Postcolonial Utopias or Imagining 'Brave New Worlds': Caliban Speaks Back

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Citation: Corina Kesler, "Postcolonial Utopias or Imagining 'Brave New Worlds': Caliban Speaks Back", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, 2nd series, no. 1, 2012, pp. 88-107<http://ler.letras.up.pt > ISSN 1646-4729.

"this is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to speak to you"

bell hooks[1]

I have recently completed a doctoral project that focused on lesser-known utopian expressions from non-Western cultures such as Romania, the pre-Israel Jewish diaspora, and postcolonial countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and India. I hypothesized a causal relationship between the conditions of oppression and expressions of utopia. Roughly: the more a people, culture, and/or ethnicity experience physical space as a site of political, cultural, and literal encroachment, the more that distinct culture's utopian ideas tend to appear in non-spatial, specifically, temporal formulations. Under the pressures of oppression, the specific character of an ethnic group/individual, having been challenged within a (often national) space, seeks not a 'where' (utopia), but a 'when' (uchronia or intopia) of mythical, or mystical time. And it is there, or rather, then, where oppressed groups give the utopian impulse expression, and define, protect, and develop their own identity. To support this hypothesis, I examined in detail texts like Mircea Eliade's *The Forbidden Forest,* Sergiu Fărcăşan's *A Love Story from the Year 41,042,* Bujor Nedelcovici's *The Second Messenger,* Oana Orlea's *Perimeter Zero,* Costache Olareanu's *Fear*; Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*; Kajo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*; Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery*; and *The Zohar: The Book of Splendor,* and practices like the Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah and the Păltiniş Paidetic school in Romania. Unlike the canonical Western examples, my selections from various non-hegemonic nations and cultures can be seen not to have ceased the

pursuit of identity which drives classic utopian literature, but to have adapted it to those contingencies suffered by non-dominant, invaded, and/or colonized peoples.

I selected specific structural, linguistic, and narrative content elements of these works to capture particular moments in the large-scale move from space to time, while mapping this (often forced) emigration of a particular people's utopian imagination onto the relevant historico-political contexts which shaped it. Cartographical evidence, archival research, and fieldwork strongly suggest that non-Western utopian traditions (Romanian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Indian, and Jewish mysticism) deploy temporality, metaphysical speculation, introspection, irony, punning, and censor-avoiding subterfuge to a degree, and in ways, which differ greatly from the more canonical cases.

In this essay I will evidence the elements that lead to the inclusion of the three postcolonial utopian examples in the extended study that generated my doctoral project. These three case studies were chosen because they shared a common colonizer, i.e., the British Empire from which they gained independence roughly about the same time: India in 1947, Ghana in 1957, and Nigeria in 1960. Although geographically distant, and linguistically not closely related, they deploy similar narrative techniques, ideological content, and approaches to identity formation (both ethnic and national) that result from the migration of the utopian impulse to its alternative, non-spatially based forms. Written from the perspective of the colonized, the postcolonial utopias analyzed below challenge the colonizer's previous representations of their local characters as subservient, inferior, savage, and, consequently, in need of the white man's civilizing hand. Nigeria's Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), Ghana's Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), and India's Amitav Ghosh's *Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Delirium, Fever and Discovery* (1995) are different from the classical examples of the genre. In their accounts of specific, non-hegemonic utopian expressions they favor and deploy linguistic innovation, temporal, and psycho-analytical translocations to address and tailor their specific utopian desires. As a form of resistance, when using the "language of the oppressor," Okri, Laing, and Gosh maneuver it in such a way as to express, in its strangeness of syntax, diction, or deployment, a re-appropriation of agency and the right to manifest their peoples' dreams of independence, nationhood, and utopia. As they represent a rather complicated and variegated category, an extended analysis of these New English Literatures utopian analogues is necessary

here before I proceed with textual analysis and case studies comparisons. I will start by evidencing some of the differences between these examples and those produced within the utopian canon

In *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* Ralph Pordzik noted that these utopian analogues deploy an expanded repertory that includes "linguistic diversity, lack of unity, inconclusive agency, and willful representation of fantastic chronotopoi" (Pordzik, 2000:18). This repertory is then used to appropriate the language of the oppressor and populate the postcolonial landscape with metanarratives different from those of the previous British master. In addition to experimenting with the tropes of the genre and the language of the previous colonizer, they have to spatially relocate the utopian paradigm. Because such novels are still inspired by the Western idea of locality, they have to "discover" new lands and islands for their imagined communities. Accordingly, the spatial utopeme is purged, or decolonized and deterritorialized of its Western utopian associations. Geography is re-appropriated and the postcolonial utopian locale moved away from the South Seas islands, and the dark, savage continents favored in the canonical examples. As they have no other virgin lands or terra incognita onto which to project their spatially based new communities, postcolonial writers revisit their own contested space and impose on it alternative realities, or *uchronias*, or use them as the locales for culturally-relevant *intopias*. Reclaiming the space, via renaming it, or re-mythologizing it with deities and heroes from their pre-colonization past enables them to place the colonized and the colonizers on more equal and dialogue-inducing ground. The final results of such imagining exercises are postcolonial narratives that belong to the category of – what progressive theorists of the genre like Fredric Jameson and Michel Foucault called *heterotopias*, or spatially overlapping, and occasionally interacting paradigms. Evidently, they incorporate dialogical and ontological variants much more nuanced in their choice of content and form than the classical stalwarts of the genre.

In most cases, this need to understand one's role in the subaltern relationship goes beyond a realistic presentation of the re-imagined world. Additionally, the subconscious –and its vast riches and potentially dangerous unknown– becomes a new source to be explored to better understand one's past condition and the means to overcome it. These postcolonial corrections, visibly performed on the geographical and literary environs, produce new narratives and/or dramatically change existing

histories. For writers like Okri, Laing, and Ghosh reclaiming the text is then also a method of interacting with the history previously written by the colonizers and populated–via fictionalized accounts–with subaltern images of the colonized justifying the master's civilizing efforts. Ultimately, their works address timely questions of nationhood, identity, and futurity in hybrid works whose complexities have been acknowledged by writers like Salman Rushdie and theorists like Homi Bhabha. As such, these postcolonial hybrid works do not propose fixed, rigid utopias, but compose open models that enable the readers to create their own visions of a better society. Needless to say, this is a complicated and arduous affair: the utopian writing is done in/from/about a hybrid geographical, historical, cultural, political, and social space.

So, when approaching the Western utopian genre, New English Literatures writers do so aware of their own history of suffering perpetuated by its tropes; they are, naturally, less likely to engage in reductionist, or dialectical, representations of the "other" as a traditional ontological foil. Instead, they represent the two (or more) interacting communities polyphonically, dialogically, and closely engage with complex issues like memory, identity, agency, and historical and cultural heritage recovery. The writers whose works make the subject of this paper, Ben Okri, Kojo Laing, and Amitav Ghosh employ folkloric, mythical, and mystical tropes to recover specific ontologies denied existence and perpetuation in the historic time claimed by the oppressor/conqueror. They take the utopian paradigm to its next level by subsuming its critical and evaluative potential to issues pertaining to *both* the colonized and the colonizer and pose several important questions: How does utopia, a quintessentially spatial and Western project transfer in the contested space of the ex-colonies? How does a Ghanaian, Nigerian, or Indian imagine utopia? How many of their projects' precepts are borrowed from the colonizer's utopian theories and practices, and how many are their own? How much of the native culture is recovered in these accounts? And, finally, how is the native language and that of the oppressor used when these "Calibans" are 'speaking back'?

Pordzik answered some of these important questions in his seminal work on postcolonial utopias when he analyzed, among many other postcolonial examples, the works of Okri, Laing, and Ghosh. He noted that

> the alternative world depicted [therein wa]s quite different from the one writers such as William Morris, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Burknes [sic] F. Skinner (*Walden Two*, 1975), and Ernest Callenbach (*Ecotopia*, 1977) had in mind when they were depicting the citizens

> of their peaceful, just, and benevolent future World State(s). While the latter employed a narrative mode of representational realism based on causal relations and a highly ordered succession of events in order to convey a future compatible with their readers' conception of history and identity, much recent utopian fiction offers the view of a world in which fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity determine the course of action and the striving of the protagonist/reader to make sense of what he or she is given to understand is constantly undermined by the introduction of new perspectives and points of reference that cannot be integrated into a meaningful whole (*idem*, 3).

Analogous utopian narratives are then born from this "clash" between the different discursive modes: "fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity" to which Pordzik refers.

Hybrids of the local dialects and the language of their oppressor, they make excellent use of allusions, puns, and irony: they evidence the need to use such tropes as writing between the lines to signal the inability of the utopian canon's toolbox to deal with complicated postcolonial issues. Accordingly, when finally given a chance to retort to the colonizer's version of utopia, the colonized speak back to the British, change their language, its syntax, and grammar, and boldly insert local dialects and paradigms into the narrative fabric of the postcolonial utopia. In doing so, they succeed not only in adapting the utopian paradigm of the oppressor to their specific cultural conditions, but also in protesting against their continuous dependence on "the oppressor's language."

To illustrate some of these differences between Western and non-Western utopias, and to better understand Okri's, Laing's, and Ghosh's utopian analogues to be discussed in the second part of this paper, it is necessary now to look at two "classical" examples which set, in their respective Western, non-Western cultures, the standard of representation of, and reaction to, the colonial balance of power.

What follows is a necessarily brief comparison of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Aime Césaire's *A Tempest*. Césaire's French version, written in 1969, was a "translation" of Shakespeare's 1611 play. It was also an adaptation, a retelling of the classic story from the point of view of the colonized/oppressed. In Shakespeare's version, Caliban's name, the anagram of the word "can(n)ibal" generated negative connotations that did not encourage the audience's, or the posterity's sympathy for the character nor, for that matter, for the fate of the people he represented. Miranda's famous exuberant lines in the original play,

> O wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
> That has such people in't! (Shakespeare, 1997: 3102).

speak both of the dangers of idealizing the colonizing process and of her innocence. Despite her being highly educated by her father, she is ignorant of human nature, and the roles she and her father play in the subjugation of the natives. The world inhabited by Miranda and the rest of the European characters is "new" only to them. Their leveling narrative presupposes itself grafted on a tabula rasa. The same world is "old" and home to Caliban: yet, he does not have the tools to create and sustain a narrative strong enough to rival that of his masters. Moreover, he is, from the moment contact is made, in a disadvantageous position: he expresses himself in a borrowed medium/language.

In Césaire's dramatic version, Caliban reacts violently to this intrusion: his ire is evident in the ways he abuses Prospero's language in an attempt to make space for his own language and reality. His mission is not easy: reconstructing his cultural history from the master's disparate, disproportionate, and disparaging accounts of his people is a tricky, complex, and lengthy process. He undertakes it willingly, systematically as he formulates his own version of a "brave new world." In the process, he is also challenging and changing the very tropes of the canonical utopia.

Césaire's Caliban, while still a slave, is not deformed, and does not attempt rape like his predecessor did. In fact, in an interesting turn of events, Césaire dismisses the Miranda character entirely and makes his tempest focus on the correction of the relationship between the two male protagonists. He makes the enslaved native highly eloquent and assertive: Caliban sounds like a well-educated man who uses this oratorical talent to converse with, and challenge, his oppressor by deploying both the foreign language, which he has mastered, and his native tongue, which he grafts into the "official" language of his island. Exemplary of this oratorical preference is the dialogue he has with Prospero, The savage hybridizes the oppressor's language when he tells his master that he refuses the inherent yoke that this medium of communication represents:

> Caliban: Uhuru!
> Prospero: What did you say?
> Caliban: I said, Uhuru!
> Prospero: Mumbling your native language again! I've
> already told you, I don't like it. You could be polite,
> at least; a simple "hello" wouldn't kill you.
> Caliban: Oh, I forgot… But make that as froggy, waspish,
> pustular and dung-filled a "hello" as possible. May
> today hasten by a decade the day when all the birds of
> the sky and beasts of the earth will feast upon your corpse! (Césaire, 2002: 17-18).

What this passage illustrates is the immediate need of many postcolonial utopian writers to recover their displaced native language in order to reconstruct their historical past and draft their peoples' future. This necessary action creates conflict not only between the languages of the colonizer and that of the colonized, but also between their cultures, ideologies, and utopian tropes. Conversely, in the above passage, Caliban deconstructs the very mechanisms through which he and his people were enslaved: he points out the selective teachings, the cultural and linguistic erasure, the prohibition and/or thwarting of local identity formation, etc.

When Prospero tells Caliban that he gave him education and knowledge, the latter replies that the linguistic training he received had been solely for the purpose of making him understand and carry out the orders of the master:

> In the first place, that's not true. You didn't teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders: chop the wood, wash the dishes, fish the food, plant vegetables, all because you're too lazy to do it for yourself. And as for your learning, did you ever impart any of *that* to me? No, you took care not to. All your science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books. (*idem*, 18-19.)

This contrast between the discursive arsenal of the West and the feeble defense by its colonies is showcased in the above dialogue between the scientifically-minded Prospero and the poetically-reflective Caliban. The latter's pressing need, and his express desire to address and correct the technological and economical disparity imposed on him in the past is common to all cultures that experienced this colonizing process. Scientific and technological advances of the Western world made spatial conquest and the colonization process possible and enabled the inception of literary and applied "utopias." The empires and the powerful nations they engendered used these advantages to take over and transform the land and space of the new worlds. The latter, without such resources, resisted the takeover with less offensive tools: poetry, mythology, mysticism, locally specific word and situational play.

There are additional tropes of colonial and anti-colonial discourse in this revised dialogue between Prospero, the bringer of civilization (language, science, education, religion), and Caliban, who is expected to reinforce his status of inferiority by being thankful for them. Defiant and poetic, Caliban accuses Prospero of damaging his beloved island with the technology he used to defeat the locals. Caliban mirrors here Césaire's own view, i.e., "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific

knowledge"(qtd. in the Introduction to the Play, 2002: xvi) when he waxes poetically the cause of black freedom:

> Sycorax. Mother.
> Serpent, rain, lighting.
> And I see thee everywhere!
> In the eye of the stagnant pool which stares back at me,
> through the rushes,
> in the gesture made by the twisted root and its awaiting thrust.
> in the night, the all-seeing blinded night,
> the nostril-less all-smelling night! (*idem*, 18-19)

Because he cannot retort with scientific prowess, Caliban replies with poetic verve. The duel is unequal.

As an additional gesture of independence, Caliban changes the name he was given by his master with one of his choice. The author, through its character, pays homage to one of his most illustrious contemporaries: Malcolm X. Because of this deliberate association, "X", Caliban's new name, is not the appellative of "a man without a name" as he claims in his debate with Prospero, but that of a representative personality in the fight for equal rights and the ending of segregation worldwide.

> Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without
> a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose nam
> has been stolen. You talk about history… well, that's
> history and everyone knows it! Every time you summon
> me it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that
> you've stolen everything from me, even my identity!
> Uhuru! (*idem*, 19-20)

Prospero, of course, resists these efforts and offers Caliban/X a list of other potential names, all with derogatory connotations, which the latter refuses. The master used to call his slave whatever he wanted, and have free reign over his life, possessions, and land. The slave, in turn, outgrows this subaltern condition and bursts with desire to break his chains and exercise his own self-defining and imagining powers.

With these two clashing narratives, Césaire intersects Ariel's, a spirit in the original play, a mulatto slave in the postcolonial version. Ariel maintains his clairvoyant abilities: he sees that the colonization game dehumanizes *both* players. Césaire and Ariel's solution is to make Prospero aware of his unjust actions, prevent Caliban from taking revenge on Prospero, and establish a dialogue between the two parties wherein more equal, co-dependent relationships can be established. Ariel's preferred choice to Caliban's impending violence is conscience.

This later dialogue between Caliban and Ariel is emblematic of the inherent dissent between the colonized themselves who disagree on the nature of the

corrections and their delivery: violence, or diplomacy. Caliban is bent on hurting Prospero, and doing whatever is necessary to regain control of the island. Ariel is an idealist who believes that, by exposing Prospero to the terrible conditions of the colonized life, he would experience a paradigm shift. He tells Caliban:

> Listen to me: Prospero is
> the one we've got to change. Destroy his serenity so
> that he's finally forced to acknowledge his own injustice
> and put an end to it […]
> I've often had this
> inspiring, uplifting dream that one day Prospero, you,
> me, we would all three set out, like brothers, to build a
> wonderful world, each one contributing his own special
> thing: patience, vitality, love, willpower too, and rigor,
> not to mention the dreams without which mankind
> would perish. (*idem*, 27-28)

Césaire's Ariel wants to build a better, even "wonderful" world in which relationships between those involved in its making are equal.

This dialogical way of building "a brave new world" is fraught with perils and challenges. The inertia of past relationships is a reminder that the co-imagining process, in its novelty and complexity, will take a long time to find its parameters and unfold its postcolonial potential. The Caliban/X and Ariel narrative needs to be constructive and cognizant of the fact that "Prospero's" departure will not be followed by immediate ethnic cohesion and economic and political success. In the vacuum of power following this departure, competing local interests and emergent ethnic voices previously leveled by the colonial metanarrative will demand representation and manifestation in any forms of imagining of the postcolonial utopia and nation.

For this to be possible, however, the colonizer needs to undergo similar epiphanies to those espoused by Ariel. Precluding the making of Ariel's "wonderful world," Franz Fanon acknowledged, was the possibility of violence. He opined that, in fact, the colonizers, or the group he categorized as "the other species" has the bigger challenge:

> National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: Whatever may be the headings used or the new formula introduced, decolonization is always a violent process…. The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness of and in the lives of men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the *consciousness* [my emphasis] of another "species" of men and women: the colonizers. (qtd. in the Introduction to the Play, 2002: xvi)

In other words, while both major players, the previously colonized and the previous masters, have to adapt and change in order to participate in the changed reality, the

former by ascending to the neutral point of encounter, the latter by abandoning the hegemonic paradigm. Out of the two, the colonizers have the harder job. Before anything else they have to come to terms with and admit their own agency in the abuses imposed on the "others." They also have to learn to interact with their victims in a neutral space from which mutually, non-exclusive heterotopian realities could be enacted.[1]

When addressing these complex changes of consciousness and lengthy processes of identity formation within their own cultures, Okri, Laing, and Ghosh created characters and situations that illustrate both the promises and conundrums of the postcolonial utopian novel. Nigerian Ben Okri's masterly constructed *Astonishing the Gods* (1992) illustrates how specific oppressive conditions–such as a black people's enslavement and omission from history books–could force their utopian desires to turn inward and focus on psychological, cultural, and personal investigations of the hegemonic-subaltern condition that defined their existence. Okri details the travels of an unnamed character who, in the manner of the utopian genre, comes upon an island and goes through an initiatory experience. He meets a community of invisibles and is shown around the beautifully landscaped, peaceful, illuminated place and is impressed with the majesty of the city, its marble buildings, and its overall feeling of peace and prosperity. The character–who is, himself, invisible–is intrigued by this locale and society and feels that he should stay and learn their secrets. He feels that before he could move forward and create his future, he needs to understand his past:

> He was born invisible. His mother was invisible too, and that was why she could see him. His people lived content lives, working on the farms, under the familiar sunlight. Their lives stretched back into the invisible centuries and all that had come down from those differently coloured ages were legends and rich traditions, unwritten and therefore remembered. [I]t was in history books that he first learnt of his invisibility. He searched for himself and his people in all of the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn't exist. (Okri, 1996: 3)

This invisibility, we find out at one point in the novel, is not one of the body, but one of historical absence. The narrator and his people are invisible not because they cannot be seen, but because, to their rulers, they did not matter beyond their function as work force/slaves. As subalterns, they did not deserve to be mentioned in imperial history books.

At first glance, Okri's postcolonial utopian novel closely follows a Western utopian pattern: there is a voyage, the traveler arrives at a novel place where he encounters a benevolent people and is shown around by a gentle, patient guide. In this

seemingly paradisiacal place, he arrives at a deeper comprehension and appreciation of human nature and becomes aware of the possibility of different relationships between people:

> There was harmony and spring everywhere. There was a difficult joy and a difficult light in the early heroic days. There were no hierarchies. Each person was an equal participant and creator. All worked to the rhythm of the most haunting music, a music full of sorrow and rich with hope. Together they built their towns and hamlets, their palaces and villas, their avenues of angels, their infinite libraries, their exemplary universities. There were no distinction between people, none high, none low, and men fed children while women constructed temples. There was suffering and a profound vision on all their faces. (*idem*, 130)

No complex plot drives this postcolonial novel. Not that the genre itself, in its classical form at least, is characterized by thrilling twists and turns. Yet, in the canonical examples, when the two societies are compared and contrasted to each other, a certain tension builds between the two societies. In this intopian postcolonial example, the tension, as the adjective indicates it, is born within the character and so is the critical estrangement generated: although he travels, the real changes happen within before they can manifest in visible reality.

The character becomes aware of his primary role in the quality of the relationships he develops along the way. His desire to understand what engendered this society and the mechanism that produced "palaces and villas, … avenues of angels, … infinite libraries, … exemplary universities", *ibidem*) turns inward to gauge his own agency in the making of reality. In the process, by assignment, design, or personal choice, he experiences doubt. His guide tells him at one point that he has been expected, that he has an important role to play. Yet, the character has to find his own way, and learn to manifest his own reality, one which should benefit everybody else on that island. In the process he learns to control his own urges and impulses, even the most primary ones, as when he is visited by a most beautiful woman whose advances he refuses. Her presence and many of the other things that happen to him change not his outside reality, but his inside one. When the mysterious guide uses riddles, parables, and paradoxes to explain complicated concepts to him he has to remain alert, ask questions constantly, and maintain an increased state of consciousness. This way of interacting with one's surroundings and circumstances is exactly what Fanon talked about as being required of those involved in the process of decolonization.

It is an arduous task, as the inner transformation is quite intense. Okri's character, for example, feels overwhelmed at how quickly his thoughts become reality and he

goes from being the object of history to being the maker of his own and, with others, the co-maker of his community and the world's history. He has become the sole master of his destiny and history and, his guide tells him, the burden of knowledge and of action rests solidly on his own shoulders. Such power and agency need to be applied correctly to avoid the mistakes of the past. His guide is adamant about this as he tells him at the beginning of his initiation: "Whatever you see is your personal wealth and paradise. You're lucky if you can see wonderful things. Some people who have been here see only infernal things. What you see is what you are, or what you will become" (*idem*, 135). The back and forth dialogue is part of the character's initiation; his frustration is obvious as he is constantly asked to consider the implications of his decisions. He is, understandably, both empowered and overwhelmed with the task at hand.

Having earned command of his thoughts, he sees both the invisible and the visible, both the already materialized and the myriad potentialities in flux. He learns that the visible city he came upon when he landed on the island was just a dream meant to deceive the eyes of (weaker) men. Reality, in fact, is that which he creates and destroys constantly. By doing this never-ending work of creation, he learns that nothing is static, eternal, or complete, and finally understands the nature of his people's invisibility. He also learns to appreciate how they overcame it: by periodically exiting linear history and revisiting defining moments and events of pedagogical importance from their past. When breaking free from their comfort zone, they learned critical skills that prevented them from repeating mistakes, and empowered them with the agency to change the status quo. This process of exiting history and accessing moments of cosmic importance is what enables the 'invisible' people in Okri's novel to realize their own agency in shaping the world around them. In this case, agency manifests instantly: the manifested society and locale is utopian if people's thoughts and actions are elevated, considerate, and noble. Alternatively, they are dystopian, if their creators' thoughts are dismal, selfish, and destructive.

This ontological fluidity points out at an important difference between Western and non-Western utopias, clearly evidenced in this postcolonial novel. Instead of having a static, embalmed locale, and a well-cemented status quo, this society and its citizens stand under the imperative of consistent and conscious self-reflection and change. Here, the invisibles' society could move from utopia to dystopia in the blink of an eye depending on changes in their thought patterns. To have an ultimately

enjoyable and enduring utopia, they have to co-create it, constantly, actively. This learning through suffering theme, the waking up and owning to one's own historical power suggests that prolonged historical suffering has changed the writer, the characters, and the peoples they represent. It made them aware of the complex causes of their predicament and their role in addressing and correcting it. These insightful ruminations outline what Pordzik inspiringly called, by way of borrowing his colleagues' ideas,[1] an intopian process.

Ghanaian Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota War*, on the other hand, is a linguistic and ideological tour de force, detailing the conflicts on the ground, post colonizer departure. The plot is complex and difficult to comprehend, the language used is convoluted, innovative, and fantastic. Many of its narrative elements defy spatial, temporal, and narrative logic. The novel intrigues and captivates through its linguistic bravado, its superbly crafted irony, the barbed comments on the vicarious ideas of the colonizers, and on their understanding of the differences between "rich countries and poor countries" of the world. The story takes place in the year 2020, in Achimota City and, instead of chapters, is divided in "zones." The continent and the rich countries of the first world had dumped language in Africa and abandoned the black continent to its own devices. The region of Accra where these wars take place is the battleground for much more than physical combat. The Achimota city, the only one surviving a terrible war, has been, for decades, engaged in battles with both European and local enemies. In detailing the warring parties and pointing out their many similarities, Laing challenges the idea of strict dichotomies between the continent of Africa and Europe, the latter's rigid systems of values and beliefs, and its white European citizens' desire to maintain clear racial and cultural demarcations between white and non-white peoples. He uses surrealistic techniques and magical realism to point at the ridiculous claims of a future Europe trying to keep its "others" at bay. Laing has the main character, Major Gentl, who has been leading the many battles against the faraway "ethnically-pure" Europeans, fight his biggest one against a local foe, a speaking carrot millionaire. In this Sisyphean quest, Major Gentl's troops include an eclectic mix of Roman soldiers, speaking bugs and elephants, shadows, and here and there, the occasional realistic character.

In addition to the surrealist atmosphere resulting from the presence of these characters, the Ghanaian writer also changes the parameters and the dicta of canonical utopia. He uses inventive puns, inspired paradoxes, and countless philosophical

riddles that make his novel a challenge to read. Not only is the plot multilayered and, from page to page, the characters shifty in their alliances, but the presence of a carrot as an important protagonist requires that the readers undertake a significant paradigmatic shift to accept the equal participation of a vegetable in the otherwise human driven story. Regardless, the carrot character provides comedic relief even as he proceeds to act as a despicable agent of discontent throughout. Laing's use of the English language unsettles its syntax and diction, and redeploys it in poetic format to introduce the unusual characters and events. Customary utopian tropes like humor, irony, puns, speaking non-human characters, etc., are deployed in unusual ways. As if these innovations and aggressions upon both the utopian genre and the English language were not enough, Laing makes necessary the consultation of a non-English word glossary. The following extended passage shows just how much he departs from both the tropes of the utopian genre and how intent he is to make his reader engage in the co-creation of narrative meaning:

> Pogo, the carrot millionaire, had a fast-yard laugh for difficult situations of this nature, a laugh that would blow both his wife and his girls off course if they happened to be standing in roughly the same place. Pogo was kind and cunning to all, amassing his wealth through carrot-inspired intrigues, through wars, delicate helicopters, his own beautiful Kwahu scarp-sharp thighs, and bright eyes that didn't need one beam from anyone else's power. Pogo was rich enough to have his own lights. But his wife Delali, who was growing more and more fond of bananas and less and less of carrots, was getting worried because she often found herself daydreaming about Major Gentl. No reason, just that his gentleness grew beside her breasts; and for this she would often give the sign of the cross in the shape of her husband's *pioto [glossary consultation discloses that "pioto" means "pants"]*. Sometimes Pogo would be so sensitive that all the carrots around him would be sliced with the pervading subtlety; and it was in one of these moods that he had built a beautiful miniature building that he installed in one of the few filthy old-fashioned gutters, so that he would feel the paradox blowing over him with the bad whiff.… He wore robes around which grew songs of praise, so that you could not blame him if he didn't want to listen to his own innate modesty. Horses and helicopters brought his breakfast in the mornings. (Laing, 1992: 11-12)

Beside the unusual reality it presents: helicopters delivering breakfast, carrots "sliced with pervading subtlety," robes that send out songs of praise, and so on, the novel forces the reader to pay special attention to alternative linguistic sounds, spellings, and culturally-specific puns.

The above passage contains words from Ga and Hsua languages and shows the same intent to hybridize the language of the colonizer with one's own that Caliban expressed in Césaire's *A Tempest*. The excerpt above and the entire story, for that matter, could not be properly understood without consulting the end glossary on the use of which Laing himself insisted, in the preface to the reader. Resounding Ghanaian words ("agromentous"–"playful," "Ataame"–"God, Good God!",

"abusuapanyin"–"the head of the family"), or funny ones ("fikifiki"–"sex," "logologo"–"intercourse"), and numerous synonyms ("Ataame" and "Ewurade," both of which mean "God, Good God!") point at the bounty and beauty of the local languages, very likely unknown to most Western readers. These multi-lingual entries require that the readers consult the end glossary, repeatedly, as without them the meaning of the story cannot be fully grasped, and the local flavor and color cannot be truly experienced. Thus, intentionally, the reading of Laing's novel is a process that requires more than following the plot, page after page. The reader also needs to learn words in several local Western African languages and is thus brought to the text. By engaging with it via repeated glossary consultations, s/he is familiarized with the non-Western composite cultures of Ghana. This authorial choice to make the reader engage with the text, and encounter complex native linguistic and cultural elements on their own "turf," demands that the non-Ghanaian reader leaves a certain comfort zone and meets this account of the utopia of "the other" on its own terms. As such, despite its evident and intentional departures from the canonical format of the paradigm, Laing's novel performs the estrangement function that characterizes the utopian genre.

This estrangement is necessary to evaluate the situation on the ground; it is no coincidence that Laing chose war and never-ending battles as the background for his novel. The borders of modern Ghana, previously a British colony known as the Gold Coast and famous for its cocoa production, do not overlap (by far) with the country's ancestral land. After the departure of the Europeans, this fact created enduring conflicts with the neighboring countries attempting to recreate their own ancestral borders. Major population exchanges and mutual expulsions of citizens challenged both the coalescing of a stable Ghanaian identity and the political balance in the area. Several (bloodless) military coups and assassinations later and the constant change of political power between the Convention People's Party and the National Liberation Movement, the country's two most powerful parties, greatly debilitated the first Western African colony to gain its independence from the British. After the latter's departure, oppressive conditions on the ground endured and, now perpetuated by autochthonous rulers, continued to challenge the time-intensive and spatially-dependent practices of imagining the nation, and/or imagining it as utopia. In these conditions, literary accounts such as Laing's address and alert the local readership as much as they do their international audience. Through its changed content and form,

Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars signals the presence of oppressive conditions that affect not only its message, but the means of its delivery to the audience.

If Ben Okri, the Nigerian writer, challenged and complicated the agency of the colonized in the creation of utopia and Kojo Laing, the Ghanaian writer, engaged the reader in cultural and linguistic study, Indian author Amitav Ghosh addressed, in his *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Delirium, Fever, and Discovery*, the exclusion of his people from the history of scientific discoveries recorded in British specialty books. His novel addresses the same conflict showcased by Césaire in his play, *A Tempest.* In Césaire's work, Caliban accused Prospero of withholding scientific knowledge from him so that his resulting ignorance justified his continuous enslavement and provided the basis for his subaltern condition. Within the multilayered plot of the British-Indian version of this conflict, Ghosh constructs a space where the situation could be remedied, and the balance corrected in such a way that India's involvement in scientific research is acknowledged. The main character, Murugan, searches relentlessly for historical evidence that his ancestors had been interested and heavily invested in scientific discoveries long before, and continued to so under, the British colonial rule.

The narrative account of Murugan's quest is complicated, and like Laing, Ghosh challenges established, Western, modes of literary construction. He works with shifting puzzle pieces: characters, historical situations, cultural allusions, and the interactions between the colonizing British and the multi-ethnic population of India seem to follow no particular logic, no specific narrative order. The reader is constantly unsettled by the changes and apparent discrepancies in the plot. The main story is repeatedly interrupted by theological and magical discourses, and the intervention of new characters. Even the main character seems to be confounded by the constant geographical translocations and his immersion in the alternative realities he needs to visit in order to accomplish his redemptive, scientific mission. Murugan, like Okri's nameless character, has to recover the unrecorded stories of his people and rewrite a history that incorporates both colonizer and colonized and better represent what he calls the "whole new story."

So, in his travels, Murugan is keen to uncover the rich spiritual universe of India, the enduring traces of its pre-colonial past, and the indigenous contributions to the British discourse of scientific discovery. The conflicting relationship between native Indian mythos and colonizing Western logos is told by recounting past abuses and

inequities at the hands of the British. This need to recuperate identity defining, and agency enhancing, key historical moments is reflected in Murugan's poignant introspections about his individual fate and his desire to have his life, and that of his people, count. He asks two of his female friends to "write him in" the history of India when the time is right:

> 'Promise me that you'll take me across if I don't make it on my own.'
> Urmila's eyes widened. 'Make it where?' she said
> 'Wherever.'
> She laughed out loud, throwing back her head. 'I don't know what you are talking about.'
> 'But promise me anyway,' Murugan insisted. 'Promise you'll take me, even if they want you to leave me behind?'
> 'Why would anyone want to leave you behind? said Urmila. 'You're the only one who knows what's happened, what's happening. You said yourself that someone had gone to a lot of trouble to help you make connections.'
> 'That's just the problem', said Murugan. 'My part in this was to tie some threads together so that they could hand the whole package over in a little bundle some time in the future, to whomever it is they're waiting for.'
> 'And how do you know it's not you they've been waiting for?'
> 'It can't be me', said Murugan flatly. 'You see, for them the only way to escape the tyranny of knowledge is to turn it on itself. But for that to work they have to create a single perfect moment of discovery when the person who discovers is also that which is discovered. The problem with me is that I know too much and too little.' (Ghosh, 1997: 253-254)

What this extended passage shows is that Murugan, like Okri's nameless character, refuses to remain 'invisible,' especially when this condition is not one resulting from *not* being interested in the process of scientific inquiry, but one of intentional omission by the colonial authority.

Additionally, this specific scene brings to light another difference between Western and non-Western utopias. Not only does the colonizer control knowledge, and the colonized crave to participate in its production, but the two have, historically, approached the process from disparate vantage points. Traditionally, the West engaged in epistemically fruitful, rational discourse, which other cultures favored more mystical approaches to understand the world and process its realities. However, when confronted with the inequity resulting from not being able to co-participate in the Western discourse of knowledge and power, the subaltern, here Murugan, attempts to gain equal admittance to the scientific discourse and use it for the benefit of his own people. This is not an easy task as he–and the emergent nation he represents–has to achieve a few other important and difficult things in the process. What makes his quest important is the timeliness of the endeavor. What makes it difficult is the situation on the ground, one which is best illustrated by the difference between Western and non-Western modes of imagining utopia and the nation. The Western paradigm details the compare and contrast encounter of two communities,

one of which is well established, fully-coalesced, and politically, economically, and culturally operational and strong. The encounter with the other community is told from this community's perspective which, most of the time, is cast in a positive light and represented as superior to its foil. In the non-Western paradigm, it is the yet to be defined community that, while proceeding with the comparative and contrastive exercises of the genre, has to also attend to self-definition and self-evaluation.

In Ghosh's novel, this process of identity formation and scientific appropriation is helped along by the late revelation of what exactly the Calcutta chromosome is. The last scenes of the novel introduce several new characters, who turn out to be reincarnated heroes, or alter egos of the main character: famous intellectuals and artists not credited for their work in the past. They have all been, and continue to be connected to each other, the history of the land, and that of the world despite the fact that none of them, or any of their accomplishments, figured prominently in colonial history books. When the various pieces of the narrative puzzle finally fall into place, India's colonial history is written over by these recovered scientific episodes. The Calcutta chromosome is, after all, a gene that makes reincarnation possible. This continuity, through reincarnation, of gifted Indian individuals allows them to continue building ethnic and nation identity, a process that had been denied to them by repeated historical disruptions on the ground.

This concept of incarnation, which in Ghosh's novel allows the characters to recover agency from the British colonizer, is also revelatory of an important intra-ethnic/national inequity that sets up the stage for a twist in my major argument. I have stated that this project is about proving that conditions of oppressions by a foreign other or the same are responsible for the resulting expressions of utopia. In my doctoral project, I have shown that this was, indeed, the case in communist Romania, dispersed localities inhabited by ethnic Jews, and West African and Indian colonies of the British Empire. Now, I want to look a bit more closely at the equation of power within India, more specifically, at the oppressive conditions generated by the still extant caste system, founded on principles of selective merit and incarnation. This complex caste system within the Indian nation points out another potentially undermining factor in the creation and maintenance of "imagined communities" like the nation. After gaining its independence from the British in 1947, India experienced continuous religious strife, which has since caused several territorial re-arrangements and partitions. The year of its independence India lost two major territories. They

soon became independent polities themselves: Bangladesh and Pakistan. And while India's deeply entrenched democratic practices prevented internal turmoil (like that experienced by the other ex-British colonies already discussed in this paper) from throwing the country in economic disarray or bend it under military rule, it failed to address many other internal problems, like the caste system, which is one of the most prolific generators of inequalities within the nation. Faced with the needs and emergent ethnic narratives of many other minority groups, speaking thousands of languages and dialects, the democratic system has managed to stunt possible upheavals and generate a national narrative sufficiently strong to enlist the co-participation of most such groups.

Still, this intra-cultural hierarchy in India highlights the fact that my original argument might be in need of a major revision. Before naming it, I would like to revisit the logical trail that brought us to this crossroad. We have observed that certain situations are not culturally specific: utopian aspiration is universal, as is discrimination, oppression, racism, and sexism. We have also noticed the recent emergence of non-Western, utopian analogous narratives and practices that showcase the ways to maintain ethnic and national identity amid historical chaos. We will now add that these conditions, which were specific to these groups in the past, are, in the twenty-first century, the plight of many. The same travails await both previously thought of as Western and non-Western groups as they attempt to ensure their ethnic and national survival amid great geo-political and economic shifts. The shifting of populations on the ground, and the fluctuation of national borders on the political map of the world are mirrored by similar, fluid, and composite phenomena in the ways narratives of imagined communities are created. Consequently, as both utopia and the nation are imagined in more complex ways and are shaped at the intersection of various media (film, literature, internet, music) from within and from outside cultural borders, the differences that might otherwise jeopardize the engendering of such projects seem to find solution in the shared need for unity and identity, while sharing a diminishing spatial resource. In other words, the Calibans, the previously oppressed, are not alone in their quest for a "brave new wonderful world." The Prosperos, the ex-masters, have fully– and responding to Ariel's wish, *consciously*– entered the co-imagining process of this shared, if complicated, world.

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