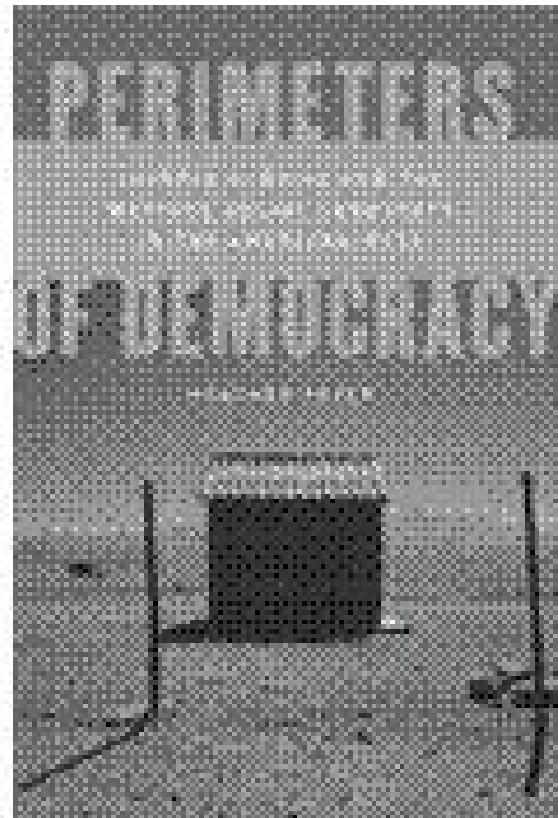
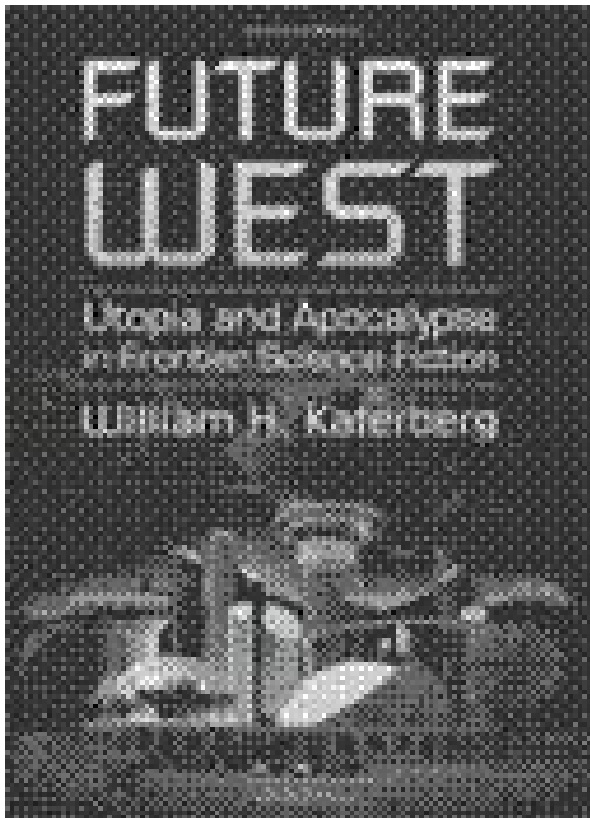


Utopias West: Or the Trouble with Perfection

Michael C. Steiner

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FUTURE WEST: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction. By William H. Katerberg. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2008.

PERIMETERS OF DEMOCRACY: Inverse Utopias and the Wartime Social Landscape of the American West. By Heather Fryer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2010.

The American West has long inspired both breathtaking hope and bitter disillusionment. Dreams of promised lands to the West—of new Edens or Elysian Fields shimmering on the horizon—have captivated many cultures across time. As Gerald Nash argued, “Almost every European language group throughout Christendom developed some tale of adventure in which a mythical land of plenty beckoned somewhere in the West,” and the discovery of a sprawling land across the Atlantic seemed to bring such dreams of adventure and perfection down to earth and within reach.¹ From John Winthrop’s hopes for building a shining “city upon a hill” knit together in bonds of brotherly affection in 1630 to Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s notion of Americans as energetic “western pilgrims” seeking self-fulfillment in 1780 and into our own times, collective and individual visions of utopia have pulled starry-eyed migrants ever westward.

¹ Gerald D. Nash, “European Images of America: The West in Historical Perspective,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Spring 1992), 5.

The image of the West as a place for perfection, a fresh slate and New Eden, continues to have a global appeal. The mythic West may be, in Robert Athearn's words, "the closest thing we have to a collective experience . . . the loveliest and most enduring of our myths, the only one universally accepted."²

That such grandiose dreams are usually doomed to failure is a lament that resounds like a breast-beating Jeremiad throughout American history. The yawning gap between utopian promise and profane reality is especially stark in the last frontiers of the Far West where westward moving dreamers run out of continent and up against the Pacific. The vast expanses of the final West not only entice people with their overwhelming beauty, but also provide an unforgiving backdrop for every misstep. It is in many ways a land littered with ghost towns, disappointed dreamers, and failed utopias, where fantasies of perfection breed angry visions of apocalypse. It is a land of last chances where the stakes are high because there's nowhere left to go, and a bi-polar dialectic of utopian dreams breeding dystopian despair runs rampant across the deserts, basins, mountains, and crowded coastlines of this final West.

A long line of American writers has evoked the West as a land of promise and utopian possibility, though often with deep irony. The tragic contrast between sacred and profane, between myth and reality on the ever-retreating frontier has been at the heart of classic American literature from James Fenimore Cooper to John Steinbeck, from Mark Twain to Jack Kerouac. F. Scott Fitzgerald's paean to the West "that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh green breast of the new world. . . . the last and greatest of all human dreams" and Wallace Stegner's evocation of the region as a "geography of hope" are both haunted by the knowledge that such dreams are often betrayed. Two fairly recent novels—Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)—might stand as chronological bookends to this process, with Morrison depicting how the western wilderness dream was corrupted from the onset by the slaughter of Indians and enslavement of Africans and McCarthy portraying its bitter end four centuries later in a scorched, almost lifeless continent.³

In less dramatic though equally compelling fashion, a string of western historians, including Henry Nash Smith, Carey McWilliams, Ray Allen Billington, Robert Hine, Richard Slotkin, Patricia Limerick, and Richard White, have also traced the dynamics of disillusionment across the American West.⁴ Building upon this tradition, two

² Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 274.

³ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 182; Wallace Stegner, "Introduction," *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Random House, 1992), xv; Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Random House, 2006).

⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (New York: Current Books, 1949); Robert V. Hine, *California Utopianism: Contemplations of Eden* (San Francisco: Boyd & Fraser, 1981); Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton: 1981); Richard Slotkin,

new historical studies make significant contributions to our understanding of western utopianism gone sour. William H. Katerberg's *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008) and Heather Fryer's *Perimeters of Democracy: Inverse Utopias and the Wartime Social Landscape of the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010) trace the fate of dashed hopes and tarnished dreams in the West and also illuminate the many varieties and larger implications of utopian thought and practice. Both books portray the trans-Mississippi West as a blank canvas for utopian projections, and both examine the shadowy recesses of such efforts—one largely through a broad sweep of creative literature, and the other through a meticulous study of government-sponsored community programs. *Future West* explores imagined utopias of every stripe across the ideological spectrum and finds them largely flawed and filled with apocalyptic prophecies, while *Perimeters of Democracy* focuses on four social engineering projects where ostensibly high ideals were translated into repressive policies and practices. Although both authors spotlight many dubious consequences of this impulse, it is Katerberg's theologically imbued journey across a fictive landscape littered with broken dreams, rather than Fryer's detailed community study, that recovers saving remnants and glimmers of hope in western utopianism.

In its largest sense, *Future West* effectively “explores questions about American identity, frontier mythology, human transformation, and the future by analyzing dystopian, utopian, and apocalyptic narratives set in the far West” (4), and it achieves this through an impressive blend of intellectual history, literary criticism, political theory, and theology. Along the way, in one of the book's finest contributions, we visit an array of carefully defined utopian types—including “antiutopias,” “critical utopias,” “racialist utopias,” “pocket utopias,” “cyberpunk utopias,” and “eco-socialist utopias”—that become an essential roadmap to understanding the larger significance of utopia and of the presentday American West.

Future West opens by exploring the myth of the West as a bright redemptive place with two antithetical cultural expressions: a dark film that turns this myth on its head and a relentlessly cheerful theme park that reaffirms it. Ridley Scott's baleful film *Blade Runner* (1982), based upon Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and Walt Disney's blissful Frontierland (1955), launch the book and serve as vivid dystopian and utopian counterpoints throughout. Scott's brooding image of Los Angeles in 2019 as the bitter end of a failed frontier, as a smog-shrouded metropolis choked with the dregs of humanity who have lost all hope for a better life in the West, is the antithesis of Disney's promised land of rejuvenating adventure and a great big beautiful tomorrow. Surveying the stark contrast between the West as a crumbled land plagued with “accelerated decrepitude” and the region as an everlasting

Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987); Richard White, “*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

fountain of youth, Katerberg takes us through a gamut of imagined Wests that fall between these extremes.

After setting up antithetical visions of the region in chapter one, *Future West* traces the roots of this dialectic to two late-nineteenth century mythmakers in chapter two. By a remarkable coincidence, Frederick Jackson Turner and William F. Cody presented riveting narratives of the western frontier on the same day at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in July 1893. Both Turner's academic paper and Cody's popular pageantry memorialized the dying frontier and brooded about the fate of a frontierless society. While Turner emphasized pioneers grappling with nature and Cody showcased cowboys defeating Indians, each man worried about the obsolescence of these character-building activities in the new urban-industrial order. Neither man, according to Katerberg, found fully satisfying alternatives for the exhilarating yet doomed frontier, and their outdated adventure stories remain embedded in the national psyche, blinding Americans to the realities and responsibilities of their crowded contemporary world.

Katerberg praises a scattering of intellectuals in chapter two—among them Josiah Royce, John Wesley Powell, and Turner himself at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the New Western Historians a century later—who have offered counter narratives of community building and regional consciousness to replace the destructive aspects of the western frontier. He also stresses that crowd-pleasing tales of rugged individualism on the open land continue to shape our national identity largely for the worse. The heart of his book is devoted to exposing such regressive narratives and finding constructive alternatives, to searching for “redemptive” stories and wise utopias that envision the West “as a home, as a place” for community building rather than as a wild open space to satisfy individual fantasies (207).

Future West's central chapters explore a multitude of utopias and fictional narratives, and the first ones that we encounter are dystopian for distinctly different reasons. Douglas Coupland's ennuiridden novels with their “ferociously hip depiction of a depthless West” (43), discussed in chapter three, are a world apart from the decidedly unhip white power fantasies examined in chapter four. Both depict the western dream gone sour, but Coupland's ironic vision of a commercialized landscape crisscrossed by world-weary “tourists on endless journeys” (48) in *Generation X* (1991) or *Shampoo Planet* (1992) is a far cry from the angry white men plotting ethnic cleansing who are heroically sketched in William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978) or O. T. Gunnarsson's *Hear the Cradle Song* (1993).

Easily the most disturbing and memorable part of the book, chapter four, “Return to Nature,” exposes a dark strata of racist utopias and “racist dreams of a better life” with their calls for redemptive violence to purify a degenerate multicultural society. Hate-filled screeds like *The Turner Diaries* and the pages of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, as well as virulent neo-Nazi, Aryan Nation, Christian identity, and survivalist manifestos and websites—all have served as field manuals, as western-themed *Mein Kamps*, for men like Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, Montana Unabomber

Ted Kaczynski, and the apocalyptic groups holed up at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, in the 1990s. Even more mainstream tracts, like Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938) or Pat Robertson's religious apocalypse novel *The End of an Age* (1995), prophesize a refuge for the faithful in a newly purified frontier West. That such return-to-nature and perfectionist impulses, with their "instinct for territorialism" (62) and "social and spiritual ties to the land" (63), can spark violent radicalism across the political spectrum is one of Katerberg's most significant and sobering insights.

After this walk on the dark side, it is a relief to discover more balanced, nuanced, and pluralistic alternatives in subsequent chapters. Focusing on the visions of novelists Leslie Marmon Silko, Ernest Callenbach, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Walter Miller, the four central chapters offer measured hope for mixed-race, environmentally sound, historically grounded, and theologically sustained futures. Set in the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, Southern California, and Utah deserts respectively, Silko's, Callenbach's, Robinson's, and Miller's cautious utopias provide positive though hardly flawless counterpoints to the dark fanaticism and rootless world weariness of so many ideologically driven western narratives.

Chapter five, appropriately titled "Legacies of Hope," presents Silko's *Almanac for the Dead* (1991) with its piercing indictment of Western civilization and creative blending of Native American and Chicano/a traditions, as a novel that highlights strengths and weaknesses in every political position, yet remains "utopian in spirit but with no intention of providing a blueprint" (106). Shifting from Silko's multicultural "critical utopianism" rooted in the Southwest to Callenbach's Edenic vision set in the Northwest, chapter six explores the strengths and weaknesses of his New Age, counterculture-inspired novels, *Ecotopia* (1975) and *Ecotopia Emerging* (1980). If Silko's novel points toward hard-earned cultural diversity, Callenbach's books set a path to ecological harmony. The strengths of one utopia highlight the weaknesses of the other. While praising Ecotopians' love of place, commitment to sustainability, and ability to make their region "a home in deeper and more integral ways" (131), Katerberg recognizes that such tight-knit communities "leave little room for the alien or the stranger and foster racial division, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia" (129). Echoing a quandary that has troubled communal back-to-the-land efforts throughout American history, Katerberg wisely observes, "A deeply rooted sense of place does not easily coexist with cosmopolitan pluralism" (129).

Chapters seven and eight, focusing on Kim Stanley Robinson's Orange County trilogy and Walter Miller's classic desert apocalypse, continue the survey of critical utopias that lack precise blueprints and "include diverse voices and conflicting views and depict utopias that are open-ended, have flaws, and are continuing to evolve in significant ways" (218). Robinson's *Wild Shore* (1984), *Gold Coast* (1988), and *Pacific Edge* (1990) trace the emergence of a chastened society from the ashes of nuclear holocaust. In this renewed Orange County with its scattering of pocket utopias close to the land, we witness a "real utopia" that draws upon the lessons of the past, and in

Robinson's words, "isn't the perfect end product of our wishes" but rather "a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process with no real end" (135).

With its central image of an isolated monastery preserving shreds of spirituality amid a ruined world, Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) brings a strong religious dimension to the ideal of critical utopianism. The yearning for spiritual redemption and need for a transcendent force to mend human flaws is a central theme of Miller's novel as well as Katerberg's book. Stressing the ongoing relevance of religion to the utopian impulse and the fundamental meaning of "apocalypse" as revealing a better world, he concludes, "There can be no utopian dreaming without glimmers of God, the new heaven and the new earth, and eternal life" (221). In this chapter and the next on "Cyborg Frontiers" and cyberpunk literature, Katerberg stresses the limits of technology, the ultimate emptiness of cyberspace, and the essential need for transcendent ideals and glimpses of God in the deeper utopian process of redemption.

In his concluding discussion of redemptive "Stories that Save"—narratives that "can powerfully shape our experience and understanding of present-day circumstances" for the better—Katerberg blends his spiritual message with a parting bow to Frederick Jackson Turner (217–18). Searching "for the utopian glimmers in his frontier thesis," Katerberg finds traces of this in what Turner referred to in a 1914 essay as "better social domains yet unexplored" (222). It is a small flaw in this brilliant book that it ought to recognize that Turner did far more than simply hint at vague alternatives to the restless frontier. Prefiguring one of Katerberg's driving themes, it is ironic that Turner, the father of the frontier thesis, was also the founder of a deeply insightful regional thesis. Along with Josiah Royce and John Wesley Powell, Turner was a pioneer of regionalist thought and a direct predecessor to Katerberg's place-based, home-dwelling perspective. Vigorously advocating regional identity as the necessary sequel to the rootless frontier for much of his career, Turner, through his oft-ignored sectional thesis, urged westerners and Americans in general to finally settle down and make their land a home and cherished place after so many centuries of footloose wandering.⁵

Katerberg's sweeping survey is a vivid contrast to Fryer's grounded study of four government-constructed communities. In moving from one book to the other, we shift from theory to practice, from fictional projections to on-the-ground projects, from godly glimmers to government interventions. While *Future West* examines a gamut of imagined utopias, *Perimeters of Democracy* provides detailed studies of misguided efforts to shape suspect populations, and Fryer's account of the rise and fall of these "inverse utopias," where high ideals coalesced into repressive public policies, is a useful counterpoint to Katerberg's more ethereal speculations.

⁵ See Michael C. Steiner, "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," *Western Historical Quarterly* 10 (October 1979), 437–66; Steiner, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Western Regionalism," in Richard Etulain, ed. *Writing Western History: Essays on Classic Western Historians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 103–35; and Steiner, "From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (November 1995), 479–501.

Fryer also portrays the American West as a fertile seedbed where utopian dreams grow in unexpected ways. Beginning with Jefferson's hopes for creating an agrarian utopia in the West, Fryer argues that the vast stretches beyond the Mississippi remain an alluring destination as "generations of freedom-seekers have piled into wagons, train cars, and Volkswagen vans and headed west to escape the many constraints of the East" (29). The deep-seated irony for Fryer is that the beckoning possibilities of western space encourage two contradictory impulses: toward individual freedom seeking, and toward collective experimentation and social control. The open West provides wide elbow room for achieving personal dreams at the same time that it is scattered with secluded security zones, experimentation sites, reservations, and relocation camps. *Perimeters of Democracy* analyzes the significance of such controlled spaces where seemingly benign government programs backfired and bred the opposite or *inverse* of the ideals they were meant to achieve and where suspect groups keenly felt "the shrill dissonance of living as government wards in a region characterized by its independent spirit" (9).

Fryer's book focuses on four groups of people feared as potential subversives needing various degrees of Americanization in times of war. The Native American descendants of the Modoc War of the early 1870s, living under federal control on the Klamath Reservation in southern Oregon, were subject to the most enduring of the four inverse utopias. Fryer's three other rehabilitative spaces grew out of wartime tensions in the early 1940s and were based partially on the federal government's experience with Indian reservations. The Topaz Relocation Center in central Utah imprisoned Japanese Americans from the West Coast; Vanport, Oregon, a rapidly constructed housing project near Portland, contained large numbers of newly arrived African American wartime workers; and Los Alamos, New Mexico, an isolated community planned for the creation of the atomic bomb, housed large numbers of free-thinking scientists and intellectuals who were deemed to need constant surveillance.

Scattered across the West, these "controlled, miniaturized Americas" witnessed social engineering ranging from ostensibly benign "Americanization with training wheels" at Los Alamos and Vanport to blatantly straight-jacketed "barbed wire democracy" at Klamath and Topaz (26). Much has been written about Japanese American internment as well as about secret atomic weapons sites of the 1940s,⁶ but Fryer's book is the first to compare them as failed utopias and to fit them, along with an Indian reservation and a wartime workers' community, into a larger utopian tradition in the American West. One of the great strengths of this book is that it gathers four seemingly disparate communities under the innovative label of "inverse utopia"—places where well-intentioned blueprints and top-down plans go astray—and in the process it expands our understanding of the utopian impulse in general and raises important questions about the implementation of high ideals.

⁶ On atomic research and test sites in the West, see for example Peter B. Hales, *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), and Carl Abbott, ed., *The Atomic West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998).

Along the way, we encounter a mountain of information about each site, both from the perspective of government officials as well as the people they're trying to control. We are introduced to an army of federal bureaucrats whose plans almost always go awry, ranging from well-intentioned idealists like John Collier and D'Arcy McNickle at Topaz to more repressive figures like Wade Crawford at Klamath and General Leslie Groves at Los Alamos. We learn about governmentsponsored red baiting and racism directed against minority shipbuilders at Vanport and a federal cover up of the causes of a preventable flood that drowned fifteen Vanport residents, mostly newly arrived Okies and southern Blacks.

Most significantly, Fryer uncovers a persistent strain of creative resistance among these suspect groups. At Klamath, for example, the legacy of Kientpoos (or Captain Jack as he was known to the whites) who fought the US Army to a standstill in the late 1860s could be detected in the courageous actions of World War II veteran Edison Chiloquin, who in the 1970s refused to surrender his land to the US Forest Service and instead built a small community where the culture of the Klamath people would be preserved. In the bleak desert at Topaz, where Fred Korematsu bravely challenged the constitutionality of Japanese relocation, the community-elected council members used their high level of education and organizational skills to demand improved healthcare, working conditions, and safety standards and "established a scholarship fund, a tofu factory, fire prevention week, regular war bond drives," and more. These and other community-grounded achievements proved, in Fryer's words, "that the Japanese had a greater appreciation for the workings of small-town democracy than their village headmen from Washington, D.C." (109).

The overriding paradox of the best laid plans from Washington was that "[f]ar from regenerating democracy and individual initiative in the new western settlements, life in wartime federal communities either bred a political apathy born of learned helplessness, sowed seeds of distrust in the federal government, or stoked the flames of lifelong political activism" (280). Fryer underscores the insidious quality of these imposed communities, stressing that "the federal government did not build fascist dystopias; it built inverse utopias where all the key features of American life were in place but worked backwards" (284). "The enduring outcome of America's great experiment in demographic management," she concludes, "was a crisis of faith in the federal government and its adherence to the principles of democracy, social equality, and due process. . . . In attempting to purify the body politic and reunite the national family, the government reaped what it sowed—suspicion, hostility, and conflict" (311).

While the thought-provoking notion of inverse utopia is the driving force behind *Perimeters of Democracy*, it also invites critical questions concerning the author's use of the term "utopia" and the spectrum of places gathered under this label. There are so many differences between these government-imposed communities and the people in them—between imprisoned Japanese Americans at Topaz, for example, and privileged physicists at Los Alamos—that comparisons can seem strained and unconvincing. Fryer's freewheeling comparison of a cross section of rehabilitative places as utopian

efforts, furthermore, raises piercing and sometimes troubling questions. In what true sense of the term can such innately oppressive places as internment camps and reservations be labeled as utopias, even with ironic adjectives attached? If top-down plans inevitably backfire, as Fryer astutely suggests, are there counter examples of successful grassroots utopian communities that might stand in contrast to the grim history of utopian failure narrated throughout her book? Perhaps, from her perspective, *any* form of cooperative utopian practice, whether from the top down or the bottom up, is doomed to failure. Perhaps, as Henry Thoreau concluded and Heather Fryer implies, a personal utopia is all that one can hope to achieve—at Walden Pond, in the open spaces of the West, or anywhere on the face of the earth.

A great strength of both *Perimeters of Democracy* and *Future West* is that they raise such pressing questions about utopian thought and practice rooted in the American West. While Fryer’s carefully anchored study stands in contrast to Katerberg’s panoramic survey, both authors present the West as an alluring place of promise and perfection, and both depict an ongoing dialectic of grandiose hopes gone sour, of dreams of perfection breeding nightmares of oppression, of Frontierland utopias becoming *Blade Runner* dystopias.

In their ingrained skepticism, both authors seem to reflect, consciously or unconsciously, philosopher Karl Popper’s devastating critique of utopian thought and practice in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). Writing in the shadow of looming fascist and communist totalitarianism in the 1930s and early 1940s, Popper depicted these vicious regimes as the inevitable fruit of utopian visions of perfection forced upon imperfect pluralistic societies. “The view that society should be beautiful like a work of art,” Popper insisted, “leads only too easily to violent measures.” Intoxicated by sweeping aesthetic visions of a perfect world, utopian wholesale social engineers—ranging from Plato to Marx to Hitler and Stalin—feel justified in resorting to radical canvas cleaning to achieve their goals, even if it means that they “must purify, purge, expel, banish, and kill” every unruly element that stands in the way. “Even with the best intention of making heaven on earth,” Popper concluded, the utopist “only succeeds in making it a hell—that hell which man alone prepares for his fellow man.”⁷ Reflecting the lasting power of Popper’s argument, Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood has recently argued that “[t]he best intentions have indeed paved many roads in Hell. . . . of course we should try to make things better, insofar as it lies within our power. But we should probably not try to make things perfect, especially not ourselves, for that path leads to mass graves.”⁸

Fryer’s dark chronicle of failed utopias echoes Popper’s and Atwood’s biting criticisms. Although Fryer would recognize an immense contrast between the benign efforts

⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Volume 1, *The Spell of Plato* (1945: reprint Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 166, 168. For a useful summation, see Popper, “Utopia and Violence” (1947) reprinted in *World Affairs* 149 (Summer 1986), 3–9.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, “Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Utopia,” in Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 95.

of a well-intentioned John Collier, for example, and the brutal schemes of a fanatical Jim Jones, her narrative remains deeply suspicious of *any* collective effort to build heaven on earth. Katerberg is also wary of the dangers of utopian dreaming, declaring, for example, that “[h]istory scorns blueprints” (130), but unlike Fryer, he provides hope for what might be called constructive or wise utopianism. In the pluralistic “critical utopianism” of Leslie Marmon Silko or the unfinished, open-ended “pocket utopias” of Kim Stanley Robinson, we encounter imperfect visions that are once again “utopian in spirit but with no intention of providing a blueprint.” In the clear-eyed narratives of Ernest Callenbach, Walter Miller, Octavia Butler, and others, we find redemptive “stories that save” by pointing us *toward* a more perfect world, *toward* heaven on earth—never quite getting there, but improving society bit by bit.

Wise utopianism accepts conflict, diversity, and shifting ideals at the same time that it offers hope for a better, though never perfect world. In contrast to Popper’s image of inflexible blueprints and murderous social engineering, a tempered or critical utopianism provides glimpses of perfection that are always changing, never fully achievable, yet always necessary. Affirming the need for provisional visions and countering Popper’s rejection of utopia, political theorist Mulford Sibley has argued, “Every generation, to be fully human, must write its own utopias, just as it must rewrite its story of the past, or history.” Recognizing that “no polity on earth has ever even approximated the ideal justice or the ideal commonwealth about which the greatest utopists dreamed,” Sibley asserted that “every utopian statement is, therefore, always a partial failure and requires constant revision in the light of new insights, information, and understandings.” “Utopia building,” he concluded, “is eminently practical. It helps save us from the illusions that both revolutionary leaders and defenders of the status quo constantly tend to propagate. . . . It helps us see civilization in perspective and to see dramatically the enormous distance between what is and what ought to be.”⁹

Despite their differences about the viability of utopia, the larger unifying message of these two important books is that the American West, for better or for worse, has been a landscape of promise and a seedbed of dreams. As we have seen, many American Studies scholars have explored the intimate ties between utopian dreams and dystopian despair, and several contemporary critics— especially Mike Davis and Rebecca Solnit—brilliantly examine the dynamics of disillusionment and the fate of such impossible ideals in the West.¹⁰ Katerberg and Fryer also dwell on the tragic side of western utopianism, adding profound theological and ideological depth to the

⁹ Mulford Q. Sibley, *Nature and Civilization: Some Implications for Politics* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1977), 257, 253–54. Sounding a similar note, Robert Hine writes in *California Utopianism: Contemplations of Eden* that utopianism, rightly practiced, supplies a general “blueprint of the destination but does not seriously chart the route, either before or after the light of the dream. It creates the outlines of a ship but does not necessarily undertake the voyages” (9).

¹⁰ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Davis, “Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country,” *New Left Review* 65 (July/August 1993), 49–73; Davis, *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American*

discussion. Revealing the false promises and twisted dreams found in the racist and survivalist enclaves, the reservations and secret installations scattered across the land, both authors ultimately affirm that the splendid spaces of the West with their tantalizing hints of perfection remain a beckoning geography of hope requiring tender care.

Such ideas are compelling, but none have expressed the immense promise and heartache of the West more powerfully than two classic Western writers whose words helped open this essay. Beyond describing the open West as “the loveliest and most enduring of our myths, the only one universally accepted,” Robert Athearn praised “its yawning distances that seem to swallow sound and time, its lingering dangers, its feel of great forces that will not be tamed, its beauty that can clutch at your stomach and make you want to cry.” And looking back at the myriad of social and environmental disasters inflicted by rootless souls upon the West, Wallace Stegner concluded, “one cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.”¹¹

West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Solnit, *Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009).

¹¹ Robert Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, 273–74; Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1969), 38.

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