

A Critique from Within: The Early African American Utopian Tradition and Its Visions
of a Better Society

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Abstract

It should not be surprising that many African-American writers have written in the utopian genre. As novelist Walter Mosley wrote in a 1998 essay titled “Black to the Future,” “Science fiction and its relatives (fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, etc.) ... speak most clearly to those who are dissatisfied with the way things are.” While scholars of African-American literature have paid increasing attention to contemporary speculative fiction (as in studies of Afrofuturism), they have overlooked the utopian precursors found in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In turn, while scholarship on utopian literature has steadily recognized uses of the genre outside of the United States and Europe, it still lacks substantial engagement with African-American utopian writing. My dissertation argues that these utopias comprise a rich archive of texts that engage with the history of racism, discrimination, and inequality in the United States—topics that are too often ignored in traditional utopian literature.

The failure to recognize these texts is a result of their emergence from the semi-periphery of American utopianism. Unable to fully present visions of a better world unique to them, black writers adopted and transformed the desires of white Americans to make their own utopian desires legible to the public. In the process, they offer an immanent critique of American values and suggest how they might be reformulated to bring about a more just society. Specifically, I examine the utopian contributions of three authors: Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and George Schuyler, before concluding with a discussion on reparations as a possible utopian movement for the present.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction – Finding the Origins of African American Utopianism	1
Chapter 1 – The Spirit of Columbia: Phillis Wheatley and the Promise of Liberty	20
Chapter 2 – Frederick Douglass’s Search for the Space of Black Liberation	46
Chapter 3 – George Schuyler and the Black Nationalist Imaginary	85
Chapter 4 – Imagining Reparations	115
Bibliography	142

Introduction: Finding the Origins of African American Utopianism

In the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born.¹

Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*

Utopian expressions shape the way we think about the future. As representations of better possible futures, they have the potential to convince us that alternatives to the present are possible and motivate us to invest time and energy in attempting to bring them into reality. Collectively, the various forms that these expressions can take—as literature, political programs, and intentional communities—form our utopian imaginary: the set of representations of the possibilities for human life.² While we are not deterministically contained within that set, its effect is most pronounced on the epistemic level—our utopian imagination defines our horizons of possibility, leading us to distinguish between representations of the future worth investing in and those that should be dismissed as forms of escapism.

Utopia has been defined in more restrictive ways, but I prefer a capacious definition that helps us recognize the many conflicts and contradictions inherent in our desires to make the world better. Describing something as utopian involves defining what “better” means from a specific time, place, and perspective. Therefore, utopia can only be understood in tension with something that has been described as “worse.” No utopia is universally valid—there will always be a possible perspective, no matter how extreme or

¹ Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Beacon Press, 2002.

² I take this tripartite definition and division of utopianism from the indispensable: Sargent, Lyman Tower. “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): pp. 1-37.

unlikely, that contradicts what is generally assumed or agreed upon (imagine, for example, a male chauvinist's reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a model for an ideal society). As Fredric Jameson writes:

All our images of Utopia, all possible images of Utopia, will always be ideological and distorted by a point of view which cannot be corrected or even accounted for ... there is no such correct Utopia.

Claiming that there is no correct utopia is challenging because it necessitates recognizing the fundamentally subjective nature of our desires. Why do we want to live in a world without sexism and racism? A utopian perspective insists that this desire should not be taken for granted: it is a position that needs to be argued and defended, especially considering how pervasive these forms of discrimination are throughout the world. By explaining what makes our utopia “better” we are forced to admit and examine our own positionality, which allows for a more substantive critique of our desires for the future.

Unfortunately, the utility of this approach has been undermined by the limitations of what scholars have considered to be utopian expressions. While the field of utopian studies has made significant progress in broadening its archive, more needs to be done to recognize the diversity and variety of utopian desires in our society. After all, in my three years as an undergraduate and two years in a master's program, I never read a utopian text by a non-white author. This was not because these texts did not exist—but because they were not present in my intellectual world and I never made the effort to go find them. They were not in the syllabi of classes I took and only sparsely represented in the programs of the Utopian Studies conferences I attended and journals I read. My

introduction to African American literature, through a course on the Harlem Renaissance taught by John Wright, led me to discover the African American utopian tradition—composed of luminaries like Frederick Douglass, Pauline Hopkins, and W.E.B. Du Bois but also lesser known figures like Edward Johnson and Sutton Griggs. These texts were not of inferior quality—their representations of utopia were inspiring, challenging, and thoughtful. Yet, their desires for a better possible future were often profoundly different from those offered by white authors. One of the most significant differences between these two traditions is that African American utopias almost always emerged out of conflict. Rather than depicting the fortuitous discovery of a utopian society located in an exotic time or place, African American utopias displayed a recognition that a better possible future could only emerge in conflict with the forces making the world worse: slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and so on.³ They have had a similar effect on my utopian imagination by challenging my preconceptions about utopia and expanding my imagination about what our possible future could and should be.

My dissertation contributes to this expansion by highlighting the utopianism of three African American writers, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and George Schuyler, from what I term the early period of African American utopianism (the mid eighteenth-century to the early twentieth century). Specifically, I argue that they were able to represent their visions of a better possible future within a utopian imaginary dominated by European and white American utopias. They were able to accomplish this by expressing their utopian desires in subversive ways, taking up dimensions of those

³ There are some notable exceptions: Hopkins, Pauline. *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*, Washington Square Press, 2004; and Johnson, Edward. *Light Ahead for the Negro*, Grafton Press, 1904.

already existing utopias and transforming them to include the desires for a better future expressed by black people. As a result, these three authors critiqued and exceeded the horizon of white progressive politics while helping us understand what it means to imagine a better present from a marginalized perspective (a perspective that is in no way limited to African Americans).

My intervention is necessary because the stories being told about utopia in the United States still reflect the early years of my education. Take, for instance, Chris Jennings's 2016 book, *Paradise Now: A Story of American Utopianism*. He tells the story of five utopian communities that formed during the nineteenth-century with the hope that they could contribute to expanding our present day utopian imaginary.⁴ As he writes:

It is difficult to linger amid the ruins of [nineteenth-century utopian] hopes without sensing a deficit in our own time, a way in which their story mocks us. In the company of these strange, familiar Americans, we might revive their essential question: What sort of a future do we want?

His pursuit is worthwhile; he helps us recognize that these communities, which were often ridiculed or stereotyped by skeptics, were attempting to solve economic, social, and personal problems that continue to plague us today. By taking their answers seriously and considering why they envisioned their futures as better than the present, we can expand our knowledge of “futures past”: alternatives to our present envisioned by people in the

⁴ He focuses on the nineteenth-century because it was a period of intense utopian longing and experimentation. Ralph Waldo Emerson characterized the nineteenth-century American as: “Not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community in his waistcoat pocket.” See further, “Emerson to Carlyle, Concord, 30 October 1840,” *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872, Volume 1*, Gutenberg Project, pp. 138.

past that can help us denaturalize the present.⁵ Yet, it is precisely this potential function that makes me harp on the major problem with Jennings's study—it only includes white people! Claiming to be tracing the origins of utopianism in North America, he begins his book with Mother Ann Lee, the founder of a Shaker colony in the 1790s, whose religious community represented the start of “a long, sunny, season of American utopianism.”⁶ His story of American utopianism then takes him through four other intentional communities, all influenced by the ideas of white Europeans.

Putting aside the existence of William and Jane Pease's *Black Utopias: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, which was published in 1963, Jennings might excuse himself by arguing that his reference to utopianism is not to a broad definition of utopia as desire, a definition I use throughout my dissertation, but instead to an intellectual and literary tradition that began in Europe. After all, the communities he covers draw their influence from European figures like Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Anne Lee, and Étienne Cabet and he argues that the American utopian tradition primarily comes out of a fusion of two European ideas: “the Judeo-Christian proposition that history is bookended by golden ages” and the Enlightenment proposition “that the human race is advancing ineluctably toward a perfection of our own making.”⁷ Yet, these propositions do not hold up under scrutiny, as it becomes clear that what holds them

⁵ As David Scott writes, seemingly unwittingly reproducing Jameson's definition of utopia: “many studies of revolutionary discontent have failed to adequately understand the role of new concepts of *generating* social discontent. This is because they have mistakenly focused on the way these concepts define *alternatives* to the present social limitations *rather* than on the way they shape our understanding of these limitations themselves” (5). See further: Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Duke University Press, 2004.

⁶ Jennings, Chris. *Paradise Now: A Story of American Utopianism*, Random House, 2016, pp. xv.

⁷ *Paradise Now*, pp. 4.

together is not their shared origins in the minds of Europeans, but their transformation in North America.

The utopians in *Paradise Now* expressed the desire for a better world in new forms, appropriate to the particularity of North America. They might have called themselves by European terms, but Jennings leaves little doubt that they were profoundly American. Take, for instance, the story of Alfred Brisbane, the major champion of Fourier's ideas in North America. In the process of translating his ideas to a North American context, he recognized that Fourier's text had to be changed to appease the sensitivities of his audience: "[Brisbane] knew that if Fourier's theory was going to gain traction in the United States certain adjustments had to be made ... He diligently pasteurized the French texts of their more lurid digressions about supertonic orgies and baby doll types. Hundreds of pages ... were left untranslated." The resulting text was a guide to founding a Fourierist Phalanx that was far more detailed and useful than "anything that Fourier himself had written." While we can call Brisbane a Fourierist for the sake of intellectual tradition, we also have to admit that Fourier's work was significantly changed by Brisbane's desire for a better possible future and the new context in which Brisbane found himself. As Jennings writes, "Countless people on both sides of the Atlantic believed that a new and wondrous society was about to take form in the American wilderness."⁸ Telling a story of the origins of utopianism in North America without reckoning with the role that non-white people played in giving American

⁸ *Paradise Now*, pp. 179, 3.

wilderness its utopian potential occludes their role in the unique intensity of “utopian longing and utopian experimentation” during the middle of the nineteenth-century.

While I am picking on Jennings’s book, he is hardly unique in overlooking the diverse origins of American utopianism.⁹ He is part of a well-established tradition in utopian studies. Mark Holloway, who wrote the earliest study of intentional communities in the United States, viewed utopia as a “quixotic” idea that “began ages ago in ancient Europe” and argued that the American utopian tradition could be traced back to Thomas More and from him back to ancient Greece: “Greek influence—that of Plato—was almost entirely responsible for the proposals contained in St. Thomas More’s *Utopia*.”¹⁰ Similar assessments were made by early scholars of utopian literature, like John Reilly who wrote in 1978 that “there is ... no fully developed Afro-American literary utopia,” a claim that was demonstrably false at the time.¹¹ William Nichols and Charles P. Henry, writing in the same year, go even further, arguing that “Afro-American literature has never had any significant utopian dimension ... efforts to imagine a more perfect society in America have been almost uniformly innocent of race as a social and political force.”¹² Some

⁹ The two most recent books offering a history of American utopianism make the same choice: see, Reece, Erik. *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip Through America’s Most Radical Idea*, Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016; and Robertson, Michael. *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and Their Legacy*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

¹⁰ Holloway, Mark. *Heaven’s on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1680-1880*, Dover Publications, 1966, pp. 20, 24.

¹¹ Reilly, John. “The Utopian Impulse in Early Afro-American Fiction,” *Alternative Futures: The Journal of Utopian Studies* 1.3 (1978): 59. A list of the major African American literary utopias written before 1978: Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave* (1852), Martin Delany’s *Blake; Or, The Huts of America* (1859), Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1902), Edward Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904), W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* (1928), George Schuyler’s *Black Empire* (1936), Samuel Delany’s *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976), and Octavia Butler’s Patternist series (published in 1976, 1977, and 1978).

¹² Nichols, William, and Charles P. Henry. “Imagining a Future in America: A Racial Perspective,” *Alternative Futures: The Journal of Utopian Studies* 1.1 (1978): 39.

scholars have gone so far as to assert that “nothing like the western utopia and utopian traditions exists in any non-western or non-Christian culture.”¹³

In the African American context, these arguments are especially troubling because they appear to reproduce the propaganda peddled by conservative postbellum historians who sought to depict slavery as a benign (if not educational) system in which Africans benefitted from exposure to Western society.¹⁴ In this narrative, black people were portrayed as unable or unwilling to present their own visions of a better world that differed from the narrative of progress in the United States. It took the work of many historians during the twentieth century to amend this view, demonstrating that slaves not only rebelled against slavery but also developed their own utopian desires about American society.¹⁵ Yet, the effects of this false history can still be seen in the distinction between utopian studies and the emerging fields of Afrofuturism and black speculative fiction, which almost exclusively focuses on texts written in the last fifty years.

These latter fields generally avoid using the term “utopia” to describe the texts being studied.¹⁶ While there might be formal similarities, scholars insist that the genres

¹³ Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Basil Blackwell, 1987, 424.

¹⁴ In the words of Ulrich Phillips, “The plantations ... were the best schools yet invented for the mass training of that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American negroes represented” (*American Negro Slavery*, LSU Press, 1966, 342-43). The popularization of this view was not limited to historians; see the literary work of Thomas Dixon and Margaret Mitchell. It also continues to be pushed by fringe academics today and politicians protesting against the removal of confederate monuments. See further: Kenney, James Ronald and Walter Donald Kennedy, *The South Was Right!*, Pelican Publishing, 1994.

¹⁵ See, for instance: Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, Harcourt Brace, 1935; Herskovitz, Melville. *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Harper & Brothers, 1941; Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*, International Publishers, 1983, Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, Oxford University Press, 1979; Berry, Mary Frances and John Blassingame. *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*, Oxford University Press, 1982.

¹⁶ For some exceptions, see: Fabi, M. Giulia. *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*, University of Illinois Press, 2005; Vandal, Gilles. “Black Utopia in Early Reconstruction New Orleans: The People’s Bakery as a Case-Study,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*

are fundamentally different. As Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman argue, the black speculative imagination draws “upon non-Western cosmologies to interrogate and critique current conditions of Black and other people of color,” meaning that they do not significantly draw on the tradition of white utopianism.¹⁷ Of the scholars who do refer to African American or black utopias, most insist that the two traditions are separate: John Bracey Jr. and August Meier refer to Afrocentricity as a utopian moment, but argue that it “served to create a utopia that could not be found in the United States” and was thus an “invention of tradition.”¹⁸ Most recently, Alex Zamalin argued in his 2019 book, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea From Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, that “Black utopians and antiutopians engaged in a unique form of utopian theorizing, unlike that of the European tradition.”¹⁹ Even Paul Gilroy, excludes the western utopian tradition from his expansive coverage of the black Atlantic:

In the revolutionary eschatology which helps to define this primal history of modernity, whether apocalyptic or redemptive, it is the moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means ... The repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principle

38.4 (1997): pp. 437-452; Shor, Francis. “Utopian Aspirations in the Black Freedom Movement: SNCC and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1960-1965,” *Utopian Studies* 15.2 (2004): 173-189; Chan, Edward and Patricia Ventura (eds). *Race and Desire in American Literature and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Columbia University Press, 2019.

¹⁷ Jackson, Sandra and Julie Moody-Freeman (eds.). *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculative*, Routledge, 2010, pp. 3.

¹⁸ Bracey, John H. Jr. and August Meier. “Black Ideologies, Black Utopias: Afrocentricity in Historical Perspective” *Contributions in Black Studies* 12.13 (1994): pp. 111-116. They take the idea of an invented tradition from: Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

¹⁹ Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea From Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Columbia University Press, 2019.

of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking.²⁰

While this work makes a valuable contribution by uncovering the multitude of ways in which black Americans have contributed to shaping our utopian imaginary, I argue that we should recognize the specifically utopian character of this tradition. By recognizing the entanglements between white and black representations of better possible futures, we can recognize that black speculative fiction was being written from the very beginning of the United States.

To do so, we must alter the way that we think about utopia. As Jacqueline Dutton and Lyman Tower Sargent wrote in 2013, “it is necessary to *reframe* western definitions of utopia in order to take into account the parallel existence of utopianism in other cultural traditions.”²¹ I draw inspiration for my reframing from a short essay written by Sylvia Wynter in 1979, in which she defines a new subgenre: the semi-peripheral utopia. She uses the term in reference to *Sinapia*, the first Spanish utopia written in 1682, to reflect “Spain’s semi-peripheral relation to European countries such as France, Holland, [and] England.” As latecomers to the utopian genre, Spanish writers and thinkers were heavily influenced by the utopian traditions of these latter countries:

²⁰ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

²¹ Dutton, Jacqueline and Lyman Tower Sargent. “Introduction: Utopias from Other Cultural Traditions,” *Utopian Studies* 24.1 (2013): 2-5. For more utopian scholarship that is attempting to analyze the relationship between race and utopia in the American context, see: Chan, Edward. “Utopia and the Problem of Race: Accounting for the Remainder in the Imagination of the 1970s Utopian Subject,” *Utopian Studies* 17.3 (2006): 465-490; Kilgore, De Witt Douglass. *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003; Strauss, Sylvia. “Gender, Class, and Race in Utopia,” In *Looking Backward, 1888-1888; Essays on Edward Bellamy*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

The utopian imagination in the semi-periphery must confront the empirical existence of superior models of social transformation in the core countries, models which constrain its projections, preventing it from postulating an autonomous and wholly other system.

Wynter argues that *Sinapia* does not mark the beginning of distinctly Spanish utopian tradition because the “referential sub-text of the utopian discourse of *Sinapia* — i.e., the social reality from which it takes its departure” refers “at the same time to eighteenth-century Spain, to the core countries, and to the *relation* between them.”²² In other words, *Sinapia*’s indebtedness to the superior utopian models found in other countries prevents the expression of a uniquely Spanish desire for a better world. Wynter argues that this is constitutive of the semi-peripheral utopia, a subgenre that reflects the uneven development of the utopian imagination.

I use the phrase “uneven development” to make clear that we should not interpret Wynter’s reference to the superiority of non-peripheral utopias as implying that they offer a better possible future than those expressed from the semi-periphery. Rather, the reference to superiority is a recognition of the hegemony that a utopian tradition, in this case that of England and France, can exert over utopian expressions emerging from a completely different context. For the many people that she characterizes as the “utopian fictional Other” of the semi-periphery, engaging with existing models made it easier to

²² Wynter, Sylvia. “Utopia from the Semi-Periphery: Spain, Modernization, and the Enlightenment,” *Science Fiction Studies* 6.1 (1979): pp. 100, 102, 105. As Wynter explains in her essay, she takes the term semi-peripheral from the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, as theorized in *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, Academic Press, 1976.

make their visions of a better world legible to the center. Crucially, as Wynter notes in her discussion of *Sinapia*, the result of this influence is not a crude imitation; it is precisely its semi-peripheral context that produces the originality of its critiques: “The utopian ‘development’ plan of *Sinapia* projects a model which ... can incorporate selected aspects of [the Enlightenment]” without displacing “traditional institutions” like the Church resulting in a world in which capitalism is rejected in favor of “technocratic/bureaucratic bourgeoisie” that bring about “intellectual and imaginative autarchy” for all its people.²³

In the following three chapters, I use Wynter’s term to unearth an early African American utopian tradition, one that was compelled to work through the “superior” models of transformation found in the United States. Specifically, I argue that each author engages with a component of American utopianism (liberty, property, and empire) to offer an immanent critique of their contradictions. To be clear, I am not arguing that European thought was the only influence on black people’s desires for a better possible world in North America.²⁴ My argument is more analytical than taxonomic: Wynter’s term helps us identify the utopianism of African Americans who might have otherwise been occluded because they hewed too closely to mainstream values. From their position in the semi-periphery, the writers in my dissertation applied pressure on the stated values of the United States and pushed the country toward a more radical and egalitarian vision

²³ While Wynter’s review focuses on the Spanish case, she does offer a group of other people who could fall into this category: “the Chinese, the Persians, the Blacks, the Mohammedans.”

²⁴ There are many studies that demonstrate the falseness of this claim. See, in particular, Berry, Mary Frances and John Blassingame. *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*, Oxford University Press, 1982.

of its own possible future. In the process, they expanded the utopian imaginary of their contemporaries and have the potential to do the same for us today, considering how understudied African American utopianism continues to be.

Expanding our utopian imaginaries is especially important now, as our world feels increasingly like it is heading in a dystopian direction, toward one of many possible worse futures. Certainly, this feeling is amplified by the fact that I am finishing my dissertation while quarantined in my apartment as a global pandemic reshapes our society in unprecedented ways. But there are many reasons to feel this way. As income inequality soars, economic segregation has created upper-class enclaves from which the rich can escape any social problem facing the general population. The unrelenting pollution of the earth, only accompanied by a rise in meaningless government gestures, leads us closer to an environmental tipping point from which no amount of human ingenuity will rescue us. Meanwhile, the two superpowers of the twenty-first century, holding a nuclear arsenal with the potential to destroy all human life many times over, are operating concentration camps for minorities within their borders with little more than token resistance from their own citizens. While the dystopian flavor of the moment is a matter of debate; it is remarkable that despite the intense political polarization of the present most people largely agree that the world is going to shit and we need new solutions to the problems of the twenty-first century.²⁵

In these moments, utopian expressions can play an important role. While so much of the present pushes us toward despair, the belief in a better world can give us hope that

²⁵ Apart, it seems, from the Democratic Party establishment.

things might change. We see this potential at work in the political world through Democratic Socialist candidates, the environmental radicalism of groups like Extinction Rebellion, and the resurgence of strikes by teachers throughout the United States. Particularly compelling utopias can bring people together on a mass scale and heighten their power during hopeless times—they stand out like an oasis in a desert. Yet, not all utopian expressions are positive. In his invocation of a return to the racially homogenous past of the United States, President Donald Trump is using a utopian expression to unite an otherwise disparate group of angry and alienated people. While many of us likely find this possible future to be dystopian, it clearly appeals to the millions of people who support him and his government. Trump is certainly not unique in his nefarious use of utopian rhetoric, but he provides me with a particularly compelling illustration of the necessity of challenging people’s utopian imaginary by offering them better and more compelling possibilities for the future.

Part of this challenge is recognizing that at its most basic level utopia is the desire for a better present.²⁶ While utopian expressions are often set in a distant time or place, their purpose is to help us see how the present could be better than it is. The shape of these expressions, their form and content, reflect the unfulfilled desires of the present.²⁷ Centering desire in my definition allows us to think about utopia analytically, rather than

²⁶ My understanding of utopia owes a lot of Ruth Levitas’s work. I adapt this definition from her work: “utopia is the desire for a better way of being and living” (*Concept 10*).

²⁷ As Ernst Bloch writes, “Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment . . . we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness” (*The Principle of Hope*, MIT Press, 1995, 12).

taxonomically.²⁸ In other words, I am not trying to define utopia, to draw clear boundaries around what is and is not utopian.²⁹ Rather, I think that attending to the variety of desires for a better present in our society can help us distinguish between utopia and escapism.

Escapism is the ugly underbelly of utopia; the lurking danger that our desires will mislead us or lead us to waste our time in flights of fancy. Ernst Bloch terms it “fraudulent hope,” a powerful image that emphasizes how easily utopianism can be used for negative purposes:

Thus manipulated, these images can be held down and misused, coloured pink and with blood ... [they appear as] a beautifying mirror which often only reflects how the ruling class wishes the wishes of the weak to be.³⁰

A compelling representation of a better future, such as the afterlife or retirement, can be an effective way to stem resistance to injustice in the present as many successful capitalists know. Donald Trump is an obvious example of utopianism being used for evil, but there are many more subtle examples. Advertising, for instance, cravenly uses our desire for a better world to sell products. Coca-Cola has started touting its commitment to sustainable packaging on its website as part of an initiative to help deal

²⁸ As Ruth Levitas writes, “[a] definition of utopia in terms of desire is analytic rather than descriptive. It generates a method which is primarily hermeneutic but which repeatedly returns us from existential and aesthetic concerns to the social and structural domain” (*Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, xiii).

²⁹ For the best taxonomy of utopia, see: Sargent, Lyman Tower. “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1-37. Sargent also created the most thorough bibliography of utopian literature in English. See: Sargent, Lyman Tower. *Utopian Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography from 1516 to the Present*, Penn State Libraries Open Publishing, 2016 and continuing.

<https://doi.org/10.18113/P8WC77>. For the best ontological approach to utopia, I would still point to Ernst Bloch’s work: Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*, MIT Press, 1986; and Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*, Stanford University Press, 2000.

³⁰ *Principle of Hope*, pp. 13.

with climate change and pollution. While we might share the desire for less trash in our oceans, we can also recognize this as a publicity stunt meant to distract from the number of plastic bottles it produces every year (110 billion a year, according to Greenpeace).³¹ The hypocrisy of their branding reveals their limited utopian horizon. They desire to be seen as an environmentally responsible corporation while continuing to sell flavored sugar-water in plastic bottles throughout the world. Coca-Cola, and other companies engaging in “greenwashing” (i.e. branding themselves to seem environmentally conscious), exploit our desire for a quick fix.³² They want us to believe that we can contribute to making the world a better place simply by buying the right products.

Advertisers are not successful in selling “greenwashed” products because we are stupid. Their success is an effect of living in a world of limited choices in which radical desires have been domesticated and redirected toward consumption. It reflects our diminished utopian imaginary and thus our lack of hope in the possibility of a radically new future. As a result, the ease of ethical consumerism is too appealing and powerful to ignore, even if we recognize our participation in a largely unjust economic system that rewards exploitation and allows for violence against people and the environment. In contrast, projects like universal health care or prison abolition may appeal to many people

³¹ Greenpeace International. “Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestle found to be worst plastic polluters worldwide in global cleanups and brand audits,” *Greenpeace*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/18872/coca-cola-pepsico-and-nestle-found-to-be-worst-plastic-polluters-worldwide-in-global-cleanups-and-brand-audits/>. For more on Coca-Cola’s efforts to brand themselves as environmentally responsible, see: “Sustainable Packaging,” *The Coca-Cola Company*, Accessed on January 7, 2020, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/sustainable-business/packaging-sustainability>.

³² For more on “greenwashing,” see: Dahl, Richard. “Green Washing: Do You Know What You’re Buying?” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 118.6 (2010): 247-252. I was first introduced to this idea by my colleague, Joy Hamilton.

on an intellectual level but never motivate any action given how impossible to realize they may seem. While it is easy to say that we identify more closely with the better worlds envisioned of the latter projects, we are more likely to engage with desires that appear to us to be possible. Our utopian horizon reflects the limits of our imaginations. An analytic definition of utopia allows us to be self-critical of these limits.

This feels contradictory—how can we be critical of the limitations to our own imagination? It is relatively easy to recognize that I lack a piece of specific knowledge, but much harder to recognize my inability to imagine something I don't even dimly perceive. Yet, it is here again that we benefit from a diversity of utopian expressions. New representations of a possible better future have the potential to expand my imagination. When those representations come from people whose experiences of the world are different from mine, they can have a more pronounced effect, uncovering desires for the future and frustrations with the present that may have otherwise eluded me.

The African American writers whom I study in my dissertation use the literary form of utopia to expand our imagination about better worlds, challenging the political and economic foundation of American society while offering an inspirational model for activism and revolution. This function does not make them unique; a similar argument could be made for almost any utopian text. The importance of black utopias is that the perspectives and social positions of their authors give them a different insight into the desires for a better world than those held by most white authors. As Mari Matsuda writes, “those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we

should listen. Looking to the bottom—adopting the perspective of those who have seen and felt the falsity of the liberal promise—can assist critical scholars.”³³ By paying attention to African American desires for a better world, we can better understand how our desires for a better present have failed to address the needs and wants of non-white people. In other words, by looking outside of ourselves we can find the limitations to our utopian imagination and correct the fraudulent elements of our own desires for the future.

In the first chapter, I argue that Phillis Wheatley invests the figure of Columbia with a utopian critique of the concept of liberty deployed by revolutionaries, illustrating the hypocrisy of fighting a war for freedom while protecting the institution of slavery. In the second chapter, I argue that Frederick Douglass offers a critique of property as emancipatory, exposing the racist foundation of Thomas Jefferson’s utopian vision of a country of yeoman farmers living on their own land. In the final literary chapter, I argue that George Schuyler exposes the dangers of both white imperialist and black nationalist utopias, arguing that they uncritically adopt a vision of the United States as a utopia that should spread its desires for justice throughout the world. I contend that each of these three critiques is effective precisely because they are utopias from the semi-periphery. Rather than directly critique condition in the present, they focused their critique on the desires of the present. In doing so, they demonstrate the impact that African American utopianism has had in correcting, bolstering, and reinvigorating the American utopian tradition. As liberty, property, and empire were taken for granted in the United States, it was African Americans that brought the unfinished nature of those desires back into the

³³ Matsuda, Mari. “Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations,” *Harvard C.R.-C.L. Law Review* 323.22 (1987): pp. 324.

public conversation. My final chapter will move to the present and argue that the movement for black reparations holds the potential to be a contemporary expression of utopia from the semi-periphery. While the discourse on reparations has taken many different forms, I argue that it can offer a critique of racial capitalism and show how we might reimagine our economy around our desires for a better possible world rather than the accumulation of profits. In the process, I hope to offer a fuller theory of the utopian semi-periphery that could apply beyond the African American context. If, as Louis Marin argues, utopias are an ideological critique of ideology, then I hope to show how utopias from the semi-periphery are a utopian critique of utopia.

Chapter 1: The Spirit of Columbia: Phillis Wheatley and the Promise of Liberty

A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision, her own room, her own house where she sits at her own table quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into the singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: at liberty. A poet is someone free. A poet is someone at home. How should there be Black poets in America?³⁴

June Jordan, 1986

She feeds on truths and uncreated things.³⁵

Phillis Wheatley, 1773

In a 1941 address at Fisk University, W.E.B. Du Bois told a story about a woman he called Phillis the Blessed. He was referring to Phillis Wheatley, whom he considered to be blessed by her elevated position within American society despite being a slave. Arriving in North America at the age of seven, she was purchased by John and Susanna Wheatley, who treated her far better than their other slaves, providing her with “security and affection, with education beyond her status, [and] by contact with cultured folk.” These comforts, coupled with her natural genius, led her to learn how to read in English, Greek, and Latin and write poetry. With Susanna’s help, she published her first poem, simply entitled “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin,” at the age of thirteen.³⁶ Despite being a black female slave, Phillis Wheatley quickly became a sensation in Boston and England and reaped the advantages of her blessings: she was commissioned to write poems for many prominent Bostonians; was mentored by Mather Byles, one of the most prominent

³⁴ Jordan, June. “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, 252.

³⁵ Wheatley, Phillis. “To a Gentleman and Lady on the Death of the Lady’s Brother and Sister, and a Child of the Name *Avis*, aged one Year,” *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, Garland Publishing, 1984, 226.

³⁶ Brindenbaugh, Carl. “The Earliest-Published Poem of Phillis Wheatley,” *New England Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 583-84.

contemporary poets in North America; and made an acclaimed tour of London at the age of twenty. Through her very existence, Phillis Wheatley posed a contradiction to the racial order of the eighteenth-century.

Yet, as the early reception of her poetry attests, her existence was not enough to disrupt that order. Outside of her circle of acquaintances, many of her contemporaries either believed that she had not written the poems in question or that, as Thomas Jefferson wrote, they were “below the dignity of criticism” and should not be viewed as artistic.³⁷ In response, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, a book of Wheatley’s poems published in 1773, contained a prefatory letter authored by John Wheatley and signed by sixteen other prominent white men assuring readers that she was the actual author of the poems in question. The letter *authorized* Phillis Wheatley, in the double sense of providing permission for the book’s publication and authenticating her status as an author for disbelieving readers. She had spent almost a year trying to publish her book of poetry before obtaining this letter; without it, it is likely that her work would never have been brought to press.³⁸

³⁷ Jefferson’s view of Wheatley was not an exception. He expressed a general belief that black people could not produce art. As he wrote, “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.” (Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, University of Virginia Library, John O’Brien and Brad Pasanek (eds.), pp. 234. Accessed online at <http://notes.scholarslab.org>). Even Bernard Romans, a contemporary who praised Wheatley as “the Phoenix of her race,” argued that he “could bring at least twenty well known instances of the contrary effect of education on this sable generation.” Qtd in. Robinson, William. *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Biography*. G.K. Hall, 1981, 101.

³⁸ The need for this kind of authorizing letter is not unique to Wheatley—they accompany the vast majority of published writing by slaves and black people before the Civil War. For more on Wheatley’s efforts to get her book published, see Vincent Caretta’s *Phillis Wheatley: A Genius in Bondage*, University of Georgia Press, 2011, pp. 139-171. While it is possible that Wheatley’s gender played a role in her struggle to bring her poetry to print, the publication of American women poets like Anne Bradstreet, Martha Wadsworth Brewster, and Jane Colman Turell suggests that her race and enslavement were the primary factors that limited her access to printing.

This letter makes clear the contradictory position Phillis Wheatley held in Boston. The list of signatories (including the governor and vice-governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony) is evidence of her access to upper-class Boston society. As William Robinson writes, Susanna Wheatley “eagerly circulated Phillis’s growing reputation by arranging for the [her] to visit and be visited by the most prominent ministers and merchants, and politicians [in Boston].”³⁹ At the same time, the letter continuously makes clear that she holds a subservient position in that society. She is portrayed by John Wheatley as “an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa* ... under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town.”⁴⁰ In case that was not clear enough, he concludes the letter by affirming his status as “her Master who bought her, and with whom she now lives.”⁴¹

As a result of this compromised position, many early readings of Phillis Wheatley argued that her poetry was too rooted, either consciously or subconsciously, within the ideology of her time. James Weldon Johnson, whose 1922 anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* contains the first major critical appraisal of Wheatley’s poetry, views her work through this lens: “one looks in vain for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about her native land.”⁴² While he acknowledges that she is an important poet, he decries her poetry’s lack of radicalism.

³⁹ Robinson, William. “On Phillis Wheatley and her Boston,” in *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 23.

⁴⁰ “To the Publick.” In *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, Edited by John Shields, Oxford UP, 1988. There is a degree of fetishization of her blackness in this quote as well.

⁴¹ “To the Publick.”

⁴² Johnson, James Weldon. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, The Floating Press, 2008, pp. 31.

In contrast, Du Bois offered the first recuperative reading of Phillis Wheatley. Rather than focus on her lack of explicit complaints against slavery and racism, he directs his audience to read between the lines and try to recognize all the things she could not say:

Her deep sense of religion and evangelical patois veiled her more human soul to us as it did to Thomas Jefferson. Yet within must have bloomed and sung a world of Phantasy. It is these imagined visions of Phillis ... that made her Phillis the Blessed. There was in [her] just the suggestion—not more—of something fey, wild and elemental, sternly repressed, confined so that the inner soul never burst through, only the transmuted echo—refined (she loved the word), not crude, not brash.

While he begins with a snipe at critical readers by comparing them to Thomas Jefferson, his point is to illustrate the layers of mystification preventing us from seeing Wheatley's utopian imagination. Her visions for a possible better future, a life beyond the attic in which she wrote, are hidden behind a fundamental repression that underlies everything about her, from her devotion to Susanna and Christianity to her use of European, and specifically British, forms and styles. This repression is an effect of Wheatley's blessedness. On one hand, her elevated position in Boston is what allowed her to write and publish her poetry, making it available for us to read today. On the other hand, those blessings make it nearly impossible to imagine that we are reading Wheatley's unfiltered, or even relatively honest, portrayal of desires for life in North America. As a result, Du Bois argues for a negative reading of Wheatley: "Only her phantasy was real, only her

dreams were true.” Only by reading into the absences in her archive, do we have the ability to see past the transmuted echo of her poetry and grasp her inner soul.⁴³

While his essay is rarely cited, Du Bois’s method for reading Wheatley is now standard for the group of critics that emerged in the twentieth century to recuperate her poetic reputation.⁴⁴ Given the conventionality of the forms, themes, and styles used by Wheatley, they argue that she subverted them to express a “strategic, subtle, and veiled” critique of slavery and white supremacy.⁴⁵ These readings of Wheatley are valuable—they continue to produce insights into her poetic innovations—but they feel less significant today given the extensive biographical evidence we have on Wheatley’s opposition to slavery. In her correspondence with Obour Tanner, a close friend, and Scipio Moorhead, a fellow black slave and artist, Wheatley repeatedly expressed frustration at racial discrimination and decried slavery as an unjust and inhumane institution. Most famously, in a widely published 1774 letter to Samson Occom, a Native American preacher with whom she was acquainted, Wheatley invoked the discourse of natural rights to argue against slavery: “in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance.”⁴⁶ Clearly, Phillis Wheatley recognized the hypocrisy of white Bostonians

⁴³ Du Bois, W.E.B. “A Vision of Phillis the Blessed,” *A W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, Macmillan, 1971, pp. 98. This essay by Du Bois anticipates Saidiya Hartman’s method of “critical fabulation.” However, as I write in the following paragraph, the huge expansion in our archive of sources undercuts the radicalism of Hartman’s approach today. See further: Hartman, Saidiya, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12.2, pp. 11.

⁴⁴ I had never heard of this essay, nor seen it cited in any of the essays that I read for this chapter, before having it sent to me by Dr. John Wright.

⁴⁵ Reising, Russell. *Loose Ends: Closure and Critics in the American Social Text*, Duke UP, 1996, pp. 258.

⁴⁶ Wheatley, Phillis. “Letter to Samson Occom.” 11 Feb. 1774, in *The Collected Works*, pp. 177.

who argued for liberty and freedom from England while owning slaves themselves.⁴⁷ As a result, speculating about what Wheatley might or might not have thought about has lost the radical force it held in Du Bois's speech.⁴⁸

As a result, my chapter takes a different approach to Phillis Wheatley's utopianism. Rather than read against the grain and produce another analysis of all the things she did not say, I argue that her most significant contribution to the African American utopian tradition is found in her use of the figure of Columbia: a representation of the United States adapted from the Roman goddess of Liberty that was becoming increasingly popular by the end of the eighteenth-century. Yet, Wheatley's depiction differed from those of her contemporaries in a significant way. Rather than celebrating the United States as the land of liberty, Wheatley used the image of Columbia to celebrate the country's aspirational values. In other words, she transformed Columbia from an escapist representation of the United States as an ideal society to a utopian representation of the country's potential. The difference is subtle, but important, and shows the semi-peripheral character of Wheatley's utopianism. Facing the superior model of social transformation offered by American revolutionaries and European philosophers, she contributed to expanding the concept of liberty from a limited to a universal right in

⁴⁷ As William Robinson writes: "It can be easily shown that almost every identifiable white person in Phillis's writings—politicians, ministers, merchants, Tories, Whigs—owned one or more black slaves or servants" ("On Phillis Wheatley's Poetry," in *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, 108).

⁴⁸ Another negative consequence is that, as Astrid Franke writes, Wheatley's poetry is transformed in a "battleground, where creative agency is reduced to a single consideration, the artist's complicity with or subversion of racist discourses." See further: Franke, Astrid. "Phillis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse," *The New England Quarterly* 77.2, pp. 225.

the public imagination, facilitating the appropriation of Columbia and liberty by abolitionists and suffragists in the nineteenth-century.⁴⁹

While my reading of Wheatley's utopianism differs from the method Du Bois describes, I am still indebted to him for offering a clue to this much less speculative dimension of her poetry. At the beginning and the end of his address, he describes Wheatley using a verse from a Dante Rossetti poem: "And the stars in her hair were seven." He does not make the comparison explicitly, but the parallel is unmistakable. Du Bois draws an analogy between Wheatley and Columbia through the figure of the Statue of Liberty: a female goddess with seven points on her crown whose inscription calls to the tired, poor, and huddled masses "yearning to breathe free."⁵⁰ In turn, Wheatley plays a similar role for African American artists. The seven stars in her hair offer "points of utter light, upward toward which strove little unborn souls." From her position as primogenitor of the African American literary tradition, she "yearned down from heaven to earth, striving to lift the soul of a people."

Building on Du Bois's reading of Wheatley, I argue that Wheatley's representation of Columbia marks the birth of the African American utopian tradition and makes clear the semi-peripheral character of its origins. While she was unable to offer distinct visions of possible better worlds, she was able to appropriate a central image of American utopianism and use it to make visible her utopian desire for a better version of

⁴⁹ Wynter, Sylvia. "Utopia from the Semi-Periphery: Spain, Modernization, and the Enlightenment," *Science Fiction Studies* 6.1 (1979): pp. 100.

⁵⁰ The inscription features a poem from Emma Lazarus that famously reads: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... I lift my lamp beside the golden door." See further: Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus," *Poetry Foundation*, Accessed April 25, 2020.

the United States. I focus on three poems in particular—“His Excellency General Washington,” “On the Death of General Wooster,” and “Liberty and Peace”—and argue that by emphasizing the tension between Columbia’s two referents (North America as a place and liberty as an ideal), Wheatley forces her audience to recognize the troubling contradictions underlying American utopianism and specifically the concept of liberty. Yet, she does use this recognition to dismiss the vision of a possible better future depicted by revolutionaries; rather, from her semi-peripheral position, she reframes liberty as an ongoing utopian project worth celebrating. I will begin by discussing the role that liberty played as an escapist desire during the American revolution. Then, I will offer a short history of the figure of Columbia and an analysis of the way it was represented before Wheatley. I conclude with an analysis of Wheatley’s use of Columbia.

I: The Promise of Liberty

On March 5, 1770, Crispus Attucks was shot and killed by British soldiers during a protest. This event, termed the Boston Massacre, was quickly taken up by Paul Revere, James Otis, and other Whig leaders to galvanize hostility against the British. Attucks’s body was carried to Faneuil Hall and displayed to the public for three days. Afterwards, having become a martyr for freedom, he was buried in the prestigious Granary Burying Ground, the eventual resting place of John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and other founding fathers.⁵¹ As Stephen Browne documents, “the formidable public relations machine”

⁵¹ It would have been extremely uncommon for a black man to be buried in a white cemetery, which speaks to the transformation Attucks undergoes after his death. For an excellent history of the Boston Massacre and contestations over its meaning, see: Hinderaker, Eric. *Boston’s Massacre*, Belknap, 2017.

wielded by North American revolutionaries left “no available means of persuasion ... unused in creating from [Attucks’s] death the spectacle of renewed political life.”⁵² The massacre was a perfect piece of ammunition for North American propagandists as it recast upper-class Bostonians as revolutionaries fighting to liberate common people from British tyranny, a shift that helped build broad support across the colonies. As John Adams reflected after the revolution, it was necessary to effect a “Revolution in the Minds and Hearts of the People. A change in their Religious Sentiments of their Duties and Obligations” was needed before a physical war could be won.⁵³

Adams’s invocation of religious sentiments was not a critique of Quaker or Anglican beliefs. His reference was to the concept of civil religion, a term coined by Jean-Jacque Rousseau in his 1762 treatise *The Social Contract* to refer to a set of nondenominational values that Rousseau argued were a necessary foundation to a modern society: a religious belief in god and the afterlife, a moral belief in the necessity to punish vice and reward virtue, and a social belief in the need for religious tolerance. While many revolutionaries personally adhered to the religious and social beliefs of Rousseau’s ideal society, it was the moral dimension that became central to the civil religion envisioned by the founding fathers. They recognized that by offering a shared utopia, depicting a possible better future, they could develop “a transcendental goal for the political process”

⁵² Browne, Stephen H. “Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, rhetoric, and the politics of commemoration,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85.2 (1999): pp. 171.

⁵³ Adams, John. “From John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 13 February 1818,” *Founders online*, National Archives, Accessed on April 11, 2020.

that could unite the varied social groups in North American in the late eighteenth-century⁵⁴

Specifically, as Michal Rozbicki argues, revolutionaries created a “cult of liberty” that they hoped would provide enough social cohesion to form a new nation. After all, as Henry Goodricke wrote in 1776, liberty was an easy sell: the terms “liberty” and “freedom” bring about “instantaneous feelings of approbation ... This gives them a peculiar energy and magic force” upon the general population.⁵⁵ Through events like the Boston Massacre, rhetorically savvy revolutionaries “skillfully transformed the conflict [between Britain and the colonies] into ... a universal battle between liberty and tyranny.” This framing was great for revolutionaries—it turned them into heroes fighting on behalf of the rights of the people—but they had to be careful that their rhetoric did not get out of hand. The desire for liberty was expressed in such a “dramatically inclusive [fashion] that almost as soon as it was [expressed], its authors began to express fears that the stability of the social order might be upset if ordinary folk took it too literally.”⁵⁶

This fear is evident in the role that Crispus Attucks played in the propaganda about the Boston Massacre—a role that illustrates the escapist character of the future promised by revolutionaries. Attucks could serve as an anonymous body on the street but

⁵⁴ Bellah, Robert. “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96.1 (1967): pp. 4. For more on the influence of Rousseau on North American revolutionaries, see the chapter on “Revolutionary Enlightenment” in May, Henry. *The Enlightenment in America*, Oxford University Press, 1978. The influence of Rousseau’s specific civil religion is clearly discernible in the Declaration of Independence, in which a majority of the complaints against the British government concern the inability of colonists to pass laws that would allow them to punish vice and reward virtue.

⁵⁵ Goodricke, Henry. *Observations on Dr. Price’s Theory and Principles of Civil Liberty*, 1776, pp. 79-80. For a much more detailed discussion of the concept of liberty in the American revolution and the civil religion of the United States, see: Reid, John Phillip. *The Concept of Liberty in the Age of American Revolution*, The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁵⁶ Rozbicki, Michal Jan. *Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution*, University of Virginia Press, 2011, pp. 79-80, 88.

he could not be represented as his actual person, a mixed-race and working class man, given that he would not have been included within the body of “wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty” envisioned by Patrick Henry in his famous speech.⁵⁷ As a result, in many of the paintings and pamphlets depicting the Boston Massacre we can see the whitening of Attucks. As Stephen Browne writes, “*there was no Crispus Attucks in late eighteenth-century America ... Racially he was invisible, and as a claimant to the rights of citizenship and nationhood he existed not at all.*”⁵⁸

Revolutionaries recognized that in order for their propaganda to inflame anger against the British instead of the American elite, it was necessary to elide the limits to liberty that Attucks illustrated.⁵⁹

While revolutionaries were able to whitewash Crispus Attucks, the position of black people in the newly formed United States was only one of the many apparent contradictions revealing the false universalism of the concept of liberty offered by revolutionaries. Shay’s rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786 revealed discontent with the upper class regardless of their nationality, while Jane Adams’s famous reminder to “remember the ladies” in drafting the Constitution speaks to the efforts of feminists to change the patriarchal basis of the new society.⁶⁰ These contradictions were then taken up

⁵⁷ Henry, Patrick. “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death.” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School. Accessed April 12, 2020.

⁵⁸ “Remembering Crispus Attucks,” pp. 171.

⁵⁹ Attucks’s role in the Boston Massacre, and his presence in the writings of his contemporaries, is well documented in William C. Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855), which can be found online through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s *Documenting the American South* project.

⁶⁰ For an excellent overview of the tensions between race, class, gender, and liberty in the late eighteenth-century, see the first four chapters of: Zinn, Howard. *A People’s History of the United States*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

in order to challenge the social order. For example, slaves in Massachusetts were able to appropriate the language of liberty to argue for their own freedom—making explicit the contradiction that Attucks represented. As Roy Finkenbine notes, “From 1765 to 1783, slaves initiated at least eighteen freedom suits in the Massachusetts courts” using the “liberal language of natural rights shared by white judges and legislators.”⁶¹ In a 1773 petition for freedom, a group of slaves sarcastically demanded: “We [slaves] expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them.”⁶² The success of many of the lawsuits shows that it was possible (even for slaves) to exploit the contradictions at the heart of the concept of liberty deployed by revolutionaries.

These slave suits were made possible by the dual position blacks held in Boston, as they “were considered both as property and as persons before the law” and therefore were able to use their small degree of agency to expose the contradictions inherent in a slave state by using discourses of freedom to argue for liberty.⁶³ Yet, there were limits to what the slaves could obtain from the judiciary system of the colonies. One of the most famous suits for reparations in Boston was made by Belinda, a slave who was freed after her master fled to England in 1775. Finding herself free in Boston but with little opportunity to make a living, she applied to the government for a pension arguing that her master had deprived her of the profits of her labor for the length of her enslavement. The

⁶¹ Finkenbine, Roy. “Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1, pp. 99. See also, “Our Modern Egyptians,” pp. 403-410.

⁶² Qtd. in Davis, Thomas. “Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions.” *The New England Quarterly* 62.2 (1989): 255.

⁶³ Greene, Lorenzo. *The Negro in Colonial New England: 1620-1776*, Martino Fine Books, 2016, pp. 324.

court in Boston found merit in her petition and awarded her and her child a yearly pension of 15 pounds and 12 shillings from the estate of Isaac Royall, her former owner. However, she only received one year's payment before the estate refused to comply with the court's ruling. Belinda appealed in 1787, won the case, and continued to receive a pension until 1790 when the estate again refused to continue to pay. No more is known of Belinda after that date.⁶⁴

Sadly, Belinda's case is characteristic of the situation of many slaves in Boston who received their freedom through freedom suits or after slavery was outlawed in 1783. Freedom, in a society in which blacks were believed to be inferior to whites, could only marginally improve their situation. As Emily Blanck writes, "slavery had been abolished by judicial decree rather than legislative act, [so] the burden [of emancipation] was on the individual rather than the system."⁶⁵ The Massachusetts militia did not travel throughout the state liberating slaves; slaves had to demand the freedom granted to them by judicial decree and hope that their slaveholders would follow the letter of the law. Even after the lawsuit of Quock Walker in 1783, which made slavery illegal throughout the state of Massachusetts, it was clear that the liberty offered to slaves did not equal the liberty available to white people. This example shows that, as Michal Rozbicki writes, "Liberty was neither entirely factual nor entirely fictional, neither institutionalized as executable law nor a timeless ideal."⁶⁶ Liberty, as a representation of a better possible future, was more powerful than its instantiation as a legal principle. It could motivate lawsuits by

⁶⁴ "Belinda's Petition," pp. 102.

⁶⁵ Blanck, Emily. "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* 75.1 (2002): pp. 29

⁶⁶ *Culture and Liberty*, pp. 4.

slaves and worker rebellions. It could also encourage those people to sacrifice their lives in a revolution for upper-class interests. Revolutionaries focused on propaganda because they recognized that the rhetorical function of liberty in the law and even politics was often determined by “its most successful portrayal.” In other words, “symbolic manifestations of freedom as a rule *preceded* the factual ones.”⁶⁷ In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Phillis Wheatley played an important role in transforming one of the most significant symbolic manifestations of freedom, the figure of Columbia, from an escapist representation of the so-called land of liberty to a utopian representation of the potential for universal liberty to exist in North America.

II: The Figure of Columbia in the American Imagination

Phillis Wheatley was not the first to use Columbia to describe the newly forming American society. That honor likely goes to Massachusetts Justice Samuel Sewell, who referred to the New World as “Columbina” in 1697.⁶⁸ Even so, the term did not gain widespread appeal until the end of the eighteenth century when it became a common way to celebrate the birth of the United States and the promise of liberty contained within its constitution. As John Higham writes, the history of this figure dates back to English iconographic descriptions of North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which represented the continent as a naked feminine figure with vaguely Native adornments meant to convey that it was “an idyllic state of nature, an uncorrupted *place*.”

⁶⁷ *Culture and Liberty*, pp. 4, 9.

⁶⁸ See: Sewell, Samuel. *Phaenomena Apocalyptica*, Digital Commons@Univeristy of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1697, pp. 46-47.

As the desire for independence grew, it became increasingly important to develop new symbols that would emphasize the need for the colonies to “separat[e] from Britain” without forsaking “their common inheritance.”⁶⁹ Through the figure of Columbia, an embrace of Roman antiquity filtered through the potential that North American represented, colonists were able to claim that they were European descendants despite living on a different continent.

We can see this function for Columbia in the first poetic use of the figure. Published in a 1761 volume of poetry written by Harvard graduates, the invocation of Columbia serves to emphasize the shared culture between North America and Britain:

Behold, Britannia! in thy favour'd Isle;
 At distance, thou, Columbia! view thy Prince,
 For ancestors renown'd, for virtues more;
 At whose sole nod, grim tyranny aghast,
 With grudging strides, hies swift from British climes
 While liberty undaunted rears her head.

Brittania and Columbia are both personified, suggesting a certain affinity between them, but the poem implies that the latter is looking up to the former given that Americans find their ancestors and gain their virtues from that “favour'd Isle.” Furthermore, by the end of the stanza, the author makes clear that Brittania, not Columbia, is the natural home of liberty. From there she “rears her head” and with a “sole nod” makes “grim tyranny aghast.” While we do not know for sure who authored the poem, Albert Hoyt offers

⁶⁹ Higham, John. “Indian Princess and Roman Goddess: The First Female Symbols of America,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 100 (1991): pp. 63, 55.

strong evidence that it is likely Thomas Oliver, a British loyalist who became the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts in 1774. Given his political leanings, and the fact this poem was written and published before any of the events that triggered the American Revolution, it is understandable his use of Columbia involves an imported concept of liberty that comes from Britain.⁷⁰

While Oliver's representation celebrates Britain as inspiring or teaching Columbia about the value of liberty, this affinity proved problematic for non-Loyalists, who wanted North America to stand on its own. As a result, they had to develop "symbols that would connect them with the civilized world while declaring their political separation"⁷¹ We see this version of Columbia in the next instance of its use—a poem published in the *Massachusetts Gazette* on April 26, 1764, about the destruction of Harvard's library in a fire. The author of this poem is unknown, but we can see a subtle transformation in the use of Columbia to refer to colonial society.

The reference to Columbia appears in passing but now stands in for North America writ large: "Why could ye not, the fam'd *Museum* spare, / Unrivall'd in *Columbia*." Unlike in Oliver's poem, Columbia is not presented as subservient or in the shadow of Britain—it has institutions and buildings worth memorializing. As a result, the rest of the poem chastises the author's contemporaries for not celebrating Harvard and its contribution to a uniquely North American culture:

Where are my Comforters? Where the whole Band
Of laurell'd Bards, once nourish'd at my Breast,

⁷⁰ Qtd in. Hoyt, Albert. "The Name 'Columbia,'" D. Clapp & Son, 1886, pp. 310.

⁷¹ "Indian Princess and Roman Goddess," pp. 59.

Who not long since consol'd BRITANNIA'S Loss,
 When GEORGE the great resign'd his earthly crown?

Calling out four graduates by name (Benjamin Church, John Lowell, William Hooper, and Samuel Deane), the poet criticizes what they see as an unequal distribution of poetic attention. In so doing, Columbia is represented as an equal to Britain that deserves its own poetic tradition. If North American authors could write many poems about King George the Second (who died in 1760), surely they could spare a verse or two for their own context: "What base Ingratitude then, to neglect / Their *alma Mater* in her mourning Weeds!" In this poem, we see an incipient move toward portraying North American and Britain as holding equal places in the world order, but no reference to liberty as its major characteristic.⁷²

To find this dimension in its fully realized form, we must turn to one final pre-Wheatley poem, written by Mercy Otis Warren and published in the *Boston Gazette* in 1775. Now in the midst of Revolutionary propaganda, her representation of Columbia fully merges its two referents: North America and Liberty. As she wrote in the *Gazette*, her poem "is now published as a Prophecy heading fast to a Completion." Specifically, she anticipated that the Revolutionary War would bring about a utopia in the form of the United States:

She, oe'r the vast Atlantic surges rides,
 Visits *Columbia's* distant fertile Plains,
 Where LIBERTY, a happy Goddess, reigns;

⁷² Qtd in. "The Name 'Columbia,'" pp. 311.

Where no proud Despot rules with lawless sway.⁷³

In Warren's poem, Columbia is explicitly analogized to Liberty, which is presented as a *fait accompli* in North America. Thus, she presents Columbia as an uncomplicated synthesis of place and value that would have made revolutionary propagandists proud. As John Higham writes of these early representations, "Columbia was the invention of poets who wanted to refer to the young republic in language with all of the latinized dignity conveyed by 'Britannia.' ... 'Liberty' emerged as the official name for the female personification of the nation."⁷⁴ Given how often the two terms were used interchangeably, it is natural that a certain slippage developed which would mask the inherent conflict between the two and illustrate its escapist character when presented in such a superficial way.

III: Phillis Wheatley's Vision of Columbia

In this final section, I argue that Phillis Wheatley's version of Columbia brought that slippage front and center, making the incompatibility between North America and liberty explicit. Yet, as I argue above, she never resorted to dismissing the illusory character of liberty or the falsity of Columbia as a representation of the New World. Rather, she transformed Columbia into a representation of American utopianism—a figure fighting to bring about a better world in North America. While many critics have attributed the utopian version of Columbia to Joel Barlow's epic *Columbiad*, published in 1787, he is predated by Phillis Wheatley's representation. Working from the semi-

⁷³ Qtd in. "The Name 'Columbia,'" pp. 312.

⁷⁴ "Indian Princess and Roman Goddess," pp. 63.

periphery, her utopian intervention was to reframe liberty from a right to a desire—from something that existed naturally to a social relation that needed to be fostered and protected. In this way, rather than directly challenging the hypocrisy of revolutionary Americans, she challenged their visions of a better possible future.

The most well-known use of the figure of Columbia in Phillis Wheatley's poetry is found in her poem to George Washington. Like Warren, she uses the figure to stand in for the newly forming country and its values:

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.

Wheatley makes a connection between North America as a place (in which scenes take place) and the value of freedom, but we can already see one significant difference: Columbia is personified as an active agent that is not coterminous with freedom but rather is desirous of it. As a result, while she refers to North America as a land of freedom, she places Columbia outside of that space, as a Goddess looking over and protecting the ideals found there:

When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!

Separating Columbia from the United States allows Wheatley to offer a more complex representation that functions ambiguously as a critique of both British and American tyranny. As she goes on to write:

Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
 For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
 Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
 While round increase the rising hills of dead.
 Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
 Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

While she explicitly references Britain's blindness to the dead accumulating in North America, it is easy to read a subversive critique of slaveholders in these lines, whose thirst for boundless power (and profits) killed many black people. From this perspective, we can see the eyes of nations as including those in Africa, wondering to what extent the discourse of liberty will extend to their shores and their people. Yet, rather than following this lead into a speculation about Wheatley's imagination, I want to shift to two other poems in which we can find a more explicit expression of her utopian desire.

After all, I am not the first to note Wheatley's radical use of the figure of Columbia. Thomas Steele, in a 1981 essay, argued that our modern representation of Columbia dates back to this poem and the synthesis of two exceptional Americans: "George Washington and Phillis Wheatley—the 'father of his country' and the mother of black American literature." While Steele is right to note Wheatley's contribution, by focusing exclusively on her poem to George Washington, he ends up offering a reading

of the figure that overemphasizes its connections to Roman mythology: “Wheatley created the personification of Columbia both from Apollo—the god of poetry and poets and thus the representation of the poetess herself in a masculine embodiment—and from Athene—the goddess of strategy and generals and thus a representation of Washington in a feminine embodiment.”⁷⁵ In contrast, by considering how Columbia appears in her post-1773 publication, after the publication of her book and her manumission from the Wheatleys, we can see more directly the utopianism that she invests in Columbia—reminding Americans directly of the ongoing nature of the struggle for liberty.

The next reference to Columbia in Wheatley’s work is found in “On the Death of General Wooster,” an elegy to a close family friend that she tried to publish in 1778. The poem begins by celebrating Wooster for fighting on behalf of the United States, but the poem quickly shifts to characterize this fight as between freedom and tyranny:

Permit me yet to point fair freedom’s charms
 For her the Continent shines bright in arms[.]
 By thy high will, celestial prize she came—
 For her we combat on the field of fame
 Without her presence vice maintains full sway
 And social love and virtue wing their way
 O still propitious be thy guardian care
 And lead *Columbia* thro’ the toil of war.

⁷⁵ Steele, Thomas. “The Figure of Columbia: Phillis Wheatley plus George Washington,” *The New England Quarterly* 54.2 (1981): pp. 266.

While freedom is presented as a charm that motivates the fight for the United States, she makes clear that it is only present as a utopia—as a vision of a better possible future that holds the potential to lead Columbia through the war. Without that desire, vice maintains its “full sway” over the population. As a desire, rather than a reality, Wheatley can use Columbia to expand her critique to the limited forms of freedom offered by her contemporaries:

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find
 Divine acceptance with th’Almighty mind—
 While yet, O deed ungenerous! They disgrace
 And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?
 Let virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers
 Be victory our’s, and generous freedom theirs.⁷⁶

By transforming Columbia into a representation of utopian possibility, Wheatley uses the figure to point out the failure of revolutionaries to live up to her full promise: how can they ask for divine aid to overthrow British tyranny while overlooking the conditions of Africans and slaves? In the final two lines, perhaps returning more explicitly to her reference to the land of freedom’s heaven-defended race in the poem to George Washington, she makes clear that the fates of white and black Americans needed to be seen as bound together in the figure of Columbia.

Wheatley’s depiction of Columbia as a figure embodied with a utopian desire for liberty is most clearly elaborated in the final poem she ever wrote. “Liberty and Peace,”

⁷⁶ Isani, Mukhatar Ali and Phillis Wheatley. ““On the Death of General Wooster’: An Unpublished Poem by Phillis Wheatley,” *Modern Philology* 77.3 (1980): pp. 306-309.

published in 1784, is a stirring celebration of her country's triumph in the Revolutionary War. She begins by describing freedom's descent from Heaven and its arrival in North America where it has "Fix'd in *Columbia* her illustrious Line, / And bids in thee her future Councils shine." Thus, Wheatley does not take for granted a connection between freedom and *Columbia*, but instead hopes that the former continues to inform the latter. This distinction then allows her to disambiguate between the victory of the United States over Britain and victory of Freedom over tyranny. While they seem connected, Wheatley is careful to keep the two separated in the final eight lines of the poem:

Britannia owns her Independent Reign,
 Hibernia, Scotia, and the Realms of Spain;
 And Great *Germania*'s ample Coast admired
 The generous Spirit that *Columbia* fires.
 Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales
 Where e'er *Columbia* spreads her swelling Sails:
 To every Realm shall *Peace* her charms display,
 And heavenly *Freedom* spread her golden ray.

Here, at the very end of the poem, we also see a careful separation of freedom and *Columbia* that does not accord with the supposed ties between the two images. Rather than celebrating the United States as the land of liberty, Wheatley used the image of *Columbia* to celebrate the country's aspirational values. Using the metaphor of a ship pushed by a heavenly wind, she depicts *Columbia* as actively spreading peace and freedom throughout the world. Thus, when Wheatley depicts countries in Europe as

admiring the “generous spirit” fired by Columbia, she is referring to the desire for liberty present in the United States rather than its partial realization. Through this transformation, Wheatley laid the groundwork for Columbia to become a part of abolitionist and suffragist rhetoric during the nineteenth-century. After all, if Columbia could represent the victory of thirteen colonies against the most powerful empire in the world, it could also represent the possibility of spreading liberty and freedom beyond the small group of landowners covered by the Constitution.

It is a cruel irony that Wheatley wrote this poem while living in poverty, having lost two of her children to sickness and her husband to prison. While she received her freedom from John and Susanna Wheatley in 1773, they did not leave her any money and it soon became clear that being a successful poet could not protect her from the triple threat of being black, a woman, and poor in Boston during the eighteenth-century. I do not present this information to characterize Phillis Wheatley as an American apologist; rather, my point is to note what we lose by overlooking the semi-peripheral character of early African American utopianism. Wheatley’s commitment to highlighting the utopian potential of the United States, considering the circumstances at the end of her life, speaks to the limits that European hegemony placed on her utopian imagination. Yet, despite those limits, Wheatley’s aspirational representation of Columbia lives on.

While historians have often attributed the utopian dimensions of Columbia to white men like Joel Barlow or Philip Freneau, I argue that this dimension should be attributed to Phillis Wheatley.⁷⁷ From her semi-peripheral position, both included and

⁷⁷ See, for instance: Schlereth, Thomas. “Columbia, Columbus, and Columbianism,” *The Journal of American History* 79.3 (1992): pp. 937-968.

excluded in North American society, she was able to transform Columbia from a celebration of the United States to a celebration to the country's desires for the future. By weaving together the discourse of natural rights with the necessity of human intervention, she laid the groundwork for the figure to become central to abolitionist rhetoric. As Higham writes: "Between the two themes — freedom and consensus, or in nineteenth-century terms, liberty and union— there was an obvious tension, which surfaced in the sectional conflict over slavery."⁷⁸ Wheatley, as the first African American utopian, played an important role in making that tension manifest.

In the following chapter, I shift to the middle of the nineteenth-century and focus on the semi-peripheral utopianism of Frederick Douglass. By the time he wrote his first autobiography, in 1845, he described his desire for liberty as overwhelming him, present throughout his world:

The silver trumpet of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled every claim, breathed in every win, and moved in every storm.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Indian Princess and Roman Goddess," pp. 75.

⁷⁹ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Dover, 1995, pp. 63.

While he does not reference Wheatley's figure of Columbia, the spirit of her utopian desire runs throughout this passage. Her goddess of liberty, apart from the United States, stands as a reminder of the country's great ambition: freedom and liberty for all. In this way, Wheatley participates in the formation of American utopianism—giving liberty its aspirational character and energizing the desire of many progressive activists throughout the country's history. Douglass, in contrast, focuses on the great utopian promise of property. From his position in the semi-periphery, he shows the deep flaws in the model of social transformation envisioned by John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Gerrit Smith, and other believers in the civilizing power of land ownership.

Chapter 2: Frederick Douglass's Search for the Space of Black Liberation

Our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps to whatever remnants of the past ones it has preserved).⁸⁰

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

I longed to have a *future*—a future with hope in it. To be shut up entirely to the past and present is abhorrent to the human mind; it is to the soul—whose life and happiness is unceasing progress—what the prison is to the body.⁸¹

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom*

In August of 1850, Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass organized one of the largest anti-slavery conventions ever held in New York, attracting over two-thousand abolitionists to an apple orchard outside of the town of Cazenovia.⁸² The convention was a great success, raising both money and awareness for William Chaplain, an abolitionist who had been arrested after helping two slaves escape from Washington D.C. Yet, the mood was bittersweet: the other purpose of the gathering was to oppose the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, an act that most abolitionists viewed as a shameless attempt to re-legitimize slavery throughout the United States.⁸³ If passed, the law would force officials in the North to capture runaway slaves and return them to the South as well as

⁸⁰ Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, 2007, pp. xiii.

⁸¹ Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage, My Freedom*, Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 218.

⁸² Close correspondents and personal friends, Douglass and Smith had drawn closer to each other in the years preceding the conference as Douglass began to split from William Garrison and his New-England Anti-Slavery Society over political involvement and what Douglass felt to be Garrison's paternalistic attitude towards his role in the movement. This split is well documented in work on Douglass's life and politics, but a good in-depth examination can be found in Pease, William and Jane Pease. "Boston Garrisonians and the Problem of Frederick Douglass," *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1967, pp. 29-48.

⁸³ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 had been greatly undermined by state law and the principle of nullification in the North. In response, the law of 1850 sought to reestablish its authority. Even after 1850, the original act was very unevenly enforced. See further: Campbell, Stanley W. *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860*, University of North Carolina Press, 1968.

fine and imprison any citizen who offered aid. It also weakened the legal requirements necessary to claim that a black person was a slave: any white person could present a judge with an affidavit and demand the return of their so-called property. As Martin Delany wrote in 1852, it made any black person in the North a slave “in the midst of freedom,” a phrase that speaks to the effect that the Fugitive Slave Law had on the spatial imagination of black people.⁸⁴ To be a slave in the midst of freedom is to be an exception to the rules of a particular place. Therefore, while many southern legislators acknowledged that the law would do little to change the attitudes and behavior of northerners, they hoped it would diminish the appeal that the North held as a utopia for black people.⁸⁵

Douglass and Smith did not have the political capital to fight against the law in Congress; they were limited to challenging its representational effects. As a result, they wrote and published “A Letter to American Slaves”—a letter that described life in the northern states positively in order to help slaves “judge for [themselves] whether the prize we have obtained is worth the peril of the attempt to obtain it.” While the letter was published as part of the convention, it was not only a response to the Fugitive Slave Law; Douglass and Smith recognized that they were opposing a set of representations of the North whose purpose was to restrict slaves’ desires for a better life to what was possible

⁸⁴ Delany, Martin. *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, 1852, pp. 55. As he goes on to say, the Fugitive Slave Law is equivalent to “the [slaveholder’s] power over the slaves in the South ... now extended to the North” (55).

⁸⁵ For the effects of the law on the attitudes and behaviors of northern abolitionists, see: Pinsker, Matthew. “After 1850: Reassessing the Impact of the Fugitive Slave Law,” in *Fugitive Slave and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, University Press of Florida, 2018, pp. 93-115.

within slavery. As Douglass wrote, it was only after he had escaped from the plantation that he discovered that:

Slaveholders are as great liars as they are tyrants ... When they told us, that the abolitionists, could they lay hands on us, would buy and sell us, we could not certainly know, that they spoke falsely; and when they told us, that abolitionists are in the habit of skinning the black man for leather, and of regaling their cannibalism on his flesh, even such enormities seemed to us to be possible.⁸⁶

Slaveholders tried to keep slaves ignorant about the world beyond the plantation or make it seem dangerous that they would be less likely to try to escape. In response, “A Letter to American Slaves” reinscribes the North as a place of possible freedom for prospective runaways. I call this act a reinscription to emphasize that Douglass and Smith viewed their rhetoric as engaged in a conflict over how the North was represented in the imaginations of black people.⁸⁷ Yet, the collaboration between Smith and Douglass masks their divergent opinions on a vital question: what better futures for black people were possible in the space of the North?

⁸⁶ Douglass, Frederick. “A Letter to the American Slaves From Those Who Have Fled From American Slavery,” In *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, pp. 158. Slaveholders described Canada in a similarly negative light. As William and Jane Pease write: “adverse propaganda diligently plied to the Negro by his white overlords that Canada was a long way off, had poor soil, a wintry climate, wild beasts and geese which scratched one’s eyes out, and that in Canada the Queen took a half of one’s wages” (5). See further: Pease, William and Jane Pease. *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1963.

⁸⁷ The Underground Railroad is one obvious example, as a representation of set of places that would lead a slave safely out of slavery, but many more can be found in the abolitionist literature of the period. See further: Pargas, Damian Alan (ed). *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, University Press of Florida, 2018.

Having experienced segregation and racial violence throughout the North, as well as being forced to flee the country after the publication of his first autobiography, Douglass was understandably skeptical about the promises made by abolitionists. He was willing to deploy a positive image of the North as propaganda but also knew the North had far more similarities with the South than many abolitionists liked to admit.⁸⁸ Given how reliant his newspaper was on Smith's (and other white abolitionists') contributions, he could not or did not express this view directly. Rather, I argue that his disagreement with Smith is best perceived in his use of the semi-peripheral utopia in a short novella published in 1853 titled *The Heroic Slave*.

The novella follows the life of Madison Washington, an escaped slave, and his search for a place in which he can liberate himself. In contrast to Douglass, Washington rejects the individual nature of freedom in the North and insists on finding a place completely outside of the reach of slavery. Yet, Douglass's depiction of that place, the port of Nassau in the British Bahamas, highlights its impossibility: an all-black utopia sheltered from the slave power of the United States by a beneficent British government simply does not exist. As a result, I argue that we can read the text as an immanent critique of the faulty assumptions underlying the utopian potential of land ownership in the North. By showing that Madison Washington's desire for a place free from white supremacy can only be realized in the imagination, Douglass illustrates that property ownership cannot be separated from slavery, on one hand, and dispossession, on the other, and thus holds an escapist element that black people must confront. As Wheatley

⁸⁸ Douglass's best response to northerners' blindness to their own racism is found in his famous speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

does with the concept of liberty, Douglass does not reject the potential of giving black people land on which to live. Rather, he illustrates that this potential is caught up in assumptions about the ability of property ownership to transform individuals into citizens and productive members of American society that overlooks differences between white and non-white people.

Unlike Douglass, Smith was fervently invested in the utopic potential of property ownership—a vision of a possible better future in which all individuals owned their own land and were thereby transformed into yeoman farmers, the “ideal man and the ideal citizen” of the American republic.⁸⁹ In the case of African Americans, Smith’s solution to the problem of slavery and discrimination was simply to grant black people land. He argued for this position as a member of the Liberty and Free-Soil party and even self-financed a reparations project in which he donated swaths of land to poor black people in New York state. As he wrote, “the robbing of men of their liberty is but a consequence of robbing them of their land.”⁹⁰ As I discuss at the end of this chapter, Douglass’s critique was not only aimed at white liberals like Gerrit Smith, but also engages with the growing influence of emigrationists and black nationalists who imagined that a better possible future for black people outside of the United States was possible simply by finding their own land to colonize. After all, the hegemony of American utopianism meant that all sorts of people were taken in by its vision of a better world. Douglass’s contribution, in both his autobiographies and *The Heroic Slave*, make him a crucial (and often overlooked) contributor to the early African American utopian tradition.

⁸⁹ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform*, Vintage Books, 1955, pp. 24.

⁹⁰ Smith, Gerrit. *The True Office of Civil Government*, S. W. Benedict, 1851, pp. 8.

I: Producing the Plantation

I start this chapter with “A Letter to American Slaves” because it highlights Douglass’s recognition that representations of space played a role in repressing or enabling the expression of utopian desires in slavery: slaves needed to have places where they could imagine themselves being free in order to sustain the utopian desire and will necessary to escape from the plantation. Slaveholders shared this recognition and, as a result, were tremendously paranoid about the effects that representations of places in which black people were free would have on their slaves.⁹¹ They used every means at their disposal to keep their slaves’ spatial knowledge limited to slavery. In this section of my chapter, I argue that this conflict over representations is a central component of Douglass’s quest for freedom, as described in his autobiographies. In doing so, I also hope to demonstrate the extent to which Douglass thought about the role of space in slavery.

After all, Douglass’s autobiographies are literary texts that he composed for a rhetorical purpose. As William Andrews writes, treating “early black autobiography as discourse” requires us to recognize that it was “an attempt to open an intercourse with the white world.”⁹² In other words, while *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and My*

⁹¹ The North was clearly the most significant representation that slaveholders were concerned about. However, outside of the United States, Haiti took on a particularly ominous presence for southern slaveholders after the revolution of 1791. Many Southerners pushed to invade the island simply to destroy the hope and desire it held for slaves. See, in particular, Ferrer, Ada. *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge UP, 2014; and Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Belknap Press, 2013.

⁹² Andrews, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 17.

Bondage, My Freedom depict Douglass's experience of slavery, they also participate in a discourse about the relationship between space and slavery. Specifically, they illustrate that escaping from the plantation was not only a matter of escaping from its physical boundaries; it also entailed escaping from the ideological mystifications slaveholders attempted to instill in their slaves. In this sense, it is significant that Douglass ends the first chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, by inviting his readers to pass together through "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery."⁹³

As Frederick Douglass describes in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, the plantation was "a little nation of its own," a place that was "seldom visited by a single ray of healthy public sentiment—where slavery, wrapt in its own congenial, midnight darkness, *can*, and *does*, develop all its malign and shocking characteristics." The objective of this spatial closure, when coupled with propaganda about the North, was to make any place beyond the borders of the plantation an unknown:

The slave is a fixture; he has no choice, no goal, no destination; but is pegged down to a single spot, and must take root here, or nowhere. The idea of removal elsewhere, comes, generally, in the shape of a threat, and in punishment of a crime ... His going out into the world is like a living man going into the tomb, who, with open eyes, sees himself buried out of sight and hearing of wife, children and friends of kindred tie.⁹⁴

Most slaves only permanently left the grounds of the plantation when they were sold—a traumatic separation from friends and family with no promise of ever seeing each other

⁹³ Narrative, pp. 45.

⁹⁴ *My Bondage*, pp. 35, 143.

again. As a result, while life in slavery was often terrible, experience taught that it was better than the alternative. Without better representations of space beyond the boundaries of slavery, slaves were bound to limit their utopian desire to the plantation—a situation that benefitted slaveholders.

In their conflict over spatial representations, both abolitionists and slaveholders recognized that, as Edward Said writes, “none of us is free from the struggle over geography,” a struggle that is about “ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”⁹⁵ Implicit in this conflict is a theory of space as a social construction—as a concept produced by our society. Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* offers a conceptual framework for understanding space as social. In contrast to philosophical or scientific approaches, which describe space as an inert substance that naturally exists, Lefebvre argues that social space is a synthesis between spatial practices (how a society’s mode of production is embodied in space) and representations of space (the set of rules, codes, and images that make up our understanding of space). This synthesis is historically contingent and open to contestation given its active production as a part of everyday life.⁹⁶ As Lefebvre writes, “The spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it.”⁹⁷ These two elements are mutually constituting:

⁹⁵ Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, Chatto & Windus, 1993, pp. 7.

⁹⁶ As he writes, “(Social) space is a (social) product ... every society—and hence every mode of production ... produce[s] a space, its own space” (Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991, pp. 26, 31).

⁹⁷ *The Production of Space*, pp. 38.

representations of space are produced by a society's spatial practices and are then appropriated in order to maintain those spatial practices.⁹⁸

Social space helps us recognize that spatial distinctions are about both practices and representations. On a plantation, for example, the terms “field” and “house” designated a difference in spatial practices: field slaves work in the fields, while house slaves work at the Great House. Yet, this distinction is also representational: the field is a space tied to labor while the Great House is a space tied to leisure. As Lefebvre argues, these representations are part of a system of rules, codes, and images that help maintain the “relations of production and ... the ‘order which those relations impose.’”⁹⁹ The social order of the plantation, with masters at the top and slaves at the bottom, is produced and maintained by these two representations. As Douglass writes, the Great House wielded enormous representational power: it was “the grandest building my eyes had then ever beheld ... occupied by Col. Lloyd and his family. They occupied it; *I* enjoyed it.” The building’s grand-ness invested slaveholders (who resided and lived in that place) “with a sort of sacredness” that was difficult to “outgrow or rise above.” This representation is not limited to slaveholders; it also “codes” the labor being done in each place by slaves, leading to the uplift of house slaves as “a sort of black aristocracy on [the] plantation.”¹⁰⁰ The representational distinction between field and house is superimposed onto the distinction between master and slave, making it more difficult for slaves to be in solidarity with each other.

⁹⁸ The Mason-Dixon line is an excellent example of this kind of representation.

⁹⁹ *The Production of Space*, pp. 33.

¹⁰⁰ *My Bondage*, pp. 79, 201, 89.

This superimposition is an example of the relationship Lefebvre describes in the previous paragraph: a representation of space produced by spatial practices becomes appropriated in order to help maintain a particular social order. Yet, the Great House could only play this role as a part of a system of overlapping representations of space within the legal boundaries of slavery. As Ira Berlin notes, “the Great House ... [was] the physical and architectural embodiment of the planters’ hegemony.” This hegemony

radiated from the great estates to the statehouses, courtrooms, countinghouses, churches, colleges, taverns, racetracks, private clubs, and the like. In each of the venues, planters practiced the art of domination, making laws, meting out justice, and silently asserting ... their natural right to rule.¹⁰¹

While all of these discrete places play a part in the spatial practices of the plantation, Berlin notes that they also play a role as representations of space. Like the Great House, they interpellated black people as slaves, forcing them to acquiesce to the social order of slavery even in places like churches and taverns that might have otherwise offered a temporary escape.¹⁰² In turn, the effectiveness of these representations was augmented by a political spatial code: laws that sought to limit slaves’ spatial mobility and thus their spatial knowledge about life beyond the borders of the slavery.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, Ira, *Many Thousands Gone*, Belknap Press, 1989, pp. 97-98.

¹⁰² Sara Evans and Harry Boyte refer to these kinds of places as “free spaces”: “environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (17). It is not hard to understand why slaveholders try to prevent their slaves from existing in such places. See further: *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

This code did not come ready-made; it was a result of deliberate efforts by slaveholders to redefine slavery in North America to fit the needs of plantation agriculture. Before the rise of this system, slaves were generally “marginal to the central productive processes” and were found at many levels of the North American social hierarchy.¹⁰³ Most lived fairly independent lives, either as sharecroppers or hired laborers, who owed all or a portion of their income to their slaveholders. As a result, while this form of slavery involved many of the brutal characteristics that accompany the ownership of people as property, it had not yet developed the control over the spatial imagination that characterized slavery in Douglass’s time. This lack of development was a result of the geopolitical context of early North American society, namely a set of fragmented borders between colonies in North America and the international rivalries between them. In 1693, for instance, Spain “offered freedom to all fugitives ... who converted to Catholicism” and “consistently refused to return runaways who took refuge in their colony,” policies that served to drain English colonies of valuable slave labor while bolstering their own Floridian settlements.¹⁰⁴ Between colonies, maroon communities of runaway slaves emerged, existing in the liminal spaces between borders. Throughout the seventeenth-century, a community of about two-thousand slaves, which existed in the Dismal Swamp between Virginia and North Carolina, “carried on a regular,

¹⁰³ *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 8. As Berlin writes, the first generation of African slaves in North America included “Atlantic creoles” whose work “as cosmopolitan cultural brokers, familiar with the languages, religions, jurisprudence, and trading etiquette of the Atlantic” offered a powerful contrast to stereotypical and racist definitions of blackness present throughout the colonies (92).

¹⁰⁴ *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 72.

if illegal, trade with white people living on the borders of the swamp.”¹⁰⁵ Within slavery, these real alternatives became representations of space outside of slavery that inspired many slaves to run away. As Berlin writes, “the ease of escape and the existence of a maroon alternative made slaveowners chary about abusing their slaves.”¹⁰⁶

These alternatives began to disappear at the beginning of the eighteenth-century, with the consolidation of the eastern seaboard under English control. At the same time, the rise of plantation agriculture led Southern legislators and slaveholders to demand a greater degree of control over slaves’ spatial imagination. The Virginia legislature began passing laws in 1705 that punished any black slave who left a plantation without a pass and prohibited black people of any status from congregating in public spaces without a white person present. The laws also prescribed punishments (though much lighter) for whites who did not comply with these attempts to ensure a consistent application of the principles of white supremacy throughout the state.¹⁰⁷ The Virginia code, one of the first to regulate the spatial practices of the plantation, became a model for states throughout the South.

Unlike the forms of agriculture that came before it, plantations required a much higher degree of discipline from slaves. As George Beckford writes, “the traditional

¹⁰⁵ Aptheker, Herbert. “Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States,” *The Journal of Negro History* 24.3 (1939): pp. 168. Douglass references this community in *The Heroic Slave*.

¹⁰⁶ *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 67. For more on the history of Maroon colonies within the American colonies, see: Diouf, Sylviane. *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons*, New York University Press, 2014; Leaming, Hugo. *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas*, Routledge, 1995; Giddings, Joshua. *The Exiles of Florida: or The crimes committed by our government against the Maroons, who fled from South Carolina and other slave states, seeking protection under Spanish laws*, Follett, Foster and Company, 1858.

¹⁰⁷ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, vol. 3, pp. 451-52, 454-59.

plantation is a total economic institution. It binds every one in its embrace to the one task of executing the will of its owner or owners.”¹⁰⁸ As a result, it both required and tended to produce representations of space, like the Virginia code of laws, that bounded slaves squarely within their slaveholders’ property. These representations were not just abstractions; rather, as Lefebvre writes, they formed a “spatial code ... a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and of producing it.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, they taught people how to exist in a particular place. Within the social space of slavery, slaves were taught that anywhere outside of the plantation was dangerous while white people were taught to make anywhere outside of the plantation dangerous to black people.

Returning to Douglass’s autobiographies, we can see the effect that these representations had on slaves wanting to run away. Despite being able to read and write and having spent years living in Baltimore, the spatial code of slavery still influenced his spatial imagination of the obstacles standing in the way of freedom: “At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol. We were hemmed in upon every side. Here were the difficulties, real or imagined.”¹¹⁰ Crucially, Douglass notes that it does not matter whether these difficulties were real or imagined because both categories functioned as a threat against the possibility of escape.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Beckford, George. “Plantation Society,” *Savacou* 5 (1971): pp. 8.

¹⁰⁹ *The Production of Space*, pp. 47-48.

¹¹⁰ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Bedford Books, 1993, pp. 86.

¹¹¹ As is hopefully evident from this section, space is not solely a metaphor in my project or in Douglass’s work—it is a concept that serves a “substantiating” purpose, not “one that theory could easily do without,” as Kathleen Kirby describes. See further: Kirby, Kathleen. *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity*, The Guilford Press, 1995.

As a result, in his autobiographies and his political rhetoric, Douglass emphasized the importance of alternative representations of space that could disrupt slaveholders' hegemony by offering slaves somewhere they could place their desires for a better possible future. After all, the relationship between practices and representations that Lefebvre describes is not a closed system. The spatial practices of a given moment are never clearly demarcated from their predecessor nor from their successor. The gradual transition to plantation agriculture was marked by a continual tension with representations of space from a previous social order.¹¹² Maroon colonies, for instance, which had been “viewed as annoying growths” in early North American society, were seen by planters “as cancerous tumors that had to be excised.” At the same time, within any social space some representations pointed beyond the present toward alternative futures—representations of space that did not fit within the spatial code of a particular mode of production. As Ira Berlin writes:

Whether in moments stolen in the field, the dark of night, holidays granted by their owners, or harvest festivals, slaves, like other working peoples, expressed themselves in songs, dance, prayer, and fables by which they understood their world and plotted to create another more to their liking ... The slaves' struggle to give meaning to their music, dance, and devotions were no less political than their struggle over work.¹¹³

¹¹² As Ira Berlin writes, “slavery was never made, but instead was continually remade, for power—no matter how great—was never absolute, but always contingent” (*Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 3).

¹¹³ *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 121, 5-6.

In other words, any existing social space contains traces of past spatial practices and practices that point toward alternative futures.

While Lefebvre's schema of social space helps us recognize how space is represented, it is not a helpful framework through which to understand that contestation. In *The Production of Space*, he refers to counter-representations, like those expressed by Douglass and Smith, as representational spaces: representations that attempt to challenge the social order by giving expression to the "clandestine or underground side of social life." However, he gives short shrift to these alternatives, arguing that while "representations of space have a practical impact," representational spaces are "symbolic works" that can set in motion "'aesthetic' trends" ultimately "run out of steam." In other words, while representations shape how we conform to the spatial practices of a social space, representational spaces ultimately "vanish into the symbolic or imaginary realm."¹¹⁴

The distinction that Lefebvre draws can function descriptively and in retrospect, in the sense that some representations of space, like some utopias, remain symbolic or imaginary. However, it is not an effective way to distinguish between the representations

¹¹⁴ *The Production of Space*, pp. 33, 42, 42. David Harvey explains this skepticism toward representational spaces as an aversion to closure: "[For Lefebvre] the production of space must always remain an endlessly open possibility. The effect, unfortunately, is to leave the actual spaces of any alternative frustratingly undefined" (*Spaces of Hope*, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 183). In this sense, there is an echo of Marx and Engels's oft-quoted critique of utopias as "castles in the air" in Lefebvre's dismissal of representational spaces as being merely symbolic or imaginary. However, as Ruth Levitas has convincingly argued, such a critique is both a misreading of Marx and a mischaracterizing of the purpose of utopia. See, in particular: Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 40; and Geoghegan, Vincent. *Utopianism and Marxism*, Methuen, 1987. As Geoghegan writes, Marx and Engels's critique "is not [of] anticipation as such, but rather the failure to root this anticipation in a theoretical framework cognizant of the essential dynamics of capitalism" (27).

offered by slaves and slaveholders. First, Lefebvre's schema underestimates the power that symbolic or imaginary representations can have. Second, and as a consequence of the first point, Lefebvre's framework essentially discounts the ability of marginalized people to contest the production of social space. Consider the unequal footing on which representations of space emerge in slavery. In Lefebvre's schema, the slave-owning class in the South produced and supported most representations of space while representational spaces are produced in secret by slaves and abolitionists away from the eyes of overseers and planters. To dismiss the latter because they often don't rise up to the level of the former is to take on a perspective in which slaves' subversive resistance to the hegemony of the planter class is generally regarded as ineffectual.

For this reason, I prefer to reframe Lefebvre's categories through a utopian lens that distinguishes between utopian and escapist representations of space on the basis of whether or not they enabled slaves to imagine a better life outside of slavery. Not only does this reframing avoid the retrospective framing of Lefebvre's terms, but it also acknowledges the role that our imagination plays in our efforts to bring utopias, our visions of a better possible future, into reality. A utopian representation of space offers a space in which the imagination can place utopias, whether they are real places, like Africa or Canada, or a series of symbolic places, like the Underground Railroad. In contrast, an escapist representation of space offers a space in which the imagination is repressed and distorted. The distinction between the two is not absolute, but contingent on the kinds of desires a particular representation makes possible. Even so, it is vital to

keep the desire for freedom “trained unerringly, usefully, on what is right.”¹¹⁵ As Frederick Douglass notes in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, he desires a future with hope in it. The plantation, as an escapist representation of space only offers a future of continuing violence and exploitation, which Douglass argues is akin to a prison for the mind. Only by finding a utopian representation of space can he place his desire for a better future outside of slavery and thus motivate himself to escape from his present conditions.

A representation can start as utopian and become escapist, as the city of Baltimore does in Douglass’s autobiographies. As a child, his desire for a better life is mapped onto Baltimore, a place of unknown but exciting possibilities. Only a small group of slaves is allowed to see the city and the honor is “no small affair in the eyes of slaves.” When Douglass learns that he is to be sent to Baltimore, to stay with Hugh and Sophia Auld, he greets the news with “ecstasy” despite knowing almost nothing about the city.¹¹⁶ Life in Baltimore is a substantial improvement over the plantation, but he discovers that he is still not free because the condition of slavery extends beyond the plantation. As a result, Baltimore is transformed into an escapist representation of space, one no longer adequate to his evolving desire for a better life.

Unlike Lefebvre’s distinction, the purpose of my terms to appreciate the active process through which the spatial imagination is contested. Consider the uses of religious discourse and specifically of afterlife. Slaveholders used this discourse to shape their slaves’ utopian desires: by depicting Heaven as an escapist representation of space only

¹¹⁵ Principle of Hope, pp. 3.

¹¹⁶ *Narrative*, pp. 43.

achievable after death, they were able to disincentivize resistance to the social order of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe provides an example in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Eliza, whose child is about to be sold, tries to convince her husband George not to run away because it will threaten their ability to get to Heaven: "Oh George, don't do anything wicked; if you only trust in God, and try to do right, he'll deliver you."¹¹⁷ By offering heaven as a representation of space in which slaves could place their utopian desire for a better life, it functions in an escapist capacity for the benefit of slaveholders: it limits and distorts the desire for freedom in an attempt to make George and Eliza acquiesce to a life in slavery.

At the same time, religious discourse could be used to delineate Heaven as a utopian representation of space counterposed to the evil of the plantation from which slaves needed to escape. Repurposing Christian discourse, slave songs expressed a desire to "transcend the narrow confines of the [world] in which [slaves] were forced to live." Often retelling the exodus of Jews from Egypt, these songs sought to inspire and maintain the hope for a better future outside of slavery while forming a symbolic resistance to the racist images of blackness offered by slaveholders.¹¹⁸ While Heaven could only serve a symbolic function, it often became a utopian representation of space in that it encouraged and justified the desire of slaves for a life free from suffering and exploitation. Rather than analyze the extent to which these representations became part of the spatial code of the plantation, as Lefebvre's schema invites us to do, by focusing on their utopian dimension we can see how two different desires for a better life are mobilized within the

¹¹⁷ Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Oxford UP, 1998, pp. 23.

¹¹⁸ Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford UP, 1978, pp. 33.

same image: the former reflecting slaveholders' desires for a higher level of control over slaves' imaginations and the latter reflecting slaves' desires for a life outside of slavery.

This distinction leads us to a different theoretical problem, but one that is more productive to consider from the perspective of slavery: how do we distinguish between escapism and utopia, especially when almost any representation of space can hold both possibilities within itself. This question is vital because, as Ernst Bloch puts it, "fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators of the human race" while "concretely genuine hope [is] its most dedicated benefactor." Since the desire for utopia can help us recognize our potential to change the world, escapism must distort and redirect that desire to render it harmless to the existing social order. From within the ideologically repressive world of the plantation, slaves would need to recognize and reject distorted desires that reflected "how the ruling class wishes the wishes of the weak to be?"¹¹⁹

Douglass's autobiographies speak to the importance of this question as he recognized that escapist representations were actively distorting utopian desires. He gives us a perfect example of this process in his description of the festivals slaveholders would hold around the holidays. During these festivals, they plied slaves with extreme quantities of alcohol in order to "disgust slaves with freedom ... plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation." Slaveholders sought to define freedom as the negation of work, diverting what desire was able to persist over the working conditions of slavery towards overconsumption of alcohol and food provided by the plantation. When the festivals were

¹¹⁹ *Principle of Hope*, pp. 5, 13.

over, Douglass describes slaves as rising “from the filth of our wallowing ... and [marching] back to the field,—feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back into the arms of slavery.”¹²⁰ As Douglass describes in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, the ultimate effect was to restrict the desire for a better life to within the imaginative horizon of the plantation:

To enslave men, successfully and safely, it is necessary to have their minds occupied with thoughts and aspirations short of the liberty of which they are deprived ... These holidays serve the purpose of keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasure, within the limits of slavery... after the holidays, they become pleasures of memory, and they serve to keep out thoughts and wishes of a more dangerous character.¹²¹

Escapist representations of space were not only valuable to restrict utopian desires but were also effective in distorting those desires into a form that was not disruptive to the social order of the plantation.

While the difference between escapism and utopia is important, neither Ernst Bloch nor Ruth Levitas, the two utopian theorists who have been most influential on my work, offer a satisfying way to distinguish between the two. Neither thinks very extensively about the conditions that enable or restrict the expression of utopian desire. In Bloch’s work, the utopian impulse is assumed to be a universal aspect of human life. Levitas, while arguing that her definition does not imply that utopia “is an essential

¹²⁰ *Narrative*, pp. 81.

¹²¹ *My Bondage*, pp. 203.

ingredient in human nature,” does not clearly explain when or where humans stop expressing a desire for a better world.¹²² As a result, both end up ascribing the distinction to individual effort—the work of avoiding “fraudulent hope” is a matter of proactive thought that sorts out the escapist and fantastic elements from their revolutionary and anticipatory counterparts.¹²³ Yet, these definitions are unsatisfying when applied to the context of slavery, a context in which slaveholders had nearly unlimited power to limit and distort the expression of utopian desire. On one hand, we must reckon with the powerful and extensive mechanisms of repression that existed on plantations to force acquiescence with the status quo. Violence, overwork, and the lack of education are incredibly effective ways to limit utopian desire. On the other hand, recognizing the ways in which slaves resisted, both physically and imaginatively, is a vital task in ensuring that we remember that slavery was constantly contested from within. Slaves exerted their agency by striking, slowing down work, running away, and even revolting in conditions that appeared totalizing and universal. Are we left to distinguish between utopia and escapism on the basis of which expressions of desire led to better conditions?¹²⁴

¹²² *Concept*, pp. 8.

¹²³ Levitas writes that “wishful thinking” (i.e. anti-utopian escapism) must be stripped “of that which is purely fantastic, compensatory and escapist” in order to reveal a truly utopian desire (*Concept*, pp. 104). Bloch is even more straightforward, arguing that “Nobody has lived without daydreams, but it is a question of knowing them deeper and deeper and in this way keeping them trained unerringly, usefully, on what is right” (*Principle*, pp. 3).

¹²⁴ This *post hoc* definition of utopia matches Mannheim’s distinction between utopia and ideology: “Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time” (173). It also largely reproduces Lefebvre’s distinction in representations. See further: Mannheim, Karl. *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Routledge, 1949.

I find a richer way to think about this difference in Douglass's autobiographies—one that centers the role of space to utopia. As I argued near the beginning of this section, the Great House functioned as an escapist representation of space: a place in which slaves could invest their desire for a better life in a way that did not disturb the social order of the plantation. Douglass describes its effects on slaves and their desires: “there was much rivalry among [slaves] as to *who* should be elected to go up to the Great House ... Being selected, too, for this office, was deemed a high honor.” Yet, Douglass also notes that there is something subversive about the desire to work at the Great House: competing slaves “sought as diligently to please their overseers as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people.”¹²⁵ While the analogy between slaves and politicians appears to be negative, it reveals a two-facedness to slaves' desires to work at the Great House: a degree of deception that has a very different meaning when it is expressed by slaves instead of politicians.

Douglass returns to this duality when he describes the supposedly happy songs that the elected slaves would sing while traveling to the Great House. While slaveholders would cite these as evidence of slaves' contentment in slavery, they spoke to Douglass of the spatial limitations on their ability to express their desires. Underlying the apparent celebration of the seat of slave power was a profound anguish to being limited to life on the plantation, a surplus of desire that was not distorted by slaveholders but could find no space in which to place themselves: “[these songs] represent the sorrows of [the slave's] heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears... The

¹²⁵ *Narrative*, pp. 45-46.

singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave.”¹²⁶ Douglass’s analogy is striking—while there is an escapist, and thus not properly utopian, dimension to slaves’ songs he connects this to the social space from which they emerge, not anything inherent in their expression. Life on the plantation is akin to being “cast away upon a desolate island.” This does not mean that a desire for life beyond slavery does not exist, but that within the plantation slaves lack the ability to express that desire within their imaginations. The limits on slaves’ ability to express desire imposed by escapist representations act like the ocean surrounding a desolate island—they bound the imagination of the possible to the grounds of the plantation.

Douglass places himself within these limits in his autobiographies. As he writes at the end of this section, “I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.”¹²⁷ Douglass acknowledges that his spatial imagination was shaped by the same practices and representations that produced these conflicted slave songs. While he was “within the circle” of slavery, he was like the slaves he describes, unable to recognize his inability to place his utopian desire outside of the boundaries of the plantation. This acknowledgement is significant because it adds a second level on which social space matters to the expression of utopia. Not only is our ability to express utopian desires dependent on having utopian representations of space in

¹²⁶ *Narrative*, pp. 46-47.

¹²⁷ *Narrative*, pp. 47.

which they can be placed, but our ability to distinguish between utopia and escapism is also dependent on the social space in which we exist.

As William Andrews writes, slave narratives were a “very public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom and then assigning it to oneself in defiance of one’s bonds to the present or to the social, political and sometimes even the moral exigencies of the present.” While many Douglass scholars have taken this point to argue about the importance of violence or education in his narratives, I argue that these sections speak to the importance that space plays in his definition of freedom. Douglass defines his freedom as necessarily being found outside of the circle of slavery. As a result, it is significant that he ends both of his antebellum autobiographies by rejecting the North as a place of black freedom, contrasting with most other slave narratives and even contradicting the way he represents the North throughout the two texts. Throughout both *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage, My Freedom*, he acknowledges that the North served as a utopian representation of space, which in turn was a vital component of his ability to envision and express his desire for a life outside of slavery. During his time in Baltimore, he meets two Irish dock workers who tell him about the North and its promises of freedom: “I ... looked forward to an escape to the North, as a possible means of gaining the liberty for which my heart panted.”¹²⁸ The North, as a utopian representation of space, has a powerful effect on him, helping him both place and maintain his desire for a life outside of slavery in extremely difficult circumstances. On Covey’s farm, where he experiences the extreme violence and

¹²⁸ *My Bondage*, 138.

overwork of field labor, the North remains as a representation of a better place as he looks over Chesapeake Bay: “The steamboats steered in a north-east course from North Point. I will do the same; and when I get to the head of the bay, I will run my canoe adrift, and walk straight through Delaware to Pennsylvania.”¹²⁹

However, by the end of his antebellum autobiographies, the North has become an escapist representation of space to Douglass, a place that is no longer adequate to his desire for a better life. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, while he initially feels as if he has “escaped a den of hungry lions,” he quickly points to the precariousness of his freedom: “I was yet liable to be taken back, and subjected to all the tortures of slavery.” The inhabitants of the North “are legalized kidnappers” and Douglass is “every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellowmen.”¹³⁰ This pronouncement reflected his very real experience of living in the North: after the publication of his first autobiography, he was forced into exile in England, away from slave catchers alerted to his name and location. Douglass’s second autobiography, written after his freedom was legally purchased by British abolitionists, is only slightly more positive about the North. Returning on a steamer to the United States after a lecture tour in England, Douglass is barred from entering the ship’s cabin, despite buying a first-class ticket. He describes the sting of segregation after his time in England as having an effect similar to the violence of slavery: “the lash of proscription, to a man accustomed to equal social position ... has a sting for the soul hardly less severe than that which bites the flesh

¹²⁹ *Narrative*, 75.

¹³⁰ *Narrative*, 98-99.

and draws the blood from the back of the plantation slave.”¹³¹ The use of whip imagery is significant; it points both to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and to the fact that he had only realized an individual form of freedom, as many other slaves still labored under a literal whip in slavery.

These two conclusions demonstrate that by the time Douglass had reached the North, he no longer viewed it as a utopian representation of space. Having experienced it as a real place with real shortcomings, he began to recognize the escapist elements highlighted by emigrationists like Martin Delany who argued that black people needed to leave the United States and create their own country in order to bring about their liberation. As a result, it is not completely surprising that Douglass’s sole work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave*, depicts a black utopia in the Caribbean Sea outside of the boundaries of the United States. Yet, as I argue in the following section, we should not view his representation as an embrace of black nationalist ideology; rather, it makes a semi-peripheral critique of how thoroughly the utopian potential of property ownership had permeated African American thought.

II: Finding the Space of Freedom

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the fullest representation of Douglass’s spatial imagination about freedom after his escape from slavery is found in *The Heroic Slave*, a novella published in 1853 as a part of a collection of essays titled *Autographs for Freedom*.¹³² Douglass’s text follows the life of Madison Washington, a

¹³¹ *My Bondage*, pp. 313.

¹³² *The Heroic Slave* was also serialized in Douglass’s newspaper in 1853.

slave who leads a mutiny, takes over a slave ship, and sails it to the British Bahamas where he and all the other slaves are freed.¹³³ While the *Amistad* incident, which took place two years before the mutiny on the *Creole*, was better known, Douglass had good reasons to fictionalize the latter. Rather than having their fate decided by the Supreme Court, the fate of the slaves on the *Creole* laid squarely in the hands of an exceptional black individual who, unlike Douglass, finds a place outside of the social space of slavery. In *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass offers a utopian representation of what this space might look like from his position as a free black man in the North. In so doing, he depicts the difficulty of escaping from the social space of slavery while showing to his many white allies that they still existed ‘within the circle’ of American ideology, unable to see why black people were rejecting the North as a place in which they would be able to realize their utopian desires of a better life.

Although not referenced directly, one of those white allies probably was Gerrit Smith. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Smith firmly believed that the solution to black inferiority could be found in the North: black people just needed to be given their own tracts of land on which to live. He embodied John Locke’s view of the power of private property to produce independent and free individuals and was a large supporter of both the Liberty Party and Free-Soil Party, political movements that envisioned a utopia of small land-owners spread throughout the United States.¹³⁴ Putting

¹³³ For the best history of the *Creole* mutiny, see Jones, Howard. “The Peculiar Institution and National Honor: The Case of the *Creole* Slave Revolt,” *Civil War History* 21.1 (1975): pp. 28-50.

¹³⁴ On the rise of free-soil ideology and its ambiguous relationship with abolitionists, see: Earle, Jonathan. *Jacksonian Anti-Slavery & The Politics of Free-Soil, 1824-1854*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004; and Foner, Eric. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

his money and influence where his beliefs were, in the mid-1840s Smith began donating large swaths of land in upstate New York to poor black residents of the state. While all people were deserving of land, Smith believed that racism and segregation had uniquely “closed against [blacks] the avenues to riches and respectability—to happiness and usefulness.” By giving land to poor blacks, he intended to help them become land-owners and start on the path to being respectable and useful members of the nation.¹³⁵ Gerrit Smith’s vision of black land ownership was in line with his belief that land rights were “as inborn, inalienable, and absolute as his right to life itself.”¹³⁶

Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Smith’s plan for land redistribution largely failed. While he distributed over one thousand parcels of land and promised to pay all taxes for the properties, very few blacks thrived or even survived on the land for reasons that Smith overlooked. For one, the land was heavily wooded and required a significant investment of capital to prepare it for farming, resources that poor black people simply did not have and were unable to obtain from banks. Black settlers also experienced discrimination in various forms, from pure animosity at the disruption of racial homogeneity to swindlers and frauds who charged blacks fake fees or fooled settlers into signing over their land deeds with no compensation.¹³⁷ Smith was aware of these difficulties, but they did not diminish view of the land a utopian representation of space for black life. As he wrote to James McCune Smith, a black physician aiding

¹³⁵ Dyson, Zita. “Gerrit Smith’s Effort in Behalf of the Negroes in New York,” *The Journal of Negro History* 3.4 (1918): pp. 357.

¹³⁶ *Civil Government*, pp. 8.

¹³⁷ Stauffer, John. *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*, Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 157.

Smith's plan, "On these tracts of land they will begin a new life. There they will brave the rigors of the wilderness, and make for themselves a hardy and honorable character."¹³⁸

Part of Smith's hubris was ignoring the black abolitionists with whom he corresponded, who insisted to him that a technical school would be far more useful than wooded and unarable land.¹³⁹ However, Smith's belief in the potential of land ownership to bring about a better future was hardly unique to him. The two land-based reparations projects of the Civil War, General Sherman's Field Order 15 and Thaddeus Stevens's Slave Reparations Bill, operated on a similar assumption, envisioning property ownership within the United States as necessary and sufficient to allow for the realization of black people's utopian desires.¹⁴⁰ These presumptions were held by not only paternalistic whites who thought they knew what was best for emancipated slaves, but also a group of black ministers who met with General Sherman before he issued his order. The ministers stated, "The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men, and we

¹³⁸ Gerrit Smith to Rev. T.S. Wright, C.B. Ray, and Dr. James McCune Smith, November 14, 1846. (Qtd. in Stauffer, pp. 149)

¹³⁹ As James McCune Smith wrote to Gerrit Smith, "The mere possession of land by our people, even if cultivated by them, must be associated with equal educational privileges, or they will fall into the sad night which darkens Westchester County" ("James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, 28 December 1846," *The Black Abolitionist Papers Volume III*, Ed. C. Peter Ripley, University of North Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 480-81).

¹⁴⁰ Thaddeus Stevens stated that "Homesteads to [black people] are far more valuable than the immediate right of suffrage ... nothing is so likely to make a man a good citizens as to make him a freeholder" (65-66). Qtd in. *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader*, Ronald Salzberger and Mary Turck (eds), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare.”¹⁴¹ While well intentioned, such proposals failed to reckon with the entanglement between land and the social space of slavery that spread throughout the United States. In *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass critiques this short-sightedness and envisions a utopian representation of space in which new and more revolutionary black desires could emerge.

The Heroic Slave opens with Madison Washington standing in a clearing, an enclave separated from the immediate violence of slavery, that allows him to express his desire for freedom. Thus free to express himself without reprisals, he is unable to accept that the animals of the forest “live free” while he was “born a slave... even before I was made part of this breathing world.”¹⁴² While some critics have tried to read Washington’s speech in the woods as a moment of liberation from the constraints of slavery, it is clear that the woods are only a space of escape from the violence and anguish of slavery: “The hope of freedom seemed to sweeten, for a season, the bitter cup of slavery, and to make it, for a time, tolerable.”¹⁴³ In fact, most of *The Heroic Slave* describes Madison Washington’s experience of finding escapist representations of space. During his first attempt to run away from the plantation, he gets lost and ends up wandering back onto the plantation after about a week. While he is cold and tired, he refuses to return to the slaves’ quarters despite seeing his “fellow-slaves seated by a warm fire, merrily passing

¹⁴¹ “Report of the Conference between Secretary Stanton, Gen. Sherman and the Colored People of Savannah,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 13 February 1865, pp. 5.

¹⁴² Douglass, Frederick. *The Heroic Slave*, Yale UP, 2015, pp. 5, 7.

¹⁴³ *Heroic*, pp. 8. Lance Newman’s reading is representative of this idealism. He argues that “By taking refuge in the woods, Washington achieves an instructive kind of freedom within the borders of the slave South” (136). See further: Newman, Lance. “Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave,’” *American Literature*, 81.1 (2009): 127-152.

away the time, as though their hearts knew no sorrow.” Washington counters that “where there is seeming contentment with slavery, there is certain treachery to freedom,” the beginning of his consciousness of the pernicious effect of the false and distorted desires of slavery.¹⁴⁴

Washington eventually runs away, with the help of a white abolitionist, and makes his way to Canada. At first, Canada seems like the realization of his desire for freedom, as he describes being nestled “in the mane of the British lion, protected by his mighty paw from the talons and beak of the American eagle,” rooting his freedom within a place separate from the authority of American slave institutions. However, he soon becomes frustrated with the limited and individual form of freedom that is available to him there. Separated from his family, he begins to view his life in Canada as a kind of escapism, distracting him from his wife’s condition: “I could not be free with the galling thought that my poor wife was still a slave. With her in slavery, my body, not my spirit, was free.”¹⁴⁵

Sadly, when Washington returns to the plantation to try to free his wife, she is killed and he is sold to a New Orleans bound slave trader, the *Creole*, removing him and his dangerous influence from the plantation.¹⁴⁶ On the ship, Washington leads a mutiny

¹⁴⁴ *Heroic*, pp. 15.

¹⁴⁵ *Heroic*, pp. 26, 38. Given that Douglass titles Washington’s narrative as that of a “heroic” slave, Washington’s refusal to recognize his own freedom while his family is enslaved is meaningful: Douglass presents freedom as a social, not individual state.

¹⁴⁶ Notably, when Washington is captured, he is used as a component of slaveholders’ representations of space; specifically to try to impress the slaves with the impossibility of escaping from the power of slaveholders: “I was kept there three days. All the slaves, for miles around, were brought to see me. Many slaveholders came with their slaves, using me as proof of the completeness of their power, and of the impossibility of getting away” (*Heroic*, pp. 38).

that frees him and his fellow slaves. The mutiny on the *Creole* is often noted as a sign of Douglass's celebration or endorsement of the use of violence in the fight against slavery.¹⁴⁷ However, I argue that this scene is more accurately described as an analysis of the importance of power embodied in legal and political institutions, not in the individual, in maintaining white supremacy. On the *Creole*, Madison Washington and the other slaves were able to disrupt and ultimately invert the social relations of slavery within the confines of a ship at sea, a place temporarily outside of the social space of slavery.

The mutiny on the *Creole* is described through a conversation between two white sailors, Williams and Grant, trying to comprehend and represent the slave revolt. Each white sailor presents a misreading of conditions that enabled the slaves to take over the ship. Williams attributes the success to giving slaves too much respect and not trusting in the power of intimidation to make them submit:

I would not honor a dozen niggers by pointing a gun at one of 'em,—a good stout whip, or a stiff rope's end, is better than all the guns at Old Point. Why, sir, to take a gun... is the best way you can select to tell him you are afraid of him, and the best way of inviting his attack.

The contrast between a gun and a whip is significant: while the gun is a powerful weapon, the whip is a powerful representation. In this case, it stands in for slaveholders' power on the plantation, a power that is able to maintain the relationship between master

¹⁴⁷ As Richard Yarborough writes, through Washington, Douglass "conscious[ly] attempt[s] to exploit the parallels between the rebellion on board the *Creole* and the American revolution... to gain reader approval of his protagonist's implied violence" (175). See further: Yarborough, Richard. "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" In *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 166-188.

and slave in a context in which slaveholders' were largely outnumbered. For Williams, the failure of the slaveholders on the *Creole* is a result of their lack of knowledge of "real character of *darkies* in general," by which he means their susceptibility to being intimidated by a representation of power such as a whip.

In making this argument, Williams reveals that he views white supremacy as natural and universal; he cannot imagine any place in which slaves could successfully rise up and resist the power of slaveholders.¹⁴⁸ In response, Grant, the second sailor, argues that this power only exists within the social space of the plantation:

All that you've said sounds very well *here* on shore... where you have the sympathy of the community and the whole physical force of the government, State and National, at our command... I deny that... your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of *salt water*.¹⁴⁹

Grant understands that the relationship between a master and slave relies on a set of institutions that support white supremacy. Without a judicial system that will sanction violence against slaves and without white racists who will administer violence, the whip loses its representative power. Given that these institutions are located within the physical, judicial, and social boundaries of the United States, the ocean offers a utopian representation of space in which slavery can be fully overthrown. As Madison

¹⁴⁸ *Heroic*, pp. 42-43. The Captain of the *Creole* shares Williams's naturalization of black inferiority. After the mutiny, he tries several times to order the escaped slaves to surrender their weapons and return to the hold, even as he is held captive and all the white sailors are hiding in the riggings of the ship. He is simply unable to recognize that the power relations on board the ship have shifted in favor of Washington and the other slaves.

¹⁴⁹ *Heroic*, pp. 43.

Washington tells the *Creole's* incredulous captain: “[you] cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free.”¹⁵⁰

Yet, the slaves are not made legally and politically free until they land the ship at the British port of Nassau, an island populated by black inhabitants and ruled by the British, who refused to recognize the slave relations that existed under the legal regime of the United States. In a moment of utopian fancy, Douglass writes that the mutineers were freed by a “a company of *black* soldiers [who] came on board ... [and] did not recognize *persons as property*,” one of the only moments in his novel that was not historically accurate.¹⁵¹ I use the term “utopian fancy” in the sense conveyed by Fredric Jameson, who characterizes them as “placeholders and symptoms of a more fundamental repression, of the coming short of the Utopian imagination against taboos that prevent any wholesale redesigning of the social order as such.”¹⁵² In this case, Douglass’s utopian representation of Nassau points to a contradiction that he would not or could not engage with the limited forms of freedom experienced by colonial subjects throughout the Caribbean. Perhaps Douglass did not want to pollute his utopia with the racial contradictions of colonialism in the Bahamas, especially given his affinity for British abolitionists and the British state. Either way, it represents a limit in Douglass’s utopian imagination, making the moment that he too fell into escapism about the potential for land to bring about black liberation.

¹⁵⁰ *Heroic*, pp. 50.

¹⁵¹ *Heroic*, pp. 50-51. In reality, the slaves on the *Creole* were freed only after a crowd had gathered and pressured British authorities to release all but the mutineers. The mutineers, including Washington, spent several months in jail before being freed (“Peculiar Institution” 31).

¹⁵² *Archaeologies*, pp. 53.

After all, for the real Madison Washington and slaves on the *Creole*, Nassau was a place of contradiction. As Howard Jones writes of the *Creole* mutineers, “[They] had heard that an American schooner, the *Hermosa*, had shipwrecked the year before ... and that English wreckers had taken the slaves on the ship to Nassau where officials set them free.” While the British Bahamas were a colony, the British were hugely outnumbered, radically changing the power relationship between whites and blacks on the island. When the captain of the *Creole* and the slaveholders on board demanded that the British return the slaves to their control, the attorney general of Nassau “privately warned ... that resistance to the slaves’ liberation could incite the islanders and cause bloodshed.”¹⁵³ Yet, mutineers had initially wanted to sail to Liberia but were convinced by their slaveholders, who hoped that the British would help them keep control over the slaves, that they lacked the supplies necessary. The British government, which Douglass consistently held up as an exemplar of abolitionism, also eventually gave in to the institutions of slavery. While the mutineers were never returned, the government did pay \$110,330 to American slaveholders as reparations for the loss of their human cargo. The head of the Anglo-American claims commission on the matter declared that while “slavery was contrary to humanity” the slaveholders still had the right to “expect shelter from a friendly power... As for the [non-mutineers], the governor should have helped officers of the *Creole* regain command and reestablish the social relations of slavery,” a reminder of the international spread of slaveholders’ power.¹⁵⁴ As critical as Douglass

¹⁵³ “Peculiar Institution,” pp. 31-32.

¹⁵⁴ “Peculiar Institution,” pp. 47.

usually was about the possibility of black freedom, we see the limits of his critique here as he asserts an idealistic conclusion to a heroic narrative of slave agency.

This conclusion also indicates how Douglass's critique of Smith and other white abolitionists led him to a contradictory engagement with emigrationism and black nationalism before the Civil War. During the 1850s, he publicly clashed with emigrationists like Martin Delany, who argued that black people would have to leave the United States after emancipation given the depth and pervasiveness of white racism.¹⁵⁵ While Douglass was well aware of this racism, he was more positive about the potential of interracial solidarity, often connecting his hopes for black freedom to land in a way that echoes Smith.. Given that slave labor had produced much of the wealth in the United States, blacks deserved to remain in the country and enjoy the fruits of that labor: "*We* leveled your forests; *our hands* removed the stumps from your fields, and raised the first crops and brought the first produce to your tables. We ... have been with you in adversity, and by the help of God will be with you in prosperity."¹⁵⁶ Yet, as we know from the conclusions to his autobiographies, he was also profoundly skeptical about the kind of freedom that black people could obtain in the United States. As a result, when attempting to concretely describe how emancipated slaves could co-exist on the land with whites, his views become somewhat contradictory.

¹⁵⁵ As Robert Levine writes, "[Delany's] efforts to challenge and cross borders emerged as one of the fundamental points of difference between himself and Douglass in their debates on black leadership and community" (15). See further: Levine, Robert. *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

¹⁵⁶ Douglass, Frederick. "The Free Negro's Place is in America," In *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, 177-78.

In “The Present Condition and Future Prospects of the Negro People,” a speech he gave the same year as *The Heroic Slave* was published, Douglass rejected emigration to Africa: “Let [the slave] remember that a home, a country, a nationality, are all attainable this side of Liberia.” Yet, he also refused to endorse living within the United States, resulting in a hazy depiction of his utopian representation of space:

Other and more desirable lands are open to us. We can plant ourselves at the very portals of slavery. We can hover about the Gulf of Mexico ... From the isles of the sea and from the mountain-tops of South America we can watch the meandering destiny of those we have left behind.¹⁵⁷

The specific place of black freedom is unclear: it exists both in and outside of the United States, a contradictory position partially resolved by the *Creole*. As a ship transporting slaves from Virginia to Louisiana, it is a part of the national slave trade while being temporarily removed from its spatial boundaries, a position that allows Douglass to reflect on the conditions necessary for to realize black liberation. Liberation requires more than an economic exchange in which freedom is “purchased” from slaveholders; it requires the creation or discovery of a place outside of the social space of slavery, outside of the control of its practices and representations.¹⁵⁸

Douglass uses the Caribbean as the space within which to stage the realization of black freedom, but he never analyzes that space with the depth and intensity he applies to the plantation. As a result, we should not take it as an expression of his view of the

¹⁵⁷ “The Present Condition,” pp. 258.

¹⁵⁸ As Henri Lefebvre writes, “A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions of political apparatuses” (54).

potential that emigration held for black people. Rather, it is an example of the immanent critique African American utopianism offers American utopianism. Engaging with the superior model of social transformation that property represented for many Americans, Douglass uses his semi-peripheral position to expose its faulty assumptions. The liberty created by property within the United States is limited by property's characteristics within the social space of slavery. While other scholars have reproduced Douglass's critique from an idealistic perspective that insists on the epistemic incompatibility of a concept of property that includes both land and people, Douglass offers a utopian critique of the concept that engages with its vision of a better possible future.¹⁵⁹ By showing that this future is impossible to achieve for black people within his present world, structured by slavery on a global scale, he helps illustrate for many people the escapist elements of this utopia. Through this illustration, Douglass makes an important contribution to early African American utopianism.

At the same time, *The Heroic Slave* also illustrates the limitations of Douglass's utopian critique: his representation of Nassau as a colony that Britain protects from the United States indicates his inability (or unwillingness) to engage with the contradictions that imperialism and colonialism posed to black nationalism. As a result, Douglass can only highlight the importance that land and space would hold in the African American utopian imagination during the rest of the nineteenth century. For a critique of that

¹⁵⁹ I think, in particular, of the group of scholars influenced by Afro-Pessimism who have argued for a full rejection of the Enlightenment and Modernity (whatever those mean) on the basis of their contradictions when it comes to race. See, for instance: Ferreira da Silva, Denise. *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007; or Sexton, Jared. "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral* 1 (2012).

utopianism, one that includes a direct adoption of the American utopia of empire, I turn to the work of George Schuyler. As I argue in the next chapter, he illustrates how the failure to secure a place in which slaves would be free from the social space of the plantation after the Civil War resulted in emigration projects that reproduced some of the worst elements of American imperialism.

Chapter 3: George Schuyler and the Black Nationalist Imaginary

One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his fathers loved,
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me?¹⁶⁰
 Countee Cullen, “Heritage”

Many black nationalists wrestled with the question Frederick Douglass posed in *The Heroic Slave*: where can black Americans liberate themselves from white supremacy? While Douglass only envisioned an answer in his fiction, black nationalists offered many concrete proposals for creating a self-reliant society or nation.¹⁶¹ I view black nationalism as a form of utopianism—an expression of the desire for a better possible future—because it helps us analyze the differences among proponents on the level of the imagination. While black nationalists explicitly disagreed on where or how black people could liberate themselves from white society, these disagreements implicitly illustrate their conflicts over what visions of the future were possible. Emigrationists, like Martin Delany, believed that Douglass’s vision of an integrated United States was impossible, just as Douglass believed that Delany’s proposals for a black nation in Central American were impossible. From a utopian perspective, however, the differences among black nationalists were not solely about the means through which the desire for

¹⁶⁰ Cullen, Countee. *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, Anchor, 1991, 106.

¹⁶¹ Despite the name, black nationalism does not only refer to the desire for a black nation-state. As Sterling Stuckey writes in his study of early black nationalism in the United States, the ideology “emphasized the need for black people to rely primarily on themselves in vital areas of life—economic, political, religious, and intellectual—in order to effect their liberation” (Stuckey, Sterling. *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, Beacon Press, 1972, 1). For a sense of the intellectual diversity of black nationalist thought, see: Bracey, John, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (eds.). *Black Nationalism in America*, MacMillan, 1970; Moses, Wilson Jeremiah, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*, Oxford University Press, 1988, and Robinson, Dean. *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

self-determination could be realized; rather, they entailed deeply held disagreements about the horizon of possibility for black life in the United States and beyond.

Black nationalism has taken many different forms; in this chapter I focus on expressions of black nationalism in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I chose this period because the end of Reconstruction in 1876, marked by the removal of federal troops from the South and the return of state sanctioned white supremacy, increased both disillusionment with the promises of liberty and equality and the desire for self-determination among black Americans. Yet, like Douglass, their desires were often constrained by the dominant model of social transformation found in the United States: American imperialism and its “system of racial domination” that both justified and excused the exploitation and dispossession of native people.¹⁶² Some, like W.E.B. Du Bois, attempted to reject this model and envision a black nationalist utopia that was the antithesis of American imperialism. Others, like Martin Delany, adopted the American model and became avid believers in an African American manifest destiny.

My interest, in this chapter, is to illustrate a third way that black nationalists engaged with American imperialism: offering a semi-peripheral utopian critique that attempted to transform, rather than accept or reject, the model. This approach acknowledges, as Countee Cullen’s poem does, that black nationalism’s emergence within the United States produces unavoidable contradictions. On one hand, the poem explicitly acknowledges the importance of Africa as an ancestral homeland whose place in the symbolic imaginary of the West continues to shape the social status of black

¹⁶² Doolen, Andrew. *Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Americans. On the other, the poem implicitly attributes that importance to the institution of slavery. As a result, the poem can only represent Africa as a series of scenes, a dramatization of the past that holds a tenuous connection to living reality. While “Heritage” depicts Africa as a place in which it was possible to invest utopian desires, it also questions whether that place is a form of escapism produced by the racial logic of the United States.

Specifically, I focus on George Schuyler, an iconoclast and prolific journalist whose intellectual legacy has become defined by the wholesale ideological shift he underwent during his life.¹⁶³ In the 1920s, Schuyler was a committed socialist who championed working-class solidarity while writing (often) vitriolic critiques and satires of upper-class African American intellectuals. His best known essay from the period was the inflammatory “Negro-Art Hokum,” which argued against the racial essentialism of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁶⁴ In contrast, at the end of his career in the 1950s and 1960s, he supported Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communism and wrote for the *American Opinion*, the journal of the nativist John Birch society.¹⁶⁵ Within this narrative of Schuyler’s career, the 1930s are often viewed as a decade of transition in which he became disillusioned with communism and became conservative.¹⁶⁶ Yet, this appraisal does not do justice to

¹⁶³ As Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes, “No black American, before or since, has written for such an ideologically disparate array of publications in both the black and white press, or embodied more contradictory ideological positions.” See further: “A Fragmented Man: George Schuyler and the Claims of Race,” *New York Times Book Review* (September 20, 1992): pp. 31.

¹⁶⁴ Langston Hughes wrote “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in response to Schuyler’s essay. For more on Schuyler’s career as a socialist journalist, see Hutchinson, George. “Mediating ‘Race’ and ‘Nation’: The Cultural Politics of the Messenger,” *African American Review* 28.4 (1994): 531-48.

¹⁶⁵ Schuyler’s expulsion from black public life was formalized after he wrote a vitriolic editorial decrying Martin Luther King Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize, calling him a “typhoid mary, spreading discord throughout the US” (Qtd. in “A Fragmented Man,” 42).

¹⁶⁶ Martha Patterson, for instance, argues that Schuyler’s writing in the ‘30s “reveal[s] an increasing cynicism toward his audience and mass movements in general, which may very well signal Schuyler’s

his extensive engagement with black nationalist thought throughout the decade. I argue that he offers an immanent critique of black nationalism that recognizes its value as a utopian desire while critiquing its tendency to reproduce the social hierarchies of the United States. In other words, he illustrates the contradiction between black nationalism's embrace of American imperialism and its desire to overthrow the social relations produced by racial capitalism within the American empire. Schuyler recognized that while black nationalists were motivated by the cruel treatment black people suffered at the hands of white Americans, they often foisted that treatment in theory and action onto people throughout Central America and Africa.

I highlight Schuyler's engagement with black nationalism in the two major texts he wrote in the 1930s: *Slaves Today* (1931) and *Black Empire* (published serially from 1936 to 1938). Each text depicts the dialectical imbrication of black nationalism with American imperialism. In *Slaves Today*, a realist novel about the Liberian slave trade, Schuyler illustrates the tendency for black nationalism to slip into escapism by reproducing the racialized exploitation of American slavery. While most of the novel is a straightforward critique of black nationalist hypocrisy, his depiction of solidarity between native Africans forms the germ of the semi-peripheral utopia he offers in *Black Empire*. In that text, which depicts the creation of a black utopia in Africa, Schuyler illustrates how black nationalism could engage with the American utopia of empire without accepting or rejecting its model of social transformation. Rather, by envisioning a nation

sharp turn to the right in the 1950s" ("Fascist Parody and Wish Fulfillment: George Schuyler's Periodical Fiction of the 1930s," *Journal of Periodical Studies* 4.1 (2013): 94). Mark Christian Thompson writes that "*Black Empire* engages with, and finds positive use for, fascist ideology" (*Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture Between the Wars*, University of Virginia Press, 2007, 72)

organized around blackness as a category of political economy, rather than biology or culture, he outlines how black nationalism could support alternative economic systems built around community that would challenge the exploitation of capitalism. However, before getting to my reading of Schuyler I want to offer a short history of black nationalism in the United States to show its engagement with American imperialism.

I: Dreaming of Africa.

One of the central challenges facing black nationalists was the conflict between race and nation, a conflict that was most discernible in debates about the borders of a prospective black nation. Who is the group of black people included within a black nation? Is it limited to a nationality or ethnicity, or does it envision a transnational body of citizens waiting to be united in a black nation? To a certain extent, these questions face any nation-state. As Benedict Anderson writes, nationalism is based on the shared consciousness of an “imagined community” of people. The imagination is required “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members.”¹⁶⁷ Yet, these questions are particularly pressing in the case of black nationalism because it envisions a community “united neither by a common geography nor by a common language, but by the nebulous concept of racial unity.”¹⁶⁸ This nebulousness has had both positive and negative consequences. In the best case, it allows the community of black people to exceed the borders of traditional nation-states, creating

¹⁶⁷ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, Verso, 2006, pp. 6.

¹⁶⁸ Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925*, Archon Books, 1978, pp. 17.

transnational solidarity that transcends cultural or ethnic differences. The Pan-African Congresses of the early twentieth century and the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War are two noteworthy examples. In the worst case, the nebulosity of race occludes differences between non-white people, justifying the unilateral imposition of nationalism onto a diverse and unwilling assortment of people that has often resulted in the reproduction of racial hierarchies that excused the dehumanization of ethnic and religious minorities.¹⁶⁹

The distinction between these two possibilities can be measured as the extent to which a certain black nationalist project was able to resist the escapist elements of American utopianism and envision a better world for black people outside of its constraints. Take, for example, the Free African Union Society of Rhode Island, a mutual-aid society of free blacks who raised money to emigrate to Africa in the 1780s. These prospective emigrants felt alienated from the United States because of the individual and institutional racial discrimination they faced, Yet, this did not magically produce solidarity among them and the native Africans. Emigration forced a reckoning with the limitations of the transnational concept of “blackness”: what did these educated, largely Christian, middle-class black Americans have in common with native Africans?

One plan, put forward by James McKenzie in 1795, would have the emigrants obtain a charter from the British government for land in Sierra Leone. Many would-be emigrants refused after learning that they would have to become British citizens rather than immediately form an independent nation. Returning to a site not under the control of

¹⁶⁹ The Rwandan genocide is a stark example of the dire consequences of this kind of imposed black nationalism.

England presented other difficulties, as members envisioned their black nation as having similar legal institutions to the United States. As they wrote to a Quaker supporter, “We want to know by what right or tenor we shall possess said Lands ... for we should think it not safe, and unwise for us to go and settle on Lands in Affrica [*sic*] unless the right and fee of the Land is first firmly, and in proper form, made over to us, and to our heirs or Children.”¹⁷⁰ The potential of Africa as a space of self-determination was caught up in Western beliefs about property ownership and national sovereignty: these black nationalists wanted conventional legal guarantees that they would own and bequeath the land on which they settled. Moreover, their vision of a black nation did not extend to the native inhabitants of Sierra Leone the material and symbolic rights they sought for themselves, thus reproducing the settler colonial relationship between Europeans and Native Americans.¹⁷¹

While the Free African Union Society illustrates how difficult it was to overcome their socialization into American utopianism, no black nationalist embraced American imperialism with the gusto of Martin Delany. The major African American proponent of emigration in the 1840s and 1850s, Delany spent years travelling to South America and Africa trying to find the perfect location for a new black nation. He believed that buying into the promises of liberty and democracy as stated in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution was naïve: “To imagine ourselves to be included in the body politic

¹⁷⁰ Qtd. in Robinson, William. *Black New England Letters: The Uses of Writing in Black New England*, Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1977, pp. 13.

¹⁷¹ There is a growing field of scholarship on the intersection between racism and settler colonialism in North America that investigates the significance of this omission with much more depth than I do here. See, for instance: Asaka, Ikuko. *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation*, Duke University Press, 2017; and Jackson, Shona. *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean*, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

... is at war with common sense, and contrary to fact ... We are politically, not of them, but aliens to the laws and political privileges of the country.” As a result, Delany insisted on leaving the United States and joining a transnational black diaspora: “our brethren ... stand ready and willing to take us by the hand—nay, are anxiously waiting, and earnestly importuning us to come, that they may make common cause with us.”¹⁷² He saw black nationalism as a discourse that exceeded the limitations of abolitionist politics by fully rejecting the myths of liberty and equality offered in the United States.

While Delany critiqued these promises as escapist, his black nationalism rather uncritically adopts the model of social transformation of American imperialism. He was a black chauvinist, believing that black people were genetically superior to white people: “we are a *superior* race, being endowed with properties fitting us for *all* parts of the earth, while they are only adapted to *certain* parts. Of course, this proves our right and duty to live wherever we may *choose*.”¹⁷³ Delany reverses the racial hierarchy of white supremacy but maintains its reification of race as a stable category of difference. As a result, he believed that wherever African Americans created a black nation they would achieve solidarity with other black people.¹⁷⁴ While his uncomplicated believe in solidarity made it easier to envision black liberation on a global scale, it also limited his ability to recognize important difference among non-white people. Believing that it was the “right and duty” of African Americans to settle anywhere they want in the world, Delany’s black nationalism ends up reproducing the imperialist ideology of the United

¹⁷² Delany, Martin. *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, 1852, pp. 56, 64.

¹⁷³ *Condition*, pp. 71.

¹⁷⁴ This belief is presented throughout his black nationalist fiction, *Blake; Or, The Huts of America*.

States. When envisioning a black nation in Nicaragua or New Grenada, he assumed that African Americans (himself included) would take on leadership roles given that they knew “what [was] best for the natives.”¹⁷⁵ This belief in African American superiority was not unique to Delany; many black nationalists of the nineteenth-century believed that it was “the task of the black elite to ‘civilize’ the ‘benighted,’ ‘ignorant’ African race.”¹⁷⁶ Figures like Paul Cuffee, Alexander Crummell, and Edward Blyden viewed the exchange between African Americans and other black people as unidirectional: they held knowledge that needed to be passed down to less ‘civilized’ people.¹⁷⁷ While the imaginary community of Delany’s black nation extended throughout the world, it was implicitly stratified by country of origin and ethnicity.¹⁷⁸

In the early twentieth century, Pan-Africanism arose as a corrective to the American exceptionalism expressed by Delany, Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden,

¹⁷⁵ Levine, Robert. *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, pp. 94. Delany most clearly lays out his arguments for emigrating to South America in *Condition*. For more on his views on the possibility of emigration to Africa, see Delany, Martin. *Official Report on the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, Thomas Hamilton, 1861. For a more detailed analysis of how Delany’s subconsciously reproduced imperialist attitudes as a part of his push for colonization, see Mattox, Jake. “The Mayor of San Juan del Norte? Nicaragua, Martin Delany, and the ‘Cotton’ Americans,” *American Literature* 81.3 (2009): 527-554.

¹⁷⁶ *Afrotopia*, pp. 124.

¹⁷⁷ As Wilson Jeremiah Moses writes, Crummell’s sermons consistently depicted “Black people ... as needing to be uplifted, civilized” (*Golden Age*, pp. 68). On the topic of African colonization, Edward Blyden wrote that “The modern desire for more accurate knowledge of Africa is not mere sentiment: it is the philanthropic impulse to lift up the millions of that continent to their proper position among the intellectual and moral forces of the world” (4). See further: Blyden, Edward. *The Origin and Purpose of African Colonization*. Published by the American Colonization Society, 1883. As Moses writes in *Afrotopia*, “Black nationalism of the nineteenth century ... considered civilization as a unilinear process. Paradoxically, however, they believed in the importance of developing a singularly black contribution to the universal civilization” (72).

¹⁷⁸ In making these distinctions, Delany reproduces the stratification of whiteness described by Nell Irvin Painter in *The History of White People* in which some white people are considered to be of better stock than others, and thus more suited to power.

and others.¹⁷⁹ Emerging from the Pan-African Conference of 1900, which spawned five additional Pan-African Congresses (in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, and 1945), the movement brought together representatives from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean with the hope of collaboratively envisioning how to form a black nation in Africa. The first Congress, organized by W.E.B. Du Bois in Paris less than a month after the Versailles Peace Conference, put forward two values that were central to the movement: “self-determination and anti-imperialism” which would be realized through “a Central African state composed of the former German colonies and the Belgian Congo.”¹⁸⁰ Du Bois envisioned a form of black nationalism that would be international and democratic by centering the political consciousness of colonized people and decentering the voices of African Americans.

In this way, Du Bois was attempting to reject the model of American imperialism. Unfortunately, this rejection could only happen in theory. The expansive imagined community of the Pan-African movement conflicted with the economic imperatives of racial capitalism in the early twentieth century. Specifically, Du Bois’s proposal would have disrupted the important role that Africa played in providing Europe and the United States with profitable resources. Du Bois’s proposal for a Pan-African state was in line

¹⁷⁹ Here I am referring to Pan-Africanism as the specific movement led by W.E.B. Du Bois and embodied in the Pan-Africanism Congresses of the early 20th century. For a distinction between this movement and pan-Africanism (with a little “p”) as a broader philosophical outlook, see Shepperson, George. “Pan-Africanism and ‘Pan-Africanism’: Some Historical Notes,” *Phylon* 23.4 (1962): pp. 346-358.

¹⁸⁰ Contee, Clarence G. “Du Bois, the NAACP, and the Pan-African Congress of 1919,” *The Journal of Negro History* 57.1 (1972): pp. 15. For more on the international dimension of Pan-Africanism in the 20th century, see Walters, Ronald. *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements*, Wayne State University Press, 1993; Adi, Hakim and Marika Sherwood. *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787*, Routledge, 2003; Sherwood, Marika. *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora*, Routledge, 2010.

with the values expressed by the Paris Peace Conference, but it conflicted with “the determination on the part of certain elements in England, Belgium, and elsewhere, to recoup their war losses by intensified exploitation of colonies.”¹⁸¹ As a result, Du Bois’s proposal was summarily rejected by the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany’s African colonies were divided between the victors—privileging the claims to land made by European nations over those of a racial group. My point is not that there is anything significant about this result—of course these nations did not surrender control over colonial land to a congress with no political power—but to note that it was clear that the economic demands of European nations and the United States could not be glossed over in envisioning black nationalism as a better possible future.¹⁸²

Yet, Du Bois was attracted by the idea of transcending this conflict. In a 1924 narrative of a trip to Africa, W.E.B. Du Bois’s description of Africa as the site of an idyllic future imagines away the machines, the economic logic, and the social relations of production found in African colonies. In other words, he imagines a utopia that has superseded American imperialism and its economic exploitation:

[There] will come a day ... when there will spring in Africa a civilization without coal, without noise, where machinery will sing and never rush and roar, and where men will sleep and think and dance and lie prone before

¹⁸¹ Du Bois, W. E. B. “The Pan-African Movement,” In George Padmore ed., *Colonial and ... Colored Unity: History of the Pan-African Congress*, Hammersmith, 1963, 17.

¹⁸² These economic demands are best described by Rosa Luxemburg’s argument that colonialism and imperialism are at the heart of capitalism’s survival in the early twentieth century. See further: “The Historical Conditions of Accumulation,” in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (eds.), *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, Monthly Review Press, 2004, 56.) A similar argument is made in: Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism in Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, 1963, 667-766.

the rising sons, and women will be happy. The objects of life will be revolutionized. Our duty will not consist in getting up at seven, working furiously for six, ten and twelve hours ... No— We shall dream the day away and in cool dawns, in little swift hours, do all our work.¹⁸³

Reading Du Bois's romantic depiction of an African future, which depicts an ideal society "without noise, where machinery will sing," could make us forget about the political and economic reality of the continent that, in 1924, was ruled by colonial powers interested in extracting profits and resources from its subjugated people. Du Bois's imagination has transformed the conditions of production: no more hazardous coal mining, no more working for twelve hours and then "eating in sullen ravenousness or extraordinary repletion." Instead, with a few hours of work, people think, dance, and "dream the day away."¹⁸⁴ Du Bois is offering his readers a traditional utopia: the purpose of this idyllic image of Africa is to remind African Americans that alternatives to Jim Crow are possible and thus to disrupt the seeming universalism of the present. Yet, this form of utopianism can only engage negatively with American imperialism, a structure repeated in the real-world Liberian project.

II: The Problem with Liberia

The origins of Liberia are found in the utopian desires of a strange coalition of white abolitionists and slaveholders who wanted free black people to emigrate to

¹⁸³ Du Bois, W.E.B. "Little Portraits of Africa," *The Crisis* 27.6 (April 1924): 274.

¹⁸⁴ "Little Portraits of Africa," 274.

Africa.¹⁸⁵ United in the American Colonization Society (ACS), this unlikely alliance founded Liberia as a colony on the west coast of Africa in 1821. Framing their work as an act of charity, members of the ACS like Henry Clay argued that Liberia would provide African Americans with the opportunity for to develop into liberal individuals able to hold the right to life, liberty and property¹⁸⁶

Unsurprisingly, the Liberian project was plagued by problems from the very beginning, not the least of which was that black people raised in the United States had difficulty acclimating to the tropical climate.¹⁸⁷ Once settled, American immigrants instated the exceptionalism beliefs expressed by nineteenth-century black nationalists. They settled on lands long occupied by the native population and treated them in much the same way that colonized people were treated throughout the world. The immigrants pushed them off valuable coastal land, forced them to attend missionary schools that taught the English language and Christian doctrine, and ultimately excluded them from citizenship when independence was declared in 1847. By the beginning of the twentieth

¹⁸⁵ While the ACS generated some interest among black abolitionists and nationalists, most ultimately recognized the ulterior motives underlying the desire to remove all free black people from the United States: the fear of miscegenation and of the mutual-aid networks existing among free blacks throughout the country. See further: Forbes, Ella. "African-American Resistance to Colonization," *Journal of Black Studies* 21.2 (1990): 210-223. Incidentally, Henry Clay, a US Senator from Kentucky, considered emigration to be a form of reparations for slavery. A colony of African Americans on the continent "might be rendered instrumental to the introduction into that extensive quarter of the globe, of the arts, civilization and Christianity ... instead of the evils and sufferings which we had been the innocent cause of inflicting upon the inhabitants of Africa ... May we not hope that [through colonization] America may extinguish a great portion of that moral debt which she has contracted to that unfortunate continent?" (Qtd. in *Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* 82).

¹⁸⁶ For the origins of this view in the United States, see Saillant, John. "The American Enlightenment in Africa: Jefferson's Colonizationism and Black Virginians' Migration to Liberia, 1776-1840," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.3 (1998): 260-77; Beverly, Tomek. "'From motives of generosity, as well as self-preservation': Thomas Branagan, Colonization, and the Gradual Emancipation Movement," *American Nineteenth Century History* 6.2 (2005): 121-147.

¹⁸⁷ On the difficulty of early settlers, and the incredible human cost of colonization, see McDaniel, Antonio. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: The Mortality Cost of Colonizing Liberia in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

century, Liberia was divided in two classes: “between 10,000 and 12,000 descendants of [a] black American mercantile class” and “an indigenous population [that numbered] between 1,500,000 and 2,000,000.”¹⁸⁸ While the country ostensibly exemplified the potential of black nationalism in Africa, its economic, political, and cultural benefits were limited to a privileged class of black people.

Liberia reflected the model of social transformation of American empire: one in which native people were enslaved for the good of the nation. While never wealthy, the country had a profitable trade with Germany until 1914, when World War I forced the two countries to suspend their relationship. As a result, Liberia entered into a contract with Spanish Guinea to provide laborers for plantations on Fernando Po, an island just off the coast. As historian I. K. Sundiata writes, “Labour was one of the few available sources of revenue” for a highly indebted Liberian government, given its lack of national industry.¹⁸⁹ Problems emerged immediately with reports of kidnapped natives and terrible working conditions. These reports in turn prompted critiques from the international community and, under pressure from the League of Nations, the formal termination of the contract in 1927.

¹⁸⁸ Putnam, Aric. “Modern Slaves,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9.2 (2006): 237. For more on the treatment of native Liberians, see Dennis, Benjamin G. and Anita K. Dennis. *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia*, Algora Publishing, 2008; and Akpan, M.B. “Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7.2 (1973): 217-236.

¹⁸⁹ “Prelude to Scandal,” pp. 107. For more on the Liberian slave trade, see Sundiata, I. K. *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis, 1929-1936*, Institute for the Study of the Human, 1980.

In response to reports that government officials had reinstated the slave trade, George Schuyler visited Liberia for three months in 1930.¹⁹⁰ While the nation of Liberia officially ceased to send laborers to Fernando Po, farmers on the island entered into private contracts with government officials who needed the income the slave trade had provided. These contracts ostensibly included clauses about pay and safety, but Schuyler discovered that these were little more than rhetoric. Shocked by the willingness of black Liberians to sell Africans into slavery, he committed to writing about the country beyond his newspaper assignment. *Slaves Today*, a novel of historical fiction he wrote about the country, depicts how racial capitalism undermined the black nationalist vision and shaped an economic system predicated on racialized exploitation. As Schuyler wrote in the foreword: “[Liberia’s] proud motto reads, ‘The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here,’ but the aborigines find little liberty under their Negro masters.”¹⁹¹ While both the Americo-Liberians (the term for non-native Liberians who emigrated from the United States and their descendants) and native Liberians were “black,” according to the racial codes of the United States, race is transformed in a new context. When indebtedness threatened the independence of Liberia, and the position of the elites within that society, indigeneity became a marker through which native Liberians are designated as subhuman and thus open to being enslaved and exploited.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ George Schuyler was on an assignment from George Putnam for the *New York Evening Post*. See further: Schuyler, George. “Wide ‘Slavery’ Persisting in Liberia, Post Reveals,” *New York Evening Post* (29 June 1931): 1-2.

¹⁹¹ *Slaves Today*, pp. 5.

¹⁹² Some Indigenous scholars have objected to viewing indigeneity as a racial category within the United States, arguing that tribes are political entities not ethnic or cultural groups. I believe the Liberian context is distinct enough from the United States to make these arguments moot in this case. See further: Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. “Who Stole Native American Studies?” *Wicazo Sa Review* 12.1 (1997): 9-28; and Stevenson,

While Du Bois offers us an idyllic depiction of black nationalism outside of capitalism, Schuyler illustrates their imbrication in Liberia. From the very beginning of *Slaves Today*, he shows how easily black nationalists could appropriate American imperialism and racism. The novel opens in the village of Takama in the aftermath of a raid by government officials who claim that the residents have not paid their share of rice and wine in taxes:

Their girls had also been taken or inveigled to the barracks and their men had been forced to work around the compound, on the road, and act as carriers and porters at the whim of the District Commander and without pay. They were forced to supply the compound with huge quantities of food, including cattle, for which they received nothing. When, for any reason, their requisition was less than stipulated, their chief was whipped and the soldiers cuffed the people about.¹⁹³

Schuyler depicts the government officials as exercising their authority from malice that resembles the harsh labor and violence experienced by slaves on North American plantations. The officials, like slave owners and overseers, rape the women are raped, whip the men,, and humiliate the leaders of the village, They do not simply demand what they are owed in taxes; rather, they attempt to exercise complete control over the bodies of the villagers.¹⁹⁴

Winona. "'Ethnic' Assimilates 'Indigenous': A Study in Intellectual Neocolonialism," *Wicazo Sa Review* 13.1 (1998): 33-51.

¹⁹³ *Slaves Today*, pp. 90.

¹⁹⁴ Frank Wilderson and other Afro-Pessimists offer a useful way of conceptualizing of the position the natives hold in Liberia: "the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-human ... perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized" (11). See

Schuyler's depiction of Liberia did not earn him admiration and the critiques leveled against him illustrate the inability or unwillingness of many black nationalists to acknowledge the grip of American ideology on them and their imagined projects. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria and a doctoral candidate at Columbia University whose research was on Liberia, wrote a negative review of *Slaves Today* that characterized it as a "historical fiction" whose depiction of Liberia is "biased and superficial" even as he ultimately justified slavery by arguing that the world "has not reached a stage where forced labor could be completely disregarded as an instrument of colonial economics."¹⁹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, dismissed the critiques of Liberia by writing that the country's "chief crime is to be black and poor in a rich, white world; and precisely that portion of the world where color is ruthlessly exploited as a foundation of American and European wealth."¹⁹⁶ These defenses of Liberia are only two examples of what Aric Putnam describes as a "discursive context in which ... indigenous Liberians were subsumed in Africanist and anti-imperialist narratives."¹⁹⁷ The contradictions of Liberia were occluded in order to protect its value as a representation of the possibility of realizing a black nationalist utopia.

In *Slaves Today*, Schuyler exposes this hypocrisy by depicting the fate of Zo, a young native Liberian who is kidnapped and sent to work on Fernando Po as a slave under the rule of a multiracial and multinational group of plantation and government

further Wilderson, Frank. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Duke University Press, 2010.

¹⁹⁵ Azikiwe, Ben N. "Review of *Slaves Today, A Story of Liberia* by George Schuyler," *The Journal of Negro History* 17.3 (1932): 382-383.

¹⁹⁶ Du Bois, W.E.B. "Liberia, the League and the United States," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1933): pp. 695.

¹⁹⁷ "Modern Slaves," pp. 240.

workers. On the island, he encounters a consul from Liberia, ostensibly there to oversee their working conditions, but who only feels responsible for Zo's well-being in the most superficial of ways: "[The consul] sometimes privately deplored the fact that very few of the laborers came of their own volition; but his conscience never urged him to protest against a practice which so liberally augmented his meagre salary."¹⁹⁸ The consul's behavior is a metaphor for Liberia's relationship with its native population—racial solidarity is sacrificed for the sake of the nation-state.

Yet, solidarity is not absent in the novel; Schuyler depicts it as arising amongst the indentured indigenous laborers on Fernando Po. Mirroring the creation of the race of African Americans out of a diverse group of Africans who were kidnapped during the slave trade, the laborers on Fernando Po are an interethnic and intertribal group that begins to solidify from their shared exploitation on the island. Schuyler writes, "Here were representatives of almost every tribe in Liberia. At home they had despised and been taught to look down on each other; here they were welded by force of circumstances into a solidarity induced by common misery." On Fernando Po, they "sat together in a foreign land and talked of home."¹⁹⁹ Within a few weeks of working on Fernando Po, the laborers begin to think of themselves as a people in solidarity with each other. I argue that this is a germ of the utopian critique that Schuyler offers in *Black Empire*, which depicts a black nationalist solidarity that unites people across the categories of race and class.

¹⁹⁸ *Slaves Today*, pp. 162.

¹⁹⁹ *Slaves Today*, pp. 165.

Ultimately, the economic incentives of capitalism work against such solidarity. At the end of Zo's time in Fernando Po, his closest friend is entrapped into breaking the rules and forced to stay on the island indefinitely. When Zo attempts to stand up for his friend, he is presented with an opportunity for solidarity: "'Do you want to stay and testify?' asked the policeman in a syrupy tone." Reproducing on a small scale the ethical decisions facing the Liberian consul and the Liberian state, Zo faces a contradiction between his desire to stand in solidarity with Soki and his individual economic interest. He ultimately chooses to look out for himself, leaving his friend behind, an act that Schuyler presents not as a betrayal, but as a rational choice given Zo's lack of power: "Even Zo was not prepared to do that ... Their time was up and they wanted to go. Even [his] regard for Soki could not persuade [him] to speak on his behalf at this hour."²⁰⁰ Through Zo, Schuyler depicts how thoroughly the ideology of American imperialism has penetrated Liberia. The government officials, like Zo, are subject to an economic system outside of their control that limits their desires for a better possible future.

This conclusion has led some critics, like Henry Winslow, to read Schuyler's unflinching portrayal of slavery in Liberia as an example of his "conviction about the incidental importance of color" to politics.²⁰¹ After all, *Slaves Today* seems to offer a characteristic Marxist analysis: solidarity (as an ideology and thus a dimension of the superstructure) is determined by the mode of production (meaning the economic base of a

²⁰⁰ *Slaves Today*, pp. 219.

²⁰¹ Winslow, Henry F. "George S. Schuyler: Fainting Traveler," *Midwest Journal* 5 (1953): pp. 30. For more on Schuyler's politics in the 1920s, including his work for A. Philip Randolph's *Messenger*, see: Hutchinson, George. "Mediating 'Race' and 'Nation': The Cultural Politics of the Messenger," *African American Review* 28.4 (1994): 531-548; Young, James. "Variations on a Racial Theme," in *Black Writers of the Thirties*, Louisiana State University Press, 1973.

society). Thus, without overthrowing capitalism, black nationalism will inevitably fail to bring about a good society for poor black people. Yet, I do not think that Schuyler means for us to read *Slaves Today* in this way. While he is very critical of the Liberian government, he frames their faults as part of a global pattern. As he writes in the foreword: “If this novel can help arouse enlightened world opinion against this brutalizing of the native population in a Negro republic, perhaps the conscience of civilized people will stop similar atrocities in native lands ruled by proud white nations that boast of their superior culture.”²⁰² The critique of black Liberian officials is not meant to stand on its own; it is part of a broader critique of imperialism. Therefore, insofar as he is critiquing black nationalism, it is more accurate to characterize him as demanding that it more significantly challenge American imperialism.

After all, while the George Schuyler of the 1960s famously stated that “at best, race is a superstition,” in the 1930s he acknowledged the analytic value of race as a category through which to see the systematic exploitation of non-white people. While he repeatedly ridiculed Marcus Garvey, he also admired Garvey’s willingness to call out the global reach of white imperialism:

[Garvey] sees plainly that everywhere in the Western and Eastern hemispheres the Negro, regardless of his religion or nationality, is being crushed under the heel of white imperialism ... If they are to be saved, they must be organized so they can present united opposition to those who seek to continue their enslavement.²⁰³

²⁰² *Slaves Today*, pp. 6.

²⁰³ Qtd. in “Afterword,” pp. 275.

For Schuyler, this global reach can only be opposed by solidarity across national borders. This key belief was expressed throughout the 1930s, culminating in an essay titled “Rise of the Black Internationale,” published contemporaneously with *Black Empire* in 1938. In the essay, he admits that racial solidarity among black people might be necessary, if only to oppose the racial solidarity of white people:

[The African American] is rightly suspicious of white labor even when it is sincere. He has seen white labor forget the Marxist divisions of the proletariat and bourgeoisie and join the White Internationale with the capitalists ... He believes that to combat this White Internationale of oppression a Black Internationale of liberation is necessary. He sees and welcomes a *community of interest of all colored people*.²⁰⁴

While recognizing that capitalism systematically exploits poor people throughout the globe regardless of race, Schuyler is also cognizant of the way in which race has been used as a tactic to fracture class solidarity.²⁰⁵ Thus, while he opposed aesthetic arguments for racial essentialism during the Harlem Renaissance, he was not unaware of the importance of race as a social construct used tactically to create “a community of interest” for people excluded from the category of whiteness. He offers the clearest expression of what such a community might look like in *Black Empire*.

²⁰⁴ Schuyler, George. “Rise of the Black Internationale,” *Rac[e]jing to the Right: Selected Essays of George S. Schuyler*, Ed. Jeffrey Leak, University of Tennessee Press, 2011, 35-36.

²⁰⁵ For more on the relationship between race and class in Schuyler’s literary work, see Kuenz, Jane. “American Racial Discourse, 1900-1930: Schuyler’s *Black No More*,” *Novel* 30 (1997): 170-192; and Retman, Sonnet. “*Black No More*: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism,” *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1448-1464. An excellent primary source on Schuyler’s thinking through of this relationship can be found in a series of articles he published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* under the heading “Aframerica Today.” These semi-ethnographic narratives of his travels through the South offer a sophisticated portrait of the ways in which race and class mutually function to reinforce inequality.

III: The Potential Solidarity of Black Nationalism

Published in sixty-two installments in the *Pittsburgh Tribune* from 1936 to 1938, *Black Empire* tells the story of Dr. Belsidus, a black supervillain (or superhero, depending on your perspective) and his revolutionary organization called the Black Internationale as they create a black utopian empire in Africa. Belsidus is willing to do anything to protect black people from white supremacy, including killing black people who refuse to carry out his orders. For many critics, the intensity of this violence has led to reading *Black Empire* in line with *Slaves Today* as a critique of black nationalism.²⁰⁶ For example, Yogita Goyal classifies the text as a satire that illustrates “the aporias, inconsistencies, and contradictions that more celebratory accounts of black transnationalism tend to gloss over.” By focusing on the ways in which Belsidus’s authoritarianism silences dissenting black voices, Goyal views Schuyler’s text as critical of W.E.B. Du Bois and other black nationalists whose visions of a better world were full of “romantic assumptions about race as a global binding force.”²⁰⁷

This reading is understandable because Schuyler depicts the Black Internationale as held together by threats of violence and indoctrination, not the mystical power of race. As Belsidus tells the assembled masses at the end of “Black Internationale” after the

²⁰⁶ Robert Hill and R. Kent. Rasmussen posed the question in their Afterword to the 1991 edition of *Black Empire*: “How seriously did Schuyler mean for anyone to take *Black Empire*’s black utopian vision?” (279).

²⁰⁷ Goyal, Yogita. “Black Nationalist Hokum: George Schuyler’s Transnational Critique,” *African American Review* 47.1 (2014): pp. 22. Similar arguments are made by Henry Louis Gates Jr, who calls Belsidus a “fascist superman” (“A Fragmented Man” 42) and by Martha Patterson, who writes that “Schuyler satirizes the longing for fascistic control and power” (“Fascist Parody and Wish Fulfillment: George Schuyler’s Periodical Fiction of the 1930s,” *Journal of Periodical Studies* 4.1 (2013): 78.)

successful invasion of Liberia, “I will not tolerate disobedience,” a message punctuated throughout the text by the killing of dissidents.²⁰⁸ Anyone out of line can be exterminated, even native Africans who do not support the black utopia he is trying to construct: “we had to use ruthless methods in some places [in Africa]. These miseducated Negroes who still favored the rule of white men to the rule of black men ... [were] ruthlessly purged and executed.”²⁰⁹ The class structure of the Black Internationale is maintained through physical and epistemic violence that disciplines individuals to their roles in production.²¹⁰

Physical violence is not the only means Belsidus uses to discipline citizens to living within the Black Internationale. Despite his repudiation of the intelligentsia as having failed to change the world, he is more than willing to use education and religion to socialize black people into acquiescing to his ideal social order. As he tells Carl during his grand tour:

We’re not worried about the masses ... The masses always believe what they are told often and loud enough. We will recondition the Negro masses in accordance with the most approved behavioristic methods. The church will hold them spiritually. Our economic organization will keep control of those who shape their views. Our secret service will take care of

²⁰⁸ *Black Empire*, pp. 9, 21, 141.

²⁰⁹ *Black Empire*, pp. 138.

²¹⁰ Belsidus’s violence is justified through *Black Empire* through a juxtaposition with white supremacy. Belsidus refuses to feel contrite for any of his crimes and argues that white people have “murdered millions of black men, women, children, and indirectly destroyed millions more by impoverishment, discrimination, segregation, cruel and inhuman treatment” (15).

dissenters. Our propaganda bureau will tell them what to think and believe. That's the way to build revolutions, Mr. Slater.²¹¹

While scientists and technicians may be fundamental to Belsidus's black utopia, their success relies on a stratified social order. Laborers must be persuaded to work for the benefit of the state, not their individual economic benefit. Controlling the masses requires a powerful sense of imagined community, structured ideologically and maintained by violence. Belsidus's desire for a nation in which black people would be free for white supremacy serves as his justification for complete control over the lives of workers. If he believes that the Black Internationale is organized for their benefit, there is no limit to the power he can exert to bring this utopian world into existence. Yet, overemphasizing Schuyler's use of satire risks overlooking the significant difference between how *Black Empire* and *Slaves Today* depict the utopian possibilities of black nationalism. While the latter highlights the ways that economic conditions foreclose racial solidarity, the former presents the inverse relationship. For the Black Internationale, racial solidarity has the potential to bring about new economic conditions.

Early in *Black Empire*, Schuyler describes a trip that Carl Slater, a journalist who is kidnapped in the first chapter of *Black Empire* and becomes the text's utopian narrator, takes to survey the industrial progress of the Black Internationale. He begins by flying to New Jersey where he visits a hydroponic farm built by black people using the best scientific principles: "we supply each pool with liquid chemical food, the same elements vegetables extract from the soil. Sunshine does the rest. Not a thing is left to chance, my

²¹¹ *Black Empire*, pp. 47.

boy. There is no plant disease, no poor distribution of food elements, no excess or lack of light.” When Carl asks where the energy for these farms comes from, he discovers that they are only one part of a large system of black industry existing throughout the United States. Black scientists design and build solar power plants that provide the power that he farms need at low cost: “This is Al’s famous sun engine ... probably the most revolutionary invention in the past thousand years. Men have been trying for a century to invent a cheap sun-harnesser which will cheapen sun power below the cost of coal power. Now, a Negro has done it.” Through Carl’s eyes, we see the crops being “miraculously grown” in a process that is “designed to revolutionize” farming. We recognize how “marvelous ... these economic enterprises” are, each “headed by some bright young colored man or woman.” Schuyler claims that the black people make these inventions not because they are smarter than their white counterparts but because their black nation protects them from racism and capitalism. Neither the farms nor the solar power plants make money for the Black Internationale, but they don’t have to thanks to Belsidus’s ample reserves of capital; their purpose is to offers a site through which “Negro brains” can be put “to work to serve [the] ends” of the Black Internationale.²¹²

²¹² *Black Empire*, pp. 49, 53. More research needs to be done on George Schuyler’s use of science fiction tropes within *Black Empire*. He was an avid reader of H.G. Wells and wrote several science fiction stories including one about “a country ... where black men have conquered telepathy, [and] atomic energy” (Qtd. in “Afterword,” 308). Most famously, his novel *Black No More* follows a black scientist who invents a technology to turn black skin white. Schuyler’s dim view of science, practiced in the real world, is clear in *Black No More*, in which the discourse of science is repeatedly used to justify racism. See further: Morgan, Stacy. “‘The Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science’: Race Science and Essentialism in George Schuyler’s ‘Black No More,’” *CLA Journal* 42.3 (1999): 331-352. What distinguishes Schuyler from his white contemporaries is that he does not celebrate science as a positive force that will inevitably bring about a better world. Only by freeing science from its use by capitalists and racists can it be put to work in creating a black utopia.

The economic success of the Black Internationale results from its integrated production lines, a result of the organization's emphasis on racial solidarity and black self-determination. The farms and solar plants are built using concrete produced by secret Black Internationale factories located throughout the country. The concrete is shipped by the organization's air force. The food grown on the farms is then brought to New York by "B.I. trucks driven by Negroes," and sold cheaply—giving black and poor people a chance to buy fresh and quality produce.²¹³ These elements are reproduced in the second half of *Black Empire*, after the invasion of Africa, and form the material basis for the black utopia achieved on the continent. In addition to providing free housing and food to every black person in Africa, the unrestrained scientific development results in the production of two-way televisions, underground hangers for the air force, and hi-tech medical centers. The Black Internationale uses racial solidarity to produce the material basis for a black utopia, one of the potentialities of black nationalism noted by Schuyler.

The significance of these scenes is heightened by the unique form of racial solidarity that Schuyler depicts throughout the text. In the beginning of *Black Empire*, Belsidus assembles representatives from throughout the world to propose his plan for the Black Internationale. Schuyler's description makes clear that these representatives are more notable for their physical differences than their similarities:

I turned to study the strange group of Negroes Belsidus had summoned from the ends of the earth ... Some were tall, hawkfaced and reddish brown. Others were short, stocky and black as midnight. Some were

²¹³ *Black Empire*, pp. 49.

brawny, others were slight and scholarly in appearance. While a few showed little trace of racial admixture, others were obviously possessed of some Caucasian or Mongolian ancestry.²¹⁴

There is no phenotypical or cultural essentialism that makes this group of people ‘black.’ The concept of race operating here is a political one: Belsidus has brought these representatives together because they are similarly exploited, alienated, or otherwise socially othered. This grouping, like that of the laborers on Fernando Po, is a result of the superior model of social transformation of American imperialism. Yet, in *Black Empire*, Schuyler imagines how black nationalists could take up that result to transform the model.

This reimagining is clearest in the Temples of Love: worship buildings for a new religion created by the Black Internationale as a means of keeping the masses under control. When Carl attends his first service, he is overwhelmed by strobe lights and a fifty-foot animatronic statue that compels him to participate in an orgiastic festival meant to relieve sexual tension. Despite knowing that the whole thing was a sham, meant to control the lower classes whose sexual impulses threaten the stability of the nation, Carl can’t help getting swept up in the excitement: “I knew Binks had rigged up this robot and I knew approximately just how it worked, and yet for the life of me I could not but enter into the spirit of the thing and obey the commands of the voice.” After imbibing some sort of drug, the worshippers were compelled by the music and a booming voice to dance and copulate in the temple. The services are meant to have “music and dancing, no

²¹⁴ *Black Empire*, pp. 27.

collections, plenty of pageantry ... with enough sex to make everything interesting.”²¹⁵

Near the end of the service, scores of women appear and become objects of sexual desire and fulfillment for the worshippers, prostituting themselves to the masses in the Temple. Despite imagining fantastical technologies that will eliminate hunger, poverty, and ill-health, Schuyler fails to imagine a role for women in his new society apart from acting as sexual objects. Misogyny is baked into the mechanisms of discipline and control of the Black Internationale—a necessary component of Schuyler’s utopia.

While the Temples show how class and gender hierarchies could be reproduced within a black nation, they also serve as the site through which the Black Internationale’s most utopian elements emerge. After the service, Carl is ushered “downstairs to the economic center where the restaurant, grocery store, drug store, clothing store, beauty parlor and gymnasium awaited them.” This model is replicated throughout Africa, and by the time of the invasion Belsidus is able to send “great truckloads of yams, tobacco, and salt fish” to the “500 Temples of Love throughout Africa for distribution to congregations.”²¹⁶ As community centers, the Temples represent a way to bridge the distribution problem between the hydroponic farms and black communities, providing a central location through which the benefits of the scientific innovation of the Black Internationale can flow to the general population.

The choice of religious institutions as depots is not incidental: Schuyler often wrote about the potential of churches as sites for social revolution. In a 1927 editorial, he wrote that “every black church should study consumer cooperation,” arguing that “its

²¹⁵ *Black Empire*, pp. 61, 58.

²¹⁶ *Black Empire*, pp. 67, 122.

mass appeal and institutional entrenchment” made it able to “act as a powerful economic force.” In other words, the embeddedness of religion made churches perfect places to begin the transformation of the world. He upheld this potential despite being incredibly critical of religion, characterizing it as “a mental crutch for those lacking the capacity to negotiate directly life’s varied dissatisfactions.”²¹⁷ While churches might involve a kind of intellectual dishonesty, their popularity makes them a site through which social life can be transformed. In a similar way, while the Temples of Love are negatively portrayed as brainwashing the masses with drugs and sex, it is only because they can attract so many people that they can become the site for the community economics the Black Internationale proposes.

The Temples of Love serve as a microcosm of Schuyler’s ambiguous assessment of black nationalism. While the Temples reproduce class and gender hierarchies they do so in pursuit of a genuine utopian impulse. Implicitly, they ask readers to consider the cost of bringing about a better world: would you be willing to sacrifice your agency and independence in exchange for relief from poverty and racism? Schuyler refuses an easy utopianism that unproblematically realizes a perfect society—the Black Internationale brings about a better society on the backs of women and non-elite men disciplined by violence, illustrating a deeply seated skepticism in the potential of realizing a better world for black people through traditional political means.²¹⁸ The conclusion of *Black Empire*

²¹⁷ Qtd. in Ferguson, Jeffrey. *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance*, Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 120, 119. In this, Schuyler recognize the vital role that the church played, and would continue to play in black political movements.

²¹⁸ As Jeffrey Ferguson writes, “Schuyler debunked ideals like freedom, justice, and morality as impediments to the realization of the best possible society. Rather than regard these ideas as metaphysical givens, he encouraged his readers to think of them as socially constructed concepts, no better than the people who created them” (*Sage of Sugar Hill* 116).

leaves open the potential of black nationalism to bring about a better world if it is able to transform, rather than reject or accept, the escapist elements of American imperialism.

Schuyler's engagement with black nationalist thought was unique for his time. Resisting Du Bois's romantic rejection of empire, on the one hand, and Garvey's autocratic embrace of empire, on the other, Schuyler's work offers a third option that better reflects the conflicted origins of black desires for self-determination from the semi-periphery of American utopianism. In both *Slaves Today* and *Black Empire*, Schuyler depicts race as a concept that helps illustrate the transnational scale on which white imperialists exploit the people they deem non-white. At the same time, as he depicts through the ruthlessness of the Black Internationale, a political coalition built around non-whiteness has its limitations—namely the occlusion of other hierarchies of gender, class, and nationality that shape our desires for better possible futures. Thus, despite his extensive satires and critique of black nationalists, by the end of the 1930s Schuyler acknowledges that the “black nation” could serve as a useful category through which transnational racial solidarity could be organized and that the most violent and exploitative elements of American imperialism could be transcended.

Chapter 4: Imagining Reparations

Repair, v.

1. To restore (a damaged, worn, or faulty object or structure) to good or proper condition by replacing or fixing parts
2. To rebuild (a city)
3. To put (a country) in order
4. To revive, reinvigorate (a person)²¹⁹

In the preceding three chapters, I have offered a theory of semi-peripheral utopianism, building from Sylvia Wynter's outline, and illustrated how it helps us recognize and appreciate the African American utopian tradition. Specifically, I argue that this theory offers two benefits to the study of utopia. First, it destabilizes the binary between escapism and utopia by demonstrating its insufficiency for characterizing utopian expressions from outside of the center (whether political, economic, or cultural). Second, and as a consequence of the first, this theory helps us recognize a longer and richer history of African American utopianism that acknowledges that many black utopians were forced to express their visions of a better possible future in the shadow of what Wynter terms the "superior models of social transformation" of the American utopian tradition. Yet, the visions offered by the three authors I examine are not reducible to those models; they critiqued and reimagined them until they more adequately reflected the desires of people outside of the mainstream. In this chapter, I argue that the theory of semi-peripheral utopian thinking can be used to examine not only literature but also the struggle over reparations for slavery. By regarding the movement for reparations as part of the African American utopian tradition, we can overcome its inability to revolutionize

²¹⁹ *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Accessed on December 20, 2019.

society and instead focus on the cognitive maps of the future this struggle generates.

Through this reframing, we can better recognize the value reparations has to our pursuit of a better world.

In the first section of the chapter, I argue that that reparations projects should be broadly categorized as utopian in the sense that they are the expression of the desire for a better possible future from the perspective of the victims and survivors of a mass atrocity. This approach makes it easier to be critical of the desires underlying reparations projects, helping us recognize escapist elements that undercut the better possible futures envisioned by their proponents. In the second section of the chapter, I complicate the relationship between utopia and reparations in the African American context by suggesting that its emergence from the semi-periphery means that the desires underlying these projects have often been expressed from within the superior model of social transformation offered by capitalism and specifically the model of equal exchange. In other words, recognizing the semi-peripheral utopianism of reparations can help us be critical of proposals that adopt the language and discourse of mainstream American society while recognizing why they do so. In conclusion, I argue that this tension speaks to the need for a more nuanced critical approach to reparations, which recognizes how thoroughly the epistemic limits of political, legal, and economic discourse have infiltrated our ability to imagine and desire better futures.

I: The Utopian Character of Reparations

The etymology of “reparations” has posed a problem for its proponents. At the root of the word is the concept of repair—the desire to restore that which was damaged back to its proper condition. But it seems impossible to describe the proper condition for the victims and survivors of mass injustice. Genocide and slavery, as just two examples, are not synchronic events; they take place over long stretches of time, and their causes and effects continue to exist in partial and mutated ways. In turn, the activists struggling for reparations will be flawed individuals socialized by the very forces they are trying to eliminate. The ongoing nature of injustice requires us to take a more capacious definition of repair that goes beyond restoration: to pursue reparations is to try to rebuild, reorder, and reinvigorate society over a long stretch of time.

Most of the twentieth-century reparations projects fit this definition. These projects generally referred to a form of redress made by a state to another state or to group of victims as part of an admission of regret for some form of injustice.²²⁰ Redress has taken many different forms, such as during this period: from financial restitution, as in the reparations Germany paid to the Allied Powers after the First World War, to society-wide moral reckoning, as in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa or Canada. Each of these envisioned reparations as a process.

²²⁰ Roy Brooks insists on the importance of atonement to reparations projects: “Responses that seek atonement of the commission of an injustice are properly called *reparations*. Responses in which the government does not express atonement are more suitably called *settlements*” (*When Sorry Isn’t Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*, NYU Press, 1999, 8). For the best collection of reparations claims throughout the world, see: De Greiff, Pablo (ed). *The Handbook of Reparations*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

The most notable example of reparations during this period is Germany's reckoning with the Holocaust.²²¹ In 1953, after years of debate, the West German government agreed to pay reparations to the state of Israel and to a Claims Commission that would disseminate funds to individual survivors and their descendants. Even though the Holocaust was perpetrated by a previous regime and many of the people involved were dead, the German government continues to pay reparations to this day (and has paid over \$70 billion in the past sixty years).²²² Neither party was under the impression that reparations would restore Jews to a proper or good condition; Israel Singer, the secretary general of the World Jewish Congress, insisted during negotiations that "you can't repair the dead."²²³ Rather, as Martha Minow writes, the goal of paying reparations for the Holocaust was to "depart from doing nothing" despite the seeming impossibility of repair: "Dwelling in the frozen space of inability and incapacity is unacceptable, unresponsive to victims, unavailing to the waiting future. This is what underlies attempts to act for victims in the affirmation of atrocity."²²⁴ Offering financial restitution was not right or appropriate, it was an expression of the desire to help the Jewish people rebuild, reorder, and revitalize themselves in the aftermath of genocide. Not all Jews or Germans agreed with the plan, and not all victims received equal reparations. This plan was not, in any sense of the word, perfect. Rather, as I argue, it was a utopian project: an expression

²²¹ For a history of the struggle for reparations for the Holocaust, see: Colonomos, Ariel and Andrea Armstrong. "German Reparations to the Jews after World War II: A Turning Point in the History of Reparations." In *The Handbook of Reparations*, 390-419.

²²² For specific statistics on reparations paid, see: *Claims Conference: Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany*, Accessed on January 3, 2020. <http://www.claimscon.org/>.

²²³ Qtd. in *The Handbook of Reparations*, 425.

²²⁴ Minow, Martha. *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence*, Beacon Press, 1999.

of the desire for a better future in the form of a vision of a better possible future.

Distinguishing between these two elements is vital—utopias can be unlikely but they cannot be impossible.²²⁵ Yet, this consistently poses a problem for reparations given how impossible they often seem. Consider the demands made in 1975 by Imari Obadele on behalf of the Republic of New Africa, a black nationalist organization based in the United States. He argued that the United States should cede five Southern states (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) to the organization along with billions of dollars in reparations payments so that they could create a black nationalist state that would provide African Americans with land and opportunity in North America.²²⁶ What is the value of this demand to us today or to his contemporaries, given how obvious it seems that it will never be met?

If we consider this question from the perspective of a politician then these proposals have little to no value. The likelihood of assembling a coalition with enough political capital to pass a reparations plan on the scale proposed by Obadele is near zero. Yet, a utopian perspective helps us extract this proposal from the limitations of political discourse and recognize that reparations, like utopias in general, are useful in their *appearance* of impossibility. Considering how and why we think something is impossible helps us recognize the epistemic limits of our present. The reason we believe in certain futures and not others is that “impossible” is a socially constructed category that reflects

²²⁵ This characteristic distinguishes utopia from fantasy. A reader might view the world of Harry Potter as a desirable future, but it is impossible given that we will not suddenly be granted magic powers.

²²⁶ See further: Obadele, Imari. *Foundations of the Black Nation: A Textbook of Ideas Behind the New Black Nationalism and the Struggle for Land in America*, House of Songhay, 1975.

our knowledge of the present.²²⁷ As Fredric Jameson writes, utopias “can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment.”²²⁸ In the case of reparations, imagining how we might address the impact of mass injustice can make us aware of how limiting it is to think from within the discursive conventions of politics.

A utopian approach to reparations does not require optimism (i.e. the belief that things will get better).²²⁹ We can imagine a better world for African Americans while still acknowledging, as Derrick Bell does, the possibility that racism will be a permanent feature of the United States.²³⁰ But, if we must recognize that injustice can continue to exist despite our best attempts to overcome it, we must also acknowledge that the world can be dramatically different than it is. Imagining reparations will not end racism or remedy racial inequality, but it can motivate us to continue struggling for reparations and for a world in which they are possible. Utopianism does not presume that things get

²²⁷ Examples of this happen all the time in science where the horizon of possibility moves after new discoveries. As a simple example, travelling to the moon would have seemed impossible to a scientist in the 1700s because they lacked a frame of reference that included engines powerful enough to escape the gravitational pull of the Earth. For a discussion of impossibility within scientific, see: Kaku, Michio. *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration Into the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation, and Time Travel*, Doubleday, 2008. More relevant to my project, see the discussion on the “social construction of impossibility” in international relations: Geuss, Raymond. “Realism and the Relativity of Judgement,” *International Relations* 29.1 (2015): 3-22; and Booth, Ken. “Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice,” *International Affairs* 67.3 (1991): 527-545.

²²⁸ Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction*, Verso, 2007, xiii. Jameson’s view of utopia as negation is heavily influenced by Louis Marin’s *Utopics*. For an excellent explication of Marin’s work and its relationship with Jameson’s views on utopia, see: Jameson, Fredric. “Review: Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse,” *Diacritics* 7.2 (1977): 2-21.

²²⁹ Although she doesn’t explicitly invoke utopia, Rebecca Solnit offers a useful distinction between hope and optimism in *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Haymarket Books, 2016. See also: Levitas, Ruth and Lucy Sargisson. “Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia,” In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Routledge, 2003.

²³⁰ As Bell writes, “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of [US] society.” (Bell, Derrick. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992): xiii). On the permanent nature of racism in the United States, see also the work of Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson.

better; rather, it insists that the possibility for radical change exists (possibilities that we are often encouraged to overlook).²³¹

It is worth remembering that we are the unrealistic future of the past. Consider the position of abolitionists who faced two dispiriting events in the 1850s: the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision of 1857 which infamously stated that the “[black man had] no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”²³² After the rise in prominence of anti-slavery politics in the 1830s and 40s, the reassertion of slaveholders’ political power in the 1850s felt like a reversal. Many black abolitionists left the country, beginning to take seriously the emigrationist belief that blacks and whites would never be able to coexist in the United States. Yet, ten years after *Dred Scott*, the Civil War was over, and slavery was abolished.

Reconstruction, the name for the period after the Civil War but before the imposition of Black Codes and Jim Crow, is an example of intense black utopianism. Legally freed, former slaves radically reshaped Southern governments to be more egalitarian and democratic.²³³ In the ten years after the war, voters in the South elected two black U.S. Senators, fifteen black U.S. Representatives, and countless state level politicians, a situation that would have seemed impossible to anyone but the most hopeful

²³¹ As Marin writes, “Utopia is already here now, but it is here as the ‘other’ of this historical place and present ... [utopia] discovers in the here and now of a historical situation ... the thrust of what is yet to come but is also already there completely” (*Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, Humanities Press, 1984, 278).

²³² *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Oyez, www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/60us393. Accessed 6 Jan. 2020.

²³³ As Mary Frances Berry writes, “The state constitutions approved by the Reconstruction [governments] were much more progressive than the constitutions of antebellum days ... These constitutions were apparently so highly regarded that even when Reconstruction was overthrown by white supremacists, the basic provisions of the constitutions were maintained” (*My Face is Black is True* 24-25). For what is still the best overview of the radical utopianism of reconstruction, see: Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, Free Press, 1998.

abolitionist.²³⁴ Communes and mutual aid societies were formed in response to the desire for autonomy from white landowners and politicians.²³⁵ It seemed as if the desire many slaves and free black people had for political and social equality was beginning to materialize.

Unfortunately, 1876 proved to be the end of Reconstruction. After a contested election, President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered the removal of federal troops from the South and allowed the imposition of Black Codes, poll taxes, and the impeachment of black legislatures throughout the South. Southern voters would not elect another black U.S. senator until 1967, a fact that reveals the tenacity of black disenfranchisement and white discrimination. What do we make of the eventual failure of Reconstruction? Do we chalk it up to the overwhelming power and duration of white supremacy? Does it speak to the impossibility of bringing about a better world, despite our best efforts? I cannot answer these questions but it seems significant that conservative historians and politicians worked very hard to discredit and hide the history of this period. Pushing a narrative dubbed the “Lost Cause,” they attempted to rewrite the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction as one of Northern aggression and black incompetence.²³⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois convincingly repudiated that theory in his 1936 *Black Reconstruction in America*,

²³⁴ A crazy statistic that captures both the incredible success of Reconstruction and how damaging the white backlash to the period was: in 1870 “about 15 percent of the officeholders in the South were black—a larger proportion than in 1990” (McPherson, James. *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1991, 19). See also: Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Harper, 2011.

²³⁵ See, for instance: Duncan, Russell. *Freedom’s Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen*, The University of Georgia Press, 1986.

²³⁶ For a good overview of the origins and specifics of the “Lost Cause,” see: Osterweis, Rollin. *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865-1900*, Archon Books, 1973. This “approach” to the history of Reconstruction is also referred to as the Dunning School.

but it was not until white academics rehashed his work in the 1950s and 1960s that the tide began to shift against this narrative.²³⁷

The efforts to hide the history of black utopianism is evidence that it matters, even as many of the accomplishments of the period were undone. As with reparations, the utopianism of Reconstruction is not invalidated by its failure. The struggle for a better world helps us reflect onto our own present: what are the forces, material and ideological, that stand in the way of our efforts to bring about the better world that we desire? The utopians of Reconstruction faced many obstacles including racist attitudes throughout the North and South, a lack of economic capital and education, and constant efforts to reestablish the plantation order by white landowners. That freed slaves envisioned and enacted radical changes to the United States despite these obstacles speaks to the power that the utopian imagination holds for revolutionaries. Utopia provides energy and hope for the hard work of changing the world.

The history of Reconstruction is evidence of the importance of the imagination, a dimension of reparations has rarely been addressed by scholars. This lacuna is an effect of the disciplines within which reparations is usually studied: political theory, legal studies, and economics. In these fields, scholars tend to produce technical analyses that focus on the political, legal, or economic feasibility of reparations, which emphasizes pragmatic considerations.²³⁸ How will a reparations bill get passed? Are these demands

²³⁷ Eric Foner explicitly addresses the lack of engagement with Du Bois's work in his introduction to *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*.

²³⁸ For example, Eric Posner and Adrian Vermeule write, "The prudential and institution issues surrounding reparations schemes [meaning who gets paid, how they get paid, etc] ... will themselves help to determine whether and when reparations should be paid in the first place." As their article attests, these issues end up foreclosing the possibility of imagining what reparations could be. See further: America, Richard. *The Wealth of Races: The Present Value of Benefits from Past Injustices*, Praeger, 2002; Bittker, Boris. *The*

constitutional? Who is going to pay? These questions are fair, but nevertheless enervating: there will always be an unresolved problem or unanticipated complication that can stand as a reason to not pursue reparations.

A utopian approach to reparations allows us to recognize, but set aside, these difficult questions. Utopianism helps us speculate about the future in ways that are more accessible than reading legislation or political manifestos. In other words, I am not arguing that the discourses I critique are unnecessary. Rather, I am insisting that their limitations call for the intervention of utopia in order to expand our imagination about reparations. From this perspective, it doesn't matter that Imari Obadele's vision for a black nation emerging within the United States is unrealistic; its value comes from considering the possibilities that an independent nation would offer to black people living within a segregated and deeply racist country. Utopias have this power because the speculative futures presented are not meant to be taken solely as models of a better world. Their function is estrangement: they help us believe in the changeability of the present.²³⁹

II: A Utopian Critique of Reparations

Case for Black Reparations, Beacon Press, 2003; Feagin, Joe. *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations*, Routledge, 2000; Martin, Michael and Marilyn Yaquinto. *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: On Reparations for Slavery, Jim Crow, and their Legacies*, Duke University Press, 2007; Posner, Eric and Adrian Vermeule. "Reparations for Slavery and Other Historical Injustices," *Columbia Law Review* 103 (2003): 689-747; Westley, Robert. "Many Billions Gone: Is It Time to Reconsider the Case for Black Reparations?" *19 B.C. Third World L.J.* 429 (1998): 429-476. For an important counter-example, see: Matsuda, Mari. "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations," *22 Harv. C.R.-C.L.L. Rev.* 323 (1987): 323-399.

²³⁹ As Fredric Jameson writes, "The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal conviction that no alternative is possible" (*Archaeologies* 232). Darko Suvin characterizes this effect as estrangement. See further: Suvin, Darko. "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genealogy, A Proposal and a Plea," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 6.2 (1973): 121-145.

That said, a utopian approach to reparations does not require us to accept any project or proposal just because it is trying to make things better. On the contrary, this approach should highlight the motivations and desires underlying these projects: what is the better possible future envisioned by its proponents? Is the goal to revitalize, even in a small way, the condition of victims and survivors or is it to sweep an atrocity under the rug by making amends for it? In other words, a utopian approach to reparations can help us uncover the escapist elements of reparations proposals.

Take, for instance, what is widely considered to be the most successful reparations project in the United States: the payment of reparations for Japanese internment during World War II.²⁴⁰ After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the internment of all Japanese Americans and Japanese resident aliens in detention centers with the justification that they posed a danger to national security. They were forced to relinquish their property, possessions, and liberty in addition to being marked as foreign and dangerous.²⁴¹ In response to this injustice, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 authorized the government to pay reparations to the survivors and their descendants, stating that internment was a “grave injustice ... motivated by racial prejudice.” While we can, and should, take this legislation as an example of the real possibility of reparations, we can also be critical of its limitations: what are the ways that it falls short of bringing about the better future activists envisioned?

²⁴⁰ For the best collection of reparations claims in the United States, see: Salzberger, Ronald and Mary Turck (eds). *Reparations for Slavery: A Reader*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

²⁴¹ As is typically the case, the result of this xenophobic marking made violence against Japanese people permissible. See, for instance, the popularization of “Jap Hunting Licenses.”

One answer to this question emerges by considering how the bill treats the Aleut people, the indigenous residents of the Aleutian Islands, who were relocated to separate internment camps out of fear that the Japanese would invade Alaska.²⁴² While the ostensible purpose of the bill was to pay reparations for internment, the specifics illustrate its failure to engage with the damage done to Indigenous people by a settler colonial society. To start, the act values the suffering of Japanese Americans more highly than that of Aleuts. Both Japanese-American citizens and Japanese resident aliens were paid \$20,000 while Aleuts were only awarded \$12,000. The act apologizes “on Behalf of the Nation” to Japanese and Japanese Americans but offers no apology to the Aleuts. There is no rationale for this distinction within the Act itself, suggesting only that Indigenous people were inherently less valuable and less worthy of an apology than Asian immigrants.²⁴³

While an apology and material redress for internment is a worthwhile result of the decades of work by activists and politicians, the bill’s treatment of Indigenous claims reveals its escapist elements. It uses the genuine desire to make amends for mistreating Asian Americans as a means to reinforce the inferiority of Native Americans. More troublingly, the bill goes on to resolve any land claims by the Aleut people. After relocating them to abandoned canneries that served as internment camps, the U.S.

²⁴² The political decision to relocate the Aleuts is more complicated than I can cover here. Suffice to say that while it was ostensibly done in good faith, the result “follows a familiar pattern in relations between the United States government and Native Americans ... attempts to protect Native Americans from perceived dangers were driven by racism and ended in decimation of entire peoples and their culture” (Madden, Ryan. “The Forgotten People: The Relocation and Internment of Aleuts during World War II,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 16.4 [1992]: 58).

²⁴³ Qtd. in Waxman, Olivia. “The U.S. Put Norman Mineta in an Incarceration Camp. Then He Went to Congress,” *Time*, May 20, 2019.

government took control of the Aleut's ancestral lands in the name of national security. The Civil Liberties Act outlines a process through which the government would make an independent assessment of the value of the land and then make a payment to the tribes. Despite providing the displaced Aleuts with no means to challenge the assessment of the value or lobby for other forms of redress, the bill then declares that the "payment [is] in full satisfaction of any claims against the United States." While this reparations project is a result of the desire to make amends for internment, it also reflects the desire of the United States government to resolve, in a limited and synchronic sense, Native American claims for land.²⁴⁴ Refusing to consider the possibility of returning the land taken, the bill assumes and ascribes that the value of the land is best captured in dollars and cents.

This transformation of land into currency is at the heart of almost all efforts by the U.S. government to redress Native American tribes for broken treaties and outright land theft. In 1946, the U.S. government passed the Indian Claims Commission Act, a law that allowed Native tribes to file claims for land against the government. The stated intention of the act was remarkably progressive. By "granting [the Indian Claims Commission] jurisdiction over 'claims based upon fair and honorable dealings that are not recognized by any existing law or equity'" it would offer tribes a mechanism for petitions of redress outside of the justice system. In other words, the commission would be able to address

²⁴⁴ For the specific legislation, see: United States, Congress, House, Civil Liberties Act of 1987, 100th Congress, H.R. 442, Accessed at: <https://www.congress.gov>. Significantly, the bill ends with this addendum: "Provides that nothing in this Act shall be construed as: (1) recognition of any claim of Mexico or any other country or any Indian tribe ... to any territory or other property of the United States; or (2) providing any basis for compensation in connection with any such claim."

injustices that were not explicitly illegal—a vital component to many reparations projects given that systemic injustice often includes the tacit or explicit approval of the state.

Unfortunately, the commission tended to reinforce rather than disrupt the primacy of the law. Tribes had to mount a prosecution against the government to prove that they had been cheated in some way. Treated as an adversary, the government had no incentive to help find evidence of malfeasance, which “moved the commission in the direction of very simply, easily quantifiable claims.”²⁴⁵ In turn, while tribes often desired control over land, the Claims Commission privileged financial redress.²⁴⁶ The reparations process was never open to the desires of Native people, and as a result they were forced to choose between rejecting the discourse of reparations or embracing the model of social transformation offered by the government.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, for instance, was meant to resolve the claims of Native Alaskans against the U.S. government by paying them \$962.5 million and returning 44 million acres of land to their control. However, as Robert Williams writes, the act was “driven by the need of the nation’s major oil companies to build a pipeline across Native-claimed lands,” not a desire for justice.²⁴⁷ The desire underlying this form of redress was to open up land on which a pipeline could be built

²⁴⁵ Newton, Nell Jessup. “Indian Claims for Reparations, Compensation, and Restitution in the United States Legal System,” in *When Sorry Isn’t Enough*, 262, 265. As Newton goes on to write, “many [non-Native people] supported the ICCA as a mechanisms to convince tribal people to abandon their outmoded notions of tribalism. They reasoned that only when Indian tribes settled their ancient grievances would they be able to cast off the last of the bitterness toward the United States and assimilate fully into the dominant culture. This vision is essentially assimilative and thus perpetuates the legacy of colonialism” (263).

²⁴⁶ See further: “Indian Claims Commission Materials,” *National Indian Law Library*, Accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.narf.org/nill/resources/icc.html>.

²⁴⁷ Williams, Robert A. Jr. “The True Nature of Congress’s Power of Indian Claims: An Essay on *Venetie* and the Uses of Silence in Federal Indian Law,” In *When Sorry Isn’t Enough*, 274.

without incurring future legal challenges. This history helps us understand the refusal of the Sioux Tribes of South Dakota to accept a 1979 decision by the Indian Claims Court, which awarded them financial redress for the theft of their land and the value of the gold extracted from it. While the award now exceeds \$1 billion (held in escrow by the U.S. government), as a young Sioux activist stated: “I cannot accept money for the Black Hills ... because land is sacred to me ... To be a traditional person is to believe in our own culture, is to believe in yourself as a Lakota person; then you cannot sell the land.”²⁴⁸ For this young man, financial reparations are escapist; they foreclose the possibility of having sacred land returned to tribal control. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Sioux writer, argued: financial reparations were an “effort to legitimize [the] theft and plunder of the Black Hills in 1877 by offering the Sioux tribes [money] to forget about the crime.”²⁴⁹

What is the value of desiring the restoration of tribal land, given how unlikely it appears that the U.S. government would surrender its control over the Black Hills? This question brings into stark relief one of the most challenging good faith objections to reparations: how can we demand redress for past injustices when the present continues to be structured by them or by their effects?²⁵⁰ For Native American tribes, many of which

²⁴⁸ Qtd. in Lazarus, Edward. *Black Hills White Justice: The Sioux Nation Versus the United States: 1775 to the Present*, University of Nebraska Press, 1991, 405. See further: Deloria, Vine Jr., “Reflections on the Black Hills Claim,” *Wicazo Sa* 4.1 (1988): 33-38; LaDuke, Winona. “White Earth: A Lifeway in the Forest,” In *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, South End Press, 1999, 113-134; Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3.3 (2014): 1-25; Trask, Haunani-Kay. “Restitution as a Precondition of Reconciliation: Native Hawaiians and Indigenous Human Rights,” *Borderland e-journal* 1.2 (2002).

²⁴⁹ Gonzalez, Mario and Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *The Politics of Hallowed Ground: Wounded Knee and the Struggle for Indian Sovereignty*, University of Illinois Press, 1998, 4.

²⁵⁰ Pablo De Greiff discusses this problem in his *Handbook for Reparations*: there is a difference between “awarding reparations within a basically operative legal system ... [and] awarding reparations in a system that in some fundamental ways, precisely because it either condoned or made possible systematic patterns of abuse, needs to be reconstructed” (457).

desire the return of ancestral land, the pursuit of reparations is coterminous with a settler colonial structure that does not recognize Indigenous claims to land, resulting in “a profound epistemic, ontological, [and] cosmological violence.” Not only have tribes been dispossessed of their land, but their claims to that land are “made pre-modern and backward. Made savage.”²⁵¹ In other words, the indigenous claims for reparations are dismissed because they are not legible within the limits of our political imagination. The idea that land (private property mind you!) should be taken away from one person and given to another based on an ancestral claim cannot be envisioned in our political system. As a result, Indigenous activists suffer a second dispossession as their desires are marked as inappropriate. Can we maintain radical desires for better worlds while accepting the limitations of the present? This question is at the heart of whether the Sioux Nation should accept the reparations payment offered by the United States government.

This question has no right answer and illustrates the insufficiency of the binary between utopia and escapism as applied to the struggle for reparations. After all, each position can be seen as escapist depending on the perspective we take. For a realist, rejecting financial payments in hope of someday obtaining tribal control over ancestral

²⁵¹ Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 5. I am wary that these examples fall into the critique Tuck and Yang make of settler scholars “[who] swap out prior civil and human rights based terms, seemingly to signal both an awareness of the significance of Indigenous and decolonizing theorizations of schooling and educational research.” I do not mean to minimize the difficulty of decolonization, nor subsume the struggle within the category of reparations, simply to note how the government’s failure to engage with decolonialism can be understood as analogous to its failure to engage with black reparations. See further: Wolfe, Patrick. *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Continuum, 1998; Byrd, Jodi. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011. For a discussion of the difficulty of mediating black and Indigenous demands for justice, see Day, Iyko. “Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1.2 (2015): 102-121; and Leroy, Justin. “Black History in Occupied Territory: On the Entanglements of Slavery and Settler Colonialism,” *Theory & Event* 19.4 (2016).

lands is a fantasy that prevents tribes from using the money to improve conditions in the present. The Sioux activist I quote in the previous paragraph would take the opposite view. As a result, we must shift to viewing reparations from a semi-peripheral perspective, one which complicates this binary, in order to break free of this debate.

III: Reparations from the Semi-Periphery

I experienced this debate first hand at a symposium on reparations I helped organize in 2018. The final panel brought all the speakers on stage for a roundtable on the overarching themes of the conference, but the group quickly split into two camps. On one side were reparations scholars discussing the need for a radical transformation of our world in order to bring about a significant remediation of current inequalities. On the other side were activists who had directly engaged with the struggle for reparations. What their experiences made clear was that there was very little that was radical about the changes they were able to accomplish, and for good reason. Two examples are illustrative. In Minneapolis, two Native American activists pressured the city into changing the name of a city lake from Lake Calhoun, which referred to a South Carolina slaveowner, back to its Dakota name of Bde Maka Ska. This name change took two years, many threats, and more recently a court challenge by residents apparently upset that a reference to slavery was effaced from their city.²⁵² At Clemson University, activists have succeeded in putting up plaques to educate the public about the history of bonded

²⁵² See further: Horner, Sarah. “‘Lake Calhoun’ returns after appeals court says state overstepped with ‘Bde Maka Ska,’” *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, April 29, 2019. <https://www.twincities.com/2019/04/29/lake-calhoun-returns-after-appeals-court-says-state-overstepped-with-bde-maka-ska/>

labor on campus—a history whose presence is easy to misread in the celebration of Fort Hill, the name John C. Calhoun gave his South Carolina plantation on which Clemson was founded.²⁵³

I assume that most people would agree these two instances of reparations were insufficient. But their shortcomings illustrate the powerful forces against which reparations is imagined and fought for. To describe these projects as forms of escapism that distracted from the necessary overthrow of capitalism—as some of the speakers on our panel did—is to over-inflate our own power and knowledge to change the world. Imagining better worlds is a necessary component of changing our world. But we must understand the limits of our imagination. The demand to destroy our society and start anew, to take nothing but absolute revolution, is counterproductive. It encourages a tendency towards nihilism, a cheerful acceptance of the end from a privileged position that avoids dealing with the harsh realities of poverty. To refuse to engage with reparations projects because they are not radical enough is to fail to understand the reality that change is always partial and limited.

After all, the only successful reparations claims dealing with black Americans clearly fit with the models of social transformation found in our legal system: reparations were paid for a limited and identifiable illegal act that was perpetrated with the tacit or explicit consent of the police (an arm of the state). In 1999, the Florida Legislature passed a reparations bill in response to the Rosewood Massacre, a series of racist attacks against the African American community of Rosewood, Florida, that authorized payments and

²⁵³ See further: “The African-American Experience at Fort Hill,” *Clemson University*, Accessed January 11, 2020. <https://www.clemson.edu/about/history/properties/fort-hill/african-americans.html>

scholarships to the victims' descendants.²⁵⁴ In 2015, the city council of Chicago approved a resolution to pay reparations to the victims of torture and brutality under the direction of police chief Jon Burge (who were nearly all African American men). In addition to offering a public apology, the resolution provides counseling, education, and financial compensation to the victims and their descendants.²⁵⁵

These examples deserve celebration, but they should not be isolated from the many failed reparations projects in the United States. To treat them as examples of how to pursue reparations ultimately reifies the boundary of what is possible within our political system. In contrast, we have to view these successes as the tip of the iceberg of reparations activism: they are only the visible successes of a long history of antiracist reparations activism. Slaves demanded reparations from Quakers in the mid-eighteenth century and subsequently the Massachusetts Bay Colony became a hotbed of reparations lawsuits around the Revolutionary War.²⁵⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, General William Sherman, Thaddeus Stevens, and other abolitionists argued for the granting of forty acres and a mule to each emancipated slave.²⁵⁷ Near the end of the nineteenth-century, Walter Vaughn, a white Democrat from Nebraska, and Callie House, a black activist from Tennessee, independently argued that slaves should be granted

²⁵⁴ See further: Bassett, C. Jeanne. "House Bill 591: Florida Compensates Rosewood Victims and Their Families for a Seventy-One-Year-Old Injury," *Florida State Law Review* 22.2 (1994): 503-523.

²⁵⁵ See further: "Establishment of Reparations Fund for Victims of Torture by Police Commander Jon Burge," Chicago City Council, Adopted on May 6, 2015. Accessible at: https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/BurgeRESOLUTION.pdf

²⁵⁶ See further: Finkenbine, Roy E. "Belinda's Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64.1 (2007): 95-104.

²⁵⁷ For more on the history and evolution of the claim for 40 acres and a mule, see: Darity, William Jr. "Forty Acres and a Mule in the 21st Century," *Social Science Quarterly* 89.3 (2008): 656-664.

permanent pensions from the government on the model of the pensions paid to Civil War soldiers.²⁵⁸ Claims preponderated throughout the twentieth century, from James Forman and the Black Economic Development Council's demand for reparations from white churches and synagogues to Queen Mother Audley Moore's reparations proposal submitted to the United Nations.²⁵⁹ Black nationalists like Imari Obadele asked the government for land on which to found the Republic of New Africa in the 1970s and lobbying groups like N'COBRA and TransAfrica pushed the issue in the 1990s and the passage of the Civil Liberties Act (which paid reparations to Japanese Americans). These reparations projects are not worse than the two successful examples I present above. The difference between these two groups says less about the struggle for reparations and more about the epistemological limits of the world in which we live. As with Indigenous desires for decolonization, more radical reparations projects (like Callie House's proposal in the 1890s to pay a pension to every emancipated slave for the rest of their lives) are often unacceptable within political and legal discourse.

Specifically, these proposals violate a central tenet of our socio-political system: equal exchange. Equal exchange is one of the central myths of capitalism: the belief that all commodities are eternally exchangeable.²⁶⁰ Radical reparations proposals reject this belief. Decolonization insists that there is no equality between land and money. Callie House's proposal insists that the economic damage of slavery is permanent and ongoing.

²⁵⁸ See further: Vaughn, Walter. *Freedmen's Pension Bill*, 1890; Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face is Black is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*, Vintage, 2005.

²⁵⁹ See further: Forman, James. "Black Manifesto," *The Black Economic Development Conference*, 1969; Moore, Audley. *Why Reparations? Money for Negroes*, Reparations Committee

²⁶⁰ For an economic critique of equal exchange, see: Amin, Samir. *Imperialism and Unequal Development*, The Harvester Press, 1997; and Emmanuel, Arghiri. *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade*, Monthly Review Press, 1972. #notalleconomists

Yet, once I began reading more reparations proposals it became clear that nearly all of them demonstrate the insufficiency of this exchange. We can see the limitations of equal exchange even in reparations proposals that center an economic quantification of the damage done by slavery. These proposals are based in an estimate of how much economic value has been lost by black people because of various kinds of discrimination. Boris Bittker, in his 1972 *The Case for Black Reparations*, argued that a significant program of reparations would cost in the range of \$34 billion *a year*, in perpetuity (and it seems relevant to note here that in 1972, by median household income, blacks made 58 cents for every dollar made by whites. In 2013, that ratio was 59 cents to one dollar). Adjusting for inflation, Bittker would be calling for spending \$210 billion per year on reparations today.²⁶¹ Richard America, an economist whose work attempts to estimate the cost of reparations, argues that the social debt owed to African Americans (meaning the economic value lost from slavery, segregation, and discrimination) at between \$4 and \$10 trillion (in 1992).²⁶² These proposals are taking the concept of equal exchange to its most extreme: if we were able to quantify the damage of slavery exactly how much money would it represent? Yet, they are ultimately inadequate in finding an equivalent to reparations in that they can only obliquely address more complex effects of antiblack discrimination like environmental racism or mass incarceration. Put more simply, the

²⁶¹ See further: Bittker, Boris. *The Case for Black Reparations*, Beacon Press, 2003. For statistics on racial economic inequality, see: Asante-Muhammad, Dedrick et. al. "The Road to Zero Wealth: How the Racial Wealth Divide is Hollowing Out America's Middle Class," *Institute for Policy Studies*, September 2017.

²⁶² America, Richard. *Paying the Social Debt: What White America Owes Black America*, Praeger, 2001, 19. These proposals offer a sense of how incomprehensibly large the economic value of whiteness is in the United States. On that note, see: Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993):1707-1791.

massive payments they argue for do not equal the damage of antiblack racism in the United States. How do we reckon with our fundamental inability to balance the books?

This inability suggests that reparations must envision a world outside of equal exchange and, perhaps, outside of capitalism (an unwieldy term that I am using here to refer obliquely to an organized system of production and social relations that relies on exploitation). If equal exchange is both a part of the epistemological limit that makes reparations impossible and of the system that makes them necessary, how can we think outside of that framework? Utopian literature offers us one avenue to pursue, as I argue throughout this dissertation. Through the power of estrangement, utopian literature can help us envision a different way of living and being with each other. Contemporary fiction, like Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Rider*, depicts life in nonhierarchical societies to help us envision life outside of social classes. From that perspective, we can critique concepts like uplift, which rely on the presupposition that there is an appropriate number of rich black people that we desire in our society. We no longer gauge the success of reparative projects on the percentage of Fortune 500 CEOs that are black, or women, or non-heterosexual. Rather, it requires us to imagine new forms of being not predicated on equality but on a different kind of value.²⁶³ Utopian literature helps us imagine these new forms of being outside of the political or economic sphere. They can open our minds to the possibility of living in a better world.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ As Adolph Reed writes, “black uplift [is enmeshed with] ... the belief that a race’s capacities were indicated by the accomplishments of its ‘best’ individuals—and it was always inflected with the class perspectives of those who saw themselves as such individuals” (“The Trouble With Uplift,” *The Baffler* 41 [2018]).

²⁶⁴ I see this feature of utopian literature as in line with J.K. Gibson-Graham’s belief that “inhabit[ing] a heterogeneous and open-ended economic space” could allow for a “vision of noncapitalist economic

Highlighting the utopianism of both literature and politics, as I attempt to do throughout this dissertation, is implicitly to value and recognize the power of radical visions of a better possible future. I dream that the world could be radically different than it is because I think there is enormous power in describing a better world to other people. It is why although Marx's magnum opus will always be *Capital*, readers will always be attracted to texts like *The Communist Manifesto* or the *Gotha Program* for their ability to envision or promise a change in the present. Radical visions of alterity matter. But it is important to read *Capital*, because in that text Marx makes abundantly clear what stands in the way of his utopian vision of post-capitalism: a deeply embedded (both materially and ideologically) system that reproduces and expands in millions (if not billions or trillions today) of micro-transactions. Every exchange of commodities naturalizes the ideology of equal exchange that justifies exploitation and inequality as part of the natural and universal order of the world. These things cannot simply be imagined away—that was Marx's critique of the utopian socialists who envisioned “castles in the air,” plans for utopian societies that would simply come into being fully formed. They failed to reckon with the dialectical reality of the world: if we are to have a better future, it will necessarily emerge out of a conflict with the present. Our dreams of the future do not exist in a vacuum, they exist in a highly contested present in which everything (even our dreams) are pulled back into the pragmatic reality of capitalist production.

This also illustrates the problem with the accusation of escapism leveled by academics at activists—it too reproduces the myth of equal exchange. In claiming that a

practices” to emerge. See further: Gibson-Graham, J.K. *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

plaque commemorating the lives of slaves on Clemson's campus is insufficient, the critic is making a calculation of that act. They are *valuing* it, calculating the benefit obtained against the effort necessary to enact it. At the core of that calculation is a belief in a kind of equity—a line at which the scale tips, a kind of project that does more good than bad, and that we should only push for those kinds of projects. But that line is a myth. It is a production of capitalist ideology that insists on valuing that which cannot be valued. In contrast, we must accept the fundamentally unequal nature of reparations. This is what it means to pursue reparations as a project of semi-peripheral utopianism.

The work of changing the name of the lake is not just the naming of the lake—it is also the utopian energy it brings about, the sense of possibility it engenders, the attack on the universal nature of the present. That hope—however limited and distorted—is not worth abandoning. We do not know what reparations will do! Their power is diffused, suspended, partial, and hits us differently in different times and places. In addition to changing the material world, they can also provide a basis of knowledge for future generations. To presume to understand the power of these acts is to fall back into a capitalist critique of activism, one that I wish we would avoid.

Does this mean that there is no ground from which to distinguish between the utopian and escapist elements of these projects? Of course not. For one, we can use our utopian analysis to critique programs that do not benefit those they purport to serve and try to understand the better future they desire. Small business grants, for instance, not only predominantly help people who are primarily educated and have some degree of capital (whether it be economic, cultural, or social), but they implicitly support a vision

of a better world that is achieved through participation in a capitalist society. These analyses help us recognize the necessity of thinking intersectionally about reparations. Crucially, these critiques cannot be an ending point—they must redirect us back toward the struggle for reparations. If I am concerned about how proposals for reparations reproduce capitalism, I have to consider how and why they do so. Why is black capitalism so central to many reparations projects? It is not enough to simply point to the power of ideology; we must also acknowledge that poverty and scarcity in marginalized communities leads to an investment in the models of social transformation (like capitalism) found in our society. Standing in the way of these kinds of proposals, because they are not radical enough, only ends up marginalizing reparations talk itself, making it into an academic exercise rather than a process of world building.

My desire for reparations is informed by my belief that we live in a wealthy society. Today, the United States has the opposite of scarcity. We produce a preposterous amount of everything and waste a preposterous amount of everything. Any scarcity that exists is social, not natural. There is enough land, enough food, and enough raw materials to provide ourselves with everything we need to live and much more. We have the social and intellectual capital to solve most problems and an amount of wealth that would allow us to withstand the difficulties and unexpected moments that radical change would bring about. These conditions should underlie our utopian visions—which, in turn, should be committed to exposing the contradictions in our society. There is no better (although I mean worse) image to look at than that of a person begging outside of a grocery store.

Noting and critiquing those contradictions is the work of utopian expressions. As Ernst Bloch writes:

Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment ... In other words, we need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness.²⁶⁵

Utopias unveil the world for us, they show us the world as it really is. Yet, these expressions then require us to attempt to change the world. We are limited to the imagination unless we engage with the world, using our theory to try and change things. In turn, the world pushes back. We push. It pushes back. Things change. Sometimes, the world splits, and there is the possibility of pushing back harder, without remorse or hesitation. Theory helps us be prepared for those moments.

The gradual nature of change can often make us feel that no alternative is possible and that things will always be terrible. This impulse directs us toward escapism, which leads us to characterize utopias that do not rise to our level of revolution as escapism. Unfortunately, this attitude is celebrated by people in power. They want us to be hopeless, to be nihilistic, so we do not push back against the world as it is. But this nefariousness does not mean that this attitude is wrong. It is possible that the world goes to shit, that the ice caps melt, that genocide continues, that inequality grows. These

²⁶⁵ *The Principle of Hope*, pp. 12.

possibilities are inherent in our present. Taking reparations seriously simply means remembering that there are other possibilities.

More broadly, it means recognizing the value of utopias—the power that our imagination has to shape our perception of the relationship between the present and future. As Richard Iton writes,

If we agree that politics is, among other things, a contest about what matters and ought to be subject to consideration and debate, we will recognize both the assertion of the aesthetic and the suggestion that art is a self-contained realm ‘above’ politics as political arguments of a particular normative type.²⁶⁶

By excluding the imagination from the realm of politics we contribute to the maintenance of the status quo by constraining our horizon of possibility for a better future. After all, judging reparations, or any of the utopian desires expressed by the writers in my dissertation from a realist’s perspective confirms their impossibility. Yet, while many of these desires are part of our past, they should remind us of the dialectical relationship between our imagination and our politics: it is the desire for a better possible future that prompts our struggle to improve the world. By recognizing the diverse and radical lineage of these desires and studying the ones we have forgotten or never known about, we can expand our utopian imagination and better recognizing the many futures that exist in within our present.

²⁶⁶ Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 18.

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