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**“THE FUTURE’S [NOT] OURS TO SEE”—VISIONS OF FORTHCOMING
HUMANITY IN SOLARPUNK**

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Introduction

This article attempts to analyse the emergence of solarpunk and selected aspects of this literary genre including its progressive approach to gender, nature and social organisation. Referring to the genre’s predecessors and Murray Bookchin’s concept of social ecology as well as some ideas of transcendental writers, I examine several examples of solarpunk stories with a special emphasis on the representation of the anticipated version of social organisation. By commenting on its imaginary versions of social organisation and underlining the openness of gender identity, I assert that solarpunk can be approached as an important element of the science fiction literary scene and a forecast of a better tomorrow. As nowadays the future does not present itself in the brightest colours, one can argue that this positive vision presented by solarpunk is essential to balance out the adversely pessimistic present. The ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, instability of the European Union, restrictions of reproductive rights in many countries around the world, ubiquitous threats to the independence of the judiciary systems, or, as listed by Rinkesh Kukreja from conserve-energy-future.com, exceptionally violent weather conditions, air pollution, soil degradation, global warming, overpopulation, natural resource depletion, waste disposal, deforestation, acid rain, and overfishing (Kukreja 1) are only some of the problems humanity is currently facing. Therefore, not

surprisingly, many people's thoughts have turned to narratives of the apocalypse rather than recovery and as "horror and tragedy are everywhere in our reality and mainstream media, they're often in our entertainment as well" (Sylver 1). Similarly, while humans destroy the planet, solarpunk's 'punk' predecessors, such as cyberpunk, steampunk, dieselpunk, decopunk, atompunk, and nanopunk, depict a hypothetical vision of the future that is characterized by pessimism.

Roots

In place of the pessimistic narrative solarpunk imagines "a solar system in which humanity has found a way to be responsible with its environment" (Dincher in Wagner and Wieland 8). It searches "for a more positive, sustainable, and realistic view of humanity's near-future" (Kobold 1), and emphasises "that humans can learn to live in harmony with the planet once again" (Valentine and Callebaut 1). Solarpunk focuses not only on being more eco-friendly but also on implementing the main principles of nature into reality. Drawing on discourses of gender and sexuality as well as race and colonialism it underscores the organisation of social life according to archaically established rules as outdated and insufficient.

Furthermore, solarpunk presents an unconventional approach to the literary form and creates a complex structure of shared imagination. Its peculiarity is related to the cultural space it occupies, as "much of solarpunk happens outside the published stories" on "numerous blog posts, Tumblr pages, and online discussion groups dedicated to the subgenre" (Williams 7). Therefore, it fits into the aesthetics formed by (and for) a generation for which the Internet and social media are part of everyday life. Moreover, due to the community-centred principles of the Internet, creativity of solarpunk has a collaborative structure that invites everyone to contribute and participate in the process of its development. Such a characteristic makes it more cooperative and encourages

a more diversified form of participation in shaping our attitudes to the natural environment.

Utopianism and New Forms of Social Organisation

Even though vision of equality depicted in solarpunk might seem somehow utopian, its utopianism is different from the sugarcoated version of it presented in other creative movements. It is not utopian in a negative sense, as it does not create a “perfect” place without considering present obstacles and social conditions that limit personal autonomy and sexual expression. It approaches the concept of utopia regarding it as a constant augmentation, which considers possible threats humanity might face in the future. Solarpunk describes a world where perpetual amendments should be implemented as often as possible because society is not unchangeable. This importance of progress is emphasised, for example, in Lev Mirov’s “The Desert, Blooming” (2017) where “[t]he work is never finished...But at least it is begun” (Mirov 114) or in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Dispossessed*, where “[c]hange is freedom, change is life” (139). By focusing on change and relating it to ecology and the climate crisis, solarpunk accentuates the importance of action. Instead of portraying the sullen, hopeless version of the future, solarpunk authors search for newer possibilities of revolutionary methods of organising society and its relation to nature.

The interest of solarpunk in a new social order is inspired by Murray Bookchin’s theory of social ecology which emphasises the necessity of replacing human tendencies to dominate over one another with a more progressive approach inspired by ecology, where variety and cooperation are prioritised. According to Bookchin, “to create a truly rational and ecological society, we must nourish the insights provided by reason to create a sense of a shared humanity that is bound neither by gendered outlooks nor by beliefs in deities,” which he identifies as “merely anthropomorphic projections of our own beings and sensibilities” (101). This critique of anthropomorphism and equality

proposed by Bookchin seem to align with ideas presented by two transcendentalist writers—Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson—over a hundred years earlier. In his famous *Walden*, Thoreau points out the delight of an “equal simplicity, and (...) innocence, with Nature herself” (1892: 139) and “a strange liberty” one feels when “the whole body is one sense” in Nature (1892: 201). Moreover, in his journals, he rejects the idea that “the proper study of mankind is man,” and indicates the necessity to “take wider views of the universe” (Thoreau 1962 [1852]: 369). For Emerson alike, nature is agentic, and it manifests in “the commodity” or “all those advantages which our senses owe to nature” (Emerson 128), that it makes “itself available or accessible to men” (Guthrie 73). He also draws a connection between spirituality, which we may understand as the inner self, and nature, claiming that “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (Emerson 134). Solarpunk, similarly to transcendentalists’ writings from the nineteenth century and Bookchin’s social ecology of the twentieth century, reaches beyond solipsistic aspirations and redefines the position of a human in relation to the rest of the ecosystem. Following Bookchin’s proposed dialectic “to find the unifying threads that overcome the disjunctions between nonhuman and human nature” (1) and to define human’s “place in nature” (141). Solarpunk focuses on a need to “redefine (...) the position of humans in our biosphere” (Meyers 188) and to go beyond the human-nonhuman distinction. In solarpunk literature, this surmounting over human/nonhuman distinction and the re-evaluation of humans’ position in nature can be found in Camille Meyers’s “Solar Child”, where the necessity to “redefine (...) the position of humans in our biosphere” (Meyers 188) reaches “beyond coping with the current hot and toxic state of our planet” (Meyers 188) and a daily struggle to survive. Moreover, this somehow realistic clinging to hope for a better tomorrow, that characterises and distinguishes solarpunk among other

speculative movements, is present in *Dust* by Daniel José Older, where the narrator emphasises “there will be another [moment], better one in the not too distant future” (Older 70). Based on that hope, instead of serving the sullen, hopeless version of the future, it tries to reason and look for other possibilities for social and ecological organisation.

Ecological Revolution

In the preface to the first solarpunk anthology ever published, *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (2014), Sarena Ulibarri refers to a conversation she had with the editor of the book, Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro. Asked why he had chosen to work with solarpunk, he replied that “it was the right time to write stories in self-sustaining fictional civilisations” (Lodi-Ribeiro and Ulibarri 1) and that it does not matter where those worlds would be located as “greener and more inspiring futures or timelines not troubled by pollution, overpopulation, famine, mass extinctions and anthropogenic global warming” are needed everywhere (Lodi-Ribeiro and Ulibarri 1). Alongside describing a greener version of the future, solarpunk foregrounds the “ideals of community, care, and humility” (Williams 6), which “are prized above economic growth or competition” (Williams 6). With the emphasis on the benefit of a community over competition, the movement calls for the revolution in socio-political terms and focuses on egalitarian systems with tendencies towards social anarchism, where personal independence aligns with the benefits of society. Accordingly, an ideal civilisation in solarpunk would be “prior to the individual in the sense that each individual enters society in a condition of utmost dependence” (Baldelli 90). Acknowledging this relation between the society and the individual indicates that “actions of one person can be of great importance to society” (Stokka 4) and supports the participatory aspect of this subgenre. Moreover, it also reflects a society that grows on “a desire for a socially just and ecologically harmonious social organisation” (Williams 6). As the ecological aspect of peaceful social

arrangements is highlighted, solarpunk emphasises how the environment and ecology are essential for people. For example, in “Riot of the Wind and Sun” by Jennifer Lee Rossman, the narrator emphasises that nothing can survive without the sun as it “gave life to the Earth; [n]urtured her with light and warmth and made her vibrant and beautiful [...] its light was transformed into energy that brought warmth and life to the most inhospitable caverns” (35). This relation to nature can be reflected in accentuation solarpunk put towards morality and conscious co-habitation of people and the planet. For instance, Camille Meyers’s “Solar Child” concludes with a statement that “who we are does not come from what we are, but from what we do” (194) concerning the unexpected outcome of genetic manipulations conducted throughout the story.

Examples of Gender Equality from Solarpunk

Another revolutionary aspect of solarpunk is related to the concept of the human body and acceptance of diversity. Interestingly, its interest in gender equality might be an effect of promoting gender awareness today. Nowadays, an increasing number of people establish “nouns and pronouns to describe more genders” (Brauer 1) and provide “education about the differences between gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality, and asserting the rights of themselves and others to choose whether and how to align their self-identified gender and their gender expression” (Brauer 1). As solarpunk reaches into the future, its readers find a description of a different world, where society is already educated in terms of gender differences and follows egalitarian principles in adjusting their old methods of organisation. This interest in gender equality prevailed in solarpunk from the very beginning and partially derived from its predecessors’ focus on this issue. Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), one of most notable ancestors of solarpunk, describes a planet called Anarres, where the concept of gender has already gone through this restructuring process and where sexuality or monogamy is no longer the main objective in organising a society. The protagonist, Shevek, at the

beginning of the novel travels to a neighbouring planet, Urras, where the most popular assumption is that “what women call thinking is done with the uterus!” (Le Guin 63). Such a way of organising a society does not align with what he believes in, which is reflected in his statement that gender seems “a very mechanical basis for the division of labour” (17), and people should be able to choose their “work according to interest, talent, strength” (17). He also asks his colleague, Kimoe, “what has the sex to do with that?” (17). Shevek’s curiosity aligns with what solarpunk narratives are trying to achieve - by questioning the importance of sex in determining one’s occupation or capacities towards certain activities, it ironizes an archaically established social construct of gender.

Nearly four decades after *The Dispossessed*, in “Dust” by Daniel José Older, the readers can find a representation of gender fluidity where the anatomy of the protagonist’s (Jax) sexual organs changes regardless of his/her will. The story begins with Jax, who wakes up next to Arkex, his/her occasional lover, and realises that “[t]oday I’m a man too - very much so it turns out” (58). By using an element of unpredictability in this switch of genders, Older creates a complex character who does not fit “into the traditional stereotypes that SF generally squeezes non-binary people” (Stephens 1). Therefore, the story emphasises the uselessness of the archaically fixed binary norms, as they no longer play any particular role in a world where gender identity is unpredictable and creates a basis for a society that is more egalitarian than the current understanding of gender altogether.

In Jaymee Goh’s “A Field of Sapphires and Sunshine”, most of the pronouns in the protagonist’s language “were gender-neutral” (112), which also reflects how society was organised without a clear distinction of labour according to sex. Additionally, the story openly emphasises that the main character, Alina, is bisexual and fully accepted by her mother (113). As bisexuality “reveals sexuality to be a process of growth, transformation, and surprise, not a stable and knowable state of being” (Garber 66), Alina’s sexual orientation serves as a

commentary on the very nature of sexuality. In this understanding, sexuality is fluid and does not have limitations within the hetero/homosexual scheme of relationships. This mention of Alina's bisexuality allows readers to interpret "A Field of Sapphires and Sunshine" as a call for inclusivity and acceptance of sexualities from the outside of the "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 150).

In the following example, "Petrichor" (2015) by Megan Reynolds, readers can find traces of liberation in terms of sex, relationships, and gendered norms of organising the society. The story describes a relationship between Elena and Anabel which slowly grows more and more intimate. Their encounters are described in a series of chronologically ordered short scenes, starting with a flirtation and moving towards an intimate and romantic bond. Reynolds not only implements lesbian love as a contradistinction to the aforementioned obligatory heterosexuality but also describes one of Elena's closest friends, Cal, with a gender-neutral pronoun 'ne'. Moreover, the usage of gender-neutral pronouns "dissolves gender expectations and includes all individuals no matter their gender identity" (Milles in Senden et. al 3). Therefore, Cal functions as a model character and signals different forms of freedom encoded in language and social organisation. Freed from the responsibility to perform (Butler 183) male or female gender attributes, Cal envisions one of the many possibilities for an anticipated human of the future.

Another story that touches upon the theme of gender-neutral pronouns is "The Boston Hearth Project" (2017) by T.X. Watson. It starts with a series of email correspondence exchanged between Andie and the non-governmental organisation X.S.U. which operates in the "digital activism and human rights" (14) sector. Andie wants to apply for a job there but is concerned about the confidentiality of the application process, which confirms Andie's/the character's high level of awareness concerning issues related to cyber-security described later in the story. Interestingly, Andy uses gender-neutral pronouns 'zie/zir' with which the emails were signed. Along with Andie's retrospective description of zir earlier life and how zie uses gender-neutral pronouns,

readers get to know zir as an outstanding member of society. Moreover, due to zir views about hacking as a method to help people, it has been described as a “modern robin-hood story” (Stokka 13). In this context, zie not only represents oppressed minorities but also functions as a kind of a mimetic character representing the actual responses of society to different scenarios.

The above examples lead to a conclusion that solarpunk calls for a more progressive and egalitarian social organisation, where neither gender identity, nor gender division of labour, nor “sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler 186) would be a necessity. Based on the examples of gender-neutral pronouns found in “A Field of Sapphires and Sunshine”, “Petrichor”, or “The Boston Hearth Project”, non-heteronormative love from “A Field of Sapphires and Sunshine” and “Petrichor”, or a complete rejection of gender immutability and stability found in “Dust”, it may be concluded that solarpunk accentuates that achieving equality and freedom would require a new way of organising societies.

Conclusion

Despite being a very young trend in the speculative genre, solarpunk may be already considered crucial for presenting images of a possible future version of humanity. It asks serious questions and wonders whether people can achieve sustainability, and, if so, how it would look and when it can be achieved. By portraying a general acceptance of all genders and relationships, solarpunk encourages the creation of an equal society. Moreover, it accentuates a belief in a future of humanity, hope for a better tomorrow, and a change, which we have to undergo as a society. It focuses on people and, as Adam Flynn has stated in his “Solarpunk: Notes toward a manifesto” (2014), presents a speculative version of “a future with a human face and dirt behind its ears” (1). Despite its utopianism, it has a chance to influence the anticipated image of the future, where gender equality would be possible. Examples from Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, Camille Meyers’s “Solar Child”, Daniel José Older’s “Dust”, Jaymee

Goh's "A Field of Sapphires and Sunshine", T.X. Watson's "The Boston Hearth Project", and Megan Reynolds's "Petrichor" examined in this paper illustrate a variety of some possible futures of humanity as presented in solarpunk literature. Additionally, by referring to "The Desert, Blooming" by Lev Mirov I emphasised the positive aspect of solarpunk utopianism that depends on change and progress, instead of being a fictitious and laudable paradise. This particular characteristic of the movement is especially crucial in the context of the gloomy future of the planet mentioned in the introduction. It brings out hope and inspiration for applying more unbiased and impartial regulations toward a civilisation that creates a more sustainable, welcoming, and accepting world.

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Abstract

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