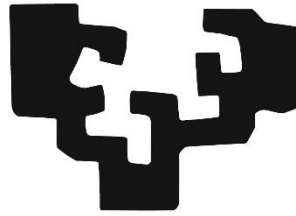


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**The Never-ending Myth: Revision of the Western
Frontier in U.S. Contemporary Dystopias**

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Abstract

Even though dystopian literature transports the readers into futuristic fictional scenarios, its undertone mirrors the concerns and fears of the authors' time of existence. Thus, the genre does not describe the incoming future but the broken path humanity could have taken as a consequence of a factual socio-historical episode. Often dystopian societies emerge as a respond to seeking for a utopian perfection, which as dystopias confirm, is an unreachable state. That is the case of the American West, which promised an empty land full of opportunities for the first European settlers. As a result, the present dissertation analyses contemporary U.S. dystopias to demonstrate the apocalyptic outcome of the utopianism of the myth of the West, by examining Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* from a utopian studies perspective. In both novels the once prosperous West has turned into a post-apocalyptic scenario that guides the protagonists through a narrative of desolation as an allegory of the social and ecological decay of the present nation. Contemporary U.S. dystopias describe the excessive modernization society has undergone for the commodity of the ruler class, resulting in the sterilization of the planet and the separation of human beings from their natural origins. Consequently, dystopias often acquire an ecocritical approach that denounces climate change and the scarcity of natural resources in readers' reality. After the environmental degradation, the American West has lost its charm and has become uninhabitable, thus, dystopian literature attempts to translate the Western frontier into modern scenarios in order to seek for a fresh reconstruction of the frontier myth, also highlighting human imperialistic behavior. The dissertation concludes by arguing that U.S. dystopian novels uncover the reality of the present America, which keeps mimicking a myth that is bound to fail. However, the genre does not intend to be pessimistic but to warn readers that some measures should be applied not to convert their world into an actual dystopia.

Keywords: dystopian literature, utopian studies, American West, frontier myth, U.S. contemporary literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

“He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.” - George Orwell, *1984*

The field of utopian studies does not only convey literature, but a wide range of other academic disciplines too, from theology to psychology. Therefore, it is challenging to conceive a consensual definition for utopianism. The linguistic terminology seems to be drawn from Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia*, in which he created a homonymous paradise where society, politics and religion coexisted in the purest harmony. Accordingly, utopia could be simplistically defined as a good place to live in. Utopian researcher Ruth Levitas states that the interdisciplinarity of the concept generates distinct disagreements on the conventions of what utopia really means, deriving in a connotative ramification (2). On the one hand, some utopian scholars highlight the idea that like Thomas More's book, utopias are fictitious inventions and consequently, unreachable. Hence, the concept can acquire a negative nuance by defining utopias just as useless entertainment; a form of escapism which could even be potentially dangerous (Levitas 3). On the other, utopias could be defined as a reaction to an unwanted present in the shape of an alternative reality, evoking a positive escapism and a glance of hope for a better world. Nevertheless, Levitas provides her own definition: “Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being” (8). This desire offers the possibility of modification over time regarding individual demands, but it will always be generated by certain conditions that are not present in real life (8).

In literary studies utopia has developed into its own literary genre and from the aforementioned negative implication of utopia, the genre of dystopia has arisen. Dystopia was crowned an independent literary genre due to its particular emphasis on socio-political questions in comparison to other science-fiction subgenres. However, dystopias are mere literary paradoxes, since they are keen on building futuristic societies, not in order to predict the future of humanity, but in order to uncover the terrors of humanity's former history. Therefore, dystopian literature seeks to expose the

hypocrisy of utopian-like occurrences in the world. Given that utopian literature is highly related with the geographical discovery of new worlds, the idyllic misconception of the American West is a perfect instance of a utopian dream. The myth of the West was originated in the 17th century America, as a result of Euro-American expansionism westwards. The American West was an unexplored territory that became a symbol of prosperity and opportunities for those adventurous enough to cross the frontier that protected the civilised from wilderness. As a consequence, the idyllic notion of the American West became a utopian reality. However, in the 20th century, American citizens began to realise their dreams would not be fulfilled just by walking down the streets of Hollywood.

Various studies have analysed the myth of the West from a utopian studies approach; however, there has been less evidence for the interrelation of dystopias and the American West. Consequently, the present dissertation aims at discussing the extent to which contemporary U.S. dystopian literature revisits one of the biggest utopias of American history: the American West. For this purpose, Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Ship?* and Octavia Butler's 1993 *Parable of the Sower* will be examined from a utopian studies perspective. In fact, the field that has grown steadily since its revival in the 1970s, will be the main theoretical framework of the present dissertation. Both novels depict a decadent and post-apocalyptic picture of prevalent locations of the American West, such as California for Butler's novel and San Francisco for Dick's. Yet not only are the two novels selected for presenting the degeneration of the West, but their storylines also represent distinctive elements that characterised frontier narratives such as colonization, environmental catastrophes, dehumanising technological impact and social discrimination. Both writings define a critical antithesis of the utopian myth of the West that, instead of vanishing, has turned into a model to replicate. Furthermore, these two dystopias, written in significantly different periods and by authors from distinct social backgrounds, portray the 2020s questioning whether the concept of dystopia has already been extinguished, and it has been replaced by the term reality.

2. THE DYSTOPIAN GENRE

Once upon a time, millions of years ago, a group of apes was fighting for survival in the emptiness of the young planet earth. In the climax of the battle, one of the apes discovered a tool that helped him defeat his rival: a bone, the remains of a stolen soul. As a symbol of victory the ape threw the tool into the wide blue sky, which suddenly turned into a starry dark atmosphere. The bone travels forward those million years to reach the present times. Now the bone becomes a spaceship and Strauss's "The Blue Danube" plays along the evolution of humankind.

This scene belongs to Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* and it is created by a match cut between a shot of a bone and a shot of a spaceship, providing the observer with the power of travelling through space and time. Its visual simplicity does not outweigh the philosophical complexity of its narrative, obtained by the juxtaposition of the primitiveness of the first human species and the advancement that space travelling implies. Precisely this integration of polarities and the emphasis on the rapid evolution of technology and human consciousness, has made this sequence of shots stand in the history of cinema as one of the most relevant science fiction scenes of all times.

Despite science fiction's popularity in cinema, literature has been producing science fiction content since the 19th century, being Jules Verne and H. G. Wells considered the fathers of this genre. When a new science fiction novel is put on the market, consumers will most probably share communal expectations about their incoming reading experience, since it is widely stereotyped that science fiction dissects the concept of time by portraying the trope of a technologically alternated society set far from the reader's time being. Yet, science fiction writers do not seek for anticipating the hereafter in meticulous detail, but to expose a possible future mirrored by past and present events. "In this sense, science fiction is concerned with projecting possibilities, not predicting probabilities" (Abbott 3). The genre attempts to recreate the author's present time-space as an alternative setting, far in time, but credible for the commonplace (Moylan 5). Therefore, the futuristic approach of science fiction is rather a literary device in order to suggest a possible, generally negative, impact of the ongoing socio-technological revolution.

Thus, the expected technological advancements need to be conceivably portrayed given the existing scientific resources in the time of writing; as a consequence, writers are inevitably conditioned by their historical context (Abbott 3). For example, science fiction novels written in the 19th century, such as Mary Shelley's pioneer *Frankenstein*, discussed the consequences of an early capitalist society, based on the damages that industrialization was already causing. For the contemporary reader, *Frankenstein* might not fall into the category of science fiction due to its lack of technological and temporal intricacy; however, *Frankenstein* is regarded as science fiction as much as *Black Mirror* is. Shelley had the knowledge of the period's scientific limitations and chose to write a cautionary-tale on the risks of playing with fire.

Science fiction's tendency of projecting a possible chaotic outcome is highlighted by its subgenre of dystopia, which henceforth will be this paper's research focus. Even though the term dystopia is decently recent in literary analysis, the first recorded usage of the word dates back to 1868 when John Stuart Mill pronounced the following speech on a parliamentary debate about Ireland with the Catholic Church (Jacoby 154):

I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called **dys-topians**, cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear favour is too bad to be practicable.

Mill conceived the term by merging the Greek prefix "dys" which signifies "bad" and the Greek "topos" meaning "place"; he was seeking for an antonym to the utopian notion of a better and happier place and he, for the first time, put into words the concept of a utopian world that could conclude really badly (Vieira 16). Mill was not the first individual who thought about this hopeless reading of utopias though. 18th century sceptics already questioned the credibility of literary utopias by displaying that too idyllic places could also ruin societies and consequently, coined the terms satiric utopia and anti-utopia (Vieira 16). Despite the etymological differences among anti-utopia, dystopia and the resultant negative subgenres of utopia, their aim is similar and their boundaries unclear; therefore, for the sake of this paper, I will use dystopia as an

umbrella term for all those literary subgenres that defeat the idealistic principles of utopias.

Dystopia as its own literary genre emerged in the early 20th century, derived from the fears of a society that had undergone the expansion of imperialism and the rapid capitalization of economy; the fears of a society that had witnessed a history of violence and misery for a whole century (Moylan xi). Dystopias and utopias convey parallel literary techniques, as both narratives are displayed in similarly realistic locations, fixed in a not so far-fetched future (Vieira 17). However, the dystopian approach is fairly pessimistic and it will always seek to expose the limits of its utopian antagonist, which searches for perfection in a flawed society.

Whereas other science fiction subgenres might focus more on technological implications and outstanding engineering, the centre of attention in dystopias is highly political. George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* became canonical in the genre and helped shaping its basic premise; both novels, separated by a decade, describe societies characterised by remarkable scientific developments that instead of facilitating the everyday live, enable the building of hegemonic dictatorships (Vieira 18). Indeed, dystopian societies would be characterised by the overpowering control of a totalitarian government that alienates its citizens, highlighting the socio-political and often ecological aftermath of tyrant forces inspired by the own author's time of existence.

Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent pessimism that dystopias evoke, their reading could be moralistic in a hopeful sense too. Dystopias display plausible future realities in which societies could collapse, but in which they could also recover a welfare status, depending on its citizens' attitude and community values. That is exactly why most dystopias conclude with open endings; there is always a glance of hope and it is the reader's task to search for it (Vieira 17). The dystopian genre is relevant because it does not reject the idea that humans are imperfect. Readers realise that instead of seeking for a non-existing perfection, a utopia, they need to do as good as human limits let them do. However, the dystopian hero would not conform to the green light at the end of the dock; dystopian protagonists represent the marginalised segment of society and often become leaders of the resistance movement that seeks to demolish the power structures (Moylan xiii).

Moreover, dystopias, more than any other science fiction subgenre, are inherently connected to history, though in a highly critical manner. As opposed to utopias, dystopias would demonstrate a negative evolution of history by suggesting that rather than progressing, society is regressing backwards (Baccolini 115). They do not necessarily need to expose an upcoming imaginary future but a possible alternative present based on past events. Dystopias pursue to replicate the socio-political patterns of the world we are living in, in order to have greater impact on the readers, who would recognise potential dangers of their present times. As a result, dystopias question where to draw the limit between fiction and reality suggesting that our world might have already become a dystopia.

3. DYSTOPIA AND THE AMERICAN WEST

As stated in the introductory section, dystopias draw heavily on socio-political episodes that authors had experienced in their time beings; but even if extrapolated to different environments, dystopian novels would still be universally relevant any time. That is the case of *1984*, which having been written in Great Britain at the verge of the Cold War , has not only been compared to the current American political situation, but it has also been reported as a top seller due to Donald Trump's controversial presidency. However, not only has the 21st century been regarded as dystopian, since there have been several occurrences in the creation of the United States of America in which the dystopian reality of the US could have been a matter of debate.

Considering the anti-utopian element of dystopia, U.S. authors of this genre can easily rely on one of the biggest utopias of American history that is the myth of the west. The western side of America had always been enigmatic for European settlers, due to the freshly discovered abundance of virgin lands; hence, this particular sleepy hollow acquired a mystified connotation of an unknown new world filled with possibilities. The so-called Promised Land became the dream-like destiny for individuals who wanted to avoid a Europe rooted in old traditions. Thus, the American West became a symbol of prosperous opportunities for everyone seeking for a fresh start predicated on individual freedom (Katerberg 5); a highly utopic picture indeed. In

this regard, the new world turned into the new Eden, the city upon a hill, the salt of the earth.

Unconsciously, narrations about the American West condition the creative process of contemporary U.S. writers, who are the descendants of the 18th and 19th century American Dreamers. In the case of science fiction, as well as dystopias, authors are concerned with topics directly withdrawn from the western narrative, such as new worlds, technological developments and even aliens (Abbott 28). In fact, dystopias drink directly from the frontier myth in regards of European-American geographical expansionism; however, here the landscape evolves from prairies, deserts and outstanding nature, to a paradoxically crowded vast emptiness (Abbott 18). On the one hand, some narratives respect more the western aspect of the myth by presenting the stories in the West coast, such as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*, which flows alongside the Colorado River. On the other, several authors choose to transfer the frontier to the outer space, exposing what the new Manifest Destiny would look like among the stars. Hence, as distant as dystopias might seem from the Old West of cowboys and sheriffs, they tend to project the western experience into different times and locations, in order to combine America's past and current present (Abbott 18).

Nonetheless, as any dystopian writer would assert, utopias are destined to fail. What the myth of the West really signified was a massive expansion westwards that postponed the frontier between the civilised and the savage until the limits of the Pacific Ocean. The frontier was constructed upon the illusion of individuals who thought could excuse another form of imperialism by calling it progress. As a result, the landscape needed to adapt to its new inhabitants and rapid mobilisation of capital was required in order to build infrastructures for the comforts of the settlers in the new world (Abbott 33). In order to do so, American dreamers began to urbanize a West that once seduced them with its sublime natural beauty, converting it as dehumanised as the continent they were primarily escaping from. Virginal lands were violated by deforestation and stamped by abandoned garbage trails, taking the first step in the environmental tragedy we are still suffering to this day (Katerberg 27). This rapid technologization and massification would evolve into the transgression of natural rhythms and forthcoming environmental trouble, encouraging dystopian writers to deconstruct western narratives often using an ecocritical approach. Nonetheless, American expansionism was founded

on the conquest of a not so empty territory, where native tribes had resided for centuries, disguising a history of colonization and genocides under the utopic principles of American patriotism. The frontier has always been described as a primitive and dangerous setting, occupied by merciless barbarians; though, the barbaric aspect of the frontier only comes into play when two different tribes collapse. No battle is one-sided. Consequently, dystopias disclose that the utopian lifestyle the ruling system aims to achieve derives in the dystopian living of its subservient inhabitants. Therefore, the critical nature of dystopias debunks the myth by suggesting that 18th century America sought to progress while causing the aforementioned chain of environmental catastrophes and human-made tragedies, resulting in the anti-utopian “rapid aging of America” (Katerberg 5).

As long as the US does not learn from its past mistakes and questionable politics continue leading the country, more and more science fiction writers will feel the need of portraying its decadence and its failed attempts of redemption. Therefore, the two novels analysed in this dissertation depict post-apocalyptic scenarios in which western narratives are very much alive, concluding that “in [...] new worlds the past cannot be swept away easily” (Katerberg 5). In these new declining promised lands humanity would no longer be capable of maintaining its utopian aesthetic due to the eruption of a world that could not cope with a corrupt civilization any longer. Both *Parable of the Sower* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* had already experienced the end of the world; in these two post-apocalyptic scenarios, survivors of the judgement day had to start over and built a new social system that would take crude measures to reassure the well-being of a few. Contemporary dystopian fiction exposes the state of America, a country defined by an unstoppable globalization and international trade; a country where industrial fumes are drastically changing the climate, where skies are burning and cities are flooding; a country so technologically developed that the citizen’s souls are stolen, deriving in the eventual loss of humanity. Obviously, all of this is a hyperbole of today’s US and the country’s beauty, together with its beneficial contributions worldwide have been hidden; but by exaggeration do dystopian writers seek to warn and help curious readers who cannot help but wonder the direction the US is taking.

4. LANDSCAPE OF THE FUTURE WEST

The physical space is a key element when it comes to American Western narratives. Firstly, their plots are supposed to develop in the western side of the US, and secondly, the frontier is a heroic allegory to discuss geographical expansionism. As a result, western fiction is not only shaped, but guided by the landscape itself, which almost acquires a leading role in the story. Consequently, the landscape transforms into another active character, capable enough of providing its own message (Tompkins 71). The landscape moves the narrative forwards and sets a new dialogue between the individual observing from the real world and the individual participating in the fictitious universe.

When imagining a common western scenario, our thoughts would automatically travel back to John Ford's Monument Valley. In fact, the classic western landscape is rather romantic in regards of the notion of the sublime: blue skies, breath-taking mountains, clear rivers and a portrayal of nature that is simultaneously beautiful and dangerous. The latter duality is highlighted by the frontier itself. As Mary Lawlor asserts, the frontier symbolises the mysterious risks of the unknown, but also the birth of hopefulness and opportunities (qtd. in Abbott 12). Moreover, dualities of the Western landscape are also represented by the climate. During the day, the sun rays set the sand into flames, but when the moon shines the environment freezes.

Indeed, if the cowboy would not ride his horse on the Colorado Desert but in a rainforest, the word "western" would automatically disappear from the narrative's genre. Yet, why does the openness of a desert-like setting build a western narrative? As Tompkins explains, the specific openness that a desert can offer sets human beings fully naked in the eyes of nature (70). The boundlessness of deserts prolongs the limits of imagination by making the American West the utopian place in which everything can happen. But as we know, when human limits are stretched, utopias start failing. Consequently, science fiction translates this notion and often extends the idea of limitlessness to infinity (Abbott 12). Science fiction characters find themselves drown in the vastness of the universe, lost and overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the galaxy.

Though, often dystopian stories take place on earth in order to be more empathetic and to explore the consequences of catastrophe on the reader's reality. For instance, neither Butler's nor Dick's novel explicitly outline the outer galaxy, but they depict the America we know through a time travel lens. However, their dystopian America cannot be recognised any longer, modernity has poisoned society by causing a nuclear war in *Do Androids Dream* and an irreversible climate catastrophe in *Parable of the Sower*. None of the novels actually explains the process of the apocalypse, instead both focus on conveying the final result: a post-apocalyptic society in which the American West has lost its sublime natural beauty, citizens are socially and physically alienated and the once utopian West is now an uninhabitable nightmare. Additionally, post-apocalyptic scenarios possess their own narrative technique, predicated on sending a message of both creation and destruction (Abbott 12). In terms of destruction, the post-apocalyptic landscape introduces the characters by foreshadowing their psychological state. A broken setting would signify a broken society, and a broken society would signify inner emotions that are broken (Barba Guerrero 59). When a landscape is more dead than alive, it places challenges for the characters to overcome. Hence, the hopefulness of the West is inverted, and the setting becomes an antagonist rather than a travel companion (Abbott 13). Nonetheless, a post-apocalyptic scenario would also induce the need for redemption, for gathering the community and constructing again what has previously been destroyed. Eventually, the end of the present world can also signify the beginning of a new one.

“The dust which had contaminated most of the planet's surface had originated in no country and no one, even the wartime enemy, had planned on it” (Dick 15). Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is set in a futuristic 2021 San Francisco. Nonetheless, the city's once vivid skyline is destroyed after a nuclear holocaust that as its self-explanatory name -World War Terminus- indicates, caused the mourning of the planet. The city, and presumably the rest of the world, is now covered in a thick layer of radioactive dust and buried under leftover trash. The earth is so highly polluted that instead of unsuccessfully cleaning the human produced mess, American citizens opted to migrate to Mars. As a consequence, the suburbs are emptied and most apartment buildings are inhabited only by a couple of reminding individuals. In this environment San Francisco becomes a massive graveyard where the myth of the West rests in peace.

Aaron A. Cloyd argues that the story highlights humanity's impact on the landscape by establishing a connexion between humans and wild nature (77). The setting develops from the broad picture of the American West Coast, to the city of San Francisco, to empty buildings, to end up with the awareness of humanity's footprints through everyday objects (77-78). The *misé-en-scène* acquires an active role in the narrative, becoming character's centre of worry and attention, rather than just a background location (78). Thus, the main character, Rick Deckard, finds himself walking through what we now would call a ghost town; an abandoned city that holds the spirit of prosperous past times. San Francisco's emptiness could be compared to the aforementioned openness of stereotypical western deserts. However, this emptiness is corrupted by humanity's touch and instead of an open space there is the claustrophobic influence of overindustrialization. It is not a physical emptiness but an inner one, one that drains society's souls.

At the beginning of the novel the characters' tone is implied due to the descriptions of this post-apocalyptic America: "The morning air, spilling over with radioactive motes, grey and sun - beclouding, belched about him, haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death" (Dick 8). This human-caused disaster would resemble the more negative outcome of the American West, when the land became so human-process that it could no longer fulfil its utopian role. Nevertheless, glances of an unharmed natural landscape make an appearance through the novel. Characters often use empathy boxes to join their "religious leader", Mercer, in what might seem as a desert. The desert, as explained earlier, is the beloved setting of cowboys and outlaws because of its lack of limits. When characters meet Mercer, especially Rick towards the end of the novel, transform their defeated attitude into restoration and well-being (Cloyd 85). This single contact with a natural landscape provides them with the forgotten hopefulness of the myth of the West; yet in Dick's fictitious reality, the desert is still a technologically created fantasy, a fake utopia.

Unlike Dick's novel, the futuristic city setting and technological advancements expected from a science-fiction novel are not present in *Parable of the Sower*; yet, the novel vividly represents the post-apocalyptic approach of dystopias. Octavia Butler presents a devastated California under the effects of an ongoing climatic disaster,

mainly due to America's excessive modernization. As a consequence, society's state is that of an implicit war, in which the only rule is anarchy and individual survival. The novel depicts the years 2024-2027, by following the central character's, Lauren Olamina's, both physical and psychological journey. Regarding the setting, the journal-style story could be divided in two parts. In the beginning, the *misé-en-scène* is constrained by the walls of the neighbourhood of Robledo. In the new U.S. people need to live in walled communities in order to be guarded from the obscure atmosphere of the battlefield outside. Lauren has never experienced anything beyond her confinement and the lack of open spaces provides both Lauren and the readers, a feeling of claustrophobia rather than protection. Therefore, the idea of escape is very much present in the main characters. For instance, Lauren's brother Keith is keen on persecuting the American dream in *The City of Angels*: "His ambition, if you could call it that, is to get out of the neighbourhood and go to Los Angeles. He's never too clear about what he'll do there. He just wants to go to the big city and make big money" (Butler 9). Keith has never physically been to LA and he would probably encountered a decadent scene there as well, yet he is clung to the idealization of the old West. Nevertheless, America's promises are now meaningless as the country has regressed to a rudimentary social and economic state. The American West where everyone wanted to escape to, has turned into the place everyone desires to escape from: "Nobody wants California trash" (Butler 65). And eventually this same American dream ends up stealing Keith's last breath.

The second part of the novel becomes a travel diary in which Lauren's nomadic soul travels the western side of America, heading north, seeking for a tranquil place to establish her own religious community. In her personal chronicle the landscape becomes a central character for Lauren to discover; since when she moves forwards, the scenario does it too. Now the walls have disappeared and Lauren finds herself, for the first time, alone in an open abysm. Indeed, Abbott implies that open spaces require movement; as a result, western narratives are not always characterised by the landscape itself but about moving throughout it (14). In fact, history has constantly demonstrated the relevance of movement for the American West, which was founded by expanding European-American territory westwards (14). However, those who are openly exposed in the middle of Lauren's post-apocalyptic America are likely to become a target. In *Parable of the Sower* the US landscapes continuously challenge Lauren's ambition by not providing the necessary shelter for surviving in an inhuman society (Barba Guerrero

51). Although in this context the setting might seem an enemy, the novel also reminds the reader that the dangers do not reside in the landscape itself but in humans, who caused a lethal environmental degradation. Parallel to *Do Androids Dream*, at the end of the novel Lauren reaches Humboldt, the ultimate landscape that will regenerate her hopefulness for a better future. And as Mercer's habitat, this landscape materializes as the purest form of nature: "The land surrounding us, however, is as empty and wild as any I've seen" (Butler 243).

In the same way as Western fiction, both of these novels demonstrate that the setting acquires an active role in dystopian literature by adding another layer to the narrative, and even creating alternative plotlines. That is specially the case of post-apocalyptic dystopias, in which the landscape unveils the apocalyptic consequences of human imprint on the planet. Whilst the landscape of the American West is defined by its outstanding nature and provides the characters with dreams and ambition, the dystopian landscape unmasks the utopianism of the myth. The industrial alterations executed in the US landscape brought the expiration not only of nature, but also its inhabitants' emotional and psychological state. The idyllic West turned into a place too perfect to be true that did not accomplish what it promised, and instead brought the end of the world. Yet, when character's in both novels encounter virginal natural landscapes their hopefulness comes back as a reminiscent of the old days and as sign of salvation for the new.

5. ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF AN INFERTILE LAND

Literature has been preoccupied with the natural environment since times were global warming was not a threat, nor enough scientific evidence had been discovered to neologise the phenomena. "[T]he study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) is now defined by the term ecocriticism (first coined by William Rueckert in 1978) or green studies, among others. In fact, its non-consensual terminology illustrates the freshness of the approach, which recently surfaced as a literary movement in the 90s, responding to the emerging consciousness of environmental issues in the second half of the 20th century (Garrard ix). Ecocritical studies do not only examine the representation of nature and the environment in literature, but they also raise awareness of the decomposition of the planet in a highly

anthropocentric era. Nonetheless, Greg Garrard dates the origins of ecocriticism back to British romanticism (1), in which 19th century poets considered nature to be humanity's only guiding principle. On the other hand, Garrard also asserts ecocritical studies to be inspired by American wilderness, especially Native American nature writing. Both romantics and Native Americans praised nature in their writings in a spiritual way and highlighted the necessity of coming back to it (3). Thus, if the history of the American West is examined, two opposing facets will be found. Firstly, an appreciation for sublime natural landscapes. However, this appreciation is not spiritual, yet rather self-interested. Thus, the second facet: human modification of the environment.

Abbott introduces the concept of terraformation in his books by explaining that "to [terraform] a planet is to make it habitable by unassisted human beings" (67). Even though the notion of terraforming is utilized in regards of making a planet habitable for humans, thus making a planet more earth-like, it could also be employed for the American West. Usually colonization also signifies colonization of nature, since commodification of the environment is essential for the colonizers. Hence, European immigrants began to build settlements, implementing technology to deliver water and trades, railroads were constructed and even non-native flora and fauna were inserted into the American landscape (Abbott 70-71). As a result, America's natural ecosystem ended up collapsing. Hence, U.S. contemporary dystopian novels often uncover the ecological aftermath of America's anti-natural modernization. As established in the previous section, the societies represented in both novels rejected nature a long time ago and are now facing the consequences of an infertile planet. None of the writings explicitly shows terraforming, yet they surely demonstrate its environmental sequels: toxic pollution, rapid climate change, large extinction of animal species and so on. By doing so, none of the authors intend to spread pessimism but to remind the readers that an ecological catastrophe happened in the construction of the American West, and it could easily worsen in the near future if we do not take care of the planet that gave us birth.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? was originated in the peak of the 60s environmental discourse and precisely due the high ecological charge of the era, the novel turns into the perfect candidate for an ecocritical reading. In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, in which humans' responsibility towards the destruction of

nature was written down for the very first time (Cloyd 80). Dick places his novel in the middle of the aforementioned environmental concerns and accentuates Carson's perception of the harm that human interference was causing on the natural environment (Cloyd 80). In his writing, San Francisco's climate is ruined by a constant nuclear winter, derived from the world war that destroyed the planet as a whole. As a consequence, the polluted city is covered with a strong radioactive dust that not even the sun rays can penetrate; "he saw at once a famous landscape, the old, brown, barren ascent, with tufts of dried-out bonelike weeds poking slantedly into a dim and sunless sky" (Dick 22). Despite not explicitly exposing the familiar effects of climate change, Dick unapologetically reflects upon the fallout of the nuclear era. The twentieth-century American West was the birthplace of science projects that facilitated the invention of nuclear weapons and the atomic bomb for military purposes. Often these projects were hidden from the public and America's federal government would invest large amounts of money on it (Abbott 62). Thus, Dick discloses the clandestine nuclear revolution by portraying an ecologically devastated society that suffered from the government's errors. Moreover, most American citizens migrated to Mars to escape from these uninhabitable conditions, resulting in the abandonment of personal belongings that left a human imprint forever upon the planet's surface. This residue has its own name, kipple, and Dick defines it as the following:

Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterday's homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there's twice as much of it. It always gets more and more. (65)

The phenomenon of kiplization is a direct allusion to atemporal readers, who will most likely understand the universality of Dick's concern. Both pollution and kiplization are a process that develops over a period of constants repetition; if environmental legislation is not implemented to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, pollution will reproduce itself, just as kipple does. Besides demonstrating how little human characters care about the environment, since they leave all their trash behind, Dick emphasises the fact that they put a name to this trash. Consequently, Quentin Samuel Miller argues that characters in the novel naturalise the phenomena of

kipplization to the point that the own trash acquires agency over humans (28). They do not intend to clean their mess and now it surpasses humanly limits. Furthermore, Mill continues explaining that the narrative ends up setting humans as “living kipple,” and compares kipplization with American hyper-consumerism derived from a history of overproduction (29).

Parable of the Sower certainly represents the same environmental concerns as well, yet its society differs substantially from Dick’s San Francisco. While in *Do Androids Dream?* society still lives within the era of technological commodities and progress, Butler’s California is drained from any kind of welfare. “*Parable of the Sower* depicts a society where barbarism, anarchy, chaos and bloodshed have become widespread because of environmental disaster” (Lone 25). The differing environmental perspectives in regards of Dick’s novel are set in the beginning of the book when Lauren’s stepmother pronounces the following: “The stars are free [...] I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars” (7). Lauren’s family lives in complete poverty, thus they have lost everything except for nature, which remained when most of humanity’s trail vanished. However, in this world nature manifest itself against the human created chaos by embodying extreme weather conditions. “Sea level keep rising with the warming climate and there is the occasional earthquake” (92). Indeed, the book portrays a vivid reflection of today’s increasing climate change. In this deadly post-global warming atmosphere, ordinary commodities we usually take for granted, metamorphosed into unthinkable privileges. As a result of the radicalization of the environment, hunger and shortage of essentials emerge as everyday occurrences, and potable water and food became as precious as money for today’s U.S. (Lone 25). Octavia Butler insists upon the scarcity of water throughout the novel, “I wonder how many years it will be before we see rain again” (48), denouncing the severe droughts that the late 20th century American West was suffering due to the rising of temperatures. Additionally, the scarce water characters can get in the novel is often poisoned with chemical residue and the narration moves forward by the necessity of searching for commercial water extensions. By highlighting the vitality of freshwater, the novel also evokes that water was “the central necessity in the economic conquest of much of the West” (Abbott 66), since it is not only crucial for human survival, but for agriculture and farming.

In a post-apocalyptic society in which humans can barely survive, the presence of animals must be almost non-existent. And in fact, both novels criticise the implications that environmental degradation would cause to America's fauna, which would undergo a mass extinction. In *Parable of the Sower* most animals are either extinct or wild, and Lauren recognises that her limited knowledge derives from old books and storytelling. Dogs seem to be one of the few animal species that survived the apocalypse, but far from friendly, all her encounters with them are tinted with violence and terror. Dogs are the living reminder of times when humans were in harmony with nature; however, "[d]ogs now are wild animals who will eat a baby if they can" (163).

In *Do Androids Dream of electric Sheep?* animals occupy a central role in the narrative. As the own title reveals, after a massive annihilation, now humans have managed to substitute animals with identical electric creations.

Of course, some of their animals undoubtedly consisted of electronic circuitry fakes, too; he had of course never nosed into the matter, any more than they, his neighbors, had pried into the real workings of his sheep. Nothing could be more impolite. To say, "Is your sheep genuine?" would be a worse breach of manners than to inquire whether a citizen's teeth, hair, or internal organs would test out authentic. (8)

In the novel animals connect humans directly with the natural environment, and owning a genuine animal offers humans the chance of regenerating their lost emotional bond with nature (Q. Miller 6). "[...] having empathy for living things demonstrates a human commitment to both the preservation of the last remaining forms of life on Earth and maintaining the capacity for empathy" (7). Moreover, as animals are considered almost as mythical creatures, the ownership of one establishes a certain social status; ergo, most people do not reveal their pets are artificial. A similar notion could be understood in *Parable of the Sower*, when Lauren mentions that wealthy people still keep dogs. Nonetheless, one of the biggest moral questions that Dick inserts in the readers' minds revolves around speciesism: ethically, should all living species be considered equals?. Dick illustrates the latter with the Voight-Kampff Test, which helps officers distinguish androids from humans by a questionnaire that measures empathy. Most of the questions are related with eating different type of animals, and a proper

human being should show the same levels of empathy for all: "Are raw oysters more acceptable to you than a dish of boiled dog? Evidently not "(51). Similarly in Butler's novel, Lauren learns about speciesism thanks to her "hyperempathy" syndrome, which forces her to feel the pain/pleasure of others. She had only experienced humanly pain before, until she cannot escape from looking at the eyes of a moribund dog: "I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow—something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die" (36). Thus, she displayed the same empathy for dogs than humans. Therefore, if she had to pass the Voight-Kampff Test, she would have certainly proof to be human.

After this simplified ecocritical analysis of the novels, Philip K. Dick and Octavia Butler have proven to be environmental advocates that do not fear to expose the crude reality of America's history of terraforming. Even though terraforming might have been inevitable for human survival in the natural West, some regulations should have been taken in its modernization process, since global warming and the extinction of animal species is already an ordinary reality. It might sound melodramatic to blame the US for the planet's environmental degradation, which of course is untrue; however, the construction of the myth of the West is a great example of a natural land that from nothing became the world's leading industrial and commercial power, hence, one of the biggest sources of the planet's pollution. In addition, both novels emphasise that humans have lost their original tie with nature; as a result, both authors wonder whether people have become "less human" because of this separation from the natural environment.

6. NEW FRONTIERS : MODERN COLONIZATION

"To survive the Borderlands you must live sin fronteras be a crossroads."

- Gloria Anzaldúa

Gloria Anzaldúa examines the modern American frontier in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. The frontier she makes reference to is the Mexican-U.S. border, and as a Chicana writer she extrapolates the physical line that separates the two countries into the symbolic border that segregates cultural, racial,

class, and gender differences. As a consequence, Anzaldúa develops a distinct image of westward expansionism by uncovering the utopian representation of the formation of America (Kynčlová para. 6). Yet, the U.S. Mexico wall did not fall with Anzaldúa's writing, it has persisted till the present 21st century, where the president's immigration policies have radicalised the closing of the border.

The U.S. Mexican border is a vivid representation of the way history repeats itself, since similar frontier narratives already began being shaped in the 17th century. The American frontier originated in colonial times, when European expeditions established their first colonies in the continent. After discovering the prosperity of an untouched land, European settlers decided to extend their horizons westwards by crossing the Mississippi River, establishing a growing number of communities in their way. In the 19th century the term Manifest Destiny was coined, referring to the God-given superiority of European-Americans. Thus, settlers believed they had the right to spread their authority over the whole continent and its native people. As a result, the frontier became a symbol of evolution by civilising an "uncivilised" continent, while promoting the spirit of democracy and capitalism. Hence, the myth of the West deals with a utopian rebirth, a mystified idea of a land full of promises.

Regarding the frontier in contemporary dystopian literature, the genre plays with the notion of the frontier by relocating it in modern settings where the new American nation is being reshaped, after the old one's downfall. On the other hand, dystopias also uncover Anzaldúa's symbolic frontier that conceals the voices of a variety of people. Frontier expansionism did not only consist of auto-sufficient Europeans searching for an idyllic place to settle in, but an imperialist invasion of territory. Indeed, in literary studies frontier narratives are often referred to as plural, making allusion to the amount of characters involved and the pluralisation of national ideology (Abbott 30). Therefore, the American West is characterised by social division; not only between European colonists and Indians, but white Americans and Asian and Mexican immigrants, men and women, upper-class and working-class... Consequently, Abbott explains that the newer western history defines the myth of the frontier not as an adventure story but as a morally more complex narrative (31). Hence, the popularisation of contemporary U.S. dystopias.

“[T]he demands of conquering the frontier and creating a new society out of the wilderness were the source of the American character and the nation’s prosperity” (Katerberg 17). However, what happens when there is no more land on Earth’s surface to conquer, or when the utopian West becomes an uninhabitable post-apocalyptic scenario? The most ethical answer to these questions would be to heal the wounds of the planet. Yet, human nature will always look beyond and search for new unspoiled territories to profit from. Some U.S. dystopias reproach American imperialist behaviour by placing the frontier in the infinity of the outer space. The two societies portrayed in *Parable of the Sower* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* expand the frontier into the galaxy, yet, in different styles and rhythms. In Dick’s novel, as analysed above, most of the population has already settled in Mars, due to high levels of toxic pollution. America has completely conquered the planet and actually the novel opens the day of the “the fifth (or sixth?) anniversary of the founding of New America” (18). The name itself “New America” mirrors clearly the correlation between the frontier myth, filled with promises of reinvention and wealth, and the colonization of a new planet as a mere extension of the American nation : “ [...] how would you contrast your life back on contaminated Earth with your new life here in a world rich with every imaginable possibility?" [...] "I think what I and my family of three noticed most was the dignity" (18).

In Butler’s novel “secretaries of Astronautics” are executing the first expeditions to Mars in Lauren’s time being, however, there is not near future prospect of migrating there. Additionally, in both novels the main characters’ opinions towards colonising the outer space also differ. Rick does not want to move out from Earth, supposedly, because of his job; he is a bounty hunter that kills androids that come from Mars to live a life of a human on Earth. Nonetheless, his attitude towards the new American nation and the new settlement of Mars is rather negative. Meanwhile in Lauren’s deadly America, her remaining hope for the future of humanity resides in the distant galaxy. Despite being pro-colonisation she is aware of the danger of history repeating itself as she pronounces that Mars is “[...] too close within the reach of the people who’ve made such a hell of life here on Earth” (19).

In *Parable of the Sower* geographical frontiers follow the protagonist wherever she goes, expanding from specific to broad. Firstly, “[t]he destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (Butler 173). Earthseed is the name Lauren provides to a religion created on her own, under the premise of “god is change”. Lauren’s ultimate goal is to establish a community based on her faith and to expand her beliefs into the broadness of the galaxy. In this case, the space becomes the frontier between the apocalypse on Earth, and the promised-land among the stars. However, since space engineering is not developed enough, she had to establish her community in the northern U.S. Therefore, secondly, she translates the classic concept of the frontier from California to the isolated North. Lauren seeks refuge North because she fantasises with the opportunities an empty land can offer. Hence, Butler questions whether the myth of the West is still rooted in Lauren, thus she seeks for a personal utopia, or she is realistic enough not to believe in its functionality.

Thirdly, at the beginning of the novel the frontier is delimited by the walls that protect most of America’s neighbourhoods. Consequently, the neighbourhood of Robledo has created its own ecosystem, in which children are home-schooled, neighbours cultivate their own food and everyone learns to shoot a gun. Here the wall becomes the frontier between a secured place and the savage wilderness of the outside. However, gated communities are just temporary alternatives for a never-ending chaos (J. Miller 350). Octavia Butler herself commented on the latter by stating the following: “A wall cul-de-sac is loaded with symbolism. People are walled-in but they are clearly going nowhere, in spite of the fact that they are surviving as long as they do” (J. Miller 350). In fact, expansion and movement are inevitable parts of human nature, and when frontiers are too restrictive, humans suffocate. Nonetheless, in this U.S. there is a huge economic gap that divides society in a hierarchical pyramid, and the size of the inhabitants’ frontier dictates their role in a classist society. The rich live in technologically guarded mansions and are the owners of big industrial companies. For these companies to work, cheap labour is necessary, therefore middle-class people (Lauren’s neighbourhood for instance) is hired and paid with a place to sleep in, instead of actual money. Butler highlights that this abuse of power is a form of neo-slavery. Besides, it only affects Hispanic or African American citizens as a re-enactment of the racial segregation in American history. Finally, there is an alternative kind of frontier in

this decadent West: not having any kind of frontiers. “Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous. They’re desperate or crazy or both. That’s enough to make anyone dangerous” (Butler 10). On the bottom of the pyramid, citizens are also deprived from humanity.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as Rick Deckard has not experienced life on Mars himself, readers do not get to know how the new colonies operate. Hence, the interplanetary frontier is just a background setting. Nevertheless, Dick introduces a different variety of frontiers: posthuman frontiers. Katerberg asserts that in some science-fiction narratives robotics are implemented to the everyday life as a utopian attempt to polish society. Often, these technological alterations are also applied to human individuals by colonising the body and the mind; as a result, in science-fiction literature posthuman frontiers substitute traditional geographical frontiers (184-185). In Dick’s novel posthuman frontiers are materialised by androids, which are only distinguishable from humans by their absence of empathy towards any living creature. In this post-apocalyptic America, the android has become an extension of the human individual. Indeed, in a modern era characterised by a lack of physical spaces to colonise, the human itself becomes the target of expansion, which by altering itself, will become the ideal human for an ideal society. Thus, androids represent the humanly nature of surpassing the limits; in the 17th century the limit was geographical, however in Dick’s 2020s the American nation has realised the old ways are not effective anymore, ergo they need to transcend biological limits.

The androids presented in the narrative have rebelled against their masters on Mars in order to seek liberty on Earth. These androids have acquired a rebellious and critical thinking that humans already abandoned in a totalitarian technologized society. Therefore, Dick questions the actual ability of being empathic in a hyper capitalist and commodified society, in which androids end up showing more empathy for each other than the actual humans. Eventually, the protagonist comes to this same conclusion at the end of the novel: “In fact everything about me has become unnatural; I’ve become an unnatural self” (Dick 230). Moreover, even though there are no concrete ethnic implications in the novel, androids are definitely depicted as the “others”. Indeed, the

storyline about androids crossing the interplanetary frontier illegally in order to seek for a better life, resembles the narrative of the present US Mexican border. As parallel to bounty hunters in Dick's novel, white American supremacist control the border in reality. Thus, once again, Dick demonstrates the reconstruction of frontier narratives.

The frontier of the West is a symbol of possibilities and new beginnings. However, this is only for a selected group. Contemporary dystopias highlight the absence of hope in a degenerated Earth, forcing the American nation to transfer and adapt the frontier to modern times. In these two novels the outer space and the own human body have become an empty canvas for the building of a new world. Nonetheless, either among the stars or by the help of robots, the myth of the frontier will always fail, since the creation of a utopian new world is not but an excuse for the ruling class to manipulate its citizens with fake dreams.

7. CONCLUSION

Dystopian literature derives as a socio-political branch of the science fiction genre. Dystopias depict tyrannical governments that control every aspect of their citizen's private life, helped by the modernization and technologization of the respective nation. Often, the ruling class intends to achieve a personal utopia that benefits a privileged group, while the general population is forced to be obedient and submissive in a decadent reality. Furthermore, dystopian novels are set in futuristic timelines, yet usually portray a recognisable world for the readers. Hence, authors do not intend to predict the advancements that humanity will accomplish, they just describe the possible negative outcome of present and past events. Indeed, more than the future, dystopias imagine alternative realities. Nevertheless, the genre does not represent the counterpart of utopias, but an aftereffect of them. The utopian urge of building an idyllic society ignores the imperfection of human nature, thus dystopias demonstrate that a forced perfection is a source of deterioration.

If U.S. dystopian literature is examined by a utopian studies approach, it should be considered in relation to what might be the most utopian passage in American history: the myth of the West. The present dissertation has demonstrated that

contemporary U.S. dystopias replicate the myth of the West to uncover the decline of the country. In order to accomplish so, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* have been examined. The settlement of the American West began in the 17th century when European pioneers expanded their colonies westwards in the American continent. The emptiness of the West offered a multitude of possibilities for settlers who sought for new beginnings to establish their domain. Thus, European-American citizens mystified the idea of going west turning it into the promised-land that could fulfil any imaginable fantasy. Nevertheless, as the present dissertation has demonstrated the colonisation of the West was a violent invasion of territory that caused the violation of the natural environment and the socio-political degradation of the country.

Both Dick and Butler commemorate the importance of the setting in Western narratives by turning the dystopian landscape into a protagonist that interacts with the characters and develops the plot forwards. Yet, although the novels are set in characteristic locations of the American West, the old Eden is now transformed into a post-apocalyptic scenario due to the massive industrial alterations and economic capitalization of the U.S. As indicated in the dissertation, dystopian literature denounces the chaotic aftermath of human intervention in the American West, emphasising the origins of the present environmental catastrophe.

Moreover, the myth of the West is constructed upon the frontier, which became a symbol of expansion and evolution as the colonization of the American continent progressed into the Pacific Ocean. Dystopian literature translates the frontier into modern scenarios, highlighting America's natural tendency of stretching its nation's frontiers when geographical expansionism is no longer plausible; together with the unavoidable social consequences that imprisoning frontiers imply. Nonetheless, the utopian attempt to construct new frontiers is just a modern replica of the myth of the West, which as this dissertation suggests, was never fully extinguished, since mistakes of the past can be found not only in fictional futures but also in the readers' present.

To conclude, U.S. contemporary dystopias do not plot against the American nation and its politics, but constructively criticise and unveil some miscalculations that could have been avoided if the human nature was not so opportunistic. In addition, for

the present reader dystopian novels become cautionary tales that advise to take the necessary measures not to witness the dystopian downfall of the planet, since 2020 is one step closer to turning into a real life dystopia. Thus, the apocalypse does not necessarily signify the end, but the disappearance of the reality we recognise in order to liberate the route for the building of a preferable new one.

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