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"There's still a world": Salvaging Hope in Garbagetown

Markus Schwarz

ABSTRACT

In Catherynne M. Valente's *The Past Is Red*, the world as we know it has already drowned. However, even after the apocalypse, traces of extractive capitalism – responsible for the destruction of the planet in the first place – are still lingering on as the novella is set in Garbagetown, a floating habitat of waste that emerged from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This article takes this rubbish as its starting point and examines what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls our "anticipated history of ruins" through the lenses of utopian theory and salvage-Marxism. By conceptualizing waste as one of the most visible markers of the Capitalocene (Moore), I argue that it is not only a planet's resources that are considered disposable in a capitalist economy but also some of its inhabitants. The analysis focuses on the novella's main character Tetley, who, in contrast to her fellow citizens, attempts to locate beauty in the ruins and has hope – not for salvation but for the broken world. By reading Tetley as a salvagepunk character, this article nods towards a different utopian horizon in *The Past Is Red*, one that is not defined by solastalgia (Albrecht) for the past or the hope for a future Eden but as a praxis of becoming post-apocalyptic, by learning to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway) of a world built out of trash.

KEYWORDS

Utopia, Capitalocene, salvagepunk, climate change

In 2015, US oceanographer Charles Moore reported in an interview for the magazine *New Scientist* that he had found one spot in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch "where there was so much accumulated rubbish you could walk on it" (qtd. in Reed 28). This floating pile of garbage is a powerful image for the rapidly increasing pollution of oceans in the "Capitalocene," a term coined by Jason W. Moore as an alternative to "Anthropocene" to more accurately describe the contemporary moment as a "historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" (176). What if, one wonders, not only capital but also this walkable flotsam of trash further accumulates, what if it indeed becomes an island? This is a speculation Catherynne M. Valente pursues in her 2021 novella *The Past Is Red*. It is set in a place called Garbagetown, a floating island of waste which emerged from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch after the rise of sea levels drowned all landmass of planet Earth. As such, Garbagetown is a place after the apocalypse, built out of the ruins, out of the trash of the capitalist past. From the perspective of the present moment, it seems like a terrible setting, a dystopian warning of what the future could look like when the rising sea levels continue to drown the world and a new place to live on has to be built out of waste – dirty, devastating, and devoid of life. However, the novella's narrator, a girl named Tetley, provides a different outlook: Since she is convinced that Garbagetown is the most beautiful place on Earth, she wants to protect it at all costs and see it thriving. From her perspective, the waste-world becomes a place of potential, a site where a life and a future can be built, even after climate disaster shatters the world as we know it. In this article, I approach the novella and its architecture precisely through Tetley's eyes, not to sugarcoat the (post-)apocalypse of the slow violence of capitalocentric climate change, but rather to put to the foreground a different way of engaging with the ruins of the present. Instead of falling into the trap of desiring to go back to a previous time – what Glenn Albrecht calls "solastalgia" – or passively hoping for salvation, hope in *The Past Is Red* can be understood as praxis, as an active process of working with the trash-traces of global capitalism towards new structures, both materially and figuratively. In contrast to the other characters in the novella, who desperately want to live like the "Fuckwits" again – a term the citizens of Garbagetown use to refer to the previous generations that are seen as responsible for climate change – Tetley "stays with the trouble" in Donna Haraway's terms and attempts to think with and through the ruins of her world.

As SF writer and literary critic China Miéville reminds us, apocalypse and utopia are intimately connected: "the apocalypse, the end-times rending of the veil, paves the way for the other, the time beyond, the new beginning" (20). This article is located in the break between apocalypse and utopia, between hope and despair. It attempts to conceive of what Megen de Bruin-Molé calls "utopian pessimism," the idea that the

hope for a new world (which in reality is the desire for a return to paradise) must first be abandoned in order to see what remains. As Valente imagines in her novella, the remnants after the destruction of the planet due to consumer capitalism are all floating around in the ocean in a gigantic pile of waste. But nonetheless, from this waste, a world can be salvaged and reassembled. Consequently, the theoretical foundation of this article is also built out of the ruins of the present. Drawing on salvage-Marxism as well as utopian theory, my analysis begins in the world of the "Fuckwits" to map out the blueprint of what subsequently becomes Garbagetown in *The Past Is Red*. Approaching the present moment through its trash allows for a new perspective on the ecological as well as the social implications of a capitalist economy, which not only discards matter but also people. After analyzing this floating archive of waste on which Garbagetown is built, I conceptualize Tetley as a salvagepunk character. "Salvagepunk" is a term coined by Evan Calder Williams in his book *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* and describes an engagement with one's surroundings that does not aim to rebuild the past but attempts to imagine and build something new out of the ruins of the present. In the novella, Tetley's salvagepunk vision unfolds against the dreams and desires of the other inhabitants, who hold on to the hope of going back to another time and place. Finally, the analysis moves from the trash-island in the ocean to a habitat in outer space. Comparing the intergalactic exodus of some people (read: the billionaire class) in *The Past Is Red* to the techno-utopian dreams of the contemporary corporate space age illustrates how the (imagined) colonization of outer space cannot act as a spatial or temporal outside refuge to a broken planet. On the contrary, it serves as a technologically mediated excuse to not change the social conditions but to merely preserve the logics of extraction that, strata by strata, leave their mark on planet Earth in the era of the Capitalocene.

A Theory of Trash: Floating Garbage, Ghosts of the Capitalocene

When every structure has drowned, the post-apocalyptic traces that remain in the novella are the products of a consumer society. They are sorted almost like supermarket aisles during the construction of Garbagetown: electronics in Electric City, teddy bears and matchbox cars in Toyside, as well as supplements and drugs on Pill Hill, as some of the areas on the island are called. But not only the districts in *The Past Is Red* are references to consumer products, this logic also extends to the inhabitants: Every name in the novella is drawn from a product, the identity of every single person a link back to the consumer-capitalist past. As child mortality is an everyday tragedy on this floating island of waste, children only get their names when they turn ten years old. On this birthday, the ritual that constitutes their names takes place. The children set off from their home and walk around the different districts of

Garbagetown without ever being allowed to wash themselves, thus collecting more and more garbage that sticks on their skin. As soon as another person calls out the brand of a piece of trash on their body, this product description becomes their name. Thus, the citizens of Garbagetown become full citizens not through the fact of being born but by being interpellated. This naming ceremony is an act of interpellation which inscribes the consumerist past onto the body of Garbagetown's inhabitants. Tetley, for instance, is a tea bag brand; her parents are named Life and Time after the magazines; there is a character called Babybel Oni, a reference to cheese. Everything in the novella's post-apocalyptic setting is a reference, a trace of rubbish of the past. This is reminiscent of what Anna Tsing et al. argue in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*: "Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life" (G2). In *The Past Is Red* this haunting is extended from the ruins of the land to every single body. The entire structure – materially, socially, and ontologically – of Garbagetown discloses ways of living in the past, its architecture literally only possible through the ruination of our neoliberal present. In grammatical terms, Garbagetown is the past continuous of a world that has ended. Analyzing the novella is an act of waste-work, of sorting the trash to uncover the foundation of the ruins on which a future can be built. *The Past Is Red* is thus set in what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls "our anticipated history of ruins" (*Allegories* 100), the logical conclusion of neoliberal expansion, extraction, and pollution. And it is precisely through the waste on which it is built that we can approach questions of past, present, and future, because "[w]aste is a remainder, a remnant of history, a ruin, and might be understood as an unintended archive" (103). This resonates with Rachele Dini, who develops her argument on waste alongside Mary Douglas's landmark work *Purity and Danger*. Dini writes that

> waste is the product of a process: it signals the aftermath of an occurrence, be that occurrence a dog defecating, the explosion of a nuclear plant, or the end of a fashion trend. This temporal dimension endows waste with narrative qualities: with its very presence a waste object signals that something has come before. Where dirt is matter out of place, waste is matter out of time. (5)

Diving into the archive of trash of the present moment is a way of reading the (dominant archive of the) past. In the novella, waste constitutes a double archive, which holds both the past and the future. While Garbagetown is the place that remains after the apocalypse, its constitutive elements simultaneously afford the possibility of reassemblage into something else, something that is not yet. Thinking with Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*, waste in *The Past Is Red* can thus be conceptualized as "analogous to the trace, only from the other end of time" (xv). The imagined waste-landscape of the novella reaches back to the past from the not yet of the future and, by doing so, allows for a different perspective of reading the present.

Garbagetown is the product of capitalism. It is a place built out of the discarded matter of products, the aftermath of an extractive economy, and the result of what Rob Nixon has called "slow violence," which he defines as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). In his book, Nixon begins his argument with a proposal by Lawrence Summers, then-president of the World Bank, who planned the export of garbage and toxic waste of rich nations to the African continent. This is a form of slow violence which "impacts the environments – and the environmentalism – of the poor." Capitalism, from the moment of resource extraction until the waste dump, leaves its mark, both on people and on the planet.[1] Bronislaw Szerszynski even goes so far to argue that "the truth of the Anthropocene is less about what humanity is doing, than the *traces* that humanity will leave behind" (169). The traces that one finds in Garbagetown are clues for reading our contemporary moment, which might more accurately be understood as "Capitalocene," as the term "Anthropocene" obscures the fact that not all humans are equally responsible for the imagined waste-world of the future. Rather, through these traces it becomes possible to retroactively see "the rise of economic regimes of disposability," which "has created enormous plastic and chemical waste across the planet, particularly in the world's oceans" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 101). Garbagetown is the accumulation of the materiality of the present, the waste dump as archive.

As the long term effects of the byproducts of capitalist production are especially visible in the oceans, where "marine plastic debris is creating a crisis for ocean and bird life, ushering in the Plasticene and turning the ocean into a 'plastisphere'" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 138), the Great Pacific Garbage Patch can be read as the most prominent example of capitalism's swamping of the natural environment. Located in the North Pacific in a large gyre, the Garbage Patch remains almost invisible as it consists mostly of microplastics and plastic floating below the surface level. This invisibility of the looming threat of a garbage island is the perfect epitome of a mode of production that abuses the ecosystems from which it extracts its resources. As Raj Patel and Moore put it: "Capitalists are, for instance, happy to view the ocean as both storage facility for the seafood we have yet to catch and sinkhole for the detritus we produce on land" (Introduction). The results are becoming ever more visible: Warming

[1] It is important to highlight the entanglement between capitalism and colonialism when it comes to waste, which is not addressed sufficiently in *The Past Is Red*. Whereas Valente's novella offers a great entry point into analyzing class differences when it comes to the causes and effects of climate change, it does not properly acknowledge the racialized nature of capitalist dispossession and accumulation. Max Liboiron's work probes these intersections through their books *Pollution is Colonialism* as well as *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (co-authored with Josh Lepawsky). In contrast to locating environmental pollution in an unspecified place in the epoch of the Anthropocene, "Liboiron identifies in waste a patently postcolonial dynamic, highlighting the ways in which colonization functions through the appropriation of land for settlement, resource mobilization, or outsourcing of unwanted and superfluous matter and populations in order to enforce normative social spaces and their strictly regulated borders" (Patranobish 38).

oceans, rising sea levels, and the extermination of more-than-human life in the world's waters all point to the devastating destruction of (marine) ecosystems.

The utopian horizon in this environment cannot be a patch of land, where the inhabitants of Garbagetown can start anew (and make the same mistakes again); this hope is abandoned by Tetley, who insists that Garbagetown is all there is. There will be no fresh start anywhere else, no magical salvation from the dire situation on the trash island. This is aligned with a salvage-Marxist understanding of utopia, as outlined by *Salvage Magazine*, which uses history's dustbin as a starting point and conceptualizes a utopian perspective that braids the idea of working towards a future with the insistence that everything is waste. As the editorial collective puts it in the inaugural issue, "between salvation and garbage there is salvage" (Salvage Editorial Collective). In other words, the utopian horizon is located between paradise and apocalypse. Precisely in this break lies the possibility to see and work through the present moment by learning from the ruins of the past. Megen de Bruin-Molé describes the outlook of salvage-Marxism as "utopian pessimism" (5), the idea that hope for salvation needs to be discarded first in order to see one's ruinated environment anew and figure out what is to be done.

Salvagepunk is exploring the other side of the Janus-faced coin of utopian narratives: Instead of milk and honey, the river that flows through its worlds is almost out of water, filled with toxic waste, dead. In salvagepunk narratives, Zak Bronson argues, "there can be no return – no salvaging of the social order that was – since all that remains is the discarded waste left buried behind" ("Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 84). However, this does not mean that there is nothing that can be done. In contrast to more traditional understandings of the utopian horizon, which might shimmer with the hope for a better future or the hope for returning to a glorified past (what Zygmunt Bauman has called "retrotopia"[2]), hope here is first abandoned to see what remains to build a future on. Salvagepunk "envisions the utopian possibilities of recreating the world anew by capturing what Jameson refers to as the radical break," as Bronson continues (84). For Jameson, this is precisely the power of the utopian imagination: "by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (232), utopia without a map can break free from the conviction that there is no alternative (to capitalist logics). In the novella, Tetley does not articulate or express how she imagines the future world to be, but in the negation of the nostalgia and the hope for a new

[2] Bauman coined the term in his 2017 monograph *Retrotopia* and described it as "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn" (5). He uses Walter Benjamin's angel of history to introduce his argument, which is also a useful linguistic metaphor for the inhabitants in Garbagetown: They live on a floating trash-island, drifting inevitably towards a future, always looking backwards towards what they believe to be paradise lost.

Promised Land, which all the other inhabitants of Garbagetown express, there lies the potential for change. She has abandoned hope for a new world, but not for this one. Consequently, she dwells in the break and sees potential in the trash, instead of falling into the trap of despair or salvation. Tetley knows that there is no future waiting outside the trash-world the Garbagetowners inhabit, which is also how she justifies her act of sabotaging the attempt of using all the fuel left for turning the floating island of trash into a boat to travel towards a promised land that does not exist: "This is *it*. This is the future. Garbagetown and the sea. We can't go back, not ever, not even for a minute" (Valente 30).

Towards Utopia: Between Solastalgia and Salvagepunk

The architecture of Garbagetown is characteristic of many contemporary dystopian (climate-fiction) works, in which "characters struggle to survive while living worlds absent of the new – their environments marked by barren lands, abandoned architecture, and rotting waste" (Bronson, "Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 82). Indeed, the people in Garbagetown do struggle: They live on a floating island made out of trash, which has been built and plotted by the first generation of the survivors of climate change, in an act that is memorized as the "Great Sorting." This act of place-making in a post-apocalyptic world "made neighborhoods out of a floating crapfill, land out of waste" (Valente 46). Uncannily resembling the societal structures from the past, although in Garbagetown all neighborhoods are built out of trash, there is still a hierarchy of trash, and Electric City is the power-hub, both materially and politically. The geography of Garbagetown thus is built unequally. Property even remains a structural advantage when a world is built out of waste. As Tetley states: "If Garbagetown had a heart, it was Electric City. Electric City pumped power. Power and privilege. In Electric City, the lights of the Fuckwit world were still on" (11). Power here is both understood in the sense of electricity, as well as politically. This is an understanding of power that is stuck in the capitalist past. The world that is evoked here is a world that does not exist anymore; it is only a shimmer, a ghostly presence. And yet, as Tsing et al. write: "Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces" (G6). The power the people of Electric City hold on to is the power of a structure that preceded them and that can never be reached again. The lights of the previous world shimmer only as long as there are batteries and fuel left, at some point the whole social (infra)structure inevitably will crumble and needs to be imagined anew. In this sense, *The Past Is Red* serves as an analogy to the contemporary reliance on fossil fuels and the frustrating political and economic non-action, which leaves the limits to growth and extractive processes

unaddressed. As Matthias Schmelzer et al. succinctly write in *The Future is Degrowth*, it would be possible to build a world where every being can flourish, but to do so

> a fundamental political and economic reorganization of society is necessary, which aims at overcoming multiple structural growth dependencies inherent in the capitalist economy – from industrialized infrastructures to social systems to the ideological myths of growth societies. (Introduction)

But so far, the political and infrastructural powers continue – both in the present and in the fictional future of the novella.

Electric City also has the biggest and most important port of Garbagetown, which is why Brighton Pier docks there during a visit. Brighton Pier is another mobile island-like habitat, which has been floating around since the rise of sea levels and which serves a special function: It is a ghostly fun fair, an amusement park and museum of the past, where the Garbagetowners can read old restaurant menus, enjoy a minute of television or watch plays by Shakespeare. From the architecture to the social structure to the realm of culture, nothing is new in this world. The reference point always is the past, the gaze is always turned back in time. The mayor of Brighton Pier – who even calls himself emperor William Shakespeare in an attempt to keep up the illusion of the past – tells the people of Garbagetown during the visit that new land has been discovered, which is an honest lie, as one of the actresses of the theater company reveals to Tetley:

> We always say it. To everyone. It's our best show. *Gives people hope, you know?* But there's nothing out there, sugar. Nothing but ocean and more ocean and a handful of drifty lifeboat cities like yours circling the world like horses on a broken-down carousel. Nothing but blue. (Valente 27–28, my emphasis)

The phrase "Gives people hope, you know?" is especially interesting when reading it from the utopian understanding of salvage-Marxism. Because it is precisely this kind of hope that must be discarded first in order to work through the difficulties and challenges of the present moment. However, the people from Electric City take this illusion of hope literally and they have already built a gigantic engine, which is going to use all the power from all the batteries left to turn Garbagetown into a ship to cruise towards this imagined shore. Instead of using the resources they have to distribute them equally to all people and places on Garbagetown, the ones in power want to follow their desire to colonize, to claim the new land for themselves. In this sense, not only the architecture of Garbagetown is "absent of the new," as Bronson suggests is typical for salvagepunk narratives ("Reproduce, Reuse, Recycle" 82), but so are the ideas, which are haunted by the logics of the colonial and capitalist past. The political economy of Garbagetown operates through what Calder Williams defines as the logics of steampunk, which he says is a "romanticized do-over": Technology is preserved,

the clock is turned backwards, and a world is envisioned "without the material configurations of economic/technological development that produced those structures" (19).

Tetley, in contrast to the people of Electric City, does not believe in this (past-oriented) imagined future. When she hears about the plan to use up all the energy to sail towards this promised land, she destroys the engine. Reading Tetley with Andreas Malm's theorizations of activism in mind makes it possible to draw a parallel to contemporary climate activism. The aim is to grind down the structures of an economic and social order that destroys worlds. Consequently, Tetley uses physical action not to blow up a pipeline, as Malm's book suggests, but an array of engines that would destroy the livelihood of a world, even if it is built out of trash. As Haraway writes: "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (1). While climate activism is often framed as destructive, it is a response to the real destruction of a whole planet, coming from a vision of care and hope to (re)build the whole structure, on which the world operates. Understanding Tetley's act of destruction from this perspective allows us to see her motives in a different light. She does not desire to move backwards towards a past that is unattainable; she tries to stay with the ruins of the present, trouble the engines (of thought), and reassemble the waste to something new – turn it into someplace that is not yet.

Living in this trash, however, most of the people in Garbagetown are not able to see Tetley's action in this way. They also feel the desire to go back, not only to a nation state on land but more fundamentally in time. After shattering this hope, Tetley becomes the most hated girl in Garbagetown – as also the first sentence of the novella foreshadows: "My name is Tetley Abegnedo and I am the most hated girl in Garbagetown" (Valente 1). Following philosopher Glenn Albrecht, the feeling of the inhabitants of Garbagetown could be described as "solastalgia," a term he suggests in order to emphasize the temporal changes of one place in contrast to nostalgia's focus on geographical displacement. The word solastalgia is a compound of two concepts, as Albrecht describes: solace and desolation. He defines solastalgia

> as the pain or distress caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory. It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. (38)

In *Earth Emotions*, Albrecht is interested in the affective entanglements between humans and the places they live in. He argues that the "negative transformation of a loved place triggers a negative emotion in the whole person who is still emplaced" (32). The setting of Garbagetown is especially interesting when read through the

concept of solastalgia, because the hostile architecture of trash makes it difficult for the inhabitants to feel "emplaced" in Garbagetown, rather they want to feel at home on Earth again. The solastalgic feeling that is prevalent in *The Past Is Red* operates on a larger scale, it represents the affective loss of the ecosystems of a whole planet. The true loss of the novella might best be understood not as the loss of place but as the loss of the possibility of feeling emplaced.

In *The Past Is Red*, the negative transformation of place, however, is twofold: On the one hand, there remains the desire to go back in time to the previous world, which has been transformed through climate disaster; on the other hand, the negative transformation of Garbagetown through Tetley's climate activist act of blowing up the engines puts an end to this solastalgic dream of going back in time. A dialogue between Tetley and a character named Babybel Oni reveals this sentiment:

> "I just want things to be easy like they used to be. I wanna be whoever I was going to be. I want to use up a whole toothpaste tube and throw it away with three-quarters of it left in the bottom because I'll just buy more tomorrow. I want to put my clocks forward in the spring and complain about it. I want to have to watch what I eat because it's so easy to get fat. I want to go where everybody knows my name. I want to be a Fuckwit."
>
> "I don't," I said evenly. "They ruined everything."
>
> Babybel sobbed. "I *want* to ruin everything! That's my birthright! But I never, ever will. I'll never get to ruin *anything*." (Valente 91–92)

Although or maybe precisely because Babybel Oni has to exist in the aftermath of the slow apocalypse (thinking back to the quote by Rachel Dini, in this sense, the Garbagetowners can be considered people out of time), the desire to have the luxurious problems of late capitalism is strong.[3] If the world is ruined anyway, he feels that he should have at least been able to participate in the process of destruction. Thus, Babybel Oni can be read as a solastalgic character, he feels the "homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment" (Albrecht 39), even when "home" here is a referent for a place and time that he has never experienced. Although Babybel Oni and Tetley are the remainders of a world destroyed by capitalism, his desire to go back is unwavering. This seems ironic and absurd, yet when read through the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus, who cites Friedrich Nietzsche in the following quote, this is one of the most fundamental questions in a time of (temporal) exile without possibility of return: "the endless search for justification, the nostalgia without aim, 'the most painful, the most heart-breaking question, that

[3] This quote also serves to illustrate the unaddressed whiteness and middle-class orientation of the novella – Valente does not engage with questions of race, class, and gender throughout *The Past Is Red*. As an example, the word "Fuckwits" to refer to the people of the past obscures the highly unequal causes and effects of climate change as it does not acknowledge the structures and logics of colonialism and extractive capitalism that have created the "totality of our environments" (104), the pervasiveness of the "weather" in the words of Christina Sharpe.

of the heart which asked itself: where can I feel at home?'" (70). Living after the end of the world engenders emotional distress, a sense of place- and timelessness in Babybel Oni and most of the other characters of the novella. However, Valente does not only offer this doom-laden solastalgia in the face of apocalypse but rather is in conversation with Nicole Seymour's argument in *Bad Environmentalism*, in which she argues "that despair and hope, gloom/doom and optimism are often merely different sides of the same coin, a coin that represents humans' desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future" (3–4). While Tetley arguably exists on the other side of the coin of doom, her journey through Garbagetown does not follow a linear trajectory towards certainty. She invites a reading of a messy utopia, a chaos-world that is in constant flux.

In contrast to her fellow citizens, Tetley's engagement with her surroundings can be described as post-apocalyptic, which Calder Williams frames as a state not of being but of becoming: "You become post-apocalyptic when you learn to do something better, or at least more morbidly fun, with the apocalyptic remains of the day" (47–48). Becoming post-apocalyptic, then, is also aligned with ruminating through the ruins of the present, of "staying with the trouble." According to Haraway, this state of being "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" (1). Tetley is truly living in the break between salvation and garbage; she is able to find joy in Garbagetown and loves the waste-world she inhabits. This evokes one particular scene in the documentary *Examined Life!* by filmmaker Astra Taylor. In the film, Taylor, among others, interviews Slavoj Žižek, who is talking about philosophy at a waste disposal site. He ends his segment with a quote that might perfectly describes Tetley's character:

> To recreate – if not beauty – then aesthetic dimension . . . in trash itself, that is the true love of the world. Because, what is love? Love is not idealization … Love means that you accept a person with all its failures, stupidities, ugly points. . . . You see perfection in imperfection itself and that is how we should learn to love the world. (qtd. in Taylor, 01:00:54–01:43)

The Past Is Red is one example of these works which fabricate a world where beauty can be glimpsed in the ruins. Beauty here is something that requires an active eye, keen on learning how to see beauty and where to locate it in the trash. And out of these ruins, the goal is to salvage whatever possible to create a future in a home that is built out of trash. In Tetley's own words:

> Despite everything, this is the best place there is. I know it. If I tell them, they will never think of anything but Mars ever again. They will stop seeing Garbagetown. They will

> only look up and they'll die looking up because the road to Mars is airless and forever. (Valente 140)

This quote aligns perfectly with the idea of salvage-Marxism – because, as Megen de Bruin-Molé argues, instead of hope, it offers "a strategy for despite." Tetley's hope is not based on wishful thinking or the hope that there will be a land on the horizon that can be claimed. She abandons this hope altogether and attempts to "stay with the trouble" of the trash-world she inhabits. Despite living in a world made out of trash, working through the waste and "do[ing] something better with it" (47), in Calder Williams's terms, is the ground on which a different kind of hope can emerge: the hope that there is a future worth fighting for. This is truly utopian thinking, a grounded hope that is needed in apocalyptic times. It is impossible to go back to the world as it has been before and the future has to be built from the ruins. History is not a time machine, as Tetley states, "that's not how time works, and it's not how oceans work, either. Nothing you love comes back. I have hope for Garbagetown, not for some suckspittle scrap of dry dirt that wouldn't give us half of what we already have" (Valente 120).

Future Habitats: Astrocapitalist Utopias, Wasted Lives

The Past Is Red is not only an exercise in world-building out of trash but also the narrativization of a ridiculous truth: it is easier to imagine the geological as well as material transformation of a whole planet than to imagine the end of capitalism.[4] The story of the people in Garbagetown is the result of such an approach towards the world, because towards the end of *The Past Is Red*, there is a revelation. The people on floating islands are not the only survivors of climate change, but the rich and the powerful have escaped to Mars and started a settlement there. Thus, *The Past Is Red* is not only a dystopian story but also the fulfilment of the techno-utopian fever-dream of space colonization, which ultimately is doomed to fail. It becomes clear that making humans multiplanetary, because planet earth is considered to be doomed, is not going to save anyone. As Miéville puts it bluntly: "we *live* in utopia; it just isn't ours. So we live in apocalypse too" (24). Mars also is a hellhole where nobody can ever go outside and the utopia of the space colonizers becomes a dystopia of scarcity. Birth rates are declining, rising cases of bone cancer have become a serious issue, and radiation keeps everyone locked in technologically mediated surroundings. As Tetley pointedly states: "But we are alive on a live world and they can never go outside ever

[4] This sentence is a riff on Mark Fisher's first chapter in *Capitalist Realism*, which is titled "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (2). Fisher cites both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek as sources for this quote, which has become a kind of truism in leftist discourses.

again. So I guess that's something" (Valente 144). This is the hidden story behind all grandiose narratives of space colonization, as Gerry Canavan writes:

> In stark contrast to the untold riches and total freedom they are imagined to provide, distant space colonies – whether on inhospitable moons or orbiting far-flung planets – are in fact necessarily markers of deep, abiding, and permanent scarcity, requiring, for any hope of survival, careful planning and rigorous management, without any waste of resources. (7)

The fact that no resources can be wasted in the uninhabitable environment of outer space is especially ironic in the context of Valente's novella, which is predominantly set on a floating island of wasted resources. Consequently, salvaging utopia on a broken planet is also aligned with sorting out the trash of the dominant archive – discard what has failed, reassemble what can be used to build towards something new. The question that really needs to be asked again and again is: What do we mean when we speak of a better future? The utopia that is promised by astrocapitalists such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk is offering a future that is not meant for everyone. The billions of dollars of public and private funding that go towards their space ventures are only legitimized when considered from the teleological perspective that climate disaster as well as technological and capitalist growth are inevitable facts. Seen through the eyes of (astro)capitalism, climate change provides yet another road towards profit, be it through "green energy" or the utopian promise of building a new habitat in space (Bezos) or another planet (Musk). These are the limits of utopia China Miéville writes about:

> Utopias are necessary. But not only are they insufficient: they can, in some iterations, be part of the ideology of the system, the bad totality that organises us, warms the skies, and condemns millions to peonage on garbage scree. The utopia of togetherness is a lie. Environmental justice means acknowledging that there is no whole earth, no 'we,' without a 'them.' That we are not all in this together. (16–17)

The millions to peonage on a garbage scree that Miéville describes here can be read as an analogy to the inhabitants of Garbagetown. Not only the architecture of Garbagetown is built out of trash, also its inhabitants are considered disposable, wasted. To make this connection between waste and wasted lives is a delicate act. I follow DeLoughrey here, who argues that this connection is "*not* to relegate peoples to waste but to foreground the political and social systems" which are responsible for this dehumanizing practice; "to render this practice visible is to open up the potential for radical political critique" (*Allegories* 103). Consequently, the escape story of the rich to Mars in the novel can be read as the intergalactic manifestation of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *Wasted Lives*:

> The others do not need you; they can do as well, and better, without you. There is no self-evident reason for your being around and no obvious justification for your claim to

> the right to stay aground. To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of *because of being disposable* – just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers, or a substandard or stained product without use thrown off the assembly line by the quality inspectors. (12)

In a conversation between the inhabitants of Mars and Garbagetown, one of the space colonizers spells this theoretical idea out when he says to Tetley: "We are the best hope for humanity to survive. You are … well. What you have always been. The remainders" (Valente 133). The reference to the people on Garbagetown as "the remainders" perfectly illustrates that not only material waste but also wasted lives are inscribed within a capitalist economy. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon but foundational for colonial modernity. For those writing "in the wake of slavery" (Sharpe 8), this has always been the reality. DeLoughrey also reminds us that "Caribbean writers have long been concerned with the heavy waters of ocean modernity and have rendered waste in terms of pollution as well as the wasted lives of slaves and refugees" ("Heavy Waters" 708). Thus, the relegation of human beings to waste "is a dehumanizing and deeply entrenched social and political practice of capitalism, empire, and neoliberal globalization" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 103). The logical extension of this practice to the future and outer space is the utopia of billionaire astrocapitalists, as Albrecht writes: "Their vision of the next era in human history will be one where the same murderous emotions that wrecked the Earth will be unleashed on new planets in other parts of galaxies that have Earth-like locations within them" (10). Both the place and the people of the novella can be understood as the byproducts of modernity, left behind with the waste of a broken planet.

Approaching *The Past Is Red* from an anti-capitalist, salvage-Marxist point of view opens up another utopia, because "in a world saturated with waste and garbage, characters are able to remake and refashion the world by repurposing objects according to their use-value instead of their exchange value" ("Living in the Wreckage"), as Bronson writes in a portrait of *Salvage Magazine*. Precisely this process of reassembling objects into something that is useful beyond its transactional value points "to the hopeful possibilities of thinking a world beyond the limits of capitalism's need for endless growth ("Living in the Wreckage"). Tetley knows that the future for the people is not found in the voyage to another place, be it towards another planet or an imagined island on the ocean. The threatening apocalypse of climate change is not to be solved by a technological fix. Rather, the apocalypse should be seen as

> the coming-apart of the rules of the game, and in the ruined wake of this, the task isn't one of rebuilding, of mourning, or of moving on. It can only be . . . the ceaseless struggle to dismantle and repurpose, to witness the uncanny persistence of old modes of life, and to redraw the maps and battle lines of the sites we occupy. (Calder Williams 8–9)

Virtually all other inhabitants of Garbagetown still follow the rules of the game of the past, the "uncanny persistence of old modes of life" is still highly visible, and Tetley is constantly and actively trying to dismantle them. The act of destroying the engine that would turn Garbagetown into a ship, sailing towards the unreachable shore of the past, is a post-apocalyptic act, a necessary action to truly salvage a future for everyone – a future that emerges out of the ruins, which are slowly turning towards something beautiful:

> The Lawn stretched out below me, full of the grass clippings and autumn leaves and fallen branches and banana peels and weeds and gnawed bones and eggshells of the fertile Fuckwit world, slowly turning into the gold of Garbagetown: soil. Real earth. Terra bloody firma. We can already grow rice in the dells. And here and there, big, blowsy flowers bang up out of the rot: hibiscus, African tulips, bitter gourds, a couple of purple lotuses floating in the damp mucky bits. (Valente 8–9)

This is a relation to one's surroundings that sees the shifting of the ground beneath one's feet. Even when the floating island is made out of waste, it is changing, slowly turning into something else, something beautiful. These changing ruins are the building blocks for a future, a truly post-apocalyptic and post-capitalist future that is not looking towards growth but towards growing. Beyond the binary of hope and despair, beyond the linear utopian narrative that always looks towards the horizon for something bigger and brighter, *The Past Is Red* is an invitation to think utopia through the trash, to look for the rose that grows not through the concrete but through its remains.

Conclusion: There Is Still a World

Tetley is a character who remains ambiguous – on the one hand, she seems naïve for loving the dystopian surroundings of her home, on the other hand, she seems to be the only person who attempts to create a world out of her material surroundings instead of dreaming of idealized pasts or futures. She wants to work with whatever is useful from Garbagetown and leave out the rest. Her friendships with animals and robots, her relations to the more-than-human, her act of resistance of destroying the engines of Electric City (and thus of destroying hope), her love for her world are all glimpses of what really needs to be salvaged – social relations: "The thought of salvage is the thought of all that is thrown out by the totality of late capitalism, the traditions and horizons of collectivity, solidarity, and true antagonism" (Calder Williams 43). Similarly, the novella remains as ambiguous and open-ended as the characterization of its main character. There is no closure, but an opening at the end – what could be considered a "radical break," coming back to Jameson. In Raffaela Baccolini's terms, the book could thus be considered a critical dystopia:

> The ambiguous, open endings of these novels, as we will see, maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups (women and other "eccentric" subjects whose subject position hegemonic discourse does not contemplate) for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained. (18)

This is what *The Past Is Red* does so well: The novella opens up this space of contesting the status quo, it opens up a space for a character like Tetley, who exists on the margins of society, and it allows us to critically think about what utopia means. Is it the technological development to build an engine to sail the ocean towards a shore that might not even exist, or is it a change in social and material relations that allows for a good life for everyone? Is it a rocket to Mars that can take just a few, or is it a global effort to deal with climate change on the only planet with an atmosphere in the galaxy? Utopia is always a question of perspective, and seeing the world through Tetley's eyes allows the reader to see the beauty and hope even in the trashcan. *The Past Is Red* is written in a unique voice that playfully traces the beauty in a world built out of trash, which, through the eyes of Tetley, becomes a beautiful world. Her somewhat naïve love of her home is what is needed to feel at home in this gigantic pile of garbage. This novella insists on a very simple truth: "There's still a world" (Valente 91). And seeing the beauty in it, engaging with it, working through it to imagine something new is precisely what is so important in apocalyptic times.

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About the Author

Markus Schwarz is a doctoral candidate at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Salzburg. His dissertation, *Decolonizing the Cosmos: Black and Indigenous Speculations between Planet Earth and Outer Space,* is situated at the intersections of climate change and space colonization discourses and examines contemporary perspectives on the future through Black and Indigenous speculative refusals. He was a visiting scholar at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in 2023, as well as at the University of British Columbia and the University of Alberta in 2024.

He holds a MA in German as well as English and American Studies from the University of Vienna and received the Fulbright Prize in American Studies for his master's thesis. His research interests include Black and Indigenous theory, utopian studies, ecocriticism and queer theory. Currently, he serves as the International Spokesperson for the Emerging Scholars Forum of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries. Upcoming publications include articles on queer Indigenous bodies, decolonial relations to other planets as well as an interview with Métis futurist writer Chelsea Vowel.

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