The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A Critical Reflection

Tom Moylan

Abstract:
In the face of the dire conditions of today’s global order, for those aiming to transform this reality in the spirit of a just, equal, and ecologically healthy existence for all of humanity and nature, it is time for the political exercise of the transformative utopian impulse. Yet, in the face of such utopian praxis, capitalism’s retrieval mechanism “subsumes and consumes” (Mark Fisher) the radical potential of utopianism. A key component of this apparatus can be seen in the contemporary upsurge of “dystopian” expression (especially in literature, film, and television). While this indulgent cooptation flourishes on the dark side of the neoliberal street, a concomitant enclosure of “eutopian” sensibility further restricts utopia’s anticipatory impulse by managed innovations that shrink this energy into a resigned “dystopian” structure of feeling as the radical utopian project itself is compromised through practices of disciplined improvement within the declared “realism” of the existing order. In this essay (writing as a utopian, and especially a teacher, and in the spirit of collegial utopian discourse), I discuss two symptomatic texts which I argue are imbricated within this dystopian ambience by way of a critique that enables me to examine such works as they play out within this current sociocultural order. On one hand, and with great respect for its internationally-recognized author, I read the text of Dystopia: A Natural History, by Gregory Claeys, as a (however unintended) component of this hegemonic structure of feeling rather than a challenge to it. On the other hand, I read Kim Stanley Robinson’s “Dystopia Now” as a negation of that negation, as the sf author and public intellectual takes up an anti-anti-utopian stance that refuses the containment field of a “seemingly omnipresent reality principle” that informs today’s “fashionable pessimism, or simply cynicism” and reasserts the radical utopian project (Robinson).

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, dystopian structure of feeling, anti-anti-utopia, Dystopia: A Natural History, “Dystopia Now.”

Bio:
Tom Moylan is a cultural studies and literary scholar who studies utopianism, in the form of texts and sociopolitical practices. He is Glucksman Professor Emeritus in the School of English, Irish, and Communication and adjunct professor in the School of Architecture, University of Limerick, as well as the founder of UL’s Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies and the Ralahine Utopian Studies Book Series. He has published several co-edited volumes and two monographs: Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination and Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia. His new book, Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation, is due out from Bloomsbury in late 2020.
Dystopias matter because they make us think. They help us to imagine and envisage how the present can change into something very nasty….. Dystopias thus interrogate the now and offer warnings and sometimes prophecies about the future; they are often the jeremiads of utopianism. But sometimes they offer glimmers of hope. (40)

--Lucy Sargisson

One way of being anti-anti-utopian is to be utopian. It’s crucial to keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how they might get better. …. So by force of will or the sheer default of emergency we make ourselves have utopian thoughts and ideas. This is the necessary next step following the dystopian moment, without which dystopia is stuck at a level of political quietism that can make it just another tool of control and of things-as-they-are. (online)

-- Kim Stanley Robinson

I.
The current global order threatens humanity and all of nature. Harm abounds everywhere. Economically, the world-wide incursion of neoliberal capitalism produces alienation and exploitation in all aspects of everyday life. Politically, the overdetermined array of corporate power, superpower aggression, and the failure of democratic politics to uphold the utopian potential of justice and peace increases the privileges of the rich and powerful and unevenly subjects people around the world to lives of intensifying vulnerability and immiseration. Culturally and existentially, accelerated by these social depredations, virulent hatred feeds a spreading wave of xenophobia (attacking on grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or any other mode of perceived difference that appears to threaten an already vulnerable populace).
And, environmentally, with the downward spiral of climate catastrophe, planetary life is facing total destruction.\(^3\) In the face of these dire conditions, for those of us (in our diverse intersectional situations) who aim to transform this current reality in the spirit of a just, equal, and healthy existence for all of humanity and nature, it is clearly time for the political exercise of the hopeful, transformative utopian impulse. Yet, even as we engage the utopian problematic and praxis, we need to recognize the ways in which capitalism’s retrieval mechanism “subsumes and consumes” the radical potential of utopianism.\(^4\)

An effective component of this apparatus of enclosure and erasure can be seen in the contemporary upsurge of “dystopian” expression (especially in literature, film, and television). This output of dark narratives has congealed in a “dystopia porn” (as sf writer Vandana Singh puts it) that suppresses humanity’s social anxieties through a fatalist, anti-utopian inoculation that normalizes pessimistic indulgence in this terrifying reality at the expense of energizing the utopian prophetic challenge of which the dystopian imagination is capable.\(^5\) Consequently, this popular structure of feeling immerses people in nihilist pleasure that opportunistically feeds back into the dark experience of our present and sustains a disarming anti-utopian pessimism.\(^6\) As Franco Berardi observes, a “mutation” has occurred in the collective cultural imagination that generates a sense of “impotence” that leads us “to think that our own suffering cannot be relieved by political projects” (Berardi 43, 44).\(^7\) Assessing the *The Hunger Games* film, Berardi argues that such a dystopian portrayal no longer stimulates anger and rebellion but rather delivers the message that the world portrayed is the world that is given, and only survivable by competing on its terms: “In this new world, only the winner can survive, and if one wants to win she must eliminate all the others, friends and foes” (Berardi 45).
While this compliant erasure of utopian hope flourishes on the dark side of the neoliberal street, a concomitant subsumption of utopian sensibility within the operating conditions of the present is also restricting transformative desire through managed innovations limited to the terms and conditions of social life as people already know it. The radical utopian project is being coopted and compromised, as Darren Webb argues, by way of combined practices of immersed resignation and disciplined improvement according to the declared “realism” of the existing order. Against this toxic resignation and complicity, what is needed is not a one-dimensional black mirror that reflects in on itself but rather a prismatic utopian beam that shines through this provincial temporality and opens people to new possibilities out of which critical and transformative visions and practices can emerge. If we choose to change these oppressive maneuvers then it’s time to throw off the veil of dystopian despair and exercise what Rebecca Solnit describes as “hope in the dark” and embrace what Sara Ahmed describes as “acts of refusal and rebellion as well as the quiet ways we might have of not holding onto things that diminish us.”

In the June 2017 *The New Yorker*, Jill Lepore addressed this resigned structure of feeling in “A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction.” After reviewing current titles in the “new literature of radical pessimism,” she concluded that this “blighted crop of dystopian novels is pessimistic about technology, about the economy, about politics, and about the planet, making it a more abundant harvest of unhappiness than most other heydays of downheartedness” (online). Like Berardi, she expressed her fear that the progressive reading effect of the dystopian form has been stymied. As she put it: dystopia “used to be a fiction of resistance; [now] it’s become a fiction of submission …. It cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn’t ask anyone to bother to make one. It nurses grievances and indulgences resentments; and it doesn’t call for courage; it finds that
cowardice suffices. It’s only admonition is: Despair more” (online). What is lacking in this dark context, she implied, is hopeful, transformative desire that counters the “dismal trend” of an “unremitting dystopianism”; for without this counterpoint, humanity is doomed. Thus, Lepore concluded: “a story about ruin can be beautiful. Wreckage is romantic. But the politics of ruin is doomed” (online).

In the review, Lepore referred to a recent scholarly work that resonates with this sociocultural zeitgeist. While she identified Dystopia: A Natural History, by Gregory Claeys, as a “shrewd new study” of dystopian writing, she found in its pages little theoretical or methodological support for her argument against the culture and politics of ruin and resignation. Yet, there is no doubt that DANH (written by an internationally-recognized scholar who has made a substantial contribution to utopian studies) stands as a timely and formidable disquisition on the nature and significance of dystopia.11 Given the previous output of its author, the prestige of its Oxford imprint, and the broad scope of its subject matter, the book has attracted the attention of utopian scholars and students. It is this very reception that prompts me (as a utopian colleague, and especially a teacher) to consider the role it might play in reinforcing or challenging the sociopolitical ambience of the present moment. Certainly, DANH is not a book to be ignored, not in these days haunted by dystopian despair and crying for utopian hope. However, based on my critical assessment, I can understand why Lepore was unable to find inspiration in this substantial volume. With respect for the author and his lifetime project of elucidating the history of utopianism, and in the spirit of utopian critique and not dismissal, I find that the text of DANH unfortunately emerges as a disciplinary contribution to the current dystopian structure of feeling rather than a challenge to it.12 II.
Based in extensive research, DANH develops a unique analysis of the “concept” of dystopia. In presenting this phenomenon as it “increasingly defines the spirit of our times,” the book’s three Parts proceed by way of rich historical detail but then coalesce into a universalizing ontology. Part I addresses the “political dystopia” and the “origin of dystopian space” through anthropological and psychological readings of early human behavior as it confronted “monstrosity” and “intensely evil spaces”; Part II links dystopia with “totalitarianism” in a review running from Jacobinism to the Pol Pot regime and ends with condemnations of the “intrusion of utopia into politics” and collective revolutionary action; and Part III offers a literary survey of dystopia (“born as a reaction to popular revolutionism” and the “extremes of utopian ambition”) based in a content analysis of texts running from an originary point in eighteenth-century British satire to “post-totalitarian” texts that dwell on the “death of nature” and the “conclusion of the artificial and mechanical history of mankind” (57, 263, 498).

In order to situate my examination of this significant volume, I want to refer to two previous contributions by the book’s author that can help elucidate the methodological and theoretical framework of DANH. First, in “The Five Languages of Utopia: Their Respective Advantages and Deficiencies, with a Plea for Prioritising Social Realism,” readers are presented with an assessment of several approaches that analyze “the subject of utopia” (10). Naming the five “languages” as “literature, religion, progress, psychology and history” (an uneven set of categories which nevertheless bespeaks the multi-layered, transdisciplinary project of utopian studies), the essay argues that, taken together, these modes of “perception” constitute not a vibrant combinatoire (my term) but rather a “babel of contending tongues in which much is lost in translation”; and it therefore suggests that they should be “reconstituted and prioritized” in order to convey a “clearer sense” of the subject of utopia (“Five Languages” 10, my emphasis).
As each “language” is reviewed, popular assumptions associated with utopianism are questioned: that utopia is exclusively a literary category, an account of perfect societies, a psychological impulse or principle, or a synonym for social improvement; and underlying all this is a “dismissal” of the “common language definition of utopia as ‘impossible’” (“Five Languages 9, see 10-11).

Within this disciplinary gatekeeping, the essay offers valuable observations (i.e., affirming the range of utopian manifestations, refusing the ascription of perfection); but it then demotes key matters concerning utopianism (its power as psychological impulse, its function as a mechanism for social improvement, its imbrication with the science fiction genre, and its relationship with categories of the possible and impossible) that are deeply embedded in approaches such as Marxist hermeneutics, feminist and queer criticism, critical ethnographic studies, literary and cultural studies, and theological and postsecular hermeneutics, to name a few). Having implicitly “reconstituted” such modes of interrogation in a manner that reduces their potential contribution, the essay nominates the “historical” language of “social realism” as the one most capable of doing justice to utopian studies. In doing so (while never quite defining what is meant by “social” or “realism”), the essay valorizes a singular approach that claims the legitimacy of an empirical, positivist paradigm (rather than working with any of the historical and hermeneutic approaches represented above). Therefore, this selected approach endorses those analyses that are aligned with a politics of the possible as it exists in the perceivable conditions of the present moment. As a result, the proffered approach lacks a deeper consideration of the complex and uneven spatiotemporal conditions of a given historical era in which untapped or undeveloped progressive, utopian, potentialities are available but rendered “impossible” to achieve by the prevailing system. Further limiting the scope of this
methodology, the essay discounts the productive value of interpretive paradigms that can address utopian affect, expression, form, practice, or temporality in ways that can adduce the range of transgressive and transformative utopian possibilities that can operate within existing trace conditions of perceived (im)possibility.

With this rectification, this disciplinary (in academic and Foucauldian senses) intervention diminishes the utopian impulse by stripping it of its multi-temporal, multi-spatial, multi-cultural, micro-macro energies and reduces it to the pragmatic task of realizing a restricted utopian program governed by “an understanding of real social relations in a realistic reorganization of society which utilizes institutional and legal means to enforce greater equality and sociability” (“Five Languages 12). Following work by Thomas More, B. F. Skinner, and J. C. Davis, the essay contains and controls the power of the utopian impulse by means of a “historical discourse” that reaffirms the program of an “ideal commonwealth or at best city-state” that respects “the restraint and control of behavior” and “portrays a system of enhanced sociability (and often suppressed individuality) in which institutionally-enforced communalism mitigates the effects of excessive social inequality” – although it is never made evident just who that social order serves, nor who or what should be controlled, nor how its aspirations should be “enforced” (“Five Languages 14). “Five Languages” thus establishes a social realist approach at the summit of a hierarchical adjudication that subordinates, and implicitly weakens, the other approaches within the strictures of an apparently objective realism (“Five Languages 14). By undervaluing the importance of the utopian impulse and stepping back from historically-contextualized interpretive engagements with cultural production (including utopian/dystopian form), a minimalist concept of utopia/dystopia overrides the complex dynamic of a utopian problematic and process that could radically challenge established social reality. The essay
therefore makes the universalizing claim that the “realistic definition of utopia permits us to reappropriate the concept as a mode of conceiving a realizable future” (“Five Languages 15). Within this disciplinary enclosure of impulse by program, the essay evinces a preference for a restricted, indeed mandarin, version of utopia that “remains a defensible concept, provided we limit it sufficiently” (“Five Languages” 15).

Returning to DANH, this assertion of a theoretically and politically domesticated theory and practice of a controlling utopianism limited to its function within the present moment is reinforced by the authority conveyed through the publisher’s back cover promotional copy that declares it to be the “first monograph devoted to the concept.” In the essay and the book, the implication is that no other approach, or combination of approaches, to utopia or dystopia is as capable of productively articulating the ideal utopian program. From this perspective, there is one preferred way to address utopianism: namely, via empirical analysis contained within the surface conditions of a confined present that has no residual past to learn from and no emergent future to anticipate (498). Yet, as a quick literature search demonstrates, at least since 1990 there have been several works that address the question of dystopia in more complex ways: such as, Raffaella Baccolini, “Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia,” in Per una definizione dell’utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto (1992); M. Keith Booker, The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism (1994); Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopia Revisited” (1994); Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination (2003); and Tom Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia (2000). While most of these are mentioned in DANH, the book does not substantively engage with them. Considered from the standpoint of DANH, this deflection makes internal sense; for historical-hermeneutic studies such
as these adduce a radically holistic cultural and political, utopian and dystopian, engagement with a depth of impulse and complexity of program – and are less prescriptive yet more open to what is actually at stake in concrete sociocultural production.

Second, given this prioritized approach to utopianism (and dystopia) and its consequent devaluation of utopia, a revealing comment in another source casts further light on the nature of the philosophical, political, and methodological paradigm that informs DANH. In the author’s short insertion of his own comments in the jointly-written (with Lyman Tower Sargent) “Introduction” to the 2017 edition of the Utopia Reader, the textual segment rejects no less than the grounding principle that drives the utopian impulse: Hope.15 In this dismissal, the extensive theoretical work on utopianism and hope – especially by Ernst Bloch but also by Fredric Jameson, Ruth Levitas, and others – is elided.16 Instead, this intervention asserts that the “suggestion that ‘hope’ is a quality to be prioritized in texts, and should be linked to preferring ‘authentic’ utopian experience over other forms, implies a questionable moral essentialism” (“Introduction” 4). Against this claim, a close reading of the diverse commentaries of hope would indicate that interpretive utopian studies (with its hermeneutics of suspicion and anticipation) do not reify hope or lock it into a fixed constellation of meaning or practice, nor make it the driving engine of a moral essentialism. Rather, in varying ways, they regard it as a palpably material element of concrete human behavior. Indeed, the more common understanding is that human proclivities of utopian impulse and hope emerge in overdetermined ways within historical contingency, often in contradiction or conflict. In this regard, the negation of thinking or practice that becomes trapped in essentialist programs or fixed teleologies is just what the original deployment of the critical utopia in its (too often overstated) critique of blueprints aimed
for as it generated the negation of that negation in a hopeful utopian project that unfolds in a self-critical, self-correcting, as historically located process.

Based on my reading of these two sources and of *DANH*, I regrettably conclude that the book’s approach to utopianism leads to the employment of a one-dimensional dystopian discourse to challenge “dystopian” reality and ends up as an epistemologically circular maneuver that strategically discharges the power of the utopian impulse to transgress and transform present conditions. Consequently, it proffers a weak utopianism that is, however unintentionally, drawn into the gravitational force of the anti-utopian tradition, especially as it sustains contemporary neoliberal culture. As such, and against progressive political positions previously expressed by its author, this specific project evinces a political standpoint that remains caught within the popular dystopian structure of feeling and fundamentally disarms utopia, even as it aims to stand against the current order of things. Given this overall stance which holds that utopian responses are significant only when realistic enough to be an engine for a controlled social change, *DANH* leaves little room for an oppositional imaginary that could anticipate radical holistic alternatives.

The overarching narrative that feeds this assertion begins with the book’s identification of dystopia as a “natural” phenomenon emerging in the primal forge of the human encounter with evil and then moves into discussions of totalitarianism and literary dystopia in a manner that traps dystopian representation in tales of institutional social terror, on one hand, and natural and social destruction, on the other. Within this framework driven by the practice of origin studies but deriving from an underlying metaphysical base, the unfolding argument collapses the relationship between sign and significer and regards dystopia as a unitary referent in prehistory and modernity before turning to a summary account of its literary “diffractions” (as a subtitle puts it). This “natural history” proceeds according to a narrative based in an ideological binary of
good and evil which is applied to the formation of early humans responding to an everyday world of natural and social horrors with minimal hope for amelioration in the face of cosmic and existential darkness. Revealingly, *DANH* never mentions anthropological paradigms that deliver more benign interpretations of human sociality as it developed in ecological compatibility with the rest of nature. Thus, the text disregards the cultural and spiritual experience of indigenous cultures, as well as Western anthropologies such as Marcel Mauss’s exploration of a “gift economy” that produced nurturing human community rather than tooth and claw competition; the humane anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss; the engaged work of Stanley Diamond or Michael Taussig; the anarchist anthropology of Peter Kropotkin, Murray Bookchin, or Pierre Clastres; or feminist anthropology’s accounts of Neolithic society as constituted by cooperative living under matrilineal leadership from Elizabeth Fox Genovese onwards.17 Little is said about such positive experiences of human endeavor embodied in compassionate and cooperative dimensions of sociable community. Indeed, when such efforts are acknowledged (in later formations such as millennial religious groups, intentional communities, or secular political movements), there is a tendency to regard such progressive actions as collapsing under the weight of the repressive power dynamics of group identity, privilege, and consequent control by processes of inclusion and exclusion. Given its proffered historical baseline in the experience of monstrosity, *DANH* is imbued by an instrumental pessimism that never throws off the “stench” of a one-dimensional dystopian experience and ends up morphing from a declared historical examination into an ontological treatise that distances itself from the hopeful project of utopian imagination and transformation (4).

Turning to the Parts of *DANH*, while there is much to reflect upon in this nearly 600-page study, my primary aim is to examine the book’s overriding perspective, as it reveals a standpoint
that tends to privilege controlled social improvement within the present world reality and negates communal efforts to break beyond it for a better world for humanity within all of nature (498). As noted above, Part I offers a reading of formative experiences of early humans in the natural world. Drawing on studies that dwell on the evil tenor of monstrosity, witchcraft, and destructive figures from devils to vampires to more contemporary manifestations of madness and perversion, DANH claims that human existence has been shaped by a physically and emotionally charged encounter informed by the perception that the “natural world is populated by threatening gods, monstrous beings, and malevolent spirits” (9). Unfortunately, the book’s account stops at this admissible point without considering the many ways that humanity has struggled beyond such dire experiences (see 58-109). Thus, ignoring such positive perspectives on human social evolution, the text argues that this “original dystopian space in which fear predominates” marks “the beginning of the natural history of dystopia” and precedes (and diminishes in anticipation) human efforts to conceive of “ideal good spaces of paradise and Heaven” (58, my emphases). It is no surprise that the Absolute Subject and Locus of this foundational dystopian reality coalesces in the Judeo-Christian figure of Satan and the fiery spaciality of Hell (see especially 79-93).

In the portrayal of those who aimed to counter this evil, such as the Christian Church, DANH develops its first reflection on the power dynamic that, from prehistory to the present, has confronted those who oppose a dystopian reality (and act with a utopian response). Significantly, this analysis is grounded in a genealogy of the disciplinary apparatus of group psychology (based in the counter-revolutionary theories of Gustav Le Bon down through Sigmund Freud and the later Eric Fromm) that operates by way of the divisive mechanism of demonization. Here, readers are given much to consider in terms of the destructive dynamics that arise as human fears
became “expressed, experienced, and defined by groups” (18). The presentation then turns to the work of René Girard to describe how such processes encased community behavior within a dystopian frame that appears almost inevitably determined by scapegoating carried out by an administrative machinery of control and domination (see 33, 49-50).

This, then, is the deep structure of psychosocial damage caused by the unmediated pairing of the monstrous and the collective that DANH locates at the heart of human endeavor. However, in its binary approach, adopting Girard’s account, the book neglects the philosophical anthropologist’s further explanation that this destructive creation was, in its emergent manifestations in primitive societies, generally a matter of unconscious behavior and not necessarily a diabolical manipulation carried out by a controlling group. The text does not go on to explore how in Christian and secular contexts this destructive power of scapegoating was, in modernity, superseded by redemptive narratives proceeding from the perspective of victims who had thrown off such practices by way of liberatory dynamics that refused authoritarian domination and opted instead for the co-creation of human possibility (as in the communism of the early Christian Church, Anabaptist communitarianism, international socialist and feminist solidarity, ecological co-creation politics, or liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor” and its praxis in Latin American base communities). To be sure, DANH does describe efforts to produce a better social reality; but more often than not that description falls back on presenting such aspirations as efforts that were able to resist the power politics of “groupism” (see, for example, 55-57). As with the argument in “Five Languages,” DANH steps away from a consideration of the complexities of the utopian impulse and the resulting transformational activity of human communities and misses the opportunity to apply the more positive aspects of later versions of group psychology to the constructive process of self-understanding among such
communities (nor does it engage with the hope-ful psychology of the human potential
movement, as elaborated by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, or Paul Goodman). Indeed, the
book’s discussion of “secular millenarianism” is indicative of its, perhaps unwilling, pessimistic
viewpoint. As the text explains, in the supersession of the Christian narrative of millennial well-
being (with its telos of the Kingdom of God transposed into a utopian horizon), the human desire
for justice and equality encourages “a sense of overwhelming and pervasive injustice and
corruption” and then reacts by way of an imperative for corrective action; however, given the
book’s insistence on the power of the monstrous, such efforts, right up to our own moment, are
doomed to fail because of a group psychology that can only work by way of “suppression” of the
human stride toward freedom (57). As DANH’s argument leans toward the anti-utopian pole of
the spectrum of political engagement, the underlying position of the text turns away not only
from militant empowerment implicit in the psychological traditions mentioned above but also
other strong explorations of the potential of transformative utopian politics articulated by leaders
of social justice movements such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Nelson
Mandela, or Thich Nhat Hanh.18

In Part II, DANH moves from this originary concept of a general dystopian experience to
an exposition that addresses totalitarianism from Jacobinism, to Nazism, Bolshevism, Stalinism,
and in China and Cambodia. In a significant departure from its author’s well-regarded earlier
studies of the emancipatory utopianism of Robert Owen, cooperation, and early socialism,
DANH draws on Jacob Talmon’s Cold War back-reading of the category of the totalitarian into
the radical politics of the eighteenth century.19 From this antithetical standpoint, the book carries
its narrative trope of ontological evil and revolutionary groupism into an a-historical
interpretation that imposes the nomination of totalitarianism onto historical developments (such
as the Inquisition and the French Revolution) that preceded its manifestation in twentieth-century fascism and extends its remit to later varieties of authoritarianism that fall outside of the conditions of that specific formation, even as it neglects the systemic oppression implicit in the totally-administered society produced by capitalism (see especially 114-128). As the account unfolds in the second step of the book’s trajectory, this treatment locks in a conflation of the totalitarian with the monstrously dystopian. While there is no question that the terrible systems and practices addressed have prompted commentators into the use of the adjective *dystopian* to describe these horrific conditions, *DANH* advances a universalizing argument by collapsing the differences between and among such historically-situated productions and the categorical term, thus rendering the “dystopian” character of the dark history of the “totalitarian” in a surface depiction that avoids a mediated examination of the differences therein and a consideration of ways in which the utopian impulse is always available in the formal operations of the dystopian (as opposed to the anti-utopian) mode.

By the end of this Part, *DANH* pulls back from a complete equation of the totalitarian and the dystopian. Yet, the text preserves that very linkage as it first presents apparent differences between the two categories but then demotes them to minor deviations that collapse under the weight of the abstract categories of horror and control. In making these distinctions, the argument characterizes the general character of totalitarianism (in its “mass cruelty, torture, and murder”) in light of what is presented as the “totalizing” function of “dystopian groups” which impose their power by suppressing (purging, cleansing) enemies and rewarding loyal adherents (267); it then differentiates the self found in the internal social construction of secular millenarianism (in *DANH*, this ahistorical attribution serves as the generic name for all progressive, utopian, organizations) from the externally dominated “totalitarian collective.” Yet,
after making this distinction, the text dissolves it by invoking the commonality of “emboldened individualism” and “collectivism” as they become the twinned offspring arising from the monstrous corruption of human sociality and community (267). Even as a set of historically specific differences between internal and external mechanisms of oppression is averred, the book’s presentation settles on a universalizing affiliation with the singularity of the dystopian and totalitarian.

Overall then, *DANH’s* treatment of the *longue durée* of the production of human evil betrays its stated remit as an historical account of the relationship between totalitarianism and the dystopian: for this detailed and informative account informs a brief that morally and politically diminishes *all* human efforts at cooperative and collective organizing to build a better society (i.e., the progressive utopian project). While the book robustly exposes the concrete horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, of the camps and the murders, of the betrayals and the cruelty, it goes on to express an all-encompassing ideological, political, and theoretical condemnation of the modern original sin of “collectivism.” Even more than secular millenarianism, this ontological abstraction becomes an umbrella term for all human solidarity in the modern political sphere, ranging from the progressive politics of the eighteenth-century bourgeois Enlightenment through to the contemporary Left. While *DANH* rightly condemns Stalinism, it reaches beyond that specificity and pursues its own demonizing project by attaching an a-chronic attribution of the ubiquity of abstract dystopian power to all other manifestations of communism, socialism, and syndicalism. In an unwelcome reprise of the anti-communism that prevailed in the 1920s and the 1950s, *DANH* engages in the very practice of scapegoating that the book itself critiques as it devalues revolutionary theory and collective practice that has developed in the progressive
tradition from the time of the Enlightenment to the present, thereby ensuring that the transformative potential for a radical utopian practice is always already condemned.

In Part III, *DANH* addresses the literary dystopia. Following its ontological narrative of anthropological monstrosity and sociopolitical terror, the text examines this mode by way of surface readings of textual content that resist interventions made possible by historical-hermeneutic engagements (270). The main body of this Part features a literary survey that locates the origins of dystopian writing in anti-revolutionary “British” satire (thus erasing the resistant roots of its Irish provenance as well as ignoring archival research that locates seeds of dystopian writing in the hopeful imaginary of the biblical jeremiads, with their admixture of warning and anticipation), then moves to the trajectory of the “totalitarian” dystopia (from the French Revolution to the end of World War Two), and on to “post-totalitarian” writing from 1950 to 2015. Between the two periodized sections, the survey offers chapters on two of the most significant dystopian works of the twentieth century: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Before commencing this textual tour, *DANH* explores the nature and criticism of dystopian writing. In a move that, for me, expresses the instrumental logic of this project, this section begins by noting the “utility” of the dystopian text, a designation ascribed to Thomas More (see 269). Picking up the thematic from Part I, the discussion avers that dystopian writing is rooted in the projection of “horrifying or disastrous conditions” and asserts that this literary process proceeds by way of nominally realistic portrayals of an imaginary future “where much has gone wrong, though sometimes ways out are indicated” (269). Within this broad ascription, the text helpfully distinguishes dystopia “proper” from “literatures of natural disaster, Apocalypse, and cataclysm” (although, in the light of the current climate crises, there a synergy
between dystopia and climate-fiction). However, it then includes “anti-utopias” in its dystopian catalogue; in doing so, the text reveals its tendency to link dystopia with anti-utopia and thus to minimize dystopia’s critical, indeed utopian, capacity (269, 270).

Given its initial comments, it is disappointing that DANH misses the opportunity of engaging in a more historically and culturally nuanced reading of the formal relationship between dystopia and realism/naturalism by ignoring one of the more nuanced assessments of this pairing: that is, Phillip E. Wegner’s argument that the modern literary dystopia, which he positions as a subgenre of utopia, evolved as a form which functioned as the “negation of the negation of both utopia and naturalism” (Wegner, Shockwaves 45). Drawing on Jameson’s observation that late nineteenth-century literary utopias challenged the pessimism of the “asphyxiating historical closure of the then reigning literary naturalisms” (generated by a confidant empiricism that produced “schematic mappings of an apparently fixed and closed social reality” that denied “real possibility of change”), Wegner contends that the modern dystopia (e.g., by Jack London, E. M. Forster, or Yevgeny Zamyatin) counters that primary opposition with a dialectical sublation of its own, one that “recapitulates and subsumes” elements of both “the radical openness of the utopia” and the “closure of naturalism” (Jameson, quoted Wegner, Life 118, 117-118, 124). Embedded in the very form of the dystopian narrative is a tension that plays out via the category of the political and haunts “dystopian writing throughout the twentieth century” (Wegner, Life 119, 124). Looked at through this periodized account of the aesthetic and political dynamics of form, specific texts can be examined to assess the degree of their negotiation of the competing pulls of the desire for radical change and the denial of “any mechanisms or agency by which such change might come about” – with some texts offering “emancipatory, militant, open, and ‘critical’” narratives that endorse a radical utopian politics of
transformation, and others maintaining a “compensatory, resigned, and quite ‘anti-critical’” anti-utopian capitulation to and reproduction of the dominant social reality (Wegner, *Life* 124, 120). 24

In choosing not to pursue such a mediated engagement with dystopia as a mode of cultural production, *DANH* holds to a limited version of realism as it reductively declares that the primary focus for dystopian literature is its narrative of the dilemma experienced by “rational autonomous individuals” lost in the grip of “collectivism.” In the subsection entitled “The Literary Dystopia Defined,” the text adds that such works “are understood as primarily concerned to portray societies where a substantial majority suffer slavery and/or oppression *as a result of human action*” (269, 290). Regrettably, these suggestive statements are as far as *DANH* goes in defining, or historically specifying, the literary dystopia. Consequently, this consideration of dystopia privileges subject matter over form. As the text puts it near the beginning of Part III: “Dystopias are not reducible to the history of ideas … But their contribution to it, rather than an analysis of the literary forms is our central, though not sole, focus here” (273-274).

*DANH* then moves into a scholarship survey. Shaping this discussion is a preference for empirical accounts: by elimination, the value of critical approaches that encompass formal analysis and what the text identifies as “presumed reader contact/response” is minimized on the basis of what are characterized as unsubstantiated declarations that “generalize from too narrow a textual basis” (290). Nevertheless, the survey ends up delivering its own version of a, non-dialectical, interpretive and reader response analysis through the book’s social realist approach, as it aims for an “objective” assessment. *DANH* develops this survey by way of summaries that too often compress and distort complex arguments, with the review beginning in the 1950s with works by Glenn Negley, J. Max Patrick, and George Woodcock as they assess dystopian writing.
by exploring relations between the literary dystopia and utopia. It is in the 1960s that more considered studies emerge: namely, by Arthur O. Lewis, Fred Polak, Chad Walsh (“the first major study of the field”), Irving Howe, George Kateb, Mark Hillegas, down to Alexandra Aldridge in the late 1970s (275-279). The survey continues into the 1980s with Krishan Kumar’s *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987), which is praised as “the chief study in the period,” symptomatically rewarding Kumar’s conclusion that locates dystopia within the category of anti-utopia (279). The review closes with brief accounts of Sargent’s “The Three Faces of Utopianism” (1967) and “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited” (1994); J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516-1700*; Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible* (1986) and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000); David W. Sisk’s *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopia* (1997), Erica Gottlieb’s *Dystopian Fiction East and West* (2001), and Artur Blaim’s “Hell upon a Hill: Reflections on Anti-Utopia and Dystopia” in Fátima Vieira’s edited volume, *Dystopia(n) Matters* (2013).

The review ends with two paragraphs that highlight, but do not resolve, the “considerable disagreement over the key terms: dystopia and anti-utopia” and then judges this multiplicity of engagements to be unsatisfactory, finding gaps and contradictions throughout (284). It concludes that in this work the “concept of dystopia” has generally been approached through three levels of interpretation: “authorial intention; reader perception or context by juxtaposition to the author; and various types of content or historical narrative” (284). While all three are recognized as part of a “nuanced treatment of the tradition” (as advanced in “Five Languages”), this response does not pursue an extensive engagement with this body of work but simply declares it to be inadequate in the face of the social realist approach. Thus, *DANH* maintains its empirical-taxonomic imperative to define, categorize, and summarize dystopia in terms that accord with a
binary sense of a social reality that is so overwhelmingly horrendous that the only possible attitude for the self-declared rational thinker is that of an equivalent pessimism. Indeed, this ultimately nihilistic conclusion is signaled in the subtitle for Part III: “The Literary Revolt Against Collectivism”; for in this attribution, *DANH* paradoxically removes the genre from history and reduces the essence of modern dystopian writing to an obsession with the evils of collective political agency from early modernity to the present (269).

*DANH* moves forward from this review of criticism by continuing its disavowal of historical-hermeneutic analyses in a subsection entitled “Science Fiction and Dystopia” (284 ff.). Given the book’s reliance on content analysis (and its suspicion of the relevance of sf to utopian literary production), the task of coming to terms with the assumed “problem” arising from considerations of the relationship between the dystopian and sf modes proves to be a challenge impossible to meet, resulting in a discussion that is, to me, sketchy and indecisive (284).

Reverting to the old debate on the appropriateness of seeing “dystopian literature as a branch of science fiction,” *DANH* resists a dialectical engagement that could have considered the intricate historical and formal contingencies that a wide variety of critics have explored for decades. While the text rejects Darko Suvin’s argument that utopia is the “‘socio-political subgenre’ of science fiction,” it does not engage with the further debate regarding this attribution between Suvin and China Miéville, much less with analyses of form and politics undertaken by Jameson, Suvin, Baccolini, Wegner, Mark Bould, Sherryl Vint, Caroline Edwards, and others: thereby developing its approach in such a way that resignedly collapses the two generic modes to no useful end. To offer one example: in not addressing Baccolini’s examination of the practice of “genre blurring” as it plays out in the formal operations of utopian and dystopian writing (especially in the critical utopia and critical dystopia), the book again stops short of an
interpretive analysis that could have deepened its consideration of dystopia and sf as it looked beyond the dated obsession with the their opposition to or absorption of each other.\textsuperscript{25}

Indeed, in reference to this formal relationship, and significantly at its meta-theoretical register, Baccolini’s discussion of genre blurring is pertinent to my examination of the gaps and silences in \textit{DANH}’s overall treatment. As she explains it, one of the key literary changes that “opens up [critical dystopian] texts is an intensification of the practice of genre blurring. By self-reflexively borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the received boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression” (Baccolini 7). Like Wegner, she exemplifies another way in which formal analysis not only elucidates the historically contingent nature of generic changes but also their social and cultural impact. Further, she stresses deeper consequences of her theoretical intervention: “Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions – fixity and singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge – and recognizing the importance of difference, multiplicity, and complexity, of partial and situated knowledges, as well as of hybridity and fluidity, the critical dystopias resist genre purity in favor of an impure or hypertext that renovates dystopian sf by making it formally and politically oppositional” (Baccolini 7). In the context of this essay, Baccolini’s methodological contribution arising from the interconnection of critical dystopian studies and feminist criticism expresses a perspective that \textit{DANH} ignores in its preference for social realism’s unmediated universalist claims based in a presumed objective knowledge.

In the end, \textit{DANH}’s focus on the relationship between dystopia and sf is distracted by minor cavils and is unproductive. Yet, as a subtext of this section, a demonization of interpretive utopian studies continues, proceeding not by way of dialogic critique but by neglect. However, in
considering *DANH* overall, I can understand why its empiricism might be cloistered from such interventions. For, in all its variations, this critical constellation generally proceeds from an identification of utopia (and dystopia) in rigorous studies that enable sociopolitical interpretations of formal productions within a historical period (including the consideration of authorial intention, which *DANH* incorrectly claims such work neglects). In this regard, the book misses the opportunity to think dialectically: to interpret social reality as a systemic totality which can be analytically approached in its entirety from any of its parts.

Part III concludes with useful plot summaries of 150 dystopias published since 2003 (the most pertinent being those addressing climate change). In the thematic synopsis of this section, the text suggests that there has been a shift in dystopian content away from a “concentration on political collectivism to that of the impact of technology, population growth, and environmental degradation,” wherein narratives featuring nuclear war and authoritarian states have folded into accounts of a more diffused “plutocratic dystopia” (488, 489). However, it then declares that two attributes of this dystopian output have diminished the genre’s capacity to confront our troublesome social reality. First, the argument avers that there is a greater tendency for recent dystopian writing to be written within a science fictional imaginary, and thus to be generating narratives that indulge in entertaining distractions of estranged locations, off-world or in the future, rather than soberly focusing on what are regarded as more pressing realistic portrayals. Second, following from this, the argument evades a consideration of the ways in which this formal capacity for cognitive estrangement can lead to a critical/transformative response to current conditions. Again upholding the worthiness of social realism, *DANH* implies that “escapist” narratives fail to confront the harshness of reality – thereby missing the long-standing observation in sf reader response criticism that the figurative work of such texts is capable of
stimulating a cultural and political break from the contemporary world that is highly productive of radical change. Taking this account further, *DANH* reveals its pessimistic position as it argues against what is described as the tendency of recent dystopian novels to be “overly zealous in their insisting on the necessity for *happy* endings, imagining deviant rebels who beat the system, implausibly rescuing their central characters, and providing ‘hope’ in the persistence of utopian enclaves”: thus delivering an inopportune underestimation of many dystopian outcomes – especially critical dystopian thought experiments exploring utopian enclaves and offering open endings to be resolved by readers – and missing the political impact that formal innovations can produce in readers (489, my emphasis).

*DANH* implies that this braided dynamic of formal estrangement and political hope diminishes the “political content of many later novels,” even as it paradoxically grants that, at the level of entertainment, they encourage their flourishing as “a richer literary genre” (489). While on one level, these remarks accord with my own argument that the currently popular dystopian structure of feeling tends to foster passive resignation rather than stimulate engagement (as in the sense of the diminution of the “political” as linked to an increased interest in commodified entertainment), I suggest that by not engaging with the politics and pleasures emanating from the formal maneuvers of recent dystopian sf (and here it’s time to accept that the two genres are indeed tightly imbricated), this important study is, for all its good intentions, complicit with that resigned attitude as it refuses the opportunity to carry out a critically interpretive analysis of these texts (considered in their authorial and historical specificities). Thus *DANH* fails to recognize that political consciousness and struggle are traceable along the continuum between utopia and anti-utopia that is at the core of the dystopian form. To be sure, while our current moment is not solely an era of totalitarian states and nuclear bombs, it is a time when those still
present dangers are entangled in capitalist and environmental crises that permeate our individual and collective lives as well as every corner of the planet more effectively than those perpetrated by state power alone. In this situation, as Singh notes, the multi-dimensional narratives required to break through this structure of tightly-sutured personal and systemic docility must be both engaged and entertaining works that can capture readerly affect and speak to the crises of their time.

I therefore question DANH’s observation that the “most marked discontinuity in the development of the genre is a relative disengagement with everyday politics which characterized so many later nineteenth-century century texts,” and I query its aversion to considering the validity of hope as a driving force in humanity’s struggle to survive the current crises and thrive beyond them (494). By holding to a narrow understanding of the “political” as found in classical dystopian narrative and discounting the potential of dystopian sf figurations that do not deflect from but rather enhance their capacity for warning and education, this substantial work nevertheless short-circuits a critical response that could make an intellectual and creative contribution to the movements around the globe struggling to oppose that culture of despair and resignation. Rather than exploring actually existing utopian elements (latent or available) within the dystopian mode (benighted as it currently is), DANH ends up valorizing a sociopolitical standpoint restricted to the provincial present.

Within this framework, the book unsurprisingly embraces the technocratic subgenre of futurology as a way to make its point that readers, and citizens, need to stop indulging in fantasies and soberly face the present global horrors in order to blow away the prevailing miasma of dystopian resignation (see 499, and 286, 459, 488). However, even as it underscores the usefulness of futurological extrapolations (expressing pragmatic possibilities rather than
anticipations of alternative realities), the text creates little room for a radical and redemptive political impulse and agency that can demand the “impossible” (as defined within the present moment) and catalyze a transformative breakthrough. Instead, these comments resonate with an evangelical, almost Calvinist, sense of a predetermined, absolute “end time” rather than an open-ended, yes utopian, millenarian or antinomian anticipation of apocalyptic stages (see 499-500). Caught in this cul-de-sac, DANH misses out on the bright potential for an apocalyptic and utopian hope that “stays with the trouble” (as Donna Haraway puts it; and as Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, and others explore in recent sf thought experiments) and thereby hails the de-sutured, anti-normative, “bad,” subjects needed to work through and against the hard times to create a better world. By dismissing the subversive potential of dystopian texts that explore movements and enclaves of resistance within their pages or that challenge readers, in a Brechtian manner, to carry on radical speculation after closing the cover, the book maintains a politically limited valorization of an apparently realistic confrontation that (by rejecting the strong thought enabled by the anticipation of a concrete utopian alternative) leaves it with the weak declaration that “pessimism has its place” (501).

Overall then, this monograph, however unintended, contributes to the current hegemonic culture of resignation. Despite its immense amount of material presented as “natural history,” DANH is shaped by a narrative that begins with a primal scene/sin based in monstrosity, moves through a plot in which totalitarian control and collectivism erase political potential for transformation, and ends with a literary coda that reaffirms a dark dénouement that evacuates the capability for a collective cultural and political action and asserts the need for authoritative knowledge and control from a singularly privileged position. Darkly, the universally monstrous runs along the spine of this sweeping commentary and infuses it with such a reinforcement of the
predominance of evil that no alternative (no utopia) can grow from the methodology or negative idealism of this study. Indeed, the closing lines of the book offer the most revealing statement of its intention (again framed within a preference for absolute binaries and the security of a social realism which in the end is neither sufficiently social nor realist):

the task of the literary dystopia, then, is to warn against and educate us about real-life dystopias. It need not furnish a happy ending to do so: pessimism has its place. But it may envision rational and collective solutions where irrationality and panic loom. Entertainment plays a role in this process. But the task at hand is serious. It gains daily in importance. Here, then, is a genre, and the concept, whose time has come. May it flourish. (501, my emphasis).

With due respect for DANH’s legitimate concern about the fate of the present world, I fear that this call for a rigorous response to our “real-life” crises (even with its surprising inclusion of collective actions) will not find sufficient political traction arising from such a, paradoxically hopeful, prayer for the flourishing of an effective dystopian realism; for its insistent pessimism plays into the ruling logic of capitalist “realism” (however much the author may oppose it) and inhibits the generation of actual next steps that could be taken to achieve a radically other, radically better society. By virtue of this resistance to the dystopian imagination’s prophetic capacity to engage the potential of a wide-ranging, especially collective, utopian agency, DANH’s sustained cathexis to the recurring force of the monstrous and the complementary need for authoritative restraint and rule leaves readers not only with the sobering conclusion that humanity has gotten it all wrong from the beginning of time but also that they cannot now endeavor to set it right (because compassionate and cooperative struggle by human groups and movements is regarded as doomed to failure through immersion within an atmosphere of
irrationality, panic, and impotence). Consequently, excesses represented by categories such as “hope” or “happy endings” must be contained, lest even more evil enters into the world.

Therefore, DANH presents more as a work of political theology than intellectual or cultural history, as it affirms an ontological and methodological standpoint that prompts despair rather than hope, leaches the utopian potential from dystopia, and consequently disarms utopia by depriving it of its transformative potential. Resonant with the religious discourse of Carl Schmitt, the book evokes a pre-modern sense of the biblical trope of the katechon (the authoritative “bulwark” that restrains the evil of the Antichrist) in its contrapuntal assertion of the necessity of a social utopia whose restrained rule will counter the evils of human behavior in a “realistic” manner that avoids the open-ended dynamism of a collective and transformative utopian project. This validation of Cold War “containment” (rooted in thinkers such as Hobbes, Le Bon, Talmon, and Schmitt) of the undisciplined and diverse forces of the utopian impulse (and indeed of a great deal of the output of utopian studies) is in direct opposition to post-World War II progressive theology informed by Bloch’s Marxist hermeneutics and the French Marxist-Christian dialogue; developed by the likes of Paul Tillich, Moltmann, and Gutiérrez; and carried forth in practices of the Second Vatican Council as well as progressive Protestantism and Judaism. There is little room in DANH for what Bloch would term a “warm stream” of utopian interpretation and politics; yet, there is a “cold stream” of a pessimistic apprehension and control of the world. While the book sincerely seeks a minimalist utopianism in the face of dystopian reality, it disappointingly delivers less than it promises; for its proffered alternative is not strong enough, not radical enough, to overcome the current order of things and support the next steps toward a utopian alternative. Consequently, we, readers and citizens, are left hope-less in the face of its general aversion to the totalizing, transgressive, and transformative substance of a radical
utopianism. In the end, Dystopia: A Natural History, for all its rigor and passion, stands less as a volume of utopian (or dystopian) historical discourse but rather as an ontologically-infused work that falls under the shadow of contemporary anti-utopianism.

III.

Fortunately, the resigned pessimism evinced by DANH is superseded by others who continue to enlist the potential of radical utopian hope in these dark times. While many are taking up this challenge (rethinking “interpretation,” as Berardi puts it, or “hope” as Solnit and Ahmed term it), Kim Stanley Robinson, as a public intellectual and author, has been particularly strong in his sociopolitical and ecological interventions (Berardi 234-236). In his fiction, essays, and lectures, Robinson addresses the dystopian conditions of our world. Yet, he always challenges them through a utopian lens, looking toward a utopian horizon. In work after work, he creates paths through the trouble that open toward a renewed world not simply imbued by justice and healing, but one in which humans as an active part of nature can find redeemed fulfillment. And so to offer one counterpoint to the current resigned ambience of dystopian modes, and to studies such as DANH, I want to turn to Robinson’s 2018 essay (in the appropriately titled Commune), “Dystopias Now.” If Lepore’s article identifies the problem of a compliant dystopian structure of feeling, and if DANH’s intervention negates the utopian possibility of breaking apart that dystopian enclosure, Robinson’s short article offers a negation of that negation, as he articulates an anti-anti-utopian stance that revives the utopian project.

In this piece that fuses the journalistic and the theoretical, Robinson keeps the categories of dystopia and utopia in proximate relation to each other. Like Lepore, he expresses his concern about the capture of a dystopian structure of feeling by neoliberal capitalism; and so, like Berardi, he characterizes the current surge of dystopias as offering an experience of regressive
comparison that is “fashionable, perhaps lazy, maybe even complacent, because one pleasure of reading them is cozing into the feeling that however bad our present moment is, it’s nowhere near as bad as the ones these poor characters are suffering through” (online). Thus, contemporary reception, and the culture within which it occurs, appears as a form of “indulgence” that creates “a sense of comparative safety” leading to a “kind of late-capitalist, advanced-nation schadenfreude about those unfortunate fictional citizens whose lives have been thrashed by our own political inaction” (online). If this is so, then “dystopia is part of our all-encompassing hopelessness” (online). At best, the utopian enclaves found in recent works end up being safe spaces reserved for the privileged rather than liberated zones fostering total transformation for all: thus, such narratives become “reactionary statements on the behalf of the currently powerful, those who enjoy a poorly-hidden utopia-for-the-few alongside a dystopia-for-the-many” (online).

However sobering Robinson’s assessment – and however much it partially resonates with the discussion in DANH on the limits of “entertainment” fiction – this utopian intellectual is not prepared to accept the toxicity of such resigned pleasures and instead calls for a refashioned utopianism. In aid of this, he invokes the formal potential of utopian/dystopian sf for engaging with the current situation in a way that tears through its sutured reality and opens to a better world for humanity and nature. In an insightful exploration of the formal mechanisms of this estranged genre, Robinson’s describes how sf’s “double action” elucidates critical engagement: on one hand, sf portrays “some future that might actually come to pass” in a “proleptic” (rather than “social”) realism that anchors the author’s critical assessment within a delineated apprehension of our current social reality; on the other, it “presents a metaphorical vision of our current moment” that disengages our perceptions from the equally metaphorical surface “realism” that reinforces our immersion in “things as they are” (online). This double helix of sf’s
“aesthetic machinery” offers an encounter with history and politics that can carry us into a future that could be but is Not Yet. Breaking with the compliant pessimism of the current structure of feeling, and transcending the confines of capitalist, or indeed social, realism, Robinson recaptures what he sees as the potential of the “real feeling expressed” in dystopian writing (online). Such an affective stimulation takes on sociopolitical effectivity as it is freed from the limited perspective of the present. Thus, suffering and destruction, and hope, can open the way for radical new possibilities. Or, as he invokes the powerful capacity of sf figuration: “since nothing seems to work now, why not blow things up and start over? This would imply that dystopia is some kind of call for revolutionary change. There may be something to that” (online).

Robinson sums up this contemporary challenge in the subhead to his article: “The end of the world is over. Now the real work begins” (online). Therefore, the question of political responsibility and activism becomes central in this dystopian moment. Like Haraway, he grants that things may well be bad, and yet it is also the case that we humans “are responsible for making them get worse” and equally responsible for engaging in “[c]ollective political action … in order to make things better” (online). Unlike the position put forward in DANH, he embraces the collective. Indeed, he asserts that “personal virtue or renunciation” will not be sufficient and embraces unified action (online).

Consequently, Robinson identifies the general agenda within the hegemonic social system to expose the collective to the inquisition of an anti-utopian ideology and practice. In response, he argues for becoming anti-anti-utopian: as he states, “[i]t’s crucial to keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how they might get better” (online). This is the “irrealistic realism” (itself productively escapist) informed by a hopeful human desire for a fulfilled happiness that is denied within DANH’s paradoxical combination of social realism and
speculative ontology; but, I would argue, it is precisely the approach needed in these times. Despite fears, despite doubts, we humans need to act. We need to engage in a utopian practice that breaks through the assumed implacability of the present moment. As Robinson puts it: “we have to do this work no matter how we feel about it. So by force of will or the sheer default of emergency we make ourselves have utopian thoughts and ideas” (online). In this way, he succinctly captures the necessity of negating the prevailing dystopian structure of feeling: “This is the necessary next step following the dystopian moment, without which dystopia is stuck at a level of political quietism that can make it just another tool of control and of things-as-they-are” (online).

Thus, Robinson refuses the limits of the provincial present. He disavows the ideological formation reinforced by works such as *DANH*; and in his own creative and critical work he aims to tear down the containment field entrapping critics and citizens, readers and activists, within the “seemingly omnipresent reality principle” that informs “the fashionable pessimism, or simply cynicism” of our present era (online). Rather than the weak anti-utopian thought shaped by *DANH*’s social realism, with its wish that dystopian critique may “flourish,” Robinson exercises the utopian strong thought of not only opposing the present but boldly articulating better ways as they unfold in an ever-evolving historical reality. The de-alienating process of imagining, and working toward, a horizon of a “sustainable civilization” can be made possible by a regenerated dystopian encounter that is again militantly hopeful (online). As he puts it in his concluding lines: “if dystopia helps to scare us into working harder on that project, which maybe it does, then fine: dystopia” (online). As opposed to *DANH*’s immersion in an undercurrent of monstrosity, Robinson asserts that dystopian disturbance must be “always in the service to the main project, which is utopia” (online).
IV.

As I argue in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, “the dystopian genre has always worked with a contested continuum between utopian and anti-utopian positions: between texts that are emancipatory, militant, and ‘critical’ and those that are compensatory, resigned, and quite ‘anti-critical’” (Moylan, *Scraps* 188). As Wegner points out, the primary subject in play along this continuum is the potential for “politics itself – of agency and of a kickstarting of the engine of history in a moment when it seems to many to be terminally stalled” (Wegner, *Life* 119).

Whether encouraged by utopian energy or suppressed by anti-utopian authority, the *political* is the core element carried within a dystopian narrative as it enables either a militant optimism or a resigned pessimism. In this regard, all dystopias confront society’s terrible conditions; however, the direction that confrontation takes (as engagement/transformation or resignation/compensation) is the crucial factor that enables us not to prescribe a singular philosophical or political line but rather diagnostically to “locate the horizon of political contestation in any present” (Wegner, *Life* 120).

In this perspective, dystopia is not reducible to the empirical status of a natural object nor to an ontological affiliation with monstrosity or evil; nor is it a guaranteed platform for a utopian assertion. Rather, dystopia (as interpretive problematic and formal creation) can produce a sociopolitical evaluation and contestation with an enclosing and dominant system. It therefore offers an agential opportunity for a utopian process of denunciation and annunciation. However, the means by which this utopian impulse is given flesh in any dystopian narrative, even within the current “dystopian” cultural milieu, is a matter for creative and interpretive intervention in each contingent case. The refunctioning of the utopian project is never a matter of absolute declaration, wishful thought, or complicit abandon. What Wegner calls the “instability”
of the dystopian imbues it with an energy (however it emerges in a given situation) that can
(re)ignite the utopian flame (Wegner, *Life* 120). It is this creative and politically charged,
unstable, unfixable, ever present yet ever evolving, condition that ensures the enduring use value
of the dystopian, in form and in history. For today, and for the future.33

Annacotty, Ireland
1 October 2019

(11,661 words, including notes)
Notes.

3 This essay is the first part of a project addressing the current dystopian structure of feeling and the possibilities for a refunctioned utopianism. Part two is tentatively entitled “Apocalypse and Hope.”
5 Vandana Singh, “What is to be Done about Climate Change? Some Thoughts as a Writer,” Symposium on the Climate Crisis, Science Fiction Studies 45.3 (November 2018): 429-430.
12 I want to affirm that this essay was not written as a traditional book review but rather as a critique which considers DANH as a symptomatic cultural production imbricated within the current dystopian structure of feeling. Basing my method in critical theory and utopian hermeneutics, I offer this commentary (on the book, not the author) in the utopian spirit of conversation and debate. For an essay that captures this collegial spirit, see Naomi Jacobs, “Utopia and the Beloved Community,” Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming, Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, 223-245. For a useful review, see Patrick Parrinder, “Claeys’s Dystopia,” Science Fiction Studies 45.2 (July 2018): 357-361.
14 I employ the categories of utopian impulse and program as developed by Jameson: utopian impulse names humanity’s desire for a better world; whereas utopian program identifies the (however temporary) realization of that new way of being. See Fredric Jameson, Valences of the


17 See the lineage of non-authoritarian communism and cooperation from the pre-Constantine Christian Church to a range of modern formations, including utopian intentional communities.

18 I am grateful to Kathleen Eull for our conversations regarding the imbrication of such spiritual and political practices.


20 The body of work critiquing the category of totalitarianism is extensive: one useful intervention is Domenico Losordo, “Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism,” Historical Materialism 12.2 (2004): 25-55.

21 On “surface reading” and the alternative of “deep” (dialectical) reading, see Caroline Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically,” Criticism 55.2 (Spring 2013): 233-277; see also, Philip E. Wegner, Invoking Hope: Reading Theory and Utopia in Dark Times, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.


26 Contrary to DANH’s claim that political projections (especially collective radical transformations) occur less often in recent dystopias, I offer three examples: Octavia Butler, The Parable of the Sower (1993); China Miéville, The Iron Council (2004); and Omar El Akkad,
American War (2017). Each in its own way is a refunctioning of the nineteenth/twentieth century
dystopias of revolution and hope (however attenuated).
27 Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Durham and
London: Duke University Press, 2016. See also, Kate Rigby, Dancing with Disaster:
Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times (Under the Sign of Nature),
28 On postmodern “weak thought” (e.g., Gianni Vattimo) versus utopian “strong thought,” see
Tom Moylan, “Realizing Better Futures, Strong Thought for Hard Times,” Utopia Method
Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming, eds. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, Oxford and
29 In 2 Thessalonians 2: 6-7, katechon warns that humanity must not act in a hopeful manner as if
the Day of the Lord will happen tomorrow, since the Antichrist still looms: what is therefore
required is restraint imposed by religious authority to curb anticipatory enthusiasm, a call
extended in DANH to secular rule against radical progressive tendencies. See Carl Schmitt, The
Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum, Trans. G.L.
Ulmen, New York: Telos, 2003. Schmitt’s argument runs counter to Joachim of Fiore’s
apocalyptic theology which identifies a time of communal human freedom and love before the
Second Coming, thus establishing a line of hope-driven utopian thought that carries into the
work of Bloch, progressive political theology, and critical utopianism.
30 On “irrealistic realism,” see Kathleen Spencer, “‘The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low’: Toward a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction,” Science-Fiction Studies 10.1 (March 1983):
35-49.
31 Tom Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia, Boulder:
32 See Tom Moylan, “Denunciation/Annunciation: The Radical Methodology of Liberation
Utopian).
33 I am always grateful to my first readers; for this essay I am especially appreciative of
comments from Kathleen Eull, Katie Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, Antonis Balasopoulos,
Nathaniel Coleman, Laurence Davis, Joachim Fischer, Kieran Keohane, Ruth Levitas, Patricia