Here and Now: Black Perspectives on Antiutopianism

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July 15, 2024

In response to the Society for Utopian Studies Call for Proposals 2024

Abstract

This paper responds to the theme of "elsewhere and elsewhen," which calls for reevaluating utopia as an ambiguous concept existing beyond the present. Drawing inspiration from Suvin and McManus's exploration of antiutopianism (2023) as a contemporary trend marked by passive resignation to the status quo, this paper argues that the prevailing notion of utopia as elsewhere and elsewhen neglects the rich tradition of Black Utopias. Specifically, I argue that contemporary black thinkers empirically demonstrate how utopia can be realized here and now. Janya Brown's *Black Utopias* (2021) is instrumental in showcasing the unique position of Black subjects, who have been historically denied full humanity yet are resilient in pursuing alternative paths to utopia through such avenues as music, art, and spirituality. Black Geography, which explores how anti-black racism shapes the conditions leading to premature death among Black individuals, reinforces this argument and highlights practical implications. By examining the works of Black geographic thinkers like Christina Sharpe (2016), Rashad Shabazz (2015), and Carolyn Finney (2014), this paper demonstrates how their utopian visions challenge the conventional elsewhere and elsewhen dichotomy, positing that utopia can be realized here and now. Through this exploration, this paper advocates reimagining an antiutopianism that embraces the multiplicity of utopian perspectives, particularly those emerging from marginalized communities, as a catalyst for transformative change.

Keywords: *utopian literature, black utopia, antiutopianism, elsewhere, social death, black geographies*

Here and Now: Black Perspectives on Antiutopianism

In only two years, over thirteen million people's deaths had to do with the COVID-19 pandemic (Rosengren, 2022).[1] The shock and awe that strained every aspect of life challenged many long-held traditional notions of society. People questioned what it means to be a society, what it means to live a satisfying life, and even what constitutes society itself. Although the term "new normal" originally applied to the 2008 recession, people have redefined it to describe how societies *adapted* to the Pandemic (Manuti et al., 2022). However, adapted might be the wrong word. Some argue that societies are becoming more inclined to passively *accept* modern atrocities as mere facts of life. In utopian terms, society is at risk of extinguishing the fire that fuels social dreaming. Recently, utopian scholars have asserted that modernity has revealed a new form of antiutopianism as a thing in itself, distinct from the conventional anti-utopia, which deserves serious attention (Suvin & McManus, 2023, p. 290).

This new vein of utopian work exemplifies what it means for utopia to be elsewhere and elsewhen. Although the utopian tradition has a deep connection to those concepts, this paper argues that these perspectives neglect the rich tradition of Black Utopia. To do this, first, I will review the historical development of antiutopianism. Then, I will introduce Janya Brown's characterization of Black Utopia as a subjective experience marked by dysselection. Finally, I will highlight Black Utopia in practice, implemented by Black geographic thinkers like Christina Sharpe (2016), Rashad Shabazz (2015), and Carolyn Finney (2014). Like Brown, I hope to have opened new questions around utopia, providing a useful provocation challenging the tradition of elsewhere and elsewhen.

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[1] This includes deaths due to the disease directly and due to the pandemic's impact on health systems.

Commented [DZ1]: I think, here, Naomi's Klein's insights from *Disaster Capitalism* might be instructive.

Commented [DZ2]: Good mapping out.

Antiutopianism

Utopia, Elsewhere, and Elsewhen

This section aims to clarify the relationship between the concepts of utopia and antiutopi-anism, particularly in terms of elsewhere and elsewhen. Generally, utopia is a vision that introduces alternative ways of being. This definition encompasses several things that scholars tend to focus on when writing about utopia. This includes the dreams and nightmares that drive people toward radical change (Sargent, 1994, p. 3, 2010, pp. 25–26). This also involves processes rather than goals (Jameson, 2005; Johns, 2010, p. 45). Utopianism is fundamentally motivational (Fernando et al., 2018)[2] and often involves imagining the impossible, whether mundane or extraordinary. Further, people often engage in utopian thinking in non-utopian terms. Take Malissa Lane's thesis in *Eco-Republic* (2012, p. 4):

> *In clinging to the comforts and familiarities of our current way of life and its fossil-fuel infrastructure, despite a mounting consensus of scientific studies documenting the damage which this is doing, are we trapping ourselves in Plato's cave? What would it mean for our conceptions of our cities and ourselves if we were to dare to leave the cave, facing the challenge of making our conveniences and competitions conform to the implacable demands of external reality?*
> *This book is an attempt to answer that question/*

Finally, another point that Lane ironically expressed most perfectly in non-utopian terms is the role of the individual. Modern utopias place a lot of emphasis on *the role of the individual*. That a single person can make a difference, regardless of its overall impact, their role matters (Lane, 2012, pp. 51–76) and change is *always* possible (Nicholson, 1998).

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[2] These authors did not explicitly argue that utopianism is motivation, but the nature of their work presupposes that it does. Their research question revolves around how utopias elicit processes of collective self-regulation, in which people act to change society.

Commented [DZ3]: And perhaps even, *aspirational.*

I'm thinking about Christina Shape's In the Wake, where she signifies anti blackness as that which creates contexts in which breathing, for black folx (in both the literal and figurative senses) is made difficult.

I bring her up because part of Shape's imagine and of an otherwise world, is one where removed (or at lease radically attenuated) are the strictures on and impediments to black breath.

Here, we can think about aspirational in a couple of different ways.

In a very broad sense, these are the basic tenets of utopianism. It is tentative and only detailed enough for the purposes of this paper, so please be wary of any omitted nuances. Two such nuances that are worthy of extra attention include *elsewhere* and *elsewhen*. Utopia as elsewhere and elsewhen denotes the idea that utopia can neither be *here* nor *now*. It is in equal parts a description and an assertion. Utopia, whatever it is, must always be *someplace* or *sometime* other than *here* and *now*.

Utopia has a long relationship with these concepts, so much so that the tension between elsewhere and elsewhen predates the term itself. Utopia begins with early human myths and classic faiths (Dutton, 2010; Sargent, 2010, pp. 30–39). These "utopias of escape" had both positive (food was plentiful) and negative (there was no fear) elements. In this way, utopia came from the grace of the gods or nature. The most influential of these early myths include the Golden Ages and Paradise. Ancient myths were as plentiful as the cultures that bore them. In this sense, utopia was *now*, but elsewhere.

Commented [DZ4]: Because this concepts anchor your paper, I think they need to be more thoroughly attended to.

Eutopia, Dystopia, and Anti-Utopia

As societies and cultures grew in line with political systems, a new kind of utopia emerged in which utopia materialized in the form of festivals and holidays. These "temporary utopias," like the ancient Roman's Saturnalia, show that fantasy and imagination can be profoundly influential (Sargent, 2010, p. 36). Now, utopia was *here*, but *elsewhen*.

Commented [DZ5]: Meaning?

Most scholars credit Plato's *Republic* as the first political utopia, but others argue that the Greek city-state Sparta had more influence (Sargent, 2010, p. 37). Sparta's reputation more closely resembled fiction than truth, but it inspired more concrete conceptions of a well-functioning society than Plato's philosopher kings. In either case, the strongest conception of a political utopia comes from Tomas More's *Utopia* (2014). More's *Utopia* represents the next shift wherein utopia

is now, but *elsewhere*. More combined the Greek terms "u-" and "-topos" to create "no-place," emphasizing the idea that utopia does not exist (Vieira, 2010, p. 171). However, at the very end of the book, the utopians asserted that instead of utopia, they ought to be called *eutopia*[3] (meaning "good place") since they actually exist (2010, p. 178). Thus, utopia broke into two parts in perpetual tension: eutopia and utopia, the good place and the no-place.

It is important to note that More's context revolved around medieval England, a period renowned for numerous atrocities and injustices. With Europe's Renaissance, utopias took on new life as people flocked to the "New World." In large part, utopian visions became synonymous with imagined geographies and almost identical to an adventurer's voyage (Claeys & Pohl, 2010)In the Enlightenment period, technological advances gave way to imaginative fury—good and bad—that exploded into a utopian taxonomy beyond the scope of this paper. The point is that fears and anxieties about the future gave birth to two other sorts of utopia: dystopia and anti-utopia. In this sense, utopia is the intersection of elsewhere and elsewhere; every vision of the future is irrevocably elsewhere and elsewhere since it can never be *here* nor *now*.

Although this paper focuses on anti-utopia, dystopias help give a full, contextualized picture of what constitutes anti-utopia, especially in light of its historical relationship. The typical dystopia might be George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2008) or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), but I would propose instead that Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* (2008) is more representative. In this story, most people live under the ruthless nation of Panem that functions off exploiting satellite states (called districts). The protagonist refuses to abide by the status quo and becomes a symbol of resistance, eventually overthrowing the draconian regime in a violent revolution. Even the latest installment in the series, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Collins, 2020)

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[3] Pronounced the same as utopia.

Commented [DZ6]: Of what sort?

Commented [DZ7]: Perhaps make the link between this sentence and the previous one a bit tighter.

Commented [DZ8]: Elsewhen?

Commented [DZ9]: Slow down a bit here. Before shifting to examples, offer up a definition (however short). That way, your examples have something on which to grip.

follows how one person refines the system that the protagonist in *The Hunger Games* comes to resist. The point here is that dystopias point out how *individuals can make a difference* – for better or worse. All else equal, things can always be better, but they can also be much worse. The point is what *individuals do*.

> **Commented [DZ10]:** This is not entirely clear. Can you say more?

The anti-utopia sought to warn utopians against going too far in their condemning of the status quo (Fitting, 2010). The anti-utopian archetype might be Mary Wollstonecraft's *Franken-stein* (1993). Although interpretations generally point to condemning scientists for manipulating natural phenomena by bringing the dead back to life (or bringing the never-should-have-been-alive to life), a utopian reading suggests a more Icarus lesson.[4] Through a utopian lens, there are many relevant elements. Victor Frankenstein aimed to discover the secrets of life and death, create species, and renew life through sciences (1993, Chapter 4). These are utopian visions. Ultimately, he created the Monster, and with immense regret, he died far away and alone from the rest of society (1993, Chapter 24). Whether or not Frankenstein is categorically a utopian text, the point is that it helps illustrate the characteristic elements of anti-utopia: the road to hell is paved with good intentions.[5] In this way, dystopia concedes a need to change but warns against blinded optimism, while anti-utopia, vehemently defends the status quo (Fitting, 2010, p. 19).

Antiutopianism

Following modern atrocities from genocide to financial collapse, from the fear of terrorism to worldwide pandemics, there seems to be a unique sense of disillusionment. People seem resigned, more than ever. For decades people have dismissed utopians as idealists. Some of the most succinct criticism comes from Kwame Antwi-Boasiako, who likened utopias to myth;

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[4] The story of Icarus is a Greek myth that follows the death of a son who failed to heed his father's warnings. Although it is tricky to pinpoint who is to blame, the point is that Icarus's hubris led to his death.

[5] This is an idiom meaning that wrongdoing are often justified with good intentions; that good intentions, when acted upon, may have unintended, bad consequences.

"Utopianism, therefore, is a myth, which can only be inspirational but not pragmatically achievable because of its intangible proposed theories" (2014, p. 34). Other arguments take political and ontological positions, claiming that any attempt at utopia inevitably leads to totalitarianism (Davis, 1983) or is incompatible with human nature (Hillam, 1980).[6] In academic circles, many scholars assume that idealism died with the onset of World War II and the German concentration camps. While recognizing the importance of social dreaming, there is still a tendency to dismiss it for the sake of "realism" (Booth, 1991; Reus-Smit & Snidal, 2009).[7] The upshot has been a general decline in the social value of utopian thinking, culminating in passive resignation to accept the world as it is rather than attempt to change it. This is what Patricia McManus and Darko Suvin (2023) have termed Antiutopianism (without the "-"). Although Suvin initially introduced this argument in *Disputing the Deluge* (2021), in the *Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies* (2023) Suvin and McManus called for collaboration (Sargent, 2010, p. 291). So, this paper is, in part, a response to their call.

According to Suvin, Antiutopianism originates with the prevailing capitalist system, which fuels a view of modern history as an endless atrocity (2023, p. 294). As art is a reflection of life, narratives accordingly begin to reflect this view, and the result is an inability to imagine an alternative system (2023, p. 296). Because capitalism depends on a certain amount of consent (or at least perceived free will), the system depends on submission. To ensure its perpetuation, the system favors those things that alter one's perception to submit in the face of undesirable alternatives. So, the fewer alternatives one sees, the more likely people are to submit. The upshot is what we see today after generations of submission and centuries of capitalism's refinement of manipulated

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[6] Hillam themselves did not make this argument. Rather, they addressed this argument. I only mention it here because it is a position I have heard in colloquial terms that Hillam breaks down and addresses directly.
[7] Reus-Smit & Snidal do not make this claim, but their paper highlights the attitude they share with the scholarly community toward utopianism (which they call idealism).

Commented [DZ11]: Good

Commented [DZ12]: Of what sort?

worldviews. To illustrate the preponderance of antiutopianism, Suvin points to *coronization* which entailed the weaponization of COVID-19 to stifle the utopian flame. If utopianism offers unapologetic scrutiny of existing systems (Brincat, 581, p. 34), then utopianism is public enemy #1 to the capitalist. COVID-19 was then the perfect vehicle to disillusion a wide range of utopians for a long time.

> **Commented [DZ13]:** Good. But we are we talking about a certain species of utopianism?

Following Suvin's Antiutopianism, McManus and Lazar Atanasković, pointed to the television show *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011). The show follows noble families, resembling medieval Europe) fighting for world control. Their tactics include war, deceit, and all the drama one would expect from a drama series revolving around warring kingdoms. What makes the show unique, for McManus's argument, is that the world that the noble families are fighting in is neither dystopian nor anti-utopian. Even dystopia espouses the power of the individual, but the show makes it clear that no *individual* matters. No matter the way, the conflict (and all the horror) will continue indefinitely. Dystopia, while it warns against an attempt at utopia, offers more of a cautionary tale – almost like the idiom: "Be careful what you ask for." What the *Game of Thrones* seems to suggest, however, is that there is no alternative; that this is not only the way things are but the only way things can be. As McManus explained, *Game of Thrones* is "A fiction that has no use for utopia at all, one in which there is no object of parody or satire but only of relentless, serious, pragmatic insistence that this is the way things are…one that acts as though it has vanquished utopia itself" (McManus, 2023, p. 328). Lazar went into even more detail and hypothesized that the targeted audience for the show consists of those[8] who play the biggest role in maintaining the status quo (Atanasković, 2023, p. 340).

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[8] Verbatim: "The aimed-at audience of [the Game of Thrones TV Series] is the class fraction of white-collar corporate employees in countries of the richer world and to some degree in the poorer periphery, which is most necessary for the reproduction of contemporary stakeholder capitalism."

While I do not disagree with Suvin, McManus, or Lazar on the particularities regarding the apparent moves against utopianism, there are some points that I think deserve attention. Utopia is ultimately about questioning what *is* and pointing out what *could be*. Eutopia helps people cope: things are bad, but they will get better. Dystopia has helped emphasize the role of the individual in initiating change. An anti-utopia has often cautioned against being an Icarus. According to McManus and Suvin, antiutopianism argues that utopia is pointless – a kind of mass-scale version of what psychologists would call *learned helplessness* (Grison & Gazzaniga, 2019, p. 564). What remains is whether this view of utopianism represents a unique and emerging perspective that reflects what people believe about utopia.

Black Utopia

The Origins of Black Utopia

Black Utopias have a marginalized position in the field, particularly because they refer to the United States' African-American denizens, otherwise known as Black folk, Black Subject, or the Black Diaspora.[9] Historically, the first Black utopia came from Sulton Griggs in 1899 which depicts the fictional biographies of two Black leaders during the United States's Jim Crow era (Griggs, 1899; Roemer, 2010, p. 134). Some have argued that W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and "The Comet" are other early forms of Black Utopia (1994). Either way, Black Utopias did not really take form until the end of America's reconstruction. Still, if utopia is supposed to represent a vision for a radically different future, then Frantz Fanon makes it clear that the Black community has done this vehemently (1963).[10] Given that the Black subject has a systemically different experience of the world than other subjects, Black Utopias accordingly address

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[9] Technically, the Black diaspora refers to *all* African-American subjects who were impacted by the North Atlantic slave trade.

[10] The entire book serves as a scathing indictment of the white man's treatment of Black folk (particularly in Africa).

Commented [DZ14]: Yes!

Commented [DZ15]: The eutopia part of this section is under-theorized.

Commented [DZ16]: I would insert some statement of transition to better establish the connective tissue between this and the last section.

In other word, qualify your shift to a discussion on Black Utopias.

Commented [DZ17]: This is perhaps to inspire some musing: You note that black utopias did not nor really take form until the end of America's reconstruction. Perhaps this is the case as it was articulated through text.

But I wonder if there is sometime that can be said about the actions of individuals that evidence their acting on a belief or toward the possibility of enacting a "new world." In other words, while black folx may not have been writing about utopias in a way that is legible as such, their actions (and, here, I am thinking about fugitively, marronage, and other modes of refusal) signaled a concern with bringing into being a world that was more than and beyond the once they presently inhabited.

We can chat more about this if you'd like.

Commented [DZ18]: You might want to say more

Commented [DZ19]: In what sense?

different questions. As Alex Zamalin put it, what distinguished Black utopians from their white counterparts was racism. He explained, "As ideologies and instruments for developing global capitalism and modern political states, race and white supremacy have been central to modernity" (2019, p. 11).

Dyselection and Social Death

Less technically, what the Black subject represents is someone who has not been conditioned to the status quo (or at least was conditioned differently). Imagine an elementary school full of second graders who fit in well enough to avoid trouble. Then, imagine a new kid who has yet to understand the unique social norms that the instructor implemented. Drawing from my own experiences as a volunteer at a local elementary school, how would someone expect to react if their peers yelled at them, "No volcanos,"[11] "Tiger haaaaaands,"[12] or ran to a bin and started rummaging through for candy.[13] With a fresh perspective, the new student can see things that no one else sees as odd and point them out as potentially unjust. According to Janya Brown, this perspective characterizes the entirety of the Black subject life and they call it "epistemic and ontological mobility" (Brown, 2021, p. 7).

This parallels the argument that Sylvia Wynters view of *dysselection* (2003). The idea is that nature *selects* those for evolution, but society has implemented *dysselection* wherein those who are unfit *by society's standards* are sterilized, killed, or otherwise removed. It is a description of racism that emphasizes the way it impacts every aspect of a person's being – historically, biologically, spiritually, and so on. In the way Brown phrased it, it is the exclusion of the category "human" (Brown, 2021, p. 125). This goes even further, however, as Black subjects are not only

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[11] Which means no talking out of turn.
[12] Which means to avoid fidgeting and keep your hands in view. Drawing out a is a necessary part. Without the drawing out the phrase has no meaning.
[13] This is an incentive called a "Treasure box" wherein students who do well get a small prize.

Commented [DZ20]: Such as?

Commented [DZ21]: What sets the conditions for this "epistemic and ontological mobility"?

ignored, but they are frequently hunted down, victimized, and subjected to numerous injustices. Many historical accounts are erased, modified, or entirely forgotten (McKittrick, 2006; Nieves, 2007). This kind of neglect and erasure is what some have termed figurative or social death (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20).

Commented [DZ22]: How does this relate to the notion of a black utopia? Make the connections clear.

Social Death

This is all to say that Black subjects have a remarkable view of society and have the potential to reveal remarkable insights into utopian thought. History, though, has shown a repeated exclusion of Black subjects from the political process (Zamalin, 2019, p. 11). The Black nationalist Martin Delany expressed this attitude explicitly in his book (2020, p. 41).

> *These provisions then do not include the colored people of the United States; since there is no power left in them, whereby they may protect us as their own citizens. Our descent, by the laws of the country, stamps us with inferiority—upon us has this law worked corruption of blood.*

This means that Black subjects long ago experienced the kind of insistent resistance that antiutopianism and colonization entail. Yet, as Brown makes clear, Black aesthetics and philosophy from mystics, musicians, and writers demonstrate a spatial/temporal kind of utopia *here and now* (Brown, 2021, p. 8). To demonstrate this, Brown delves into the lives and worldviews of Sojourner Truth (itinerant preacher), Alice Coltrane (musician), Lauren Olamina (a fictional character[14]), Sun Ra (performer), among others. Along the way, Brown showed how they each challenge traditional notions of society,[15] question what it means to live a satisfying life,[16] probe the

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[14] Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of Sower* (1993) and *Parable of Talents* (1998).

[15] A major theme of the book is on exploring how people outside the European tradition envision utopia (Brown, 2021, p. 10).

[16] Brown does this in Chapter 2, "Lovely Sky Boat: Alice Coltrane and the Metaphysics of Sound." Coltrane lived in the mid-1900s and used music to connect spiritually with the universe, exploring self-awareness and autonomy (60). Coltrane created a new sense of radicalism and social experimentation (71), establishing intentional communities and producing musical albums that were both lyrical and provocative. While not explicitly political, Coltrane adopted Eastern ideas that represent a break from the Western episteme's hold over Black ideas and spiritualism;

division between friendship and sexuality,[17] and redefine what it means to be a biological being.[18] For example, Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* follows a non-biologically based civilization that comes to Earth following humanity's extinction. They try to understand out what a "human" is using the remnants of Western society, particularly its stories and myths. In the process, they try to "become" human by forcing their civilization to undergo risky biological transformations. The result was a caste system in which the protagonist lives. Generations later, biological transformations become unstable, and the protagonist makes the point that being human doesn't "work" anymore. As Brown asked, the question, "Is it about the end, and therefore we need to preserve the human? Or is it the beginning, and we need to embrace change?" (Brown, 2021, p. 133). This is particularly relevant in the age of artificial intelligence, cloning, and genetic alterations.

Taking Black Utopias as a whole, this tradition challenges both Suvin and McManus's antiutopianism *and* the conventional concept of utopia as elsewhere or elsewhen. Although Black Utopia does not imply that antiutopianism does not exist, it shows that antiutopianism may not be as prominent or as powerful as initially thought. Further, Black Utopias shows that antiutopianism

> **Commented [DZ23]:** I would articulate *how* black utopias does this.

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highlighting a new perspective that Black consciousness can move beyond a history of slavery and European indoctrination (72). Part of her process, however, involved bloody "austerities" which introduced exercises of devotional endurance involving pain, torture and suffering (73).

[17] Brown does this in Chapter 1, "Along the Psychic Highway: Black Woman Mystics and Utopia of Ecstatic" focusing on the itinerant preacher and musician, Sojourner Truth in the mid-1800s. By popular accounts, Truth created spaces where freedom and power could comfort the Black (and especially female) experience (24). According to Brown, this begins with Black radicalism (27) that involved an amalgamation of abandoning the senses (including one's sexual identity) and embracing God (27, 31, 40). With this approach, Truth introduced a unique worldview to 19th century communities in the United States' south during a period of pronounced tension. Wherever Truth rested, the question remained where was the line between fellowship, sexuality, and physical touch (37).

[18] Brown does this in Chapter 4, "Speculative Life: Utopia Without the Human." This theory-heavy section plays with the idea of "new genres of the human" and asks what to means to be "completely outside" all the assumptions of what it means to be human" (111-112). This involves embracing biological plasticity by accepting the unknowable, the unexpected activity of biological life (115). Traditionally, people see humans as the most evolved form of biological life – unintentionally prioritizing qualities like cognitive and physical ability. So, by being critical of what it means to be a *biological* entity, we also elevate what it means to be human (113). In the end, she concludes a dilemma: humanity needs to come to grips with whether it wants to preserve conventional notions of what it means to be human, or embrace the change that will inevitably arise as humanity evolves into a new way of existing (133).

is not the inevitable result of coronization since Black subjects, who have been subject to coronization for decades, keep the utopian flame as bright as ever. If, as Lazar hypothesizes, antiutopianism encompasses the attitudes of those necessary to maintain the status quo, then that might be a profoundly small population. After all, it is well known that the Western world represents only a small, unusual proportion of people (Henrich et al., 2010) – and those necessary to maintain the status quo are even a smaller subset. Still, seeing Brown's point of utopia being *here* and *now* is difficult. The purpose of the next section is to highlight Black geographic thinkers whose works showcase Black utopia in the *here* and *now*. Drawing on the insights of Black utopias in the face of modern atrocities can teach us how to breathe new life into the fire of social dreaming.

Commented [DZ24]: I love this!

Black Geography[19]

Black geography is an upcoming field in academia. In a phrase, it studies the spatial relationship between Black life, oppression, and radical imagination (Hawthorne, 2019). In practice, black geographics encompass the real and imagined geographic conditions of Black subjects (McKittrick, 2006, p. x). The chief focus of this field is on how anti-Black racism creates a systematic vulnerability for Black folk's premature death. To this end, Black geographies highlight the intersection of race, space, and power. With utopianism, Black geographies can reveal alternative spatial realities.

Commented [DZ25]: You might signpost a bit more, making clear the relationship between this literature and the concepts at the center of this work (antiutopianisn, dystopianism, etc.).

In the Wake

Christina Sharpe (2016) used the analogy of a *ship* and its *wake* to describe the enduring legacy of American chattel slavery. Sharpe asserted that the United States' slavery emancipation is incomplete (12). The *wake*, Sharpe explained, is a "…conceptual frame of and for living

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[19] The vast majority of this section comes from a paper I wrote for a graduate seminar, POSC280 Political Theory with Dr. Desiree Melonas in Fall 2023 "Black Geography and Eutopia."

blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery" (10). In this way, the *wake* is about premature death –literal and figurative. Literal in the form of anti-Black violence (9, 73-83) and figurative in the form of systemic injustice (16-18. 83-97). To combat the *wake*, Sharpe championed *wake work* as a kind of analytic style. This style not only proposes but also implements novel ways to reconcile the *wake*. She explained wake work "…to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imagined lives. With that analysis, we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery" (original emphasis; 20). For Sharpe, this meant emancipatory practices like Black annotation/redaction which seeks to restore the validity of Black experiences (81-85), aspiration which seeks to inspire Black thought (79), and counternarratives which seeks to restore Black voices (48). Ultimately, this means theorizing and living in a way that *considers* the Black diaspora and validates their experiences. It means fostering a kind of society that does not erase Black experiences and publicly acknowledging Du Bois' color-line and veil (Du Bois, 1994).[20] In a sentence, it means having a public life that reconciles America's experiences with slavery. Beyond the United States, this means recognizing the Western World's role in exploiting various cultures and peoples. This is utopian as here and now in that *wake work* begins when individuals decide to listen to Black experiences.

Spacializing Blackness

Rashad Shabazz's (2015) thesis is that Chicago's history of policing, surveillance, and architecture of confinement produced racialized and gendered consequences for Black folk (1). The

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[20] In a phrase, the color-line and the veil are descriptors for the distance between Black and White subjects during the United State's reconstruction era. The veil is the difference in worldviews that makes interactions between the races so contentious while the color-line is the geographically demarcated boundary between Black/White-dominated areas. There is are many more details and facets to these concepts than I can describe here, but the point is that these concepts encompass various racialized aspects of daily life in the United States.

argument begins with Chicago's policing of interracial sex and other forms of carceral domination led to high-rise housing projects. Although the projects were explicitly intended to alleviate Black suffering, they were constructed with the spirit of carceral power. The final products included draconian security measures and devoid of comfort that the overall impact was negligible. Some Blacks even felt that life around the high-rise structures "prepared them" for life in prison (2015, Chapter 3). As Shabazz recounted, the late imprisoned thinker and activist George Jackson's position:

> *For Jackson, carceral power took the symbiotic forms of captivity he saw expressed between home and prison. It was the 'minimum-security prison' Blacks lived in and the ubiquity of the presence of security within Black geographies. Racialized practices expressed via geography became normalized, rationalized, and even (for some segments of the society) desirable" (71).*

Under this context, Black youths developed a unique sense of gendered identity and geographic belonging. In trying to sort out this new identity, carceral power further radicalized group dynamics, creating a context that perpetuated violence. In this way, according to Shabazz, the historical relationship between Black identity and the environment, race, space, and power is carceral. If the environment (high-rises with intense security features) created a generation of Black men primed for prison life, then it makes sense that the incarcerated felt "…the only difference between [prison] and the streets is that one is maximum security while the other is minimum security" (69).

Shabazz ultimately recommended agricultural spaces as a form of positive change that fosters a landscape of liberation. He explained that newly formed agricultural spaces are part of the reason that modern segregation in Chicago's South Side is breaking up (115). He insisted that green spaces allow a community's *residents* to take control and transform their lives. Shabazz's account showed that the relationship between Black identity and green space is emancipatory such that the formerly incarcerated are empowered to change the system. In this way, individuals can

take an active role in their environment. Shabazz explained, "It shows that poor and working-class people can be architects and planners, that they can augment their geographies in ways that produce healthy people and vital, vibrant communities…on their own terms" (118). This is utopian as here and now in that *emancipation* begins when individuals take charge of their communities.

Black Faces, White Spaces

To the same ends, Carolyn Finney offers a unique perspective on the geographic relationship with Black identity and the role of green spaces in shaping Black communities' way of being. This works helps highlight the difficulty of navigating and reclaiming spaces in a society marked by racial inequalities. *Black Faces, White Spaces* (2014) focused on the Black community's relationship with nature. Finney started her inquiry by pointing out that ecological and environmental protection activities tend to be tailored to a white audience (xi). In exploring the historical development of the United States' relationship with nature, Finney realized a contradiction. On the one hand, society has likened Black people to nature. For example, the pejorative connection to apes (38-39). On the other hand, there have been numerous attempts to deliberately excluded Black people from engaging with nature (81-86). In some sense, Black people have a deep, intimate history with nature that spans many facets, including refuge[21] and the episteme (57). In another sense, Black people have an intense fear of nature, brought on by Jim Crow-era lynchings (59). In this way, Finney concluded that the historical relationship between Black identity and the environment is traumatic, infecting the collective memory of Blacks across the United States.

Like Shabazz, Finney saw green spaces as fundamentally emancipatory. Throughout her book, she explained that nature has both trauma and regeneration. Trauma, which currently affects Black memory, includes slavery, violence, eugenics, media exclusion, and absented presence.

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[21] Refuge includes the safety that runaway slaves experienced when running from their masters.

Regeneration includes refuge and reclamation. In this way, Finney expected that altering the Black community's relationship with nature can offer a kind of collective regeneration; that coming to terms with the legacies of slavery begins with changing the way we understand nature. She explained, "There is something about our collective experiences…and the relationship between those differences that offers a chance to recognize and embrace our common humanity…" (134). This is utopian as here and now in that *environmental regeneration* begins when communities confront their collective memories.

Conclusion

Despite the traditional conception of utopia as elsewhere and elsewhen, this paper argued that this view neglects the rich tradition of Black Utopia. To do this, I reviewed the historical development of antiutopianism. Then, I introduced Janya Brown's characterization of Black utopia as a subjective experience marked by dysselection – reconceptualizing utopia as *here* and *now*. Finally, I highlighted Black Utopia in practice, implemented by Black geographic thinkers like Sharpe, Shabazz, and Finney. Although Suvin and McManus have identified Antiutopianism to explain the fact that people seem resigned, more than ever, to dismiss utopians as idealists and scoff at social dreaming, there are some points that I think deserve attention. Utopia is ultimately about questioning what *is* and pointing out what *could be*. Eutopia helps people cope; dystopia emphasizes the role that individuals play in initiating change; and anti-utopia cautions against unrestrained imagination. This new vein of antiutopianism, however, suggests that utopia is pointless, since no matter what things never change. Black utopia shows that antiutopianism may not be the inevitable result of coronization since black subjects, who have been subject to coronization for decades, keep a healthy, lively collection of utopian thought. If the argument is that society is at risk of extinguishing the fire that fuels social dreaming, then Black utopia can show how to breathe

new life into the utopian flame. Ultimately, this points to the necessity of reconceptualizing an-
tiutopia to incorporate, not only a prevailing attitude by those who play the biggest role in main-
taining the status quo, but also neglecting (or even stifling) the perspective of those on the periph-
ery. While this paper has not sought to argue against Suvin and McManus's conception of antiuto-
pianism, I have contributed to an ever-growing field that continues to challenge what it means to
be a society. I may not have answered many questions, but like Brown, I hope to have opened new
questions around utopia, providing a useful provocation challenging the tradition of elsewhere and
elsewhen.

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