the rhetoric of Christianized “utopianism” that has “characterized so much American life, from the founding of the Massachusetts Bay colonies, to the pilgrimage of the Mormons” (Moses, *Messiahs* 2). The tradition thus grows out of “two seemingly contradictory experiences—oppression by American social institutions, and immersion in the mainstream of American messianic culture,” and uses the former to turn the latter’s rhetoric against itself (Moses, *Messiahs* 14). Chapter 3’s discussion of Ngũgĩ’s work will focus on this mode in an African context in novels that not only draw on Western messianic discourse, but also some extant “African cognates” of this apocalyptic mode as well.

Karl Mannheim has called Christian apocalypticism “the most extreme form of the utopian mentality” (213). However, it is rife with contradictions: “the very idea of the dawn of a millennial kingdom on Earth always contained a revolutionizing tendency,” yet this “spiritualization” of revolution transports it into an intrinsically apolitical and ahistorical realm (Mannheim 215). Further, it is passive: Chiliasm does not work to bring about heaven on earth, but rather “stands still” and *waits* for it in a static (and ecstatic) state of “absolute presentness” (Mannheim 215). Yet it is the constant expectant tension of this “attitude” that foments
revolutionary activity among those who share it. Ideas “[do] not drive these men to revolutionary deeds” (Mannheim 213). Rather, “Chiliasm sees revolution as a value in itself, not as an unavoidable means to a rationally set end” (Mannheim 217). However, the apocalyptic nonetheless becomes historical through explosions of expectant energy: “ecstatic outbursts [begin] to operate in a worldly setting . . . . the impossible gives birth to the possible, and the absolute interferes with the world and conditions actual events” (Mannheim 213). This point of interface is the crux of the matter. At its most extreme, the apocalyptic mode, with its inconsequential “this” world and its void-like unimaginable “other” world, purges itself of all content, and might perhaps be conceived of as the latter-day Jameson conceives utopia: as absolutely pure form. However, Mannheim ultimately insists (and Jameson would agree) that history cannot be escaped, and stresses the utopian potential that exists when this “form” makes contact with world-historical “content.” The confluence of politics and spirituality, in Mannheim’s view, can produce a heightened sociopolitical awareness that assumes the “motor function of the total social process,” which, in the case of the Anabaptists, played a role in fundamentally destabilizing the monolithic feudal order almost in spite of itself (Mannheim 212).

What we see in texts like Blake is an attempt to manipulate and fuse this utopian form with a specific historico-political content that would raise awareness in order to force a revolutionary explosion. Paradoxically then, in utopian fiction, “the apocalypse represents a call to action” (Pfaelzer, Utopian Novel 116)

Something similar can be observed in The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon, one of the twentieth century’s great utopian thinkers. Read through a utopian hermeneutic, his writings about the “misty idea” of “this Africa to come,” their transcontinental influence, and their projection of a transnational understanding of the “nation” onto a supranational future space
constitute a utopian textbook (*Toward 197, 177*). Critics have remarked on Fanon’s proclivity “often—and paradigmatically . . . to phrase his ideas in messianic terms” as a “utopian conceptualization of the liberation struggle” (*Lazarus, Resistance* 12). Against the negative “veritable apocalypse” of the colonial situation in Algeria, Fanon hurls an equally apocalyptic vision of “the Third World starting a new history of Man [sic],” a history into which, in the text’s final sentence, Fanon’s “new man” seems just about to step (*Fanon, Wretched 291; Lazarus, Resistance 315*). Neil Lazarus argues that Fanon’s messianic bent “makes the setbacks of the postcolonial era seem incomprehensible. No references to betrayal on the part of postcolonial leaders, and no evocations of the deadly sinuosity of neocolonialism, are sufficient to explain the collapse of the revolutionary unity and purpose that the messianic formulation assumes was present at independence” (*Resistance* 17). In light of this, Lazarus calls for a Habermasian “reconstruction” of Fanon’s work such that the “messianic emphases would be excluded in the interests of the overall coherence and cogency of his thinking” (*Resistance* 17).

However, it is more appropriate here to stand Lazarus’s argument on its head. That is, if it is indeed necessary to “exclude” anything, it is a concern for “cogency of thought” that would predicate itself on the exclusion of Fanon’s “messianic” proclivities. To read *The Wretched of the Earth* exclusively as a theoretical text is to foreclose the possibility that the text *should be* read foremost as a performative rhetoric rather than as a constative analysis. It scarcely seems necessary to note that Fanon’s systematic, analytic, mythoclastic thinking is but part of a rhetorical strategy that communicates on multiple registers, including the affective. This strategy is ultimately crafted to inspire people to change their historical situation. Moreover, given the way *The Wretched of the Earth* fuses intellect and affect, politics and desire, its messianic tone is a rhetorical maneuver for tapping the expectant energies of its historical moment and infusing
decolonization and independence with an aura—an imminence, a wish-dream—to catalyze popular action. Indeed, the text attempts not just to capture, but in the vocabulary of the essay “On Violence,” to be “what makes the lid blow off” a potentially volcanic sociopolitical situation (Fanon, *Wretched 71*). In the more positive language of the essay “On National Culture,” it seeks to tap into the “secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today . . . some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (Fanon, *Wretched 210*, emphasis added).

Although Lazarus would fault Fanon’s text for an inability to account for postcolonial reality, it is noteworthy that unlike the detailed dystopian warnings in the “Pitfalls” essay, which appear as a repetition-with-difference of the existing state of affairs, *The Wretched of the Earth* is in keeping with much messianic or revolutionary rhetoric insomuch as the text makes no attempt to represent the “splendid era” to come, and in this way is faithful to its very “unrepresentability.” Rather, it remains a promise that invests the signifier of political “independence” in order to achieve that very goal. *The Wretched of the Earth* should be read according to its own terms as the very sort of “literature of combat” Fanon militates for in the essay “On National Culture”: writing designed to shake and awaken the people, to “[mold] the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons.” Such literature “assumes [social] responsibility” as “the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space”—a perfectly serviceable definition of utopian narrativity, as it were, one that speaks to how and why, in addition to *The Wretched of the Earth*’s theoretical value, it may also be read as a work of utopian fiction (Fanon, *Wretched 240*, emphasis added). Like Delany’s *Blake*, Fanon’s merging of apocalypticism and utopianism is at once representational, motivational, and supra-rational.
The Sense of an Ending

The apocalyptic mode evident in both Blake and The Wretched of the Earth is linked to another important characteristic of black utopian fiction. On the one hand, as “paradigmatic” fictions, “utopias” and “apocalypses” both “exist under the shadow of the end” (Kermode 40, 8). Even in “open” narratives, “all . . . plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole [narrative] duration and meaning” (Kermode 6, 46). Of course, the figure of the apocalypse—that contradictory resolver and epitomizer of contradictions—conflates “end” and “beginning,” a conflation that manifests itself in multiple ways in utopian fiction. In black utopian literature, an impending end dominates the text, but almost never appears within the narrative. Rather, these texts cultivate a strong desire for the end, and the new beginning it promises, only to refuse fulfillment by leaving the ending/beginning in the narrative’s future, and in the reader’s as well.

In More’s Utopia, when the island is excised from the world surrounding it, this effective end of history becomes the beginning of Utopia. As might be expected, however, in apocalyptic utopias the punctual event is usually imagined in far more cataclysmic terms than More’s trench-digging. Such world-historical detonations strive to be equal to the task of irreparably rupturing a reality that “feels so massively in place” (Jameson, “World Reduction” 270). As with radical utopian Otherness itself, a bona fide apocalypse inevitably makes extreme demands on the imagination as well as representation, and most texts skirt the problem through indirect representation or temporal displacement. The primary texts that Jameson invokes in his discussions of the “world-reducing” apocalypse trope follow Utopia (where the event has ascended from realistic to mythic discourse) and locate the apocalyptic break in the primary narrative’s past as the “end” with which their new worlds “began.”
This is almost never the case in black utopian literature. Mark Bould observes that “while the classical utopian text performs an end run around history and into postrevolutionary everyday life, with perhaps a glance back at ‘the Event . . . the moment of revolutionary transition’ [that compresses] ‘all of diachronic time . . . into [a] single apocalyptic instant,’” black utopias always remain “on our side of such a convulsion” (“Come Alive” 234). On the one hand, locating the impending apocalypse in the future acquires a certain significance in light of the inevitable “failures” of utopian representation, whereby the impossible becomes mired in the all-too-familiar. We will see that John A. Williams’s critiques of the civil rights-era pursuit of a “fulfilled” American Dream, Ngũgĩ’s indictments of neocolonialism, and Morrison’s criticisms in Paradise of both a racist American society and the utopian form itself, all testify to the stakes involved in the repetition-without-difference of a flawed “familiar” world, particularly for those whom that world excludes or oppresses. Indeed, the idealized multiethnic Cuba that is referentially prefigured in Blake is imagined as—problematically and impossibly—fully integrated into the existing transatlantic capitalist system, the very system that Henry’s hemispheric travels debunk point-by-point as identical with racialized slavery (which Gilroy describes as “capitalism with its clothes off”) (Atlantic 15). In this regard, Blake reveals even in spite of itself that actual liberation would require an even more radical utopian transfiguration than the black capitalism its author embraced. Accordingly, the text’s own ideological constraints are in tune with why, in Blake, the apocalyptic revolution never finds its way into representation.

The infinite deferral of the end/beginning in black literary utopias gives rise to a related feature shared by a vast majority of texts: structural “anti-closure.” Pordzik likens the open-ended narratives of postcolonial utopias and dystopias to the openness of the critical utopia.
Like Ahmad, he aligns this anti-closure with a “locus encompassing all those possibilities of change that have not yet been fully realized” (Pordzik, *Quest* 16). He supplements this notion of generalized forward dreaming with the suggestion that the sense of incompletion created in such texts can function, as it does in *Blake*, as a “prescriptive . . . assumption of the inevitability” that radical change is going to come (*Quest* 57). Indeed, *Blake’s* final sentences, which promise “woe” for whites and reaffirm “hope” for blacks, sound a prophetic pronouncement to this very effect (Delany 313). Editor Floyd J. Miller confirms that multiple chapters of the original serialized version of *Blake* have been lost, and “we do not know how Delany concluded his novel” (Miller xxv). However, Miller introduces the novel to the Black Power generation in 1970 with the claim that “the very inconclusiveness of the novel as it now exists—the rebellion in progress—is perhaps more relevant today than any ending Delany could possibly have conceived” (Miller xxv, emphasis added). Indeed, Miller’s comments not only call up the limits of the utopian imagination, they also suggest an odd verisimilitude as they absorb the text into a rebellion of a century later, when liberation is still in the future. Further, insomuch as any serial is constructed in a to-be-continued fashion, the novel’s individual segments perform the fact that, regardless of how—and if—the novel ended, a *structure of incompletion* is built into this narrative, which on its final extant page insists that it is yet the “improper time” for revolt (Delany 313). This structure is crucial to how black utopian literature performs its political work. In a more general discussion of “narratives of struggle” and “works of highly volatile ideological significance,” Russell Reising discusses how “anticlosure” reopens and even exacerbates “the very tensions” that endings “are meant (or are to appear to mean) to ‘conclude’” (327, 321, 315). Claudia Tate’s claim that a “fantasy can sustain a successful work of propaganda and indeed inspire . . . social activism” hints at how open-ended utopian narratives can gesture beyond
themselves by inflaming utopian political desires and their accompanying psychic “tensions” while refusing to resolve them vicariously, thus urging readers to work for closure in the world outside the text (*Psychoanalysis* 19). In this way, their potential futures focus the attention back toward the present, and the not-yet-realized change that needs to occur. Indeed, *Blake* teaches its readers that its impending apocalypse is a “call to action.” Chapter 4’s discussion of *The Salt Eaters* will demonstrate how Bambara’s novel offers particularly useful insights into how utopian writers manipulate “structures of incompleteness” in hopes of instigating real social change.

**Political Biography and Autobiography**

*Blake’s* cognitive mapping of the transatlantic slave trade has a kinship with the traditional utopia’s largely schematic spatial orientation. Of course, it maps a dystopia, and in a way that is more akin to the dystopia as well as the critical utopia that “negated” it, the novel’s exploration of space serves as the background for the foregrounded story of its larger-than-life protagonist. As the first strong black protagonist in American fiction, Henry Blake himself is a utopian creation in his own right in an era when affirming black selfhood was itself a challenge to the sociopolitical status quo. We shall see in Chapter 4 that especially in black women’s writing, the personal, the public, and the political converge in agentic poetic or auto-poetic acts of social subject-constitution by those who have been marginalized or silenced. In this respect, “artistic expression . . . becomes the means toward both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation,” and this linkage is worth reiterating (Gilroy, *Atlantic* 40). Some students of utopia have suggested that narratives of self, despite their focus on the individual, can acquire a utopian function through their interrelationship with the community, even if such narratives focus less explicitly on social problems than more conventional utopian literary forms. Leah Hadomi coined the term “intopia” to signify the “quest for an alternative identity,” a move that calls
attention to the utopian potentialities of even the most inwardly inflected narrative “mode of positioning the subject” (Pordzik, *Quest* 70). In the intopia, a “protagonist’s” inward “search for a wished-for, yet unattainable reality” does not entail a solipsistic “negation of the empirical world,” but it usually does not achieve a utopian empirical world either (Pordzik, *Quest* 70). While this turn inward may not explicitly position the subject as a powerful agent of change, it does not necessarily equate to a fatal dehistoricization of the subject.

In fact, black literary utopias frequently involve a radical *rehistoricization* of the subject in direct contestation to Western liberal humanism and psychologism. This should in no way be confused with a historical determinism that envisions a “future . . . subject to the laws of historical and economic development that the individual is not able to direct or influence” (Raphael-Hernandez 18-19). Rather, as in Bloch’s account, “utopia can become an objective and real possibility only when it is not bound by predetermined conditions”; and further, there is a dialectic “between the subjective and the objective” such that history influences, but does not determine, the utopian wish-dreaming that, in turn, influences history (Levy 6; Raphael-Hernandez 19). Delany’s Henry Blake is at once an exemplary individual and a political descendent of several historical black rebels, and like them, he is both impelled by, and impels, the movement of history. Gilroy agrees that biographical narratives can perform a utopian—indeed a political and historical—function that surpasses monadic notions of the subject. This is true, for instance, in the way “narratives of loss, exile, and journeying” often entail individual variations on communal themes that can, “like particular elements of a musical performance, serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness . . . back to significant, nodal points in [a] common history and its social memory,” thus “organizing the consciousness of the ‘racial’ group socially” to “invent, maintain, and renew identity” (Gilroy, *Atlantic* 198). Such narratives
speak not only to the deep imbrication of the subject in the community, but also to the Jamesonian issue of utopian allegory (or metonymy). Both aspects are particularly salient in the “illness narratives” discussed in Chapter 4, in which the connections between the personal and the historico-political are figured at the level of psychophysiological matter itself. These narratives also accord with Raphael-Hernandez’s claim about the utopian nature of black biographical narratives that “send their protagonists on . . . journeys from broken to healed personalities”—and, we might add, healed bodies—which “additionally show how the transformed protagonists catalyze their communities” in positive ways (Raphael-Hernandez 2). Raphael-Hernandez’s Blochian generalization that “any literature that portrays transforming protagonists or transforming societies” can be considered utopian perhaps raises questions about the conceptual utility or dilution of utopia if a pan-utopian expressive culture is to be assumed (Raphael-Hernandez 17). However, in the texts discussed here, personal transformations are coupled with transformative social politics to the extent that this dialectic speaks for itself. Delany’s biography of a kidnapped, enslaved, liberated, and subsequently revolutionary protagonist could hardly be said to obscure the political “world” it relegates to the background—without which, Henry Blake is scarcely thinkable in the first place.

**Insurgent Historiographies**

The re-historicizing of subjectivity in black utopias is embedded in a broader engagement with “history” itself, especially with the “public transcript” of “official” history. Indeed, the biographical narratives in black utopian literature are often used as a means of rewriting normalized narratives of the past or the present. In *Blake*, not only does Henry’s biography defamiliarize the present, but the impending future American slave revolt is conflated with the American Revolution—that is, a distinctly American war for true freedom for all, which is presented as having never really happened. In such texts, the question of a better future is
deeply invested in a relationship to the past that diverges from many canonical utopias. One of Ahmad’s main goals is to distinguish between anti-colonial utopias and the cycle of Euro-American utopianism that Bellamy inaugurated, in which possible futures are projected based on developmentalist “modernization theory.” Ahmad’s concern is that developmentalism’s “notion of progressive improvement became linked with doctrines of European superiority,” and thus emerged as “one of the central ideologies of both colonialism and neo-colonial relations” (22).

Due to the work of Darwin and Spencer, the conceptualization of historical time as teleological, technological, and evolutionary “progress” was particularly influential during the period that Ahmad covers. Of course, on the one hand, this teleological view of history is coeval and coextensive with modernity itself, and can be found in a utopian literary tradition that dates back to “that Cockaigne of the scientific imagination,” Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* (Elliott 18). On the other hand, it continues to saturate the “last surviving great narrative of the West . . . the idea of inescapable, ubiquitous globalization, which is largely based on technological modernization” (Goebel and Schiabo 1). The developmentalist understanding of history thus remains a site of intense contestation amid a broader discursive struggle with history and historiography in black utopias. Some of the more readily apparent means by which black utopias counteract the ideology of developmentalism involve “*replacing* the evolutionary understanding” of time (Ahmad 132, emphasis added). Indeed, apocalyptic figures like Gilroy’s Jubilee “mark a special break or rupture in the conception of time defined and enforced by the regimes that sanctioned bondage” (*Atlantic* 212). Most crucially, however, black utopias engage in the political struggle over history and historiography through their proclivity to appropriate and re-present the past, a discursive practice which has implications for both the politics of race and the generic conventions of utopian literature.
Ahmad observes that one of the ways in which developmentalism manifests itself in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century utopias is that their visions of the future “present a racially homogenized nation on the vanguard of global development” (Ahmad 49). Wegner’s reading of *Looking Backward* offers insight into how Bellamy’s utopia addresses race through a developmentalist historical e-race-ure, one in which social “evolution” is paradoxically dependent upon the expungement of an inconvenient past. This speaks to the very mental processes necessary to imagine the racial and social “dedifferentiation” that appears in Bellamy’s presumptively more perfect society, as well as the purgation of various “savage” elements that, for Bellamy, personify “the larger nightmare of industrializing America, that of disorder” (Wegner, *Communities* 73, 70, 66, emphasis in original). In his utopia, “Bellamy evokes the condition of a subject literally pulled from history” (Wegner, *Communities* 90). Its narrative thereby reveals the mythopoetic “historiography” involved in the creation of a national consciousness rooted in a common imaginary “history,” which represses or expurgates the terrifying remnants of differential, contradictory, and self-contradictory actual histories. Wegner shows how this process involves “a fundamental restructuring of the memories, and hence the very identities of the subjects composing it” specifically through the “annihilat[ion]” of “undesirable memories” (Wegner, *Communities* 65, 93).

Utopias by black authors frequently combat this amnesiac construction of the West’s hegemonically imposed official history through a dissident relationship with the past which engages in a “restructuring” operation of its own. This intervention is achieved through “‘rescuing’ critiques of the present by both mobilizing memories of the past and inventing an imaginary past-ness that can fuel . . . utopian hopes” (Gilroy, *Atlantic* 57). This operation is closely related to Bloch’s claim that “the real dimension of hope” is predicated upon a historical
openness rooted in the understanding that “true action in the present itself occurs solely in the totality of [a] process which is unclosed both backwards and forwards” (Bloch, *Principle* 18, 9). Ensuing chapters will trace how what Toni Morrison calls “re-memory” functions as an ontolytic weapon for reopening the ideological enclosure of the historical public transcript in order to “rescue” the alternative possibilities located in the “unbecome future [that] becomes visible in the past” when it is remembered differently (Bloch, *Principle* 9).

Black literature abounds with “hidden transcripts” of history in order to reclaim, retell, or entirely reconceive the past for the purposes of disrupting the tacticalforgettings and defensive erasures that bowdlerize the public transcripts of the present. However, the texts that are truly utopian are concretely historically grounded and oriented toward the future. Even the most seemingly fantastical counter-histories are never retrogressive, and should not be confused with the traditional, “conservative utopian” trope of prelapsarian “Golden Ageism” and its extrahistorical mythic conception of time. This is the very sort of retrograde thinking that Fanon addresses in his critique of the Negritude movement’s desire to exhume intact and fix in place the museum pieces of an imagined “authentic” cultural past buried beneath the slag-pile of colonial history. The “grounded aesthetics” of black utopian texts intercede in the historical narrative via a combination of what Gilroy calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of memory,” which together comprise the critical perspective from which the utopia’s first, negative operation arises: “a redemptive critique of the present” (*Atlantic* 71). Through individual and collective cultural memory, counter-hegemonic “dissident assessments of modernity’s achievements” estrange the “normative structures provided by modernity itself” as part of the larger, collective project of composing what Walter Benjamin called a “primal history of modernity” from Others’ points of view (*Gilroy, Atlantic* 71 55). For Benjamin, transfiguring
the future requires “images in the collective consciousness” which function as “ideals,” and “in which the new and the old are intermingled” (W. Benjamin, “Paris” 159). In these ideals, “there also emerges a vigorous aspiration to break with what is out-dated—which means . . . with the most recent past,” and Benjamin argues that “these tendencies turn the fantasy, which gains its initial stimulus from the new, back upon a primal past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it, the latter always appears coupled with elements of prehistory” (“Paris” 159). Elements of this “primal” history thus “interact with the new to give birth to the utopias” (W. Benjamin “Paris” 159).

Whereas Pordzik calls this operation “alternatively performed historiography,” this study will use the term insurgent historiography, which perhaps better grasps the confrontational nature of its politics. Such texts often “restage confrontations between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless . . . African slaves” (Gilroy Atlantic 220). They may record or recontextualize testimony, orature, or events. They may involve “damaging” the conventional tropes and narrative structures via which public transcripts are unquestioningly received. This can be seen in the disruption of literary form by authors like Bambara or Morrison, who cautions that “the history of the novel as a form” is coextensive with the history of “a middle class” that came to understand itself through the form (qtd. in Gilroy, Atlantic 219). Insurgent historiography may entail an “imaginative recovery” of history through fiction which, by means of its “proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding,” thus “lead[s] back from contemporary racial violence . . . toward the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage” (Gilroy, Atlantic 222). Nevertheless, texts such as Morrison’s Beloved, and other neo-slave narratives of the 1970s and ‘80s that “revisit the slave experience” after more than a century, do so in order to
“sift it for resources with which to bolster contemporary political aspirations” (Gilroy, Atlantic 220, emphasis added). In re-presenting the historical past, such politically attuned acts of un-forgetting and “re-memory” seek to invade and cognitively remap the cultural terrain of the present and its “spaces of representation” in order to imagine new immanent conditions of possibility for the future. Like the North American neo-slave narratives, postcolonial utopias rework the texture of the past to create “a revised perception of the history of European colonialism . . . inextricably linked to the present as an agent of cultural transformation and to the future as an alternative space within the narrative’s epistemology where the imaginative revisualization of national and cultural identity can take place” (Pordzik, Quest 164, emphases in original). In this way, black utopias leverage the “capacity of remembrance” to give “flesh and blood to the notion of utopia, without betraying it to empirical life” (Gilroy, Atlantic 212). The fictional “memories” in these works of literature thus “point out of the present toward a utopian transformation of racial subordination” (Gilroy, Atlantic 71).

**Dystopia**

While Blake’s revolutionary desire is rooted in the slave rebellions of the past, its mapping of the entrenched transcontinental slave system employs many thematic elements familiar from literary slave narratives. Thus, although the text carries a powerful utopian impulse that looks ahead to a transformed future world, the present world represented in Blake epitomizes how “any slave world is necessarily dystopic” (Varsam 217).83 Representations of worlds structured by institutionalized racism and colonialism, and their legacies, often cause the negative, critical first movement to dominate black utopian and dystopian texts alike, whether they are primarily focused on the past, the present, the future, or most likely, some combination of the three. Often, this critical tonality is far more pronounced even than in the Anglo-American critical utopias. The few scholars who have published book-length studies of black utopian
literature generally acknowledge that even in “healing” narratives like Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Alice Walker’s *Meridian*, or Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), “negative circumstances” can seem to overpower the other aspects of the narrative. Often, as in the case of the “rawness of the hate that develops instead of love” and soaks Jones’s particularly bleak novel, these texts can seem to figure bare “survival” as the best hope that healing can supply (Raphael-Hernandez 131). An exception is the “stubborn idealism that often appears quixotic or even insane” in Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and to a lesser extent in *Dark Princess* (Ahmad 148).

Generally, there is “overwhelming” preponderance of “dystopian writings” in the literary tradition, and these can require an especially well-calibrated analytic in order to discern their positive, utopian “surplus” (Pordzik, *Quest* 58). However, the negative/positive valences of the utopian text are indicative of a dialectical relationship between utopia and dystopia, both of which are formal aesthetic implements for educating utopian desires. To the extent that there is a “boundary” between the two, in some texts it can be difficult to distinguish.

Both utopian and dystopian works of black literature share a deep investment in insurgent historiography. More generally, a drive to recover a lost past is a thematic fixture of the dystopian genre. Indeed, the dystopian “negation” of utopia in the early twentieth century represented the utopia’s tendency to erase the past in a way that inverted its political implications. Familiar texts like Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1950), feature authoritarian regimes that “distort or deny completely” the historical past that is capable of calling into question their absolutist authority and idealized self-image (Gottlieb 12). However, *Brave New World*’s invocation of Shakespeare reverberates with how references to the past in dystopias written by European elites often express nostalgia for some variant of the “public transcript” of “official” history positioned as a
comparatively “eutopian” alternative to the dystopian world of the novel. Much black literature, utopian and otherwise, brings a black historical perspective to the position taken by the “ex-centric” dystopian literature for which “official history” is not only the story of a dystopian past: the public transcript is the obfuscatory mythology of an oppressive system. Thus it, too, involves the very sort of erasure against which literary dystopias invoke “history” as a weapon. As a result, the insurgent historiographies in these texts perform a double-function that uses the past to challenge the hegemony of the present in hopes of influencing future events, and amid this very process, also corrects, appropriates, or rewrites official history to create a narrative of the past that serves, rather than thwarts, the text’s political aims. While nearly all such texts re-member history, some, such as Shirley Ann Williams’s neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* (1986), explicitly narrate the interruption of official historiography itself. Others, like the “demythologizing dystopias” described by Pordzik, place multiple “mutually exclusive versions of history . . . in confrontation in order to stress the fact that the past is not a set of established truths in which all further development[s] originate” (*Quest* 46, emphasis added). It is true in a sense that all dystopias, indeed all estranging fictions, demythologize the world. However, several of the texts discussed here are testimony the fact that the dystopia has a particularly powerful ability to “‘disclose’ the world” (*Varsam* 207). As a genre of dis-closure, it both discloses the world by retelling it and uncloses it by reopening official history’s ideological closure.

Dystopian disclosures of the past and the present are ultimately oriented toward the future, whether they sound dire warnings or reveal untapped possibilities. Pordzik affirms that dystopian mythoclasm can open new possibilities for “identifying” an alternative communal “sensibility” that can counteract, for instance, “a view of the nation as a finite and racially exclusive body politic” (*Quest* 47). Due to modernity’s history of racial terror and colonization,
much black utopian literature situates itself in a dystopian grounding, amidst which it works for mythoclastic “intellectual decolonization” and out of which it projects condition-specific eutopian desires and visions (Ahmad 5).

The intimate relationship between dystopia and utopia manifests itself differently across historical and cultural situations. Jameson writes that “if one wishes to avoid thinking about suffering and misery, one must also avoid thinking about the utopian text, which necessarily carries their expression within itself in order to constitute the wish fulfillment of their abolition” (Seeds 102). This “dialectical equation of hope and despair that demarcates literary utopias” is at work in the dystopia as well, although the balance of hope and despair may tilt quite differently (Shor 50). Booker sums up the matter this way:

Utopian and dystopian visions are not necessarily diametrical opposites. Not only is one man’s utopia another man’s [sic] dystopia, but utopian visions of an ideal society often inherently suggest a criticism of the current order of things as nonideal, while dystopian warnings of the dangers of “bad” utopias still allow for the possibility of “good” utopias, especially since dystopian societies are generally more or less thinly veiled refigurations of a situation that already exists in reality. Moreover, dystopian critiques of existing systems would be pointless unless a better system appeared conceivable. One might, in fact, see dystopian and utopian visions not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project. (Dystopian 15)

This dialectic of dystopia and utopia has been prominent in a long tradition of black literary projects. This study will trace the movement of this dialectic across a series of texts as they respond to the movement of history. Under the later stages of globalization, when utopia itself has been betrayed, coopted, and commoditized after a brief mid-century reappearance, we will see the dystopian position paradoxically emerge as the primary vehicle of utopian politics after a series of attempts to revive the utopianism of the 1960s. In an age when critical or oppositional thought grows ever scarcer and holistic social transformation seems less possible than the end of
the world itself, the functions of “redemptive critique” and “neutralization” acquire a new importance.

The Shape of Utopia

Debates about utopian form and content over the years have ranged from Bloch’s claim that everything can be utopian, to the anti-utopian claim that nothing can be. There seems to be far less debate, however, in the functional arena, where words like “impulse,” “imagination,” “hope,” but most of all, “desire,” almost inevitably appear. On the one hand, the interpretive openness of such concepts is precisely their strength in that the breadth of human expression they admit for analysis encourages quests for utopia in cultural territory that would otherwise be cordoned off limits. On the other hand, a reasonably specific definition of utopia, however provisional, is necessary in order to conduct this quest with any useful degree of rigor. In this spirit, the conceptual elements outlined above have been enumerated in order to provide a defined yet pliable toolkit for analyzing texts like those discussed in the next four chapters. These tools will be deployed selectively when they prove valuable, but it is hoped that this will prove more productive and interesting than a sequence of identically manufactured readings without sacrificing either the clarity or the thematic unity of this work.

Notwithstanding the notion that of course “defining” utopia is “impossible,” and despite the fact that phrases construed as broadly as “the education of desire” offer what amounts to a nearly infinite set of potential interpretations, a surprisingly small set of fundamentals seems eternally to return in discussions of utopia. However much this may reflect the limitations of the human imagination—which it incontrovertibly does—more interesting is the way this suggests that despite its evasiveness, utopia does seem to have a particular “shape” that is almost discernible on its own horizon. If utopia is indeed to be “defined” as Marin’s “organizing lack,” it seems to organize both fictional worlds and theoretical architecture around it in recognizable
patterns. At the edge of the conceptual void, it remains somehow almost possible intuitively to “know” utopia when we (don’t) “see” it. Although More’s *Utopia* is coextensive with modernity, its “anticipatory illumination” of the future has nonetheless shed light at least as far into the past as Plato’s *Republic*, allowing scholars to see “utopian” impulses and blueprints at work there. Gilroy finds utopia in black expression throughout modernity in music ranging from the earliest slave songs to recent popular music, and in over a century’s worth of written literature. Fanon finds explosions of pent-up utopian energy in the dance rituals of colonized peoples. We might thus pause to consider, or reconsider, whether Bloch’s notion of a “fundamental human ‘tendency to utopianize’” should be “take[n] seriously.” Whatever we decide, utopia’s ability to influence social change would seem to compel our consideration of utopia to be as serious as possible.

Notes

1. In addition to being a recurring theme of *The Black Atlantic*, references to utopia appear, for example, in the “Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism” chapter of *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), in *Against Race* (2000), and in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005). Gilroy discusses utopia’s place in his overall thinking in a 2006 interview with Tommy Shelby published as “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia: A Conversation with Paul Gilroy,” and cited below.

2. Locke (7).

3. Ongiri (24).


5. See Wegner, *Communities*.

America, 1888-1918 (Greenwood, 1997) does dedicate one important chapter to novels by Sutton Griggs and Pauline Hopkins. In the realm of postcolonial studies, extended studies include Ashis Nandy’s Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias (Oxford, 1987), Ralph Pordzik’s The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures (Peter Lang, 2001), and Eric D. Smith’s recent Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

7. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses’s Afrotopia, a study of historiography, when not dismissing utopia as idealistic, conflates it with the “ideology” from which Karl Mannheim attempted to distinguish it, arguing that the utopian, Afrocentric historiography of the early twentieth century inevitably collapsed back into notions of “primitivism” or “progressivism” that inevitably align it with Western modernity’s dominant, racialized worldview (33). While this study acknowledges the reasons for Moses’s critique, it also seeks to usefully complicate this point of view.

8. Hopkins and Wallerstein (1).

9. “The Great Globalization Debate” is David Held and Anthony McGrew’s term. Their 2000 essay of the same name is cited elsewhere in this study, and it rehearses the academic debates between those who advocate a global paradigm for analyzing contemporary political economy and those who still view the nation-state as the dominant frame of analysis.

10. See Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia. Gilroy draws his ideas in part from Du Bois’s 1947 declaration of the “collapse of Europe,” and he characterizes its beginnings by the advent of consolidated supranational structures composed from what Du Bois described as the postwar “debris” in order to compose a new “institutional order” (33). For Wallerstein’s views, see Hopkins and Wallerstein’s Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World System 1945-2025. For Appadurai’s “dramatic and unprecedented break” theory, see Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1996), cited in Jay (35). Winant’s views can be found in multiple writings, but see for example, The New Politics of Race, cited below. Bret Benjamin’s Invested Interests: Capital, Culture, and the World Bank, also cited below, focuses on the role of the World Bank as it follows the trajectory of globalization in the years following the 1945 Bretton Woods Conference. Benjamin’s perspective on culture and globalization relies on claims and periodizations made in Michael Denning’s Culture in the Age of Three Worlds (London: Verso, 2004). Jameson’s adoption of Ernest Mandel’s term “late capitalism” is omnipresent, and is also conceived as a postwar “break” that marks a shift toward globalization (Postmodernism 3; see also Part V of Valences of the Dialectic).

11. Held & McGrew (3).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. (24, 26).

15. Wallerstein (212).


17. B. Benjamin (19).

18. Ibid. (92).

19. This will become clearer below. Wallerstein identifies the “serious troubles for the US currency” that began in 1967 and the “worldwide revolution of 1968” as among a series of “shocks” that marked a “turning point” in the evolution of the post-1945 world-system (“Picture” 209). Amy Abugo Ongiri’s study of the Black Power Movement rearticulates the consensus view that in the U.S., the transition from Civil Rights Movement’s reformist position to the more radical alternative of Black Power was completed in the period between the June, 1966 March against Fear and Martin Luther King’s assassination in April, 1968 (Ongiri 2-3). Postcolonial scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that 1968 marks the point when, in Africa, it became clear that anticolonial nationalism had yielded bourgeois “kleptocracies” instead of liberation. Utopian scholar Tom Moylan’s seminal book, Demand the Impossible cribs its title from a slogan that appeared during the French upheavals of May, 1968, and indeed, for utopian studies’ founding generation, this moment is also a turning point in utopian literature.

20. See Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s.”

21. See Tom Moylan’s Demand the Impossible and Scraps of the Untainted Sky, cited below. The utopian “revival” inspired by the late 1960s is a historical context to which the present project repeatedly returns.


23. Moylan discusses the same phenomenon and its effect on utopian literature in Scraps of the Untainted Sky. See also the final chapters of Ruth Levitas’s The Concept of Utopia (cited below). Moylan’s arguments are discussed in more detail below.

24. “The End of The End of The End of Ideology” is taken from Russell Jacoby’s The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy (New York: Basic, 1999). It may be worthwhile to note that the borrowing of a phrase is in no way equivalent to the espousal of any of a book’s arguments. The phrase is a play on Daniel Bell’s widely familiar declaration of the “End of Ideology” in the 1950s, a declaration that passed from the erroneous to the ridiculous in the 1960s before meeting its own “End” in the culture wars of that decade. The year 1989 of course marks Francis Fukuyama’s alleged “End of History,” and the “End” of the “End” of Bell’s declaration.
25. The “critical utopia” is theorized in Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible*, while the “critical dystopia” is theorized in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.

26. Butler’s work is the exclusive subject of *Utopian Studies* 19.3 (2008).

27. For his discussion of Williams’s texts, see Bould, “Come Alive by Saying No: An Introduction to Black Power SF,” cited below. Bould’s project in this essay, along with “Revolutionary African-American Sf before Black Power Sf,” is to position a substantial bibliography of black fiction under the generic umbrella of sf.

28. Bould argues that “not the least” of the reasons for omitting texts like Williams’s from the sf canon is “the fact that the preeminence frequently afforded the Gernsback-Campell American magazine tradition” (“Revolutionary” 54).

29. Through this process of “implication,” this project is intended to theorize and apply an approach to utopia in which no single perspective dominates or “colonizes” the others. Yet in doing so, it also seeks to avoid politically paralyzing “undecideabilities” as well as what Malini Johar Schueller calls “expunging the politics of location.” The objective is to be productive rather than reductive, to ambitiously negotiate both “global” and “local” concerns in a way that emphasizes both and effaces neither in the process. At the same time, this is not the same as arguing that the incommensurability of differences should be assumed *a priori* in any universalized or reductive way, let alone arguing that such thinking always constitutes a political, cultural, or identitary strength. Critiques have been advanced by many thinkers concerning the drawbacks of the “absolute sense of ethnic difference” or “authenticity” that Werner Sollors has called “cultural insiderism” and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has more forcefully called the “cult of ethnicity.” (Sollors is cited in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* [3]; Gates’s comments can be found in his article “‘Authenticity,’ or The Lesson of Little Tree,” [*New York Times* Nov. 24, 1991]).


31. Over a decade later, despite the provocative title of this novel by a towering figure of American literature, despite its passionate utopian content, and despite Moylan’s opening of what would seemingly promise to be a fruitful discussion, no extended analysis of *Paradise* from a utopian studies perspective has managed to find its way into print. In fact, the only work of scholarship exclusively devoted to Morrison’s writing to be found in *Utopian Studies* is an article on *Beloved* that appeared in the journal’s first issue: Jewell Parker Rhodes’s “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Ironies of a ‘Sweet Home’ in a Dystopian Slave Society.” *Utopian Studies* 1 (1990): 77-92. Database searches yielded only four additional published articles or book chapters in English that address utopianism in Morrison’s *oeuvre*. All but one of these, Raphael-Hernandez’s were published in Germany (which is also where Raphael-Hernandez taught at the time of her book’s publication). As mentioned above, more generally speaking, Ahmad’s observation that the black literary utopia has scarcely been studied at all came another twelve years after Moylan’s essay appeared.
32. Raphael-Hernandez’s approach is a rare case in which a utopian studies-based theoretical model is constructed to read African American literature. In addition to the three authors she focuses on in her book, her model may be useful for reading other texts as well. However, although she does explicitly address the problematic nature of applying a strictly European theoretical model in order to engineer readings of black literature, the portable theoretical apparatus she brings to bear on multiple texts is overwhelmingly composed of concepts advanced by a single German-Jewish thinker. More can be done not only to attempt to avoid even the appearance of re-colonizing the particularities of such texts, but also to construct a more multidirectional, dialogic theory.

33. Compare with Wegner “Utopia” (79); “Here or Nowhere” (113).

34. For Gilroy’s discussion of Bloch’s influence on his thinking, see Shelby.


36. See Raphael-Hernandez (2-4). Raphael-Hernandez makes the sweeping claim that “most” African American women’s novels since the seventies articulate concrete utopian visions.

37. Bloch’s understanding of the “surplus” immediately seems to offer a means to resolve developments in late-twentieth century thinking as diverse as the revolution in the metaphysics of presence achieved by the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, the neo-Freudian semiotics of Julia Kristeva or the later, poststructuralist Lacan, various de-essentializing theories of individual and collective identity, and other theoretical transformations beyond the scope of this discussion, with a concrete “situated-ness” and a dialectical understanding of an always as-yet-incomplete history.

38. The term “organizing lack” is taken from Louis Marin’s Utopics (268).

39. See also Levitas (172).

40. Moylan draws on the work of frequent collaborator Rafaella Baccolini in order to formulate many of these claims.

41. While Baccolini’s contention is true with respect to the protagonist in Zamyatin’s We, the individual “number” D-503, Wegner’s rethinking of Zamyatin’s text as a utopia demonstrates that the ending of We is far more complicated than Baccolini’s argument suggests it is (see Communities 147-172).

42. See Jameson, Archaeologies (223).

43. For a thorough discussion of utopia and social spatiality, see Wegner’s Imaginary Communities.
44. It is crucial that because they constitute but one of Lefebvre’s three “dimensions” of space, symbolic representations of space should not be reduced to a poststructuralist notion of a purely “textual” spatial reality (Wegner Communities 15).

45. This expression is taken from Wegner’s Imaginary Communities (133). Lefebvre himself describes something similar in The Production of Space when he argues that a critical interrogation of space as a whole can engender an “experimental utopia,” which dares to question what rhythms of daily life might be inscribed in, and prescribed by, spaces that are conducive to happiness (151-152). This, as Wegner emphasizes, also has everything to do with what Louis Marin calls the utopic activity of “spatial play.”

46. See Tompkins’s Sensational Designs (Oxford, 1985). In her article, “Manifest Domesticity” (American Literature 70.3 [1998] 581-606), Amy Kaplan reframes Tompkins’s gendered construction in terms of race and imperialism, writing that, “when we contrast the domestic sphere with the market or political realm, men and women inhabit a divided social terrain, but when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien, and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness. Thus another part of the cultural work of domesticity might be to unite men and women in a national domain and to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home. The border between the domestic and foreign, however, also deconstructs when we think of domesticity not as a static condition but as the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien. Domestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery” (582). While the focus of her analysis is different that Tompkins’s, Kaplan also shows how the bounded social space of the domestic sphere functions as a totalizing figure for imagining the space of the nation.

47. Hutcheon, The Poetics of Postmodernism (20).

48. The debate about “totality” is integral to why utopia has been widely scapegoated as part of, in Jameson’s rather strong phraseology, a more generalized “vulgar repudiation of totalization” as synonymous with “totalitarianism” (Valences 405).

49. Marin, Utopics (9).

50. See Moylan, “Introduction: Jameson and Utopia.” Moylan lifts the two adjectives here quoted, “troubling” and “fruitful,” from an article by Peter Fitting.

51. Suvin explicitly invokes both the Russian Formalists and Brechtian theater (6). Jameson references the theoretical models of Shklovsky and Brecht in several of his writings on utopia, including Archaeologies. The foundational texts wherein these concepts are introduced can be found in Viktor Shklovski’s oft-anthologized monument of Russian Formalism, “Art as Technique,” and the well-known chrestomathy, Brecht on Theater (1964), edited and translated by John Willett.
52. See Suvin (63). As mentioned above, Angenot and Suvin argue that this paradigm is too enormous to fit into a text, and is thus implied or absent.


54. Jameson’s well-known concept of “cognitive mapping” is a mental operation by which the subject orients herself within society’s structures by a process of symbolic cartography (Postmodernism 51, 409-418).

55. The quoted words are American studies scholar Amy Kaplan’s (qtd. in Ahmad 134).

56. See B. Cooper, cited below. Cooper’s ideas about magical realism are discussed further in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

57. Any discussion of *Blake* requires a knowledge of its publication history. In his editor’s introduction to the 1970 Beacon edition, Floyd J. Miller discusses how the text was compiled from chapters published serially in two separate periodicals. Miller infers that “perhaps six” of *Blake*’s “approximately eighty” chapters “have not yet been uncovered” (*Blake* ix). The lost issues of *The Weekly Ango-African* in which these chapters “undoubtedly appeared” are chronologically last and therefore support Miller’s assertion in his editor’s introduction that “we do not know how Delany concluded his novel” (xxv). However (and it will be necessary to return to this point), it is worth noting that the serial form requires each installment to incorporate a “cliffhanger” in order to implant the desire for the next installment. Regardless of how the novel may have “ended,” if indeed it did, both the promise of an ending and its denial are built into the very structure of the serial form.

58. Himes had largely completed the extant manuscript of *Plan B* by 1971, making only minor changes thereafter (see Tal). Bould discusses all of the titles listed here in his essays “Revolutionary African-American SF Before Black Power SF” and “Come Alive by Saying No: An Introduction to Black Power SF.” See also Tal’s “That Just Kills Me: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction,” also cited below. Tal discusses *Imperium in Imperio, Black Empire, The Spook Who Sat by the Door, Plan B, and Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*. This study follows Bould and Tal in looking toward this body of work, and argues that these revolutionary texts should be considered literary utopias. Indeed, Griggs’s and Schuyler’s texts are among the most commonly cited among the few black novels referred to as utopias, and in positioning texts as black “sf,” Bould repeatedly cites their utopian qualities as a reason for doing so.

60. This quotation is taken from Eric Sundquist’s influential commentary on Delany in To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (198).

61. Bould’s reference to “public” and “hidden” transcripts, concepts—worth pausing over given their importance to utopian scholars like Francis Shor and Jean Pfaelzer—is a reference to James C. Scott’s Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (Yale, 1990).


63. In her essay, “Poor Eliza” (cited below), Lauren Berlant characterizes Stowe’s “sentimental politics” as an attempt to occupy the “high ground of an ethics beyond politics” that is manifested “wherever putatively suprapolitical affects or affect-saturated institutions (like the nation and the family) are proposed as universalist solutions to structural racial, sexual, or intercultural antagonism” (638). See also Suvin’s discussion of myths, fantasies, and folktales (18-21). In Stowe’s novel, it seems pertinent to add class antagonisms as well, and Jameson assures us today that the same is true, as social critiques “tend fatally to mobilize an ethical or a moralizing rhetoric . . . . But surely it is a rhetoric which is singularly ill-suited to the kind of society that this has become, a society in which religion has been trivialized into an ethnic badge or a hobby of small subgroups, while moralism is at best a harmless generational tic and at worst a matter of ressentiment and historical bitterness; as for great prophecy, were such a thing still conceivable, it could only take the form, today, of crank oratory or mental aberration” (Valences 406).

64. See Gilroy, Atlantic (28).

65. Delany, Blake (292).

66. Gilroy uses this term explicitly (Atlantic 38).

67. Moses, Messiahs (2).

68. Lazarus quotes directly from Habermas’s Communication and the Evolution of Society to explain exactly what he is calling for: namely, “taking a theory apart and putting it back together again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it had set for itself” (Resistance 17).


70. The internal quotations in Bould’s remarks are from Jameson, Archaeologies (187).

71. Bould, “Revolutionary” (54).
72. In a 2002 review of Pordzik’s book (Science Fiction Studies 29.2), Moylan notes that Pordzik draws a categorical distinction between the Western and the non-Western utopia. Pordzik footnotes Levitas’s discussion of Moylan’s concept of the “critical utopia” (Quest 9-10) to draw parallels between the critical utopia and the postcolonial utopias he is describing, but does not use the term in his analysis, preferring instead Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia and a less-prominent array of other terms. Moylan makes an argument based largely on literary form that the critical utopia offers a stronger analytic for many aspects of the utopias that Pordzik discusses, and that Pordzik’s insistence on maintaining a Western/non-Western distinction sets up a simplistic binary opposition that contradicts many of the points Pordzik makes about openness and multiplicity. Much of Pordzik’s argument does rely on a recognizably “postmodern” hermeneutics that incorporates ideas recognizably similar to those of Linda Hutcheon (Pordzik coins the term “utopographic metafiction,” for instance), Brian McHale, and other now-familiar names. Moylan addresses the paradox created when, on the one hand, Pordzik’s text maintains a clear Western/non-Western binary throughout despite its heavy emphasis on “trespassing the established boundaries” between genres, while on the other hand, by virtue of this very “blurring,” Pordzik’s study moves a great deal more freely from places like Australia to Nigeria than its allegedly “comparative” nature might suggest, essentially flattening the entire postcolonial world into a monad. In light of this binary, and in Pordzik’s postmodern spirit of favoring a more multiplicative, boundary-bluring approach, Moylan proposes the critical utopia as a kind of generic “thirdspace” that would establish a continuum between the “classical” and “postcolonial” approaches. While heeding the awareness Pordzik seems to show concerning the danger of collapsing his postcolonial analysis into that of the erstwhile colonizers, in terms of form and function, but not content, Moylan’s suggestion seems worth accepting here, albeit with caution.

73. See Ahmad’s discussion of Du Bois’s The Quest of the Silver Fleece and the explicitly messianic Dark Princess (145-178).

74. For discussions of the primacy of the protagonist in these genres, see Moylan, Scraps (150); Demand (45).

75. See, for example, Herndl, “Invisible” (567). Ellison’s Invisible Man is, of course, an exploration of the same problem almost a century later.

76. See Hazel Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood (New York: Oxford, 1987) , which offers an account of the particular experiences of black women writers, the deep prejudices that have historically excluded them from multiple waves of feminism and its liberatory projects, and the way black women writers used literature as a means to write a subject position into existence.

77. Although such a discussion would be too expansive to undertake here, Bloch is adamant about the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual subject and objective historical becoming. The theoretical calisthenics he dutifully and convincingly puts himself through to separate his conceptualization of the subject from that of the “bourgeois individual seen by Freud in a bourgeois way” are as conscientious as they are detailed. His analysis is
certainly as rigorous as Claudia Tate’s widely accepted engagement with the same psychoanalytic dilemma in regard to African American literature (Principle 52; See Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race. New York: Oxford, 1998). Tate is careful to acknowledge and account for what some see as the dangers of psychoanalytic theory. Some of the most prevalent criticisms are that psychoanalysis “offers no clear and immediate path to greater freedom and justice,” and insists on localizing trauma within the context of the family romance, which “relegates the bleak material circumstances of real lives to the background and blames . . . dysfunction on personal or familial deficiency” (Tate 16). Similarly, it brackets the ideological and world historical via its Eurocentric focus on the individual subject. Nevertheless, Tate argues for the irreducibly intersubjective nature of language and works to connect the personal and the political in psychoanalysis by scrutinizing what she terms the “politics of desire.” Of particular concern to Tate is once again the “enigmatic surplus meaning” in certain texts by black authors, the inevitable and problematic “excess” produced by their acts of signification (Tate 12). Tate has shown how reading for the “absent presence” of this surplus makes it possible to read desires in black novels that disrupt, and “exceed,” constraining cultural and discursive ideations of “race” and often destabilize the normalizing symbolic regime of the status quo more powerfully than the reverse discourse of direct protest.

78. See Blake’s chapter entitled “A Flying Cloud,” in which Henry visits a maroon enclave in North Carolina’s “Dismal Swamp.” Several of the maroons claim to have been “patriots” who fought in the American Revolutionary war only to have become slaves. Henry observes that “those were the kind of fighting men they then needed among the blacks,” and “the Swamp contained the insufficient number to take the whole of the United States, the only difficulty in the way being that the slaves in the different states could not be convinced of their strength.” Henry, of course, does just this, and the connections the text draws position the imminent “general uprising” will as a second American Revolution that, according to the text’s politics, will really be the first.

79. See Levitas (175-176); Elliot (9).

80. Fanon’s advances his critique of Negritude in The Wretched of the Earth (212-227).

81. Working against this critique, yet without assuming the “opposing” point of view most frequently associated with Césaire, Diop, and Senghor, postcolonial studies pioneer Bill Ashcroft reexamines Negritude once again in a 2009 article on the work of Ben Okri and Ayi Kwai Armah (“Remembering the Future: Utopianism in African Literature”). Ashcroft introduces concepts from Bloch and Jameson as well as from Congolese philosopher Kâ Mana to recuperate Negritude’s utopian elements, reexamine the relationship between memory and invention, and complicate the simple binaries of past/future and Euro-America/Africa that often have framed the debate.

82. Pordzik, Quest (128).
83. The words quoted in Varsam are Heidi S. Macpherson’s.

84. This is Cheryl Wall’s description of Jones’s “difficult book to read” (qtd. in Raphael-Hernandez 127). Indeed, the word “trauma” appears over and over again in the titles of articles about Jones’s novel. If one reads carefully, however (and others already have), despite its physical and emotional brutality, *Corregidora* is a remarkable story about a dawning agency that allows its protagonist, if not to escape, at least to drastically alter in an empowering way what formerly had been the single *Master* Narrative that held sway over generations of women in her family.

85. See Gilroy (Melancholia 151); Jameson (Valences 371).

86. See, for instance, Elliott and Suvin.

87. In Levitas (34).
CHAPTER 2
THE DIALECTIC OF DYSTOPIA AND UTOPIA IN THE WORK OF JOHN A. WILLIAMS

In a 1993 New York Times interview, John A. Williams tells Shirley Horner that when it comes to the problem of “white-black race relations,” he is “pessimistic, but . . . it’s the kind of pessimism that would be delighted to be proved wrong, absolutely wrong” (Horner). Williams’s words capture the atmosphere of several of his most politically invested works of fiction. Novels such as The Man Who Cried I Am (1967), Jacob’s Ladder (1987), and Clifford’s Blues (1999) work methodically at the interface between fiction and history to depict worlds in which racism and its consequences are omnipresent, systemically entrenched, and brutally enforced. Reality can seem scarcely bearable, and change nearly impossible. Even his “novels of revolution,” Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light (1969) and Captain Blackman (1972), are highly skeptical about the possibility of substantive social transformation. While they stop short of the explicit anti-utopianism of George Schuyler’s Black No More (1931), both novels are ambivalent at best. At worst, they speculate about what Schuyler’s novel insists: that the future “might turn out to be . . . a strange land governed by historical reversals” in which black people assume prominence only to repeat the mistakes of the very racist logic they hoped to see eradicated (Muller, John A.115). Nevertheless, the pessimism that dominates Williams’s work always contains glimmers of hope, which refuses to be extinguished.

One of Williams’s most provocative moves is to invoke the Nazi Holocaust in multiple novels as the absolute logical culmination of any social structure, particularly those of American and European modernity, that would consolidate itself identitarily or materially through the persecution, exclusion, or eradication of difference—especially racial difference. Mark Hillegas was one of the earlier literary critics to observe that the horrors of Nazi Germany were among the historical influences behind the widespread “anxieties” that are manifested in the virulent
dystopian and anti-utopian “nightmare” literature of the mid-twentieth century. The specter of the Holocaust appears quite explicitly in Williams’s oeuvre as one of the kernels of his dystopian vision.

Within this context, the primary concern of Williams’s fiction, as well as his substantial output of nonfiction, is the institutionalized oppression of black people in the United States and elsewhere. Few novelists have captured twentieth-century black experience as comprehensively and compellingly as Williams. Given the fearlessness with which his writings confront history, their suffusion with dystopian pessimism is hardly surprising. Yet the very negativity that floods many of Williams’s novelized historical topoi almost inevitably summons—more often than not by virtue of its very extremity—an equally forceful response from characters, readers, or both, in the form of a desire to prove history wrong. This bespeaks something quite other than the fatalism that Tom Moylan and others call “resigned pessimism,” a “response to a historical situation that regards it as ‘already decided’” (Scraps 153). Rather, even in Williams’s novels that present “history as genocidal conspiracy,” it is nonetheless the case that what can appear as historical “determinism” is ultimately “deflected into hope” (Bigsby 166, 167). His most poignant political fiction thus embodies what Bloch refers to as “militant pessimism,” which approaches a given situation as “not yet a closed matter”: militant pessimism resides in “the tension between actual tendency and latent potential, a ‘space of possibilities,’ as Bloch describes it, . . . in which [historical] movement can still occur” (Moylan, Scraps 153). In the fiction examined here, there is a tension between the bleakness of the actual past and present, and the latent possibility of a transformed future that lies “hidden in the darkness of the lived moment” and appears “only in an anticipatory way, in quite weak, quite small signs” (Bloch Principle 303). This tension between dystopia and utopia appears in individual texts as well as
across multiple texts as they respond to each other and to the history in which they are so deeply invested.

The majority of this analysis will concentrate on Williams’s critically acclaimed magnum opus, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, and his subsequent novel, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*. A primary concern will be the texts’ engagement with the utopian hopes and dystopian realities of the 1960s, the decade that witnessed the conflicts of the “Second Reconstruction” in the U.S., and of independence and its aftermath in several African nations. This discussion concludes with an examination of *Jacob’s Ladder* and *Clifford’s Blues*, novels which decades later revisit some of the earlier texts’ dominant themes in a manner informed by the events of the years between their publications. Notwithstanding the acclaim heaped on *The Man Who Cried I Am*, all four novels are underappreciated contributions to twentieth-century American literature. In them, Williams employs some of the definitive tropes of the black utopian political aesthetic, past, present, and future.

Moreover, the implicit argument of these readings is that these novels should also be considered landmarks of utopian fiction. As with this project in its entirety, the analyses presented here are intended to illuminate elements of black utopian politics and aesthetics that can provide a useful interpretive schema for reading other texts. Williams’s aesthetic, as with any other, is indebted to earlier authors while also undergoing constant change, and his variations on this “changing same” are in part responses to the vicissitudes of their historical substrate.

Especially in *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *Jacob’s Ladder*, one of the more interesting features of his work’s historicity is the way in which it maps the racial implications of postwar global changes that, while unprecedented, were also haunted by uncanny repetitions of the past.
Williams himself is a key transitional figure linking the radical black intellectuals and artists of the 1940s to the revolutionary Black Power Movement of the ‘60s and early ‘70s. Ishmael Reed testifies to Williams’s influence on his generation, referring to Williams as “the best African-American writer of the century” and “the greatest novelist of the twentieth century.” While such superlatives are of course subject to debate, Earl Cash’s more modest claim that Williams “holds his own among the best American novelists of [the twentieth] century” is one Williams’s literary output can easily support. However, Cash notes that in 1975, during the most influential and productive period of Williams’s career, he “received scant recognition” for his accomplishments, a claim borne out by modest book sales as well as what remains a scanty amount of academic scholarship. Among the reasons for this neglect is the fact that Williams was eclipsed by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, who dominated a literary establishment that “for so long [had] seen to it that only one black writer be recognized at a time,” a situation that Williams and Chester Himes contemplate in their correspondence. However, Jerry Bryant suggests that it was Williams who, during a time of generational transition, “picked up the baton from Richard Wright” and “set out to use his art . . . to embody the sociopolitical concerns of black Americans in fictional form.” Born in 1925, Williams left the multiethnic “melting pot” of Syracuse, New York’s Fifteenth Ward to serve in a segregated U.S. Navy during World War II. Like other black soldiers, he returned home to an America where “the blatant contradiction between the country’s opposition to fascism and the herrevolk nation state and the continued existence of Jim Crow in the States after 1945 was made perfectly clear to all” (Marable, Race 13). Most of Williams’s best-known works were published between 1960 and 1972, but his career spans more than four decades.
Williams’s life and work thus stand astride two generations. On the one hand, he was part of the generation that returned from war to experience the political awakening that would lead to the juridical reforms achieved by the Civil Rights Movement. This was also the literary period dominated by the influence of Wright, whom Williams transparently fictionalizes in The Man Who Cried I Am as the “father” of mid-century black literature. Williams had personal connections to prominent authors from this generation, most notably Himes, as well as to figures from earlier generations such as Langston Hughes. With the exception of the experimental Mothersill and the Foxes (1975), Williams’s primary literary mode owes much to the unflinching novelistic realism that Wright pioneered in the 1940s, an aesthetic that is widely known to have roots, in part, in anti-romantic turn-of-the-century literary naturalism. On the other hand, Williams was also well connected with the younger generation of authors and activists who dominated the 1960s, and worked alongside them. Many in this group rejected reformism to espouse radical, even revolutionary political views, and endeavored to forge a distinctive and empowering black literary aesthetic. Williams was on familiar terms with Amiri Baraka, William Melvin Kelley, and Ishmael Reed. He helped found the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in 1968, and he coedited the journal Amistad in 1969-70. He was thus deeply immersed in the black politico-artistic scene in the late ’60s, where he was an influential senior figure. While the Black Arts Movement tended to privilege poetry and drama, Williams’s creative vehicle remained the novel. Nevertheless, Night Song (1962) and Clifford’s Blues, make it especially evident that music was an important source of inspiration for Williams’s writing.

Gilbert Muller periodizes Williams’s career when he argues that it entered a distinct “second stage” with the publication of The Man Who Cried I Am. In a marked departure from his first three novels, the fiction Williams produced between 1967 and 1972 resonates with the
radical politics of the Black Power era. It also begins to push, sometimes quite vigorously, against the boundaries of Wright School naturalism, gesturing toward the kind of apocalyptic quasi-surrealism that Baraka deploys in his play, *The Slave* (1964), and even making forays into the fantastic, as did Kelley, Samuel Greenlee, John O. Killens, and other novelists of the era.9

*Captain Blackman*, the final novel of this “stage,” vacillates between dream sequence and *bona fide* science fictionist time travel in the manner of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979). In summarizing Williams’s relationship to this generation, Bryant states that although Williams is not the typical “incarnation of the ‘black writer’ of the 1960s”—he was “not the overt activist that Amiri Baraka has become, nor a militant pusher of [a] ‘black aesthetic’”—he nonetheless “stands pretty much at the center of the black fiction of that decade” (81).

For Cash, the writers of the 1960s were “as much Utopia-seekers as anyone else; only they take their quest seriously” (Cash 5). In arguing this, Cash attempts to separate writers who embrace the “Dream” that America is a “new paradise” from those who seek a different Dream altogether: the “American tragedy,” he writes, is that “no matter how fatuous the national dream, no matter how many times it has proved to create more problems than it solves, the American,” black or white, nevertheless “clings all the harder to it” (1, 2). By contrast, “serious” utopians “can see that America’s flaw comes from not owning up to its weaknesses” (Cash 5).

Indeed, it is precisely in making these weaknesses visible that the literary dystopia serves its utopian function; and as we shall see, Williams’s work tends toward the dystopian. M. Keith Booker notes that due to their “inherently critical” nature, dystopias often proliferate in societies that “can brook no criticism” and thus fiercely resist change (*Dystopian* 37). Further, Addison Gayle argues that “a critical methodology has no relevance to the black community unless it aids men [*sic*] in becoming better than they are,” thus suggesting that even the most vehemently
critical Black Aestheticians (must) work to improve a recalcitrant society (xxiii). Beyond critique, serious utopians “search for a surrogate system” (Cash 5). However, Cash laments that this search far too frequently arrives at a system “based even more heavily on the principles which have failed America” (5). Against this tendency, the late 1960s saw many activists and authors militate for the wholesale dismantling of the American Dream and a replacement of its “system.” Some went as far as to insist that the sort of revolutionary cataclysm Williams imagines in Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light is necessary to break the system’s structural and ideological grip if a just society is to be achieved. At its best, the utopianism of the ‘60s radicals was not the “fatuous” utopianism of a failed American Dream. Unlike the recycled American Dream of the integrationist reformists, Black Power’s politico-aesthetic synthesis faced down history, strove for “the de-Americanization of black people”—and thus, it follows, of America itself—and militated for self-determination and “the pursuit of a healthy, self-loving environment” (Gayle xviii; Ogbar 92). (Of course at times, there were paralyzing disagreements about what, and where, these should be.) This dream did not come true, but all told, the utopian visions that drove civil rights activists, Black Power, neo-nationalists, the Black Arts Movement, and the other groups that participated in the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s collectively did achieve a Second American Reconstruction that brought about “the end of rigid racial/caste structures which had been used to oppress blacks for many decades” and inaugurated “great changes in how Americans negotiated issues of race and identity” (Marable, Race 3; Ogbar 1).

Manning Marable completed the first edition of his history of the Freedom Movement in 1983 during Ronald Reagan’s first term as President. Retrospectively assessing the Movement from this vantage point, Marable concludes, “nothing fails like success” (146). The de jure dismantling of Jim Crow, greater opportunities for social advancement, and cultural self-
affirmation achieved during the Second Reconstruction met with persistent de facto structural inequality, cultural backlash, and “law and order” police-state crackdowns. Yet another reason that Williams is a compelling figure is that while he linked an earlier generation to the literary vanguard of the ‘60s (in addition to the Black Power writers, he was friends with noted postmodernist E.L. Doctorow),¹² his career outlasted that moment by decades. Thus, just as it is possible to track the historical shifts of the ‘60s in his fiction, it is possible to follow his later works through the comparatively dystopian moment of the ‘80s. Williams exhaustively researched his best novels, as is clearly evident in their deep and detailed engagement with history. Additionally, Williams spent time in “Mexico, Europe, Israel, and Cyprus; and covered Africa on assignment for Newsweek” (Muller, John A. 71). The result is a transnational worldview of a scope that few American authors of his time could match. *Jacob’s Ladder* is at once an African-American and a postcolonial “African” novel. His work’s purview carries the pan-African outlook of earlier generations through the Fanonism of the ‘60s and beyond. Of especial interest here is the way in which, during what Michael Denning calls the “Age of Three Worlds,” Williams’s fiction tackles racial politics on a global scale to engage with the struggles instigated by the emergent new world order. His work confronts the consequences of Euro-American racism, the Cold War, and the rise of the multinational capitalism that would emerge in 1989 as full-blown globalization. As it does so, Williams’s best fiction lives, often quite ambiguously, with and in the tension between dystopia and utopia. While the novels discussed here tend toward the former as they grapple with some of the twentieth century’s most horrific realities and “actual tendencies,” one can nevertheless read latent possibilities and desires at their cores. Beneath their dystopian surfaces lie what *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*’s protagonist Eugene Browning simply calls “our dreams . . . . about a good world” (J. Williams, *Sons* 9).
A Decade and Its Antinomies: *The Man Who Cried I Am*

*The Man Who Cried I Am* is the story of a bad world. Williams’s literary biographer Gilbert Muller claims that it is “arguably the most important political novel” to emerge from the “volatile decade” of the 1960s (“Foreword” xii). In Ishmael Reed’s opinion, it is also the “best” novel written about the 1960s.\(^\text{13}\) Taken together, these statements draw attention to the way in which *The Man Who Cried I Am* grants expression to the decade’s transformative political impulses while simultaneously taking the 1960s, including these very impulses, as its primary subject matter. The result is a literary monument to, a critical meditation upon, and an attempt to participate in the decade’s political battles. It has been well documented that the 1960s led to the rebirth of utopia and utopian fiction; yet it is worth recalling that the literary “utopian revival” of 1968-1976 was predominantly a phenomenon of the 1970s.\(^\text{14}\) The dominant mode had been dystopian for decades, particularly after the terrors of Hitlerism and Stalinism,\(^\text{15}\) reflecting a pervasive anxiety that “Great Britain and North America . . . could be moving toward . . . totalitarian dictatorship” (Gottlieb 7). For reasons that will become clearer, it is useful to read *The Man Who Cried I Am* and the novel of revolution that followed it as a pair of texts that negotiated a transition between dystopian and utopian positions, even if neither text breaks completely free of the pessimism that pervades both. While the texts should in no way be read as mere “documents” of the period, the transition from a dystopian to a somewhat more utopian position does have resonances with changes in literary politics that occurred during the historical moment they capture so well.

More important is the novel’s situatedness with respect to black history, for which the 1960s mark a utopian revival as well. The Black Freedom Movement is one of the “two brief moments in history” when “the United States experienced major social movements which, at their core, expressed a powerful vision of . . . human equality” (Marable, *Race* 4). However, by
the middle years of the 1960s, the Movement’s first wave—which initially advanced this utopian vision with nonviolent tactics and an optimistic message of love—had met with hate-filled cultural backlash, beatings, murders, bombings, and assassinations. Williams began writing The Man Who Cried I Am in 1964 during a period when he “had become preoccupied with the increasing violence, racial polarization, and cultural and political breakdown of the 1960s” (Muller, John A. 73). In 1963, Williams took a journalistic tour of the U.S. for Holiday magazine, which resulted in a book-length black American reply to Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley (1962). This take on the shopworn journey, “in search of an old dream . . . my America,” included Williams’s first significant experience of the South as well as the March on Washington, and became a cognitive mapping of the tumultuous racial situation across “a potentially lethal American landscape” (Williams, Country 1; Muller, John A. 43). Despite what he witnessed, and the “fear and anger” he experienced, Williams ends his book with an expression of “hope” that the nation’s racial crisis could be overcome (Country 161, 162).

However, in an afterword written a year later after a trip abroad that saw him return to the U.S. on the day when activists Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner disappeared in Mississippi during the murderous Freedom Summer of 1964, it is clear that his hope was souring. Williams levels a caustic indictment at a nation “born of violence,” where he is “forced to hope” even as he feels “afraid the worst is still to come” (Country 166, 169, 168). In an even more “Pessimistic Postscript,” which appeared in Holiday in 1967, Williams conjectures that the Movement will shift “very quickly from nonviolent to violent,” and he proffers a more ominous vision of the future: “today . . . I believe that if [racial equality] comes, it will first have seen this nation in a degradation perhaps comparable to Germany’s at the peak of World War II. Violence will clear our eyes” (Flashbacks 391; 390). The trajectory of Williams’s outlook, which closely resembles
that of the Movement, manifests itself in his fiction. Muller writes that while the texts of
Williams’s first period (1956-1963) convey “a tone of cautious optimism in [their] depiction of
possibly affirmative lives in America,” in the second period (1963-1972), “the American dream
vanishes, to be replaced by a world governed by unimaginable racial, historical, and political
violence” (John A. 47). This is the world of The Man Who Cried I Am, a world whose possible
future (if such a statement is possible) is even more “unimaginable” than its actual present
already is.

The events of The Man Who Cried I Am’s main narrative take place in 1964 in The
Netherlands during the last twenty four hours of American writer Max Reddick’s life. Max, who
is in part a fictional amalgam of Himes and Williams himself,\(^{17}\) is dying of rectal cancer. In
typical dystopian fashion, the action picks up in medias res\(^ {18} \) when, having recently arrived from
Paris where he attended the funeral of renowned black author Harry Ames, Max waits to meet
his Dutch ex-wife, Margrit. The next several hours find Max conversing with Margrit and
planning to rejoin her the following evening. Max then makes a trip to Leiden at the behest of
Harry’s mistress, Michelle, who presents Max with Harry’s bequest: a mysterious dossier of
papers. In pain and disoriented by the effects of multiple doses of morphine, Max retires to the
bedroom to rest and read these papers. These events are related in comparatively short stretches
of narrative that are interrupted by lengthy flashbacks through which Max’s life flashes before
his eyes, as it were. Beginning with Max’s first encounter with Harry in the late 1930s, the
flashbacks carry Max’s biography forward until it reconnects with the main narrative. They
traverse his service in World War II, his early struggles and later successes as a novelist and
journalist in the U.S. and Africa, changing race relations in the postwar era, and his relationships
with many women. (In a review of the 2004 Tusk Ivories reissue of The Man Who Cried I Am,
James Campbell writes that “Max’s sexual politics are likely to seem . . . unappetizing to a present day readership [and probably did to many in 1967]” [31].

One of the salient aspects of his life-narrative is the way in which it presents an imaginative history of the mid-century black literary scene. Literary patriarch Harry Ames is a doppelganger for Wright, whom Williams’s roman à clef scarcely bothers to disguise, and the novel also includes fictionalized renderings of James Baldwin (Marion Dawes) and Carl Van Vechten (Granville Bryant). Max’s path also crosses those of political figures based on Martin Luther King (Paul Durrell), Malcolm X (Minister Q.), Joseph McCarthy (Senator Braden), and an unnamed U.S. President who serves as a means for the novel to criticize John F. Kennedy’s civil rights record. Indeed, the narrative is a provocative composite of history and fiction that tracks the events of the civil rights era from its beginnings through the escalating conflicts of the 1960s. Max’s biography is largely a character-driven narrative. However, what Cary Nelson argues about the biographical narratives of radical writers is true of Williams’s Max Reddick: his life is intimately intertwined with historical events and struggles that inevitably transform him.

Max is at once dying and gaining world-shattering new information as he narrates his life to himself, and the reader thus learns his life-history as Max simultaneously relearns it.

Over hundreds of pages of text largely devoted to Max’s remembrance of things past, the comparatively brief fragments that deal with the present gradually reveal the mystery of what Harry has placed in Max’s hands. The materials in the dossier—a letter from Harry as well as a series of government documents compiled by Igbo dignitary and playboy Jaja Enzkwu—detail the existence of the Alliance Blanc, a secret organization comprised of the former colonial powers along with the U.S. that is dedicated to maintaining control of Africa and preventing black unity. The materials also include a copy of the U. S. ’ “King Alfred Plan.” The Plan
outlines actions the U.S. government will take in the event that a domestic racial “emergency” occurs, including mobilizing the Armed Forces to round up and intern all black Americans in camps. The final paragraph of the Plan implicitly but quite clearly reveals the ultimate intention of these camps via muted references to the Nazi Holocaust. Realizing that he must choose whether or not to “wreck the nation” by revealing this information, and that American operatives are likely to kill him (as they did Enzkwu and Ames) before his cancer does, Max phones Minister Q. and reads the dossier into a tape recorder (Williams, *The Man 370*). However, the Minister’s phone has been tapped and American authorities make hurried arrangements to liquidate Minister Q. at the beginning of a meeting (just as Malcolm X. was killed) before he can make any information public. Max flees Michelle’s house, but he is killed by secret operatives who have been trailing him. The narrative concludes with Margrit Reddick sitting alone in a café waiting in vain for Max to return.

Immediately before the reader is confronted with the contents of the genocidal King Alfred Plan, the novel reproduces the complete text of Harry’s explanatory letter, theretofore only given in fragments. On the one hand, this culminates the narrative’s work of piecing together both Max’s life and the grisly details of the white world’s conspiracy to maintain power by any means necessary. (The disproportionate number of black casualties in Vietnam, for instance, is due to the fact that “since the Korean War [the American Defense] Department” has sought to “eliminate, through combat, as many combat-trained Minority servicemen as possible,” thereby minimizing the possibility of any trained, organized resistance [375].) On the other hand, by placing the complete conspiracy at the point when the narratives of the past and present converge, the text recreates its tragic hero’s Moment of Recognition, a trope that also bespeaks the text’s debt to the structural patterns of detective fiction.⁴¹ Although he initially tells himself
“I have not read what I just read,” a second reading ultimately forces Max to recognize the worst of all possible worlds (362). The explicit parallel between the novel’s King Alfred Plan and the Holocaust—official history’s definitive example of human horror that defies, yet politically and ethically requires, imagination—projects an apocalyptic future on par with literary history’s most terrifying dystopian visions. Given the fact that the novel describes “whites and blacks at each other’s throats” to the degree that Washington seems poised to go “up in smoke” at any moment, this future appears as not just probable, but essentially guaranteed (360, 361).

Williams invokes the specter of the Holocaust not only as a figure for “the future as nightmare,” but also as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman frames it in Modernity and the Holocaust: as a “window” through which “one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible. And the things one can see are of the utmost importance not just for the perpetrators, victims and witnesses of the crime, but for all those who are alive today and hope to be alive tomorrow” (viii). Interestingly, Erika Gottlieb theorizes the literary dystopia as this very sort of “window on history” (Gottlieb 15). In Williams’s dystopia, the Plan emerges as both “the inevitable outcome in a pattern of historical determinism that spans centuries” and a “corroboration of lessons” Max has “learned over three decades on three continents” (Muller, John A. 81). But this works in the other direction as well, insomuch as the Plan functions as the cognitive estrangement apparatus (as the Holocaust functions for Bauman) through which the pattern can assemble itself and teach its lessons in the first place. The Plan not only “corroborates” Max’s experience; it makes it intelligible for the first time. Max is “caught in the web of history,” to use Muller’s phrase, and the Plan illuminates this history, radically rewriting both the present and the past in the process (John A. 73):

They had the Civil War; that was to be a start. Reconstruction; that was to be a start. Truman’s integrated army; that was to be a start. [the Brown v. Board
decision of] May 17, 1954; that was to be a start. The March [on Washington] last August; that was to be a start. Each new President, his mouth filled with words, promised a new start. There were always starts . . . but there were never any finishes. Enzkwu’s papers proved they were faking it all the time; all the goddamn time! (J. Williams, The Man 386)

This epiphanic passage spans a century of American history and shreds any remaining illusions about the possibility of racial equality under the existing system. The hopeful decade of the 1960s is recast as one more episode in a long series of periodic, ultimately delusional irruptions of wishful thinking actively cultivated by a deceitful power structure in order to perpetuate itself. Any sham notions of “progress” disappear, and history rematerializes as the kind of absolute stasis that is the hallmark of the totalitarian dystopia and the crypto-totalitarian classical utopia alike. “America” appears as a Janus-faced white supremacist utopia that is determined to maintain at any cost its status-quo racial inequities (as it always has), the reverse side of which is an authoritarian, oppressive black American dystopia (as it always has been). If the Plan projects a fantastical future as the ne plus ultra dystopian nightmare scenario, it is important not to overlook the fact that the text represents the past and the present as dystopian in their own right in a way that is akin to the dystopianism of Wright-school naturalism, a point to which we will return. Indeed, the Plan “is a condensed version of the white’s treatment of blacks in America, a symbol of the historical and systematized control of blacks since the country’s very beginnings” (Bryant 94). The novel highlights how Max’s presence in Holland brings him back to the embarkation point of the Dutch ship that brought the first African slaves to Jamestown. In this way, the text embeds his biography in a vast history of transcontinental racism and colonialism. The international Alliance Blanc extends the Plan’s logic beyond America to insist that where—anywhere—black people are concerned, the modern world, past, present, and future, is dystopian.
This approach to history exemplifies the way in which *The Man Who Cried I Am* both makes use of and deviates from conventional dystopian devices. In so doing, it reflects broader generic ambivalences common to black utopian literature. On the one hand, the King Alfred Plan reflects the familiar arguments of critics like Hillegas, Moylan, and Andrew Ross, who note that whereas the utopia focuses on the deficiencies of the present, the dystopia is a critique of “perceived deficiencies in the future” (Ross, qtd. in Booker, *Dystopian* 19). Although he uses this future-oriented formulation to support his argument that the dystopia’s function is social criticism, Booker offers a needful corrective by noting that “it is usually clear that the real referents of dystopian fiction are generally quite concrete and near-at-hand” (*Dystopian* 19).24 Indeed, the future that menaces *The Man Who Cried I Am* functions in the manner of the conventional dystopia to “warn” readers about the logical consequences of the present world’s “actual tendencies.”25 As authors like Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Margaret Atwood did for the decades in which they wrote, *The Man Who Cried I Am* warns of fascist tendencies lurking in its own present, a warning that functions as a “negative prophecy,” in which “dreaded outcomes are envisaged and therefore hopefully deferred, in such a way that the reader is induced to ponder on the present signs of disaster” (Seed 9). The manner in which a nightmarish future and hefty portions of Max’s past intersect on the last day of his life underscores how, in keeping with Booker’s argument, Williams’s novel is fundamentally about the absolute present.

However, this is true in another sense that deviates from convention and speaks to *The Man Who Cried I Am*’s genre-bending and blending. Gottlieb’s work on Eastern Bloc dystopias contends that in texts written under conditions that were not potentially but actually brutal and oppressive, “the dystopian impulse [does] not seek its expression through works of speculative fiction”; rather, “it is simply a statement about the way things are” (19, 20). Max Reddick’s
biography parallels this mode of dystopian realism while adding important estranging devices. Its fictional narrative is intertwined with “real-life” events like the attacks on Freedom Riders in 1960 and the violence in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 where, in front of national television cameras, police mercilessly clubbed protesters and unleashed police dogs on black children who knelt in prayer.26 These references are seamlessly integrated and often made in passing such that it is clear the text can count on readers to fill in the gaps. Elsewhere, because Williams’s novel works with history at such close range, the thin fictionalization of historical actors like Dr. King, or of events like James Meredith’s enrollment at the University of Mississippi, allow the text to report, comment on, and manipulate actual history. Imagined episodes, such as the one in which Max and his fellow journalists are attacked by a racist mob as they cover real events in Atlanta, use fiction to bring such realities to life. These events punctuate the needlessness of extrapolation amid a reality that is already outrageous enough. In a certain sense, temporal displacement or excessive embellishment would be a disservice to the “in-credible” sociopolitical world on which the text comments. While much ado has been made about the The Man Who Cried I Am’s “blockbuster” ending and its dire prediction for the future, its true concern for the horrors of the here and now is also evident in its depiction of mid-1960s America as a dystopia.

Taken together, the novel’s prophesied future, its remapped 1960s present, and the bulky narrative of Max’s personal past comprise a multimodal “insurgent historiography,” a literary strategy that manipulates dystopian literature’s recurring theme of recovering a forcibly suppressed history.27 Williams’s novel was marketed as a rejoinder to The Confessions of Nat Turner by William Styron, whom Williams, like many of his peers, called “a propagandist for white history” (Williams, qtd. in Muller 26). As with Martin Delany’s literary retort in Blake to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Williams’s novel works to undo the kind of “distortion of history” of
which Styron’s novel is at once a perpetrator and a symptom (Muller, John A. 26). The Man Who Cried I Am’s “rebellion against history” operates on multiple cognitive and temporal planes and uses a combination of aesthetic tactics (Cash 98). The historical planes are the three dystopian layers of past, present, and future. Interwoven as they are into a single day, they can be characterized in terms of the “threefold nature of the present moment” that Mark Bould invokes to describe the “uncanny space-time” of Black Power sf novels (including The Man Who Cried I Am). In these chronotopes, the present is “composed equally of the past (memory) and the future (expectation)” in a way that recalls Paul Ricoeur’s formulation: such time is “not a future time, a past time, and a present time but . . . a present of future things, a present of past things, and a present of present things” (Bould, “Come Alive” 220-21). The fragmentary, back-and-forth temporal flashes in The Man Who Cried I Am reinforce this multiple nature of the present. The same is true of the way in which the three elements recursively illuminate, and indeed rewrite, one another. However, Williams is no postmodernist, and does not handle time in the strategically disorienting way that Ishmael Reed does in Flight to Canada, for example. While the overall effect of The Man Who Cried I Am’s historiography is synergistic, the novel’s form makes it a simple matter to separate the three temporal planes and examine them independently.

Max’s life-narrative not only comprises a fictional biography, but also a capacious alternate history of the recent past. It overlaps with the U.S.’s rise to the status of world superpower, the paradox of postwar optimism and anticommunist paranoia, and the transformative “watershed” period of “African American history” that began in the postwar years and culminated in the Second Reconstruction (Marable, Race 13). Max’s narrative is inserted into this historical moment not only to retell it but also to challenge the American story writ large. Indeed, a central objective of The Man Who Cried I Am’s social criticism is to debunk the
seemingly “unshakable” utopian master narrative of the American Dream, that “dictum of infinite possibilities” that envisions America as “a new paradise” (Cash 1-2). As we shall see again in Chapter 4, this paradisiacal dream reaches back at least as far as John Winthrop’s seventeenth-century “Model of Christian Charity.” It is not surprising that Houston A. Baker, Jr. cites tropes like Winthrop’s “New Jerusalem” as the “governing structures of . . . traditional American history,” and he argues that “unofficial American histories” can produce “ruptures” in “structures” such as these in order to uncover “not only new historical terms but also” the “variant historicity” of the structures themselves (61).

Indeed, Max’s personal narrative tells quite a different story than the traditional one. His story exposes how, especially for black Americans, the Dream is a “lie” that, in the last analysis, “isn’t much better” than the “sicknesses” of the dystopian truth it would mask (Williams, The Man 49). In recounting Max’s service in the Army ostensibly fighting for democracy, the text states that “armies are like the societies that produce them,” and the American Army “expected, nay, demanded, that every black soldier within its ranks die as he had lived—segregated, deprived, discriminated against” (76-77, emphasis in original). Despite the changes through which Max lives, this assessment still captures his life, and his death, in civilian society as well. The most explicit example of the Man Who Cried I Am’s mythoclastic assault on the American Dream occurs when Max, home from the war and struggling to become a successful writer, falls in love with a young black teacher named Lillian Patch, an affair that becomes one of his life’s defining experiences. Lillian, whose parents struggle in menial jobs, craves social advancement and refuses to marry Max until he secures a stable job that can provide them with a comfortable life. Max remarks on the archetypal nature of Lillian’s desires, thinking to himself, “Get a job? Man, wasn’t that like the American dream? Boy meets girl, gets good job, and everything’s all
Turning to his own grand dream of being an important writer, Max (in an apostrophe to Wright) acknowledges the hard realities he faces: “but he was black. Of course he was black, but Negro men, they had a way of starting out with a bang with the long, long dream, but ending with less than a whisper. . . . You couldn’t eat dreams; they wouldn’t even put cheap, gaudy furniture from 125th street stores into your home. If you dreamed too much you got hurt” (103). In the spirit of both love and American pragmatism, Max begins to search for the job that will allow him to pursue the more modest American dream of work, marriage, family, security, and domesticity.

However, this dream, too, rapidly dissipates. Max searches for work only to be held back by the color line, and grows increasingly frustrated and angry as his quest uncovers just how pervasive and intractable the racial barrier is. The couple is forced to delay their marriage, but they soon learn that Lillian is pregnant. In keeping with her desire for propriety, or at least its appearance, Lillian chooses to have an illegal abortion and dies of a massive hemorrhage.

Enraged, Max places the blame squarely on both white America and the American Dream itself:

Goddamn them! They could not be accused of murder or even being near the scene of the crime. What did they have to do with Lillian’s death? Everything, and yet, they believed, and would continue to believe, nothing. . . . They refused to understand why he wanted them dead. This was why: They gave Lillian the photograph, the image of the American Family Group, but when she looked very closely, she wasn’t in it . . . she was nothing, and she was not to get that little house surrounded by shrubbery and a white picket fence. But they let her teach about America the Beautiful, and she knew it was not . . . but she hoped it was. . . . See what the desire for old American security got you, baby? (116-117)

Max’s understanding of society’s indifference and his lack of agency only exacerbate his anger and sense of injustice. He realizes that even if he were to lash out, he would be seen as “just another Negro gone berserk,” and this would further negate what he so keenly feels (116).

Through this doomed relationship, the novel gives voice to culturally silenced suffering and anger; yet it also positions both Max’s subjectivity and the story of the relationship as
inseparable from the context in which that story plays out (Muller’s “web of history”). The text
preserves, indeed *leverages*, the subjectivism of character-driven novelistic fiction, but it
imbricates this perspective with the systemic structural and historical dimensions of Max’s
indictment of white America. Indeed, Max’s accusations contain at least as much analysis as
rage, and the target of both is the American Dream that seduces Lillian. Her fate thus dramatizes
the pernicious illusion of her hope to advance beyond her parents’ place in the world. In daring
to “dream too much,” both she and Max do “get hurt.” Max further observes how Lillian’s job
teaching history implicated her in reproducing the very mythology that negates her. Max’s
recognition that the image of the American domestic utopia does not and cannot include Lillian
confronts the historical erasure and cultural exclusion on which the image is predicated. Even
before he learns of Lillian’s death, Max regards his reflection in a mirror, and expressing a
sentiment with Orwellian overtones, thinks to himself, “I am as dead as she. Deader” (115).
Here, he comes “face to face” with the symbolic death that the segregationist American Dream
entails, a death that is literalized through Lillian, the abortion, and the dreams of the present and
future that simultaneously die. While this relationship is one of the text’s more extreme episodes
preceding the revelation of the Plan, it in many ways epitomizes Max’s constant struggle. If
America has always “been conceived as utopia,” and “a critical question in the 1960s was the
shape of the American Dream that was emerging, or being denied, in the period of postwar
affluence,” then *The Man Who Cried I Am’s* rejoinder is that this utopia does not include black
people, for whom America is always already a dystopia (Moylan, *Demand* 47).

Working against Lillian’s complicity with the mythical history that expunges and
ultimately buries her, the novel develops an alternative pedagogy that interrupts the reproduction
of official history, exposes its in-built racism, corrects its distortions, fills in its omissions, and
demystifies its enchanting but tainted myths. In keeping with the legacy of Wright (and forebears such as Thoreau, Douglass, and Toomer) the novel’s social criticism relies on Williams’s “belief in the moral necessity of the artist to make a didactically explicit statement about the politics of oppression” (Muller, John A. 28). This didacticism is of a piece with the cultural work of dystopian fiction, at least as regards its negative function of critique. Beyond merely “showing” oppression, however, Williams’s novel also reflects the way in which, “the Black Aesthetic generation . . . demystified (having discovered to uncover)” the myth that Baker names “AMERICA” (Baker 83, emphasis in original). The (his)story of Max’s past is an important component of a demythologizing pedagogy of “discovery” (or “dis-closure”). Indeed, The Man Who Cried I Am’s function of “discovery” is augmented via the palette and tropes of detective and spy fiction, formal conventions closely related to dystopian literature. These devices perform the work of Albert Murray’s black literary “blues detective,” although the novel’s mode is tragic rather than the comic mode that Murray theorizes. Baker, following both Murray and Bloch, describes this detective work as an “ability to break away from traditional concepts” in quest of discovering “why things are the way they unequivocally are” (135). If the gradually revealed contents of Harry’s papers detail the conspiracies that explain the “why,” Max’s retrospective life-narrative unmasks official history in order to reconstruct and critique how things really are.

The Man Who Cried I Am’s use of its protagonist as the vehicle for its alternative history once again epitomizes the novel’s tendency alternately to partake of, depart from, or meld dystopian literary conventions. Critics preoccupied with the phantasmagoric King Alfred Plan tend to overlook how, for hundreds of pages, The Man Who Cried I Am leans heavily on a quasi-naturalist aesthetic, and is predominately character-driven. As does the typical dystopia, The
*Man Who Cried I Am* reverses the utopia’s tendency to privilege social systems over characters, and pits a central “unhappy, alienated, sometimes dissident protagonist” against “the totalizing mechanisms of the hegemonic system” (Moylan, *Scraps* 150). Further, the protagonist’s alienation facilitates “a new understanding” that “cognitively distances the dystopian narrative and its denouement from the conditions of the author’s (and readers’) empirical situation” (Moylan, *Scraps* 150). As with the sf dystopia, the real target of the cognitive critique enabled by alienation in Williams’s novel is the historical “situation” of the implied author (and many readers).

*The Man Who Cried I Am* is one of many black novels in which it is important to observe how elements of the fantastic coexist with those of naturalism and critical realism. Indeed, incorporating, shuttling between, or even scrambling these forms is often what makes their social critique so effective. In contrast to the sf dystopia’s reliance on plausible scenarios that “could not arise in the world we know, but [are] hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or . . . pseudo-science,” Williams’s novel’s estranging “new vantage point from which to survey ‘our culture’” in many cases is not based on hypotheticals, but on “empirical situations” that can and do arise in our world (Amis 18, 16). Indeed (in one sense), the very *closeness* of Max’s narrative to the implied extratextual situation is what enables the narrative’s cognitive mapping. Thus, literary naturalism is an indispensable aesthetic strategy in the novel, as well as a marker of Wright’s legacy. The distinguishing feature of socially critical naturalism is its drive for what Wright called “dreadful objectivity,” an effective estranging tool in its own right capable of unmasking aspects of the empirical world that are “glossed, shrouded, [or] romanticized” away by popular literature and popular mythologies (Cash 1). In Wright’s black naturalism, this is augmented by the variant of double-consciousness that Wright called “double vision.”
is indeed a “deep formal link” between the dystopia and literary naturalism, a difference being the dystopia’s tendency to retain a modicum of utopian openness (however slim) against naturalism’s “asphyxiating historical closure” (Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths* 123, 118). The ambiguous conclusion of Williams’s novel, in which Max’s final actions may or may not be futile, suggests the possibility of both openness and closure, while also exemplifying how the novel oscillates between naturalistic and fantastic elements. Both, ultimately, are crucial to its estranging function.

It is true that the revelation of the Plan culminates the “veil-rending” that Bould sees as one of the key functions of what he calls Black Power sf. However, his claim that Williams’s novel *is only science fiction* obscures its naturalistic facets, a crucial “veil-rending” feature that seeks less to “break the chains of reality” than to bring readers *closer to a masked reality* in a direct, rather than an indirect way (Bould, “Come Alive” 228). However, it is equally reductive for Cash to frame the novel’s overtly “bizarre and repulsive” elements as its “most naturalistic,” which makes the familiar move of positioning the text completely within Wright’s shadow while also occluding the ways in which its dialog with the more speculative aesthetic of the next generation “frees” the novel “from the naturalistic protest format which for a time seemed the sole métier of the black novelist” (Cash 101, emphasis added; Fleming 187). Ultimately, the novel’s social commentary relies on suturing the “naturalistic” to the “fantastic” such that it is difficult to locate the seam between them, and “double vision” is at work here as well. It is noteworthy that in 1973 Robert Fleming conjectured that “white readers are likely to dismiss King Alfred as something like science fiction, while black readers are likely to accept it as showing real insight into contemporary attitudes and conditions” (195). Even for those who might be disinclined toward the twin essentialisms in Fleming’s hypothesis, his comments speak
to why it is crucial to acknowledge the naturalistic aspect of *The Man Who Cried I Am*’s aesthetic, which insists on, if not the “reality,” then at least the real-ness of the dystopia it reveals behind the veil of official history.

The pedagogical value of this concreteness is demonstrated on several occasions in the text, as when Kermit Shea, a white friend of Max’s, is estranged from his comfortable, normative “consciousness” when confronted with the difficulties Max faces looking for employment: “Shea was discovering for the first time in his life what kind of world he lived in, what kind of world he had helped to build simply by not building at all” (J. Williams, *The Man* 108). Indeed, estrangement, realism, and historicity work together in the text’s insurgent historiography. Ultimately, the ends are more important than the means. Piercing the veil is necessary for what the novel’s most fantastical character, philosopher/cannibal Moses Boatwright—who lives double-consciousness to its extreme(s)—terms “seeing precisely.” And in dystopias like the one in which Max discovers himself, “this seeing precisely . . . is a bitch” (377, emphasis in original).

To return to *The Man Who Cried I Am*’s three temporal planes, the novel’s dismantling of the American Dream continues in the text’s explicit sortie onto the ideological terrain of the present-as-present. The text is fundamentally about the 1960s, and from its mid-‘60s vantage point, its story of disillusionment mounts a dystopian challenge to the utopian tone and the political content of the Black Freedom Movement during the early years of that transformative decade. Its approach is not anti-utopian, but it does reject a specific, pervasive, utopian idea. Williams’s critique in many ways parallels the Black Power ideologies that emerged as the novel was written, and which transformed the Movement’s vanguard.⁵⁵ Williams’s novel seems to take the position that, as Moylan remarks of the ‘60s in another context, “it [had] become necessary to destroy utopia in order to save it” (Demand 46).³⁶
Marable argues that, notwithstanding the juridical achievements of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, the “Second Reconstruction” began on February 1, 1960 with the lunch-counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, which marked a new period in the Movement’s history that culminated with the March on Washington in 1963. Within months following the Greensboro sit-in, “non-violent, direct action protest” swept the country, inaugurating a period of powerful utopian idealism and generational transition (Marable, Race 59). Historian Vincent Harding recalls that young activists of this era “were believers. When they sang in jail, in mass meetings, in front of policemen and state troopers, ‘We Shall Overcome,’ they meant it” (159). This optimism becomes palpable in the The Man Who Cried I Am when the narrative reaches 1960. After a period of dire struggle, Max gradually achieves a modicum of success as the times begin to change. In near synchrony with the Brown v. Board decision in 1954, he lands a position with Pace magazine (read: Time) when its editors decide that they “want Negroes” on their staff (J. Williams, The Man 238). Max’s personal advancement closely tracks the racial advancements of this period, but it is not until 1960 that the text begins to speak of what is “supposed to be a new era”: “racial barriers” begin “coming down with a crash” and society begins to believe that “it was the start of a golden age” (296, 304, 305). Max is once again caught up in history when, due to the new prominence of civil rights issues, he returns from assignment in Africa and accepts a position on the newly elected “superstar” President’s speechwriting team.

Max is skeptical of the “massive, powerful, though insidious optimism” sweeping the country, but almost in spite of himself, he also harbors some of this hope as he arrives in a “Washington that was new indeed” (292, 297). However, this hope is short-lived. The actual events on the ground belie the idealism in the air. He observes the attacks on the Freedom Riders, the violence in Alabama, and the devastating irony that the Civil War Centennial
celebration plans to maintain segregated facilities. Through a fictionalized James Meredith (William MacKendrick), Williams alludes to the brutal “Battle of Oxford” and creates a scenario that inculpates a President who, during the first months of his presidency, “tried to placate both the racists and the desegregationists simultaneously” (Marable, Race 65). In the name of maintaining social stability, the administration pulls procedural strings to delay and even possibly prevent MacKendrick’s matriculation. Like Kennedy, who “supported the gradual desegregation of American society, but . . . took few concrete steps at first to promote civil rights,” Williams’s President balks at civil rights legislation (Marable, Race 58). After the crisis in Cuba gives the President an excuse to table civil rights in favor of Cold War matters, Max is caught in a dystopian Washington “shell game” (J. Williams, The Man 307). The promise of a Golden Age gives way to a publically disseminated simulacrum of an integrated America that enhances the President’s political image by “filling Washington with [black people],” but “in government posts, not as residents”: “he’s improving the picture,” Max notes, and “the picture has lots of colored folks in it, but that isn’t getting it at all” (315, emphasis added). Disenchanted, Max resigns without being asked to write a single speech and turns his back on a “Golden Age” in which “the gold had turned very suddenly to brass” (313).

Max’s experiences resonate with those of the Movement itself, for which the utopianism of the early 1960s quickly reached an impasse. Especially for those who were on the Movement’s front lines, such as the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), “the idealism of the early years . . . had worn away quickly” largely as a result of America’s increasingly violent aversion to change (Marable, Race 66). At the core of the problem remained the same specious American Dream that infests the entire narrative of The Man Who Cried I Am. Marable notes that the aspirations and actions of the early ‘60s were
earnestly reformist; they “were no rejection of the American Dream; they were . . . steps taken towards its culmination” (Race 63). Debbie Louis maintains that the activists “held on to the traditional democratic ideals they had been taught,” attempting to “eliminate the inconsistencies between doctrine and reality” (32). Yet these “inconsistencies” have consistently proven constitutive of the American democratic experiment itself, which from the very outset undemocratically debarred black people. The harder the Movement pushed toward its utopian ideal, the more a dystopian countermovement reinforced itself. What Booker argues of the classic dystopias appears to be true of the American “utopia” as well: there is a “need for an official other” against which the “society can define itself by exclusion much along the lines of Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences’” (Dystopian 158). Williams’s novel unMASKs these realities as its fiction interacts with history. Max’s experiences in the White House suggest the futility of working within a system that is corrupted at its core; the impotence of the new “laws on the books” to affect substantive concrete change; and the fact that the Dream, even in its newest reincarnation, is the same false utopia that it always has been (J. Williams, The Man 309). American “democratic capitalism,” as Max sees it, is “a philosophy which [is] inherently duplicitous, meaning all its fine words and slogans, but leaving the performance of them to unseen elfs, gnomes, and fairies” (386). Max’s observation is typical of how The Man Who Cried I Am demystifies the Dream as well as slogans of the early 1960s, and recreates a moment of recognition that many in the Movement experienced.

The text’s working-through of the early ‘60s thus maps America as a concrete dystopia swept up in a “bad” utopianism that envisions change as a different articulation of the same imperfect society. It consequently aligns itself with the transition from reformism to a revolutionary stance, mirroring many factions of the Movement (such as SNCC) during the
second half of the decade. Some, like Robert F. Williams, were already advocating such a position by 1963. The text’s privileging of Minister Q.’s radicalism over the complicity of Paul Durrell, whom Max holds in contempt (as Williams did King), is indicative of this perspective. The situation in the novel, however, is more complex than the simple “separatist”-versus-“integrationist” binary of “Great Men” that rankles some historians and teachers of black history. Like intellectual Harold Cruse, the novel rejects King’s utopian “promised land” envisioned as “integration” into a flawed culture. It also repudiates the civil rights-era notion of “long-suffering, loving, well-behaved, forgiving African Americans petition[ing], peacefully and patiently, for citizenship rights” to be bestowed by “a well-intentioned (if slow) federal government”—images that sanitize and occlude mainstream historical understandings of the 1960s to this day (Crosby 159). Max’s last-ditch attempt to reconcile with Margrit, after their marriage is demolished by American cultural pressures, might be read as indexical of an integrationist rather than a separatist position (as well as Williams’s not unproblematic tendency to restage structural political issues as sexual or domestic ones). The text nonetheless clearly has affinities with an emergent revolutionist position that insisted, often vaguely, on a wholesale transformation of America—even the world—“by any means necessary.” “There exists no substitute for a fight but a fight,” Max states at one point, and accordingly, he becomes convinced that “only a racial explosion of unimagined proportions” can change America (J. Williams, The Man 316, 307). And yet, such a fight is hardly represented as winnable. All told, The Man Who Cried I Am’s representation of the mid-‘60s impasse is dominated by a dystopian pessimism that dwells on the faulty vision of the Movement’s civil rights phase and the combination of disenchantment and anger that resulted from the vicious response it faced.
Yet, beneath this pessimism, the text is haunted by the desire for a transformed world. The Movement’s own utopian desire would be remade as the vision of “racial pride, strength, and self-definition” that defined the Black Power Movement after 1965 (Van Deburg 2). When Max’s narrative ends in 1964, however, the prevailing atmosphere is a far cry from the militant, messianic affirmation of Baraka’s Black Power-era poem, “It’s Nation Time” (1970). Rather, it dwells in the present utopian stalemate.

Out of this impasse, *The Man Who Cried I Am* makes its foray onto the plane of the future, and the future it projects takes the mortifying form of the genocidal King Alfred Plan. Given the escalating situation in the U.S. at the novel’s end, genocide looks all but certain. In seeming, at least intratextually, to foreclose the future, the novel evinces another kinship with the classical dystopia, and its specific invocation of the Holocaust aligns it with other “nightmare-futures” of the postwar era. The Plan also marks a turn toward an apocalyptic view of history in the second phase of Williams’s career. Among other details, the Plan divides the U.S. into 10 regions to facilitate the efficient forcible “evacuation” of “Minority members” from the cities into internment camps; it lists 12 “major Minority organizations” (among them SNCC and the NAACP) that are under 24-hour government surveillance; it calls for the unseating of “Minority members of congress,” accurately noting that “this move is not without precedent in American history”; and it enumerates an eight-hour timetable for implementing the Plan in the event of an uncontainable racial “Emergency” (J. Williams, *The Man* 372-76). Included in the plan is a committee report stating, a “survey shows that, during a six-year period, Production created 9,000,000 objects, or 1,500,000 each year. Production could not dispose of the containers, which proved a bottleneck. However, that was almost 20 years ago. We suggest that vaporization techniques be employed to overcome the Production problems inherent in King Alfred” (376).
The Plan’s evasive, objectifying bureaucratese obviously references the Holocaust, and illuminates with chilling finality the full implications of the Plan’s intention to “terminate, once and for all, the minority threat to the whole of the American society, and, indeed, the Free World” (372). The irony inherent in the fact that American society and “indeed, the Free World” are here imagined as excluding—in the absolutist manner of classical utopian exclusivism—the black people currently striving for inclusion is especially bitter.

On the one hand, with an eye toward the future, the Plan assumes the properly dystopian form of the “negative prophecy”: indeed, New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay exclaimed, “if this book is to remain fiction, it must be read” (qtd. in Cooke 618). The Plan is thus a genre-blurring departure from the novel’s naturalism that functions like the familiar estranging devices of dystopian fiction to “dramatize . . . frightening social conditions” through their “logical extension,” and thereby “jolt the conscience of the nation and influence its future” (Fleming 187). Especially in light of the violent racial polarization that the anti-Movement backlash brought back to the surface of American society during the 1960s, the possible future projected in Williams’s novel compels readers to confront, on a very basic level, the full and unsanitized implications of the present’s “actual tendencies,” and it uses a terrifying historical parallel to illustrate the nightmare to which such tendencies can lead. In this respect, the novel’s “uncanny spacetime” presents the future-in-the-present as the repetition-with-difference of a phantasmagoric past-in-the-present. This “return of the repressed . . . articulated as futurity,” which Bould also observes in Julian Moreau’s The Black Commandos (1967) and traces back to Shelley’s Frankenstein, does suggest that scholars’ comparisons of the novel to both sf and the gothic (which already share a genealogy) apply (230). In Williams’s novel, un-repressed history illuminates how the present is coextensive with a nightmarish rather than a romanticized
past. The future is doomed as well unless the hegemony of the present, which is that of official history itself, is transformed by some other means. Yet even so, summoning an estranging but horrible past in order to demystify and hopefully derail present tendencies, and thus avoid a ghastly future (and, implicitly, to build a better one), remains a crucial political tactic. The difference is that the unpressed past, too, serves as a warning, and any sources of change remain unrepresented and belong entirely to futurity.

Paradoxically, the investment of the novel’s dystopian timescape with elements of the past and the future consolidates rather than disperses its focus on the present, the primary target of any dystopian critique whether it extrapolates an imagined future from that present or not. It is imperative not to lose sight of the way in which even the *The Man Who Cried I Am’s* celebrated, astounding projection of the future is *immanentized* (to borrow one of Bould’s terms). Mayor Lindsay’s comments testify to the political importance of the diachronic projection of futurity, but is equally important to bracket the teleology implicit in both the received conventions of narrative temporality and interpretational approaches that focus on “actual tendencies,” in order to interrogate the ways in which the King Alfred Plan—which is already in place—critiques the synchronic structural and racial actualities of the novel’s here and now. In this regard, the Holocaust provides a “window” that summons the sociopolitical architecture of the present into view. As Fleming hardly needs to point out, “black people have been systematically killed off in the United States since their first introduction to its shores” through both direct and indirect means (195). As with the already-existing class inequities re-presented in Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), “King Alfred is not only a prophetic warning of what might happen here but a fictional metaphor for what has been happening and is happening still” (Fleming 195). Further, Williams’s novel questions the extent to which it is a metaphor. Like many works of estranging
fiction, one of the features of *The Man Who Cried I Am* that makes it so effective is the way its fabulation veers so close to historical reality. King Alfred Plan not only immanentizes a possible future, but actual historical past precedent as well. The convergence in the present of different but uneasily connected histories of genocide only reinforces the concrete immediacy of the text’s critique of that present.

As Du Bois did in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Williams (whose wife, Lori, is Jewish) draws parallels in several novels between the respective histories of the black and Jewish diasporas. Paul Gilroy and Michael Rothberg are two scholars who have been willing to ask difficult and controversial, yet productive questions that “implicate” the history of the Holocaust with the histories of racialized slavery and colonialism in quest of what might be learned from reading them dialogically. While he conscientiously notes the vehement opposition to such an undertaking by thinkers such as James Baldwin and Stanley Crouch, Gilroy risks asking “what would be the consequences” of setting “the Holocaust of European Jews in a provocative relationship with the modern history of racial slavery and terror in the western hemisphere?” (*Atlantic* 217). He suggests that there might “be something useful to be gained from setting these histories closer to each other not so as to compare them, but as precious resources from which we might learn something valuable about the way modernity operates” (*Atlantic* 217).

Rothberg, who is also careful to acknowledge the particularities of these different histories, reads Du Bois’s account of his trip to a Warsaw ghetto in 1949 and notes how seeing the destruction was an instructive experience for Du Bois, for whom “the color line lives on, as does the specificity of African American life, but the lines that connect the African diaspora from within and those that differentiate it from European American life without exist in a new relation to other histories of racism and violence” (116-17). Working against what he calls “competitive
memory,” whereby “the Holocaust is frequently set against global histories of racism, slavery, and colonialism in an ugly contest of comparative victimization,” Rothberg invokes Du Bois’s thinking as an example of “multidirectional memory” (7). For Rothberg, “multidirectional memory” is a “making present” of multiple elements of the past that is “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” among different cultures and their histories; this cross-referencing is “productive, not privative,” and generative of new understandings (3).

Rothberg’s multidirectional examination of “the emergence of collective memory of the Nazi Genocide in the 1950s and 1960s” occurs, he contends, “in a punctual dialogue with the ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle” (22). Rothberg also observes such a dialogue in Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism as well as in Du Bois. Especially in The Man Who Cried I Am and Clifford’s Blues, but in other novels as well, Williams attempts the sort of project that Gilroy and Rothberg advocate. In The Man Who Cried I Am, the Holocaust is part of a multidirectional, intercultural dialog that produces new cognitions of 1960s America.

Williams’s novel uses multidirectional memory as part of a praxis similar to that of Bauman’s study of the Holocaust, a book-length examination of “the way modernity operates.” Bauman’s work exhumes the past in aid of structurally and culturally anatomizing later times, and like Bauman, Williams looks to the Holocaust for the illuminating “message” it “contains about the way we live . . . the institutions on which we rely” and “the patterns of interaction we accept and consider normal” (Bauman xii). Bauman attempts to debunk both the notion that “the perpetrators of the Holocaust were a wound or a malady of our civilization—rather than its legitimate product” and the corresponding “moral comfort of self-exculpation” that arises from imagining “it all happened ‘out there’—in another time, another country” (xii). Rather, he argues that “the Holocaust was an outcome of a unique encounter between factors by themselves quite
ordinary and common”: among these are “racist form[s] of communal antagonism,” the consolidation of power and permissible violence in the hands of the state, an obsession with the exclusionist policing of boundaries, the omnipresence of bureaucracy and rationalist technocracy, and meliorist “social engineering ambitions” (xiii, italics in original). All are implicated in the modern drive to achieve “a perfect society” (Bauman 8). Indeed, much as Williams’s text argues of the American Dream, Bauman argues that Nazi Germany arose from a deeply flawed form of utopianism. Innumerable authors and thinkers—utopian and anti-utopian alike—have since sought to distance themselves from this particular utopian “program,” yet it still exerts a powerful world-historical influence. For Bauman, far from being an aberration of western civilization’s “dream” of rationally programmed progress and an orderly, culturally “purified” society, the Holocaust “uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar face we so admire” (7).

This is precisely the function Holocaust memory performs in Williams’s dystopian novel: defamiliarizing a utopian America to expose its nether “face” and offer glimpses into a cryptic reality that reveals why and how “the way black men live . . . was no accident” (J. Williams, The Man 369). Given the history of American racial terror, the “unthinkable” not only appears as quite thinkable; it is socially necessary to think it. Accordingly, The Man Who Cried I Am attempts to dramatize what Bauman attempts to theorize, namely, what the Holocaust can add “to our understanding of this society’s normal state” (Bauman 1, emphasis in original). For both authors, this reveals the chilling fact that “if it could happen on such a massive scale elsewhere, then it can happen anywhere” (Bauman 11). Both insist that all that is required for “it” to “happen” is a particular combination of omnipresent, already-existing sociopolitical dynamics with some sort of emergency “state of exception” that self-justifies extreme measures. Bauman’s
focus on the normal and the ordinary—which might be considered through the lens of the ordinary experiences recounted in Max Reddick’s biography—is a reminder that the King Alfred Plan should be understood not only as a logical extension of the present, but also as the full articulation of the social logics and political structures that are already fully present and discernible to anybody who cares to look. The function of the text, of course, is to force readers to look, and to “see clearly” while doing so.

On the one hand, the conspiratorial King Alfred Plan gestures toward the disturbing congruencies between Nazi Germany and American history in order to demand that readers “let their minds go out” to “see evil rearing up before them,” which the text suggests Europeans of the 1930s failed to do until it was too late (J. Williams, The Man 377). As far as the novel is concerned, a “politics of paranoia” is more viable than a complicit politics of reformism, and it uses the estranging yet strangely familiar details of the Plan as well as the devices of detective fiction to inoculate readers with this suspicion. On the other hand, as scholars have pointed out, actual governmental activities like the FBI’s COINTELPRO underscore the way in which notions of conspiracy are far from theoretical. J. Edgar Hoover writes understatedly in a 1967 memo that COINTELPRO’s mission was to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of . . . black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters” and “counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder [sic]” (Hoover 134, italics in original). The list of “hate-type” groups in Hoover’s authorization of covert police-state action and overt media distortion includes King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Further, David Henderson notes that the American detention camps ordained by the McCarran Act of 1950 still existed in 1967, waiting to be filled in the event of an “emergency . . . involving internal security” (370-71). Although
despite the urban uprisings of the ‘60s, no full-scale emergency had yet arisen, internment camps and “secret operatives” were among the uncanny structural aspects of American reality that broach discomfiting questions about how “speculative” Williams’s fiction really is. Indeed, the erosion of “the arbitrary distinction between the real and the surreal” is precisely how and why the novel works (Bigsby 164). Cooke argues that “conspiracy and paranoia as they are negatively imagined by mainstream White discourse operate” as a means for the system “to obfuscate itself” (617). For this very reason, Williams’s dystopia suggests that just as the notion of “conspiracy” should be decoupled from its frequent companion term “theory” when it comes to the black experience in America, the term “paranoid” does not necessarily denote pure “fantasy.” Thus, while The Man Who Cried I Am does work diachronically to prophesy a future on par with the most terrifying literary dystopias, there is another sense in which it is crucial not to read the King Alfred Plan as entirely fantastic, temporally displaced, or paranoid and thus miss (or avoid or suppress) its concrete historical grounding. Most frightening, perhaps, is how little “extrapolation” is required to imagine it. The Man Who Cried I Am thus attempts to use both the past and the future synchronically to demystify and re-imagine the realities of the present more clearly. Fleming is right to argue that “perhaps [Williams’s] most important achievement is his escape from the protest novel tradition that,” since Wright, “threatened to confine black writers within one narrow school,” and that he accomplishes this through his turn away from documentation toward speculation (195). However, Williams’s work does not jettison tradition completely, and indeed carries forward its valuable aesthetic and political resources. Ultimately, just as the novel’s chronotope sets up an interchange between three temporal planes, it also leverages the interplay between speculative and naturalistic literary modes.
While *The Man Who Cried I Am* provides penetrative insights into 1960s America, its multidirectional analysis adds important further geographical dimensions to its dystopian critique. Max’s travels crisscross the Atlantic as he moves between New York, Atlanta, Paris, Lagos, Washington, Amsterdam, and elsewhere, mapping a network of sociopolitical linkages that, especially in light of the U.S.’s relationship with the European *Alliance Blanc*, is global in scope. Muller explains that “*The Man Who Cried I Am* is Williams’s critique of a world, indeed of an epoch, governed by malignant historical forces” (*John A.* 74, emphasis added). The text’s transnational framework situates the localized experience of black America within a broader context of racial struggles that dilates, rather than dilutes, the text’s political statement as well as its analytical power. Harry asks, “what doesn’t start with Africa?” and in certain respects, the dialectic between dystopian reality and utopian hope in America is positioned in relation to the clash between the Euro-American “white man’s world” and an “other” world in which it initially appears that “black men were coming to freedom” (J. Williams, *The Man* 363, 367, 261). The novel thus intertwines the hopes and frustrations of decolonization with those of the Black Freedom Movement in the U.S., a vision of globality that embraces certain strands of pan-African politics. In conjuring the “ghost of Marcus Garvey,” for example, the novel situates itself in dialogue with the pan-African utopianism of previous generations (261). In sync with a new generation, the novel draws intimate connections between the American Movement and the African struggles of the ‘50s and ‘60s as well as leaders such as Nkrumah and Lumumba. This perspective shares much with those of authors like playwright Adrienne Kennedy and the later Baraka, as well as leading exponents of Black Power, including Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown of SNCC, and Floyd McKissick of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). Emphasizing these connections affirms Marable’s argument that “it is impossible to relate the
full narrative of the experiences of people of African descent in the United States . . . without close integration and reference to the remarkable history of the African continent” (“Blackness” 3). “Focusing solely on the events of one nation,” he writes, “distorts the narrative and cripples our understanding of fundamental events” (“Blackness” 3). Further, Williams acknowledges that there are commonalities binding together the liberatory struggles of black people around the globe, including a common impulse toward concrete sociopolitical transformation that might be called properly utopian, and might serve as a basis for solidarity.

However, there is also a dystopian face to The Man Who Cried I Am’s sweeping global vision. Beyond reflecting on the difficulties faced by transnational liberation movements, the novel captures what Howard Winant sees as the “global shift, [or] ‘break,’ in the worldwide racial system that had endured for centuries,” from which a new “world racial system” emerged that “maintain[s] a certain continuity with the legacies of imperial rule, conquest, enslavement, and so forth” but operates in a qualitatively new and more clandestine way (“System” 41-42).51 This new system appears in the novel via the machinations of the Alliance Blanc and its opposition to what a potential “United States of Africa” might bode for white, Euro-American power and interests (J. Williams, The Man 364). Harry’s letter doubles as a political précis of the postwar shift toward globalization that tracks the evolution of the Alliance’s tactics “from a belligerent posture . . . to one based on economics” (365). Through a combination of “soft,” financial imperialism and covert aggression—Patrice Lumumba, whose 1961 assassination by Congolese secessionists was abetted by the Belgian government and the CIA,52 “was a victim of the Alliance” in the text’s world—the Alliance achieves the very continuity of racially stratified power that Winant describes by changing its strategy from domination to exploitation, at least on the surface (366). Of course, Domination has by no means disappeared. While “racial wars are
called something else” in this new era, Max observes that in places like Korea and Vietnam, “instead of the British and French kicking the Orientals in the ass, now it was steady Uncle Sam,” and “when the white Americans called out, ‘Gook!’ it sounded awfully like nigger” (194). These uncanny similarities extend the novel’s vision beyond the Atlantic world to map even broader interconnections within the new racial world-system. *The Man Who Cried I Am’s* political cartography is thus able to capture how the historical shifts of the ‘60s produced a new, dystopian world order of capitalist globalization, economic neocolonialism (which is examined further in Chapter 3’s discussion of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novels of the 1970s and ‘80s), and a new species of warfare that often assumes the form of crypto-racist, unofficial military operations undertaken in the name of preserving a “stable democracy” synonymous with Euro-American whiteness and invulnerable free-market liberalism. Indeed, war has become the free market by other means, and *vice versa.*

With the benefit of forty years of hindsight, Muller observes in 2008 that *The Man Who Cried I Am* creates “fictive structures that reveal the deepest historical and political impulses governing contemporary global existence” (“Foreword” x). Moreover, retrospectively, it becomes clear that the novel situates the racial conflicts in the U.S. and elsewhere within globalization’s planetary “new racial domain” (Marable, “Blackness” 7). The *Alliance* serves as a dystopian estrangement device that, in part by once again blurring distinctions between the fictive and the actual, attempts to rend the veil of the “convenient myth” of globalization that “helps justify and legitimize the neoliberal global project” (Held and McGrew 5). Further, echoing the radicalizing segments of the Movement, this critique implies that especially in terms of race and class, a liberatory counter-politics requires the farsightedness necessary to account for these planetary structural developments.
The dystopian world of *The Man Who Cried I Am* is utterly bleak, the novel’s outlook ruefully pessimistic. Through the King Alfred Plan and the *Alliance*, world political structures (excepting the communist “Second World”) are constructed so as to fix in place white power at any cost and in perpetuity. The possibilities for meaningful change are minimal if they exist at all. Yet the novel remains a work of *militant* rather than resigned pessimism, one that, through the very negativity of its worldview, insists that action *must* be taken to break the grip of history, from which there remain urgent lessons to be learned. Max himself learns and acts by committing to the one deed of which he is capable: revealing the details of the Plan to Minister Q. and thus, perhaps, to others. The outcome of his effort is far from clear. It is uncertain what will happen to the recording that documents the Plan, and equally uncertain whether the Minister relays the information before the meeting at which he is to be assassinated. What is clear is that even the other member countries of the *Alliance* will never countenance the Americans’ plan for genocide, and once black Americans learn of it, there will be no more illusions about assimilation—and this is perhaps the novel’s deepest utopian wish. In transmitting the Plan, Max acts “not” out of “hate. . . the future demanded something different,” but he does intend to “tear up that unreal tranquility that exists in the United States” (*J. Williams, The Man* 385, 388). “The promises, unfulfilled, can go to hell now,” he thinks; “we will know just where we stand. It will be a start” (388). The novel offers no indication of what will start—perhaps a revolution; perhaps extermination; perhaps the Plan’s re-suppression and therefore nothing—but it is telling that Max acts *as if* history is not a closed matter, even if the narrative itself overwhelmingly suggests that it is. At least intradiegetically, the final endeavor of Max’s life is one of the few flickers of hope the novel offers.
These glimpses of hope amid a powerful vision of hopelessness are symptomatic of the particular historical and literary antinomies in which Williams’s novel is rooted. As Max decides to reveal the Plan and “wreck the nation,” he decides that “change could no longer be imperceptible, without cataclysm. Permanence was imperfection” (386). These thoughts about stasis and imperfection reverberate with the transformations that would occur during utopian literature’s move away from the stasis of the classical utopia toward the process-oriented critical utopia. More important is how Max’s thoughts reflect the “apocalyptic elements” that appear in Williams’s fiction during the second stage of his career, elements characteristic of Black Power fiction in general. Variations on this theme appear in the work of Ngũgĩ, Walker, and Bambara discussed in subsequent chapters. Among the paradoxes of this narrative mode is the fact that the figure of apocalypse, whether it signals revolution or doom, stands in for how such novels, like all utopian fiction, cannot imagine a qualitatively different future amid the ideological encumbrances of history. Yet simultaneously, they recognize this in avowing that “real change can only achieved by an event so traumatic” as to achieve the unimaginable “semiotic shattering of [history’s] hegemonic prison-house” (Bould, “Come Alive” 230). From a historical perspective, the contradictions of apocalypticism are of a piece with the turn from reformism to revolution while also reflecting a long and continuing tradition in black utopian expression. In the context of the 1960s utopian rebirth, apocalypticism becomes part of a strategy for breaking the dystopian monopoly in mid-twentieth-century literature that differs from the critical utopian one of representing an improved, self-reflexive, and more plastic social structure. Through the figure of the apocalypse, such texts channel desires for radical, total change—indeed, often of any kind and at any cost—while evading the perils of imagining or representing an inevitably compromised utopian alternative.
In the nightmare-world of *The Man Who Cried I Am*, the dialectic between utopia and apocalypse ultimately tilts more toward doom than it does toward rebirth. Max’s decision to take action that could destroy America calls to mind the trope of an active will-to-apocalypse familiar from revolutionary texts like *Blake*. However, King Alfred’s eschatological determinism seems a far more possible future in the novel. Nevertheless, the shards of hope visible in Williams’s dystopia are indexical of the dialectic of hope and despair endogenous to his own work, as well as utopian literature itself. Not despite but *because* of their tone and content, militantly pessimistic novels like Williams’s dystopias (and indeed, the naturalistic hellscapes of protest fiction) remain deeply invested in social transformation. Precisely by *disturbing* its readers, *The Man Who Cried I Am* works like other estranging fictions by “modifying one’s perceptions [as] a forerunner to causing change in society” (Bryant 97). In this regard, the dystopian *intradiegetic* content of the novel has utopian *extradiegetic* goals. The dialectic of dystopia and utopia at work in *The Man Who Cried I Am* in turn mirrors actual historical clashes between realities and dreams that occurred during the 1960s. The novel’s ambivalence reflects the fact that it was written at a moment when the utopian spirit of the Second Reconstruction had reached a stalemate. The later years of the decade saw an ideological pivot that attempted to push through this impasse, and Williams’s next novel undertakes a similar effort with regard to the changing times, as well as his own fiction.

**From Dystopian Pessimism to Utopian Skepticism: The Ambivalent Revolution in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light***

*Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* appeared in the final year of the turbulent 1960s after the mid-decade political shift from reformism to radicalism. The Black Power Movement overtook the Civil Rights Movement after the latter suffered a number of additional setbacks subsequent to those chronicled in *The Man Who Cried I Am*. These included the damage sustained by King’s
reputation after the bloody events in Selma, Alabama in 1965,\textsuperscript{57} the Watts uprising that same year, and the shooting of Meredith during his 1966 March Against Fear. In a moment when “many sagging spirits were finally broken,” Black Power emerged with an alternative affirmative vision, one that “repudiate[d]” a “dream of ‘freedom’ . . . as American as Horatio Alger: social acceptance and upward mobility within the very centers of . . . power” (Marable, \textit{Race} 78, 85). Instead it embraced self-empowerment, self-defense, and a positive black self-image. Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton characterized Black Power in 1967 as “a political framework and an ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerilla warfare” (qtd. in Marable, \textit{Race} 94). Black Power insisted that black people “exercise control over our lives, politically, economically and psychically”; but Carmichael and Hamilton noted that it would “also contribute to the development of a viable larger society . . . there is nothing unilateral about the movement to free black people” (qtd. in Marable, \textit{Race} 94).

This iteration of Black Power is but one of many, and Marable is among a number of historians who argue that Black Power was “not a coherent ideology,” nor did it offer a consistent, pragmatic plan for materially restructuring American society (\textit{Race} 97). It did, however, exert a powerful centripetal force for cultural solidarity-building. Debbie Louis makes the interesting argument that Black Power’s appeal lay in the very way it spoke to the antinomies of the 1960s, when “the black community stood as a conglomeration of often contradictory interests and directions, dubiously tied together by a common mood which combined centuries of anger with a new hope, increasing desperation with new confidence” (296-97). Even with the qualification of “dubiousness,” Louis’s assessment captures the rebirth of hope amid unhopeful circumstances. Like Carmichael and Hamilton, Louis also addresses how this hope was tinctured
with both anger and revolutionary desires in a way that made it radically different from the nonviolent reformism of the decade’s early years. During the Black Power period, both SNCC and CORE adopted more militant stances, and radical groups like the Black Panther Party appeared. In turn, state repression and police violence were ratcheted up in opposition to this new militancy. Activists quoted Fanon and Mao, and there were some who truly “believed that revolution was imminent and that the Panthers would be its vanguard” (Ogbar 175). The idea of revolution pushes the contradictions of the ‘60s to their extremes. It embodies the apocalyptic figure of a destructive cataclysm combined with the utopian hope of systemic transformation, while looking past the impending catastrophe to consider the worlds it might make possible.

In his essay, “Judgment Day is Coming!” (1980), C.W.E. Bigsby observes that the literature of this period frequently manifests this revolutionary impulse through apocalyptic tropes that echoed Baldwin’s earlier The Fire Next Time (1963). In that text, Baldwin writes, “in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand,” and he goes on to prophesy “if we . . . do not falter in our duty now, we may be able . . . to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time” (104-106). Akin to the messianic prophecy that Baldwin intones, the fiery apocalypses that appear in revolutionary Black Power novels are secular ones brought about by human agency. Nevertheless, Baldwin’s words capture the urgency, the immediacy, the threat, the hope, and the central dialectic of dystopia and utopia at the heart of this fiction. Richard Yarborough recalls in his introduction to the 1999 reissue of Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light that “King’s death” in 1968 “constituted the final straw for many
African Americans, and violence erupted in 125 cities” (viii). In the final years of the 1960s, it seemed that something akin to Baldwin’s prophecy was near at hand.

This is the stage on which *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* appeared, and in the novel’s world, the prophecy is fulfilled. In his foreword to a reissued edition of George Schuyler’s revolutionary utopia, *Black Empire*, Williams situates Schuyler’s novel as well as his own *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* and *Jacob’s Ladder* within a “tradition” of novels of “revenge, racial redemption, and release from white oppression in all its forms” (xv). This tradition stretches back to Delany’s novelization of the impulse that spurred the slave revolts of even earlier days. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* updates this tradition to reflect the second phase of the Second Reconstruction while maintaining the spirit of the “usual old-time slave revolt” (J. Williams, *Sons* 65). Muller is accurate in describing it as a Black Power novel, one that “sympathizes . . . with the black radicals and revolutionaries” rather than with “those who operate within the system” (*John A.* 93). The text “creates a cross-section of black power” that critiques the Movement, and is thus by no means an un-self-reflexive tract (Muller, *John A.* 93). However, it ultimately reaffirms the notion that radical systemic transformation is necessary to overcome the U.S.’s racial problems.

The novel, which falls under the rubric of what Kali Tal calls “black militant near-future fiction,” is set in 1973 and subtitled *A Novel of Some Probability*. It prognosticates a full-scale race war in the U.S. However, despite this prediction, Muller is still perhaps too quick to claim that Williams’s 1969 “retrospective on the decade and . . . forecast of the future” is “the author’s bleakest” literary “vision,” a difficult argument to float in any case given the Holocaustic near-determinism of *The Man Who Cried I Am* (*John A.* 85). Neither the civil war that explodes in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, nor the fact that the militant groups driving this bloody
revolution are portrayed as dubious at best can detract from the fact that differentiating it from its predecessor is a clear vein of hope running throughout. If the novel visits an eschatological “fire” upon the United States, it also expresses a fierce desire to change the country for the better, as well as a sense of “possibility” that Williams’s earlier novel lacks. Indeed, by the end of the book chapter in which he argues that *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* is Williams’s “bleakest vision,” Muller’s own analysis of the text’s “seemingly disparate impulses” has pivoted its attention toward the “utopian promise” inherent in the fact that although “the world in certain ways is coming to an end . . . well-intentioned people will remain to rebuild it” (*John A.* 97). This promise is suspect, steeped in violence, weighed down by the burden of history, and marked by the ambivalence of apocalypse itself. Yet, if Bigsby’s argument that *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* “takes over where *The Man Who Cried I Am* left off” is accurate, then like the Movement itself, the novel attempts to negotiate the sociopolitical impasse of the ‘60s, and “goes a stage further” in moving from a dystopian toward a more utopian position (Bigsby 164; Bould, “Come Alive” 225). In terms of Williams’s militant pessimism, whereas *The Man Who Cried I Am* ends with an act of resistance against complete historical closure, the revolutionary apocalypse in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* blasts history wide open.

Williams’s follow-up to his masterpiece is a simpler, more straightforward work. Formally oriented critics tend to find it “melodramatic and contrived” (Bryant 84). Its characters, particularly the villainous police officer, John Carrigan, can lapse into flat stereotypicality. Additionally, these characters “always seem to be the only people in New York that day” (Cash 115). In an oft-cited interview with Earl Cash, Williams himself agrees, and pans *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, describing it as a “pot boiler” that he wrote “comparatively quickly” because he needed money and, “in America,” books “that are crap . . . always for some reason do
better” in sales (Cash 137-38). Nevertheless, Yarborough disagrees in noting that unlike The Man Who Cried I Am’s exclusive focus on Max Reddick, Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light “is more diffuse in perspective,” and through the intertwining narratives of multiple characters, “offers us several alternative centers of consciousness,” presenting “the United States as multiethnic long before ‘cultural diversity’ became an all-too-easily-invoked catchphrase” (xiv). The novel retains its predecessor’s deep historicity, and in contrast to The Man Who Cried I Am’s near-determinism, it turns instead toward the dialectical relationship between the “choices and behaviors” of its characters and their relationship to the “historical process writ large” (Yarborough xiv). Even though protagonist Eugene Browning, like Max Reddick, is entangled in the “web of history,” and his actions are caught up in forces that are partly beyond his control, he clearly possesses agency, and his decisions and actions profoundly influence events.

Gene Browning is a man with “dreams,” a former professor who has given up political science in favor of political action and gone to work for the New York City-based Institute for Racial Justice (IRJ), an organization that resembles the NAACP. Gene has devoted his efforts to the civil rights struggle, often at the expense of his family life. However, the novel begins on the day when Gene, frustrated by the IRJ’s ineffectuality, decides to circumvent nonviolent, legal, and institutional reform. The event that triggers him is the police shooting of an unarmed black youth. Gene resolves that the killer, Officer Carrigan, should die so that “people [would] know that if they were willing to take black lives the way they had been, then they also ought to know that they had to forfeit their own. Once everyone understood that,” he reasons, perhaps too hopefully, “things would improve” (J. Williams, Sons 23). Through an Italian acquaintance, Gene clumsily manages to reach a former mafia boss and arrange a “hit.” He finances Carrigan’s killing by pocketing some of the money he collects on behalf of the struggling IRJ.
To eliminate Carrigan, the ex-Don contracts an “outside person,” Itzhak Hod, an exiled Israeli militant. Hod uses the money to finance his marriage and return to Israel. The narratives of Don Mantini, an Italian immigrant, and Hod, a Jew, are given substantial space in the novel, and they provide, albeit in somewhat stereotyped forms, additional perspectives on prejudice in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Although Gene had planned for the “hit” to be a single, targeted act of anonymous retaliatory violence, Carrigan’s murder starts a chain reaction that ignites explosive racial tensions. Other retaliatory killings occur. Mobs of off-duty white police officers assault black neighborhoods in over 50 cities and meet with fierce resistance, while a black paramilitary group sets into motion “Operation Black Out,” a plan to cripple New York by blowing up several bridges and tunnels. Violence sweeps the U.S. and Gene retreats from a besieged New York City to Sag Harbor, where he rejoins his family. The family is in turn joined by daughter Nora’s white boyfriend Woody, and the two men arm themselves as the country hurtles toward civil war.

Muller observes that the final scene strikes a rather off-key note: “Browning and his wife make love while America burns, a symbolic restorative act perhaps more in keeping with denouements in the pulps” (John A. 97-98). Still, this domestic allegory of restoration, along with Gene’s final words — “It’s going to be better” — bring the novel to a close with a notable expression of optimism that conflates the destruction of what is with a hope for what might be (J. Williams, Sons 279). However, beyond the totality and finality inherent in the fact that Gene’s actions have brought about “the end of the world,” what will happen remains uncertain save that America will be destroyed, and there can be no going back (273). Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light neither represents nor even conjectures about the shape of the future. Rather, it brings its readers past the point of no return to the threshold of a future where anything seems possible.
The narrative’s end thus embodies the ambivalence of all apocalyptic visions: it is an ending and also a beginning in the most absolute imaginable terms. In contrast to *The Man Who Cried I Am*, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* fixates more on the beginnings and historical openings created by the cataclysmic event, even as it acknowledges its horror. Its ambivalence is indicative of the fact that it is by no means jingoistic, reactionary, or un-self-critical. The mass carnage of the narrative’s climactic conflict will result in the deaths of untold numbers of blacks and whites alike, and in one respect, the novel functions “as a form of dystopian prophecy” (Muller, John A. 95). In the manner of Williams’s previous novel, it warns of the dire human costs if America’s racial problems are not overcome. However, its tone, content, and implications are markedly different. Like the more radical thinkers of its day, the text seems convinced that history can be altered only through some sort of explosive systemic rupture. Whether or not revolution is necessary, it at least seems necessary to attempt to imagine it fearlessly. The promise of an apocalyptic break is, in the balance, presented as a hopeful one.

Gene’s ultimate conviction that a violent sweeping away of the old idols will lead to a “better” future (at least for those who survive) overlays the text’s dystopian aspects with a forward-looking utopian orientation that is at least as powerful, if not more so.

In an important early exchange, Gene rejects both political disenchantment and American bourgeois complacency when he challenges Val: “you won’t think back to our dreams as a point of reference . . . . About a good world. I look and listen and you’ve become, night by night, deed by deed, just like the others. You don’t dream anymore and perhaps you never did” (9). The almost naïve dream of a better world, which Gene refuses to renounce, runs beneath the entire narrative and is reaffirmed on the novel’s final page in the midst of unimaginable calamities. The text explicitly returns to *The Man Who Cried I Am*’s America, in which the white establishment
seems only to require “a paper-thin excuse to do exactly what the Germans did to the Jews,” but its response to this reality is quite different (81). Amid such dystopian circumstances, Muller, for instance, sees the “devices of . . . utopian fiction” at work (John A. 95). He in fact continues to undermine his assertion of the *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*’s singular bleakness when he argues that compared to *The Man Who Cried I Am*, which “is largely unrelieved by any degree of conviction . . . that the power structure can be altered. . . . *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* depicts a revolutionary situation and a world where people fight oppression” (John A. 95-96). Whereas Max Reddick acts “fruitlessly at the end of his life,” Williams’s next novel “seems to exult in the ability of a single man like Browning and urban minorities to make the American landscape shudder,” even if it “implies that the acts of revolutionaries are limited, fragile, and perhaps doomed” (Muller, John A. 96). In addition to the hopeful dream that propels the narrative, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* also affirms human agency, or at least the potential for social action. Whether or not it is possible to achieve a “good world,” the text, despite its ambiguities (and its ethics, which pose important questions of their own), insists on the value—indeed, the imperative—of social dreaming, of imagining and working for such a world.

The movement from a dystopian toward a utopian outlook that occurs between *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* is but one important difference between the two texts. Another is a temporal shift away from the past and toward the future. It is worth reiterating that the insurgent historiography is itself a forward-looking strategy, and in keeping with such a perspective, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* acknowledges the consciousness-raising obligation to “discover Negro history,” especially a “tradition of resistance so secret that even we have been unaware of it,” in order to liberate America from an official history that “started lying with the Pilgrims and . . . kept right on lying” (J. Williams, Sons 276, 167, 10). However, while
both novels are about the immediate present, the present as Gene conceives it in the moments before he hands over the money for the “hit” on Carrigan typifies the temporality of the novel, which is far more invested in the future than in the past as either truth or lie. Gene, in fact, hopes to annihilate the past: “the need was for now, anyway, not even for the future. The need was for now so there could be a future. History and time had created a wrong so complex, creeping into every American institution, that it had to be shorted with simplicity. That was the beginning” (101, emphasis in original). The past remains significant, whether it appears as Gene’s few reminisces, the reflections of the elderly Don, or the personal history of Hod, who is old enough to have lived through World War II. However, this past does not drown the future as it does in The Man Who Cried I Am. All these characters start new lives at the novel’s conclusion. The prioritization of beginnings distinguishes this novel and distances it from its earlier counterpart. (Captain Blackman, interestingly, synthesizes both approaches.) It is also of a piece with the radical-break revolutionary mindset of the Black Power Movement and the fiction it produced, as well as with the more general “rebirth” of utopian sf in the late 1960s. Indeed, Muller’s observation that Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light integrates familiar conventions of utopian fiction applies to the way in which the text conflates the creation of a totally new world with a complete disjunction from the historical past, one of the genre’s definitive tropes.

This break is further emphasized by the temporal displacement strategy the novel mines from the repertoire of utopian and dystopian fiction since Bellamy and Wells. The novel’s future setting literalizes Williams’s forward-looking shift, but, importantly, this future is barely removed from the historical present that is the text’s most urgent political concern. Rather than rewriting the distorted palimpsest of the past, the novel instead appropriates the blank slate of historical futurity in a way that honors this politics and the growing impatience of the Movement.
that advanced them. More than *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light’s* speculative nature, the fact that it is technically a future-scape is likely the main reason that critics have classified it as sf, although save perhaps for the spectacular siege of New York City, the novel’s familiar realist aesthetic would disappoint those looking for the then-futuristic marvels of Schuyler’s *Black Empire*, or the extraterrestrial black Superman of Moreau’s *The Black Commandos*. However, the “near-future” aspect of *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* charges it with an imminence that augments the narrative’s apocalyptic expectancy. It also galvanizes both registers of the novel’s fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, the text is a dystopian “negative prophecy” that “warn[s] white America” in no uncertain terms “that they had better listen” or risk the country’s destruction (Bryant 84). On the other hand, from a more affirmative perspective, it spurs the “growing confidence of some black revolutionaries” with the utopian notion that, if it proves necessary, radical action can lead to radical social transformation (Bryant 84). In either case, the near-future setting of this “novel of some probability” portends, even promises, that change can, should, and will happen, *and soon*.

Despite its projective nature, the text accords with a black utopian tradition that does not betray the post-apocalyptic, “better” future to empiricism, ideology, or the semiotic regime of the present—the pitfalls of utopian consciousness, as it were. The question of “what comes after” remains unanswered, even in Williams’s possible future (80). Indeed, what Tal notes in passing, and Bould briefly remarks upon in his discussion of Black Power sf, is a hallmark of black utopian fiction, revolutionary and otherwise: from Delany on, such texts conclude in an open-ended fashion at the very moment before social transfiguration occurs—although, notably, the texts of the 1960s, such as *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, Baraka’s *The Slave*, and Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* push the narrative forward past the point when the cataclysm
has already, and irreversibly, begun, as if their political aesthetic would not only inspire revolution, but write it into existence.

Moreover, Bould obliquely suggests that in doing so these texts negotiate, precisely by refusing to negotiate with, what Jameson calls the literary utopia’s “formal flaw”: its inability to represent the revolution, let alone the postrevolutionary society, as a viable “practico-political” program. Further, the ambiguity between the purposeful and the accidental, between intent and impact in Gene’s actions, underscores the fact that *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* does not presume to guarantee that any action will yield the desired outcome that it refuses to represent in the first place. In referencing the novel’s utopian “devices,” Muller notes that it “does not possess deep resonances of horror” like *The Man Who Cried I Am*, but rather “present[s] some of the most urgent problems facing America in the 1960s in a provocative but nevertheless emotionally detached manner . . . as an intellectual exercise” (*John A.* 95). In a way, Muller’s assessment only reinforces how *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* reflects an awareness that intellection is a suitable instrument for critiquing the same, but an insufficient one for articulating difference. Gilroy further suggests that Western modernity’s notion of a “rationally pursued utopia” is fundamentally incompatible with the advent of the radical difference signified as “revolutionary or eschatological apocalypse” in black utopian expression (*Atlantic* 56). “Revolution must not only be permanent,” Bould writes, “but also total,” and is thus, to use Gilroy’s term, “unpresentable” in the lexis of the present (Bould, “Come Alive” 234). Williams’s novel makes no attempt to do so, yet nevertheless enjoins readers to do the impossible work of imagining revolution. In this regard, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* exemplifies Jameson’s contention that by “not offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break,” the utopia’s formal flaw “now becomes a rhetorical and political
strength . . . a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right”: this figuring of the impossible “break itself” is “far from a liberal capitulation . . . however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived” (*Archaeologies* 232-33). Indeed, Williams’s novel’s focus on the revolutionary potential in the present neither capitulates to the existing system, nor attempts to represent alternatives in the system’s own flawed terms. Rather, it concentrates on the radical rupture without which its unimaginable demands can never be met.

Another of the many “breaks” from the past that *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* attempts is, tellingly, a break from the 1960s themselves. Such a break would usher in another stage in history, one that, paradoxically, still retains the earlier stage’s utopian desires. In the narrative’s version of 1973, the ‘60s are, retrospectively, a “decade of rebellions that had gone nowhere” (*J. Williams, Sons* 236). Not only had the urban uprisings in Watts, Newark, and elsewhere accomplished little more than damaging black neighborhoods, the “civil rights acts and new laws had not influenced” structural realities “much”: “no Negroes lived in the new buildings” constructed during so-called “urban renewal” projects “because they couldn’t afford to, which made segregation just as effective as it had been since the conquistadors tracked through America almost four hundred years ago” (55). There are two key issues at play in this estranging projective retrospective on the ‘60s, Williams’s attempt to create enough distance for historical hindsight before the historical period under scrutiny has even ended. First is the fact that “everyone had hoped” in the past, “and that [hope] now lay dead” (101). However, even though the text renounces the 1960s, it still attempts to retrieve the decade’s hopeful conviction that there *could* be a qualitatively different future. The novel is thus a bid to make the ‘70s what the ‘60s *should* have been, although this will clearly require drastic political retrenchment.
The second issue involves a complete disavowal of the kind of politics for which the 1960s is already being remembered in a fictional 1973, and a call to embrace more radical alternatives. When he decides to renounce the IRJ, Gene tells its leader, Bill Barton (who also plans to leave) that he is fed up with “working from within instead of outside the system. Can’t be done, just can’t be done; if you’re working inside the system then you’re not working at all” (258). Here, Gene sums up the text’s rejection of a civil rights-era position. Similarly, Morris Greene, one of the text’s significant if flawed black revolutionaries, mentally retraces the 1960s as he reflects on the shortfalls of reformism, recalling in turn “the first sit-ins in 1960 . . . the Freedom Rides and the burned-out buses, the beatings . . . the Martin King marches, the SNCC voter registration drives in the Deep South, and the plunging fear that had come after the murders of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner . . . the false starts, the false hopes, all the waiting, all the killing” (181). Greene concludes that “game-time [is] over” (181). He and Leonard Trotman, a character who became radicalized after his sister was killed in an Alabama bombing, are the architects of the plot to seize New York. The pair have drafted a list of unilateral and pragmatic demands, such as “the immediate allocation by executive order of ten acres of land, one intermediate-sized car and five thousand dollars”; “an immediate review of wage scales and a redefining of values,” which is to focus primarily on education and public-sector jobs; “tax relief”; and, in a transnational gesture, the immediate withdrawal of “U.S. investments in South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, and Rhodesia” (178, 179, 180). At the same time, through Greene and other figures, the text questions the extent to which the Black Power militants of the 1960s were still operating within the “system.” Characters like Lincoln Braithwaite III, owner of the predatory Crispus Attucks Mutual Insurance Company, and even the paramilitary mastermind Millard Jessup, are used to critique Black Power envisaged as Black Capitalism:64 that is, Black
Power practiced by people who “want to live good, comfortably, and in this country, as in most countries, it has to be at the expense of others” (81). Jessup’s bizarre collusion with the John Birch Society (perhaps a reference to Schuyler, who had such connections, or to other unseemly collaborations such as Karenga’s relationship with Reagan), is also disparaged for its attempt to “begin a black revolution with white money” gleaned from people who “have no plans for us except graves” (182). Gene himself is no willing revolutionary, and despite chastising Val for holding such values, his own middle-class tendencies are quite removed from the radical lumpenproletarianism espoused by some Panthers and other groups. The urban resistance that occurs toward the end of the narrative, however, hints at the possibility of mass revolt by America’s most excluded populations. The text’s critique of complicity is summed up in its insistence that one would have to be a “fool” to believe “pure revolutionaries can come out of a system like this one,” and in striving to break free of the 1960s, Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light suggests that a new “dream” would necessarily purge itself of any vestiges of the American Dream that remained within the Movement (182).

Greene’s insistence that “game-time” is over implies that the era of nonviolence is as well. On both the individual and collective levels, the text broaches the thorny question of political violence. It thus at once leverages the fears of the establishment during a time of escalating unrest while stoking the resolve of those who sought radical change. It also opens an additional set of questions about violence, ethics, commitment, and social transformation. Noel Schraufnagel argued in the actual 1973 that Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light “illustrates a theory proposed by Frantz Fanon which suggests that violence tends to unify an oppressed people. From an individual point of view, it acts as a cleansing force which frees a person from his despair at watching the world go by without doing anything to stop the oppressive forces that work against
him. Violence in the face of oppression restores self-respect” (192). Such a conception of self-respect inevitably invites objections. For one, it suggests the violent patriarchalism for which Black Power has been criticized. However, Smethurst points out that this criticism “was true of almost every segment of American society” (85). This is partly why in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* violence is an “argument” that is “furnished” by an oppressive system, as Fanon himself viewed it, and the representation of violence in the novel conjures what Fanon calls an “ironic turning of the tables” (*Wretched* 84). Gene entertains similar questions of reciprocal violence within the context of the ‘60s’ place in history:

> You could work in a famous civil rights organization . . . you could work with all your heart and what was left of your soul, but you also had to know, finally, that none of that was going to do any good; that you had to obtain your goals by almost the same means *Chuck* obtained his, remained the only obvious conclusion, and Chuck did not get his with Freedom Now or Love Your Brother marches. That was the truth. (J. Williams, *Sons* 11-12, emphasis in original)

Gene thus concludes that the “only answer” to this dilemma is the kind of selective, retaliatory violence he deploys when he arranges Carrigan’s killing (22). This risks the conclusion that such violence may be the sole means available to “do something” to change an oppressive status quo—a status quo, moreover, that Carrigan’s actions demonstrate is already rampantly violent. The rather simplistic scenario of violence against an intentionally murderous, overtly racist police officer takes a didactic step beyond a self-defense posture in order to imagine the possibility of meeting force with force to level the field on which the future will be negotiated (or fought for). Muller and Cash both argue that Gene’s actions, as well as those of the black New Yorkers who respond forcefully to the invasion of white mobs, reflect *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*’s position that organized, premeditated violence should be met with retaliation in kind. However, in acknowledging the fruitlessness of events like the Watts rebellion, as well as the fact that Jessup’s militarism for militarism’s sake is a disaster in the making, the text
ultimately sides with “violence, but not madness” (84). For Fanon, a willingness to “turn the
tables” is but the difficult first step toward changing a violent order of things.

In addressing the possibility of change in the post-civil rights era, the novel uses fiction to
reflect on this taboo issue. The result is both complicated and ambiguous.

First, there is an obvious sense in which Gene’s actions and the deadly wave of violence
that radiates from them are emblematic of how the “fictive world” of Sons of Darkness, Sons of
Light, “cannot bear close ethical scrutiny” (Muller, John A. 90). Muller further maintains that the
fact that Gene himself (intradiegetically) “escapes . . . ethical judgment” is equally problematic
(John A. 90). However, Muller’s adjudication overlooks how the function—one might even risk
the intentional fallacy and argue the purpose—of the novel’s scenario is to compel close ethical
scrutiny concerning violence. Muller, from some historical distance, clearly chooses a different
position than the text’s own. Whatever one’s position, Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light demands
that difficult questions be asked about what course of action remains when putative “democratic
principles” produce and reproduce undemocratic inequalities, and when, as Gene maintains,
“Chuck had given all he intended to give” and it seems “the rest would have to be taken” (J.
Williams, Sons 22). Furthermore, the novel echoes Fanon in asking what—or whether—ethics is
possible in a situation where institutionalized racist violence is constitutive of the dominant
order—whether it is Nixonian “Law and Order” America, or Paris during the Algerian conflict.
The novel challenges, as does Baudrillard’s reading of Watergate, the extent to which the very
notion of normative ethics serves as a screen that perpetuates, masks, and exonerates a society in
which unethicality is the norm. A central question in the novel concerns what is necessary to
create an ethical world from an unethical one, a question that was indeed topical in an era when
nonviolent resistance had clearly failed. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* uses its “possible world” as an imaginative space for both asking, and provisionally answering, these questions.

A second ambiguity arises when, although the text advocates “violence, but not madness,” Gene’s actions produce *both*. Williams’s text is willing to risk espousing targeted, organized violence, but Cash points out that it rejects “unpremeditated violence”; yet Gene’s calculated retaliation amplifies into total, mostly chaotic destruction (110). The novel’s position on this latter kind of violence is reflected, for example, in Gene’s rejection of Jessup as “almost too militant” when he reflects that “one could create the shock waves, but it would not be easy to survive in the desolation of the murderous reaction; that had to come” (J. Williams, *Sons* 72). Jessup’s crew, he concludes, “were like people who could not stand stiches, and so ripped them out, to their own detriment and everyone else’s” (72). Through Jessup, Williams advances, “his critique of the various methods he sees being advanced by groups such as the Black Panther Party” (Cash 115). However, Cash’s claim that “in baldest terms [this] is what *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* is all about” cannot bear much critical pressure in light of the text’s overall militancy, no matter of how self-critical it may be (115). Gene’s course of action—precisely an extension of the early Panthers’ strategy of *reaction* against police brutality—is presented as preferable to the status quo. Jessup is represented as extreme, but the text is more sympathetic toward Greene and Trotman’s carefully laid plan to “attack the system physically somewhere near the center of power” and start a “genuine revolution” before things “slip back into old molds” (J. Williams, *Sons* 177). Yet, Greene and Trotman know that despite their own methodical efforts, others “were ready and willing to act, but in indirect and often wasteful ways”; they thus feel a “sense of disaster hastening up” (177). In the end, they still choose to hasten that disaster. Indeed, except for the coordinated destruction in New York, the violence
that accompanies the “shock waves” is largely the blood-soaked madness Gene fears when he tours Jessup’s training camp.

As the disaster unfolds, Gene reflects that his “simple, selective, violent act, calculated to deliver a message, had become magnified,” and in consequence, “all the black populace he had been trying to save from slaughter looked like it was being slaughtered after all” (269). Ironically, precisely because of Gene’s violent intervention, his intentions have been swept away by history. This introduces an additional ambivalence concerning agency (and indeed ethics). On one level, Gene’s pursuit of his “dream” leads to something “out of a nightmare” (273). However, on another level, despite the bedlam, Gene’s hopeful conviction that the world is eventually going to be “better” punctuates the text’s preference for even a messy revolution over the tidy orderliness of a corrupt stasis. What Fanon writes of decolonization seems an apt description of the novel’s portrayal of revolution: it is “always a violent phenomenon,” and any program that “sets out to change the order of the world is, obviously, a program of complete disorder” (Wretched 35, 36, emphasis added). (Compare this statement about “disorder” with the quotation above from J. Edgar Hoover’s COINTELPRO memo.) The novel’s black casualties underscore the fact that Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light is not simply a revenge fantasy, nor is it a facile revolutionary utopia. Rather, it faces down some of the direst issues involved in the radical transfiguration of society. Notwithstanding Gene’s sanguinity, it is uncertain what awaits after the “world-reducing” apocalypse, yet the text reaffirms that the present order is unsupportable, and true change is all but impossible without such a cataclysm. This not only accords with Bloch’s suggestion that the rending open of a seemingly static history is the genesis of hope,68 but also broaches the Blochian question, “how could the world be perfected without this world being exploded and apocalyptically vanishing?” (Principle 215, italics in original)
The novel maintains that it could not. Bould observes that Black Power sf is suffused with “a politics of refusal: enough is enough, explanation superfluous” (“Come Alive” 228). However, saying “No to the bad situation which exists” is only half of what, for Bloch, is a “revolutionary interest” that also affirms a “Yes” to the possibility of a “better life that hovers ahead” (Principle 75, italics in original). Without whitewashing the dystopian aspects of revolution, Williams’s novel ultimately affirms the more utopian “Yes.”

In speculating about social change in this way, Williams uses his fictional world to reduce the question of ends and means to a zero-sum proposition, and thus weigh this proposition in a situation where the means are violent. Gene’s determination to show that the deaths of black Americans will no longer go unreciprocated is precisely what hurls the country into a “new phase” (J. Williams, Sons 155). Gene recognizes, “this was the time of crisis, not the Sixties as everyone thought. Forms of amelioration had set in then; enough to push back the boiling point. But there was no pushing back now” (194). The near-future setting thus imagines both a complete break from the 1960s, and the advent of the Event that signals at least the possibility of a greater break from American history itself. A knot of dilemmas and contradictions attend the novel’s climax, and yet, the revolutionary break finally assumes absolute priority, and force is shown to be able to achieve what other means could not.

The explosion at the end of Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light shatters the historical determinism that haunts The Man Who Cried I Am. However, the ambiguous combination of methodical and chaotic violence in Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light also points toward still another paradox in its vision of history and agency. While Gene has no intention to push the country over the brink, this is exactly what happens. Several of the actors involved are portrayed as agents in history, and as far as the black characters are concerned, this sharply differentiates
both the organized and impromptu militants of an imagined 1970s from the historical victims or ineffec
tual ‘60s-type activists shown in both *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* and *The Man Who Cried I Am.* Yet Gene’s experience testifies to the fact that although the events that occur are irreducible from the decisions that influence them, there is another sense in which history has a momentum of its own that exceeds the control of its agents. The apocalypse is not only greater than the discrete actions that comprise it; there are tensions among causal factors surrounding what occurs, including intentionality, determinism, and spontaneity, tensions Fanon also interrogated. These suggest both historical immanence and imminence: that a “boiling point” not only already exists, but amid the kind of volatile “long hot summer” that appears in the text, this point will assuredly be reached. Thus, there is a Delany-esque “will-to-apocalypse” in the novel, a paradoxical call for direct action amid historical contingency *and* the hopeful assurance of independent historical inevitability. Insofar as the text is utopian, this paradox is integral to the revolutionary praxis of Williams’s near-future fiction. Although *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* presents history as open to purposeful intervention, its ambiguities seem to suggest that history, as Djuna Barnes once wrote, is “untidy.”

The text sounds a further dystopian warning, this time to would-be revolutionaries themselves. This warning cuts against the grain of Gene’s hopefulness, and also troubles Schraufnagel’s argument that violence is a collectivizing force in the text. It targets insufficiently self-critical articulations of Black Power, much as Gene does in mentally dressing down Jessup, who “thinks that just because he’s black he’s an automatic revolutionary” (182). The most severe admonishment, however, centers on Greene and Trotman. In a sensationalistic scene, Itzhak Hod, newly awakened to the U.S.’s racial realities, kills the man who murdered Trotman’s sister; but this happens only after he finds Trotman hiding in the murderer’s closet waiting to do the
same. Later, Hod writes a note attributing the killing to Greene (who had claimed responsibility for Carrigan’s killing). Trotman’s truthful but bizarre explanation of these implausible events makes Greene suspicious. Fearing that Trotman might sabotage Operation Blackout, Greene locks him in a closet. Greene understands what this mistrust portends in a moment when solidarity is needed:

What the hell was it all for if it soured you on your brothers? Or soured them on you? What kind of insanity lurked behind the attempts to alter an insane society that had already indicated that insanity was at its very core? He wanted to rush to the closet, throw open the door and take Trotman into his arms once again; tell him that black people were not going to have the same kind of revolutions that white people had had, where at some point, always, white turned against white as the revolutions progressed. He wanted to apologize to Trotman for behaving like a white man, and tell him that the essence of their revolution was that, yes! Black people were better than whites; were not going to make the same mistakes . . . white brothers were going to be made, not white enemies, and by force which had proved to be mandatory. That’s what this revolution is about, to forge the opening to the better. (240-241, emphases in original)

Given the uncertainty of the novel’s conclusion and the glimpses of hope it offers, critic Charles D. Peavy is perhaps too hasty in seizing on this scene to argue that “despite the elaborate planning and idealistic goals of the revolution, it is portrayed ultimately as a failure” (221-22). “While the military operation will doubtlessly succeed,” he claims, “the dissolution of the ideal behind the revolution becomes apparent” (222). Such a failure is by no means “portrayed” as inevitable. However, what occurs between Greene and Trotman does capture what is at stake, and tempers Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light’s revolutionary tone. Not only is this another instance of the text’s tendency contemplatively to pull back from an idealistic position; it also signals the text’s awareness of the always-present danger that the longed-for revolution will devolve into historical repetition, or the kind of pernicious reversal that Muller ponders in his readings of Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light and Captain Blackman. Indeed, although (or because) Williams’s novel refuses to represent anything beyond the cataclysm’s very beginnings,
the conflict between Greene and Trotman suggests a full awareness of the peril at the core of any truly utopian endeavor. Greene’s self-reproaches emphasize the need for brotherhood and the consequences of repeating history’s mistakes. (As we shall see later, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* poignantly captures how such disunity contributed to the Movement’s demise.) Once again the past as well as the present is among the wrongs to be corrected. Despite the potential failings that seem to infect the revolution before it even begins, the narrative still pushes on toward this possible “opening to the better,” breaking off exactly at the historical break itself.

It is in this regard that the odd denouement of *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, of which critics generally disapprove, deserves another look. To be sure, Gene’s retreat to a domestic enclave and his sudden distancing of himself from the world events he instigated seem somewhat incongruous with the rest of the narrative. Particularly peculiar is the tableau of Gene and Val’s sexual coupling against the backdrop of an America in flames. Williams’s own “make love not war” reading of this scene seems out of step with the novel. Indeed, because of Gene’s demanding work-life, he and Val have no opportunity to make love before war breaks out. There is thus a sense in which family domesticity assumes in the novel a utopian valence that is not without a substantive politics of its own. In his chapter on Williams’s earlier novel, *Sissie* (1963), Muller suggests that the fictional Joplin family is portrayed, despite its conflicts, in a utopian light as an important social institution and source of hope. Muller makes the vital political point that in contrast to then-prominent sociological studies—as for example, the Moynihan Report’s sweeping generalization of twenty million black families as a “tangle of pathology”—*Sissie* is a needful, positive corrective (qtd. in Muller, *John A.* 61). The image of utopian domesticity that appears in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*’s denouement is reinforced elsewhere through the story of Itzhak Hod and his young fiancée, Mickey. Here, Williams once again establishes
parallels between the historical struggles of blacks and Jews. Considered in light of the carnage that befalls America in Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light and the novel’s strong Zionism, the Jews are “survivors” of both slavery and “a holocaust the earth had never been witness to before,” a people who have turned a historical corner and are struggling to build a “Jewish home” in the world (J. Williams, Sons 53). Muller reads the story of Itzhak and Mickey’s marriage and journey to a new Jewish settlement in Israel as a “voyage literally to build a new world, a microcosmic community of patriots for a nation” (John A. 97). The implied promise of a reconciled Browning family building a previously impossible home may be understood as a similarly utopian figuration. In this regard, Woody and Nora’s relationship is especially significant given that Woody and the Brownings come together at a moment when black and white people are massacring one another. Although Val is antipathetic toward the relationship, and Gene observes that much of America views it even more harshly, the young couple hints at a generational shift that will overcome the racial divide. This couple is thus another means by which family becomes a locus of hope.

Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light’s images of macrocosmic change are thus combined with microcosmic ones in ways that fortify Gene’s concluding expression of optimism. This further reflects how, despite the destruction the text visits upon the U.S., Williams’s novel of revolution reverses the valences of The Man Who Cried I Am. In both texts, the frictions along the color line during the 1960s have the U.S. slouching toward racial apocalypse. Moreover, both are marked by an antinomy between dystopian prophecies of doom and utopian pulses of hope. Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light, however, tilts the balance more toward the utopian. In the novel, Black Americans unequivocally claim agency and bring about what may possibly be a Second American Revolution. While the confrontation will involve great human costs, the novel admits
the chance that this cataclysm might in fact be the storm-before-the-calm, an opening toward an “epoch of rest” as hinted at by the final scene. Historically, this move from dystopia to utopia in the two novels recapitulates the Freedom Movement’s transition from mid-‘60s disenchantment toward the militant affirmation of Black Power. Furthermore, the novel’s near-future setting attempts to extricate the text from the problems that arose during the decade and imagine a new beginning that is nonetheless propelled by its transformative events. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* is by no means a purely utopian novel. Indeed, William’s update of the “usual old-time slave revolt” synthesizes elements of the messianic revolutionary utopia familiar since *Blake* with a Black Power-era sf avatar of the militant pessimism Williams carried forward from Wright. Looking forward, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*’s portrayal of a world in need of radical change, its skepticism about social “perfectibility” and its internal critique of the utopian imagination itself anticipate the militantly pessimistic critical dystopias that began to appear in the 1980s. Yet the militancy of Williams’s historical novels demonstrates once again how the common thread that runs beneath all utopias and dystopias is the desire for a better future. In *The Man Who Cried I Am* and *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, this utopian desire is the same impulse that binds together the contradictions of the tempestuous decade that produced them.

**A Pessimistic Postscript: Jacob’s Ladder and Clifford’s Blues**

Williams returns to the theme of revolution in 1972’s *Captain Blackman*, which once again concludes with an apocalypse that is both a “hideous vision” and a “historical vindication” (Muller, John A. 115). Muller notes that after the publication of *Captain Blackman*, the political exhaustion of the 1970s opened another phase in Williams’s career, one marked by a retreat from history and politics seen in *Mothersill and the Foxes* (1975) and *The Junior Bachelor Society* (1976). However, writing in 1984, Muller forecasts a return to politics that did in fact occur after 1982’s capacious *künstlerroman, !Click Song*, in the two novels with which this discussion
concludes. The first, Jacob’s Ladder, was begun in the mid-‘70s but not completed and published until 1987. The second, Clifford’s Blues, was drafted by 1988, but not published, due to dozens of rejections, until 1999.

Williams’s return to politics took place within a context marked by increasing pessimism among advocates of radical social change. Marable claims that by 1976, the “radicalism and militancy” of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s were “defeated” (Race 146). While the changes wrought by the Second Reconstruction had produced a politically connected and increasingly moderate black elite, this “7 to 10 percent of the total African American population [was] set apart from the vast majority of working-class and impoverished blacks” who by no means enjoyed parity with white Americans (Marable, Race 149). The poor also bore the brunt of a “white backlash” against the advancements that were made in the 1960s, a backlash that facilitated Reagan’s election in 1980. Marable asserts that “the ‘ideological glue’ of Reaganism was racism,” and “for black Americans, the central political characteristic of the 1980s was the conservative reaction to the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, and the apparent capitulation of both political parties to a more conservative and repressive social order” (Race 176, 194).

Moylan too argues that the Reagan “revolution” and its negation of the utopian 1960s led to a dystopian turn in the literature of social transformation. This new fiction preserved the utopian impulse, but its dominant mode was critical, and both its tone and content tended toward negativity. Williams’s return to political literature during this period reflects these historical and aesthetic shifts. In black American literature, the most high-profile response to the new repressive order was the neo-slave narrative. While Williams did not partake of this genre sensu stricto, Clifford’s Blues is an American neo-slave narrative of sorts that opens up a more transnational and “multidirectional” perspective than some of its peers. The revolutionary fervor
of *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* and *Captain Blackman* is long gone during this phase of Williams’s career—in fact, *Jacob’s Ladder* soberly reconsiders this very posture—and what has replaced it is a renewed, critical pessimism that struggles to maintain a militant belief in the possibility of social betterment.

*Jacob’s Ladder* returns to the mid-1960s moment of *The Man Who Cried I Am*, and it shares the earlier novel’s pan-African perspective. Its events take place in Africa, but they are backlit by the American realities of “Watts, New York, Selma, Birmingham” as well as the American racial imperialism of the Vietnam War (J. Williams, *Ladder* 21). American-led international intrusion, recalling the *Alliance Blanc*, shapes the realities of Africa. With the benefit of historical hindsight, the novel casts a more dystopian light on the revolutionary utopian elements that found their way into Williams’s fiction in the late ’60s and early ’70s.

Williams sets *Jacob’s Ladder* in the country of Pandemi. Although Pandemi is geographically located someplace on a recognizable African continent, it is an entirely fictional no-place. The country is a literary chronotope with all of the trappings of nationalist utopian fiction, yet the novel’s representation of it also reflects the historical transition toward transnationalism. What results is a social space where the boundaries and sovereignty of the modern nation-state are sites of tension and contention. Pandemi has been nominally independent for over a century, but the changes accompanying the mid-century wave of decolonization have resulted in the flight of its previous white stewards and the ascension of the idealistic Chuma Fasseke to the presidency. In contradistinction to the corrupt regimes and debilitating financial dealings that have contaminated postcolonial nations elsewhere on the continent, Fasseke “seeks something else” (J. Williams, *Ladder* 95, emphasis added). He aims to “help [Pandemi’s] people and all of Africa that is truly Africa . . . select our own destiny” (173).
Fasseke refuses to join onerous Cold War alliances; he has nationalized industry; and he attempts to build a nation, a true “home” for Africans. However, Fasseke’s objective is not utopian or nationalist isolationism: the independent nation must “be in the world, not just outside it” (106).

In order for Pandemi to take its place on the world stage, Fasseke forges a partnership with the country’s oil-rich neighbor, the fictional Temian, and builds a nuclear power plant without assistance from the Cold War superpowers. Located on the symbolic site of a former slave-trading port, the plant houses a breeder reactor that will supply electricity to fuel Pandemi’s “modernization” and the materials necessary to produce nuclear weapons. Fasseke’s goals are peaceful; but as for the rest of the world, he knows that power—in this case, nuclear power—is “all they understand” (24). With the security these weapons will provide, Fasseke intends to take control of his nation’s future and negotiate on equal terms with the world’s great powers. As the narrative begins, the power plant comes online, the electric lights in the capital are switched on, and after a post-independence period of stagnation, it appears that Pandemi is about to realize the utopian dream of an independent, self-sufficient African home-land that drove the anti-colonial nationalist movements. Nmadi Ouro, Pandemi’s great poet, links this dream to the dreams of the past, of “Du Bois. If only he’d lived three years longer! To have seen this” (24).

The dream is short-lived, however. Soon after the power plant becomes operational, an American-led strike force (in blackface) permanently disables the reactor and stages a bloodless coup that replaces Fasseke’s government with a puppet regime. Pandemi’s achievement seems destined to “slide under the consciousness of the continent, as though it hadn’t happened at all” (196). In one sense, Jacob’s Ladder can be read as a postcolonial dystopia, a novel by an American author with pan-African political sensibilities that espouses what Aimee Glocke
generalizes as an “African world-view” (212). A particularly important aspect of its worldview is the notion that “everything is interconnected and interdependen[.]” (Glocke 208). However, in *Jacob’s Ladder* this becomes ambivalent when interdependence clashes with independence, and the world with which Pandemi’s fate is interconnected proves as hostile as the colonial one. The novel’s vast historical lens focuses on Africa’s global situatedness, and its perspective is pessimistic. In the novel, “independence” has been revealed to be but a “western word”:

It was usually garnished in Africa with celebration, spectacle . . . and with promises flung like sucked fishbones to the wind. It was all more like a disease than the wind O’Brien said was sweeping the continent. . . . For Patrice independence had meant death . . . for want of it Chief Luthuli and Nelson Mandela remained trapped in that vast concentration camp to the south; for others there had been shattering, fiery deaths, disappearances . . . for Jomo a chance to invite more British back to Kenya than had been there before the “emergency.” Wherever one looked, independence had not truly come. (J. Williams, *Ladder*10)

Williams’s novel draws these harsh lessons directly from a history in which independence often proved to be an “empty thing” (11). Its bleak depiction of postcolonial Africa thus has much in common with Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels, which Chapter 3 deals with in more detail.

Williams also shares with Ngũgĩ a critique of some of the factors shaping the dystopian world of the postcolony, most notably the disastrous combination of compromised leadership and persistent Euro-American hegemony. In *Jacob’s Ladder*, Fasseke assesses postcolonial Africa in this way: “not yet a decade into independence . . . the others had run off to the Dutch for Fokkers, to the British for Comets or VC-10s, to the French for Caravelles, and to the Americans for 707s. They had gone not only for the planes, but for all the gadgetry of the other world” (10). Meanwhile, “the bushbeaters of foreign companies slipped across the continent like vipers, stalking oil, uranium, cobalt, ferrochrome, bauxite, gold, iron, copper, diamonds,” and “they trapped and manipulated the crops” (11). As in *The Man Who Cried I Am*, much of Africa remains under the sway or control of the West; as Fasseke puts it, Africa “had merely gone from
one form of colonialism to another” (10). Indeed, the novel’s representation of what Nkrumah called “neocolonialism” captures the postwar machinations of the Cold War military industrial complex, multinational corporations, consumer capitalism, and an imperialism that shifted its tactics from overt brute force to financial coercion and covert operations. For both Williams and Ngũgĩ, these factors, along with a collusive or even handpicked leadership, structure a dystopian postcolonial Africa. In Williams’s representation of it, “Americans” and other westerners “presume . . . they can determine which nations will have what and when”—and “what they don’t want [Africans] to have,” both literally and figuratively, is “power” (173, 42). Fasseke vows that “things would change in Pandemi if nowhere else in Africa,” but he lacks the opportunity to fulfill this promise, and his utopian experiment is demolished by more powerful forces from beyond its borders (11).

In another sense, however, Jacob’s Ladder is an African-American dystopian novel. The novel’s central character is Jacob “Jake” Henry, a black Major in the U.S. Army and ostensibly the new American military attaché to Pandemi. Jake is tasked with “mak[ing] the U.S. look pretty good with all of Africa because of what’s going on back there” (107). In actuality, several layers of intrigue render the situation more sinister. Jake spent his childhood in Pandemi, where his father was a Christian missionary, and was personal friends with Fasseke. While in Africa, Jake’s family spoke of America as “home” and “a shining place,” but they struggled against American racism after their return (51). At the beginning of the narrative, despite his joint African and American roots, Major Henry self-identifies as “American completely,” and is prepared to use his relationship with Fasseke to help the U.S. achieve its true mission in Pandemi: “to teach Chuma a lesson that Africans should never forget: Do not fuck with [Uncle] Sam” (101, 81).
Jake’s position, and indeed his positionality, are complicated in two ways by the events that unfold. On the one hand, the novel’s expatriate black American jazz singer Iris Joplin points out that Jake is in effect “The Man,” a representative of (white) America’s exercise of power over Africans (128). On the other hand, the novel’s events underscore how American racism precludes Jake’s ability to occupy the very role assigned to him. Jake initially cannot, or will not, face this fact: “Jake hated discussions of racism. He found them more complicated to explain than he wished. This was especially true with foreigners. Such talk always left him feeling that he had defended, or tried to, someone he should have attacked” (97). This suspicion proves correct when he discovers that he is being used as a decoy to draw the attention of Pandemian surveillance away from the U.S.’s real operation, and is to be eliminated once he has outlived his usefulness. Jake detects the plot in time to escape death, but his illusions about being “completely” American are destroyed. In fact, America treats him as an enemy. Here, twenty years after The Man Who Cried I Am, Williams uses a conspiracy plot once again to perform dystopian fiction’s function of “disclosure,” and its target is American assimilationism.

At the same time, Jake’s experiences in Pandemi draw him ever closer to a renounced African past, one that is both personal and historical. Glocke observes that the novel’s titular metaphor reflects the fact that “the higher Jacob climbs up the ladder towards consciousness, the closer he moves towards his African roots and culture; and the further away he moves from the . . . influences that once encompassed his life” (204). In Jake’s coming-to-consciousness, Jacob’s Ladder is an “intopia” of sorts: by the novel’s end, “history”—American and African—“has overtaken him” (J. Williams, Ladder 195). Although he lacks the power to alter history, his new awareness engenders a new identity. When Africans help rescue Jake from the assassination plot,
Jake in turn embraces his personal and cultural ties to Pandemi and changes sides to help Chuma and his family escape the country after the coup.

Through Jake’s transformation and the connections it unearths, Jacob’s Ladder expresses a unifying and potentially utopian pan-Africanism. However, the racist leader of the Americans’ covert operation, Ken Klein, scoffs that because of the transnational connections that people like “Malcolm X,” “Nkrumah,” and others are establishing between the upheavals in America and the situation in Africa, the U.S. will soon go on the offensive and “break up the romance between these [African] monkeys and ours. (Solidarity, no, never.)” (161). While Jake’s epiphany and the potential solidarity it represents constitute a point of hope, in the novel’s dystopian world-historical context, Klein’s divisive politics achieves another devastating victory.

While Jacob’s Ladder retrospectively casts a cynical shadow on the hopeful militancy of the 1960s, its dystopian critique is a militant act in the political landscape of the 1980s insomuch as it disrupts the dubious utopian narrative of late-capitalist expansionism and “development,” and exposes the constitutive racism of this “endless” new “Manifest Destiny” (138). Additionally, Jake’s personal transformation serves as an intradiegetic figuration of the utopian pedagogy inherent in its dystopian world-picture. Through Iris Joplin, who uses a phrase borrowed directly from Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light, the text discloses its underlying utopian desire to “teach down systems. Create new kinds of people. Just with the facts that most others don’t bother to teach” (114). Her words convey the text’s position that “the truth”—especially the “unofficial” truths that dystopian “fiction” can provide—“is revolutionary” (114). In this way, despite the fact that the narrative tells a historically based story of the destruction of a utopia, it stops short of being anti-utopian. Rather, like the critical dystopias, its consciousness-raising ambitions harbor utopian desires.
Whereas *Jacob’s Ladder* uses a fictional *topos* as a means to create a politically useful alternative history, *Clifford’s Blues* uses an actual historical *topos* to create a fiction. The result may be Williams’s most powerful insurgent historiography. It is also a compelling concrete dystopia. And yet here once again, despite a litany of horrors, it refuses to abandon hope.

Despite the many allusions to the Nazi Holocaust he makes in his fiction, *Clifford’s Blues* marks the first time Williams uses it as his primary subject matter. The novel takes the form of the fictional diary of Dachau prisoner Clifford Pepperidge. The use of the diary form reflects what Rothberg characterizes as “the importance of testimony as a mode of articulating . . . suppressed truth” (25). Autobiographical testimony is also vital to blues music, to which the novel also acknowledges its debt. Clifford’s testimony is bookended by two letters dating from late 1986 and exchanged between Gerald Sanderson, who discovers the diary while traveling in Europe, and Jayson Jones, an author whom Sanderson thinks can find a publisher for the document. Clifford is a black, gay, expatriate American jazz pianist, a member of an “unpopular category” whom the Nazis place in “protective custody” in 1933. He remains a captive until the end of World War II. He is “spared” from the worst atrocities that take place in the Dachau concentration camp when Dieter Lange, a closeted gay S.S. officer, hears Clifford’s music and commandeers him as his personal servant. For twelve years, Clifford lives in the Nazi’s home as a captive “houseboy,” house musician, and sex slave. The form and content of *Clifford’s Blues* thus resonate with slave narratives old and new. Dieter is also a war profiteer, and Clifford is forced to work in the canteen that Dieter manages in the Dachau labor camp, where he is both an insider and an outsider. Although he suffers terribly, he does not endure the tortures experienced by many of the other internees. Rather, through this rather ingenuous character, the text conveys a subjective, affective experience, but it avoids sensationalizing or fetishizing the immeasurable
suffering that occurs in the camp. This is in part due to the way Clifford records it from a standpoint of proximity, but also of slight distance. Clifford is deeply empathetic toward what he witnesses (and he summons empathy), but his documentation of the horrors at Dachau generally circumvents spectacular sentimentalism in favor of a shocked objectivity. From the microcosms of the Lange domicile and the concentration camp, Clifford documents both his life and the historical arch of the Third Reich from its rise to power to its descent into homicidal chaos. He witnesses the experiences of different “unpopular categories” such as blacks, gays, gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, criminals, political subversives, and especially Jews. He watches helplessly as those closest to him are killed. He also records horrors ranging from a box containing hundreds of putrefying gold teeth, to gruesome events at the war’s end, when the Nazis “aren’t even trying to feed the prisoners” and piles of “bodies are stacked up beside the moat, in the ‘Platz, in the ‘Strasse, along the outside walls of the crematorium, and just inside and outside the electric fence” (J. Williams, Blues 304). Indeed, the ability to think clearly amid the unthinkable proves crucial. First, as a trickster figure, Clifford’s wits allow him to survive by “using” Dieter even as Dieter uses him. Second, clear thinking is vital because Clifford’s Blues seeks a cognitive response as well as an emotional one. It is especially crucial to the text’s dystopian cognitive mapping, which discloses unsettling connections between the nightmare of Nazi Germany and other nodes of world history. The final entry in Clifford’s diary finds the Nazis burning historical records and liquidating the camp before the Americans arrive, and Clifford about to leave Dachau along with Dieter’s wife Anna as part of a larger evacuation. “The Cliff’s” future beyond this point is unknown. The narrative thus follows Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light by employing an open-ended structure.
The interplay between structure and openness is better captured, however, in the way in which Clifford’s Blues incorporates elements of blues and jazz, through which it taps the potential of what Bloch considered the “most utopian” art form: music (Levitas, “Welt” 221). Clifford describes the Holocaust as the “blues to end all blues,” and throughout, the novel makes explicit the ambivalent, “blues-like” relationship between suffering and affirmation (Williams, Blues 230). It also provides a ready means for understanding the text’s historical critique. In particular, Williams uses Clifford’s blues as part of a political project of multidirectional memory. Houston Baker theorizes the blues as a distinctly African American form of cultural signifying whereby “autobiographical narrators” are able to employ such tropes as “existential declarations of lack” and macabre visions of death to “successfully negotiate an obdurate ‘economics of slavery and achieve a resonant . . . expressive dignity” (13, 5, 13). In a way that recalls Baraka’s notion of the “changing same,” Baker argues that each individual expression of the blues connects the autobiographer, both formally and culturally, to a shared blues “matrix,” a semiotic “crossroads” that functions as a “codifying force, providing resonance for experience’s multiplicities” (7). In this way, “discrete blues instances are always intertextually related by the blues code as a whole” (Baker 6). This code enables the blues’ culturally distinctive communication. As regards “sameness,” Baraka invokes this shared whole when he argues that the blues is “the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling . . . the racial memory” of “a people without a memory. No history” (189, 188). The blues matrix is thus a history in its own right, one that stands in direct contrast to, and indeed countermands, the official history that Baker calls “AMERICA.” Moreover, Baraka observes that “different expressions (of a whole)” also involve change (Baker 190). Each blues performance reprises, but also adds to and alters the collective memory. The blues autobiography thus has a ripple effect: it re-writes a history that is
itself an insurgent history, which, in turn, is a re-writing of the dominant history from a marginal point of view. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. maintains that the Blues/Jazz tradition involves a “trope of revision as well as figuration,” one that “functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically,” by rewriting “the received order” in a way that “alters fundamentally the way we read [a] tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand to the tradition” (124).

Clifford’s autobiographical “blues to end all blues” leverages this form’s dialectic of change and sameness in order to use the memory of the “actual” Nazi Holocaust as part of a multidirectional, revisionary politics that critically rewrites history in three overlapping ways. First, as in The Man Who Cried I Am, Williams uses dystopian fiction to revise a dystopian nonfictional world’s distortions and erasures of history. Williams first conceived of Clifford’s Blues in the late 1960s when he and his wife Lori stopped at Dachau while traveling through Europe. Williams was surprised to see the faces of two black men among the concentration camp’s identification photos, and when he began his novel years later, he “wrote to Dachau, and they verified the existence of black prisoners” (Horner). After completing the novel in the late 1980s, Williams had difficulty finding a publisher. The rejection letters he received call to mind Rothberg’s notion of “competitive” Holocaust memory. Williams describes them thusly: “the reaction I sense is that I, as a black man, have no business touching this topic. Well, World War II was very important to me; this was a war that I was in” (Horner). The prevailing history of the Holocaust had not only erased the memory of black experience; competition over the event’s memory had dictated by whom, and of whom, this history could be written. Working instead in the spirit of multidirectional memory, Williams’s novel takes a position similar position to that of Clarence Lusane’s path-breaking study, Hitler’s Black Victims (2001), which postdates and references Clifford’s Blues. Lusane “does not argue that the Holocaust should be recast away
from the Jewish experience, but rather that an expanded appraisal of the intentions, behavior, and perspectives of the Nazis toward Blacks should be included if a holistic view is to be obtained” (10). While it focuses largely on a few fictional characters, *Clifford’s Blues* is punctilious in its factual accuracy. It references historical figures such as jazz trumpeter Valaida Snow and the black, Jewish artist Josef Nassy, both of whom were interned by the Nazis, as was future Senegalese President Leopold Sedar Senghor.79 The novel documents how black people “were used as slave laborers in some of the camps,” how they were labeled as “asocials” and potential “race defilers,” and how the practices of interning, sterilizing, experimenting upon, and even killing black prisoners were connected to the Nazi dream of creating an Aryan racial utopia by eliminating all “otherness” (Lusane 156). As a discrete blues “instance,” *Clifford’s Blues* thus (re)signifies “a black presence” that was “mystified . . . dismissed as inconsequential, and lost . . . in a reading of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust in which Blackness is excluded” (Lusane 4). Additionally, the text uses Clifford’s narrative, as well as the reemphasis of historical events such as Jesse Owens’s triumph at the 1936 Olympics, to make more affirmative statements that contravene the white supremacist utopianism of which the Nazis are the supreme example.

Second, Williams establishes a blues “crossroads” between points in the blues matrix that are seldom avowed in the “public transcript” of history. Scholars of the blues tradition point out that “the blues was conceived by freedmen and ex-slaves” first and foremost “as an emotional confirmation of, and reaction to, the way in which most Negroes were still forced to exist in the United States” (Baraka 33). As in *The Man Who Cried I Am*, *Clifford’s Blues* invokes Holocaust memory as a window on the United States. Gates argues that the blues is a form of signifyin(g)—which he designates as “the slave’s trope,” a “trope of tropes, as Bloom characterizes metalepsis” (and De Man allegory) (25). It is “a trope-reversing trope,” and Williams’s literary blues reverses
certain tropes of dystopian fiction, including those deployed in *The Man Who Cried I Am* (Gates 52). First, instead of creating a future in order to warn of what the present may become, Williams employs the neo-slave narratives’ tactic of (re)creating a past in order to warn the present about what it still is. Second, instead of showing how the U.S. could become similar to Nazi Germany if certain tendencies are taken to the extreme, the novel digs up the past to show how certain Anglo-American tendencies, taken to the extreme, *did become* Nazi Germany.

The novel’s penchant for such reversals is exemplified in how, whereas Max Reddick comes to understand the U.S. by using the Holocaust as a hermeneutical schema, Clifford Pepperidge uses his personal memory of American history as an interpretive framework for making sense of the Holocaust he witnesses. One of the refrains in Williams’s blues aesthetic is the familial resemblance between these two histories, and the novel, which includes a bibliography of scholarly sources, grounds these resemblances in undeniable historical realities. Clifford himself is one of the narrative’s means of drawing attention to them, as he does at the very outset when he is stripped of his identity and reduced to a number, a badge, and a marked, stereotyped category. Clifford observes “I don’t exist,” save as “Major Lange’s Neger, like in the slavery days (and after, I suppose)” (J. Williams, *Blues* 14, 38). Clifford maps correspondences between American and German contexts, and between his own situation and those of Jewish prisoners, suggesting that in Germany, “the Jews are the niggers of Dachau and in all the other camps where they are found” (211). Cultural and historical differences remain distinct in the text, but they are less important than the ways in which, even in light of these differences, what Clifford experiences in Germany is “no different than back home” (117). Comparisons with American slavery, both *de jure* and *de facto*, abound. Indeed, as he surveys the Dachau camp, Clifford quips, “the Nazis have got a pretty good slave system here. By the time they finish, with
the forced labor . . . Germany will be as big as America became with slavery, eh?” (106). However, these comparisons do not begin and end with slavery and the American past. For example, Clifford repeatedly draws equivalencies between American Jim Crow laws he knows all too well, and Nazi legislation, including 1935’s “stuff about blood and honor and Nuremberg laws” (125). In this way, the novel articulates the suppressed truth that Holocaust researcher Ben S. Austin confirms: “Hitler used the Jim Crow segregation statutes as his model for defining Jews in the Third Reich” (qtd. in Lusane 105). As a form of blues signifyin(g), even when the novel’s subversive discourse takes the form of “smarty pants” remarks like Clifford’s comment that “the latrine signs” that read “Nur für Polen . . . might as well be For Whites Only like back home,” such comparisons are deadly serious (J. Williams, Blues 205, 240).

Jayson Jones’s letter, which concludes the novel, punctuates the seriousness as well as the accuracy of the information in Clifford’s diary by, for instance, verifying Valaida Snow’s imprisonment and reminding readers that “one of the German defenses at Nuremberg was that a lot of their crazy experiments were conducted here [in the U.S.] first” (309, italics in original). Indeed, Clifford’s diary refers to both social experiments and “nasty” scientific experiments performed “on Jews, Gypsies, Pinks, and Blacks” at Dachau and elsewhere (242, 234). Two of the novel’s black characters are the victims of “scientific” experiments. Clifford’s surrogate son Pierre is bombarded with X-rays, and his friend Dr. Nyassa is forcibly sterilized after undergoing a number of mysterious experimental “tests.” Jones’s letter draws a further parallel when it compares experiments such as these to the notorious Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments that began in the 1930s.80

Jones’s reference to the Nuremberg trials is indicative of how, beyond making mere comparisons between Germany and the U.S., Clifford’s Blues adumbrates a genealogical
relationship. The novel maneuvers references to the use of “asocials, like the blacks” as “meat for the Institute for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology,” in combination with factors such as the Reich’s decree that its S.S. Aryan supermen must each father four children, to summon the history of the eugenics movement (106). After decades of suppression and silence, Stefan Kühl is one of an increasing number of scholars who have recently attempted to draw more attention to the fact that the strongest link binding Nazi Germany to the U.S. was eugenics, the “new science,” or pseudoscience, of “race improvement” (D. Smith 2). Although eugenics was an international movement, the U.S. occupied its vanguard, and its purist notions of racialized human “improvement” “took white supremacy as a given” (English 145). American eugenicist Herbert Henry Goddard was in fact the first to coin the phrase “final solution.” As Kühl points out, not only did “the German racial hygiene movement [follow] the development of the American eugenics movement closely,” but the “eugenicists in the United States were the strongest foreign supporters of Nazi race policies” (15, 37). Clifford’s Blues’ depiction of the sterilization of “undesirables” like Nyassa, a so-called “race defiler” whose wife is white, underscores the influence of American eugenics on Nazi policies and practices. Beginning in the 1920s, laws were adopted in over thirty American states that led to the compulsory sterilization of approximately 60,000 supposedly “dysgenic” Americans. Sterilization laws remained on the books in the U.S. until Virginia finally repealed its law in 1972. Daylanne English explains that these “state sterilization statutes,” were the “model for the Nazi Sterilization Law of 1934” (English 10). Links such as these are reinforced throughout Clifford’s Blues either through allusions or overt references. In so doing, the novel’s rigorous, historically grounded dystopian critique attempts to use these suppressed truths to “disturb the dream” of America “in the abstract,” with its “American army cowboys, the Statue of Liberty,” and “the Four Freedoms,”
and concretize what “America is really like” (J. Williams, *Blues* 264). The novel’s most damning claim is that the Holocaust is not “unthinkable”; rather, it could not have been thought without the American history the novel works to unconceal. This history made it possible for American eugenics enthusiast Margaret Sanger to propose before Congress in 1932 a utopian “Plan for Peace” that included an injunction to her nation to inventory, sterilize, and quarantine those “whose condition is known to be detrimental to the stamina of the race,” and to “apportion farm lands and homesteads for these segregated persons where they would be taught to work under competent instructors for the period of their entire lives.”

Most importantly, as with any insurgent historiography, William’s novel’s estranging retelling of the past encourages the reexamination of the historical moment(s) in which it is written, published, and read.

The final revision that *Clifford’s Blues* undertakes is quite different, and has both dystopian and utopian implications. While the novel reflects Williams’s deep concern for recuperating black history and articulating black cultural memory, *Clifford’s Blues* is distinctive for the way it accentuates a multidirectional approach to historical memory that is less prominent in earlier works. As a character who is not only black, but also gay (and a foreigner), Clifford’s multiplicative subject position is indexical of how the novel opens up its critique of bigotry, exclusion, oppression, exploitation, and domination to consider them more inclusively and holistically without ever losing sight of black experience.

The diverse population in the Dachau camp adds further dimensions of “otherness” to the novel’s critique, revealing commonalities among the experiences of “unpopular categories.” For instance, the novel breaks a “widespread silence” that Richard Plant identifies concerning the Nazis’ “systematic destruction” of gay people (18). Williams’s portrayal of Clifford is generally sensitive and not overly stereotyped; it is certainly both rounded and sympathetic. Even
the novel’s portrayal of Dieter is complex enough to capture the fact that he, too, is in several ways a “prisoner” of the Reich (J. Williams, *Blues* 90). Moreover, it does so without exonerating him. Clifford feels connected to the sufferings of many of Dachau’s gay prisoners, for whom particular cruelties are often reserved. Through the experiences of Clifford and the other victims, the novel accounts for, respects, and grants voice to the discrete experiences of people affected by different vectors of bigotry. However, the text also emphasizes the single uncrossable “line” that separates “the Nazis—that means everyone who isn’t in a camp,” from *everyone* who *is*, a situation it extrapolates to include material and cultural apartheid everywhere in the world (65).

On the one hand, when Clifford remarks that “wherever you are, if you’re colored it’s all the same” he absolutely refers to the Fact of Blackness, as Fanon tersely put it (65). He laments that should he escape Dachau, his color would make it impossible for him to hide. Yet on the other hand, the “strange echo” he hears between “*Die Juden! Die Juden!*” and “The Negro! The Negro!” exemplifies how the meaning of “colored” acquires additional dimensions in the novel (234, 65). Indeed, the numbered tattoos and colored badges worn by each of the prisoners reinforce how they are all differentially, but also collectively, marked as “others.”

The dialectic in *Clifford’s Blues* between the differences exacerbated by the Nazis’ methodical categorization, and a categorical indentitary and spatial division stressing commonalities, coexists with a second dialectic. Williams’s Dachau figures in microcosm, and *in extremis*, a dystopian world defined by exclusions, hierarchized oppressions, and even regimes of systematic destruction, that bear certain structural if not always cultural similarities. Simultaneously, however, its more utopian function is to argue for resistance against these related inequalities and segregations in all their forms. This, Rothberg argues, is one of the political strengths of multidirectional memory, which “acknowledges how remembrance both
cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (11). He contends that “assertions of uniqueness” such as Holocaust memory itself “prompt further assertions of uniqueness,” yet “such moments coexist with acts of solidarity in which historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities” (11). Indeed, the cross-cultural connections created in *Clifford’s Blues* map out a position that at once acknowledges “multiplicity” and rejects competitive micropolitics. In its place, the novel offers a strategic essentialism that would combat apartheid writ large. Rothberg contends that the “unexpected acts of empathy and solidarity” that can arise from such a multidirectional perspective may be essential to “framing justice in a globalizing world” (19). In the years between its completion in 1988 as the Cold War came to a close and its publication in 1999, *Clifford’s Blues*’ political perspective, which alludes to the possibility of a pluralist coalition of excluded “others,” became even more relevant.

The most pronounced means by which *Clifford’s Blues* obstinately harbors and communicates utopian desires is the blues itself. This is true both in the sense that Clifford’s autobiography is intertwined with Baker’s blues “matrix” as well as in novel’s explicit use of music. Trudier Harris notes that in addition to being a specific musical form and a cultural content, the blues is an “ethos” and even an existential “condition” characterized by isolation, loss, and powerlessness. This condition, “even in the absence of song,” is “definable as the blues” for those who “cannot control the circumstances of their existence or have an appreciable impact upon the forces that [prevent] them from becoming self-determining” (T. Harris). Baraka similarly argues that the “Blues (impulse)” carries with it a “total environment (including, at all levels, the spiritual)” (189). Clifford’s testimony, as well as the music he describes, carries with it the specificities of his experiences in Dachau while speaking to the larger “shared rapport with
the presence of death which derives from slavery” that Gilroy describes in his discussion of black music (Atlantic 203). However, Clifford’s autobiography affirms the fact that there is a dialectic of death and life, of dystopia and utopia, at work in the blues.

In the early pages of his diary, Clifford hints at this duality when he defines the blues by harkening back to the words of his former bandleader, who likened the “blues” to “what white folks called a ‘lament,’ because what you were lamenting or feeling blue about was what you knew but couldn’t do anything about. So you sang or played, and that helped to make things a little better” (J. Williams, Blues 20). On one level, Clifford’s remarks suggest the blues’ “cathartic” value: “considering the history of black people, it is a wonder we are not all crazy or dead, [and] I would maintain that the blues is one of the primary reasons for life and sanity” (T. Harris). Both Clifford’s journaling and the music he has the opportunity to hear and play sustain him during his twelve year imprisonment, allowing him to declare as he leaves Dachau that “living is everything. Death is shit” (J. Williams, Blues 306). Beyond catharsis and the affirmation of life, Baker writes that “even though” blues performances “speak of paralyzing absence and ineradicable desire, their . . . rhythms [also] speak of change, movement . . . unending possibility” (8). In Williams’s novel, Clifford describes both blues and jazz (of which, as Baraka asserts, “blues is the parent” [21]) as “always changing” (J. Williams, Blues 64). In certain circumstances, he further connects them with a feeling that is “almost like being free” (86). Unlike Wagner’s Siegfried, which “ended in knee-deep blood,” and other European music connected with the Third Reich’s mythos, Clifford reflects, “the music I was brought up with and played . . . signified, it was sassy, it was joyful, and it was blue. There was no hate in it. There should have been a lot” (88, 138). In its most powerful moments, Clifford’s “Dachau Blues” contains the intimations of utopian “perfection” that Baraka, Gilroy, and others identify in black
music (Baraka 189). Through its incorporation and representation of blues forms, Williams’s novel of the Holocaust exemplifies Bloch’s contention that “if death, conceived as the axe of nothingness, is the harshest non-utopia, then music measures itself against this as the most utopian of all arts” (Principle 1097). Additionally, whereas dystopian critiques like those found in several of Williams’s works follow a generic tendency to operate didactically, *Clifford’s Blues*’ use of music approaches utopianism as “improvisations on the education of desire” (Levitas “Welt” 227). Indeed, when Clifford explains “singing” as “a way of saying something with tone and word that expressed more than just plain talking,” he references how Williams’s novel communicates its utopian impulse through the extratextual *surplus* that Gilroy argues is constitutive of black utopian expression, especially music (J. Williams, *Blues* 17).

Through Clifford, Williams’s novel often reiterates the material and cultural roots of the blues in the experience of black Americans. However, Clifford’s blues interact with and change the blues matrix to reflect the discrete historical conditions that shape his autobiography, and this has utopian implications as well. The “invitation to energizing intersubjectivity” in each individual blues “instance” opens itself to “others” (here writ large) in a way that reflects the pluralism toward which the novel gestures (Baker 5). This is true intradiegetically, as well as extradiegetically with respect to the novel’s utopian function. Clifford’s diary records a walk with Dieter through the concentration camp on Christmas Eve, 1939, and recounts that “Gypsy singing drifted up the street in a sad, soft language I didn’t understand. But I understood the tone, you can’t hear blues and not know that there is sadness” (J. Williams, *Blues* 205). Clifford’s understanding crystalizes how, in the novel, the blues is a shared condition that is able to communicate supra-discursively its shared-ness across cultural boundaries. Clifford even believes that the music has brought a tear to Dieter’s eye.
Of the novel’s many examples of music’s power, the most remarkable involve Clifford’s “swing” band. “Neger Musik” such as jazz is verboten in Nazi Germany (78). However, the Nazis love it, and Clifford is compelled to lead a swing band that supplies music for an S.S. club. Williams beautifully renders the way in which jazz requires individual musicians to improvise while simultaneously listening to and intimately responding to each other, and how through the music, a band comprised of prisoners from drastically different backgrounds and walks of life “suddenly discovered each other” (89). A poignant episode involves Oberleutnant Eric Ulrich, a horn player who sits in with the band. Although it “doesn’t seem right he was a Nazi,” Ulrich’s “feeling for the music” bespeaks the possibility that, as Clifford puts it, “maybe he felt what we were thinking” (105). This unspoken intersubjective understanding proves real when Ulrich loses his life in a foiled attempt to transport Clifford to freedom. These episodes and events reflect how Clifford’s Blues dramatizes music’s capability to cut across cultural divisions and speak to a shared human condition. It also narrates how this condition may be a basis of intersubjectivity and solidarity. Foremost, such solidarity might bring together in a meaningful way those subject to different, yet related forms of exclusion and oppression. However, as the case of Ulrich dramatizes, this intersubjectivity might possibly even reach across the lines that separate the normative from the marginalized, the oppressor from the oppressed. In doing so, it suggests the potential for new coalitions, sites of resistance, and even the nucleus of a possible alternative community. Considered itself as the performance of a “blues to end all blues,” Williams’s novel of Holocaust and survival contains a utopian “surplus” even amidst its pessimistic, dystopian depiction of the human condition.

Like Jacob’s Ladder, Clifford’s Blues is a novel that conveys a pessimism reflective of the racial realities that dominated its historical moment, and the feelings of disempowerment
experienced by many who sought to alter them. From within that moment, the novel turns an
estranging hermeneutical “window” on the U.S., and indeed the world, to retrace historical
structures of racial domination. It also begs questions about the extent to which the present still
resembles a history from which it has not yet parted ways, despite assurances to the contrary.
The pessimism of both novels is made sharper by the living memory of the dead promises of the
1960s, especially as they are explicitly rehearsed in Jacob’s ladder. Gone is the revolutionary
zeal of Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light. Jacob’s Ladder even depicts a successful
counterrevolution. In Clifford’s Blues, mere survival is depicted as the best one may be able to
achieve. Nevertheless, beyond the political value of dystopian critique, the naked hope that
resides in Fasseke’s dream and Clifford’s music has not been extinguished. Indeed, the move
from the barely mitigated pessimism of Jacob’s Ladder toward Clifford’s Blues’ representation
of stubborn hope amid impossible circumstances is a muted recapitulation of the dialectical turn
from dystopia toward utopia that occurs between The Man Who Cried I Am and Sons of
Darkness, Sons of Light. During the 1960s, the Second Reconstruction in the U.S., and continued
decolonization abroad achieved profound and lasting transformations. While the radical
utopianism of both movements fell far short of the world for which it strove, Williams’s work is
testimony to the fact that the utopian desires that lay beneath these transformations did not
entirely fade. Even in the most pessimistic of times, Williams’s fiction remains militant, rather
than resigned, and continually finds new ways to preserve utopian desires.

Notes

1. See Hillegas (3-4).
2. See Calihman (139-140).
3. See respectively the 2004 Tusk Ivories reissue of *The Man Who Cried I Am* (front matter) and the 1999 Coffee House Press paperback edition of *Clifford’s Blues* (back matter). Both are the editions referenced here, and are cited below.

4. These letters have been recently published by Williams and his wife, Lori, as *Dear Chester, Dear John*, cited below.

5. For this and other biographical information about Williams, see Muller’s *John A. Williams*, cited below.

6. See, for instance, Williams’s letter to Himes dated January 14, 1970 (p. 114) in *Dear Chester, Dear John*, in which Williams sends Himes the “best regards” of Baraka (whom Williams, out of habit, continues to call LeRoi [Jones] despite his 1963 name change [135]) and Reed. “Bill Kelley” appears in letters, as well (e.g. Williams to Himes, July 21, 1970).

7. James Smethurst reminds readers that a “commonplace about the Black Arts Movement is that it elevated the oral over the written, and public collective performance over more individual modes of cultural production and reception” (Smethurst 89).

8. See the “Preface” to Muller’s 1984 book, in which Muller periodizes “three main stages” of Williams’s career up to that point. Muller elaborates on this periodization throughout his book.

9. See Mark Bould’s “Come Alive by Saying No.” See also Kali Tal’s reading of Greenlee’s novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*.

10. The radicals did, of course, have detractors who charged them with such fatuousness. These ranged from literary critic Robert Bone to “Old Guard” black intellectual Baynard Rustin. See Gayle (xv); Marable, *Race* (93).

11. The citation here is from the 2006 Third Edition of *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, cited below. The first edition was also published by the University of Mississippi Press, and Marable leads off Chapter 4 of that edition with the same phrase.

12. See Calihman (154-155). A fictionalized Doctorow appears in *Captain Blackman*, and Calihman believes that the character named Williams in Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971), whom the novel also compares to Paul Robeson, is a nod to Doctorow’s friend, John A.


14. The earliest text of the “critical utopian” revival that Moylan analyzes in 1986’s *Demand the Impossible*, Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* was composed in 1969-71. See *Demand* (57).

15. See for example the chapter “The Fear of Utopia” in Elliott’s 1970 *The Shape of Utopia*. 

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16. *This Is My Country Too*. Williams did not choose this book’s title, which he hated (see *Flashbacks* [36]). He has wryly alluded to the experience of writing it as “travel[s ]with Mr. Charlie” (34).


18. See Baccolini and Moylan, “Introduction” for dystopian narratives’ tendency to begin in *medias res* (3).

19. It has never been a secret that Black Power and the artistic movement associated with it frequently, and often justly, have been accused of “misogynist and homophobic masculinism” (see Smethurst 84-89). The fiction of Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison explored in Chapter 4 of the present study takes up this very issue in compelling fashion. These charges certainly apply to *The Man Who Cried I Am*’s Max Reddick. The sexual politics of the novel itself are more nuanced and complex than Max’s, although ultimately, they would scarcely stand up to even a cursory second or third-wave feminist critique. Importantly, however, as Campbell is quick to notice, Max’s attitudes about gender are symptomatic of the fact that, at least until the final pages of the novel, he is not a very self-aware character—a characteristic that is indispensable to the epiphanies he experiences in the novel’s dramatic final section. The narrative is punctuated by moments of insight into, and empathy for, the way both wife Charlotte and mistress Michelle are made to suffer because of the (insecurity-driven) hyper-masculinism of Harry Ames, for instance. However, there is otherwise, at very best, a profound ambivalence toward these characters, who are overwhelmed by, and peripheral to, the stories of the male characters; who often view themselves as the sexual objects the men would have them be; or in the case of Margrit at the end of the novel, are used to provide an opportunity for a dying Max to perform a kind of sacrament of contrition—one which, significantly, he never completes.

20. Nelson’s proposition, which for him applies to the writers of the Old Left, among them Langston Hughes, is that “biography on the left is almost never primarily a personal story. Writers on the Left live their lives in a constant struggle with historical conditions and historical ambitions. They write at the intersection of personal experience and contemporary events. Indeed many of them find their lives taken up and transformed by contemporary struggles . . . . Of course every human life is lived in a historical context, its fears and dreams shaped by what it is possible to imagine in a given time . . . . But [writers] whose life and work is formed by meditation on the possibility of historical and political agency bring these issues to the foreground” (Nelson 4-5). Muller argues that Williams’s Max Reddick is at once a “relatively individualized character” and a “generalized historical type” (*John A. 80*). His assessment reiterates that of Ronald Walcott, who in a 1972 essay writes that “Reddick is not a hero in the conventional sense” of “an active and informing and developing consciousness, the outcome of which determines the course of the narrative; rather, he is a necessary and convenient presence through which certain things can be seen” (qtd. in Muller 161n10).

21. Walter Mosley’s introduction to the 2004 reissue of *The Man Who Cried I Am* compares the novel to Hellenic tragedy. The genealogical relationship between tragic Recognition and the
crime thriller is a commonplace of literary studies, as any edition of Harmon and Holman’s *A Handbook to Literature* will attest. Muller argues that Williams’s use of the devices of the detective novel is in part instrumental insomuch as they “appeal to popular audiences,” in order to “transmit values to a broad reading public.” However, “they also are integral to Williams’s creation of highly dramatized lives linked to a continuous historical landscape” (Muller, John A. 76). Muller does not elaborate on the significance of this latter statement, but seems to be suggesting that the tropes of detective fiction allow Williams to blend hyperbole and historical realism in order to advance the points his novel makes, and to do so by employing elements of a genre whose very familiarity has already habituated readers to such combinations of gritty realism and sensationalism. (Himes, doyen of the detective genre, described *The Man Who Cried I Am* as “a blockbuster, a hydrogen bomb” [Dear John 83]).

22. The phrase “The Future as Nightmare” is borrowed from the title of Mark Hillegas’s influential 1967 study of dystopian fiction.

23. See Chapter 1’s discussion of globalization. Williams’s 1967 rewriting of the 1960s resembles Fredric Jameson’s 1980s-era retrospective periodization of the 1960s, in which Jameson writes that the forces of liberation and the forces of oppression during the decade were not opposed to one another so much as they were part of the same dialectical process of globalizing capitalism, which both produced and subsumed liberation movements.

24. Moylan further expanded upon this notion a few years later, albeit with notable discrepancies, at length and in a definitive way. See chapter 6 of Moylan’s *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. It is worth mention that Moylan, following Peter Fitting, criticizes Booker’s study of the literary dystopia, and its companion bibliography, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (1994), the first significant works of their kind in decades, as insufficiently rigorous. For Moylan, this is particularly the case with regard to differentiating between texts that critique society with those that critique utopianism: that is, between dystopias and anti-utopias (Scraps 309n18). This case can certainly be made with regard to Booker’s treatment of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which utopian studies scholars—among whom Moylan has worked for decades—view as an *ur-text* of anti-utopian—not dystopian—literature, a stance that Booker does not take (nor does Gottlieb). On the other hand, while Booker takes up and works with the ideas of some of the more prolific utopian studies scholars (Moylan and Fitting among them), his work does not seem interested in a doctrinaire utopian studies approach, nor with the embrasure of any particularly rigid analytic. It is, as Moylan notes, a thematically oriented study, and does not attempt to accept, construct, or employ any overarching theoretical architecture. This may both limit and liberate what often seems like a largely exploratory approach, which nevertheless does offer a number of insights.

25. Moylan (Scraps 196).

26. See Marable (Race 68).
27. This concern for historical recovery is thematized when, for example, Minister Q., ventriloquizes Malcolm X. to inveigh, “those white devils took away our history. They hid the records and lied to us. We have a history, but no white man is going to reveal it. We have to dig it out ourselves” (251). However, African American historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses warns of the pitfalls of “romantic” and “extravagant” fantasies that characterize many such efforts to exhume the past (Afrotopia 17). Although Moses is perhaps too quick to dismiss these as uselessly “utopian,” such efforts can lapse into the backward-looking nostalgia of which Fanon has also warned. This can be found—albeit along very different cultural coordinates—in the romanticized museum-pieces found in Zamyatin’s We, Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, and Pauline Hopkins’s Of One Blood. The Man Who Cried I Am critiques this very phenomenon in its sardonic references to synthetic afro-wigs and through the stylized Africa-chic of the narcissistic Jaja Enzkwu. Instead, through the lens of the King Alfred Plan, Max’s biography functions as an insurgent historiography. Not only does it write a counter-history that debunks the “public transcript” of official American history, but also, the anti-romantic nature of its “hidden transcript” forecloses the possibility of any nostalgia in the very process of its writing. Against what Karl Mannheim calls the “conservative utopian mentality,” a cryptically “counter-utopian” drive solely toward “the past” that it would “rescue it from oblivion,” Williams’s insurgent historiography is oriented, albeit ambiguously, toward the future (Mannheim 235).

28. Williams himself has remarked upon this approach on multiple occasions. Muller quotes him stating that “In America . . . the novelist is only just beginning to correct history. Is it because the losers who have joined their ranks have made them aware of gross manipulation of it or is it because of the losers outside their ranks? In either case, we have viewed history poorly illustrated for too long. The illustrations have been altered, sections have been omitted, and mythographers have filled in the gaps” (John A. 103).

29. See Booker, Dystopian Impulse (173).

30. While Muller has noted The Man Who Cried I Am’s debt to the detective novel (see note 21 above), Phillis Klotman’s “An Examination of the Black Confidence Man in two Black Novels” in American Literature (2003) discusses the novel’s use of the conventions of spy fiction as well, largely with respect to the two government agents who track and kill Max and Harry. Espionage assumes even greater significance in Jacob’s Ladder. While the structures of the crime thriller are used in part to propel the narrative of The Man Who Cried I Am, particularly during its climax, what is more important is the way that the detective structure uses a narrative of the present in order to tell a second narrative of the past—a past “crime”—confer coherence upon it, and “solve” it, often in a climactic flash of recognition. Detective novels, at least those of the “whodunit” variety, invariably “dig up the past” and in this way are always exercises in in historiography that more often than not tell the story of some violation of the status quo or upset complacent views of the social world. Crime fiction is frequently used as a vehicle for social criticism, and this criticism often occurs in an atmosphere of powerful pessimism. Andrew Pepper describes detective fiction as a genre that has “been able to register the ‘existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment’ experienced by different individuals and communities, and, more significantly, relate these conditions to the oppressive character of an American
society founded on deep-rooted and at times all-pervasive relations of domination and subordination” (7). For Pepper, Himes’s Harlem cycle is among a body of “savagely dystopian” detective fiction that maps the underside of urban America, and which, by the late 1960s, tracks “social unrest on an unprecedented scale” (117, 115). Indeed, the detective novel and the literary dystopia are similar in both tone and political function.

31. Baker explicitly invokes Bloch. For Bloch, detective fiction is a cognitively “estranging” genre, one that uses “suspicion” and “the uncanny” to disrupt the notion that “everything is well with the whole history of the world” (Bloch, “Detective Novel” 222). Bloch argues in his influential essay on the detective novel that behind their drive to wrest events “from their pre-narrative, un-narrated state” is their “deep suspicion of . . . façades [which is] directed at all that ideal and upright superficiality that is too beautiful or comfortable to be true” (“Detective Novel” 213, 218). This process of narration performs the same function as the dystopia does in Gottlieb’s view: that of “unmasking” reality and history; “the illuminating power of this uncovering, discovering view of history,” writes Bloch, can have the effect of “nitric acid in the testing sense,” that of dissolving “false gold” (213, 219). Additionally for Bloch, the detective figure, in certain novels, is one who “intuits the totality of the case,” as evidenced in the kind of world-altering Moment of Recognition that Max experiences in Williams’s novel (215).

32. Both authors were particularly influenced by Theodore Dreiser. Interestingly, in The Man Who Cried I Am, of the many secret meetings of the global Alliance Blanc, the one held in the U.S. reportedly took place “up around Saranac Lake—Dreiser’s setting for An American Tragedy, that neck of the woods” (364).

33. See Gilroy, Atlantic (30).

34. See Gilroy, Atlantic (161). Wright introduces the idea of “double vision” in his novel The Outsider (1953). In The Man Who Cried I Am, Max, who in his diegetic roles as character and a writer functions to turn an “objective” eye on the world, demonstrates how “double consciousness” can contribute to the defamiliarizing function of black utopian aesthetics. Max’s double consciousness is explicitly dramatized in mental confrontations with a voice identified as “Saminone” (Sambo-in-one). Saminone replies to Max’s self-affirmational cries of “I am. I am a man” with taunts that reinforce how the normalized American worldview views him: “Know what youse is? . . . Youse a stone blackass nigger” (187, italics in original). Max progressively silences the voice, and his own vision cuts through the “second sight”—Du Bois’s obscurantist “veil”—that America imposes on him. The estranged America that appears from this outsider’s perspective is a different, dystopian world. Harry sums this up in observing, “in our society, which is white—we are intruders they say,” and for this reason, black people, especially writers, are “capable of describing what [society] believed nonexistent”—and what is described is “inherently horrible” (49). Harry’s comments reinforce how through Max, double consciousness is integral to The Man Who Cried I Am’s dystopian debunking of the the American myth.

35. See Van Deburg for this chronology; see also Ogbar.
36. Moylan’s phrase is drawn from his discussion of the postmodern, post-dystopian utopian revival inspired by the 1960s. It is a meditation on the twentieth-century fear of (and need for) utopia, and a properly utopian re-contextualization of “one of the most arrogant and terrible phrases of the United States military during the Vietnam war” (Demand 46).

37. As a result of the violence encountered by the Freedom Movement, Robert F. Williams was among the earliest advocates of armed self-defense. In his “Speech from Radio Free Dixie,” Williams excoriates Kennedy due to the fact that “while all of these heinous crimes are being committed against our people, while all of this oppression and tyranny is being directed at us, slick John Kennedy pledges to the world that the U.S. will defend democracy around the world. What is this democracy,” he asks “that the USA finds necessary to force on the people of South Viet-nam with armed might . . . while black Americans beg and pray for simple justice and human rights?” (R. Williams 94). Williams ends his speech with the injunction “in the spirit of Lexington and Concord, LET OUR BATTLE CRY BE HEARD AROUND THE WORLD, FREEDOM! FREEDOM! FREEDOM NOW OR DEATH!!” (96).

38. Williams excoriated Martin Luther King shortly after King’s death in his book The King God Didn’t Save (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), a controversial work for which Williams took a figurative beating in the mainstream press, most notably in Time magazine (see Williams’s letter to Himes dated October 17, 1970). Williams’s disapproval of King, or at least of the “King” of the early to mid 1960s, stemmed from, among other things, King’s assimilationist reformism, his advocacy of passive resistance, and his status as a media figure, which, for Williams, made him a tool of the establishment and, especially as the decade wore on, a non-threatening embodiment of the (too slow) Movement with which the establishment was all too comfortable. These views were not out of keeping with those of Malcolm X (see Ogbar 42-43). In his book, Williams laments the man King could have “become,” noting the more radical positions that King began to take in his last years (see Ogbar 149-150), but for Williams, this change was too little and too late.


40. See Ogbar (24) for a discussion of Cruse’s view.

41. On Williams’s use of sexual and domestic allegories, see especially Muller’s discussion of the conclusion of Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light (John A. 97-98). This study’s analysis of that novel returns to this issue.

42. See Muller; Bigsby.

43. For comparisons to the Gothic, see Fleming, and Muller, John A. Williams.
44. Shoshana Felman’s concept of “implication” is explained in Chapter 1.

45. In *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin wrote, “The Jew’s suffering is recognizes as part of the moral history of the world and the Jew is recognized as a contributor to the world’s history: this is not true for blacks. Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honoured, is certainly known: the black history has been blasted, maligned, despised. The Jew is a white man, and when white men rise up against oppression they are heroes; when black men rise they have reverted to their native savagery. The uprising in the Warsaw ghetto was not described as a riot, nor were the participants maligned as hoodlums: the boys and girls in Watts and Harlem are thoroughly aware of this” (qtd. in Gilroy, *Atlantic* 216).

46. Among other vulgar criticisms, Crouch calls Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* “a blackface holocaust novel . . . . written in order to enter American slavery in the big-time martyr ratings contest” (qtd. in Gilroy, *Atlantic* 217).

47. Bloch has famously made a similar argument. Indeed, his *magnum opus* grapples with the “repulsiveness of [the] kind of wish” that found its ultimate expression in the “Nazi dream” of imperial domination and eugenic purity, yet his project attempts to rehabilitate the utopian “drive [that] is working in the direction of the good end”; “the fact that deceivers make use of this drive,” Bloch dares to speculate “disproves it . . . almost as little as the ‘socialist’ Hitler disproved socialism” (*Principle* 30-31; 443).

48. “Politics of Paranoia” is Andrew Cooke’s term. Cooke argues that “paranoia” is a politics insomuch as it engenders what both Cooke and Gilroy separately refer to as a black “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Cooke sees it as an inherently critical “cognitive system” for interpreting the world (Cooke 613). Moreover, it is capable of producing the “redemptive critiques” and “dissident assessments” of the dominant worldview that Gilroy argues are politically crucial functions of a grounded black aesthetic (see Chapter 1). When combined with what Gilroy calls a “hermeneutics of memory,” it is instrumental in creating dissident histories as well, and *The Man Who Cried I Am* exemplifies this combination.

49. See Boyd, for instance.

50. Carmichael and Brown were leaders of SNCC when, in the mid-‘60s, the group transitioned from a nonviolent to a militant Black Power stance and expelled white members. In a gesture that many argue signaled Black Power’s mainstream ‘arrival,’ Carmichael famously embraced the slogan in public when he, along with King and McKissick, led a group of activists who completed James Meredith’s Mississippi March Against Fear in summer, 1966, after Meredith was shot by a sniper and his wounds rendered him unable to continue. King denounced Carmichael’s actions (see Ogbar 60-63). SNCC’s position paper on Black Power, which appeared in *The New York Times* in August, 1966, drew global connections and expressed a kinship with the decolonization movement to close with the claim that “the broad masses of black people react to American society in the same manner as colonial peoples react to the West
in Africa, and in Latin America, and had the same relationship—that of the colonized toward the colonizer” (SNCC 126). Elsewhere, McKissick expressed similar sentiments, insisting that “the young people . . . view the ghettos as a colony, controlled, dominated and exploited by the white society” (qtd. in Ogbar 63).

51. See also Chapter 1.

52. Allman (347).

53. See Chapter 1.

54. On Williams’s apocalypticism, see Muller, John A. (75). On apocalyptic Black Power fiction, see Bould, “Come Alive,” and Bigsby.

55. Conversely, another “contradiction” at the heart of the apocalyptic fiction of the 1960s is the fact that “the revolutionary, no less than the liberal, takes the existence and reality of alternative possibilities as an axiom”; however, although cataclysm heralds change, “apocalypse, as Goethe asserted of death, constitutes the abolition of choice,” thus serving as a dystopian warning to “convert the sinner” or a utopian assurance to “give heart to the faithful” (Bigsby 149).

56. See Chapter 1.

57. Marable renders the events in Selma this way: “King’s compromised and contradictory politics were revealed tragically in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. SNCC workers had been organizing in that section of black-belt Alabama for two years. One black man, Jimmy Lee Jackson, was clubbed to death by police officers as he tried to protect his mother. SCLC and SNCC organizers agreed to schedule a march from Selma to Montgomery beginning on 7 March, 1965, to protest against the Wallace regime’s brutality. On the morning of the march, SNCC leaders were shocked that King was inexplicably absent. Walking across Selma’s Pettus Bridge, the 2000 nonviolent demonstrators were attacked and brutally beaten by hundreds of state troopers and local police. On 10 March, King agreed to lead a second group of 3000 protestors across the bridge—but secretly made an agreement with Johnson’s Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach, that the marchers would not confront the Alabama state police again. With King at the head of the march, the demonstrators sang and prayed as they walked over the bridge. As the police barricade approached, King ordered everyone immediately to retreat. In subdued anger, the amazed SNCC leaders and others walked back into Selma . . . Later, after hard bargaining, the march to Montgomery was finally held; but the damage to King’s reputation was incalculable” (Race 78).

58. Bigsby (151).

59. See Tal’s article, “‘That Just Kills Me’: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction,” cited below. Tal includes in this category Samuel Greenlee’s, The Spook Who Sat By the Door and Chester Himes’s unfinished Plan B—novels that were contemporaneous with Sons of Darkness, Sons of
Light, although Himes’s novel was not published until after his death over a decade after he stopped working on it—along with Sutton Griggs’s fin de siècle novel Imperium in Imperio.

60. For a discussion of this, see Bould, “Come Alive.”

61. See Chapter 1. See also Chapter 4’s discussion of Toni Morrison’s Paradise. Jameson’s “Of Islands and Trenches” discusses this in detail.

62. See Jameson, Archaeologies (232).

63. See also Jameson, Unconscious (193).

64. See Marable’s comparable critique in Race (95).

65. See Tal (85-86). See also Williams’s introduction to Black Empire, in which Williams, who first met Schuyler in 1963, upbraids the older man, traces his transformation into a reactionary, and suggests that he had fascist leanings.

66. See Ogbar (115).

67. See Ogbar, Chapter 4.

68. See Bloch, Principle (18); see also Chapter 1.

69. See Barnes, Nightwood (126).

70. See Muller, John A. (98).

71. Notably, Hod’s participation in the Shomrim, “a group of young Jews who patrolled the streets” of Polish ghettos “protecting other Jews from the roving bands of Jew-haters,” places him in a group whose role is not unlike that of the Panthers (J. Williams, Sons 48).

72. See Chapter 7 of Muller’s John A. Williams, in which Muller discusses these texts, the 1970s, and this new phase of Williams’s career.

73. Ibid. (155).

74. Ibid.

75. See Horner.

76. See Moylan’s Scraps of the Untainted Sky.
77. Eugene Browning expresses a desire to “teach down the system” should he return to the academy to teach political science (J. Williams, Sons 258).

78. Clifford’s Blues does not use its subject matter for the kind of “ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion” for which Baldwin famously excoriated Wright, by way of Harriet Beecher Stowe, in his essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” Lauren Berlant’s critiques of sentimentalism as both cruelly sensationalistic and politically stultifying are widely known. In her essay, “Poor Eliza,” Berlant invokes Baldwin and theatrical productions of Stowe to ask “why and how do specific kinds of collective but individually experienced pain get turned into modern forms of entertainment? How do we come to terms with the use of aesthetic conventions of excess (in melodrama, satire, comedy, romance) in processes of national-cultural normativity and critique, insofar as these genres are relied upon to express the true suffering and true desires of ordinary persons? How are different types of person and kinds of population hailed by the universalist (but really national) icon of the person who loves, suffers, and desires to survive the obstacles that bind her or him to history? What are the political consequences of the commoditized relation between subjects who are defined not as actors in history but as persons who shop and feel?” (637). While in its particular context, The Man Who Cried I Am uses extremity as an estranging device, Clifford’s Blues, which is at once already set in an estranging historical time-space and in a situation that is already understood as extreme, seems aware that ostentatiousness is needless, and would undermine the historical critique it attempts to make.

79. See Lusane.

80. Jayson Jones’s letter refers to James Howard Jones’ book on the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in Alabama. As the latter Jones informs readers, in 1972 it came to light that the U.S. Public Health Service had been “studying” for the past 40 years the effects of syphilis in 399 infected black men in an “experiment” that not only “had nothing to do with treatment,” but was in fact predicated upon an “initial decision to withhold all treatment” (Jones 2, 9).

81. See English (10).

82. See D. Smith (7).

83. See Sanger


85. See Chapter 1.
The later novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o are distinctive for maintaining an unremitting utopianism long after the revolutionary optimism of anticolonial nationalism gave way to postcolonial disenchantment in many African nations. In these works, Ngũgĩ preserves but reconfigures the pan-African utopian imagination of earlier decades in order to meet the demands of a new historical situation. Ngũgĩ concludes the “Author’s Note” to *Homecoming*, his 1972 collection of essays, by stating that he, his readers, and “our brothers scattered over the world” are “all involved in a common problem: how best to build a true communal home for all Africans,” so that, after the nightmare of colonialism, “the African masses can truthfully say: we have come home” (xix). As we saw in *The Man Who Cried I Am’s* thematization of the exclusionary American Dream, in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light’s* domestic allegories, and in *Jacob’s Ladder’s* meditation on exile and nation-building, dreams of “home” often appear as both guiding images and sociopolitical objectives in the pan-African utopian problematic. A communal “home-land” is also a, if not the, central organizing principle of the three novels written during what James Ogude designates as the “postcolonial phase” of Ngũgĩ’s career, a phase that began near the end of the 1960s (*Novels 8*). The implications of Ngũgĩ’s phrase “we have come home” are further unpacked by pioneering postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft. He argues that whereas in Western fiction’s language of liberalism, the collective “We” is typically associated with dystopia through representations of totalitarianism and mass conformism, in much postcolonial literature, this “collectivity” is the “beginning” of “Heimat, which in Ernst Bloch’s utopian reclamation of the concept, designates humanity’s ‘feeling at home in existence’” (“Ambiguous” 12). This home-likeness here “signifies an instance of arrival rather than origin” (Ashcroft, “Ambiguous” 12).¹ The “postcolonial” Marxist Ngũgĩ imagines this
collective home as a utopian “Africa” with a “completely socialized economy, collectively owned and controlled by the people,” a people liberated from exploitation and at home in a distinct “culture” (Homecoming 13).² This not-yet-realized utopian community is at the core of the anticipatory consciousness animating Ngũgĩ’s work during this period: in Bloch’s terms, it is the “red thread of dream utopia” running through and binding together nearly two decades’ worth of his writing (Principle 98).

Although Ngũgĩ’s political vision is ultimately a global one, he is committed first and foremost to his home country of Kenya. Ngũgĩ emphasizes that the independence declared on December 12, 1963 did not mean “total liberation” for the vast majority of “the people,” who still faced drastic material inequities after the transition of power. In terms of the Blochian “Not-Yet,” Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels are a literature of “Not Yet Uhuru,” the phrase that gives Kenyan political leader Oginga Odinga’s 1967 autobiography its title, and which surfaces in both Petals of Blood (1977) and Devil on the Cross (1982). Apollo Amoko observes that “disillusioned by the failures of independence, Ngũgĩ projects his vision of independence into the future” as a “dream yet to be realized” (Postcolonialism 83). Working in this way against the post-independence atrophy of utopia occasioned by the bleak realities of neocolonialism and a literary milieu awash in a corresponding pessimism, Ngũgĩ is among those authors who were able to “reaffirm their social commitments even in the darkest moments” (Lazarus, Resistance 21). Moving beyond reaffirmation, Ngũgĩ reenergized his writing with a sense of expectancy and defiant optimism. Indeed, Simon Gikandi suggests that Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial narratives may be read as “part of a larger project trying to will an independent Kenyan nation into being” (Ngũgĩ 1). In them, the arrival at Uhuru, a “coming home,” once again becomes a possible future to be fought for. Ngũgĩ’s writing actively strives for utopia in a way that imbricates the realities of
postcolonial Kenya with broader continental and global histories during a momentous politico-economic transition.

Although Gikandi and other critics remark upon the utopian character of Ngũgĩ’s writing, there exists no focused analysis of Ngũgĩ’s novels as utopian literature. The pages that follow present “utopian readings” of *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross*, and Wangũi wa Goro’s English translation of *Matigari* (1987), texts which not only manifest a utopian spirit, but also employ or reinvent for a late-twentieth-century African context a number of familiar utopian and dystopian conventions. One of the most conspicuous of these is the millennialist dialectic of utopia and apocalypse that frames these novels’ anticipation of a “new world,” a world that the texts variously figure as a secularized “New Jerusalem” of African socialism.

**Ngũgĩ’s “Crisis of Representation” and the Sources of His “Prophetic” Aesthetic**

Despite these three novels’ common utopian aspirations, nearly identical themes, deep historicity, and shared set of recurring tropes, *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari* are more often approached in terms of their differences. This is particularly the case regarding Ngũgĩ’s rejection of English in favor of Gĩkũyũ as his artistic medium. Ngũgĩ’s much-discussed linguistic shift during the period between the publication of *Petals of Blood* and the writing of *Devil on the Cross* is but one of many transformations the author’s work underwent between his third novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Matigari*. These changes also include a move away from English-style novelistic realism toward an increased use of elements of the grotesque and the fantastic. John Chileshe reiterates the scholarly consensus when he describes this transformation as a “struggle to come to terms, within the novel form, with his authorial ideology” (134). Echoing Lewis Nkosi and quoting Fredric Jameson, Gikandi argues that this effort to “find appropriate narrative agents” for Ngũgĩ’s “passion for change” manifests itself in his fiction as “an aesthetic dilemma, a crisis of representation” (*Ngũgĩ* 10-11).
This study takes up Gikandi’s claim to argue that the question of utopia lies at the epicenter of this crisis. In Ngũgĩ’s work, this question involves four of utopia’s most familiar “faces.” First, how does one respond to the anti-utopia of independence without liberation? Second, how can an author use political fiction to critically, cognitively map the unprecedented dystopian realities of the postcolony? Third, how might one mobilize, appropriate, or invent literary strategies in aid of what Pordzik sees as postcolonial literature’s “imaginative transformation” of the dystopian text, “which, instead of providing stereotypes of material dread and coercion,” attempts to “fulfill the more enabling contract of a re-visionary post-dystopian future?” (Quest 58). Finally, how might one create eutopian “visions of the future” that for Ngũgĩ as Gikandi reads him, as well as for so many utopian thinkers, are the very motor of history?

As Ngũgĩ negotiates this “crisis” across three novels, the most pronounced alterations that appear in his prose are a move away from realist fiction toward fantastic or “magical” realism and the incorporation of traditional African elements. In Chapter 4, we shall see parallels of these transformations in African American texts written during the same period, which suggests that these changes are not unrelated to broader transnational tendencies in the black utopian literary aesthetic. At the same time, however, Ngũgĩ’s work remains distinctly his own, and deeply invested in local Kenyan history and politics. F. Odun Balogun has gone as far as to suggest that Ngũgĩ’s struggle with representation resulted, in Matigari, with the development of a “qualitatively different novelistic genre” (“Matigari” 187). Indeed, this quasi-fantastical work, which was originally written in Gĩkũyũ, scarcely resembles the European-style novels Ngũgĩ produced during the early years of his career, as it draws heavily on oral storytelling, and features a “collective” protagonist. This literary transformation in part reflects how
“revolutionary content demands revolutionary form, [the] one interacting with the other to change the consciousness” (Nazareth 127).

In Ngũgĩ’s case, it is pertinent to stress that formal changes are subsumed by and subordinated to political praxis, the work for actual social change. Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels are distinct from others that reflect a more general crisis in postcolonial representation in that they do not confine themselves to searching for “new methods for telling . . . a dreary, but familiar story” of postcolonial fragmentation, identity crises, corruption, or punishing “underdevelopment” (Nkosi 200). Nor do they merely “express” a passion for a different state of affairs. His works earnestly labor to create sociopolitical change. Glenn Hooper articulates such a view when he writes that “Ngũgĩ’s ability (or determination) to provide answers to problems about postcolonialism, rather than simply defeatist analyses, marks him out as a special case” in the post-independence climate in which he and the other “second generation” African authors worked (Hooper 59).6 At the heart of Ngũgĩ’s utopianism is the fact that his works are part of his decades-long political activism. During the postcolonial phase of his career, Ngũgĩ, like Brecht whom he greatly admired,7 viewed his writing “as an instrument of knowledge and social change” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 33). His unflappable commitment to African socialism is in keeping with what C.L.R. James—another deeply utopian thinker, whom Ngũgĩ met in Uganda in 19698—claims about another of Ngũgĩ’s influences: “we especially, of the underdeveloped countries, should not misunderstand [Lenin’s] views. We may claim that they are utopian, visionary, unrealistic, unworkable, a fantasy. We should bear in mind that these were exactly the charges that the majority of his colleagues made against him in March 1917” (“Lenin” 346). Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to say that Ngũgĩ’s work evinces a hope that it can promote the kind of consciousness and energy that, according to James, Lenin instigated “almost
alone,” and which subsequently “hurled the masses . . . at the . . . regime and initiated a new epoch in world history” (“Lenin” 346). Ngũgĩ’s aesthetic experimentation must be understood as inseparable from an intensely utopian desire for his work to help bring a new world into being.

The “people,” the Kenyan “masses,” figure prominently as both fictional and historical subjects in Ngũgĩ’s later work. Intrinsic to his “crisis of representation” is the political and pedagogical problem of how to reach the workers and peasants he came to view himself as not just “writing about,” but increasingly “for” (Ngũgĩ, Decolonizing 72). The transformative collisions of ideology and form in Ngũgĩ’s novels are part of his utopian search for an appropriate ideology of form—or what Jameson has more recently called the “content of the form,” the particularized aspects of a given world-historical situation irreducibly bound up in form itself—one that is capable of reaching the people in order to spur the transformation of the situation. In this regard, the trajectory of Ngũgĩ’s career during the 1970s and ‘80s both represents and manifests in representation a tireless and, given the imprisonment, exile, and other difficulties he has faced, fearless attempt to grapple in a nonfictional way with the very possibility of postcolonial utopia itself.

Ngũgĩ’s “crisis of representation” is the result of a radical “ideological shift” that began while Ngũgĩ was completing A Grain of Wheat in the late ‘60s, and appeared in full bloom nearly a decade later in Petals of Blood (Ogude, Novels 10). This shift is in part the result of a general “disillusionment with Uhuru,” but it also arose from his exposure to thinkers like James (P. Williams 7). At Leeds University, Ngũgĩ was influenced by “radical” thinkers like Marxist scholar Arnold Kettle as well as fellow African students, for whom Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth became “a sort of Bible” (Ngũgĩ, qtd. in P. Williams 8). These influences are readily
apparent in his work beginning with *Petals of Blood*. Transnational connections such as those Ngũgĩ made at Leeds surface in his novels through the ways in which localized struggles are also implicated with larger, pan-African struggles within a global context. Henry Indangasi notes that one of the sites “in the African diaspora” where Ngũgĩ came “face to face with the realities” of the struggle was at Illinois’ Northwestern University, where in the early 1970s he began writing *Petals of Blood* amid the decline of the American Black Freedom Movement (196).

Ngũgĩ’s encounters with the work of thinkers like Fanon, James, Lenin, and Marx, along with the geopolitical perspective facilitated by his travels, shaped his aesthetic ideology as well as the “greater awareness of the systemic nature of the problems facing Kenya which marks the shift in *Petals of Blood*” (P. Williams 96, emphasis added). Beginning with that novel, Ngũgĩ’s work tends toward totalizing analysis, totalizing representations, and a utopian vision commensurate with Fanon’s call for “total, complete, and absolute” change—“a whole social structure . . . changed from the bottom up” (*Wretched* 35). The other two locations in which *Petals of Blood* was written, Limuru and Yalta, reflect an additional layer of connections traceable in the novel’s geopolitical imaginary. Ngũgĩ locates his fictional worlds amid the Cold War struggle between mutually antagonistic globalist ideologies, “positing the centrality” of the so-called “Third World” to a “global political struggle” (Booker, “African Literature” 61).

Furthermore, Ngũgĩ’s texts represent the postcolonial world as increasingly embedded in a network of multinational “imperialist finance capital” that emerges as “the real enemy in Africa” (Kamenju 131). Thus, a key issue for Ngũgĩ is a then-emergent globalization, the enormous context in which his fictionalized microcosmoses plot various coordinates of domination, exploitation, exclusion, resistance, and revolutionary potential. As with Fanon’s psychological writings, Ngũgĩ’s systemic analysis reaches “down” to the level of individual lives; and as with
Fanon’s pan-African Marxism,\(^4\) it invariably looks “upward” through the concentric frames of community, nation, continent, diaspora, and globe. Ngũgĩ’s later novels thus navigate the interstices and tensions between the local and the global, the very contested “space” where many argue the anti-imperial battles of the globalization era will be fought.\(^5\)

The influence of thinkers like Fanon is evident in other aspects of Ngũgĩ’s fiction during this period. One is a move away from Ngũgĩ’s tendency in his earlier novels to privilege individual characters and stage anticolonial struggles in liberal humanist terms of conflicted subjectivities and personal acts of heroism or treachery. For Fanon, with decolonization and the formation of revolutionary consciousness, “individualism is the first to disappear” (\textit{Wretched} 47). Gikandi chronicles how Ngũgĩ accordingly attempts to “reformulate the whole idea of literature itself by shifting its locus from the experiences of unique bourgeois individuals . . . to the social collective,” a shift that spans the three novels discussed here (\textit{Ngũgĩ} 138). Fanon’s influence also manifests itself in the ways Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels represent “post-independence” Africa as the dystopian world Fanon delineates in his essay, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” a “diagnosis of national betrayal” that “provided Ngũgĩ with a critical grammar for explaining the phenomenon of arrested decolonization” (Gikandi, \textit{Ngũgĩ} 31). In Ngũgĩ’s work too, the “national bourgeoisie” has stepped “into the shoes of the former European settlement” and assumed the “historic mission . . . of intermediary” (Fanon, \textit{Wretched} 152). Indeed, it appears that the national bourgeoisie’s allegedly liberatory mission “has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism” (\textit{Wretched} 152). Fanon’s essay, which appeared two years before Kenya’s independence, reads like a prophetic warning—the kind of projective critique of “deficiencies in
the future” that defines the dystopia for Andrew Ross. Ngũgĩ first encountered Fanon’s text after its prophecy had come true in Kenya, and the book laid the groundwork for his postcolonial novels’ dystopian portrayal of his home country.

An additional and more utopian parallel with Fanon is evident in Ngũgĩ’s revolutionary articulation of what Gikandi calls the “trope of prophecy,” which pervades his work from his first novel, The River Between (1965) onward (Ngũgĩ 49). This trope was initially mobilized for its “capacity to sustain the utopian longing that defines cultural nationalism, the belief that a moment of restoration exists after colonialism” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 51). However, in keeping with Fanon, for whom there is no going back to “that past out of which [the people] have already emerged,” the postcolonial Ngũgĩ shifts the trope of prophecy away from the “restoration” of an imaginary past toward an apocalyptic focus on a radically transfigured (and unprecedented) future (Wretched 227). Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels write what Phillip Wegner, invoking Walter Benjamin and Derrida’s Specters of Marx, calls a “messianic historicity.” For Wegner, “such conjurations of the messianic in response to” Benjamin’s aptly phrased historical “state[s] of emergency” incorporate the “understanding that every present moment . . . contains within it the explosive possibility of a radically other future” (Life Between Two Deaths 145, 143). Derrida writes that this other historicity is “not a new history . . . but another opening of event-ness as historicity that permit[s] one not to renounce, but on the contrary to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic as emancipatory promise as promise: as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design” (74-75).

Wegner further points out that Derrida’s formulation is in keeping with Marxism’s effective “ban” on the full representation of the promised social order, lest it and its inevitable imperfections harden into myth or dogma. Ngũgĩ’s later texts similarly figure utopia as an
apocalyptic promise. There is a deep historicity to these novels; but if their insurgent historiographies create alternative possible teleologies, these ultimately lead only as far as the historical rupture that will fulfill this promise. Similarly prophetic approaches to utopia are abundant in black utopian literature—we saw them at work in Chapter 2 in John A. Williams’s fiction. The three sources from which Ngũgĩ draws its formal tropes are also familiar ones: pan-Africanist thought, Christianity, and traditional cultures.

With regard to the first of these, the apocalyptic “messianism” that runs throughout Ngũgĩ’s oeuvre from *Petals of Blood* forward takes a distinctively Fanonian turn. Ngũgĩ’s fiction is indebted to Fanon not just for ideological but for aesthetic reasons as well. In addition to fictionalizing Fanon’s dystopian prophecy of neocolonialism, *Petals of Blood* inaugurates a prophetic rhetoric through which Ngũgĩ channels both *logos* and *pathos* away from this dystopia toward visions of a revolutionary collectivity of the oppressed—a collectivity that has both “national” and pan-African dimensions. Like *The Wretched of the Earth*, Ngũgĩ’s fiction employs this rhetoric in service of a concretely grounded will toward apocalypse that concludes on the brink of transformation with both formal and historical “anti-closure.” Ngũgĩ also shares Fanon’s suspicion of retrograde politics; his hortatory messianism looks “forward all the time” in order to use a possible future as a means to apply political pressure to the historical present (Fanon, *Wretched* 315). Its re-presentations of the present and the past are structured according to a dialectic between the actual present and the absent paradigm of an imagined desired future. If the goal of revolutionary content and form is to change consciousness, the self-documented change wrought on Ngũgĩ’s consciousness by his collegiate “Bible” at Leeds is traceable in the form, content, and rhetorical aims of his own fiction.
Importantly, the concrete historicity of Ngũgĩ’s work is not identical with modern rationalism. The formal transformations that take place across his postcolonial novels lead to a withering away of the rationalist “thinking” that characterizes Petals of Blood and its replacement by the fabulist messianism of Matigari. This undoubtedly has much to do with the changes in the author’s linguistic and cultural approaches. However, Ngũgĩ’s perspective is also in alignment with Karl Mannheim’s view that “nothing is more removed from actual events than the closed rational system,” which also “contradicts the intense emotional drive of . . . sensually alert” apocalyptic utopianism (219). Rationalism’s relentless and paradoxically mystifying demystification reduces social transformation to pragmatic “realism”: the promise of change becomes “a mere regulative device in mundane affairs” (Mannheim 219). This decidedly unrevolutionary trivialization of utopia is antithetical to Ngũgĩ’s vision, which confronts a postcolonial situation that, according to Paul Gilroy, “demands a variety of creative work similar to Fanon’s”: Ngũgĩ responds, also as did Fanon, by “imagin[ing] or invent[ing] political cultures” akin to Fanon’s “complex and foreboding ‘new humanism’” (Melancholia 40, emphasis added).

Two additional sources invest Ngũgĩ’s messianic “trope of prophecy.” One arises from Christianity. Christian tropes are abundant in Ngũgĩ’s novels in “profuse renditions of scriptural motifs and allusions” (Anonby 3). John Anonby seizes in particular upon the foretelling of the “divinely-instituted year of Jubilee” (3). As discussed in chapter 1, Paul Gilroy identifies the figure of the Jubilee as one of the most powerful and pervasive utopian tropes throughout the African diaspora. This vision of “liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” has links to both the Old Testament notion of the Millennium and the New Testament’s “apocalyptic prophecy” of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Anonby 3, 10). In addition to the
Jubilee, Ngũgĩ appropriates other tropes from the lexicon of Christianity to serve political ends, just as he claims the Mau Mau forest fighters did: “the Mau Mau took up . . . hymns but now turned them into songs of actual political engagement in an actual political universe. . . . Christians sang of a second coming to bring about judgment and universal justice. The Mau Mau sang of the return of their political readers to lead the people to a political kingdom of social justice” (Writers in Politics 21). Ngũgĩ here offers apt description of his own strategy of appropriating Christian forms. Indeed, it is useful to read the Christian discourse in Ngũgĩ’s work through the lens of Chapter 1’s discussion of Mannheim and Chiliasm: that is, as an affectively charged absolute formalism that Ngũgĩ infuses with a particularized political content. Ngũgĩ forcefully secularizes the Christian tropes he uses, including “transmut[ing] the Christian eschatological vision into earthly political concerns,” thus rhetorically conflating revolution with the apocalypse that will “bring heaven to earth” (Anonby 10). As Ngũgĩ’s messianic rhetoric escalates from novel to novel, “the increasingly terrestrial and less otherworldly” they paradoxically become (Anonby 5). Implicated with this terrestriality is an attempt to tap the explosive energies implicit in a utopian “form” in hopes of purposefully channeling these energies to direct them toward a specific vision of change.

The final source is a Gĩkũyũ discourse that first appeared in The River Between’s invocation of the prophetic narrative, attributed to Mogo (or Mugo) wa Kebiro, which foretells the arrival of European colonizers. The same novel constructs around the character Waiyaki a second prophecy that foretells decolonization. Gikandi reminds us that “the prophetic trope—and the narrative of history associated with it—is retrospective . . . a specific cultural response to colonialism in general and Christian conversion in particular” (Ngũgĩ 50). As a “symptom of the discontent generated by colonization,” the trope’s “historical and imaginative function” is as a
culturally and historically situated “attempt to construct culture in the site of ‘occult instability’” between colonizer and colonized by imagining “a scene of cultural restoration that exists both in an idealized past and an imagined future” (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 51, 59). It is a “narrative mode in which a future beyond European conquest can be imagined or revealed” (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 51). This utopian, culturally specific mode of representing a triumphal future as a pending “revelation” persists in Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial writing. However its forms mutate, moving away from a romantic nostalgia for “the ideal of a benign nature, and the sanctity of a precolonial past” toward a more forward-looking notion of cultural “restoration” (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 140). This is evident not only in Ngũgĩ’s appropriation of proverbs and other such content in his Gĩkũyũ works, but also in the discourse Ngũgĩ invents to construct a mythical Mau Mau.

These three layers of Ngũgĩ’s prophetic discourse meet in the complex figuration of a “second coming.” This figure incorporates a restoration of a cultural “past” that takes the form of an “aborted future” via the ideal of *Uhuru*, and a properly new imagined future, a “second chance” at liberation that acknowledges the realities of a neocolonial present. Ngũgĩ was well aware that “[Jomo] Kenyatta systematically used [the] messianic tradition” to his advantage during his rise to power: Abdul JanMohamed notes that “Few Gĩkũyũ of the [1940s and ‘50s] doubted that Kenyatta represented the fulfillment of Mugo wa Kibiro’s prophecy” (193). Ngũgĩ’s texts marshal the same demonstrably powerful messianic discourse with the aim of replacing with his own vision the governments of this same Kenyatta and his successor. More generally, the “trope of prophecy” in Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels speaks to the ways in which the postponed revelatory *apokalyptein* “is inextricably tied to the concepts of utopia and dystopia” (Knickerbocker 347). In hopes of radically altering history, Ngũgĩ leverages several permutations of this discursive form in a way that reflects Lois Parkinson Zamora’s argument.
that all apocalyptic thinking is inevitably historical, and frequently born of historical marginality. She observes that the Christian Revelation of John, written “literally in exile on the Greek island of Patmos,” is definitive insomuch as “the end of the world is described from the point of view of a narrator who is radically opposed to existing spiritual and political practices . . . . [His] narrative reflects not only his opposition to existing practices but also his political powerlessness to change them” (Apocalypse 2). Ngũgĩ’s representations of a “willed” apocalypse add to this form a Fanonist insistence, amid an atmosphere of disillusioned postcolonial powerlessness, on the historical agency of the supposedly powerless. They, not “god,” are the ones with the power to seize a corrupted history and create a new world. The “impossible” challenge Ngũgĩ’s novels seek to answer is how to create literature that will foment such a utopian cataclysm. This is the task that sets the agenda throughout Ngũgĩ’s “crisis of representation.”

**Neocolonial Dystopia and Visions of Utopia in Petals of Blood**

Although Ngũgĩ’s three postcolonial novels share a powerful utopianism, these texts are also *bona fide* literary utopias. All three make use of utopian spaces, localized chrono-topoi that serve as fictional spaces for imagining community. In them, Ngũgĩ stages his formal experiments with representing different “worlds.” *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* are both set in the fictional Kenyan village of Ilmorog, which focalizes the two novels’ formal similarities and differences. *Matigari* takes the additional step of renouncing spatiotemporal referents altogether, alleging that it is set in a genuine “no . . . space,” and entreating readers to “place the action in the space of your choice!” However, Ngũgĩ’s preface to *Caitaani Műtharaba-inĩ*, which was omitted from the author’s English translation of *Devil on the Cross*, insists that there is “no such . . . place called Ilmorog” (Mwangi 35). The “narrated events” in all three novels are thus located in “utopia” (that is, in *oú*-topian “no-places”) (Mwangi 35).
The Ilmorog of *Petals of Blood* is represented using an aesthetic that Patrick Williams generalizes as “broadly realist” (79). This aesthetic in part reflects the novel’s deep concern for historical verisimilitude. Carol M. Sicherman notes that *Petals of Blood* is the point at which the “dense . . . allusions to historical personages and events” that populate Ngũgĩ’s work reach their point of maximum density (350). Although the novel is set during a period roughly equivalent to the dozen years between the declaration of *Uhuru* and the novel’s completion in 1975, a much more massive, multi-layered agglomeration of thick historical descriptions, both diachronous and synchronous, is compressed into the fictional timespace of Ilmorog. Consequently, “several Ilmorogs” exist simultaneously (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 280). Amoko characterizes this imaginary community as “a classic example of a postcolonial palimpsest,” and several distinct “utopias” are inscribed onto this multilayered text (*Postcolonialism* 74). All of them are depicted in order to propel the narrative toward its ultimate apocalyptic utopian vision: a transfigured Ilmorog in a socialist Kenya. This future Kenya is in turn projected as a local articulation of a global “society of one world liberation” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 344). However, this post-apocalyptic Ilmorog is not represented in the novel except as a nebulous dream. The novel’s concluding paragraphs look “to the future,” and sound a “militant, nationalist call to arms” in hopes of sparking the conflagration that will bring this dream into history (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 345; Amoko, *Postcolonialism* 69).

Scholarly discussions of Ngũgĩ’s fictional village often note its representational schema’s tendency toward totalization. Patrick Williams posits Ilmorog as a “paradigmatic community of postcolonial Kenya” (102). Nazareth adds that through his representation of Ilmorog, “Ngũgĩ deals with the whole of Kenya, and indeed the whole of the world by focusing on a grain, a petal, a small village” (120). These observations testify to how Ilmorog embodies “Ngũgĩ’s first attempt to represent culture as a totality” (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 139). In doing so, *Petals of Blood*
negotiates the specific tensions between the local and the global that emerged during its historical moment, and uses the space of Ilmorog as the kind of geopolitical allegory for the new world-system that Jameson describes in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Brendon Nicholls argues that *Petals of Blood* marks the turning point when Ngũgĩ’s fiction moved away from the anticolonial nationalism of *A Grain of Wheat* and toward “the recognition that neocolonial exploitation is global in scope and therefore demands postnational axes of identification in the formulation of a novelistic response” (118). *Petals of Blood’s* transnational perspective is signposted in its very composition in part through references to figures ranging from Amilcar Cabral to William Butler Yeats. The fact that *Petals of Blood’s* title is taken from Derek Walcott’s *The Swamp* suggests a pan-African sensibility, as does the influence on the novel’s emplotment of another text from the diaspora, George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*.

The four-part plot narrates the lives of a small collection of characters who meet in Ilmorog. Part one moves as unhurriedly as the village life it depicts, and its aesthetic bears the closest resemblance to the novelistic formalism that the text progressively strips away. Its character-driven approach devotes significant attention to the conflicted subjectivities of protagonists who are haunted by the past. The novel begins with and periodically returns to a detective fiction structure that reconstructs the events that led to the murders of three wealthy businessmen. As in *The Man Who Cried I Am*, perhaps the most important function of this device is to compel the retelling of history and *force* a reconstructed past into the present. Part one opens in 1963 and coalesces around four main characters, Munira, Wanja, Karega, and Abdulla, whose stories unfold against the backdrop of the static peasant life of the village. Along the way, the reader learns the history of Ilmorog, itself a veritable character in the narrative. This history is traced from its precolonial origins through an independence that has largely passed it over,
save for the fact that its young people are being lured away by dreams of a new life in Kenya’s “modern” cities. At the end of part one, the village faces drought and famine, and the community decides to send a delegation to Nairobi for desperately needed assistance.

Part two narrates in the style of a classic epic the pilgrims’ slow march to the capital. Although harbingers of change appear in part one, part two’s journey literally establishes the connection between a formerly-isolated Ilmorog and the brave new world of the postcolony. At first, the ragged Ilmorogians’ pleas for help are met with hypocritical platitudes from politicians and even persecution by the police. However, their case soon becomes a cause célèbre thanks to an activist lawyer and the press. The village is saved, but of more consequence is the fact that through the media spectacle they become, Ilmorog appears for the first time on the “map” of the new Kenya.

Part three is dominated by expectancy. The main characters celebrate a successful harvest by the ritual drinking of Theng’eta, a home-brewed intoxicant, and as a result, some of the main characters fall out with one another. The section ends as the “modern” world literally crashes into Ilmorog in the form of a plane scouting for a place to locate a new Trans-Africa highway. Wanja and Abdulla decide to sell Theng’eta to the people who come from miles around to gawk at the wrecked plane, a decision that will have profound consequences.

Part four enacts a dramatic break from the earlier portions of the novel in terms of both content and form. While hints of part four’s “new world” are glimpsed earlier, here the narrative acquires furious momentum and increased urgency following Ilmorog’s transformation from “a sleepy agricultural village” into “a modern city full of factories and slums” (Stratton, “Patterns” 123). In this way, the narrative’s aesthetic mimics the increased rapidity of daily life and even the tacit violence of “development.” Although some critics generalize the novel’s aesthetic as
“critical realism,” “a Zola-like naturalism,” or “socialist realism,” there is a clear distinction between the “critical” realism of the first three parts and the “socialist” realism of the fourth. In this final section, which was composed largely in the USSR, a rotation is completed in which the sociopolitical setting assumes predominance over the heretofore painstakingly subjectivized characters, many of whom “flatten” noticeably to become conduits for orthodox Marxist commentary on different ideological and political positions. The novel acquires what some readers criticize as the “over-didacticism” of socialist realism as it depicts what is at stake in the choice between capitalist exploitation and socialist cooperation. The socially “critical” function that pervades the first three parts is ratcheted up in the fourth’s mapping of New Ilmorog’s modern hell’scape, but this is ultimately supplanted by Ngũgĩ’s now-fully articulated combination of “materialist, long-historical socialist internationalism” and messianic catastrophism (Lazarus, “Return” 21-22). The latter surfaces in his depiction of an emerging solidarity among workers, and a militant hope that what the novel represents as a nascent worldwide proletarian revolution will one day transform Ilmorog yet again.

The aesthetic shift between the third and fourth parts of the *Petals of Blood* results in the text’s most powerful articulations of utopia and dystopia, and these will be the primary focus of this discussion. However, Ilmorog is a utopian “palimpsest,” and figures of utopia and dystopia appear in the narrative’s first three parts as well. One of these is an “escapist” utopia. The novel’s main characters are all world-beaten and emotionally wounded. They are “subjects [who] live and relive experiences defined by a radical chasm between the utopian desire for belonging and totality and the brutal realities that have brought them to Ilmorog” (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 155). The Ilmorog of part one is an inland island, “cut off from the rest of the country in time and space” and thus from the world that has ill-used the characters (Gikandi, *Ngũgĩ* 136). For Munira, a
schoolteacher, Ilmorog is initially a “happy . . . escape hole” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 49). A self-described “outsider” and mere “spectator” in life’s drama, Munira attempts to withdraw from the historical world completely after disappointing his father. Wanja, too, is in flight from a personal past in which her once-promising life was disrupted by pregnancy. Betrayed by Kimeria, the child’s father and one of the businessmen whose murder frames the novel, Wanja commits infanticide and descends into dissolution. Repulsed by what she has become, she reconnects with her grandmother, Nyakinyua, in Ilmorog, where she hopes to “have a completely new beginning” (106-107). Karega, the novel’s “rebel” and a one-time student of Munira, periodically drifts in and out of Ilmorog “searching” for “a lost innocence, faith, and hope” (46). The fourth main character, Abdulla, is a petty merchant and former Mau Mau who lost a leg fighting alongside Karega’s brother Nding’uri, who was executed during the Emergency. Haunted by a broken pact to avenge Nding’uri’s death, Abdulla, too, attempts to “hide in Ilmorog” (224). Abdulla’s presence there signifies how in the “new” Kenya, the dispossessed forest fighters who battled for independence have been marginalized once again. His existence “no place” reflects President Kenyatta’s injunction that Mau Mau “must never be remembered again” (*Suffering* 124).

All four main characters in *Petals of Blood* are postcolonial exiles, “strangers . . . in [their] land of birth” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 101). They approach Ilmorog as an otherworldly lacuna in which they attempt to forge a sense of at-home-ness. This proves impossible, however. What results is a critique of the escapist, “abstract” utopia consonant with Bloch’s rejection of “enervating escapism.” This escapism is best embodied by Munira, the novel’s most determined fugitive from the world “out there.” All the characters discover that their personal histories are interlinked. The same Kimeria who betrayed Wanja, for instance, also collaborated with the colonists and betrayed Nding’uri to his death. It is also revealed that Munira’s younger
sister was Karega’s first love, and took her own life after their father condemned the relationship. Such coincidences dramatize the interconnectedness of individual lives and highlight Ngũgĩ’s shift in focus from individuals toward communal subjects. Collectively, the characters represent a mode of subjectivity often found in postcolonial literature: one that has been fragmented by colonial and postcolonial violence.

At the same time, the novel’s binding together of its characters’ lives forecloses any possibility of a viable escapist utopia. Interconnected as they are, the characters cannot escape their personal pasts any more than they can escape history more broadly construed. Indeed, their “local” interrelationships allegorize a larger order. 27 Kimeria’s actions, for instance, which fundamentally shape the protagonists’ lives, are overdetermined by his business concerns, a set of connections which at once reflect his position within the overall structure of colonialism and an emerging international neocolonial capitalism. Joseph Gugler points out that “the protagonists” of Petals of Blood “are the losers under the new order” (331). They are not “outside” but rather implicated in the very history that has erased them. As indicated by both the characters’ lives and the airplane that surveys Ilmorog in part one, the “‘forgotten village,’ an island of underdevelopment” is already caught up in neocolonialism (Ngũgĩ, Petals 184).

In part four, Karega recognizes that this “new order” is total: it is everywhere characterized by “the same pattern: rapid in some places, slow in others, but emerging all the time in all of them,” and “there [is] no other place to which he could turn” (302, emphasis added). Karega’s “search” for the lost hope embodied by his dead brother thus leads to something other than escape when, in part as a response to these conditions, he is transformed into a revolutionary. Initially unemployable and rootless, a postcolonial incarnation of his mother’s ahoi status as a squatter on Munira’s father’s estate, Karega gains (and then loses) a
teaching position at Munira’s school. There, he teaches himself the pan-African political consciousness that dominates part four. The dystopian changes Ilmorog undergoes strengthen Karega’s resolve to “enlarge” the “consciousness” of others, a pedagogical labor he began in the schoolhouse by encouraging children who “knew no world outside Ilmorog” to “see themselves, Ilmorog and Kenya, as part of a larger whole, a larger territory containing the history of African people and their struggles” in all “corners of the world” where they are “scattered” (109). This pan-African consciousness merges in the final chapters with a transnational class-consciousness.

As the mouthpiece for Ngũgĩ’s politics, Karega embraces a revolutionary position that would “create the basis of [a] new order,” an African socialist alternative to neocolonialism (194).

Petals of Blood negotiates the tension between a desire for an “other place” and an inescapable historicity in the other “utopian” Ilmorog that appears in the novel’s earlier parts. This utopia takes the form of “Ilmorog’s great past,” and is embodied by the elderly Nyakinyua. An omniscient narrator informs readers about how Ilmorog “had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children”:

It had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature’s forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men. How they toiled together, clearing the wilderness, cultivating, planting . . . . In those days, there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers, no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers. Only, so they say in song and dance, only the feeble in age and the younglings were exempt from their common labour: these anyway were carriers of wisdom and innocence. Sitting round the family tree in the front yard the aged would sip honey beer and tell the children with voices taut with prideful authority and nostalgia, about the founding patriarch. (120)

This “patriarch,” Ndemi, is a legendary herdsman who settled Ilmorog. There, “he made the earth yield to the touch of his fingers and the wisdom in his head” and established the geographic and familial nucleus of a “great centre of trade” (120-121). Until the advent of New Ilmorog, this “trading remained incidental to [the] daily struggle with the soil and the weather,” which took
place on land that “was not for buying” but for common “use” (70, 82). The emphasis on this connection to the land reflects how “the importance of the landscape is paramount” in Ngũgĩ’s “visions of Africa” (Loflin 76). The Ilmorog of the past represents a life that was harmonious in these respects until “colonialism caused catastrophic disruption” (Loflin 77). In *Petals of Blood*, this culminates in “the battle of Ilmorog . . . one of the fiercest of all the wars of conquest and resistance fought in Kenya” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 69). Pre-colonial Ilmorog thus becomes an intertext with Ilmorog *circa* 1963, the former a “lost,” Edenic utopia while the latter reads as a classic postlapsarian dystopia imbued with a great deal of cultural specificity.

This local history is used in turn in the manner of many idealized “recovered” histories to stage an Africa-centric critique of a dystopian colonialism writ large. Ilmorog’s reduction to a “drought-stricken, depopulated wasteland” is a result of white settlers’ forceful displacement of the people from fertile common lands, as well as industrial deforestation and the introduction of the railroad (110). Kamenju points out that the text’s representation of the railway echoes Lenin’s claim that “under imperialism, the infrastructure of roads, railways, and other means of communication must be seen for what they really are: as means of gaining deeper and closer access to the natural as well as human resources of the colonial world for the purpose of . . . more intensified exploitation” (Kamenju 134). Indeed, even after the colonists have departed, Ilmorog continues to live with their legacy: its trees are gone, its soil is depleted, and its youth abscond for the cities. The novel makes clear that these factors contribute to the drought and famine that hasten Ilmorog’s next transformation into a neocolonial dystopia, in which the Trans-Africa highway represents a contemporary repetition of the colonial railway.

On the surface, this history of Ilmorog might seem in line with what Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swali designate as the “golden age of consensus” in African nationalist
historiography’s tripartite thematization of the past: “the bliss that was African life before the coming of the Europeans”; “the injustice of colonialism”; and “how gloriously the African fought his way to *Uhuru*” (qtd. in Sicherman 356). Even though adjectives such as “glorious” seem to reinscribe “this self-congratulatory pattern” in *Petals of Blood*, Sicherman and others show that the matter is much more ambiguous and complex (Sicherman 356). The passage above exemplifies how the novel installs a familiar utopian historical narrative as part of its dystopian critique. However, Ngũgĩ’s future-oriented utopianism ultimately requires *Petals of Blood* to undermine this nostalgic “consensus” history when confronted with its limits.

On the one hand, *Petals of Blood* suggests that in the postcolonial scenario it depicts, it is important not to dismiss out of hand certain “glorious” reconstructions of the past. The novel—as with the work of the consensus historians, many poets and scholars of Negritude, and artists throughout Africa and the diaspora—writes an alternative “subaltern” history (Ogude, *Novels* 8). Like Gilroy’s historical “rescuing critiques,”^30^ such insurgent historiographies can be meaningful utopian acts on the terrain of an imposed social imaginary. Whether they take the form of “unforgetting” past resistance to oppression, the dystopianization of a celebratory hegemonic history, or the more utopian practice of re-membering the past as grounds for imagining community differently, such historiographies disrupt the regnant order of things. They do so by making incisions, additions, and transformations at the very sites where Benedict Anderson critiques the imagined “nation” for flattening vertical social hierarchies into a horizontal unity.^31^

A number of readings of *Petals of Blood* invoke Van Wyck Brooks’s term “usable past”—akin to Pordzik’s “enabling cultural myth”—to describe how “Ngũgĩ looks to the past to provide a meaningful,” living “continuum with the present and future” (Pordzik, *Quest* 57; Podis and Saaka 105).^32^ An enabling myth is “usable” when it helps establish sources of “cultural
authority, communal coherence, and individual agency” in response to “the knowledge that legitimate sources of communal identity have been destroyed or are unevenly available” (Zamora, *Usable* 5, 7). Zamora likens this fictionalized “re recuperating” of “histories and traditions” to what Toni Morrison describes as a “process of entering what one is estranged from” (*Usable* 209). In Morrison’s project of writing alternative histories such a process paradoxically involves a *coming home*, a process exemplified in her novel entitled *Home* (2012). 

Ngũgĩ’s narrative of Ilmorog similarly confers a historically grounded sense of place-ness upon the placeless place of exile. This “usable past” functions in turn like other such primal histories, “founding legends that stand as explanations of, and exhortations toward, the promised new communal order” (Podis & Saaka 121). If, as Jameson writes of Western modernity, the historical “present” can be “intensified, and prepared for individual perception, by the construction of a historical past from which as a process it could be felt to issue slowly forth,” then Ngũgĩ retro-constructs a narrative of the past that figures the present as a timespace in which alternative possibilities for community already exist waiting to be claimed (Jameson, “Progress” 287). Even more significantly, “glorious” stories of past resistance—from the “Battle of Ilmorog” to Mau Mau—epitomize how the refigured present is one in which potentially explosive “subterranean currents of unrest in the country” already point the way toward a revolutionary future (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 42).

Karega’s frustrated search for “a vision of the future rooted in a critical awareness of the past” demonstrates a textual self-awareness on the part of *Petals of Blood’s* narratological project (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 198).³³ Karega maintains that the “idea . . . of a past. A great past. A past when Ilmorog, or all Africa, controlled its own earth” is ultimately more important than the “details” of any allegedly factual history (125, emphasis added). The novel’s utopian “usable past”
manipulates tropes and themes familiar from anticolonial and postcolonial African counter-histories. If, for instance, “glorious” old Ilmorog is, in Ogude’s words, a “symbol of land in its most ideal state,” it is also “land as communal property and a home of the peasantry,” the latter understood in Fanon’s sense as always already potentially revolutionary (*Novels* 28). In service of his vision of utopia, Ngũgĩ reconfigures the “consensus” historiography of resistance: not just as celebratory patriotism, but as a harbinger of a radically other future. This history runs from the “Battle of Ilmorog,” through Nyakinyua and her “warrior’ husband,” and to a reimagined Mau Mau. In Abdulla, the novel’s imaginative appropriation of Mau Mau passes through a complicated lifecycle toward the “rebirth” signaled in part four. In this forward-looking history of resistance, messianic discourses of Mau Mau and Marxism converge in the neocolonial present. Gikandi argues that “although Gĩkũyũ temporality inscribes itself by invoking an ancient history . . . the people who have come to be known under this [Gĩkũyũ] corporate identity invented themselves to meet the challenges of colonial rule and domination”; this act consolidated a “fluid, acephalous culture” into a “Gĩkũyũ group consciousness” (*Ngũgĩ* 15). In inscribing its own “ancient history,” *Petals of Blood* projects another past in order to imagine a group consciousness that might meet the challenges posed by multinational capitalism.

Because of this overriding concern for what C.L.R. James called “the future in the present,” *Petals of Blood* critiques Ilmorog’s glorious history even as it incorporates it. In the last analysis, the text invokes the past as a tool to be used in a “teleological (and utopian) scheme [that] would see Kenya’s evolution from British rule as an incomplete dialectic” (C. Smith 99). Patrick Williams rightly notes that *Petals of Blood* differs from consensus history in that it is not an exercise in nostalgic utopianism (that is to say, in “Golden Ageism”). In fact, the novel is meticulous about debunking any such notion. The common element in Golden Age narratives is
a mythical (and often lost) “Earthly Paradise” where there is “no strife,” and in extreme forms, like the biblical Eden or the English incarnation of the Land of Cockaigne, there is often “no pain” or even “no death” (Elliott 4). Robert C. Elliott observes that this sort of paradise “exists outside history, usually before history begins,” and for this very reason is “not utopia,” which is by nature a historical effort to “work out imaginatively what happens—or what might happen—when the primal longings embodied in the myth confront the principle of reality” (9, 16, 8-9).

Akin to Golden Ageism is the trope Mikhail Bakhtin names “historical inversion,” the projection of the future as a “state of nature” or as the return to some other ideal “mythical” past. A Gĩkũyũ variant is “the epoch of epochs, the past before the past” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 149).

Beginning with Homecoming, Ngũgĩ “rejects the romanticism of the past typical of the Negritude poets” as well as any possibility for a “cultural restoration” of, in Fanon’s terms, the “mummified fragments” of “outworn contrivances” (Loflin 83; Fanon, Wretched 224). Despite its concern for the past, Petals of Blood undercuts “Golden Ageism” in a way best captured in Karega’s discourse on the past as “a living lesson to the present”:

We must not preserve our past as a museum: rather, we must study it critically, without any illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today’s battlefield of the future and the present. But to worship it—no. . . . I don’t want to continue worshipping in the temples of a past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature. (Ngũgĩ, Petals 323)

Karega’s remarks about “slavery to nature” are apropos to one of the central problems of a historical inversion whose mythopoetics efface history. The novel’s observance that “the vagaries of nature” had “always” been present in Ilmorog, and that one such natural caprice, a famine, had “weakened people’s resistance to the European marauders,” problematizes the past in a way that disqualifies any imagined restoration (111). Further, in any actual past that history has overtaken, the preconditions for the problems of the present already lurk. And, even if a “restoration” were somehow desirable, Karega realizes it is impossible: “the Ilmorog whose past
achievements had moved him so . . . was not there anymore” (302). As with the Biblical apocalypse, the future the novel looks toward will not be a return to a lost “Eden,” nor any other form of repetition: the “kingdom” to come will be unimaginably new. If the novel summons the continuum of history, it only calls forth the past for its use value in looking toward a future that throws open that continuum. The various pasts it enfolds are located at the interface between utopian myth and proto-utopian history, and are in this regard the “chips of messianic time” with which the present is “shot through” (W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* 263).

*Petals of Blood*’s dramatic fourth part is where both the novel’s dystopian images and its messianic utopian politics reach their greatest intensity. It also brings the narrative abruptly into the present. Here, Ngũgĩ employs the familiar dystopian strategy of beginning in medias res by omitting any narration of the events that transform Ilmorog into the radically different world that now confronts the reader. As we shall see shortly, this world, and the themes introduced along with it, establish the material that Ngũgĩ reworks in subsequent novels. Part four’s increased sense of urgency communicates the violence Ilmorog experiences when it is “catapulted . . . into modern times” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 263). Hooper observes that this violence recapitulates “the originary moment of colonial contact itself” (59). The text’s description of the “demarcation” and “fencing” with “barbed wire” of formerly common lands is one of the ways in which the novel foregrounds this repetition (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 268). This fencing-off of the commons and the resulting displacement of the peasantry also enacts a repetition of the enclosure movement that occurred at the dawn of modern capitalism itself.³⁶

However, part four represents the contemporary enclosure movement as a repetition-with-difference insomuch as the capitalism that colonizes the New Ilmorog is unmistakably neocolonial multinational late capitalism. Nyakinyua’s fate at once personifies the fate of the
peasants under this system and allegorizes Petals of Blood’s ambivalent relationship with the past in the wake of this evental rupture. Nyakinyua is first lured into onerous bank loans to “develop” what remains of her land, and then dies when it is foreclosed upon by the bank. Wanja “redeems” the land, which is dense with symbolism, but at a tremendous personal cost: she is forced to sell her and Abdulla’s Theng’eta business to an Anglo-American conglomerate. Nyakinyua, the embodiment of “glorious old Ilmorog,” is thus robbed of an irretrievable past that is literally “foreclosed,” while Wanja, a representative of the Uhuru generation, is robbed of a future that (already) could never materialize. The local cultural tradition of Theng’eta is appropriated as yet another mass commodity, while Wanja assimilates to the new order by becoming a prostitute.

These events epitomize the chronotope in the novel’s fourth section. The forces at work in New Ilmorog would empty the space of its history, immobilizing it via a flattening of spacetime whereby what the novel sardonically calls “trade and progress” appears as the metastasis of an all-consuming sameness (265). The two faces of this ahistoricality are, first, a version of “progress” figured as simply the self-reproduction of ever more identical capitalism, the antinomic equation of “absolute change equals stasis” that Jameson diagnoses in the “new global system” (Seeds 19); and second, an expectant “absolute presentness” resonant with Mannheim’s account of utopian millennialism. In play in this portion of the narrative are what the novel suggests may be the only three utopias that remain possible in this “new” world: a religious utopia of mythic time, a capitalist utopia of the present, and a revolutionary socialist utopia of the future.

The first is narrativized through Munira, who is “born again” as a Christian. After a lifetime of avoiding commitment, the novel’s Hamlet chooses a “side” in the historical struggle
by renouncing history altogether. Munira interprets New Ilmorog not inaccurately as a modern Babylon, and derides Karega’s speeches about a “new earth” as “communist nonsense” (Ngũgĩ, Petals 299). Munira’s “new earth” is “revealed” to him at the moment of his religious conversion, at which point he finally feels delivered from his past: “my years of agony and doubt and pursuit of earthly pleasures were over” (298-99). Simultaneously for Munira, the biblical prophecy of the redeemed “world to come” has sufficient explanatory power to naturalize a present world full of “injustice that did not make sense” (298, 296).

However, the text itself rejects as delusional and undesirable Munira’s latest escape attempt. Petals of Blood’s messianism, and indeed its utopianism, are not “vertical” and transcendent, but rather “horizontal” and concrete. The text undermines Munira’s doxology in multiple ways. The evangelical movement he joins is revealed as a scheme “financed by some churches in America, which made a lot of money by insisting on the followers giving one tenth of their salaries as tithe,” and which encourages members to read books like “World Aflame by Billy Graham and other tracts published in America and speaking of communism as the devil” (306). The commoditized Christianity that dupes Munira is as deeply implicated as everything else in New Ilmorog in an exploitive multinational capitalism. Furthermore, the “new” Munira is a rather unsympathetic character: he “broadly represents the essential Christian position” as “narrow-minded, fervid and fanatical” (Sharma 309). In this way, the novel shows that “high-minded and well-meaning” moralizing is no substitute for a systemic politics with a clear “understanding of socio-economic issues”—in fact, according to Karega, it is the “biggest threat” to such a politics (Sharma 310; Ngũgĩ, Petals 305).

Most importantly, by dismantling of Munira’s position, the text performs its crucial maneuver of peeling away the content of an opiate Christianity from its lexicon of rhetorically
powerful poetic formal tropes. Through the chiasmus between Munira’s and Karega’s respective worldviews, the novel endows its own militant socialist vision with the power of an apocalyptic discourse. Just as Munira’s Christian escapism dismisses the historical world of the novel, the Christian vision of utopia is dismissed from the novel’s world.

What remains is a struggle between Karega’s revolutionary utopianism and the “utopian” multinational capitalism that structures New Ilmorog’s status quo. The latter is represented in the familiar grammar of the developmentalist utopia: as “progress! Yes, development did come to Ilmorog” (Ngũgĩ, Petals 268). However, this developmentalism is clothed in the new garments of globalization. The New Ilmorog is a microcosm of the “fruits” of Uhuru, modernization, and Westernization. During a “year of hope,” an infusion of investment capital, bank loans, and the long-foreshadowed arrival of the Trans-Africa road transform Ilmorog “from a deserted village into a sprawling town of stone, iron, concrete, and glass” (268, 263). For parvenu Kenyans like Kimeria, Chui, and Mzigo, the three doomed businessmen, the New Ilmorog’s shopping mall and consumerist pleasure palaces make the town a veritable (and profitable) Xanadu. However, Karega points out that “there are a million Karegas for every ten Kimerias,” and for the “poor, the dispossessed, the working millions and the poor peasants,” this capitalist dream-world is quite another world indeed (317). The novel’s verdict on New Ilmorog sides with the “people,” and what emerges from its perspective is a powerful literary dystopia.

If, as Gikandi argues, the epic “story of Ilmorog is that of the warped logic of colonial modernity,” then the cognitive estrangement achieved by New Ilmorog’s mutated repetition of colonialism demystifies the equally twisted logic of neocolonial postmodernity (Ngũgĩ 136). Considered as a postcolonial “demythologizing dystopia,” Petals of Blood estranges the neocolonial world by deploying two mutually exclusive, competing histories that assume the
perspectives of what Ngũgĩ elsewhere calls the “only two tribes left in Africa: the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’” (Homecoming xvii). Projecting a vision of postcolonial Kenya from the latter position combats the state-sponsored “political culture of orderly amnesia” that “excluded the voice of whole classes of the landless” from the national discourse (Odhiambo & Lonsdale 4). In keeping with the dominant culture’s ties to multinational capitalism, “class struggle” was deleted from Kenya’s “vocabulary of politics” (Odhiambo & Lonsdale 4). The eruption of the have nots’ perspective into the world of the novel represents post-Uhuru Kenya in the political vocabulary of Fanon’s dystopian warning: as the dream-world of a corrupted national bourgeoisie, which “instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people,” is “only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what might have been” (Wretched 148).

For “the people” themselves, this world is what Devil on the Cross later explicitly calls a hell on earth. Ngũgĩ’s representation might be said to gather into itself the formal elements of the prophetic dystopia that dominated the mid-twentieth century, and the post-apocalyptic dystopia that appeared in the postmodern period and proliferated as the millennium approached. In Ngũgĩ’s New Ilmorog, a terrifying present appears as a post-apocalyptic world in which the most ominous prophecies have been fulfilled.

This capitalist apocalypse is inscribed on the landscape of New Ilmorog in many ways. The most didactic such strategy Ngũgĩ employs is in the naming of its shantytown, “New Jerusalem.” There, the community’s poor live with the “failed promises” of a national “faith in the practical recommendations of [realists] from abroad” (Ngũgĩ, Petals 262). The communal “land of honey and wine” that Abdulla dreamed of as a forest fighter has been replaced by a Kenya whose mantra is “no free things . . . you want it, you pay for it” (285, 279). The story of New Ilmorog is thus a tale of two cities:
One was the residential area of the farm managers, County Council officials, public service officers, the managers of Barclays, Standard and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state money and power. This was called Cape Town. The other—called New Jerusalem—was a shanty town of migrant and floating workers, the unemployed, the prostitutes and small traders in tin and scrap metal. Between [them] . . . was All Saints church . . . . Also somewhere between the two areas was Wanga’s Sunshine Lodge. . . . The shopping and business centre was dominated by two features. . . . a tourist cultural (Utamaduni) village owned by Nderi wa Riera and a West German concern. . . . The other was Theng’eta Breweries, which, starting on the premises owned by Mzigo, had now grown into a huge factory employing six hundred workers. . . . They brewed a variety of Theng’eta drinks: from the pure gin for export to cheap but potent drinks for workers and the unemployed. (280-281)

The transformation of Ilmorog into a capitalist utopia/dystopia has introduced capitalism’s inevitable socioeconomic polarities. The town’s small cadre of “haves,” many of them Kenyans, have created a system of economic, social, and spatial apartheid in which the New Ilmorog’s massive poor population is cut off from the town’s prosperity. The dispossessed include both peasants “driven off their land” by government and corporate initiatives reputed to “develop the area” and “raise the standard of living,” and workers who labor in oppressive conditions for meager wages (289). One such place is the Theng’eta brewery, where the workers then “return the money to the factory” by purchasing intoxicants to escape their miserable lives (317). In the most extreme example of profit at any cost, MP Nderi wa Riera’s cultural museum serves as a front for an operation that smuggles gemstones, animal and human skins, and “Black Ivory,” young girls recruited to satisfy tourists’ “physical whims” or exported to Europe as exoticized “slave whores from Africa” (334). The brutal Spencerian logic of the “new” Wanga’s personal ethic aptly captures “this world . . . this Kenya . . . this Africa,” which “knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten” (291).

In a dystopian reversal of the Manichean “social evolutionism” that shapes the West’s para-religious belief in “development,” Petals of Blood re-presents the “developed” world as a “savage” realm of “crime and treachery and greed which passed for civilization” (262). New
Ilmorog is a jungle full of cannibalistic creatures like Hawkins Kimeria ("hawk that swallows"), Chui ("leopard"), and Nderi wa Riera ("vulture of the air"). In this brutal world, capitalism produces an “eternal interminable cycle of destitution and deprivation amidst plenty” (317). Ngũgĩ’s dystopia excavates the suppressed contradictions of a “system that needs to be changed,” and reinstalls the erased narrative of class struggle through both its emplotment and Karega’s iterations of a major theme in Ngũgĩ’s later work: “exploitation of labor by capital, itself stolen from the workers” and the attendant “struggle” for the future between “those whose sweat made” the world and “those whose power was the bank . . . who came to reap and harvest where they had not ploughed or sowed” (308, 304).

The social, spatial, economic, and potentially political dichotomization of Ilmorog is redoubled and projected into a series of larger spatial frames through the representation of the Trans-Africa Road, a wound in the land that literally has “cleaved Ilmorog in two halves” (323). As a result, the erstwhile land-centered people of Ilmorog are now people “of the road,” a characterization that expresses both an exilic rootlessness and a new rootedness in modernization (262). Trucks on the highway bear the names of multinational corporations, “SHELL, ESSO, TOTAL, AGIP . . . beside the word DANGER,” and it is rumored that the road will eventually “reach Zaire and Nigeria, and onto the land of white people across the red sea” (263, 265).

On the one hand, the Trans-Africa Road has bifurcated Ilmorog in a way that resembles a Global North and South. However, the road also unifies, insomuch as it integrates Ilmorog into the emerging structure of a new world order. This contradiction is duly noted: “and so, abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of the earth’s surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation” (262). On the surface, Ilmorog’s “development”
entails a homogenization that refashions it in the image of the American-led “First World.”

Finance capital assumes power as an “invisible government,” American popular culture abounds (“Jim Reeves . . . Jim Brown . . . Kung Fu Fighting”), and technological “progress” is everywhere (275, 286). Yet integral to this development is an economic stratification produced through the relentless concentration of wealth by mammoth European and American corporations, for whom governments, subsidiary businesses, and their functionaries serve as intermediaries or enforcers. Even Kimeria and other nouveau riche are portrayed as debased lackeys, a puppet “comprador” bourgeoisie that Ngũgĩ characterizes in Homecoming as “struggling for crumbs” from the tables of “masters [who] sit in New York, London, Brussels, Paris, Bonn, and Copenhagen” (xvii). Nazareth argues that such characters “become even more white than the people [they] replaced” (121). While this may be an oversimplification, Ngũgĩ’s tendency toward binaries is part of a multi-novel class politics that seeks politically usable coherence amidst rapidly multiplying sociopolitical categories.

Amoko is among several scholars who point out that Petals of Blood’s depictions of the ways in which “the promise of postindependence plentitude gave way to the crisis of underdevelopment and corruption” make it a well-suited “fictional companion” to Colin Leys’s contemporaneous sociological study, Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964-1972 (Postcolonialism 69). Influenced by dependency theory, Leys describes Kenya as “locked into” its subordinate role in an emerging international capitalist system. Parts of his account do read like synopses of part four of Ngũgĩ’s novel. However, critics such as Gugler who claim Ngũgĩ’s novel is “wedded to an analysis borrowed from the social sciences that has been shown to be inadequate” seem to forget that what they are reading is fiction (Gugler 338-339). Petals of Blood is not subject to the same constraints as a
sociological study in its attempt to consolidate allegiances or affect political change even as it negotiates the same difficult realities. At the center of both Ngũgĩ’s and Leys’s crises of representation is the question of how to interpret a new order that is both like the old order and different from it. Both Ngũgĩ and Leys attempt to map a world-system in a moment when the old models have been rendered insufficient, yet many of the old models’ primary categories remain in place. For example, the colonial “centre-periphery” relationship certainly holds for the kind of extreme periphery embodied by the old Ilmorog. And it still holds for the New Ilmorog, whose road serves as a conduit by which local resources are speeded away to the multinational corporations of the U.S. and Europe. At the same time, this dispersed, transcontinental “center” is oddly shaped in its new incarnation. Moreover, the New Ilmorog is both center and periphery—another node in an international structure that has become self-replicating, and in which the movement of wealth increasingly occurs not along a horizontal geographical axis but rather a vertical social one. Indeed, Leys points out that the neocolonial order is giving way to a class structure which “resemble[s] the old colonial system less and less” (27). One facet of the representational struggle in Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels is an attempt to map this world-system in transition while simultaneously demythologizing it.

One of the ways in which Petals of Blood surpasses underdevelopment and dependency theories lies in its confrontation with those theories’ most pressing problem: a disempowering determinacy. Florence Stratton reads this determinacy in Petals of Blood when she argues, “the view of human history that we get from the novel . . . is that there will always be exploiters and exploited,” and as a result the novel’s “basic theme . . . is the cyclical nature of human history” (“Patterns” 120). However, such a narrow anti-utopian reading neglects the ways in which the narrative gathers momentum toward breaking this cycle. Although Ngũgĩ’s dystopian New
Ilmorog uses much of the same material that Leys draws from to map the complicated new realities of neocolonial Kenya, part four of *Petals of Blood* explodes perceptions of hopeless determinacy with its turn toward a more hopeful vision of the future latent in the present. The novel closes with a defiant prophecy of another new world to come. As signified by Ngũgĩ’s addition of the word “again” to a revised final line of Yeats’s “The Second Coming”—“Walking toward Bethlehem to be born again”—it is a prophecy that insists that bringing the new world into being will require change every bit as apocalyptic as the “birth” of the bestial New Ilmorog.

Part four’s third utopia, the figuration of this second “second coming,” is as complicated as the new geopolitical situation that *Petals of Blood* depicts. Here, Ngũgĩ makes his first attempt to reconcile the two principle narratives that form his utopian vision: a nationalist narrative of revolutionary Mau Mau and a class-based narrative of revolutionary socialism. In a milieu where local, national, African, and global geopolitical concerns cut across the identities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality, it proves a significant challenge to forge a “nationalist” vision that might possibly cohere. One function of Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels is to confront the challenge of imagining and representing community, of delineating and locating the “people” and the “nation,” in an increasingly postnational world. The bringing together in *Petals of Blood* of a fictive rural peasant movement and a national/international urban proletariat in the circumscribed yet interconnected space of Ilmorog represents only the first and most provisional of Ngũgĩ’s attempts to achieve such a coherence.

The Mau Mau strand of the narrative “refigures the Gĩkũyũ’s reverence for ancestral spirits associated with the land through [Ngũgĩ’s particular] revolutionary perspective,” and coalesces around a reinvigorated Abdulla and his adopted “brother”/“son” Joseph (Loflin 84). After losing the Theng’eta business, Abdulla leads a marginalized life in New Jerusalem as a
Theng’eta drunk. However, he later experiences a rebirth of sorts after beginning a relationship with Wanja. More than any other character, Abdulla embodies the utopian conundrum negotiated by part four of *Petals of Blood*. On the one hand, Abdulla’s “bitterness” and despair capture the post-*Uhuru* world of “broken promises [and] the wider betrayal of the collective blood of the Kenyan fighters for land and freedom” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 310). His broken life and broken body literalize the consequences of this betrayal. Conversely, the past Land and Freedom Army is cast in spiritualized, utopian terms: the Mau Mau struggle is framed as a “black David . . . triumphing over a white Goliath.” This narrative also contains a “dream of total liberation”: a “beautiful dream, a hazy softness of promises, a kind of call to something higher, nobler, holier, something for which [Abdulla] would have given his life over and over again” (220, 310). In the closing chapters, Abdulla recommits to this dream, and vows again to avenge Nding’uri’s death. However, by the time he is ready to act, Wanja has already murdered Kimeria, and Abdulla must rescue her from her *Sunshine Lodge* bordello, to which Munira has set fire. In this conflagration, three lives converge in an event that will change Ilmorog, reinforcing the connections among individuals as well as between individual destinies and collective history. This event is also an anticipatory, miniaturized figure for the transformative catastrophe prophesied by the novel’s ending.

The reader also learns that Wanja is pregnant and the father may be Abdulla. When asked who the child’s father is, Wanja draws an image of the statue she saw in Nairobi of Land and Freedom Army Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi, but, like Abdulla, “without one limb” (338). The unborn child thus represents both a generational transfer—a recurring trope in black utopias—and the “rebirth” of the revolutionary Mau Mau. This motif of rebirth is redoubled in the closing paragraphs, in biblically inflected rumors that forest leader “Stanley Mathenge,” who
mysteriously disappeared in 1955,⁴⁸ “[has] returned from Ethiopia to complete the war he and Kimathi started” (344). This “impossible” return of a previous generation of Mau Mau is folded into the continuum of present and future history not only in Wanja’s pregnancy, but also more collectively in Karega’s utopian insistence that “new Mathenges” and “new Kimathis” are being “born every day among the people” (344). This implied repetition-with-difference epitomizes the novel’s “double vision” of Mau Mau: the movement’s anticolonial aspect, a “resistance to foreign invaders” that succeeded in defeat insomuch as it “hastened Britain’s withdrawal”; and Ngũgĩ’s second (re-visionary) figuration of Mau Mau as a “class war, of the poor and exploited against the bourgeoisie, black and white,” a “phase of Mau Mau” that, “in Ngũgĩ’s representation, has only just begun” (C. Smith 98). This tactic of vision/revision is akin to what we will see in Chapter 4 in Alice Walker’s Meridian and Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters. On the one hand, with this maneuver, Ngũgĩ reaches back to an earlier historical period marked by drastic political transformations in order to revive the formidable utopian impulse that served as its driving force. On the other hand, he critically analyzes the earlier period’s limitations, failures, and incompletions, in order to reinvent its utopianism for a new historical moment.

The recuperation of Mau Mau is a crucial component of the utopianism in Ngũgĩ’s later works and has been the subject of a great deal of commentary. Mau Mau has “a special status” in Kenya’s historical discourse as “a lightning conductor of disagreement” (Odhiamo & Lonsdale 3). In some historians’ descriptions, Mau Mau figures as a void in the past, the filling in of which has become a way of “saying something about the present” (F. Cooper 313). In Ngũgĩ’s oeuvre, an earlier ambivalent retrospective meditation on a phenomenon that deeply divided the Gĩkũyũ community⁴⁹ gives way later to a forward-looking insurgent discourse that valorizes Mau Mau as a revolutionary movement devoted to ending all forms of oppression. Here, Mau Mau is depicted
as a trans-cultural phenomenon encompassing “all” those dedicated to reclaiming for “the people” what is rightfully theirs: the land and the products of their labor. It becomes an alternative unifying discourse, “the major icon” around which “the schismatic segments of Kenyan history are summoned and ordered into a coherent centre” (Ogude, “Narration” 278; Novels 33). Through Mau Mau, Ngũgĩ attempts to create a combative Fanonist narrative of national culture, one that is of sufficient scope both to serve as a counternarrative to the official narrative of *Uhuru*, and to overcome narratives that pit intra-national cultures against one another.

Mau Mau is also a messianic discourse with a great deal of cultural power and affective force. Ngũgĩ’s entry into what Stuart Hall would call the “discursive struggle” over Mau Mau dethrones Kenyatta as the national prophetic figure and replaces him with Kimathi. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ interweaves fictive historiography with “actual” history by placing characters alongside “historical” liberators in a pan-African struggle. This struggle is framed as a contest between “the past of a broken civilization . . . [with] black people scattered over the globe to feed the ever-demanding god of profit” and “the past of L’Ouverture, Turner, Chaka, Abdulla, Koitalel, *Ole Masai*, Kimathi, Mathenge, and others” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 214, emphasis added). In this way, Ngũgĩ’s Mau Mau is part of his construction of a “usable past,” which within this broader pan-African framework resembles the transcultural utopian “counternarrative” that Susan Buck-Morss calls a “universal history,” a term to which we will return in this chapter’s discussion of *Matigari* (110). As with Buck-Morss’s formulation, *Petals of Blood*’s particular insurgent history (of insurgents) aims to facilitate the eruption into the present of a repressed, radically destabilizing historical narrative that would enable a transformation of the future.
Additionally, Ngũgĩ’s appropriation of Mau Mau is also a utopian attempt to write, and even cause, an inverted “alternate history.” Karen Hellekson defines the alternate history as a literary genre in which some historical “nexus event” has “come out ‘wrong,’” in the sense of occurring differently than it did in our world (100). The classic example is Ward Moore’s Bring the Jubilee (1955), wherein as the result of minor differences at the Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederacy wins the U.S. Civil War. For Ngũgĩ, on the other hand, “actual” history (as well as “official” written history) has “come out wrong.” Petals of Blood’s insurrectionary prophecies of a Mau Mau “second coming” are nothing short of an attempt to repeat-with-difference the punctual “nexus event” of the uprising so that it can come out right. Abdulla’s remark about “new horizons . . . again,” is oddly enough an apt way to capture the novel’s desire for the re-birth of Mau Mau as a return to the past in order to retrieve a stolen future and restore it to the present (Ngũgĩ, Petals 137, emphasis added).

While Mau Mau represents the militant nationalist component of the utopian vision in Petals of Blood, the second key component is Karega’s socialism. The peasants and workers supply its potential body politic and revolutionary critical mass. It is by means of Karega’s activism that the dystopian mood in Petals of Blood’s fourth part begins to shift. To his own question “is there only one world?,” Karega offers this ambiguous response: “then we must create another world” (294). By effectively answering both “yes” and “no,” Karega imagines the world as historical—indeed, dialectical—as opposed to static. New Ilmorog, opened as it now is to the outside world, becomes an allegorical space for articulating a vision of “another world” that rejects “national and regional chauvinism” and refuses capitalism’s self-protective tendency to “sow discord” among its opponents (305). Yet as with the invocation of Mau Mau, Ngũgĩ’s utopia attempts simultaneously to be distinctly Kenyan. As Karega’s utopian consciousness
emerges, the entire novel’s rewriting of Kenyan history-as-resistance internally enacts its own use of this “usable past”:

The lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue singing until a human kingdom came: a world in which goodness and beauty and strength and courage would be seen not in how cunning one can be, not in how much power to oppress one possessed, but only in one’s contribution in creating a more humane world in which the inherited inventive genius of man in culture and science from all ages and climes would not be the monopoly of a few, but for the use of all . . . . If Abdulla could choose a brother, why couldn’t they all do the same? Choose brothers and sisters in sweat and toil, in struggle, and stand by one another and strive for that kingdom. (303)

As Karega becomes the text’s political “voice,” his critical analyses of the neocolony and his prophetic oratory about the future fuels the novel’s utopianism against the dystopian backdrop it depicts. His pronouncements also function as the doctrine by which the new millennial “kingdom” would be brought about by the actions of workers and peasants themselves as agents in history. By the end of the novel, Karega is imprisoned for his role in a workers’ strike at the Theng’eta factory, a strike that figures as a small, local rebellion that might spark future uprisings. These events are perfunctorily narrated in two pages. However, the socialist realism of the novel’s final section presents them as a sufficient object correlative to instigate revolutionary rumblings among the Ilmorog proletariat that might spark the sort of apocalyptic purgation heralded by the razing of Wanja’s bordello. As with the novel’s portrayals of interconnected lives, such scenes bear out the fact that for Ngũgĩ, “solidarity is not only possible but already exists” (P. Williams 81). Wanja waxes prophetic about the possibility of the imprisoned Karega’s “second coming,” but Karega promises that tomorrow, “it would be the workers and peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of
man and woman really begin” (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 344). In keeping with his beliefs, Karega transfers messianic status from any of the novel’s potential Christ or Waiyaki figures—Karega, Abdulla, Joseph, Mathenge, and Wanja’s child—to the collective. The novel’s ultimate utopian prophecy is that the “masses” will bring about an egalitarian new world “tomorrow . . . tomorrow” (345).

In images such as these, *Petals of Blood’s* reintroduces a hopeful utopian impulse at a disillusioned moment in both Kenyan and postcolonial history. Its vision is nothing short of the total destruction and creation figured in the apocalypse-utopia dialectic. As with many other revolutionary black literary utopias, *Petals of Blood’s* story of Ilmorog is an open-ended narrative that confronts dystopian historical determinacy with a narrative anti-closure that projects its reader’s attention beyond the text and into the “tomorrow” of history. However, Ngũgĩ’s future fiction testifies to the fact that the author found the novel to be an insufficient vehicle for his utopian vision. Ngũgĩ’s next novel seeks a revolutionary form better suited to its revolutionary content.

**The Transformation of Form in *Devil on the Cross***

The triumphal apocalyptic prophecy that concludes *Petals of Blood* represents Ngũgĩ’s first fictional endeavor to break free from dystopian postcolonial disenchantment and revive a revolutionary utopian impulse toward a transformed future. Nevertheless, what some understand as the novel’s “overall tragic mode,” its general tone of high, even “lofty” seriousness, as well as the predominance of its dystopian images, have caused some critics to view it as mired in the very postcolonial malaise it seeks to overcome (Berger 10). Even Gikandi, who acknowledges the text’s utopianism, argues that while “Karega’s disenchantment, perhaps because it is so radical, opens up spaces in which alternative narratives of community are to be imagined,” the novel is finally unable to surmount the “political impasse” it so carefully demarcates (Ngũgĩ 158, 159). Gikandi sees in the novel’s “tomorrow” a “doubt and uncertainty” in which “readers can
detect how even in its revolutionary message, *Petals of Blood* replicates the complicated and ambivalent endings in Ngũgĩ’s first three novels” (Ngũgĩ 159).

Gikandi’s conclusion usefully suggests an incomplete synergy among the text’s elements of liberatory ideology, form, content, and function. If, as Jameson would have it, realism has traditionally been “the central model of Marxist aesthetics,” then it is as though despite *Petals’* clearly readable longing for change, the novel’s own versions of realism confront that aesthetic’s tendency to become, as Walter Ben Michaels claims of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, a “literature only of exhausted desire and economic failure” (Jameson, *Unconscious* 104; Michaels, qtd. in Jameson, *Postmodernism* 200). Even the turn from critical realism toward socialist realism in part four seems unable to overcome these constraints. Beyond critics’ assessments of the novel, Ngũgĩ’s own future work suggests certain agreements with this view, hence Gikandi’s postulation of a “crisis of representation.” In light of this, it is useful to read Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels in the manner in which Jameson reads Lukács’s *oeuvre*, and ask “what if the earlier works proved to be fully comprehensible only in light of the later ones? What if . . . successive [works] proved to be a progressive exploration and enlargement of a single complex of problems?” (*Marxism and Form* 163). On the one hand, *Petals of Blood* clearly marks its author’s turn away from the dominant paradigm of previous works toward a new utopian, Marxist politics. On the other hand, however, subsequent works shed light on the way in which this political shift inaugurated a particular representational conundrum that, in *Petals of Blood*, remained incompletely resolved, and further, on what exactly these unresolved elements were. Gikandi’s remarks allude to what the formal departures that appear in Ngũgĩ’s next effort, *Devil on the Cross* illuminate: the “complex of problems” that emerges in *Petals of Blood* is directly related to the author’s search for the best aesthetic conduit for his utopian politics.
While the underwriting ideology changes little in the years following *Petals of Blood*, the aesthetic transformations that take place in Ngũgĩ’s fiction involve radical departures from that novel. Some of the most significant of these aesthetic shifts coalesce around the “problem of how well a European form [can] express” the “African national identity” crucial to his utopian vision (P. Williams 17-18). This includes his decision to write in Gĩkũyũ, a decision born of his experience collaborating with peasants on the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*.

For Ngũgĩ, the language question has multiple facets. One aspect is an Obi Wali-inspired desire to develop a distinctly “African” literature. Another is epistemological, ontological, and political, insomuch as Ngũgĩ regards the language of the colonizer as the medium for controlling “the most important area of domination . . . the mental universe of the colonized,” wherein “people [perceive] themselves and their relationship to the world” (*Decolonizing* 16). Language is also a means by which one becomes an exile, “divorced from his spoken language at home” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 17, emphasis added). The shift from English to Gĩkũyũ is thus, at last ideally, an attempt to sever his writing from the determinate and often oppressive influence of the “thought-processes and values of the adopted tongue,” a part of his “search for a revolutionary break with the neocolonial status quo” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 72, 25). It is simultaneously an attempt de-alienate his work from the “values of [the] mother tongue,” to don its “spiritual eyeglasses” in order to create literary “worlds” that are constitutively different than English prose in “moral, ethical, and aesthetic” terms (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 72, 14).

Yet another motive for Ngũgĩ’s return to Gĩkũyũ is a desire to connect his work to “the language of the masses” in order to reach workers and peasants, and to render his fictional worlds in the language of everyday life rather than the “cerebral” abstractions of English school
culture (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 72, 17). Encouraged by his experience collaborating with peasants in the performative space of the theater, Ngũgĩ’s fiction, beginning with *Devil on the Cross*, does not simply translate a novelistic aesthetic into the Gĩkũyũ language. It transposes the novel form into the aesthetic of Gĩkũyũ oral storytelling to reach an audience “schooled in oral stories” (Julien 145). Eileen Julien observes that this transition ultimately occurs less because of Wali-like notions about “authentic” African-ness than because it “offer[s] possibilities to achieve specific ends—in this instance, to appeal to a specific audience” (142). Notably, while the incendiary *Petals of Blood* garnered no such response, the Kenyan government found Ngũgĩ’s Gĩkũyũ-language work at the Kamĩrĩĩthu Theatre sufficiently threatening to ban *I Will Marry When I Want* and imprison Ngũgĩ without trial in December of 1977. The theater itself was razed by the authorities during the uprising of August, 1982, and Ngũgĩ went abroad into exile. These developments speak to the fact that the government at least saw in Ngũgĩ’s experiment the seeds of an oppositional collective.

*Devil on the Cross* is renowned for having been written on toilet paper during the months Ngũgĩ spent in Kamiti prison. Its pages body forth the formal transformations that occurred as a result of the author’s linguistic repatriation. Julien has noted that these changes corroborate Jameson’s argument that genre itself “is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms … form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right,” and that this is especially evident in situations of historical or cultural discontinuity (Jameson, *Unconscious* 141). In *Decolonizing the Mind*’s chapter on fiction, this is the central dilemma, and Ngũgĩ writes of his struggle to write a “novel” in a language that “did not have a significant tradition of novel or fiction writing,” and which was to be read by “an audience that had never read a novel” (74, 75). What emerges is a “simpler plot” than that of *Petals of Blood*, a mode of storytelling that at once
is crafted with a “stronger story element” and yet avoids “patronizing” readers (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 77). Ngũgĩ incorporates many forms of oral narrative, including Gĩkũyũ proverbs, fables, stories, songs, a call-and-response framing device, the fantastic, and parables. These last are drawn from what Ngũgĩ notes is the one book introduced by Europe that has been translated into (and read aloud in) every African language: the Christian Bible. Idiomatically speaking, the novel mines the cadences of everyday speech in a way that is noticeably unlike its predecessor’s literariness, another aspect of Ngũgĩ’s transliteration of his political message into features “people would be familiar with” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 78). Like *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* is a didactic novel. However, rather than hectoring its readers, it frames its contemporary political lessons in terms of the “oral tradition[’s]” lexicon of “moral lessons,” while also relying on this tradition as “an efficient conveyer of collective experience” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing*, 71; Gĩtĩtĩ 111).

The importance of collectivity is evident in another gesture away from the solitary practice of novel reading toward the more interactive experience of oral storytelling. Ngũgĩ revives a fading tradition by portraying a fictional gĩcaandĩ performer, a type of poet who accompanies a public storytelling performance by playing a musical gourd. Ngũgĩ’s gĩcaandĩ performer simulates “speaking” to the reader in a gesture that invites fellow community members to “enter” the story and its world. Importantly, Ngũgĩ’s project is not invested in the sort of folklorist fetishization of tradition that Fanon admonishes—the essentialized “orality” Julien sees “encased . . . under glass as it were” in the early Achebe, for instance—but rather a more living “manifestation of social consciousness, vision, and possibility allowed by particular moments and niches in African sociocultural life” (Julien 144, 155). The unique form that emerges from the collision of Gĩkũyũ spoken and European written forms is a dialogic text
bearing numerous elements and voices from its complicated historical milieu. Evan Mwangi points out that when *Devil on the Cross*’ narrator invokes Okot p’Bitek’s “Song of Lawino”—originally an Acoli poem that would reach [Ngũgĩ] only through transcription, translation, and publication as a commercially circulated text—the Gĩkũyũ ‘gĩcaandi’ artist underscores the interrelation of the written and the oral and the interpenetration of different African cultures” (32). However, this should not obscure the significance of Ngũgĩ’s text’s particular “location,” a written “orature” rendered in a subnational language yet interpenetrated by a multiplicity of written and oral intertexts with local, national, and transnational origins. These features testify that *Devil on the Cross* is a utopian effort to write “the national, viewed from the needs of the majority—peasants and workers” at a historically specific intersection of the local and the global (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 103). Its goal is to create the “necessary base for a take-off into the world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the international democratic and socialist community of tomorrow” (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing* 103). In other words, it is deeply invested in Ngũgĩ’s search for an appropriate utopian political aesthetic.

Although it is customary in discussions of *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* to contrast the two texts and catalog their differences, it is equally important to note their similarities. Despite the latter’s departure from the former’s realism, both novels are deeply historicist even as they vigorously rewrite “official” history. By demystifying neocolonial forms of capitalism and imperialism, both, through their insurgent historiographies, “educate desires” for sociopolitical change. *Devil on the Cross*’ utopian pedagogy preserves and even escalates the directness of *Petals of Blood* while radically changing its approach, imagery, and tone. *Devil on the Cross*’ drastic move away from realism might be read as a continuation of the strain that the socialist realism in part four of *Petals of Blood* already begins to exert on novelistic
“verisimilitude.” In the later novel, characters and scenes continue to flatten into political schematizations; ideological positions are staked out even more simply and transparently; and the grotesque and the fantastic are used to intensify key points. With the exception of its gender politics, the political, economic, and theoretical content of Devil on the Cross’ depiction of neocolonial Kenya is nearly identical with Petals of Blood.

The differences between the two novels are thus largely confined to form. Even these changes are by no means total, however, and an additional important similarity lies in the fact that the two narratives share not only a utopianism, but also utopian literary conventions. Both employ the fictional no-place of Ilmorog as their primary topos, and each represents the neocolony as a dystopia from which it makes a dialectical turn toward a socialist utopia via the open-ended utopian form. Finally, each text leavens its rhetoric by drawing on Gĩkũyũ, Christian, and Fanonist sources to overlay its narrative with a messianic discourse that links utopia with an impending apocalypse.

The tensions between these similarities and differences indicate how Devil on the Cross reads “like a sequel to Petals of Blood,” and even “like a second chance” (Amoko, Postcolonialism 94; P. Williams 103). Devil on the Cross employs a different plot structure, but as with Petals of Blood, plot is subservient to the politics for which it serves as a vehicle. The novel’s gĩcaandĩ player claims to be a “prophet of justice,” and endows his story with “the language of apocalypse and revelation” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 212). The story follows another group of four protagonists, who, along with two of the novel’s principal antagonists, journey to Ilmorog in a matatũ bus. As in Petals of Blood, they discover unknown connections with one another. Warĩĩnga is a woman with a past similar to Wanja’s: also sexually used and then rebuked by a rich older man, she leaves Nairobi for Ilmorog jobless, homeless, and suicidal after rejecting the
unwanted advances of her lecherous employer, Boss Kĩhara. Gatuĩria is a professor of music at the University of Nairobi, who attempts to compose a nationalist oratorio. Wangarĩ is an aging former member of the forest army, but, as with Petals of Blood’s Abdulla, contemporary Kenya finds her reduced to penury and marginality. Mũturi is a participant in a secret revolutionary workers’ movement. These protagonists travel with Robin Mwaũra, the unscrupulous petty businessman who owns the mataũ, and Mwĩrer wa Mũkiraaĩ, a mysterious man in dark glasses. All bear ominous invitations to either a “Devil’s Feast” or a “Big Feast” in Ilmorog, where a competition will determine seven experts in “modern theft and robbery” who will be awarded large loans and the directorships of financial institutions. The wealthy Mwĩrer wa Mũkiraaĩ’s ticket is “real,” while the others are forgeries printed by a group of student activists bent on exposing the inner-workings of the neocolony.

Many have noted that the journey depicted in the narrative resembles John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. However, in Devil on the Cross, the journey is not a “vertical” one toward a utopian “Celestial City,” but an earthly, “horizontal” one toward a “City of Destruction.” Although in Devil on the Cross Cape Town bears the name of “Golden Heights,” the rest of Ilmorog, with its New Jerusalem slum and its brewery, is one that readers of Petals of Blood will recognize. It functions in Devil on the Cross as both the City of Destruction—a capitalist “Vanity Fair”—and a microcosmic figure of a potential “new Earth,” an earthly “Celestial City” that “[the country] should have given birth to . . . long ago” (Ngūgĩ, Devil 246, 46). The characters attend the Devil’s Feast, which is otherwise reserved for well-heeled compradors and representatives from the U.S., Europe, and Japan. The “robbery competition” dominates the narrative with its phantasmagorical boastings by hideously deformed paragons of the neocolonial economy. This frank exposé of multinational capitalist exploitation performs in striking fashion
The dystopia’s function of “disclosure.” A scandalized Wangarĩ summons the police, only to find them side with the “robbers.” Mūturi and a contingent of workers, peasants, and students stage a revolt that the police immediately, and brutally, crush.

The narrative then breaks off abruptly and picks up two years later, shifting its focus from the space of Ilmorog to the lives of two characters: Warĩnga, who has been “reborn” as a self-reliant mechanic, and Gatuũria, who is engaged to marry Warĩnga and has completed his oratorio. However, Warĩnga discovers that Gatuũria’s father is the estranged father of her child and shoots him with a gun Mūturi had given her. The novel ends ambivalently, in an ellipsis. While Gatuũria remains behind in a palsy of indecision, Warĩnga walks confidently into an ambiguous, unrepresented future “without once looking back” (254). The novel thus pushes further into the “future” than Petals of Blood by resolving one important conflict, yet still ends in an anti-closure that suspends fulfillment. The future is once again bound up in tropes of prophecy. Balogun argues that Warĩnga’s story reads like a hagiography, only in this case, Christian tropes are appropriated to portray Warĩnga’s conversion “from a devout Christianity to a devout Marxist revolutionary” (“Hagiography” 136).

*Devil on the Cross*’ narrative is overdetermined by the discourse of Christianity. The unabashed “blatantness” of this aesthetic is immediately evident in the novel’s use of a Bunyan-esque dream sequence to thematize the dystopian world of the neocolony (P. Williams 107). Warĩnga experiences a nightmare that consolidates Ngũgĩ’s historiography of *Uhuru* as well as his politics:

She saw first the darkness, carved open at one side to reveal a Cross . . . . Then she saw a crowd of people dressed in rags walking in the light, propelling the Devil towards the Cross. The Devil was clad in a silk suit . . . . The Devil had two mouths, one on his forehead and the other at the back of his head. His belly sagged as if it were about to give birth to all the evils of the world. His skin was red, like that of a pig . . . . He moaned, beseeching the people not to crucify him, swearing
that he and all his followers would never again build Hell for the people on Earth. And there and then the people crucified the Devil on the Cross, and they went away singing songs of victory. After three days, there came others dressed in suits and ties, who lifted the Devil down from the cross. And they knelt before him and beseeching him to give them a portion of his robes of cunning. And their bellies bean to swell, and they stood up, and they walked toward Warĩnga, laughing at her, stroking their bellies, which had now inherited all the evils of the world. (Ngũgĩ, Devil 13-14)

This obvious appropriation, inversion, and “perversion” of familiar Christian tropes re-presents decolonization as a moment of anti-salvation and the neocolony as the resurrection of a dystopian hell on earth. Furthermore, Warĩnga’s nightmare frames the entire narrative thematically and aesthetically. The dream’s unsubtle symbolism pits “the people” in rags against “others” in suits to install the theme of class struggle, and also swiftly introduces and allegorizes the comprador bourgeoisie. As with the previous novel, the world of Devil on the Cross is one in which the euphoria of independence and its “songs of collective good” have given way to “new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of money,” learned from “American experts” (15). The valuations ascribed to these positions are so clear that they scarcely require comment.

However, unlike the utopian counter-discourse exemplified in the earlier novel by Karega’s often-awkward intellectual appeals, Devil on the Cross fashions a discourse in which Ngũgĩ’s ideology can be conveyed on a different register: revolutionary class politics are transposed into the language of the allegoric parable. In addition to the Christian tropes in Warĩnga’s dream, the novel incorporates elements from the Gĩkũyũ-language stories that constituted Ngũgĩ’s first “schooling,” in which the communal “good” was elucidated through confrontations between “two types of characters”: “truly human beings with qualities of courage . . . hatred of evil . . . [and] concern for others,” and “a man-eat-man two-mouthed species with qualities of greed, selfishness, individualism, and hatred of what was good for the larger co-operative community,” a species that “lived on the labor of humans” (Ngũgĩ, Decolonizing 10,
The two kinds of “flat” characters in *Devil on the Cross* function in a similar way as typological “interpretive signposts” and “mediators of theme” (Ndigirigi 97, 96).

The oversimplification of a stultifying postcolonial reality through devices like parables reflects Ngũgĩ’s struggle to fashion a liberatory pedagogy by depicting this historical complexity in ways that endow it with both coherence and a clearly defined set of choices represented via familiar discourses. In taking the risk of this strategic essentialism, *Devil on the Cross* overcomes the politically incapacitating ambiguity of Ngũgĩ’s early works. At a fragmented and unstable moment during the world-systemic transition when multinational corporatism has taken capitalism’s totalizing tendencies to new extremes, Ngũgĩ responds with a utopianism that transliterates an equally totalizing Marxist analytic through modes of storytelling that employ totally unambiguous, traditional systems of “good” and “evil.”

Amoko has argued that “capitalism relies on mystification so that various forms of exploitation and exclusion are made to seem not only just but also inevitable” (*Postcolonialism* 73). The moralism with which *Devil on the Cross*’ postcolonial dystopia frames its concern for “justice,” then, uses local narratives to critically demystify global neocolonial capitalism—including injustices that can very well be understood as moral bankruptcy—by recasting political and economic abstractions in palpable, familiar, human terms. This approach is not without its critics. However at the heart of Ngũgĩ’s strategy is the desire for a politics that is at once situatedly “human” and coherently totalizing. In a way, it already anticipates what Tom Moylan, writing at the millennium, posits as a dialectical sublation of the self-undermining critique and fragmentary, ambiguous micropolitics of the postmodern period by a utopianism that attempts to meet the challenges of globalism through a “more totalizing critique of the political economy” that “takes the political imagination into the larger realm of a democratically unified alliance.
politics” (Scraps 190). This sort of political solidarity is, of course, the utopian objective of Ngũgĩ’s “nationalism,” in which the local and the global are complexly interconnected. Devil on the Cross’ interweaving of structural transnational politico-economic analysis with the narrative structures of familiar local parables is another step in Ngũgĩ’s project of hashing out an affirmative political aesthetic capable of addressing the pressing questions posed by globalization.

Warĩĩnga’s dream also introduces the aesthetic transformation that, with the exception of the change in language, constitutes the most drastic difference between Devil on the Cross and its predecessor. The dream’s very “dreaminess”—its phantasmagoric setting and monstrous figures—mark the “fantastic’s” entrance into Ngũgĩ’s fiction. In Devil on the Cross’ narrative centerpiece, the theft and robbery competition, the novel’s aesthetic is overtaken by literalized versions of the hyperbolic, blood-drinking, flesh-eating “gnomic angels” that the final pages of Petals of Blood briefly allude to in the abstract. Ngũgĩ’s references to the ogre-like creatures that appeared in the tales he heard in his youth confirm the relationship between this aesthetic alteration and the modes of storytelling he chose for Devil on the Cross.

However, the text’s fantasticalities and grotesqueries also have other sources, as well as distinctive uses and implications that are directly related to Ngũgĩ’s multi-novel utopian project. One such factor involves a three-fold aesthetic decolonization, and even a liberation, of both form and content. Lewis Nkosi is one of many who observe a generalized flight from literary realism in African fiction, an aesthetic change widely understood as a “sign of the crisis affecting the postcolonial novel in Africa generally,” as authors attempt to “plot” the violence, corruption, economic decline, and disillusionment “among Africa’s populations” (Nkosi 199). Indeed, the largely realist Petals of Blood is an anomaly with respect to this trend among major African
writers that dates back to the late 1960s and reflects a deeply historical crisis that cannot be disentangled from Ngũgĩ’s struggle with utopian representation.

The first way in which the literary fantastic assists Ngũgĩ’s negotiation of this crisis involves the author’s break from a form-as-ideology in a way that is related to, but not identical with, his exchange of languages. Ngũgĩ leaves behind the nearly exhausted literary “soil out of which his major fiction had grown,” and dispenses along with it the kind of ideological complicity he attributes to the use of English, as well as a dispiriting postcolonial disenchantment and a bourgeois moral anemia (Nkosi 200). Nkosi maintains that these ideological issues are sedimented in the novel form itself, “as if the ‘spiritual penury’ which afflicts the national middle class had taken revenge on the very aesthetic . . . vehicle of its own class consciousness” (200). Second, Ngũgĩ shares a comradeship with other African authors who seek images with sufficient novelty and power to “plot the story” of historically unprecedented neocolonial corruption and exploitation; as Ngũgĩ sees it, this story is sufficiently surreal to be “stranger than fiction” (Nkosi 199; Ngũgĩ, Decolonizing 78). In this respect, the fantastic as form and content is interwoven with dystopian social critique. Third, Devil on the Cross’ breaching of “the boundary between novelistic realism and what lies beyond: fantasy, the supernatural, magic realism, the hyper-real, Bakhtinian grotesque realism, etc.,” enriches the text with an expanded aesthetic arsenal for creating its world and conveying its message (P. Williams 111). These resources are mobilized as part of an attempt to break free of the dystopian malaise from which Petals of Blood’s realism is unable to extricate itself, as well as an artistic liberation of the utopian impulse via a broader and more fertile aesthetic field for imagining difference.

This last development is what Brenda Cooper posits in claiming that magical realism transgresses aesthetic and cultural borders so that “newness is free to enter the world” (217). By
virtue of the fundamental alterations each text’s “newness” makes to the normalized schema of novelistic verisimilitude, magical realism inevitably offers a “holistic” vision (B. Cooper 2). That is, it engages in the utopian practice of worlding, endowing each fictional world with a totalized, absent paradigm that determines its own laws governing what is possible, typically in defiance of the pseudo-realistic laws of the European novel. In Cooper’s view, “such a project can ‘reintegrate’ the postmodern concern for ‘liminality, diversity, multivalency’ with the ‘historical explanatory force’” of totalizing modern political theories such as Marxism (1-2). Indeed, despite Ngũgĩ’s departure in *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* from the “realism” with which Marxism is so often simplistically associated, his treatment of political economy is not compromised, and is even enhanced. Finally, magical realism’s proclivity for “worlding” is in keeping with apocalyptic literature’s tendency to comprehensively order—and its desire to comprehensively alter—history. These concerns underscore how Ngũgĩ’s “crisis” is indeed a representational one. That is to say, his utopian vision remains remarkably consistent despite the changes in his aesthetic, which serve to expand his novels’ imaginative horizons.

Several critics who discuss the fantastic in *Devil on the Cross* wrote when Bakhtinian theory was at the height of its popularity, and Patrick Williams’s reference to Bakhtin is typical of the way such critics tend to frame their observations in the terms established by Bakhtin’s theory of the “carnival-grotesque.” Bakhtin’s concepts are indeed useful for explicating the relationship between grotesque figures like the devil of Warĩĩnga’s dream and the novel’s utopian strategy. With respect to Ngũgĩ’s ongoing dialectical project, it is especially worth noting that for Bakhtin, “grotesque realism . . . is a point-by-point inversion of the categories used” by Soviet officialdom “to define Socialist Realism” of the sort echoed in *Petals of Blood* (Holquist xvii, emphasis added). In the first place, Ngũgĩ’s migration from English-language
novelistic discourse to Gĩkũyũ-language storytelling parallels the difference between “official” language and the demotic, often “vulgar” vernacular of everyday life used in the carnivalesque.61 For Bakhtin, the populism and common language of “non-official cultures” are constitutive of the way in which “the utopian ideal and the realistic merged in . . . carnival experience,” which he describes as “a second life . . . a ‘world inside out,’” where, through “the suspension of all hierarchical precedence,” a collectivity was created in which “all were considered equal” (Rabelais 10-11). The carnivalesque utopia is therefore potentially subversive and even liberatory insomuch as it “consecrate[s] inventive freedom,” and “liberate[s] from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 34).

Grotesque representations of the body characterized by “exaggeration” and “wild hyperbole” are integral to the carnivalesque’s utopian potential in ways that are consequential for Devil on the Cross’ aesthetic (Berger 6). Embellished, grotesque physicality often involves scatological references to the “lower body stratum” in a way that “degrades but also frees” by horizontally leveling artificial “vertical” social distinctions through its “horizontal” emphasis on an inescapable shared human embodiment (Berger 6). This “liberating degradation” also works through an ambivalence that acknowledges death and decay, but also signifies rebirth and regeneration. Bakhtin writes, “the material bodily principle” is “something universal, representing all the people”; it “is contained not in a biological individual, nor in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (Rabelais 19). Warĩĩnga’s nightmare is a harbinger of the grotesque depictions of the body that gorge Devil on the Cross’ aesthetic during the robbery competition, and these represent an important aesthetic innovation in Ngũgĩ’s
political project. Such depictions are used in a highly ambivalent manner, and it is necessary to acknowledge both sides of this contradiction in order to apprehend their roles in the postcolonial dialectic of dystopia and utopia at work in the novel.

The novel’s use of the fantastic and the grotesque is carefully localized. With the exceptions of the dream sequences “the two registers of the real and the fantastic belong to two different worlds in Devil on the Cross: the latter to the cave . . . of the capitalist ‘thieves and robbers’; the former to the world outside” (P. Williams 112). In this way, the novel incorporates one of magical realism’s primary devices: the collision of worlds, cultures, norms, and values. In infiltrating the world of the “haves,” the novel’s protagonists function as both conventional utopian “visitors” to an Other world and the reader-surrogates who, in Tzvetan Todorov’s formulation of the fantastic, perform the genre-defining “hesitat[ion] between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (Todorov 33). An incredulous Mũturi speaks to this very sort of blurring of the “real,” the empirical, and the supernatural when he testifies that “what I have seen and heard in that cave beats all the miracles I’ve ever experienced” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 155). The world of the cave, like Ilmorog’s Golden Heights, is a capitalist dream-world, where Uhuru means that, for the wealthy few, “the profit curve should go up and up all the time” like “a progressive path to paradise,” and that future generations will grow up to be “just like European children” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 165, 177). The cultural erasure implied here is symptomatic of lingering colonial Eurocentrism and its embrasure by the comprador class. Indeed, present for the theft and robbery competition are “distinguished guests” from the “First Word’s” foremost powers, before whom the comprador nationals grovel and scrape. However, this erasure also reflects the multinational dimensions of the novel’s capitalist utopia, which already seems to be
progressing toward the “universal homogenous state” that Fukuyama envisioned at the end of the 1980s. The bifurcation of worlds in *Devil on the Cross* is linguistically doubled. The official “language of business” and other references to the Euro-American cultural phenomena saturating the neocolony are estrangingly preserved in English in the Gĩkũyũ version of the novel, and are italicized in the English translation, thus calling attention to their “foreignness.”

The novel’s most estranging features are concentrated in the cave where, in great detail, the political and economic geography of neocolonialism is mapped in a way that is reminiscent of *Petals of Blood*. However, Ngũgĩ’s transformed form results in a very different pedagogical approach. This “pedagogy of the grotesque” is exemplified by the competition itself, in which several businessmen boast of titanic personal and economic exploits, and of schemes for future atrocities. The narrator’s description of one of the participants, Nditika wa Ngũńni, is typical of the grotesque Brechtian aestheticization of these characters as the inheritors of “all the evils of the world”:

> Nditika wa Ngũńni was very fat. His head was huge, like a mountain. His belly hung over his belt, big and arrogant. His eyes were the size of two large red electric bulbs, and it looked as if they had been placed on his face by a Creator impatient to get on with another job. His hair was parted in the middle, so that the hair on either side of the parting looked like two ridges facing each other on either side of a tarmac road. He had on a black suit. The jacket had tails cut in the shape of the wings of the big green and blue flies that are normally found in pit latrines or among rotting rubbish. His shirt had frills down the front. He was wearing a black bow tie. His eyes rolled in time to his words. (176)

In a similar manner to other contestants, Nditika brags of his mistresses and the superhuman quantities of rich food he consumes in the course of a day. He boasts of his “BMW (which stands for *Be My Woman*)” and of how he has grown wealthy by exploiting his workers, including former Mau Mau: “all these joys have grown out of modern theft and robbery. . . . I own several
farms in Njoro, Elburgon, and Kitale. I pay my workers seventy-five shillings a month, plus a daily ration of flour and a weekly bottle of separated milk. Ha! ha! ha!” (176, 177).

Whereas other contestants imagine horrifying biopolitical schemes to abuse workers for further profit by grinding laborers’ bodies into fertilizer or sequestering the very air they breathe and selling it back to them at a profit, Ndïtika wa Ngũnji’s plan to “improve the quality of . . . propertied lives” is based in a lament rooted in the “lower body-stratum”: “with all my property, what do I have, as a human being, that a . . . poor man does not have? I have one mouth, just like the poor; I have one belly, just like the poor . . . I have one . . . er, you know what I mean, just one like the poorest of men” (179-180). His plan would use the “magic” of Western technology to create a “factory for manufacturing human parts” (180). Thus, “a rich man who could afford them could have two or three mouths, two bellies, two cocks and two hearts”; he could even “purchase immortality” and “leave death to the poor! Ha! ha! ha!” (180, 181). However, Ndïtika is “horrified,” when his wife mentions a desire for “two female organs”: “I told her to take her equalities to Europe or America . . . Here we are Africans, and we must practice African culture. I struck her a blow on the face” (181, italics in original). His own desires appear grotesque even to him when they are desired by another, and especially by a woman. Beyond the self-absorption they communicate, such images reflect Devil on the Cross’ conflation of capitalism with violent patriarchy.

Images of grotesque embodiment in Devil on the Cross perform a double function. The first aspect involves the links Bakhtin observes connecting such representations of “copulation, birth, growth, eating, drinking, [and] defecation” to the discourses of folk humor, and especially forms of satire (Rabelais 88). The scenes in Ilmorog’s den of thieves are the primary means by which Devil on the Cross represents neocolonialism through dystopian satire rather than the
“straight” realism of its predecessor. The understanding of utopianism that emerges from Bakhtin’s theory parallels the often-observed kinship between satirical traditions and utopian forms. Elliott underscores this connection when he claims that the “Janus-face[d]” genre of utopian literature inverts the structure of satire, an aesthetic mode “characterized by two main elements: the predominating negative part, which attacks folly or vice, and the understated positive part, which establishes . . . a standard of excellence, against which folly and vice are judged” (22). The “younger” genre of dystopia in turn inverts this inversion and primarily shows the genre’s critical “face.” Yet even in the dystopia, the utopian “standard of excellence” is retained, if largely implied.

The grotesquity of the cave’s spectacle serves a didactic function by amplifying the vices that it assaults. Ogude observes that in it, “greed and power [are] magnified to their full and logical extremes—reduced to their essences” (Novels 58). The unambiguousness of these representations, as well as their fantastical difference from the more “realistic” outside world, cognitively estranges them, augmenting the poignancy and accessibility of the text’s political critique. This dystopian representation of the cave’s capitalist “utopia” does indeed imply a eutopian alternative by way of negation, especially through its extreme depictions of exploitation, broken labor strikes, and splintered solidarity. However, the novel takes no chances with its pedagogy, and offers a more explicit alternative thorough the egalitarian dreams, and scandalized reactions, of socialist “patriots” from the underclass like Wangarĩ, Mūturi, and eventually, Warĩĩnga. By incorporating these polarized political visions, Devil on the Cross leverages both the “negative” and “positive” elements of grotesque satire.

The grotesque is also deployed in service of satirical ridicule and humor, which serve a utopian function. If neocolonialism appears in Petals of Blood as tragedy, it reappears in Devil
on the Cross as farce. The text’s representation of the Devil’s Feast is not unlike Bakhtin’s “feast of fools,” a “parody and travesty” of austere church officialdom that included the “grotesque degradation” of sacralized symbols and “their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing” (Rabelais 74-75). Such mockery of the “sacred” abounds in Devil on the Cross. As in Bakhtin’s grotesque, “the devils and hell itself appear as comic monsters,” and concomitantly, the monstrous but ideologically sanctified practices of “free-market” capitalism and its “upper-class” paragons are reduced to low comedy (Rabelais 41). Roger A. Berger contends that this aesthetic functions “first, to demystify such figures and make them objects of abuse and, second, to remove whatever residual fear . . . readers might have of these kinds of characters by subjecting them to ridicule through the use of organic, grotesque imagery” (19). This derisive satire has everything to do with what Bakhtin sees as the hierarchy-leveling powers of laughter, and the comic is put to sociopolitical use in Ngũgĩ’s novel insomuch as “what cannot be taken seriously loses its authority” (Berger 19). Although the novel’s grotesque representations are of an ambivalent nature that requires attention to their “darker” side, it is quite clear that the text encourages readers to laugh at the “authority figures” at the feast and deride their “verbal diarrhoea” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 196). The rebellion that interrupts the feast is a serious matter, but it also incorporates elements of slapstick such that even the dwellers of New Jerusalem are able to laugh at “the wonderful spectacle of Gĩtutu wa Gataangũrũ,” another fantastically obese thief, “and Nditika wa Ngũũnji, trying to run away, like two spiders with eggs, while their buttocks were lashed by their pursuers with sticks” (207).

This humor is symptomatic of how the Janus-faced nature of satire has an affirmative aspect as well. Bakhtin writes that “laughter at the feast of fools was not, of course, an abstract
and purely negative mockery of . . . the Church’s hierarchy. The negative derisive element was deeply immersed in the triumphal theme of bodily regeneration and renewal” (Rabelais 75). The most important utopian implication of this “renewal” is that the “body” and the “body politic” are interrelated and in many ways homologous. It is a useful corrective to note that just as Gilroy cautions about overestimating the political power of parody, Terry Eagleton is among those who sound warnings about romanticizing the alleged subversive potential of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. However, Devil on the Cross’ combining of grotesque satire with its distinctive political content makes for an effective utopian pedagogy. This aesthetic not only achieves a forceful, incisive critique, but also assumes and cultivates a radically different attitude than the tragic, and sometimes pedantic, Petals of Blood. This change in mood is instrumental in shaking loose from the disenchantment that colors the earlier text. Booker argues that Ngũgĩ’s fantastical aesthetic manages to work as a political text, while also succeeding as a sophisticated work of art, despite remaining “so openly (even simplistically) didactic.” In these ways, Devil on the Cross appears to make significant “progress” in regard to some of the representational dilemmas Ngũgĩ confronts in his postcolonial novels.

Satirical ridicule and laughter, however, are but one side of Ngũgĩ’s ambivalent employment of the grotesque. The other side, which may in fact be its obverse, is no less critical, but there is little about it that is ludic. Indeed, the ambivalence of Devil on the Cross’ cave of thieves is a means of confronting the pervasive, banal grotesquery of postcolonial reality, and inevitably for Ngũgĩ, its interconnections with neocolonialism. Additionally, Booker argues that Devil on the Cross’ definitive Brechtian estranging moment occurs when “readers experience the shock of realizing that even the book’s most seemingly fantastic descriptions of capitalism are not that far off the mark” (“African Literature” 67). Indeed, although Gilbert Rist, no friend of
developmentalist ideology, ridicules dependency theory’s conception of “relations of domination . . . according to the model of blood transfusion . . . so that the centre became a huge Ali Baba’s cave continually replenished by thieves and swindlers bleeding the periphery dry,” even Ngũgĩ’s most extreme literalizations of these very metaphors—such as the “Kenyo-Saxon Exporters” of “Human Blood and Flesh”—nevertheless expose something eerily familiar about the politico-economic order of things (Rist 199; Ngũgĩ, Devil 187). Surely, it is difficult to deny that through its depictions of the “wealth of nations,” the machinations of the World Bank, and the enriching of the privileged few through the labor of the many, Devil on the Cross’ world of “modern theft and robbery” aims to represent nothing so much as a denuded, denaturalized, multinational capitalism seen from the estranging perspective of the exploited; a perspective from which the globalist vision of the “Free World” indeed appears as “a world where there are absolutely no barriers to stealing from others” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 173, italics in original).

Ogude borrows Jean-Francois Bayart’s phrase, “the politics of the belly” to describe how Devil on the Cross’s extreme aesthetic veers close to the realities of neocolonial Kenya, where such a politics is “very much in the imagination of Kenyans and is not just a fictive creation of Ngũgĩ” (Novels 61). The novel’s gastropathic villains are represented as corporealizations of capitalist voracity and individual greed. The “bulging stomachs” of Ngũgĩ’s newly rich Kenyans resemble those of the businessmen of an earlier era of Western capitalism: literal, publically readable embodiments of accumulated wealth and plentitude. 66 Further, as Ogude notes, “boasting about one’s wealth in Kenya is part of the social norm” among “men of big bellies like Oloitiptip,” one of Moi’s ministers, who declared in front of parliament, “I’ve got money. . . . I am able to spend 150 million shillings from my own pocket for the marriage of my son . . . I have six cars, two big houses, twelve wives and sixty-seven children” (Novels 61). For Ogude,
Oloitiptip is paradigmatic of the “everyday” politics of the postcolony, “whose primary objective is to acquire power as the ultimate vehicle for economic success” (*Novels* 61). This self-congratulatory, histrionic politics pretends no subterfuge. What Ngũgĩ’s characters experience as an “incredible spectacle” is simultaneously a faithful representation of the ordinary, one in which Ngũgĩ makes clear that men like Oloitiptip “have been fattened” by the “sweat and blood” of the powerless (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 208). In this way, the novel deploys the “realism” in grotesque realism to create a trenchant dystopia, one similar to other dystopias in black literature in that its representation of a “nightmare world” leans on a documentation of reality experienced from the margins of a violently unequal society. This “other side” of *Devil on the Cross*’ grotesquery indicates how its aesthetic oscillates between “rational” and “marvelous” explanations for what it narrates, thus leveraging the political utility of the fantastic’s ability to induce reader “hesitation.” This aesthetic’s most useful function is to exemplify how the grotesque marks “the locus of conflict between two contradictory principles” in a way that “infects order with its own negation,” and in this respect, beyond the leveling power of laughter, it entails a more “radical subversion, for it opens the gaping chasm of categorical separation” (Robertson 5).

While the dystopian Devil’s Feast dominates *Devil on the Cross*’ narrative, the novel uses this fantastic scene to initiate a utopian turn. Warĩĩnga employs metaphors of renewal to insist that the kind of “talk” in the cave must be met with optimism as “the rain that should make buried love for one’s country burgeon,” and that without coming face to face with “shit,” one “will never learn the difference between dirt and cleanliness, hate and love” (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 132). *Devil on the Cross* misses no pedagogical opportunity, and the “learning” experienced by the reader-surrogate protagonists is narrated in order to make the text’s utopian politics unambiguous. Warĩĩnga remarks, “I feel as if I have lived in darkness all of my life,” and the
text’s class-inflected collision of worlds is represented as a consciousness-transforming event of Pauline proportions (128). The cave episode engenders a perspectival shift that allows Warĩŋa to “see” through the “lens in her head” that her Uhuru generation has “been taught to see and to hear only one world” (183, 185). Seen anew, this world appears as one in which “the edifice of progress is erected on top of the corpses of human beings” (131). Warĩŋa’s mental vision gives way to a revelation, in which this single world divides into the “two worlds” made visible by the cave and spatialized in Ilmorog, “the world of the robber and the world of the robbed . . . of those who eat what has been produced by others and the producers themselves” (186).

Moreover, there emerges a “third world, the world of revolutionary overthrow of the system” (188). The utopian vision that gives this incipient world it contours in Devil on the Cross has changed little since Petals of Blood. It reaches back to a re-visioned Mau Mau generation to connect unfinished business with the potential for an anti-neocolonial revolt posited as latent in the next generation. The text looks toward the horizon of a future in which the pending revolution will create an egalitarian, socialist world for peasants and workers. As with Petals of Blood, this utopia remains an unrealized, hopeful promise. However, Devil on the Cross makes additional gestures in the direction of this future that take a step further than the previous novel.

One such move beyond Petals of Blood’s largely expository utopian rhetoric is the miniature cataclysm that occurs at the end of the first part of Devil on the Cross. During the Devil’s Feast, Mũturi’s secret workers’ organization, which figures as an immanent, already existing solidarity among the oppressed (an imperium in imperio of sorts) succeeds in organizing Ilmorog’s “wretched of Kenya,” who stage an uprising at the cave. As the crowd attacks, the text argues that the “peace and the order and the stability” it disrupts are in fact integral to the world
“of the rich,” and to a pacifying rhetoric designed to preserve the neocolonial status quo and placate nervous international investors (204). Ngũgĩ narrates the uprising by manipulating the Christian discourse that saturates the novel. The workers themselves sing refashioned hymns akin to those Ngũgĩ attributes to the Mau Mau. This “army” of singing workers stages a fantastic spectacle of its own, as what looks to Warĩĩnga to be “the whole” of a mobilized New Jerusalem drives away the thieves and annihilates the cave’s “world,” reducing it to a mephitic “hell” of “burnt debris” (201, 207).

The revolt is not, however, a true apocalyptic moment of transformation. Rather, the destruction of the cave serves as an object lesson of “the power of a people united” (211). The uprising is soon crushed by a lethal police counteraction, and the second part of the narrative reveals that the revolt has not changed Ilmorog in any visible way. The coming of a true (and unironic) New Jerusalem remains deferred and unrepresented in the text. Mũturi takes to a kind of revolutionary “preaching” and becomes for a brief time Devil on the Cross’ incarnation of Karega. He insists that there will be a “workers’ feast some time in the future,” thus uttering Devil on the Cross’ version of the utopian prophecy that runs through Ngũgĩ’s three postcolonial novels (211). Before he is arrested, he hands Warĩĩnga a gun he calls her “invitation” to that feast, underscoring how this prophecy, as in Petals of Blood, involves human rather than divine intervention.

Following the sharp break in the narrative after the stymied rebellion, Devil on the Cross takes a new turn in its exploration of utopian possibilities, one that carries the narrative beyond the point reached by Petals of Blood only to arrive at limitations of its own that are in turn surpassed in Matigari. Although the novel’s protagonists are essentialized types who function, like characters in a morality play, as vehicles for universalized values, the text sharpens its focus
on the individual fortunes of two characters, Gatuĩria and Warĩĩnga. The latter is the balladized heroine of the gĩcaandĩ performer’s tale. Zamora notes a “parallel construction of communal and individual destinies . . . in apocalyptic fiction,” whereby the “outer events of sacred history” are recapitulated as “the inner events that may occur within the soul of every person” (Apocalypse 17). In Ngũgĩ’s novel, the powerful events at the cave result in an “intopian” conversion whereby Warĩĩnga transforms from a victim of capitalist patriarchy to a woman in control of her own her-story. For Warĩĩnga, the revolt discloses the connections between capitalist class-based Otherization and exploitation, and the gender-based exploitive experiences of women under the same regime. Part two thus moves toward a mutualistic basis for multiple-difference alliance politics, in which representations of gender are used to argue for strategic solidarity among balkanized groups of the exploited. Additionally, Warĩĩnga rewrites the problematic story of Wanja from Petals of Blood, and by means of this narrative, the final chapters of Devil on the Cross rework Ngũgĩ’s gender politics (albeit with only partial success). Finally, through Warĩĩnga’s intopian rebirth, Devil on the Cross represents on individual terms an apocalyptic destruction-creation that signifies the kind of political consciousness and decisive action necessary to fulfill its utopian prophecy.

When the gĩcaandĩ prophet picks up “the broken thread” of his narrative, Warĩĩnga the “mere flower” has been reborn as “Warĩĩnga, the worker!” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 215, 216, 218). This Warĩĩnga has discovered her “real strength . . . her true humanity” by putting herself through the polytechnic school and becoming a mechanic. She is also an expert in martial arts, and packing Mũturi’s pistol, Warĩĩnga is now a force to be reckoned with who battles prejudices to successfully “storm [the] man’s citadel” of her new profession (220). She has equal standing—even a kind of at-homeness—with her male coworkers at a Nairobi garage, where the mechanics
create an alternative business cooperative in which “the fruits of each worker’s labor went into his own pocket. But at the end of every month each worker would contribute a fixed sum to a common pool” (222). Their microcosmic workers’ utopia, however, is destroyed by the collusive political, economic, and patriarchal interests that loom over the novel’s world. This occurs when the City Council supports the plans of Boss Kīhara and his international corporate collaborators to turn the site into a hotel for tourists. One of the subnarratives at work in Ngūgī’s texts is in fact a demythologizing portrayal of the postcolony’s transformation into an exoticized playpen for moneyminded visitors—the sort of dystopian exposé of tourism exemplified by Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988). Importantly, however, the garage opens up a utopian space of possibility in contradistinction to the dominant order, and through it, the novel goes as far as to offer a small representational figure of what might be should workers achieve a larger collectivity capable of resisting the forces of a dystopian status quo.

*Devil on the Cross*’ conclusion revolves around an aborted narrative of heteronormative romance that seems incongruous with the image of Warĩĩnga the worker. Warĩĩnga sheds her mechanic’s overalls for traditional clothing to emerge as a statuesque vision of female beauty, and prepares for her marriage to Gatuĩria. Gatuĩria is also greatly changed by the Devil’s Feast. He has completed his utopian oratorio, a harmony of “many voices” that tells the national story and builds toward a musical “rebirth” through the “revolutionary unity of workers and peasants” (230). The couple is full of heady talk about “a new beginning for a new earth” (246). However, these gestures toward conventional “happy” narrative closure are derailed once Warĩĩnga discovers that Gatuĩria’s comprador father is the “Rich Old Man” who abused her in the past. Warĩĩnga’s “Marxist hagiography” concludes when Warĩĩnga rejects the temptation of earthly riches and vanquishes the old “Devil” on the spot with Mũturi’s gun. She then walks away,
choosing to make an absolute break from the world of her past, including Gatūria, to confront an uncertain future alone. Warĩŋga thus walks right through the end of the narrative to emerge as Devil on the Cross’ incarnation of Ngũgĩ’s reoccurring messiah figure and the embodiment of a triumphant, empowered future that this novel promises but does not narrate.

This anti-closure once again calls to mind Jameson’s axiom that any attempt to represent the new in the language of the old (whatever that language may be) will inevitably fail. Indeed, although it takes a step forward through the intopian figure of Warĩŋga, the novel declines to fully represent the utopian collective that Warĩŋga only allegorizes. Additionally, it includes a critical utopian reflection on the insufficiencies of utopian art itself. Gatūria the artist responds to Warĩŋga the worker’s decisive climactic action with indecision and inaction, looking for answers in “music that lead [sic] him nowhere” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 254). As exemplified by the unfinished uprising in Ilmorog and the open-endedness of Warĩŋga’s narrative, Devil on the Cross refuses to attempt work that can only be done through the imagination and action of its readers. Even Warĩŋga’s story ends by denying any facile solutions, fictional or nonfictional. Its final line indicates that “the hardest struggles of her life’s journey lay ahead . . .” (254, ellipsis in original). After Warĩŋga’s personal “mini-apocalypse,” the novel thus concludes, in a fashion familiar to us now, with a new beginning followed by an ellipsis. Even this final punctuation mark performs an important function as one “of those Iserian ‘gaps’ the reader fills in order to concretize the imagined world of the novel,” thus transferring to the reader the imperative for imagining the utopian telos that Warĩŋga’s narrative only blocks out (Crehan 109). The gīcaandī performer’s opening dialog suggests that at the moment her story is told, Warĩŋga (if she is not the performer’s invented fiction, or revealed, unempirical truth) exists in the past tense, and thus is likely dead. Not only is hers yet another abortive narrative, but it is also clear that even though
“Saint Warĩĩnga” is the novel’s messianic character, she is not the agent who will bring about the “workers’ feast” that constitutes *Devil on the Cross*’ version of the prophecy trope (Balogun, “Hagiography” 136). These historical actors must be the workers—the prophecy’s intended audience—for whom Warĩĩnga’s political and personal transformation, and the “miracle” of her triumph over the “Devil,” serve only as an inspirational didactic example (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 251).

The “new” Warĩĩnga serves a useful pedagogical purpose as a representation of an individual that differs dramatically from the avaricious individualism critiqued through the ogres in the cave of thieves. However, her narrative also reveals some of the remaining aesthetic challenges in Ngũgĩ’s ongoing project. After the thread of the narrative “breaks” and is taken up again, the shift from the collective toward the individual, however exemplary that individual’s life and politics may be, nonetheless sacrifices the grand sense of scale of *Petals of Blood*, and even of *Devil on the Cross*’ earlier depiction of collective consciousness among Ilmorog’s downtrodden. The collective is paramount for Ngũgĩ, whose claims about *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*’s “appropriation . . . into the oral tradition” of Gĩkũyũ storytelling (claims that have been disputed) prioritize the “group reception of art over the novel’s isolated individual reader” (*Decolonizing* 83). Additionally, on the one hand, Warĩĩnga’s narrative “ends” on a positive, forward-looking note, and recapitulates a number of important tropes. Not the least of these is a reiteration of one of black utopian literature’s central strategies in the individualized form of Warĩĩnga’s liberating confrontation with the past. On the other hand, however, Warĩĩnga’s implied future martyrdom, while integral to the novel’s refusal to represent the still-needful historical Not-Yet, moves the narrative away from the carnivalesque of part one and back into the realm of tragedy. Indeed, in choosing to embody the utopian promise of a realistically represented human individual with positively defined qualities, the novel’s vision
seems constrained by her inevitable limitations. Warĩĩnga is a strong saint but a weak messiah, a problem that finds a provocative solution in Matigari. Further, the ease with which the workers’ rebellion and the mechanics’ cooperative are wiped out likewise suggests the powerlessness of localized resistance in the face of massive systemic exploitation. Devil on the Cross nurtures hope, but it also seems to reflect the oft-criticized “(en)closure” of dependency theory. Despite the fact that the novel assumes a more hopeful tone than Petals of Blood, it still incorporates one of the reasons for the postcolonial disenchantment its hopeful tone would combat. Although the ellipsis at the novel’s conclusion can be read as a narrative openness that invites future-oriented thinking, it simultaneously “function[s] as the most visible sign” of an “uncertainty about the future” (Gikandi Ngũgĩ 222). Thus, Devil on the Cross’s “parable” of Warĩĩnga does not completely exorcize some of the “devils” that plague Ngũgĩ’s struggle with utopian representation, and “it is to Matigari that readers must turn for a possible resolution of these moments of doubt and crisis” (Gikandi 222).

*Matigari, Messianism, and Homecoming*

The narrator of Matigari tells his audience that “success is born of trying and trying again,” capturing in the form of a hope-filled proverb Ngũgĩ’s grappling with representation (70). As discussed in Chapter 1, Jameson makes a similar argument concerning the conundrum of utopia itself, and the novels of both Ngũgĩ and Ben Okri embody and narrate this phenomenon in sequential attempts to imagine a postcolonial utopian homeland. If one follows Gikandi, Matigari must be read as the “outcome” of Ngũgĩ’s representational crisis, and the result is the work that most successfully articulates Ngũgĩ’s utopianism. This sparse text clarifies, unifies, and refines thematic, ideological, and aesthetic elements it retains from its forebears, while adding or subtracting others to further transform Ngũgĩ’s utopian form. Nkosi’s suggestion that Matigari “simply gathers up all the wood shavings left over from Ngũgĩ’s other political novels
and the play [The Trial of Dedan Kimaathi],” and Balogun’s observation that the text commences a fundamentally new novelistic genre, are both correct (Nkosi 199). As in the relationship between Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross, Matigari dialectically sublates the definitive aesthetic departure of its predecessor into a moment of transition, a “rehearsal,” in Balogun’s terms (“Matigari” 191). Ngũgĩ’s second Gĩkũyũ-language novel pares down its story structure to the bare essentials. It also maintains a more consistent narrative voice than Devil on the Cross from the moment it utters the conventional request for the reader/listener’s permission to continue, all the way through its final song of an anticipated victory of the people. In so doing, it more fully realizes the discursive transfiguration Ngũgĩ began in Kamiti prison. What emerges is a text that achieves a much more balanced narrative movement from the utopian moment of Uhuru through the dystopia of the postcolony, and toward the messianic promise of a future utopian “homecoming.” In the end, it arrives at an aesthetic that distills Ngũgĩ’s utopian vision into its clearest and most forceful iteration.

Ngũgĩ’s short novel is a surprisingly inventive aesthetic achievement in which a far-reaching palette of elements harmonizes. It melds African orature and Western literature. It incorporates Gĩkũyũ fairy tales, songs, poems, and proverbs through which it interlaces Ngũgĩ’s revolutionary ideology with the discourse of everyday wisdom. It experiments with cinema-like imagism,71 real and imagined histories, urban legends, radio broadcasts, grotesque satire, and other ingredients. The narrative is divided into three sections which are further subdivided into multiple, disjunctive, often imagistic vignettes. Despite its tendency toward fragmentation and parataxis, its politics, utopian vision, and narrative trajectory remain unitary and lucid. As such, it bears out Ngũgĩ’s insistence that forms of oral storytelling can convey disjunctive elements in an “apparently linear way” (Ngũgĩ and Jaggi 247). Ngũgĩ’s “multiform,” “multigenre,”
multicultural novel is indeed the “multivocal” text that Balogun claims it is, but there is a univocality to the novel, a voice that offers in its very aesthetic form unambiguous glimpses of the coherent collectivity toward which it aspires (“Matigari” 188).

Balogun’s formal comparison of Matigari to the epic narratives of multiple traditions sums up the way in which its three disparate chapters coalesce in the form of an episodic quest narrative. Its hero, Matigari ma Njirũũngi (translated by Wangũi wa Goro as “the patriots who survived the bullets”) is a reconfigured version of the valorized forest fighters of novels past and the embodiment of Not-Yet-Uhuru. Its setting is an unnamed, imaginary African country. The story commences with what is supposed to be an ending, but instead becomes a beginning in medias res. Matigari returns from the forest after an exile of indeterminate length (“it felt like so long ago; and yet . . .”), buries his weapons, and dons a “belt of peace,” prepared triumphantly to rejoin life in his fictional country, where he “hope[s] that the last of the colonial problems had disappeared” (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 4, ellipses in original). Immediately, the novel self-consciously employs the “Rip Van Winkle” trope, the same device that Edward Bellamy makes use of in Looking Backward, to fuse the fantastical with the practical (99). Like Bellamy’s Julian West, what Matigari finds when he steps back into history after a long “sleep” is “development” (99, emphasis in original). However, for Ngũgĩ’s freedom fighter, this capitalist utopia is far from the Uhuru he envisioned. Rather, it is a “world . . . upside down,” a third version of Ngũgĩ’s neocolonial dystopia, complete with the radical economic inequality, dire poverty, and “theft and robbery” that also characterize Ilmorog after it is re-colonized by multinational corporations and their comprador stooges (80, 26). Expecting to find a country governed by the people, and amazed to find “Africans . . . driving their own cars,” Matigari is taken aback when he finds the factories surrounded by iron gates (7). He is even more astounded when he meets Mũriũki, an
orphaned boy who becomes a sort of “son” to him, living in an abandoned Mercedes in a junkyard called “Trampville.” For the remainder of the first section, Matigari traverses this *mundus inversus*, functioning as an inverted version of the conventional estranged utopian visitor. During his odyssey toward his “home on top of the hill” he makes one unbelievable, disenchancing discovery after another amid the “world” described in the following song (5):

The builder sleeps in the open
The worker is left empty-handed
The tailor goes naked
And the tiller goes to sleep on an empty stomach. (82)

Matigari’s homecoming ends not with his entry into a New Jerusalem, but with his discovery that the house is occupied by the newly wealthy Mr. Boy and his European “guest,” Robert Williams. The pair are the descendants of Settler Williams, a colonist, and his African servant John Boy—a relationship that unambiguously establishes a direct line of transmission between colonialism and neocolonialism despite the fact that an African now “occupies” Matigari’s home. After a brief confrontation, Matigari is jailed. The section concludes when Matigari and his cellmates escape prison. Once his cellmates learn who Matigari is, biblically inflected rumors of a “second coming” of the “patriots” spread about the country.

The second section finds Matigari exiled from his home and wandering about the country searching for “truth and justice.” His journey cognitively maps this neocolonial dystopia as he passes through the marketplace, the farmlands, the church, the law courts, and the university. The narrative centerpiece is a “meeting called by the Minister for Truth and Justice . . . to resolve [a] dispute between the workers and the factory owners” (84). Ngũgĩ uses a more restrained version of *Devil on the Cross*’ grotesque aesthetic to render another spectacle of power. This display of “instant justice at work” is a travesty dispensed in “Orwellian double-speak” by an
ironical Minister who is at once the “torch of development” and allegedly the “soul of [the] nation” (Ngũgĩ, *Matigari* 98; Gurnah 171; Ngũgĩ, *Matigari* 85). This fictional nation is ruled by the single-party government of dictator His Excellency Ole Excellence and the *Kĩama Kĩrìa Kĩrathana* (KKK: “The Ruling Party”). The spectacle of justice is attended by “guests from Western countries,” and during it, the Minister orders the detention of “subversives,” bans workers’ strikes, censors “all subversive songs and dreams,” and proscribes “fucking among the poor” lest they outnumber the rich and “breed” more Matigari ma Njirũungí (93, 105, 100).

In addition to dramatizing the perversion of justice, this scene also involves an important, mythoclastic intervention that de-doxifies the very nature of truth-construction in *Matigari’s* dystopian nation. The pronouncements of the Minister, the teachings of the “good” professors in the university, and the media broadcasts that pepper the narrative—the “Voice of Truth” in *Matigari’s* world—are exposed as a “parrotology” of the ruling party’s official version of reality. As in *Devil on the Cross*, this absurdity reflects actual conditions in postcolonial Kenya, where this is “the literal truth of Daniel Arap Moi’s view” outlined “in a speech in September 1984 (while Ngũgĩ was writing the novel)”; the speech “called on ‘ministers, assistant ministers, and every other person to sing like parrots’ in faithfully echoing his political position” (P. Williams, 125). Ngũgĩ’s Minister changes the name of “Trampville” to “Progressville” in order to transform through pure discourse this material refutation of the official national Imaginary into the embodiment of the developmentalist promise. However, the Minister’s most impressive linguistic gymnastics manage to transform naked bribery and corruption into utopian communalism when Williams and Boy, two Board members of the factory’s parent company, openly purchase his verdict in the labor dispute:

Do you see this cheque? Look at it carefully. We like doing things in the open. Christian democracy. Honesty. This is a cheque for 50,000 shillings toward the
special presidential fund for handicapped children. This company is truly one with a human heart and a human face. . . . Do you see these certificates? These are for personal shares. They are for His Excellency Ole Excellence. The other one here is for me. . . . But the most impressive thing this company has done, a real revolutionary step, is that they have given the ruling party a few shares. The ruling party is our party. It is your party. It is the national party. Therefore this company has given shares to the country, the whole nation. From now onwards, all of you here and even those who are not here have a stake in the company. Now this company is yours. It is ours. It is a national company. This is capitalism with a socialist face—or socialism with a capitalist heart. That is to say, true African socialism. (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 90, italics in original)

The irony of the Minister’s speech calls attention to the radical disconnection between the really-real and the reigning mythology, as well as the parabasis of truth itself. Both of these devices prove crucial for the novel’s aesthetic strategy. When Matigari confronts the minister demanding “truth and justice,” the Minister dismisses him as “speaking in parables.” However, Matigari’s aestheticized primer in Marxist tenets as well as his unmasking of the material conditions in places like Trampville gives voice to an alternate reality that estranges the fantasy promulgated by the novel’s official “Voices of Truth.” The institutionalized power responds by dismissing his speech as the ravings of a madman, and forcibly committing him to a mental hospital. In a moment of ironic humor, he is compared to two other historical “madmen”: Jesus Christ and Karl Marx. On the other hand, the regime demonstrates the very real power of a self-conscious mythopoetics of “Truth,” a power the Minister acknowledges when he attempts to silence the voice of the people’s truth, the “subversive” songs about Matigari that proliferate in the crowd gathered at the spectacle. Such lessons about the power inherent in such truth-making are not only a crucial element of the novel’s aestheticized “world,” but of its utopianism as well.

In the novel’s third and final section, Matigari escapes once again and becomes, depending on the point of view adopted, either a madman on the loose or a miracle-working messiah whose “second coming” is imminent. Here, the novel turns from dystopia toward utopia. Matigari declares that his upside-down world “must be set right again” (116). He vows to
remove his “belt of peace,” take up arms again, and drive the occupiers from his house forever. Still an exile, Matigari continues his journey, and continues charting a dystopian, late-capitalist reality in which “Americans are all over the world” promoting development, abetting South African Apartheid, sending warships to the Middle East, and militarizing space (131). By the novel’s climax, the “whole country” is waiting, and a crowd has amassed at Matigari’s house, “shar[ing] the same hope: that a miracle should take place” (134). Matigari tells an interlocutor that his individual “homecoming” is not the “second coming.” However, Matigari’s arrival allegorizes such an apocalypse in miniature in the novel’s most “cinematic” moment, when he drives a car through the front door and the house is consumed in flames. Matigari escapes, but he and his two companions, Mūriūki the boy and a woman named Gūthera, are pursued toward the banks of the river that serves as the country’s border. On the other side lie Matigari’s weapons. Gūthera is shot by the police, and Matigari tends to her, telling Mūriūki to cross the river and retrieve his weapons. Matigari and Gūthera are then attacked by police dogs and vanish into the river. Their future is unknown. However, Mūriūki makes it across and unearths “all the things that Matigari had hidden” (148). Suddenly, he imagines that he hears “workers’ voices, the voices of the peasants . . . and of the other patriots of all the different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony: *Victory shall be ours!*” (148, italics in original). Like Ngūgī’s two previous novels, *Matigari* ends with a beginning: in this case, on the very cusp of apocalypse with a “new” Matigari apparently about to re-cross the river for a “second (home)coming.”

In certain respects, *Matigari* reaches back to the aborted climax of the workers’ uprising staged in part one of *Devil on the Cross* in the hope of “trying again” to condense this immanent revolutionary potential into the form of a particularized messianic figure. This revision results in the text’s two most important innovations: its re-presentation of social space and its unique
strategy for creating its protagonist. The novel reworks the issues of scale that arise in Warĩĩnga’s narrative by at once expanding its central character to “fit” his world while contracting its space-time to fit that character. Taking advantage of the resources of the fabulist mode of oral storytelling, Ngũgĩ sets his parable in an imaginary timeless and spaceless utopia of a size (or plasticity) such that Matigari is capable of traversing the “whole country” in the course of a “whole day” (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 94). Gikandi argues that because Matigari was the first novel Ngũgĩ produced in exile, the author’s distance from “the vagaries of the nation and the burden of everyday realities” had a liberating effect on his imagination such that he “could begin to rethink the three categories that the nation and the novel had brought into being—geography, time, and subject” (Ngũgĩ 228). The result is a distinctive utopian chronotope with vastly expanded creative capacities. At the same time, this spacetime remains deeply enmeshed in actual world history, the narrative punctuated by media broadcasts about “space shuttles . . . United States . . . Soviet Union . . . nuclear bombs . . . ANC . . . PLO . . . Nicaragua . . . El Salvador,” and so forth (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 69, italics and punctuation in original). Yet notwithstanding its aesthetic plasticity or its global perspective, the novel’s fictional space remains situated “clearly . . . in Africa” (Ngũgĩ and Jaggi 243). In representing this “world,” Ngũgĩ not only reimagines the novel, but the nation as well. Gikandi contends that Matigari’s aesthetic attempts “not just to represent reality but to create it” (Ngũgĩ 226). Through its grotesque depictions of spectacular government ceremonies, media campaigns, and their distortions of reality, the novel demystifies the “textual economy through which the state established its political and cultural hegemony” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 226). Simultaneously, it appropriates and redirects some of these same strategies to create an alternative discursive economy that fashions the alternate “reality” of its own fictional world. This reality-construct is
intended to be every bit as influential as the hegemonic discourse it combats. What results is a microcosmos that is fantastic in ways that are intermittently absurd and liberating, yet also recognizably real in ways that are politically poignant. Additionally, it is a world created such that its protagonist can set in motion the machinery of historical change. Given the points of intersection between Ngũgĩ’s fictional world and the historical world, this estrangement and re-narration of reality bespeak ambitions for remaking the world that extend beyond the borders of the narrative, borders already made porous by virtue of its mode of storytelling.

The omnipresent instant media broadcasts about world events near and far reinforce the space-time compression that characterizes both the multinational and technologically mediated nature of Matigari’s historical moment and the aesthetical rendering of its fictional world. Within this globalized world, however, the novel represents its central dystopian/utopian figure of “home” in terms of the absolutely local. The “house,” Matigari’s metaphor for its themes of exile, neocolonialist “theft and robbery,” and a future African socialism—and in certain ways the entire “world” of its fictional country—is retrieved from the conclusion of the first part of Devil on the Cross. One of that novel’s student protesters declares, “let us join hands with the workers as they struggle to build a house that will benefit all the builders” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 209). In Matigari’s quest to “go back to [his] house and rebuild [his] home,” Matigari’s main themes converge with history itself in the deferred promise of homecoming (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 4). This “domestic” figure, including Matigari’s ideal of bringing his “family together,” becomes an allegory for both Kenya, as Nkosi notes, and the fraught figure of the “nation” as a lived concept. A bit of geopolitical static is thus introduced into the concept’s Fanonian iteration. As a vehicle for Ngũgĩ’s politics, Matigari’s articulation of utopia inevitably involves the “workers”:

[Matigari] saw a vision of himself and his children [here, the orphans of Trampville] entering their house together, lighting the fire together and working for
their home, smoke drifting from the roof of their common home. The children would come out of this graveyard into which their lives had been condemned. They would build their lives anew in the unity of their common sweat. A new house. A paradise on this earth. Why not? There is nothing that a people united cannot do. Still carried away by his vision, he began walking toward the wrecks, to bear the glad tidings to the children. A new heaven on a new earth. (14)

Through this literalization of “Heimat,” Ngũgĩ re-presents his personal version of history to create a concrete utopianism grounded in the politics of everyday life. The novel thus locates its dominant aesthetic paradigm in the realm of the intimate and the everyday, yet simultaneously creates a social space that is total and paradigmatic.

The liberties that the text takes with space reinforce this totalization even in the form of the physical house itself, which “seem[s] to stretch out for miles, as if . . . it had no beginning and no end” (35). On one level, Matigari is “a schematized documentation of the entire postcolonial experience” (Tobias 164). Anonby further suggests that its chronotope encapsulates “the timelessness and ubiquity of social and political class struggles throughout the world” (162). Moreover, Matigari’s intimately rendered parable takes a notable position on sociopolitical struggle through its use of “local sources to produce [its] universal narrative on repression and the search for freedom” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 227, emphasis added). In this way, the text negotiates the nexus between the global and the local to envision resistance and revolution in the neocolony and beyond. Its grounding in culturally distinct politics of concrete lived existence still reveals the kind of “correspondences across nonidentical cultural fields” necessary to write what Susan Buck-Morss theorizes as a revolutionary “universal history” (Buck-Morss 126). For Buck-Morss, whose example is the San Domingo revolution, a universal history is a totalizing “counternarrative” replete with diverse “residues of the past, containing the sedimented history of utopian dreams . . . political struggles, and power effects,” and capable of “inspir[ing] action to change” the “status quo” in a context that must now be understood as global in its scope
This has of course been the objective of Ngũgĩ’s Marxism and his appropriation of Mau Mau from the very beginning of the postcolonial phase of his career. However, the further his fictional universes divagate from novelistic realism, shed their determinate referents, and eschew the rote language of underdevelopment theory qua theory, the broader his counternarrative’s reach even as its universe shrinks, and the more the utopian dreams themselves come to the fore without losing their historical grounding. Matigari’s protagonist himself becomes a meaningful universal “history.” Matigari notes near the end of the novel that he needs to “retrace [his] steps to where [he] went astray and resume [his] journey from there. It is better to build another house altogether—a new house with a better foundation” (118). His remark is at once a mundane proverbial statement and a holistic utopian allegory that signifies nothing short of Matigari’s attempt to embody—and body forth into existence—an alternate history capable of building anew the world that would be his home.

Matigari approaches this history with Ngũgĩ’s characteristic messianism. The novel’s aesthetic renders a pending world-transformation through apocalyptic tropes, and its protagonist is the most actualized messianic figure in any of Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels. Matigari is initially described as a middle-aged man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a leopard-skin coat, and holding an AK-47. In this form, he encapsulates Ngũgĩ’s utopian Mau Mau mythology as a romanticized everyperson, an exemplar of national/class-consciousness, and a personification of revolutionary potential. At this point he is not unlike Abdulla or Wangarĩ; but as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Matigari is more than an individual “member” of a Mau Mau collective, let alone its typological representative. Ngũgĩ arrives at an aesthetic that allows Matigari to achieve his task of being Ngũgĩ’s utopian Mau Mau, as a history and as an ontology. What initially appears as an individual man is transformed into a collective historical mythos.
The narrative’s “impossible” task is to achieve a dialectical reversal of this process in its audience.

By part two of Ngũgĩ’s narrative, Matigari “acquires mythical proportions,” and one of the mythical figures contained in Ngũgĩ’s protagonist is General Stanley Mathenge, whose “second coming” is prophesied at the end of *Petals of Blood* (Gurnah 171). Gikandi points out that according to Kenyan “popular legend,” Mathenge was “waiting for an opportune time to return and restore the reign of justice and truth” (“Epistemology” 162). *Matigari* escalates its messianic rhetoric through the “allusions to biblical metaphors” that constitute its “dominant symbolic framework” (Gurnah 170). These metaphors construct Matigari as the novel’s Christ-figure, the “body” in whom the many become one, in ways that would be difficult for his intended audience to mistake. This status is “officially” conferred upon him when, jailed for attempting to re-enter his house, Matigari shares his food with his cellmates, reenacting, according to the text, Mau Mau communalism captured in song: “When a bean fell/We would share it among ourselves” (Ngũgĩ, *Matigari* 46). However, this scene is quickly retranslated into Christian terms when a drunken cellmate begins to speak “as though he were reading the Bible from the pulpit” (47). He intones, “when the time for the supper came, he sat at the table together with his disciples. He told them: I want you to share this last supper with me, to remind us that we shall not be able to eat together again until our kingdom comes” (47). Baptized as a Christ surrogate, Matigari’s many prophetic proclamations of familiar Ngũgĩan secular themes acquire biblical proportions: “our kingdom come as once decreed by the Iregi revolutionaries: the land belongs to the tiller and not to parasites and foreigners!” (52). When Matigari leads his cellmates out of prison, they look on their escape as “perhaps a miracle,” and afterward Matigari becomes “legend,” “dream,” and figure of the “second coming” among the populace (54).
Crucially, however, Nkosi notes that Ngũgĩ’s text “approximates . . . the category of metafiction” by self-reflexively intervening in this very myth-making process (Nkosi 202). If Ngũgĩ deploys grotesque satire in Devil on the Cross to portray the neocolony as both absurd and real, Matigari strives for an even more difficult balance. On the one hand, it debunks its protagonist’s mythologization while also undermining the discourse through which that myth is created. On the other hand, recalling Karega’s suggestion that “ideas” can be more important than “facts,” it promotes the very mythopoiesis it demystifies while retaining the rhetorical power of the familiar symbolic domains from which its mythology borrows.

The self-debunking side of this “Janus-faced” aesthetic employs a “critical fantastic” strategy. As with Devil on the Cross, Matigari incorporates reader-surrogates. These take the form of both characters and the narrator, who hesitate or equivocate as to whether Matigari and the events surrounding him have natural or supernatural explanations. When one of the other prisoners discovers that Matigari has managed to bring food into the prison cell, he declares, “No! I don’t believe it,” and wonders if Matigari may be the sort of supernatural figure that the Last Supper tableau suggests (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 47). Similarly, speaking for the prisoners during their astounding escape, the narrator declares “this must be a dream!” (54). However, the fact that the narrator later reveals that the explanation for the escape is a completely mundane one—Güthera seduced the guard and took his keys when he fell asleep—epitomizes how the text undermines its potentially fantastic events, and indeed their very “fantasticization.” The phrasing of the narrator’s suggestion that the prison break is “perhaps a miracle” is typical of the novel’s self-aware narration, which filters its descriptions of events through characters’ limited points of view or employs qualifiers that cast them into doubt. On the surface of the novel’s discourse, Matigari is a protean figure: now a careworn old man, now a youngish warrior with superhuman
endurance. However, nearly all of the descriptions of his transformations and feats are either self-referentially qualified, or more subtly hedged. For instance, the narrator states in characteristic fashion that “the courage of truth had once again transformed him. It seemed to have wiped age off his face, making him look extremely youthful” (26, emphases added). Additionally, as with the escape from prison, the explanations for even Matigari’s most extraordinary deeds are revealed as not just plausible, but utterly unremarkable. When asked about his seemingly impossible escape from his burning house, Matigari answers that he simply exited through a window. The narrator is thus careful to separate reality from semblance, from witnesses’ “experience” of that reality, and from the myth that it becomes. Indeed, for didactic purposes, the text retains, on one level, the “reality” of its depiction of Matigari as an ordinary man empowered by the courage of his utopian ideals, or at least as an analog for such a man.

However, the other “face” of Ngũgĩ’s aesthetic makes it clear that the way in which Matigari acquires his mythical status is ultimately more important. Through Matigari’s metafictionality, the reader/listener is privy to the very processes by which the “real” Matigari is transliterated into semblances and characters’ experiences, which are themselves translated into enabling myths through “fantastic” storytelling and rumor. One of Matigari’s seeming transmogrifications occurs when he “rescues” Güthera from a pair of rapacious policemen. Intratextual and extratextual audiences witness Matigari announce his name, demand that the police “leave her alone!,” and defy a policeman’s threat to loose police dogs on him (26). The scene functions as a sort of reverse Althusserian “hailing” in that the police are jarred out of their complacency by his semblance of powerfulness and his bizarre appellation. Wary that he may be “an eminent person dressed plainly,” they promptly leave (26). Beyond Matigari’s repudiation of the police’s authority—his refusal to be hailed by them—nothing extraordinary seems to happen.
Yet this event represents an unsuturing of the ideological fabric of a “reality” that positions the police and the regime they embody as uncontestable power. It in turn produces a flood of new discourse. Rumors generated by Matigari’s deeds find their way back to the jailed Matigari, who hears himself described this way:

Can you believe this! He is a dwarf of a man. What did I say? A dwarf? When this dwarf stood up . . . he was transformed into a giant. I say again, a giant! He stood tall and strong and told the dog police: I am Matigari ma Njirũŋgi, and I warn you. Leave that woman alone! How can I describe it? His voice was like thunder. The dogs stopped with their tails in mid-air. Have you ever heard such a thing? (50)

Matigari’s actual deeds are clearly discernible in this fantastic story; yet they have also obviously been wildly embellished in an attempt bridge the gap between the real and the seemingly impossible. The cellmate who tells the story was arrested during a workers’ strike, and he observes that these very rumors about a “second coming” of the forest fighters have already fortified the workers’ resolve to stand up to the authorities.

In this way, the novel attempts an intradiegetic dramatization of the power of messianic images and rumors: oral discourses that are capable of inspiring, unifying, and communicating among the powerless. Sicherman underlines the significance of “the weight Ngũgĩ gives to ‘what is said,’ to ‘rumor’ and ‘gossip’ as agents in forming the imaginative life of his people,” as well as the author’s attentiveness to how “myths made things happen during the emergency” (Sicherman 360). Gikandi argues that such rumors, particularly ones that can be disclaimed as fantastic or non-referential, offer recourse for repressed populations. In an enforced culture of silence, fantastic rumors can encode and spread subversive messages while also “counter[ing] the phantasmic narratives promoted by the state” with “an alternate phantasm” (Gikandi Ngũgĩ 232).  

Indeed, by the end of *Matigari* it is clear that the myth—Matigari the idea, or the ideal—overtakes (and outlives) the “real” Matigari, if ever there *is* or *was* one in this fairytale fiction. In effect, although the notion of Matigari as a real person is indispensable to the narrative, he
functions much like the figure of King Utopos in Thomas More’s *Utopia* by becoming the “vanishing mediator” for the instantiation, in the form of an enabling myth, of an alternate utopian universal history.\textsuperscript{78}

Matigari’s distinctiveness involves not so much Ngũgĩ’s rethinking of the subject as it does Ngũgĩ’s strategy for representing that subject. Like Warĩĩnga in *Devil on the Cross*, Matigari is “the representative of the best ideals and values of his community” (Gikandi, Ngũgĩ 236). That is to say, both characters are signifiers for which the signified is a totalized utopian Imaginary, and whose implied referent is utopia itself, a community from which the “unideal” has been banished. In *Matigari’s* case, utopia is the unbecome history of Ngũgĩ’s mythic Mau Mau. However, notwithstanding Warĩĩnga’s status as an ideal type, she is still narrativized as a recognizable individual subject, one who can function as a “site of identification” in the manner of the bourgeois novel. Gikandi rightly points out that Matigari cannot perform this function (Ngũgĩ 236). Matigari ma Njirũũngi’s name, which in the English edition of the novel appears as “the patriots who survived the bullets” multiplies and reconsolidates him as a plural, communal subject. This is in keeping with Ngũgĩ’s claim that Matigari represents a universal “collective worker in history” (Ngũgĩ and Jaggi 243). At the same time, Ngũgĩ historically localizes Matigari ma Njirũungi as the vestiges of Mau Mau. Gikandi, retranslating Matagari’s name as “the remnants (or leftovers) of the bullet,” argues that this “does not refer to a character, but to an event” an “unnameable and unspoken experience, an event in search of a representam” (“Epistemology” 165, 161). (The utopian significance of such “event-ness” will be discussed further in Chapter 4.) This “event”—figured for example in rumors of the return of Mathenge—contains the promise of its own repetition. Considered as such, “Matigari” is messianic history itself. The figuration of Matigari is thus the inverse of Warĩĩnga’s affirmative representation.
Like all representations of apocalypse or utopia, he is a placeholder for the “unnameable” point at which all representation breaks down, yet which, for this very reason, compels the proliferation of ever-more-imaginative and urgent representations—the very phenomenon one sees occurring in the progression of Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels. Such a mythopoetics has the potential to alter the course of actual history.

In Matigari’s fictional country, as questions about this elusive character multiply, the “search for representations” intensifies and mythic rumors accumulate. Simultaneously, the “real” Matigari recedes ever further, such that in the latter portions of the narrative, despite the abundance of discourse “about” him, the question that haunts the entire text is urgently repeated: “who really was Matigari ma Njirũũngĩ? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A savior or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people’s minds? Who was He?” (Ngũgĩ, Matigari 134, emphasis in original). Myths circulate that confirm that Matigari is at once any one of these things, or all of them, or none of them: he is, to use Gikandi’s term, an “enigma.” Nevertheless, on the basis of these rumors, “people from all religions and denominations” flock to his house to await his return, which they anticipate as “Jehovah’s sword [falling] from heaven . . . the Final Judgment” (134, ellipses in original). By the end of the novel, “Matigari” is rendered a void at the center of a enabling mythic discourse of apocalyptic utopian promise. In this way, Ngũgĩ’s novel portrays Matigari in the form of what Derrida famously calls the “messianic” that is the “ineffaceable mark . . . of Marx’s legacy,” a messianism “without content and without identifiable messiah,” but which nonetheless names or “nickname[s]” the “coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the arrivant as justice” (Derrida 28, emphases in original). Indeed, Matigari’s depiction of Matigari
stays true to its collectivist vision while also making a distinctive gesture toward solving the aesthetic problem posed by this mode of messianism.

Matigari solves another dilemma by insisting upon the notion of agency in history, the possibility of causing an apocalyptic transformation. It is vital that the novel retains the notion of Matigari as a “person” who makes things happen. However, by the time the character Matigari disappears into the river to become a sort of “Schrödinger’s Christ” from the unknowing observer’s perspective, both alive and dead, “buried” and resurrected, he has already been transformed into Matigari the myth. This myth outlives him, and is able to influence events. The mythic “Matigari”—an alternative messianic history and a transformed mode of collective revolutionary subjectivity—is crucial.

Gikandi claims that Matigari cannot function as a site of identification; however, it would be more precise to say that he cannot yet perform such a function. *Intratextually,* in the world of the novel at the narrative’s end, this identification *is* possible. Another aspect of Ngũgĩ’s representation of the mythic Matigari involves the fact that “he” is an alternative discourse collectively created by the people; and ultimately “the rumor is wrenched from its mythology because it has become an *alternate means of cognition*” (Ogude, “Matigari” 106, emphasis added). In other words, it is a “truth” that provides the means of an alternative coming-to-consciousness. The novel takes a firm position that “one could . . . not defeat the enemy with words alone,” while also insisting “one could not defeat the enemy with arms alone. One had to have the right words” (Ngũgĩ, *Matigari* 111). This preserves what Ngũgĩ’s postcolonial novels insist is the relationship between social transformation and a counterhegemonic voice that refuses to be silenced. Mũriũki’s taking up of Matigari’s arms does represent “a generational transfer of resistance,” and this historical “updating” is important (P. Williams 13). However, it is equally important that the decisive moment for Mũriũki is when he
“suddenly” hears the voice of the people. This is the long-awaited moment of identification with the collective consciousness expressed by the voice—a Marxian Pentecost as it were. And in this respect, Mũriũki is the “remnants of the bullet,” Matigari, as both collective subject and messianic historical event. This is what “Matigari” has been all along. However, the story of the mythologization of his acts plays a vital pedagogical role by virtue of allegory’s ability to give “concrete form” to “complex or abstract historical processes” (Wegner, Life Between Two Deaths 6). In Ngũgĩ’s metafiction, Matigari the concrete “man” is an allegory for “himself”—a self-transcending idea that is also a mode of subjectivity.

Wegner argues that the diachronic nature of narrative transforms “antinomies into contradictions,” and thus the “unity” of Matigari as a particular, concrete agent and a collectivized historical subject is narratively divided into two aspects, which are placed before the reader for inspection (Life Between Two Deaths 7). Further, allegorical narrative “enable[s] a working through, on the level of the imaginary at least, of . . . historical crises and blockages” (Wegner, Life Between Two Deaths 7). By narrating the movement from the man to the myth that Mũriũki also comes to embody, Ngũgĩ renders a being a becoming, projecting a second coming of Uhuru in the future. This at once honors the fact that the class-consciousness Ngũgĩ hopes to foment is not-yet-become and holds open the possibility for the evental inauguration of unbecome history. It also underscores the primacy of the utopian imagination itself in the process of historical change—in this case, utopian insurgent historiography as a process and an education of desire. The fact that rumors about Ngũgĩ’s Matigari made their way beyond Matigari’s pages and into the national discourse of Kenya, much to the consternation of the authorities, underscores the porosity of any text’s borders, and the ability of alternative imaginings of the past and present potentially to influence future events.
As the culmination of a search for an appropriate aesthetic vehicle for utopia that lasted over a decade, Ngũgĩ’s third effort is his most successful in both aesthetic and pedagogical terms. It is also the text Gikandi claims has generated more debate than any of Ngũgĩ’s others.\textsuperscript{80} Indeed, the events surrounding Matigari’s reception in Kenya suggest that Ngũgĩ had created a utopian text most well-suited to his goal of educating desires and influencing events. Its privileging of orality and enabling myth is especially noteworthy given that the novel was able to spark the beginnings of the very sort of mythopoesis that it internally narrates. After Matigari’s release, Kenyan domestic intelligence caught wind of rumors circulating in the country about a man named Matigari, his deeds, and his demand for “truth and justice.” The Moi government issued a warrant for “Matigari’s” arrest. Ngũgĩ writes in his “Note on the American Edition”:

The hardworking loyal policemen found out that the man they had come to arrest was only a fictional character in a book by the same title. The dictatorship reacted to this information by calling for the arrest of the book itself. And indeed, in a very well-coordinated police action, they raided all the bookshops in the entire country sometime in February 1987 and took away all the copies of the novels \textit{sic}, presumably to burn it or let it rot to death in a police garrison. (n.p.)

The story of Matigari’s suppression and even “detention” is as fantastically absurd as any depiction of governmental excess found in its pages. The silencing of the text, and of the alternative discourse it created, seems like nothing so much as yet another repetition, this time in actual history, of the thwarted attempts at social transformation that are scattered throughout Ngũgĩ’s novels.

Like Moi’s 1986 declaration that “the history of the Mau Mau should not be written,” the government’s paranoiac response to Matigari testifies to the power of alternative “Not-Yet” histories, and the utopian hope they carry with them to challenge the status quo (Sicherman 365).

If the glimpses of Not-Yet-Uhuru in Ngũgĩ’s real and fictional worlds end in incompleteness, all his work makes clear that the long struggle for utopia must continue. Sicherman argues that “if
the government reneged on its promise” of *Uhuru*, “Ngũgĩ is determined to fulfill it: his works constitute a developing monument to the freedom struggle” (348). Even more significantly, his work serves “unquestionably . . . [as] a major inspiration to the . . . Kenyan resistance” (Sicherman 348). *Matigari*’s historical lesson and its power to intervene in history lie in the novel’s refusal of what is in favor of what might be: a utopian hope that surpasses both the text and the conditions it documents. Even though Ngũgĩ’s own 2002 homecoming met with tragedy, his work is a testament to the fact that such events are precisely why it is necessary to rededicate ourselves once again to the promise of home.

**Notes**

1. Ashcroft does not directly reference it, but it is important to note that Bloch’s “reclamation” attempted to reappropriate and rehabilitate the concept of “Heimat” from its association with German National Socialism and the mythical, “volkish” nationalism that fed it. As he does elsewhere in his work, Bloch attempts to separate the utopian impulse from the disastrous Nazi dystopian “ends” for which the impulse was made to serve as a “means.”

2. Indeed, “culture,” as Ngũgĩ defines it in *Homecoming* is entirely at “home” with Bloch’s notion of “Heimat.” Ngũgĩ’s notion of culture, “in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavor to live and come to terms with their total environment” (4).

3. Ngũgĩ makes the political and epistemological cases for his linguistic shift in a series of lectures between 1981 and 1986 that were published as *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986).

4. The latter two quotations are Jameson’s words as quoted by Gikandi. Apollo Amoko has argued against Gikandi and the widely accepted narrative of Ngũgĩ’s career being advanced here, which sees *Petals of Blood* as the pivotal moment of this “crisis.” His argument insists that this fails to capture completely the complexity of the aesthetic changes in Ngũgĩ’s approach over the years. Working against Gikandi’s notion of a clean break from an “English aesthetic” that characterizes his “postcolonial phase,” Amoko is able to demonstrate that these aesthetic transformations are already evident in Ngũgĩ’s earlier work. See “The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry.”

5. Gikandi, Ngũgĩ (16).

6. Lazarus uses the early work of Ayi Kwei Armah to exemplify what he sees as a generalized pessimism that pervaded the period. According to Lazarus’s analytic, both the general “crisis” of
postcolonial representation and the sense of bleakness he describes are implicated in a broader, paralytic “world-historical crisis of radical intellectualism” during the same period (Resistance 196). In his concluding chapter, Lazarus argues that Ngũgĩ and Ousmane Sembene (whom Jameson also lauds in his “Third World Literature” article) are definitive of “a fundamental revaluation of formal and artistic priorities and political tactics” that, as he writes of Petals of Blood, is marked by an “insistence upon the transformability of existing conditions” (212, 213).

7 See P. Williams (15).

8. Ibid (8).

9. Patrick Williams too notes Ngũgĩ’s political outlook is similar to James’s, which “despite all the . . . vicissitudes of history in the twentieth century, retained a clear-sighted belief in . . . the possibility that ordinary people could create a fundamentally better world for themselves” (P. Williams 9).

10. This is also true of Ngũgĩ’s dramatic works beginning in the mid-‘70s. This analysis, however, focuses on his fiction.


12. Indeed, for some, they appear “extremist and dogmatic” (Indangasi 200).

13. Gikandi argues that “totality was the operative word in Ngũgĩ’s critical lexicon when he was writing Petals of Blood” (Ngugi 138).

14. This is, of course, an oversimplification that the author hopes will not be considered too damaging. As is well-known Fanon’s own insistence that “we must again come back to the Marxist formula” does not bear itself out in his works that deviate significantly from “formulaic” Marxism, if indeed such a thing actually exists, as so many seem to want to claim (Revolution 187). A well-known deviation from the “formula” that is an important one for reading Ngũgĩ is the way Fanon conceives “any genuine movement for national liberation in Africa” as “powered by the peasantry and, for that matter, the lumpenproletariat, rather than the urban working class” (Lazarus Resistance 13). Ngũgĩ’s ideology straddles two positions; although his Marxism can be bookish and “formulaic,” his novels show a deep concern for Fanon’s “mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the lumpenproletariat,” where “the rebellion will find its urban spearhead” (Wretched 129). Indeed, references to “peasants and workers” or “workers and peasants” fill Ngũgĩ’s novels and essays. Ngũgĩ preserves the separation of these categories and does not invent a new one that would represent some sort of ideal synthesis of them, but he does envision them as potentially united, and attempts to unite them, in a revolutionary movement in which he suggests both groups would have a common stake.

15. Malini Johar Schueller is one scholar who advocates for such a view, writing that “local struggles are important in creating anti-imperial solidarity because they engage us at the nodes of
imperial power where most of us live our daily lives and where the exercise of imperial power is experienced most directly. These kinds of local struggles are effective in the long term in challenging imperialism because they articulate specific types of resistances and global solidarities that contest the nexus of the national and global raced order” (30). She also advocates for the value of a focus on the local and the lived as an important strategic countermeasure for what she calls the “racial erasure in global theory.”

16. See Chapter 2. Ross is quoted in Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse* (19). In the case of Kenya, it should be noted that the machinations that would ensure the nation’s nearly seamless transition to neocolonialism were in place well before “Uhuru.” See Colin Leys’s discussion of this, including the “collaboration between European and African interests in making a transition to political independence without any radical change in the economic and social structure,” and the New Kenya Group’s emergence in 1959 as a political party “backed by finance from various firms with interests in Kenya” (43). Following the NKG’s dissolution, it was replaced by an “African leadership with similar interests and similar ideas” to those “which the NKG had looked towards,” in the form of Kenyatta’s KANU party (62). See also Sicherman’s remarks about how “KANU bid good-bye to revolution and embraced neocolonialism” (Sicherman 347).

17. *The River Between* was written before, but published after *Weep Not Child* (1964).

18. The original title of Ngũgĩ’s first novel was in fact “The Black Messiah” (see Dinwiddy’s “Biblical Usage and Abusage in Kenyan Writing” [32]).

19. See Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (43) for an influential account of this prophecy.

20. Mwangi argues that one of the reasons Ngũgĩ announces his “utopian” setting in the Kenyan version of the novel is “partly to eschew retaliation for exposing the evil practice of the powerful.” Similar claims, of course, have been made about Thomas More’s displacement of *Utopia*’s political content onto a “no place.” Mwangi also writes that, paradoxically, Ngũgĩ’s message to the reader also serves “to signal that the story, as an allegory is based on real-life political situations.” This would place the novel squarely within the purview of the satire from which utopias derived, and also, as Mwangi is quick to point out, of Jameson’s “unfairly criticized” argument about the invariable allegorical content of ‘Third World’ literature in the era of multinational capitalism (35).

21. See Chapter 1.

22. See Nicholls (117-118).

23. Berger (9).

24. Chileshe (133). See also Goodwin (4).


27. The characters’ story calls to mind Jameson’s controversial claim that “Third World” texts should be read as “national allegories” (“Third World” 69, italics in original).

28. These visions resonate with Kenyatta’s early argument (and it is important to situate his statements in this 1930s-era anticolonial nationalist context) that it is impossible to understand the Gĩkũyũ without first considering “land tenure as the most important factor in the social, political, religious, and economic life” of the people (Facing 22).

29. See, for example, the discussion of land and agriculture in the early portions of Chapter 2 in Leys for a summary of these aspects of colonial political economy in Kenya. Ngũgĩ’s rendering of Kenya in *Petals of Blood*, while fictional, generally keeps quite close to the history in which it is embedded, and which it bodies forth. In addition to *Petals of Blood*’s depiction of Ilmorog, readers familiar with this history will doubtless be familiar with many features of the story involving Munira’s and Karega’s two families.

30. See Chapter 1.

31. Anderson makes this observation in the compelling and oft-cited closing paragraphs of his introduction to *Imagined Communities*, in which he writes of the modern nation-state that “it is imagined as a community regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail . . . the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this [imagined] fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7).

32. The latter two quotations are from Cook & Okenimkpe’s *Ngugi wa Thion’o: An exploration of his writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983). Podis and Saaka quote these authors in the context of their discussion of how Ngũgĩ and the later Achebe deal with the challenge of “envisioning a radically new society out of the elements of a usable African past” (105).

33. Ngũgĩ outlines this perspective in *Homecoming*. He argues that “what has been—the evolution of human culture through the ages, society in motion through time and space—is of grave import to the poet and the novelist. For what has been, especially for the vast majority of submerged, exploited masses in Africa, Asia, and Black America, is intimately bound to with what might be: our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential, has roots in our experience of the past” (*Homecoming* 39).

34. See P. Williams (82).

35. See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (146-151).

36. See Marx’s *Capital*, particularly Chapter 27, “The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land.”
37. See Anonby (151).

38. See Chapter 1.’s discussion of Ahmad’s excellent study of developmentalist utopianism in *Landscapes of Hope*.

39. Pordzik’s term *(Quest 46)*. See Chapter 1.

40. Gikandi equates New Ilmorog’s elite with Fanon’s national bourgeoisie in *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o* (137).

41. For discussions of postapocalyptic dystopias, see, for example, Knickerbocker, or Moylan’s discussion of Octavia Butler’s *Parable* novels in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*.


43. These translations are taken from Nicholls (139), whose own source is Carol Sicherman’s *Ngugi wa Thiong’o: The Making of a Rebel* (London: Nahs Zell, 1990).

44. Ogude argues that it is an oversimplification that Ngũgĩ shares with the dependency theorists of the ‘70s. See *Novels* (38).

45. Leys is worth citing at length here: “a new process of social and political integration takes place between domestic interests and foreign capital, at various levels; the incorporation of local personnel into executive jobs in foreign firms, the financing of local politicians by foreign firms . . . the supply of ‘technical assistance’ and especially economic advice by capitalist governments . . . and so on, all of which progressively articulate the periphery with the centre, and strengthen the position of the ‘comprador’ regimes . . . In short, the phase of industrialization . . . does not lead to an autonomous process of capitalist development, but to a further consolidation of underdevelopment. The population of the towns increases, but urban employment does not keep pace with it. *Per capita* incomes barely rise, the gap between them and *per capita* incomes in the metropolitan countries grows wider, and income distribution inside the underdeveloped countries remains so unequal that the real income of the majority may well decline. . . . the society has been ‘locked into’ its subordinate role in the international capitalist system by new means (17-18).”

46. See Chileshe, who discusses the center-periphery relationship in *Petals of Blood*.

47. Amoko and Gikandi note Ngũgĩ’s often ambiguous tendency to negotiate sociopolitical divisions through problematic figures of individual heteronormative relationships, and this is the case here. For a widely cited critique of Ngũgĩ’s gender politics, see Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

48. See Anonby (163).
49. See, for example, Ogude, “Narration” (274).

50. See Clough (259).

51. The specter of Mau Mau is so provocative that even Nelson Mandela’s well-intended invocation of Kimathi’s name in a 1990 visit to Kenya caused a frantic reaction by the government of Daniel Arap Moi. See Clough (251).


53. See Ngũgĩ & Jaggi (241).

54. See Julien (155-156).

55. Gikandi also sees the “admixture of idioms” in the novel as a reflection of “the complexity of the politics of everyday life in the postcolony” (Ngũgĩ, 213).

56. See, for example, Anonby (135-150).

57. If Marxism, according to Jameson, reliant as it is on what he identifies as the “much-stigmatized notion of totality,” remains at once “the very science of capitalism” and a utopian “prophetic vocation” with a truly systemic vision, Ngũgĩ seems to anticipate Jameson’s argument that not only is ambivalence self-destructive in a historical moment of globalization characterized by nothing so much as relentlessly more totalizing capitalism, the appropriate response involves ever more Marxism (*Valences* 389, 409). (See, in general, Jameson’s “Actually Existing Marxism” chapter in *Valences of the Dialectic*.)

58. Ogude, in particular, views this universalizing (not to mention dualistic and value-laden) approach as a derivative and moribund modernist politics, a fossilized utopianism already buried by postmodernism and postcoloniality, as well as its own hermeneutical shortcomings. See *Novels*, especially pages 6-7.

59. Wegner, writing with additional hindsight, contends this trend begins in earnest in 1989. See Chapter 1 of *Life between Two Deaths*.

60. See Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* (4).


62. See Faris (21-23).

64. Eagleton has cautioned that Bakhtin’s approach to the disruption of hierarchy is next door to the “sheer shitlike amorphousness which is Stalinism, nihilism, the demonic or . . . the leveling exchanges of the capitalist marketplace”; as Eagleton puts it “the endless couplings and exchanges of the carnivalesque body are also terrifyingly close to what is worst about modern political regimes” (Eagleton 236). Eagleton enjoys some hearty laughter of his own at academia’s embrasure of the carnivalesque, whereby academic’s own officialdom, “chaired professors and presidents of learned societies” imagine they can “tumble from their offices into the streets, monstrous papier mâché phalluses fixed in place” (230).


66. See Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (191).


68. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ states that *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ* was made available to the urban poor and those dwelling in rural areas through the use of vans as mobile bookshops. *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*, he claims, was read in family settings by literate family members, as well as in busses, taxis, and public bars by “professional readers . . . who would read the book aloud to the other drinking but attentive customers” (83). Ogude questions whether this is a romanticization of the book’s reception on Ngũgĩ’s part. Admitting that the author’s claims cannot be verified, he notes that “statistics from Ngũgĩ’s publisher indicate that very few copies of the text were sold and, given the record of a poor reading culture among Kenya’s lower classes, it is unlikely that the book was read by Ngugi’s target audience” (*Novels* 165-166n4).

69. This is not to be interpreted as claiming the novel is “simple,” a claim that has been made, and which Gikandi rather aggressively critiques as a “defense mechanism of metropolitan readers who are condemned to read it in relation to their modernist standards” (“Epistemology” 165).

70. It is important to acknowledge that this study reads the English translation of *Matigari ma Njirũũngĩ*, a translation that unlike that of *Caitaani Mũtharabainĩ*, was not written by Ngũgĩ himself. Gikandi argues in his essay, “The Epistemology of Translation,” that the former presents a number of epistemological problems. Notwithstanding the importance of the cultural specificities Gikandi refers to, many of which are bound up in language, this study reads the English translation in the spirit of the text’s own representation of how discourse works.
Especially through its use of rumor, *Matigari* destabilizes any overly strict interpretation of itself, and dramatizes how storytelling inevitably entails that stories themselves change—that is, are translated, re-translated, and transform—with each new telling. One might view *Matigari ma Njirũŋgi*’s translation into English—and indeed, this study’s re-translating of it—as part of the ongoing process of translation and transformation that is narrative itself, a notion that Ngũgĩ’s Gĩkũyũ-language novel, interestingly, seems both to resist and to authorize.

71. Ngũgĩ talks about the influence of cinema in an interview with Hansel Nolumbe Eyoh, stating that the novel is written “as if each scene is captured in a frame, so that the whole novel is a series of camera shots” (qtd. in Anonby162).


73. Ngũgĩ discusses the relation of his oral storytelling mode to the representations of space and time in *Matigari* in further detail in his interview with Maya Jaggi, cited below.

74. As mentioned above, Balogun discusses Ngũgĩ’s reinvention of the novel form in “Matigari.” Ogude discusses the author’s re-narration of “nation” in *Novels*.

75. See Nkosi (199).

76. Gikandi also uses the phrase “universal history.” See *Ngũgĩ* (231).

77. See Gikandi, *Ngugi* (232-235), for Gikandi’s broader discussion of rumor in contexts of domination and subversion.

78. Wegner argues that in More’s *Utopia* “King Utopus . . . marks the place of the absolutist monarch in the real history of the formation of the modern nation-state: the monarch serves the role of a “vanishing mediator,” dissolving older forms of social and cultural power, that of the feudal estates and the Roman Catholic Church, thereby clearing the space for the emergence of a new kind of centralized social, political, and cultural authority” (*Communities* 52).

79. In addition to the account of this story given in Ngũgĩ’s note to the American edition, discussed below, see Balogun, in which he observes that *Matigari* “was so artistically successful that the Kenyan government had mistaken its protagonist for a real life revolutionary seeking government overthrow” (185).


81. See, for instance, “Association of African Women Scholars (AAWS) Condemns the Rape of Njeeri Ngũgĩ, Wife of Professor Ngugi wa Thiongo.” (*The Black Scholar* 34.3 [2002]: 8.). With Moi Gone, Ngũgĩ returned to Kenya only to be attacked by thieves. His wife was raped during the attack. The couple fled the country.
CHAPTER 4
REVIVING THE DREAM: THE HEALING NARRATIVE AND UTOPIAN DESIRE IN ALICE WALKER’S MERIDIAN, TONI CADE BAMBARA’S THE SALT EATERS, AND TONI MORRISON’S PARADISE

The epigraph to Alice Walker’s second novel, Meridian (1976), reads in part, “I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch . . . . And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.” Taken from Oglala Sioux medicine man Black Elk’s story of the slaughter at Wounded Knee, these words connect Walker’s mid-1970s meditation on the 1960s with the broader history of racist imperialism. They also serve as an overture to the text’s urgent attempt to revive hope at a historical moment when utopian social dreaming, after a brief but powerful efflorescence, once again lay in ruins. The particular context for what Mab Segrest calls Meridian’s “rebirthing moment” is the end of the civil rights phase of the U.S. Black Freedom Movement.¹ The utopian dream in question is the vision of “Freedom Now!” that, whether manifested as what Francis Shor views as the “ethereal” dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. or the more “grounded” approach of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was the Movement’s motive force and guiding image (“Aspirations” 178). In King’s case, the dissolution of the Civil Rights Movement after ‘65 caused him to reflect that “the dream I had in Washington back in 1963 has often turned into a nightmare” (qtd. in Segrest 37). Ultimately, “King’s dream turned” completely “to ash,” and eventually “the hopes of the movement died with [him]” even though “the hardest and most paramount tasks [still] lay ahead” (Sitkoff 200, 221, 228). King himself assessed this unfinished work in a late essay that reevaluates his earlier ideas, writing that “the real issue to be faced” remained (and yet remains) the “radical reconstruction of society itself” at a “systemic rather than [a] superficial” level (qtd. in Segrest 37).
Walker, a veteran of the ‘60s’ political struggles,\(^2\) is among a group of black activist writers who insist that if this “Third Reconstruction”\(^3\) is to be brought about, it is imperative to combat the “malaise” that resulted from the failures, incompletions, and eventual demise of the Movement. Because of this malaise, the “young militants” of the 1960s “abandoned their former . . . ideals” (Sitkoff 210). While these authors acknowledge the ways in which the Movement itself, and society as a whole, fell short, their works are equally adamant about the necessity of preserving the dream of “a world governed by norms of social justice,” and of renewing the hope necessary to resume the unfinished work of creating a “beloved community” (Danielson 329).\(^4\) Paralleling Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s attempt to overcome postcolonial “disenchantment,” African American novels like *Meridian* look backward beginning in the mid-’70s in order to learn from, but also to resuscitate, the powerful utopian impulse of previous years. Walker’s text exemplifies this view in that “where Black Elk puts down his burden with sorrow and hopelessness,” *Meridian*’s eponymous protagonist “picks it up and goes on, with determination and hope” (Downey 39). Clayborne Carson argues that, for a whole generation, there was a very real “important and irreversible change . . . among black people” during the ‘60s’ Second Reconstruction, especially in terms of people’s senses of identity and agency (301). The works of Walker and her peers teach readers that in order for the even more profound changes of a Third Reconstruction to come, utopia must be “rebirthed” from its own ashes.

Like Walker’s *Meridian*, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) are works that sift through the rubble of the past, especially the 1960s, in order to meditate upon complicated questions about the future of social dreaming about the future. All three concern themselves with the period surrounding the American Bicentennial year of 1976, *Meridian*’s year of publication. Bambara’s novel picks up where Walker’s leaves
off, turning forward in history in order to merge the concerns of the past with the emergent political realities of the “last quarter” of the twentieth century. Morrison’s work returns to 1976 to re-member the past from the vantage point of the century’s end, and uses that revision to thematize its look forward into a new millennium. All three texts communicate the imperative of pursuing the “unfinished business” of the 1960s, a “business” that is deeply implicated with questions of the utopian imagination. Despite the fact that these three novels do not populate their narratives with “perfect” utopian communities, nor are they even primarily concerned with representing the kind of less idealistic, “more perfect” communities that are yet “shown with [their] faults, inconsistencies, [and] problems” in the Anglo-American “critical utopias” of the post-’60s era, they are nonetheless resolutely utopian works bent on revivifying desires for social “paradises” (Moylan, Demand 44). While Morrison’s novel is the one work among the three that explicitly represents alternative social collectives, its two doomed “utopias” are not offered to readers as viable social possibilities; they are not ends but means created to educate desires and motivate readers to imagine a transformed world, one informed but not constrained by the historical lessons of the First and Second Reconstructions. Meridian, The Salt Eaters, and Paradise share a deep commitment to restoring a damaged hope, the hope necessary to bring about what Karen F. Stein deems an even “more fundamental social change than that promised by revolution”: the “transformation” described by Adrienne Rich in 1977 as a “vision of a process which will leave neither surfaces nor depths unchanged” (Stein 140; Rich 248). In their efforts to do so, these three novels demonstrate the necessity of critiquing and transforming the utopian dream itself, as well as the way it is envisioned in fictional form.

In salvaging the ruins of the 1960s to address the “need for and difficulty of continuing to ask” the question of radical social transformation in a post-radical age, all three novels share a
set of additional concerns (Segrest 38). Foremost among these is the way in which “the [black freedom] movement failed to acknowledge women’s selfhood and thus perpetuated the counterrevolutionary values of a destructive society” (Stein 129). In this way, Walker’s, Bambara’s, and Morrison’s works exemplify how “U.S. ‘women of color’ in the 1970s and beyond have added gender and sexuality to King’s list of racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism” in order to revise and expand the Movement’s “unfinished” utopian “business” (Segrest 38). They argue that no social transformation can achieve real justice without constitutively transfiguring the existing hegemonic gender norms and relationships. Additionally, in light of these intersecting and often conflicting political concerns, all three novels “move between mourning the postmodern destruction of community” and a “reclaiming of the term” that moves, however inchoately, toward overcoming the paralyzing political fragmentation of the postmodern world (Duck 516). Still further, although each text works toward this reclamation in its own way, they all do so through another kind of reclamation that Susan Danielson sees in *Meridian* in particular: they all attempt to “help us recall and reclaim the past with appropriate complexity and love” (318). These novels look backward to recapture the spirit of the political struggles and successes of the 1960s, and to mourn the decade’s failures and deaths; but far more importantly, they intervene in the post-’60s era by disrupting received understandings of the past and envisioning alternative-historical groundings from which a transformed future could possibly emerge. This future, in Ashis Nandy’s words, is paradoxically “unfettered by the past and yet, inevitably informed with the past” (23). In this regard, their approach to the past—what Morrison, in *Beloved* (1988), famously called “rememory” and Paul Gilroy (citing Morrison) calls “the imaginative appropriation” and “recovery” of history⁶—shares much with Bloch’s ideas about the relationship between a particular kind of memory and utopia:
there is in present material, indeed in what is remembered itself, an impetus and a sense of being broken off, a brooding quality and an anticipation of Not-Yet-Become; and this broken-off and broached material does not take place in the cellar of consciousness, but on its Front. So it is a question here of the psychological processes of approaching, which are so characteristic above all . . . for times of change . . . [and] for all phenomena therefore in which Unbecome is located and seeks to articulate itself. (Principle 11-12)

For Bloch, the utopian function of memory has nothing to do with the primordial “backward dawning” of Freudian psychoanalysis; rather, the lacunae of the “Not-Yet-Brought-Out” are the spaces in which “depictions of the wished-for, the anticipated better life in psychological and material terms” begin to assume form (Bloch, Principle 11, 13, emphasis added). It is precisely the opening of such spaces of unrealized potential that the revisitings and re-visitations of the past that occur in *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, and *Paradise* work to achieve.

The confluence of psychology, historicity, and materiality in Bloch’s discussion of utopian memory is clearly evident in a final element shared by these three novels, and one of the primary concerns of this discussion: while each text entails its own particular approach to the question of utopia, all three texts respond to, and attempt to surmount, the most debilitating aspects of the past through narratives of healing. Specifically, each text incorporates a story of a healing process that involves one or more protagonists. In all cases, however, the psychological and physical convalescence of individual characters is deeply embedded in multiple strata of social politics. Consequently, these acts of storytelling use healing narratives in ways that extend beyond the immediate lives of the characters and gesture toward healing the black community, the disenchanted dreamers of the 1960s, a fractured postmodern world, and ultimately the embattled idea of utopia itself.

**Healing Narratives as Utopian Texts**

As novels of healing, *Meridian*, *The Salt Eaters*, and *Paradise* share a utopian impulse that assumes a distinctive diegetic form—that of the “illness narrative”—in order to tell their
stories of dis-ease, recovery, transformation, and renewed commitment to a better future. Ann Folwell Stanford observes that African American women writers of the 1970s and 1980s frequently turned to this genre to emphasize how “individual disease is inextricably bound up with broader social ills,” and to figure “individual healing in a world, a global community that itself bears symptoms of a terminal illness” (“Disease” 28). The novels discussed here couple the healing of their respective protagonists with an impetus to heal sociopolitical maladies, and to instill a desire for such ameliorative change. However, what distinguishes these texts from mere representations of convalescence is that they do not simply “restore” intact their subjects or the political spirit of the 1960s these subjects often allegorize; rather, these novels reconfigure the past to open toward a fundamentally transformed, “healthy” future world.

One of the core tasks of the “illness narrative,” as theorized by sociologist Arthur Frank, is “to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person’s sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going” (Frank 83). It is crucial, however, that “repair” does not connote what Frank calls the “restitution narrative,” the main objective of which is “returning the sick person to the status quo ante” (83). Instead, Frank prioritizes stories of illness that take the form of “quest narratives.” These, he argues, “meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it” as a “journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but [it] is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is to be gained through the experience” (Frank 115, emphasis in original). Unlike the escapist restitution narrative, which seeks to return the sufferer intact to state equivalent to one in which the illness never happened, the quest narrative’s notion of healing involves a process of “re-drawing maps and finding new destinations” (Frank 53, emphases added).
For Frank, these new destinations—new futures, new identities, new worldviews, and indeed, new “worlds”—emerge through the illness narrative from what he calls the “narrative wreckage” that sickness wreaks on prior life-histories. An ill person’s life-narrative is “wrecked,” according to Frank, because due to the onset of sickness, “its present is not what the past was supposed to lead up to, and the future is scarcely thinkable” (55). Narrative wreckage involves “disrupted memory,” whereby the past is not experienced as the “past,” but rather as “unassimilated fragments that refuse to become past, haunting the present. Just as present illness struggles with a past that was not supposed to lead to illness, the present that is recovered from illness struggles with a past that never received its due telling when it was happening” (Frank 60). The practical mission undertaken by the life-narrative’s retelling involves the (re)creation of a narrative structure in which the disrupted “past is still viewed in light of its connection to the present and future in an ongoing project” (Frank 60-61). Thus, for Frank, “the process of creating a story” also necessarily “creates [a] memory structure,” and via the narrative process by which this “memory is created . . . a future is also being created, and that future carries a distinct responsibility” (Frank 61, emphasis in original). For the ill person, this responsibility entails, on the one hand, a struggle to “live out or live up to” the new, radically different self-narrative and its plans for the future, and on the other, the need to “choose that narrative,” to commit to living up to it with full awareness that the future it creates remains absolutely contingent (Frank 60). Following Paul Ricoeur, Frank argues that the act of telling the chosen narrative births de novo from narrative chaos not only a transformed future, but also a transformed subject, and that “this initial non-givenness of the subject or self is a necessary condition of the story’s morality,” a morality that finds its genesis in “the liberation from [the] narcissism of being a narrator who believes he already knows who he [sic] is” (61).
Frank often prioritizes questions of morality and ethics in order to emphasize the fact that the most vital functions of the illness narrative are not ego-driven and personal, but rather interpersonal, social ones. Part of the responsibility inherent in the narrative creation of the future lies in a simultaneous transfiguration of the past that might be likened to Walter Benjamin’s notion of “fanning the spark of hope in [a] past” that “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (*Illuminations* 255). For Frank, the telling of such personal histories is inevitably social “because as it is told” the story “reaches beyond the individual into the consciousness of the community” (63-64). Indeed, community is at the core of Frank’s understanding of storytelling not only because the act of storytelling implies a listener, but also because it “attempts to change one’s own life by affecting the lives of others” (Frank 18). For Frank, the reciprocity of storytelling is not just interpersonal; it is intersubjective. “The moral genius of storytelling,” he claims, “is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story for the other” (17, 18). Frank expands on the implications this mutualistic “occupation” of narrative space holds for postmodern times through Zygmunt Bauman’s revision of Levinas, arguing that the teller is an “I being for the Other” (Bauman, qtd. in Frank 14). This mode of identity should not be thought in the oft-criticized terms of self-subordination, self-sacrifice, or even as an individual moral choice, but as an ethical ontology. Frank writes, “Living for the other is not . . . an act of exemplary goodness. Persons live for others because their own lives as humans require living that way. The self is understood as coming to be human in relation to others” (15). This being for is thus also a being with that reflects what Frank calls the “core morality of the postmodern” insofar as it crosses the “postmodern divide” through communion, and deals with what Alan Wolfe calls the postmodern “Void” by re-grounding meaning in “the everyday struggles of people . . . who are trying to
make moral sense of their own suffering and who are witnesses to sufferings that go beyond their own” (17, 7, 19).

Beyond what Frank sees as this alternative self’s ability to overcome postmodern rifts, the reciprocity that arises from the empathic bonds formed in the process of narrating illness, construed more generally, possess transformative power, especially for communities in crisis. “Stories can heal,” he writes, and thus “the wounded healer and the wounded storyteller are not separate, but are different aspects of the same figure” (xii). This figure’s social role is in part a pedagogical one because by serving as “witnesses” to “the experience of reconstructing one’s own map,” narrators of illness and healing “tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who will follow them” (Frank 17). This pedagogy is integral to the sociopolitical work of the three novels discussed in this chapter, narratives which attempt to teach readers to heal themselves and others, to change, and to rebuild their relationships to the past for the purpose of re-mapping the future.

Frank’s theorization of the “wounded storyteller’s” transformation from a passive, medicalized, isolated, “sick” individual to an integral, active—even activist—member of a community is in many ways a utopian one. Although Frank focuses primarily on individual subjectivity (albeit that of a transformed, intersubjective subject), on autobiographical self-stories, and on comparatively limited communities of listeners or readers, it would be a mistake to overlook the illness narrative’s potential for remaking society on a larger scale. Indeed, Frank moves in this direction when he argues that the storyteller’s wound can function as “an opening that heals,” an opening toward a reinvented self capable of “reenchanting a disenchanted world” for a community of listeners, and which has the power to “provide glimpses of . . . perfection” (185). This approach to what could be called the utopian, considered in conjunction with the
illness narrative’s coming-to-selfhood, shares much with what Leah Hadomi calls the “intopia.” In inwardly directed, intopian representations of a “protagonist’s growing consciousness of his utopian quest for an alternative inner reality,” Hadomi argues that “the absolute categories of traditional utopian thinking . . . are replaced . . . by a subjective, relativistic approach . . . reflected in the protagonist’s search for a wished-for, yet unattainable reality” (110). In this vein, the illness narrative, understood by way of the intopia’s merging of utopia and a kind of antiestablishment bildungsroman, is in league with a substantial and diverse body of activist writing from the political margins. It resonates with what Bambara (then Toni Cade), writing during the Black Power years, described as “revolution” re-envisioned as “a free society made up of whole individuals . . . [as] a call for Self-hood” (qtd. in McDowell 262). It is also akin to the feminist utopian tradition’s personal-political “concern . . . not so much with the fixed structure of social institutions as . . . with the fluid practice of everyday life and human consciousness in a society where those who have been oppressed . . . live free of their oppression” (Moylan, Demand 56). Referencing Gayatri Spivak, Frank himself likens the illness narrative to “post-colonialism in its most generalized form” in that through it, the subject, colonized by both illness and the objectifying discourse of modern scientific medicine, “demand[s] to speak rather than being spoken for and to represent oneself rather than being represented or, in the worst cases, rather than being effaced entirely” (13).

There is indeed much that is utopian in the movement from stereotype to subjectivity that black feminist critics see as a central project of African American women’s fiction in particular. Beyond the question of the subaltern subject’s achievement of a new inward consciousness and outward voice, however, the question of utopia as a totally transfigured society would seem to demand that the intimate relationship between subjectivity and the
“structure of social institutions” be reexamined. Further, it is necessary for such a reexamination to scrupulously avoid re-reducing the subject to a determinist social construct while reinvesting the subject in larger social, historical, and political matrices, and *vice versa*, in ways that extend even deeper into “personhood” than is suggested by claims that the personal is political, without devaluing such claims in the least.

Nandy’s utopian thought engages in such a project by calling for a reconsideration of the sociopolitical position of the subject in response to an “anti-psychologism” that he sees as “partly a reaction to the over-psychologization of the age of psychological man” (Nandy 25). In theorizing toward a “third world utopia,” Nandy is a staunch critic of totalizing thought, of what he calls “vulgar materialism,” and of certain brands of teleological or developmentalist historicism (24). As a corrective, he advances the idea that “history as a discourse is a modern medium,” and thus “utopias participating in that discourse” are inevitably “definitionally located in the worldview of the dominant; even while trying to speak for the dominated, they have to define freedom in terms borrowed from the dominant” (13). Thus, both “history” and “subjectivity” are rife with problems. And yet despite these caveats, he argues that the psychical and the subjective are inextricably connected with broad-scale world-historical realities and sociopolitical institutions. “No vision of the future,” he contends, “can ignore that institutional suffering touches the deepest core of human beings, and that societies must work through the culture and psychology of such suffering in addition to its politics and economics” (26).

Ultimately re-affirming the imbrication of all of these issues in what is now a “global structure of oppression,” Nandy posits objective and subjective “worlds” as two articulations of the same phenomenon (25). Yet, as part of the political thrust of his own argument, he theorizes the embattled subject back into a position of prominence, and claims that its suppression by both
scientific and political “anti-psychologisms” is equivalent to “belittling the long-term cultural and psychological effects of violence, poverty and injustice” on both “the sufferers and those involved in the manufacturing of suffering”—“effects which persist [even] when what is usually called political and economic oppression is removed” (26).

For this reason, subjective interiority (and indeed a notion of exteriority enriched by a dialectical relationship with this interiority) cannot be ignored in Nandy’s vision of utopia. He argues that “eupsychia,” construed as “the idea of an ideal personality and the idea of an ideal of shared consciousness” is “embedded in . . . utopia and each utopia in turn is embedded in an eupsychia” insofar as any utopia “has to have its implicit concepts of human personality and person-in-society” (17-18, emphasis added). Such a view of the utopian subject as a psychically healthy person in (or “figuring” or anticipating) a healthy society resonates with Frank’s ideas, as does Nandy’s collectivization of the necessity for a “human aggregate to work through its own past, and to critically accept, reject or use that past” as part of its living self-identity and as a means to an enabling mythopoetics (23). Nandy’s thinking helps to illuminate the broader political, “utopian” potential of Frank’s work, and other manifestations of the “intopia.” One of Frank’s useful interventions is to theorize, at a needful historical moment, a person-in-society that represents an alternative to both the atomized consciousness of modernity and the molecularized, relativized postmodern subject-as-“construct.” It is a kind of self with renewed agency by virtue of the shared, reciprocal consciousness enabled by the creation of an intimate narrative that extends beyond the self to enfold the community, and which endeavors to make it a better community through a healing process that presumes, and makes positive use of, this communal “psyche.”
The deeply political aspects of many illness narratives become even more pronounced when, in addition to the nature of the “wounded storyteller’s” subject-hood, the nature of the wound itself is examined. Diane Price Herndl calls to mind Susan Sontag’s argument that “disease imagery” is often used metaphorically “to express concern for the social order” when Herndl goes as far as to claim that “how we represent . . . suffering” and the way “subjectivity changes when the body suffers”—and in turn how these representations “work as metaphors for cultural crises”—marks “one of the clearest sites in contemporary critical work where we can see the interactions of representation and the political” (Sontag 73; Herndl, “Condition” 772). Such an analysis should be pushed a step further in reading the novels under consideration here. Rather than reading illness as a political metaphor (or as allegory), it is instructive to read it as metonymy; in other words, the ailing body should be understood quite literally as part of an ailing body politic. Stories of healing in turn should be read as embrasures of this relationship by storytellers who seek to become actors in history by using “representations of illness [to] make real differences in the world” (Herndl, “Condition” 772). Notwithstanding his preoccupation with ethics, Frank gestures toward such a political understanding of illness when he writes that “bodily symptoms are the infolding of cultural traumas into the body. As these bodies continue to live and to create history, these symptoms outfold into the social space of that history” (28). In this analysis, Frank’s conceptualization of a “biopsychosocial” subject shares much with non-Western conceptions of illness, like the Navajo view that “bodily complaints are . . . icons of disharmony in social relationships and in the cultural ethos” (Kleinman 12). It also is aligned with the political projects of material feminists who would re-“enflesh” the Cartesian subject of modernity to retrieve “the ineliminable dependence of the inside and the outside, mind and matter, on each other,” and materialist feminists who insist on “inserting the social subject . . .
into the historical contest over meaning and resources” in ways that learn from, but surpass postmodern and poststructuralist constructivisms in terms of historicity, scope, and most importantly, agency (Grosz 28; Hennessy xviii). Such thinkers’ devotion to the politics of gender in particular is especially pertinent to the readings below.

As it is for material feminists, embodiment is the pivot of Frank’s theory, which can be said to imagine and theorize a utopian body, what Frank calls “not only an ideal type but also an idealized type”: the “communicative body-self” (48). The communicative body is also a “communing body” that exists in an open, “dyadic” relationship with the Other via “our shared corporeality” (Frank 49, 35). The “ethical dimension” of the dyadic body is, for Frank, rooted in the body’s capacity for “producing desire”: “when a body . . . turns outward in dyadic relatedness,” Frank writes, “it sees reflections of its own suffering in the bodies of others. When the body is a desiring one, the person wants and needs to relieve the suffering of others” (49).

The “political dimension” of this theory is most salient in “the least gentle quest stories,” which are “manifestoes . . . often carrying demands for social action” (Frank 120, emphasis in original). The manifesto “asserts that illness is a social issue, not simply a personal affliction. It witnesses how society has added to the physical problems that disease entails, and it calls for change, based on solidarity of the afflicted” (Frank 122). More generally, the “dyadic” body-subject whose wound is a “half-opening” to the world is inevitably infused with the political and material conditions of that world. In asking why self-stories of illness tended to “proliferate” in the “postmodern” moment of his book’s appearance, Frank answers that “because the accumulated violences of modernity are no longer deniable,” the experience of “the really real . . . is often pain” (72). Frank’s observations offer a historico-political assessment of a world in crisis.

Afflicted bodies here must be read metonymically as dystopias; but their narratives of healing are...
utopian. Healing narratives like Walker’s, Bambara’s, and Morrison’s create new “remade” futures as they use the illnesses of the present to work through the narrative wreckage of the past. In works such as these, it is perhaps best to think about utopia as “as a literary practice” that does not necessarily “assert utopia as a literary object,” but asserts it instead as “the emancipating possibilities of the dream” (Moylan, Demand 56). In terms of the “dream” itself, the novels examined here are not only utopian stories of renewal; they are stories that renew utopia.

**Healing the 1960s: Gender and Intopia in Meridian**

Walker’s *Meridian* is one of the most direct and conspicuous literary attempts to resurrect the dream of the Black Freedom Movement and heal those who survived its demise. Walker began writing *Meridian* in 1970, when the civil rights struggles of the 1960s had already “been declared dead” (Hendrickson 112). Long before its publication in 1976, SNCC and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) were defunct, and King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had been utterly ineffectual since his assassination. King’s is among the thirteen names of slain 1960s figures that serve as a makeshift title for a brief chapter in *Meridian*, a text that performs a political and philosophical postmortem on a “decade marked by death” in order to rework the wrecked narrative it left behind (Walker 21). In addition to the fact that the narrative of the 1960s freedom struggle failed to reach its promised conclusion, the text’s task is compounded by a problem summed up in the character Truman Held’s observation that “no one is thinking about [the 1960s] anymore”; at least for this mid-1970s incarnation of Truman, “revolution, like everything else in America, [has been] reduced to a fad” (206). In returning to the 1960s to “think about” them once again, *Meridian* does not seek the wholesale “restitution” of a Freedom Movement that has vanished from popular consciousness. Instead, its reading of the decade exercises Gilroy’s interventionist “hermeneutics of memory and of suspicion.” In doing so, it exhumes, along with the movement’s sociopolitical aspirations, the “inadequacies”
and “contradictions” between its “reality and [its] ideology” in order to revise those aspirations even as it revivifies them (Danielson 318). As a result, the ‘60s vision of transformation is itself transformed. Nevertheless, this does not undermine how, in re-membering “the dream,” Walker “reaffirms the Movement’s vision,” and in counteraction to Truman’s assertion, “compels us to think about these issues once again” in a way that attempts to overcome what compromised that vision (Hendrickson 126). For Bloch, “all freedom movements” are urged on by the idea of utopia, and according to Shor, “the black freedom movement” in particular represents an “articulation and enactment” of the very “utopian aspirations” at the heart of Bloch’s philosophy (Bloch, Principle 7; Shor, “Aspirations” 173). Intrinsic to Meridian’s narrative labor, then, is the “rebirth” of a utopian impulse that, like the assassinated leaders whose memories circulate in the novel, left the world before its work was finished.

Meridian’s narrative tells of the personal healing of Meridian Hill, a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement and a devotee of nonviolent resistance, during a historical moment when American society no longer has a place for her. Meridian grows up in a small, isolated Georgia town. While still in school, she becomes pregnant, is expelled, and marries the child’s father, Eddie. Her marriage soon disintegrates, and Meridian decides to give up her child for adoption and attend college on a scholarship. While at Saxon College (modeled on Walker’s experiences at Spellman),

Meridian’s narrative tells of the personal healing of Meridian Hill, a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement and a devotee of nonviolent resistance, during a historical moment when American society no longer has a place for her. Meridian grows up in a small, isolated Georgia town. While still in school, she becomes pregnant, is expelled, and marries the child’s father, Eddie. Her marriage soon disintegrates, and Meridian decides to give up her child for adoption and attend college on a scholarship. While at Saxon College (modeled on Walker’s experiences at Spellman), a school dedicated to the production of young black “ladies,” Meridian becomes involved in the Atlanta Movement. She also becomes involved with Truman, a black intellectual, artist, and activist from New York. Truman abandons Meridian for a white exchange student and future activist named Lynne Rabinowitz. As the Movement transitions from its nonviolent civil rights phase to its revolutionary separatist phase, both Lynne and Meridian are marginalized: Lynne because she is white, Meridian because she cannot commit to the idea of violence in the
name of social justice. The remainder of the narrative largely follows the tribulations of the members of this triangle. Lynne’s life becomes a shambles, as does the flawed romanticism that drew her into the Civil Rights Movement. Her and Truman’s young daughter, Camara, is murdered, and Lynne suffers a mental breakdown. Truman “sells out,” painting fetishistic, romanticized portraits of black women while continuing to dally with white women, and working on a sculpture of Crispus Attucks for the Bicentennial, a celebration for those who “adore America just the way it is” (Walker 206). An ailing Meridian abandons her possessions and moves into a single-room shack in the rural South where she attempts to carry on the work of improving black people’s lives. Truman periodically visits her. Meridian remains faithful to the practice of nonviolence, albeit to much less effect, while continuing to search for an answer “to her questions about the relationship between violence and change” (Christian 206). At the novel’s conclusion, Meridian experiences a personal, physical, and spiritual transformation, and leaves her temporary home to “return to the world cleansed of sickness” and begin a new phase of her life to which readers are not privy (Walker 241).

Meridian’s story takes the form of an illness narrative that incorporates the three genres with which illness narratives often overlap: spiritual autobiographies, stories of gendered becoming, and stories of the survival of personal or cultural trauma.18 Further, as critics have repeatedly pointed out, Walker’s treatment of the Movement and its aftermath involves a “quest” narrative.19 Walker is “the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and participated in it and the only one to write a novel about [it],” and in this regard, Meridian’s quest is a kind of autobiography (Hendrickson 112). However, consistent with Claudia Tate’s contention that “Black women writers usually project their vision from the point of view of [their fictional] female characters,” Walker herself cautions that
“Meridian is autobiographical only in the sense of projection. Meridian is entirely better than I am, for one thing. She is an exemplary person; she is an exemplary, flawed revolutionary” (Tate, Women xx; Walker, qtd. in Tate, Women 184). Through this projection, Meridian’s autobiographical content takes on the three “facets” of the quest story: in addition to the “manifesto,” these are the “memoir” and the “automythology.” In both Meridian the character and Meridian the text, there are tensions among Walker’s remembrances of what was, her vision of what ought to have been, and a questioning of (that is, a questing for) what ought to be.

These gaps are especially visible in the novel’s treatment of gendered becoming. Stein notes how this issue emerges over time in Walker’s various written recollections of the Movement: “while [Walker] wrote of the Civil Rights Movement with unreserved approval in 1967, she would later contend that it continued to oppress women and so failed in its mission of human liberation” (129). Throughout Meridian’s personal journey, her effort to overcome gender oppression within the Movement as well as without is integral to her quest to heal herself and others from the cultural traumas, both old and new, that outlasted the 1960s.

Meridian is indeed a trauma narrative of “broken bodies and spirits” that attempts to “garner wholeness from the bits and pieces of the past and recreate them” in the “search for regeneration” that drives every illness narrative (Downey 39; Christian 182, 181). Meridian Hill metonymically embodies the moribund Movement’s broken dreams, and Hettie V. Williams’s description of the Movement’s “collapse” in anthropomorphic (and Fanonist) terms as a “nervous breakdown” is an apt one for describing Meridian’s psychic and somatic condition for much of the narrative (4). The search for wellness that shapes the trajectory of this bildungsroman is both personal and political; it is both physical and philosophico-spiritual. Through what Barbara Christian’s oft-cited early reading of the novel describes as the text’s
“ability to put flesh on ideas,” Meridian becomes “not only a character,” but also “the embodiment of the novel’s major concept, the relationship between personal and social change” (206). In Walker’s “telling” of Meridian’s story, “Meridian becomes a ‘griot’” (N. Harris 80). Norman Harris notes that in this way, she “keep[s] [alive] the story of the people” and their “struggles,” but additionally, as a “wounded storyteller,” her story of regeneration also aims to heal the people and the dreams that move the struggle forward (80).

Walker’s novel “provides instructions for reading Meridian’s life as though it were inscribed on the archeological site of her body,” a body which serves as a “cipher” through which one can read the novel’s “lessons” (Nadel 56, 66). This foregrounding of embodiment is thus not only a feature the text shares with other illness narratives, it is central to Meridian’s utopian political pedagogy. At times, Meridian desires to escape her body “because she hate[s] its obstruction,” and critics who privilege the “spiritual” aspects of Meridian’s quest link her ascetic character to the “urgent disregard for the body” characteristic of many mystical traditions (Walker 97; J. Brown 314). However, the “sick” body’s ineradicable presence in the text provides object lessons about how Meridian’s personal journey must necessarily be a struggle with, rather than against, materiality. The “newly grown hair” and “thin, resolute face” that signify the “new” Meridian when the text’s conclusion “announces her health” reinforce the bodily aspects of Meridian’s journey toward rebirth (J. Brown 320). Indeed, both “the relationship between Meridian’s body and the body politic” as well as what many feminist thinkers insist is a need for “a unity of body and mind” become clear as, through Meridian, readers witness a gendered and raced body-self in transformation (Nadel 56; Christian 212).

When the narrative opens in the rural South of the 1970s, Meridian embodies “an anachronism . . . still dressed in the customary denim overalls, the uniform of SNCC” (Danielson
Looking “burnt out and weird” in her strange wardrobe, Meridian is frail, prone to hair loss and paralysis, and “sick” with a generalized malady that has plagued her since the 1960s (Walker 6). The etiology of her illness has two interrelated facets. One is public and thoroughly political, and makes clear the open relationship between “outside” and “inside” that characterizes the “biopsychosocial” nature of Meridian’s subjectivity: she suffers from “battle fatigue.” During her years as a civil rights worker, the physical toll exacted by serial demonstrations, police beatings, and other demanding aspects of her incessant public activism reduces Meridian to “constant tears” until “suddenly [her crying] would stop, and some other symptom would appear. The shaking of her hands, or the twitch in her left eye. Or the way she would sometimes be sure she’d heard a shot and feel the impact of the bullet against her back; then she stood absolutely still, waiting to feel herself fall” (82). Eventually, fall she does during recurring losses of consciousness. By the 1970s, Meridian is thoroughly “debilitated and sick” not only because of battle fatigue, but also because she is “unable to find new strategies” for living or for advancing the struggle for social justice (Danielson 319). She instead finds herself fighting ever-smaller and more pointless battles in what Stein labels a “caricature” of civil rights history (131). As Truman sees it, Meridian makes herself “catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere” (Walker 12).

The other cause of Meridian’s illness is more personal, yet still political. Deeply implicated in the “stress of her daily life” that causes her body to “grow frailer every day” are oppressions related to her embodied subject position as a black woman (96). This is true in terms of both the repressive, coercive gender expectations within and outside the movement, and the “almost primeval guilt” Meridian feels because of her inability to live up to these institutionalized expectations (96). While these expectations are most poignantly embodied by
her mother, they saturate her entire world. Meridian “fails” to reproduce conventional
motherhood by giving up her first child and by aborting a second child conceived with Truman.
Her marriage similarly fails to live out its stereotypical script and her few sexual experiences,
which begin in the context of child abuse and end in tubal ligation, are bankrupt of desire and
lead to painful disasters. By somaticizing the guilt caused by the gap between gender stereotypes
and Meridian’s very different experiences, illness functions here in one of the ways that Herndl
identifies in the complicated representations of illness in nineteenth-century texts by African-
American women: as a marker of the “space in between” Barbara Welter’s “True Womanhood”
and “Real” womanhood. As in many nineteenth-century texts, Meridian’s illness embodies “a
political complaint” against the social order in which that illness’ public and private “causes”
both originate (Herndl, “Invisible” 562-563). However, the function of illness extends beyond
negative critique. Authors “assert their heroines’ liability and resistance to illness” in a way that
also “suggests a rhetoric of” positive “self-assertion,” and indeed, Meridian’s narrative
exemplifies how in such texts, “illness becomes, ironically, a way to imagine wholeness”
(Herndl, “Invisible” 568). Read metonymically, Meridian’s journey toward wholeness represents
how the text “reaches for a new definition of revolution” in which “hope for a just society
inheres” not just “in political change, but [also] in personal transformation,” and it teaches
readers that “only by replacing the inhumane old order with life-affirming values can a new
world be built” (Stein 130). At the end of the novel, Meridian herself embodies, and affirms,
such a world.

Meridian’s pilgrimage occurs in two stages marked by two personal transformations (or
“Reconstructions”), both of which are linked to broader changes that are necessary to achieve a
just social order. The reborn Meridian—a healed body and an “intopian” self—should in fact be
read *ipso facto* as a utopic representation in prosopopoetic terms. Readers witness the first transformation, but the second is largely left to the imagination. Meridian’s narrative does not begin at the “beginning,” but *in medias res* in a moment of almost deathlike suspension during the 1970s when her first transformation has run its course and her second, more profound transformation has yet to be completed. As Meridian describes this, she is still “a woman in the process of changing her mind” (Walker 12). Christian points out that Meridian’s transformative quest involves a “moving backward to move forward beyond the point at which you began,” which not only causes the narrative to become “a visual representation of *revolution,*” but also punctuates, often via piecemeal, flashback narration, a theme we have seen before: the role that recreating the past plays in creating future wholeness (207, emphasis in original).

Meridian traverses, and surpasses, the political and philosophical confines of two generations during the process of her two re-generations, yet she also interiorizes (sometimes retroactively) and carries forward invaluable cultural and spiritual traditions from several generations. Her first transformation involves moving beyond attitudes held by her mother’s generation. From a standpoint amid the revolutionary Movement of the next generation, Meridian looks back upon her mother’s generation as the present incarnation of “a decidedly unrevolutionary past” (Walker 18). Mrs. Hill “did not complain about anything political because she had no desire to understand politics. She had never voted in her life” (75). In contrast to the civil rights era’s politics, Mrs. Hill is intent on continuing to do “what we did when I was coming up” (83). For Meridian, her mother also represents “Black Motherhood personified,” and Meridian remains “in terrible awe” of her mother and the institution she embodies even as she comes to glimpse “the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and child” of that “great institution” (96). Meridian is already reliving her mother’s self-negating sacrifices to the
culturally imposed scripts of “motherhood” and domesticity when her first transformation occurs. When her unfaithful husband abandons her at seventeen, Meridian then refuses to reproduce her mother’s martyrdom and gives up the son she cannot bring herself to love. As a result, Mrs. Hill insinuates that Meridian is “some kind of monster” (88). Not until her second transformation will Meridian overcome the emotional strain of the “monstrosity” she embodies as a figure of anti-normative Otherness. Concomitant with this transformative moment in Meridian’s personal life is an equally momentous political transformation. A nearby house occupied by civil rights activists is firebombed, and during the events and publicity that follow, Meridian discovers that a formerly invisible world full of political conflicts exists in parallel with, and effectively next door to, her own world. With this discovery comes Meridian’s “Awakening”: “and so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world” (70). The irruption into her world of the civil rights era’s violent political clashes is the personal “catastrophe” that plunges Meridian into world history, and this first personal revolution occurs at the very moment when “her life appears to be shaping itself into defeated molds from the past” (Danielson 320). Instead, Meridian is jarred out of these past molds and begins working for a better future, thereby “replacing the ‘old skin’ of marriage [with] a new one of social activism,” to use McDowell’s fleshly metaphor (McDowell 263). The pedagogy of this transformative moment is to insist not only on the responsibility to engage in historico-political struggles to overcome oppression, but also that self-actualization and social justice are interconnected with one another.

The remainder of the narrative deals with the ascendance, collapse, and fallout of the Black Freedom Movement, and Meridian’s second healing transformation represents the successful working through of her own generation’s shortcomings in order to renew the impulse
of the 1960s and carry it future-ward. The text’s retrospection makes problems, especially those with the Movement’s gender politics, evident from the moment Meridian joins an organization that resembles SNCC. However, at this early juncture, there is clearly a utopian optimism evident that mirrors how “the early Movement was imbued with a yearning for community” based in “idealistic American radicalism” and dedicated to the idea that “black and white together . . . would demonstrate to the world new possibilities for human relationships” (Danielson 321). Filtered through the personal lives of Meridian, Truman, and Lynne, the text captures this social dreaming, but also diagnoses the ills that lead to the movement’s failure.

Through Meridian’s Saxon years, Walker fictionalizes the transition, exemplified by the Atlanta Movement, from nonviolent assimilationism to militant radical separatism. This transition is followed by the Movement’s dissolution as it is torn apart by internal divisiveness and external political defeats; and the novel devotes a large expanse of its narrative to tracing the “disillusionment of the workers themselves” as it explores “the contradiction between the theoretical egalitarianism of the Movement and the twisted ways it came to be realized” (Danielson 322). Meridian embodies this disaffectedness through her illness, and her physical “falling apart” mirrors the Movement’s fate. These events initiate for a second time the cycle of “death and rebirth” that critics see “throughout” the novel (McDowell 263).

Meridian’s second rebirth occurs in a black church that has itself been transformed by the Civil Rights Movement, one of the few remaining spaces in which the Movement’s spirit remains vivid and alive. It is not the ethereal and abstracted church of her mother’s generation, whose passive approach to social inequities insists on the compensatory belief that the “lord” will provide. Rather, while it maintains deep roots in the traditional American black church, it is also inflected with “liberation theology” and steeped in the historico-political urgencies of the
moment: the preacher, in a voice resembling the fallen Dr. King’s, rails against Richard Nixon and forbids young congregants to participate in the Vietnam war; the congregation’s “ah-mens” convey an unsentimental “tone of ‘We are fed up’” (Walker 215). Walker describes this church-topia as “the only place left for black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally” (218). McDowell also sees the place where Meridian experiences her “epiphany of sorts” as “the restored church of her slave ancestors . . . of Nat Turner [and] Denmark Vesey” (McDowell 247, 272). Here, the traditions of the past and the struggles of the present are linked and marshaled in aid of forward-dreaming and active striving toward a transfigured world.

Meridian is imbued with the spirit of this community, and in keeping with the novel’s metonymization of illness, Walker renders Meridian’s “spiritual” transformation in physical terms, writing that “there was in Meridian’s chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely” (219). As part of her healing, Meridian becomes aware of the fact that rather than assuming a “sick” role by suffering—even martyring herself—in struggle, her commitment to that struggle requires the self-affirmation of living. Walker writes that Meridian “understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own” (220, emphasis in original). McDowell sees this epiphany as the “blooming” of a “self” that bestows a “certain completion to Meridian’s characterization” and “resolves some of the most besetting quandaries of her life” (272). It represents what Frank, ventriloquizing Joseph Campbell’s popular work on the “quest” narrative, would call Meridian’s “apotheosis,” the end of her “road of trials.” Crucially, Meridian’s achievement of self-definition as both “a place or situation with its own distinctive character” and a personal
realization of the “highest point of power . . . [the] culmination . . . the highest point of health, vigor, etc.”—two of the dictionary definitions of the word “Meridian” listed in the novel—is narrated as an “existence extended beyond herself to those around her because . . . the years in America had created them One Life” (Walker 220). Thus, the “new” Meridian has indeed used her illness as a quest to achieve a subjectivity that exists for, with, and through others; a self that, in fact, cannot exist without others. Although she here achieves a full and healthy personhood, the novel is clear that this person is not only interconnected with the other selves in the church, but also with that church’s tradition and other valuable aspects of a collective past. By virtue of how this past accrues through the telling of her biographical narrative, Meridian represents an insurgent disruption of official history’s distortion of the past by “centuries of cultural rape” (Nadel 57). Further, because Meridian is rendered as a self who also embodies this “beloved community,” her narrative also invites readers into its space in a mutually participatory way. Christian describes this aspect of the novel using words that uncannily anticipate Frank’s, arguing that it “suggests that even her dearly won salvation is not sure unless we others sort out the tangled roots of our past and pursue” a “health” equivalent to hers (234, emphasis in original). Through her story of healing, Meridian’s transforming self is thus at once a cipher—a utopian “anticipatory illumination”—of a rewritten history and a transformed community, and an impetus to work actively, even militantly, for such a community. This imperative is crystallized in Meridian’s bequest to Truman in the novel’s final chapter. Truman realizes that “he would never see ‘his’ Meridian again” because a “new part had grown out of the old,” and witnessing the rise and departure of a new, healthy Meridian, he acknowledges that “the conflict in her own soul . . . must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (Walker 241-242). His final act is to commit to this imperative and assume Meridian’s former place as an “ill” quester and activist.
The story of Meridian and her comrades dramatizes how the narrative wreckage that must be worked through in the process of “becoming” is strewn with urgent political contradictions. Walker’s text reveals that intrinsic to the main contradiction in the U.S. Black Freedom Movement—that between utopian desires and anti-utopian realities—are a number of related pernicious paradoxes that further confound the situation. Stein argues that in Meridian “Walker suggests that a primary reason for the Movement’s failure was its lack of a sustained sociopolitical critique,” and accordingly, the novel undertakes the very self-critique it alleges the Movement failed to accomplish (131). In the process, it excavates deep contradictions pertaining to issues of gender, race, culture, class, consumerism, lifestyle, leadership, and strategies for resistance. Meridian’s journey toward her second regeneration involves successfully navigating many of these antinomies. This healing process amounts to what Segrest, using terms that are not out of keeping with Frank’s, describes as “decolonizing her female self of the deeply embedded effects of racism, sexism, poverty, and violence” (39, emphasis added).

As Segrest’s emphasis on the “female” self indicates, Walker’s novel considers gender the most important issue within this diverse matrix of problems. In Meridian’s representation of the Movement, divisive and un-equalitarian gender politics oppress the women of the would-be revolutionary 1960s generation just as they did the women of the “unrevolutionary” generation preceding it. Through its historical critique, the text provides an object lesson in Patricia Hill Collins’s dictum that “Black antiracist politics that do not make gender central are doomed to fail because someone will always be left behind” (Politics 7). The conflict between the sexes in Meridian is most obvious and most intimate in the relationship between Meridian and Truman:

Of course Meridian appropriated all the good qualities of black women to herself, now that she was awake enough to be aware of them. In her life with Eddie she knew she had lacked courage, lacked initiative or a mind of her own . . . . At times [now] she thought of herself as an adventurer. It thrilled her to think she belonged
to the people who had produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who’d led troops in battle. But Truman, alas, did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilt and fears and remorse, to claim her own life. She knew Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie’s wife, for all that he admired the flash of her face across the picket line—an attractive woman, but asleep. (Walker 112-113)

The explicit link between Truman’s attitude toward women and the expectations that surrounded Meridian’s marriage to Eddie punctuates how Meridian finds that the Movement undercut its own professed utopian, egalitarian vision by remaining “permeated with the sexism of the community it [sought] to change” (Danielson 324). In this regard, the novel reflects how, despite the important contributions to the cause made by women like SNCC founder Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Diane Nash, and Ruby Doris Smith for instance, it was the case nonetheless that in organizations like SNCC, “women were viewed as inferior to men” (Urban 188). Meridian’s historical narrative loosely tracks a very real progression of gender-related conflicts from an earlier period exemplified by the efforts of some black men to suppress “the growing feminist consciousness of young black women . . . toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement,” through the more pronounced misogyny that occurred under the mantra of “Black Power,” which “urged black women, who had struggled for their freedom along with black men in the Civil Rights Movement, to subordinate themselves to black men, to make themselves less, for the good of their people [by] confining” themselves “to the role of wife and mother” (Hendrickson 112-113).28 As a corrective, Meridian critiques the gender oppression within the Black Freedom Movement that occurred despite what should have been a clear “analogy to the racist oppression of black people,” and through Meridian’s healing narrative, this political exigency is interiorized and intermingled with the overcoming of her personal confrontation with her mother’s standards of “womanhood” (Hendrickson 112).
In addition to gender politics, Meridian’s experience with the Movement excavates and scrutinizes additional contradictions that compromise its utopian “dream.” They involve the cultural politics of race and class, and Danielson emphasizes that Truman embodies these contradictions as well as those of the Movement’s sexual politics. Although Truman is “driven by a concern for social justice” and chooses “to go south” to do activist work, he nonetheless “prefers any community to the American Black one,” and performs the ways in which class, education-level, and cultural identity are endemic to his “preferences” (Danielson 324). SNCC’s activities in the South were often influenced by Northern black male intellectuals,²⁹ and without impugning any individual, Walker’s novel asks questions about the possible cultural disconnect between this social position and those of the southern black people such activists mobilized, and in whose name they presumed to speak. A New Yorker and an artist who has spent time abroad, Truman functions as an archetype of a certain kind of 1960s black male intellectual. He wears flamboyant dashikis; he “believe[s] that people who [speak] French,” like he does, “[are] better than people (les pauvres, les misérables!) who [do] not”; he paints black women as “magnificent giants, breeding forth the warriors of the new universe” even as he verbally finds physical fault with them and dates white women for narrow, racially motivated reasons (Walker 100, 183). Truman desires and marries Lynne “because she [is] white, first of all,” but also for reasons that are deeply class-based and equally narrow (169, 325). Truman explains his preference to Meridian “in a way designed to make her despise the confines of her own provincial mind,” by telling her curtly that women like Lynne “read the New York Times” (152). Truman’s later alienation from Lynne critiques not only the problematic bases for their relationship, but also the equally reductive racial exclusivism of the later phases of the Movement. (Whites were voted out of SNCC, for instance, in 1966.)³⁰ In the novel, this exclusivism is recapitulated on a personal
level as Truman is driven apart from Lynne, who is banished from a community she helped to build. Lynne’s parents’ racially motivated declaration that she is “dead” to them marks her pariah status in her original community as well.

Additionally, through Lynne, the text examines the assumptions about race and class that constrained many educated white Northerners in the Movement. As part of its pedagogy, the text preserves the Movement’s ideals while expurgating abstract idealisms that are not grounded in material reality and thus, in Bloch’s terms, not concretely utopian. One of the ways in which it accomplishes this symbolically is to dismantle the romanticism that initially leads Lynne to join the Movement, a romanticism that objectifies and mythologizes Southern black people, and their alleged “closeness to the land,” in aesthetic terms as a kind of “art.” The destruction of Lynne’s romantic notions about Truman, about black people, about self-sacrifice, and about the Movement itself reveals a deeply rooted, latent racism in Lynne, who begins using racist epithets in moments of anger. In broaching this issue, the narrative insists that it must be dealt with further. When Lynne uses slurs in conversation with Meridian, additional gender-inflected divisions—wounds, even—between black women and white women surface as well. Beneath these intersecting problems of race, gender, and class, the narrative’s working-through of the Movement’s wrecked narrative uncovers, at the core of its “breakdown,” the persistence of a pathological addiction to dualisms that, *a priori*, make equality impossible. As a metonym for the movement and its social dreaming, Meridian’s path toward healing thus involves both confronting and combating the “sinking, hopeless feeling about opposites, and what they do to each other,” a disenchantment that is part of the legacy of the movement’s dissolution (135).

Overcoming warring opposites is vital to Meridian’s utopian quest. In Stein’s reading of Meridian’s rebirth, this theme is crucial insomuch as diametrically opposed groups of “whites
and blacks, women and men—all seek to destroy [Meridian] by fitting her into their confining molds”; “Meridian survives” only by “resisting their rigid definitions” through “quiet heroism and determination [that] contain the seeds of social transformation” (141, 140). The way in which Meridian’s embodiment functions as a cipher for the narrative’s approach to its central issue of gender politics exemplifies the text’s broader insistence that a decisive release from entrenched social dualisms is indispensable for a better world. Walker’s rendering of Meridian’s illness and healing engages with multiple sets of binaries while remarkably navigating an additional set of cultural complications involving racial and gendered stereotypes—what Collins calls “controlling images” and their narratological history. The traditional function of the illness narrative as a “political complaint” in African-American women’s fiction is, according to Herndl, to make visible the sufferings of black women that are frequently culturally obscured. Against the illness tropes of Anglo-American sentimental fiction, the women in early African-American women’s novels “are not women who faint away at every opportunity . . . . illness in these narratives is not a matter of a state of being (female), but a result of circumstances, shock, exposure, and overwork” (Herndl, “Invalid” 566). In this vein, Meridian’s illness is consistent with Walker’s focus on the de-romanticized, exhausting materiality of black women’s historically under-credited struggles against massive sociopolitical forces. In Meridian this involves women struggling within the Freedom Movement while also struggling along with it. Yet, as Herndl points out, because the voicing of bodily suffering makes the implicit claim that “I am just like everyone else,” it also transcends the negative moment of “complaint” and becomes an affirmative “argument that the African-American woman has a ‘self’” (“Invalid” 567, emphasis in original). In this respect, Meridian’s illness narrative is essential to her (re)birth as a subject.
In her use of embodiment to make this affirmation, Walker deftly circumvents a number of other ideological “traps” laid by existing cultural stereotypes, especially those involved in the “difficulty of claiming any physicality at all without being subsumed by an ideological view that sees black women as only physical” (Herndl, “Invalid” 559, emphasis in original). Such a view tends to divide even contemporary representations of black women into yet another pair of opposites, which Patricia Morton identifies as the hypersexualized “Jezebel,” and the de-sexualized maternal “workhorse,” the “Mammy.”

While the novel deals directly with such stereotypes, Walker’s representation of Meridian, a mother who disavows conventional motherhood, an indefatigable worker who nonetheless nearly breaks under the strain, a woman who resists her sexual objectification and ultimately seems to discard sexuality altogether because there is no culturally available space in which she can achieve a fulfilling physical relationship with a man, passes through many stereotypes obliquely, but only to deconstruct and surpass these controlling images. In foregrounding Meridian’s physicality and its consequences, Walker’s text does not sidestep stereotypical images, but rather confronts them directly in order to denaturalize them and present alternatives. Indeed, the text’s multifaceted critique does not stop at destabilizing stereotypes of women; it deconstructs gender itself. According to McDowell, the troubling of gender that occurs in scenes like the novel’s opening one, which finds a hairless, overall-clad Meridian facing down a military-style tank and kicking open a door only to almost maternally usher a group of children into a segregated carnival exhibit, reflects Meridian’s “striving toward creating an androgynous, fluid self” (McDowell 266). In some respects, this re-envisioned subject position represents the sort of transgressive feminist utopianism described by Lucy Sargisson, which subversively disrupts “either/or” oppositions—
especially patriarchal ones—in favor of unstable notions of multiplicity. However, as we shall see, this account does not go far enough in theorizing the radicality of what Meridian embodies.

In addition to the intersecting axes of gender and race, Meridian’s narrative destabilizes a number of other dualistic constructs as well, and as a result, some critics interpret her as the embodiment of a whole litany of paradoxes. Indeed, Stein’s reading of Meridian as a subject continually in flux between fixed definitions, as “both powerful and powerless, crazy and supremely sane,” for example, is analogous to claims about Meridian’s “androgyny” insomuch as for Stein “Meridian is a complex fusion of opposites” (132). However, Truman’s observation late in the narrative that Meridian’s “ambivalence” to dogmatic radicalism “will always be deplored by people who consider themselves revolutionists,” while her “unorthodox behavior will cause traditionalists to gnash their teeth,” is an observation that suggests, through its focus on what Meridian is not, that she embodies not so much a “both/and” as a “neither/nor” position (Walker 241). Most certainly not a man, but conspicuously outside conventional constructions of womanhood; entirely not-white but nonetheless outside the stereotyped black identities imposed by both the dominant culture and the exclusionary “Blackness” promulgated by the novel’s separatists; a “failed” 1960s revolutionary who yet refuses to sink into the tar pits of 1970s anti-revolutionary American normalcy along with her formerly revolutionary friends; embodying neither the values of her mother’s generation, nor, at the end of the novel, the compromised ideologies of her own; Meridian’s transformation represents not the “combination” of any of these pairs of opposites, but instead a self-decolonization of all of them.

In other words, she can be read as an icon of “neutralization.” According to Jameson, a “neutral term” is “not both at once, but neither one nor the other, without any third possibility in sight” (Archaeologies 180). This neutral term is, theoretically speaking, the place of utopia.
Rather than submit to “a bad utopianism, founded on the illusions of representation and affirmative content,” or what Jameson calls “some humanist organic synthesis,” an unrepresentable neutral position rejects entirely a pair of unacceptable and irreconcilable opposites; it thus amounts to a “scandal for the mind, but a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or eliminating it” (*Archaeologies* 179-180). Instead, this scandalous double-negation of a dichotomous pair not only avoids the Saussurean *cum* Althusserian conundrum that “any positive or substantive terms in which utopia is thematized will . . . reflect the . . . ideology of its deviser (and its public),” but also focuses and sharpens attention on its void-like absence, the empty non-space of “not-ness” it creates (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 180). This space of the un-thinkable is precisely the “organizing lack” around which utopian desires and imaginings circle without being able to reach it.

![Figure 4-1. Greimas’ Semiotic Rectangle (after Wegner, “Greimas” 212)](image)

Building on Marin’s deployment of A. J. Greimas’s “semiotic” rectangle (Figure 4-1) to map the literary utopia’s neutralization of the historical situation in which it appears, Jameson’s work has repeatedly shown the usefulness of Greimas’s analytical tool for visually schematizing
the way in which the “neutral” position of utopia amounts to the traversal and precise
cancellation of the conflicting binaries in a given situation. As both a radical alternative and a
historical future, utopia defies the situation’s symbolic resources and “lies entangled in [an]
unrepresentable outside” which, if forced into representation, “can only be conveyed as a mass of
logical paradoxes and unresolvable conceptual paralogisms” (Jameson, Seeds xiii). Indeed, the
scholarship on Meridian attests that Meridian is represented as precisely this sort of “mass of
paradoxes.”

As shown in Figure 4-1, the “top” two terms or “corners” of the semiotic rectangle (“S”
and “-S”) represent a simple pair of binarily opposed “contraries.” To this initial opposition, the
Greimasian rectangle adds two additional terms: the bottom pair of terms which represent the
“simple negations or contradictories” of the top terms. Each of these “bottom” terms is
positioned diagonally on the corner of the rectangle 180 degrees away from the term it negates.
Four additional positions “between” the pairs of terms are allotted for each respective pair’s
possible “combination” or synthesis. These positions mark the corners of a second rectangle that
is superimposed upon the first, but rotated 45 degrees (the “diamond” in the schematic above).
Of most importance are the top position on the diamond: the “complex” term, or what Jameson
calls the “ideal synthesis of the two contraries”; and the bottom position, the position of the
“neutral,” which is equivalent to the synthesis of the two negations.36

One of the benefits of using the semiotic rectangle as a heuristic device is its capacity to
offer an expanded understanding of what initially appears to be a simple duality by representing
it as a more “fully realized complex of terms”37 composed of multiple sets of intersecting
antinomies. Phillip Wegner’s dialectical reading of Greimas’s “fundamental” structure of
signification rethinks what is often mischaracterized as the “quintessence of a structuralist drive
to abstraction, marked by totalizing/totalitarian tendencies and an utter rejection of historicity (the diachronic) and indeterminacy,” as a model of radical openness and dynamism, a theoretical machinery for visualizing the space of the new and absolutely different (Wegner, “Greimas” 211). Wegner’s discussion of the “neutral” position crystalizes an important implication of the semiotic rectangle for utopian hermeneutics. Following Jameson, Wegner shows how the neutral position is “the site of potential emergence within the spatial closure of the Greimasian mapping”; it “stands as the formal, allegorical placeholder for concrete potentialities” for radical change—allegorical because “this emergent horizon of possibility . . . escapes our efforts to represent it fully” (“Greimas” 226). Wegner’s key intervention is to elucidate how this is so by reading Jameson’s reading of the three “planes” of the Greimasian schema—the places occupied by the complex synthesis, the two side syntheses taken together, and the neutral synthesis, respectively—alongside Lacan’s three “orders” of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. Wegner argues that “the plane . . . occupied by the complex term is that of the Symbolic order,” or “the parasitic symbolic machine (language as a dead entity that ‘behaves as if it possesses a life of its own’)”;38 the corresponding “middle” plane “occupies the place of Lacan’s Imaginary, primarily a matter of dualities and oppositions . . . whose apparent irresolvability constitute[s] the lived experience of a particular situation”; the plane of the “neutral” term is “homologous to the Lacanian Real,” which in Lacan’s famous formulation “resists symbolization absolutely” (“Greimas” 227). By marking the place of the Real, the neutral position is synonymous with that “hole in the whole” that “assures the nonclosure or suturability of any reality” (Wegner, “Greimas” 228, 227). Understood this way, the neutral term paradoxically stands in for an absolute lack and yet, by marking this very incompleteness, also a kind of utopian surplus insomuch as it gestures toward the very real possibility of something more than the totality of
what Imaginarily and Symbolically “is.” Wegner argues that the neutral position, considered as the extra-Symbolic space of the Real, represents the ineradicable, if Symbolically obliterated, potential to “cut into the texture of the social body” by way of a “traumatic disruption,” a disruption that can be variously signified as revolution, apocalypse, or utopia (“Greimas” 236).

Figure 4-2. A Greimasian-Lacanian mapping of Alice Walker’s Meridian

Figure 4-2 uses Wegner’s Greimas-Lacan schema to plot elements of Walker’s *Meridian* after Meridian’s second transformation. This “map” is based on the text’s two most important binary oppositions: black/white and man/woman, at least as they are construed by the dominant order of
things. The “middle” plane of the Imaginary is occupied by the characters of Truman and Lynne, who, as a black man and a white woman, embody these two sets of warring ideological contradictories. Further, the identities of these two characters are shaped by pairs of contradictory terms that are themselves mutually exclusive: Truman embodies the black manhood mythologized by the movement; Lynne embodies an equally mythic white womanhood, “a thing of movies and television, of billboards and car and soap commercials” whom culture places on an Imaginary pedestal to mask its oppression of her (Walker 146).

Before her second transformation, Meridian’s status as an “outsider within” both the masculinist movement and a racist society—the “double-jeopardy” that black feminists argue adds an additional, gendered dimension to “double consciousness”—stretches her between both sides of this double-contradiction simultaneously, an unendurable strain made manifest symbolically and somatically through her illness. In the text, the “complex” position (Stein’s “complex fusion of opposites”) is not occupied by Meridian, but by Lynne and Truman’s daughter Camara, the embodiment of the union between black and white, between man and woman. Her arrival in the text and its world represent the entrance of this position into the Symbolic. True to the novel’s proclivity for critical realism rather than romance, Camara is not represented as a messianic or mythical figure that would resolve all contradictions and signify this resolution. Rather, her murder by a racist, male attacker acknowledges the sociopolitical outrage she represents to the existing order. Pamela E. Barnett corroborates this in arguing that the “miscegenetic” Camara, the material avatar of the novel’s “insoluble problem,” is “erased” (77). That is, she is quite literally erased, purged from a Symbolic order which allows no place for her.

In Walker’s novel, the figure of a reborn Meridian occupies the neutral position. Her appearance at the text’s conclusion amounts to Gilroy’s transfigural, utopian attempt to “present
the unpresentable” (Atlantic 38). Understanding her as inhabiting the position of the Real rather than the Symbolic suggests that in contradistinction to Barnett’s rather tragic reading of the novel as a “reinstall[ation]” of the “fiction of ‘race,’” Meridian instead opens toward a position absolutely outside this fiction that cannot be symbolized (77). Lynne and Truman do indeed live this tragic, pan-social fiction, as indicated by their positions on the Imaginary plane, but Meridian should be read as occupying a radical neither/nor position that does not just “blend” or “blur,” but outright cancels and ruptures this Imaginary, binary economy of race just as she disrupts similar fictions about gender and the copious other contradictions she embodies.

Paradoxically, the affirmation of her new identity is achieved by the double-negation of the very Symbolic “labels” that negated her in the first place. Her quest does not end in a “spurious synthesis” or a “superposition of opposites” that, in Jameson’s words, would seek to “have it both ways”; rather, her quest involves a process, exemplified by neutralization, of “going all the way through [the] contradictory content and emerging on the other side,” the very process that the semiotic rectangle makes it possible to visualize (Archaeologies 179).

Through Meridian’s transformation into the embodiment of the change she would like to see in the world, the novel does indeed depict a “rebirth[ing]” of the Black Freedom Movement’s utopian spirit from the wreckage of its contradictions. As she leaves the narrative to “return to the world cleansed of sickness,” the “new” Meridian appears like an anamorphosis that Truman, who tries to “read” her from his position on the Imaginary “plane,” as well as readers themselves, lack the necessary perspectival angle to see clearly. Meridian enters the world “alone” as a kind of inscrutable singularity. But her conviction that “all the people who are alone as I am will one day gather at the river” expresses a confident, even messianic hope that she may become the nucleus for a new “beloved community” on the horizon of a future that cannot yet be
seen through the ideological mists of the present (Walker 242). Just as Meridian’s illness
metonymically embodies the social dis-eases that must be “cured” to nurture such a community,
her healed body also functions in the text as this community’s “allegorical placeholder.”

Read through the lens of Frank’s “illness narrative,” Meridian’s value is bound up in the
way that her quest involves not only the struggle to reinvent herself, but also, as a storyteller, to
heal others as well. This becomes especially pronounced in Meridian’s interactions with Truman
in the later portion of the narrative. Hendrickson observes that because it privileges “quest” over
“romance,” the narrative does not lead to the reunion of the former lovers, as Truman desires;
rather, it avoids what Rachel Blau DuPlessis sees as the two “ideological solution[s] to the
fundamental contradictions” in conventional novels about women: “success” in the form of
heterosexual union, and death (DuPlessis 3, 1). By “tak[ing] Meridian beyond all the endings of
romance and death,” Walker’s novel not only rejects the “easy closure” that would “shortcircuit
the difficult work on gender and sexuality necessary for future revolutionary projects”
(Hendrickson 161; Segrest 39). It also opens its narrative toward the horizon of that future. In
doing so, it gestures toward the creation of an “alternate history” by reopening a 1960s utopian
narrative that had itself been assigned the conventional closure of “death,” and, in the process,
attempting to retrieve a missed opportunity for a different “ending.”

At the ending of Walker’s novel, Meridian’s relationship to Truman is not that of lover,
but of comrade and teacher. At the diegetic level, their relationship offers a representation of
how the novel’s utopian pedagogy is fundamentally about pedagogy. “Revolution,” as Meridian
tells a skeptical Truman, begins “with teaching,” and the concrete utopian “value” of Meridian’s
healing, in both ethical and political terms, is that it can help to teach us how to live (Walker
205).41 Her power to transform another life through the example of her own life-narrative also
becomes embodied in the novel by Truman, who himself begins to change at the novel’s end. As Meridian bears the Movement’s utopian impulse into the world once again free of its necrotic contradictions, Truman, who can already see that opposites such as “revolutionists” versus “traditionalists” are “practically imaginary,” is profoundly affected by “how deeply Meridian allowed an idea . . . to penetrate her life” (241, 242, emphasis added). In keeping with her “neutral” position, the “appeal” of Meridian’s “idea” for Truman lies, as it does in Susan Buck-Morss’s notion of revolutionary “morality,” “in the register of the negative” rather than in the existing ideological register, or in the “imposing [of one’s] own morality on others” (Buck-Morss 84). Nonetheless, Meridian’s example moves Truman not simply to pledge himself to the idea(l) of a better world, but to undertake Meridian’s quest to become it. Like Meridian, Truman abandons his former life and his material “things,” and strips away his former identity. Walker literalizes the way in which he thus assumes Meridian’s “place” when “Truman gets into her chrysalid sleeping bag, dons her visored cap, and begins his first shaking spell,” willfully becoming “infused with the same illness” in order to become “a new Meridian” (DuPlessis 160). Truman climbs into Meridian’s discarded “skin,” and as the embodiment of a problematic gender politics, this becoming-woman aspect of his journey is especially significant and instructive. Further, Truman also recognizes his responsibilities as a wounded storyteller as it dawns on him that his healing must involve the teaching and healing of others, of “tak[ing] them along the next guideless step” with him (Walker 242). His premonition that Anne-Marion, another disillusioned comrade, will one day replace him, and that he and the new Meridian, whom he will only then be able to “recognize,” will “meet again . . . at some future time,” affirm a hope that the community Meridian awaits will come to pass (241). In this way, through Meridian’s narrative and those it touches and teaches, the Movement’s “dead” dream of a better world is reborn. By taking the
form of an illness-quest, what the novel teaches readers is that this rebirth requires not a restitution but a transformation of the dream itself, a transformation that obliges an acknowledgement of the social ills that led to the narrative wreckage of the past, and a rewriting of that past as a means to heal the future. As Truman’s example instructs readers, this healing requires living up to the new narrative.

**Healing Magic, Narrative, and the Pedagogy of Desire in *The Salt Eaters***

Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* is another narrative of healing by an African American woman that attempts to “rebirth” the utopianism of the 1960s. In healer Minnie Ransom’s “baby catching hands,” the novel’s protagonist, an exhausted activist named Velma Henry, makes an arduous inner journey that begins with her suicide attempt in the “carbon walled . . . cave” of her gas oven and ends when she emerges “renewed” from the “burst cocoon” of her shawl in the text’s final sentence (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 148, 18, 294, 295). As in *Meridian*, Velma’s intopian transformation is not a solipsistic one, but rather insists upon the indivisibility of inside and outside, of mind, body, community, and world. Stanford observes that *The Salt Eaters* “foreground[s] the connections between an individual’s physical body and her private as well as collective history” by depicting how “living human bodies carry with them the symptoms of a sick world” (“Disease” 29). At the same time, it also articulates the political injunction that understanding this connection is “crucial to the making of a workable vision equipped for urgent social change and global healing,” in that through this understanding, “individual healing . . . empowers its recipients in many cases to move beyond a narrow understanding of individual illness to become potential world-healers themselves” (Stanford, “Disease” 31). *The Salt Eaters*’ illness narrative also shares *Meridian*’s concern for ameliorating the aftermath of the Black Freedom Movement, a moment in history that Bambara, like Walker, describes in obituary language: “Malcolm gone, King gone, Fannie Lou gone, Angela quiet, the movement splintered,
enclaves unconnected” (Salt Eaters 193). Velma is a devotee of the Movement who also “might have died,” and, like Meridian, she represents the movement’s metonymic embodiment (271).

In part because of The Salt Eaters’ deep embeddedness in the historical moment of its emergence in 1980, its “thick description” of illness is even “thicker” than Meridian’s. Like Walker’s novel, The Salt Eaters stridently critiques race and gender inequities, especially women’s experience of the Movement’s problematic sexual politics. Additionally, however, it also speaks to the urgency of newly prominent nuclearization issues, human-made ecological disasters, the “master plan,” poverty and stagflation, the new imperialism of multinational corporations, and Western scientistic medicine (to name but a few) at a time when the 1960s seem a distant memory and the “conservative utopia” of the “Reagan revolution” looms on the horizon. Thus, while sharing Meridian’s utopian impulsion to revise and renew the social dreaming of the ‘60s, The Salt Eaters undertakes a redemptive critique of the “last quarter” of the twentieth century (to use the novel’s own vocabulary), which is beginning to assume a discernible political shape. Also like Meridian, its narrative reaches an “apotheosis” in a moment of regeneration that at once involves the repaired health of its protagonist and the insistence that only through a radical, collective transformation—one that once again defies intradiegetic representation in the text—can a utopian world-healing be achieved. This transformation, too, is figured in a way that paradoxically re-members yet breaks free from history.

Although The Salt Eaters continues and updates Meridian’s fundamental post-‘60s (and properly “postmodern”) political project of “think[ing] about how individuals create and experience ‘community’ at a moment when old understandings of the term no longer apply,” while also augmenting Meridian’s formal approach via an even more radically fragmentary illness narrative, Bambara’s text differs from Walker’s in important ways (Duck 518). In
addition to its multiple new political layers, there is also a more outward, or communally “other-
ward,” approach in its representations of healing subjects. Walker’s representation of Meridian’s
illness remains quite “interiorized” despite its undeniable trans-personal dimensions, and the
narrative’s action occurs on a very intimate level. While Bambara’s story of Velma relinquishes
none of this intimacy, it represents her “intopian” healing as an effort of the whole community. It
also involves an “ecological” intercalation of Velma’s “person” in various interpersonal,
traditional, political, spiritual, and “natural” interconnections in ever-widening spheres of mutual
influence that radiate out through her community and the global ecosystem. As a result, Velma
represents a more intersubjective exteriorization of subjectivity than Meridian. Notably, this
exteriorizing trajectory is continued in Paradise’s mutualistic healing of a “collective
protagonist” (Weese 157). This is certainly not new. Historically, both selfhood and illness have
been understood primarily as interrelational in many African and diasporic traditions, and
Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf
(1975) is an exemplary portrayal of the reciprocal healing of multiple intersubjective subjects
that predates the three texts discussed here. However, there does seem to be the suggestion of a
movement across these texts toward further expanding a tradition of representing (and “voicing”)
black women’s relational subjectivities by experimenting with the positioning of an
interconnected, agentic subject amid the emergent paradigm of globalization.

An additional difference between Meridian and The Salt Eaters involves a trend that
parallels the “decolonizing” aesthetic transition in Ngũgĩ’s novels, and which continues in
Paradise (but is already fully realized in Morrison’s oeuvre in Song of Solomon [1977]).
Bambara incorporates elements of the fantastic and the magical. In strict terms of the illness
narrative, this might be said to reflect what Frank posits as its potential to “re-enchant” through
storytelling a Weberian twentieth-century world. It also calls to mind what Gay Wilentz sees as counterhegemonic illness narratives’ challenge to the “biotechnical model” of Western medicine’s “belief system,” which has simply “left out” phenomena “it cannot explain” (10). Indeed, Wilentz’s inclusion of *The Salt Eaters* in her discussion of “wellness narratives” reflects the novel’s position that “the binary opposition of science versus magic needs to be displaced so that one can be well in the fullest sense of the word” (10). More broadly, this shift reflects the trend in African American fiction exemplified by the proliferation of “neo-slave narratives” in the 1970s and ‘80s. According to Ashraf Rushdy, these texts became the new and reimagined literary standard-bearers for late-‘60s black political movements. Referencing Rushdy, A. Timothy Spaulding argues that neo-slave narratives not only “forge a distinctively African American postmodernism”—a historiographic metafictionality “rooted in black history”—but also that texts ranging from Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) to Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988), and including novels by Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, Charles Johnson, and Sherley Ann Williams, “claim authority over the narrative construction of [the] past” in part by “embrac[ing] non-mimetic devices in their treatment of history” (3, 2, 3). In Spaulding’s theorization, these narratives use fantastical elements to “defamiliarize” official history and historiography, and to “occupy the past, the present, and, in some cases, the future simultaneously” (2, 5). This practice of rejecting novelistic verisimilitude “reinvests the contemporary writer with political agency by radicalizing the act of storytelling,” and by vastly expanding available imaginative and discursive resources (Spaulding 17).

The particularly powerful ontolytic “estrangement” function of this narrative mode, and the way in which its critiques and re-presentations of “worlds” willfully break the frame of the dominant Symbolic order’s “normative structures,” constitute a historically specific expression
of the more general utopian practices Gilroy describes in the Diaspora.\textsuperscript{46} This increasing turn toward more “magical realism,” is visible in many black utopias and dystopias of the twentieth century’s “last quarter.”\textsuperscript{47} It is intrinsic not only to Ngũgĩ’s work during this period, but also to works such as Guadeloupe native Maryse Condé’s neo-slave narrative, \textit{Moi, Tituba, Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem} (1986), in which magic plays a key role in its interesting dialectic between dystopia and utopia. This strategy is also evident in the North American texts by Bambara and Morrison examined here, which are tasked with re-visioning utopia while negotiating the twin difficulties instantiated by, first, the fact that the ‘60s’ dreams collapsed precisely because, as these authors show, their utopian visions dragged too many “normative structures” along with them; and second, the fact that ascendant multinational corporations as well as the “Reagan Revolution” plundered the conventional tropes of utopia under the auspices of the “pseudo-utopian flag of rational choice and the free market” (Moylan, \textit{Scraps} 184). This at once idealized the globalist “dream” of worldwide capitalist imperialism and, as in Karl Mannheim’s description of the conservative mentality, exerted “a subduing influence on the utopia espoused by [its] inner enemies” (Moylan, \textit{Scraps} 184, Mannheim 239). Bambara’s text exemplifies the way in which embracing “magic” allows for a reconnection to suppressed worldviews, while also providing a means for imagining utopian wellness in the present in ways that actively reject the “normative structures” of conservative pseudo-utopianism. More importantly however, as will be shown, \textit{The Salt Eaters} quite literally attempts to blow open a future seemingly foreclosed by free market globalism, and to reopen our imagination of it as well.

The narrative of \textit{The Salt Eaters} begins after Velma, the fictional town of Claybourne, Georgia’s most indefatigable worker for social justice, is rescued from her suicide attempt. Velma, a “veritable superwoman,” has at last worn out her body, strained or severed her
relationships, and frayed her nerves to the point at which she finally feels beaten (Stanford, “Disease” 33). After her physical wounds are treated by conventional doctors, Velma is placed in the care of Minnie Ransom, the “fabled healer of the district,” for a laying on of hands (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 3). With the help of her “spirit guide,” Old Wife, Minnie guides Velma through a long and often tedious path to wellness, a process that demonstrates how, in the fragmented world in which Velma lives, “wholeness is no trifling matter” (10). Minnie’s initial questions to Velma, “are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well,” and “what’s your story,” emphasize, as Frank does, the importance of choice, responsibility, and storytelling in the healing process (9). Velma’s healing ceremony takes place in a public forum at Claybourne’s Southwest Community Infirmary, a center for syncretic “radical medical” practices (10). It is attended by Velma’s relations and other members of the community, including a visiting contingent of medical practitioners, and the local *loa*, who are always present, but whom most contemporary denizens of Claybourne largely ignore. Unfolding as it does in this public environment, her story reveals the depth and breadth of her connections to the town and its people. The novel’s numerous other characters, whose fragmentary sub-narratives form Bambara’s unconventional narrative patchwork, are all woven together in the process of “telling” Velma’s biographical narrative. Thus, the progress of this nonlinear narrative engages in a reciprocal process of “making the connections to heal the whole person” (Wilentz 56). Further, it becomes clear that in many ways Velma holds together the town of Claybourne itself, much as she almost single-handedly “pulled together” the community’s activist think-tank, the “Academy of the 7 Arts,” as it began “splintering” in parallel with the Freedom Movement (and eventually, herself) (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 92). In her absence from the Academy, her husband Obie realizes that “it took him, Jan, Marcus . . . Daisy Moultrie and her mother . . . the treasurer of the board, and two
student interns to replace Velma” (93). Guided by Minnie and Old Wife, and followed by members of the community, Velma “(re)works her past” and reconnects herself both inwardly and outwardly, spiritually and materially, with the “best” of her community and its “traditions” (Wilentz 75). She discovers that her other guides, activists, artists, “Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs . . . DuBois, Garvey . . . her parents, Malcolm, Coltrane, the poets, her comrades, her godmother . . . her neighbors . . . the workers of the sixties,” have taught her how to “build immunity” and continue her work (Bambara, Salt Eaters 258). Reconnecting with her roots at the deepest level in the form of the phantasmal “mud mothers,” and “born” again from this “clay,” Velma chooses health. Her reconnection to her spiritual heritage also allows her to recognize and accept the fact that she has the “gift” necessary to be a healer as well. At the narrative’s close, Velma, like Meridian, appears, paradoxically, to have transformed into her “self.”

Through a jazz aesthetic that reiterates her interconnectedness on the level of narrative structure, Velma’s healing is externalized, through a kind of “magic,” in the transformations of all the other characters; still further, through this magic and what Bambara terms an “ecology of the self,” the physical world itself changes when she does. In the pivotal moments leading up to Velma’s rebirth, two friends, Jan and Ruby, talk about politics—like many characters in the novel who talk more than they act—and discuss how the new problems posed by the multinational Transchemical corporation’s implication in “the power configurations . . . and the quality of life in [the] city, region, country, world” seem “too big” to handle compared to the “ole-fashioned honky-nigger” politics of the ‘60s (242). This “ecology stuff” (an issue that Deena Metzger claims threatens “national suicide,” reflecting yet again the metonymy of Velma’s predicament, albeit in terms that perhaps remain too narrow) seems to Ruby like a “diversion” from the unilateral politics of the earlier era. While the novel rejects single-issue
politics as outmoded and reductive, Jan, sounding “like Velma,” advances a unifying—indeed a
totalizing—political vision when she realizes that race, ecology, and health are all “connected.”
you think they hire for the dangerous dirty work at those plants? . . . And all them illegal uranium
mines on Navajo turf—the crops dying, the sheep dying, the horses, water, cancer, Ruby, cancer”
(242). Exactly synchronous with Velma’s transformation is a “mystical turn” in the narrative that
affects all of the novel’s characters (Wilentz 75). A cataclysmic event occurs when “a sudden
downpour” appears “with no warning” and “everything [goes] phosphorescent” with strange
lightning (Bambara, Salt Eaters 244, 291). The characters agree that it “couldn’t be simply a
storm with such frightening thunder as was cracking the air as if the very world were splitting
apart,” yet the exact nature of this earth-shattering incident remains forever indistinct (245).

What is clear is that all present experience it and, through it, are reborn along with Velma.
Visions of the Movement, the “dream,” the loa, an anti-escapist spirituality, politics, humanism,
nature, eco-consciousness, and flashes of past and future wholeness flood the community,
inundating the characters’ consciousnesses and desires. Looking backward to the 1960s, the text
tells readers that this moment will be “fixed more indelibly on the brain and have more lasting
potency than circumstances remembered of that November day in ’63,” and, looking forward,
that it will forever supply the “latter-day” answer to the question “when did it begin for you?”
(246, emphasis added). The reader never learns with any certainty, however, what “it” is, save
that history is wrenched “from its track so another script could play out,” and that this new
narrative implies a denouement at an undetermined future point in a global wholeness that
extrapolates the reborn Velma’s own intopian transformation (247).
Velma’s path to wellness has already been retraced by critics several times. A significant proportion of the scholarship on *The Salt Eaters* reads the narrative in the context of other healing narratives by black women (as is being done here), and is most interested in its curative implications for intra-racial gender politics. bell hooks argues that this reflects Bambara’s effort to “gain a hearing for the complex narratives of [African-American women’s] interior life” and “create feminist revolutions that would help the wounded relationships between black women and men” (“Uniquely”). Indeed, like *Meridian, The Salt Eaters* employs an explicit and intimate utopian “rescuing critique” of the Black Freedom Movement’s fracturing along gender lines. This critique ranges from the domestic realm, where Velma’s activist husband has “not a clue . . . as to how the eggs, bacon, and biscuits come to appear before him every morning,” to the squelching of women’s concerns at local “Academy” meetings, to a particularly poignant scene at a rally, where an exhausted Velma, covered in mud, her feet bare and swollen from miles of marching and menstrual blood oozing down her leg, watches the rally’s leader emerge from an air-conditioned limousine, his boots perfectly shined (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 31).

However, the critical function of Velma’s exhaustion and ultimate collapse also achieves the affirmation of self over stereotype that Herndl discusses in black women’s illness narratives—in this case the stereotype is the Strongblackwoman. Velma’s illness captures and focalizes the individuality and humanity of a seeming “superwoman.” Beyond the “negative” movement of this critique, *The Salt Eaters* bodies forth a positive vision by offering, through Velma’s healing, a “wider, more visionary, perspective” that “allows the individual to recognize his/her ability to transform self, community, and society” (Ikard). David Ikard notes that “to recognize, despite the overwhelming disparities in power, that one has options and choices at his/her disposal is perhaps the first and most crucial step towards ushering in a new era of black liberation
generally, and ameliorating the relationship between black men and women specifically” (Ikard). Beyond this recognition, the *telling* of Velma’s story also reveals the connection between art and the *healing arts* in the novel’s very writing. For Wilentz, this amounts to a “linguistic praxis, toward ‘practical action’” based on a vision of “cultural healing,” and she argues that such healing “embodies the most powerful metaphor for transformation that we have . . . a paradigm for both social revolution and self-development” (20).

This paradigmatic change is embodied intradiegetically not only through Velma, but also through what Wilentz sees as the “most utopian of the visions presented in the novel,” the “healing of [Doctor Julius] Meadows,” a half-white practitioner of conventional medicine who is as disconnected from black people as he is from other notions of healing (77). In a flash-forward, Meadows reflects that when *it* began for *him*, he was sitting on a stoop with Thurston and M1, two black men he encounters during a confused, aimless quest through Claybourne’s streets, listening to them describe conditions at the Transchemical plant. During his personal apotheosis, Meadows not only reconnects with the estranged half of his personal past, he also takes a new oath “to give the Hippocratic oath some political meaning in his life” (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 281). Meadows subsequently connects with healers and activists in the community to work for Claybourne’s collective health, and thus the transformation he shares with Velma amounts to an internal representation of the positive, forward-looking, “creative” facet of Bambara’s healing narrative.

Wilentz is the one critic who freely uses the term utopia in her analysis of the text, and she departs from other critics when she discusses, at least indirectly, the utopian spaces in the novel. This feature of *The Salt Eaters*, which distinguishes it from *Meridian*, also reappears in *Paradise* in even more clearly defined forms. Wilentz notes, for instance, that the fictional town
of Claybourne is “a representation of Frogmore, South Carolina” (59). It thus harkens back to a discrete Gullah culture as well as several maroon colonies established by “resisting slaves” in “isolation from the mainland,” where “African cultural traditions” from “different groups such as the Vai, Mende, Akan, Igbo, and Yoruba,” have “endured in ways distinct from African-American experiences in other areas of the United States” (Wilentz 56-57). Thus, this space serves Bambara’s cultural and political aims as a kind of utopian Other-space outside the economy and cultures of American slavery, a “repository” of the “African-based traditions” to which her healing narrative reconnects its protagonist (Wilentz 57). Additionally, the radical medicine of Claybourne’s Southwest Community Infirmary is loosely modeled after Frogmore’s Penn Center, a “site of both healing and resistance” (Wilentz 59). Indeed, the syncretic medicine practiced at the Infirmary, where traditional healers like Minnie work together with conventional doctors, reflects a multivariate and transfigural approach to healing and spirituality in the novel that incorporates African, Western, New Age, and even Marxist notions, and thus is neither essentialist nor exclusionary despite its rootedness in tradition. The space in which Velma’s healing occurs is in this regard a counterhegemonic utopian, or at least a heterotopian one. This is exemplified by its motto, “HEALTH IS YOUR RIGHT,” which would seem to at once embrace a liberal-humanist ideal while also critiquing the materiality of a culture that does not live up to it, if the novel did not so urgently insist that something Other than this culture is necessary for health to be achieved.

While critics have analyzed the culture and politics of Velma’s personal illness narrative in great detail, they have devoted far less attention to the mysterious “storm” that occurs in the The Salt Eaters’ final pages. Yet the storm, more than any of the characterizations, quests, spaces, or other elements represented in the text, is undeniably the The Salt Eaters’ most
transformative event. It is also where we find the text’s deepest connection to, and its most powerful expression of, the utopian impulse. Indeed, here the novel’s strange magic becomes especially important.

Much like Frank’s “wounded healer,” Velma’s full capacity for healing is not contained within herself or her “closed” narrative, but rather extends beyond her to others through the telling of her story. At its most obvious level, the storm that occurs in synchrony with her rebirth represents a collectively experienced revelation of the interconnectedness that Velma embodies. It also marks an apocalyptic end-as-beginning. However, in structural terms, the way in which the “world-splitting” storm represents an internal reference to the novel’s own narrative rupture gestures toward even more important implications for the narrative’s “openness.” In discussing what she views as Velma’s “circular rather than linear” personal narrative, Stanford argues that in *The Salt Eaters*, “plot—the soul of (hi)story, as Aristotle would have it—is circular yet inconclusive, ordered yet open,” and that on the mythoclastic terrain of the text’s world, “the liberating epiphany . . . can occur . . . only when the ‘telos’ of discovery is seen as a point of departure” (“Inscription” 19). If one strategically reads Velma *strictly* as a Campbellian quester who “returns” from her healing journey as the “master of two worlds,” then the dystopian, “corrupt” *first* world in which she has “learn[ed] to live” derives its importance only as the precondition for the *second, healed* world that will be born from it, for which Velma (like Meridian) rises to her feet to “depart” at the novel’s “end.” The very point of departure, and not the new world itself, however, is as far as the narrative carries readers along with her. This is why *The Salt Eaters*, despite fulfilling in every way an implied narrative contract by delivering closure in the form of a “happy” ending in its very last sentence, does not end with any corresponding sense of completion.
Susan Willis complains of this very issue in an early reading of *The Salt Eaters*: “I know of no other novel that so poignantly yearns for cataclysmic social upheaval. . . . It seems, reading the novel, that revolution is only pages away. But for all its yearning and insight, the novel fails to culminate in revolution, fails even to suggest how social change might be produced” (129). Reiterating the ways in which critics have since offered readings that countermand Willis’s claim about social change is perhaps less interesting than how her comments bring to the fore questions of representation (or lack thereof), desire, and what at least reads as an earnest, readerly identification with—and reaction to—the text. As in *Meridian*, the vanishing point toward which all threads of *The Salt Eaters*’ narrative lead is occupied by an absence. The narrative “closes” only by opening onto a representational void, and Willis’s essay expresses the *horror vacui* that Bloch describes as the “abhorrence of the Not,” of the nothing-ness which is nonetheless also the “origin, the Not-Yet in history, the Nothing or conversely the All at the end”—an end that is therefore also the beginning of “every movement toward something” (*Principle* 306, emphasis added). Further, for Bloch, this “movement” is instigated not by affirmative content, but by the “drive, need, striving . . . hunger” to “escape” from its “lack” (306, emphasis added). Indeed, in the “end,” it is not the representation of “revolution” or even of its protagonist’s healing with which *The Salt Eaters*’ utopian aspirations are concerned, but rather with the *yearning* for it: the very desire that Willis attributes to an anthropomorphized text (and certainly, the text *communicates* such desire) but which, in a much more immediate sense, Willis’s references to her own reading experience suggest she undoubtedly feels. Beyond merely resisting ideological closure in DuPlessis’s sense, this anti-closure, by throwing open the structural conventions of narrative even as it manipulates them for effect, violates reader expectations and invades the experience of reading. By replacing a completed becoming with the
absence of a not-yet-become—implanting this lack in place of the very culmination of the reading ritual itself—the narrative reproduces its “own” desire for the post-cataclysmic world that the text withholds, or at least defers. As with Walker’s Meridian, however, this lack should not be thought in negative terms, but as a double-negative, as a figure of “negated deprivation” akin to the elusive dream, “and hence, of hope” (Bloch, Principle 77).

Whereas Meridian exhibits an anticipatory openness by offering at its conclusion an allegorical or metonymic figure for an unbecome future world, Bambara’s turn toward the fantastic allows her text to push this utopian device further. At minimum, the world-splitting paranormal storm near the narrative’s conclusion literalizes the way in which utopias “hold open the exit in a given reality” and can even “offer a window onto something absolute” in the sense of something absolutely else (Bloch, Principle 98). It also intradiegetically marks and announces the introduction of its extradiegetic “absent paradigm,” including its very absence—emptily signified pronominally as “it.” This punctal wholesale transformation would totalize Velma’s personal one, “magically” conferring her newfound health upon the world around her. Through this “window,” represented in the text as a world-shattering “hole in the whole,” a few brief flash-forwards that refer back to the storm offer fleeting glimpses of the future world that is not represented in the text, for which the storm’s phosphorescent lightning-flashes serve quite literally as an inchoate “anticipatory illumination.” In this way, the “magical” storm not only breaches the constraints of novelistic realism and the worldview it reproduces, but also does what Meridian cannot, which is to drag the unrepresentable Other world partway into representation even without signifying it in any direct or coherent way. Rather, the bits and pieces of Otherness filtered back through it are means for readers to access it intuitively and inductively by means of the future’s implied difference from the historical world presented in the
text (its “health,” for example). This figuration does share a kinship with the classic, “closed” utopia’s indirect figuration of an absent utopian ideal by means of its own imperfect “perfection,” and with the paradoxically “direct”-indirection of the postmodern/postcolonial utopia’s channeling of desires through an “ambiguousness” or “open-endedness.” However, The Salt Eaters’ intervention is to metaphorize and draw attention to this very function of the text or, to put it another way, to present not exactly the unpresentable, but unpresentability itself. In Lacanian terms, the text violates the dominant Imaginary through suppressed “magic” symbols to represent a more important second violation, an encounter with the Real, on Symbolic turf.

This “encounter” can be understood as what Alain Badiou’s “meta-ontological” theory of ontolytic transformation terms an “event.” For Badiou, an event is an inherently uncontrollable occurrence “which brings to pass ‘something other’ than [a given] situation,” its “opinions,” and its “instituted knowledges” (Ethics 67, emphasis added). Badiou posits that the “event” irrupts from the void of the Real, which “exceeds the situation”; its constitutionally disruptive emergence “proceeds ‘explosively,’ or ‘everywhere,’ within a situation” such that it “ruins the topology of situations” (Ethics 74). According to Badiou, “what any event reveals—and I think it’s particularly striking in politics—is that there was something which had its own identity beyond,” a something “which was not taken account of” by the existing situation (Ethics 134, emphasis added). Simply put, “the event is not” (Badiou, Event 190). Further, it “cannot be named” in the old language—a “new name” is needed (Event 356). It “subtracts itself from any explicit nomination and any attempt to signify it in the very situation whose operator it nevertheless is—having induced it in excess of the fundamental situation in which its lack is thought” (Event 387, emphasis added). In The Salt Eaters, the storm—or “it”—is, in Badiou’s terms, an attempt to signify “nothing” (Event 356). It is the addition to the narrative of a
“supernumerary sign” a “purely formal mark of the event whose being is without being” in the
given situation, but rather emerges from an immanent, void-ed “second situation” (Event 387).
Thus, like the utopian “surplus” described by Bloch and Gilroy, *The Salt Eaters*’ “event” appears
as an “excess” to a situation’s Imaginary and Symbolic totality, a disruptive addition that appears
as a subtraction or absence. In Bambara’s text, this latter is nothing less than another possible
world that the given world’s Imaginary “forecloses,” and “what stands in . . . is the
supernumerary [sign] itself, and it is thus quite coherent that it designate nothing” (Badiou, *Event*
356). When the “event” occurs in *The Salt Eaters*, the characters inside its world perform for the
reader this quixotic attempt to name the unnamable.

The evental storm is immediately followed by a poetic “storm” of metaphor, an accretion
of attempts to describe it that performs the impossibility of fixing “it” in language. Among the
various symbolically available comparisons made are to the shout of Ogun, the hammer of Thor,
and the sword of Siegfried. What is nonetheless clear despite these insufficient metaphors is that
whatever it is, it sounds the “knell of the authoritarian age,” and is “the thunderous beginning of
the new humanism, the new spiritism” (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 248). The event is perhaps least-
inemptly captured by the character Campbell, a café waiter and aspiring writer, in the tautological
“everything was everything,” which he equates with the *loa* Damballah and futilely attempts to
record on his writing pad. Bambara renders his struggle this way: “Damballah, he wrote,
represents, he wrote, and scratched that out, Damballah is similar to, he wrote, and scratched that
out, Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the law of
time and is, Campbell wrote, everything that is now has been before and will be again in a new
way, in a changed form, in a timeless time” (249).
In a 1984 essay, Ruth Elizabeth Burks cites such passages as the reasons why *The Salt Eaters* “does not work.” “Bambara’s gift of language,” she writes, “turns back on itself, as she uses language, which she has already demonstrated is not efficacious, to create characters who must eschew language if they are to communicate. As a result, Bambara cannot describe with words (and must leave to the reader’s imagination) the resurrection that occurs at the end of this novel that finally sets the people free” (56, emphasis added). Burks’s argument concerning the failure of language is entirely correct, and readers are indeed given almost no concretely “graspable” clues at all as to what the “new humanism” might be, save that it is something Other than the old liberal “bourgeois humanism” that Gilroy quips “cannot simply be repaired by introducing the figures of black folks” (*Atlantic* 55). However, *The Salt Eaters*’ eschewal of language and its appeal to the imagination are crucial to precisely why and how Bambara’s novel *does* work. Bambara’s own comments about writing are instructive insomuch as she finds “linear literary conventions and . . . conventional narrative postures,” insufficient for the task of “Dream work”; her response is to reposition “the narrator as medium” (“Salvation” 43, emphasis added). In the case of *The Salt Eaters*, narration is a medium for transmitting the utopian yearnings that Willis attests to *feeling*, and locating the dream of utopia in the reader’s desiring imagination—the very locus where anticipatory consciousness “overhauls the available world”—rather than on the textual surface of its own pages, is precisely the novel’s political point (Bloch, *Principle* 76). The fact that “describing” the resurrective event in words has *nothing to do* with what Bambara “can” or “does” write is built into her narrative’s structure down to the level of its very grammar and syntax. This is most poignantly the case in brief flash-forwards, which almost invariably anticipate looking backward from a second, *un*presented narrative of the future in phrases such as “many *would mark* the beginning of *it all* as this moment” (Bambara, *Salt Eaters* 246,
emphasis added). The vague glimmers of the future contained in such phrases are indices of how the narrative does not narrate what happens after it jumps its “track,” but does open toward an absent story of a reborn world that nonetheless already “exists” within it, albeit outside the chronotope of the “given situation” it represents. The collapse of the novel’s metaphorical language embellishes this world, paradoxically, by reinscribing the lack that teaches readers to desire it.

This points toward just how The Salt Eaters is not “indicative,” but “subjunctive” (Traylor 69). The fragments of the future after the storm are clues to how, beyond the level of grammar and metaphor, the transmission—and the pedagogical potential—of its own “yearning” are built into the novel’s very narrative structure. Indeed, The Salt Eaters is a distinctive example of an open-ended black revolutionary utopian narrative that provides more broadly applicable insights into how this form’s pedagogy of desire accomplishes its work. Peter Brooks’s work illuminates the connections between desire and the narrative structure of novelized “fantasies,” and ultimately how these might be implicated in social activism. Further these connections often have a great deal to do with the effects of narrative anti-closure. Brooks argues that as a fantasy structure fashioned of signifiers, “aesthetic form harbors an erotic force”: textuality is, above all, libidinal, and desire is the “very motor of narrative, its dynamic principle” (Storytelling 26; “Masterplot” 281). This desire is twofold in that narratives “tell . . . some story of desire,” but also “arouse and make use of desire as a dynamic of signification” (Brooks, “Dynamics” 131-132). Inasmuch as the exchange between text and reader involves the reader’s desire to piece together the discrete elements of “plot” in order to reconstruct an underlying “story” and its meaning, both of which remain absent or incomplete until the very “end,”57 Brooks claims that one aspect of the reader’s desire is akin to Freudian “epistemophilia,” the desire to know,58 and
structural elements of narrative are deployed to manipulate this desire (Storytelling 25). This is especially true for the reader’s desire for closure, the desire to know what both the narrative’s internal logic and its borrowed conventions promise as its proper end (Brooks, “Masterplot” 291). In denying this resolution, narrative anti-closure inflames and frustrates this desire, and in utopian texts, the object of desire is, of course, a world transfigured.

The way in which the The Salt Eaters’ particular narrative machinery “works” through this psychodynamics of reading can be further understood by means of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s summary of Tzvetan Todorov’s structural analysis of detective fiction. According to Todorov, each detective story contains two stories: “the missing story of the crime, and the presented story of the investigation, the role justification of which is to make us discover the first story” (qtd. in Gates 227). Todorov posits three variations of the detective novel. The first is the “whodunit,” in which “the story of the crime” as Gates puts it, “is the story of an absence since the crime . . . has occurred before the narrative begins” (228, emphasis added). The story of the investigation, therefore, is only a mediator for the telling of the first story that proceeds from effect (the investigation itself) to cause (the gradually disclosed “absent” crime). The second type is the “thriller” which “reveals at its outset the causes of the crime,” and privileges the “thrilling” events of the second (presented) story over the (absent) first; it “sustains itself through sheer suspense, through the reader’s expectation of what will happen next” rather than through mystery (Gates 228). Todorov’s third type, the “suspense novel,” “keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories,” but because “it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth,” it retains the thriller’s focus on the present (Gates 228). The Salt Eaters “works” by more or less inverting and signifying on the structure of the “suspense novel.” It maintains the “thrilling” qualities of the present story (Velma’s healing), yet it also incorporates the “mystery”
of an absent story. In the suspense novel, since the story of the crime has taken place in the past, the *absent* story is the one that is always already complete throughout the presented, yet-to-be completed story of the investigation. Because the “completed” story of the crime appears as the absent *cause* at the outset of the story of the investigation (the effect), the desire to know the absent story’s “ending” is also simultaneously the desire to know the presented story’s “beginning.” Conversely, Bambara’s novel *presents* its initial, completed story but interrupts its *ending* with an absent, uncompleted story that *will have taken place* in the future. Further, and consistent with this inversion, the desire to know the “end”—the “culmination” for which Willis longs—is also a desire to know the *beginning* of the absent story: the exact nature of the evental “transfiguration.” In this way, the novel’s structure uses the unbecome future to direct attention toward, and intensify its focus on, the present situation and its latent potentialities.

By reaching outside of itself and “leaving” the “resurrection” to readers’ imagination, *The Salt Eaters* does not fail to “work.” Rather, if Bambara’s “work,” as she herself describes it, is “to produce stories that save our lives,” then this is perhaps the only means by which her text possibly *could* do the work with which it is tasked (“Salvation” 41). According to Bambara, such work must combat “bourgeois . . . ‘literaphilia’ as a surrogate for political action and ‘sensibility’ as a substitute for social consciousness” (“Salvation” 42). *The Salt Eaters* refuses to provide a literary surrogate for the political resolution/revolution it teaches us is *actually* necessary. Instead, it points outward to offer readers a potentially redemptive critique of the world’s “illness,” and through it, the means to imagine in the future-perfect tense a world that will have been healed. However, it insists that “redemption” will remain merely potential until it is brought about by real people, and the way in which it works to kindle and shape readers’ desires is ultimately aimed at instigating concrete social action. As such, the utopian pedagogy built into
The Salt Eaters’ very form exemplifies Avery Gordon’s description of Bambara’s work as the very “practice of freedom . . . . the process by which we do the work of making revolution irresistible, making it something we cannot live without” (272).

The Salt Eaters has a final lesson to teach readers about the “practice of freedom,” one that is learned by all of the characters who look back on the narrative’s punctal “event” from the future, but is best embodied by Dr. Meadows and his transformed Hippocratic Oath. This lesson has to do with what Badiou calls “fidelity” to an event and the “truth” it produces. For Badiou, fidelity is “a sustained investigation of the situation, under the imperative of the event itself,” and fidelity, in turn, “gathers together” and “constructs, bit by bit” an event’s “truth” (Ethics 67-68). This truth “punches a ‘hole’ in knowledges,” and “since the power of truth is that of a break, it is by violating established and circulating knowledges that a truth . . . reworks that sort of portable encyclopaedia from which opinions, communications, and sociality draw their meaning” to create “new knowledges” (Badiou, Ethics 70). To be “faithful to an event” ultimately involves acting according to this new knowledge. It is to “move within the situation that [an] event has supplemented, by thinking . . . the situation ‘according to’ the event. And this, of course—since the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation—compels the subject to invent a new way of being and acting in the situation” (Badiou, Ethics 41-42, emphases in original). The Salt Eaters is adamant about seizing the potential evental instances in the present, and in its narrative, fidelity to its event is shown to involve “releas[ing our] hold on notions that might lock [us] to the old,” because during history’s pivotal moments there are always “choices to be noted. Decisions to be made” (Bambara, Salt Eaters 248). These decisions concern precisely how to “be” and “act” according to the “new” truth that is both learned and made through fidelity. Long after the “event,” Dr. Meadows’ decision to give a more concrete “political meaning” to his
abstract Hippocratic oath, and his faithfulness to it, are evident in everything from his expanded,
more syncretic definition of healing (exemplified by his collaborative luncheon with a group of
activists that includes Sophie, a traditional healer like Minnie with “magical” gifts) to his social
commitment to improving the health of black people, the poor, and the environment. His
renewed oath is made of old words, but they have been newly and utterly reworked.

Similarly, the text’s more general reconnection with African and African-derived traditions
and its symbolic “reenchantment” of everyday life, which are explicitly signified by renewed
significance of the loa, for instance, should not be thought simply in terms of the “restitution” of
a cancelled past. Rather, these are indicative of a past and a present that have been reciprocally
transformed by each other and offer an opening for a completely new “truth” to be created.

Buck-Morss writes of this kind of reciprocal truth-making amid the unprecedented “event” of the
San Domingue revolution. According to Buck-Morss, the spiritual component of the revolution
drew on yet also transformed African traditions according to needs of the present:

If vèvès and altar arrangements in Haitian Vodou temples replicate in miniature the
cosmograms paced out by Lemba members on African meadows, if the names of
Dahomean divinities reappears [sic] in the dominant Rada cult of Vodou loa, in
short, if the words and the structure of cultural language remained, what was said in
this language in response to historical events was totally new. . . . None of Vodou’s
precedents in Africa ever conceived of eliminating the institutional arrangement of
master and slave altogether. No European nation did either. The radical anti-slavery
articulated in Saint-Domingue was politically unprecedented. (Buck-Morss 132-3)

Similarly, if Bambara’s narrative rehabilitates dormant, proscribed, and even extinguished
elements of the past—ancestral traditions, spiritualities, cultural identities, the Movement, the
utopianism of the 1960s, and even radical anti-conservative utopianism itself—and marshals
them under the banner of envisioning a radically new, healthy “human eco-system,” it does so in
response to its specific historical situation. In the process, it renews and even reinvents these
elements of the past as well. On the level of narratology, The Salt Eaters introduces elements of
“old” “magic” in a new setting, as the freedom fighters of San Domingue once did, as an integral part of its utopian aspirations. It enriches both the novel’s insurgent historiography and the forward-looking desires it nurtures and educates with vastly expanded cultural, imaginative, and even ontological resources. On the political level, Gloria Hull argues that the novel “accomplishes even better for the 1980s what Native Son did for the 1940s” and “Invisible Man [did] for the 1950s . . . it fixes our present and challenges the way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation; teaching it can be a political act” (124). Ultimately, the politics of the novel’s transformative pedagogy depend upon the way its attempts to heal the past can teach readers to desire, and work for, a healed future.

Toni Morrison’s Paradise: Rethinking Utopia at the Millennium

If The Salt Eaters critically remaps political topography to reshape the utopian impulse for the last quarter of the twentieth century, Morrison’s Paradise, which appeared in 1997, performs a similar operation on the threshold of an even more momentous historical transition. Stephane Robolin points out that Paradise’s “reassessments of the past (and its representations)” occur at the end of the “decade of intensive retrospection” that was 1990s, and at “the closing of the millennium,” the novel takes on the ambitious project of “pausing to take stock of the century defined by the ‘problem of the color-line’ . . . as W.E.B. Du Bois would have it” (298). Accordingly, although the novel’s action is set in the post-civil rights period between 1968 and 1976, the historical palimpsest on which it traces its re-memberings of the past is vastly expanded to contextualize the Second Reconstruction within a sequence of events that stretches back to the First Reconstruction as, another two decades after The Salt Eaters, it turns toward the future to anticipate a still-unrealized Third Reconstruction. Like Walker and Bambara before her, Morrison turns a critical and creative eye toward the politics of race and gender. Similarly, her depictions of personal and social transformation also incorporate narratives of illness and healing.
rooted in “female-authored counterhistories that correct . . . patriarch[al] mythic history” within the contexts of both Black Nationalism and the U.S. at large (Gauthier 407). Finally, like The Salt Eaters, Paradise’s revitalization of over a century’s worth of black Americans’ social dreaming employs elements of magic and the fantastic to seize representational possibilities beyond those deployed by conventional realism, yet it does so in aid of a concrete, fervently “realist” politics.

Unlike Walker’s and Bambara’s novels, Paradise includes explicit representations of two utopian communities that draw on recognizable conventions of mainstream utopian literatures. These are “two ultimately failed utopian experiments”; yet importantly, despite these “failures,” Paradise does not descend into anti-utopianism (Aubry 351). Rather, the fates of the two communities in Paradise are used to create an open-endedness that, as in Meridian and The Salt Eaters, indicates that the quest for utopia must go on. In his reading of Paradise’s two “doomed” fictional communities, Timothy Aubry argues that “Morrison seeks to promote a relationship between her text and her readers that can function as yet another model of utopian communal politics, a relationship whose terms she refuses to dictate” (Aubry 351). In this way, “Paradise’s power [does] not end on the last page,” but rather, “the labor Morrison initiates will persist, indefinitely, after readers have put the book down” (Aubry 351). Morrison’s novel also continues the progressive move toward a global perspective on communality, which gathered momentum during the “last quarter” of the twentieth-century. In the process, it regenerates once again a centuries-long political struggle, as well as the literary form in which that struggle finds expression, with an eye toward a new millennium in which the “shape” of the social world, in this case the whole world, promises to change dramatically.
During a 1998 *Oprah Winfrey Show* “Book Club” discussion of the newly published *Paradise*, Morrison described her work as a “rethinking that the whole idea of all paradises in literature and history . . . and in our minds and in all the holy books are special places that are fruitful, bountiful, safe, gorgeous, and defined by those who can’t get in” (“Book Club,” emphasis added). *Paradise’s* narrative bears out this claim insomuch as the text is not concerned with actually representing “paradise” in literature, but instead with a politically oriented aesthetic project directed toward “rethinking” the very concept. Morrison’s language punctuates this project’s ambition to problematize and revise an *entire history* of utopian thought and representation. Thus, if familiar tropes from multiple traditions of utopian representation are abundant and conspicuous in Morrison’s novel, they should be understood in terms of Gates’s assertion that “black formal repetition always repeats with a difference” and this “changing same” has important potential political and aesthetic repercussions (xxii).

Curiously, while several scholars make at least some mention of the term “utopia”—often in the context of utopian “failure”—when discussing at least one of the novel’s two imaginary communities, there is nothing yet in print that focuses exclusively on *Paradise* as a work of utopian literature, much less on Morrison’s self-professed “rethinking” of the genre. In fact, Holly Flint argues, years after the novel’s publication, that critics seem strangely “at a loss when it comes to” what she views as its “overarching question”: namely, “how does this novel represent paradise?” (Flint 607). This question of representation speaks to the way in which conventional notions of utopias as manifest literary “blueprints” of would-be ideal societies can influence critics’ approaches to a text like *Paradise*. Yet these expectations constitute the very “samenesses” that Morrison pushes back against in her “Book Club” discussion, although her critique of these conventions constitutes but half of her full process of “re-thinking.” In his brief
1998 discussion of the novel, Moylan acknowledges that *Paradise* is “not within the usual parameters of the literary utopia” yet he argues that this defiance of convention is precisely the key to its intervention (“Introduction” 1). In retrospect, Moylan’s reading suggests that later critics, such as those Flint cites, may be pursuing an underproductive line of questioning. For Moylan, *Paradise* is concerned “not with a given utopian object,” but rather with a “meditation” on “the complexities of Utopia itself” (“Introduction” 1, emphasis added). Indeed, like Jameson’s work, Morrison’s text is occupied with contemplating the utopian imagination’s “absolute limits,” and moreover, *Paradise*’s notoriously elusive, “contorted” narrative dredges up and brings to the surface the “figural difficulty and structural contradiction” that Jameson argues “all authentic utopias have obscurely felt” (*Seeds* 57). *Paradise* is distinguished from its peers by the dynamics involved when formal conventions and familiar utopian “objects” converge with its particular historical situatedness on the cusp of the new millennium, and further, by the role this history plays in Morrison’s revisionary political project. Methodologically speaking, Morrison’s re-thinking of “paradise” interrogates the history of a traditional utopian social, spatial, and literary form at a historical juncture when that form has reached its own absolute limits.

More specifically, *Paradise*’s most urgent utopian vocation is to push—and to expose—the limits of the notion of utopia as a world apart, an island unto itself: what Jameson calls the utopian “enclave.” The enclave is “something like a foreign body within the social . . . beyond the reach of the social . . . a space in which new wish images of the social can be . . . experimented upon” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 16). However, Jameson argued in 2005 that globalization “spells an end to this type of utopian fantasy” (*Archaeologies* 16). Even more urgent for *Paradise*’s experimentation with utopia than its rich and corrective engagement with the American past is its deep concern for the tension between notions of bounded, separate (or
separatist) nationhood and the global “New World Order” of the present and future. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe this condition as a “direct contrast to” modern imperialism’s “project to spread its power linearly in closed spaces and invade, destroy, and subsume subject countries within its own sovereignty”; instead, the new order is “constructed on the model of rearticulating an open space and reinventing incessantly diverse and singular relations in networks across an unbounded terrain” (Hart and Negri 182). To confront this planetary re-ordering, Paradise uses its two enclaves—the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the all-women sanctuary known as “The Convent”—as utopian “laboratories,” as it were. In them, “possible [social] alternatives are . . . portrayed on a trial basis” in a manner akin to Bloch’s conception of Brechtian theater (Principle 416). The novel employs limit-cases of the classical, “modern” utopia, the absolutely closed enclave; and what this analysis will generalize as the “postmodern” utopia. The latter is a space that, while it confronts modern utopian closure through formal open-endedness and radical social “openness,” nonetheless remains an enclave by virtue of the fact that in the new, postmodern utopias that first appeared in the ‘70s, “the core of” their counter-hegemonic “opposition” is grounded in “individual sovereignty and local community” (Moylan, Demand 11, emphasis added). As with the anarchic “unlicensed sector” in Samuel R. Delany’s Triton, the mode of postmodern utopia discussed here appears as a boundary-lessness that is nonetheless effectively bounded insomuch as it is spatially and/or (micro)politically localized. The creation and destruction of Paradise’s two communities can be read as an endeavor—and an injunction—to think through and past both the modern and postmodern forms at a moment when it was imperative to rethink utopia, and sociality itself, in post-postmodern, global terms.
Under the auspices of *Paradise’s* deployment of these two literary forms, the text also incorporates a multivalent utopian “illness narrative.” The multiple personal healings that take place in the communal space of the “Convent” comprise a form of “intopia” that is more radically intersubjective than those in *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters*. On a more holistic level, the contrast between the “regressive” community of Ruby and the more “progressive” Convent depicts a transformative movement on the communal level from a repressive, “sick” social space to a more liberatory and “healthy” one. After working through the oppositions between its mutually antithetical “essentialist, patriarchal” and “postmodern feminist” communities, *Paradise’s* narrative, like *Meridian’s*, builds toward a second transformation that is only provisionally narrated, this time on an allegorical level (Jessee 84). Crucially, through the way in which the narrative pushes past its climactic tragedy—when the men of Ruby murder the women of the Convent and destroy their community—via a gesture that moves from death and negation to resurrection and affirmation, *Paradise* attempts to complete the dialectical movement begun by the critical dystopia. As we have seen elsewhere, this “turn” in utopian representation during the last quarter of the twentieth century shifted the “counter-narrative [of resistance]” from the optimistic visions found in the new utopias born of the ‘60s to a “utopian pessimism” in response to the neo-conservative utopianism of the 1980s (Moylan, *Scraps* 148, 149). In black utopian literature we see this sort of turn in the movement away from last-ditch efforts (like Bambara’s) to revive the optimism of the ‘60s toward the kind of militant utopian pessimism that can be found in later texts like John A. Williams’s *Clifford’s Blues*, or Morrison’s *Beloved*. Thus, *Paradise* is not only a literary attempt to surpass outmoded utopian forms, its conclusion is also an attempt to reclaim utopia—and with it optimism—for counterhegemonic politics. It is an urgent engagement with the “problem of utopia” at a historical crossroads when, as Marianne
Dekoven writes in her 1997 essay on “post-utopian desire” in *Beloved*, “Utopia . . . is multiply defeated and discredited” (125). Ultimately, the text endeavors to re-imagine and revivify *positive*, liberatory social dreaming in the context of a distinctive moment, and of a distinctive politics, the nucleus of which is *still* the Black Freedom Movement’s vision of social justice infused with the lessons of history, including the lessons about gender found in Walker’s and Bambara’s novels.

Of *Paradise’s* two enclaves, Ruby is historically the “first,” and it exemplifies the promise and problems of the archetypal modern utopia. To create Ruby, Morrison repeats the founding trope of the genre, and the defining characteristic of the enclave form: what Jameson posits as More’s originary “radical act of disjunction,” the “unimaginable separation” from the “real world” signified by the digging of the great trench that transforms a promontory into the island of Utopia (“Islands” 100-101). Ruby was founded by people who “joined no organization, fought no civil battle,” but instead sought freedom and community by physically isolating themselves from relentless American racism (Morrison 194). Ruby, which “has ninety miles between it and any other” town, is a veritable utopian island in the center of the United States “accessible only to the lost and the knowledgeable” (3, 186). Ruby’s self-separation is a mid-twentieth-century recapitulation of the separatist gesture that created an earlier, defunct all-black town called Haven, Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century. This seemingly compulsive repetition on the part of some of Haven’s former residents is a pervading theme in *Paradise*, and bespeaks the extent to which utopias as received, formalized representations of “paradise” influence and even constrain any attempt to imagine a “perfect” community. Haven’s founders were ostracized by whites and “fair-skinned colored men” alike in a series of rejections by other “closed” communities, an ordeal that the citizens of Ruby refer to as “the Disallowing.” Haven’s
patriarchal “Old Fathers” responded by inverting yet otherwise repeating this exclusivist closure, and repudiating all but those with the very darkest skin.

Morrison’s novel explores both the positive and negative valences of this disjunction through its deep engagement with literary and sociopolitical history. Channette Romero alerts readers that Haven’s Old Fathers’ ordeal is based upon the historic “Exoduster” movement, the “black migration out of the South” in the late nineteenth century in response to the failures of the Reconstruction; the migrants founded “60 all-black towns” hoping that doing so would “guarantee them safety, education, [and] land” (Romero 421-422). Morrison’s fictional town of Haven suffered the same fate as the historical Exoduster towns that “knuckled to or merged with white towns” (Morrison 5). Insufficiently isolated from the external pressures of American society, Haven folded after a series of setbacks linked to the Depression, World War II, and postwar racial hostilities that constituted a repetitive “Disallowing, Part Two” (194). However, for several years, Ruby’s attempt to recreate Haven in an even more remote location enjoyed prosperity, safety, and a utopian peace while managing to maintain its separation from the historical world outside its borders. The reader is informed that Ruby needs no police department, and a woman can walk the streets alone at night in safety because “nothing for ninety miles around [would think] she was prey” (8). Additionally, it is a space where its residents have engaged in the utopian practice of “imaginatively remap[ping] their own worlds” (Robolin 300). In doing so, they have achieved positive senses of individual and collective identity that counteract, and attempt to heal, the painful negation of the “Disallowing.” Paradise makes clear that this re-imagined community is made possible by Ruby’s total separation from a racist society and its dominant imaginary, a disjunction that thus has both objective and subjective dimensions.
Ruby’s imaginative “remapping” of both its insular space and its collective identity involves the town’s “controlling story,” its rewritten master narrative. Marni Gauthier, among others, discusses at length how in *Paradise’s* millennial (and centenary) project of historical remembering, the role of Ruby’s reimagined “mythic history” as a “narrative of national identity” in miniature is to function as a recuperative “countermemory to national mythologies” by means of a combination of “factual and experiential truths from African-American history” (396). As such, the chronotope of Ruby embodies the temporal contradiction of More’s *Utopia* by combining a familiar, ante-modern desire for a mythic space “out of time . . . for all time” akin to longings for a “Golden Age” or a “New Jerusalem,” with historically embedded secular political criticisms and desires that conjoin it to the very social conditions from which it seeks to break free (Jessee 85). The “timeless” space Ruby’s citizens attempt to wrench from history and preserve indefinitely is in fact immersed in, spatializes, and temporally flattens a deep column of American history that runs from the nation’s founding, through slavery and the Reconstruction, to the symbolic Bicentennial moment in which its most important events take place. The compression of so much American history into the temporally rarefied space of Ruby allows *Paradise* to vigorously critique this history, as well as a mythic mainstream American historiography. The more positive aspect of Ruby’s countermythology is that it serves as a “usable past” that allows the town’s residents to reimagine themselves.

Much like its ambitious internalization of history, *Paradise’s* representation of Ruby folds into itself a wide array of classic historical permutations of the modern utopia as rubrics for imagining paradise, and it devotes particular attention to distinctively American re-articulations of these forms. Moreover, these elements are often subject to trenchant critiques. In addition to the master trope of the separatist enclave, scholars have (either directly or indirectly) touched
upon some of the utopian forms that Ruby recreates. Foremost among these is what Carola Hilfrich has called the “Exodus trope,” a refitted version of the biblical *Grand Récit* of “chosen-ness” and patriarchal nation-building that shaped both white American history and Black Nationalism. For Lyman Tower Sargent, this trope is akin to the foundational ideas underpinning all colonialist utopian projects. Katrine Dalsgård’s influential reading of Ruby as an interrogation of the putatively “morally superior master narrative” of American exceptionalism traces its genealogy through Puritan colonist John Winthrop’s millennialist vision of a “City upon a Hill,” a fantasy which “continu[ed] a general European desire for a utopian place” that would represent a fallen Europe’s redeemed Other (233-234). Repetitions or extensions of this “colonial dream” appear, for instance, in Brigham Young’s covenantal “Mormon utopia,” and in the more earthbound “geographical utopia” of Manifest Destiny (Jessee 88; Flint 588).

Traces of both are visible in Ruby’s legend of the Old Fathers’ intrepid and prayerful trek west to found Haven, and in turn, in the attempt to create Ruby half a century later through an exact repetition of Haven’s master narrative. Two levels of critique emerge. On the one hand, the historical arc of Ruby’s American countermyth, beginning with its origins in the post-Reconstruction South’s racial purges and segregation, makes visible the racist brutality and other radical shortfalls of the American utopian experiment that are suppressed by the American master narrative. What becomes visible in the process is the pernicious chasm between the “real and the ideal, the utopian and the actual . . . the mythic and the diurnal,” which Dalsgård suggests is the troubling “legacy of the Puritan imagination to the American mind” (235). On the other hand, and even more provocatively, the text also subjects Ruby’s ameliorative automythology to a meta-critique. For instance, Morrison’s novel cогитате on unofficial town
historian Patricia Best’s uncovering of the perfidious nature of the Ruby’s own “controlling story,” as well as the danger involved in the always potentially dubious processes of mythopoetics and modern utopography themselves.

The lessons of Ruby’s narrative have their fundamental source in the problem of “repetition without difference,” as well as in “what happens if difference is rejected in order to maintain the utopian harmony of paradise” (Krumholz 21, emphasis added). Paradise reveals that these problems are rooted in the modern utopian form itself. The working title of Morrison’s Paradise, War hints at the dialectic of utopia and dystopia at work in the enclave of Ruby, a paradox that ultimately undermines the town’s idealistic foundation. At issue is the very problem Morrison references in her “Book Club” comments. Jameson also notes that the utopian master trope of “disjunction” is always already “one of exclusion as well” (“Islands” 100, emphasis added). Elizabeth Kella observes that this principle of exclusion is spatialized in a “generalized antagonism” that “has literally shaped [Ruby’s] town planning,” a classic utopian “blueprint” that concretizes an obsession with the integrity of borders, and which is engineered to keep the outside out and the inside in (213). This is evident in how the town has been built with “nothing to serve a traveler, no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital” (Morrison 12). The same exclusionary paradigm is also the underside of the town’s affirmative self-identity, which is girded against perceived “pollution” by “impure” Othernesses. Additionally, the town’s grid-like arrangement reflects the “Euclidean” social and spatial imagination in many modern utopias from More on down, and rebelled against in dystopias like Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We.

The rigidity of Ruby’s spatial ordering is consonant with the strict codifications of its social structure. Much has been written about the ways in which the (re)constructions of race,
gender, and religion in Ruby’s self-imaginary, with its idealization of pure black skin and its men’s vehement reclamation of a stereotypified masculinity after the humiliation of the Disallowing, are merely inverted repetitions of the Disallowing’s exclusionary logics of racial purity and patriarchy. Further, these logics are imbued with the supernatural imprimatur of an extreme, un-self-critical, ersatz-“Christian” pseudo-piety of the stripe stereotypically associated with Southern Klansmen. Although in Ruby this American version of a dystopian white supremacist longing for a racially purified “paradise” has been inverted in terms of its racial content, its form remains largely intact.

Most scholars agree that in Paradise, gender trumps race as the primary category of segregation. For the subordinated women of Ruby, in spite of the physical security afforded by the enclave’s isolation, its enclosures and other strictures nonetheless make it a “prison calling itself a town,” a “backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control” (Morrison 308, emphasis added). Morrison’s choice of language in this passage captures how, from the point of view of many of Ruby’s excluded women (in this case Billie Delia, a member of Ruby’s younger generation), the town is an inverted and retrograde ou-topia that is as dystopic as it is obsolete. The marginal, “women’s space” of the Convent seventeen miles from the town’s center becomes a physical manifestation of its patriarchy’s unremitting, if futile, attempts to exclude all difference and maintain its physical and ideological closure. It is a site of projection and abjection into which are cast the town’s various irreconcilable “impurities.” Ruby’s extra-racial desires, its repressed sexualities, its unsanctioned pregnancies, its “weakened” men and “wayward” women—and in many ways, “femininity” itself—are banished to the Convent, or seek refuge there. Andrew Read notes that in depicting the consequences of these practices of exclusion, “Morrison’s ultimate indictment of Ruby’s patriarchy is that it reproduces ideologies
and practices of racist white men” (538). Ultimately, the Convent’s “difference” becomes fatal as Ruby’s “men form a conventional white lynch mob” in the novel’s climactic slaughter, which is also likened to a witch-hunt (Read 538, emphasis in original). The mob’s members claim that they murder the women in the name of purity, so that “nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (Morrison 5). The source of the violence that ultimately not only liquidates the Convent’s utopian community, but also shreds Ruby’s immaculate master narrative and the town’s already-faltering unity, ironically lies, then, in disjunction itself. That is, in the fact that “neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13). Thus, the men of Ruby repeat the narrow exclusivity that marred the American utopian ideal, an ideal that is itself a variation on the modern utopian Ur-text. *Paradise* dramatizes the grip held by this schema for imagining communities, even on the excluded, as Ruby and its citizens “become the world they had escaped” (205).

Ruby’s story would seem in this respect to veer close to becoming another literary performance of twentieth-century anti-utopianism. In Wegner’s words, such anti-utopianism “inexorably drags the reader to the conclusion that every effort to effect a total change of the present, to institute a utopia . . . invariably gives rise to total systems of domination, systems wherein, ultimately, even the potential for change might be eliminated” (*Communities* 191). At the very least, critics have argued that the utopia of Ruby “dissolves into a dystopia” deserving of the charges of racism, totalitarianism, catastrophic idealism, and other crimes leveled at the utopias of modernity’s past (Gauthier 397). Peter Widdowson adds that many critics also “have been unconvinced” by the novel’s “idealistic visionary ending,” in which specters of the murdered Convent women are seen acting in the world in newly empowered ways (333). This final “vision,” to which we will return, seems to have done little to soften the novel’s proverbial
blow to readers’ paradisiacal sensibilities. Indeed, *Paradise* does renounce the modern utopian form. However, Morrison’s rethinking of utopian literature involves more than a simple anti-utopian “Disallowing” of utopia. Rather, in her portrayal of the community at the Convent, and especially in the interplay created by the diametric opposition of the novel’s two alternative communities, Morrison’s meditation on utopia is much more complex.

*Paradise’s* meditation on utopia offers additional layers of productive commentary. Via its dystopic demythologization of Ruby’s master narrative, *Paradise* demonstrates a critical awareness that is notably, and perilously, absent from the modern utopian form, and from its anti-utopian and dystopian counterparts as well. In this regard, the novel can be understood as a postmodern “critical dystopia.” As Raffaella Baccolini argues, amid the last quarter’s hyperglycemic commoditized escapism that grafts a utopian veneer onto a hypertrophied repetition of modern capitalism (and all its antinomies and injustices), the tropological lexicon of dystopia is all that transformative discourse has left at its disposal to achieve the “estrangement” necessary for readers to “see the differences of an elsewhere,” or to serve as “a warning” about the “dark future” of a false utopia, or to create a political “space of contestation and opposition” (520).

*Paradise* performs many such operations. Jameson argues that “Other people’s ideologies” are always “more self-evident than our own,” and the inversion, displacement, and repetition of regnant ideologies that Ruby represents allow the novel to achieve unique vectors of “estrangement”: parallax perspectives for “showing whites what they look like in black mirrors,” for “reveal[ing] problems of patriarchal concepts of manhood without reproducing racist stereotypes,” and for critiquing violent Western colonialism, nationalism, and, in the process,
problematically (and in some cases uncritically derivative) “patriarchal forms of black separatism” such as the Nation of Islam (Jameson, “Progress” 291; Storace 69; Read 527, 535).

One way in which Paradise’s narrative intradiegetically “warns” of dark days ahead for Ruby is through an allegorical discourse of illness. Schreiber points out that “the lack of healthy progeny” in the town “challenges [its] future . . . which lies in the next generation” (56). In addition to the fact that town patriarchs have no direct “heirs,” the unviability of the next generation is most blatantly symbolized in the character Sweetie Fleetwood’s chronically sick children. Sweetie’s ordeal perhaps best reflects how in Paradise, as in the other texts discussed here, depictions of individual health reflect the wellbeing of the whole community. Sweetie’s exhausting “motherly duties” have ruined her health, and she and her four “broken babies” literalize how, on a collective level, the town’s patriarchy is “maiming” Ruby’s “wives and children” in the name of protecting them through both a borderline-incestuous policing of “pure” bloodlines and an asphyxiating, essentialist, radically over-gendered social code and its attendant “controlling images” (Morrison 142, 306). In the novel’s final chapter Sweetie’s youngest child dies, bringing literal and Symbolic death into the still-young enclave for the first time since its establishment, and heralding the foreclosure of Ruby’s “closed” vision of a timeless, deathless, positive community. Like Haven before it then, Ruby seems destined to end up a “dreamtown” turned “ghosttown” (5).

Paradise’s Convent is a space of healing that directly contrasts with Ruby’s incompletely subterfuged “illness,” and more generally represents nearly everything that Ruby is not. This textualization of a “binary opposition of old/dominant and new/oppositional societies” is in fact one of the hallmarks of the postmodern critical utopias (Moylan, Demand 44). The Convent reimagines one of the earliest tropes in women’s fiction about alternative communities, “the
cloister,” to create a counter-space of contestation that, in typical postmodern fashion, is spatially and ideologically decentered from the hegemonic nucleus of Ruby. In it, stereotyped, essentialist notions of race and gender are radically destabilized. The cloister trope connotes the separateness and closure of the enclave, but Aubry remarks that the distinguishing features of the Convent’s community are (paradoxically) “inclusivity” and “an openness to unfamiliar experiences, modes of discourse, concepts, and identities seemingly at odds with the restrictive gate-keeping measures typically at work in” the “conventional versions of paradise” that Ruby of course epitomizes (352). No matter one’s identity or personal history, the Convent is a welcoming place where, as Billie Delia puts it, one is accepted with “[n]o questions,” and where “you can collect yourself . . . think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you alone—which ever way you want it” (Morrison 175-76). Whereas Ruby’s defining feature is its rage for order and closure, this accepting, labile, and radically open community is in keeping with what one of postmodernism’s most well-known explicators, Linda Hutcheon, calls postmodern fiction’s anti-totalizing “interrogations of the impulse to sameness” (Poetics 42). Politically and ideologically, it is of a piece with the historical impetus that Moylan argues gave rise to the utopias of the postmodern era, which took the “anti-hegemonic as a political and social principle, recognizing the permanence of difference,” and were influenced by antiracist, feminist, and environmentalist movements (Demand 27, emphasis in original). Formally, this manifests itself as “anti-closure,” perhaps the master trope differentiating the literary utopias of the high-postmodern period from their predecessors — although, as we have seen, this trope has been a definitive feature of black utopias for nearly a century and a half.
Paradise’s Convent is such a virtuosic and comprehensive utopian fictionalization of some of the most pervasive statements of postmodern progressive politics that much of the first wave of scholarship that appeared on the heels of its publication is replete with familiar terminologies that testify to how comfortably one might fit it into several then-dominant postmodern and postcolonial theoretical models. Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, for instance, reads the Convent as a “liminal space where the monolithic categories of religion, race, class, and gender converge” in “cultural hybridity” (4). Magali Cornier Michael similarly examines the unstable, boundary-blurring “subject positions” and the “local and temporary” coalition the Convent women create in order to focus on their potential value vis-à-vis the postmodern conundrum of “agency” (646). Phillip Page also reads the novel using postmodernist pet terms. He argues that Paradise is an embrasure of “multiplicity,” and he draws on well-known Lyotardian formulations to discuss how Ruby’s totalizing master narrative is irreparably disrupted by the multiple, irreconcilable narratives generated by the Convent massacre. Such readings point to how if one reads the Convent as a “postmodern” utopia, it captures the politics of postmodernism exquisitely.

By the time Paradise was published in the late 1990s, a moment that Wegner periodizes as late postmodernism, Wegner argues that these approaches to theory and politics were already obsolete. With the end of Denning’s “Age of Three Worlds” in 1989 and the beginning of the battle between unfettered globalization and various counter-globalization movements, Wegner sees a tendency during the 1990s toward a “‘negation of the negation,’ a post-postmodernism” that entails “a movement beyond the paralysis of the postmodern in the theoretical domain . . . and a resurgence of . . . radical transformative energies” (Life Between Two Deaths 34). This movement away from the micropolitical toward “original and influential
‘universalizing’ theoretical projects” is exemplified by the alter-globalization Left, for which the slogan “Another World is Possible” best captures the scope of this period’s emergent “utopian aspirations” (Wegner, Life Between Two Deaths 33-34). With the benefit of hindsight, it becomes clear how the narrative of Paradise attempts to negotiate this late postmodern moment of transition. If the Convent is a consummate (high) postmodern utopia, one of the uses to which Morrison puts this imaginary community is to test the potentialities and the limitations of postmodern political theory and practice. In doing so, it rethinks the previous rethinkings of 1960s politics that occurred during the years in which its narrative is set, and during which Meridian was written. As part of looking forward toward a post-postmodern utopianism, the story of the Convent generates valuable insights into what is viable and worth carrying forward, and what is untenable or worth leaving behind.

Unsurprisingly, the most powerful lessons conveyed by Morrison’s portrayal of the Convent community pertain to gender. Indeed, the Convent can be said to represent a particular sort of postmodern feminist utopia, as Sharon Jessee, among others, has suggested (84). Insomuch as the “openness” of the Convent tends toward the “expansive rather than the reductive,” it is indeed in keeping with Moylan’s description of the feminist utopias written during the utopian “mini-boom” that coincided with “the politics of the women’s movement” of the 1960s and ‘70s, a movement which, as Hutcheon notes, existed in a complicit, but conflicted relationship with postmodernism. Its anti-essentialist stance toward the patriarchal master narrative of Ruby (and American culture in general), and the fixed, modern utopian “blueprint,” participates in the postmodern cum poststructuralist political critique of received, naturalized norms and conventionalized forms that Hutcheon has called “de-doxification.” In this sense, it makes use of the interpretive approaches that many feminisms, black and white
alike, have developed by adapting and modifying the hermeneutics of deconstruction to serve their political aims. The agentic and liberating identities the Convent women fashion for themselves are an outrage to Ruby’s particular construction of True Womanhood, and the enclave’s critically celebrated racelessness—Morrison has made it impossible to discern which of the Convent women is the “white girl” whom the invading Rubiconians shoot “first”—experiments with the possibility for a “post-racial” society in which race as an ideological construct has been dismantled as well. In this and other ways, by virtue of how it “breaks rules and confronts boundaries . . . challenges paradigms . . . [and] creates new conceptual space,” the Convent can be thought of as what Sargisson calls a “transgressive utopia” in the “separatist” tradition of feminist utopian literature, one that also gestures toward bridging the racial rifts in feminism during and after the women’s movement (Sargisson, Transgression 4; Feminist 72).

The enclave of the Convent employs but modifies a potentially utopian feminist trope that Lucie Armitt calls the “crucial” space for female freedom and creativity, the very space that patriarchal Ruby cannot abide: the Room of One’s Own. Its space is, Morrison writes, “permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too”; a woman “might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic self” (Morrison 177). The “Convent women,” permanent resident Consolata Sosa and four wanderers named Mavis, Grace (or Gigi), Pallas, and Seneca, are all socially Otherized in some way, and find sanctuary within the convent walls. Here, they recover from traumas in their personal pasts. In a way that is utterly consistent with Ruby’s racially inverted but otherwise nearly complete repetition of the dominant American society the women fled, the town’s repressive social machinery constructs them as what Morrison, in Playing in the Dark, argues that blackness was made to signify in the white American literary tradition: “illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness,
and helpless, hapless desire” (qtd. in Aubry 362). With Connie’s help, the four fugitives turn their flights from abuse and oppression into transformative quests for personal healing and liberation. They reinvest these signifiers (to the extent that they even apply) with new and even empowering meanings. Although the hegemonic understanding of “blackness” has no hold on the characters within the Convent’s walls, it is thus, in this indirect way through its chiasmus with gender, an integral part of the Convent’s utopian meditation on identity and difference.

From a racial perspective, the deracinated, women-centered “world” of the Convent explores the implications of the “race-specific yet non-racist” communal space that Morrison has famously described as “Home,” a utopian space in its own right and a figure to which Morrison returns in her 2012 “healing” novel of the same name (Schreiber 1). It is also akin to what bell hooks calls for in discussing the rifts between black and white feminisms: a mutually affirmative “future feminist movement” based in “love and solidarity between black women, white women, and all women” (“Feminism” 277). In terms of subjectivity in general, Paradise’s important re-thematization of the modernist room of “One’s” own is that, although it is a separatist enclave, the Convent is nonetheless a shared space. Consistent with Jean Pfaelzer’s axiom that women’s utopias privilege intersubjectivity, the Convent women are not only transformed as individual subjects; their “growth occurs in mutual collaboration” such that they become a “collective protagonist” (Weese 157).

The intersubjective community that the Convent women create with, and for, each other exemplifies Frank’s “postmodern morality,” and fittingly, this community-building is accomplished through a healing ritual of storytelling. The Convent’s healing narrative is a collective story that intertwines the individual illness narratives of its residents, who all arrive “damaged by society” (Anderson 314). If Paradise’s story of Ruby involves a descent from a
semblance of wholeness into narrative wreckage, the narrative of the Convent proceeds in the opposite direction. The community and its members achieve physical wellness and subjective wholeness through a “ritual of transformation” that takes place at the “nexus between real and imaginative,” the very locus where Bloch and Gilroy argue utopianism begins (Zaudito-Selassie 135). In a series of “lost” days, the women retreat to the Convent’s cellar, where Connie traces chalk outline-like “templates” around their bodies, which the women then embellish and personalize with colorful paint. Seneca, for instance, whose obsession with cutting herself corporealizes the narrative fragmentation illness inflicts, transposes her self-mutilation by drawing cuts and scars on her template instead, thus “blur[ring] the line between the representational and the actual” while also underscoring the role that representation plays in the healing process (Anderson 314).

This relationship is best captured in the Convent women’s transformative, oral storytelling ritual of “loud dreaming,” in which, Morrison writes, “half-tales and the never-dreamed [escape] from their lips to soar high above. . . . And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer’s tale” (264). This collective ceremony uses the working-through of past traumas to fuel and express an automythopoetic utopian imagination, and in it, there is a consummately postmodern transgression of boundaries between flesh and spirit, self and other, reality and dream. Together the women compose a transfigured alternative history that is polyphonic, dialogic, and nearly everything that the patriarchal history of Ruby is not. The transformation that occurs is recognizably utopian: there is a “changed air of the house,” a “sense of surfeit,” and a “markedly different look in the tenants’ eyes” even as they seem “calmly themselves” (Morrison 266). The fistfight between Mavis and Gigi is an indicator of how, as in
the postmodern “critical” utopias written during the years in which the novel is set, the
Convent’s world is not perfect, but rather is shown with its faults and insufficiencies.
Nevertheless, to use Darko Suvin’s oxymoronic expression, the community is undeniably more
perfect, and it would seem in many respects that if there is a “representation of Paradise” in
Paradise, the Convent comes closest. Indeed, in light of Levitas’s definition of utopia,
Consolata’s offer to “teach” the other women what they are “hungry for” makes it perfectly clear
that this “paradise” has everything to do with the “education of desire” (Morrison 262).

It is through Connie that Paradise first introduces elements of the fantastic. One of the
reasons that Connie is so capable in helping the women heal themselves is that she is literally
magic. Consolata’s “gift,” which she calls “in sight,” allows her to co-inhabit other people, share
her energy with them, and in this way even bring them back from the dead. Using the theoretical
vernacular of postmodernism, Melanie R. Anderson points out that as such, Connie achieves the
“melding” of multiple pairs of “opposites” to become a boundary-transcending “liminal” figure
who exists between life and death, between the spiritual and physical worlds, and between self
and other, yet nonetheless maintains a “single identity” (310, 317, 310). Connie’s “liminality” is
reflected in her ability to reconcile her Christianity with the magical abilities with which she
feels “God” has invested her. She thus embodies the novel’s spiritual syncretism, which stands in
opposition to Ruby’s dogmatism. Indeed, one of the truly utopian dimensions Consolata brings
to the Convent is the inclusiveness, balance, and healing power of her alternative spirituality,
which enfolds her Catholicism with “Afro-Christianity,” Gnosticism, and vodun, along with
several African Spiritual Traditions. In more general terms of utopian representation,
Morrison’s use of the fantastic is a narrative tactic that challenges the “reductive stigma” of the
“conventional utopia” by combating its rigid formal closure with an “interrogation of
boundaries” through which utopia becomes a “destabilizing series of glimpses, or . . . a means of opening up a chink of light onto the unknown and unknowable beyond” rather than a purportedly “full” representation of an already complete community (Armitt 15). Through the use of “magic,” the postmodern openness of the Convent’s syncretic community is thus reflected in Paradise’s aesthetic paradigm.

The Convent’s transgression and even erasure of entrenched sociopolitical and ontological boundaries creates a postmodern “smooth” space that negates the modern “striation” of Ruby apparent in everything from its behavioral strictures to its grid-like spatial arrangement. However, the fate of the Convent also punctuates Deleuze and Guattari’s warning: “never believe that a smooth space can save us” (500). Paradise’s great tragedy is that the very openness, marginality, and celebratory difference that make the Convent a utopian enclave for its residents are precisely what foment its destruction by Ruby’s outraged town Fathers (who, incapable of imagining such openness, shoot their way in through its unlocked door). As with its treatment of Ruby, the novel makes a dystopian turn in order to meditate upon the limits and limitations of what might be called the Convent’s postmodern utopian values. These privilege de-essentializing micropolitics, the transitory and the marginal, the liminal and the local, the hybrid and the multiple, and so on. By pushing the “postmodern paradox” that Hutcheon calls “anti-totalizing totalization” to its limits, Morrison’s narrative reveals that the Convent’s postmodern repetition-with-difference of the utopian form retains, amidst the absolute difference-as-difference that differentiates it from the modern utopia of Ruby, a single but fundamental sameness (Politics 63). It, too, is founded on the untenable principle of disjunction (and thus exclusion) that Morrison seeks to “rethink.” Indeed, the Convent’s world reflects what Rosemary Gray, albeit somewhat reductively, calls “postmodernism’s flight from the horrors of
history,” and the fact that the women must retire to the cellar to achieve their miraculous transformations underscores their need to be shut of the outside world (29). The Convent’s postmodern repetition of the enclave model’s separatism thus recapitulates in the realm of literary and imaginative form the lesson it also teaches on the sociopolitical level: the Convent women “are not able, anymore [sic] than the Rubyites, to live outside of history” (Jessee 105).

Similarly, for Ruby, even though the Convent’s “threat” to its stability and identity is neutralized, it becomes clear that the town will also suffer a “total collapse” (Morrison 304). Page observes that this is caused in part by the damage the Convent slaughter does to Ruby’s master narrative of “moral superiority.” However, the text reveals that the true threat to Ruby is the “future” that “pant[s] at the gate” in the form of an encroaching historical world that will inevitably penetrate Ruby’s timeless realm: “the connecting roads will be laid” and the “outsiders will come and go, come and go” (Morrison 306). Even though at the novel’s end this remains in the future, the fact that town patriarchs Deacon and Steward Morgan have grown rich through dealings with outside capital has been clear for some time, signaling the town’s inability to maintain its fetishized borders, and its inevitable absorption by a nascent world order. For good or ill, the now-familiar confluence of the global and the local has begun. Reverend Misner alludes to what ultimately dooms both the novel’s modern and postmodern “paradises” in the text’s most important statement about utopia: “we live in the world . . . . The whole world. Separating us, isolating us—that’s always been [a] weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future” (210, emphasis added).

The Reverend’s pronouncement crystallizes Paradise’s critical utopian intervention in its historical moment. What Misner recognizes is what Jameson also insists: the enclave, the utopian “island,” is no longer viable, “since on the level of globalization on which we are now posing the
political problem” of utopia, “there is no outside . . . left” (Archaeologies 223). In what she proposes as a corrective to earlier readings of the novel, Flint transitions her historical focus from the past to the future, and recommends that readers also approach the text’s alternative history of Ruby as “a narrative told against and within a larger, global framework of historical and cultural events” (607). Although Ruby’s imagined community has undergone a disruption of seismic proportions following the massacre, Flint reads this disruption as precisely the locus of “hope” in that the residents will be compelled constantly to re-imagine themselves “in the same way that postcolonial subjects around the world must constantly reinvent themselves to remain viable participants in an era marked by globalization and continued practices of imperialism” (608).

Something of the postmodern is retained in Flint’s extolment of an absolutely transitory subjectivity, a constitutive pressure-driven instability that, in certain ways, shares in the cultural logic of the new global imperialism itself. The final scenes of Paradise attempt to surmount this very way of thinking. Nevertheless, Flint’s analysis is useful for noting that Ruby’s collapse is only truly dystopian for the town’s ruling patriarchy. The disruption of the town’s narrative is a potentially utopian event for those who would resist the Town Fathers’ discredited hegemony insomuch as, like the Convent, it opens imaginative possibilities for change amid a formerly fossilized sameness. Further, the novel’s re-membered American Bicentennial becomes a movement toward the future that demands a rethought forward-dreaming capable of addressing the exigencies of emergent globalization. By the similarly symbolic millennial moment of Paradise’s publication, these demands had become unavoidably urgent.

By marking the horizon of a future that it does not narrate, and by demanding the imagination of a future world-citizenship predicated on global social equality, Paradise’s narrative achieves a postmodern utopian open-ness in the process of breaking open Ruby’s
internalized modern metanarrative and, by extension, all it allegorizes. However, Morrison’s novel takes a crucial additional step. Moving beyond the ambiguity or outright refusal of representation that characterizes so many paragons of the open-ended utopian form, it fully, if tentatively, represents an “impossible” but affirmative vision of the future. Especially in light of Reverend Misner’s comments about isolationism, it is significant that in Paradise’s oft-dismissed quasi-epilogue, specters of the transformed Convent women, whose bodies vanish after their (apparent) shootings, reappear beyond the convent’s grounds in what was formerly the “real world” of their everyday lives and interact with people from their troubled pasts in positive ways. When asked in an interview whether the women are alive or dead in this portion of the novel, Morrison replied that they are “both,” inviting her readers to hold open this fantastical contradiction. Megan Sweeny expresses similar thoughts in what may be the most convincing utopian reading of the novel’s conclusion. Sweeny argues that despite critical and readerly dissatisfaction with this “fantasy of healing closure,” Paradise’s conclusion is “a political necessity precisely because [it] cannot fully be mapped onto the social real” (56, 58, emphasis in original). It is, rather, “an act of utopian imagination that stretches our theoretical horizon . . . for creating an earthly elsewhere” (Sweeny 58). Indeed, the earthly aspect of this supernatural stretching of the utopian imagination and its aesthetic vehicle (the novel’s grounding of paradise “down here” [Morrison 308]) is the most crucial component of the text’s utopian “elsewhere.” If the Convent women “signify a new point of departure, a leap out of the known into new possibilities of representation and imagination,” it is even more important that where they leap is out of their enclave and into world history (Krumholz 22).

In this way, Morrison renders the Convent women as empowered agents in a world that has been totally transformed to accommodate their impossible presence. This intervention can be
read in the way Brenda Cooper reads the politics of magical realism, which, in representing absolutely Other cosmoses that are yet readable, participates in what she calls Jameson’s war on Lyotard’s postmodernist “war on totality” by “map[ping] a totality” that recognizes “social, political, and economic forces” on a global scale (2). Indeed, Morrison’s new and timely utopian vision can be understood in terms similar to those that Wegner employs in his reading of Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Talents, which was published the year after Paradise. Writing in 2009 with historical hindsight, Wegner revises earlier critics’ interpretations of Butler’s novel to argue that in contrast to the postmodern “alternative” politics of the earlier Parable of the Sower (1993), the sequel “reject[s] any kind of postmodern enclave politics that would attempt to found an alternative community outside the dominant world order” (Life Between Two Deaths 15). For Wegner, at the dawn of the new millennium, “the only valid political project . . . is one that would take as its aim nothing less than the transformation of our global totality” (Life Between Two Deaths 15). In the brief, concluding narrative flashes through which Paradise’s fantastical new vision appears, readers witness the transmogrified Convent women returning with-difference to scenes from their former lives within the “dominant order.” On the one hand, Morrison’s “resurrected” protagonists embody several forms of the socially ab-ject that, according to Julia Kristeva, “stand for the danger to identity that comes from without . . . society threatened by its outside”; this includes the specter of death itself, which pushes difference, and the tenuous boundaries that maintain it, to the extreme (71). On the other hand, however, as Mavis’s daughter remarks, it is “indisputable” that the dead/living women are very much themselves—their transformed selves—as they move freely through this newly fantastical world at large (Morrison 312). Thus, these final scenes attempt to depict a world in which, crucially, radical difference still exists, yet this difference is radically included rather than excluded, and
further, this inclusivity is portrayed in positive, empowering terms. Although any attempt to represent utopia is inevitably imperfect, *Paradise’s* gesture toward representing a whole world that has been “made whole” surmounts the utopian enclave as an imaginative paradigm, and with it, the social and spatial disjunctions in which it has colluded.

In mobilizing, if only to *immobilize*, modern and postmodern forms of utopia, *Paradise* confronts the absolute limits of these forms in order to rethink utopia yet again. It retains the openness and inclusiveness of the latter while paradoxically retrieving and even expanding the totalizing political ambitions of the former in a way that sheds its fatal shortcomings of paradigmatic isolation and exclusion. According to Jameson, this approach is now necessary in the world order of the new millennium, where community is no longer defined by who can’t get in, but by the fact that we’re *all* always already in it together.

And yet, to focus on *Paradise’s* formal interventions or the details of its fantastical representation of a transformed world would in some ways miss the point of this utopian fantasy structure. The epilogue’s employment of magic to stretch the boundaries of its world (necessarily) remains on the terrain of the Symbolic. In Greimasian terms, this transcendence or unification of the binary opposition between the Convent’s world and the world from which it had to be absolutely separated in order to come into existence in the first place represents the “complex” position occupied by an (impossible) synthesis of contraries. More important to the novel’s utopian function is that its representation of the spectral women serves as an attempted Symbolic iconography of the Real, the realm to which “specters” truly belong. Mellard notes in discussing “anxiety”—frustrated *desire* in Lacanese—that spectrality is where Slavoj Žižek claims one finds “the most succinct definition of the Lacanian Real: the more my (symbolic) reasoning tells me that X is not possible, the more its spectre haunts me” (Mellard 372). In this
way, what many critics have seen as the novel’s weakness\textsuperscript{87} becomes its strength in that the obvious insufficiencies of its representation of a magically transformed world redirect attention to the disquieting \textit{absence} that is the \textit{neutral} position. Readers’ “dissatisfaction” with this incompletions thus appears as a clear affective manifestation of the very frustration to which Mellard alludes. After working through the antinomy-strewn narrative wreckage of now-outmoded modern and postmodern literary imaginings of utopia, Morrison’s novel confronts readers with a spectral, negational (but neutralizing) representation of an “impossible” something-still-Other. The very incompletions in this vision that have frustrated readers’ desires for closure are in fact crucial to the text’s true utopian function, which is to educate those desires rather than to satisfy them. By denying readers the utopia it teaches them to hunger for, the text demands new acts of the utopian imagination capable of confronting the realities of a globalized world. The novel thus would implant a utopian desire, and impel readers to fill this absence by imagining what personal and collective “health,” and social justice, might look like under millennial conditions of globality. The text demands, and works to instigate, this act of the utopian imagination, but it is also clear that it is but part of the concrete “endless work” we are “created to do down here in Paradise,” where, paradoxically, there is “no better place to be” (Morrison 318, 306).

Notes

1. Segrest (27, 36-37).

2. Stein (129). See also Claudia Tate’s interview with Walker in Black Women Writers at Work.

3. See Chapter 1. The “Third Reconstruction” is a term used by several writers and thinkers, including Sitkoff (229) and Manning Marable to refer to a future transformation of U.S. society that will, at long last, achieve justice and equality for American black people. In this chapter, this term, when used, signifies one of the utopian ideals with which the works in question are concerned.
4. SNCC organizer Diane Nash is one of many who use the familiar utopian term “beloved community” to describe the aspirations of the 60s (See Shor, “Aspirations” 175-176).

5. The term “unfinished business” is borrowed from both Segrest (38), and Sitkoff (237).


7. In addition to *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters*, among the most frequently discussed examples of such narratives are Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) and *Mama Day* (1989), and Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). See Stanford, “Disease.” See also Athena Vrettos’s “Curative Domains: Women, Healing, and History in Black Women’s Narratives.” (*Women’s Studies* 16 [1989]: 455-473.) In her article, “Claiming Black Women’s Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery” (*Callaloo* 19.2 [1996]: 519-536), in which she discusses Sherley Ann Williams’s novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), Farrah Jasmine Griffin coins the term “textual healing” to designate the sociocultural project of “re-membering” the black female body that historically has been the target of physical and discursive violence; both writers and readers of such texts, she argues, participate in this healing process.

8. Gay Wilentz makes the same claim in *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*; indeed, exploring these narratives and their implications is the central theme of her book. Her analysis (which cites Stanford) takes a multi-ethnic approach to literature and reads healing narratives, including Bambara’s, in works by African-American, Jamaican, Navajo, Laguna Pueblo, and Jewish women authors.

9. Frank’s Description, of course, shares a kinship the classic structure of trauma. Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart describe “traumatic memories” as “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (176).

10. See Wolfe (114). Wolfe’s description of the postmodern Void calls to mind late-twentieth-century trends in critical theory, postmodern political thought, and the overall state of knowledge and the human sciences familiar from Lyotard. He writes of the voiding of meaning through intellectual developments that claim “nothing is eternal, all value is relative, meaning is self-referential, and the sacred is little more than an ideological construct imposed by those who hold power over those who lack it.” Frank claims that if one would seek values in postmodern times, to look to “intellectual trends is to look in the wrong place” (19).

11. See Pordzik, *Quest* (70).

12. See, for example Christian, “Book I.”
13. This term, borrowed from Kleinman (6), was first used by George Engel in 1977’s “The Need for a New Medial Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine.” *(Science* 196 [1977]: 129-136).

14. For more on non-Western notions of healing, see Wilentz, whose work is also deeply indebted to Kleinman’s.

15. Blumberg (189).

16. See Chapter 1.

17. Hendrickson (114).

18. See Frank (69).

19. See, for example, J. Brown (311); Christian (204); Danielson (318); Downey (37); Hendrickson (119); Stein (130).

20. See Frank. Frank elaborates that the “*memoir* combines telling the illness story with telling other events in the writer’s life. The illness memoir could also be described as an interrupted autobiography.” The manifesto, in addition to carrying “demands for social action,” also “underscore[s] the responsibility that attends even provisional return from illness. Society is suppressing truth about suffering, and that truth must be told.” In the automythology, “individual change, not social reform, is emphasized” as the author is born anew following the destruction of an old self via illness. Yet, the intopian automythology extends into the social through its “universal” paradigm (Frank 119-123; 126).


22. See also McDowell’s claim about Meridian’s “repudiation of the body’s claims for those of the spirit” following the coma she experiences at one point in the narrative (271).

23. See also Tate’s interview with Walker, in which Walker observes in her discussion of Meridian that “suffering is not all psychological. The body and mind really are united and if the central nervous system is crucially unbalanced by something, then there are also physical repercussions” (180).

24. Nadel has already pointed out the connections it is possible to draw between Walker’s focus on the body in *Meridian* and the *écriture féminine* of 1960s and ‘70s French feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray, and refers readers to Ann Rosalind Jones’s well-known synopsis of this practice of “writing the body.” While it is crucial to bear in mind what Walker, in developing “womanism,” thought about the race and class exclusivity of the overwhelmingly-white, middle-class feminisms of the period, and it is thus possible to question on these grounds whether “Walker” really “engages” in this practice as Nadel claims she does (60), Jones’s description of
écriture féminine does offer insight that is of interest to the present discussion. She writes, “to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to recreate the world” (qtd. in Nadel 60).

25. “Battle Fatigue” is the title of one of Meridian’s chapters, which describes some of Meridian’s most deeply-involved days with the movement, and with Truman. Shor discusses “battle fatigue” and its relation to the sort of debilitating feelings of hopelessness mentioned by Sitkoff. Shor writes, “against unremitting racist violence and lack of federal protection, SNCC members suffered a kind of ‘battle fatigue’ (Dittmer 327; Matusow 507) that eroded their hope for change and created despair (R. King 138) and frustration, the kind of frustration that Bloch described as ‘the coffin that constantly waits beside each hope’” (Shor, “Aspirations” 184).

26. See Carson’s “Racial Separatism” chapter (191-211) for a discussion of the Atlanta Movement as well as this transition within SNCC more generally.

27. See Frank (117-119). Joseph Campbell’s 1949 classic, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), is widely known, if not uncontroversial. It probably should be noted that Campbell’s formulation of the “quest” is seen by some as linked to the ideology of colonialist domination. Some feminists have linked, as Susan Knutson does, the “quest” narrative’s structure of Subject-overcomes-obstacle-to-conquer-object, a structure which descends to the level of the standard grammatical sentence, to “semiotic mechanisms for the production of generically masculine human subjectivity” (Narrative 115). It is highly significant, therefore, that all three texts discussed in this chapter disrupt the linearity (or Freitagian triangularity) of the conventional masculine agonist quest structure through the use of fragmentary narration that involves shifts and disjunctions in temporality as well as character-centrality. These structural differences have everything to do with the differences in the nature of the subjectivities that these texts construct and represent via their “quests” for healthy selfhood.

28. This misogyny is perhaps most notoriously exemplified in Eldridge Cleaver’s admission that he raped black women to “perfect his technique before raping white women” and SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael’s assertion that the only position for women in the movement was “prone” (see, for example, N. Harris 112).

29. See Shor (179). SNCC’s influential leader, Robert Moses, for instance, studied at Harvard.


31. See Chapter 4 of Collins’s Black Feminist Thought, in which Collins discusses at length the stereotyped “negative images” of black women that have been “essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women’s oppression.” Acknowledging the impact of symbols as “a major instrument of power,” Collins discusses how “controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be a natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (67-68).
32. Herndl (557). These stereotypes are linked to white patriarchal representations of women according to a “Madonna/whore” dichotomy (see Stanford, “Inscription” [20]), but, as Collins notes, they are also racially specific constructions that have deep links to the material economics of slavery: “If black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility,” and thereby profit, “should be the expected outcome. . . . and by forcing Black women to work in the field or ‘wet nurse’ white children, slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery” (Black Feminist 77). For a definitive discussion of these stereotypes, see Patricia Morton’s Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women (New York: Greenwood, 1991).

33. See Christian (223).

34. See Sargisson’s Contemporary Feminist Utopianism (1996), especially Part II, for a full elaboration of her theory. For Sargisson, “willful transgression,” particularly of “generic or conceptual boundaries is both an effect and a function” that is the most definitive aspect of “utopian thinking” (58), and is indispensible to both its negative and positive interventions, which she calls its “critical” and its “creative” facets. Sargisson describes “oppositional thinking of the utopian kind” as “particularly destabilizing, not only of that which is opposed but also of the very ground on which the opposers stand. . . . feminist opposition is multiple, multifaceted, and multidirectional” (96). For Sargisson, political theories and practices that are “transgressive of dualist thought and binary oppositional thought” are “utopian” in that they can create “a new conceptual space” with a “transformative function,” and for feminism in particular, their primary value lies in a transformation from “politics of exclusion to a politics that is open to difference” (98).

35. See Chapter 1.

36. This explanation of the Greimasian semiotic rectangle is largely based on Jameson’s introduction to the schema in The Political Unconscious (166n13).

37. The quoted words are taken from Wegner’s chapter on Yevgeny Zamyatin and Ursula Le Guin in Imaginary Communities, in which Wegner uses the Greimasian rectangle to demonstrate how, in each of these utopian novels dominated by two diametrically opposed “worlds,” there are in fact much more complicated relationships between them than their simple duality would initially suggest.

38. Here, Wegner invokes Slavoj Žižek.


40. Anamorphosis is meant here in the sense in which Lacan uses the term in his Seminar VII, as a distorted image that only becomes recognizable when viewed from a certain perspective. Lacan references anamorphoses in the process of discussions of art, architecture, courtly love, and the
character of Antigone, which all also involve the creation of the illusion of substance or space on or in what is in fact a void.

41. When Truman queries her about this very matter, Meridian expresses what might be called critical utopian sensibilities: “I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don’t see it as a handling down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want” (206). Her demand for critique is both in keeping with the feminist readings of the novel discussed here as well as Moylan’s classic formulation of the “critical utopia’s” emphasis on “debunking” (Demand 10; see Moylan’s introduction in general). Nandy goes as far as to require an orientation toward unending questionings as a condition for utopia, a condition in which social “illness” has a role to play: “Only by retaining a feel for the immediacy of man-made sufferings can a utopia sustain a permanently critical attitude toward itself and other utopias, and yet have a creative dialog with the latter” (9). Meridian’s recognition of the problems that inhere in the imposition of “answers” also recognizes the dimensions of ideology, power, and representation that the “open-ended” or “ambiguous” critical utopias attempt to avoid. Furthermore, it resonates with Jameson’s thoughts about the value of negation and neutralization over affirmative synthetic solutions. From the perspective of a utopian pedagogy, the final sentence of Meridian’s comment, which involves the relationship between “education” and “desire,” the very core of the Bloch-Thompson-Levitas-Jameson definition of utopia, indicates an awareness—particularly within the context of the individual pleasure-seeking consumerism of its post-1960s moment—of the danger of directing desires toward commodified “items,” reified objects, Symbolic representations, and by extension, even the utopian “blueprints” that Jameson and Moylan problematize.

42. Stanford, “Disease” (28).

43. See K. Brown (257).

44. Wilentz writes of Jeanne Achterberg’s argument in Women as Healer as she discusses both non-Western and women-centered notions of healing that some contemporary advocates of feminist healing view as possible alternatives to monological Western scientistic (and patriarchal) medicine. Echoing Thomas Kuhn, Wilentz writes that Achterberg “demands a paradigm shift, so as to rebalance the notions of health within the human condition” (12). Achterberg herself argues that “in order for true progress—true healing in a global sense—Western cosmology must change” and “reflect a broad sense of healing that aspires to the wholeness or harmony within the self, the family, and the global community” (qtd. in Wilentz 12). Wilentz’s invocation of Achterberg’s 1990 text reflects the periodized understanding of health and “globality” being adumbrated here. In the interest of epistemological vigilance, it would perhaps be useful to both this dissertation’s presentation and its understanding of Achterberg’s own argument to maintain a critical awareness that while Achterberg calls for a syncretist approach to healing—as does Bambara in many ways—that incorporates non-Western theories and practices, her very use of the term “global community” is steeped in contemporaneous academic and popular (and corporate) discourses that are entirely Western in origin.
Although she and Frank share a connection to Jewish thinking, Wilentz’s theorization of the “wellness narrative” is far more concerned with “non-Western” cultures and traditions, particularly African Diasporic and Original American ones, than Frank’s theory of the “illness narrative” is. This is true both in her focus on healing practices and in the attention she pays to the specific “cultural sicknesses” to which individual “biosychosocial” sicknesses are linked. Hers is also a more women-centered approach. The primary reason that Frank’s approach, rather than Wilentz’s, was used in this analysis has to do with Frank’s emphasis on transformation over restitution. Rather than Frank’s choice of Campbell’s “quest,” Wilentz chooses to ground her understanding of narrative via Terry Eagleton’s ultra-reductive claim that all narrative can be distilled to a primal *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*-like structure of Object Lost/Object Recovered (15). While Wilentz rightly dismisses Eagleton’s interpretation of narrative as “consolation” as the radically insufficient hermeneutic that it quite obviously is, and moves toward an understanding of narrative that focuses on its healing power, Eagleton’s notion of the “recovered object,” a notion of “restoration” that is much closer to Frank’s idea of “restitution” than it is to transformation, influences much of her argument. This influence can be seen throughout her argument, from her understanding of healing to her claim that Bambara’s novel is “grounded in the *reclaiming* of the healing practices and worldview of a violently transplanted . . . culture group” (53-54, emphasis added). On one level, it has of course been well-documented that this is what Bambara is doing, and that this reclamation project is part and parcel of many counterhegemonic literatures. Yet despite acknowledging Bambara’s novel as a “ritual of transformation,” Wilentz’s phraseology still suggests an almost wholesale notion that these “practices” and “views” have been restituted unchanged and in *toto*, and her notion of transformation seems linked to this “recover[ying] of lost parts of ourselves” (78). *The Salt Eaters* does indeed mine the past, but it does so in order to try to find a way to incorporate it as part of a “worldview” that must set about healing a world that includes such things as nuclear waste: material problems a purely “recovered” worldview could neither imagine nor materially cope with. In this regard, Frank’s notion of transformation and its relationship to the past, present, and future, is both more applicable to, and needful for, the understanding of healing and/as utopia being developed here.

46. See Gilroy, *Melancholia* (67); *Atlantic* (71).

47. The presence of Butler’s novels in both Spaulding’s work on American neo-slave narratives and Moylan’s writing on “critical dystopias” suggests a definite, if culturally nuanced, kinship between these two genres that would seem to demand more as-yet-undone scholarship.

48 Metzger (199).

49. In addition to Stanford “Disease” and “Inscription,” hooks (“Uniquely”), Ikard, and Wilentz (cited below) see, for example, Karla Holloway. *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992).
50. See, for example, Collins’s *Black Sexual Politics* for more on the controlling image of the Strongblackwoman (or SBW), which involves a seemingly superhuman capacity for work, mothering duties, and for otherwise enduring “abuse, namely, physical, emotional, and sexual harassment” (208).

51. It should be noted that Bambara herself denounced the signifier “Utopia,” although the concept of utopia she refers to is a conventional one that she, like many writers and thinkers of the post-‘60s generation, has found the need to reject. Avery Gordon quotes at length Bambara’s “absolute” disavowal of utopia in a 1982 interview. However, more recent reimaginings of the utopian, such as Gilroy’s, Jameson’s, and indeed most of those invoked here and discussed at length in Chapter 1, were undertaken in order to address the very concerns Bambara voices about the dangers intrinsic to the assumption of “common set[s] of values,” as well as about the fact that the utopian program’s static social blueprint “does not look at process,” nor does it reflect in any way what Bambara calls the “world as I know it” (Gordon 257).

52. Wilentz lifts the idea of a “counterhegemonic utopia” from a workshop conducted on April 17, 1986 at Michigan State University by Abdul JanMohammed, who connected the notion of utopian vision to Fanon’s concept of counterhegemonic critique (Wilentz 178 n15).

53. In this passage, Stanford quotes Kimberly Benston’s work on Invisible Man (see Stanford, “Inscription”).

54. Stanford, “Inscription” (26).

55. In addition to the many readings mentioned above that discuss healing, rootedness, interconnection, and various kinds of activism, Derek Alwes has directly confronted what he, perhaps a bit reductively, considers to be “the limitations” of Willis’ “orthodox Marxist criticism that imposes an artificially narrow definition of political action” (Alwes).

56. See Chapter 1.

57. The terms “story” and “plot” as used here reflect Brooks’s specific usages. Brooks conceives of the term “plot” in a multivalent way. He preserves received understandings of it as an analog for the Russian Formalist concept of *syuzhet*, the structural ordering of events presented in a narrative. However, he also acknowledges its status as a “structuring operation elicited in the reader,” as an active, sense-making performance through which the reader (re)constructs the underlying *fabula* or “story” (“Desire” 131-132).

58. In *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*’s chapter on transference, Brooks likens the act of reading to a psychoanalytical session, which itself is a libidinally charged event. Brooks here formulates the dual, reciprocal nature of the text-reader dynamic according to the paradox identified by Shoshana Felman, whereby, “1) the work of literary analysis resembles the work of the psychoanalyst; 2) the status of what is analyzed—the text—is, however, not that of the patient, but rather that of a master. . . . the text is viewed by [the reader] as ‘a subject presumed to
The advent of the Lacanian “subject presumed to know” is necessary for the establishment of transference. This subject is not the analyst, but an intersubjective illusion. It is “in no way knowledge, but the point of attachment which links [the analysand’s] very desire to the resolution of that which is to be revealed.” What the “subject” is presumed to know and have the power to reveal, and thus resolve, is “that from which no one can escape, as soon as he formulates it—quite simply, signification” (Concepts 253), the (impossible) but presumed “hidden” meanings of signifiers, in this case, the analysand’s speech or gestures. In the paradoxical context Felman identifies, this can be thought of as the meaning of the literary text.

In regard to the debate on “magical realism”—including the fight for custody of it, and/or the wish to evade it as reductive, stereotypical, biased, or inappropriately culturally located when applied to a particular text or group of texts—scholarly readers of Morrison have approached the term in a number of ways. James M. Mellard’s reading of Paradise argues that critics who “pigeonhole” her works as magical realism neglect the important critical realism of her novels, in which the “magical or apparently supernatural effects with which she laces them” serve to augment (Mellard 367). Others argue for the centrality of traditional African worldviews in her representational strategy. La Vinia Delois Jennings’s recent book, Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa, offers a more nuanced view of the matter. On the one hand, Jennings’s purpose is to rigorously situate Morrison’s oeuvre, including its incorporation of “supernatural” elements like animism and spirits, within African traditions, as well as Morrison’s more localized experiences, such as her embrasure of the fact that she “grew up in a house in which people . . . had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable.” Her approach is quite balanced, however, seeming to at once challenge and accept claims like Mellard’s. Invoking Morrison herself, Jennings writes that Morrison first learned of magical realism from the source with which it is most often associated: “a style of writing by Latin American men.” Jennings notes that Morrison “sensed that the word ‘magic,’ especially when applied to works treating discredited knowledges held by discredited people implied that those works lacked ‘intelligence,’” and was determined to “write about [such] knowledges,” in her case largely African-based ones, “as an authority and authentication of Blackness.” On the other hand, in a sense that differs from this traditional and epistemological one, she cites as one of Morrison’s reasons for doing so the fact that Morrison “regarded the ‘label’ as ‘evasive,’” as a “way of not talking about the politics . . . in the books.” Applying the word ‘magical’ seemed to dilute the realism legitimately ‘because there were these supernatural . . . things . . . going on in the text.’ Literary historians and literary critics’ usage of the term ‘seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers’” (Jennings 126-127, emphases in original). This latter argument seems to have a great deal to do with what Mellard contends, although he advances his argument from a Derridean direction rather than an African traditionalist one.

60. Jameson, “Progress” (289).

61. This particular term is Widdowson’s (315).

62. These words are Jim Miller’s. The quotation is taken from Baccolini and Moylan’s introduction to Dark Horizons (4), cited below.
63. Robert C. Elliott captures this chiasmus in influential study, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*, in which he differentiates utopianism from purely mythical “Golden Ageism” by arguing that utopia involves a confrontation between the “primal longings embodied in the myth” and “the principle of reality” (8-9). See also Chapter 2.

64. See Hilfrich, cited below, for a full discussion of this trope.

65. See Sargent (206).


67. See, for example, Rob Davidson’s “Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” (*Twentieth Century Literature* 47 [2001]: 355-373); Candace Marie Jenkins’s “Pure Black: Class, Color, and Intraracial Politics in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” (*MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 [2006]: 270-296); or Andrew Read’s “‘As if word magic had anything to do with the courage it took to be a man’: Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” cited below.

68. See especially Read’s critique.

69. See, for example, Mellard (359-360) and Widdowson (329).


72. See Page’s discussion of multiplicity, interpretation, and meaning in the novel.

73. In *Life Between Two Deaths*, his study of the 1990s, Wegner “divide[s Jameson’s] period of postmodernism into ‘high’ postmodernism, characteristic of the 1980s and the subject of Jameson’s classic analyses, and what we might call ‘late’ postmodernism that only emerges in the 1990s. . . . it is the ‘late’ moment that witnesses the revival of a radical political energy in abeyance in the earlier” (5).

74. Obviously, there is not space here to elaborate on all of the debates, nuances, and other problems involved in the use of the term “feminism,” which means radically different things to different people. Its use here in reference to Morrison’s *Paradise* should, to approach it here on the most general level, connote an understanding of the term that lies somewhere between the “second wave” feminism that characterized the early postmodern period that the novel narrates (which argued that “women and men were significantly different beings”) and the “third wave”
feminism dominant in the moment from which the novel emerged (which “focuses on the differences amongst women”); if gender trumps race to the point of e-race-ing it in the Convent’s women-only utopia, this can be thought of as an exploration of a problem consistent with critiques by black feminists, among others, that mainstream feminisms have “always been at best exclusive and at worst imperialistic as a movement” insomuch as they have often assumed the standpoint and needs of white, middle-class women to the silencing or subsumption of others (Sargisson, Transgression 22).

75. See Moylan, Scraps (79-80). The utopian “mini boom” is a phrase coined by feminist utopian author Joanna Russ.

76. See, for instance, Hutcheon’s “Postmodernism and Feminism,” in The Politics of Postmodernism (141-168).

77. Hutcheon writes that postmodernism “work[s] to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique. To adapt Barthes’ general notion of ‘doxa’ as public opinion, or the ‘Voice of Nature’ and consensus . . . postmodernism works to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import” (Politics 3). For more on this issue with respect to Morrison’s novel, see also Robolin (311).

78. See Sargisson, Contemporary Feminist Utopianism (87-97), in which Sargisson discusses the thought of Derrida along with the responses of feminist thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti. Sargisson (like Hutcheon, in her discussion of postmodern feminism cited above), acknowledges the usefulness of deconstruction while rejecting the disempowering notion of undecideability. Patricial Hill Collins, in her discussion of Sojourner Truth for example, discusses the intellectual value of deconstruction, as well as the value of deconstructing the very idea of intellectualism itself in articulating a specific black feminist position (Black Feminist Thought 14-15).

79. See Lucie Armitt, Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic, New York: St. Martin’s, 2000 (2).


81. In this way, Morrison’s revised “Room of One’s Own” bears out what Hutcheon sees as “postmodernism’s complex relation to modernism: its retention of modernism’s initial oppositional impulses, both ideological and aesthetic, and its equally strong rejection of modernism’s founding notion of formalist autonomy” (Politics 26).

83. For more, see Weese, Chapter 7, “The Gospel According to Consolata.”

84. Zauditu-Selassie (119). See “In(her)iting the Divine: (Consola)tions, Sacred (Convent)ions, and Mediations of the Spiritual In-Between in Paradise,” Chapter 5 of her book African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison, for an extensive discussion of the many traditions and rituals enfolded in the Convent’s spiritual world.

85. Quoted in Page (639).

86. See Mellard’s discussion of “spectrality” in Paradise, particularly his implication of Derrida’s notion of the spectre with the Lacanian theorizing of Žižek (367, e.g.).

87. See, for instance, Anderson’s discussion of the critical response to the novel (318).
Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* is not only a millennial rethinking of the fundamental shape of the utopian imagination. Its triumphal concluding vision would also fling away the dystopian pall that had enshrouded utopia for almost two decades. Despite the admirable efforts of writers like Walker and Bambara to rehabilitate the 1960s’ utopian impulse in the wake of its political exhaustion, John A. Williams’s political novels of the 1980s—which traverse both American and African contexts—exemplify the dystopian turn in black utopian literature during that decade, one that parallels the fate of radical utopianism more generally. This literature reckons with the ways in which the transnational black liberation movement was overrun by a host of conservative historical forces during the last quarter of the twentieth century. At the close of a century that began with dreams of “the golden inauguration of the *belle époque*,” but ended as “the one . . . in which politics turned to tragedy,” the idea of the millennium as an epochal moment of transformation acquired a substantial amount of symbolic power (Badiou, *Century* 8). A number of competing prophetic narratives either appropriated the figure of the millennium or were caught in its gravitational field. These ranged from George H.W. Bush’s prognostication of a New World Order to the apocalyptic narrative of the Y2K survivalists; from leftist, neoliberal, and crypto-racist neoconservative ideations of a “post-racial” world to eschatological neo-fascist fears of the same.

Against this discursive backdrop and its rumblings of epochal change, globalization emerged as a dominant paradigm for imagining such change. Although globalization had its beginnings in the late ‘40s and emerged terminologically in the ‘60s and ‘70s, it only acquired its definitive currency and shape in the public imagination during the latter half of the 1990s, filling the vacuum left by the Cold War with a world-engulfing vision conflating “the freedom of
the market [with] the freedom of democracy” (Jameson, *Valences* 412). Fredric Jameson expresses a millennial “fear” in worrying that this vision might turn out to be “the last” successful “attempt at a utopian forecast of the future transfigured” (*Valences* 412).

Morrison’s 1997 novel not only counters the politically anesthetizing notion of neo-liberal globalization’s inevitability. As discussed in chapter 4, the agentic depictions of radical difference and inclusivity in the novel’s epilogue confront the narrative of globalization with an alternative utopian vision that counteracts the former’s imperialist “trend . . . toward greater polarization,” a trend that is often obfuscated by a tendency to associate globalization with homogenization (Samir Amin, qtd. in Schueler 11). Further, *Paradise* advances a utopianism that rejects an isolated “enclave” politics to demand total, *positive* change on a global level while also taking “polarization” as one of the key sociopolitical phenomena it critiques. *Paradise* also intends a dialectical shift in utopian literary politics, a move from dystopia toward a new utopianism with a power and a scope exceeding even that of the 1960s’ and capable of meeting the global demands of the contemporary world order.

After the year 2000 had come and gone, however, world events strained the kind of optimism for which *Paradise* expresses a tempered but sincere hope. The postmillennial World Trade Center attack led to a number of new developments in the new order’s evolution. These included the mutated return of Cold War Militarism advocated in the late-‘90s by the Project for the New American Century, and a swelling global tide of racism couched in neo-nationalist rhetoric. At the same time, however, the giddy, supranational expansion of a polarizing late capitalism continued with little meaningful disruption.

In the United States, the same Bicentennial that figures so heavily in both Walker’s and Morrison’s utopian texts also marked the beginning of the dystopian literary trajectory
exemplified by the neo-slave narratives. Heike Raphael-Hernandez demonstrates in her reading of Morrison’s neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*, that there is a utopian impulse nurtured even in Morrison’s narrative of slavery, poverty, and infanticide. Nonetheless, the general aesthetic shift toward slavery and away from Black Power’s emphasis on liberation is of great consequence, and *Beloved* typifies how utopian longings and anticipations are often comparatively muted in narratives that are overwhelmingly dystopian in content and tone. In this regard, Morrison’s work reflects a literary movement that, as discussed in Chapter 2, is an effective historico-cultural gauge for an era that saw the dismantling in the 1970s and ‘80s of many of the gains achieved by the Freedom Movement in the ‘60s. During the 1990s, the end of the Cold War led to “heated debate over the direction of the future” that opened a space of “immense possibilities for the global left” (Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths* 1). However, the collapse of state communism removed the final impediments to a global economic restructuring that rendered income security, and indeed life itself, more precarious in rich and poor countries alike. In the U.S. this decade was bookended by the 1991 police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles and the gratuitous 1999 police shooting of the unarmed Amadou Diallo in New York—and the acquittal of those responsible in both cases—and it witnessed the bombings of dozens of black churches in the South. It saw the ascendance of a facile and largely discursive narrative of “multiculturalism” that did little to ameliorate the concrete racial inequalities it often obfuscated. The Clinton Administration filled black neighborhoods with thousands of police. The advent of “maximum minimum” sentencing with often-drastic racial disparities in adjudication caused the mushrooming of a prison-industrial complex with a disproportionately black inmate population. Affirmative-action policies were undermined, and racial stereotypes were leveraged in order to hack away at the social safety net. Although the decade suffered from a comparative void in
black leadership, escalating racial problems led to a groundswell of activism by the middle of the decade, which included demands for “reparations.” Its momentum, however, was squelched by the World Trade Center attacks, which led to a bizarre combination of overt racial hostility and neoconservative rhetoric proclaiming that in an allegedly “color-blind” society, even broaching the subject of racial inequality was tantamount to “reverse racism.”

In postcolonial Africa, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s works of the ‘70s and ‘80s are among the exceptions to a dystopian turn that had begun by 1968, by which time the utopian paradigm of anticolonial nationalism “had plainly failed” as “the national bourgeoisie that took on the baton of rationalization, industrialization, bureaucratization in the name of nationalism, turned out to be a kleptocracy” (Appiah 150). That year saw the publication of Malian author Yambo Ouologuem’s “African holocaust” novel *Le Devoir de Violence*, a stunning anti-utopia that rejects anticolonial nationalism, negritude, and any other “desires to dream the echo of happiness,” an “echo,” it contends, that “has no past” (Appiah 151; Ouologuem 181). For Ouologuem, the past is a story of innate human violence that stretches back beyond colonialism into time immemorial and is the unalterable destiny of the future as well. In Kwame Anthony Appiah’s account of African literature, Ouologuem’s text also begins the pivot away from novelistic realism, a literary mode inseparable from “nationalist legitimation” (150). This dystopian literary trend continued, and even the powerful utopian impulse in Ngũgĩ’s novels nonetheless emerges from dystopian neocolonial conditions. By the 1980s, the “age of structural adjustment” had dawned, and the debts that sub-Saharan African nations owed to multinational financial entities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) came due. In many cases, neocolonial comprador governments withered away in the face of the “removal of all barriers . . . to the operation of global market forces” (Saul 23). Further, multinational creditors “emerged as
particularly central to the process of dictating global capitalism’s new terms to Africa,” often effectively usurping national sovereignties while also easing multinational corporations’ access to local natural resources (Saul 23). As a result, the majority of sub-Saharan Africans not only lacked capital, but now were bereft of basic social services as well, and these dire circumstances exacerbated ethnic chauvinisms that undercut coalitional politics.

In *Millennial Africa*, John S. Saul suggests that there were flickers of optimism in the 1990s embodied by the end of South African Apartheid, and the Ogoni people’s uprisings against Shell Oil’s abuses in the Niger Delta. Nevertheless, at the millennium, the “African crisis” had not abated. In spite of neoliberal globalization’s utopian doxology of prosperity, “capitalism’s regulation of so much [sic] of Africa’s one billion people to the status of ‘supernumeraries of the human race’” means that the liberation of “Africa’s future” depends on a viable alternative “utopia” (Saul 243). For Saul, this alternative requires a “popular critique of power” capable of “expand[ing] its focus beyond local abuses of office to confront global injustices (from the abusive Nigerian state, in the Ogoni case, via Shell Oil to a fresh perspective on the workings of the global system, perhaps)” (34). The millennial moment did witness a gathering momentum toward such a “global opportunity,” which led to a 2001 conference on race in Durban, South Africa; however, the conference convened the same week as the World Trade Center attacks, after which it closed its doors early.

This study concludes with a brief assay of the ways in which three authors approach utopia after the millennium. In light of the call sounded by Morrison’s *Paradise* for a rethought and reenergized *global* utopian imagination, this concluding discussion returns to the pivotal question of politics and form to examine black utopian aesthetics in the ensuing years. This exploration begins with the novel *In Arcadia* (2002) by Nigerian-British author Ben Okri,
arguably black literature’s preeminent utopian writer during this period. It then reads Jamaican-born American author Claudia Rankine’s multimedia prose-poem *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), a text that is important for its distinctive formal experimentation as well as for its direct engagement with the repercussions of the World Trade Center attack. Lastly, it discusses American author Colson Whitehead’s novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), which confronts utopia’s cooptation by the corporate world, perhaps the new century’s most pressing issue in the discursive struggle over the figure of utopia.

The novels on which Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this study have focused were written by authors who experienced the 1960s as adults, and whose work bespeaks the direct influence of the decade’s utopian spirit. By contrast, the three authors discussed in this closing section represent the next generation of black utopian writers. Their investment in history—past, present, and future—is as deep as their predecessors, but the passage of time means that these authors inevitably draw their materials from different historical resource-bases. The wellsprings of their utopianism are different, and their aesthetics are diverse. The works represented here were chosen in part precisely because of their formal differences. It is not the aim of this brief survey to distill from this small but diverse array of texts a single literary form that it would posit as the “New Black Utopia.” Rather, it approaches utopia at the millennium as a literature in flux, a condition that reflects the transitional nature of the moment, and it reads these very different individual texts as discrete attempts, some more successful than others, to arrive at a synergy of form, content, and function equal to the new and colossal political demands of the times.

By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, no new distinct utopian ideology of form arose that was as definitive as the reimagined revolutionary utopia seen in the works of Williams, Bambara, and Ngũgĩ, or the utopian “healing narrative” that emerged in
black women’s writing in the mid-'70s. It is possible, however, to discern some trends among these millennial novels, although they will here be posited as trends rather than full-fledged principles. There are exceptions in nearly every case, but it is possible to trace the following tendencies:

- The persistence of dystopia as the dominant literary mode and mood.
- The fact of globalization: for the postmillennial texts discussed here, globalization is not an emerging order, but the default order of things to be dealt with, most often through the chiasmus between the global and the absolutely local.
- A debunking of the myth of a color-blind society.
- Gradualist struggle as a utopian trope: a millennial re-placement of apocalypticism that transliterates the promise of a transfigured future into the struggles of the present—often of the local “here-and-now”—in a reformulation that makes explicit what is, in fact, every concrete utopia’s ultimate function.
- A waning of affect: the younger generation’s texts are politically earnest, but lack the revolutionary militancy and affective power of the 1960s generation.
- A postmillennial shift away from magical or fantastic realism toward a neo-realism that, paradoxically, is often a more effective estrangement strategy than the fantastic.
- A New Humanism. Distantly echoing Fanon, the drive for an alternative to liberal humanism that yet prioritizes the rethinking of humans, humanity, human communities, and the humane. Regardless of the shape of the new utopia, it often begins on the level of a transformed human-being.

**Postmillennial Realism: Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia* **

Many of these trends are observable in Ben Okri’s work. What Douglas McCabe rightly characterizes as the “obsession with ideal worlds that marks” Okri’s “fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in the latter 1990s and early 2000s” makes his fiction an ideal starting point for this discussion (3). Ralph Pordzik’s contention that in *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) Okri surveys his writing’s context in order “to take stock” of available “cultural and political resources of utopian thinking” might be even more fittingly applied to his literary output as a whole (*Quest* 144). If Morrison’s *Paradise* demands a rethought utopia for a post-postmodern world, then Okri’s
repeated, formally diverse engagements with this problem can be seen as part of a struggle to produce figures for what utopia might “look like” in a new era. Interestingly, *In Arcadia* marks a departure from the distinctive fantastic aesthetics of Okri’s renowned 1990s trilogy—*The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) and *Infinite Riches* (1998)—and *Astonishing the Gods*. All four are novels whose utopianism has been recognized by critics. In a somewhat surprising contrast, Okri’s early postmillennial novel, which names its utopianism in its title, is rendered in an aesthetic that is primarily realist.

In Okri’s fantastical trilogy, the central character is Azaro, an *abiku* child whose story begins in *The Famished Road* as a Nigerian national allegory of the Jamesonian variety. The *abiku* is drawn from the Yoruba tradition, although similar figures appear in other West African folklore as well. It denotes a spirit-child who “will not stay among the living but, instead, keeps dying and being reborn” (Brooks de Vita 18). The figure of the *abiku* is thus a personification of a “recurrent cycle of birth, death, and rebirth,” and *The Famished Road* posits Nigeria as an “abiku nation,” one that has passed through a succession of aborted attempts to actualize the utopian dreams of the independence era (Soliman 151; Okri, *Famished* 494). The *abiku* is also an apt metaphor for Okri’s engagement with the problem of utopia, which is “born” into his fiction in one political-aesthetic incarnation only to disappear and reappear in a different form. A generation after Ngũgĩ, Okri’s “decolonized fiction” likewise seeks to move “the [postcolonial] narrative beyond” the “historical catalepsy” caused by the “colonial experience” and clear a space for renewed forward-dreaming (Cezair-Thompson 34, 35, 34). Within this context, Okri’s novels both mine the existing stockpile of utopian tropes and invent new ones in order to imagine and reimagine utopia “over and over again,” thus providing “vehicles for meditation” on the limits of, but also the need for, the utopian imagination.
In the first novel of the Azaro trilogy, *The Famished Road*, Okri introduces his celebrated fantastic aesthetic, which has been variously characterized as “magical,” “grotesque,” “spiritual,” “shamanic,” “animist,” “cosmopolitan,” or “New Ageist” realism, and which draws on traditional West African storytelling to create a “world” that “attests to the literality of ghosts and specters in African societies” (Adééko 477, emphasis added). This astounding aesthetic endows the novel with singularly powerful estranging capabilities that enhance its political critiques. In a way that establishes parallels with Nigeria’s drawn-out political transition in the 1990s, *The Famished Road* returns roughly to the 1960 “birthdate” of an independent Nigeria to ruminate, in critical utopian fashion, on the hope, ideals, and failings of the decolonization era. The novel revives but critiques the transformative imaginings of a previous generation through Azaro’s father’s fervid and idealistic, but doomed, dreams of a “new continent”; it also enacts a generational transfer of hope through the young abiku’s decision to live and remain in an imperfect historical world rather than escape to the ahistorical “perfection” of the spirit world. In doing so, Azaro learns from an earlier generation’s mistakes while carrying forward his father’s desire for a transfigured, more equal, more humane world, especially for globalization’s dispossessed. Through these characters, a powerful utopian impulse arises from a fantastically grotesque postcolonial dystopia.

*Astonishing the Gods* transports the utopian spirit, and spiritualism, of the Azaro novels into a more rarified realm of “pure” dreams. In a reversal of *The Famished Road’s* plunge into history, *Astonishing the Gods* is an intopia, a “eupsychia” in which a subject is disjoined from a corrupted history and reborn through an inner quest to imagine a perfect collective society, a quest, the novel suggests, which must be undertaken before a new history can be achieved. Whereas the Azaro trilogy draws on African tradition, *Astonishing the Gods* turns primarily to
the European utopian tradition, and teems with “classical” utopian literary conventions as it experiments with eutopian visions like those of Campanella, Andreae, and others. Okri manages here to create an even more breathtakingly fantastic aesthetic than The Famished Road’s, and through it, his utopian journeyer creates a constantly morphing “world of dreams” that conforms to his every wish, hope, and fear, its possibilities limited only by the outermost boundaries of the imagination.

However, for all the astonishing beauty of Okri’s text, these boundaries are what ultimately come to the fore. The text’s attempt to render its final moment of utopian revelation crashes into its own intrinsic limitations by devolving into conspicuously unimaginative, capitalized platitudes about “THE FIRST UNIVERSAL CIVILIZATION OF JUSTICE AND LOVE” (Okri, Astonishing 155). A stark contrast to the flights of unfettered fancy that fill the narrative to bursting, the climax of Okri’s novel is an uncanny repetition of a similar moment in the Strugatsky brothers’ novel Roadside Picnic (1972). In the latter novel, the apparition of perfection figured by the utopian fictional form can only find its way into manifest symbolic content through the vague, unremarkable cry of “HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED.” For Jameson, Roadside Picnic thus exemplifies the utopian paradox by at once providing a “glimpse” of the “most archaic longings of the human race” and offering a virtuoso performance of their “impossible and inexpressible” nature (“Progress” 195). Nevertheless, the glimpses of the impossible that such novels’ utopian dreamings provide are where their social value lies.

While Astonishing the Gods pulls Okri’s utopian aesthetic out of history into a dreamy numen, its next reincarnation in In Arcadia hurls it back into history with a thud—at least at first. Completed in September of 2001, the novel “appears out of place in Okri’s oeuvre” to “almost
every critic” (Ashcroft, “Remembering” 718). This is largely for two reasons. Most immediately noticeable is the predominance of realism in Okri’s first postmillennial novel. The other is the fact that the novel is set entirely in Europe. Although its characters are “imaginary creations,” In Arcadia fictionalizes a “real” journey Okri took in 1996 for the BBC, which involved the filming of a train expedition from London to the legendary utopian site of Arcadia in the Peloponnese. The novel employs the familiar quest motif, and its train is a veritable “ship of fools” that carries a fictional film crew, a menagerie of human failures whose dreams have been crushed, on a journey toward one of Western history’s most enduring symbols of wishful dreaming. As the train draws nearer to Arcadia, the narrative is interspersed with digressive “intuitions” that interrupt its empirical realism with increasing frequency. These flights of fancy scarcely approach the fantastic excesses of Okri’s earlier novels, however. Rather than an attempt to represent an alternative physical world, the text is a metaphysical, millennial meditation on utopia itself at a moment when “no one thinks about that stuff anymore. No one believes in it. All we care about is the next pay packet, the next meal, the next gratification, the next party, the next football match, the next sensation” (Okri, Arcadia 8). The text’s realism thus abets its attempts to embed itself in the mundane realities of this historical moment, and amidst this atmosphere of anomie, “millennial discouragement,” social disengagement, and instant consumerist gratification, the novel reflects upon the very possibility of possibilities.

While the eutopian Astonishing the Gods is a literary anomaly, In Arcadia’s world-historical situatedness is more in keeping with the formal conventions outlined in this study insomuch as its unfulfilled utopian desires sublimate out of the fundamentally dystopian reality in which its narrative is set. The text wastes very little ink before confronting readers with this world through its confrontational main character, Lao, the documentary film’s on-camera
“personality.” Lao’s misanthropy rankles his fellow crew members and the novel’s critics alike. As the narrative opens, he immediately begins venting his spleen about the “inferno that we call the modern world,” and the hell he describes is a toxic millennial wasteland in which “folks are . . . falling apart, hanging out in the fag end of the long centuries” (Okri, Arcadia 5, 8). The novel positions the seeming “impending apocalypse” of this historical juncture as a culmination point of the overlapping dystopian tendencies of the modern and the postmodern (47). The long march of modernity has engendered a disenchanted Weberian world in which “we killed off the mysteries in the name of civilization; we murdered wonder in the crucibles of science—and left the world bare, empty, swimming with barren molecules, inert space, and glorified serial killers” (47). This world is compounded with the “emptiness” of a postmodern “age without a centre” and its spectacular media hyper-world, which fills this emptiness with a “sheer avalanche of monstrous information . . . [that] cascades down on us minute by minute,” replete with “notices of murders, serial killers, suicides, sex scandals, ministers entangled in fraud or corruption or vice, children sexually molested by teachers or parents or priests or strangers, or nuclear waste leaking into the world’s drinking water and poisoning the rivers” (76, 47). “We breathe in death, and breathe out neurosis,” Lao intones, aptly characterizing the humans who abide in this poisoned ecosphere, a dysphoric lot who manifest its dire conditions as subjects: “we’ve lost all our beliefs, our innocence . . . we don’t care anymore, we loathe ourselves, and resent our neighbours, we’re eaten up with jealousy and malice, gorged with sin, choking with rage, gasping with failure” (47, 8). The early portions of the novel brim with tirades like these, and the rapid, comma-spliced strings of objective horrors and subjective anxieties Lao invokes to describe his surroundings mirror the overwhelming sensory onslaught of the novel’s late-postmodern dystopia. Amidst these harsh and “cynical times,” a mysterious personage named
Malasso initiates the film crew’s journey to Arcadia, and the novel thus becomes an archetypal search for utopia in a world “clinging on by [its] broken fingernails to the rotten beams of hope” (10). Lao is positioned as the voice of his age. He initially “doesn’t believe in [the film’s idea] at all” and dismisses the project as the caprice of a “feeble-brained idealist” (9, 8). The changes in his outlook are the text’s yardstick of its millennial attempt to rescue utopia once again.

Both the novel’s dystopian “real world” and the various conceptualizations of utopia that collide within its pages have important roles to play, as does the contrast created as these worlds are provisionally set against one another in critical utopian fashion. The personal changes that Lao and the other characters experience on their journey are facilitated by the renewed dreams that the utopian notion of Arcadia inspires. Whereas The Famished Road lodges itself in history, and Astonishing the Gods flees history for a subjective dream-world, In Arcadia sets up an interchange between the two by moving back and forth between the empirical and the intuitive.

In Arcadia’s dystopian orientation performs the typical function of estranging social criticism. Lao at once gives voice to and critiques the harried, hard-bitten “realism” of the contemporary Western society against which he inveighs. His vituperations are often hyperbolic, but the novel’s overall aesthetic could not be called grotesque. Rather, it employs the familiar conventions of realism to “faithfully” document, yet also estrange, the normalized grotesquerie of a millennial “reality” that is already surreal, hyper-real, and even “unreal.” This kind of realism is quite different than fin de siècle naturalism or Wright-school black naturalism. Whereas naturalism sought to replicate the detached, “objective” scopism of science or photography, Okri and his compeers are writing in and about a world in which the ruse of “objectivity,” including the alleged objectivity of photographic representation, has been debunked.19
A second difference arises from the fact that willfully manipulated, illusive images that yet traffic in obsolete suggestions of photographic objectivity have in many cases usurped the reality they would purport to represent faithfully. Echoing Guy Debord’s foundational premise (and its romanticism) that through the rise of visual mass media, “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation,” Lao curses the camera as a “devourer of time and true living,” an “externalizer of fantasies,” and “the greatest disseminator of illusions in a world already composed, atom by atom, of illusions” (Debord 12; Okri, Arcadia 19). According to Lao, to partake of this seductive, illusory world is to “collude in the invalidation of your natural flesh-and-blood life . . . to accept the notion . . . in camera ergo sum, a monstrous reduction of self from selfhood to visibility-hood” (19). This notion, moreover, is at the mercy of a camera that is “not so much a faithful recorder of what it capture[s] as a distor[t]er of what it gaze[s] upon” (19). In a media pseudo-world, the critique enabled by the novel’s aesthetic paradoxically leverages literary realism’s ritualized semblance of verisimilitude to “mimetically” capture these distortions for what they are. In the process, its realism attempts to puncture, defamiliarize, and disclose the mediated illusion. In the un-real, “inside-out” world of late postmodernity, the novel turns the machinery of the utopian-dystopian aesthetic inside-out through what might be called a “re-familiarizing neo-realism,” a “de-aesthetization of reality” with ambitions to reverse Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra. At its most romantic moments—and romanticism is by no means uncommon in Okri’s fiction—In Arcadia attempts to cut through the veneer of images and retrieve a liquidated “authentic” reality (and with it, an “authentic” self). On a less positivist level, the stylized nature of Lao’s rants and their “game of revolving meanings,” as well as the dream-work that occurs in the novel’s “intuitions,” suggest a self-reflexive deployment of both dystopia and utopia as part of a discursive struggle against mediated image-culture over how the
world is to be imagined (21). In a “world where phoniness rules,” the primary purpose of the
dystopian aspect of In Arcadia is to disrupt the dominant imaginary “by which politicians and
admen con [people],” and to disturb those who “believe what they read, accept what they see” by
re-presenting what appears to be a denuded, dystopian “really-real” (17, 21). This reality is
familiar enough to be recognized, yet unfamiliar enough to be estranging in part through its very
repulsiveness. Against millennial apathy or despondency, Lao’s harangues exemplify how “in
the face of global more-or-less complacency as postmodern nigh-utopia the dystopian trope
provides what Jameson describes as a ‘bile . . . a joyous counter-poison and corrosive solvent, to
apply to the slick surface of reality” (Baccolini and Moylan 4). Amidst dissimulation and
anomie, a new hope would find its source in Lao’s “hope” that he is “getting on your nerves,” a
move that would reconnect the neuroses of the age to their de-sublimated causes, and replace
complacency or resignation with an inflamed desire to change them (Okri, Arcadia 21).

The objects of Lao’s bilious critiques are legion. In addition to a “phony” media culture,
he critiques the phoniness of “real” people themselves in condemning a society in which “a fine
hypocrisy is absolutely essential to success” (8). There are drive-by critiques of capitalism’s
“superhuman translation of all the finest energies and intelligence in the human spirit into an
unholy scrum and scree for money,” as well as of globalization’s “invisible imperialisms
spreading their cancer all over the earth,” its ecological consequences, and its polarizing
“injustices and inequalities raging across the globe, but concentrated in the vast continents that
are also the poorest and the most exploited” (30, 219).

It would be an overreach, however, to read these and other such references in a way that
would align In Arcadia with the Azaro trilogy as primarily an allegorical “critique of the failures
of post-independence Africa,” as Ashcroft attempts to do (“Remembering” 719). Rather, from
his diasporic position, Okri aims his critique of political and racial economy primarily at the
Europe that has emerged since decolonization. In contrast to previous generations who fought
against overt racisms, Okri and his peers have a different phenomenon with which to contend. In
Arcadia addresses a state of affairs in which continued material polarization along a racially
inflected global North/South divide is coupled with, and dissimulated by, a “phony” millennial
cultural discourse of “colour-blindness and universal amity” which has insinuated itself as the
“learned response” of many white people to any reference to the fact of racism (Okri, Arcadia
112). Lao, who is black, also believes “deep down” that “all are one” and “seldom” thinks of
“colour differences” (105). However, whatever the characters’ “beliefs” are, practical reality
pierces the narrative (after twenty-six chapters) when Okri’s film crew passes through customs in
a security-conscious Paris, and Lao is confronted by the awareness that he is being silently
racially “profiled.” His experience of “being painted into being, becoming only a colour, not a
simple complex human being” uses a similar metaphorical construction, and a nearly identical
existential analytic to those found in Fanon’s essay, “The Fact of Blackness”: “below the
corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema . . . provided for me . . . . by the other,
the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories . . . . the
corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (Okri, Arcadia 105-
106; Fanon, Skins 111-112). However, there is no explicit shout of “look!” that casts Lao into
racialized objecthood. Rather, the “color line” is now a network of unspoken and “invisible lines
that society sets up to make some people more visible” (Okri, Arcadia 107, emphasis added). In
the harsh light of this visibility, “pigment . . . makes pigs of people,” and Lao’s pigmentation is a
historico-racial “inscription which says ‘Ecce mugger’” to some people (107, 110). As Lao
confronts the film’s white director, Jim, about this reality, the text confronts the reader, making
this invisible dystopia visible in order to “crack the complacency” of those who “want to believe in the inherent fairness of their world” and its purported colorblindness (109). Although this episode, the first direct reference to Lao’s skin color, occupies only a few pages, it adds a crucial subtextual layer to the novel’s dystopian world-picture.

Beyond its vigorous attempts to disturb millennial complacency, *In Arcadia’s* litany of criticisms explicitly makes the point that dystopia and utopia are inextricably linked. On a societal level, the novel invites comparisons between the millennial global North and a crapulent Roman Empire by observing that the Romans “dreamt up and crafted the legend of Arcadia” precisely because of “how fucked up they were” (83). On a personal level, despite dismissing the idealism of the Arcadia film project, Lao defends his own dystopian worldview and irascible temperament by arguing that it reflects how he is “more sensitive to the course material of everyday life” than the “even-keeled,” “truly insensitive ones” whom “the wonderful possibilities of life brush past . . . without so much as stirring vague impulses of a better way of being, a rage at the limitations that so much of society imposes on you” (26). Without the disposition to see, acknowledge, and reject the world’s “fucked-up-ness,” the text insists that there can be no real desire for alternatives. However, *In Arcadia* also demonstrates that the kind of directionless, defeated rage that Lao expresses in the novel’s early pages is insufficient by itself; the narrative’s quest for “a hint of paradise lurking in this great universal wound of living” contends that “even if we don’t believe in it, we need the Arcadian dream” (58, 89).

Unlike *Astonishing the Gods*’ kaleidoscopic exercise in utopian representation, *In Arcadia* is primarily a meditative exercise that considers utopia on conceptual terms, with the Peloponnesian Arcadian destination serving as a convenient excuse and placeholder. In the place of the earlier text’s hoard of utopian literary tropes, *In Arcadia* contemplates a catalogue of
historical *ideations* of “Arcadia” that is as voluminous as its list of dystopian critiques. These ideas are further multiplied as they are individually worked over and collectively discussed by the novel’s cast of characters. The novel cogitates over the meanings of familiar *topoi* like Arcadia, Atlantis, and Utopia. It considers Arcadia in Biblical or Miltonic terms as a lost Eden, in mythical terms as a lost Golden Age, in Freudian terms as a lost childhood, in pastoral terms as a lost idyllic countryside, in ecological terms as a lost nature, in subjective terms as a state of mind, in domestic terms as home and family, and in aesthetic terms as the realm of beauty and the function of art. Propr, the film crew’s soundman and resident pragmatist, considers the allure and problems of escapist Arcadias. Jute, the film’s corporate-type “manager,” conflates utopia with work and reprises the twentieth-century anti-utopian clichéd refrain about how idealism is complicit with “the makers of the Holocaust [who] wanted to create vast shining Arcadias that masked the incredible evils that they had wrought in daylight” (180). The novel’s preoccupation with loss (and with the past) is tempered by other notions of Arcadia as a future yet to be gained.

The two most important stops along the novel’s journey are Versailles and the Louvre. At the former, both the opulent sun palace and Marie Antoinette’s fetishistic ersatz peasant cottage are positioned as testimony to how “the rich and powerful always think that they can create Arcadia” and “impose it on the world” (Okri, *Arcadia* 161). Versailles, like the allusion to imperial Rome, is employed as part of the novel’s millennial re-thematization of imperialism. At the Louvre, Lao and the others view Nicolas Poussin’s painting *Les Bergers d’Arcadie* and ponder its enigmatic message about death: “*Et in Arcadia Ego.*” Through the painting’s suggestion that death lives even in Arcadia, the novel arrives at some of the few conclusive statements it makes about utopia. The painting’s contradictory combination of happiness and death, transcendence and non-transcendence, the eternal and the transitory, possession and loss,
and so on, seems to insist that Arcadia demands the “negative capability” to think paradox, and with it an epistemic anti-closure that is of a piece with postmodern utopianism: “if you close the image, if you have all your answers to your question about a picture. . . . it dies, it dies” (212). Indeed, the novel itself resembles Poussin’s “open painting” insomuch as the innumerable versions of Arcadia that circulate within its pages are an invitation to further thinking rather than attempts to reach a closing consensus (203). Fittingly, the narrative ends openly, leaving off before its journey to the Peloponnese is complete. It leaves its work unfinished, and instead offers resources for, and examples of, the needful real-world work left to be done.

Nevertheless, the very process of this work itself is shown to have utopian potential. In the face of the “wound of living,” the quest incorporates the “illness narrative” seen in the works of Walker, Bambara, and Morrison, while the idea of “Arcadia” emerges as the answer to Lao’s question “where must the healing to begin?” (223). The utopian paradox is that Arcadia is at once an abstract concept waiting to be filled with ideas and, in a theme that emerges in millennial utopianism, a concrete struggle always located in the here and now. Lao’s recognition that “our redemption is always there, here, waiting. . . . Home is here, in time, and in timelessness,” reverberates with Wegner’s reading of Parable of the Talents, in which, he argues, the classical concept of “‘no where’ in effect becomes ‘now here,’” a utopia “located in time, one that comes about only through direct human praxis” (Okri, Arcadia 224; Wegner, Life Between Two Deaths 211, emphasis in original). In Arcadia’s praxis consists foremost of remembering, replenishing, and even transforming “forgotten dreams of Arcadia” (Okri, Arcadia 120). In the text, the absent presence of Arcadia as an idea conjoins the progress of the journey and the process of healing: “unbeknownst to [Lao], he was changing. The journey was changing him. The theme of the film was gently invading him. He was undergoing a slow contamination
with a longing for a new way of being, a better way of living, a sense of peace and harmony” (131). In the wake of these changes, Lao becomes noticeably less caustic by the final third of the narrative. Further, his “intuitions” are a stark contrast to the empirical world depicted in his acerbic rants. Pondering “the first Arcadia,” Lao envisions a “small globe of garden in the fathomless reaches of the universe” where “summer was always touched with enchantment, and the garden was always fresh, and the flowers in their fragrances always seduced the air”; there, “freedom is woven into the fibre of things. Happiness is laced into the breathing material of things” (40-42). The other characters also experience such intuitions and dreams, which differ according to their personalities and desires. In turn, they too heal and change. This has collective as well as individual implications, as portrayed in an episode in which an “Arcadian charm” turns the group into a “magic circle” for a time simply “because of talking about it” (151). By weaving these passages into the fabric of the narrative, the text meditates on utopia; but beyond this, the structure of its healing narrative performatively reintroduces “Arcadia”—and with it, beauty, happiness, possibility, imagination—into a “sick” world that has been bled dry of these things. Further, this aesthetic’s oscillation between “inner” and “outer” worlds, between reality and dream (which neither amalgamates them like The Famished Road nor segregates them like Astonishing the Gods) hints at a productive dialectic between these interconnected spheres. That is, between historically grounded forward dreaming and the historical ground that this reawakened utopian dreaming might help transfigure.

In the last analysis, however, the fact that this aesthetic has so much potential is what makes some of the few conclusions that In Arcadia does draw seem inadequate to their world-transforming aspirations (although it is important to reiterate that its ending is an open and inconclusive one, and the novel rightly prioritizes the imaginative process over product). On the
one hand, Lao’s inference that “the healing” the world needs “must begin within” is in keeping with *Astonishing the Gods’* focus on subjectivity and utopian dreaming, and with its new humanist contention that a new world requires new kinds of people (Okri, *Arcadia* 225, emphasis added). On the other hand, however, *In Arcadia* exacerbates some of the problems intrinsic to *Astonishing the Gods’* complete turn inward. What differentiates the novel from healing narratives like Walker’s and Bambara’s is that rather than daring to demand a totally new humanism, the novel regresses toward some of the least transformative aspects of the liberal humanist status quo. If Okri has been accused of “bourgeois individualism,” *In Arcadia* may be the text least able to counter this charge (B. Cooper 109). In direct contrast to *Meridian* and *The Salt Eaters*, *In Arcadia*’s dialogic crosstalk between inner and outer worlds attempts a nearly complete dissociation from the political: “the disease is within,” writes Okri, “the world is more or less neutral” (Okri, *Arcadia* 223). This solipsistic perspective disavows the concrete historico-political connections that Walker’s and Bambara’s “intopias” set up, and never allow readers to ignore. By its final pages, *In Arcadia*’s complex meditation on the nature of utopia has devolved into trite aphorisms reminiscent of apolitical cognitive behaviorist (or New Ageist) self-help manuals. Its narrative is derailed by anti-epiphanies such as “life is as open or as closed as you care for it to be. As you love it enough to be. As you dare . . .” (228, ellipsis in original). The simplicity and individualism of such formulations cannot stand up to the demands of the dystopian world-historical situation the novel maps, in which wars, mass poverty, greed, ecological disasters, imperialism, and racism cannot be reduced to pathological caprices of Lao’s disaffected mind that can be overcome by a kind of utopian self-talk.

Further, the novel moves toward a privileging of art and the artistic imagination in its later chapters, as captured in declarations such as “all dreams are paintings. All spirit painters are
world-remakers” (190). Such statements do reinforce the value of the utopian imagination, utopian representation, and the impulse they carry. However, *In Arcadia*’s version of the imagination has more in common with the monadic, promethean author-god of the Romantics than with the concrete utopian imagination theorized by Bloch. The novel’s approach to art is that of the aesthete who would rescue a Platonist ideal of “beauty” from a garish late-postmodern popular culture. Andrew Smith is keen to point out the political stakes, particularly from a postcolonial perspective, inherent in the fact that *In Arcadia*’s narrative culminates in “the Louvre, more or less the epicentre of consecrated European culture” (11). In doing so, the text seems to uproot itself from any “causal historical accounts” of the world and flee into an Arnoldian “realm of cultural sweetness and light” where it would cultivate a privatized utopianism based in a “cultivated” aesthetic sensibility toward life (A. Smith 9). Utopian thinkers have long avowed that utopian art like Okri’s is an important means to visualizing and achieving historical ends, but here—as with fin de siècle bourgeois high culture and millennial popular culture alike—it has become an end in itself, and this has its political consequences. While *In Arcadia* performs the important function of demonstrating the necessity of utopia in the new millennium, its own particular version of utopia seems conspicuously to demonstrate the need for more of the kind of utopian rethinking that its narrative leaves unfinished.

**The Aesthetics of Healing in Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely**

Jamaican-born American author Claudia Rankine’s 2004 “American lyric,” *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, offers quite another perspective on both subjectivity and art in the new millennium. In Rankine’s text, the political, the material, the existential, and the aesthetic are indivisible from one another. Despite being a decidedly different sort of work, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* might be likened to *In Arcadia* in two respects. First, it, too, depicts a dialogic interchange between the self and the world, between the personal and the historical. Second, Rankine’s inimitable
multimedia prose-poem is also a millennial “healing narrative” that desires to repair an ailing, dystopian present and resuscitate hope a better future.

These two aspects of Don’t Let Me Be Lonely are where such similarities end however, and indeed, Rankine’s approach to representing subjectivity, community, and history is in marked contrast to Okri’s. Rankine’s text is an autobiographical narrative that diarizes a time period spanning from 1999 until 2004, straddling the millennium to chronicle events that begin with George W. Bush’s first campaign for President and conclude in the period leading up to the U.S. presidential election of 2004. In between, Rankine narrates significant historical occurrences that include the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The unconventional dimensions of the physical book resemble a newspaper in miniature, and throughout, text and images related to prominent news stories are interspersed with confessional prose and poetry in order to intertwine one American’s autobiography with a politically charged historiography of the world in which she lives. The text’s her-story is an illness testimonial that narrates the maladies of its suicidal narrator as well as those around her as they struggle with numerous physical and psychological afflictions. The way in which the personal is interwoven with the political makes it apparent that the ultimate answer to the text’s pivotal question, “why do people waste away?” is directly related to a dystopian early-twenty-first century society, which the text depicts as alienating, terror-stricken, racially divided, and constitutionally “sick” (Rankine, Lonely 11). Perhaps the two most debilitating conditions afflicting individuals and the collective alike are what the text diagnoses as “IMH, The Inability to Maintain Hope,” and its titular loneliness (23). In terms of both form and content, Don’t Let Me Be Lonely charts the etiologies and epidemiologies of illness through a dialectic between the subjective and the objective to suggest that individual and communal health are inextricable from one another.
However, rather than prescribing a self-help retreat into the individual mind, Rankine’s remedy focuses on the body, and it advocates establishing human connections within the body politic. Beginning with its title, Rankine’s poem reaches out to others for such connections, and in so doing, proposes that the means to heal the community, and its members, is community itself. In performatively taking this first step toward the possibility of a new, healthy, beloved community, the text expresses a hope to maintain hope at the dawn of what appears to be an unhopeful new millennium.

What sets Rankine’s work apart from the other texts discussed here is an aesthetic form so distinctive that Robert Creely has pronounced it “altogether her own.”[^22] *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* is an inventive *bricolage* composed of bits of prosaic poetry, poetic prose, intimate journaling, intertextual quotations, dialogic exchanges, pictures, television and film stills, diagrams, doodles, internet cut-and-pastes, well-researched endnotes, and white space, which is as important an element of this visual-textual project as the print. Its appearance in this study otherwise devoted entirely to novels has to do with how this unusual text so powerfully illuminates this project’s overarching concern for the convergence of aesthetics, history, politics, and utopian desire. One of the reasons Rankine’s approach is effective is that its multiplicative form grasps the phenomenological world it depicts more effectively than any work of novelistic fiction. It not only captures the fragmentary, mixed media-saturated nature of contemporary life; it performs it. The reading experience is further broken up by a “hypertextuality” created by the endnotes, which augment the text with additional parcels of information in a way that mimics the randomly disruptive yet informative function of internet search engines (which it references through an image-capture of Google’s search portal).[^23] The text’s distinctive form is integral to its politics, and to the semiotics of illness. Its focus on bodily dis-order reinforces the fact that its

[^22]: 22
[^23]: 23
disjunctive aesthetic should not be understood as ludic or even poetic postmodernism but rather as a form of gritty realism. Emma Kimberley situates Rankine’s “American lyric” amidst a millennial tide of ekphrastic poetry that not only “speaks of a preoccupation” with the “mediated representations” that overwhelm “perceived reality,” but also uses media itself to explore the politics and ethics of representation, often in protest against “those that harness” representations of cultural trauma “for commercial or political ends” (777). Further, Kimberley’s focus on trauma highlights the ways in which Rankine’s aesthetic at once represents representation’s struggle with the “unrepresentable”—which constantly lurks in the text’s expanses of white space—as well as how, in Cathy Caruth’s words, “to be traumatized is . . . to be possessed by an image or event” (Kimberley 777; Caruth, qtd. in Kimberley 784). In terms of Arthur Frank’s theory of the “illness narrative,” few texts so literally and effectively materialize the “narrative wreckage” illness causes as Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s fragmentary pastiche of millennial American life. Its multimodal storytelling is true to Frank’s theory insomuch as in the course of working through personal and cultural traumas ranging from isolation and depression to AIDS, racism, terror, and war, the text’s fragments gradually narrate into existence a coherent, intersubjective subject who embodies this trauma yet holds transformative potential for herself and others.

The narrator’s illness is shown to be intertwined with a number of causal factors rooted in a dystopian millennial lifeworld. One of these is the isolating nature of twenty-first-century consumer culture’s all-consuming mediasphere. The text’s brief episodes are separated from one another by pages that are blank save for a small picture of a television with a screen full of white-noise. Turning the pages is equivalent to changing the channel, which nevertheless confronts one with more of the same world. The omnipresence of television in Don’t Let Me
Lonely is part of what Ira Sadoff sees as its general dramatization of how “imagining the interior of the other . . . Becoming compassionate, ‘inhabiting,’ becoming less lonely . . . is problematic in a culture where defensive distancing strategies dominate,” and where “the fiction of identity has been corrupted by contemporary culture’s assaulting sense data” (Sadoff). While a loneliness exacerbated by media hyperreality and distancing contributes to the narrator’s suicidal state, her condition is aggravated by a pervasive pharmaceutical dependency that turns ostensible healing into yet another form of sickness. Rankine’s narrator comments on how “pharmaceutical companies . . . advertise in the middle of the night, when people are less distracted and capable of tuning in more and more and most precisely to their fearful bodies and accompanying anxieties” (Rankine, Lonely 29). Her documentation of her health points toward the pernicious biofeedback loop endemic to a pill-dependent “Prozac Nation,” a phenomenon perhaps best captured in the text’s reference to Prozac Weekly’s ironically self-inculpating slogan, “try to convince your doctor that taking a pill every day for depression is depressing,” which is cribbed directly from pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly’s promotional literature (53, 141).

These cultural maladies are compounded by the historico-political world events that infect the narrator’s life. A resident of New York City, the narrator contemplates the mass death at the World Trade Center site as her “eyes burn and tear” (Rankine, Lonely 82). She documents how the subsequent anthrax scare, color-coded “terror alerts,” and the advent of war paralyze her and those around her. In addition to the individual and collective trauma of events that tear open the “American fantasy that we will survive no matter what,” part of the text’s dystopian critique is aimed at the ways in which representations of these traumas were coopted to “[feed] most people’s fear of the terrorist other” (Rankine, Lonely 25; Kimberley 784). Rankine’s text observes how this fear instantiated a reactionary attempt to resuscitate the American fantasy by
means of a histrionic neo-nationalism predicated on the binary Us/Them opposition promulgated
in President Bush’s congressional address of September 20, 2001. Gilroy has argued that the
“militarization of social life” by the so-called global war on terror has reinstalled a Manichean
logic whereby “political conflicts” are once again “made intelligible through racial or ethnic
difference” (Gilroy Melancholia 24, 20). In passages such as this conversation between a taxi
driver and the narrator, Rankine’s text remarks on the racism and xenophobia of the new fear
culture at the level of everyday life:

So tell me this, have you
noticed these white people, they think
they are better than everyone else?

Have I noticed? Are you joking? You’re
not joking. Where are you from?

Pakistan

I see. It’s only a few months since 9/11.
They think you’re al Qaeda.

I know. But the things they say to me.
They don’t know anything. (Rankine, Lonely 89-90)

At the same time, while it recognizes this aspect of so-called “post-9/11” America, Don’t
Let Me Be Lonely’s critique also points to its seamless connections with the trauma of a toxic
American racism that always existed behind the veil of the American national fantasy. The
narrative includes textual and pictorial references to Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo, black
immigrants who fell victim to police brutality in the late 1990s. Louima was held down and
brutally sodomized with a broken broomstick, while the unarmed Diallo was shot 41 times for
“acting suspiciously” in front of his own home. Perhaps most damning, however, is the text’s re-
membering of the fact that Bush, the “Leader of the Free World,” “can’t remember if two or
three people were convicted for dragging a black man [James Byrd, Jr.] to his death in his home
state of Texas” despite having been Texas’ Governor at the time (22). On a collective level, Rankine’s text incorporates such American realities to explain its diagnosis of the condition of “black people today,” who, as the narrator puts it, are “too scared by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think” (23). The interrelationship between this collective condition and the narrator’s own depression is made clear in passages such as the one in which she unpacks the word “sadness” in material as well as existential terms: she suggests that to her, the word “meant exceptionally bad, deplorable, shameful; it meant massive, weighty . . . it meant falling heavily; and it meant of a color: dark. It meant dark in color, to darken. It meant me. I felt sad” (107). In piecing together the causes of her illness, the narrator simultaneously exposes the paradox of her isolation by demonstrating the permeability of the boundaries that supposedly separate the self, the body, and multiple levels of communality. The text not only demonstrates this by intertwining its protagonist’s life-narrative with a historical narrative, but also exquisitely captures the way in which the ailments of a diseased, dystopian body politic are literally embodied and lived by the sick bodies that populate its pages, beginning with the narrator’s own.

In certain respects, Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s illness narrative might be understood in terms of the “body dystopias” that Lucy Sarginson explicates in her discussion of the “Spirit/Matter Relation,” in which she describes how gendered and racialized bodies are Othered, dominated, and wounded amid repressive, dystopian cultures of fear. In joining other feminist dystopian rejections of Cartesianism, Rankine’s “poem” grounds itself in corporeality in order to perform a radical reimagining of subjectivity and intersubjectivity with utopian potential. Indeed, Don’t Let Me Be Lonely offers a consummate representation of the sort of “biopsychosocial” embodiment that also appears in Alice Walker’s Meridian, and which clearly renders what
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, posits as the “Ineinander” of lived experience and physiochemistry, a bidirectional “inherence of self in the world and of the world in the self, of the self in the other and the other in the self” (306n15). An unmistakable example of this approach is a parodic anatomical diagram that replaces the human intestines with a crude map of the United States. Beyond the drollery of this scatological commentary on American culture, the diagram literalizes the concrete relationship between the subject and the society she takes up and “lives.” Conspicuously next to the intestinal United States in the diagram is the liver, which the text also allegorizes as the “live-er” by way of its histological function: to filter everything the body ingests and metabolize toxins, some of which, the reader is told, “are toxic to liver cells” themselves (Rankine, Lonely 54). In Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s narrative, these toxins are both physical, like the pharmaceuticals that the text notes are responsible for 55% of liver failures, and cultural, as in the case of an often-noxious American society (53).

Don’t Let Me Be Lonely is pervaded by such relationships among embodiment, sociality, and pathology. By juxtaposing a photographic head-shot of James Byrd with a photograph of the word “head” spray-painted on the pavement where his head was later found over a mile from his torso, the text punctuates the literal violence that the cultural sickness of racism wreaks on human bodies (while also re-membering the dismembered man that Bush forgot). Of even more consequence is the mode of intercorporeal intersubjectivity imagined and represented by way of the openness between self and world the text establishes, as well as through Rankine’s distinctive “blood and guts” idiom. Even when she is in tears, the narrator’s responses to events eschew affective sentimentality and focus on the physical. Confronted with the image of Louima on television, she observes, “I get a sharp pain in my gut. . . . Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from the flesh in the form of a blow to the body” (56). Similarly,
when sees Diallo’s face and learns about the circumstances of his death, she describes how the pain she feels “happens as something physical, something physically experienced” (57). Such responses interconnect the psychophysical sufferings of the narrator, the sufferings of others, and their social causes. Tellingly, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* explicitly appeals to the same Levinasian imperative as Frank’s theory of the illness narrative. However, there are two crucial differences. First, in Rankine’s text, the boundaries between self and Other are far blurrier than they are for either Levinas or Frank. Second, the suffering of an Other does not merely call forth a metaphysical ethic: the narrator’s recognition of the Other manifests itself as a physical experience, an intersubjective reverberation of the Other’s trauma that has concrete corporeal consequences for her own health.

However, this embodied, intersubjective perspective is an ambivalent one, and is indispensable to how *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* uses the very trauma that dominates its pages as part of a more utopian quest for healing. If the sufferings of Louima and Diallo are internalized by the narrator and relived as her own, the text also demonstrates that this recognition and reciprocity can work in a more salubrious direction as well. For example, when the narrator reads in *The New York Times* of South African President Thabo Mbeki’s decision to make generic antiretroviral drugs available to five million HIV-positive citizens, her response to this alleviation of suffering is just as corporeal as her reaction to Louima’s ordeal: “my body relaxes. My shoulders fall back. I had not known that my distress at Mbeki’s previous position against distribution of drugs had physically lodged itself like a virus within me” (117). If sociopolitical trauma can manifest itself as bodily illness, Rankine’s narrative also teaches readers that acts of healing—in this case caring for five million sick bodies—are tantamount to an even broader social healing that, in turn, can heal still others. Further, this healing gesture marks a turning
point late in the narrative. The events that grant a multitude of HIV-positive South Africans a second chance at life literally retrieve the possibility of a future. This causes a “translation” of the narrator’s “grief” as she comes to understand bare “life” itself as harboring a “form” of “tremendously exhausted hope” (118-19). The text thus moves from a dystopian to a tentatively utopian outlook that is intimately connected to its concern for healing. The narrator’s bodily response also reaffirms the text’s insistence that each individual life is bound up in a communal life, regardless of whether or not one is conscious of it. One of Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s other utopian interventions is thus, in a fragmented and divided world, to posit community as an a priori condition of human existence at the most basic level.

Further, the deep, visceral connection that the narrator feels to the events in South Africa expands the frame of Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s geopolitical purview from the national to the global. The narrator documents the parties involved in the situation in South Africa, including the millions of HIV-positive South Africans, the thirty-nine pharmaceutical companies who sued to prevent South Africa from manufacturing generic antiretrovirals, President Clinton, whose eventual “about face” on the issue led to the dismissal of the lawsuit, and President Mbeki, the last party to stand in the way (117). In doing so, she provides an object lesson of the complex network of people and forces implicated in the sickness and health of a globalized world. Against the corporate drug manufacturers and aloof politicians whose decisions proved detrimental for so many, a picture of Nelson Mandela wearing a t-shirt that reads “HIV Positive” figures a kind of global solidarity rooted in embodiment, illness, and healing.

Additionally, this episode, along with the segments on Byrd, Louima, and Diallo which are also punctuated by pictures of human faces, suggests another form of ambivalence in the text with regard to the contemporary world’s saturation by global media networks. On the one hand,
as in an earlier scene that finds the narrator shouting in vain at a televised George Bush, media punctuates her isolation, distance, and helplessness when faced with the situation in South Africa, causing her to feel “like a skin-sack of uselessness” (117). On the other hand, if such passages reflect Debord’s argument that through media, “society eliminates geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation,” *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* also shows how the elimination of distance is yet capable of fostering new forms of closeness and commonality (120). This is palpable in the narrator’s powerful responses to the world that the media brings into her life. Indeed, her bodily reactions occur precisely because of the inter-human recognition of the Other that media can enable, even if it often does the opposite. The *faces* of Byrd, Louima, and Diallo pictured in the text underscore the urgent need to recognize a humanity that is too-often muted or distorted by contemporary experience. Like the Levinasian “face of the Other,” their visages speak an expressive language of transhuman responsibility. In re-membering these men, the text also endeavors to restore the humanity of three dehumanized victims of racist violence. Bound up as it is in the text’s embodied intersubjective ontology, this Levinasian call for a mutual re-cognition of humanity is part and parcel of what might be called *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s* gesture toward a new humanism.

In keeping with this gesture, Rankine’s ekphrastic illness narrative does not merely *represent* intersubjective recognition. Part of its social praxis is to call forth this recognition in its readers. Despite experiencing the beginnings of hope, the narrator notes in its closing pages that she is “still lonely” (119). If her story illustrates that the very human community for which she yearns already and inevitably exists among us, it also teaches that this community requires mutuality. The narrator’s ailment stems in part from being “one [who] recognizes without being recognized,” and just as Rankine’s multimedia “poem” portrays the way in which twenty-first-
century global reality brings the lives of others in proximity with her narrator, the poem itself is used as a way to bring her in proximity with others (117). It announces the communal role of its own poetic voice by quoting Emmanuel Levinas’s insistence that “the subject who speaks is situated in relation to the other. . . . By offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open” (Rankine, Lonely 120). In doing so, the narrator summons the reader’s recognition; and indeed, Don’t Let Me Be Lonely’s title even appeals to the reader’s responsibility toward the other. The text’s poetics of the body also foregrounds its haptic dimension by invoking Paul Celan’s equation of a poem with a “handshake”; Rankine’s poem is thus nothing short of an attempt to make one life touch another (130). The text ends with a photo of a billboard that reads “HERE,” a word the narrator parses in a passage packed with multiple meanings: “HERE” means “‘in this world, in this life, on earth. In this place or position, indicating the presence of,’ or in other words, I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are . . . Here both recognizes and demands recognition” (131). Don’t Let Me Be Lonely thus echoes other millennial texts that suggest that a better community “can occur only through the transformation of the totality of the world that already exists here (ici)” (Wegner, Life Between Two Deaths 210). However, the tentative utopian potential that flickers amidst Rankine’s dystopian America suggest that healing “this world” and “this life” in totality have their modest but powerful beginnings “here” at the level of the absolutely local, in human beings’ mutual recognition of one another’s humanity.

In this way, a text that opens with a reflection on loneliness and death concludes with an open—but as yet unreciprocated—invitation to begin the task of creating community, health, and life. In so doing, it participates in the critical dystopia’s search for new bases for “alliance
politics,” and summons what Cornel West calls the “hope not hopeless but unhopeful” with which many black Americans approached the new century (Moylan Scraps xv; West 112).

**Branded Communities: Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt* and the Twenty-First Century’s Battle for Utopia**

Whereas Rankine’s prose-poem devotes most of its pages to depicting a dystopian millennial America, Colson Whitehead’s novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* debunks millennial America’s predominant form of “false” utopianism: the corporate utopia. Whitehead has garnered a bit of attention as a utopian writer, and his work has more widely been read as afro-futurism. His first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), is a work of somewhat-speculative fiction and a veritable utopian text. It reimagines the contours of the present through the lens of an uncanny historical past, and explicitly pits the empirical against the intuitive in its story of a mysterious visionary’s quest to theorize an alternative epistemology, and with it, a transfigured “shining city” that may represent “hope’s last chance against modernity’s relentless death march” (Whitehead, *Intuitionist* 198, 238). The text dallies with certain sf devices, and what is striking about *The Intuitionist’s* 1950s-esque chronotope and its weird cadre of “elite” elevator inspectors is the eerie quotidian familiarity—the under-extrapolation, perhaps—in its depictions of racial and gendered “glass ceilings,” of academia, and of a jargon-larded, self-important, overspecialized American technocracy. *Apex Hides the Hurt* does not reprise the earlier text’s temporal displacement strategy, but it does retain *The Intuitionist’s* capacity for foregrounding the strangenesses of contemporary social reality while working even closer to that reality. What the later text estranges is the everyday world of a twenty-first century technological “innovation economy” that seeks to remake the world in its own utopian self-image. The text subjects this “utopia” to a thoughtful and often absurdist critique, especially as regards its rootedness in corporate-crafted images that have not just occluded, but utterly supplanted concrete historical
reality. Much more subtly than *In Arcadia*, but more effectively for this very reason, *Apex Hides the Hurt* employs a “re-familiarizing neo-realism” in order to slice through an image-dominated status quo. In doing so, it mounts a counterhegemonic offensive against the corporate utopian imaginary via a concrete utopianism which insists that real utopian social transformation can only be brought about by facing, rather than effacing, unpleasant realities that must be changed.

The re-familiarizing perspective of *Apex Hides the Hurt* is provided by its protagonist, a minor incarnation of the contemporary corporate celebrity. Whitehead’s nameless protagonist is a talented, successful young black man who works as a “nomenclature consultant” for a commercial “identity firm.” His work inventing catchy brand names lampoons twenty-first-century white-collar, immaterial, “creative” labor with a plausible absurdity reminiscent of *The Intuitionist*’s parodic non-parodies of twentieth-century bureaucracy. The protagonist’s life recently has been unsettled—and his perspective altered—by what he calls his “misfortune.” One of his toes was amputated after a wound festered unseen beneath an “Apex” adhesive bandage, the “multiculturally”-hued product that gained him widespread fame in “nomenclatural” circles. His psychosomatic limp is emblematic of how the incident has “crippled” him existentially as well as physically, and his story is an illness narrative of sorts. The text leverages its protagonist’s newly marginalized standpoint as part of its cognitive estrangement strategy, a fact he hints at when he observes that “the true lesson of accidents is not the how or the why,” but what there is to be learned about “the taken-for-granted world they exile you from” (Whitehead, *Apex* 130).

The novel’s plot finds the protagonist on his first job since the injury. He is summoned to a Midwestern town named Winthrop—“the middle of nowhere”—to settle a dispute over the town’s name (48). All three of the principles in the dispute hail from this decaying former
industrial boomtown known for manufacturing Winthrop brand barbed wire. Albie Winthrop, the now-destitute heir of the town’s industrial patriarch, wants Winthrop to continue bearing his name. In the nineteenth century before the first Winthrop’s arrival, however, the community was an all-black Exoduster town (not unlike Haven in Morrison’s *Paradise*). Regina Goode, a descendant of the freed slaves who founded the town, and Winthrop’s first black mayor, seeks to reinstate its original name: “Freedom.” The last of the three disputants, Lucky Aberdeen, is a technology magnate who has returned home from the West Coast and hopes to “bring [the] place into the twenty-first century” by “rebranding” it as “New Prospera,” a name that supposedly “reflects new market realities” (114, 61, 74). The town’s space is thus a periodized palimpsest of historical utopias. Through Lucky’s eagerness to transform it into a reflection of the “market” itself, the text directly engages with the contemporary appropriation of utopia by neoliberal capitalism. The protagonist gradually learns Winthrop’s official and unofficial histories, and in the process, the novel cogitates on the different histories represented by Winthrop’s three utopian experiments. Implicitly, what also emerges is a millennial reflection on the notion of utopia itself. As it considers the fates of utopias past, *Apex Hides the Hurt* uses its newly estranged protagonist to deconstruct the twenty-first-century incarnation of utopia represented by Lucky’s corporatist vision.

Through Lucky’s endeavor to put the “little town on the map—literally,” the text explores what is at stake in the integration of social space into the “new money, new media, [and] new economy” of the “New Order” (84, 52). Lucky, a college dropout and CEO of Aberdeen Software, epitomizes the American cliché of the “maverick” technology entrepreneur in his trademark “costume” of jeans, a polo shirt, and an “Indian Vest.” His attempt to transform Winthrop into a neo-utopian “company town” finds a nonfictional analog in the Google
Corporation’s ongoing activities in Mountain View California, the “template for a 21st-century company town” (Whitehead, Apex 135; Vance). In Mountain View, Google is reimagining the Fordist-era company town for a post-Fordist world, refitting some of its civic objectives while also reviving some of its social tensions. Ashlee Vance writes that the company’s relationship to the community is “part economic engine, part benefactor and a soon-to-be real-estate developer with an opportunistic eye for underused assets” (Vance). Google is planning combination residential-office-retail spaces, insinuating itself into public-sector institutions such as a local NASA outpost, and strong-arming the local government. Instead of subsidizing cultural institutions as Ford did with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Google is concentrating on employee “perks” like day-care centers in leased public school space, funding free citywide wireless internet (so residents can, among other things, use Google), and brainstorming potentially profitable joint space-related projects with NASA. As the corporation colonizes the town and reshapes it into what less-receptive residents refer to as “Google View,” it is inaugurating a “new chapter in the way that governments and companies work together,” one that represents an emergent form of community: the “branded utopia” (Vance).

Google’s development plan merges material, social, and spatial changes in the landscape with the less tangible terrain that Martin Kornberger calls the “brandscape.” Even before the advent of consumer capitalism, an inversion occurred whereby brands were no longer simply names for products bearing use value, but rather, “the product turns out to be nothing but the material extension of the brand” (Kornberger 18). The brand has become an ontological phenomenon of sorts, a product’s imaginary “essence” and the generator of “people’s perceptions and interpretations of the product,” which matter far more than the item’s function (Kornberger 13). The “brandscape” is the total array of manufactured “symbolic resources”
through which corporations “structure the internal functioning of organizations,” and, externally, through which “consumers” construct “personal meanings and lifestyle orientations” (Kornberger 10, emphasis in original; 234). This symbolic order contains “no overarching ideology” save that the brands that compose it are “miraculously and meticulously produced in order to make profits” (Kornberger 13). Like Baudrillard’s simulacra, brands “refer to nothing else than their own reality,” and thus possess a “weird status in this world” by virtue of their “ontological ambiguity”: the brand “is neither real nor imaginary; it defies the definition of an event or a representation of an event” (Kornberger 13, 5). Yet, updating Benedict Anderson’s discussion of print capitalism, Kornberger contends that in the “global and fragmented” new world order, brands have become “the medium through which new, imagined, yet very real communities take shape” (139). Under globalization, the brand is a privatized version of what the public “nation” and its sub-forms were for the imagined communities of modernity.

Whitehead’s novel understands this power, as evident in characters’ belief in “the world of opportunities that a wonderful name like New Prospera will bring” to its fictional town, that is, in the potential of the brand name itself to transform Winthrop into a new utopia for “big businesses looking for a tax-friendly haven, [and] young people who want a fresh start” (Whitehead, Apex 106, emphasis added). The New Prospera brand also merges well with Lucky Aberdeen’s “personal brand,” which is equal parts corporate executive and laid-back Silicon Valley trendiness. The protagonist sardonically imagines Lucky’s rebranded town roadmap in terms of contemporary corporate buzzword-salad: “take Innovation all the way to Synergy, then hang a looey on Scalability all the way to Cross-Platform” (128). However, this corporate cant is conflated with notions of “leisure.” In choreographing a massive weekend “barbecue” event to lure collaborators and employees to town, Lucky the vest-clad “character” transforms Winthrop
and its surroundings into a perk-filled theme park that calls to mind the work/play-spaces that companies like Google have engineered to spur the “creative” economy. Potential future New-Prosperians indulge in a number of “diversions” like “THE GOLFING EXPERIENCE, BUBBLING BROOK SPA AND MENTAL RELAXATION CLINIC,” and “Thinkin’ ‘Bout Spelunkin’” (101-102). One of the attendees declares the experience “magic,” and indeed, with important caveats, this consumerist life-stylization and corporate theme-parkification of space follows the example of the “magical” pioneering exemplar of branded utopias, Disneyland (157).

For Louis Marin, the artificial, stringently controlled, profiteering fantasy world of Disneyland is the paragon of “utopic degeneration,” a kind of Mannheimian reversal whereby “utopic representation can be entirely caught in a dominant system of ideas and values” and stripped of its transformative potential (240). As with Marin’s Disneyland, the imagined future world of New Prospera is steeped in a “collective fantasy” that is at once a “representation of the makeup of contemporary American ideology” and a machinery for “the conversion of history into [that] ideology, a conversion by which the utopian space” is itself converted (Marin 240, 253). Marin notes branding’s translation of the ideological “fantasy” into the self-referential “trademark, the sign, the symbolic image of Disney’s utopia”; and further, the ontologically ambiguous way in which “image” itself “is duplicated by reality in two opposite senses: on the one hand, it becomes real, but on the other, reality is changed into image. The support for the figure has become the figure” (245). Baudrillard has famously picked up this portion of Marin’s argument to argue that Disneyland’s “pacified,” “comic-strip” version of hegemonic American values is “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of . . . the America surrounding it [is] no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation,” or in other words, of pure image (171-72).
The difference between the postmodern moment in which Marin and Baudrillard were writing and the millennial moment Whitehead depicts lies in the fact that this discrepancy between a fantasy-real and an avowed fantasy has become a two-fold problem, at the heart of which lies the brand-image’s ontological ambiguity.

First, the proper figure for understanding the contemporary situation, hardly a metaphorical one, is not Disneyland but Disney’s branded utopian community of Celebration, Florida. Naomi Klein has noted that “the problem with branded vacation destinations” such as Disneyland “is that they only provide temporary opportunities for brand convergence, an oasis from which families, at the end of the trip, are abruptly yanked and dumped back into their old lives” (154). Conversely, she observes, “privatized branded cocoons” like Celebration, Florida reflect the “truly imperialist aspirations of branding”: “maybe you start by shopping . . . and then you continue by holidaying . . . but eventually why not just move in?” (Corporation). “The meticulously planned development” of Celebration and other such “privatized public utopias,” achieves the “ultimate goal . . . for the brand to become life itself” (Klein 155). Similarly, in one respect, Apex Hides the Hurt captures a contemporary desire to live in, or to live out, the lucrative, theme-parkish corporate fantasy embodied in the New Prospera “brand,” and indeed, in “innovative,” gentrified, space-gazing Tomorrowlands like Google’s Mountain View. If “products are designed to match [real] needs,” but “brands are created to produce desire,” then even the semblance of reality of which Baudrillard writes is no longer desired (nor seemingly needed) in this scenario of “branded lives” (Kornberger 8; Klein 156).

Second, however, a key difference arises in that the vision Disney CEO Michael Eisner realized in Celebration’s “branded . . . artificiality bonanza” differs from the company town Walt Disney conceived decades earlier (Klein 155). Unlike Walt’s “temple to the mid-fifties futuristic
gods of technology,” Celebration, Florida “is less futurism than homage, an idealized recreation of the livable America that existed before malls, big-box sprawl, freeways, amusement parks, and mass commercialization” (Klein 155). The plan for New Prospera, however, is more akin to an updated version of Disney’s original plan. It contains elements of nostalgic Americana like the “nice ranch house” one of Lucky’s guests plans to acquire for “a steal”; but the real Main Street U.S.A. iconized by Winthrop Street and its decrepit Winthrop Hotel is quickly being overrun by corporate big-box stores like the celebrated consumer destination “Outfit Outlet,” another one of the protagonist’s prospering brand-children and an avatar of the kind of “progress” to which Lucky and his entourage aspire (Whitehead, Apex157). (Of additional significance is the fact that the Outfit Outlet is moving into the building that used to be the Winthrop Public Library.)

The corporate utopian vision signified by New Prospera, then, is a new one in which certain contradictions of late capitalism have been illusorily resolved. The escapist theme-park fantasyland has been absorbed by, and recast as the very image of, the normalized contemporary corporate fantasy world, or what amounts to the same thing, its branded simulacrum of itself. Additionally, commoditized work and commoditized “leisure” become indistinguishable when the latter is conflated with corporate “perks.” Finally, a romanticized pseudo-past and an equally romanticized techno-future are harmoniously compressed into a utopian imagination identical with a present corporate imaginary that, as Jameson worries, approaches inescapability. This worldview, which imagines the future—and “change”—solely as elaborative mutations of itself, lays claims to concreteness by tying itself to the ever-changing-same of the (intrinsically self-contradictory) notion of “market realities,” and even posits itself as the object of the very desires and fantasies that might otherwise seek to escape it. In the idea of New Prospera, Apex Hides the
*Hurt* offers a paradigmatic representation of the contemporary corporate utopia. If rebranded, the town, which legally hovers nameless amid the nomenclature dispute, would at once become a branded utopian enclave and another node in the globalizing utopian brandscape.

Through its protagonist, *Apex Hides the Hurt* attempts, in its own words, to “pierce the veil” of this degenerated corporatopian fantasy (Whitehead, *Apex* 198). The wounded former corporation man acknowledges the pull of the “artificial environment” Lucky has created, into which he is almost re-assimilated during the final evening of the barbecue’s “honey-tongued,” participatory “infomercial for a lifestyle” (174, 175, 174). As he is swept up into the *jouissance* of the festivities, he thinks to himself, “New Prospera strutted on the quicksilver feet of futurity. It was progress . . . pure brand superiority. Beyond advertising. Why advertise when the name of your product was tattooed on the hearts and brains” (175). However, an episode of somatic noncompliance occurs as he tipsily mounts a stool to officially rename the town and “something in him [gives] way,” causing him to fall to the floor (179). This repetition of his “accident,” and estrangement from the corporatopian pseudo-world, returns him to the perspective he occupies for most of the novel.

While this viewpoint performs the defamiliarizing function of much utopian literature and sf, the “re-familiarizing neo-realism” of Whitehead’s iteration reverses the conventional polarities of these genres: whereas classical utopian fiction and sf employ aestheticized fictional worlds in order to estrange a reality that is made available for cognitive critique, *Apex* uses a de-aestheticized reality to estrange and critique the aestheticized fiction that has replaced it. This reversal is epitomized by a scene in which the protagonist overhears some of Lucky’s guests speaking in corporate jargon that has congealed into a symbolic order that legislates both ideality and banal reality at once:
Most of the time he didn’t know what white people were talking about, but from
the references to insourcing and gainsharing, he hypothesized that the two guys
sitting across from him . . . had just returned from a confab on corporate values.
The words they used were strange, odd souvenirs, tiny fragments that had been
chipped off an alien business meteorite. This was language from outer space. (154)

A similar sf-like lexicon is used during the protagonist’s visit to the former Winthrop barbed
wire factory in the midst of its conversion to an Aberdeen Software office: “the transplant was a
success, he thought. The old guts had been scraped out without damaging the remaining shell. He
limped past the standard molded plastic of companies starting out in the world, power strips and
cubicle walls, free soda machines and foosball tables . . . Aberdeen was merely the latest alien
organism to latch on [to the area] with tiny teeth and grit down hard” (163). In positioning Lucky
and his “mouse jockeys” as terraforming aliens, the text usefully distances an ascendant
corporate utopianism which, in the historical world exterior to the novel, is relentlessly
normalizing itself (163). From the “grounded” standpoint of a protagonist whose injury has
caused him to fall to earth, as it were, this world reappears as otherworldly and bizarre. Further,
by defamiliarizing the corporate world and its symbolic order, the text attempts to cut through
the illusory “reality” engendered by naturalized brand-images and reveal the “deception that [is]
their stock in trade” (170). In posing an estranged illusion against the reality it has usurped, the
novel would retrieve the “true natures” of things “hid[den] behind false names, beneath the skin
we [nomenclature consultants] gave them” (182). In “alienating” the predominant degenerate
utopian fantasy, the text looks beneath its imagistic surface to survey the world it masks—a
reality which could scarcely be called utopian.

This critical project is made even more explicit in Apex Hide’s the Hurt’s titular reference
to the painful, fleshly reality beneath the “false skin” of the protagonist’s Apex bandage. This
central metaphor signifies another attempt to pierce the plastic veil of the “branded utopia”; but
also, and more specifically, it crystalizes the novel’s commentary on twenty-first-century race
relations. In response to the implicit racism of the Band-Aid’s “flesh” color, the Apex bandage is available in twenty different flesh-tones designed to approximate humanity’s chromatic diversity and avoid adding “insult to injury” (89). Unlike the “raceless” clear plastic bandages that “dispelled the very illusion they attempted to create” because of their “white square of white cotton wadding,” the “multicultural adhesive bandage” acknowledges difference while also camouflaging wounds more successfully (87, 90). The “Apex” bandage and its brand name symbolically conjure a “multicultural” utopianism that gained significant cultural traction during the years bookending the millennium. Against this phenomenon, *Apex Hides the Hurt* un-hides what is at stake in what it portrays as glib diversity rhetoric, and confronts this rhetoric’s role in a pseudo-utopian corporate globalization narrative that traffics in a “commercial and resolutely antipolitical . . . understanding of what ‘races’ are” (Gilroy, *Melancholia* 55). Indeed, commercialized multicultural imagery of the infamous “United Colors of Benetton” variety is hardly a structural antiracist politics, yet it often masquerades as or even supplants such a politics. At its worst, it subterfuges material realities like the Benetton Corporation’s displacement of indigenous people during its Patagonian land-grabs. Such a perspective is readable in the novel’s sarcastic references to the Apex bandage as an embodied metaphor for false-utopian racial healing: “the deep psychic wounds of history and the more recent gashes ripped by the present, all of these could be covered by this wonderful . . . multicultural adhesive bandage. It erased. Huzzah” (Whitehead, *Apex* 130, 90).

This device plays out through the story of the protagonist’s wounded toe, to which he applies an Apex that is precisely “his kind of brown. . . . such a perfect tone that it looked as if he’d never had a toenail at all. That he had never stumbled” (131). However, the wound becomes septic and eventually life-threatening beneath this cosmetic image of health. The “ghastly shock
waiting underneath the adhesive bandage” allegorizes the disjuncture between the utopian branded image of consumable multiculturalism and the concrete wounds it attempts to erase (198). Further, the text insists that the painful “hidden” reality is exactly what needs to be tended to, and healed, lest it prove fatal. To invoke one of Jameson’s most perpetually apt phrases, *Apex Hides the Hurt* maintains that “history is what hurts,” and any attempt to “cover” historical reality is escapist “bad” utopianism at best, and at worst, a dystopian act of violence (Jameson, *Unconscious* 102).31

The problem of historical erasure is foregrounded throughout Whitehead’s critique of the convergence of utopianism and corporate branding. Indeed, the novel emphasizes that “re-branding’s” very function is to disengage from (or ideally, symbolically eradicate) past failures or offenses through the production of an immaculate new brand essence with no history whatsoever. The text acknowledges this, for instance, in a barely fictionalized reference to the WorldCom scandal, in which an “identity firm” named “Best ReImagining” saves “TelKing following the indictment of their entire board for accounting fraud of new, almost supernatural proportion. (Rechristened UnyCom, the company was a Dow darling again)” (Whitehead, *Apex* 169). Just as it is intrinsic to re-branding, historical erasure has also historically been a feature of classical utopian (and dystopian) literature, and the proposed re-branded utopia of New Prospera is used to dramatize this phenomenon as well. Indeed, on a very basic level, in keeping with capitalism’s willfully forgetful tendency to posit more capitalism as the solution to the problems it creates, the history that New Prospera’s proposed capitalist utopia would erase is precisely the history of the failed capitalist utopia that was industrial-era Winthrop.

More central is how the text’s indictment of shallow multiculturalism represents a contemporary, temporally “horizontal” iteration of its more general critique of historical erasure,
a deeper, “vertical” project it shares with so many African-American dystopias. Indeed, the branded utopia of New Prospera ultimately appears as the latest incarnation of an “American Dream” that Whitehead’s novel demythologizes. To do so, it employs the now-familiar strategy of insurgent historiography to unearth the intertwined histories of racism and colonialism that official American history elides. “Critics of consumer society depict branding as a quite simple process of colonization,” and Whitehead’s critique suggests that despite his multicultural crew, Lucky’s descent on Winthrop with intent to “erase it all” is “no different” than “Winthrop the Elder” and his colonialist gesture of “forc[ing] his vision on the land” (Kornberger 220; Whitehead, Apex 80, 175). In Winthrop’s “official” town history, the protagonist reads about how the heroic Elder Winthrop arrived in an “untamed wilderness,” and “after winning over the area’s main inhabitants—a loose band of colored settlers . . . opened up his factory. . . . Grateful for this fresh start, they passed a law and named the town Winthrop, after the man who had the courage to dream” (60-61). This description obviously mirrors the characteristic historical elisions found in official narratives of colonialism and Manifest Destiny as the town of Freedom, along with its “colored” inhabitants, is reduced to “untamed wilderness” available for annexation and privatization by white “settlers” after a minimum of “friendly” negotiations. The end of Freedom, the all-black utopia “where colored folk could be treated like human beings,” and its symbolic re-enslavement through the imposition of a new white Prospero’s name is rewritten as a “fresh start” (194).

Suspicious, the protagonist becomes a “blues detective” of sorts and uncovers a censored early draft of Winthrop’s historical “corporate pamphlets” (59). In it, he discovers the erased history of the town’s renaming, a deal in which Winthrop colluded with Goode, Freedom’s original name-giver, to exclude Freedom’s other founding “father,” Field, from the name-
changing vote. This is because Field, a far less optimistic man than Goode, would have dissented. The novel’s fictionalized disclosure of “how it really was” raises repressed “real” issues of race and colonization, and reconnects them with its interrogation of the present. Simultaneously, it comments on the historically amnesiac enterprise of utopian re-branding itself. On the one hand, Lucky’s attempt to rebrand Winthrop now appears not as transformation, but as the repetition that it is insomuch as Lucky initially colludes with Regina Goode to “double-cross” his “old pal” Albie Winthrop (73, 75). However, Regina’s double-double-cross of Lucky introduces a new element through Regina’s attempt to resurrect the name of Freedom, and (it would seem) re-member in the process the effaced history it signifies.

Yet *Apex Hides the Hurt* adds another layer of critique that undermines Regina’s plan as too simple. Further, it even equates Freedom’s original “black settlers” with the “pale generations of Winthrops” and the “mouse jockeys” as part of the same “succession” of misguided attempts to create utopia (Whitehead, *Apex* 163). (It is worth noting that the devolution of the utopian figure from liberal Freedom to the neoliberal “Prosperity” signified by New Prospera is a thought-provoking historical commentary in its own right.) Regina remarks that “what united” the former slaves who founded Freedom “was their tragedy . . . . And the idea that they could make something better” (204). However, by the end of the narrative, the protagonist has uncovered enough of the past to realize that while the name Freedom reflects the utopian half of Regina’s statement, it is also symbolically deletes the tragic history that engendered the settlers’ utopian aspirations, and their community, in the first place. The novel thus takes the position that the town’s original nomenclature is yet another attempt to institute a new and total reality through the facile imposition of a mere name. Additionally, as does *Paradise’s* Exoduster town of Ruby, Freedom represents a problematic embrasure of the
American Dream. Jesse S. Cohn is quick to point out that “‘Freedom’ is the American brand par excellence: a cliché, a euphemism,” one that bears “no relation to the slaves’ real existence” but is instead “a soothing balm for ‘history’ itself” (18-19). In using its palimpsestic utopian space to allegorize the “ontology” of branding, *Apex Hides the Hurt* updates for the twenty-first century a black literary tradition that critiques both historiography and the forms taken by the utopian imagination itself. Like many of its predecessors, the novel’s critique finds its center of gravity in the distinction between the abstract and concrete utopia. In Whitehead’s iteration, the abstract utopia does not seek to “transcend” reality; but it still seeks to escape it by covering and thus ignoring it. The concrete utopia, on the other hand, takes this reality as the necessary starting point for its utopian imaginings and strivings.

The protagonist’s final nomenclatural verdict embraces this latter position. He rejects Goode’s original name as an alluring but useless “bauble” that would “hide the badness from view” (Whitehead, *Apex* 210). Instead, the name he chooses, which the town is contractually obligated to adopt for one full year, is the far less glamorous one that Field had wanted: “Struggle,” a name that bespeaks aspiration while also refusing to ignore “what they lived through” (210). In reflecting on the name, the protagonist reasons, “was Struggle the highest point of human achievement? No. But it was the point past which we could not progress, and a summit in that way. Exactly the anti-Apex, that peak we could never conquer . . . . They will say: I was born in Struggle. I live in Struggle and come from Struggle . . . . I will die in Struggle” (210-211). While “Struggle” hardly embodies the strident optimism of the “branded utopia,” it should not be equated with dystopian or even critical dystopian negativity. Nor should it be misread, as Morrison’s *Paradise* often is, as anti-utopian resignation. Rather, *Apex Hides the Hurt*’s meditation on historical utopias past and present arrives at a variation on the sort of
utopianism that focuses on process rather than instantaneous total perfection, and it connotes an active drive toward the impossible while not dissembling the reality of its impossibility. Like Rankine’s postmillennial utopian text, the utopianism of Apex Hides the Hurt plunges into the unvarnished, concrete-historical “here and now,” and this itself becomes a genuine counterhegemonic move in the face of the corporate utopia’s deceptive anti-realism. However, even this focus on the present contains resonances of the future insomuch as to struggle is inevitably to hope.

In these ways, Apex Hides the Hurt thus participates in a black utopian literary tradition that demythologizes the “official transcript” of the past while feeding desires for a better future world. In so doing, it directly confronts some of the most urgent sociopolitical problems of the millennial world order. Additionally, the text retains the crucial meta-analysis of utopia that began in the aftermath of the 1960s, as well as the wariness against “degenerate” utopias exemplified by the critical utopian form. Although rhetorically, it hardly reflects the revolutionary magniloquence of the 1960s generation, it nevertheless uses its tableau of spaces and characters to conduct paradigmatic analyses of racial and economic realities that still speak to the need for radical social change. This is more generally true of the new generation of black utopian texts, including the other works surveyed above. Apex Hides the Hurt shares with them a pervasive postmillennial transition away from the fantastic toward a re-familiarizing neo-realist aesthetic. Indeed, Toni Morrison’s Home (2012) is a realist dystopia that eschews the magical elements found in many of her earlier novels. However, this generation’s most decisive renovation of black utopian literature may be the one performed in Apex Hides the Hurt’s move away from the apocalypticism that stretches back to Martin Delany’s Blake, and a concomitant rethinking of utopia as a more gradual concrete “struggle,” without renouncing the totalizing
demand for social transformation. Such a position should not be misunderstood as a degeneration into the notion of “progress” that is the tainted trademark of both modernity and reformism. In a tacit critique of commercialized multiculturalism, Kornberger calls branding a “hegemonic vehicle for endless diversity”: “while traditional power regimes were based on sameness and homogeneity, branding is preoccupied with differences. . . . Brands are the cultural engine rooms in which every difference that might make a difference is exploited” (Kornberger 22). What Kornberger gestures toward but does not quite alight upon is the way in which the advent of globalization and the “innovation economy” collapse without sublating the antinomies of modernism into those of postmodernism. Modernism’s contradictory, simultaneous drives for “essences” and total newness for its own sake converge with postmodernism’s reduction of “essences” to surfaces and its concern for the endless play of differences whereby “everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image [such that] nothing can change any longer” (Jameson, Seeds 18). In a world in which changeless hegemony takes the form of a utopian illusion of constant, total change, an alternative utopia understood as a grounded struggle for real change might be the most viable counterpolitics imaginable.

Notes

1. See Chapters 1, 2, and 4. Manning Marable’s Race, Reform, and Rebellion provides an excellent account of racist, Reagan-era backlash to the Second Reconstruction, which influenced the direction of black American utopian literature. We shall see that postcolonial Africa suffered similar setbacks during this era which dampened the possibility for political optimism among its progressive writers, as well. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan are among those who document how “in the 1980s,” the sputtering remnants of the “utopian tendency” sparked during the 1960s “came to an abrupt end.” “In the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification,” they write, utopian literature found itself “moving back in the dystopian direction” (“Introduction” 2).

2. See, for example, Gilroy, Melancholia (33).

3. See Held and McGrew (1).
4. See, for example, Wegner, *between Two Deaths* (222n43).

5. See Gilroy, *Melancholia*.


8. See Marable, *Race*, Chapter 9, for an overview of race relations in the U.S. during the 1990s. This chapter’s summary draws much of its information from Marable’s overview.


10. Kwame Anthony Appiah brings to the reader’s attention similarities between *Le Devoir de Violence* and “André Schwartz-Bart’s decidedly un-African 1959 holocaust novel *Le Dernier des Justes,*” and presents side-by-side passages from each book which resemble each other nearly word for word (*House* 151). Here, once again, the specter of the Nazi Holocaust functions as both a means to rebuke utopia and a dystopian window on the world in a very different context.

11. See also Osaghae, cited below (245-246).


13. Ashcroft references the utopian qualities of the trilogy in “Remembering the Future,” in which he discusses *Infinite Riches* at length. Pordzik reads the self-consciously utopian *Astonishing the Gods* in *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia*.


16. The novel’s fiction retrieves and drags the antinomies of the 1960s into its real-world context of the early ’90s, a period of seemingly “endless transition” in Nigeria, when the nation struggled to convert itself from a military state to a democracy, a “re-birth” that was delayed from October
1990 until October 1992, then until January 1993, and once again to August 1993 (Osaghae 223). It was not completed until 1999.

17. See Pordzik, *Quest* (49).

18. Okri’s film was part of the BBC’s “Great Train Journeys” series. See Ashcroft, “Remembering” (718).

19. Linda Hutcheon’s critique of photography in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (47-61) is a well-known and concise rehearsal of common postmodern critiques of “the ideology of ‘the visible as evidence,’” the naturalized fallacy that “documents” are “inert or innocent,” the inherent and subjective meaning-making activities involved in photographs’ construction as well as their reception, the inevitably incomplete perspectives photographs provide, and other such ideas.


22. Rankine, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (Back Matter). Indeed, despite the salesperson-ship intrinsic to any cover blurb, the text’s collage of disparate but familiar formal elements, and the narrative it creates, are so singular that there is little hyperbole in Creely’s assessment of the work as “altogether [Rankine’s] own,” or in broader terms as “an extraordinary melding of means to effect the most articulate and moving testament to the bleak times we live in.”


24. See Chapter 4.

25. Quoth Bush, “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (qtd. in Kimberley 779).

26. See, for example, Sargisson’s discussion of Susan McKee’s *Walk* and *Motherlines* (Feminist 160-164). Sargisson’s text is cited below.


28. Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, has been read as an sf “ethnoscape” (See Lavender, cited below), and a counter-rationalist, antiracist utopian text (see Joo, Hee-Jung. “Speculative Nations: Racial Utopia and Dystopia In Twentieth-Century African American and Asian American Literature.” Diss. U. of Oregon, 2007). In discussing the novel’s relationship to afrofuturism, Lavender invokes John Pfeiffer’s argument about black literature’s proclivity to “supply or reflect the altered content and perspective that social transformation requires” (187).
29. The author is indebted to Richard Simpson of the University of Miami for insights about Google’s experiment at Mountain View and its implications for social space.


31. Indeed, Jesse Cohn invokes Jameson’s phrase in his reading of the novel. See Cohn (19).

32. In keeping with its preoccupation with naming, the novel makes clear elsewhere that, as the highlighting of self-naming in the writings of so many escaped slaves attest, “to give yourself a name is power. They will try to give you a name and tell you who you are and try to make you into something else, and that is slavery. And to say, I Am This—that was freedom”
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mark A. Tabone was born in Portland, Maine. He was raised in Freeport, Clinton, and Belgrade, Maine, and graduated from Lawrence High School in Fairfield, Maine in 1992. He attended The University of Maine where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in biology in 1997 and a Master of Science Degree in zoology in 2000.

From 2000 until 2006, Tabone worked as the Academic Coordinator for the Upward Bound Program at Mars Hill College in Mars Hill, North Carolina. During this time, he was active in the not-for-profit North Carolina Council of Educational Opportunity Programs, and served on its Executive Board. Throughout his career, he has occasionally moonlighted as a professional musician and a culinary instructor.

Tabone returned to the University of Maine in 2007, and earned a Master of Arts degree in English in 2009. He then enrolled in the doctoral program in English at The University of Florida, where he was the recipient of an Alumni Fellowship. He earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree in 2013 and accepted a position as a lecturer at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Tabone is a member of the Modern Language Association, the Society for Utopian Studies, and the National Council of Teachers of English. His essay, “Delany’s New Worlds Revisited” received the Society for Utopian Studies’ Arthur O. Lewis Award in 2011. His essay, “Rethinking Paradise: Toni Morrison and Utopia at the Millennium,” is forthcoming in African American Review.