Introduction

Victoria W. Wolcott

"Sometimes that's all it takes to save a world, you see. A new vision. A new way of thinking, appearing at just the right time."[1] These words were spoken by a fictional character in N. K. Jemison's 2019 utopian novella *Emergency Skin*. But the idea of saving the world through utopian imaginings has a deep and profound history. At this moment of rupture, with the related crises of the pandemic, racial uprisings, and climate change, utopian thought and practice offer alternative paths to the future. Together the authors in this volume examine lived and imagined utopian communities from an interdisciplinary perspective. These are troubled utopias, not models of perfection, but they offer us insight and perspectives on the possibilities of utopian thinking and practice.

Utopia has never been contained in one discipline. Indeed, as a field, utopian studies is as anarchic and multivalent as utopias themselves. Many of scholars who study utopia are grounded in radical communities rather than elevated in ivory towers. And they draw from a panoply of sources, from science fiction to archives of intentional communities. They live temporally in the potential future as well as the deep past. And because utopia is most often defined as "social dreaming," imagination is at the center of utopian studies.[2] This volume contains contributions from historians, sociologists, and literary scholars, among others. And it ranges from discussions of medieval utopian religious practices to contemporary utopian projects and theories. However, this collection is not exhaustive. The chapters focus on Western concepts of utopia and do not engage with every aspect of utopian studies.

But three major themes tie the chapters together: the idea of utopia as a method, the rejection of blueprint utopias, and the practice of utopia as a collective project.

Deploying the concept of utopia comes with its own dilemmas, inherent in its coining by Sir Thomas Moore in 1516. Moore combined the Greek word for "good place" (eutopia) with the word for "no" (u) to construct "utopia" (no place).[3] Thus, from the term's inception, people considered utopias to be fantastical and out of reach, a world best left to fiction rather than lived reality.[4] But the social imagination necessary to envision utopia can also power dramatic social change. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, both religious and secular utopian communities proliferated in the United States, from cooperative towns founded by British utopianist Robert Owen to millenarian religious groups such as the Shakers. By the early twentieth century, utopian communities ranged from anarchist and single tax enclaves to student cooperatives and Christian socialist communities. And today there has been a resurgence of interest in utopian thought and practice. "Another world is possible," the slogan of the World Social Forum beginning in the early 2000s, is now a global refrain among progressives.

For progressive thinkers, utopianism has long been an arena of generative conflict. For example, debates between scientific and utopian socialism dominated left-wing discourse in the late nineteenth century. Self-described scientific socialists, including Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, criticized the influential American utopian socialist and writer Edward Bellamy.[5] Utopian socialists such as Bellamy rejected conflict and violence as a path to revolution, embracing instead nonviolent revolution. For this reason, scientific socialists were disdainful of Bellamy, whose novel *Looking Backward* suggested that a peaceful but swift evolution of society would lead to a socialist utopia.[6] Marx decried Bellamy and his followers' lack of class analysis and their claims of universal emancipation, cooperation, and brotherhood. But because Bellamy posited a "velvet revolution," his ideas became popular among pacifists who feared the chaos of class conflict but still desired revolutionary change.[7]

The desire to prevent violence meant that some utopianists had an ambivalent relationship to strikes and other working-class political action. And they openly criticized the sectarian politics of the communist left. Despite that, the modern labor movement was deeply influenced by Bellamy and other utopian socialists' communal and hopeful vision of a utopian future. Many intentional communities actively supported organized labor and created cooperatives to offer an alternative to competitive capitalism.

These movements offered broad and inclusive visions of solidarity that went beyond trade unionism. And the idea of peaceful revolution was central to utopian socialists and radical pacifists well into the twentieth century. In 1940, for example, the famed white pacifist A. J. Muste called for "pacifism as a revolutionary strategy."[8]

Utopian socialists' framework for social change involved giving the ends and means of social struggle the same weight. The white British author Aldous Huxley, highly influential in pacifist and radical circles, was one popularizer of this model. Although best known for his dystopian novel *Brave New World*, Huxley was an active promoter of utopian thought and practice. While living in California during the 1930s, utopian socialists introduced Huxley to Vendanta mysticism, a philosophical branch of Hinduism, and he later wrote a utopian novel, *Island*.[9] His 1937 essay collection, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Ideals*, was widely read by political radicals. In this work he promotes nonviolent solutions to revolutionary change. On cooperatives, a key institution for utopian socialists, Huxley writes, "Co-operatives and mixed concerns already exist and work extremely well. To increase their numbers and to extend their scope would not seem a revolutionary act . . . In its effects, however, the act would *be* revolutionary; for it would result in a profound modification of the existing system."[10] Cooperatives provided a revolutionary end through peaceful means, ameliorating the worst excesses of capitalism and promoting egalitarianism.

The relationship between means and ends is also captured in the term "prefigurative," coined by the political scientist, Carl Boggs in 1977. "By 'prefigurative,' " stated Boggs, "I mean the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal."[11] Like Huxley, Boggs identified movements where the means and ends converged. And he characterized the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s as the recipient and popularizer of this tradition. Sociologist Wini Breines, in her 1982 work *The Great Refusal*, expands on the prefigurative nature of New Left politics. This politics encompasses "[t]he effort to build community, to create and prefigure in lived action and behavior the desired society, the emphasis on means and not ends, the spontaneous and utopian experiments that developed in the midst of action while working toward the ultimate goal of a free and democratic society . . ."[12] By balancing means and ends, linear time collapses as utopianists live society's future in the present.

Historians have largely overlooked the legacy of utopian socialism as the New Left's prefigurative politics emerged from what appeared to be a relatively conformist and contained post–World War II political world that rejected utopianism. In the late 1940s the twin horrors of fascism and Stalinism suggested to many liberals that utopian thinking was dangerous. Works such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center*, Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology*, and Judith N. Shklar's *After Utopia* as well as political philosophers Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno argued that utopian thinking had led to totalitarianism.[13] These works emphasized the horrendous costs of "blueprint" utopias that were inflexible and dictatorial.[14] "The urge to construct grand designs for the political future of mankind," noted Shklar in 1957, "is gone. The last vestiges of utopian faith required for such an enterprise have vanished."[15] The anti-utopian thinking of the mid-twentieth century inaccurately tied totalitarian states to utopian communities. Indeed, cooperation, not domination, was a central tenet of communal utopianism. For example, most radical pacifists who lived in utopian communities generally defined themselves as socialists or anarchists, were deeply critical of the Soviet Union, and were among the first to speak out about the dangers of fascism.[16] The anti-utopianism in the post–World War II era has largely faded. But the concept of what a utopian vision in the West should look like has also gone through revision and transformation.

That transformation has led to even greater emphasis on means. Utopia has become less about achieving a goal and more about the process of getting to that goal, what Ruth Levitas calls a "method," the first theme in this volume.[17] We see this in utopian pedagogies that push students to imagine a different future or in a theatrical space where audience and players unite in utopian practice. Indeed, this book is part of a larger project in utopian studies of destabilizing, or troubling, ideas of modernity and progress. Because the idea of progress is central in Western thought, it can have a totalizing role in utopian practice with every experiment designed to achieve a final goal. In contrast, utopia in these chapters is always becoming, always in process. Troubled utopias question more simiplistic ideas of modernity and progress, and they bring to light problematic aspects of utopian experimentation. Settler utopianism, for example, in North America led to the displacement of Indigenous people as idealistic white reformers created intentional communities in spaces they perceived as untouched.[18] Even more troubling are utopianists who created experiments within the institution of slavery, as did Fanny Wright and Joseph Davis in the United States. History and literary imaginings, in this volume, are not simply a way station to an ever more perfect future. They are modes of thinking and doing that challenge Western notions of perfection.

The best example of modernity in Western utopias is the notion of a "blueprint" utopia, which provides fixed and rigid future plans. These chapters, in contrast, describe utopias in flux, always reimagined and rebirthed, the collection's second theme. Blueprint utopias are also static, lacking the flexibility and improvisation needed for change. But change is central to utopian methodology. As Octavia Butler memorably wrote in her 1993 utopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, "All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change."[19] Blueprints are immutable, but for Butler utopia *was* change.

This collection also reflects an engagement with what Laurence Davis defines as "grounded utopia" as a way to escape the trap of modernity. Davis asks, "can we imagine a form of radically refigured, 'down-to-earth' utopianism capable of staying with our contemporary troubles and contributing to transformative processes within them?"[20] He suggests that such an approach will release "greater imaginative awareness of neglected or suppressed possibilities for qualitatively better forms of living latent in the present," rather than a "transcendent utopia" that quests for absolute perfection.[21] To avoid a blueprint utopia imposed from the top, utopian methods must be practiced in interaction with others, in classrooms, on stages, on pages, and in the streets. Grounded utopia also centers the cooperative, as an economic organization and philosophy that offers alternatives to both competitive capitalism and individualism. Historical work that elevates the lives of working people engaged in such social imaginary methods offer a perspective on grounded utopias. Radical pedagogy and examination of contemporary movements, such as queer utopias, also drive this practice.

The final theme linking the chapters is the importance of the collective, rather than the individual. Classrooms, churches, and intentional communities all offer spaces that help us rethink the possible. Utopian experimentation challenges our understanding of how to raise children, what a family looks like, or how to sustain a local economy. As Tom Moylan suggests in his work *Becoming Utopian*, "Working collectively in comradely solidarity, those who consciously desire that better world have to find ways to tease out the tendencies and latencies that will enable all of humanity to build it, here and now, in the shell of the old."[22] Such a project requires flexibility and improvisation, again negating the rigidity of blueprint utopias. Utopia is about the journey rather than the destination.

The first section of the volume, "Toward a Utopian History," uses a historical lens to examine troubled utopias. Francis J. Butler and Jennifer Hull Dorsey explore the interracial utopia envisioned by the Reverend Thomas

James, a Black abolitionist whose vision for racial integration and equality failed in the aftermath of Reconstruction. During the antebellum period, James worked with white abolitionists who fully embraced the humanity and aspirations of African Americans. Born enslaved, James found the religious and political atmosphere of antebellum Western New York conducive to utopian thought and practice. These activists called not only for an end of slavery, but also for Black enfranchisement and desegregation.

Similarly, my chapter on Black cooperators examines the influence of Robert Owen on multiple generations of African Americans and white reformers, often with problematic outcomes. Fanny Wright and Joseph Davis attempted to create cooperative utopian plantations with enslaved labor. After emancipation, freedpeople on Davis's plantation used Owenite ideas to overcome economic deprivation and white racial violence. The legacy of Owenite cooperatives carried into the twentieth century when African American cooperatives thrived in the mid-twentieth century, most notably in the Father Divine movement. And they have found new life in cities such as Buffalo, New York, in the twenty-first century.

Katelyn M. Campbell takes us to the 1970s, arguably the height of prefigurative politics in utopian history. She traces the emergence of a feminist utopia at Sagaris, a radical feminist school that failed among conflict and controversy. Founded in 1975, Sagaris sought to create a physical and intellectual space for feminist theorizing. Campbell tells the story of their unrealized utopian dreams. By foregrounding the process of creating utopia, rather than judging its product, she gives us a window into radical feminist struggles with perfection. These "sites of failure" provide opportunities to evaluate radical feminist social dreaming and reclaim the discarded fragments of those dreams. But Sagaris had a lasting legacy in radical feminist circles as participants went on to form new communities and collectives.

The next section, "Toward a Utopian Method," brings together contemporary examinations of collective struggles that create utopian spaces. Secil E. Ertorer envisions the promise of utopia for migrants, an understudied area in utopian studies. Through her work in social research, she contrasts the seeking of utopia with the dystopia many migrants find upon arrival. Ertorer also explores her own role as a researcher in dialogue with refugees, who have conflicting emotions and narration regarding their experiences. From Syrian refugees in Turkey to Karens in urban Canada, utopia proved fleeting and unattainable.

Daniel Shanahan, the artistic director of Buffalo's Torn Space theater, offers another way to trouble utopia through public ritual. In the performance space, Shanahan seeks to create community and build trust. Following Foucault, Shanahan views these spaces as heterotopia, othered spaces where the "real" can be experienced and grappled with. Torn Space creates this heterotopia through public ritual that brings together performers, often with no formal training, and spectators who become participants in the ritual. Shanahan uses Creative Placemaking to displace the audience as passive observers and transform them into participants. I know from personal experience attending and participating in these public rituals that Silo City, the industrial site in which they exist, is transformed into a kind of sacred space. The ephemeral nature of the experience and the constructed site, which is dismantled, add to this feeling. Shanahan's utopia is not one of perfection, but rather a heterotopia where change happens in real time.

The third section of the volume, "Toward a Troubled Utopia," explores the ways that utopias can be both troubling and make trouble in our society. Alex Zamalin and Alix Olson provide a rich overview of Black/Feminist/Queer utopianism in political and literary thought. They give us an outline to envision how utopia can be liberated "from some of its most reactionary proclivities." By troubling utopia, displacing it from the heteronormative, masculine European tradition and centering Black, queer, and feminist thinkers, the authors liberate utopia for use in contemporary political thought and practice. Black intellectuals, such as Martin Delany, George Schuyler, Octavia Butler, W. E. B. DuBois, N. K. Jemisin, and Richard Wright, avoid the moral absoluteness of European modern utopian planning and reject a teleological movement toward perfection by creating a more disjointed temporality. For Octavia Butler and N. K. Jemisin, for example, utopia is found not in an imagined future, but in the struggles of the present. Feminist scholars also trouble utopia, putting the concept in motion as struggle rather than a mechanistic goal. They mapped out a world outside patriarchy with collective care and continual grassroots struggle. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of queer and trans utopian struggle, which also disrupts the teleological temporality of classical utopian thought. Examining queer theorists such as Jose Munoz and Lauren Berlant, who challenge the assimilationist politics of mainstream LGBTQ struggles, constructs a queer utopia that places desire at the center. Together these scholars demonstrate that utopia is a resource for the dispossessed.

Alexandra Leah Prince explores possibly the most notorious intentional community in American history, Jim Jones's Peoples Temple, an interracial utopian religious movement that ended in wholesale massacre in 1978. But they refocus our lens from culpable adults to the role of children in cooperative and collective sites created by the community. Prince traces how Jones's creation of an interracial family reflected the broader communal vision of the Peoples Temple. And as the community grew children and their welfare were highly visible and active parts of the movement. Concern for children also framed the horrific end of the movement in Jonestown, Guyana.

Marla Segol also explores a religious utopia, but one embodied in ritual. Segol takes us back in time to examine how Kabbalistic sex magic rituals sought to restore the connection between human and divine. Regendering this process created what she terms a trans theology, and thus also a trans utopia. Segol's remarkable analysis of ancient texts centers sexuality and queer utopian ideas. She understands trans not as moving from one gender category to another, but rather as a process of movement without a focus on destination. The messianic utopian vision of a religious community required a series of rituals and practices in the kabbalistic tradition based on sex magic. These rituals epitomize the concept of utopia as method. Segol's analysis of the deep past resonates powerfully with more contemporary conversations about a queer and troubled utopia.

We end the volume with the theory that most effectively disseminates utopian thought and practice, "Toward a Utopian Pedagogy." In an act of utopian instruction, Richard Reitsma and his students explore the space between utopian dreams of migrants and the reality of their experiences. His pedagogy privileges the agency of students and the migrants they study to construct their own narratives. Reitsma interrogates the myths of utopia that are largely performative to uncover real utopian strivings. Reitsma calls this a "pedagogy of love" that reflects his deep engagement with utopian pedagogical experimentations across Latin America, but particularly in Cuba, through the practice of *concientización*. Similarly, Anita C. Butera's pedagogy questions the United States' image of utopia through the lens of immigration. Transforming the classroom into a "community of learning," Butera troubles utopia by teaching dystopia. Within her classroom, hierarchies are overturned to create a collective that explores the myths of a unified American identity, primarily through the personal stories of professors and students.

The volume culminates with Dalia Antonia Caraballo Muller's inspired pedagological Impossible Project. Muller draws on numerous thinkers, including Paulo Freire and bell hooks, to make a call for immediate practice, rather than social dreaming of a distant future. Muller criticizes the neoliberal university for stifling such a project and creates collective spaces within the university that challenges its teachings. The Impossible Project also deploys Afrofuturist ideas of alternative outlooks to push students into acting collectively to move toward a more just future. Muller brings these ideas into the classroom by employing a critical pedagogy that centers hope. Thus, her Impossible Project is a praxis rather than a lesson plan.

This volume is based on a premise of hope. If not utopia, then what? Given the state of our world, from mass incarceration to the climate crisis, the question should be what will happen if we do not engage in utopian pedagogy and practice. We may, in that case, end up in Moore's "no place," or no place that we and other living creatures can easily live in. The collective, communal, and cooperative utopian practices reflected in this collection offer hope, but also a series of pathways. Through ritual, on stage, or in sex magic, through pedagogy and through intentional living, utopians stubbornly challenge the established conditions of the present to create an alternative future. Collectively they use the tools of the past to build our future, with focused intention on the process rather than the product.

Notes

1. N. K. Jemison, *Emergency Skin* (Seattle: Amazon Original Stories, 2019), 25.

2. The political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopianism as a form of "social dreaming" that "allows communities to envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live." Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 3.

3. Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2. Western concepts of utopia predated Moore, dating back to at least Plato's *Republic*. There are also powerful non-Western traditions of utopia. Overviews of utopian studies include Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia: A Study of Theory and Practice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982); Howard P. Segal, *Utopias: A Brief History from Ancient Writings to Virtual Communities* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London: Philip Allan, 1990); Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Vandana Singh, *Utopias of the Third Kind* (London: PM Press, 2022); Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

4. As a result, some proponents of utopian thought and practice have preferred the term "eutopia." In his 1922 work *The Story of Utopias*, for example, the urbanist Lewis Mumford wrote about possible eutopias, planned communities

like the garden cities of England and later America (Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959, 1922). On Mumford's use of "eutopia," see Donald L. Miller, *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 167; Robert Wojtowicz, *Lewis Mumford and American Modernism: Eutopian Theories for Architecture and Urban Planning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 35–40; and Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, & Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 207–11.

5. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892). For a discussion of the relationship between scientific and utopian socialist, see Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 41–67; and Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 72–77, 163–68. Marx and Engels were primarily reacting to the popular mid-nineteenth century Owenite and Fourier movements.

6. Csaba Toth, "Resisting Bellamy: How Kautsky and Bebel Read *Looking Backward*," *Utopian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2012): 57–78. Toth argues, "The immediatism of this American utopia flagrantly violated the stagist view of history" (63).

7. Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 13.

8. A. J. Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 51.

9. Aldous Huxley, *Island* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962). Huxley wrote several books on pacifism, including *An Encyclopedia of Pacifism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). For a discussion of India's influence on Huxley, see Sumita Roy, Annie Pothen, and K. S. Sunita, eds., *Aldous Huxley and Indian Thought* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2003).

10. Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Ideals* (1937; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 96.

11. Carl Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control," *Radical America* 11 (November 1977): 100.

12. Wini Breines, *The Great Refusal: Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962–1968* (New York: Praeger, 1982), xiv. The historian Sheila Rowbotham uses the term in her 1979 essay "The Women's Movement and Organizing for Socialism," in *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (Newcastle, New South Wales: Newcastle Socialist Center, 1979). See also Stears, *Demanding Democracy*, 185; Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6–8.

13. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949); Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (The Free Press, 1960), esp. "The Exhaustion of Utopia," 275–409; Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1958); Karl Popper, *The Origins of*

Totalitarian Democracy (New York: Praeger, 1960); and J. L. Tallmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1960). In *Picture Imperfect*, historian Russell Jacoby insists that totalitarian regimes should not be considered utopian. "Utopia has lost its ties with alluring visions of harmony and has turned into a threat. Conventional and scholarly wisdom associates utopian ideas with violence and dictatorship" (81). See also Stears, *Demanding Democracy*, 123–30; and Goodwin and Taylor, *The Politics of Utopia*, 18–19. Goodwin and Taylor argue that true utopias should benefit everyone within a society, which excludes totalitarian societies.

14. On "blueprint" utopias, see Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect*, x–xv.

15. Shklar, *After Utopia*, vii.

16. Victoria W. Wolcott, *Living in the Future: Utopianism and the Long Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

17. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

18. On settler utopianism, see Karl Hardy, "Unsettling Hope: Contemporary Indigenous Politics, Settler-Colonialism, and Utopianism," *Space of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* 1 (2012): 123–36; Lyman Tower Sargent, "Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 200–22; and Susan Bruce, "Utopian Justifications: More's Utopia, Settler Colonialism, and Contemporary Ecocritical Concerns," *College Literature* (2015): 23–43.

19. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993).

20. Laurence Davis, "Grounded Utopia" in *Utopian Studies* 32, no. 3 (November 2021): 553.

21. Davis, "Grounded Utopia," 571.

22. Moylan, *Becoming Utopian*, 15.