

## Writing Utopia Now

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### Abstract

*Writing Utopia Now is a multi-modal manifesto interrogating the category of the utopian in modern and contemporary literature. Building upon the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and drawing upon my current doctoral research, I propose 'utopian poetics' as a literary gesture towards the utopian, whereby reader and writer may enter into an equal and non-oppressive relationship with one another via the text. Rather than a description of, or proposal for, a better world—fraught with the limitations of language and the imposition of one person's perspective on how that better world might look—utopian poetics offers the possibility of a performance, or experience, of non-alienated subjectivity through the text's formal processes. Many modern and contemporary literary texts employ formal strategies, such as fragmentation, proliferation and attention to language's materiality, to invite readers into the process of meaning construction. Thus, the text becomes a site of utopian potential, both through its proliferation of possibilities and through its openness to the equal subjectivities of reader and writer. In Bloch's lifelong engagement with the utopian he frequently employed spiritual vocabulary to explain the utopian process. He describes the utopian potential of non-alienated subjectivity through the aesthetic object as the 'ultimate self-encounter', or, in Sanskrit, *tat twam asi* ('there you are'). In my own life, I have experienced a striking similarity between the effects of utopian poetics in a literary text and the spiritual practices of yoga and meditation. In this manifesto I include reflections on that similarity and suggest ways in which a spiritual practice might be interpreted as a performance of the utopian possibility of non-alienated subjectivity. This manifesto for utopian poetics is founded primarily on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's text, performance and video works. Cha's uses of fragmentation, material enunciation, and innovative pagination in *Dictée* (1982) speak across her multi-modal artistic production to explore the possibilities and problems of subjectivity-in-relation, which Cha calls 'interfusion' in her 1978 MFA Thesis, *Paths*.*

*Keywords: Utopia; Contemporary literature; Poetry; Poetics; Utopian poetics*

## WRITING UTOPIA NOW

*Atha yogānuśāsanam*

*Āsana* : posture=position=thesis  
pose, position [thesis].

Every yoga pose a thesis.

*Atha* : Now

Now, an exposition of yoga

*yoga* : *yuj*=yoke=union

### NOW YOGA THESIS

[Now: thesis of union]

communion / non-alienation / non-oppression / utopia/n

Utopian poetics is the performance of a relationship of non-alienation between reader and writer, listener and speaker. This relationship exists in/as the poem's performance. The poem may be performed visually on the page, materially in the book, or physically as a spoken text. All of these performances of a poem—and others—may happen simultaneously.

**WHERE IS THE POEM LOCATED?**

**WHERE IS THE POEM ENACTED?**

**WHERE DOES THE POEM LIVE?**

The poem is located in the space between the writer and the receiver of the text; it is enacted in the [sub]vocalising, breathing body of the reader while reading, the writer while writing, the listener while listening, the speaker while speaking. In the writing/reading/speaking/listening/poem/text/breathing: the poem lives. In this space of non-alienation, the poem performs a utopian poetics by which the reader and the writer are not alienated from one another, but are brought into relationship by the poem as it is performed. ***Poems need readers to live. Poems need writers to give them form.*** In this space of non-oppression, neither the writer nor the reader is superior nor subordinate. In this space of non-alienation and non-oppression, the writer-speaker-reader-listener is/are **intersubjective**. Living/reading/breathing [in] the poem as the poem is living/writing/breathing [in] us. Utopian poetics brings writereaders into a commun[ion]al space of presence, which is both no-place and perfect-place (*e/u/topia*), where we may experience ourselves as simultaneously both embodied subjects and intersubjective beings. ***Tat twam asi.*** You Are That. Self-realisation as both embodied and intersubjective. Non-alienated both from ourselves and from

others. This is the essence of the utopian. Utopian poetics *performs* this, it does not describe. *Poiēsis* not *mimesis*. Connected by the textual threads of the words the poem dances: breathes: the threads of wyrd. [Wyrd = Old English verbal noun formed from the verb *weorðan*, meaning ‘to come to pass, to become’; cognate w/ *verse* (*n.* poetry); from the root *\*wer-* ‘to turn, to bend’/ ‘be changed’].

**UTOPIAN POETICS FUNCTIONS THUS:**

- 1) AS POIĒSIS – PERFORMED BY THE POEM’S BECOMING
- 2) AS ANTICIPATORY ILLUMINATION OF WHAT IS NOT YET
- 3) AS EMBODIED GESTURE – SIMULTANEOUSLY PERFORMING & ANTICIPATING UTOPIA

That is, utopian poetics simultaneously performs and anticipates the possibility of non-alienation, whilst operating within the alienation of this world. Non-alienation [communion, union, yoga] with oneself as an embodied subject and simultaneously with an/other/s is always possible to a greater extent than one can/is currently experience/ing it. Alienation [ego] persists within our experience of non-alienation [embodied intersubjectivity]. In opening up a space in which embodied and intersubjective non-alienation becomes possible between reader and writer, utopian poetics enacts the possibility of non-alienation within an alienated world. In that it is a poem/text, and not the world, it anticipates the possibility of non-alienation while recognising that non-alienation is not-yet. In short: *Utopian poetics both performs and anticipates utopia by performing the possibility of embodied intersubjectivity within the body/breath of the poem/text, the body/breath of the reader/listener and the body/breath of the writer/speaker.*

**NON-ALIENATION IN UTOPIAN POETICS**

***Between the writer and the reader:***

- The functions of openness and multiplicity within the poem/text create a breathing space within which the writer and the reader are both active participants in the co-creation of meaning*
- Openness and multiplicity may be generated via parataxis, juxtaposition, hesitation, use of [breathing] space within poetic form, use of [breathing] space within and between words and parts of words, a-syntactic grammar, a-teleological narrative, non-narrative, anti-narrative, the foregrounding of language’s material properties/processes, the foregrounding of the material properties of the codex, or by any other generative methods*
- The purpose of open form and multiplicity of possibility is to ensure the intersubjective agency of both writer and reader in the process of making meaning in utopian poetics*
- It is in this co-creative process that utopian poetics performs the possibility of embodied non-alienation*

***Between the writer and the source text/s***

- Additionally to the above, the utopian poet strives to maintain a poethical, non-violent relationship with source text/s*
- A poetics is not utopian if it employs methods or strategies of: oppression; cultural appropriation; racism; entitlement; privilege; misogyny; ableism; homophobia, transphobia or queer-phobia, in either its forms or content*
- An ethical relationship must be maintained with one’s sources as well as one’s readers*

- *The utopian poet acknowledges their position within an embodied and intersubjective constellation of connections that extend horizontally, vertically and laterally through space, time and geography; this constellation includes one's sources, oneself and one's readers in a relationship performed by the writing and reading of the poem/text itself*
- *The utopian poetic is the nexus of connections performing a relationship of embodied intersubjectivity between otherwise ostensibly disparate [&/or disembodied] subjects*
- *This relationship is formed with, in, via and through the medium of language/speech and its interactions with body and breath*
- *Language, bodies & breathing, and their performance on the page or in person, are the interconnecting materials of utopian poetics*

## UTOPIAN POETS & UTOPIAN POETICS

This manifesto for utopian poetics is founded primarily on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's text, performance and video works. Cha's uses of fragmentation, material enunciation, and innovative pagination in *Dictée* (1982) speak across her multi-modal artistic production to explore the possibilities and problems of subjectivity-in-relation, which Cha calls 'interfusion' in her 1978 MFA Thesis, *Paths*. In negotiating the inarticulable subject position of a Korean-American woman, *Dictée* opens itself to an intersubjective relationship between writer and reader that can be read as both performing and anticipating the utopian. These utopian gestures are manifested in *Dictée*'s formal processes at the level of linguistic materiality, such as the use of fragmentation to introduce multiple semantic possibilities into the text and engage the reader as an active participant.

Writing that best performs the utopian also resonates with Isabel Waidner's description of radical innovation in *Liberating the Canon* (2018). That is: Writing that works 'across various systems of oppression (intersectionality), across formal distinction (prose and poetry, critical and creative, and the various genres), and across disciplines'.

### *Examples of source texts that perform various elements of utopian poetics:*

- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982) – anticipating and performing the utopian possibilities of non-alienation (communion) and non-oppression (equality) through its linguistic and structural materiality, which opens and invites the reader into a space of intersubjective participation (which Cha calls 'interfusion')
- Maggie O'Sullivan's *In the House of the Shaman* (1993) – linguistic & lexical disruption and experimentation foreground language's materiality and invite the reader to co-construct meaning from fragmentary remains
- Anne Waldman's *Fast Speaking Woman* (1996) & *Trickster Feminism* (2018) – laying down language as mantra, casting spells & creating rituals to make material transformation in the physical world through participation in the poem's rhythmic action
- CAConrad's *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (2014) – embodying language through ritual as both protest and performance to manifest change in the material world; encouraging reader participation in both the ritual-making & the poem-making

### *Early roots of utopian poetics can be traced in:*

- Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897)
- Mina Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914), 'Aphorisms on Futurism' (1914)
- William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* (1923)
- Gertrude Stein's 'Composition as Explanation' (1926)
- H.D.'s *Trilogy* (1946), *Hermetic Definition* (1972), *HERmione* (1981)
- Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' (1950), 'Proprioception' & 'Human Universe' (1965)

- Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) & 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' (1966)
- Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968) foregrounds the global ritual & shamanic roots to which this manifesto of utopian poetics is indebted

***Further sources of utopian poetics include:***

Some or all of the poetry/writing of: Rae Armantrout; Caroline Bergvall; Laynie Browne; Diane di Prima; Lyn Hejinian; Jack Kerouac; Lila Matsumoto; Tracie Morris; Harryette Mullen; Hoa Nguyen; Lorine Niedecker; Lisa Robertson; Robert Sheppard; Scott Thurston. Bernadette Mayer's *Utopia*; Paul Hawkins' *Place, Waste, Dissent*; Francesca Lisette's *sub rosa*; Sandeep Parmar, Nisha Ramayya and Bhanu Kapil's *Threads*; M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!*; Nat Raha's *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*; Dolly Turing's *Oh (Para)Cosmic Being*; Samantha Walton's *Self Heal*. Works of utopian poetics can also be found in the following journals and zines: *Adjacent Pineapple*, *Blackbox Manifold*, *Cumulus*, *Datableed*, *Empty Mirror*, *Hotel*, *Intercapillary Space*, *Jungftak*, *para.text*, *Tentacular*, *The Projectionist's Playground*, *Zarf* and many more.

THESE LISTS ARE EXEMPLARY

NOT EXHAUSTIVE

**UTOPIAN POETICS IS *NEVER* SENTIMENTAL OR NOSTALGIC**

**IT DOES NOT SEEK TO CONSTRUCT FANTASY WORLDS OR FICTIONAL  
BORDERS**

**ALONG THE LINES OF NATIONALISM, GENDER, SEXUALITY, RACE, OR ANY  
OTHER SUCH**

**EXCLUSIONARY CONSTRUCTS**

**UTOPIAN POETICS DOES NOT EXCLUDE**

**IT INCLUDES**

**YOU ARE WELCOME**



**Notes:**

- 1) 'Atha yogānuśāsanam'. *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 1:1.
- 2) 'Tat twam asi'. *Chandogya Upanishad*, 6:12-14.
- 3) 'Wyrđ'. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.  
'weorđan'. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.  
'verse'. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.  
'\*wer-'. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- 4) Bloch, Ernst. 'Anticipatory illumination' and 'not yet'. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987.
- 5) Retallack, Joan. 'Poethical'. *The Poethical Wager*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- 6) Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictée*. 1982. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.
- 7) Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Paths*. 1978. MFA Thesis. From the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Collection 1971-1991, University of California, Berkeley: Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Item number 1992.4.165.
- 8) *Liberating the Canon*. Edited by Isabel Waidner. Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018. 18.