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Fictionalisations of American Populism: From Edward Bellamy's Utopia to Angie Thomas's Black Lives Matter Novel

Populism is a contested concept with a special place in US history. It has its roots in the late nineteenth-century progressive agrarian and labour movements, organized into The People's (or Populist) Party, whose political platform was adopted on July 4, 1892. Among their demands, the Populists listed a stronger government, the nationalization of railroads and communication lines, a graduated income-tax, the direct election of senators, and above all, an end to the unjust post-Civil War policies that had made land and financial speculators richer and millions of working Americans poorer. Although the party was soon absorbed into the Democratic Party, parts of its platform continued to influence the progressive agenda well into the twentieth century. By the time President Franklin D. Roosevelt carried out his New Deal to rebuild American society and its government during the Great Depression, the populist label had been extended to a special kind of political profile, one centered on the charismatic leader whose discourse and policies were tainted by demagoguery and authoritarianism. Huey P. Long, the colourful political boss of Louisiana, and Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest turned radio star who spoke admiringly of Hitler and

Mussolini, are prime examples of that species. From the 1930s onwards, populism would be increasingly associated with the far-right ideology and anti-intellectualism, justifying liberal historians like Richard Hofstadter (1964) to postulate that populism in its entirety (including the late nineteenth century movement) is an anti-democratic movement driven by irrational resentments, the manifestation of "the paranoid style of American politics." In spite of the negative connotations, the populist label in US politics has never lost its progressive aura, as demonstrated by present-day left-wing scholars who have urged the American left to proudly reclaim their populist roots (Riofrancos 2017; Cantrell 2019).

This chapter discusses three best-selling novels published at key moments in the history of American populism. It explores the fictional expressions of various populist themes and attitudes with an aim to contribute to a literary history of populism in the United States. I have avoided the word 'representation,' commonly used in literary studies when referring to the relationship between text and context, because of its implication that the objects or phenomena 'represented' exist before the literary text. While certain attitudes, socio-political or economic conditions and even populist leaders predate the texts and inspire them, the populist movements and practices fictionalized in these novels are aspects of an envisioned future and constitute incentives for the readers to act with or against them.

The first book, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, is a famous utopia and protest novel that helped crystalize the populist movement and exerted influence on the political agenda and organization of the People's Party in the early 1890s. The second, *It Can't Happen Here*, is a realist dystopia written by Nobel Prize laureate Sinclair Lewis in 1935, in an epoch marked by the successes and failures of the New Deal and the rise of totalitarian ideologies in the United States and abroad. The last narrative is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, a young adult realist novel about African Americans' victimization by police brutality and systemic racism. The book was published in 2017, the first year of an

exceptionally divisive presidency under a populist leader and, in retrospect, an important stage in the escalation of racial unrest, leading up to the nationwide and eventually global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Reading these three novels and reflecting over their relationship with populism may shed light on the continuous transformation of the perception of American populism, from a progressive reform movement to an anti-democratic front fuelled by resentment and down to a two-faced notion that reflects the growing division between left and right in present-day American politics. This approach regards populism as a historical phenomenon enmeshed in broad sociocultural contexts, rather than the more or less expected outcome of certain political dynamics. Consequently, this chapter, like others in this volume, engages populism tentatively, paying attention to shifts in values, attitudes, social relations and thought paradigms. In addition, approaching the history of American populism through fiction enables one to focus less, as most analysts and commentators of populism do, on the "supply" side of populist politics (populist leaders and populist parties) and more on the "demand" side of this kind of politics (the public perception of, and need for, populist politics and politicians).

The Ideational Approach to Populism

In their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (2017) identify three major conceptual approaches to populism in political science, namely, the ideational, the political-strategic and the socio-cultural[1] (14). The political-strategic approach focuses on populist leaders and parties' methods of securing mass support and exercising power (Weyland 2001, 12). Although it might be relevant for a rather narrow discussion of *It Can't Happen Here*, this type of conceptualization cannot contribute much to this chapter. The socio-cultural approach relies on a simplified definition of populism as the "flaunting of the low in politics" (Ostiguy

2017, 73), where "the low" signifies a style or a type of performance and appeal that resonates with certain categories of voters. Because of its emphasis on political identification and the socio-cultural dimension of the populist appeal (74, 78), this approach is a more promising choice for a discussion of populism from within literary studies. However, unless the study is informed by reception theory or a special brand of reader-response criticism, the conception of socio-cultural differences in this approach merely as disparities of educational level and economic status (following Bourdieu's sociological understanding of "culture") is of limited value for a literary analysis more akin to the history of ideas than sociology.

According to the "ideational" approach, populism is "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). It is an ideology because it is "a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society" (6); it is thin-centered because it must attach itself to other ideologies (like fascism, socialism, liberalism, and nationalism). The ideational approach in populism scholarship is interesting for this study for three main reasons. First, by abandoning the emphasis on populist leadership, the definition above no longer favors a top-down approach, making it easier to focus on the demand for populism and populist leaders.

Second, the ideational approach suits historicist analyses because it accounts for the past manifestations of the concept of populism and its associated political phenomena. Ultimately, populist attitudes and ideas emerged long before the movements of the late nineteenth century in the United States and Russia (Hawkins, Read and Pauwels 2017, 278). They are actually embedded in the democratic political culture and have their origins in the principle of popular sovereignty (Kelly 2017). Writing at the climax of President Andrew Jackson's war on the national bank (1832-1833), a political war that the administration

emphatically fought on behalf of the 'common man,' Alexis de Tocqueville (2007) considered the general excitement and the huge popular support for the president prime examples of the "democratic passions" derived from the sovereign power of the people (146). Finally, with respect to the "historicist" argument in favour of the ideational approach, it must be acknowledged that historians themselves have conceptualized populism in quasi-ideological terms. I have already cited Hofstadter's censure of populism; at the opposite end of the spectrum, Lawrence Goodwyn, the main proponent of the appreciatory view of populism in American history, wrote in his classic study *Democratic Promise. The Populist Moment in America* (1976) that the late nineteenth-century agrarian populists created "a new way of looking at things – a new culture … that attempted to shelter its participants from sundry indoctrinations emanating from the larger culture that was industrial America itself" (xi). In the middle, historians who are neutral toward populism may not agree with the claim that it is an ideology, while embracing a definition that is otherwise quite similar to the one proposed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). For example, Swedish historian Erik Åsard (1994) defines populism as "the movements whose representatives – using a distinctive political language that appeals to people's dissatisfaction with the status quo – attack the ruling elites and propose solutions that are claimed to lie in the interest of the many" (my translation, 18).

The third and most important argument in favour of the above-mentioned ideational definition is that it accounts for the demand for right- as well as left-wing populism, which makes it more observant of the special circumstances and paradoxes of populism in American history. In other words, we need an approach that can explain why, in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street were considered populist movements and the populist label is currently assigned to both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. However, not all ideational definitions are ready to

accept this duality. While defining populism as "a set of distinct claims" having "an inner logic" (10), Jan-Werner Müller (2016) contends that this logic is not only anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist, and therefore inherently anti-democratic (19-22). Like other European political scientists, Müller sees populism, ipso facto, as a threat to democracy because he equates democracy with liberal democracy. According to this view, the American People's Party in the United States was populist only in name. By contrast, the post-Marxist approach proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) identifies liberal democracy as the real problem and sees populism as a beneficial and emancipatory force, the promise of a radical democracy based on the understanding that conflict and division, rather than consensus, are the essence of politics. The populist logic Laclau and Mouffe theorize applies to both right- and leftwing movements, but the primacy it assigns to the aggrieved people's reaction to the injustice perpetrated by the elite makes their model more suitable for the study of leftist and socially inclusive populist movements.

There must be, however, a fundamental distinction between the normative worldviews of Trump and Sanders's supporters. In this respect, John B. Judis's *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (2016) is particularly illuminating. He argues that left-wing populists direct their antagonism toward the elite or the establishment, while right-wing populists see themselves as the people against an elite that indulges an often marginalized group, such as immigrants, legal or illegal, Muslims and Islamists, LGBTQ communities and activists, ethnic or racial minorities and their organizations: "Leftwing populism is dyadic. Rightwing populism is triadic. It looks upward, but also down upon an out group" (15). Judis's useful distinction is relevant for the analysis of the fictionalizations of populism in three American novels.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will introduce the three works of fiction and discuss their engagement with contemporaneous strains of American populism. The texts will be

interrogated from the point of view of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational definition of populism, with the purpose of identifying the presence of the Manichean "us vs. them" discourse, conceptualizations of "the people" and "the elites" respectively, claims about the general will, and the nature of their protest against the conspiring elites. In addition, the links of populism with other ideologies represented in the texts will be investigated, as will the dyadic and/or triadic structure of the conflict between the novels' representations of the people and the colluding elites.

Looking Backward 2000-1887 and Late Nineteenth-Century Progressive Populism

Sold in one million copies and translated into fifteen languages (2006, 204), Bellamy's novel was the American best-seller of the nineteenth century, second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the classic protest novel with which it was sometimes compared. In an essay on Bellamy, John Dewey (1934) wrote: "What *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the antislavery movement Bellamy's book may well be to the shaping of popular opinion for a new social order." It is the story of Julian West, a thirty-year old upper-class man from Boston, who, following a mesmeric trance to help him go to sleep one night in 1887, wakes up in the year 2000 in the home of Dr. Leete, in a modern building raised in the proximity of the cellar of Julian's long burnt-down and forgotten house. Dr. Leete, his wife, and his daughter Edith (who bears the name of Julian's fiancée) help our hero make sense of, and adjust himself to, life at the end of the twentieth century. There are many examples of technological progress, such as widely available electricity, communications by telephone and pneumatic transmitters, and access to non-stop live musical programs in the comfort of one's own home, but by far the most impressive developments are social and economic. Everyone is prosperous, and all are equal. There is no money, no banks, no lawyers, no politicians, no businesspeople, and no

companies. There are no jails, no poorhouses or orphanages, because once society and its economic system have been re-organized, poverty and crime have been eradicated. From the age of 21, people are mustered into an industrial army, which they leave at 45, when everybody retires to enjoy the rest of their lives in peace and relaxation. The army is actually a form of labor organization resulting from the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation peacefully, sometime at the beginning of the twentieth century. In other words, the monopolistic practices continued until there remained only one monopoly and one great business corporation, the nation, into which all the others were absorbed. The new age of prosperity and social justice was therefore the result of the natural evolution of the capitalist system, not of its demise or violent overthrow. Moreover, this evolution meant nothing more than the completion of the historical process that the nation's Founders had started: "The epoch of trusts had ended in The Great Trust. In a word, the people of the United States concluded to assume the conduct of their own business, just as one hundred odd years before they had assumed the conduct of their own government, organizing now for industrial purposes on precisely the same grounds that they had then organized for political purposes" (Bellamy [1888] 2007, 33).

What motivates people to work is not money or any material advantages (because everybody earns the same) but "honor and the hope of men's gratitude, patriotism and the inspiration of duty" (56), that is, the same motives soldiers had when they were called upon to die for the nation. Promotion is strictly based on personal merit. Everybody works according to his or her own abilities and motivation levels and everybody has to start from the lowest of the industrial army ranks. No one is left behind, even if some will be unable to advance beyond the lower ranks in spite of the opportunities to try out trades and careers. Those individuals who cannot work at all are duly and affectionately taken care of. Women work too, but in a separate army corps, forbidden "to follow any employment not perfectly adapted,

both as to kind and degree of labor, to [their] sex" (151). There are no more wars in the world because at different moments in the twentieth century all the nations adopted similar socioeconomic solutions, and international relations are now based on commerce and mutual respect.

Much of the novel consists of the dialogue between the time traveler and the eloquent and indefatigable Dr. Leete, who spares no effort to explain people's blissful living and social conditions in the year 2000. The contrast with late nineteenth-century life and society, marked by injustice, selfishness, individualism, poverty, social conflict, workers' strikes, and impending economic and social doom, provides the red thread of the narrative. There is also a loosely followed and conventionally romantic subplot about the love between Julian West and Edith Leete, who turns out to be the great granddaughter of Edith Bartlett, Julian's fiancée from the nineteenth-century. To Bellamy's credit, however, it must be said that much attention is given to the protagonist's state of mind throughout the novel, which is therefore not only utopian fiction but also a work of psychological realism (Beaumont 2007, xxviii). Julian struggles with double consciousness, and he is acutely aware of his imperfect adjustment to the conditions of life in Boston in 2000. His greatest anxiety is that it is all a dream from which he will wake up soon. In the final chapter, Julian does wake up back in the year 1887, the morning after he had fallen asleep. That afternoon he walks to his fiancée's home to attend a party hosted by his prospective in-laws. He strolls through a Boston of grotesque social injustice, wasteful consumerism, mindless competition, dejection, squalor and selfishness. Above all, he is appalled by the face of poverty, and all culminates with a scene in which starving children fight over heaps of garbage littering the streets of the city. His sadness and indignation increase to a boiling point and, for the first time in his life, genuine feelings of empathy and solidarity overcome him: "No more did I look upon the woeful dwellers in this Inferno with a callous curiosity as creatures scarcely human. I saw in

them my brothers and sisters, my parents, my children, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood" (189). Then he starts to feel remorse at the realization that he had been a silent accomplice by ignoring the plight of his less fortunate fellows for so long. With a biblical sense of righteousness, he exclaims, "I found upon my garments the blood of this great multitude of strangled souls of my brothers. The voice of their blood cried out against me from the ground. Every stone of the reeking pavements, every brick of the pestilential rookeries, found a tongue and called after me as I fled: What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?" (190). At the party, he tries to reason with his rich friends, to make them see reality with his own eyes, but fails completely. They take him for a fanatic, an enemy of society, and they throw him out of the house. In the end, he wakes up back in the year 2000 and realizes that his return to the nineteenth century had been, in fact, a nightmare.

The success of the book was huge and instantaneous. It gave birth to a middle-class movement that took its name from Bellamy's utopian figuration of the concept of nation. By 1890, 127 Nationalist Clubs were established throughout the United States by intellectuals, artists and professional men and women determined to make Bellamy's dream come true (Robertson 2018, 66). In spite of the discrepancies between Bellamyism and Agrarian Populism, the former being a collectivist movement based on a utopian novel and the latter a farmers' movement based on individualism and business principles, the relationship with Populism was from the beginning one of deep mutual sympathy. In the following years, the Nationalists committed themselves to the Populist cause and were eventually absorbed into the People's Party, a party for which Bellamy himself campaigned vigorously in his influential publication *The New Nation.* The party, officially constituted in 1892, after the Farmers Alliances from the South and the Great Plains joined forces with the Knights of Labor, the industrial workers' organization, challenged both the Democratic and Republican

parties on the grounds that they had colluded with big business against the interests of the American people.

The People's Party Platform, acclaimed as a "Second Declaration of Independence" by its reform-minded contemporaries (Postel 2007, 158), is a classic of American political and protest literature. Its preamble, written by Ignatius Donnelly, echoes many of Bellamy's notions and ideas: the producing classes' deplorable condition, the injustice of laissez-faire capitalism, a strong central (national) government and the nationalization of key economic sectors as the solution for economic inequity, the alignment of the goal of social equality with the nation's democratic foundations, and, above all, the vision of a Republic built on the values of brotherhood and solidarity, "a free government… built upon the love of the whole people for each other and for the nation" (Tindall 1966, 92).

The Bellamyite notion of 'the people' largely coincides with that of the Populists. The people are also frequently referred to as 'the nation' and are considered the ultimate source of government authority. Fundamentally, the working classes make up the pure or real people, as Julian West maliciously acknowledges before his change of heart, when he was still living in 1887; fed up with the prolonged strikes that delayed his wedding plans, he compares his feelings for the American laboring classes with those of Caligula, who wished that the Roman people had but one neck so that he could more easily cut it off (Bellamy [1888] 2007, 15). Later on, of course, much of his admiration for the industrial army of the year 2000 rests on the entire nation's transformation into one amorphous producing class.

There are, however, areas of divergence between Bellamyism and the Populist message. Although both rejected violent revolution as the solution to alleviate social ills, the Populists at least pursued political agency to bring about change, while in Bellamy's utopia, society is transformed as part of natural evolution and the logical consequence of America's corporatization. Furthermore, their conceptualizations of the elites or the enemies of the

people differ as well. The People's Party Platform clearly names and shames the greedy capitalists, the banks, the corporations, and the millionaires for the systematic plunder of the nation's wealth (xx). In the novel, the enemy is more abstract: hunger, poverty, or the system; the rich are castigated for their aloofness, but they are basically portrayed as misguided, albeit luckier, victims of the system, who live in constant fear of losing their money and status. In this respect, the narrative diverges from the ideational conceptualisation of populism, because it only reproduces the fundamental conflict between the people and the elites in a diluted form. Nevertheless, the similarities between the literary text and their own beliefs and political agenda weighed much more in the balance for the Agrarian Populists.

The 'thin' ideology of populism needs to latch on other ideologies to support itself, and one of them was US exceptionalism: the Populists, who considered themselves American patriots, regarded economic equity as the 'natural' consequence of the nation's unique democratic ethos. Similarly, in Bellamy's utopia, the people took control of their own business just as they had assumed the conduct of their government in 1776, and the other nations eventually followed America's lead toward a more just and prosperous social and economic order. Another ideology present in both the novel and in the late nineteenth-century Populists' documents in their common extolment of the dignity of labor is producerism (Robertson 2018, 58). According to this ideology, with roots in Jacksonian America, the workers (not the Gilded Age capitalists and tycoons) were the motor of the economy and the real producers of wealth. The value of labour was intrinsic and non-marketable, and the 'producers' were set in contrast to 'the idle,' both the rich and the dependent (Lowndes 2017, 232). Finally, militarism is an associated ideology that can be detected in Bellamy's novel but did not appeal to its contemporary populists. The ideal industrial society is organized like an army, and the workers do not strive for materialistic gain but for military-like honours.

Although not central to the farmers and workers' agenda, the utopian vision expressed in *Looking Backward* did contribute to the ethos and politics of the broad reform movement called Populism in the 1890s. Above all, to paraphrase its author, it gave reform-minded people hope that the Golden Age was lying before them and not behind them, and it was not far away. Let us now make a fifty-year leap in the history of American speculative fiction writing.

It Can't Happen Here and the Spectre of Populist Fascism

In the 1930s Sinclair Lewis was a highly respected writer and the first American to have received the Nobel Prize for literature (in 1930). Some of his earlier novels, such as *Main Street* and *Babbitt* had established his reputation as an astute critic and satirist of American life and mores. The dystopian novel *It Can't Happen Here* is probably his best-known work from the period after winning the Nobel Prize. It was so successful that Lewis even wrote a stage version that is still produced today. Interest in this work has re-surged dramatically since the US general elections in 2016, when journalists and literary historians drew attention to the similarities between the far-right populist Trump-Bannon duo and the fictional left-wing-populist-turned-fascist Senator Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip and his chief ideologue, the diabolical anti-Semite Lee Sarason.

Through a combination of charisma, demagoguery, nativism, racism, anti-elitism and fear mongering, Windrip, a character loosely based on Huey P. Long, sways the masses and many opportunistic businessmen and politicians before the eyes of liberal-minded Doremus Jessup, who is the central consciousness of the novel. A rather cynical sixty-year old journalist from rural Vermont, the editor and proprietor of the local newspaper, Doremus, unlike many of his friends and family, quickly realizes the dangers posed by Windrip's election. Sure enough, as soon as he is elected President, Windrip and his band begin turning

the United States into a fascist totalitarian state. Congress and the judiciary are dissolved, opposition leaders are imprisoned, murdered, or exiled, all political parties are abolished and replaced by a single party, the American Corporate State and Patriotic Party (or the Corpos), the states are dissolved into six provinces and paramilitary troops called Minute Men become the repressive police force of the fascist and militarist American government. Doremus refuses to bow to the Corpos and is persecuted by the regime. The oppression, the lies and injustice become overbearing, and, after a failed attempt to run across the border to Canada and after seeing his son-in-law killed by his former lazy and impertinent hired man, now a cruel Corpo official, he sets up an underground press only to be caught, tortured and thrown in a concentration camp together with his closest associates. Half a year later, Doremus receives help to run away from prison and joins the national resistance against "Corpoism." In the meantime, in Washington, Buzz Windrip is ousted after two years by Secretary of State Lee Sarason, who prepares the country for war with Mexico. Sarason is killed after only one month in a coup by the Secretary of War, who turns the screws of oppression even tighter and continues the plans to invade Mexico. Finally, a civil war breaks out as large sections of the country revolt against the government.

Lewis's novel is a cautionary tale of American politics; it warns about the real possibility of American liberal democracy falling prey to fascism. The novel is interesting for this study because, in the first thirteen chapters, it fictionalises right-wing populism, which is triadic, to recall Judis's useful distinction. The late nineteenth-century populists were hostile to those immigrants (especially Chinese) who supplied the industrialists with cheap labour, and the presence of the Colored Farmers National Alliance among their ranks led to discord between the Southern agrarians and the other populists, but their movement was inclusive, and the capitalist elite was their nemesis. Furthermore, Bellamy's ideal society that so many populists admired was classless and oblivious to the racial divide. By contrast, Lewis's far-

right populists targeted both the political establishment and certain historically underprivileged groups. Windrip's fifteen-point electoral program declared leftist radicals enemies of the state, promised to exclude women and black citizens from the public sphere, as well as to annul the latter's voting rights, and compelled the Jews to swear allegiance to the New Testament in exchange for holding public offices or working in the learned professions (Lewis [1935] 2014, 61-64).

The thorough portrayal of the populist leader is another novelty in the fictional representation of American populism. Lewis's model for Buzz Windrip was obviously Huey Long, an authoritarian demagogue to be sure, but a decidedly leftist populist politician. By exaggerating his demagoguery, through the liberal intellectual protagonist's perspective, Lewis turns Buzz Windrip into a caricature of a populist leader. Buzz is a maverick politician from Illinois, whose career started by advocating better beef stew in poor-farms and promising even more graft to local party leaders and more jobs for their families and business partners. Doremus describes him as "vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic" (71). Yet he is an actor of genius who mesmerizes his audience, and perhaps his most dangerous quality is that he has the "earthy American sense of humor" of a Mark Twain or Will Rogers (143). As if to illustrate the theory that populism needs to attach itself to 'full' ideologies, Windrip does not seem to have any personal convictions and ideals, but he deftly and opportunistically assumes several ideological positions, such as fascism, nationalism, militarism, racism, and statism. He tirelessly attacks the political, financial, and intellectual elites, proclaims himself the greatest advocate of the working classes, and identifies himself as a "Common Man" (72). As Doremus observes, the senator shares indeed all the prejudices and aspirations of the average American:

> He believed in the desirability and therefore the sanctity of thick buckwheat cakes with adulterated maple syrup, in rubber trays for the ice cubes in his electric refrigerator, in the special nobility of dogs, all dogs, in the oracles of S. Parkes Cadman, in being chummy with

> all waitresses at all junction lunch rooms, and in Henry Ford …, and the superiority of anyone who possessed a million dollars. He regarded spats, walking sticks, caviar, titles, tea-drinking, poetry not daily syndicated in newspapers, and all foreigners, possibly excepting the British, as degenerate. (72)

Such nuggets of sarcastic wit encapsulate a cynical and embittered conception of 'the people' in Lewis's dystopia. Through his protagonist and narrative focaliser, Lewis strips the nation's portrait of any idealism and self-complacency. Americans are not the innocent victims of sly populist demagogues; the nation is actually ripe for a fascist dictatorship. In a tirade against the argument that this cannot happen in the country of free men, Doremus Jessup mentions, among other things, the Red scares and the Catholic scares, the KuKlux Klan and the lynchings, the crimes and the gangs of the Prohibition era, and the war hysteria that had made censorship perfectly justifiable but replaced 'sauerkraut' with 'Liberty cabbage' (17). Arguably the most devastating critique of 'the people' in the novel lies in the success of Buzz's promise to give every workingman 5000 dollars after being elected President (that was actually one of the central points of Huey Long's "Share the Wealth" program). This simple populist promise is enough to make millions ready to throw democracy off the table.

Lewis's portrait of the people could not be farther from the understanding of the term on which the ideational definition is based. In fact, his conception of the people reveals an unabashed elitist bias that is at the core of American political history and democratic traditions. After all, the US Constitution with its checks and balances, indirect election of senators and presidents and other hindrances to popular sovereignty was the most enduring legacy of many Founders' classical liberal distrust of the masses. Doremus' notion of the people is an important element of the novel's realism; it is part of the very authenticity of the book's message that *yes, it can happen* in the land of the free. The people may be seduced by the populist leader not because he represents them as pure and at odds with the elites or

because of their general will, but for very mundane reasons. Here, the narrative suggests a scenario of populist ascent that contradicts the ideational model.

At the end of the story, when the fascist Corpo State implodes, Lewis mentions the populists among those who started the revolution: "It was the part of America which had always been most 'radical'—that indefinite word, which probably means 'most critical of piracy'. It was the land of the Populists, the Non-Partisan League, the Farmer-Labor Party, and the La Follettes—a family so vast as to form a considerable party in itself" (371). Incidentally, this is also the only time populists are mentioned in the narrative. Apparently, the likes of Huey Long and Father Coughlin had not altogether erased Lewis's fond memory of the Agrarian Populists of the 1890s. However, as in the case of the representation of the people, there is no trace of a Manichaean opposition in a populist sense between these 'radicals' and a corrupt elite, since their revolt is strictly a matter of no longer tolerating a totalitarian regime.

The Hate U Give and Black Lives Matter

Angie Thomas's novel was an instant success. It debuted at the top of the *New York Times*' Young Adult best-seller list, and, as of June 13, 2021, it had stayed on the top ten list for 216 weeks. A film adaptation was released in 2018. The novel tells the story of Starr Carter, a sixteen-year old black girl who witnesses the murder of her childhood friend Khalil at the hands of a white male police officer whom she thereafter names One-Fifteen, which is the number on his badge. It is not the first time Starr witnesses the killing of a friend. Six years before, her best friend Natasha, who was just ten, was killed in a drive-by shooting while playing in the street, an incident that underlines the dangers of living in Garden Heights, a poor ghetto-like neighbourhood run by violent gangs. That tragedy prompted her parents to move Starr, along with her two brothers, to a school in the affluent predominantly white

suburb of Riverton Hills, where her uncle Carlos, a police detective, lives. As a result, Starr must constantly negotiate between two conflicting identities: a Garden Heights girl who is proud of her community and a Williamson Prep student with a white boyfriend and rich friends who sometimes indulge in stereotypes about life in the ghetto. Against this socio-cultural inner conflict and the childhood trauma now reawakened and amplified by Khalil's violent death, Starr's dilemma on how to go about her role as a witness to the killing of her innocent friend creates the central drama of the narrative. Starr is at first reluctant to attract any attention to herself (she keeps her involvement and even the fact of knowing Khalil a secret from everybody at Williamson, including Chris, her devoted white boyfriend), but with each step in the all too familiar process of downplaying the incident and blaming the victim, the choice to speak up and protest the injustice becomes inevitable. The investigating officers' attempt to justify One-Fifteen's conduct, the media's portrayal of Khalil as a thug and drug dealer in contrast with the sympathetic coverage of the officer and his family's plight, and, finally, the grand jury's acquittal become the counts of a powerful indictment of systemic racism in contemporary American society. In the climax of the narrative, Starr joins the riots sparked by popular outrage in Garden Heights, addresses the crowd with a bullhorn and starts the violent confrontations after hurling a tear gas can back at the riot police. The morning after the riot, the people of the neighbourhood speak out against the gang boss and his lieutenants and turn them in for burning down the grocery store owned by Maverick, Starr's father. As the people of Garden Heights help him and others clean up and rebuild their businesses, the novel ends with a list of recognizable first names, all real people and victims of racism and police brutality, and Starr's promise to never forget and never be quiet.

The Hate U Give is primarily a protest novel meant to raise awareness about the systematic racism and injustice that constantly threaten to lives of black Americans. As the other two novels, it has no direct relationship with populism, but its message and appeal can

be juxtaposed with those of contemporaneous social movements or political leaders that display populist characteristics. The movement Thomas's narrative is immediately associated with is Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement started by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, in protest of the acquittal of Treyvon Martin's murderer on July 13, 2013. It is also a reaction and an alternative to extant African American civil rights organisations, which, according to the BLM founders, have continually promoted heterosexual cisgender black men and marginalized women, queer, and trans people (Black Lives Matter, n.d. "Herstory"). BLM does not identify itself as a populist movement (not even a left-wing one, like Occupy Wall Street), but it is avowedly inclusive: "We … believe that in order to win and bring as many people with us along the way, we must move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities. We must ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front" (Black Lives Matter, n.d. "About"). Furthermore, in her memoir of the movement, Cullors protests against the terrorist label affixed on her and her colleagues by defiantly invoking the most celebrated expression of popular sovereignty and the battle cry of all American populists: "We, … the three women who founded Back Lives Matter, are called terrorists. We, the people" (Khan-Cullors and bandele 2017, 8). It is the inclusiveness of the movement in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality (that is, its new conception of 'the people') that appeals to populism scholars like Joseph Lowndes (2017), who regards it not only as a new type of left-wing populism, but also as one that departs from the producerist ideology of both left- and right-wing American populism, and which "may open new vistas of populist identification beyond this particular set of issues to broader counterhegemonic concerns over poverty, state violence, and political powerlessness" (244).

However, the populist label should be used cautiously on BLM. As Ann-Cathrine Jungar explains in the first chapter of this book, the idea that society is built upon a unified and homogenous notion of people is essential in populism. Yet BLM's conception of 'the

people' is predicated on identity politics, which even modern left-wing populism might find problematic (remember the Occupy movement's claim to represent "the 99 percent"). Furthermore, the perceived enemy of the people (understood as black people, and especially black women, queer, transgender and other marginalized black persons) is not an elite, but an assortment of white supremacists, misogynists, homophobes, minority haters, far-right populists, as well as the norms, practices, institutions and value systems that have produced and maintained hatred and prejudice.

In a recent article, Charles Olney (2021) discusses BLM's ambivalent approach to justice as both attainable through anti-racist reform and, simultaneously, an impossibility in a legal, political and economic system inherently oppressive and anti-Black (2). This dualism reflects the old distinction between the 'integrationists' and the 'radicals" in the history of African American protest and struggle[2]. One tradition calls for the redemption of the national promise of equality of opportunity and justice for all, while the other challenges these foundational values of the Republic, which it sees as irredeemably subordinate to white supremacy. These opposing attitudes are fuelled by contrasting ideological allegiances and co-exist in the BLM movement. Whereas *The Hate U Give* has been criticised for its failure to capture the radical dimension of BLM (see Haddad 2018), I would argue that the novel and the movement (fictionalized as "Just Us for Justice" in the narrative) overlap along their shared vision of justice as redemption and a common future for black and white citizens.

The meaning of 'the people' is clearly articulated in a crucial scene in which Starr has a conversation with her father about the meaning of Thug Life (Tupac Shakur's acronym for "The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody"), and it echoes the BLM platform: "'Black people, minorities, poor people. Everybody at the bottom in society.' 'The oppressed,' says Daddy" (Thomas 2017, 168). They are the perpetual victims of a system designed against them (170). The lack of opportunities (no jobs, poor educational facilities) forces some to

become gangsters and drug dealers and breaks many others, who succumb to drug addiction. The hate American society gives these people returns in the form of violence, criminality and poverty, but what infuriates them, including those who are neither gangsters nor drug addicts, is the injustice that goes on with impunity. This rage erupts in the novel, for example when Maverick is harassed and humiliated by police officers presumably because of Starr's testimony against One-Fifteen and especially after the grand jury acquits Khalil's killer: when her brother Seven asks her what she wanted to do, Starr thinks, "Anything. *Everything*. Scream. Cry. Puke. Hit somebody. Burn something. Throw something" (389). Soon afterwards, Starr and her friends get involved in the riot.

However, throughout the story, the antagonistic, disruptive mode is balanced by an unflinching belief in the possibility of change by speaking out against injustice or by helping those in need. If populist claims rely on a conception of the people as 'pure' and united, Thomas's narrative actually fits the populist label better than BLM. Its focus is on solidarity, a value shared by all the black characters in the community with the exception of the local gangsters, the King Lords. This solidarity crosses racial and class divides and is presented in the narrative as genuinely human. Starr is a victim of racist bullying by her white friend Hailey, but her other close friend Maya, an Asian American who was also a target of Hailey's racist comments, supports Starr and forms a "minority alliance" with her against Hailey (252). The co-captain of Williamson's basketball team, Jess, a white senior student and the daughter of an attorney couple, refuses to participate in the other white students' mock-protest for Khalil organised for the sole purpose of skipping classes (186). But the clearest example of interracial solidarity and the character through which the novel gestures towards a racially integrated future is Starr's loyal and considerate boyfriend Chris, whom she calls her 'normal' (377), and who stays by her side and participates in the riot. The interracial love plot is not at all marginal, but part of the solution: the antidote to the hate society gives you is not more

hate, but love, and every act of kindness and compassion in the narrative points to that idea. The title of the novel therefore invites a deconstructive reading of Tupac's T.H.U.G.: *The Love U Give*.

Thomas's novel expresses the grievances of people generally identified as the oppressed and, more specifically, as the black people from ghettoes, but through its affective strategies of identification with Starr's powerfully authentic narrative voice, it appeals to a young, racially diverse and even global readership[3] thereby expanding the category of 'the people.' By carefully cultivating empathy, the novel brings the systematic injustice and oppression that make African American lives seem not to matter to the conscience of the people thus broadly defined. As in Bellamy's utopia, the elites or the oppressors of the people form a rather diffuse category. "The system" is the main oppressor, and the police, the media and the courts are its accessories. However, the police are to a certain extent rehabilitated thanks to Starr's Uncle Carlos, the good cop, and the arrest of King, the powerful gang leader, at the end of the story. That the local gangsters are identified as the oppressors of the Garden Heights community while the police eventually do their job and protect the people can be explained by the novel's allegiance to the (black) politics of redemption (cf. Olney 2021). This option is reflected even in the ideological frameworks in which populist attitudes and ideas are embedded in the text. Although the ideology of Black Nationalism is omnipresent in the narrative (Maverick follows the Black Panthers' Ten-Point Program, his family pray to Black Jesus and they sing Stevie Wonder's version of "Happy Birthday", a song in honour of Martin Luther King, Jr.), the vision of a racially integrated future and the promise of equal opportunity for all are deeply rooted in Republicanism, which is the predominant ideological framework of the novel.

This journey through the history of American populism as seen through its fictionalisations in three very different literary texts has shed light on the political culture and ideological contexts in which various populist attitudes have developed and populist movements and their actors have operated. It has also hopefully drawn attention to perceptions of populism that may not have perfectly mirrored the public conscience or the general will of their times, yet, through their success as works of fiction, have generated legacies that speak to us more powerfully than historical accounts and political scientists' theoretical models. Fiction and close reading analysis may have more to say about the complexity of reality and human experience than any one-size-fits-all definition of socio-political phenomena like populism. Whether they converse with or tell stories of left- or right-wing populist movements and attitudes, every one of these novels has a civic message and proposes a solution to the societal problems that created the demand for populism in the first place: Bellamy's utopian novel promotes sympathy, Lewis's dystopia puts forth reason and common sense, while Thomas's young adult narrative suggests that love and solidarity are the driving forces of change.

Notes

1. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017) also acknowledge the definitions based on a specific kind of economic policies (i.e. the "populist" emphasis on welfare expenditures and income distribution that usually results in high inflation and great deficit) as a fourth direction within the scholarship on populism, but exclude them from their overview of the state of the field (14) and do not assign them a place in their book. This approach has little to offer this study.
2. The emblematic representatives of the two traditions are Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany in the antebellum era, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the century and Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X in the 1960s.

3. The many references to popular TV series like *The Fresh Prince of Bell Air*, *Law and Order*, to the Harry Potter books and movies, to Nae-Nae, Jordan shoes and African American hip hop global icons like Tupac and N.W.A. must have brought the novel and its message closer to Generation Z anywhere in the world.

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