

Renegotiating Utopia: Where is the New Harmony for the Marginalized?

Shawna Guenther (Coordinator)
(Dalhousie University, Canada)

Ibtisam Ahmed (Speaker)
(University of Nottingham, UK)

Jessica Day (Speaker)
(University of Lincoln, UK)

The 2018 USS Conference cfp asks, “will our future generations be able to renegotiate utopia and maintain the utopian spirit or will dystopia become inevitable?” We insist that future generations can neither maintain nor renegotiate a utopian spirit because of the continual global marginalization of individuals and groups. To attain a New Harmony, marginalized voices, with differing needs and varied perspectives, need to be heard, given agency, and allowed to participate fully in life. Significantly, we must also establish what and who still needs to be “heard and listened to” to reach a more harmonious and inclusive future. To initiate engaged discussion, our panel will highlight four bases of marginalization – mental illness, race, gender, and sexuality – that must be contemplated in the utopian pursuit. First, mental illness, a global epidemic, impacts every aspect of society, yet persists as a target of an ignorance that leads to fear and violence, and isolation. Mental illness sufferers are silenced and openly abused, mental illness itself being taboo in many cultures, while governments and health agencies fail to reach their own (inadequate) objectives. Further, race is still widely seen as a monolithic identity without much consideration for the inherent diversity of People of Colour (PoC) communities and the other intersections with which PoC engage. Also, through a feminist lens, by looking at the different spaces or manifestations in which silencing, listening, and speaking (up) occur, whether public or private, social or independent, we need to identify which women are being heard in the twenty-first century, who hears them, and most importantly, what this hearing enables (or disables) in terms of their (and other’s) socio-political agency. Finally, queerness has an intersectional set of identities that should be understood as part of, and distinct from, other contemporary marginalized identities. As a co-constitutive identity, queerness is particularly affective — it is produced by, and produces, emotions, excesses, and disruptions which reveal new openings and directions for the no longer “straight” identities with which it is interwoven. Our intersectional approach to validating and giving voice to marginalized individuals and groups signals new, better forms of sociality and illuminates these silenced identities as vital constituent parts of utopian harmonies. Such harmonies, ultimately, can only be fully realized when these voices are heard and included. Thus, in our quest to build a New Harmony for all, these myriad voices must be understood and heard, and included in the conversation of utopianism.

Begum Rokeya and Intersectionality: the multiple layers of Bengali feminist utopias in the early 20th century (Ibtisam Ahmed)

At its very essence, utopianism is a discipline that strives to counter oppression, as there is no way for the good life to be legitimately achieved without providing solutions for, and agency to, the most marginalised. Utopian works have traditionally reflected this by responding to the challenges faced by their creators in radical ways. This paper will explore the writing of Bengali utopianist and reformer Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain with a focus on the ways in which she responded to the oppressions of her time.

Popularly known as Begum Rokeya, Hossain was a pioneer of intersectionality in feminist critique. Her works *Sultana's Dream* (1905) and *Padmarag* (1924) typify this multi-faceted approach with two very different plots. The former is a science fiction short story about a country run entirely by women while the latter is a novella about a women's boarding house in her native Bengal. Both stories are radical and innovative for their time and would even be considered so in the modern era.

In this paper, I analyse the following common threads between the two pieces, which are also present in Begum Rokeya's personal life: (1) the strong anti-colonial politics; (2) the need for Islamic reform and secularism; (3) the importance of education; (4) the rejection of classism; and (5) the strong criticism of social conservatism. In doing so, I hope to provide a multi-faceted reading of an important and oft-overlooked innovator of feminist utopian thought.

Keywords: anti-colonialism, gender/feminism, intersectionality

Everyday Sextopianism: Sustaining the Utopian Spirit of (Fictional) Sextopias (Jessica Day)

500 years after Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the utopian literary genre has adapted itself in diverse forms to meet the demands of new times. Yet, today, the demoralising dystopian climate of the twenty-first century means the demand for utopia, for alternatives to the present, is met with feelings of hopelessness and impossibility: how, in an era characterised by fear and dictated by the exclusionary and individualistic discourses of patriarchal-capitalism, can the spirit of utopia, of hope, kindness, community and equality, be (re)generated?

Sextopias – a new term I have coined to describe a body of twenty-first century, utopian fictional work – endeavour to (re)awaken the spirit of utopia by intersecting the libidinal economy of sexual pleasure with the utopian imaginary. That is, by (re)presenting new forms of erotic-sociality and utopian unity, fictional sextopias arouse the mind politically and promote new forms of collective, sexual-political agency and harmony. Typically, literary or filmic sextopias provoke such utopian desires through three distinctive characteristics: the establishment of, what I term, a sextopian *an-other* space, the representation of Dionysiac and/or carnivalesque sextopian bodies, and the imagining of new sextopian subjectivities which disrupt conventional binary models of subjectivity. Yet, beyond sextopian fiction and film, various counter-cultural practices, such as the Burning Man festival (which celebrates alternative, hedonistic ways of living), for example, embody or practise ideals which closely correspond to the features of fictional sextopianism.

This paper will establish the definitional terms of the sextopian genre and detail the conventions of its three main characteristics, before identifying their relation to or visibility within various instances of 'everyday sextopianism,' such as Burning Man. Then, the paper will examine what

happens when sextopian practices materialise in the everyday, questioning what type of utopianisms are produced from/ within them as well as whether the utopian spirit of them can sustain itself within today's dystopian environment.

Keywords: sexual pleasure, queerness, everyday utopianism