To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility.

Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.1

The opening paragraphs of Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* speak of two contradictory senses that provide guidance to our being in the world: the sense of reality and the sense of possibility. Both depend on and influence each other, as Musil’s protagonist, Ulrich, soon comes to appreciate. This is the case because one cannot expect to cultivate a sense of reality, of what is necessarily so-and-so, without simultaneously exploring a sense of possibility, of what could, due to its contingency, always be otherwise.2

1 Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, para. 8.3–8.4. Throughout this book, I cite from e-books (in epub-format) by referring to the paragraph from which quotes are taken. To determine the paragraph, I use the cross-platform, open-source application Calibre (https://calibre-ebook.com).

2 See: Sattler, “Contingency and Necessity.” This attention to both the sense of reality and the sense of possibility also influences Musil’s strategy of narration. On this aspect, see: Weissberg, “Versuch einer Sprache des Möglichen.”
In this book, I pay heed to both the solid frames that structure our existence and to the open doors that enable us to change our lives. More concretely, I follow up on Musil’s lead by looking at various and sometimes competing expressions of the utopian imagination.

This certainly seems to be an opportune moment to direct attention to utopias. Today, utopias are everywhere: from popular TV series telling post-apocalyptic stories, to revolutionary plans for the built environment; from philosophical treatises on the technological enhancement of *Homo sapiens*, to intimate settings created by counter-hegemonic communities. Our collective appetite to conjure and inhabit other worlds appears to be insatiable.

How can we explain this, given that only a few decades ago utopias were either derided as lofty castles in the sky or denounced as dangerous schemes for social engineering? And what should we make of the growing number of rival utopias that circulate in the public sphere? Are they merely the by-product of a craving for escapist fantasies in an era when alternatives to the status quo are increasingly elusive, or do they genuinely articulate empowering visions of the future?

Answers to these questions are not easy to discover. Important findings in the humanities and social sciences notwithstanding, we do not yet possess a satisfactory account of utopian visions in and for our times. This book aims to fill this lacuna, by analyzing what is the biggest challenge the world presently faces: anthropogenic climate change, a challenge for which, due to its multi-causality and scope, no straightforward solutions present themselves. The ongoing ecological crisis, which imperils our survival as a species, accelerates the extinction of the Earth’s biota and significantly affects the planetary ecosphere, makes it imperative to critically reflect on how we could salvage our sense of reality while at the same time extending our sense of possibility.

It is one of the book’s underlying assumptions that we do not have much chance of survival unless we take the task of figuring out better ways of being and living very seriously indeed. Utopias, conveyed through social and political theory and speculative fiction, can help in this process. Properly conceived, they are as much concerned with disclosing radically new perspectives as they are about illuminating the material and ideological circumstances that shape our lives. Precisely because the
future is uncertain and risky, we cannot but conjure alternative scenarios – some hopeful, others fearful – of what is yet to come.\(^3\) Since there is, in spite of delusions of interstellar escape, no other planet for our species to dwell on, we have no choice but to imaginatively explore better ways of being and living here on Earth.\(^4\)

Against this backdrop, we may ask ourselves what modes of imagining a climate-changed world are prevalent today. And why should we turn to theory building and storytelling in particular when so much is practically at stake? These queries are central to reckoning with the current predicament, for coming to terms with the effects of climate change is not only a matter of acquiring the correct kind of scientific knowledge and of taking appropriate mitigating and adaptive action; it is also a matter of debating viable futures for a world that will look and feel very different from the one we are living in right now, as the COVID-19 pandemic has already been teaching us.\(^5\)

Since “utopia” and “utopianism” can mean so many things, it will be helpful to start with an exploratory definition. With Miguel Abensour, I understand utopianism broadly as the education of a desire for being and living otherwise. This utopian pedagogy can take multiple forms, depending on the historical context wherein the underlying desire arises, but there are three key mechanisms on which it relies: estranging, galvanizing and cautioning. As will become evident on the following pages, it is through estranging, galvanizing and cautioning that social dreaming proceeds.

This definition is perhaps not commonly accepted in the public, but it equips us with the best framework for capturing a great variety of proposals to envisage a climate-changed world. Utopianism, thus

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\(^3\) On the centrality of imaginaries for debates around climate change, see: Milkoreit, “Imaginary Politics.”

\(^4\) The emancipatory potential of such acts of picturing alternatives has been acknowledged by many advocates of Critical Theory, but it is Iris Marion Young who put it most succinctly: “Imagination is the faculty of transforming the experience of what is into a projection of what could be, the faculty that frees thought to form ideals and norms” \((Justice and the Politics of Difference, 6)\).

\(^5\) For a discussion of the intersections between the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, see: Malm, _Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency._
understood, is not exclusively directed at the idealizing construction of wholly other worlds. Rather, it consists in a specific form of creative and transformative reflection that breaks the spell of the status quo, a demonstration – in thought and in practice – that things could be otherwise: better (eu-topia) or worse (dys-topia), but different nonetheless.

Throughout this book, I follow Lucy Sargisson in holding “utopianism” apart from “utopia”: utopianism describes a wide phenomenon that can be reconstructed in different cultural contexts and historical eras, and whose essence will be fleshed out shortly in terms of a desire for being and living otherwise, or in terms of social dreaming. Utopias, by contrast, are concrete manifestations of said phenomenon – they instantiate what utopianism aspires to be. Hence, while my overall goal is to improve our understanding of utopianism in and for our times, the way to achieve this is via an in-depth engagement with manifold and sometimes conflicting utopias, formulated across a range of media and genres.

By way of creative and transformative reflection, utopias perform various functions, from offering relief to those who have to endure oppressive and violent conditions to the propagation of revolutionary agendas that aim to overthrow the hegemonic order of things. These tasks can be initially approached through the juxtaposition of two extremes: daydreaming (for the sake of coping with an unbearable situation) and worldbuilding (for the sake of creating a different order). Both represent forms of utopianism, but they play very different roles for the individual or collective undertaking them.

In the first case, utopia is there to console us in a situation that appears overbearing and beyond our control. In the second case, utopia is supposed to aid us in modifying the fundamental circumstances of our existence. While daydreaming can have important, if somewhat inchoate, repercussions – just think how the unofficial slogan of the soixante-huitards “Be realistic – demand the impossible!” keeps on invigorating counter-hegemonic struggles – it is worldbuilding that usually gets associated with the transformative potential of utopianism.

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7 On the delayed yet real impact of the revolutions of the 1960s see: Graeber, The Democracy Project, chap. 5: Breaking the Spell. On the revolutionary appeal of the 1968 generation,
In her recent work, Donna Haraway has uncovered the biggest impediment that any vindication of utopianism in and for our times faces: that of avoiding both the “position that the game is over, it’s too late, there’s no sense trying to make anything any better” and, on the other side, “the comic faith in technofixes.” The still unexplored space between these two positions is where the most fruitful conversations around the future of our species, the Earth’s biota and the planetary ecosphere are to be had. Only if we manage to liberate ourselves simultaneously from the incapacitating grip of ecological grief and from the delusional obsession with what I will later call “solutionism,” can we grapple in earnest with the present moment.

Not everyone welcomes the resurgence of utopian thinking and acting, though. In fact, aversion to utopianism possesses an impressive pedigree in the history of political ideas. Traditionally, two objections have been levelled against it. The first accuses utopias of being useless, because the proverbial “castles in the sky” do not furnish us with protective shelter in the here and now. In this case, the charge entails that utopianism-as-daydreaming propagates nothing but wishful thinking. It ultimately collapses into escapism, dressed up in the shiny garb of sophisticated theory or high literature.

According to the second objection, utopias are not merely impractical but dangerous, for they frequently become, perhaps even against the best intentions of their creators, vehicles for domination. Here, the future fabricated by utopianism-as-worldbuilding is condemned as a manipulative smokescreen, rendering invisible the many sacrifices that would have to be made to reach the preferred ideal state.

Both of these criticisms will receive attention in Chapter 2, but note that they take off from diametrically opposed premises. In the first case, utopianism’s problematic side is blamed on its presumed failure to come to terms with what Musil calls the “solid frame” of our shared reality. Daydreaming can become harmful when it distracts us from what should

and its continuing relevance for political theory, see: Rossi, “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible.”

Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 3.
matter most – remediing the dire situation we currently find ourselves in.

In the second case, the concern is, by contrast, that utopianism can have profoundly negative consequences, precisely because people might actually want to create the alternative world that a specific utopian vision conjures. The perniciousness of worldbuilding, on this account, stems from its propensity to seduce an audience into believing in utopia’s realizability. In this view, Musil’s “open door” is nothing but a trap.

The ambition behind this book is to respond to these criticisms and to rehabilitate utopia’s potential for our times. Put simply, my rejoinder to the challenges of utopianism-as-daydreaming and utopianism-as-worldbuilding is not so much that they completely miss the point – there is an important truth to these worries that should not be ignored – but rather, that they overemphasize the risks and dangers of utopianism while discounting its tremendous benefits. The crux of my argument is therefore that we urgently require utopias to identify ways out of our current predicament, the ongoing ecological crisis; yet, at the same time, we also need to comprehend which utopias will be useful for engaging the imagination in productive ways, and which utopias might lead us astray.9

Accordingly, the project I pursue here delivers a systematic account of those utopias that assist us in dealing with real-world problems. These problems, I contend, are the result of an extraordinary dearth of genuine alternatives to the status quo. In addressing this lack, the book hopes to accomplish two objectives: to reconstruct the main eutopian and dystopian tendencies in contemporary discussions about climate change; and to provide orientation for our planetary future on the basis of which a political theory of radical transformation – avoiding both fatalism and wishful thinking – can emerge.

The remainder of this introduction lays the foundation for the more detailed analyses in the rest of the book by doing several things: first, I will elaborate on the wide-ranging concept of utopianism that undergirds my approach. In a second step, my goal is to say something more specific about the context in which I discuss contemporary

9 Benjamin Kunkel thus seems right to suggest that today’s existential choice is really between “utopia or bust.” See: Kunkel, Utopia or Bust.
1.1 A PRIMER FOR STUDYING UTOPIAS

In order to chart the space between defeatism and self-aggrandizement, we require a capacious framework that covers a great variety of utopias. Even though Chapter 2 will be devoted to examining this framework in more detail, this section includes a primer for how I propose to study utopias in the Anthropocene.

When approaching utopianism, we need to attend to at least three interrelated issues; first, the dimensions of utopianism: utopianism contains both eu-topian and dys-topian elements. This view contravenes everyday linguistic conventions whereby the word “utopian” is usually reserved for positive visions that are meant to be significantly better than the status quo. However, the advantage of zeroing in on both eutopian and dystopian theories and narratives is that this allows us to better grasp the varying roles that hope and fear play in utopias: they can mobilize people to fundamentally change their behaviour by widening their horizon of expectation; or they can constrain their freedom, by imprisoning them in fatalistic stories.

Second, the sites of utopianism: utopianism manifests in three domains, which shape one another – political and social theory; fictional narratives in various genres and media (novels, films, paintings and even music); and social movements and experiments in communal living. It is a central claim of this book that a holistic account of utopianism cannot materialize unless we scrutinize the intersections between these

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10 Although I employ a different terminology, this perspective resonates with Gregory Claeys’ idea of a “composite definition” of utopianism. See: Claeys, “News from Somewhere.”

11 For the locus classicus of this taxonomy, see: Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.”
three sites. We need to examine them in parallel and investigate where there are overlaps and divergences. The structure of this book reflects this insight by concentrating in particular on the storytelling and theory-building poles of utopianism.

Third, the varieties of utopianism: the utopian tradition is split between two rival strands – one that foregrounds the top–down construction of other worlds and one that conceives of utopian visions as more localized, modest, piecemeal interrogations of the hegemonic mainstream in society. Objections to utopianism often entail a critique of its tendency to generate static blueprints of the future. Human beings, the worry goes, are simply incapable of making systematic plans for transforming society as such. If they still try to do so, their wishes will inexorably pave the way for totalitarian domination, these critics deplore. Yet, once we envisage utopianism as internally varied and structurally ambiguous, the charge of utopianism’s violent perfectionism becomes much less trenchant.

Based on this tripartite framework, I will argue that utopianism amounts to a flexible method, rather than the formulation of a fixed end goal, that can be applied to the anticipatory modelling of an uncertain and risky future. Where do the origins of this framework lie, given that up until recently utopianism seemed to be entirely discredited? The complex notion of utopianism springs from a rich discussion that emerged at a particular historical juncture. In the aftermath of the fall of communism, utopianism seemed to have been deposited on the ash heap of history. The triumphant victory of liberal democracy ostensibly signalled the end of history, to cite Francis Fukuyama’s diagnosis.\textsuperscript{12} In the New World Order, there would be no further appetite for utopias. The capitalist West appeared to have miraculously succeeded at what the most ambitious designs for a better future had only dreamed about: bringing into existence a global order where individuals could prosper in full liberty, without fear of oppression by the state.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The End of History and the Last Man}.

\textsuperscript{13} To be sure, I do not claim here that nobody pursued utopian ideas in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. All I am suggesting is that the public mood after the demise of “actually existing socialism” was a decidedly anti-utopian one, due to the triumphalist
“Cold War liberals” – from Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar and Leszek Kołakowski – had long warned that images of a better future would exert a detrimental impact on human freedom and societal pluralism. To hope too much, for instance by putting eschatological faith in a classless, egalitarian society, was condemned as the harbinger of extremism. The picturing of another world, just on the horizon and cleansed of all impurities, was so problematic, these commentators maintained, because it erased the inherently defective nature of human beings, perenially torn between impulses to do good and temptations to do bad. In promoting social and political arrangements that were ill fit for what Immanuel Kant described as “the crooked wood” of humanity, utopian thinkers thus prepared the ground for widespread, eliminatory violence, unleashed by those who took it upon themselves to turn the perfect blueprint into harsh reality. A mature polity would be one, the Cold War liberals insisted, in which utopian impulses were either suppressed, circumscribed or transmuted into depoliticized aesthetics.

Over the past two decades, however, utopian thinking and acting has been resurrected from its temporary deathbed. This resurfacing can be observed in various social and cultural arenas. From global insurgencies against autocratic regimes to science fiction narratives, from radical pleas to transform the built environment to exhilarating experiments in communal living – today’s public debate seems saturated with utopian ideas and practices. Just think of increasing enthusiasm around the World Social Forum, whose celebratory motto Another World Is Possible is unabashedly utopian. This slogan points to the centrality of prefigurative forms of action and organization within the movement and beyond. Put otherwise, since the goal of the alter-globalization camp is to demonstrate in practice that alternatives to the unjust status quo
already exist, the means to attain that goal need to abide by the underlying principles of a more equitable, dignified and non-violent society.\textsuperscript{17}

Moreover, changes in local and workplace democracy have infused campaigns for wider civic participation with fresh energy.\textsuperscript{18} Revolutionary occupations, too – from Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street – have been described as concerted attempts to carve out inspirational spaces for mounting resistance against the hegemonic mainstream of late capitalism. It is from within these utopian settings that protesters and activists have been trying to alter society at large.\textsuperscript{19}

Once we move from the social sphere to the realm of culture, we quickly realize that utopias have undergone an astonishing renaissance in recent times. From the huge success of dystopian narratives in popular TV shows and adaptations (\textit{Westworld}, \textit{Handmaid’s Tale}, \textit{Black Mirror}, to name but a few) to the constant growth of climate change fiction, “other worlds” have become major sites of artistic expression.\textsuperscript{20}

It is important to acknowledge that this resurgence of utopianism represents more than just a short-lived trend. As I will show, there are specific reasons why social dreaming has become so prevalent at this precise moment in time, to do with the circumstances of our precarious existence on planet Earth, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is, I argue, because we feel deeply disoriented, perhaps even paralyzed and terrified, when we contemplate an intrinsically uncertain and risky future, that we are drawn to utopian visions of what is to come.

Here is another reason for today’s revival of utopianism: even though they frequently depict societies in the far future, utopias are always concerned with the present moment. The “not yet” and the “no place” alluded to in utopian projects necessarily hold up a mirror to the status quo.\textsuperscript{21} Whether the future is imagined as foreordained, or whether it can

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Prefiguration is, at its core, a utopian practice. See: Kinna, “Utopianism and Prefiguration.”}
\footnote{Fung and Wright, \textit{Deepening Democracy}; Wright, \textit{Envisioning Real Utopias}.}
\footnote{Butler, \textit{Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly}; Graeber, \textit{The Democracy Project}.}
\footnote{On the recent turn to dystopianism in particular, see: Trotta, Platen and Sadri, \textit{Broken Mirrors}.}
\footnote{It was Ursula K. Le Guin who put this point best: “The thing about science fiction is, it isn’t really about the future. It’s about the present. But the future gives us great freedom}
still be shaped through resistant thought and action is a vital issue that all utopias seek to address. In meshing together “explanatory-diagnostic and anticipatory-utopian moments,” they cast a critical light on the contemporary condition, thereby opening the door to alternative ways of being and living.

Given the breadth of utopias that this capacious interpretation covers, can something more general be said about them? One way of responding to this question would be to focus on what utopias seek to achieve, rather than on an essential quality that they all share. Accordingly, prominent scholars within utopian studies, such as Ruth Levitas, have shown that utopias typically perform three functions, which often, but not always, overlap: compensation, critique and change. Utopia as compensation is about consoling those who are suffering under the hegemonic order by offering them an alluring view of an alternative world. As critique, it is about setting up a juxtaposition between the status quo and an alternative world. Finally, utopia as change is about transforming the hegemonic order, by enacting forms of resistance that draw on the utopian imagination.

Naturally, these functions intersect. As I demonstrate shortly, utopian visions of a climate-changed world typically tend to combine critical with transformative functions – demonstrating that the status quo is unsustainable as well as insisting that urgent modifications need to be made. But other permutations are possible, too: dystopian narratives often weave together critique and consolation, interpellating their audience to become aware of the dangers inherent in the present moment, while at the same time denying the immediate availability of remedial action.

Each of these functions will be further explored, but notice here that this ecumenical framing of what utopias do lets us appreciate how difficult it is to nail down a singular drive behind them. This is the reason why influential scholars have chosen to define utopianism in broad terms, of imagination. It’s like a mirror. You can see the back of your own head” (Le Guin, “The Gift of Place,” para. 5.3.).


23 Levitas, Utopia as Method, 4,107. This classification maps, to some degree, onto the spectrum between daydreaming and worldbuilding that I hinted at previously.
such as “social dreaming”\textsuperscript{24} or as what Miguel Abensour calls the “education of desire.”\textsuperscript{25}

This desire should not be understood psychoanalytically, but rather as a cognitive as well as affective state that channels the aspirations of those who long for an alternative future. Utopianism, in this view, derives from humans’ propensity to formulate wishes that a particular state of affairs be otherwise. Yearning for alternatives is more than merely the product of an individual’s particular preferences, insulated from outside influence. Rather, the desire that Abensour invokes remains responsive to different types of external intervention, from the historical as well as contemporary archive of “real utopias”\textsuperscript{26} to the artistic exploration of “green”\textsuperscript{27} or “red”\textsuperscript{28} planets.

Importantly, the utopian visions that we will be discovering in this book take the form of thought experiments that differ sharply from the abstract hypotheticals about unavoidable dilemmas sketched by analytical philosophers: (speculative) fiction in particular always seeks to make the reader feel – not only rationally contemplate – what it would be like to make difficult decisions.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, utopias can be seen as fashioning our idiosyncratic wishes into concrete, shareable proposals for other ways of being and living. In so doing, they illuminate the historical specificity of the present moment.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{24} Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.”
\textsuperscript{25} Abensour’s definition arises from his engagement with William Morris. See: Abensour, “William Morris,” 145. Amongst contemporary utopian studies scholars, Ruth Levitas is best known for her adoption of Abensour’s definition: Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, 140–41. Abensour was first introduced into the Anglo-American debate through the following article: Thompson, “Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism.” For the wider context see: Nadir, “Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea”; Mazzocchi, “Excavating Abensour.”
\textsuperscript{26} Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias.
\textsuperscript{27} Canavan and Robinson, Green Planets.
\textsuperscript{28} Bould and Miéville, Red Planets.
\textsuperscript{29} For a critique of the use of thought experiments in contemporary political theory see: Thaler, “Unhinged Frames.”
\textsuperscript{30} Behind these proposals lies not just any kind of hope for alternatives, but what Ernst Bloch, perhaps the most important voice in the discussion around utopianism of the twentieth century, named \textit{docta spes}, or “educated hope.” See: Bloch, The Principle of Hope; Volume 1, 7,9.
While the definition of utopianism as the education of desire is not uncontroversial, it captures an indelible component of all utopias: they arise in response to the perception of a lack or deficiency – something is to be desired – that in turn anchors demands for fulfilment and satisfaction. As Ernst Bloch observed in a conversation with Theodor W. Adorno, the starting point of all utopian projects can be condensed into a succinct formula, taken from Bertolt Brecht’s libretto for Kurt Weill’s opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: “But something’s missing.”\(^{31}\) Utopias, then, aim to determine what that something entails and come up with strategies for responding to the emergent yearning for fulfilment and satisfaction. Even though the object of this desire, and the concomitant demand, varies greatly, a frequently desperate, sometimes joyful anticipation of a different world, of being and living otherwise, forms the backbone of all the manifestations of utopianism that interest me in this book.

1.2 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ORIENT ONESELF IN THE ANTHROPOCENE?

Rather than approaching the current resurgence of utopianism in the abstract, the book aims to situate it within a specific context: the Anthropocene. In the following, I investigate what it means to “desire otherwise”\(^{32}\) in an age shaped by the realization that the relations between humans and their environment are shifting. The Anthropocene is one of the names we can give to this disorderly web of relations. As we shall see, the label “Anthropocene” itself remains highly contentious, but it has the virtue of bundling together insights into what seems distinctive about rival ways of imagining a climate-changed world.

In this section, my goal is to demonstrate that utopian visions seek to accomplish something specific in the present moment: to provide orientation around a landscape that is both unknown and unsettling. Figuring

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out what it means to inhabit a climate-changed world can be a disconcerting and bewildering exercise. It is this cognitive and affective anxiety that explains the paramount relevance of utopias for our times. In a nutshell, my claim throughout this book will hence be that utopian maps of the Anthropocene are, for various reasons yet to be outlined, instrumental in navigating a climate-changed world.33

Before turning to the place of utopias in the Anthropocene debate, a short excursus into the meaning of this concept, and its contemporary applications, will be necessary. Geologists use the so-called Geologic Time Scale to divide periods in the genesis of our planet.34 The word “Anthropocene” – a Greek neologism signifying “the age of the humans” – was introduced in 2000 by the chemist Paul Crutzen to challenge the existing periodization. Crutzen deemed the Holocene, which covers the past 12,000 years, from the last Ice Age onwards, simply unsuitable for describing the present moment.35

When the concept of the Anthropocene is deployed, it thus marks a literally world-changing break with the established periodization of planet Earth. Although the term itself originated in response to many different effects that humans have on the environment – from the loss of biodiversity36 to the destruction of ecosystems on both land and sea37 – it is human–induced climate change that has seized the public imagination the most.38 The Anthropocene describes a rupture signalling the start of a new epoch in which humanity itself has become a geological force.

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33 I borrow the metaphor of utopias as mapping devices from: Tally, Utopia in the Age of Globalization.
34 For a pictorial representation, see: The Geological Society of America, “GSA Geologic Time Scale (v. 5.0).”
35 Falcon-Lang, “Anthropocene.”
36 This reduction in biodiversity is usually termed the “sixth extinction” event in geological history. See: Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction. On the historical emergence of discourses around biodiversity and extinction see: Sepkoski, Catastrophic Thinking. For critical discussions around extinction, see: Grusin, After Extinction; Rose, Van Dooren and Chrulew, Extinction Studies.
37 There is a massive academic debate around this issue. For representative publications, see: Malhi et al., “Tropical Forests in the Anthropocene”; He and Silliman, “Climate Change, Human Impacts, and Coastal Ecosystems in the Anthropocene.”
38 This is the reason why I pragmatically use the phrase “a climate-changed world” to describe the Anthropocene epoch. Even though the concept of the Anthropocene has
1.2 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ORIENT ONESelf IN THE ANTHROPOCENE?

We can convey the essential thought behind the Anthropocene through the notion of a “human-activity-induced geological time unit.”39 The impact of human societies on the planetary environment is, in this view, deemed so overwhelming that a new geological epoch beyond the Holocene needs inaugurating.

An important question within the Anthropocene debate concerns the starting date of this emergent period. When geologists examine transitions from one epoch to another, they use so-called golden spikes to identify the precise moments of fundamental shifts in the Earth system.40 While the official organization for worldwide collaboration amongst geologists, the International Union of Geological Sciences, has not yet ratified the novel periodization, the scientific argument around the dating of the Anthropocene continues to evolve.41

Why is the issue of dating the Anthropocene so divisive? In their book *The Human Planet*, which contains a wide-ranging survey of the ongoing debate, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin pinpoint the underlying tension:

Since Buffon’s first attempt at sketching Earth’s history, when considering humans, geology often gets mixed up with how we want to view ourselves. Or put another way, geology plus humans equals politics. Whether you assert or deny that human activity has driven Earth into a new epoch undoubtedly has political implications. Such views, which are beyond a narrow, rational view of scientific evidence, are not welcome in modern-day scientific circles. Geologists who champion the Quaternary and Holocene today rationalize these choices by applying different criteria to define the final 0.1 per cent of Earth’s history. They focus on climate, specifically glacial–interglacial cycles, rather than changes to life.42

much wider ramifications than climate change alone, this phrase captures something essential about our precarious life on the “human planet.”

40 More precisely, a “golden spike” marks the physical place at which a global boundary between formal units of geological time can be stratigraphically detected. See: Walsh, Gradstein and Ogg, “History, Philosophy, and Application of the Global Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP).”
41 Meyer, “Geology’s Timekeepers Are Feuding”; Maslin and Lewis, “Anthropocene vs Meghalayan.”
The task of periodizing the Anthropocene is a political one, for the idea of a post-Holocene epoch highlights the immense impact that human beings have already exerted on the planet. The explosiveness of the very notion of a “human planet” manifests itself in the competing claims around the Anthropocene’s inception. The creator of the label “Anthropocene,” Paul Crutzen, dates the origins of the new period back to the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and the concomitant increase in anthropogenic CO₂ emissions. Others have gestured to the first nuclear bomb test in 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico, as the site of the Anthropocene’s “golden spike.” In this perspective, the Anthropocene is essentially coeval with the nuclear age. Scholars have also pointed to the Great Acceleration – the recent phase of unprecedented population and economic growth starting in the mid-twentieth century – as the historical period wherein the boundary between the Holocene and the Anthropocene ought to be drawn. Yet another attempt at dating identifies the genocidal colonization of the Americas as the event that eventually triggered the “Little Ice Age” of the seventeenth century.

In each of these cases, a different catalyst of change is identified for bringing the age of the human planet into existence: industrial capitalism, Cold War politics and European imperialism. As this cursory review demonstrates, the Anthropocene continues to be hotly contested, not least because it – implicitly or explicitly – issues a judgment as to who should be held causally responsible for its beginnings and for the current phase of environmental disruptions.

43 Crutzen and Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene.’”
44 Waters et al., “Can Nuclear Weapons Fallout Mark the Beginning of the Anthropocene Epoch?”; Zalasiewicz et al., “When Did the Anthropocene Begin?”
45 Steffen et al., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene.”
The continuing struggles over the Anthropocene’s inception thus bring into view the centrality of not only place and geology, but also of time and chronology for our understanding of a climate-changed world. There is a backward-looking dimension to this temporal dimension, as we saw in the controversy around who should bear responsibility for past actions that continue to influence the present state of the planet. But there is also a future-oriented aspect to it, insofar as the Anthropocene calls for forward-looking proposals that seek to reckon with the devastations wrought by anthropogenic climate change. This is where the utopian imagination comes into play.

The Anthropocene’s power, Ursula Heise submits, “resides not in its scientific definition as a geological epoch, but in its capacity to cast the present as a future that has already arrived.”48 Conversations around the links between the past, the present and the future are always open-ended and pluralistic, full of polemicism and disagreement – a fact that will be consequential for our engagement with contemporary forms of social dreaming.49

Even though the notion of the Anthropocene has seen significant uptake in both the scientific and the public debate, there are also commentators who object to its prevalence. Perhaps the most common attack on the very idea of a human planet is that it tends to cover up socio-economic inequalities and differential responsibilities within and between diverse populations and societies. According to this perspective, a much closer link between the ecological crisis and the rise of capitalism would need to be established, leading to the competing nomenclature of the “Capitalocene.”50

48 Heise, Imagining Extinction, 203.
49 See: Ellis, Anthropocene, 145; Szerszynski, “Getting Hitched and Unhitched with the Ecomodernists,” 243. This view also chimes with an understanding of the Anthropocene not only in terms of a scientific proposition, but as “a cultural and political space where particular understandings of environmental problems, relations, places, and futures take form, stabilize, are contested, and are made anew” (Nikoleris, Stripple and Tennant, “The ‘Anthropocene’ in Popular Culture,” 67).
In a nutshell, not all humans are to the same degree blameworthy for the devastating effects of climate change, which is why it would be disingenuous to designate the current moment, in an undifferentiated manner, as the “Anthropocene.” Homogenizing talk of a human planet sidesteps the crucial question of “unequal human agency, unequal human impacts, and unequal human vulnerabilities” in our climate-changed world.

Indigenous scholars in particular have insisted on the need to decolonize the concept of the Anthropocene, mostly by contesting its claim to relative newness. Since genocidal colonialism has already completely upended the living conditions of Indigenous populations around the world, it would be imperative to include their unique viewpoints about civilizational collapse in our reflections on the Anthropocene. Moreover, students of gender politics have charged the notion of the Anthropocene with reinforcing “individualistic approaches to environmental and climate responsiveness, which stereotypically casts women in the roles of either vulnerable climate victims or hardy climate heroes.”

Others have maintained that naming a geological epoch after humans is a sure indication of our species’ characteristic arrogance. Donna Haraway, to refer to a further sceptic, suggests we should rather use the word “Chthulucene” to account for the web of relations holding together multispecies communities, something that the concept of the Anthropocene does not do with sufficient care. A related worry says that, in its emphasis on our transformative impact on the Earth system,

51 On this critique, see: Malm and Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind?”
53 For presentational reasons, I am simplifying an immensely intricate controversy here, which we will encounter again at several junctures in this book. On this debate, see representatively: Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies”; Davis and Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene”; Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene”; Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now.”
54 Chiro, “Welcome to the White (M)Anthropocene?,” 489.
55 Brannen, “The Anthropocene Is a Joke.” On the tension between hubris and humility in the Anthropocene debate see: Mitman, “Hubris or Humility?”
56 Davis et al., “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, . . . Plantationocene?” Needless to say, the carousel of terminological innovations keeps on spinning. See: McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction”; Clark, Between Earth and Empire.
the Anthropocene erects an artificial divide between humans and nature, which is not warranted by a sound theory of environmentalism. The discourse around the Anthropocene emerged, others observe, exclusively within “particular social, cultural, and political contexts (Euro-Australo-American academic environmental studies and environmental politics) and does not surface, nor has it gained any epistemic or political traction, in other contexts that are equally concerned with the social and ecological impacts of runaway climate change (environmental justice/climate justice organizations and social movements).”

One aspect that remains divisive in the debate around this emerging nomenclature concerns the extent to which the periodization itself should be approached from a human-centred, or a planet-centred vantage point. The social scientists and the humanities scholars partaking in the controversy grapple with the concept of the Anthropocene by relating it, one way or another, to historical time, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us. That is to say, in the discussion around naming and dating the human planet it is the history of our species – from the colonial intrusions of the Early Modern period to the deployment of nuclear weapons – that is investigated in view of its impact on the planet.

Geologists, by contrast, are innocent of such anthropocentrism. They are interested in studying stratigraphic transformations in the Earth system itself. This eventually leads them to adopt a planet-centred definition of the Anthropocene. From this perspective, talk of a “human epoch” is, at least to some degree, misguided insofar as the Anthropocene is here considered as an epoch of Earth time, just like all Earth’s previous epochs. It so happens that its distinctive characteristics have up until now been driven largely by a variety of human actions. But if

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57 An interesting rejoinder to these challenges can be found in the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty. See: Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”; Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change.” For an engagement with Chakrabarty’s thinking on this issue, see: Meyer, “Politics in – but Not of – the Anthropocene.”


59 This distinction between human-centred and planet-centred ways of thinking about the Anthropocene is indebted to: Zalasiewicz, “The Extraordinary Strata of the Anthropocene,” 126.

60 Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time.”
these characteristics (such as sharply increased atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, global carbon isotope and nitrogen isotope anomalies, a biosphere modified by species extinctions and invasions, and so on) were driven by any other means – such as by a meteorite impact, volcanic eruptions or the actions of another species – then they would have exactly the same importance geologically.61

A corollary of the aforementioned parting of human-centred and planet-centred viewpoints is that the unfathomable chasm between historical time and the Earth’s “deep time” comes more forcefully into view. The extreme temporal scales of geological change do not only pose a challenge to students and practitioners of global governance;62 they also force a rethink of what cultural reflection and dialogue, instigated through climate fiction for example, can accomplish.

Since I am not a geologist, I have little of substance to add to the ongoing discussions around the precise dating or naming of the epoch we are presently living through. But the basic intuition behind the Anthropocene strikes me, despite the challenges outlined before, as vital for a responsible engagement with the current crisis. This is the case because the “Anthropocene provides a framework for understanding the modern ecological catastrophe, rather than a prescription for resolving it. It is a way of seeing, not a manifesto.”63

The Anthropocene, in this sense, has managed to stir the imagination of citizens and scientists alike. As an epochal marker of planetary alteration, the notion of a human planet has already rippled across society, influencing both policies to mitigate or adapt to climate change,64 and

62 Galaz, “Time and Politics in the Anthropocene.”
63 Davies, The Birth of the Anthropocene, 193. I do believe that, understood in terms of a malleable framework that shines a light on the ecological crisis, the notion of the Anthropocene can in fact accommodate the objections of Marxists, Indigenous scholars and students of gender politics. But if you still feel unpersuaded by the capacity of this concept to disclose what strikes you as distinct about the current moment, I suggest you call it whatever you find suitable (“Capitalocene,” “Chthulucene,” “Plantationocene,” “Necrocene,” etc.) and then try to engage with the substantive remainder of my argument.
64 Biermann et al., “Navigating the Anthropocene”; Biermann, “The Anthropocene.”
affecting our capacity to deliberate on a future in which humanity has finally taken account of its environmental footprint.\textsuperscript{65}

Moreover, the Anthropocene has also thrown into sharp relief the massive obstacles that established political institutions as well as environmental justice movements will have to surpass in the coming years. Anthropogenic climate change summons us to reconsider some of the basic norms undergirding democratic practice and global governance.\textsuperscript{66} This development will only accelerate in the foreseeable future.

It is important to note that the Anthropocene, as a discursive “framework for understanding the modern ecological catastrophe,” leaves it open to further scrutiny whether we are about to enter an “epoch of the apotheosis, or of the erasure, of the human as the master and end of nature.”\textsuperscript{67} This indeterminacy results from the clash between human-centred and planet-centred ways of thinking about a climate-changed world. In other words, while the diagnosis of a human planet unmistakably assigns responsibility for the dire state of affairs to (some agents amongst) our species, it is far from certain that humans will keep on playing the role of a geological force for a long time.\textsuperscript{68} As we will remark in Chapter 5, social and political theorists as well as fiction writers have begun to take seriously the proposition that we have already passed the tipping point of our own extinction. Others, including the so-called ecomodernists we encounter in Chapter 4, vehemently rebuff this bleak assessment, accusing its proponents of baseless fearmongering and doomsaying.

Irrespective of where one stands on this question, it seems likely that the unresolved nature of the Anthropocene explains why so many competing visions of a climate-changed world are in circulation today. It is from within the tension between the confident reign of \textit{Homo Deus} and the devastated, nostalgic universe of \textit{Wall-E} that a great variety of today’s

\textsuperscript{65} Yusoff and Gabrys, “Climate Change and the Imagination.”
\textsuperscript{67} Szerszynski, “Reading and Writing the Weather,” 16. See also: Dibley, “The Shape of Things to Come.”
\textsuperscript{68} On this point, see also: Nixon, “The Anthropocene.”
utopias spring. Social dreaming cannot provide us with unequivocal answers to the question of whether the “human planet” should be lauded as the apex of our species’ achievements or whether it should be lamented as a period where the extinction of humanity becomes inevitable. Utopias probe different responses to the Anthropocene’s unresolved nature. The ensuing chapters will therefore trace the ways in which utopian maps of a climate-changed world can be directed towards divergent objectives: democratic, technocratic or catastrophist ones. Each of these need to be subjected to careful scrutiny and evaluated in light of the impact they exert on our thinking and acting.

The basic intuition behind the Anthropocene invites us to face up to a challenge of gigantic proportions. A helpful way to make sense of that challenge would be to describe it, in Amitav Ghosh’s words, as a time of “great derangement”; a historical epoch that forces us to contemplate how climate change is already permeating all facets of global politics, down to the everyday lives of vulnerable populations across the world. “The climate crisis,” Ghosh observes, “is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.” This calls for new ways of orienting ourselves in a disconcerting, uncanny landscape where maps are being drawn not only by geologists and climatologists, but also by social and political theorists, novelists, filmmakers, activists and indeed citizens in variously affected regions around the globe.

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69 On Wall-E, see: Canavan, “Unless Someone Like You Cares a Whole Awful Lot.”
70 Searle, “Three Anthropocenes.”
71 For an example of how this could be achieved, see: Dalby, “Framing the Anthropocene.”
72 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, para. 9.2. Environmental philosophers have made the same point for almost twenty years, as the following passage demonstrates: “If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problem, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 2).
73 Note, though, that Ghosh is deeply sceptical about the contemporary novel’s ability to address the climate crisis. He also seems to think that science fiction inevitably slides into escapism, which would render it unsuitable, as a genre, to deal with the harsh realities of the Anthropocene. However, this argument is clearly based on a misunderstanding of science fiction’s critical function, and of utopian literature more widely – a misunderstanding that this book seeks to clear up. On Ghosh’s limitations, see: Heise, “Climate Stories.”
I use the term “orientation” here not metaphorically, but rather in the illuminating manner Sara Ahmed has employed it. Applying a phenomenological lens to examine queer identity and the cultural politics of feelings, Ahmed posits that “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention to.” What Ahmed gestures at is that our relations to the environment, which can be composed of human as well as non-human beings, are always shaped by emotional and bodily investments: “To be affected by something, such that we move toward or away from that thing, is an orientation toward something.” There is nothing natural about how we cope with the experience of closeness, for example. Rather, feeling (too) close to someone or something is a sensation conditioned by social and political factors.

This notion of “orientation” seems productive for grasping what is at stake with the Anthropocene – not only the production of scientific knowledge, but also the cultivation of imaginative proposals that allow us to reassess, emotionally and bodily, how we should live in a “world of shared inhabitance.” Our emotions and our bodies are paramount for exploring how we may not only survive, but flourish in this climate-changed world.

Orientation in this sense is meshed together with the education of desire. If social and political factors have a bearing on how we move around the world, how we stand in relation to different objects, how we become (or fail to become) affected by those near to us, then we should reflect on the ways in which these factors can be transformed in light of specific objectives. As I show in the following pages, speculative fiction is particularly well attuned to this task. But social and political theory, too, can be said to be in the business of providing orientation. It is a crucial

74 Ahmed, _Queer Phenomenology_, 3.
feature of theorizing (on my account) that it seeks to practically guide action towards desirable goals.

A possible worry with this appropriation of Ahmed’s concept of orientation might be that it is extracted from the context it was initially designed for. It is one thing to propose that sexual and racial politics ought to be scrutinized through the phenomenological lens of object relations. It is quite another to assert that our stance vis-à-vis a climate-changed world would be approachable by the same means. If the Anthropocene is clearly not an object like any other, how can the notion of “orientation” become generative for discussing utopias?

To answer this question, we need to pivot from a view of ordinary objects, which underpins Ahmed’s account, to a rival one that focuses on another set of objects. As Timothy Morton has contended, climate change (or, in his preferred terminology, global warming) is akin to a “hyperobject” that is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”

Hyperobjects are multidimensional to such a degree that even the most sophisticated scientific models and philosophical approaches will fail to capture them in their entirety.

In essence, my claim throughout this book will be that it is the scale and intricacy of the Anthropocene, the immensity of imagining a climate-changed world, that makes it imperative for us to strive for orientation with the help of various utopian visions. The education of desire not only concerns the modelling of possible futures, but also channels our affects and reconfigures how we live with and through our bodies. Compressed into a pithy formula, we might therefore say that utopias provide orientation in situations where conventional maps around ordinary objects have forfeited their usefulness. This is their chief purpose in our greatly deranged age: to guide us, cognitively, emotionally and bodily, around hyperobjects.

Another way of expressing the same thought would be to propose that utopias work like maps. Orienting oneself in a landscape that is deeply unsettling necessitates, first of all, the disposal of outdated, inadequate maps. In a second step, orientation hinges on the creation, maintenance and adjustment of new maps that are better suited to the changing

77 Morton, Hyperobjects, 1. See also: Boulton, “Climate Change as a ‘Hyperobject.’”
circumstances. Utopias permit us to both gauge the utility of old maps for navigating a climate-changed world, and to draw new ones that guide our action as we move into a radically uncertain and risky future.

Note that orientation and mapping of this variety is not identical with the pursuit of quick fixes that attempt to patch up systemic pathologies. Much of today’s public debate around the Anthropocene seems to be afflicted by what Evgeny Morozov has dubbed “solutionism”: the consequential idea according to which intractable problems can always be broken down into smaller, manageable ones that existing technologies will be capable of comprehensively addressing. The issue with this type of reflecting on global problems is that it completely misunderstands the nature of hyperobjects, or rather, that it mistakes a hyperobject, such as the Anthropocene, for an ordinary object.

Faced with the challenge of picturing a climate-changed world, the solutionist quest for quick fixes is not only ill-advised and myopic, it also distracts us from the actual task we have to confront – to devise ways of seeing the world anew that provide orientation in these disconcerting times. The utopias I shall be analyzing all try to offer orientation in the sense of better understanding those social and political circumstances

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78 Morozov, To Save Everything, Click Here. On solutionist tendencies in the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic, see: Morozov, “The Tech ‘Solutions’ for Coronavirus Take the Surveillance State to the next Level.”

79 I am not claiming here that “solutionism” amounts to a universally held position in the current debate. Most scientists are, of course, fully aware that the Anthropocene creates multiple challenges for the Earth system that cannot be tackled with the help of innovative “silver bullets.” On this point, see the recent report on biodiversity and climate change co-authored by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): “Climate Change and Nature Loss Must Be Tackled Together, Says Report.” Yet, the solutionist impulse remains deeply ingrained in the political imaginaries of global elites. This is why I believe that Morozov’s diagnosis is, broadly speaking, correct when it comes to examining proposals for inhabiting a climate-changed world – as evidenced, for example, by Bill Gates’ recent intervention into the debate. See: McKibben, “How Does Bill Gates Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis?”

80 On the ways in which managerial solutionism affects mainstream environmental politics, and on potential rejoinders, see: Hammond, “Imagination and Critique in Environmental Politics.”
that will allow us to move in one direction or another. The essential task of charting the future can only be accomplished with the support of visions and projects that traffic between two of utopianism’s domains: theory building and storytelling.

The view of the Anthropocene as a hyperobject makes it clear that new forms of map-making are required. The added value that utopias bring to this endeavour is that they manage to account for the uncertainty, contingency and complexity of our climate-changed world. Utopias are far from static ideals. They formulate dynamic models for alternative possibilities that shatter ossified schemas of reality.

What all these visions and projects have in common is that they consider Earth to be the setting where the utopian desire for being and living otherwise needs to be educated. We might thus call them, perhaps paradoxically, “this-worldly” utopias, to stress that they disavow reveries of escaping from our home planet. In showing that other ways of being and living are possible, the theorists and the writers we will be conversing with on the following pages remind us that our species ultimately has nowhere to go: we must accept our fate as Earthbound creatures. Since the Anthropocene inaugurates an epoch moulded by humanity’s impact on the planetary ecosphere, fantasizing about interstellar escape is as reactionary as it is pointless.

Utopias in the Anthropocene hence commence with the recognition that there is no other planet for our species to thrive on. This acknowledgement of our eco-social grounding is shared amongst utopian visions and projects that are otherwise very different. N. K. Jemisin’s far-future tale of a vengeful planet, which we will discuss in Chapter 3, as well as Kim Stanley Robinson’s near-future narrative of Washington politics, the

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81 On the power of the idea of the Anthropocene to inspire utopian thinking and acting of this kind, see: Purdy, “Anthropocene Fever.”

82 This echoes what Mark Levene has said about the impact of the Anthropocene on the discipline of history: acknowledging the reality of the Anthropocene can stimulate outdated modes of thinking and facilitate novel patterns of ethical responsiveness. See: Levene, “Climate Blues.”

83 In his scathing review of Christopher Nolan’s film Interstellar, which dramatizes the challenges that humanity might face when leaving its decaying habitat on Earth, George Monbiot makes this very point. See: Monbiot, “Interstellar.”
topic of Chapter 4, channels the power of social dreaming “down to Earth,” to reimagine what survival on this, rather than any other, planet, might require of us as a species.

This-worldly utopias have a tendency to trouble the distinction between human-centred and planet-centred thinking about our climate-changed world. That is so because speculative theory building and storytelling around the Anthropocene engages not only with how humanity manages (or fails) to prepare for an uncertain and risky future, but also attempts to shine a light on Earth’s unique modes of self-organizing, along its own temporal scales that defy comparisons with historical time.84

To finish this section, a word on which utopias will be selected for closer scrutiny. Turning to the Anthropocene has the advantage of delimiting the temporal range of the utopias examined in this book. Given that the label only emerged in the early twenty-first century, the book primarily deals with utopian visions from 2001 onwards, while leaving further space for historical contextualization. Using the publication of Crutzen’s seminal paper as a dividing line is obviously arbitrary, but it still supplies us with a pragmatic threshold for demarcating the remit of this investigation.85

1.3 DISCIPLINARY PILLARS

I now want to continue by reflecting on the disciplinary perspectives that inform this inquiry. In more narrowly academic terms, the book stands

84 In fact, as Bronislaw Szerszynski holds, “just as the Anthropocene as an epoch-in-the-making disrupts the role of the human as the detached knower and coherer of the Earth, so it may also disrupt the very idea of the Earth as a singular body, and of the ‘timeless’, distanced understanding of geological time” (Szerszynski, “The Anthropocene Monument,” 127).

85 This tighter focus on utopias from the beginning of the twenty-first century also differentiates my project from preceding ones, such as Lisa Garforth’s book Green Utopias. Garforth draws a much longer arc, from the emergence of environmental thinking in the 1960s to the current day. To be sure, her aim is, in many ways, similar to the one I have set for myself here: to trace and assess different utopian visions developed in response to environmental crises. However, while she uses a historical lens to accomplish this goal, reconstructing various ecological debates from the 1960s onwards, I choose a different structure and am committed to other objectives. Another prominent discussion of the same topic, which covers even more ground and charts various utopian projects from the sixteenth century onwards, can be found in: Geus, Ecological Utopias.
on three pillars of scholarship. As a work in political theory, it promotes a view of practical philosophizing that is directly concerned with problems in the world today. As an interpretive endeavour, political theory tries to make sense of a shared world marred by inequality, violence and oppression. In so doing, it caters to three objectives that are crucial for theorizing with a “practical intent”: understanding, evaluation and orientation.

As Raymond Geuss – a principal voice in the debate around realism and utopianism – observes, these tasks are entwined with one another. In order to evaluate the current state of affairs, one first needs to grasp what is actually going on. Equally, in order to orient ourselves in the world, evaluative judgements about the direction of travel will be necessary. These judgements in turn guide us in the pursuit of understanding, and so a virtuous circle between understanding, evaluation and orientation is set in motion.

Political theory aims to discharge of these objectives in a systematic and coherent fashion so as to inform public debates about controversial issues. What matters most, according to this view, is that we approach these issues with both a critical and a normative mindset. The goal of a distinctly political-theoretical approach to utopias in the Anthropocene is not only to describe and explain their key components and historical

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86 Evidently, biophysical research on climate change matters to all discussions around the Anthropocene and hence also proves vital to the interests behind this book. Given my own professional background in the humanities and social sciences, however, I do not feel competent to directly intervene into these areas of research in the same way I do in discussions within and across political theory, utopian studies and the environmental humanities.

87 Given the global range of the problems analyzed in this book, we might add that political theory always needs to be international in its focus. This is one of the key assumptions behind my reflections as well. For an introduction to this debate, see: Lang, *International Political Theory*.

88 Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 5.


90 On the relationship between political theory and public discourse see: Tully, “Public Philosophy as a Critical Activity.”

91 For a more comprehensive outline of my views on the ultimate purpose of political theory see: Thaler, *Naming Violence*, chap. 1. For an application of the same idea of orientation, see: McKean, *Disorienting Neoliberalism*.
trajectories, but also to subject them to evaluative scrutiny, in order to arrive at constructive proposals for navigating an uncertain and risky future.

Since all utopian visions need to be scrutinized against the material and ideological background in which they are formulated, it would be hard to say anything meaningful about these proposals in abstract terms. But towards the end of this book, I will develop a more general account, suggesting that we can test the reliability of competing utopian maps for our climate-changed world by the degree to which they are aware of, and constructed around, the predetermined fault lines along which they will break down. A conscious recognition of utopianism’s inherent shortcomings thus delivers a criterion for assessing social dreaming today. It is this immanent and self-reflective critique that sets the kind of political theory I am embracing apart from the other two disciplinary pillars supporting this book – utopian studies and environmental humanities.

Second, this book engages with a diverse range of positions from utopian studies. Over the past thirty years, scholars across various academic disciplines have surveyed utopianism in many contexts. Academics such as Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas and Tom Moylan have in great depth explored storytelling and social experiments, covering those aspects of utopianism that are also vital for tackling climate change. In articulating my own ideas on what is generative about utopianism, I therefore draw on findings from utopian studies, especially with regard to the critical turn that commentators have diagnosed in the late 1970s.92

What distinguishes utopian studies is the field’s interest in the many settings in which the education of desire can be staged. As we will remark in Chapter 2, commentators have trained their eyes on such disparate phenomena as intentional communities in remote parts of the world,93 the history of Black nationalism and Afrofuturism,94 the practices of

92 The novel that is usually credited with inaugurating this critical turn in utopian fiction is: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*. On Le Guin’s masterpiece, which has spawned a massive secondary literature, see exemplarily: Burns, *Political Theory, Science Fiction, and Utopian Literature*, Davis and Stillman, *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*.

93 Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*.

94 Zamalin, *Black Utopia*.
queer futurity, the racialized dreamworlds of Anglotopia and human existence under conditions of widespread automation to expand the horizon of what “utopia” usually signifies. This area of research is so illuminating because it allows one to detect cases of social dreaming where they would normally not be expected. Once we adopt a comprehensive framework, it becomes feasible to search for expressions of the yearning for alternative ways of being and living in many different domains and across many different genres.

Third and finally, the book turns to scholarship from the nascent discipline of environmental humanities. Climate change is not only a topic of interest to the “hard sciences”; the humanities, too, have recently begun to pay heed to the cultural production around humanity’s impact on the planetary ecosystem. This becomes evident in the increasing fascination with what is known today as “climate fiction,” which will be a focus of attention in the following chapters. Critics such as Adeline Johns-Putra, Antonia Mehnert and Adam Trexler have taken important steps to investigate the degree to which climate change poses a unique and exhilarating challenge to contemporary writers.

While the environmental humanities still represent a relatively recent addition to the scientific debate, they open up a valuable perspective on the problem I am interested in here. This is the case because scholars working within this field steer attention to how climate change creates both serious obstacles and extraordinary opportunities to traditional tropes and techniques of storytelling, not least due to the temporal scales of Earth’s “deep time.”

95 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.
96 Bell, Dreamworlds of Race.
97 Danaher, Automation and Utopia.
98 For an influential programmatic statement about the purpose of the environmental humanities see: Rose et al., “Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities.”
100 For an overview, see: Streeby, Imagining the Future of Climate Change; Tuhus-Dubrow, “Cli-Fi.”
101 Johns-Putra, Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel.
102 Mehnert, Climate Change Fictions.
103 Trexler, Anthropocene Fictions.
Methodologically, this book is therefore interdisciplinary in its outlook.\textsuperscript{104} Anyone who wishes to pursue such an agenda – if it is to amount to more than a facile buzzword – will soon become aware that reaching beyond one’s area of expertise is always a tricky undertaking, for it invites accusations of being “a jack of all trades, but a master of none.” That risk is certainly one that I have felt acutely throughout the writing process, frequently grappling with specialized debates that are remote from my core qualifications. But, despite a nagging anxiety about amateurish dabbling, the risk is well worth it, not least because the problem I am interested in truly cuts across the three pillars of academic scholarship identified before. In fact, I am now convinced that one cannot even start to comprehend what is distinctive about utopias in the Anthropocene unless one becomes acquainted with findings from political theory, utopian studies and the environmental humanities.\textsuperscript{105}

Part of what I hope to achieve on the following pages can thus be conveyed through the notion of “translational research.” It remains a lamentable fact of the current academic landscape that initiatives in the humanities and social sciences are, more often than not, isolated from one another. This is especially blatant in the questions this book is animated by: political theorists, scholars within utopian studies and students of environmental humanities rarely speak to each other, despite

\textsuperscript{104} Such an orientation has recently been recognized as absolutely paramount for dealing with problems such as the ones associated with the Anthropocene. See: Brown, Harris and Russell, \textit{Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination}.

\textsuperscript{105} This commitment to an interdisciplinary research agenda also grew out of a discontent with my own academic background. Even though the topic of utopianism has gained significant traction within political theory over the past ten years – notably in discussions around ideal and non-ideal theory, feasibility and realism, etc. – the debate almost always unfolds in a state of blissful ignorance about seminal findings by scholars actually studying utopias. The effect of this navel-gazing has been that political theorists frequently end up employing conceptions of utopia that are either superficial or unexamined (or both), such as “hopeless aspirational theory,” for example. The problem with such a nomenclature is that it fails to interrogate the common-sense understanding of utopia as a “no place,” which then produces a seriously limited picture of what utopianism actually entails. For a symptomatically narrow rendering of utopianism in recent political theory, which my approach seeks to counteract, see: Estlund, “\textit{Utopophobia},” 2014. For a book-length treatment, see: Estlund, \textit{Utopophobia}, 2020. I return to this methodological concern in Chapter 6.
a shared commitment to original scholarship, which ought to transgress disciplinary boundaries. The goal is hence to break through the walls of our comfortable silos, revealing points of contact and, where possible, exchange between distinct approaches to the Anthropocene and its utopian dreams.  

Beyond this bridge-building effort, I seek to combine empirical and normative considerations. This objective further sets my argument apart from allied accounts that also focus on green utopias. To explain, one ambition behind this book is to reconstruct the form and content of existing utopian visions in the Anthropocene. I take this to be an explanatory exercise that unpacks what exactly imagining a climate-changed world consists of.

A parallel aim is, however, to go beyond the charting of the current landscape. Since I subscribe to an understanding of political theory as critically and normatively geared towards real-world problems, I want to say something concrete about which kinds of utopian vision will be conducive for addressing the challenges arising today. If, as Ghosh reminds us, the current ecological crisis is also coupled with a crisis of the imagination, then efforts at intervening at the level of the imagination hopefully have a beneficial impact on practical action as well. The intersection between social and political theory on the one hand, and speculative fiction on the other, strikes me as an especially propitious site for identifying this-worldly utopias that can provide orientation in these greatly deranged times.

As I shall argue in the book’s final chapter, productive utopias can be identified by the extent to which they are aware of, and constructed around, the predetermined fault lines along which they will fail. To some

106 Naturally, I am not suggesting here that there is no exchange at all between these three disciplines. A quick look at the editorial board of the journal Environmental Humanities, for example, reveals that it contains several political theorists. My claim is rather that learning across these disciplines still remains hampered by the widespread institutionalized mentality of inward-looking scholarship – what is aptly referred to as Fachidiotentum in German (see the prior footnote). Following in the footsteps of others, this book hopes to devise a remedy to this scholastic mentality.

107 Although my book has a stronger affiliation with political theory, it shares this interest in speculative fiction with other recent publications. See in particular: Atchison and Shames, Survive and Resist; Wolf-Meyer, Theory for the World to Come.
degree, social dreaming is hence bound to go awry – due to its in-built propensity for indeterminacy, wishful thinking and defeatism. If that diagnosis is correct, then what matters most is how utopianism’s susceptibility to failure gets adjusted through practices of self-reflective iteration – a process I explicate in the book’s conclusion.

1.4 CONSTELLATIONS AND PLOT LINES

To conduct this analysis, I concentrate on three utopian constellations that are narrated through distinct plot lines. Since this terminology – “constellations” and “plot lines” – might sound fanciful, let me try to clarify what is meant here. In a nutshell, while the idea of a constellation is helpful in outlining the substantive content of my chosen cases (what a theory or story is about), the notion of a plot line foregrounds the formal characteristics of different forms of social dreaming (how a theory or story is construed).

I borrow the notion of a “constellation” from Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of art. In The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin uses the metaphor of a constellation to analyze what kind of linkages exist between ideas and objects. Just like a “star image” (Sternbild), an idea, for Benjamin, does not actually exist in the world – it is a figment of the imagination (a social, rather than a natural kind) that enables us, however, to describe the ways in which various objects stand in relation to one another, when viewed from a specific vantage point. A constellation therefore facilitates the organization of things in an intelligible manner: it embodies a heuristics for drawing out the interconnections between otherwise disparate phenomena. Observed from a unique position, separate elements instantaneously cohere into a whole, akin to the star image that Benjamin adduces.

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108 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 34.
109 As Fredric Jameson notes, “concepts represent aspects of empirical reality, while the Idea (and its philosophical notation) represents the relationships between them” (Jameson, Late Marxism, 54–5).
110 See: Sahraoui and Sauter, “Introduction.”
Even though Benjamin’s historiographical approach need not interest us here in any detail,111 the notion of a constellation helps explain how this book’s raw material of utopianism gets organized. Benjamin’s methodology makes it clear that thinking in and through constellations is always relational, contingent on the viewers’ vantage point and on their capacity to communicate with discernment what they see in front of them. Accordingly, I hope to persuade the reader that my way of approaching utopias in the Anthropocene – my proposal for envisaging otherwise unrelated texts as adding up to a perspicuous image – turns out to be not only one amongst many possible accounts of our climate-changed world, but a particularly lucid one.

Due to its declared reliance on the spectator’s standpoint (its perspectival character, we might say), this type of approach remains contestable, of course. But perspectivism of this variety does not entail relativism.112 This is why the concept of a “constellation” opens up an original path for elucidating how different sorts of intellectual and cultural production, in terms of both theory building and storytelling, partake in the same utopian project. Thinking in and through constellations allows for a linking together of various kinds of vision that would normally be considered as not so easily comparable.113

The book thus extends an invitation to approach the aforementioned ideas through the lens of a unified framework, sparking in the reader what one might call “aspect change,”114 the faculty of seeing something as something: in this case, the ability to appreciate how a specific text in social and political theory might relate to, and interact with, a book written in the genre of speculative fiction. Once we realize that viewing

111 For an introduction, see: Pensky, “Method and Time.”
112 This is one of the persistent concerns in the literature around Friedrich Nietzsche’s perspectivism, which becomes especially pronounced in: On the Genealogy of Morality, 87 (III/12). On the exegetical debate see exemplarily: Nehamas, Nietzsche, Life as Literature, 72–3; Gemes, “Life’s Perspectives,” 555.
113 None of this is to imply that my specific selection of speculative fiction is the only plausible one. As the burgeoning literature in the environmental humanities demonstrates, there is a huge variety of artworks that one could engage with.
planet Earth as an actor in its own right amounts to a distinct utopian constellation, it becomes feasible, for instance, to detect family resemblances between Bruno Latour’s revitalization of the Gaia theory and N. K. Jemisin’s far-future narrative in which our home planet is depicted as a vindictive agent waging permanent war on its human occupants – which is precisely what Chapter 3 claims.

Through the prism of constellational thinking, I suggest reading specific theoretical proposals in the debate around the Anthropocene in parallel with texts of speculative fiction for two interdependent reasons. First, I contend that these neighbouring sites of the utopian imagination – theory building and storytelling – can illuminate each other, revealing both strengths and weaknesses, fundamental insights and structural limitations. Whereas theorists tend to systematically address questions arising from the Anthropocene, fiction writers respond to climate change in a more poetic fashion, unravelling “the relationship between climate change and humanity in psychological and social terms, exploring how climate change occurs not just as a meteorological or ecological crisis ‘out there’ but as something filtered through our inner and outer lives.”

In terms of providing orientation, a key driver behind today’s climate fiction hence resides in the recovery and renegotiation of human as well as more-than-human agency, vulnerability and responsibility.

By concentrating on the narrative development of characters inhabiting other worlds, artistic accounts add experiential texture and depth to debates that social and political theorists cannot properly touch upon. What renders speculative fiction a valuable object of study, then, is its potential to produce novel frameworks for envisaging reality, coloured in either hopeful or fearful hues. Storytelling about climate change manages to stir the reader’s imagination in ways that theory building does not even aspire to, thereby facilitating the drawing of original maps that are so pivotal to our greatly deranged times. As expressions of a utopian

115 Trewxler and Johns-Putra, “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism,” 196.
116 See: Cole, “At the Heart of Human Politics.”
117 On this aspect, see: Nikoleris, Stripple and Tennyart, “Narrating Climate Futures.”
118 The impact of fiction writing on readers’ perception of climate change has also been empirically studied. See: Schneider-Mayerson, “The Influence of Climate Fiction”;

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desire surfacing from the same constellation, these contrasting approaches hence speak to each other via stimulating conversations that have not yet been fully appreciated in the scholarly debate. 119

The second reason for turning to speculative fiction in conjunction with academic writing is that storytelling harbours resources of direct relevance to social and political theorists. In fact, literature can itself be read as promulgating a kind of theory, albeit one that traditional registers of interpretation are unable to unlock. 120 As Joan Haran expounds, the gain of “reading fiction as theory is due to the capacity of fiction to narrate multiple trajectories of social theory within a single text, and to reflect upon the potentials and foreclosures that specific trajectories enable and constrain.” 121 Social and political theorists have consequently much to learn from the worlds conjured by authors such as Jemisin, Robinson and Atwood.

My claim here is not that zeroing in on such narratives should completely replace abstract theory building. Rather, the book starts from the more modest and more plausible supposition that speculative fiction can expand social and political theory’s horizon of problematizations, and vice versa. 122 Thus, if the current moment demonstrates, amongst other things, that we are going through a profound crisis of the imagination, which in turn necessitates new modes of orienting ourselves vis-à-vis hyperobjects, then we simply cannot afford to disregard fictional representations of an uncertain and risky future. 123

Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Just as in the Book’?… Obviously, fictional accounts of our climate-changed world will not exert a uniform impact on all readers. Rather, the point here is that storytelling can disclose novel dimensions for studying the Anthropocene that theory building alone would not be able to reach.

119 For a notable exception that emphasizes the seductive power of storytelling, see: Mihai, “Epistemic Marginalisation and the Seductive Power of Art.”
120 Nora Hämäläinen calls this approach the “open-ended use of literature in philosophy.” See: Hämäläinen, “Sophie, Antigone, Elizabeth – Rethinking Ethics by Reading Literature.”
121 Haran, “Redefining Hope as Praxis,” 394. See also: Haran, “Revisioning Feminist Futures.”
122 For two applications of this framework see: Thaler, “Hope Abjuring Hope”; Thaler, “Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares.”
123 Broadly speaking, this book hence subscribes to the “literary turn” in social and political thought. The most prominent voices in this philosophical debate range from Richard
How these deliberative processes across different genres of writing evolve concretely will vary from case to case, as I show in the analysis of my three constellations. But the methodological bet on which this book rides is that our comprehension of utopian visions in the Anthropocene can be enriched if we pay attention to the interfaces between theory building and storytelling.

The attentive reader will have noticed that I have consistently spoken of “speculative fiction” when underscoring the kind of storytelling I am interested in. What do I mean by this? It is not easy to give an answer to this question so long as the boundaries of the genre of speculative fiction remain hotly disputed. At various points in this book, I will return to the thorny issue of boundary setting and policing, be it in the controversy around the separation of science fiction from fantasy or in the argument around the peculiar features of near-future narratives. At this stage, though, let us commence with a broad categorization of “speculative fiction” in terms of all genres that deliberately depart from imitating “consensus reality” of everyday experience. In this . . . sense, speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more.124

Another way of teasing out the same thought would be to say, with China Miéville, that the kind of literature I am drawn to in this book deals with “specific articulations of alterity.”125 The advantage of such a focus on otherness is that it manages to capture all kinds of utopian storytelling, while still leaving sufficient space for meaningful variations as to how far from the real world a text of speculative fiction might be creatively situated.126

Rorty, Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler to Bonnie Honig. For a comprehensive survey, see: Stow, Republic of Readers?
125 Miéville, “Cognition as Ideology,” 244.
126 Instead of realistic writing, the opposite of such a fiction of alterity could also be signified as “mimetic literature,” the origins of which have been reconstructed in: Auerbach, Mimesis.
The authors discussed next conceptualize the alterity of their imagined worlds in interestingly varied ways: N. K. Jemisin conceives of the purpose of speculative fiction as assailing the “illusion that what you see is not actually what is happening.”\(^\text{127}\) Despite its commitment to otherness, her speculative fiction thus consciously reflects back on reality to demystify the obfuscation on which oppression and injustice always rely. Kim Stanley Robinson, on the other hand, calls his recent climate fiction “proleptic realism,” an attempt to model the near future, which looks only slightly different than the current moment. By contrast, Margaret Atwood insists on her bleak stories of a world ravaged by catastrophe having nothing at all to do with science fiction – despite being frequently hailed as masterpieces of that genre. (Atwood instead elects to reserve the term “speculative fiction” for narratives of the future that have been sensibly extrapolated from what we know about the present.)

As a further structuring device, I employ a distinction that the science fiction author Octavia Butler made between three types of speculative fiction: the \emph{What-If}, the \emph{If-Only} and the \emph{If-This-Goes-On}.\(^\text{128}\) These are competing, and to some degree mutually exclusive, frames that shape specific modes of social dreaming. A useful way of understanding them would be as unique types of “emplotment.”\(^\text{129}\) “Emplotment” denotes a strategy for unpacking “the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the \emph{kind of story} that has been told.”\(^\text{130}\)

\(^{127}\) Bereola, “A True Utopia.”


\(^{129}\) If you prefer a musical metaphor instead, think of Butler’s types of speculative fiction as rival expressions of a distinct \emph{basso continuo} – the underlying harmonious scaffolding upon which various improvisations can be fixed.

\(^{130}\) White, \emph{Metahistory}, 7, italics in original. White applies this concept not to the exegesis of works of fiction, but to the ways in which historians have tended to frame their accounts of the past. This notion permits him to refine his interpretation of historiography, by shifting attention from how argumentative frameworks are constructed and what ideological positions are taken, to the specific styles in which histories are written. Looking at historiography through this lens reveals, for example, that one can separate out four major plot lines in nineteenth-century writing: romance (associated with Jules Michelet), tragedy (exemplified by Alexis de Tocqueville), comedy (linked to Leopold Ranke) and satire (connected with Jacob Burckhardt).
My suggestion is that this intuition about the significance of plot lines – of how a story is told, rather than what it tells – can be rewarding for the study of utopian visions. Although Butler herself has not elaborated on this schema, we can with relative ease flesh out its implications for our topic, applying each of her types of emplotment to my three constellations. Accordingly, the proposal to envisage planet Earth as a living being (my first utopian constellation) raises a What-If question: what would happen if we managed to reconceive our existence as deeply entangled with all kinds of planetary life forms? The ecomodernist wager in favour of a “good Anthropocene” (my second utopian constellation) urges us to declaim “If only!”: what would happen if we were capable of taking on the current challenge, by harnessing science and technology to guide us through a climate-changed world? Finally, foregrounding collapse and apocalypse as likely consequences of our actions (my third utopian constellation) pushes the reader into the direction of an If-This-Goes-On inquiry: what would happen to our efforts in these greatly deranged times if our species’ irresponsible behaviour did not change at all, or if mitigation and adaptation measures simply gained momentum too late?

It is not difficult to contemplate how these three plot lines spur the imagination in singular ways: the What-If evokes a type of speculation we would otherwise associate with philosophical thought experiments, often weaving together eutopian and dystopian themes. The If-Only will veer onto a more unambiguously eutopian track, whereas the If-This-Goes-On encourages visions that are shaped by dystopian reflections. Although they are always liable to rupture along discrete fault lines, these three kinds of emplotment illustrate how we might succeed in sidestepping the twin pitfalls that Haraway identified as serious risks to our imagination: nihilism and self-aggrandisement.

Two important clarifications need to be added here: first, even though they serve the objective of organizing the material surveyed in this book, I do not mean to intimate that specific utopias will always fit neatly into any one of these frames. To illustrate this, consider that, in some sense, all forms of social dreaming embark on a What-If inquiry.131 That is, after all, the purpose of speculative fiction, and of speculation

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131 It might even be argued that “‘What if?’ is the question all fiction asks” (Burrow, “It’s Not Jung’s, It’s Mine.”).
more broadly – to confront the reader with theories and stories of other worlds that stand in more or less stark contrast to their ordinary perception of reality. Hence the emphasis on alterity. Similarly, all the fictional texts I discuss next contain, to certain degrees, not only eutopian but also dystopian motifs. Hopes and wishes, as well as fear and despair are, with varying intensity, marshalled in all the theories and stories that take centre stage in this book.

The point of Butler’s tripartite schema is therefore to flesh out some general tendencies within my three constellations. Her distinction between What-If, the If-Only and If-This-Goes-On narratives has the virtue of equipping us with a conceptual platform that lends structure to the otherwise unruly utopias we can observe across different contexts.

Second, highlighting how a story is told privileges a text-immanent standpoint for the interpretation of utopias. The notion of emplotment directs attention to the rhetorical styles and atmospheric moods that prevail within specific texts, while putting less emphasis on how they are perceived by actual readers. This has important implications for one of the most challenging aspects of studying utopian ideas: their open reception. It is surely accurate that “one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia.” What might appear like an Arcadian future to some, will be experienced as an oppressive and violent vision by others. In fact, dystopias often riff on this fact, when they deplore how the collective dream of a better society can morph into a hellish nightmare for some.

133 This point is central to the analysis of right-wing utopias, such as, for example, The Turner Diaries, William Luther Pierce’s (pseudonym: Andrew Macdonald) infamous story of future race wars. Given that one’s conjuring of a “worst place” crucially hinges on where one stands at the moment, it is undoubtedly true that some people consider The Turner Diaries visionary and empowering – in fact, many white supremacists, from Timothy McVeigh to the German terror cell NSU, have explicitly referred to Pierce’s book to prop up their murderous plans. On the rise of right-wing utopias, see: Brodie, “The Aryan New Era”; Fitting, “Utopias beyond Our Ideals.”
134 As Samuel Delany remarks: “To the man who yearns after Arcadia, any movement to establish New Jerusalem will always look like a step toward Brave New World, that mechanized, dehumanized, and standardized environment, where the gaudy and meretricious alternate with the insufferably dull; where, if physical hardship is reduced, it is at the price of the most humiliating spiritual brutalization. In the same way, the man
To illustrate the openness of all interpretation, consider that even Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in spite of being lionized as a genre-defining exemplar of dystopian fiction, could be understood as a eutopian narrative. The basis for such a reading is that the ultra-violent patriarchy of Gilead might be thought to produce the salutary effect of erasing all the differences between groups of women who otherwise remain separated along lines of race, class and sexual orientation. While nobody will deny that the fate of women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is horrific, Gilead’s reign of terror does shed light on what presumably unites all women – their subjugation to unfettered male power. In other words, Offred’s fate is reimagined here as the portent of a peculiar type of homogenizing feminism that flattens hierarchies between women of various backgrounds.135

If we solely concentrate on how utopian visions are received, then we have no argument at our disposal to defuse such a reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The problem with unreservedly subscribing to the proposition that “one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia” is that it too quickly dissolves judgements as to the textual character of a specific theory or story into an undifferentiated, relativistic muddle. Separating *What-If*, *If-Only* and *If-This-GoestoOn* narratives affords a counterpoint to the view that just because every theory or story can be read from different perspectives, there are no better or worse ways of interpreting them.

Attending to the plot lines that frame theories and stories helps clarify why it would be erroneous, or at least twisted, to conceive of the *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a narrative that might sustain an affirmative vision of feminism. Although there are elements of eutopian promise in even the bleakest of dystopias, that does not render them positive visions of the future altogether. Like all *If-This-GoestoOn* narratives, Offred’s story contains a harrowing account of dangerous trends within the present that or woman who dreams of New Jerusalem sees any serious attempt to establish an Arcadia as a retreat to the Land of Flies, that place of provincial ignorance, fear, disease, and death, where humans are prey to the untrammeled demons of our own superstitions as well as any caprice of nature: fire, flood, storm, or earthquake” (Delany, “Critical Methods/Speculative Fiction,” 25).

135 On this interpretation of Atwood, see: Lewis, “Dreams of Gilead”; Merteuil and Lewis, “Gestational Decrim.”
might eventually have terrible effects on our lifeworlds. Although not impossible, reading Atwood’s novel as a hopeful narrative is thus predicated on disregarding the cautionary pedagogy that inheres in all dystopias. Deciphering The Handmaid’s Tale as heralding a peculiar type of feminism therefore strikes me as one of its less plausible interpretations.

With these two caveats in mind, once we look more closely into Butler’s taxonomy, we will appreciate how utopias use various devices to fulfil their intended functions. I have already observed that social dreaming can cater to a multiplicity of goals, from the offering of consolation to the drafting of concrete plans for alternative worlds. On the basis of Butler’s views on emplotment, one can further specify these goals by identifying three core mechanisms whereby utopias in the Anthropocene advance. These are estranging, galvanizing and cautioning.

Utopias written under the guise of a What-If question try to defamiliarize an audience from deeply held beliefs, to render unfamiliar what often appears to be entirely natural and normal. The effect of such an estrangement strategy is to interpellate the reader to see the world from new and unexpected angles. If-Only narratives play a different role: they seek mobilization when a situation appears too dire to permit any action at all. As a consequence, utopias can facilitate an overcoming of debilitating inertia in precisely those moments when no alternatives seem available. Finally, If-This-Goes-On stories aim to identify perils that are concealed within the status quo. Such warnings are especially salient when people fail to take current dangers seriously, either because they do not want to acknowledge them or because they cannot perceive them in the first place.

Already on this abstract level, it is obvious that these mechanisms – estranging, galvanizing and cautioning – can overlap with one another. I will probe these intersections in detail shortly, but note here that desires and hopes, and fear and despair play varied roles in all three constellations. A What-If plot line is premised on the longing for a certain state of affairs to be otherwise. Hence, defamiliarization amounts to a technique that tries to render the impossible thinkable. In If-Only

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utopias, the rationale behind the propagation of a positive story is to insist that “another world is possible,” to invoke the World Social Forum’s motto once again. A plot line of this kind aspires to lift the audience out of its apathy and frustration, through the circulation of optimistic images of what might be just on the horizon. In If-This-Goes-On narratives, the drive behind a negative vision of the future is to establish that things could easily go awry, unless a radically different path is forged ahead. Even the bleakest of dystopias therefore always leave some residual room, however constrained, for oppositional agency. Without this hopeful perspective, a plot line of this type would collapse into fatalism.

While what I have proposed so far might appear rather anodyne, these constellations and plot lines will be scrutinized in more granular detail in the following chapters. There, I also explain how exactly theory building and storytelling set into motion the mechanisms I have associated with my three plot lines. My objective in this section has merely been to explicate on a conceptual level what the principles are on the basis of which the utopian visions of the Anthropocene have been selected.

1.5 SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

In drawing this chapter to a close, I offer a synopsis of the rest of the book. Chapter 2 sets the stage for the substantive analysis of my three constellations by developing a robust account of utopianism that manages to withstand the charges laid out by anti-utopian critics, both from the left and the right. I hold that these detractors miss their target because they fail to acknowledge the intricacy of social dreaming. While utopias can, under specific circumstances, turn out to be impractical or dangerous, the standard objections are wrong to assume that this is necessarily and always the case. I hence claim that anti-perfectionist utopias embody forms of social dreaming that can educate our desire for things to be otherwise.

The chapter continues by investigating utopianism’s chief function: the production of estrangement. By establishing critical distance from what is conventionally taken for granted, utopias teach us to perceive reality from surprising and illuminating angles. In short, they prompt us to see the world anew. This process has the effect of disrupting habitual
patterns of lived experience that hold sway over our normal modes of existence.

In a further step, I scrutinize the other two purposes that utopian visions of the Anthropocene serve: galvanizing and cautioning. The chapter suggests that eutopias’ main goal is to kick-start emancipatory action by outlining viable pathways into a future freed from the limitations of the past and the present. The risk that accompanies these positive visions is that they collapse into wishful thinking, downplaying or neglecting the obstacles that systemic transformations always have to surpass.

Dystopias, by contrast, operate under a different logic: their objective is to issue warnings about grave dangers that are located on society’s horizon of expectations. Alerting an audience about existential perils remains a tricky endeavour, though. If the dystopian theorist or author paints too bleak a picture of the imminent catastrophe, the addressees of the narrative might be tempted to simply give up and adopt a fatalistic posture. What is needed, then, is a dystopia generating just the right level of despair – too much of it would hamper the audience, too little would banalize the threat.

I conclude Chapter 2 with a short intermezzo discussing utopian practices – experiments that organize social life “against the grain.” Prefigurative communities transpose the desire for being and living otherwise from the realm of imagination to the real world. Even though the practical dimension of utopianism does not constitute a central preoccupation of this book, it still seems necessary to acquire at least a rudimentary sense of the diversity of such social experiments, from micro-level “everyday utopias” (Davina Cooper) that unfold oppositional spaces where bottom-up resistance to the mainstream can be launched, to macro-level “real utopias” (Erik Olin Wright) unearthing radical potentials from within the hegemonic order.

Chapter 3 moves on to our first constellation, the utopian vision of planet Earth as an actor in its own right. Rather than conceiving of humans as endowed with a special status that sets them ontologically, epistemically and ethically apart from both non-human animals and the planetary ecosphere, proponents of this idea outline a hypothetical
scenario that destabilizes entrenched modes of reflecting on our species’ place in the world.

I approach this utopian constellation, framed by a What-If plot line, via two steps: first, by analyzing the Gaia hypothesis as recently revisited by Bruno Latour. Here, I hold that Gaia should be deciphered as a critical and normative framework that seeks to estrange us for, rather than from, the world. While James Lovelock initially came up with the idea to envisage Earth in terms of a self-regulating system, baptizing the entirety of feedback loops of which the planet is composed with the mythological name “Gaia,” it is Bruno Latour’s interpretation that interests me in particular. Latour attempts to ground a political ecology that repudiates the binary opposition of nature and culture, which underpins the modern condition and ultimately obstructs a responsible engagement with environmental issues. From this, an image of Earth emerges in which agency is radically dispersed across different forms of being.

In a second step, the chapter directs attention to N. K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy, claiming that this science fiction text can further draw out the contours of the Gaia figure. Through her subtle portrayal of a group of survivors of environmental disaster, Jemisin underscores three themes that are key to this constellation. The trilogy, first, describes our home planet as a living, raging entity that enacts brutal retaliation for the harm done to it. Second, Jemisin understands violence amongst humans as well as between humans and other species as cyclical in character. While rebellion must sometimes be pursued with brutal means, this will bring about results that cannot be calculated and foreseen in advance. A third insight that may be taken from Jemisin’s fantasyland is that interpersonal and interspecies solidarity provides an effective antidote to the devastations wrought by oppressive institutions and structures. All these motifs rebut simplistic conceptions of our climate-changed world, for Jemisin’s novels illustrate that humanity is internally too diverse and too conflicted to be considered a homogenous actor. Only if we recognize the historical divisions within our own species will we be able to foster new relationships with Earth and its myriad inhabitants.

Even though the champions of the Gaia hypothesis as well as the author of the Broken Earth trilogy weigh up several options – from Latour’s manifesto for the “Earthbound” to Jemisin’s embrace of a
fragile peace between our planet and its multiple occupants – their utopianism consists primarily in the opening up of novel possibilities for being and living otherwise. An ineradicable fault line running through the What-If frame is therefore its reluctance to forge concrete ways forward. My reading of this constellation thus reveals that this kind of utopia always oscillates between world-disclosing and world-negating estrangement.

This challenge is openly confronted in Chapter 4, which deals with one of the most prominent themes in contemporary utopianism: the notion that science and technology can somehow be harnessed to elevate humanity beyond the current impasse. My argument here is that ecomodernism – the tantalizing thought that scientific and technological progress will have a thoroughly constructive impact on the Anthropocene – should be understood as a unique type of social dreaming.

I analyze this constellation by, first, discussing various defences of ecomodernism. With regard to the theory pole of this If-Only plot line, my argument is that ecomodernism constitutes a broad movement in which both right- and left-wing defenders of scientific and technological progress have found ideological homes. Tracing the roots of this utopian vision back to a programmatic statement by the American think tank The Breakthrough Institute, the chapter identifies a number of key commitments to which all ecomodernists subscribe. Chief amongst those is the plan to emancipate our species from its resource reliance on ecological processes. “Decoupling,” which effectively turns Gaia’s model of universal connectedness on its head, is supposed to be advantageous for both humanity and the environment.

Right- and left-wing ecomodernists seek to defuse the allegation that their eutopian vision of such decoupling is nothing but wishful thinking. They do so by celebrating actual discoveries and inventions, from carbon capture to geoengineering, that simply need to be optimized to turn the Anthropocene into a triumphant age of human attainment. At the heart of their proposals lies a worry about the debilitating effects that a catastrophist mindset can have. Only if we imaginatively explore realistic pathways into a positive future will we be able to reap the benefits of social dreaming.
In a second step, I embark on a reading of what is perhaps the most elaborate attempt at fictionally working through the material and ideological contradictions of a science-based response to climate change: Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Science in the Capital* trilogy. Robinson’s oeuvre examines how an optimistic state of affairs could grow organically from within the status quo, eschewing both revolutionary upheaval and an aggressive strike against “Gaia’s revenge.” The books are set in a near-future version of Washington, DC where a small group of scientists, politicians and spiritual leaders collaborates to confront the enormous challenges of a climate-changed world.

In over 1,200 pages, Robinson probes the utopian credentials of a scientific community that has become immunized against capitalist co-optation and willing to mount political struggles. Through a detailed study of the National Science Foundation (NSF), the *Science in the Capital* trilogy locates the motor behind progressive action in a state-sponsored organization that funds and coordinates technological innovations. Based on his sophisticated account of utopianism as a procedural, conflictual and open-ended exercise in modelling alternative futures, Robinson asks which changes on both the personal and the societal level would be required for our species to not only survive, but thrive in the Anthropocene.

Eutopian stories, such as the *Science in the Capital* trilogy, can shed light on the theoretical approaches of contemporary ecomodernists. In adding experiential and affective texture and narrative complication to the *If-Only* plot line, they invite the reader to acknowledge that the desire for being otherwise cannot be satisfied through scientific discoveries and technological innovations alone – Western lifestyles will have to undergo radical transformations as well, if there is to be any chance for our species to keep on living on this planet. Yet, just as is the case with both right- and left-wing ecomodernists, the danger of wishful thinking still looms large in Robinson’s writings, as I demonstrate in the chapter’s conclusion.

This is where our final constellation enters the stage. Chapter 5 turns to a much bleaker vision of the Anthropocene, based on the suspicion that the catastrophe is all but inevitable. In this part of the book, I attend to various dystopian visions of a climate-changed world, by first looking into contemporary expressions of apocalyptic thinking, which are then
juxtaposed to a fictional narrative of what our planet might look like after the Anthropocene: Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy.

I begin the discussion of the *If-This-Goes-On* plot line with a historical overview, pointing out that we are currently witnessing a transformation of the ways in which the apocalypse is construed, not least since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Today, the environmental breakdown is not anymore imagined as an extraordinary event that will happen sometime in a far-away future. Rather, most people today are aware that climate change has already triggered a state of permanent crisis that cannot be reversed in any meaningful sense. The cataclysm, in other words, has become routinized, habitually integrated into our brittle lifeworlds.

Dystopias perform one major function in this context: to warn an audience about existential threats that are imminent, but whose true causes still remain hidden from public purview. In the case of climate change, I argue that we ought to separate narratives that either spin cautionary or post-cautionary tales. That is, on the one hand, we find analyses that use apocalyptic imaginaries to determine where the true origins of the ongoing breakdown might lie. In these dystopian visions, the future remains pliable, since we can still remedy the structural shortcomings in our current world that have exacerbated the ecological crisis.

Post-cautionary tales, on the other hand, contradict the proposition that the catastrophe may still be averted. The idea that climate change creates a state of constant cataclysm has been taken up by influential commentators. Their diagnoses culminate in a number of “palliative” verdicts on the future, from a philosophical inquiry into how we may learn to perish in the Anthropocene to the resigned withdrawal from all activism. What haunts these ideas is not only a waning of hope but also the spectre of defeatism – that the situation is in fact so dire that nothing we might do would ultimately make any difference.

Turning to the storytelling pole of this constellation, Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy navigates this rocky terrain by examining where grave dangers might emerge from within the status quo, without however suffocating the desire for alternative ways of being and living. The trilogy tells the story of a small group of humans who survived a
global pandemic that has wiped out almost our entire species. Atwood’s books move back and forth between a storyline that explains the unfolding catastrophe and another one that depicts how the surviving humans build a common future with other species.

My interpretation of the MaddAddam trilogy concentrates on two key features that are characteristic of Atwood’s utopianism: first, the notion that eutopian and dystopian perspectives are always entangled with each other; and second, the observation that Atwood’s writing grapples with fictional scenarios that might appear far-fetched but are meant to be eminently believable from the reader’s point of view.

The trilogy visualizes the apocalypse not only as the catastrophic end of an era but also as an opportunity for pondering what might lie beyond the Anthropocene. Atwood’s narrative thus troubles the arguments put forth by proponents of cautionary and post-cautionary tales. By summoning the reader to imagine what would come after the reign of our species, the trilogy exposes the contradictions and ambiguities of our climate-changed world that the utopian desire feeds on.

Chapter 6 concludes this book by exposing both the fault lines and the horizons of contemporary utopianism. Throughout the substantive chapters, I home in on what I consider the key mechanisms underpinning utopianism (estranging, galvanizing and cautioning), while also stressing the ways in which these mechanisms can misfire. Attentiveness to inherent tensions is essential for a balanced vindication of social dreaming in the Anthropocene. Based on a comparative reading of the three constellations, my argument is that utopianism remains pervaded by the following three fault lines: indeterminacy, wishful thinking and defeatism.

The What-If plot line aims to undo habitual patterns of experiencing the world, but it is susceptible to the charge of indeterminacy – what ought to follow concretely from the strange scenario conjured by these utopias is not always evident. The If-Only plot line, by contrast, seeks to mobilize people into action, yet its pedagogy of desire might come dangerously close to wishful thinking. Finally, although the If-This-Goesto-Go plot line intends to warn an audience about imminent risks, its depiction of a dire world to come can veer into fearmongering that incapacitates, rather than motivates, people.
Since these fault lines cannot be removed, the most auspicious manner of dealing with them would be to accept their pervasiveness and prepare for the eventual traps that any utopian project might fall into. If we conceive of social dreaming as the education of the desire for being and living otherwise, we need to remain constantly alert to the ways in which these pedagogical interventions can go awry. Critical self-reflexivity is therefore pivotal to the orientating function that all utopias perform in our climate-changed world. The book ends with a proposal for how such critical self-reflexivity could be cultivated. Ulrich, the anti-hero of *The Man without Qualities*, will offer valuable insights in this regard.