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Imagining Action in/Against the Anthropocene: Narrative Impasse and the Necessity of Alternatives to Effect Resistance

1. Introduction: The Political is Personal[1]

In the Anthropocene era, political action against climate change has been widely presented as a set of personal choices (that come always at the expense of comfort; my own and that of others), and it is difficult to know what, if anything, constitutes a course of action that is just and equitable, or that will make a tangible difference. Feminist philosopher Chris Cuomo points out the crucial but not well-known fact that "household consumption and personal transportation account for a significant but minority slice of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide . . . . personal sphere reductions . . . . are insufficient for adequate mitigation" (701). Cuomo reminds readers that fossil-fuel use is "woven" into the fabric of daily life in societies around the world, and it can be a difficult and exhausting process to effect change (702). Even if individual consumers are prepossessed of the money and time necessary to consistently seek out and buy local, organic, ethically-traded produce, install renewable energy systems, drive an electric vehicle, and all the rest, it would not count towards reducing emissions in any significant way. Yet, as Cuomo points out, concerned individuals have been exhorted by most environmental organizations to change their ways at a personal level in a way that alters their own private sphere—to change buildings' lightbulbs, to buy electric vehicles, to shop local, and to consume ethically. There is not an interrogation of the fact that consumption occurs at a staggering and unsustainable rate—the growth narrative goes largely unquestioned (Cuomo 700). At the same time, however, collective political lobbying or rallying against policies that are harmful to the environment are not actively encouraged by environmental groups as a more impactful course of action available to individuals (Cuomo 700). There do exist organizations such as Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, and the Tiny House Warriors that empower individuals to combat the forces of climate change and neoliberal capitalism in their

own communities through direct action. Yet individuals who participate in collective action are socially and politically condemned as posing a dangerous threat to the continued flow of local and global economies. Individuals are caught in a bind: take action against climate change, but do not be so active as to disrupt the status quo, which is what has prompted individuals to desire action in the first place. Change the self and, somehow, society will eventually change.

This is the hallmark narrative of the Anthropocene: the political has become personal and, more than that, a personal imperative. The conceptual framework of the Anthropocene funnels an incredible complexity of intersecting issues into an individualistic refrain: disempowered and distracted by the 24-hour news cycle, conscientious individuals can easily be led to believe that the fate of the world rests on their shoulders alone. Collective political mobilization to combat environmental problems—such as the international cooperation of countries, corporations, manufacturers, and consumers per the Montreal Protocol in the 1980s to reverse the widening of the hole in the planet's ozone layer (Sidder)—seems a distant and almost unimaginable action in the present day. There seems little that "I" can do, alone, about the multitude of negative forces that are tearing at the fabric of the world; as Martin Lukacs writes for *The Guardian*, "[w]hile we busy ourselves greening our personal lives, fossil fuel corporations are rendering these efforts irrelevant" ("Neoliberalism"). Lukacs articulates this as the result of an "ideological war" wherein a neoliberalist mindset has, over the latter half of the 20th century, dismantled walls barring the exercise of corporate power at the same time as rendering collective democratic action by citizens "unthinkable" ("Neoliberalism"). The concept of the Anthropocene constitutes a significant psychological impasse that requires the exploration of alternative narratives in order to realize meaningful resistance to it. As Amitav Ghosh so compellingly argues, the Anthropocene presents a challenge to "our commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general" (9); this is a crisis of narrative, in that viable alternatives do not seem to exist, so strong are the reductionist influences of Anthropocene discourses. This paper attempts a partial unravelling of the Anthropocene narrative, in order to create an opportunity to consider the tangible and attainable multiple alternative narratives of sustainable, just futurity as presented by the genre of solarpunk. Solarpunk is a relatively recent development in science fiction that imagines a near future where individuals are empowered to act not just against the climate crisis, but against the oppressive forces of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and the corruption of the political and socioeconomic status quo that enables it. Solarpunk is an artistic, activist, philosophical, grassroots, speculative movement forcing a new narrative of the future that combines realism and hope to articulate possibility.

Genre fiction can provide the necessary narrative disruption and recognitive remedies to redress and break through the conceptual impasse of the Anthropocene in order to imagine a sustainable future, particularly when written in the mode that Istvan Csicsery-Ronay describes as "science-fictionality" (2). Csicsery-Ronay draws on Darko Suvin's 1970 analysis of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement to argue that science fiction effects a spatio-temporal dislocation by employing the use of the *novum* or *nova*, the novelty or innovation(s)

from which all changes in the world of the narrative flow. Suvin required that the novum must lead readers in to a validation of its novelty through "scientifically methodical cognition" (65-66); a claim interrogated as suspect by women, people of colour, and readers from a non-Western context. In 1971, feminist writer and critic Joanna Russ published "Images of Women in Science Fiction," which in essence pointed out that, for (western) women, science fiction was rarely "cognitively valid," focusing instead on technological nova and sidestepping questions of gender entirely in favour of rehearsing stereotypical "images" of women as opposed to adequately portraying the realities of women's lives (Lefanu 14). Postcolonial and queer theorists added the dimensions of race and sexuality to this critique and pointed out that the claim of cognitive estrangement "suggests that everything in science fiction follows or should be conceptualized through the lens of the Western scientific rationalist paradigm" (Langer 9). Solarpunk can be found in this tradition of critical interrogation of the status quo of the future even before it has come to pass, as not merely proposing a swap of the fossil fuel-based economy of the present for an economy based on "greener" energy technologies (such as solar or wind) as the future's novum, but further exploring the ramifications of significant social change for all planetary life in order to fully imagine more realistic and just futures. Solarpunk is non-western in origin (the first anthology of solarpunk stories was published in Brazil in 2012) and strives for inclusion of feminist, queer, and BIPOC theory and thought, but, as noted by Rob Cameron, still has much to do to break from its parent genre of science fiction's definition by and perpetuation of western patriarchal norms and mindset and find "a solid connection with the underrepresented groups it's meant to include" ("In Search . . . Part 2"). There is a pressing need, Cameron points out, for solarpunk to detach itself from western utopic aspirations if it is to be truly committed to anti-racism ("In Search . . . Part 2"), as the western utopian urge historically and presently generates dystopia in real-time for marginalized and oppressed groups worldwide.

2. Counter-Narratives: Solarpunk Realities

It is becoming increasingly obvious that many societies are living the outcomes of their imaginative inabilities, as the dystopic earth predicted by so many science fiction narratives (in film and text) looms as an inevitability so ingrained into our vision of the future that we fail to be shocked by its arrival.[2] We are left to glumly assert along with theorist Hasana Sharp that we simply do not have the concepts and tools for the task of thinking and acting in the face of "genuinely global, planetary problems, with deep historical, biological, and chemical roots" (17). We may even invoke the tired line that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In this resignation is the temptation to give in to being overwhelmed, as the ends—and even the means by which to arrive there—are not something we can see. Enter solarpunk, a category of narratives that contains the potential to combat the overwhelming despair instilled by the Anthropocene, manifesting across a range of different media including

2 See Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, Netflix's *Altered Carbon*, William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromance*r, and the literary genre of cyberpunk for various depictions the same future of runaway late capitalism, environmental degradation, and ramped-up cyber-surveillance.

art, political activism, community organizing, and literature: it is "social justice as survival technology" (Cameron, "In Search . . . Part 2"). Solarpunk combines an art-nouveau aesthetic with a science-fictional implementation of green technologies (most notably solar, but also wind, wave/tide, and geothermal energy generation) as its first, basic, component (missolivialouise). The second, that of socio-political and economic revolution, is solarpunk's acknowledgement of the many different fronts on which it is necessary to combat the issues of the contemporary moment in order to create a positive future for all beings that qualifies it as a viable alternative imaginary to empower humans in the midst of the so-called Anthropocene.[3] Perhaps it is for this reason that explicitly solarpunk published literature has to date appeared in the form of short story anthologies such as *Sunvault: Stories of Eco-Speculation and Solarpunk* (2017) and *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018). There is no one vision of the future, but it can be pieced together out of many different viewpoints.

"The Boston Hearth Project" by T.X. Watson is an example of a story that mobilizes many of the key themes of solarpunk in its narrative, such as community, extra-legal-action driven by empathy, valuing individual humans, and infrastructure as resistance, and depicts an assemblage of humans navigating a small corner of the Anthropocenic world with care. The story focuses on main character Andie's description of homeless advocates' break-in and illegal occupation of the Hale Centre, a smart building[4] in downtown Boston, in the year 2022. The collective does this via a combination of augmented reality (AR) technology and disruption of the building's computer system that is evocative of the cyberpunk hacker ethos, appropriating technology and infrastructure built to serve "the Man" (a.k.a. corporation or government interests). Yet Watson's short story is unapologetically solarpunk in its politics: the point of the building's takeover is summed up succinctly by Andie:

> The rate of winter deaths of homeless people in Boston has been increasing every year since climate change has made weather patterns more and more erratic. The city was never equipped to protect the homeless during polar vortices, and it was getting worse, not better. There had been no new construction of homeless facilities, and two closures, in the last five years. (16)

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[3] Generic forbears include climate fiction (cli-fi) (extant for over 50 years; JG Ballard's *The Drowned World* [1962] is generally agreed to be one of the first cli-fi novels) and cyberpunk (a mid-eighties phenomenon exemplified by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* [1984]). Cli-fi novels foreground changes to the environment as the science fiction novum. Solarpunk is conscious of how class, politics, and technology structure its characters' environments and advocates for systemic change and rebellion against the status quo; however, solarpunk emphasizes intersecting oppressions such as racism and sexism that are absent from mainstream cyberpunk, and is as fiercely hopeful as cyberpunk is cynical about the future. As scholar Rhys Williams notes, solarpunk is not genre-bound, moving fluidly between signifiers of science fiction and fantasy in its aesthetic (Williams, "Solarpunk").

[4] That is, a building of many interconnected systems, comparable to an intranet, wherein all building functions are monitored and maintained by a single integrated "supernetwork." Please see https://buildingefficiencyinitiative.org/articles/what-smart-building for more information.

The way that political inaction is responsible for the situation of society's poorest members is the driving motivation of the short story; Watson's descriptions of transparent solar panels, advanced silent drone technology, ad hoc wireless networks, giant tanks of algae used as indoor "water filters and oxygen scrubbers" (21), and self-sustainable smart buildings are all certainly necessary to set the scene, but are not in themselves what gives the protagonist and their collaborators their impetus.

It is care and community that lie at the base of the narrative of "The Boston Hearth Project." It is the affect that drives narrative development and within which character actions take place. Andie does not work alone: the Boston Hearth Project is a community effort that relies on the talents of multiple volunteers to hack and rewire AR game gear, put up posters, manage social media, deal with police violence, and physically gain access to the Hale Centre to disable the intranet. Importantly, the Hale Centre itself is an active participant in the occupation: Andie writes that "the building was our weapon as well as our hostage" (Watson 24); the activists use its temperature regulation and automatically locking doors to trap and disarm police in riot gear—after hours at heightened temperatures, the police are made to discard their armour and arms and are sent away unharmed. The Hale Centre's controlled atmosphere, made possible by the algae's oxygenating properties and the self-generating energy of the sun, provide the ideal place for the volunteers to wait out a siege of outraged establishment forces. The collective effort is done without expectation of payment for their life-saving, world-changing work. Andie and fellow activists respond to the pressing issues of homelessness and structural disempowerment in the midst of catastrophic climate change, the ruthless collusion of governmental and corporate forces for fiscal gain, stark disparity between the rich and poor, and the seeming indifference and even hostility of the establishment towards the disadvantaged.

Solarpunk, in its development, is attentive not only to issues of sustainable technology and economic organization, but to diversity and justice as well, which "falls naturally" (Arsenault "Solarpunk") from its premise of solidarity with the earth and its beings. As an anonymous blogger wrote in a 2008 blog post generally considered to be the first instance of the articulation of solarpunk, "solarpunk ideas, and solarpunk technologies, need not remain imaginary, and I indulge a hope of someday living in a solarpunk world" (Anonymous). Claudie Arsenault describes solarpunk as the imagination of a near future in which humanity has realized its efforts to create a better world, where "community and solidarity finally prevail over productivity" ("Solarpunk"). Solarpunk can be seen to draw inspiration from and often runs parallel with extant and exciting developments in movements such as Afrofuturism, queer and LGBTQIA++ representations in science fiction, Indigenous futurisms, and feminist speculation in its ongoing self-actualization (Arsenault; "Solarpunk & Tea"; Light; jay; Hamilton; Cameron). Adam Flynn, in "Solarpunk: Notes Towards a Manifesto," points out that the under-30 generation:

grew up with doomsday predictions slated to hit before our expected retirement ages, with the slow but inexorable militarization of metropolitan police departments, with the failure of the existing political order to deal with the existential-but-not-yet-urgent threat of climate change . . . . We're solarpunks because the only other options are denial or despair. (Flynn)

As negative effects such as climate change anxiety are finally being recognized by health professionals ("Climate Psychology Alliance—Home"; "Psychology and Global Climate Change"; Greenspan; Masemann et al.), solarpunk has paid attention to the neurodiversity, affective resilience, and diverse abilities of its members, with tips on combatting anxiety and depression, and even advice on how to build community despite living with anxiety (Solarpunk Citizen; txwatson).

Solarpunk is an intentionally affirmative movement, embodying feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's call to mobilize theory beyond negativity; it is not enough to be against. Affirmation, in contrast, is not optimism, but rather the process of transforming pain into praxis (Braidotti, "Affirmation & Endurance"). One of solarpunk's strengths lies in its ability to praise, support, and adopt a variety of alternative ways of living outside of the confines of capital and away from a fascist, fear-fueled worldview. The realization that humans are not, at base, inherently destructive in their interaction with more-than-human nature opens doors of opportunity to learn from initiatives across the globe that practice regenerative agriculture and restoration ecology, as well as the teachings of Indigenous communities that emphasize land-based pedagogy. The *-punk* appendage comes into play in actions such as advocating for the homeless, solidarity with Indigenous peoples' struggle to protect their lands, resisting environmentally damaging legislation, rallying against worker exploitation, agitating for animal rights, protesting fascist politicians, rejecting structural sexism and racism, and more.[5] Anthropocene discourse's insistence that the political is personal is reversed effectively in solarpunk inspired lifestyle blogs, with their emphasis on lobbying governments to adopt green technologies, legislate against environmentally deleterious policy, and enable citizens to intentionally build community, regardless of governmental approval ("Solarpunk World

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[5] As Flynn noted in 2014, "And yes, there's a -punk there, and not just because it's become a trendy suffix. There's an oppositional quality to solarpunk, but it's an opposition that begins with *infrastructure as a form of resistance*. . . . Solarpunk draws on the ideal of Jefferson's yeoman farmer, Ghandi's [sic] ideal of *swadeshi* and subsequent Salt March, and countless other traditions of **innovative dissent**" [emphasis in original]. Later in 2015, Arsenault expands on this to state "Some people protest that there is nothing punk in a hippie-green future. But here's the thing: **punk is refusing to accept false universal truths constantly pushed down our throats, and standing up together against them**" [emphasis in original]. The contrarian nature of *-punk* is mobilized as a tool in solarpunk to critique current systems of oppression in order to open up new possibilities of a sustainable, communitarian future, responding to Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer's call to "map out other ways of being, behaving, and belonging" to resist petrocapitalism (qtd. in Williams, "Solarpunk"). As the Solarpunk Reference Guide makes clear, it is not enough to simply critique and call it a day: "solarpunk can be utopian, just optimistic, or concerned with the struggles en route to a better world—but never dystopian. As our world roils with calamity, we need solutions, not warnings" (jay).

Building"; "Solarpunk & Tea"; "The Solarpunk Network"; "Solarpunk (57 Books)"; *Solarpunk Anarchist—Home*).

3. Against Negative Isolate Individualism

The solarpunk movement is an explicit refusal of negativity, as "The Boston Hearth Project" demonstrates. It is comprised of multiple people who experience oppressions within a society structured by capital accumulation at the expense of human and more-than-human life. Yet solarpunk artists and activists use that recognition of shared oppression and disempowerment not to turn inward and shut others out but as grounds for cooperation to ensure mutual flourishing in spite of negative circumstances. In the summer of 2018, Braidotti stressed that it is imperative to think multiply at this juncture of history: to recognize that yes, we are a part of supporting the capitalist system, the continued fouling of the earth, the exploitation of people of colour and the lower classes, and the death of non-human life, but it is possible to be part of something and oppositional to it simultaneously. She argued that by being immanent to the conditions that we are combatting, we can become different political subjects—active resisters instead of passive consumers. Working to incorporate a variety of perspectives, contextual, embedded, situated knowledges can empower individuals to be able to imagine effecting positive change (Braidotti "The Posthuman Convergence and Posthuman Ethics").

A viable response to the troubles of the Anthropocene is a solarpunk one that affirms that, while not every individual has contributed to the state of the planet, all humans do have the capability to respond to the times, and all humans are able to care for their shared planetary home. A viable response recognizes the truth of Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality: the way in which "all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them" (435). Trans-corporeality is radical immanence to the stuff of the world; even to pollution and capitalism, which are also part of what constitutes us as subjects in this era. Cuomo points out that an individual can cause great harm by unthinkingly contributing to mob actions such as purchasing water bottles, littering, or driving a car unnecessarily (701). An active response to the issues of the Anthropocene can be to reverse this logic of negative accumulation and to invest instead in positive community action, such as protesting unfair working legislation, using a reusable water bottle or mug, or taking transit, and so contribute to cumulative gains in protecting workers' rights, the reduction of litter, and cutting down on carbon emissions. It is necessary, in order to combat the Anthropocene discourse of isolation and guilt, to be able to think and act on multiple levels to address multiple harms: in other words, to practice a mobile form of intersectionality. As Lukacs states, we are required to resolutely break from the "spell" of neoliberalism: we need "to stop thinking like individuals" ("Neoliberalism") and become trans-corporeal carers.

4. Conclusion

Imagining a course of action and way of life outside of the limits of Anthropocene discourse is vitally necessary to develop the ability to stage meaningful resistance to the forces of neoliberal capitalism and the consumer culture which is driving the degradation of the planet and the extinction of more-than-human life. As many by this point have noted, an exploration of the solarpunk genre can aid in developing cognitive capacity to picture positive futures (Alberro; Williams; Light; Hamilton, Cameron). Expanding our imagination of the future to include the ability to picture oneself contributing to the development of an environment that both sustains and is sustainable can grant resisting citizens the ability to forge communities in which the actions of each individual count towards the much larger and effective actions of a significant group. It is important, therefore, for solarpunk to source as much of its ideology, theory, and methods from multiple sources, especially from movements such as feminism, Afrofuturism, Indigenous futurisms, and non-western and LGBTQIA++ political and speculative writings, in order to avoid the perpetuation of current oppressive systems. Collective power can then be used effectively in order to lobby local, provincial, and federal governments on behalf of the climate, or to invest in sustainable technologies, or to disrupt systemic racism, or to demand justice for Indigenous peoples, or to set up alternative ways of living altogether. In addition, a community of individuals who retain their unique concerns is far better equipped to work across multiple fronts, combatting Anthropocene effects where they arise in structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, and human supremacy. It is crucial to shift the framing of the Anthropocene. The prominent Anthropocene worldview is both isolating and deeply disempowering, relying on a version of independence that is self-castigating and self-ostracizing. Instead, we need imaginative expansion that is positive and recognizes the web of relationality that constitutes the subject at any given time, insistent on the fact that one is never not in relation with their surroundings, and consequently not alone.

In closing, I would like to make clear that I am not holding up solarpunk alone as an alternative to Anthropocenic despair, since alternatives to the restrictive Anthropocene narrative of isolation can be found in many instances of community solidarity and group action, no matter how small. Solarpunk demonstrates this ability to think across multifarious issues of disempowerment, and often points towards future-generating projects that already exist, notably the work of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Extinction Rebellion, and antifa rallies in cities across North America, as well as local climate justice movements. Better stories about the future can be found in the actions of groups organizing for immigrant and Indigenous rights, protesting income disparity and massive debt, and movements targeting racism, misogyny, and homophobia in the workplace, schools, cities, and governments worldwide. There is no magic bullet for the harms of the Anthropocene: a single shot is not going to bring down a mob. Only a recognition of how systemic oppressions in the Anthropocene are mobile and entangled with each other, along with a recognition of the trans-corporeal and interconnected nature of all life, can help changemakers to choose a posture of care and ultimately see a way towards a just future.

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