

The truth is far more complicated than mere hopelessness.

—John Green, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*

The Wagon's Got All We Need:
Developing an Optimistic Speculative Theory from the
Fiction of Ernest Callenbach, Becky Chambers, and
Emily St. John Mandel

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Abstract

Amidst the climate crisis, hopeful narratives are as sparse as they are necessary, which is problematic; we cannot build a future that we cannot even imagine. This thesis develops a nuanced, pragmatic literary framework, called optimistic speculative theory, that rejects “climate doomism,” resists oversimplification, and instead imagines and aims to create a hopeful future. This framework draws upon ecocriticism, queer utopian theory, and solarpunk (an internet aesthetic and subculture). The value and possible applications of optimistic speculative theory are examined through analyses of three literary imaginings of the future: Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), Becky Chambers’s *Monk & Robot* duology (2021, 2022), and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014). Each of these works is set in a future that is ultimately hopeful, be the setting utopian or post-apocalyptic. By focusing on the construction of these three narratives, this thesis complicates the utopia/dystopia binary, ultimately arguing for an expanded definition of optimistic environmental literature.

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Introduction

Contemporary environmental literature is rarely hopeful; dread is all too common, appearing across fiction and non-fiction, everywhere from speculative novels to popular science writing. Contemporary environmental texts typically align with a narrative of imminent catastrophe, of a world beyond repair, of a version of humanity that has either willingly participated in the destruction of the planet or utterly failed to save it.

Furthermore, contemporary environmental literature is laden with warnings, primarily against a persistent belief that humanity is special, exceptional, or separate from the health of the environment – and in the defence of these literary trends, it is unsurprising that we as readers have found ourselves drawn to these frightening possibilities. Climate change is a global issue that already has or soon will affect everyone on the planet in some way, and yet, some of the world's most powerful leaders resolutely deny the existence of climate change, willfully ignoring a problem which every day becomes more dire. Capitalism – which feels like a relentless societal and economic machine built for consumption and disposal, without thought for finite resources or reciprocal relationships with the land – runs rampant, increasing the problem as it pushes individuals to adopt a scarcity mindset, existing without thought for the collective. The situation can understandably feel hopeless, and from the perspective of a scholar, it might seem like all one can do is document environmental failures, perhaps to try and make things better, or at least as a last-ditch effort to prevent them from getting worse. As a literary scholar, it seems as though all one can do is wade through depictions of disaster. However, when this kind of thought takes precedence – and comes to define environmental literature, making it primarily a place of hopelessness and doom – it risks

limiting the futures that we allow ourselves to imagine, and thus, limits the futures we believe we can create.

In what could be considered both a limitation and a strength, fiction is not constrained by real-world practicalities, nor does it have to be pragmatic. However, the narratives that we tell ourselves – and that are culturally celebrated and venerated – can be influential in shaping our reality. While this can be a comforting thought, especially regarding optimistic fiction, the same thought turns troubling when we consider the ways in which environmental literature is shaped by dystopian and post-apocalyptic conventions. Fiction does not equate with reality, but fiction is a mechanism for generating ideas; it is nearly impossible to work toward building a future that we struggle to even imagine. Among fiction's valuable qualities is its interpretative possibility, meaning that we can find visions of hopeful futures in texts that are not necessarily optimistic or utopian.

This thesis outlines a nuanced – and ultimately hopeful – theoretical framework that offers a realistic alternative to despair. This theory, which I refer to as optimistic speculative theory (or an optimistic speculative framework), adapts and combines existing literary theories – specifically ecocriticism, utopian studies, and aspects of queer theory – with the internet-born subcultures of solarpunk and hopepunk. I will demonstrate the possible uses and applications of optimistic speculative theory by examining three core texts: *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, the *Monk & Robot* duology by Becky Chambers, and *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel. *Ecotopia* (and its somewhat baffling sequel, *Ecotopia Emerging*) is the oldest of the three texts. Published in 1975 by American author Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* is an early example of

optimistic environmental fiction¹ that attempts to imagine, in impressive detail, a nation that prioritizes environmentalism above any other value. In contrast, Becky Chambers's *Monk & Robot* duology, which consists of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022), is set off-planet, in a futuristic utopian world where humans and robots have decided it is mutually beneficial to no longer have contact. The novels examine the relationship between humans and technology by way of the unlikely friendship between a travelling tea monk and a wild robot. *Monk & Robot* makes use of impossible science fiction technology in a way that *Ecotopia* avoids, as Callenbach's novel takes great pains to outline a utopia that feels tenable and achievable. However, *Monk & Robot* humanizes and complicates its characters in a way that *Ecotopia* never quite manages, allowing Chambers's duology to be compelling and emotionally stirring in ways where *Ecotopia* falls short. Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, which was published in 2014 and won the Arthur C. Clarke Award (for science fiction), straddles the two approaches. Technically, everything that happens in *Station Eleven* is within the realm of possibility² – the novel features no hitherto unknown technology or scientific advances – and Mandel rejects labelling *Station Eleven* as science fiction on this basis. In *The Washington Post*, Mandel states, “I was surprised to discover that if you write literary fiction that's set partly in the future, you're apparently a sci-fi writer” (Charles). Nevertheless, *Station Eleven* draws significant influence from post-apocalyptic genre conventions, and though it goes on to subvert many of those conventions, largely

¹ Though the novel pre-dates the term, *Ecotopia* is regularly cited as one of the first recognizably solarpunk novels; it was both singular in its time and highly influential on novels that came after.

² However, one might reasonably wonder what it will do for morale if we start labelling post-apocalyptic fiction as realistic or contemporary fiction.

through the introspective light with which it views the “apocalypse,” the novel has a quietly nuanced futurity and is ultimately speculative in tone.

Initially, it might not seem like Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* novels, Chambers’s *Monk & Robot* novels, and Mandel’s *Station Eleven* are all that similar, beyond a speculative flair and a shared broad theme of concern for the state of the world. However, each novel takes a different, albeit ultimately optimistic, view of the future. The novels have diverse settings: Callenbach’s texts take place in the recently developed country of Ecotopia (made up of California, Oregon, and Washington, which, in Callenbach’s world, have joined forces and seceded from the United States), Chambers’s novels on a fictional moon called Panga, and Mandel’s novel in a post-apocalyptic North America. The *Ecotopia* series is made up of two novels, *Ecotopia* and its prequel, *Ecotopia Emerging*. *Ecotopia* follows William Weston, an American reporter who travels to Ecotopia on a journalism assignment. Weston is entrusted with meeting Vera Allwen, the president of Ecotopia. His main goal is to gather a kind of “insider scoop” that he can send back as newspaper articles to the United States, revealing, to the American people, a firsthand account of the perceived strangeness of Ecotopia. However, as Weston spends time in Ecotopia, and as he forms connections with the country’s citizens, his perspective changes. Though he may not be doing so consciously, he grows to appreciate the Ecotopian values of company, community, and collective understanding. Both *Monk & Robot* novels follow Dex, a non-binary tea monk who, after realizing that they feel weary and disillusioned with their life, embarks on a destination-less journey through a remote forest. On the road, Dex meets Mosschap, a robot who lives in the forest, and the two set out to answer the central question of Chambers’s narrative: “what

do humans need?” *Monk & Robot* is meditative, comforting, and radically gentle. Though it does not imagine an alternative Earth, like *Ecotopia* or *Station Eleven*, the duology does spend time reimagining alternative, sustainable systems of community, and it is deeply compassionate toward the experience of being human. *Station Eleven* is set in a post-apocalyptic Ontario/Great Lakes region. The plot follows a troupe of actors who perform Shakespearean plays for the scattered remaining communities. Though *Station Eleven* takes place in a landscape of total social and technological collapse, caused by a deadly pandemic known as the Georgia Flu, the novel centres around a phrase that permeates the novel: survival is insufficient.³ I have positioned this group of novels in conversation with one another, as they each represent an alternative take on optimistic speculative futurism: *Ecotopia* was written during the twentieth-century environmental movement, pre-dating contemporary environmental concerns; *Monk & Robot* is a contemporary addition that recognizes and contextualizes solarpunk as a cultural influence; *Station Eleven* is representative of unlikely optimistic fiction, demonstrating the potential for speculative optimistic futurism to apply to texts that may otherwise feel innately despairing.

These authors’ perspectives on futurism are shaped by differing geopolitical spaces and cultural moments. Callenbach (1929-2012) was a key member of the late twentieth-century environmentalist movement, particularly in California. According to his obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*, Callenbach’s “environmental consciousness was formed as a child growing up on a farm in Williamsport [Pennsylvania]... The rural lifestyle meant that ‘everything was recycled because no one was there to carry it away,

³ This phrase is a quotation from “Survival Instinct,” a 1999 episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*.

and we practiced sustainable agriculture ... because the country hadn't gotten on a petrochemical kick yet,' Callenbach told the Chicago Tribune in 1990" (Woo). From a brief look at Callenbach's life, one can infer that his background, interests, and values contextualize *Ecotopia* as a text. Becky Chambers is an American author, best known for her science fiction series *Wayfarers*. She is one of the few relatively mainstream authors working in the solarpunk/hopepunk genres. *Wayfarers*, which is categorized as traditional science fiction, since it features spaceships, aliens, and intergalactic travel, engages with solarpunk themes less explicitly than *Monk & Robot*. However, by setting the *Wayfarers* novels in an entirely speculative space, Chambers can work with solarpunk concepts, outside the limitations of established society⁴ or physical possibility. Emily St. John Mandel is a Canadian author from Denman Island, British Columbia, though she has lived in the United States for many years. Two central characters in *Station Eleven*, Arthur and Miranda, are from the fictional Delano Island – based on Denman Island. Arthur and Miranda feel connected by their shared background, particularly the pull – or memory – of quiet island life. Unlike *Monk & Robot* or *Ecotopia*, *Station Eleven* is a standalone novel, but Mandel's novels are interconnected, set in a series of possible realities; she has created her own literary multiverse. Her 2020 novel, *The Glass Hotel*, mentions both the Georgia Flu and characters from *Station Eleven*, but *The Glass Hotel* takes place in a universe where the flu was rapidly contained, and society thus remained intact.

⁴ Solarpunk concepts often appear in tandem with the depiction of a recognizable society that has been vastly reshaped, usually due some kind of climate disaster. This is a common solarpunk worldbuilding tactic; it is widely found throughout the genre, including many of the stories in World Weaver Press's *Glass and Gardens* anthologies.

Though these authors present a range of speculative optimistic futures, it is important to acknowledge that all three are white and North American, like myself, and their positionalities impact the kinds of optimistic futures that they imagine. The foundational frameworks for imagining radical futures has been shaped by Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism, not only in terms of the literary articulations of such thinking, but also in the theories that emerged from these creative works. Though I ultimately chose not to include Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) as a primary text, Butler's novel is a key example of the intersections between eco-literature, faith, and a post-apocalyptic setting, as well as being a seminal work of Afrofuturist literature. I will more closely examine how the novel considers faith in chapter two, as part of a comparative analysis of Chambers's novels, but overarchingly, *Parable of the Sower* combines the themes that I analyze from each of my primary texts. Thus, in demonstrating how the novel combines seemingly discordant concepts (ecological and societal collapse; faith; hope), I position the novel as a theoretical complement to my primary texts. *Parable of the Sower* opens in the year 2024,⁵ and follows Lauren Olamina, a teenager living in a dystopian United States. In Butler's world, an increase in social inequity and resource scarcity, due to a dangerously unstable climate, has led to a deeply individualistic culture that is rife with violent crime – not dissimilar to the United States described in Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. Lauren rejects the faith of her father, a Baptist minister, stating that “At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God” (8). Throughout Butler's novel, there is the implication that Christianity has failed not only Lauren, but society. Lauren's father's God did not keep communities

⁵ Somewhat alarmingly, the same year that I began writing this thesis.

strong, homes intact, or people alive. Thus, Lauren turns to *Earthseed*, a faith she has developed, which she claims to not have invented, but discovered. *Earthseed*'s main tenet is "God is Change," suggesting that there is comfort to be found in destabilization. In other words, it might not get *better*, but it will get *different*.

Earthseed is a faith system that rejects commandments. As society collapses further, Lauren is forced to abandon her home and journey north, on the west coast of the United States, again like *Ecotopia*. Her character adopts the archetype of the travelling prophet, like the prophet in *Station Eleven*, though Lauren follows the mantra of, "I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves further and farther from this dying place" (78). As Lauren and her party travel further northward, searching for a reprieve from the violence and instability of their home, *Parable of the Sower* shifts into a kind of creation myth – or at least, an examination of how faith and personal narrative can motivate one to continue what might otherwise be deemed an impossible quest. While the basic idea of "faith in something" is not inherently hopeful, in the context of speculative optimism, faith *can* generate hope. Beyond *Parable of the Sower*, I argue that dystopian storytelling tends to prevail over utopian storytelling because dystopias rarely promise a fixed state. In dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives, we almost always follow characters who are fighting to change the system *or* stay alive in the world – and while these circumstances are stressful, bleak, and often tragic, the intensity of the environment ramps up the need to think resourcefully and originally. In a twisted way, dystopia offers a way forward, whereas traditional utopias imply that this is the best life can get.

Collective Climate Action

Over the last decade, large-scale responses to the climate crisis have evolved and polarized, becoming simultaneously more radical and more conservative. This is not particularly surprising, especially since the years from 2015 to 2025 have been a time of political, social, economic, and environmental upheaval, including, but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic, the global rise of right-wing ideology, and the response, or lack thereof, towards increasing rates of climate instability – instability which manifests as hurricanes, floods, and forest fires, regularly occurring at a scale of destruction that was previously thought to be once in a generation. The literary response to this upheaval, in both fiction and non-fiction, tends to exist in one of two spaces: either we are collectively and individually faced with certain doom, in which we must learn how to live or die within the wreckage of an unrecognizable planet, or there is hope, and though we will inevitably contend with devastating losses, we may still be able to salvage a future in which humanity not only survives but flourishes. Typically, the former sensibility has guided most climate fiction – the genre has been characterized by narratives of environmental devastation and the cost of humanity’s long-term environmental negligence. *Parable of the Sower* is one such example, and others include J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2007), and Hugh Howey’s *Wool* (2011). And yet, optimistic responses to the climate crisis do not exist solely in the imagination. There are many existing examples of real-world collective climate action – a prominent one being the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (more commonly known as COP). The most recent of these

conferences, COP29, was in November 2024, in Baku, Azerbaijan. At COP21, held in Paris, the Paris Agreement was created, an international document that “delineates a unified strategy for combating climate change. All governments of the world unanimously adopted it in December 2015, and most ratified it into law in record time” (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac xvi-xvii). At the time of its creation, the Paris Agreement was celebrated as a global step toward the mitigation of climate disaster – but it is not without justified criticism. The novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh critiques the Paris Agreement, largely by comparing it to *Laudato Si’* (subtitled “on care for our common home”), Pope Francis’s encyclical letter, which also appeared in 2015. Ghosh argues that the “Encyclical is remarkable for the lucidity of its language and the simplicity of its construction; it is the Agreement, rather, that is highly stylized in its wording and complex in structure” (151). He goes on to state that the Agreement’s “rhetoric is like a shimmering screen, set up to conceal implicit bargains, unspoken agreements, and loopholes visible only to those in the know” (156). In contrast, Ghosh states that *Laudato Si’* concludes with “acknowledgements of how profoundly humanity has lost its way and of the limits that circumscribe human agency [...] ‘We have forgotten,’ goes the text, ‘that ‘man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself.... He is spirit and will, but also nature’” (158-59). Beyond responses to the Paris Agreement, these UN conferences are often mired in controversy. For example, during COP29, the conference’s Chief Executive, Elnur Soltanov, was secretly filmed discussing potential oil and gas deals. Nevertheless, the conference establishes a space in which the climate crisis takes front and centre on a global stage. To acknowledge the conference’s failings need not take away from what it is trying to achieve.

Co-written by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, who together led negotiations for the Paris Agreement, *The Future We Choose: The Stubborn Optimist's Guide to the Climate Crisis* is a book that attempts to appeal to a wide audience. In the introduction, the authors claim that “Without diminishing the enormity of what we are facing with climate change, we are capable of changing course, and no objective evidence says otherwise” (xx). Figueres and Rivett-Carnac are resolute in their views: despair may be powerful, but it is not particularly interesting, nor is it likely to appeal to most people’s innate sense of curiosity. Despair is an ending; a solid wall that prevents ideas or possibilities from developing or growing. Figueres and Rivett-Carnac go on to state that

All studies you may read about the Anthropocene epoch point to the unprecedented levels of destruction that we have caused in just five decades. The underlying assumption in those analyses is that we have irretrievably cast our die and that increasing destruction will be the leitmotif of the entire geological era... [; instead,] we argue that devastation is admittedly a growing possibility but not yet our inevitable fate. (5)

Essentially, Figueres and Rivett-Carnac are striving to change the climate narrative, and they are not alone in this goal. There are climate activists and environmental companies that focus on storytelling as one of their chief missions. For example, Earthrise Studio, a self-described climate-focused storytelling company based in London, England, has a mission to “harness both urgency and optimism – in a delicate balance – resisting the pull of climate doom.” On their “about” page, they outline their “theory of change,” which progresses from stories to culture to values to leaders to policy to systems

(“About us”). Initiatives, such as Earthrise (which primarily focuses on environmental documentary filmmaking), are crucially demonstrating that a future in which humanity *has* acted in the interest of collective prosperity is being imagined for the real world, not just in fiction. Stories are the first step toward changing systems.

Constructing fictional futures is a tactic employed in *The Future We Choose*, and while this is a manoeuvre that is ultimately compelling, it complicates the tone of the book. The early chapters of Figueres and Rivett-Carnac’s text read as though they are pulled from a speculative climate fiction novel. The authors rely on a kind of fiction (i.e., their imagining of the long-term everyday effects of the climate crisis) to provoke an emotional response in the reader. Presumably, this is meant to invoke a stronger emotional response, and subsequent conviction, than might occur from reading dry factual material. In this way, *The Future We Choose* blurs genres, presenting as a non-fiction text, but relying heavily on speculative fiction to convey its message. In chapter two, “The World We Are Creating,” the authors outline the future that they believe is on track to becoming our reality – one in which, by 2100, the global temperature has risen by three degrees. The outlook is bleak. The future they depict is one of environmental suffering, displacement, and inequity, in which people increasingly fall victim to despair. In that regard, Figueres and Rivett-Carnac are not subtle, somberly stating that in 2100,

The demise of the human species is being discussed more and more. For many, the only uncertainty is how long [humanity will] last, how many more generations will see the light of day. Suicides are the most obvious manifestation of the prevailing despair, but there are other indications: a sense of bottomless

loss, unbearable guilt, and fierce resentment at previous generations who didn't do what was necessary to ward off this unstoppable calamity. (19)

This portrait of the future, notably written in the present tense, strikes me as more compelling than most because it is *not* written in the context of pure fiction or pure literary scholarship. Though Figueres and Rivett-Carnac are using narrative to their advantage, by constructing a narrative that urges us into collective action, they have built their worst-case scenario on their genuine, realistic fears of what the future may hold – and they are writing those fears in a format that will hopefully galvanize a wide audience.

Figueres and Rivett-Carnac contrast the grim future in chapter two with the third chapter of the book, “The World We Must Create.” In this chapter, the authors describe a world in which we have “been successful at halving emissions every decade since 2020” (20) – and this future is a beautiful one. It is a utopia, filled with rewilding, tree planting, electric trains for transportation, renewable energy, community-based approaches to food and shelter, and – in a sentiment that can seem optimistic to the point of naïve – a notable shift in powerful individuals’ priorities (i.e., away from capitalism and toward equitable community). Ultimately, Figueres and Rivett-Carnac, like other optimistic environmental writers, urge us to let fiction inform our reality. The chapter ends with the pronouncement that “we emerged from the climate crisis as more mature members of the community of life, capable not only of restoring ecosystems but also of unfolding our dormant potentials of human strength and discernment. Humanity was only ever as doomed as it believed itself to be. Vanquishing that belief was our true legacy” (33). This future is dangled before us, enticing. *This is what we could have.*

The Power of Narrative

In popular environmental writing, the specifics of narrative determine how much the reader is compelled by the authors' argument(s). Be it present in fiction or non-fiction (or both), narrative can sway a reader toward hope or despair. Nuanced narrative can embrace complexity and ambiguity in ways that allow for both hope *and* despair, even inciting other intertwined emotions, like anger, grief, apathy, and excitement. While a well-constructed narrative can allow significant space for readerly interpretation, it will nonetheless establish the boundaries of a specific idea. Outside of an argumentative context, i.e., in a strictly literary sense, both fiction and non-fiction are shaped by narrative intent. For example, in the *Ecotopia* books, Callenbach often turns to a non-fiction-esque narrative voice, which lends his novel a more authoritative tone and more credible world-building than it might have otherwise. Much like how *The Future We Choose* uses fiction – the positive and negative imaginings of the future – to evoke an emotional response in the reader, *Ecotopia* utilizes “non-fiction” to provoke feelings of actionability and realism.

Fiction and reality are intertwined, each exhibiting significant influence from the other. Trends in fiction are often shaped by real-world events and concerns. Fiction impacts real-world events – both because of the actual content of the fiction (and the subsequent shifts in a group or individual's mindsets, vocabularies, interests, etc.) and by how the creation and distribution of fiction has real-world effects (e.g., the publishing industry). *Ecotopia* “is cited by leading members of the German Green party as a major source of inspiration for their real-world political efforts” (Cummings 69). In developing this thesis, I initially became intrigued by the idea of trying to uncover if and when

fiction has impacted real-world environmental policies – and while *Ecotopia*'s influence on the German Green Party is an obvious example, tracing other examples proved difficult and often tenuous. The need for imagination is what bolsters the power of fiction in the face of the climate crisis, and fiction is a power that is carefully wielded, albeit quite differently, by Callenbach, Chambers, and Mandel. By resisting the futurity that is most often depicted in Western literary markets – one of apocalypse, dystopia, or totalitarianism – simply by imagining an optimistic alternative beyond utopian idealism, these authors automatically expand the definition of what a future could look like.

In the late 2010s, the environmental movement became disproportionately fixated on single-use plastic drinking straws. Huge amounts of energy were channeled into advocating against the use of plastic straws, as well as searching for sustainable alternatives. While it is true that plastic straws are problematic (the 2018 *Ocean Conservancy* cleanup report listed plastic straws and stirrers as the seventh most commonly collected item; in the 2024 report, plastic straws and stirrers sank down to ninth place⁶), it remains suspiciously convenient for massive businesses, such as fossil fuel companies, to encourage that the burden of plastic pollution be placed on the shoulders of the individual straw consumer. Much of the public perception of climate change is shaped by marketing, narrative, and a fixation with convenience – and we can see this by thinking back to the environmental issues that went through phases of dominating the media. Genuine climate action is inconvenient for capitalism; thus, something must be sacrificed to shift public focus. This is not to say that the plastic straw debate was pointless – one study, published in 2023, theorized that “the plastic

⁶ The most collected items in both 2018 and 2024 were cigarette butts: 2,412,151 were reported in 2018, and 1,947,483 in 2024.

straw alternative would not be superior in all indicators, but would lead to environmental problem-shifting” (Guo 1) – but that the *narrative* of plastic straws became one of the chief ways in which the *narrative* of environmental destruction was shifted to blame the individual consumer.

Thus, much like how narrative can be used to promote environmental action, it can also be employed to minimize problems, shift blame, or benefit corporations that profit from environmental destruction. Consider three of the main terms used to describe our ongoing environmental state: “climate change,” “global warming,” and “the climate crisis.” Writing for *The New York Times* in 2003, journalist Jennifer 8. Lee chronicles an instance of the American Republican Party’s strategic shift in language:

In his memorandum, Mr. Luntz [Frank Luntz, American communications consultant] urges that the term “climate change” be used instead of “global warming,” because “while global warming has catastrophic communications attached to it, climate change sounds a more controllable and less emotional challenge.”

Also, he wrote, “conservationist” conveys a “moderate, reasoned, common sense position” while “environmentalist” has the “connotation of extremism.” (Lee)

This tactic is not shocking; it was Luntz’s job to manipulate language to support his desired outcome. Interestingly, Luntz has since changed his position on the climate crisis. In 2019, at a hearing called “The Right Thing To Do: Conservatives for Climate Action,” Luntz stated, “I’m here before you to say that I was wrong [about climate action] in 2001 [...]. Just stop using something that I wrote 18 years ago, because it’s

not accurate today” (Yoder). Apparently, this change in perspective was spurred by Luntz’s own house being in the path of the Skirball Fire, which destroyed parts of southern California in 2017. Essentially, Luntz is a marketer – and while the ethics of his marketing are debatable, he has valuable experience in shifting public perception, and his approach is not entirely unlike a fiction writer’s: at that same climate hearing, Luntz argued that the necessary approach for the climate crisis is to “stay away from the complicated science of climate change and personalize the message instead” (Yoder).

If we accept that “humanity was only ever as doomed as it believed itself to be” (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 33), the logical next step is to assess how doomed we think we are right *now*, and which narratives, expectations, or ideologies are shaping the parameters of those beliefs. This is a question that Callenbach, Chambers, and Mandel each grapple with throughout their works. It is crucial to remember that the narratives we tell ourselves *about* ourselves will have a powerful impact on how we interact with the environment. Storytelling is everything – and to enact change, we must believe that we are capable of it. We must believe that we are not yet doomed. In *Station Eleven*, the Travelling Symphony is a symbol of hope. Theatre and music will not undo the apocalypse, but art carves out a space for joy, and in so doing, can shift a narrative of despair into a narrative where not all is lost. In *Monk & Robot*, Chambers sidesteps many real-world environmental realities by setting the story on the fictional moon Panga – and yet, there remains a reverence for the natural world and a quiet refusal to create a hierarchy of humans, technology, and nature. Mosschap’s name is a prime example of this: as Mosschap explains, “We [robots] name ourselves for the first thing we notice when we wake up. In my case, the first thing I noticed was a large clump of splendid

speckled mosscaps” (*Wild-Built* 55). Implied in this narrative is a radically holistic understanding of Panga’s ecosystem. No life form inherently exists above or below another.

However, there are also instances where narrative is constricting: *Ecotopia* never quite manages to extend its scope beyond what is directly beneficial for humans, which seems paradoxical, given the novel’s proximity to and influence on environmentalist movements. Furthermore, *Ecotopia* limits its own narrative by being unable to imagine a world that has moved beyond the boundaries of the nation state. While *Ecotopia* is somewhat systemic in scope, the novel positions global problems as oddly siloed. In Callenbach’s novel, simply choosing to live differently, in an environmental haven, is enough to make life utopian for the citizens of Ecotopia. In other words, *Ecotopia* (the novel) works because Ecotopia (the country) exists in a vacuum. In reality, the environmental situation of any specific country is largely affected by the actions of other countries; it is well documented that populations who have done the least to cause the climate crisis are suffering the worst of its effects. Carbon emissions do not care about political borders.

Non-fiction, as a broad genre, is helpful in both determining the relevance of optimistic speculative theory beyond literary analysis and offering concrete examples of narrative’s potential to shape reality. Scientific consensus is that the climate crisis has reached the point of no return; we must be taking collective action that is beyond just talking about the problem. Popular media is one of the best ways to share climate knowledge, and though my primary texts for this thesis are all fiction, it would be an error to overlook the potential that both academic and popular non-fiction has in

influencing the public narrative of the climate crisis. In searching for a genre that bridges pragmatism and utopian theory, and thus offers a wider breadth of perspective for optimistic speculative theory, we can turn to climate fiction, but we might also turn to popular science writing, as I do several times throughout this thesis.⁷ Nonfiction synthesizes the real-world data from which fiction can imagine new futures, and thus carries an air of authority that can be mimicked in fiction, as we see in *Ecotopia*. Popular nonfiction texts are often the driving force for communicating the facts of the climate crisis to a wide audience, and while nonfiction literature primarily works with facts, studies, and theories, narratives still emerge. These emergent narratives offer insight into social and cultural realities. *The Warming Papers: The Scientific Foundation for the Climate Change Forecast* (2011) is an academic text that has compiled all major historic scientific papers that indicate the presence of global warming due to human activity – and the earliest one in the anthology is French physicist and mathematician Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier’s 1824 paper, “On the Temperatures of the Terrestrial Sphere and Interplanetary Space.” As the editors explain, Fourier, who died in 1830, “is generally credited with the discovery of what is now known as the greenhouse effect” (3). Fourier’s paper was published over a century before the concept of “global warming” entered public consciousness, but his work established a precedent for a phenomenon that could – and should – have been widely studied and monitored (obviously it *was* monitored, but only to a certain extent). Though *The Warming Papers* is a scientific anthology and not a literary one, it is relevant to literary ecocriticism

⁷ See Figueres and Rivett-Carnac, Kimmerer, Simard.

insofar as it reveals patterns regarding scientific and public thought. New scientific knowledge will inevitably affect contemporary fiction. In an obvious example, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), widely regarded as one of the most influential books ever written, impacted scientific *and* literary discourse. As George Levine writes, "deeply embedded in the conventions of narrative is the imagination of reality Darwin helped affirm for us. The traditional novel, after all, depends on the unfolding of sequential time, often on the characters' discoveries of earlier events, which help explain present conditions" (Levine). In 1938, British engineer G.S. Callendar published a paper titled "The artificial production of carbon dioxide and its influence on climate," in which he became the first to assert "that human activity could change the climate of the Earth" (Archer 259).⁸ We have known about the impact of carbon emissions for a long time – nearly a century – but the wider narrative surrounding this knowledge was not one of urgency. The science was there, but the science was inconvenient, and so the narrative made it disappear.

Developing Optimistic Speculative Theory

To be able to consistently approach storytelling from an optimistic, yet nuanced, environmental perspective, a supporting framework had to be created. Thus, I needed to develop a consistent mode of analysis, built on the foundation of existing theories and subcultures. The result of this project is optimistic speculative theory. The goals of this framework are twofold: first, to create a space where the real and the speculative are

⁸ However, Callendar was not the first to think of this idea. In 1896, as a part of developing a theory that would explain the ice ages, Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius calculated that carbon affected the temperature of the planet.

allowed to co-exist and even influence each other, while concurrently considering how both the real and the speculative can impact actionable, sustainable futures; and second, to realistically but resolutely complicate and counter the overwhelming despair that permeates environmental literature, spaces, and conversations. In this section of the introduction, I will outline the parameters, applications, and possibilities for this theory, as well as briefly chronicle its development. In the following three chapters I will explore how optimistic speculative theory is relevant to my primary texts, while simultaneously developing the framework and its potential applications.

Keeping the real-world hopes and proposed solutions from texts like *The Future We Choose* in mind, let us now turn to the speculative realm of solarpunk. Solarpunk, as both a genre of writing and a subculture, has an explicit set of values and a strongly established aesthetic, making it a useful and highly imaginative resource for assessing the usefulness of environmental literary theory in a real-world context. This is particularly true when solarpunk is positioned as its *own* branch of literary theory. Drawing from the foundational ethos that is already established by solarpunk, I will examine existing literary theory – specifically ecocriticism and utopian studies – in order to demonstrate the sprawling, interdisciplinary potential of an optimistic speculative framework.

In attempting to describe what a solarpunk theory might look like, were it to move into a critical space, I first found myself writing in terms of what solarpunk was *not*. It is neither strictly literary, nor strictly non-literary. It is neither solely real-world, nor solely fictional. Furthermore, there are many ways in which solarpunk both resists and supports ecocriticism and utopian studies. However, I argue that the key to

solarpunk's potential within a critical space is that the subculture's origins lie outside of academia. In other words, solarpunk was created *for* the people *by* the people, and this is crucial, because these origins inherently make solarpunk accessible. Solarpunk was not created in a vacuum, and it is instead part of a long tradition of "punk" aesthetics that have grown into their own genres (the most famous genres being steampunk and cyberpunk⁹). The subculture most like solarpunk is hopepunk (for clarity and ease, I will often use solarpunk as an umbrella term for solarpunk, hopepunk, and other related, yet even more niche subcultures), and the titles are often used interchangeably, seeing as they have largely overlapping ethos. Solarpunk is the older of the two terms, and, though it has rather amorphous internet origins, it seems to have been coined in an anonymously written 2008 blog post, "From Steampunk to Solarpunk." In the post, which focuses on describing the Beluga Skysail, the first modern cargo ship to be partially powered by a kite rig, the author states that the ship has inspired them "to suggest a new literary genre: solarpunk" ("From Steampunk") and goes on to describe their new genre:

[Like steampunk], [s]olarpunk also conflates modern technology with older technology, but with a vital difference. In the case of steampunk, the focus on Victorian technology serves as a guideline for imagining an alternative world. In the case of solarpunk, the interest in older technologies is driven by modern world economics: if oil isn't a cheap source of energy anymore, then we

⁹ Steampunk is a retro-futurist, anachronistic genre, primarily inspired by 19th century aesthetics, that imagines what the world would be like if modern technology had more closely coincided with the industrial revolution (i.e., if steam power had remained technologically dominant). The cyberpunk genre is commonly described as being "high tech, low life," and is characterized by the juxtaposition of futuristic aesthetics and gritty backdrops. Solarpunk is often positioned as a foil to cyberpunk's tonal nihilism.

sometimes do best to revive older technologies that are based on other sources of energy, such as solar power and wind power [...] Obviously, a major difference between solarpunk and steampunk is that solarpunk writings, and solarpunk technologies, need not be imaginary.

From this passage, we can see that even in its earliest iterations, solarpunk was adapting and building on an established body of work. Notably, though the author reaches for another genre (steampunk) as point of comparison, the post's central example – and the catalyst for solarpunk's creation – is a real-world endeavour.

It is remarkable that the culturally agreed-upon definition of solarpunk has managed to stay consistent with what the anonymous author first proposed. “From Steampunk to Solarpunk” gained traction online, particularly on Tumblr, a website which has historically been a hub for both digital art and the development of internet subcultures. At first, it appeared almost exclusively as an aesthetic movement, with visual artists adopting solarpunk principles to guide the development of a recognizably defined aesthetic landscape. And the aesthetics *are* recognizable, even to those unfamiliar with the terminology. The imagery is filled with greenery and outdoor spaces, with imagined cities that are clean, well-organized, inviting, and vaguely futuristic. There is almost always a ramshackle quality to these designs (embodying the values of “reduce, reuse, recycle”), but this speaks of waste reduction more than it does scarcity. Many of these elements can be broadly categorized as utopian urban design. As solarpunk continued to gain momentum, the subculture moved beyond a set of aesthetics and abstract possibilities, and toward a movement that now needed a clear definition. “A Solarpunk Manifesto,” published by Regenerative Design, outlines the twenty-two

mandates of solarpunk, such as “We are solarpunks because optimism has been taken away from us and we are trying to take it back” and “In [s]olarpunk we’ve pulled back just in time to stop the slow destruction of our planet. We’ve learned to use science wisely, for the betterment of our life conditions as part of our planet. We’re no longer overlords. We’re caretakers. We’re gardeners” (“Solarpunk Manifesto”). With this realization – that solarpunk has potential on a systemic, societal level – the genre then becomes a model for and a place to experiment with actionable changes.

Researching solarpunk was the first step in my development of optimistic speculative theory; I considered referring to what ultimately became optimistic speculative theory *as* solarpunk theory, before deciding that, while aligned, optimistic speculative theory is rooted in literary theory in a way that solarpunk is not. Ideally, solarpunk is a conceptual and speculative bridge between the scientific and the creative, the *already* possible and the visionary. Recently, there has been a surge of solarpunk-themed anthologies, including the *Glass and Gardens* anthologies, published by World Weaver Press, *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures*, and even *Wings of Renewal: A Solarpunk Dragon Anthology*, which blends solarpunk with high fantasy story elements. In late 2024, Simon & Schuster published *Solarpunk: Short Stories from Many Futures*. Though the genre undeniably remains a niche, every year brings more “official” solarpunk publications, more public recognition, and more opportunities to influence mainstream storytelling. As stated in the final bullet point of the Solarpunk Manifesto, solarpunk “can happen. Now.” Furthermore, solarpunk is an intellectual alternative to the futures proposed by dystopia. Both *Ecotopia* and *Monk & Robot* fall

comfortably within the boundaries of solarpunk as it is currently defined.¹⁰ Classifying *Station Eleven* as solarpunk requires a more expansive interpretation. However, by examining *Ecotopia*, *Monk & Robot*, and *Station Eleven* through the lens of solarpunk as a literary theory, I posit that even the speculative elements of solarpunk have actionable possibilities.

Two pre-existing literary frameworks form the critical foundation for optimistic speculative theory: ecocriticism and utopian theory (particularly queer utopian theory). Examining these theories in conversation with one another – particularly by studying how queer utopian theory can be applied to an optimistic environmental future – fleshes out the framework of my solarpunk-inspired theory. Ecocriticism aligns itself with solarpunk in obvious ways, particularly in relation to the climate crisis; in recent years, the climate crisis is where ecocritical discourse has naturally shifted. A central text in this shift is Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* (2016), which grapples with the overwhelming scale of the climate crisis. Ghosh interrogates the contemporary literary landscape, attempting to determine why the climate crisis rarely features in literary fiction but is instead relegated to science fiction (this is not unlike Mandel’s reluctance to view *Station Eleven* as science fiction). In relation to this thesis, Ghosh is one of the few prominent ecocritical thinkers who is specifically examining the real-world consequences (whether positive or negative) of climate fiction. Ghosh also offers a suggestion as to why climate writing feels incongruous with traditional nature writing, arguing the following: “in that [climate change events] are not entirely of Nature [...],

¹⁰ *Monk & Robot* is more readily and commonly defined as hopepunk. However, *Monk & Robot* explores sustainability and the human-technology relationship in a way that is quite characteristic of solarpunk. *Ecotopia* pre-dates the term “solarpunk,” but is nonetheless often positioned as an early example.

they confound the very idea of ‘Nature writing’ or ecological writing: they are instances, rather, of the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the non-human” (33). In Ursula K. Heise’s 2006 article “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” a useful overview of early iterations of the critical discipline, Heise argues that between the 1960s and the 1990s, “the notion of nature tended to be approached as a sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of specific social groups” (505). Indeed, early ecocritics were not focused on the climate crisis *per se*, but instead on the social aspects of depicting the natural world. This aspect of ecocriticism should not be disregarded, but it is notable that it is now of lower “priority.” Until the mid-2000s (around the time that Heise published her article) ecocriticism was not a mainstream literary framework and was rarely applied in an interdisciplinary way. However, as the climate crisis increasingly permeates, and at times defines, certain literary spaces, ecocriticism has had to shift its focus toward themes of instability, urgency, survival, and humanity’s destructive potential. Optimistic speculative theory aims to hold ecocriticism to its interdisciplinary potential, both in terms of ecocriticism’s capacity for linking fiction and non-fiction, and in terms of its ability to generate actionable ideas.

In contrast to ecocriticism, utopian theory does not always have an environmental lens. Utopia is a sociopolitical concept that exists in spatial terms – it describes a place of idealism. Utopian theory has expanded the understanding of utopia as place-bound, introducing frameworks that make use of the utopian idea beyond a fixed state. However, when treating utopian theory with actionable applications outside of criticism, we encounter pragmatic issues, especially since utopia is largely presented

as something that is unattainable, or at least a radical departure from a reader's everyday experience. In either case, utopia is beyond the scope of a human lifetime. In the introduction to *Imaginary Communities*, a text that considers utopia in conversation with the idea of the nation, author Phillip E. Wegner states that "a fixed and stable space [...] is an inappropriate one for the narrative utopia. Narrative utopias are more akin to traveler's itineraries, [...] tracing an exploratory trajectory, a narrative line that, as it unfolds, quite literally engenders something new in the world" (xix). To use Wegner's terms, in a narrative utopia, "description itself serves as what in other contexts we think of as action or plot" (xviii). He goes on to argue that "Utopias are too often read as static descriptions of a place, real or ideal" (xviii). However, in the first chapter of *Imaginary Communities*, Wegner writes the following:

[I]n the narrative utopia, the presentation of an 'ideal world' operates as a kind of lure, a play on deep desires, both immediately historical and otherwise, to draw its readers in and thereby enable the form's educational machinery to go to work – a machinery that enables its readers to perceive the world they occupy in a new way, providing them with some of the skills and dispositions necessary to inhabit an emerging social, political, and cultural environment [...]. Thus, rather than focusing on the often-trumpeted failures of the utopian form (its failure, for example, to provide a 'realistic,' or realizable, program for a radically other form of social existence), I want to look at ways the form not only succeeds, but plays a definitive role in the histories of Western modernity. (2)

There is much to consider here, including that even Wegner, a utopian theorist, seems to implicitly acknowledge that it is unclear, or impossible to determine, how to go about a

realizable attempt at utopia. Darko Suvin offers an alternative construction of utopia, arguing that “an acknowledgment that utopias are verbal artifacts before they are anything else, and that the source of this concept is a literary genre and its parameters, might be, if not the first and the last, nonetheless a *central* point in today’s debate on utopias” (39). Both Wegner and Suvin recognize that the conventions of utopian literature present practical challenges that extend beyond the limits of the text itself; this understanding situates utopias in the literary world more than the real one. Working with Ernst Bloch’s envisioning of a “concrete utopia,” in which a utopia is anticipatory but somehow not abstract, Ruth Levitas writes that “Concrete utopia embodies what Bloch claims as the essential utopian function, that of simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future” (15); this is an idea that works in theory, but again, is challenging in practice. If the parameters of utopia are set by the utopian literary genre, it is a logical supposition that utopia is constrained by fiction, as opposed to being enhanced.

It is understandable that one might consider utopias to be exclusively speculative or fantastical, especially given how one is often introduced to the concept. An image search of the word “utopia,” in the contemporary context, presents a uniform aesthetic: clean, green spaces and towering, streamlined, artistically designed glass buildings. Thus, it might seem as though our choices for utopia truly are either abstract or fantastical – and as José Muñoz writes, “abstract utopias are indeed dead ends, too often vectoring into the escapist disavowal of our current moment” (30). Ultimately, seeking a rigid definition of utopia requires a long-winded acknowledgement of the genre’s failures, and thus the concept remains intangible, implicitly enforcing the sentiment that

utopia requires perfection. Much like my early attempts to define a solarpunk theory, it is tempting to list what utopian theory *cannot* do.

Queer utopian theory is more focused on expansiveness, destabilization, and anti-idealism. This does not mean that queer theory has somehow tarnished utopian ideals – instead, queer theory has expanded the definition and resisted limitations for what constitutes utopianism. Muñoz argues that queerness simply cannot fit within the boundaries of a heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist society, suggesting that the standard ideal queer future, as envisioned by many, is not imaginative enough. More importantly, this future overlooks the already existing potential for utopia. There is potential to find utopia amidst great tragedy; there is potential to find dystopia amidst perfection. Queer utopian theory argues that a utopia *must* be alive and liveable, at least in some capacity. In other words, utopia can be reframed as a dynamic environment; it is a living ecosystem in which we can participate. We can extend this to how we think about the genre – specifically, by re-evaluating common distinctions of when a text is viewed as utopian, hopeful, or optimistic. While one response to this is to look for glimmers of hope within dystopian or post-apocalyptic stories, it is more sustainable and encompassing to instead expand our understanding of when utopia is a useful concept. Or, in Muñoz’s words, “utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema” (115). Perhaps utopia is something that must always be striven toward. Perhaps utopia is temporally speculative (always in the future), but philosophically pragmatic – not unlike solarpunk. Either way, we must build our future in the reality of the present.

Ultimately, examining ecocriticism alongside queer utopian theory forms the foundation for optimistic speculative theory, but it is the ethos of solarpunk that brings the framework to life, despite the “-punk” of solarpunk and hopepunk seeming perhaps incongruous to the formal sphere of academic study. Punk is countercultural and anti-establishment; attempting to force it to fit within the confines of literary theory would miss the point entirely. Thus, I argue that instead of bringing solarpunk and hopepunk to academia, we must bring academia to solarpunk and hopepunk. Academia must expand and make space for grassroots ideas and movements like solarpunk, because these movements have great value, even if (and sometimes *especially* if) they are not neatly defined. Solarpunk has the potential to be much more than a curiosity. The ethos of solarpunk is to make use of what we already have; academic writing is something we already have, and it can support the solarpunk search for realizable, sustainable futures.

Dystopia and Clean Air: Ernest Callenbach's Environmental Utopia

In a strictly literary sense, the *Ecotopia* novels are not entirely successful; in both books, plot and characterization serve to prop up Callenbach's world-building (particularly in *Ecotopia*; *Ecotopia Emerging* has a more traditional format). This world-building is creative and detailed enough that plot and character *can* become secondary considerations. However, Callenbach's characterization is not complex or multi-dimensional enough to make the novels truly stand alone, and thus, unlike Chambers's or Mandel's novels, *Ecotopia* has survived as a generative historical work rather than as a compelling piece of fiction. Throughout *Ecotopia*, Callenbach, writing in the voice of journalist William Weston, eagerly tells the reader about the cleverness of Ecotopia's complex and sustainable systems for community living. We are implicitly told to celebrate the radical idea that Ecotopia encourages equitable access to natural spaces and enacts laws that protect the environment. Even in developing the novel's themes, Callenbach tends to rely on the depth and exhaustive description of his world-building. For example, we learn that "Shortly after independence, an expropriation law made all waterfront properties into 'water parks.' Beautiful exclusive estates were seized and turned into fishing communes, schools, hospitals, oceanographic and limnological institutes, museums of natural history" (38-39). The idea of resisting the privatization of property is only briefly mentioned and not further examined. Throughout the novel's descriptive passages, Callenbach does recognize the power and importance of beauty, but this recognition is mostly to acknowledge the contrast between the utopian Ecotopia

and the dystopian United States. Weston notes the greenery, the pedestrianization, and the overall sustainable creation and maintenance of Ecotopia's settlements, which are implied to be extremely different from the aesthetic reality of the United States.

Since most of our information about Ecotopia is learned through Weston's skeptical reports for an American audience, except for what we learn in Weston's journal entries, we are also aware of the heavy subtext in his reports. He finds the community-oriented values of Ecotopia disorienting and controlling. Despite the violence and isolation of American life, Weston initially thinks of Ecotopia as the dangerous place. In a description of the waterfront properties, Weston writes of the estates being "seized" (39); earlier in the scene he explains how the prohibition of cars has "forced" citizens to walk (38). Weston is conditioned to a culture of extreme individualism in which one's circle of care does not extend beyond oneself or one's immediate family. Thus, the collective priorities of Ecotopian society feel not only alien, but downright irresponsible. Weston is not shocked by Ecotopia itself, but by the Ecotopians' collectivist mindset, and by the absence of the poverty and violence that are deemed unavoidable in the United States. In one of Callenbach's most effective scenes, Weston is so desensitized to extreme individualism that he views Ecotopia as a tragic ruin of a formerly great city:

The signs of a once busy civilization – streets, cars, service stations, supermarkets – have been entirely obliterated, as if they never existed. The scene was sobering, and made me wonder what a Carthaginian might have felt after ancient Carthage was destroyed and plowed under by the conquering Romans. (30-31)

While it is understandable that Weston would mourn the loss of the familiar, Callenbach ladens Weston's perspective with a heavy dose of irony, as Weston does not view environmental destruction as a tragedy, and is thus blind to the destruction that he is complicit in. To adapt Weston's own analogy: if the environment is Carthage, who exactly are the Romans? Are they the United States? Systemic industrialization? Humanity itself? Are humans the conquerors or the ones forced to stand amidst the wreckage of what once was – or are these ideas one and the same?

There is a baffling moment in *Ecotopia's* prequel, *Ecotopia Emerging*, in which Callenbach refers to *Ecotopia* as a text-within-a-text. A passage in *Ecotopia Emerging* describes a short novel that, “in the guise of a report by an Eastern journalist...[assumes] that the Northwest had seceded from the union” (310).

Callenbach then goes on to summarize many of William Weston's observations about Ecotopia from the first novel – including his reactions to Ecotopian visions of sustainability, technology, transportation, and economics. This section is peculiar for two reasons: first, positioning *Ecotopia* as a meta-narrative invalidates the non-fiction-esque tone and worldbuilding that propelled Callenbach's novel in the first place.

Ecotopia is successful because Callenbach puts effort into imagining how an environmentally conscientious society actually *would* work. In other words, the fact that *Ecotopia* treats itself as non-fiction is its strength, and *Ecotopia Emerging* undoes this work. Second, introducing *Ecotopia* as an in-world novel disrupts the timeline of Callenbach's overarching plot, since *Ecotopia Emerging* follows characters that first appear in *Ecotopia*, without keeping the plot consistent to what happens in *Ecotopia*. For example, Callenbach writes that Vera Allwen, Ecotopian president, “rather enjoyed

the novel's playful portrayal of her as mother of her country but did not wish to have the Party totally identified with the novel" (311). While it is plausible that a writer might write a narrative that fictionalizes a famous (but "real" political leader), Marissa and Ben D'Amato – private citizens that Weston encounters in *Ecotopia* – are puzzling additions to the prequel. It seems unlikely that a novel, no matter how discerning (or inspiring to the creation of a nation) would feature detailed accounts of the movements of private citizens, particularly those who are older in *Ecotopia*, which is released as an in-world novel early in the chronology of *Ecotopia Emerging*, than they are in the *Ecotopia Emerging* timeline.

In a 1989 article that – initially, at least – is distinctly skeptical in tone, Michael S. Cummings attempts to discern whether *Ecotopia Emerging* imagines a genuinely viable path to achieving a real-world environmental utopia. One of Cummings's core reservations about *Ecotopia Emerging*'s plot is the way that Callenbach relies on strong individual convictions to change the world. Or, in Cummings's words, "Cost-free solar electricity, low-tar marijuana, and sensual lady lumberjacks aside, there are some large organic flies in the ointment of Callenbach's transition to utopia: namely, Americans, even those of the Pacific Northwest" (74). He goes on to argue that the (non-Ecotopian) United States that Callenbach depicts creates a problem for his own world-building: "However compelling rational persuasion may be in a reasonable world, the world Callenbach mirrors for us is quite the opposite: ignorant, rigid, defensive, self-serving – the characteristics fostered by the prevailing ecocidal system. Yet in the author's scenario, these very Americans readily give up their infatuation with economic growth" (74). In *Ecotopia*, Callenbach's world is a compelling thought experiment; in *Ecotopia*

Emerging, it transforms into a creation of wishful thinking. Ultimately, Callenbach has a shiny vision for an environmental utopia, but this vision does not hold up to interrogation. However, to understand why optimistic climate fiction novels like *Ecotopia* – particularly given the time in which it was published – are read as unexpected or radical, we can examine the alternative, and more commonly depicted, literary futures. In the next section of this chapter, I conduct a brief survey of contemporary dystopian and negative environmental fiction, to better contextualize *Ecotopia*'s successes and failures.

Dystopia and Climate Doom

As I stated in the introduction, a brief survey of eco-literature is not an optimism-inducing pastime. Recent environmental novels usually fall under the umbrella descriptor of climate fiction (“cli-fi”), a genre which tends to ground its narratives in depictions and imaginings of incoming or ongoing climate disasters; the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*'s entry on climate fiction describes the genre as “[pulling] the issue-oriented and didactic approach of activist fiction into contact with the intensive description and site specificity of Romantic nature writing” (Irr). Examples of novels that fit into some or all these parameters are wide ranging, diverse, and often unexpected. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) is an urgent tale – inspired by legend and linguistics – of unstable waterways amidst detrimental sea level rise. A central storyline in Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and is often thought of as *the* contemporary ecocritical novel, recounts a group of activists' increasingly desperate and dangerous attempts to protect ancient California

redwood trees. Another of the novel's storylines follows a young man developing a wildly successful videogame based on forest ecology. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) is set amidst the chaos and terror of Hurricane Katrina; the novel deftly demonstrates how a reality as all-encompassing as the climate crisis can be brutally honed into a personal tragedy. Unfortunately, climate "doomism" does not come out of nowhere – and even an optimistic view of our collective future cannot be complete without reckoning with and accepting loss. The frequency of dire climate narratives in contemporary publishing is not random, but simultaneously, contemporary writers and publishers are not required to prioritize narratives of doom. I argue that the market for apocalyptic climate narratives comes from a culture of fear and despair surrounding the climate crisis – or, alternatively, perhaps the desire to brace for the impact of worst-case scenarios. Again, as Figueres and Rivett-Carnac write in *The Future We Choose*, "Humanity was only ever as doomed as it believed itself to be" (33).

Even novels that are not explicitly about the climate crisis can often be read as such. In contemporary literature, climate anxiety can feel inescapable – and this extends beyond English-language novels. *Fever Dream* (2014), by Argentinean writer Samanta Schweblin, is a short, dreamy fable that implicitly interrogates the dire consequences of chemical dumping and toxicity – a theme which is prevalent throughout late twentieth-century environmental literature, including *Ecotopia*. In *Fever Dream*, the narrative follows a woman on her deathbed. Drifting in and out of lucidity, the woman attempts to piece together what has happened to her and why she has been poisoned, from toxins in the waterways, before presumably succumbing to her exposure. At no point in the novel does Schweblin explicitly position the narrative as an ecological one, but the plot speaks

for itself. *The Employees* (2018), a highly experimental speculative novel by Danish author Olga Ravn, is simultaneously a space opera and a satirical examination of labour under capitalism. The novel is structured as a series of transcriptions from the crew – not all of whom are human – of a spaceship that is doomed to never return home. In a poignant moment, midway through the novel, a character laments,

Those of us from Earth, we can hardly talk to each other. We're weighed down with memories of where we came from and what we left behind...Remember when it rained at the beach, how when you paddled out, the sea was warmer than the rain? [...] All of us miss the weather, which surprised us. It's as if the only thing we can bear to have in common is weather conditions on a lost planet. (81)

While the novel is not explicitly environmental – and nor is it explicitly apocalyptic – Ravn manages to capture the empty ache of losing the mundane.

In the realm of speculative fiction, even apocalyptic climate narratives are outnumbered by the wide swath of modern dystopias, perhaps kickstarted by the mass popularity of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. While *The Hunger Games* was certainly not the first dystopia,¹¹ and while many dystopian novels overlap with both the post-apocalyptic and climate genres, contemporary dystopias (at least as represented by novels that have enjoyed popularity and time on bestseller lists) tend to fall into the young adult category and feature plucky teenagers determined to overthrow an oppressive government or regime. These dystopian worlds tend to be structured in

¹¹ The title of “first dystopian novel” is up for debate and largely depends on the questioner's criteria. Dystopia is largely defined as an “anti-utopia” (which brings the question of “first dystopia” all the way back to Thomas More's coining of “utopia” in 1516), but it is a genre that has taken decades, if not centuries, to become fully established. Early examples, which are considered particularly formative to contemporary dystopias, include *We* (1924) by Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, which went on to inspire *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and, of course, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell.

similar ways – either there is a brutal structure imposed upon society (such as the games in *The Hunger Games*, or the factions in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series), or something inherent to humanity is stripped away. Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* trilogy imagines a world in which love is a disease that must be cured; Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series takes place in a society in which people undergo extreme plastic surgery, at the age of sixteen, to become “pretty.” Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, which predates *The Hunger Games* by fifteen years, imagines a world where most of humanity has given up the ability to see colour. The *Legend* trilogy by Marie Lu is set in the western United States, mimicking some aspects of how Callenbach imagines the secession that ultimately leads to Ecotopia. These young adult novels can be logically read as responses to fascist systems (as well as publishing and marketing demands post-Suzanne Collins success); the threat, whether it be an individual or a system, is typically political or economic, as opposed to environmental – at least up until the mid-2010s. However, in recent years, and much like the shift seen in other genres, dystopia has turned towards the ecological.

A compelling example of dystopia’s environmental shift is Cherie Dimaline’s 2017 novel *The Marrow Thieves*, which gained significant momentum in the Canadian literary scene and has steadily made its way into Canadian school curricula. *The Marrow Thieves* is a speculative novel that imagines a world in which everyone, save for the Indigenous people of North America, has lost the ability to dream. The Indigenous people are hunted for their bone marrow, which is said to cure the loss of dreams. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic North America, and though it utilizes well known hallmarks of dystopian, post-apocalyptic, and survivalist genres, the novel is ultimately

a critique of exploitation (of both bodies and natural resources). Furthermore, though the novel follows the expected young adult dystopian formula, including its focus on a plucky teenager who resists an authoritarian government, the novel is distinctly environmental. The dreams disappear only after governments and corporations have ravaged the earth, and the novel is as much a critique of ecological failure as it is a depiction of a dystopian system. The earth is positioned as a kind of wounded hero; the land is not the antagonist – it is the victim. Dimaline writes,

The earth was broken. Too much taking for too damn long, so she finally broke. But she went out like a wild horse, bucking off as much as she could before lying down [...] And all those pipelines in the ground? They snapped like icicles and spewed bile over forests, into lakes, drowning whole reserves and towns. So much laid to waste from the miscalculation of infallibility in the face of a planet's revolt. (Dimaline 87)

This “miscalculation of infallibility” seeps into the social response to the state of crisis in *The Marrow Thieves*. When it becomes clear that Indigenous people have retained the ability to dream, reactions from non-Indigenous people shift from performatively respectful to self-interested and violent:

At first, people turned to Indigenous people [...], all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them. They asked to come to ceremony. They humbled themselves when we refused. And then they changed on us [...], looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves. How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical? (88)

In examples such as this passage, *The Marrow Thieves* demonstrates its uncanny ability to make clear connections between climate crisis and social inequity. In a world that has been destroyed by the exploitation of natural resources, the non-Indigenous characters in Dimaline's novel swiftly adapt, and the Indigenous people become yet another "natural resource" to exploit – a concept that renders the Indigenous people as sub-human.¹²

While *The Marrow Thieves* focuses on a great number of systemic issues, Dimaline's novel is also about individual experience of crisis. There is something deeply vulnerable about dreams being stored in bone marrow; it is an idea that blurs the boundaries between mind, body, and the wider world. In an interview conducted by Niranjana Iyer, Dimaline states:

I am in love with the idea of memory and experience being held like beads on a string. It's something I imagined when I was very young, that stories were just one way of weaving, of creating jewelry that kept us warm and made us beautiful. I also noticed that when people hear news, or learn something, that they react physically—they clutch at their chest or hold their own hand or rock on their feet. There is something so immensely tactile about emotion and something so generous and terrible about the spaces where we keep them. Sometimes I feel like I could tell a story by reading the braille bumps on my own spine. And when I am grieving, there is a discreet pull behind my knees. It's such a beautiful ache that demands I keep moving to shake it off. (Iyer 31-32)

¹² "Natural resources" is defined by the *OED* as "Those materials or substances of a place which can be used to sustain life or for economic exploitation" ("Natural"). This implies that to be categorized as such, the resource in question must be utilized by humans. Human bodies are not considered natural resources; to argue that they are is to dehumanize and exploit those individuals.

There is very little in *The Marrow Thieves* that is surface-level optimistic – in many ways, the novel emphasizes the apocalyptic potential for everything to go wrong. However, the novel is also a depiction of quiet resistance. As Dimaline writes at the end of the novel, “as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream” (231). Perhaps the willingness – even eagerness – to approach crisis with despair is not a reality for those with dreams in their bones. Examining *The Marrow Thieves* proved critical in my development of optimistic speculative theory, particularly in terms of pragmatism, as Dimaline’s novel eloquently illustrates the inextricable linkages between the climate crisis and social inequity. Perhaps humanity is fundamentally incapable of viewing the planet *without* the bias of being human, and our solutions to the climate crisis will always be through the lens of our humanity. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “What else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What else can you give but something of yourself?” (38).

Is *Ecotopia* Utopian?

Classifying *Ecotopia* (not to mention *Ecotopia Emerging*) as a utopian novel is a challenging endeavour, in part because it is resistant to many literary conventions. First, we might consider whether Callenbach has created a pragmatic utopia. Theoretically, it should be difficult for earlier depictions of “utopia” (even those from the 1970s, i.e., relatively recent) to feel achievable and relevant, as our understanding of and response to the climate crisis have changed dramatically in the time since then. Inherently, this should render non-contemporary utopias less pragmatic. However, it seems as though one of Callenbach’s chief goals *is* pragmatism; indeed, throughout the two novels, he

upholds pragmatism at the cost of narrative. We see this in *Ecotopia*'s framing as a journalistic endeavour, which allows the plot to be incidental to Callenbach's vision of an environmentally conscientious nation. Callenbach has given thought to sustaining a real-world utopia. Pragmatism is an important and necessary aspect of sustainable environmental movements, but I suspect that it is also a driving force behind many of our worst-case scenarios. After all, is it not pragmatic to prepare, or brace, yourself for the worst? Furthermore, one could question whether environmental fiction is a pragmatic medium in the context of the climate crisis: amidst climate instability, global unpredictability, and extreme urgency, should we not be focusing our literary energy on non-fiction texts that provide (seemingly) actionable solutions, or at least concrete steps to minimize the impact of the crisis? In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh writes that "at exactly the same time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike" (80). Fiction can help recover the collective. To exile climate fiction from the "environmentally pragmatic" is to underestimate the complexity of the problems, and thus, underestimate the necessity of creative solutions. *Ecotopia*'s strength is that it is made up of Callenbach's suggested solutions.

I am not stating that *all* climate fiction is pragmatic, and I do not suggest pragmatism should be a primary or even necessary goal in fiction. Art – and the creative process – is valuable for its own sake, and to force fiction into solely a practical role does nothing but create another set of problems. However, within the context of fiction, I argue that we can expand what is defined as pragmatic. It is difficult to find

pragmatism in our conventional understanding of utopia, particularly when an imagined utopia is built on the inherent expectation that all of humanity will somehow find an unprecedented way to behave collectively. Nevertheless, fiction can be a highly practical form, both in its particular ability to hold nuance, as well as in the depth and breadth of worldviews and possibilities that it can explore – possibilities that need not be limited by reality. Ellen Peel argues for “[t]he pragmatic type of utopianism,” stating that the genre’s “emphasis on change can make [pragmatic utopianism] possible, and its on-going self-criticism can aid in guarding against undesirable, dangerous consequences” (9). Despair is not pragmatic, if only because overwhelming collective despair is not nuanced enough to be truly realistic. Of my central texts, *Ecotopia* has the most traceable real-world impacts, in terms of both Callenbach’s surprisingly accurate predictions – such as widespread municipal systems for recycling and a focus on developing energy-neutral methods of transportation – and the ways that *Ecotopia* has gone on to influence subsequent climate literature and ecocriticism. This is not always positive: Pat Joseph argues that “The Ecotopian worldview is of such a cultish consistency [...] that politics are superfluous,” stating that *Ecotopia* is a “cult classic in the fullest sense” (Joseph). This is an understandable reading of the novel, and one that is likely built on a foundation of frustration with the novel’s limitations. However, *Ecotopia* has become a “cult classic” for a reason, and while it may not model a society that we would necessarily want to live in, it establishes a remarkable number of practical, actionable ideas.

Despite how imaginative Callenbach’s environmental nation might be, the novel’s world-building is dampened by Callenbach’s failure to complicate or reimagine

real-world power structures. This leaves *Ecotopia* feeling both generative and limited, determined to develop a new future while remaining propped on the frameworks of the past. Callenbach seems unable to world-build outside of the male gaze – indeed, in the introduction to *The Complete Ecotopia*, written by Callenbach’s longtime friend Malcom Margolin, Margolin states that “Despite depicting a female leader and progress in certain areas of gender equality, a troubling sexism pervades the story, and stereotypes abound” (xiii). This centring of the male gaze is problematic, not only because it contributes to the *Ecotopia* novels reading as outdated and one-sided, but also because it profoundly limits his imagining of a utopian future. Callenbach’s novel seems to lack all self-awareness: *Ecotopia* rigidly focuses on the flawed premise that encouraging women to have jobs will instantly dismantle centuries of patriarchy. In structuring his “utopian” society, Callenbach consistently returns to the heteronormative, gendered, relational expectations that are widely familiar. In other words, Callenbach’s limited understanding of the gendered structures of labour and relationality prevents him from developing a radical worldview.

From a queer utopian perspective, *Ecotopia* is barely, if even, a utopia. Ellen Peel writes that “given the alternatives of patriarchy, which is oppressive, and static utopian feminism, which is rigid and possibly tedious, pragmatic utopian feminism offers a third choice – a necessary, flexible process” (15). Interestingly, Peel views her own critical analysis through a pragmatic lens, concluding her text’s opening chapter by stating, “I am hopeful that I am making progress but not declaring that I have found the ultimate answer. Like a parent who nurtures a child so that daughter can outdistance mother, this study will, I hope, enable others to outdistance it in the future” (15). Having

established that *Ecotopia* is a pragmatic text, it is worth conducting an in-depth reading through the lens of queer utopianism. More specifically, I will do this by returning to the novel's limited understandings of gender and relationality. Ultimately, it is not particularly subversive, even during the time that *Ecotopia* was written, to announce that Ecotopia has a female president and that this has magically led to total gender equality across the nation. In one of Weston's early diary entries, he writes:

[W]omen in Ecotopia have totally escaped the dependent roles they still tend to play with [men]. Not that they domineer over men – but they exercise power in work and in relationships just as men do. Above all, they don't have to manipulate men: the Survivalist Party, and social developments generally, have arranged the society so that women's objective situation is equal to men's. Thus people can be just people, without our symbolic loading on sex roles. (35-36)

Beyond the stereotypes that remain present in this description, i.e., “women as master manipulators,” Weston's description of Ecotopia, which should presumably be taken in good faith, does not align with what we see throughout the rest of the novel. It is soon apparent that in Ecotopia, the driving force for women's equality is the accessibility and foolproof nature of birth control, an idea which could theoretically be seen as empowering, but which ultimately places the physical and mental labour of contraception solely on women. This is eerily similar to the dystopian idea in Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, but in *Ecotopia*'s case, women are implicitly positioned as a resource for either sexual or reproductive labour. Weston goes on to state that despite this seemingly egalitarian society, the women present as feminine, and the men present as masculine. Implied within this statement – and aided by *Ecotopia*'s reverence for

what is deemed natural and organic – is the understanding of Western gender roles as being inherent and uncomplicated.

Throughout his journalistic reports, Weston repeatedly claims that Ecotopia is a progressive, egalitarian society, yet the women in the novel(s) are often little more than propped-up male fantasies. This characterization is at times so blatant that it becomes comedic, such as when Weston is injured and ends up in the hospital in the care of a very “liberated” nurse, Linda. After Linda “wryly [...] gets him off” (147), Weston is eager to tell readers back in the United States that “the nurses are highly trained in a number of specialities unknown to ours, particularly massage, which they regard as important for stimulating the body’s recuperative powers” (148). As Pat Joseph writes, this scene is “comical to be sure, but given the unrelenting earnestness of the novel, it’s difficult to say whether or not the humor was intended” (Joseph). We can also consider Callenbach’s treatment of his older female characters. Vera Allwen is the most obvious example. Vera is the figurehead of Ecotopia’s “peaceful power,” and she is also one of the few women who is never sexualized, presumably because she is too old, rather than because she is respected. She leads Ecotopia in a collaborative, nurturing way; she is a maternal figure for the nation. Laura D’Amato also avoids the male gaze – she is a mother in her fifties who rapidly dies of lung cancer. These women are not objectified, but are deemed too old or too sick to be seen as desirable, and therefore receive limited narrative elaboration. Implicit in this is the idea that a woman’s chief attribute is her desirability – and if she is deemed undesirable, we must hope that she is maternal. This is not to say that Callenbach lacks respectful characterization in *every* facet of his female

characters, but rather to emphasize the few instances in which *Ecotopia*'s female characters evade sexualization.

While in *Ecotopia*, Weston meets Marissa Brightcloud,¹³ Laura D'Amato's adult daughter, who is described as "strong" and "warmly physical" (53). Marissa embodies the *Ecotopia* that Weston will eventually fall in love with. Rather than occupying space in the story as an individual, Marissa becomes a symbol of utopia, implicitly designed to satisfy the male gaze. She is confident, exotic, and deeply sensual, and she occupies very little of *Ecotopia*'s narrative, aside from her relationship with Weston. She is often referred to in relation to her brother, Ben, who is initially antagonistic toward Weston, though he is more agreeable by the end of the book. The animosity between Weston and Ben – usually regarding Marissa – explores the relationship between the two men while leaving Marissa silent. Existing criticism on the roles of women in *Ecotopia* is limited, and what little does exist is often from several decades ago. For example, in 1985, Peter Fitting published his article "'So We All Became Mothers': New Roles for Men in Recent Utopian Fiction," in which he conducts a survey of seven contemporary utopian novels. Fitting describes Weston and Marissa's relationship as such:

William Weston is a successful reporter in the old society who, in traditional utopian fashion, falls in love with a woman as a part of his falling in love with the utopia. The Ecotopian woman, Marissa, is of course contrasted to the women at home (where he has both a wife and a mistress), but Weston's discovery that male and female roles have changed and his acceptance of the new society is

¹³ Her name is described as "self-adopted, Indian-inspired" (53). This is one of the few references that Callenbach makes to Indigenous peoples in *Ecotopia*; despite their "connection" to the land, it seems as though Ecotopians retain European colonialist attitudes.

relatively painless; indeed, his own sexuality and identity are reinforced by his experience of change and difference, and in fact lead to enhanced sexual experiences. (170-71)

Fitting is broadly complementary of Callenbach's world-building, and his own feminist analysis is often nuanced. However, his understanding of Marissa's character is still through the lens of how she affects Weston's identity. Fitting writes that "the dichotomy between wife-mother and sex-object is but half of a dialectic which produces men as the masters and oppressors and as the subjects of sexual desire [; ...] many women speak of the socially sanctioned violence which enforces that dichotomy" (170). Fitting argues that "sexism and hetero-sexism" are "embedded in our own [...] unconscious patterns of behaviour. And these patterns [...] would not automatically change with the legal abolition of patriarchy" (170). To a contemporary reader, Fitting's ideas seem like a standard application of feminist theory. However, Fitting's analysis only underlines Callenbach's shortcomings in queering existing social systems. Once Weston settles into his new life as an Ecotopian, he thinks back to his life in the United States, writing that "I begin to see that I have fallen in love with her country as much as with Marissa. A new self has been coming to life within me here, thanks to both her and her people" (172). Marissa is Weston's perfect woman, serving only to enhance – or perhaps crystallize – the paradise that is Ecotopia. Ecotopia is the novel's true love interest.

In contrast to Marissa, Lou Swift is the seventeen-year-old protagonist of *Ecotopia Emerging*. Lou is described as "strong, even though she was slender," with a "delicate face" and "a bubbly laugh and a voice that was low and throaty" (177). Despite her role in the novel as a young scientific innovator – who develops an invention so

influential that it is the lynchpin for Ecotopia's independence – she is introduced to the story in terms of what makes her physically attractive. Nevertheless, Lou is intent on creating the “first cheap, efficient, reliable solar cell” (178). As expected, she succeeds, and the invention of this solar cell is the catalyst for the environmental revolution, which ultimately leads to the secession of the Pacific Northwest from the United States and the creation of the nation of Ecotopia. Throughout the novel, Lou shows remarkable intelligence and determination, both in her invention of the solar cell, and then in her efforts to freely release the invention as “public disclosure.” Instead of focusing on these elements of her characterization, much of *Ecotopia Emerging* reads as a strangely out-of-place coming-of-age tale for Lou. She begins a sexual relationship with an older man, which is considered acceptable because they consider their community to be “liberated territory” (196) – and we are assured that Lou's mother, Jan, approves of the relationship. Callenbach was, in a way, attempting to queer society, and he does so by relying on hippie and “free love” vocabulary. This is also presumably intended to set the groundwork for Ecotopian women's mentality around sex. However, Callenbach's attempt is largely unsuccessful, and reads as poorly motivated, because the *only* character that Callenbach explores these ideas through is a teenage girl. She is relentlessly sexualized and objectified, under the seemingly earnest guise of being “liberated,” and as such, never materializes into a fully formed individual.

Callenbach's world does queer *some* systems of power, though these changes are largely insubstantial. Nevertheless, subversion inevitably occurs, even if it is unconscious, since the nation of Ecotopia was fundamentally created to subvert the

capitalistic, patriarchal tendencies of the United States. Midway through the novel, Weston describes how he understands family and living structures in Ecotopia:

I must report that the sexual practices of these families seem about as stable as ours. Generally there are more or less permanent heterosexual couples involved – though both male and female homosexual couples also exist, and I gather that same-sex relationships pose less of a problem psychologically than they do with us. Monogamy is not an officially proclaimed value, but the couples are generally monogamous (except for four holidays each year, at the solstices and equinoxes, when sexual promiscuity is widespread). (68-69)

Much of this ideology is rooted in 1960s and 70s hippie culture, and nothing that Weston reports is all that culturally radical, but it is worth noting that he was thinking about more expansive kinds of relationships. However, the novel is so focused on the idea of embracing what is “natural,” emphasized here by Ecotopians’ quarterly promiscuity, that Ecotopia begins to feel like a stronghold for biological determinism. This is most notable in the Ecotopian “war games.” The war games are a form of combat in which able-bodied Ecotopian men are divided into teams that fight one another; they justify this cultural tradition by saying it offers an outlet for their primal natures and aggressive urges. Initially, Weston struggles with this aspect of Ecotopian culture, viewing it as primitive and uncivilized (and somehow entirely different from the violence back in the United States), before soon becoming enthralled and participating himself. Weston describes how “Some of the leading warriors on the winning side went off with women in the bushes” (76); once the men have successfully proven their masculinity in combat, they can prove it sexually. The war games are clearly supposed

to be a subversive and controversial element of both Ecotopian society and *Ecotopia*, the novel. And yet, more than anything, the war games serve to support Callenbach's surprisingly strict reinforcement of gender roles and binaries. The war games are fought by men only, as this primal need for violence seems to apply to only and all men, and one of the unofficial prizes for victory is women's sexual attention. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Callenbach's imagined utopia features the glorification of violence as one of its core values. Despite the novel's perceived insistence on reimagining society, Callenbach has limited large sections of his world-building by reverting to Western notions of inescapable human nature.

The Evolution of Environmental Concerns

A reader of solely contemporary eco-literature might be taken aback by the most pressing environmental concerns in *Ecotopia*. The Ecotopians are not alarmed about warming temperatures or sea level rise (again, the novel was published in 1975). Instead, Callenbach writes of the dangers of herbicides and pesticides, the toxicity of chemicals in waterways, and the impending (and to him, inevitable) disaster of relying on nuclear power. In *Ecotopia Emerging*, Callenbach imagines a massive nuclear power accident that completely changes the political and ecological landscapes of Washington state, which was later echoed in the real world by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in northern Ukraine. It is sobering to study environmental concerns from the past and acknowledge that some of these concerns are either still relevant today or were "solved" in unsustainable ways. In an essay on Onondaga Lake in New York State, which was

used as a chemical dumping ground for years, despite being a sacred site for the Onondaga people, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes,

[S]o far the *if-then* formula isn't working. People *do* know the consequences of our collective damage, they *do* know the wages of an extractive economy, but they don't stop. They get very sad, they get very quiet. So quiet that protection of the environment that enables them to eat and breathe and imagine a future for their children doesn't even make it onto a list of their top ten concerns. The Haunted Hayride of toxic waste dumps, the melting glaciers, the litany of doomsday projections – they move anyone who is still listening only to despair. Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth. Environmental despair is a poison every bit as destructive as the methylated mercury in the bottom of Onondaga Lake. (328)

Attempts to mitigate environmental disasters have often resulted in secondary disasters, e.g., the after-effects of chemical dumping,¹⁴ which only amplify the belief that humanity is helpless in the face of climate crisis. Nevertheless, harm that has been done does not erase progress that *has* been made. Environmentally inclined authors obviously engage with the environmental concerns of their time, and while this can imbue early pieces of eco-literature with an incomplete quality, it does not render them irrelevant.

In observing a change in environmental threats – from deforestation to pesticides to nuclear power to global warming to sea-level rise to climate migration – we also see a delineation between “realistic” eco-literature and speculative eco-literature. For example, contemporary solarpunk narratives are typically set in imagined (usually

¹⁴ Echoed in Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream*.

futuristic) versions of real-world locations, though the genre can also take the route of off-world science fiction. As I explore in the next chapter, Becky Chambers sets all of her books off Earth, and thus does not have to deal with Earthly practicalities; while this means that the futures she imagines seem less realistic than something like *Ecotopia* (considering the proliferation of aliens in her *Wayfarers* series), it also means that Chambers's potential for generative, inventive social concepts is not constrained by real-world practicalities. As we have seen, even a text that feels grounded, like *Ecotopia* or its prequel, is a fantasy itself. Indeed, the strength of fiction is not that it details the necessities and mechanics of a sustainable society, but that it can imagine aspirational futures not limited by real-world constraints, without concern for whether those constraints are real or self-imposed limitations.

There is a similar cultural landscape and set of environmental concerns in literary works contemporaneous with *Ecotopia*. One example is Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), which primarily serves as a critique of capitalist-fueled consumerism; DeLillo positions the consequences of a chemical explosion as a metaphor for American society's disconnect from reality. The novel follows the Gladney family – particularly the patriarch, Jack Gladney – and chronicles their response to and eventual evacuation from an ominous chemical disaster. *White Noise* was published a decade after *Ecotopia*, and the similarity in cultural concerns is noticeable, not only because of the types of crises that ultimately impact the characters, but also in terms of social dynamics such as the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. There are two things that position *White Noise* as comparable to *Ecotopia*. First, it is not typically considered environmental fiction, and most critical responses to *White Noise* are focused on the non-environmental

implications of the abstract “airborne toxic event.” Second, DeLillo’s novel offers an alternative depiction of the United States, from a similar period as Callenbach’s. The likely reason for *White Noise*’s somewhat shaky status as an ecocritical text is DeLillo’s implicit, and perhaps somewhat underdeveloped, treatment of the cloud as an environmental metaphor.¹⁵ *White Noise* does not foreground ecological themes, and it is surprising that DeLillo does not utilize the airborne toxic event to examine climate toxicity in any substantial way.

White Noise offers a compelling example of how narrative can impact our environmental realities – or, at the very least, narrative’s powerful ability to shape how we respond to environmental realities. When the cloud that eventually becomes known as the airborne toxic event first appears, and Jack’s son, Heinrich, spots it with a pair of binoculars out his window, the radio is referring to it as a “feathery plume” (109). Heinrich insists that it is not a plume, and Jack suggests that the radio calls it that because “Air time is valuable. They can’t go into long tortured descriptions” (109). The radio then lists the expected symptoms of exposure to the chemical – and the symptoms keep changing: “At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath” (109). The entire family has been listening to the radio, and when Babette, Jack’s wife, states that their daughters have been complaining of sweaty palms, Heinrich matter-of-factly explains that “There’s been a correction...[t]ell them they ought to be throwing up” (110). Then, the radio changes the name of the feathery plume – they are now calling it a “black billowing cloud” (111), to

¹⁵ Another toxic event in the novel is the presence of Dylar, a mysterious drug with a side effect that prevents the user from differentiating between sign and signifier. Dylar ends up characterizing much of *White Noise*’s amusingly absurd final act.

which Jack says, “That’s a little more accurate, which means they’re coming to grips with the thing. Good” (111). At this point, the Gladney family – and the rest of the neighbourhood – is concerned, but they are not panicking. A “feathery plume” sounds insubstantial and manageable, and while a “black billowing cloud” sounds more threatening, it remains an event that sounds both fast-moving and transient. Then, the radio changes the symptoms again, stating that the cloud doesn’t “cause nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, like they said before” (114). Now, it causes “heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*” (114). Furthermore, the radio has once more changed the name of the cloud – now, it is “the airborne toxic event” (114). Jack notices that Heinrich “spoke these words in a clipped and foreboding manner, syllable by syllable, as if he sensed the threat in state-created terminology” (114). It is at this point that most of the family panics – while the cloud itself has not changed, the narrative around it has evolved, and “airborne toxic event” sounds significantly more threatening than “feathery plume.” And yet, Jack still cannot bring himself to evacuate, as he is too caught up in how he feels he *should* react to crisis, arguing that “I’m the head of a [college] department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (115). So, the family reluctantly stays, with the girls retching and Heimlich complaining that they are showing “outdated symptoms” (115). However, after an official order to evacuate, the Gladneys do pack up and flee.

I have gone into this example in detail for two reasons: first, this scene emphasizes the overwhelming power of narrative to affect how an event is understood. The Gladney family has a changing response to the crisis, depending on what the cloud

of smoke is being “officially” termed. When it is called a plume, it is feathery and inconsequential. By the time it is called an airborne toxic event, it is a life-threatening emergency. Responses to climate crisis will change depending on what the crisis looks like and on what the crisis is called – the aesthetics of crisis can be overwhelmingly powerful. Second, this example emphasizes an alternative strategy for demonstrating how narrative *can* control reality. DeLillo’s writing is absurdist and sharply satirical; he embraces the freedom and flexibility offered by fiction, though his real-world social engagement is no less palpable than in *Ecotopia*. Callenbach’s rigid realism, reliance on retaining strict social frameworks, and adoption of a non-fiction-esque tone are not the only effective tactics for using fiction to cultivate engagement with real-world environmental issues.

Faith and Futurity: Becky Chambers's Solarpunk Worlds

Becky Chambers is very much a contemporary author, and her work is categorized as genre fiction, as opposed to literary fiction; thus, literary or academic criticism on her work is sparse. In researching responses to her work, ecocritical or otherwise, I turned to popular writing, including opinion pieces from modern science fiction publications and/or culture magazines. Soon after the publication of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Jason Kehe, editor and critic for *Wired* magazine, published an article on Chambers's writing in which he argues that her worlds offer a new kind of futurity for science fiction. Gleaned from reading some of his other articles, Kehe's typical writing has an edge that is both cynical and ironic. Nevertheless, it seems even he is not immune to the gentle compassion infused in Chambers's writing and the softness inherently offered by solarpunk worldbuilding. Kehe structures his article through the lens of observing Chambers's tea-drinking practice – he considers how tea is a culturally shared practice; a moment of connection, community, comfort, and rest (i.e., a nearly universal, real-world practice that embodies the values found in solarpunk and hopepunk). However, Kehe also points out the darker side of a culturally shared tea practice, writing “tea has always been a kind of prototypical trade object, the material evidence of one culture dipping into, and often exploiting, another...In a way, tea functions as shorthand for the colonialist fantasy that powers the exploratory thrust, the Prime Directive, of [science fiction]” (Kehe). With this observation, Kehe has deftly pointed out the dichotomy that makes Chambers's work compelling: her hope is not devoid of darkness.

Climate fiction, despite its long-standing reliance on dystopian worlds and post-apocalyptic narratives, can be shaped by different frameworks. As I expand upon in the next chapter, *Station Eleven* is closer to being a utopia than a dystopia, contrary to what one might gather from the premise. However, given the long history and centring of dystopian futurism in fiction, one might reasonably conclude that optimistic fiction should acknowledge dystopia, either as a history, as a point of comparison, or as a reality that is in the process of being re-configured. Nevertheless, in both *Monk & Robot* and the *Wayfarers* series, Becky Chambers bypasses dystopia entirely. The Long Now Foundation, a San Francisco-based organization that encourages long-term thinking, states that “We believe a world that operates at the timescale of civilization — a world that takes the long-term past and long-term future seriously — would operate very differently” (“Vision”). In a filmed conversation hosted by the foundation, Chambers and fellow speculative writer Annalee Newitz discuss the ways in which dystopia is ultimately unhelpful for long-term thinking. Most notably, Chambers rejects the idea that “cynicism equals sophistication,” expressing her frustration with the patronizing way in which optimistic fiction is often spoken about, as though it is naïve or childish. As Chambers says, “You’re saying that hope is something that belongs to children [...] and if that is the case, what are we fighting for?” (Chambers and Newitz).

Ultimately, solarpunk is both an independently defined genre and an intellectual alternative to the futures proposed by dystopia. In her article on solarpunk as an alternative to post-apocalyptic fiction, Polish scholar Katarzyna Więckowska states that there is an “overall melancholia [in] contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, whose focus on the present leaves hardly any space for imaging the future” (348). With this

observation, Więckowska captures solarpunk's potential – and it is not as a blueprint for environmental policy or a list of specific directives that should be fulfilled. Instead, the strength of the genre is in its generative potential for ideas. Many of the key themes in solarpunk can be traced to the impact of *Ecotopia* (which could be described as solarpunk before solarpunk had a name) – indeed, one will quickly arrive at *Ecotopia* when researching explicitly solarpunk novels. Though utopian visions have existed for most of literary history (and the term dates back to Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516), *Ecotopia* was one of the first novels to imagine a utopia through an explicitly environmental lens. However, *Monk & Robot* benefits from being contemporary – many of Chambers's themes directly relate to current environmental and sociopolitical discourse. Viewing recency as an asset could, rather aptly, be dismissed as recency bias, but the climate crisis is urgent and ever-developing, and we must keep up, as well as reflect. In *Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Mosschap is seeking the answer to a single question: what do humans need? (59). With this, a question that encourages Dex and Mosschap to seek common ground, Chambers develops a narrative that is simultaneously based on Dex and Mosschap's assumptions about one another *and* on their desire for authentic understanding.

Hopepunk, one of the most recent offerings in a long line of literary “punk” aesthetics, is a term coined by science fiction writer Alexandra Rowland in a 2017 Tumblr post. There Rowland argues that “Hopepunk says that kindness and softness doesn't [*sic*] equal weakness, and that in this world of brutal cynicism and nihilism, being kind is a *political act*. An act of *rebellion*” (Ariaste). Solarpunk and hopepunk can be used interchangeably in a variety of contexts, particularly when one is focusing on

stories' themes as opposed to their imagined futuristic or environmental possibilities.

While hopepunk is the more philosophically engaged of the two subcultures, it does not centre actionable possibilities in the same way that solarpunk does. However, focusing on a broad theme allows hopepunk to be found in a wider variety of places than solarpunk (Rowland even uses *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example). Though many, including myself, would happily include Chambers's writing in the solarpunk category, she is the writer who currently best anchors hopepunk as popular fiction. Rowland further expands on the definition of hopepunk in an article commissioned for Festive Ninja, a company that produces speculative role-playing games. The article begins with Rowland's rejection of the prioritization of "niceness"; Rowland states that niceness is only a veneer, and that "the world has always been on fire. We have always been monstrous to each other" (Rowland). The essay continues rather dramatically, with Rowland leaning on lofty, occasionally melodramatic descriptions of stubborn, tireless resistance against a brutal world. And yet, there is something compelling in Rowland's fierce elegy to the spirit of resistance. It is a committed, point-blank refusal to hold people to anything but their morally highest, grittiest self. Furthermore, Rowland's essay reminds us of anger's role (a role that is perhaps crucial) in fuelling hope, writing,

[Hopepunk] isn't nice, though I expect the natural inclination (and even my own instinctive inclination) is to make it so—to forget the word "radical" in the phrase "radical kindness," to forget the "punk" part of "hopepunk," which is really the operative half of the word. To forget the anger of it and let it soften, because softness is what we're aching for. We want the world to be better—kinder, more just, more merciful. (Rowland)

Rowland is oversimplifying – not all radical ideas are angry – but it is nonetheless important to stress that solarpunk and hopepunk imagine a real future, not just a pleasant ideal. This idea is drawn from Black Futurism and Black Feminism; as Audre Lorde writes in her essay “The Uses of Anger,” “Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (282). Fighting for, and holding onto, tangible hope is a messy process. Inevitably, this is a fight that requires an immense amount of energy, and anger is a powerful fuel – one that the punk subculture understands well. In the same *Wired* article, Kehe quotes Chambers’s response to her novels’ inclusion in the hopepunk genre:

For Chambers, who didn’t ask to be labeled hopepunk but likes the term “very much,” the simple act of being kind in her writing, of imagining futures in which decency triumphs and people are allowed to cry tears of joy, qualifies as more than sufficiently rebellious in the 21st century. “You’re looking at the world exactly as it is, with all of its grimness and all of its tragedy, and you say, *No, I believe this can be better,*” she says. “That to me is punk as hell.” (Kehe)

A sustainable future – which can only come through change – *must* be fought for.

Solarpunk Aesthetics

Solarpunk imagines a future that is collective, equitable, and sustainable, much like Panga, the moon on which *Monk & Robot* is set. Solarpunk envisions a world in which innovation has led humanity to a sustainable climate and a way of life powered by renewable energy. We see this in Panga (and Ecotopia, for that matter). Solarpunk has a *look*. Imagine a city made up of clean glass buildings with garden rooftops, each level

containing its own centralized green space. Imagine swaths of solar panels, their supports covered in spiralling plants; or expansive wind fields, built amidst fields of regenerative agriculture. Imagine a world in which resources are cherished, and reused, and recycled. In my experience, the most straightforward way to introduce the concept of solarpunk is to show images; solarpunk goals become easier to conceptualize when we study the aesthetics of a world that has blurred the divide between civilization and nature. Furthermore, as synthesized by Elvia Wilk, “If solarpunk’s goal is to close the plausibility gap by expanding the aesthetic imaginary, its aesthetics have to be taken as part and parcel of its politics, and examined as such” (128). However, as solarpunk continues to gain traction, there has been growing concern, among the subculture’s members, that the movement will become greenwashed, be known as *solely* an aesthetic movement, or fall victim to capitalist and consumerist urges, especially if a solarpunk aesthetic is deemed trendy. In her essay “Future Looks,” which examines how we are narratively inclined to think of the future, Wilk argues that “a certain form of romantic nostalgia pervades much of the solarpunk universe” (112), before admitting that “Solarpunk’s aesthetic for technology [...] is neither Luddite nor corporatized” (113). Wilk has a measured assessment: it would be inaccurate to say that aesthetics (including the aesthetics of technology) are not at the core of solarpunk, but to diminish solarpunk’s radical potential because of the centrality of technological aesthetics is both unrealistic and unsustainable. Art and aesthetics are an important part of the climate movement; as solarpunk artist Jessica Woulfe states, “Art is a way to connect to people on an emotional level and has a chance to show them a different perspective, and one that people can identify with” (Steinkopf-Frank). Woulfe’s argument – though centred

on visual art as opposed to literature – aligns with my own, at least with regards to the necessity of communicating the climate crisis through diverse forms of media. Woulfe continues by arguing that “creative projects often reach broader audiences than say a scientific paper and are a powerful medium to communicate knowledge” – or, in Woulfe’s words, “like putting some broccoli in mac and cheese” (Steinkopf-Frank). Ultimately, the core idea is being able to communicate climate knowledge – and real possibilities for optimistic, equitable futures – to a non-specialist audience, without necessarily expecting or requiring that audience to understand academic jargon or analyze scientific publications. What positions the *Monk & Robot* novels as explicitly solarpunk texts is that the series imagines communities in which a good, safe, and sustainable life is not only desired, but has largely been achieved. Dex does not have to *earn* the right to a good life – i.e., a life where it is understood that survival is insufficient. Instead, Dex is allowed to just be.

Furthermore, the aesthetics of solarpunk are not a surface-level part of the movement. As demonstrated in my examination of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, we are familiar with the aesthetics – and the language – of disaster. We know what descriptions trigger our feelings of crisis. In contrast, we can consider the aesthetics of optimism. I use the phrase “aesthetics of optimism,” as opposed to aesthetics of utopia, because optimistic speculative fiction need not be limited by fruitless attempts to achieve a static utopian ideal. Instead, particularly within the contexts of contemporary climate discourse, established genres, and internet discourse, optimistic aesthetics can bolster a work, but also, through visualization, make it a more accessible reality. Consider

Chambers's description of the village of Kat's Landing, which Dex and Mosschap visit in *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*:

There were houses made of plastic, of old tires, of shipping crates painted every color a human eye could perceive. Cracks bestowed by age were patched with modern touches, like mycelium or bacterial cement [...]. Some of the river-builds stood on the grassy banks, but just as many bobbed on the water itself, buoyed by old rain barrels or perched upon stilt-like supports made from discarded plumbing pipes. Everything there was constructed to withstand the moods of rising tides and heavy rains, but resilience had not been the builders' only intent. Flights of fancy could be found everywhere [...]. It was a town built of trash, but its current incarnation transcended that unseemly origin. (*Crown-Shy* 58)

In this evocative and vivid description of the village, Chambers has imagined a place that is not only sustainable in terms of its repurposing of materials and its ability to navigate unpredictable weather patterns, but also in its celebration of beauty. These "flights of fancy" – which Chambers describes as being varied, such as "windmills and whirligigs made of old-fashioned bicycle wheels, [and] mosaics crafted from bottle caps and resin" (58) – are vital in maintaining a sustainable existence for the inhabitants of Kat's Landing. The world of *Monk & Robot* is neither dystopian nor apocalyptic – Panga's inhabitants live a peaceful life – and yet Chambers highlights that beauty, art, and creative expression are still necessary for a *good* life. Like the characters in Mandel's *Station Eleven*, those in *Monk & Robot* have reached the conclusion that *just* survival is insufficient. Ultimately, for a good life, whether in an optimistic or dystopian

imagining of the future, we need more than just the basics for survival; we need connection, community, art, purpose, and any number of other things. This fundamental desire for more than just survival is a common theme that drives nearly every literary depiction of futurity, whether the characters are fighting against a limiting world or not.

Searching for Faith in *Monk & Robot*

In many ways, the *Monk & Robot* novels are about faith, though Chambers expands her definition of faith beyond the practice embodied by religious institutions. The first line of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* reads as follows: “If you ask six different monks the question of which godly domain robot consciousness belongs to, you’ll get seven different answers” (*Wild-Built* 1). It may be home to peaceful, advanced societies, but even Panga will never reach a unanimous opinion on humanity and technology. Importantly, this dissension is not equivalent to social unrest. Faith – even explicitly religious faith – is not a foreign concept in eco-literature. However, when we expand our vision of the future beyond the utopian or the solarpunk, faith within an apocalyptic setting – especially in a Western context – is a difficult theme to explore with any nuance, since the entire concept is a minefield of negative tropes; consider the proliferation of cult-adjacent storylines in post-apocalyptic narratives.

In coming to know Sibling Dex, we are also introduced to Panga’s primary faith system: worship of the Six. As outlined in the preliminary pages of *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Panga’s pantheon consists of three Parent Gods – Trikilli, of the Threads; Grylom, of the Inanimate; and Bosh, of the Cycle – and three Child Gods – Chal, of Constructs; Samafar, of Mysteries; and Allalae, of Small Comforts. Of the gods, the

scripture states, “They do not speak, yet we know them. They do not think, yet we mind them” (*Crown-Shy* 1). There are devoted religious sects that, while happy to co-exist, interpret the Six in different ways. Sibling Dex is a monk of the Child God Allalae, God of Small Comforts – and interestingly, as Dex grapples with the frustration of not feeling a clear purpose or vocation, the God of Small Comforts becomes a small comfort – or, as Dex thinks to himself¹⁶ “Praise Allalae for the company” (*Crown-Shy* 11). A faith system that cherishes small comforts is pragmatic, both in terms of fostering the feeling that one has had a fortunate life, but also in being able to find hope within difficult circumstances. I will expand on this in chapter three, but *Station Eleven*’s hopeful – and even utopian – elements could easily be overlooked as “small comforts.” Nevertheless, being sustained by small comforts, enough that one can carry on in the face of environmental or systemic difficulty, demonstrates remarkable resilience. This is also what gives the faith system in *Monk & Robot* transportable, real-world qualities. In some ways, faith (or belief, or even just conviction in something greater than the self) is positioned as an antidote to dystopia – particularly when a collective comes together to resist despair. Dex is a monk; Dex’s mere characterization provides space to analyze the role of faith within a hopeful future, not only in the idea of resisting or overthrowing a system of oppression (the typical plot arc seen in young adult dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games* or Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy), but also in the idea of believing in something enough that you are willing to keep it alive during the apocalypse. This concept is what sustains Lauren in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*. Each chapter of the novel begins with a “quote” from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* (i.e.,

¹⁶ For consistency and clarity, I am using the pronoun “themselves” when referring to a singular person, and “themselves” if referring to a group of people.

Lauren's written version of the faith system). The quote that begins the novel's final chapter reads:

Create no images of God.
Accept the images
that God has provided.
They are everywhere,
in everything.
God is Change –
Seed to tree,
tree to forest;
Rain to river,
river to sea;
Grubs to bees,
bees to swarm.
From one, many;
from many, one;
Forever uniting, growing, dissolving –
forever Changing.
The universe
is God's self-portrait. (Butler 315)

In some ways, this format feels quite Christian, which echoes the novel's namesake, the biblical Parable of the Sower. In the parable, a farmer, the "sower," is representative of those who spread the Gospel (the seeds). The seeds take differently in various soils,

representing people's different responses to the Word of God ("Bible"). In parallel to the parable, Earthseed responds differently depending on the kind of "soil" that it is placed in. By the end of Butler's novel, Lauren's journey has been mostly successful. Her travelling party arrives at the peaceful land owned by Bankole, an older doctor who joins their party and subsequently begins a relationship with Lauren. Lauren establishes the first true Earthseed community, named Acorn. Aptly, the community chooses a name from the natural world; after all, it is from the acorn that the mighty oak grows. Naming the town Acorn is hopeful, suggesting a place of promise and potential – and this is certainly one reading of *Parable of the Sower*, though Butler may not have intended such an optimistic interpretation. In the novel's 1998 sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, set five years after the first book, Acorn is invaded and subsequently ruled over by a group of Christian American "crusaders." This group is rapidly gaining power throughout the United States; rather prophetically, they operate under the rule of a president whose slogan is "Make America Great Again." The crusaders, determined to cleanse all non-Christian faiths from the United States, reintroduce slavery and rely on virtual reality headsets to escape from the brutality of the real world. Though Lauren and her community eventually manage to kill the invaders – around the same time as the president's regime collapses – the novel ends with Lauren watching the first wave of humans leave Earth, giving up on this planet as they hunt for other places to inhabit. Butler died before she could complete further novels in the series, but she had already developed notes for a third novel, titled *Parable of the Trickster*, which would have chronicled humanity's struggle to survive on a new planet. This element makes it difficult to categorize the *Parable* novels as optimistic speculative futurism: ultimately,

Butler's series holds a defeatist view of life on Earth. In a narrative that echoes a long history of science fiction, Butler's characters forfeit the planet in search of a place where not only life, but presumably humanity, will be *better*. Earth was not enough – or it was a lost cause – so we shifted our gaze to the skies, trying to outrun our home.

This galactic turn is echoed in Chambers's *Wayfarers* series, which pre-dates *Monk & Robot*, but grapples with similar themes. The third novel in the series, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018), is most relevant to an exploration of faith, and connects to themes that Chambers goes on to explore in *Monk & Robot*. *Wayfarers* is a loosely interconnected series, in that the stories are set in the same universe and sometimes feature characters who have briefly appeared or been mentioned in other novels, but the novels are ultimately standalone narratives that could be read in any order. *Record of a Spaceborn Few* follows the Exodus Fleet, a community living in a group of spaceships, descended from the first humans to leave Earth, many centuries ago. Though humans have now spread throughout the galaxy (in Chambers's universe, humans are neither the most powerful nor the most intelligent form of life, and have only recently become major galactical players), some remain on the original fleet, protecting the immense archives that record all human civilization, including the now-lost life on Earth. The novel is quiet, thoughtful, and primarily introspective – as is generally the case with Chambers's writing. The characters in *Record of a Spaceborn Few* are grappling with an aching, slow-moving grief. In his *Wired* profile of Chambers, Jason Kehe describes the plot of *Record of a Spaceborn Few* as “following bored humans living on generation ships” (Kehe), but this snappy summary misses the point of the novel entirely. Aside from one plotline that follows a bored teenager trying to establish his place in the world

– and even that storyline is ultimately about the grief of isolation – *Record of a Spaceborn Few* is primarily an examination of legacy and expectation, and of the ways in which communities can get lost in their own narratives. *Record of a Spaceborn Few* also explores humanity’s capacity to build systems that sustain us and our communities. On the Exodus Fleet, the community composts corpses, a process which helps to power the ships’ fuel tanks, nourish the community gardens, and provide a more circular and sustainable tradition than “spacing” the corpses (i.e., dropping them off in empty space), or flying them into the nearby sun. The job of caring for and recycling the corpses is regarded with dignity and respect – it is a sacred role within the culture of the Exodus Fleet. Throughout the novel, it is asked if this process is continued out of necessity or tradition, with a character wondering, “In terms of resources, is [composting corpses] still the best thing for us to be doing?” (210). Eyas, who performs funerary practices, finds herself unsure. What happens to tradition if circumstances shift? In composting the corpses, the crew of the Exodus Fleet has found an effective compromise between faith and pragmatism. And yet, faith – or tradition – often remains influential long after it is pragmatic. Our ways of seeing the world, and our assumptions about the best ways to treat it, are often, if not usually, based on approaches that *used* to be the most pragmatic option.

Examining *Monk & Robot* through a pragmatic lens is challenging; a pragmatic reading may seem incongruous for a novel that is largely focused on faith. Furthermore, the elements of traditional science fiction within the duology, such as a fictional moon and imagined pantheon, as well as the existence of true artificial intelligence, suggest that Chambers’s novels are focused on the fantastical as opposed to the pragmatic. One

could argue that solarpunk is inherently at odds with pragmatism because of the limits of possibility. Unlike hopepunk, which is rarely constrained by genre-specific settings, solarpunk regularly offers sustainable futures that are built on non-existent – and often impossible – technology. However, to view *all* solarpunk as non-pragmatic overlooks the real-world examples and effects of solarpunk in practice. Więckowska argues that solarpunk embodies “the faith in the possibility to change political systems through collective action and *the conviction that science can help build a sustainable society*” (352, emphasis added). While solarpunk certainly has a predisposition toward scientific innovation,¹⁷ the genre can also exist independently from genre constraints. The speculative elements can be thematic: while the pantheon in *Monk & Robot* is a fictional creation for the story, the themes that the gods embody are relevant to real-world experiences. While we do not have artificial intelligence technology as sophisticated as Mosschap, Dex and Mosschap’s relationship facilitates real-world questions around technology, work, humanity, and interconnection. *Monk & Robot* demonstrates how mindset shifts can be meaningful, and ultimately pragmatic. For most of us, our individual impact on the climate crisis, and thus our ability to implement large-scale solutions, is quite limited. We can implement small changes – which do add up, over many people – but we can also engage in acts of community connection that can eventually create a gradual shift in society. Mosschap is preoccupied with asking “what do people need?” The answer shifts dramatically based on who is responding – but no matter the response, the act of asking creates a community bond. This is a kind of faith

¹⁷ Also, solarpunk *does* take inspiration from real-world scientific discoveries, such as Suzanne Simard’s research regarding “mother trees” – research which went on to inspire much of Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*.

in itself – trusting that your actions will contribute to a bigger story, though you may not yet be able to see it.

Chambers's Queer Futurity

Monk & Robot approaches queerness in a way that is both nuanced and normalized. In terms of both society and identity, the novels calmly and subtly reject a gender binary. The novels' treatment of gender is not only integral to our understanding of them as solarpunk – particularly since solarpunk is in conversation with queer utopianism – but also in seeing the core ways in which *Monk & Robot* differs from Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. Callenbach seeks an artificial freedom in biological determinism; Chambers expands beyond this notion. Soon after Dex and Mosschap meet, Dex asks if Mosschap has a gender, to which Mosschap says no, and Dex replies, "me neither" (*Wild-Built* 55). This is the extent of their conversation and is the only information that both Dex and Mosschap need to understand the other – at least in terms of their gender, or lack thereof. However, the question of pronouns arises in chapter four; it is brought up not because of Dex's gender-neutral *they* pronoun, but because Dex wonders how best to refer to Mosschap:

Dex took note of Mosschap's phrasing. "So, *it* [emphasis added] is correct, then?

You wouldn't prefer *they* or – "

"Oh, no, no, no. Those sorts of words are for people. Robots are not people. We're machines, and machines are objects. Objects are *its*." (69)

When Dex struggles with the idea of viewing Mosschap as "just" an object, Mosschap points out that "We don't have to fall into the same category to be of equal value" (69).

Though Chambers imagines this conversation within the context of human and robot, we might extrapolate and consider the wider implications. *Monk & Robot* takes place in a world where difference does not equal difference in value. This leads to unique perspective intersections between nature and technology. Early in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Dex and Mosschap meet for the first time. Having altered their course and headed off into uncharted territory, Dex – who claims to have “canceled their life, bailed out on a whim” (*Wild-Built* 47) – finds themselves alone and content. When Mosschap appears, seemingly out of nowhere, Dex’s emotional state swings between fear and shock – and when trying to verify that Mosschap is genuinely one of the legendary robots who disappeared so long ago that their existence has slipped into myth, Dex and Mosschap have the following exchange:

“Do you call yourself *robots* or something else?”

“*Robot* is correct.”

“Okay, well – it’s kid stories, mostly. Sometimes, you hear somebody say they saw a robot in the borderlands, but I always thought it was bullshit. I know you’re out there, but it’s like...it’s like saying you saw a ghost.” (*Wild-Built* 54)

Once Dex confirms that Mosschap is not a threat to their safety, the two settle into a state of mutual curiosity. Unspoken between them is the Parting Promise, a mutual agreement between humans and robots to have no further contact, unless the robots wish it. The setting of *Monk & Robot* resists and subverts existing hierarchies, not through some kind of return to “natural” order, but through a commitment to respectful co-existence and social equity.

Even when considering a relatively conventional romantic relationship, Chambers has crafted a world in which queerness is profoundly normalized. In *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Dex begins a relationship with Leroy, an artisan whom Dex and Mosschap seek out when Mosschap needs a replacement part. Dex spends the night with Leroy, and Mosschap is inevitably curious, as it is curious about every – and any – aspect of humanity. To Dex’s chagrin, Mosschap proudly states that “Ms. Amelia was *very* helpful in teaching me the social norms surrounding such behaviour. I’m still not sure I understand it in full, but she made it quite clear that I should *not* disturb you, even though I would love to know the particulars of how you –” (*Crown-Shy* 78). The queerness of Chambers’s world-building extends beyond individual relationships and identities, and the element of Chambers’s world that could be seen as the “queerest” is the overarching respect for other ways of life. Social systems, identities, and alternative ways of being are normalized, even when they are viewed with curiosity. Panga is a place that has rejected currency and has embraced living in peaceful co-existence with the environment. As Dex tells Mosschap, “the human footprint along the coast is a very small one, by design” (87), as the community knows to leave wild space for other life. Indeed, we might think of the more-than-human world as a queer space – a space that has evolved to sustain life and encourage communities to mutually thrive. When the robots leave for the woods, as a part of the Transition, they learn to co-exist with the woods, and how to live *with* and in support of the land, as opposed to *from* it. By most definitions, the robots are not “natural” – yet, in Chambers’s world, their consciousness, and thus their conscience, invites them to be a part of a community.

Arguably, the world of *Monk & Robot* could be considered a kind of post-utopia; or perhaps more accurately, a post-technological utopia. Humanity achieved the dream of a society that developed a true artificial intelligence and integrated robots. Humans and robots learned that they were incapable of sustaining this society. As Muñoz would say, utopia is “a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema” (115) – utopia cannot be a fixed state. Neither can utopia be defined as relentless progress. *Monk & Robot* implicitly cautions against the unhindered prioritization of scientific development – a conversation that feels increasingly relevant in the age of AI. While *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is by no means anti-science, Dex finds themselves seeking a return to simplicity – a return to stillness, and quiet. While *Monk & Robot* is peaceful, the narrative makes quiet reference to a time when things were not so balanced – indeed, a time with enough societal tension that the robots retreated from human society entirely. Dex, feeling burnt out from the routines of their life, grapples with their desire to leave known (and inhabited) roads:

I bet it's quiet out there, they thought.

No, they replied, and continued on.

They stopped the wagon again twenty minutes later.

I bet you could travel that road for days and never see another person, they thought. The wagon's got all you need. (44)

Dex's wagon is already loaded with everything they need to survive in an uncharted landscape. Dex is *prepared* for a different future, but now they must choose it.

I must resist the urge to rigidly define utopia. There are countless ways to streamline the definition, particularly when seeking tidy boundaries for optimistic

speculative theory. I could argue for utopia as a temporal concept, utopia as a destabilized state, utopia as a journey, utopia as a community. Instead, I hope for optimistic speculative theory to encompass all these ideas by embodying a flexible definition of utopia – a definition that can be tailored to individual circumstances and realities. In optimistic speculative theory, utopia is the ability to protect the present *and* the future. Utopia – a hopeful, sustainable future – is an unexplored path in the forest that we can collectively choose to travel down. We already possess the resources and the energy and the potential for the journey – our wagon’s got all we need.

Impossible Hope: *Station Eleven*'s Apocalypse

Emily St. John Mandel's pandemic-turned-apocalypse novel, *Station Eleven*, has a deceptively simple premise, and on the surface, it may seem as though the novel comfortably fits into the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic category. *Station Eleven* is set in a world that has been ravaged by an extraordinarily deadly virus, the "Georgia Flu," which has left ninety-nine percent of the global population dead and forced the few survivors to rebuild their lives in a world in which all of society has collapsed. Notably, the disaster that ultimately ended society is not strictly ecological – it is a pandemic instead of pollution or climate change – which places this novel in the minority of contemporary apocalyptic fiction. The setting suggests that Mandel's novel is not an obvious candidate for a solarpunk – or even an optimistic – reading, which makes it an intriguing case study. Phillip E. Wegner argues that "The successful dissemination and subsequent flourishing of a genre [...] results from its inherent 'portability,' its capacity to be carried into and redeployed in contexts quite different from those from within which it first emerges" (8). Post-apocalyptic narratives are often a thematic exploration of hope, no matter how tenable that hope may be.

However, reframing the post-apocalyptic as hopeful is bound to be perceived, at least initially, as a tenuous assertion, particularly in a literary climate that is tilted toward despair. In *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, an essay collection in which John Green reckons with the overwhelming scope of humanity's influence on the planet, Green writes that "Despair isn't very productive. That's the problem with it. Like a replicating virus, all despair can make is more of itself" (253). As he says, "the truth is far more

complicated than mere hopelessness” (254). These lines come from Green’s essay on sycamore trees, in which the sycamores become a symbol of existential hope. Green writes “I’m just looking up at that tree, thinking about how it turned air and water and sunshine into wood and bark and leaves, and I realize that I am in the vast, dark shade of this immense tree. I feel the solace of that shade, the relief it provides” (255). How interesting that shade – something which might so often be a negative image (i.e., keeping away the sun) – becomes a solace. Within darkness, we find hope – or more to the point, the hope exists only within the context of the darkness. This idea disrupts, or at least complicates, traditional notions of optimism. Mathias Thaler interrogates the idea of eco-miserabilism, which he defines as “the thought that it is already too late to avert the collapse of human civilization” (318), but, in a similar vein to my reframing of the apocalypse, asserts how even this point of view can be deemed a kind of radical hope. Thaler argues that “My reparative interpretation intimates that it is not only feasible, but necessary to separate eco-miserabilism’s indictment of solutionist shortcuts from its ostensible instigation of paralysis or even nihilism” (327). What might we learn about hope when we explore frightening dystopia? What are the many shades of grey between optimism and despair?

Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* and Chambers’s *Monk & Robot* duology share the setting of a current, immediate utopia, whether that utopia is surrounded by a corrupted society (like the United States in *Ecotopia*), or a general sense of global harmony (as in *Monk & Robot*). This makes them straightforward subjects for an optimistic speculative reading; an optimistic framework relies on texts such as these as literary examples. However, when structuring this framework, it is important to explore texts in which optimism

might not be as natural a takeaway. Doing so both tests the boundaries of the framework and offers alternative, unexpected models of optimistic futures. Among my primary texts, *Station Eleven* is the outlier. In Mandel's novel, the survivors of the Georgia Flu refer to the pandemic as the "collapse," because afterward, organized society simply ceases to exist. It has collapsed. Too many people have died, meaning previously established ways of life are no longer sustainable or even maintainable. However, what is so distinct about Mandel's novel – what makes it unusual within the post-apocalyptic genre – is that instead of centring her narrative on the harrowing fight for survival, life-and-death stakes sit on the periphery of the plot. Mandel explores what exists *beyond* survival. She examines our need for community, and connection, and music, and art, and storytelling. She examines the things that survive, if only because humanity cannot let them die. The novel follows a theatre troupe, known as the Travelling Symphony, on their route through what used to be Ontario and the Great Lakes region. Moving through the remnants of old societies and new, makeshift settlements, the troupe performs Shakespeare's plays, determined – and somehow still motivated – to share art and music in world that feels lost.

The novel takes place in multiple timelines, before, during, and after the collapse, and the characters are interlinked by their proximity to Arthur Leander, a famous actor who dies onstage while performing *King Lear*, the same night that the Georgia Flu hits North America. Arthur becomes a link between different years, a way for people to connect to each other throughout time and circumstance. The Travelling Symphony becomes the lens through which we see the post-apocalyptic world – and while the picture is undoubtably one of survival, it also reveals community care and

collective sustainable action. The main character from the post-collapse timeline is Kirsten Raymonde, who barely remembers life before the collapse – the pandemic struck when she was eight years old. Kirsten is obsessed with a duology of comic books, called *Station Eleven*, that were given to her by Arthur before the collapse. The comics follow Dr. Eleven, a character on a distant, isolated, enormous space station called Station Eleven. We soon learn that the *Station Eleven* comics were written and illustrated by Arthur's first wife, Miranda (her name being one of many not-so-subtle Shakespeare allusions in the novel). In the years prior to the Georgia Flu, Miranda treats her comics as an escape, fleshing out her fictional world as her real one constricts under the scrutiny of Arthur's fame. For its inhabitants, Station Eleven is a place that has morphed into both sanctuary and prison; it is both a home and a reminder that it is not *their* home:

Station Eleven is the size of Earth's moon and was designed to resemble a planet, but it's a planet that can chart a course through galaxies and requires no sun. [...] There has been a schism. There are people who [...] long only to go home, to return to Earth and beg for amnesty, to take their chances under alien rule. They live in the Undersea, an interlinked network of vast fallout shelters under Station Eleven's oceans. There are three hundred of them now. (83)

Miranda dies early in the pandemic. Stranded in Malaysia on a business trip, she contracts the Georgia Flu and understands enough to know that she is going to die. She hauls herself down to the beach, compelled to see the lights of the cargo ships glinting on the horizon:

Miranda opened her eyes in time to see the sunrise. A wash of violent colour, pink and streaks of brilliant orange, the container ships on the horizon suspended between the blaze of the sky and the water aflame, the seascape bleeding into confused visions of Station Eleven, its extravagant sunsets and its indigo sea.

The lights of the fleet fading into morning, the ocean burning into sky. (228)

Miranda's death is one of billions in Mandel's novel, but she is never – and nor is anyone else – merely a number or a statistic. The sun still rises, even as Miranda dies.

For Kirsten – and many others in the Travelling Symphony – storytelling becomes intertwined with the act of collecting, which thus becomes a way of keeping the past alive. The compulsion to collect appears throughout the novel, as we see the characters' desire to memorialize the past, if only to remind themselves that it was real. Clark, a friend of Arthur's who survives the collapse, sets up camp at the Severn City Airport (where days turn into months, months turn into years); there, he accidentally establishes what becomes known as the Museum of Civilization. The museum is just a collection of items from before the collapse, and remarkably, not only are the survivors interested and even fascinated, but they contribute. The museum is a curiosity, a memorial, and a tomb.

Beyond the collecting of objects, Kirsten (and others) collects symbols. Kirsten has tattoos of two knives on her arm, each knife representing someone she has had to kill. She also has a tattoo of a quotation that Mandel lifted from a 1999 episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*: "Survival is insufficient." Kirsten's Station Eleven comics are both stories and symbols. Humans require more than just being alive; in other words, survival is not, and has never been, enough. This is an idea I will explore in more detail

throughout the rest of this chapter, as it encapsulates what is vital about applying an optimistic speculative framework. To *live*, we turn to community, to collectivity, to creation, to art. This is the role of the Travelling Symphony, and this is why Mandel's novel ultimately *is* optimistic. Carmen M. Méndez-García states that "*Station Eleven* walks the line between dystopia and utopia, or rather between dark dystopia and what I would like to call 'glimmeringly hopeful' dystopia" (113), going on to argue that the novel is "a fantasy mostly about goodness and decency in human nature, and the possibility of communal creation of little cells of camaraderie, a kind of preservation of the best of culture, society, and previous models of civilization" (114). The novel itself is a collection. Beyond just the presence and retention of art – and beyond the recognition of humanity's fundamental decency – it offers a semi-hopeful ending: a futurity that suggests brighter days might (quite literally) lie ahead. One night, staring into the distance, the characters see "pinpricks of light arranged into a grid...a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity" (311). After twenty years of turmoil and collapse, communities are rebuilding – how very hopepunk. In the words of Alexandra Rowland, "sheer, simple, bloody-minded obstinacy" is "how you hold the story even when it's unraveling in your hands. You grit your teeth, and bear the pain, and keep going: one star at a time, one brick at a time, one step at a time" (Rowland). The final paragraph of *Station Eleven* is written from Clark's perspective, shortly after the Travelling Symphony moves on from the Severn City Airport, and it speaks of loss, grit, faith, and hope; hope that even if things do not get better, at least they will get different:

If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain? Perhaps vessels

are setting out even now, travelling towards or away from him, steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge of the stars, driven by need or perhaps simply by curiosity: whatever became of the countries on the other side? If nothing else, it's pleasant to consider the possibility. He likes the thought of ships moving over the water, towards another world just out of sight. (332-33)

This final paragraph – this inextinguishable hope that Mandel leaves us with – is intertwined with themes that run through both Callenbach's and Chambers's work, as well as the subcultures of solarpunk and hopepunk more broadly. Can we propel ourselves to a better world through the power of curiosity alone? Curiosity is certainly key – both Callenbach's William Weston and Chambers's Sibling Dex are motivated by the act of going on a journey. They seek to discover alternative ways of life or ways of being. And while Weston travels with a pre-conceived notion of what he might find on the road, Dex seeks only the journey, and the Travelling Symphony knows only to keep moving. This is not to say that a journey is the only, or the best, way to move forward – nor does the journey erase the danger. *Station Eleven* is not primarily plot-driven, but the narrative does not shy away from conflict, violence, or abuses of power. Indeed, throughout much of the novel, Kirsten and the Travelling Symphony are contending with the mysterious figure known as the prophet, who we eventually learn is Arthur Leander's now-adult son. The prophet is not a particularly original character (most post-apocalyptic narratives seem to include an encounter with a dangerously charismatic cult leader), but Kirsten is able to connect with the prophet because of their shared knowledge of Miranda's Station Eleven comics. After the prophet is killed, Kirsten

reflects that “Whatever else the prophet had become, he’d once been a boy adrift on the road, and perhaps he’d had the misfortune of remembering everything” (304).

In a 2015 NPR interview, shortly after the publication of *Station Eleven*, Mandel was asked her opinion on the popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction, to which she offered several ideas, stating that “A suggestion that I hear quite often is that our interest in post-apocalyptic fiction is a natural expression of the anxiety we feel. We always seem to think the world’s ending. It’s some sort of combination of pessimism or narcissism that — it’s almost as though we want to believe or [*sic*] living at the climax of the story.” Mandel has a point – at least in that writing offers us a semblance of, or the illusion of, narrative control. If we return to Figueres and Rivett-Carnac argument for the power of narrative in real-world climate change discourse, narrative is a tangible way to harness the fear and unknown of impending climate disaster. However, while this narrative control is commonly harnessed as a threat or a warning, we can also harness it as a tool for optimistic change, strengthening the cultural conviction that we have the capacity to act from the best parts of ourselves. This shift in perspective is straightforward when considering a text that depicts a utopia, particularly when the author has already done most of the imaginative work. However, the principle of seeking optimism within slightly murkier narratives is something that we will have to improve upon, especially as we seek out potential blueprints for what our futures could look like. In finding these glimmers of hope, we will have to trudge through, and subvert, established expectations of what apocalypse *must* mean.

Survival is Insufficient

While solarpunk is certainly about the survival of the planet, established human society, and ways of life that feel good, solarpunk also recognizes that we need to sustain ourselves. It is this distinction that makes solarpunk different from hopepunk. Hopepunk looks for hope, for grit, for the spark, be it gentle or bright, that keeps us moving forward against all odds; solarpunk seeks to sustain, to build systems, worlds, and ways of life in which the hope and the grit and the sparks need not be so difficult to find.

More simply, we can return to the *Star Trek*-turned-*Station Eleven* passage and recognize that survival is insufficient. This simple statement, which is the core theme of *Station Eleven*, could also be adopted as the unofficial motto of optimistic speculative fiction. Surely we can aim higher than *just* survival. One way to do this, and the way in which *Station Eleven* approaches this theme, is through art. The creative process, even if it is just the act of sustaining something creative, becomes a way for humanity to keep living. Through their roles as performers and creatives, the members of the Travelling Symphony sustain a purpose. The written word keeps them alive.

From Mandel's point of view, it seems that Shakespeare *will* survive the apocalypse. However, the theme of survival – including the survival of pre-apocalypse art – is not reliant upon Shakespeare's work specifically. Though Shakespeare's plays, primarily *King Lear*, have a prominent thematic role in *Station Eleven*, Shakespeare's work reads as more of a stand-in (admittedly, one that is inevitably riddled with clichés) for humanity's unstoppable compulsion to share stories. Méndez-García takes issue with "a deep contradiction at the heart of Mandel's text" (114), problematizing Mandel's centring of Shakespeare. Méndez-García rejects the universality of Shakespeare's work

by drawing on postcolonial theory, before isolating what she finds to be the most troubling aspect of the novel:

Even more problematic is that, in a novel about art as what brings us together, what reveals our human emotions, our shared past and present, nobody actually *creates* art. The clarinet player in the *Traveling Symphony* tries to write something new and representative of her times but gives up after just a couple of lines [...]. I would argue here, however, that meaningful art does not depend necessarily on its intrinsic beauty or assumed universality but on how it can be a *response* to specific circumstances, in the case of the novel to the characters' immediate, postapocalyptic reality, something that would be at odds with the supposed "universality" of any given text. (116-17)

In contrast, Maximilian Feldner argues that *Station Eleven* "does not focus on survival, struggle, and conflict but rather examines the possibility and necessity of cultural expression in a postapocalyptic setting, demonstrating the importance and value of art and memory even in strained circumstances" (166). In the scene that Méndez-García describes, in which the clarinet player tries to write her own play, Mandel writes, "Survival might be insufficient, [the clarinet player had] told Dieter in late-night arguments, but on the other hand, so was Shakespeare" (288). Though the clarinet player *does* give up after writing only a line, the first line she does write is representative of Mandel's novel: "Dear friends, I find myself immeasurably weary and I have gone to rest in the forest" (289). Mandel does not position Shakespeare as better than contemporary art; instead, she is emphasizing a profound yearning for familiarity in an exhausted, traumatized world. In other words, Mandel highlights the inexhaustible

capacity for art to sustain. Indeed, how often does a reader find themselves seeking comfort in works from the past, as opposed to contemporary art? It often seems easier to find comfort in those who have come before you, as opposed to sitting in the relentless discomfort of your own present. Furthermore, Méndez-García's statement is incorrect. Art is created in *Station Eleven*. Adaptation and production are creative pursuits. Directors, actors, and musicians are artists; they just use different materials, creating art out of source material rather than from scratch.

Méndez-García is not without compelling points, though her analysis repeatedly overlooks the ways in which Mandel's novel radically resists the dominant "point" of post-apocalyptic media. However, from Méndez-García's analysis, one would think that *Station Eleven* is a novel *about* Shakespeare, or that Mandel posits that the troupe survives *because* of Shakespeare. This is echoed in how Méndez-García writes about the Museum of Civilization:

The Museum of Civilization's utopian impulse seems to be doomed to failure: a museum that celebrates objects that were markers of a civilization, but which are now unusable, just beautiful, empty signifiers, is an institution that precludes the creation of new objects just as the exclusive celebration of Shakespeare precludes the creation of new art. This is the paradox of conservation: in conserving, the collection solidifies the past and, while celebrating that past, it closes it off from the future. And the museum can keep the past alive, through inanimate objects, only while it has a curator that can explain that past. (121)

I argue that Méndez-García is misreading what Mandel's novel ultimately strives toward. *Station Eleven* is not fundamentally about Shakespeare – indeed, Shakespeare

could be swapped out for another example of popular media, and the novel would fundamentally remain the same. The themes of *Station Eleven* are focused on the process and the urge to keep stories alive, not the individual stories that are featured. Ultimately, Mendez-Garcia's analysis, though not without merit, is both a cynical view of Mandel's novel and a reinforcement of conventional post-apocalyptic narratives. Méndez-García ends her article with a section on "hope after the apocalypse," in which she writes,

[*Station Eleven*] is a deeply romanticized postapocalypse, one where characters can sit around the fire at night, look at the stars, listen to music, watch a play, and reminisce about the past. [...] It is an uplifting future world but not one that is necessarily realistic. Furthermore, *Station Eleven* is a text that, unlike other postapocalyptic texts, does not concern itself directly with politics or global problems, but rather takes as its center an abstract idea of humanity and life.

(124)

By turning away from the "politics or global problems" that traditionally characterize dystopian fiction (and utopian: consider the painstaking realism that Callenbach attempts to portray in both *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*), *Station Eleven* can instead focus on the personal – and even personal narratives can be inherently political. While Mandel certainly engages in the romanticization of Shakespeare and a heavy dose of nostalgia, she does so in a way that allows *Station Eleven* to test the boundaries of what the post-apocalyptic genre surely *must* be. After all, the kind of apocalypse that appears in *Station Eleven* cannot be overcome – there is no government to overthrow, no zombies to destroy, and no planet to save. Hope must be sought elsewhere.

Isolation and Solitude

A sense of being cut off from the world is nearly ubiquitous with the dystopian, and specifically the post-apocalyptic, genres. Whether it happens in one cataclysmic event or over time, isolation becomes a motivator and a context for humanity's response to the "end of the world." Consider one of the genre's most common tropes: 'we've lost communication and we have no idea what's going on outside.' While this is playing into a wariness of the unknown and the protective instinct to fear what is deemed "other," I posit an alternative reading, in which we consider our fixation on isolation as a fear of loss, as opposed to a fear of the unknown.¹⁸ Isolation implies a loss of community – a breakdown of established systems and support structures. It promises not only the unknown, but a known loneliness. In *Station Eleven*, the Georgia Flu leads to a loss of life so unimaginable that the scope is too large to confront. Modern society is untenable; Mandel imagines a world that we no longer have the manpower to keep running. The remnants of the world – crumbling buildings, permanently grounded airplanes, abandoned highways – are a curiosity for those too young to remember the collapse, and a relentless reminder of loss for those who were there before. When apocalyptic isolation is viewed from this angle, it becomes more logical to see where hopepunk and solarpunk themes emerge in these stories – or where an optimistic speculative theory could hold relevance, even amidst the bleakest of circumstances. We see optimism in the tenacity of community; we see it in our sheer inability to strip ourselves of humanity,

¹⁸ A prominent example of a post-apocalyptic story that uses this tactic is the video game turned HBO TV show, *The Last of Us*, in which the ongoing zombie apocalypse takes a thematic backseat to character development and an examination of what makes us human once established society has collapsed. Interestingly, the narrative does establish an ecological origin for the apocalypse: people are turned into zombies if they get infected by a fungus that evolved to withstand the planet's rising temperatures. This also means that the fungus can survive the human body temperature.

even in the worst-case scenarios. Consider how most post-apocalyptic stories focus on the construction of a community, no matter how unlikely or doomed for tragedy that community may be. In contrast, consider how utopian stories focus on modelling a “perfect” community. What might a utopian story look like if it followed a character who was profoundly lonely throughout? Does utopia *rely* on a strong community? Solarpunk and hopepunk narratives nearly always rely on a community working as a collective – there is rarely a lone solarpunk survivalist – and the texts that express the tenets of these subcultures often centre around reframing family and/or community roles.

This idea is further complicated, because even isolation is not wholly negative. Waubgeshig Rice’s post-apocalyptic novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), which reframes isolation to destabilize the traditional apocalyptic narrative, takes place in a remote Anishinaabe community that finds itself suddenly cut off from the outside world, with no idea of what may have caused the sudden, all-encompassing collapse of (presumably) the rest of society. While the mysterious societal collapse is obviously a cause for concern, the novel’s imminent threat is a stranger, a white man who has asked the community for shelter from the chaotic world outside. After attempting to sustain existence as it was, with sometimes disastrous results, the community collectively decides that their best chance for survival *and* happiness is to abandon their current way of life and return to living off the land. What is originally positioned as an apocalypse – and what likely is an apocalypse for Western colonial ways of life – becomes an opportunity for rebirth in Rice’s fictional community. Rice and Mandel share writerly instincts when it comes to the apocalypse – a desire to burn it all down and start again,

as it were. In *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, and more loosely, *Ecotopia*, we follow characters who have, at least initially, embraced isolation; the separation of self from community is not a forced event. In the *Monk & Robot* duology, it is striking that, on the surface, Dex essentially goes out in search of what so many post-apocalyptic characters fear. And yet, by intentionally isolating himself, Dex finds clarity, which eventually leads to community. Not only that, but the community comes from an unlikely place: a robot, part of a group who walked away from humanity in the hope of achieving a better reality. In surrendering to potential isolation, Dex finds a friend. Dex's newfound clarity does not come from a sudden discovery of purpose. As a mildly frustrated Mosschap tells Dex,

You're an animal, Sibling Dex. You are not *separate* or *other* [...]. And animals *have no purpose*. Nothing has a purpose. The world simply *is* [...]. You keep asking why your work is not *enough*, and I don't know how to answer that, because it is enough to exist in the world and marvel at it. You don't need to justify that, or earn it. You are allowed to just *live*. (138-39)

Mosschap does not tell Dex that they are allowed to 'just survive' – Mosschap firmly and emphatically states that Dex can and should *live*. Here too, survival is insufficient.

Ultimately, such reframing of isolation only bolsters the unlikely optimism of Mandel's novel. The characters in *Station Eleven* are generally not alone – and those who are, like the prophet, are unable to even just survive in such a changed world.

This difference in perspective begs the question: is there such a thing as a universal apocalypse? In the introduction to *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-*

Spirit & Indigiqueer Fiction,¹⁹ editor Joshua Whitehead asks, “Who names an event apocalyptic and whom must an apocalypse affect in order for it to be thought of as ‘canon?’” (9). Writing from a queer Indigenous perspective, Whitehead asks, “What better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?” (11). In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Evan, the protagonist, finds himself talking to Aileen, a community elder. Aileen denounces the apocalypse, saying “[...] apocalypse! What a silly word. I can tell you there’s no word like that in Ojibwe” (149). She grows frustrated with the youth in the community, who seem not to understand just how many earth-shattering events their community has already survived. As she says, “We’ve had [apocalypse] over and over. But we always survived. We’re still here. And we’ll still be here, even if the power and the radios don’t come back on and we never see any white people ever again” (150).

Both Whitehead and Rice offer vital perspectives and rightfully decentre Eurocentric definitions of the apocalypse. We can also question the definition of the apocalypse beyond just the human perspective. The planet will survive just fine without us, but we *are* destroying our own habitat. In *Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Mosschap chides Dex for thinking of animals hierarchically. Mosschap argues that “All parasites have value [...]. Not to their hosts, perhaps, but you could say the same about a predator and a prey animal. They all *give back* – not to the individual but to the ecosystem at large” (142). One of the aesthetic hallmarks of a collapsed human society is rewilding.

¹⁹ This text, and specifically Whitehead’s introduction, is a resource I return to often. Not only does the text subvert expectations of both environmental and Indigenous narratives, but Whitehead emphasizes that “Originally, the project was designed to be geared toward the dystopic, and after careful conversations, we decided to queer it toward the utopian” (10). Optimism is the radical choice.

Vegetation encroaches on the ruins of “civilization,” choking the buildings and sprouting through cracked highways. Squirrels, raccoons, fox, mice, and bats move into empty buildings. Even in post-apocalyptic futures brought on by catastrophic climate change, fear and loss are almost always in relation to humans, because without human interference, nature takes back the land, reclaiming all that was manipulated for human-centric use. Furthermore, in a post-apocalyptic scenario that has taken nearly all human lives, we are no longer able to sustain environmental destruction. In *Station Eleven*, air travel is a thing of the past, and abandoned airplanes are merely another kind of decaying ruin – think of all the carbon that was *not* pumped into the atmosphere because of this.

From a non-human perspective, perhaps the apocalypse is the best thing that could have happened. And there is something beautiful about this; something that feels timeless, or at least of a perspective that comfortably extends beyond humans. Perhaps it is simply the recognition that the destruction of some is not inherently the destruction of *all*. This is a perspective that post-apocalyptic media often choose to portray, even unconsciously. In an iconic sequence from the Naughty Dog video game *The Last of Us*, the two main characters, Joel and Ellie, who have spent the game fighting their way through an apocalyptic version of the United States, stumble across a herd of wild giraffes in what was once Salt Lake City. Presumably, the giraffes are the descendants of zoo animals. This scene is one of the few hopeful moments in an otherwise bleak landscape, and within the context of the game’s narrative, encountering the giraffes is what gives Joel and Ellie the strength to carry on. As a *Game Rant* article explains, “This final moment of watching the giraffes can last forever so long as players choose

not to leave the edge of the rooftop that Joel and Ellie are perched on” (Zotomayor). In the animated DreamWorks film *The Wild Robot* (2024),²⁰ which toes the line between dystopian and solarpunk, we see glimpses of a world that has adapted for rising sea levels – and in one memorable frame, a group of whales swims gently over the sunken deck of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge (a particularly poignant scene, given that 1970s whale conservation was one of the first causes that launched the environmental movement). This moment of hope comes not from humanity, but from the planet’s ability to survive in some capacity, no matter the toll that is placed upon it. And that may not feel like much, but it is hope.

²⁰ The film is based on the first book of a popular children’s book trilogy, Peter Brown’s *The Wild Robot*.

Conclusion

An optimistic speculative framework is most successful when it is dynamic, evolving, and – often – unlikely. Ideally, it is a framework that can adapt to literature of all genres. Fundamentally, speculative fiction is a long and complicated answer to the question of ‘what if?’ What if it is too late to do anything about the climate crisis? What if robots (or AI) destroy humanity’s creative spirit? What if a pandemic kills ninety-nine percent of the population? What if aliens invade? An optimistic speculative framework changes the bias of the questions. What if we find solutions? What if we act from the best parts of ourselves? What if it (something, anything) goes right?

In the last pages of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, Dex finally admits to Mosschap what they are afraid of, and the realization that motivated them, perhaps somewhat unconsciously, to venture into the woods in the first place:

“My work doesn’t satisfy me like it used to, and I don’t know why. I was so sick of it that I did a stupid, dangerous thing, and now that I’ve done it, I don’t know what to do next. I don’t know what I thought I’d find out here, because I don’t know what I’m looking for. I can’t stay here, but I’m scared about going back and having that feeling pick right back up where it left off. I’m scared, and I’m lost, and I don’t know what to do.” (145)

Instead of placating them, Mosschap offers Dex a cup of tea, foraged from ingredients that Mosschap knows are safe for human consumption. Writing about the climate crisis is essential but draining, particularly during a time that is alarmingly urgent yet politically fraught, taking place as it does amidst climate displacement, increasingly “improbable” weather events, and the dismantling of environmental protections. Writing about the

climate crisis is often accompanied by a persistent sense of futility, leaving one (to paraphrase Dex's words) scared and at a loss as to what to do. However, the climate crisis is an immensely complex problem, which means it requires a wide range of creative solutions, including the creative work of imagining alternative, hopeful futures. These solutions include understanding, and if necessary, altering cultural narratives around the climate crisis, as narrative is so often the first step toward action. These solutions include developing and strengthening one's ability to look at what possibilities lie in the face of an encroaching wall of despair. Our culture is a sum of stories, and the ability to acknowledge when those stories are no longer serving their purpose is extraordinarily valuable.

Deciding what makes a text optimistic, dynamic, and evolving is an amorphous, tricky, and downright subjective task. In terms of considering my primary texts through an optimistic speculative framework, *Monk & Robot* is, in many ways, my control group. It is the most traditionally science fiction of my primary texts – it does not take place on Earth, and it utilizes world-building (particularly religious world-building) that is not adapted from existing cultures – and the most explicitly solarpunk. It is also the most peaceful of the three; unlike *Ecotopia* or *Station Eleven*, there is no looming threat of violence, and the conflict within the two novellas is internal and self-reflective. Interestingly, *Ecotopia* (the country), which is the most traditional “utopia” of the three settings, is the setting that seems least dynamic. For all its creativity and social ingenuity, *Ecotopia* is a static place; within the context of the novel, Weston is reporting on a fixed system that has reached a level of near unattainable perfection. The main source of conflict that the nation of *Ecotopia* faces is a set of ongoing external threats

from the United States, since the citizens of Ecotopia are unrealistically and eerily aligned in their personal beliefs. An optimistic speculative reading largely serves to highlight the problems in Callenbach's world-building. *Station Eleven* is an unlikely utopia, specifically in terms of how the novel explores community and the preservation of art. Mandel's novel complicates our notions of the apocalypse, demonstrating a surprisingly flexible view of what can be deemed optimistic.

Undoubtably, there are limitations to an optimistic speculative framework: there is no fiction that can offer an all-encompassing perspective or solution for solving the climate crisis and saving us all. Narrative can catalyze or bolster, but it is not a replacement for action. To *overstate* the abilities of fiction – or to suggest that fiction cannot simply exist for art's sake – is troublesome and limiting. In her essay "Future Looks," Elvia Wilk points to another concern:

[T]he problem with fiction that promotes solutionism²¹ as a worldview is that solutionism can't help but be a top-down strategy. No solution is one-size-fits-all, and no solution should be imposed from above (from the government or writer), especially in an age when 'the system' or 'the man' is no longer a monolithic evil entity but a networked system of oppression that operates along multiple axes of power and persuasion. (127)

Wilk makes a compelling point, especially in, as stated earlier, a politically fraught time where we must be extremely wary of any single "solution" that promises to solve an overwhelming problem. However, to entirely reject solutionism in fiction, or

²¹ Solutionism has technological connotations (it is sometimes referred to as "techno-solutionism") and relies on the idea that all problems can be solved, primarily by technology. "Future Looks" is an essay that examines technology, but Wilk seems to be thinking of critiquing solutionism more in terms of sweeping, idealistic ways to "fix" the climate crisis.

more broadly, to reject fiction as a real source of climate vision and action, is to forgo one of our most valuable idea generators. Midway through *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy*, Dex and Mosschap come across a settlement that does not view robots favourably, and Dex has to explain that “some people went in kind of an extreme direction after the Transition. They think tech is a slippery slope that heads right back to the Factory Age, so they don’t use anything automated” (88). While in the village, Dex and Mosschap meet a villager who is willing to connect with them. The villager, Mx. Avery, argues that “[the villagers’] way of life shows you how comfortable the world is on its own. Paring things down makes the small comforts all the sweeter” (101), to which Dex replies that “there’s no harm in any sort of construct so long as said construct has been proven to *do* no harm” (102). It seems reasonable that imagined futures, like solutions, like constructs, may be considered until they have been proved to do harm.

Birnam Wood (2023), a climate novel by New Zealand author Eleanor Catton, utilizes the plot of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as a framework for a contemporary eco-thriller. Unlike *Station Eleven*, in *Birnam Wood*, Shakespeare is key to how Catton positions the novel as an eco-text. The novel is primarily set in Korowai Pass, a fictional area – based on regions of New Zealand’s South Island – that has been cut off from the outside world due to a massive landslide. The plot follows the conflict between a guerilla gardening group, called Birnam Wood, and a tech billionaire, Robert Lemoine, who is illegally mining in Korowai Pass. It would be exceedingly difficult to argue that *Birnam Wood* is optimistic, and despite the centrality of environmental activism, the novel does not usefully lend itself to an optimistic speculative reading. Catton positions the novel as an exploration of characters who undercut the environmental movement and

undermine any real potential for social change. The novel reads like a warning; it offers us a depiction of how activism can turn nasty, especially when the best intentions are knocked awry by individual failings. *Birnam Wood* is split into three parts, and the final scene of the first part is an exhausting study of how left-wing activism can be extraordinarily effective at tearing itself apart. As the activists – the members of Birnam Wood – argue over the buzzwords of identity politics and the intricacies of who is allowed to speak in which conversations, their concrete goals are lost or become secondary to semantics. As Catton’s novel is so new, there is limited scholarship on how it can be situated within contemporary eco-fiction. Jessica Murray, a scholar based at the University of South Africa, includes *Birnam Wood* in a recent article, in which she argues that contemporary eco-fiction “fail[s] to meet the demands of this historical moment by mostly not moving beyond various articulations of the problem. In other words, [contemporary eco-novels] expose the environmental and epistemological challenges presented by the age of the Anthropocene, but they do not move much beyond this exposure to suggest meaningful modes of activism” (124). Murray’s critique is valid; it is exceptionally frustrating to seek out answers or solutions to the climate crisis in media that only seems able to restate the problem. Simultaneously, fiction is a place where “modes of activism” can be tested, with fewer consequences than in the real world. *Birnam Wood* does not ultimately offer an activism-based solution to the climate crisis, but the novel is immovable in its insistence on demonstrating where activism – and by extension, the collective – fails, and it is this alternative reading of the collective that allows *Birnam Wood* to work as a compelling counterpoint to *Ecotopia*, *Monk & Robot*, and *Station Eleven*. Both *Birnam Wood* and *Station Eleven* draw on a

Shakespearean tragedy (*Macbeth* and *King Lear*, respectively), but while *Birnam Wood* solemnly follows through on the tragedy, *Station Eleven* provides a more nuanced version of hope.²²

The above critiques of fiction could be applied to practically any other method of tackling the climate crisis. Fiction, like any form, is limited, but how we read it can be used in pursuit of a sustainable future. There is no *single* idea that will solve the climate crisis, which is why interdisciplinary, collective work is crucial, and ultimately, the only realistic solution. Seeking a single solution to the climate crisis will lead to, at best, oversimplification, and at worst, burnout and hopelessness. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh writes that “I would like to believe that out of this struggle will be born a generation that will [...] be able to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement” (162). In analyzing my three central texts, I have striven to highlight a variety of tangible examples that demonstrate that hope within the climate crisis is not misplaced, nor naïve, nor impossible. *Ecotopia* (and *Ecotopia Emerging*) offer an imaginative attempt at mapping an environmental utopia, and though the story may be weak, Callenbach offers a model for how we might utilize both fiction and non-fiction to protect the planet. The *Monk & Robot* novels are a soft place to land, a best-case-scenario utopia that does not feel static but instead urges us to see that our greatest strength is each other. Indeed, our strength is in our ability to care for one another, and in the choices that we make to keep the greater community – or, as

²² Catherine Bush’s *Blaze Island* (2020) is another Shakespearean-inspired climate novel. Drawing from the plot of *The Tempest*, Bush’s novel follows a blacklisted climate change scientist, now living on an isolated island with his daughter. The plot eventually shifts to an exploration of climate engineering – and while *Blaze Island* is more traditionally “cli-fi” than either Mandel’s or Catton’s novels, it concludes somewhere between the pessimism of *Birnam Wood* and the relative optimism of *Station Eleven*.

Robin Wall Kimmerer says, the human and “more-than-human world” (252) – healthy. *Station Eleven* offers an alternative, apocalyptic version of the future that is nonetheless both nuanced and resistant to despair. The premise of *Station Eleven* is one that could so easily lead to hopelessness, and it is in how the characters overcome feelings of futility – by leaning on community and art – that we can locate a valuable model for real-world responses to the threat of climate change. These texts are not without flaws, but neither are any of them positioned as ideological weapons.

Ultimately, I hope for the optimistic speculative framework to be a useful and actionable tool, both for reflecting upon our existing climate narratives and for conceptualizing future narratives that contribute to solving the climate crisis. A startling amount of our reality is shaped by the stories that we tell ourselves. Choosing to alter that narrative is not a sign of ignorance, naïveté, or desperation, but instead an opportunity to recognize that despair, while at times understandable, is inherently an oversimplification. Fiction cannot change what has already happened, but it *can* change how we think about what has already happened. It stands to reason that fiction then has the power to change what we think *could* happen. If we think it could happen, then it is possible. And if it possible, then we can find a way to make it a reality.

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