

***Arcadian Rhythms in the Concrete Jungle:
Utopian New York From the Automat to Adam Purple and Beyond***

A talk with discussion to follow

By Eric Darton

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Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World

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How is it possible to trace utopian impulses working themselves out over time in a city as densely ephemeral as New York? Well, one closes one's eyes, puts out one's hands and feels for images. Whatever images come, come by induction. And allowing for a succession of utopian images is a way of making space for the impulses they induce. Looked at this way, utopia becomes the practice of making room for what is always imminent, which is the possibility of utopia.

Where does utopia begin? One source is Cockaigne – land of barefoot satisfaction of all earthly needs. To invoke Cockaigne, which runs over, around and beneath utopia, we need music. Here is the Dominican singer and lyricist Juan Luis Guerra's *Ojalá que llueva café* – a contemporary reworking of a very deep and ancient theme.

*Ojalá que llueva café en el campo
Que caiga un aguacero de yuca y té
Del cielo una jarina de queso blanco
y al sur una montana de berro y miel¹*

Ojalá, as I understand it, entered the Spanish language as a disparaging comment on the Muslim exclamation-invocation. Over time, *ojalá* became a stronger expression of desire than *quero*. The adaptation of the Arabic “O Allah” into the Spanish “*ojalá*” brings with it inescapable references to and resonances of the Koranic paradise.

¹ Juan Luis Guerra – 440. *Ojalá cue llueva café*. Karen Records, c. 1990

Just to give a sense of the first verse: O how I wish for a rain of coffee in the fields / A falling shower of yuca and tea / From the sky a wheel of white cheese / on top of a mountain of watercress and honey...

Immigrants are always discovering New York. Some estimates put the number of Dominicans who have discovered New York at over 700,000 in the last ten years. So it is clear that the Dominican Republic is not Cockaigne, although many who come to the US find life so harsh here, they eventually return. Another utopian song of Juan Luis Guerra's – a hit that helped make him a culture hero among island and mainland Dominicans is called *Visa para un sueño* – Visa to a dream.

We do not have records of the Mohican discovery of New York. But we do have some material on Verezzano and Henry Hudson. We are informed that when Henry Hudson's ship was sighted, some on shore believed it to be a large canoe bearing the Manitou – the great or supreme being – coming to visit and perhaps bring game such as the people had not tasted before.

As the *Halve Maen* drew closer, it appeared to them as a floating house from which shouts emanated – “a house of various colors and crowded with living creatures.”

And we know that the Manitou-Hudson came ashore, trimmed in lace, and holding cups and a bottle. Then he poured a round of aqua vitae for everyone. It's a very enduring utopian notion, and a primal one too, that we all drink from the same bowl, or at least simultaneously. The passing of fluids to and through one another is the basis of a communion between the mortal and immortal worlds, between what is now and what has past. Think of *Aulde Lang Syne*, which was sung for who knows how long before Robert Burns wrote it down and added his lyrics.

Hudson had come to the right place, which was also the wrong place if you were a shareholder in the Dutch East India Company. Hudson's mission was to find an Arctic Sea route from Amsterdam to China. After a ferocious transatlantic voyage and rough northern encounters, he arrived at Sandy Hook.

His navigator, Robert Juet records the moment:

"This is a very good land to fall with, and a pleasant land to see..." Off the south coast of Staten Island, Juet reported sighting "many salmons, mullets and rayes, very great." On Coney Island, they caught ten mullet "of a foote and a halfe long apeece and a ray as great as four men could haule into the ship..." Crossing into Bergen Neck from Staten Island were "lands...pleasant with grasse and flowers and goodly trees as ever they had seene, and very sweet smells came from them."²

Ojalá que llueva café en el campo...

Having arrived at the intersection point between new and old worlds, we have also come to a crossing between the trajectories of Cockaigne and Utopia. Utopia may be a place of tremendous material abundance, but that abundance results from planning – it rests on a set of highly structured social relations. It uses the tools of reason and causality to retrofit social life to the mythic Golden Age, a time of Chronos, of the old gods, or an Edenic past. The great mid-20th century corporate utopian credo was Dupont's *Better Living Through Chemistry*.

The Land of Cockaigne on the other hand is a place where cheese falls from the skies, roasted birds tumble into the mouth, fountains pour wine, or sweet water, like the spring

² Michael Pye. *Maximum City*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991, p. 43

of Arethusa in Sicily. Unlike organized political structures, however idealized or beneficent, Cockaigne just happens. It is a pagan place, a gut place, and best of all nobody ever has to work. Not working is very important to the Citizens of Cockaigne. As is receiving entirely unconditional blessings of abundance.

In Cockaigne, there would be plenty of mullets, salmon and rays, but it wouldn't take four men to pull one fish into a boat, the great thing would jump in of its own accord. In Cockaigne, fish debone themselves on their way from the water into your mouth. But Hudson's men were mostly protestant, the majority of them Calvinist, so *haul away Joe*, they knew better than to expect any handouts from the cosmos.

Thus Henry Hudson arrives in New York in 1609 to an all-you-can-eat fish dinner. Less than half a century before, an anonymous peasant in the countryside near Lucca – alert to the threats of the Inquisition hid his identity behind the nom de guerre Scolio. In his long, still unpublished poem, the *Settenario*, Scolio proposed an earthly utopia and an afterworldly Cockaigne. Utopia starts off with an unconditional premise:

Man or woman, suffice it that it be a mouth
And entitled to its share in life.

(And perhaps to a share of the mountains of macaroni and parmesan cheese Boccaccio discovered in the district of "Bengodi".) But Scolio then goes on to lay out a social blueprint:

It is not fitting for anyone to have more
Than an honest portion of food and clothing,
Or to eat better, dress better, or dwell better.

For, whoever wants to command must first obey.
It is impious and inhuman that you should have a surfeit,
Or that others or I should be made to suffer for you;
God has made us rich and not servants as before:
Why then do you want someone to fatten you up and serve you?
...and whether one is born in a city, villa or castle
And is low or high in birth,
Let there be no difference between one and another
And let no one have the least advantage.

The Cockaigne that Scolio displaces to the afterlife, however, keeping it belly-full materialism. Its single divinity is the androgynous “donnahomma” whose ten radiating fingers – each finger a will-to Commandment – spout all good things:

The first river is full of sweet honey,
Hard and liquid sugar the second,
Of ambrosia the third, and nectar the fourth,
The fifth manna, the sixth bread that in this world
Has never been seen, the whitest and least heavy
That causes the dead to return joyous.
It was well said by a man of holy place
That the face of bread represents God...

Scolio's afterlife also comes complete with fresh milk and butter and "partridges, fat and tasty."³

Jump cut here to the Automat – the chain of restaurants operated by Horn and Hardart beginning in the '30s and lasting into the '60s – because this is the intersection point between Utopia and Cockaigne in New industrial-age York.

The Automat's interface was thoroughly mechanized and streamlined, but its menu could have been planned by Scolio.

Here is where these utopian scenes get personal. There is a family legend that my uncle Joe Darton, before he trimmed down, used to order two full-course meals at the Automat and work his way through both of them, one after the other. But my strongest association with the Automat is through my maternal grandfather Meyer Kroll, who came here from Poland-Russia in 1912. Together, on our rambles around the city, we visited several different Automats, which have since blended into one. What I remember clearly though is that these were the moments when my grandfather truly seemed to be free.

He also frequented the Garden Cafeteria on Essex Street, a place which has achieved literary preservation in Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "The Kabbalist of East Broadway." For Meyer, the Garden Cafe was a kind of utopia too. But there he had to play the role of a homeboy – people who knew him greeted him as Meyer Kalish – after the town where he was born. He spoke Yiddish to them – the mama-loshen even more facile than English – but it took him back to the old days in the old world.

³ Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. New York: Penguin, 1982, pp. 113-118.

In the Automat, Meyer became a modern man. Who there knew, or cared that his craft, a kind of highly-skilled semi-mechanized embroidery, had evaporated even before the Depression, leaving him a worker without a trade. Here, entering through the revolving doors, Meyer would hand me a dollar and I'd walk to the high marble change counter where George Washington instantly transmuted into twenty buffaloes – and twenty buffaloes went a long way at the Automat. Meyer's essentials were coffee, either with a cheese danish, or a kaiser roll with sweet butter.

Coffee was obtained by placing a cup under the brass spigot, which I remember as having the shape of a lion, but perhaps I am embellishing. Then you would insert the requisite nickles and push the button. Out would gush a river of milky coffee that never failed to overflow the cup. This is how I developed my taste for – well, addiction really, to coffee. When I brought the cup back to our table, Meyer would hand me the saucer and I drank the runover. [Only now that I am a semi-nutritionally conscious parent do I suspect that my sainted grandfather may have unwittingly helped shoot my developing nervous system to hell.]

The same nickles inserted into slots next to glass and metal rotating cylinders liberated the pies, rolls and danishes, stacked vertically within. Such were the wonders where mechanized Utopia met pie-from-the sky Cockaigne – at the vaulted intersection between the sunlight through the big plate glass windows, and the soft incandescent glow of the hanging lamps. Here Meyer breathed the city air that makes one free? Not rooted to the shtetl of the Lower East Side, but sitting amidst the timeless abundance ever available at *any Automat at all*.

There are a few more scenes to show. One is a dystopia – an earthly hell – from New York's 19th century, when Juet's "lands...pleasant with grasse and flowers and goodly trees" and their "very sweet smells" had become "congested", "suffocating" and

“miasmatic.” Insistently repeated in scientific and religious journals and the popular press, the association between urban density, clinical tuberculosis and social asphyxiation reached a metaphorical peak when an infamous concentration of tenements on the Lower East Side became known simply as the “Lung Block.”

The Lung Block preceded the Garden Cafeteria by roughly a half century, but geographically it lay just around the corner. Same neighborhood, different day. And the Garden Cafeteria, was, as the pigeon flies, not far from Adam Purple’s Garden – the street-level Eden that lasted a decade before it was bulldozed by municipal authorities in 1986. Many of the lush mini-arcadian zones that took Purple’s garden as a model survive in the gaps between tenements today, always one protest, or court injunction ahead of the official urge to assert the inviolability of property rights. As recently as last February, Lower East Side residents fought a pitched battle with police in an attempt to save Esperanza Garden on East 7th Street, between Avenues B & C. Esperanza’s spirit animal was the *coquí* – a large tree frog which according to Puerto Rican legend wards off attackers. Esperanza Garden lasted 22 years and took two hours to destroy.

The Garden Cafeteria, which made it nearly to the close of the 70s, was just down the street from the Seward Park Houses, a union-built residential co-operative complex for working people. Urban-renewal utopia of the 1950s – recently privatized and ramping up to market rate. Today’s real estate utopia. Tomorrow, who can say?

In the 1960s, Lower Manhattan got a World Trade Center and 100 acres of landfill dug out of the towers’ pit. Harlem, over its protests, got a waste treatment plant at 139th street and the Hudson River.

Today, standing on the esplanade, built on the Battery Park City landfill it is easy to be filled with a sense of – dare one say utopian? – well being.

Eventually, a playground was built atop the waste treatment plant. And in 1997, the playground became the site of a true utopian intervention: the “Totally Kid Carousel” – brainchild of artist and magician Milo Mottola, whose persistence ultimately defeated all bureaucratic attempts to keep the world standing still. One distinguishing feature of the carousel is that you do not go round on a traditional prancing horse. Instead, you ride one of 36 fantastic animals, drawn by local schoolchildren, aged between 4 and 6, and rendered “life-size” in the here-and-now.

A final cluster of scenes comes from the post-war golden age of cities – this first one not set in New York, but across the continent in another great port on another bay. Here is what Stan Weir, an auto worker, talking about what he witnessed in 1946:

The Oakland General Strike was called by no leader. It was unique, I think, in general strikes in this country. There was a strike of women who were the clerks at Kahn’s and Hastings’ department stores and it had been going on for months. The teamsters had begun to refuse to make deliveries to those department stores and the department stores needed commodities badly.

Not many people had cars right after the war and you took public transportation to work in the morning. You had to go downtown to the center of Oakland and then out in the direction of your workplace. So thousands and thousands of people traveled through the heart of town every morning on the way to work.... Very early one morning, here were the policemen of Oakland herding a string of trucks, operated by a scab trucking firm in Los Angeles, with supplies for these department stores. Some truck driver or some bus driver or street car conductor asked the policeman about the trucks... Well, that truck driver, that bus driver, or that street car

conductor didn't get back on his vehicle... and that increased till those trucks and those busses and those street cars just piled up and thousands of people were stranded in town.

In a small way, it was a holiday. The normal criteria for what was acceptable conduct disappeared. No one knew what to do and there were no leaders. No one called it. Pretty soon the strikers began forming into committees on the street corners. Certain shopkeepers were told to shut down and drug stores to stay open. Bars could stay open if they didn't serve hard liquor and they had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk. People were literally dancing in the street in anticipation of some kind of new day.... It lasted fifty-four hours.⁴

On the streets of the New York where I grew up, a regular feature of winter was the utopia of the city shut down by snow. And in the summer, you could find a utopian waterfall anywhere there was a johnny pump. All you needed was a really hot day, some kids, a stilson wrench, and the motive power to turn it on.

⁴ American Social History Project; Joshua Freeman et al. *Who Built America*, Vol II. New York: Pantheon, 1992, p. 476.