CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Daily into the Blue

> Stage and story can be either a protective park or a laboratory; sometimes they console or appease, sometimes they incite; they can be a flight from or a prefiguring of the future.
>
> Ernst Bloch in interview[1]

This book explores the narrative treatment of time from a philosophical perspective. I will be concerned with how the experience of lived time, or temporality, functions in a specific set of British novels to reveal the persistence of the utopian imagination in the twenty-first century. Central to this book is the assertion that utopian expression not only persists within the twenty-first-century novel, but is shaping an emerging body of fictions whose shared interrogation of lived and historical time reveals a series of radically non-linear, disjunct, pluralised and alternative temporal constructions. The writers I have selected for inclusion within this study represent a renaissance of British literary talent in the contemporary period that cuts across different generations. I include younger writers who have recently emerged into the world of letters but remain understudied within academic circles, such as Claire Fuller and Grace McCleen; as well as those writers whose careers have developed into maturity as I have been writing this book over the past ten years – David Mitchell, Hari Kunzru, Joanna Kavenna and Jon McGregor; and I am also interested in writers from an earlier generation: figures such as Ali Smith, Jim Crace and Maggie Gee, who came of age during the 1980s at a pivotal time in the internationalisation of British writing as literary prizes and lists of recognition transformed British fiction and its international reception (e.g., Granta's Best of Young British Novelists lists, in which several of the novelists with which I am concerned have been named: Maggie Gee was in the first 1983 selection, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell in the 2003 list and Joanna Kavenna in the 2013 list). A shared preoccupation with examining the *lived experience of time* and its bewilderingly non-linear forms in

the contemporary hyper-digitised era brings these novelists together, and their dynamic body of fictions demonstrates the ways in which literary texts can contribute to critical and philosophical theories of temporality. It will be my argument that these British writers are producing innovative engagements with time through their narratives of futurity, apocalypse, transmigration and haunting. As works of fiction, these novels can therefore *dramatise* the experience of time – at both the individual and the collective levels – in a way that political theory and philosophical discourse cannot.

The formal innovations presented by these writers are accompanied, in many cases, by an engaged intervention into social and political debate, presenting us with a series of questions concerning the role of the British novel in the twenty-first century. Maggie Gee and Jim Crace have dedicated their careers to examining questions central to British cultural life over the past thirty years, including thorny issues of class, racism and multi-ethnic integration (in Gee's *The White Family* (2002), for example), often exploring complex issues of identity and community in a mythopoeic register (in Crace's *The Gift of Stones* (1988), *Arcadia* (1992) and *Harvest* (2013)). Gee's novels, in particular, have consistently examined the domesticity of British families through the prism of broader geopolitical and apocalyptic concerns (in *The Burning Book* (1985), *Where Are the Snows?* (1991), *The Ice People* (1998) and *The Flood* (2004)), leading Mine Özyurt Kiliç to name Gee as an exemplary author of the 'condition-of-England novel'.[2] Younger writers included in this study have similarly brought formal experimentation to bear on questions of British identity. Jon McGregor's first novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002) weaves omniscient narration into a story of connection between the anonymous neighbours of an archetypal British street, whilst *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006) and *Even the Dogs* (2010) explore the traumatising experiences of alcoholism, poverty, homelessness and mental illness upon characters situated in British urban landscapes, in specific as well as indefinite ways. David Mitchell and Joanna Kavenna's novels have similarly combined this kind of national and regional locatedness with a more formally dislocating sense of geographical ambiguity. Whilst the English cities and villages of novels such as Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999), *Cloud Atlas* (2004), *Black Swan Green* (2006), *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and *Slade House* (2015) and Kavenna's *Inglorious* (2007) and *The Birth of Love* (2010) are clearly identifiable, they slide into surreal alternate

topographies of possibility, but also of violence, predation and insanity. Much of Ali Smith's fiction similarly layers mimetic English locations (London, Norfolk, Cambridge, Cornwall) with additional rich imaginative terrain through poetic formal devices in novels such as *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005), *How to be Both* (2014), *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017). Meanwhile, the emerging careers of the younger novelists with whom I am concerned similarly yoke realism with the fabulism of formally and generically hybrid narratives in texts such as Fuller's *Our Endless Numbered Days* (2015) and McCleen's *The Land of Decoration* (2012).

Since the millennium, we have witnessed a new confidence in the experimentation and inventiveness of British fiction. As Patrick O'Donnell argues, this places contemporary British novels in important company, 'comparable in quality and range to that of American postmodernist experimentation during the 1960s and 1970s'.[3] This new confidence can be identified within the particular British novels under discussion in this book through their shared utopian imaginary. As I shall describe, this utopian imaginary suggests the important political function of novels that bring formal innovation to bear upon a reconceived sense of social engagement in the twenty-first century, as the previously hegemonic phase of neoliberal economic and political alignment that held sway in the late twentieth century has become unmoored in Britain, as elsewhere. These contemporary British novels intervene in pressing discursive struggles around issues of identity, belonging, community and historical locatedness at a time of encroaching environmental catastrophe and bewildering geopolitical realignment. The material effects of such dislocatedness can be seen in a number of discursive arenas, including, for example, the impact of anti-terror legislation on the project of multiculturalism, the resurgence of national and parochial identities in response to globalisation, the grinding onslaught of austerity politics following the Global Financial Crisis, rising inequality and the profound tensions of asymmetrical economic growth across the different regions of the United Kingdom – all of which became crystallised in the June 2016 Brexit referendum and its subsequent political fallout. Despite the uncertain and often foreboding sensibility of these times, the novels I shall discuss in this book present a perhaps surprisingly *hopeful* outlook in the face of subjects that more often lend themselves to portrayals of dystopian near-futures and political despair. The novels with which I shall be concerned offer us a different picture of contemporary British life. Their formal inventiveness and suggestively non-mimetic encounters with otherwise realist narrative

representations of contemporary experience open up a realm of utopian possibility that shines through in moments of temporal alterity: glimpses of the future, redeemed strands of past hopes and alternative social worlds already alive in the present.

Focusing the discussion of this powerful utopian imaginary through an analysis of time and temporality helps us understand the deep anachronisms at work within the contemporary period. The purpose of this book is therefore to interrogate what narrative functions these representations of time perform, what philosophical questions they raise, what utopian strategies they employ, how their innovative temporalities weave between secular as well as religious models of time, and what their broader cultural and political implications might be. I will be arguing for the distinctiveness of a particular set of British writers and novels as well as presenting a strategy for reading these utopian fictions. As David James has written, 'contemporary writing is more than ever demanding a fresh critical language';[4] and the task of this book will be to respond to this pressing need for a critical language that is capable of apprehending the subtle interplay of formal innovation and philosophical questioning that such utopian novels rehearse. The twenty-first-century fictions under discussion thus contribute towards a disrupting of the solidity of the real in the naturalised genre of realist 'literary' fiction through their non-linear temporalities. The present becomes malleable as redeemed pasts and anticipated futures eddy within a roiling depiction of temporal experience that often blurs the secular and the sacred, and this delinearised sense of time is given aesthetic expression through non-mimetic experiments with narrative voice and structure.

This collection of innovative fictions is also distinctive in terms of its generic borrowings. The writers I discuss are equally comfortable sampling the generic motifs and plotlines of pulp thrillers, dystopian fiction, science fiction and post-apocalyptic narratives, as they are echoing the innovations of 'high' modernism or writing back to the classical texts of literary realism. This signals a decisive shift away from the late-twentieth-century tenets of postmodernism, with its depoliticised ludic playfulness, paranoid narrators, historical reflexivity, metafictional self-regard and fragmented linguistic and discursive registers. But it also suggests the importance of developing a coherent reading approach through which to understand the nascent new century and its emerging aesthetic and political concerns which, at the time of writing, remain gelatinous and yet to be fully understood. An approach that takes seriously the premise that fiction intervenes into political discourse – both intentionally, if we are interested in

authorial intentionality, as well as unintentionally through our politicised readings – returns us to the question of genre. One of the most striking developments of post-millennial fiction in Britain as elsewhere has been the increasing number of novels that blur the boundaries between 'genre' fiction (science fiction, fantasy literature, speculative literature, detective fiction and so on) and 'literary' fiction (traditionally conceived in terms of a particular mode of literary realism). This kind of boundary crossing has led Gary K. Wolfe to identify the 'evaporating genres' that populate twenty-first-century literature and require readers to reconceive their previously held methods of interpreting texts, as well as asserting a revived sensibility of the fantastic and the speculative in the contemporary period.[5]

Ours Is a Time of Profound Unevenness

Questions of formal experimentation and generic borrowings are never divorced from the material, political circumstances to which they respond, and in which literary texts intervene. Indeed, as theories of the novel have consistently demonstrated, it is a form that both enables and privileges a cannibalisation of other narrative modes of representation; what Mikhail Bakhtin called its dialogic function.[6] The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) connect the novel's formal dialogism with an ability to absorb, rework and contain other times and their socio-political structures. 'The peculiar plasticity and hybridity of the novel form', they write, 'enables it to incorporate not only multiple literary levels, genres and modes, but also other non-literary and archaic cultural forms – so that, for example, realist elements might be mixed with more experimental modes of narration, or older literary devices might be reactivated in juxtaposition with more contemporary frames'.[7] As I will argue in this book, the juxtaposition of literary styles, the sampling and mixing of older novelistic devices with newer formal developments, gives narrative expression to our experience of the contemporary. In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly clear that ours is a time of profound unevenness in the sense that Trotsky described in *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930). As a general law of the development of history, he wrote, unevenness:

> . . . reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* – by which we mean a drawing together of the

> different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an *amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms*.[8]

Trotsky's influential formulation recognises the discontinuous temporalities that constitute any given historical moment, with its eddying blend of archaic and anachronistic ideas abutting contemporary, progressive or even futuristic currents. Whilst this 'combined and uneven' approach has been influential within socio-political analyses, it has failed to penetrate discussions within literary scholarship.

As we near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, this recognition of the temporal unevenness of the present time seems more pertinent than ever. There can be little doubt that postmodernity, which Fredric Jameson famously described as the cultural logic of late capitalism,[9] has now relinquished its paradigmatic position within cultural production. The specific combination of globalisation, liberal humanism and neoliberal economic growth that supported postmodernism's cultural hegemony has given way to an era defined by radical uncertainty. Since the tectonic geopolitical shift of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and America's subsequent 'War on Terror', the world has witnessed an escalating sense of the disintegration of a number of political stabilities. The interventionist policies that characterised the Bush and Blair premierships and ideologically underpinned the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the US-led war in Afghanistan have subsequently given way to political anxieties concerning intervention (as seen, for example, in the recent failure of developed countries to intervene in Saudi Arabia and Iran's proxy war in Yemen, which has caused the worst man-made humanitarian crisis of our time since the civil war began in 2015). Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and protracted economic downturn have led to widespread discussion concerning the viability of the neoliberal project; a project that appeared globally triumphant in the 1990s, as expressed in Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis. William Davies, a British political and sociological theorist, suggests that since the financial crisis neoliberalism 'has entered some sort of post-hegemonic phase' which marks a new historical era of ideological and political development: distinct from neoliberalism's ascendency as a tool of class power in the 1980s, as well as its entrenchment during 1989 until 2008 as the normative logic of marketisation that penetrated all spheres of human life and cultural activity.[10] In the United Kingdom, neoliberalism's shift post-2008 has been characterised by austerity and punitive measures against numerous social groups (notably, welfare claimants, public sector workers, women and disabled people), leading to an 'apparently senseless

violence'[11] against ordinary citizens that has fuelled the resurgence of anti-capitalist political opposition. Resistance to the visibly ailing structures of neoliberal ideology sparked a global political movement in 2011 when activists camped at Zuccotti Park in New York's Wall Street financial district, the seat of neoliberalism's financialisation in the United States, to highlight their protest against economic inequality and the role of the banking sector in the Global Financial Crisis. The Occupy! movement rapidly spread to Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia, merging with social justice movements in places as disparate as Israel, Chile and Greece. Protests in Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Egypt, known collectively as the Arab Spring, surprised complacent dictatorships with youth movements that articulated demographic inequality and high youth unemployment, and led to regime change, ongoing civil wars and regional instability. Closer to home, stagnant wage growth, the soaring cost of living and rising migration and refugeeism have given rise to the resurgence of nationalist and protectionist policies in the United Kingdom (of which the June 2016 Brexit vote is but one expression), the growth of far-right political groups in Europe and the United States, and a gnashing sense that austerity politics has failed. The decline of ordinary people's incomes and prosperity whilst a global cabal of billionaires continue their untrammelled accumulation of capital returns us to levels of income inequality not seen since the end of the First World War.[12]

A broad sense of crisis thus marks the ways in which global capitalism continues to amplify inequality in the twenty-first century. At a time of political and economic uncertainty, Trotsky's theory of the *combined and uneven development* that capitalism enacts by absorbing different modes of production and their social forms into its own insatiable unfolding seems more relevant than ever. In London, where I live and work, the extent of the crisis is all too visible in the social cleansing taking place on an industrial scale: the city continues to sell precious space to international property developers to build unaffordable luxury towers that sit empty, despite their glinting spas and twenty-four-hour concierge, as homelessness and insecure housing drag an ever-increasing number of individuals and families into life-threatening destitution. Indeed, the Grenfell Tower fire of June 2017 in which over 70 people lost their lives became a catastrophic reminder of how little value the city's ruling elites place on ordinary Londoners. Inequality, then, is on the increase in the capital as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. At the same time, a more specific kind of historical disarticulation has been taking place, which reveals the *temporal unevenness*

in the period under discussion. By this I mean the sense in which the national narrative has become muddied to the point of incoherence. The June 2016 Brexit vote is a sharp reminder of the growing cultural and political tensions that lie behind Britain's fraught narrative of 'imagined community', the term Benedict Anderson gives to the project of forging collective identities at the national level through cultural representation.[13] As Michael Gardiner suggests, the Brexit referendum reminds us of the way in which nationalism often appears 'out of time'. 'If the British economic underpinnings of progress point to a single temporality', he writes, 'then "nationalism" could mean local points of temporal unevenness, or anachronism. The potential for questioning from the absolute sovereignty of the economy can be glimpsed in such *glitches of apparently natural developmental time*.'[14] This time 'that simply naturally unfolds', the so-called natural time of national economic and cultural development, is of course the linear progressive time of neoliberalism or what Mark Fisher termed 'capitalist realism'.[15] Such a narrative reifies and obscures the deep asynchronisms at work in British life. It is an ideological construction in which 'progress' is coupled with the passage of chronological time so that a narrative emerges in which markers of economic prosperity (increasing social mobility, for instance) and cultural flourishing are perceived to increase over time in the same way that advances in medicine, technology and scientific research accumulate across the decades and generations. Literary production, however, is not anchored in this cumulative, developmental time. Works of fiction may actively reshape the material world in which the author finds him- or herself, including the ideological, ideational and experiential coordinates of space and time. Thus, rather than simply reflecting or even mediating the anachronisms at work within twenty-first-century lived experience, we find that writers and other artists are increasingly using anachronism 'as a weapon', as Fisher observed. Laura Oldfield Ford's collage text *Savage Messiah* (2011), for example, reconstructs forgotten temporal forms and examples of political collectivity – among punks, anarchists, protesters, and so on – whose previous howls of discontent against neoliberalism and its cruel programme of gentrification leave powerful archaeological traces on the London landscape; building what Gardiner calls a 'glitchscape' in which the formerly hegemonic national time of progress and development becomes unstuck, unmoored and riven by glitches.[16]

These are just some of the immense political changes that have taken place during the period in which the novels under examination in *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* have been published. These novels have

been written at a time of profound political and economic upheaval; in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere around the globe. Their articulation of utopian anticipation, as well as their distinctive formal and generic experimentation, must therefore be read within the context of a transitional period that has important ramifications for literary readings. It is this sense of political, and even ontological, uncertainty that interests me here; and the temporal disjointedness that marks our experience in the twenty-first century has given rise to different expressions of the unevenness of the contemporary, at the level of novelistic structure, prose style, generic sampling and non-mimetic interventions into otherwise realist narratives and juxtaposed timescales. This is what I call *non-contemporaneity*. This study will explore how the non-contemporaneous temporalities suggested in a number of contemporary British novels respond to, and suggestively reshape, the inequalities and unevenness of twenty-first-century social and political life in a distinctly utopian direction. In identifying and analysing the different ways in which non-contemporaneity functions in these novels, I will show how their stylistic and aesthetic concerns relate to the inescapable material realities to which they respond and also creatively (re-) shape. Non-contemporaneity offers us a philosophical frame through which to understand the multiple, overlapping and contradictory time signatures that clash and coalesce within the present moment, and which the fictions under discussion in this study eloquently depict. As this book hopefully demonstrates, attuning our literary readings to the functioning of non-contemporaneous temporalities within these novels allows us to disambiguate the complex formal and aesthetic strategies that such texts offer for grasping the present moment.

My analysis of non-contemporaneity will be brought to bear on three levels of literary analysis. The first level is *formal*. The novel is a literary form that both enables, as well as privileges, multiple temporalities. It emerged in the eighteenth century to give expression to a new experience of contemporaneity (as Peter Rawlings observes, the term 'novel' derives from the Italian word *novella*, which means 'tale' or 'piece of news', and establishes the genre's concern with the present time of everyday experience rather than the heroic past of poetic antiquity).[17] As such, it is well suited to an examination of the uneven timescales that co-mingle within our experience of the present. More than this, the contemporary British novel exemplifies an accelerated sense of the incoherent temporalities that have come to define the contemporary moment since 2001, which can be identified through a growing preoccupation with formal and generic experimentation that speaks to a distinctive phase of literary production

in the 2000s and 2010s. The second level of my analysis of non-contemporaneity is therefore *political*. The period during which these novels were written is one that is defined by the growing unevenness of capitalist development, and to which a utopian vocabulary responds through the insistence that another world is possible and is, in fact, already germinating. This has become clear in the revival of leftist opposition, student protest movements and digitally coordinated global struggle of the kind not seen since the 1968 cultural revolution.[18] Finally, the third level is *philosophical*. The experience of contemporaneity, as many philosophers tell us, is strictly impossible. To be contemporary, one must also be *un*-contemporary: open to other times and other ways of being that circulate within our experience of the present. This has particular relevance for a reconsideration of liberal humanism (as I will describe in the discussion of post-anthropocentric timescales in Chapter 5), and can be felt in the resurgence of a number of historical anachronisms, particularly post-2011 – the return of the rentier class not seen at this scale since before the First World War, or Donald Trump's intransigent championing of the fossil-fuel economy during his tenure as US President, at a time of finite, dwindling resources and irreversible climate change; to take just two prominent examples. These political, ideological and economic anachronisms have resurfaced in recent years alongside the *nova* of contemporary (and often seemingly futuristic) innovations, such as the algorithmic control of news and social media consumption, or the threat to entire industries and professions presented by increased automation, or even the complicated supranational supply chains and production lines of many of today's industries, which defy older understandings of geography and temporality. The unevenness of wealth, opportunity, education and access to the basic necessities for living are becoming ever more apparent as we head towards the third decade of the twenty-first century; and these political effects meet with a recalibration of temporal experience and its literary representation in the years since the millennium.

In the chapters that follow, I lay the philosophical groundwork for my own reading of non-contemporaneity, which will inform the textual analyses of twenty-first-century fictions in this study. This reading is explicitly utopian in its conceptual heritage and builds upon the German utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch's notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (translated variously as 'simultaneous uncontemporaneities', 'non-simultaneity' or 'non-contemporaneity') outlined in *Heritage of Our Times* (*Erbschaft dieser Zeit*) (1935).[19] Bloch called Germany the 'classical land of non-contemporaneity'[20] which, unlike