



# “Wheels turning in opposite directions”: the Utopian Dynamics of Individual and Collective Temporality in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*

*Sarah Lohmann*

*Abstract:* Einstein may deem objective temporality an illusion, but temporal relations of self and other still strongly shape our lived experience. I explore how individual and communal temporality function in two apparently “ideal” societies, Anarres in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Women’s Country in Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988). While both quasi-utopias are founded on long-term egalitarian communality, I argue that anarcho-communist Anarres successfully combines progress-orientation with holistic cyclicity to pursue sustainable inclusivity against the odds while Women’s Country fails to do the same through separatist feminism and performative group identity: it succumbs to the tragic temporal trajectory at its core. However, I ultimately suggest that the novels still serve as complementary testimonials to the utopian potential of sustainably integrative temporality if we consider the utopianism negatively encoded in *Gate*’s performativity.

*Keywords:* utopia, feminism, community, individuality, sustainability, temporality, Ursula K. Le Guin, Sheri S. Tepper, *The Dispossessed*, *The Gate to Women’s Country*

## 1. Introduction: Reinventing the Literary Utopia on Temporal Terms

Utopia was famously given its last rites by many in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the cited reasons for its decline including everything from the fact that “utopia itself [had] become the enemy” after World War Two (Elliot 241) to Francis Fukuyama’s conviction that we had arrived at the “end of history as such” and utopia was no longer necessary (4; see Godhe’s prefatory of this section). However, it has now become apparent not only that history is far from over, but that part of the problem with traditional literary utopias was their lack of sustainability, which was also in large part due to their lack of inclusivity. In utopian classics, such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1887), marginalised groups such as women experience utopia differently from the supposed norm, for instance by being largely excluded from public life and made subservient to their husbands.<sup>1</sup> The golden “eternal present of utopianism”, as Eduardo dos Reis terms it, is thus only accessible to privileged members of society. In turn, this arguably contributes to the danger of utopian stasis in these texts, which Erin McKenna terms “end-state models”: lack of possible development is particularly treacherous when it functions through oppression, and can ultimately unleash totalitarian terrors from “nuclear destruction” to “sophisticated genetic engineering”, as McKenna points out (1).

However, Samuel Delany, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “critical utopias” of the 1970s (Tom Moylan) addressed this danger in their basic organisation: they made utopia accessible to all, including women and other marginalised individuals. In doing so, they created not only “more recognisable and dynamic alternatives” to the “systematising boredom of the traditional utopia” in Moylan’s terms, but fundamentally reinvented the utopian project as something that could not only survive diversity and change, but thrive on it (10). Specifically, rather than sacrificing individuals to oppression or eternal stasis, these texts highlighted the importance of both dynamic, inclusive communities and individual agency across time in sustainably bringing about alternative futures – thereby complicating the traditional utopian idea of ahistorical perfection and the concept of linear, one-size-fits-all progress that the Fin-de-Siècle utopias (such as Bellamy’s) espoused.

In this article, I will take a closer look at one of these critical utopias, Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), in order to show how the integration of these collective and individual temporal experiences plays a vital role in the text; as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, the “inseparability of space and time” means that utopia is also always “uchronia” (15).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I will read this text alongside Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988), a post-apocalyptic, quasi-

<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps even more clearly the case in these utopias than in the non-utopian “zero worlds” (Suvín) giving rise to these texts, given the often brutal regulation underlying these communities and the resulting vast discrepancy of utopian experience between individuals.

<sup>2</sup> My reading assumes the Einsteinian premise that every object and person’s experience of time is unique due to their specific spatiotemporal placement and movement; however, it is primarily interested in how these experiences can also be further divided or aligned through changes in personal or cultural perceptions of self and other.

utopian successor to the critical utopias that is predicated on the same collective-based inclusive consciousness as Le Guin's novel, yet ends up taking a radically different utopian direction. Ultimately, however, I will suggest that these directions are complementary, offering up challenging impulses for truly inclusive and sustainable future-oriented thought – something we are currently in dire need of.

## **2. *The Dispossessed* and *The Gate to Women's Country* as Examples of Inclusive Utopian Sustainability**

### **2.1 *The Dispossessed*: “To be Whole is to be Part”**

Both *The Dispossessed* and *The Gate to Women's Country* (henceforth referred to as *Gate*) feature utopian societies in which old patriarchal systems of dominance have given way to attempts at long-term utopian sustainability grounded in feminist awareness. In *The Dispossessed*, the planet Anarres, located far from Earth and far in the imaginary future, was colonised seventy years prior by settlers from the planet Urras, after their female leader, Laia Odo, instigated a successful anarchist communist revolution. The resulting utopian society of Anarres, an “experiment in nonauthoritarian [i.e., anarchist] communism that ... has survived for a hundred and seventy years” (282), is imperfect but deeply egalitarian in its set-up: there are no centralised government or authoritarian institutions, and the resulting flat hierarchy disregards sex and gender in contributions to social maintenance, with jobs assigned by a system called Divlab solely on the basis of personal ability and social requirement. As the protagonist, Shevek, remarks, “a person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength – what has the sex to do with that?” (17) Moreover, voluntary partnership replaces marriage while anti-proprietary sentiment forbids any inclination of ownership within relationships, and optional full-time day care supports both parents' careers, freeing up both men and women to participate in the long-term utopian advancement of Anarres.

Indeed, besides equality, long-term thinking is an essential part of Anarresti Odonian philosophy, whose guiding works, such as Odo's *The Social Organism*, centralise paucity and the thereby required conservation of resources as the new society's guiding principle: one of the mantras of Anarresti life is “excess is excrement” (127–8), which leads to what Christine Nadir describes as “the penetration of functionalism and organicism into all facets of life” (39). Moreover, this long-term planning is in large part environmental: for example, many job placements assigned by Divlab require the cultivation of the previously barren planet through the planting of thousands of trees, following global heating that led to “millennia of drought” (59). As such, *The Dispossessed* appears to fulfill Lisa Garforth's designation of a “green utopia” as typically depicting a “dramatic reduction in material wants as the basis for ecological security and an expansion of human well-being”, which in turn allows “the replacement of nature's taken-for-granted domination and exploitation with a utopia of environmental collaboration and caution” (405). Sustainability, then, is achieved on Anarres through a collective commitment to

this long-term endeavour of disciplined self-restraint, eschewing private property in favour of “I use this one and you use that” (75) and with “profiteer” serving as “the most contemptuous word” (293) in the Anarresti vocabulary.

Thus, the long-term cultivation of Anarres places its utopia not in the unreachable Not-yet that Ernst Bloch famously deems utopian, and which Darko Suvin calls “less significant than the *orientation* toward a better place” (77), but in the Anarresti’s daily communal commitment to keep the forward momentum of communist anarchist revolution alive. This, in turn, is only possible when everyone, regardless of gender, can contribute to the cause – an egalitarian process-orientation that thus resists the stereotypical identification of women, in particular, with temporal cyclicity, grounded in rhythms of fertility and childbirth.<sup>3</sup> And yet, cyclicity is still clearly present within this progress: the natural cycles of all beings and the re-awakening landscape are reflected through the Odonian symbol of the green “circle of life”, which adorns all official publications and symbolically “encloses all individuals within the group” while “emphasiz[ing] a holistic approach to life” (517). Clearly, this circle is an open one, supporting collective forward movement that is nevertheless supportive of all its members. Shevek’s partner Takver, for example, demonstrates this progressive holism within her cutting-edge marine biology research: Shevek notes that “it was strange to see Takver take a leaf into her hand, or even a rock. She became an extension of it: it of her” (154). Moreover, vignettes like these show the crucial role of *every* element in the utopia’s cyclical progression: Takver and Shevek’s scientific work and community labour provide important communal services, but so do all the other human and non-human members of the system. Against the environmental odds, the Anarresti are attempting to create a more livable future together, thus incorporating both individual and communal temporality into their utopian ideal.

Notably, the anarchist communist nature of Anarresti society plays a big role in this sustainable and egalitarian valuing of both individual and community: elsewhere, Le Guin explains that the novel’s “political theory” was “formulated” (“Interview”, 166) on ideas “prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelly and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman”, which she found to be “the most idealistic, and ... the most interesting, of all political theories” (“Quarters”, 285). This is significant on feminist terms due to the significant contributions of women like Goldman to communist anarchist thought and Marxism: as Bonnie G. Smith writes, “Marxian time” has been “of interest to women since the nineteenth century” as it “presents temporality as the medium for the ups and downs of women’s condition, showing an egalitarian society deep in the human past and a deterioration of that society with the advent of private property” (986). As such, Marx’s socialist future showed feminist promise, and several women writers and artists contributed to their own “hoped-for liberation” following the Communist Revolution (986). As Dan Sabia notes, moreover, “a key attraction of the ideology has always been its stress on the equal and paramount value of both individualism and community, personal autonomy and social solidarity, individual freedom and responsibility

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Bonnie G. Smith notes, the cyclical “temporality of the female body” has led to women not only being “associated with the phases of the moon or with instability and insanity” but equated with “those devalued animals whose estrus cycles seemed similar to menstrual ones” (982).

to others”; theory and practice thus attempt to show “why and how self and society, or individuality and community, can be reconciled or harmonized” (112). After all, as D. Novak writes, “anarchist communism views the individual as essentially a social being who can achieve full development only in society, while society can benefit only when its members are free” (Sabia 113): societies support and protect, while individuals innovate and adapt. As such, the mutual aid systems of anarchist communism support Anarres’ inclusive sustainability, grounded in the belief that “*To be whole is to be part*” as Odo’s tombstone reminds the Anarresti (108).

## 2.2 The Gate to Women’s Country: Farsight and Ritual

*Gate*, meanwhile, features a post-apocalyptic world that is likewise focused on long-term utopian development on egalitarian principles and even more obviously designed as an apparent feminist utopia. On our world, 300 years in the future, neo-Classical city-states run by unelected all-female Councils have emerged following a nuclear devastation. Indeed, the towns only hold women and boys up to the age of five, at which point they are brought to the all-male garrisons outside the city gates, to be trained by the warriors in “defending” the city – otherwise warriors and women only come together for supervised “assignments” during regular festivals. However, young men may choose to return to the city through the “gate to Women’s Country” after they turn fifteen years old, up until they see active duty at 25; if they return, they live and work with specific families as “servitors”. Accordingly, women live their lives in relative autonomy and freedom from patriarchal structures: they may pursue any career path (as long as they select a science, an art, and a craft, to speed up societal redevelopment) and have reclaimed all aspects of governance and administration. Stavia, the protagonist, notes that the “women’s studies” at her school include “management, administration, sexual skills” as well as special electives (31). In fact, some gender-based stereotypes have become inverted: male children’s age is kept track of, instead of that of girls, in Stavia’s family (10), and schools teach that all women are kin, without any mention of men (30). Similarly, vanity is accepted in men but frowned upon in women: “‘If you’re going to raise a child, wouldn’t you rather it was good-looking?’ ‘But suppose it’s a daughter, and it grows up to be like him?’ ‘Yech. A crowing hen! Cock-o-doodle-doo!’” (59).

Moreover, as on Anarres, long-term thinking plays an important role in the governance of Women’s Country. In fact, in terms of temporality, a strong distinction is drawn between the temporal perception and experience of the garrison warriors and that of the women and servitors in the cities, on whose terms this utopia functions: while the women oversee the long-term maintenance and growth of the cities as well as the allocation of resources, the warriors focus on short-term martial victory and accumulation of military honour. We are shown this specifically in the discrepancy between Stavia and her warrior lover, Chernon: while Stavia carefully follows in her Councilwoman mother’s footsteps in supporting the city as a doctor, Chernon is uninterested in education and only cares about gaining the respect of his garrison officers. His favourite fantasy is “imagin[ing] himself as Odysseus, leaving the battlefield after victory”, “wounded just enough that his bloodstained bandages showed

everyone he had been in battle”(148). Chernon is not interested in the actual experience of the battle, but the imaginatively extended moment of glory to follow. This temporal discrepancy is also evident in Stavia and Chernon’s attitudes towards eating and love-making: Stavia takes her time with both, while Chernon is preoccupied with momentary pleasure, gulping and “not even bothering to taste” his food (75). Indeed, Stavia realises that for Chernon, “everything was now. Nothing was later” (242), and she compares him to a “small child” in this regard (248). Other warriors mirror this near-sighted, immature temporality, with Chernon himself noting that their lives are mostly defined through the cyclical anticipation of fleeting pleasure in military parades and battles: “the splendor of it was spasmodic, brief orgasms of emotion separated by long periods of calm, almost of depression” (183–84). The women of the cities, on the other hand – the actual citizens of “Women’s Country” – join Stavia in acting with the farsight of adults. They look beyond the present to continually gather information, both long-lost and new, about the world around them and lead long-term projects of exploration as well as ecosystem restoration like that of the Anarresti, thus partially situating their extended temporality in environmental care. Moreover, this care bears fruit: nearly-extinct deer are released and multiply, to Stavia and her mother Morgot’s delight (102), hatcheries release more fish every year (12), and forests gain ground as reforestation crews “drop ... feathery tree seedlings into shovel slits” (102). The women thus hope both for a greener future and for an expansion of their civilisation beyond the radioactive devastations that currently trap them.

However, as in *The Dispossessed*, this long-term utopian project comes with the price of disciplined commitment on the part of the women. There is not as much material deprivation as on Anarres (besides the lack of such pre-devastation goods as foreign spices), but the women are expected to study and work diligently, learning their sciences, arts, and crafts to the highest possible level, even if they also choose to pursue motherhood. Moreover, they must maintain strict self-control, for example in reining in their romantic feelings for individual warriors: as Stavia recites to Morgot, “infatuation makes otherwise reasonable women behave in unreasonable and illogical ways. It is a result of biological forces incident to racial survival” (52). This statement is, in fact, part of the “ordinances”, a set of rules governing life in the cities just as anarchist communism implicitly governs Anarres. Adherence to the ordinances is the strictest requirement of the women in Women’s Country, who must memorise them at school and henceforth follow them religiously, as enforced by the Councilwomen. Underlying this custom is the belief that the cities’ inhabitants were “robbed” by their ancestors who brought about nuclear war, “which is why we must obey the ordinances, so we don’t rob our own descendants”, as Stavia’s friend Beneda quotes (62). However, this is not always easy: Morgot ominously tells Stavia and Beneda that “we all have to do things we don’t want to do. ... All of us here in Women’s Country. Sometimes they are things that hurt us to do. We accept the hurt because the alternative would be worse.” Moreover, Morgot adds, “we have many reminders to keep us aware of that. The Council ceremonies. The play before summer carnival.” Eventually, she says, “the pain will pass” (11–12).

Indeed, these “reminders” introduce temporal cyclicity into the forward-looking utopianism of Women’s Country, just as the “circle of life” mentality does on Anarres. Most notably, the women are all required to memorise the

play Morgot mentions – *Iphigenia at Ilium* – at school, alongside the ordinances, and it is performed every year by the Councilwomen, thus weaving through the novel as a leitmotif. The play is a reworking of the Greek tragedy *The Trojan Women*, and it is performed, as even Stavia’s obstinate sister Myra knows, as a “commentary on particular attitudes of preconvulsion society” (37): symbolically, it focuses deeply on the pain and grief that Iphigenia and her female kin (dead and alive) feel after the Trojan War, where several of them were killed. The significance of the play, beyond its general critique of pre-apocalyptic society and the accordant justification of new utopian ways, is not immediately apparent, and it is, in fact, paradoxically advertised as a comedy. However, its performances evidently play a large role in the women’s social cohesiveness and group identity over the cycles of years and generations. This recalls Judith Butler’s dictum that identity is performatively constituted, with particular reference to gender identity. The play’s performance, likewise, appears as a “stylized repetition of acts” (519) forming “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the repetitive performance appears to align with Northrop Frye’s suggestion that “the behavior of the [utopian] society is described *ritually*”, whereby “a ritual is a significant social act, and the utopia-writer is concerned only with the typical actions ... significant of those social elements he is stressing” (324). Clearly, the utopian identity of Women’s Country rests on this play’s performance as a “significant social act” of identity-formation.

By contrast, somewhat oddly for a utopian society but with great significance that is later revealed, the men of the garrisons are not treated as citizens of Women’s Country, and thus, they are not subject to this particular performance of group identity formation, nor to any other ideological adherence to the ordinances or any long-term organisational responsibilities supporting the ideology. In fact, one might say that, due to thereby effectively lacking a government, the men’s lives are quite literally “nasty, brutish and short” (89), in Thomas Hobbes’ words, if they remain in the garrisons: it is, in fact, part of the ordinances that warriors are not to be given life-extending healthcare by Women’s Country as “they choose battle” and thus “have to live with the consequences” (129). Yet, they appear quite happy with their restricted temporality, supported as they are by the women’s labour, and as they are given certain freedoms, such as access to prostitutes regulated by Women’s Country. The warriors do occasionally launch rebellious attempts at conquering the cities, but the women seem oddly non-reliant on the garrisons when it comes to defending themselves; besides, as Wendy Pearson points out, “[the warriors’] desire to subjugate and rule the women seems impractical even in terms of serving their own interests” (208).

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<sup>4</sup> Although this performance is not exactly about gender identity in Butler’s terms, the subject matter is essentially the same: here, the focus is not on individuals performing a certain gender, but on an entire gender performing its apparent role within a strictly regimented social play.

## 2.3 Becoming Utopian

Overall, then, it is primarily through the juxtaposition with their non-utopian foils – Urras in *The Dispossessed* and the warrior men’s garrisons in *Gate* – that Anarres and Women’s Country demonstrate their utopianism. By creating group cohesion through their anarchist communist principles and their gender-based identity performance respectively, both Anarres and Women’s Country are able to construct an egalitarian/feminist temporal utopian trajectory that appears to successfully combine ongoing progress-orientation with supportive cyclicality, and draw on disciplined self-restraint and ordinance-following to do so. They are thus seemingly able to sidestep both the stagnant ahistoricism of classical utopianism and the exclusionary progress fetishism of the Fin-de-Siècle utopias, while also avoiding the sacrifice of individual temporality to the utopian collective that tends to characterise their utopian predecessors, at least in regard to marginalised individuals. Instead, both societies employ cyclical holistic solidarity or ‘reminders’ to reassure each utopian citizen of their essential role in the functioning of the utopia. As such, they appear to propose something akin to Elizabeth Grosz’s perception of feminist temporality as neither abstract clock-time nor immediate consciousness but a sense of *becoming*. Grosz writes that “this becoming infects not only beings in/as duration but the world itself”, which is clearly the case here (1019). However, Grosz dismisses deliberate policies and political activism as “the stuff of linear time” and thus “more or less a dead end”, whereas the worlds in these novels are committed to disciplined ideological co-creation of utopia (988). Another possible analogue is Julia Kristeva’s “women’s time”, which applauds second-wave feminism for making linear temporality accessible to women; however, Kristeva seems committed to traditionally gendered temporality, which makes Grosz more attractive in terms of inclusive temporal utopianism.

## 3. Trouble in Paradise: The Trials of Utopian Temporality

### 3.1 *The Dispossessed*: “True Voyage is Return”

Yet, the apparent utopian temporalities of both *The Dispossessed* and *Gate* are subjected to severe trials within the narratives. At the beginning of *The Dispossessed*, utopian progress appears to have stalled as innovation and creativity fall prey to increasingly rigidifying social and academic conventions; Shevek, a respected physicist, feels that his academic work is severely compromised, as he cannot publish his research independently of powerful academics. Power has begun to “inhere in [the] centre”, Shevek’s mentor Mitis warns him before he goes to study with leading researcher Sabul. Indeed, Shevek is soon in danger of becoming “Sabul’s man” (50), as he loses his intellectual independence. Moreover, his work on a “simultaneity theory” of physics is systematically discouraged, as it is apparently in conflict with the established “sequency principle”. Sabul tells Shevek his work is anti-Odonian, as it represents “a certain disaffection, a certain degree of privatism, of non-altruism” (200); however, this rejection actually appears to indicate that the values of the inclusive Odonian “circle of life” are in danger of succumbing to

pressure to conform to the collective. In other words, individual temporality is once more being subsumed by that of the community – this time through the perversion of the Anarresti’s scarcity-based discipline, which discourages intellectual freedom and paradoxically enables egotism. Shevek’s friend Bedap observes that “The circle has come right back round to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the centre of the Odonian ideal, we’ve thrown it all away” (146–47). As Sabia points out, this is not a natural consequence of communist anarchism – in fact, it can be attributed to a few circumstantial factors in Anarres’ development, such as the planet’s barren landscape, which does not lend itself to the kind of decentralisation originally planned by the Odonian settlers. The reader is told that “on arid Anarres, the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources, and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back their notions of what is needed for support” (81). Sabia notes that the resulting centralisation and coordination brought with it “the need for bureaucratic ‘expertise and stability’ and hence new sources of power, based on proficiency, knowledge, information, and strategic position” (121), which in turn gave “scope to the authoritarian impulse”, in Bedap’s words (140). Moreover, in a society in which “social conscience, the opinion of others” is the “most powerful moral force motivating the behaviour of most Anarresti” (95), as the reader is told, lines between “conviction and conformity”, “self-interest and selfishness”, “tend to blur”, as Sabia adds, and “the maintenance of community ... solidarity and cooperation ... become indistinguishable from the suppression of individuality, freedom, and difference” (122). To make matters worse, Shevek tells us that, after a series of emergency measures, “five years of stringent control may have fixed the pattern permanently” (271), so that innovative individual freedom seems a distant memory: as Bedap laments, “we’ve made laws, laws of conventional behaviour, built walls all around ourselves, and we can’t see them, because they’re part of our thinking” (272).

Shevek is trapped by these walls as if by a physical restraint, and is even contemplating suicide. However, he eventually escapes by returning to Urras as a visiting scholar – the first Anarresti visitor the planet has seen – to exercise his intellectual freedom there, attempting to combine sequency and simultaneity theories of temporality into a General Temporal Theory. Shevek thus demonstrates to other Anarresti that their walls *can* be broken down: as Takver says, “if you talk about it and nobody goes, you’ve only proved that custom is unbreakable” (309). On Urras, Shevek is surprised to experience a society which appears to exist in a flourishing eternal present recalling traditional utopias, and indeed, the lushness of the landscape appears utopian to him, symbolising what Anarres longs to achieve at the end of its utopian strivings: a world in which collective labour bears fruit for all. Moreover, even the inclusivity of the Odonian “circle of life” seems to have been realised on Urras: Urras’ fertile ecosystems boast far more animals than still-barren Anarres does, and Shevek gets a glimpse of possible trans-species connection and utopian integration when he makes eye contact with a horse, wondering “what that deep, dry, dark gaze out of the darkness would have meant to Takver ... Takver would have known how to look back at that eye” (22). And yet, Shevek soon realises that extreme hierarchical social division in fact limits any actual progress to that of the ruling classes on Urras, which switches his perception of

Urras from utopian to almost entirely dystopian. This is in keeping with Odo’s experience that sparked her revolution. In fact, Shevek comes to realise that he himself is a prisoner on Urras, almost as Odo was – he is being held so that the government may exploit his research in order to gain martial advantage through faster-than-light travel. “Evidently if it’s in anybody’s pocket ... Dr. Shevek, it’s in yours” (111), Urrasti scientist Oegeo tells him. It turns out, then, that rather than supporting individuals (like Shevek) and grounding their quality of life in the end point of collective advancement, Urrasti leaders conversely value exploitative individualism, or the misuse of individual potential for profit – as symbolised by the possibility of objective temporality in faster-than-light travel – so highly, in fact, that it precludes the basic communality of Anarres, which has likewise tipped the scales towards “profiteering utilitarianism”, although not quite to this extreme. In other words, the balance has swung too far from individual freedom to exploitation, meaning that neither Urras nor Anarres represents a livable, sustainable society at this point – let alone a functioning utopia. Yet, it is ironic that Urrasti leaders rely specifically on the work of Shevek – born of the relative freedom of thought on non-hierarchical, anarcho-communist Anarres – to make progress in their own repressive society; this speaks volumes of these worlds’ relative merits.

Shevek’s breakthrough in coming to understand utopia in temporal terms, then, ends up taking a very different form: not an embrace of Urras’s exploitative individualist progress over the compromised cyclical communality of Anarres, but the *merging* of the positive aspects of both, as exemplified by the General Temporal Theory he finally arrives at. Shevek realises that his theory will only work if temporal movement is perceived as having two complementary sides – sequency and simultaneity – a finding that is, in fact, described in terms of both cyclicity and linear progress. As Shevek explains to a Urrasti,

Time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, or direction, or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises. ... A true chronosophy should provide a field in which the relation of the two aspects or processes of time could be understood. (185-6)

Given this duality, Moylan criticises that in *The Dispossessed*, “utopian matter is locked into a series of binary oppositions” (109), while Nadia Khouri speaks of a “reduction of the dialectic to binary oppositions with points of gravity congealed in static equilibrium” (51). However, Shevek’s actual breakthrough lies in positing that these two aspects necessarily *support* one another, rather than needing to be proven independently – just as, by extension, both individual and collective temporality, and thus individual freedom and social responsibility, are necessary elements of a functioning utopian society. He notes that

We don’t want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and end. ... A complexity that not only includes creation but duration, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after, but how to ask the question... (187)

Shevek's temporal theory thus supports his understanding that a sustainable utopian goal must essentially represent the irreducible temporal complexity of life itself, which by necessity includes both forward movement as well as the cyclical maintenance of interpersonal connections and of that which has already been achieved. Accordingly, he understands more deeply that communitarianism can only function successfully if it also incorporates and values the lives and contributions of its individual members. After all, forward movement may at times be driven by the individual, who requires the support of the community and its cyclical rhythms, while at other times, the individual may be stuck in cycles and require the forward drive of the community to help them thrive. Shevek's personal temporality is forward-facing and impatient, but his return to Urras and then again to Anarres has helped him to grasp the complementary value of community and its cyclical connectivity – despite, or indeed because of, the way the community previously complicated his personal creative trajectory on Anarres. Anarres' communal dynamics must be reintegrated into Shevek's and others' personal trajectories, and vice versa. However, this is a process which may include a few steps forward and a few steps back, as symbolised by the reader's journey through the alternating chapters, and as alluded to by the remainder of Odo's gravestone inscription: “*True voyage is return*” (108–109). Ultimately, then, we have once more arrived at something like Grosz' sense of *becoming* to describe Anarres' utopian temporality.

In light of this, then, it appears that rather than representing a “regressive dialectic”, the text interrogates and *challenges* the very dialectics that are at odds with true utopian temporality: it is not a question of either/or, but a question of sustainable cohesiveness. In moving between binary oppositions, in order to incorporate their energies into a complex whole, *The Dispossessed* actually generates a compelling image of such a sustainable, inclusive utopianism. This is beautifully illustrated by the temporal dynamics of a canon sung by revolutionaries on Urras, whom Shevek joins:

The melody seemed always to be lagging and catching up with itself, like a canon, and all the parts of the song were being sung at one time, in the same moment, though each singer sang the tune as a line from beginning to end.  
(246)

Moreover, this image highlights that this temporal complexity is not the final goal of anarchist communist Anarresti society, but once again, a constant process of becoming: as Sabia points out, in an anarcho-communist society committed to autonomy and liberty, “some degree of conflict and instability is likely ... to be both ongoing and inevitable” (124). In fact, “the ideal of complete harmony implies the death of freedom, and of life” (125), Sabia suggests, similarly to McKenna's warning of the traditional utopias. Bedap, too, asserts that “change is freedom, change is life — is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that?” (139). The antidote to communal stagnation and individual suppression is not a final integration into a settled, if complex, whole, but an integration into a whole that is constantly being re-evaluated, both by “lasting vigilance” (82) and by “permanent” revolution, “an ongoing process” (147). It is also worth noting that this applies to both Anarres and Urras – on the latter, Shevek's presence ignites contemporary activists, who are likewise inspired by

Odo’s revolution. Indeed, Chris Ferns points out that another uprising on Urras would further aid Anarres’ return to Odonian values, since “once Urras is shown to be susceptible to change ... there is no longer a fixed point of reference by which the Anarresti can determine their difference” and rest on their revolutionary laurels (259). Moreover, Ferns notes that a global economy including Urras could help to alleviate the scarcity of resources on Anarres, thus also helping to eliminate the “principal source of the recurring emergencies ... producing an increasing tendency towards conformity” (259). Overall, however, Anarres is already on solid utopian ground: making the revolution sustainably and integratively permanent is simply a return to its most basic anarchist communist values of social equality and individual freedom, reinforced through an ethic of mutual aid.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 The Gate to Women’s Country: Tragic Temporality

In *Gate*, however, the stumbling block on the road to utopia is not something that is ultimately subsumed in a gradual back-and-forth movement towards a more sustainably integrative utopian society. In fact, any unease the reader may have felt about this utopia defining itself in exclusion to the city-adjacent garrisons – and thus establishing a performative group gender role, whose long-term utopianism contrasts with the warriors’ short-term temporality – is affirmed and rewarded with a major plot twist. It is revealed that this temporal rift is even greater than first assumed, and that it even negates the warriors’ one long-term goal: the siring and raising of warrior sons. In truth, the Councilwomen are conducting a centuries-long project of eugenics, whereby the men who remain in the garrisons as warriors – as opposed to returning through the gate to Women’s Country – are bred out of the gene pool through sleight and misdirection. Instead, the women are procreating with the genetic material of the servitors, who – based on their self-selection – do not appear to exhibit the same tendencies for dominance and violent control over the women. The eventual goal is to not have “any more wars ... no wars at all” (295), as Morgot eventually tells Stavia, who had in the meantime run off with Chernon and must now be told the secret of Women’s Country in order to decide whether to keep his baby. By fully taking control of their reproduction, the women hope to deal the final death blow to the patriarchy, for as Shiloh Carroll notes, “patriarchy’s commodification of women is based, for the most part, on the ownership of a woman’s reproductive ability, not the woman herself” (30). It is a project of deception on a vast scale, but the Councilwomen leave “clues here and there, for those with the wits to see them” (52) – not least in their cyclical reminders, which turn out to be far more than innocuous encouragements to disciplined progress towards a better life.

This also explains the eternal recurrence of *Iphigenia at Ilium* as a central reminder on a deeper level: the pain and grief of the women in the play – the singular figures of specifically patriarchal violence and of the abuse taking

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<sup>5</sup> This return to community-based values is also confirmed through the eventual invention of the “ansible”, an instantaneous interplanetary communication device, which is made possible by Shevek’s General Temporal Principle and enables a radical alteration of the relations between Anarres and its neighbouring planets.

place in Classical Mythology – is due to the senseless violence of their men, whose desire for pleasure and glory brings them misery and death. The play is intended to strengthen the memory of this misery in the minds of the women of Women’s Country, whose foremothers suffered and died at the hands of (in their minds) predominantly male violence, which culminated in the nuclear apocalypse. These men apparently believed themselves to be living in an eternal present like that of the traditional utopias, paying no heed to their treatment of others, including women and the planet itself; this complete lack of equality and long-term thought, therefore, led to its extreme opposite, the minutely planned long-term control of society by the remaining women themselves. The deeper value of the play, regarding identity as performatively constituted in Butler’s terms, is this control through appearance: as Morgot tells Stavia, “half of what we do is performance. Ritual. Observances. If we are seen to be in control, the people are calm and life moves smoothly ... Learn to perform, Stavia. I have” (127). Ritual, then, becomes more than a “significant social act” (324), in Frye’s words. For this utopia, it is the very glue holding it together. Moreover, it is meaningful that *Iphigenia at Ilium* is a reworked Greek tragedy. As Victoria Wohl notes, Greek tragedy had a disproportionate number of female characters, yet still tended to “actively reproduce the unequal gender relations of Athenian society”, thus “reinforc[ing] the ideological status quo” (157). Indeed, Froma Zeitlin adds that Greek drama employed female-coded aspects of tragedy to merely “achieve ... a broadened understanding of what it meant to be a man” (Wohl 151). Iphigenia is thus the ideal figure to subvert this injustice and finally give women a voice: she, whose “pathetic murder symptomized the violence of the old order even as her enforced silence presaged the violent exclusion of the female from the new order” (152), in Wohl’s words, has returned not only to “haunt men’s imaginations, dreams, and nightmares”, as Sarah Pomery suggests of the disproportionately female tragic figures (229), but to seek revenge on the men who have wronged her – *all* men. The Councilwomen thus employ tragedy as an “ideological state apparatus”, much like the tragedies were employed in antiquity (Wohl 155), yet in complete inversion of gendered Athenian power relations. As such, they attempt to “organise and manipulate reality [through a] continuing reciprocity ... between individual psyche and collective ideology”, as Zeitlin says of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (119). Indeed, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor notes that the novel thus “recalls rather frighteningly the power of theatre and ideology alike to conceal”, as it suggests that “no utopian conception can hope to get beyond ideology even as it creates a new one” (129).

Moreover, unlike the performances of *Iphigenia at Ilium*, this ideology, the eternal performance of social deception that Morgot speaks of, is aimed at both women and the warriors: even simple-minded Chernon notes that “none of them in Women’s Country show us their real faces” (216). In fact, he is not far from guessing the reason. Realising the conflict between the women’s stated aim of keeping the garrisons strong and the simultaneous longing for their sons to return through the gate to Women’s Country, he says: “whenever I think about it, I think of two wheels, turning in opposite directions” (217). Indeed, some of the other warriors also suspect a secret of some kind. However, their short-sighted martial focus only allows them to imagine it as some form of weapon, which is only partially the case. In truth, the warriors – those lacking the courage and the abhorrence of martial violence to return – are

systematically ground to death between these wheels of Women’s Country: Stavia finds out that rebellious commanders are secretly put to death by Councilwomen and servitors (by using a special weapon indeed), and regular battles between garrisons are arranged to thin them out, particularly if rebellious propaganda has flourished there. Incidentally, the weapon used to quell dissident commanders appears as a “silver wheel”, which turns out to be “a curved blade at the end of a chain, whirled by a short handle” (304). Fittingly, the women know it to be a deceptively simple instrument – one that gains force through subterfuge and brilliant technical ability, like the women’s eugenics project – while the doomed commanders perceive it as a wheel, possibly symbolising the men’s sexist misjudgment of the women’s temporality as cyclical, when it is actually fatally long-term. With this set of deadly tools, which are both directly and indirectly lethal, the women thus plan to eventually “rid Women’s Country of those who are not and will not be part of it” (303), justifying their violence with the principle that they “never kill except in self-defense”, which however encompasses ‘the defense of ourselves and our cities .... The defense of Women’s Country’ (303). To protect their carefully curated community, and in their quest for “no [more] wars at all” (295), the women are fighting their own “war to end all wars”,<sup>6</sup> which Adam Roberts also specifically interprets to incorporate the warriors’ and women’s different temporalities: “In this novel the men plan to seize the city for short-term and hedonistic goals. The women are also fighting, but for long term goals to do with the larger social good. The women are winning.” (xi)

However, it is not clear that the women are truly “winning”. More and more men return through the gate to Women’s Country every year, that is true, but there is also a deep tragedy that comes with this long-term project of secretive, selective exclusion: the Councilwomen who hold the knowledge and facilitate the process call themselves the “damned few” (290), given the high price they pay for a future free from patriarchal violence and control. This price includes not only the guilt over the ongoing deception of both the warriors and their fellow citizens, but the accordant impossibility of true friendship, as seen in the relationships between Stavia and Beneda, or their mothers, Morgot and Sylvia. Further price is also paid with the loss of individual psychological coherence, as the mental dissociation required of the Councilwomen is immeasurable, and the unattainability of trusting and genuine romantic partnerships, as those between women and warriors remain forcibly childless, while those between women and servitors are kept hidden. Moreover, here violence is not only averted but embedded in the very system of Women’s Country itself – it thus ultimately renders the apparently utopian temporal project of Women’s Country a dystopian downward spiral, unravelling into an uncertain future clearly shaped by coercion and subterfuge rather than inclusive collectivity. The Councilwomen hope for some kind of eschatological redemption at the end of their descendants’ long journey towards utopia, when there are “no [more] wars”, and thus, no more need for the women’s gendered violence. Yet, it is difficult to imagine a future founded on systemic violence that does not end in tragedy. This fear is foreshadowed in *Iphigenia at Ilium*, by Cassandra who cries: “I have seen blood, but not this blood here today. I have

<sup>6</sup> This term is historically used to describe World War One, and it originates from H. G. Wells’ *The War That Will End War* (1914).

seen bodies broken, but not these! I see a desolation yet to come! In time! At the end of time” (169).

In fact, it appears that this fear is not unfounded. Even if the eugenics programme is successful, there are cracks in the system. For instance, assumptions rooted in gender essentialism are preventing the Councilwomen from being as rigorous about the elimination of violent or unruly tendencies in women as in men: Myra is permitted to have three children before her involuntary hysterectomy. Moreover, the genetic selection seems to be based not necessarily on the aversion of violence, but on the pomp and peer pressure of the garrisons. Additionally, it may select for a certain kind of telepathy, which several of the servitors exhibit and which may simply have given them the knowledge that returning through the gate to Women’s Country ensures their survival, as showman Septemius also guesses in the text: “perhaps because they had it, they chose to come back” (289). Incidentally, this telepathy, known as the “the long-feel or the time-feel” (98) by the servitors, aligns nicely with the Councilwomen’s long-term eugenicist planning, but it is odd that they themselves do not have this ability – another sign that their survival after the elimination of the warriors is hard to predict. In any case, the readiness to commit violent acts is still clearly present in the servitors. For example, Stavia’s biological father, Joshua, decapitates several bandits who attack their camp, and in another scene, he kills Michael, the man purporting to be Stavia’s father. Joshua himself admits that jealousy forced him to do so, despite previously claiming that “in Women’s Country, we learn not to have jealousy” (205).

Overall, the tragic totalitarian temporality of Women’s Country seems to have systematically sacrificed any chance of a sustainable utopian trajectory. Its long-term utopian vision – seemingly non-patriarchal individual freedom supported by group identity – is, in fact, not a Groszian feminist *becoming*, but, one might say, a *coming undone*. Just as Stavia sees herself as a “smaller version of Morgot” (83) and has taken on her “damning” duties by the end of the text, the dystopian downward spiral of cyclical re-damnation in Women’s Country appears inescapable, trapping the women between the imagined polarities of being either “dead or damned” (315), to use Hecuba’s words from the play; they are either killed by male violence or forced to pre-empt this violence. However, it is not this dichotomy, imagined or not, that dooms Women’s Country, but the fact that this belief leads to its temporality being neither inclusive or supportive of individuals nor collectively sustainable – our two established hallmarks of individual and communal utopian temporality. Inclusivity and individual support are lost, for one, when the women are coerced to participate in the eugenicist project, knowingly or not, to say nothing of the men being systematically eliminated in their very lineage. Moreover, whereas individual temporality is integrated into the collective ideal on Anarres, in Women’s Country it has been fully overridden by that of the collective: while the warriors’ lives and genealogies are cut short in cruel exaggeration of their already short-sighted martial temporality, the utopian citizens’ lives are dedicated to a long-term plan that most are entirely ignorant of. As such, both men and women are ultimately sacrificed to the “wheels turning in opposite directions” in Women’s Country – sometimes quite literally. While men are killed by cyclical battles and the Councilwomen’s deceptive “silver wheel”, it turns out that the women’s lives are also entirely expendable

in the framework of the eugenicist plan.<sup>7</sup> After being prematurely let in on the secret upon her return, Stavia is informed that had she not sworn an oath of secrecy, she would have been eliminated by the Council: “You would never leave this room, Stavia. Because you’ve broken the ordinances and endangered us all” (294). Finally, on the other hand, utopian sustainability fails in Women’s Country because what is made permanent is not a progressive, change-embracing revolution resting on solid ideological ground, as on Anarres, but a systematic, all-consuming, and tragically exclusionary violence. Women’s Country fundamentally defines its feminist, sustainable, utopian temporality in repudiation of the short-term focus of its garrisons, but the dystopian experience of the warriors is paradoxically also the very thing that spells the damnation and extended downfall of Women’s Country. By eliminating or effectively neutering individual warriors, the women are ultimately euthanizing their own sons, their own blood, whether ‘defective’ or not; it is this fundamental act of self-directed violence that tears apart not only Women’s Country as a whole, along gendered lines, but also the Councilwomen themselves, as they cannot perform this violence without likewise cauterising part of their own conscience. Their violence against the warriors returns to haunt them eternally, just as they had resurrected Iphigenia’s wrath with the intention of haunting all men who had wronged her and womankind.

Consequently, it appears that these deeply unsustainable temporal dynamics of Women’s Country are at the heart of the systemic tragedy that Roberts terms a “rue-topia” (vi) and Peter Fitting describes as a “politics of despair” (44): the ideological spiral of doom that replaces sustainable inclusivity in this utopia ensures that repeated violence breeds violence from which there is no escape. Moreover, Wohl portrays tragedy as an ongoing struggle whose “conclusions [are] always provisional”; it is “not the victory of one position over the other that constitutes ideology, but the struggle itself”, and ultimately, Wohl states that “ideology always contains both hegemonic and subordinate positions” (156). Perhaps the utopian project of Women’s Country can, in any case, only survive in the struggle of creating new hegemonic positions and must fall apart once its eugenicist telos is reached, if it ever is. After all, its entire ideological and logistical apparatus rests on this project being performed. Finally, even in the case of its unlikely success, it seems that the system would succumb to crisis and self-destruction once its ideologically embedded violence has lost its mark. Again, in Wagner-Lawlor’s words, “no utopian conception can hope to get beyond ideology”, and the ideology of Women’s Country is all-consumingly destructive. The “damned few” may be acting in “self-defense” of utopia, but they appear to be thereby constructing something much like McKenna’s “end-state models” – having, indeed, already

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<sup>7</sup> Beyond the women, warriors, and servitors, there are other groups in and around Women’s Country who are not as affected by this spiraling tragedy: for example, the inhabitants of the “Holyland”, a regressive patriarchal community that Stavia and Chernon come across on their excursion, have no future at all due to inbreeding, and their misery helps to convince Stavia of the Councilwomen’s utopian project. Moreover, there are itinerants like the showman Septemius, who has always moved through life in a “floating” fashion (161), using intuition and indirection to navigate. This provides an interesting utopian impetus to the text, as it appears to represent the flexibility Women’s Country has lost, but not much is made of it, and Septemius and his nieces eventually settle alongside Stavia’s family.

unleashed the “sophisticated genetic engineering” that she envisages in the totalitarian utopian tool kit.

#### 4. Conclusion: Darkness and Light

It appears that in our comparison of *The Dispossessed* and *Gate* as sustainable utopian constructs arising from critical feminist awareness and based on the integration of collective and individual temporalities, *The Dispossessed* succeeds where *Gate* fails. Accordingly, *The Dispossessed* is generally read as a true utopia, despite the original title self-describing it as “ambiguous” – possibly due to the shifting dynamics of its “permanent” revolution – while *Gate* occupies a more difficult position as a possibly dystopian “battle of the sexes” amid the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s. In fact, Fitting describes *Gate* and some of its contemporaries as downright regressive compared to critical utopias such as *The Dispossessed*. He writes that “in contradistinction to the critical utopia, which was an attempt to give the utopian dream new direction by liberating it from past mistakes and misdirection”, these novels present “not only ... a vision of a world on the *verge* of being born, but as a retreat, the doorway through which the authors are backing away from the utopian hopes and dreams of the 1970s in a movement which effectively repudiates earlier utopian energies” (44-5).

However, it is often said that every dystopia contains a utopia in its negative image and vice versa, and one could argue that if *Gate* was read as being *aware* of its own tragic trajectory – which it quite plausibly is, given its emphasis on theatricality and appearances – then the two texts together actually offer a deeply complementary suggestion of the temporal dynamics that a truly inclusive and sustainable utopia must feature. Once again, such a utopia must ultimately align the temporalities of individuals and the collective, along with forward-movement and cyclicity, telos and process, present and future – and all this must be balanced in an organic manner that is not only founded on inclusive and sustainable cooperation but is always in the process of internal renewal and self-examination, to ensure that these goals continue to be met. Only thus might one circumnavigate the fatal internal destruction that Anarres possibly avoids and Women’s Country will most likely meet in the darkest possible terms. Specifically, in lamenting its tragic fate, *Gate* seems to tell us that the values perpetuated in the utopian process are as vital to its aim as the outcome, while the redemptive political journey of *The Dispossessed* highlights the importance of continuously ascertaining that these values are still upheld in the utopian system. On this basis, one might even argue that *Gate* is as much a critical utopia as *The Dispossessed*, showing the dark side of why sustainability and inclusivity must be central to utopia: their lack spells doom, while their presence is critical for reforming without stagnation.<sup>8</sup> Collective hope, these texts thus seem to suggest, is fully possible, desirable, and even

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<sup>8</sup> One might also propose the text to be a “critical *dystopia*”, a category more recently introduced by Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. However, these “break through the hegemonic structure of the text’s alternate world” to “maintain a utopian impulse” (7) within dystopia, and this does not entirely seem to be the case here, since the tragic hegemonic structure is the very thing showcasing utopian criticality, as I suggest.

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imaginable through shared temporality – but only if we all imagine together, on the basis of sustainable values.

*Biography:* Sarah Lohmann is a Teaching and Research Fellow in the Department of English at the University of Tübingen, Germany, having previously completed her PhD at Durham University in the UK. Her work focuses on utopian literature, science fiction, and systems theory, and her PhD thesis proposed a classification of utopian literature according to structural Bakhtinian chronotopes based on system dynamics. Sarah is currently completing various publication projects and teaching courses on feminist utopianism and climate fiction.

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