

**ENGLISH 5821**  
**American Utopias**

**Dr. Jason Haslam**

**Winter 2016**

**Phone: 494-3328**

**E-Mail: Jason.Haslam@dal.ca (email is the best way to get in touch with me)**

**Office: McCain 1193; Winter Office Hours: Friday, 1:30-3:30**

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**Course Description:**

Thomas More's Utopia (1516) is usually held up as the progenitor of the literary and political tradition bearing that work's name, though the form, as it exists in the Western tradition, can be traced back to earlier works, notably Plato's Republic. Utopian works generally construct speculative worlds that, expanding or focussing on certain aspects of a given society, show how the social world could be made perfect or, at the least, vastly improved (the concepts of perfection and improvement themselves are defined widely, either in terms of the utilitarian functions of society, of the spiritual or cultural aspects of a given time and place, of human interaction with the environment, and so on). Equally important, however, is the long tradition of "dystopias," those speculative worlds that are held up as negative examples, as models or warnings of the dysfunctional aspects of society.

America, and later the United States, was from its "discovery" by Europeans tied to utopian politics. A "brave new world" already inhabited by an indigenous population (and so not "new" at all), the "American Utopia" is always a radical political experiment even as it re-entrenches traditional social structures (often violently). From John Winthrop's assertion that America should stand as the "city on the hill" to Ronald Reagan's and others' appropriations of that phrase, and beyond, the American Utopia is, paradoxically, always a space of conflict. As often as not, one person's utopia rapidly becomes another's dystopia.

We will explore these non-places, focussing especially on the nineteenth-century—the height of the production of utopian literature and social experiments in the US—while also framing that focus with readings from earlier periods and from the twentieth century and later. Starting by defining the varieties of utopian thought and early utopian discussions of America, we will move through nineteenth-century political Utopias, and then to twentieth-century revisions. We will study a variety of topics in class, examining both literary Utopias and actual utopian societies in the US, but the course will be designed in such a way as to allow students entry points into other areas not explicitly covered.

**Required Texts**

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887*

Samuel Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Blithedale Romance*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*

Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue*

Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood*

Joanna Russ, *Female Man*

**Recommended Text**

*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*

### **Course Policies**

In addition to the information below, see the page “Course and University Policies” on our OWL site for information regarding academic honesty, accessibility information, and course participation grades. Please note it is the responsibility of all students to read and understand all applicable university policies.

### **Method of Evaluation**

Weekly discussion questions: 10%  
 Critical bibliography assignment and presentation: 10%  
 Longer Analytical Presentation: 20%  
 Final Essay: 45%: **Due 11 April 2016**  
 Cli-Fi Readings Assignment: 5%; **due February 12**  
 Class Participation: 10%

### **Assignment Descriptions**

Weekly discussion questions: **For each class, starting January 12**, students will submit 2 discussion questions/critical thoughts about the material. Before the last class, students will submit the same on the Cli-Fi texts, but can also sum up their thoughts on the course as a whole (you do not have to submit on the days you present; this makes 9 weekly question assignments in the term). These should be specific questions, addressing particular aspects of the material read, and should also engage with both the primary and secondary materials. These questions will form the basis of discussions for our weekly meetings. **Please submit the questions at least 24 hours in advance, through the discussion board on BbLearn/OWL.**

Questions are marked out of 5 points: 1 point is given per question/thought, and the instructor will use the additional points to note the strength of the overall weekly submission (0 points for an overly general submission that doesn’t engage with the material in a specific fashion, up to 3 points for a specific, incisive submission). The ratio between points available and points achieved in the term is then used to calculate an overall mark out of 10.

Critical bibliography assignment and presentation: This assignment consists of two parts. First, you will prepare a bibliography of critical works dealing with the primary material scheduled for a particular week. This list can be as comprehensive as possible, but must be comprised of at least 5 entries. Second, you will then present a 5-10 minute overview of what you see as a significant critical trend on the subject as evidenced by the items on your bibliography. This overview can analyze either some of the most recent articles, or some of the standard texts. This report should focus on the critical works; it should not be restricted to a summary, but should analyse the material, providing an argument about trends in the critical field just as you would present an argument about a set of literary texts.

Both the bibliography and a formal written version of the criticism review will be submitted on the same day as the presentation. The bibliography and overview will be weighted equally. The bibliography will be marked for its adherence to MLA style; the critical overview will be marked for the quality and clarity of the analysis. **Note: you must do this assignment on a different week and author than your analytical presentation.**

Analytical Presentation: This 15- to 20-minute presentation (approx. 8 to 10 pages, double spaced), following the style and format of a conference presentation, will consist of an analysis of one or more of the primary readings scheduled for the week of the presentation. You can analyse any aspect of the text, using whatever critical approach you think most appropriate and helpful. A formal written version of the analytical presentation must be submitted on the same day as the presentation. The written version and the presentation will each be worth half of the grade.

**For both presentations:** The written version and the presentation will each be worth half of the grade. Both the presented and written versions will be graded according to the English Department's statement on Graduate Seminar Evaluation (see Course and University Policies on OWL/BbLearn), while the grade for the presented version will also take into account the student's ability to respond to questions and lead class discussion.

**Note:** Presentations will begin 26 January. A sign-in sheet for both will be made available in the week of 11-15 January.

Final Essay: The final essay will be 5000-6000 words (approximately 17 to 20 pages, double spaced), and can analyse any text or group of texts studied in the class. It can be based on your analytical presentation (though it will be expected that you take into account both class discussions and my comments on your presentation, in addition to expanding it). This essay will be graded according to the English Department's statement on Graduate Seminar Evaluation (see OWL page).

**Note:** All written work must be documented according to the latest edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. The final essay is due **11 April 2016**.

**Note:** for all written assignments, submit electronically through OWL/BbLearn.

Cli-Fi Readings Assignment: In lieu of class on 9 February and to replace the weekly discussions for that week, students are being given research time to find one or two short stories, and one or two critical texts, related to what is often referred to as "Cli-Fi" or "climate fiction." Often participating in utopian/dystopian traditions, this subgenre is not only seen as a response to human-made climate change, but also to the wider implications of the so-called Anthropocene and the cultural implications of petroleum and other energy economies (also known as petroculture).

This assignment is designed to provide experience in topic-specific research and archival study. Anthologies may be used, but students must also provide the bibliographic information for the works' initial publication. Responses are to be posted on the BbLearn Discussion page (as per the weekly questions) and include the following:

- the list of stories and material, formatted as an MLA Works Cited list (as best

OWL/BbLearn lets you)

- a brief (two or three sentence) explanation as to why you chose this specific material.

Class Participation: This grade will be based on the quality and consistency of your participation in class discussions (with an emphasis on quality). Students will be expected to respond constructively and professionally to their colleagues presentations, and to contribute to general class discussion of course material. Come prepared to discuss specifics about the material each week. (The page on course policies on our OWL site includes other statements about participation that are mandated by the Faculty of Graduate Studies, most of which are stunningly obvious, and some of which don't apply to English courses.)

### Class Schedule

**Please note: both** “primary” and “secondary” readings are **required**, and must be read before the class for which they are scheduled.

#### **Introduction: Finding Utopia, Founding America**

January	05	Introduction Reading: Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”
	12	<u>Defining Utopia / Defining America</u> Primary Reading: John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”; Cotton Mather, <i>Wonders of the Invisible World</i> (sel.); Thomas Jefferson, [Natural Bridge] from <i>Notes on the State of Virginia, Declaration of Independence</i> Secondary Reading: Fredric Jameson, <i>Archaeologies of the Future</i> , sel.

#### **Romantic Utopias**

	19	<u>State of Nature</u> Primary: Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle,” “Sleepy Hollow,” [The Men of the Moon] (from <i>History of New York</i> ); Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden</i> (sel.)  Secondary: Karl Mannheim, “The Utopian Mentality”
	26	<u>Troubling Romantic Utopias: Brook Farm</u> Primary: Nathaniel Hawthorne, <i>Blithedale Romance</i> Secondary: Charles Fourier, selections of Utopian writings; Craig White, “A Utopia of ‘Spheres and Sympathies’: Science and Society in <i>The Blithedale Romance</i> and at Brook Farm”

### Utopian Programs: Socialism and Feminism

- February 02 Socialist Utopias  
 Primary: Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887*  
 Secondary: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, from “Manifesto of the Communist Party”; Engels, from “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific”; Matthew Beaumont, “Shopping in Utopia: *Looking Backward*, the Department Store, and the Dreamscape of Consumption”
- 09 Cancelled: Cli-Fi Research Day  
 16 Break
- 23 First Wave: Feminism, Socialism, Racism  
 Primary: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*  
 Secondary: Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (sel.); Lynne Evans, “‘You See, Children Were the—the Raison D’être’: The Reproductive Futurism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*”
- March 01 Second and/or Third Wave  
 Primary: Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue*  
 Secondary: Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”
- Enter the Twentieth Century, or, The End(s) of Utopia**
- 08 The Lines of Utopia: Race and the Individual  
 Primary: W. E. B DuBois, “The Comet”; Derrick Bell “The Space Traders”  
 Secondary: Isaiah Berlin, “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West”
- March 15 Primary: Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood*;  
 Secondary: M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (sel.); Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (sel.)
- 22 The Pleasures of Ambiguity  
 Primary: Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*; Octavia Butler, “Bloodchild”  
 Secondary: Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”; Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly”
- 29 Primary: Samuel Delany, *Trouble on Triton*; Ursula K. LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”

Secondary: M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (sel.); Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (sel.)

April

05

Cli-Fi: Reimagining the Planet:

**See Assignments**

Primary: 2-3 stories; TBA

Secondary, Michel Foucault: "Of Other Spaces"; one other article,  
TBA