

Utopian Acts 2018 Conference Report: Birkbeck, University of London, September 1, 2018

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When organizers Katie Stone and Raphael Kabo put together the program for Utopian Acts 2018, they themselves acknowledged that “to talk about Utopia in 2018 seems like an act of naïve, reactionary optimism.” The world of today is rife with inequality, active bigotry against various marginalized communities, the continuing denial of the dangers of climate change, and increasing moves toward spaces of violence. Yet it is precisely because of this almost dystopian world that we inhabit that a day of papers, workshops, activism, and affirmation based on human hope was so vital. Framing the ethos of the inaugural edition of this conference as a space that takes utopianism out of its intellectual ivory tower and into lived realities ensured that participants would not only think of ways to reimagine the world but also reimagine ways in which we engage with our work.

The day opened with a one-hour workshop called “The Art of Listening” by Tanaka Mhishi and Silke Grygier. The focus of their session, a writing-based workshop, was to reconfigure listening in the era of #MeToo into a utopian space of two. It was aimed toward building a personal code of best practice for navigating difficult, often traumatic conversations. By actively involving the listening party in this movement, it allowed for utopia to be thought of as a personal and intimate interaction. Considering the exploitative and abusive system that was being unpacked through this listening, it was powerfully and radically hopeful.

Following this was the first keynote of the day, with Professor Davina Cooper presenting “Why Conceptual Futures Matter (and How to Take Them Up).” Cooper considered how the state and gender are two very different but equally pervasive concepts and how they can be imagined in different ways. In order to reimagine them, it is important to be pluralistic in our

approach, by embedding them in an understanding of the past and present while making them malleable in the future. Concepts cannot be dreamed of in a vacuum, after all. By reminding listeners that the praxis of utopia is one of disorientation and rethinking the now, Cooper provided a valuable reminder that social dreaming cannot be detached from the present. Using the state and gender as two examples, she worked through not only the multiple futures that can be achieved but what that would mean for the present.

Subsequent panels happened simultaneously during the same time slots, so I was unable to attend the majority of the day's visions of radical optimism. Nonetheless, I was fortunate to attend four wonderfully diverse sessions. At 11 a.m., I attended the paper-based panel "Queer Utopia and Its Discontents" chaired by Harriet Israel. Tom Dillon and Linda Stupart kicked things off with the paper "Turning the Tables: The Table as Utopian Object." Instead of thinking of abstract or fantastical spaces of utopia, the presenters instead queered the everyday object of the table as a space of struggle—by advocating for a seat at the table for marginalized groups before ultimately turning or upending it. It is important to note the gendered and racialized dynamics of spaces thought of as apolitical. For an intellectual (usually a white man), a table is a simple surface. But for a worker (usually a woman of color), it represents a site of labor. It becomes even more politicized in domestic spheres, for instance, the use of tables as a site of organization by women of color in the civil rights movement. By tracing the various histories of an object often thought of as mundane, the paper complicated physical space and its very real impact on utopian activism. Sasha Myerson was next, presenting "Making Utopia Sexy: Anarchism, Desire and BDSM." Beginning with an acknowledgment that queer bodies are unavoidably political because of their outsider status, the paper looked at how exploring queer affirmations of desire and kink can be a useful framework for understanding utopian thought. Utopia is essentially a sexy discourse because it is exciting, is much desired, and has a level of continuous perfectibility. Queerness, by the same token, is utopian because its desire for autonomy is radical and not-yet. BDSM (a private space) and anarchism (a collective space) are both sexy and utopian because of their consensual power-sharing, which is a hearty antidote to neoliberal capitalism. It is important to ensure that such forms of thinking remain accessible and provide voices to those in the margins. Rebecca Moses rounded off the panel with the paper "*Slam!* Performance Poetry as a Reparative Practice Between Queer Theory and LGBTQIA History." The focus of this final paper was in dismantling the

linguistic hierarchies associated with the word *queer* and its marginalization of individuals within the LGBTQIA community through spaces such as slam poetry. Queer art is in many ways an inherently utopian space because it takes abstract hope and then turns it into a concrete space. Because of this, Moses critiqued the dangers of such spaces becoming exclusive in any shape or form, as well as warning against the dangers of being co-opted into mainstream capitalist spaces. Overall, the panel focused on centering queer voices as examples of marginalized communities who have radical ways of conceptualizing and reconceptualizing the present in more egalitarian ways.

During the subsequent lunch break, the queer feminist punk witches from Dream Nails ran a workshop on punk zine making, combining the DIY sensibilities of punk with the need for accessibility, grassroots storytelling, and collective action. Although spaces were limited, all participants were guaranteed their own mini zine to take away and spread the utopian spirit. Also available at this time, and during all the breaks, was an interactive art piece by Patti Maciesz called *Bill the Patriarchy*. It enabled participants to calculate how many hours of unpaid labor they undertook every year, compounded by gender, ethnicity, disability, and other factors, in order to create an itemized invoice for their lost wages. While somewhat humorous in its bluntness, it raised some uncomfortable questions about the nature of work and how best to reconfigure such a system.

At 1:45, I was one of two presenters on the panel “The Radical Imagination,” with my contribution being a workshop and Dr. Joan Haran, the other presenter, delivering a paper presentation titled “The Imaginactivism of Utopian (Counter)Public Intellectuals.” Haran traced the work of cultural producers such as Starhawk, Walidah Imarisha, and adrienne maree brown and presented her own version of “imaginactivism.” The works outlined by Haran highlighted intra-actions between cultural productions of imagination and the social justice work of activism. A common thread among these diverse practitioners was their dedication to creating a counter-public space of people working from the margins to dismantle oppression. It is important in this context to be accessible, use multiple platforms, share skills of organizing, embody social justice in daily practice, and provide solidarity to others doing the same—a call that was becoming akin to a mantra throughout the day’s proceedings. My workshop, called “Collective Imagining,” asked participants to envision what their individual utopias would look like before seeing where contradictions and tensions arose out of a room full of diverse

social dreamers. Starting with a basic question—If you could spontaneously dismantle one form of oppression by imposing a universal idea, what would you choose?—I then encouraged participants to find areas where they diverged from each other. The goal was to build support and solidarity, not through finding common ground but by working through uncommon ground. By actively facing tensions, the participants came to terms not only with the limits of individualized utopias but also with the power of collective utopias. At the end of the session, we had come up with ways to unpack challenges as varied as queerphobia, ableism, anthropomorphic environment damage, poverty, racism, and Eurocentrism. And while it would be foolish to suggest that we solved the world's problems, it was indeed a hopeful feeling to establish dialogue toward a better future—thus embodying Haran's imaginactivism in real time.

The final panels of the day ran at 3:30 p.m., and I chaired the session "Decolonising Utopia." Dr. Rehnuma Sazzad began the proceedings with a paper titled "The Critical Importance of Utopian Thinking: Locating the Concept in the Present/Past Linguistic Struggles of South Asia." Sazzad looked at two historical-political cases of linguistic emancipation movements in South Asia as sites of utopia, focusing on the gendered dynamic of women's participation vis-à-vis decolonial politics. The struggle in these moments of utopian decolonization is the resolution between women as active participants and women as symbolic caregivers (an almost dystopian delineation). On the one hand, this can result in traditional markers such as clothing taking on a revolutionary tilt when used by women autonomously to express agency. On the other hand, they can become pigeonholed into docile symbols of being "mothers" or "sisters" who must be protected—and potentially targeted for abuse. Comparing the Bengali Language Movement in historic East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) with the Tamil Movement in Sri Lanka, Sazzad looked at both the utopianism of gendered egalitarianism and the dystopianism of chastity and purity forced onto womanhood. Dr. Jan Etienne wrapped up the panel with a paper titled "Sisters, Challenge and Community: Thinking Radical Womanist Solidarity Inside the Academy." Etienne centered the voices of black women as nuanced and dynamic agents of change. So doing not only brings more voices into the conversation; it also challenges the dual discrimination of "misogynoir." This is done through womanist learning—bringing more (black) women into the academy while also embedding learning into the wider community, an approach that is already used by

black feminist activists when tackling racism against the diaspora and supporting black youth. This panel was a vital intervention because it not only highlighted decolonization as a utopian movement but focused on feminist decolonization by having two women of color speak on ideas that are both anticolonial and antipatriarchal.

The final keynote of the event brought the conference to a close, with Professor Lynne Segal presenting “Resources for Hope: Moments of Collective Joy.” Echoing the conference organizers’ opening statement, Segal acknowledged that the provocative nature of the title stemmed from how turbulent and dystopian the present actually is. Yet hope is ever present as a resistance to the disorders of oppressive systems. Tracing the history of activism, primarily in the United Kingdom but also taking into account major transnational movements, Segal essentially traced a history of demanding happiness. Looking for happiness, for collective joy, is not a naive endeavor; it is at the heart of the radical utopian project of dreaming for a better future. Thus, to be utopian is to pursue joy.

The conference officially ended with an evening of comedy and music courtesy of Dominica Duckworth and YaYa Bones, two performers who continued to reiterate the day’s calls to center the oppressed and the marginalized. Yet the hopes and dreams fostered by an entire day of collaboration and collective action really only just started then. *Utopian Acts 2018* raised some difficult questions, some of which remain unanswered, but it also acted as a call to arms to rethink our today for a better tomorrow. It reminded us that utopia needs to be appreciated and experienced in moments, sometimes conflicting, sometimes incomplete, but ever present. We must engage with the now, dream of the not-yet, and, thus, shape the future.

IBTISAM AHMED is a final-year doctoral research student at the School of Politics and International Relations, at the University of Nottingham. His thesis aims to be a decolonial killjoy that deconstructs the political utopianism of the British Raj and focuses the narrative on grassroots anticolonial utopias instead.