

Introduction

A Land of Utopias

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

UTOPIA'S PECULIAR SPATIAL CONFIGURATION is inscribed in the very word coined by Thomas More at the dawn of Modernity, roughly five hundred years ago. The term is ambiguous in that it means “no place” but can also be interpreted as “a good place.”¹ For More, utopia is such a good place that there is no space for it in the real world. It is, literally, too good to be true. And the spatial instability inherent in the expression cannot be uncoupled from its temporal ambivalence. Literary utopias such as the island society conjured up by More were perfect communities that, so the fiction goes, existed in some faraway location in the present. Still, the goal of most of these narratives was to criticize the ills of their time—greed, arbitrary exercise of power, corruption, and so on—that emerged in all their abhorrence when compared to the exemplary sociopolitical organization of their literary counterparts. The critical impulse of utopian writings was therefore complemented with a didactic one: such texts were to furnish a blueprint for the improvement of their authors' communities that could aspire to approximate the perfection of

utopia in a distant future. Neither fully rooted in a determinate place nor entirely embedded in its time, utopia is always outside and beyond itself, hovering between the real and the imaginary, presence and absence, the present and the future.

In More's book, news of utopia is brought to Europe by a Portuguese sailor, Raphael Hythloday, thus underlining the indelible link between the Old Continent's colonial project, the encounter with disparate landscapes, and the contact with very different peoples, on the one hand, and the ability to envision societies more perfect than the European ones, on the other. The sailor's nationality is an allusion to the Portuguese voyages to Africa, Asia, and, in particular, to America, a continent Christopher Columbus believed to be the location of the Christian paradise on earth when he first reached it. More than any other region, the so-called New World embodied the promise of a better Europe, where a society designed to avoid the faults of Old World monarchies could be built.² While the Americas harkened back to the past and reminded explorers and colonizers of the perfection once found in the Garden of Eden, they also pointed in the direction of the future, to a coming community of justice and plenty. Even though he never specifies the geographical coordinates of his imaginary island, More does write that it was located in the "New World," leading readers to believe that he envisioned it somewhere in America, a continent unknown to Europeans until little more than twenty years before the English writer's publication of his renowned book (5).

In one way or another, utopia became ingrained in the imaginary of America and was later included in the mythical makeup of most American nations.³ Suffice it to think about the United States' self-understanding as a beacon of hope for those reaching its shores, each metropolis a "city upon a hill" that would set an example of tolerance and equality for the rest of the world. This utopian drive is particularly salient in the case of Brazil. Ever since the arrival of the first Portuguese sailors and settlers, the region's lush environment has been compared to the bountiful nature of paradise that obviated the need for human toil, and its pre-Columbian inhabitants have been regarded, at least at

first, to be as amicable and innocent as Eve and Adam, as we shall see in chapters 2 through 4. Early Brazil was perceived to be utopia realized and, though it was a far cry from the sophisticated society portrayed by More, we can easily picture Raphael Hythloday favorably comparing the easygoing, money-free existence of its native Indians to the avarice and rapacity of Europeans.

Even when Portuguese colonizers began to realize that the luxuriant tropical forests posed challenges to agriculture and that Brazil's native population was not as amenable to exploitation as they had initially thought, the territory's utopian allure did not fade. To be sure, part of this attraction was considerably removed from the lofty dreams of social, political, and economic justice that tend to drive utopian thought. The fantasy of easy enrichment, grounded on the perception of the region as a treasure trove of natural wealth, has been one of the most powerful utopian forces leading settlers to establish themselves in Brazil. From the prosperity brought by large-scale sugarcane plantations, starting in the first decades of colonization, through the Gold Rush of the eighteenth century, to the riches generated by the Amazonian rubber boom in the early twentieth century, the country has been depicted as an El Dorado at various points throughout its history.

But economic considerations alone do not exhaust the utopian aura of the territory. Both Brazilians and outsiders often identify the nation as a stage where not only great economic but also sociopolitical exploits will one day take place. For instance, Austrian author Stefan Zweig titled his 1941 book on the area *Brazil: A Country of the Future* (*Brasilien: Ein Land der Zukunft*). There, he contrasts the internecine war and racism that devastated Europe at the time to the peaceful coexistence of different races and ethnicities in the South American nation. In his rosy depiction of the country's racial politics he sees the prototype for human relations in the rest of the globe. For Zweig, Brazil is a diamond in the rough. Even though the land was already prospering, he believed its current growth to be just the beginning and predicted that "[the country] is certainly destined to become one of the most important factors in

the future development of our world” (“[ein Land,] das doch unzweifelhaft bestimmt ist, einer der bedeutsamsten Faktoren in der künftigen Entwicklung unserer Welt zu werden”).⁴ “I knew that I had glimpsed the future of our world,” writes Zweig about his travels in Brazil, adding a little farther down in the text that spending time in the nation “gave him the feeling of living in a process of becoming, in what is to come, in the future” (“Ich wußte, ich hatte einen Blick in die Zukunft unserer Welt getan;” “dieses Gefühl zu empfinden, im Werdenden, Kommenden, Zukünftigen zu leben”). Zweig’s view of Brazil as a country of the future, where events to come in other regions can already be found *in nuce*, became etched into its identity. The futuristic architecture of the capital city of Brasília, founded in 1960, testifies to the nation’s eagerness to coincide with and embody the time to come. To this day, Brazilian politicians, economists, scholars, and artists speculate about their country’s ability or failure to live up to its potential and to fulfill its promise as a land of the future.

A delimited geographical area reminiscent of an indefinite paradise and a land whose present situation is persistently overshadowed by its glorious future, Brazil, like utopia, never fully coincides with itself. Its diverse, bountiful, territory first functioned as a space onto which Europeans projected their manifold fantasies of economic prosperity and sociopolitical advancement. Later, certain more peripheral parts of the country served the same function for the nation’s elite. The Amazon, a “dazzling stage, *where sooner or later the civilization of the globe will be concentrated,*” (“deslumbrante palco, *onde mais cedo ou mais tarde se há de concentrar a civilização do globo,*” Cunha 219–20), is a case in point, as we shall see in chapter 2. Brazilian intellectuals perceived the Amazon River basin as an empty space of prodigious wealth lying in wait to be explored and exploited. In addition, the country’s present tends to be regarded as a mere step on the path toward a future that perpetually escapes its population’s grasp. The view of leisure as the mode of being characteristic of Brazilians and in store for the rest of humankind, discussed in chapter 4, illustrates this point. Current events are interpreted in light

of a glorious time to come, the nation's eyes firmly turned toward futurity. It is therefore not surprising that utopia is such an integral part of Brazilian culture. If outsiders tended to project utopian aspirations onto the region, Brazilian intellectuals have, in turn, internalized, modified, and reworked these dreams that became part of the lens through which they reflect upon their nation.

This book looks at key moments in the development of utopia in Brazil. While discussions of utopia may focus on three distinct domains, namely utopian thought, utopian literature, that is, fictional accounts of utopian communities, and practical attempts to found better societies (Claeys 11), this study concentrates almost exclusively on the first. I aim to trace the evolution of utopian thought as it has been configured in Brazil, rather than analyzing specific literary portrayals of fictional utopias set on Brazilian soil or concrete attempts to found perfect communities in the area. Still, these spheres are not watertight compartments, and utopian thought necessarily overlaps with literary and concrete utopias. Antônio Vieira's utopian writings discussed in chapter 1, for instance, had their roots both in theology and in actual Messianic groups that sprung up throughout Europe from the Middle Ages onward and, later, in the Americas.⁵ Similarly, the legend of the utopian community of the Amazons analyzed in chapter 2 or the utopian societies of leisure examined in chapter 4 would not have emerged without a palpable, material substratum: the remoteness of the Amazon, in the first case; the natural wealth of Brazil and the country's self-perception as an alternative to Northern capitalist economies, in the second. Furthermore, while utopian thinking is often expounded in essay form, as we shall see in chapter 4, writers also frequently resort to literature as a means to convey these ideas. Chapters 2 and 3 analyze literary writings that cannot be defined *sensu stricto* as utopias but that weave utopian elements into the fictional fabric of the texts.

Throughout the discussion of utopias in a Brazilian context undertaken in this book I espouse a broad understanding of utopian thought. I believe that utopia cannot be reduced to a transhistorical ideal, easy to

dismiss given that it will never be reached in the finite temporality of human existence. Rather than unattainable goals, utopias formulate an intrahistorical transcendence, based upon the impulse to go beyond history in history, thus inaugurating new possibilities within reality. Utopian transcendence is therefore not a sphere separated from the real but exists within immanence itself, thus destabilizing the spatiotemporal continuum that stretches between potentiality and its concretization.⁶ The present study therefore implicitly refutes the position of thinkers such as John Gray, according to whom all utopias necessarily lead to totalitarian political regimes. In his book *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Gray argues that utopias work as normative ideals and are frequently used in order to justify violent acts. Unlike Gray, I do not consider all utopias to be transhistorical notions one would blindly submit to. Rather, they can be interpreted as nonnormative breaches in lived time and space that allow us to envision different ways of existing in a community. True utopias are always incomplete and destined to fail as totalitarian projects, as Fredric Jameson points out: “the best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively” (xiii). In the case of Brazil, utopian thought derives from the desire to jolt society out of a stagnant status quo and to valorize the possibilities inherent in the country, pointing to new ways of being together that are already latent in the everyday. Brazilian utopian thinking shows that the “utopian impulse,” which German philosopher Ernst Bloch defines as a central feature of Modernity, is not a purely negative or nihilistic drive but an attempt to inscribe an element of transcendence in concrete existence—a way to broaden the limits of what is and to consider reality anew.

The states of grace mentioned in the title of the book highlight the transience of utopianism. As Clarice Lispector points out in her texts, analyzed in chapter 3, grace cannot be taken for granted. It emerges as a rupture in our routine and opens up new avenues for interpreting and transforming existing circumstances. The utopian thought analyzed in this study envisions societies living in a state of grace that entails a situation of peace, social justice, and economic equality in the texts examined

in chapters 1, 2 and 4, and an interspecies community in the writings discussed in chapter 3. The state, understood not only as a fleeting condition but also as a political configuration, is therefore transformed by grace, which allows us to imagine a better sociopolitical arrangement.

While the notion of a state of grace evokes a moment of union with divinity happening in human history that puts us squarely within a theological paradigm, I hold that utopias have inherited and secularized some of these religious undertones. The state of grace achieved through a close connection to the divine—be it in a prelapsarian, innocent existence in the Garden of Eden or in a Millenarian Kingdom of Christ on earth described in apocalyptic, eschatological Christian doctrine—will be reworked and transformed but never quite abandoned in utopianism. This is particularly true in Brazilian utopian thought, which often goes back to an idealized, paradisiac past, at the same time as it draws on the country's Messianic tradition in its vision of a utopian future.

Many Brazilian depictions of a perfect era to come involve the recovery of an earlier Edenic time, perceived as more egalitarian and just, an arrangement that the authors believe could be secularized and modified to respond to present demands. Utopia performs in this case an elliptical movement that reclaims a theologically configured state of grace and projects it into a secular future, adapting the positive aspects of the former to the changed circumstances of the latter. At the same time, Brazilian utopian projects—and many non-Brazilian ones—often result from the secularization of Messianic aspirations. The faith in a period of peace and prosperity inaugurated by the Second Coming of the Messiah, who will govern the earth for a thousand years before the end of times, as described in the Book of Revelation, is, in and of itself, a projection of a renewed, paradisiac state of grace into the future. This belief is transformed in Modernity into the secular, utopian expectation of an improved community to come. Even literary utopias that postulate the present existence of a perfect group somewhere on earth long for the future betterment of their own societies, hoping they will one day approximate fiction. This is not to say that religion is abolished in

all utopian thought; to the contrary, many utopian writings accept the existence of God. But while Messianism relies on divine intervention to facilitate the arrival of the Millennium, the fulfillment of utopian longing depends on human ingenuity alone. Deprived of a heavenly guarantor, utopian states of grace are predicated on uncertainty, since it is doubtful whether human beings will live up to their promise. Utopian thinking draws its strength precisely from this volatility that makes it question and reassess its own tenets at every step.

The structure of this book retraces the development of utopian thought in Brazil from its theological, Messianic origins to the secular utopias of the twentieth century. Chapter 1 analyzes the prophetic writings of Jesuit Priest Antônio Vieira (1608–1697), where he depicts a future, Messianic, Christian Kingdom that would encompass both Portugal and Brazil. This earthly empire of Christ—the Fifth Empire, after the Assyrian, the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman empires—would be predicated on equality and justice. I argue that, for Vieira, the distance between the Native Brazilian population he had encountered in America, the exiled Jews who had fled the Iberian Peninsula because of the Inquisition, and the Christians of Europe would progressively fade, as all would come together in the Fifth Empire. He believed that the colonization of Brazil heralded the advent of a new kingdom of perpetual peace, where people would live in a mystical communion with God and all would have equal rights, mediated by their faith in Christ.

Antônio Vieira's Messianic thought exemplifies the theological paradigm that will leave a lasting imprint in later utopias in the country. Brazil witnessed several concrete utopian experiments grounded on religion, the most famous of which was perhaps the community of Canudos, headed by Antônio Conselheiro (1830–1897). This Messianic leader heralded the impending arrival of a harmonious time of plenty, a message that resonated deeply with the impoverished population of the country's drought-ridden Northeastern region. The rise and fall of Canudos, disbanded in 1897 by the Brazilian Republican Army after a long and bloody campaign, was immortalized in journalist Euclides

da Cunha's (1866–1909) sociological and literary masterpiece *The Backlands* (*Os Sertões*, 1902). Canudos retains to this day an emblematic status in Brazilian popular culture, literature, and cinema, as the ultimate example of a real-life utopian community.⁷ A historical attempt to establish a utopian society, Canudos lies outside the purview of this study.⁸ Still, it testifies to the overlap between theological and political elements already at work in Vieira's thought, a connection tying transcendence and immanence, the beyond and the here-and-now, that we will find in a secularized form in the twentieth-century utopian writings discussed in the rest of this book.

The utopian texts examined in chapter 2 recover the communitarian, egalitarian thrust of Vieira's works. The chapter examines the different representations of the mythical Amazon warriors that lent their name to the Amazon River basin from the time the first European explorers arrived in the region onward. In the past, the legend of a fearsome all-women tribe went hand in hand with a dystopian vision of the territory as a "green hell," according to which unsuspecting travelers and colonizers often fell prey to dangers lurking in the shadows of a threatening natural environment. I contend that, with the development of the Amazon region in the wake of the rubber boom in the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, especially, with the rise of environmental concerns, the Amazons became part of an idealized image of the rainforest. The chapter analyzes three modes of utopian representation of the Amazons: Gastão Cruls's (1888–1959) portrayal of a communitarian tribe of women in the novel *The Mysterious Amazon* (*A Amazônia Misteriosa*, 1925); Abguar Bastos's (1902–1995) vision of the land of the Amazons, free from the problems of his time, in *The Amazon Nobody Knows About* (*A Amazônia que Ninguém Sabe*, 1929); and the Modernist fantasy of a matriarchy that would obviate the negative consequences of capitalist rule.

Chapter 3 begins by examining the link between nation and nature in Brazilian thought and discusses the centrality of plants and animals in the country's literature, with reference to the writings of Machado de

Assis (1839–1908) and Guimarães Rosa (1908–1967). Drawing on the work of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I argue that literature can function in a way similar to Amerindian shamanism by attempting to represent the worldview of nonhumans, to regard them as subjects and to espouse their perspective. I call this kind of writing *zoophytographia*, or interspecies literature. The chapter then turns to the texts of Clarice Lispector, which offer a utopian vision of a nonhierarchical world, where plants, animals, and human beings share their living space. On my reading, Lispector suggests two main modes of relating to nonhumans: metamorphosis and encounter. The face-to-face encounter with plants and animals in short stories such as “The Imitation of the Rose” (“A Imitação da Rosa”) and “The Buffalo” (“O Búfalo”), or in the novel *The Passion According to G.H.* (*A Paixão Segundo G.H.*), results in a profound transformation of anthropocentric categories such as language or reason, which are now extended to our nonhuman others.

Chapter 4 addresses the positive valuation of idleness as a quintessentially Brazilian way of being-in-the-world that distinguishes the country from the overworked nations of Europe and from the United States. I begin by discussing the ideal of a blissful, work-free Golden Age, present both in Greco-Latin and in Jewish traditions, and then consider various critiques of the current ideology of work by political theorists, economists, and anthropologists, who hope that a leisurely society will arise in the wake of mechanization. I subsequently look into the different ways in which the ideal of leisure has been appropriated in Brazilian culture: the myth that indigenous peoples lived in communion with nature in a Golden Age without labor; the popular figure of the “malandro,” someone who moves between organized society and the world of crime; and the ritual of Carnival, together with the dream of a permanent carnivalization of society that would obviate the need to work. I contend that authors such as Oswald de Andrade or Antônio Cândido believe that liberation from work and adoption of a leisurely way of life open the possibility of a utopian world where people could devote themselves to meaningful artistic and intellectual endeavors.

The study of utopian thought in Brazil undertaken in this book aims to contribute to a multifaceted appreciation of the country's ontology, of its self-understanding from a social, political, economic, and environmental points of view. But this multidimensional portrait is split from the start, doubled between the way things are and how they could improve, between the present and an imagined future, which, in turn, often goes back to an idealized past. These temporal dislocations destabilize the existing order and give depth to the present, tapping into its uncharted or neglected dimensions and exploring its latent possibilities. Utopianism disrupts what is, contaminating it with the thought of what could be, and allows one to imagine a more just time to come that would function not as a distant ideal but as a nagging conviction, embedded in our everyday, that another world is possible. This belief nudges us out of complacency, and turns the here-and-now into the very place and time of utopia.