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## Postcapitalist Desert Visions from Earth to Anarres

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Postcapitalist Desert Visions from Earth to Anarres

by

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## Abstract

Human industrial and economic activity around the world—happening either directly in the global North (recall the coal-choked London of Dickens) or, increasingly, in (un)developing nations of the global South because of the North's demand— has burned and pumped so much CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that climate has noticeably changed even over the span of a single generation. As long as the world and its people are held in the clutches of the hegemonic capitalist politico-economic system, the environment will continue to degrade, and so will life for all the people of Earth, especially those most vulnerable. Though the outlook seems dire, and for good reason, the world can be vastly improved. We can imagine alternative futures in which a greater majority of humans are safe and secure, getting all or most of their needs and wants; a future in which we benefit by living *alongside* the environment as an equal, rather than simply using it as a tool to a capitalist end: we can construct an environmentalist society using the core of Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited*. Here I discuss through a socio-ecocritical lens three desert societies: two from SF novels—Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and, to a lesser extent, Robinson's *Blue Mars*—, and one real instance of an explicitly environmentally and socially utopian project still in the works today: Arcosanti. These examples demonstrate imagined future alternatives to the current hegemonic capitalist structure of our world; all three are exercises in how human society can progress and improve

under the tenets of a purposefully *limited* utopia; and all three, importantly, present real ways in which a society that's moved past capitalism can benefit people *while* (indeed *because*) it cooperates with the environment. These examples show that by incorporating into our laws and customs rights for nature itself, we can more faithfully ensure the protection of a sensitive and ever-changing environment *and* better lives and futures for the vulnerable human population. By engaging ecocritically and socio-politically with SF literature, we can imagine ways in which we as humans can move beyond the current hegemony of capital and the social and environmental damages it causes toward something more ideal, more egalitarian, more like utopia.

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## Introduction

The climate is changing. Since the Industrial Revolution human activity around the world—happening directly in the global North (recall the coal-choked London of Dickens) or, increasingly, in (un)developing nations of the global South because of the North’s demand— has burned and pumped so much CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere that temperatures have risen and weather has noticeably changed even over the span of a single generation. Now that the science is finally being widely accepted decades after its synthesis, some world governments and certainly many individuals are making conscious efforts to stop the current climate trajectory, and even to reverse it among the most idealistic. It seems many people have real hope that at least some of the damage already done can be undone through law, public policy, international cooperation, and individual and collective social action. From global collaborations like the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement to the proliferation of recycled, upcycled, and reusable versions of everyday objects, there has been recently a visible push to “save the Environment.” However, the reality of our environmental crisis is more dire than many know (or are willing to admit). In “What If We Stopped Pretending?” Franzen gives a painful but necessary punch to the gut:

If you’re younger than sixty, you have a good chance of witnessing the radical destabilization of life on earth—massive crop failures, apocalyptic

fires, imploding economies, epic flooding, hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing regions made uninhabitable by extreme heat or permanent drought. If you're under thirty, you're all but guaranteed to witness it.

All of these problems stem from the advent and vicious international spread of Capitalism: a system that exists entirely on the premise that growth through capital investment and subsequent expenditure is infinitely possible—indeed necessary—even though most resources are easily exhaustible, at best mildly replenishable, and at worst irreversibly depletable. Importantly, this “scarcity” is a built-in feature of the capitalist system—if materials and resources (including capital) are equally available to everyone, they would have no “value” under the system and would become useless. In a review and discussion on theories of economic scarcity, Tahvonen explains that the most widely accepted calculation among economists is that “it is possible to maintain a positive consumption level forever only if capital can be substituted for nonrenewable resources without technical difficulties. If the substitution possibilities are limited, future consumption per capita *must* finally fall to zero” (4-6, emphasis added). Even those individual and collective efforts for “sustainability” mentioned earlier are ignorant of their own relative insignificance. Though it intends to make a positive impact, the idea of “sustainability” is a myth so long as it exists inside a capitalist system: “sustainable development is intended to create the impression that only minor adjustments to the [capitalist] market system are needed... hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental considerations” (Escobar 197). At current rates of environmental extraction,

energy demands, emissions of carbon and other pollutants, and unrelenting deforestation, it is only a matter of time before the natural environment suffers to an irreparable extent. Sklair distills this thought: “With the mantra of endless growth integral to the survival of both global capitalism and the state system, it seems obvious that these systems are incompatible with planetary survival in the long term” (77). Because it is antithetical to real-life ecological and social limits, capitalism and the inter- and transnational states which depend on it will inevitably lead to large-scale damage and destruction of the environment.

Everything, in the capitalist world, must be a resource because of the constant need of the capitalist class to make profits to keep the system functioning. Logically, then, as the system expands and matures, resources (including land) must become more and more scarce, driving costs—and especially consumer prices—ever upward through inflation to keep the system afloat. In the end, this voracious commodification extends even to individual people. This results in those who had more to begin with gaining ever more, and those who didn’t falling behind and becoming “surplus,” forced outside of the system because they’re not able to participate to any significant degree. As Nixon explains: “[capitalism] writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental... [which] has often been projected onto ecosystems inhabited by those whom Annu Jalais... calls ‘disposable citizens’” (17). These citizens then become the bearers of the brunt of economic, governmental, social, and especially environmental violence. Without the resources or ability to make any significant change beyond protests

often quashed by militaristic capitalist states, the people outside the system can be ignored or disposed of by those within it. As long as the world and its people are held in the clutches of the hegemonic capitalist politico-economic system, it will continue to degrade, to descend into apocalyptic chaos for the natural environment and inevitably, by extension, to all people of Earth, especially and most immediately to those most vulnerable:

human liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the historical conditions under which human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other societies, *both human and non-human*, and without imagining new ways in which these societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed. (Huggan and Tiffin, 22)

We're seeing now that the degree to which the planet currently suffers is even more extreme than we could have previously imagined or, more accurately, that those in power saw coming but chose to ignore. Because we are animals living within and dependent upon the natural environment, humanity suffers in turn. Unless we move beyond capitalist relations and the systems they produce and operate within, we will be trapped on a planet doomed to complete destruction—not just of the natural world (ecology), but of human society as well.

What, though, does a post-capitalist world look like, and how does it behave in regards to government, society, economics, and environmental justice? Sklair suggests an alternative: "given the failure of governments and corporations to seriously engage with the risks of the Anthropocene, smaller

democratically organized communities at different geographic and socio-political scales offer prospects for simpler less ecologically destructive living” (77). This outlook sounds admittedly utopian, and possibly overly idealistic, especially in the current geopolitical climate: are we not already past the tipping point, so to speak, of being able to *save everything*? Can we manage to construct a new version of our world without massive corporations and corrupt or otherwise inept world leaders profiting off of the destruction of the natural world and the vulnerable people who live in it? Will it be possible for everyone to live perfect lives where each gets everything they want and none suffers, and no additional damage is rendered to the ecosystem? In the end, no. I believe it fair to say that the world will never be perfect. However, this doesn’t mean that the world cannot be vastly improved, that we can’t imagine alternative futures in which a greater majority of humans are safe and secure, getting all or most of their needs and wants; a future in which we live *alongside* the environment as an equal, rather than simply using it as a tool to a capitalist end. We can construct what Nersessian conceptualizes in *Utopia, Limited*: “a [worldview] that develops the paradigm of utopia limited by considering occasions when the *human demand for a better world is matched by the recognition that the world can only take so much of human demands*” (22, emphasis added).

On Earth, desert climates impose many “natural” limits on plant and animal life: low moisture often due to virtually nonexistent precipitation; temperatures that soar to searing and swoop down to freezing in an average day; oppressively sunny skies; and a lack of shelter. In response, desert life has

evolved a set of characteristics that allows it to survive and, in some cases, to thrive in this most challenging environment. Plants use and therefore need less water; increased pigmentation, reflective coloration, and even “armor” help to block out constant ultraviolet radiation, many animals become lean and their metabolisms slow in order to survive off of less food, and burrowing into the loose desert sand provides protection from exposure and other wildlife. Though obviously simplified, these examples show how natural life has evolved to accommodate existing in an environment defined almost exclusively by limitations. Humans are no different, of course: the same factors that make life hard for fauna and flora make desert living hard for us, too. Because of this, past and present desert-dwelling humans have had to alter their own lifestyles to stay alive in arid regions. From agricultural to infrastructural, the desert imposes its harsh limits. This makes the desert a perfect setting in which to explore human communities that demonstrate the idea of limited utopia.

Here I will discuss through a socio-ecocritical lens, three desert societies: two SF novels—Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and, to a lesser extent, Robinson’s *Blue Mars*—, and one real instance of an explicitly environmentally and socially utopian project still in the works today: Arcosanti. All of these examples demonstrate imagined future alternatives to the current hegemonic capitalist structure of our world; all three are exercises in how human society can progress and improve under the tenets of a purposefully *limited* utopia; and all three, importantly, present real ways in which a society that’s moved past capitalism can benefit people *while* (indeed *because*) it cooperates with the environment.

## **Chapter 1: Arcosanti and Its (Failed) Desert Utopian Vision**

We are the victims of our own materialism because such materialism has failed to understand that its own entelechy ought to be the transfiguration of the physical world into the metaphysics of consciousness, knowledge, and creation. The mandatory gate to the universe of consciousness, knowledge, and creation is the gate of complexity-miniaturization. The complex miniaturized is the frugal. It does more with less. (Soleri 76-7)

Arcosanti is a prototype city imagined and supervised by Italian-born architect Paolo Soleri until his death in 2013. Since beginning construction in 1970 in the Arizona desert, it is still in development. It is self-described as “one of the modern world’s first attempt [sic] at creating an urban living experience that is vertical, densely integrated with mixed uses, and environmentally conscious” (arcosanti.org). Clearly, from the beginning according to Soleri’s own words, the Arcosanti project was meant to demonstrate an urban setting with consideration to—even defined by—limits. Through “doing more with less” and being “frugal,” Soleri and his followers who now carry on the development and spirit of the project seek to prove to the world that their alternative form of urban living is superior for both its citizens and the environment. According to its website, “the Cosanti Foundation operates Arcosanti as a counterpoint to mass consumerism, urban sprawl unchecked consumption of natural resources, and social isolation.”

The experiment in alternative urban living was and continues to be fueled by the obviously utopian goal of improving both the quality of life of humans and the health and security of the natural environment at the same time. This tenet is described by Soleri: “the central concept... is that of Arcology—architecture and ecology as one integral process, [which is] capable... of demonstrating positive responses to the many problems of urban man, those of population, pollution, energy, and natural resource depletion” (Soleri 74). By living alongside the environment and paying attention to its limitations—not only considering them but working them into the design of the city and the daily lives of its inhabitants—humans can live more fruitful lives, live more comfortably, and deal with minimal “problems of [urbanity].”

Soleri and those who continue to work on Arcosanti share many of the ideals that stem from the architect’s founding Arcology theory. At the Lindisfarne conferences, Soleri explains that “there are a few physical and biological phenomena, which I call effects, known, used or lived by man which by intent and by design can be brought together in such a way as to act upon one another ‘in pursuit’ of a synthesis useful to mankind” (Soleri 74-5). These “effects” influence many of the aspects of Arcosanti’s architecture and arrangement. The entire city is laid out in such a way that the desert sun is used to its highest potential. The city is almost completely built from concrete, designed to absorb heat during the day and release it during the night to protect inhabitants from the desert cold. The two apses (with many more planned) are supposed to serve doubly as shelter from hot summer days when the sun is at its highest and sun-

collecting bowls when the sun is low in winter. The greenhouses too, are meant to use this passively collected heat to aid food crops in their growth. In turn, the fresh filtered air from the greenhouses would be lifted into the buildings to provide breeze and ventilation to residents. Rainwater is collected and used for the city's inhabitants, and subsequently used for the food plants and for cleaning as grey water, recycling it multiple times. All of these designs demonstrate Soleri's deep awareness of the desert's limitations, and some plausible ways to work with the inhospitable environment best in order to make life better for the city's residents while having as little of a footprint as possible on the environment around the Arcology.

The construction process itself of Arcosanti demonstrates a collectivist approach to urban existence: "The entire [city] was built by volunteers—more than 7,000 of them over the years—and this is still true today... Anyone wanting to live at Arcosanti [completes] a five-week workshop... [after which] they can apply for employment on the site, or stay on and volunteer" (McCartney, 2015). These volunteers learn about the history of the project and its goals, and over the weeks gain hands-on experience in many of the important functions of the project, from construction to working in the on-site cafeteria to feed their fellow residents and outside visitors. During this time, they stay on-site and devote all of their effort to learning and working on the Arcology project. In many ways, the architecture, construction process, and community of Arcosanti are as close as the United States has ever seen to a fully self-sustaining, self-governing, and environmentally-conscious city.

However, though it seems impressive at first glance, Arcosanti is currently only a ghost of what Soleri intended it to be. Many of the city's volunteers and residents, and indeed the continued existence of the project itself, rely on the outside world. From its inception, Arcosanti was dependent upon money in the form of finance capital: "the land for Arcosanti was bought with a loan. Money for the project was an issue from the beginning..." (Schieler 2019). Whether that loan is paid off I was unable to find in my research, but the fact that the project's growth has been so slow, even stagnant at times, leads me to believe the Cosanti foundation, who has headed the development of the Arcology since Soleri's death, still owes money for the land they're building on. In this way, Arcosanti has been entirely dependent upon US currency and its capitalist financial model, inherently casting a dark shadow on its utopian vision. After all, no matter how developed the city becomes, if it still owes money for the very land it rests on, it does not belong to its Foundation or the people who reside there. It belongs to a bank, to investors, to invisible money. Financial problems continue to plague the project to this day. One of the main reasons population growth has been so minimal (Arcosanti currently holds about 70 permanent residents at any given time) is that work for residents is sparse, and wages are low: "most of Arcosanti's [residents]... earn minimum wage working for the Cosanti Foundation... Residents are required to put in 40 weekly hours of on-site work in areas like grounds maintenance, construction, or administration" (Bendix 2019). This struggle has led to many residents leaving, to return to conventional sprawling cities in the West where they can find better employment. Likewise,

many other residents only live in Arcosanti part-time, returning home for the brunt of the year where they can live more comfortably. One of the main struggles for the Cosanti foundation since Soleri's death has been to "find robust leadership, [since] there never was much of a hierarchy or plan for succession" (Lubell 2015). Without Soleri's leadership and inspiration, Arcosanti has had an even harder time attracting and keeping permanent residents than ever in its short history.

In addition to financial troubles, Arcosanti has failed to prove Soleri's concept of Arcology itself. In a visit to the city in 2019, San Francisco architect Mark English described it as "a sad place" where "he noticed flaws within minutes of exploring the property" (Schieler 2019). English reported that he found air conditioning units attached to at least one of the buildings, hidden from plain view but aurally noticeable. Since one of Soleri's central tenets, one of the most important goals of the Arcology, is to work alongside the environment to passively heat and cool buildings, this struck English as deeply troubling: "English said Soleri failed to pay attention to working with the desert environment and instead made an architectural object statement rather than a revolutionary town" (Schieler 2019). This failure is made obvious in another important way: food. Designed to produce all of the needs of its residents from energy to , importantly, food, Soleri's Arcosanti is supposed to be completely self-reliant, without need of outside resources to keep it afloat. This does not seem to be the case, though, at least currently: "Arcosanti is a far cry from a sustainable utopia. Its olive trees provide little respite from the desert heat and residents reportedly

still buy food from the grocery store” (Bendix 2019). Not only does Arcosanti rely on the electrical grid for artificial air conditioning, but it can’t even produce enough food for its handful of residents. Instead, they must travel (by car) an hour out of the city in order to buy food from commercial grocery stores in bigger urban areas using currency. In the end, Arcosanti’s residents must still rely on the capitalist infrastructure to survive. Clearly, the utopian goals of Soleri’s Arcology have not been met by Arcosanti. In a striking quotation, English says that “in its very form, it’s wrong. It’s falling apart. It’s irredeemable.” 50 years and a far cry from its original goals of housing 5,000 permanent residents in an entirely self-reliant bubble, Arcosanti may never be able to live up to its ideals.

Because it ultimately exists on financed land, depends upon outside resources, and cannot even succeed in its least ambitious goals of passive climate control, Arcosanti in its ultimate form was doomed from the beginning. Soleri must have known this the moment he agreed to the terms for the land loan. Though it tried, and still is making effort, Arcosanti cannot remove itself far enough from the global capitalist system in order to achieve its self-sufficiency. As more and more of the current nations of the world join the transnational neoliberal system of corporatized trade, it is becoming less and less possible for somewhere like Arcosanti to exist. In order to truly live free from capitalism and its harms on the individual and the environment, we must put enough distance between us and the capitalist world, both figuratively and literally.

## Chapter 2: Limited Utopia, Community, and Responsibility

There were wide, clean streets... and all the buildings were low, except the strong, spare towers of the wind turbines. The sun shone white in a hard, dark, blue-violet sky. The air was clear and clean, without smoke or moisture. There was a vividness to things, a hardness of edge and corner, a clarity. Everything stood out separate, itself. (Le Guin, 97)

Here, Shevek, the main character of Le Guin's 1974 SF novel *The Dispossessed*, observes a city on his home planet of Anarres, the desert moon of the larger Earth-like Urras. Much of the diction chosen by Le Guin reflects the sparseness of the landscape and the city itself, from its "wide, clean" streets that suggest emptiness to the "clear and clean" desert air, to the "hardness or edge and corner" of the architecture that houses the city's inhabitants. The simplicity and utility of the city are visual signs of a limited existence on a harsh desert world. Interestingly, the city shares many similarities with Arcosanti: "the city's buildings were pretty much alike, they were small, but there were a lot of them, for there was no artificial lighting provided... no heat was furnished... The principal of *organic economy* was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly" (Le Guin 98. emphasis added). This "organic economy" and the influence it has on the architecture and energy use of the city strongly recall the "effects" Soleri took into account when laying out the ground work for the Arcology. Odo herself is a figure much like Soleri was

in the early days of Arcosanti's construction. An ideological leader, and the spiritual founder of what would be Anarresti society as it is in the novel, words continue to inspire a society free from capitalist power and its deleterious effects it imposes on both people and the environment. Odo "had no intention of trying to de-urbanize civilization. Though she suggested that the *natural limit* to the size of a community lay in its *dependence on its own immediate region* for essential food and power" (Le Guin 95, emphasis added). Here, we see that Odo engages in a thought-experiment very similar in nature to Soleri. By ensuring that communities are limited in size and scope, and that they rely not on international neoliberal trade networks but rather on the land and resources immediately around them, Odo lays the ground work for a network of small, sustainable cities much like Arcosanti intends to be.

In addition to the structure of physical cities, Odo further insisted that private ownership of resources must be eliminated. In her own writing she explained that "a child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it... this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection, and of sociality as a whole" (Le Guin 247). The ideal Anarresti does what must be done not purely out of necessity, but out of a deeply respected appreciation for making society better for all through their work, even if they must struggle to do it. Everything in a healthy collectivist society, even will, must be divided and shared among its people to promote an egalitarian ideal. In addressing the revolutionaries of Urras towards the very end of the novel,

Shevek speaks about Anarres in its Odonian mission: “We know that there is no help from us but from one another... You have nothing. You possess nothing. You own nothing. You are free... We are sharers, not owners... You cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself” (Le Guin 300-1). The Anarresti society, inspired by Odo and her beliefs and struggles, is deeply rooted in community and mutual aid, striking out rugged individualism and money. We see an example of this ideological stance early on in the novel. A toddler Shevek is seen sitting in a square of sunlight shining through a window, enjoying the radiant warmth. Noticing this scene, another larger toddler comes to investigate and, feeling that the sunlight on his skin is comfortable, sits next to Shevek to join in the simple pleasure. However, due to the size of the other child, Shevek is largely pushed out of the sunlight into the shade. This causes him to burst out in anger, claiming that the sun (or, at least the spot of warmth he’d found) is his. The elder woman watching the children at the day care tries to calm him through reason, explaining that “it’s not yours... nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it” (Le Guin 27). This further establishes Anarres, the planet on which Shevek and the other Anarresti live in the novel, as a utilitarian, communal society. This philosophy is strikingly similar to what Nirgal shares on his trip to Earth from his home planet Mars:

Thus in our small way we do our part to create the great civilization that trembles on the brink of becoming. We are the primitives of an unknown civilization... That’s what it looks like to us on mars, anyway—a long evolution through the centuries, toward justice and peace... On Mars we

have seen that the best way to express this interdependence is to live for giving, in a culture of compassion. Every person free and equal in the sight of all, working together for the good of all.” (Robinson 172)

By this point in Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, Martian commerce is largely based upon a “gift economy” in which objects were given to others without explicit agreement on future rewards or even an equally-valued trade. In this same speech, Nirgal further asserts that “no hierarchy is worth acknowledging but this one: the more we give, the greater we become” (Robinson 172). Martian society, much like Anarresti society, is based upon the ideals of equality, mutual aid, and teamwork.

This collectivist mindset extends into virtually every factor of individual life on both Anarres and Mars. Single, separate housing arrangements are not common in Anarresti cities, the people preferring life directly alongside their community in dormitories. Shevek ruminates about the rarity of separation: “there was the private room, another moral thorn. As a child, if you slept alone in a single it meant you had bothered the others in the dormitory until they wouldn’t tolerate you... In adult terms... aside from sexual pairing there was no reason for not sleeping in a dormitory” (Le Guin 110). Every factor of Anarresti society is based on the common good, on sharing, and on living freely among one’s community. Though not illegal, living alone is generally looked down upon, a sign of lacking sociality and desiring too much privacy. And even those “who accepted the privilege and obligation... privacy was a value only where it served a function” (Le Guin 111). Similarly, Nirgal was raised in a commune much like an Anarresti city. The adults all served as parents and teachers, and all of the

children and adults lived in communal buildings, sharing mealtimes, baths, and other necessary functions as a community. In these societies, privacy and separation are much less valued than in their opposing capitalist Earth and Urras. In an environment as hostile as a fully-desert planet, community and radical sharing is the only way to ensure a safe and successful society.

In this vein, the environment itself serves as an important symbol throughout *The Dispossessed*. On Anarres, only one crop plant grows well in the desert soil: the Holum tree. This plant is recalled many times by Shevek both on Anarres and also during his trip to Urras. One of the most striking examples is when he travels to a park for the first time while on Urras. As he walks beneath tall, leaf-laden trees, he thinks about how “the tree holum got along very efficiently with spines and needles, and no excess of those. Wasn’t all this extravagant foliage mere excess, excrement? Such trees couldn’t survive without a rich soil, constant watering, much care. He disapproved of their lavishness” (Le Guin 100). As he begins to fall disillusioned with Urras and specifically his treatment there, he falls back on his core Odonian ideals of frugality and necessity. Urras is no utopia, that much Shevek has begun to discover, and just like its society, the nature on the planet reflects excess to the point of wastefulness in Shevek’s eyes.

The climates of these two planets play a large part in reinforcing their collectivist societies. Like Arcosanti, both Mars and Anarres are entirely desert. Because of this, resources like food, water, and arable land are much more scarce than on their opposing Earth and Urras. This makes it a virtual necessity

for the people of these societies to help and share with one another in order to keep their worlds functioning at all. Just like with Arcosanti and Soleri's initial plans, the desert climates of Shevek and Nirgal's home worlds impose limits upon individuals and their societies. In her work, Nersessian posits that "Utopia, Limited gleans elements of a political paradigm that... [reconstitutes] the world as a place where grief, loss, suffering, and habits of self-denial—all far from the surfeit implied by the word 'perfect'—become essential to the idea of utopia per se" (Nersessian 2). Getting by with as little as possible is central to the tenets of these desert societies and, I believe, any real "utopia." When speaking with Pae, one of the first men Shevek meets on Urras, the Urrasti asks: "what do working people do on Anarres for a bit of jollity, to escape the woes of the world together for a night?" To this, Shevek replies, "I don't know. Perhaps our woes are inescapable?" (Le Guin 79). Unlike on the capitalist Urras, the Anarresti acknowledge that suffering is inherent to the human condition, that woes are part of daily life, inescapable. Le Guin reinforces this view in a way very close to Nersessian's own conception of limited utopia: "'All of us here are going to know grief... That's the condition we're born on... Any happiness seems trivial. And yet, I wonder if it isn't all a misunderstanding—this grasping after happiness, this fear of pain... if instead of fearing it and running from it, one could... get through it" (Le Guin 60). Rather than try to erase all pain and suffering, Shevek acknowledges in the Odonian mode that to live is to suffer, to a certain extent. And to suffer isn't necessarily negative, rather just another facet of human life. This is the mentality of the communal desert society of Anarres at work. Instead

of selfishly seeking personal comfort over all else, as those of the capitalist class on Urras do, Shevek sees more value in feeling grief, feeling pain, and letting it pass, as long as there is a community to share it with, from which to lift each other up.

### Chapter 3: Capitalism, Incompatible and Unreturnable

All we know is Earth. Humans evolved over millions of years alongside all other plant and animal life, over geographical epochs, through totalizing global shifts, to end up where we find ourselves now. We were molded by this planet and in turn we are suited for it: no other planetary surface (at least, that we're aware of) in the Sol system can support human life as it is. However, the societies of Anarres and Mars in these two novels demonstrate an interesting reversal: those who were born on the desert planets have been molded by *those* conditions, natural *and* social. They have become, in a way, a new subspecies of Homo Sapiens. Urras—the original, “natural” home of humanity in the Tau Ceti system, has become environmentally incompatible to the acclimated (but, importantly, not technically biologically evolved) Anarresti. Although narration tells us that, upon first arriving on Urras, Shevek thought “the air on his face and hands, in his nostrils and throat and lungs...was not strange. It was the air of the world from which his race had come, it was the air of home” (Le Guin 20), we quickly see a change in Shevek’s biological compatibility with the planet. After his first sleep, “his nose was stuffy, his throat was sore, and he coughed a lot...likely a massive hay-fever, an allergic reaction to the foreign dusts and pollens of Urras” (Le Guin 63). This is mirrored, multiplied, by Nirgal’s experience on his first visit to Earth in *Blue Mars*: “the interior of the [station] resembled the one on Pavonis Mons, an incongruous familiarity, for the air was salty, thick, hot,

clangorous, heavy...it reeked of salt, fish, leaves, tar, shit, spices: like a greenhouse *gone mad*" (Robinson 169, emphasis added). To Nirgal, Earth is "mad." Compared to his birth-home of Mars, it's disturbingly wet and loud, hot and bright, with too much stimulus both visual and aural. Eventually, this overwhelming difference forces Nirgal to return to Mars. After diving as part of his interplanetary mission to find his birth-mother for guidance, he becomes increasingly sick to the point of incapacitation. According to Sax, one of the initial group of scientists who made a home on Mars, "It could be a form of altitude sickness. Or a disease vector. Or allergies. A systemic response. Edema, anyway" (Robinson, 217). It's unclear exactly why, but Earth itself has made Nirgal so sick he must leave: "This world had infected him—crushed him—cooked him in steam and bacteria. A blow to the ribs: he was allergic to Earth" (Robinson 217). These psycho- and physiological reactions to the very air of Urras and Earth demonstrate the importance of climate both within the novels and as objective reality outside of them. The humans who have fled their evolutionary cradles for desert worlds lose the physical and mental capability to cope with the overwhelming intensity of their wetter, louder, and greener "home worlds." This literal bodily illness is a visible symptom reflective of a more pressing problem for Shevek, Nirgal, and all the citizens of Mars and Anarres—ideological incompatibility.

One of the main ways in which Le Guin pits the hyper-capitalist world of Urras against the Odonian Anarres is by describing the excess Shevek consistently notices during his trip to the planet. At first, Shevek is enamored by

the visual stimulation he's exposed to on Urras. While he's recovering from his initial sickness, he decides to sit by the window of the large room given to him by the University and look out over the land. Le Guin notes that "it was the most beautiful view Shevek had ever seen. The tenderness and vitality of the colors, the mixture of rectilinear human design and powerful, proliferate natural contours, the variety and harmony of the elements, gave an impression of complex wholeness such as he had never seen [on Anarres]" (Le Guin 65). While he is at first in awe of the objective beauty of the lush planet, he quickly becomes disillusioned with that same complexity. It overwhelms him, makes him feel out of place: "He felt himself dry and arid, like a desert plant, in this beautiful oasis. Life on Anarres had sealed him, closed off his soul; the waters of life welled all around him, and yet he could not drink" (Le Guin 129). Here Shevek identifies directly with his home environment. Because he is so steeped in living within limits, so used to denying excess and hedonistic indulgence, he feels "lacking". This excess is not limited to the natural world, either. Shevek "always felt uneasy amidst the extravagant decorations and conveniences of the public buildings... The Urrasti had taste, but it seemed often to be in conflict with an impulse towards display—conspicuous expense" (Le Guin 145). The maximalist design of the Urrasti interiors, purposefully chosen to reflect wealth and power, are unfamiliar and, importantly, uncomfortable for Shevek. These ornamental interiors have taken such a psychic toll on him that when he encounters a more sparse, simple design he remarks on its "grace, achieved through *restraint*" (Le Guin 135, emphasis added). This restraint, the use of *limited* and purposeful

decoration, is much more in tune with Shevek's personality and ideals, shaped by the Odonian Anarresti social framework.

Ornamentation becomes an important central theme in Shevek's rejection of Urras as a whole, as it is a visual reminder of capitalist excesses and inequalities.. After he's taken on a shopping trip by some of his guides, he recalls that "the whole experience had been so bewildering to him that he put it out of his mind as soon as possible, but he had dreams about it for months afterwards, nightmares... everything [he saw] was either useless to begin with or ornamented so as to disguise its use; acres of luxuries, acres of excrement" (Le Guin 131). In the capitalist Urrasti society, the decoration and disguise of objects serves many the same goals as the gaudy interior design: demonstrating wealth and a cornucopian bounty of resources. Anyone who can afford to buy a useless tool simply for its appearance, simply to have it and claim it as one's own, clearly has no regard for limitation. On Anarres, everything is limited to utility and everything is shared with purpose. Even personal pleasure is often ignored, as we see Takver mentions in a conversation with Shevek: "nothing's wrong with [pleasure]. And I do want it. Only I don't need it. And if I take what I don't need, I'll never get to what I do need" (Le Guin 180). Takver shares here a distillation of the Odonian mentality: if something is unnecessary, if it serves no function to benefit the greater good, it should not be sought after. Instead, individual energy should be focused on making the world a better place for the collective. In a brilliant moment of metaphor, Shevek compares Urras to "a box, a package with all the beautiful wrapping of the blue sky and me A black cellar full of dust, and a

dead man. A man whose hand was shot off because he held it out to others” (Le Guin 346). Underneath its beautiful and inviting ornamentation, represented by not only the lush nature of the planet but by its gaudy objects, there is nothing real worth fighting for, worth living for. The false presentation of capitalist evil as a visually pleasing, enjoyable object, causes significant disconnect between Shevek’s mentality of limited desert utopia and the capitalist society of Urras. In a conversation about life, before Shevek came to Urras, his close friend Dap tells him that “reality is terrible. It can kill you... The reality is pain—you said that! But it’s the lies, the evasions of reality, that drive you crazy. It’s the lies that make you want to kill yourself” (Le Guin 165). Everywhere on Urras Shevek sees these lies, these evasions of the limitations of reality on display by the capitalists who make the planet their home. This frustration is what ultimately drives Shevek over the edge and leads to him seeking out revolutionaries and, eventually, the Terran ambassador.

Shevek also remarks on the degree of separation between people on Urras, both in regards to class and, relatedly, in regards to community and interpersonal interaction. When riding in a car to another city during his trip to Urras, we learn that cars and car travel are anything but accessible and community-based:

there were not many [cars] on the roads: the hire was expensive, and few people owned a car privately, because they were heavily taxed. All such luxuries which if freely allowed to the public would tend to drain

irreplaceable natural resources or to foul the environment with waste products were strictly controlled by regulation and taxation. (Le Guin 81)

Though it seems to be for a valiant ecological cause, the management of cars on Urras is inherently classist and exclusionary. Only those who are rich enough within the capitalist state are able to afford to travel by car; anyone without a spare sum of money is unable to afford it. It's not explicitly stated, but I assume other forms of transportation are much more time-inefficient than travel by car, and if Urras operates under anything like the US system, public transport is almost certainly sorely lacking. Further, those who are able to use cars do so only by the virtue of the money gained within a capitalist system, leaving out anyone who has been, likely by no fault of their own, left without a savings or sizeable disposable income. As Shevek comes from a highly decentralized, currency-free, egalitarian society, this disturbs him. One of his tour guides even mentions that "the excesses of the Ninth Millennium were ancient history" (Le Guin 81). This stands in contrast to many of the excesses observed by Shevek during his visit, many mentioned earlier and many more not included in this essay. In addition, Shevek is struck by the presence of slaves on Urras: "[a man] came out again. He said something—'there you are, sir,' perhaps?—and ducked his head in a curious fashion, as if he thought that Shevek, five meters away, was about to hit him in the face" (Le Guin 66). Eventually, Shevek learns that this man is his assigned bedroom servant, and cannot comprehend the role explaining that he has brought no money or gifts in exchange for the service the man offered. The Urrasti in the room simply laugh, assuring Shevek that the

service is free of charge. This is one of the very first times we see Shevek truly confused and unnerved by Urrasti society.

Even at their most vulnerable, either from sickness in Nirgal's case or from threat of certain danger in Shevek's, both men decide to make their way back to their home worlds, back to the desert, even with all of its inherent limitations and discomfort, because they believe their egalitarian communal societies are more livable, better for themselves and for their environments, and better for society as a whole. After Sax's "diagnosis" of Nirgal's Earth-caused condition, Nirgal states that he wants to go "Home, yes" (Robinson 217). In the same way, Shevek in his conversation with a member of the revolutionary anti-capitalist protest on Urras says "I can't take the money and the things they give me. I want to get out" (Le Guin 293). Shevek and Nirgal both *choose* to re-separate themselves from the green worlds they visit, the planets that were once humanity's only homes. Their incompatibility is at once uncontrollably physical and purposefully political in nature. They are simply unsuited to live in the lush nature of Earth and Urras; unwilling to return to capitalist societies, rife with state violence, environmental irresponsibility, and socioeconomic inequality.

## Chapter 4: Spec Lit, Ecocriticism, and Alternative Arrangements

By its very nature, capitalism ultimately leads to both social and environmental destruction. Before the events of *Blue Mars*, Earth experiences a massive, apocalyptic flood when global warming leads to the total collapse of the Antarctic ice shelves, displacing hundreds of feet of seawater over coastal areas. This climate phenomenon, the direct result of capitalism's continued greedy emissions and pollution even in the face of scientific warning, killed millions and displaced even millions more. Though the Urras we see in *The Dispossessed* does not seem drastically damaged, we learn from the Terran ambassador that capitalism is the cause of Earth's climate disasters and that, logically, it will lead to the destruction of Urras as well. She explains that "my world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left. And then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first" (Le Guin 347). If we are to avoid this imminent doom, we must drastically shift the way we operate as a society. Science and experience both warn us that capitalism is inherently unsustainable, and will only result in irreparable damage to our planet and our societies. We must find alternatives.

Arcosanti shows us a real-life possibility of living, at least partially, removed from a capitalist system. However, because various forms of tourism

are the main source of funding for the “city,” it ultimately relies on fiat currency and the commodification of its own land and people. More importantly, the project exists within the borders of a capitalist state and as such is subject to its laws; Arcosanti must work *within* the confines of the United States’ capitalist framework. Though it takes some substantive strides towards a working vision of a post-capitalist society, in the end it fails in its most ambitious goals. It remains unfinished, it remains the only sustainable micro-city of its kind, and most importantly it still relies on currency. Much of its funding dollars are gathered through tourism, in addition to the commodification and sale of its own art (the windbells it sells for profit and the hosting of art and music festivals to bring in external revenue). While it remains an important real vision of a limited utopian urban society, Arcosanti has so far failed to meet even a fraction of the world-changing power Soleri hoped to achieve upon its conception in the mid-20th century.

Anarres and Mars, in the two novels I’ve worked with in this essay, present large-scale, more successful extrapolations of the Arcosanti project. Anarres was settled by descendants of the Odonian tradition, who, sparked by her political writings, revolted against the capitalist state and the violence it forced upon them on Urras. In turn, they were “given” rights to the desert moon, and have lived on it since, with no contact between the two worlds until Shevek’s journey. Though it is barren, desolate, difficult, and extremely limiting, the Anarresti have managed to form a functioning “experiment in non-authoritarian communism, that [has] survived for a hundred and seventy years”

(Le Guin 341). Anarres is the result of a refusal of authoritarian capitalism and a subsequent exiting of the world it rules to a foreign desert. Similarly, though its transition is much messier than Anarres', the Martian society of Robinson's trilogy manages to beat back the transnational hyper-capitalism that threatens and almost succeeds in consuming Mars, making it a second Earth rife with all of the same issues immigrants to Mars came to escape.

Based on these discussions, my conclusion is twofold. First, I believe the desert is an ideal setting, both symbolically and practically, for constructing human societies which follow the type of minimalist, environmentally-conscious, and socially beneficial aspects of Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited*. Secondly, I feel strongly that SF and other forms of Spec Lit are inherently superior literary tools in which to explore these kinds of alternative societies. Huggan and Tiffin mention in their introduction that "ecocriticism has tended as a whole to prioritize extra-human concerns over the interests of disadvantaged human groups, while post-colonialism has been routinely, and at times unthinkingly, anthropocentric" (17). Both novels I've discussed demonstrate the capacity of SF literature to bridge that gap, to close the distance between the concerns of humanity and the concerns of the environment, and to engage in deeply critical commentary about how our capitalist societies have failed both a majority of the people living in them and the environment in which we all must live. SF is adept at this precisely because of its scientific interest. Heise predicts that "With a scientifically informed foregrounding... ecocriticism [can] contribute significantly to the interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and science, but also to the broad rethinking of the

relations between humans and nature that is currently taking place in Western societies” (4). Because SF literature is by its nature already invested in science and scientific thought, it is more appropriate for this kind of ecocritical analysis, and can provide more fruitful insights into how we as humans can understand and adapt our ways to cause less harm to the environment while improving the lives of as many people on Earth as possible.

As we don't currently have the technology to send large groups of humans to other worlds, we cannot make the same kind of exit from capitalism that the societies in the *Mars* trilogy and *The Dispossessed* make. They were able to literally escape the capitalist trappings of Earth by leaving the planet and making a new home on desert worlds. However, these novels can teach us something about how we might be able to work from within the current systems in power on Earth to better life here. Arcosanti, Mars, and Anarres all represent how human societies can improve by paying attention to and working with natural and societal limits rather than ignoring them in an impossible capitalist quest for endless growth and individual wealth. In addition, by incorporating into our laws and customs rights for nature itself, we can more faithfully ensure the protection of a sensitive and ever-changing environment, in turn encouraging a lifestyle more in tune with nature. The new Martian Constitution ratified toward the end of the *Mars* trilogy demonstrates this possibility. The constitution uses the earlier Dorsa Brevia agreement as its basis. That agreement lists 7 tenets for what Martian society should look like. Included here are some of them:

2. All individuals should have some inalienable rights: material existence, health care, education, legal equality. 3. The Martian land, air, water are common goods and cannot be owned. 4. The fruits of an individual's labor belong to this individual; Martian human labor is part of a communal enterprise; the Martian economic system should balance self-interest and the society's interests. 5. Martian economics will be based on ecologic science and should serve the prosperity of the entire biosphere; thus the metanational order is not sustainable. (kimstanleyrobinson.info)

These ideals that would later become the basis for laws in constitution demonstrate the belief that, by working with the desert environment rather than against it, and by ensuring humans have equal rights and power, the Martian society will not succumb to the same environmental, political, and social disasters of Earth.

SF literature is unique, along with other forms of the speculative, in that it can allow us to explore worlds not yet existent but not unimaginable. SF in particular allows us to ground much of its speculation in currently known and mutually acknowledged science, therefore making it even more applicable to the study of real futures than others like pure Fantasy. By engaging ecocritically and socio-politically with SF literature, we can imagine ways in which we as humans can move beyond the current hegemony of capital and the social and environmental damages it causes toward something more ideal, more egalitarian, more like utopia.

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