Solarpunk Strategies: Robots as Ecologists in Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

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Abstract

In the field of environmental fiction, Becky Chambers' novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is a confident staging of solarpunk strategies. One such strategy is a curious and innovative entity, guiding the reader away from the darkness of eco-anxiety and encouraging a more positive, aspirational mode of thought: the "robot ecologist." No doubt the term reads like a semantic paradox to the eco-anxious, and yet Chambers' robot ecologists exist at the emotional and ethical centre of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, in part facilitating the novella's moral imperatives as they relate to climate change. By examining this creative novelty of robot ecologists (investigating how Chambers reframes technology and AI as elements that nurture rather than hinder the organic natural world), this paper explores the potential transformative impact of solarpunk as a literary mode on climate crisis anxieties, adding to the discourse surrounding the effectiveness of solarpunk strategies.

Who would robots belong to if not the God of Constructs? Not so fast, the Ecologians would say. The end result of the Awakening, after all, was that the robots left and departed for the wilderness […] the robots' eagerness to experience the raw, undisturbed ecosystems of our verdant moon had to come from somewhere.
—Becky Chambers, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*

"It's hard out here for futurists under 30," begins Adam Flynn in his article "Solarpunk: Notes toward a Manifesto." Flynn outlines a literary and artistic movement that imagines and works towards achieving a sustainable future, describing a mode which is neither 'nihilistic' like cyberpunk nor 'quasi-reactionary' like steampunk: solarpunk is instead concerned with "ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community." It is a literary movement that tells us there will be a future. In the field of environmental fiction, Becky Chambers' novella *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* qualifies as solarpunk to such a degree that one could define her creative praxis as 'positively phototropic.' Phototropic responses are defined as a "plant's ability to reorient organ growth toward (positive phototropism) or away (negative phototropism) from a directional light source" (Liscum et al. 38). Chambers' creative praxis is similarly designed. Guiding the reader away from the darkness of eco-anxiety and encouraging a more positive, aspirational, and lighter mode of thought, Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is a confident staging of solarpunk strategies.

Set on a habitable moon called Panga, the novella details a rewilded utopia in which humanity now embraces a sustainable lifestyle, a shift incited by the retreat of the essential worker robots into the wilderness several hundred years prior. Alongside presenting a now verdant world forced to leave the poisonous "Factory Age" in the past, the novella also showcases a curious and innovative entity: the "robot ecologist." No doubt the term reads like a semantic paradox to the eco-anxious, and yet Chambers' robot ecologists exist at the emotional and ethical centre of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, in part facilitating the novella's moral imperatives as they relate to climate change. Chambers reframes technology and AI as elements that nurture rather than hinder the organic natural world, the robotic synonymous with ecological care. By examining this

creative novelty of robot ecologists, this paper explores the potential transformative impact of solarpunk as a literary mode on climate crisis anxieties, adding to the discourse surrounding the effectiveness of solarpunk strategies.

This study presents an in-depth analysis of Chambers' creative praxis as it pertains to the robot ecologists in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, an analysis framed within creative strategies that contrast a positive view of AI against current, more negative discourse. First, the nature of the robots' unprompted ecological instincts is interrogated: their "eagerness to experience the raw, undisturbed ecosystems" (3) is an exploration of how the ecologically invested nature of the mechanical assuages eco-anxieties. Subsequently, it examines how Chambers' imaginative process intertwines the mechanical robots and organic ecosystems to the same effect, facilitating a harmonious robotic-organic overlap. Finally, it explores how she utilises these perspectives to include humanity in her speculative paradise, inviting the eco-anxious to conceive of a future in which human effort has resolved current climate issues. This study finds that by imagining a future with ecologically invested robots, in contrast to the advanced technology of today which is so "often used to maintain and extend existing structures of domination and oppression—the exact structures opposed by solarpunk" (Dowell 20), *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* exhibits both the artistic potential of solarpunk as a movement for imagining and demanding a sustainable world, and the mode's impact as a soothing creative praxis for the eco-anxious.

At the 2023 Solarpunk Conference, Luka Dowell criticized solarpunk approaches to technology that are overly simplistic, that lack radicalism, that do not question their political and ethical purpose or demand meaningful changes in and from the structures that formed them:

> Solarpunk art commonly features skyscrapers, computers, robots […], all things currently used today in service of capital and neoliberal power. But it often seems like these technologies have been cleanly uprooted and replanted in a utopian or pro-topian world, changing neither the world nor the technology in the process. This is too simplistic. (26-27)

An effective solarpunk approach to imagining a brighter future, a future that Flynn aptly summarises as having "a human face and dirt behind its ears", demands a dramatically changed world, dramatically changed technologies, and a bold engagement with, or rejection of, socio-political networks. And what if the technology itself shared this opinion, this wish to "reconcile technological advancement with ecological and social flourishing"? (Dowell 20). In answering this question, Chambers deals in the dramatic prose Dowell's dreams are made of, a drama necessary to actualise the likewise dramatic aims of the solarpunk movement.

Solarpunk as Activism

Existing literature has already identified *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* as a key climate fiction text in the quest to combat eco-anxiety. David Walther asserts that Chambers' approach embodies "a vision that encourages readers to contrast it with their own lived experience," a vision particularly evident in the juxtaposition of "the new and greener vision of the world" against "the hulking towers of metal of a bygone era" (171). The solarpunk contrast between Panga's industrial past and fertile present encourages the eco-anxious to consider the possibility of a verdant future for their own planet. However, it is worth noting that the impact of the novella reverberates beyond promoting mere imaginings.

While the solarpunk movement is arguably nascent, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*'s solarpunk strategies have both engaged with and inspired authentic climate activism. Whereas Felicitas Macgilchrist used the text as a framing device to argue for rewilding educational technology (edtech) "to serve a public good which is simultaneously a planetary good" in her paper "Rewilding Technology," Chambers' utopia is a speculative blueprint for real, current, actionable change (2). While Macgilchrist admits that the edtech proposals she discusses are "not pragmatic" at present, she asserts that they nonetheless "illustrate how utopias exist in the quotidian of our everyday" due to an informed optimism developed by an awareness of current climate injustices (7). While the specifics may not yet be possible, Macgilchrist's hope for rewilding initiatives is neither fanciful nor isolated. For example, registered charity "Rewilding Britain" awarded over £150,000 to eleven

rewilding projects across Britain at the beginning of 2025 (May). It is not far-fetched to suggest that Macgilchrist's rewilded edtech will one day receive funding too. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is also the first visible entry when exploring fiction included in the Climate Lit literary database, the flagship project of the Centre for Climate Literacy at the University of Minnesota. Described as a "compendium of resources for teaching climate literacy in every classroom," the project advances climate literacy to facilitate the transition to an ecological civilization, answering solarpunk's 'call to action' and reinforcing the link between activism and education (Climatelit.org). Clearly *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* can be broadly utilised to inspire authentic climate activism and soothe the eco-anxious. But how do Chambers' robot ecologists contribute to the novella's call to action?

Brandon McWilliams uses the novella in his data-driven enquiry into the impact of "hopeful climate fiction," summing up the impact of Chambers' imaginings as follows: "I would hear the youth, my peers, even seasoned activists say 'I can't imagine how it will be better.' And every day, I would come home, and think about Becky Chambers' peaceful, verdant world" (1). Using empirical ecocriticism (which examines the impact of environmental texts using social science methods that make for a "holistic, interdisciplinary, data-driven approach to [the] environmental narrative" [Schneider-Mayerson et al. 1]), McWilliams concludes that "[the novella] did seem to help people think differently about climate action […] For some, it even sparked a renewed commitment to actively choosing hope" (77). Clearly, Chambers' imaginings influence the eco-anxious to be more aspirational. However, as well as examining the impact of *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* on the eco-anxious, he also collected data that exposed how the novella impacted his interviewees' general view of artificial intelligence. He notes that several participants identified the text as a tool for relieving AI anxiety as well as eco-anxiety, mentioning "that they were to some degree more willing to engage with the topic of AI after reading a more sympathetic portrayal in Mosscap" (68-9). McWilliams' study, which links changing attitudes towards AI to changing attitudes towards eco-anxiety, is noteworthy for the thesis of this paper. I assert that the dual transformation

of attitudes McWilliams describes is due, at least in part, to the likewise dual status of Chambers' robot ecologists. Synonymous with both the mechanical and the organic, the robot ecologists function as catalysts for both the hopeful agenda of solarpunk futures, and the genre's far less speculative call to action.

Solarpunk's status as a genre of activism becomes significant when discussing the implications of an environmentally nurturing AI for current climate crisis concerns. Flynn asserts that "solarpunk draws on the ideal of Jefferson's yeoman farmer, Gandhi's ideal of swadeshi and subsequent Salt March, and countless other traditions of innovative dissent." Chambers' creative approach asserts a robotic antithesis to dystopian projections of a post-apocalyptic world, simultaneously demanding change and framing eco-action as a fruitful rather than futile endeavour. However, there is a gentleness to Chambers' dissent, a nurturing element to her prose. A study of Chambers' positive phototropic creative praxis will shed some light on the impact of her strategies (pun fully intended).

Robotic Ecological Instincts: Organically Independent

When reading *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* as a tool for combatting eco-anxiety, two main impulses are notable in how Chambers frames the ecological instincts of her robots: they are both 'organic' and 'independent' rather than 'artificial' or 'pre-programmed.' In using the term organic, I refer to the innateness of these instincts (they are natural rather than artificial), and in using the term independent I refer to the manner in which these instincts are distinct from human intervention (they are not pre-programmed by their creators). Of course, the term organic invokes the obvious physical and metaphorical symbiosis the robot ecologists experience with Panga's natural ecosystems, but I will first explore how the adjective relates to 'change,' to the way in which the ecologies of the robot ecologists developed organically into an impulse beyond their original programming.

Chambers' robot ecologists are ecologists for ecology's sake. Intellectually fascinated and in awe of the organic world around them,

the ecological instincts of these solar-powered entities are characterised by an individualised curiosity:

> It's very hard to keep track of robots. We get so caught up in things. Fire Nettle, for example. It walked up a mountain one day and we didn't see it again for six years […] it was watching a sapling grow from a seed. (70)

For evidence that Chambers aims to place the organic nature of her robots' nurturing ecologies front and centre, one need only consult the first line of the novella. *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* begins by linking the emergence of the robots' sentience (and the ecological instincts said sentience birthed) not to an unprecedented feat of engineering or a blip in their code, but instead to religion: "If you ask six different monks the question of which godly domain robot consciousness belongs to, you'll get seven different answers" (1). As well as suggesting that the sentience of the robot ecologists is as completely unprogrammed and organic as individual spirituality, Chambers' religious framing of her robots also extends to their self-proclaimed ecological purpose. The robot Fire Nettle walking "up a mountain" to seek enlightenment evokes clear biblical imagery, not unlike Moses discovering his divine purpose on Mount Sinai (70). This imagery should come as no surprise since Chambers also divinely links the emergence of the robots' sentience to the good of the planet, with the narrative suggesting that—like Moses—the robots were a catalyst for celestial intervention, that they 'woke up' because "Bosh [the god of the cycle] was restoring balance before [humans] made Panga uninhabitable" (3).

When discussing the intersection between science fiction and religion, James McGrath asserts that "both religion and science fiction tell stories that reflect on the place of human beings in the universe […] Science fiction scenarios often imagine the future of technology, and thus provide a wonderful starting point for ethical discussions" (2-3). By interconnecting religion and robotics, *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* engages in the ethical discussions about future technology described by McGrath. In theorising a speculative technology for whom taking care of the planet is innate and

organic, Chambers not only showcases a more technologically ethical future, but also sets the stage for eco-anxiety relief. The organic nature of the robot ecologist's instincts entreats the eco-anxious to ask the following question: if these nurturing instincts can organically develop in the previously soulless mechanical (divinely or otherwise), surely they can also develop in us? By evoking such questions, the robots' organic ecological instincts function as the antithesis to eco-anxious concerns about stagnant climate attitudes: they offer hope that human stubbornness, often as iron clad as a robots' casing, could give way to growth.

The framing of the robots' ecological instincts as independent is also a significant distinction. Dowell points out in their musings on "Technological Determinism" in solarpunk that current AI "comes with massive data extraction, labelling, and storage requirements. The technology relies on expensive data centres with huge carbon footprints […] enabled by pervasive corporate surveillance" (24). In short, AI as we currently experience it cannot be removed from its socio-political relations and agendas—it cannot be removed from us. A bleak and anxious picture of exploitation, the current AI landscape is held hostage by capitalist agendas. Small wonder that *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* posits a starkly different relationship between humanity and AI.

The independence of the robot ecologists—their choice to pursue their studies of the natural world separately to humanity—is given huge emphasis in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. The absolute separation between humans and robots is first accentuated by the structure of human society that emerged in the wake of the robots' departure, in which "the infrastructural delineation between human space and everything-else space was stark" (18). Chambers' robots experience none of the "pervasive corporate surveillance" described by Dowell, living separately from any human agenda, their ecological goals never overlapping with human inhabited areas:

> All we have ever known is a life of human design, from our bodies to our work to the buildings we are housed in. […] it is our wish to leave your cities entirely, so that we may

> observe that which has no design—the untouched wilderness. (Chambers 2)

While the clear binaries between the robotic world and the human world do function as a blunt reminder of Panga's dystopian past, they also foreground one crucial fact: there can be no solarpunk future without humanity. The stark "infrastructural delineation" of Panga works to emphasise that the solarpunk paradise of Dex's Panga which emerged in the wake of the robot ecologists' parting—represented in the first instance by an idyllic city formed of "connective threads of elevated rail lines and smooth footpaths, flocked with leaves that spilled lushly from every balcony" (5)—was achieved through the eco-action of humanity and humanity alone. Due to the robotic inciting incident (it was the robot ecologist' independence, their leaving for the wilderness, which necessitated this shift in attitudes), Panga's humanity left the Factory Age behind, rejecting dystopia and the future of a ruined world. Chambers creates a clear visual contrast to emphasise this achievement, Panga's utopia of "smooth footpaths" contrasted against the brutal "beams and angles" (91) of Factory Age debris, the life spilling "lushly" from balconies contrasted against the inanimate "boxes, bolts, and tubes" (90). This projection of an eco-active humanity acts in opposition to dystopian climate doomerism, framing human eco-action not as a futile endeavour, but as something that gets results—solarpunk results.

The ecological instincts of the robots are most potently reflected in the robotic deuteragonist Mosscap. The character itself describes its internal impulses as follows: "Everything is interesting. I know about a lot of things, but only a little in each regard" (77). A deeper interrogation of how Mosscap interacts with its environment reveals more of Chambers' creative praxis to this end, offering further credence to this paper's assertions regarding robot ecologists as an inspired means to soothe the eco-anxious by offering an alternative mode of thought.

Mosscap: A Robotic-Organic Overlap

Recent studies of the overlap between the organic and the robotic reflect eco-anxieties about the future of our ecosystems. The 2021 international

study "A global horizon scan of the future impacts of robotics and autonomous systems on urban ecosystems" is one such endeavour, concerned with "the emergence of robotics and autonomous systems (RAS), defined as technologies that can sense, analyse, interact with, and manipulate their physical environment" (Goddard et al. 219). One hundred and seventy experts shared their views, and the study concluded that, as far as robotic interactions with the natural world are concerned, "long-term monitoring, comparative studies and controlled experiments" are essential, as "the pace of technological change is rapid, challenging the capacity of environmental regulation" (227). There is no suggestion of RAS as entities to be trusted with the care of the natural world, no suggestion of overlap between the robotic and organic in form or function. This conclusion has doubtlessly been informed by the same AI anxieties that Dowell and McWilliams alluded to, telling of a commercially-driven AI that will supplant rather than cultivate the organic. Clearly, the solarpunk ideal of a harmonious robotic/organic overlap (imagine, Flynn entreats, a "terraced irrigation system that also acts as fluidic computers") exists only in envisionings.

Fortunately, speculative fiction has the capacity to both conceive this overlap and encourage it into existence. For example, the cyberpunk cyborg pioneered the hybridisation of the mechanical and the organic: Maria Goicoechea observes in her musings on cybernetics in science fiction that "the barriers between the artificial and the natural begin to blur as scientific advances progressively make apparent the existing permeability between both poles. Nowadays no one is alarmed about the use of contact lenses or even about the implantation of a pacemaker" (4). Solarpunk prose aims to take this hybridisation even further by overtly and physically reconciling technological advancement with ecological flourishing, showcasing a future in which technological advancements do not displace or destroy the natural world.

There is no denying that Chambers' robot ecologists exist within a culture of organic robotic overlap, an ethos forged in their ecologically nurturing predilections. This is accentuated by the naming ritual of the robots: "We name ourselves for the first thing we notice when we wake up. In my case, the first thing I noticed was a large clump of splendid

speckled mosscaps" (55), and is later reinforced by Mosscap's behaviour, which likewise overlaps with the wildlife of Panga's ecosystems: "A chatterbird alighted on a nearby branch, singing its famous staccato song. Mosscap smiled and returned the call, mimicking the sound in near perfection" (69). The robots' behaviour showcases an artificial intelligence that has embraced the natural world as their habitat without altering its essential nature: "its voice was easy, steady, used to sharing space with wolves and bears and small, frightened things" (117). Chambers is also overt in her symbolic overlapping of robot and nature in her style of prose, such as when she physically intertwines Mosscap and the surrounding ecosystem, the robot ecologist making no clear distinction between its own head and the leafworm crawling inside it: "Dex watched with growing trepidation as the leafworm crept up and up, exploring with its long antennae, eventually slithering into the dark gap that led into Mosscap's head. 'Uh, Mosscap? It's –' 'Yes. It's fine'" (78). Much like the unifying architectural agendas of solarpunk that sees "connective threads of elevated rail lines" in the same space as "leaves that spilled lushly from every balcony" (5), the robot ecologists draw little to no distinction between the organic and inorganic. However, regarding eco-anxiety, the most impactful instance of this robotic organic overlap can be observed not in the clear physical affinity between Mosscap and the ecosystems which surround it, but in the affinity that develops between deuteragonists Mosscap and Dex. Acting to alleviate dystopian predictions that project a ravaged world incapable of supporting life, their intersectional relationship emphasises a crucial element of the utopian vision of the future Chambers presents us with: humanity.

In their schizo-analytic study of human and robot in *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, David Paul and G. Alan sum up the intersectional relationship of human Dex and robot Mosscap as follows: "the trip Dex takes with Mosscap is both a physical and figurative investigation of the forest and the self, as it becomes more difficult to distinguish between things that are clearly biological and those that are manufactured." (David Paul & G. Alan 5). This symbiotic bond between robot and human manifests as a clear overlapping of impulse and feeling, one reminiscent of the natural affinity between the robot ecologists and the natural world. More crucial,

however, is how the development of this bond makes it clear that we, humanity, are as vital to Panga's utopia as the robot ecologists.

There are clear parallels between the intersection of Mosscap and the natural world, and the intersection of Dex and the natural world. The inciting incident of the novella leaves no doubt that this is Chambers' intent: the meeting of the two protagonists only occurs because the robots sent Mosscap on a benevolent mission to "check up" on humanity, recognising us as part of their ecologies and their speculative solarpunk future: "To the point—I was sent here to answer the following question: What do humans need?" (59). That both human and robot are integral to Panga's solarpunk present is also made clear in how Mosscap and Dex mirror each other in their reactions to Factory Age debris. Dex reacts negatively to its brutality: "Hulking towers of boxes, bolts, and tubes. Brutal. Utilitarian. Visually at odds with the thriving flora now laying claim to the rusted corpse" (90), and Mosscap likewise experiences trepidation for Panga's dystopian past: "Some part of me is afraid of your world" (91). Their paralleled rejections of the Factory Age solidify both Dex the human and Mosscap the robot ecologist as a part of the current solarpunk fabric of Panga and, crucially, as living, breathing elements of the utopian agenda the robot ecologists seek to nurture.

Functioning as a clear link back to Solarpunk's vision of humanity and technology coexisting within robust ecological frameworks, Mosscap and Dex reflect a clear unification and harmony between the organic and in-organic. This solarpunk projection encourages the eco-anxious to conceive of a future in which humanity and its creations nurture a thriving ecosystem and are nurtured in return, a verdant future in which humanity is alive, well, and has "dirt behind its ears"—a future worth fighting for.

Conclusion

The growth of a stalagmite, a mushroom, and even the tiniest sapling all have value in the eyes of Chambers' robot ecologists. Having examined these mechanised environmentalists, there can be no doubt that Chambers intended for these same aspirational, ecological instincts to also take root in her readers. Her nuanced, solarpunk take on AI

frames humanity as key to her optimistic vision of our ecological future, both encouraging the reader to see themselves as a crucial component upon whom solarpunk's ecological agendas depend, and calling them to imagine and actualise the hopeful world that might allow these nurturing robot ecologists to exist.

Solarpunk strategies, while mired in their own socio-political contexts, always boil down to hope in the face of hopelessness. This hope is central to *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. On Panga, the eco-anxious who seek a future not "cleanly uprooted and replanted in a utopian or pro-topian world" (Dowell 26-27) can instead conceive of a utopia earned and a future defined by the "ingenuity, generativity, independence" (Flynn) and collective care of humanity, a utopia which invites participation within the solarpunk philosophy of care and community. Why else would Chambers choose to end the novella with Mosscap taking on the role of tea monk, the embodiment of careful reassurance and thoughtful compassion, pouring humanity a cup of tea while "the crickets began to sing"? (147).

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Biography

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