A Desire Called America: Biopolitics, Utopia, and the Literary Commons, by Christian Haines

Benjamin Blackman


Christian Haines’s first book is a timely one. At a moment when the logics of American exceptionalism (e.g., “Make America Great Again”) have appeared to culminate in a bleak present whose dystopian mood is fed in part by the rise of neo-Fascist politics, rampant wealth inequality, capitalist violence, and a climate crisis that decimates non-human species and burns down cities and whose maximum effects we still tensely anticipate, Haines looks to literature from the American Renaissance (mid nineteenth-century) and postmodernism in order to recover a minor utopian tradition that offers from within exceptionalism a corrective to ideologies of exceptionalism and the systemic injustices that sustain and are sustained by such ideologies.

Focusing on the work of Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, William S. Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon, Haines cultivates a series of readings that builds toward a vision of what he calls a “singular America,” a “refunctioning of nationality: a nation without nationalism, a people without the exclusionary logic of citizenship, a collective bond without the mediation of the state”. (7) Unlike futuristic or exoplanetary societies found in science fiction, a “singular America” exists here and now, residing in the contemporary moment alongside and within neoliberal and capitalist forms of social and political arrangement. If this notion of a singular America is a utopian one that offers a more fair and just society, Haines urges us not to see it as fundamentally opposed to the logics of exceptionalism but instead part of the very same structure of desire for “unique social, political, and cultural vitality”. (3) As such, each of these writers works toward a singular America not by imagining other worlds distinct from our own but by remodeling America (or the concept of America) from the inside out, pushing “the revolutionary potential of American exceptionalism to the point where its nationalist-capitalist frame breaks”. (3) Many years before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, Lucretius explained that a thing contains within it what happens in its past, present, and future. America, too, as Whitman would put it, “contains multitudes.” If this singular version of American society sits captive in the present, Haines offers literature as a vitalizing agent. Imbuing literature with the power to help realize a culture of the commons, and drawing on Foucault’s work on biopolitics as a theoretical framework through which to locate the emergence of utopia in the body itself – from a site within the bounds
of the nation – Haines advances what he calls the literary commons as the socio-political form of a singular America. Each of these writers offers a vision of a singular America mobilized by the utopian impulse which sits at the heart of American exceptionalism. Indeed, this utopian impulse is baked into the very concept of America, even if today that impulse has been largely co-opted by neoliberalism, wrapped in rhetoric that promises a return to a Golden Age that never really existed (or was only golden for a certain population), conjuring a future that might appear different but merely reifies the conditions of the present.

Early in the book’s introduction, Haines cites Thomas Paine writing on the American Revolution, paying special attention to Paine’s language which frames the Revolution as a kind of historical rupture – a chance to, in Paine’s words, “begin the world over again.” It’s here, towards the end of Paine’s *Common Sense*, that Haines grounds his theorization of utopianism with exceptionalism. Noting that Paine’s “new world” rhetoric rehearses colonial narratives of the American continent as an “exceptional space…[that] consecrates violence against indigenous peoples in the name of ‘Man,” Haines nevertheless identifies in Paine’s language “a surplus of social potentiality immanent in the long arc of American exceptionalism – a singular America that doesn’t transcend exceptionalism but lives within and against it”. (4) Crucially, Haines does not read the utopian nature of Paine’s writing in opposition to the presence of a colonial narrative that promises the genocide of Native Americans, nor does he dismiss Paine’s utopianism as merely false. Rather, he holds these positions together, if painfully at first, in order to extract a disquieting yet liberatory insight: that the intensification of American exceptionalism over the last two centuries or so might well be understood as itself the product of utopian resolve. As Margaret Atwood reminds us in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), “Better never means better for everyone… It always means worse, for some”. (211) Yet, recognizing this relationship between utopia and exceptionalism brings our attention to the fact that utopia does not exist elsewhere in space or time, but lies dormant in the very structures of Americanism itself.

Scholars of American culture and literature will find Haines’s reading of these canonical American writers compelling, not least because each is mobilized by a utopian imperative that offers new, peripheral ways for thinking through forms of the American speculative imagination outside mainstream traditions of early and canonical science fiction. Scholars of science fiction, too, would be wise to read this book for its deft sensitivity to the nuances of the speculative imagination and its grasp on the role of utopia in a politically turbulent present. Drawing on the language and theories of science and speculative fiction (citing Suvin and Jameson), and rarely shy in addressing what is his visibly American audience, Haines offers a praxis of utopian hermeneutic that encourages us to recognize the commons in our literature, and take up the work of estrangement ourselves so that we might see our home again for the first time.

**Works Cited**