

## ***“I don’t see how singing and dancing could be dangerous”* Becoming Utopian in *Utopia Falls* – Interrogating a Nano-Utopian Moment in YA TV**

*Utopia Falls* (2020) is a vastly underdiscussed Canadian sci-fi teen TV show about Afrofuturism, youth activism, and eco-awareness written by RT Thorne.<sup>1</sup> Set in New Babyl where the state declares “we all work in harmony...regardless of your age, background or gender”, young performers selected for a prestigious dance competition find a forbidden archive of cultural relics.<sup>2</sup> Their exploration of music leads to them requesting examples of “people standing up” and “forms of protest”, prompting lessons on the civil rights movement and racial segregation. The sounds and movements of a rebellious history become embodied into their “subversive” contemporary performances. The young performers are “becoming utopian” re-learning the world to imagine it could become radically other.<sup>3</sup> The centrality of the archive demonstrates how knowing history inspires future change. This “refuses the totalising closure” of New Babyl; as this utopia/dystopia falls the open potential of utopian change emerges.<sup>4</sup>

This paper explores *Utopia Falls* season one as embodying a potential a nano-utopian moment, which may have far-reaching consequences.<sup>5</sup> Daniella Broadway notes it “gives us what we’ve been waiting far too long for — representation for people of color in [TV] sci-fi.”<sup>6</sup> As the self-declared first sci-fi hip hop cross-over, it challenges the white-heteronormative-masculine norms of the genre, offering a cast that features mostly BIPOC, diverse sexualities, placing women in authority. *Utopia Falls* attempts to represent youth subcultures on television in a way that fundamentally values BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives.<sup>7</sup> It valorises the potentiality of non-violent protest, while also exploring physical and structural violences, tackling police brutality, injustice of incarceration, privilege, nepotism, infertility, ableism, and precarious bodies in activism.<sup>8</sup> Further, it centres the importance of storytelling, and how individual acts of resistance influence collective change.

*Utopia Falls* demonstrates the revolutionary potential of the intersection of arts and activism, with the explicit agenda of inspiring young people into social justice movements. Despite its relevance to teen engagement with Black Lives Matter protests, and School Strikes, season two has Not-Yet been announced. However, there is a clear call for its reinstatement in online petitions and teen-activist blogs that indicate we should not be ignoring the relevance of *Utopia Falls*, or its ability to inspire future sci-fi shows, as well as its viewers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Utopia Falls - CBC Media Centre’, accessed 28 June 2021, <https://gem.cbc.ca//www.cbc.ca/mediacentre/program/utopia-falls>. Note this has failed to be include in the recent Routledge guide to Teen TV, despite coming out after numerous other TV shows featured with less radical messaging.

<sup>2</sup> Manoj Ashodia, ‘Utopia Falls Season 2: Release Date Information And More’, DKODING, 18 April 2021, <https://www.dkoding.in/entertainment/tv-web/utopia-falls-season-2-release-date-information-and-more/>.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Moylan, *Becoming Utopian*.

<sup>5</sup> Heather McKnight, ‘Chaos and Hope: Nano-Utopian Moments of Activist Self-Organisation’, *Excursions Journal* 10, no. 1 (4 December 2020): 33–60, <https://doi.org/10.20919/exs.10.2020.252>.

<sup>6</sup> Danielle Broadway, ‘R.T. Thorne on the His Television Series “Utopia Falls”’, *Black Girl Nerds* (blog), 26 March 2020, <https://blackgirlnerds.com/r-t-thorne-on-the-importance-of-representation-culture-and-the-arts-in-his-television-series-utopia-falls/>.

<sup>7</sup> Stefania Marghitu, *Teen TV* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229645>; marvelous-me-always, ‘Black Lives Matter - Utopia Falls!’, Tumblr, *Marvelous Me Always* (blog), May 2020, <https://marvelous-me-always.tumblr.com/post/617086007472422912/alright-so-i-just-finished-utopia-falls-on-hulu>.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> ‘#utopia-falls on Tumblr’, accessed 28 June 2021, <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/utopia-falls?sort=top>.

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**Bio:** Heather McKnight has a PhD in Law Studies from the University of Sussex, and is founder of the Magnetic Ideals Collective. She is a critical utopian scholar and activist with research interests in protest, unions, school strikes for climate, education, feminism, gender, the utopian analysis of science fiction TV, and speculative fiction.