“500 Years of Utopia” An exhibit at Rivera Library—Now Open
Irene Morrison

Fig. 1: From top to bottom: Joseph Hall’s *Mvndus alter et idem*, Francis Bacon’s *Nova Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas Solis* (bound by Campanella, 1643); Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1517); and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1643)

The Eaton Collection has a new exhibit on display until December 15, 2016. “500 Years of Utopia” commemorates the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, as well as the 50th anniversary of *Star Trek*. The exhibit is curated by Irene Morrison, a PhD Candidate in the English Department, and JJ Jacobson, the Jay Kay and Doris Klein Librarian for Science Fiction.

“500 Years of Utopia” showcases the Eaton’s holdings in the genre, highlighting key utopian texts of the last five centuries, and telling the story of how utopia has long been a site of ideological contention about what a better world might look like. Among the exhibit’s central texts are the 1517 edition of More’s *Utopia*; a 1643 edition of Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Campanella’s *City of the Sun*, and Joseph Hall’s *Discovery of a New World*, bound and published together by Campanella; and a first edition of Restif’s *Discovery of the Austral Continent by a Flying Man* (1781, French). Important dystopian works are on display as well, including the rare "asbestos edition" of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

Also on display are some of the maps, illustrations, and cover art that enhance works of utopia, as well as the memorabilia and collectors’ items of popular utopian fiction, such as the children's utopia, *Dinotopia*. Finally, the exhibit looks at utopia in the present day, focusing on the ways people of color, Indigenous, and non-Western authors—such as Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor and Egyptian novelist Ahmed Khaled Towfik—have taken the traditionally Western concept of utopia, and remixed and repurposed it toward a decolonized utopian vision.
1. How did you come to work in the Eaton collection?
I began working with JJ Jacobson, the new Eaton Librarian, after she pitched the idea of a collaboration to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Utopia at a Speculative Fiction and Cultures of Science (SFCS) program meeting. She is firmly committed to engaging graduate students with the Collection, and ours the first of many exhibits she intends to curate with grad students. Thanks to JJ, instead of feeling like a cold research space where I went when I simply couldn’t find a book anywhere else, the Collection became a boundless, adventurous opportunity for me. And I think the space changed for other graduate students, too thanks to new initiatives such as summer RAships there; it feels more like a hub for the SFCS community here now.

2. What sorts of materials did you initially plan on using? How did your plans change as the project took shape?
The biggest thing that I had to cut was a video element. I wanted to have four short films screening in a loop, including Larissa Sansour’s “Nation Estate” (2012) and Nanobah Becker’s “The 6th World” (2013). This wasn’t technologically or financially feasible given how little time we had to put the exhibit together, and I intend them to be part of an online exhibit. I hope that the many novels on display that could be classified as post-colonial sf made up for this.

I also hoped to display more than fiction, such as the major works of utopian socialism, but we didn’t have any early or unique editions from utopian socialists such as Fourier. Instead, I found something more obscure but arguably visually more appealing: Restif de la Bretonne’s La Decouverte Australe/Discovery of the Austral Continent by a Flying Man (1781), which was only recently translated into English and is said to have influenced Fourier. The illustrations in it of strange flying contraptions and human-animal hybrids enriched the exhibit beautifully.

3. Were there any especially interesting items you discovered while putting the display together?
The Eaton has a TON of memorabilia and realia! The day I came across Dinotopia plush toys and children’s watches featuring Bix—one of the main dinosaur characters—I felt like a kid on Christmas. I was able to fill a case with Dinotopia books and memorabilia, and we had another case of realia commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Star Trek.
Another item that I found, thanks to Lyman Tower Sargent’s excellent bibliography on utopian fiction, was 2894, or The Fossil Man (1894), by Walter Browne. It’s a sexist satire where gender roles are reversed, and I found it nearly unreadable but interesting in its own way. It was in very poor condition, so I didn’t want to display it, but I did learn that it was one of the rarest books in the English language. The collection ended up removing it from the stacks and putting it in the vault at my recommendation.

In terms of intangible discoveries, I learned so much about the ways libraries work and make information accessible. I’m definitely a better researcher now that I’ve seen, for example, a librarian use the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), model for cataloguing items in databases. I’ll now be less likely to miss things during research.

4. **500 years is a long time; how did you choose what to include? What organizational principles did you use?**

After talking with JJ, I developed a sort of diagram of the three elements of an exhibit as I saw it: an item has to be part of an overarching exhibit story, it must be visibly appealing, and it must showcase the Collection’s uniqueness. I chose to chronologically represent major eras since 1516 in four of the five literature cases, with the help of Manuel and Manuel’s *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (1979), which was extremely useful for pre-20th Century works. We tried to represent each era with 4-9 items. So for example 18th Century Enlightenment case has a beautiful French edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1761, 1719), accompanied by text that explained the way the book sparked the robinsonade genre and influenced later utopian works. It also displayed an early edition of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1727, 1726), and three more obscure works that showcased the depth of the Eaton Collection—including some utopian pornography. The 20th Century case contains the major works of utopia and dystopia that visitors would probably be most familiar with, such as our asbestos edition of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974). The final case featured postcolonial utopian fiction written in (or translated to) English from the last 30 years. I was able to buy or donate some works for this case, which is also where my research is focused; the Eaton has truly great holdings in this subgenre and I’m given to understand it’s an area in which they’re looking to further expand.

5. **What was the biggest challenge in putting the exhibit together?**

I struggled most with making the exhibit appealing beyond just text and ideas, especially to an audience non-academics (a lot of students and staff have come to visit). The exhibit had to be visually appealing, so we left out some works that are important to the narrative of what utopia has meant these past 500 years, but that looked dull or were not first/old editions. One example of this was Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666). We don’t have a first or early edition of this or Sarah Scott’s *Millennium Hall* (1762), so as a result there are no women writers displayed until the 20th Century. Also, all text written to accompany objects needed to be at an 11th grade reading level, which challenged my tendencies toward writing in unnecessarily convoluted ways (as we do!). When I was done running my text through reading level calculators, it no longer felt like my writing. But what’s the
point of utopian ideas if they aren’t communicable? It was a challenge that has influenced my approach to academic writing.

Finally, it is difficult to provide a sense of an ending to an exhibit on utopia. I was asked to speculate on where the genre is headed in the future but what I came up with sounded twee or unoriginal: essentially I wrote that utopia is “more important than ever,” and postcolonial sf is taking utopia in exciting new directions. This perhaps resembles that time-honored dictum that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world as we know it than a utopian future. For me it was hard to imagine the future for utopia, even though I absolutely believe there is one.

6. What are your future plans for the exhibit/project?

JJ and I plan to take the exhibit online, though we are looking at alternatives to a straightforward image-and-text-based website. We want something that will create a sense of space for visitors to inhabit, and again be attractive to a wider audience. One possibility is to put it on Second Life or a similar virtual environment. We are also thinking through ways of “breaking the exhibit,” of challenging the imperialist-oriented conventions of exhibiting objects (behind glass, in rows, with an attention to chronology, and so on). Public exhibitions originated in the Victorian era and were aimed at displaying the newfound superiority of England and exoticizing the cultures it conquered. This “breaking” might look like exhibits with touchable, moveable objects and opportunities to contribute content to the exhibit as a visitor. It seems that the traditional layout of an exhibit does not lend itself to the utopian or even to the kinds of learner-centered methods of teaching that we tend to adopt in the classroom.

Fig. 3 - William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1926, originally published 1890)