

World Unmaking in the Fiction of Delany, VanderMeer, and Jemisin

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 2007

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M.A., Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2012

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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the
university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical
relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

This dissertation examines end-of-world and posthumanist themes in speculative fiction and theory through the concept of “world unmaking.” Reading for world unmaking in three popular U.S. works of speculative fiction — Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1974), Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014), and N. K. Jemisin’s *the Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-17) — it explores how varying representations of “the end” are deployed to destabilize normative ideals of the human and the world that undergird conventional notions of the subject under late liberal humanism. While much attention has been paid to world building and how inherent logics cohere within fictional worlds, world unmaking asks how representations of world disorder, instability, and breakdown might hold important insights for narrating and navigating disordered worlds. Contemporary posthumanist critical theorists increasingly vie for speculative practices that disrupt the inherited onto-epistemologies of liberal humanisms and settler colonialisms. In particular, new materialists and speculative realists argue urgent work must be done to expand thought beyond naturalized and neutralized discourses that subtend conventional versions of reality, especially as the pressures of multiple ecological and geopolitical crises bear down unequally upon the lives of both humans and nonhumans on a shared planet Earth. The rise in popularity of post-apocalyptic, eco-catastrophe, and survival narratives in recent decades suggests a growing appetite for speculative imaginings of the end. While some representations of the end of the world serve as an escape from the intersecting crises of the environment, the resurgence of right-wing politics and white supremacy, and the ongoing violence of settler colonialism,

this dissertation illustrates the importance of attending to speculative imaginings that use the end-of-the-world conceit to destabilize dominant culture and pose more expansive questions about what it means to be human.

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Dedication

For my niblings, who look further into the future than I can see and embrace the world in ways I wondrously cannot.

Introduction

It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

— Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

People have always been good at imagining the end of the world, which is much easier to picture than the strange sidelong paths of change in a world without end.

— Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*

. . . what we need is something like an ethico-onto-epistem-ology — an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being — since each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter.

— Karan Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

What else will need to abide by my rule in this new war of the world — those minerals, lakes, air particles, and currents that thrive in one formation but not another?

— Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies*

World Unmaking: Practicing Counterhegemony in a Destabilized World

Insurrection. Outbreak. Extinction. These are terms that might seem more at home in the works of science fiction and fantasy than as baseline descriptors of our present moment. And yet, these sorts of extreme terms — add to the list pandemic, lockdown, mutation, domestic terrorism, white supremacy, conspiracy, state violence, wildfire, drought, famine — hardly signal extraordinary, apocalyptic events in the current political climate. Rather, these sorts of events are quickly becoming a normalized part of the backdrop of our unstable world, beset by multiple, intersecting crises and escalating,

emergent forms of vulnerability and risk. The epochal shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, due to humanity's indelible and destructive impact on the planet and its ecosystems, marks, among other things, our movement into a grand, eco-geo-political era of uncertainty and instability. This shift is occurring after a century of upheavals in onto-epistemological practices that have fundamentally altered what we can say we know about the material world and the things that inhabit it. Significant uncertainty about the fundamental operations of our planet, the stability of our political systems, the organization of our societies, and our presumed narratives of progress give the impression of reality unravelling. *It's the end of the world as we have known it.* Of course, the moment this kind of statement is made, it is easy to recognize the trouble of such a universal claim. Who are "we?" What world are we speaking of? How can we say we have known it? For whom, exactly, is it ending?

One way we might be able to think of *how* the world is coming undone is to consider the many ways the simplistic binary of real and unreal is no longer useful. From the scientific revolutions of quantum mechanics to the workings of human consciousness to claims made about the nature and age of the universe — real things have become increasingly difficult to point to or stabilize. Sometimes the "real" things we speak about are simply projections based on complicated models that calculate likelihoods based on multiple, shifting variables. Sometimes we get these approximations are wrong, the inputs incomplete. And even a cursory glance at headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines, the science of climate change or the outcome of a major democratic election will demonstrate that what is "real" in shared social realms can be virulently contested. The absence of shared facts and conceptual frames in the Western world has

generated deepening divides in political life, so much so that it can feel like polarized publics are *actually* witnessing and living different realities. Without shared facts and commensurate narratives about what is and what is happening, it has become increasingly difficult to stabilize the event of the present. Instead of “the world,” we come up against the multiplicity of lived realities and disparate, even contradictory, practices of worlding. The more closely we consider this proliferation of worlds, the less convincing, and the less functional, universal claims about “reality” become. In many ways, social and political life has become ontologically and epistemologically unmoored. Compounding this effect, our escalating planetary crisis is, in part, a demonstration of inadequate scientific awareness about the Earth and ecosystems and a failure to account for the unintended consequences of (so-called and, of course, unequal) *progress*. Unsurprisingly, publics have broadly become suspicious of human institutions, authorities, and truth claims. In the current moment of ecological and geo-political instability, our inherited assumptions about the *normal* world are no longer operational.¹ Instead, we find the world, what unfolds to us in reality, can resist our interpretative frames or collapse them altogether. As knowledge practices and our presumptions about the material world destabilize, we find the more we understand about this current geopolitical moment, the less we know. It is as if the world around us is being unmade.

¹ I intentionally problematize the word normal throughout this dissertation, often calling attention to its use through italics and quotation marks. I do so in order to generate a sense of estrangement from the descriptor “normal,” which operates as a stand in for often-politicized presumptions about how things, including the world, *ought* to be. Throughout this dissertation I will look for ways commonplace notions of the normal are destabilized in order to demonstrate how normativity acts as a hegemonizing force that legitimates some ways of thinking and being but not others.

This dissertation explores the concept of “world unmaking” as a method for conceptualizing and interrogating the onto-epistemological upheavals of the Anthropocene. World unmaking considers the discourses and representations of worlds that are coming undone. Thinking through how worlds are unmade or break down is critically important in this time of global material-discursive crises, especially as we consider the unequally distributed impacts of and vulnerabilities to ecological and geopolitically instability for modes of life and ways of being. Whether we call this a post-truth, post-normal or weird reality, there are identifiable and urgent implications of these current dis-arrangements of life. The lack of a consensus-based reality in unstable times has resulted in dangerous opportunity for those who hold power.² Political leaders and corporate executives vocally and cheerfully deny the scientific consensus around climate change or casually downplay the implications of major resource projects on communities or species at risk of extinction. The election in 2016 of former President Donald Trump seemed to usher in new state-sanctioned practices of public deception. Denialism, dishonesty, and intentional disinformation are regularly deployed as the everyday tools of

² Within the generalized camps of left-wing or right-wing politics, this idea of a ‘dangerous opportunity’ can cut both ways. The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has generated a great deal of discussion and conspiracy around a rearrangement of the world’s systems and economies under an idea known as the “great reset.” While progressive social institutions and politicians have identified present global political and economic disruption as an opportunity to restructure the world’s systems to alleviate wealth inequality and promote ecological sustainability, prominent conservative figures suggest the “great reset” is a liberal conspiracy that represents a dangerous threat to global capitalism. Right-wing and neofascist figureheads have leveraged the current moment of metapolitical crisis and the language of the “great reset” to advance anti-immigrant and nationalist politics. For an overview of the “great reset” narrative and its deployment within conservative, anti-lockdown movements, see Quinn Slobodian’s piece in *The Guardian*, “How the ‘great reset’ of capitalism became an anti-lockdown conspiracy.”

political life, even generating, in the instance of Trump, public conversations about the role of the media in official briefings clearly designed to spread not information but politically charged falsehoods. The imperilled state of public discourse has meant that even the environmental crisis — documented through diminished natural resources, dramatic biodiversity loss, globalized streams of pollution, and accumulating greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere — has emerged as a politicized tangle of competing facts and interpretations. The climate emergency has bizarrely become both an existential *and* a bureaucratic matter. Worldwide, governments have so far demonstrated an inability to meaningfully respond to this crisis and the forms of predatory capitalism and settler colonialism that lie at its root. As the dangers of living in the Anthropocene become more apparent, particularly to the privileged communities that have historically been the most capable of keeping environmental insecurities at bay, the Western world in particular has seen a resurgence of right-wing and ultra-conservative social and political movements, generating new forms of fascism, territorialization, and nationalism. In even just the last five years, controversial state policies such as the building of a border wall between Mexico and the United States, a travel ban to prevent Muslims from traveling to the U.S., and Britain's succession from the European Union under Brexit have trafficked in xenophobic stereotypes, renormalizing and recirculating dangerous race-based myths of the outsider. The coincidence of these forms of exclusionary nation-building, centred around Euro-American ideals and subject, with the resurgence of neo-fascist and white supremacist movements globally is generating new threats for minoritized and racialized communities and individuals. In the last year, the struggles for Black and Indigenous Rights in North America have exposed dramatically differential realities when it comes to

racialized individuals' exposure to state-sanctioned forms of violence. In early 2020, Indigenous land defenders opposing construction of a pipeline in Wet'suwet'en traditional territory in northern British Columbia were met with snipers, helicopters, and militarized police forces in tactical gear and were systematically placed under arrest. In late 2020, a mob of violent non-Indigenous lobster fishers threatened Indigenous fishers in Nova Scotia, shooting and injuring a First Nations' Chief and setting an industrial seafood plant ablaze while local police forces refused to intervene for days. While peaceful Indigenous land defenders were identified as a social threat and significant state resources were deployed to protect the interests of a corporation and its pipeline, non-Indigenous mobs received no such response, underlining tacit presumptions about the rights of (some) individuals to engage in civil protest. In the U.S., similar comparisons have been drawn between the violent, militarized response to Black Lives Matter protesters in the summer of 2020 as opposed to the anemic response of police and national guards during the planned insurrectionist attack on the Capitol by predominantly white conspiracy theorists and right-wing Trump supporters on January 6, 2021, during which five individuals died. The manner in which these events played out, especially in media and within public discourse, made apparent the extent to which competing worldviews and narratives not only shape public opinion around racism, legality and rights, but appear to divide the very unfolding of reality itself. As these events make clear, those who tell stories as well as those who read and think about them cannot afford to underestimate the importance of narrative, the tales that are told about the present, and what politics they mobilize. The unravelling of the world is, in many ways, a narrative

event. How we tell stories — and who and what concerns they centre — are of urgent political and ethical significance.

As a journalist and editor, my day job involves documenting forms of world unmaking through ecological and colonial catastrophe at *The Narwhal*, an award-winning, non-profit Canadian magazine dedicated to in-depth and investigative reporting on the natural world. My work at *The Narwhal* has taken on a new urgency and tenor over the last year as the COVID-19 pandemic wound its way around the world, exposing anew the ways in which social risk and vulnerability are not equally distributed. The pandemic means some Indigenous communities, for example, already facing the twin burdens of historical colonialism and neocolonial extractivist imperatives, must face greater risk of infection because of the thousands of itinerant workers who travel in and out of Indigenous territories for the construction of major energy and infrastructure projects. Despite widespread social efforts and lockdown measures to contain the viral COVID-19 outbreak, many of Canada's natural resource projects continue on unencumbered, bolstered by government policies that grant corporations exceptional provisions to operate as essential services. In many cases, governments have relieved companies of regulatory burdens, such as environmental monitoring or emissions reporting, in order to streamline industrial activities during the pandemic. The positioning of the natural resource industries as essential services and the creation of new streams of profitability (through reduced regulations and governmental pandemic relief funds) highlights the extent to which disaster and social disorder can activate new opportunities for corporations and state actors. Most of these corporate dealings have occurred largely out of the public's eye. The focused attention on rising death tolls, overwhelmed

hospitals, and uncertainty around the shifting rules of social life and public protocol created something of an empty theatre for industry operations. Of course, this is not the case for communities at the epicentre of industrial activity across the country who were faced with the extraordinary challenge of monitoring a public health crisis as well as the ongoing activities of industry in their lands and lives. *The Narwhal*, which I co-founded with my colleague Emma Gilchrist in 2018, was launched with an acute awareness of journalism as a potentially radical aesthetic practice. The media landscape has suffered an erosion of revenue in recent years, leading to massive layoffs, including of environmental journalists. We began to notice that while many newspapers and legacy media outlets continued to report on the extractive industries, they did so from within the pages of the business section, considering, for example, the attractiveness of a new mine to potential investors. While these publications centre the interests, ideals, and concerns of shareholders, *The Narwhal* centres the worlds and worries of a broader set of stakeholders, the people and places most likely to be impacted by such projects but often silenced or ignored by decision-makers. Journalism, as a narrativization of catastrophe and crisis, can be seen as participating in practices of social worlding. Through the literalization and articulation of events (especially events that could have otherwise gone unnoticed), journalists document existential, social, ecological and geo-political impacts of phenomena. By charting these impacts within the diverse and manifold worlds of individuals, communities, cultures, and ecologies, journalists engage in an aestheticizing act that can potentially impact how societies narrate and navigate decision-making. Because of this, journalists are crucial agents in the politics of attention. By telling the stories of underrepresented and marginalized voices in particular, journalists do important

work to make manifest the complex entanglements of social living and planetary belonging. Giving articulation to the cares and concerns of individuals and beings historically relegated or excluded from the dominant discourse is not only an important democratic impulse, but holds a powerful potential for ethical counterhegemony. The simple *making visible* of certain people and concerns within broader public narratives, for instance within discourse around the public benefit of natural resource projects, can generate new ethical imaginaries and new social possibilities. Simply *paying attention* can be a bold political and ethical act.

My concern with politicizing the aesthetics of attention and our social attunement to narrative in times of world instability is at the root of my interest in speculative fiction and representations of nonnormative, counter-hegemonic worlds. I come to speculative fiction and fantasy studies not just from within a backdrop of environmental catastrophe journalism, but also from an academic background informed by critical theory and continental philosophy, in particular eco-phenomenology. The multiple intersecting crises of the Anthropocene have given rise to a rapidly growing body of knowledge around end-of-world themes including eco-anxiety, extinction events, and eco-catastrophe. The apocalyptic tenor of discourse within the sciences and humanities is inflected in pop culture rhetoric and evidenced in the recent proliferation of apocalyptic narratives in film, television, podcasts, and literature. These end-of-world narratives are used to explore current threats to the planet and human civilization as well as explore methods to protect the future of “humanity.” These imaginaries can generate productive conversations about what is at stake and what is at risk of being lost if the threats of political extremism, climate change, resource depletion, pollution, and biodiversity loss are not adequately

addressed. Yet these narratives can also betray a heightened concern with protecting not the future of the planet or humanity, *per se*, but with protecting the future of white, Western bourgeois subjectivities and political ideals. The dramatic upheavals of the environmental crisis, which have led to calls for a greater reckoning with racism, colonialism, and the ills of extractive capitalism, represent a threat to hegemonic whiteness. The disorder of the Anthropocene challenges the white, settler colonial world's exclusive claims to truth, power, authority, and future wayfinding.

Speculative fictions that question the realities and possibilities determined by whiteness offer us a way into alternative imaginaries that are critical to challenging the apocalyptic ends and possible futures conceived by white scholars. White apocalypse and white futures are likely to offer different diagnoses and proscribe different solutions to “humanity’s” crises than those generated by the speculative imaginaries of Black, Indigenous, minoritized and racialized thinkers and artists. End-of-world frameworks can be used to heighten anxieties about white and privileged futures, but they can also be used to generate critiques about dominant cultures and the violence of inherited onto-epistemologies that subtend current forms of planetary crisis. Speculative narratives of the end can also provide arenas of thought that are untethered from fantasies of consensus reality conceptually confined by Euro-centric discourses and rationalities. Speculative imaginaries are particularly powerful right now in this moment of socio-political and ecological crisis, when ideas of the possible and notions of the future are shot through with uncertainty. When the measures and methodologies used to anticipate and prepare for what is to come no longer operate, speculative practices become much more potent in their potential to influence conceptual and practical acts. Works of speculative fiction that

envision various futures inflected with the current crises of the human and the natural world are of particular importance. By drawing our attention to what is at stake, especially what is at stake for those whose care and concerns are not reflected by the majority or dominant culture, speculative fiction can bring us into a more finely attuned awareness to how the world may be breaking down for those unlike ourselves.

Having a view into these other worlds and their social dramas shows us how we³ might think about and what we might worry about in worlds that are not our own. Speculative fictions offer an avenue through which we might explore the values, injustices, promises, and dangers of worlds both like and unlike our own. To engage in speculative imaginaries, to read speculative fiction, is to develop an awareness of, even an attunement toward, the multiplicity of worlds and the proliferation of worlding practices. These forms of awareness and attunement are valuable within and outside of the text. A deepened awareness of multiple practices of worlding can act as a powerful antidote to extremist thought and the entrenched, polarized politics to which it can give rise. These otherworldly speculative realities can facilitate the development of knowledge practices that might advance nonnormative and counterhegemonic thought — an epistemological precondition for change in the politics of our mundane world. By expanding the frameworks within which we might engage in critical and public

³ In my writing as a white, settler individual, I seek to write against or outside of the imperious ‘we.’ Yet I also find myself conjuring an imaginary collective of readers of this dissertation — a group of readers, writers and thinkers engaged with or curious about speculative fiction and who care about definitions of the human beyond those confined by inherited onto-epistemologies and late liberal logics. In doing so, I recall Kandice Chuh’s gathering of imagined readers for her work *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*. Chuh writes explicitly for those “standing in defense of the humanities” with special awareness of “the position of those for whom the humanities have long been a site of contestation” (122).

discourse, speculative imaginings produce new fertile ground for concepts and discourses that do not reproduce the axioms of inherited and conventional modes of understanding. As universalisms feed into new forms of neocolonialism and neofascism, the most vulnerable are already facing new threats and suffering the worst of new emergencies. To fend off the reactionary retreat into dangerous, exclusionary forms of thought and political practices, we need to become more aware of the ways in which both power and oppression take root. We must diversify our narratives, those we create and those we attend to, and expand our repertoire of un/worlding practices. We need to embrace speculative practices that accommodate a multitude of world experiences and are more representative of who and what shares this planet. Doing so will not only make us more attuned to forms of oppression and hegemony that must end but allow us to generate and embrace emerging forms of counterhegemony and relationality that point to new ways forward.

Speculative Fiction and World Unmaking

This dissertation examines three versions of world unmaking in works of American speculative fiction from the last half-century to question how the undoing of the “normal world” reconfigures representations of the human to perform a denaturalizing of liberal human subjectivity and post-Enlightenment versions of “the real.” Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1974), Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014) and N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* (*The Fifth Season* 2015; *The Obelisk Gate*, 2016; *The Stone Sky* 2017) are texts broadly representative of divergent trends within the field of speculative fiction. Tapping into (but not entirely conforming to) generic conventions

of science fiction, weird fiction, and science fiction-fantasy from across nearly five decades, these three works might at first appear a strange collective. Yet read within the framework of world unmaking this collection demonstrates how varying themes of “the end” can be deployed to destabilize normative ideals of the human and the world while also making visible other possibilities for subjectivity and life beyond what has been naturalized and neutralized in dominant discourses that subtend conventional versions of reality.

By figuring the undoing of the so-called normal world, *Dhalgren*, *Annihilation* and the *Broken Earth Trilogy* present speculative worlds that complicate the material and discursive conditions that contour the possibilities for life. While the undoing of worlds in these three texts manifests differently, world unmaking as a framework focuses readings across these texts to ask how unmade worlds act upon material-discursive norms to make way for alternate versions of reality and structures of rationality. In particular, these works can be read as thought experiments in world unmaking that render worlds of counterhegemonic, alternate possibility: not just worlds that demonstrate forms of human being “beyond the human,” but, more specifically, posthuman worlds that are so materially disordered, they give rise to entirely new realities, subjectivities, and ethico-onto-epistemologies. These disrupted, posthuman worlds provide a context in which the question of the human and the functions of normative humanism remain at stake. The intention here is to explore how the collapse of the “normal” may be used to bring about a sense of world that is not static, but ecstatic; not an enclosure, but an opening. The aim of world unmaking is to capture the productive political energy of end-of-world narratives to retain the much-needed theoretical inquiry at risk of being lost in pursuit of

the posthuman. What kinds of practices of worlding arise in times of deep ecological and geopolitical crisis? How does the unraveling of the normal world not only bear down on presumptions of what it means to be human, but increase the pressure on the beings and bodies to whom humanity has historically been denied? By reading end-of-world speculative fiction alongside speculative realism and its critiques of liberal subjectivity, world unmaking offers a framework for recuperating and reintegrating the urgency of biopolitical and ethical concerns within the onto-epistemological revolutions of the material turn.

The collection of diverse fictional works in this dissertation does not take place in spite of their difference, but is enriched because of it. These worlds unravel the norms that might be presumed as mere background in conventional world building, in both a literary (on the level of form) and nature-cultural (content) sense, in order to experiment with articulations of the posthuman. Each of these texts are, importantly, linked by their representation of post-normal materialities and their contributions to speculative imaginaries that destabilize and critique, rather than reaffirm, dominant social orders. Read as figurations of, or responses to, the anxieties of the Anthropocene, these texts foreground destabilized materialities in order to provoke modes of thought and experiments in representation that challenge readers to attend to norms and possibilities beyond their own. But profoundly altered material landscapes are not enough on their own to profoundly challenge normativity and presumed ideals of order. Traditional tales of apocalypse and even works of science fiction and fantasy can figure catastrophic ends, or weird realities or alternate dimensions, only in order to “return” back to the normal world from which these representations deviated. As a framework for reading and

writing, world unmaking is asking after those representations of ends that don't deviate from the norm in order to return to it. Rather these texts represent the unmaking of the normal world in order to represent worlds, individuals and tangles of concerns that remain non-normative, post-normal, irresolvably weird. In many ways the worlds presented in the fiction of Delany, VanderMeer, and Jemisin challenge readers to stay with disorder and consider what it means for those not currently served by inherited onto-epistemologies. These worlds are unmade in the service of worlds-to-come, worlds that are otherwise, abject, erstwhile, emergent.

In this sense, world unmaking should be seen as centering a different set of concerns than the study of traditional apocalypse or contemporary works of post-apocalypse, broadly speaking. The study of apocalyptic literature can be very generally described as concerning end-of-world themes in theology, religious studies, and biblical scholarship in historical and contemporary texts. Apocalyptic literature in the traditional sense considers usually religious narratives regarding the end of the world and the reestablishment of order in a biblical or transcendental sense. The study of modern post-apocalyptic literature from the last century, in distinction, concerns what might be regarded as more secular and even anthropogenic forms of apocalypse including nuclear annihilation, viral outbreak, and ecological catastrophe.⁴ These narratives often fail to deliver world renewal or a restoration of order in the transcendental sense.⁵ Even so,

⁴ For a detailed description of the apocalyptic genre and the distinction between apocalypse in the biblical cannon and within the modern tradition see Joe Trotta and Houman Sadri's *Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypse and Dystopia in Popular Culture*, especially the book's introduction, "Welcome to the Beginning of the End of Everything."

⁵ C.f. Galbraeth "Ambiguous Apocalypse," Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture* and Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*.

many of these tales can be read as deploying end-of-world frameworks to reimagine the dominance and survival of predominantly white, Western, and bourgeois individuals and collectives. George R. Stewart's 1949 post-apocalyptic novel, *Earth Abides*, for example, centres the story of a white man, Ishmael, who survives a global plague in order to, under his understanding, repopulate the world with a new Christian, American society. Ishmael even recreates the biblical stone tablets and laments his children's return to forms of primitivism. While the use of apocalyptic themes in science fiction is no one thing, the end-of-world conceit has long been used to represent the reestablishment of Eurocentric culture. In his work, *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture*, Patrick B. Sharpe tracks the use of end-of-world themes in tales of white, Western triumph that circulate racist narratives in order to represent "superior Europeans winning the struggle to establish a new and better civilization" (172). Works of fiction that narrativize social collapse run the risk of emphasizing threats to dominant cultures alone, producing texts that offer an *escape* from the real-world dangers of cultural genocide, racism, imperialism, and the ongoing violence of neocolonialism and capitalism. Yet what stories are needed in the present are not those that seek to escape such real-world dangers, but survive and even thrive within them.

Recent work to recognize the new generation of Black and Indigenous writers of speculative fiction exposes fault lines within the science fiction and fantasy genre, especially around its relationship to race and postcolonialism.⁶ Historically, many works

⁶ Two seminal anthologies that feature Black and Indigenous writers of speculative fiction are Grace L. Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* and Nalo Hopkinson's *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*. Additional work to address the relationship between science fiction and colonialism can be found in John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science*

of science fiction and fantasy glorified depictions of deterritorialization and conquest and relied on racist and xenophobic tropes in the creation of monstrous others and foreign, alien races.⁷ Works belonging to the science fiction and fantasy genre have reified the anxieties and/or fantasies of dominant cultures. Canadian Caribbean theorist and fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson argues writers concerned with postcolonialism should engage more deeply with speculative fiction, despite — even because of — its problematic past. In the introduction to the anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Hopkinson notes that racialized and marginalized readers of science fiction are likely to feel alienated by some of the genre’s most commonplace themes:

Arguably, one of the most familiar memes in science fiction is that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives, and as I’ve said elsewhere, for many of us, that’s not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere. (7)

The capacity for the genre to represent broader sets of interests and concerns prompts Hopkinson to recommend not a dismantling of the tradition but its “renovation” (ibid.). Hopkinson thus recommends writers concerned with decolonization,

Fiction, Isiah Lavender III’s *Race in American Science Fiction*, Mark Bould’s “The Ships Landed Long Ago: AfroFuturisms and Black SF,” and De Witt Douglas Kilgore’s *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. The evolution of racialized speculative storytelling as a form of “alternative futurisms” is explored in a special 2020 issue of the journal *Extrapolations* and its introductory article “The First Death of Afrofuturism” by Isiah Lavendar, III, and Lisa Yaszek. Lavendar III and Yaszek have continued this scholarship with the release of a new collection of essays, *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*.

⁷ See Adam Robert’s *The History of Science Fiction*, which addresses how the early science fiction of the nineteenth century can act as a “direct mapping of Imperialist or political concerns” (88).

take the meme of colonizing the natives, and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things. (9)

This impulse to pervert the science fiction genre ‘from the perspective of the colonizee’ can best be seen in the emergence of the two bodies of writing known as Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms. First coined in 1993 in Mark Dery’s “Black to the Future,” the concept of Afrofuturism gathers together the speculative elements in the fiction of Black writers, many of whom have not been included under the speculative fiction label. While elements of the speculative and the fantastical have been on prominent display in Black literature for the last century and a half (Yaszek, “Afrofuturism”), especially diasporic literature drawing on history and folklore, a more recent generation of writers are producing works of fiction intentionally designed to fit under the speculative fiction label (Burnett 136).⁸ The relationship between Black fiction and science fiction is fraught, but in recent decades the importance of representing Black history and experience within speculative fiction has seen greater emphasis.⁹ In his work “Black American Speculative Literature: A Checklist,” John Pfeiffer notes both Black fiction and science

⁸ Critic Isiah Lavender, III, argues that “all black cultural production in the New World is sf” (“Ethnoscapes” 187). He writes, “the mixing of the physical and the metaphysical to confirm white identity by denying black identity is an exercise in and of power, a shaping of reality that Africans in the new world had no choice but to accept. Therefore black experience in America is defined by alienation: ‘Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine’” (ibid.).

⁹ C.f. andré m. carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* and Isiah Lavender, III, *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*.

fiction “could supply or reflect the altered content and perspective that social transformation requires” (np). But while “science fiction sometimes does; Black American writing almost always has” (ibid.).

Drawing on the Afrofuturism label, the term Indigenous futurism was coined in 2012 by Grace L. Dillon in her introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. There Dillon argues the science fiction genre has ignored and othered Indigenous speculations, cultures, and knowledge, while also extracting Indigenous lives and epistemologies for material.¹⁰ Yet, as Dillon points, “Indigenous sf is not so new — just overlooked” (2). Indigenous writers are best positioned to not only respond to the genre’s historical relationship with race and colonization, Dillon argues, but, liberated from the genre’s expectations, are best positioned to “invariably *change* the perimeters of sf” (3). In his essay “Historical fantasy,” Ramón Saldívar argues contemporary ethnic writers are setting a “new stage in the history of the novel” by “revers[ing] the usual course of fantasy, turning it away from latent forms of daydream, delusion, and denial, toward the manifold surface features of history” (594). By incorporating historical concerns within speculative representations of the future, these writers participate in the “oxymoronic blending of history and the speculative genres” (“Second Elevation” 5). By attending to how racialized and minoritized writers are changing the bounds and purpose of speculative fiction, readers and theorists may be able

¹⁰ As Dillon notes in her introduction, Michelle Reid has even made the argument that upon a postcolonial reading, science fiction appears preoccupied with the “fantastic basis of colonial practice” (*The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* 256-66). Dillon also points to John Rieder’s work in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* to document the influence of colonialism and imperialism not just in historical but also contemporary works of science fiction.

to generate new sensitivities and new sensibilities when it comes to representations of the end. This dissertation asks how world unmaking can prompt a deeper critical engagement with end-of-world stories and how such stories express, problematize, or aggrandize social anxieties. This deeper engagement is particularly relevant within the context of real events¹¹ that exacerbate the vulnerabilities of racialized and minoritized individuals and communities. As such, reading with world unmaking in mind asks readers to consider how speculative imaginaries might decolonize the readerly gaze and turn readerly expectations and presumptions of the “normal” back in on themselves.

Rather than generate fear about the loss of the “normal” world, this dissertation explores how end-of-world narratives might represent not the desire for but the violence of normativity. The texts of particular interest to the framework of world unmaking do not imagine disordered worlds to represent the reestablishment of presumed order, but to explore what occurs in normativity’s wake. If traditional apocalyptic tales are used to shore up the promise of theological and teleological ideologies (and warn against their rejection), world unmaking offers up a radical alternative. World unmaking instead invites the unraveling of such ideologies and the teleological presumptions used to establish the geo and biopolitical arrangements of life and power that appear, unthought, as the “normal world.” Reading for world unmaking in works that grant representation to queer, communal sociality, for example, or anti-colonial fantasy or the entanglement of human and alien corporeality raise urgent questions about the embattled nature of world

¹¹ In her 2005 article “Science Fiction and Postmodernism,” Veronica Hollinger catalogues how the hyperreal present and its alienations and anxieties undergird postmodern science fiction. The nature of what constitutes the “real present” in the intervening years between 2005 and 2021 has been altered by the escalation of global environmental crises and political destabilization.

building and by what means *some* worlds come to be while others do not. World unmaking does not look for an apocalyptic restoration of order, but rather considers what plays out when the veil of order of the “normal world” catches fire and turns to ash.

The differences between the three texts presented in this dissertation should not be glossed over, however. Delany, VanderMeer, and Jemisin each represent distinct sets of concerns in the three works under consideration. Most notably, *Dhalgren* was written in the 1970s at a time when many of the ecological and geopolitical concerns of the present moment had not yet gained popular traction. Delany’s concern with identity and language in his novels and within the writing of science fiction texts might, by some, be seen as outmoded in a critical environment contoured by the ontological and material turns. However, I would argue, given the present-day convulsions over gender identity and the way in which politically engaged conservative movements have mobilized against the rights of trans people, sex workers, and the queer community at large, works that problematize language and identity formation remain as important now as they have been over the last four decades. Speculative realisms that engage the inadequacy of our current onto-epistemological traditions rely on and continue to animate the fundamental insights of poststructuralism. Delany’s foregrounding of both material and hermeneutic instability also brings *Dhalgren* into comfortable conversation with contemporary works that have themes of ontological disorder at their core. *Dhalgren*, despite being nearly half a century old, still offers fresh insights into the question of the historical conditions of racial being and belonging. As Black American authors, Delany and Jemisin also belong within and speak to the tradition of Afrofuturism and write in forceful response to concerns of race, colonization, and displacement raised by the speculative imaginaries of Black American,

Afro-Caribbean, and Black diasporic authors. Afrofuturist texts deal explicitly with colonial histories and racialized forms of oppression and violence that are all but disappeared from VanderMeer's world in *Annihilation*. My intention is not to elide the difference between these texts and their generic divergences within the Afrofuturist and new weird fiction camps. I argue instead that VanderMeer's text exemplifies a type of world unmaking worthy of consideration alongside Delany and Jemisin's work, especially for its commentary on the nature of the human and human knowledge claims in realities contoured by a constitutive unknown that is not other to but is a part of the human itself. Such reflection on the inadequate nature of human onto-epistemologies is useful and holds important insights for ideas of belonging and survival in the materially disrupted present.

The cross-reading of Delany, VanderMeer, and Jemisin is meant to invite an exchange across critical discourses of new materialism and liberal subjectivity, especially as these authors and their works challenge the onto-epistemologies that produce and legislate normative ideals that organize the human world. A more in-depth description of the mechanisms of this production and legislation will take place in Chapter One with the introduction of critical posthuman aesthetics. Before the turn to a discussion of aesthetics and the production of norms, the following will give an overview of the field of speculative fiction and, in particular, how the framework of world unmaking intersects with current critical practices of reading for non-normativity in the materially disrupted Anthropocene.

While discussions about the field of speculative fiction and what works properly belong within its bounds are ongoing, for our purposes here, speculative fiction is meant

in the broad sense. Although previously viewed as a subset of science fiction, more recent articulations of speculative fiction see the genre as a diverse “field of cultural production” used to challenge everyday conceptions of “the real” (Oziewicz 2). According to Marek Oziewicz, the more recent expanded definition of speculative fiction brings one to a “super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating ‘consensus reality’ of everyday experience” (1). Oziewicz offers a useful and rather comprehensive account for the current impulse to broaden the category of speculative fiction. Here, I quote it at length:

Theorized as a field of cultural production rather than a genre, speculative fiction is not limited to any specific literary techniques. Nor can its development be traced through a linear chronology. The current understanding of speculative fiction reflects a quantum jump that connected several established and emerging traditions. Some of the forces that contributed to this cultural shift include accelerating genre hybridization that balkanized the field previously mapped with a few large generic categories; the expansion of the global literary landscape brought about by mainstream culture’s increasing acceptance of fantasy, science fiction, and horror; the proliferation of indigenous, minority, and postcolonial narrative forms that subvert dominant Western notions of reality or employ non-mimetic elements in different configurations than traditional Western genres; and finally the need for new conceptual categories to accommodate diverse and hybrid types of modern storytelling that oppose a stifling vision of reality — with its correlates of “truth,” “facts,” “power,” and others — imposed by exploitative

global capitalism. An inherently plural category, speculative fiction is a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real. (1-2)

Works produced in the tradition of speculative fiction share the common, experimental thread of resistance — resistance to standards legislating what constitutes a worthy literary subject and its worthwhile representation. As Oziewicz contends, works of non-Western speculative fiction reflect a rich tradition of non-mimetic representations of reality outside the Western cannon.

But it was the cultural revolutions of the twentieth century that ignited the Western academy's departure from privileged realist presumptions about the neutrality and stability of life and its "real" representation in thought and language. Thus, Oziewicz points out, current trends in speculative fiction in the Western world should be seen as arising alongside developments in critical theory, including post-colonialism, feminism, and poststructuralism. He writes:

The understanding of speculative fiction as a label for a large cultural field began to take shape at the time of the first multicultural turn of the 1970s and in resistance to the specifically Western, post-Enlightenment, androcentric, and colonialist mindset that had long excluded from "Literature" stories that failed to imitate reality or embraced a different version of the real. Indeed, no other cultural formation had put such a premium on the distinction between the real and the unreal, or had so reductively defined the real as the post-Enlightenment West. This distorted perception generated a counter-reaction, one facet of which was the meteoric rise of non-mimetic genres, starting with the gothic, horror, fantasy, and science fiction in the 19th century, followed by a rapid diversification and

hybridization of these and other non-mimetic forms throughout the 20th century. In hindsight, the trajectories and permutations of these genres may be traced as individual strands in the same larger process that combined to create the field of speculative fiction. In one sense, then, speculative fiction is a tool to dismantle the traditional Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality. (3)

As strands of the speculative field, science fiction, weird fiction, and fantasy have an important history of thinking beyond the bounds of the normal human world. And this speculative practice is garnering renewed critical cache with theorists preoccupied with the emergence of new posthuman and emergent speculative ontological frames.

In her work, *Geontologies*, Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues the emergence of the geologic concept of the Anthropocene and . . . the proliferation of new object ontologies (new materialists, speculative materialists, speculative realists, and object-oriented ontologies), all point to the perforating boundary between the autonomy of Life and its opposition to and difference from NonLife. (14)

Povinelli suggests this recent material-ontological turn transforms “an older interest in social and cultural epistemologies and cosmologies into a concern about multiple ontologies” (ibid). Such work in the critical vein is “only catching up to a conversation begun in literature,” Povinelli writes. Works of speculative, post-world fiction such as Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and the *MaddAdam Trilogy* as well as films like *Mad Max* are part of an “entire field of

ecoliterary studies [that] examines fictional, media, and filmic explorations of the coming postextinction world” (ibid.).¹²

World unmaking offers a framework to question how the undoing of the “normal world” reconfigures representations of the human in order to perform a denaturalizing of liberal human subjectivity and post-Enlightenment versions of “the real.” Speculative fiction has long played a role in representations of the end by representing that “which from the human viewpoint lies beyond or goes beyond human limits as they are defined by . . . the cognitive norms of human understanding” (Galbreath 56). But the political potential of speculative fiction does not lie in its severing of norms from their comprehension — rather, it arises by virtue of the *making apparent* of normativity’s operation in world constitution, most invisibly through the legislation of modes of being and ways of life that are contoured by inherited worldviews that entangle former, current, and future worlds. World unmaking brings end-of-world themes in speculative fiction into contact with normative and conventional ideals of the human while attending to pressing bio and geopolitical concerns of the materially disrupted present. Such contact prompts us to ask, what, exactly appears at “the end” of the normal human world.

Chapter Outlines

The first chapter of this dissertation presents the theoretical framework and concerns pertinent to world unmaking. I argue all end-of-world narratives are not equal,

¹² Theorists Donna Haraway and Kathryn Yusoff also point out the important work speculative fiction has done to flesh out alternate arrangements in reality, different orders of knowledge and underrepresented experiences of life and world. C.f. *Staying with the Trouble* and *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.

and that special attention must be paid to how worlds end and for whom. Grounding this dissertation's theory in the work of posthumanist, feminist, and decolonial scholarship, this chapter explores how reading and writing the end can represent or erase certain racialized and minoritized experiences and histories. Working with scholars committed to forms of posthumanism and speculative realism that do not erase the complexities of collapse and crisis, this chapter considers how a more complicated sense of how worlds are had, how they come to be made and unmade, is necessary for conceiving disparities in articulations of the non/human. The practice of world unmaking in this dissertation is also situated within a critical posthuman aesthetic terrain. The articulation of subjectivities and futures beyond the confines of the "normal" world in speculative fiction and theory, suggests at realities beyond our own. But these other worlds push beyond the confines of our inherited modes of understanding and frames of reference. So, how can the incomprehensible or unknowable appear to us in thought? World unmaking, as a framework for reading through the undoing of inherited onto-epistemologies and notions of the in/sensible, positions speculative fiction as a field that undermines the presumptions of the so-called "normal world" by representing the *unrepresentable* and thinking the *unthinkable*. Along these lines I explore how a sense of aesthetic awareness and the use of critical aesthetic practices can be used to seek out (and possibly look beyond) the logics that determine ways of knowing and delimit possible ways of being. Finally, this chapter situates this aesthetic posthuman practice as one that operates distinctly from some forms of speculative theory and posthumanism that vie for a flattening of the ontological plane. While some theorists want to consider all things within a neutralized ontological realm, thereby diminishing human exceptionalism and

elevating the thing-being of nonhuman agents and actants, I argue along with many others that we cannot afford to dismiss altogether the question of the human. Retaining the historical and political complexity of the question of the human seems especially urgent as many human beings have been and still are denied their belonging to the category of humanity. The danger of identifying as nonhuman may be more acute for Black, brown, and queer individuals, and this fact cannot be overlooked in end-of-world engagements with the posthuman.

In what ways might a world coming undone allow for the proliferation of non-proscriptive subjectivities? In Chapter Two, I explore the apocalyptic eroticism of Delany's *Dhalgren*, paying particular attention to how the destabilization of the "normal" world might give rise to forms of "queer" worlding. This chapter explores how Delany's representation of the unmade world of Bellona, a post-apocalyptic American city that shapeshifts and continually rearranges itself under strange cosmic skies, performs an unmaking of subjectivity. Within this materially unstable environment, Delany unsettles representation itself, foregrounding the slipperiness of language and identity claims that do not function as expected. A novel with no clear plotline, *Dhalgren* disrupts the conventions of both writing and reading in order to provide commentary on conventional critical practices and normative expectations of the sf genre. Delany's novel positions the author as both a gender-bender and a genre-bender through the violation of expectations around subjectivity and its articulations. Delany's work frustrates the importation of background assumptions, forcing readers to become suspended within the world of Bellona, which operates according to its alternate grammars, logics, and versions of social belonging. I argue *Dhalgren* prompts readers to engage in practices of *world*

unknowing, where presumed knowledge and reading practices are upended in the purist of re-orientation within Delany's perpetually disoriented world. The novel, with its shifting material and hermeneutic environment, ultimately asks readers to reconsider the presumed onto-epistemological stability undergirding the fabric of normative identities and social realities.

In Chapter Three, I further the reading of materially unstable environments with VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation*. Through his portrait of human incursion into the unknown world of Area X, VanderMeer makes visible the way reliance on dominant orders of knowledge and discourse can malfunction in alternate or alien ecologies. *Annihilation* represents how the intellectual operations of one world may fail to transpose to another. Area X, posed as an invasive, otherworldly reality, exposes the unthought mechanisms at work within human knowledge practices, and demonstrates how these mechanisms might malfunction within weird, potentially unknowable material contexts. Because there is no strict boundary separating Area X from the novel's "normal world," this alien zone raises questions about the fundamental weirdness and unknowability of reality itself. VanderMeer uses Area X to demonstrate the extent to which even our own, mundane reality might outstrip human intellectual capacities and reductive rationalities. The novel suggests humans are always part of and becoming-with unknown, imperceptible forces, an insight that bears down on liberal, post-Enlightenment conceptions of the capacitated human subject. Representing an unknown that is *part of* the world and the human being, *Annihilation* asks readers to reconsider posthuman sensibilities and sensitivities. If the more-than-human world exists outside the strictures of human thought, how can we think it? And further, in response to the multiple crises of

the material world, how can we become responsive to and responsible for a world that is characterized by the indeterminate and the imperceptible? If we are convinced of the reality and relevance of the unknown, if we believe that what it means to be human is to be co-mingled in a world of indeterminate becoming, can we conjure an ethics of not-knowing? How might we respond to the call for a new sensibility? This chapter considers how a posthuman reading of *Annihilation* and its aesthetics gestures towards the alternate sensibilities that may be necessary for navigating the uncertainties of not only other worlds but also our own reality in times of onto-epistemological crisis.

In Chapter Four, I turn to Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* to consider how representations of biogeographical being might transform the way we understand and represent people (beyond the traditionally occupied category of the "human") and their material-planetary belonging. Jemisin crafts new and multiple kinds of characters that experience distinct aspects of corporeal-materiality to experiment with various modes of earth-being and earth-belonging. The entanglement of *bios* and *geos* in the trilogy provides a way of reading world unmaking through the removal of the material divide that is presumed to separate the human from the inhuman, the active living from the inert dead, the sedimented, fossilized past from the uncertain, possible future. Throughout the trilogy, Jemisin articulates how these different kinds of beings experience differentiated vulnerabilities and empowerments within the backdrop of a dramatically unstable planet, beset by seasonal mini-apocalypses that send parts of the world into war, famine, and mass migration. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* asks readers to consider how, even within catastrophically unstable times, power, ideology, myth, and worldview persist to deny people their being, capacities, and belonging in their world. Jemisin's account of the

relationship between material world histories and contested notions of humanity acts as a remix of historical and ongoing settler colonialisms that ultimately warns readers how material instabilities can generate a drive for conquest and exploitation. The trilogy asks readers to consider whether world systems built upon the subject unmaking or dehumanization of some people are worlds that *must* be unmade, even through acts of apocalyptic violence. If such worlds demand an ethical disordering, Jemisin presents a speculative world in which we can consider the people who would have the capacities and sensibilities to undertake such an act.

In Chapter Five, I conclude the dissertation and consider avenues for furthering the research presented here. Our present world currently expresses forms of world unmaking as its eco-geopolitical arrangements and onto-epistemological orders unravel. Some have felt the effects of this unravelling more acutely and for much longer than others. The pressures of ontological hierarchies, globalized late capitalism, heightened consumer throughput, and settler colonialism's fantasies of progress and freedom are bearing down on all forms of life and ways of being on a planetary scale. The act of paying attention to how this world is breaking down is important for recognizing how worlds come apart and for whom/what. Becoming more attuned to the distribution of risk and vulnerability in our unstable reality can help ensure that past and ongoing forms of oppression are not simply recast within the foundations of our shared future.

I. On Theory: Reconfiguring the Horizon of Attention

‘A telling of the truth,’ casts our voices and words only as far as vocabulary and perception allow.

— Grace L. Dillon, *Imagining Indigenous Futurisms*

The protagonist of Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation*, a biologist whose name we do not know, recounts the profound experience of staring so long at a rare sea star she feels herself begin to disappear into the strange wonder of its existence. Although a trained and experienced scientist, the biologist feels the explanatory power of her discipline dissipate the longer she contemplates the marvelous creature. Aptly nicknamed “destroyer of worlds,” the organism’s other-worldly being draws the biologist in to such an extent she feels the boundaries that separate her world from its world begin to dissolve. The guardrails of her scientific knowledge and her position as a neutral observer slip away and she becomes disoriented, set adrift in an experience of reciprocal being-with that she cannot fully comprehend.

The longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all — about nature, about ecosystems. There was something about my mood and its dark glow that eclipsed sense, that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in the taxonomy — catalogued, studied, and described — irreducible down to any of that. (*Annihilation* 116)

The biologist's experience may have been heightened by her drunkenness and yet, this moment demonstrates the extent to which attention — how and to what it is paid — can alter one's sense of world, one's ability to make sense of a world. The biologist's world seems to come undone in this event of attending to the sea star, a creature whose singular existence cannot be exhaustively captured or ordered within the thought that is representative of modern biology. Her meditation on this particular being holds significance for the objectivity of scientific observation, the legitimacy of human-produced regimes of truth, and the presumed stability of the human subject in the face of a dizzying encounter with another form of life. The profundity of her experience at the seaside's tidal pool reminds one of Rilke's famous edict at the end of his poem, "The Archaic Torso of Apollo:" "you must change your life."

What we see and how it might prompt us to change our lives are concerns pertinent to the framework of world unmaking, a way of situating thought within the proliferation of end-of-world and end-of-human themes in fiction and theory. In intersecting ways, many contemporary works of speculative fiction and posthumanism¹³ grapple with the question of the human and nonhuman in unstable realities, in worlds come undone with the simultaneous and interconnected unraveling of the ecological and

¹³ Posthumanism is an expanding and contested domain. Like postmodernism and poststructuralism, posthumanism is a field of concern within which adherents widely diverge and at times virulently disagree. Yet, common to most streams of posthumanism is an effort to decentre the human subject in order to move beyond anthropocentrism and consider in new and deeper ways the nonhuman, broadly conceived. In this dissertation, I apply the umbrella term of posthumanism to theoretical and philosophical efforts to rearticulate human and nonhuman relations, most especially through the 'ontological turn' recognized in new materialism, speculative realism and object oriented ontology. For further reading on the divergence of posthumanism and transhumanism, often regarded as an aggrandizement and extension of the human, see Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism* and Katherine Hayles' *How we Became Posthuman*.

onto-epistemological in the dawning of the new era known as the Anthropocene. The challenge of figuring and reconfiguring human/nonhuman relations in these altered realities is equally the stuff of speculative fiction and speculative/new realisms. The presentation of worlds beyond our own — realities that render inoperable our preconceived notions of the “normal world” — is as much the proper material of theorists articulating agential matter in an era of climate change as of the authors of fiction representing altered landscapes and lifeforms that shape shift and slip outside human comprehension and control. Yet, all ends-of-worlds are not created equal.

In many realms of academic and public discourse, the Anthropocene is situated as the “end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it,” prompting worthwhile interrogations of notions of “world,” of “we,” and of what it means to “know” or have a world in the first place. This epochal shift into the Anthropocene, initiated in part by a renewed understanding of human/nonhuman entanglements, foregrounds the planet’s material, geologic properties and the extent to which ecological systems are dramatically altered by human activity and industrial development. What it means to be human, in turn, is dramatically altered by changes to the earth and the rearrangement of matter — through extraction, dispossession, pollution — done primarily to serve the needs and interests of the few. If the Anthropocene signals the end of the world, it is critical to note, this end — its losses and impact — is not equally distributed.

Thinkers committed to feminist, queer, and postcolonial lines of inquiry point out that, while some narratives of the end seem all too quick to discard notions of the world or the human, much work remains to attend to the historic and ongoing imbalance in not only representations of the human and the nonhuman but in the geopolitical and

biopolitical implications of world unmaking. In her work *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* Kathryn Yusoff writes, “the Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (xiii). Similarly, Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear states plainly: “Indigenous peoples have been post-apocalyptic since Contact” (Re-Story 2). Yusoff and Tallbear offer these critical historical reminders in order to cut through glib universalisms of current end-time themes. A more complicated sense of how worlds are had, how they come to be made and unmade, is necessary for conceiving disparities in articulations of the non/human. Thus, the work of rethinking the nature of human and nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene needs to be adequate to the task of interrogating how dominant discourses of “the end” and promises of “new worlds” are used to legitimate and proliferate orders of knowledge that subtend the hierarchies of being used to elevate some forms of life¹⁴

¹⁴ Within posthuman theory, efforts to move beyond the human in thought and language have led to a search for less loaded terminology to describe *what exists* that does not *prima facie* elevate the human being in a hierarchy of meaning and mattering. In recent decades theorists have proposed a variety of terms to invoke the existence of things in a way that does not evoke the human/nonhuman or subject/object categorical divide. Some of these terms include things, beings, matter, existents, and life. In this dissertation I’ve elected to use a variety of these terms but most often deploy the terms being and life in order to refer to the ecological, political, and aesthetic registers that often determine how the things of the world exercise *modes of being* and *ways of life*. Yet, in doing so, I recognize that even terms like ‘life’ can reinforce hierarchies that prize the vital and the agential over the presumed inert, powerless and therefore lifeless. The world-unmaking implications of the human/inhuman divide will be explored in detail and concert with N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* in Chapter Four. For a discussion of the agency of matter see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. For a critique of the terminological perils of ‘life’ from a queer perspective see Jami Weinstein’s “Posthumously Queer” in *Dossier: Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms*. Weinstein writes, “We could say that life as we know it is a habit — one that strictly frames the limits of who gets interpreted as Human, and one that must be nervously reiterated in order to reinforce those limits. As such, it may be

over and above others. Because, as theorist Sylvia Wynter articulates, “the Human is an occupied category” (qtd. in Yusoff 7), posthumanist complications of the non/human question cannot (should not, or perhaps, can no longer) abandon those formulations of life historically and perpetually excluded from attention in dominant onto-epistemological and ethical considerations. Efforts to revisit and reconceive the nonhuman, material world are enlivened in the Anthropocene, but these endeavours are not neutral. Instead, these theoretical interventions run the risk of replicating the dominant onto-epistemological frameworks that gave rise to the material and discursive conditions for a disrupted geophysical earth in the first place. The Anthropocene marks an opportunity to attend more cautiously to historical practices of imperial world making and how dominant apparatuses of power affect the possibilities for subjectivity and the flourishing of life even as worlds become unmade. Some worlds come into being by virtue of another’s end. The New World of colonial powers dawned because Black, brown, queer and other “undesirable” worlds were dismantled. World are brought into being on the basis of ontological presumptions and epistemological practices, but these are not without material consequences. Upon a geopolitical and new material reading, the frame of the Anthropocene can be used to demonstrate the extent to which geologic and extractive activities participated in bringing dramatically disparate worlds into being. For

more apt to talk in terms of the *posthumous* than posthuman, inhuman, or nonhuman, thus deframing the manifold investments in life, breaking the habit, and refuting humanism more exhaustively. Posthumous life pushes the envelope by exposing the legacies of humanism still haunting us in the specter of life — even in our posthuman theories and analyses” (236).

Yusoff such disparities call for renewed attention to the world un/making power of both onto-epistemological and material practices:

Thinking of the Anthropocene as a set of material practices of duration and arrival that brought this world into being, alongside the fact that for a certain proportion of the world, the entire dismantling of this colonial apparatus is a desired state, launches a call for a different kind of world making . . . The end of the world has already happened for some subjects, and it is the prerequisite for the possibility of imagining ‘living and breathing again’ for others. (12-13)

Yusoff’s claim that the end for some might arise as a condition for “the possibility of imagining” (ibid.) life for others is an invitation to think about world building and world unmaking as speculative and material practices occurring in tandem and in conversation. Yet while much theoretical attention has been paid to practices of world building within and outside the text, little consideration has been given to practices of world unmaking and in particular how representing the breakdown of worlds might also hold valuable insights into practices of and possibilities for worlding. World building, the study of the inherent structures and logics of fictional universes, has long been a central focus of literary theorists. Fictional worlds are made possible through the articulation of these inherent logics and “the degree to which world details are plausible, feasible, and without contradiction” (Wolf, 43). The consistency of fictional worlds in the literary study of world building draws on the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and his understanding of “possible worlds” that inhere in the “ontological make-up and the internal organization of such worlds” (“World Consistency” 262). Leibniz’s work to theorize the relational aspects of what it means to be possible in a world contributes much to contemporary

theorizations of relational ontology and the ways in which temporal experience coheres individualities, anchoring them in rich, interconnected realities that give rise to the very possibility of life.¹⁵ If world building in literary theory concerns the inherent logics of fictional universes, world unmaking attends to the way in which fictional worlds destabilize inherited logic once sought to cohere experience and secure subjectivities. In this way world unmaking performs an undoing of the metaphysical regimes of truth and attendant aesthetic rationalities that normalize and justify some forms of life over and above others. World unmaking should not be considered *contra* world building, however. Rather, world unmaking asks us to consider the ways in which world destabilization can play a constitutive role in world building. World unmaking focuses attention on the mechanisms by which worlds cohere and can become incoherent. Read through the lens of critical posthuman aesthetics, world unmaking asks what the destabilization of worlds (discursively, materially, onto-epistemologically) can tell us about practices of worlding, about the dangers and possibilities of worlds as they rise and fall and what, in particular, these representations reveal or make visible. In addition, world unmaking is embedded within the end-of-world themes of catastrophe and instability because these are representations of and responses to the “real” world’s ongoing eco and geopolitical crises.

¹⁵ Leibniz theorized the distinction between *possible* individual substances, with monadic predicates, and *compossible* individual substances that contain a multitude of predicates that can be ascribed to that individual by virtue of experience over time. The temporal aspect plays a role in limiting the criterion of possibility. For more on Leibniz and the relational aspects of the compossible, see D’Agostino F. B. “Leibniz on Compossibility and Relational Predicates.”

Proclamations about “the end of the world” and “the end of the human” are fraught with assumptions about who and what “has” a world to lose at all and to what end. If we are to conceive of or represent the end of the world, whether in fiction or in theoretical imaginings, work must be done to interrogate for whom the world ends and how. Much post-apocalyptic literature, as critics like Theresa Heffernan and Robert Galbreath point out, is not truly about the world’s absolute end, but about what continues on in worlds facing disorder or catastrophe (Galbreath, 56; Heffernan 27). This dissertation looks to various representations of world unmakings, to ask how the end of the world can be used as a tool to break away from assumptions about the so-called normal world, to allow alternate paradigms and underrepresented forms of life to emerge in its wake. What becomes in unmade worlds, what becomes of unmade worlds, can be used to sustain dominant orders and forms of power. But these becomings can also be revelatory, offering new orientations and perspectives on reality by calling our attention to what has come about, or perhaps, what has been there, unacknowledged, all along. The end of the world is a mere thought experiment. But it is also a creature in a tidal pool — capable of generating metaphysically disorienting effects that can transform our comprehension of the world and our human place in it — if only we stare at it long enough.

The world unmaking at issue in so many contemporary works — both scholarly and popular, fictional, and theoretical — offers an opportunity to question what shows up at the end of the world and why. World unmaking also considers what edicts are placed on those who live in shared worlds that have not ended yet. In addition, world unmaking considers how the discourses engaged to situate and imagine ends are deeply

consequential for practices of reflection on history as well as the here and now. The proliferation of post-apocalyptic works of fiction in literature and pop culture gives some indication as to the relevance of world unmaking thematics in the uncertain present of mass global and ecological disruption. Yet post-apocalyptic storylines can just as easily offer insight into what is at stake at the end of the world, as offer an escape from those very stakes. Television hits like AMC's *The Walking Dead*, which situates small social dramas in a world ravaged by zombies, enjoy mass appeal by playing out post-apocalyptic scenarios in which the realities of globalization, natural resource conflicts, climate change, land dispossession, forced migration, and the rise of right-wing and fascist state politics have all but disappeared.¹⁶ These simplified survival tales can offer a cathartic escape, offering a “painful pleasure in popular culture’s post-apocalyptic visions” (Tallbear 2). By representing resource-rich individuals or small, socially coherent collectives that overcome apocalyptic adversity, many end-of-world tales (including *The Walking Dead*) operate as an endorsement of the fundamental tenants of bourgeois neoliberalism, upholding capacitated subjects capable of self-realization and achievement — even amid chaos. The end of the world can and does operate as a frame to show the struggle of the privileged classes in arenas where they are no longer fully safeguarded by the affordances of the state or personal wealth — i.e. existing in a state

¹⁶ In his article “The End-of-the-World as World System,” Robert T. Tally Jr. argues the appeal of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films lies in their simplification of worlds. “The planetary scale . . . presents almost inconceivably complex and vast networks in which the perceiving subject is wholly entangled . . . I find that fantasy, broadly conceived, makes possible meaningful artificial ensembles, figurative maps, by which to make sense of an increasingly unimaginable, global, social, economic, and cultural sphere” (269). C.f. Tally Jr. Robert T. “The End-of-the-World as World System.” *Other Globes: Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society*.

more properly belonging to the underprivileged.¹⁷ Representing self-reliant, property-owning subjects as the most worthy of representation (and survival) these popular narratives can also participate in the erasure of the ongoing, present-day destructiveness of hegemonic social orders, settler colonialisms, and “the epoch of imperial world building that is not yet at its end” (Yusoff 11). Tallbear warns that the desire to imagine individual survival in end times can “dull our sense of vulnerability” and obscure how “many of these escapist visions retain the viciousness of a settler-colonial world pre-apocalypse” (2). Yusoff warns that, just as the fictions of post-apocalypse can all too easily disappear the vagaries of human and inhuman(e) histories, so too can the creation of new discourses and subjectivities of the Anthropocene. She warns that, from a minoritized perspective,

to be included in the ‘we’ of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations, taking part in a planetary condition in which no part was accorded in terms of subjectivity. The supposed ‘we’ further legitimates and justifies the racialized inadequacies that are bound up in social geologies.” (12, emphasis in original)

Thus, the modes of thought use to situate and imagine iterations of “The End” matter deeply and are consequential — not only to one’s ability to confront history — but to

¹⁷ In his work *The New American Exceptionalism*, American studies scholar Donald E. Pease argues fiction functions as an effective mechanism for the inscription of readers as capitalist subjects, participating in a doctrine of U.S. national exceptionalism over and against alternative social imaginaries (10). In a complimentary vein, humanities scholar Kandice Chuh elaborates the extent to which the philosophy of humanities and interpretation of literature have played a role in affirming established neoliberal ideology and the inequality integral to the bourgeois liberal project. C.f. Chapter Two, “Knowledge Under Cover” in *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*.

recognize that unfronted histories can repeat themselves in the here and now. These practices of thought influence how the present remains contoured by suppressed histories of power and violence and, importantly, whether and how possibilities for an emancipatory future remain tethered to the material and discursive practices that configure the horizons of our attention and who and what shows up there.

Critical Posthuman Aesthetics and World Unmaking

The practice of world unmaking in this dissertation is positioned on a critical aesthetic terrain. The articulation of subjectivities and futures beyond the confines of the actual in speculative fiction points towards the possibility of thought about worlds and lives beyond “our reality” — and asks us to consider how what lies beyond our reality may take shape in our thought, might “appear.” World unmaking, as a framework for reading through the undoing of inherited onto-epistemologies and notions of the “sensible,” positions speculative fiction as a field that undermines the presumptions of the so-called “normal world” by representing the *unrepresentable* and thinking the *unthinkable*. The representable and the thinkable are not neutral categories. They represent orders of logic, practices of thought, and the deployment of presumptions that undergird common and shared notions of so-called normal reality. Ideas of the “normal” and the “real” are troubled in world unmaking. Rather than providing the backdrop for thought, notions of the normal and the real are re-examined as discursive, metaphysical frames, locked in a relationally constitutive entanglement with the political, with hegemonic operations of power, and modalities of truth. In the following section the

development of critical aesthetics¹⁸ and, in particular, critical posthuman aesthetics will take place within the framework of world unmaking. Along these lines we will explore how a sense of aesthetic awareness and the use of critical aesthetic practices can be used to seek out (and possibly look beyond) the logics that determine ways of knowing and delimit possible ways of being.

Foundationally, the question of aesthetics concerns the mechanisms of perceptibility and the politics of attention; why do some things, some concerns, show up? Why not others? Aesthetics, according to Kandice Chuh in her text *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, “may be understood as integral to the production of particular kinds of difference — for example, that of the racial and colonial other, that of sex-gender regulation — as part of the naturalized visceral experience of the world” (ii). In Chuh’s work the aesthetic “refers to the relationships among the senses and the processes and structures of value making by which certain sensibilities become common sense and others are disavowed, subjugated or otherwise obscured” (ibid.). Chuh argues the

¹⁸ The notion of critical aesthetics here is informed most specifically by the work of Jacques Rancière and Kandice Chuh. However, there is a wide range of scholarship advocating for a revised and updated conception of the aesthetic beyond Enlightenment forms of aesthetic theory developed along the lines of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller. In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai argues the aesthetic be reconceptualized as a critical category in attempts to understand humanism and commodification in late capitalism. “Our aesthetic experience is always mediated by a finite if constantly rotating repertoire of aesthetic categories” that are “by definition conceptual as well as affective and tied to historically specific forms of communication and political life,” she writes (948). Isobel Armstrong, in *The Radical Aesthetic*, brings the aesthetic in line with a deconstructionist critique, “remaking its theoretical base and changing the terms of the argument” to “give new content to the concept of the aesthetic” (2). Armstrong suggests contemporary trends in critical theory that overlook the aesthetic or are even “anti-aesthetic” “rely on deconstructive gestures of exposure that fail to address the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse” (ibid.). See also Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*; Hein and Korsmeyer, *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

aesthetic is central to “the philosophies and practical structures of liberal humanism” and can aid in revealing “the ways that this reigning humanism sorts people into the fit and unfit, the rational and the unreasonable, Man and other, Man and woman, and Human and racialized subject” (xi). At the same time, by attending to the aesthetic and its centrality in organizing the evaluations that shape the relationships between (different) things, Chuh argues aesthetics are also “the grounds of uncommon, illiberal sensibilities,” which are “incommensurate to the epistemologies and common sense of liberal humanism” (ibid.). “Illiberal humanisms,” Chuh argues, are those practices and experiences that *counter* the principles of liberal humanism:

they posit relationality and entanglement rather than individuality and autochthony as the grounds of human ontology; they refuse bourgeois aspirations and illuminate their parochialism; and they radically disidentify from the teleological narrative of progressive development that gives texture to liberal humanism. (Ibid.)

For Chuh, aesthetic inquiry is “double-voiced” by articulating the “role of aesthetics in securing the common sense of bourgeois liberal modernity” while simultaneously “provid[ing] entry to the apprehension of illiberal, uncommon sensibilities” (3). This double valence of the aesthetic is carried into the framework of world unmaking, which looks to identify the role of critical aesthetics in articulating shared conceptions of the “normal world” while also giving rise to articulations of nonnormative worlds where such shared conceptions can no longer function smoothly or in an unquestioned manner.

World unmaking as a practice of reading end-of-world texts also looks to how aesthetic practices participate in the *making visible* of alternate modes of life and

practices of being. The cultivation of a critical posthuman aesthetic within world unmaking draws attention to the onto-epistemological by noticing what *things* and therefore what *concerns* appear at the twilight of the traditional liberal subject of humanism. What calls for our attention *at the end of the world as we've known it* is a matter of pressing bio and geopolitical concern as new formulations of posthuman, ecological ethics emerge alongside new and radical ontologies and materialisms. Critical aesthetics can be understood as a twofold practice of critiquing normativity and the regimes of truth to which it gives rise as well as the pushing out toward unhabituated modes of thought. This practice arises as a much-needed challenge to the normative grounds upon which bio and geopolitical organization of life appears as simple reality. Notions of the “real,” as Yusoff points out, can be used to build worlds that are vastly unequal and in conflict. Norms and their arrangements of being *operationalize* worlds. In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff calls for the rendering of “critical black aesthetics” (11), to critique anew a world history of geologic practices that normalize(d) the violent arrangements of marginalized bodies and earthly matter. According to what orders of thought was it not only possible but *normal* that Black people appeared as inhuman, awaiting circulation in a material economy of extraction and exchange? It is following Yusoff’s prompt that we might consider a practice of critical *posthuman* aesthetics. Such a critique would bear down on the question of the in/human at the end of the world, asking who and what appears in this present arrangement’s wake. This critique also bears down on the struggle to conceive of the human beyond the received traditions of Man and its role in organizing biopolitical life. As Wynter writes,

The struggle of our new millennium will be between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. (“Unsettling” 260)

Critical posthuman aesthetics brings the critique of Man and the “human” into conversation with the world unmaking practices of reading end-of-world narratives for what they make visible. To uncover the potential political thrust of fictional post-apocalyptic worlds we must ask what worlds they bring to an end and to what worlds (beyond the onto-epistemological confines of Man) they may give rise.

In “The Politics of Fiction,” Jacques Rancière argues it would be a mistake to assume fiction has only to do with the development of mere “imaginary worlds in contrast to solid reality” (269). Rather, he writes, fiction, “is first and foremost a structure of rationality” (ibid.). The creation of alternate worlds in fiction relies on the linkages (following Stengers we might also call this importance; following Donna Haraway, knots) created between things and their circumstances and it is upon these linkages that perceptibility and intelligibility rely. Fiction “is a mode of presentation of things that cuts out a frame and places elements within it so as to compose a situation and make it perceptible and intelligible” (ibid.). The linking of things, situations and events “establishes causal connections between them, makes sense of this linkage, and gives to it the modality of the real, the possible, or the necessary” (ibid.). Rancière suggests a “sense of reality” relies on the linking of things and events within a structure of relationality that is intelligible. But this has to do with “formulating . . . [modes] of intelligibility” in which

those links appear meaningful. Rancière warns this formulation of the real, while relational, is not relativistic: “This has nothing to do with any kind of ‘relativism’ about truth. What is at issue is not the truth about facts. It is the form of rationality of their linkage” (ibid.). Fiction relies openly on the necessity of relational linkages when determining the perceptible and the intelligible (i.e. the representable and the thinkable). On the other hand, Rancière warns, those who claim to consider only “solid realities” — the politician, the social scientist, the journalist — forget their own entanglement within structures of rationality and the linkages that underlie “the sense of reality constructed by the dominant discourses that claim to be the mere expression of reality” (269-270). An openness to the constructedness of fiction’s arrangements of rationality amounts to a sort of “‘epistemological’ privilege,” according to Rancière: “it is not obliged to deny its fictional [i.e. *relational*] character” (270). Yet the critical insight for Rancière is the extent to which “fictional forms” are employed in the everyday, through the construction of shared senses of reality. Rather than take on the fictional character of constructed worlds, everyday reality appears “to be imposed by the very obviousness of the real” (ibid). Fiction holds an important key for attuning thought to the processes of relationality that undergird reality: “it can better teach us the multiple ways of creating a sense of reality and their links with the forms of the social order” (ibid.). The break with a normative sense of reality represents an opportunity to encounter things and their situations outside the formula of habituated thought.

For Rancière, one’s sense of reality is conditioned by conventional arrangements of the sensible and their taking shape within habituated modes of thought. The nature of aesthetic inquiry, then, has to do with the formulations that partition the sensible from the

nonsensical, the reasonable from the unreasonable. In his work, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière calls attention to the distribution of the sensible which conditions “what presents itself to sense experience” (2).¹⁹ What appears to thought (the thinkable, the representable) relies on arrangements of knowledge that condition the nature of the intelligible in advance. These arrangements of knowledge have to do with “a specific regime of identifying and reflecting” (ibid.). For Rancière, critical judgments about the arts, often presented under the guise of universal principles and matters of objective cognition, rely on operations of reason that are legislated and legitimated through dominant discourses and political arrangements.

For Rancière the aesthetic takes on a particular political valence when one begins to question the modes of governance and authority used to authorize some ways of being over and above others. The aesthetic is the modality through which the sensible is conditioned. The sensible, for Rancière, becomes an

order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular

¹⁹ In Yusoff’s work, the partitioning of the sensible, as the *technē* of optics, has to do with world making as it has to do directly with the distribution of subjectivity and the parceling out of the world. The designation of Black bodies as inhuman is a function of an assignment of metaphorical values: “It is only through the level of the symbolic that the substitutions between Black and Gold can be mobilized” (73). Geologic principles are productive of subjectivity, are “racially coded” and “ideologically maintained” (ibid.). To demonstrate how aesthetic judgments of inhuman value influence world un/making Yusoff quotes Franz Fanon who in *The Wretched of the Earth* argues “the world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. . . When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species” (39).

activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (*Dis-Agreement* 29)

In her work on aesthetics in the humanities, Chuh suggests the “overtly political edge of aesthetic inquiry” lies within a critique of communal sensibility or “common sense” that dictates and legitimates what is collectively thought to be normal and reasonable (23). Chuh argues the establishment of normative frameworks for understanding reality and subjectivity naturalizes certain ways of being and knowing in the world while categorizing other ways as abnormal or unreasonable. The regulatory power of social norms and the status quo generate material and discursive conditions that contour the world through “the reproduction of hegemonic social formations” (14). By generating and proliferating normative and thereby acceptable ways of being and acting in the world these regulatory forces of common sensibility “organize the material conditions of existence in aggressively hierarchical ways” (ibid). The formation of the naturalized subject, Chuh argues, is structured by the forces of “geography, class structure, racialization, gender relations, sexuality, indigeneity” that are “structurally and culturally conditioned, coordinated by political and social relations unfolding in multiple scales” (ibid). Because of social historical formations and practices, Chuh argues, the naturalized subject *appears as* the bourgeois individual developed under the project of liberal humanism, a version of humanism “that has come to have the effect of truth through the powerful machinery of modernity” (5). The subject is delimited by naturalized narratives of the willful and rationally intentional liberal and neoliberal subject responsible for securing her or his own good life (the liberal-ethical subject), or the continuing stronghold of a developmental notion of

civilization (dependent on the liberal-political subject), that asserts and assumes the privileged destiny of humanity. (14)

Yet posthuman and end-of-world narratives trouble the possibilities and autonomy of the presumed liberal-ethical subject and developmental promises of liberal-political subjectivity. These narratives can be read for the structures of rationality and acts of attention that counter the production of the bourgeois liberal subject and its regulatory ideals.

For Chuh, aesthetic inquiry has to do with recuperating the political edge of the sensible in order to keep hold of the unresolved question of the human and the humanities after the formulation of Man is no longer in operation. Returning to the question of aesthetics reorients thought within the “relationship among the senses and the processes and structures of value making by which certain sensibilities become *common* sense and others are disavowed, subjugated, or otherwise obscured” (ibid.). Charting the path of “illiberal humanisms” for Chuh amounts to recovering the disavowed, subjugated, and obscured expressions of being and knowing that have remained outside articulations of the human in dominant discourses and literary representations. While much classical literature has participated in the making-visible of reigning humanisms, in Chuh’s formulation, the literature at stake in this dissertation participates in the making-visible of inhumanisms or other humanisms, of the others and alternatives to those figures centralized in representations of “the normal world.” In this sense these texts are read in light of their ability to respond to theorist Lisa Lowe’s call for thinking and writing beyond our inherited knowledge. In her work *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lowe writes that the present is so overburdened with assumptions about freedom “made

universal through liberal political enfranchisement” that “it has become difficult to write or imagine alternative projects or communities” (208). Because of this it is “necessary to think beyond our received humanist tradition and, all the while to imagine a much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now, in which what is foreclosed as unknowable is forever saturating the ‘what-can-be-known’” (ibid.).

The works of Delaney, Vandermeer, and Jemisin considered in this dissertation are an attempt to think with a more “complicated set of stories” that allow us to face Lowe’s project “of visualizing, mourning, and thinking ‘other humanities’ within the received genealogy of ‘the human’” (ibid.). Collected within the framework of world unmaking, these texts can be read as efforts to recover a more expanded and imaginative notion of the world and the lives that inhabit it. While taking place within materially destabilized backgrounds, these texts foreground the experiences and concerns of beings that destabilize inherited concepts of what it means to be human. This recovery follows Wynter’s call to repossess minority discourse in efforts to enrich notions of the human. In her essay “On Disenchanting Discourse,” Wynter writes,

Our present arrangements of knowledge . . . were put in place in the nineteenth century as a function of the epistemic/discursive constitution of the ‘figure of Man.’ . . . Therefore, the unifying goal of minority discourse . . . will necessarily be to accelerate the conceptual ‘erasing’ of the figure of Man. If it is to effect such a rupture, minority discourse must set out to bring closure to our present order of discourse. (208)

Unmade worlds have to do with the dis-arrangements or *derangements* of present knowledge. The framework of world unmaking concerns the conceptual erasing of the

“normal world” and those formulations of Man based on epistemic/discursive conditions that can no longer be assumed in contemporary times. For Wynter the act of bringing the inherited order of discourse to a close requires pushing “beyond the grounding analogic of the episteme or ‘fundamental arrangements of knowledge’ of which our present practice of literary criticism (in effect of normal ‘majority discourse’) is an interconnected component” (433). Such a push means venturing “beyond the ontology of the figure of man and the empowering *normalizing* discourses with which this ‘figure,’ as the projected model/criterion, is still enchantedly constituted” (ibid., emphasis in original).

World unmaking seeks to recuperate the question of the human and human subjectivity, even as, and perhaps, especially as the traditions of the subject of liberal humanism becomes “not available to think with” (Haraway, *Staying* 57). How such traditions become untenable and what happens when they do is the substance of this dissertation. If apocalyptic narratives, in the traditional sense, are deployed to restore order and bring about renewal in new world orders, world unmaking can be deployed as an effort to “stay with the trouble” of disordered worlds that do not end, and in which the stakes of life are still at issue. What “shows up” or what “appears” in these unmade worlds is of particular interest here. Unmade worlds do not subscribe to the discursive or material norms of presumed “reality.” The unstable material conditions for life in an era characterized by ecological, geopolitical, and onto-epistemological uncertainty have reoriented the imperatives of thinking being and ethics in a “post-normal” world (Harman 2012; Robertson 2018). The task of identifying and uprooting the dominant paradigms and metaphysical norms that have given rise to the event of the Anthropocene is of

particular interest to posthumanist and new materialist theory, which increasingly finds synergy between speculative/new materialisms and speculative fiction and its imagined worlds.

Facilitating an exchange between speculative fiction and speculative realism/materialism, world unmaking is a framework for recuperating the question of the human/nonhuman in worlds that have not ended, but continue on, persisting even as they come undone. This recuperation is not effected to resuscitate the human as conceived by liberal humanism, but to revisit the troubled conditions of possibility for both human and nonhuman life — reconceived within worlds that no longer function according to discursive or material norms. Situated as a bridge between speculative fiction and theory, world unmaking attends to the representation of worlds after inherited dominant frameworks of the human are no longer functional. World unmaking offers a new framework for conceiving the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it where liberal human subjectivity and knowledge practices are destabilized in order to make way for the appearance of alternative and yet-to-come possibilities of life.

Dynamic Worlding Versus Flat Ontology

The call for renewed readings of material geopolitical histories and the unresolved question of the human bears down on recent trends in posthumanism and the material/ontological turn. World unmaking looks to “stay with the trouble” of the human and commits to thought that does not elide but signifies racialized and oppressive histories of Western rationalism and colonization. Within this light, some versions of the posthuman — those that generate a flat, undifferentiated realm of subject being and

existence devoid of history²⁰ — become increasingly problematic. Flat ontology, a fundamental concept within speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, is defined by Manuel DeLanda as “one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status” (58). Reaching back to the roots of posthumanism in Martin Heidegger’s work on fundamental, ontological anti-humanism, the emphasis of ontological sameness within a general category of being or things has been an important theoretical move for those wanting to critique humanism and its metaphysical premises. Yet amid the important theoretical turns of the ontological and material turn, there are ongoing concerns about the erasure of difference *between* humans, especially as that category has remained exclusive and occupied by only some human kinds.²¹ And one cannot help but consider the ways that the insistence on the

²⁰ The tension I am addressing here between flat ontologies and dynamic worlding has much to do with thinking historically or practicing theory grounded in histories of oppression. Harkening back to a quotation used above from Ramón Saldívar, we are asked to consider how racialized authors write novels that do not create fantasized escapes from history, but use the speculative mode to reveal the “manifold surface features of history” (594). It is within these folds that the intimacies of oppression are stored. Speculative theoretical practices that discuss the human within the grand and smoothed-out registers of Humanity, Being, Existents, Actants, Agents, Species-being or even Humankind run the risk of overlooking these historical folds and thus eliminating *some* existential experience from the ground of theoretical concern.

²¹ The rise of speculative realism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology has generated new questions about the nature and knowability of objects in contemporary metaphysics. The idea of fundamental sameness or a flat ontological horizon is, in a way, foundational to posthumanist critiques of ontological hierarchies that would, for example, place the being of the human over and above the being of the animal. Yet, recent work within the camps of speculative realism, new materialism and object-oriented ontology abandons ontological hierarchy — but not necessarily to critique humanism and its role in racial, gendered, and class divisions. Much recent work within these emerging theoretical fields demonstrates a deepening concern for the ontological, over and above the ontic. For some, the exclusion of ontic, social, historical, and existential matters in theory is problematic; for others it is intentional. As speculative realist Levi Bryant writes: “These are ontological matters, not ethical matters” (“Flat Ontology” np). The theoretical consideration of objects (including human beings) without attention to race,

sameness between human being and other kinds of biotic or material being might troublingly echo the rationalizations used to legitimize slavery, dispossession, genocide, and other dark Western and colonial histories. Perhaps one way to think about the useful work of posthumanism and to bring the necessary critiques of humanism into a more comfortable alliance with current trends in speculative realism and new materialism is to consider the productive difference between flat ontology and dynamic worlding. While flat ontologies emphasize an undifferentiated plane of significance within which being takes place, dynamic worlding offers a theoretical posthumanist analytic that makes an ethical commitment to hold onto the ways in which histories, material realities, and dominant discursive practices generate dissimilarities and inequities within the horizon of being.

The theoretical erasure of ontological hierarchies that prize some beings over and above others has been critical to challenging the privilege of the human while elevating the status of nonhuman matter, which can no longer be adequately thought as a general category of stable, simple, inert objects over which human observers preside. Instead, a reinvigorated sense of the vibrant and agential qualities of matter has made way for

class, gender, and ability remains problematic for many posthumanist scholars. For foundational texts related to flat ontology within speculative realism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology see Graham Harman's *Object-oriented ontology a new theory of everything* and *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Levi Bryant's *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, and Steven Shaviro's *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. For theorists concerned about the ethical and political implications of flat ontology and flattened posthumanisms see Andrew Cole's "The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies," Cristin Ellis's *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, and Vadim Kvachev's "Unflat Ontology: Essay on the Poverty of Democratic Materialism."

transformed relations between the human and nonhuman, wherein important rethinkings of capacity, causality, subjectivity, and life fare.²² However some recent trends within posthumanism elide the call for attention to the geo and biopolitical histories of materiality and how they intersect with the conditions of possibility for (some) subject being. For example, in his work *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, object-oriented ontologist Timothy Morton suggests that the material turn continues the “great humiliation of the human following Copernicus to Darwin” (16). To this event of humiliation he ascribes the removal of human consciousness from the centre of psychic life in the work of Sigmund Freud; the subject’s economic dislocation in the work of Karl Marx; the loss of epistemological centrality in the works of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida who “displace the human from the center of meaning-making” (17). Object-oriented ontology extends this humiliation “to a yet more extreme limit” by situating the human in inescapable but uncontrollable material circumstances that outstrip the human’s spatial and temporal frames of existence and comprehension (ibid.). As Morton puts it, object-oriented ontology “radically displaces the human by insisting that my being is not everything it’s cracked up to be — or rather that the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine” (ibid.). In yet another iteration: “in a relatively *flat ontology* . . . there is hardly any difference between a person and a pincushion” (14). The reduction of human being within a flattened ontological realm of thing-being signals a welcome end of the world, for Morton: “Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that

²² For an overview of the fundamental theses of ‘flat ontology’ see Ray Brassier’s “Against Flat Ontologies.”

reality is significant for them alone” (108). Morton’s configuration does hold political and ethical direction in his telling, in that this newfound *likeness* with nonhuman things ushers humanity into an “intimacy” with “the entities that coexist with us” (108). The end of the world for Morton represents the end of harmful forms of metaphysical anthropocentrism: “we now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*” (ibid.). In distinction from Morton, Yusoff’s work warns of an enduring elision and distortion of social and political histories embedded in the flattened ontological realm. As theorists seek to reinvigorate a sense of the material and nonhuman world, flat ontology runs the risk of producing what Yusoff calls an “undifferentiated and indifferent politics” (4). The “view from nowhere” through which “the Anthropocene extends its purview” (ibid.) relies on certain normalized ideals of the liberal humanist subject and its world — a structuring of reality to which some beings and forms of life have never belonged. The making of inhuman subjects in flat ontology shares an uncomfortable relationship with the making of Black inhuman bodies into the non-subjects of colonialism and slavery in Yusoff’s framework. These histories of colonialism and slavery invoked processes of *subject unmaking*, the categorical organization of things into being (white, Western subjects) and nonbeing (Black bodies, gold). The construction of “biopolitical categories of nonbeing” allowed for the trafficking and exchange of not only minerals, but Black slaves (5). Thus, for Yusoff, “this unmaking of subjects constitutes a warp of dispossession in the progressive narrative of collective accumulation or geologic commons in which ‘we’ all share” (ibid.). Following Christina Sharpe’s work on post-slavery subjectivities, Yusoff, in dramatic distinction to Morton, warns of the “*monstrous*

intimacy” of the “rendering of nonbeings . . . through the designation of the inhuman” (ibid., emphasis mine). Intimacy in Yusoff’s telling does not equate with the building of alliances, but instead functions as a potentially monstrous mechanism of order through which power distributes vulnerability and relegates inhuman (i.e. Black) life.

Arguing along parallel lines, queer theorist Jinthana Haritaworn highlights the vulnerability of identifying as nonhuman, especially as “inhuman ‘orientations’ intersect with different proclivities towards life and death” (“Decolonizing the Non/Human” 212). In response to posthuman paradigms that seek to flatten the human/nonhuman ontological plane, Haritaworn poses this question: “for whom might identifying with the nonhuman be too risky a move?” (ibid.). Identification with the nonhuman when considering “queer inhumanism” discloses the dangers of subject unmaking amid histories of “racism and colonialism that highlight starkly uneven changes and vulnerabilities” (ibid.). In light of the material/ontological turn, Haritaworn writes, “it once again seems important to consider the uneven terms of which bodies interpellated as ‘queer’ or as ‘racialized’ are sorted into various biopolitical and necropolitical molds” (ibid.). Haritaworn offers a critical perspective for those seeking affinity with the nonhuman, suggesting it is important “to forge accounts of the nonhuman that actively interrupt the creation of deficient and inferior surplus populations” (ibid.). The monstrous intimacy that can inhere in formulations of the inhuman does not, importantly, lead Yusoff or Haritaworn to call off the theoretical pursuit of the nonhuman in emerging posthuman materialisms. Rather, Yusoff asks how reformulating the question of the nonhuman can be informed by “the material language of the inhuman and its production of the subjective category of nonbeing” that “set up historical deformations and present impossibilities for subjective

life” (6). In particular, Yusoff utilizes Saidiya Hartman’s notion of the “afterlives of slavery” (1997) to ask how the unmade worlds of some subjects “constitute the materiality of the Anthropocene and its natal moment” (ibid.). ‘Afterlives’ remind us of the complex and often overlooked material histories that condition the possibilities for what Yusoff wants to call “geologic life” in the Anthropocene.²³ By reading the material pasts of inhuman subjects into the present and possible futures of the Anthropocene, Yusoff commits to examining “the epistemological framings and categorizations that produce the material and discursive world building through geology in both its historical and present forms” (7). The material and geological turn, for Yusoff, represents the opportunity to reintegrate histories of the earth, its mattering, its extraction, its racist and colonial configurations into ongoing examinations of human/nonhuman relations. Orders of knowing and the organization of life are granted a (potentially) new articulation in the Anthropocene and yet the many universal claims regarding humanity and the world already employed in descriptions of the new era “[render] a violent homogenization of subjective affects and material possibilities” (50). World unmaking looks to explore how end-of-world narratives in speculative fiction might contribute to more dynamic articulations of the posthuman in ways that undo the “violent homogenization” of subjectivities by making way for alternative imaginings of worlds that foreground the others of the late liberal human subject. That is, world unmaking seeks the dynamic and diverse worldings of those lives and bodies ostracized, monstracized, overlooked, or

²³ Yusoff writes, “When I use the term *geologic life*, I do so to signal the corporeality of geology as a material embodiment and a systematic framing of materiality that has geopolitical and biopolitical consequences for the possibilities of being and nonbeing.” n.d. 1, page 3

underrepresented in the history of settler, late liberal world making: the queer, the femme, the weird, the racialized, the silenced, the decolonized, the nonhuman.

The work of imagining other, possible worlds and futures set in the trajectory of the Anthropocene cannot be quietly disentangled from the monstrous intimacy of subjugated lives with the planet's material histories. Yusoff cautions, "the move *toward* a more expansive notion of humanity must be made with care" (50). Can worlds also be *unmade* with care? World unmaking recognizes that worlds are simultaneously made and unmade, impinge upon and, at times, come at the cost of one another. But unmade worlds also carry the seeds of worlds to come. World unmaking is what allows alternate worlds to appear. Narratives about the end of the world or the end of the human are also, always, narratives about beginnings (importantly, even if these are *the beginnings of afterlives*). World unmaking as a framework for reading narratives of the end thus attends to how such narratives figure the undoing of dominant orders of discourse and representation that structure ways of being and knowing, and thereby contour the possibilities of life in possible worlds. The "care" of world unmaking comes about by attending to what the undoing of dominant orders *makes visible* and the consequences of that undoing for the possibilities of life. Such caring is an important part of Donna Haraway's work on the entangled practices of SF, which, in her configuration, involve science fiction, speculative feminism, speculative fabulation, speculative thinking and many a "risky game of worlding and storytelling" (*Staying* 13).²⁴ Part of the challenge of thinking in the

²⁴ Haraway's broad and inclusive definition of SF signals a broad array of speculative practices, all of which are relevant here. Like Haraway, I am most interested in the "web of SF worlding[s]" (*Staying* 14) that speculative thought — in fiction and in theory — makes possible. I do not focus much attention on the definitions and conventions that gird genres. Although it is worthwhile noting all three of the authors considered in this

Anthropocene, or, for Haraway, thinking beyond the Anthropocene, involves having “to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars” (ibid.). Haraway pulls together speculative practices in fiction and theory in order to demonstrate how worlds are dynamically interwoven, even while they compete and persist among forces of disorder. Attention paid to how such competition and persistence occurs, its influence on the potential for life, amounts, for Haraway, to “staying with the trouble.” Rather than resolving questions by appeals to universalisms or simplifying quandaries through reversion to particulars, Haraway situates her interventions in the tangled conception “becoming-with” (*Companion; Staying*). “Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are . . . rendered capable” (*Staying* 12). Following Isabelle Stengers in her “speculative thinking” around cosmopolitics, Haraway offers a reminder that radical thought and decisions about materiality “must take place somehow in the presence of those who will

dissertation are genre-benders of one form or another. As such a variety of SF terms are deployed throughout this dissertation. The following chapters will consider texts that properly belong to the categories of science fiction (SF), speculative fiction (SF) and science fiction and fantasy (SFF). But those categories themselves are fraught. And their boundaries have been problematically managed by generic gatekeepers who are themselves entangled in histories of racism, white supremacy, elitism and conservatism. For our purposes here, I think it best to follow Haraway’s inclusive impulse when considering what works belong under the SF banner. Accordingly, the terms SF, SFF, speculative fiction and science fiction are all used throughout this dissertation, at times signalling historical trends (Delany’s *Dhalgren* was written before the term speculative fiction had become *en vogue*) and at other times reflecting contemporary genre discourse. While some of the contested history of these terms is addressed, this dissertation does not deal specifically with the battles over the nature of SF. For those interested in such battles, see Paul L. Thomas’ *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres*; Keith M. Booker’s *Contemporary Speculative Fiction*; Brian Willems’ *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*; Crawford Killian and Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *A Writer’s Guide to Speculative Fiction: Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

bear their consequences” (ibid.). Stengers advocates for a kind of speculative thought that recognizes “the plurality of modes of importance, which are part of the self-same reality in which we participate” (“The Insistence of Possibilities” 13). But what appears as “important” for Stengers (informed by Alfred Whitehead) “can never be reduced to a de facto or given situation: it implies attachment to something in a disappearing world, dwelling on possible becomings, pressing for, insisting on, all those ‘might haves’ or ‘could bes’ implicit in situations” (ibid.). Reaching out towards the “possibilities of importance” in a situation (a scientist kneeling over a tidal pool, for instance) relies on speculative thought, for Stengers, because to do so “means intensifying the sense of possibles it harbours, as expressed by the struggles and claims to another way of making it exist” (17). Stengers adds, “this is why speculative thinking is so readily found in stories and tales, which, like science fiction explore other possible trajectories” (18).²⁵ For Haraway, a reflection on the difference of potentialities as they persist in situations, and differ across experience prompts her to rethink materiality as a becoming-with bodies, kinds, genders, and genres (*Staying* 12.). The weight of the possible bears down not only on the importance or significance of a situation but how that importance or significance bears differently across diverse bodies and even competing lives. Speculative fiction, alongside speculative theory, holds serious and ethical implications for such

²⁵ Stengers also highlights the importance of speculative fiction’s work to push past the boundaries of the presumed ‘normal world’ to feminist lines of thought: “With Donna Haraway we would like to highlight the strong link between the ‘speculative’ type of science-fiction pioneered by Ursula Le Guin in the early 1970s and the so-called second-wave feminism. For this feminism, science-fiction was an experimental field of thought which resists the reasons justifying why the world had to be the one we know and not a different one, that is, resisting the great modern narratives of progress and development,” (n.18, page 18).

considerations which, for Haraway, take place through “practices of worlding” in that these modes of contemplation render thought “competent to make a home world for staying with the trouble” (ibid.). Haraway writes:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (ibid.)

Along these lines, it matters what worlds end, what worlds begin and what stories determine who and what shows up. Stengers suggests speculative thought intervenes in the fundamental tension between the possible and the probable: the possible returns again and again as a revolt against the authoritative insistence of the probable. She writes,

what we need to activate today is a thinking that commits to a possible, by means of resisting the probable — fighting any interpretation subscribing to the irresistible nature of unbounded capitalism as if that were our immutable destiny, even the conduit conveying messages of progress and emancipation, whereas in fact it denotes the desertification of our worlds and our inability to think that what we care about might have a future. (18)

The probable, for Stengers, stands embedded in a history of thought, rationalizing its own operations, legitimating some becomings but not others. Stengers warns against critical thought that elides questions of importance in a turn towards what can be explained as rational within the probable. A “clash between scientists and critical thinkers” in the 1990s propelled a rationalist impulse in theory that led to what Stengers considers a “dead-end situation” (“The Insistence of Possibles” 19). Such “critical,

demystifying thinking, was ‘right’ but this being ‘right’ extended the desert, ratified capitalist appropriation, was an insult to that to which practitioners are attached, to what binds them” (ibid.). The more response-able task of speculative thought, is to attend to what binds thought and what is excluded to/by it: “making perceptible the becomings eluding it” (ibid.). In her work *Cosmopolitics*, Stengers outlines the power of speculative thought in operationalizing the possible over the probable and by placing under question the historical logics of the probable, of the world that is. To think speculatively is to engage with the potentialities that might allow the world to become something other than what it is, to become what it is not yet. She writes:

The diagnosis of becoming is not the starting point of a strategy but rather a speculative operation, a thought experiment. [It does not have] any role other than that of creating possibles, that is, of making visible the directives, evidences, and rejections that those possibles must question before they themselves can become perceptible. [It is] first and foremost a struggle against probabilities, a struggle wherein the actors must define themselves against probabilities. In other words, it is a question of creating words that are meaningful only when they bring about their own reinvention, words whose greatest ambition would be to become elements of histories that, without them, might have been slightly different. (12-13)

World unmaking is a framework for responding to the challenge of speculative thought as a mechanism of *making visible* some alternatives to the “normal world.” By attending not only to the creation of possibles, but also to the “making visible the directives, evidences, and rejections that those possibles must question before they themselves can become

perceptible,” world unmaking asks how we might responsibly attend to the interplay of the probable and the possible. This reading takes place not only in light of the possible worlds to come, but the weight of a real and probable world to be overcome.

II. *Dhalgren*: Queering Meaning in the Age of Instability

To be is to be queer because to be is to be singular.

— Geoffrey Bennington, “Just Queer”

What is at stake for me is the shape of the future.

— De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism*

Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* is a notoriously difficult work of science fiction. The novel, published in 1975, caused discomfort for its deviance from and challenge to the SF genre’s presumed norms.²⁶ This would not have surprised Delany. The author wrote in playful defiance of the conventions and norms that dictated what his writing, in order to be considered science fiction proper, ought to be. He pondered the boundaries of the generic conventions undergirding SF, and he purposively wrote beyond them. Writing in this resistant manner, Delany found himself curious about the breakdown of convention through the explicitly *un-conventional* and what the non-normative might show about the flexibility and uncertainty inherent in the borders built to legitimize SF as a literary pursuit. For Delany the urgency around the need for definitions, the desire to fix

²⁶ *Dhalgren* faced criticism for its meta-literary qualities and poststructuralist influences that some felt blurred the line between science fiction and science fiction criticism. Delany himself said that he became increasingly interested in the latter in the early 1970s, just before *Dhalgren*’s publication. Delany also thought that it was the pushing of SF’s generic boundaries that gave rise to more robust critical conversations: “But it was only when the functional limitation on these generic aspects began to break down that the critical question — in all senses of the phrase — became “What is the SF genre?” (“Science Fiction and Criticism” 191).

the necessary and sufficient conditions for “true” SF,²⁷ spoke to the broader problem with an insistence upon pure identities, whether generic, gay, or racial. Delany was critical of that purifying impulse, finding instead that the conventions that supposedly determined the true form of literature or SF — much like the conventions designed to safeguard the identity of a “true” gay man — fall flat in the face of the individual experience or the experience of an individual thing — which are more properly characterized not by likeness but by difference and excess. “*All genres resist definition,*” Delany notes in the interview “Science Fiction and Criticism: The *Diacritics* Interview” (*Silent Interviews* 191). “If SF were definable, then it would be the only genre that was!” In a similar vein,

²⁷ In the book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, literary critic Darko Suvin articulated a formula for the identification and authentication of works of science fiction, arguing that “no field of studies and rational inquiry can be interrogated unless and until it is at least roughly delimited” (16). He further outlined a particular definition of science fiction: “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (7-8). In direct response, Delany writes: “It is, of course, those words ‘necessary’ and ‘sufficient’ that make this a proposed definition. Well, the fact is that the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition in a literary work are simply and blatantly insufficient to produce SF. If they interact in one way, they produce fantasy. If they interact in another, they produce surrealism. If they interact in still another, they produce criticism. And it can be argued that as well as insufficient, they are not really necessary either. There are too many space-operas, as familiar to readers as the last fifty of them read, in which there is no cognitive thrust at all. And if these are excluded — by definition — from the genre, then we have no definition at all. Nor is that even taking on the rather considerable problem of describing, in a necessary and sufficient manner, just what ‘estrangement’ and ‘cognition’ mean in an SF context anyway. But this notion that SF is somehow definable is an idea that haunts the academic discussion of SF as much as it haunts the informal discussion that has filled the fanzines since '39. If SF were definable, then it would be the only genre that was! No one has found the necessary and sufficient conditions for poetry. No one has found the necessary and sufficient conditions for tragedy, for the novel, for fiction. If SF is, as Suvin calls it, ‘a full fledged literary genre,’ why should it be the single one to have necessary and sufficient conditions?” C.f. “Science Fiction and Criticism: The *Diacritics* Interview” in *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics: A Collection of Written Interviews*.

Delany might have suggested *that if the queer identity or the Black identity was definable, then it would be the only identity that was*. In the place of an emphasis on identity and the politics that foment around categories and their imperatives, Delany emphasizes difference. “Differences are what create individuals,” he writes in “Coming/Out” (88).

Identities are what create groups and categories. Identities are thus conditions of comparative simplicity that complex individuals might move toward, but (fortunately) never achieve — until society, tired of the complexity of so much individual difference, finally, one way or the other, imposes an identity on us. (88-89)

He concludes that identities are “by their nature, reductive” and so “you do not need an identity to become yourself; you need an identity to become *like* someone else” (ibid.).

As Jeffrey Allen Tucker writes in his book *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity and Difference*, Delany leans into the “impurity of genres” — a notion inspired, as Delany notes, in part by a read of Jacques Derrida and his essay “*Le Loi de genre*.”²⁸

For Tucker, “genres, like genders, can be bent; that is their purpose, as well as Delany’s own” (15).²⁹ Delany’s orientation towards genre as well as gender becomes a queer dis-orientation, one that shifts away from the direction of literal meaning and adherence to

²⁸ In “Science Fiction and Criticism: The *Diacritics* Interview” Delany writes: “But we’d do better to turn to something like Derrida’s “*La Loi de genre*,” which is nothing but an interrogation of generic *uncertainties*, as a model for where to locate, at the theoretical level, our generic problems” (192).

²⁹ In his work *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, andré m. carrington suggests that science fiction participates in the creation of social order and considers gender, genre, and race as similar in that each acts as an “organizing principle of cultural production” (2).

convention and toward a practice of reading that asks how one uses referents to obtain meaning in the first place. Tucker sees evidence of queer theory in Delany's thinking on the question of SF and its generic belonging: "Delany's analysis of SF shifts emphasis from what the genre *is* to how it is read, in a fashion similar to the way Butler's critique of identity shifts the focus from ontology to performativity" (15). For Delany, what links conversations around the identity of SF and subject identity is the function (the edicts and limitations) of language. "Without identities . . . language would be impossible (because categories would not be possible, and language requires categories). Still, in terms of subjects, identity remains a highly problematic sort of reduction and cultural imposition" (*Shorter* 89).

Dhalgren offers readers the opportunity to read for *unconventional* subjectivity in the unmade world of Bellona, a burning, shifting apocalyptic city where linguistic, material, and ontological norms are subject to breakdown and freeplay. Within a world caught amidst the breakdown of these norms, the unacceptable may appear, strangely, as acceptable. Delany was celebrated as breaking new ground with *Dhalgren*, a novel that some consider "the inaugural Afrofuturist take on the inner city" (Moynagh 221, note 8). With its ghettoized enclaves and street-centred social dramas, Delany describes *Dhalgren* as a "fairly pointed dialogue with all the depressed and burned-out areas of America's great cities" and, as such, "threatening" to American self-identity and fantasies of urban progress (*Silent Interviews* 85). Rather than the capacitated city dwellers of America's cities of promise, *Dhalgren* presents an unexplained "nonnormal situation" that considers the lives, concerns, appetites, desires, and wanderings of socially 'undesirable' individuals who survive "social disaster" in alleyways and abandoned buildings (36). Delany notes himself

that the subject matter of the novel was controversial, not because it was dense and technically challenging to read, but because it figured central characters that traditional readers of science fiction did not care about (ibid.). In a 1983 interview with academics Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery, Delany recounts a conversation in which an academic told him, “I’m just not interested in the people you write about. I can’t believe they’re important in the greater scheme of things” (ibid.). While at the same time, Delany recalls receiving a significant amount of fan mail about *Dhalgren* which included messages like, “. . . this book is about my friends;” “This book is about people I know;” “This book is about the world I live in” (ibid.). Delany calls attention to the ways in which acceptability and sensibility are social and discursive orders that contour the conditions under which Black and minoritized individuals must find their human belonging. The threat that emerges for high culture holders, Delany insists, is in *Dhalgren*’s social commentary that indicates

that when society pulls the traditional supports out from under us, we all effectively become, not the proletariat, but the *lumpen* proletariat. It says that the complexity of “culture” functioning in a gang of delinquents led by some borderline mental case is no less and no more than that functioning at a middle-class dinner part. (ibid.)

In reading *Dhalgren* for world unmaking, one can, following Delany, read for a disruption of social identity. After all, *Dhalgren*’s protagonist is a purposeless, nameless amnesiac — a subject that in many ways cannot be sutured finally to any stable identity throughout the novel. Reading for world unmaking, readers look to how the end of the presumed normal world (or representatives of its alternatives) can be used as a tool to break away from

convention and normalcy to attend to what paradigms and underrepresented forms of life many find representation and emerge. There is no one way to read *Dhalgren* (or any text as Delany would argue) and there is no final or accurate way to determine what the work means. But following Delany's own advice,³⁰ we might look to how *Dhalgren* calls attention to the practices of referentiality that guide our presumptions about the world and how it can be known. *Dhalgren*'s challenges to referential reading permeate the work structurally (without a formal beginning or end the book can be read as a mobius strip), linguistically, and diagetically. Yet what Delany provides through the work is an experience of a-referential reading that intentionally frustrates a reader's reliance on background assumptions and presumed knowledge about subjectivity and reality. The result is a challenge to the reliance on such assumptions and presumptions not just in reading but in navigating through reality in everyday life in the mundane world.

The challenge *Dhalgren* presents to readers is apparent from the text's opening passage. *Dhalgren* begins with a dislocated scene: the text's unnamed protagonist is crouched on a hill in the dark among leaves and vines. The immediate environment is a throng of sensory inputs that seem to overlap and entangle the material and immaterial

³⁰ Delany notes that criticism does not need to perform referential readings to be useful. Without saying what role criticism ought to perform, Delany does offer one path forward to critical readers: "At least one purpose of criticism is to give utterance to (or fix names to, or even to create anew) the a-referential patterns that order references. The relation between orders of reference, orders of meaning, orders of fiction, which is the relation we deal with when we talk about the relation between 'science fiction' and 'science fiction criticism,' has always been slippery. One writer writes a text about an imagined experience. Another comes along and writes a text about an experience he or she imagined — what else is insight and understanding? — about reading the first text. The second writer is called a critic" ("Science Fiction and Criticism: The *Diacritics* Interview" 187).

world. There is an interplay between light and dark, sound and silence, movement and stillness that imbues the scene's shadows and intermittent wind with an animate power. The man, who we later will come to know as "Kid" (among other variants), listens to his "breath sound tumble down the ledges," while "reflected moonlight flittered" and "the leaves winked" (1). The shifting interaction between aspects of the landscape, the environment and the characters creates a sense that what is *observable* is not *comprehensible*, at least not exhaustively so. "What had been wind was a motion in brush below . . . She stood up, two dozen feet down and away, wearing only shadows the mood dropped from the viney maple; moved, and the shadows moved on her" (*ibid.*). The woman is composed as a feature of the landscape: the wind becomes motion becomes the woman who wears shadows dropped by the moon. The perceived overlap between the environment and the woman confounds Kid's ability to process her facial attributes and expression. ". . . He *still* could not make out her expression for the leaf dappling" (2). Kid works to determine her racial character, describing her physical features as suggesting Asian heritage. Her "cheekbones were Orientally high," and yet, "her eyebrows were un-Orientally heavy." Kid seems to insist to himself "she *was* Oriental" and listens for an accent (2). But when the woman speaks, "you've come!," she does so in a "musical Midwestern Standard" (*ibid.*). Kid is unable to stabilize her indeterminate racial identity amid her entangled appearing as both a human character and earthy feature of an animate landscape. This first encounter serves to "[heighten] the instability of our perceptions and our uncertainty over the governing norms of [*Dhalgren's*] fictional world" (Jerng 251). The mingling of environment (background) and human character (foreground) creates uncertainty for the reader regarding what objects to attend to and *to what ends*. Both light

and shadow play a participatory role in concealing and revealing the scene and the woman to both Kid and the reader: “Motion rearranged the shadow, baring one breast. There was a lozenge of light over one eye. Calf and ankle were luminous before leaves” (*Dhalgren* 2). Delany utilizes the inseparability of subject and object, foreground and background, to track “the way Kid’s perception of the world constantly shift[s] because of reinterpretations of what he sees” (Jerng 251). In “A World of Difference: Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* and the Protocols of Racial Reading,” Mark Chia-Yon Jerng suggests Delany’s use of indeterminate descriptors for the woman and her comingled representation among the objects of the background environment “alerts us to the discursive rules — an economy of language — by which we generate perceptions” (252).

Dhalgren confounds the readerly experience of safely importing background presumptions about ethnicity and material reality into the world as Kid experiences it. There is no smooth transition of normalcy from “our world” to the world expressed by Delany. The description of the woman, variously revealed and concealed by moonlight, and her association with “oriental” features “cannot signify in conventional ways; it does not disclose the background of the character, telling us something about the character’s history, ancestry, or social location” (252). Instead her appearance “only attains significance within the reordered totality of signs and features of the world *Dhalgren* presents” (ibid.). The novel disrupts and plays upon the reader’s desire to import background assumptions about the world, the environment and human experience, ultimately demonstrating “the failure of this imposition” (253).

Race, here, is related not to practices of identity formation but to practices of world construction, as it is an effect of how readers either can or cannot import

beliefs from their world into the background of the text. Whether or not one attends to the racial marker is directly related to the cognitive activity of making sense of the world as a whole. (254)

Delany, Jerng writes, “redistributes the reader’s attention to race by juxtaposing racial markers with other contingent factors of the landscape” (ibid.). Yet it is not only in regard to race and racial markers that Delany introduces such confounding articulations. Instead, the novel plays with and troubles the portrayals of things of all kinds, making them indiscrete, incoherent and both ontologically and epistemologically unmanageable. For the reader, this presents a challenge: what one knows about the *normal* world offers little direction when it comes to navigating and comprehending Kid’s experiences in *Dhalgren*. The novel forces a deconstructive encounter with conventional readings of identity by refusing their importation within its disordered world. For both the reader and Kid, the practices of representation and observation do not conform to conventional norms. For this reason, the reader shares a certain sense of disorientation with Kid. Just as he cannot comprehend his surroundings, or rely on presumptions of what *should be*, neither can the reader: both must employ a certain technique of deferral. This deferral “produces a commentary on our desire to . . . exercise a certain form of ‘fictive coherence’ upon the world of the novel” (253). The reader attempts to lay down a coherent framework for understanding the world of the novel, despite this world’s unfamiliarity. The reader is in a continuous state of gathering, sorting, mapping in an effort to gain a semblance of orientation so the mystery of the world’s incoherence may be re/solved. And yet, at the novel’s end, many of those gathered moments, references, objects or conversations cannot be related back to the text as a whole. The narrative

structure holds objects and subjects in a state of perpetual fluidity as they emerge within events or sets of conditions. The text is meant to remain in a state of *in-coherence*, where things in their appearing do not cohere within a larger interpretative structure. The result is a readerly experience in which semiotic and hermeneutic referents are held in permanent suspension. No order is to be found in a cogent economy of meaning. By employing this narrative strategy, Delany makes apparent the reader's reliance on background assumptions, presumed coherent structures of representation and the desire to import conventional ideas of the world *into* the other, speculative and alternative worlds of the novel. However, Delany intentionally frustrates this reliance, posing "particular dilemmas for referential reading practices" (255). Instead, as Delany himself describes it, he works to provoke a transformative reading practice, one in which "the reader of the sf story must create a new world that operates by new laws for each new sf story read" (*Starboard Wine* 29). In the chapter "Some Presumptuous Approaches" in *Starboard Wine* Delany sets this practice of readerly world creation in science fiction against the receiving of the "given world" in "mundane fiction:"

The writer of mundane fiction tells a story set against a more or less vividly evoked section of the given world. I say 'given world' rather than 'real world' because the world of the most naturalistic piece of mundane fiction is a highly conventionalized affair; and these conventions, when one studies them, turn out to have far more to do with other works of fiction than with anything "real." (29)

While Delany concedes that the writing of science fictional worlds, too, relies on some manner of convention, he suggests the constitution of science fiction worlds relies on "altered" readings that pay unique attention to the devices used to "direct the play

between the world and the story” (29). The practice of world making in science fiction writing is intended to perform a disruption of normative reading practices and normal-world attunement. Science fiction relies on the breaking open of mundane ways of seeing the ordinary world, according to Delany. This disruption, in large part, relies on recrafting the very landscape which determines-in-advance so much of the ordinariness of the mundane “real” world. These altered, unmade (in that they un-do or defy the laws that provide explanatory frameworks for the “normal” world) landscapes make visible and believable what otherwise would have appeared unbelievable. Delany writes:

What I, as an SF writer, do continually is take *a real relationship* and try to present it believably. This is a task impossible in mundane fiction *because* of the ideological freight borne by the landscape in which the relationship occurs when translated into its nearest ‘literary’ equivalent, but sometimes possible in science fiction by means of a deft distortion of the landscape to relight the relationship so that it becomes visible to those to whom it would have been ‘unbelievable.’ (19)

Delany’s authorial technique makes visible, or “relights,” what has become unthinkable (unbelievable) or simply unthought (mundane). He works to make the unthought thought.

The invisible and the unthought play a specific role in the history of social convention around sex and sexual identity, for theorist Michel Foucault, who in *The History of Sexuality*, writes that repression “[operates] as a sentence to disappear” (4). Nonnormative or queer modes of subject being that were not sanctioned and legitimated by the governing modes of thought and acceptability would be “driven out, denied, and reduced to silence” (ibid.). Such ways of being, such things were denied the articulation

and representation necessary for an affirmed existence. “Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon least manifestation — whether in acts or in words” (ibid.). Read as a queer text, *Dhalgren* provides a queer landscape that sheds the “ideological freight” of the normal world in order to allow the queer world to appear, to be made visible. Yet *Dhalgren* cannot be simply or comfortably described as a representation of or articulation of ‘queer life.’ *Dhalgren* is as much a queer text as it is an exercise in queer theory. While Delany’s depictions of character and environment in *Bellona* are used to challenge governing norms and conventional representations of identity, at a deeper root the “ideological freight” or representational thought and language itself are also deftly distorted. *Dhalgren*, upon this reading, can be said to provide a queer zone for language, within which the governing norms of signification are subject to *queer play*. Throughout the text, Delany plays with the instability of language to disrupt the very figuring of identity within language, using the slipperiness of linguistic acts to point to a fundamental “queerness” (i.e. play) operating at the heart of discourse and metaphysics. By opening up the field of language to playful dis-articulation and perversion, Delany gestures towards the relationship between the queer and the ungovernable, the transgressive and the non-normative. A queer critique of language that invites play into the realm of signification, undercuts the legitimacy of what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism”³¹ that links the presumed authority and stability of linguistic acts to

³¹ In *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida defines phallogocentrism as “the system of metaphysical oppositions” undergirding Western philosophy (20). For more on the relationship between phallogocentrism and the dualisms foundational to dominant discourses and cultures that create racialized and gendered minorities, c.f. Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*; Katherine Hayles’ *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* and *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetic, Literature and Informatics*.

the hierarchical ordering of heteronormative forms of life over and above the perverse and Other modes of being deemed *queer*. Along these lines *Dhalgren* can be read as both a representation of a queer text and a text *queering representation*. If convention and governing norms around identity can enforce a silencing and enclosure of queer possibility, then *Dhalgren* can be read as providing the space for and giving voice to such possibility. The undoing of the normal world in Delany's text counteracts what Foucault calls repression's "injunction to silence, and affirmation of nonexistence" (4). *Dhalgren* is a call to the worlds that exist beyond the normative paradigms of acceptability and the echo of that call reverberates in the ethico-onto-epistemological realm as well. For the unmaking of the normal world in *Dhalgren* allows for the appearance of queer worldmaking and the relighting of those modes of life and ways of being obscured by the shadow of normativity.

And yet what is made visible is not necessarily made comprehensible or coherent within a larger relational structure of plot, storyline, or economy of meaning. A text like *Dhalgren* makes visible (but does not reward) our reliance upon representational schemes — both exegetically as navigators of texts (as a reader) but also diagetically as navigators of worlds (as the character Kid). The impossibility of importing pre-given expectations about what it means to read a text or inhabit a world, forces both readers and characters to more carefully attend to the world *as presented*. *Dhalgren* points to the absence of coincidence between our inner world — our presumptions, interpretations, thoughts, and beliefs — and the world *out there*. In doing so *Dhalgren* provides social commentary on the presumed regulatory aspects of truth and conventions of normativity governing life.

The disorienting experience of navigating or not-really-navigating *Dhalgren* is relatable to the process of making-one's-way-through-everyday-life outside the text.

In the following sections we will explore how world unmaking in *Dhalgren* might prompt what could be considered a queer reading of non-normative materiality and identity. Following the work of queer theorists and the concept of “queer worldmaking,” *Dhalgren* can be read as a conceptualization of queer dis-orientation, which takes place in the absence of epistemological but also socio-bio-political normativity. The first section of this chapter will examine how disrupted notions of identity in *Dhalgren* allow for a paired reading of world unmaking alongside the project of “queer worldmaking.” The second section of this chapter marks the ways Delany uses deconstructive writing and reading practices to point to the queer play at the heart of language and identity. Without a stable discursive paradigm for referentiality and identity, *Dhalgren* queers the very nature of representation as we see through Kid's inability to secure a name and consistent identity. The third section considers how the instability and play at the core of signification does not preclude the possibility of subject being and instead points out towards ways of being that exceed and defy semantic and epistemological reduction. The fourth section considers how the background of Bellona's disrupted environment further bolsters a poststructuralist and also posthumanist critique of metaphysics that reduces the world of things to their appearing. The materially altered landscape in *Dhalgren* frustrates and makes impossible a coherent reading of a stable, knowable subject within a world of stable, knowable objects. Rather than a world of mere objects, we find Bellona imbued with a vibrant material environment that exudes a force and a constitutive power that threatens the presumed human powers of authority, apprehension, and

comprehension. Bellona's shifting landscape forces an ontological and epistemological state of suspension upon the unmade world of *Dhalgren* that invites a reading of materiality alongside the "inventiveness of . . . queer world making and of the queer world's fragility" ("Sex in Public" 548). The final section will examine the aesthetics of world unmaking and the role of identity disruption when writing of worlds that do not mirror the normalcy of mundane reality, but look to unravel the social configuration of that reality.

World Unmaking and Queer Worldmaking

In their 1998 paper "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner advocate for a practice of seeking out "queer zones and other worlds estranged from heterosexual culture" (547). The practice of exploring for such zones and worlds is a fraught exercise. Heteronormativity, far from a localized and simplified concept, is understood by Berlant and Warner as a vastly distributed social force that takes up invisible positions in "institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations" that present the dominant mode of heterosexuality as fixed, coherent and privileged (548, note 2). Alternatives to normative heterosexuality, conversely, lack such traits. There is no fixed and meaningfully "straight" alternative to heteronormativity — there is no "homonormativity" to speak of "because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has" (ibid.). This lack of an alternative to heteronormativity is, for Delany, the reason why "heterosexuals do not usually ask each other, 'What was the moment you realized you were straight?'" (*Shorter* 73). In his essay "Coming/Out," Delany goes on to write that "to know you are straight is

to know you are normal. Thus, to the extent that such ignorance is itself a form of knowledge, not to know you were straight would signify a time when you were dangerously close to *abnormal*” (ibid.). The act of “coming out” or identifying as gay can reify dominant social hegemonies, according to Delany, who argues that which is marginal is often forced to take on a definition the demarcates and reinstates the norm. This is as true for literature as it is for queer individuals, for Delany, who expresses a deep suspicion of the coming-out moment behind the discovery of a gay identity. He writes,

the rhetoric of singular discovery, of revelation, of definition is one of the conceptual tools by which dominant discourses repeatedly suggest that there is no broad and ranging field of events informing the marginal. This is true of science fiction versus the pervasive field of literature; art as compared to social labor; blacks as a marginal social group to a central field of whites; and gay sexuality as marginal to a heterosexual norm. That rhetoric becomes part of the way the marginal is trivialized, distorted, and finally oppressed. (74)

Political organization around the social rightness of heterosexuality in North America was heightened during the research and writing of this dissertation, most explicitly during the campaign and election of former United States President Donald J. Trump in the fall of 2016. In the ensuing years after Trump’s election, the U.S. experienced a surge in hate crimes and violence against Latinos, immigrants and the LGBTQ2 community, in particular against black trans women in the country’s south (Edwards np). In late 2019 the American Medical Association declared violence against trans people an “epidemic,” although at the national level no formal statistics are collected on queer, trans or non-

binary gender identities or on homicides against individuals identifying as such.³² Canada has similarly experienced an increase in hate crimes against the trans community and despite including a “gender identity and expression” in new hate crime legislation in 2018, still lacks formal data collection.³³ In the years following Trump’s election, researchers identified a surge of popular support for the President, particularly in voters responding to threats against American superiority as experienced by a dominant group: primarily white, Christian men (Mutz). Berlant and Warner argue white-dominated society generates specific phobias “to organize its public” and such organization aids in the maintenance of proscriptive social orders. The force of the normative operates along multiple bio-political and aesthetic registers in contemporary life. This force, according to Berlant and Warner, has not been sufficiently rooted out and exposed by the queer and critical communities, in part, because of the veil of social sensibility through which it appears. White, heterosexual being functions as the ultimate order and referent to which alternative modes of life and desire are oriented. The primacy and position of this “normal” way of being grants heteronormativity its power. In identifying the invisible and privileged configuration of what appears as normal, Berlant and Warner gesture towards a key component of the normativity’s force: power is what prevents its alternative from appearing.

³² The lack of statistical data on violence against the queer and trans community can be read as a continuation of queer and trans invisibility. Here too we find evidence of Foucault’s casting of repression as an “injunction to silence, and affirmation of nonexistence” (*The History of Sexuality* 4). C.f. Stozer, Rebecca L. “Data Sources Hinder our Understanding of Transgender Murders.”

³³ Statistics Canada does not list hate crimes against the trans community but does include hate crimes pertaining to the categories of “sexual orientation” and “other similar factors.” C.f. “Police-reported hate crime, by type of motivation, Canada (selected police services).” *Statistics Canada*.

Berlant and Warner's call for "sex in public" is less a request for intimate acts in view of the public (although it is a call for that too) and is more so an exposure of the presumed intimacy of private sexualities. The demand that sexuality be relegated to the bedroom at once denies the cultural relevance of the queer world while at the same time masks the explicit and sexual nature of society's heteronormative organization, directed as it is to heterosexual romance and the institutions of marriage and reproduction. This is, after all, heterosexual sex in public. It is sex that does not take on the appearance of sex at all, but rather the everyday ongoingings of the normal world. Heteronormative world making, recall, is invisible, fixed, and privileged. Queer worldmaking, on the other hand is forced to organize against the requirements of privacy and invisibility — and the strictures of heteroeroticism — to come into being. Berlant and Warner write that queer worldmaking requires a radical decoupling of sex from its ultimate bio-political referents. Thus the "radical aspirations of queer culture building" amount to "not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or privileged example of sexual culture" (548). *Dhalgren* can be read as a 'zone' of such queer worldmaking. The absence of material and socio-political normalcy in the unmade world of Bellona grants the city's inhabitants a fluidity of possibilities to explore what comes about in a radically disordered environment. Delany also pushes into the decoupling of sexuality and normativity that Berlant and Warner call for in their appeal to queer worldmaking. Yet the unmaking of normalcy in Delany's work does not only bear down on personal and intimate sexuality and desires, but the broader relationship between heteronormativity and the social and moral orders of the institutions of contemporary

domesticity under capitalism. Berlant and Warner suggest that intimacy has been held captive to the imagination of the consumer state. For that reason, the making of a queer world requires “the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (558). In his roaming through Bellona, Kid offers an articulation of how such intimacy might appear in a world decoupled from the strictures of the ideal of a liberal humanist subject as envisioned by the purposes and pursuits of state economies. He is unable to exchange his work for money or his money for goods. He lacks any teleological purpose. He has no historic, purposive identity. His intimate desires are unregulated and he participates in sexual acts that do not cohere within broader heteronormative frames. His sense of eroticism also blends in unsettling ways with tragedy and violence, as in Kid’s arousal at the death of Bobby Richardson in the elevator shaft. Kid’s sexual desire is un-programmatic: he desires both men and women, in groups small and large, representing age and racial diversity. His sexual urges outstrip the bounds of heteronormative convention and such ‘transgressions’ expose readerly expectations guarding and typifying ‘normal’ sexual behaviour. Kid’s queer pleasure is unbounded and, from the standards of Christian hetero-morality, impure. Berlant and Warner warn that the presence of queer desire, or perhaps even any public sexual desire dislocated from the marital bed, is easily catalogued as perverse: “the spillage of eroticism into everyday social life seems transgressive in a way that provokes normal aversion, a hygienic recoil” (56). Throughout *Dhalgren*, Delany appears to work at provoking that reaction of recoil, not to guard the presumptions lying at the root of heteronormativity, but to expose their operations. Kid’s sexuality is but one element of his character that does not conform to

normative standards. In many other aspects of his identity, Kid slips in and out of the boundaries of traditional subjecthood. He has no stable markers of identity: no memory, no clear racial belonging (although we are told he has an Indigenous mother), no economic purpose or stated outcome-oriented desire. In his transience, Kid operates as a sort queer deconstructive subject, constituted predominantly by his persistent dislocation and the multiplicity of his desire. As a figure of instability and plurality, Kid cannot be properly located or orientated within conventional modalities of life. Kid is not a pure, knowable subject. Rather he operates as what could be considered an *event of being*, presenting a challenge to traditional readings of subjectivity and, consequently, the presumptions undergirding modes of truth and ways of knowing. In his lack of fixity, Kid comes to represent a form of ontological impurity. Queer theorist Elaine L. Graham argues the universals of humanism require that subjects accord to a program of “ontological hygiene” (*Representations* 35). Such hygiene emphasizes the uncorrupted purity of subject-being that conforms to liberal, bourgeois humanist standards and expectations. Yet Kid, with his untethered, unhygienic desires, does not conform to standards of purity and stability that such subject-being would require. Kid, as a protagonist, might articulate what theorist Kandice Chuh considers an “illiberal” subject who grates against the sentiments and aesthetic judgments of bourgeois liberalism. Such judgements, Chuh writes, operate “to narrow via common sense the parameters of acceptable and laudable desires” (101). By articulating Kid’s desires of what is not acceptable, Delany makes visible a sort of queer world wandering that stands out as an alternative to and confrontation of normative desire. Chuh’s formulating of “illiberal aesthetic inquiry” is useful here to direct a reading of *Dhalgren* as providing not only a

critique of bourgeois humanism but also pointing out to those worlds and possibilities that lie beyond normativity's parameters. Chuh writes that,

rather than trying to expand such parameters, illiberal aesthetic inquiry takes the metrics of acceptability as object of knowledge, to remember and remind of their interested constructedness and to ask: What worlds correlate with the desires incommensurate to normative paradigms of judgment? To what and whose (dis)advantage is the regulation of permissible desires directed? (101)

Here Chuh provides a directive for a queer reading of *Dhalgren* by asking readers to attend to the correlation of “worlds” and desires, especially when those desires do not conform to the hegemonic standards of heteronormative order. Delany, drawing on the ‘conventions’ of science fiction, uses the unmade, queer world of Bellona to present a correlative to unmade, queer possibilities for subjectivity and human being beyond the purview of the humanist subject. The expectation that readers will read for altered worlds in science fiction allows Delany to play around with not only the confines of earthly materialism, but the bodies and beings that inhere within. Chuh’s directive for illiberal aesthetic inquiry also asks that readers query after the operations of power in such alternate worlds, asking who and what benefits from the regulation of ‘appropriate’ desire. Liberal rationality, Chuh argues, does damage to the possibility of worlds and ways of being that lie outside of inherited humanism. The human “as illiberally constituted” is positioned as a *failure* to be fully, properly human within the structures of meritocracy and the (neo)liberal hegemonic order. Within the framework of liberal humanism, the illiberal human is conceived of as a “mistake.” Bringing the strictures of liberal humanism into view “is part of a twofold project” for Chuh that entails

“delegitimizing bourgeois liberalism and elaborating illiberal humanist onto-epistemologies” (98). This can, in part, be accomplished by reconceiving of what she understands, following the work of Gayatri Spivak, as the “intended mistake” (100). For Spivak, the intended mistake comes about by purposefully displacing Eurocentric correctness that naturalizes colonialism. By intentionally mis-taking the truth claims of Enlightenment humanism, one can expose the presumptions embedded within inherited economies of meaning while simultaneously “making room for justice” (*Aesthetic Education* 21). Chuh takes up the procedure of the intended mistake to “enact a pedagogy of disidentification oriented toward maintaining openings for worlds in which the idea of justice remains possible” (100). Illiberal aesthetic inquiry, for Chuh, is a “modality of the intended mistake” in that it inheres in a “practice of identifying the mistaken assumptions and assertions of the world according to the received humanities, and to mis-take them towards the ends of learning to sense and make sense (out) of subjugated desires” (ibid.). This move does not entail a suspension of disbelief, but rather a suspension of “belief in what is given/imposed as universally desirable . . . as defined by bourgeois liberalism” (ibid.). Reading *Dhalgren* along these lines, Kid emerges as an illiberal subject with queer, Other desires in a correlate world in which such desires may be at home. The absence of national, economic, and heteronormative imperatives in Bellona allows for Kid and his appetites to come into being (mostly) outside of liberal parameters (one exception, perhaps, being when Kid enters into the bourgeois domicile of the Richardson family). Reading Kid as an ‘intended mistake’ gives rise to not only a portrait of an illiberal human but a world in which such a human may actually appear. For Chuh, novels hold a particular power to provoke questions about the organization of the subject

and its desires according to the principles and interests of the institutions of the modern, heteronormative state. “While it is not especially difficult to identify nonhegemonic desires,” she writes, “it is more challenging to defunction the economies of correctness by which desires are judged to be worthy, valuable, or not” (101). It is perhaps within this vein we might conceive of *Dhalgren* as a successful effort to “defunction” the normative world and its rationalities in order to articulate the “intended mistake” of Kid and document his desires outside the normal world and its conventions. According to Chuh, the aesthetic judgement of liberal humanism operates “within governing economies” that minimize desire “through particularization (e.g. ‘what women want,’ ‘queer desire’)” (ibid.). What Delany offers is an unmade world *without* such governing economies, to expand, beyond common sense “the parameters of acceptable and laudable desires.”

Nonidentity and the Queering of Representation

In the ungoverned world of Bellona, Delany is not simply representing a queer counterpoint to the tidy life of heteronormative consumer culture. Instead, the world of *Dhalgren* is used to demonstrate the difficulty or even impossibility of representation itself. The closer one looks at Kid, the less sure one becomes of who Kid is. In *Dhalgren* what you see is not what you get. More likely what you see is a *diffusion* of what you get or a *refraction* of what appears. Delany uses the motif of prisms, lenses and mirrors in *Dhalgren* to play with the nature of appearances and undermine the onto-epistemological assumptions at root in the very notion of representation and meaning. Throughout the text there is a lack of correspondence between things and their appearing, between subjects and their identities and between the sign and its function. In this sense, readers find not

simply a representation of the queer in *Dhalgren* but a *queering of representation*. Delany uses the figures of prisms, lenses, and mirrors to emphasize the warp of light (i.e. appearance) as it passes through an interpretative frame. In his work *A Sense of Wonder*, Delany scholar Jeffrey Allen Tucker writes that the jewel/prism is Delany's "master trope" for its ability to serve as a figure of the nature of perception.³⁴ In "Science Fiction and Criticism" Delany writes, prisms

reflect and refract the light that passes through them. In doing so, they shatter unitary images. Look through them and things become at once fragmented and multiple. The refractive quality of cut gems is a metaphor for analysis, brilliance, and pluralism. (203)

In his representation of Kid, Delany places emphasis on this "fragmented and multiple" nature of images in order to emphasize the non-unitary nature of subjecthood. For Tucker, Delany uses the motif of refraction, dispersion, and reflection to "[represent] the values that inform a politics of difference" (*Sense of Wonder* 46). In *Dhalgren*, the subject is not a unified self that can be tracked back to an origin or that gains significance within an ordered universe of meaning. Instead, Kid is portrayed as a subject that coheres within gathered experiences that cannot be traced back to an origin or larger coherent universe of significance. Kid can be read as a poststructuralist figure of the failure of symbolic

³⁴ Delany might scoff at the suggestion of a "master trope" appearing in his work. In the introduction to *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics: A Collection of Written Interviews*, Delany said he repeatedly told his students that "'Symbols,' 'hidden meanings,' and 'themes' don't really interest me — and, quite probably, refer to things that don't even exist" (4). Throughout *Dhalgren* numerous seemingly rich figures and objects appear — including characters with crimson eyes, handheld weapons called orchids and the optical chains of mirrors, prisms and lenses — that find no tidy hermeneutic closure within the text.

stability. Delany gestures towards the instability of meaning at the beginning of *Dhalgren* by situating Kid within a context steeped in allusions to canonical mythology. Yet these allusions do not reflect a stable, coherent reading of Kid in the world of the text. Instead, these myths are refracted and fragmented in Kid's experience, pointing out to a textual reality that refuses conventional interpretation and asks the reader to attend more carefully to this othered, unfamiliar territory.

Kid cannot be traced back to his origins or secured within the bounds of a teleological personhood, which presents a challenge to *straight* readings of his character as a figure cast in the light of liberal, bourgeois humanism. Yet, his positioning as an unstable referent allows Delany to play with the nature of subjectivity as conceived under the banner of "illiberal" humanism. Unlike a portrait of a stable, sane individual, Kid cannot be contained within the projected artifice of a normative self. Kid is rather presented as an anti-Oedipal figure, cast as an egoless *semi*-madman disassociated from his experience of reality, which he experiences as contradictory, fragmented and incoherent. The passage recounting memories from Kid's childhood begins, "Here I am and am no I" (61). Although Kid may be connected to his childhood, he cannot be located there. Kid's presentation as an egoless self raises the question of self-identification. He is both a self, "here I am," but without a centering identity, "and am no I." The separation of self from identity poses Kid as a subject of non-identity, not self-same and not reducible to his origins. Kid is forged as a singular character in *Dhalgren*, having the experiences of an embodied, creative, thinking subject. And yet, critically, Kid is severed from his own subjective continuity through a lack of memory. References to Kid's past in a mental institution illuminate the question of identity and its relationship to memory and

definitions of mental stability and madness. Kid is not presented in *Dhalgren* as an explicit madman, however. Rather he is a character for whom the question of subjectivity stability is at question and for whom the continuity of self is not necessarily presented as seamless and unthought. In his friendship with Tak, Kid's lack of self-certainty is presented as a truer seeing that is made possible by the fracturing of a multiple self. Tak says:

Look . . . about, being nuts . . . You're not, and you never have been. That means what you see, and hear, and feel, and think . . . you think that *is* your mind. But the real mind is invisible: you're less aware of it, while you think, than you are of your eye while you see . . . until something goes wrong with it. *Then* you become aware of it, with all its dislocated pieces and its rickety functioning, the same way you become aware of your eye when you get a cinder in it. Because it *hurts* . . . Sure, it distorts things. But the strange thing, the thing that you can never explain to anyone . . . stranger than the hallucinations, or the voices, or the anxiety — is the *way* you begin to experience the edges of the mind *itself* . . . in a way other people just can't. (53-54)

To Tak, Kid's estrangement from himself is the outcome of the mind's making itself known. The foregrounding of the mind as something that has "gone wrong" is reminiscent of Heidegger's broken hammer, which makes itself present to consciousness by virtue of its inability to perform its function.³⁵ Like the recalcitrant hammer, Kid's

³⁵ In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger uses the example of a broken hammer to demonstrate how everyday objects withdraw from consciousness as they retreat into their use functions. The brokenness of the hammer interrupts the thoughtlessness with which the tool is grasped and breaks back into consciousness. This moment of interruption represents, for Heidegger, a phenomenological shift in perception that allows for a

mind is made visible to him in a way that is uncommon and, in this sense, Kid's mental instability is permeated with a truer seeing and more authentic self-relation. In conversations Kid hints at his past experience in a mental hospital — although it is unclear if these memories can be trusted. Still, the trace of madness in his memories further establishes Kid as an anti-Oedipal figure, reminiscent of the schizoid in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 1977 work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze and Guattari's text provides a critical reading of the subject established in the works of Marx and Freud, suggesting capital and libidinal economies provide a reductive (even if useful) rendering of subjectivity that confines humanity to versions of experience as suppressed, reactive neurotics. This egocentric telling of human subjectivity emphasizes human alienation and reinforces social power dynamics that essentially bind the subject to narratives of self-oppression. The subject of the political economy and the subject of the libidinal economy are reduced to mechanisms of the systems that confine them and define them. The self, structured under these overarching frameworks, is fated to exist always as a subordinate to external, regulating constructs and power flows. As an alternative, Deleuze and Guattari deploy the experiment of ego-loss in the character of the schizophrenic. As Mark Seem writes in the text's introduction,

[Deleuze and Guattari] urge mankind to strip itself of *all* anthropomorphic and anthropological armouring, all myth and tragedy, and all existentialism, in order

renewed awareness of things. "When we concern ourselves with something, the entities which are most closely ready-to-hand may be met as something unusable, not properly adapted for the use we have decided upon . . . We discover its unusability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its properties, but rather by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it" (*Being and Time* 102).

to perceive what is nonhuman in man, his will and his forces, his transformations and mutations. The human and social sciences have accustomed us to see that figure of Man behind every social event . . . They talk figures and icons and signs, but fail to perceive forces and flows. They blind us to other realities, and especially the reality of power as it subjugates us. . .and the result is the fabrication of docile and obedient subjects. (xx)

The myth of Oedipus “territorializes” the subject by virtue of its structuring of the unconsciousness and the force by which it explains, always in advance, the being and experiences of the individual. Deleuze and Guattari write that “Oedipus-as-structure” is a demonstration of metaphysical imprisonment that confines and constrains the singular becoming of the individual. The neurotic subject produced by psychoanalysis is colonized:

they never stop involuting and evolving between these two poles [of Oedipus]. Oedipus as the last rock, and castration as the cavern: the ultimate territoriality, although reduced to the analyst’s couch, rather than the decoded flows of desire that flee, slip away, and take us where? (135)

As a schizoid subject, Kid is free to flow and fragment, his prismatic movement cannot be reduced to the production/desiring of the Oedipal neurotic. The purposeless schizoid cannot be contoured according to the *a priori* of the formal contents of the Oedipal myth. Instead, the schizoid represents the an-archic, as that which does not bend to the arche of the myth and the historical structure of subjectivity.³⁶ Rather than solidify the experience

³⁶ In a rather inventive description, Deleuze and Guattari suggest only an-archic texts that are ‘explosive’ are *actually* literature: “all writing is so much pig shit — that is to say, any literature that takes itself as an end or sets ends for itself, instead of being process

of the individual within the psychoanalyst's matrix, which keeps subjects "harnessed to the yoke of daddy-mommy" (50), the "task of schizoanalysis is that of learning what the subject's desiring-machines are" (338). As a character, Kid resists the Oedipal yoke in the free flow of his desire and his refusal to be situated in systems of cultural exchange — both sexually and economically. If the free and queer play of subjective experience is defined along lines of madness, Kid says it is madness, then, that he prefers. He writes,

the psychology, structures, and accoutrements that define **any** sex act are always internalized from social structures that already exist, that have been created, that can be changed. All right: let me ask a terrible question: Could it be that all those perfectly straight, content-with-their-sexual-orientation-in-the-world, exclusive-heterosexuals really **are** (in some ill-defined, psychological way that will ultimately garner a better world) more healthy than (gulp . . . !) us? Let me answer: No way! (*Dhalgren* 794, emphasis in original)

To Kid, the social arrangements that cause people to "cling like drowners to their active/passive, male/female, master/servant, self/other set-up" is contingent upon arbitrary social norms that can be changed. Kid writes, "**any** madness is preferable to **that**. And madness is **not** preferable" (795, emphasis in original). Kid's non-identity and non-position within social phallogocentrism and hetero economies of desire situate him as an anti-Oedipal/schizoid character, suggesting references to his lack of memory and

that 'ploughs the crap of being and its language,' transports the weak, the aphasiacs, the illiterate. At least spare us sublimation. Every writer is a sellout. The only literature is that which places an exploding device in its package, fabricating a counterfeit currency, causing the superego and its form of expression to explode, as well as the market value of its form and content" (134). *Dhalgren* is likely sufficient to meet this criteria.

madness might be more richly read as his non-locality (i.e. play) within larger socio-historical economies.

As an ab-normal, impure self with no stable origin, Kid provides a rich portrait of a Derridean deconstructive subject. And the play that Kid's instability provides, can be read as a commentary on the desire for ordered subjectivities that fall neatly within metaphysical hierarchies. Jacques Derrida's critique of metaphysics relies on the undoing of hierarchical ordering of what appears over and above its conditions of appearing. He writes,

The enterprise of returning 'strategically,' 'ideally,' to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. . . . And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.

(Limited Inc. 236)

Kid's complexity and his inability to be stabilized disrupts the desire for pure and straightforward subjectivity can be read as an articulation of a *queer singularity* that refuses to be enfolded in a hierarchical binary. As Geoffrey Bennington writes in his chapter "Just Queer" in the collection of essays *Derrida and Queer Theory*, Derrida's deconstruction aims to break free from the "ongoing nightmare of straightlined, straightlaced repressive orthopedic normalizing heteronormativity" to greet "the new dawn . . . the prospect of the neverending ongoing queering of queer" (250). As Bennington writes, the deferred subject becomes an "indefinite process with no possible end or determinate product, the perpetual differing and deferring of any thing or outcome

whatsoever” that mirrors how “queering queers and will queer again, endlessly” (ibid.). Following Derrida, Bennington writes that the singular, in defiance of the ordering of the conventional and the repetitive, becomes the “queer” in its escape from the self-identical. It is for this reason, he suggests, Derrida’s “To be is to be queer”³⁷ is the “slogan of all deconstructive slogans” (251). He adds: “To be is to be queer because to be is to be singular” (253).

The Wild Machinist

Kid’s inability to be traced back to his origins and secured as a stable self can be read as the central characteristic of a deconstructive subjectivity that, in many ways, defies the act of representation. Delany uses the unmade subjectivity of Kid and the unstable world of Bellona to portray the collapse of discursive representation inherent within language itself. Throughout the text, language appears to peel away from its own meaning, its own possibility both diagetically (through Kid’s experience and writing) and extradiagetically (through the readers’ attempts to make sense of *Dhalgren* as a work). Delany gives articulation to the failure and slippage of language as a means of representing representation’s un-representability. The slipperiness of language throughout *Dhalgren* introduces a level of play into Kid’s identity, opening up his character onto a horizon of self-creation or auto-poesis. Based upon his lack of origins and the lack of an originary centre within language itself, Kid recognizes himself as a “wild machinist,”

³⁷ In his essay “Justices,” Derrida writes that “to be is to be queer” because the queer represents a kind of absolute singular mode of being. For an elaboration on the queering of singular being and the tension this introduces to the ground of ontology, c.f. Bennington, Geoffrey “Just Queer.”

capable of “tak[ing] identity” for himself. Without the territorialisation of mythico-poetic identities and in the absence of representational security, Kid becomes a self set free from the confines of conventional representation and let loose to play with and redefine the norms of subjectivity.

Throughout the novel, Kid’s name, his nominal signifier, is a matter that remains perpetually unsettled. The question of what Kid should be called is of continuous importance to characters throughout the text, demonstrating a desire for a centre, a fixed point of reference to which individuals can orient themselves. Yet Kid himself seems to resist this impulse, espousing both a suspicion of the ability of language to capture reality and an ease with his state of non-identity.³⁸ Delany situates Kid as a subject on the limits of language, never fully cast as a definable self within the text. Kid’s internal reflections on his “lacking appellation” calls attention to the inadequacy of language and also a lingering threat at the heart of naming:

He did not demand a name. What does this confidence mean? Long in her ease and reticence, released from an effort to demand and pursue, there is an illusion of center. Already, presounded, I am armed with portents of a disaster in the consciousness, the failure to suspect, to inspect. Is she free here, or concerned with a complex intimacy dense to me? Or I excuse myself from her, lacking

³⁸ In her work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* Judith Butler calls attention to the inherent danger of queer identity categories that obscure the relations of discourse and power that precede and condition subjectivity. “One might be tempted to say that identity categories are insufficient because every subject position is the site of converging relations of power that are not univocal. But such a formulation underestimates the radical challenge to the subject that such converging relations imply. For there is no self-identical subject who houses or bears these relations, not site at which such relations converge. This converging and interarticulation *is* the contemporary fate of the subject. In other words, the subject as a self-identical entity is no more” (229-230).

appellation. Some mesh, flush, terminal turned here through the larynx's trumpet. The articulate fear slips, while we try to measure, but come away with only the perpetual angle of distortion, the frequency of an amazed defraction. (*Dhalgren* 185)

Kid's namelessness is associated both with confidence and with anxiety. On the one hand he does not demand a name and yet he gestures towards the failure of naming, of language: a fear of the slippage and distortion associated with articulation. The rupture appears here as Kid situates himself both outside of language, unnamed, but also always already implicated within language, "already, presounded." Kid cannot fully escape the metonymic force of language, which seeks to locate and secure him within a shared structure of meaning and referents. Yet he instinctively knows this process has a "distorting" effect as his singular identity is forced through the inadequate and brutalizing effect of language and speech. His location within language is the result of a "disaster in consciousness" in which his subjectivity — in all of its play and fecundity — will become reduced to a stable signifier,³⁹ run through the crude mechanics of the mouth. There are times, however, when Kid wonders if he can exercise an autonomous role in being named, as in "taking identity." Kid is first named in the novel during his first interaction with Tak: "I'm going to call you Kid, then. That'll do you for a name. You can be — The Kid, hey?" (20). Immediately a sense of multiplicity, *de-fraction*, is introduced in the naming of Kid: both Kid and The Kid. Kid registers Tak's name as both

³⁹ Reinforcing the reductive power of naming, Kid once expresses this thought in the text: "Indeed, though a label might cling to such when we review it with a smile, certain images lose their freedom and resonance if, when we regard them with a straight face, we do so though the diffraction of a name" (*Dhalgren* 548-549).

a gift and a threat to his identity, recognizing there is a “cost,” a price to be paid in exchange for a name:

Three gifts, he thought: armor, weapon, title (like the prisms, lenses, mirrors on the chain itself). . .with the sudden conviction that this third would cost, by far, the most. Reject it, something warned: ‘Only I’m not a kid. Really, I’m twenty-seven.’ (20-21)

Kid instinctively fears the regulatory mechanism of being named but he also questions if he can take an active role in claiming some manner of identity from the unfolding events of the night with Tak and their eventual sexual encounter:

From this play of night, light, and leather, *can I let myself take identity?* How can I recreate this roasted park in some meaningful matrix? Equipped with contradictory visions, an ugly hand caged in pretty metal, I observe a new mechanic. I am the wild machinist, past destroyed, reconstructing the present. (26, emphasis added)

Kid engages here with the creative, deconstructive and an-archic aspect of identity, the play of signification within the totalizing whole of identity, a “meaningful matrix.”

Kid’s name is further subject to this field of play and substitution throughout *Dhalgren* by virtue of the homonym. Kid is referred to as Kid, kid, the kid, The Kid and Kidd, variations that are homographs, detected in spelling only. The use of homonym in Kid’s identifiers can be read as a further destabilization of language and its articulation within a shared meaning matrix. Consider Tak’s introduction of Kid to Lanya:

“This is the Kid.”

“Kit?” she asked.

“*Kid.*”

“K-y-d-d. . .?”

“*-i-d.*”

“. . .d.” she added with a tentative frown. “Oh, *Kidd.*” (27)

Delany introduces a difference between signs here that can only be read. The difference appears in language but is effectively *silent*. Delany points to sound as the event of language, but an event in which we as readers witness the play of the audible and the inaudible, what is available to the senses and what is non-sense. The various spellings/sayings of Kid’s name points to the supplemental nature of Kid’s name and provides additional commentary on Kid’s non-identity. This silent presentation of difference can be richly read as an example of what Derrida terms *differánce*, as that which both differs and that for which meaning is deferred (*Margins* 8). Derrida’s use of the term *differánce* which substitutes an /a/ for the /e/ in the French *différence*, points to the silent nature of substitution in language (*differánce* and *différence* are pronounced identically) but also to the inarticulability of a difference in language that exists beyond sound and thus is not present to the senses. Derrida uses this linguistic trick to acknowledge that *what is not sensible is not senseless*. What is beyond the senses is not non-sense. Instead, what exists beyond the senses and what is present beyond the formal aspects of language points to a possibility (play) that exists beyond the sign’s linguistic mark. More broadly *differánce* also heightens the ontological contours of a thing’s possible appearing, suggesting that like language, our conceptual forms may not be sufficient to capture and settle the appearance of being. Here too, we find the thing’s possibility exceeds its established categorical presence. For this reason, interpretation of

the sign and certainty of the thing becomes deferred, suspended. It's important to note here for Derrida that what is deferred is not to be understood as unintelligible. Again, what is not sensible is not to be confused with non-sense. Rather Derrida challenges readers to consider the inadequacy of the sensible/intelligible distinction in light of what Christopher Norris terms the "supplementary play of meaning which defies semantic reduction" (32). The silent play of the homophone repeats itself throughout the pages of *Dhalgren*, serving as a signal to the reader to attend to the slipperiness and non-identity of language and the sign. We too at times read characters within the novel attending to this homonymic twitch, even though it only appears extra-diagetically in the novel's written iteration and not the diagetic, spoken reality of the characters within the world of the text. When Kid meets the old man wearing chains, the man catches Kid performing a homophonic slip:

"My name's Faust," the old man said. "Joaquim Faust."

"Wakeem. . .?"

"You're pronouncing it right. From your accent, though, I bet you wouldn't put the same letters in it I do." (77)

Faust specifies that Kid pronounces his name right, but finds reason to question the linguistic mark of his name *as it appears in Kid's mind*. The moment between the two characters quickly passes but the reader is reminded to attend to the supplemental nature of language and the spoken word's non-identity with itself. We find another reminder in a simple, nearly imperceptible difference between the way Madame Brown refers to the Richards' apartment as "apartment 17E" (128) and Kid's later recounting of the address as "seventeen-E" (137). Delany points to the heterogeneous functioning of language and

its polyvocal aspect in the separate minds and voices of individual characters. The separating out of linguistic and speech practices between characters also illuminates the performative role of vocalizations and the gap that persists between one and another's use of words. We see this, for example, when a member of the scorpion gang finds Kid climbing the wall of Mr. Calkin's home. The gang member hollers, "What the fuck do you think you're doing, kid?" (90), using Kid's name in a way that is also *not* his name. The move highlights the illegitimacy of Kid's name as a titular imposition, forced upon Kid by Tak. The name seems to operate as a projection from an other, rather than as emanating from and properly belonging to Kid himself. The fact that various characters refer to Kid using different homonymic versions of his name (in the written text of the novel Tak uses "Kid" whereas Lanya uses "Kidd") exposes the division between Kid as an individual and Kid as a social construct, the recipient of externally projected, assigned predicates (96). This division is no mere linguistic inadequacy. For Butler, such projected utterances are what introduces a subject into the discursive realm of being and, in doing so, enact subjectivity through discourse. Butler recognizes an inherent danger for queer and non-normative identities that must be formed and formalized through language that is inadequate to the task of queer articulation. "The 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, to use the Althusserian term, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the 'I'; it is the transitive invocation of the 'I'" (*Bodies* 225), Butler writes. It is through being "mobilized. . .in speech" (*ibid.*) that brings about "the discursive condition of social recognition that *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject" (225-226). Butler identifies the terror of discursive identification in the fundamental "impossibility

of full recognition” or “of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized” (226). For Butler, this implies “the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation” (ibid.).

Kid also seems to have difficulty with self-expression, but this difficulty seems to express not Kid’s alienation from his individuality, but being’s fundamental alienation from language and presumptions of the sayable. At times, Kid’s voice is smothered. Arriving home in one remembered scene as a child, he attempts to hug his mother, but she holds him at a distance. She asks, “Where have you been? What is the *matter* with you, shouting in the street like that?” (66). Kid finds he cannot answer: “His mouth snapped. Sound to deafen built behind his teeth” (ibid.). The absence of Kid’s voice here does not suggest its elimination, but its frustration and censure from his mother. If Kid’s voice does not participate in the conventional codes of verbal language, he is told to be silent. However, the force of his primordial voice, which “builds behind his teeth,” hints at an inner subjectivity that exists outside of and prior to encoded speech. Cast out from his home, Kid bears silent witness to an orgy scene, the business and chaos of street life which is rich with scenes of hostility and eventually a scene of violence. Kid’s silence does not indicate an absence of experience but rather the separateness of experience from its meaningful articulation. It is a resonant silence. Kid is aware of the distance between his voice’s reverberations and meaningful speech and carries this awareness with him throughout the text. He is often found reflecting on the trouble of self-expression that points to an inner richness that exceeds even the possibilities of language: “There is no articulate resonance. The common problem, I suppose, is to have more to say than vocabulary and syntax can bear” (84).

Kid's experience of the inadequacy of language and the phenomenon of ineffability is expressed in his position as a writer, too. Kid's speechless experience with his mother marks a strange relationship with his hands, which are represented as tools of both feeling and writing. Kid's inability to translate his sound into words transforms into a "scalding energy he could not release" (66). In a frustrated response to this mute moment, Kid forces his hands into his mouth, "he had been silent, chewed on his knuckles, the heels of his palms, his cuticles, and what was left of his nails" (ibid.). Speechlessness is morphed into a form of self-mutilation, transforming Kid's hands, as we learn throughout *Dhalgren* into "ugly" monstrosities, described as animalistic. We are introduced to Kid's hands early on in the text's opening scene, during his interaction with the woman:

She pulled back. "Your *hands*—!"

Veins like earthworms wriggled in the hair. The skin was cement dry; his knuckles were thick with scabbed callous. Blunt thumbs lay on the place between her breasts like toads. (3)

The creaturely, monstrous description of Kid's hands is connected to descriptions of his mouth: "His tongue lay down like a worm in his mouth" (67). Kid's mouth, like his hands, acts as mechanism of communication, a translation point between conception and articulation, thought and language. Kid's hands are equally positioned as sensuous receptacles, through which information about the world is taken *in*. But what is taken in through experience finds no adequate outlet through expression. Kid says:

What I write . . . doesn't seem to be . . . true. Life is a very terrible thing, mostly, with points of wonder and beauty. Most of what makes it terrible, though, is

simply that there's so much of it, blaring in through the five senses. In my loft, alone, in the middle of the night, it comes blaring in. So I work at culling enough from it to construct moments of order . . . what in me can order gets exhausted before it all. (818)

We also find Kid's hands being used as navigational points of reference, sorting through the physical, textural material around him: "he brushed his right knuckles against the stone flank in passing: It was exactly as warm as Lanya's wrist, brushing his knuckles on the left" (185). Space and presence are registered through touch, which Kid uses to orient himself in Bellona. Much like his feet, one in a sandal, one bare, Kid's hands are often positioned in an interplay of bound and unbound. Kid's hands, disfigured, we come to realize, as the result of his inability to communicate with his mother, are often referred to in the context of his writing. What cannot be communicated through the mouth seemingly belongs to the hands: "Adrift in the violent city, I do not know what stickum tacks words and tongue. Hold them there, cradled on the muscular floor. Nothing will happen. . . . Holding it in the mouth distills an anger dribbling bitter back of the throat, a substance for the hand" (573). Kid is plagued by an inability to communicate, his self-expression often held and caught behind the mechanisms of his mouth and hands. The foregrounding of Kid's hands is apparent in their creaturely description, described as both human and nonhuman/monstrous. In addition to this sense of otherness, Kid's hands are seemingly imbued with a mind/ability of their own which appears to propel Kid into writing:

His hand had wandered to his shirt pocket to click the pen . . . his hand crabbed and crossed and rearranged the vision's spillage . . . An obtuse time later, he raised his hand, swallowed, and withdrew . . . He jabbed the pen back in his

pocket. His hand dropped, dead and ugly on the paper . . . Between his fingers he watched the curling ink-line peeled off from meaning. (176)

Kid's body seems to represent a comingling of self and other, just as his process of writing seems to give rise to the irresolvable interrelation of interiority and exteriority. The outflow of language spills onto the page where meaning peels away from itself. Kid experiences a perennial alterity with his own body and its crude mechanisms of language, the mouth, and hands which seem to have a productive force of language that exists outside his authority and control.

Kid's practice of writing, copying and re-copying establishes him as a speaker/author always already located within an archive of the trace from which he works and reworks language to his own (uncertain) ends. But in this copying process Kid is interrupted by the trace of the text. In his own copying process, Kid is dis-tracted, is taken off the tract (as land/area, but also of the text/treatise) he is working from. This distraction becomes more fully embodied in the final pages of *Dhalgren*, which are filled with fragments (traces) of text and narrative that are not integrated with the text as a whole. Many of these passages are offset from the conventionally set text thus defying a possible "straight" reading of *Dhalgren*. Even upon multiple readings it is unlikely *Dhalgren* could ever be read through in the same manner. The novel also does not formally begin nor conclude but represents a circular structure or as Delany himself suggests a "Möbius strip" that feeds back into itself, fated to its own repetition as a structure with no centre.⁴⁰ Repetition of reading here would approximate itself but will

⁴⁰ The description of *Dhalgren* as a Möbius strip comes directly from Delany, who described it as such in an unpublished draft of the novel, according to Jeffery A. Tucker's book *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity and Difference*. He quotes

not be exact or self-identical (looped back to its origin). In a similar fashion, Bellona could not be traversed in an identical fashion as it shapeshifts, burns, crumbles, and bends.

Kid's relationship with language, expression, and representation as both a writer and interlocutor positions him in a perpetual state of uncertainty and disorientation. He cannot orient himself in language. He cannot orient himself in the city. He often wonders if Bellona's own "grammar" casts representation into a unique and non-translatable form of expression. "We speak another language here . . . Anyone sensitive to language, living in this mess/miasma, must applaud it" (830), Kid muses, wondering if any line written in the city "would be comprehensible outside city limits?" (ibid.). The structural relationship of language and landscape plays a constitutive for Kid and others in Bellona: "Does the City's topology control us completely?" (771). It is to the relationship between the physical environmental and possibilities for meaning that we turn to in the next section.

A Deft Disorientation

As Kid enters Bellona, a ruined, post-catastrophe city, he carries with him this gap between self and world, between his experience and its significance. It is this inability to

Delany as writing, "such a strip, needless to say, is only fully enjoyed the second time over: One passes the same space, but on another surface. By extension, if you read Part One, then Part Two, then read Part One *again*, Part One, I suspect will seem rather different, in light of what comes after — or does it come before?" The Mobius strip structure is also discussed in Douglas Barbour's *Worlds Out of Words: The SF Novels of Samuel R. Delany*.

close the circle of meaning through knowledge or language that comes to represent horror in the text: “What an odd ritual exchange to exhaust communication. (Is that terror?)” (12). And it is Bellona, more generally, that is the overarching, environmental figure of this failure. Bellona’s smoky skies keep the sun and its illuminated forms perpetually out of sight.

The smoke hides the sky’s variety, strains consciousness, covers the holocaust with something safe and insubstantial. It protects from greater flame. It indicates fire, but obscures the source. This is not a useful street. Very little here approaches any eidolon of the beautiful. (84)

Under Bellona’s skies and within its streets, light is withdrawn and does not aid in revealing the world. It keeps the world at bay by smothering and obscuring “the source,” or things themselves, Plato’s *eidōs* or true form (*eidolon*). The split between things and their appearing creates a permanent conceptual fog in which the thing, the *real* thing, always remains out of sight or appears by way of distortion. In Bellona the fires ignite and burn out spontaneously, no longer retaining their referent to light, revealing and shadow play. Instead, the fires participate in the obscurity that blots the sky with smoke and ash, separating the subject from its surroundings. The grey, ashy circumstances in Bellona are associated throughout the text with silence and shadowlessness: “‘Pale grey is silence,’ Kid thinks” (67). And as Lanya puts it, “I like grey days, days like this, days without shadows” (71). The absence of light and shadow refute a Platonic reading of this place where reality refuses to appear by virtue of light. Instead, things remain obscured and hidden: “the smoke hides . . . obscures the source” (84). The absence of shadow indicates an absence of the shadow play on the wall of the Platonic cave. A shadowless

dim represents a primordial state in which the presence of objects and human interaction cannot be projected, represented. The grey atmosphere obliterates the hierarchy of appearance we find in Plato's allegory where shadows suggest a manufactured and unreal version of reality while objects viewed in the open sunlight represent real things in their true disclosure. Without light as an illuminating, revealing force, Bellona is cast as a space of indeterminate disclosure. In Kid's experience, Bellona's grey, silent and shadowless space prompts a feeling of delusion and strangeness:

The mist had turned evening-blue. He got up and started along the street. Several blocks later he identified the strange feeling: Though it was definitely becoming night, the air had not even slightly cooled. Frail smoke lay about him like a neutralizing blanket. Ahead, he could see the taller buildings. Smoke had gnawed away the upper stories. Stealthily, he descended into the injured city. It does not offer me any protection, this mist; rather a refracting grid through which to view the violent machine, explore the technocracy of the eye itself, spelunk the semi-circular canal. I am traveling my own optic nerve. Limping in a city without source, searching a day without shadow, am I deluded with the inconstant emblem? I don't like pain. With such disorientation there is no way to measure the angle between such nearly parallel lines of sight, when focusing on something at such distance. (94)

Bellona provides a neutralized hermeneutic domain in which the symbolic structure of appearing cannot operate. Although Kid feels he is obscured by the smoke and so moves "stealthily" through Bellona, he also feels this does not afford him safety. The smoke both masks the world's appearing but also eats away (gnaws) at objects. The smoke is a

force of appearing, disappearing/hiding and, more forcefully, erasure. What does appear is left to the “machinery” of the eye, the body’s limited sensory apparatus that does violence (“violent machine”) to the “injured city.” The smoke defracts and deludes and disorients, impeding Kid’s ability to orient himself (“measure the angle”) within a world of inaccessible signs (“inconstant emblems”).

Delany’s use of the term paraspace can help us read *Bellona* as a foregrounded alternate realm that aggrandizes the unfamiliarity of things in their appearing. In his essay, "Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?," Delany defines paraspace as a science fiction realm that exists outside of mundane diegesis. The “other realm” of paraspace is characterized by heightened rhetoricity. Many SF writers, Delany claims, “posit a normal world — a recognizable future — and then an alternate space, sometimes largely mental, but always materially manifested, that sits beside the real world, and in which language is raised to an extraordinarily lyrical level” (31). The intrusion of paraspace (in cyberpunk fiction this is often cyberspace or virtual reality) upon an otherwise ‘normal world’ introduces a basic ambiguity into notions of place and space. This provides for an experimental backdrop in which identities and communities, even corporations and nation-states, may arise without the confines of the mundane, normative world. Alternate worlds/realms prompt a defamiliarization with spatial aspects of reality and give rise to other forms of dis/order that may not have been imaginable upon the restrictive plane of the real. The position of a paraspace within or alongside mundane space serves to open possible notions of self and place that might otherwise be predicated on an experience of stability. Read as a site of paraspace, *Bellona* exposes the reader to an experience of material and spatiotemporal “otherness” that seems to exist both within

and outside the precepts of the normal world. Delany uses the strangeness of Bellona to establish new “norms” that reconfigure and disfigure conventions of space and time. In Bellona these alternate norms are unstable in that they adhere to spontaneity rather than predictability, thus defying any sense of norm as regulatory function. This unregulated space, that is not circumscribed by any social, political, economic, geographic, or space-time law, creates a new configuration of place that allows for the possibility of reimagining life and its arrangements. In his book, *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman reads paraspace as a fundamentally *postmodern* zone. He writes,

the postmodern text replaces . . . an epistemological impulse with an *ontological* imperative. Knowledge is no longer emplaced as the structuring problematic; instead, Being is centered, as the status of the world and existence become defining issues. (162)

Bellona provides a useful site for considering these postmodern questions as it “stages a dissolution of ontological boundaries, presenting a collision and shifting of worlds” (ibid.). The lack of structural integrity in Bellona gestures out towards a world that itself is shifting. And, in response, the movement of Bellona’s inhabitants tracks the way in which that shifting landscape becomes a constitutive force on the characters themselves who register the ways in which they are altered by and exist in response to their environment. In turn, the denizens of Bellona, and perhaps the novel’s readers, are faced with the challenge this altered reality enforces upon perceptual and conceptual conventions.

Bellona is a place that seems to simultaneously exist and not exist within contemporary America. As a space of disintegration and ruin, Bellona's is a dissolution that will not be televised:

Very few suspect the existence of this city. It is as if not only the media but the laws of perception themselves had redesigned knowledge and perception to pass it. Rumor says there is practically no power here. Neither television cameras nor on-the-spot broadcast function: that such a catastrophe as this should be opaque, and therefore dull, to the electric nation! It is a city of inner discordances and retinal distortions. (16)

Bellona acts upon visual and communicative practices, becoming imperceptible, perhaps nonsensical, to the external world. As a geographical paraspace Bellona cannot be physically located. For Bukatman, the indeterminacy of paraspace introduces a rupture within the horizon of the familiar: "an alien space *within* a familiar space, or *between* two adjacent areas of space where no such 'between' exists" (200). Although situated within contemporary America, Bellona also acts as a spatial blind spot, apparently hidden in plain sight. But it is in the very nature of Bellona to elide its own possibility of orientation. Early on in the novel, Kid attempts to establish a sense of direction, placing himself in relation to the river he crossed when he first entered the city. At Tak's place, he tells Lanya the river, which he plotted just two blocks from the apartment, now seems more distant: ". . . when I first came up here, you could just see the water, as though suddenly the river was a half a mile off" (110). Lanya responds definitively, "You couldn't see the river from here" (ibid.). In a following scene, Kid warns Lanya of a sudden drop off he fell from when previously exiting Tak's apartment. She laughs at him:

“That’s *across* the street!” (116). Bellona’s shapeshifting is textually foregrounded, providing an active, productive lack of structural coherence to Delany’s fictional world. In *Postmodern Fiction*, Brian McHale writes that the trope of ‘the Zone,’ is used widely to represent alternative territories that provide a space of dis-location. As a morphing, malleable city, Bellona acts as a site of ontological disruption that raises perpetual questions about the status of objects, their knowability, and their belonging to a shared referential “sense” of the world. Bellona’s lack of a strict border suggests a borderlessness that is replicated in its own crumbling structure that prevents the reading of boundaries between inside and outside, sidewalk and lawn, street and building. Within this heterogeneous zone people and things and events do not conform to their social “scripts” but arise within bizarre circumstances that verge on the comedic (e.g. the selling of George Harrison’s pornographic portraits by the Reverend Amy Taylor: “they’re very popular. We like to be up to date” 214). The city’s lack of conformity to expectation seems to open up the space of play for individualities that, too, proliferate in this unconfined space. As McHale writes, in the zone “a large number of fragmentary possible worlds coexist in an impossible space” (49). In his text *Terminal Identity*, Bukatman argues that while McHale does well to highlight the ontological indeterminacy the zone makes apparent, he fails to grasp the fundamental relationship between epistemological and ontological slipperiness. For Bukatman, the subject’s inability to secure a sense of meaning in the world is no mere shift in “only literary-aesthetic significance” (as he finds it is for McHale), but makes apparent the extent to which the collapse of epistemological certainties bears deeper into the fundamental ontological structure of the known world. Bukatman writes, “the ontological mutability of the

postmodern text does not simply *exclude* an epistemological position, but is fully a sign of *epistemological surrender*" (164). The loss of "visibility, corporeality, and comprehensibility" (ibid.) in these unmade worlds means we too have lost the grounds upon which to establish the rise of the subject.

The convergence of epistemological and ontological instability in Bellona, with its disorienting erosion of stable structures and boundaries, is apparent in the way the city acts upon the possibility of subjectivity and the possibility for shared knowledge. Soon after Kid enters the city, he meets Tak, who tells him the sun appears to rise in different places. Kid wonders if this could perhaps be explained by a seasonal procession. But Tak says he's come to think this is the result of an internal, rather than external shift: "I've thought, maybe: It's not the season that changes. It's us. The whole city shifts, turns, rearranges itself. All the time. *And rearranges us*" (*Dhalgren* 40, emphasis mine). The influence of setting upon the subject encourages a disruptive ontological reading of science fiction texts and representations of the zone, according to Bukatman. He suggests in the zone it becomes very difficult to map the disoriented subject: "Here is the point at which the subject disappears from our fictions as coherent sites of exploration, to be replaced by worlds and zones whose rules of functioning are precisely *not* to be determined" (*Terminal* 164). The strange world of Bellona which foregrounds the weirdness of the city environment also gives rise to the strangeness of identity, what contours and influences (but does not determine) its conditions of possibility. We find Bellona's multiplicity reflected in the different and irreconcilable experiences different characters have throughout the novel.

Much like Kid and Lanya's impasse over the possible location of Bellona's river, we find that throughout the text, characters express conflicting perspectives concerning their experience of the city's reality. And due to the lack of regulatory laws and norms in Bellona, the absence of any centralizing, logical principle (logocentrism) makes way for the interpretation of parallel, incongruous realities as a form of madness. As Kid tells Lanya,

I live in one city . . . Maybe you live in another. In mine time . . . leaks; sloshes backwards and forwards, turns up and shows what's on its . . . underside. Things shift. Yeah, maybe you could explain . . . In your city, you're sane and I'm crazy. But in mine *you're* the one who's nuts! Because you keep telling me things are happening that don't fit with what I *see*! Maybe that's the only city I can live in . . . I don't know if I *want* to live in yours! (*Dhalgren* 462)

For Kid, these disparate experiences reveal the coexistence of multiple realities that do not defer to a singular, higher, true reality. The question of madness and sanity loses its hold in a world without reason. Madness here merely expresses the disjunction between one's singular experience and another's. Without a central point of reference to which all experience can be referred all characters can perhaps be read as equally "mad." But Delany does not present a one-dimensional experience of Bellona's destabilizing qualities. For example, in between the characters of Edna Richards and Tak we find the polar responses of disorientation and freedom. Edna, a character that represents a final vestige of bourgeois society in Bellona, lives with her family in an upscale but rundown apartment building that is starting to be populated by squatters. This unwelcome presence in her building deeply distresses Edna, to whom all activities in the apartment should be

ordered by “management,” a source of authority to which she constantly refers but which never appears. The change in structure, maintenance, organization and inhabitants in the apartment appears to unsettle Edna more than Bellona’s overarching chaos. Amid the external catastrophe, Edna clings increasingly to the security of the home, the rituals of domesticity, and the urban family life. She admits she resists the disorder of the world outside her apartment: “Do you know, I don’t believe all that out there is real” (273). Because of this, Edna deeply admires the efforts of her husband to perform the formal but empty gestures of his regular role in their former world. Edna’s husband, Arthur, a figure of institutional conformity, returns to his work at a factory in Bellona, each day, even though there are no or few other employees and the factory is no longer producing. To Edna, Arthur’s resistance to the event that has transformed Bellona is honourable. She tells Kid, “once the smoke covers him, I don’t believe he goes anywhere. I don’t believe there’s anyplace to go” (ibid.). But his insistence he perform his regular function and attend work evokes a feeling of desperate gratitude in Edna: “I’m very much in love with that man. And I’m very much in awe of him. It frightens me how much I don’t understand him” (ibid.).

The staging of regularity in the Richards’ home, however, is dramatically disrupted by their decision to move one floor up to create more distance from the squatters. During this move the Richard’s youngest child, Bobby, backs into an empty elevator shaft and is killed in the fall. The empty elevator, which follows its pair to whatever floor it is called, represents a terrible and inescapable lacuna at the heart of Edna’s reality. Edna’s manufactured reality is exposed by the force of the gap that dangerously persists in the centre of the building’s structure. More than an inert

emptiness, the elevator seems to express its own hostile character, “hissing” at passers by, stalking them in their movements about the building, always threatening to consume (223). In a previous scene, Kid grabs the back of Bobby’s shirt, preventing him from mindlessly and accidentally walking into the shaft (212). Kid confronts Edna, pressing her to explain why they family stayed in the building, alongside such a hazard. In response, Edna voices her own rebellion against the disorder of Bellona and its disruptive effect on her efforts of world-building. She tells Kid that, as a mother, it is essential to solidify a domestic sphere that resists the threat of the external world: “It’s terribly necessary. You must make it your own world. And everyone must be able to feel it” (252). For Edna, one’s mental structures are identical to world structures and, for her, heterogeneity represents a threat both internal and external. The threat of “rearrangement,” as Edna explains, is the possibility of introducing mutagenic forces that contain a difference that may infect/transform the entire structure. This is apparent in Edna’s description of the danger of her family’s move to a different floor:

You are sensitive, a poet; you understand that to tear it all apart, and set it up again, even on the nineteenth floor: that’s taking a desperate chance, you see? But I’m doing it. To you, moving like this is just a gesture. But you don’t understand how important a gesture can be. I cannot have a home where I hear the neighbors shrieking. *I* cannot. Because when the neighbors are shrieking, I cannot maintain the peace of mind necessary for *me* to *make* a home. Not when that is going on. . . .Do you know how I thought of *this* moving? As a space, a gap, a crack in which some terrible thing might get in and destroy it, us, my home. You have to take it apart, then put it back together. I really felt as though some dirt, or filth, or

horrible rot might get in while it was being reassembled and start a terribly decay.

(253)

In this extended passage, Edna equates her state of mind to her state of world. She cannot “make” her home if she experiences mental disquiet.

The unity of Edna’s mind/home/world makes her a commensurate structuralist that adheres to near pathological boundaries of inside/outside. Her requirement for strict and rigorous borders is the result of her fear of the external which represents a fundamental threat to the homogeneity that underlies the structure of her safe, inhabitable world. For Kid, this represents a perplexing coherence to a world of her own arbitrary making — an arbitrariness exposed, inexorably, by the smoke lingering outside the apartment windows. To Edna, the corruption of Bellona seems to reinforce the necessity of her reality management, a task that appears to have become more difficult amid the chaos: “Do you *know* how terrible it is to live inside here . . . with everything slipping away?” (251). Kid suggests she submit to what Bellona has become: “you’ve got to walk around in it because there isn’t anything else” (251) . . . “if everything *outside* has changed —” (253). But the unraveling of the outside only serves to buttress Edna’s inflexibility: “Then I have to be . . . stronger inside. Yes?” (253).

Edna’s fear of rearrangement stands as a counterpoint to Tak, who finds Bellona an emancipatory space. Without the confines of social expectation and governing behavioural norms, people are free to engage in a free-form process of individuation. For Tak this represents an expanse of authentic becoming. When Kid asks Tak why he remains in Bellona, Tak responds:

“Well, actually, I’ve thought about that one a lot. I think it has to do with — I got a theory now — freedom. You know, here —” ahead, something moved — “you’re free. No laws: to break, or to follow. Do anything you want. Which does funny things to you. Very quickly, surprisingly quickly, you become —” they neared another half-lit lamp; what moved became smoke, lobling from a window sill set with glass teeth like an extinguished jack-o-lantern — “exactly what you are.” (23)

Tak suggests Bellona’s deregulation prompts a sort of shedding of patterns of behaviour, allowing one to become what they are, beyond proscribed and projected selves as conscripts of social norms. The movement around Tak as he speaks serves to emphasize the malleability of the space of Bellona where things continuously shapeshift in their becoming (“what moved became smoke”). The act of becoming “exactly what you are” is for Tak, like Edna Richards, a process of world building. But whereas Edna submits to the conscriptions of conservative domesticity, Tak views the act of world building as fundamentally imaginative. He tells Kid, “Bellona is terribly hospitable. You can have your fantasy and . . . well, besides eating it too, you can also feel just a bit less like you’re depriving anyone else of theirs” (416). Tak finds heterotrophic space of identity formation accommodating to parallel, but distinct, world experiences. His description of Bellona as “terribly hospitable” suggests Tak too registers the insecurity of ontological determinacy but understands that a lack of structure as welcoming to heterogeneity — a *terrible hospitality*. For this reason, Tak says he understands Bellona as a science-fictional realm of open space: “The Universe is an essentially hospitable place, full of earth-type planets where you can crash-land your spaceship and survive long enough to

have an adventure” (415). The city is a “science fiction,” for Tak, “only real” (415). And the detritus of the environment becomes a sort of foragers paradise: “In Bellona you can have anything you want, as long as you can carry it by yourself, or get your friends to” (ibid.). The acquisition of identity, like objects, is a matter of withstanding the weight, burden of your own desires. This creative enterprise of self-making, is unlimited and polymorphous, for Tak. Kid mentions that despite Bellona’s offerings, most people don’t have much. Tak replies: “A comment on the paucity of our imaginations — none at all on the wonders here for the taking” (ibid.). Bellona becomes a near fantasy of self-realization and self-empowerment for Tak where one simply *enacts* reality. As Bukatman writes, “Bellona is a site of social and subjective redefinition” (*Terminal* 169). Like the members of the scorpion gang who literally project holographic representations of their mythical selves and roam the streets as dragons and griffins, Bellona is an autopoetic universe, where the self re-presents, ego-unbound. But for Kid, the separation of self from identity does not represent emancipation or terror, but is simply a material and constitutive feature of life in Bellona. As Kid suggests: “I’ve lost a name. So? If the inhabitants of this city have one thing in common, it is that such accidents don’t interest them; that is neither lauded here as freedom nor wailed as injury; it is taken as a fact of the landscape, not personality” (*Dhalgren* 773).

Bellona emerges not merely as an alternate zone or space in which the alternate world of *Dhalgren* takes place; it also emerges as its own agential vitality that acts upon its inhabitants. The particular force of Bellona as a constitutive object is raised explicitly by Kid when he looks for an explanation for Bobby’s elevator shaft death. Reflecting back on the circumstance he begins to wonder if there is a causal relation between

Bellona's strange vitalism and Bobby's fall down the shaft. He tells Lanya he wants to believe Bobby's sister Mary may have had a hand in Bobby's death, because if she didn't cause the accident, then Bellona did:

That's what terrifies me. That's the thing I'm scared of most . . . Because . . .

Because that means it's the city. That means it's the landscape: the bricks, and the girders, and the faulty wiring and the shot elevator machinery, all conspiring together to *make* these myths true. And that's crazy. (278)

The city becomes actively linked to the lives and deaths of its inhabitants here as a vital force, a conspirator. Bellona's positioning as an actant within *Dhalgren* brings the city to the foreground, not simply as environment, but as an agent. In her work *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett develops a theory of agential matter, which makes room for a vitality of things often overlooked in ideas of world/environment/object as static backdrop. Bennett develops a rich sense of vitality to get at the "capacity of things . . . not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). She identifies "active powers issuing from nonsubjects" to highlight "the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things" (ix). For Bennett, the longstanding "philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends" is too often bound up in fictions of inanimate, inert contexts that represent the exceptionalism of human beings, separate from and mastering their external material worlds" (ibid.). To reorder the arrangement between human being and world being is to destabilize the position of the human in the hierarchy of being. This allows for a vibrant materiality to emerge from the shadows, Bennett argues, that prompts a necessary revision in "operative notions of matter, life,

self-interest, will, and agency” (ibid.). Bennett’s theory of “thing-power” asks us to attend to the otherness of things that escape our metaphysical forms of knowing and our limited and imperfect awareness of reality. Thing-power has to do with an ontological recalcitrance of things that can never be reduced to human intelligibility and control (3). Bennett’s formulation gives rise to a version of the world that cannot be described via automatistic or mechanistic frameworks. Instead, with the vital materiality of thing-power we are confronted with a force of things that are “existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects” (4). Bennett ascribes thing power to such banal things as roadside debris that has the capacity to provoke affect, give rise to repulsion, curiosity and a “nameless awareness of . . . impossible singularity” (ibid.). The effect of Bennett’s vital materiality is a diminishment of subjective force emanating from the human and an elevation of the force of things that have the capacity to rise up and alter the world, even outside of human awareness. Larger collectives of things, assemblages, have the capacity to appear “as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (5). The transformation of inert matter to lively agential forces incurs a substantial shift in human self-regard. Suddenly space and things are ascribed a productive, constitutive force normally held in reserve for the human subject. Bennett’s theoretical, posthuman turn situates the human subject in an alternate world, one that is other, recalcitrant and has a power of its own.

An analogue to this speculative theoretical practice can be found in the development of science fictions paraspaces and zones — disorienting alternate worlds characterized by an “otherness” and weirdness that outstrips the traditional abilities of the

human-subject-as-master. As Bukatman writes, postmodern cities like Bellona, act as paradoxical sites of conversion where “the subject is neither the causative agent nor the epistemological center of these shifting realities” (*Terminal* 169). The location of the human within this “live” space underscores the significance of place over and above the subject which experiences it: “The city is linked to the condition of subjectivity, but in these later cities of postmodern representation, it is the subject that is formed in response to the conditions of existence — the world can be understood as a subjective projection no longer” (*ibid.*). For Kid, the idea that Bellona might engender a causative power strikes him as terrifying. He asks Lanya, “Do you think a city can control the way the people live inside it? I mean, just the geography, the way the streets are laid out, the way the buildings are placed?” (279). In the wake of Bobby’s death, Kid seems to want to resist the realization of Bellona’s thing-power, an acknowledgement that represents the subject being usurped by an environment that holds within itself a capacity for violence. Under this formulation, the power of things points not simply to a hospitable or neutral heterogeneous flow of forces but “as terror . . . as a radically meaningless void” (*Vibrant* 54). Kid wonders if experiencing the world in this way amounts to a form of madness: “thinking that live streets and windows are plotting and conniving to make you into something you’re not, that’s crazy, isn’t it?” (279). What Kid articulates is the strangeness of giving life to the world. Kid fears his submission to the anarchy of a world that exists outside the grasp of meaning-making, world-making human subjects. Delany writes that science fiction, in particular, is a mode of writing that intentionally provokes this confrontation:

Despite the meaningful differences in the ways of reading that constitute the specific literary modes, they are all characterized . . . by a priority of the subject, i.e., of the self, of human consciousness. To a greater or lesser extent, the subject can be read as the organizational centre of all the literary categories' many, many differing expectations . . . Science fiction is far more concerned with the organization (and reorganization) of the object, i.e., the world, or the institutions through which we perceive it. It is concerned with the subject, certainly, but concerned with those aspects of it that are close to the object: How is the subject excited, impinged on, contoured, and constituted by the object?" (*Starboard Wine* 188)

Dhalgren places many of the novel's characters at the precipice of this submission, testing how the appearance of a weird and lively world acts upon subjects and their standard frames of reference.

Bellona's most dramatic instance of this confrontation occurs with the massively altered appearing of the world's cosmos. The appearance of a second moon one night creates confusion about the arrangement of cosmological order far beyond Bellona's streets. Leaving the bar one evening, Kid, Tak, and Lanya among others catch rare glimpses of the sky through "tears" in the ceiling of smoke and cloud: "Through one rent, the lunar disk had appeared; then, as the aperture moved with the wind, he saw a *second* moon! Lower in the sky, smaller, it was in some crescent phase" (106). Two moons, one gibbous, one crescent, flit in and out of appearance above a small crowd of drunken onlookers. The appearance of the second moon creates a sudden proliferation of light, and yet it provides no meaningful illumination:

Look for shadow in this double-lit mist. A dark communion in the burning streets between the landscape and the smarting senses suggests more sterile agonies.

Clouds out of control concoct anticipation. What use can any of us have for *two moons?*” (108)

Bellona’s double-lit atmosphere does not emerge out of its darkness and irreality. Despite this seemingly significant change to the external world, the senses are still presented as providing painfully limited comprehension. This new illuminating source does not validate or elucidate the real but further confounds the senses. The moon is seen as evidence of a cosmic rearrangement that signals the beginning of a new disorder: “The miracle of order has run out and I am left in an unmiraculous city where anything may happen. I don’t need more imitations of disorder. It *has* to be more than that!” (ibid.). Kid’s sense that the moon is a mere “imitation” of disorder stems from his sense the night sky isn’t a display of the cosmic realm, but the projection of Bellona heaven-ward:

Above is light. What else does this city cast up on its cloudy cover, from ill-functioning streetlights, from what leaks tentatively out of badly shaded doors and windows, from flame? Is it enough to illuminate another bright, brief, careening, but less-than-standard body? (109)

The sense that Bellona may be the illuminating source that lightens the new moon radically redefines the place of the world no longer governed by standard physics. Here Bellona disrupts more than its own geography and inhabitants and refigures the mechanistic order of the universe. Kid sees Bellona as enfolded in and implicated in what he observes — he does not occupy a neutral position of observation. The second moon’s appearance seems to divest Lanya’s cosmogony of its meaning and its sense of place. She

recalls how seeing the first astronauts on the moon on television transformed the moon, previously just a light in the sky, into “a place” (111). But with this appearance of the second moon, that sense of place is obliterated: “because there was another one, that you don’t know if anybody’s walked on, suddenly both of them were . . . something else” (ibid.). Lanya cannot incorporate both moons in her understanding of the universe and so they become no-place, something other than a knowable “place” in her mind. The threat the double moons pose to the intelligible universe also becomes a subject of distress for the editor of Bellona’s newspaper of record. *The Times* prints the reflections of a Professor Wellman who suggests the particular arrangement of light on the two moons suggests a second source of illumination that is not the sun: “Even with *two* moons, the sun can only be in *one* direction from the both; no matter which phases they are in, if they are both visible in the same quarter of the sky, *both* should be light on the *same* side — which was not the case here” (132). Wellman’s observation makes room for the suggestion that Bellona may be a secondary illuminating force. But the very idea, the very question of a secondary light source pushes too far past the reasonable bounds of speculative thought for Roger Calkins, the paper’s editor. To Wellman’s letter, Calkins responds: “To which your editor can only say that *any* ‘agreement,’ ‘certainty,’ or ‘definiteness’ about these moons are cast into serious doubt — unless we are prepared to make even *more* preposterous speculations about the rest of the cosmos? No” (132). Professor Wellman suggests that the play of light on the two moons must elicit a new working theory of the universe. What is visible in outer space indicates the presence of an *outer* outer space. This is a mutation Calkins cannot stomach and he outright refuses to revise his cosmological framework in order to accommodate or incorporate difference.

This non-standard heavenly body bewilders Calkins' standard theory of the universe and yet, for him, it is the second moon that must be suspended, rather than his established epistemological frame. Calkins' response to this neo-Copernican moment appears in stark contrast to the musings of the former astronaut Kamp. In his former career Kamp traveled to the moon and so perhaps represents most explicitly a de-naturalized perspective on "place" and "world" and the *situatedness* of knowledge. For Kamp, conventional knowledge structures and schemes are place-based and do not necessarily survive their movement in space and time. Knowledge has to do with pattern recognition, according to Kamp, who suggests the real world *shows itself* to observers through patterns and information flows:

It's the *pattern* that colors and shapes assume that tell you whether it's a cow or a car you're looking at. It's the very finest alternations in color differentiation over a surface that tell you whether it's maple or pine, styrene or polyethylene, linen or flannel. (677)

It is pattern recognition that transforms pure sensory data into information, according to Kamp. There is "richness" in the given world that has to do with the conformity of sensory input to intelligible flows (patterns) of knowing. Yet these patterns can become heightened or disappear depending on one's experience of place. Kamp describes his participation in an LSD experiment in Michigan in which test subjects are enclosed in a mimetic world, a spherical room upon which sensory inputs were streamed. As he describes it to Kid: "They could cover it with colors and shapes and flashes. They put earphones on me and blasted in beeps and clicks and oscillating frequencies" (ibid.). The experiment's subjects were asked to identify patterns in the sound and projections. Kamp

learned that he was part of a control group, to which no patterns were given: “I was told all the ones I had seen I had imposed myself” (ibid.). Kamp’s participation in the experiment makes apparent the activity of pattern recognition, which causes a near disorienting effect when he reenters the “real world:”

when I went outside, into the real world, I was just astounded how . . . *rich* and complicated everything suddenly looked and sounded . . . And I suddenly realized what the kids had been calling sensory overload was really information-deprivation. (ibid.)

Kamp’s other-worldly experience in the projection sphere makes apparent the extent to which one can become blind to the richness of the world and the extent to which that richness is channeled into sensible, identifiable information. This, in turn, gives rise to a fear of an onto-epistemological reduction of being. Kamp’s experience prompts a defamiliarization with knowledge and the unthought processes of cognitive functions. He goes on to relate how that experience of re-entering the world and its richness was put into new relief when he traveled to the moon: “it’s another *world*, and when you’re there, you have no way of knowing *what* anything means . . . The moon is a different world, with a different order that you don’t understand. There *isn’t* that richness” (678). This absence of richness doesn’t have to do with a lack of sensory givenness, but the absence of an interpretative framework through which to make that givenness intelligible. For Kamp, the moon “had been a place — and it happened in every mile en route — where standard information patterns just broke down” (677). “The moon,” he adds, “is a different world, with a different order that you don’t understand” (678). Kamp experiences an estrangement from meaning both on earth and on the moon. For him,

intelligibility relies on human-imposed patterns of recognition that, while emanating from things themselves (“the finest alterations in color . . . tell you”), rely on a certain familiarity of place. A lack of intelligibility for Kamp does not indicate a lack of richness, but the absence of an interpretative frame that has a meaningful orientation to place (e.g. the moon). These reflections point towards an excess of other, external worlds, that may exist on and off planet earth. For the inhabitants of Bellona, the known world’s order is vanishing, forcing subjects into an unknown realm not of mere disorder and chaos, but a given richness that outstrips human patterns of intelligibility. Kamp does allow for a unique difference between the experience of disorder and unintelligibility on earth and on the moon. A lack of referential orientation in outer space “wasn’t horrible,” Kamp says, adding, “horror still has something to do with earth” (ibid.). The defamiliarization Kamp experiences with the meaning of the real world is a source of horror for him, placing him outside the realm of the earth’s place-based knowledge. His sense of alienation stems not simply from his positioning outside of knowledge but from his sense of himself outside the meaning of his world. That horror, for Kamp, properly belongs to the earth indicates the extent to which meaning gains its worth and significance in places of value, i.e. Kamp’s world, the earth. This estrangement effect, for Delany, has to do with a perspectival rupture that shifts the subject’s position within the universe. In his introduction to the comic book, *Empire*, Delany suggest this kind of cosmic disorientation is an important feature of science fiction writing:

But it is just that multiplicity of worlds, each careening in its particular orbit about the vast sweep of interstellar night, which may be the subtlest, most pervasive, and finally the most valuable thing in s-f . . . It’s a basic image which, if you let it,

can almost totally revise the gravity-bound, upper/lower organization which holds up (or holds down) so much of our thinking . . . the whole concept of an endless, linear, vertical measure, ever mounting and with no ceiling, has given way to the concept of relative, unfixed centers, different worlds, different points of view related only by direction, distance and trajectory . . . This experience of constant de-centered de-centeredness, each decentering on a vaster and vaster scale, has a venerable name among people who talk about science fiction: “the sense of wonder.” (*ix*)

Delany uses defamiliarization to reignite a sense of wonder in what has become unfamiliar and unthought. Shifts in the landscape and the cosmos allow for a shift in thought, according to Delany, that comes about from a radical de-centering of mundane perspectives.

The Sensible, Sensibility and a Sense of Wonder

The result of world unmaking and its radical de-centering is a kind of disorientation. In unmade worlds we cannot find *our way* by virtue of pre-formed, stable onto-epistemological markers. Disoriented in unmade worlds, we are forced to find *another way*. For readers of SF and end-of-world narratives, these texts contain an implicit challenge of making one’s way in, making *sense* of, unknown and unfamiliar worlds. In reading for world unmaking, we are not reading for reorientation in a disrupted place but are asked to engage in the practice of reading that is at home within a state of dis-orientation. Here we find that the absence of the familiar and the normal does not lead to an absence of sense. Reading in unmade worlds is not reading nonsense. Instead, we

find that, set apart from familiar worlds and practices of orientation, we are ushered into a deeper state of sensuous attention. In unmade worlds we must rehabilitate our sensuous engagement with our surroundings and companions, seeing things anew to gain our bearings. This newfound attentiveness is important because it asks us to engage an awareness that exists outside of knowing. The result is also the emergence of a new set of interpretative possibilities introduced by the aesthetic practices of world unmaking, which make way for alternative functions of meaning and forms of life.

When worlds are unmade their organization and coherence is decomposed. Authors have a unique access to this de-composition when writing of worlds that do not mirror the normalcy of mundane reality, but look to unravel the social configuration of that reality. This has the double effect of representing alternate worlds through new configurations while also calling attention to the very nature of such configuration in the first place. For literary theorist Yves Citton, the capacity for such attention has an explicitly political edge. Citton writes “Literature is less in the eye of the beholder than in his gaze, i.e., in the aesthetic attention he devotes to the text” (“Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene,” 317). Citton engages with Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s analysis of the aesthetic experience that distinguishes between standard and aesthetic attention. Schaeffer insists that what is fundamental to the latter is a capacity for epistemological suspension, in which the reader might linger in the unknown: “To engage in an aesthetic experience means to adopt a particular divergent style,” and further that “the disposition to adopt this divergent cognitive style is proportional to the individual’s capacity to tolerate delayed categorization” (Schaeffer *L’expérience esthétique* 104-105, quoted in Citton 317). Reading in non-normative environments necessitates a certain

tolerance for indeterminacy and a certain sensitivity to how sense-making is a context- and norm-dependent practice that implicates all manner of presumptions. The presumed normalcy of things is, rather than a neutral backdrop, a deeply conditioned expectation that reality ought to cohere to pre-existing fundamental judgments about being, categorization, discourse, and history. Thus, the practice of attending to the aesthetic imposes a requirement we move beyond standard attention “so that we can let unsuspecting categories emerge from a freewheeling attention that discovers new facts and new concerns within the matter under scrutiny” (Citton 317). Citton further states

this suspensive time and space of delayed categorization requires us first to accept, and then hopefully to revel in, looking and listening without understanding: they need us to be receptive to what can be perceived and made sense of, beyond, above, and apart from what our preconceived categories lead us to identify. (317-318)

Citton draws heavily on the work of Rancière and his notion of the “partition of the sensible” in developing a radical emancipative aesthetic attention. In “The Politics of Literature,” Rancière writes of the interrelation between the political and the sensible by threading together the processes of what one sees (has attention of) and what one acts upon (attends to).

What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to

designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. (10)

For Citton, the partition of the sensible gives a name to the relationship between the aesthetic and the political but also generates a moment of “real action” (“Political Agency and the Ambivalence of the Sensible” 123). For it is within the moment of partition that “some data are perceived and selected as relevant, others are rejected as relevant, others are simply ignored” and when this occurs

agents inherit a specific social configuration . . . which they can retransmit as it has been transmitted to them or which, following the encounter with this singular set of data, can lead them to alter it, at an infinitesimal or sometimes at a more dramatic level. (ibid.)

This reconfiguration for Citton appears as “the founding moment of political subjectivation.” What is at stake for Citton in that moment of potential reconfiguration is “the possibility of politics” which “rests on such a moment when I am led to reconfigure the *partage du sensible* I have inherited from the majoritarian norm (along with its blind spots, its denial of rights and its hierarch of privileges)” (ibid.). To overcome one’s inherited *sense* of normalcy and the appearing of the world is to open onto an emancipatory political possibility where the very act of sensing is engaged as an act, and an act with consequences. Emancipation

begins when one understands that looking is also a form of action, which confirms or transforms the pre-existing distribution of positions. The spectator too acts, like the pupil or the scholar. He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He links what he sees with many other things he has seen on other stages, in other

types of places. He composes his own poem with the elements of the poem provided to him. (Rancière, *Le spectateur emancipe*, in “Fictional Attachments” 318)

An increased sensitivity and attentiveness to the active categorization of things in their appearing leads to an increase in agential power for Citton. And the outcome of this power is an increased ability to “feel well,” that is, feel in such a way that is adequate to navigating a world of difference where lives and the well-being of various actors is at stake.

The fact that we can develop our sensitivity, our *capacity* to sense, suffices to show that some type of activity, whatever it may be, is involved in the process. We, people of the twenty-first century, are therefore fully entitled to feel good (about ourselves) when we “feel well,” that is, when we *do* our best to become sensitive to the existence, sufferings, and rights of all the creatures (women, colonial subjects, gays, and battery hens) that previously fell outside of the *partage du sensible* experienced by our barbarian ancestors. (122)

The “complex mechanisms of distinction” that determine how and why we sense what we do are “socially constructed over time,” Citton writes, but also open to change and reconfiguration because these mechanisms are “individually reconstructed each time we sense anything” (ibid.). *Dhalgren* can be read as an invitation to readers to develop Citton’s *capacity* to sense and Delany’s “sense of wonder” (*Empire ix*). It is within this deepened attunement for sense and feeling we may begin to catch a glimpse of the uncommon sensibilities *of the possible* in distinction to the common sense of the actual. The decentering offered by the novel is not only an invitation to experience another

world, but to feel the disorienting pull of the differential of the sensible between worlds.

Delany suggests this movement between worlds is what generates the potential for subversion, for surprise: “The basic s-f construct, the worlds to come and the flights between them, suggest, by those de-centerings, ways to *under-cut* that up/down thinking, ways to *over-come* it, ways to surprise it and to subvert it” (ibid.).

III. *Annihilation: The Weird World*

Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what / looks to us like nothing.

— Alice Fulton, “Cascade Experiment”

We are all lichens now. We have never been individuals. From the anatomical, physiological, evolutionary, developmental, philosophic, economic — I don’t care what — perspective, we are all lichens now.

— Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”

The instability of levels produces not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

In the late summer of 2020, writer Rebecca Solnit awoke to an unsettling day in California. Smoke and ashfall from wildfires along the west coast obscured the sun, casting San Francisco into a cold daytime darkness. “Ash was falling, the ash of trees, forests, homes, towns, dreams burning up,” Solnit writes in a September 10, 2020 column for *The Guardian* (Solnit np). “In the strange light, the world around us looked ghostly, otherworldly, unnatural, unnerving, disturbing.” After four consecutive years of a new event with which to mark our calendars — wildfire season — Solnit said the infernos fed by the climate crisis represent a “new kind of fire” and “we are in a new kind of era.” The particular urgency of the west coast’s 2020 wildfires was highlighted by their ferocity and the inability of fire experts to meaningfully chart their course. UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain tweeted the fires were strikingly unpredictable: “Standard

reporting/mapping procedures are essentially not capable of keeping pace with the unbelievable rates of spread now being observed on these fires — it is historically unprecedented” (@Weather_West). Some of the fires began in the midst of a crippling heat wave that brought temperatures of 49.4 degrees Celsius to the Los Angeles area, which occurred, as Solnit notes, at the same time as unseasonably cold temperatures brought early snowfall to Colorado and hurricane winds to Utah. Other fires were caused by the neglected infrastructure of utilities company Pacific Gas and Electric, leading to forced blackouts. The decision on whether to swelter amid the heat indoors or face dangerously poor air quality outdoors was a maddening decision given all of this was taking place amidst the unprecedented global coronavirus pandemic. Solnit writes that the blackened skies brought about a day that was the “most unnatural-feeling and unnerving” in her life. But it was the intersecting crises of the planet and the uneven toll it takes on life that aggrandized, for Solnit, “the dread and dismay of living in this whole new hell.”

Similar firestorm events in the summer of 2018 gave rise to the term “smoke apocalypse” to describe the feeling of weirdness that overtakes everyday life lived beneath eery skies (Riley np). The phenomena of de-saturated daylight, mid-day darkness, and the orange haze of smoke-filtered sunlight prompted discussions of solastalgia, ecological mourning, and environmental grief in the Anthropocene. Wildfires are on the rise across the globe due to the multiple effects of climate change. Warmer on-average winters have meant less precipitation, leading to drier conditions and smaller snowpack to feed rivers and lakes in the summer. Higher temperatures have also meant a flourishing of pine beetle populations which can kill vast swaths of trees, left standing timber dry. The range and extent of recent wildfires — larger, hotter, and faster than in

previous decades — have created a new inferno-induced meteorological phenomenon known as pyroclouds. Fast-rising smoke and heat from enormous fires has the ability to generate entirely new weather systems, which often generate lightening strikes, creating, in turn, more forest fires. The reality of living alongside such dangers or under the transfigured skies of destructive infernos is becoming an anticipated part of summertime life. The weirdness of this “new normal” is not just registered ecologically but plays an emotionally affective role in individual lives and one’s ability to feel at home in their world.⁴¹

To live under the shadow figure of the wildfire smoke is to be trapped within the disorienting onto-epistemological bind of the “hyperobject” called climate change. In his work *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Timothy Morton describes hyperobjects as phenomena that exist beyond human spatial and temporal scales and are always partially outside human apprehension and comprehension. As a hyperobject, climate change “means something ontologically scary about our world” in its material irrefutability that is at once profoundly t/here but cannot be pointed to (48). Hyperobjects usher us into a new kind of ecological thinking that diminishes the role of human desire and consciousness in shaping and ascertaining reality. At the same time as the very feelings and possibilities of our lives are being intimately impacted by changes in, for example, the atmosphere, we are also coming to terms with the fact that human conception is inadequate to the task of fully comprehending — much less containing —

⁴¹ In N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*, which will be discussed in the following chapter, an apocalyptic event known as the Madness Season was precipitated by a volcanic eruption that “launched large deposits of the dark-coloured mineral augite into the air” (*The Fifth Season* 454). The resulting years of darkness brought about “a higher than usual incidence of mental illness” (ibid.).

climate change. Hyperobjects upend common liberal notions of human subjectivity and the human's presumed command of objectivity. Among new materialists, speculative realists, and object-oriented ontologists, the distance separating the subject from the object is replaced with a tangle of intersecting events and spatio-temporal horizons that undermine the notion of independent, human selves that can be meaningfully parsed from their nonhuman environments. This entanglement produces a strange double effect. Humanity can gain no functional "distance" from a warming planet and yet, the phenomena of climate change is non-local, we cannot point to it. For Morton, these strange circumstances "unground the human" (18) and "reestablish the way we experience 'here'" (19). "Hyperobjects provoke *irreductionist* thinking," for Morton, because "they present us with scalar dilemmas in which ontotheological statements about which thing is the most real (ecosystem, world, environment, or conversely, the individual) become impossible" (19).

The environmental transformations of the Anthropocene are making the material world unfamiliar and unpredictable. At the same time as the scientific community works to find new ways to articulate emerging ecological realities, the theoretical community is experimenting with novel articulations of matter and materialism that can contend with the resulting conundrum of epistemological and ontological instabilities. The Anthropocene, as a conceptual device, can be read for its own expressions of world unmaking. As conventional descriptions of the so-called normal world become unuseable, thinkers, authors, practitioners, and decision-makers must do the work to reenvision a kind of reality that does not conform to sedimented ways of thought and inherited ways of being. In the Anthropocene, the world has become *weird*. That

weirdness presents a specific challenge to normative claims about the planet and its presumed stability, both geophysically, geopolitically, and, following Elizabeth A. Povinelli's work, we can also say geontologically, as the divisions once cleaving conceptions of the human from nonhuman and life from nonlife no longer hold sway. Climate weirding, the effects of which have outrun even the most sophisticated climate modelling, is induced by human activity which a warming planet in turn makes weird. As the material world alters, we must add new colours to heat maps, and add new words to our lexicons, even as we let familiar terms and concepts melt away. Permafrost is no longer permanent. Land is lost to sea. Officials plan, not to avoid risk, but to rework social organization with the variable of perpetual disaster in mind.⁴² The Anthropocene is an age "in which hyperobjects start to oppress us with their terrifying strangeness" (*Hyperobjects* 48) and wherein we feel "the urgency and the passion and the horror . . . and the sense of cognitive weirdness" of being confronted with material realities that have the capacity to "profoundly alter life on Earth" (135). Yet for new materialists and especially thinkers committed to feminist and postcolonial lines of thought, such reflections on the weirding of the world must consider how the transformations of our lived reality are forced to contend with the way such changes bear down on the vulnerable and overlooked. The terror and strangeness of the changing world redirects questions to the fundamental concerns surrounding the possibilities for life in the ruins.

⁴² In the book *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck outlines his theory of the contemporary "risk society" wherein governments are forced to make decisions about the distribution of risk within populations. He notes this distribution is often uneven.

The loss of a sense of normalcy in the Anthropocene is a material crisis that binds the ecological and the human together.⁴³

The challenge of representing the world as it is altered by climate change and the intersecting crises of the Anthropocene is a notably difficult one (Ghosh). Even as it has emerged “as a dominant theme in literature and literary studies” the presentation of climate change in fiction is often limited to externalized, background aspects of the narrative.⁴⁴ Perhaps this is why Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Annihilation* is celebrated as environmental fiction of the Anthropocene for its ability to generate a sense of ecological weirdness that articulates the inmixing of the human and nonhuman, producing a sense of the weird that inheres in both the landscape and experiences of it. Foregrounding an altered environmental reality, VanderMeer highlights the troubling and troubled position of humans who attempt to make sense of the confoundingly nonhuman reality that seems to contour this imagined world. In *Annihilation* a region of the local environment somewhere along the coastal U.S. is perforated by a mysterious zone, known as Area X.

⁴³ In her work *The Mushroom at the end of the World: On the possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing tracks the development of economies of survival and human meaning-making in regions destroyed by the environmental crisis. Mushroom hunters, the prime subject of Tsing’s study, enliven new purposes in ruined forests, reminding us that possibility for ecological and human flourishing exist in “the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes” (282).

⁴⁴ A specific accounting of climate change literature was performed by Adeline Johns-Putra in article “Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theater and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism.” Interestingly this overview found that “overwhelmingly, climate change appears in novels as part of a futuristic dystopian and/or postapocalyptic setting. In such novels, climate change is depicted not just as an internal or psychological problem but for its external effects, often as part of an overall collapse including technological over-reliance, economic instability, and increased social division. This is not to say that such novels fail to deal with climate change’s psychological or political ramifications but to show that they emphasize its physical dramas over its emotional or mental ones.”

Within this zone there are alien and ecological *happenings* that do not conform to established forms of human understanding. The book is the first in a trilogy that also includes the novels *Authority* and *Acceptance*, which together detail the strange and terrifying experiences of an all-female expedition into Area X, the failed efforts of a secretive governmental bureaucracy of the Southern Reach to contain and control the zone and the story of the individuals first impacted by the arrival of this transformed environment. Readers of *Annihilation* never fully understand what caused the arrival of Area X on planet Earth, but VanderMeer hints at a proliferation of conspiratorial rumours that include government experiments, illegal dumping of chemical waste, and other accidents. The true origin of Area X is never delimited, much like its “border,” which readers learn is expanding, promising to swallow up the rest of the world in its slow but unstoppable encroachment.

The mainstream success of *Annihilation*, made into a 2018 feature film by Alex Garland, has led some to suggest VanderMeer has “transcended” his own genre of weird fiction and should be placed in the “American naturalist tradition” for his contribution to contemporary environmental literature.⁴⁵ Alongside other texts that take place in altered environments, including *Borne*, *Finch*, and the Veniss and Ambergris novels, VanderMeer is lauded for his use of warped materialities that prompt the need for new conceptions of reality that can bear the weight of the weird experience of life — both within the pages of his novels and in the Anthropocene. Like life under the veil of a

⁴⁵ Joshua Rothman’s article in *The New Yorker* magazine dubbed VanderMeer “The Weird Thoreau.” A piece in the *LA Review of Books* also argued for VanderMeer’s belong among literary heavyweights such as environmental writers Rachel Carlson and Annie Dillard. C.f. Tompkins, David. “Weird Ecology: On the Southern Reach Trilogy.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

smoke apocalypse, the weirdness of reality might not have to do with supernatural or extraterrestrial beings but rather the tangle of human/nonhuman activities, environmental conditions, and material forces that in disorienting ways come to bear down on forms and experiences of life. VanderMeer's fiction offers up worlds that cannot be made intelligible through conventional anthropomorphic and anthropocentric frameworks. As such these works ask readers to consider what logics and sensibilities might show up in these worlds that may not show up in our own. And in turn, readers are asked to consider to what kinds of life these altered realities may give rise.

VanderMeer's material other worlds, importantly, bear down not just on ecological conceptions of reality, but also have implications for thinking the meaning of the human in relation to materiality *prima facie*. Area X represents an ecological transformation but also presents an onto-epistemological⁴⁶ black box in which knowing human subjects are reduced to uncertain figures, incorporated into the landscape, and transfigured in strange and uncertain ways. The means by which the world of Area X appears as "weird" are significant, not only because of the ecological changes that are unfolding in the present,

⁴⁶ I take the term onto-epistemological, in all of its material and discursive resonance, from Karen Barad's work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. The linking of the ontological and epistemological is foundational in this dissertation, which stems directly from Barad's thought on the inseparability of human and nonhuman beings and the practices of knowledge production and meaning making. Barad's account of agential realism vies for a relational ontology that works within the productive binds of entanglement between the human and nonhuman world, which is made up of 'material bodies.' Her account is set up to work against detached representationalism and instead advocates for "*a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted* (i.e. discursive practices, in my posthumanist sense) *and specific material phenomena* (i.e., differentiating patterns of mattering). This causal relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced is one of agential intra-action" (139, emphasis in original).

but because these appearances represent perceptual shifts that allow us to ask questions about the nature of reality *as well as* the nature of that reality's appearing to us in the first place. The sprawling effects of climate change have been of particular interest to speculative realists and new materialists curious about objects that present a challenge to the limits of human perception. For Morton, the expansiveness of the phenomena of climate change, unravels the very notion of human subjects and the human world. "Hyperobjects are what have brought about the end of the world," Morton writes (*Hyperobjects* 6). "Clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept *world* is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise" (ibid.). Morton suggests that objects like climate change, radioactivity, and oil spills present a crisis to human thought because they require "thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic" (*Dark Ecology* 25). Pressures exerted on human existence and the fate of human thought by the presence of hyperobjects call for new ethics, politics, and philosophies that can contend with the capacities, needs, and shared futures of both human and nonhuman entities in the more-than-human world. While VanderMeer acknowledges he did not come across *Hyperobjects* until after he published *Annihilation*, he claims an affinity for the concept, noting in a conversation with Morton published by the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that "the very term 'hyperobject' kind of encapsulated what was going on organically in *Annihilation*," ("A Conversation" np). As a writer of fiction VanderMeer said the concept of hyperobjects creates an appealing space in which things are "both an anchor" and also cause one to get lost at the same time (ibid.). The concept is "both concrete and abstract at the same time . . . Even as you define hyperobject, it oddly begins to slip away" (ibid.). Morton, in response, suggests

Area X conjures a similar feeling, “where you’re going into this region which becomes more strange the more you know it:”

It’s like the more you look at something — looking doesn’t necessarily demystify things. I think science isn’t necessarily about stripping the illusion off, but it could be about seeing how things could become even more strange than they were about five minutes ago. (ibid.)

For VanderMeer, the disorienting effect produced by hyperobjects is not limited to just those grand and unwieldy phenomena such as oil spills,⁴⁷ but can also be generated by a form of attunement to the everyday world around us. He notes that what appears as unremarkable contains the capacity to disorient if one only pays attention. “I’m a big believer in trying to bring the reader or viewer back to understanding that the under-meaning of what they think is mundane is not really that mundane and is also incredibly complex,” he tells Morton. “Just noticing this thing around us, which I can lose sight of — this is of incredible importance when we talk about things like ecology” (ibid.). For both VanderMeer and Morton, a sense of the weird world can come about through both reflections on a glass of orange juice or the processes of decay in sweltering Florida ecosystems. For VanderMeer the weirdness of weird fiction is about inverting the everyday object to show its hidden strangeness. He notes, “in writing fiction you’re just

⁴⁷ In various talks VanderMeer describes how a wisdom tooth extraction coupled with the event of the Deepwater Horizon well blowout led to a fever dream that inspired the creation of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*. In his article “Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*,” Andrew Strombeck notes how the nonhuman world played upon the author’s material body to, in effect, produce the writing that makes up *Annihilation*. “If we believe VanderMeer, the Deepwater Horizon spill worked through him, settling in his brain’s neurons, its form – a whorl — impressing upon him, the way that a charcoal rubbing registers the surface beneath it” (1). C.f. Strombeck, Andrew. “Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*.”

transcribing reality to some degree” (ibid.). A link that binds together VanderMeer’s fiction to those generating theory in the new materialist space is the diminished role of the human in directing and unmasking the strange *event* of the material world. The move away from an androcentric metaphysics calls for the generation of new and radically posthumanist modes of thought. In *Hyperobjects* Morton writes,

what comes into view for humans at this moment is precisely the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobjects, one of which is assuredly Earth itself, and its geological cycles [which] demand a *geophilosophy* that doesn’t think simply in terms of human events and human significance. (7)

Morton and others like speculative realist Graham Harman agree the unfolding of the current ecological crisis pairs well with the insights of weird fiction. Like alien beings or dark, underworld monsters, the realities of the Anthropocene are disorienting, obliterating human claims about nature and reality, altering humanity’s position on Earth and in the cosmos. In his work *The Dust of This Planet*, philosopher Eugene Thacker writes that the hyperobjects we confront on a daily basis — “a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction” — make the world “increasingly unthinkable” (7). The way the world appears, revealed as it is through crisis and instability, brings human thought to an “absolute limit” (7) by facing the inadequacies of human comprehension. This notion of the “unthinkable world” (ibid.) gives rise to one of the “greatest challenges that philosophy faces today,” that is, “comprehending the world in which we live as both a human *and* a nonhuman world — and of comprehending this politically” (8). The genre of horror fiction, according to Thacker, has taken as its central concern the idea of the

unthinkable world and the terror this represents for anthropocentric modes of living and thinking. The relationship between the nonhuman world and horror lies primarily in the diminution of the human role in the world's revelation and in securing ideologies that can produce stabilizing effects on reality. For Morton, the hyperobjective quality of our new material circumstances ushers us out onto an ontological abyss where the rules (from Euclidean geometry to subject-object distinction) no longer apply:

By understanding hyperobjects, human thinking has summoned Cthulhu-like entities into social, psychic, and philosophical space. The contemporary philosophical obsession with the monstrous provides a refreshing exit from human-scale thoughts. It is extremely healthy to know not only that there are monstrous beings, but that there are beings that are not purely thinkable, whose being is not directly correlated with whatever thinking is. (64)

For Morton and other speculative realists and new materialists, the supposedly monstrous outside to human thought and capability emerges as a welcome threat to epistemological traditions that suggest the world can be adequately thought of as that which reveals itself through purely human interests and forms of cognition. But one of the urgent challenges for contemporary weird fiction (and for theorists interested in the revelations of speculative fiction) is to hold on to the ways in which the impacts of "the monstrous" are unequally distributed in the shared human-ecological crisis of the Anthropocene.

The estrangement of the "world outside" from the realm of human influence is the kernel of terror that runs throughout much of the horror genre and more specifically the development of weird fiction in the Lovecraftian tradition from which VanderMeer draws his influence. Many critics suggest weird fiction's *weirding* is unique from the traditional

forms of world alienation that arise in articulations of the uncanny and its presentation in Gothic or early weird fiction (Witzel 561). Sigmund Freud's popularized sense of the uncanny has to do with the familiar becoming unfamiliar, which for some literary critics belies an adherence to a normal, domesticated world to which the strange always appears in relation. The weirdness of weird fiction that pushes past a return to the familiar signals a critical demarcation between the conventions of "old" and "new" weird fictions. Harkening back to the beginnings of weird fiction in the work of H. P. Lovecraft, considered the genre's progenitor, critics point out that much of the weird's origins reside in "literature that refuses the centrality of human life within a rapidly expanding cosmos . . . through this de-emphasis of the human and the inherent inability to ever fully comprehend the mysteries of the universe" (Sperling np para 3). Telling tales of strange beings, hellish portals, oozes, and aliens that infiltrate normal worlds, Lovecraft's work unsettles neat boundaries between the human world and the non. The weirdness of Lovecraft's fiction, published in the first half of the twentieth century in popular pulp magazines, "asks readers to contemplate how one comes to know what one knows, whether knowledge of the world is ever really possible at all, and to imagine instead forms of nonhuman knowledge" (para 4). In portraying the weird as *belonging to* this world, the "new weird" also has an important role to play in growing the genre away from roots that are embedded in Lovecraft's fierce racism and blatant hatred of minoritized peoples.⁴⁸ For Timothy S. Murphy, the new weird carves out new ontological

⁴⁸ In the 2016 anthology *The Age of Lovecraft*, Jed Mayer suggests that in Lovecraft's works the "mingling of horror and recognition that accompanies the encounter with the nonhuman other is one that is vitally shaped by Lovecraft's racism" (67). In the same anthology, China Miéville notes that "the anti-humanism one finds so bracing in [Lovecraft] is an anti-humanism predicated on murderous race hatred" (179). This

space in which the wholly other is situated as *part of* the world. He describes the new weird as “welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming” (“Old and New Weird” 125). For Witzel, the move to incorporate the alterity of strange worlds into a sense of *our weird world* points to the critical contribution of weird fiction for reading in the Anthropocene. “We must allow ourselves to be transformed if we are to survive,” he writes. “This variant of the weird may not retain the horror of its prior orientations, but it does suggest a way to accept the world that anthropogenic climate change has given us” (564).

If transformation and acceptance are essential to surviving the new weird world of the Anthropocene, new weird fiction may help initiate the techniques of thought and aesthetic sensibilities that are necessary for recognizing and inquiring about novel realities that emerge as slippery and unknown. In his book *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, Benjamin J. Robertson writes that VanderMeer’s fiction creates worlds that “authorize modes of thought that help us to interrupt and overcome received wisdom and entrenched modes of thought that produce this wisdom” (3). Such an interruption is timely in Robertson’s estimation, “in [this] historical moment when nothing seems normal, and under the conditions of a global catastrophe designated as the

provides all the more reason to place Lovecraft’s racism at the forefront of examinations of his oeuvre. In a 2017 article on LitHub.com, Wes House writes that “the admixture of his maniacal bigotry and hysterical racism ignite stories of nihilism often based on the master-race ideology” (np). As Lovecraft has recently enjoyed a renewed surge in popularity, House calls for a more “meaningful grappling with the connection between Lovecraft’s racism and the cosmic anti-humanism that defined his horror.” C.f. Jed Mayer’s “Race, Species, and Others: H.P. Lovecraft and the Animal,” “Afterword: Interview with China Miéville” in *The Age of Lovecraft* and Wes House’s “We Can’t Ignore H.P. Lovecraft’s White Supremacy.”

Anthropocene invisible to conventional human knowledge practices” (ibid.). In *Annihilation* and other texts, VanderMeer gives rise to spaces that “operate according to laws — ontological and epistemological, physical and metaphysical, ethical and moral — quite different than those we assume in our day-to-day lives” (ibid.). These “fantastic materialities” (4) give rise to norms that are obscured or impossible in the materialities, histories, onto-epistemologies, aesthetics, and ethics of the presumed “normal world” (2). VanderMeer, in assuming a materiality different from that of our mundane reality, creates a space that allows for the production and articulation of different subjects and objects that we may find are “resistant to our knowledge practices” and force a reckoning with the “anthropocentric and anthropomorphic understandings of the material conditions on which our constructions are built and which we assume in our thought” (4). The material norms that are disrupted in Area X provide for more than an opportunity to expand on assumptions about the natural world: they call into question the very nature of reality and its appearing, most especially to human observers who, we learn, cannot be disentangled from Area X and its strange effects. The result is an *unmaking* of the boundaries that separate the human from the nonhuman, the plant from the animal, the creature from the structure, the subject from the object, the perceiver from what it sees, and the thought from what it thinks. The reverberating lesson cascading out from Area X and the expeditioners who explore its geography is that the meaning-making and life-living efforts of humans can attain no purchase unless the trappings of bounded individualism are discarded in favour of an agential realism that sees the unfolding of realities (human and non, living and non) as coextensive, co-constitutive, and foundationally ontologically relational.

Transitional Environments

World unmaking for VanderMeer entails making the world weird. And VanderMeer's particular kind of weirdness is valuable for thinking through the weird reality of the Anthropocene and the edicts this unstable epoch places on thought about reality and posthuman subjectivity in a shared more-than-human world. The way VanderMeer articulates the weirdness of the world offers up a challenge to old ways of thinking of the self-contained, mastered, competent subject brought forth by the histories of thought influenced from the Enlightenment through to the era of late liberalism. Rather than isolated selves, the humans in *Annihilation* are, like the area they investigate, *transitional environments*. There are no strict boundaries through which to buffer the bounded individual in this weird world. To say that the human is not strictly human, but is also already (and often unknowingly) nonhuman, is to undermine the very *humanness* of ostensibly human knowledge claims. Both the environment and the human become unmade, unbounded, in this strange envelope. This ontological slippage between human and nonhuman worlds in *Annihilation* prompts an epistemological revolution. Area X's reality, characterized by excessive ontological possibility, weirds human attempts to isolate and stabilize truth claims about the world. As such, the influence of the nonhuman world infects the human search for truth and we find that no claims about "what is" can be fully stripped of the mark of an "outside" to human thought that alters techniques of observation and articulation. The challenge Area X presents to human knowing gives play to some of the fundamental questions at issue in various strands of new materialism: as the world of objects both transcends and subtends human thought, how can we ground

knowledge claims about the world? And, as the nonhuman world offers reminders that the reality of matter exceeds its correlate in human thought, what do we do with this known unknown? The humans in *Annihilation* are situated in the centre of this onto-epistemological inquiry that demands a rethinking and even a reconfiguration of material and discursive norms. Rather than presenting the incursion of a monstrous, alien other into a normal, stable world, VanderMeer gives representation to the entanglement of the human and nonhuman world (both within and outside of Area X, as we shall see) and raises questions about how this ontological revelation rearticulates notions of life and world in the first place.

In the very first pages of *Annihilation*, Area X is presented as a zone that blurs boundaries. The very stuff of the environment appears physically enmeshed to the group of scientists sent in to explore the zone. Even upon close inspection, one aspect of the landscape cannot be easily distinguished from another. As the team makes its way into Area X, the biologist, the unnamed narrator of the novel, tells us the surrounding's "elements had the ability to unsettle" (4). The origins of Area X remain mysterious, but there are the lingering remnants of human life in the zone that now seem to be sinking into their surroundings: "eerie signs of human habitation: rotting cabins with sunken, red-tinged roofs, rusted wagon-wheel spokes half-buried in the dirt, and the barely seen outlines of what used to be enclosures for livestock, now mere ornament for layers of pine-needle loam" (ibid.). The natural environment within Area X is actively assimilating the world from before, smudging out pre-existing edges and hiding formerly recognizable contours. And, as we come to learn, the entire boundary of Area X itself is advancing and incorporating the outside world, pressing the Southern Reach agency to arrive at an

explanation of what is happening “before the world *becomes* Area X” (105). These blurred borders aren’t merely represented in the landscape but in the creaturely inhabitants of Area X as well. The team comes across a boar who seems to express a deep inner torment; a dolphin with eyes that seem human, possibly even familiar; an unseen creature that bellows a mournful sound at nightfall. As she works to determine the nature of the landscape in Area X and its foreign biotic life, the biologist begins to sense that there are forces and perhaps even *purposes* active within the landscape that she cannot fully grasp. At one point she comes to sense that in Area X “the natural world around me had become a kind of camouflage” (64). But just what was being masked and hidden from her view appears as a haunting mystery for the team as they move deeper into the strange terrain.

Early in their journey into Area X, the team comes across an indeterminate structure (the tunnel/tower), which occurs within a space that is itself characterized by ecological transition: “we found the tower in a place just before the forest became waterlogged and then turned to salt marsh” (4-5). The tower appears “half-hidden by fallen moss” and is composed of “some greyish stone seeming to mix cement and ground-up seashells” (5). The biologist notes the “materials are ambiguous” (5) and the actuality of the structure seemingly inexplicable: it appears on no maps consulted by the team. The biologist is also struck by some strange but deeply held conviction that the tower carries a geophysical relation to a mapped lighthouse, located some distance away. She describes being struck by a mental picture of Area X undergoing some sort of subterranean reorganization:

as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of . . . the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing this underground part of it inland. (ibid.)

The uncertain nature of the tunnel/tower — on display in arguments between characters about what, precisely, the thing should be called — emphasizes both the material and discursive ambiguity of Area X itself. The environment shapeshifts and is seemingly involved in ongoing processes of turning, transition, movement, and becoming.

Although we are told the biologist is an expert in “transition zones,” she quickly becomes lost in transition, unable to fully ground herself in either the “normal world” or the altered world of Area X. When the biologist eventually descends into the tunnel/tower, she inhales seemingly “tiny . . . insignificant” spores from little plants that, as though offering up a gift, resemble upturned human hands (17). The small plants or, perhaps, “parasites” (113) are part of a much larger organism that appears in the form of a living cursive script, carrying words along the wall of a descending staircase. The biologist describes herself as being lured by the writing, seemingly tricked into leaning in close against her better judgement and subjecting herself to contamination. This “infection event” marks the beginning of the biologist’s own transformation. Like the enmeshing and merging of things in the environment of Area X, the biologist finds herself becoming-with this weird ecology, the edges of her personhood blurring as she eventually exhibits new capacities and draws upon enhanced sense-abilities. Her body begins to emanate a luminescent “brightness,” a manifestation of her altered personhood physically visible to others on the expedition.

Here VanderMeer is making way for a complex portrait of an altered, agential realism in which the human and environment are materially inseparable. Of ongoing concern amid thinkers of the ontological turn, whether new materialists or speculative realists, is the problem of overcoming the subject/object and life/nonlife divide deeply rooted in Western metaphysics. In representing the physical merging of the biologist and ecology of Area X, VanderMeer gives articulation, albeit in a “weird” way, to the comingling of the human and the nonhuman. Yet, what VanderMeer presents in *Annihilation* may not be much weirder than the everyday human/nonhuman comingling discoverable in the mundane world. In her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett describes the basic arrangement of existence by virtue of assemblages⁴⁹ that take place amidst a plane of vibrant materiality. Like the biologist inhaling alien spores which begin to work upon her body and her senses, Bennett documents the numerous ways that similar interactions occur in human bodies in everyday life. Using the example of omega-3 fatty acids and their influence on the behaviour of prison inmates, Bennett argues the mundane act of ingestion shows the productive power of food and the extent to which human agency cannot be understood as separate from the operations of a food/body, human/nonhuman integration. “On this model of eating, human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted upon”

⁴⁹ Bennett notes that the end of the twentieth century was marked by a proliferation of descriptions regarding the “arena in which stuff happens” (23). This included the terms network, meshwork and Empire. But Bennett chose to deploy the term assemblage following the work of Deleuze and Guattari to conjure the idea of an “event-space.” She further defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant material of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24).

(49). Musing on the simple act of ingestion exposes “a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry; my meal both is and is not mine; you both are and are not what you eat” (ibid.). Such blurring of the lines and unmaking of boundaries between the inside and the outside of the human, undermine the presumed independence and dominance of human subjectivity and capacity. The human is fundamentally rearticulated in the “tangles and aporias” of a shared material vibrancy in which events, bodies, and lives take place (120). Bennett emphasizes the physicality of human and nonhuman collaborative being to highlight the extent to which objective reason and analysis has missed out on sensing, tracking, and accounting for the lively powers and influence of supposedly inert “stuff.” In doing so, descriptions of the human have become misleadingly independent of their reciprocal relationship with their own inner outsides: “One can invoke bacteria colonies in human elbows to show how human subjects are themselves nonhuman, alien, outside, vital materiality” (121). But this integration is not, as it is in Area X, a form of invasion or contamination. Instead, the human benefits from and, in a fundamental sense, depends upon the influence and functions of these nonhuman, alien parts of the self: “One can note that the human immune system depends on parasitic helminth worms for its proper functioning or cite other instances of our cyborgization to show how human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like” (ibid.). In order to become attuned to the overlooked reality of this agential force, Bennett notes, one must do work to shed the conventional view. One must become estranged from the normal. By staring long enough at familiar (and presumed passive) matter, Bennett notes, things become unfamiliar. This useful attentive “estrangement” is important to Bennett

for exposing the vibrancy — the social and political agency — of the things all around us (x). Whether electromagnetism, weather systems, trees, garbage, or rocks, things affect outcomes and the events that make up existence. This reanimated conception of the world makes way for what Bennett offers up as a “positive ontology of vibrant matter” (ibid.).

The co-mingling of the human and non has always been foundational to what it means to be a human being in the world. Bennett writes: “There never was a time when human agency was anything other than in interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (31). And yet modern theoretical and metaphysical frameworks have failed to give an adequate accounting of — or more forcefully, have worked to deny and obscure — this basic entanglement. Extending from Rene Descartes’ transcendental cogito, consciousness and its operations have played an outsized role in formulations of a human subjectivity that is severed from the material realm of bodies and environments. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno critique the role of reason in restricting modernity’s orientation to reality. Reason obscures entities through “concepts” and “abstractions,” (4) leading to a fundamental “estrangement” of the human from a realm of “dominated objects” (12). The harm of excessive rationality comes about from a totalizing agenda stemming from modern thinking that brings about the “subjection of all existing things within logical formalism” (20). Yet, the authors write, despite this “totalitarian” attempt to perceive, classify, and calculate (20) all things in their entirety, “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (1). Martin Heidegger saw the modern, technological era as the progressive movement towards anthropomorphizing projections of being, whereby things only “show up” in the world to the extent that they

conform to our expectations. For Heidegger, modern thought failed to account for the disclosive structure of being, the tendency of things to “withdraw” from human perceptual and conceptual apprehension. In Heidegger’s formulation, a forgetting of the “triumphant calamity” of being — its temporal movement between presencing and absencing, or, its fundamentally excessive character as outstripping human conceptual schemes — led to an impoverished correspondence theory of truth which takes truth as the correctness or conformity of propositions about the object to which they refer. Under this structure of thought, the vibrant character of things became solidified within an objectivating force that presumes “the uniform accessibility of everything to everyone” (“Letter on Humanism” 32). In this way, objectification and representational ways of thinking “decide in advance what is intelligible and what must be rejected as unintelligible” (ibid.). For Heidegger, what the modern era deems *intelligible* or *sensible* is that which can be reduced to the objective world of entities — but exclusively those entities that conform to *expectations* of what entities are. What cannot be reduced in such a manner or what does not conform to our presumptions is deemed to be no-thing at all. And it is the specific agenda of modern metaphysics to subsume reality within its theoretical frameworks or, as Heidegger describes it, “relinquish nothingness” (“Metaphysics as History of Being” 42-43).

For new materialists, however, that nothingness has turned into quite the *somethingness* — a somethingness that cannot be adequately or even remotely allotted for within the confines of human perception or cognition. As Morton argues, in the age of hyperobjects, hyper-objectification and modern science have fallen over a certain epistemological precipice in that what we know points more specifically than ever before

to all we do not. This amounts to what Morton calls the Age of Asymmetry, “in which our cognitive powers become self-defeating” (160). Climate change, radioactivity, particle physics are all phenomena that transcend the limited conceptual frames of human knowledge at the same time as they are materially enmeshed with human bodies and any sense of functional human awareness. Increasing human knowledge does not lead to demystification, for Morton, but an ongoing lack of correspondence between *what is* and *what is thought* about the world. In this “ontological asymmetry between humans and nonhumans” . . . “things become more, rather than less, strange” (161). A sense of a reverberating unknown alters what we can say we know about the world and, resultantly, about ourselves:

The more we know about an object the stranger it becomes. Conversely, the more we know about an object, the more we realize that what we call *subject* is not a special thing different from what we call an object . . . *Object* does not mean *objectified*. Rather it means *totally incapable of objectification*. (175-176)

Area X demonstrates this enlivened sense of the no-thing that is actually something. In this alternate realm, the inexplicable and the indeterminate take up a position in experience as a *vibrant unknown* that has the capacity to act upon the human and the material environment. In her movement throughout Area X the biologist chronicles both her impulse to document, identify, and catalogue what she sees and also her experience of bumping up against the limits of her own knowledge. Such confrontations with the unknown are described by the biologist as *unreal* and *impossible* and she resists the effect such experiences produce on her sense of what is. We get a sense of this in *Annihilation's* early pages, when the biologist spies a pair of otters:

At one point, they glanced up and I had a strange sensation that they could see me watching them. It was a feeling I often had when out in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity. (21)

Here we see the biologist working to limit her exposure to the unknown. Things, for the biologist, *must be what they seem*. Things must accord to meaningful representation in thought. The alternative is something the biologist feels compelled to resist. And yet Area X, in turn, resists the biologist's humanized intending, continually blurring the human and nonhuman worlds and confounding her ability as a distinct subject to measure a world of knowable, distinct objects.

The co-mingling of the biologist and her environment provides a way into reading VanderMeer's portrayal of anthropomorphic knowledge practices and the possibility of their passage *between worlds*. Area X appears to perforate the real world of the Southern Reach government agency and yet, in turn, Area X is perforated by successive scientific missions, established to determine *what* exactly the area *is*. But as the biologist is quick to realize, determinations about the nature of Area X are difficult, if not impossible to make. This has to do with the inefficacy of the normal world's orders of knowing that appear misplaced or inadequate to contend with the abnormal being of Area X. Yet Area X does not stand as simply unknowable and entirely other for the biologist. Instead, the environment begins to reveal itself as a part of the biologist's very body and sensuous awareness, even while standing as the "object" of her interrogation. In this sense, VanderMeer presents the act of observation *as a phenomena of Area X*—itself worthy of examination. What does it mean to observe, to know, in Area X? By suspending the

usefulness of the biologist's methodological overtures, the practicality and, perhaps even the *actuality*, of those practices themselves are called to our attention. That the team of scientists sent in to gather information about Area X cannot perform their standard tests foregrounds the extent to which the landscape will not conform to the norms and protocols of observation. The scientists who venture into Area X remain nameless, their characters are reduced to the embodiments of their discipline and the bodies of knowledge they represent. As such, the expedition represents four realms of knowledge: biology, psychology, geography, and anthropology. We learn the team lost a fifth domain of knowing when a linguist backed out of the expedition. In naming and embodying these characters by virtue of their epistemic domains, VanderMeer highlights the extent to which the expeditioners are not pure, neutral observers of Area X, but rather the carriers of pre-established knowledge practices. When the team encounters the Crawler's strange script, for example, VanderMeer emphasizes the extent to which the capacity to recognize (or, we can say, epistemologically enframe) the phenomenon is a function of one's background training. The biologist writes:

I had the wrong brain for this task, and so did she; we needed a linguist. We could look at that latticework script for ages and the most original thought I would have is that it resembled the sharp branching of coral. To the surveyor it might resemble the rough tributaries of a vast river. (33)

Through their estranged experiences with Area X, the team begins to realize none of their knowledge practices are sufficient to grasp this world, because they perform as mimetic recognitions (what things "resemble") rather than *originary cognitions*.

In her quest for understanding the biologist confronts the biggest questions about the onto-epistemological at the same time as she must work to unlearn everything she previously thought she knew about reality and her access to it. The “contamination” event provides an onto-epistemological break for the biologist who eventually becomes aware of the internal mechanisms of consciousness that condition the way Area X appears to her as an object of awareness in the first place. This interruption from standard ways of seeing allows the biologist to apprehend Area X in an alternate appearing, one the biologist must continue to consider as a function of her own ways of knowing, from which she becomes increasingly estranged. VanderMeer accentuates how states of consciousness and cognitive processes participate in the team’s efforts to understand what is happening in Area X. The extent to which the biologist is affected by the environment and life forms in Area X is also the extent to which her preexisting cognitive conditioning is made apparent. This is particularly evident in the biologist’s growing imperviousness to the psychologist’s hypnosis, used to conceal certain aspects of Area X and the team’s journey into the zone. For the biologist, this immunity makes apparent the “underlying *conditioning* hidden in our training” (23). But it also made apparent the parallel ways in which her field of study and the underlying conditioning of her scientific practice is also at work in her ability to see or not see Area X *in its own appearing*. We see the biologist bumping up against the unintelligible in Area X, and her efforts to comprehend this aspect of the world that outstrips and lies outside of human order. Despite her growing awareness of the distance she feels from her own “normal” ability to navigate and apprehend the world of Area X, the biologist attempts to carry on with her work. Yet, increasingly she finds she cannot transmit the standard knowledge and

practices of her scientific expertise from the outside world into this strange zone. Upon close inspection the weirdness of Area X is presented as a sort of strange familiarity that grants a certain agential capacity to the biologist's samples, which seem to trouble her acts of observation through mimicry, resistance, and entanglement. The biologist notes her samples appear to be "doing a magnificent job of mimicking certain species of saprotrophic organisms" (48). Yet other aspects of the sample "resisted any interpretation" to which the biologist acknowledge "was strange but told me nothing" (48). Confronting the limits of her comprehension the biologist finds "nothing," suggesting that what lies beyond the bounds of the known is no-thing at all. This prompts the biologist to conclude her sample must have been ruined: "At the time, I interpreted this as a contaminated sample or evidence that this organism decomposed quickly" (ibid.). But the biologist continues to consider the ruined sample. She wonders if "having absorbed the organism's spores, [she] was causing a reaction in the sample" (ibid.). Further engaging with samples that appear to mimic human cells ("Was it *pretending* to be human?" 49), the biologist begins to become disoriented, without the stability of objective observation to ground her. "I felt unmoored, drifting, once again" (ibid.). The biologist encounters through her microscope a dizzying mixture of the human and nonhuman which presses up against the limits of her understanding. Her experience with her samples brings to the fore the role expectations and presumptions have to play in ascertaining the real: "Sometimes you get a sense of when the truth of things will not be revealed by microscopes" (33). For the biologist, viewing samples from Area X that do not conform to her understanding of possibility pushes her to describe certain features of Area X as impossible (33). What lies outside the familiar or the normative, for the biologist, is described as impossible,

inexplicable, madness, or nothing at all. She notes: “we were scientists, trained to observe natural phenomena and the results of human activity. We had not been trained to encounter what appeared to be the uncanny” (46). What lies outside or confounds the order of representational, objective thought is a fundamental question of intelligibility and its role in presenting reality to human thinkers.

This unknowable aspect of Area X is an outcome of its “fantastic materiality,” and its resistance to being incorporated within the limits of human intelligibility and state-bureaucratic projects. In *None of This is Normal*, Robertson writes that Area X does not wait out there for humanity to discover, contain, and affect it. It is already with us but unaffected by us because we constitutively cannot perceive or understand the manner in which it registers what we do. Neither human techniques, from architecture to critical thought, nor the invisible lines these techniques render visible have anything to do with Area X, which remains immune to logics that identify the known and the unknown so the latter may be contained by the former. (115)

Robertson argues Area X’s defiance of human attempts to understand it brings us to a conception of a weird planet that is characterized by abdifference, distinct from both difference and indifference in that it cannot be subsumed by conventional categorical modes of difference and sameness that govern the distribution of kinds in liberal politics. He writes: “Area X manifests a radical difference” that “does not afford a collapse in which terms previously distinguished by abstract borders find one another and merge” (116). Rather than a unifying plane of sameness, which represents the homogenizing urge of late liberalism, Robertson contends Area X’s radical difference “involves an

uncontainable space that is nothing but a bordering without a border, a limiting that cannot be limited” (116-117). Such recalcitrant difference gives way to a geopolitics that rethinks the nature of the other and must come to terms with forms of abstraction that can never be fully grasped or assimilated by virtue of a deeper underlying sameness (117). The cosmic gap between Area X’s being and humanity’s understanding of Area X constitutes an onto-epistemological chasm in Robertson’s reading that keeps the human and nonhuman worlds alienated even as they touch. In my reading of *Annihilation*, I depart from this characterization of abdifference to focus on the ways in which an affective *inseparability* emerges between the human and nonhuman worlds that unmake the supposed boundary between what is and what is not Area X. While Robertson emphasizes the extent to which Area X is “unaffected” and “immune” to human activity, I read Area X as an assimilating force that, while separate from the human and potentially permanently unknowable to the human, is nonetheless impacted by human materialities and actions. Like the entanglement of human and nonhuman material bodies in the real, mundane world, Area X’s environment and the humans that inhabit it are inseparable. We come to see this inseparability in three ways: through the incorporation of the human into Area X; the incorporation of Area X into the human; and through the apocryphal “border” that inadequately keeps the two worlds distinct. Rather than bordered worlds, the inside and outside of Area X are more like the transitional environments of Area X’s landscape and the body of the biologist. Robertson points to a line from the third book in the trilogy to express the being and nonbeing of the border that supposedly separates the known world from its unknown counterpart: “there is nothing but border. There is no border” (*Acceptance* 5). If there is anything resembling a border it is imperceptible,

moving and porous — in effect, no border at all. Its possibility is perforated by the comings and goings of the known and unknown, the perceptible and the imperceptible in indeterminate space and timescales that, like all hyperobjects, exist vastly beyond the human.

“Words? Words? What are they made of?”

Although human intentionality may not function as anticipated in Area X, the human characters still subscribe to a certain belief that humanity’s efforts to capture and represent this breakdown will be successful once back outside the border. Evidence of this belief can be found in the expeditioners’ journals, in which they are instructed to keep detailed accounts with “maximum context” (*Annihilation* 6) for their superiors. But VanderMeer troubles the very practice of this human knowledge transfer and, as a result, the agenda of the Southern Reach agency’s expeditions. The extractive nature of the excursions into Area X do not merely break down as the result of mis-aligned science or faulty ontology, but because of a fundamental material-discursive entanglement that lies at the heart of language and representation itself. The *representation of representation* in Area X and throughout *Annihilation* brings to light the inherent materiality of language that makes words as weird as the alien zone’s materiality. Following Robertson, we can perhaps say there is a sense of a *fantastic textuality* brought about by Area X that shows how the material conditions the possibility for language and is, in turn, affected by that language production. The world of Area X composes words and is composed by those words, even while hastening their de-composition. Such a recursive intra-action raises

questions about the prospect of nonhuman writing and the life of language — and thus meaning making — beyond the human.

For theorists of the material turn, language, discourse, and the act of writing share a lineage with other capacities and behaviours used to shore up claims of human individuality and exceptionalism. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida considers the capacity for language to be among the list of attributes used to separate the human animal from animals of all other kinds. Derrida notes that acts which can represent internal cognition — “speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, crying, respect, etc. . . . *all of that*” (135) — are means by which humans delimit themselves from the nonhuman world and its inhabitants, all of which are presumed bereft of these capacities. Yet much of what Derrida lists is no longer considered exclusive to the human realm.⁵⁰ And much of what was once considered belonging to a purified realm of human consciousness, transcendent of brute animality and corporeality, is now being understood as the outcome of complex, embodied processes that are distributed throughout entangled human/nonhuman systems. In her work *The Animal Who Writes: A Posthumanist Composition*, Marilyn M. Cooper notes the move away

⁵⁰ Much effort has been dedicated to documenting and understanding meaning-making, communication practices and cognition in nonhuman animals in recent decades. C.f. Vilmos Csányi’s *If Dogs Could Talk: Exploring the Canine Mind*; Peter Godfrey-Smith’s *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness*; Donald R. Griffin’s *Animal Minds*; Marc D. Hauser’s *Wild Minds: What Animals Really Think*; Debra Hawhee’s *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw: Animals, Language, Sensation*; Glen A. Mazis’ *Humans, Animals, Machines: Blurring Boundaries*; Irene M. Pepperberg’s *Alex and Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence — And Formed A Deep Bond in the Process*; Thomas Rickert’s *Animal Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*; Barbara Smuts’ “Encounters with Animal Minds.”

from the discursive turn and towards the material transforms conceptions about writing and consciousness as unique and inalienable human attributes. “Rational conscious thought, language, and technology are all involved in writing, but they do not account for what is most important about writing nor does possessing them distinguish humans from other living beings,” Cooper writes (46). She adds:

we know that the thinking involved in writing is not only not limited to rational conscious thought but is as much a behaviour as any action or feeling. We think with our bodies — and not just with our brains — and everything we make, from texts to technologies, are material entities entangled in on reality. Nor is thinking a process internal to individual organisms. We think with others (humans and nonhumans) in intra-acting with them: with axes as we chop wood, with GPS as we try to find our way, with border collies as we herd sheep — and with the sheep too. . . . Like all other beings, we create our worlds — and ourselves — through the entanglements of our living and of our writing. (47)

Cooper argues the material world plays a constitutive role in the capacity and actuality of human cognition and writing, pointing to the fundamental inseparability from the human and the material reality within which the human takes its being and engages in its activities. Feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad, in her work *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, links the material and the discursive in practices of meaning making that cannot be considered exclusively human because the human cannot be excluded from its material substrate. “Knowing is not a play of ideas within the mind of a Cartesian subject that stands outside of the physical world the subject seeks to know . . . knowing is a physical practice of

engagement” (342). For Barad, material-discursive practices bring about “boundaries, properties, and meanings” that are useful for knowledge production, but these practices cannot be functionally thought of as purely human. The human does not precede the engagements that give rise to meaning, instead humans — and all entities and “selves” — are produced by and through these engagements. Language and other human knowledge practices “enact different materialized becomings” according to Barad, which transforms the act of writing from a human activity to a human/nonhuman intra-action which brings about a world (361). Cooper uses Barad’s conception of onto-epistemological entanglement to figure writing as a material practice in the world rather than “the manipulation of representations in the mind” (*The Animal* 51). As a material practice of engaging and articulating worlds, writing, for Cooper, “is a process of the world’s becoming” and as such “the agents of writing are not just human animals but all living and nonliving entities” (5-6). The posthuman and material aspects of consciousness and writing raise questions about the possibility for nonhuman writing and how to better understand language and meaning as emergent from and intrinsically bound to matter.

In *Annihilation* the theme of writing as a nonhuman practice is prominently on display in the spectral being that writes upon the walls of the tower, creating words composed of living organisms. When the biologist first reveals the existence of words on the walls of the tower, the anthropologist asks in disbelief, “Words? Words?” (16). The surveyor follows with the question: “What are they made of?” (ibid.). Within Area X both the material and the discursive composition of the words are presented as significant. The question of what the words *are made of* highlights both the materiality and context in which words are always already embedded. The materiality of the words

foregrounds an issue of ongoing concern for new materialists, that is the force of material reality in shaping and influencing seemingly “human” or “cultural” forms of representation. For Barad, the discursive turn belied a faith in the disclosive power of language and culture, compelling “the belief that we have a direct access to cultural representations and their content that we lack towards the things represented” (*Meeting* 132). For Barad and others theorizing after the ontological turn, a preoccupation with discourse and acts of cultural representation forgets the ways by which the material world casts and recasts the possibilities for language and acts of representation in the first place. In order to adequately interrogate the depths of the human/nonhuman intra-action, the question of language and its nonhuman capacity must come to the fore, for Barad. Without an independent and distinct human subject who accesses the representational realm, it becomes very difficult to assert the primacy of language. Barad asks:

Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity, while matter is figured as passive and immutable or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture? How does one even go about inquiring after the material conditions that have led us to such a brute reversal of naturalistic beliefs when materiality itself is always already figured within a linguistic domain as its condition of possibility? (*ibid.*)

In addition to the overlooked significance of the material world’s constitutive force in the creation of human linguistic domains, Barad also asks how and why language and acts of representation are presumed accessible to human interpreters. As Barad outlines, critiques of representationalism suggest we cannot access things themselves, only their representations. But these critiques overlook the internal, parallel presumption that we

have access to the pure, unmediated content *of those representations*. But what is there to say that the content or meaning of representation is any more accessible to us as a stable, separate referent than those things of the external, vibrantly material world out there? The privileging of representational content as “what we have direct, unfettered access to” mistakes the excessive nature of language, its discursive formations, and its contextual embeddedness — all of which trouble the presumption that we have direct, unmediated access to the representation of things. As Joseph Rouse puts it:

I want to encourage doubt about [the] presumption that representations (that is, their meaning or content) are more accessible to us than the things they supposedly represent. If there is no magic language through which we can unerringly reach out directly to its referents, why should we think there is nevertheless a language that magically enables us to reach out directly to its sense or representational content? The presumption that we can know what we mean, or what our verbal performances say, more readily than we can know the objects those sayings are about is a Cartesian legacy, a linguistic variation on Descartes’ insistence that we have a direct and privileged access to the contents of our thoughts which we lack towards the “external” world. (Rouse 209, qtd. in Barad 49)

Throughout *Annihilation*, VanderMeer gives expression to the ways in which both acts of representation and what is represented exist beyond human intention. The presentation of the written word by means of a “fantastic materiality” also allows VanderMeer to portray a nonhuman, material agency at work within language and the written word itself. The

result is a representation of a representation that troubles presumptions about human access to meaning and the very humanness of meaning-making acts.

For the biologist, the heightened materiality of the words in the tower presents a challenge to how and what to read for. She cannot resolve the linguistic from the biotic significance of what is written: “I was still trying to parse the lingual meaning, had not transitioned to the idea of taking a physical sample” (17). These words,⁵¹ “composed” of/by fruiting bodies seems to generate an overabundance of significance and the biologist is caught in a sway of a dizzying ebb and flow of meaning:

At first, there were ‘merely’ the words, and that was enough . . . and for a time I tried to record them, but there were too many of them and the sense of them came and went. That was one agreement the surveyor and I came to right away: that we would document the physicality of the words, but that it would require a separate mission, another day, to photograph that continuous, neverending sentence. (31)

The foregrounded materiality of the writing is disorienting for the team and actually confounds the practice of sense-making. Sense seems to wander (“comes and goes”). The experience emphasizes the extent to which the biologist and her companions — despite being able to recognize these words — are not ‘readers’ of this language. The words

⁵¹ In the *Southern Reach Trilogy*’s third book, *Acceptance*, the words of the script are later revealed to be those of the lighthouse keeper, Saul, who receives them after being pricked by a strange plant in what will become Area X. The words, themselves the result of a human/nonhuman intra-action, go as follows: “Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen” (*Annihilation* 46-47).

themselves also compose something *other than language*: “Whole ecosystems had been born and now flourished among the words, dependent on them, before dying off as the words faded” (59). The biotic significance of the words, in this sense, can be ‘read’ separate from what is signified in language. This flourishing of unique ecosystems is entirely dependent on the embeddedness of the words within their material context: “a side effect of creating the right conditions, a viable habitat” (ibid.). Here, matter is seen as a primordial ontological force, determining in advance the very conditions upon which some things (words, ecosystems, beings) may arise.

The biologist remains intent on identifying what the words can tell her. She suggests that their only significance can be found in their ability to generate a more specific revelation: “It was important only in that the adaptations of the creatures living in the words could tell me something about the tower” (59-60). The biologist expresses a strong desire to stabilize the words within some sort of referential circuit. Without a heuristic framework for the words, the biologist feels she is set adrift from reason: “Even though I didn’t know what the words meant, I wanted them to mean something so that I might more swiftly remove doubt, bring reason back into all of my equations” (19). As the team attempts to bring understanding to the script, they find they are already being contaminated by it: “the sense of unease in ignoring the ominous quality of those words was palatable. It infected our own sentences when we spoke, as we tried to catalogue the biological reality of what we were *both* seeing” (32). We come to learn that the words on the tower’s wall match words written in the journals of other expeditioners. In a disintegrating “insane midden” (70) of these journals, the biologist finds snippets of the same script, but these bits of words are not pulled back into a final, coherent master text.

Instead, she finds Area X is actively incorporating the physical journals that have become “a collapsing garbage hill of disintegrating pulp” (73). The biologist realizes that “slowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X” (74). There is no explanation for the appearance of the words on the tower’s wall, though the biologist considers there could be a “biological imperative” or a “process [that] might feed into the reproductive cycle of the Tower or the Crawler” (61). The Crawler, described in Cthonic terms as descending the tower by way of slime-filled cilia, appears to “gather” the words, and “had to assimilate them, even if it didn’t understand them” (ibid.). The biologist wonders at the material-discursive enmeshing of the Crawler and the word, considering the creature must have “had to in a sense *memorize* them, which was a form of absorption” (ibid.). But her search for semiotic meaning in the “use” of language by Area X as a site is ultimately unfulfilled. In this sense the biologist’s alienation from this “text” mirrors her own inability to establish meaning within journals written by human authors. When reading through the records of former expeditions, she notes that what the texts represent indicates a split between true “meaning” and what can be activated in the knowledge of the reader. She writes: “Looking for hidden meaning in these papers was the same as looking for hidden meaning in the natural world around us. If it existed, it could be activated only by the eye of the beholder” (24).

The “living words . . . phantom words . . . ghost scripts” scattered throughout Area X, indicate that a recursive de- and re-composition of words is taking place through authors that are both human and nonhuman (32). Later in the trilogy these words being to appear outside of Area X and even upon the very walls of the Southern Reach agency. Thus, the government bureaucracy itself becomes a participant, unknowingly, in the set

of relations that materially and discursively make up a world in which there is no true inside or outside of Area X and its effects. Area X cannot be meaningfully contained or even fully represented in the writings of Southern Reach's agents, as those agents themselves are part of the recursive loop of "gathering" and "absorbing" the words that constitute this alien site. Thinking alongside Barad, the Southern Reach, through its writers and ambitions, doesn't precede its intra-action with Area X but rather emerges through that relation. VanderMeer gestures towards a material-discursive intermingling that does not fall prey to the critique of correlationism. Rather, he creates an alternate reality in which the material world, which slips outside the realm of human perception and cognition, is nonetheless tracked in its vibrancy, effect, and agency. The no-thing gets to be a something, in *Annihilation*, and that something, unknown and indeterminable, participates in the creation of the world and the possibility for both human and nonhuman life. That humans are inadequate to the task of properly containing that something and bringing it under the authority of governing institutions provides a commentary on the nature of limited human perception and the need for new ways of orienting and navigating in a world that is resistant to and more-than what can be charted in human consciousness or marked on human maps. This human inadequacy is a part of the horror of *Annihilation* but also part of the challenge the novel poses to human thinkers: how might humanity situate itself within knowledge practices that, like the material world itself, are imbued with more-than-human and fantastic agencies?

The expedition into Area X is presented in *Annihilation* through the perspective of the biologist who gives an account of the writing being in her journal. We come to find her journal is one among many journals that form a rotting archive of firsthand accounts

of Area X. Words found in those abandoned documents are replicated by the Crawler, an alien author which, like its world, seems to incorporate and reproduce elements of the human world in a disfigured, mimetic fashion. The spectre of nonhuman writing in *Annihilation* troubles the presentation of writing as a technology of the human, both disrupting the security of human powers over and above those of the nonhuman world and also imbuing the nonhuman world with agential powers that are presented as potentially (although in the novel only strangely) meaningful. The nonhuman world's incursion into the human realm of symbol-systems represents more than the material, planetary breach of Area X into the known world, raising questions about the nature of reality and human as well as nonhuman access to it. The secret archive of expeditioners' accounts of Area X also raises the question of power: who has the authority to make texts available to readers and why might that availability be denied? Writing in *Annihilation* is presented as both situated within institutions of power and practices of knowledge but is also generated by the alien world itself.

The Stirring of the Inexplicable

In portraying a human incursion into an unknown world, *Annihilation* makes visible the way reliance on dominant orders of knowledge and discourse may malfunction. The text shows that the intellectual operations of one world may not transfer to another. By presenting an alternative to the normal world, Area X exposes its internal, unthought mechanisms of knowledge and their inability to function within a new material context. But *Annihilation* also forces its readers into a confrontation with the unknown as that which stands outside of human frames of reference. If the more-than-human world

exists outside the strictures of human thought, how can we think it? And further, in response to the multiple crises of the material world, how can we become responsive to and responsible for a world that is characterized by the indeterminate and the imperceptible? If we are convinced of the reality and relevance of the unknown, if we believe that what it means to be human is to be co-mingled in a world of indeterminate becoming, can we conjure an ethics of not-knowing? How might we respond to the call for a new sensibility? By way of critical posthuman aesthetics, we can ask how *Annihilation* might point towards alternate sensibilities.

Although the biologist's transformation might appear by way of a common trope in weird or horror fiction — namely, the “contamination” event — VanderMeer presents her changing nature by way of heightened physical capacities and amplified sense perception. Rather than a disfiguring or transfiguring into the monstrous, the biologist experiences improvement to her human form as a result of inhaling the spores. Immediately after doing so, she experiences a “pinprick of escalation” in her ability to smell (17). But this is just the beginning of her “brightening,” which protects her from the inoculating and blinding effects of the psychologist's hypnosis (23). She also begins to exhibit new powers of perception that appear to more finely attune her to Area X. She registers the “strange sensation” of being observed by the creatures there (21) and finds her senses so heightened that “even the rough brown bark of the pines or the ordinary lunging swoop of a woodpecker came to me as a kind of minor revelation” (25). It is through this “truer” way of seeing that the biologist comes to realize the structure she has been exploring is neither a tunnel nor a tower but a living, breathing creature. She becomes aware of her “descen[t] into an organism:” “The tower was *breathing* . . .

carried the echo of a heartbeat . . . and [the walls] were not made of stone but of *living tissue*” (27). She describes the world as seeming to “lurch” at this revelation. Like classic texts in the genre of weird fiction, the biologist experiences a certain cognitive alienation due to her contamination: “I was steadily, irrevocably, becoming estranged from the expedition and its purpose” (ibid.). But as the biologist becomes untethered from her former world and its normal sensibilities, her transformation is presented as not simply terrifying but revelatory.

This altered perceptual awareness brings the biologist’s attention to things she cannot understand and she, at times, expresses her resistance to these new sensuous experiences:

I could also see, from the location of the Tower, a kind of brightness on its own, a sort of refracted phosphorescence, that did not bear thinking about. That I could see it, that I had an affinity to it, agitated me. I was certain no one else left here, not the surveyor, not the psychologist, could see that stirring of the inexplicable.
(69)

This affinity for the weird world of Area X disturbs the biologist, who feels she must rescind her grasp of reality to meet this inexplicable, altered reality Area X is impinging upon her. From her group’s early encounter with the boar (its agonized presence) to her passage through the humanesque tableau of plant bodies that seem to mimic human forms, it is this encounter with the limitrophic that hints at the terrifying transformative power at work in Area X. Yet what appears to the biologist now becomes a question of her evolving attunement to the weird. Her experience of Area X is partly a function of the biologist’s *ability* to apprehend the world in this altered appearing. Her “brightening”

operates as a kind of phenomenological turn. This strange altered appearing is cast as a phenomenological moment in the biologist's own recognition that her apprehension is hers alone and cannot be transposed onto the surveyor: "The surveyor couldn't see what I saw, couldn't experience what I was experiencing. And I couldn't make her see it" (28). *Seeing* in this scene is an outcome of the conditions of possibility within consciousness, that, for the biologist and the others on her team (perhaps excluding the psychologist), are conditioned in advance by modes of apprehension that are subject to external force and control (e.g. hypnosis). The biologist and the surveyor stand at odds over this moment of cognitive, phenomenological estrangement from one another. "You saw something that wasn't there," the surveyor tells the biologist with alarm. To which the biologist thinks: "*You can't see what is there*" (28). The question of what is or is not *there* points out toward the question of what makes itself available to apprehension and what does not and, importantly, why. The split experiences of the pair demonstrates that the appearing of reality may differ between individuals because of their intellectual conditioning. But, importantly for those wary of the correlationalist trap, the weird reality of Area X exists independently of any human awareness. A fundamental question that lingers between the disparate sensory experiences of the surveyor and the biologist is what are the conditions that make some things and not others available to apprehension. And, critically, *how we should conceive of that which does not appear as sensible?*

In her essay "Insensible worlds: postrelational ethics, indeterminacy and the (k)nots of relating," Kathryn Yusoff argues for a deepened relation to the insensible and the unknown, in particular as a way of fostering a more responsive "cohabitation with nonhuman others" (209). The insensible, for Yusoff, is a nothing that is indeed a

something. But human sensitivity to the insensible is a problem for human/nonhuman relations and, in particular, is a quandary for ecological thought. Thinking specifically about the crisis of biodiversity loss, Yusoff notes that the “*making sensible* of biotic subjects is a basic tenet of conservation practices and taxonomic orders” (ibid.). And yet, “every attempt to do so simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of such a project through the excess of ‘insensible subjects’ that always await description, nomination, or apprehension” (ibid.). Like the scientists trekking the reaches of Area X, scientists of the mundane must come to terms with the fact that there is no way to fully and absolutely “relinquish nothingness” in the vast, unfolding world. A 2011 study found that despite two and a half centuries of taxonomy, an estimated 86 per cent of terrestrial species and 91 per cent of marine species “remain imperceptible” (ibid.).⁵² The rapid loss of biodiversity occurring during what is called the sixth extinction event points to a “surplus to intelligibility” for Yusoff: “a surplus of material and immaterial forces, a surplus of insensible entities” (ibid.). This field of excess, which points to the excessive nature of reality, marks “the overwhelming condition of what biodiversity *is*” (ibid.). The need for “thinking along the edge of the insensible” might offer what Yusoff hopes can be “a way into an expanded realm of realtionality that queries the exclusions that govern the sphere of intelligibility, and might help us think *between natures* to promote a noncontemporaneous ethics of apprehension of the biotic world” (ibid.). The sensible acts

⁵² The authors of the 2011 study note that “the diversity of life is one of the most striking aspects of our planet; hence knowing how many species inhabit Earth is among the most fundamental questions in science. Yet the answer to this question remains enigmatic, as efforts to sample the world's biodiversity to date have been limited and thus have precluded direct quantification of global species richness, and because indirect estimates rely on assumptions that have proven highly controversial. C.F. Mora, Camilo et. al., “How Many Species Are There on Earth and in the Ocean?”

as an entry point into which worlds, concerns, and beings are made visible, made to matter. Critical posthuman aesthetics asks after the governing of the insensible (the nothing) and the sensible (the something) that undergirds notions of life and its possibilities. Yusoff notes that thinking the ethicopolitical implications of the insensible counters the liberal humanist project of intelligibility: “It involves a modality of thought that moves against the priority of our sense to attempt to release other modalities of being that are not our own, and will never be fully sensible to us” (ibid.). The biologist’s altered sensual engagement with Area X makes visible, makes sensible, the gap between the mundane and fantastical worlds and the manner by which they become perceptible. What VanderMeer exposes the reader to is the task of thinking between worlds and the extent to which certain orders of discourse and thought may not make this passage successfully. In *Annihilation*, the insensible is not separate from the realm of human experience: it can touch human bodies and invisibly alter human experiences. As with the biologist, what is imperceptible may nonetheless have the capacity to alter an individual’s capacity for sense in the first place. Although the biologist is aware of the spores she has inhaled, she remains unaware of the mechanisms through which they spores open her out onto a new relational engagement with a foreign world.

Throughout the *Southern Reach Trilogy* there is a futile human attempt to subsume the reality of Area X within the confines of knowledge and under the authority of state-led agencies. The capacity to ‘respond to’ Area X is confined to the ability for Area X to be brought under human understanding and control. This program of domination is undermined by humanity’s blindness to its own onto-epistemological inadequacies. For Yusoff, current political responses to the ecological crisis mirror the

hubris of the Southern Reach agency. Responses to species extinction have revolved around a “grand knowledge project of the biotic world” that remains “configured around the accumulating potential of biological description” (209). The imperatives of economy operate as root concerns for governments developing policies capable of addressing the financial implications of biodiversity loss. Yet Yusoff argues that “what is needed in apprehending biodiversity loss is a mode of recognition that does not try to resolve this quandary with the false equivalences of capital, such as ‘offsetting’ and ‘ecosystem services’” (ibid.). But a move away from such modes of thought require a rethinking of human political agency that is capable of *remaining responsible* through states of uncertainty and unknowing. Key to rethinking what it means to be a response-able human here are the relational ontologies that reframe the human in terms of the intra-action between things that produce the possibilities of life in the first place.

Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism holds that thinking requires moving beyond human agency over and above objects to a consideration of entangled phenomena. For Barad, phenomena are a “specific intra-action of an ‘object;’ and the ‘measuring agencies;’ the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action *that produces them*” (*Meeting* 128, emphasis mine). It is within this productive relation that knowledge about the world comes about, but only as part of the co-constitutive interrelation of the human and nonhuman world. For Barad it becomes impossible to hive off discrete human subjects from these intra-active phenomena that are at the root of the binding of the ontological and the epistemological:

Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of

the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. (185)

While thinking through differences and distinctions produces frameworks for configuring subjects and objects, what is needed, according to Barad, is a *reconfiguration* of the human based on this fundamental intra-active relation. She writes:

Intra-actions reconfigure the possibilities for change. In fact, intra-actions not only re-configure spacetime-matter but reconfigure what is possible. Ethicality is part of the fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is. There is no spatial-temporal domain that is excluded from the ethicality of what matters. Questions of responsibility and accountability present themselves with every possibility; each moment is alive with different possibilities for the world's becoming and different reconfigurings of what may yet be possible. (182)

Like Yusoff, Barad is concerned with the question of the insensible and the indeterminate when attempting to conceive of human and nonhuman relations.

In her essay "On Touching," Barad notes that despite the intra-active nature of relational ontology, there is an irony at the quantum core of reality: things that touch never really 'touch' at all. In place of a direct causal link indicating contact between particles, quantum physics understands the intra-action of virtual particles as an unpredictable and imperceptible movement between being and nonbeing. "Virtuality is difficult to grasp," Barad writes. "Indeed, this is its very nature" (210). In the place of perceivable and knowable interactions, virtual particles are "*quantized indeterminacies-*

in-action” (ibid.) that “conceptually . . . [are] a queer theorist’s delight” (213). The indeterminacy at the heart of being calls for a reckoning with the unknown that amounts to a “radical un/doing of identity” in order to take into account “new realms of in/determinacy, which have incalculable effects on mattering” (214). Such a reckoning “calls us to a new sensibility” (216) that can awaken new sensitivities to the phenomena of a more-than-human world that, like Area X, will continue to unfold in an irruptive excess.

For Barad, the challenge of taking indeterminate matter into account is an ethical enterprise:

For all our concerns with nonhumans as well as humans, there is, nonetheless, always something that drops out. But what if the point is not to widen the bounds of inclusion to let everyone and everything in? What if it takes sensing the abyss, the edges of the limits of “inclusion” and “exclusion” before the binary of inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, mattering/not-mattering can be seriously troubled? What if it is only in facing *the inhuman — the indeterminate non/being non/becoming of mattering and not mattering* — that an ethics committed to the rupture of indifference can arise? What if it is only in the encounter with the inhuman — the liminality of no/thingness — in all its liveliness, its conditions of im/possibility, that we can truly confront our inhumanity, that is, our actions lacking compassion? Perhaps it takes facing the inhuman within us before compassion — suffering together with, participating with, feeling with, being moved by — can be lived. How would we feel if it is by way of the inhuman that we come to feel, to care, to respond? (ibid.)

Charting the domain of the insensible, demands a new kind of attunement to other worlds and a generation of new kinds of thought to think between one world and the next. Such attunement and thought are not conducted in order to bring the world into a knowable presence, but to face the question of what it means to be human becoming-with at the edge of the perceptible world. For Yusoff, the very question of sense is world forming, “matter forming” (“Insensible” 217). “It organizes the possibility of identity, and thus becomes the very condition of the field in which worlds of sense are raised around vulnerable entities (or not)” (ibid.). Responsiveness and responsibility give rise to the possibility of bringing us to matters and bringing our attention to what matters. The insensible draws us to the indeterminate space that exists between entities. Yusoff wants to shift focus onto the space “*between natures*” in order to

begin to think the space between these sensible entities as a spacing where life and death are made possible (or not) and life and death are already drawn by what is inherited, what is claimed, where desire works and inhabitations take place, and where there is already becoming towards entities (or not). (ibid.)

The call to a new sensibility becomes a call to an expanded sense of matter, what is and what matters, beyond exclusive, inherited sensibilities. New sensitivities, new sensibilities bring about new worlds. Even in theoretical exercises or speculative practices in theory and literature, “thought experiments are material matters” (Barad “On Touching” 208). Barad suggests that the material world, in its vast and strange variety of being, beckons thought to engage with such experiments:

Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making

leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps, shifting familiarly patterned practices, testing the waters of what might yet be/have been/could still have been, doing through experiments with their very being. (207-208)

Meanwhile, in *Annihilation*, VanderMeer brings the reader to the edge of the perceptible to ask what forms of sensitivity and sensibility emerge in the thought experiment of Area X.

As the biologist continues her transformation in Area X, she becomes increasingly more-than-human in ways that begin to turn her experience of the landscape into a kind of phantasmagoria. She writes, “it was if I travelled the landscape with the sound of an expressive and intense aria playing in my ears” (59). She senses the world through “new eyes” as a series of “sudden revelations,” “imbued with emotion” (ibid.). Her overwhelming sensuous experience pushes her beyond her being as a biologist and she emerges instead “as the crest of a wave building and building but never crashing to shore” (ibid.). The particularly beautiful quality of light in an ecosystem heavy with a “sense of *waiting*” brings her “halfway to a kind of ecstasy” (ibid.). Her involution⁵³ draws her more deeply to the environment in Area X, as the brightness “washed over me in unending waves [that] connected me to the earth, the water, the air, as I opened up and

⁵³ Natasha Myers notes the term *evolution* draws upon the way species diverge from one another whereas “*involution* offers a way to story the ongoing, improvised, experimental encounters that take shape when beings as different as plants and people involve themselves in one another’s lives” (297). Myers brings involution into descriptions of the ‘reciprocal capture’ of human and nonhuman lives in “projects of co-becoming” (ibid.). C.f. Myers, Natasha. “From the anthropocene to the planthroposcene: Designing gardens for plant/people involution.”

kept on opening” (106). When the surveyor accuses her of no longer being human, the biologist responds, “I’m as human as you . . . this is a natural thing,” (97) referring to her brightness. But her transfiguration is not presented as blandly positive. The biologist also admits that her heightened abilities were what allowed her to sense the surveyor’s movements in the reeds in order to kill her: “it was with these enhanced senses still at work . . . that was the only reason she was vulnerable to me” (100). With her intensified sense-abilities the biologist is also exposed to the excessive nature of being within Area X that produces its own mix of pleasure and terror: “The depths now revealing themselves in a kind of ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity that I could not fully take it all in. But I tried, just as I had always tried, even from the beginning of my career” (29). The biologist’s euphoric and disorienting experience of the world’s unfolding is not limited to the strange world of Area X, however, and we come to understand her sense of the vibrant unknown reverberates even in everyday experiences of mundane landscapes out in the ordinary world.

VanderMeer draws the onto-epistemological insights of the biologist’s transformation in Area X, out into the novel’s mundane world (and by extension into our own). The estrangement from normalcy the biologist experiences in Area X with its shifting landscape, unfamiliar creatures and fantastic materiality is drawn in connection to her experience of *unremarkable* landscapes outside this abnormal zone. The biologist’s favourite place in her youth was an unfilled swimming pool that, like Area X, represents another world: “Inside the house, my parents did whatever banal, messy things people in the human world usually did, some of it loudly. But I could easily lose myself in the microworld of the pool” (30). In her explorations of the small ecosystem that flourishes

in this forgotten space, the young biologist “eschews books on ecology or biology” in order to “discover” the inner workings of this world on her own (ibid.). When her family is forced to move into a small apartment, she fears this small world’s unique existence would be destroyed: “Would the new owners see the beauty and the importance of leaving it as it is, or would they destroy it, create unthinking slaughter in honor of the pool’s real function?” (31). For the child the pool emanates its own purpose and reality, but this is at threat from the presumed “real function” of a pool in the ordinary, human realm. The possible destruction of the pool and its own lifeworld represents a “great trauma” for the biologist in her childhood and begins a new pattern of behaviour of never returning to her places of research. For her “there are certain kinds of deaths that one should not be expected to relive, certain kinds of connections so deep that when they are broken you feel the snap of the link inside you” (ibid.).

The pool functions as a parallel to Area X which also faces the threat of destruction for its “real” purpose in the world. That real purpose is determined by the Southern Reach agency or other governmental bodies for which recalcitrant ecosystems hold no meaningful value. By becoming attuned to the life and functions of the biotic world of the abandoned swimming pool, the biologist accentuates the extent to which new sensitivities and sensibilities are world making and matter making. She also surfaces the trouble and tension that can arise *between worlds* and their presumed imperatives and how insensitivities to other worlds can lead to “unthinking slaughter” (31). Such experiences for the biologist in her youth mirror her phenomenological transformation in Area X. Another transformative *area* the biologist experiences is an overgrown, abandoned parking lot. But for her, the space was not devoid of meaning, but rich in its

own world, one that she had become attuned to: “The empty lot appealed to me because it wasn’t truly empty” (103). Observing the creatures that inhabited that world, the biologist had a sense of the inmixing of observer and observed that mirrors her entanglement with the weird ecology of Area X. The creatures from the lot “all had a watchfulness about them” (104). But this “watchfulness,” she notes, “was different from animals in true wilderness; this was a jaded watchfulness, the result of a long and weary history. Tales of bad-faith encounters in human-occupied territory, tragic past events” (ibid.). The observer quality of the lot’s inhabitants has to do with the clash of worlds, the human and the non, that reflects the vulnerability of some forms of life and especially ecological life under threat from human imperatives. It is her own watchfulness and sensitivity to the world of the lot that allows the biologist to register this vulnerability. She carries this insight to other “areas” that are also “rendered invisible” because they do not make “sense” or are not of immediate use value to their human counterparts. “There were thousands of ‘dead’ spaces like the lot I had observed,” the biologist notes (104). “Thousands of transitional environments that no one saw, that had been rendered invisible because they were not ‘of use.’ Anything could inhabit them for a time without noticing” (ibid.). The making-perceptible or making-sensible of these spaces positions the biologist’s observation not as a scientific practice but as an act of world making and matter making that renders previously invisible worlds sense-able and relevant to human ethical and onto-epistemological considerations.

Her experience at the edge of a tidal pool also carries this phenomenological weight. Staring down at the sea star called “destroyer of worlds” (116), the biologist feels her own sense of self and world unravel: “the longer I stared at it, the less

comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all — about nature, about ecosystems” (ibid.). In this disorienting estrangement the biologist loses her position in the world: “I could not tell where the sky met the sea, whether I faced the water or the shore. I was completely adrift, and dislocated” (ibid.). All she could navigate with “in that moment was the glowing beacon below me” (ibid.). The sea star becomes a reference point, not in the biologist’s orientation, but in her dis-orientation as she is untethered and set afloat in a moment of relationality with an unknown creature.

This moment and the other seemingly mundane experiences of the natural world become inflection points for the biologist within Area X as she confronts a heightened level of terror of the nonsensical and the unknown in her interaction with the Crawler. As the biologist passes through the spectral presence/body of the Crawler (or perhaps it passes through her) in the tower she is brought back to these moments of attunement to the environment both within and outside of Area X, but in an altered way. In this encounter, where she seems to feel herself being torn apart and reassembled by the Crawler, she enters into a kind of horror-infused reverie wherein she switches positions with what she observed in the swimming pool, lot and tidal pool:

I felt the impression from behind me of hundreds of eyes beginning to turn in my direction, staring at me. I was a thing in a swimming pool being observed by a monstrous little girl. I was a mouse in an empty lot being tracked by a fox. I was prey the starfish had reached up and pulled down into the tidal pool. (119)

Taking up the position of what she observes, the biologist begins to knit together her experience of Area X and her work as a human observer outside of the strange zone.

These moments of observation share a transformative potential in that they call to attention the limited capacity of the human to objectively know the world. In this formulation, the biologist begins to recognize the mundane world is as estranged from her as the weird world of Area X. What is revealed to her in experience is not necessarily an exposed Truth about Reality, but an entangled phenomena of observer and observed that make some things apparent while hiding others. There is no world, for the biologist, but only the practice of worlding in which things are made and unmade, sensible and not, truthful and deceptive in an ongoing unfurling of experience:

A swimming pool. A rocky bay. An empty lot. A tower. A lighthouse. These things are real and not real. They exist and they do not exist. I remake them in my mind with every new thought, every remembered detail, and each time they are slightly different. Sometimes they are camouflage or disguises. Sometimes they are something more truthful. (125)

The biologist does not presume to know the nature of reality within or outside of Area X, but she begins to reflect on their fundamental inseparability. For her, the “normal world” has come undone both by virtue of its own excessive and indeterminate character and due to what she begins to understand as its co-constitution with Area X. Area X works by creating “a new world” out of the Earth’s ecosystems through “supreme acts of mirroring” but does so “without surrendering the foundations of its *otherness* as it becomes what it encounters” (126). The new world of Area X is imbued with “processes and aims” that remain “utterly alien” to the human world — in a manner not entirely different from the microworld of the overgrown swimming pool or the “empty” lot that is not empty at all. The biologist comes to believe the tower “makes and remakes the world

inside the border” as it also “slowly sends its emissaries across that border in ever greater numbers, so that in tangled gardens and fallow fields its envoys begin their work” (127). It is upon further reflection that the biologist comes to wonder if “in some future moment, perhaps the infiltration will reach even a certain remote sheet of coastal rock, quietly germinate in those tidal pools I know so well” (127). The question is put to the reader as to whether or not this infiltration has already occurred. The lack of a border between Area X and the rest of the world, while representing the pinnacle of horror in *Annihilation*, comes to be seen as no longer a source of terror for the biologist. She admits, “the terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing” (127).

IV. The Battle for the Broken Earth

This has been a hard year, hasn't it? A hard few years. A hard century. For some of us, things have always been hard.

— N. K. Jemisin, Hugo Award acceptance speech 2018

Ah, my love. An apocalypse is a relative thing, isn't it? When the earth shatters, it is a disaster to the life that depends on it.

— N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*

We have to do something, or we just might as well accept extinction. There's never going to be a perfect chance.

— Prasát (Shelly Boyd), Member of the Sinixt⁵⁴

Don't be patient. Don't ever be. This is the way a new world begins.

— N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*

The end of the world has already happened for some subjects, and it is the prerequisite for the possibility of imagining 'living and breathing again' for others.

— Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

For whom might identifying with the nonhuman be too risky a move?

— Jinthana Haritaworn, "Decolonizing the Non/Human"

At the start of 2020, the Canadian media landscape was transfixed by an unfolding crisis on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory in northern British Columbia.

⁵⁴ The Sinixt were officially declared extinct in Canada in 1956 by the federal government. Over the last decade, members of the Sinixt have fought to be recognized legally in Canada and their case is currently being heard in the Supreme Court of Canada. See Stephanie Wood's article "I wanted to show them I wasn't extinct" in *The Narwhal*.

Tactical police forces descended on the landscape to remove Indigenous land defenders from the route of the Coastal GasLink pipeline under the authority of a court-ordered injunction. Hereditary chiefs and matriarchs of the Wet'suwet'en were vocally opposed to the construction of the pipeline across their traditional lands and for more than a decade a group of these leaders and their supporters constructed and inhabited encampments, including the Unist'ot'en healing centre, along the intended route of the pipeline as a demonstration against the project and an exercise of territorial and cultural rights. As editor of *The Narwhal*, I assigned and wrote numerous stories on the movement of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) through Wet'suwet'en camps and barricades, including the Unist'ot'en encampment where *Narwhal* photographer Amber Bracken was embedded to document the lives of those awaiting arrest. At the heart of much media coverage was the contested nature of Wet'suwet'en territorial rights and sovereignty. For many, the question of whether or not these Indigenous land defenders were in the right had already been settled by the authority of a court, which granted the RCMP the "right" to remove individuals preventing work of Coastal GasLink. For many Canadian onlookers, a presumed uncontested authority of the court guaranteed the legitimacy of state police forces and their actions. That the court had explicitly not ruled on the question of territorial rights (but instead ruled on procedural natural resource permitting rights) remained peripheral to debates over whether or not the actions of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders were legitimate. The judge who issued the injunction noted that Indigenous land claims were a separate legal matter. These claims are decided in another court and through specific filings, assessment of evidence and

proffering of arguments.⁵⁵ But while legal questions determined and divided public opinion on the justification of the land defenders' actions, there was little room within that moment of heightened discourse to recognize the contested nature and violent history of colonial legal systems for Indigenous Peoples. While the legitimacy of state powers — judicial, political, and militarized — was uncritically accepted by many settler colonial bystanders, the Wet'suwet'en legal system, hereditary governance systems, and territorial claims were disparaged and deemed invalid. Even among those who did not outright deny the legitimacy of Wet'suwet'en authority, many suggested the ultimate question of Wet'suwet'en land rights must be settled through the colonial legal system — another way in which Indigenous worldviews, ideologies, and political histories are denied and subject to the legitimizing powers of “true” colonial authorities.

As these legal battles waged in public discourse and media headlines, state military powers forcibly removed the land defenders from Wet'suwet'en territory. Heavily armed police placed Indigenous matriarchs under arrest as they sang ceremonial songs and drummed. The removal of the physical bodies of these land defenders is ultimately what made way for the “authorized” and “legal” work of corporate actors. The spurious business of deciding which bodies belong where reaches back into Canada's

⁵⁵ The Wet'suwet'en nation, importantly, had previously launched a title case for land rights to traditional territory. The judges overseeing the case recognized the legitimacy of the claim but told hereditary chiefs they failed to make the appropriate legal arguments. The nation was invited by the Supreme Court of Canada to bring a fresh case to argue for territorial rights. The possibility of a nation winning such rights to their unceded territory in B.C. was bolstered by the 2014 victory of the Tsilhqot'in nation in the Supreme Court of Canada. That case took more than a quarter century to wend its way through the courts, highlighting the challenges Indigenous nations face when working to protect landscapes from industrial incursions while title cases are fought. Both efforts require the commitment of significant resources to communities that are often under-resourced due to historical disenfranchisement.

dark colonial history, connecting the Wet'suwet'en to other Indigenous communities that were forcibly removed from their lands to make way for extractive enterprises. Canada's colonial past and present are linked through a reliance on material-discursive practices that naturalize the activities of colonial settlers and their interests over and above the presumed-invalid ways of life of Indigenous inhabitants. This battle over naturalized ways of being continues to unfold in the Wet'suwet'en crisis as governments and courts deploy settler colonial frameworks to denaturalize and disavow the nation's histories, ancestral relations, and geographical belonging. That particular *material* belonging to the landscape and its histories is further eroded by the corporations that physically reorganize matter to make way for roads, work camps, and fossil fuel infrastructure. The unearthing of Wet'suwet'en artifacts, including lithic tools, demonstrates a particular way through which Wet'suwet'en belonging to the landscape extends geologically into the ground below.⁵⁶ The destruction of these geophysical traces during pipeline clearing and pre-construction represents a breaking of discoverable bonds that link together contemporary Wet'suwet'en bodies with those of their ancestral past — bonds that exist within and through the carrying or holding capacity of the Earth, its bark, roots, mud, and strata.⁵⁷

The erasure of these geophysical traces of history and relations also plays out through the

⁵⁶ The historical presence of the Wet'suwet'en within their territory is evidenced in archaeological findings from burial sites, war paths, hunting trails, and culturally modified trees. From the strata beneath the ground to the trunks and branches of trees, the material modification of the landscape bears the mark of Wet'suwet'en belonging and practices of wayfinding. C.f. Bracken, Amber. 'They are erasing our history': Indigenous sites buried under Coastal GasLink pipeline infrastructure."

⁵⁷ These geophysical bonds are often used by Indigenous Peoples to demonstrate continuous occupation of a land over time — a forceful 'evidence-based' argument for colonial legal systems. The destruction of artifacts by Coastal GasLink employees or contractors could undermine the Wet'suwet'en nation's future title claim through the destruction and displacement of evidence.

destruction of ancient trails, war paths, burial grounds, and storied spaces that act as territorial reservoirs of “biogeographical” being (Yusoff, “Geologic Life” 783). The holding of Indigenous biogeographical being within the landscape, connects Wet’suwet’en pasts and presents in some very harrowing ways. The Unist’ot’en healing centre is located just 66 kilometres from B.C.’s “Highway of Tears,” a remote stretch of road named for its connection to the disappearance and murder of Indigenous women in the province. Matrilineal leaders awaiting their arrest at the centre in early 2020 noted construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline could disturb the more recent burial grounds of undiscovered Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The connection between violence against the Earth and violence against women was visualized at the Unist’ot’en camp through the hanging of red dresses that were placed on display around the healing centre. The dresses, national symbols of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, were designed to greet RCMP forces, according to matriarch Freda Huson, and act as “an invitation to the spirits of those women” to confront “the RCMP who are failing to seek justice on their behalf, who failed to protect their safety by being complicit in this epidemic that our communities are facing” (Huson qtd. in Linnitt np).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In an interview in February 2020, Unist’ot’en camp founder and spokesperson Freda Huson, who also goes by Tsake’ze Howilhkat, told *The Narwhal* she worried the bodies of Indigenous women could be out on the land now claimed as access route for the pipeline. “Maybe some of them are out here, somewhere,” Huson said. “Because of lot of them went missing and they could have easily went on these back roads. A lot of this territory was hardly used, so they could have been brought out here somewhere.” Indigenous opposition to natural gas development and its infrastructure as well as Indigenous opposition to the murder and disappearance of Indigenous women and girls are unrecognized and delegitimized by the Canadian colonial state and its corporate actors in their pursuit of energy security. Both fossil fuels as well as the remains of Indigenous women are subject to the specific arrangements of geontopower, “a social project whose purpose is to keep an arrangement of accumulation in place through the specific governance of difference and markets that stretches across human and nonhuman

In naming the tragedy of disappeared and murdered Indigenous women, Indigenous advocates and researchers have identified a phenomenon that previously remained invisible to law enforcement agencies and settler publics: the unique vulnerability of Indigenous women and girls to forms of violence. That state forces could so quickly and dramatically mobilize to bring to life a gas pipeline but for decades refused to acknowledge the existential violence Indigenous women face demonstrates the extent to which fossil fuel imperatives matter more than the bodies and lives of some humans. The ongoing histories of natural resource extraction continue to participate in the biogeographical making and unmaking of Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs and supporters who, at the time of writing, continue to fight against pipeline construction amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The unfolding conflict between the Coastal GasLink pipeline and the Wet'suwet'en offers a view of “geologic life” (Yusoff “Geologic Life”) and the concept's implications for rethinking political agency and subjectivity in the Anthropocene. In her work to rearticulate and rematerialize human and nonhuman subjects amid the geopolitical and geomorphic upheavals of the Anthropocene, Kathryn Yusoff can aid a reading of the Wet'suwet'en conflict as an expression of the double valence of geologic life. While the Wet'suwet'en express geological subjectivity as people embedded biogeographically in a place, this community is also subject to “colonial geo-logics” that throughout the history of the developed Western world have used the “extractive

forms of existence” (Povinelli, *Geontopower* 173). Povinelli might also prompt us to consider the ways in which lethality, both as “state killing” and “letting die” operate upon “a specific catachresis between the security state and the neoliberal market — between sovereign state and biopolitical state — [that] animates contemporary late liberal attitudes toward various forms of living and dying” (“The Child in the Broom Closet” 511).

grammars of geology” to sanction “the violent dispossession of Indigenous land” (Yusoff, *A Billion 2*). As discourses and analyses of the Anthropocene struggle to contend with geologic life, it is necessary to remember and assess the ways in which power deploys the metabolisms of the geological to dehumanize some lives and ways of life as anachronistic, inert, historical, and dead. A worldview that enlivens the metabolic belonging of human life to the material strata of the Earth holds the potential to push back against the dehumanizing force of settler colonial worldviews that categorize earth-bound peoples as inhuman and without political agency. For Yusoff, the concept of geologic life offers “a mineralogical dimension of human composition that remains currently undertheorised in social thought and is directly relevant for the material, temporal, and corporeal conceptualisation of fossil fuels” (“Geologic Life” 780). In bringing to light the mineralogical dimensions of the “material and discursive knots in the narrative arc of human becoming,” Yusoff vies “for a ‘geological turn’ that takes seriously not just our biological (or biopolitical) life, but our geological (or geopolitical) life, as crucial to modes of subjectification in the Anthropocene” (ibid.). The renunciation of Indigenous belonging and sovereignty on Wet’suwet’en territory perpetuates the erasure of that belonging and sovereignty. This is occurring in the present but touches upon and knots together historical points in the past that gather together on a long material timescale which materializes through the destruction of ancient and contemporary sites. This active erasure binds together the past and present on broad timescales that are implicated in the violence of colonial fossil fuel capitalism and its imperatives. The exterminating force of late capitalism here, legitimated and mobilized through contemporary Canadian law and public and political discourse, is generative of some forms of subjective life at the

expense of others. While the material subtends the possibilities for geopolitical life, the material is also subjected to the forces of human political power that are capable of mobilizing the material for the purposes of extinguishment of certain lives and their geostories and geohistories. To render Wet'suwet'en geopolitics useless and Indigenous geo-ontologies irrelevant is necessary to make possible state and corporate "territorializations" (Povinelli, *Geontologies* 25) — such as the usurping of land for gas pipelines said to serve the larger 'public interest.'

Yusoff's push to "use the Anthropocene as a provocation" comes at a critical juncture as intersecting social, political, and ecological crises expose the transversals of vulnerability that underlie the lives and possibilities for life of racialized and minoritized people. The coronavirus pandemic has introduced a rapid reorganization of social living that distributes new kinds of risk — and new kinds of reward — on incredibly unequal registers. The virus represents a greater threat to minoritized and marginalized populations, especially for labourers considered to provide "essential services" and required to work in many cases without protective equipment or hazard pay. Governments have also used the essential services categorization to justify exceptional exclusions for oil and gas companies to suspend environmental monitoring and cleanup responsibilities. Pandemic policy compounded the challenges for the Wet'suwet'en in their attempt to keep up with government negotiations. Lockdown measures also prevented community members from monitoring the work of Coastal GasLink, which continued to operate as an "essential service" on the landscape. The urgent task of protecting life from social systems that operate through exclusion, oppression, and violence has been made more dangerous for disenfranchised, impoverished, racialized,

and minoritized people globally. The presence of COVID-19 in the United States added additional burdens on participants of Black Lives Matter demonstrations, for example, which were organized to spotlight an epidemic of police violence against Black bodies. These demonstrations were taking place as wildfires made air in some cities dangerous to breathe, layering levels of risk for those needing to be outside, whether to patrol territory from corporations or join mass protests to make visible and interrupt patterns of death.

That the current language and conceptual frames used to discuss the Anthropocene are inadequate to capture the stakes of life and death in this current moment is well documented and evidenced in the proliferation of nomenclatures designed to emphasize the otherworlds of the current epoch, including Donna Haraway's Chthulucene and Capitalocene. Haraway, among others, regrets the inheritance of the term Anthropocene and its emphasis on *Anthropos* (man) as the key agent of change and agency in the new era. Long overlooked are the "Cthonic ones," Haraway writes, those "beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute" (*Staying 2*). In her work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway wants to move beyond the language of Anthropos and the primacy of human action to articulate the other beings and abilities that proliferate within, without, and amongst human realities. By unhitching conceptual frames from human interests and timescales, Haraway suggests Chthonic thought can become comfortable with belonging to geologic time and histories that are "full of inheritances, of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturings what might still be" (*ibid.*). The Chthulucene brings about a toolbox for Earth-belonging that knots together "all sorts of temporalities and materialities" (*ibid.*) that stretch far beyond the bounds of the presumed individual human being. For Haraway, thinking Cthonically

means thinking with the “beings of the earth” and with those “monsters in the best sense” who “demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters” (ibid.). For Haraway, the history of Euro/Western power, “the world’s great monotheisms in both religious and secular guises,” have sought to do away with Chthonic ones. This is because they are “not safe; they have no truck with ideologies; they belong to no one; they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth” (ibid.). In calling up the “scandals of times called the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene,” within which we can list the Wet’suwet’en crises and the Black Lives Matter movement, Haraway wants to make plain the “exterminating forces” that seek to sever the binds that bind people and places, individuals and things, humans and “chthonic ones . . . replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair” (ibid.). For Haraway, it is in reconfiguring our conventional modes of thought and conceptual frames that we can begin to conceive of the ways in which we live-together and die-with each other in order to recognize these new modes of thought offer a “fierce reply to the dictates of both Anthropos and Capital” (ibid.).

Haraway’s push for kinship and ally-hood in the “troubled present” recasts senses of responsibility and how they link together life and being through histories and within timescales that transcend the singular human. Such practices of forging new modes of being-with and belonging are critical for the work of Yusoff, too, particularly in her use of the Anthropocene as a provocation to unearth histories of slavery and violence against Black and brown bodies, so integral to the geo-logics of extractive material practices of the Anthropocene. Yusoff names the emerging field of discourse surrounding

the Anthropocene as a potent realm for the reintegration of forgotten and silenced Black and brown histories denied by the settler colonial progress narratives underpinning Anthropos and Capital. Rather than carry forward the unthought geo-logics that have defined Black lives through their “material colonial inscription,” Yusoff wants to expose the intimacy that binds together the inhuman earth with dehumanized Black and brown bodies. “The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom” (*A Billion* xiii). The work of reintegrating these overlooked lives, intimacies, and histories amounts to a recasting of the origin story of the Anthropocene and the ways in which “racialization belongs to a material categorization of the division of matter (corporeal and mineralogical) into active and inert” (2).

In doing so, Yusoff argues we can then tell stories of the formation and the deformation of both the material Earth and its material subjectivities. By voicing the Anthropocene and articulating its matterings through the histories and concerns of white, liberal subjects, we commit to an epochal turn forged by White Geology and colonial, ecological violence. In doing so we miss the message of the “humanist trickster” figure, which arrives to place “an injunction on the recognition of historic modes of geopolitical matter while maintaining unequal relations of power through continued environmental exposures” (3). The switch from thinking with White Geology to a mode of thought infused with a billion Black Anthropocenes alters our ability to apprehend and comprehend the “world making . . . and world breaking” of subjects and their epochal pronouncements (1). The Anthropocene is not a new condition, Yusoff writes, but a very

old one that continues to rely on the building of some worlds at the expense of others. The world unmaking of White Geology rests on an atemporal mythology that severs the material world from “its languages of description and the historical constitution of its social relations” (5). To think alongside the afterlives of slavery and through the billion openings of Black Anthropocenes, Yusoff offers an analytic and a radical aesthetic for reconnecting the links between the bodies and ecology cast as materially inhuman. The push to “decenter Eurocentric logics” and White Geology is “not just a theoretical exercise of decolonization but a realignment of sense through affective infrastructures, an affective mattering in the discourse of materiality and its worlds” (98). Doing the work to reframe the Anthropocene as bound to its geologic and colonial lineage creates a space for “new arrangements of sense,” for Yusoff (*ibid.*). Such thought “unsettles sense and settles it into new formations that have a political charge precisely because they have a subterranean force that travels underneath and through colonial technologies of space and time” (98-99). Thinking alongside Yusoff, the world unmaking of critical Black aesthetics discovers the epistemological and ideological violence that subtends the geological trauma of the Anthropocene in order to understand the articulation of these material histories as a necessary act for bringing about the end of this world’s present arrangement:

Turning to critical Black aesthetics is not an attempt to reformulate the Anthropocene into a different scene through black ontologies, ontologies without territories, but to locate more precisely how the praxis of that aesthetic, forged as it was within the context of inhuman intimacies that are inherently antiblack (constituted by the material geographies of colonialism, slavery, and diaspora),

locates an insurgent geology. The origins of the Anthropocene continue to erase and dissimulate violent histories of encounter, dispossession, and death in the geographical imagination. This geologic prehistory has everything to do with the Anthropocene as a condition of the present; it is the material history that constitutes the present in all its geotraumas and thus should be embraced, reworked, and reconstituted in terms of agency *for the present, for the end of this world* and the possibility of others, because the world is already turning to face the storm, writing its weather for the geology next time. (100-101)

The Trembling Earth, the Geomorphic Arts

What so much intellectual labour devoted to the nominative event of the Anthropocene tell us is that telling the story of the present is difficult and consequential. It matters who gets to tell that story. It matters how it is told. This is because, in Haraway's formulation, the telling of stories is the sowing of worlds. She writes, "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with . . . It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (*Staying* 12). The importance of storytelling is aggrandized in the Anthropocene as reckoning with more-than-human realities and timescales relies, in part, on narrativizing the inhuman. The need to rely on purposeful, meaningful, and useful storytelling⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The question of whether or not science fiction and fantasy *ought* to be useful in a socio-political sense is a fraught one. In recent years a battle has waged within the science fiction and fantasy world, with conservative authors arguing recent trends in identity politics is polluting their fictional environment, forcing authors to stage real-world political dramas within their work. The resentment towards authors who understand their fiction as political works and works with political, world making, and world unmaking

refocuses attention on the basic elements of stories and their tellers and the extent to which both are embedded within material histories, languages, and social relations that play a constitutive and politicized role in who says what, how, and why. In the Anthropocene we see the need to tell a new, collective story of the Earth and its ecosystems as they respond to the pressures of human existence. To consider the Earth's agency requires a geophysical reconceptualization that allows an inert substrate to take on new kinds of mattering and force. "The immemorial, fixed Earth, which provided the conditions and foundations of our lives, is moving, the fundamental Earth is trembling" writes Michel Serres ("The Natural Contract" 86). In his essay "Agency in the Time of the Anthropocene," Bruno Latour notes the recognition of the Earth as agent amounts to a new Copernican revolution in thought: "Not only does [the Earth] move around the Sun (that much we knew), but it is agitated through the highly complex workings of many enmeshed living organisms, the whole of which is either called 'Earth system science,' or more radically, Gaia," (3). In order to rearticulate Earth as an "*agent of history*," Latour suggests we rethink "our common *geostory*" (4). For Latour, the need for geostory pushes storytellers up against a new question: "The problem for all of us in philosophy, science, or literature becomes: how do we tell such a story?" (ibid.). N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* offers a reply. Jemisin's novels offer up a geostory that moves well beyond the mere expression of the ecological in the form of a trembling earth. Her works extend the notion of planetary agency by casting "Father Earth" as an angry and vengeful being,

implications, like N. K. Jemisin, is evidenced in the significant blowback against the rise of female and minoritized authors within the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Association and the genre's premier awards event, WorldCon's Hugo Awards. More on this below.

with a long and fraught history of relations with the planet's human and inhuman inhabitants. Jemisin also seems to speak to Latour's idea that stories might play a potentially disruptive role in the generation of possible futures and worlds to come. Geostories, upon Jemisin's telling, can mark the expressions and origins of new material futures that create new geologic, geomorphic, and geopoetic imaginaries and subjectivities.

The unmaking of human timescales in Jemisin's novels also helps demonstrate the extent to which the human experiential plane is insufficient for conceiving of the world and the horizon of significance. The idea of planetary stability comes undone in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and yet, importantly, all manner of life and matters of vulnerability still persist. By showcasing the ongoing struggle for survival and a desire for ecological harmony Jemisin demonstrates how world unmaking is not a simple undoing of the normal, but can be the conditions of possibility for the unfolding of new structures of reality, new possibilities for personhood, and even the emergence of new forms of violence and vulnerability. Jemisin shows a world that inheres amidst its destruction, suggesting that world unmaking is not a final, apocalyptic culmination but rather a set of ongoing conditions in which worlds are made and unmade, worlds are had and lost, and people are included and excluded from the realms of significance that are consequential to charting vulnerability and precarity in life. In bringing together human and material being under the banner of geologic life, Jemisin demonstrates how stories and narratives of life intersect with, move through, and are shaped by colonial and extracto-capitalist geopolitics and the making of matter into not just power but, critically for readers in the Anthropocene, ecological/territorial security. We come to understand throughout the

trilogy that geologic life binds together the *possibilities for life* and the histories and transversals of the Earth. These formative terran and subterranean forces constitute embodied worlds in which human meanings arise. This yoking together of the human and nonhuman recasts the ontological mold, moving us toward conceptualizations of what, through the work of Elizabeth Povinelli, can be considered the geontological. In particular through the experience of orogenes, subjectivities that are *in* and *of* the earth, Jemisin shows how people can be cast within a geontological mold, with bodies and beings that are bound to and made vulnerable by the Earth and its history of relations with human and nonhuman beings. Through these characters that can ‘feel with’ the Earth, Jemisin performs the telling of a “geostory,” and demonstrates how such stories might play a generative role in the new imaginings of possible futures and worlds to come. Geostories, as Latour notes, can mark the origin of new futures and upon Jemisin’s casting, such origins hold the potential to create openings for new geologic, geomorphic, and geopoetic imaginaries and subjectivities. If we think along with Haraway that it matters what stories tell stories, the *Broken Earth Trilogy* provides us a story to retell the story of our present, the unstable era of the Anthropocene built upon a violent geologic that subtends the past and the present. These stories allow us to restory and geostory the current moment as the rendering of long, fraught colonial and extractive histories of power that have relied on the stories we tell about the inhuman. Such inhuman tales have bound together beings and bodies and the Earth in arrangements that feed colonial and extractivist methodologies and worldviews.⁶⁰ Jemisin’s stories give us fresh languages

⁶⁰ This chapter brings into conversation Black and Indigenous resistance to extractivist colonial geologies. There is precedent for reading Black and Indigenous post-colonial experiences together in literature. See Jack Forbes’ *Africans and Native Americans: The*

and imaginings through which to think about the Wet'suwet'en crisis and the broader struggle for Indigenous personhood and rights in colonial contexts. The trilogy also tells anew the potential horror of stories and how they can be violently deployed through tales, the crafting of language and worldviews, to shape the narratives of people and place. In the current context of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, stories can be used to sever the bonds that link the human to the inhuman, the people to the place. Jemisin's broken world and broken stories help to make literal how life and nonlife are bound up in deep earth histories; how worldview shapes world; how the boundaries surrounding the category of human are drawn; and the extent to which worlds are not equally had and not equally lost.

“They’ll break themselves”

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-17) is the story of a dramatically unstable world, characterized by tectonic disruptions that bring about mini-apocalypses known as fifth seasons. These times of planetary instability create chaos for humanity through unpredictable geologic and atmospheric events that lead to forced migration, physical and

Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples, Jonathan Brennan's *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature* and Joanna Brooks' *American Lazarus: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. Yet Mark Rifkind in his work *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculations*, asks how forging identity between Black and Indigenous social struggles might overlook important points of historical nonidentity between such struggles. Rifkind suggests “we can approach Black and Indigenous imaginaries as, in Marisol de la Cadena's terms, varied ‘ways of making worlds,’ ways of articulating and mapping present sociopolitical dynamics while connecting forces from the past to the emergence of future potentials” (17).

mental illness, famine, and war. Efforts to suppress or temper the violence of the sentient character named Father Earth are made by officials of the Sanze Empire, the world's sole state power, which established the Fulcrum, an imperial caste of orogenes that operate under the empire's authority. Fulcrum-trained orogenes harness a unique "sensing" power to sense when earthquakes and other tectonic perturbations are near in order to prevent or quell them. The Fulcrum participates in the creation and distribution of local Stonelore, a mixture of myth, state-sponsored propaganda, historical mis/information, and directives for surviving through seasons. Stonelore and other aspects of Fulcrum education/indoctrination are critical to the formulation of a worldview that categorizes orogenes as inhuman, fundamentally dangerous and, in part, responsible for the Earth's instability. This worldview masks the violent oppression of orogenes who are captured by the Fulcrum to receive imperial training and are also bred for the purpose of maintaining central nodes used to stabilize politically valuable geographic regions. The manner in which the node keepers are kept is horrific, their bodies physically restrained and run through with feeding tubes, kept only 'alive' enough to serve their function as stabilizing conduits. These figures, always powerful orogenic children, are otherwise stripped of life. The story of the Fulcrum and its capture and oppression of orogenes is predicated on the larger, longer history of the broken relationship between an angry Father Earth and the planet's inhabitants, many of which strive, in one way or another, to be seen as fully human. At one point in the far past, civilization became excessive in its consumption and desire for comfort and, seeking to extract yet more resources from the planet, accidentally cast the moon, the son of the Earth, away from his father. The central character, along with her family and allies, embarks on a mission amid a war-torn and ecologically

degraded planet to rehabilitate humanity's historically and geologically broken relationship with the Earth. To do so, the group must use their orogenic and collaborative powers to overturn centuries of harmful mythology, bring the moon back into its original orbit, and rehabilitate a balanced relationship with Father Earth, the key to overcoming the world's perpetual cycle of apocalyptic ends.

Central to Jemisin's award-winning trilogy, is humanity's broken relationship with the Earth. But readers don't know that, at first. Yet, it is within this long-running, although initially invisible, context that we meet the trilogy's central character, Essun as she experiences the twin trauma of a world-altering earthquake — that signals the beginning of a fifth season — and the discovery of the brutalized corpse of her son. Essun soon realizes that her husband, Jija, likely murdered their son in response to the earthquake and the realization that the child was orogenic. Although Essun made efforts to hide the orogeny of their two children, three-year-old Uche and eight-year-old Nassun, she understands her husband killed their son as a result of the child's powers. Orogeny is a sensory awareness and geomorphic power that allows orogenes (or in the derogatory, *roggas*) to feel or “sess” and control the composition and movement of matter. Skilled orogenes can intentionally and methodically direct matter in order to quell earthquakes, for example, or to alter the temperature and moisture in the ground or atmosphere in a manner that can “ice” enemies to death or force an invasive swarm of deadly insects up from the ground. Unskilled orogenes can harm others intentionally or accidentally, though the same is true for skilled orogenes. The connection orogenes share with the material world has for several thousand years been used against them by the imperial powers of the Sanze Empire, which has fomented a culture of fear and hatred against

these people. Official doctrine, carried through the ages on tablets and known as Stonelore, categorizes orogenes as inhuman and dangerous. As a result, those possessing such capabilities are often forced to live their life in hiding or, if they are discovered and captured by the Fulcrum's guardians, forced into educational programs that teach orogenes to use their power according to the institutional mandates of state-sanctioned programs. Oppressed orogenes and their human counterparts who contain no such geomaterial powers, called "stills," are taught to hate orogeny and only allow such unique abilities to be tolerated under the sanction of Fulcrum officials. Essun, readers come to learn, embodies the experience of many kinds of orogenes, first through her early family life where she lived as a despised child in hiding, then as a captured and Fulcrum-trained student, and eventually as a woman who has fled the strictures of the empire, living a life of both quiet retreat and radical rebellion. The novels chart her movement through these various subjective embodiments that share a common personhood despite vastly different lived realities and names: Damaya, Syenite, and Essun. The storyline culminates in Essun's transformation into a stone eater, yet another subject kind and embodied/inearthed experience. Stone eaters are marked with an inhuman categorization but also with a deep, unique, and historically important relationship with the material planet.

Throughout the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, Jemisin gives articulation to numerous types of people that in various ways are *made up by* and *bound up with* the Earth. These characters literalize the modalities of the geologic and material turn by intering *living* human bodies. These physical bodies are inearthed through the sharing of their matter, their meaning, their agency, and their history with the Earth. Following Yusoff, we can

read the trilogy as “remetabolizing” human life within geologic timescales, making the move from biologic life-course to thinking with epochs and thinking with geologic life (“Geologic Life” 784). The entanglement of *bios* and *geos* in these texts provides a way of reading world unmaking through the removal of the material divide that is presumed to separate the human from the inhuman, the active living from the inert dead, the sedimented, fossilized past from the uncertain, possible future. The inseparability of the human body and human life from the material world and ‘life’ of materiality provides an avenue for the reimagining of people as place and subjects as space. At the intersection of the individual and the matter that surrounds them, Jemisin casts new kinds of human experience and new kinds of human kin, that draw together long historical injuries, civilizational ebbs and flows, and a planetary belonging that cannot be severed from human being (whether this is made available to consciousness or not).

The experience of orogenes demonstrates how this earth-bound being makes individuals both uniquely powerful and uniquely vulnerable. Essun’s vulnerability is made apparent through her capture as a child and conscription within the semi-militarized academy of the Fulcrum. Named Damaya when we first meet her, Essun is discovered hiding in a barn loft after being cast out of her family home in a comm, usually an agriculture-based community of stills, called Palela. She has been reported to the comm’s headmaster by her parents and now finds herself given over to the Fulcrum, under the charge of an official Guardian named Schaffa, a man with paper-white skin, ice-white eyes, and long black hair.⁶¹ In response to bullying at school, the young girl nearly kills

⁶¹ Upon seeing Schaffa for the first time, Damaya thinks: “nothing about him makes racial sense” (*Fifth* 29). This is significant in part because it points towards Jemisin’s use of physical characteristics to identify certain people groups within the Stillness. Unlike

another child by harnessing the material power of the boy's body, creating a dangerous chill that turns his sweat to ice.⁶² This event exposes Damaya's orogeny, which begins her transformation from human child to something inhuman in her mother's eyes: "Damaya had hidden it from them, Mother said, hidden everything, pretended to be a child when she was really a *monster*" (*Fifth Season* 31). Schaffa explains to the young girl that she is lucky to have been reported because other parents or angry comm mobs simply murder orogenic children. Still parents are instructed by the Fulcrum to report orogenic children so they may become of use to "all the Stillness," Schaffa says (34). "The orogenes of the Fulcrum serve the world," he tells Damaya (*ibid.*). "You're a gift of the earth," he adds, "but Father Earth hates us, never forget, and his gifts are neither free nor safe" (38).

Delany, who purposefully used shape-shifting and a fluidity of facial features to undermine the racial stabilization of characters in *Dhalgren*, Jemisin is very explicit in her use of racialized characteristics to define people groups through geographical belonging and historical being. In a blog post entitled "Creating Races," Jemisin notes she was very intentional in the use of racialized features, even when those used to show inmixing of different races. The Sanzeds, for example, are equatorial and thus have mixed features: "they once had many nations, cultures, and languages, but have homogenized over 3000 years of the empire" ("Creating races" np). Jemisin notes she created the Sanzed in this way "partly to illuminate just how different the Stillness is; races on our world differentiated in response to environmental conditions, and since the environmental conditions in the Stillness are so different, it made sense that what we think of as racial markers would've developed along completely different lines. Which is why Sanzeds tend to be tall and physically imposing, having descended from generations of Mad-Max-esque warlords. A lot of these warlords were women, which is also why they don't tend to have a lot of gender variance — that is, there's not a lot of physical disparity between men, women, or other genders; they're tall broad people. They have a tendency to be what we'd call fat; they'd call it 'famine resistant'" (*ibid.*).

⁶² Orogenic power is about more than feeling with the material Earth. The "sessapinea, paired organs located at the base of the brain stem, have been found to be sensitive to far more than local seismic movements and atmospheric pressure. In tests, reactions have been observed to the presence of predators, to others' emotions, to distant extremes of heat or cold, and to the movements of celestial objects. The mechanism of these reactions cannot be determined" (*Fifth Season* 343). These details are known to the Fulcrum as an outcome of scientific analysis and in thanks to the Fulcrum's "cadaver donation" program.

Schaffa says Damaya's deliverance to the Fulcrum training centre in Yumenes will hone her sharpness: "then you will become valuable" (ibid.). On the road with Schaffa, Damaya begins the undertaking of a new self-understanding, the start of an auto-ontological transition from what she comprehends as human to what she fears and dreads as inhuman. Schaffa tells her a story of a powerful emperor and his wise bodyguard that protects her leader from an orogene's attack. Listening to the story, Damaya identifies with the heroic bodyguard, only to realize with horror that she represents the villainous orogene in the story (92). She does not like the story and realizes that Schaffa "did not *intend* for her to like it" (93). In frustration at this realization and upon recognition of the unfairness of her situation, Damaya tells Schaffa she does not need him to control her. When he breaks her hand in response, and warns against her using orogeny in retaliation, he tells her: "I love you . . . I hate doing this to you. I hate that it's necessary. But please understand: I have to hurt you so that you will hurt no one else" (99-100). He adds, "What I do is not random: Damaya. It's about control" (102).

Damaya's conscription within the Fulcrum represents her immersion within a storied worldview that both sediments the inhumanity of orogenes and the absolute authority of the Sanze Empire. Jemisin uses the Fulcrum as a way of demonstrating how the ideological roots of oppression originate and operate not only through sovereign authorities but through the extended apparatus of institutional state power, even those under the auspices of the oppressed themselves. At the root of the Sanze Empire, which readers learn is the only empire to survive not only one but seven fifth seasons (94), is a violent belief system that operationalizes an extractive geologic that codifies orogeny as inhuman matter to be arranged and deployed to maintain state power and keep the Earth's

instability at bay. As a student of the Fulcrum, Damaya excels in her instruction and adheres willfully to the regulations that govern her life and her orogeny. She notes, with pleasure, that “there is order to life at the Fulcrum” (Fifth 191). Coming from a small comm, she appreciates the food and cleanliness of the institution, especially the ability to harness hot, clean water for daily showers. The bodies and daily activities of the young orogenes are rigorously regimented, an intimate register through which the imposed order of the empire manifests itself.

As young trainees, these students are considered “grits” (191). The grits, through language and lore, are identified with stone and matter and stripped of their human descriptors and qualities. Grits, Damaya learns, are “an unimportant bit of rock ready to be polished into usefulness, or at least to help grind other, better rocks” (191). These orogenes are imbued with subjectivity to the extent that they exist collectively as a force and a dangerous possibility, rather than as a people. They are granted individuality only to the extent that they represent a threat to one another. The voices of their instructors tell the students, “*You are representatives of us all. . .When you’re dirty, all orogenes are dirty. When you’re lazy, all orogenes are lazy. We hurt you so you’ll do the rest of us no harm*” (192-193). Damaya prickles at the suggestion she is like the other grits because she sees herself as more disciplined and talented than the others. She refuses this imposed belonging, not because she is freed unto a more emancipated sense of identity but rather because she has taken up the program of the Fulcrum so effectively. “One cannot easily expect sameness out of so much difference, and it makes no sense for Damaya to be judged by the behavior of children who share nothing save the curse of orogeny with her” (193). The young girl’s desire to excel at the Fulcrum, to achieve perfection under its

programs, is expressive of a kind of self-making and subject-formation that accords with the biopolitical techniques of the Fulcrum. Through the Stonelore historical archive, which is chiseled in stone to better survive the seasons, we can read the words of Erlsset, an emperor who ruled during a cannibalistic era known as The Season of Teeth, as he expounds on the establishment of the Fulcrum at a party:

Tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at these contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their weakness and doubt. Then *they'll break themselves* trying for what they'll never achieve. (76, emphasis mine)

The Fulcrum is designed to purge orogenic children of their humanity while also naturalizing this dehumanization as an inevitability of social progress and a guarantor against the insecurity of the seasons. The imperial arrangement of powers utilizes narratives, pedagogical and epistemological techniques to impose an ontological territorialization of the orogenic self, a territorial ontology wherein the resource learns to submit and exploit itself.

Erlsset's suggestion that orogenes will learn to "break themselves" reveals the world unmaking mythopoetic power of the Fulcrum, an educational institution inspired in part by residential school systems in Canada and Australia.⁶³ While Canadian residential

⁶³ The relationship between residential schools and the Fulcrum is noted in an article in the publication *Wired*. An article posted on the publication's website notes *The Fifth Season* was "influenced by the grim history of reservation schools in Australia and elsewhere, in which Indigenous children were removed from their families in an attempt to erase their culture . . . This cruel system [of the Fulcrum] is administered by other

schools were designed to “kill the Indian in the child,” the Fulcrum looks to kill the child in the orogene. The parallels between the Fulcrum and residential schools can be tracked through their shared formation of ‘acceptable’ subjects constituted by the material-discursive apparatus of colonial violence. In her essay, “‘Killing the Indian in the child’: Death, Cruelty, and Subject-formation in the Canadian Indian Residential School System,” Bryanne Young notes how the Canadian government’s use of geography, discourse and law

makes persons and convokes personhood, constituting certain subjectivities as worthy of protection and rendering others extraneous, disposable, abject/subaltern, their deaths ungrievable, their lives an otherworldly haunting of the body politic. (np)

Essential to the functioning of residential schools and, for our purposes here, the Fulcrum, are the techniques of control that emerged at the intersection of “discursive power and authority of the law” which, within the context of militarized academies with strict biological and behavioural regimes, is “amplified through emerging biopolitical technologies and techniques of control” (ibid.). Young notes that residential schools conjured a narrativization of a new Indigenous personhood by rearticulating a kind of subject life that benefits (and benefits society) by being exposed to death. The discursive

orogenes, which Jemisin feels reflects an important truth about oppression.” In the article Jemisin is quoted as saying, “it is not always a case of an evil overlord coming in and saying, ‘Mwahaha! I’m going to make you my slave’ In a lot of cases you’ve got people complicit in the system who are part of it themselves.” She added, “one of the ways in which the orogenes were kept in line was that they are told repeatedly that if you act right, if you are respectable enough, then you won’t be hurt And it’s a lie. It’s always a lie when you hear that kind of thing.” C.f. “Black Lives Matter Inspired This Chilling Fantasy Novel” in *Wired*.

power through which settler-colonial violence enacts itself is notable for its ability to *literalize* imagined ‘acceptable’ (Indigenous, orogenic) being. Young wants to “take seriously” the discursive-material modalities of colonial power that operate in order to both paradoxically *kill* and *improve* the child. What kinds of late settler liberal politics might these modalities make possible when deployed within populations and upon individual bodies? She writes,

Taking seriously the paradoxical nature of the schools' mandate, the kinds of imaginaries it activated, and the kind of political subjectivities it convoked is to take seriously not only the way subjects are constituted through the word of the law, but also, importantly, the kinds of life and registers of death inaugurated by the literalization of the discursive onto the corporeal body of the child. (np)

The Fulcrum also operationalizes certain inhuman imaginaries in order to keep the orogene alive but the child dead. This is critical to the Empire’s positioning of orogenic children with the system of “nodes” that are used to maintain tectonic stability within the part of the world that has come to be known as the Stillness.

As Damaya grows up and advances within the Fulcrum she is given the new name of Syenite and paired with a highly trained orogenic instructor named Alabaster with whom she is intended to produce a child. Here Jemisin draws together the arrangements of the Fulcrum and the inhuman intimacies of Black slavery. Syenite’s rage against the breeding arrangement can be read as a “struggle for the freedom to love” that “parallels the struggle of American slave women to legally marry partners of their choosing, to keep their children, to control their very bodies, in a system which made all of those things commodities” (Jemisin, “How Long” np). Syenite understands that to submit her

physical and reproductive body to the demands of the Fulcrum is not only how imperial power persists (through the breeding of powerful orogenes), but that this submission is what allows her to belong within and among humanity: “This is what it means to be *civilized*” (*Fifth Season* 75).⁶⁴ Readers learn that Alabaster has previously fathered Fulcrum-bred children who have been identified as particularly powerful and subsequently moved to nodes. In a particularly harrowing scene, Alabaster brings Syenite to a node to dispel the myths she has been told about what node maintainers do and how. Upon arriving at a node station, they discover a scene that, to Syenite, is difficult to comprehend:

The body in the node maintainer’s chair is small, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things — tubes and pipes and *things*, she has no words for them — going into the stick-arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There’s a flexible bag on the corpse’s belly, *attached to* its belly somehow, and it’s full of — ugh. The bag needs to be changed. (139)

Syenite notes that she didn’t know it was possible to keep a body in such a state: “immobile, unwilling, indefinite” (140). She begins to realize the node maintainer is a child who resembles Alabaster:

The node maintainer: a child, kept like this for what must have been months or years. A *child*, whose skin is almost as dark as Alabaster’s, and whose features might be a perfect match for his if they weren’t so skeletal. (*ibid.*)

⁶⁴ Syenite’s conviction that she must tolerate and submit to hateful and dehumanizing social codes in order to properly belong to ‘civilization’ takes on a particular significance when considering racist attacks Jemisin has faced by other figures within science fiction and fantasy genre. Because she is a Black woman, Jemisin was publicly referred to as “not fully civilized” by a white, male author. More on this below.

As Syenite works to register what she is seeing, Alabaster refers to the child, his child, as a “rogga,” who could not learn to control his orogeny. The use of the derogatory term catches Syenite off guard until “she understands that his use of the slur is deliberate. A dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing. It helps” (ibid.). In a post on her blog entitled “Creating races,” Jemisin notes that the dehumanization of orogenes is an intended and functional outcome of how the world sees orogenes and what is needed of/from them. “It makes sense that a world which has such complicated feelings about orogenes would conceptually fission them off from the rest of humanity” (np). In fact, she adds, “as Essun alludes at one point in [*The Fifth Season*], Old Sanze officially classified orogenes as non-humans a few centuries back. The better to oppress” (ibid.).

The dehumanized child figure of the node keeper is reminiscent of the sacrificial child kept in a dark closet in the fictional city of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” In that short story, the beauty and comfort and safety of the utopian world, its denizens are told, is reliant on the misery of the child who is “naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festering sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually” (971). Those who live in Omelas are told their happiness is cosubstantial with and dependent on the child’s being in the closet and many find ways to justify this reality: the child is “too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy” (Le Guin, “The Ones” 866). For those who are disturbed at learning of the child’s circumstance there appear to be only two responses: to mourn and accept “the terrible justice of reality” (ibid.) or to reject this sickening arrangement of the city and walk away. Le Guin foregoes any articulation of what alternatives exist to Omelas. For those who leave, “the

place they go is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all” (ibid.). By abstaining from the impulse to imagine other social realities that might see the closeted child free, Le Guin compels readers to attend to the social mechanisms through which Omelas is possible in the first place.

The parable demonstrates how worldview and mythology can function as the cultural foundation and framework for establishing and normalizing the contours of social order. Both Omelas and the Stillness are built upon social arrangements that are possible only because of a radically violent (even if appearing mundane) hierarchy of being that prioritizes the safety and security of some lives and bodies over and above dehumanized others. Both texts share the work of narrativizing the horror of the sacrifice economy that subsists on the figuring of inhuman and expendable bodies.⁶⁵ In the case of the Stillness, the Fulcrum, aptly named, becomes a gathering place of the weight of society’s violent arrangement. It is the holding point and the gravitational centre of the empire’s order. Through discursive and epistemological frames, the Fulcrum constructs worldview and through Stonelore determines who speaks Truth and how those proclamations are produced, kept, and held through the seasons. Jemisin, like Le Guin, offers a kind of mythmaking in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* that narrativizes the stakes of

⁶⁵ The concept of sacrifice and sacrificial zones has become critical to determining the distribution of harm and vulnerability in settler colonial economies. In his book *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*, Steve Lerner identifies zones, inhabited by low-income and racialized peoples, that are offered up as a ‘sacrifice’ to industrial progress and forced to bear the externalized costs of industry through higher-than-average levels of pollution, toxic waste and industrialized sites. Even presumed clean energy projects such as hydroelectric development have traditionally dispossessed Indigenous Peoples and minoritized peoples in Canada and elsewhere. C.f. Elkaim, Aaron Vincent, “State of erosion: the legacy of Manitoba hydro” in *The Narwhal and Scott*, Dayna Nadine and Adrian A. Smith’s “‘Sacrifice Zones’ in the Green Energy Economy: Toward an Environmental Justice Framework.”

participation in human value systems and the danger of universalizing and transcendental truths. Stonelore as a mythopoetic structure is world unmaking, or following Yusoff “world breaking,” for orogenes.

Jemisin asks readers to consider how mythology and worldview participate not just in mythopoeitic world building, but in the undoing of possibility, the making-impossible-of-life for some. Stonelore participates in the building of one possible world within the Stillness. It makes possible the Sanze Empire and makes possible the empire’s persistence through seasons. It is also what makes possible a world in which the nodes are even *thinkable*. Stonelore is responsible for creating the conditions for a reality in which geopolitical stability relies on the sacrifice and suffering of children, positioned on the brink of life and death, made into batteries of geomaterial force on supply from the Fulcrum’s reproductive assembly line. The nodes in the Stillness can be read allegorically as sites of environmental racism in a sacrifice economy: they physically redirect Earth’s instability onto *some* oppressed bodies. The nodes offer a way to recircuit vulnerability to protect and create stability for those in power. In many ways this arrangement resembles the way that present geopolitical and economic systems in the mundane world select some people and places as receiving sites for ecological instability and damage. While the mundane world actualizes these sacrificed sites through necropolitical and neoliberal frames under late liberalism,⁶⁶ in the Stillness the acceptability and normalcy of the nodes

⁶⁶ Upon reading “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” Povinelli asks readers to consider the “broom closets” of late liberalism. She notes that the fetid conditions of Indigenous communities operate as a broom closet in Australia, where the logics of privatized risk (rather than historical disenfranchisement that brought about endemic illness and poverty) place responsibility for living and thriving on the individual. In her article “The Child in the Broom Closet,” Povinelli suggests late liberalism brings about “conditions of lethality” (527) through strong (sovereign) and weak (biopolitical) forms

is obtained through the repetition and distribution of Stonelore. This worldview structures the shape of material reality in the Stillness by playing a constitutive role in determinations of who gets to be human, who is protected, and who is sacrificed. What knowledge does not serve the interests of the empire or is irrelevant to its aims becomes ‘lost’ to Stonelore. Jemisin gestures here to a kind of worldview that “does not convey transcendental truths . . . but rather obscures ‘real’ historical (ancient as they might be) events” (Trębicki, “Mythic Elements” 37, note 34). In this way the *Broken Earth Trilogy* draws upon the silenced and obscured histories of colonial violence against Black and brown people and communities — the historical and geomaterial condition from which our present reality emerged. Stonelore, as the codified ideology and preferred history of the empire, recreates the “cramped space” of late settler liberalism in which alternate ways of living and adjustments to human value systems are considered impossible, impracticable, or uneconomical.⁶⁷ But we are brought into confrontation with

of killing, although the mundane, daily and quotidian aspects of ongoing state violence become easy to overlook. But she emphasizes the importance of recognizing how late liberal power extends itself to the capture of “countervailing energies and imaginaries” to force its internal logics “deeper into the tissues of everyday life.” In this way the Australian state. . .”is slowly installing neoliberal markets and cultivating the neoliberal subjects who will occupy them.” In a similar fashion we might reflect on how the Fulcrum creates the need for nodes and cultivates the dehumanized subjects who will occupy them.

⁶⁷ In her article “Reading Povinelli in the shadow of the Alberta Tar Sands: Thinking wahkohtowin into disruptions of late liberalism,” Zoe Todd uses Povinelli’s notion of “cramped spaces” to write about late liberalism in which little room is made for Indigenous values, histories and perspectives, especially when they collide with the exigencies of colonial, corporate fossil fuel extraction in Western Canada. Todd writes, “it is not enough to merely *recognize* non-Western or Indigenous ontologies. We must engage with the consequences and implications of their erasure and capture.” C.f. Todd, Zoe. “Reading Povinelli in the shadow of the Alberta Tar Sands: Thinking wahkohtowin into disruptions of late liberalism” in *Geontographies: On Elizabeth Povinelli’s Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism. Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*.

normalization of the Fulcrum at the end of the trilogy, where Essun's orogenic daughter, Nassun, is told by a stone eater that the end of the seasons signals the end of Fulcrum schools. "The Fulcrums *are* wrong," she is told but has trouble comprehending the statement (*The Stone Sky* 395). The stone eater, Hoa, goes on:

"Imprisonment of orogenes was never the only option for ensuring the safety of society." I pause deliberately, and she blinks, perhaps remembering that orogene parents are perfectly capable of raising orogene children without disaster.

"Lynching was never the only option. The nodes were never the only option. All of these were choices. Different choices have always been possible." (ibid.)

Nassun's difficulty imagining the world without the Fulcrum has to do with her difficulty imagining what to her have appeared as the absolute conditions of reality being subject to change. Just as in *Omelas*, where readers are told the suffering of the child is a part of the "terms" of that order of reality, so too does Nassun accept that the terms of stability and life in the Stillness requires, absolutely, the sacrifice and suffering of orogenes. Much more difficult than rescuing the children in *Omelas* or in the Stillness is upending the unconscious myth structure upon which their suffering is based. Jemisin and Le Guin revise and make explicit the practice of mythmaking to "make conscious what is unconscious," in mythopoetic structures using texts as a "bridge between the conscious and the unconscious" (Le Guin "Myth and Archetype" 78). Le Guin aims to make visible the invisible structures of consciousness and implicit belief that shape the world and like Jemisin, uses the novel to articulate "in words what cannot be said in words" (Introduction, *The Left Hand* 159). Through Le Guin and Jemisin, the making and unmaking of worlds can be read as a practice of making and unmaking worldviews.

In this vein it is interesting to consider Jemisin's short story "The Ones Who Stay and Fight," written to present a speculative counterpoint to Le Guin's "Omelas." While Le Guin uses the unarticulated 'outside' to Omelas to force readers into a confrontation with the imperfect foundational arrangement of this city, Jemisin is interested what it might mean to root out that imperfection. In response to Le Guin's construction, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" tells the story of an equal, happy world, Um-Helat, where people are generous. In this world, racism and other forms of prejudice are not innately a part of the shared social reality. However, some people of Um-Helat have learned to use technology to eavesdrop on a dangerous and imperfect world: our real human world. This connection between worlds triggers a contamination stream, with the hatred, racism, and "poisoned knowledge" ("The Ones Who Stay" np) of our everyday reality infecting the perfected world of Um-Helat. Those who become infected are killed by "social workers" with a pike driven through the spine and heart: "In this manner is the contagion contained" (ibid.). Yet the story pauses on the moral conundrum of a contaminated child who is "nearly septic with the taint of our world" (ibid.). Yet instead of killing the child, the social workers channel the little girl's contamination experience, preparing her for quarantine where she will herself begin the journey to become a social worker, "fighting an endless war against an idea" (ibid.). The spared child is offered a hand rather than death. Readers are asked:

What? What surprises you? Did you think this would end with the cold-eyed slaughter of a child? There are other options — and this is Um-Helat, friend, where even a pitiful, diseased child matters. (ibid.)

Jemisin is not satisfied with the choices presented by Le Guin's Omelas, which are to submit to a social wellbeing build upon a child's suffering or reject it altogether. In her pointing to "other options," Jemisin reveals a perforated worldview that seeks new openings within the enclosure of possibility. In doing so, Jemisin articulates unarticulated options for those compelled to dis- and rearrange world constructions, raising fundamental and political questions about why things are the way they are, in Um-Helat and elsewhere. By crafting the social worker, Jemisin fleshes out the kinds of characters and actions necessary to maintain Um-Helat's radical difference from our world. The militarized and violent response to threats of world corruption suggest that the conditions necessary for Um-Helat's alternate social order are not the result of a fantasy of pluralism and peace. Instead, Um-Helat emerges as a battle ground, engendering the hidden but brutal realisms of a constant war against power and oppression. Peace and prosperity here are not the result of imbalanced social hierarchies operating within an extractive, sacrifice economy of free markets. What emerges in Jemisin's portrayal is a socio-political order generated by and reflecting a vigilant, intolerant worldview that undermines dehumanizing and oppressive arrangements of life.

What the worldview of the Sanze Empire makes possible is a structure of power that is not only inherently violent but fundamentally *extractive*. The figuring of the inhuman orogenic child as a centralized node of stability within a network or infrastructure that subtends the Empire's power brings the *Broken Earth Trilogy* into conversation with extractive energy economies and the colonial geo-logics on which they rely. Orogenes are stripped of their corporeal being to isolate their useable *mineralogical* being. Following Yusoff, we can understand orogenes as being brought into an inhuman

intimacy with the material world, yoked together through a shared vulnerability to the imperatives of extractivism and the kinds of territorial violence that subtend empire building. Following the work of Elizabeth A. Povinelli, we might further read orogenes as an articulation of ontological territorialization that recasts power within the frame of the geontological. In her work *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Povinelli finds a productive distinction in the fissure generated between concepts of Life and Nonlife in late liberalism. Within this distinction, a divide is drawn between biotic life and the denuded and lifeless spaces of the geomaterial world. Povinelli positions Michel Foucault's notion of biopower as dealing exclusively with the ability to rule over life and death, whereas a conception of geontopower generates the ability to think through the "set of discourses, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (17). While biopower offers an analytic for the incursion of state and sovereign power within the maintenance, reproduction, and survival of human and inhuman bodies and life systems,⁶⁸ geontopower operationalizes power from the harnessing of that which can be said to be lifeless.

Geontopower emerges as "a set of dominant patterns" according to which "Life is fabricated and Nonlife is used" (174). Povinelli writes, "late liberal geontopower is an activity of fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements into a common form and purpose" (*Geontologies* 173). For Povinelli, geontopower undergirds the economies of settler colonialism and late liberalism by

⁶⁸ Orogenes are expected to exterminate themselves if Seasonal Law is declared to "remove themselves from the competition for resources — so that normal, healthy people have a better chance to survive" (*Obelisk Gate* 263).

divining the ontological categorization of material bodies through extractive geologies. Biopower draws its analytic upon the divide between Life and Death, whereas geontopower operates on the division of Life from Nonlife. Povinelli finds biopower useful for theory based upon concepts of species and populations that became critical to analysis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In many ways biopower offers a valuable analytic for registering the methods and tactics of the Fulcrum and the means through which its educational programs are internalized and performed by orogenes. Povinelli writes,

We know for instance that biopower hides its way of killing through a discourse of life, of making live, a discourse that tells us to be normal, and to be healthy, and to be vital: to live well, to thrive, to strive toward thriving, and it allows those that do not strive to thrive, or in striving exhaust themselves and die, allows them their death, and does not waste its time killing. (175)

Yet what geontopower provides is an analytic for examining how orogenes land within the division of Life and Nonlife in the prevailing politics of extraction.

Geontopower animates how the category of Nonlife, as what is “used,” provides the ideological framework through which orogenes, *as material reservoir*, are harnessed within specific imperial and economic arrangements. It is through the ordering of the world according to Life and Nonlife that the Sanze Empire is able to arise. The geopolitical order the empire is able to manufacture within the Stillness, a geophysically unstable planetary realm, relies on the extraction of orogenic, minerological capabilities. The empire is founded on and made possible by this extraction. Political and geographical stability — as *imagined* and *operationalized* by the empire — relies, quite

physically, upon the figuring of orogenes as inhuman and extractable. Thinking geontologically about the arrangement of orogenes within the Sanze Empire animates the means by which state and corporate extractivism operates through the Life/Nonlife divide. Povinelli is particularly interested in the way “the tense of Nonlife and Life. . . animates the narratives of harm” (173).⁶⁹ But she is equally interested in the way attending to the deployment of the Life/Nonlife distinction can “help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing *biontological orientation and distribution* of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason” (4-5). But just as the articulation of this divide makes possible the dangers of geontopower, so too does the making visible of the divide offer pathways out.

For Povinelli, the figures that disrupt the Life/Nonlife division offer up a collection of governing ghosts who exist in between two worlds in late settler liberalism — the world in which the dependent oppositions of life (*bios*) and

⁶⁹ Povinelli notes that the logic of late settler extractivism also relies on the categorization of the material world and specific landscapes as devoid of life. Companies in Australia, for example, insist upon, invest in, and weaponize worldviews that subdue rather than enliven landscapes in order to justify the ecological damage associated with mining projects. This deployment of Nonlife can occur in direct opposition to Indigenous ontologies and worldviews that understand and co-exist with certain landscapes through their active history, ancestral being and contribution to and integration with current Indigenous geobiography and geological orientation. Yet within the framework of geontopower, Indigenous communities are continually forced to submit their ontologies and existential analytics to a liberal categorical enframing of ‘Indigenous culture.’ Povinelli asks, “What role did Nonlife play in settler liberalism’s control of Indigenous analysis of existence, the transformation of Indigenous analytics into Indigenous culture?” (173). “The demand on Indigenous people to couch their analytics of existence in the form of a cultural belief and obligation to totemic sites (a belief and obligation that is absurd from the point of view of geontopower . . .) is a crucial longstanding tactic wherein settler late liberalism attempts to absorb Indigenous analytics in geontopower” (33). C.f. Povinelli’s discussion of Two Women Sitting Down in Chapter Two of *Geontologies*, “Can Rocks Die? Life and Death inside the Carbon Imaginary.”

death (*Thanatos*) and of Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos, meteoros*) are sensible and dramatic and the world in which these enclosures are no longer, or have never been, relevant, sensible, or practical. (16)

The articulation of these worlds and what figures and orders they make possible is critical to thinking through the new dramas of the Anthropocene, “the extinction of humans, biological life, and as it is often put, the planet itself” (8). By articulating the kind of politics that emerge from within the productive space of the Life/Nonlife divide, Povinelli is considering the ways in which forms of human and nonhuman existence, are made possible and are governed in late liberalism. Considering humans as the dominant force in the world is a way of “sorting the world” which only makes sense, according to Povinelli, on the basis of certain geo-logics. So, what will happen if our operational logics are changed? Who and what will thrive if the present arrangement of fabricated life and used nonlife is adjusted? The battle over such arrangements is nothing less than a war for the world: “What else will need to abide by my rule in this new war of the world — those minerals, lakes, air particles, and currents that thrive in one formation but not another?” (12).

Making visible the order of geontopower allows us to reconceptualize competing modes and competing “struggles for existence” (13). Such making-visible might not undo the order of geontopower, but it may create room for its interruption:

It is . . . clear that late liberal strategies for governing difference and markets . . . only work insofar as these distinctions are maintained. And it is exactly because we can hear “insofar” that we know that these brackets are now visible, debatable, fraught, and anxious. It is certainly the case that the statement “clearly, *x* humans

are more important than y rocks” continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse. But what interests me in this book is the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent. (9)

“There are more people in this world that just humankind”

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* articulates how the question of the human is uniquely animated when cast within a material, geontological register. Life, for orogenes, is in large part determined in advance by the material planetary conditions into which they’re born. In the Stillness, material instability has played a fundamental role in the shaping of language, the sedimentation of worldview, and the contouring of the boundaries of the human. The effects of geophysical instability are not equally distributed in this world. And even among the people of this world, humanity and humanness are not equally distributed. Vulnerability is not equally distributed. Jemisin crafts a world in which the material conditions of life are foregrounded and actively participate in the processes and possibilities for life — and life, in this sense, cannot be read as what exists in distinction from unliving matter. Importantly, this geontological story does not merely unfold through the storyline of major socio-political powerholders: the Empire, the Fulcrum.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The diminution and disappearance of state actors and formalized state-sanctioned social organization allows for the refiguring of people outside “the twin poles of identity under late capitalism,” that is, as either individual (neo-liberal subject) or population (nation-state subject) (Yusoff, “Geologic Life” 784). In her article “Geologic Life,” Yusoff argues the literature surrounding sustainability and climate policy “bifurcates the human” between these twin poles, setting up personhood within the definitions of subjectivity made possible under late capitalism.

Jemisin instead demonstrates how the critical action of her geostory lies within the lives and activities of characters disempowered, disenfranchised, and oppressed by conventional hegemonies. Jemisin also demonstrates how geostories told within the material register can operationalize a proliferation of new geological imaginaries and new *human kinds*. Through the orogenes, stone eaters, guardians, tuners, and Father Earth, Jemisin articulates entirely new posthuman figures. These are distinct from the classic SF articulations of posthumanity seen in the cyborg, zombie, and surrogate (Ferrández San Miguel, 31) because they represent knotted formulations of the anthropos and the geos, linked by their shared material bodies and sensibilities. The articulation of these posthuman geontological figures is significant for what kind of politics and possibilities they give rise. The Fulcrum, through the use of ideology and worldview, crafted the inhuman and monstrous figure of the orogene in order to manifest a political reality that legitimated the use of orogenic children as material nodes. Yet the geopolitical drama of the Sanze Empire is presented as symptomatic of a much deeper imbalance in people-Earth relations — an imbalance Jemisin's *other* geontological figures are much more capable of sensing, comprehending, and responding to. While traditional powerholders like emperors are denied active speaking roles within the trilogy (aside from showing up here and there in Stonelore fragments) the *real* matter and deep history of humanity's broken relationship with the planet is enlivened by the vulnerabilities and concerns of people and communities that must forge alliances for survival. The traditional agents of geohistory — state and colonial powers, agents of extractive industries — are left largely unnamed so the geostory can be narrativized in the lives of rejected, oppressed, marginalized, impoverished, systematically disempowered, and dehumanized figures.

Telling the Broken Earth's geostory through these figures allows Jemisin to operationalize and foreground alternate subjectivities, sensibilities, and entanglements with the material world. By portraying these aspects of "geologic life," Jemisin can ask after the "inhuman dimensions of subjectivity" (Yusoff, "Geologic Life" 780). These dimensions of the geontological position Jemisin's characters as those for whom a relationship with the material represents a "praxis of differentiated planetary inhabitation and corporeal affiliation, rather than an externality" ("Geologic Life" 780-781). How different bodies and different agents embody their material entanglement has everything to do with breaking free from onto-epistemological cycles of violence and bringing about a new planetary belonging that makes all of humanity in this world less vulnerable. As Haraway writes, "who and what counts as an actor . . . matter[s] for political, ethical and emotional action" (*Companion* 27).

The need to expand and build out articulations of differentiated human *kinds* and the unique belonging of those kinds to human civilization is not a mere political thought experiment for Jemisin. Jemisin notes that the trilogy is a response to the crisis of police violence against Black people and the demands of the Black Lives Movement. Yet Jemisin's personal experience as a Black female writer also factors into her treatment of themes of dehumanizing and racist worldviews within the trilogy. Jemisin made history with the *Broken Earth Trilogy* by winning the Hugo award for three consecutive years for each book in the series. Jemisin's win marks the first time a single author has won the best novel award three years running, but also marks the first time a Black woman has won the Hugo. Such prestigious recognition of a female Black author did not come without controversy. Jemisin's rise to prominence within the genre occurred at the same

time as antiblack and misogynist backlash had besieged the science fiction and fantasy author's community.

The controversy sedimented in the formation of two alt-right groups, the "Sad Puppies" and the more aggressive "Rabid Puppies," designed to disrupt and campaign against the rise of female and marginalized writers within the world of science fiction and fantasy. The groups organized voting blocs to nominate conservative, white and male writers for Hugo Awards and were seen as successful, at least at first.⁷¹ Rabid Puppies leader and author Theodore Beale, who also goes by the name Vox Day, was dismissed from the professional Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America association for publishing a post in which he referred to Jemisin as "an educated, but ignorant savage" (Beale qtd. in El-Mohtar, "Calling" np). The call for Beale's expulsion from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' of America came on the heels of Beale's lost presidential run for the association's presidency. Beale, who wrote openly racist and misogynist comments on the association's messaging boards, won ten percent of the vote. Jemisin worried aloud about that ten percent in the "microcosmic nation" of the science fiction and fantasy community during a guest of honour speech at Continuum in Australia in 2013 (Jemisin, "Continuum GoH Speech" np).

Imagine if ten percent of this country's population was busy making active efforts to take away not mere privileges, not even dignity, but your most basic rights.

Imagine if ten percent of the people you interacted with, on a daily basis, did not regard you as human. (ibid.)

⁷¹ For a rundown of the rise and fall of the alt-right groups, the Sad Puppies and the Rabid Puppies, see Romano, Aja. "The Hugo Awards just made history, and defied alt-right extremists in the process." *Vox.com*.

Beale's response embodied the kind of racist rhetoric that to this day remains foundational in widespread white supremacy and violence:

Being libertarian, I am not actively attempting to take away anyone's 'most basic rights.' Jemisin has it wrong; it is not that I, and others, do not view her as human, (although genetic science presently suggests that we are not equally homo sapiens sapiens), it is that we do not view her as being fully civilized for the obvious reason that she is not. . . . Unlike the white males she excoriates, there is no evidence that a society of NK Jemisins⁷² is capable of building an advanced civilization, or even successfully maintaining one without significant external support. (Beale qtd. in El-Mohtar, "Calling" np)

Eventually the tactics of these groups to overwhelm the public voting processes of the Hugo Awards backfired. Some puppy nominees used their nominations to elevate the work of female and marginalized writers or choose to withdraw from the awards altogether. In protest to the alt-right vote mob, other eligible voters utilized a "no award" option to drown out votes from the puppy groups. Jemisin's victories during this racist and white-supremacist backdrop were seen as a repudiation of the alt-right community,

⁷² Beale's speculation upon a "society of NK Jemisins" is a worthy and notable thought experiment. Upon reading this comment, couched within a harrowing racist screed, I could not help but wonder at the enchanted, imaginative and altogether *different* society this would be. Pondering this possibility heightens not only Beale's hateful and white supremacist worldview and narrow historical perspective, but his failure of imagination. The need to imagine societies of N. K. Jemisins is the same as the need to break out of white hegemonies and dominant colonial cultures. It is the same as the need to recalibrate social values and orders to fight back against the erosion of the world through capitalism. It is the same as the need to protest against the indiscriminate killing of Black and Indigenous people by state-sanctioned police forces. It is to imagine worlds that are not our own, because they have not been allowed to be. I'm reminded of Inuit throat singer and artist Tanya Tagaq who once said, "I want to live in worlds that are not supposed to be." C.f. "Tagaq brings animism to studio Q."

“a giant rejection of right-wing gatekeeping in the struggle to diversify the world of science fiction and fantasy writing” (Romano np). In her acceptance speech, Jemisin noted the dominance of white colonialism in the science fiction and fantasy universe propels her to create worlds that represent those disavowed by the genre’s history:

I wrote the *Broken Earth Trilogy* to speak to that struggle, and what it takes just to live, let alone thrive, in a world that seems determined to break you. A world of people who constantly question your competence, your relevance, your very existence. I get a lot of questions about where the themes of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* come from. I think it’s pretty obvious that I’m drawing on the human history of structural oppression, as well as my feelings about this moment in American history. What may be less obvious, though, is how much of the story derives from my feelings about science fiction and fantasy. Then again, SFF is a microcosm of the wider world, in no way rarefied from the world’s pettiness or prejudice. (Jemisin qtd. in Cunningham, “Read N.K.” np)

Jemisin added that the *Broken Earth Trilogy* shows that “life in a hard world is never just the struggle,” because it is also “family, blood and found” (ibid.). Science fiction and fantasy, for Jemisin, offer the ability to not only explore what life in struggle looks like but also how allies are found and forged within broken worlds. “I look to science fiction and fantasy as the aspirational drive of the Zeitgeist: we creators are the engineers of possibility” (ibid.). As the genre, “however grudgingly, acknowledges that the dreams of the marginalized matter and that all of us have a future, so will go the world” (ibid.).

Jemisin’s commitment to imagining diverse other worlds is, in part, driven by the absence of Black and non-white people in the science fiction and fantasy genres. In a

blog version of her essay “How Long Til Black Future Month,” Jemisin describes watching reruns of the cartoon television show “*The Jetsons*,” which she loved as a child (“How Long” np). But as an adult, attuned to “the toxins of speculative fiction,” Jemisin becomes alert to the fact that “there’s nobody even slightly brown in the Jetsons’ world.”

Even the family android sounds white. This is supposed to be the real world’s future, right? Albeit in silly, humorous form. Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world’s population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So, what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show’s creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo? I’m watching the Jetsons, and it’s creeping me right the fuck out. (ibid.)

After reading an essay by Samuel R. Delany (himself a Hugo award winner) entitled “Racism in Science Fiction,”⁷³ Jemisin notes she began to understand the

⁷³ In his article, “Racism in Science Fiction,” Delany writes about his own experience with the Science Fiction Writers of America association and, in a particularly uncomfortable scene, his being the target of an angry diatribe at the Nebula banquet where an “eminent member” of the organization railed against “pretentious literary nonsense” over and above “good, solid, craftsmanlike storytelling” (np). Delany, who at 28 had just won an awards for his novel *The Einstein Intersection*, wrote that “it was evident I was . . . the prime target of this fusillade” (ibid.). “It’s an odd experience, I must tell you, to accept an award from a hall full of people in tuxedos and evening gowns and then, from the same podium at which you accepted it, near a half-hour jeremiad from an *eminence gris* declaring that award to be worthless and the people who voted it to you duped fools. It’s not paranoia: By count I caught more than a dozen sets of eyes sweeping between me and the speaker going on about the triviality of work such as mine and the foolishness of the hundred-plus writers who had voted for it.” The speech was met with awkward, scattered applause. Following the diatribe, Delany immediately won a second award for his short story “Aye, and Gomorrah,” and was met with a standing ovation. While this occurred, renowned science fiction author Isaac Asimov leaned toward Delany (his common nickname is Chip) and with irony said, “You know, Chip, we only voted you those awards because you’re a Negro. . .!” (ibid.). Delany said the comment was meant with good intentions but that those words were not what he needed to hear in that

disappearance of non-white individuals as the result of the “conscious choices on the part of the genre’s gatekeepers” (ibid.). “This was deliberate, ahistorical, scientifically nonsensical, exclusion” (ibid.) As a means of pushing back against the appearance in speculative fiction of Black people only within “archetypal playgrounds,” Jemisin deigned to create the worlds she elsewhere could not find.

If I wanted to see people like me, doing things I could relate to, I had to look to my own . . . But I wasn’t any more interested in all-black futures than I was in all-white futures. I just wanted fantasies of exploration and enchantment that didn’t slap me in the face with *you don’t belong here*. I just wanted to be able to relax and dream. (ibid.)

Jemisin’s resistance to the toxic archetypes and imaginaries of speculative fiction brings about a forceful interruption of dominant culture and normative representations of life. This resistance also seems to reflect the possibilities of the SF genre, not as a means of rearticulating and reimagining social order in other worlds, but as an expression of a specific attunement of the world and its urgent need for new imaginaries. Jemisin demonstrates how, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. puts it, “SF has ceased to be a genre of fiction per se, becoming instead a mode of awareness about the world” (“The SF of Theory” 308).

Taking direction from Jemisin that the *Broken Earth Trilogy* is written with the conviction that “the dreams of the marginalized matter,” we might read the novels as a “mode of awareness,” attuned to the divide between how people desire to live and how

moment. “The racial situation, permeable as it might sometimes seem. . . is nevertheless your total surround,” Delany wrote upon reflection (ibid.).

the world forces them to live. The trilogy, in many ways, hinges upon the relationship that develops between two powerful orogenes: Syenite and her instructor, Alabaster, who eventually becomes her lover. Initially forced to pair and reproduce under the control of the Fulcrum, the couple's early years together are fraught. But Syenite comes to realize Alabaster, despite being a high-level, Fulcrum-trained orogene, is aware of lost Stonelore that hints at an alternate orogenic worldview. "They are the gods in chains," Alabaster says of orogenes, quoting a hidden or lost Stonelore tablet Syenite has never hear of (*Fifth Season* 167). "The tamers of the wild earth, themselves to be bridled and muzzled," Alabaster quotes (*ibid.*). Syenite is initially suspicious of his apocryphal knowledge, but eventually learns Alabaster has access to orogenic strengths and abilities Fulcrum-sanctioned training and Stonelore cannot account for. Alabaster begins to gain Syenite's trust by acknowledging her anger at the way the Fulcrum structures their lives: "You hate the way we live. *The way the world makes us live*. . . . We can never just . . . be" (123, emphasis mine). Alabaster is the first to reveal to Syenite that she may represent a kind of knowledge, power, and potential that exists *outside* of Fulcrum order and control. Alabaster, a Fulcrum-bred orogene, calls Essun a "feral . . . a wild mutt to [his] domesticated purebred. An accident to [his] plan" (72). Essun is put off by this insult, but Alabaster goes on to explain the special significance of her non-Fulcrum natality: "What it actually means is that they couldn't *predict* you. You're the proof that they'll never understand orogeny; it's not science, it's something else. And they'll never control us, not really. Not completely" (*ibid.*). Within the bounds of Alabaster and Syenite's relationship, the possibility for alternate modes and applications of orogeny becomes possible.

Alabaster too struggles to break out of the bounds of thought and being determined by the Fulcrum:

I had to make my own training. And sometimes, it seems, if I can just *think* differently, if I can shed enough of what they taught me and try something new, I might . . . I don't know, I really don't. But I guess it's just as well that I don't, or the Guardians would've killed me a long time ago. (287)

Some freedom of thought comes to both Syenite and Alabaster when they decide to flee to the remote island community of Meov, where orogenes and stills have built a community together to endure the danger of the ocean during tectonic events. The novel structure of this society transforms the bounds of the geopolitically possible in the minds of these two characters, who also enjoy a powerful shared intimate sexual relationship with another orogene named Innon. The trio's blissful time in Meov is violently disrupted by the arrival of guardians who have hunted Syenite and Alabaster down, resulting in a dramatic battle where Syenite makes the decision to kill her own orogenic son, rather than have him captured by the Fulcrum and potentially transformed into a node-keeper. Syenite's experiences and relationships are interwoven into her character as she moves through the embodiments of Damaya to Syenite to Essun. Jemisin emphasizes not only the geobiography of being through the trilogy, but a sense of entangled and unfixed subjectivity. The trilogy's characters demonstrate the binds of a relational ontology that, alongside the planet, are in a state of constant reformation and the stakes of survival and response-ability shift. It is ultimately the inmixing of these earth- and experience-bound relationships that substantiate the self:

After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself and the family that rejected her and the people of the Fulcrum who chiseled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster and Innon and the people of poor lost Allia and Meov. Now you are Tirimo and the ash-strewn road's walkers and your dead children . . . and also the living one that remains. (*Obelisk Gate* 1)

Jemisin rematerializes and re-metaphorizes the bounds of being in order to demonstrate how personhood is tied up with not only the past but with, tragedy, with place, with the planet, and with the other beings and bodies that populate it.

The question of who gets to be human and how is at constant play throughout the trilogy. Inherited definitions of the human are largely determined through the conventions of Stonelore. Yet what is dictated through lore and passed down through conventional imperial logics is fundamentally at odds with the convictions and experiences of the characters. In a conversation between the stone eater Hoa and Essun (years after she has fled the tragedy of Meov and is struggling along with many others to survive in the underground geode city of Castrima), she asks which of his forms — human child or stone statue — are true. “Both have been true at different times,” Hoa responds (281). He asks Essun:

“Are you human?”

“Officially? No.”

“Never mine what others think. What do you feel yourself to be?”

“Human.”

“Then so am I.” (ibid.)

In his book chapter “Geological Insurrections: Politics of Planetary Weirding from China Miéville to N. K. Jemisin,” scholar Mortiz Ingwersen notes Jemisin uses the question of humanness to demonstrate that “identity is relational and multilaterally emplaced” (83). Ingwersen suggests Jemisin’s integration of characters and their shared interrogation of human boundaries makes way for the literalization of “what Haraway calls becoming-with, a celebration of oddkinship among monstrous outcasts and chthonic being uncontainable by myths of bounded personhood” (ibid.). The move is from bounded individuality to the bindings of relationality.

Such oddkin come about through symbiosis and the shared goal of “survival . . . contingent on collaboration, trust, and reciprocal response-abilities” (ibid.). The conversation between Hoa and Essun recontours the terms within which the question of human being is established. Rather than what is ‘official’ doctrine, Hoa asks Essun to consider her humanity based upon her own ‘feeling.’⁷⁴ In recasting the question of humanity within one’s own story, Essun and Hoa perform an undoing of the violent onto-epistemologies of the Empire. Hoa’s response to Essun, “then so am I,” acts as a reciprocal becoming-with that both affirms and shares in the radically political and sympoietic act of together taking humanity for oneself. As Haraway writes in *Staying with the Trouble*, sympoiesis means “making-with” (58). “Nothing makes itself; nothing

⁷⁴ Jemisin also suggests that personal and experience and trauma may have transformative effect on one’s sense of self. After losing her son to Jija’s violence in Tirimo, Essun tries to “decide who to be” (42). “The self you’ve been lately doesn’t make sense anymore; that woman died with Uche. She’s not useful, unobtrusive as she is, quite as she is, ordinary as she is. Not when such extraordinary things have happened” (ibid.). For a discussion of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* and its exploration of racial trauma, see Ferrández San Miguel, María. “Ethics in the Anthropocene: Traumatic Exhaustion and Posthuman Regeneration in N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*.”

is really autopoietic of self-organizing . . . earthlings are *never alone*” (ibid.). The implied togetherness of sympoiesis points to “complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems” that can more richly account for “wordling-with, in company” (ibid.). The sympoietic and mythmaking capacities of people has long been foundational in recalibrating conventional metrics of the human. Haraway writes,

Peoples from every fold of earth had long been both generated and nourished by stories, myths, performances, powers, and embodiments of entities not divided into categories recognizable to most conventional Western philosophy and politics. (161)

Telling stories about and charting the course of new, imagined embodiments can help us understand how “beings render each other capable in actual encounters,” Haraway notes (127). Such stories can open out onto a kind of “thinking [that] enlarges, even invents, the competencies of all the players” so that “the domain of ways of being and knowing dilates, expands, adds both ontological and epistemological possibilities, proposes and enacts what was not there before” (ibid.).

Jemisin shows how worlds are enlarged and extended by the act of worlding-with others. It is by virtue of those considered ‘nonhuman’ that generative, collaborative acts of worlding in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* take place. Jemisin indicates that the world in the trilogy is “fortunate” to have those who fall outside the Empire’s official category of the human because it is within those people that the ways of being and modes of thought necessary for survival exist. In an “interlude” between chapters in *The Fifth Season* we’re told the people of the Stillness do not consider the ontological or epistemological possibilities that exists *outside* of Stonelore:

They simply take as given the bit of lore passed down from braver civilizations that says there's nothing else. Likewise, no one speaks of celestial objects, though the skies are as crowded and busy here as anywhere else in the universe. This is largely because so much of the people's attention is directed toward the ground, not the sky. They notice what's there: stars and sun and the occasional comet or falling star. They do not notice what's missing. *How fortunate, then, that there are more people in this world than just humankind?* (150-151, emphasis mine)

For this reason, these people, as beings who must suffer the repetitive cycle of fifth seasons, are lucky to live in a world where other *human kinds* exist. Those other kinds are capable of looking up, of noticing, of registering the way that the world might be wrong and what it will take to fix it.

Key to fixing humanity's relationship with Father Earth is the memory of his lost child, the moon. Only the stone eaters have access to this knowledge, however. It is within the shared, deep-earth historical memory of these characters that the possibility of restoring balance with the planet arises. The moon was cast away from the Earth during a slave rebellion wherein tuners (an ancient form of orogene) refused to harness a dangerous amount of energy from the Earth for their greedy masters. This largely forgotten history is part of the reason orogenes are feared and the resulting fifth seasons are the reason orogenes faced a new form of enslavement under the Fulcrum. To maintain power, the Fulcrum advanced very specific knowledges about orogeny, that delimited orogenic practices and defined them according to very specific uses. However, the Fulcrum was unable to prevent Essun, Alabaster, and Nassun from discovering their own unique orogenic powers through which they rediscover *magic*. As Essun exercises her

personal orogeny, shedding her Fulcrum training, she discovers new geomorphic and material powers and connections that extend far beyond the tectonic movements below her feet:

Magic derives from life — that which is alive, or was alive, or even that which was alive so many ages ago that it has turned into something else. All at once this understanding causes something to shift in your perception and . . . You see it suddenly: *the network*. A web of silver threads interlacing the land, permeating the rock and even the magma just underneath, strung like jewels between forests and fossilized corals and pools of oil. Threads in the clouds, though thin, strung between microscopic living things in water droplets. Threads as high as your perception can reach, brushing against the very stars. (*Obelisk Gate* 361)

Jemisin’s introduction of magic or ‘silver’ in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* participates in the remetabolization and renarrativization of human integration with diverse geosystems of material bodies. In doing so, Jemisin opens up the pathways of possibility and survival for the characters in this dangerous and broken world.

Through the introduction of magic and its connecting threads that bind together all that is, Jemisin deepens and extends her depiction of geontological modes of subjectification. Through magic, orogenes are able to ‘see’ places and geologies far away, how they are affected by fifth seasons and ecological disruption.⁷⁵ Magic also

⁷⁵ Further research for this dissertation would benefit from a deeper engagement with scholarship on the role of magic or *juju* in Afrofuturism and its counter-discursive relationship with Western science as well as the tradition of science fiction, notably Lisa Yaszek’s work including “Afrofuturism in American Science Fiction” and “The Bannekerade: Genius, Madness and Magic in Black Science Fiction.” It would also be interesting to read Jemisin’s presentation of magic alongside Indigenous animisms and traditional worldviews. Following Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, we might see

binds together the past, the present and the future. The threads of this network carry the pain of Father Earth from the far past and also hold the potential of reorganizing human-Earth relations into the future. It is also upon his understanding of magic and humanity's fractured relationship with Father Earth that Alabaster comes to view the present arrangement of society as contingent, unjust and in need of disruption. It is through the blending of what the Fulcrum has taught him and what the Fulcrum could never have taught him, that Alabaster brings an end to the world's violent order. Standing upon a hill overlooking Yumenes, where he was bred and trained, Alabaster conjures an apocalyptic event, not to end the world, but to allow for its reorganization.

. . . he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection. His fingers spread and twitch as he feels several reverberating points on the map of his awareness: his fellow slaves . . . He can . . . make their suffering serve a cause greater than one city's hubris, and one empire's fear . . . He takes all that, the strata and the magma and the people and the power, in his imaginary

how the description of magic in the trilogy invokes the Indigenous cosmologies that have been displaced by settler colonialism. Under the colonial geologies of settler worldviews, ecosystems are reduced and disconnected to justify and enable their exploitation. Heath notes that under the bounds of these extractive imperatives, “[t]he world increasingly becomes a commodity to be purchase, consumed, and flushed away” (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 39). “A great resource-consuming part of humanity is busy ravaging. . . delicate threads of interdependence” (ibid.). Heath argues that being a “good relative” entails “counter[ing] these exploitative forces and the stories that legitimize them, while at the same time affirming — or reaffirming — better, more generative more generous ways to uphold our obligations and our commitments to our diverse and varied kin” (84).

hands. Everything. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him. And then *he breaks it. (Fifth Season 6-7).*

The end of the world here represents the end of the world according to the Fulcrum. And it allows for the beginning of a new world, according to another possibility that does not rely on the violent dehumanization and dispossession of orogenes for geopolitical stability.

Alabaster did not ‘walk away from Omelas,’ nor did he accept the terms and conditions of that world. Alabaster stayed to fight. He burnt that world, its stories, and what reality they operationalize, to the ground. We are reminded by the stone eater Hoa that “apocalypse is a relative thing” (*Stone Sky* 6). “When the earth shatters, it is a disaster to the life that depends on it” (ibid.). For Hoa and other stone eaters who watched the Sanze Empire and the Fulcrum rise, this particular end of the world is not what we should mourn. “Some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don’t lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place” (7).

What Worlds World Worlds

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* invites us to view the Anthropocene as a provocation. For many scholars the Anthropocene represents an opportunity to seek out the “fault lines of pain” upon which our present world is built, upon which its present arrangements rely. The Anthropocene as a world, as a story of our world, is merely possibility operationalized. Upon what logics, modes of subjectification, modes of extinction and potentials for cohabitation and survival does that operationalization rely? Yusoff argues

part of the challenge of thinking in the Anthropocene is developing the figures and imaginaries necessary to found new articulations of life, human kinds and relational politics. “How do we speak of deep time and inhuman beginnings within the context of these Earth forces in ways that offer a generative politics of minerality, rather than one of unilateral destruction?” (“Geologic Life” 780). The need to articulate new modes of subjectification in the Anthropocene is urgent, according to Yusoff, because “the imagined geologic subject . . . underpins [this] collective geomorphic event” (781). If we are capable of thinking and *rethinking* the present moment, with its planetary disruptions, we may begin to understand ourselves “as geologic subjects, not only capable of geomorphic acts, but as beings who have something *in common* with geologic forces that are mobilized and incorporated” (ibid.). An expanded sense of our own geosubjectification might further help us identify the “collaborative junctures that govern and provoke these affiliations to enact corporeal and planetary (de)sedimentations” (ibid.).

Yet how geologies and geosubjects are enacted and how they are en-worlded, is of consequence. Are they thought and brought into being within the broom closets of the world? Haraway warns the consequences of our thinking within the Anthropocene have to do with the unprecedented spread of suffering and vulnerability that emerge as an outcome of this world’s current order.

These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing

to know and cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in an to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away. (35)

Haraway does not want to look away. Haraway does not want to walk away. Instead Haraway advocates for a kind of thinking that is committed to those who are made vulnerable by this world. “The obligation is to speak from situated worlds” (132). This is because the present arrangement of the world is not a transcendental absolute, but rather an anthropogenic outcome: “The pattern is in our hands,” she writes (*Staying* 35). Facing the broom closet, we are compelled to generate new forms of thought, new ontologies and new epistemologies: “The answer to the trust of the held-out hand: think we must” (ibid.). Thinking in the Anthropocene takes on a particular valence, for Haraway, because, like Alabaster, we may discover thinking the world demands its destruction. But both Haraway and Alabaster are not necessarily interested in the *end* of the world, but the opening of possibilities that may allow for this worlds’ present arrangement to be overturned. Haraway asks: “How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?” (ibid.).

This chapter began in the situated world of Wet’suwet’en land defenders fighting the deterritorialization of traditional lands for the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline. That battle is ongoing. Most recently health care professionals and Wet’suwet’en matriarchs voiced concerns about the proliferation of COVID-19 cases in remote workcamps built to serve pipeline crews. The outbreak of viral infections within these workers compounded the risk Wet’suwet’en people face from pipeline construction.

So far, the provincial government has ignored appeals to pause construction work while the coronavirus pandemic remains uncontained in work camps and throughout the province. Attending to the situated world of the Wet'suwet'en and resistance to the pipeline demonstrates the ways differentiated ways human beings are interlaced and/or complicit within the event of the Anthropocene. While Wet'suwet'en cultural traditions and hereditary systems may have contributed to the healthy ecological stewardship of that contested landscape for millennia, those cultural traditions and systems have no value nor authority with the settler colonial systems that can now legislate the land's destruction. Métis scholar Zoe Todd notes that "not all humans are equally implicated in the forces that created the disasters driving contemporary human-environmental crises, and I argue that not all humans are equally invited into the conceptual spaces where these disasters are theorized" ("Indigenizing" 244). Overlooked Indigenous worldviews and voices contribute to not only an impoverished view of the Anthropocene and its provocations, but contribute to the erasure of the onto-epistemological 'outside' to the settler colonial logics that gave the current environmental crisis rise. Acknowledging and resuscitating the devalued and disavowed perspectives that have also been eroded under colonial geologies becomes especially critical as theorists seek new inflection points from which to analyze contemporary subjectivity, concepts of flourishing and emergent politics.

As Mortiz Ingwersen points out, contemporary theoretical revisions of our current epoch, such as Latour's geostory and Haraway's Chthulucene, rely on animated materialisms and geologic subjects for their "emancipatory counterpoint[s] to the Anthropocene concept" ("Reclaiming" 60).

In their rejection of anthropocentrism, such celebrations of geologic subjectivity are frequently compounded with approaches to ecology as the study of more-than-human kinship, nonhuman agency, and human-nature enmeshments — concepts predominantly formulated within a Euro-Western frame despite their rich history in Indigenous traditions. (ibid.)

The challenge of retaining the usefulness and poignancy of concept of the Anthropocene for thinking through the present, theory, and critique must be “grounded in a thorough examination of the structural links among resource extractivism, settler colonialism, and the Euro-Western construction of modernity” (ibid.). In her essay “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ is Just Another World For Colonialism,” Todd suggests many Western thinkers have “absolved themselves of any implication in ongoing colonial realities throughout the globe” (15). And yet, Todd notes “each one of us is embedded in systems that uphold the exploitation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples” and “the academy plays a role in shaping the narratives that erase ongoing colonial violence” (ibid.). She adds,

. . . it is important to think, deeply, about how the Ontological Turn — with its breathless ‘realizations’ that animals, the climate, water, ‘atmospheres’ and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are sentient and possess agency, that ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ ‘human’ and ‘animal’ may not be so separate after all — is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. (16).

Todd suggests theorists and academics engage in a form of “reciprocity of thought” that “requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us” (19). Incorporating different voices within a considerate plurivocity can contribute to the expansion, rather

than, erasure of human kinds. Todd points to the work of Cree scholar Dwayne Donald as an articulation of how reciprocal relationality may forge alliances and enrich practices of storytelling and worlding-with. Donald writes that “ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other” (6). He adds that relationality can be seen to contain an ethical move because “it does not overlook or invisibilize the particular, historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world” (ibid.). For Donald, reciprocal relationality participates in the making visible, and making sensible of the lives and worlds of others. Such making visible, rather than making invisible, of others and their experiences puts ethical concerns at the “forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference” (ibid.).

Reading the *Broken Earth Trilogy* within the situated worlds of those violated and dispossessed by and through settler colonialism brings these texts into conversation with the urgent need for discourses, practices and imaginaries that will break out of and not replicate the White Geology and white imperialisms that have brought about the multiple crises of the Anthropocene. Jemisin is writing to and *for* readers steeped in dominant white supremacist culture, the ongoing exterminations of climate change and extractivism and the daily exigencies of state violence. Jemisin is also writing towards the possibility for change. In the introduction to her work *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff acknowledges Jemisin’s influence on her work to challenge forth new analytics for the Anthropocene. Yusoff writes, “I am particularly grateful for the courageous analytical and politically poetic work of N. K. Jemisin’s bringing together of race and

geology across the rifts of broken earth.” (xi). To overcome the violence of late liberalism and settler colonialism, Yusoff argues work must be done to “repudiate the structures of thought and material arrangements that brought the Anthropocene into being” (18). She argues that this cannot be accomplished without transitioning in Aimé Césaire’s formulation from the “thought of the other” to the “other of thought” (qtd. in Yusoff, *ibid.*). To question after the human and the modes of thought that have positioned some people as inhuman requires a turn towards the ways in which such thought has forged specific and specifically apocalyptic structures of Black and brown experience.

If the Anthropocene is viewed as a resurrection of the impulse to reestablish humanism in all its exclusionary terms of universality, then any critical theory that does not work with and alongside Black and Indigenous studies (rather than in an extractive or supplementary mode) will fail to deliver any epochal shift at all. (*ibid.*)

Rather than replicate the praxis of dispossession, Yusoff wants to generate a critical Black aesthetics and Black poetics that elivens rather than deadens subjectivity and relational belonging to place (72). In her work to consider “Black aesthetics at the end of the world” (89), Yusoff argues the creation of new inhuman, geologic grammars and alternate ways of thought that are endangered within the axis of geos and anthropos represent a deeply political aesthetic in that these practices “relate to the possibility of life and its survival under conditions of violence” (88). Within these counter-aesthetics we may find a materiality that “cuts through coloniality” (93).

Reading for critical Black aesthetics within the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, we can see how Jemisin positions colonial subjects outside of hegemonic and dominant colonial

logics and pursuits in order to foreground the others of thought. Jemisin not only foregrounds the cares and concerns of these individuals to make visible and believable the specific ways they are vulnerable to the world that disregards them, but in order to demonstrate how these alternate subjectivities hold the capacity to bring about worlds beyond their own. World unmaking is ultimately about the making visible the structures and contours of the possible that can both constrain and free social imaginaries. Such imaginaries not only play a role in determining the structural conditions of the past, but they determine the governance of kinds and the arrangements of difference in the present. So too do such imaginaries play a determinative role in shaping and channeling the event horizon of the future. Jemisin's trilogy positions the role of social imaginaries and differentiated subjectivities in a way that enlivens most urgent theoretical questions of the Anthropocene: Do our imaginaries inflect and repeat the perpetual crisis of the normal world? Or might they bring about possibilities and realities yet to come? World unmaking is not about registering a specific political program for the future. Rather it marks the registers through which specific political programs and dominant patterns operate and signals the possibility of alternate modes of thinking and being. The work of world unmaking makes the possible more probable but does not guarantee any outcome. Only the groundwork of making visible the discourses and practices that have made *this* world possible can generate the openings through which *other* worlds may become possible.

V. Conclusion: The Groundwork for Other *Possible* Worlds

The need to think about how worlds come apart is urgent. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to develop new skills for paying attention to what we do not fully fathom. We must learn to orient awareness and thought as emergencies escalate, power coalesces, human death tolls rise, and skies burn. Learning how to read for world unmaking is a theoretical practice but also a survival skill. At the time of writing this conclusion, nations across the globe are in various stages of lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. As the first vaccines are being rolled out in wealthy countries across the West, a new, more-infectious variant of the COVID-19 virus is also emerging and quickly spreading. The United States entered the year 2021 just as it met the inauspicious mark of 20 million infections nationwide. Canada is seeing its infection rate surge with a staggering 10,000 new cases each day. Even as the impacts of the virus are being more acutely felt, conspiracy theories run rampant about the original ‘cause’ of the virus and the purported ‘reasons’ behind its spread. Suspicion about the vaccine, the most quickly developed vaccine in human history, is widespread. In Minnesota, a clinic staff member was caught vandalizing vaccine doses and all across North America anti-mask and anti-lockdown parties have been held in protest of official policy. Members of the public in Ontario are enraged after a provincial politician was caught returning from a Christmas holiday in the Caribbean that violated his own government’s imposed travel ban. The pandemic operates like a sci-fi paraspace, violating ideals of social order and norms, generating disorientation and suspicion and uncertainty about reality. This abnormal and dangerous reality provides a strange and unpredictable backdrop for actors to emerge within the play of the present. The pandemic is also like an alien zone, perhaps

even like Area X, with fuzzy boundaries and blurred edges that seem like they're on the move. The future is gloomily uncertain with the pandemic adding new layers of risk and disorder onto a planet already in the grip of runaway climate change, diminished natural resources, and widespread species extinction. This world, its present geopolitical arrangements and orders, is coming undone and is fracturing under the pressure of globalized late capitalism, heightened consumer throughput, and settler colonialism's fantasies of progress and freedom. Attending to the way this world is buckling is one way of ensuring its weaknesses and vulnerabilities aren't carried into the foundations of the future.

As literary theorists, scholars and readers, we've paid ample attention to world building — the way that worlds are constructed and adhere to certain forms and arrangements of logic. But world unmaking is asking us to pay specific attention to the way worlds break down. How do some worlds come apart, become unintelligible, become rearranged, and abide by new or different logics? How do norms shift? How does a rearrangement of our ontologies, our epistemologies, and worldviews lead to a material and ethical rearrangement of our lives? This dissertation explored the world unmaking practices of three authors to explore how a breakdown of convention and normativity challenges prevailing hegemonies of the world and the human inherited from Enlightenment metaphysics and late liberal ideologies.

In *Dhalgren*, Delany shows how the world of Bellona breaks down as language and representation become unraveled from shared, stable meanings. Like meaning, the city itself is constantly subject to reordering. Bellona becomes unmade and then made again as objects and entities — once thought inert and stable — begin to shift and move.

As Delany's world unravels the very question of identity, whether personal, racial, or of a particular staircase, becomes slippery and no longer functions as expected. Readers of this world are challenged to engage with subjects and circumstances that are defined by instability and mutability, rather than appear as the stable, teleologically oriented referents valorized in Western philosophies and progress narratives. As Delany reminds readers, the power of science fiction lies in asking readers to suspend their presumptions about the world and instead open up to a sense of not-knowing, even a sense of wonder about reality in its continuous unfurling.

We find this suspension of knowing essential for navigating VanderMeer's world in *Annihilation*, as the 'normal' world breaks down through the mysterious arrival of an alien ecosystem. This ecosystem and its inhabitants cannot readily be thought of as outsiders or aliens, however, because, like so many other 'others,' they are already a part of our bodies and our thoughts, our institutions, and our material-discursive paradigms. VanderMeer uses world unmaking to demonstrate how the 'normal,' mundane world that we live in every day may not be as normal or as mundane as we might like to think. Such reflection on the changing and uncertain nature of reality is especially poignant to readers in the Anthropocene, where the real world shapeshifts and outstrips our comprehension on the regular. Yet, just like the characters in *Annihilation* who must contend with the way their altered world adjusts and recalibrates what it means to be human, so too must the novel's readers contend with how our entangled relationship with a changing, uncontrollable, and at times partially unperceivable planet is forcing a rearticulation of the parameters and significance of both human and nonhuman being.

Recasting the stakes of personhood and how such an endeavour can occur at the cost of some lives is at the heart of Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*. Jemisin is using the frame of world unmaking to show how worlds and lives and vulnerabilities persist, even as worlds rise and fall over long geohistories and civilizational ebbs and flows. Using significant tectonic, atmospheric, and geopolitical instability as a backdrop for her novels, Jemisin situates the drama of survival and the politics of vulnerability within a world where apocalypse is the norm. In doing so, Jemisin can explore how the rise of violent and oppressive worldviews within unstable realms can differentially parse out freedoms and personhood between categories of the in/human. Jemisin's work offers a pertinent warning that planetary instability, like that experienced in the Anthropocene, can foster dangerous ideologies and political orders. But she also shows how world unmaking and the breakdown of order can offer an opportunity to break out of repetitive cycles of oppression and violence and perhaps even heal a humanity's broken relationship with the Earth.

These authors seize upon the ends-of-worlds to challenge conventional onto-epistemologies, to interrogate power, and to upend inherited practices of worlding and techniques of thought. Such a challenge to conventions, norms, and inherited frameworks is critical to confronting the uncertain future to come. This becomes especially relevant in the Anthropocene, an era that emphasizes how the insufficiencies and violence of habituated thought in the Western world have led to escalating planetary emergencies and devastating vulnerabilities, especially *for some*. As we confront these crises and their rootedness in late settler ideologies, thinking through how worlds are unmade becomes an opportunity to attune ourselves to the discursive and material arrangements of the so-

called normal world. In particular we may become more sensitive to how such arrangements unequally distribute the possibilities of worlding and how the rise of some worlds may come at the cost of others. Competition for worlds arises because practices of worlding are imbricated. In a vibrant material register, humans and nonhumans alike are enmeshed and implicated in world building and world destroying endeavours alike. There are not self-made worlds, only those built within, among, on top and at the cost of the creatures, places, histories, and evolving materialities through which practices of worlding take place.

An enlivened sense of worlding and unworlding is useful for complicating and enriching our sense of what it means to be more-than-just-human, what it means to be made vulnerable, have power, suffer oppression in shared, sympoetic environments. An evolving sense of how we world-with others is of crucial importance to the concerns of posthumanists and new materialists who are actively creating the discourses, metaphors, and practices necessary for reconceiving what being human will need to mean for sustainable, shared futures going forward. Many of the thinkers who have informed this dissertation are committed to enriched, rather than flattened, ontologies that pay special attention to who and what is made precarious in such worlds. Such enriched ontologies are especially important as theoretical enterprises move beyond anthropocentrism, without disappearing the human and erasing those battles still being fought by some to be seen as fully human. Theorists such as Donna Haraway, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Karan Barad, Kandice Chuh, Katherine Yusoff, and Sylvia Wynter recommend in various ways “staying with the trouble” (to borrow Haraway’s formulation) of the human, a category that persists and retains a powerful ethical and geopolitical force in the material world

today. The humanities have a role to play in the ongoing battles to attend to the ways in which constructions of the human and nonhuman have historically participated in violent and oppressive figurations of race, class, and gender and the extent to which emerging conceptualizations will play a defining role in the purpose and value of critical scholarship going forward.

As the unmade worlds of Delany, VanderMeer, and Jemisin demonstrate, a particular challenge arises for theorists and authors of the humanities within the unstable age of the Anthropocene. Practices of thinking must contend with ongoing states of suspension, times of unknowing, and periods of unpredictability in a world reconfigured by the new considerations and inputs of more-than-human materialities. For Lauren Berlant, the humanities are challenged to overcome the “cruel optimism” that grasps for the comfort and legitimacy of conventional meaning. Instead, thinkers in these times of instability must learn to operate without the certainty of normative approaches to their work. They must learn to “tread water” (*Cruel Optimism* 10). This state of interpretative and intellectual suspension is also recommended by Yves Citton, who vies for the practice of “literary attention” that is at home in a not-knowing. We find additional ways of conceiving the future of the humanities in the work of Timothy Clark, who claims a commitment to old ways of thinking and knowing within our dramatically altered present amount to a form of denialism. Holding on to conventional models for making sense of the world “may now also be a form of intellectual or ethical containment” (159). For Clark the humanities must work beyond established methodologies in order to embrace the ways by which “a barely calculable nonhuman agency brings about a general but unfocused sense of delegitimation and uncertainty” (151). The critical importance of

world unmaking as it seeks to represent and think the non-normative can be transformative to not only the humanities but deeply held and socially cherished notions of the status quo and what constitutes 'common sense.' Chuh's work to demonstrate the extent to which normativity and convention have contained subjectivity is notable here, especially in her close reading of the social regulation of representation and the legislating influence of 'aesthetic rationality' that undergirds contemporary ideals of subjectivity that renders some lives sensible and others senseless or even reprehensible.

As our current planetary unravelling demonstrates, we are in urgent need of new ways of interpreting and inhabiting this world. World unmaking asks us to consider how the normal world might breakdown and alternate realities and possibilities might emerge in its wake. A broken world can bring about a de-naturalizing moment through which common sense conventions and inherited logics no longer operate. In weird, unmade worlds, normal onto-epistemologies and logics may no longer make sense, they may no longer appear as sensible. As a result, unmade worlds demonstrate how the commonsensical is contoured by cultural, historical, and politically conditioned sensibility. World unmaking delegitimizes the legitimate and asks us to think the unthinkable and represent the unrepresentable. The other worlds of speculative fiction are not necessarily free from habituated and hegemonic modes of thought. But these worlds can show what may emerge when the conventions, arrangements, and ideals of our normal world break down and break away. The power of unmade worlds lies not in their restoration of order but in their productive dis-orientation, that forces readers to rehabilitate a sensuous and sense-making engagement with representations of reality. It is within the unfamiliar surroundings of these other worlds that we sharpen our modes of

attention and methods of attunement that may help us get our bearings in strange, new places. World unmaking animates the structures of normativity and possibility — both of which are contoured by the operations of sensibility. New practices of attentiveness and sensitivity are important in new and different worlds where we are asked to engage an awareness that exists outside of knowing. The result may be new sets of interpretative possibilities introduced by the aesthetic practices of world unmaking and worlding-with, which make way for alternative modes of meaning and forms of life.

Citton notes that the radical potential of literature lies within the attention a reader grants it: “Literature is less in the eye of the beholder than in his gaze, i.e., in the aesthetic attention he devotes to the text” (“Fictional Attachments” 317). In this sense reading for world unmaking is an act of exercising a certain kind of readerly gaze. Reading in non-normative environments necessitates a certain tolerance for indeterminacy and a certain sensitivity to how sense-making is a context- and norm-dependent practice. The presumed normalcy of things is, rather than a neutral backdrop, a deeply conditioned expectation that reality ought to cohere to pre-existing fundamental judgments about being, categorization, discourse, and history. The practice of critically attending to the aesthetic requires we move beyond standard attention “so that we can let unsuspecting categories emerge from a freewheeling attention that discovers new facts and new concerns within the matter under scrutiny” (ibid.). Citton further states

this suspensive time and space of delayed categorization requires us first to accept, and then hopefully to revel in, looking and listening without understanding: they need us to be receptive to what can be perceived and made

sense of, beyond, above, and apart from what our preconceived categories lead us to identify. (317-318)

To revel in what we cannot understand is not merely to read with curiosity; it is to generate new aesthetic practices and registers that condition the shape of our shared world. For Rancière, such generation hold radical and emancipative political potential: “What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking” (“The Politics of Literature” 10). The act of emancipation “begins when one understands that looking is also a form of action, which confirms *or transforms* the pre-existing distribution of positions” (“Le Spectateur Emancipe” 19, qtd. in Citton “Fictional Attachments” 318, emphasis mine). Paying attention in unmade worlds is a provocation, to not only notice but potentially transform the thinkable and the perceivable that contour our shared world. As we understand the world in increasingly unstable and nonhuman terms, we must push out onto horizons of thought that exceed the limits of the sensible. We must consider modes of attention that extend beyond the human and its present arrangements of being, doing, and knowing.

By pressing out into realities where conventions and norms no longer function, world unmaking animates the *narratives of possibility* for other worlds. World unmaking is ultimately about the making visible the structures and contours of the possible that can both constrain and free social imaginaries. Such imaginaries played a role in determining the structural conditions of the past and the governance of kinds and the arrangements of difference. So too will such imaginaries play a determinative role in shaping and channeling the event horizon of the future. Do our imaginaries inflect the perpetual crisis

of the normal world? Or might they bring about the possibilities and realities yet to come? This is a practice of thinking through sense and consequence: what forms of reality are recognizable? What forms of subjectivity are operational? What gestures and political movements towards alternate worlds are actionable? World unmaking is not about registering a specific political program for the future. Rather it marks the registers through which specific political programs and dominant patterns operate and signals the possibility of alternate modes of thinking and being. The work of world unmaking makes the possible more probable but does not guarantee any outcome. Only the groundwork of making visible the discourses and practices that have made *this* world possible can generate the openings through which *other* worlds may become possible.

Throughout the course of researching for and writing this dissertation, I have felt the shift of my own attunement to what appears as relevant to world unmaking. In particular, I recognize the tensions that arise when gathering a diverse set of writers under a shared theoretical banner. There is more work to be done to address what world making as an analytic can or cannot offer authors addressing specific histories of power and oppression. Even as I recognize what world making makes visible, I have become increasingly attuned to what the generation of world making as a construct for considering speculative fiction might crowd out. I am convinced that world making can offer a productive avenue for what Todd calls intellectual “reciprocity of thought” in that this framework “requires us to pay attention to who else is speaking alongside us” (“An Indigenous Feminist’s Take” 19). Yet I am not convinced I have done enough in this dissertation to explore how world unmaking intersects with and can elevate the voices of racialized and minoritized scholars already deeply attuned to the end-of-world themes in

speculative fiction, especially within the Afrofuturist and Indigenous futurist fields. There is an abundance of recent works of speculative fiction that carry the ideas presented here well beyond the bounds of this dissertation. The success of this research going forward would hinge on a broader engagement with more and more diverse speculative imaginaries in fiction and in theory.

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