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A Grenade With the Fuse Lit: William S. Burroughs and Retroactive Utopias in *Cities of the Red Night*

SEAN GRATTAN

Abstract

In 1981, William S. Burroughs—often considered a writer of devastatingly apocalyptic dystopian vision—published “Cities of the Red Night,” his first foray into utopian writing. This article examines Burroughs’s conception of the “retroactive utopia.” It highlights Burroughs’s ambivalence toward utopian projects and invokes both his hope and his disappointment in the ability for utopian writing to engender political change.

William S. Burroughs is justifiably famous for his stark and uncompromising criticism of structures of social, economic, and political control in the United States in the late twentieth century. For all of his criticism, however, Burroughs did not offer any concrete positive alternative visions for social organization until the publication of *Cities of the Red Night* in 1981. *Cities of the Red Night* is an important literary intervention into the possibilities of utopia during the rapid expansion of the logic of late capitalism. Briefly, in *Cities of the Red Night* Burroughs develops the idea of the retroactive utopia as a way of conceptualizing utopia in a time when utopia, or at least left-leaning understandings of alternative social structures, are facing attacks from all sides. Burroughs imagines the retroactive utopia as a historical moment when there is a chance for a radical alteration in the social fabric. *Cities of the Red Night* uses Captain Mission, a seventeenth-century pirate, and his attempt to create a utopian pirate colony on Madagascar to imagine what might happen if this historical moment had been successful. By making the foundation of his utopian vision conditional on the overturning of the failure of an actual utopian moment, Burroughs wrestles with the ambivalent nature of utopian literature in relation to revolutionary practice in the late twentieth century.

In his essay “Postmodern Anus,” Wayne Pounds examines the parodic and utopian impulses in William S. Burroughs’s work, going so far as to describe the “building of utopia” as the telos of Burroughs’s project. Pounds’s essay, a vacillating yet favorable reading of Burroughs’s oeuvre, asks an important

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question that it then fails to answer: “To put it country simple, the question is whether the boys’ camp of Burroughs’s earthly garden of delights is one any of us would want to spend a summer in—not to mention a lifetime. More specifically, it should be asked whether even the most charitably allegorical reading of the boys’ camp utopia, with its sexist exclusionism, can save it from falling back into an unredeemed mechanism indistinguishable from the systems of control it is meant to subvert.”¹ This question cuts to the heart of all utopian writing. Is it possible for any utopia to transcend its foundations, or do they always remain tethered to the past? Pounds measures out what he considers to be utopian and dystopian, though he is quite vague in his utopianism while incredibly specific in his dystopianism—the books are utopian because they “do imagine utopia” and because of their “semiotic structure,” while they are dystopian because of their misogyny and their linking “knowledge to destructive technology.”² What Pounds’s murky analysis misses is the ambivalence of utopia as a conceptual framework in and of itself. The brilliance of Burroughs’s work is his understanding of the complexity of claiming utopian projects and universalizing political positions. In other words, Burroughs’s texts engage with the difficulty of writing utopia within a historical context that shies away from totalizing narratives. Therefore, rather than attempting to schematically trace what is or is not utopian in Burroughs’s later work, an examination of how the ambivalence of utopia becomes an encapsulating social and thematic category provides richer ground for study.

I Know What the Future Holds for Me

As a literary genre, utopian writing most obviously wrestles with Fredric Jameson’s injunction to “always historicize.”³ Utopian literature must simultaneously balance between narratives familiar enough for readers to connect with and defamiliarizing enough to shock readers into imagining alternate sociopolitical formations. The formation of new forms of subjectivity through the practice of reading utopian literature is the primary reason utopian texts are written and distributed. After poststructuralism, however, and a much deserved distrust of totalizing master narratives, what is the space for utopian narratives and the concomitant commitment to molding subjectivity through utopian narrative?

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson describes a bifurcation in utopian thought: one line invested in the realization of the utopian project

and the other an “omnipresent Utopian impulse.”⁴ The two lines intertwine and inform one another; the utopian project is impossible without the utopian impulse, and once the impulse erupts into practice, it passes over a threshold wherein the impulses are codified and degraded. Jameson outlines the constellations of utopian desire and narrative—trying at once to distinguish the momentary flashes of revolutionary desire from the simultaneous recodification of those desires. This desire is inherently political but not motivated by politics. In other words, political systems insulate the populace from their potential, but the utopian impulse, the hope for something better, invests all political thought. Therefore, the utopia occupies a paradoxical space where the fulfillment of utopian desire simultaneously renders it desiccated and obsolete.

Utopian texts are programmatic insofar as they attempt to engender new worlds through their textual practices. In his insightful book *Imaginary Communities*, Philip Wegner argues that utopian narratives and the modern nation-state are inextricably tied to one another. Wegner extends Etienne Balibar’s argument that “*every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary*.”⁵ According to Wegner, the narrative utopia produces the social practices of the reader so that even as a failure the utopia begets something. Wegner asserts that “if we too quickly and uncritically accept as a conclusion that the narrative utopia, like every other form of cultural representation, fails to break free of the gravitational field of the ideologies, or ‘beliefs,’ of its moment, we risk losing sight of the unique critical, pedagogical, and representational work performed by the genre.”⁶ The facile acceptance of utopias as marked primarily by failure elides the possibility inherent within the utopian project. In Wegner’s formulation, the performance of oppositional practices through narrative utopias allows a rupture from the text’s specific politico-historical framework. Furthermore, the act of narrating utopia itself works as an exploration of utopia as genre, and as such, the modern utopia must struggle with the weight of self-awareness. It seems, however, that the representational, critical, and pedagogical work performed by utopian narratives appears through failure; a meditation on utopia, on nowhere, cannot help but struggle with what Jameson calls the “formal flaw” of utopian writing.⁷ So, though utopia may succeed through failure, the postmodern utopia must make this formal flaw clear. If there is a kernel of failure within all utopias, then modern and postmodern utopias—in

their self-awareness as a genre—make this kernel explicit. Furthermore, if the performance of narrative utopias is the depiction of something beyond the politico-historical moment of their formations, then thinking the moment of that break, or that beyond, *has* to confront its own impossibility constantly and has to powerfully approach its own contingency.

In *Cities of the Red Night*, Burroughs deploys both straight realist narration (often nearly hard-boiled in tone) and the more avant-garde cut-up/fold-in method he made famous in his 1960s Nova Trilogy to follow the exploits of a failed band of pirate revolutionaries attempting to wrest control of Panama from Spain. Burroughs organizes the transnational and transtemporal narrative, part twentieth-century detective novel and part seventeenth-century pirate adventure story, around an ethics outlined in the foreword that perhaps can best be summarized as collectivized freedom to exist in a world removed from the tyranny of governmental oppression.

Cities of the Red Night is a text heavy with the weight of its impossibility. Burroughs begins the novel with an invocation, if not a challenge. Readers must imagine a world where the pirate Articles of Captain Mission were accepted on a worldwide scale. Captain Mission's Articles, slightly changed by Burroughs, outline a society where mutual recognition of individual and collective rights powers social interaction.⁸ This, coming before the American and French revolutions, radically reimagines social relations based around mutual recognition. The outcome of the acceptance of the Articles as imagined by Burroughs is a completely different Western history—an avoidance of the horrors of colonialism and slavery, capitalism and oppression. The foreword to the novel—humorously titled “Fore!”—is the blueprint for the sociopolitical changes envisioned by Burroughs and narratively enacted throughout the rest of the text. Here, Burroughs first describes the history of Captain Mission and the pirate Articles; he then moves into a description of what he calls retroactive utopia; and finally he points out the missed chance represented by the failure of Captain Mission's pirate utopia. Burroughs repeats this arc of hope and failure throughout the rest of the text. He points to the ingenuity and imagination of pirates like Captain Mission who, in the face of encroaching capitalism, created an alternative way of living that stressed an immanent set of individual rights within communal groups. In the novel, however, Burroughs's utopia is certainly ambiguous insofar as the positive aspects—freedom from oppression based

on sexuality, gender, or race—are predicated on the violent eradication of a wide swath of the population. This opens all the potential traps of utopias shifting into despotic totalities.

Burroughs depicts a utopia, but he ultimately describes its spectacular failure. For Jameson, “the Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.”⁹ Through its constant repetition, *Cities of the Red Night* gives the reader *nothing but the break*—the break from traditional political formations but also the break from that disruption. Utopias, by describing new and oppositional positions simultaneously, engender these same positions. It is, however, also the forceful positioning of disruption as a sociopolitical framework, the discovery of new ways of imagining social formations, though almost immediately mapped and subsumed, that gives *Cities of the Red Night* its force as a political intervention.

The oscillation between utopian desire and the actualization of that desire forms the central productive blockage to utopian texts. It is precisely the ambivalence inherent in utopias that causes Jameson to remark, “The best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively.”¹⁰ Though Jameson judges the spectacular failures of utopic texts as the best in the genre, he also insists on the continual desire for utopias. Jameson asserts, “[The] desire called Utopia must be concrete and ongoing, without being defeatist or incapacitating; it might therefore be better to follow an aesthetic paradigm and to assert that not only the production of the irresolvable contradiction is the fundamental process, but that we must imagine that some form of gratification inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible.”¹¹ Thus, the best utopian desire does not fall into resignation because the confrontation itself helps form the jouissance of utopian desire.

The balance between expressing the desire immanent in utopian projects and the codification inherent in the creating of utopias is the linchpin of Burroughs’s foray into utopianism, specifically what he calls “retroactive utopia.”¹² Burroughs describes the retroactive utopia as a historical moment that, if it had been slightly different, would radically alter history; the retroactive utopia “[rewrites] history from certain crucial junctures.”¹³

In Karen Hellekson's taxonomy of alternate history fiction, Burroughs's retroactive utopia would fit closely with her "nexus story." A nexus story is an alternate history that "focuses on a crucial point in history, such as a battle or assassination, in which something happens that changes the outcome from the one we know today."¹⁴ Burroughs says that "*nothing* is inevitable, except possibly the speed of light," and the impossibility of the retroactive utopia illustrates both the potentiality for alternate history and the fragility of utopian structures.¹⁵ For Burroughs, the crucial point is at least twofold: first, the acceptance of Captain Mission's pirate Articles, and second, the invention of a repeat firing pistol that gives the pirates an overwhelming technological advantage. With the retroactive utopia the nexus is described, but that crucial change between our history and the alternate history still falls short of the sweeping revolution necessary for the fulfillment of utopian desire.

The most important concept to stress is the failure of this project; not only is Captain Mission's historical chance missed, but the Burroughs chance is missed as well. The "Fore!" section of *Cities of the Red Night* begins on a seemingly high note, but then in the final line the mood shifts when he writes, "The chance was there. The chance was missed. . . . Only a miracle or disaster could restore it," and the complexity, nuance, and difficulty of any utopian project emerge.¹⁶ The difficulty in imagining and then representing alternative sociopolitical formations is sometimes glossed by utopian writers because of the overwhelming utopian desire for progress and change. Here is where Jameson's statement about failure both complicates and compliments Burroughs. Are all utopias nothing but chances that were there but missed, spectacular and impossible missteps that, if anything, further Power's grasp on the social? *Cities of the Red Night* traces the movement from utopian desire to utopian failure narratively; we see the moment of hope and desire and nearly simultaneously the failure of that desire. "Fore!" encapsulates this movement, and then the rest of the text plays this movement out. Aesthetically, Burroughs explored this territory with his use of cut-up/fold-in in the Nova Trilogy. Simultaneously, he also advocated the practical uses of tape recorders as disruptive social commentary in his more programmatic texts. In *Cities of the Red Night*, however, Burroughs attempts to combine the aesthetic and the programmatic while simultaneously approaching the problem of the utopian desire within utopias. In other words, the idealism in utopian

thought carries a fundamental flaw by thinking that humanity is, in some way, good. This quandary is inescapable for Burroughs—he can kill half the population, shoot the good or the bad into space, destroy money, or eradicate gender, but in the end, his solution is the mutation of humans into something that is *not human*. As we both form and are formed by our spaces we must make both our future spaces and ourselves unrecognizable to our current selves. However, failure is immanent in the utopian project; what sets *Cities of the Red Night* apart is the ultimate acceptance of the failure throughout the fight for utopia.

Burroughs's retroactive utopia differs in many respects from other utopian projects, most specifically by looking backward in order to move forward. Burroughs's retroactive utopia carries both hope and sadness, looking wistfully toward the past while accepting the crushing conditions of the future and the near impossibility of the situation getting any better. The retroactive utopia begins by accepting that something could change, but that change is impossible without a massive restructuring of the social. Failing to accept Captain Mission's challenge destroys the path that leads to utopia. Unfortunately, for Burroughs this leaves only one possible solution: an apocalyptic rupture, whittling the population down into only the acceptable freaks and degenerates. Burroughs cathects revolutionary desire through Captain Mission; he acts as a signifier for the entirety of piratical revolutionary action. According to Burroughs, had this ghost of a chance been taken, fought for, and achieved, history would have been rerouted and the tyranny, oppression, and disaster of European colonialism would have been avoided.

The missed chance—the ever-present road not taken—hangs over much of Burroughs's work, but as it looms it also informs. The missed chance and the retroactive utopia form a web of simultaneity—a multiplicity of possibility anchored in history but also existing as a phantasmatic construction. The section "Fore!" structurally encapsulates the entire text: moving from hope to desolation, toward a teleological openness—a blank aporia that problematizes both the hope and the desolation. In many ways, what we are left with is a kind of transcendental writing—that somebody, sometime, will make the necessary moves to allow a retroactive utopia to move away from retroactivity and fulfill the moments of potential inherent all along in the utopian chance.

Space Is the Place

The pirate narrative of *Cities of the Red Night* begins with Noah Blake's father deciding to move Noah and his friends out of town because of the nosiness of the neighbors. Burroughs writes,

Noah Blake and his father, Bert Hansen, Clinch Todd, Paco, and Sean Brady board a boat with their luggage stacked on deck. The villagers watch from the pier.

Mrs. Norton sniffs and says in her penetrating voice, "good riddance to the lot of them."¹⁷

The prejudice the boys feel on land disappears once they ship out on the *Great White*. Noah Blake writes about the difference between the discrimination on land and the freewheeling acceptance and community of the ship: "Who are the others—Brady, Hanson, Paco, Todd? Strangers like myself. I think that we came from another world and have been stranded here like mariners on some barren and hostile shore. I never felt that what we did together was wrong, but I fully understood the necessity and wisdom of concealing it from the villagers. Now that there is no need for concealment, I feel as if this ship is the home I had left and thought never to find again."¹⁸ The ship operates as a safe zone of conduct for Blake. On the *Great White's* deck Blake encounters a level of freedom impossible in the village he grew up in; the dissolution of the social bonds that forced him to conceal his sexuality allows Blake to realize that many of his problems stem from ideological formations that he can avoid through divorcing the land. Of course, Blake realizes that this idyll has to end, that the voyage must stop, and he asks the question that haunts the entire novel: "and what then?" Blake avoids the need for concealment, but only within a specific space, a space cordoned off from the rest of the social—a sacred space. The crew of the pirate ship offers solace and community; Blake feels "not only attraction, but kinship" to the rest of the crew.¹⁹ He recognizes that they too are strangers, extraterrestrial interlopers, but this recognition is tied, and remains tied, to the space of the pirate ship.

The safety and kinship on the *Great White* are a model for a utopian space, but it happens in an actual space, the space of the ship. The members of the crew of the *Great White* all sign a set of Articles modeled after Captain Mission's Articles. The signing of the Articles is the beginning of a revolution

that moves from the space of the ship to the land; a dubious character named Nordenholz leads the revolution. During their revolution, Nordenholz et al. do not account for or navigate the singularity of the piratical space, and this lack of forethought leaves the revolution (though still full of potential) a closed circuit. This is not to say that the piratical project is a total failure or must remain immanently impotent. Rather, the failure redeems the piratical potential but simultaneously reasserts the power of control societies.

Cities of the Red Night goes a long way in describing the everyday practices of the Articulated. According to Wegner, “By inserting something heretofore unknown in the world . . . the narrative utopia generates the cognitive space around which new kinds of lived experiences and theoretical perceptions form.”²⁰ Therefore, if one of the major purposes of utopian narratives is to articulate changing social practices, even texts that fail to transcend their specific historicity (as it seems they must) paradoxically offer momentary escapes. Burroughs writes moments of escape; this escape parallels Michel Foucault’s heterotopia—a denaturing of language and social practices that infiltrates legitimate spaces, momentarily rending them and engendering alternate social practices. Foucault writes:

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.²¹

By describing the boat as a place without place, Foucault asserts the materiality of the ship while simultaneously inscribing the ship within utopian discourse. In other words, Foucault maintains Thomas More's seminal concept of utopia being precisely nowhere while inscribing a spatial specificity to nowhere. Moving from the sea to land complicates the heterotopia of the pirate ship. Though Foucault wants to distance the heterotopia from the utopia proper—mostly by claiming utopian space as unreal space—it is all too clear that if utopian space does manage to come into being, it does so as a heterotopia. Unfortunately, if heterotopian space is tied to specific sites (the ship, the cemetery, the whorehouse), then moving a community whose subject positions are built around that site fractures the founding epistemological notions. In other words, the pirate ship, as the site of the formation of the Articles, is, by necessity, the only space where the Articles operate clearly. Losing the ship and the sea eviscerates the Articles and concomitantly the Articulated.

If, as Wegner and Balibar suggest, all communities are imaginary, then the truly utopian moments are those that imagine different forms of the imaginary—the accretion of these moments lays the material framework for revolutionary politics. Revolution is not necessarily a positive; reading “different forms of the imaginary” as only a positive thing obfuscates the dreadful catastrophes inflicted by humans upon themselves and the world. What renders the heterotopia useful is the denaturing of existing systems and practices—pirate ships, for instance, are the refraction of maritime labor. The problem, of course, is that the heterotopia binds the users to that particular space. Does the repetition of these spaces, multiple or singular, render what was once denaturing impotent and codifiable? Do subject positions, spatially arranged, embrace spaces that, emancipatory at first, simply shift from reformulating and reshaping systems of power and control to reproducing new and greater control structures? A multiplicity of interconnected heterotopias might solve this problem, a vast patchwork of friendly (or even neutral) spaces, but these spaces cannot be the linchpin of the communities within them.

A Ghostwriter and a Poison Pen

The retroactive utopia is a missed chance; it presents an obsolete possibility, a possibility only retrievable through storytelling. The two main protagonists in

Cities of the Red Night, Noah Blake and Clem Snide, both work, in one way or another, as scribes. Noah Blake begins the novel apprenticing as a gunsmith, but when he ships out with the *Great White* he begins keeping a diary; Blake's diary forms the backbone of the historical pirate narrative. However, he does not realize the power of his work; the pirate Captain Strobe wonders, "Noah writes that I am interested in printing his diaries 'for some reason.' Does he have any inkling what reason? He must be kept very busy as a gunsmith lest he realize his primary role."²² Like Noah Blake, Clem Snide also works as an undercover author. Snide starts the novel as a "private asshole," but soon enough he also finds his "primary role" as a forger of historical texts for the dubious Iguana Twins.²³ The Iguana Twins, who are in both the pirate and the detective narratives, understand the power of originals when they say, "Changes, Mr. Snide, can only be effected by alterations in the *original*," but simultaneously accept Snide's forgeries and, as such, problematize the notion of the stressed "*original*."²⁴ Clem Snide's forged documents make up the Noah Blake pirate narrative.

There is an interesting juxtaposition when Noah Blake describes the dinner he has at Skipper Nordenholz's house. Eating at a table filled with the most nefarious characters in the novel, Blake reports the conversation was "all concerned with weaponry and tactics but on a level I had never thought possible outside my lonely adolescent literary endeavors—for I have always been a scribbler and during the long shut-in winters filled notebook after notebook with lurid tales involving pirates from other planets, copulations with alien beings, and attacks of the Radiant Boys on the Citadel of the Inquisition. . . . The conversation at the dinner table gave me the feeling that my notebooks were coming alive."²⁵ Blake's feeling is hardly surprising—the entire text of *Cities of the Red Night* sounds like his notebooks. The movement of this passage to the description of how the articulated insurrection will happen is telling. Nordenholz rises and says, "I *would like to say* that our enemy in this area is Spain, and our most powerful weapon is the freedom hopes of captive peoples now enslaved under the Spanish."²⁶ The conditional here pertains both to the enemy and to which weapons are most powerful. The long list of weapons pushes the reader's attention away from the odd abdication of surety that has dominated the text up to this point. Simultaneously, what we find is that the most powerful weapon at the Articulated's disposal is not Noah Blake's firearms innovations as much as his power as an author.

After the section “Fore!” Burroughs writes an invocation, dedicating the text to an unsavory and motley collection of deities, a seemingly nihilistic grouping of death and disease, pestilence and abortion. However, more importantly (and appropriately), in the penultimate paragraph Burroughs dedicates *Cities of the Red Night* to “all the scribes and artists and practitioners of magic through whom these spirits have been manifested. . . .”²⁷ By juxtaposing writers with a list of seemingly destructive deities, Burroughs invests writers with mystical potential. The creation of a text is the formation of a world, and believing in that text—by an individual or group—invokes that world, filling it with power. Sorcery and writing exist hand in hand, not sorcery through deception but the creation and reworking of the world. Hirondelle de Mer, a sorceress who is part of Nordenholz et al.’s revolution, wonders how a society can continue to function without “the usual machinery of government, ambassadors, standing army and navy.” She replies to her own question: “They can only plan to hold the area by sorcery. This is a sorcerers’ revolution. I must find my part as a sorceress.”²⁸ The sorcerers’ revolution casts light on Noah Blake and Clem Snide’s role within the novel, not merely as gunsmiths or private investigators but as *writers*. They rewrite the world through their texts; however, these acts of writing work to codify desire.

Cities of the Red Night circles around the Articles. When the Articulated capture a town they immediately find the literate and have them read the Articles and explain it to the rest of the captured enemy. The act of reading and writing, therefore, is a central thematic in the text both as a way of forming communities and as a way of understanding those communities. The circulation of the Articles maps the desire for revolution—marking territories and shaping the form of the potential utopian moments. How do we move from the mapping and codification of desire to a territory that allows, perhaps, a repository of desire that does not inherently stamp it out but, instead, works through and with that desire?

Repression and Utopia

The confluence between desire and repression forms the central axis of Burroughs’s work. If, as Fredric Jameson asserts, “the Utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and to extirpate this specific root of all evil from which all others spring,” then

Burroughs's antinomianism registers as a foundational axis in the formulation of utopian desire.²⁹ In other words—and Burroughs clearly exemplifies this—it is a mistake to imagine utopias as springing primarily from a desire for inclusion. Now, in the case of Burroughs, and simultaneously his model pirates, there is a tendency for violence and bloodshed to foreground any revolutionary practice. Though this violence clearly opens multiple routes for wish fulfillment—whether through a desire for lawlessness, revenge, or control—it also inaugurates the community within the same dialectic of repression and freedom. Therefore, it becomes instantly obvious that any wholesale endorsement of a utopian project has to concomitantly question its own genesis.

For instance, after the Articulated capture Panama City they separate the garrison into two groups: those suited for training as partisans and the troublemakers. Burroughs writes, “Any body of men will be found to contain ten to fifteen percent of incorrigible troublemakers. In fact, most of the misery on this planet derives from this ten percent. . . . [T]here is but one sure remedy. In future operations, as soon as these individuals are discovered, either by advance intelligence or by on-the-spot observation, they will be killed on any pretext.” Thus, for the utopia to exist Burroughs eradicates the troublemakers whenever and wherever they are found. The lines directly before Burroughs's tract on troublemakers, however, offer an interesting juxtaposition. Blake describes the rationale behind the killing of two Inquisitors: “Brutal sanctions against a minority from which one is generally exempt cannot but produce a measure of satisfaction in those who are spared such treatment: ‘as decent clergymen you have nothing to fear.’ Thus the burning of Jews, Moors, sodomites produces a certain sense of comfort in those who are not Jews, Moors, or sodomites. . . . [T]o turn this mechanism back on the Inquisitors themselves gives me a feeling of taking over the office of fate. I am become the bad karma of the Inquisition. I am allowing myself also the satisfaction that derives from a measure of hypocrisy, rather like the slow digestion of a good meal.”³⁰ The brutality of the Inquisition is, simultaneously, the brutality of the Articulated. Power shifts, but in certain important ways the discursive practices remain the same. In becoming the “bad karma” of the Inquisition, Blake accepts the logics of the Inquisitional practice; from the very beginning, the Articulated have a veneer of newness but remain rooted in the past. The acceptance of the violent practices of the status quo is a fundamental failure in thinking the new.

Utopian desire runs through Burroughs's opening polemic; the desire is strong enough so that he ignores obvious problems within his own narrative of Captain Mission's failed settlement. Even though Captain Mission's colony was destroyed by a surprise attack by the indigenous population, Burroughs maintains that under the Articles "we have allies in all those who are enslaved and oppressed throughout the world, from the cotton plantations of the American South to the sugar plantations of the West Indies, the whole Indian population of the American continent peonized and degraded by the Spanish into sub-human poverty and ignorance, exterminated by the Americans, infected with their vices and diseases, the natives of Africa and Asia—all these are potential allies."³¹ The desire to envision the utopian agenda here dilutes the particularity of the situation. Rather than deciding to live under the Articles—becoming Articulated—the native population surrounding Mission's colony slaughtered the colonists. The failure of Captain Mission starkly contradicts the utopian desire espoused by Burroughs in the forward. Rather than greeting the Articles with open arms, the indigenous population rose up and eradicated the colonizers. The slaughter underscores the cynicism embedded in Burroughs's project.

Like any utopia, Burroughs's retroactive utopia attempts to flatten out the conflicts between people, and this flattening happens through antagonistic relationships between the utopian community and those outside of it. And although any utopia delimits itself from the community it exists in resistance to, Burroughs makes this resistance explicit and immanent at the foundational moment of the utopia and continues through antagonistic relationship with the outside as a narrative device—the fluctuation between pastoral and urban, experimental and traditional narrative—marking many of the antinomies within utopias and utopian literature. Therefore, the insistent question is: How does one first construct and then navigate a utopia, and, furthermore, how does this constituent utopian desire manifest itself within the text? How does the desire for a break with the sociopolitical formations of the present moment emerge in a way that does not fall back upon the violent or exclusionary practices of that present?

Freedom, in Burroughs's model, is only possible through a reconstruction of space; the codification of space at the hands of oppressive forces is the beginning of Burroughs's critique of capitalist social relations. Burroughs uses examples of seemingly open spaces (in this case

early colonial South America) as the entry point into his reconstruction of revolutionary projects. Burroughs writes, “There is simply no room left for ‘freedom from the tyranny of government’ since city dwellers depend on it for food, power, water, transportation, protection, and welfare. Your right to live where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree, died in the eighteenth century with Captain Mission.” It is impossible to continue without stopping here and noting the glaringly problematic moment in Burroughs’s formulation. The most obvious problem is his insistence on the positive potential of renegade Europeans occupying “underpopulated” continents like Africa and South America.³² To strip Burroughs’s formulation of grace and nuance leaves a shivering version of manifest destiny. Burroughs uses Captain Mission and the pirate Articles as a specific historical irruption—had Captain Mission lived long enough to set an “example for others to follow, mankind might have stepped free from the deadly impasse of insoluble problems in which we now find ourselves.”³³ The problem persists—a problem not directly addressed by Burroughs: Captain Mission was slaughtered by the indigenous population of Madagascar. This is the population Burroughs claims will welcome the Articles with open arms, but the theoretical reality is gravely out of touch with the practical manifestations. Similar to becoming the bad karma of the Inquisition, there is a failure of imagination here; the imperialist overtones are unavoidable.

Is it enough to focus on the immanent revolutionary desire expressed in Captain Mission and rearticulated in Burroughs, or are the problems so overwhelming that they leave that desire emaciated and stultified? To believe in the project, to have faith in the world, is the foundational step in any constituent desire. According to Gilles Deleuze, “If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume. . . . [O]ur ability to resist control or our submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move. We need both creativity *and* a people.”³⁴ The Articulated emerge as a people invested with creativity; the drawing up of pirate Articles, for instance, is a radical reinvention of maritime living. Burroughs imagines deciding to live under the Articles as an explosive event, a moment that blows “a hole through time.”³⁵ The decision is the foundational moment for a future politics. In part, then, the work becomes tracing this decision—which

is synonymous with foundational belief—through Burroughs’s utopian construction. To come back to the Pounds quote I began with, how different is the Burroughs utopia from the systems of control it seeks to subvert?

Burroughs perpetually repeats the form of the foreword; the diary of Hironde de Mer is perhaps the most interesting repetition because she is also one of the few positive female characters within Burroughs’s body of work. Since Hironde de Mer is also a diarist, she is part of the pantheon of heroes in *Cities of the Red Night*. The unequal power structure based on gender in the Articulated revolution is therefore brought under scrutiny by Burroughs. The explicit attack on gender inequality under the guise of universalism is one of the moments that make *Cities of the Red Night* such a rich and complex text in relation to utopias. With Hironde de Mer, Burroughs points to the formal flaw in the Articulated utopia; from the very beginning this utopia fails to take the singularity of the ship into account as the foundational moment of the utopia. While Burroughs seemingly does not see the problem with the assumption that certain underpopulated areas are open for colonization, he does see the inherent problematics of the universalization of freedom through antagonist relationships. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. Hironde de Mer simultaneously describes the utopia and points out its inherent sexism. Her critique of Captain Strobe and his band of “shabby adventurers” is a scathing indictment of the ideological rigidity and immanent flaws within utopian movements. In her diary she remarks, “I am a sorceress and a warrior. I do not relish being treated as a breeding animal. Would this occur to Skipper Nordenholz? No force, he says, has been applied—but I am forced by my circumstances, cast up here without a peso, and by my Indian blood which compels me to side with all enemies of Spain. The child will be brought up a sorcerer or sorceress.”³⁶ Choice, here, is fraught with all the negative valences of lesser evils. Hironde de Mer enumerates the positive aspects of the Nordenholz revolt but also acts as a voice of reason and caution against simplifying utopia and revolt. Poverty and her gender force her to side with Nordenholz and his crew; though she signs the Articles she does not enter the community in the same way as Noah Blake or any of the other male members of the Articulated. Do they recognize her as a sorceress and warrior? No. The lack of recognition, coupled with a naïveté about freedom of choice, hobbles the revolution from the beginning. Burroughs, therefore, builds a utopia and

continually shows its ruination. Hironnelle de Mer embodies the coercion, force, and violence hiding underneath universalizing utopian movements. Though Burroughs looks for “freedom from the Tyranny of government,” the problems of Hironnelle de Mer are exemplary of the web of control operating in late capitalist global economies. Hironnelle de Mer remains with the Articulated but also must search for her own role within a revolution mostly constructed for and by men. This is a good reminder that no community functions as a totality, no matter how universalizing its convictions.

Hironnelle de Mer represents the kind of creativity that Deleuze calls for in the production of subjectivities and events, but she is also a refraction of the failure of utopian projects. In *Wising Up the Marks*, Timothy Murphy writes, “[The Noah Blake narrative] contains Burroughs’s first fully articulated *affirmative* model of revolutionary subjectivity.”³⁷ Yet, when Murphy writes that in *Cities of the Red Night* Burroughs attempts to navigate the “Scylla of violent, specular rupture *à la The Wildboys* and the Charybdis of idealistic utopianism,” he misunderstands the nature of the retroactive utopia.³⁸ Inchoate in the retroactive utopia are both Scylla and Charybdis; there is no navigating between the two. *Cities of the Red Night* depicts the continuation of Captain Mission’s chance, an event that appears for a moment: “that moment that matters, it’s the chance we must seize.”³⁹ However, even though Burroughs seizes that chance, the repetition of failure continues. The final pages of *Cities of the Red Night* make this all too evident. Port Roger is in disarray, the pool covered in algae and the stairs falling in—“nothing here but lost years.”⁴⁰ The sense of frustration is palpable as Burroughs writes, “I didn’t want to write about this or what followed. Guayaquil, Lima, Santiago and all the others I didn’t see. The easiest victories are the most costly in the end.”⁴¹ The Articulated, it seems, swept through victory after victory, but their revolution still ends with failure and despair. The Articulated succeed, but their success is mirrored by regimes of power and knowledge; the lost years fill with newer and more insidious forms of control. In the final scenes, set as a play performed by the “Billy Celeste High School” titled *Cities of the Red Night*, time and space collapse, leaving a delirious combination of characters playing each other. The effect is chilling insofar as the velocity of the text increases; Burroughs collapses the entire narrative into a few pages, reveling in the revelation that all the characters are as indistinguishable as we have been led to believe.

Resignation and hope painfully collide in the final two paragraphs:

I have blown a hole in time with a firecracker.
Let others step through. Into what bigger and
bigger firecrackers? Better weapons lead to
better and better weapons, until the earth is a
grenade with the fuse burning.

I remember a dream from my childhood.
I am in a beautiful garden. As I reach out
to touch the flowers they wither under my
hands. A nightmare feeling of foreboding and
desolation comes over me as a great mushroom-
shaped cloud darkens the earth. A few may get
through the gate in time. Like Spain, I am
bound to the past.⁴²

This passage simultaneously transcends the teleological structure of narrative and remains firmly entrenched within it; the narrator (newly introduced) looks back with distaste at what has come before. Not only like Spain, the newly introduced narrator is also like Walter Benjamin's historical materialist who "cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history."⁴³ The hole the narrator has blown through time may accommodate a few, but it cannot accommodate him. The narrator straddles the present, looking into the future while tied to the past. Wendy Brown understands Benjamin's description of the historical materialist as "being untimely," yet using that untimeliness to "blow up historical time" through a "profound reading of the times."⁴⁴ Only through a reading of the times can utopian thought exist, but it is precisely the subsequent entanglement in the times that renders utopian literature ambiguous. If, as Fredric Jameson asserts, utopian writing is primarily concerned with its own inability as a genre to imagine itself, then the final lines of *Cities of the Red Night* perfectly illustrate his point. However, if this self-awareness is the central kernel of the postmodern utopia, then this failure, which Burroughs continually repeats, is a masterly rendering of the ambiguity of utopia. The narrator, having opened a hole in time, is unable to step through; rather, he stares backward, tied, like Spain, to the past.

Any Island Will Do

Cities of the Red Night illustrates the radically contingent nature of utopic space. As such, it also offers cogent critiques of the nature of utopias, the politico-historical moment the texts were written in—a historical moment that, I would argue, is still largely the dominant and operative cultural logic—and the potential for humankind to actually create or maintain democratic and ethical social networks. As Ernesto Laclau writes, “The only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations.”⁴⁵ These foundations, mired yet resplendent in their ambivalence, force a reformulation of the present by intensely engaging in thoughts of futurity. Utopias are never free of their foundations, but the only ethical way to maintain a utopia is for those foundations to remain under constant scrutiny. The idea of becoming-new, probably the most horrifying and radical possibility, is the aporia of every utopian text. Utopias are unrepresentable by nature; authors trace elements, but these tracings only work to briefly separate utopias from the sociohistorical framework from which they emerge. Burroughs, by using Captain Mission and the retroactive utopia, simultaneously engages and sidesteps the problem of representing a future through the past—both are unrepresentable, teeming with subjective concerns of the specific present moments. By laying the ambiguities of utopia bare, Burroughs grapples with the contingency of political foundations, simultaneously undermining and asserting utopian desire. We get the constant horizon, Burroughs’s cities laid out on a burning page. A fragmentary joke at totality, *Cities of the Red Night* offers a map, a concrete plan for living, only to unwind into a conflagration of failure, resignation, and simulacra. To return once again to Pounds’s question of whether any of us would actually want to live in Burroughs’s utopia: the actualization of utopian desire renders it impossible for the social to coagulate and maintain the utopian. We might answer, resoundingly, “Yes, sign me up to the pirate ship,” but that ship, and that utopia, can only pale in comparison to our actual desire.

Endnotes

1. Wayne Pounds, “The Postmodern Anus,” in *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959–1989*, ed. Jenny Skerl and Robin Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 217–33, at 222.

2. *Ibid.*, 222, 225.

3. Frederic Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 9.

4. Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2007), 3.

5. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1991), 93.

6. Philip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 23.

7. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 232.

8. William S. Burroughs's incarnation of the Articles is as follows: "Article One: No man may be imprisoned for debt. . . . Article Two: No man may enslave another. . . . [Article Three:] No man may interfere with the religious beliefs or practices of another. . . . Article Four: No man may be subjected to torture for any reason. . . . Article Five: No man may interfere with the sexual practices of another or force any sexual act on another against his or her will. . . . Article Six: No man may be put to death except for violation of the Articles" (*Cities of the Red Night* [New York: Picador, 1981], 186–88).

9. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 232.

10. *Ibid.*, xiii.

11. *Ibid.*, 84.

12. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, xiv.

13. William S. Burroughs, *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews: 1960–1997* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2000), 675.

14. Karen Hellekson, "Toward a Taxonomy of the Alternate History Genre," *Extrapolations* 41, no. 3 (2000): 248–56, at 252.

15. Burroughs, *Burroughs Live*, 675.

16. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, xiv–xv.

17. *Ibid.*, 31.

18. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

19. *Ibid.*, 61.

20. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities*, xx.

21. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22–27, at 27. For additional discussion, see Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, and Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). For a concise criticism

of heterotopias, see David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

22. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 95.

23. Ibid., 35.

24. Ibid., 166.

25. Ibid., 103.

26. Ibid., emphasis added.

27. Ibid., xviii.

28. Ibid., 122.

29. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 12.

30. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 190.

31. Ibid., xiii.

32. Ibid., xv.

33. Ibid., xvi.

34. Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 169–76, at 176.

35. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 332.

36. Ibid., 111.

37. Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William S. Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 182.

38. Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," 176; Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 185.

39. Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," 176.

40. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night*, 331.

41. Ibid., 332.

42. Ibid.

43. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Henry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64, at 262.

44. Wendy Brown, "Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–16, at 14.

45. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universalism* (New York: Verso, 2000), 86.