

Utopia in Progress in di Prima's Revolutionary Letters

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Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo,
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Abstract: In her article "Utopia in Progress in di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*" Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo describes Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* (1971) within the context of social transformation and spatiality studies. In the context of the socio-political revolt and utopian revival of the 1970s, di Prima's utopia is grounded in reality and in progress; and it needs people's help and strength to be attained. In the first section of the article Pinedo analyzes a group of letters which serve as "tips" or a "how-to" guide to prepare for a revolution and in the second part she considers letters in which glimpses of a post-revolutionary utopian society are offered. These two aspects create a space which is both socially-formed and transformed. In this light, di Prima's revolution is read as a heterotopia, as a place of resistance used to move towards utopia.

Estibaliz ENCARNACIÓN-PINEDO

Utopia in Progress in di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*

Since the publication in 1516 of Thomas More's *Utopia* the concept of an ideal society has been popular in the academic and literary world. Together with the dozens of utopia-related words which have been coined—such as "eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia and hyperutopia" (Vieira 3)—other factors such as the socio-political and literary traditions of each epoch have also influenced the way utopias were conceived, ultimately affecting readers' and critics' approach to any text with utopian elements. Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, first published in 1971, is representative of the cultural and political revolt which grew out of American postwar oppression and conformity. Full of uprising and insurrection, the letters urgently call for anarchist rebellion against the system—the latter understood as global machinery which affects all aspects of human life. This approach makes di Prima's collection an excellent example of socially and politically engaged poetry exemplary of its time. The Cold War and Vietnam War, together with an increasing poverty rate partly motivated by the oil crisis of the early 1970s, prompted a loss of faith in the government and encouraged different forms of social dissent as well as accordingly revolutionary manifestations in poetry and other artistic realms. This oppositional force was given expression in a revival of utopian thinking and writing in the 1970s, in particular, with the rise of critical utopias. Works by Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Ursula LeGuin, and Samuel Delany have been shown to portray "the process of social revolution and historical change" (Moylan 30). This revolutionary impulse, notoriously present in di Prima's book, can be closely linked to Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" as a different space which reflects and challenges the dominant order and serves, as Kevin Hetherington points out, as "obligatory points of passage that become the basis of an alternate mode of the ordering" (44) possessing, therefore, a potential transformative power for the creation of a different order.

I read di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* as a utopia in progress within the context of social transformation. Contrasted with the society di Prima describes in letter #19 for *The Poor People's Campaign* as "a science fiction utopia" (*Revolutionary* 31), her letters illustrate how, as Paul Ricoeur pointed out, "Utopia is our resource [and] an arm of critique" to build a new society (*Lectures* 300). To analyze di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* in the context of utopian writing, I take into consideration two different approaches adopted in the poems towards this end. The first section analyzes a group of letters which functions as "tips" or a "how-to" guide to prepare for a revolution. Food and water storage, heating and cooking utensils, as well as which weapons to use or where to go when the riots begin, are approached and discussed in this set of letters in a straight-forward, practical way. In the second part of the article I consider a different collection of letters in which glimpses of a post-revolutionary utopian society are offered. Issues such as education, sexual freedom, work and politics are addressed in these letters which transport the reader to a utopian society which—at face value—can be interpreted as the result of di Prima's revolution. The conclusion highlights the connection between these two sets of letters, suggesting that the notion of revolution as heterotopia acts in unison with di Prima's description of a critical utopia in progress, emphasizing the process as social change rather than the goal of the fight.

Referring to heterotopia on three different occasions between 1966 and 1967 (see Johnson for a summary), Michel Foucault's description of the term, although criticized as incomplete and incoherent by some critics such as Benjamin Genocchio or Edward Soja, has been influential for a spatial approach to studies of utopia. I argue that the pro-revolution set of letters in di Prima's collection is better understood if analyzed as a heterotopia, as the poems delineate a revolutionary space that acts as one of Foucault's "counter-sites [which serve] as a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (17). Within this dialogue, the revolution itself becomes a space which is both in and out, inside reality and outside of it, situated at the margins of society but participating in it. In this light, Foucault's first division of heterotopias, where he draws attention to their changing role and function in different times and contexts, becomes relevant to di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*. In "Of Other Spaces" Foucault differentiates between heterotopias of crisis—in primitive societies—and heterotopias of deviation—in modern societies. The latter are defined as "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (18), and I consider di Prima's anarchist poems a revision of this kind of heterotopia. While Foucault mentions as examples of heterotopias of deviation the prison and the mental institution—places where people are normally sent to and kept isolated from the rest of society by the system—the revolution, conversely, is a voluntary counter-culture which is deliberately at variance with the social norm. Therefore, the concept of heterotopia that I am using in this study is one that has evolved and changed in the context of cultural and political revolt of the 1970s alluding, incidentally, to Foucault's understanding of the necessary evolution of the

term: "each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function of another" (18). Di Prima's heterotopia in this collection is a volitional and target-directed movement born out of the individual and collective realization of society's flaws and needs.

To counteract this flawed society, a first group of letters can be read as a "how-to" revolutionary guide and, to a certain extent, they do serve that specific function within the heterotopic space of political and social revolution. The political intention is made clear from the very first poem "April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa," dedicated to di Prima's grandfather Domenico Mallozzi, whom she introduces as a "friend of the great anarchist dreamers of his time, / who read me Dante at age of four / and named my mother after Emma Goldman" (*Revolutionary* 4). In this poem, by naming different historical figures—writers, artists, editors, anarchists, as well as Marxists theorists and thinkers, etc.—di Prima places her revolution in a larger historical context of struggle and rebellion: "we do it for you, and your ilk, for Carlo Tresca, / for Sacco and Vanzetti, without knowing / it, or thinking about it, as we do it for Aubrey Beardsley / Oscar Wilde (all street lights / shall be purple), do it / for Trotsky and Shelley and big/dumb / Kropotkin / Eisenstein's Strike people, Jean Cocteau's ennui" (6). These catalogue-like references stress the value of both individual and communal resistance to different kinds of oppression. In addition, opening the collection by stating that the revolution is dedicated to "the stars over the Bronx / that they may look on earth / and not be ashamed" (6), "April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa," establishes the process of cultural and political transformation and sets the mood for subsequent letters in which more pragmatic issues are addressed. Some of these practicalities include the storage of water and food, as we find in "Revolutionary Letter #3": "store water; make a point of filling your bathtub / at the first news of trouble / ... it should be good enough / for washing, flushing toilets when necessary / and cooking ... / store food – dry stuff like rice and beans stores best / goes farthest. SALT VERY IMPORTANT: it's health and energy / healing too" (9).

Using the imperative tense and a very simple and straight-forward style, the letter addresses the speaker who is assumed to be preparing for the revolution. Essential information is offered in this letter as to how to survive once the riots begin and the system crashes. The tension of the revolution is further explored as we read on and the atmosphere becomes increasingly war-like. In "Revolutionary Letter #5," the revolutionary-to-be is warned that "at some point / you may be called upon / to keep going for several days without sleep" (12) or "you may have to crash, under tension, keep some downs / on hand / you may have to cool out / sickness, or freak-out, or sorrow" (12), for what they are advised to take some remedies to avoid or induce sleep—some natural, like guarana root, and some chemical, like amphetamines. From basic water and food supplies, to medicine and other stimulants, di Prima's poems move on to weapons and battle strategies. In "Revolutionary Letter #7," for instance, the reader is encouraged to learn "how to make molotov cocktails, flamethrowers, / bombs" (15) and advised to "define / your aim clearly, choose your ammo / with that in mind" (15). Similarly, in "Revolutionary Letter #8," the city and the places where the revolution is going to take place are openly referred to as a battlefield: "Everytime you pick the spot for a be-in / a demonstration, a march, a rally, you are choosing the ground / for a potential battle. / You are still calling these shots. / Pick your terrain with that in mind. / ... go to love-ins / with incense, flowers, food, and a plastic bag / with a damp cloth in it, for tear gas" (17). The explicit call to arms, although violent in essence, is treated in the letters both as "an incidental part of the action" (15) and also as a necessary rite of passage towards the change in society, as we can appreciate in "Revolutionary Letter #12," where the poet states that, since "the vortex of creation is the vortex of destruction," "every revolutionary must at last will his own destruction / rooted as he is in the past he sets out to destroy" (23).

This set of letters, which addresses other aspects such as locomotion, hiding locations, guerilla tactics, or appropriate fighting garment, to name a few, places the revolution as a site of opposition; a counter-site which cannot exist on its own but which necessitates the presence of the system it is fighting against. In Foucault's terms, di Prima's revolution can be studied as a space that both represents and reflects society, but also opposes and contradicts it. As far as spatiality is concerned, the revolution is nowhere—hidden in the margins—and at the same time everywhere—potentially able to erupt anywhere. In addition, it is a physical space—parks, streets, alleys, etc.—as much as a mental space—philosophy, political intention, and mental preparation behind it. As Hetherington notices in his study of the concept of heterotopia, "the important point to remember when considering heterotopia is not the spaces themselves but what they perform in relation to other sites ... it challenges order and its sense of fixity and certainty" (*The Badlands* 49-50). That is to say, it is not what revolution is, but what it does, or at least plans to do, to the established order that makes it a heterotopia. It becomes a heterotopia in so far as it represents an opposing, alternative space in which non-conformity, protest, and social change are

given form and voice. It becomes a purposeful resistant force which, in this context, is not only necessary for the construction of a utopian society but, as other poems in di Prima's collection point to, might be the only real move towards utopia.

Intertwined with these revolutionary poems, in di Prima's collection there are other poems in which glimpses of a post-revolutionary utopian society are offered. Unlike More's *Utopia*, which established the traditional description of the journey and discovery of a new far-away land where the utopian society is located, in di Prima's text the utopian society is the poet's real, contemporary society with some changes or improvements. Although the format is quite different from other utopian texts, di Prima's serves the same function as far as it describes diverse aspects of an improved, or perfected, society. An early example is found in "Revolutionary Letter #4," where the repetition of the verse "Left to themselves" (11) helps situate the action in a hypothetical freer alternative society in which people are allowed to "grow their hair" (11), "take off their shoes" (11), "make love / sleep easily" (11) or even "share blankets, dope & children" (11) without prejudice or discrimination. This vague description of a hippie communal-like lifestyle is one of the many possible outcomes of the revolution, one of the many desired results. Interesting in light of the revival of critical utopias in the 1970s—utopian texts aware of the limitations of the concept of utopia—the description of the utopian society in di Prima's collection is purposely ambiguous, and at times it gives the impression of being played by ear. For example, in "Revolutionary Letter #9," di Prima toys with different economical systems: "i.e., destroy the concept of money / as we know it, get rid of interest, / savings, inheritance / ... or let's start with no money at all and invent it / if we need it / or, mimeograph it and everyone / print as much as they want / and see what happens" (18).

These improvised possible paths to follow, on the one hand, help di Prima drift away from the totalitarian turn that so frequently has transformed utopias into dystopias, making the supposedly ideal society as oppressive and despotic as the one it set out to improve. On the other hand, it also leads to the idea of a utopia in progress, as a complex process which is in constant evolution and is only carried out with the help of its inhabitants. In order to "reclaim / the planet, re-occupy / this ground" (48), in letter #51, the poet encourages people to move towards their idea of a utopian society and to "be strong" (66) since they "have the right to make / the universe we dream" (66). That envisioned universe is placed in opposition to the current society which is described in some of the letters and which functions as a counter-point or dystopian version of what reality should look like. "Revolutionary Letter #65," for instance, can be read in terms of the dichotomy dystopia/utopia in which it is structured. The first section of the poem describes mechanisms through which the state oppresses the inhabitants: "We have had enough of secrecy, paid assassins, radio / controlled robots, mysterious disappearances, planted / evidence, men's doubles arrested in their stead in / funky rooming houses whose landladies disappear, / thinly-veiled race war, fake shortages, inflation, night raids, / manipulated famine, / transistors in brain, overdoses of tranqu, truth serum, / interrogation" (82).

This tyrannical, domineering, asphyxiating atmosphere is not that much different from the classical portrayal of dystopian societies in literature. It is a society in which people are subject to strong surveillance and control; where they live in a constant state of fright and cannot trust the government or its methods. Against this nightmare, the poet reads her anarchist manifesto for the liberation of knowledge and the abolition of different controlling institutions: "Out w/it, brothers! Let's everybody tell everything they / know / We'll have a press conference in the form of ancient / confession where each can absolve his fellow. It may / take a decade but in the end: No prisons, no schools, / no madhouses, no IRS, no IBM, no ITT, no government!" (82). Schools, together with other channels used by the system to manipulate and circulate information, are portrayed as powerful oppressing environments in the collection. For example, in "Revolutionary Letter #11," di Prima condemns the mainstream media and conventional schooling as instigators of hatred and disharmony between different people and demands, as a necessary step towards utopia, to "SMASH THE MEDIA ... / AND BURN THE SCHOOLS / so we can meet, can sit / and talk to each other, warm and close / no TV image flickering / between them" (22). In much the same way, in "Revolutionary Letter #19," education is depicted as highly flawed, favoring injustice and social imbalance, and schools are places "where all our kids are pushed into one shape, are taught / it's better to be 'American' than Black / or Indian, or Jap, or PR" (31). Contrasting with these images, in "Revolutionary Letter #22," the reader gets a glimpse of the kind of education which will be valuable in the post-revolutionary, emerging, society. Coinciding with a yearning for simpler, past times, children should learn to "eat off the woods, to set / a broken arm, to mend / his own clothes, cook simple food, deliver a calf or baby" (35) among other things.

Rather than a well-laid out utopian construction, these letters offer quick snapshots of what a utopian society could look like once it is devoid of the institutionalization that in "Revolutionary Letter #32" is described as the "cancer" (45), the "disease which is eating us" (45). By denouncing these and other

forms of control, and by avoiding producing a singular model of the future society, di Prima champions total freedom and turns away from civilization as we know it. The utopian outcome of the revolution, however vague or elusive in its description, is placed in clear opposition to social and political conformism. An example of this is found in "Revolutionary Letter #19," where those who value as essential to society and their wellbeing elements such as housing, wealth, jobs, or material possessions, are condemned as the enemy:

if what you want is jobs
for everyone, you are still the enemy
... if what you want is housing,
industry
... a car for everyone, garage, refrigerator,
TV, more plumbing, scientific
freeways, you are still
the enemy, you have chosen
to sacrifice the planet for a few years of some
science fiction utopia. (31)

With the denunciation of the materialistic welfare some people have mistaken for perfection, we get an image of what utopia should not be and, consequently, a better notion of what the revolution is trying to achieve. Interesting to di Prima's utopian impulse in *Revolutionary* is the fact that both the critiques of the current society, as well as the description of the post-revolutionary utopian sketches, tend to have a nostalgic look on the past, often turning to simpler times when life was not as dominated by science and technological progress. In "Revolutionary Letter #34," using a cool beatnik-meets-hippie argot, the poet opposes the technological revolution with one based on environmental responsibility: "hey man, let's make a revolution, let's / turn off the power, turn on the / the stars at night, put metal / back in the earth" (47). This return to a "greener" past time allows a reading of di Prima's utopia as ecotopia. Even though Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Nelson*—the novel that introduced the ecological turn in utopian writing—was not published until 1975, di Prima's collection is similarly influenced by the rising awareness of environmental issues and the green movement in politics of the early 1970s.

As a similarly pressing socio-political issue of the 1970s, the letters also tackle the position of women in society. Although the poems are not overtly feminist—or not as woman-centered as other works by di Prima—favoring a vision of the human being in its totality rather than differentiated by sexes, di Prima makes room for the disestablishment of patriarchy in her book. This is especially emphasized in "Revolutionary Letter #66," subtitled "To the Patriarchs: *for Inez Garcia*" (83). Alluding to the (in)famous case of a Hispanic woman who was charged with the murder of a man who had raped her in 1974, in the poem, di Prima inverts and appropriates the violence women are subjected to within patriarchy, using it to empower them through their bodies. The poem opens with a quotation from the Free Inez Garcia Committee that addresses precisely the physical objectification and victimization of the female body: "That a man's body is / in itself a weapon in a / way that a woman's body / is not" (83). It is precisely this power imbalance that the poem seeks to invert, an aim summarized in the first line: "My body a weapon as yours is" (83). The rest of the poem is an enumeration of different parts of the female anatomy and their new function as ammunition against gender violence within the poet's liberated body: her thighs, hips, hair, hands, teeth, jaws, arms, knees even breasts and genitalia are given a new agenda in the battle against patriarchy. Specifically, in this letter di Prima redefines female sexuality and motherhood as sources of empowerment, subverting their historical use as pretexts to subjugate women—sexually liberated women seen as prostitutes, and mothers reduced to the domestic sphere. In di Prima's poem, children are depicted as "WEAPONS ETERNALLY" (83), capitalized to highlight the way in which motherhood has been used against women; a central episode in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2001) deals explicitly with the motherhood/creativity dilemma. Turning tables on patriarchy, female sexuality is given the power to "annihilate / all future shock / all future shock forever" (83) which can be read in the double sense of surprise and collision, as both a mental and physical aggression.

In essence, di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* do not limit themselves to claiming the need of revolution in society, but also introduce an example of what a utopian society would be like. However, the utopia offered is only introduced in sketches and the image we get is superficial, shown but not yet made available. Unlike the revolutionary poems studied in the first section of this article, where the imperative tense predominated, the language in these poems ranges from the present tense, to the future or to a hypothetical form. This makes di Prima's utopia unstable and difficult to situate; it is here and now but it is also in the future, or it might take place if the circumstances are right. Besides, in line with the

critical utopias of the time, it is a society which needs the inhabitants' active role to be achieved. The ambiguity with which the author sets out different ways of arranging society—as the example of the role of money showed—illustrates the poet's intention of depicting an open and self-critical utopia which, as Lucy Sargisson writes of critical utopias, "does not blueprint, but rather it privileges social change in process. It embraces imperfection and uncertainty" (*Fool's Gold?* 11). That is to say, di Prima's utopian vision is a path rather than a final destination; it is not definite but yet in progress.

In "Revolutionary Letter #26" di Prima raises the following question: "DOES THE END/ JUSTIFY THE MEANS?" (39; capitalization in the original) and her answer succinctly summarizes her approach to utopian thinking: "this is / process, there is no end, there are only / means" (39). Read through the lens of critical utopias and understanding the revolution itself as a heterotopia through which a new social ordering is established, Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* functions as a utopia in progress in constant state of evolution. The letters that acted as instructions and recommendations to prepare for the revolution manifest not only the necessity of uniting strength and creating a sense of community central to di Prima's political activism, but also establish this movement as a place of otherness and resistance against the norm, a heterotopia with the potential of altering the order of reality. In accordance with other utopian texts, di Prima touches upon several aspects of her vision of an improved society through utopian visions—physical or ideological freedom, economy, work, sexual liberation, education, to name a few, are discussed in some letters. The poet, nonetheless, provides these images without imposing a fixed, stable representation; on the contrary, her description often portrays various, at times contradicting, ideas.

Unlike More's *Utopia*, which represented a well-structured, fairly complete plan of a new society—even while the author might not have agreed with each factor addressed—di Prima opts for an incomplete critical utopia to highlight the need of constant revision and human interaction in the process. This notion of an interdependent revolution towards utopia can be linked to di Prima's interest in Buddhist philosophy and, specially, to a popular brand among poets and intellectuals in the 1960s known as Buddhist Anarchism. This socially engaged Buddhism was championed by Gary Snyder in a 1961 essay, where he wrote: "it should be realized that whatever is or ever was worthwhile in any culture can be reconstructed through meditation, out of the unconscious. It means resisting the lies and violence of the governments and their irresponsible employees. Fighting back with civil disobedience, pacifism, poetry, poverty—and violence, if it comes to a matter of clobbering some rampaging redneck or shoving a scab off the pier" (*Buddhist* 242).

Although di Prima does not allude specifically to the connection between the two traditions, her poems persistently associate the gathering of people to fight against the system with Buddhism. For instance, in "Revolutionary Letter #7," it is through mantras, and through the energy stemming from "the buddha nature / of everyone, friend and foe" (16), that allows individual and collective possibility of change. This same revolutionary energy is described in "Revolutionary Letter #43" as "prana (vital energy) moving smooth / thru all yr flesh" (56), and in "Revolutionary Letter #28" the revolutionaries are fighting and "crying out / to Maitreya" (41), the prophetic future bodhisattva of complete enlightenment and pure dharma. The equilibrium between Buddhism and anarchism in the collection might seem unlikely at first. As Trevor Carolan writes, "finding reconciliation ... between the demands of the compassionate views it [Buddha dharma] encourages and the anger that frequently accompanies political action is a central point of tension in her work" ("Avanti!" 14). Long a practitioner of Buddhism, particularly of Zen—which she started to study in the late 1960s—and Tibetan traditions, di Prima resolves the tension by pointing to the transformational power of anger when approached from an egolessness state. As di Prima put it in conversation with Carolan, "you have to remember the Buddhist idea of Wrathfulness—that whatever opposes compassion is a demonic form and an incitement to become mindfully wrathful" (14). In the context of social transformation, then, the anger behind the revolution is not rooted in the individual ego, but in a collective realization of the need for change. Gary Snyder had already emphasized the Buddhist concept of interdependence in the afore-mentioned essay, stating that "personal realization ... cannot be had alone and for one 'self'— because it cannot be fully realized unless one has given it up, and away, to all others" (*Anarchism* 241). This premise permeates di Prima's collection, as well as her understanding of a Buddhist/anarchist revolution. As the poet writes in "Revolutionary Letter #43," in her revolutionary vision, "anger becomes 'Buddha's anger' a steady roar / righteous, behind yr action" (56), rather than a solely personally motivated emotion.

In any case, whether united through a philosophical or political mindset, possible outcomes of the utopian society achieved by the effort of this "Tribe" (8)—as the poet refers to it in "Revolutionary Letter #2"—are also displayed in the letters. The division between revolutionary letters and visions of a utopian society should not be read as disconnected, separate discourses, but as inseparable parts of the same movement. In *Revolutionary Letters*, without revolution there is no utopia, and without the visions of

utopia, as David Harvey claims, "there is no way to define that port to which we might want to sail" (*Spaces* 189). If revolution is seen as a voluntary reactionary space, and utopia is understood as a process rather than a final state, then the sole act of revolution becomes utopian in essence. An anecdote told by the Uruguayan novelist and journalist Eduardo Galeano emphasizes the unreachable nature of utopia by relating how, when his friend and filmmaker Fernando Birri was asked at a conference the question, "What is utopia for?", Birri answered: "Utopia is in the horizon. I know full well that I will never reach it. That if I walk ten steps, it will walk ten steps away from me ... Utopia is used for that, to walk" ("Singulars" n. pag.). Di Prima's conception of utopia in *Revolutionary Letters* stems from the same emphasis on action and movement, rather than result. After all, it might be the only way in which we can approach, even if never get to reach, utopia. As di Prima herself puts it: "ALL RESISTANCE IS / TRIUMPHANT RESISTANCE / All love / is revolution / & all touch / a form of love. / The moment of revolt is the moment of victory" (92).

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