A Utopia for Our Times: from Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* to Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future*

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the emerging genre of Ecotopian fiction, which envisions alternative societal structures through an environmental or ecological lens. Examining two seminal works, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* (2020) and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), I investigate how these ecotopian narratives contribute to progressive ideologies on resource management, shedding light on the environmental requirements of utopia. Applying Darko Suvin's methodology to analyse the utopian framework in both novels, my reading of the works demonstrates that Callenbach's *Ecotopia* offers a confined utopian vision while *Ministry for the Future* employs a narrative approach that encompasses multiple possible utopian horizons. This adaptation of the Ecotopian framework serves to reimagine and reassess our strategies for addressing climate challenges within the complexities of the global economy. My argument draws from Booker and Daraiseh reading of *Ministry for the Future* which posits that the dialogic elements within Robinson's work foster reader engagement, prompting consideration of diverse perspectives and possibilities. Moreover, the polyphony of narrators in the *Ministry for the Future* facilitates a detachment of climate resolutions from Western-centric perspectives and from the perspective of one person - an imperative step towards the necessary global system change. As agents shaping potential worlds, ecotopian writers must articulate new economic systems in a manner that resonates with readers, fostering integration of these concepts into the collective consciousness. I contend that, to endure impending challenges, it is essential to continue developing the ecotopian horizon, exploring variations on ecological economies and that is best done through a multi-voiced approach. This ongoing effort is crucial to ensure the survival of future generations, empowering them to contribute to their own narratives of ecotopia.

**Keywords**: Ecotopia, Utopian Studies, Suvin, Ministry for the Future, Climate Change Literature, Locus, Horizon
Eco- from the Greek oikos (household or home)
-topia from the Greek topos (place)

Introduction

The term "climate change" is commonly used to refer to anthropogenic (human-induced) changes beginning in the mid-20th century. Without mitigation, this environmental change could make large parts of the world uninhabitable by 2050. This threatens the health and lives of human and non-human creatures across the globe and will have profound negative impacts on our quality of life. Cultural responses to climate change have evolved over the last 50 years. In the 1960s and 70s, American environmentalists employed “a novel back-to-the-land ideology that combined decentralism and pastoralism with an emerging white identity politics that appropriated from non-white tradition.” This counterculture movement highlighted personal transformation but could not “attract a diverse coalition” nor “offer a radical alternative to Cold War society and culture.” Following, environmentalism became a larger part of American politics; to force the issue onto the national agenda, a senator in the U.S. inaugurated its first Earth Day in 1970. As awareness became more widespread, a new school of economics emerged called ecological economics which aimed to address the ecological impact the economy has and find ways to make it more sustainable. Much


progress has been made. As I write this paper in 2023, world governments are embarking on their 28th annual COP (Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) and there is a global awareness around the issue of climate change. However, with the complexities of a global economy, it becomes more and more challenging to map the underlying social and economic mechanisms that continue to drive the burning of fossil fuels and the pollution of the environment. In a capitalist system driven by exchange value and the accumulation of profit, quantifying the environment in economic terms becomes essential for its integration into the system. As counterculture ideas are often subsumed by capitalism through market dynamics, attempting to introduce these ideas into a larger cultural framework requires a new means.

Fiction and its narrative voice, especially utopian fiction, provide a unique opportunity to explore ecological economies and imagine what it means to introduce environmental value into an economic system that prioritizes profit over environmental viability. There is a new genre of utopian fiction, Ecotopian, that presents “alternative visions of society using an environmental or ecological lens.”

Although written during very different socio-political times, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* (2020) and Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) are both ‘ecotopian’ providing fictional frameworks that push progressive ideologies of resource management; their fiction accounts for the environmental costs of the economy often ignored within capitalist ideology. Robinson sets his novel in 2025 while Ecotopia takes place in 1999; by setting their narratives in realistic worlds in the near future, these novels create frameworks which demand a sense of urgency, attempting to solve pressing

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environmental challenges. Moreover, both detail initiatives addressing the threat of climate change, introducing economic and state apparatuses that incorporate environmental value into the possible worlds they construct. Using Darko Suvin’s methodology to probe the Utopian framework in both novels, I will demonstrate that Callenbach’s Ecotopia offers a limited utopian horizon while *Ministry for the Future’s* narrative approach engages multiple horizons, adjusting the Ecotopian framework to reimagine and reevaluate our approach to climate solutions within a complex global economy.

Additionally, utopian fiction is also modulated by narrative voice. While *Ecotopia* is driven by a singular narrator, Kim Stanley Robinson utilizes persistent dialogue and a polyphony of voices to speak to the need for utopian horizons of both radical and reformist change. This ensemble of utopian agents provides a compelling framework for introducing the concept of environmental value into our economic system and our literary utopias, challenging the idea that capitalism is a naturally occurring paradigm. The narrative works to orient individuals toward the possibility of creating an ecological economy while using novel concepts like the carbon coin to imagine a world beyond capitalism. To further explore *Ministry*’s distinct use of narrative voice, I will use Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic where exchanges within the narrative create a dynamic interplay of voices and ideas that offer multiple horizons for climate change solutions. I argue that the dialogic elements of Robinson’s novel foster engagement with the text, encouraging the audience to consider a range of

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4 “In his essay, Discourse in the Novel, Bakhtin claims that all kinds of discourse are “orientated toward an understanding that is ‘responsive’” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). This is one of his core ideas: that the meaning of any utterance, whether spoken or written, can only be understood in a particular context and “against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme” (p. 281).” Brettschneider, Allison Weiss. “Voices in Dialogue – Dialoguing About Dialogism: Form and Content in a Bakhtinian Dialogue: Dialoguing About Dialogism: Form and Content in a Bakhtinian Dialogue.” In Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning, edited by Arnetha F. Ball and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, 99-104. Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive and Computational Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511755002.005.
perspectives and possibilities. In addition, this polyphony of narrators helps detach climate resolutions from the West and provide a voice to those who will be most affected by climate change, a task necessary for the required global system change.

The Structure of Utopia

As a literary device, utopias have played a significant role in enhancing our comprehension of the ethical implications associated with societal structures. To examine and frame the function of Ecotopian fiction, this paper will employ Darko Suvin’s critical work to explore how each utopia builds their speculative fiction. As Suvin states, “any utopian novel is in principle an ongoing feedback dialogue with the reader,” asserting that these narratives task readers with reshaping the conclusion of the utopia into the dynamics of their own minds and their own world. The actual place of a utopia is not meant to be taken literally. It is “less significant than the orientation toward a better place somewhere in front of the orienter (Suvin, 77).” Suvin’s theory emphasizes that Utopian works are distinguished by their ability to transport us to different worlds or ‘loci’, stretch the ‘horizons’ of what is possible, and challenge readers’ ‘orientations’ by presenting unfamiliar and speculative settings.

For Suvin the ‘locus’ in fiction refers to the specific environment where the story takes place, allowing readers to consider how the world could be different from the one that they know. The ‘horizon’ sets the parameters for the narrative’s consistency and what kind of speculative ingredients the reader must consent to, and ‘orientation’ is the position of the agents in relation to the fictional world. Since utopias, even closed utopias, are never truly static, Suvin argues that the necessary element to a utopia is an ‘agent that moves.’ For Suvin, utopias are never fully formed, but constantly moving towards a new horizon. For a reader to integrate utopian ideals, there needs to be “an
agent that moves and an imaginary space towards where he moves (Suvin, 77).” This utopian agent - the person or thing moves through the locus and towards a horizon only changes their orientation towards the horizon.

Suvin sees utopia as a methodology for understanding how utopian frameworks transmit ideas and contends that the different types of utopias are defined by how the locus interacts with the horizon, proposing alternate ways of viewing the interaction between the two. He argues that utopian writers should adopt a “dominance of Horizon over Locus” where the “Locus does not coincide with but interacts with Horizon (Suvin, 79).” This makes for a dynamic, open-ended utopia where the movement through the work teaches the lessons of the utopia. In contrast, Suvin suggests a classic utopian structure where the “Locus coincides with or swallows Horizon…makes for a dogmatic, static, closed utopia.” He quotes his graduate student Somay’s assessment which asserts that when the utopian focus is ‘ultimate’ and “drastically limits the possibilities of the utopian horizon” while a dynamic utopia, “portrays a utopian locus as a mere phase in the infinite unfolding of the utopian horizon, thereby abolishing the limits imposed on by classical utopian fiction (Suvin, 79).” Suvin considers that while the closed-ended utopia provides an easy-to-understand moralistic structure, this counterintuitively makes it easy for the ‘casual reader’ to turn themselves against its’ ideas. Suvin thus suggests that by keeping utopian literature dynamic with a horizon that moves along with the agent(s) of its utopian vision, it is easier to integrate the utopian lessons into our own ideology.

Ernest Callenbach’s Ecotopia (1975)

Ecotopia’s locus is a narrative centered in a revolutionary “independence movement” that has used radical means to annex the Pacific Northwest states of America and
establish a new state called Ecotopia. Ecotopia is a ‘stable state:’ an ideal, ecologically, and socially balanced society where nothing produced harms nature. Rather than work towards economic growth, its inhabitants work towards degrowth. Here Callenbach builds an organic society which, though not entirely static, can be seen as striving towards an ideology of “‘human collectivism’ with an emphasis on sharing and a concomitant sense of neighborhood and community (Tschachler, 305).” Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* also alludes to ecologist and economist Herman Daly’s influential anthology, *Toward a Steady-State Economy*, which set the basis for ecological economics. Daly viewed humanity's economic system as a subsystem of the global environment and largely called for degrowth—a call that echoed the ‘back to the land movements’ of Callenbach’s time. By using this ‘stable state’ concept as his locus, Callenbach successfully offers a representation of an ecological economy. However, I will argue Ecotopia’s closed-ended utopia shuts the door on ecological horizons outside its own utopian vision. Its closed utopian structure limits the feasibility of its devised ‘stable state solution,’ thus evoking Suvin’s critiques of closed ended utopias.

In *Ecotopia*, Callenbach offers a classic utopian structure in which he describes an idealized society that has incorporated the need to preserve environmental value. The narrative is primarily developed through the perspective of American journalist William Weston, in the form of third- person journalistic reporting or first- person journal entries. The text serves to illustrate how Weston's personal encounters with utopian people and policies influence his decision to leave his American life and join Ecotopia's 'stable state.' Weston acts as the agent that moves and the lessons of Ecotopia are taught through his personal experience.

The novel starts with Weston planning a journalistic foray into Ecotopian society in hopes of sparking a dialogue between the U.S. and Ecotopia. However, the
more time he spends immersed in Ecotopia’s repaired forests, taking in Ecotopian ideology (and sleeping with an Ecotopian woman), the more detached from America he becomes. The novel ends six weeks later when Will Weston decides to stay in Ecotopia, advising his publishers that he will not come back. He sends in the combination of his journal and reports with a note that reads, “As far as I’m concerned, you can pass it around the office, put it in the archives or print it (Intact or not at all please);” the entirety of this printed notebook is meant to help us understand why he has converted to this way of life (Callenbach, 173). Ecotopia acts as both the locus—the framework which informs about utopian principles—as well as the horizon that Weston moves towards; Weston, the carrier of the utopian horizon, is swallowed by the locus. Rather than a continued dialogue with the U.S. system the only further horizon offered is to expand Ecotopian thinking through the dissemination of Weston’s text in America.

By confining the agency to Weston’s perspective, his transformation positions him as the principal agent of utopia. While the state of Ecotopia is Callenbach’s locus, we only come to understand it through Weston’s horizon. Throughout Ecotopia, Weston’s reporting on conversations with various individuals provides insights into Ecotopia’s economy and creates a dialogic exchange. However, the reliance on Weston as the primary narrator introduces limitations in encountering the multiple perspectives within Ecotopian society. For example, in one of Weston’s early articles entitled “Food, Sewage, and Stable States,” his biases clearly color his account of his first meetings with an Ecotopian, the Assistant Minister of Agriculture. He is skeptical of the economic benefits of Ecotopian society’s ecological system and initially hesitates to accept the ideology espoused by the local politician. However, later in the work, his thinking shifts as he integrates Ecotopian ideas, and he finally admits that “No survey
of Ecotopian energy developments would be complete without mention of an extremely daring project which will be truly revolutionary - if it works (Callenbach, 110).” Regardless of the probability of the various Ecotopian solutions, relaying the dialogue through Weston’s perspective creates an unnecessary and limiting tension which requires identifying with his assessment as he transitions from an American point of view to an Ecotopian one.

Utopian works are a dialogue about the type of viable futures we can create; in *Ecotopia*, the different futures in contention are represented by the U.S. and Ecotopia. Throughout *Ecotopia*, the Ecotopians make clear that they do not want to engage the United States in a dialogue about how they can work together to change their societies. Rather, they believe that America and other nation states will simply follow their lead in converting to an Ecotopian way of life. The novel presents this as the only alternative to the American capitalist system for both nation-states in the story and, I contend, for the reader. If Weston’s transformation does not persuade the reader to embrace an Ecotopian way of life through his transformation, the presented utopia becomes static, and the possibility of a continued engagement with Ecotopia, the Locus, disappears along with Weston as he joins their society. While Callenbach does introduce an opposition group within Ecotopia who, though agreeing to several of the positive changes in Ecotopia, want to “take a softer line - make a few compromises,” and who are hopeful Weston’s presence means a “resumption of normal relations between the two countries (Callenbach 51),” they are depicted as a clear minority in the society.

Some of Callenbach’s radical proposals find echoes in contemporary real-world policy, such as the decentralization of industry, sustainable agriculture, resource conservation, or calls for localized economies and economic equality and employee-owned businesses. However, other aspects of the Ecotopian political economy
challenge credibility. To begin with, many of the economic ideas presented in Ecotopia’s locus are fully rooted in the concept of degrowth, which represents a significant departure from growth-oriented and resource-intensive economic models. Furthermore, Ecotopians—and by extension, eventually Weston—presumes that people would respond positively to a sudden economic shock, and go as far as to claim that “a financial panic could be turned to advantage if the new nation organized to devote its real resources of energy, knowledge, skills, and materials to the basic necessities of survival,” and that “if that were done, even a catastrophic decline in the GNP (which was, in their opinion, largely composed of wasteful activity anyway) might prove politically useful (Callenbach, 47).” This is due in part to the stabilizing influence of humans’ ‘natural’ state: open sexual proclivities and holistic food. However, to imagine (even from the free-love counterculture perspective of the 1970s, but especially after the financial shocks of 2008) that financial panic could cause such an effective positive shift in societal ideologies or construction sows doubt in the speculative aspects of the horizon. Indeed, Callenbach’s conceit is that the collapse of the growth economy will engender a new Ecotopian political paradigm through discussion and rational thought—and that the gun-toting Americans in the states that eventually join Ecotopia would not instead take up arms to preserve their personal property and free-market values. It is not that this type of change isn’t possible but a clear transition of how to arrive at Ecotopia is not offered. The lack of dissent and resistance in these states are another implausible feature of Ecotopia.

The discussion of ecotopian fiction emanates from the premise that utopian and ecotopian narratives are spaces in which to explore societal alternatives. However, if Ecotopia does not chart a believable path out of environmentally damaging ideologies and a globally detrimental system, it incites Suvin’s critique of the classical utopian
construct with the ‘error of utopophobes’ which rebuffs a utopia because they believe it is impossible to escape old-fashioned beliefs and a harmful global system that causes destruction (Suvin, 79). Rather than attend to these problems, Callenbach suggests we suspend disbelief. This can be seen in how an Ecotopian neatly evades Weston’s (and, surely, the reader’s) question,” ‘in order to follow an extremist ecological program, millions of people were willing to jeopardize their whole welfare, economic and social?’”, responding simply, ‘we were very lucky’ (Callenbach, 50).” The reader’s ability to suspend disbelief and accept a narrative’s speculative elements of a book only supports their orientation towards a future horizon where the world looks like Ecotopia. Would contemporary readers believe that most of the people in the major American Northwest would willingly hand over all private property and now live in communal tribes? From the orientation of the 21st century where cheaper and more advanced renewable energy exists, would readers be willing to submit to this neo-primitive state? Ecotopia’s ‘stable state’ offers a closed utopia which, while critiquing American capitalism of the 1970s, does not offer a horizon beyond the Ecotopian locus. Perhaps Ecotopia’s biggest contribution is that it developed a utopia (an ecotopia) that integrates environmental value and provides a starting point for other authors to build their own Ecotopian horizons.

For all its shortcomings, Ecotopia left an indelible mark on later speculative fiction writers. Compellingly, Robinson calls Ecotopia “one of the most important novels of the twentieth century,” stating that “it will always convey to perfection the wild optimism of that moment: a feeling we need to recapture, adjusted for our time” (Callenbach, dust jacket). In a gesture towards “recapturing” that spirit, in the 1990s Robinson edited a book of short stories entitled ‘Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias,’ which Callenbach contributed to. Reviewing that compilation, John Moore noted that
Robinson’s work, which “has shown a concern with the relationship between literary and social utopian impulses,” “uses ecotopia as a springboard to launch a far more ambitious project.” Moreover, he notes that Callenbach’s title *Ecotopia* is:

> Well on its way to becoming a word in our language, a variation on utopia that will become more and more important as our understanding of this concept grows...Rather, ecotopia is a concept which we need to grow to understand - and need to understand to grow. It is about the process, rather than the stasis (Moore, 345).

In both Moore’s critique of Callenbach and Robinson’s dedication to the theme, it becomes apparent that an ‘ecotopia’ is a utopian genre in and of itself and the task for any ecotopian author is to create an open, dynamic utopia where we are co-creating ecological sound possible horizons.

**Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* (2020)**

Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future* develops a locus that is like the world in which we live. Based on Earth, a ‘Ministry for the Future’ is developed to protect the environmental rights of future generations. Located in Switzerland, this ministry engages with various stakeholders around the world with the sole task of discovering, developing, and expanding projects that protect the environment for posterity. The ministry reflects the current role of the UN, WHO, and WTO, which all have offices in Geneva. What makes the narrative construct unique is that the drastic effects of climate change are already being felt in 2025, with the timeline for the world’s warming cut short (he kills twenty million people within the first chapter). While there are clearly fictional elements to this world, Robinson creates a possible world that, although speculative, offers us a horizon that places us squarely in our own paradigm and details the effects of climate change through multiple narratives within the construct of the ministry.
The novel starts out with a haunting chapter and a stark warning: “It was getting hotter,” generally and in India where a heat wave kills a huge portion of its population in a graphic depiction. Frank May, an American aid worker, watches the people in the community slowly boil to death while coming near to it himself. As a result, Frank suffers from PTSD throughout the book and becomes radicalized by the experience. The story loosely unfolds against the lives of Frank and Mary Murphy. Mary is the head of the Ministry and after the Paris Accord is charged with leading the program mitigating the impact of climate change on future generations. Their lives intertwine as Frank takes Mary hostage to demand she make more radical changes to their program. Their interactions throughout the novel can be read as an allegory between a sick suffering Earth (Frank) and the administrative power of the Ministry (Mary) who is tasked with saving it. While they are the character’s most present throughout the book, the narrative does not rely on them nor is the story driven by their personalities or plotlines - their role is to provide a red thread for the multitude of voices who share their perspectives on how climate change is affecting them.

There are a hundred and six chapters in Ministry which feature any number of narrative voices and characterizations. From chapters written in the collective voice of a herd of Caribou to chapters that give first person voice to a photon or carbon atom. The multiple story lines and voices Robinson presents expand the possibilities beyond the Ministry into multiple narratives simultaneously pushing the horizons of what is possible. “Though some chapters give third person accounts of the lives of Frank and Mary, most of them come from other voices. Some are straightforward infodumps; others describe local happenings in a wide range of voices, usually anonymous and often collective (“we” rather than “I”) (Shaviro, 109).” Mary and Frank are not present in most chapters and there are several long chapters that highlight the socio-political
reality of the time while using a monologic voice. Robinson uses the Ministry as a locus, but it is not static; rather, it is a conduit through which to encounter a polyphonic chorus of agent voices which through their own unique horizons map the complexity of global climate change. In this way there is not just one horizon in *Ministry for the Future*, but utopia is accessed through multiple possible horizons.

In *Ministry*, Mary Murphy embodies one of many utopian horizons. Through her, Robinson focuses on the diplomatic power of the Ministry rather than offer only radical means of pursuing change. Through her narrative arc, Robinson offers thirty years of her bureaucratic cajoling of global banks with the aim of creating a carbon coin that helps administer the various carbon sequestration projects underway and store value for future generations. Like Weston, storylines move through her, or rather through the Ministry with her at the helm. The tragedy in India motivates Mary and her team to employ multiple methods to take on the courts, economic initiatives and taxes while also creating the carbon coin, which is a proposed global currency generated by finding ways to store carbon. But while Weston’s story unfolds over a couple months, Mary works as the director of the ministry for decades. She is aware that radical factions exist through her encounters with characters like Frank and Badim, and she acknowledges the need for them while focusing on her horizon of political reform.

Alternatively, Badim - Mary’s right-hand man at the ministry - represents an alternative environmental horizon, one where violence is necessary to shift global opinion and force action. Emerging out of India’s confrontation with global warming is a political system focused on green energy and regeneration but also the Children of Kali who occupy themselves with ecoterrorism against the rich and governments who pollute the environment; creating chaos in the system and pledging to end the era of cheap Indian labor and working towards a new kind of national solidarity. Through
Badim’s conversations with Mary, it becomes clear while working for the Ministry he is also the covert head of this violent faction. Badim is also a utopian agent that moves through the ministry’s locus, but his horizon offers one that takes radical violent action, when necessary, “The War for the Earth had lasted years, his hands were bloody to the elbows (Robinson, 381).” Badim and Mary have their individual horizons but read together, they show the importance of different reactions to climate change and that there is not one prescriptive solution. The tension between the radical and reformist elements generates different possible horizons which could unfold. Each agent of utopia has their own horizon and gives shape to the ‘ministry’ through their own personal arc.

While the ministry’s efforts trudge along, they are aided by the fact that both the state of India and the more radical of its citizens are willing to try bold solutions and take up arms. This reflects some of the efforts taken by the radical groups in Ecotopia. India’s leadership is radical and takes place on multiple fronts, including taking actions that are not popular like altering the atmosphere through chemicals. The radical and reformists in society dialogue through the conduit of the ministry. It is through the multiple horizons unfolding that public opinion changes and the Ministry can impact the global economic systems. These different factions help us map a complex system and offer many different possible futures.

Booker and Daraiseh’s essay is particularly useful in helping us understand where the multi-voiced Ministry offers us a multiplicity of possible worlds that makes climate change solutions accessible regardless of one’s orientation to the capitalist paradigm. They offer a reading of Ministry through an understanding of Bakhtin’s view of the dialogic as well as Jameson’s ‘Politics of Postmodernism.’ Jameson argues that the splintering and lack of historical depth of postmodern literature serves to conceal the economic and social structures of late capitalist societies. This makes it difficult to
understand the reality of global economic inequality and how finance systems devalue the economies of the future through ecological destruction today. They assert that *Ministry* has many of the same characteristics often linked to postmodern literature but overcomes Jameson’s critique of it by not only outlining the dangers of climate change and economic injustice, but by offering solutions to it through a polyphonic narrative.

When referring to Robinson’s previous utopian Mars trilogy, Jameson spoke of a new more sophisticated type of utopian text, one that is not concerned with the elaboration of a single utopian blueprint for an ideal society but with “The conflict of all possible utopias, and the arguments about the nature and desirability of utopia as such.” Booker and Daraiseh suggest that the same is true of *Ministry* which presents “credible visions of people working to find solutions to problems that previously seemed intractable (261).” They suggest that Robinson’s climate fictions “never seek to remain within a single, consistent future universe, but instead imagine many different possible futures, emphasizing that the course of history is not fixed but can go in different directions, depending on our own actions (261).” It is through the narrative but also the actions of the characters (the agents of utopia) and their narrative voice that we see a new social reality unfold in *Ministry for the Future*.

Booker and Daraiseh defend that the incorporation of multiple styles, narrative voices and genres is essential to Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogic nature of the novel. *Ministry*'s merger of styles and attentive use of both the monologic and dialectic is crucial to its potential to show that the wasteful system of late-stage capitalism is not inherent. They argue that Robinson's aim is highlighted frankly as the first anonymous narrator concludes it is “‘Easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism: the old saying had grown teeth and was taking on a literal, vicious accuracy (Robinson, 25).’ The paper spotlights that “in *Ministry*, Robinson undertakes precisely
the project of imagining a series of events that could indeed lead to the end of capitalism without an apocalypse - and, in fact, precisely via a series of events that could together avert an apocalyptic climate disaster (Booker 260).” Importantly, the key to learning the utopian lessons is his carefully chosen narrative voice.

Often Robinson shifts into an authoritative voice which is monologic in nature to relay information about climate change or to make the reader cognizant of the economic and social structures which steal value from the future. Early in the story, for example, when he presents the impact of carbon emissions on the Earth system, he highlights the amount of carbon that needs to stay in the ground and compares that to the amount of carbon big oil companies have already laid claim to. He then names nineteen companies who would have the power to make the changes, and highlights that they are made up of people:

Executive decisions for these organizations’ actions will be made by about five hundred people. They will be good people. Patriotic politicians, concerned for the fate of their beloved nation’s citizens; conscientious hard-working corporate executives, fulfilling their obligations to their board and their shareholders. Men, for the most part; family men for the most part: well-educated, well-meaning. Pillars of the community. Givers to charity. When they go to the concert hall in the evening, their hearts will stir at the somber majesty of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony. They will want the best for their children (Robinson, 30).
Through this monologic voice, Robinson maps the physical conditions of the situation, provides clarity about who is in charge and demonstrates that even the most powerful care about the future of their children. He then takes on the task of showing that making an extra trillion dollars in the short term is in fact stealing from the future. There are some elements of the fiction he wants to imply that they are indisputable facts. While mapping the economic and social structures that threaten climate change, he is acknowledging the human agents within these structures. Alternatively, he often introduces possible solutions to climate change as a dialogue which allows for a more dynamic interaction between the reader and the text.

Robinson lets his characters speak for themselves, deliberately using dialogue in a way where his narrative voice does not try to influence a point of view but rather allow them to enter a dialogic conversation with the ideas presented. Take for example, the sharp conversation between Mary and Dick, the ministry for the future’s chief economist, where they discuss the concept of preserving environmental value for future generations:

“Mary: So…is there a way we can make the calculations better?

Dick: This is where India comes into it. Since the heat wave, they’ve been leading the way in terms of re-examining everything…Badim tells me that in India it was traditional to talk about the seven generations before and after you as being your equals. You work for the seven generations. Now they are using that idea to alter their economics…Either way you remove the infinities from the calculation, and give higher value to future generations.
Mary: Good idea.

Dick: We’ve been running modeling exercises to see how various curves play out in the creation of new cost-benefit equations. It’s pretty interesting.” (Robinson, 133)

Robinson writes this dialogue as he begins to introduce the carbon coin. Through the dialogue, it is as if we were watching the interaction ourselves. Many of the interactions the ministry or other groups have throughout the book, especially in scenes where the members of the ministry discuss new economic concepts or environmental technology, are presented in the form of a flat dialogue - giving a unique dialogic quality. Cognitively it is as if listening to the exchange, making it easier to integrate the lessons of the utopia. This effect is similarly true in the multi-voiced sections of the work.

Robinson’s use of narrative voice is deliberate. When he writes in third person as if from the mind of Mary, an additional authoritative tone takes over. This occurs in Mary’s last meeting with the group of international bankers. When she sees that the concept of the carbon coin is starting to make sense to the Chinese Finance Minister Chan, Robinson writes from Mary’s perspective:

Looking at the central bankers listening attentively to her, Mary saw it again; these people were as close to rulers of the world as existed. They were now, using their power to protect the biosphere and increase equity, the world could very well tack onto a new heading and take a good course. Bankers! It was enough to make her laugh, or cry.
And yet by their own criteria, so pinched and narrow, they were doing the necessary things. They were securing money’s value, they still told themselves; which in this moment of history required that the world get saved.” (Robinson, 510-11)

In the transfer of this bold new economic horizon from a concept within the ministry to Minister Chan, we see Robinson build Chan's own horizon within the polyphony. If we see Mary as an allegory for a reformist institution trying to fix the climate crisis, this third person revelation can be seen as the institution witnessing the integration of the ecological economy into the mind of minister Chan but also as a passing of the baton. By not tying these thoughts directly to Mary as Will Weston’s ecotopian transition is tied to him, it is possible to read them as our own utterance of an ecological utopia made possible.

Booker and Daraiseh consider why Robinson has chosen to not put full agency into Mary’s voice, “even the sections that center on them are double voiced - narrated in the third person, but in a mode of indirect free style in which the narrative point of view is heavily influenced by the point of view of Mary or Frank, establishing a dialogue between the characters’ perspective and that of a conventional third-person narrator (Booker, 257).” Perhaps Robinson chooses to create this distance because it is not simply Mary having an aha! Moment: it is the logical outcome of anybody who has read the last 500 pages. Using different narrative voices and horizons, Robinson’s Ministry convinces bankers, the “rulers of the World” and by extension the reader to shift their thinking about the value of nature. What is clear at the end of the book is that the horizon is infinite. Minister Chan integrates the understanding of the ecological economy through the carbon coin and Badim becomes head of the ministry. Their
distinct voices, and horizons, will continue to offer a new type of agent moving toward an ecologically just horizon after Mary retires.

While giving agency to multiple horizons, Robinson also gives a voice to a series of anonymous narrators who will be most impacted by climate change. These random chapters decentralize solutions and allow us to see them as global in nature. Some of Robinson's strongest voices are the individual voices from across the World who detail how climate change is impacting them, like the refugees who make crossings or workers in indentured situations. Robinson introduces their stories by moving between first person and first-person plural narratives. “We were slaves in that mine, (Robinson, 365)” an anonymous voice says right before a group comes to unionize it. Using first person plural, includes the reader in these unnamed accounts. After the concept of the carbon coin starts to take shape, Robinson depicts a family on a small farm who is working towards regenerating their soil in hopes of receiving a payout. Through a first-person account of a wife’s daily experience, we encounter a small patch of arid farm that her husband inherited. To receive compensation from the carbon coin they turn “shit to gold…we did all that. I drove him and he drove his workers, and we got some trees and perennials (Robinson, 400).” As an anonymous narrator, she details how the carbon coin directly affects her and her family. When they are paid with the carbon coin for keeping carbon to the ground, it turns out to be almost two years’ worth of all their expenses. The use of the “we” helps the reader identify with her story and integrate a shift in thinking towards how the ecological economy could work and positively impact both people and the economy across the world.

By using a monologic voice to show the inevitability of economic and societal collapse at the hands of climate change, Robinson demonstrates that even capitalism will be wiped out by it. By moving towards multiple utopian horizons in the narrative,
both radical and reformist, Robinson issues that a multipronged approach is necessary to reconstruct the larger system and maps the societal structures that continue to impact the climate’s degradation. He does this by employing a ministry made up of multiple agents of utopia and providing each a horizon that is in the realm of the possible. Only through this polyphony of voices, often contradictory, does Robinson reconstruct a possible world with the necessary complexity to imagine our way out of late-stage capitalism. The use of different narrative voices helps us integrate not just the content but the lessons of the utopia. While it may seem radical that the banks eventually accept these changes, it is a believable transformation when read through multiple viewpoints and through a multi-voiced narrative. Robinson’s locus shows us how this future utopia came to be through slow moderate system changes and shifts in narrative voice, the means to an ecological economy rather than the ends.

Conclusion

While the Ecotopian ‘stable state’ refuses to dialogue with American capitalists and traps the utopian horizon in “us” or “them” conflict between the ideal Ecotopian state and the American capitalist paradigm; Robinson takes a different approach, offering a multiplicity of agents that dynamically move towards the ecotopian horizon. Ecotopia’s utopia embraces a pastoral and an idealized vision of the future without truly examining the complexities of this transition to a stable eco state. With the World past several environmental tipping points, humans are starting to feel the effects human activities have had on Earth's geology and ecosystems. In the age of the Anthropocene, speculative fiction must move beyond the future dystopian nightmare where society has already collapsed and offer ecotopias with the means to map the complex economic and social structures which impact our economic decision making and climate impact.
Ministry for the Future shows that Utopia must be a method by which we map the world. Once the social and economic systems are understood, our new horizons emerge. Robinson proposes a departure from impending environmental and economic collapse through the carbon coin, a new economic horizon that is both radical and feasible. In doing so the Ministry offers us a way out of certain environmental and economic collapse and is successful in making the utopian horizon the means, not just the end.

Through an interplay between a multitude of voices; human, animal, monologic, the possible development of a new economic horizon becomes clearer. The polyphony of the Ministry's narrative reconciles that there are multiple means, and that we must inspire others to encounter the socio-political in its multiplicity. While neither Robinson nor Callenbach shy away from radical violent action as one of the many solutions, the future cannot be shaped by radical action alone. The reformist politics of the Ministry both acknowledge the unsustainable extraction of value from the future within our neoliberal paradigm while offering a narrative that demonstrates how to integrate ecological economics into our own utopian vision. As the Ministry demonstrates through its interactions with each other and society at large, institutions must find the language to speak to each other, especially to those who only think in economic terms. As creators of a possible world, utopian writers must find the language to convey new economic systems, and voice them in a way that allows humans to integrate their messages. To survive what is coming, we need to continue to build the ecotopian horizon developing variations on the ecological economy to ensure that future generations are still around to write their own version of ecotopia.
Works Cited


