Introduction: Ecotopia in General

I define the ecotopian imagination as the narrative construction of spaces that create speculative social ecologies. Ecotopian spaces often share common characteristics: social, economic, or (and?) ecological closure; an attention to energy throughput[1] that includes human actors; and response to a larger, contemporaneous political or social regime or movement. They often also share formal features: sections defined by ecotopian spaces are often sequestered in their own sections[2] and entrances and exits from such spaces often have a transformative or wish-fulfilling effect on plot and characters. Above all, ecotopian spaces articulate an environmental (if not always environmentalist) perspective through imagined material.

Though it might appear trans-historical, the ecotopian imagination in American literature is firmly historically situated, emerging when the frontier disappears (according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1890). Indeed, the history of the narrative ecotopian imagination in the United States is inseparable from the dialectically related figures of frontier and crisis (apocalypse?), figures that usually define the two sides of an exploitative relationship, be it colonial, economic, or gendered. The frontier is an ever-shifting promise of the freedom to invent structures anew, beyond the bounds of space that has already been determined. While a naive conception of the frontier might envision it as the border between civilization and empty space, a more contemporary one would note that the frontier concept causes space *to be emptied* so that it can be filled anew, opening it to the intervention of an unfettered spatial imaginary. *Crises* emphasize (and therefore recognize) the destruction that is required to enable invention, but they do not permit the frontier's imagined freedom to build something entirely anew. Rather, anything new that results from a crisis is built "in the shell of the old," as it were. The creation of new spaces and the social systems they contain is a function of either model—the frontier's "creative destruction" or the post-crisis creation that is *forced* by destruction; *which* model is determined by one's relationship to distributions of power, production, and abundance.

These concepts might apply to any examination of Utopian literature or politics, but the ecotopian imagination uniquely privileges the role of human and social ecologies in this interaction, targeting the "metabolism"[3] between human and non-human natures as the initial site of re-imagination and praxis. The authors in question, in other words, imagine transformations in the material interactions between human and non-human natures that lead to transformations in distributive and social interactions among humans. The "closure" that Fredric Jameson identifies as crucial to utopian politics and literature[4] takes on a new cast in its ecotopian form. All other forms of closure in an ecotopian schema arise from the primary creation of a closed, steady-state regional ecosystem. This vision of human and non-human systems that are so closely yoked creates a relationship of mutual determination and complex coevolution, not only challenging what has been called the "master dualism" of nature and culture,[5] but re-imagining the role of social ecology in politics and revolutionary praxis.

This introduction will outline and situate the ecotopian imagination theoretically, at the cross-section of the Environmental Humanities, the discussion of utopian literature and politics in Marxist literary theory, and discussions of internal colonialism in the history of the United States and its literature. It will then address the fundamental anachronism of the project's conception—the comparison of American Literary Naturalism from the 1890s to American Speculative Fiction in the 1990s—with two guiding schemata. First, this introduction will outline the movement from the *lost frontier* of the 1890s through the displacement onto the *high frontier* in midcentury SF, reframing the dominant modes of both temporal bounds in terms of the frontier/crisis dyad. And second, it will delineate the mode of what I might call "reading speculatively," a displacement of the quality of "speculativeness" in "speculative fiction" from the inherent attributes of a text to the reading practices it inspires. To read speculatively is to read for traces that define the world envisioned by the text—whether that means the natural laws by which it imagines a world to be governed, as in the deterministic forces of literary naturalism, or the traces of physical structure and infrastructure that define an imagined space. The introduction will conclude by outlining the individual chapters.

[1] *The Dictionary of Environment and Conservation* defines throughput as "Output relative to input; the amount that passes through a system from input to output."

[2] See, for example, the "Tom Outland's Story" section of Cather's *The Professor's House*.

[3] I mean "metabolism" in the sense used by Marx and elaborated by John Bellamy Foster (among others).

[4] See the first chapter of Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*.

[5] See Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

Chapter I: Ecotopian Naturalism: Determination and Ecological Praxis

This chapter will examine the ways that transformations in the ecology of an ecotopian space determine the shape of social systems and narrative form in the rest of the work that contains it. It will do so by juxtaposing the environments of a classic naturalist plot of determination (represented by the work of Frank Norris) with a less recognized form of what I am calling "utopian naturalism," most clearly exemplified in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*.

In Norris's work, social systems are governed by natural laws that lead to predictable ends—"predictable" because the systems governing those ends are static and definitively closed to praxis and mutual determination. Despite this apparent stasis, there is an ecotopian imagination present in Norris's works, but its expressions are always fleeting, reigned in by the inexorable laws of capital. The reasons for this ephemerality are fundamentally related to a gendered view of the frontier. Norris's masculine ecotopian imagination is bound to the domination of a frontier, but as he is writing *after* the frontier's disappearance, these ecotopian spaces are never more than a step ahead of the totalizing capitalist system: without a frontier, there is (as for McTeague) nowhere to run.

Gilman's ecotopian space is based in a rejection of this absolute determination. She does not dispute that environment and natural laws are deterministic, but she asserts a greater degree of human control over the forces that determine. She imagines a space to which the frontier and its implicit modus operandi of domination are irrelevant, short-circuiting the expansionist view of space that they rely on with a vision of social, historical, economic, and (of course) ecological closure. This closure, however, results from a would-be apocalyptic event rather than relying on the absent frontier (the country is isolated by natural disaster and war). The combination of closure and management of the environment establish a vision of ecological praxis that challenges mainstream naturalism's naive understanding of determinism with a more dialectical model.

Probable texts:

- Gilman: Herland, "The Yellow Wallpaper,"
- Norris: The Octopus, The Pit, McTeague

Chapter II: Ecotopia and History: Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Reclamation

This chapter will examine Willa Cather's depiction of Ácoma Pueblo ruins in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House* alongside writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz (probably? I need to do a lot of reading here) to argue that the ecotopian imagination can be a means of resistance to historical relations of colonization and production as well as history itself as a concept. The basic tension of this chapter will be the frontier mentality of cultural appropriation and the apocalyptic motif of cultural reclamation as inverse forces that generate anti-historical ecotopian spaces.

In Cather's novels, Outland and Latour are both readers of culture as it is expressed in infrastructure—and not just readers, but *rereaders* who take these infrastructural signs and translate them for their own Utopian ends. Out of the traces of Ácoma Pueblo ruins (or ruins based on them), they create ecotopian spaces that either permit the queering of domestic labor, in Outland's case, or resolve the tension between colonial conquest and religious conversion in Latour's. The attempt to live within or recreate frontier conditions through someone else's culture relies on a rewriting of world-historical events as well as individual origins, making these forms of ecotopia both obsessed with history and fundamentally ahistorical.

The inverse of Cather's frontier ecotopia can be found in the writings of Pueblo authors, among them Leslie Marmon Silko and Simon Ortiz. If the ecotopian imagination in Cather's novels is a meditation on appropriative and ahistorical constructions of culture-through-environment, the Pueblo writers in this chapter offer a vision of ecotopia as a response to crisis and total appropriation, in which place-based cultures must be reconstructed far removed from the temporal and spatial bounds in which they arise. In Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, for example, the titular Almanac must be reconstructed out of a combination of maintained

fragments and modern additions if it is to form a coherent whole. As scholars of American Indian literature like Joni Adamson have argued, this adaptive and inventive cultural paradigm is also expressed through many Pueblo figurations of the garden: such a garden is a space in which the hybridity of human and natural history is acknowledged and accounted for, even, implicitly, when that history is colonial and appropriative. The "apocalyptic" counterpoint to the frontier of appropriation is the remaking of a place-based social ecology and culture despite destruction and displacement. (We might call this a form of "reparative" ecotopia, though I don't want to import any associations with "reparations," so I'm not sure.

**Note: I need to do more reading in these Pueblo works to determine exactly what spaces I will read—but other scholarship leads me to believe this won't be a problem.

Probable texts:

- Cather: Death Comes for the Archbishop, Professor's House
- Leslie Marmon Silko: Ceremony, Almanac of the Dead(?)
- Simon Ortiz: Selected Works (?)

Chapter III: Reparative Ecotopia: Social Ecologies and Historical Trauma in Post-Plantation Fiction

This chapter is still under development while I revisit the texts. Ideally, I'd like to look at former plantations in post-Reconstruction Southern literature as an environment in which the ecotopian imagination struggles against the rifts of historical trauma. This perspective would allow me to compare the exploitative, resource-based view of human and non-human nature with human ecologies represented through human-nature hybridity in texts like Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* and Toomer's *Cane*. Hybridity in Chesnutt and Toomer can be read as a metaphor for the human and social ecologies that arise out of conditions of forcible bondage to the land. In the post-Reconstruction period, as DuBois shows, assimilation of formerly enslaved communities into the system of capitalist agriculture often led merely to a different type of exploitation through predatory loans and land rents. In response to this new form exploitation, post-Reconstruction authors use hybridity to reimagine, in post-bondage conditions, the extra-economic social ecology that arose as a form of resistance under conditions of bondage. While it does not attempt to foreclose historical trauma, it does seek to imagine a continuation of place-based life beyond it.

The disappearance of the frontier for the dissenting member of the post-slave-holding class means countenancing complicity in historical trauma; the ecotopian vision that results must offer a counterpoint to the exploitative environment of the plantation, which persists through legal inheritance of the fruits of that exploitation. In other words, the ecotopian space here is one that successfully hides or erases, making complicity disappear in the construction of a space to which ownership is irrelevant. The tension between landscapes and documents in Faulkner's "The Bear" is exemplary: the utopian function of "wilderness," as as a place that is unownable and illegible, is to blot out awareness of a form of ownership that cannot be countenanced. Ownership of land and people is based in legibility, as is dramatized in the narrative of reading ledgers and historical chronicles. The gradual becoming-legible of the wilderness culminates in its destruction, seeming to contrast the role of the written word in property and ownership with the unknowability of the "wilderness" in its idealized, American sense. But prior to the loss of the hunting ground, the relationship with the land seems to cause a suspension of historical tension and trauma. The very illegibility of the space, then, forms an extra-legal (and therefore extra-ownership and extra-enslavement) space in which historical crimes can be temporarily forgotten.

Possible texts:

- Chesnutt: *The Conjure Woman*
- Faulkner: Absalom, "The Bear"
- Toomer: *Cane*

Chapter IV OR Postscript/Chapter V: Nature Beyond Earth: Ecotopia on the High Frontier

The central tension of this chapter will be the concept of "nature" implied by the ecotopian imagination, ambiguous as it is on the division between human and non-human nature and the naturalness of a "managed ecology". On one hand, the totally artificial closed system of the spaceship puts philosophical pressure on the role of "nature" in natural systems that are created or managed by humans. This issue takes a wider relevance in the anthropocene, when there is arguably no "non-human nature": the reach of the human species is too broad to allow it. The artificiality of the spaceship and the planet come together in the vision of "spaceship earth" that became a major paradigm of sustainability in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Further, encounters with extra-terrestrial natures demands a reevaluation of the hierarchies according to which concepts of nature have been historically constructed. The loci of the spaceship and extra-terrestrial planet finally becomes test-cases for the possibility of determination in complex systems: time and again in ecotopian novels of the high frontier, the ultimate limits of human management and domination are exposed as determined systems come into contact with systems that resist determination. It is necessary to discuss the science-fictional wing of the ecotopian imagination to show that "nature" in an ecotopian space always exists in a tension between the conscious interaction with systems that go beyond the human and the limits of human control.

Possible texts:

- Kim Stanley Robinson: Mars Trilogy, 2312, Aurora?
- Octavia Butler: Dawn
- John Varley: Titan
- Robert A. Heinlein: The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, Farmer in the Sky

Notes