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What If: Multispecies Justice as the Expression of Utopian Desire

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Abstract:

One way of understanding calls for “multispecies justice” is to interpret them as utopian demands for a desirable future in which the structural anthropocentrism of conventional forms of morality, including environmental ethics, has been thoroughly abolished. I hope to clarify what kind of utopia multispecies justice might specifically entail. Mobilizing a conceptual framework developed by the science fiction author Octavia Butler, three potential plotlines for the utopia of multispecies justice are identified: the *What-If*, the *If-Only* and the *If-This-Goes-On*. Each of these engages the various tasks of utopianism in interestingly different ways. The key argument is that multispecies justice primarily raises a challenging *What-If* question: as a critical interrogation of how we should process and experience the world (and our place within it), its power derives from the “educated hope” to disrupt and reassemble outdated frameworks for making sense of the nature/culture divide.

Keywords:

Estrangement; multispecies justice; perfectionism; utopianism.

1. Introduction

Calls for multispecies justice can be reconstructed as expressions of utopian desire. My thesis is that envisaging both practical engagements with, and imaginative explorations of, multispecies encounters through the lens of utopianism will be helpful for better comprehending what is at stake with demands for bringing justice to a more-than-human world.¹ That is the case because, properly construed, utopianism's main goal is not the escapist design of static blueprints for a perfect world, but rather a critical interrogation of the present that paves the way for systemically transforming the status quo. The research agenda behind multispecies justice is geared toward precisely such an interrogation, via its recasting of the subject of justice, its espousal of novel and dynamic ways of processing and experiencing the world, and its attack on liberal principles of individualistic normativity.

To defend this claim, I proceed in three steps. First, I outline the chief features of the multispecies justice project, focusing in particular on its ontological underpinnings, its epistemological commitments and its ethical orientations. Ontologically, multispecies justice is premised on the idea of a “flat” distribution of all beings. Epistemologically, multispecies justice is based on a view of knowledge that is receptive of, and in dialogue with, forms of knowledge production that have traditionally been marginalized

¹ A caveat on the use of “species” here. Defenders of multispecies justice usually do not employ this term in the sense of a fixed and homogenous concept to describe a natural kind. Rather, in line with their ontological, epistemological and ethical frameworks, they use “species” as a heuristic term to capture “any relevant gathering together of kin and/or kind” (van Dooren *et al.* 2016, p. 5).

in Western societies. Ethically, multispecies justice is anchored in non-anthropocentric principles of universal connectedness that give grounds to novel types of care and empathy – or what Donna Haraway evocatively calls “response-ability” (2016, p. 26). In a further step, I specify what I mean by utopianism, vindicating the proposition that utopian visions are neither prone to perfectionism nor to escapism. Drawing on Octavia Butler’s taxonomy, my suggestion is that we can analytically hold apart three narrative plotlines through which the desire for being and living otherwise can be framed: the *What-If*, the *If-Only* and the *If-This-Goes-On*. In a nutshell, each of these fulfils one central function, namely estranging (*What-If*), galvanizing (*If-Only*) and cautioning (*If-This-Goes-On*).

The paper’s conclusion applies this model to multispecies justice. My claim is that multispecies justice primarily raises a challenging *What-If* question: as a critical interrogation of how we should process and experience the world (and our place within it), its power derives from the “educated hope” to reassemble conventional frameworks for making sense of the nature/culture divide.

The way I understand it, multispecies justice describes an emergent research programme, weaving together multiple intellectual inheritances and sustained at its core by a specific normative vision. As such, it amounts to an inherently pluralistic enterprise that resists facile subsumption under catch-all categories. This is why a clarification on the paper’s interpretive strategy and argumentative scope seems necessary. As already explained, my claim below will be that multispecies justice chimes with a particular utopian plotline, which I associate with the generation of estrangement (*What-If*). While the ensuing sections attempt to tease out this notion, it is imperative to acknowledge from the start that I do not conceive of it as fully exhaustive with regard to all proposals for justice in a more-than-human world. Indeed, as I maintain in final section, we can

also contemplate divergent plotlines for multispecies justice, accentuating either eutopian (*If-Only*) or dystopian (*If-This-Goes-On*) motifs. This should not surprise us, given that multispecies justice, as a field of scholarly collaboration and socio-political praxis, still remains very much in flux. All I am maintaining is, accordingly, that the *What-If* frame constitutes a dominant, but surely not the only, plotline through which the utopian desire for justice in a more-than-human world can be expressed.²

2. Multispecies Justice: Attempt of an Outline

In this section, my goal is to sketch the contours of multispecies justice by focusing on its substantive outlooks and by explaining how it simultaneously builds upon and

² A note on my use of the first person plural in this essay: we, us, our. I am entirely aware of the dangers that such significations harbour, especially with regard to homogenizing ways of speaking and writing that tend to ignore vital differences within the collective alluded to – a heavy bone of contention in the controversy around the nomenclature of the “Anthropocene”, for example (Haraway 2015, Moore 2016, Whyte 2017). When employing these phrases, I refer to them in a relatively straightforward manner, to gesture towards a collective identity that is perhaps not yet fully formed, but which is the ultimate audience here: all those who grapple with ideas of multispecies justice. What I do not want to suggest under any circumstances is that, when it comes to different levels of vulnerability, “we” all find ourselves in the same situation, as the metaphor of Earth as a lifeboat seems to insinuate. That is obviously untrue because some of “us” humans are much more exposed to racial, economic, gender and environmental harms than others.

departs from earlier contributions to environmental ethics.³ At its most basic, multispecies justice advances a revolutionary idea about what sort of relationships ought to obtain between human and non-human actors. Its ambition is, consequently, to work towards a “politics for composing a common world that considers the needs and livelihoods of a diversity of human and nonhuman life” (Jones 2019, p. 485). In more concrete terms, multispecies justice “seeks to understand the types of relationships humans ought to cultivate with more-than-human beings so as to produce just outcomes” (Celermajer, Schlosberg, *et al.* 2020, p. 2).

Put this way, the underlying research agenda might seem quite conventional, due to its contiguity with other types of environmental ethics based on ecocentrism, deep ecology and animal rights/liberation. But as we shall observe in the following, the aim of producing just outcomes for both human and more-than-human beings has specific ramifications that set multispecies justice apart from cognate ethical theories.

One way of approaching multispecies justice would be via a negative route, by first highlighting the position that it seeks to repudiate. On the anthropocentric view⁴, humans occupy a pivotal place in the moral universe for three interrelated reasons: (a) they are fundamentally distinct from other species and the natural as well as

³ Note that my approach here is heuristic by design: given space constraints and given the internal complexity of multispecies justice, fleshing out the normative vision underpinning multispecies justice is necessarily a very focused affair that will leave some issues open.

⁴ Needless to say, for presentational reasons, my summary of this highly complex debate, which has proliferated within environmental ethics since the 1980s, will have to be compressed. For seminal contributions see: (Callicott 1984, Norton 1984).

technological world more widely; (b) they are unique compared to other species, due to their possession of a set of special qualities, such as the ability to consciously reason and deliberate; and (c) they are, as a consequence, worthy of greater moral consideration than other species (Thompson 2015). Rather than conceiving of humans and non-humans as subject to different moral regimes, multispecies justice posits a vital equivalence between them.

The postulated likeness between humans and non-humans is rooted in a worldview that sharply breaks with modern articulations of the divide between nature and culture (Latour 1993). Donna Haraway goes so far as to completely collapse this divide, opting instead for the neologism “natureculture” (2000a, pp. 105–106) to signal that a new conceptual apparatus is needed to make sense of humanity’s entanglement with a more-than-human world.

In order to elucidate what exactly is at stake with multispecies justice, I now want to tease out three dimensions – an ontological, an epistemological and an ethical one – that I believe are foundational to it. First, the image of the world as one in which nature and culture cannot be neatly parsed is grounded in an ontology that might be described as “flat”. A flat ontology is characterized by the observation that “all entities are on equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects” (Bryant 2011, p. 246).⁵

An important implication of this kind of ontology is that agency needs to be radically rethought in relational terms. The atomistic conception of the individual as free-

⁵ This notion has lately seen an astonishing career within Actor-Network-Theory as well as various strands of new realism and materialism (Coole and Frost 2010, Harman 2014, 2016).

standing and autonomous, which has been instrumental in projects of colonial dispossession and extraction (Moreton-Robinson 2015), turns out to be completely incompatible with such an image of the world. As a consequence, multispecies justice relies on a wider framework that further expands on the primary understanding of a flat ontology so as to produce just outcomes for both humans and non-humans. This brings me to the second point: the epistemological commitments upon which multispecies rests. What sort of knowledge production is suitable for grasping humanity's entanglement with a more-than-human world? Advocates of multispecies justice respond to this question by deploying epistemologies that also account for non-human animals and, perhaps most controversially, even for inanimate matter (Bennett 2010). Anna Tsing describes the precondition for creating such knowledge as the "passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhuman subjects" (2010, p. 201). Immersing oneself in this manner is a prerequisite for mapping the complex relationships that different forms of life build together. Attentiveness to various ways of *becoming* therefore constitutes a decisive skill for this new kind of ethnography, which has been applied to a range of encounters between different species, from canines (Haraway 2008) to plants (Marder 2013). While this form of knowledge production is not opposed to the established methods of modern science *per se*, it does cast doubt on ways of knowing the world that too sharply separate nature from culture. At the same time, advocates of multispecies justice show increasing appreciation of Indigenous epistemologies (as well as practices), which have been historically excluded from the canon of established scholarship (Cadena 2015, Whyte 2017). This has also led to a reappraisal of how colonial mindsets keep on informing and sustaining the global academy (Todd 2016). A third feature appears to be operative in all efforts to dedicate oneself to multispecies research: a certain ethical orientation. The very term "multispecies justice" indicates

already that the epistemology described above is supposed to serve a specific goal – not only to accurately describe and explain humanity’s entanglement with a more-than-human world, but also to draw out lessons of practical concern that will have moral salience. What, then, are the cornerstones of the ethical orientation behind the quest for marginalized types of knowledge production?

In this regard, a valuable resource for multispecies justice can be found in ecofeminist reflections on the power structures undergirding hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies. Ecofeminists have for some time asserted that the oppression of human beings, and of women in particular, is linked to a distinct paradigm of (Western) rationality that organizes the world via hierarchical oppositions. According to Val Plumwood’s influential analysis (2002), this “master model” of exclusion delivers the source code of class, gender and racial domination. Moreover, its underlying dualist logic saturates everyday as well as academic discourses around the presumed radical Otherness of wild nature.

What this analysis brings out is the pervasiveness with which dualisms cut up the world into artificially segmented pieces. They thereby disfigure the relations between men and women, colonizers and colonized as much as they profoundly affect humanity’s stance vis-à-vis the environment. The dilemma arising from this master model is that the Other is always confronted with an agonizing, and ultimately impossible, choice – either to be misrecognized as wholly alien or to be wholly assimilated into the norm. From within this framework, no meaningful path forward seems available, for envisaging the world through the lens of rigid oppositions inevitably gives rise to inegalitarian, and often violent, hierarchies. Anthropocentrism, on this account, is but one corollary of the master model’s structuring grip on the common world.

One way in which ecofeminists have sought to defuse the dominative force of this dualist logic is through a reinvigorated engagement with care ethics. Care ethics comprises a wide field of ideas and practices, founded on different moral convictions, but for our purpose it should suffice to remark that, far from merely encompassing interpersonal relations, recent contributions to the debate have also underscored the capacity of care perspectives to inform socio-economic and political issues (Ruddick 1989, Tronto 1993). If caring involves, in essence, an “*activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*” (Fisher and Tronto 1991, p. 40 Italics in original.), then there is, in principle, no reason to delineate the boundaries of “our world” by reference to human needs and interests alone. Caring about and for a more-than-human world certainly demands a readjustment of prevailing ethical frameworks, yet ecofeminists have tried to argue that we already possess the conceptual tools to make sense of the complex entanglements captured through the notion of a flat ontology (Gruen 2015, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

The view I have been trying to motivate so far draws inspiration from a significant range of theoretical positions. Historically, it appears that multispecies justice resumes a vibrant conversation around environmental ethics that initially commenced in the 1970s. This conversation turned out to be internally diverse, containing both ecocentric worldviews (Goodpaster 1978, Rolston 1988), deep-ecological thought (Fox 1984, Næss 2005, vol. X) and disputes over animal liberation/rights (Regan 1983, Singer 2009).

While there is hence a clear sense of historical continuity permeating the basic structure of multispecies justice, we can also identify genuinely new perspectives that were not foregrounded in prior iterations of the debate around environmental ethics. Within the

humanities, the most important of those can be detected in the recent surge of so-called “posthumanist” scholarship⁶, which starts from the assumption that humans are by necessity enmeshed in both biological and technological networks (Haraway 2000b, Barad 2007). This posthumanist sensibility has proliferated in a variety of academic disciplines, from philosophy (Braidotti 2013) to literary studies (Wolfe 2010) and theology (Waters 2006). Within Science and Technology Studies, authors such as Bruno Latour (2005) and John Law (1992) have over the past decades challenged conventional pictures of agency as pertaining exclusively to humans, arguing instead for a novel framework that would found an entire field of research – Actor-Network-Theory (Farias *et al.* 2019). Finally, to name just one more of posthumanism’s many upshots, anthropology has been profoundly affected by the insight that the human and the non-human world are entangled with one another. Through their research into a great variety of relationships between humans and other species, ranging from mushrooms (Tsing 2015) to forests (Kohn 2013), anthropologists have sought to develop new approaches to ethnography that tear down the traditional confines of researchable culture. What all these disciplinary perspectives share, despite pursuing their unique routes, is a commitment to enlarging existing frameworks, away from an entrenched

⁶ Needless to say, the concept of posthumanism remains hotly contested. This becomes especially palpable if we look into so-called “transhumanist” projects, whose aim is to enhance humans’ capacities in view of our natural dependencies. In so doing, many transhumanists in effect reaffirm anthropocentric principles, which is something that most posthumanists would want to avoid. For an emblematic statement see: (Savulescu and Bostrom 2009).

anthropocentrism, toward new research agendas. Against the backdrop of overlapping intellectual legacies, an account of the field of multispecies justice surfaces that revolves around a number of key insights: a redefinition of the subject of justice based on a flat ontology, a shift to non-Eurocentric ways of knowing the more-than-human world and an attack on liberal principles of individualistic normativity insofar as they remain implicated in (neo-)colonial enterprises (Celermajer, Schlosberg, *et al.* 2020, pp. 8–11).

As we have seen already, put together, these features build on, yet also significantly extend other approaches to environmental ethics. In its ambition to deliver just outcomes for both human and more-than-human beings, multispecies justice resolutely rejects anthropocentrism, instead highlighting a “relational understanding of harm and flourishing” (Tschakert 2020, p. 2). The concomitant attention to “becoming” (Houston *et al.* 2018) reveals the truly radical impetus behind multispecies justice: rather than homing in on the static, observable qualities of individuals or collectives, the research programme summarized in this section intends to bring about novel and dynamic ways of being and living together. In the next section, I will build on this conceptualization so as to inquire into the specific imaginary that this view of multispecies justice engenders.

3. The Education of Desire: Tracing Utopia’s Plotlines

An important issue arising from this picture has to do with the *imaginary horizon* of multispecies justice. Are we expected to understand this project, with its ontological underpinnings, epistemological commitments and ethical orientations, as a desirable projection of a world to come? Or is the more-than-human world already here with us, merely operating at some distance from existing frameworks that remain tethered to anthropocentric premises? My argument in this section is that we should turn to findings from utopian studies to answer these questions. This will eventually enable us to

account for the radical impetus behind multispecies justice – its determination to comprehensively upend outdated modes of planetary (co)-existence that fail to offer guidance through the current environmental crises.

A good place to launch this endeavour is with Donna Haraway's approach to multispecies justice, succinctly summarized in her statement that we should “stay with the trouble” of a climate-changed world, rather than ponder our escape from it:

In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (2016, p. 1).

What Haraway means here is that we must avoid falling into one of the following two traps when considering what will become of planet Earth: either to invest hope in the Promethean capacity of science and technology to rapidly “solve” the current environmental crises, without fundamentally altering the way the global economy is structured; or to succumb to a cynical defeatism about life on Earth, such that nothing could be done to ameliorate the state of planetary disarray. Whereas the first response is liable to wishful thinking, the second one might trigger paralysis, or even nihilism on the part of affected people. Confronted with this false binary, “staying with the trouble” gestures toward a third option, the competing imperative to not look away from the entanglements that constitute our common world – what Haraway also dubs “becoming-with” (2009).

This insistence on learning to remain “truly present” can be fruitfully juxtaposed with another possibility for viewing multispecies justice: as the *expression of a utopian desire*. While I claim that this perspective discloses a promising perspective for understanding multispecies justice, not everyone agrees. For example, Bruno Latour's

effort at recovering James Lovelock’s Gaia figure to examine our climate-changed world is staunchly anti-utopian. “Gaia”, Latour notes, “is the great figure opposed to utopia and uchronia” (2017, para. 15.79).⁷ Even though his approach bears striking similarities with the flat ontology endorsed by champions of multispecies justice, due to its emphasis on the constitutive entanglement of human and non-human beings and its assertion that “[o]n this Earth, no one is passive” (Latour 2017, para. 9.70), Latour vehemently rejects any association of his project with utopianism. The main explanation for why some prominent authors such as Latour tend to disavow the label of utopianism is that they identify it with either *escapism* or *perfectionism*. That is, they assume that describing an idea as utopian would signal a retreat from the messiness of a climate-changed world; a messiness that the very thought of a flat ontology composed of entangled beings is supposed to centre.

In the following, I want to suggest that this nervous antipathy is in fact a symptom of a widely shared anxiety about the supposedly adverse ramifications of the radical imagination, the origins of which can be traced back to debates during the Cold War. Constructively, this section develops a remedy to this anxiety and makes the case for

⁷ Latour’s aversion to utopianism is not peculiar to his work around the Gaia hypothesis. In his book on political ecology, he embraces a “reconstructive” agenda and notes that “[f]ar from designing a world to come, I have only made up for lost time by putting words to alliances, congregations, synergies that already exist everywhere and that only the ancient prejudices kept us from seeing” (Latour 2004, p. 163). Latour’s anti-utopianism is, moreover, evident in his latest publication, *Down to Earth* (2018), where he denounces as utopian (in the pejorative sense) all forms of geo-politics that forsake an eco-social grounding.

conceiving of multispecies justice as a utopian project. To achieve these twin goals, I first have to explain what exactly I mean by “utopian”.

One of the reasons for the continuing appeal of, and contestation around, utopianism lies in the concept’s multiple, and frequently incompatible, meanings. In everyday parlance, when we designate a proposal utopian, we might express admiration for it, but simultaneously cast doubt on its realizability. Part of why we question the practical merit of utopias is that they are more often than not associated with *perfect plans for ideal societies*. This association can, at first glance, be traced back through the history of ideas, to Thomas More’s satirical depiction of the island of “utopia” (More 2002, See also: Davis 2010). The vocal oscillation between a no-place (*ou-topia*) and a good place (*eu-topia*) brings to the fore the consistently playful tone of the literary genre that More’s book inaugurated.

The emphasis on perfect plans for ideal societies has fed into what is doubtlessly the most strident objection to utopias today: that they are ultimately harbingers of totalitarianism. So-called “Cold War liberals” like Karl Popper (1986) or Leszek Kołakowski (1990) all suspected that utopias were profoundly pernicious, for they contained social and political arrangements that appeared to be without flaws and contradictions. The conjuring of another world that would be just on the horizon and cleansed of all impurities was so dangerous, these commentators maintained, because it erased the inherently defective and ambiguous nature of human beings, forever torn between impulses to do good and temptations to do bad. In designing social and political arrangements that were ill fit for what Kant described as “the crooked wood” (2006, p. 9) of humanity, utopian thinkers thus prepared the ground for widespread,

eliminatory violence, unleashed by those who took it upon themselves to turn the dream into reality.⁸

The Cold War liberals had, of course, deeper motives for denouncing utopian visions as totalitarian blueprints, given their unwavering hostility to actually existing Socialism.

But the suspicion of utopias as perfectionist, and hence problematic, has from the 1960s onwards seeped into the cultural mainstream, culminating in the unofficial slogan of the neo-liberal Thatcher/Reagan era: TINA, or *There Is No Alternative*.

The issue with identifying utopias with perfect plans for ideal societies is not so much that it completely misses the point, but rather that it puts too much stress on one dimension of utopianism, at the expense of alternative features that deserve our attention as well. Authors such as Ruth Levitas (2013, pt. I) and Lucy Sargisson (2014, chap. 1) have convincingly demonstrated that we should move beyond a simplistic understanding of the drive behind utopian projects. It is one of their key contentions that utopias have often made room for flaws and contradictions, especially after the so-called “critical turn” in utopian fiction from the 1970s (Moylan 2014). While the image of utopia as a static blueprint, with its concomitant charge of oppressive social engineering, remains firmly anchored in the wider public, it is therefore possible to unearth a rival meaning that highlights an entirely different aspect: utopianism as the “education of desire” (Abensour 1999, p. 145) for alternative ways of being and living. Utopianism, on this account, is essentially a form of “social dreaming” (Sargent 1994), anchored in humans’ propensity to formulate wishes that a hegemonic state of affairs be otherwise. Note, though, that these wishes are not merely the product of an individual’s

⁸ For contemporary articulations of the same thought, see: (Gray 2007, Galston 2010).

particular aspirations and yearnings. Rather, they always remain responsive to different types of *pedagogical intervention*, from the historical as well as contemporary archive of “real utopias” (Wright 2010) to the artistic exploration of “green” (Canavan and Robinson 2014) or “red” (Bould and Miéville 2009) planets. In other words, utopias can be seen as moulding our idiosyncratic aspirations and yearnings into concrete, shareable proposals for other ways of being and living. Behind these proposals lies not just any kind of hope for alternatives, but what Ernst Bloch memorably named *docta spes*, or “educated hope” (1995, pp. 7, 9).

The advantage of this broader account of utopia is that it allows us to capture the majority of radical schemes for a different future, no matter where and how they are developed, without subjecting them to the requirement of perfectionism. This vantage point has significant implications for our grasp of environmental thinking in general, as Lisa Garforth (2018) has recently persuasively claimed, and of multispecies justice in particular.

Building on these observations, we can further specify the utopianism of multispecies justice by homing in on its distinctive modes of *emplotment*. “Emplotment” is a narratological term that describes a strategy for teasing out “the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told” (White 1973, p. 7 Italics in original).

This point about the significance of plotlines – of *how* a story is told – can be harnessed for scrutinizing utopian visions too. The science fiction writer Octavia Butler proposed as much in a lecture from 1998, where she ascribed to Robert Heinlein the belief that there were “three categories of science-fiction stories: The what-if category; the if-only category; and the if-this-goes-on category” (1998).

Although Butler herself has not elaborated on this classification, we can with relative ease flesh out its implications for our topic. *What-If* narratives raise trenchant questions

that unsettle the common sense, usually through the introduction of a *novum*, an unexpected element that does not exist in the real world (Bloch 1995, pp. 201–204). In N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015, 2016, 2017), for example, our home planet is depicted as a vindictive agent that wages permanent war on its human occupants. The upshot of this portrayal of the planetary habitat as a living, raging being, rather than a passive, calm background to humanity’s sovereign actions, is that the reader’s expectations of her natural surroundings are held in abeyance. In fact, Jemisin’s work captures Earth and its inhabitants through powerful allegories of universal connectedness – neatly termed “planetary weirding” (Ingwersen 2019) – that resonate with key insights from multispecies justice. What is more, the *Broken Earth* trilogy also sheds light on the shifting intersections of class, gender, racial and environmental harms – yet another theme that is essential for the normative vision underpinning multispecies justice (Iles 2019, Bastiaansen 2020). Hence, *What-If* narratives pursue plotlines that generate estrangement (Suvin 1978): they come up with imagined scenarios, which *defamiliarize us from what we habitually take for granted*.

The *If-Only* plotline casts utopian visions in a slightly different light. These stories describe alternatives whose purpose resides in the opening up of optimistic perspectives about the future. In contemporary environmentalist discourse, ecomodernists enlist this kind of emplotment strategy, most notably through their provocative belief that science and technology might eventually expedite a “decoupling” of human needs from natural resource systems. (Asafu-Adjaye, *et al.* 2015, For an analysis see: Arias-Maldonado 2019). Kim Stanley Robinson’s eutopian *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004, 2005, 2007) inspects this “educated hope” with inimitable acumen. In his account of how the American scientific community might marshal its influence to redirect the entire Washington apparatus onto a sustainable policy platform, Robinson tries to establish

that viable paths out of the current impasse do exist – if only all the actors involved finally reckoned with the severity of the situation. The chief ambition of this narrative frame is thus to *affectively galvanize an audience* that is at the moment either apathetic about its capacity to transform the status quo or paralyzed by the many obstacles that lie ahead.

Finally, *If-This-Goes-On* unfolds a plotline that is predicated on a bleaker judgment: unless we change our ordinary ways of being and living, the apocalypse will not be averted. Dystopian stories perform this cautionary instruction by excavating dangerous trends that remain concealed within the current moment.

Commentators such as Roy Scranton (2015) or David Wallace-Wells (2019) maintain that there is little we can do to slow down the planetary breakdown and the eventual demise of our own species. Margaret Atwood's dystopian *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013) takes one step further when she invites the reader to imagine how life after the cataclysmic collapse of human civilization might look. Interestingly, Atwood's novels are also concerned with the prospect of a multispecies community emerging and thriving in the wake of the apocalypse (Nugent 2018). The main task of this kind of narrative is to *warn an audience about risks* that are already present right now, but whose magnitudes have not yet been fully appreciated in the wider public.

This section has insisted that utopias must not be mistaken for static blueprints. Far from designing perfect plans of what is to come, utopias set into motion complex processes of problematizing the present that allow the reader to imaginatively explore competing possibilities for future orientation. Further, it has been contended that Octavia Butler's separation of three plotlines for speculative fiction can be applied to utopian thinking more broadly: although speculative fiction differs in crucial respects from the research programme behind multispecies justice – its forms, pleasures and

functions are dissimilar from, yet related to, non-fiction writing (Trexler and Johns-putra 2011) – analytically holding apart the *What-If*, the *If-Only* and the *If-This-Goes-On* categories furnishes us with a theoretical framework for examining the normative vision at the heart of multispecies justice.

Note, finally, that this theoretical model is meant to be flexible and malleable; it is clearly not built around iron-clad categories. To explain, it certainly seems true that all kinds of speculative fiction (and all types of utopianism) aim to unsettle our common sense, in more or less radical ways. But the attempt to parse *What-If*, the *If-Only* and the *If-This-Goes-On* plotlines is still helpful and indeed pivotal for comprehending the various directions that multispecies justice can take. In other words, Butler’s taxonomy allows us to pick out general trends – tendencies that unveil implicit political agendas – within the research programme broadly sketched in the prior section.

4. What Kind of Plot for Multispecies Justice? A Provisional Conclusion

In this concluding part of the paper, my objective is to apply this theoretical framework to the research programme behind multispecies justice. We can embark on this effort by looking into the way wishes and hopes figure in multispecies justice. As we have remarked above, the three functions that utopias seek to fulfil to are, roughly, estranging, galvanizing and warning. The role of wishes and hopes is slightly different in each of these cases. A *What-If* plotline is based on the longing for a certain state of affairs to be otherwise. Hence, defamiliarization amounts to a technique that tries to render the impossible thinkable. In *If-Only* utopias, the rationale behind the propagation of a positive story is to show that “another world is possible”, to invoke the euphoric motto of the World Social Forum. A plotline of this kind aspires to lift the audience out of its apathy and frustration, through the circulation of optimistic images of what might be just on the horizon. In *If-This-Goes-On* narratives, the drive behind a negative vision

of the future is to establish that things could easily go awry, unless a radically new path ahead is forged. Even the bleakest of dystopias therefore always leaves some residual room, however constrained, for oppositional agency. Without this hopeful angle, a plotline of this type would ineluctably slide into fatalism.

My interpretation of multispecies justice as a utopian endeavour approximates it to the *What-If* plotline. This means that the attempt to replace conventional ontologies, epistemologies and ethics can be best accounted for as an *enterprise of estrangement*.

What is important about this enterprise is that, *pace* Latour, it does not originate in a longing for escapism or perfectionism. In other words, it appears possible to unearth the utopian dimensions in multispecies justice so long as we forsake a skewed picture of what utopias are all about.

In proposing a flat ontology whose outline can only be sensed if we fundamentally alter how we care for and about the more-than-human world, advocates of multispecies justice seek to unsettle their audience's common sense. Their attack on the taken-for-grantedness of anthropocentric frameworks is directed at a critical and transformative target: to better comprehend the complex ways in which human are *always already entangled* with the more-than-human world. Many of the proposals put forth by multispecies justice defenders are meant to be resolutely challenging. For example, the suggestion that agency is not only a human property, but distributed across "animal, vegetable and mineral" (Cohen 2012), surely comes across as a great *provocation* to hegemonic frameworks. To phrase it somewhat emphatically, the ultimate objective of this provocation is to prompt readers to fundamentally reconsider their place in the world.

This process is spurred by a utopian desire for systemic change that can be fleshed out by looking again at the three axes of multispecies justice identified above:

Ontologically, the idea of a “flat” distribution of all beings subverts a view of the world firmly anchored in common sense, namely that, in thinking about environmental crises, human interests need to be absolutely prioritized due to our species’ special status. By contrast, the wager of multispecies justice entails that the subject of justice becomes profoundly transformed once we jettison the atomistic conception of the human individual as free-standing and autonomous.

Epistemologically, the turn to non-Eurocentric ways of knowing the more-than-human world aims to create a space for mutual learning between “Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, activist-academics, and engaged citizens” (Tschakert *et al.* 2020, p. 7). That space is a counterhegemonic one insofar as mapping the complex relationships between different forms of life requires from us “unlearning practices of methodological individualism to relearn practices of collective development” (Lakind and Adsit-Morris 2018, p. 36). A central premise of this type of pedagogy, which puts tentative encounters with nonhuman subjects at the centre of its efforts, is that modern ideas of scientific objectivity must be called into question.

And ethically, multispecies justice’s attack on liberal principles of individualistic normativity once again advances with the help of estrangement devices. Expanding the scope of care and “response-ability” to include, for example, soil networks (Celermajer, Chatterjee, *et al.* 2020) or seascapes (Neimanis 2016) provides a stark reminder that what should count as worthy of moral concern is always open to revision and negotiation.

So, if the agenda behind multispecies justice is founded, at its core, on a utopian idea about making the ordinary look extraordinary (and vice versa), then its defamiliarization strategy hopes to facilitate what Svetlana Boym, in another context, described as

“seeing the world anew, a possibility of a new beginning that is fundamental for aesthetic experience, critical judgment, and political action” (2005, p. 602).

While I have so far submitted that envisaging multispecies justice through the prism of a utopian *What-If* frame helps elucidate what is at stake in the ongoing discussion, I also believe that eutopian (*If-Only*) and dystopian (*If-This-Goes-On*) motifs might be foregrounded more strongly in our analysis. Although this conclusion is not the place to expand on this observation, it might still be feasible to contemplate how this could be accomplished. One possible way the eutopian plotline could be further highlighted is through the linking up of calls for multispecies justice with discussions around the Green New Deal (Aronoff *et al.* 2019) and the political rights of non-human animals (Cochrane 2018). By contrast, a possible route toward accentuating the dystopian plotline would be through a closer connection of the discourse around multispecies justice with debates around extinction (Heise 2018) and around the technofossil debris left behind in the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2016).

Summing up, I have maintained that multispecies justice seeks to educate our desire for a more equitable, dignified and nonviolent world, by demonstrating that existing anthropocentric frameworks structurally impede a sober reckoning with the current environmental crises. This, I have claimed, is its primary utopian function. In paying attention to all of utopianism’s three plotlines – the *What-If*, the *If-Only*, and the *If-This-Goes-On* – champions of multispecies justice might put themselves in a better position to effectively exercise this critical and transformative function.

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