

Radha Hosad

Professor Wong

Lit 367

12-10-2021

Liberatory Affordances of (U/Dys)topia through Kaba and Ta-Wei

What are the affordances of Liberatory Imaginings? Mariame Kaba's short story in "We do this till we free us" and Membranes by Chi Ta-Wei are both visions of the future from a liberationary leftist lens. The notable difference is that Membranes is a dystopia and Kaba's short story is an imagination of what a society that has achieved abolition looks like. Through Dystopia, Membranes critiques present day society and its pressures to aid and abet systems of oppression. Kaba's short story instead imagines a world where these pressures do not exist, and an alternate system of Restorative Justice is the norm. What do these two different methods of imagined futurity offer in terms of inspiring support for liberation?

Membranes by Chi Ta Wei shows a dystopia, where queer identities are accepted so long as they help support the Military industrial Complex. The novel showcases queerness in several ways. Memo's mother created her with another woman, showcasing a sapphic relationship. Memo herself is a transgender woman. The novel makes really prescient commentary on how LGBTQ people would eventually be accepted only insofar as they supported status quo systems of oppressions. For example, the push for Transgender rights in the US has been centered a lot on the Transgender Military Ban, using the glorification of the military industrial complex as a way to garner sympathy for Trans people. Mainstream gay rights discourse also centered on the Military with things like don't ask don't tell. The novel's depiction of Memo being used as a

robotic tool of the Military's meaningless war as the only way she could exist predicted how in the real world LGBTQ people can only be accepted if they enforce systems of oppression.

The Healthcare aspect of Membranes reflects how Transgender healthcare is used to oppress and lock in Trans people. The only way that Memo's mother could save Memo was to sell her to Draupadi and ISM to be used as a tool. This is very similar to how in the US, Transgender healthcare is used as a way to lock trans people into capitalism. In order to afford Hormones and surgeries, trans people need to participate in Capitalism and often in exploitative systems that dehumanize people and turn them into robotic tools. This is true of for profit healthcare as a whole, forcing people to participate and be dehumanized by exploitative systems to afford to live a healthy life.

Ta-Wei also uses the Halberstamian idea of queer temporalities to showcase how the Capitalist Societal obligations can dequeer queerness. According to Halberstam, "The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the mo-ment and, as Doty explores, squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand." (Halberstam 1) In other words, Queer temporalities rejects traditional notions of longlasting temporality in favor of enjoying the immediate and short term. In membranes, Memo has the short term robbed from her. Her life has been literally written and mapped out from childhood and any form of short term living in the moment is gone. This is exemplified by how Memo often talks about the past, specifically her childhood when she had autonomy and short term temporality, more so than her current life ISM manufactures and replaces queer time with a falsehood.

The *Membranes* emphasis on childhood is also rather interesting from a Halberstamian perspective. Halberstam states “that we rethink the adult/youth binary in relation to an 'epistemology of youth' that disrupts conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood, and maturity.” (Halberstam 2) Halberstam is arguing that queerness breaks down the societal division between the spur of the moment freedom of youth and the expectation of societal assimilation when you get older, extending aforementioned queer temporality to be beyond age. *Membranes* fits into this idea very well, with the twist revealing the difference between youthful queer temporality and “mature” assimilation was the difference between reality and illusion. ISM and Memo’s mother scripted Memo’s adult life as a tool of oppressive systems, a life completely devoid of short term impulses. Meanwhile, Memo’s flashbacks to childhood showcase immense impulsivity. The entire scene with Second Andy in chapter six of *Membranes* shows Memo acting extremely impulsive with autonomy that she does not have in the present. Even the fact that she is able to leave the house on her own (Ta-Wei 75) is in sharp contrast to her present fate of being trapped in a military warehouse with no escape or autonomy.

These explorations of Halberstamian queer temporality are done as well as they are because of the affordances of the dystopian setting. *Membranes* showcases the violent desecration of Queer Temporality with visceral emotion. The reader feels the betrayal that Memo is unaware of, we know the life that was stolen from her and we are placed in this position of deep mourning. Through dystopia, we are able to see from an outsider's perspective how everyone is currently being oppressed by “ism”s. Ta-Wei is very blunt about how ISM is meant to represent “isms” like capitalism and militarism, saying, ““ISM” could be found in many of the world's most provocative hegemonic concepts: concepts such as imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, fascism, nationalism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, fundamentalism, postmodernism,

and so on.”(Ta-Wei 118) The bluntness of this allegory can make most readers teak the empathy and horror they have for Memo and begin to ask if they themselves are going through what Memo is. Is the life of the average person a joint script of parental control and Societal control. Is youth truly the last time you are actually alive? These considerations are powerful, and it is easy to understate how impactful those thoughts can have on people. Thus, dystopia affords a radical sense of empathy with the oppressed.

By showcasing a dystopian vision of the future, Ta-Wei is able to showcase the evils of modern society in a very engaging way. The novel is very blunt in its message about the exploitation of Queer people by “isms” and because of this bluntness the message of the novel is very effective. It is a strong warning about how the future will look if we continue the ills of the present.

Mariame Kaba’s Short Story Justice also imagines a future, but instead of a dystopian critique of modern society it is an imagining of Abolitionist potential. It tells the story of a 16 year old girl who lives in a society built on restorative justice and is killed by an outsider. It then shows how restorative justice is used to resolve the murder and eventually reintroduce the murderer into society.

One flaw with the story that could extend as a potential flaw of all liberatory imaginings is that the story is written in a specific way that silences discussion and critiques on the topic. For example, the protagonist of “Justice” is the victim of the crime that the society forgives the murderer for, the message being that punishment doesn’t really do anything for the victim. However, using this depiction of a murder victim, someone who cannot speak for themselves inherently, does not serve to confront some of the issues most people face when trying to be abolitionists. The people around Addie would be more affected by her death than Addie herself,

but the short story does not really explore how they feel. The story describes the process of restorative justice, saying that

“After several days of mourning and celebrating the life of the person killed, the killer's life and actions are explored. In a series of circles, participants discuss why the violence happened, how it happened, and who was harmed. Community members are asked to stand in the shoes of the person who committed the harm, to consider the conditions that underlie their actions, and to examine their own roles in perpetuating those conditions.”(Kaba 161-162)

This description of a restorative justice system is very clinical and emotionless. It reads like theory more so than a piece of fiction, likely because Kaba meant for this to be read as theory more than as fiction. However, this writing choice serves to make it difficult for the reader to overcome any issues they may have with abolition from the perspective of a community member. If Kaba elaborated on or gave more description of the restorative justice process, maybe telling an example of some of the stories people told about Adila or showing what people said when they were trying to put themselves in the shoes of the murderer EV. Operating within the Utopian genre could have been what caused this writing style choice. Kaba's focus seems to be more about painting this picture of this Utopian world than truly exploring it, which is not a good or bad choice. It just affords more to showcasing a positive alternative our current society than debating the nitty gritty of abolition.

Because of the Utopian genre of the novel, we skip to the part where everyone has normalized a non-punitive system where forgiveness is the norm. This intermediary stage is likely the one which most people that an abolitionist would want to convince to support the world of “Justice” would have issues with. It is somewhat easy to imagine a far off detached

future where people forgive each other and punitive justice is unnecessary, with the story itself saying that murder was extremely rare. The murderer being from off world further serves to make this society seem flawless. Accepting and supporting a far off future like that does not translate necessarily to supporting working to abolish these systems now, and namely supporting abolition before abolition has addressed the root causes of crime.. As a related example, there are plenty of people that would hypothetically support a classless society, but those people would not necessarily support working to enact a classless society.

The Utopian nature of the short story also paints a rosy idealized view of abolition that could do more harm than good. Having an idealized society where things are going so perfect that the threat comes from an outside source seems to fetishize abolition into this flawless vision. Let's say that in contrast, the Abolitionist future in "Justice" was portrayed as imperfect. There was still crime, murder wasn't obscenely rare, and people felt rage, anger, and hatred. If "Justice" explored abolition in that world, showing that even in a flawed society with bad actors abolition and restorative justice was still the right thing to do, it would serve as a much more convincing case for abolition and could teach a lot more. It is important to show that even if Abolition does not reduce crime or make everyone happy, it is still worth fighting for, which is in fact something that Kaba talks about a lot in the rest of *We Do This Til We Free Us*. Despite this being resolved in other parts of Kaba's work, taking the short story by itself this feels like a limitation of the Utopian genre.

This is all not to say that Kaba's Utopic vision in "Justice" is not useful. On the contrary, despite its idealism it is important to see this alternate future. Imagining a future different from the present is extremely difficult, and so reading something like "Justice" can easily showcase to someone what the end goal of abolition is. An imagined person being introduced to abolition

could read Kaba's story and understand the core tenets of abolition. The explanation of how the society works is very clear, and it showcases how each of the issues people have with the crime itself are addressed. Some readers will definitely read about the ceremony of honoring someone's life including the murderer and think about whether or not they would prefer that to locking them in a cell, and that thought is the first step towards eventually embracing abolitionist politics. Even someone familiar with abolition will gain something from seeing how the system would work in practice, even if it is somewhat idealized.

The value of imagination is something integral to Boggsian ideology. Boggs, inspired by Albert Einstein, said that "Einstein asserted that the solution of world peace could arise only from inside the hearts of humankind. That is why 'imagination is more important than knowledge.'" (Boggs 39) Boggs goes on to say that "the movement today, in this period and this country, is being created not by the cadres of a vanguard party with a common ideology, but by individuals and groups responding creatively with passion and imagination to the real problems and challenges that they face where they live and work." (Boggs 111) This Boggsian valuing of Liberatory imaginations is a resounding endorsement of the Utopian visions in Kaba's "Justice" short story.

A benefit utopia has over Dystopia is that Utopias add to liberational imaginings while Dystopias mainly highlight current or potential issues. The value of positive imaginings and exposing current issues is not really fruitful to be placed with one being of more importance than the other, especially as the utility of each fluctuates over time. However, from a modern perspective, the exposure of current issues is far more common than imagining alternate systems. Every day, thousands of news stories showcase the failures of Capitalism and other oppressive systems, while imaginations of alternate systems are few and far between.

One could also argue that a Utopian imagining like “Justice” gives the reader more actionable steps than a dystopia. *Membranes* for example exposes the issues with contemporary society and even predicts future issues, but by its genre it cannot really showcase an alternative or a solution. Memo never escapes, ISM is never taken down, Draupadi is still profiting off of war. On the other hand, “Justice” through its genre has a clear request from its audience: work to abolish oppressive carceral systems. If you are successfully convinced of Kaba’s vision by her story, you now have a political vision to strive for and may be inspired to read other abolitionist writings to learn what you can do to achieve that vision.

Another notable difference when comparing Utopia and Dystopia seems to be with empathy. As was aforementioned in *Membranes*, Dystopian fiction is very prone to have the reader empathize with the plight of the main characters. One main reason for this is that Dystopian Fiction serves to in some way critique societal issues of the present. Since there is this connection to the present, readers will be able to connect more with these stories than perhaps they would with a Utopian story. “Justice” is actually structured around its differences to the present rather than its similarity, challenging readers to question the dissonance they may feel with this story. The story’s message is supported by its lack of relatability. Instead of showcasing the evils of today, it showcases the good of a potential tomorrow. It is thus a harder sell to convince people that your utopian vision is a good one.

Thus, it is clear that there are different affordances in utopias and dystopias. Utopias can offer a Boggsian imagination and inspire people to support a liberatory vision. Dystopias can cause people to realize flaws in current society, warn of future societal ills, and illicit empathy for marginalized groups. It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to see which form is “better” than the other, but the reality is that both forms are vitally important to liberatory imaginings. In fact,

the flaws and benefits of both forms actively complement each other, showing that if the goal of your storytelling is to convince people of a liberatory vision, perhaps using both a dystopian story and a utopian story together is the best method.

Kaba actually does this herself in her book that “Justice” is a part of. *We Do This ‘Til we Free Us* is a collection of Kaba’s works, and a lot of it involves exploring the dystopia that is the Prison Industrial complex. The chapter “The System Isn’t Broken” reads as especially dystopian in its depiction of the realities of the criminal justice system. In this chapter, Kaba makes a harshly critical but honest description of society, including a description of the constant despicable actions of the cops, saying:

“Trans and gender nonconforming youth will be bullied and verbally harassed for walking down the street. Young people will be picked up without cause and driven into rival gang territory to be dumped without wallets or phones—only to hear the cops announce for all to hear that they belong to the rival gang. Young women walking down the street minding their own business will be sexually harassed by those sworn to ‘protect and serve.’” (Kaba 10)

This chapter serves as the non fiction dystopian counterpart to Kaba’s Utopian “Justice” short story, and they both form a Dialectic that is explored by Kaba throughout the rest of the book. Thus, Kaba’s book overall gets the aforementioned affordances that *Membranes* had in addition to the affordances that “Justice” had, with the downsides being somewhat addressed by each other. This is why Kaba’s book is so compelling to so many people.

On the flip side, I feel like *Membranes*’ Dystopia may be balanced out with a Utopic vision as a palate cleanser. It would be incredibly moving to read *membranes* and its scathing critique of “ism” and dehumanization and then read an imagined vision of a future where that

isn't the case. Pairing the two would accentuate both's strengths, just like Kaba's *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* does.

All in all, the affordances of Dystopia and Utopia are both vital to Liberation movements and should be used together to both critique the present and imagine a better future. *Membranes* and "Justice" despite having some limitations are powerful tools for liberation. They showcase how important and useful speculative fiction is for organizing and praxis.

Works Cited

Boggs, Grace Lee, and Scott Kurashige. *The Next American Revolution : Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, University of California Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aul/detail.action?docID=919284>.

Halberstam, David. *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York, New York University Press, 2005.

Mariame Kaba, and Naomi Murakawa. *We Do This 'Til We Free Us : Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago, Il, Haymarket Books, 2021.

Ta-wei, Chi. *The Membranes: A Novel*. 1996. Translated by Ari Heinrich, Columbia University Press, 2011.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Stevie Martin, Briana Creeley, and Max Robins for their immense help in the editing process. I would also like to thank Professor Green Simms and their 2021 Fall class of Value of Literature as well as Professor Horne's Dystopian/Apocalyptic Fictions Classes for informing me in coming up with this idea for the final. I would also of course like to thank Professor Wong and everyone in the Solidarities in World Class for all the extremely insightful Discussions all semester!