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CLIMATE CRISIS AND LIVABLE FUTURES: URSULA K. LE GUIN'S UTOPIAS AND SOLARPUNK FICTION

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ABSTRACT

While literary responses to global environmental change have been varied, many have adopted a dystopian tone offering bleak visions of the future and thus helping to reinforce present-day perspectives and prevent action. In this essay, I examine texts that diverge from the prevailing apocalyptic mode and propose a more optimistic vision of the future: neither narratives of catastrophe and extinction nor eco-modernist tales of techno-optimism, these – what I call – 'modest utopias' sketch scenarios of livable futures beyond the Anthropocene. I discuss Ursula K. Le Guin's work as an important model for this way of writing and thinking about the future and climate change, focusing in particular on her *Always coming home* (1985) and some selected essays. Novels, as Le Guin claimed in "The carrier bag theory of fiction," are best seen as medicine bundles "holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (2019b: 933). Accordingly, my exploration of Le Guin's works traces the relations they have helped establish in contemporary critical theory and climate fiction and examines the latter's efforts to transform the present by imagining habitable futures through solarpunk utopias that are participatory, peaceful, and nurturing, and that focus on process and relations rather than on progress and growth.

Keywords: climate change, hyperobjects, Ursula K. Le Guin, utopia, solarpunk.

A book is an act; it takes place in time, not just in space.
It is not information, but relations.
Ursula K. Le Guin

1. Introduction

Discussions of environmental breakdown in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have produced an overall sense of being lost, resulting from the gradual realization of the extent and the long-lasting effects of the changes brought about

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by human actions. The growing awareness of the dangers of environmental degradation and species extinction has contributed to shifting the focus to non-human perspectives, such as that offered by the recognition of the existence of hyperobjects. Timothy B. Morton describes them as objects that are massively distributed in time and space, whose scale and magnitude exceed and radically destabilize the human-centered notion of time. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*, Morton writes that hyperobjects are almost inaccessible to perception, "time-stretched to such a vast extent that they become almost impossible to hold in mind" (2013: 58). They are simultaneously familiar and strange, producing an uncanny sense of estrangement that decenters the human by revealing the existence of other time scales and spaces. Hyperobjects—such as climate, capitalism, the Earth, or the biosphere—radically question the restriction of agency and thinking to humans alone by revealing that objects have a history of their own, one that exceeds their interactions with humans. By "generat[ing] spacetime vortices" and through horrifying timescales (Morton 2013: 2, 59), hyperobjects effectively shatter the certitude of anthropocentric time and unveil the existence of multiple and intersecting temporal frames and agents.

In these newly disturbed timescales, experiencing and living with actual and anticipated environmental loss has been mirrored by the bleak, dystopian and post-apocalyptic visions that dominate contemporary fiction. These dystopian imaginaries not only reflect the general distress but also, as Erik Swyngedouw argues, displace social conflicts, work to "foreclose a proper political framing" (2010: 219), and halt productive actions by demonstrating that there is no time left for change, that humans are powerless, and that nothing they do can avert the apocalypse. In this article, I examine texts that offer a less dystopian, more empowering, and socially engaged response to environmental degradation. Emerging at the beginning of the 21st century, solarpunk fiction is neither a narrative of catastrophes and extinction nor an eco-modernist tale of techno-optimism. Rather, it presents scenarios of feasible, livable futures beyond the Anthropocene that I suggest could be best referred to as modest utopias. If dystopias retreat in the encounter with hyperobjects by presenting images of decay, demise, and the end of man, environmental utopias, such as solarpunk, strive to incorporate the awareness of their existence by decentering the human and emphasizing the role of multispecies connections.

I begin the article by referring to selected works by Ursula K. Le Guin, whose oeuvre provides an important model for the more optimistic way of writing and thinking about the future and climate change, and one that seems better suited to convey the large scales of hyperobjects. I describe Le Guin's proposal of a new type of utopia, presented in the essay "A non-euclidean view of California as a cold place to be" (2019c), and discuss the new utopian elements in her 1985 novel *Always coming home (*2019a). The analysis of selected solarpunk fictions

approaches them as building on Le Guin's insights and highlights their non-euclidean[2] features, particularly their recognition of multiple timescales and spaces that transcend the anthropocentric perspective common to traditional utopias. Novels, as Le Guin argued in "The carrier bag theory of fiction," are best seen as medicine bundles "holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (2019b: 933). By stressing the role of Le Guin's work in the emergence of solarpunk fictions,[3] I approach her writing as a complex bundle of ideas and affects that establishes networks of relations between various stories, concepts, and times, and opens routes to habitable futures through the construction of utopias that offer visions of sustainable future living, yet one critically anchored in the readers' present.

2. Non-euclidean imaginaries and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always coming home*

First published in 1983, "A non-euclidean view of California as a cold place to be" is a critique of traditional utopias, which are contrasted with less expansive, more modest utopias that offer visions of a future that is not perfect but is livable for humans and nonhumans alike. Le Guin's description of the old-style utopia, which she labels euclidean, criticizes its rational character and the underlying belief in progress. Like Euclidean geometry, this utopia stresses simple, unchanged, and universal rules that apply only to an idealization of the real world, striving to create a reality recognizable to the readers. Le Guin condemns such utopias for being "trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth" (2019c: 907). Significantly, this kind of utopia is by definition uninhabitable because it is always postponed into a distant future, so that "[a]s soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia" (Le Guin 2019c: 901).

Instead, the writer proposes a utopia that does not erase the present nor distorts the past, and that can be reached not "by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways" (Le Guin 2019c: 922), gathering various objects and subjects intersecting in what could be described, following Morton, as "a crisscrossing mesh of spacetime fluctuations" (2013: 65). Le Guin portrays the non-euclidean utopia as not progressive, European, expanding, or masculine (2019c: 910), but as "dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful,

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2 Following Le Guin's essay, I do not capitalize the word "euclidean" to stress the concept's embeddedness in Le Guin's work and her critique of the European, masculine ideals of utopias based on progress.

3 The role that Le Guin's work, in particular her *Always coming home*, has played in developing a new model of environmental utopia has been discussed by numerous critics, including Lisa Garforth (2005), Karl Zuelke (2021), Ben Garlick and Liesl King (2022), and Daniel Davison-Vecchione and Sean Seeger (2023), to whose findings I refer in this article.

nurturant, retreating" (2019c: 913), associated with qualities historically coded as feminine. This distancing from European masculine ideals of progress and continual expansion signals a rejection of imperial histories of conquest and the forceful erasure of other cultures and peoples that accompanied them, and points to the need to devise other, more caring and nurturing ways of being in the world. Most importantly, in an era of living with environmental loss, the non-euclidean, non-European utopia imagines a society that, according to Le Guin, "has made a successful adaptation to its environment and has learned to live without destroying itself or the people next door" (2019c: 921).

Always coming home, published in 1985, was created in cooperation with artist Margaret Chodos-Irvine and geomancer George Hersh. It follows the rules set out in Le Guin's essay by depicting "a society with a modest standard of living, conservative of natural resources, with a low constant fertility rate and a political life based upon consent" (2019c: 921). The Kesh live in the Valley of Na (Napa Valley) in Northern California in the distant future after a catastrophic, earth-transforming event. While the nature of the catastrophe is not revealed, the high levels of toxicity, extensive regions devastated by poisonous and radioactive substances, and people suffering from permanent genetic impairment all suggest that an ecological disaster must have occurred in the past. Uncannily, the past echoes the readers' present, demonstrating the damaging character of neoliberal, capitalist, and extractivist modernity. As Daniel Davison-Vecchione and Sean Seeger write, "Le Guin's own society is … woven into Kesh lore and superstition via the evidence left from that era's destructive activity" (2023: 134). This comingling and coexistence of the readers' present and the Kesh's past in the Valley of Na's future collapses the linearity of time and follows the protocols of storytelling described by Le Guin as characteristic of the non-euclidean utopia, which she claims works not "by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways" (2019c: 922), with the events taking place in various timelines, and often simultaneously.

The fixity of borders between the past and the future is questioned at the very beginning of the book, in "A first note," where *Always coming home* is described as a "translation from a language that doesn't yet exist" of a story about people "who might be going to have lived a long, long time from now" (2019a: 11). The next section, "Towards an archeology of the future," further illustrates the difficulty of differentiating between the future and the past and deciding "[w]hich is further from us, further out of reach, more silent—the dead, or the unborn?" (2019a: 16). Accordingly, in the book, the past, present, and future are presented as entangled and interdependent, proving that, as Le Guin suggests when describing the new utopia, "[i]n order to speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward" (2019c: 906). This act of "going backward" makes it possible to revisit the readers' present so

as to explore the processes that have shaped the world of the Kesh and thus to defamiliarize what to the readers appears "ordinary" and "taken for granted." Le Guin's combination of science fiction and anthropology results in the creation of what Davison-Vecchione and Seeger call "speculative anthropology," where the "anthropological component" makes the scenarios presented in the book more than "mock futures" and places them in "a zone somewhere between present and future: a kind of exploratory anticipation" (2023: 135) that does not preclude the possibility of acting for a different future world.[4]

By manipulating the temporal framework, Le Guin can draw attention to the importance of human actions and highlight the damaging effects of the activities originating in the time of the readers. The focus on spacetime vortices makes it possible to depict the consequences of what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence: occurring "gradually and out of sight" and "typically not viewed as violence at all," this is a violence of "delayed destruction" that is "dispersed across time and space" (2011: 2). While the mechanisms and effects of slow violence may not be visible in an individuals' lifetime, they are clear in the longer histories of communities, societies, and the planet. Slow violence and its "belated casualties" are routinely ignored in "our rhetorical conventions" (Nixon 2011: 14) and euclidean tales, which, as Le Guin warns, favor the figure of the Hero and their heroic deeds (2019b: 932), but may be portrayed in stories which move backward or sideways and make it possible to travel between worlds and times.

Although labelled a novel, *Always coming home* subverts the conventions of the genre by featuring multiple protagonists, both human and nonhuman, and weaving a variety of narratives that are linked by their affinity with the Kesh and the valley. The book is a compendium of stories, biographies, poems, songs, recipes, and plays of the community. Multimodal in form, it features maps (drawn by the author) and sketches of animals and plants, and was accompanied by a cassette with the "Music and poetry of the Kesh" (re-released on CD in 2018). *Always coming home* presents data gathered by an anthropologist named Pandora, whose cultural background and mindset seem similar to those of the readers, and who compiles reports about Kesh festivals, medicines, and beliefs, as well as comments on the difficulties and doubts she has experienced while studying the society. The most "conventional" part of the book is the story of Stone Telling, a young Kesh woman of the Valley, who narrates

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[4] The anthropological component of Le Guin's writing is undoubtedly a legacy of her parents. Her father, Alfred Louis Kroeber, was one of the most famous American cultural anthropologists in the 20th century studying Indigenous cultures. Her mother, Theodora Kroeber, was an anthropologist and author of several books about Native Californian cultures, including *Ishi in two worlds* (1961), the biography of the last known member of the Yahi Native American people. For a discussion of her parents' influence on Le Guin's love of place, see Garlick & King (2022): 7–9.

the time spent with her Condor father among his people. The beliefs and values of the Condor people recall the restrictions imposed by the modern patriarchal and militaristic society and illustrate the short-sightedness of extractivist capitalism. The final part, entitled "The back of the book," presents various aspects of the Kesh life, including a chart of the alphabet and its pronunciation, a description of medical instruments, an explanation of the names of the Kesh houses, and a glossary of Kesh words used in the text.

The variety of genres and modes of storytelling and the complex organization of the sections make the book significantly different from the traditional novel: rather than following a linear timeline, *Always coming home* foregrounds process and relationships to dwell on selected aspects of the Kesh life and portray their value system from different perspectives. There is no single plot and no simple description of the social structure in the text, just as there are "no central institutions and no formal politics" in the society of the Kesh (Garforth 2005: 414). The novel's polyphonic character, lack of a simple timeline and disrupted chronology, and the absence of a unified narrative structure require the reader's active participation in constructing meaning. As Lisa Garforth argues, this unique design turns the book into "a series of provocations or incitements to readers to intervene and invent" (2005: 415).[5] In line with Le Guin's definition of non-euclidean utopia, *Always coming home* is retreating, cyclical, and contracting rather than aggressive, progressive, and advancing (2019c: 913). With information dispersed, mosaic-like, across various sections, the book becomes like a sack, a spacious holder of words and meanings, which Le Guin suggested in "The carrier bag theory of fiction" might be "the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel" (2019b: 933).[6]

Listing the sources of inspiration for *Always coming home*, Le Guin highlights the importance of nonhuman others and "lessons from the people who lived there [in the Napa Valley], who had always lived there, the people who were the land—the old ones, the first ones, trees, rocks, animals, human people" (2019d: 959). The turn to Indigenous values and ways of living is one of the novel's most significant aspects. Karl Zuelke notes that the book "is remarkable in the way that it works to give voice to the absent referent of an indigenous society living in community with the plants, animals, and landscape" (2021: 143). The human

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5 A similar observation is made by Davison-Vecchione and Seeger, who write that Le Guin's book "requires sustained, active engagement on the part of the reader in constructing a context for the people and practices it depicts" (2023: 129).

6 Garlick and King note that reading the book "recalls Deleuze and Guattari's notion of book-as-rhizome" (2022: 3). While the organization of the book invites constant movement between its various parts, ultimately, it is the reader who determines how to read it and in what order. Similarly to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the book is a model of the heterogeneous: it is a dynamic system that expands endlessly in many directions, without a center (see Deleuze & Guattari 1988).

story is just one of the many tales in the novel, where various kinds of matter, like "toxic substances, chemicals, … landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (Iovino & Oppermann 2014: 7). The representation of matter as vibrant, "lively, agentic, and generative" as well as "densely storied" (Oppermann 2018: 411), decenters the human perspective and shifts the focus to nonhuman timescales and modes of situated, or emplaced, storytelling. The novel, as Ben Garlick and Liesl King argue, is distinguished by its depiction of the Kesh love of place, *topophilia*, which the scholars see as Le Guin's unique proposal of "a survival strategy in/beyond the Anthropocene" (2022: 7).[7] The relationship with the land plays a crucial role in the Kesh way of life: the community defines itself as extending beyond the human to include land, soils, water, plants, and animals, and its members are defined by their affiliation with one of the nine houses: five of the earth and four of the sky.

The depiction of the community as composed of human and nonhuman beings, things, and objects echoes the organization of Indigenous societies and makes the Kesh truly "international" in the sense given to the word by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who describes the Nishnaabeg "complex ways of relating to the plant nations, animal nations, and the spiritual realm" as "a network series of international relationships" based on "consent, reciprocity, respect, and empathy" (2017: 56, 60). In the Kesh culture, "kin" embraces all kinds of beings with whom one enters into a relationship, and there is nothing "primitive" or "symbolic" in "call[ing] an olive tree grandmother or a sheep sister," or "address[ing] a half-acre field of dirt plowed for corn as 'my brother'" (Le Guin 2019a: 638). For the society, "distinctions between plants, minerals, animals, and people are much less important than their shared life as members of the valley community" (Zuelke 2021: 144). Significantly, forming networks of connections is the only mode of living that offers a chance of survival for human and nonhuman people in the post-apocalyptic world. Their nature-centered way of life borrows from Indigenous cultures the insistence on the role of reciprocity and the belief that "all flourishing is mutual"—"What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together" (Kimmerer 2013: 15).[8] Garlick and King describe the relations between the Kesh and the Valley as

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7 Garlick and King situate their discussion of the sense of place in Le Guin's novel by references to hyperobjects, a framework to which I refer as well.

8 Significantly, an excerpt from Le Guin's essay "World-making" provides an epigraph to a chapter of Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (2013: 241), illustrating the reciprocal exchange of ideas and gifts which both the American writer and the Potawatomi botanist see as an essential component of being in the world.

providing "a model for a slow, emplaced way of living amidst a more-than-human landscape, peopled with kin and addressed as a subject of care" (2022: 10). These relations can also be described as a model for a culture of gratitude in which, as the botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer states, "[e]ach person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them" (2013: 115). The sense of duty to and responsibility for the valley forms the basis for the Kesh system of values and way of life, with care for all its inhabitants—human and nonhuman—serving as their guiding principle.

In "A non-euclidean view," Le Guin evokes the opening formula of a Cree story, "I go backward, look forward, as the porcupine does," as a way to help herself and her readers find a sense of their "future as a people" (2019c: 906). According to Howard A. Norman, for the Cree, the formula was "an instructive act of self-preservation" (in Le Guin 2019c: 906), which encouraged them to consciously turn to the past and then return to the present to prepare for what is to come. Similarly, the journey into the future of *Always coming home*, whose past is the readers' present, invites them to (self-)consciously turn backward to find ways to cope with the environmental harm done "under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism" (Yusoff 2018: 11). By positioning the readers as "conscious, mindful social actors" (Garforth 2005: 402), the book establishes a critical distance between the future it depicts and the readers' world to stress the importance of their present choices and to "point to ungrasped utopian possibilities within the present" (Davison-Vecchione & Seeger 2023: 122).[9] Unlike stories of eco-apocalypse, *Always coming home* foregrounds choice and agency (Garforth 2005: 399), and by looking back to Indigenous cultures, it imagines a "new" way of being in and with the world.

In her essay on utopias, Le Guin argues for the need to exchange "the exclusive and aggressive Spirit of Race" or "mysticism of blood" for the more benign and inclusive "Spirit of Place" (Le Guin 2019c: 906). *Always coming home* performs this exchange by redefining humans as emplaced and as nodes in a web of relations of care with the land, things, and human and nonhuman people. For Le Guin, the embeddedness in the present and the care of the land and kin provide the way into the future. She stressed the importance of place in her 1988 speech "Legends for a new land" (2019d), pointing to the depiction of being *with* the hyperobject Earth as one of the main goals

[9] This turn the future to explore the political and social organization of the present to suggest alternative future scenarios is one of the features that make Le Guin's description of non-euclidean utopia – and thus also solarpunk fiction – similar to Ruth Levitas's account of utopia as a method. See, for example, the introduction to her book, where Levitas discusses provisionality, reflexivity, dialogism, and the transformative potential as characteristic of utopia (2013: xvii–xviii).

of writing *Always coming home*. She described the book as the attempt "to write that hereness. To use without exploiting; to move in the sacred land that is also the commonplace world; to dance the way they dance in the Valley" (Le Guin 2019d: 965).

3. Solarpunk

Le Guin's *Always coming home* provides a model of utopian writing that replaces the belief in rationalism, progress, and growth with an emphasis on process, relationship, and circularity. Instead of focusing on human time and heroic achievement, it brings to the fore the time of hyperobjects, such as the Earth or climate, and depicts the spacetime fluctuations resulting from the recognition of their presence. By rejecting the linear vision of unlimited progress and placing readers in "a zone somewhere between present and future" (Davison-Vecchione & Seeger 2023: 135), Le Guin's work challenges the denial of agency that characterizes apocalyptic fictions and creates "a way to re-imagine social relationships with nature that aren't simply about survival but include the possibility of a better way of being" (Garforth 2005: 403).[10] As such, it creates a model for utopian writing that foregrounds the possibility of change and crafts careful visions of sustainable futures without denying the reality of the present environmental loss. This way of imagining the future has been adopted by solarpunk, a contemporary movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion, architecture, and activism that strives to counter the scenarios of a dying Earth by presenting visions of survival and living otherwise.[11]

Solarpunk emerged in the first decade of the 21st century and, from the very beginning, has been linked to the desire to develop ways of thinking about the future that are not dystopian. This desire was openly expressed in the essay published by Adam Flynn on Tumblr in 2012, tellingly titled "On the need for new futures." Commenting on the situation of young people at the beginning of the millennium, Flynn claims that their "future does not, strictly speaking, exist" and that they "are starved for visions of the future that will sustain [them], and give [them] something to hope for" (2012). Accordingly, solarpunk strives to provide hopeful visions of the future and seeks to revise and transform the dominant way of conceptualizing time by, on the one hand, re-imagining the future differently and more optimistically, and on the other, immersing the time of humans within that of other beings and objects, particularly

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10 I borrow the description from Garforth's discussion of two utopias: Le Guin's *Always coming home* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific edge* (2003).

11 While I stress the influence of Le Guin's work in this essay, other equally important influences on solarpunk include the work of Octavia Butler, Ernest Callenbach, Frank Herbert, and Kim Stanley Robinson.

the hyperobject Earth. This need to decouple ways of thinking about time from the limiting human perspective is one of the main goals of solarpunk. It combines the idea of "extending human life as a whole species, as opposed to just individually" (Flynn 2012) with the recognition of the importance of the Earth and nonhuman Others.

The significance of non-human others to imagining a realizable future has been stressed by numerous solarpunk writers and texts. The editors of *Multispecies cities*, a collection of solarpunk stories about urban futures, state in the introduction to the volume that "we can only truly understand the world if we look at the many ways humans and other life forms are entangled, in a way that cannot be easily separated" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 3). Similarly, in a "Foreword" to *Wings of renewal: A solarpunk dragon anthology*, Claudie Arseneault writes that these "stories are about banding together, dismantling oppressive structures, and leaving no one behind" (2015: loc. 60). The importance of combining environmental sustainability with social justice and equity is stressed in *A solarpunk manifesto*, published in 2019, and can be seen as a response to Le Guin's call to create a society ruled by consent and respectful of natural resources (2019c). Most importantly, solarpunks reject the euclidean mode of thinking and acting by declaring a new relationship to the Earth, where humans are no longer "overlords" or conquerors but "caretakers" and "gardeners" (Solarpunk community 2019).

The rejection of the euclidean mode requires a transformation of the ways of storytelling in order to depict the newly imagined relation between the human and nonhuman worlds. Echoing Le Guin's protests against linear stories of Hero's achievements, the editors of *Multispecies cities* call for a reform of literature and transformation of "the familiar fabric of fiction" through, among others, questioning the value and validity of "progress-based narratives, stories of the individual, the lone hero, [and] people against people" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 7). This new type of narrative can be seen in "The Boston hearth project," published in 2017 in one of the first solarpunk collections,[12] *Sunvault: Stories of solarpunk and eco-speculation*, where instead of a hero, the protagonists are a group of rebels who hijack a corporate building for the rich and repurpose it into a shelter for the homeless. Likewise, the authors and protagonists of "Midsummer night's heist," from a 2018 solarpunk collection, are members of Commando Jugendstil and Tales from the EV Studio, artistic and activist collectives based in

[12] Printed collections of solarpunk stories began to appear in the second decade of the 21st century. Significantly, from the beginning, the collections aimed at international authorship and readership. In most cases, the writers are not professionals, and the printed stories are winners of contests organized by environmental organizations, including Extinction Rebellion, which held its first global short story contest in 2021. Solarpunk stories continue to appear both online and in print.

Italy. Their actions—both in the story and in the real world—aim to combat nationalistic, sexist, and xenophobic attitudes and movements. The story depicts a takeover of city space, an all-night guerrilla action, by pacifist organizations, where art and communal cooperation become the means of effective protest. The belief in everyday heroism and the rejection of the lone-hero model are explicitly addressed in the Tales from the EV Studio's website, where they state that "everybody can be the hero of their own story, regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status and health" (Tales from the EV Studio). Commando Jugendstil's real-life artivism, such as creating giant art projects that generate energy, puts into practice the solarpunk recognition that science fiction is not simply entertainment but "a form of activism" (Solarpunk community 2019).

Solarpunk stories endeavor to transform narrative structures and to open storytelling to both human and more-than-human voices. The editors of *Multispecies cities* argue that new techniques are required in order to depict "decentralized action and cooperation" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 8) and to present nonhuman protagonists. Such texts also require a different rendering of time so as to portray the slow violence of "capitalist production or a centrally commanded system" and "the slowness of the response on a planetary scale" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 7). Accordingly, the stories in *Multispecies cities* and other solarpunk collections attempt to reflect the timescale of hyperobjects by shifting emphasis from stories of individuals to those of communities or peoples and by making the natural world the character or protagonist of the tale. Many depict small communities trying to survive in a hostile environment and to cope with, and sometimes undo, the ecological degradation of the Anthropocene.[13] By focusing on multispecies relationships "as a core element of worldbuilding" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 5) and insisting on the need to understand and realize "the responsibilities of kinship" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 7), the stories emphasize the need for social change and global action by making their storytellers not only "aesthetes of a stricken time but also … designers and navigators of a tomorrow to look forward to" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 10).

The emphasis on multispecies relations of reciprocity and care that characterizes the solarpunk movement and the new way of thinking about time complicates the neat division into (human) past, present, and future and uncovers the existence of other (human and nonhuman) timescales. Like Le Guin's *Always coming home*, solarpunk stories stress the importance of remembering and taking

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13 Some stories present solutions to climate change and species loss that are uncannily close to geoengineering or genetic experiments. See, for example, D. K. Mok's "The birdsong fossil" (2021) which describes scientists' efforts to combat species extinction by constructing mechanical animals.

responsibility for the past when preparing projects for a better future. A.C. Wise's "A catalogue of sunlight at the end of the world" (2017: 221–236) from *Sunvault* depicts people leaving Earth in 2232, when anthropogenic climate change has rendered life impossible. The human timescale is juxtaposed with Earth's through the description of death at the levels of the planet, the species, and the individual, i.e. the narrator's wife. The story concludes on a hopeful note for humankind, with people embarking on a journey in search of a new home aboard ships carrying specimens from the dying planet. However, it also foregrounds sadness and the sense of failed responsibility by depicting an elderly narrator who refuses to leave because he feels that he "owe[s] it to the Earth to stay with her as long as [he] can" and because "[n]o one, not even a planet, should have to die alone" (2017: 228). The decision to stay illustrates the ongoing duty to care, while the ambiguous ending—neither dystopian nor utopian—embodies the solarpunk idea of optopia: a place between utopia and dystopia, not a perfect world, but an achievable one.[14]

The representation of time as a knotted, nonlinear, and multiscalar, and the need to look to the past in order to speculate about the future, which Le Guin links with the non-euclidean utopia, echoes Kyle Whyte's description of the Indigenous notion of spiraling time which captures reality as constant change. A spiraling temporality, as Whyte explains, is a perspective that brings together the past, present, and future, and refers to "the varied experiences of time that we have as participants within living narratives involving our ancestors and descendants" (2018: 229). Spiraling narratives insert human time within the time of the species and the planet—they "unfold as constant dialogues" and "through our interacting with, responding to and reflecting on the actual or potential actions and viewpoints of our ancestors and descendants" (Whyte 2018: 229). The poem "Please" by Chloe N. Clark from *Sunvault* adopts such spiraling perspective by presenting "honoring the dead" and remembering the past as a necessary part of a sustainable future. The poem starts with the command to remember the past of the Earth, and finishes by describing the conditions of moving into the future:

Mother says honor the dead
but don't be lost in them,
those birds whose skeletons
spread across shores, those
landscapes left wanting

[14] "Optopia" is the title of a solarpunk zine about climate change, sustainability, and the future. See, for example, https://optopia-zine.tumblr.com/page/3

Mother says push
forward, promise to keep
moving, seeking, dreaming,
imagine that there is something
left that we have to give (Clark 2017: 13)

The birds and landscapes in the poem are among the ancestors who accompany the speaker, and the call to "push forward" and "keep moving" is an encouragement to dream of a future despite the memory of the wasted creatures, lands, and rivers "that no longer run, their bodies / thick with sludge, mouths / coughing up refuse" (Clark 2017: 13). The poem is a plea to continue caring for the damaged planet, and to treasure its memory in order to nurture a better future, demonstrating that looking back is necessary to move forward.

The role of the past in shaping visions of a livable future is highlighted in "A séance in the Anthropocene" by Abigail Larkin which was published in the 2023 collection of solarpunk stories *Afterglow: Climate fiction for future ancestors*. In this text, remembering the lost world and "forging a connection to our past" (Larkin 2023: 74) are described as values crucial to the future society and as warnings against repeating past mistakes. The story juxtaposes two perspectives on the past by contrasting the teenage protagonist's desire to tend to the past with care and kindness with the rage against the past cultivated by those who survived the Anthropocene. While the survivors use memories of environmental loss to fuel their "rage against the past—to build a more righteous future on behalf of those who perished" (Larkin 2023: 76), the protagonist's meeting with a surviving representative of the fossil fuel industry leads her to realize that her world needs not only anger but also forgiveness. As the protagonist states, "[k]indness toward the past" (Larkin 2023: 91) is necessary to put the ghosts of the Anthropocene to rest so as to be able to move forward.

The future community portrayed in the story lives by Cherokee values, which further complicates the conventional divisions of time and history, demonstrating that the 'new' world may not be as new as it seems. By turning to Indigenous beliefs and modes of living, the short story echoes the emphasis on relationships and care of *Always coming home*, in its attempt to decenter the human and to open the way for imagining a more-than-human future. Like other solarpunk stories, it productively uses the past, turns and returns, "goes backward" to "look forward" (Le Guin 2019c: 906) so that "we can learn to negotiate, coexist, and flourish together" (Rupprecht et al. 2021: 4).[15]

[15] It is worth mentioning that the importance of Indigenous beliefs and value systems to solarpunk fiction is visible not only at the level of the content of the stories but also in the attempt to publish

Afterglow: Climate fiction for future ancestors begins with the recognition of the need to decolonize our imagination in order to be able to fashion new ways of thinking and speaking about the future. As adrienne maree brown writes in the introduction to the volume, "[i]n many ways, the work of decolonizing the future is the work of decolonizing our imaginations" (2023: x). Decolonizing involves not only telling "stories in which the protagonists are those whose stories are least often told" (brown 2023: x) but also it involves telling them in a different, non-euclidean mode that de-centers anthropocentric notions of time and foregrounds relations of multispecies kinship. In "Afterglow," the story opening the collection, one of the protagonists points to the importance of adopting such relational thinking as "a way of seeing that recognizes change and connection as the constant" (Brodeck 2023: 9). The protagonist-narrator argues for the need to replace the "language of imperialists, one that objectifies and capitalizes on virtually everything it comes into contact with" with a way of speaking that "emphasizes the connections between us, not the arbitrary boundaries intended to separate us" (Brodeck 2023: 8). The transformation of language reflects the newly gained awareness of the multifold entanglements between human and nonhuman beings. As a character in "Afterglow" explains, "it is incorrect to think of 'you' or 'me' as composed of only human-ness," because the fact that we are in and of the world "makes us amalgamations, holobionts, chimeras" (Brodeck 2023: 9) or, as Donna Haraway puts it, it makes us humus, not anthropos (2016: 55).

The variety of fictions grouped under solarpunk, along with the ongoing transformation of the genre, makes it challenging to formulate any definitive claims or distinctions. Still, among the multitude of texts, some common threads and perspectives emerge that indicate a move towards a different understanding of the form and function of utopia. The shift of emphasis from product to process and the focus on community and cooperation rather than an individual hero answer Le Guin's call for non-euclidean utopias that are nurturant, non-European, and participatory (2019c: 913). Instead of the static perfection of euclidean utopias, a quality that makes them uninhabitable (Le Guin 2019c: 911), solarpunk fictions embody the recognition of "change and connection as the constant" (Brodeck 2023: 9) and present the future as both dystopian and utopian, full of hardships but livable. By presenting images of uncertain futures, solarpunk creators refuse to focus on total collapse, apocalypse, and descent into a dark age which, as Sarena Ulibarri claims, "is the

culturally diverse writers and to support Indigenous communities. For example, all profits from *Wings of renewal: A solarpunk dragon anthology* (2015) were given to organizations dedicated to protecting the environment, with a focus on Native movements such as NoDAPL.

easier future to imagine" (2020: 7). The future is not a given but a potential, and solarpunk works strive to imagine how the potential can be realized because solarpunk is "not just about the stories, it is also about how we can get there" (Solarpunk community 2019).[16]

4. Conclusion

In "Deep in admiration," a speech delivered in 2014 and printed in 2017 in the collection dedicated to *Arts of living on a dying planet*, Le Guin speaks about humans "as particularly lively, intense, aware nodes of relation in an infinite network of connections" and as part of "[a] web of connections, infinite but locally fragile, with and among everything—all beings—including what we generally class as things, objects" (2017: 16). The importance of the more-than-human world and the emphasis on relationality make Le Guin's work an important model for solarpunk, where questioning the societal structures and human timescales as well as focusing on relations—between and within human and nonhuman communities—form the basis for imagining and realizing projects for the future. The emphasis on interconnectedness and relationships in solarpunk stories, as well as the representation of humans as enmeshed in the time of hyperobjects, unmasks the euclidean utopia's speciesist assumptions and the violence inherent in its promise that it is possible to build a perfect world from scratch. In many ways, solarpunk ecological tales are like the non-euclidean utopias described by Le Guin, which do not focus on progress, growth, or the individual hero, turning away from what the writer calls the euclidean mind, "obsessed by the idea of regulating all life by reason and bringing happiness to man whatever the cost" (2019c: 907).

Solarpunk fictions about the future are most often obscure, uncertain, yet hopeful about what may come, recognizing and yielding to the rights of other beings; modest in their utopian visions, they are participatory and circular, cyclical, peaceful, and nurturant (Le Guin 2019c: 913). Instead of focusing on the hero's story, they foreground the importance of cooperation, democratic governance, and slow action, and search for non-European value systems and ways of living. They propose a model of ecological ethics and politics that originates from the realization that there are various temporality formats, which is, as Morton argues, "equivalent to acknowledging in a deep way the existence of [human and nonhuman] beings that aren't you, with whom you coexist"

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[16] Solarpunk has been criticized for its focus on activism and breaking societal structures, and its emphasis on communities rather than individuals. The emerging genre that complements solarpunk is lunarpunk, which highlights spirituality and individuality. For a discussion of the two genres, see Payne (2022).

(2021: 66). Unlike the rationalist utopia, these stories are not "power trips" nor are they what Le Guin calls "a monotheocracy, declared by executive decree," premised on progress, not process, and with no habitable present (2019c: 909). Most importantly, while rejecting anthropocentric, androcentric, and heteronormative narratives, solarpunk stories offer images of an imperfect yet livable world and present futures that are not merely alternative but possible and habitable.

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