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John West-Sooby, ed., *Nowhere is Perfect: French and Francophone Utopias/Dystopias*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 251 pp. Notes. \$30.00 U.S (pb). ISBN 978-0-87413-048-5.

Review by Sanja Perovic, King's College London.

Any collection of essays about utopia invariably faces the question of definition. Is utopia, as Raymond Trousseau has argued, a literary genre distinct from other imaginary worlds such as the golden age, paradise and otherworldly delights?^[1] Or is it, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have suggested, a way of acting politically in the present by radically revealing its contingent nature?^[2] Is utopia a figure that both relates to, as well as opposes, the closure of dialectical thought, as Louis Marin put forth?^[3] Or is it, as Fredric Jameson has recently claimed, nothing less than the desire to imagine a world in which capitalism is not our only present and future?^[4]

For John West-Sooby, the question remains open. This collection of essays, augmenting a 2006 special issue of the *Australian Journal of French Studies* also edited by West-Sooby, presents utopia as a “paradoxical” *topos* that escapes its own self-definition. Utopia, West-Sooby argues in his introduction, operates through a series of oppositions. It is a “no-where” that is “almost invariably mapped in precise detail” (p. 1). It is about freedom yet its preferred spaces are “island settings, closed spaces surrounded by inaccessible mountains, walled cities, and the like” (p. 1). It expresses a desire for radical historical rupture in visions that remain strangely static and full of “torpor” (p. 2). Given the permeability of the term and the diversity of its representations, readers may well wonder whether and how utopia can ever serve as conceptual rubric for a collection of essays that range chronologically from the eighteenth century to the present and thematically from the penal colonies of Australia to workers habitations in France to the twentieth century French novel.

And yet, surprisingly, *Nowhere is Perfect* succeeds in conveying a sense of cohesion. By insisting less on generic classifications of utopia and more on the disjunction between the utopian imaginary and the “real,” this collection illuminates a series of family resemblances linking utopia to the four themes of politics, ideology, the modern novel and modern life. The decision to group complementary essays together works well. For example, Jacqueline Dutton’s essay on French perceptions of the Australian penal colony as a utopian site of expiation and regeneration of criminals is followed by Dominique Kalifa’s fascinating account of Biribi, the colloquial term given to the military prisons that were situated mostly in North Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Dutton emphasizes the impact of the utopian penal colony on subsequent French debates on penal reform and eventual endorsement of deportation for criminals. Kalifa describes how journalists, popular singers and writers invested Biribi, a geographically indeterminate place due to the mobility of prison camps, with symbolic and social signification. Kalifa’s essay in particular stands out as an excellent example of how to conduct historical research on the popular imagination. Drawing on such sources as popular speech (the French almost exclusively used Arabic words to refer to this para-judicial military institution), firsthand accounts, songs and popular novels, Kalifa demonstrates the role played by Biribi in constituting a myth of the incorrigible delinquent later popularized by cinema. Such a methodological approach presupposes that historical “facts” are inseparable from a collective imagination that is utopian and dystopian at once.

The intersection of utopianism and commerce is underscored by the pairing of Peter Hambly's essay on "Fourier, Gautier, Banville" with Jean Fornasieros' article on the role of financial patronage in the establishment of utopian communities. Readers might be especially interested to learn about Jean-Baptiste André Godin, industrialist and founder of a *fouriériste* colony in Texas, who also commissioned the famous *Familistère* in the town of Guise, France, one of the first examples of social housing and planned community that has recently reopened as a "utopian" museum.

The essays on Caribbean literature by Peter Poiana and Bonnie Thomas perhaps go furthest in demonstrating the intellectual and ideological purchase of utopian thought for the present day. For it is in Caribbean literature that the tropical island—the utopian space *par excellence* since the discovery of the new world—meets up with the dystopian elements of colonization and the slave trade. Readers will be familiar with Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant's term *créolité*, which these writers promoted as an alternative to Aimé Césaire's *négritude* or Black Pride. Poiana shows how both writers consciously embrace the utopian model in their writing while refashioning it as "*archipelagic thinking*" (Glissant) in order to differentiate it from the "conceptual tyranny of Western thought" (p. 174). As a description of a writing practice, *heterotopia* captures utopia's generic connection to the realm of possible worlds. But one wonders if such an additive, capacious redefinition is ultimately compatible with utopia's dialectical function. For example Louis Marin, whom West-Sooby cites in the introduction, has argued for an understanding of utopia as the third, neutral term that foregrounds a contradiction between two terms while forestalling its resolution.

This same section on the novel engages most directly with utopia's literary origins, well emphasized by Penny Boumelha in "Regeneration: Time, place and Gender in Fin-de-Siècle Utopian Narrative." David Bellos' "The New Frontier: the Human Utopia of Romain Gary" provides a fascinating account of Gary's life and literature. Bellos emphasizes Gary's unconventional and often ribald send up of Nazi concentration camps, which suggests an affiliation of utopian thinking with the carnivalesque world of comic inversions popular in East European literature. While Bellos shows how dystopian literature, particularly in its grotesque and satirical forms, is compatible with moralist thought, defining Gary's humanist faith as "utopian" may be diluting the concept too much.

The editorial choice to consider Françoise Gauby's article on French writer and AIDS victim Hervé Guibert in the section on "modern life" raises interesting questions about the relation between utopia, a literary genre, and the outside world. Gauby's article picks up on the theme of glass introduced by Ben McCann's essay on Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, a film that explores the modernist city made famous by Le Corbusier. In its transparency, glass, McCann argues, is a utopian material *par excellence*. Gauby connects this image to the medical utopia of a completely transparent body so keenly analyzed by Guibert. As Gaudy shows, Guibert's refusal to separate the medical portrait from the literary self-portrait underscores to what extent any utopia exists as a specifically textual process.

Due to limitations of space, it is impossible to give an adequate account of all sixteen essays in this volume. Readers expecting a more vigorous or conceptual treatment of utopia, such as for example can be found in the recent work inspired by Reinhart Koselleck [5], may be somewhat disappointed in its thematic focus. Likewise the decision to begin with Montesquieu and the eighteenth century severs utopia's literary and philosophical connection to the ideal city such as that found in More and Campanella. On the other hand, as I hope the diversity of the essays sampled here makes clear, utopia remains a productive figure of thought, especially in helping us to understand modernity's specific relation to historical time and change. On the whole, this collection makes a compelling argument for a wide-ranging and thematic understanding of utopia as intrinsic to the modern cultural imagination.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Philip Gerrans, "Montesquieu's anti-utopian political theory"

Jacqueline Dutton, "Expiation in the Antipodes: A Utopian Endeavour for the French?"

Dominique Kalifa, "Biribi: histoire d'un non-lieu de l'imaginaire français"

Kay Chadwick, "Philippe Henriot's Utopia: Propaganda and the Last Days of Vichy"

Peter Hambly, Fourier, "Gautier, Banville: Utopisme et textes littéraires"

Peter Hambly, "Un poème utopique de Baudelaire: "J'aime le souvenir"

Jean Fornasiero, "Mécènes de l'utopie fin-de-siècle: le cas de Paul Adam et d'Emile Zola"

Penny Boumelha, "Regeneration: Time, Place and Gender in Fin-de-Siècle Utopian Narrative"

William Jennings, "Escaping from Gide's Dystopia"

David Bellos, "The New Frontier: the Human Utopia of Romain Gary"

Peter Poiana, "The Competing Caribbean Utopias of Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau"

Bonnie Thomas, "Utopia and Dystopia in Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* and *Fleur de Barbarie*"

Ben McCann, "Du verre, rien que du verre": "Negotiating Utopia in *Playtime*"

Françoise Gauby, "La 'maison de verre': utopies corporelles et arts de guérir dans *Le Protocole compassionnel* d'Hervé Guibert"

Greg Hainge, "*L'Invention du Troisième Peuple*: the Utopian Vision of Philippe Grandrieux's Dystopias"

Hélène Jacquard, "'Tu rêves?': "utopies, dystopies et heterotopies dans quelques écrits beurs"

NOTES

[1] Raymond Trousson, *D'utopie et d'utopistes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la Philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991).

[3] Louis Marin, *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973).

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire called Utopia and other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005); *Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[5] Reinhart Koselleck, *Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985)

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