

MAKE A FOREIGNER OF YOURSELF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DUELING  
CRITICAL UTOPIAS OF *THE DISPOSSESSED* AND *TROUBLE ON TRITON*

By

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A Project Presented to

The Faculty of California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English: Applied English Studies

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May 2023

## ABSTRACT

### MAKE A FOREIGNER OF YOURSELF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DUELING CRITICAL UTOPIAS OF *THE DISPOSSESSED* AND *TROUBLE ON TRITON*

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The purpose of this project is to analyze the critical utopias of two sci-fi novels: *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) by Ursula K. Le Guin and *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) by Samuel R. Delany. Both of these novels were published within two years of each other, with Delany rewriting his novel to intentionally put it into direct dialogue with Le Guin's. This project will attempt to establish the landscape of utopian fiction, draw out this dialogue between these two grandmasters of the science fiction genre, and answer this question: "As a result of Delany positioning his novel in this way, what contrasts and overlaps occur between these two authors' view of an improved society?" This will be accomplished by examining the concepts of utopia, dystopia, and critical utopia; the backgrounds of the authors themselves; the utopian worlds they constructed; and, finally, showing where Le Guin and Delany's worlds were in agreement and where they were in conflict.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my family and friends (Mom, Dad, Kathy, Lexi, Eric, Yoshino, Uncle Tony, Aunt Maria, Aunt Pat, Grandpa "Tata" Armando, Ademar, Kyle, Maria, Tony Guillory, Grandy Lirungan, and Paul Shepherd) for supporting me not just through the entirety of the grad program here at Cal Poly Humboldt, but through my undergrad at Cal State East Bay and all the little endeavors in between. They asked no questions and passed no judgments; all they wanted to know every single time was how they could help me through the next hurdle.

ありがとうございました！

Thank you to my cohort and the Cal Poly Humboldt faculty, especially my committee members, Renée Byrd and Andrea Delgado, for their kind advice and for working with me through the rapid assembly of this project; Janet Winston, for helping me truly understand how to approach this project; and Suzanne Scott, for a wonderful class and introducing me to a subject that I didn't know I loved.

Thank you to my friends at the City of Funabashi and Funabashi Municipal High School for encouraging and enabling me to pursue this program.

Finally, thank you to the professors from both Chabot College and Cal State East Bay who not only provided me with memorable classroom experiences, but also enthusiastically signed my letters of recommendation: Homeria Foth, Michelle St. George, and Eve Lynch.

None of you had to, all of you did—and I'll never forget it.

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## INTRODUCTION: A MANIPULATION OF STARS

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning——

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

When it comes to crafting a society, it really is like that old adage about planting a tree; no one who's there for the sowing will be around for the shadow. Subsequent generations will have the freedom to cultivate, prune, and enrich, but the initial casting of the dice is done. Our contributions are course corrections, which ideally keep us riding the line between chaos and stagnation, all while we march ahead in the name of progress—questing for utopia.

Urban planning, social and economic movements, verdicts passed in a courtroom, all of it toys with the concept of a utopia, because each of these is enacted with the singular (self-professed) goal of making society a better place. It's the practice of coaxing a society that only exists in our dreams, in fiction, out into the canvas of reality. All the time, we make decisions in accordance with a place that does not presently exist in the hopes that one day *it will*.

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Growing up in Turlock, California in the 1990s, I was introduced to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* by my great grandmother. It only came on late at night, well past my bedtime, and so she did me a great service by hitting the record button on the VCR when it finally aired. After school the next day, we'd watch it together. I was always amazed by the show visually and the drama was usually enough to sustain my interest for the whole hour, but the smaller details never really clicked with me until I was well into junior high school.

A lot of teenagers start to look at the world much more critically around this time, even if it's just by asking the simple question: "Why did this happen?" This is inevitably followed-up by another question: "Could this have happened differently?" This second question is an interrogative response, a reflexive reassessment of all the choices made up until that point, and a silent plotting of how things could've been changed to produce a different, more desirable outcome. Although it's too late to affect the past, the natural reaction is to ensure that these unsavory outcomes never happen again. For some, that means educating directly. For others that means forging the alternative.

In *Star Trek*, there is no economy because the society of future Earth has moved beyond material wealth. People don't starve because they've invented replicator technology that allows food to be synthesized through the manipulation of matter. Diseases such as cancer have been eradicated and later episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager*, such as "Mortal Coil," depict scenarios in which even death itself can be reversed. The trick of utopia is that it shows us this fictional society *removed* of many issues plaguing

the modern world, a place where the grass is *always* greener, and forces us to ask the earlier question in regards to our own society: “Could this have happened differently?”

These are the questions that pulled me deeper into science fiction and ultimately led me to studying literature in my undergraduate program at Merced College, and eventually Chabot College and Cal State East Bay. Fiction is what allowed me to dream and see these alternate takes on reality, all the while allowing me to dissect and wonder how these ideas can drive us forward to the society I saw in *Star Trek*. Because while the STEM fields drive us forward to that undiscovered country, the humanities provide the guard rails.

During one particular English course at Merced College, I was assigned “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin for the first time. In Le Guin’s short story, she asks the reader to imagine a place called Omelas where everything is perfect, where everyone gets along, where nothing bad ever happens... with *one* notable exception. The overlying peace that Omelas is experiencing is predicated on the intense suffering of a single child, who is kept in cramped darkness and treated with cruelty every moment of its existence. Whether or not the torture of this child is *truly* maintaining perfection for the rest of civilization is not made clear, but it asks the reader to place themselves within that scenario. Is peace and prosperity for all worth the suffering of one child? Or is it best to walk away and reject any further engagement? To bring us all back to *Star Trek*: Do the needs of the many *truly* outweigh the needs of the few? Or the one?

At the time, I didn't realize that "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" would be my first exposure to a more critical take on utopia, which presents a society that is clearly better, but not without obvious flaws. The story provides a direct invitation to the reader to place themselves in the world and reason through the flaws along with the other characters. In many ways, these types of utopia are more effective at getting their point across because of this participatory conceit. This is in stark contrast to other utopias, where the fictional society is typically prescriptive. Rarely did classic *Star Trek* angle a mirror back at itself, since that mirror was almost always aimed at the audience.

Near the end of my time at Merced College, I attended a library book sale in Turlock, which is a major event for those of us who relish the idea of walking away with bags of books for pennies on the dollar. While scouting out the piles, I happened to pick up a skinny little sci-fi book with amazing cover art that happened to catch my eye. That book was *The Ballad of Beta-2* by Samuel R. Delany, which ignited a love affair that eventually prompted me to begin reading Delany's bibliography. I fell in love with his grasp of the genre, the beauty of his writing, and how effortlessly he folded such relevant themes into his stories. *The Ballad of Beta-2* described a fleet of generation ships that had long ago disappeared, and only recently arrived at their destination. The crew had arrived changed, seemingly uncivilized, and had developed rituals of unknown import. A young anthropologist is sent to these ships to parse out what had happened during the journey to make the crew forget their humanity, which opens the door to a literary conversation about the old notion of being "civilized" and what it means to be human in a unique, liminal society that's never known what it means to live on a planet.



And so both Le Guin and Delany became an inseparable part of my growth as a student of English literature.

I came out of the 2010s very much enamored with Le Guin and Delany, since both authors were responsible for pushing me further into literary studies. They were among the first books that got me to truly think about theory, criticism, and induced within me the novel concept of reading for fun, a quality which I had always just assumed had been burned out of me in my high school years. Le Guin and Delany became very important to me, which is why it came as some surprise when I learned that these two had crossed paths in the 1970s.

At some point, I read an interview where Delany confessed that he had once rewritten one of his novels, *Trouble on Triton*, to be in direct dialogue with Le Guin's utopian novel, *The Dispossessed*. Artists are always participating in call-and-response with regards to theme, concepts, characters, etc. *Star Wars* famously acted as both a direct interpretation of Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory, as well as a celebration of the westerns of John Ford and the samurai films of Akira Kurosawa (Higgs). Michael Moorcock wrote his *Elric of Melniboné* series as a direct response to the "infantilism" of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Moorcock 185). Delany himself wrote a direct response to Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* in the form of *The Fall of the Towers* ("On *Triton*" 301). It was shocking to me, though, that Le Guin and Delany, two of my favorite authors, had crossed paths like this. At the time, learning that Delany had intentionally put his novel in conflict with Le Guin's was like watching your parents fight.

After reading both novels with this in mind, I came to believe that *Trouble on Triton* and *The Dispossessed* couldn't be better positioned for comparison, so maybe it was a recognition of serendipity that encouraged Delany to initiate this dialogue. The authors themselves are from similar generations, but completely different backgrounds. Le Guin was a woman of German and Polish descent who grew up in privilege on the west coast of the United States among a family of renowned academics. Delany, an African-American man, was born on the east coast. His family owned a funeral home in Harlem and he was only the second generation of his family to be born after the abolishment of slavery. While his youth was spent in relative comfort thanks to the success of the family business, he came to prominence while fighting off almost every social stigma imaginable. Both Le Guin and Delany have held the title of Grandmaster of Science Fiction. Both had completely different ideas of what constituted a utopia.

The purpose of this project is to bear out a debate that began almost five decades ago. It's my hope to puzzle out: Why did Samuel R. Delany purposefully position his novel to be in direct dialogue with Le Guin's? What dialogue emerged because of that move? Did he feel like there was an important facet of utopia missing from her novel? After all, if an author is writing a utopia, then the implication is that the author believes some quality of that fictional place would be an improvement over our current society—but one author's utopia might very well be another's dystopia. Perhaps Delany simply felt compelled to add to the dialogue. It wouldn't be the first time he intentionally made connections between his work and others. *Trouble on Triton* even directly references some of his own works.

In attempting to map out this dialogue, this project will cover *four* key subjects in four sections. The first will be the concept of utopia itself, including its derivatives such as dystopia and, of particular concern to this project, critical utopia. The second will be a biographical overview of the two authors themselves, since it's my hope that their personal experiences will shed some light on why they made particular artistic choices within their respective novels and utopias. The third will be the utopias themselves, how they function, and how they relate to other established spaces within their novels. The last section will cover how the critical utopias of Le Guin and Delany agree and disagree, which will be drawn out using previous sections, literary analysis, utopian theory, and the writings of Delany in which he points out some of his grievances with Le Guin's novels.

All of this touches on personal interest, but the impact of these two authors cannot be understated. The preeminent scholar of utopian studies cut his teeth on *The Dispossessed*. Authors like Neil Gaiman have said "Samuel R. Delany is one of the most important living [science fiction] writers" (Neil Gaiman), while Nalo Hopkinson expressed to me personally during a reading here at Cal Poly Humboldt her admiration of her former mentor. Both writers approached the genre from a distinctly American point of view, both were ultimately writing about a better future for America and both had wildly different ideas. Perhaps, somewhere in between *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*, is another world calling that demands our attention.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Triton, a colonized moon of Neptune, has just engaged in a devastating interplanetary war against Earth, resulting in a decisive victory against the homeworld of the human race. This war, which barely lasted an hour, has left Triton wounded for the effort, but Earth is not so lucky. Despite being the aggressor, Earth is no more. Most of the planet is dead or dying, a vast majority wiped out in an instant. It's a time of great mourning, even for those who have pulled themselves out from the rubble of Triton, because everyone has a connection to Earth. Everyone has friends, family, or an ancestral story that begins there; the whole human race was born of Earth and now Earth is destroyed.

This is the perfect time, Bron Helstrom decides as he walks through the devastation on Triton, to get a sex change as a means to slight a woman he loves, who does not love him back. He can accomplish this in just under seven hours and be home in time for bed. He can accomplish this because Triton, orbiting the furthest planet from the sun and Earth, has enabled its citizens to truly pursue life, liberty, and happiness by creating a basic standard of living that includes food, housing, limited transport, and the ability to change your body at will. Bron indulges in all of this and appears at work as a woman to fanfare that could be considered on par to getting a nice haircut. All of this is normal. This is utopia.

When Samuel R. Delany wrote this society into existence in *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* he did so under the knowledge that he was toying with the

idea of utopia but not explicitly writing one in the tradition set forth by Thomas More in the 16th century. After all, if his protagonist had to weave through rubble and bodies to achieve his sex change, did this truly count as utopia?

A similar argument could be made for the novel with which he was situating his novel to be in dialogue: *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Here, Le Guin wrote about a moon in the Tau Ceti star system called Anarres, where a breakaway society has formed around the idea of anarchism. Unlike Delany's novel, Anarres had done away with almost all power structures, leaving a society that is community-oriented and interreliant. Laws have been abolished, and because there are no laws there are no crimes, and because there are no crimes there are no prisons. Education can be pursued at the rate of curiosity, with not a moment of thought bound up in concepts like tuition or prerequisites because there is no currency and no prerequisites to curiosity

Similar to Delany, Le Guin must have known she was also not writing a traditional utopia, or was perhaps just playing with the idea. For all the improvements that Anarres society has rallied around outside of the sphere of capitalism, Anarres is still a limited and unforgiving place. Resource insecurity is constant, as well as job insecurity. If a drought occurs, then dwindling food and water stores do not care if someone trained to be a teacher or a playwright, those people must head to the fields and sacrifice for the good of the many.

Independently, both *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton* have much to say about the state of contemporary society either by way of omission or clear improvements.

*The Dispossessed* interrogates mass incarceration by depicting Anarres as a place where no one even knows what a prison is, except as some archaic and demeaning practice from generations past. On Anarres, incarceration is treated like a myth, hearsay, or cruel speculation. What better way of showing the pointlessness of incarceration by showing a society that can function without it? *Trouble on Triton* interrogates the concept of welfare as a handout or a crutch by depicting Triton as a place where social programs, if provided as a standard right that needs no oversight, is actually *more* efficient and beneficial than the ones tied up in the inefficiency of bureaucracy. Much of these systems in a modern context are structured in such a way to determine need and merit, but none of those structures and flagrant levels of inefficiency are necessary when *everyone* has merit. Why pay for ten different social workers and various other ancillary workers so that they can pay one person? Why not just pay that person and call it a day? Why is there an assumption that people who utilize welfare will use it as a permanent crutch, when the wealthy who would otherwise never have to work another day in their lives are apparently active drivers of our economy and society? Unless, Delany proposes, the calculus that *stability creates stagnation* is only pointed in one direction: towards the working class and those of insecure socioeconomic status.

When brought into dialogue, these two novels complement each other thoroughly. By having two future societies with the hindsight to see where humanity misstepped, both Anarres and Triton represent fresh starts for the human race. Both these moons, however, being extensions of their respective authors' perspectives and biases, present two completely different visions of utopia. Where Anarres has almost no power structures,

Triton has a government and an entity called the “computer hegemony” that seems to act as the moon’s economic engine. When brought together, these two are suddenly asking readers to choose between no power structures with an emphasis on interreliance as a means of survival, or a massive power structure that enables a consistent level of security. They ask us to choose between a direct connection with labor and its associated products, or a completely automated economy that deemphasizes labor in favor of comfort. They ask us to choose between anarchism and libertarianism.

Whether they’re labeled “ambiguous utopias” or “ambiguous heterotopias,” both novels successfully engaged with utopia and utopian concepts, producing utopias whether that was their goal or not. In order to more gracefully analyze *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton* for the duration of this project, I’ll be using Thomas More’s *Utopia* as a frame of reference for the utopian model, as well as applying utopian theory as discussed by Lyman Tower Sargent and Tom Moylan. For Sargent’s part, I’ll mostly be utilizing articles that he wrote for his own publication *Utopian Studies* as well as articles published elsewhere. “Five Hundred Years of Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Utopianism” was absolutely essential for defining the overlying concept of utopia that has persisted throughout the centuries. His discussion concerning the misconceptions surrounding utopia and its ultimate goal of catalyzing real social change is what first put the concept of the importance of utopias in my mind, as well as how to best describe the boundaries of one. He writes in the article:

Utopia has nothing to do with perfect or perfection, never has and never will. This is a slight exaggeration in that some utopias placed in Heaven after death are

described by their authors as perfect, but the overwhelming majority of utopias are about better not perfect. And the distinction is important. The equation of utopia and perfection is a deliberate ploy of those opposed to positive social change and is intended to undermine that possibility. (“500 Years” 189)

Tempting society with the idea of perfection in order to create change is rarely as encouraging as it seems to be. If perfection were enough, Heaven wouldn’t need Hell. Utopia, then, being situated in the real world—on Earth or out in orbit around other planets, other suns—creates an assumption of those improvements being achievable.

Another book that became crucial to the writing of this project was Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Moylan’s book and his writings about modern utopias (including *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*) enabled a more thorough understanding of the utopian subgenre that came to be defined by Le Guin and Delany’s novels, among others. Moylan introduced the idea of a “critical utopia,” which acts as a subgenre for utopian novels that were no longer attempting to provide a “blueprint” for success in the same way Thomas More’s *Utopia* did. Instead, critical utopias introduce more overt flaws that would feel recognizable to contemporary readers. By introducing these flaws, critical utopias further accentuate the imperfect quality that all utopias typically have, making them seem all the more achievable since familiar flaws might have familiar remedies. This also allows readers to interrogate not just the utopia itself in a more critical manner, but our own society, since critical utopias often draw out more dramatic contrasts between reality, the fictional, and the plausible.



A big part of this project became detailing the authors at play, since utopias, as pointed out above, are direct extensions of the authors themselves. Utopias necessarily contain all of their author's hopes, fears, perspectives, and biases. Le Guin grew up in a family of anthropologists, which explains why her stories, such as *The Dispossessed*, often depicted a stranger in a strange land, a protagonist in search of truth amidst cross-cultural clashes. Delany grew up in New York, and being a closeted gay man created within him an attraction towards people who were free in their self-expression and self-actualization. *Trouble on Triton*, then, with its high degree of self-actualization and personal freedom perhaps more accurately articulates life as he knows it compared to Le Guin's novel. In the hopes of showing this in action, I utilized a batch of biographical texts and a documentary. As Le Guin only authorized an official biography to be written after her death, the unofficial biographies of Charlotte Spivack and Joe De Bolt were required in order to draft a sketch of her life and her works. Also included are many passages from Le Guin's mother's book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, a chronicle of the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe of Native Americans. Though Ishi lived and died before Le Guin was born, her father's interactions with Ishi forever tethered their stories together.

For Delany's biographical sketch, there was a great deal more to draw from. Delany is simply a prolific writer and is frequently willing to discuss his life, work, and where the two have met. His article "Racism and Science Fiction" is a detailed look at how being a black science fiction author at a time when there were *very* few at all affected his professional trajectory, as well as the types of experiences he wrote into his

books. A documentary called *The Polymath or, The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman* was also made about his life, which features many interviews with Delany about his childhood, growing up in New York, and about his lifestyle during the writing of his early novels. Delany himself has also written several autobiographies and memoirs, including a more condensed biography (written under the pseudonym K. Leslie Steiner) titled simply “Samuel R. Delany” that was very useful in filling the gaps of this sketch.

Several other articles were used to flesh out additional context on the literary and biographical fronts of this project, but the works listed above represent the backbone of the project. All of this will assist in outlining the model for utopia and how Le Guin and Delany were among the first to break it down so that it might be more effectively interrogated—and potentially applied closer to home.

## CHAPTER 1: SOCIAL DREAMING

## 1. Utopia and Dystopia:

The Best of All Possible Worlds  
and the Maximally Unpleasant

And where would these cities be  
that evil never touches,  
in which labor is blessed  
and death is never feared?

- E.M. Cioran, *History and Utopia*

Really, what *is* a utopia?

It seems a common notion that “utopia” is shorthand for paradise—but more specifically, a state of social and cultural perfection for all. When we think of utopia, we think of something like Heaven, where there are no ills, where there is no poverty, no crime, all personal aspirations are respected and nothing is expected of anyone except that they live and live well. We get imaginative pangs of utopia from religious and literary concepts such as: “The Land of Milk and Honey,” “The Garden of Eden,” “Elysium Fields,” “The Big Rock Candy Mountains,” “Valinor and the Undying Lands.” Places that might only be reached beyond death or by way of a journey that demands leaving behind the world as we commonly know it.

At the term's inception, however, dating all the way back to the 1500s, utopia was meant to be a place that described how things ought to be here on Earth—that is, as far as its respective author was concerned. It encapsulated most social systems, including religion, law, and even government. In other words, although humanity has long been in the business of constructing fictional locales throughout history, utopia was specifically an antique form of worldbuilding or social theorycrafting to draw a direct comparison to its contemporary societies, an approach that utopian scholar and bibliographer Lyman Tower Sargent has termed “social dreaming.”

I define the broad, general phenomenon of utopianism as social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live. But not all are radical, for some people at any time dream of something basically familiar. (“The Three Faces” 3)

Many people will participate in social dreaming in one form or another, sometimes in innocent ways such as imagining a world where “rush hour” didn't exist in major metropolitan cities, making the commute to work a breeze. Going one step further, maybe a world where people didn't have to drive into the city for work at all and jobs were more accessible from home. Even one step further, maybe a world where people didn't have to work at all.

Sir Thomas More—an English social philosopher, statesman, and saint, among many other things—was the first to coin the word “utopia” in the early 16th century. He conceived of an imaginary island in the New World that he detailed in his book called

*Utopia*, first published 1516. The manuscript's original title is much more explanatory of the book's intent and goal, which translates from the original Latin as: *Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia: A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining by the Most Distinguished and Eloquent Author Thomas More, Citizen and Undersheriff of the Famous City of London* (More 5). More has a bit of fun here.

In the book, More creates a fictional epistolary narrative wherein he, acting as the narrator, is introduced to Raphael Hythloday, a man who claims to have intimate knowledge of a wondrous island society in the Americas known as Utopia, having lived there for some time. There are all sorts of reasons provided for why no one has heard of this island and why it sees so little communication from anyone in Europe. Within the story, More and his friend Giles are listening intently to Raphael's description of Utopia, but both manage to miss the location due to simultaneous distractions, including an ill-timed cough (More 130-31). In any case, More and Raphael's conversation bears out the stark differences between Europe and Utopia.

For one, because of how its society has arranged itself, Utopia has no interest in wars or conflict unless directly provoked from without, which Raphael points to as one of Europe's chief flaws with many rulers embracing the idea that territorial expansion equates to an expansion of power. The fictional More is impressed by this idea and suggests in response that Raphael dedicate his time to public affairs and advising royalty. Raphael waves off this idea and details his dislike for expansionism further:

“I don’t have the capacity you ascribe to me, and if I had it in the highest degree, the public would still not be any better off if I exchanged my contemplative leisure for this kind of action. In the first place, most princes only apply themselves to the arts of war, in which I have neither the ability nor interest, instead of to the good arts of peace. They are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms by hook or by crook than on governing well those they already have.”

(15)

There is no poverty in Utopia; traditional forms of wealth are used only for external interactions with other countries, such as purchasing goods, but otherwise precious metals like gold are used to make mundane items like chamber pots. There is no private property, though this is to allow the population to be distributed evenly and sustainably across the island. Every city is limited to 6,000 households and every ten years the entire population is required to move into new domiciles. If the population of Utopia becomes too overwhelming, then colonies are established on the mainland until there is a population shortfall.

There are hints of a more egalitarian society in More’s writings, with everyone wearing the same clothes and contributing to the common good by way of learning useful trades that benefit the collective over the individual. Everyone must apply themselves to farming for a minimum of two years. Many belief systems are allowed—atheism being the sole exception—and women are allowed to serve alongside men as priests. In addition, the government is much more representative, making the prospect of a war-making ruler of Utopia unlikely (43-44).

All of this composes a place that is, at first blush, a marked improvement over what life for the average European citizen might have been like in the 16th century. By today's standards, however, More's *Utopia* also describes several systems that are still very much projections of their time. Raphael states that each house in Utopia has two slaves assigned to it, with slavery being the ultimate punishment for disrupting social order or attempting to escape the island. "Generally, the gravest crimes are punished by slavery, for they think this deters offenders just as much as getting rid of them by immediate capital punishment, and is more beneficial to the commonwealth" (73). This is also where gold makes another appearance, as it is also used to adorn slaves as a form of dissuasion—not exclusively from committing crime, but from preventing citizens from making the connection between gold and value. Similar to using gold in the fabrication of chamber pots, the idea is that creating the mundane out of gold and drawing attention to criminality with gold will have the effect of forcing the populace to mentally and culturally devalue the otherwise precious metal. "As a result, if they had to part with their entire supply of these metals, which other nations give up with as much agony as if they were being disemboweled, the Utopians would feel it no more than the loss of a penny" (53). In the hierarchy of metals, iron is the most venerated and sought after, since it is of direct material use to the citizens.

There is also the small matter of how Utopia manages its occasional bout of overpopulation by colonizing the mainland. Though Raphael specifies that they are only to colonize "unoccupied and uncultivated land," there is still mention of ensuring that any natives of these lands that choose to live among the Utopians obey Utopian laws,

“sharing the same way of life and customs, much to the advantage of both” (49). Natives who do not abide by these laws are exiled, those who cause further issues for the Utopians will be inviting war upon themselves. Atheists receive similar treatment, as their lack of belief is ironically in conflict with Utopia’s diverse religious beliefs that run the gamut from Christianity to the worship of more celestial deities:

“There are different forms of religion throughout the island, and even in individual cities. Some worship as a god the sun, others the moon, and still others one of the planets. There are some who worship a man of past ages who was conspicuous either for virtue or glory; they consider him not only a god but the supreme god. (84)

So it is ironic that a society that would’ve been seen as radically progressive for its time, which allows its citizens to consider all gods and divine sources as worthy of worship, *still* finds the concept of atheism distasteful and colonization worthy of policy.

So in a more modern context: How is More’s island of Utopia still a utopia if it is so obviously flawed? How can a place that is purported to be perfect also engage in slavery? This goes back to the original question of this section, which is: Really, what *is* a utopia?

The word “utopia” is a bit of a play on words, as More employed Greek roots to create a name for his fictional island whose direct translation means “no place.” When pronounced in English, however, “eutopia” takes on a second meaning in Greek, which amounts to “good place.” All of this was pointed out in a playful manner by More in the



front matter for *Utopia*, and is just one example of More's usage of double meanings throughout *Utopia*:

Wherefore not Utopia, but rather rightly,

My name is Eutopie: a place of felicity. (Anemolius)

This makes More's basic definition of utopia out to be a "nonexistent good place" ("500 Years" 185). While the concept of a realm of perfection is often associated with utopia and vice versa, it's important to establish that there is a distinction which separates the concepts of *utopia* and *paradise*. Sargent makes this distinction in his writings, as well, where he equates early descriptions of paradise as being closer in concept to More's *eutopia*, or "good place" ("The Three Faces" 20). In most religious and eschatological contexts, paradise is a kind of final destination of either the mortal body or the immortal soul. On the mortal side of things, paradise is described as a place so resplendent and delightful to bodily needs and senses that there is literally no reason to ever leave. No one goes hungry, no one has to work, all physical needs are met, all of the harsh edges of life are removed leaving only the sublime.

Often such places are *provided*, are supernatural in their existence, and attending these places amounts to the immediate satisfaction of mortal needs. The need for immortality is satisfied in paradisiacal locations such as the Fountain of Youth. The need for wealth is satisfied by El Dorado, the mythical city of gold. Many hobo ballads revolved around places where basic necessities were met and work either came easy or was not needed at all, such as in a 17th century English poem called "An Invitation to

Lubberland,” which is often credited as the inspiration for “The Big Rock Candy Mountain”:

The Captain says in e'ry Town,  
 hot Roasted-Pigs will meet ye,  
 They in the streets run up and down,  
 still crying out, Come eat me:  
 Likewise he says at e'ry Feast,  
 the very Fowls and Fishes,  
 Nay, from the biggest to the least,  
 comes tumbling to the Dishes.

The Rivers run with Claret fine,  
 the Brooks with rich Canary,  
 The Ponds with other sorts of Wine,  
 to make your hearts full merry:  
 Nay, more then this, you may behold  
 the Fountains flows with Brandy,  
 The Rocks are right Refined Gold,  
 the Hills are Sugar-Candy. (“An Invitation to Lubberland,” Stanzas 6-7)

Lubberland is described here as a working class paradise. The natural order here is so bent in favor of satisfying the needs of humanity that all of the rivers are running with alcohol instead of water, any old rock you might find is made out of gold, sustenance will

literally come running up to you, and the hills are made out of candy. These are not features that could be found out in the natural order with enough searching. All of these are supernatural qualities that appease need and greed, which renders it distinct from a utopia, where the society can conceivably be recreated outside of fiction with enough effort.

Lubberland cannot be created with enough effort. Neither can Heaven or Valhalla or the Garden of Eden or Valinor. Elvis Presley's song, "If I Can Dream," written by Walter Earl Brown, expressed marked frustration with this notion of the impossibility of bringing paradise to earth. More's fictional island of Utopia, though it did not exist, was written in such a way that the line between fact and fiction was blurred, just enough to plant the idea that it *could* exist. The epistolary framing and the discussion of qualities that never quite cross into the fantastical other than the fact that Utopia is a fictional island: the economy, the social structure and urban planning, and the very culture itself—there's nothing preventing such a society from existing, it's just that it doesn't. We haven't allowed it.

Every society and all its constituent elements require consensus to work. This is what makes general strikes such a powerful tool for workers; much like a limb being cut off from its blood supply, it'll just outright cease to function after a time. A strike is a manifestation of dropping out of consensus, which thereby compromises the system's ability to function. Without consensus, society itself does not exist. As far as More's Utopia is concerned, it's not too difficult to see why such a place would have trouble finding consensus. It is *not* a paradise and has not been divinely delivered, supernaturally

created, or situated at a place beyond death. It is a place that might have seemed like a genuine utopia in More's time, given what the average quality of life was in 16th century Europe. Lyman Tower Sargent claims as much in his article for *Utopian Studies*, "Five Hundred Years of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Utopianism":

“[A]t some point I began to wonder how my sixteenth-century self might have responded to Utopia if I had been aware of it. I concluded that, since I most likely would have been illiterate, I would not have been aware of it, but if by chance I was, I would have seen it as entirely positive because in Utopia I would have had a full stomach, decent clothing and housing, and not too onerous work. I would have had to obey very strict laws, but no stricter than in the real sixteenth century, and they would have been applied much more fairly than in that real sixteenth century.” (187)

Utopias are snapshots in time of what an author might have believed an improved society—or “perfect” insofar as it’s an improved social scenario that can realistically achieve consensus given the contemporary conditions—might look like. More’s *Utopia*, with its nonchalant acceptance of slavery as a matter of course and consequence, its infatuation with colonization as a form of population control, and its inhibition of private property and personal freedoms would make for a more-than-unsavory pivot for modern western society. Which technically makes it not a utopia at all, but a transitory one.

From all of this, we can form a couple conclusions: *all* utopias are transitory, since they are ultimately a pivot away from the social conditions of their time and therefore lack applicability once those conditions change or disappear. Even then, *all*

utopias have historically lacked universal applicability to some degree even in their own times and will continue to do so, since they are often situated within the designer's own cultural biases, which other contemporary societies might not share. One person's utopia is quite possibly another person's personal hell. More's vision for an island where power is more decentralized and private property does not exist was likely none too popular with the ruling class of his time. To that class, More's island of Utopia would not fall into the category of a "good place." Quite the opposite, since it's in conflict with their own interests, which would paradoxically make the island of Utopia a veritable *dystopia*.

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As a worldbuilding exercise, dystopias have long played a part in literary tradition as a counterpoint to the idea of utopia. If a utopia is supposed to exist as an outcome of success for a society that is attempting to improve itself, then a dystopia would function as the outcome of failure to improve. In some cases, as well, dystopian stories are not just cautionary tales about what happens if no social progress takes place, but what might happen if we actively work *against* utopian ideals and progress: consolidate power rather than decentralize, deploy scarcity rather than abundance, restrict freedoms rather than broaden them. Similar to More's usage, "dystopia" comes from Greek roots which translate to "bad place" as opposed to utopia's "good place." The concept of a dystopia was referred to in various forms over the decades before being coined by English

philosopher and Member of Parliament John Stuart Mill in March 12, 1868 during a speech before the House of Commons concerning policy aimed at Irish land:

Does the noble Lord really think it possible that the people of England will submit to this? I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable. (Mill)

Although Mill's usage of the term isn't precisely what would stick, the idea of a society "too bad to be practicable" would generally form the basis of dystopian fiction as a genre. A personal favorite definition of dystopia is: "A world that is the opposite of a utopia, i.e. flawed and maximally unpleasant" (Wiktionary). A very succinct way of describing fictional worlds where civilization has developed down the lines of a social worst case scenario. Freedom is countered by harsh totalitarianism, knowledge is hidden, creativity is bounded or eliminated.

One of the seminal novels in the dystopian genre was *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, a vision of a futuristic world-spanning society where the human experience has been engineered from womb to tomb into more rigid, artificial structures resembling Henry Ford's assembly line. Huxley originally started writing his novel as a parody of H.G. Wells' utopian novel *Men Like Gods* (1923), but that parody gradually turned into an inversion, and then something else entirely (Huxley). In Huxley's novel,

readers can glean the author's anxieties concerning a world that was becoming so bound up in industry, that it ran the risk of depriving humanity of self-determination. In *Brave New World*, he illustrates that risk and the outcome of its dismissal.

Illustrating a social risk and extrapolating a fictional, yet plausible, outcome is a tactic at the heart of dystopian literature. Kurt Vonnegut exercised this tactic in 1961 with his short story "Harrison Bergeron," which criticized the notion of artificial equality by presenting the United States in the year 2081 as a nation that has utilized technology to force all Americans to adopt a universal benchmark for physical and mental ability. There was also *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury, which described an America in the distant future that has begun to burn all printed books in an effort to censor free speech, deprive avenues of critical thinking, and enforce political correctness. All of this sourced from Bradbury's anger over McCarthyism and the book burnings in places like Nazi Germany, and expressed in a form that Bradbury called "the art of the possible" (Bradbury).

These stories were not just examples of sadofuturism. For some authors, the approach of creating repellent fictional societies was just as valid as creating an appealing one. By wielding "the art of the possible," dystopian writers were able to create fictional societies as warnings to modern audiences that if steps were not taken, we could be inhabiting these dismal worlds along with the protagonists of these novels. This would, ideally, not be very palatable for a majority of readers, who would, perhaps, take steps not to allow these worlds to come into existence. Here we see the opposite reaction that a utopia might have; instead of leading social development, dystopias repel. Instead of

presenting the best of all possible worlds, dystopias show just how dark and “maximally unpleasant” the world can get. This runs beyond Mill’s idea of dystopia being a society “too bad to be practicable” by asserting that, given enough consolidation of power and enough corruption, *nothing* is out of the realm of practicability.

Both utopias and dystopias are meant to inspire choices, and we have seen some of those choices in action over the years as a direct response to these fictional societies.

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A utopia *needs* to be fictional. It seems contradictory to require that an idealized society must remain a fantasy, considering we as a species have not yet arrived at the concept. Utopia, however, actually only truly self-actuates as fiction. It is a concept that must perpetually be out of reach, but still yet sought. Present, but distant. The bright orange carrot on a stick or the bright green light in the distance that civilization must forever lurch towards.

One of the most popular instances of utopia in the 20th century was the society depicted in *Star Trek* and its various spin-offs. Gene Roddenberry’s sci-fi television series, which originally began airing in the 1960s, introduced viewers to a vision of our future where humanity put aside all its differences and united under the banner of space exploration. The social turmoil that Roddenberry would’ve witnessed—systemic racism, war, assassinations of public figures—did not exist in his civilization since it had taken all the right lessons from the suffering and death of others, choosing instead to embrace



solidarity. Twenty years after Executive Order 9066, two years after the signing of the Civil Rights Act: Roddenberry showed Earth's most advanced starship being crewed by black and Japanese officers. After receiving criticism from the network regarding this decision, Roddenberry urged "if we don't have blacks and whites working together by the time our civilization catches up to the time frame the series were set in, there won't be any people" (Roddenberry).

Just by virtue of producing the show under this philosophy, *Star Trek* and its various spin-offs went on to be a groundbreaking and inspirational institution that influenced not just science fiction, but the genre of utopian fiction as well. Its emphasis on unity, curiosity, and science drove many young people to head into the STEM fields. One example being Professor Milind Tambe of the University of Southern California, who remarked in an interview with *TechRepublic*:

Science fiction in general and *Star Trek* in particular was instrumental in inspiring me to pursue a Ph.D. in computer science and more specifically in artificial intelligence. I watched reruns of the original *Star Trek* in India in the 80s—where I grew up—with fascination. The "Measure of a Man" episode questioning whether a robot had rights, with the conclusion that robots indeed did, seemed so far-fetched to friends and relatives, but was quietly very inspiring to AI Ph.D. students. (Maddox)

The utopian vision in *Star Trek* also had an impact on the Civil Rights Movement, as Martin Luther King Jr. was a fan of the show and watched it often with his family. Upon hearing that Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, was considering a

departure from the show, he famously convinced her to reconsider. According to Nichols, “he said, don’t you understand what [Gene Roddenberry] has achieved? For the first time, we are being seen the world over as we should be seen” (Martin). A true utopian, King understood the cultural value of encouraging others to see the world as it could be. Roddenberry echoed this sentiment during his interview with *The Humanist*, believing that the unification of peoples, identity, and destiny that society has experienced in *Star Trek* is necessary for the survival of the species. History continues to prove his assertions well-founded. In 1976, after a widespread letter-writing campaign resulting in “hundreds of thousands” of letters, President Gerald Ford directed NASA to rename its newest space shuttle being constructed in Palmdale, California from *Constitution* to *Enterprise* in honor of the show. Gene Roddenberry and several cast members were present at the unveiling.

Dystopias, despite their unpleasant slant, can foster positive change, as well. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation was ever-present, the anxiety over which fostered a number of films and novels speculating on a future where the worst happened, where the keys were turned and the missiles launched. One such film, *The Day After*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, depicted a cast of characters who are going about their various affairs around Kansas City, Missouri and Lawrence, Kansas. They’re going to work, getting married, preparing to attend college: day-to-day concerns, when the bombs fall. Director Nicholas Meyer’s dystopia emerges from this point, showing survivors emerging from the devastation who must continue on under a new set of rules. Radiation has caused survivors to lose their hair, their memories—their lives. A scarcity of

resources has people murdering each other for what's left. The United States of America, as the audience and the characters knew it, has vanished completely as desperate radio calls for assistance are met with no response.

By actualizing the aftermath of a nuclear war within a fictional space, Meyer succeeded in creating a maximally unpleasant society that sickened its audience to the point of real social change. On October 10th, 1983, President Ronald Reagan wrote the following in his diary after watching *The Day After*:

Columbus day. In the morning at Camp D. I ran the tape of the movie ABC is running on the air Nov. 20. It's called "The Day After." It has Lawrence Kansas wiped out in a nuclear war with Russia. It is powerfully done—all \$7 mil. worth. It's very effective & left me greatly depressed. So far they haven't sold any of the 25 spot ads scheduled & I can see why. Whether it will be of help to the "anti nukes" or not, I cant say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war. Back to W.H. (Reagan)

The film was likely one of many factors that led to President Reagan eventually signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, which banned a number of long-range ballistic missiles from both the United States and the Soviet Union.

It should be said that Nicholas Meyer is also a *Star Trek* alumnus, having directed *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, which places *Star Trek* creatives on both sides of the utopian/dystopian divide.

So we have a utopia on one hand, which has a goal of *prescribing* an alternate or future society that could be considered an improvement over our own. We also have dystopia, which has a goal of *discouraging* our society from particular paths of development by showing the natural conclusion to be repellent enough to be avoided altogether. Both utopia and dystopia in fiction, however, are asking the same basic question: Is this the society we want to become?

In the early 1970s, however, utopian fiction was about to take another turn, with authors attempting to strike a balance between the prescriptive blueprints of utopia and the hope-scorned hellscapes of dystopia.

## 2. Critical Utopia:

### Ambiguous Advancement

“W-w-wait! Before you go: What’s Heaven like?”

“Oh, it’s fine. There’s a shortage of chairs...”

“Oh.”

“Yeah...”

- *Family Guy* (Season 3, Episode 14)

More’s *Utopia*, although tongue-in-cheek at times, did not establish a society that was intentionally flawed. It’s only through the passage of time, as is often the case, that *Utopia* gradually revealed itself as not only flawed but inadequate in many ways. In other

words, More's vision expired. The fact remains, however, that More still had an idea for an improved society and, while he allowed for events such as overpopulation and residents who displayed a complete lack of faith, these events were not themselves allowed. More tried to anticipate the natural occurrences that might affect any given society, even Utopia. After all, utopias still had to function within a world where every other society was implicitly regressed. No matter how many mechanisms for adaptation are baked into a utopia, the world is always ready and waiting to surprise.

*The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *Trouble on Triton* by Samuel R. Delany are two utopian novels that opted to approach utopia from a different angle. Rather than creating a fictional societies that were only to be used explicitly as carrots on a stick for contemporary readers, Le Guin and Delany instead postulated that utopia could be presented in a manner that was *non-prescriptive* and instead invited criticism in the form of overt flaws that both the protagonist and the reader would be asked to reason through. However, despite presenting utopias with baked-in flaws that would've left *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton* in a sort of tenuous middle-ground between general speculative fiction and utopian fiction, utopian scholars like Tom Moylan began to argue that this brand of society that Le Guin and Delany have crafted speaks to a more pragmatic view of an improved society. After all, having established the difference between a utopia and a paradise, one of the prime differences between the two is that a utopia is *not* innately perfect, therefore it *cannot* be static in its development. The idea of rearranging furniture in Heaven does not compute given its status as a perfect realm, but this is not the case with utopias. This is because utopias leave room for themselves to

grow and adapt, to essentially improve further. Critical utopias just make those imperfections more obvious while still maintaining its utopian qualities and resisting the crossover into dystopia. For as much drama and despair is woven into the novels, both still allow for hope.

While More worked with the idea of colonization in order to combat overpopulation, it wasn't written as a flaw; it was a feature, because colonization was not perceived as detrimental to either side of the equation. In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin presents a society that has freed itself from power structures by thoroughly decentralizing that power and distributing it among its populace. One flaw deliberately presented is that those power structures were broken down in accordance with the dominant anarchist ideology of Le Guin's utopia, which is itself, on the basis of being the dominant ideology, gradually being wielded as a source of power within the society since no competing ideologies are allowed to flourish without consequence. In *Trouble on Triton*, Delany presents a society that boasts a *tremendous* amount of individual freedom allocated to its citizens that the government is powerless to compromise. *However*, that freedom is still allocated by a government that, at the outset of the novel, is shown to also have positioned itself on the brink of an interplanetary war.

This game of flawed utopias that Le Guin and Delany are playing with is made more intentional by way of the novels' subtitles. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* signaled that Le Guin was going to present a society that could *possibly* be considered a utopia depending on how it was approached or which facets were examined. *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* also signaled that Delany felt the society

he was presenting was something so different from utopia that it trended towards the Foucaudian concept of a heterotopia, which has several definitions that generally distill down to a location that exists separately and within a culture. A “counter-site,” as Foucault called it, which must necessarily exist, but also necessarily clashes with the culture in which it’s nested. Some examples of this might be a cemetery, a movie theater, or a library, where conflicting ideas can at once be brought to bear against one another within a particular space (Foucault). One definition that Delany specifically had in mind—though he admitted several applied—in addition to the Foucaudian definition was the medical definition: “Well, a major definition of "heterotopia" is its medical meaning. It's the removal of one part or organ from the body and affixing it at another place in or on the body. That's called a heterotopia. A skin graft is a heterotopia. But so is a sex change—one of the meanings of the word. So there” (“On *Triton*” 300). Given that changing one’s sex, in addition to almost any kind of bodily and chemical modification, is not only possible in Delany’s novel but can be achieved in an afternoon, this definition certainly fits.

This literary approach to utopian fiction, wherein the authors present intentionally flawed utopias as a way to invite readers to interrogate the world being relayed to them, is what Rob Moylan refers to as a *critical utopia*. He defines his term thusly:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is

more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (Moylan 10-11)

Moylan lists this first wave of critical utopias as including *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ (Delany took inspiration from Russ by introducing her fictional game “vlet” into *Trouble on Triton*), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy, and the novels with which this project is primarily concerned: *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*.

While utopian fiction certainly hadn't died out in the 20th century (Moylan points to Sargent's bibliography of utopian fiction, which shows a literary utopia released every year from 1900 to the publication of his own book, *Demand the Impossible*) there was cultural emphasis being given over to dystopian writings, which was reckoning with social upheaval and powers strong enough to engage in two world wars—with the potential for a devastating third looming as the Cold War progressed. The conclusion drawn from these events became that utopia was unattainable. Critical utopias, then, enabled writers to bring back the hopeful, dreamlike vision of an improved society while still retaining a measure of realism. Here is a future where humanity has continued to make mistakes that seem familiar, yet rectifiable. When Delany writes a scenario where Triton's citizens have come to accept a tremendous amount of surveillance on the part of the government in exchange for increased security, it feels eerily familiar, even in a 21st century context. Similarly on Le Guin's side, the possibility of a nation becoming so dogmatic over its own governing ideology that it rejects changes in the status quo to the point of violence might also seem familiar.



In stark contrast to the more prescriptive utopias that came before, these new “critical” utopias ask us to pick and discard, pick and discard, which allows readers discursive agency in a way that wholesale acceptance or rejection does not. They also tend to position themselves in such a way that they foster much sharper contrasts between our world and the fictional world; as-it-is versus as-it-could-be. Critical utopias ask us to assemble our own improved society, which makes this new sub-genre that the likes of Le Guin and Delany pioneered a much more democratic exercise, and all the more meaningful that their utopias were intentionally positioned into dialogue.

### 3. Dueling Utopias:

#### War of the Worlds

*Must redefine utopia.*

*It isn't the perfect end-product of our wishes. [...]*

*No. Utopia is the process of making a better world,*

*the name for one path history can take,*

*a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process,*

*with no end.*

*Struggle forever.*

- Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Shore*

By the 1960s, Ursula K. Le Guin and Samuel R. Delany had already established themselves as two of the most lauded science fiction writers working in the genre at the time. Not only were their books themselves praised for their thoughtful approaches to themes relating to sexuality, race, and identity, but the authors themselves had to push through and combat a number of social restraints before they were even able to get their work published to begin with.

Le Guin was a woman writing in a genre so dominated by men that she was once asked to publish one of her stories under an abbreviation of her name, U.K. Le Guin, so as to hide the fact that she was a woman (De Bolt 20). Delany was a gay black man writing in a genre dominated by straight white men. While attempting to publish his novel *Nova*, he was told by one editor that he had opted not to purchase Delany's book because he didn't feel that his audience could relate to a black protagonist—despite the fact that Delany's protagonist, Lorq Von Ray, was half-Nordic and half-Senegalese, half was still too much for John W. Campbell of *Analog* ("Racism and Science Fiction").

Le Guin and Delany had already become acquainted by the time their utopian novels crossed paths in the 1970s. Delany and his then-wife Marilyn Hacker had been publishing a speculative fiction anthology series called *Quark*, with Le Guin being featured in the first volume with her short story "A Trip to the Head." They crossed paths again when both Delany and Le Guin were nominated for "Best Short Story" at the Hugo Awards, during which Delany's "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones" claimed the prize over Le Guin's "The Winter King." Although Le Guin would claim the

prize herself four years later for her aforementioned “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”

In 1972, Delany had just completed his first draft of what would be published as *Triton*. (Delany’s preferred title, *Trouble on Triton*, was rejected by his editor, Frederik Pohl, due to its similarities with another novel, *Trouble on Titan*, and a Leonard Bernstein opera from which Delany took direct inspiration, *Trouble in Tahiti*. Delany’s preferred title was restored to the novel after Wesleyan University Press took over as publisher in 1996.) It was around this time that, on account of Le Guin and Delany sharing a publisher, Delany received an advanced copy of *The Dispossessed*. It was a case of sheer coincidence that Le Guin would publish a utopian science fiction novel at the same time Delany was finishing the first draft of his own. Though very different, Delany started to see places where their stories could potentially bounce off one another. And so as he began revising *Triton*, he made intentional edits that would place his novel in direct and open dialogue with *The Dispossessed*. One of the more obvious edits was the addition of a subtitle, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, which riffed off of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. He details this decision further during his informal interview with *Science Fiction Studies*:

Having read *The Dispossessed* after I’d finished a first or second draft—was I halfway through the second when a copy of Le Guin’s book from Harper & Row reached me in London by mail?—I thought I could probably make that dialogue more pointed by changing a few things here and there—or, better, by clarifying a few things here and there that Le Guin’s book directed me to think about. When I

first looked through *The Dispossessed*, it occurred to me that the two books generated an interesting dialogue with each other. My added subtitle was an attempt to put the two novels clearly into a dialogue I already felt was implied. (“On *Triton*” 301)

The end result was two futuristic utopian societies written by two of the most renowned science fiction writers of their time writing at the peak of their ability. Two writers, however, who had come from completely different economic, educational, sexual, and cultural backgrounds. They were even both raised on opposite coasts, with Le Guin spending most of her time in California and Oregon, while Delany was raised in New York. Before digging into their novels in earnest, let’s examine Ursula K. Le Guin and Samuel R. Delany by way of a brief biographical sketch of each, in an effort to see just how much of who they were found their way into the utopian worlds they placed delicately among the stars.

## CHAPTER 2: LE GUIN AND DELANY

### 1. Ursula K. Le Guin

(October 21, 1929 – January 22, 2018)

In every revolution, there are winners and losers.

Every dystopia is a utopia for somebody else.

It just depends where you are.

Are you in the class that benefits

or are you in the class that's not?

- Ken Liu

On August 29, 1911—eighteen years before the birth of Ursula Kroeber Le Guin—the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe descended from the hills and stumbled upon a slaughterhouse just outside Oroville, California. “Slaughterhouse butchers found him, barefoot and emaciated, wearing a canvas shirt, with buckskin thongs hanging from his pierced ears” (Japenga). After a brief stay in the nearby jail, this mysterious man was freed by a pair of anthropologists from the University of California, Berkeley: Thomas Waterman and Alfred Kroeber, the latter being Le Guin’s father.

Kroeber would soon discover that their mystery man was, in fact, a survivor of the Three Knolls Massacre—one of several raids upon the indigenous Yana tribes in the region by locals, Indian hunters, and scalpers—and was almost certainly the last

surviving member of the Yahi tribe (Kroeber 80-90). Further credence was granted to this by the fact that this Yahi man professed to have no name, as there had been no one living to grant him one. Kroeber, referring to the Yana vocabularies provided by two members of the Yahi man's parent tribe (Batwi and Chidaimiya), began referring to the man as "Ishi," which translates to "man" in English (Kroeber 6; "Concerning Ishi").

For the remainder of his life, Ishi would be the subject of intense study by Kroeber, who made recordings of Ishi's voice using wax cylinders—which, as of 2011, have been added to the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress due to their cultural significance—took many photographs, attempted to build out a vocabulary, and worked with Ishi in an attempt to reconstruct Yahi cultural practices ("2010 Registry"). This included a trek up to the hills that Ishi once called home, now barren, where he reenacted ceremonies and common tasks like flintknapping, which he accomplished with such practice and precision that his methods are still studied and utilized among flintknappers today.

Kroeber took Ishi to performances around the San Francisco Bay Area and got him a job at University of California Affiliated Colleges working as a janitor's assistant for \$25 a week (Kroeber 141). Ishi predominantly lived in the campus museum, never having a place entirely of his own in this new world (122). To many he was an oddity, an attraction, a specimen, widely proclaimed to be the last living Native American to grow up largely isolated from the influence of western civilization. He was frequently ill due to his lack of immunities and it was a bout of tuberculosis that eventually claimed his life five years after appearing at the Oroville slaughterhouse. Though it was Ishi's wish to die

at home, a compromise was made that he be taken to the museum at the Affiliated Colleges to live out the rest of his days.

Ishi's preferred funerary rites, related to Kroeber, were that he be cremated whole without an autopsy. As Kroeber was out of the country at the time of Ishi's death, he could only direct the funeral arrangements by mail, which unfortunately arrived too late to be entirely followed. A colleague of Kroeber's, Gifford, relayed the results of Ishi's funeral:

“I took the stand which you asked me to take some time ago: namely, that [Ishi] have a Christian burial like any other friend. The only departures from your request were that a simple autopsy was performed and that the brain was preserved. The matter was not entirely in my hands—in short what happened amounts to a compromise between science and sentiment with myself on the side of sentiment.” (Kroeber 235)

After Ishi's passing on March 25, 1916, a death mask was made of his face, his brain was removed, and his body cremated. There was, at the time, a belief among scientific circles that there was valuable information to be gleaned from the examination of “exotics,” and so Ishi's brain was sent east in a pottery jar wrapped in deerskin—where it was subsequently misplaced in the depths of a Smithsonian warehouse for over eighty years (Curtius).

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People often ask me about Ishi. I know no more about him than anyone else who read my mother's book. [...] The only useful thing I can tell people is about his name. Since his people didn't tell other people their name and there was no one to do it for him, he and my father Alfred Kroeber and the other people working with him agreed to use a word which they understood to mean, in Ishi's language, simply "Man." ("Concerning Ishi")

Le Guin's father, Alfred Kroeber, became an anthropologist whose legacy experienced wide renown in the 20th century, followed by intense scrutiny in the 21st century. A man who was at the forefront of defining the field of anthropology—having studied under Franz Boas— whose textbook was required reading at universities for decades, and who even had a building named after him: Kroeber Hall, which houses the anthropology department at UC Berkeley to this day. A man whose legacy with regards to his indigenous subjects accrued enough ire that his name was removed from the very same building in 2021 following a unanimous vote by the university's Building Name Review Committee. (Kell) The source of this ire might be gleaned from Kroeber's letter to Gifford, in which he paradoxically asks that Ishi's funeral requests be respected, while also commenting on the skeletons of indigenous persons the anthropology department had in reserve:

I do not, however, see that an autopsy would lead to anything of consequence, but would resolve itself into a general dissection. Please shut down on it. As to disposal of the body, I ask you as my personal representative to yield nothing at all under any circumstances. If there is any talk about the interests of science, say



for me that science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our friends. Besides, I cannot believe that any scientific value is materially involved. We have hundreds of Indian skeletons that nobody ever comes near to study. (Kroeber 234)

Le Guin, her mother, and her three brothers faced a growing number of questions about Ishi over the years, but by the time Ishi had died Le Guin's father and mother had not even met. Ishi's own legacy, however, would continue to entangle itself in the affairs of the Kroeber family for decades after.

Theodora Kracaw had been a doctoral student in anthropology when she met Alfred Kroeber in one of his seminars. They were married in 1926 and had two children, Ursula and Karl—in addition to two other children from Theodora's previous marriage, whom Alfred adopted. The family wanted for nothing and traveled often, sometimes internationally to assist in Alfred's anthropological studies in places like Peru, and every year they would leave Berkeley to summer at their sweeping estate in the Napa Valley of California. Le Guin saw many parts of the world as a young child and experienced others vicariously through the interests of her parents.

Even before learning to read, however, Ursula had heard her father tell Indian legends, so that the oral tradition of folk tales was part of her earliest memory. She was also introduced to mythology very early. She found that she preferred Norse myths to the Greek, and these distinctive tales from the northern peoples have had a direct influence on her own works. (Spivack 2) She read often from her parents' extensive library and her family played host to world-renowned scientists such as Robert Oppenheimer, the

physicist who would eventually become director of the Los Alamos Laboratory that constructed the first atomic bomb (Barr).

Before Le Guin was even in her teens, she was already writing science fiction, and by the age of eleven she had submitted her first short story to *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine. The story was rejected, as was another story she submitted a decade later. Now in her twenties, she put writing aside in order to focus on her education. Initially considering a major in biology, Le Guin's dislike of math persuaded her to head towards the humanities, majoring in French and Italian Renaissance Literature at Radcliffe College, an all-women's institution of Harvard University, and then earned her MA in French at Columbia University—where her father had accepted a teaching position after his retirement from Berkeley. Le Guin's heightened interest in the French language persuaded her to accept a Fulbright grant that sent her overseas to study the poetry of Jean Lemaire de Belges in France for her doctoral studies. It was on the way to France aboard the RMS *Queen Mary* that she met Charles Le Guin, another Fulbright recipient and historian, whom she married in December of that same year.

Le Guin's marriage to Charles is what precipitated the abandonment of her doctoral studies, in addition to a brewing sense of dread over the possibility of being pigeonholed into teaching freshman French for the rest of her life (De Bolt 17). After moving back to the States with her new husband, they relocated frequently as Charles's various teaching opportunities took them on a cross-country journey. It was during one of these stops at the University of Idaho that, at the age of 28, Le Guin gave birth to her first child.

At some point between moves, Le Guin reacquainted herself with the notion of publishing some of her writings. She submitted some poems and short stories to small press publishers with some success, but the bigger works of hers, her novels, the ones she was most proud of, struggled to find an audience. However, two events would serve to catalyze a more concerted push into the realm of science fiction. The first being the death of her father, Alfred, in 1960; the second was being loaned a collection of science fiction stories that did the trick of reminding her how much she loved the genre.

With the support of her family, Le Guin started writing full-time, successfully publishing a number of short stories before getting her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, published at Ace Books in 1966 as an Ace Double, coupled with *The Kar-Chee Reign* by Avram Davidson. *Rocannon's World* was also the first novel in what would eventually become Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*, which includes *The Dispossessed*. (Le Guin's trajectory through science fiction at this point was very similar to Samuel R. Delany's, who also published his first novel through Ace Books as an Ace Double only four years previous.)

Le Guin's bibliography grew at a steady rate from there, including two sequels to *Rocannon's World*; *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), which would kick off her very popular *Earthsea Cycle*; and even a short story published in *Quark/1* in 1970, which was a speculative fiction anthology Samuel R. Delany and his then-wife Marilyn Hacker. It was in 1969 that Le Guin published her first widespread hit in the form of *The Left Hand of Darkness*—another entry in the *Hainish Cycle*—which would go on to win both the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award for Best Novel, making Le Guin the first woman to win

either award in that category. She would win both awards for Best Novel again five years later for *The Dispossessed*, making her the first author to win both awards in that category for two different novels.

Le Guin's success brought with it heightened scrutiny of her work, as she was writing in a genre absolutely dominated by men at a time when second-wave feminism was reaching its peak. Le Guin herself had been subjected to unfair treatment early in her career when a publisher requested that they publish her story "Nine Lives" under the name U.K. Le Guin to hide the fact she was a woman: a request she acquiesced to and later regretted (De Bolt 20). Feminist critics pointed out, however, that despite her success in a male-dominated industry, Le Guin seemed hesitant to write stories with female protagonists. Indeed, though feminist themes were a constant throughout her bibliography, her novels *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971) and *Tehanu* (1990) were the only two books she wrote before the turn of the century to center on female protagonists. Samuel Delany even commented on this independently when discussing *The Dispossessed*:

Let me state, by the bye, that though I've criticized it at great (even excessive) length, *The Dispossessed* is a rich and wondrous tale. It's a boy's book: a book to make boys begin to think and think seriously about a whole range of questions, from the structure of society to the workings of their own sexuality. ("On *Triton*" 305)

Joanna Russ, another writer in the first wave of critical utopias, offered harsher criticism of Le Guin shirking more feminine characters in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which

describes humanoids called the Gethenians who spontaneously change from sexless to either male or female once a month. Despite its dialogue centering on a species that has no definite sexual boundaries, Russ claims in her essay “The Image of Women in Science Fiction” that Le Guin’s novel is still unabashedly masculine:

It is, I must admit, a deficiency in the English language that these people must be called “he” throughout, but put that together with the native hero’s personal encounters in the book, the absolute lack of interest in child-raising, the concentration on work, and what you have is a world of men. Thus the great love scene in the book is between two men: the human observer (who is a real man) and the native hero (who is a female man). [...]

Miss Le Guin seems to be aiming at some kind of equality between the sexes, but she certainly goes the long way around to get it; a whole new biology has to be invented, a whole society, a whole imagined world, so that finally she may bring together two persons of different sexes who will nonetheless be equals.

(Russ 209-10)

Le Guin herself has also broached the subject a number of times over the decades. Her early books being led by mostly male protagonists was largely a pragmatic decision. She was a woman writing in a genre where the writers and readers of science fiction were predominantly men. At the time, when all Le Guin wanted was to see her work published, she was willing to make concessions. Beyond that, though, writing stories that men wouldn’t blush at picking up and trying out appealed to her, which was one of the reasons specifically that she wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* with a male protagonist. If making

the main character a man meant that male readers would be more likely to be taken in by the story and consider its elements and themes with intrigue, potentially being changed by them, then it was a gamble Le Guin was frequently willing to make (De Bolt 24-25).

Le Guin was a prolific writer throughout her career, inspiring generations of artists with the worlds she created and themes that frequently forced readers to reconsider their own world, as well as the perspectives that governed how they engaged with it. *The Dispossessed* became one of her most famous novels for how it grapples with a place where the environment has allowed a utopian society to emerge and sustain itself for over a century. At the center of the novel is a citizen of this utopia, forced to leave his home and travel into the depths of a highly advanced society. He barely speaks the language of this new world, his very presence is a public draw wherever he travels, and he lives at the behest of academics at a sprawling university. Le Guin frequently enjoyed writing characters who embodied the “stranger in a strange land,” and it’s possible this was due to the influence of her parents, their passion for anthropology, and stories such as that of Ishi, whose tragic journey shares much overlap with that of the protagonist of *The Dispossessed*.

What was truly important to Le Guin, however, was the change in a person that a journey—physically, culturally, intellectually, spiritually—could promote, and how bringing those lessons back home to promote even more change was crucial for true social progress. The “eternal return” is central to the protagonist’s view of time and progression—simultaneity and sequency; ie, cyclical linearity—and the return home is an important lesson that he learns while abroad in the new world. Through the narrative, he

expresses his regret that the Odonians who left for Anarres have never made the all-important return:

The Settlers of Anarres had turned their backs on the Old World and its past, opted for the future only. But as surely as the future becomes the past, the past becomes the future. To deny is not to achieve. The Odonians who left Urras had been wrong, wrong in their desperate courage, to deny their history, to forgo the possibility of return. The explorer who will not come back or send back his ships to tell his tale is not an explorer, only an adventurer; and his sons are born in exile. (*The Dispossessed* 89)

Summed up even more succinctly at the end of the novel: “True journey is return” (367).

On January 22, 2018, Ursula Kroeber Le Guin passed away at her home in Portland, Oregon at the age of 88.

## 2. Samuel R. Delany

(April 1, 1942 – Present)

All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there,  
by the people who are not allowed in.

- Toni Morrison

Samuel Ray Delany Jr. (“Chip” to his friends) is sitting among some of the science fiction genre’s heaviest-of-hitters at the Nebula Awards Banquet on April 14,

1968, with two of his works having been nominated for “Best Novel” and “Best Short Story.” This is not to say that Delany himself is not a heavy hitter, but at twenty-six years old, he is certainly one of the youngest among the attendees, especially considering that the novel for which he’s been nominated, *The Einstein Intersection*, is his eighth novel—his first being published when he was just twenty years old. He has accomplished much for such a young author even up until this point. This isn’t even the first time he’s been nominated or won for “Best Novel” at the Nebulas; the last time being only one year ago, when his book *Babel-17* won the award, though it was shared with *Flowers for Algernon* (1966) by Daniel Keyes.

*The Einstein Intersection* wins “Best Novel” for the night and, with his family in attendance, Delany accepts the award. Things go sour quickly, however, when another “eminent member” of the Science Fiction Writers of America takes the podium and immediately dives into a prolonged diatribe, as Delany recounts in his 1998 essay “Racism and Science Fiction”:

Perhaps you’ve heard such disgruntled talks: They begin, as did this one, “What I have to say tonight, many of you are not going to like . . .” and went on to castigate the organization for letting itself be taken in by (the phrase was, or was something very like) “pretentious literary nonsense,” unto granting it awards, and abandoning the old values of good, solid, craftsmanlike story-telling. It’s an odd experience, I must tell you, to accept an award from a hall full of people in tuxedos and evening gowns and then, from the same podium at which you accepted it, hear a half-hour jeremiad from an *eminence gris* declaring that award



to be worthless and the people who voted it to you duped fools. It's not paranoia: By count I caught more than a dozen sets of eyes sweeping between me and the speaker going on about the triviality of work such as mine and the foolishness of the hundred-plus writers who had voted for it. ("Racism and Science Fiction")

Things get even more tense when Delany wins the "Best Short Story" award for "Aye, and Gomorrah..." Returning once again to the podium, he nervously accepts his award and quite diplomatically replies in his defense: "I write the novels and stories that I do and work on them as hard as I can to make them the best I can. That you've chosen to honor them—and twice in one night—is warming. Thank you" ("Racism and Science Fiction"). This earns him a standing ovation.

On his way back to his seat, Delany is stopped by Isaac Asimov, writer of books such as *I, Robot* and the *Foundation* series, and is told in a way that Delany only interprets as sarcastic, "You know, Chip, we only voted you those awards because you're Negro . . . !" He takes it the way Asimov intended it, but it's still one more thing he prefers hadn't happened that day. Despite his young, yet formidable career, Delany feels Asimov's quip is just one further reminder that no matter how much more he accomplishes, no matter how successful he is within science fiction, that there will always be a looming asterisk over him and his body of work. The first mainstream African-American science fiction author (though he is often credited as the first ever, it's a title he refuses), the first African-American to win both the Hugo and the Nebula awards (two of the most prestigious awards in the genre of speculative fiction), a man whose career would inspire his contemporaries and subsequent generations of writers

decades down the line. Thirty years later, writing “Racism and Science Fiction” for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, he still remembers that night keenly. A night that by all rights should’ve been his, now has to be forever shared in memory with bitter company.

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Samuel Delany was born in Harlem in 1942 to Margaret and Samuel Ray Delany Sr. His father was the owner of the Levy & Delany Funeral Home in Harlem, which is referenced in the works of Langston Hughes and was, at one time in 1947, directly assisting with the funeral arrangements of W.E.B. Du Bois if he should die in the United States (Du Bois). However, Du Bois lived another sixteen years before dying overseas in Ghana, outliving Delany’s father who had already died of cancer.

Delany was only the second generation of his family born into post-emancipation America and grew up hearing family stories of race-based atrocities both old and new, which made a significant impact on him and would heavily influence the topics he gravitated towards in his writing. His grandfather on his father’s side was the first black bishop of the Arch Diocese of North and South Carolina of the Episcopal Church and counted W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington among his friends (Steiner; Episcopal). His grandfather on his mother’s side worked as an elevator operator alongside Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Delany’s family had a significant presence in Harlem and he grew up on the second and third floors above the family funeral home. When he

was still just a kid, Delany was enrolled in a school for the gifted and during the summers he would visit a family home in upstate New York, where “upwards of a hundred family and friends would gather to drink and eat barbeque, along with tubs of cole slaw, boiled corn, potato salad, and endless homemade pies, to tell stories and generally enjoy themselves” (Steiner).

At a young age, Delany had come to realize that he was gay. An incident that later became the basis for his novel *Dark Reflections* took place when he was eleven years old, when during a hospital visit he asked the doctor how many gay people there were in the United States:

“[The doctor] told me it was an extremely rare disease,” Delany says. “No more than one out of 5,000 men carried it.” Rest assured, the doctor added, no medical records existed confirming the existence of black homosexuals. “Simply because I was black,” Delany says, “I didn’t need to worry!” (D’Anastasio)

His attraction to men would put him at a rather distressing social intersection. He was black at a time before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 when Jim Crow Laws were still in effect in some states; he was bright at an unusually early age; a gifted reader and writer despite grappling with severe dyslexia, which up until then was not acknowledged as a disorder; he was gay at a time when it was still considered “an extremely rare disease”—and now, thanks to an interest in science, he began to write within a literary genre that had, up until that time, been outright dominated by white men with very few exceptions: science fiction.

At the age of nineteen, Delany married Marilyn Hacker, a poet and editorial assistant at Ace Books. Since he was black and she was white, they had been forced to leave New York and marry in Detroit, since it was the closest place where interracial marriages were recognized. Around this time, he also completed what would become his first published novel: *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962), which was brought to the editor-in-chief at Ace Books by Hacker. After Delany's twentieth birthday, *The Jewels of Aptor* was published as an Ace Double with *Second Ending* by James White.

From then on, Delany began writing multiple books at a time and publishing at least one per year for the next six years. He wrote feverishly, to the point of burnout and a brief stay at Mount Sinai Mental Hospital. He worked odd jobs and wrote novels to support himself while his relationship with Hacker fell into a pattern of breakups and repairments, all while Delany was frequently seeking out quick, anonymous sex with male partners multiple times a day. (By Delany's own estimation, he's had over 50,000 such encounters over the course of his life.) In one instance, he wrote a novel in under two weeks in order to finance a trip to Europe, which became *Empire Star* (1966). During his trip, he met with some of his peers in the genre and began writing *The Einstein Intersection*, the book that would lead to the unfortunate encounter at the Nebula Awards in 1968 (Steiner).

He continued working on science fiction throughout the '60s and '70s—including the manuscript for *Dhalgren*, largely considered to be Delany's magnum opus—but pivoted a lot of his creative energies into almost every other artistic direction available. He produced a play in San Francisco, in French; created a version of the play that was

recorded and broadcast over public radio in Berkeley; he produced short films, some experimental; he was hired by DC Comics to write two issues of *Wonder Woman*; he wrote essays, literary criticism (including “To Read *The Dispossessed*,” which will be utilized within this project), and even a memoir. His fiction writing also trended artistically towards queer fiction and the pornographic, where he has dabbled with famous (and infamous, depending on the reader) degrees of intensity ever since. This resulted in what is considered to be the last queer novel to be written before the Stonewall Riots (by Delany’s estimation, only a matter of days before the event, but unpublished until 1995) called *Hogg* and the first novel distributed by a major publisher to directly tackle the AIDS epidemic: *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, which was included in a collection called *Flight from Nevèrjion* (1985).

Now in his eighties, Delany is still writing against type, though he is much beloved by a vast number of artists who consider him a trailblazer across the science fiction and queer fiction communities. His fiction deliberately focused on characters and experiences that, up until that point, had been such a rarity to have been practically nonexistent. *Babel-17* featured a bisexual Chinese poet named Rydra Wong as the protagonist. *Nova* (1968) prominently featured a mixed-race character named Lorq Von Ray (half-Norwegian and half-Senegalese) whose presence in the novel became the sole reason for its rejection by John W. Campbell at *Analog Science Fact & Fiction* magazine, since Campbell “didn’t feel his readership would be able to relate to a black main character” (“Racism and Science Fiction”). And *Trouble on Triton*, which will be a focus of this project, features a host of characters of various races, sexualities, and genders,

including a protagonist who (similar to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*) changes sex from a man to a woman partway through the novel. All of this was driven not by an urge to write how a publisher saw the world, but to write in such a way that he accurately translated the patchwork society he experienced growing up in New York, as well as the experiences of his own life that he was hard pressed to find elsewhere—even in fiction (Taylor).

Despite the subject matter, whether the story takes place on Earth or a utopia on the moon of Neptune, despite the race, gender, or appearance of the protagonists Delany presents to his readers, they're all an extension of his own life experience: "All the experiences that were used in my own stories and books were black experiences—why? Because they were mine" (D'Anastasio). He's a professor who never made it through college. He's made friends and admirers of many artists around the world—including Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ, Nalo Hopkinson, Neil Gaiman, Kim Stanley Robinson, Walter Mosely, and William Gibson—some of whom count him as an influence and mentor. He's even made friends of his enemies, including the unnamed author who took to the stage at the awards ceremony in 1968 to harangue the panel for voting in *The Einstein Intersection*. After actually *reading* the book, Delany says, this author became one of his strongest proponents.

As of 2023, Delany lives with his partner of over thirty years, Dennis Rickett—and is still frequently asked if the future has lived up to his expectations.

## CHAPTER 3: ANARRES AND TRITON

### 1. Anarres: An Anarchist Utopia

“To make a thief, make an owner;  
to create crime, create laws.”

- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*

In *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* by Ursula K. Le Guin, Earth is an echo in the background. It is a planet that once had potential, just as most of the human worlds now composing the galaxy did, but instead saw fit to squander it for temporary gain. In doing so, Earth became a proving ground on which humanity learned several bitter lessons in rapid succession after having failed to consider their own gift of foresight at times otherwise considered crucial. In the book, they are described as “intellectual imperialists, jealous wall-builders” (266). Natural resources were harvested liberally and without any thought given to the notion of sustainability. Eventually, the planet reached a tipping point from which there was no return and, as a result, Earth became a wasteland.

A Terran ambassador later in the novel describes the fall of Earth:

“My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first. There are no forests left on my Earth

[...] People are tough! There are nearly half a billion of us now. Once there were nine billion. You can see old cities still everywhere. The bones and bricks go to dust, but the little pieces of plastic never do—they never adapt either. We failed as a species, as a social species. We are here now, dealing as equals with other human societies on other worlds, only because of the charity of the Hainish.”

(329-30)

While it is able to limp on in some way and maintain some form of connection with other star systems, it is described as a place that no one would intentionally travel to except out of the same curiosity that drives people to visit the graves of historical figures. Out of a decided lack of options, people still cling to the planet, which is known throughout the galaxy as Terra, its people Terrans, and its situation terra-ble.

But Terra is just one of many worlds in the galaxy that plays host to human life. The collective setting, which has come to be known informally as Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle*, is described gradually over the course of eight novels and several short stories. In the series, humans did not come into existence spontaneously, but were instead one species among many that were intentionally seeded by an advanced civilization known as the Hain. Terrans, along with many other races, were created as a form of interstellar colonization on the part of the Hain. These far-flung human races are only just recently, after many millennia separated from each other, beginning to connect with each other and their creators by way of advancing technology and some measure of intervention on the part of the Hain.



At around this time is when the story of *The Dispossessed* begins. Another group of humans have come to prominence on the galactic stage, this group having evolved on an Earth-like planet called Urras in the Tau Ceti star system. The Cetians upon Urras have developed along lines very similar to Terra and one can glean many parallels between Urras and Earth, such as it was. It has managed to endure longer than Terra and has managed to find a balance between sustainability, expansion, and technological advancement, but still sees the same kinds of segmentation that readers of *The Dispossessed* might find between countries here on Earth in modern times. A-IO is the Urrasti world power and shares a lot of overlap with the United States: capitalistic, democratic, and specializes in material excess, but is overwhelmingly patriarchal and many of its citizens are exposed to severe wealth disparity. A-IO is the country that the main character of *The Dispossessed* interacts with the most on Urras, though he also encounters members from other countries that share parallels between Soviet Russia and North Korea.

Urras is described in such a way that makes it seem like Earth. That is, a version of Earth that might exist if we don't somehow destroy ourselves and are mostly able to head into the future as we are. By making Urras and the nation of A-IO a more exaggerated version of Earth and the United States, all of their faults become that much more obvious. Women have almost zero social mobility here, being segregated from most fields or, even if they are able to somehow push into sectors such as academia, barred from climbing much higher than entry level positions. As the protagonist of *The Dispossessed* encounters some of the most enlightened and intelligent minds that Urras

has to offer, he is still told that the minds of women simply cannot handle the complexities of mathematics and science, and so are not even allowed to try. This is borne out during a conversation the protagonist Shevek has with some of his Urrasti counterparts, when he asks:

“Are all the scientists here men, then?”

“Scientists?” Oiie asked, incredulous.

Pae coughed. “Scientists. Oh, yes, certainly, they’re all men. There are some female teachers in the girls’ schools, of course. But they never get past Certificate level.”

“Why not?”

“Can’t do the math; no head for abstract thought; don’t belong. You know how it is, what women call thinking is done with the uterus! Of course, there’s always a few exceptions, God-awful brainy women with vaginal atrophy.”

“You Odonians let women study science?” Oiie inquired.

“Well, they are in the sciences, yes.”

“Not many, I hope.”

“Well, about half.” (*The Dispossessed* 75)

The wealth gap is enormous on Urras, with the massive, layered cities of A-Io driving people situated outside of education and the prestige positions of society down into the darkened lower layers. There is also conflict between countries at a time that is most unbeneficial to everyone involved. Despite Urras being so isolated and on the precipice of an astounding scientific breakthrough that could change the course of

civilization, the counties upon it are intent on waging war against each other, both within and without. All of this gives the impression that Urras would be a model civilization within the context of this burgeoning interstellar alliance if it would just quit being so stereotypically human. This is driven home by Le Guin showing that the great scientific breakthrough, which the protagonist Shevek is the key to unlocking, has to rely on the humans of Terra—humbled by their own self-destruction—and *not* Urras to properly distribute his findings.

All of these imperfections that Urras carries with it comes to a head near the end of the novel, when a proxy war between A-Io and Thu (a nation that draws many parallels to the Soviet Union) erupts in the nation of Benbilli, and protestors find themselves being gunned down indiscriminately.

War, economic disparity, a severely patriarchal society, an exclusionary education system, all of these being a fact of life on Urras, as well as the self-wrought devastation on Terra, are used by Le Guin in order to draw out more defined comparisons between itself and its moon Anarres, where the other half of the novel takes place.

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Anarres is the product of Urras's own state of inequality. Well over a century before the beginning of the novel, a woman named Odo gathered followers under the banner of a new form of society, one that was essentially built around anarchism. Where Urras had managed to weave power structures into almost every facet of society to the

point where people are born with high or low status before they draw their first breath, Odo's new society would redistribute that power to the people. Where Urras favored patriarchy, Odo's would favor egalitarianism. Odo led a revolution in an attempt to make her vision of an anarchist utopian society a reality, but would die before her efforts could bear fruit. Eventually, Odonism cultivated enough power that the governments of Urras opted to buy them off by giving them the moon of Anarres, which, while largely barren, was habitable.

For the next century and a half, the Anarresti would build a sustainable society out of the deserts of the moon and put Odo's anarchist vision into motion. A society with a decentralized power structure meant that everyone had to work together for survival. A move away from the more capitalist philosophies of Urras meant that nothing could be owned, which was a beneficial practice on a moon with scarce resources. Children would be raised communally; families would be formed by mutual agreements that could be broken without consequence at any time; individuals could move between locations and disciplines without any real issues; and no one was born with any more or less social status than anyone else.

As a consequence of nothing being owned (itself a consequence of Anarres having no currency), crime became exceedingly rare, removing the need for prisons altogether. After all, if all basic needs are provided and everything is communal, nothing can truly be stolen. Hence prisons do not exist but for having some presence in stories about the "horrors" of Urras that kids pass around to scare each other.

Eventually, resources on Anarres being so limited began to cause issues, which necessitated a running trade agreement with Urras. This could be seen as Odonism and the entire Anarresti lifestyle being undercut by their system not being enough to provide for the entire population. Indeed, these shipments from Urras are a source of shame for many on the moon, a sign that despite their revolution, despite having a world of their own, they are still reliant on the society from which they broke away.

It's also because of this scarcity, Anarresti society has begun to rely more heavily upon form of automation: a computerized system run by the Division of Labor (DivLab) that both assigns unique, gender-neutral names to all citizens (names are pulled from a pool at birth and then reassigned upon death, showing that not even names can be owned) and also jobs to anyone looking to volunteer their time. DivLab is constantly updating and maintaining profiles on all of its citizens, as well as balancing a kind of triage of labor depending on the conditions on Anarres. For example, if there is a food shortage, then it's likely that even teachers will be assigned to farming in order to rapidly make up for the shortfall.

The protagonist of *The Dispossessed*, a man and a scientist named Shevek, is thrown through almost every facet of life upon Anarres. As a child, his mother abandons the family. As he grows older, he finds himself attracted to the sciences and the big questions regarding the universe. He's also assigned to various jobs by DivLab during a prolonged drought and subsequent famine. In the end, though, he's allowed to follow his curiosity—to a point—though this is where the utopian elements of Anarres come into play.

Ultimately, Anarres, despite its shortcomings such as resource scarcity, allows for a tremendous amount of personal freedom, as well as freedom *from* scenarios like large-scale violence, criminality, and class/economic disparity. Shevek himself is allowed to pursue his curiosity directly at an academy without having to wander through a maze of unrelated prerequisites or monetary barriers, which enables him to get fairly close to discovering his “General Temporal Theory”—a theory that eventually allows for instantaneous communication between any two points in the cosmos. This discovery, however, is only accomplished after he eventually leaves for Urras, and is only disseminated after providing his work to Terra, giving the impression that Anarres, Urras, *and* Terra hold the key for an ideal society that neither one has been able to accomplish independently.

Out of this comes Anarres’s most prominent flaw, which precipitates Shevek’s temporary departure to Urras as the first Anarresti to leave the moon since the initial exodus over a century and a half ago. Anarresti, for the most part, have fallen into a pattern of applying the question of “*Cui bono?*” to most endeavors. *Who benefits?* How can Shevek’s General Temporal Theory be of use to an isolationist moon where supplying enough food and water to the populace every year is the utmost cause? What good would instantaneous communication be to a people who have no interest in talking to anyone beyond their orbit, including the world around which their world orbits? Charlotte Spivack, Le Guin scholar and professor of English at UMass Amherst, believes that this emphasis on providing stability on Anarres has amounted to intellectual stagnation:

On the other hand, the goal of social harmony creates tensions with the demands of the individual. Society does not cultivate or even understand genius. The individual with an outstanding talent may be discouraged by the group who show no interest in his work, not being motivated by respect for personal achievement.

Shevek is a case in point. (Spivack 79)

Anarres, in the end, is a utopia in the sense that it has been able to break away and endure beyond the influence of Urras. Poverty, crime, class-based inequality, extreme patriarchy, and traditional barriers that might stand between an individual and their intellectual curiosity, none of these exist on Anarres. The Odonians fostered a dream of moving beyond the capitalistic tendencies of Urras by distributing power. There is no widespread suffering unless all are suffering, but there is no widespread prosperity unless all contribute. The Anarresti can choose their own destinies with very little opposition beyond the understanding that one's destiny can only be pursued as long as there is a society there to enable that pursuit. In that sense, destiny cannot be owned either on Anarres; it must be shared.

## 2. Triton: A Libertarian Utopia

“Well, I... it's just that I have difficulty,  
with you, sometimes,  
deciding what's real and what's theater.”

- *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*

In *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* by Samuel R. Delany, the city of Tethys sits enclosed in a dome upon Triton, a moon of Neptune, at the farthest reaches of the Solar System. It's a relatively new community in the grand scheme of things, with the oldest standing structures being around seventy-five years old, while those of the first extraterrestrial community on Mars, the city of Bellona, are around a hundred and ten years old (136). Humanity has strewn itself across the Solar System—but although colonization of the stars has occurred with relative haste, so too has the transformation of what would fall under even the broadest definition of human culture by today's standards. As Earth and Mars continue developing under more oppressive and traditionalist boundaries, the communities that have come to form the Outer Satellites (with its boundaries beginning at the moons of Jupiter and moving outward to Neptune), having been able to exist independently of the influence of the Inner Worlds for a significant stretch of time, have begun to distinguish themselves in a few crucial ways.

Firstly: the Outer Satellites have embraced technology in almost every facet of their lives. *Trouble on Triton* has its protagonist, Bron Helstrom, traversing a significant portion of Tethys after work, allowing the reader to experience a kind of vertical slice of Tritonian society. During this jaunt, he stops to operate a machine called an “ego-booster booth,” which allows users to have access to randomly-selected clips of government surveillance data that has been collected about Bron. Traditional companies have been phased out in favor of “hegemonies” that are predominantly automated, with a contingent



of humans hired to work in a kind of supportive role. In this sense, life on Tethys does not seem to require much human intervention in order to function efficiently.

There's also the matter of the construction of Tethys itself, which, unlike Le Guin's community on Anarres, exists beneath a dome that provides an atmosphere for its moonbound citizens. It also, as exemplified in an earlier chapter, provides artificial gravity and a "sensory field" that dampens the rather static view of the perpetual night of Triton's sky and the gaseous, blue surface of Neptune in favor of interpolated colors that make the sky more dynamic and stimulating in the name of preserving human sanity. The assumption being that humans have a baked-in need for a *sky* and even swirling colors overhead is better than nothing at all.

Secondly: the Outer Satellites have moved towards a more Libertarian form of society. Citizens of Triton, in ways similar to Anarres, enjoy extraordinary levels of personal freedom and self-expression. Arguably more freedom than Anarres, though this comes at the cost of having a government in place, which means a tangible power structure and laws... to a degree. In Tethys proper, people are allowed to be whomever they want to be and can express their identities freely both in public and in the workplace. Gone are the days of business attire. Workers can show up to work wearing any clothing they want, or none at all. Advancements in bodily modification means people can also show up to work the next day as someone else completely; a different race, sex, or just a modified version of their current bodies. This has removed any kind of identity, cosmetic, or body standards on Triton, resulting in a community that truly celebrates uniqueness.

Triton's emphasis on personal freedoms also means freedom from hunger, homelessness, poverty, and even the laws themselves. The amount of automation on the moon means that the government on Triton can provide all of its citizens with a brand of universal basic income, where everyone is supplied with enough credits (called "franqs" in currency-form) to maintain a standard of living, while also being allotted housing and transportation around Triton. For those who feel even the lax levels of authority the government retains is too much, they can move into "the unlicensed sector," a section of Tethys where no laws are enforced and anything is permitted.

Thirdly: the government is established in such a way that it is *truly* representative. When a candidate for governor runs for office, even if they only get a single vote, they still get the job. They become the governor of everyone who votes for them (a governor who received twenty votes becomes the governor of those twenty voters), resulting in a system equating to social unions. According to Delany, this allows citizens to augment the ratio of taxes, working hours, housing conditions, types of food made available, and even the kinds of greenery planted in residential areas ("On *Triton*" 318). So not only is identity democratized on Triton, but how people interact with their society has been democratized, as well.

Similar to the dynamic Le Guin establishes between Anarres, Urras, and Terra, Delany has positioned Triton to draw more distinct comparisons with Earth and Mars. Though *Trouble on Triton*'s protagonist is from Mars and only visits Earth briefly, we can see that Earth has clung to almost stubborn levels of traditionalism, with clearly defined gender roles, no universal basic income, and is leaning into authoritarianism, as

evidenced by Bron being plucked off the street and tortured by government officials in a black site under the *presumption* of being a spy for the Outer Satellites. We see that Mars is likely trending more progressive in some ways, but Delany still inserts a few clues that it might be embracing authoritarianism, as well, given that one of the prominent locations listed is “The Goebels,” which quickly evokes Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda for Nazi Germany. Bron’s own struggle to adapt to Trionian society, as well, indicates that there is a quality inherent in Martian culture that doesn’t completely mesh with that of the Outer Satellites. In either case, Earth and Mars form an alliance (bringing Earth’s now-populated moon, Luna, along for the ride) in a violent bid to secure “economic domination of Jupiter’s and Saturn’s moons, big and little alike” (*Trouble on Triton* 120).

This establishes the conditions that Bron Helstrom traipses through at the outset of *Trouble on Triton*: a man from a more traditionalist world now living on a distant moon on the brink of war with his previous home, forced to engage with a new society that provides him with more modes of self-expression than he’s ever had before. Unfortunately for Bron, every choice presented to him is more detestable than the last.

## CHAPTER 4: ANARCHY AND LIBERTY

### 1. Scarcity as a Provider

The shadows moved about him but he sat unmoving  
as Anarres rose above the alien hills,  
at her full, mottled dun and bluish-white, lambent.  
The light of his world filled his empty hands.

- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*

If we step away from our environments to a certain level, we are all communities of scarcity and reliance. Even in the United States, natural and man-made disasters are enough to disrupt our quality of life drastically. Points of failure, if breached, will create a cascade that is felt by all. The COVID-19 Pandemic created far-reaching consequences in just about every country on the planet, as nations struggled with reduced interaction with one another and dependent economies were hampered severely. In the grand scheme of things, we are all living and working together in our own isolated corner of the universe, and all things we depend on come from our home. In recent years, we have begun to reckon with the “ecological accord” (as Delany calls it) that demands we balance our needs as a species with what our environment can realistically provide. Since we must directly harm our environment in order to sustain ourselves, the best course of action then

is to only do reparable levels of harm. Rather than irreparable, as in the case of Le Guin's Terra.

The communities upon Anarres and Triton are constructed in such a way that scarcity and reliance are heightened, since the points of failure in these communities don't just mean a disruption of resources or living standards trending into discomfort, it can mean complete societal decimation. As illustrated in the earlier chapters of *Trouble on Triton*, the city of Tethys is reliant on technology to such a great extent that it's required *just* to keep everyone's feet on the ground. When a momentary power failure causes the city's artificial gravity to shut down, the entire population of Tethys experiences a momentary bout of near-weightlessness. Considering that Triton sports a level of gravitational force that is only 8% of Earth-normal, this temporary glitch is enough to cause real problems when the gravity reengages and brings all those floating bodies back down to the ground in short order. The air that the Tritonians breathe, the food they eat, the gravity that keeps them tethered to the moon, the sensory shield that prevents mental and emotional anguish: all of it is *required* for a basic level of existence on Triton and exactly none of it is provided by the moon itself; all of it must be artificially refined or produced either in Tethys or elsewhere in the Outer Satellites.

Anarres fairs somewhat better in regards to gravity, but much worse in regards to general sustainability. At some point in the history of Anarres, the moon was much more verdant with parts of the surface actually forested, but a thousand-year drought put an end to that era, and the moon that the Anarresti have inherited is much more inhospitable. The air is breathable, there is a limited but sustainable food supply, and there is water in

isolated areas (though much of the drinkable water must be reclaimed), but there is nothing in abundance. Anarresti ration and share often, and are taught at a very young age that “excess is excrement” and nothing can be owned.

This quality of Anarres is something that Delany has pointed to as a hindrance to a more robust conversation about Le Guin’s anarcho-communist utopia. In short, Delany believes that it’s impossible to judge whether or not Anarres could possibly survive as a society on its own merits as an anarchist community, since its environment of scarcity is so pronounced that it undercuts its potential to survive independently of external factors: namely capitalism. Delany discusses this during an interview with *Science Fiction Studies*: “In scarcity societies, you just don't have the same sort—or frequency—of discipline problems as you do in an affluent society. In a scarcity society the landscape itself becomes your spy, your SS, and your jailer, all in one” (“On *Triton*” 302). The level of useful resources on Anarres is so scant that the moon is still reliant on Urras for certain materials, which appears to be one of the few uses of the starport at the opening of the novel, which is to engage in trade eight times a year. Anarres has an abundance of useful minerals that Urras craves, while Anarres needs petroleum products that it is unfit to refine, as well as “certain delicate machine parts and electronic components which Anarresti manufacturing was not geared to supply, and often a new strain of fruit tree or grain for testing” (*The Dispossessed* 91).

With resources so scarce on Anarres, how then can the population justify maintaining an anarcho-communist society where no one *has* to do anything? Where

nothing is done for money and citizens can freely abstain from participating in Anarresti society? Delany's argument would be that survival is one heck of a motivator.

As the original Anarresti were ideological outcasts from Urras, they came from a land of plenty to a land of scarcity boasting an anarchist philosophy that rejects overt power structures like government, law, and class- and gender-based hierarchies, believing these factors lead to disorder and social injustices. The kind of injustices, perhaps, that we later see on Urras when a war between nations begins, when protests are met with gunfire, and its class system is stratified to the point of revolution. The philosophy the Odonians brought with them to Anarres is one that favors the collective good, and while personal pursuits are allowed, they are only allowed insofar as they don't sabotage the community.

As we see throughout *The Dispossessed* there are some instances of people refusing to participate, becoming violent, or pushing themselves into positions that are not in the community's best interest. Shevek himself runs across these scenarios. Such as when his friend Tirin creates a play that parodies the social order on Anarres, which almost instantly makes him *persona non grata* among locals and, potentially, among the leadership that uses an automated computer program to assign roles across the moon. Tirin, who was qualified to teach mathematics, is suddenly assigned to road construction by the computer. Later we find that this experience causes Tirin to commit himself to an asylum. Through this we can see that ideological diversity falls short in Anarres, even when compared to More's Utopia.

The reader is also made aware that while people are free to pursue their own interests outside of that of the community's, it doesn't make them immune from ostracization. These individuals might find themselves banished from dormitories, entire cities and communities, deprived of food security, and maybe even human contact in general. Shevek, whose scientific interests eventually creates friction between himself and his city, learns that his child is being bullied at school because of his pursuits. This friction is what precipitates his decision to leave for Urras. We see the community's reaction to this at the beginning of the novel, as they attempt to waylay Shevek's attempt to cross into the moon's only spaceport:

Some of them had come there to kill a traitor. Others had come to prevent him from leaving, or to yell insults at him, or just to look at him; and all these others obstructed the sheer brief path of the assassins. None of them had firearms, though a couple had knives. Assault to them meant bodily assault; they wanted to take the traitor into their own hands. (*The Dispossessed* 9)

By this description, we can assume that if Shevek had been less stealthy in his escape, then he might have risked bodily harm, kidnapping, or even death. All of this in an anarchist society supposedly removed from power structures or an overt mandate of conformity.

As Delany points out, the environment of Anarres makes many of these events possible. The scarcity on the moon leads to an embrace of electronically-assigned roles that are meant to be "fair" and create efficiency among essential jobs that maintain a particular standard of living. Pursuing individual interests outside of these assignments is



a signal to the community that their survival is not being prioritized, which can lead to ostracization. Even a philosophical divergence away from Odonism, such as what happened when Tirin playfully criticized the ideology, can lead to antagonism and, perhaps, punishment. All of this occurs under the banner of survival. If, as Delany argues, Odonism had been prevented from reaching Anarres, we might have seen a community that fell apart much quicker in the presence of *stuff*.

But if the Odonians had set up their “non proprietarian” utopia on Urras (and Le Guin says as much in the novel), you'd simply have too many individuals—and groups—saying: “Look, since there's all this *stuff*, why *can't* I own some of it?” And the expulsions and disciplinary actions would bloom all around—no matter how anarchistic they started out! (“On *Triton*” 302)

Essentially, Delany argues that a society forged at the altar of scarcity would likely dissolve if transplanted into an environment of abundance. On Anarres, however, survival has become part of the very cultural tapestry of the moon's society, and since society requires consensus to function, consensus is *required* for survival. Individualism is allowed as long as Anarres can bear the budget of individualistic pursuits; as soon as the drought strikes later in the novel, educators are immediately sent from the academies to the fields, Shevek among them.

The argument, then, is that Anarresti society is being propped up by a culture of survival, which has begun to dictate how information is presented to citizens (or if it's presented at all), which brands of thought are useful, which lifestyles are useful—all of which ultimately blurs utopian discourse of an improved society or even an anarchist

society. In a vacuum, Anarres could not exist without its culture of survival, which wouldn't be encouraged without an environment of scarcity, which makes judging the merits of Anarres as a proposal for an anarchist utopia a much more difficult prospect. Moylan comes to a similar conclusion in his book: "The physical parameters set by Le Guin limit the utopian logic of the book and do not pave the way for utopia as much as for individual moral excellence in the face of adversity" (Moylan 102).

In Delany's own novel, he takes the problem of scarcity in a different direction. As discussed above, Tethys being a domed city upon Triton naturally means that all of the ingredients required for existence must be imported from elsewhere. This has created a situation similar to that of Anarres' where the population must necessarily rely on automation. Whereas on Anarres, automation is used to assign identity and labor to the human population, automation on Triton means that efficiency amongst its industries (called "computer hegemonies") has been maximized and that most of the essential jobs that such a society could conceivably rely on are done by machines. The human population is still able to get jobs, but Tethys as a whole is so efficient in its pursuits that it is able to provide universal welfare (housing, food, transportation) to all citizens. In fact, it's actually more cost-effective at the government level for a citizen to be on welfare rather than working, since workers incur additional processing and paperwork. Triton does not need an entire branch within the government to assess need and assign welfare proportionally; if you exist on Triton, you are supported, you have inherent value. X always equals 1; whereas on Anarres, X has the potential to equal 0 depending on whether or not you contribute to society.

With *Trouble on Triton*, Delany is arguing that a society on an unforgiving moon would require a heightened level of efficiency in order to sustain itself and provide for its citizens in perpetuity. Anarres has gone so far as to make the process of assignments efficient, but has not attempted to take this idea a step further and automate additional jobs, since this would undercut the collectivist slant that Le Guin's world is intent on propping up. This also extends to Urras, which is advanced to the point of interstellar travel, but still maintains rigid social structures and occupations that only exist as a direct result of those structures, such as butlering. Automation in Delany's world has enabled people to succeed and fail on their own terms, solving scarcity in the meantime and solving it in such a way that personal failure doesn't amount to a fair standard of living being compromised. On Anarres, traditional power structures have been abolished, but mob rule has taken their place, spurred on by a refusal to work with Urras in any meaningful way and an assignment system that seems to suspiciously favor Odonian fundamentalists.

While both moons struggle with a scarcity environment, only Anarres is attempting to correlate its own success with the validation of an ideology. If Anarres is an argument for anarchism, then it is one that is beginning to falter due to its reliance on capitalism and unwillingness to allow true intellectual and ideological diversity. If Triton is an argument for libertarianism, then it's succeeding, since it has the proven capability to enable anarchism, capitalism, and libertarianism under one dome—while also coming out victorious in the forty-five minute war that devastates Earth, Mars, and Luna, depicting it as the fittest in this interplanetary game of unnatural selection.

Across our two critical utopias, scarcity has been treated as a problem to be overcome and a spur to stimulate belief in an ideology that is beginning to fail its tests of resiliency.

## 2. Earth as a Failed Civilization

“Well, Earth’s the place we all came from.

Remember that.

Remember that, I keep telling myself.

Remember that.”

- *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*

Earth’s positionality to both Anarres and Triton is of crucial importance to the narratives of Delany and Le Guin’s novels. After all, as one of Delany’s characters in *Trouble on Triton* puts it, “I suppose where you are doesn’t matter unless you know where you’ve been” (168). Direct comparisons to modern civilization are essential in utopian fiction; it’s only by realizing where we could be in relation to where we are that anything within the story can have any impact. It factors into Moylan’s definition of a critical utopia, specifically with regards to this specific passage: “[T]he novels dwell on the conflict of the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated” (Moylan 10).

Across both *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*, Earth is presented as a civilization that long overstayed its welcome and continued to make mistakes on a global scale that, when compounded, eventually resulted in a point of no return. It might be fair to look at Earth across both novels as a dystopia based on its positionality with our own world *and* our two critical utopias. Whereas our world is progressing technologically at an exponential rate, resolving old problems while creating new, unanticipated ones, Le Guin and Delany's Earth has violated the "ecological accord" and cultivated its blind spots to a point where both are suffering the consequences.

In *The Dispossessed*, which is largely isolated due to the conceit of the broader narrative across other novels in Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*, Earth/Terra still plays a significant role in the denouement of the story despite not having a particularly substantial presence. Although everyone in the book is human, none of the humans of Urras or Anarres have any direct biological connection to the humans of Earth beyond a tangential connection to the Hain. In the novel, Terra is mercifully pulled back from extinction by the Hain and allowed to join an expanding interstellar community of Hain-descended humans. Terrans have been humbled, being forced into a small space on Earth where the population is a fraction of what it once was. Terrans seem willing to participate in the greater civilization but come off as much more passive than any of the other groups presented in the novel.

In *Trouble on Triton*, Earth is an antagonistic force throughout the entirety of the novel, gradually escalating an interplanetary cold war with the Outer Satellites over the economic control of Jupiter and Saturn's moons. Bron makes a trip to Earth with Sam, a

dormmate and government official, and experiences a world that seems culturally static compared to any other populated world in the Solar System. The buildings are older than most in the Outer Satellites, the population is still segmented into clear gender roles, has no clear universal welfare, still occasionally wears corrective glasses (which Bron finds particularly fascinating), and relies on archaic forms of conveyance like rail systems (141-51). A guard on Earth is also the only other character other than Bron (and Alfred, who looks up to Bron) who uses hate speech towards black characters (139).

This is where Le Guin and Delany are largely in agreement: using Earth within their novels as a way of extrapolating destructive “traditionalist” policies out into the future to show that, truly, this isn’t a future that we’d want to have for ourselves. Regardless of whether or not a reader might entertain the idea of occupying Anarres or Triton, Le Guin and Delany are communicating that rigorously holding to the old ways is not going to end well. Painting the Earth of the future in a dystopian light provides a sense of gravity to the issues that the authors would prefer to see settled at some point soon. Failing in preserving Earth means clinging imperfectly to remnants or other worlds entirely, if we’re alive to cling to anything at all. Even though both novels are presenting utopian societies *away* from Earth, the underlying implication is that it would have been much better for humanity to determine a way to forge analog societies *upon* Earth rather than within the crucible of bitter moons.

### 3. Sexuality in Utopia

“Having’s wrong; sharing’s right.

What more can you share than your whole self,  
your whole life, all the nights and all the days?”

- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*

On Anarres, no one can own anything—or anyone. Shevek himself learned this early when growing up with a noticeably absent mother. While people are, of course, encouraged to have children, the concept of marital bonds is not something that exists on the anarchist moon. Couples can create lasting partnerships and are even given priority access to private rooms within dormitories, but that’s about as far as things go. Shevek’s mother decided, one day, that she valued her working life over her family life, and so exited her son and partner’s life entirely. Except for the bitterness instilled within Shevek by the move, there are no societal boundaries for how sexual or romantic partnerships should be conducted.

As a result, sexuality in *The Dispossessed* is characterized as rather free. Anarresti are free to pursue or abandon sexual relations with anyone they choose at any time, without stigma. That they are mostly reared in communal dormitories from a young age means that they experiment with each other quite early. Shevek himself engages in three relationships that could be called long-term over the course of the novel. The first is with Beshun, a woman whom Shevek meets while on an assignment with an afforestation mission. It’s Beshun who provides Shevek with his first sexual experience that goes beyond pleasure and into the romantic and the meaningful. This relationship doesn’t last

long, however, as Beshun beds down with other men while still with Shevek. Here we get the sense that while some Anarresti are perfectly liberal with their sexual freedom, there are still some who prefer monogamous or exclusive romantic relations with their partner. Shevek appears to be in this latter group.

The second is with Bedap, a childhood friend of Shevek. They run into each other after some years apart and decide to pursue a homosexual relationship with each other. While Bedap is gay, Shevek discovers after some experimentation that he is not. During a trip they take together to the mountains, Shevek is reintroduced to a woman from his past who will be his romantic partner for the remainder of the novel: Takver, a marine biologist. Shevek and Takver serendipitously both prefer to carry on a monogamous relationship and together they have two children, daughters named Sadik and Pilun.

Delany writes about Shevek's relationships in his critical analysis "To Read *The Dispossessed*." While he applauds Le Guin for fashioning a society that has normalized relationships of all kinds, he accuses her of still maintaining a more traditional approach in practice which ironically dispossesses this element of Anarres of its progressive take on sexuality. Using Shevek's relationships as an example, he maps out a rather drastic transformation of relationships between Shevek, Bedap, and Takver. It's while in the midst of a relationship with Bedap that he reconnects with Takver, a woman Shevek had met in passing at a party but still stuck out in his memory in a positive way. In pursuing Takver, Shevek leaves his relationship with Bedap behind, downgrading it from romantic and sexual to third-wheel platonic.



In Le Guin's narrative, this romantic redrawing happens with the suddenness of a child putting down one toy in favor of another, and with all the consequences that would realistically come about. That is to say: none at all. Shevek's friendship with Bedap isn't damaged. Takver doesn't look at Bedap with disdain or jealousy, Bedap doesn't appear the least bit harmed. In fact, Bedap goes on to become a stalwart friend of Shevek and Takver's growing family, who dotes on their kids like a proud uncle. While this could be Le Guin trying to illustrate that swapping partners within Anarresti/Odonian culture is *that* insignificant of an event and therefore does not merit exploration, other scenes of the novel do not support this. Such as when Shevek grows angry upon seeing his mother again *years* after she abandoned him:

He gave way to the fear that had come with her, the sense of the breaking of promises, the incoherence of Time. He broke. He began to cry, trying to hide his face in the shelter of his arms, for he could not find the strength to turn over. (*The Dispossessed* 123)

Or when Tirin, who later commits himself to an asylum for being openly critical of Odonism via theater, expresses concerns that the Annares administrative body, the Production and Distribution Coordination (PDC) is stoking fear of Urras via propaganda:

“All right. I agree that it's probably wise to fear Urras. But why hate? Hate's not functional; why are we taught it? Could it be that if we knew what Urras was really like, we'd like it—some of it—some of us? That what PDC wants to prevent is not just some of them coming here, but some of us wanting to go there?” (46)

It seems unlikely with several characters (including Shevek) questioning ideology and practice throughout the novel, that everyone would suddenly become the strictest of fundamentalists when it comes to swapping partners. Shevek's negative reaction to Beshun bedding down with other men during their relationship makes this extra unlikely.

Delany also does not buy into this. Through omission, we are denied a few crucial events as readers. The first two omissions pertain to Shevek's lovers, Bedap and Takver. Le Guin does not find it important to detail what Bedap experiences emotionally when his childhood friend-turned-partner suddenly shunts him away for a woman that Shevek only met once before at a party years ago, and briefly at that. We're also denied any response from Takver, who does not question or interrogate the nature of Shevek and Bedap's relationship at all, nor does she see Bedap as any kind of a threat. The narrative's omission of these emotional outcomes, Delany argues, robs both Takver and Bedap of true agency within the novel. This is quite disappointing to Delany, since overall the novel deliberately constructs an egalitarian society with the express purpose of forcing a comparison with a much more patriarchal and unequal society where the positions of power are almost completely male.

Because of this, Anarres might have been much more effective at drawing out those social distinctions if women like Takver had been given much more agency and presence within *The Dispossessed*. Same with Bedap: it might have been much more effective to contrast Urras's sexual conservatism and emphasis on heterosexual relationships by giving characters like Bedap much more agency and presence instead of relegating him to an outsider, and then nothing at all as he is unceremoniously withdrawn

from the novel. As it stands, however, Delany points out that although Le Guin went to some effort to ensure that there are a near equal number of male and female characters presented on Anarres, she does not attempt to show homosexuality as anything other than something that *could* happen. The novel doesn't present any lesbian relationships and only one gay relationship that is treated as a passing moment of self-discovery for Shevek, while Bedap is otherwise characterized as unhappy and just content to be on the perimeter of Shevek's family for the remainder of the novel. As Delany says in his essay:

As it is, in the omission of Bedap's psychological transition from Shevek's lover to Shevek's and Takver's best friend, in the omission of Takver's response to Shevek's and Bedap's affair, the omission of Shevek's feelings about the movement of his sexual allegiances from one to the other and possible reactions it might cause, there is an element of novelistic chicanery. The point isn't that such transitions are not believable. In the real world, one way or the other, they are accomplished every day. But the payoff in psychological richness to be gained by some insight into how Bedap, Takver, and Shevek—and by extension the generally promiscuous Anarresti—accomplish such transitions is sorely missed. (“To Read *The Dispossessed*”)

This is in *stark* contrast to what the reader is treated to in *Trouble on Triton*, which is maximally liberal. In Delany's utopia, technology has advanced to such a point that race, sex, and gender identity are practically cosmetic. During a conversation with Bron, The Spike mentions that most pregnancies are initiated by design and that, at around a particular time of the year, about twenty percent of the population decides to

have kids. This annual twenty percent increase is just under what Tethys can realistically bear (112). However, this doesn't mean that just women can have babies; men who *become* women can have babies, men can have a new uterus installed to have babies without any other changes, and men can also play a more motherly role in the rearing of children. The latter category is exemplified by Bron's boss, Philip, who takes a pill that allows one of his breasts to lactate so that he can breastfeed one of the babies he's parenting while the mother is away.

This breakdown in how sex and gender operate, coupled with the fact that marriage is illegal on Triton since citizens "can't make a redressable contract across either a sexual or a sectarian subject" means that sexual relationships are frequent and take almost every shape imaginable (*Trouble on Triton* 72). If someone gets curious about what sex is like with people outside their attraction, they can have their brain chemistry rewired to change who they're attracted to. Bron himself undergoes a procedure to make him biologically female towards the end of the novel, and spends an additional seventeen minutes to have his (now *her*) brain chemistry rewired to only find men attractive.

This freedom from sexual and sex-adjacent boundaries means that most of the characters presented, even in the central cast, have indulged in a wide array of sexual partners. Unlike in *The Dispossessed*: non-exclusive, non-monogamous, and non-heterosexual relationships are not just something implied or stowed away in subtext, they are right out in front. By establishing early on that citizens in Triton are frequently rotating through sexual partners of all types and genders, while also rotating through

potentially several different bodies during that time, Delany forces the reader to abandon any hope of attempting to fit his characters into specific categories. Even Sam, whom Delany describes as this paragon of masculinity (young, muscular, black skin, tall, polyamorous, and spends his time in clandestine roles for the government) reveals to Bron that he had once been “a rather unhappy, sallow-faced, blonde, blue-eyed (and terribly myopic) waitress at Lux on Iapetus, with a penchant for other sallow, blonde, blue-eyed waitresses (*Trouble on Triton* 126). No one is who they appear to be, which means that the only defining characteristic of everyone on Triton and the other Outer Satellites is that they cannot be defined. Everyone is everything until shown to be otherwise. In *Trouble on Triton*, Delany describes an ocean and shows us an ocean. In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin describes an ocean and shows us a puddle.

This is why Delany found this issue worth mentioning in his analysis of *The Dispossessed*. If an author is going to depict a true interstellar counterargument to a stubbornly traditionalist society, then it follows that the author submits a world that is truly unconventional *everywhere*. However, while Anarres is described as being a very liberal place when it comes to sex and sexuality, it is only described and seems reluctant to revel in this idea much further. Indeed, despite the supposed wide array of possibilities on Anarres, Shevek ends up in what could be considered a much more traditional nuclear family: with Shevek entering into a long-term, monogamous relationship with a woman, who mostly seems to stay at home with their two kids while Shevek works on this Temporal Theory at home and abroad. All of this while reducing the presence of

homosexual relationships in the foreground to the point that they're practically non-existent.

Without proper representation of these more progressive ideals in the foreground, and with only a passing moment of hesitant participation in a homosexual relationship with the only other named gay character in the novel, Le Guin is only paying lip service to a brand of freedom around which Delany intentionally constructed his idea of utopia.

#### 4. The Protagonists:

##### The Ones Who Walked Away

“Well, I’ve never thought your sense of personal tact was anything but a disaster zone. That obviously hasn’t changed.”

- *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*

To conclude this analysis of *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*, it is important to discuss the perspectives through which the authors allowed readers to engage with their stories, settings, and themes. Perspective is everything, which is especially important in this case because Le Guin’s Shevek and Delany’s Bron Helstrom couldn’t be more different in attitude and characteristics. They have, however, one trait in common that drives much of the drama across both novels. Both Shevek and Bron are transplants, immigrants, strangers from strange lands. This informs both novels, which

are constantly grappling with the clashing of cultures, identity, and limited perspectives. The similarities between the two men ultimately end there.

Shevek grows up as an Odonian, which naturally favors the idea that everyone living on Anarres is there because of a great schism between the extraordinary greed of the “propertarians” of Urras and the dispossessed followers of Odo. This notion is what prompts many Anarresti to grow up without having any real compulsion to engage with Urras, and any willingness is looked at with suspicion—referring back to above discussions about social reinforcement of Odonian ideology, any curiosity towards Urras is met with dissuasion. Does Anarres not provide? Why yearn for excess?

After all, Anarres is a utopia. It has less product to throw around and resources are limited, but it could be argued that excess isn’t necessarily a requirement if all needs are met. Everyone still has food and water, though this is all rationed. People are free to pursue their own individual endeavors unless, again, as mentioned above, circumstances arise that preclude forgoing individualism in favor of collectivism—such as the famine that strikes later in the novel. Perhaps most importantly, Anarres is egalitarian in a way that Urras is unfamiliar to a point that it seems to cause certain Urrasti characters some physical stress.

Le Guin utilized the subtitle “An Ambiguous Utopia” for a reason, however. Shevek sees Anarres as a utopia, an escape from the greedy propertarianism of Urras that corrupts, entraps, and discards. He feels lucky to be born upon Anarres... *until* it begins to work against him. *The Dispossessed* opens with a description of a wall, which becomes a recurring theme throughout the novel as Shevek spends a great deal of his time moving

across boundaries. Physical boundaries, such as the wall that he crosses in the first chapter, but also ideological boundaries, cultural boundaries, social boundaries. His great discovery that has drawn the attention of scientists across three worlds, the ansible, has the potential to knock down the boundaries between populated worlds, eliminating the boundary of space and time. All of this to allow the universe to feel smaller. But before crossing any boundaries or walls, he exists contentedly behind them for a time.

It's the process of asking questions, interrogating his surroundings, and listening to the experiences of those around him that gives Shevek the willingness to push back on the boundaries that exist within Anarresti society. Shevek's recognition of Sabul's political maneuverings and abusing one of the few existing power structures upon Anarres convinces him to try and submit his original writings to Urras directly without Sabul's approval. The backlash that Tirin faces after performing a play that was only somewhat critical of Odonian society, according to Bedap, is what clues Shevek in to a growing sense of social antagonism towards anything that compromises the status quo on Anarres. It's this antagonism, when he begins to experience it personally, that convinces him to accept an invitation to Urras.

Shevek's willingness to leave Anarres is important to the overall perspective that the novel is trying to create. He isn't kidnapped; he *chooses* to leave Anarres for Urras. Even though it's temporary, leaving Anarres represents his desire to experience things for himself, to find where hearsay gives way to fact. He is willing to apply the scientific method across both worlds: to defend aspects of the Anarresti lifestyle that he feels are more beneficial overall, while yielding to the notion that there are things that Urras does



much better. For instance, education on Urras is something that Shevek goes back and forth on. Universities are structured similarly to what readers in the United States are accustomed to, which leaves it open to criticism from Shevek in how lessons are structured around examinations rather than curiosity. The universities on Urras are also extremely patriarchal, like the rest of the planet, which means that the odds of a woman reaching the higher ranks is exceedingly unlikely. Meanwhile, many of the upper echelon of the education system on Urras accepted one of Shevek's mentors as an equal, without realizing she was a woman the entire time.

Despite this inequity, there appears to be no downward pressure on particular kinds of knowledge like there is on Anarres. Back at Shevek's home, there are certain kinds of knowledge that are seen as almost useless, since they are of no clear benefit to Anarresti society as it exists. After all, if the main priority of almost everyone on Anarres is to secure what they already have and keep themselves isolated from the corruption of other civilizations, then an interstellar communications device doesn't make a whole lot of sense. It's an *October Sky* situation: Why build rockets when there are mines to dig? Conversely, Shevek receives a lot of academic support once on Urras and is practically given *carte blanche* on what he would like to pursue and how long he needs to pursue it. The drawback, though, is that anything that Shevek creates would be utilized by Urras and Urras alone. Not only that, but only a particular nation on Urras, which would be A-Io. Shevek's decision that no singular civilization should have possession of his discovery, but that it should belong to *everyone* in equity, is what persuades him to reach out to the Terrans. Anarres instills in Shevek the notion of share and share alike; Urras

enables Shevek to freely chase his ideas to their natural conclusion, even if it's so that Urras may capitalize on those ideas. Both worlds help Shevek succeed and so both are able to reap the benefits of his work.

In the end, Shevek is changed by this time in Urras. He has experienced the extreme stratification of class that ushers citizens into roles that are seen as wasteful to someone who comes from a place where everyone has to count; he sees selfishness born of concepts like wealth and greed that he feels are fleeting concepts. Urras doesn't quite live up to his negative preconceptions, though. Ultimately, the Urrasti have been good stewards of their planet, fulfilling their ecological accord and effectively maintaining some balance between progress and preservation. They have also consistently maintained some relationship with other populated worlds, shirking the isolationism that Anarres stubbornly embraces. And despite the severe stratification of the classes, no one is experiencing the same kind of resource-based hardships that Anarres does. The novel ends with Shevek returning to Anarres not out of a complete dismissal of Urras and its society—though, after his run-in with the authorities of A-Io at the protest, it's likely there's at least *some* love lost—but because he *must* return and bring with him everything he has learned. His hands are still empty, but there's a chance that he will be soon attempting to plug the ideological gaps that he experienced throughout his time on Anarres. There are improvements to make, people to inspire, and perhaps some walls to break down.

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Bron Helstrom, the protagonist of Delany's *Trouble on Triton*, is a whole other story. In frank terms, he's a jackass of the highest order.

The interesting thing about *Trouble on Triton* is that the reader can be forgiven for believing that the novel *isn't* a utopian novel. In fact, the reader can be forgiven for believing that Tethys, a domed city perched upon Triton, is actually a *dystopia*. After all, the novel opens with Bron making his way through an urban area that is described in rather deplorable terms. There's graffiti everywhere, posters that hint at discontent brewing upon Triton and elsewhere in the Solar System, and Bron's attempt at using an ego-booster booth is thwarted by the machine being outright broken. This is not too long before Bron, while crossing through the anarchistic unlicensed sector, is actually drugged without his consent so that he can experience a piece of micro-theater while in the appropriate state of mind. These are not quite descriptions that lend themselves to a supposed utopia.

Bron is a semi-recent transplant from Mars, which is on the opposite side of a boundary that has recently been drawn between the inner worlds and the Outer Satellites. There are tensions brewing between these two factions after a dispute over the aforementioned moons of Jupiter and Saturn. None of this really matters to Bron, however. He lives his life as if nothing spectacular is happening around him. During the "day," he applies his knowledge of metalogics at a facility called the computer hegemony, a massive operation that is described as potentially having domain over almost everything. At "night," he returns home to a place called The Serpent's House,

where he lives with a group of men. Living arrangements on Triton are broken up into “co-ops” that cater to different combinations of gender and sexuality. Similar to Anarres in *The Dispossessed*, communal living arrangements have become necessary given the limited resources and population. Bron lives in a co-op that caters to non-preferential men, meaning that gay and straight men can live there together.

When Bron is drugged and forced to experience a micro-theater performance, he is introduced to a woman who calls herself The Spike, who is the ringleader of the troupe. For reasons that are never quite made abundantly clear, Bron falls in love with The Spike. Given the theatrical setting, it’s played off as a “love at first sight” scenario, and he spends the rest of the novel in hot pursuit of The Spike’s affections and respect. For a while, things seem to be going his way until the last third of the novel, when they decidedly don’t and he is brutally rejected.

This rejection is important as far as the story is concerned and is why many readers can be forgiven their initial impressions of Triton as a dystopia. To reiterate: Bron is a jackass. The interesting thing about his status as our protagonist, though, is that he has no clue that he is one. He moves about Tethys in abject misery. He dislikes almost everyone and everything around him, despite people trying to extend an olive branch in his direction. A young man by the name of Alfred is seen gravitating towards Bron, looking for advice as he enters adolescence, but is given the cold shoulder. Bron also uses hate speech with some consistency, sometimes directed towards the only people in the novel who actually attempt to care about him.

It's only after Bron's advances and professions of love are outright rejected by The Spike that the audience is clued into a very important fact: as a protagonist and our window into the society upon Triton, Bron is tremendously unreliable. Delany does something quite clever with Bron Helstrom, giving us a protagonist in a utopian society who *hates* being a part of it almost every minute of every day.

Tethys is a society where there is a minimum standard of living, which means that food, water, housing, and transportation are all provided by the government. Not only this, but "tax" money doesn't go to services that you don't use; if you never use any transportation services, you pay less in taxes. People are encouraged to express themselves as individuals, which means there are no dress codes at businesses or government facilities. Bron shows up to work at one point wearing an elaborate outfit worthy of a production of *The Phantom of the Opera* while others simply show up naked. Technology has advanced to the point where near-transhumanistic levels of augmentation are widely available, which means someone can show up to work the next day as a completely different gender or race without much fanfare. There is very little actual violent crime in Tethys proper due to the creation of what is called an "unlicensed sector," where true anarchism is allowed to take root and no laws are enforced except for whatever takes root naturally between communities.

And yet, Bron his miserable.

As the novel progresses, the reader comes to understand that Bron is a traditionalist who is moving through Tethys as if it's an oddity or a theme park, as if nothing that occurs there truly matters there. He makes an effort at trying to express

himself and wearing elaborate attire at work, but this is only after witnessing The Spike's micro-theater. He also shows up to work naked, but only does this after seeing one of his dormmates, Sam, walk around the co-op naked. Bron knows how to mimic, but doesn't know how to properly come into his own. He is a man who is paralyzed by decisions, who has no wish to learn anything new because he believes he already has a firm grasp on life and has no interest in changing, and also has been led to believe that he *deserves* certain relationships. He *deserves* a better class of friend than Sam or Lawrence. He *deserves* The Spike's love and desire rather than the love and desire from Audri, who truly cares for him despite his personality. He is the complete opposite of Shevek, who left his home in order to broaden his own perspective and learn. Bron, meanwhile, has convinced himself he has nothing new to learn, and his complete disinterest in everything surrounding him is exemplified by his reaction to Tethys being brutally attacked by Earth. Despite all the brutal death and destruction around him, including the deaths of people who cared for him, all he can think about is The Spike's rejection and his anger towards her.

His perspective, at some point, became ossified and now he can only mimic and hope that whatever he's doing enables him to fit in correctly. On Triton, you can be anyone, even someone awkwardly trying to fit in with little success, but the society itself will not bend to the desires of one man, as Bron learns in a hard lesson towards the end of the novel.

After The Spike's rejection, Bron makes the decision that he can do it all better. That he can use Triton to become someone worthy of the kind of affection that he

demanding from The Spike. With the city still reeling from the attack by Earth, Bron makes the decision to become a woman, a better woman than The Spike could ever be. After all, removed of all the supposed trappings of toxic masculinity, there would be no reason anyone would reject him ever again. He travels to the nearby clinic and asks for a treatment that goes beyond cosmetic: that turns him into a woman down to his very genetic makeup and even chemically alters his brain chemistry to desire men over women. With a few additions, he'd even be able to have children naturally.

After a six hour and seventeen minute procedure, Bron emerges from the clinic as a woman. After the initial wave of shock from her acquaintances, things more-or-less normalize rather quickly. Bron, however, is surprised that she's not immediately the object of desire for everyone back at work. Even when she goes out on the town with the intention of having anonymous sex, she can't get anyone to take her to bed. She gets desperate enough to ask Sam, whom she had spent most of the novel disrespecting, to have sex with her but is diplomatically turned away. Sam has been kind to Bron, but is not blind. Despite Bron being exactly his type, he has no interest in the personality behind the new face. Bron is even rejected by The Spike for a second time after they run into each other at a bus stop. There's a moment where it seems like The Spike might be interested in a second try, but that moment passes when Bron accidentally makes it clear that she doesn't have an interest in anything except for The Spike's affection. As if that affection is something that she desperately needs to possess, like a condition for victory, which is entirely distinct from what could be considered a normal desire for a

relationship. The Spike sees this, that her life is incidental to Bron's desperate need to conquer and possess.

They part ways for the last time. Bron is forced to move from The Serpent's House to another co-op since she's now a woman and cannot remain in the men's co-op. She finds herself in a position similar to where she was at the outset of the novel: dismissive of the people who are trying to connect with her, including another young woman in need of Bron's guidance. At work, her boss Audri confesses her love for Bron and, in rapid succession, offers up everything that Bron has supposedly been yearning for the entire time: love, partnership, family, and sex. Hearing all of this, Bron instead decides to dismiss this, as well. At the end, we see that Bron doesn't really want to be happy in the traditional sense; she just wants to win, to conquer, to dominate in a society that will not enable her to do so. Her conditions for victory and satisfaction are The Spike's affection, even if she doesn't *truly* want it. Like a spoiled child, she craves what she cannot have and wants to dominate what cannot be governed.

Bron returns to her dorm and, with the briefest moment of clarity, realizes that despite changing her body entirely she cannot change *who* she is. Which is all that's keeping her divorced from contentment in utopia: a willingness to change and adapt in ways beyond what's written on the body.

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Both Shevek and Bron have moments where they allow moonlight to play off of their empty hands, likely one of the scenes that Delany positioned to be in direct conversation with Le Guin. He mentions the scene with Shevek directly in “To Read *The Dispossessed*” and inserts this scene at the conclusion of a chapter where Bron is experiencing life on a new world, just like Shevek. These two scenes express much about what each character represents within their narrative.

In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek is looking up from Urras to the moon of Anarres, reflecting on how far away from home he’s come. He reaches out and the light of his world, only a moon fills his empty hands. Despite the line expressing that his hands are empty, they *are* being filled by the light of his home, which can be seen as Shevek embracing the memory of his world and all he learned upon it. He is, perhaps, also lamenting that the light is all he has of his home, his family, and friends. Being of the dispossessed, the light and its memory is all he needs.

Bron, on the other hand, reaches out expecting something to be there. During his final date with The Spike, they rummage around an archaeological dig site on Earth and discover a device that once helped people navigate by the stars. It’s something that The Spike finds exciting, but Bron isn’t quite as interested. This moment is one of the last lifelines that The Spike attempts to throw in Bron’s direction, to see if he truly wants to meet her halfway in a possible relationship. Bron’s reaction doesn’t impress The Spike and they part ways for the night. In a stupor, Bron believes he still has the device in his hands, but lifts them up to the light to discover that he doesn’t have anything. What he thinks he possessed was never there to begin with. What he wants, he cannot have. While

Shevek is embracing memories and leaving his hands empty as if in acceptance, to show that he truly has nothing, Bron is embracing an illusion and is leaving his hands empty in an attempt to possess.

How these two characters move about their respective worlds affects their eventual relationships with their surroundings. Their attitudes also augment how the readers will perceive utopia—additionally, what they *don't* perceive. Shevek has a positive relationship with Anarres. There is a lot about his world that he is proud of, that he never questions independently. Many times during conversations with the Urrasti, Shevek finds himself defending Anarresti culture or going on the attack when necessary. Then again, he also seems willing to accept many aspects of Urrasti culture at face value, at least until he's able to consider it further. He also willingly folds himself into Urrasti culture as soon as he arrives, casting off his comparatively ascetic lifestyle as soon as he's granted his own house, a comfortable bed, and a near-endless supply of food and water. Despite his allegiances, Shevek is not afraid to explore and give himself over to new experiences.

This leaves Anarres and Urras in the ambiguous state that the novel's subtitle hinted at. Since Shevek is willing to weigh both sides openly, the merits of both worlds bear themselves out in his mind—and, by extension, the reader's. Neither world feels any closer to paradise than the other. The egalitarianism of Anarres is as utopian as it gets in this modern era, same with the education system perceiving more benefits in allowing students to pursue curiosity rather than forcing them to study for exams. Shevek also meets people on Urras, however, who have found vectors for applying soft power at the

highest levels. The wife of one of the Urrasti scientists, for instance, proudly points out that although men control everything, it's the *women* who control the men:

“Women do exactly as they like. And they don't have to get their hands dirty, or wear brass helmets, or stand about shouting in the Directorate, to do it.”

“But what is it that you do?”

“Why, run the men, of course! And you know, it's perfectly safe to tell them that, because they never believe it. They say Haw Haw, funny little woman! and pat your head and stalk off with their medals jangling, perfectly self-content.”

*(The Dispossessed 207)*

And despite the education system favoring exams over curiosity, there is also very little threat of the academic environment being compromised by something like the famine that forced everyone out of school, and Shevek himself out of his desired job. What Urras lacks in terms of equality, it makes up for in terms of a basic standard of living that Anarres struggles to provide.

Shevek is free to weigh the pros and cons of each world, therefore the *reader* is free to reason through this debate, as well. This is what truly makes *The Dispossessed* a critical utopia. Despite Bron being about as static as a protagonist as there has ever been, Delany writes the novel in such a way that the reader is still able to reason through Triton as a critical utopia. Instead of reasoning through a debate with a likable and trustworthy protagonist like Shevek, Delany asks us to disagree with his own protagonist, to debate Bron.

If *The Dispossessed* allows readers to debate the novel's utopian merits alongside Shevek as he weighs the pros and cons of Anarres and Urras, *Trouble on Triton* allows readers to debate the novel's utopian merits with Bron as he goes about casually dismissing everything Tethys has to offer.

If there hadn't been such a long section in *Trouble on Triton* where The Spike mapped out all of Bron's faults, pulling specific scenes that might have caught the reader's eye as defects that went pardoned by the narrative, then the reader might not have completely caught on that Bron is a hammer that only sees nails. He's the kid in a candy store who hates sweets. He's the Holden Caulfield of Triton. Because of this unusually extreme bias that Bron retains, it becomes necessary to doubt everything that we experience through his perspective. *Everything*, going all the way back to the start of the novel. By doing so and mapping out the perspective that we're allowed via Bron as well as mapping out Triton as it actually exists, we might actually be able to discuss the utopian qualities of Tethys independently. Qualities such as the minimum standard of living that applies to all residents, which does not seem to exist on Earth; the ability to change one's body at will; an entire section of the city that allows people to do anything they want without interference by authorities; greater political representation; and true social egalitarianism now that identity has become unbound from race and sex. Not to mention the defensive capabilities of the Outer Satellites, which seem to be so advanced that Earth is practically wiped off the interstellar map after a war that doesn't even last an hour. It says something that most of the drama that introduces itself into Bron's life on

Triton is drama that he instigates. Despite all of the benefits that Triton is able to provide, our protagonist still perceives himself to be in a dystopia.

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In the end, what do our two protagonists learn from their respective experiences in utopia? It is very likely that Shevek will always be a man of many worlds from then on out. He has discovered the means to communicate instantly with anyone, anywhere. Community is no longer limited to the speed of light. He has achieved “the annihilation of space” (*The Dispossessed* 325). Already, he is showing a willingness to introduce a member of the Hain to Anarres and, in doing so, is violating the rock wall boundary shown at the opening of the novel for a second time. This and the fact that Shevek is returning to Anarres at all shows that he’s going to at least attempt to fulfill the idea of “the return,” which is to say that he will disseminate his many experiences and epiphanies throughout his homeworld in the hopes that the population at large will benefit and change from those lessons. Throughout the novel, we see little instances of power structures creeping back into Anarres. The novel, in fact, opens with an instance of what appears to be a lynch mob aimed at preventing Shevek from leaving the moon. In this case, power has built up around the preservation of Odonian ideology, and a desire to leave Anarres amounts to a direct challenge of the universality of that ideology.

It is possible that Shevek, now armed with the truths of both worlds, will be able to improve the situation on Anarres and prevent those destructive power structures from

permanently taking root. By crossing the rock wall, too, it might mean that he will convince Anarres to drop its isolationist mandate. Just as Shevek was challenged by the culture of Urras, Anarres might be challenged, as well. Utopia cannot be challenged or adapt or progress in isolation. To quote the science fiction novel *Blade of Tyshalle* by Matthew Stover, “If reality is the sum of our perceptions, to acquire more varying points of view is to acquire, literally, more reality” (218).

Bron is another story. The irony at the conclusion of *Trouble on Triton* is that Bron has been changed drastically by his experiences in utopia, but that change is only physical—quite literally skin deep. He is challenged on a personal and physical level throughout the novel, but never quite reacts in a way that gives the reader any indication that he is learning or changing. His pursuit of The Spike seems almost to fall in line with the opening of some kind of space opera, with a man who works with the mathematical desiring the company of a free spirit, an artist. Bron and The Spike have good times for a while, but ultimately she leaves Triton without any kind of show of reciprocal interest. She doesn't invite Bron along off-world, she doesn't profess her love. Her performances are calling and she must answer. Bron argues and pleads with her, but he ends up being left behind.

Meanwhile, Sam and Lawrence, two of his dormmates, are relentlessly trying to be supportive of Bron. Alfred, the young man in the same building, is being ignored by Bron despite showing interest in Bron's advice. One of Bron's bosses, Audri, is showing some signs of affection towards Bron, which is repaid with Bron being casually dismissive towards her. Bron loves to be heard, but he doesn't enjoy listening. He fancies

himself a kind of genius, who dives into prolonged explanations of metalogics without stopping to consider whether or not he has a willing audience. And his intellect, such as it is, frequently fails him. He will force The Spike to listen to his metalogic riddle concerning the Taj Mahal (When have you *truly* visited the Taj Mahal? When you've entered the grounds? When you've entered the building? When you've touched one of its stones? When you've touched one of its *original* stones?), but then, once on Earth, he has no idea where anything is. He never knows where he is, where Boston is, where Mongolia is. He doesn't know how far a mile is or how to pay for a meal with currency.

Originally from Mars, Bron has spent much time on Triton and a little time on Earth as part of a diplomatic mission with Sam. None of those interplanetary moves seems to have any kind of effect on him in the same way those moves would have affected Shevek. Nothing he experiences seems to force Bron to reconsider his own ideologies and perspective. Despite surviving a *devastating* war between the Outer Satellites and the inner worlds, he instead mopes around while Alfred's corpse still sits in the room near his, lamenting how The Spike treated him during their long-distance breakup.

Indeed, Bron's decision to become a woman isn't really born of any kind of revelation about himself and it certainly isn't born of a newfound understanding of the utopia he's been moving through. No, becoming a woman is done out of spite and a complete misunderstanding of why so very few people in the Solar System can stand to be around him and why The Spike now actively avoids him. He changes his body, but does not have the self-awareness or even desire to alter his own outlook. The novel ends

with Bron likely doomed to continue through life in a kind of ignorance that not even war or torture could shatter. Unlike Shevek, Bron has learned nothing of value and has not changed emotionally or ideologically in any measurable way, and not for a lack of effort on the part of all the people around him who, for a time, considered Bron worthy of their friendship.

Shevek and Bron take readers on a tour of utopia. All of these worlds have qualities that function in a true utopian sense in that they force comparisons to our own world by way of structuring a fictional society around concepts that would be familiar to almost everyone. Shevek presents most of his experiences even-handedly (with some exceptions, considering a bias for his own world) though tinged with self-righteousness, while Bron has a disinterest in Triton that borders on immutable, truly living up to an updated version of the old joke: No one goes to Triton, there are too many people living there.



## CONCLUSION: ALL THESE WORLDS ARE YOURS

“Yet I freely confess there are very many things in the Utopian commonwealth that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see.”

- Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*

Utopia, critical or otherwise, is a deeply personal undertaking in many ways. At its core, it's an author or artist expressing how the world *ought* to be based on their own perspective, biases, and positionality to the rest of us. Utopia is mostly unconcerned with the path that we take to get to this improved society, but *is* concerned with the outcome and thereby allows artists the freedom to skip over the obstacles and, instead, build out the result. Utopia is building without a budget, abundance without a supply, unity without a debate. It is also a very subjective exercise. My utopia might seem to be an improvement to me, but might be a dystopia to my neighbor or classmate. The failings of my utopia might reside in my blind spot, or the facets of my fictional society that I outright fail to address, *people* that I fail to acknowledge, all because of my inability to remain objective.

Thomas More might have been absolutely certain that his approach to constructing the island of Utopia was an improvement over European society, though this likely would not have *not* been as appealing to natives of the Americas, atheists, and anyone at the time who had a vested interest in the centralization of power. Gene Roddenberry might have also been absolutely certain in his time that *Star Trek* was the

best society that we could endeavor to create. However, we could also make the case that because of Roddenberry's military background, he intentionally or unknowingly omitted the notion that there might be anyone to reject a vision of Starfleet that was in lockstep with a militaristic command structure: complete with rank, accompanying power structures, and even a strict dress code that denotes one's role and importance within Starfleet, which also strips down identity. All in the name of exploring and intentionally making contact with alien species in the hopes of creating new allies within the United Federation of Planets, a move that could be looked upon as a colonial ethos or an impression of hegemonic power. Perhaps there are places we were not meant to boldly go.

Still, it's my belief that imperfections in utopian concepts do not automatically render them null and void. Roddenberry's vision of humans as a unified species is still powerful, with our ability to effortlessly move about the cosmos, matured by our social "gestation" on Earth, acting as a metaphor for humanity's reward for putting aside our differences. Even More's vision of an island where power is decentralized, wealth has become uncoupled from materials, and its citizens embrace an ethos that is at odds with flippant warmaking have been enough to keep *Utopia* in literary conversation for nearly five centuries. Perhaps lending some credence to the idea that there is a perpetual market for hope.

At the intersection of *The Dispossessed* and *Trouble on Triton*, there is a "conflict" (maybe a "non-flict") over the worlds that we have the potential to create. Barely five years after the United States landed on the moon, the prospect of truly making

our way out into the vastness of space as a matter of course was still fresh. At that time, more than ever, we raised the question of what version of humanity was going to take to the stars. *Whose* version of humanity?

As Le Guin suggests, a more humbled version of humanity will ascend from Earth, but only after much hardship and with direct intervention. Our flaws, perhaps, too great to be reconciled before the planet crumbles around us, but flaws nonetheless that we will look back upon with understanding. But maybe we won't fulfill the role of the Terrans in her story, perhaps we will be the Anarresti, who refused to bring their prisons with them when they finally left their homeworld.

As Delany suggests, perhaps a more expressive and compassionate version of humanity will reach the edges of our Solar System. We might be a species that invests much time into removing the physical and invented boundaries that manufacture oppression throughout society. Will we have value regardless of our contribution to the system, or will we begin mapping out hierarchies of power the day we first land on Mars?

Maybe we can be the Anarresti and Tritonians both, and the dialogue between Le Guin and Delany will mean we'll be all the better for their meeting. Perhaps, as Carl Sagan envisioned in *The Pale Blue Dot*, our descendants will regard a distant Earth and "will love it no less for its obscurity and fragility. They will marvel at how vulnerable the repository of all our potential once was, how perilous our infancy, how humble our beginnings, how many rivers we had to cross before we found our way" (Sagan 334). We'll have to cross many rivers to find Triton, Anarres, or any of the other utopian

worlds that have been assembled for us over the centuries, and what we leave behind and what we hold close as we go to the stars will determine the world that meets our arrival.

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