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Critical Dystopias and the Necessity of Melancholic Hope

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Abstract

What kind of stories are most effective for envisioning a hopeful future when alternatives to the status quo are sorely needed? Few would turn to dystopian fiction for this specific purpose. Despite their current resurgence across different media, dystopias are often suspected of undermining progressive action, due to their militant pessimism and their all-too frequent succumbing to despair. In this paper, I respond to this charge by focusing on a type of dystopia that productively negotiates the tension between hope and despair: critical dystopias. Originating as a genre in the 1980s, critical dystopias leave space for the cultivation of utopian desires – so long as the hope for a better future is tempered by the memory of past and present suffering. To flesh out the implications of this nuanced view, I embark on a reading of Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*, whose alternative history of emancipation from slavery epitomizes the power of critical utopias to stir the imagination. To put it metaphorically, critical dystopias contain bleak dreams of violence, but they differ from nightmares. Upon imaginatively visiting a critical dystopia, the reader is summoned to feel empowered, rather than deflated, by the dark visions enclosed in these stories.

Author Bio

Mathias Thaler is Senior Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Edinburgh. His main research interest is in contemporary political theory. Thaler's recent publications have appeared in the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Critical Review of Social and Political Philosophy*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *Political Studies*, *Political Theory*, *Polity* and *Review of Politics*. He is the author of *Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture and Terrorism* (Columbia UP, 2018), *Moralische Politik oder politische Moral? Eine Analyse aktueller Debatten zur internationalen Gerechtigkeit* (Campus, 2008), and co-editor (with Mihaela Mihai) of *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies* (Palgrave, 2014).

The task of the literary dystopia, then, is to warn us 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 a concept, whose hour has come.

Gregory Claeys (2017, p. 501)

1. Despair More!

In a recent article, Jill Lepore expressed serious reservations about the contemporary surge in dystopian narratives, from successful TV series (e.g. *Black Mirror*, 2011) to celebrated novels (e.g. El Akkad, 2017). In an era when the absurd has become normalized, when utter cruelty has seeped into the societal mainstream, what kind of stories are needed to conjure alternative futures? Certainly not dystopias, Lepore surmises:

> Dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance; it's become a fiction of submission, the fiction of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century, the fiction of fake news and infowars, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness. It cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn't ask anyone to bother to make one. It nurses grievances and indulges resentments; it doesn't call for courage; it finds that cowardice suffices. Its only admonition is: Despair more. (Lepore, 2017)

This worry, widely shared, albeit for different reasons (Bould, 2018; Jameson, 2016; Kunkel, 2008), speaks to a number of issues that have perplexed progressive minds for a long time: Does an excessive degree of pessimism hamper struggles for a different world order? What is involved in imagining a better future, if the current moment makes a sober reckoning with past and present failures imperative? How can we hold apart empowering "social dreaming" from escapist "wishful thinking"?

At the heart of all these questions lies a concern about narratives, and their relation to the real world, when political alternatives to the status quo are found wanting. While this question has been approached from various angles, both within the discipline of utopian studies (Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2014a; Sargisson, 2014) and within political theory (Geuss, 2015; McKean, 2016; Raekstad, 2016), the paper aims to bring the two approaches, which frequently operate in separate

spheres, into a dialogue. In steering attention to the internal complexity of dystopian fiction, I show that hope and despair are in fact much harder to disentangle than one would expect. Rather than conceiving of hope and despair as polar opposites, my key contention is that we have to investigate more carefully the various and shifting interfaces between them. A certain type of dystopia – what commentators such as Raffaella Baccolini, Gregory Claeys and Tom Moylan have called "critical dystopia" – can expose the intertwining of hope and despair, and its political relevance, in an exemplary fashion.

This is so because critical dystopias perform a dual function: when they portray the world through a litany of painful stories, critical dystopias simultaneously determine where danger looms in the present and gesture towards potential responses in the future. As a consequence, I will propose, via a close reading of a specific text, that critical dystopias pivot around a type of hope that remains sensitive to the catastrophic failures of the past, and alert to the immense perils of the present, without, however, foreclosing the prospect of a less oppressive, less violent and less unequal future.

Before proceeding with the substantive argument, two provisos are necessary. The first concerns the political status of storytelling. While the paper is indeed premised on the assumption that certain kinds of fiction are helpful in uncovering new avenues for oppositional agency, I do not subscribe to the overdrawn proposition that storytelling in isolation will have any positive effect on a social reality marred by suffering and violence. As the example examined in detail below – a highly original re-telling of enslavement and its aftermath – shows, the contingent impact of fiction needs to be appraised in the broader context of struggles for a less oppressive, less violent and less unequal future.

Amidst these struggles, storytelling may still play a valuable role, though: it can under auspicious circumstances, as Hannah Arendt (1998, para. 2189) and her many followers remind us (Disch, 1993; Lara, 2007, 2008; Stone-Mediatore, 2003), prompt critical thinking by making us see things

differently. On this view, narratives are instrumental in rendering the familiar extraordinary; they estrange us *for*, rather than *from*, the world, to invoke Svetlana Boym's memorable distinction (2005). But this disclosive effect does not entail any automatism – stories on their own will be incapable of triggering social change of any kind. (Mihai, 2016; Schiff, 2014) Hence, my argument in favour of certain kind of fiction simultaneously includes a plea to envisage the fight for a less oppressive, less violent and less unequal future in a holistic manner.

The second proviso relates to the perspectival character of utopianism and dystopianism. It is a truism to say that one person's utopia might be another's dystopia. (Sargent, 2005, p. 158). What looks full of promise to some, will instill deep-seated fear in others. Things get even more complicated once we begin to appreciate that a sharp division between utopias and dystopias is difficult to uphold, even in the most canonical of works: Thomas More's vision of a perfect society will likely appear despotic to many contemporary readers. Does that mean it would be futile to try to distinguish between more or less productive forms of dystopian fiction?

Not necessarily. The lesson to draw from the insight that utopias and dystopias cannot always be neatly separated is that their "definitions are thus relative to time, place, and social position as well as to expectations about values like liberty, equality, and order, more than to authorial intention." (Claeys, 2017, p. 281) Fictional utopias and dystopias represent, by default, local interventions into concrete debates, whose normative structure is both shaped by, and transformative of, societal values that change over time. As a consequence, each political moment calls not only for transversal alliances between various agents of social change – as per our first proviso – but also for specific depictions of worst-case scenarios that potentially serve as imaginative safeguards against real-world disasters.[1]

I will have more to say about the precise nature of these safeguards but note here that they are meant to engage the readers' imagination in a specific way: by opening up a window into a different world, they adjust the perspective from which reality is usually viewed. The aesthetical experience

of being exposed to, and drawn into, such an alternative universe can enable the readers to see their own lifeworld in a different light. Put otherwise, art works can "seductively sabotage entrenched exclusionary habits of thought" (Mihai, 2018, p. 2) insofar as they manage to entangle their audience in a conversation over the shared responsibility for the past, present and future. Of course, not all art works, and by implication not all dystopias, do this; but those that do are vital for our age, or so I shall argue.

The plan for the paper is as follows: The next section reconstructs the rise of critical dystopias and delineates why they offer a suitable framework for artistic representations in an age of post-truth. Section 3 contains a close reading of Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016). The book narrates the American story of liberation from slavery as a series of bitter disappointments and cruel betrayals. In the final section 4, I flesh out some of the wider implications that follow from the novel's problematization of notions of progress. The conclusion also maintains that the perspective of critical dystopias needs to be supplemented by a utopian outlook.

2. Utopia, Dystopia, Anti-Utopia

In order to grasp what is unique about critical dystopias, one needs to first obtain a clear sense of what dystopias are and what techniques they employ in terms of storytelling. Dystopias can be defined through a contrast with utopias.[2] In everyday language, we often speak of utopia as a vision for an ideal, or even perfect world – the proverbial "castle in the sky" that is very hard to build in reality. The word "utopia" contains a deliberate pun, for phonetically it can mean both no-place (*ou*-topia) and good place (*eu*-topia). (Abensour, 2008; Vieira, 2010) Thomas More, the originator of the literary genre of utopian writing, creatively exploited this dual meaning when he baptized the island that Raphael Hythloday visits *Utopia*. (More, 2002) While early utopias were normally set on far-away, isolated territories, from the 18th century onwards, utopias became increasingly temporalized (Koselleck, 2002), projecting the alternative worlds into the future and thereby

inaugurating the genre of science fiction as the literature of "cognitive estrangement". (Suvin, 1978, 1988) A central purpose of all utopias is to hold up a mirror to society, thus exercising a critical function through its detailed portrayal of "alternative ways of living" (Ricœur, 1986, p. 16).

If utopias present a geographically or temporally distant society in a distinctively positive light, then dystopias do something else: they describe a "non-existent society […] in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent, 1994, p. 9). Gregory Claeys (2010) traces the origins of dystopian writing back to two distinct periods, the first one in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the second one towards the end of the 19th century, when eugenics and socialism became predominant topics for authors such as Samuel Butler and William Morris. Each of these periods was characterized by massive social upheaval and technological transformation, which these writers tried to make sense of by imagining alternative worlds that were radically different from their background, yet recognizably derived from it.

Yet, the dystopian genre only came to full fruition when H. G. Wells, and later Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, started to pen their accounts of what the future of humanity might look like.[3] The two seminal contributions to the 20th century canon – Huxley's *Brave New World* (2010) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2003) – illustrate that dystopias often contain anti-utopian elements. The worlds conjured up by these writers do not only portray societies marred by extreme forms of oppression, they also entail comprehensive critiques of utopianism itself. Huxley's and Orwell's novels causally connect the rise of state surveillance to organized plans for improving human nature through visions of an ideal, or even perfect society. As such, their narratives are anti-utopian by design, denouncing positive visions of the future as dangerously seductive and detrimental to collective welfare: the flawless society imagined by utopians turns out to be a nightmare from

which no escape seems possible. Classical dystopias are, thus, suffused with pessimism regarding "technological modernity and psychological manipulation" (Claeys, 2017, p. 389).

Not all dystopias are anti-utopian, though. (Sargent, 1975, p. 138, 1994, p. 8) This becomes especially evident once we direct our attention to stories from the past 30 years. While the 20th century canon of dystopian fiction is well-known, recent developments within the genre have received less consideration. Tom Moylan's book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) filled this lacuna by scrutinizing in detail the "maps of hell" that science fiction authors sketched in the 1980s. Moylan's chief contention is that the latest wave of dystopian writing disavows the anti-utopian impulse:[4]

> From works such as Robinson's *Gold Coast* (1988) to Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and the series begun by Octavia Butler in *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), a discernible and critical dystopian movement emerged within contemporary science fiction and film that at its best reached toward Utopia not by delineation of fully detailed better places but by dropping in on decidedly worse places and tracking the moves of a dystopian citizen as she or he becomes aware of the social hell and – in one way or another, and not always successfully - contends with that diabolical place while moving toward a better alternative, which is often found in the recesses of memory or the margins of the dominant culture. (Moylan, 2000, p. 106)

Moylan's description captures the strategic combination of hope and despair in these narratives. Critical dystopias construct alternative worlds in which human beings are subjected to extreme hardship, but they characteristically leave space for the nurturing of hope. To better understand the motivation behind this meshing together of dystopian and utopian motifs, let us recall the political moment in which critical dystopias first materialized. (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003) The principal contributors to this sub-genre, from Marge Piercy to Octavia Butler, all wrote in the shadow of Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's reigns. In this context, the classical dystopian position, with its "militant pessimism" (Moylan, 2000, p. 157) and its complete negation of hope, would have appeared self-defeating: when the semi-official slogan of a hegemonic order bars the prospect of a different world – TINA, or: *There Is No Alternative* – dystopias, which frustrate the

yearning for a better future, are indeed at risk of degenerating into a "fiction of helplessness and hopelessness".

In order to eschew complicity with the neoliberal project, critical dystopias hence problematize naïve forms of hoping that come perilously close to wishful thinking. These narratives, in Moylan's words, mine the "dystopian tradition in order to bring utopian and dystopian tendencies to bear on their exposés of the present moment and their explorations of new forms of oppositional agency" (2000, pp. 198–199). This was as much true for the Reagan/Thatcher era as it is true for our times. The present moment is therefore ripe for a rediscovery of critical dystopias, which have largely escaped the purview of political theorists.

This claim needs to be defended against two objections. On the one hand, numerous commentators have suggested that, for our age, the classical canon of dystopian fiction continues to be the ideal guide. (Gopnik, 2017; McGrath & Deb, 2017; Seaton, Taylor, & Crook, 2017). These commentators assert that we should, in short, all be reading Orwell today, and the English writer's estate appears to have profited from this recommendation: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* topped the bestseller lists immediately after the current US President embraced the idea of "alternative facts". (Freytas-Tamura, 2017) But in the essay's introduction, we have also grasped that, on the other hand, not everybody agrees with this positive assessment of dystopias. Lepore's dismissive stance echoes a wide-spread worry about all things dystopian in times of crisis.

If my analysis is correct, then both the advocates and the critics of dystopian fiction are mistaken, for they fail to pay close attention to the genre's complexity. Here is why this matters, politically speaking. A politician like Donald Trump, whose policy script seems to be copied straight from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, cannot be effectively confronted by a writer like Orwell.[5] As Bonnie Honig has maintained in a number of illuminating articles (2017a, 2017b, 2017c), it is a symptom of misguided nostalgia to believe that the truth alone – one of Orwell's recurring anxieties – will suffice to successfully oppose a hegemonic order that possesses the power to "re-make reality".

This is why a concern with dystopian fiction's fatalism is justified: without the inclusion of a hopeful perspective, dystopian narratives may indeed engender a sense of fatalism, eroding the counterhegemonic force of social dreaming.

In moving beyond the dispute between advocates and critics of dystopianism, my proposal in the following is that, now more than ever, we rely on stories that weave together feelings of hope and despair in ways that cannot be captured through the neat opposition of optimism and pessimism.[6] As we shall discuss, the distinctive quality of critical dystopias lies in their potential to reveal reality in a specific manner: through a variety of estrangement devices, actual and fictional events are subtly blended with one another. The outcome of this peculiar narrative strategy is, counterintuitively, to throw a spanner in the works of post-truth politics. Precisely because the familiar can be discerned within the unfamiliar, critical dystopias are instrumental in forcefully asserting the difference between truth and fiction.[7]

3. Freedom Rides on the Underground Railroad

This section substantiates this thought by embarking on a reading of Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Even though my reasons for selecting this story will become evident in the following pages, I want to briefly explain why I turn to a historical novel to bring out the value of critical dystopias. *The Underground Railroad* is not set in a far-fetched future, as many other critical dystopias are, but in a painful and twisted past. Nevertheless, its re-telling of antebellum America holds powerful lessons for the contemporary world, especially through its peculiar representation of slavery's aftermath.[8] It should furthermore be remarked that amongst Whitehead's intellectual forebears is Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (2004), which is today – together with her other narratives of enslavement (2000, 2001) – considered one of the main catalysts of critical dystopianism. (Dubey, 2013; Miller, 1998; Zaki, 1990) It is not uncommon within the genre to set a story in the past, rather than the future. What is unique about critical dystopias is that they reject the anti-utopian impulse inherent in classical dystopias.[9]

The Underground Railroad tells the story of Cora, an enslaved girl, who escapes from a plantation in Georgia. Her escape leads through a number of Southern and Northern states, which are connected through a literal Underground Railroad. Whitehead re-imagines the abolitionist network of support as an actual system of railway lines, joining Southern and Northern states in subterranean locations. This secret transportation system is operated by freed slaves as well as whites, who wish to help dismantle the system of slavery.

As Cora moves from one stop to the next, her hopes of achieving freedom are repeatedly thwarted. Not only is Ridgeway, a notoriously ruthless "slave hunter", chasing her down with furious sadism, but each railway station – from Georgia to South, then North Carolina, leading to Tennessee and finally Indiana – offers a fleeting prospect of freedom, without actually attaining it. In South Carolina, which prides itself on having abolished slavery, Cora works in a "Museum of Natural Wonders" for white audiences, as a performer of various stages of enslavement, from the abduction in Africa to the everyday drudgery on the plantation. Through a friend, she soon learns of hospital treatments for escaped slaves, which she slowly begins to realize in fact involve sterilization measures targeted at freed slaves. In the name of charity, doctors undertake eugenic experiments on the black population, with the ultimate aim of eradicating it by making both men and women infertile.

Her next stop is North Carolina, which has outlawed slavery as well, but with a terrible consequence: all former slaves entering the territory are chased down and massacred by white supremacists ensconced in the state. Martin, an operator of a now-defunct Underground Railroad stop, and his wife Ethel, take Cora in, hiding her in their attic. Betrayed by their maid Fiona, the authorities soon discover that Martin and Ethel harbor an escapee. While they are stoned to death by an angry mob, Cora is kidnapped by Ridgeway and his adjutant book-keeper Homer, an ex-slave of only 10 years, who shows no mercy for the people he assists in catching. At some point during the trek back to the plantation, Ridgeway takes Cora out for dinner in a saloon, but when

they return to the wagon, Ridgeway and his accomplice are attacked by three black men, led by the freeborn Royal. Ridgeway's fate remains uncertain as Cora is liberated from his clutches.

The final destination in the narrative is Indiana, where Cora is staying on the farm of John Valentine. A community of free black people has established itself there, exploring opportunities for liberal education and the arts. The Valentine farm provides both a meeting place for abolitionists from around the country and a space for discussion about the struggle against slavery. But tensions remain palpable, particularly with regard to how newcomers are to be treated: should they be welcomed or sent away? During a heated argument between Mingo and Elijah Lander, two outspoken and influential proponents of each side of the argument, Ridgeway assaults many inhabitants of the farm.

After burning down the buildings, Ridgeway forces Cora to show him the entrance to the Indiana stop of the Underground Railroad. Once there, Cora manages to overpower the slave hunter, throwing her weight on him as they descend into the tunnel. While Ridgeway is fatally wounded from the fall, Cora moves the stationary handcar away from her tormentors. The book's final pages show us Cora finally reaching the North, where she begins to tell Ollie, a new companion, her story.

In my interpretive engagement with the novel, I shall focus on three overlapping motifs that explain how Whitehead's narrative weaves together hope and despair: (1) the method of defamiliarization, (2) the unravelling of the idea of progress and (3) the adaptation of the slave narrative. Regarding defamiliarization, from my summary it should be evident that *The Underground Railroad* is not exactly a realistic tale of slavery. But that does not mean the novel is pure fantasy. To grasp the tension between realistic and fantastical elements in the narrative, we need to first identify how and why Whitehead recasts the actual history of slavery and abolitionism. Apart from transforming the informal network of abolitionists into a subterranean transportation system, which by itself operates as a technological metaphor of progress toward freedom, there are at least

three respects in which *The Underground Railroad* paints an unusual picture of the past: concerning the geography, the chronology and the actors of slavery and abolitionism. (Dischinger, 2017, p. 89)

Cora's voyage, Whitehead clarifies in a radio interview, is based on a thought experiment with a Swiftian touch: "[W]hat if every state our hero went through – as he or she ran North – was a different state of American possibility? So Georgia has one sort of take on America and North Carolina – sort of like 'Gulliver's Travels.' The book is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state." (Gross, 2016) This thought experiment generates a warped geography of Southern and Northern states: both Carolinas, for example, have historically been slave states, but in the novel they have completely eliminated slavery – apparently in the absence of a Civil War – yet with varied upshots: one (South Carolina) is committed to the racial "betterment" of freed slaves through eugenic interventions, while the other (North Carolina) is terrorized by a White supremacist junta that plans to exterminate all black people on its territory.

Even more than the places Cora travels through, it is the chronology of slavery and abolitionism that perplexes the reader. The first thing we encounter when Cora enters South Carolina is the Griffin building, "one of the tallest buildings in the nation" (Whitehead, 2016, para. 19.05). But skyscrapers did not exist before the late 19th century. The building itself stands for the confidence that South Carolina exudes, priding itself on its enlightened, humane treatment of African-Americans. (Ward, 2017, p. 11) The sterilization measures and the mob violence depicted in the chapters on the Carolinas conjure separate episodes of African-American oppression that have in fact occurred only after the abolition of slavery: the first evokes the Tuskegee Syphilis Study between 1932 and 1972, when the medical establishment observed the spreading of the venereal disease in African-American patients who did not know they were not being given appropriate treatment. (Reverby, 2009) As Julian Lucas remarks (2016), the second episode is reminiscent of the so-called "redemption of the South" in the aftermath of emancipation: the violent assertion of

White supremacy during the 1870s, aiming to roll back the achievements of Reconstruction. (Foner, 2014, Chapter 12)

The anachronisms become more striking in the characters that Cora deals with. Consider the argument between Mingo and Elija Lander, which rehearses essential divisions within the anti-slavery movement. (Singer, 2016) While Mingo's cautious position resonates with Booker T. Washington's accommodationist gradualism, Lander is modelled on Frederick Douglass. His sensitive idealism shines through one of the most powerful speeches of the book, which takes place just moments before Lander/Douglass is shot by the book's nemesis, Ridgeway.

> We can't save everyone. But that doesn't mean we can't try. Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth. […] Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade. When you saw your mother sold off, your father beaten, your sister abused by some boss or master, did you ever think you would sit here today, without chains, without the yoke, among a new family? Everything you ever knew told you that freedom was a trick—yet here you are. Still we run, tracking by the good full moon to sanctuary. Valentine farm is a delusion. […] Yet here we are. And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are. (Whitehead, 2016, paras. 44.27-44.30)

The modification of the geography, the chronology and the actors of slavery and abolitionism reveals that Whitehead assembles pieces of the historical record into a new plot. Cora's escape contains many fantastical elements, but its background setting is astutely compiled from past events that are meant to be recognizable with relative ease. Why, then, does *The Underground Railroad* defamiliarize the past? Why not depict the horrors of slavery through a coherent narrative that remains faithful to actual events?

The answer to these questions is not simply authorial caprice, as some critics have averred (Müller, 2017), or the cynical appropriation of "wokeness", as others have suggested (Williams, 2016). Such interpretations fail to acknowledge the deeper purpose of estrangement. A more insightful reading would zoom in on the impact that an altered view on the geography, the chronology and the actors

of slavery has on the standard account of abolitionism. Matthew Dischinger apprehends this dynamic when he writes:

> By untethering its story from real history before revealing the stark impossibility of moving out of history, the novel demands that we reflect on our own desires to see the underground railroad take Cora to a new place – or even, as many reviews have discussed, to see the existence of the real underground railroad as evidence that we live in an ultimately progressive nation. The novel's movement in and out of states of possibility at once allows readers to place themselves in another world only to find it all too familiar. The novel puts forth these imagined landscapes, and, in so doing, refamiliarizes us with the histories of the present while simultaneously gesturing toward an alternative possibility. (Dischinger, 2017, pp. 95–96)

Cora's escape, full of violent set-backs and shocking detours, deliberately subverts the reader's desire for resolution and closure. Along the railway line, whose promise is to carry Cora (and the reader) away from misery and desolation, station after station rehearses a different chapter in the chronicles of American racism. Yet, hope finds a place in the *The Underground Railroad*, too. This transpires, on the one hand, in the formidable oratory of Lander/Douglass, who pleads for the unavoidable illusion of liberty animating the "American dream"; and it manifests itself, on the other hand, in the novel's open ending. Killing Ridgeway and fleeing through the railway system, discloses yet another possibility that remains to be actualized: that freedom can indeed be attained, if only through contingent actions that are, in some sense, beyond the intentional control of the oppressed.

Turning now to our second motif, the peculiar enmeshing of historical facts and fantasy explains how the novel perturbs ideas about progress. We can approach this issue by first interrogating why the label "speculative fiction" might apply to the novel. "Speculative fiction" is a concept originally developed by Margaret Atwood to highlight that the worlds conjured in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are derived from scenarios that are, while far-fetched, plausible from the present viewpoint, here and now.[10] Even though it estranges the reader from the status quo, speculative fiction hence remains committed, on a basic level, to the literary conventions of realism. Science

fiction, by contrast, is predicated on the idea of a complete rupture with the present, often with the help of technologies that radically transcend real-world capabilities.

The Underground Railroad narrates an alternative history of slavery and its afterlife that seems to adhere to the "Atwood principle" (Claeys, 2017, p. 287), thus conceived: none of its places, timelines or subjects are implausible, but they are meticulously reconfigured in such a way as to perturb ideas about progress that figure prominently in hegemonic accounts of the past. What makes Whitehead's narrative strategy so compelling is the formal composition of its individual elements (the way how the geography, the chronology and the actors of slavery are arranged), not the elements themselves.

This point is important for my argument. To elucidate it, let us look at the eponymous means of transportation. While it is certainly strange to consider how emancipation would have played out, had such a subterranean railroad actually been available to escapees, it does not require us to take a massive leap of the imagination: after all, metros exist all over the world today; we know how subways work, and simply have to project our experience into an unfamiliar context – that of antebellum America.

By contrast, consider how Octavia Butler's *Kindred* does require us to become imaginatively accustomed to a radically different means of transportation, which no reader has experience with: time travel. When Dana, the book's protagonist, moves back and forth between California in the 1970s and a pre-Civil War plantation, her voyage through time illustrates that the present cannot be neatly divorced from the past. Time travel serves as a "distancing mechanism as much as a vehicle of identification between the black subject shaped by the militant racial politics of the 1960s and the antebellum slave" (Dubey, 2013, p. 346).[11]

This comparison shows that, even though both *The Underground Railroad* and *Kindred* can be called critical dystopias, only the former complies with the "Atwood principle" and may thus be labelled speculative fiction.[12] The interplay between the recognizable and the unfamiliar is so crucial

because it affects the perception of emancipation's trajectory. When following Cora, the reader's understanding of the relationship between past, present and future is profoundly unsettled. This has the effect of overturning dominant notions of linear, uniform and inevitable progress.

To further illuminate this aspect, it is helpful to introduce Amy Allen's distinction between two kinds of progress. In her trenchant critique of the Frankfurt School's failure to address the ills of colonialism, one of Allen's objectives is to interrogate Critical Theory's lingering attachment to problematic notions of progress. The pervasive issue that Allen detects in the writings of contemporary luminaries of the Frankfurt School (especially Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth) is that they anchor the forward-looking conception of progress in a backward-looking account of "progress as a fact".

> The first conception is forward-looking, oriented toward the future. From this perspective, progress is a moral-political imperative, a normative goal that we are striving to achieve, a goal that can be captured under the idea of the good or at least of the more just society. The second conception is backward-looking, oriented toward the past. From this perspective, progress is a judgment about the developmental or learning process that has led up to "us," a judgment that views "our" conception of reason, "our" moral-political institutions, "our" social practices, "our" form of life as the result of a process of sociocultural development or historical learning. (A. Allen, 2016, p. 12)

This distinction can shed light on the ways in which *The Underground Railroad* complicates appeals to progress. While Cora's escape demonstrates that historical learning is nothing but a mirage, Whitehead never goes so far as to fully discard the "idea of the good or at least of the more just society". Even though the Valentine farm is ultimately destroyed, the memory of its surviving inhabitants can still give grounds for hope, however fragile and excruciating – a topic to which I shall return in the final section.

With regard to our third interpretive motif, to appreciate this dialectical interplay between estrangement and re-familiarization, it is worthwhile to juxtapose Whitehead's novel with the genre of "slave narratives" (cf. Fisch, 2007), of which Frederick Douglass's autobiographies (2009, 2014) are only the most famous examples. Maria Varsam has shown how critical-dystopian writing in the late 20th century transformed the first-person slave narrative, by shifting the focus from the

"education of perception", which figures prominently in the writings of Douglass and others, to the "interdependent relationship between past and present" (Varsam, 2003, pp. 212, 218). While the original slave narratives aimed at rendering visible the suffering and violence of slavery in order to renegotiate the boundaries of the democratic people (N. Bennett, 2016), dystopian novels that rework slave narratives activate a different register: their key target is the prevalent story of the past, which presumes a sharp rift between the suffering and violence caused by slavery and the present moment.

This change in perspective has ramifications for the reader's affective encounter with the novel: whereas witnessing Cora's getaway will most likely elicit feelings of empathy, her failure to reach a safe haven provides an agonizing memento of the unfinished business of emancipation. In other words, *The Underground Railroad* is as much about the violence inflicted on enslaved people as it undoes the hegemonic account of the origins and the consequences of that violence. Cora's voyage undermines the dominant view of how slavery has been overcome. Like other novels that retell the history of enslavement, Whitehead's book employs estrangement devices to sabotage notions of progress that too easily feed into the mythical image of the "American dream" as the epitome of freedom.

To sum up, in its use of the literary technique of defamiliarization, *The Underground Railroad* induces the reader to experience "cognitive estrangement": the moment the reader becomes aware of the story's fantastical composition, she will go back and forth between the well-established official history of enslavement and its aftermath, and Cora's tortuous trajectory, with its multiple set-backs and disappointments. The novel thus enables its audience to reflect on, and thereby problematize, deeply ingrained truths about the past that greatly matter for both the present and the future. This dialectical process is as much about the aesthetical experience of imagining a different world as it is about soberly reckoning with today's reality – which is why the conjuring of alternative possibilities need not entail any form of escapism. Once "the universal ideological conviction that

no alternative is possible" (Jameson, 2005, p. 232) is shattered, a space for critical interrogation reveals itself. *The Underground Railroad*'s open ending, admitting to both hope and despair, makes it clear that mapping and inhabiting that space is up to the book's audience.

4. Thinking Through Melancholic Hope

It should be obvious from the above that my interpretation of Whitehead's novel seeks to exemplarily gesture towards the unique power of critical dystopias. This motion must, however, be accompanied by an acknowledgment of the fact that *The Underground Railroad* does not by any means exhaust the range of issues that critical dystopias can illuminate. As my reference to the earlier works of Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler intimates, the genre is internally diverse: critical dystopias may take different forms and work towards different goals, spanning both speculative and science fiction. Nevertheless, a unifying feature among these narratives seems to be that, in their rejection of militant pessimism, they incorporate a form of hope that forestalls wishful thinking.

In the final section, I therefore want to return to the concern identified at the essay's beginning: What narratives are needed when political alternatives to the status quo are lacking? My concluding argument is that, despite worries about dystopia's relentless negativity, we should embrace dystopian narratives underwritten by a conception of hope that works through, rather than obfuscates, the catastrophic failures of the past.[13] This is, in essence, a hope interlaced with despair, a peculiar kind of disconsolate optimism.

We can discover traces for such a hope in Cora's shifting horizon of expectation when she finds temporary refuge in the "civilized" state of South Carolina, where she hears a word whose meaning she cannot grasp:

> "They're only there for a short time," the white woman added. "We're optimistic."
> Cora didn't know what *optimistic* meant. She asked the other girls that night if they were familiar with the word. None of them had heard it before. She decided that it meant *trying*.
> (Whitehead, 2016, para. 21.10)

This passage shows that optimism is a worldview reserved for white people. Or, to put it more precisely, the white woman's optimism is facilitated through, and conditioned by, Cora's obliviousness to an optimistic outlook. The subjection to enslavement and its intergenerational repercussions block Cora's access to the white woman's worldview. As a consequence, (white) optimism and (black) pessimism are bound up with one another. This picture reverberates with the thought that the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2013, p. 6) generates a permanent state of "social death", which cannot be overcome through practices of emancipation. (Patterson, 1982) The idea that the continuous experience of social death renders any form of optimism frivolous plays a central, if contested, role in the current debate around Afropessimism. (cf. Gordon, Menzel, Shulman, & Syedullah, 2018; Sexton, 2016; Wilderson, 2010)

Despite his ostensible aversion to scholarly categorizations (McCarthy, 2016), Whitehead does appear to riff on Afropessimist tropes, most notably in his portrayal of Cora's escape as curtailed and circuitous, and of Lander/Douglass's insistence that the scars of slavery "will never fade". Yet, my positioning of the novel within the genre of critical dystopia underlines that *The Underground Railroad* renounces militant pessimism as well as unwarranted optimism. I have already delineated how the novel exercises this double function: its primary ambition is to dispel the optimistic aura of the "American dream", by experimenting with conflicting historical possibilities in parallel and by foregrounding the nightmarish permanence of slavery's aftermath. In so doing, it reminds us that narratives of teleologically assured progress – "backward-looking progress", in Allen's terminology – inevitably occlude the plight of the subjugated.

But Whitehead's novel proffers more than a dreary compendium of nightmares. It envisions, secondly, the hope of those who struggle against oppression and violence as a necessarily melancholic one. The memory of past and present set-backs and detours thus circumscribes the manner in which a better future is imagined. Toward the end of the novel, Cora has been

inoculated against wishful thinking, through her experience of suffering, through her disappointment and through her disillusionment.[14]

This type of hope has recently been examined in great detail by Joseph Winters. In *Hope Draped in Black* (2016), Winters seeks to better understand why, in the context of US history, notions of progress have obstructed a truthful reckoning with the continuing legacy of enslavement. Optimism about the gradual, but steady overcoming of slavery represents a cornerstone within the American story of redemption. Through careful interpretations of a wide range of African-American authors – from W. E. B. Du Bois to Toni Morrison – Winters claims that melancholy about past and present suffering can build an effective bulwark against such a redemptive reading of emancipation.[15] The memory of slavery, kept alive through the "black literary and aesthetic tradition" (Winters, 2016, p. 16), thus puts a check on how the future is imagined.

Hope Draped in Black brings into a productive conversation these writers and two major proponents of the Critical Theory tradition, namely Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. What sets Winters's account apart from related explorations of Afropessimism is the claim that hope, of a particular kind, continues to play a vital role in the struggle against anti-Blackness:

> This melancholic hope, in opposition to triumphant, overconfident narratives, tropes, and images, suggests that a better, less pernicious world depends partly on our heightened capacity to remember, contemplate, and be unsettled by race-inflected violence and suffering. […] Instead of wishing for some past (or future) wholeness, melancholic hope exposes how this all-too-human desire for wholeness and unity obscures the breaks, cuts, and wounds of history and human existence. […] Instead of trying to recover a more complete and happy past, melancholic hope imagines a tension-filled interaction between the past and present. (Winters, 2016, pp. 16, 248)

Winters thus anchors the centrality of pessimism in historical experience, without, however, abandoning a "forward-looking" notion of progress as moral-political imperative. He wants us to think hope as being constantly tempered by a remembrance of loss and disappointment. The crux of this proposal is that such memory does not necessitate a sense of fatalism. A history that is sensitive to the catastrophic failures of the past teaches us only one thing, namely that the model of historical learning in itself, with its underlying conception of progress as linear, uniform and

inevitable, is deceptive and in need of repair. Importantly, this does not mean that taking progressive action is always impossible or that optimism must always collapse into wishful thinking. Rather, it serves as a necessary reminder that, unless we contend in earnest with the continuous links between the past and the present, our visions for a less oppressive, less violent and less unequal future will remain severely distorted.

This nuanced understanding of melancholic hope lends support to my interpretation of Whitehead's novel, and to the analysis of critical dystopianism more broadly. Through the construction of alternative worlds, critical dystopias adjust the angle from which reality is usually perceived and judged, while retaining a hopeful perspective for social dreaming. Storytelling attempts to build a safeguard against dystopias in the real world, by summoning the readers to see the world from standpoints that trouble dominant narratives about the past and present. Critical dystopias frame this cautionary pedagogy in a way that nurtures oppositional agency, delicately balancing despair with hope.

What is distinctive about *The Underground Railroad* is that it locates the origins of a real-life dystopia in the very notion of backward-looking progress that undergirds hegemonic understandings of the past: slavery's aftermath is thrown into sharp relief by the unusual depiction of emancipation's curtailed and circuitous trajectory. By reconfiguring both temporal and spatial reference points, the familiar, celebratory story of abolishing slavery is profoundly disturbed. Against the entrenched notion that history is, in the end, nothing but a series of learning processes that culminate in the present moment, Whitehead's text exposes the dangerousness of narratives that construe progress as a simple fact from which hope can be drawn. The novel's defamiliarizing strategy thus upends a redemptive reading of emancipation that erases (and thereby perpetuates) the devastating legacy of slavery.

If warning and educating are their central tasks, can critical dystopias also be enlisted for crafting positive visions of the future? This is, I believe, where the limits of dystopian fiction become

apparent. As *The Underground Railroad* demonstrates so vividly through Cora's voyage, hope and despair affect one other, maybe even enable one other. It is symptomatic, however, that the novel has less to say about the precise direction hopeful action can take. Although the Valentine farm prefigures a space for collective renewal, the argument about the community's future is typically cut short by yet another outburst of cruelty; neither do we know for sure where Cora will end up.

If we were to contemplate how the debate between Mingo/Washington and Lander/Douglass might unravel in another setting, we would be well-advised to steer attention to utopian fiction. Critical dystopias possess a mirror genre that can complement their cautionary pedagogy: critical utopias, such as the ones depicted in the works of Ursula K. Le Guin or Kim Stanley Robinson, conjure alternative worlds that are significantly better than the current one, "but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the Utopian genre" (Sargent, 1994, p. 9). Since this is not the place to further elaborate on the peculiar features of critical utopias, suffice it to merely note that the foregrounding of change and contestation within their imaginary societies renders them especially suitable for providing a counter-balance to critical dystopias. (Moylan, 2014b; Wegner, 2002, Chapter 4)

This essay has argued that the suspicion of literary dystopias as defeatist, or even nihilist, is ill-advised. Typified by Colson Whitehead's work, some examples of dystopian fiction sustain a hope that is constrained by the memory of violence and suffering, yet powerful in its aspiration to mobilize oppositional agency. Critical dystopias such as *The Underground Railroad* cannot give us all the answers that we need to ponder alternative futures; but through their weaving together of hope and despair, they have a revelatory potential that deserves our attention.

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6. Notes

[1] A critic might object to my discussion of critical dystopias that I merely stipulate their progressive credentials, without vindicating them through precise argumentation. Could *The Turner Diaries*, William Luther Pierce's (pseudonym: Andrew Macdonald) infamous story of future race wars (1978), not be described as a dystopian novel, whose main purpose is to warn the "white race" of its impending eradication? Given that one's conjuring of a "worst place" crucially depends on where one stands at the moment, I am certain that some people deem *The Turner Diaries* visionary and empowering – in fact, many white supremacists, from Timothy McVeigh to the German terror cell NSU, have explicitly referred to Pierce's book to justify their murderous plans. Due to this context-dependence, it seems impossible to provide a fully convincing rationale for my depiction of critical dystopias as progressive. Still, *The Turner Diaries*, and many other racist novels that mesmerize the radical right, cannot exemplify the kind of writing I have in mind here. This is so because the book severely restrains the reader's interpretive freedom: its apocalyptic millenarianism about white genocide leaves no space whatsoever for divergent opinions; its only goal is to incite violence and hatred. The novel I am analysing in the following pages, by comparison, avoids propaganda of this sort; it thrives on the reader's reflective engagement with ambiguity and uncertainty. On the rise of right-wing utopias and dystopias see: (I. Allen, 2018; Brodie, 1998; Fitting, 1991)

[2] A case can also be made for a "composite definition" of utopias and dystopias, which emphasizes the wide spectrum on which both utopian and dystopian visions exist. See: (Claeys, 2013)

[3] As a "utopian pessimist" (Kirsch, 2011), Wells is an especially interesting figure because he wrote both utopian – for example *A Modern Utopia* (Wells, 2016) – and dystopian – for example *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Wells, 1896/2014) – "scientific romances". Wells also played a crucial role in the dissemination of socialist ideas around the globe. (Bell, 2017; Parrinder & Partington, 2005; Partington, 2003; Planinc, 2017) It should be noted that Huxley, too, wrote a novel that clearly falls into the utopian genre: *Island* (1993)

[4] The leading scholar of utopian studies of the past 50 years, Lyman Tower Sargent, is usually credited for coining the term "critical dystopias". See: (Sargent, 1994, p. 9) Importantly, we can also think about the relationship between classical and critical dystopias in terms of a spectrum: from a complete negation of hope at one extreme to a more complex negotiation of pessimistic and optimistic themes at the other. Put differently, the distinction between classical and critical dystopias is one of degrees, rather than kinds. This implies, then, that the majority of fictional dystopias will be located somewhere between those extremes.

[5] For an artistic re-writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through Trump's tweets, see the work of Emma King: (Yalcinkaya, 2017)

[6] This thought resonates with the idea that Octavia Butler, and especially her novel *Parable of the Sower* (2000), might be one of the most appropriate dystopian author for our days. See: (Aguirre, 2017) Similar arguments have, furthermore, been proposed with regard to feminist dystopias. See: (Ditum, 2018)

[7] Here, I am not assuming a simple mechanism whereby the divide between truth and fiction is easily made visible under all circumstances. If, as per my two provisos from the introduction, dystopias are essentially local interventions into concrete debates, then their societal uptake will

necessarily depend on the readership's pre-existing knowledge and concrete expectations. As my interpretation of *The Underground Railroad* demonstrates, I propose reading the book as a political text aimed at subverting a specific understanding of slavery and its aftermath. Whether the novel will in fact be read in this way at any given moment in time is a question I do not attempt to answer, however. Rather, my argument is that, read in this way, *The Underground Railroad* performs exactly the kind of reflective, problematizing function I associate with critical dystopias. In other words, I am not making an empirical point about the actual impact of the book but offer an interpretation that plausibly illustrates my theoretical claim.

[8] *The Underground Railroad* won Whitehead domestic and international acclaim, with critics praising the book as "potent, almost hallucinatory" (Kakutani, 2016), admiring its attempt to "rip the veil" (B. Bennett, 2015) away from the White saviour syndrome. (Bond, 2016; See also: Lucas, 2016) Not only was it awarded both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Arthur C. Clark Award for science fiction, it was also chosen for Oprah's book club – roughly, the literary equivalent of winning the lottery. (Dean, 2016; McClurg, 2016) Whitehead's earlier works are equally inventive, ranging from the philosophical detective story of his debut novel *The Intuitionist* (2017) to the zombie apocalypse in *Zone One* (2012). Yet, *The Underground Railroad* seems to have touched a nerve that his writing before could not reach. Some of Whitehead's other books have already undergone a sustained reception in academic discourse. See for example: (Berlant, 2011, Chapter 2; Elam, 2007; Lavender, 2007; Liggins, 2006)

[9] Another author, who I could have introduced in this section, is Toni Morrison. Especially her novel *Beloved* (2013) deals with themes that Whitehead, too, negotiates with great care: memory, slavery and hope. On *Beloved*, see representatively: (Dubey, 1999; Raynaud, 2007; Rhodes, 1990)

[10] See: (Atwood, 2004, 2011). See also: (Howells, 2006).

[11] More specifically, time travel figures as the novel's *novum*, to invoke Darko Suvin's criterion for identifying science fiction. (1978, pp. 63–86)

[12] Note here that my attempt at classifying *The Underground Railroad* and *Kindred* does not entail any value judgment; I merely wish to underline the diversity of dystopian writing, covering both speculative and science fiction. I also acknowledge that the "Atwood principle" might not always be helpful for grappling with different types of dystopias. Despite Atwood's aversion to the genre, science fiction has been greatly invigorated by the recent rise of so-called Afro-futurist narratives – from Samuel R. Delaney's writings to *Black Panther*. See: (Bould, 2007; Delany, 1994, 2009; Eshun, 2003; Womack, 2013; Yaszek, 2006)

[13] For an excellent discussion of the centrality of a political conception of catastrophe to Critical Theory see: (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2013)

[14] Note here that *trying* is also pivotal to understanding Lander/Douglass, who defends his radicalism with the following words: "We can't save everyone. But that doesn't mean we can't try." (Whitehead, 2016, paras. 44.27-44.30).

[15] Importantly, Winters sides with Judith Butler, rather than Sigmund Freud, when he suggests that a "different kind of hope is opened up when we confront the intractability of loss or the ways various forms of unrecognized loss both shape and puncture our social worlds and relationships. For Butler, an alternative to violence and perpetual war involves developing forms of solidarity and community that affirm our shared vulnerability to injury, loss, and death, a shared quality that proponents of empire and war tend to disavow." (2016, p. 15) Freud's view of melancholia is shaped by his theory of mourning, whereby healthy mourning has a definite end, once the subject worked through its grief, while melancholia is pathological in its unconscious failure to process loss. (Freud, 2005)