

Where Is Utopia in a Time of Disaster and Catastrophe?

A Conversation with Allegra Hyde

ALLEGRA HYDE, CATRIN GERSDORF

In search of new literary voices that might present an answer to Amitav Ghosh's 2016 lament on the failure of contemporary literary fiction to find forms that adequately express the multiple challenges of the Anthropocene, I came across a review of Allegra Hyde's debut novel in the *Los Angeles Times*. The novel's title, *Eleutheria*, was suggestive enough to pique my interest: etymologically, it evokes the concepts of liberty and freedom; geographically, it calls to mind the small island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas that was colonized in the late 1640s by a group of English Puritans known as the Eleutheran Adventurers. Add to this that Willa Marks, the novel's narrator-protagonist, is a twenty-two-year-old member of Generation Z, the same generation as the students we teach these days, and *Eleutheria* (2022) becomes a worthy candidate for an American Studies syllabus. What kind of narrative tapestry was the author able to weave out of the materials of history, climate change, and a young generation's growing frustration with the ecological and political state of the world? I was ready to discuss these and similar questions with a group of students in a seminar on Anglophone Literature in the Anthropocene during the summer semester 2023. Serendipitously, the son of an American colleague and long-time friend studied with Allegra Hyde at Oberlin College, where she is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing. He suggested that she might be willing to discuss her novel with a group of German students. When I issued the invitation to join us digitally for one session, she accepted. I interviewed Hyde, who is also the author of two short story collections – *Of This New World* (2016) and *The Last Catastrophe* (2023) – a few days later. The following text is the transcript of that conversation. It has been edited for readability.

Catrin Gersdorf: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview for the *New American Studies Journal*. I would like to use one of the stories of your most recent collection, *The Last Catastrophe* (2023), as the starting point of our conversation. The story's title is "Democracy in America," which is of course a reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's nineteenth-century analysis of American society. Arguably, de Tocqueville concentrated a good part of his attention on the danger of a democracy reverting to despotism. He writes: "If despotism were to be established in present-day democracies, it would probably assume a different character; it would be more widespread and kinder; it would debase men without tormenting them." Would I be wrong to read your story as an articulation of this new kind of despotism – the despotism of a dream indefinitely deferred which becomes the story of America?

Allegra Hyde: I welcome that interpretation. In my story, my "Democracy in America," I'm imagining a near-future version of America in which a modern de Tocqueville journeys through America and observes what's happening. The specter of despotism shows up as rampant inequality and the impact it has on society—the way it crushes people and controls their lives and limits them. It also shows up as, like you said, a dream of social mobility gone awry, perverted in a sense—that has a stranglehold on this fictional vision of the country.

CG: In those sections where he addresses despotism, de Tocqueville refers to the fear of *political* despotism. What I saw at work in your story was a different kind of despotism, a kind of cultural and social despotism, if you will, one that is inherent in the fetishization of youth, for example. In your story, it emerges from the gap between the poor and the rich. I also found it really interesting that your "Alexis," much like her historical forebear, originally comes to America to study the prison system, another space where despotic structures are more prevalent than democratic ones, right? Or take the idea that humans try to control nature, a form of ecological despotism, I would say.

AH: Yes, I think that was what I was trying to say there. In "Democracy in America" I also wanted to gesture toward a neo-Jacksonian president with a fixation on infrastructural projects. That's why I have that short bit about "one big lake"—a political initiative to bulldoze all the Great Lakes into "the Greatest Lake." This premise is silly, but it is also meant to capture a kind of cultural and social despotism; one can assume that a project like "one big lake" has been created for the sake of political performance and/or funneling money somewhere.

CG: Hm?! I find it interesting that for your modern-day Tocqueville “infrastructure” does not simply mean building railroads or factories anymore. It becomes a terraforming project, infrastructure on a geological scale. Can you say a little more about your motivation for drawing on de Tocqueville, and especially for using the title of his work?

AH: I’m interested in finding ways to show repeating patterns through history, and to depict how events or movements from the past might manifest in the present or the near future. Historical patterns undergird my novel, *Eleutheria*—which I know we’re going to talk about later. But in “Democracy in America,” I wanted to show how aspects of America that the real de Tocqueville observed in the nineteenth century continue to persist, even in an America with more advanced technologies and seemingly evolved political realities. The idea of having a European observer—with an outsider’s ability to understand and make sense of American society—was a compelling narrative starting point. And by the end of the story, my fictional de Tocqueville does write *Democracy in America*, a text we can assume echoes the original. So that was the intention behind using “Democracy in America” as a title. Maybe it’s a bit cheeky to claim the name of such a famous work, but it felt right for the piece.

CG: You mentioned your novel, *Eleutheria*, which brings us to another aspect that has often been associated with America – the idea, or fantasy, of utopia. Is *Eleutheria* a utopian novel?

AH: It depends on your definition of a utopian novel. *Eleutheria* is, in one sense, a book about a group of people who try to create a paradise of sustainability on an island in the Bahamas, with the intention of initiating a global climate revolution. These individuals have utopian aspirations that derive, in part, from a fictional utopian text called *Living the Solution* that outlines the plan. To me, this is enough to give *Eleutheria* utopian credence, even if—as the characters discover—practical realities and unaddressed historical injustices impinge on their ability to ultimately realize the vision.

CG: In her famous essay “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be” (1982), Ursula K. Le Guin claimed that “Utopia is uninhabitable.” She saw “the utopian imagination ... trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth.” Forty years later, you seem to disagree with the *grande dame* of American science fiction when you described yourself, in an interview with Matt Bell, as an aspiring utopianist. Where do you see the value of the utopian imagination in the age of the Anthropocene?

AH: I agree with Le Guin that utopia is ultimately uninhabitable. It’s a “no place” that can’t exist—or that can only exist for an ephemeral moment—because of human fallibility. Nonetheless, I call myself an aspiring utopianist because I am interested in the movement towards utopia, despite its inherent unreachability. I’m interested in the practice of actively imagining better worlds—that feels useful to me, especially in a time of disaster and catastrophe. I’m also interested in the way utopian thinking has undergirded so much of American history. Such thinking has been a real long-term curiosity for me, and it informed my writing process for *Eleutheria*. Though the novel is primarily set in the near future, there’s a historical backbone that runs through the book, starting with Puritan settlers landing in the Bahamas with a utopian vision for a proto-democratic society. As these Puritans face the challenges of surviving, their ideals break down. They eventually become a community that operates in a manner far from the founders’ original pious intentions. In *Eleutheria*, I wanted to show how cycles of idealism and exploitation have happened over and over again through the history of the Americas. And hopefully, the historical thread in the novel undergirds what I’m showing in a speculative capacity.

CG: Yes, I think we tend to forget that in spite of all its later shortcomings, the Puritan project in America actually began as a communitarian project. The author Sarah Vowell writes about that in *The Wordy Shipmates* (2008), her own, witty account of Puritan history. It was a communal effort to build something new that then turned around (into something despotic?) like so many utopian projects. Which is why Le Guin calls utopia “uninhabitable”: we can never really reach it, we can only try to find it. This actually brings me to another theorist of utopia – the German philosopher Ernst Bloch. His study of *The Principle of Hope*, first published in the 1950s, can actually be read as a study of utopian thinking. One of his theses is that when Europe began to transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age towards the end of the 15th century, it also began to replace

India with America as the utopian place or space *par excellence*. For the longest time, as you pointed out, America in its double-identity as real geographical location and idea, represented the possibility of realizing utopian dreams. At our current historical moment, we are experiencing another era of transition, one which began in the 1950s and in which America has been gradually replaced by the Moon or Mars as the goal of Utopia. With *Eleutheria*, you insist on finding utopia on Earth, though. What prompted that decision not to take the utopia of Camp Hope, *Eleutheria*'s utopian community, into space, but to the Bahamas?

AH: Well, there's only so much you can put in a novel. So that was definitely one factor. And I explore space and the American imagination in both of my story collections—specifically, in “Americans on Mars!” and “Colonel Merryweather’s Intergalactic Finishing School for Young Ladies of Grace & Good Nature”—so space is certainly on my radar as an expression of Manifest Destiny. In *Eleutheria*, I was interested in concentrating on this specific geographic location for several reasons, one of them being that the Bahamas was where Columbus first met the physical reality of his anticipated promised land. An island is also a classic utopian conceit: it's a concentrated, isolated landscape that can contain distinct social projects. The history of a real island like Eleuthera can help make larger historical patterns legible by showing a cross-section through time. In *Eleutheria*, I layer a narrative about Puritans who become pirates who become British Loyalists who become tourists who become the neo-colonial environmentalists who end up creating Camp Hope, with the goal of showing how the same patterns of inverted ideals are going to continue unless we consciously and persistently prioritize equality, justice, and perhaps a different perception of freedom moving forward.

CG: Moving forward means progress, right? Are you interested in the idea of progress as one of the possibilities of creating change? I'm asking you this question because this morning over breakfast I was actually listening to the audiobook version of Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* where she formulates an ecological critique of progress. Tsing says that we should not so much look *ahead* as we should look *around* – a simple but intriguing image. What is your take on progress?

AH: People define progress in many different ways. In conventional American political speech, “progress” usually means continuing to grow the economy and continuing to exert American influence on the world. That’s not necessarily what I think of as progress. I would be interested in a conception of progress that entails, for instance, creating more sustainable economic systems, creating ways for the vast wealth that America holds to be redistributed and shared. My idea of progress in many ways involves de-escalation and collaboration. And that’s why in *Eleutheria* I include a passage that is meant to be a potential utopian map for how we might collectively address climate change at the individual, municipal, and international level. Maybe that was my attempt to “look around,” in a sense.

CG: Are you thinking of the list at the beginning of chapter 10? The list of things we can do that begins with “Turn off your lights,” includes “Add green roofs, green walls, green sidewalks” and ends with “Make sustainability synonymous with equality”?

AH: Yeah. [laughs]

CG: For one of the students in the seminar in which we read your novel, that was actually her favorite passage. Finally someone writes about something we can actually do, she said. So, at least one of your readers was really grateful for that list.

AH: If I can interject briefly, something I want to note is that when I read that passage [out loud] to your seminar, it occurred to me that Germany is already doing many of the items on the list. Germany is, from my vantage point, leading the charge in terms of taking on sustainability initiatives at a national level—so I felt self-conscious reading that list to you and your students because it is largely directed at Americans.

CG: And I think the students knew that, and yet with the plethora of dystopian stories and doomsday news that we read and hear on an almost daily basis, I think students were grateful for some practical ideas. What I have noticed frequently in this past year or so, is that young people suffer from high anxiety about their future, even here in Germany. I don’t know whether you have heard about a group of climate activists who call themselves “The Last Generation”?

AH: No, I'm not familiar with that group.

CG: It's a group that is very active here in Germany, and has chapters in other European countries as well as in some parts of the United States. One form of protest is that they block traffic in big cities like Berlin by gluing themselves to the asphalt. The goal is to draw attention to their critique of the German government for not taking the necessary political steps that can solve the climate crisis. So it's interesting to hear your American perspective on Germany as being part of the climate vanguard. But back to your work. In *Eleutheria*, as well as in many of your stories, hope is a recurring trope. "The tough part is continuing on." You write this almost like a mantra at the end of one of your stories. Willa Marks, your novel's protagonist, in spite of a series of disappointments in her life, almost religiously believes that what is coming in the future will be good. After reading the novel twice, I still could not quite determine what the source of Willa's optimism is. Do you care to explain?

AH: I can try. I think hope for Willa is a survival mechanism, because without it, things are pretty bleak. In many ways, the intensity of her hope and her insistence on it is a way for her to continue on. She's seen what it is to lack hope because of how she was raised: by doomsday-prepping parents who gave up on participating in society because they felt there was no hope, and for whom things did not end well. In the wake of that childhood trauma, Willa is continually trying to find ways to live in an opposite manner from her parents—that's where I see her insistent hope coming from. I also think hope is just part of her nature as a person.

Going back to what you were saying about your students and about the prevalence of anxiety and depression—I also feel conscious of that as a professor who works with young people, and just as a person who lives in a catastrophe-filled world. For me, it's important to maintain some degree of optimism and possibility in my outlook, because without those attitudes, there's just nihilism and fatalism—which aren't going to solve anything. It's true that hope can go too far, and can be blinding in a sense, but balancing hope with pragmatic self-reflection is, at least for me, the best way of navigating our world.

CG: Which, in a way, echoes Anna Tsing's claim that there's always a possibility of life, even in capitalist ruins, right? And I think especially as teachers, we need to draw attention to that possibility. But I would like to switch gears now and talk about formal issues like tone and characterization. You have mentioned already

your interest in history. I think your writing negotiates a fine line between modes of realism and surrealism, history and speculative future, but also moral sincerity and, I hope you don't misunderstand this, wisecracking commentary on the state of modern America. Do you feel appropriately represented by this characterization of your prose?

AH: Yeah, I'll take it. [laughs]

CG: Okay. In "Cougar," one of the stories in *The Last Catastrophe*, your sense of humor and your use of irony shine particularly bright. The story is set in the Udall-Meyer's Treatment Center for Digital Disorders, treating among other patients "Nomophobics," people "marked by a fear of *no-mobile-phone*." I laughed out loud when I read that. In another story, "The Future is a Click Away," Inez, a seventy-something, is the only woman in the neighborhood who does not follow the almighty Algorithm in her decisions about what she needs and what she needs to buy. I really appreciate the ironic tone in these two and similar stories. And yet, here we are, you and I, in a long-distance conversation via the internet. Are we moderns – as a society, as a culture – trapped between the Scylla of digital disorders that need to be treated and the Charybdis of being the analog fool in the digital village? Is there no way out; is Inez really an alternative? How did these characters, how did these stories come into the world?

AH: These characters and stories relating to technology, they come from research, they come from first-hand observations, and they come from my efforts to show what it's like to live in our world right now—to live in the Anthropocene. I use fiction as a site of synthesis where I am, as you say, merging history, speculative ideas, critical commentary, and a sense of possibility. The hope is that this synthesis helps my fiction grapple with our present realities, while also being readable and fun and engaging. I know we're probably going to talk about Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* later, but to jump ahead now: combining genres is one of the ways I respond to his critiques of literary fiction. Getting back to technology and how to exist within technology: I think navigating that decision-making comes down to remembering and prioritizing our values. If our values are connection and community and sustainability, for instance, then how can technology serve us in fulfilling those goals? Maybe the answer

involves having a Zoom call to talk across continents, but maybe it also means closing the laptop and spending time with people in real life. Keeping our values front and center can be a way of navigating difficult choices presented by technology.

CG: Going to real instead of digital markets, right? And, you know, as much as I enjoyed characters like Inez who refuses to worship the Algorithm, which, as you so aptly write, “worked in mysterious ways”—that still leaves us with the more general question about the function of literature in the age of climate change. This is exactly Amitav Ghosh’s question. You just mentioned his *The Great Derangement*. How important are Ghosh’s poetological thoughts for you as a novelist?

AH: I remember picking up *The Great Derangement* in a bookstore in Houston, Texas, around 2016. I mean, this is not really relevant, but I can remember the moment of selecting the book from the shelf and admiring the cover and then later devouring the text. I was already trying to write about environmental issues, but seeing how Ghosh breaks down the failings, as he sees it, of literary fiction and science fiction to communicate the realities of the climate crisis—to me these critiques were parameters I could try to problem-solve in my work. I’m a writer who enjoys thinking about fiction as a puzzle. I like to work within constraints. That’s why, in *The Last Catastrophe*, I took on the challenge of writing a story in the form of an audio transcript, for instance. So with regards to *The Great Derangement*, one of Ghosh’s critiques is that contemporary realist fiction does not operate on geologic time, which means that it cannot effectively depict the scope of the Anthropocene. I responded in *Eleutheria* by showing centuries passing over the course of the novel. And then in *The Last Catastrophe*, a story like “Mobilization” spans millennia and imagines how human beings and their gas-guzzling RVs might eventually turn into fossil fuels—which was another attempt to capture geologic time.

As a writer, I have also responded to Ghosh by trying to highlight the experience of the collective over the individual, to show how we’re all connected across time and place, and to capture the wild, unpredictable nature of our reality. We live in a world in which disaster can arrive in our lives with shocking suddenness and extremity, where there’s not always a steady escalation of perturbation. For a fiction writer, this poses a narrative puzzle of believability that I’m continuing to explore; but in the meantime, there are plenty of disasters in my fiction. I hope that, ultimately, I’m straddling a line between the familiar and the fantastical,

between literary and science fiction, in that way that gives readers a sense that the present conditions we're in are more deranged than we often realize. Climate change is not an apocalypse that will happen a hundred years from now—it's on our doorstep.

CG: You mentioned your story "Mobilization." I really liked the end, the time lapse, and again, picking up an aspect that we talked about earlier, young people's anxiety about what happens in the future, I think this story does not necessarily soothe these anxieties, but what it does, particularly at its end, is invite us to think differently about who we are as humans: that in the end we also consist of chemical substances, that we are organic bodies that decay. It may not be pleasant to think of oneself as a dead body in decay, but it certainly puts human life in perspective. As moderns, we have unlearned in the last two-hundred, two-hundred and fifty years, to show a certain degree of humility towards non-human life. The end of "Mobilization" decenters the human in that it integrates us humans into a cycle of growth and decay, life and death. We will be "mobilized" again, but differently. I don't know whether that's necessarily soothing, but it changes the perspective, the *telos* of human life.

There is no good segue to my next question, but I wanted to talk about another one of your stories, "Endangered." Without giving too much away, the title refers to artists as an endangered species. Is our relationship as humans with other species akin to modern American culture's relationship with its artists—a species that is kept from going extinct, but only in controlled environments? Or can art still be rebellious, wild?

AH: Lots of questions [laughing]. I want to start by circling back to "Mobilization" and say that that story ends in a posthuman place. Trying to find ways to create narratives that decenter the human experience is an exciting initiative for me as a writer—it's something I'm trying to do more—and I wonder if "Endangered" reflects a movement towards, if not an exact embodiment of, a posthuman paradigm. The story seeks to disrupt our usual understanding of an animal state and a human state by, as you described, having human artists kept in zoo-like enclosures. And of course "Endangered" is also trying to speak to other issues present in society as well; I don't like zoos, for one thing. The story is also an expression of the precarious state of art-making—of being an artist trying to practice one's craft in our capitalist ruins, as you said. But to get back to your

original questions: economic challenges and social constraints are not new for artists; art-making through the ages has often involved the push-pull between patronage and creative freedom, risk and liberation. If I didn't think art could be rebellious, wild—even dangerous—I wouldn't be trying to make it.

CG: Speaking of art and art-making: you teach creative writing, which is a form of art-making. What kinds of stories do your students write? What subjects are they interested in?

AH: That's a great question. The stories my students write are all over the map; I encourage them to experiment constantly and try out different forms and modes of writing. A lot of them are drawn to fantasy, though, perhaps because it was their entry point into becoming readers and then ultimately writers. I also think that they want to escape our current times. Fantastical landscapes offer a way of stepping outside of the intensity and despair that's swirling around them. So one of the craft topics I discuss with them is how to bring conflict and danger and challenges into these fantastical landscapes, because fiction can't just be a fantastical utopia. Something has to go wrong.

CG: Because things go wrong in life, right? But it also seems to me that your students don't care that much about Amitav Ghosh's call to literary arms if, in their writing, they imaginatively move into the world of fantasy fiction. I'm not sure how much use Ghosh would have for that genre. Have you actually discussed *The Great Derangement* with them?

AH: I taught a climate fiction class this spring—a class specifically designed to help students find ways to write about the climate crisis—and so Ghosh came up in that class. We read a lot of different types of climate fiction as well, and we tried to define what “climate fiction” really means, since the label encompasses many genres. The students in the class really wrestled with expressing and communicating disaster, sometimes using fantastical landscapes and modes to do so. Perhaps most significantly, the class was an opportunity for students to, in a safe way, dig deep into the reality of what's going on. Being able to read an article about the horrific effects of a drought, for instance—and to then express your grief and your shock in a small group of peers—that collective processing makes it easier to absorb information rather than simply brush it off. So, an unintended but beneficial aspect of the class was that it allowed everyone to process what was going on.

CG: Who are some of the writers you read in that class?

AH: I'm really bad at remembering things off the top of my head! [laughing]

CG: [laughing] I absolutely understand, I was just curious because you talked about how difficult it is to define climate fiction. The seminar I am currently teaching is called Anglophone Literature in the Anthropocene. Most students, I think, expected it to be about climate and climate change, but I also included Richard Powers' *Gain* (1998). Climate change is not at the center of that novel's narrative attention, but it does play a role. So I was just curious which texts you would include under this hard-to-define category.

AH: One author I taught was Paolo Bacigalupi, who wrote *The Water Knife*—a dystopian thriller that imagines a war over water in America. That's a real classic in the genre of climate fiction. And then we read Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, which depicts the impact of oil extraction in a fictional village in Africa. And we read a fantastic utopian novel that's coming out this summer called *The Great Transition* by Nick Fuller Googins. This novel depicts what it would take, on the ground level, to transition America to a green economy. For instance, there is a reality TV show that follows climate disaster mitigation groups, which is an inventive way of showing how entertainment could play a role in shifting cultural values toward sustainability.

CG: My last question, actually, is who are some of the writers, thinkers, or artists, for that matter, who were really influential for you as an emerging writer.

AH: My early influences were some of my early teachers. I was lucky enough to work with Karen Russell, for instance, and I think her attention to stylish prose as well as her vivid imagination helped me blossom as a writer—along with the fact that she was just really encouraging. More than any text, having an encouraging person in your life when you're starting out as a writer can be profoundly influential. Another book that had a big impact on me, that I read during my MFA, was *The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka. That book is told in first-person plural, and it was one of the first times I encountered that mode of expression. I've been exploring first-person plural myself ever since; I'd like to think

that in *The Last Catastrophe*, my use of that collective perspective really comes to fruition. *The Buddha in the Attic* is also a historical narrative about Japanese picture brides coming to the US; seeing how Otsuka re-vivified history was powerful to me. I'm trying to think of one more—

CG: None of the classic utopian sci-fi writers?

AH: [laughing] Maybe more than a book, reading about the history of places like Fruitlands—or other transcendental utopian experiments—inspired me as a young person and got me interested in the impact of utopianism in America. That's what I enjoy and get excited about.

CG: Is there a new novel in the pipeline?

AH: Yeah [laughing]. I'm working on it right now, my stack of research books is over here [gesturing to the shelves]. It's a multi-genre novel—and I won't go into a long description of it—but I will say that I'm going to merge history, first-hand experience, and speculative imaginings to talk about how American mythologies have shaped so much of our daily lives, as well as how those mythologies might be reinvented.

CG: Well, I look forward to reading that novel. Thank you very much for this conversation. I hope we'll have a chance to talk again.

About the Authors

Allegra Hyde is the author of three books: the story collection *Of This New World*, which won the John Simmons Iowa Short Fiction Award; the novel *Eleutheria*, which was a finalist for the Ohioana Book Award and shortlisted for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Prize; and *The Last Catastrophe*, which was named an Editors' Choice selection by *The New York Times*. She currently teaches creative writing at Oberlin College.

Catrin Gersdorf is Professor of American Studies at the University of Würzburg, and the Speaker of the Environmental Humanities class at the Graduate School for the Humanities. She is the author of *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (2009). Her published work includes essays and edited volumes on landscape and literature, the intersection of ecology and (American) democracy, the literary and cultural history of forests and gardens, and on individual writers, thinkers, and artists such as Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Walter Benjamin, Willa Cather, Nathanael West, Angela Carter, Ana Mendieta, Toni Morrison, and Annie Proulx. Her current research focuses on literary and cultural responses to the challenges of the Anthropocene.



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