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Challenging Solarpunk's Technophilia through Degrowth Imaginaries in Julia K. Patt's "Caught Root" and Linda Jordan's "Reclaiming"

by Alejandro Rivero-Vadillo



Abstract

Although still in its infancy, the sci-fi subgenre of Solarpunk has become a popular aesthetic mode in today's literary field, with an extensive corpus of short-story collections having been published during the late 2010s and early 2020s. These narratives tend to explore postcapitalist imaginaries through a technophilic lens, thus depicting the idea of possible futures in which high-technology and industrial development can become environmentally sustainable. Against these logics of techno-optimism, some rare literary pieces subvert the hegemonic conceptualization of the Solarpunk imagination, representing degrowth societies that highlight the idealization of greenified techno-futures. This article first introduces the notion of Solarpunk and briefly analyzes it through the lens of degrowth theory. It then explores two short stories by two US authors, Julia K. Patt's "Caught Root" (2018) and Linda Jordan's "Reclaiming" (2021), to show how they both create alternative low-tech futures neighboring Solarpunk cities. This essay focuses on how both authors' narratives not only criticize Solarpunk's mainstream assumptions, but also how they create alternative ecologic and economic spaces following degrowth rationalizations.

Keywords: solarpunk, degrowth, techno-optimism, environmental humanities, Linda Jordan, Julia K. Patt



About the Author

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One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary ecological discourses—either in academic, activist, or educational terms—is that they all tend to advocate for the creation of environmentalist narratives. Despite the many differences in ecological traditions, scholars as diverse as Serpil Oppermann (2014), Donna Haraway (2016), Joni Adamson (2018) and Jorge Riechmann (2020) point to the need of creating new narratives (audiovisual, literary, and artistic) which incorporate contemporary ideas about ecology and environmentalism in an attempt to disseminate them in mainstream public discourses. As a result, environmental theory is constructing new narrative genres, providing them with (at least) the basic thematical elements that should (or could) be integrated in the story. It is not strange, then, that the 2010s brought readers a new subgenre within science fiction, Solarpunk, which was theorized years before several short story collections of this subgenre started to appear in Amazon bookstores. The genre was originally conceived in 2008 in an anonymous post in the online blog *Republic of Bees* that called for a new literary genre based on depicting renewable technologies as the Earth's energetic paradigm ("From Steampunk" 2008). Slowly, the idea of Solarpunk started to enter the Internet imaginaries, with forums discussing how a green Post-Cyberpunk imaginary could be (MormonMobster 2011; Flynn 2014). The concept was easily accessible, yet the literary works would not appear until the late 2010s and, indeed, the early 2020s.

One of the main premises of Solarpunk, at least in its first stages, was to create new narratives that would show contemporary developments in green technology, imagining hopeful futures that would defeat previous sci-fi catastrophism—as seen, for instance in Cyberpunk worldbuilding (Wagner and Wieland 2017, 9). Academically, this genre has

mainly been analyzed in these terms, either criticizing or praising its technophilia as a way to achieve environmentally sustainable utopias. Literary Solarpunk texts (most of them short stories) tend to create pseudo-utopian imaginaries based on green energy and high technology. Although many of these texts are uncritical with techno-optimism, in some cases, they use its own techno-solar imaginary to criticize its technophilic premises, highlighting from the inside the different problematics embedded in these imaginaries.¹ These imaginaries, nonetheless, fail in developing an alternative to hyper-technolithic landscaping; they contest the dominion of high-tech environmental solutions but do not provide a different way of organizing human communities in the Anthropocene. There are, nonetheless, a few recent examples of Solarpunk narratives that both criticize techno-optimistic paradigms and envision sustainable worlds outside green high-technologization. The purpose of this essay is, therefore, to examine how contemporary Solarpunk is challenging the genre's dependence on high technology ethos through the analysis of narratives that feature productive scenarios escaping the consumerist, extractivist, and growth logics implicit in these fictions. Through the view of Degrowth environmentalism, I explore two short stories by two relatively unknown US authors: "Reclaiming" (2021) by Linda Jordan and "Caught Root" (2018) by Julia K. Patt.

Defining Solarpunk

The Solarpunk subgenre inherits the aesthetics and concerns of two highly popular and widely explored science fiction subgenres: Cyberpunk and Climate-Fiction (Cli-Fi). It is often defined as an optimistic narrative space in which issues such as high technology, environmentalism, and grassroots activism merge, depicting positive visions of human habitability in the Anthropocene. In this sense, the "solar" prefix refers to the energetical technology that predominantly constructs the genre's narrative imaginaries. Contrasting with Cyberpunk's "postindustrial setting defined by cold technology, virtual reality, and crime" (Lavigne 2013, 11), Solarpunk is famous for depicting physical spaces in which green technologies have created an almost idyllic sense of urbanism. Thus, solar panels, windmills, and trees (natural or artificial) tend to colonize most Solarpunk territories. This mixture portrays futuristic locations in which modern architecture, city planning, and industrialism have incorporated environmental sustainability as a core part of their design, therefore providing a vision of a world in which human (but also non-human) entities are safe and saved from a climatic collapse. Aesthetics aside, Solarpunk narratives represent significant ecocritical proposals that go beyond the mere romanticization of energy transition. According to Wagner and Wieland, "Solarpunk literature imagines new futures in the shadow of and in opposition to environmental change and collapse, [and] then works to create those futures" (2017, 9). The genre, therefore, is not simply

concerned with the environmental dynamics of a utopia, but with the way in which Edenic futures can be constructed in the shadow of the current environmental and socio-economic crisis. Through this envisioning of eco-technological societies based on contemporary green energy, Solarpunk narratives provide an innovative depiction of hopeful scenarios through which discourses on technology and ecology are negotiated.

Representations of speculative eco-technology are nonetheless not the only significant component of Solarpunk narratives, since, as commented by Andrew Dana Hudson:

whatever Solarpunk is, it is deeply political. [...] The very name 'solarpunk' implies that scientific breakthroughs alone won't fix our environmental, social and economic problems. After all, it posits a world of solar-energy abundance and then argues that we will still have need of punks. No magical tech fixes for us. We'll have to do it the hard way: with politics. (2017)

Although environmentally sustainable, Solarpunk worlds are not fully utopian, and often attempt to represent societies in need of contesting certain social problems that post-petroleum cultures have not been able to fully tackle. As a paradigmatic example, the first short-story collection ever published with the tag Solarpunk, *Solarpunk: Histórias ecológicas e fantásticas em um mundo sustentável* (2012), edited by Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro, features stories in which, although global sustainability has been achieved, capitalism still maintains the same power structures that characterized it in the oil-industrial era. The extensive corpus of Solarpunk stories available currently in print (more than 10 collections) shows, however, that there is no homogeneous approach to the question of green technology. Sometimes this is praised as a solution to society's inequalities and a way to achieve environmental justice and, for some others, it is seen as just one element in the process of social "utopization." Something that most stories share, nonetheless, is the fact that they observe the (Post)Anthropocene era through the lens of system-critical discourses which, ultimately, are meant to either inspire or represent contemporary proposals (usually from a liberal left political spectrum) on social rights, egalitarianism, and democracy.

Most of Solarpunk's narrative production has taken place in the US literary context, with many short-story collections aiming to actively distance themselves from the dystopic, highly pessimistic essence of mainstream representations of the future. In early US collections, the editors, following the previous online amalgamation of theoretical understandings of the notion of Solarpunk, intended to select literary examples of futures in which eco-technological progress was represented in a hopeful, affirmative, and "punkish" way.² In many of these early stories, either the transition to more sustainable

forms of high technology catalyzes a social revolution, or a social revolution catalyzes the adoption of these ecological forms of advanced technology. In any case, sustainable high-tech is an almost mandatory element for a hopeful Earth-based future for humanity. This perspective is aligned with specific US ecological traditions that observe green technology as a means to overcome modern industrial techno-culture. US techno-optimism, and specifically its solar-power variety, can be traced back to the works of eco-socialist philosopher Barry Commoner. In *Making Peace with the Planet* (1990), Commoner already defended the need to redesign economic progress through technology, a doctrine that has continued to this day in the form of discourses on the need for geo-engineering and terraforming.³ Examples of this *Weltanschauung* can be observed in Claudie Arseneaut and Brenda J. Pierson's⁴ understanding of the genre, claiming that it "looks at existing technologies—from colored glass solar panels to 3D printing, vertical farming to permaculture—and projects them into a world where humanity overcame eco-disasters, mega-corporations, and dystopian governments" (2015, 1). Although not as explicit as Arseneaut and Pierson, most editors have generally followed this understanding of what Solarpunk represents. For instance, Sarena Ulibarri, editor of several of these early collections,⁵ states that, when selecting stories for her collection, these "had to touch environmental issues and/or climate change and they had to have a general optimistic tone" (2018, 1). A similar idea comes from Wagner and Wieland, who in their "Introduction" to *Sunvault* point out that "Solarpunk emphasizes innovative interaction with both our communities and our environment, socio-environmental thought and creation, rather than merely survival in a decaying world" (2017, 9). In the stories included in their collections, their sense of "socio-environmental thought and creation" and "optimistic tone" is mostly driven through the envisioning of worlds in which high technology is permanently present, and usually the more utopian the world building is portrayed, the more technologized it is depicted.

A few examples of the scarce academic reception of these texts show the importance that critics are applying to high-tech cosmovisions in Solarpunk narratives. Whenever articles are not directly praising Solarpunk's techno-optimism or hopeful imaginaries (Hansen 2021; Johnson 2020), they tend to interrogate the technophilic nature of the genre. Rhys Williams (2019), for instance, highlights the function of the physically unrealistic technological imaginaries of Solarpunk stories included in stories in the above-mentioned *Wings of Renewal* and in *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (Ulibarri 2018). Ariel Kroon (2019), in a different tone, analyzes notions of anti-systemic resistance in the highly cyborgized Boston of "The Boston Hearth Project" by T.X. Watson. Kenneth Farver (2019) explores the operativity of environmental justice theory in the technophilic environments developed in Shel Graves' "Watch out, Red Crusher!" and Gregory

Scheckler's "Grow, Give, Repeat." The three of them, although critical of Solarpunk's idealistic proposals, focus on the supposedly innate hyper-technological essence of the genre, in a way ignoring the few Solarpunk examples which contest this technocratic paradigm.⁶ In this sense, stories including scenarios based on the use of low technology (such as the ones that I analyze further in this essay) provide an interesting ecocritical twist in how this genre could be explored and categorized, observing the not-so-technological scenarios as a discursive reaction to Solarpunk's high-tech premises.

Degrowth Theory and Solarpunk

Low-tech Solarpunk narratives are characterized by a sense of ecology that highly contrasts the environmental values of their techno-optimistic counterparts. Opposing contemporary philosophical perspectives, political ideologies and narrative imaginaries feeding on eco-technophilia, Western ecological thought and environmentalism both have a long tradition of critical thought that believes human salvation will collapse in the de-technologization of our industrial socio-political systems (both free-market or state-controlled variants). Today many different environmentalist traditions propose the abandonment of high-technologies due to their environmental impact, such as their carbon footprint, resource consumption, and the ecocidal damage that their implementation causes in different territories. From Indigenous culture-based environmentalisms to Western philosophies such as Deep Ecology, Anarcho-Primitivism or, indeed, Degrowth theory, many contemporary discourses argue for alternative relations to technology and the local land involving the de-activation of our global industrialist infrastructure. Although highly heterogenous, these ecological traditions are tied together by their rejection of oil-based techno-economies and their embracement of different understandings of reconnection to the environmental flows of the non-human world (what could problematically be called "Nature"). From all these perspectives, the Degrowth movement seems interestingly suitable for the analysis of non-technophilic Solarpunk short stories for different reasons. Firstly, both Degrowth and Solarpunk have frequently attempted to imagine hopeful visions of a future in which societies keep operating in urban spaces⁷ and refuse to simply return to a sense of tribalism often imagined by primitivist proposals. Secondly, Degrowth theories are finding a prolific field of study in environmentalist science fiction,⁸ with a growing corpus of literary analyses that have barely touched Solarpunk narratives. This study, in this sense, aims to contribute to contemporary conversations on how Degrowth is represented in different sci-fi contexts.

Collectively developed by post-Marxist economists and philosophers like Jorge Riechmann (2005), Serge Latouche (2010), Joan Martinez-Alier (2009), Carlos Taibo

(2009), and Giorgios Kallis et al. (2012) among others,⁹ the Degrowth movement aims to highlight capitalism's mythology of eternal progress and consumption—and therefore the many methodologies of anthropogenic terraforming that come along with it—and attempts to elaborate political alternatives and spaces based on radically changing the ways in which global consumerism, economic production and ecological policies operate. In this sense,

degrowth is opposed to the dominant ideology of economism, that is the idea that the economic logic pervades other spheres of social life and reduces their autonomous logics to merely instrumental rationality—a view stemming from the mainstream depiction of the economy as an isolated system, separate from the social, political and ecological spheres. Looking beyond GDP growth, it aims to redefine the collective values and core objectives of public policies. At the same time, through research, experimentation and participation in a democratic process, it begins outlining an ideal form of societal organization. (Petridis et al. 2015, 177–78)

Degrowth, therefore, is not merely a movement based on uniquely rejecting the idea of progress—and the toxic techno-industrial system that comes along with it—but a way to reformulate how we may collectively approach human relationships with the ecosystem in more democratic and sustainable ways.

One of the most poignant commentaries to the paradigm of growth criticizes the ability to alienate non-capitalist futures. Exploring Cornelius Castoriadis's proto-Degrowth work, Spanish scholar Luis. I. Prádanos highlights that “for [Castoriadis] all social realities are constructed according to pervasive dominant conceptions and postulates about humans and their relations to each other and the world. These conceptions influence every aspect of society” (2018, 11). In this sense, each system operates under the assumption of a “social imaginary” that alienates the individuals that compose it and that prevents them from rationalizing perspectives undervalued or unacknowledged by the hegemonic apparatus. Thus, the neoliberal imaginary is observed as a semantic reflection of capitalism's glorification of permanent economic progress and growth, implying that “unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is in fact the central objective of human existence” (Prádanos 2018, 24). The Degrowth perspective on this issue is that this view of the world implies a conflict between abstract ideas and our biophysical reality. *Strictu sensu*, growth is mathematically unlimited. With this logic, there is always place for “more” progress and economic advantage, ignoring that the Earth and its non-human and human entities, the sources that ultimately generate this growth, are spatially and quantifiable limited. The preeminence of this eternal and materially impossible sense of growth presents itself as a fallacy that, nonetheless, pervades hegemonic discourses. This paradigm affects even

those discourses attempting to solve ecological crises, developing “solutions” that require the reproduction of the growth paradigm in order to be accepted by the system. Prádanos, who has extensively worked on the critique to growth imaginaries, establishes that:

The growth-oriented ideology reproduces and self-amplifies itself over and over, limiting collective imaginative processes to the task of depicting different images of itself and creating innovative ways to refashion itself. [...] That is why it seems that there is no alternative to an ideology that is destroying the life-supporting systems of the Earth. Within this epistemological framework, ‘the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination’ [Buell’s term], for it becomes almost impossible to imagine a postcarbon, postgrowth, post-capitalist, post-neoliberal, post-patriarchal, decolonial society that is desirable and viable. (2018, 25)

Technophilic Solarpunk, and specifically the development of solar-powered industrial zones to avoid dependence of petrochemical energy, are good examples of the materialization of this idea.

However, the theoretical commonalities between Solarpunk and Degrowth agendas, at least in socio-economic and environmental terms, could not be more similar. Not only do both aim to restructure human/non-human relationships, but they also both attempt to develop positive, post-capitalist imaginaries in which collective actions have managed to, at least, stop some of the damages of our contemporary climatic crisis. In this regard, Degrowth theory—and more importantly, Degrowth-influenced cultural objects—can contribute “to challenge the cultural authority that perpetuates the dominant imaginary responsible for disconnecting economic activity from its ecological, social, political, and cultural interdependencies” (Prádanos 2018, 25). Prádanos comments that these potentially subversive artistic, literary, audiovisual instruments can be defined as conveyors of postgrowth imaginaries. As he comments: “we need new stories to counteract the pervasive fantasies of neoliberalism and to expose its social and ecological downsides” (Prádanos, 2018, 27). Thus, the creation and the analysis of narrative objects (and other cultural artifacts) portraying degrowth scenarios, constitutes a primary act of activism in which consumers are presented decolonized and decolonizing narratives inspiring dissenting perspectives on how to address today’s climatic crisis. This intention is shared by Solarpunk author and theorist Andrew Dana Hudson, who claims that

Solarpunk’s strategy should be to create pockets of [ideological] progress and imagination within a larger political landscape of decay, deadlock and long emergency [...] Understand that Solarpunk’s ‘dirt behind the ears’ needs to come from planting something that will reclaim a bit of that carbon we burned. Hold your optimism up to the muggy, yellow light and

make sure we are willing to work for it. For Solarpunk to lead us towards a better future, it must look our climate sins in the eyes, acknowledge their gravity, and start fixing that carbon. (2017)

Hudson's perception of the genre, which, in 2015, had almost no literary production, precisely attacks purely technophilic conceptualizations of Solarpunk utopias, highlighting the need for a truly punk, guerilla-based sense of narrative programs. In essence, this other perspective on what Solarpunk should be(come) is more related to Prádanos's notion of the postgrowth scenario than to early idealistic perceptions of the genre, as it problematizes the neoliberal fallacy of eternal growth and proposes a new sense of narrative that decomodifies the path to socio-environmental sustainability.

Contrasting Utopias: Julia K. Patt's "Caught Root"

In Julia K. Patt's "Caught Root," a story from the collection *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (Ulibarri 2018), readers may find one of the earliest examples of degrowth ideas inserted in a postgrowth Solarpunk imaginary. Patt's story explores what two different societies might look like in a post-capitalist future in which absolute environmental sustainability has been somehow achieved. In "Caught Root," Ewan, the narrator and protagonist, is a botanist sent by a highly technologized city, Hillside, to study and earn the alliance of the neighboring city of New-Ur, a far less industrialized municipality. In both architectonical and cultural terms, the differences between the two cities are so great that, to Ewan, it seems that "New-Ur and Hillside would never trust another" (Patt 2018, 3). On the one hand, Hillside is depicted as the archetypical technophilic Solarpunk city, with "shining towers [that] reach for the blue sky" (3), building materials that are "recycled, unblemished, new looking" (5), and with heavily automated solar-powered technology and a climate-controlled atmosphere (6). On the other hand, New-Ur "seems born from the very rock, all adobe and stucco and low-sitting buildings" (3). Everything in the city is built from "reclaimed and reused materials" (5), and even vital infrastructure, such as water purification systems, are made from sustainable materials such as "porous clay" (5). Ewan and Khadir, New-Ur's delegate and the protagonist's guide, frequently debate about the ecological and economic differences between both cities, the latter commenting on his suspicions regarding the egalitarian model of Hillside (4). The story ends with Ewan abandoning New-Ur as his mission comes to an end, but promises to return when Khadir requests more help from Hillside's botanists.

The significance of both cities' opposing nature is evident, as Patt depicts them as an allegory of the traditional technological binary of environmentalism, Hillside representing technophilia¹⁰ and New-Ur degrowth urbanism. It is important to note that the narrative sets readers in an idealistic world where both models can coexist. In this

post-growth imaginary, expansionism and conquest (military, economic, or technological) does not seem to be necessary, since the problem of scarcity seems to have been somehow solved. Whenever Khadir reacts suspiciously to some of Ewan's claims on Hillside, the protagonist would comment that they "are not some hard-hearted corporation, Dr. Khadir, just because we are well funded. We have the same goal as New-Ur: to reimagine civilization" (4). Hillside is represented in industrial terms, with a technological level that allows them to automatize most of hard-labor tasks, something that allows its population to "choose their tasks more freely, [and] devote more time to study, creativity [and] bettering their society through innovation" (6). Hillside's depiction aligns with what Kate Soper calls "Tech Utopianism":

Tech Utopians trust digital technology and automation to cut out the drudgery they associate with almost all forms of caring and provisioning work, and to deliver an abundance of goods of the kind we already consume. Their post-work future is conceived as greener (thanks to smart energy) and more idle (thanks to robots and drones doing most things for us), but it is still in essence consumerist in that much of its pleasure is tied to the availability and use of machines and high-tech gadgetry. (2020, 84)

Hillside is then the utopia of Post-Commoner environmentalism: one that has not only managed to sustainably adapt to Earth's climate change, but also has managed to do so by overcoming the inherent ecological problems of industrialism. As utopian as it might be, it reproduces the same growth logics associated with the techno-industrial complex, furthering the imaginary of perpetual progress as a possibility for human survivability on Earth.

New-Ur, in contrast, presents a very different urban landscape, one that is clearly connected with contemporary degrowth positions. Unautomated, New-Ur "adapts to the seasons, shifting work schedules with the demands of summer and winter" (Patt 2018, 6) rather than creating a high-tech bubble, following the same philosophy of environmental adaptation that also applies to the city's architecture. The apparently "more" primitive (meaning, less consuming and less mechanistic) culture of New-Ur, however, does not reflect any negative impact on scientific progress or how work operates in the city. As Khadir shows Ewan, sustainable plant experimentation is present in the city (7) and, in some cases, it is more advanced than in Hillside—Ewan, for instance, takes a unique edible flower in order "to bring something of this place back to [Hillside]" (Patt 2018, 7). In the end, the two cities seem to posit as possible, viable futures, a depiction that could be analyzed as a discursive solution easing the colliding positions of both technophilic and degrowth environmental perspectives. Narratively speaking, nonetheless, New-Ur's perspective appears to be slightly revindicated as the most viable of the two.

Apart from the fact that, in economic and industrial terms, New-Ur has managed to achieve a similar utopian status with far less consumption logics implied—as they do not require such technological refinement for prosperity and survivability—the story interrogates social paradigms that make Hillside a laborless utopia with the abolition of work through automation. Not only does Khadir question whether this sense of “bettering” society is a valid approach (6), but also the way in which work automation is seen as profane in terms of human/non-human relationships. According to Khadir, automation means that “there is no connection between the work and the workers. You’ll take us right back to a divided labor force, alienated from the meaning of the task” (6). In contrast, work in New-Ur operates differently—but, following the utopianism of the text, also very idealistically—since “everyone takes part in everything ... No one is too important for any work” (8). This is also translated in education, and rather than focusing on freely choosing a career without worrying about blue-collar jobs—as in the automated Hillside—children’s “lessons roll continuous[ly] from one subject to another, uninhibited by rigid structures. If a question demands one explain Algebra or Chemistry or Chaucer, we discuss Algebra or Chemistry or Chaucer” (7). Both cities achieve a certain sense of equality (at least in educational terms), but Hillside is focused on individualism—one chooses whatever professional purpose they want—while New-Ur is focused on communalism. In this sense, the equal and cooperative interhuman relationships are encouraged by New-Ur’s educational system and are also a reflection of the city’s approach to human/non-human relations, which is also built upon symbiosis with the local terrain and climatic conditions.

De-Idealizing the Degrowth Utopia in Linda Jordan’s “Reclaiming”

Linda Jordan in “Reclaiming” sets the narrative on the coast of a post-capitalist Seattle, in a future in which millionaires and powerful people “stripped the earth for their own greed,” and “when it became inhabitable,” they fled into space, leaving behind anyone who couldn’t afford the trip (2021, 162).¹¹ The protagonist of the story, Jonnie, is a 12-year-old girl living in Cedar Flats, a city on an island near Seattle’s mainland that follows a very strict (but also highly sustainable) way of life. In the story, Jonnie develops a mysterious disease similar to epilepsy, and lacking the necessary medical resources on the island, she is sent for a better diagnosis in a far more technologized city on the mainland. After several scenes in which the protagonist compares the differences in lifestyle, architecture, and ecology between both cities, she finally gets a fatal prognosis that kills her future aspirations in her hometown—she wants to be a beekeeper. The story finishes with her return to Cedar Falls and reflecting on the few things that she wants to accomplish before she eventually dies. Although the text is centered on Jonnie’s personal drama, both the representation of Solarpunk spaces and the way in which she

interacts with different social imaginaries constantly defines her attitude towards life, ending in a sense of Whitmanesque transcendentalism that regards degrowth perspectives as an alternative to traditional green techno-utopianism.

The way in which the two different locations in the story are depicted follows the same premise that characterizes “Caught Root.” On the one hand, Cedar Flats’s architecture and economy seem to apply a degrowth technological model focused on both recycling/reusing and the employment of low-tech devices to become autonomous. As with most of Solarpunk’s urbanism, Cedar Flats’s main feature is constituted primarily of trees. However, rather than being planted on the top of buildings as in other Solarpunk stories, these widely colonize the soil, and they are revered for their inherent properties protecting the local ecosystem:

The main rule was: no old trees could be cut down for new construction unless they were so badly diseased as to be dying.

Trees were the island’s life blood. Connecting everything. Creating clean air, sheltering them from huge storms and providing habitat for so many creatures. Breaking down the rocky soil and making mulch for people’s gardens. Trees were why Meridian Island hadn’t become a weed desert like so many of the other Islands of Seattle. (155–56)

Architecturally, buildings in the island are built with “concrete and brick” taken from “old quake-damaged buildings” (155), and thus, extractivist policies are reduced to a liminal level. Additionally, money, perhaps the strongest signifier of capitalist logics, has been abolished, and instead labor is the main currency to pay for other services. Thus “people paid for their medical care by helping clean or with food or woven fabrics. Everything around the island was bartered” (159). Although far less advanced than its counterpart in the mainland, the ecological and productive model of life in Cedar Flats seems to be a living alternative for a great number of people outside the community, and hence it is constantly attracting migrants. This highly disturbs Willow, Jonnie’s sister, who, in a problematic anti-migration statement, claims that “too many strangers who have money [are coming]—It won’t do them any good over here” (158). Since money has no use on the island, migrants are only welcome whenever they “bring in resources or skill” (158). This restriction anticipates possible problems with overpopulation in the environmental utopia of the island, an aspect that is not present in Patt’s “Caught Root.”

In contrast, the unnamed city of the mainland is constructed as a pseudo-capitalist Solarpunk community. In her trip to Wedgewood Hospital, Jonnie observes the type of post-growth urbanism that techno-optimism has generated. If it is true that society in the mainland has better healthcare, electric cars (and even flying cars) (170), and that its roads have been rebuilt and “turned [...] into bicycle and walking paths” (165), many

aspects of the collapsed capitalist society still permeate this urban space. Jonnie is shocked by the fact that “there were areas where people were obviously more wealthy [sic] than others. Society over here had stratified” (165). Some of the people she encounters on her way to the hospital “looked miserable [and their] housing looked old and squalid” (165), whereas in the richer areas, “people lived in houses with more than three rooms. Each house had its own large garden, instead of shared gardens [and] at least half of the houses had glass greenhouses” (170). This city, nonetheless, is not presented as an ecologic dystopia, since, it seems, it has achieved a sense of sustainability that prevents its collapse. The price of hyper-technologization is portrayed in socio-economical terms. Whereas Cedar Flats has overcome class struggle—sacrificing commodities and life expectancy—the city in the mainland still operates under the same techno-politic premises as its predecessors; they have simply figured out a way to not disturb the earth’s ecological flows in auto-destructive ways. In the end, when Jonnie must take the decision of either going back to Cedar Flats or remaining in the hospital—where she will be better cared for but disconnected from her “more natural” community—she does not hesitate and decides to return home. As a result, anti-consumerist logics and Degrowth paradigms are praised over the pseudo-utopian techno-culture of archetypical Solarpunk.

Conclusion

Although Solarpunk appears to be a sci-fi subgenre that, by its own technophilic nature, directly opposes the ideals of Degrowth biopolitics, literary analyses of stories like “Caught Root” or “Reclaiming” provide a new perspective on what Solarpunk is transforming into. Rather than simply being a literary field imagining green techno-utopias, Solarpunk might well provide readers with hopeful examples of degrowth societies in which capitalism’s paradigm of growth has been eradicated. Both Patt’s and Jordan’s texts contest the very theoretical bases of early Solarpunk narratives, directly comparing the traditional hyper-technologized, sun-powered urban spaces of Solarpunk with degrowth imaginaries. Their dual representation is vitally innovative for the genre, since in most short-stories—and indeed in most artistic depictions of Solarpunk cities—high-technology, and therefore industrial progress, is seen as a necessary means to the utopian end. The fact that “Caught Root” and “Reclaiming” are marketed as Solarpunk stories forces readers to interrogate the components that ultimately define the genre, diverging from the idea of a technological fix and searching for new possibilities of life on Earth based on integrating human urbanism into pre-existing ecosystemic flows. Rather than constructing a high-tech utopia in the Anthropocene, the degrowth societies depicted in these stories adapt their ways of living to a damaged planet, resulting in the hopeful dismantling of the power dynamics of capitalism and industrialism.

Notes

- ¹ Later in this text I analyze the way in which contemporary scholarly works have addressed Solarpunk narratives.
- ² Such as *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (Wagner & Wieland 2017), *Wings of Renewal: A Solarpunk Dragon Anthology* (Arseneault & Pierson 2015), or *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (Ulibarri 2018).
- ³ See for instance, Benjamin J. Bratton's *The Terraforming* (2019) as a clear example of these technophilic discourses applied to global environmentalism.
- ⁴ Editors of the collection *Wings of Renewal* (2015).
- ⁵ *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018) and *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Winters* (2020).
- ⁶ Farver, however, briefly explores "Caught Root" and its sense of sustainability in terms of environmental justice, commenting on some of the non-technophilic aspects of the story.
- ⁷ For Degrowth reflections on urbanism, see Anguelovski (2014), Alexander and Gleeson (2019), Xue (2021).
- ⁸ See Kallis and March (2015), Prádanos (2018).
- ⁹ These are examples of contemporary approaches to the environmental and socio-economic notion of Degrowth. The seminal texts can be traced back to the works of philosophers such as Cornelius Castoriadis (1985), the scientific research of Donella Meadows et al. (1972), and the ideas expressed by Ivan Illich in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973).
- ¹⁰ In line with the ideas developed by Aaron Bastani in *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019)
- ¹¹ A clear reference to contemporary space exploration projects envisioned by multinational corporations such as SpaceX and Blue Origin.

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