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Political Theory as Speculative Climate Fiction: Near Futures in *Half-Earth Socialism* and *Desert*

A slew of works in political climate theory have exhibited a tendency of late to explicitly deploy modes of speculative fictional storytelling more commonly associated with literary science fiction. Rather than treating such moves as illustrative and accessible accoutrements for communicating heady philosophical ideas, I contend that these fictional forays into speculative near futures are better read as animating forces in their larger discourses. I focus on two treatises, *Half-Earth Socialism* (2022) and *Desert* (2011), which project competing climate futures from two distinct yet related leftist political traditions. I show that interrogating political theory through the lens of literary criticism discloses the role of fictionalization, genre, poetics, and literary history in imagining alternative political regimes and avenues of action in response to the climate crisis. It also opens up new angles from which to reconsider the efficacy, role, and function of literary ecocriticism within the wider interdisciplinary project of the environmental humanities.

Keywords: political theory; climate change; speculative futures; ecocriticism; ecotopia

Mark Coeckelbergh opens his book *Green Leviathan or The Poetics of Political Liberty* (2021) with a brief foray into the genre of science fiction: A prisoner, locked up for several decades for engaging in an act of climate sabotage, is released into what first appears to be an ecotopia.[1] It is not long, however, before the troubling sacrifice made to achieve this climate salvation begins to dawn upon Coeckelbergh's unnamed protagonist: "the loss of human freedom" (1). An AI-enabled monitoring device strapped upon him to "care for his well-being" (2) during his incarcera-

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tion has been dispersed throughout the social body. Every citizen now goes through life accompanied by an AI agent which 'nudges' (and, if necessary, coerces) them into acting sustainably. The result is "an electronic panopticon" in which "AI was given absolute power in the interest of the planet and in the interest of humanity" (1). This, in the name of "a green utopia, a Brave New World that turned out to be a new prison" (2). Coeckelbergh's "mini story" (8) thus claims a forerunner in Aldous Huxley's celebrated novel while serving as a provocative hook that quickly and efficiently introduces readers to the central political and philosophical issues tackled by *Green Leviathan*: namely, the tension which arises between the need for regimes to manage human behavior on a quickly warming globe and the particular poetics of freedom that have tended to preoccupy Western political thought.

Coeckelbergh's brief fable typifies a tendency exhibited in certain recent works of political theory on climate change to dabble in speculative modalities native to science fiction. This, perhaps, is not very surprising. Science fiction, after all, has long been celebrated as a form of thought-experiment, laboratories of the imagination in which writers and readers work through anxieties about the future. And yet, when literary scholars approach works of political and social theory, it is often not to treat them as primary resources demanding analysis, but rather as secondary sources from which insights or concepts may be mined. As Sophia Hatzisavvidou notes, "[s]cholarship on how speculative knowledges can contribute to envisioning sustainable futures is thriving" (1). However, "[t]here is less attention to the specific ways in which political theory as speculative knowledge is relevant to these scholarly discussions" (1).

While Hatzisavvidou turns to a novel, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* (2020), so as to read "climate fiction as political theory" (5), I turn this formulation on its head and read political theories for the ways in which they generate, leverage, and even ground themselves in speculative fictions. This requires us to rethink certain assumptions about the role of fiction in ostensibly non-fictional works of political theory. There is a tendency to think of digressions into speculative fiction found in works of political theory as useful accoutrements, colorful but ultimately gratuitous ways of illustrating complex concepts and arguments. Such fictions may be presumed to be highly motivated, somewhat instrumental means for framing, humanizing, or exemplifying problems or solutions which more fundamentally belong to the "loftier" realms of concepts and argumentation. Often, they seem rehearsed so as to be scrutinized by the self-same author(s) who fabricated them: a peculiar kind of

self-serving analysis usually orientated more around themes than other aspects of literariness. And indeed, many such tales would not hold up to sustained literary scrutiny. It is probably for precisely this reason that literary scholars practicing in the field of ecocriticism still largely (although not exclusively) continue to focus on self-described works of literature rather than turn their critical gaze upon ostensibly 'non-fictional' works of political theory.

Even so, any scholar of literature or cultural studies worth their salt (as well as many self-reflexive political and social theorists) would quickly recognize that all works of social or political theory (indeed, non-fiction more broadly) engage, however opaquely, in a certain degree of fictionalization and even poeticism. Olli Pyyhtinen, for example, readily admits that not only do "there exist points of mutual resonance between art and social theory, and the insights and discoveries of each can be translated in a fruitful manner to the domain of the other" (2) but that "there may also be a poetics or fiction to be uncovered in sociological scholarship" (5). Even climatological forecasting requires some degree of narrative storytelling. As Bradon Smith writes,

> The standard tools employed to apprehend the future of climate – computer models, scenario planners, and foresight analysts – are, I would argue, not only cultural mediations but various forms of speculation, indeed of speculative fiction. [...] Through various media, they tell stories about possible futures; in some cases, these productive fictions tell a story about the future in hopes that doing so will bring it about. (138)

And yet, such realizations tend to fall by the wayside when it comes to the debates which such works summon forth. This is even more so when we are discussing not just self-described works of cli-fi or sci-fi literature, but texts which understand themselves primarily as non-fictions, yet self-consciously project imaginary speculative futures.

I contend that literary and cultural scholars need to pay greater critical attention to works of not only hegemonic or conservative, but also radical political, social, and even climatological non-fiction which speculate about, and in doing so lay some of the groundwork for, our climate fu-

tures.[2] Criticism can be the handmaiden of more self-conscious political theorizing, and thus more inspiring political storytelling. To this end, the current effort turns to two works of political theory which engage both critically and creatively with modes of dystopian and utopian speculative storytelling: the anonymously published anarchist manifesto *Desert* (2011) as well as Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass's treatise *Half-Earth Socialism* (2022). In doing so, I seek to tease out the role of literary history and fictional speculation in each. Even though these works share many core leftist political values and presumptions, they also represent two distinct poles in terms of their levels of relative hopefulness for averting catastrophe. *Desert* is a work of anti-civilizational anarcho-pessimism which eschews the hope of messianic climate salvation and instead urges environmentalists and anarchists to focus less on grandiose missions to save the world and more on targeted interventions and subversive practices of desertion. *Half-Earth Socialism* on the other hand projects an essentially technocratic solution to the climate crisis vis-à-vis a rehabilitation of centralized planning, yet seems fundamentally unable or uninterested in thinking through the revolutionary social transformations necessary to achieve such ends, let alone the pitfalls they open up. If the former projects a continuation of politics-as-usual into climate dystopia and concerns itself with imagining ways of securing freedom and resistance nevertheless, the latter imagines a global socialist utopia which bends humanity's 'collective will' towards the avoidance of catastrophe. In each, speculative storytelling in either the dystopian or utopian mode serves not merely as an accoutrement, but rather anchors their thinking.

Extending the scope of our objects to encompass forms of textual production which literary analysis would traditionally find odd may entail the feeling that one is stepping on the feet of allies in rooms where literary and cultural critics may not feel immediately competent. This is especially so when one is otherwise sympathetic to the ethos of the works under interrogation. Americanists in particular may feel out of their depth when dealing with texts which not only address truly global concerns

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2   To be sure, such an approach is not without precedent. Practitioners of the environmental or energy humanities could trace such treatments at least as far back as works like Imre Szeman's analysis of Retort's *Afflicted Powers* (2005) in his celebrated essay "System Failure" (2007), if not earlier. That said, I contend that more such work needs to be directed not only at dominant, residual, and emergent metanarratives, but at the specific ways in which thinkers construct speculative narratives which aim to influence the future of radical climate politics.

such as climate change, but which furthermore draw inspiration from an international assortment of intellectual and cultural histories. That said, the situation is too urgent to respect the disciplinary walls which, in spite of institutionalized rhetorics of interdisciplinarity and transnationalism, still too often divide us. This entails both drawing from as well as reconsidering the practices, approaches, objects, and assumptions most usually dealt with in literary ecocriticism, and to which we now turn.

Ecocriticism at its Limits

In *Green Leviathan*, Coeckelbergh notes the importance of figurative language in philosophical thinking. Far from "a kind of 'illustration' of 'serious' concepts that can and should be carefully disentangled" he rather urges us to think of "metaphors [...] as *central* to philosophical work": "the use, examination, and critical discussion of metaphors belongs to the core business of philosophy, including political philosophy" (8). Here, we see one way in which literary critics can enter the game and bring something to the table in its discussions with political and social theorists. Indeed, practices such as this are in some ways nothing new, as literary treatments of ostensibly non-fictional scholarship have a vintage which goes back at least as far as deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Hayden White. Coeckelbergh, however, seems less interested in deconstructing the liberal political tradition than replenishing it with more "unusual metaphors" (8) arising from debates surrounding concepts such as the Anthropocene and posthumanism. This, as a means of recasting "politics and liberation into a 'poetic' project" (11).

It would not, I think, be inappropriate to read Coeckelbergh's project as a philosophical venture which, as a species of environmental humanities, overlaps with the terrain of literary ecocriticism. As Timothy Clark has noted, ecocriticism is "less the affirmation of an established body of literary work" and

> more the continuous articulation and theorisation of a crisis of value [...]. At issue is the gradual and uncomfortable realisation of just how deeply inherited modes of thinking and reading are contaminated by a destructive anthropocentrism, that is, the assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else acquires value. (Clark, *Value* 14)

One of the functions of ecocriticism is to 'invent' its own tradition by identifying, selecting, and interpreting texts, and in doing so trace out

both a field of investigation, generate a common scholarly project, and bootstrap into existence an otherwise disparate tradition of literary production ranging from nature poems to sabotage novels. It thereby shapes an alternative canon oriented around explicitly normative and political goals. Such revisions only sometimes result in a widening – let alone an explosion – of more established canons: "Just as in a previous generation a frequent formula for the revaluation of old texts was 'x and women'[…] now 'x and the environment' becomes a source of new PhD projects or book titles" (Clark, *Value* 14). Although there is now an impressive diversity of work done under the rubric of ecocriticism, "its intense focus on the cultural feeds into an arguable weakness in much ecocriticism, that of projecting the view that environmental destruction rests entirely on false values or intellectual mistakes" (Clark, *Value* 15). In this sense, ecocriticism has the tendency to bracket questions of material relations and difficult questions of *Realpolitik* in favor of an emphasis on how "a change in cultural values can lead to less destructive forms of life" (Clark, *Value* 4). Changing values requires more than a plea for empathy; it means projecting persuasive visions of alternative futures capable of compelling otherwise apathetic audiences into action. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), Clark calls this ecocriticism's "intractable question […] *how far does a change in knowledge and imagination entail a change in environmentally destructive modes of life?*" (18, emphasis in original).

If literary scholars seek to recalibrate values or provide platforms for environmentalist ideas and ideals, they must also think seriously about how to address material and political questions of power, resistance, revolution, and radical social transformation. It is for this reason that scholars in adjacent fields such as the energy humanities have not only extended their methodological breadth but have also widened the universe of texts and cultural objects put under the critical microscope, including journalistic, legislative, judicial, and administrative documents. Works of climatological forecasting and speculative political theorizing are not absent from this list, but they are less frequently centered as objects of primary analysis than drawn upon, treated as armories to be looted for applicable facts and concepts rather than as artifacts to be put under the microscope of literary analysis. However, since such works often engage in speculative storytelling, it behooves ecocritics to foreground and interrogate their literariness, even (perhaps especially) when they may already be predisposed to approach such work with sympathy or deference.

If ecocriticism tends to engage in a primarily liberal-democratic project of persuasion largely aimed at shifting values through communicative

action (a project whose presumed potency is currently under interrogation by the burgeoning field of empirical ecocriticism), it leaves itself susceptible to recuperation or may be drowned out in the mass rigamarole of competing interests vying for attention in an ever more rancorous and fragmented public sphere. Alternatives may lie in political traditions which are fundamentally skeptical of effecting change through liberal commitments to expression, persuasion, and procedural justice. Some in this vein, such as Andreas Malm, have reluctantly championed rejuvenating communist traditions of "war communism" and "just terror" which he esteems increasingly unavoidable the longer renewable transitions are delayed (188). Similarly, authors such as Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann have speculated about the emergence of a state-centric "climate Mao" regime which, while sidestepping a "climate Leviathan" regime which preserves capitalism or a "climate Behemoth" movement based upon right-wing religious or ethno-populist appeals, would likely resort to a brutal authoritarian (5–6).[3] Such possibilities risk stomping their boots upon fundamental values of freedom and equality in the name of climate salvation. Setting these aside, we are left with political philosophies that occupy a fourth "anti-capitalist, anti-sovereign" (5) position Wainwright and Mann designate as "climate X": positions which sidestep illiberal authoritarianism to overthrow entrenched systems of national sovereignty and state capitalism (15). These, broadly speaking, are anarchism and socialism.

Socialism and anarchism come in a variety of often intermixed flavors. If socialism tends to focus on capturing the state and the means of production in order to establish a fundamentally egalitarian and democratic approach to economic planning and distribution, anarchism is at once sympathetic to such egalitarianism and fundamentally skeptical of state power for its ever-looming propensity to trample human freedom. However, they both generally view political and social conditions under the ravages of capitalism as fundamentally dystopian. While both subvert state-sponsored capitalism's claims to liberal enlightenment and progress by pointing to its clandestine dystopian undersides, anarchists, especially those suspicious that civilization itself is inherently corrupt and corrupting, worry not only that the egalitarianism arising from state-power would prove hollow, but that it would additionally be forced to continue

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[3]   Notable here are not only allusions to Thomas Hobbes's political treatise *Leviathan* (1651), but also the source of these terminologies in Biblical mythology, a literary origin of which Wainwright and Mann are distinctly aware and explicitly thematize.

ravaging nature in order to fuel the means of production, possibly at the demand of the masses. Thus, protecting values such as liberty and equality while preserving the fragile integrity of the Earth system requires more than just an emphasis on 'right-minded' values, but also aspirational visions of meaningful alternative social configurations and practices, as well as credible pathways for achieving them. This requires not only political analysis but also a literary sensitivity to narrative, rhetoric, and aesthetics. Here, the speculative imagination, alongside critical sensibility, enter the game.

Imagining a Modest Utopia: *Half-Earth Socialism*

Troy Vettese and Drew Pendergrass's *Half-Earth Socialism* opens in a future on the verge of disaster. The year is 2047, and humanity's attempts to solve the climate crisis through a mix of technocratic solutioneering and neoliberal finance have locked the earth into a spiral of calamities. Having attempted to stave off increasingly destructive weather events by shooting sulfuric mist into the sky, they find that such attempts at solar radiation management "could not simply be switched off" even though it is eating away at the ozone layer, since "the high concentrations of greenhouse gases will heat the atmosphere all at once" (2), leading to termination shock. Catastrophe bonds have been introduced to compensate poor nations affected by climate disasters, a form of financial "greenwashing" which, it turns out, often fails to pay out in time, if at all (3). The introduction of carbon pricing has failed to disincentivize energy usage, as energy efficiency is offset by a complimentary increase in energy demand (4–5). These and other attempts at "green capitalism" fail to find "'win-win' solutions for both business and nature" (5). Even as it becomes clear that energy quotas and veganism will need to be imposed, governments decide that "[i]mposing such inconveniences was political suicide" (5): "The market could sell both the poison and its antidote, but cared little about the right ratio of the two" (6). As such, not only does inequality continue to rise, but the most predictably vulnerable populations continue to fall prey to capitalist predations and climate externalities, many of which are only worsened by attempts at manipulating nature via eco-technical interventions: "geoengineering, it seems, has always been a form of planetary class war" (3). The impact is not only economic and social, but changes the very aesthetic of nature: "in the core capitalist states […] quotidian life continues more or less as normal save for the

nearly permanent overcast weather. […] Many saw blue skies as an inevitable casualty of modernity, much like electrification's extinction of starry nights a century before" (3).

This dystopian projection is juxtaposed to *Half-Earth Socialism*'s ultimate commitment to installing in its stead a green utopia vis-à-vis global governance: "a countervailing positive vision for the future" which far from providing "the only possible solution for everything that ails the world today […] [i]s merely a start, a provocation, for a broader but more serious discussion about life after capitalism" (12). Aiming to restore traditions of socialist planning long bedeviled by neoliberal hegemony, the authors propose "reviving the utopian socialist tradition" (18) vis-à-vis a "new ecosocialism […] based on the unknowability of nature" (19). Recognizing "the difficult trade-offs such a society would have to navigate" (20), they place the conservationist idea of rewilding half of the earth at the center of their vision (19). However, they insist that the resulting society needs to avoid the paternalist and colonialist impulses which usually motivate such proposals as they tend to burden poor and Indigenous people. "Half-Earth must be socialist" (74), and thus "a feasible utopia is one where its costs are democratically appraised rather than hidden by the pseudorational measure of money" (84). This will entail rewilding massive amounts of land currently used for animal farming to decarbonize the agricultural system (75–78).

Perhaps more important than these particular policy proposals, however, is Vettese and Pendergrass's insistence on utopian thinking: "leading proposals offered by the environmental establishment today […] are insufficient not because of any technical shortcomings (though there are many) but because of their lack of utopian imagination" (60). Central to this problem is their inability to connect their proposals to "any rigorous critique of contemporary political economy, as if the environmental crisis could be understood in isolation from the structure of the society that caused it" (60–61). Notably, the utopian tradition Vettese and Pendergrass draw upon is neither necessarily socialist nor primarily technical. Instead, it arises mostly from the realm of fiction. While the authors discuss key political thinkers who influenced the intellectual history of both socialist planning and neoliberal critiques thereof, they also explicitly draw inspiration from more literary sources ranging from Plato's dialogues in *The Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974).

This literary tradition is most evident in the book's final chapter. Entitled "News from 2047," the chapter is grounded in a conceit any Americanist will be familiar with: its protagonist, William Guest (a moniker borrowed from Morris's utopian socialist novel), falls asleep and awakens in true "Rip Van Winkle" fashion to a world wholly transformed in the wake of a political and economic revolution. However, whereas the protagonist of Washington Irving's famous short story falls asleep in a sleepy corner of a colonial village in the Catskills and awakens to a bustling consumer society governed as a republic, William awakens on a Massachusetts farming commune in the wake of a global green socialist revolution. If Irving's short story enlisted fantasy in the name of a triumphalist American present, Vettese and Pendergrass project a future in which national distinctions have been subsumed by a green globalist victory over crass nationalist chauvinisms.

The rest of "News from 2047" is heavy on exposition and light on plot, as its goal is less to thrill than to put minds at ease: The new world is not an industrial nightmare governed by an ironfisted single-party communism, but instead a collection of relatively sleepy communes. Using supercomputers powered by a constant flow of big data, central planners project a series of broadly desirable future scenarios before devolving the authority for realizing their "coarse plans" to democratically-elected local and regional councils (140–142). Working hours and conditions are far from onerous, and decided in consultation with local workers' councils; those who wish to earn additional benefits can choose to work in factories which produce solar panels and are remunerated through perks like larger residences, shorter work weeks, and resort vacations (155). In this way, incentives and differing preferences are accommodated to some degree. Food production is primarily (although not exclusively) local; the protagonist is educated on the "Three Sisters" method of growing maize, beans, and winter squash together to maximize soil and resource sustainability, a method borrowed from Native American agricultural practices (161).

Far from an accelerationist's pipe-dream of fully-automated luxury communism which would inevitably burn through nature's resources at an unsustainable pace, this is a modest utopia. There are energy quotas and widespread veganism, but all needs are met, all work is meaningful, and the economy is driven by intentional, data-rich cost-benefit analysis of environmental impacts rather than colonial exploitation, naked profit maximization, and rent-seeking. This is not without consequence: there are often shortages of consumer appliances (159); one of the characters grumbles about the limited availability of steak (157–158). The goal how-

ever is not the realization of a fantasy world in which scarcity, disagreement, and difference are abolished, nor one of decadent idleness, but rather what they call (taking their cue from the subtitle of Morris's novel) an "*An Epoch of Rest*" (168) for both an exhausted planet and its exhausted denizens.

Although it would be easy to read "News from 2047" as a mere illustration of the heady arguments laid out in the rest of *Half-Earth Socialism*, I suspect that the line of motivation also runs the other way around; it is the utopian vision of an "epoch of rest" which motivates the desire to revive traditions of utopian socialist planning. "News from 2047" is not Great Literature (then again, such a pedestrian observation hardly makes for Great Criticism), but it has an earnestness to it. In this sense, "News from 2047" exhibits certain fundamental elements of what has come to be known as 'solarpunk' (although I am not sure that either Vettese or Pendergrass would cop to that label). As Phillip M. Crosby defines it, "solarpunk narratives imagine worlds that focus on the community rather than the individual, on environmental sustainability rather than environmental degradation, on social justice rather than subjugation and inequality, and on optimism rather than nihilism" (Crosby 82). Central to solarpunk is a focus on embedding technologies, powered by renewable energy sources like solar and wind, within pastoral human environments. Often asserting itself as an antidote to the cynicism of cyberpunk, solarpunk tends to embrace technology while eschewing dystopian aesthetics in favor of more pastoral settings. In this sense, one way to think of "News from 2047" (whatever its authors' intentions) is as a contribution to an as yet uncongealed solarpunk canon, one which attempts to move that nascent genre's needle more towards an explicitly political utopian socialism.

The mere act of projecting such utopias may be valuable in itself, but achieving them is another matter entirely. Whatever its merits, *Half-Earth Socialism* is surprisingly mute when it comes to questions of transformation or revolution, let alone the kinds of political and PR strategies (possibly even military ones) which would lay the groundwork necessary to achieve it. It offers neither a political strategy nor a fictional simulation for achieving rapid change. If recent political events in the USA and elsewhere have taught us anything, it is that pluralities of voters worry more about access to cheap consumer luxuries than ecological or social wellbeing, and most people are moved much less by technocratic simulations than grandiose narratives, charismatic leaders, and identitarian tribalism. Thus, it is unlikely that half-earth socialism will appear on the scene anytime soon, at least not through peaceful means. Questions of

political organization and vanguardist planning therefore come immediately to the fore, but are largely sidestepped.

This is not to discredit the wisdom or, frankly, calming beauty of the vision Vettese and Pendergrass put forth: "Far too often," they perceptively note "the Left has been better at critique than creating its own positive visions" (21). Positive visions are indeed necessary if any leftist program is to remain viable, electorally or otherwise. As such, their goal is to lay seeds which may yet "develop into a total alternative to capitalism, including everything from a plan for resource allocation to an outline of what life will *feel* like" (21). In this sense, *Half-Earth Socialism* is best read as an attempt, however successful, to push past the ideological constraints imposed by "capitalist realism" (a la Mark Fisher) and imagine a post-capitalist world. In this sense, it throws into question whether Fredric Jameson's contention that "[i]t seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (xii) is still tenable. While the forces exerted on all sides by neoliberal capitalism (not to mention the reactionary populism which increasingly advertises itself as neoliberalism's antidote) no doubt deeply compromise our political imaginations, I suspect that what troubles us most is not our inability to imagine utopias, but rather the realization we can never stop imagining them. This, however, does not doom us to impotence, but rather is the very condition of our agency.

That said, one must wonder whether such visions are enough on their own to effect large-scale change. Again, we run up against Clark's intractable question. Powerful anti-capitalist imaginaries still find it difficult to gain airtime, let alone traction, in a media ecosystem drowning under the vast, exponentially expanding, and algorithmically amplified seas of increasingly sludge-like wealth porn which floods both digital and traditional entertainment channels. In this context, one must also worry that some of the techno-utopian proposals Vettese and Pendergrass offer run the risk of substituting our contemporary moment of surveillance capitalism with an equally pervasive system of surveillance socialism. Thus, we may not be wrong in bracing ourselves, emotionally and practically, for a leftist politics capable of navigating a much less rosy future. We may hold out hope for the advent of an ecotopia which realizes an epoch of rest, but we might also be sensible in priming ourselves for a future foray into the desert.

Anarchism in Dystopian Times: *Desert*

Clark notes the tendency for ecocritical work to highlight "the need to focus on environmental issues at larger, often truly global scales, and the challenge to inventiveness which questions of scale and complexity represent for inherited aesthetic forms" (*Value* 15). The anonymously authored treatise *Desert* is inherently skeptical of meaningfully addressing such global scales. Evincing a kind of post-ecological anarcho-pessimism, *Desert* laments:

> Global anarchist revolution is not going to happen. Global climate change is now unstoppable. We are not going to see the worldwide end to civilisation/capitalism/patriarchy/authority. It's not going to happen any time soon. It's unlikely to happen ever. (1)

Similarly, Clark wonders: "is it too late for environmental criticism in any case? It is now widely acknowledged that human actions have, inadvertently, already triggered a profound and irreversible change in the operations of the Earth system" (*Value* 11). *Desert* affirms this bleak outlook:

> while the details may vary the inexorable direction of much of the science seems to be that we are probably heading to a considerably hotter earth, and fast. Recent observations put us further down the road than many of us thought even a few years ago. [...] Combined with inertia around reducing carbon emissions this makes the chances of stopping massive climate change probably rather slight. (7)

Desert notes that "[o]ne recurring theme in environmentalism is that the apocalypse is always imminent but forever deferred. Every generation seems to have one last chance to save the planet" (6). Nowadays, however, "apocalypses feel more and more like unfolding realities. [...] Farming has already replaced wilderness on an estimated 40% of the earth's land surface so for the animals, insects, peoples, and plants it replaced, the apocalypse has already come" (38). *Desert* thus argues that in the face of these realities a naive "hope for a Big Happy Ending" to the challenge of climate change ultimately only

> hurts people; sets the stage for the pain felt when they become disillusioned. Because, truly, who amongst us now really believes? How many have been burnt up by the effort needed to reconcile a fundamentally religious faith in the positive transformation of the world with the reality of life all around us? (1)

And yet, *Desert* argues that this disillusionment can be paradoxically liberatory: "to be disillusioned – with global revolution/with our capacity to stop climate change – should not alter our anarchist nature, or the love of nature we feel as anarchists. There are many possibilities for liberty and wildness still" (1).

In many ways, *Desert* projects a vision of the future which is fundamentally dystopian. Yet, as with many dystopian narratives, repression gives rise to an ultimately ennobling resistance:

> The tide of Western authority will recede from much, though by no means all of the planet. A writhing mess of social flotsam and jetsam will be left in its wake. Some patches of lived anarchy, some horrible conflicts, some empires, some freedoms, and of course, unimaginable weirdness. As states recede and 'fail' – through entropy, stupidity, revolution, internal conflict, climate stress – people will continue to dig, sow, herd and live – most, admittedly, in vastly more challenging climates, and few with the guarantee of a peaceful life. In many places commodified land will be reclaimed as commons and new communities will be formed by refugees from the collapsed economies. Anarchic societies – old and new – will need to defend their liberty and lives, through avoidance, arms, flight and 'outwitting the state.' (21)

Skeptical of "millenarian and progressive myths […] at the very core of the expansion of power" (55), *Desert* abandons "visions of salvation" (51) rooted in pie-in-the-sky hopes for global revolution or technocratic solutioneering. Instead, it maps out "present and plausible futures whilst calling for a desertion from old illusions and unwinnable battles in favour of the possible" while calling us to "individually and collectively desert the cause of class society/civilization" (55).

The term desert, then, is polysemic – one of Coeckelbergh's "unusual metaphors" (8) for an ambivalent future. It refers not only to liberatory practices of psychological and political desertion, but also to the wastelands left in the wake of civilizational overexpansion via the exhaustion of nature as well as the vibrant, living landscapes of tundra and dune which either survive or take hold in their wake. These in turn serve as spaces for escaping and resisting the imperial encroachments of evermore insecure, and thus evermore repressive, capitalist security states:

> as the planet hots [sic] up we should remember the nomadic freedoms of the herders and foragers, the refugia of aboriginal peoples and renegade drop-outs, the widening habitats of desert flora and fauna. That arid zones will expand brings positive possibilities as well as sadness for the dimin-

ished, often previously vibrant, ecosystems. There can still be a beautiful flowering in the desert. (Anonymous 25).

Kasia Paprocki and Jason Cons write:

> Time, dystopian narratives tell us, is growing short. What we can do with the time we have left is limited. Yet, dystopia is more than a manifestation of nihilism – the collapse of utopian possibility under the contradictions of progress. Dystopia swaps a new telos for an old. It projects new normative frames that structure the terrain of the possible. Often, these normative frames are eerily resonant.

In *Desert*, we see not only an illustration of their point, but also an interesting turn of the tables; time is indeed growing short, and ideas of progress prove themselves thin ideological veils. Yet the *telos* proposed here does not point forward: It points backwards, towards Indigenous and nomadic forms of existence which predate the ravages of empire, civilization, and capital. Resistance arises not from techno-futuristic aspirations but, somewhat romantically, are inspired by past stages of social development. These provide the blueprint for more sustainable lifeways which can be adopted to resist state-capitalist incursions even in the wake of climate catastrophes.

Rather than taking its cues from traditions of utopian literature as *Half-Earth Socialism* does, *Desert* finds inspiration in traditions of lyricism.[4] *Desert* cites Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," lines from Auden's *Fall of Rome*, the Turkmen poet Seidi, the American poet Kenneth Rexroth, and lyrics by the California-based folk-punk band Blackbird Raum which variously wallow in the victory of nature over empire, the indifference of nature to the affairs of men, the freedom and beauty offered by desert plains, and escape from the shackles of civilization. It thus bootstraps a literary ecology which roots its alternative *telos* of history in a cyclical process through which civilizations rise and collapse, engendering a return to nature. The invention of such a "usable past" (Brooks 339) is far from utopian, as it rejects narratives of linear progress. But neither is it sufficiently written off as a mere surrender to nihilistic eco-apocalypticism.

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4   One must assume it is also inspired by earlier anarchist works which thematized either desertion or anthropogenic desertification, including the work of Piotr Kropotkin. I am grateful to Anja Lind for bringing this possible *homage* to my attention. For more, I suggest Mike Davis's "The Coming Desert: Kropotkin, Mars, and the Pulse of Asia."

Instead, *Desert* urges us to move forward by identifying targets, strategies, and tactics on much more manageable immediate and local scales of resistance. Deserting the scale of the global or the teleology of utopia need not mean a desertion of climate politics altogether. *Desert* suggests myriad blueprints for living anarchically and advocates forms of direct action while tempering our expectations of their potency:

> Strikes and syndicalism may not be steps towards a future anarchocommunism but may aid survival in the here and now and open up time in which to live better. Riots may not lead to revolution, but they can break the social spell for many […] the 'weapons of the weak' are the ones they have, not the ones they dream of. (51)

To achieve this, *Desert* suggests a clever rhetorical strategy of reframing "disadvantages into advantages" (41). Although anarchists are few in number, this fact also makes them "better able concentrate on those battles that most reflect our ethics" (42). The sad fact that budgets for conservation are quite trifling also means that "small amounts of outside money […] have a significant impact if carefully targeted" (42). All in all, the fact that "[o]ne can't really make the situation much worse" (43) since "climate change is probably now the context in which ecological struggles are fought, not a subject against which one can struggle" (44) makes damage control much more practical, meaningful, and indeed urgent than heroic, world-wide efforts at wholesale climate salvation. In sum, the speculative near future *Desert* predicts is already upon us, pregnant in the present world in which we already live. Whatever humanity's fate, "[n]ature's incredible power to re-grow and flourish" continuously defies the "anthropocentric thinking of those who would profit from the present or attempt to plan the future" (44). The most ambiguous advantage lies thus in a bleak truism which deserts human hubris altogether: Whatever else happens, "nature bats last" (44).

Neither Dystopia Nor Utopia

Is there a way to reconcile the utopian socialist and anarcho-pessimist orientations which underly the futures envisioned by *Half-Earth Socialism* and *Desert* without hitching one's horse to either? In *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal* (2021), Rodrigo Nunes attempts to "escape binary thinking" (16) between activists who favor more anarchist-inspired horizontalist approaches to political organizing and those who insist upon the neces-

sity of a more Leninist-inspired verticalism. Just as "debates on the left" tend "to pitch conceptual pairs" (13) against each other, we have a tendency to imagine speculative futures as either utopian or dystopian. Nunes instead argues for an approach which does away with such binary thinking: "Not only could one be critical of horizontalism without having to become a verticalist […]. It was possible to take (sometimes opposing) questions raised in both traditions seriously without having to choose between them" (16). This entails a shift away from "defined boundaries" towards "the concept of organizational ecology" (14) by thinking "in terms of forces more than forms" (Nunes 12). I propose that we approach the political efficacy and imaginative potentials of speculative political storytelling in a similar fashion, as forces which congeal, function, and evolve *ecologically*. Consequentially, speculative futures arise from within and between pre-existing contexts. Again, I turn to Nunes, who argues for

> an account of self-organisation not as seen 'from above' – from a supposedly objective perspective – but as seen from the inside. That is, by agents with limited information and capacity to act, for whom the future is unknown and open, and who wish to increase the probability of certain outcomes over others without ever having absolutely certain knowledge of what might be the best way to do so. (10–11)

Many readers have a tendency to imagine themselves as positioned outside utopian speculative fictions, especially when set in the future. Relatedly, political theory often strives to view social totality from above, at a distance. Many ecocritics, by comparison, have a tendency to imagine the present we inhabit as either already dystopian or lurching towards it. However, perhaps it is more correct to say that we have always already been living within the ambiguous intermixing of these different spatio-temporal registers. Such an embedded ambiguity is the precondition of both politics and literature. This is evident in both *Desert* and *Half-Earth Socialism*'s excavation and invention of usable literary pasts to propel their political speculations about climate futures. Speculative fictions, and especially those which animate political theory and practice, need not necessarily propel us into radically other worlds; they can also anchor us *within* the worlds we already live while imaginatively orienting us towards possible futures. It is as much within as against this thick ecology of possibilities that we must "work to make things work" (Nunes 16).

Political theorizing operates not above or beyond the literary, but within the ongoing interplay of speculative (theory-)fictions from which it

draws and to which it contributes. Such fictions have never been secondary accoutrements, but serve as the very engine which drives political theory and action forward. If we are moving towards an "epoch of rest" it is one in which we will remain fundamentally restless – it will take work to get us there and work to sustain it. The same will be true if we are made to sustain ourselves in the desert. This work belongs not only to the field of political or climatological analysis, but the speculative imagination, without which activism and politics have nothing to orient themselves. If the value of political theory and climate forecasting is to lay bare the parameters within which we must operate, then the role of speculative fiction in relation to radical climate politics is to identify the competing pathways by which we may achieve workable futures which are at once sustainable and sustained by political principles of egalitarianism, justice, and freedom, as well as the work it will take to get us there. The particular role played by cultural and literary criticism in helping to refine these efforts may force us to violate disciplinary borders and be as often critically adversarial as deferential towards political theorists and climate scientists with whom we may otherwise agree. So be it; the stakes are too high, the future all too near.

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