DYSTOPIAN SPACE IN COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS: SIERRA LEONE AS ‘THE WHITE MAN’S GRAVE’

by

Richard Phillips


ABSTRACT. This paper explores the power of dystopian imaginations. It does so by examining the form and function of dystopias in colonial contexts, both in general and through one particularly salient and significant colonial dystopia, which was known widely in imperial England as ‘the white man’s grave’. A detailed analysis of the form and function of dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone, with particular attention to Richard Burton’s negative appraisal of the colony, illuminates a particular form of geographical colonial discourse, and clarifies some of the power relations more generally associated with dystopian representations and interventions.

Introduction

This paper explores the twofold power of dystopian geographical imaginations: fantasies of spatial appropriation and transformation; and material practices that appropriate and transform real places. The critical geographical literature on dystopias, like that on utopias, tends to focus on European and North American urban visions and transformations, as the balance of contributions to this theme issue illustrates (see also Gruffudd, 1995). Although many dystopian authors have been concerned with Western cities (Eaton, 2002), their narratives have not been wholly parochial in content. They have used faraway imagined places such as the centre of the earth and outer space as mirrors of their own cities and societies, though their settings have sometimes verged closer to reality – in extraordinary voyages to the moon or Australia, for example. The more (generically or specifically) realistic settings have added significance, as they are no longer simply mirrors, but real places that may be affected by the dystopian intervention, or may be its prime target. Thus, for example, whereas Gabriel de Foigny (1676) used Australia in much (but not quite) the same way that Swift (1726) used the lands of the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms – as an abstract critical space in which to formulate coded attacks on aspects of his own society – some contemporary English writers produced very different dystopian and utopian accounts of Australia, which were concerned not only (though partly) with perceived shortcomings of their home, but also with prospects for and experiences of settlement in the very real Australian continent (Hughes, 1986; Coleman, 1999). Indeed, dystopian fantasies and practices have been closely associated with colonial discourses and processes. By examining the specific forms of colonial dystopias, and investigating the significance of dystopias for colonialism, it may therefore be possible to understand something of the power of dystopian imaginations more generally.

The analysis of relationships between dystopias and colonialism therefore illuminates an important form of colonial discourse. As Edward Said and his critics have shown, colonial discourse is regularised and powerfully ordered, yet dynamic and differentiated (Said, 1978, 1998). Thus, while colonial discourse reproduces certain broad power relations through its abstract binaries of master/slave, white/black, civilised/primitive and so on, its contextual deployments constitute more than (historical and) geographical manifestations of abstract imperial impulses. On the contrary, the form of this colonial discourse matters; its media-specific spaces of representation shape the kinds of statements that can be made. Some spatial and visual forms of colonial discourse are products of colonial times and impulses, others adapted to colonialism. Ella Shohat has shown how cinema has been associated, since its inception, with imperialism, for example, in the representation and imaginative appropriation of terra incognita (Shohat, 1991). Similarly, the technologies and representational conventions of Western cartography and mapping strategies more generally have been extended to and developed within colonial contexts, in which they have been instrumental (Huggan, 1994; Edney, 1997). Certain literary forms, such as action stories and
myths, also proved adaptable to colonial subjects. The literature of adventure was extended in modern form to the narratives of explorers, surveyors and geographers, who played important parts in European imperial outreach (Phillips, 1997). This paper is concerned with another of these overlapping forms, which has also been closely and recursively associated with European imperialism: dystopian literature. The paper begins by examining the powerful synergy that exists between the history, the form and the function of (utopian and) dystopian literary forms and colonial processes, both representational and material. Doing so, it seeks to contribute to the wider geographical literatures on colonial discourse and post-colonial geographies (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Barnett, 1998; Driver, 2001; Blunt and McEwan, 2002). Through its attention to a form of geographical literature, and its consideration of the interplay between representational and material geographies, the paper also contributes to broader, contextual analyses of geographical imaginations and texts, and relationships between texts and contexts (Barnes and Duncan, 1991; Gregory, 1994).

If, as Said and others have argued, colonial discourse is fundamentally differentiated and dynamic, then it is essential to consider not only its variable spatial forms, but also its contextual deployments and their implications for ongoing colonial processes. It is therefore important to examine in detail individual dystopias and, more specifically, types or groups of authors and individual authors. Beyond its broad opening sections, this paper concentrates on one particularly salient and significant colonial dystopia, which was widely known in imperial England as ‘the white man’s grave,’ and then on one particular author who portrayed this colony in dystopian terms: Richard Burton. It is more suggestive than scientific. A more formally representative account of the subject might consider a wider range of factual and imaginative sources ranging from official records to documentary photographs (Allison, 1988). Nevertheless, through its specificity, this paper edges back towards some more general conclusions about the imperial and other power relations in utopian and dystopian representations and interventions.

Colonial dystopia

Colonial and dystopian literatures overlap, in the sense that some colonial discourse is dystopian, and some dystopian literature is colonial in content and/or significance. This section begins by reviewing historical and formal properties of dystopian texts, and then considers how each of these relate to colonial processes.

Derived from the Greek dys (bad, diseased, inverted) and topos (place), dystopia is conceived as a bad, diseased or inverted place (Elwood, 1976). It is all that utopia is not. Utopias are characterised by positive attributes such as natural abundance and beauty, sensual gratification, moral order, and social harmony; dystopias by the absence or opposite of these things. Utopia and dystopia are ‘very much part of the same project’ (Booker, 1994, p.15). Both describe an other world, spatially and/or temporally removed from that of the author and/or intended readership. In each case, an other society is described as a whole. Self-contained and disconnect ed, it must be reached through some kind of extraordinary journey if the narrative is to be plausible. Travel to, within and from utopias and dystopias also tends to make the stories more interesting, contributing a degree of action that may turn potentially static description into a lively narrative. Travel through the utopia or dystopia facilitates a form of exploration, which makes visible that society and space, in an act of imaginative appropriation. Through the act of description, places are characterised as good (utopian) or bad (dystopian). Whether explicitly or more often implicitly, their good or bad qualities are explained. Dystopias are explained as failed, inverted or fallen utopias (Elwood, 1976). As failed projects, they warn people elsewhere not to attempt similar things, and/or they present problems to be solved, implicitly suggesting solutions. In this respect, dystopias refer beyond their often fictional settings, to real places and politics.

Whether they be fiction or non-fiction, general or specific in their setting, dystopias refer to real places, whether close to home or further afield, and whether domestic or colonial. Many utopias and dystopias are fictional. Thomas More’s original Utopia (1516) was a fictional place – etymologically, the good place that is nowhere (Elwood, 1976) – and loosely set fictions, including science fictions and imaginary voyages, have come to dominate the genre. Dystopias, too, have often been overtly fictional. The author of a dystopia writes ‘as if there were such a place, to shed light on the (mental) spaces we do occupy’ (Rohatyn, 1989, p. 95). Some utopias and dystopias depict more realistic, but fictionalised or generalised space. Daniel Defoe’s arguably utopian Robinson Crusoe (1719), for example, was set somewhere off the coast of Guyana, but...
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More fundamentally in generic colonial space (Phillips, 1997). Other utopian and dystopian narratives, including the travel accounts of Sierra Leone that are reviewed in this paper, portray particular places.

Whether they portray imagined, fictionalised or particular places, there is always a place to be recognised on some level, and ultimately to be changed. Booker (1994, p.176) argues that dystopias present ‘unfamiliar perspectives on familiar issues’ through a ‘defamiliarizing strategy of revealing evils in society through shocks of recognition’. Whereas utopias tend to address ‘deficiencies of the present’ and advocate progressive solutions (Marin, 1984, p.195), dystopias warn about ‘deficiencies of the future’ and adopt more radical positions (Ross, 1991, p.143), ‘sounding warnings about the direction in which contemporary society seems to be heading’ (Elwood, 1976, p.vii). Dystopias have been written from a range of political perspectives and on a range of themes, from the abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves, condemned in Thomas Carlyle’s dystopian account of mid-nineteenth century Jamaica (Carlyle, 1860 [1849]), to the industrialisation of England and the proletarianisation and alienation of workers, lamented in Frederick Engels’ dystopian chronicles of Manchester and Salford (Marcus, 1973). Thus dystopian narratives are never mere descriptions, but interventions.

The appropriative and interventionist character of dystopian writing underpins its close association with a wider set of processes concerned with taking and changing places: those associated with imperialism. The synergy between utopias and dystopias and colonialism is both formal and historical. As discrete, holistic, distant, controllable places of otherness, dystopias fit neatly into colonial geographical imaginations. Marin illustrates the most fundamental synergy between utopian and dystopian thought and imperial discourse when he writes that: ‘Utopia is not only a distant country on the edge of the world; it is also the Other World, the world as ‘other,’ and the ‘other’ as world’ (Marin, 1984, p.242). In More’s seminal text, and in subsequent utopias and dystopias, ‘the New World hovers on the horizon of the utopic discourse’ (Marin, 1984, p.138). Where the utopia or dystopia is set in colonial space, regardless of whether it is aimed at colonial or domestic issues, the sense of reality grounds and enforces the intervention. Arguably, a dystopia set in a real, albeit unknown new world might be taken more literally and accepted as more realistic than a dystopia set in fantastic space. It might also intervene in broader issues and in other places. For example, as noted above, Carlyle’s dystopian account of ‘frightfulest’ Jamaica (Carlyle, 1860, p. 80) implicitly criticised the abolition of slavery and emancipation of slaves, asserting the need for a more rigid racial order in the British Empire. Similarly, in some respects, a number of British authors produced dystopian accounts of West and Central Africa. They were particularly harsh on Sierra Leone, which was routinely labelled ‘the white man’s grave’, and became a quintessentially dystopian reference point in British geographical imaginations. The following sections explore the form and function of dystopian images of Sierra Leone in British travel writing.

Dystopian form: Sierra Leone

British travellers started writing books about Sierra Leone soon after their countrymen and women established a settlement there in the early 1790s, and they continued to do so through (and after) decolonisation in 1961 (Table 1). Before introducing and then examining travel books about Sierra Leone, it is necessary to establish briefly the historical and geographical context.

The Sierra Leone peninsula was, for several centuries, an important node in the slave trade (Ogborn, 2000). Its role changed dramatically in 1787, when a group of British businessmen who claimed to be philanthropists founded a settlement there, in which to settle poor blacks and freed slaves (Braidwood, 1994). The original settlers were driven away by neighbouring people three years later, but in 1791 Royal Charter was granted to the Sierra Leone Company, which assumed responsibility for administration of the colony and reopened the settlement to freed slaves. The following year saw an influx of African-Americans, who came via Nova Scotia. The settlement, particularly its capital, renamed Freetown, absorbed former slaves from Jamaica (Lockett, 1999) and migrant Kroo labourers from other parts of West Africa. Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony in 1808. It was small, extending twenty-five miles along the coast and up to twelve miles inland, but it was important to the British, who used it to settle captives, whom they rescued from illegal slave vessels. The colonial economy revolved around trade. Freetown Harbour was an important site for trans-shipment and storage of ocean-borne cargoes (Fyfe and Jones, 1968). The capital city grew, its population increasing from around 18,000 in the middle of the century to around 22,000 in the 1880s (Banton, 1957). This
The dystopian image of Sierra Leone was also temporally and socially differentiated. British travel writers described the different chapters in the history of Sierra Leone, which I have outlined, and they did so in historically specific ways. They also offered different perspectives on it, not only because they comprised a mixture of women and men, black and white people, tourists and explorers, amateurs and professionals, private individuals and public servants, but also because of their different political interests and objectives. Their works comprise a variety of entertainments and studies or polemics, simple and more literary works, non-fictional accounts of actual journeys and fictions derived less directly from journeys. The accounts reviewed in this paper were all informed by visits to the colony – whether for a few days or for many years – and therefore fall within a conventional, if not uncontested, definition of travel writing. Some of the principal authors during the colonial period include: Anna Maria Falconbridge, who visited and published on the colony in the early 1790s; Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, who was consulted over proposals to found a colony in Sierra Leone in the 1790s; Elizabeth Melville, the wife of a colonial judge, who served in Sierra Leone in the 1840s; Richard Burton, a consul in the region in the 1860s and an independent traveller and prospector in the 1880s; Mary Kingsley, who visited in the late 1890s; and Graeme Greene, who passed through as an independent traveller in the mid-1930s and was posted to Sierra Leone during the Second World War. Although different in some respects, their travel accounts of Sierra Leone are strikingly repetitive. Derek Gregory has noted that travel writers tend to read each others’ books, to see the places they visit through them, and in some respects to reproduce their ideas and assumptions (Gregory, 1995). His observation, derived from British travellers and travel writers in Egypt, applies equally to Sierra Leone. For example, Captain Chamier elaborated the by-then clichéd image of the ‘white man’s grave’, claiming in 1832 that:

I have seen many-many places in my life: I have been east and west, north and south, ascended mountains and dived in mines; but I never knew, nor ever heard mention of so villainous, sickly, and miserable an abode, as Sierra Leone.

(Chamier, 1832, p.264)
In turn, Burton quoted Chamier in the epigraph to his own account of the colony (Burton, 1863, Vol. I, p. 193), and others quoted and borrowed from him. Like other dystopias, Sierra Leone was constructed as a fallen, failed or inverted utopia. Early writers, in particular, recalled the colony’s utopian ideals (as a home for poor blacks and emancipated slaves, and a place for the advancement of black and mixed-race peoples), and explicitly or implicitly claimed that these ideals had failed to deliver. Equiano wrote that he had been ‘very agreeably surprised’ to hear of the British plan to send some African former slaves from London ‘to their native quarter’ (Equiano, 1814, p.171), though his optimism subsided when, appointed as a ‘commissary for government in the intended expedition’ (Equiano, 1814, p.172), he witnessed corruption and embellishment on the part of the contractors, suffering among the ‘black poor’ on board ship (Equiano, 1814, p.173), and then chaos in the colony itself. He concluded that the utopian project, ‘humane and politic in its design’, had proved ‘unfortunate in the event’ (Equiano, 1814, p.174). Other writers expressed the disappointments of Sierra Leone figuratively and/or spatially. One of Greene’s English characters ‘felt an awful disappointment, as though he had not found what he was looking for’ (Greene, 1948, p.190). To others, the colony was attractive from a (spatial, temporal or intellectual) distance, but closer inspection proved otherwise. Melville’s account of Sierra Leone begins as a kind of Eden, with soft focus images of local flora and fauna, and an optimistic attitude towards the liberation and progress of Africans in the colony. Later, though, she began to complain of the difficulties of ‘a country so uncivilized and remote as this’ (Melville, 1849, p.122) and was reminded that her ‘home is indeed on a foreign shore’ (Melville, 1849, p.122). Other writers, including some who were less sympathetic and/or familiar with the founding ideals of Sierra Leone, represented its disappointments more summarily. As Kingsley put it, ‘Sierra Leone appears at its best when seen from the sea’ and ‘here its charms, artistic, moral, and residential, end’ (Kingsley, 1897, p.15).

Accounts of Sierra Leone, like those of other dystopias, construct this as an other world, a microcosm of society. Holistic, the colony could be visualised from a single point in material or imaginative space. Melville’s ‘whole voyage’ to the colony was ‘like a confused dream’ (Melville, 1849, p.1), while Banbury’s departure was ‘an indistinct remembrance of a sick bed, a few kind visitors’ and finally ‘steaming away’ (Banbury, 1889, p.288). The absolute otherness of Sierra Leone was also suggested in descriptions that explicitly abandoned realism and thereby portrayed a place off the edge of the map, beyond the compass of conventional geographical description. Of course, Sierra Leone was clearly marked on contemporary maps and sea charts, and, as a staging post for West African shipping, it was regularly visited. Metaphorically, however, the colony remained ‘off the map’—to Chamier, for example, it was the ‘poste restante of the devil’ (Chamier, 1832, p.266).

Dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone referred, both locally and widely, to a range of interconnected themes and issues including: slavery and race; sickness and public health; social order and social change. Race is perhaps the most salient theme in British accounts of Sierra Leone. Although important differences exist between British writers in the colony, and though their racial attitudes generally changed over time—I explain below that attitudes to cultural and racial hybridity and creolisation in the colony changed markedly through the nineteenth century—some themes cut across their accounts. Melville, for example, complained of laziness and misplaced pride among the colony’s original British and Nova Scotian settlers, and its liberated Africans alike. She devoted considerable portions of her account of Sierra Leone to the difficulties of finding servants and then getting them to work (Melville, 1849). Creoles and Africans were accused widely, by these British writers, of sexual immorality ranging from rape to child abuse. Banbury (1889, p.162), for example, noted that ‘Much has been written and said against the morals of the natives’, and asserted that ‘there is little doubt civilized notions of propriety are anything but strictly regarded’. The image of moral laxity and disorder was fundamentally racialised. Kingsley (1897, p.17) wrote that ‘the great majority of the native inhabitants of Sierra Leone pay no attention whatever to where they are going, either in this world or the next, the confusion and noise are out of all proportion to the size of the town’. Not simply describing a bustling street, she was suggesting something more fundamental about the instability of racial and ethnic categories in the colony. Particularly unsympathetic towards the Creoles, whose Europeanisation sat awkwardly in relation...
to binarised imperial discourse, with its simple divisions between coloniser and colonised, white and black, master and servant (Porter, 1963; Brathwaite, 1971; Bhabha, 1994), she admitted a yearning either to ‘laugh with, or at’ the Creole, or to ‘punch his head’ (Kingsley, 1897, p.17).

In addition to portraying race per se, travel writers considered racial encounters. In ‘the white man’s grave’, white people were not only medically but, more fundamentally, racially vulnerable. Most tangibly, whites were portrayed as vulnerable to sickness and death. Travel writers claimed, for example, that ‘It is quite customary to ask in the morning, how many died last night?’ (Rankin, 1836, p.i). Clarke generalised that ‘one by one [Europeans] have dropped into an untimely grave, or perhaps have lingered out an existence, stamped in their sallow, pallid or jaundiced looks, emaciated limbs, and tottering gait’ (Clarke, 1843, p.15). His descriptions of medical conditions were often pungent; he claimed, for example, that ‘The late Colonial Surveyor, a few hours previous to his death… voided a tape worm twelve feet in length’ (1843, p.101). Racialised vulnerability was also depicted in the form of sexually threatened whiteness. Falconbridge wrote of women who had been abducted in England and shipped to Sierra Leone, where they were compelled to work as prostitutes and take black husbands, a process that not only violated but obscured their racial identities (Coleman, 1999). The women, she claimed, were ‘so decrepit with disease, and so disguised with filth and dirt, that I should never have supposed they were born white’ (Falconbridge, 1802, p. 66).

Until the end of the nineteenth century, and in some cases into the twentieth, disease was blamed on what Kingsley (1897, p.681) vaguely called the ‘deadliness of the climate’. Precise climatic explanations for the most prevalent diseases were not established, or more often refuted, until the turn of the century. In 1897, certain mosquitoes were identified as the carriers of malaria, and this established a link between climatic and environmental causes of the disease (Gale, 1976). The new environmental explanation was both articulated and anticipated in travel writing, which portrayed an environment that was broadly deadly. Chamier portrayed Freetown as ‘a swamp: day and night mosquitoes buzzed with their ceaseless buzz, excepting when they rested to bite their victim’ (Chamier, 1832, p.264). Miasmatic explanations were offered by writers such as Holman (1840), who argued that a belt of wood ‘must considerably impede the current of air’ around nearby marshland (Holman, 1840, p.71), and Burton, who blamed the colony’s geological foundations for its poor drainage (Burton, 1863, Vol. I, p. 199). Although they blamed climate and physical environment for poor health in Freetown, travel writers sketched a human ecology in which physical and social disorder were interlinked. Most tangibly, Ingham (1894, p.313) complained of ‘the unpaved and grass-grown streets, the absence of sidewalks, the open gutters, the poor arrangements for lighting, the inattention to sanitary matters’, and Kingsley of smells in the air, which ‘demonstrate that the inhabitants do not regard sanitary matters with the smallest degree of interest’ (Kingsley, 1897, p.16). Fundamentally, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Freetown and Sierra Leone were identified with chaos, nature and savagery. Human life was chaotic – ‘the wooden huts were distributed in careless irregularity’ (Chamier, 1832, p.263). Disorder also defined the natural world, which was both savage and beyond control – the river ‘frequently overflowed’ (Chamier, 1832, p.263), and ‘alligators appeared the lords of the deep’ (Chamier, 1832, p.264). Cheryl McEwan (1996, p.70) argues that ‘the image of West African landscapes’ in British travel literature was characterised by ‘absolute pandemonium’ (see also Brantlinger, 1985). This chaotic setting embodied many of the threads of dystopian literature more generally, but functioned in specific ways, as the next section explains.

Explanation

To observe that colonies were sometimes portrayed in conventionally dystopian terms is to raise a series of questions about why they were, and why it mattered that they were. These questions are addressed, in the following sections, through continued attention to Sierra Leone. In the first instance, it is important to consider practical and often straightforward reasons for why writers consistently portrayed a place in dystopian terms. It will then be necessary to consider the more fundamental processes at work when places are portrayed as dystopias, and the implications of this for the places themselves and the wider world.

There is a simple answer to the question of why Sierra Leone was portrayed as the white man’s grave: initially, it was a white man’s grave. The image is deceptive though, with respect to gender and race, for the settlement was also the grave of white women, and many black men and women. Death
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rates among Europeans in their first year in the settlement reached 700 per 1000 in the late eighteenth century. Between 1819 and 1836 the Sierra Leone Command lost 48 per cent of its 1843 men, most to sickness (Gale, 1976). But Europeans were not the only ones to suffer poor health in Sierra Leone. Medical evidence does suggest that repeated outbreaks of malaria and yellow fever had built up an immunity among the indigenous people, giving them a decisive advantage over the Europeans (Hewa, 1995, p.2). However, once they had survived a year or two on the coast, whites were no more susceptible to disease than were others in the region (Curtin, 1961). Second, medical conditions improved, particularly in the 1840s when overall death rates fell to half of their earlier levels (Curtin, 1961), but the colony’s image for sickness and death only became more entrenched.

Another reason why travellers were often negative about Sierra Leone relates to the circumstances of their travel. Few British people who visited the colony did so out of choice. Civil servants generally preferred other colonies with larger European populations, prospects for promotion and reputations for attractive lifestyles (Frenkel and Western, 1988). Falconbridge came to the colony in a kind of social exile; her hasty marriage to a man who turned out to be alcoholic and violent had excluded her from certain circles in England (Coleman, 1999). Melville was happier to be in the colony, but her husband’s posting was not a great endorsement of his standing in the legal profession, so it must have been somewhat unwelcome, and she admitted in her account of the colony that she found its social life very limited (McEwan, 1996). Burton was also an exile in West Africa; after public scandals that threw his integrity and also his sexual morality into question, his posting to a minor consulate in Fernando Po was a form of exile (Brodie, 1967). Greene first visited the colony out of choice, but his long wartime sojourn there was another involuntary journey. He could have been referring to any one of a number of British travellers in the colony when he wrote (of an Englishman), ‘A grievance stirred in him, a hatred of those who had brought him here’. (Greene, 1948, p.190). This sort of grievance translated to negative attitudes towards the colony.

On another level, the image of Sierra Leone did not improve because, although individuals such as travel writer Harrison Rankin made ad hoc efforts in this direction – he argued that the colony’s reputation was unfair (Rankin, 1836) – relatively few systematic attempts were made to change it. The government and commercial interests in Sierra Leone did place the odd advertising supplement in a British newspaper, but their efforts did not compare with those of other British colonies, which invested heavily in their reputations. They did so to counter negative images such as drought in Australia and cold in Canada, and to replace them with positive images that would attract investors, migrants, travellers and others. Their marketing campaigns depended upon large numbers of individuals and organisations, at levels ranging from small town boosters (newspapers, speculators, committed individuals) to corporate propaganda departments (such as that of the Canadian Pacific Railway) and colonial government departments (the Canadian Department of the Interior, for example) (Owram, 1980). Sierra Leone, in contrast, did not depend upon large numbers of European immigrants, partly because its economy and military depended largely upon non-Europeans, partly because some of its European population was coerced to serve there, for example, by court martial sentences and by civil and military postings. Nor did Sierra Leone, a small colony with minimal levels of imperial investment, have the economic or cultural potential for image production. Consequently, while the image of certain colonies improved, that of Sierra Leone only worsened. For example, New South Wales started out with a dystopian image, as a place of punishment, and Sierra Leone with an utopian image, as a place of freedom, but within a generation these roles and images were reversed (Coleman, 1999).

In addition to these practical explanations, dystopian images of Sierra Leone may also be linked to some more fundamental dynamics, associated with the racial order of the colony, and more generally of the British Empire. These dynamics identify some important functions of colonial dystopias.

Dystopian function
To understand the ways in which dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone functioned, it is necessary to know something about the colony and its place within the British Empire.

Although small and often economically marginal, Sierra Leone played an important role in the changing racial order of the British Empire, and indeed the world, largely because of its crucial role in British anti-slavery campaigns and then in experiments with the advancement of black peoples (see...
The British anti-slave trade squadron, based in Sierra Leone from 1809, brought large numbers of recaptives to the small colony. Those who stayed were absorbed into the dominantly Creole society (Banton, 1957; Wyse, 1988). Creoles lived mostly in or near Freetown, wore European clothes and ‘adopted many of the values of Victorian society in their public life’ (Banton, 1957, p.6). Local Temne and Mende peoples and West African migrants formed a minority in the Sierra Leone colony, but a majority in the surrounding area, which later constituted the Protectorate. The colony was also home to a relatively small but powerful population of Lebanese traders (numbering several thousand); and a small population of British merchants, military personnel and officials (these numbered just a few hundred, most of them men, throughout the nineteenth century). This political and settlement history made Sierra Leone a complex multiracial society.

The colony played an important role in Britain’s slow process of ending slavery. First, it absorbed black people who had been freed by Britain’s domestic ban on slavery, but who found themselves in poverty there and unable to emigrate. Then it absorbed would-be slaves, freed from slave vessels but in danger of recapture, in a world where slavery continued—including in other British colonies. Effectively, Sierra Leone enabled Britain to maintain contradictory policies on slavery and thereby make a gradual transition from that system. As noted above, it also played an important role in the changing, perhaps improving, fortunes of (some) black Africans. Creoles in Sierra Leone participated, to an unprecedented extent, in European education, professions, business, politics and other areas of social life. There were pragmatic as well as idealistic reasons for this; difficulties in recruiting and retaining European civil servants and soldiers led to increased reliance on Africans for much of the nineteenth century. For many years, however, the colony was at the cutting edge of a certain kind of black liberation and advancement, and played an important part in the transition from a slave to a post-slave imperial economy. One might expect it to have been held in high esteem, held up as an example of progress. On the contrary, despite or perhaps because of its progressive practices and its significance in processes of change, the colony was regarded with horror in many quarters and portrayed, as I have explained, in conventionally and specifically racially dystopian terms. The following paragraphs consider ways in which dystopian images may have functioned, both locally within the colony and more broadly within the British Empire, with reference to the works of one British travel writer: Richard Burton. Burton’s accounts may be positioned in relation to the racial attitudes and race relations of the periods in which he visited: the 1860s and 1880s.

Through his dystopian account of Sierra Leone, Burton variously endorsed and outdid the harder of contemporary racial theorists (see Lorimer, 1978). He claimed to find evidence of ‘the arrested physiological development of the negro’ (Burton, 1864, Vol. II, p. 178). Supporting general assertions with observations of Sierra Leone and other parts of West Africa, he maintained that ‘the negro is still, as he has been for the last 4000 years, best when “held to labour” by better and wiser men than himself’ (Burton, 1864, Vol. II, p. 204). Abolition and emancipation were irreversible by the time Burton visited the region, in the 1860s, though he did have scope to intervene in more contemporary racial politics, generally through the propagation of a new racism (noted above), and specifically through interventions relating to the racial division of labour markets and residential space in Sierra Leone, and to the spread of colonial rule in West Africa. There was, however, a considerable time lag between Burton’s travel writing on Sierra Leone, and the changes that were to take place there, along the lines he proposed. This makes it clear that Burton did not influence colonial policy in any immediate way, and indeed that his likely influence was not to guide policy-makers, but rather to sow the seeds of new colonial policies, which had yet to find mainstream support.

Through his dystopian account of Sierra Leone, as a space of social and more specifically racial disorder, Burton not only asserted the inferiority of blacks, he also condemned those who appeared to transgress the racial hierarchy: the Creoles. It was, of course, a contradiction in Burton’s racism that he condemned blacks as a whole for their alleged laziness, but also attacked certain black and mixed race individuals for their ambitions. ‘No one,’ he argued, ‘is more hopeless about the civilisation of Africa than the semi-civilised African returning to the “home of his fathers”...’. (Burton, 1863, Vol. I, p. 210). Racially conservative attitudes, which Burton promoted, have been linked to increased segregation in a number of spheres of colonial life, both in Sierra Leone and in other parts of the British Empire in the second half of the century. One manifestation of this was a reduction of workplace mobility.
and status for blacks. In Sierra Leone in the 1890s, black professionals were removed from many key positions in the colonial establishment – Queen’s Advocate, Colonial Postmaster, Colonial Chaplain, to name but a few. In 1903 the Governor of Sierra Leone wrote to the Colonial Secretary in London seeking assurance that certain key posts including Private Secretary and Clerk of the Executive Council would be reserved for Europeans (Frenkel and Western, 1988). These developments should not be linked too directly to racism in general, nor to dystopian images of race in the works of writers such as Richard Burton, though some historians insist that some link did exist between hardening racial attitudes and the marginalisation of black Africans in employment. For instance, Boahen (1990, p. 208) argues that the ‘ascendancy of racist theory led to a policy of denying Africans, no matter how well educated, equal rights and opportunities with the whites in the colonial service’. Later, Creoles were to be further disempowered, as the British began to prepare an enlarged Sierra Leone for independence and, with it, majority – African – rule. In his antipathy to Creoles, Burton pre-dated and promoted the twofold marginalisation of Creole people; in a perverse way, he was ahead of his time.

Through other strands of his dystopian narrative, particularly his version of ‘the white man’s grave’, Burton intervened with respect to a number of other, more implicitly racialised social and political questions which were being addressed in Sierra Leone and beyond. Throughout West Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, implicitly or explicitly racist colonial authorities increased the racial segregation of residential areas (Boahen, 1990). In Sierra Leone, Burton argued for segregation, ostensibly on health grounds. His arguments, which others also put forward, filtered through to the highest levels of colonial administration. In 1863 he proposed that ‘On the heights above the settlement, there is doubtless room for cool and healthy country seats, where the European exiles might be comparatively safe from dysentery and yellow fever’ (Burton, 1863, Vol. I, p. 200). In 1900 the colonial medical officer stated that ‘We advocate segregation from the native’ (Dr W. Prout, quoted by Frenkel and Western, 1988, p.211). Segregationist policies led to the construction and opening in 1904 of a European residential enclave, built at a distance from Freetown and connected by a railway line (Gale, 1976). Frenkel and Western (1988) argue convincingly that segregationist policies were not necessarily directly or primarily racist; the separation of races was an attempt at protecting Europeans from disease, and was a racially unfair policy but not necessarily a racist one (Hewa, 1995, p.6). If not intrinsically racist, however, segregationist practices did enjoy the support of openly racist commentators such as Burton.

Burton’s dystopian account of Sierra Leone as a region of disorder can also be linked to the wider scramble for Africa, which took place in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Burton concluded his unsympathetic portrayal of the Sierra Leone region with a suggestion that this region could (still) be developed and improved: ‘With good management the colony might have become a flourishing portion of the empire, extending deep into Africa, and opening up to our commerce lands teeming with varied wealth. Now it is the mere ruin of an emporium’. (Burton, 1863, p.265). Other writers made explicit the subtext of disorder, which is the scope for imperial order. Thus, for example, Holman (1840, p.84) had commented on the ‘great fertility, and natural beauty of the surrounding country, which it was really painful to contrast with the extreme ignorance and indolence of its inhabitants. There is not, perhaps, a country under Heaven more calculated to repay the exertions of industry, from the richness and fertility of the soil...’. References to the first signs of improvement, which were said to establish order, civilisation and material prosperity, qualified the otherwise dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone. For example, Freetown’s regular street plan was a subject of general approval, and improvements in public order were also praised, not least by colonial officials. Thus Governor A.E. Kennedy had ‘no hesitation in stating that the colony is progressing safely and rapidly’, partly through investment, secured through stability and order (Kennedy, 1853, p.194). The establishment of the protectorate in 1896 and the consolidation of British influence in the region continued this process, which rested upon assertions about the dystopian state of the region, which colonialism would transform.

To summarise, Burton argued that Sierra Leone had not lived up to the utopian intentions of its founders, asserting that ‘this colony, intended as a “model of policy”, and founded with the object of promoting African improvement, has been the greatest obstacle to progress’ (Burton, 1883, Vol. II, p. 30). Although he lamented the demise of slavery, Burton was less interested in the past than in the present and future, for which he presented dys-
topian scenarios of chaotic and regressive racial equality, and proposed alternatives based on segregation and the extension of imperial rule. Of course, the mechanisms linking dystopias by authors such as Burton with policies and practices in areas such as residential segregation, employment discrimination and racially structured imperialism were, at most, indirect.

Conclusion
The preceding analysis of the form and function of colonial dystopias, and specifically dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone, suggests some conclusions regarding the imperial and other power relations in utopian and dystopian imaginations and interventions.

The power of dystopian geographical representations is shaped by their form and content, and negotiated by their readers and users. No text is intrinsically powerful. Texts must be read, and readings must be deployed, if they are to have any effect. The relative autonomy of readers is underlined in Carlyle’s account of conditions in Jamaica (mentioned above), which was presented as the script of a public lecture, punctuated with audience reactions: from ‘emotion in the audience; which the Chairman suppressed’ (Carlyle, 1860, p.81) to ‘various persons, in an agitated manner, with an air of indignation, left the room’ (Carlyle, 1860, p.85). Although the dystopian text – indeed, any text – can be read and used in more than one way, its range of possible readings and uses is not unlimited (Fish, 1980). Said is right to insist on the power of colonial discourse and of the differentiated geographical imagination, for the form and content of a text or image structures and delimits the kind of intervention it is able to make, or be used to make. Dystopias are distinctive in the specific ways that they assert geographical – or assert geographically – problems, and implicitly or explicitly propose solutions to them. In this respect, they do in a specific way something that colonialism does much more generally, which is to appropriate and transform, both imaginatively and materially.

Dystopias tend to run against the grain of dominant imperial power relations and/or processes. As contextual interventions they are both dynamic and contradictory. Dynamic, dystopian images may appear and disappear within relatively short periods of time, not just because the places have changed, but because the politics associated with their representation have changed. Thus, as enthusiasm for ending slavery gave way to hardening racial attitudes, Sierra Leone’s utopian reputation flipped into its dystopian opposite. The fluidity of utopian and dystopian representations highlights an underlying dynamic in colonial discourse, which may facilitate change within a never static, never monolithic imperialism. Contradictory, dystopias challenge, and are challenged by, other texts and images of place. Dominant dystopian representations of Sierra Leone by writers such as Richard Burton challenged more sympathetic if not wholly utopian texts by writers such as Elizabeth Melville. In turn, his and other dystopian images have been contested by a range of writers and in a range of other media, including photography and film, official records and newspapers, and by a range of British and other individuals and groups. Travel writer Harrison Rankin tried to dismantle the dystopian image through argument and evidence. Creole barrister William Rainy contested Burton’s portrayal of Sierra Leone in his pamphlet, The Censor Censured (1865). Looking beyond the British and colonial scope of this paper, a series of historically and/or politically postcolonial travel and other writers illustrate a wider range of literary strategies for unmapping dystopias. In his 1995 travel novel, White Man’s Grave, American writer Richard Dooling parodies and subverts the colonial narrative of travel to and within West Africa, destabilising the negativity of Western representations of the region. To deconstruct resiliently dystopian images – of a white man’s grave or a heart of darkness – is potentially to contest colonial ways of seeing, contributing to the broader, anti-neocolonial project of Decolonising the Mind (Wathiong’o, 1986).

Given the plurality of representations, it is important to qualify the claims of this paper, which have tended to generalise about the form and function of dystopian accounts of Sierra Leone, and to do so with reference to one particular medium and writer, by acknowledging the dynamics – the changeability and the tensions and contradictions – inherent in geographical representations. Although it would be wrong to overstate the significance of individual writers and/or texts within broad and complex imperial processes of representing and making places, it is important to insist upon and continue to examine – contextually and critically – the significance of such writers and texts for real people and places, whose labour and land, bodies and resources, constitute the imperial or neocolonial bottom line.
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Richard Phillips, Lecturer in Geography, European Studies Research Institute, Salford University, Manchester M5 4WT, UK. Tel: +44 161 295 5646 E-mail: r.s.phillips@salford.ac.uk;

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