Reading Utopia in 2021

Hannah Lauren Murray

University of Liverpool

If the pandemic has demonstrated anything, it is that we are not all in it together. National responses to coronavirus have exacerbated existing disparities along lines of gender, socio-economic status, disability, geography, and race, and where these pre-existing inequalities intersect. Higher mortality rates have been experienced by the disabled and in deprived areas, and vaccine apartheid prevents lower income countries from protecting their citizens.[[1]](#endnote-1) Eighteen months since initial lockdowns, there are long term or permanent inequities in access to work, healthcare and shelter. Women’s participation in the workforce has dropped and may not return, millions have lost access to reproductive care, and evictions risk disproportionally impacting Black neighborhoods.[[2]](#endnote-2) Debates continue over the role of the state to protect public health while maintaining civil liberties. The present and the future seem to be increasingly ones of surveillance, borders, authoritarianism, and individualism. Dystopia feels apt, yet it is utopian literature, both historical and contemporary, which is most pressing. By envisioning a new world centered on social care and connection, rather than one driven by technology, profit, and the nation-state, utopia can imagine a better future.

Finding another way of living in which all humans have an equitable and active stake requires a radical reimagining of society. As Ruth Levitas argues, utopian thinking, for example in speculative literature, is a valid method for building the future through new creative forms of knowledge. In *Utopia as Social Method*, Levitas outlines that utopian thinking requires a reengagement with how the past imagined the future through the “institutional design and delineation of the good society” of writing. In the late eighteenth century, writers looked to America to imagine how new societies could develop and progress outside of European civilization. For example, in J.P. Brissot’s *New Travels in the United States* (1792), his friend Étienne Clavière considers post-Independence America an apt environment to plan “a society before it actually had a single member” and create “institutions which would promote public and private virtue.”[[3]](#endnote-3) America itself could be the grounds for a perfect society, planned and organised by intelligent, independent men.

In this short piece I suggest one example of an utopian text that for me resonates with the contemporary moment and that I ask other eighteenth-century scholars to visit. John Lithgow’s anonymously published *Equality – A Political Romance* (1802) is the first utopian fiction written in the United States.[[4]](#endnote-4) Part travel narrative, part historical document, the label “romance” is key here. The romance at the end of the eighteenth century operates as a proto-fiction that creates a meaningful narrative of the past and imagines the future. For Charles Brockden Brown, a romance “deviate[s] from present and sensible objects, into speculations on the past or future; it is eager to infer from the present state of things, their former or future conditions”.[[5]](#endnote-5)Lithgow is a romancer, drawing on the failures of the early United States where wealth inequality was ballooning, and speculating on a society that may come into existence. Set in the proto-communist, proto-feminist and anti-individualist island of Lithconia, *Equality* offers readers a world without financial property, class hierarchy, gender inequality, or slavery. A nation that is physically unlocatable (there is “no such place on the maps”), the island is geographically apart from the early national United States. However, as a space that may exist at “some time or other”, Lithconia occupies its own temporality as a model for a possible, future America.[[6]](#endnote-6)*Equality* is a utopian text with a narrative of radical change that not only helps us to understand today’s headlines as part of a history of inequality but also asks us to imagine moving beyond them.

Untethered from explicit early national geographical and chronological referents, *Equality* imagines a radically different social, economic and political world from 1800s Philadelphia. Published serially in Deist magazine *The Temple of Reason* from May to July 1802, *Equality* is a found manuscript structured as a travel narrative and historical study. Exploring the seas around the fictive worlds of “Utopia, Brobdignag” and “Lilliput”, the narrator finds himself in Lithconia in order to take on fresh water (10). Asking if he can pay for provisions, an elder smiles at his simplicity and explains that Lithconia is a world without property or money. Instead, the narrator must work his way around the island for three months in order to receive shelter and food. Once labour can be exchanged the Lithconians claim this leads to “the beginning of barter, and barter produced money which was the root of all evil” (11). In the history of Lithconia the islanders provide, unchecked private property led to vast financial and social inequality.

Such was the progress of evil which arose out of the system of separate estates, that nine-tenths of mankind groaned under the most oppressive tyranny, labouring from morning till night for a poor and scanty diet, and hardly clothes to protect them from the inclemency of the seasons, while the other tenth enjoyed every luxury, and rioted in waste and profusion. (27)

Lithgow’s historical narrative reflects the widening wealth gap in late eighteenth-century America, which received increasing criticism in early national radical writing. For example, a December 1800 article in *The Temple of Reason* calls for a revolution against “the tyrants of the earth” who extort labour and monopolise wealth through “speculation and oppression.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Pre-communist Lithconia has become the United States in the twenty-first century, as the wealth gap expands from 90% to 99% and as people experience record unemployment and evictions ­– continuing after lockdowns have ended – while stock markets rise.

In 2021 we are living in world before 1802 Lithconia. As a result of coronavirus, unequal social relationships to the economy have increased along lines of gender, profession, and health. Without full sick or quarantine pay, employers demand unwell, potentially infectious and vulnerable chronically ill workers to return to work, impacting groups from lower socio-economic and disproportionally ethnic minority backgrounds. Without state support, women have taken on the burden of caring responsibilities for children and the sick, while expected to continue working at the same level. As workplaces reopen, employees are looking for more meaningful work in new professions and better conditions including improved work-life balance, higher wages and flexible hours.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The far-off Lithconia remedies capitalist catastrophe, offering readers a new model of social and economic relations, radically beyond increased pay and improved conditions. Given the chance to restructure after suffering a “plague which swept away 500,000 inhabitants” in overcrowded cities, *Equality* counters exploitative capitalism with an ethics of care, where social support from birth to death is provided by the state, including maternity and sick leave (15). In this national collective, women are no longer dependent on a man for financial support. Unlike Brissot’s plan that maintains traditional gender roles, in *Equality* women “will succeed in their turn to the duties of administration” of government (14).A common theme in utopian fiction, people live in shared houses “occupied by nine or ten persons, whom love or friendship has drawn together” and children are raised by the state (14). Society is structured through belonging and participation rather than ownership.

*Equality* fundamentally disrupts Lockean property rights that guarantee freedom to accumulate wealth for the liberal subject. Lithgow refuses to make labor exchangeable as “no man is permitted to do another’s work” – labor cannot be compelled but it also cannot be willingly traded (11). The individual freedom to own labor and property is remodeled as the communal body’s collective ownership. The narrator reflects “no such word as mine and thine are ever heard”; Lithconians see themselves as one group rather than individuals (16). Almost everyone works, but for only four hours a day. The nation’s “lands are in common” and after the citizen has labored “the remainder of his time is his own” (10). Farmers distribute “every necessary for the consumption of a family” twice a week and clothing is provided once a year (12). With material needs met through the state and private property removed, *Equality* presents a world in which no one’s survival is dependent on working beyond their capacity, no one hoards toilet paper.

*Equality* prompts readers to ask not just where and when Lithconia is, but also who it is for. Lithconia’s obscure setting enables Lithgow to evade contemporary discussions of slavery and Indigenous genocide. In Lithconia these issues are circumvented by the omission of any histories of slavery or settler-colonialism. Slavery contradicts Lithconians’ proto-communist communal belonging, which is predicated on all able citizens working an equal amount to contribute to the nation’s self-sufficient prosperity. Choice of work is eliminated but no one is exploited, and all workers are remunerated through an equal ownership of produce and goods. However, the text is not just without slavery, but as an undiscoverable island, isolated Lithconia has avoided discussions of emancipation, migration, or racial difference. The text’s unlocatable geographic and temporal setting outside of 1800s America acts to circumvent pressing debates over slavery taking place. In the early republic, a world without slavery is a segregated one. In *New Travels*, Brissot writes at length on abolition and supports colonization movements to send African Americans to West Africa. He endorses a paternalistic view that “return[ing] them to their native land” protects African Americans from the cruelty of Native Americans and frontiersmen, and the animosity of white citizens who will reject Black participation in a democratic society.[[9]](#endnote-9) If we reorient *Equality* as a model of a future America without exploitation and inequality, Lithgow’s evasion of slavery is tacit support for the segregationist logic within early national abolition. Without a history of enslavement to be overcome and remedied, racial integration and equality are not required in this alternate nation. *Equality* contributes to a discourse of white-only belonging and improvement in the early national period.

Lithgow’s omission of expansionist settler discourse found in 1800s America is a counterpart to his evasion of slavery. In *New Travels*, Brissot predicts Native Americans will assimilate “or else a thousand causes will bring about their annihilation” in a future America. He praises the backwoods where “there is not a single Indian left – they have made room for another race”.[[10]](#endnote-10) Without this direct violence, *Equality* demonstrates its investment in an America without Indigenous peoples by enacting what Jean O’Brien terms the “replacement narrative”: the writing of Euro-Americans as their own first people.[[11]](#endnote-11) *Equality* offers a national history in which Lithconians – alternate Euro-Americans – are the original inhabitants of the land. Before providing a long stadial history of Lithconia’s rise and fall from the pastoral “age of innocence” to the corrupted commercial stage, the narrator states that Lithconians are “progressing [back] from civil society to a state of nature”, rejecting excessive legislative and the exploitation inherent in private property and trade (16). In an eighteenth century stadial view of history, the Native American exists in a “pre- or noncivilized state of closeness to nature”.[[12]](#endnote-12) *Equality* is framed in this racialised language of development in which Native Americans are erased to rewrite and justify settler-colonialism. Furthermore, Lithconians are improved versions of the Indigenous “noble savage”, as within this state of nature they inhabit a well-ordered “city spread over a large garden” where land is enclosed into small farms and manufacturing takes place in local workshops (18). While looking far beyond 1800s America, *Equality* reflects an early national progressive politics in which ideal white societies take the place of Indigenous peoples.

Utopias intensify what we already do as scholars of historical literature – looking back to look forward, thinking outside the contextual frame to draw comparisons between older texts and the contemporary moment. A companion to contemporary “up lit” that narrates uplifting personal stories of kindness between loved ones or strangers, utopian fiction offers structural change where that care is not a remarkable plot point but part of society’s design.[[13]](#endnote-13) Today, mutual aid groups take up some of the functions of the collective in Lithconia – providing shelter and food, sharing resources, caring for the sick – functions that should not be an emergency stopgap during a pandemic but an everyday practice to “prefigur[e] the world in which you want to live”.[[14]](#endnote-14) *Equality* proposes an alternate 1802 that in many respects is far more advanced than 2021, leading today’s reader and scholar to ask when and how this improvement can occur, and furthermore, who it is for. Lithgow is radical in his reimagining of economic and social relations, but he cannot commit to a radical racial politics, and instead elides these crucial questions of who gets to belong in a real ideal America. In our classrooms, reading groups, and scholarship, eighteenth-century utopian texts are a jumping off point to consider utopian thinking for our present moment: universal basic income, free health and social care, the four-day week, the end of structural inequalities. Reading utopian writing provides a blueprint of the future – it is up to readers to bridge the gap between the present and the future yet to pass, whether that future is written two centuries ago or today.

1. NOTES

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3. Étienne Clavière to Brissot, 21 May 1788, Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America*, ed. Durand Echeverna, trans. Mara Soceanu Vamos and Durand Echeverna (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I assign authorship to Lithgow as he claims it himself in an 1804 letter to Thomas Jefferson. Lithgow to Jefferson, 24 December 1804, The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-0888. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Brockden Brown, ‘The Difference between History and Romance’, *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review*, April 1800, 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. John Lithgow, *Equality-A Political Romance*, ed. Duncan Faherty and Ed White, Just Teach One, 2017, 7, https://jto.americanantiquarian.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Equality-JTO-Format.pdf. Hereafter all references will appear in parenthesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Man, the Author and Artificer of the Most Part of His Own Evils and Misfortunes’, *The Temple of Reason*, 6 December 1800. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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9. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels*, 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 421, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jean O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 335. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
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