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# Interspecies Communities on the Margins of Capitalism and the Problem of Insects

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## Abstract

Western conceptions of community have long been premised on the anthropocentric fantasy that humans are separate from and superior to the rest of the ecosystem (Plumwood 1993). Yet, anthropogenic climate crisis has made it increasingly difficult to ignore the ways in which human lives are inextricably bound up with nonhuman lives (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). This demands new conceptualisations of communities so that human and nonhuman alike find new ways of life amongst the ruins of capitalism (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015). As a genre that imagines new worlds – and therefore, new relations – speculative fiction is well placed to explore and experiment with new forms of postcapitalist and posthuman communities (Vint 2010). At the same time, as Frederic Jameson writes, “our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production” (2005). Speculative fiction thus provides fruitful ground for learning about the potentialities and limitations of contemporary imaginations for new communities.

In contrast to the recent predominance of dystopian fiction (Jameson 2005; Fisher 2009), Becky Chambers’ novels *Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* (2014) and *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (2018) depict a critical utopian future. Humans have been forced to abandon Earth and have subsequently encountered extra-terrestrial species. Much of the galaxy is united under the banner of the Galactic Commons (GC) – a multi-species capitalist institution – but I argue that the central community in each novel can be framed as “pericapitalist.” In Lowenhaupt Tsing’s work, pericapitalist spaces exist at the margins of capitalism and allow for experimentation with alternative ways of living on the margins of capitalism (2015). The critical literature is overwhelmingly positive about the depiction of these multispecies communities in the novels.

However, my paper will ask how the depictions of shared tables in the novels may nuance these readings, illuminating the normative exclusions that constitute the multispecies pericapitalist communities. Particular attention will be paid to insects in the novels: insects are eaten at shared tables but excluded from the multispecies community around them. Insects threaten many models of relational ethics premised on empathy because they are non-sentient and physiologically very different to both humans and most other nonhuman animals (Loo & Sellbach 2013). Their liminality thus reveals the kinds of norms that have gone unquestioned in Chambers’ speculative experimentation with new relations between human and nonhuman. Looking to the world beyond the novels, this proves useful in exploring the limits of entanglement, empathy, and alterity as foundations for experimentation with egalitarian communities.

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**Phoebe Chetwynd** is a PhD candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London, supervised by Ruth Cruickshank and Danielle Sands. Her research focuses primarily on relationships between the human and the nonhuman through the prism of food studies. Her doctoral thesis explores different imaginations of the future of meat in contemporary francophone and anglophone speculative fiction. Phoebe is also a temporary lecturer at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and has recently developed her a new module entitled "Food in Film and Literature: Culture, Identity and Anxiety."