



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

SUPERVISOR'S REPORT
M.A. THESIS
AMERICAN LITERATURE SPECIALISATION
Other Places: Visions of Utopia in Selected African-American Novels
Bc. Marie Hamšíková

In the introduction to her straightforward and lucid thesis, Ms. Hamšíková provides a basic definition of utopia, contrasting it with Foucault's notion of heterotopia. She subsequently outlines the contours of the relationship that African-Americans have had to the utopian genre. The remaining parts of the thesis analyze three African-American works (*Imperium in Imperio* by Sutton E. Griggs, George S. Schuyler's *Black Empire* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*); the central argument is that with the exception of *Black Empire*, these novels depict imaginary worlds in which real-life power dynamics is inverted. In other words, the underground society in *Imperium in Imperio*, as well as Ruby and the Convent in *Paradise* represent merely valorized heterotopian spaces of the real world.

As stated above, the thesis is sharp and concise, which is both its strength and weakness. On the one hand, the argument is forceful, and there are few digressions and repetitions; on the other hand, certain debatable issues are concluded briefly (such as the definitions of utopia and heterotopia, or the supposedly predominant reliance of African-American utopias on segregation rather than assimilation). Mostly, however, I remain unconvinced that *Black Empire* ultimately escapes what Ms. Hamšíková calls "the status of heterotopia." It is argued that:

African heritage is present in the new religion, Love Church, celebrating sunsets and sunrises after the Egyptian model and employing primitive dances. Despite its advanced technology, the empire still communicates and spreads information with the help of tom-tom drums. Unlike in Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, there is no search for a new George Washington who would liberate blacks; on the contrary, the *Black Empire*'s battleships are named after significant black personalities, such as the leader of slave rebellion Nat Turner, the ex-slave and social reformer Frederick Douglass, the first African American pilot Bessie Coleman, the poet Phyllis Wheatley, or the West African ruler Samory. There is no longer any need to rely on the benevolence of the white man, asking him for a permission to live in his world, for there is now an independent African world. Even though they started with using white sources (ideological, technological), they end up surpassing them, employing the talents of their most gifted fellows. In this respect it could be said, unlike in Griggs and Morrison, that Schuyler's empire escapes the status of heterotopia in the end.

But why is this not a *satirical* portrayal of pan-Africanism? Aren't religious gatherings in *Black Empire*'s Temples of Love absurd, given that they involve a 150-piece symphony orchestra, a chorus, a ballet and an ultimate "shameless orgy" which "the women of the



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chorus and the beautiful ballet girls joined” (*Black Empire* 62)? Moreover, weren’t personalities like Wheatley and Douglass intertwined with white America in such a way that naming ships after them suggests, rather than Black Empire’s surpassing the white world, its being caught in a perpetual battle and tension with white culture? And lastly, if Black Empire escapes its “heterotopian status,” what does it become? A utopia?

Proposed grade: **excellent** (výborně) or **very good** (velmi dobře), depending on the report of the opponent and the defense.

Pavla Veselá, PhD.
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