### Introduction

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]](#footnote-2) that includes human actors; and response to a larger political or social regime or movement. 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 what has already been determined. While a naive conception of the frontier envisions 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. 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 “creative destruction” or creation *forced* by destruction— one’s relationship to relations of power, production, and abundance.

These concepts might apply to any examination of Utopian literature or politics, but the ecotopian imagination privileges the role of human and social ecologies in this interaction, targeting the “metabolism”[[2]](#footnote-3) between human and non-human natures as the most fundamental site of praxis. The authors in question, in other words, imagine changes to the material interactions between human and non-human natures from which changes to distributive and social interactions among humans derive. The “closure” that Fredric Jameson identifies as crucial to utopian politics and literature[[3]](#footnote-4) takes on a new cast in its ecotopian form. All other forms of closure arise from the 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 the “master dualism” of nature and culture,[[4]](#footnote-5) but reimagining the role of “nature” in politics and revolutionary praxis.

### 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. 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 to predictable ends of decline—“predictable” because the systems governing those ends are static and definitively closed to praxis and codetermination. There is an ecotopian imagination present in Norris’s works, but they are always fleeting, reigned in by the inexorable laws of capital. The reasons for this ephemerality are fundamentally gendered. Norris’s masculine ecotopian imagination is bound to the domination of a frontier, but he 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 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: Queerness and Internal Colonialism

This is still very much coming together, but:

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—both themes are represented in different ways on both sides of the divide.

Probable texts:

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

note: these latter two writers produced most of their work in the 90s, so this will require me to think hard about the temporal bounds of the project.

### Chapter III: Social Ecologies in Plantation Fiction

This is far and away the least developed of the chapter ideas. Ideally, I’d like to juxtapose texts from the ruling and oppressed sides of the plantation after the plantation economy has collapsed. This perspective would allow me to compare the resource view of human labor power and non-human production with the speculative human ecologies represented in texts like Chesnutt’s *Conjure Woman*. Somehow I think it’s possible (necessary?) to get Faulkner in here: I’m thinking of the tension between landscapes and documents in “The Bear” and maybe even Sutpen’s Hundred, but I’m not prepared to elaborate on this aspect of it yet. My goal is to think through the competing impulses of absolute domination and resistence through ecological cultures (agro-cultures?) based on alternative epistemologies. There is quite a bit of reading I’d need to do on the current conversation around Obi, etc.

Possible texts:

Chesnutt: *The Conjure Woman* Faulkner: Absalom, “The Bear”

### Chapter IV: 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”.

Possible texts:

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

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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I mean “metabolism” in the sense used by Marx and elaborated by John Bellamy Foster (among others). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See the first chapter of Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)