

RECOVERING HOPE IN DARKNESS: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES

*Recuperando a esperança em meio à escuridão: o papel do gênero em
narrativas distópicas*

Raffaella BACCOLINI

Università di Bologna, Forlì Campus

raffaella.baccolini@unibo.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8380-7867>

ABSTRACT: My aim is to comment on dystopia based on an approach that has foregrounded, from its very beginning, issues of writing in their intersection with gender and the deconstruction of high and low culture. In the first part of the article, I carry out a reflection on the genre of dystopia, how it has changed, its constituent elements and their transformations, with a look in particular to its gender dimension, its formal and thematic features, as well as to its modes of articulating horizons of hope. In the second part, I discuss dystopian conventions and developments, drawing from Lyman Sargent's (1994, 2022), my own work and together with Tom Moylan (2003, 2020), Ildney Cavalcanti's (2000), Ruth Levitas's (2007) contributions. I understand that dystopia remains fundamentally a term for a distinct literary genre, with its particular history, its formal characteristics, but also its evolving form. In the third part of the article, I analyze Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, as an example of critical dystopias produced today. Finally, I conclude that in dark times, dystopian literature becomes even more important to us, providing both the tools and the necessary incentive that we need to critically interpret and transform our present.

KEYWORDS: (Critical) Dystopia; Gender; Gender blurring; Leni Zumas.

RESUMO: Meu objetivo é comentar a distopia a partir de uma abordagem que tem destacado, desde o início, questões de escrita em suas intersecções com questões de gênero e da desconstrução da alta e da baixa cultura. Na primeira parte do artigo, desenvolvo uma reflexão sobre o gênero da distopia, seus elementos constitutivos e suas transformações, com um olhar específico para sua dimensão de gênero, suas características formais e temáticas, bem como seus modos de articular horizontes de esperança. Na segunda parte, eu reflito sobre as convenções e desenvolvimentos da distopia, me apoiando nos estudos de Lyman Sargent (1994, 2022), em meu próprio trabalho e junto com Tom Moylan (2003,

2020), e os de Ildney Cavalcanti (2000), Ruth Levitas (2007). Entendo que a distopia permanece sendo um termo para um gênero literário distinto, com sua história particular, suas características formais, mas também sua forma evolutiva. Na terceira parte do artigo, analiso o romance de Leni Zumas, *As horas vermelhas*: para que servem as mulheres, como exemplo das distopias críticas produzidas hoje. Finalmente, concluo que, em tempos sombrios, a literatura distópica se torna ainda mais importante para nós, oferecendo tanto as ferramentas quanto o incentivo necessário para que interpretemos criticamente e transformemos nosso presente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Distopia (crítica); Gênero; Indefinição de gênero; Leni Zumas.

INTRODUCTION

As an Italian woman who did her graduate work in the United States, and who specialized in American “high” modernist poetry, my approach to utopian studies has been shaped by my cultural and biographical circumstances as well as by my geography.¹ It is therefore a hybrid approach that combines these geographical and historical circumstances with other issues like desire and interest. In particular, my interest in feminist theory and in writings by women has intersected with my belief that good literature is meant to disturb and unsettle readers. I believe that a feeling of being out of place, not at home in the world is a necessary condition of utopia and of the desire to contribute to the transformation of society. It is an approach that has foregrounded from the very beginning issues of genre writing as they intersect with gender and the deconstruction of high and low culture. Such an approach, however, has and must also come to terms with the political and cultural circumstances that have characterized the recent years.

I would like to start with a quotation by Virginia Woolf, even though she is not a figure traditionally associated with dystopia and science fiction. The quotation is Woolf’s by now famous statement that “On or about December 1910 human character changed. [...] All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature” (1924, p. 4-5). I chose to start with this quote, because we are witnessing, I believe, one of those moments in history, an “event,” that has ruptured the appearance of normality, causing a transformation in relationships, but also in literature and in dystopia, in particular, and therefore opens a space to rethink our assumptions.

Moments of crisis such as armed conflicts, political transitions, or even watershed events like the 9/11 attacks or the recent pandemic have always produced significant transformations in gender identities, roles, and relations: while so much has changed regarding the role of women in private and public life as well as in the social context, notions of masculinity that are a barrier to gender equality have been challenged too, but

1 A version of this article was delivered as a keynote address at the Minuto 2 Conference (4-5 December 2021). I would like to thank Ildney Cavalcanti, Elton Furlanetto, and the audience for the stimulating discussion. Being part of the conference gave me an opportunity to practice what it means to be “utopian” – a question that Elton Furlanetto asked me and Tom Moylan during the “Dialogos Fantastikos Symposium (Fantastica 451),” in 2020 (See BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2020). Being a student of utopia and dystopia means for me to try to become an agent of radical change, to be an activist within and outside the University, to teach and continue to learn and to engage with utopianism as a way of opposing privilege and discrimination and work collectively in intersectional solidarity.

this struggle often results in an effort to take back control of female roles, bodies, and sexualities. Considering, for example, a watershed event that has shaken the confidence of many, such as September 11, several studies have investigated the gendered nature of the psychological response to the attacks.

Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2008), for example, has described the post-9/11 age as an era of reconstituted traditional manhood, redomesticated femininity and "nuclear family togetherness" (p. 3). According to Faludi, the American media, entertainment, and advertising reacted to the event by blaming women's liberation – and the subsequent feminization of American men that left the nation vulnerable – as the real culprit of the attacks (p. 23). The myth of cowboy arrogance and feminine weakness, revived every time the nation felt vulnerable, was restored once again "through fables of female peril and the rescue of just one girl" aiming at displacing Americans' insecurity (p. 200). While American men were cast back in the role of heroes, the ideal post-9/11 American woman was instead "undemanding, uncompetitive, and dependent," recast as a mere victim deprived of agency (p. 131).

This conservative retreat to the mid-1950s culture has affected even the dystopian genre (cf. BACCOLINI, 2018). Consider, for example, Steven Spielberg's 2005 adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897) and John Hillcoat's 2009 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), two films where the gender narrative is "split along the lines of invincible manhood – and more specifically manly protectiveness and fatherhood – and jeopardized femininity." In so doing, such films propose a restoring of the traditional, nuclear family, and a critique of the emasculation brought about by feminism (BACCOLINI, 2018, p. 181).

What follows, then, is a reflection on the genre of dystopia, how it has changed, its constituent elements and their transformations, with a look in particular to its gender dimension. In my work, in fact, I have been studying dystopian literature in its formal and thematic features, while trying to look for other modes of articulating horizons of hope. Together with many others, I have come to believe that contemporary dystopian production, in its themes and in its formal aspects, is an example of an oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains hope and a utopian horizon *within* the pages of dystopia *in* these very dark times.

OF DEFINITIONS, GENRES, AND BOUNDARIES

Before I venture into the matter of definitions, it is necessary to say that they are intellectual constructs. They include and therefore also exclude, but as utopia's most prominent bibliographer, Lyman Tower Sargent, has reminded us, they "are rarely or ever useful at the extremes, and the boundaries established by definitions are both moveable and porous or permeable, but for certain purposes (e.g. bibliography) boundaries are necessary" (1994, p. 5). And so are definitions.

The notion of genre carries with it the binary opposition between original and derivative – hence superior and inferior – with an implied validation of the former over the latter. As feminist scholars we might want to question the very notion of genre, boundaries, and exclusionary politics, and to investigate instead the intersection of gender and generic fiction, and the ways in which gender enters into and is constructed by the form of the genre and, in turn, helps to create new texts.

Genres have specific rules, conventions, and expectations and, until recently, a writer's art was shown through their faithful observation of such norms. According to Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, genres are "essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (1981, p. 106). Thus, the history of literary genres, says Tom Moylan, "allows us to understand a given literary work not only as an individual text subject to immanent analysis but also as one which can be further understood historically in terms of the evolution of the particular form and of the societal events and contradictions of which it is a part" (2014, p. 30). But genres, Jameson continues, are also "clearly implicated in the literary history and formal production they were traditionally supposed to classify and neutrally describe" (p. 107).

Since Aristotle's *Poetics*, in fact, genre theory has been concerned with the delimitation of boundaries as well as the hierarchizing of genres. But as Celeste Schenck has pointed out in her essay on women's poetry and autobiography, what seems to be just a literary theory is actually "drenched in ideologies" (1988, p. 282). For Schenck, and rightly so, the ordering of genres has rested upon much more than aesthetics: "traditionally viewed as purely aesthetic markers, genres have been highly politicized (not only gendered but also class biased and racially biased) in the long history of Western literary criticism, a phenomenon that has had enormous implications for the banishment of women writers (and other marginalized groups) from the canon"

(p. 282). Genres – like definitions – are cultural constructs; implied in the notion of genre and boundaries lies a binary opposition between what is normal and what is deviant – a notion that feminist criticism has attempted to deconstruct since this difference relegates feminine practice to inferiority. Moreover, Western genre theory, Schenck continues, remains for the most part prescriptive and legislative, as its main preoccupation continues to be the establishment of limits, boundaries, and exclusion (p. 285).

Women writers, therefore, have necessarily had to resist and possibly revise the essentially masculine literary heritage with its notions of well-defined genres, while feminist critics have exposed different issues regarding women's writing, canon formation, and genre theory. In particular, feminist criticism has focused on the ways in which women were marginalized into non-canonical genres, on women's use of generic forms traditionally dominated by men, and women's use of genres of their own – although feminist theory has also questioned the very establishment of genre and its consequences. Feminist appropriations of generic texts, on the other hand, have become radical re-revisions of conservative genres (cf. BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 14-15).

While some contemporary women writers carry out a conscious re-vision and re-appropriation of generic texts from a feminist perspective, some others employed similar strategies well before Adrienne Rich's notion of re-vision became a conscious methodological approach. Anne Cranny-Francis, in fact, points out that the use of generic fiction as a form of political resistance has a long history (1990, p. 6). What these women share, whether consciously or not, is the manipulation of genre conventions and the rejection of high/low culture classification. Such an undertaking becomes an oppositional strategy, a site of resistance against the hegemonic ideology that, among other things, sees women and other marginalized groups linked with the notion of deviance and inferiority.

DYSTOPIA: CONVENTIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS

As far as dystopia is concerned, the intersection of gender and genre has been of paramount importance for the development of the genre. Themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity, have helped to challenge and denounce stereotypes and damaging notions about women and/or gendered identities. Interventions on the conventions of dystopia have also contributed to the transformation of the genre, what I initially called “open-ended” or “critical dystopias,” which has become a flourishing genre since the 1980s and in particular in recent years (BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 16).

In “The Three Faces of Utopia Revisited,” Sargent defines dystopia as “a nonexistent society described 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 the reader lived” (1994, p. 9). In Sargent’s definition, dystopia is then a textual form. By the middle of the twentieth century, dystopias became the dominant form of utopian literature.

In my own work and together with Tom Moylan, Ildney Cavalcanti, Ruth Levitas, Lucy Sargisson, and all the contributors to *Dark Horizons*, we have examined the emergence, particularly in the late-80s (though we found examples before and certainly after the 1980s) of what we have collectively called the “critical dystopia.”² We traced the origin of this formal development of the literary dystopia to the neoliberal principles of the 1980s, as a reaction both to the times and their values. While maintaining the familiar narrative structure of the dystopia, these novels offer a “capacity for *narrative* that creates the possibility for social critique and utopian anticipation in the dystopian text” (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 147; BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 6). The new critical dystopias describe a mostly dystopian, future society, but they also portray surviving and imperfect utopian enclaves within the larger dystopian world. By changing the traditional, tragic endings of classical dystopias, the critical dystopias maintain the utopian impulse at the level of form:

Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope within the story, utopian hope is maintained in dystopia only *outside* the story: it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning, that we as readers can hope to escape such a pessimistic future. This option is not granted to the protagonists of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Winston Smith, Julia, John the Savage, and Lenina are all crushed by the totalitarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them. (BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 18; BACCOLINI & MOYLAN, 2003, p. 7).

Conversely, the new critical dystopias allow readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open – and today I would add precarious – endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia “opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 7 and BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 18).

2 In “Three Faces,” Sargent asked if a “critical dystopia” was plausible. Cf. Sargent’s reconstruction of it in his *Rethinking Utopia*, 2022, p. 333.

Therefore, we argued that the critical dystopian form, both in its 1980s transformation and as a generic category that can still be applied today, offers both a criticism and a transformation of the present by exploring the struggles of small groups that act both individually and collectively. In so doing, these texts “refresh the links between imagination and utopia and utopia and awareness in decidedly pessimistic times” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 8). They preserve radical action, create a space in which opposition can be articulated and received, and allow us to continue to recover hope in darkness.

Thus, dystopia remains, for me, fundamentally a term for a distinct literary genre, with its particular history, its formal characteristics, but also its evolving form. In fact, if my understanding of dystopia has changed over the years, since the historical and material conditions and the use of dystopia have also changed, the fact that dystopia is a narrative, textual practice (where by “textual” I mean both a literary or filmic text, for example) has remained the same.

The ambiguous, open ending is the most distinctive feature of the new critical dystopias. By challenging the traditional expectation that dystopias must end tragically, these texts also open spaces of resistance and maintain the utopian impulse within the story. But opposition can be articulated and received also through some other formal features and strategies typical of the genre.

If it is commonly accepted that travelling is an essential element of the utopian experience, it is equally shared that it is absent in the dystopian genre: “classical dystopian novels open directly on the nightmarish society, with no need for time and/or space dislocation for the dystopian citizen” (BACCOLINI, 1993, p. 343). The “typical” utopian narrative is composed in fact by a description of the “good place” and a reflection on the problems of the author’s own society by means of a comparison between the original and the visited place. The dystopian text, on the other hand, usually begins directly in the terrible new world, and yet the element of textual estrangement and the critique of society soon become clear since, on the one hand, the narrative often revolves around a protagonist who questions the dystopian society and, on the other, because of dystopia’s narrative structure – a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance. (On the conventions of the dystopian genre, see BACCOLINI, 1992, 1993, 1995 e 2000). These two elements are essential in making the critical dystopian form a concrete tool of resistance and critique.

As we have observed in *Dark Horizons*, “since the text opens in *media res* within the nightmarish society,” cognitive and political estrangement are at first reduced by the immediacy and normality of the location. “No dream or trip is taken to get to this place of everyday life. [...] the protagonist (and the reader) is always already *in* the world

in question, unreflectively immersed in the society. However, a counter-narrative develops as the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 5), or in what Tom Moylan has called, in *Becoming Utopian*, a “break” or “gestalt shift” from their “‘well-adjusted’ subject[ivity] to the radically free, self-actualizing” utopian agency (MOYLAN, 2021, p. 7). “This structural strategy of narrative and counter-narrative most often plays out by way of the social, and anti-social, use of language. Throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text turns on the control of language. To be sure, the official, hegemonic order of most dystopias [...] rests, as Antonio Gramsci put it, on both coercion and consent” (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 5).

A central feature of dystopian novels is, in fact, the use of language as a tool to control and, therefore, manipulate truth and reality. The dystopian citizen is more or less prohibited from using language (both writing and reading are usually forbidden) and, when s/he does, it means nothing, words having been reduced to a propaganda tool. Apparently, the new society uses language, usually accompanied by the erasure of past and memory, in order to avoid all ambiguity and create the official, “true” version of history; but in fact, the dystopian regime greatly manipulates facts in order to create just another fiction of history. This new fiction is presented as the only one and, above all, as non-fictional – that is, the new narrative becomes the truth; it becomes the master narrative. The reappropriation of language remains one of the dystopian protagonists’ tools to understand and criticize their society and to unmask its fictions.³

Recovery of history and literacy, and individual and collective memory become instrumental tools of resistance for the protagonists of dystopias. Because authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased, individual recollection becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action. Taking control over the means of language, representation, and memory become crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial, individual consciousness to actions which may attempt to change society (cf., for example, BACCOLINI, 2003). As opposed to the plot of dislocation, education, and return of an informed visitor in utopia, dystopia produces its own account in the critical encounter that occurs when the protagonist confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society that is present from the very beginning.

3 On the intersection of language and dystopia, see also SISK, 1997; BACCOLINI, 1995; CAVALCANTI, 2000; e MILLWARD, 2007.

There are three other constituents of the dystopian genre that need to be addressed: genre blurring, the link between hope and precarity, and the feeling of discomfort. While genre blurring is part of my early work on the critical dystopia, the last two are more recent and are linked to my work on the commodification of dystopia (cf. BACCOLINI, 2020).

Genre blurring is another strategy that makes these novels sites of resistance and oppositional texts. By borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias more often blur the established boundaries of the dystopian form and thereby expand its creative potential for critical expression. Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions, fixity and singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge and recognizing the importance of differences, multiplicity and complexity, partial and situated knowledges, as well as hybridity and fluidity, the critical dystopias resist genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text which renovates dystopia by making it formally and politically oppositional (BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 18; BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p 7-8). Thus, for example, “Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* revises the conventions of the time travel story and creates a novel that is both science fiction and slave narrative, while her *Parable of the Sower* combines survivalist science fiction with the diary and the slave narrative. Similarly, Margaret Atwood employs the conventions of the diary and the epistolary novel to narrate the life of her protagonist.” Furthermore, her *Handmaid’s Tale* and her sequel, *The Testaments*, can be seen as literature of witness. “By fragmenting the narrative of the future society with the narrative of sixteenth-century Prague, [Piercy’s *He, She, and It*] creates a historical science fiction novel” (BACCOLINI, 2000, p. 18). It is the very notion of an impure genre, with permeable borders which allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of dystopia and makes it also multi-oppositional.

The last aspects that I want to concentrate on are precarious hope and discomfort. They are linked together, and I have always considered them necessary ingredients of dystopia. Darren Webb, among others, has noted the depoliticization and domestication of Bloch and his concept of hope:

Bloch is the touchstone for countless studies which point to and celebrate traces of utopian hope to be found in the fabric of everyday life. An ever-growing number of conference papers take as their focus a television programme, a pulp novel, a playground, a piece of music, fashion design, gaming, the performativity of a play, and use Bloch as a means of uncovering the traces of hope to be found there. But no project is suggested, no politics stems from these studies, no course of action is developed. Traces of hope are simply pointed to or pointed at (WEBB, 2020, D8).

The realization that utopia had been commodified and domesticated is certainly not new. As others have already noted, among whom Ruth Levitas (2007), the concept of utopia has been applied too generously even within the field of utopian studies, where, for example, the fulfilment of material yearnings has come to represent instances of utopian desire. What we are witnessing today, is the appropriation and commodification of dystopia as well. Dystopian fiction has become extremely popular and even 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 by HULU). Another example of this co-optation is the proliferation of dystopian and post-apocalyptic TV series. Even more problematic appropriations of dystopia are represented by the now withdrawn Halloween "Sexy Handmaid" costume or the various *Handmaid's Tale*-themed party and fashion.⁴ These examples represent a form of appropriation, where something transgressive and radical is "taken, tamed, co-opted, neutralized, and commodified" (BACCOLINI, 2020, D43). Repressing women's reproductive rights becomes a game, and dystopia becomes a place that readers can "casually visit, party in, and then emerge from" as untouched (WRIGHT, 2019). The cooptation of dystopia destroys the recognition of vulnerability and precarity, 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" (cf. BACCOLINI, 2020, D44).

Against the depoliticization of dystopia, of Bloch and of his notion of hope, I think it is necessary to remember that hope is, for Bloch, "the opposite of security" (BACCOLINI, 2020, D16). One thing that I have always found problematic in the commodification of utopia is the idea that the mere pursuit of happiness is necessary to reach utopia. I do believe instead that a feeling of being out of place, not at home in the world is a necessary condition of utopia. In my work on critical nostalgia, I spoke of a "slight suffering" as necessary (BACCOLINI, 2007, p. 162). Today I would revise my notion as one of discomfort. The presence of utopian hope, as I have said, does not need a consoling and comforting "happy ending." Rather, discomfort seems to be the precondition of hope. Discomfort and the precarity of hope are the conditions of the citizens and the readers of dystopia, as good literature must disturb and unsettle. And here I would agree with Sara Ahmed who, in *Living a Feminist Life*, invites us to "stay unhappy in this world" because "happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods"

4 For a treatment of dystopia commodification, discussing the appropriation of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Baccolini, 2020.

(2017, p. 254). The power to unsettle the readers and not to reassure them remains one of the key critical elements of dystopia, and of critical dystopias in particular. It is what allows protagonists and hopefully readers alike to “become utopian” – to hark back to Tom Moylan’s title.

CRITICAL DYSTOPIAS TODAY: LENI ZUMAS’S *RED CLOCKS*

In the last part of my article, I want to show that there is still a strong critical utopian output through today’s critical dystopias. Despite the emptiness of complicit commodification, there are still critical dystopias that continue the work of critique and transformation. But how have they changed?

Because utopian literature is always a product of the historical and material conditions in which writers live, there have been changes both at the level of form and themes. As far as themes are concerned, some stand out and have to do with the crises of our times, sometimes set in an alternative world almost coequal with the author’s present. The climate emergency, including the spread of viruses, make up a consistent number of recent dystopian texts by diverse authors such as Kim Stanley Robinson (*New York 2140*, 2017), Vandana Singh (*Entanglement*, 2017), Larissa Lai (*The Tiger Flu*, 2018), N.K. Jemisin (*The Broken Earth* trilogy, 2015-2017), Emily St. John Mandel (*Station Eleven*, 2014), Emmi Itaranta (*Memory of Water*, 2012), Niccolò Ammaniti (*Anna*, 2015). Due to the backlash on women’s rights in many parts of the world, another theme that has seen a flourishing of dystopian texts is the status and experience of women, with prominent themes like the ban on abortion, control of reproduction, infertility, rape. Among them, are (uneven) novels by Margaret Atwood (*The Testaments*, 2019), Leni Zumas (*Red Clocks*, 2018), Naomi Alderman (*The Power*, 2016), Christina Dalcher (*Vox*, 2018), Maria Rosa Cutrufelli (*L’isola delle madri*, 2020), Sophie Mackintosh (*The Water Cure*, 2018), Louise Erdrich (*Future Home of the Living God*, 2017), Bina Shah (*Before She Sleeps*, 2018). Likewise, the experience of emigration and immigration finds space in contemporary dystopias by Mohsin Hamid (*Exit West*, 2017), Gillian Cross (*After Tomorrow*, 2013), and John Lanchester (*The Wall*, 2019), while the contested nature of a global electronic technology and culture is treated in novels by Cory Doctorow (*Radicalized*, 2019) and Dave Eggers (*The Circle*, 2013).

In these texts, the narratives develop in a critical dystopian mode, focusing on individuals that are at odd with the dystopian society. If hopeful yet precarious and uncertain alternatives are still developed within the pages of these texts (rather than lingering in some extra-textual outside), the narrative moves are, however, often those of

micro interventions and changes, small steps, sometimes highly personal. Such narratives are therefore fragmented and individual, and yet, by being developed through multiple points of view (for example, in Atwood, Zumas, Robinson, Hamid, Alderman), they generate a polyphonous text, which, in turn, calls for a collective rather than an individual agency. Finally, the presence of genre blurring is also maintained in some of these texts, as the dystopian narrative blurs elements with fantasy (magic realism), historical and realistic fiction, the diary, and the biographical genre.

In the remarkable output of dystopia of our times, one of the most interesting examples of how dystopia can recover hope in darkness out of precarity, discomfort, unsettling endings, awareness, and responsibility is Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018), a "provocative exploration of female longing, frustration, and determination" (CHARLES, 2018, n.p). The future imagined by Zumas in this novel is not as extreme as other feminist dystopias, but it shares with them the violation of reproductive rights. And yet, as Ron Charles, has remarked, "the ordinariness of the world that Zumas imagines is perhaps the most unsettling aspect" of this lyrical novel (online). At the heart of the novel are the stories of four women, whose lives intertwine as they come to terms with an imagined America that – unfortunately – is increasingly 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 the voice of Ro, one of the four female protagonists, who 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, p. 32-3).

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 revealed in an interview, all the restrictions she imagined were based on real proposals by American politicians such as Republicans Mike Pence and Paul Ryan, proposals that, under the Trump-Pence administration, no longer seemed to be extreme, but were actually real threats (SUGIUCHI, 2018, n.p):

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.

The effects of this situation on the lives of the individual characters (Ro, a single woman who is trying to have a baby, and Mattie, a 16-yo dealing with an unwanted pregnancy) raise their awareness of the oppressive society and initiate a narrative trajectory that moves from “apparent containment into an experience of alienation and resistance” into the possibilities of radical, utopian agency (BACCOLINI; MOYLAN, 2003, p. 5). Awareness is the first step: Zumas's characters regret not acting in time and being simple bystanders, those “ordinary citizens [who] are aware but do nothing” ((ZUMAS, 2018, p. 286; cf. also p. 268, 254)).

In addition to Ro's – a high school teacher desperately trying to have a child on her own while writing the biography of Eivør Mínerudottír, 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 through alliances and solidarity – in a word, through interdependence. 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 should desire. Thus, the novel manages to maintain the complexity of the different positions of the four female characters, without judging the choice of carrying a pregnancy

to term, ending it, or adopting a child. Zumas does not choose – with what would be the possibility of adoption – the easier and more comforting and compensatory 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 face their choices and responsibilities, and in so doing to embrace their contradictions and to desire more than one thing. So that, in Ro’s voice, she will be able to “see what it is. And to see what is possible” (ZUMAS, 2018, p. 351) – thus, opening up the space of a precarious, fragile hope. This sense of precarious hope is, however, also accompanied by a new consciousness of the need for resistance: among Ro’s future proposals there is also the resolution “to go to the protest in May,” followed by the realization that it will also be necessary “to do more than go to a protest” (ZUMAS, 2018, p. 351). Ro comes to realize that in the present situation it is essential to “work outside the apparatus” like the rebellious women of the “Polyphonte Collective,” who illegally assist women in reproductive choices (ZUMAS, 2018, p. 348). Ro thus completes her journey from alienation and discomfort to active resistance.

CONCLUSION

Critique of and desire to transform our present are the constituents of the dystopian genre: using challenging themes, complex visions, and unsettling endings, writers of dystopias can motivate readers. As Jack Zipes also reminds us, “without discontent there is no utopia” (2003, p. ix). We must feel out of place, not at home in the world and we need dystopias to mobilize us, to own the discomfort that will educate us into a displacement from and critique of the societies we live in. Reading dystopias can promote critical thinking and foster hope for change. Thus, the precariousness of open endings serves to disturb, challenge, and motivate readers. By resisting the convention of reassuring readers, the futures foreshadowed in dystopian novels do not foreclose hope; they actually mobilize readers to intervene critically in the imagination and construction of a future they desire and to possibly do something in their present that can begin to build that future.

The critical dystopia, then, stresses the connection between imagination and critique. Discomfort, awareness, resistance, solidarity, and interdependence are necessary to activate precarious hope; when combined, they are the tools of the critical dystopia with which we can crack the darkness, let the light in, and begin to “dismantle the master’s house,” to use an expression from Audre Lorde (1984, p. 112). Critical dystopias, then, provide a means to analyze and critique the present and inspire a militant awakening with the potential for radical, utopian agency.

There are two quotations that, for me, sum up the extremely important work of literature, and particularly dystopia, in recovering hope today. The first is from a speech by Neil Gaiman, called “Why our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading, and Daydreaming,” where he discusses the importance of reading books fostering literacy and imagination, especially for children. Although he does not quite talk about dystopia, he nonetheless addresses the importance of discomfort and of a literature that unsettles:

Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you’ve never been. Once you’ve visited other worlds [...] you can never be entirely content with the world you grew up in. And discontent is a good thing: people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different, if they’re discontented (GAIMAN, 2016, p. 8).

The second is from Marge Piercy and comes from an essay called “Active in Time and History,” a reflection about her own writing of political novels. Again, imagination is linked with understanding and acting, and literature becomes the place where readers are shaped and mobilized:

Imagination is powerful, whether it’s working to make us envision our inner strengths and the vast energy and resources locked into ordinary people and capable of shining out in crisis, capable of breaking out into great good or great evil; or whether imagination is showing us utopias, dystopias or merely societies in which some variable has changed [...] When such [societies are] imagined we can better understand ourselves by seeing what we are not, to better grasp what we are. We can also then understand what we want to move toward and what we want to prevent in the worlds our children must inhabit. (PIERCY, 1989, p. 107-8).

Finally, I want to conclude with a positive example of the power of dystopia today. I have mentioned above the appropriation of Atwood’s iconic symbol, the handmaid’s costume. But that symbol has also served to support political struggles around the world. The handmaid’s costume continues in fact to be used in a number of protest demonstrations: in Poland, on 26 July 2020, for example, women took to the streets in protest against the government’s decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe (the one against violence against women and for the protection of victims of gender violence); in Italy, in Perugia, on 22 June 2020, for instance, women dressed as handmaids protested against the local government’s decision to obstruct women’s request for pharmacological abortion. In the United States, handmaids continued to

regularly “welcome” former President Trump in the various destinations of his official visits and spurred the protests of transversal feminist groups, such as “Ni una menos.” Offred and the handmaids have served activist women to form a resilient and fighting affective community. In this instance, identification has been able to sustain political movements and struggles in support of the common vulnerabilities caused by oppression and reactionary forces, including those of totalitarian regimes or those disguised as false democracies.

In dark times, dystopian literature becomes even more important to us, providing both the tools and the incentive that we need to critically interpret and transform our present. Critical dystopias, with their permeable borders, their invocation of precarity and discomfort, their resistance to closure, can still represent one of the preferred sites of resistance for our feminist utopian agenda.

REFERENCES

AHMED, Sara. **Living a Feminist Life**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “‘A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past’: Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Telling*.” In: BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom (Eds.). **Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination**. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 113-134.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia.” In: MINERVA, Nadia (Ed.). **Per una definizione dell’utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto**. Ravenna, Itália: Longo, 1992, p. 137-146.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “Feminine Weakness and Restored Masculinity in Post-9/11 Science Fiction Cinema.” In: GUALTIERI, Claudia (Ed.). **Utopia in the Present: Cultural Politics and Change**. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018, p. 175-192.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “Finding Utopia in Dystopia: Feminism, Memory, Nostalgia, and Hope.” In: MOYLAN, Tom; BACCOLINI, Raffaella (Eds.). **Utopia, Method, Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming**. Oxford: Lang, 2007, p. 159-189.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler.” In: BARR, Marleen S. (Ed.). **Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism**. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 13-34.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “‘Hope isn’t stupid’: The Appropriation of Dystopia.” **mediAzioni**. Vol. 27, 2020, p. D39-D49.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “‘It’s not in the womb the damage is done’: Memory, Desire and the Construction of Gender in Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night*.” In: SICILIANI, E.; CECERE, A.; INTONTI, V.; SPORTELLI, A. (Eds.). **Le trasformazioni del narrare**. Fasano: Schena, 1995, p. 293-309.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. “Journeying through the Dystopian Genre: Memory and Imagination in Burdekin, Orwell, Atwood, and Piercy.” In: BACCOLINI, Raffaella; FORTUNATI, Vita; MINERVA, Nadia (Eds.). **Viaggi in Utopia**. Ravenna: Longo, 1993, p. 343-357.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom (Eds.). **Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination**. New York: Routledge, 2003.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom. “Introduction. Dystopia and Histories.” In: *Revista X*, v. 17, n. 04, p. 1224-1244, 2022.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom (Eds.). **Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination**. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 1-12.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom. “Reconsidering Dystopia in Dark(er) Times: An Interview with Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan.” **Diálogos Fantásticos Symposium (Fantástica 451), VI Colóquio Literatura e Utopia: 20 anos**, São Paulo, Brasil, 4 de Dezembro de 2020.

BLOCH, Ernst. “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing.” **The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays**. Tradução Jack Zipes e Frank Mecklenburg. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988, p. 1-17.

CAVALCANTI, Ildney. “Utopia of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Dystopia.” **Utopian Studies**. Vol. 11, num. 2, 2000, p. 152-180.

CHARLES, Ron. “‘Red Clocks’ imagines a world where abortion is outlawed. And it feels eerily real.” **The Washington Post** (16 de Janeiro de 2018). Disponível em: https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/red-clocks-imagines-a-world-where-abortion-is-outlawed-and-it-feels-eerily-real/2018/01/16/0575e678-fa5b-11e7-a46b-a3614530bd87_story.html Acesso em: 13/Junho/2019.

CRANNY-FRANCIS, Anne. **Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction**. New York: St. Martin’s, 1990.

FALUDI, Susan. **The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America**. New York: Holt, 2007.

GAIMAN, Neil. “Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming: The Reading Agency Lecture, 2013.” In: **The View from the Cheap Seats**. New York: Harper Collins, 2016, p. 5-15.

JAMESON, Fredric. **The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

LEVITAS, Ruth “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method.” In: MOYLAN, Tom; BACCOLINI, Raffaella (Eds.). **Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming**. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 47-68.

LORDE, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” **Sister Outsider**. New York: The Crossing Press, 1984.

MILLWARD, Julie. “**Dystopian wor(l)ds: language within and beyond experience.**”

(Tese de Doutorado). University of Sheffield, 2007.

MOYLAN, Tom. **Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation**. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

MOYLAN, Tom. **Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination**. Edição de Raffaella Baccolini. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014.

MOYLAN, Tom. **Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia**. Boulder: Westview, 2000.

PIERCY, Marge. "Active in Time and History." In: ZINSSER, William (Ed.). **Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989, p. 91-123.

SARGENT, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." **Utopian Studies**. Vol. 5, n.1, 1994, p. 1-37.

SARGENT, Lyman Tower. **Rethinking Utopia and Utopianism: The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited and Other Essays**. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022.

SCHENCK, Celeste. "All of a Piece: Women's Poetry and Autobiography." In: BRODZKI, Bella; SCHENCK, Celeste (Eds.). **Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 281-305.

SISK, David W. **Transformations of Language in Dystopia**. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997.

SUGIUCHI, Deirdre. "On Dismantling the Power of White Antifeminist America". In: **Electric. Lit.** 2018. Disponível em: <https://electricliterature.com/on-dismantling-the-power-of-white-antifeminist-america/> Acesso: 20/Dezembro/2018.

WEBB, Darren. "The Domestication of Utopia and the Climate Crisis." **mediAzioni**. Vol. 27, 2020, p. D6-D16.

WOOLF, Virginia. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." The Hogarth Press, 1924. Disponível em: <https://archive.org/details/VirginiaWoolfMr.BennettAndMrs.Brown/page/n3/mode/2up> Acesso em: 26/novembro/2021.

WRIGHT, Jennifer. "Kylie Jenner's *Handmaid's Tale* Party Sends a Terrifying Message", In: **Harper's Bazaar**. 12/junho/2019. Disponível em: <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/politics/a27921894/kylie-jenner-handmaids-tale-party-explained/> Acesso em: 13/junho/2019.

ZIPES, Jack. "Foreword: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Quest for Hope." In: HINTZ, Carrie; OSTRY, Elaine (Eds.). **Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults**. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. ix-xi.

ZUMAS, Leni. **Red Clocks**. New York: Little, Brown, 2018.

Submitted: 1 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 13 Sep. 2022