

“Hope isn’t stupid”: The Appropriation of Dystopia

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I have borrowed my title from a volume by Sean Austin Grattan (2017) on utopian affect in contemporary American literature. He borrowed it, in turn, from Ursula K. Le Guin’s ideas put forth in her short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1975). In the story, Le Guin, trying to convince her readers about the possibility of utopia and yet the difficulty of portraying it, states that “we have a bad habit [...] of considering happiness as something rather stupid,” whereas only “pain is intellectual, only evil interesting” (1975: 254; cf. also Grattan 2017: 24). Likewise, hope has been perceived as problematic, and – as Darren Webb also claims in his contribution to this issue – has been depoliticized and domesticated as well. But Ernst Bloch would still remind us that “hope is the opposite of security” (1988: 16). The recognition of the precarity of hope is what may still help us today to renovate the discourse on utopia. And I think that dystopia may still help to renovate it despite the many attacks against it.

The realization that utopia had been commodified and domesticated brought some of us to work primarily on dystopia.¹ As others have already noted (see, for

¹ See, in particular, Baccolini (1992, 1995, 1996, 2000), Moylan (2000), and Baccolini and Moylan (2003) on the critical dystopia; see also Moylan and Baccolini (2007) on the commodification of utopia and its use value.

example, Levitas 2007), the concept of utopia has been applied too generously even within the field of utopian studies, where, for example, cruises have been represented as instances of utopian desire. That is one of the reasons we started working on dystopia and how dystopia can maintain a utopian impulse, thus renovating utopian thinking.

However, we are witnessing today an appropriation and a commodification of dystopia as well. Dystopian fiction has become trendy and mainstream, especially after the success of Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and the rediscovery of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985, also thanks to the huge success of its TV adaptation). Another example of this co-optation is the proliferation of dystopian and post-apocalyptic TV series (cf., for example, the success of *Black Mirror* and many others). And, as I will try to show, dystopia is being commercialized even in the fashion industry.

I would like to discuss briefly a couple of examples of such appropriation that show us the danger when we let go of dystopia and commercialize hope. My examples relate to the world of Young Adult dystopian fiction and the issue of women's human and reproductive rights in dystopia.

My first example is represented by the widely successful *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth (2011-2013). Set in a post-apocalyptic dystopian Chicago, the society described in the trilogy defines its citizens by their belonging to five different factions according to their social and personality types: Amity, Abnegation, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite. The result is a controlling society where young people are forced to conform and abandon any chance of independent will. However, I do not intend to discuss the novel's problematic development – and, particularly, its Christian overtones – but focus instead on the marketing strategies for which, I am well aware, the author cannot be faulted. The first volume of the trilogy, *Divergent* (2011) is accompanied by 70-some pages of promotional material (1-72). The bonus section includes a Q&A with the author (5-12), inspirational quotes (13-15), Roth's *Divergent* playlist (16-17), writing tips (18-19), as well as some discussion questions (20-23). It also includes the different factions' Manifestos (35-48), along with Roth's explanation on how she chose the names for her factions (27-29), and her reflections on utopian

worlds (24-26). As it could be expected, it also contains a “sneak peek” of the second book of the trilogy, *Insurgent* (49-72). But it also displays a puzzling “Faction quiz” made up of seven questions whose answers determine to which faction the reader belongs (30-34). The readers are therefore asked to identify with the very exclusionary logic that is the foundation of the state’s faction system that Roth’s novel is supposed to criticize. However, as said, I do not think that Roth may necessarily be responsible for all of such material. And yet, in the third instalment of the trilogy, *Allegiant* (2013), in the final acknowledgements, the author dedicates a “Special Thanks” section to some of her fans, who participated in fifty blogs that “helped spread their love for the DIVERGENT series [...] in a faction-based online campaign” (531). They are divided, once again, into the five factions of the book, identifying for each group one or more faction leaders. Roth’s surprising acknowledgements question the premise on which the novel is built, and I was left to wonder what have these participants actually understood of the faction system.

My second example comes from the hype surrounding the rediscovery and consumption of Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*. While Donald Trump’s election and the attacks on women’s reproductive rights have given new life to Atwood’s 1985 novel, its TV adaptation has certainly been most instrumental to its revival and popularization. Again, I do not intend to discuss its controversial adaptation (while the first season has been generally praised, the second has been criticized for its reveling in excessive violence so much so that the show has been dubbed as being “torture porn”; cf. Sturges 2018, and Mahdawy 2019), but I want to focus instead on a couple of instances of trivialization of Atwood’s critical dystopia.² At the beginning of June 2019, Kylie Jenner, an American media personality, influencer and socialite of the Jenner-Kardashian business family, organized and hosted a *Handmaid’s Tale*-themed party for one of her friends.³ Guests were

² Another instance of dystopia commodification has recently taken place at the presentation of Margaret Atwood’s much expected sequel to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Testaments*. During an interview with Atwood at the Mantua Literature Festival on 5 September 2019, members of the attending public were given the white bonnets to wear (cf. Figure 2; De Santis 2019).

³ According to the internet she is one of the most followed people with over 129 million followers on Instagram and the world’s youngest billionaire.

greeted with conventional Gilead sayings (“Praise be, Ladies. Welcome to Gilead”) and were invited to wear the handmaids’ traditional red gowns and white bonnets, while sipping “Praise be vodka” and “Under his eyes tequila” cocktails (Mahdawy 2019).⁴ The event was obviously shared on social media (cf. figure 1). Although it prompted a backlash, it went viral and, I’m sure, has to be considered successful in terms of the publicity it afforded Kylie Jenner (Wright 2019).



Figure 1 – The *Handmaid's Tale*-themed party, from one of Kylie Jenner's Instagram profiles (@kyliesnapchat 2019a)

⁴ Short videos of the party can be viewed on Kylie Jenner's *Instagram* profile (cf. @kyliesnapchat 2019b).



Figure 2 – White bonnets given to members of the audience at the Mantua Literature Festival (*La Repubblica* 6/09/2019)

In a different and yet equally problematic way, my third example comes from the world of fashion industry and how it has appropriated, once again, Atwood's imaginary. In 2017, a young, independent NY label called Vaquera has shown a collection sponsored by Hulu and inspired by its hit TV series. Although the designers claimed that the collection – which was not available for sale – was conceived to “reflect themes of oppression and empowerment,” they also stated that the collection played with the notions of being “sexy,” showing and concealing one's body, as if that were a choice in the world of Gilead (Safronova 2017).

Although these last two examples are different, I still find them problematic and representative of today's climate of dystopia appropriation. Like the now withdrawn Halloween “Sexy Handmaid” costume, these examples represent a form of appropriation, where something transgressive and radical is taken, tamed, co-opted, neutralized, and commodified. Kylie Jenner's trivialization of the *Handmaid's Tale* is pretty obvious, as she and her guests transformed the anguished cry about the violent subjugation of women of the novel and series into an out-of-context co-optation of dystopia's critical message. As Jennifer Wright wrote, “once you start portraying dystopia as cute or sexy, you're opening the door to a world where repressing women's reproductive rights is *fine*; appealing, even. [...] The notion of Kylie treating a dystopia as someplace she might casually

visit, party in, and then emerge from unscathed is jarring” (2019). And I think that it is precisely Kylie Jenner’s privilege that allowed her to transform the dystopia’s warning about the potential outcomes of reproductive restrictions into a fun and glamorous experience.

The Vaquera Collective’s appropriation is slightly different and yet still problematic. Though it was welcomed by the show’s costume designer as “a way for people to bring attention to a symbol of oppression and to reclaim it as well, making it less potent” (Safronova 2017), their reinterpretation gave rise to a new trend called “modest fashion” that was picked up by other designers (Gowans-Eglinton 2017). Unlike Jenner, Vaquera appropriated the rebelliousness of the *Handmaid’s Tale* and still capitalized on it by making a name for themselves and commercializing with others the modest fashion.

The taming of dystopia destroys the recognition of precarity and vulnerability, which are constituents of the genre, by reassuring its audience and by moving these features into security zones of middle- and high-class conformism and consumerism. We have commercial, mainstream dystopias with a tendency to close the stories with “happy” endings, where hope is not maintained ambiguously but is substituted by a conformist happiness: Catniss’s traditional marriage at the end of Collins’s *Hunger Games* or the unexpected “happy” ending of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, after 300-some pages of total misery. Both novels, in fact, end on the uncanny image of the traditional, nuclear family: the image of Catniss and Peeta’s children innocently playing in the Meadow and that of the boy finally in the hands of a “normal” family (Collins 2010: 454-55; McCarthy 2006: 301-07).

But dystopias can and do more than this. There are still dystopias that invite readers to mobilize against the present and the risks of its possible outcomes. I want to end my notes with such an example that shows how dystopia can maintain hope out of precarity: Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks* (2018).

Although the future imagined by Leni Zumas in this novel is not as extreme as Atwood’s, it nevertheless shares the violation of reproductive rights with other feminist dystopias. At the heart of the novel are the stories of four women, whose

lives intertwine in dealing with an imagined America that is not so distant from today's situation: abortion is illegal, in vitro fertilization is banned, embryos have full rights, and a law prohibiting adoption for unmarried individuals is about to be passed. It is Ro, one of the four women, that explains the situation:

Two years ago, the United States Congress ratified the Personhood Amendment, which gives the constitutional right to life, liberty, and property to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception. Abortion is now illegal in all fifty states. Abortion providers can be charged with second-degree murder, abortion seekers with conspiracy to commit murder. In vitro fertilization, too, is federally banned, because the amendment outlaws the transfer of embryos from laboratory to uterus. (The embryos can't give their consent to be moved.) (Zumas 2018: 32-33)

As if this were not enough, a "Pink Wall" divides the US border from Canada to prevent women to get an abortion there, where Canadian women's rights are still guaranteed. As Zumas herself claims in an interview, all the restrictions she imagined are based on real proposals by American politicians such as Republicans Mike Pence and Paul Ryan, proposals that, under the Trump-Pence administration, no longer seem to be extreme, but are actually real threats (Sugiuchi 2018).⁵

In addition to Ro's – a high school teacher desperately trying to have a child on her own while writing the biography of Eivør Mínervudottír, a fictitious nineteenth-century polar explorer – the other narrative voices belong to Susan, a wife/mother trapped in an unhappy marriage; Mattie, one of Ro's best students who finds herself pregnant and seeks an abortion; and Gin, a healer whose arrest and trial for her activities contribute to bringing all the women together. The voices and lives of the four women intertwine and create the story of a community, where women who rebel against the impositions dictated by society are strengthened

⁵ As Zumas states: "Pence is one of the politicians who helped me imagine our current hell. As governor of Indiana he sought to discipline and punish the bodies of women and LGBTQ people. In 2005 and 2007 he co-sponsored federal legislation that would recognize human zygotes as legal persons, thereby outlawing not only abortion but certain fertility treatments and all non-barrier forms of contraception. In 2016 Pence signed a bill (later blocked by a federal judge) that would require women who have miscarriages or abortions to pay for the fetus's funeral. Another radical conservative who gave me ideas for *Red Clocks* is Paul Ryan, a longtime proponent of so-called personhood amendments. He cosponsored the 2013 Sanctity of Human Life Act, which would grant full legal rights to a fertilized human egg" (Sugiuchi 2018).

through alliances and solidarity. Through the story of the bonds between women who can be as supportive as they are competitive, the novel shows the conflicting but valid feelings that every woman who desires or experiences pregnancy and motherhood may have. In particular, every woman is faced with difficult and complicated choices, intrinsically linked to a self-determination that in the novel is threatened not only by laws, but also by personal dilemmas and biases that the women have about themselves and that they imagine the community also has about them – in short, by expectations about what a woman should be or want. The novel thus manages to maintain the complexity of the different positions of the four female characters, without judging the choice of completing a pregnancy, ending it, or adopting a child. Zumas does not choose – with what would be the possibility of adoption – the easiest and most consolatory way of a private accommodation between Ro's yearning for motherhood and Mattie's desire not to become a mother. Instead, the novel's open ending allows each of her characters to deepen their contradictions and to desire more than one thing, so as to "see what it is. And to see what is possible" (Zumas 2018: 384) – thus, opening up the space of hope.

Against the conformist happy ending of commercial dystopia, I insist that an ambiguous open ending is what allows us to retain the important precarity of hope that may continue to renovate the discourse on utopia.

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