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Vassar College

Dancing In the Stars: The Radical Capacity of Utopic Thought

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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Thesis Advisor:

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## Abstract

In the following thesis I posit that Utopia can be the center of radical, active, imaginative, and necessary thought. I analyze a series of case studies ranging from multidisciplinary theory, to music/film, to spiritual praxis, and finally to science fiction stories in order to illustrate and explore this argument. I perform a discourse analysis of these sources, striving to connect and weave them together into a cohesive, theory of radical Utopia in flux. Data collection for this project occurred over a nine-month period (August 2018 to April 2019) and was a process which consistently reworked itself and was informed as it came into contact with myriad thinkers and writers. This thesis at its core looks to address how one might conceive of, let alone construct, a socially sustainable futurity. It questions normative logics of time and space in order to do so. In the following work I aim to center voices that seek not only to deconstruct, but to (re)build.

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“Utopia enables us to see and experience potentialities,  
often ephemeral, that offer imaginations of something otherwise.”

—Jose Esteban Muñoz

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Spheres*

As my friend Violet and I were walking out of an environmental sociology seminar and towards our house, I tried to explain to her a thought I had during my modern social theory class. My professor and I had discussed the impossibility of creating egalitarian social systems when minds are socialized by the hegemonic powers that be. In working through this thought I showed Violet a drawing I had doodled in class. Our society, I explained, was at the epicenter of a circle, the area of which was everything we could conceive of. As we move towards the edges of the circle, our thoughts move further away from social norms and into radical thinking. The answer to the problem of socially sustainable and just futurities lies somewhere outside of the circle, though its direction is unclear. By shifting the epicenter to anywhere in the periphery, the scope of the circle changes, moving closer to something else. This is when I began to evaluate the capacity of radical Utopic thought.

The labor of Utopia is inherently unstable, its etymology being rooted in the greek “ou-topos,” translating literally to “no place.” Different radical thinkers imagine different loci for Utopia, some viewing it as a promised land and others as a relationality. In this work I will move through recent Utopian visions in the United States. I, of course, will not be able to look at all instances of Utopic thought throughout this time. I will not be asserting a moral or ethical

hierarchy of these Utopias nor do I intend to fully explicate or analyze any one site in its entirety (a project that could span infinite pages). Rather, this thesis seeks to explore understandings of Utopia through a variety of lenses, tracking how it shifts, morphs, and changes. I aim to consider connections between Utopia and race, religiosity, media, and literature.

Utopic thought can be engaged with for pragmatic reasons as well as for more ephemeral ones. Various iterations of this concretize Utopic thought as a valuable project. This work of expanding the imaginary is necessary in order to work actionably towards a socially just futurity. Utopia has been considered overly optimistic, useless, and naive, particularly in relation to realist and pessimist thought. Positioning Utopic thought in contrast with these is a limiting project, forcing Utopic thought into an inherently anti-queer binary, allowing it only to exist oppositionally and not expansively. Relegation in this way dilutes Utopia with a binary sensibility, one which has historically upheld hegemonic power structures by investing in binary understandings of social systems and logics (black/white, gay/straight, past/present, criminal/victim etc.). The delegitimizing of queer and non-binary identity is expanded to queer, non-binary temporalities and futurities. Perceiving of Utopic concepts, instead, as transitory and non-binary allows Utopia to be expansive yet adaptive. It allows for a queer temporal understanding, a concept which I will explore in the following chapter.

In this thesis I will argue for the value of Utopias, and more specifically radical Utopic thought. The voices and minds on the periphery, in spite of and through marginalization and oppression have imagined visions of Utopia in struggles for liberation. These movements are poised to break beyond deep socialization and move into new capacities of thought. By sharing in these Utopic visions, communities and individuals can radicalize their own thinking and

attempt to imagine new futurities. Envisioning Utopia necessitates labor and produces impact that eclipses whether or not society will arrive at these exact iterations of Utopia.

Keeping in praxis with subversion of western temporal thought, I have chosen to order this work thematically as opposed to chronologically or linearly. Sections will echo one another, weave together, and project into future analyses. The thesis will consider science-fiction, prophetism, spiritualism, and social movements as sites of Utopic thought. The chapters will be divided by these sites, using Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* as a point of departure. Afrofuturism, ecotopia, and queer temporalities are sites holding a wealth of data to consider, ranging from seemingly dystopian novels to Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches. The iterations and explorations of Utopia in these cases are particularly compelling in their shared understanding of impending doom and visions of liberation, sharing a collective synergy.

### *The Stakes*

The necessity of these thought projects cannot be understated. The stakes shared by those participating in this practice are high. In the midst of mass incarceration, police brutality, the razing of the planet, the subjugation of queer bodies, and systematic hatred, Utopia illustrates an alternative futurism. One which moves away from a typical futurism, entrenched in capitalist, racist, mechanistic ideals, and towards something, somewhere else. Within epidemics, hazard, uncertainty, and risk, there lies a magnitude of problems so massive and pervasive and interconnected, which demand equally complex solutions. The available solutions are unlimited and boundless when they live and breathe in the realm of radical Utopic thought. Divestment

from hegemonic paradigms necessitates sustainable social futures; how can these be envisioned if our minds are socialized to think only within the pre-existing limits?

We need to linger in the moments that make life livable. Within these we find refractive Utopias. These moments are central to this project. They are like rays of light that are altered and projected outward. In livable moments we are able to identify pleasures and liberatory desire, which serve as a skeletal Utopia of sorts. The glint of refracted Utopia exists here, in something amorphous and not fully knowable. Vital to liberation is the preparation to be free; it is not enough to tear down systems of oppression. Without building up community there will be nothing at the end.

### *The Road*

This work knowingly meanders and moves, at times, messily. Throughout the project I will revisit Janelle Monáe's recent emotion picture *Dirty Computer* (2018). I analyze the film as a text; it exists aurally, visually, emotionally, and textually at once. It touches upon many themes centric to the different case studies of thought that are explored in the thesis. *Dirty Computer* can both ground the ideas set forth in this project as well as engage them.

In the first chapter I will consider several theoretical frameworks which serve as useful lenses to view case studies of Utopic thought projects through. Social theory and philosophy offer up valuable understandings of Utopia, time, the imaginary, and our senses. Here I rely heavily upon the writing of Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and adrienne maree brown. Collectively these thinkers span disciplines. Within these framings, I make my

own interventions and work to broaden my initial understandings of temporality. These are all read together to begin creating a synergistic framework of Utopic thinking and time.

The second chapter goes into spiritual and prophetic iterations of Utopias. Reading Utopia through religiosity helps establish Utopic thought within a socio-historic context and a larger communal practice. In exploring the oration of Martin Luther King Jr., history of Wicca and witchcraft, and testimony of Harriet Jacobs I will read these practices and visions. They are in many ways interconnected, though perhaps otherwise contradictory. What may appear as oppositional allows for conceptual complications of radical Utopia while pointing towards the value of the project. The aforementioned sites serve as central case studies for this chapter, articulating Utopias spatially, spiritually, and magically.

Chapter three expands Utopia across space and time, relying upon the radical visions formed within science fiction. Octavia Butler's work demonstrates the waves made by expanding the voices included within the American science fiction canon, while bridging the spiritual, the painful, the future, and the Utopic. The impact of this work is exemplified in *Octavia's Brood* and particularly in the writing of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who explores the underpinnings of hope, ancestral connection, community, and resilience. These novels do the multitudinal labor of illuminating oppression, articulating liberation, and conceiving of freedom. It is within this genre that I add to a liturgy that is compelling, accessible, and visionary.

*Let All Souls Be Brave*

Janelle Monáe's self-labeled Emotion Picture, *Dirty Computer* (2018), creates for viewers and listeners a dystopian world that exists at the intersections of identity based oppression, anthropogenic habitats, state enforced "sanitation," and the subjugation of people through their classification as "dirty computers." As an accompaniment to her album of the same name, the picture explores themes of race, gender, sexuality, dystopia, Utopia, and love. In the world of the film, the state views people and organic matter in mechanistic terms, with a background of desolate ecosystems and highly developed technology. Dirty computers are abducted and cleaned by the state, a fate that Monáe makes clear at the opening of the picture. *Dirty Computer* is a radical science-fiction narrative, one which relies uniquely on visual media, music, and narratives centered around violence and liberation faced by the land, queer folk, and people of color.

Throughout the film viewers witness moments of rebellion, scenes of celebratory resistance in which the characters create art, play with gender binaries, delve into sexuality, dance, find new spiritualism, and love together. It seems almost impossible, within a system that seeks utter domination, that there might be spaces for and embodiment of liberation. However, Monáe imagines a fugitive mode of existence for her characters, one in which they dream of Utopia and realize liberty within the loopholes. Viewers are treated to shots of raucous, colorful, queer parties set to hedonistic, liberatory melodies and beats. There is a special attention given to celebration by and of Black queer women, fittingly as Monáe's lyrics oscillate between praising the strength of queer Black women and illuminating the violence their bodies are subjected to.

In this dystopia, where marginalized people are seen as dirty, Monáe foregrounds the significance of memory. It is through the scanning and elimination of memory that the “House of the New Dawn” works to clean dirty minds. The protagonist, Jane 57821, played by Monáe, is abducted early on in the film after continuous surveillance by the state. She is taken to the House of the New Dawn for cleaning where, despite fighting to preserve her memory, she is consistently forced into subjugation by the deployment of a noxious “nevermind” gas (a fume which causes the user to forget their will to resist).

As she is stripped of her agency and selfhood, Jane fights to remind her lover-turned-employee of the state, Zen, depicted by Tessa Thompson, of their shared history and through this, of their shared struggle. Monáe makes clear the communal stakes we will all hold in a dystopian future. The loss is not only our own, but that of our cherished spaces, loved ones, and free will. Jane is met with a defeated and confused version of her lover, who hauntingly insists: “Thinking will only make it harder. It’s best if you just enjoy the process, accept it. People used to work so hard to be free, but we’re lucky here. All we have to do is forget.” Zen’s defeated nature is a testament to oppression’s laboring to break, twist, and warp its victims. Its goal is to make pain so unbearable and objection so futile that subjection is disguised as a willful choice rather than a result of intricate and pervasive domination.

To Zen, Jane replies, “I don’t want to forget *you*. [emphasis mine]” Here it is made clear that Jane’s final tie to determination is tethered to Zen, and later to her second partner, Ché. She recognizes the deep importance of retaining memory and pushing Zen to do the same. This moment is striking in its emphasis on relational memory, specifically in its queer, polyamorous, Black context. The salience of this care is reified throughout the picture as viewers watch the characters’ love stories unfold in warm, pinkish hues and poetic lyricism. In choosing this queer,

Black love as a central theme of *Dirty Computer*, Monáe creates a vision of Utopia within the most desolate and grim of realities. Each party, each kiss, each lyric is an active rebellion against the state's assertion that this dystopia is acceptable and necessary. In moments of everyday Utopias, Jane, Zen, and Ché (and their community of queer rebels) know that they deserve something better, no matter how uncertain or unstable that "better" may be.

I choose to witness this as evidence that there is and should be such a category as radical Utopic thought, full of art, theory, and testimony from many voices, including emphatically those in the periphery. We can see utterances of Utopia in a plethora of actions and visions. As Jose Esteban Muñoz aptly explains in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Utopia may be found in the quotidian. In his text Muñoz finds Utopia in the quotidian, the relational, and the aesthetic, in public sex (gay cruising), in visual art, and in poetry. I argue that in Monáe's project Utopia can be found in similar places, notably in the queer Black moments I have chosen to discuss.

In the film's ultimate shots Jane too has been converted to serving the House of the New Dawn and is meant to attend to Ché, whom viewers can assume has been recently brought in. A figure clad in a gas mask enters the room and, after a beat, tosses a mask to both Jane and Ché. In this moment we hear the opening lines for the picture's final song: "Americans." The figure reveals herself to be Zen and smiling, says only: "Let's go." The shot sequence moves from nevermind gas being deployed to a fly succumbing to the fumes. The triad standing calmly together, gas masks on, wait for the smoke to clear, and Janelle's voiceover sings:

Hold on, don't fight your war alone  
Halo around you, don't have to face it on your own  
We will win this fight  
Let all souls be brave  
We'll find a way to heaven  
We'll find a way

These six lines deviate from the dystopic norm painted by the film and move towards a vision grounded in unity, strength, and ultimately, a belief in Utopia. Monaé reassures her listeners that there need not be solitude within struggle; instead, she envisions victory, bravery, and togetherness. In this instruction there lies a path to “heaven.” So, what is the promised land, and how do we get there? And if there is a Utopic place or a futurity that we can exist in—how do we know once we’ve arrived? As Angela Davis might ask, how do we know when we are free?

*Dirty Computer* serves as a prophetic work, in its timely understanding of political and social realities, and future potentialities. With grace and clarity Monáe evokes deep feeling and meaning-making. The emotion picture makes active choices to the end that readers feel simultaneous dread and hope, forcing a revelation that we are bound up together not only in our struggle, but also in our liberation.

As Ché, Zen, and Jane execute their escape they move down a near empty hallway, bodies intertwined, holding one another up, moving towards the light. As they stumble nearer the end of the hall, they pass the scattered, unconscious bodies of employees of the House of the New Dawn. Monaé makes no promises that we will all make it to this Utopia, she does not say that some will not remain lost. Oppressors so deeply entrenched in their work for the state are not the focus of this radical imagining. The focus, rather, is this Queer Black Love that heals and generates. There is a clear through line here: the importance of memory, of relating through love, and of liberation in community. Even though the odds are slim, the stakes are too high. Even though it may be “harder,” we must remember—and not only remember, but reimagine. As the song ends, Monaé sings, “Please sign your name on the dotted line,” and with a backward glance, beckons us to join her.

“I think there are many ways to find that simple path  
within ourselves, and I think that those of us who wish  
to see a truly, radically different world must demand of ourselves  
the possibility that we are called to lead  
not from right to left, or from minority to majority,  
but from spirit towards liberation.”  
—adrienne maree brown

## **CHAPTER ONE: WOVEN THEORIES**

### *Introduction*

In order to fully appreciate the necessity of radical Utopic thought projects, a relationship between the imaginary/visionary, the oppressive/socialized, and the liberatory must be established and explored. *Where* our Utopias come from is an integral part of understanding what they look like and how they operate within social imaginaries. Utopic tradition can be found across disciplines and exists within both classic and contemporary theory. Sociological theory alone is not capable of fully navigating radical Utopia. This chapter pulls in and leans on the frameworks of Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and adrienne maree brown. Their works are indispensable; each thinker expands and complicates social relationships to the imaginary, the senses, community, and praxis. When read with and through one another these works create a lens on which radical Utopic thought projects can be examined and understood. Marxist theory establishes alienation and socialized senses as central sociological phenomena. Marcuse furthers this by exploring the aesthetic dimension and its capacity to enhance imaginative social development. Muñoz queers this understanding, working to find Utopia in the quotidian and the relational. brown complicates and enriches these projects by articulating the

stakes of these projects, within what she terms an “imagination battle” (brown 2017: 18), as they seek to bring forth the healing power of “visionary fiction” (2017: 27). Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* emotion picture serves as an additional through line between these thinkers: exemplifying aspects of theory, throwing others into question, and developing a connective tissue.

*Method:*

This thesis will utilize media as sites for inquisitive exploration without positing a moral value or standing of each. The texts considered serve to expand, contextualize, and engage with one another. In reading them collectively and interwovenly, I will delve into different understandings, using texts to question and define conceptions of radical Utopia. Literary analysis, sociological examination, historical contextualization, and media critique work together to perform a discourse analysis. Chapters will revisit tropes and themes emergent within Utopic thought (e.g. the prophet, time travel, fluidity, community-building). The connective tissue of this work will aspire to develop social theory of Utopia. Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and adrienne maree brown illustrate within different modalities of imagination, operating on different axes of meaning. While Marx and Marcuse are rooted in past, classical analyses of futurity, Muñoz and brown critically engage Utopic thought through the present and in a queer temporality. When read together these theorists create a map for exploring the value of radically imagined Utopias.

### *Emancipating the Senses:*

Alienation emerges within the marxist canon as a fundamental social product of capitalism. Marx uses the term to explain the experience of wage-laborers who are alienated from themselves, their fellow workers/class, the product they manufacture, and the larger society. This can be translated somatically; wage-laborers within capitalism are distant from their senses. One aspect of socialization Marx discusses centers around human senses. He states: “senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its *object* has become a social, *human* object – an object made by man for man” (Marx 1844: XI). These senses, as they become produced objects, are alienated in their relationship to people. Marx goes on to discuss the “complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities,” explaining that this is emancipation precisely “because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*” (1844: XII).

Herbert Marcuse continued exploring this concept of sensory emancipation in his work, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards A Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1977), critiquing Marxist conceptions of the aesthetic and relying upon art as a powerful political tool:

I shall submit the following thesis: the radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (*schoner Schein*) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. (1977: 6)

Here Marcuse argues that truly liberatory work cannot be held within social limits, but rather it must artistically “transcend,” which can be expanded in an understanding of the “given universe”

he mentions as including oppressed sensory experience. This transgression is evoked on many levels, where it is at once temporal, real (vs. imagined), and embodied emotionally. In this sense, the aesthetic becomes a plane where image can be both grounded yet unbound. Within art, liberatory works can project audiences into different planes of thinking while pushing past social limitations into and beyond creative bounds. Marcuse elaborates on his thesis by exploring the “political potential of art in art itself.” He argues that art reflects class interest (a concept which, I believe, could be broadened to include aspects of other socially grouped interests) and that it goes on to subvert “the dominant consciousness,” calling into question institutional and social relationships (1977: IX). Marcuse aligns his aesthetic theory with the radical, claiming that:

what appears in art as remote from the praxis of change demands recognition as a necessary element in a future praxis of liberation-as the "science of the beautiful," the "science of redemption and fulfillment." Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world. (1977: 32)

While Marcuse may claim that art cannot change the world, there seems to be an inherent contradiction in his phrasing. The artistic work that he says has this radical political potential is referred to as a fundamentally consciousness-altering praxis which ultimately leads to people power that *does* change the world.

Marcuse introduces the idea of liberating subjectivity, a concept which lends itself easily to support the consumption of alternatives (it is not just what Utopia may look like *for you*, but how it morphs within the imagination of others). This becomes an element of the emancipation deemed necessary within the marxist lens. He goes on to emphasize the importance of emotion and imagination, as well as the risk of leaving these behind, saying: “It is all too easy to relegate love and hate, joy and sorrow, hope and despair to the domain of psychology, thereby removing them from the concerns of radical praxis.” (1977: 5). These emotions experience to an intensely

intimate experience of one's own emotionality and vision as being central to the praxis Marcuse deems necessary to achieve liberation.

Utopic vision is woven throughout *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Marcuse explains that: the affinity, and the opposition, between art and radical praxis become surprisingly clear. Both envision a universe which, while originating in the given social relationships, also liberates individuals from these relationships. This vision appears as the permanent future of revolutionary praxis (1977: 71)

Art and radical praxis are rooted in vision, an imagination of an alternative futurism. This is seen throughout the Utopic thought projects examined within this thesis, as they each seek to examine and free social relationality, while articulating a liberatory imaginary. Art has the potential to at once reflective of reality and project itself into unknown realms of futurity. In this way art can become "a utopia to be translated into reality" (1977: 57).

The works of Marx and Marcuse can ultimately be relied upon to argue that imagination of social alternatives to current systems of oppression are not accessible to socialized and sensorially dominated realities. With senses so bounded, the imaginary is heavily conditioned to perceive the world in particular ways. It becomes nearly impossible to fully intake what is needed for an alternative futurism. Minds become blocked to recognizing sites of resistance and utopia within our world, though they are not unable to experience them.

The understanding of emancipation of the senses becomes increasingly profound as we expand our definition of senses. In this project I posit that imagination is, at its core, a sense and is embodied in this way. Within the need for liberation is the necessity of emancipating the senses, including the human imagination. Through various channels it becomes possible to refuse systemic oppression and envision what could be. In her thesis on movement and abolition, or "Why White Boys Don't Dance," Maggie Kennedy explores the ways in which dance as practice expands how bodies know to exist. She writes:

In order to interact with the world differently, and think different worlds are possible, we must be able to feel and reframe what we know through our bodies. I want to emphasize practice here, as our bodily habitus are being practiced and reinforced constantly, so any aim of liberating the senses, and walking towards different embodiments will have to be a forgiving practice as well. (Kennedy 2019)

The idea of a forgiving practice eases the body through emancipation. Kennedy's emphasis on practice is applicable to radical imaginaries. Utopic thought projects need not be individualized instants, they can exist, rather, as an expansive practice.

The domination (and necessary emancipation) of the senses that Marx and Marcuse discuss is evident throughout *Dirty Computer*. Monáe's dystopia is filled with visible state surveillance and control of bodies. The central characters push back against this in acts of rebellion that are ostensibly rooted in emancipating their senses. They dance, fuck, sing, and move together. In the film's opening moments Jane and her friends, after evading a camera-carrying robot, drive to a party whose guests push the boundaries of normative aesthetics. They move together in a futuristic hover-car, synchronized in their dancing, raising their hands to Black Power, echoing movements of the revolutionary Black Panthers.

Analyzing movement and dance in particular are essential to reading Monáe's work as she foregrounds bodies. Sara Ahmed, a queer phenomenologist and critical race scholar writes both that "bodies become orientated by how they take up time and space" (Ahmed 2006:5) and that "Orientations...are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (2006:8). The bodies in *Dirty Computer* are oriented towards one another and away from the clutches of the state which seeks to oppress them. In dancing and moving together, they embody the community and Utopias that they wish to exist in. The notion of improvisational dance can be practically connected to liberation, as movement theorist Danielle Goldman explains:

In order to make improvised choices (which is not to imply a rigid opposition between instinct and rationality), one must develop a sense of how one's own body pulses—how it moves habitually and how it might move otherwise—in relation to its surrounding rhythms, which are neither static nor essential (2010: 52).

In order for Monáe's protagonists to be able to to improvise their freedom (a freedom which presumably is not fully familiar to them, though it may be momentarily echoed) they must somatically practice this improvisation. Through somatics they build connection and refine attunement to their selves, others, and their environment. This concept is further explored in *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (Syedullah, Owens, & Williams 2016), which reads as a meditation, set of liberatory protocols, reflection, and a call to action:

anyone engaged in the practice of liberation must actively discover it in their own being, and having a body-based or somatic practice is a direct way to reclaim connection to their psycho-physical connection to themselves" (Radical Dharma 2016: 100).

*Dirty Computer* exemplifies Marcuse's assertion of the radical qualities of art, while broadening Marx's scope of what rebellion against the capitalist state might look like. As characters sing "Crazy, Classic, Life" they are seen connecting and rebelling through, often queer, touch. Viewers share in the intimacy between the characters on screen, especially Jane (Monáe) and Zen (Thompson). The emotion picture also works to emancipate the senses of its viewers, foregrounding deviant audiovisuals. In centering queers of color, rebellion, and the pursuit of freedom *Dirty Computer* tells stories that are underrepresented in U.S. Media. Radical storytelling works within the picture to push back on social ideologies that privilege the dominant voices, failing to explore myriad experiences and identities.

Almost every frame of "Crazy, Classic, Life" is at least half filled with people, centering individual humanity while orienting towards community. Characters fill the screen with an abundance of queer coding through both fashion (leather, studs, non-gendered/androgynous

dress) and modified bodies (dyed hair, piercings, tattoos etc.). This party becomes quickly symbolic of a relative Utopia within a larger dystopic world. It is a futurism accessible within our imaginary, a close or near future of sorts. This future is not one that the government of Monáe's world wants to repress, shutting it down with a police raid that evokes fear, chaos, and confusion. The practice of freedom in this party scene is a threat that must be neutralized.

Emancipation of the senses here bleeds into emancipation from the state, which becomes explicit in the song's bridge:

We don't need another ruler  
All of my friends are kings  
I am not America's nightmare  
I am the American dream  
Just let me live my life

The continuation of this, allowing for the emancipation of the imaginary and the envisioning of this as a sense, is central to the narrative that Monáe constructs, and can be clarified when it is read through the work of Muñoz.

#### *Momentary Glimpses:*

In his seminal text, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Jose Esteban Muñoz develops a queered understanding of Utopia and temporality. He pushes back on arguments that Utopias must be purely and stiflingly optimistic, instead allowing them a messiness and an intimacy they are not usually permitted to have. Within aspects of the queer canon, Utopic thought is easily dismissed. Karma Chávez, in *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (2013) finds value in some Utopic thought, but argues that it ultimately is a distraction from politics and action. Chávez uses the label “utopia politics” to

describe this phenomenon. In this framework Utopia becomes a fanciful engagement, one that may be aesthetically pleasing, but does little labor to actually offer up radical social systems or antidotes to social plagues. Marcuse's theory of the aesthetic as political and Muñoz's development of quotidian Utopias can serve to interrogate this conclusion. Utopia can be framed alternatively (to Chávez's conception) as a source of fodder for radical ideas and praxis. There is certainly a way to make the production and digestion of Utopic thought radical and actionable. This is especially true when the project is moored by voices on the margins and thinkers in the periphery or the shadows. Envisioning does not need to be the only form of liberatory thought projects, rather it is one of many practices for liberation. It does not need to replace political activism, but instead can serve to build empathy, hope, and vision.

There is also a certain attachment to success within arguments against Utopias, though Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), articulates the inherent subversiveness and queerness of failure. Utopic thought can make space and room for the failing and depressive, it does not need to be relegated to naive optimism and a lack of the range of human emotionality. Many iterations of Utopia that erase failure and emotionality create eerie, static, and dominative universes. In contrast allowing for the "failure" of a Utopic project (e.g. Lesbian Separatists Utopias) can be inherently queer and seen as Utopic in and of itself, still holding value. Within this failure there is room for growth and exploration, the capacity to adapt and stretch to new futures, presents, and pasts. Halberstam's work is very much in conversation with Muñoz as they both complicate understandings of imagination and emotionality.

Muñoz finds Utopia in the quotidian and the relational, in public sex and in poetry. By performing close analyses of a variety of art, Muñoz threads out the Utopic within the aesthetic. He emphasizes that many of these sites are located within the everyday. The Utopic as quotidian

allows for a re-imagination of how queer time might be kept. In discussing the purpose of his text, he states:

cruising utopia can ultimately be read as an invitation, a performative provocation. Manifesto-like and ardent, it is a call to think about our lives and times differently, to look beyond a narrow version of the here and now on which so many around us who are bent on the normative count (2009: 189)

The temporality Muñoz refers to is “bent on the normative,” restricting itself to linear constructions of time and history. Here Muñoz invites readers to consider through an alternative lens how the everyday and the futurist might weave together and perhaps coexist in a queer time, one which deviates from the normative. How can Utopia serve as an intervention, a performance against and a journey away from the heteronormative? How might it create a certain queer Utopian memory and envisioning that is all at once about love, otherness, subversion, and resistance? Muñoz expands on his conceptions of queerness, viewing it as “not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future,” it rejects limiting being to the present, insisting on “potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009: 1). Queer ontology is not reliant on recognition and often locates itself precariously between past, present, and future temporalities. There are limitations of linear thought, which forces the three to be separate from one another, failing to acknowledge the reflection of one within the other. Non-linear, queer, bent time visibilizes the residue of the past left in the present to become and the ways in which it might settle into the future. It witnesses the three happening together; it acknowledges that the future we choose to believe in begins its life in the present.

What I believe Muñoz’s work can bring readers towards is an understanding of our present glimpses of utopia. These are the moments that make life livable and the future something worthy of existing for, that Muñoz allows to exist messily and intimately. They are prophetic moments that cast radical possibility, rested upon constellations of relationality. We

mark sacred truths that are in danger of dissolution, finding inspiration for the types of futures we desire for ourselves and one another. As these moments are experienced, they serve as sites to make ethical commitments to telling time through a relationship to being, becoming, and being with. *Cruising Utopia* shows the wealth of loci this act can be found in, ranging from cruising to sharing art. It is in these interactions, whether they are with our own bodies, our surroundings, our minds, or others, that we find our own refracted utopias. Closing my eyes in the woods I listen to the birds and the river, breathing crisp air deep into my lungs; in that moment I can imagine a world without highways and smog, one where organic life is valued over inorganic commodities. In the art of queer fucking, bodies become temporarily liberated from homo-normative chains and can begin to conceive of futurities that bend time, love, and being away from the normative as Muñoz writes. It is in these moments that relational memories are formed, a reservoir that can be drawn upon later in hopes to imagine Utopia.

This intervention of prophetic, refractive, utopic moments remains rooted in Marcuse and Marx's assertions of the need to emancipate the senses. Muñoz queers the notions of time they predicate their theory upon, while reading *Cruising Utopia* through Monáe allows for the centering of glimpses of alternative futurities in the midst of dystopia. Throughout *Dirty Computer* viewers watch as Jane finds reservoirs of resilience in her memory and imaginary. It is not inconsequential that Monáe's fictional authoritarian overlords use the deployment of a noxious, memory-wiping fume as their primary tactic of subjugation. Jane is repeatedly violated as her captors use this "never mind gas" to remove important moments in her life from her conscious mind.

One of these memories is centered around a soft, stylized celebration of women's bodies and networks of femme resistance. This scene, which doubles as the music video for Monáe's

song, “Pynk,” celebrates black femmes and finds a beautiful paradise in an arid landscape. Monáe locates vitality in the middle of a seemingly barren setting, finding life making in a place devoid of life. The visuals are all strikingly emotional, exuding a joyful, colorful, loving, crush filled, sweet, and resilient energy. Each frame offers up tastes of a radiant version of communal resistance. There is an emphasis on taste (largely through visuals of eating), movement (in dance and touch), sound, and warm, glossed visuals. Monáe sings the refrain: “It’s cool if you got blue, we got the pynk.” They do not *want* just any Utopia, certainly not one that is patriarchally bent, but rather want their own. Nor do they need to rely upon a surveillance state that uses police force to subjugate part of its populous in the name of “safety.” This double meaning of the word “blue” is particularly poignant in the sociopolitical context of widespread police brutality. Monáe points to a truth iterated by many: that the police exist to “protect” certain communities (read: white, wealthy, cisgendered, straight) at the expense of others. One that is heightened in the rest of the emotion picture, which makes explicit the violent racism of U.S. society through both lyrical testimony and narrative parallels. Blue Lives exists to negate the validity of Black Lives Matter, victimizing the police force rather than holding them accountable and creating space for outrage, grief, and pride in the face of brutality. What necessary gendered, racialized implications does this construction rest upon? What would a pynk life look like? And how does this hold within its understandings of care and softness that are present throughout the video?

Throughout the song there is a sense of precariousness; time is uncertain and there is a desire to “make it last.” *Dirty Computer*’s time is queered, pulled like taffy to wrap around itself.

Zen and Jane share what is arguably one of the most intimate moments of the film. The tempo slows down. Monáe sings:

I just wanna, I just wanna  
I just wanna, I just wanna

I just wanna, I just wanna paint the town  
I don't wanna hide my love  
I just wanna hold your hand and be the one that you think of  
When you need a holiday, when you wanna drink rosé  
I just wanna paint your toes and in the morning kiss your nose

The emotionality of the scene is evoked not only narratively and lyrically, but through the cinematography. Zen and Jane are cast in pink light while all of the other characters fade away. They exist together in their own universe. Monáe moves away from moments of not wanting that exist in other parts of the picture, and dwells on what she does want. This is Muñoz's queered time, the context for refracted prophesied moments of future sacred spaces. Queer love is at the center of this Utopia. It's because of this moment that Jane resists and knows that a universe where queer black femme love is free and celebrated is possible. What may appear to be misleadingly inconsequential moments have the capacity to change the course of a life. Loving Zen makes Jane's life livable and clarifies a future worth fighting for.

### *Imagination Battles*

adrienne maree brown in her recent work, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), writes about the importance of imagination. Throughout her work she blends activism, environmentalism, racial justice, and science fiction. She posits that the U.S. has found itself in an "Imagination battle" (brown 2017: 18). Implicit in this battle are questions of who gets to imagine, what kind of things get to be imagined, and what the stakes of imagining are.

Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable. Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free. All of this imagining, in the poverty of our current system, is heightened because of scarcity economics. There isn't enough, so we need to hoard, enclose, divide, fence up, and prioritize resources and people. (2017: 18).

Terming an aspect of the context this thesis exists within as an imagination battle has a deep connection to its stakes. Radical Utopic thought projects are not only just about imagining for the sake of imagining, nor are they solely to practice a sustainable future, but they exist in part oppositional to other futures. brown places the concepts in this thesis within a larger sociological understanding. She acknowledges the horrific types of imaginations that have been allowed to exist over time and names their very real consequences. Expanding imaginaries is a necessity, though it is also a privilege, one that is foregrounded by danger. My own stakes in the project are both individual and communal. They are my whiteness and the ways it perpetrates racial violence, the way my feet root in the soil and crave life on concrete sidewalks, my mother's latinidad and my own, queer love and gender exploration, the bills that pile up and the anxiety that accompanies them. The mythos of scarcity works to create a worldview moored by individualism and fear. Through this thesis I work to articulate my own plentiful imaginary from which to draw on in addition to theorizing how this practice is both necessary and valuable. In actuality there are infinite possible futures and as brown says, "if we can't articulate more viable futures, and adapt, our human future is pretty hopeless" (2017: 17).

There are many imagined that are *not* socioenvironmentally viable. This is articulated exceptionally well in Vandana Shiva's framing of mechanistic versus organic paradigms, the two

being caught in an imagination battle in her book: *Soil Not Oil* (Shiva 2007). The technological Utopias envisioned by many minds is one which is strikingly desolate in a multiplicity of senses. They tend to incorporate many of the destructive tenets of capitalism, notably including an acceptance of dominionism and the abuse of the earth as a necessary means as achieving progress (which throughout them is often conflated with increased capital gain or the linear accumulation of time). Shiva opens *Soil Not Oil* by presenting three major global issues as a triple crisis: climate chaos; energy crisis and peak oil; food injustice and insecurity. These crises, according to Shiva, not only will have a disastrous impact on our collective global future, but are already violently affecting communities. The urgency of these issues cannot be easily lost on her readers. The situation is life or death. For animals, for people, for the livelihood of our planet. Shiva argues that we must “power down energy and resource consumption” and “power up creative, productive human energy and collective democratic energy” if we wish to survive and eventually thrive (2007: 4). She makes clear that the path to human destruction has been paved by fossil fuel driven societies which exist wholly within a mechanistic (read: commercial, focused on massive energy consumption, and wasteful of resources) paradigm, held up by the infrastructure such a paradigm designates necessary. Shiva explains how this one imagination is so deeply assumed that it is taken for granted, going, in many but not all spheres, uncontested. She describes this system as being an allopoetic one; it derives power from external sources (2007: 4). She highlights the difference between this type of allopoetic system and a living, organic system:

Mechanically organized industrial systems are designed externally. They are structurally uniform and functionally one-dimensional. Mechanically organized systems do not need to heal or adapt; they break down under stress. When a twig of a tree breaks, the branch

heals itself. When a part of a car breaks, the car cannot repair itself. It must be taken to the mechanic. (2007: 15)

In this work Shiva engages in imaginative theorizing, drawing on indigenous, working class, agrarian, and natural ideologies to develop frames which allow a Utopic potentiality to exist. An imagined, and reflected, organic socio-economic system exists in radical opposition to a mechanistic reality or futurity, locked in battle.

At the center of brown's work is a primary strategy of fighting against oppression and working towards just futurities. She terms these: emergent strategies. "Emergent strategies are ways for humans to practice complexity and growth of the future through relatively simple interactions" (2017: 20). These are planning and acting within connections. They premise themselves on relationality found in nature. brown looks to these with admiration and gratitude, a sentiment echoed by case studies of witchcraft and environmentalism found in chapters Two and Three. She says:

Together we must move like waves. Have you observed the ocean? The waves are not the same over and over—each one is unique and responsive. The goal is not to repeat each others motion, but to respond in whatever way feels right in your body. The waves we create are both continuous and a one-time occurrence. We must notice what it takes to respond well. How it feels to be in a body, in a whole—separate, aligned, cohesive. Critically connected. I would call our work to change the world "science fictional behavior"—being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations. We are excited by what we can create, we believe it is possible to create the next world. We believe (2017: 16)

There are infinite worlds possible, the question is what world do you want to exist in? And what are the ways of moving towards it? Thought projects are central to answering these questions. "A visionary exploration of humanity includes imagination" (2017: 17). brown acknowledges the impact of sociology within this, explaining that "imagination is shaped by our entire life

experience, our socialization, the concepts we are exposed to, where we fall in the global hierarchies of society” (2017: 17).

brown’s theorizing of emergent strategies and placing of Utopia within a natural order begins resolving (or accepting) the inherent contradictions in Utopia-building. As Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin write in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*:

Dreamers of utopia have a particular problem with diversity, since every utopia must account for the disorder, the conflicts and fissures, that it wants to resolve into some orderly harmony. A disorderly utopia is an unstable one...Utopia is traditionally a genre associated with gaps: between what we have and what we’d like to have; between what we would like to have and what someone else would prefer; between our apprehension of possibilities and the words we find to construct them.” (ix)

adrienne maree brown does not negate this, but her work can be used to begin addressing some of these problems while reifying Jones and Goodwin’s characterizing of Utopia. Firstly, by establishing a theory of imagination battles, brown posits that Utopias need not all be in collaboration with one another and that failing to imagine simply allows dominant imaginations to go unfettered. Secondly, considering Utopic interventions within the natural world allows both order and chaos, there is a certain amount of collaborative harmony in nature, though it exists in a larger realm of disorder. Thirdly, brown, and the other theorists enumerated in this thesis, embrace living in the gaps. It is in these spaces of in-betweeness (a concept explored further in Chapter Two) that Utopia takes on a radical posture—one that pushes back against the what-is, moving towards all of the what-could-bes.

Imagining cannot exist in a vacuum, nor can it exist on its own. It must work collaboratively, engaging with both its situational context as well as with the imaginaries of others. They are thought *projects*. These begin to serve as work. They are active as both the channel and the channeling. This is only the very beginning of the work. It must move through

activism and scholarship, find itself in classrooms as well as bedrooms, channeled through speech, feeling, and movement.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noontday.  
The Lord will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.  
Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

—Isiah 58

"It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work,  
but neither are you at liberty to desist from it"

—Avot 2:16

## **CHAPTER TWO: SPIRITUALITY & PROPHETISM, SPELLS & PRAYER**

### *Introduction*

Radical Utopic thought exists within a larger tradition of Utopia-making. There are numerous iterations of Utopia throughout history in different spiritual practices. This chapter centers itself on these by exploring the evocation of Utopia in religious discourse and spiritual practice. I begin by looking at visions of the Promised Land, particularly in the Black Christian tradition. The first case study is of Martin Luther King Jr.’s use of the Promised Land in poetic speeches and writing. Through this, King brings into question

where thoughts are leading society temporally and whether or not futurity can exist as a place. The intuitive prophesizing of the futurities we want, explored earlier by Muñoz, is brought to life in King's work. The second case study of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) opens up the pragmatism and spatialization done by King's work by exploring Exodus in fugitive time and the Promised Land as not as a place, but as something else—maybe a feeling, an idea, a dream. Reading these questions not only through moments in the Black prophetic tradition but also through the Wiccan tradition allows conceptions of Utopia to live in spiritual magic, finding resonance in realms easily dismissed. Throughout this chapter scenes from *Dirty Computer* illuminate how and why Utopia, in memory, imagining, and radical propensities threatens established systems of power.

### *The Promised Land*

Visions of the Promised Land have been iterated countless times within the Black Christian Tradition. In this section and the following I will be looking at the writing of Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Jacobs to shape an understanding of prophetic visions of Utopia. Through these usages and evocations of biblical symbolism, King and Jacobs articulate movement towards liberation and imagine freedom even when faced with the painful reality of complete subjugation. Fugitive temporalities, narratives of Exodus, and prophetic leadership serve as sites and moments of freedom.

Dr. King draws on familiar biblical narratives, utilizing them pragmatically through spoken and written word. He uses conceptions of the Promised Land as a means for political mobilization in the midst of the Civil Rights. The story of Exodus, which tells of the Israelites in Egypt grappling for freedom from enslavement and struggling to then learn how to live in this new freedom, works to nourish both action and hope. It is useful to consider King's compelling usage of Utopian thought within an understanding of Exodus. Eddie S. Glaud Jr., in *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (2000), writes that:

No other story in the Bible has quite captured the imagination of African Americans like that of Exodus. The story's account of bondage, the trials of the wilderness, and the final entrance into the promised land resonated with those who experienced the hardships of slavery and racial discrimination. (Glaud 2000: 3)

The general themes present in Exodus as they are chronicled in the Torah are as follows: Moses coming to terms with his role as prophet and fighting for his people; the Israelite's escape from Egypt through the Red Sea and the wrath of God on the Egyptians; the Journey to Mount Sinai, the reception of the Ten Commandments, and the descent into the worship of false idols; the punishment of wandering forty years, lost in the desert; and finally the arrival to Canaan, the Promised Land given unto the Jews by God. As the Israelites flee, the Egyptian Army is trapped and killed in the once-parted Red Sea. King's use of these themes is at once moving, prophetic, and effective.

In *Why We Can't Wait* (King 1963), Martin Luther King, Jr. chronicles a critical moment in the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama. The text provides insights into the complexities of King's mind, voice, and actions. A self-evidently charismatic, influential, and rousing leader, Dr. King speaks directly to the reader, adeptly writing for a variety of audiences. *Why We Can't Wait* echoes the biblical language commonly present in King's speeches, drawing upon the Baptist minister's religious knowledge and spirituality. In this way and through his

impeccable ability to take the pulse of a nation (and as importantly, his own community), King begins to take on a prophetic nature.

The trope of the prophet, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is rooted in close readings of the Torah and the New Testament. Throughout these texts, those figures labeled prophets (e.g. Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel etc.) have a commonality of experiences, characteristics, and abilities. The traits denoting a prophet include: *being chosen by God* (e.g. hearing direct messages or demands from God); *a sense of obligation* (this may be to God, to community, to the world at large etc.); *adept leadership* (often an ability to unite people, articulate messages, skillfully orate); *being of mixed identity* (the prophet may access hybrid experience, e.g. Moses simultaneously accessing Jewish and Egyptian identities); *possessing a contagious or ecstatic energy*; *having visions* (from God or other divine sources, e.g. the burning bush); and *being reluctant* (the prophet may not want to accept a task from God, as seen in the story of Jonah and the City of Nineveh).

Many of these tropes are salient aspects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s public persona. He undeniably commands attention, through his vocal tone, physical presence, and lyricism. This lends itself to his contagious and ecstatic energy—an ability to rouse, gather, and excite vast crowds and to lead large masses of people in marching on Capitol Hill. The energy, tactical expertise, decision making ability, and success evident in King's activist history exemplify his more-than-adept leadership capabilities. In his commitment to civil rights and to the church, his obligation to community, God, and the nation's Black population is more than evident. In both speeches and written work (notably in the famous "I Have a Dream" speech) King references telling visions and dreams. There is a sense of urgency in this work, of timeliness and of being

able to identify, articulate, and bend a temporality. King calls on Utopic ideologies of the Promised Land as a prophet to move (emotionally, politically, and actionably) his audience.

In *Why We Can't Wait*, King describes a particularly poignant vision. It comes as he is considering whether or not to join fellow protestors in a Birmingham jail after “announc[ing] [an] intention to lead a demonstration on April 12 and submit to arrest” (1963: 78). King describes weighing his options:

I walked to another room in the back of the suite, and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing also at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the twenty-four people, waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting. Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, past city lines and state lines, and I thought of twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt. (1963: 80)

This moment is striking, especially in its description of this moment of clarity and its invocation of religious symbolism. The vision is an essential experience of the prophet. In this case King is able to see all those he feels responsible for and to, and in doing so is brought to his decision. This decisive nature of the prophet is clearly an important attribute for a leader and especially necessary in key moments of any social justice movement. It is this ability to recognize a turning point or a need for unwavering faith ("no more room for doubt") that allows a leader to move beyond historical temporalities and towards newly imagined realities. In this context King frames this alternative future, or progressive goal, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, referencing Exodus and the Red Sea. Vision, in this moment, gazes beyond immediate surroundings and expands to the entirety of the nation, moving through the Red Sea and towards the Promised Land.

The usage of Utopic language is particularly affective in this context, artfully calling upon the Judeo-Christian canon. There is an emotional draw in positioning the Black American experience within a narrative of Exodus, past the “Red Sea of injustice” to the Promised Land “of integration and freedom.” This language evokes a sense of hope and healing, uniting readers within a (potentially) shared religious framework and a (potentially) shared experience. Imagining a social Utopia within the context of the Promised Land also begins to articulate imaginings about Utopia as both location and destination.

What does considering Utopia as a locus mean for Utopic thought? Is the Promised Land meant to be a destination we (or some) may arrive to as King asserts? This idea of Utopia as a somewhat established place is questioned and reworked by Afrofuturist works I will explore in the latter sections of this project. A Black Christian framing of Utopia allows us to imagine paths and journeys to more socially just futures. Perhaps some will get lost in the wilderness along the way. And perhaps not everyone will be able to see this future, as Monáe implies in her film. Moses makes it to Mount Sinai, but is not allowed into the Promised Land when his people finally arrive.

There is a strong, obvious sense of messianism throughout the story of Exodus. Judaic waiting and projecting exist simultaneously. There is a coexistence of always having been waiting for the Messiah to come, knowing that the Messiah never will come, and the necessity of being ready for the Messiah’s arrival, unsettling linear or one-dimensional time.

The understanding that not all will see the Promised Land they have worked towards resonates in Martin Luther King Jr.’s final speech before his assassination. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (1968) was delivered to a few thousand listeners at the Mason Temple in

Memphis, Tennessee just a day before King was shot and killed at the Lorraine Motel. Originally King was not planning to speak. Due to increasing frustration within the movement regarding nonviolence, a climate of uncertainty, or perhaps “the actual storm brewing outside, the crowd was thin, with far fewer present than had seen King speak in the same hall mere weeks before” (Keeley 2008). There is unwavering strength and determination in King’s presence, both physical and auditory. The speech begins by discussing time and Exodus:

And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt (Yeah), and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather, across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there. (King 1968)

Again imagery of this Biblical narrative is brought to the fore and draws on the collective imagination of the audience. This is used to frame and structure the speech as a whole, as King moves through different concepts of time and the realities of racism in America. He continues:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. *I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!**

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord! [Emphasis mine]

(King 1968)

Here King clearly references Moses’s trip to the top of Mount Sinai and parallels it to his own enlightenment. He has prophetic sight and is able to envision the Promised Land to come. Like Moses, King knows he may not be able to access this Utopia. Not only might King not make it,

but the Utopia may not be accessible to his oppressors either. When read in tandem with the ten plagues prelude to the Exodus and Monáe's escape in *Dirty Computer*, King's work points to the limiting nature of the Promised Land. It is not meant for everyone, but for the chosen, a fate which the Bible implies will not include the oppressors. King's insight that he may not get to the Promised Land is particularly uncanny in light of the tragedy of the following day. In this view of Utopia, the individual does not work towards their own futurity, but rather for the sake of the collective. It becomes acceptable to have wavering clarity on the present or of the path towards Utopia, when there is such certainty in one day reaching a better future. This articulation asserts value on its own, without being tied to a "successful" journey to the Promised Land. The imaginative and healing power of prophetic foresight is reiterated in King's "Dream" speech, having become a key part of his political and activist legacies.

### *Fugitivity in Exodus*

The Exodus narrative present in Dr. King's work is one that can be read over antebellum abolition narratives, particularly those of individuals fleeing enslavement and attempting to find freedom. In her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs chronicles her life, detailing enslavement in North Carolina, her fight to emancipate her children, and her experience as a fugitive. Jacobs creates for herself a fugitive existence, one in which she lives in the loopholes, both figuratively and literally. She writes of the degradation and suffering she endures at the hands of her master and the larger system of chattel slavery. These hands which work to viciously and repeatedly tear her apart, ripping control away from both her own being and her family.

Harriet Jacobs' exodus does not follow the protocols of Exodus as it is classically understood. As the Israelites fled Egypt, she flees from her captors, though she does not have a Promised Land to run to. She describes, instead, the garret space she lives in for *years*, evading her captors in (almost) plain sight:

A SMALL SHED HAD been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap-door, which communicated with the storeroom...The air was stifling; the darkness total. (Jacobs 1861: 128)

Her space of refuge holds within it a whole other host of captors. She lives here with the rats and mice, unable to exercise her limbs or to call out to her children who play nearby unaware. It is in the garret that she must develop her own time. The days bleed into one another and stretch out into years of stifled solitude. This loophole of retreat (as she terms it) is a liminal space: one which is in-between freedoms and captivities. Miranda Green-Barteet in her article "*The Loophole of Retreat*": *Interstitial Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2015) writes: "Jacobs's garret is interstitial because it exists literally between other spaces of her grandmother's house and because it is undetectable to those who are unaware of its existence" (Green-Barteet 2015: 54). She goes on to describe how this "in-between status [and] very interstitiality" is what makes this space so useful for Jacobs. The in-between space Jacobs occupies is not only physical, but also emotional. In her account Jacobs details both the joy and sadness of being able to hear her children. She is comforted by their presence and by their somewhat safe, though still precarious, positions. Simultaneously, however, she feels the pain of longing and knowing that she cannot contact her children despite being within their reach. This

pluralistic interstitiality (between house and roof, freedom and captivity, and joy and sadness) is where she is able to theorize Utopia, its stakes, and the necessary social shifts necessary to provide her true freedom, something that escaping physical captivity failed to provide her. Dr. Jasmine Syedullah, who has guided and overseen this thesis, in her dissertation: "*IS THIS FREEDOM?*" *A political theory of Harriet Jacobs's loopholes of emancipation*, argues:

The perspective she gains in the loophole of retreat is not only the will to overcome the tyranny of her master then, but the realizing sense that her possessive investments in freedom were not about her or her children's safety alone, but would require the abolition of the whole social relation of mastery to slavery to make the kind of future she imagined for herself to be realized. (Syedullah 2014: 74)

Bound to a space that further restricts her senses (in the ways that Marx and Marcuse theorize), she can only emancipate her imagination. She exists in this space for such a significant amount of time, able only to think to herself. Here she gains both the will to resist and to identify her own nuanced modes of resisting. Jacobs develops an imagined future for herself in this interstitial space. The act of expanding futurities for herself is deeply rooted, as Dr. Syedullah discusses, in her own embodied safety as a formerly enslaved woman subjugated to gendered and radicalized violence as well as in her love of her children. The Promised Land ceases to be a real place, the Northern States or the Land of Canaan, but becomes something other. Utopia might not be a physical space (though it can be) and perhaps might not even be a future time, but rather a mental spacetime. Harriet Jacobs finds a means for concurrent temporalities, existing in the loopholes while pursuing a more hopeful futurity, one in which Jacobs and her children are liberated.

This imagining is a reiteration of an earlier moment in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* where Jacobs has a prophetic vision of her children. She has found a brief refuge in a house after running away from her captor. She writes:

I sat there thinking of my children, when I heard a low strain of music. A band of serenaders were under the window, playing "Home, sweet home." I listened till the sounds did not seem like music, but like the moaning of children. It seemed as if my heart would burst. I rose from my sitting posture, and knelt. A streak of moonlight was on the floor before me, and in the midst of it appeared the forms of my two children. They vanished; but I had seen them distinctly. Some will call it a dream, others a vision. I know not how to account for it, but it made a strong impression on my mind, and I felt certain something had happened to my little ones (Jacobs 1861: 121)

This vision is pulling on relational memory, like that emphasized in *Dirty Computer*. Jacobs is called to her children and to protecting her family. Imagining her children in danger clarifies her need for resistance throughout the text, while imagining a free future for them continues to strengthen Jacobs' modes of resistance.

Imagination is both necessary and enhanced within the interstitial space of Harriet Jacobs' *garret*. It creates a new understanding of time-keeping and meaning-making which is deeply connected to protocols for liberation. Jacobs' account of her vision is not only prophetic, but borders on the magical. There is an unknowable-ness to her dreaming that is at once a manifestation of her fugitive exodus and a clarification of a Utopia worth surviving through years of subjugation.

### *Witchcraft & Wicca*

Witchcraft has a long and muddled tradition, existing in the mysterious world of spiritualism, ritual, and magic. This realm provides means of seeing the Utopia already in the world provided to us by the Earth and deities. Witches often root themselves in rites of the so-called past, allowing them to exist in present and future temporalities. Through these they shape

systems of care for the individual, the community, and the Earth. Magic is ripe with imaginations of Utopia and practices for realizing them.

Historically witches have lived in opposition to or outside of capitalist and colonial projects. Examples of this can be seen in many hegemonic interactions with witchcraft, notably European colonists' weaponization of witchcraft and indigenous religiosity to other and dehumanize as well as in English witch hunts following the enclosure movement, which predicated sentencing of, most often, women in the peasant class. Silvia Federici, in her recent work: *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women* (2018), delves into the latter.

Federici details the state sanctioned genocide of women as a means of repressing dissent, controlling bodies, and propping up the underpinnings of the capitalist system. Within this capitalism is seen as a continual process of expropriating capital—requiring only necessary forms of reproduction and elimination of opposition. Demonization of magic and witchcraft (the efficacy of the practices notwithstanding) became a tool to target peasant women resentful of the loss of the commons and of policies of social care (e.g. local government ensuring food for the hungry). A contemporary Italian Marxist, Federici's work is in conversation with Marx's theories regarding alienation and the emancipation of the senses. This anchoring allows Federici to theorize about the capitalist class' goals to demystify the body and disrupt matriarchal/ancestral knowledge production of medicine and magic. Witches were threatening in the way their craft empowered and relied upon the collective. The capitalist project of suppression rested upon attempted domination and restriction of uncontrollable ephemera (magic, bodies, touch, herbalism, sensuality, etc.) at a very real cost (2018: 20). Witchcraft pushes back against this, opening up a host of imagined social alternatives. Federici writes: “[Witchcraft] was a world that

we now call superstitious but that at the same time alerts us to the existence of other possibilities in our relationship to the world” (2018: 21).

Witches create a divergent imaginary, an opposition to phallic, capitalist, racist, etc. imaginaries, that invites practitioners to consider intimacy, pleasure, envisioning, and actualizing as the core of a central ethos. These tenets exist within an emphasis on the self, the community (or coven), and the larger world. Magic asks us to think about how we touch another: the mystery and unknowable nature of queer intimacy and pleasure within dominant social systems. Touch, despite co-opting attempts, is inherently rebellious and forges resistance of witches in the shadows. Witches are invited to experience multitude, reshaping singular or binary paradigms of time. This exists in experiences of pleasure, or identity, for example.

A framing based upon multitudes and increased perception opens practitioners up to notice and feel Utopia more in their daily life. The gratitude central to Wicca in particular, especially in regard to the natural world, intensifies this opening up to and acknowledging of Utopic energies. In *Living Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (1993), Scott Cunningham explores definitions and practices of Wicca, focusing on the 21st century. Cunningham writes that “there is not, and can never be, one ‘pure’ or ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ form of Wicca... Because of this healthy individualism, no one ritual or philosophical sateen has emerged to consume the others” (Cunningham 1993: ix-x). He goes on to explain an interpretation of Wicca that remains in flux, though rooted in appreciation and attunement of energies, allowing it to push boundaries and ask witches to be intentional in their religion. In this view Wicca asks for a reconnection or acknowledgement of existing Utopia, before delving into actualizing Utopic visions through magic.

Like Wicca, magic is a concept difficult to pin down. Starhawk, in their essay from the collection *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (ed. Diamond & Orenstein: 1990), shares a compelling, potential definition.

What Witches and Pagans do is practice magic. I like the definition of magic that says, 'Magic is the art of changing consciousness at will.' I also think that's a very good definition of political change...And one of the things we learn when we practice magic is that the results don't necessarily happen immediately. They unfold over time, and they always unfold in surprising ways, which is why we talk about our spiritual tradition in terms of mystery rather than answers and dogma and certainty. (1990: 76)

Magic is, if anything more unknowable by nature than any other aspect of witchcraft, though clearly imbued with embodied experiences of intimacy. Spell-casting, in certain instances, tries to give form to and bring into being desires, intentions, and visions of a better world. Spells seek actualization of Utopic aspects. They put out an energy and a vision, moored to the Wiccan ethos.

The potency of Witchcraft lies not only in this understanding of magic, but in its emphasis on a particular praxis. Practice rooted in rituals is active and requires full engagement of the practitioner. It also asks covens/solitary witches to revise and adapt their practice critically. This serves as a foundation for the expectation of community, self, and global care. Witches must not only be grateful for, but actively care for that and those around them. Active care, of course, is intrinsic to social justice work and grassroots activism.

Later in Starhawk's piece, they use poetry to exemplify an understanding of an embodied Earth and magic: its promises about time and change. Their poem ends:

Out of the bone, ash  
Out of the ash, pain  
Out of the pain, the swelling Out of the swelling, the opening Out of the

opening, the labor Out of the labor, the birth  
Out of the birth, the turning wheel

the turning tide (1990: 86)

Here there is an emphasis on labor pains and birth, but from that birth a “turning tide.” Through this Starhawk provides some hope and solace. Movements towards social and environmental justice *will* be painful and *will* have casualties, but the faith that they will generate a new tide is what makes them worth fighting for.

### *Conclusion*

There are moments during “Crazy, Classic, Life” juxtaposed with colorful, nightlife scenes, that center Zen (portrayed by Thompson) performing a variety of rituals. She holds people together, standing above them as she gently shaves and paints their heads. It is in one of these moments that Jane (Monae) first sees Zen, or at the very least first really *sees* her. Monae injects ritualism and ceremony, allowing it to be a central part of her narratives of resistance and of loving. The practice of these—as I show through witchcraft, Exodus, and Black Christian Tradition—projects practitioners into different imaginaries. This work of mental-emotional expansion is an act to emancipate thought. Jane performs a ceremony of her own, reifying that magic and spiritualism can exist individually, flexibly, communally, and interconnectedly as from two goblets she pours water that washes down the shimmering, golden beings that kneel at her feet. The practitioners are then seen seated at the table together, evoking imagery from the Last Super as well as emanating power and presence. This party is ended with a police raid, throwing celebration into chaos, an act that is allowed in the state of exception the film locates itself

within. Community building around identity, rebellion, and spiritualism is a direct threat to the state, one that must be neutralized or destabilized. It works to reclaim all that the state has attempted to wipe clean, throwing biases and double standards back in their faces.

Monae intervenes in the notion of Utopia as a place, positing in many ways that while there are real spaces of celebratory resistance. Utopia might not be a literal place and that we can simultaneously be both already there and not there yet. She uses a King-like voice in “Americans,” who in a resonant voice states: “Until Latinos and Latinas don't have to run from walls / This is not my America / But I tell you today that the devil is a liar Because it's gon' be my America before it's all over.” There is a use in conceiving of a promised land, but it doesn't have to be a distant land. We can move through the loopholes on some bastardized exodus holding on to those we love and the futures we want for them. We can move towards new ways of thinking, feeling, and being.

“Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together.”

“This is a time-travel exercise for the heart.  
This is collaborative ideation—  
what are the ideas that will liberate all of us? “

—adrienne maree brown

## CHAPTER THREE:

### SCIENCE FICTION, DOUBLE FEATURE

#### *Introduction*

As a genre, science fiction predicates itself on rule breaking. It creates new worlds, that often reflect concurrent experiences, while pushing imaginative bounds. Once rules are broken notions about time, space, and society are all up for grabs. At its most compelling science fiction weaves stories of love and resistance in with looming dystopia or social commentary. In such an unstable genre, themes of Utopia exist in flux. The following chapter will look at a novel (*Parable of the Sower*, Butler 1993) and an anthology (*Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, eds. Ishamara & brown 2015) that exemplify the expansive capacity of science fiction when read through and as social theory. *Parable of the Sower* is particularly connected to religious narratives, as it parallels a version of Exodus and reimagines both God and religion. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, as it's title implies, positions itself within a broader social justice understanding of activism.

Relationality, practice, and time travel are dominant themes in these works, tying them in to my analysis of both *Dirty Computer* and case studies of spiritual radical Utopic thought.

### *To Root Among the Stars*

Some of the most radical Utopic thought sprouts from the harshest of soil. Within violence, struggle, and subjugation Black thought has continually produced and found, remembered, and imagined temporalities of hope and beauty. This remains true throughout many narratives created by Afrofuturist writers. In dystopian worlds the protagonist can reach for Utopia, beginning to articulate freedom and change, amidst uncertainty and chaos. Octavia Butler has notably developed various vivid Afrofuturist worlds to bring her readers into. One of the most influential and respected novelists of her time, Butler's work was groundbreaking within the canon of science-fiction literature—being of the first to decenter white, male experience and instead asserting powerful social critique and foreground voices from the margins.

*Parable of the Sower* (Butler 1993) serves as a poignant example. The text situates itself in an unspecified future time in which California (and the U.S. at large) has fallen into chaos following environmental and social catastrophe. Butler's protagonist is Lauren Olamina, a teenage black girl, who lives in a closed community with her family (including her preacher father). The book is written entirely as a journal kept by Lauren, centering a voice that is not typically centered within science-fiction.

Olamina is relatable and accessible in her struggle towards understanding, which is portrayed here not as a sudden jolt of knowing from above but rather as a grappling with loss and

meaning. Questions of God for are central for Olamina, along with questions about what time it is for her and her community. She wants to know how to survive, how to move on and away from this community when it is no longer sustainable (a time which she senses is drawing near). These questions are not met with passive contemplation, they are urgent, demanding, and ongoing. She begins to record her process of grappling. Following a loss in her community she writes:

I need to write about what I believe. I need to begin to put together the scattered verses that I've been writing about God since I was twelve. Most of them aren't much good. They say what I need to say, but they don't say it very well. A few are the way they should be. They press on me, too, like the two deaths. (1993: 30)

Here it becomes clear to Lauren that testifying and chronicling her own experience is vital. This need weighs on her, like the loss of those around her. The need to testify, to write down, to articulate roots itself in a knowledge that in writing her thoughts and letting them grow and twist and shape out of and beyond what she is being taught she can unlock something special. She does not shy from the pain nor does she accept her father's teachings of God, she instead decides to collect her own. These verses become a central part of the text and later cumulatively become a new religion or set of beliefs, known as Earthseed: The Books of the Living, very much centered around the idea that God is change. Olamina's growing faith that God is flux and growth are paralleled by her own growth and flux. As she explores this vision of God, she explores her own place in the world and her own relationships to her family, independence, sexuality, and ability to lead. It is this that makes her the ideal protagonist in this text as a hyper-empath who is changing and growing in a world full of chaotic suffering.

The idea that God can be change is also extended into understandings of Utopia and the Promised Land. If God can be change and if everything can be change, then perhaps Utopia can be as well. Within this framework, Utopic thought is not static, but flowing. Morphing and

shifting as it encounters new minds, new times, new realities. It adapts to meet needs as they too are changing. This liberates Utopia from being a fixed conceptual location, allowing it its own freedom. The use of Utopic thought is not necessarily vested in an arrival to the Promised Land, but rather in the practice of articulating and re-articulating a radical imagination.

Lauren asserts the necessity of critically considering the time she is in and the temporality she wants to move into. She reaches this conclusion early on in the novel, writing:

God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn't enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that's the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak-- too poor, too hungry, too sick-- to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out. *There has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape. Another place. Another way. Something!* [Emphasis Mine] (1993: 151)

There is a clear understanding of shared stakes and impending doom here. "It isn't enough for us to just survive." Freedom is deserved and needed. There is a time, a moment, when the status quo must be disrupted and overturned. The alternative in this case is death. Lauren desperately seeks something better. It may be a place to journey to, it may be a way of living, it may be something else entirely, but it must be something better.

Right after this realization, Lauren writes a new Earthseed verse. These are scattered throughout the text, building off of one another, poetically and increasingly more determined.

The verse is as follows:

We are all Godseed, but no more or less so than any other aspect of the universe, Godseed is all there is-- all that Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths. The universe is Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. (1993: 85)

Lauren locates herself and all of humanity within a vast universe. There is a destiny, a determination, a settled fate. She does not articulate the path or even the place, but knows what it

will take root among. Through analyzing this verse there room to acknowledge that Utopias may be inherently unstable or unsustainable. Humanity may not literally reach outerspace, but that doesn't change the necessary beauty in fating ourselves for something better.

The faith that emanates from Lauren and within her verses fuels her journey throughout the text. She aims for a tangible destination other than the stars, deciding to travel North along the West Coast. It is belief in Earthseed and in the possibility of better that allows her to keep going. Olamina is prophetic in her clarity and attracts other travelers along her way. As she leads she continues to develop tenets of Earthseed and protocols for her group, allowing community to shape her understandings as they go. She goes on this Exodus of sorts to a Promised Land (the farm property of one of her group and later her lover), always moving towards something else, always embracing change. Earthseed at it's core is change which allows Utopia, at least in the context of *Parable of the Sower*, to be change as well. In working to articulate Utopias the fact of its own changing nature does not become excluded, rather the articulation can seek to follow and stay with change, to heighten awareness of time-keeping and identifying.

The mode Butler uses to articulate these ideas is significant. Science fiction literature as an art form works to envision futures by captivating the minds of their audience. Marcuse's frame of identifying the connection between art and radical praxis in future envisioning is key here. It reifies how Butler's work can be read as a creative social theory, a reinterpretation of religious text, and/or a series of liberatory protocols. Not only does it envision, but it works to share this vision with its readers. adrienne maree brown says: "Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together" (brown 2017: 19). This practicing is sensorially embodied, not only through visual processing but through mental imaging. Her colleague Walidah Imarisha coined the term "visionary fiction" "to describe the work of people who use fiction to advance justice

and liberation “ (2017: 27). brown discusses *Parable of the Sower* as an example of such visionary fiction. “Woven throughout her work are two things: 1) a coherent visionary exploration of humanity and 2) emergent strategies for being better humans” (2017: 17). Conceiving Butler’s work as a practice of emergent strategies begs the question: How do we practice destabilizing? Destabilization of our environment, imaginaries, social constructions, communities, and self identities is a necessary aspect of liberation. This is made clear in Jacobs’ autobiography or Monáe’s emotion picture. Something must shift. As Butler posits a fluctuating imagining of utopia, she allows it to once again exist in the in-between temporally, theoretically, and spatially. Butler and Olamina show readers what flux can look like and what things (love, friends, family, growth, spirituality) can serve as anchors in the storm.

In her development of Lauren Olamina as her protagonist, Octavia Butler articulates a Utopic hope that there is another *something*. The stakes are too high. The world may be ending and turning in on itself and Lauren knows that the time for change has come. There is no other option and forfeit is unacceptable. She knows that there is a destiny to root among the stars. Utopia will be worked and reworked until we get close or closer than we once were.

### *Fearless Flesh, Fearless Touch*

To Octavia E. Butler, who saves as a north star for so many of us. She told us what would happen— ‘all that you touch you change’ —and then she touched us, fearlessly, brave enough to change us. We dedicate this collection to her, coming out with our own fierce longing to have our writing change everyone and everything we touch. (ed. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown 2015: X)

Butler's work touched and changed many. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015), collects the writing of many of these people, named in her honor. By merely existing, the collection attests to Butler's influence and legacy. It is a touching, intimate, and brave legacy. This testament reads like a Black feminist theory of the flesh, reifying an insistence that writing has a radical capacity to and for social change.

"Evidence" by Alexis Pauline Gumbs is one of many short stories featured in the anthology, centering around themes of time travel, community, oppression, silence breaking, Utopia, and hope. The story unfolds in pieces of "evidence" each from different moments in time and reaching back through an ancestral history. As the piece evolves it becomes clear to the reader that some sort of rupture has occurred, a breaking of silence, and after that has come an age (and society) of peace and equity. It is from this Utopia that Gumbs' protagonist, Alandrix, writes their ancestor Alexis. At age 12 they find it hard to imagine that people were afraid and that things were once uncertain: "I have to remember that no one knew that things would get better, and that even people who were working to make it happen had to live with oppression every day" (2015: 34). The time that Alandrix lives in is free of that oppression, centered around community, choice, and love. Alexis was working towards that futurity without knowing it would one day arrive. Though Alandrix writes, "It seems like maybe you knew about us. It feels like you loved us already. Thank you for being brave" (34). This piece of evidence is incredibly moving and striking as it positions two people tied through relation, who, though missing a shared relational memory, share in love and gratitude. It puts forth a Utopian vision in feeling, without an explicit set of protocols, boundaries, or coordinates. Alandrix honors optimism in the face of uncertainty that holds within it the instability of Utopia. They explain the contrasting

temporalities that they and their ancestor exist within and perhaps hint towards how to create rupture within oppression:

People broke a lot of things other than silence during your lifetime. And people learned how to grow new things and in new ways. Now we are very good at growing. I'm growing a lot right now and everyone is supportive of growing time, which includes daydreams, deep breaths, and quiet walks. (2015: 35)

In the Utopic dream of Gumbs, there are "hope holders and healers" (2015: 36), growth, support, and breath.

Exhibit E of *Evidence* is a "letter from Alexis after capitalism to Alexis during capitalism" (2015: 39). Gumbs uses a form of Black feminist time travel as a disruption of linear Western temporalities and normative story-telling. She outlines a beautiful Utopia:

Now life, though not exactly easier, is life all the time...Here in the future we have no money...technology is the brilliance of making something out of anything...We have the world we deserve and we acknowledge everyday that we make it what it is. Everybody eats. Everybody knows how to grow agriculturally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually...Each everything is an opportunity and we are artists singing it into being with faith, compassion, confusion, breakthroughs, and support...even though our experience breaking each other apart through capitalism has left much healing to be done. We are more patient than we have ever been. And now that our time is divine and connected with everything, we have developed skills for how to recenter ourselves. We walk. We drink tea. We are still when we need to be. No one is impatient with someone else's stillness...Everybody is always learning how to grow. (2015: 39)

In this description Gumbs acknowledges that even in a more Utopic reality, there will be many wounds to be healed. Learning to be free may not be easy and there may be forty proverbial years of being lost in the wilderness first. But, Gumbs allows everyone to grow and to be still.

This Utopic thought also serves to outline and name the problem of capitalism, without lingering in its time. Instead, she moves into writing different iterations of freedom and Utopia, each found in small and large details she provides (spanning from singing, to community support, to food justice, to drinking tea). This Utopic thought allows one to imagine: What does it mean to

reassure yourself with certainty? To time travel to and from yourself to say “breathe deep, baby girl, we won” (2015: 39-40)?

There must be a better way, to escape my scenery  
Don't want to look to far and waste my energy  
Traveling down the same old street  
There must be a doorway leading to the pretty blue  
Don't have to turn no key to get there, just a little thought of you  
Oh, there's a beautiful place  
Somewhere way beyond the trees  
Don't have to wish it down  
Like it's too hard to reach  
I'm already there in my dreams

(Already There, Emily King 2016)

## CONCLUSION

With the temperatures and tensions rising I cannot help but wonder if it is too late. Too late to change, let alone to imagine changing. And if it is too late does it matter? Is it still worth knowing what time it is if we might not have enough time left? I don't think the stakes of these projects exist alone in any stagnant temporality. Imagining for later is not enough if we don't allow our radical Utopias to permeate the present. We engage in a continuous practice, shifting the epicenter of our spheres of conception over and over and over again. Consistent, complex, expansive oppression necessitates consistent, complex, expansive, and caring resistance. Activism cannot be only about tearing down, it must construct and nourish. As I find our world in increasingly dire states of emergency I look to the emergent strategies and protocols of care outlined by the authors highlighted in this text. They overlay messily and unstably, just as I imagine utopia to be.

## *Water*

I am seeking revelatory spaces that may not be universalizable. I find my way to them in channels while I feed bodies of water new(ish) thoughts of my own. I do not think there are pure bodies of water left and must accept that the sites I am drawn to might be polluted, contaminated and yet in order to do this work I have to rely upon all of them. I have to flood myself with these projects that aim to work through and articulate social plagues. By this I mean that we all find different modalities of communication, the streams, and that to search for perfect thought projects will not only be limiting but is an ultimately fruitless pursuit. Instead I think it is necessary to find sites that are compelling, ones that trace and expand our own passions and sensibilities. These may weave their way through public speaking, literature, music, activism, video, art, movement, love, or theory. And it is in these sites that we find the ideologies, tools, and networks to sustain social change and pour this work back into our own channels (interpersonal, professional, individual, and communal).

## *Cruising*

This past week I went to a panel discussion held by NYU Tisch Center for the Arts. It commemorated the re-release of Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* featuring Barbara Browning, Ann Pellegrini, and Nao Bustamante (a simultaneous collection of performance artists/queer theorists/friends of Muñoz). Pellegrini opened the panel discussion by speaking to the recent re-release of

*Cruising Utopia*, drawing out threads of Muñoz and casting them into the room. She viewed social movements as lovers, acknowledging the mis-appointments and disappointments we face with our love objects. Perhaps it is not that we need to give up our excessive reach toward Utopia, she mused, but rather we need to give up the belief that Utopia will be realized. It bears negation in its own naming (meaning no place). It is a not-yet-here time. It is also an already-here time. There is a necessary rejection of the here and now, moving instead to insist on potentiality. She and the other panelists worked to articulate hope in the midst of grieving their lost friend and colleague. She said that Muñoz had left them care instructions in his work. The aim of this thesis has become to identify these instances of care and to weave together varied notions of instructions; the case studies within each explored evoked imaginaries.

In introducing Barbara Browning, Pellegrini read the following from the recent (re)publication:

After Muñoz's death, his friend and colleague Barbara Browning issued a call for people to inscribe the following passage from the book's opening paragraph in a paradigmatic location of queer cruising, the bathroom stall: "Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" People sporadically performed the act in bathrooms or other public spaces (including a bathroom in the department where Muñoz taught), sometimes posting a photo of the transgression (or of the encounter with its written trace) to social media. It circulated in other ways as well: a group of queer activists designed and distributed stickers with the passage printed across Andy Warhol's Silver Clouds (an installation of balloons discussed in the book's eighth chapter). And in a statement to the *Windy City Times* discussing her gender transition, the film director Lilly Wachowski wrote: "I have a quote in my office...by José Muñoz given to me by a good friend. I stare at it in contemplation sometimes trying to decipher its meaning but the last sentence resonates: ' Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.'" (Muñoz 2019: xiii)

There was something striking in the way these theorists engaged with one another and their audience. They joked about the queer art of failure when PowerPoint presentations couldn't play, or about running on "queered time" when they ran in late. Hearing them speak helped me bring the thoughts floating around in my head and on the page back into something more grounded, or at the very least something collectively ungrounded.

In some ways this thesis has answered questions and filled gaps, in others it has only left me with new things to ask myself and those around me. I do know it has reified my commitment to building sustainable futures, both in my mind and on the ground. I have run out of ways to convincingly state that Utopia can be both radical and valuable, so as Barbara Browning says: Let's blow this hamburger joint; better late than never.

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