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GEOGRAPHIES OF HOPE: READING BECKY CHAMBERS' *RECORD OF A SPACEBORN FEW* AS UTOPIA[1]

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ABSTRACT: American author Becky Chambers has become well-known for her science fiction works that denounce social inequality while still enunciating kinder and more hopeful worlds. This research paper is centered around her third novel, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018), which follows the Exodus Fleet, a group of spaceships that harbors the descendants of the last humans to leave Earth after a series of environmental catastrophes. The Fleet is presented as a somewhat literal vehicle of hope, as life inside the starships is organized according to Marxist principles of mutual support, solidarity and horizontal care. The aim of this paper is to examine Chambers' alternative worlds as a site of hope, both physical and metaphorical, while exploring how Chambers hopeful speculation exemplifies the potential of science fiction as a genre to imagine different realities that not only question the nature of what is normal and possible, but also go beyond capitalist and neoliberal imaginaries.
RESUMEN: Becky Chambers se ha vuelto conocida por sus obras de ciencia ficción que denuncian la desigualdad social al tiempo que reimaginan mundos más amables y esperanzadores. Este artículo se centra en la tercera novela de Chambers, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018), la cual sigue al 'Exodus Fleet', un grupo de naves espaciales habitadas por los descendientes de las últimas personas que abandonaron la tierra tras una serie de catástrofes ecológicas. El 'Fleet' se presenta como un vehículo de esperanza, ya que la vida

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dentro de estas naves se organiza de acuerdo con principios marxistas de apoyo mutuo y solidaridad horizontal. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar los mundos alternativos que propone Chambers como espacios de esperanza, tanto físicos como metafóricos, a la vez que explora cómo la obra ejemplifica el potencial radical de la ciencia ficción para crear diferentes realidades que van más allá de los imaginarios capitalistas y neoliberales y cuestionan que consideramos normal y posible.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, Becky Chambers has established herself as a successful science fiction author that is well-loved by critics and the reading public alike. Her novels have been awarded several Hugos (2019, 2022, 2023) and have been nominated for other renowned prizes such as the BSFA (2019), Locus (2022) and Women's Prize for Fiction awards (2016). Her texts are generally characterized by a hopeful and lighthearted tone and tend to (re)imagine and embody better, brighter futures while centering subjectivities that have not always been included in the utopian tradition, or that have been casted as undesirable when narrating alternative futures[2].

The portrayal of Chambers as an author of cozy and kind science fiction that is inclusive of othered identities started with her Wayfarers series. The tetralogy includes *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* (2015), which explores themes such as queerness,[3] social agency and found families; *A Closed and Common Orbit* (2016), which deals with Artificial Intelligence, posthumanism and body autonomy;[4] *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018), an exploration of a Marxist utopia; and *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* (2021), which concerns itself with multicultural communication and issues of hospitality and belonging.[5] Apart from the Wayfarers series, Chambers has published

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[2] When discussing how science fiction has been used to craft alternative worlds, Alexis Lothian explains that queer and racialized people, among other social groups, have usually "been marked as futureless or simply left out by dominant imaginaries" (2), and that the construction of the future through speculation is never neutral, but rather, must be analyzed critically in order to understand how our beliefs about identity shape and influence who gets to be included in these new spaces. I believe that this idea is central to Chambers' science fiction and one of the reasons her work can be read as an example of radical and political hope rather than mere optimism.

[3] See Collier and Prince for an analysis of gender and sexuality in the complete tetralogy.

[4] See Roldán Romero's 2022 work on posthumanism in *A Closed and Common Orbit.*

[5] See Peter Admirand's work on multiculturalism in *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* and its commentary on the Wayfarer Series as 'gentle' or 'kind' science fiction.

some short stories and three novellas that further explore these themes—*To Be Taught, if Fortunate* (2020), *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown-Shy* (2022). While these novellas are set outside of the Wayfarers' world, they are still heavily influenced by the critical and almost defiant hope that is present in the series and that has come to be synonymous with Chambers' body of work.

While Chambers' literary production is quite vast, the focus of this essay lies within the Wayfarers' third installment, *Record of a Spaceborn Few*, which has been quite under researched in academic spaces despite its commercial success. This space opera is set in an alternative future where the Earth has long ago collapsed after the climate crisis was exacerbated by continuous military conflicts and the extreme capitalist exploitation of the planet's natural resources. The novel follows the Exodus Fleet, a group of spaceships that harbors the descendants of the last humans to leave Earth after the environmental catastrophes. The Fleet is presented as a somewhat literal vehicle of hope, as life inside the starships is organized according to Marxist principles such as mutual support, horizontal solidarity, and the abolition of wage labor[6]—deliberated decisions and policies that are made with the intention of creating a shared future rooted in equality, while still preserving the memory of the ecological and socioeconomic struggles that led to global collapse.

Here I understand speculative and science fiction as narrative strategies of social resistance and change that allow readers to both denounce and shed light over their current struggles and to, simultaneously, enunciate more hopeful alternatives to their present and future. In fact, science fiction has been theorized as "a site for articulating and imagining difference" (Tomin 4); that is, as a mode for storytelling that (re)imagines other forms of being, relating and becoming that are deemed impossible or unsustainable in our current world.[7] I am particularly interested in the possibilities of building, through speculation, other social and economic systems that de-center and displace capitalist and neoliberal values, as these narratives have the potential to "construct alternative spaces beyond

[6] While this research paper reads *Record of a Spaceborn Few* as a Marxist utopia, it acknowledges that it is also possible to interpret the novel as an anarchist utopia.
[7] See Tom Moylan's exploration of science fiction and utopia.

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the hegemony of Western liberalism" (Fulk 55) by challenging late capitalism as the only viable—and imaginable—system (Jameson xii).[8]

It is through this lens, this centering of the radical potential of science fiction, that I analyze the Fleet as a hopeful place[9] that reconfigures social and economic relations through the inclusion of Marxist praxis and politics. My aim is thus to examine Chambers' alternative worlds as sites of hope, both physical and metaphorical, and to explore how Chambers hopeful speculation serves as a strategy of social resistance against the pervasiveness of late capitalism and the notion that it is the only viable alternative for sociopolitical and socioeconomic organization. By reading the Fleet as a utopian place, it is possible to question and to dive deeper into the potential of science fiction to build kind and hopeful futures that still acknowledge and are grounded in our current oppression and struggle.

This choice of approach and scope implies rejecting the common view that characterizes hope as naïve and apolitical or describes it as a form of mere optimism that is somehow divorced from social struggles. Instead, I draw from Cornell West's idea of "critical hope" and Henry A. Giroux's 2015 work on "educated hope" to argue that hopefulness is a necessary or even urgent strategy of survival in a context where "social despair has already been weaponized by the alt-Right" (Boucher 1) and is thus used as an affective strategy[10] to avoid social change.

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[8]Here capitalism is not only seen as an economic system that prioritizes the profit of the few over lives of the many, but it is also understood to be part of, and to be sustaining, a set of neoliberal values, policies and practices that allow everything and anything to be treated and conceptualized as consumable commodities whose value can only be conceptualized in economic terms, including our planet, our relationships, and even ourselves.

[9] See David Harvey (180) for an exploration of space, place, and hope with an emphasis on urban planning and urban spaces.

[10] Geoffrey Boucher describes social despair as an affect or emotion that has been deliberately used by certain political groups such as the far and extreme right to normalize the extreme inequality and social violence that is commonplace in many countries, such as the United States. This, in turn, results in a seemingly shared feeling that, since this kind of violence, which may include extreme precarity, climate change police brutality, and anti LGBTI+ legislation, is somehow unavoidable, any kind of pushback against these measures and systems is destined to fail. Of course, this is very much a generalization, but I do believe that Boucher's work speaks directly of/to the social landscape of the United States, and of a shared feeling of hopelessness that benefits the *status quo*. For a nuanced discussion of the distinctions between affect and emotion, and the political nature of affect, see Sara Ahmed.

The meaning of hope is examined further in the first section of this paper. This section also contextualizes the concept of utopia and connects *Record of a Spaceborn Few* to a larger tradition of utopian and hopeful narratives that reimagine both our present and future, while dissecting the approaches and understandings this paper takes toward ideas of hope, space, and utopia itself. The second section focuses instead on the Fleet's Marxist practices and their connection to building a kinder, better world through science fiction and speculation, as well as inquiring as how the Fleet serves as a physical reminder of the capitalist destruction of the Earth's climate and natural resources. The third section problematizes further the notion of utopia and questions the possibility of sustaining Chambers' utopia in a fictional globalized world. Finally, the paper ends with a brief conclusion that revisits and reevaluates the main argument and aims of the article and ties all the sections together.

READING *RECORD OF A SPACEBORN FEW* AS A UTOPIAN NARRATIVE: DISSECTING HOPE

The term 'utopia' was first coined by Thomas More with the publication of his homonym work *Utopia* (1516), a narrative text that described an idealized world organized according to stoic and monastic principles. More's work, with its depiction of a seemly just and equal society and its new formal conventions that went beyond that of travel narratives, philosophical dialogue and satirical texts, became the blueprint of a new genre that quickly became popular partially because of its intrinsically political and critical nature and its acknowledgement of current social anxieties and concerns— here one may think for instance, of other similar works such as Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626) or Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), which consolidated the utopian form in the English context.

Utopia has often, albeit not exclusively, been described in the collective imagination as an abstract or inexistant space, a horizon that one should move towards and aspire to reach but that will nevertheless remain at a distance; a better, perhaps even perfect, world. However, utopia has also been the object of much critical attention and scrutiny in the academic world. While there is no singular definition of utopia, most scholars agree that utopia must be understood as inherently critical, rather than as idealistic or as a form

of escapism.[11] In this line, Fátima Vieira emphasizes that utopia itself can be defined according to different characteristics—the content of an imagined society, a specific literary form, the function of utopia, and/or a broad desire of a better life (3). In a similar note, Lyman Tower Sargent argues that utopia might be a combination of social theory, literary texts, and utopian practices (1994)[12]—that is, as a combination of theory, text and practice, a description that highlights the complex nature of utopia, and is central to my reading of Chambers' work as utopic.

As a result, and following this scholarship, I believe that rather than thinking about utopia as an abstract or idealized place, it might be useful to discuss broader utopian wishes, impulses and visions that are very much central to text and genre and yet go further beyond them[13] Fredric Jameson's *Archeologies of the Future* (2005) explores the connections between science fiction and utopia through time. In this work, Jameson distinguishes "the Utopian form"—a kind of text—"the Utopian wish"—or an "Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices"—, and a "political practice" that is central to realizing a "Utopian vision" (1). While the book does focus on genre and form, it also emphasizes that Utopian wishes and impulses are central to the construction of utopia. Thus, political practice and radical imagination are characterized as utopic, despite their (lack of) connection to text or a specific literary form. Drawing from this scholarship, I look at utopia as a set of impulses that help readers imagine alternative presents and futures which may allow for other ways of living, being and connecting with one another. These new imaginaries would help us to both reject and go beyond capitalist and neoliberal modes of relationality that see human and environmental connection as a monetary transaction, as they question and problematize the idea that the status quo is the only viable or possible system.[14]

This possibility of creating new spaces on and off the page has been described as "a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end" (Robinson, cited in Thaler 672), for it is an ongoing process that requires a continuous and critical examination of our collective imagination. This continuous commitment to hope is very much a

[11] See Ernst Bloch (1986) and Ruth Levitas (2000).

[12] See also Claeys (2022).

[13] A similar argument is made in Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (1999).

[14] See Vincent Geoghegan's work on utopianism and Marxism, and its discussion on the capacity of utopianism to imagine different worlds.

utopic practice in the most ambivalent and expansive sense, as utopia demands to be (re)made anew and to be questioned if it is to help us to create new realities.

This understanding of utopia as a continuous practice implies that "utopia is not always about the future, nor about impossible blueprints" (Firth 2019: 494), but rather, that utopia is about a constant struggle, about using people's collective imagination and actions to help build, enunciate, and project better worlds. In a context where, in many countries, precarity is on the rise, the violence of capitalism is ever present and seems inescapable, and neofascism appears to gain more and more power, utopian literature and utopian practices are necessary, if not vital, to constructing what Judith Butler refers to as "livable lives" (8) and futures, lives that we can live openly and with dignity.

Here I want to briefly allude to the work of the Spanish writer, translator, and cultural analyst Layla Martínez Vicente. In her essay *Utopía no es una isla—Utopia is not an island—*, she rejects the notion of utopia as a seemly perfect and completely idyllic project, and instead turns to recent history to find instances of social upheaval and struggle that can be read and interpreted as utopic projects or as projects fueled by a utopian impulse. She argues that utopia can be understood as something that has already happened and that has already led to a better present, even if those utopic upheavals were not perfect. The title of her work also alludes to the fact that More's utopian place was not initially an island but a peninsula, suggesting that it should not be understood as something that is completely isolated and separate from reality, but instead, as something that already sustains us, something that continues to pierce our lives.

It is through this fragmented, complex lens, that I examine the Fleet, the spaceships that harbor the descendants of the last humans to escape Earth in Chambers' fiction, as a utopian place and as a place of hope. Rather than looking at the Fleet as a static place that serves as the backdrop of a perfect static society, I argue that the Fleet acts as a physical embodiment of hope, a dynamic place that is in constant change and reconfiguration—which in turn allows for readers to understand the politics of the Fleet as utopic actions that create a better world through Marxist policies. Again, by understanding utopia "not so much in terms of fictional texts about change and transformation but in terms of a cultural process through which social, spatial and subjective identities are formed" (Pordzik 20) it is possible to view this space as in dialogue with the entangled politics

that lay at its very core. In this way, Chambers offers readers alternative futures where multiple subjectivities and positionings can be explored and understood through a hopeful yet critical lens.

This view of space as dynamic rather than static, as in constant movement and change comes from the view of space studies theorists such as Henri Lefebvre (1992) and Michel de Certeau (1984) that see space as “socially produced” and as in constant dialogue and proximity with the “political, social, and cultural conditions” that surround it (Hartmann 285). The question of place and physical space in relation to utopia has been thoroughly examined,[15] as utopias have usually been described as “sites with no real place” or “fundamentally unreal spaces” (Foucault 24). However, rather than insisting on the impossibility to carry out perfect utopian projects, this research paper focuses instead on the necessity to understand space as complex and as ruled by social dynamics that are intertwined not only with global systems of power and oppression, but also with circumstances and dynamics that are specific to a certain place when discussing the possibility of spatially and physically embodying utopia.

In this line of thought, Jameson argues that “the ongoing transformation of individual relations and social institutions has increasingly been projected onto “the vision of place and landscape” (*Postmodernism* 160), which reinforces the necessity of centering space and spatial speculation in the discussion of projecting new places that challenge the status quo, such as Chambers’ narrative. By centering the Fleet as a hopeful place, it is possible to engage with the political nature of utopia and science fiction, and the social dimensions of space.

I am aware that my argument of the necessity or centrality of hope may sound naïve, as there is a certain tendency to codify these emotions as feminine, and thus, as unimportant in the face of masculinized pessimism,[16] but I see hope not as mere optimism or as blind faith in a positive outcome, but rather as part of a larger cultural politics that denounces the violence of vulnerable communities, and

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[15] For an exploration of the differences between space and place, see Ana Mª Manzanas Calvo and Jesús Benito Sanchez’s work on space in American literature and cultural products.

[16] Ursula K. Le Guin has discussed the existence of a certain tendency to view hopeful stories as naïve and not worth telling, while pessimism and pessimist stories tend to be associated with “serious” and “real” literature (67). She also explains that this negative view of hope and optimism has to do with them being coded as feminine in Western society, and, thus, as unimportant.

tries to build something new on its ashes instead. This political dimension of hope has been noted by many scholars, such as Ernst Bloch (1984), bell hooks (2003), Henry Giroux (2005), and Darren Webb (2013). I am particularly interested in hooks' idea that hope is "a belief in the potential to address injustice even in the face of resounding challenge and as part of a community" (xv)—that is, as part of a collective movement that requires collective mobilization and reimagination.

Becky Chambers' Wayfarer series in general, and *Record of a Spaceborn Few* in particular, focus on a hopeful future and a hopeful reality that are born as a result of collective action in response to an ecological disaster caused by the use of fossil fuels in a capitalist system. The hopefulness that is present in the novel is not apolitical, but rather, a radical affective response[17] to the catastrophe faced by the ascendants of its characters, a community-negotiated response that is in constant state of change. In reading Chambers' work as part of or in dialogue with a utopian tradition I intend not so much to defend a specific understanding of utopia over another, but rather, to dissect and question how hope operates in this novel to critically reconfigure and constitute utopia, hope, and space.

THE FLEET AS MARXIST SPECULATION: REMEMBERING AS COMMUNITY-BUILDING

As part of a tetralogy, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* follows five new characters into Chambers' fictional world: Isabel Itoh, an elderly queer archivist; Tessa, an engineer and a young mother; Eyas, a funeral worker; Kip, a young teenager that is unsure about his path in life; and Sawyer, a recent immigrant that is trying to integrate into the Fleet.

The novel starts with Isabel Itoh witnessing a gut-retching catastrophe. As the head of the Astoria's ship Archives, Isabel's duty is to protect the Fleets' memory, and to record its meaningful events. In this case, Isabel records what is believed to be a shuttle crash and its aftermath because "nobody would want to look at it now, but they would want to one day, and it was important that nobody forgot. Somebody had to look. Somebody had to make a record." (6) Isabel's

[17] See Cecilia Mancuso's work on hopepunk for an examination of hope and hopeful narratives as radical responses against vertical and oppressive structures of power.

presence does not only serve to physically record the accident, but it is also portrayed as an act of kindness, a form of compassion: Isabel is to bear the weight of the event until others are ready to confront it and need to remember and say goodbye to the victims. At the end of the fragment, Isabel offers the following words to one of the other archivists working on the site of the accident: “Keep recording […] It’s all we can do for them now” (8).

This effort to preserve pain and learn from it, to keep the (hi)story of the Fleet alive is also present in not-so grim occasions. After the crash, Isabel also records the birth of a new child and her formal welcome into the community, a scene that consolidates the tone of the book and helps readers learn more about its setting. The ceremony is a place of joy, where all members of the Fleet stand together in celebration and open their arms for the newcomer. As Isabel specifies, “The person being honoured there would not remember any of it, but the others present would, and they would relay the story one day” (33). The ceremony does not only serve the purpose of formally including and welcoming someone into the community, but it also serves to make sure that “everybody [is] a link in a chain” (33), and to create a shared memory that will be carried on for generations.

This celebration—the so-called Naming Day—starts with an acknowledgement of the Earth’s collapse and its role in the Fleet’s formation and way of life. While the novel does not include a detailed explanation of the exact events that led to the planet’s destruction, it seems that the continuous exploitation of the Earth’s natural resources resulted in several human and environmental crises such rapidly rising sea-levels, extreme temperatures, and international armed conflicts motivated by the search and control of fossil fuels. Consequently, the Earth became so inhospitable that the human population was forced to flee and find safety in spaceships navigating open space and other planets. The few thousand people remaining on Earth until its eventual destruction established the Exodus Fleet, a community that in their leaving, was bound not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

During the Naming Day, the Fleet’s story is cast as a utopia that is simultaneously born of greed and generosity, a tale of survival and fear, an act of hope, and a commitment to never going back to capitalist ways. As the Fleet’s utopian project is based on the very destruction of the Earth, it constitutes a “contextually specific form[s] of critique that demand[s] radical transformation” (Thaler 681). Isabel,

the head archivist, opens the Naming Day ceremony with the following words:

> 'We destroyed our world,' she said, 'and left it for the skies. Our numbers were few. Our species had scattered. We were the last to leave. We left the ground behind. We left the oceans. We left the air. We watched these things grow small. We watched them shrink into a point of light. As we watched, we understood. We understood what we were. We understood what we had lost. We understood what we would need to do to survive. We abandoned more than our ancestors' world. We abandoned our short sight. We abandoned our bloody ways. We made ourselves anew.' (34)

After this declaration, Isabel welcomes baby Robin Garcia into the Fleet by claiming that, as part of the community she will be guaranteed food, water, a safe home, and access to healthcare. From Isabel's lips, Robin is promised a future where survival has no price and life is not a commodity.

> She is now, and always, a member of our Fleet. By our laws, she is assured shelter and passage here. If we have food, she will eat. If we have air, she will breathe. If we have fuel, she will fly. She is daughter to all grown, sister to all still growing. We will care for her, protect her, guide her. We welcome you, Robin, to the decks of the *Asteria*, and to the journey we take together (35)

As the novel unfolds, readers learn about the Fleets' anticapitalistic and Marxist politics and how their recalling of the past relates to their current social organization; and how both are intended to protect a way of life that is understood to be more just and dignified than past life in the Earth under a capitalist system. In this wat, the Fleet operates as its own warning, its history a cautionary tale. Cultural practices such as reciting the Fleets' past, or painting on the shell of the ships and watching recordings from life back on Earth, are meant to protect life in the Fleet while being the base of its very existence. The ships' community makes an effort to preserve and protect the memory of its past in an attempt to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the present and the future, as they see themselves as not only a live reminder of the possible consequences of capitalist

violence but also as a testament of the possibility of a better future.[18] A future when people would be able to care deeply and honestly about each other instead of seeing one another as competition is depicted as a world in which hopefulness and revolution are not seen as antagonistic but as interconnected.

> *That's* why the theatres are here, Kip. That's why we keep Archives, why we paint our hands on the wall. It's so we don't forget. We're our own warning. That's why the Fleet needs to remain. Why it *has* to remain. Without us out here, the grounders will forget within a few generations. We'll become just another story, and not one that seems relevant. Sure, we broke Earth, but we won't break *this* planet. We won't poison *this* water. We won't let *this* invention go wrong. (297, original emphasis)

In addition to Isabel's views, readers also get acquainted with the social organization of the Fleet through the outward perception of characters from other parts of the supranational and intergalactic union known as Galactic Commons. Such is the case of Ghuh'loloan, an intergalactic scholar that stays with Isabel and reports back on an online newsletter about life in the Fleet; and Sawyer, an immigrant that has come to the Fleet after being laid off another temporary job and is attracted to the ideal premise of life on the ships. Through their eyes Chambers enriches her description of the Marxist horizontal principles that dictate life on the ships. Thus, readers learn that there is no wage labor inside of the ship since all the jobs that cannot be automatized and that are deemed as essential to the maintaining and self-sufficiency of the ship are rotated on a regular basis.[19] They also find that work is not a mark of social status, but rather, something that must be done for the good of the community. Since people have enough time to build meaningful relationships outside the workplace, work is not a marker of identity either, but seen as a way of protecting the ship's independence and as a way of caring and providing for the local community.[20] Although some jobs are not rotated because they

[18]Here, the "same mistakes" that the Fleet is trying to avoid repeating are not limited to the use of fossil fuels and the exploitation of the Earth's resources, but rather, it refers to the exploitation of human beings and the prioritization of profit over the lives of the working class.

[19] See Aaron Bastani for an exploration of automatization, Marxism, and kind futures.

[20] *Record of a Spaceborn Few* is not the only of Chambers' works to explore Marxist futurities and the abolition of wage labor. Both *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021) and *A*

require specialized qualifications, they are not held in a higher regard nor are they used as a form of social currency. In the following extract, Eyas, the funeral caretaker and one of the main characters, explains to newcomer Sawyer how Exodans—people from the Exodus Fleet—think of professional careers as a way of helping the community, rather than as a means of economic or social gain.

> "Nor do some professions receive more resources than others, or finer housing, or any such tangible benefits. You become a doctor because you want to help people. You become a pilot because you want to fly. You become a farmer because you want to work with growing things, or because you want to feed others. To an Exodan, the question of choosing a profession is not one of what do I need? but rather what am I good at? What good can I do?" (163)

When after moving in, Sawyer asks for a job on the Fleet, he rejects sanitation jobs that he believes are both unpleasant and beneath his level of education. Eyas then confronts him about his refusal and explains that, since he is now a member of the Fleet and, as such, benefits from free food and free housing, he must participate in the Fleet's socioeconomic system. Not only that, but Eyas also challenges Sawyer's idea that there are jobs beneath him, and explains the Fleet's perception of work and status:

> They tried to give you a sanitation job because *everybody* has to do sanitation. Everybody. Me, merchants, teachers, doctors, council members, the admiral—every healthy Exodan fourteen and over gets their ID put in a computer, and that computer randomly pulls names for temporary, mandatory, no-getting-out-of-it work crews to sort recycling and wash greasy throw-cloths and unclog the sewage lines. All the awful jobs nobody wants to do. That way, nothing is out of sight or out of mind. Nothing is left to *lesser people*, because there's no such thing. (116, original emphasis)

Eyas then goes on to reinforce the idea that the Fleet's social and economic organization is essential for guaranteeing the survival of the Fleet, a practice of mutual solidarity and commitment to a shared future. The economic system of the Fleet is also different from the rest of the Galactic Commons. The Fleet does not rely on any form

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Prayer for the Crown-Shy (2022), the two novellas that comprise the Monk and Robot saga, explore alternative realities in which life is not confined to capitalist production.

of official or international currency, as it is sustained by both local trading and an even distribution of resources.[21]

In this, Chambers' novel proposes that hopeful speculation would allow to enunciate spaces that are built on the grounds of mutual care and support. These affective elements are not peripheral to the Fleet, but part of its radical compromise to reject capitalist and neoliberal visions of people as commodities to be consumed. The Fleet's social organization and landscape is not what Miguel Abensour describes as "eternal utopia" (407), which Thaler then characterizes as "a conservative trope that necessarily entails an appeal to perfect order" (681). Instead, it is closer to Abensour's concept of "persistent utopia:" the "wish for the advent of a radical alterity here and now" (407, cited in Thaler 681), a wish that comes from the acknowledgment of a tumultuous past and the desire for a different, more just present.

SYMBOLIC RETURNS AND CIRCULAR STRUCTURES: QUESTIONING UTOPIA

While the Fleet is depicted as an idyllic, utopian place by its inhabitants, it is also a space in a precarious and tenuous balance with its surroundings, which Chambers describes in the rest of the Galactic Commons world of the Wayfarers' tetralogy. Through the character of Ghuh'loloan, readers learn Exodans are regarded as an 'exotic' group by species from different planets who have been following with interest how humans keep trying to have a dignified life after the destruction of the Earth despite their limited economic and technological resources. Ghuh'loloan's ethnographic accounts of the Fleet reveal that humans were viewed as primitive and dangerous before—and during the process of—being accepted as members of the Galactic Commons. It was precisely this perception that led Aeluons, one of the most powerful alien races in the Galactic Commons, to provide the Fleet with their own sun and their own resources so that Exodans were able to continue their utopian project. However, even

[21] The Fleet is also self-reliant when it comes to waste management. When Eyas explains that "We're made out of our ancestors. They're what keep us alive" (56), she is referring to the fact that the Fleet is sustained by its people—both metaphorically and literally. As the funerary director of one of the ships, Eyas composts the bodies of the deceased to grow vegetables that the Fleet cannot afford to trade with other planets or spaceships. The social, the economic, the affective, the ecological realities of the Fleet are laced together to create a place of hope that serves as an example of the potential of speculation to build better realities both inside and outside fiction.

though the value of maintaining and protecting a place such as the Fleet is acknowledged by other species, there is still a certain tendency to think of humans, and Exodans in particular, as catching up to more civilized societies. In this sense, the Fleet is not always viewed as a utopian or perfect place from the outside. As such, it is possible to read the Fleet as a utopia that has been 'contaminated' by dystopia, or as a failed or incomplete utopia. Following this train of thought, it is even possible to imagine the Fleet as a potentially dystopian space—especially when looked at from outside from the point of view of more technologically advanced planets. However, Ghuh'loloan rejects this view of the Fleet, and emphasizes the resilience and commitment to the Exodan project of hope and equality. In the following extract, Ghuh'loloan acknowledges and tries to combat these stereotypes:

> I should note, in case you're getting the wrong idea, that Exodans have been steadily innovating and inventing throughout their history. [...] It is not that the Exodans were standing still. It is that the rest of us were so far ahead. (166)

While the Fleet is a utopian project, it is born out of destruction and misery—out of dystopia, perhaps. The Exodus Fleet is deeply committed to avoiding the mistakes of the past, such as the levels of production and consumption of the past and the rites and rhythms of capitalism. For instance, this rejection of what is associated with capitalism is quite clear in the Exodans' reticence or outright refusal to use creds and to participate in interplanetary economy, as it is seen as "a harmful acquiescence to foreign values" (169), and as more aligned with Martian rather than Exodan values. Here, it is possible to infer a nationalist identity tied to the sharp differences and separation between the Fleet and the rest of the Galactic Commons. This identity, in turn, seems to be based on the values and practices that the Fleet proudly calls its own and holds at its very core, such as the already mentioned alternative economy, its horizontal organization, its rejection of capitalist ideals and its emphasis on mutual aid. When reading the Fleet as a dynamic place that is being constantly (re)made and negotiated, it is necessary to remember that the Fleet is in direct opposition to its past, but it is also its (distorted) reflection. The Fleet carries its memories both symbolically and physically and holds it as a reminder of what has gone wrong and could go wrong again. In this sense, the Fleet is a hopeful yet hybrid place, one that embodies the possibility of carving hope out of reality while making visible the

struggles that surround it, while still questioning the viability and the future of utopia. The alleged superiority of surrounding civilizations explains that despite its utopian social organization, the inhabitants of the Fleet keep moving to other parts of the Galactic Commons. Although one of the Exodans explains that "there's no denying that more Exodans are leaving than coming back, but we're hardly in danger of dying out. Farms are still working. Water's still flowing. The Fleet is fine" (217), the theme of people leaving the community is central to the novel as the main threat to the Fleet's survival. The fact that the Fleet is not considered utopian by everybody allows to read this space as a failed or incomplete utopia that has been 'contaminated' by dystopia. In fact, when looked at from outside from the point of view of more technologically advanced planets, the Fleet is described as potentially dystopian. Thus, Tessa has to rely on outside technology to give her aging father an ocular transplant, and eventually leaves the Fleet to pursue a professional career and to offer a supposedly more expansive future to her daughter. Similarly, Kit also leaves the community to start university in another planet, one that is renowned for its commitment to academic excellence. However, as he comes back to the Fleet to work as an apprentice to the Archive in the last chapter of the novel, Kip's performance of another naming day invests the novel with a circular structure that suggests continuous renewal. This repetition of the Naming Day ceremony at the end of the novel acknowledges the limitations and the darker parts of its utopia. As the text recognizes the Fleet's limitations and issues and uses them to enact new hopeful imaginaries, it is possible to read *Record of a Spaceborn Few* as an imperfect utopia, whereby Kit's return to the ships symbolizes a broader narrative commitment to the Fleet's imperfect way of life.

It is this imperfection precisely what prevents said way of life from becoming stagnant, making instability essential to its nature and survival through constant change and renewal. In the end, changing the Fleet's foreign policy regarding educational opportunities makes it a more hospitable and welcoming space both for insiders and outsiders. As a place of hope, the Fleet must be a space in constant change and redefinition. The fact that the Fleet must interact with non-utopic spaces and practices in a globalized world does not mean that its utopic impulse is being watered down, but that it cannot be static. Precisely because utopia allows to understand "'what is' (thus helping us to soberly understand the world we currently inhabit)" as well as "'what might be' (thus helping us to nurture the hope for a

better future" (Thaler 674), it is possible rely on it as a way of creating presents and futures that are kinder than current reality.

CONCLUSION

In this research paper, I have argued for the possibility of reading Becky Chambers' *Record of a Spaceborn Few* as a utopian narrative. I have looked at the different ways in which the science fiction elements of the novel problematize the idea of utopia through the creation of dynamic and ever-changing places that contain negative or even dystopian elements, while still constructing new spatial and literary hopeful imaginaries that acknowledge systemic injustice and exploitation. It is precisely this ambivalence, this rejection of totalizing or *perfect utopias*, that allows Chambers' work to be read as an exercise in educated hope that is not naïve or simplistic, but rather, deeply political; one that holds close and refuses to forget the violence of the past while still advocating for a kinder, better future.

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