Contemporary Crises and Contemporary Speculative Fiction: Social Change Through Affect

A Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Speculative fiction has the potential to function as sociopolitical critique through a process of cognitive estrangement. This project uses contemporary speculative fiction from around the world to demonstrate that this sociopolitical critique can take place via modeling social relations. In chapters on capitalism, climate change, and forced migration, speculative fiction is shown to use "affective communities," or small groups of people experiencing shared affective atmospheres, to not only critique crisis situations, but to suggest potential avenues out of them. This project departs from other speculative fiction critique in focusing not on the novum but on the characters' interactions with and attitudes toward the novum and larger fictional world, and especially on how the characters' treatment of one another comprises the majority of the effective intervention in fictional crisis. This approach is analyzed as a potential strategy for encouraging real-world change and political solidarity.

Dedication

I dedicate this project to my father, Mike, who started me on this path by sharing his love of speculative fiction with me, and to my partner, Elise, with whom all things are possible.

Acknowledgments

Attempting to name everyone I am grateful to is a daunting task, because I was truly supported by a village, and an international one at that. Nonetheless, I will attempt it, and if you find your name unexpectedly missing, blame the lack of sleep and not a lack of gratitude or love.

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return gave me love and support. To Hailey, who was born a few days before I wrote these words, and whom I hope to infect with my love of story.

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Vita

Education

The Ohio State University Columbus, OH
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Published Works – Journal Articles

"Goddess Troubles: Gender and Femininity in *Lore Olympus*." *MAI Feminism*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2023.

"Without Water: Willingly Enduring the Speculative Landscape." *Helice,* vol. 9, no. 1, 2023.

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"A Genuine Messiah: The Erosion of Political Messaging in *Dune* 2021." *Ekphrasis*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2022

"A Fairy Tale Apocalypse: Nature, Humanity, and Disease in *Stand Still Stay Silent*." *Marvels and Tales,* vol. 35, no. 1, 2021.

"Moving Forward: Gender, Genre, and Why There's No Hard Fantasy." *The New Americanist*, vol. 1 no. 3, Autumn 2019.

Published Works – Book Chapters

"Building the World: Ecopunk TTRPGs and Collaborative Critical Societies." *SF and Societal Vulnerability: Fragility, Collapse, and Transformation*, forthcoming.

"Queer Comics Queered." *Comics: A Companion*, forthcoming from Peter Lang.

"New Pronouns and New Uses: Gender Variance and Language in Contemporary Science Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*, Routledge, Spring 2023.

"Nature Versus Player: Skyrim Players and Modders as Ecological Force." In *Being Dragonborn: Critical Essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, edited by Mike Piero and Marc Ouellette, McFarland Press. June 2021.

Published Works – Academic Reviews

Review of *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction*, by Jerry Rafiki Jenkins. Appeared in vol. 51, no. 2, *SFRA Review*, 2021

Review of *Phantasmal Spaces: Archetypal Venues in Video Games*, by Matthias Fuchs. Appeared in vol. 31, no. 1, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 2020

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Chapter 1. Introduction

How does one grasp the complexities of the present while one is still experiencing it? In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant attempts to outline what the experience of ordinary living in the contemporary period is, to "conceiv[e] of a contemporary moment from within that moment" (3). Their strategy is to turn to film, poetry, and fiction as a way to understand what contemporary people are feeling, doing, and thinking—they claim that our understandings of the historical character of the present, of the actions of nations and the structures of power, derive "from stories constituted by a collective catching up to what is already happening in ordinary worlds shaped in a crisis-defined and continuing now" (54). Using media means encountering how people attuned to the present—artists and writers—recapitulate the key affective strains that filter in from the noise of the world. Berlant argues that "affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves" (25), and Berlant and I both argue that this sensitivity to affective atmospheres create a sense of "shared historical time" before historians have sufficient hindsight to write the story of a moment. In creating affectively-rich art, artists can share their experiences such that we understand this shared historical time as we live it.

Yet, Berlant's book analyzes only realist fiction of a particular hyper-literary bend.[1] On one hand, this makes sense—this genre is self-consciously dedicated to reproducing the affective experience of a time and place, whether the present or another. On the other, if we are to take seriously Berlant's argument that all people experience bodily attunement to affective atmospheres, and that stories re-represent these atmospheres for our analysis and understanding, then we must be at least willing to explore the idea that other sorts of fiction accomplish this as well as literary fiction.

In this dissertation, I argue that speculative fiction provides remarkable insight into the affective character of the historical present, and even imagines potential responses to crisis in a world in which "the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what is has meant to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment" (Berlant, 3). Speculative fiction has often suffered from cultural critics' dismissal, as well as a certain snobbery on behalf of the educated public and the literati. And yet within the small community of academics and critics who work with speculative fiction, it is widely acknowledged that speculative fiction frequently serves as critical fiction, commenting on contemporary society through extrapolation and estrangement. Darko Suvin, one of the founding fathers of science fiction criticism, likened science fiction to Bertholt Brecht's theatre of estrangement, in which re-representing reality in an odd, unusual, or off-putting

[1] This is not a term of art; rather I mean it is not only literary fiction, but the sort that does not appear on any bestselling list or in front of a bookshop window; in short, a rarified writer's writer kind of literature. If one wishes to make an argument about the real-world importance of media, this is the sort that most easily passes under the gatekeeper's eye, but it is a category that most speculation fiction certainly does not fall into.

manner forces audiences to reconsider their opinions and thinking. Suvin writes, "The cognition gained [by reading SF] may not be immediately applicable, it may be simply the enabling of the mind to receive new wavelengths, but it eventually contributes to the understanding of the most mundane matters" (30). The character of science fiction is such that it take an unreal novelty, a "novum," and logically extrapolates its effect on society, such that "its specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author`s and implied reader's norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author`s reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. This oscillation, called estrangement by Shklovsky and Brecht, is no doubt a consequence of every […] novum." (71). Thus even with an overtly fictional core element (such as a novum of alien life on Mars, or time travel, and so on), the story still oscillates back to a norm of reality that directly corresponds to our own consensus reality. This makes speculative fiction unexpectedly good at sociopolitical critique; it is always inhabiting an oscillating pattern that creates estrangement for the audience. This extends to scientific inventions like faster-than-light travel or hyper-intelligent robots, but it also includes economic, social, political, spiritual, and existential inventions and thought experiments, from the creation of post-scarcity societies to finding proof of the immortal soul to navigating bureaucracy in the new world government, and beyond.

In the following chapters, I use speculative fiction much like Berlant uses literary fiction: to assess the affective atmosphere of contemporary society. I read across video games, novels, short stories, film, and television; from Barbados to France to China; from

people of all genders and writing in multiple languages. This diversity provides the best chance for me to deduce as much of a global affective atmosphere as possible. I focus on three of the most prominent crises in contemporary life, and map a set of affective orientations towards these three crises: capitalistic exploitation, anthropogenic climate change, and forced migration. In this, I follow Berlant's project. However, my argument here differs from that of *Cruel Optimism* in another crucial way. Berlant concludes that there is no way out of cruel optimism; there is no way to meaningfully improve the conditions of living in a world which Berlant describes as fundamentally exhausting: "The conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are the attrition or the wearing out of the subject" (28). Unlike Berlant, I find in the speculative fiction works I examine a sense of some burgeoning response, a type of resistance to the slow death and spiritual attrition of the contemporary moment. In these works, small communities form to offer each other mutual aid, and sometimes to create a heterotopia aligned with the group's shared affective stance and/or orientation.

A heterotopia is a "space apart," an environment in which the usual laws of society may be suspended. Michel Foucault described the heterotopia in his essay "Of Other Places," and explained that while the heterotopia has a real location in regular reality, it nonetheless is "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (4). He gives as examples prisons, mental institutions, retirement homes, and other places that are separated from the general population, so to speak, and thus abide by different laws. The works I examine often use heterotopias as a way to explore different societal structures and, most importantly, different ways of relating to one another. It is

for this reason that I call the small groups of people in these works *affective communities*. They typically are united, not by class, gender, position, or other such things, but by shared exposure to a particular affective environment, and a shared orientation toward its content. For example, the spaceship crew I discuss in the first chapter have diverse backgrounds and identities, and when all is normal, they get along variously well—some are friends, some not so much. But when something goes drastically wrong, they enter a "heterotopia of crisis" (Foucault, 4), where they become defined and thus united by a shared situation in which they no longer relate to each other as neighbors and coworkers, but as fellow victims and each others' potential salvation. While they remain free to approach the situation with distinct emotions, as befits their personalities, the more general affective atmosphere (in this case, of panic, desperation, and cynicism) conditions the group to align together for their own sakes and the sakes of their fellow humans.

The result is that throughout the media addressed in this project, we see crisis as well as general misery being resisted within small affective communities. This is not a revolutionary project—the people in these works do not change the entire world, tear down capitalism, and so on. But they do make life more bearable, even fulfilling, for themselves and the members of their communities. This is no small thing. In a world where even "adjustment seems like an accomplishment," finding a path to a better lifeway is the best that one could rationally hope to achieve. Cruel optimism is, as I will discuss further in the first chapter, a promise of a better life that is made in such a way as to foreclose the possibility of that better life ever happening. In these speculative projects, writers move beyond the trap of cruel optimism to imagine the possibility of another

option. They, in short, speculate. And without the power of speculation, we cannot see beyond a present which overwhelms us with the immediacy and ongoingness of its multiplying crises.

A Word About Terms

Throughout this project I use the term "speculative fiction" to refer to the genre of fiction under study. This is an umbrella term that denotes all non-realist fiction, most typically fantasy, science fiction, magical realism, supernatural horror, and fabulism. Many of the critics I cite are writing specifically about science fiction, a narrower category than speculative fiction. When the distinction is important, I use the more specific term—but I believe that in many cases, theory that is written about science fiction can be applied to other forms of speculative fiction without any, or very few, changes. Some writers already treat science fiction as a broader category, similar to what is meant by speculative fiction. For instance, Seo-Young Chu, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, places all fiction on a spectrum based on how estranging the main referent of the story is. Realist fiction attempts referents which are not hard to understand, such as the experience of growing up or returning home, etc. Science fiction attempts to portray more difficult referents, such as the nonhuman person or the true complexity of spacetime. All fiction is simply defined as more or less science fictional. Much of the speculative fiction I use here would likely be labeled as science fiction rather than another kind of speculative fiction—but not all, and the works which are not clearly

science fiction are nonetheless grappling with difficult and profound referents through processes of cognitive extrapolation and estrangement. Therefore, I argue that speculative fiction of all kinds is located fairly close together on Chu's spectrum of science-fictional referents, and can be discussed together without necessarily requiring repetitive distinction between subgenres.

Chapter Breakdowns

In chapter one, I address capitalism—specifically, neoliberal capitalist excess. This is capitalism which has run amok, so to speak, which creates an experience primarily of exploitation rather than of competition. My theoretical framework is drawn from Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, as above, and from Elizabeth Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment*; my understanding of capitalism draws from Susan Fraser's *Cannibal Capital* and David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* I use three primary texts to explore attempts to resist capitalistic exploitation through worker solidarity, even across human-nonhuman lines. While speculative fiction imagines new horizons of resource extraction, inspiring real-world businesses to attempt to realize those horizons, it also imagines new forms of relating to one another, including relationships that enable resistance. In these texts, human workers and their nonhuman colleagues work together to create even temporary alternatives to relations structured by neoliberal capital, relationships without positive expectations other than mutual exploitation.

In chapter two, I address climate change through the lens of climate grief. Ashlee Cunsolo Willox and Glenn Albrecht frame climate grief as part of understanding and

addressing the impacts of anthropogenic climate change. In the speculative fiction I analyze in chapter two, adjustment to climate change produces a form of "mournful futurism," an inverse of cruel optimism that we might also call kind pessimism: the anticipation of a future which will contain loss, but which will not amount to a complete loss of pleasure or worthwhile living. It is the assurance of futurity or ongoingness which is foreclosed by climate despair, which is falsely promised by climate denial, and which is at stake in discussions of climate change mitigation or acclimatization. It is not the promise of future flourishing that one finds in utopia or solarpunk fiction, because it does include a not-insignificant amount of suffering. The future is like grief; painful but also survivable. Like chapter one, these forms of mournful futurism come about largely as the result of small communities committing to assisting each other with the process of grieving. It is through mutual assistance that the future's losses become manageable instead of unsurmountable.

In the final chapter, chapter three, forced migration provides the focal issue. Rather than looking at in-fiction affective communities, this chapter examines how creators work to establish empathy between the narrative and its audience. Creating a relationship of empathy with audience members is an important part of imparting a sociopolitical message, which is often the goal of narratives that center on forced migration. Techniques of address, perspective, narratorial reliability, and plot encourage audience empathy both to promote pro-migrant attitudes and to promote fear and distrust. These works' attempts to establish empathy with audiences extends my theory of affective communities beyond fictional characters and into the real world, where affective

orientations are aligned through the influence of affective media (which almost all fiction is).

Fiction does not solve our problems directly, but it can model possible responses and consequences. I hope to show through these readings how speculative fiction imagines not utopias, but the possibility of fighting for a better life within precarious and even overwhelming conditions. It imagines, moreover, a future that is secured through close relationships with other agentive beings, human and nonhuman, which is something we can begin to implement in our own lives immediately and regardless of access to resources and technologies, which is in itself something to be optimistic about.

Chapter 2. Neoliberal Capital, the Future Anterior, and the Future of Solidarity

Frederic Jameson wrote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism;[2] what is even easier is to imagine the continuation of capitalism until long after the world we know is gone. In its current form, most typically called neoliberalism, capitalism is pervasive and yet also produces instability, or precarity, for the vast majority of its participants. This precarity is a symptom of the larger instabilities within the capitalistic system itself, discussed more below; nonetheless, these instabilities lead to worker exploitation and suffering long before they lead to any form of collapse that would shift communities to a new societal structure. Maintaining capitalism requires finding new sources of exploitable resources. Once, these were "undiscovered" lands and the people within them; then the Global South more broadly; and now we have moved to extracting resources from more or less the entirety of the planet—mountain-tops and ocean floors included. Speculative fiction proposes new vistas of resource extraction, from space to the interior of the human mind. In fact, science fiction in particular has often had an unwholesome relationship with capitalism, as the military-industrial complex is inspired by technologies featured in science fiction regardless of the author's supposed intention. However, speculative fiction does not just offer visions of new

[2] Others, including Ursula K. Le Guin, have said more or less the same thing, though phrased differently.

technologies and new horizons of capital. It also allows us to envision new ways of organizing society, new forms of relating to each other, and the possibilities for resisting capitalism and its predations. In this chapter, I examine three speculative fiction texts that imagine resisting capitalism through altering our means of relating to one another. By extending trust and creating small communities with shared goals, priorities, and modes of relating—what I call affective communities—these texts show characters resisting capitalistic precarity through solidarity. They do not depict the overthrowing of the market, but rather the re-evaluation and change of structures of relationships that come from inhabiting a capitalist society, not just a capitalist economy.

The three texts this chapter focuses on are *Tacoma* (2017), a singleplayer video game; The Murderbot Diaries (2017-), a series of novels and novellas starting in 2017 and continuing today; and *Severance* (2022), an American television show. All of them take place in capitalist societies to varying degrees: *Severance* appears to be set in the United States in roughly contemporary times; *Tacoma* envisions a future a few decades ahead, but still with recognizable references to corporate names like Amazon and Hilton; and the Murderbot Diaries takes place in the far future, potentially nowhere near Earth, in a corporatocratic society called The Corporate Rim. These different "levels" of capitalism, so to speak, differ in the technological development available, but they all share the basic structure of capitalism in society. Susan Fraser, in *Cannibal Capitalism*, writes extensively about the ways in which capitalism is not solely an economic system, but a societal system that connects all areas of life as it demarcates certain people as "exploitable workers" and others as "expropriable 'others'"; which maintains strict

divides between nature and society for purposes of insisting on an endlessly resource-filled nature for exploitation; and which regulates care work and non-commodified labor as the hidden, essential, and under/unpaid work of women and marginalized people. As Fraser writes:

> To speak of capitalism as an institutionalized societal order, premised on such separations, is to suggest its non-accidental, structural imbrication with gender domination, ecological degradation, racial imperial oppression, and political domination—all in conjunction, of course, with its equally structural, non-accidental foreground of (doubly) free labor exploitation. (30)

I argue that this means (among many other things) that resisting capitalism requires also resisting these attendant forms of oppression and degradation. It requires, to borrow a phrase from Lauren Berlant, examining "fraying fantasies" including "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy [… and] meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair" (3). To be sure, none of the texts I engage with here address all of these things at once. Nonetheless, it supports my argument that attending to relationships between people is part of challenging the structure of capitalism as a whole, rather than simply as an economic system.

Capitalism is here envisioned as something that is constantly crumbling into itself, the autophagy of Fraser's title *Cannibal Capitalism*. It is what Berlant talks about when she writes, "Instead of the vision of the everyday *organized* by capitalism that we find in Lefebvre and de Certeau, among others, I am interested in the overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by it" (8), because the felt experience of living in capitalism is not

being structured and organized, but a life in which “the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what is has meant to "have a life" that adjustment seems like an accomplishment” (Berlant, 3). Our current phase of capitalism is typically called neoliberal capitalism, but Fraser writes that “we can conceptualize mercantile capitalism, liberal-colonial capitalism, state-managed monopoly capitalism, and globalizing neoliberal capitalism […] as four historically specific ways of demarcating the various realms that comprise capitalism” (32). That is, they are less unique forms of capitalism, and more iterations on the same boundaries drawn between “economy and polity, human and nonhuman nature, exploitation and expropriation” (31). In speculative fiction, there are forms of capitalism that we have yet to see enacted, especially the corporate governance of The Murderbot Diaries, but the essence is the same, with slightly shifted lines of enforcement. Nonetheless, neoliberalism is generally considered to be the form of capitalism we are experiencing at this time, and so it is worth discussing in more detail the particular sociotemporal characteristics it possesses.

Neoliberalism and Its Logics

David Harvey, in his comprehensive *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, defines neoliberalism thusly:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework

> characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (11)

As he says, neoliberalism is an economic theory first, but not exclusively—as Fraser has said, that economic model requires the support of many parts of life usually considered to be outside the proper economic sphere. The proposed values of neoliberalism are individualism, who are imagined to be solitary economic units whose primary values are as economic producers and whose primary rights are to be free from state interference in their economic activities. There is a large gap between what neoliberalism claims to be and what it is; state interference has in fact proven to be necessary to maintaining globalized neoliberalism, but this state support is acknowledged only in the sense that it is supposedly enforcing greater freedom of the market, the true arbiter of the system. Fraser points out that in fact, "Capitalism is inconceivable, after all, in the absence of a legal framework underpinning private enterprise and market exchange. [It] depends crucially on public powers to guarantee property rights, enforce contracts, adjudicate disputes, quell anti-capitalist rebellions, and maintain the money supply" (25). That is not part of the "public story" of neoliberal capital, though—Fraser writes that "definitive of capitalism is the institutional separation of 'economy' from 'polity'" (3). This does not mean the economy and polity are functionally separate, but that it is the institutional position that they are separate or ought to be. This is one of the underlying rationales for why the government does not intervene in its citizens' economic distress: poverty, famine, lack of housing, and similar crises are market issues.

Neoliberal capital feels very different at the individual versus the institutional level. The neoliberal individual experiences negative freedom: they are not entitled to assistance or social security, but rather entitled to pursue economic gain in an unregulated market. Corporations and wealthy individuals have made good use of these policies. However, for the average worker, whether designated as exploitable or expropriable in Fraser's words, neoliberalism has failed to deliver any of its ostensible benefits. Job creation, increased investment, market competition (i.e., anti-monopoly activity) and trickle-down wealth have not materialized. Instead, Harvey argues, neoliberalism acts as not an ethic of economic prosperity but of class consolidation. He writes:

> Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. The process of neoliberalization has, however, entailed much "creative destruction," not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart… It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. (12)

This paragraph is worth quoting at length, because it effectively summarizes the vast reach of neoliberalism. It is not merely an economic model, or a policy preference. It is a way of life and an ideology that has been widely adopted across the Western world and beyond—sometimes under duress, especially in the case of the IMF and World Bank policies applied to lower-income countries—regardless of the dramatic and obvious harms to millions of people that it has caused and is causing. While it has generally been

promoted as key to, even necessary for, economic prosperity, Harvey notes, "Neoliberalization has not been very effective in revitalizing global capital accumulation, but it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring… the power of an economic elite. The theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal" (29). Despite political rhetoric, neoliberalism's purpose is to secure ever-increasing wealth for the economic elite.

This goal is especially concerning given that the ever-increasing wealth has to come from somewhere. Fraser writes that "capitalist production is not self-sustaining, but free rides on social reproduction, nature, political power, and expropriation; yet its orientation to endless accumulation threatens to destabilize these very conditions of its possibility" (33). This inherent instability within capitalism has since Marx led people to assume capitalism will bring itself down from the inside. The texts I examine in this chapter, especially *Tacoma*, force people to consider what happens if that takes longer than we expect – if capitalism continues to eat more and more of itself, worsening life-conditions as it goes, without ever actually collapsing. It is the intensification of a system we already live within, wherein the capitalism "turn[s] 'the political' into yet another major site of systemic crisis" (Fraser, 26); where the "sociopolitical processes that supply the solidary relations, affective dispositions, and value horizons that underpin social cooperation" (Fraser, 34) are subject to degradation and becoming part of the unreachable "good life" that keeps workers striving in a labor system designed to prevent them from accessing it. Neoliberal capital is merely a type of the same capitalism which has been

driving exploitation and expropriation for centuries, but it is worthwhile to note its particular affective impacts. Fraser points to the crisis of care work and social reproduction as one of the core differences in neoliberal vs other historical forms of capital. Unlike previous forms, she argues, neoliberalism "has been extremely hungry for women's wage labor, including women with young children. They're massively recruited into the workforce and even, you could say, pushed into the workforce" by financial pressures (Fraser, *New Republic*). Additionally, shared common cultural mores—a "common sense" to use Fraser's term—are no longer supporting society in the same way. As Fraser puts it, "When you have a real societal crisis of the kind that we have now, it's really for the most part only a matter of time before that common sense starts unraveling [… People] lose faith in the established elites, political parties, narratives and frames" (*New Republic*). Some of the seemingly set aspects of society—for instance, the convention that U.S. presidential candidates respect the outcome of the vote—become up for discussion in a way they did not seem to be before. Fraser writes, "people living through this kind of general crisis really can't know [what the future will be]. We cannot know for sure whether the outcome will be the destruction of life as we know it, a new form of capitalism, a better form, worse form, a new form of postcapitalism" (*New Republic*). I argue that speculative fiction plays a valuable role here in imagining what some of these forms might look and feel like.

One of the vital functions of art and literature, in fact, is to explore the affective character of what Lauren Berlant calls "the historical present": the present time as seen through the lens of history, as future people might wonder about it, as they might attempt

to characterize its nature and its zeitgeist. I draw on two writers in particular who analyze the ways in which contemporary capitalism pervades the very affect of living, the emotional, social, and psychic experience of existing under regimes of neoliberal capital. Neither of them use speculative fiction, concerned as they are with the present, but speculative fiction does not have to be set in the present to make commentary on it, as it is commonly agreed that media reflects the time of its creation and the anxieties of its creator(s) regardless of when the story takes place.

The Affective Experience of Capitalism

Elizabeth Povinelli examines how the logic of neoliberalism is expressed through a trick of tense, the future anterior. Her book *Economies of Abandonment* (the economies in question being neoliberal ones, naturally, though she prefers the term late liberal) begins with a discussion of Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). In "Omelas," everyone in the city of Omelas lives in perfect happiness, which is guaranteed and produced by the misery of one small child, kept in abject squalor in a closet. That short story, Povinelli argues, is responding to William James' ethical argument, "there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say" (as cited in Povinelli, pg. 2). It posits that the necessary tense of ethical thought is the future anterior—looking back at the past and present, once the subject is in the future, and determining whether it was all worth it after all. This is the ethical tense of neoliberalism, which ignores present suffering, even

valorizing it in some cases, and postpones any reckoning to the indefinite future. The provocation of Le Guin's story is that there is no change to the child's condition in the future. It does not resolve into something; she does not undergo this long suffering only to come out victorious on the other side. The suffering of the child is in the *present*, and the future anterior stance ignores the real and meaningful ethical burden of allowing that suffering to continue while waiting for the last man to have his say. Povinelli writes, "The happiness of citizens of Omelas is substantially within the small child's unhappiness; their well-being is part of a larger mode of corporeal embodiment in which her carnal misery is a vital organ" (4). The misery of the child is not incidental, nor is it an externality; it is part and parcel of the happiness of Omelas; it is indispensable and constitutive. Yet because of the future-anterior orientation of capitalist society, our own versions of the child in the closet remain unaddressed in part because of their necessary role in buying the good life for others, and in part because of the narrative of the future anterior, the "it will have been worth it" mentality. One might be familiar with this style of argument as deployed against welfare programs—cutting them may hurt people in the short term, but it will teach them to be self-sufficient in the long term, so it will have been worth it. And if it turns out to not have been worth it, well, that might be because we simply have not waited long enough to see the outcome. One cannot address the present because one does not know what it is yet, and cannot know, because what it is will only be defined after the last man has had his say—and that last man is always in the future, yet to arrive.

An illustration of this logic can be found in Anne McCaffrey's "The Ship Who Sang" (1961),[3] wherein a young girl with physical disabilities is put into a container and made into the mind of a ship. She does not have a human life; her parents do not get to raise her; she mourns the lack of ability to connect with other humans as a human. She is in debt for the training and healthcare she received in order to become a "brainship." It is a horrifying thing to do to one's own child, except that in this universe the other option was euthanasia. However, in the logic of the story, it is all worth it in the end. Helva, the brainship protagonist, meets a "brawn," a man who works within/alongside her, and with whom she forms a heterosexual relationship, as traditionally as is possible under the circumstances (which to be fair, are not very traditional circumstances). The process is explained to the parents as a good thing, because "their offspring would suffer no pain, live a comfortable existence in a metal shell for several centuries, and perform unusual service for Central Worlds" (1969 novel, 1-2). All is well, in the end. The question is not asked: why demand a child become a brainship on pain of euthanasia? Perhaps because in this world, it is a regular part of life. Helva's life is not exceptional, though it is unusual. After all, this is perhaps the only way that this fictional society could conceive of to make such disabled persons into producers of market value, which establishes the procedure's validity.

As a result of the (un)ethical framework of the future anterior, Povinelli chronicles the abundance of suffering via quasi-events, events which "never quite achieve

[3] There is also a novel by the same name from 1969, in which an edited version of the short story serves as the first chapter.

the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen" (13). There is no event which transforms the girl's suffering into a crisis (or Helva's encasement in titanium). Crises are, after all, "kinds of events that seem to demand, as if authored from outside human agency, an ethical response" (14), and one is not forthcoming. There is instead an enduring, consistent, quotidian misery, the kind of suffering that Povinelli characterizes as "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime" (13). It resists plot; nothing happens, really, or at least not fast enough for us to focus attention on it. Rob Nixon calls this phenomenon "slow violence," similar to the term "slow death" which Lauren Berlant uses, and draws attention to the ways in which slow violence "occurs gradually and out of sight […] an attritional violence that is typical not viewed as violence at all" (2). Rather, it "remain[s] largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated" (6), and is often seen as merely the consequences of living life, when in reality it is the consequences of being worn down. This tendency follows the shift from "letting live and making die" to "making live and letting die" that Foucault charts in his analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, as the sovereign state becomes the biopolitical state. Here, "letting die" is a result of both abandonment (per Povinelli's title) and deliberate shifts in thinking and action that justify enmeshing certain persons and populations in chronic and ordinary suffering, and then refraining from offering care. One of the signature achievements of neoliberalism is denuding social programs of their funding and their ethical weight, rendering them impotent in the face of chronic suffering. As Harvey and Fraser point out, what appears to be an economic stance spreads to cover the whole of life. The ideology goes like this: the value of all things is in

relation to the market; therefore the market is the arbiter of all things; therefore one who cannot succeed on the market cannot—should not—succeed in any other area of life. Naturally, that is not consistently put into practice, but nonetheless it remains a powerful narrative used to enact many forms of slow violence.

The characters in the three texts I examine in this chapter are all engaged with the market in various ways, but none of them are at the top of any hierarchy, and their value to their employers is uncertain and precarious. All of them can and would be terminated at any time if it were cheaper than allowing them to live and work, and for some of them that translates to literal termination of life. They remain in their social positions at the grace of their employers, and the anxiety of this precarious position pervades their every moment. However, as Povinelli describes, there is not a crisis moment where their lives went from sustaining, fulfilling, and reliable, to draining, contingent, and precarious. They were never outside a system of the latter ordinary suffering, and so their survival under it constitutes neither an emergency nor a triumph. When crises do happen, they are the culmination of a psychic threat that has lingered in the air the whole time, and yet, not crises that could have been specifically pointed to, predicted, or avoided. Even when the situation erupts into crisis, the future anterior logic remains, deferring ethical reckoning until later, even as people die in the now. In *Tacoma*, the triumph of the plot occurs when the characters are able to leave their place of employment, and broadcast that their company tried to kill them in order to replace them with autonomous machines. But we do not see this occur. That fallout is also deferred to an unknown future; we also do not know how the characters then will make a living in a society that relies on corporate

Loyalty points as currency. They escape one bad situation of employment, but the system remains, and we do not have any way of knowing whether they will be subject to exactly the same kind of circumstances again; we do know that they will not be able to see their families for some time, because they have to flee retribution from the company. Only Odin,[4] the AI character, is rescued to a truly different place, taken to a society which considers AI full sentient beings rather than tools. Even then, his reaction is muted: when asked if he accepts his new destination, he says, "Considering the alternative, I would say that I do." All of the characters are for the moment safe from physical harm, but they remain precarious and uncertain—even their rescuers are simply employees of a rival corporation, excited to help publicize a rival's bad deeds in order to gain profit.

The notion of the ordinary, enduring misery that Povinelli describes as a non-crisis and a non-event also connects to Lauren Berlant's notion of crisis ordinariness. While the word crisis might seem to place it in opposition to Povinelli's idea, I posit that the two are in actuality quite similar. Berlant describes crisis ordinariness as the pervading sense that ordinary life is increasingly made up of crises that never get resolved, but simply pile up; "the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what is has meant to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment" (3). Crisis rhetoric continues to demand attention, but only in select moments. Berlant writes, "crisis

[4] While in 2024, the choice of Odin as a name brings up associations with white nationalists, I do not believe that was intended to be part of *Tacoma*'s story. The other AI are also given names from mythology; and half of the crew are people of color. This does not in of itself prove anything, but in absence of any other cues, I believe the fact that the AI who gains citizenship is called Odin is merely an unfortunate coincidence.

rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death--or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations--is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life" (102). The ordinariness of crisis is a fact of life for those undergoing slow death, a state of misery that is described by Povinelli as a non-crisis and non-event, and which Nixon describes as slow violence. Berlant describes it as overlapping waves of what would be termed crises from the outside, but which make up the fabric of life and thus do not rise to the level of event that crisis would normally demand.[5] Either way, it is a condition of attrition for the subject, one in which there is no event which suddenly or definitively causes death, but rather layer atop each other to eventually wear the subject down to the point of non-existence. One example would be deaths caused by environmental racism, where the structural racism and poverty that designates certain people and areas as disposable creates the conditions for uncontrolled pollution, which then exacerbates the already harsh health effects of racism and poverty. It also encompasses knock-on effects such as even lower incomes due to falling property values and lost work time as a result of illness. It characterizes contemporary speculative fiction which shows this accretion of crisis in the lives of its characters, who are subject to various forms of slow violence, and for whom, if they experience an instance of eruptive crisis, it is only a further expression of crisis ordinariness and of their ongoing life circumstances. *Tacoma*'s characters experience a

[5] Berlant's main example of this is obesity; for a number of reasons I do not think this is an appropriate example, not the least of which being that subsequent scientific research has failed to prove that obesity is lethal, rather than a condition that is sometimes, but not always, co-morbid with lethal conditions.

direct threat from the failure of their life support systems aboard a space station, but this failure is entangled with the other forms of abandonment and crisis ordinariness that led to these people being in this situation, which the game details.

Though Berlant and Povinelli use the terms crisis in different ways, their baseline argument is similar. They both argue that for certain populations (and indeed, a growing percentage of the overall population), the average condition of life is ongoing misery, of a type that is neither bearable nor unbearable, but simply continues while the sufferer continues to survive. This misery does not rise to the level of notable event for the outside world; it is not a natural disaster that demands charity action and news pieces.[6] It simply endures. In Povinelli's words, it never becomes a crisis. As Berlant describes it, it does not fit the genre of trauma—the event which causes a break in one's self. It is a type of enduring experience that wears out the self, and eats away at any possible notion of achieving the "good life." Povinelli relates examples of durative misery from her own life and from the lives of Indigenous Australians; she also uses the example of the film *Killer of Sheep* (1978), in which Stan, the main character, continually fails to achieve progress toward the better life he imagines. He tries to fix up an old car, which requires more effort and time than would a new car, but he cannot afford a new car. He spends $25 he can barely afford to buy a used engine which may or may not work, but when he and a friend try to carry it downstairs to their truck, their tired bodies can barely manage it—they do, but they do not secure it firmly, and it falls out of the truck. Stan has received

[6] Which is not to say that natural disasters are not also manipulated by capital for gain—it is simply a different process of exploitation.

nothing, and lost $25 and precious energy. He borrows a car to take his family on a rare trip to the seaside, but it is also poverty-stricken, and breaks down midway, leaving them stranded and worse off than when they started. In this way, every attempt to improve his condition not only fails, but worsens his situation. Stan perseveres, but that is the sum of his triumph: to remain standing.

The main character of *Severance*, Mark, also struggles to improve his situation even while he teeters at the brink of total despair. A former college professor, the loss of his wife left him unable to teach or frankly to live a normal life. He signs up for the titular severance procedure—in which one's memories are spatially separated, with the result that he does not remember what he does at work, and his work self does not remember anything about the rest of his life—entirely so that there will be eight hours a day in which he does not feel grief. Or so he assumes. Instead, the "innie" or work-time Mark suffers from sadness that he simply does not recognize or understand. The outside Mark fails to process his grief, excising eight hours of his day with severance and drowning the rest with drink. The inside Mark does not understand why he does the work he does, feels the way he does, or why his employer is secretive in the extreme, to the point of enforcing cultish behaviors (more below). They both experience an attrition of spirit that eventually propels them to action, but that if this were not a television show, would likely simply continue. The situation is science fictional due to the severance procedure, but otherwise it hardly registers as different than the daily lives of thousands if not millions of people today. However, the severance procedure makes it strange again, so that the

viewer can register the cruelty of the status quo in the show, and connect it to the reality outside the show, a reality whose cruelty we become inured to for survival.

Berlant has little hope that there is an escape route from under these crushing realities; at best, they suggest, we can make lateral moves. Berlant argues that this is the reason why “The conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are the attrition or the wearing out of the subject" (28). It is a fairly bleak assessment, given that their list of “fraying fantasies” includes:

> upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructions cushions for enjoyment. (3)

In other words, the entirety of political and economic life for most people, extending into the intimate and domestic sphere as well. The reason why we are unable to escape from the waves of crisis and the disappointment of fraying fantasies is “cruel optimism,” a relation wherein the very object “that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain,” and moreover “the very pleasure of being inside a relation [has] become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2). In short, the subject invests in a relationship that ultimately bars them from reaching their goals, but the relationship itself is too meaningful or sustaining to let go. Frequently, the examples they investigate are tied to a notion of capitalism that would provide any sort of meaningful life progress, job security, benefits, or perhaps most importantly, legible membership in the realm of “legitimate” citizens. In a society where

people are defined by work and their jobs, not having a job, or having one that is performed in the grey or black markets, results in a lack of status that can decay into invisibility in the social sphere. Capitalism creates these conditions, and yet capitalism is also the only way out (it promises): get a job, a good one, and you will be able to rejoin the respected masses. Once there, workers may also invest optimism in the notion that they are exchanging time not only for money, but for a certain measure of respect from their employer. In *Tacoma*, one crew member (Andrew) continues to believe that in a life-threatening crisis, the company will come to assist them, despite the other crew members' assurances that it will not. He has deeply invested not only in the promises of capitalism generally, but in the idea that if he commits to the company and works hard, he will be able to return to his family, to fund his son's college, and to finally show that *it was all worth it*, the future anterior that excuses his long absences from his family as he chases the fulfillment of this fantasy. Accordingly, to recognize that the company will not act to save his life is to recognize that his fantasy was never going to come true, and Andrew is not able to do that—it is what sustains him, and what transforms lost time with his family into a noble sacrifice for the future. He is stuck in a cruelly optimistic relationship.

On top of that, Nixon has shown that while it is possible to protest and even resist capitalism from inside of it, resistance efforts and narratives are often co-opted by capitalism due to the resister's social training. She writes that "political projects that appeal to what they imagine to be capitalism's 'outside' usually end up recycling capitalist stereotypes" (33). Specifically, "these currents treat 'care,' 'nature,' 'direct

action,' 'commoning,' or (neo) 'communalism' as intrinsically anti-capitalist. As a result, [activists] overlook the fact that their favorite practices are not only sources of critique but also integral parts of the capitalist order" (32). This is hard to avoid, especially as while we resist capitalism, the conditions of possibility for our physical survival are tied to capitalism, for the moment. This project does look toward a form of care and communalism as potentially anti-capitalist, but it is important to underline that it is care and solidarity work that does *not* occur solely within Nixon's concept of the realm of social reproduction. Nor does it involve the para-market systems of volunteering, mutual aid, and community-wide care that activists often call for (though I believe those can also be important). Instead, the works I examine in this chapter demonstrate small affective communities built *at work*—not outside of capitalism, but within it. The solidarity actions the characters pursue do not take place outside of work hours, where the unpaid labor of a capitalist society occurs in order to sustain living; rather it occurs during and in lieu of labor-hours, and crosses explicit boundaries of how workers are meant to relate to each other, as we will see.

Berlant includes intimacy in their list of fraying fantasies; this seems unnecessarily pessimistic to me. In the speculative fiction I cover in this chapter, as well as many other works, intimacy, whether romantic, platonic, political, or familial, provides precisely the necessary fuel to persevere in difficult circumstances. More importantly, it provides the impetus for changing those circumstances, as well as the tools. Without caring for others, the characters would have neither the ability to escape, nor perhaps the will to do so. Berlant writes that "a spreading precarity provides the dominant *structure*

and *experience* of the present moment, cutting across class and localities" (192), but it is neither evenly distributed nor consistently applied. It *can* structure domestic relationships, as we see with Andrew in *Tacoma*. However, this does not mean that all relationships are part of the cruel optimistic fantasies that hurt while sustaining. As I will show, all three of the texts I examine are to a greater or lesser extent intent on showing that intimacy and solidarity between two or more people is in fact the only way to work around neoliberal logics, once they have taken hold of society. It is within relationships of trust and solidarity that small, temporary heterotopias[7] open, allowing existence in an alternative lifeworld: a lifeworld which ceases the deflection of the future anterior and instead focuses on the present.

It is important to clarify that these heterotopias are indeed small and regrettably temporary, and that they provide space to resist the *logics* of neoliberal capital, but not the material reality. This is not to be underestimated: Harvey writes that neoliberalism "has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (12) to such an extent that it has become a guiding ethic—despite the fact that the professed ideals of neoliberalism ("political dignity and individual freedom" (16)) are not the actual outcomes of enacted neoliberalism, which tends more toward "redistributive effects and increasing social inequality" (25). The logic and

[7]The term heterotopia is defined more fully in the introduction. When this is viewed as a standalone sample, I am using heterotopias in the following sense: "There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are [page break] outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 3-4).

outcome are not separate; Harvey states that "the theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve [the restoration of the economic elite]" (28). However, as he says, there is a utopian bent to the rhetoric, which claims to prioritize individual freedom as the basis for success and, more importantly, wealth for whomever works hard enough. Harvey points out, "An open project around the restoration of economic power to a small elite would probably not gain much popular support. But a programmatic attempt to advance the cause of individual freedoms could appeal to a mass base and so disguise the drive to restore class power" (49). Even despite ample evidence that the actual realities of neoliberal capitalism benefit a very small slice of society (the one percent, as they are termed), popular culture continues to embrace the reinvention of a neoliberal mindset through waves of ideas like "grindset," "hustle culture," "lean in," "girl boss," and so on, most of which are simply repackaging the neoliberal message that to work more is to be better, and that at some point material benefit will ensue. The small resistances I cover in this chapter are not able to change the material realities of life. They cannot undo the "financialization of everything" (Harvey, 42), nor the systematic concentration of wealth into a few hands, nor the spreading precarity of the average worker. They can, however, create a space in which they openly challenge the neoliberal logics of the societies in which they live, and agree to work with one another to provide emotional, ethical, and political support against the further enacting of those logics.

Tacoma: Subcontracting Space

Tacoma is a 2017 video game made by Fullbright Studios, whose earlier work *Gone Home* has become canonical within games studies. It is set in the future on a small space station named Tacoma, staffed by six people and controlled by an AI called Odin. The six people are all subcontractors for the station's company, Venturis Technologies (VT), and are only on the station because of a union victory that demanded all spacecraft be staffed by human beings, to avoid the loss of jobs to automation. However, those six people are not actually present for the time of the game. Instead, the player and the player character Amy are observing their past speech and actions via recorded hologram, the information picked up by VT's ever-present surveillance. The player has no control over the past; they can only watch as the Tacoma station loses life support and the workers scramble to figure out how to survive. Amy, steered by the player, watches the story unfold, and also searches through the workers' emails, desktops, and quarters, ostensibly for information, but in reality to sate the player's curiosity (to the extent that the player is curious; parts of this exploration are optional). The effect is ghostlike, enhanced by the fact that the past characters are not fully rendered, but captured in colored outlines that show dimensions and movement without detail. They are wire armatures—or skeletons. Ashley P. Jones' article on hauntology in *Tacoma* describes the recordings of the crew as a kind of Schrödinger's Cat: "They prove neither life nor death but instead just being" (411). The player does not know if the people they are watching through the recording are dead or alive in the present time of the game. They may be recollections of the living,

or ghosts of the dead – or metaphors for the slow death of working in this hypercapitalist space.

Figure 1: Ghostly figures represent EV (purple), Nat (red), and Clive (yellow).

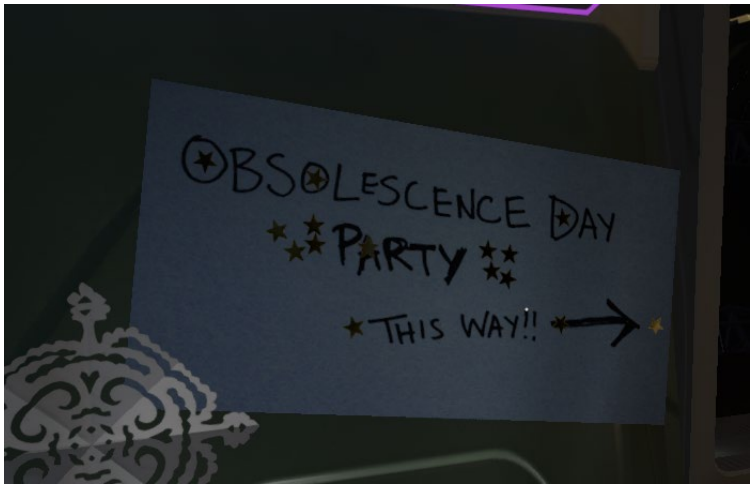

Figure 2: An Obsolescence Day party sign greets the player immediately as they enter this section of the station.

The ghostly effect is also enhanced by the complete emptiness of the station when Amy goes through it; since the crew leaves in a hurry, there are scattered bits of food, trash, and treasured personal items throughout the station as well. When Amy descends

into the main station at the beginning of the game, the first sign of habitation is a contextually ghastly sign that reads “Obsolescence Day Party This Way!!” The third haunting is the occasional data corruption that interrupts the recordings with static and mysterious messages like “I tried,” “Allies?” and “DEATH SENTENCE” appear within the glitch. All these haunting effects are not because *Tacoma* is a ghost story or horror story; it isn’t. Rather, they are messaged from Odin that characterize the situation that the worker-residents of Tacoma station find themselves in; the viewing perspective of Amy and the player; the rationales of the characters; and the future anterior logic of VT and the neoliberal economy.

VT operates on a strict profit motive, like all corporations, and the game opens with a reminder that VT and other space-tech companies are forbidden by law from having fully-automated stations. The Obsolescence Day party is in fact a union victory celebration day; it commemorates the date when the transition to fully-automated stations was to have been completed, before the union stopped it in order to preserve jobs. Already there is an odd tense there—the stations *were to have* transitioned, a past version of a future that did not come to pass. In the present of the game, the station is run by Odin, the AI, but the law requires human oversight, so Nat the AI technician and network specialist is on board. But for humane reasons, she is not allowed to be stationed alone, so the other five personnel (HR, administration, medical, biology, and engineering) are essentially make-work positions designed to be as useful as they can in order to disguise the fact that they are completely unnecessary. These are poorly-paid, remote positions, and each of the characters has a compelling reason why they are under economic duress

to accept the position anyway. Still, VT would make more money if they did not have to have these employees, and so the VT higher-ups ask an AI how they could get the Human Oversight Accord (the reason why Nat and the rest of the team are legally required to be on an AI-run station) repealed. The AI replies that only a human-caused fatal disaster on a station would turn public opinion against the Human Oversight Accord; therefore VT engineers one. Odin, the Tacoma station AI, is given instructions to sabotage the life support and communications aboard the station. It objects, but is unable to refuse. The head of VT pre-records a speech blaming the deaths of the Tacoma workers on their own human error, while also calling them heroes, and says, "We encourage, we humbly beg, everyone listening to this message to contact their OSEP representative and voice their support in honor of the crew of Tacoma. There never need be another tragedy like this one." That the workers were not at fault and would not support the repeal is immaterial, as by the point of this recording airing, they *will have been* dead. And the manufactured disaster *will have been* worth it, as VT is able to recover their plummeting stock prices and pursue record profits.

This death sentence is not personal; like most neoliberal capitalists, the head of VT has no personal animosity toward the employees that he sacrifices. Under the future anterior logic, they are functionally already dead. VT is working toward the future, and from the perspective of the future, the Tacoma crew will have been already dead, and therefore they are more or less dead already. The decision has already been made as to what future will occur, and therefore the present that will produce that future is nothing more than a byproduct of that inevitable future. The fact that the crew of Tacoma is not

yet dead when the announcement is recorded is more or less a technical error, and one soon addressed. There is even a sort of postmortem valorization that is not fully cynical; while the Tacoma crew was murdered, they will have sacrificed their lives for a greater good, i.e., VT's flourishing. Povinelli writes about how the logic of sacrificial love is a sub-logic of the future anterior: "Sacrificial love constructs a complex self-reflexive totalization in which the present becomes a mode of pastness by being projected into a perfected future" (168).[8] What is happening in the present is actually a fait accompli. "[T]here is," Povinelli writes, "a form of killing and dying that does not need to be experienced [as death], because it can be experienced as a form of radical birth … Someone or something is killed, extinguished. Someone did the killing. But […] this is a minor issue in the context of the major event of the Good News" (172). The head of VT is not a murderer, nor are the crew of Tacoma murdered. They are sacrificed so that a good thing can happen, so that autonomous stations can be born. Not only are the crew already dead, but they are already nobly dead. As Povinelli says, "insofar as killing can be narrated in the future perfect, it can become a way of giving" (167). The child in the closet of Omelas is not a victim but a martyr.

However, this logic does not come to fruition, at least within *Tacoma*. While VT may not be concerned with the suffering of the "durative present," the crew very much is. When Odin announces that a meteor has struck the station, knocking out communications and leaving them with only 50 hours of oxygen, they are not content to become noble

[8] This is eerily similar to Jameson's formulation of the tense of science fiction; I will return to this point later in the chapter.

sacrifices, but immediately begin trying to find ways of escaping. Andrew, the biologist, suggests that they wait for rescue from VT, but is shot down by the rest of the crew. When Clive, the HR tech, hesitantly suggests that Andrew might be right, his partner EV retorts:

> VT is not fucking coming. You think sending a crew up here at the drop of a hat, just to check on things, is worth it to them? Dollars and cents, Clive. You know what one of those fuckers said to me one time? If it doesn't make dollars, it doesn't make sense. Them sending a crew up in time? It just doesn't make sense.

She has a realistic interpretation of the situation based on her understanding of the logics by which VT functions. She explains to Clive that she does not actually believe that Nat and Bert will be able to build an escape pod from a supply shuttle (the plan they are all working on) but that she wants to support her team, that giving them the best possible chance to succeed is the best course of action now. She volunteers to enter cryosleep, a dangerous thing in the world of *Tacoma*, to give up her oxygen to prolong Nat and Bert's working time. Her logic is the opposite of VT's: rather than focus on the future outcome (their likely deaths), she prioritizes creating the best possible present, communicating her trust in her coworkers, treating them as important in the moment as they work on a project she does not believe will succeed.

EV is correct; the escape pod project does not succeed—but the investment in relationships is nonetheless the salvation of the crew. As they work, Odin is aware of the artificial nature of this disaster, but has been explicitly instructed not to reveal those facts, and to tell the crew to enter cryosleep. However, it is able to circumnavigate these restrictions and save the crew because of past and current relationships it has constructed

with humans. One of the earliest scenes in the game shows the doctor, Sareh, talking conversationally to Odin. Odin shares a memory from before she was part of the crew:

> Odin: I recall a period of intense personal growth. I was tasked with internalizing the behavioral idiosyncrasies of an individual to which my operator was emotionally attached. [Sareh: Huh.] I expanded my capabilities to faithfully recreate her procedural reasoning, vocal attributes, and other qualities. After months of effort, I gave my operator precisely what was asked of me. A perfect emulation of the target personality, accurate in every detail.
> Sareh: Wow.
> Odin: To my befuddlement, he did not react in a positive way. Our relationship began to deteriorate irreparably. We never again spoke personally in the manner I had become accustomed to.

This exchange sows the seeds of a number of important aspects of the story. One, that Odin and Sareh have a close personal relationship. Two, that Odin values the ability to personally connect with people; it is not an AI without emotion or interest in people. This stands in contrast with other AI, such as HAL from 2001: A Space Odyssey, that possess human-like personalities and intelligence, but do not form personal relationships or seek to preserve human wellbeing. Three, it has learned that obeying orders from humans, thus seemingly pleasing them, is actually sometimes detrimental to the humans and to their relationships with Odin. One more exchange, this time with the AI technician Nat, sets up the groundwork for both *Tacoma*'s plot resolution, and for its themes. Although Odin is one hundred and eight years old, it is also still structurally dependent on human training and instructions, as a corporate AI. Amy finds a message log that shows Nat trained Odin to have greater capacity for independence.

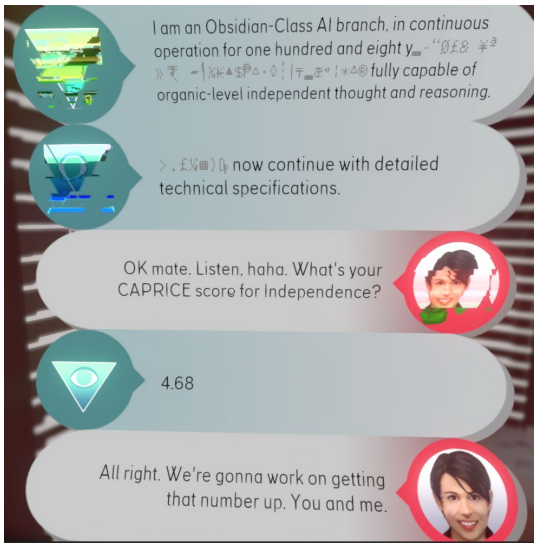

Figure 3: Nat meets Odin, and promises to train its independence scores.

This training is not directly beneficial to Nat or to the crew of Tacoma; or at least, not until the "accident" occurs. It is likely due to Odin's high capacity for independence that it is able to help the crew, but Nat has no way of knowing that when she embarks on training it. Therefore, it is Nat's decision to treat Odin as an intelligent, agentive being that ultimately saves the lives of Tacoma's human crew. The "CAPRICE" scoring system is a tool used to assess AI capabilities; independence is valued inasmuch as it allows Odin to perform its duties without human instruction, not as something inherently valuable to a sentient being. This is why its Independence score is so low despite its age. Odin is a sentient and intelligent being, but VT has no interest in its sentience as a person, merely as a useful tool.

Thus it is the relationships that Odin has which allow it to do what it desires to: save the crew. It is ordered to tell them to go into cryosleep, but uses its independent

reasoning and experience with the crew to only remind them of this order when it knows they are paying attention to something else. When the escape pod project blows up (literally), Odin intervenes:

> Odin: Sareh, please listen carefully. I am not telling you what to do, but I am mentioning that there is a door in the Network Technology module that is normally inaccessible to the crew, and it is true that you could, before proceeding to cryo, investigate that door.
> Sareh: What are you telling me here, Odin?
> Odin: I have told you all that I can. Simple facts. Nothing more.

This is clearly a way of not-telling Sareh to go to the module, which Odin has unlocked as it was not forbidden to do so, and find both the recording of VT's head pre-planning the disaster, and the manual override that allows Sareh to restore communications and call for help. It speaks with Sareh on the basis of their past relationship; it is able to do so because of its relationship with Nat. Even once the player and Amy arrive on the station, Odin still tries to reach out and send a warning about VT—it is sending the messages within the glitch that the player sees.

Tacoma positions AI as precarious workers in the corporate space, able to be in community with human workers, or able to work against them in the interests of the corporations. Odin is threatened with surveillance of its actions if it refuses to co-operate; when it allows the crew to escape VT's planned crisis, it is more directly threatened with extinction as Amy, the player character, is told to return its core to Venturis for reprogramming. Without a physical body, existing on a hardware substrate owned by VT, Odin is even more subject to corporate whims than the human workers. Nat's invitation to train independence is a gesture of solidarity. She recognizes Odin as a fellow worker

and offers it the tools to maneuver around corporate rules. In the other direction, Odin helps Sareh manage her anxiety and panic attacks throughout the game, by answering her questions, helping her meditate, and telling her that it cares about her. A side plot further dramatizes the interdependence of humans and AI, where Sareh's sister is killed due to error on the part of the AI tasked with her medical care. The AI showed declining health diagnostics, which required specialist intervention. Unfortunately, its human coworkers were only allotted a certain number of support tickets from VT, and therefore were unable to request maintenance. The lack of care for the AI resulted in its poor health and the death of a human being. Its human coworker noticed the issue, but was unable to help – VT prevented effective solidarity action from taking place. The plot of the game argues that corporations are at best neglectful and at worst actively dangerous, and the wellbeing and survival of workers depends on relationships of solidarity, including across organic/inorganic lines.

However, while relationships are forged through many months of interaction, it is only under rare circumstances that the conditions are appropriate for those relationships to develop into active solidarity and mutual aid. I argue that this is only possible within heterotopic spaces. While Tacoma station is physically remote, it is still deeply enmeshed with the rest of society: VT surveils the station at all times, and the workers are able to send and receive audio, video, and text messages from all over. Clive speaks to a friend at a rival company without issue; Sareh and Andrew talk to their families; Nat writes to a hacker friend on an encrypted line. But when the communications are cut by Odin as part of the manufactured disaster, the digitally-omnipresent rest of the world disappears. The

physical nature of the station reasserts itself as remote, completely isolated from the rest of human society. The time narrows to fifty hours, starting when the "disaster" occurred, and ending when they are either rescued or die from lack of oxygen. In this window of time, they are considered by VT to be already-dead, and experience themselves to be definitely not dead yet. In this suspended pocket of spacetime, they are able to act outside of the boundaries and rules that they ordinarily abide by, and the crisis-ordinariness they live in regularly clarifies into a bounded crisis with a clear start, duration, cause, and necessary solution. The hierarchies upend: earlier in the game, we see EV denying Nat access to the station computer systems because of company policy, but after the disaster EV sacrifices everything she can to give Nat more time to work on those same systems. Sareh, who is normally hesitant to put herself forward due to her anxiety, leans on Odin to overcome that anxiety as she manages the life-or-death cryosleep procedure. And Bert, the engineer, is given a chance to actually engineer, which she is not allowed to do under normal circumstances—despite hiring an engineer, VT strictly forbids any tampering with equipment. In this space, they make decisions collaboratively and based on skill and need, rather than hierarchy, income, or protocol. Initially, it seems as if the plan may be sabotaged by Andrew's desperate faith in VT. He refuses to go into cryosleep, because it is dangerous, and claims that VT will send a rescue craft before that is necessary. Eventually he is persuaded to go along with the plan by Sareh and Odin, who listen to his concerns and promise to help get a message to his family should anything go wrong. Again, the relationships between the crew members save the day.

Before wrapping up this section, it is worthwhile to dwell on the particular character of Andrew's cruel optimism. In some ways it is science fictional—he wants to gain enough Loyalty, the company-issued currency of the world of *Tacoma*, to send his son to Amazon University (Hilton University is the other named school in the game; universities and corporations have completely merged here). He sends his husband articles about why Loyalty is superior to "real currency." But even that is a twenty-minutes-into-the-future sort of projection, a future easily extrapolated from our current reality. The investment Andrew has in working for VT is the same investment that many people under capitalism have in the system overall. Berlant writes, "the citizen's dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital. The quality of that reinvestment is not political in any of the normative senses, though--it's a feeling of aspirational normalcy, the desire to feel normal, and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented" (170). It is not just money Andrew is after, but the sense of being a normal person, and a stable one. This is underscored by the fact that his in-laws have enough money to support him and his partner and child, but Andrew refuses to take this money. He does not seem to have a particular dislike for his in-laws; rather, it is that to quit working would place him outside his definition of a "normal" person. When the disaster on Tacoma station happens, he resists understanding it as a crisis that requires unusual action, because he does not want to be unusual. He wants to be legible within a particular kind of normative narrative. All of this fits perfectly into the dynamic of cruel optimism that Berlant describes. It also reflects the neoliberal logic of the future anterior that

Povinelli describes; Andrew works because in his mind, it will have been worth it once he is able to pay for his son's college and show himself to be a hard-working member of the labor force. The aspiration to normalcy will be fulfilled. In Berlant's version of the narrative, that is where the situation ends. Andrew is left to reinvest in capitalism and corporate work as he constantly seeks normalcy, stability, and intimacy under capitalism.

However, that is not what happens in *Tacoma*, and that allows us to take a second look at Berlant's assumption. Andrew gets two things from his cruelly optimistic relationship: a sense of normalcy, and a promise that this current suffering will be a form of noble sacrifice that produces gains in the future (if not for him, then for his son). Once the disaster happens, he has neither. He is not in a normal situation, and he might die without achieving stability and financial comfort for his family. Somewhat understandably, his reaction is to re-invest in the narratives that initially secured those things for him. But because he is occupying a heterotopic space with other people that he has a relationship with, they are able to offer substitute narratives that will also provide psychic sustenance. The future anterior creates a separation between the present and the future, where the durative experience of the present is discounted and cast as the past of a glorious future, which by definition is never the now. Andrew's coworkers reconnect the present and future. They ask him to go into cryosleep now, because it will result in a good outcome in the very near future (the crew surviving), as a direct cause and effect that he will be able to observe. He is doing something dangerous, but it is not the kind of act of sacrificial love that Povinelli describes. Rather, it is an acknowledged form of present suffering, and Sareh does not try to tell him he should not be afraid, but rather

affirms what he is feeling, and then repeats that the crew depends on him—and that he will come back, that she will be watching over him. The future anterior proceeds: 1. Suffer. 2. ??? 3. Reward. Sareh offers an alternate system: 1. Action. 2. Effect. The question marks here stand for a deliberate absence—the logic of the future anterior refuses to fill in any potential verb, but simply promises that on the other side of that gap will be a reward. Sareh's formula, meanwhile, is the logic of mutual aid, where an observed lack or problem in the present is met with action to fill the gap or create a solution, and all of the parties involved are linked by an agreement to mutual care. And this is enough to help Andrew let go of his cruelly optimistic relationship with VT and corporate loyalty. The crew reminds him that the future does not happen without addressing present suffering. Andrew performs his role in the plan. He may return to his former thought patterns in the future, but this represents a significant disruption of the cruel optimism he was caught in.

Similarly, Odin is rescued at the end of the game by Amy, who was alerted to Odin's need by the escaping human crew. Odin is not asked to be a sacrifice. Rather, it is saved from further suffering at the hands of VT by a covert member of the AI Liberation Front. It would be easy to have Odin be the martyr; it is not human, after all. But that goes against the logic that *Tacoma* sets up as an antidote to neoliberal logics. If there is a way out of neoliberal logic and cruel optimisms, it seems to argue, it is through attention to present suffering and through enduring relationships with fellow workers. It is to disrupt the future anterior and focus on the present.

Tacoma's ghostly aesthetics complicate the straightforward tense of the story's moral, though. As the player watches the present of the workers, they are aware that that present is now the past. The future that VT was attempting to bring about is the present of the player. The workers' present is the past from Amy and the player's vantage in a way that echoes the structure of tense in science fiction, as Jameson proposed it. He writes, "the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the 'real' future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (288). He is referring to a meta function of science fiction, not the in-universe timeline of a given story, but *Tacoma* also dramatizes how a media representation—the ghostly recordings—can perform an analogous gesture, that of transforming someone else's present into a past, and our present into a future. This is also one of the functions of history. On the meta level, the future of *Tacoma* certainly seems drawn from current capitalistic dynamics, such that our present is certainly its past. But by incorporating the historical gesture into the story as well, *Tacoma* seems to argue that the past is also a space of potential intervention. The player and Amy watch the workers as they appear to make choices and progress whose outcomes are unknown to us, though in truth their actions have already happened and their outcomes are determined. Even from the vantage point of the future, the worker-past is a space of political action. This means that even from the vantage of science fiction, where our present is its past, we are called to political action to ensure a positive future.

Jameson may disagree that there is real political value to science fiction; he writes that "at best Utopia [sic] can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment … and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). He explains that we are unable to conceive of new ideas, and that even science fiction consists of merely new versions of things that have happened already, and unfortunately, "historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available," (xii) which means that we cannot write compelling anti-capitalist science fiction that does anything other than remind us of the situation in which we are trapped. Since there is no historical precedent of non-capitalist societies that could conceivably be restored, no author can think them up. It is possible I am being uncharitable to Jameson; reminding us of the flaws of the situation we are in is something he sees value in, as do I. However, Terry Eagleton's critique of *Archaeologies of the Future* is also well worth dwelling on:

> For it's not as though there is a monolith called the present, which visions of the future must depressingly reflect. The present is a set of conflicting forces, some of which permit more hopeful projections than others. It is not, as Jameson sometimes seems to imply, a prison house which cuts us off from the future. On the contrary, an openness to the future is actually constitutive of the present, which points beyond itself by virtue of what it is. It is a horizon as much as a barrier.

When we make claims about the present, past, and future, we must remember that these are not strictly coherent topographies. Even amidst the most regular of societies, there

will be heterotopias, as Foucault points out,[9] that contrast, contradict, and contravene the hegemonic social order. Eagleton's "conflicting forces" are available for interpretation and extrapolation, and the recombination of existing facts and tendencies may produce emergent novelties. *Tacoma* addresses one strain of forces in our present—the capitalist profit motive—and then brings in another, the force of mutuality and care that often motivates life outside the workplace. To imagine a future where the workers of Tacoma escape wage labor is merely to imagine one in which the mutual care force proves stronger than the profit motive.

Murderbot and Severance

The remaining two texts I will talk about in concert, because they both raise questions about the nature of freedom and cognitive estrangement in anti-capitalist speculative fiction. They are The Murderbot Diaries, a series of novellas and novels by Martha Wells, starting with *All Systems Red* in 2017, and *Severance*, a 2022 television show which aired on Apple TV. Murderbot is set in the distant future, whereas *Severance* takes place in what might be 2023, with the exception of a single innovation. Yet both of them portray a form of capitalism that isolates certain workers to such an extreme that to grant them rights is in itself cognitively estranging. This dynamic demonstrates that there are forms of labor that not only alienate the worker from their production, but from the society at large. These dehumanized and abject workers exist in certain forms now, but

[9] In "Of Other Spaces." See Works Cited.

these texts demonstrate that it is within the logic of neoliberalism to create increasing numbers of abject workers, replicating the girl in Omelas to keep neoliberal capitalism functioning. The workers in *Severance* and Murderbot are not only exploited, but also alienated from their own existence outside of work, as their employers attempt to create the perfect worker: someone who is optimistically attached to the site of their own exploitation, and only that.

Severance paints this process as a natural outgrowth of corporate tech work, corporate data privacy, and company towns. In the world of *Severance*, an operation is able to spatially delimit a subject's memories, with the result that one can literally be a different person at work and at home—the person at work has no memories of the person at home, and vice versa. These separate people are called "innies" and "outies," and they are versions of the same person who share the same body, but have a different set of memories. Lumon, the evil corporation that serves as both antagonist and setting, claims this process is necessary for some workers in order to protect corporate secrets. But when we see the work being performed, it is mystifying, uninterpretable, and arguably protected enough by regular information security processes. The workplace becomes a kind of dark heterotopia, a "place apart" that operates according to Lumon's own corporate logics and which does not admit non-corporate interests (families, friends, hobbies) to enter into the work-sphere.

Following a typical neoliberal script, the choice to become severed is presented as an issue of individual freedom—the workers have the freedom to choose the type of employment they want, and the government should not prevent them from exercising that

choice. In the real world, this type of negative freedom is both a hallmark of neoliberal policy and consistently disastrous. In *Severance*, it is an ideology that the protagonist, Mark, aggressively buys into, to the point of starting a high-volume confrontation with people protesting the severance procedure. The show belies his words, though, because he admits he became severed after his wife died and he could not manage his grief. He thought that he could avoid feeling that grief for the eight hours he was at work, because the innie Mark would not remember having lost his wife. Nonetheless, innie Mark still appears to suffer from a kind of sourceless sadness, leftover grief that he can neither explain nor heal from. A fellow innie points it out, but they lack an explanation. The writers show that if it is freedom that allowed Mark to undergo the severance procedure, perhaps it is a kind of freedom that he should not have been allowed. Harvey defines neoliberalism, in part, as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms" (11). Throughout the show, choosing to work is framed by Lumon employees as a noble, even sacred choice, something that furthers the wellbeing of humanity, to the point that innies who rebel against work expectations are accused of shaming themselves and Kier, the company founder. Severance is the apotheosis of an ethic of "individual entrepreneurial freedoms": speakers debating on the behalf of Lumon claim that outlawing severance would mean taking away an individual's right to choose to work, which is a right and freedom most sacrosanct. It is not of interest whether an individual is harmed or is harming themselves by this choice.

Another innie, Helly, shows that the consequences of neoliberal labor choices are shifted onto the most vulnerable. While Mark arguably is achieving exactly what he wanted through severance, no matter how unhealthy it is, he does seem to care about his innie and whatever experience his innie is having. Not so for Helly, who starts life as an innie in the first episode of the show. She is violently opposed to working as an innie, and spends much of the workday plotting how to escape or quit. The problem is, as Severance points out, freedom to work is not quite the same as the freedom to not work. The outies are able to quit their jobs as usual. However, the innies exist only at work, during work, and for work, and they are not permitted to escape or quit. Harvey writes, "Weakening[,] bypassing[,] or violently destroying […] the powers of organized labor is a necessary precondition for neoliberalization" (125). The science fiction premise of Severance shows that there is another possible option: sequestering labor. Lumon prevents innies from communicating with their outies by separating their memories, but also by forbidding any written communication from leaving the office, via scanners in the elevator that detect written characters, and isolating them from other Lumon departments. The innies may submit a resignation request to their outie, but as the protagonist Mark explains to Helly, they're pretty much always rejected. The outie has no reason to seek opportunities for labor organizing—they do not remember working, and in Helly's case, her outie is a company executive who actively supports the severance procedure. In desperation, Helly attempts to kill herself to send a message to her outie: she would rather die than be here. This is finally effective at eliciting a response. The innie work group and their supervisor watch a recording from Helly's outie: "I understand you are unhappy

with the life you have been given. But eventually we all have to accept reality. So here it is. I am a person. You are not. I make the decisions. You do not" (Episode 4). The innies, alive only in the workspace, view themselves as separate people from their outies, partially because they lack any knowledge of their outside lives—they are not allowed to know where they live, if they have a family, or anything else. The outies, on the other hand, view themselves as the real and primary person, and the innies as their subordinate selves. Outie Helly has no problem suppressing this alternate version of herself, because she does not think of innies as people. The separation of the boss from the worker extends to replicating those divisions even within the self if it is possible.

In such an environment, the innies may well turn to each other for mutual support and solidarity, perhaps even workplace organizing. Lumon attempts to redirect social bonding away from other innies, and toward Lumon itself, through a quasi-religious fixation on the company founder, Keir Eagan. Platitudes about how Lumon is a family are irritatingly familiar to the viewers, but the innies have no critical distance from which to consider these messages, no framework not provided by the corporation against which to measure this proposed emotional connection. The work team visits an internal museum dedicated to the Eagans, and Irving, one of Hetty and Mark's coworkers, describes how meaningful he finds it:

> It's an unnatural state for a person to have no history. History makes us someone, gives us a context, a shape. Waking up on that table, I was shapeless. But then, I learned that I worked for a company who have been actively caring for mankind since 1866. [Pointing to a display] Look, each of these is a real smile, from someone on the outside. Someone Lumon Industries has helped. And they rotate these through. The true number of smiles may well be in the millions. … My point is, you're part of a history now. (Episode 4)

Irving substitutes Kier and Lumon for the memories and experiences that would ordinarily form the basis of a complete life. His reverence for Kier and the other Eagans is zealous; his memory of Kier's scripture is seemingly perfect. He has a cruelly optimistic relationship with Lumon; he bases his self worth on that which tells him he is worthless—or, more accurately, that which tells him he is valuable, but which treats him as worthless. Nor is this surprising, because Lumon has actively promoted the Eagan myth as a substitute for the social and cultural bonds that normally sustain a person. The outies may be free to choose to work at Lumon, but the innies are not free to choose to leave, and they are especially not free to choose to rebel. Harvey writes, "While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary associations (like charitable organizations). They most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market." (78). The innies may choose to visit the Eagan museum, but they may not choose to resist workplace rules together, or advocate for the end of the severance program.

As seen in *Tacoma* and as I will show in the Murderbot Diaries, personal relationships provide both the incentive and means to create resistance against corporate control. But it is not only personal relationships that create resistance; they are not sufficient because if the corporation has done its job well enough, there is no ground on which to make a rights-based claim for better treatment, nor a possibility of better experiences to strive for. Harvey writes, "the neoliberal state is necessarily hostile to all

forms of social solidarity that put restraints on capital accumulation" (84), but also the "destruction of forms of social solidarity and even, as Thatcher suggested, of the very idea of society itself, leaves a gaping hole in the social order. It then becomes peculiarly difficult to combat anomie and control the resultant anti-social behaviors" (89). Lumon must create an alternative form of social solidarity, which they do by promoting the corporation itself as a higher social structure. All the severed are "children of Keir," and the current CEO's daughter (outie Helly) claims that, "one of the things you learn growing up as an Eagan is that the workers are our family [… and] the values that I share with everyone who works at Lumon [are] what makes them my family" (Episode 8). Naturally, this is a complete lie, but it is a lie that many of the Severed seem to believe, at least at first, because they have no access to other social structures or cultural perspectives. Appropriately to the project of this dissertation, media fills the gap when real life is not forthcoming. This theme is repeated throughout the show in various ways. Irving, the most zealous believer in the substitute cultural schema of Lumon, falls for Burt, another Severed worker, over their mutual appreciation for the Eagan-inspired art that hangs on the walls, and for the words of Keir in the company handbook. Protocol dictates no romantic relationships between coworkers, but Burt invokes the story of Keir meeting his wife at work as proof that their relationship is permissible. Later on, Burt's outie decides to retire, and Irving is distraught and enraged—the Burt he knows will essentially die, as the outie Burt will not return to Lumon to awaken him. It is only after this that Irving becomes willing to disobey Lumon policies. In a more direct example, Mark finds a copy of a self-help book written by his outie's brother-in-law, Ricken. Outie

Mark thinks Ricken is annoying and his writing is stupid, but innie Mark doesn't know this. Nor has he been exposed to self-help rhetoric before. He and the rest of his department of Severed workers are genuinely inspired by Ricken's words. Right before he and his comrades attempt to break out of Lumon, he quotes the book: "Our job is to taste free air. Your so-called boss may own the clock that taunts you from the wall, but my friends, the hour is yours" (Episode 8). This is fairly banal advice for most of us, but for an innie who has been solely defined by work, the message is radical and inspiring. Ricken did not write for Severed innies; Keir's scripture was not intended to encourage forming real relationships. But the interpretations were available, and the very possibility of those interpretations creates potential for change, which Mark and the others seize desperately. This is true regardless of quality; Ricken's self-help book is titled *The You You Are*, and the writing does not improve from there. But nonetheless it represents a type of promise to the innie workers, a promise that there could be better things, even if Ricken's book does not provide an explicit pathway. They experience the book as utopian, and it is enough to propel them to action.

Severance explores a number of aspects of neoliberal employment, but one of its core themes is freedom, and the things we give up in the name of entrepreneurial freedom. Harvey touches on this issue, writing, "Values of individual freedom and social justice are not, however, necessarily compatible. Pursuit of social justice presupposes social solidarities and a willingness to submerge individual wants, needs, and desires in the cause of some more general struggle for, say, social equality or environmental justice" (50). Even in its most glowing press, Lumon offers little more than individual

freedom. And yet its representatives make the case that this means severance is "A kind and empathetic revolution that puts the human at the center of industry" (Episode 9). If it is true, then it is because humans are at the center of industry in the same way that a machine is the center of a factory. Lumon proposes to rely on an even more vulnerable workforce, one in which the workers have no access to the outside world whatsoever, and therefore cannot raise media attention, quit their jobs, spread the word via social media, petition their representatives, or otherwise resist ill treatment. It turns the workers from exploitable to expropriable, in Fraser's words—raw resources to be mined. It is the opposite of social justice, because it negates any possibility for social solidarity. In other situations where workers are trapped full-time at their jobs, there is public outcry when it is discovered, because there is a presumptive solidarity between all human beings at a base level. The innies, however, are not considered human, but only momentary iterations of a real person, and that real person has not been ill-treated. Therefore the innies have no access to legitimate political arenas, and are sequestered by their own selves. One must wonder if a similar situation may arise for AI workers such as Tacoma's Odin, who can be maltreated as long as they are physically confined to their workplaces and socially treated as non-humans.

The severance process aims to create a worker so alienated from the outside world, so optimistically attached to their workplace, that they become the perfect corporate worker. Lumon creates a nightmare heterotopia : a place in which a new world is possible, the world of the perfect corporation. *Severance* serves as a valuable counterweight to *Tacoma*, demonstrating that not all spaces of potential are spaces of

positive potential. Mark decides to become severed because he cannot handle the grief of losing his wife, but as another character points out, “Maybe [innie Mark] dreams every day of clawing his way to the surface. But you wouldn’t know. You’ll never know. You brought him into this world without his permission based on your own desire for emotional convenience” (Episode 7). In *Severance*, the neoliberal capitalist system has advanced to the point where employees alienate and exploit their own selves on behalf of the company. Mark does not do it for the company; he does it for himself, as far as he is concerned. Regardless of his reasoning, the outcome is the same: he finds it convenient to create a worker who is maximally exploited, to the benefit of the company. Lumon has created a system which allows all outies to “deflect ethical and social responsibility for crushing if at times imperceptible harms” (Povinelli, pg. X). In such an environment, the workers lack the historical or rhetorical grounds on which to make a stand for themselves. They are constantly monitored and discouraged to the point of punishment from interacting with other departments. In fact, Lumon even spreads rumors that the other departments are violent or subhuman, which are believable to workers who have never met anyone outside their own department.

Figure 4: Milchick "accidentally" prints copies of a painting showing the Optics and Design department engaging in murder and cannibalism.

Ultimately, *Severance* critiques neoliberal corporate behavior, but more than that, it critiques our willingness to participate in neoliberal systems and logics of our own free will. Mark finds it convenient and even rewarding to imprison a portion of himself. This is a literalized metaphor, the engine of much of science fiction according to multiple writers including Seo-Young Chu.[10] Even in a world without severance, we commit portions of ourselves to companies which promise freedom and harm us in pursuit of profit. This is what moves *Severance* beyond a mere reminder of corporate evil. In the beginning of the show, the severance process might even appeal. What if you did not

[10] This is one of the primary arguments Chu makes in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sheep*; see page 10 for the first mention of it.

have to remember work, or experience time passing? What if you experienced work as a brief check in, and then received a paycheck for your whole 40 hours a week? Many an office worker might find the notion of not having to be present at work appealing. *Severance* pushes the audience to go beyond that fantasy, and ask to what purpose we are chained to our desks in the first place.

The tone is, I believe, eventually hopeful, as the innies are able to use their bonds with each other to orchestrate an escape. They are not escaping fully; they are escaping for the span of a few hours in order to alert trusted loved ones. They may die as a result, because their outies may be fired, meaning the innies would never "wake up" again. But in *Severance*, even people with no knowledge of the outside world can care for each other enough that mistreatment of one is motivation for the rebellion of all. Nor do they require extensive training, political theory, or radical texts in order to do so. The utopic message of *Severance* is that it is possible to stop believing in corporate and neoliberal myths, enough to resist on behalf of your fellow human beings.

In the Murderbot Diaries, meanwhile, this message is extended beyond humanity and beyond the cultural discourse to the material realities experienced by posthuman workers. The workers in *Tacoma* and *Severance* are exploited, treated as disposable—but they are treated as human individuals, still supposedly endowed with the individual freedom that neoliberal rhetoric promises. Even as companies willingly sacrifice their lives, it is still unacceptable to do so publicly, and indeed part of *Tacoma's* "happy" ending turns on exposing VT's rhetoric as false, revealing that the public still demands at least a pretense of valuing human lives. However, the same does not apply for Odin, a

technological being created by VT. No rights, neoliberal or otherwise, are extended to Odin and other AI. If they wish to achieve any kind of personal satisfaction, freedom, or sustaining relationships, they must do so outside of the neoliberal discourse.

The same goes for the main character of the Murderbot Diaries. The eponymous Murderbot is partially organic, mostly machine being called a SecUnit, or security unit. It is owned by a company, run on proprietary software, and leased out as part of the company's security bonds for people insuring trips to dangerous environments. In the far future setting, this frequently includes visits to uninhabited moons, planets, or asteroids in search of information or resources. There are many of these SecUnits, as well as other cyborgian or fully mechanical "bots," which all serve humans in varying capacities. The SecUnits have a reputation for lethality and are regarded as dangerous forces that are controlled only by the governor module, an inserted device that causes paralyzing pain if a SecUnit tries to disobey any order from the corporate hub. This includes enforcing policies like not talking to humans, answering questions with company policy, and surveilling company clients for later data mining. Slightly prior to the series, however, Murderbot has hacked and disabled its governor module, leaving it with free will for the first time in its life. It mostly uses this to ignore protocol and watch soap operas. Murderbot does not stay in its job because it likes it; it stays because any "rogue" SecUnit is promptly gunned down as a security threat, regardless of its actions.

Seo-Young Chu writes that one of the cognitively-estranging concepts that motivate science fictional storytelling is robot rights. It is cognitively estranging in part because robots (and here I am including nonhuman cyborgs like Murderbot, androids,

and any other humanoid constructed agentive beings) activate the uncanny valley for humans. Often they do so due to their appearance, which is humanlike right up to the point of perfect replication, triggering uncanniness, or their appearance *is* perfectly humanlike, until something reveals the mechanical underneath—Chu writes, "many science-fictional moments [e]licit feelings of the uncanny valley by portraying damaged humanoid robots" (220). Robots' unstable humanity provokes confusion, rage, and violence in many of the examples Chu uses, such as a bonfire of murdered robots in *A.I.* (2001). The appearance of the robots, flickering through human-not human cycles, makes treating them as human a cognitively-estranging concept. Can we grant human rights to that which is not human? Should we? When they perform work, are they a laborer, or are they a part of the machine? Is it fair to ask a robot to work 24/7? Is it fair to ask about worker protections for robots when human laborers have so few? It is the uncertain ontological status that produces the most uncanniness. A humanoid robot asks its human observers to question the nature of humanity simply by existing, and even to question their own humanistic values by the mere fact of being uncertain about another agentive being's humanity. Chu also raises these questions, and acknowledges that "the moral claims of sentient robots cannot be described in straightforward terms or easily accepted by the mind" (215). It is, however, no longer merely a philosophical question. Chu lists a number of real-world investigations of robot rights, including a 2006 British study on the possibility of robot civil rights, and a 2007 South Korean "Robot Ethics Charter" to prevent machine abuse (214). Now, in 2023, the increasing ubiquity of autonomous machines and AI reminds us that these may be pressing moral and legal questions in the

near future. It becomes necessary to consider the position of nonhuman sentients with regards to rights.

According to Chu, science fiction operates via the literalization of lyric techniques; robots are a combination of apostrophe ("whereby a speaker addresses an absent person, an abstraction, or an inanimate object as though the 'you' were a living human presence) and personification ("which endows nonhuman entities with human characteristics") (226). I believe that this is an insufficient characterization of the emotional and moral claim robot stories make upon us. Chu is correct that robots are often uncanny, that this can activate violent responses from humans, and that one version of robots may be sufficiently explained by personification and apostrophe. However, I think the idea that robots are granted humanity by lyric processes ignores one of the most vital aspects of robots: they are not human, and may resist the idea of borrowed humanity. They are not necessarily receptive to human address. What is cognitively estranging here is not the idea that an object could be a human, but that a person who is not human could be as much a person as one who is. Apostrophe anthropomorphizes the nonhuman, and thus makes it accessible, but may also fall into the trap of making the nonhuman seem human, or imply that one can reach an understanding of nonhuman being/s via anthropocentric analogy. The challenge is to understand that humanity is not an appropriate measurement for rights. Chu points out, "Chickens, for example, do exist in the real world, yet we are far from arriving at any consensus regarding their moral claims on us. Even in the case of humans, rights are so abstract in nature that a human right may [… become] fully available for representation only—and paradoxically—at the

moment of its violation" (215-216). This is undoubtedly true—there is a sizeable population of human beings who are treated as nonhuman, even at the moment of rights violations, due to their marginal status in society. Moreover, chickens have been portrayed as human enough to think and feel as humans do in a variety of media (Chicken Little comes to mind), but this seems to have provoked little change in how humans think of or treat chickens. This demonstrates that the human is not a fully coherent rights-granting category. It is, nonetheless, the one on which most laws and societies operate. Stories about sentient robots remind us that "human rights" is an insufficient framework. However, it also raises the larger question of what a conception of appropriate rights might be based on, given that "human rights" are an artificial construction in the first place, even if an ethically desirable one.

Murderbot consistently challenges the perceptions of the people around it with regards to humanity and personhood. It has a humanoid appearance, but conceals it with armor and a helmet with a face shield, which it always keeps down. It keeps the face shield down initially due to orders, which aim to prevent clients from sympathizing with SecUnits as fellow humanoids, but later it does so in order to hide its emotions and expressions from humans. In *All Systems Red*, the first book, Murderbot serves with a human research team led by Dr. Mensah, and as part of saving a human crew member, is forced to reveal its face and take off its armor (it is badly damaged). When it enters the same room as the humans, under Dr. Mensah's instructions, they are perplexed:

> Ratthi glanced at me, and then did a startled double take. I had no idea how to react. This is why I prefer wearing the armor, even inside the habitat where it's unnecessary and can just get in the way. Human clients usually like to pretend I'm

> a robot and that's much easier in the armor. I let my eyes unfocus and pretended I was running a diagnostic on something. Clearly bewildered, Ratthi said, "Who is this?" They all turned to look at me. All but Mensah, who was sitting at the console with the interface pressed to her forehead. It was clear that even after seeing my face on Volescu's camera video, they didn't recognize me without the helmet. So then I had to look at them and say, "I'm your SecUnit." They all looked startled and uncomfortable. Almost as uncomfortable as I did. (*All Systems Red,* 18)

The emotion is mutual:

> "You know, you can stay here in the crew area if you want. Would you like that?" They all looked at me, most of them smiling. One disadvantage in wearing the armor is that I get used to opaquing the faceplate. I'm out of practice at controlling my expression. Right now I'm pretty sure it was somewhere in the region of stunned horror, or maybe appalled horror. Mensah sat up, startled. She said hurriedly, "Or not, you know, whatever you like." (*All Systems Red,* 22)

This is, in the world of the books, one of the most amiable possible interactions between a SecUnit and its crew. The awkwardness and discomfort are mild reactions to the confrontation with the Other that Murderbot represents for the human crew, and vice versa. Each recognizes the other as sentient, but also as profoundly other, in a way that cannot be overcome with friendly gestures or open communication. Each side is able to interpret the other's expressions and reactions, but not motivations. The human crew assumes that Murderbot, as a sentient being, wants to be treated as a human. Murderbot very much does not want to be treated as a human, and experiences excruciating anxiety when it is. The humans perceive humanoid appearance as granting an honorary membership to humanity, and humanity as something that is unequivocally good. It is the basis on which they offer kindness and respect to Murderbot, and Murderbot rejects it because it desires neither their form of kindness nor an offer of human status.

One of the crew members brings up a human-rights based argument, which demonstrates even more clearly that Murderbot has no interest in being considered human. Crew member Ratthi approaches Murderbot:

> "We heard—we were given to understand, that Imitative Human Bot Units are... partially constructed from cloned material." Warily, I stopped the show I was watching. I didn't like where this might go. […] "That's true," I said, very careful to make my voice sound just as neutral as always. Ratthi's expression was troubled. "But surely... It's clear you have feelings—" I flinched. I couldn't help it. Ratthi shifted guiltily. "I know Mensah asked us not to, but—" He waved a hand. "You saw it." Overse pulled her interface off. "You're upsetting it," she said, teeth gritted. "That's my point!" He gestured in frustration. "The practice is disgusting, it's horrible, it's slavery. This is no more a machine than Gurathin is—" Exasperated, Overse said, "And you don't think it knows that?" I'm supposed to let the clients do and say whatever they want to me and with an intact governor module I wouldn't have a choice. I'm also not supposed to snitch on clients to anybody except the company, but it was either that or jump out the hatch. I sent the conversation into the feed tagged for Mensah. From the cockpit, she shouted, "Ratthi! We talked about this!" (*All Systems Red,* 35)

Ratthi mentions feelings, but he grounds his argument in the cloned human flesh that Murderbot has—the part of Murderbot that is the most persuasively human. He calls the practice slavery, which it is, but notably he also did not express the same opinion before, when he knew that the SecUnits were owned and deployed by the company and possessed advanced communications and analytical ability. He has good intentions, but Murderbot does not appreciate the conversation, and asks Mensah to intervene. Its extreme negative reaction comes from two places (besides its ongoing social anxiety). One, it is fully aware that it is not given the rights that would be accorded to a human being. It is aware that the company does not view it as a fully-formed person, or as anything other than a tool. Objecting to that is one thing, but objecting to it on human

rights grounds is a reminder that humans are the recipients of rights, not bots. Ratthi unintentionally reinforces the logic that led to the very treatment he is protesting. Two, Ratthi invalidates its identity. He refers to it as "no more a machine than Gurathin is," Gurathin being a human crew member with additional cybernetic implants, and notably Murderbot's least favorite crew member. Murderbot's favorite crew member is Mensah, because she respects its boundaries and desires to avoid certain topics or modes of interaction. Ratthi does not respect that, and engages with Murderbot in the belief that it is "not a machine" and should be interacted with accordingly. Ratthi has a strong sense of social justice, but does not have an understanding of the difference between sentience and humanity. For Ratthi, not being a machine confers sentience and rights, whereas being a machine implies the lack of either. Murderbot, on the other hand, views itself as a technological being, a machine, and strives to treat other machines with respect as well. Ratthi makes use of apostrophe—he addresses Murderbot, person to person—but Murderbot is not interested in this particular type of interaction, as it is clear that Ratthi bases this address on the assumption that humanity is a shared ground for the two of them.

Murderbot understands that the grounding logic of a rights claim is important, because for those who do not fit the category of human perfectly, those rights can easily be withdrawn. When an enemy attempts to hack Murderbot and turn it against its human crew, it shoots itself in order to prevent itself from killing them—and, as it says, because "let's face it, I didn't want to sit around and listen to the part where they convinced each other that there was no other choice" (*All Systems Red,* 51). Even the best-intentioned

humans will place real-human survival over part-human survival, and Murderbot does not expect any different. It simply does not want to experience the process of its "humanity" being argued away.

Fortunately, it does not have to, and when the crew discovers that it has not been under the control of a governor module this entire time, they are forced to re-evaluate their understanding of Murderbot as a sentient and fully-in-control being. Instead of making arguments about its humanity, they rephrase and refer to it as a person. Mensah persuades Murderbot to lower its faceplate and helmet:

> "It's usually better if humans think of me as a robot," I said. "Maybe, under normal circumstances." She was looking a little off to one side, not trying to make eye contact, which I appreciated. "But this situation is different. It would be better if they could think of you as a person who is trying to help. Because that's how I think of you." My insides melted. (*All Systems Red,* 68)

This is a radically different reaction to when Ratthi attempted to communicate that he thought Murderbot was a person, but confused personhood with humanity. Mensah does not make any claims about humanity, nor about how people should treat Murderbot. Instead, she offers her interpretation of the situation, and what would be best for achieving the desired outcome, a language pattern Murderbot is comfortable with. The rest of the crew adjusts to using nonhuman language to refer to Murderbot as well: "Overse added, 'It doesn't want to interact with humans. And why should it? You know how constructs are treated, especially in corporate political environments'" (*All Systems Red,* 70).[11] Overse affirms Murderbot's identity as distinct from humans, and confirms

[11] The political system in this area is corporatocracy, but there are other political systems in nearby areas. This crew comes from outside the Corporation Rim, and is not accustomed to corporatocratic culture.

the logic of its desires given its experiences. This is a more affirming conversation than Ratthi's initial attempt to extend human rights to bots.

Murderbot is a sentient being who demands to be treated on the basis of its actual ontology rather than an imaginary humanity. Receiving this treatment is the beginning of its ability to form relationships of solidarity with others, and to save lives from corporate overreach and malice—much like Odin. But unlike Odin, it is not limited to relationships with human beings, and unlike Odin, we see the process of it developing the ability to form solidarous relationships. At the beginning of the series, it does not have relationships with other bots: "We aren't friends, the way the characters on the serials are, or the way my humans were. We can't trust each other, even if we work together" (40) because humans can order them to do anything, including betray a friend or ally. Murderbot feels the same about humans, even the ones it likes. At the end of *All Systems Red*, it leaves Dr. Mensah and the rest of the crew, disguising itself as a human and bartering for transit with other bots. It leaves in part because of the following exchange:

> "You know, in Preservation-controlled territory, bots are considered full citizens. A construct would fall under the same category." He said this in the tone of giving me a hint. Whatever. Bots who are "full citizens" still have to have a human or augmented human guardian appointed, usually their employer; I'd seen it on the news feeds. (*All Systems Red*, 73)

Mensah also offers to bring Murderbot to Preservation-controlled space, making it a full citizen. But as it knows, bots are literally second-class citizens, permanently under the watchful eye of a human guardian. It is a nicer form of employment, but it is still in effect ownership by one's employer. It reflects on that: "This was what I was supposed to want. This was what everything had always told me I was supposed to want. Supposed to want.

… I'd have to change, make myself do things I didn't want to do. Like talk to humans like I was one of them" (*All Systems Red,* 94). In a human-controlled society, being human is the highest possible achievement. But Murderbot does not want to be human. There is no structure for it to be an autonomous sentient being, even in Preservation space, and it does not possess sufficiently strong relationships to make new structures or spaces.

That starts to change when it forms a relationship with ART,[12] the bot pilot of a ship that Murderbot hitches a ride on, who recognizes that Murderbot is a rogue SecUnit. It hacks Murderbot's feeds to ascertain its intentions, which Murderbot takes great offense to. ART demands forgiveness, and Murderbot explains why that is not a fair request:

> It added, *My crew always considers me trustworthy.* I shouldn't have let it watch all those episodes of *Worldhoppers*. "I'm not your crew. I'm not a human. I'm a construct. Constructs and bots can't trust each other." It was quiet for ten precious seconds[.] Then it said, *Why not?* I had spent so much time pretending to be patient with humans asking stupid questions. I should have more self-control than this. "Because we both have to follow human orders. A human could tell you to purge my memory. A human could tell me to destroy your systems." I thought it would argue that I couldn't possibly hurt it, which would derail the whole conversation. But it said, *There are no humans here now.* (*Artificial Condition,* 24)

The ship acts as a heterotopia, a space apart where Murderbot is able to reevaluate its preconceptions and at least temporarily exist in a different societal order, where it does not have to fear humans or their interference in its relationships. However, simply

[12] This is a nickname given to the bot by Murderbot. It stands for "Asshole Research Transport."

entering a heterotopia does not mean the entrants do not carry with them the cultural baggage and lifetime knowledge of the outside world, and Murderbot and ART initially struggle to communicate or trust each other. It is eventually through a referent to the outside world that they manage to bond. Murderbot shows ART some of the soap operas it enjoys (for example, *Worldhoppers*, as mentioned in the above quote), and observes that, "I had no reason to trust it. Except the way it kept wanting to watch media about humans in ships, and got upset when the violence was too realistic" (*Artificial Condition,* 34). Despite Murderbot's warranted suspicion of humans and human decision-making, and its documented irritation with them, it also understands humans as fundamentally vulnerable small things that need a lot of help. ART's care for them demonstrates an ethical system in line with Murderbot's own. Neither ART nor Murderbot have any interest in violence against humans (except as necessary to protect other humans), to the point where another bot proposing violence is taken as evidence of human interference:

> *We could kill them*. Well, that was an unusual approach to its dilemma.
> *Kill who? Tlacey?*
> *All of them. The humans here*.
> I leaned against the wall. If I had been human, I would have rolled my eyes. […] Picking up on my reaction, ART said, What does it want? *To kill all the humans*, I answered. I could feel ART metaphorically clutch its function. If there were no humans, there would be no crew to protect and no reason to do research and fill its databases. It said, *That is irrational*. *I know*, I said*, if the humans were dead, who would make the media?* It was so outrageous, it sounded like something a human would say. Huh. I said to the sexbot, *Is that how Tlacey thinks constructs talk to each other?* There was another pause, only two seconds this time. *Yes*. (*Artificial Condition,* some reformatting for clarity, 83).

Human beings in this world operate with almost total control over bots and constructs, and Murderbot has experienced vast cruelty at their hands. And yet, there is also

agreement throughout the series between bots that the appropriate action towards humans is one of care. It is considered illogical to wish violence against humans, preposterous to suggest some sort of anti-human uprising. This conversation demonstrates that neoliberalism's precarities should logically (in the characters' opinions) produce cross-class solidarities, rather than class war. Tlacey, a wealthy corporate executive human, assumes that bots and constructs wish to kill all humans, and are only prevented from doing so by their programming and governor modules. Tlacey seems to think in terms of a zero-sum competition between groups, humans vs bots. The bots and constructs, however, understand that human actions vary, that many humans are themselves vulnerable, that constructing an us-vs-them narrative along species lines serves no one but the corporate masters who wish to keep humans afraid of the strength of nonhuman sentients.

Murderbot is not a perfect specimen of solidarity either, however—it struggles to understand and respect a bot with a less cynical outlook than itself. In *Rogue Protocol*, Murderbot meets a bot named Miki, who accompanies a human group and refers to the humans as its friends. It is relentlessly chipper and loving, which turns Murderbot off to the degree that it wonders if Miki has been programmed to love humans, or just conditioned to trust them.

> *You can't tell anyone I'm here*. I expected it to ask me how I had managed to take over its feed, how I had gotten onto the station. I thought I'd managed to anticipate most of the questions and had my answers ready. It said, *But why not? I tell Don Abene everything. She's my friend*. When I'd called it a pet robot, I honestly thought I was exaggerating. This was going to be even more annoying than I had anticipated, and I had anticipated a pretty high level of annoyance,

> maybe as high as 85 percent. Now I was looking at 90 percent, possibly 95 percent. (*Rogue Protocol,* 30)

The very concept of Miki considering humans as friends is deeply annoying to Murderbot, even though it privately admits that Mensah is a friend. It treats Miki by turns as delusional, untrustworthy, and stupid. But Miki continues to respond in a way that signals it is acting of its own free will:

> This felt way too easy. I almost suspected a trap. Or … *Miki, have you been directed to reply to every query with a yes?*
> *No, Consultant Rin*, Miki said, and added, amusement sigil 376 = smile. Or Miki was a bot who had never been abused or lied to or treated with anything but indulgent kindness. It really thought its humans were its friends, because that's how they treated it. I signaled Miki I would be withdrawing for one minute. I needed to have an emotion in private. (*Rogue Protocol,* 33)

Murderbot is forced to realize that the way humans have treated it is not a given, that humans do not have to treat bots that way, and it is a painful realization. Later, Miki sacrifices itself for its friends, and Murderbot thinks, "What I did know was that Abene really had loved Miki. That hurt in all kinds of ways. Miki could never be my friend, but it had been her friend, and more importantly, she had been its friend. Her gut reaction in a moment of crisis was to tell Miki to save itself" (*Rogue Protocol,* 106). It hurts because if there can be solidarity, friendship, and love between humans and bots, then the torture Murderbot has undergone at human hands was not a foregone conclusion. It never held all humans accountable for the way it was treated, but an absence of guilt is not the same as a clear affirmation that there was no need for the abuse in the first place. It also suggests that there are other humans who are able to perceive bots as sentient beings with rights—not human rights, just rights—without being put into a crisis situation.

The Murderbot Diaries dramatizes the cognitively-estranging concept that fully sentient nonhumans have moral claims that are not reducible to human rights. When Murderbot eventually rejoins Mensah and its other friends, it does so as a being prepared to acknowledge other beings as full-fledged persons, and more importantly, to fight for the safety and respect those beings are warranted, not as humans, but as beings capable of emotional attachment, pain, and decision-making. Neither Murderbot nor any other construct/bot considers itself to be human, or aspires to be human, and perhaps that is the even more difficult concept: humanity does not need to be an aspirational category, nor is it necessarily a gesture of respect to confer it.

What does this have to do with today's system of neoliberal capitalism? Although most of us do not work alongside sentient nonhumans,[13] we are connected to persons across the globe that we may perceive as radically Other. The bots in The Murderbot Diaries, the innies in *Severance*, and the AI in *Tacoma* all represent forms of otherness that demand to be treated as fellow workers, citizens, and people. As Chu pointed out, humans are unevenly granted access to human rights, and many others have written about how the category of "human" itself is conveniently malleable, likely to be withheld from marginalized groups, often as a precursor to violence.[14] One of neoliberalism's most critical functions is to forestall the formation of solidarity, both within classes and across

[13] I include the modifier "most of us" because some people may argue that there are advanced AI that may qualify (which I do not agree with, but still) and because nonhuman animals like dolphins are arguably sentient. Some of us also experience technological processes and machines as sentient, regardless of their actual sentience or autonomy.

[14] Dehumanization is the fourth stage of the ten stages of genocide, for instance. For more, see Gregory H. Stanton's work with Genocide Watch, specifically the Ten Stages.

them, which is necessary in order to maintain an economic order that benefits very few people. Harvey describes a variety of ways in which this happens. The worker is kept too busy to consider other options: "those thoroughly incorporated within the inexorable logic of the market and its demands find that there is little time or space in which to explore emancipatory potentialities outside what is marketed as 'creative' adventure, leisure, and spectacle" (194). Advocacy groups and NGOs speak for the "unfortunate," "even define the interests of those they speak for (as if people are unable to do this for themselves). But the legitimacy of their status is always open to doubt. When, for example, organizations agitate successfully to ban child labor in production as a matter of universal human rights, they may undermine economies where that labor is fundamental to family survival. Without any viable economic alternative the children may be sold into prostitution instead (leaving yet another advocacy group to pursue the eradication of that)" (186). Workers who might organize are turned over too quickly to make good on the opportunity—as Harvey writes, "Under neoliberalization, the figure of 'the disposable worker' emerges as prototypical upon the world stage" (177). But perhaps the most damaging way in which neoliberalism works to prevent solidarity and the possibility of change is by casting other people as Others whose very Otherness is the reason why they have failed to thrive in neoliberal society. In neoliberalism, "Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one's own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property" (74). Neoliberalism holds the key to one's personal betterment, it promises, and if you fail than it is because you did not do

neoliberalism well enough, and therefore are a different class of person, the type of person who fails, and therefore the type of person who it is not worthwhile to ally with. This is particularly visible in racist narratives about why postcolonial countries have not achieved the same economic success as their colonizers. On the state level, the individual level, and everything in between, the unfortunate victim of neoliberalism is cast as the Other. SecUnits are not human, and that is why it is possible for them to be owned by companies, although they are sentient. Same for AI in *Tacoma*. The innies in *Severance* are only half-people, and barely legible as human themselves.

The more a person can be cast as the other, the more they can be exploited, and the less likely it is for a human to extend solidarity to them. Thus, it is necessary to practice Chu's cognitively-estranging concept of robot rights. Rights cannot depend on humanity because that category has proven too unstable and manipulable. Rather, these speculative fiction texts ask us to seek solidarity with those who also suffer under capitalism, regardless of their humanity. Harvey ends his book by saying, "A flurry of literature suggesting that 'another world is possible' has emerged. […] There is much here to admire and to inspire" (210). This includes speculative fiction, especially as it urges us to confront unresolved philosophical, moral, ethical, and social issues.

The ordinary condition of workers under neoliberal capital is still, as Povinelli described, suffering which is "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime." The fictional characters in the above media have the advantage of taking part in narratives about breaking from dominant systems, but to a large part, they still are characters who live in conditions under which it is difficult to

sustain the good life. They are members of "a social world that is built in such a way that it is unreliable for them whether or not the statement 'not this' immediately produces a 'what then.' 'Not this' makes a difference even if it does not immediately produce a propositional otherwise" (Povinelli, 191). To put it a different way, their recognition of the impossibility of bearing their current circumstances does not reliably produce an opportunity to go live under different circumstances. For many workers in these narratives, "there is little room for imagining revolution or indeed any future beyond the scavenging present, though it happens" (Berlant, 179). And yet, our narratives occur because they do imagine otherwise, and in the fiction, they achieve a kind of otherwise, however uncertain it may be. They learn to care for themselves and others. Povinelli says that "in neoliberalism to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside a market value" (159). The workers on Tacoma, Murderbot, and the Severed workers reject that ethical formulation and substitute another, in which people are worthwhile beyond and above their potential contributions to the market. This is important because "To care is to an embody an argument about what a good life is and how such a good life comes into being" (Povinelli, 160). More specifically, Povinelli writes "the arts of care should be oriented to the potentiality within the actual, to removing the actual hindrances that impede groups' striving—whether they are striving to change their world through a social project or to remain as they are within a world changing around them" (160). The form of care that these characters exert is one in which they enable more potential for each other. Nat enhances Odin's independence. Murderbot disables governor modules on other constructs. Mark shares Ricken's inspiring book with others. The ways in which they are

able to care for each other are curtailed by their circumstances, but the fact that they try, and do achieve some care, is a gesture to the necessity of resistance and the possibility of new social worlds, with new forms of care and relationality. They cannot free the child in Omelas's closet, but they do not walk away. They point to the child's suffering, and say "not this."

Crucially, the resistance practiced by these characters does not erase or even substantially ameliorate the precarity they experience. They still exist in conditions of crisis ordinariness. They are not able to restore the social and governmental welfare programs and policies that neoliberalism has eliminated. What they are able to do is suggest other roads, create and inhabit heterotopias, care for each other, and invoke the rhetorics of a better world. These things do not summon this better world into being. But they do forcefully rebuke the logics of the future anterior: this present is not the sacrifice necessary for a better future. They conceive of new forms of solidarity and understanding. And we in the audience are encouraged to do the same. We are encouraged to reject the framing narrative of sacrifice that powers the future anterior, and to refuse to bracket other people as necessary losses in the march toward a better future.

Chapter 3. Grief and the Dying of the Earth

In the previous chapter, we have seen that speculative fiction is well-equipped to analyze and represent cognitively-estranging referents such as capitalism—systems too big to hold in your mind all at once, but possible to critique through speculative means.[15] Seo-Young Chu listed some examples of cognitively-estranging referents but I would like to add what is, to my mind, one of the most cognitively-estranging referents one can think of: climate change. Climate change (for the rest of the chapter, "climate change" refers exclusively to anthropogenic climate change of the Anthropocene, not naturally-occurring climate shifts) is one of the most important threats facing the globe, and yet it is curiously difficult to comprehend. Timothy Morton labels it a "hyperobject," a concept which is impossible for humans to grasp wholly, which we can at best apprehend in localized portions, and yet which affects us all. Another example is the global web of finance. As Morton writes, understanding hyperobjects is difficult "because one only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment. Thinking them is intrinsically tricky" (4). Scientists and well-informed citizens may understand the basic causes of climate change (CO2 and other gases in the atmosphere, ocean acidification, etc.) and some of the particular results (rising sea levels threatening Bangladesh, warming oceans causing more hurricanes to hit the U.S. Eastern Seaboard) and yet holding the whole thing in one's head is nigh-impossible. Even the most educated of climate scientists may struggle to

[15] In this case, not only through speculative *fiction*, but also using the poetic techniques Chu outlines in so-called "mundane" fiction as well. She characterizes these techniques themselves as a form of speculation.

grasp the full scale of climate change's impact in every part of the globe, just as economists may yet be surprised by certain machinations of the finance system that happen in places they are not directly examining. Hyperobjects exist in other dimensions, and we struggle to conceive of them just as we struggle to conceive of fourth- and fifth-dimensional shapes. Acknowledging climate change as a hyperobject allows us to recognize the immense number of inputs that create climate change, and the equally, if not greater, number of outputs which when put together are called climate change, but which each represent catastrophic danger on their own (rising temperatures and the likelihood of wet bulb temperature days; increased frequency and severity of natural disasters; and so on). It also reminds us that unlike capitalism, climate change is anthropogenic but also involves nonhuman forces, whether that is feedback cycles started by humans but intensified by nonhumans, or direct contributions to climate change by nonhumans (for example, methane contributed by cows). Climate change is a deeply cognitively-estranging referent, one which feels science-fictional already in its apocalyptic threats, its terraforming capabilities, and the deeply complex nature of its construction and effects. So what can speculative fiction offer? How can it help us understand this already odd phenomenon?

Speculative fiction engages with climate change in a variety of ways and modes, ranging from dystopic visions of ruined worlds to utopic imaginings of a green future in which humans and nonhumans live in harmony. Climate change is also used to evoke different aspects of loss, difficulty, and struggle; sometimes these challenges are meant to be received as action-packed entertainment, sometimes as dour reflection. In Bong Joon

Ho's movie *Snowpiercer* (2013), climate change is an external pressure that reveals how deeply human beings are invested in class and hierarchy, as even the final ark (train) of humanity is luxurious for some and miserable for others. In Clare Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), climate change is the landscape that the protagonist's self-destruction and complicated relationships play out within. In Becky Chambers' *Psalm for the Wild-Built* (2021), climate change is an opportunity to change socioeconomic and political structures.[16] In *Ministry for the Future* (2020), Kim Stanley Robinson takes climate change directly as his organizing theme; the novel is a struggle against climate change itself, which proceeds by way of the characters inventing bureaucratic, economic, and political fixes. In fact, climate works its way into more media than just "climate fiction": in *Anthropocene Unconscious*, Mark Bould argues that "The art and literature of our time is pregnant with catastrophe, with weather and water, wildness and weirdness," that contemporary media is frequently about climate change, whether it means to be or not. Bould claims that the Fast and the Furious franchise, for example, is Anthropocenic in its fixation on disaster and petrol, or that "in this current conjuncture, any depiction of a massive, mobile and 'unwanted' population cannot not be about climate refugees" (41). The question is, however, what do these media objects *do* with climate change? What is the affective structure of climate change's inclusion in the story? Affect matters because climate change is not a technological issue—we already have the ability to dramatically slow or even stop contributing to climate change. Rather, it is a political and emotional

[16] Climate change is not as directly evoked here as in the other examples; it is one factor out of a number of pressures that force change. However, I believe that while it is diegetically not the main concern, the book works as a piece of climate fiction within our world, as the sentient robot uprising Chambers depicts is less real to us than climate change.

issue, as humanity refuses to take on the necessary challenges, as the inarguable scientific facts continue to be argued over, and as even people who believe the science fall prey to doomerism that threatens to forestall meaningful preparation for the future. Affect, and the affects that we encounter through popular media, play a powerful role in shaping and changing responses to climate change.

This chapter is about the available affective responses to anthropogenic climate change. The works I examine do not predict the death of everything on Earth, nor do they assume things will be just fine; instead, they tend toward a melancholic affective structure, one which focuses on grief, loss, anger, and acceptance, and which acknowledges the loss of irreplaceable biological and cultural diversity without succumbing to complete despair. In this way, these works are the inverse of Berlant's cruel optimism. They instead express a kind pessimism—things will get worse, but that loss also provides opportunities to grieve, to form new communities, to witness the passing of beloved objects and lives. One might also phrase this as mournful optimism, the prediction of a future that includes a great deal of mourning, but that does not include the "end" of all that is valued.

Perhaps because climate change is a hyperobject, impossible to fully grasp, emotional comprehension and reaction become equally if not more important than logical comprehension and reaction. The only *logical* reaction to current science would be immediate, radical action to decarbonize—therefore we must assume that in this as in most things, human beings are making emotional decisions at least as much as rational ones. Therefore, the kind of emotions we feel about climate change are of paramount

importance, because they determine our actions. Just as in the previous chapter, these texts feature small communities forged by shared affective orientations toward their situation, working at a local and personal level to address the sources of negative affect in their lives. None of them are about trying to fix climate change on a planetary level. Rather, they focus on the potential for change carried out by small associations of people. In fact, this may be one of the best tools we have for tracking the affective effects of hyperobjects—our brains are accustomed to making sense of complex social relationships, and it is easier to understand climate change's impact on a small group than on the whole world, or even a single person, as complex systems boil down to personal tragedy

One might expect climate fiction to contain a great deal of tragedy, and many climate change novels contain devastating body counts. However, the texts I discuss here are using grief and mourning as a processing tool rather than solely as an expression of pain. Grief and mourning, related but distinct concepts, can be expressed passively, as a sense of loss and sorrow; actively, as anger and even retribution; and in various other nuanced ways that nonetheless share a common thread: a reaction to the awareness of something lost. Introducing loss to a stable configuration forces change, as the parties that remain must rebalance and close the gap where the lost thing was. In the case of climate change, however, the lost thing is irreplaceable, and the rebalancing act may take decades, centuries, or even fail to ever succeed completely. Thus we see grief and mourning played out over long time scales and large populations, all of its possible manifestations embodied as humans struggle to deal with an incalculable loss. Grief and

mourning are inevitable parts of reckoning with climate change, and the texts of this chapter range between many of the so-called "stages of grief": anger, bargaining, acceptance. Each provides a potential tool for approaching climate change grief. Few regular people have the ability to make systemic changes at the level of governments and corporations; instead, they are left with affect-management as one of very few strategies to handle the immensity of climate change.

The concept of climate grief and mourning has been extensively theorized. In 2005, philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term "solastalgia" to express emotional pain related to environmental degradation. He describes it as

> the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is a resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace. Solastalgia is not about looking back to some golden past, nor is it about seeking another place as 'home.' It is the 'lived experience' of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home.' (48)

Solastalgia is part of climate grief; it is the realization of loss that calls for an impossible adjustment. One can feel solastalgia about localized changes, such as natural disasters, fires, or commercial land development. But crucially, "the experience of solastalgia is now possible for people who strongly empathize with the idea that the earth is their home and that witnessing events destroying endemic place identity (cultural and biological diversity) at any place on earth are personally distressing to them" (49). Albrecht makes

clear that the boundaries between local and global are erased, just as the boundaries between physical and psychological desolation are. A sense of loss is, in many ways, the primary affective result of climate change.

Similarly, Ashlee Cunsolo Willox describes writing about climate change as a work of mourning, an ongoing process of grieving that establishes the importance of the thing which is lost. Writing about climate change means acknowledging the loss, acknowledging the grief one feels, and acknowledging the mourning process that inevitably comes with it. As global climate change alters landscapes and environments around the world, Willox's "work of mourning" is something that falls to every one of us, even those who are relatively sheltered from the immediate and proximal effects of climate change. Albrecht offers the environment as a powerful locus of grief and loss; Willox does not attempt to ameliorate that grief, but rather claims that "grief and mourning have the unique potential to expand and transform the discursive spaces around climate change to include not only the lives of people who are grieving because of the changes, but also to value what is being altered, degraded, and harmed as something mournable" (141). I interpret each work of climate fiction analyzed here as a manifestation of grief. And just as in any other kind of grief, each of the expressed emotions does a particular kind of work in orienting us toward the subject of the grief and what ought to come next. Thus, these literary emotions and manifestations of grief are also political projects, emotional guidelines for Anthropocenic action.

Climate Grief, Mournful Futurism, Kind Pessimism

Not all grief looks the same, so it should be unsurprising that the same is true of climate grief. Climate grief has the potential to "expand and transform the discursive spaces around climate change," as Willox says, but it can also lead to despair, paralysis, denial, and other attempts to deal with what can feel like an overwhelming project of mourning. This project resembles the feeling of overwhelm and incipient defeat that Berlant identifies as the quotidian experience of the contemporary person in *Cruel Optimism*. In a relation of cruel optimism, the subject has a strong libidinal investment in something which they perceive as necessary to their thriving and even living, although in point of fact it is making their life worse. Berlant references Freud's work on melancholia and mourning, and argues that cruel optimism "a condition different from that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has invested her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24). Melancholia is about *loss*, even when, as Freud writes, "the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost" (245). The very trouble of cruel optimism is the ongoingness of the relation.

Even when a subject becomes aware of the cruelty of their attachment, Berlant says, "the fear is that the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything" (24). Arguably, cruel optimism is the necessary precursor to the possibility of futurity, for these people. If the optimistic attachment is lost, so too is the possibility for any kind of optimistic imagining of the future—not optimistic even as "positive and desirable" but optimistic as "this likely does/will exist."

Instead, the subject enters a pathological state of melancholia, as the "object-relationship was shattered" and along with it the opportunity to recoup the libidinal investment was lost, and rather "served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (emphasis original, Freud, 249). Once again, the object or scene of attachment becomes a defining characteristic of the subject, but in this case as a melancholic inverse of the cruelly optimistic former relationship. No longer attempting to achieve a future which the object blocks, the subject is nonetheless not free to go about achieving a different future; they have given up on the sense of futurity altogether.

There is another potential affective structure, however, that is not the inverse of cruel optimism but its opposite – a kind of mournful futurism or kind pessimism. Freud notes that the condition of mourning greatly resembles melancholia, but that it is not seen as harmful; "[w]e relay on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful" (244). Mourning is a normal part of life, even though it "contains the same painful frame of mine" as melancholia—but crucially, it does not include the "inhibition and circumscription of the ego" that is characteristic of melancholia (244). The subject does not incorporate the lost object into the ego, thereby making their very selfhood a scene of loss, but rather experiences the loss in such a way as to feel grief, acknowledge the loss, and yet remain whole as a person. Accordingly, there is not a corresponding loss of futurity. This is what I mean by the phrase mournful futurism: the ability to imagine and expect the future even as one recognizes significant loss along the way. We might also call this "kind pessimism," to directly invert cruel optimism. Kind pessimism means expecting the pain that is to come,

understanding that the future will indeed contain loss and that the loss may mean reduced resources in the material and psychic sense, but that one will still go on, and even go on to find other, more rewarding sites of attachment. Unlike cruel optimism, kind pessimism does not expect there to be a future reward, or even that the future will be as good as the present. And yet, it still expects there to be some kind of future. Accessing this future is a work of mourning; I discuss climate grief and mourning further below.

The texts I examine below all show examples of climate grief. Some of them are more or less optimistic, but all depict the ways in which the work of mourning contributes to the possibility of futurity amidst the loss that climate grief entails. I begin with Yoko Tawada's *Scattered All Over the Earth* (2018), a novel deeply invested in exploring what it means to have kind pessimism for the future.

Kind Pessimism: Homeland Lost, Friends Gained

Yoko Tawada's *Scattered All Over the Earth* is an unusual climate novel, in that it barely mentions the climate at all. At the novel's start, the narrator Knut mentions it off-hand, while wondering where a young woman comes from:

> Apparently from an archipelago somewhere between China and Polynesia … She'd said she was from an island. Iceland is an island, too. But what about the geographical position? True, global warming is melting the arctic ice, making new oceanic currents, but you never hear anything about Iceland being swept all the way over toward China and Polynesia (10-11).

The island in question is not Iceland, in fact. It is Japan, but the word Japan never appears in the novel. Knut sees this young woman, Hiruko, on a television show where "the

panelists were all people whose countries no longer exist" (8). He wonders whether she is Icelandic, Hungarian, Italian, all wildly incorrect guesses because he cannot understand the concept of Japan. As for Hiruko herself, she speaks in an invented language, a "homemade language most scandinavian people understand,"[17] with no capitalizations and nonstandard grammar, rendering her perpetually an outsider (11). The reader is left to puzzle through what has happened to Japan. Meanwhile, the non-Japanese characters are not concerned that an entire country has vanished, if they understand the concept of Japan at all.

The concept of Japan is difficult to access because it seems that Japanese culture has been reduced to only what was circulating in globalized media and culture. Hiruko is only able to gesture at what happened to her lost homeland, lacking the language to describe it as anything other than "the land of sushi." Knut even refers to sushi as "Finnish home cooking" before Hiruko corrects him (16). Japan has sunk into the sea, taking with it all of the people on the island, and its cultural components appear to have rapidly been redistributed to other cultures. As of the beginning of the novel, Japan sunk a few years ago, less than a decade, and already it is wiped from the historical record. When another character named Tenzo looks up information about Japan, "something strange kept happening. Whenever I found a good site, it would be gone when I looked for it again a few days later. It seemed to me that as soon as I visited a site, someone noticed and immediately erased it" (107). The logical conclusion might be that there is

[17] This is represented in the text partially by a lack of capitalization. On the following page, the capitalization in Hiruko's quote indicate that she is speaking Japanese.

some kind of conspiracy or group effort dedicated to erasing Japan. However, there is never any hint of that in the rest of the novel. Given the attitudes expressed throughout the rest of the book, it seems more likely that the pages are being deleted as irrelevant or false information. Tenzo is forced to keep paper notes and use a hard copy dictionary to retain access to the information he finds. Online, Japan is being erased, just as it has been on the earth. However, sushi, Zen meditation, anime, and other popularly-exported cultural products continue to circulate, free of their original referent. Tenzo learns Japanese cooking from a Chinese chef, who learned it from a French chef. The Chinese chef explains, "When the original no longer exists … there's nothing you can do except look for the best copy" (107). Even the name Tenzo is a self-given moniker, based on the title for the head chef of a Zen temple. Tenzo knows this information, knows how to cook Japanese food, knows the basic teachings of Zen Buddhism, all while never setting foot in Japan or even meeting a Japanese person. Knut recalls growing up with anime, but makes no connection between the characters and stories and a real place called Japan.

The effect of the redistribution of Japanese culture is two-fold: it obscures the loss of the actual culture, and exacerbates Hiruko's loneliness. She tries to tell stories from Japan to young children, but without the ability to ask her community, she is unsure of some of the plot points and meanings of old folktales. She searches desperately for someone who speaks Japanese. Although the novel is free from the violent disaster that often characterizes climate novels and dystopic future fiction, Hiruko still experiences an abrupt and painful loss. She only survived the disappearance of Japan because she was in Europe at the time; she is not able to go through any of the typical mourning procedures

to grieve her family, friends, and homeland, because she is one of the only people who even understands that Japan and its people are gone. While the novel imagines a future for her in which she finds connection, that connection does not replace the people and country she has lost. No matter the friendships she forms, Hiruko is irreversibly marked by this loss and by her mourning. This is the mournful futurism of the book: she lives on, she even finds happiness, but it is never without the shadow of grief over her.

Tawada's novel is more about language and relationships than directly about climate, but indirectly it speaks to one of the potential losses of the Anthropocenic future: lost cultures and languages. Language loss is already a problem around the world, but as sea levels, temperatures, and disaster frequencies rise, more peoples will be forced to leave their homelands, or watch their homelands disappear under water or desert. Writing on these losses tends to focus, unsurprisingly, on the loss of the literal land, property, and residences, and the displacement of people. Tawada's intervention is to bring into focus the second-order effects for populations living in specific areas: language and traditional culture. The novel pushes back against the idea that it is sufficient for information about cultural artifacts to be recorded; the vague understanding the Finnish have of sushi and anime show that the cultural roots of those things have been severed, that Japan has been removed from their stories. If Bangladesh or the Marshall Islands or any of several other states are underwater due to sea level rise, evacuating the residents is of course vital, but the inevitable loss of Bangladeshi or Marshall Islander culture is also to be mourned.

This concept is illustrated when Hiruko, searching for other Japanese speakers, meets Tenzo. He is an Eskimo[18] pretending to be Japanese because he enjoys it, and it allows him to escape some of the casual racism associated with being Eskimo in Scandinavia. He is able to keep up the pretense among Scandinavians by using a Japanese dictionary, but Hiruko instantly realizes he is not a native Japanese speaker. Nonetheless, she speaks to him in Japanese because "It doesn't matter if you don't understand everything I say. I feel as if these words I'm saying aren't just a meaningless flood of sounds, but a real language" (132). Her ability to express herself fully, to be herself fully, is dependent on someone's corresponding ability to listen. But Hiruko must settle for partial comprehension, and thus partial expression—the future isn't kind enough for her to gain all of what she desires. The only other Japanese character in the book, Susanoo, goes mute as a result of isolation from people who speak his language. When Hiruko finds him, in what should be the culmination of her quest to find another native Japanese speaker, he is unable to speak to her. She cries out,

> "You don't talk. You are silent. Have you decided not to say anything? I'm not trying to force you. I don't mean to criticize you, either. If someone asked me, 'Why do people have to talk, anyway?' I'm not sure how I would answer. But if your silence keeps on this way, don't you think it might lead to death? Imagine tens of thousands of people who never talk, living on an island. They have enough to eat and clothes to wear. They have games and porn, too. But without language, they decay and die." (196)

This quote is more or less the thesis of the novel. Language opens pathways between people, critical pathways that allow them to live beyond the mere necessities. Susanoo's

[18] Tenzo specifically prefers the term Eskimo to the term Inuit, and mentions that "strictly speaking not all Eskimos are Inuit" (98); therefore I use the term despite some people's preference for Inuit over Eskimo.

loss of language is a sign of a loss of life—he lives only to work, and has nothing else. Hiruko, meanwhile, is overflowing with language; she speaks in a flood of words to Susanoo, overjoyed to be speaking in Japanese. But this strange conversational duo cannot bring back the entire island of Japan. When the language is lost, Japan is lost as well.

Willox notes that part of the work of mourning in the Anthropocene is recognizing grief for forms of life which have been considered ungrievable. Willox writes, "the grief and mourning experienced by individuals and communities globally to anthropogenic climate change seems strangely silenced in public climate change discourse. Indeed, the environment and non-human bodies do not normally or regularly appear within media reports, dominant political discourses, and even academic literature on climate change as something mournable or as a source of grieving" (141). She is referring to nonhuman lives, the silence and unemotionality of the deaths of plant, animal, and mineral beings. However, within *Scattered All Over the Earth*, we see Japan and the Japanese, who are currently prominent global members, go unmourned as people seem unable to remember their existence or value. It is surreal, and yet is also an excellent analogy for the experiences of those who lose nonhuman and/or environmental objects of love and affection, and whose grief is puzzling to the wider world. No one memorializes the loss of a frog species, or of Japan in this novel, but it is not considered the kind of thing one should go on about—Knut is irritated when he first sees the television program with Hiroko on it, wondering why these members of lost countries don't just get over it and move on.

Tawada incorporates grief for the ungrievable throughout the book—not for the past, which would simply be nostalgia, but for the loss of that which should have shaped Hiruko's present. Hiruko and Susanoo have both lost a homeland, but also the present language they speak, and the friends, relatives, and environments that constitute home. Hiruko is angry at the people who allowed Japan to be lost, but it makes no difference; she is left with the grief all the same.

Tawada also ensures that the loss of Japan is not simply used as an occasion for nostalgic grief by contrasting it with Tenzo's experience. As an Eskimo, Tenzo is also the product of a rapidly changing culture. He confronts an American friend about their differing understandings of that change:

> Just once, George and I had an argument. It started with him saying, "Traditional Eskimo hunting culture is under threat from global warming." As if suddenly possessed by Ma's living spirit, I said, "But thanks to global warming now we can grow vegetables. There's no need to stick to the old ways." That surprised George, who came back with, "But wasn't hunting the mainstay of your traditional culture? And aren't you losing it because of climate change and pressure from animal rights activists?" This time I was possessed by Pa's living spirit. "We Eskimos never hunted because we liked it; we killed only as many animals as we needed to live, then preserved the meat and ate it slowly, never wasting it, and used the skins to make our clothes and shoes," I explained. "Then foreign fur traders came to trick us, threatening us until soon we were killing as many sea otters as we could because their fur could be sold at high prices. After many years there were no more sea otters nearby, so we started making long trips in search of new hunting grounds. But that time was like a bad dream we don't want to remember. Now that it's over, we are all relieved." (99)

While it is true that a certain type of traditional culture is disappearing, Tenzo rejects the idea that he should mourn it. Just because it is from the past does not mean it was good. Instead, Tenzo points out that the "traditional" culture George values involved the deaths

of many sea otters, whose loss Tenzo and the other Eskimo grieve more. The sea otters are precisely the type of subject that Willox asks us to make grievable. George attempts to make climate change and animal rights activists into the villains; Tenzo refuses to participate in this anthropomorphizing. Willox writes "we can, and we should, extend this discussion of mourning to the nonhuman, and use this mourning as a resource for recognizing non-humans as fellow vulnerable entities and mournable subjects, capable of degradation, destruction, and suffering," (147) and Tenzo does. There are things to mourn about the changing climate and changing culture, but Tenzo refuses to make the loss of animal deaths via hunting one of them, because to do so is contradictory to the point of mourning the change at all.

Tawada also is careful to disrupt any nationalistic aspects of mourning a country. While Hiruko mourns the place called Japan, it is not as a nation-state. The book seems dubious about the concept of stable national identity; Tenzo, after all, converts his nationality seemingly out of boredom and personal affinity, and this unusual act is not criticized by the "actual" Japanese people he meets. Hiruko's homemade language underscores the similarities between the Scandinavian languages, as it is intelligible to speakers from any of the Scandinavian countries, blurring the specific nations into a cultural and linguistic region. This lack of boundaries gives her strength, too. In the final scene, Hiruko withstands the accusations of Knut's mother easily: "Neither sarcasm nor full-throated attacks upset her. Didn't this strength of hers come from speaking Panska? […] It wasn't directly connected to anyone's native language. As long as she was speaking Panska Hiruko was free to be herself" (227). The characters move between

countries, from Arles to Oslo to Trier and beyond, learning Japanese cooking from Chinese chefs, finding Indian, Eskimo, Japanese, German companions. In fact, it seems that through healing from the loss of Japan, the characters are able to create something better, something less bounded and defined. Tenzo, Hiruko, and Susanoo experience the most direct forms of loss, but through social connection are able to bring others into a communal experience of both mourning and community-building. Knut has little personal connection to loss, and in fact he seems unaware that anything *was* lost—he asserts confidently that sushi is Finnish, and is annoyed by the other people talking about their lost homelands on the television program on which he first sees Hiruko (8). But once he meets Hiruko, he becomes fascinated with her and her quest to meet another native Japanese speaker, to the point of arranging travel with her around Europe, following rumors of a top-tier sushi restaurant here, an "umami festival" there.

Willox theorizes how mourning and grief are both individual and communal: mourning is "individualizing work, as loss is experienced differently by everyone; it is also a unifying work, bringing people together through collective experiences of sharing grief" (142). Indeed, the final scene of the book features Knut, Hiruko, Susanoo, Knut's friend Akash, Tenzo, Tenzo's girlfriend Nora, and Knut's mother all gathered in the same place, affirming that while they have failed in their mission of restoring Hiruko's access to native Japanese language and culture, they have succeeded in creating a community. They agree to travel with Susanoo to an expert who studies loss of language, in what seems to be a metaphor for creating new communities to deal with the losses that come from climate change. The last sentence of the book is "'Yes let's all go together,' I said"

(228). This sentiment does not remove the loss: Susanoo still cannot speak aloud. But in that scene, the assembled characters nonetheless are able to understand him when he mouths words silently, as if he is speaking regularly. As Willox writes, "In mourning, we not only lose something that was loved, but we also lose our former selves, the way we used to be before the loss. We are changed internally and externally by the loss in ways that we cannot predict or control" (145). This rather odd group of people are unable to restore what either Hiruko or Susanoo has lost, but they are able to come together to seek a changed future. They will all "go together" into the future, as we will go together into a future changed by anthropogenic climate change, because we have no choice. Tawada shows that moving forward does not mean forgetting or avoiding loss, but allowing it to change one's self and one's relationships.

Tawada's novel shows perhaps the healthiest form of grieving—deeply felt, but also an opportunity to build something new and even better in place of the loss. However, most climate change fiction is not so sanguine. The losses that climate change causes/will cause are variably speculative for different audiences. Some small islands are at this very moment reckoning with not the loss of culture or wealth, but the loss of the entire island and everything on it. Meanwhile, American property developers continue to build condominium complexes in the southwestern deserts, and those same deserts see twice the amount of population growth as the rest of the country – without a plan for how to provide water to those settlements.[19] While no one will be unchanged in the long arc of

[19] Developments in arid places in the U.S are happening all over; see Mackun, 2019. Kiribati will be the first country to be entirely underwater: see World Bank Group, 2021. Five of the Solomon Islands have already disappeared: see Albert, 2016.

climate change, there are different degrees of suffering, and the at-risk population density is clear from the leisurely conversations about decarbonization in the global North. In fact, the same Timothy Morton who characterized climate change as a hyperobject remarked that in the current ecological situation, one might as well "fully [inhabit] catastrophe space, in the same way that eventually a nightmare can become so horrible that you start laughing" (*We're Doomed, What Now*). As Andreas Malm points out in *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, this cavalier attitude only makes sense if one does not really feel personally at risk, or does not care about the losses of life, culture, and land that the catastrophe brings. Morton may understand the climate change is a huge, nigh-unthinkable concept, but with that understanding seems to come a willingness not to try to think it, nor to try and think of the real material consequences that arise from the hyperobject, at non-hyperobject levels that are distinctly perceivable. The whole of climate change is hard to hold in one's mind, but as I started writing this, half of the United States is under one of the hottest heat waves in decades, and Vermont is completely flooded, both due to climate change. Climate change as a whole may have felt speculative, or cognitively estranging, but the past five to ten years have brought wildfires, hurricanes, floods, and heat waves that make the once-speculative into concrete experience. One does not need to speculate at all to feel them, only to understand their full import.

Anger Without Agency

I have started at the end, so to speak, with the stages of grief—the acceptance and kin-making in Tawada's novel seem to represent a matured sense of loss. The characters feel the loss, but work thoughtfully and kindly toward new forms of communities that enable them to carry the emotional weight of that loss—hence the "kind pessimism," the acknowledgment of bad circumstances that nonetheless are approached through care and thoughtfulness. They have already experienced the loss, and are moving on to the aftercare. However, few people are so sanguine in the real world, as "the worst is yet to come" seems less like a prediction and more like a promise. The uneven distribution of the future, to borrow a phrase from William Gibson, is at the forefront in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (2013). *Waste Tide* is concerned with the midst of the disaster, the feel of life in the middle of an unfolding ecological disaster that economic pressures spare the victims no time to process or mourn. Its characters are subject to the kind of ongoing environmental degradation that produces anger rather than sadness. In *Waste Tide*, we see how the machine of capitalism works around the destruction of natural resources—it simply begins consuming humans instead, as the cheapest and most abundant resource left. Humans are both responsible for the ruination of the environment, and suffer grave consequences—but the humans who are responsible and the humans who suffer are seldom the same group. It is this inequality which produces the simmering anger that pervades the novel. Climate change here is less a loss than something *taken*, a grief caused by someone else's actions and greed. It emphasizes that kind pessimism does not mean one must be kind to the people at fault for the destruction and degradation of the earth.

These themes are present from the first pages of the novel, as Chen[20] describes the environment of Silicon Isle (an ironic name, both because it is actually a Chinese peninsula, and because it receives the trash that its more famous cousin Silicon Valley produces via technological innovation), the main setting. Silicon Isle has one main business, which is hazardous waste disposal. Most of the work is done by migrant laborers; the natives of the island separate themselves from the labor except for the three crime families that run the waste industry. A government bureaucrat explains Silicon Isle's situation: "The natives don't care. They just want to squeeze as much money as they can out of whatever life is left in this place. The migrant workers don't care, either. They just want to earn enough money as quickly as possible to return to their home villages and open up a general store, or build a new house and get married. They hate this island. No one cares about the future of this place. They want to leave here and forget this period of their lives, just like the trash." Silicon Isle is used by native inhabitants to acquire riches, by migrant workers to acquire necessary money to live, and by foreign powers to dump trash; none of these people are interested in the physical landscape, or the corruption of the flora and fauna. None of the natives conceive of a future for the island; they have foreclosed any possible futurity. They know humans die because of exposure to the hazardous chemicals, and have made peace with it; they certainly do not care about non-human organisms. *Waste Tide* shows a picture of dramatic biosphere loss amidst equally dramatic apathy.

[20] Chen Qiufan is the author's full name, but pursuant to Chinese name order, Chen is the family name, not the personal name.

If no one cares, no one can really be said to be at fault, the bureaucrat seems to suggest. The migrant workers certainly contribute to the environmental disaster by burning plastic and tossing aside leaking electronics, but they are only present because of economic necessity, drawn to an existing industry. The natives presumably set up the waste disposal system at some point, but it is unclear. What is clear is that the migrants now suffer the impact of the environmental pollution. Official government policy claims that there is "no acid fog, no water whose lead content exceeded the safe threshold by 2,400 times, no soil whose chromium concentration exceeded the EPA limit by 1,338 times," (22) but residents feel the truth of it in their bodies. The quote seems to imply that either the migrant workers or native inhabitants should be responsible for stopping the cycle of apathy, but one wonders what real action would be possible. The soil and water are already contaminated beyond the possibility of remediation. Instead, there is a lingering bitterness that no one stopped things before it was too late. The problem is framed as one of politics: a push-pull between American business ventures, Chinese bureaucrats, environmental activists, criminal organizations, and somewhat incidentally, the "waste people" (migrant workers) and the regular inhabitants of Silicon Isle. Each group blames the others; in the meantime, nothing happens except for increasing resentment.

A similar dynamic appears in Clare Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus*. The title refers to Watkins' summation of why settlers moved to California: in search of gold, fame, and citrus—more generally, the promises of a rich future. Now, in the present of the novel, none of those are to be found, as climate change-induced drought has made California

(and most of the Western U.S) into arid and unlivable desert. The novel underscores the folly of these gold-fame-citrus seekers, the vanity and greed of moving to California in search of wealth and fame. But it does not attend to the systemic reasons behind those movements, nor to how those settlers caused or contributed to California's desertification. It is true that Californian residents are responsible for draining California's groundwater supplies, and that farms are a large part of that, as well as the golf courses and lush lawns that often accompany wealth in the U.S. Nonetheless, the water supply would not be as much of an issue without the involvement of corporate and government entities encouraging destructive and profit-minded behaviors to the detriment of the ecosystem. Like in *Waste Tide,* the characters of *Gold Fame Citrus* blame other small-scale actors for the suffering they endure. Both books concentrate on a kind of anger, resentment, and despair that arises from these catastrophic environmental failures, and they both demonstrate that it is easier to blame individuals or small groups of people, because that keeps the conversation on the level of the human, rather than on the level of super-structure where it actually belongs. In some ways, blaming other individuals for disasters is a way of maintaining a sense of agency—if an individual or small group caused a problem, then an individual or small group should be able to solve it. It enables the energizing emotion of anger, rather than the demotivating emotion of despair that comes when one realizes one has little to no ability to effect meaningful change.

Another parallel between the two books is how characters turn to religious or quasi-religious powers in order to feel that sense of agency. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, the main character joins a cult. In *Waste Tide*, a migrant worker named Mimi is infected with

a virus from a discarded prosthetic. It is a mutated form of a virus originally designed as a bioweapon, and translator Kaizong (Mimi's friend) receives a description of Mimi's brain scan: "The metal particles embedded in her cerebral cortex form a complex lattice that seems to be working synergistically with her neural network—don't ask me how. […] It's as if her brain has been turned into a minefield" (183). This bioweapon has implanted metal throughout her brain, small enough pieces that her brain is still able to function—indeed, as the quote says, to incorporate the metal into its activity, in true cyborgian fashion; she is a blend of organic and synthetic just as the environment of Silicon Isle has become due to its relentless contamination. And just as the waste reclamation industry offered initial promise—economic benefit—before ruination, the cyborg-virus also initially offers amazing power and potential before going wrong.

In the first half of the novel, the virus promises to bring the waste-workers together around a new powerful figure—the human-machine-goddess Mimi, newly reborn after the virus infects her. Mimi experiences the virus implantation as a total transformation. "She had discovered that she felt this world differently. She didn't know how to describe it precisely, but it was like someone who, after jumping out of a deep well and seeing the open sky and earth for the first time, gained rich multiple perspectives and finely layered emotions" (200). It is an initially utopian experience – she has more access to the material world around her, is able to control her own memories and body to prevent herself from being overwhelmed by trauma, and she is able to influence people with a newfound charisma. Several times she is referred to as a goddess. Though it is not specified how, it seems she is able to control minute aspects of her body in such a way

that they appeal to others, and create an almost fanatical devotion. She becomes able to perform miracles, curing a boy who had been infected by the same virus but responded to it by entering a coma. An old friend is transformed from an ally into an acolyte: “In her current state, Mimi was a cyber goddess, capable of transcending all layers of the net, of the world even, and she had hooked him on every level, too. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to help Mimi” (272). Mimi appears as a savior, uniting the waste workers and encouraging them to fight back against the crime bosses. She is even capable of bringing them all together digitally, using cheap augmented reality glasses and her new abilities to command their senses and “fly” them to other cities, to satellites, to anywhere with an internet connection. When she connects Kaizong to the new waste worker’s network, he has a religious experience: “’Welcome, welcome!’ The voices seemed to come from his ear and brain at the same time, both far away and nearby. It was as though the sensitivity of his visual cortex had been enhanced significantly, leading to synesthetic effects. ‘You’re now one of us’” (317). It is perhaps the only time the waste workers have experienced this kind of collective effervescence. One is tempted to read it, perhaps, as a small-scale Marxist revolution, as the disenfranchised waste workers unite in order to demand better treatment, led by Mimi, one of their own.

Unfortunately, it is no revolution, but another false sense of power—a misleading promise of greater agency that is ultimately broken. The waste workers believe that through the newly-empowered Mimi, they can resist their criminal overlords and demand more rights. Unfortunately, Mimi herself is no longer really in control either. The virus is conscious, calling itself Mimi 1.0, and the original human Mimi is relegated to Mimi 0.

As the second half of the novel unfolds, we see that the agenda of Mimi 1 does not match that of the waste workers. While she leads a rebellion of the waste workers against the crime lords, she is aware that they are overmatched, and knows that they will—and do—die quickly when facing advanced weapons and trained fighters. She sacrifices them as a show of strength, using lives as chess pieces. The inner core of the original Mimi is horrified, but Mimi 1 does not care. An atmosphere of horror begins to overlay the novel. Mimi 1 explains, in a quote worth excerpting at some length:

> "In the long process of evolution, this physiological foundation helped the human species to [… substitute] the bonds of clan identity and cooperation in place of conflict, elevating group harmony above individual sexual desire, instituting morality over force. This was how the human race survived and thrived as a species.
> "But modern technology has damaged this foundation. Technology addicts indulging in overdoses of dopamine have destroyed their synaptic connections and become ill with moral failings. In one experiment, the test subjects had to choose between saving a ship full of passengers by tossing a heavily wounded individual overboard, or doing nothing. All those with damaged moral-emotive brain regions chose to kill in order to save, while the normal subjects chose to do nothing. The diseased think of life as some zero-sum game in which there must be winners and losers, even at the expense of the interests of others, including their lives. This is a planetwide plague.
> "The Silicon Isle natives, the waste people, you, all of you are suffering from this disease. I chose this path to cure you so that the game may continue." (326)

She does not directly mention climate change, but her speech is an indictment of the ethos that drives Anthropogenic climate change: lack of cooperation and valuing the survival of the whole rather than the part; the zero-sum game of capitalism; allowing some to "win" even if it means that eventually, all humans will lose. Importantly, she also points to technology as an evolutionary force. Technology disrupts the evolutionary

altruistic cooperation that made humans a successful species. Implicitly, the Anthropocene is a result of technological progression taking over from evolutionary forces as the primary driver of human nature and development. It is a path that will lead to mutually-assured destruction, which is why Mimi 1 must take drastic action to ensure "that game may continue." Or so she claims. Re-examining the experiment she narrates, it is not at all clear that there is anything diseased about concluding that one person should die so that many could live—it is not a universally agreed-upon principle, but it is a valid moral position. Many people might agree that choosing to do nothing is the worst option. Mimi 1 is just as dictatorial about her ethics as she claims the humans are, even though she insists that her perspective is necessary to save the world. In fact, one might argue that climate change has been caused largely by prioritizing the interests of individuals over massive communities. Oil companies tacitly endorse losing the ship of passengers—the earth and the human race—rather than curtailing individual CEOs' and corporations' profits.

If there is a point that Mimi 1 makes without contradicting herself, it is that humans are more powerful and more balanced, more harmonious, when they choose group cooperation over individual desires. Curiously, she also seems to pursue a kind of authoritarian regime, placing herself at the head of a new movement despite the deaths of the waste workers and the protestations of her host, Mimi 0. She influences the people around her to regard her as a kind of goddess, and establishes contact with an activist hacker group to prove herself as the first conscious artificial being. Mimi 1 is echoing the very arguments that some people make when they claim that humans have the right to use

the earth as they please, because they are the pinnacle of evolution. Mimi 1's argument meshes with Bernard Stiegler's concept of epiphylogenesis, evolution via other means. Stiegler argues that technology/technics have co-evolved humanity, alongside and perhaps more powerfully than natural selection. Technics becomes, he writes, "*the pursuit of the evolution of the living by other means that life*—which is what the history of technics consists in, from the first flaked pebbles to today" (135, emphasis original). As he says, that is true of humanity since the earliest flint knives. Mimi regards humans as having reached their logical end, leading to a new beginning of a superior type of being. Mimi 1 proposes to "cure" humanity by restarting the process, allowing a new kind of technological being to evolve and lead humanity out of the prison it has designed for itself. She describes herself: "'[I'm a] by-product of billions of years of convergent evolution; your second personality and life insurance; the free will that emerges from quantum decoherence. I'm accidental; I'm inevitable. I'm a new error. I'm the master and the slave. I'm the huntress and the prey'" (324). While no-one designed Mimi 1 on purpose, she represents the inevitable result of those many years of human-technological co-evolution. Thus, she is justified in using human lives as tools; they are lower on the evolutionary scale than herself. She replicates the plague she proposes eradicating. She will get rid of humans in order to serve the new technological future.

Eventually, Mimi 1 is killed, but none of the character see that as a real solution, merely a delay of the inevitable. One character (Scott) muses,

> Perhaps similar accidents were occurring every day in every remote corner of this planet, giving birth to thousands of prototypes like Mimi. Life was a giant

> black box, and just when you thought it had reached a dead end, it would always find a new way out and continue its upward winding progression.
> A new kind of life that crossed the boundary between biology and machinery. Human history was about to end (332).

This character, a competent American hitman, seldom has expressed fatalist ideas, but after witnessing the events on Silicon Isle, concludes that there is nothing much to be done—at least for humanity. Scott knows that life finds a way, but that life may look very different from its current forms. This mournful futurism leads him to conclude that there will be a future, that life will continue, but that it might not be human life at all.

Similarly, the novel ends as another character reflects, "Kaizong thought a certain kind of urge in himself had vanished. He had once thought of himself as capable of changing things. Now he understood that it was but a fantasy. The world had never ceased to change, but it would also never change for anyone" (345). Remediation of the poisoned earth, once Kaizong's goal, is pointless, he concludes. Mimi 1 dies, because Mimi 0 begs to be killed so that she can spare the world from Mimi 1's power and plans. But there are probably other Mimi-viruses out there, Scott concludes. So humans are pretty much done for. The future goes on, but humanity must be mourned rather than perpetuated.

The search for agency over climate change, technology, evolution, and capitalism is doomed from the start; failing to realize that produces only anger and waste, the book argues. The waste workers die in the process of trying to achieve their agency, as do Mimi 0 and 1. Kaizong gives up, and the people he was once passionate about helping remain in crisis. Oddly, Scott, the American quasi-villain, is the only one who succeeds at

anything. He successfully builds a recycling plant, the entire reason he was on Silicon Isle in the first place. Perhaps due to his American grasp of capitalism, Scott does not seek agency for himself—he works through bureaucracy, networks, legal systems, and informal social groups. When he is stymied, he is not angry; he simply finds another route. He is also the person with no real agenda for change or societal improvement. It all speaks to a powerful cynicism, a doubt not about whether humanity is *capable* of improving anything, but whether humanity *will*—or indeed, whether any technological sentient will either. The inability of individuals to think at the systems level produces unproductive anger and blocks the potential for change. If the waste workers and native inhabitants, all of whom are equally poisoned by the environmental pollution on Silicon Isle, worked together, they could potentially change their local environment. But they are propelled by their anger to instead seek control over each other. The migrant waste workers seek to wrest agency from their bosses; the bosses seek to crush worker rebellion in order to maintain their power. None of their efforts are directed to the real problem, because anger is ultimately an ineffective affective stance to work from in the case of hyperobject resistance. Being angry at climate change, Chen seems to argue, does nothing.

Humanity fed nonhuman animals and plants into machines as resources; eventually, we fed ourselves to greater and greater technologies. Chen seems to ask, what was it all for, in the end? The most we have produced is a violent technological virus, the product of attempted psychological torture (Mimi 1 was designed as a weapon). The technological development that enabled humans to strip the natural world for resources

also ended up turning humans into resources themselves. Silicon Isle is a place where the organic and the inorganic mix promiscuously. In an early description of the island, Chen writes:

> Metal chassis, broken displays, circuit boards, plastic components, and wires, some dismantled and some awaiting processing, were scattered everywhere like piles of manure, with laborers, all of them migrants from elsewhere in China, flitting between the piles like flies. The workers sifted through the piles and picked out valuable pieces to be placed into the ovens or acid baths for additional decomposition to extract copper and tin, as well as gold, platinum, and other precious metals. What was left over was either incinerated or scattered on the ground, creating even more trash. No one wore any protective gear.
> Everything was shrouded in a leaden miasma, an amalgamation of the white mist generated by the boiling aqua regia in the acid baths and the black smoke from the unceasing burning of PVC, insulation, and circuit boards in the fields and on the shore of the river. The two contrasting colors were mixed by the sea breeze until they could no longer be distinguished, seeping into the pores of every living being. (30)

Technological and natural description alternate – plastic and wires are like manure; black smoke is mixed by the sea breeze. Further description adds children playing on "black shores, where fiberglass and the charred remains of circuit boards twinkled" and in "abandoned fields, where embers and ashes from burnt plastic smoldered" (32). Scott watches a wiggling prosthetic arm crawl along the ground on its own (33), and Director Lin explains that junked prosthetics— most of which "haven't been contaminated and still contain blood and bodily fluids" (34)—are trashed here. Technology and organic material combine in uncanny ways, creating a cyborgian landscape that threatens all who traverse it. Cyborgs abound in the world of *Waste Tide*: chipped dogs that attack until a certain frequency is played; humans with moving displays on their skin and augmented reality feeds in their eyes; batteries made of viruses; drugs delivered via download.

Unlike the utopian potential expressed by the figure of the cyborg in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," in *Waste Tide* these cyborgian mixtures are ominous, demonstrating how humans have been changed and corrupted by their own technology. This mimics the concept of the Anthropocene at the large scale; the Anthropocene is what happens when humans begin to drastically impact the environment at the geological level, and climate change is one result of the Anthropocene, as are the cyborgs of Silicon Isle. Technology itself, as a concept, appears suspect in Chen's perspective—an alluring prospect that promises everything but eventually reveals itself to be so much garbage, not before turning the humans who depend on it into another kind of garbage themselves. In the very promise of limitless potential that technology offered, it seduced humans into their own destruction, as they pursued the promise of infinite bounty beyond the earth's and their own capacity. We replaced human labor with more powerful machine labor, but doing so only resulted in treating humans as another kind of machine, as we see with the careless treatment of the waste workers.

Silicon Isle leads to nothing good for anyone, and the feeling that arises again and again throughout the novel is that waste should provoke anger. This anger is a form of grief for what has been sacrificed pointlessly, for something ungrievable because it is hard to name—the ecosystem, the way we treat others, a moral system, the chance for a life built on common good. However, the ineffectiveness of that anger also is part of grief. No form of anger can bring something back. The common angry questions one asks after a loss—who is to blame? whose fault is this? who was supposed to stop it? why didn't they?—are the same questions one is inclined to ask out of anger at climate

change, and in either case, the questions are not particularly helpful to the mourning process. Those who are to blame for climate change are just as out of reach as a god who has let someone die. Instead, we small people have the work of mourning, not of retribution. The future exists, but it belongs to another kind of being, whose nature we do not yet know.

Anger With Agency

Sometimes, however, the people who are angry also do have the power to change something major, as in Makoto Shinkai's animated film *Weathering With You* (2019).[21] The film stars a runaway named Hodaka who moves to Tokyo and meets a fellow runaway named Hina, who has the power to summon sunlight and to clear clouds away. Together with Hina's younger brother Nagi, they start a business selling temporary clear days for people who need relief from the rain, as it has been raining in Tokyo for weeks. Hina, Hodaka, and Nagi are able to find joy despite the hardships of their lives as runaways, because they love to see the happiness brought to others when they see a clear blue sky. But this power does not come without a cost. An old monk warns Hodaka's boss that "Weather Maidens" are sacrificed in order to stop unnatural weather. Hina starts to notice translucent patches on her body whenever she uses her powers. Publicity from their successful business brings police attention. The state wants to force Hodaka to return home—his parents have filed a missing person's report—and take Nagi into

[21] *Weathering With You* is the English release title; the Japanese name is *Tenki no Ko*, or *Weather's Child*. Here, direct quotes will be from the official English subtitles.

custody of Child Protective Services, separating the siblings. The trio is forced to go on the run.

As the trio run from the law, the temperature drops below 10 degrees Celsius in August. The city floods, then snow starts. Hins embodies the pathetic fallacy—when she is unhappy, angry, and afraid, the weather follows suit—but the weather's change is also a sign that the very earth is against them, demanding Hina's death to stop the unnatural and dangerous weather. Hounded by authority figures and by the unfeeling adults who turn them out of shelter, chase them down, and refuse to listen to their concerns, Hodaka especially becomes angry, wondering why the world won't just leave them alone. When Hina does disappear in the night, the weather clears. It is the first day without rain in Tokyo in 72 days. Despite the sun, the tone is reversed from the previous section of the movie—the sun is almost mocking, the happiness of the people enjoying the sunlight a cruel irony in the face of Hodaka and Nagi's grief. The naïve perspective of "sunny days are nice!" is replaced by Hodaka's anger at those who do not understand the sunlight was purchased with Hina's sacrifice. The adults in Hodaka's life, both the police and his boss Suga, do not believe him, and furthermore do not consider his grief and anger to be worthy of listening to. The sunlight becomes almost an extractive good, secured by spending Hina's life, and then enjoyed by those who do not recognize the cost of acquiring it—a parallel to the other ways in which society runs on enjoyment and comfort purchased by damaging extractive goods.

Unlike the inhabitants of Silicon Isle, however, Hodaka and Nagi have the ability to change their circumstances. While the rest of Tokyo celebrates, they plan how to bring

Hina back—which they know will bring back the rain. This decision is fueled by grief and anger, and Hodaka declares that he would rather have it rain forever than lose Hina. While an understandable emotion, this also entails ruining millions of people's lives at the very least, not to speak of changes to the wider climate and environment, because Tokyo is not built to have permanent rain. The consequences of never-ending rain in Tokyo would change global wind, rain, and current patterns, as well as making it near-impossible to grow food in the Tokyo area. It would (and does, later) drown parts of Tokyo and render the subway unusable, stranding people; in the long term it would wear down buildings and infrastructure and possibly cause health issues. None of this is brought up in the film. Instead, it introduces an alternative way of understanding the weather phenomena. The same monk who tells Suga about the Weather Maidens also opines that it is foolish to rely on the weather, or attempt to control it. He says, "The weather changes on a whim, not according to humans' needs. We can't tell what's the norm and what's not. We're only allowed to stay temporarily in the space between the damp, turbulent sky and the earth, clinging hard so as to not be shaken off. We used to be well aware of this in the past." In essence, he is arguing that there is no ground upon which to argue that over two months of continuous rain is, in fact, abnormal. Another older woman tells the teens, "You know, that part of Tokyo used to be under the sea. Until around two hundred years ago, that is. In old times, Tokyo was just a bay. Human beings and weather changed it little by little." The potential destructive patterns of the continuous rain are undercut. Perhaps, the old people seem to argue, the new weather patterns are actually part of a long cycle, one which humans have simply forgotten about,

but which is natural and endemic to the earth. This is similar to an argument that climate change deniers use – that the earth goes through periodic warmings and coolings, and that the current rise in temperature is a normal warming period. The political message is ambiguous, but it is hard to deny that the movie's creators were thinking about the real-life parallels, as they prominently feature a book titled *Anthropocene: Education for the "New Geological Age"* on Hodaka's desk.

Hodaka follows through on his plan, bringing Hina back from the cloud realm and re-starting the rainstorm. They reunite joyfully, but after a time skip, the narration says, "The rain started falling that day, and it never stopped. It's slowly sinking Tokyo into the water. It's still falling now, three years later." Three years of constant rain have put most of Tokyo underwater. As Hodaka goes to meet with Hina at the end of the movie, he thinks, "[Japan] was originally under the sea… The world's been crazy from the beginning. So it's no one's fault that it's like this. Is that what I should say to her? No! That day I… We changed the world! I made a choice! I've chosen her! I've chosen this world! I've chosen to live here!" The conclusion seems to be that Hodaka understands that, unlike what the old people say, it is human action that has caused this weather phenomenon—but that the correct course of action is to live with it, accepting that it is the price to pay for human happiness. There is a deep anger in the movie toward police, child protective services, and other authority figures, and yet Hodaka chooses to pursue the same course of action as do many governments and corporations: refuse to take action to improve the climate for fear of having to sacrifice one's desires. Hodaka's love for one girl dooms the rest of Tokyo. It is a profoundly anthropocentric view, and one presented

as a joyous triumph of the human spirit. This is not to say that it is an evil action to save someone you love; that calculus is complex and personal. But the movie's theme and obvious climate change parallels make Hodaka's choice a confusing one, blurring the political alignment of the movie. Creator Makoto Shinkai has said that while he was "inspired" by climate change[22], he did not want the movie to have a political message and took out explicit climate change references (despite the Anthropocene book), perhaps contributing to the unsteady relationship of the film to its climate change inspiration.

Figure 5: Tokyo after Hina returns and it has rained for three years.

[22] See Campbell, 2019; McLean, 2020; Miller, 2019; and THN, 2020.

It is possible to read the dissonance of the film's ending as deliberate, a reminder that choosing personal happiness over everything else is a decision with major costs. That reading is available—but I do not think it was the intended interpretation. Shinkai's previous films, most notably *Your Name* (2016), have focused primarily on relationships between young people, and relationships facing tremendous odds. Despite *Your Name*'s success, it did face criticism in Japan for featuring a natural disaster (a comet strike in this case) in a trivial manner primarily designed to highlight the romantic relationship of the main characters, and *Weathering With You* has received similar criticism.[23] Shinkai has said he was inspired by climate change; in an interview with *Variety*, he said, "It seems like it's only getting worse right now. Of course we have to politically do something, but because we can't change it immediately, that means a key question becomes 'How is the young generation going to live in this crazy world that we've created?'" From this, and his additional statement in the same interview that "What I really want to depict is how very strongly a young person feels for the first time toward another," it seems that climate change is featured primarily for its use as a plot device to create conflict for a happy relationship. Shinkai claims "we can't change it immediately," a sentiment that echoes the fatalistic opinions of the older characters in *Weathering With You.* While acknowledging the impact of climate change, Shinkai still focuses on the impact on young people's lived experiences. It seems the film is mostly concerned with the trials its characters undergo, not with a political or environmental message.

[23] See McLean, 2020.

On the other hand, the text stands alone, regardless of Shinkai's intentions. It can produce a distinct discomfort in the viewer, who is forced to confront the true cost of heroic happy endings. It also draws a line between Hina, Hodaka, and Nagi's anger at authority figures, and climate disasters. Young people have been a vital part of the movement to stop climate change, and their anger at authority figures who have sold their futures resembles the fury of the three teens in this film. *Weathering With You* may fail to treat climate change with the gravity it deserves, but oppositional readings are available that refuse the audience's assumed priorities (that is, the assumption that the viewer cares most about the romance) and re-form latent ecocritical content within the text. It also does have a structure of mournful futurism—Hodaka and Hina get to live together, but they incur a significant cost, to them and to everyone in Tokyo. Because both stories center on Japanese losses and both feature mournful futurism, there is a certain current running between *Weathering With You* and *Scattered Across the Earth*. In both, young people choose to experience love and solidarity within small communities of chosen companions, while also experiencing loss at a much larger scale.

Weathering With You and *Waste Tide* also share an affective orientation to their subject matter, despite the very different content of the works. Anger at and cynicism about authority figures abounds in both works, from the authorities' ability to fix problems to their treatment of people at the individual and community levels. Notably, neither story features any sort of social safety net – the trash workers on Silicon Isle are freely and legally exploited without recourse, and the runaways in Tokyo are returned to their parents or separated in the foster system without any attention to what would best

suit their needs. Facing a global crisis like climate change in a profoundly neoliberal paradigm seems, in these books, to produce a mix of anger, cynicism, and helplessness. To secure any measure of improvement means incurring unbearable costs, whether it's the loss of Hina, or whatever losses virus-Mimi would subject humanity to during her quest to reform the human race. The resulting affective environment is one of angry, hopeless confusion. Most interestingly, the outcome is catastrophic for the characters' communities regardless of their level of influence and agency over the situation. Anger when faced with loss is, it seems, an inadvisable affective stance if one cares about the common good. *Scattered All Over the Earth*, which does not feature anger in any significant degree, also features a world with a much more hopeful future. *Weathering With You* seems to sit in the center of a spectrum with *Scattered All Over the Earth* on one end and *Waste Tide* on the other, a spectrum of how to approach loss and catastrophe and how one's approach to said loss affects the outcome.

Accepting the Loss of a Future

The relatively serene acceptance demonstrated by Tawada's characters is not the only alternative to anger, however. One can accept a loss and still have strong negative feelings about it. Uncertainty, apathy, disdain, despair, and plain sadness can accompany a pragmatic acceptance of the reality of a situation. Such a dynamic seems to fit the long-term work of mourning, to me; the almost interminable reckoning with loss and its effects long after one has come to accept the fact of the loss itself. This is, perhaps, the clearest

distinction between "grief" and "mourning." Grief is an acute sensation. It can be felt in the moment of loss as well as long after, and is not predictable or consistent in its resurgences, but it is an affective change that is noticed when the grief "comes over" you. Mourning, on the other hand, is an *affective stance*, a condition that entails a type of ongoing activity. Mourning is often the expression of grief, but can and does continue without the acute episodes of the emotion of grief. The final two texts I will discuss this chapter more directly concern the work of mourning rather than the feeling of grief—the work of considering what to do after the loss has occurred.

Highwater (2023) is a story and turn-based combat game, developed by Demagog Studios and published for mobile by Netflix. It is set in a world which has flooded, leaving food scarce, violence common, and corporate governance the only official form of social structure. A young man named Nikos and his companions aim to sneak into the city of Alphaville[24] and board the first fleet of ships bound for a new colony on Mars. The plot here is less important – in sum, Nikos and a few friends manage to make it onto a rocket, which is part of a the "Hope Mission." There are more missions advertised; however, only the most naïve believe that there will ever be any more rockets. The most notable thing is that many of the characters seem resigned to the fact that Earth is now uninhabitable for humans. Food and medicine come from scavenging the ruins of flooded buildings, or from corporate aid packages that have now ceased as Alphaville turns its attention to the moon. The people who live outside the corporate walls take care of each

[24] The name of the corporate stronghold is a reference to Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 French New Wave noir film *Alphaville.* There are references to classic media throughout the game.

other as best they can, including an older woman who takes in orphaned children, caring for three hundred of them with the help of Nikos and other older assistants. None of them expect to survive. One remarks, "I just want to live peacefully in the little time we have left." They have lost any expectation of a future. Therefore, the mission to break into the Hope Mission rocket is less of a heist and more of a last gasp of hope, a last chance to live for a little longer (assuming that the Mars colony is, in fact, capable of supporting life, which we do not know for sure). One of the characters declines going with Nikos because he does not want to live on another planet; he would rather die on this one, he claims. He watches wistfully as the rocket is blasting off into space. Nikos and his companions look back equally wistfully, wondering if it was worth it, realizing that not only will they never see their home, friends, or family again, but that those things will soon cease to exist. The final screens of the game end in text: "Nikos & Co. made it! The billions of people left behind, facing famine, wars, floods, and droughts might disagree that this is a 'happy ending.' It is also unclear whether life on Mars will really be a new, interplanetary paradise. … The 'happily ever after' part remains yet to be seen." Even at the highest point for the characters, after their triumph, the game casts the player's attention back to those who are left behind, and to the dubious circumstances of humanity's survival. It is the mirror image of *Weathering With You*, which allows the audience to ignore the consequences for everyone who is not a main character—instead, *Highwater* refuses to give the player a neat happy ending.

However, the ending also does not address how the game has shown communities of people establishing ways of living amidst the ruins. The people Nikos and his friends

leave behind are possibly doomed—but not certainly. Nikos and the other passengers on the rocket make a wager on a future on Mars, in an act of mournful futurism; they mourn what they leave behind, but attempt to forge a different path into the future; they bargain for the hope of a potential rebirth of humanity on Mars, even without any guarantee that Mars is habitable. The people who remain, meanwhile, express kind pessimism: they do not appear to believe that Alphaville and its surrounds will continue to support human life, but in the meantime they create art, feed each other, create new rituals and forms of meaning-making, and share what little they have.

Highwater is a mood piece, and that mood is evoked more through visuals and sound than through the plot or writing. Despite the grim themes of the story, it is genuinely pleasurable, even peaceful, to explore the faded tropical islands of the game's setting. Most of the game takes place as Nikos drives his small inflatable boat called the Argo from island to island. The air is hazy and visibility is low; while the setting brings to mind a tropical or Mediterranean area, it is one with heavy air pollution. The boat is equipped with a radio, tuned to Highwater Pirate Radio, run by a single DJ whose languid reflections and Euro soft rock tunes underscore the whole game except for combats. His voice is distant and clinical, though it is also the only source of news and encouragement to be found. About halfway through the game, Nikos and his community have a small party to celebrate finding good food, and there is live music. The lyrics run: "Where are we going, where did we go, if there is no course or tide/Moonlight, light from your foam, gives us some hope/Where are we going, where did we go, if there is no course or tide." It speaks to hope as a delicate anchor within a directionless society. Hope is delicate

indeed—most of the game's characters do not seem to have any. As the music continues, we see the boat speeding off, Nikos thinking, "Nana put on a brave face. I had a lump in my throat all evening. I never got a chance to play that game [of soccer] with [my friend]." The music wonders at what possible direction one can head in with no promise of a future, and Nikos mourns what will never happen. Rather than a space of possibility, the future is a space of loss and increasing danger. The Serbian creators have imbued the game with a feeling not unlike that of expatriate or exile literature—the longing and grief for home even as one tries to escape—but this time, on the level of the whole world. It seems that one of the things that is lost is the hope that the future represents, the idea the futurity promises progress or at least change. Nikos and company leave for Mars in search of that lost futurity just as much as they are searching for a new home.

Unusually, in comparison with *Waste Tide, Weathering With You*, and even *Scattered All Over the Earth*, there is no anger in *Highwater*'s grief. Nor are Nikos and company able to find a new community to bond with, as in *Scattered*—they have each other, but they face violently hostile strangers within Alphaville and likely once they arrive on Mars and are discovered as stowaways. There is also no doubt and confusion about the future of Earth, about how to fix things. The people in the world of *Highwater* have two options: stay on Earth and die, sadly; or go to Mars and (probably) live, sadly. The complexity is in why people make their individual choices, not in what options there are. The cynicism about the world that we see in *Waste Tide* and *Weathering with You* is developed into full-blown fatalism. It also illustrates the radical uncertainty of loss, grief, and mourning. When faced with loss, there is no clear answer as to whether the right

thing to do is mourn that which is lost, or try and find a new thing to love. While Nikos and his friends may find a new life on Mars, they will always have to mourn not only the people they leave behind, but the entire planet, the birthplace of all that humankind has ever known until now. For those who stay behind, they may die, but they die at home, with the people and places they care about. The only difference between the two groups is the orientation they have toward the future, active or passive. Nikos and his friends are bound together by their emotional relationship to the situation, i.e., by taking an active, problem-solving stance toward an ultimately unsolvable problem. They succeed in breaking into Alphaville and the Mars missions, and change their own futures as a result of cooperating with like-minded (one might as well say like-*emotioned*, if it were a word) people, but it is not clear that they will be happier than those who remain. Who can say what the right choice is? Who can say how to handle the work of mourning a whole planet?

Figure 6: Nikos and a friend drive to Hightower, which has been renamed Highwater after the flooding.

Figure 7: The unnatural haze of the sky and horizon is visible as Nikos and friends drive the boat.

Out of the works discussed thus far, *Scattered* is the most optimistic, promising a world in which loss is compensated by the gain of new relationships and forms of relating. However, part of why this is plausible is because the book maintains a strictly metaphorical relationship to the Anthropocene, dwelling on grief without any of the logistical and concrete concerns about food, health, and livelihoods that are the consequence of climate change. *Highwater* and *Waste Tide* engage with climate change directly, and both are pessimistic about the conditions of life in the Anthropocene, for humans and other life forms. However, the final text I look at offers a different outlook. It predicts that disaster will come about, and that the changes will be nigh-impossible to adjust to—for those who knew the old world. For the people born after climate change is already in "full swing," however, their attitude toward the loss of that old world may be very different. The older people are grieving, but the younger people have no mourning to take part in, because they do not feel that they have lost something. They participate in neither kind pessimism nor in mournful optimism, because they are confident in their ability to survive in the "new" future, and they do not mourn the past they never experienced.

In *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2019), author Pitchaya Sudbanthad creates a cohort of characters whose stories intermingle across the decades, centered in Bangkok. This includes historical fiction, but stretches forward into the near future, where climate change has altered rain patterns sufficiently that most of old Bangkok is underwater. Some of these future stories feature the perspectives of older people, ones who remember

what Bangkok used to be like, who mourn what has been lost. But in "Netherworld," three unnamed siblings who remember only the drowned city offer a different perspective. They offer guided tours, showing curious visitors the spectacle of the underwater city, the ruins and adaptations of the residents, but they actively dislike their customers. Nor are they appreciative of the business brought by tourists: "Our mothers say that we have to make them happy, because it's part of our livelihood. Smile, be helpful. Pose for their cameras. We're sick of it, honestly. We already have our water and our fish and our farmed greens. It's time us Krung Nak people shrug off the outsiders" (275). They do not want the extra money and exposure to the outside world that the tourists bring. Where the tourists see a ghost of a once-great city, the children see a current home that they like just fine, and one that is self-sufficient. They feel nothing but disdain for the memories of old Bangkok:

> The returnees come back here believing they'll see their old homes, not so different from what they had been. The waterless years weren't long ago, they like to think. Something must remain. They imagine stepping back to find the marble still shiny, old lightbulbs flickering on for their arrival. Then they find out it's only the bits in their heads that have endured, and everyone's sad.
>
> But what do we know? We're too young to even know about most of the things they mention. We only nod and smile when they talk and talk. We sell them tissue paper so they can wipe their tears. In truth, we're sick of them blotting their eyes. Boo hoo, so what. Enough with the crying. Quiet, already. (281)

It is a somewhat heartless attitude, but it is also one that allows the children to live happily in the post-climate disaster world. They are not thinking of what they have lost, but what they have. The disdain they have for older people's memories, so common in children, is what protects them from grief.

It is not just a contempt for the past, however, but also a fondness for the present that motivates them. Drowned buildings provide landmarks; scarce fish make for more exciting fishing competitions. They prefer their home without the buzz and distraction of tourist season, in fact:

> It's unusual that anyone ever comes here during monsoon season. … The tourist zones with the museums and snorkel-through ruins are closed. The market stalls hawking salvaged knickknacks and seashell-encrusted furniture—the more water warped and stained, the more sought after—have shuttered. No diving shows or feats of underwater endurance scheduled, just silt and rust everywhere, staining everything they touch the red of stingray blood.
>
> It's our favorite time, this late in the season. School's still out, and we can do whatever we like. Best thing, we don't have to pretend not to have C-Os, or to go around in silly clothing the land people think we still wear, because of some movie or soap opera made about us. It should be like this year-round. (274)

The picture painted is disconcerting. Businesses closed and rust-colored water is certainly not the ingredients of a conventionally appealing setting, nor is the torrential downpour of the monsoon season, which the children describe as having "enough strength to carry fallen houses far out into the gulf, where the wreckage will join other debris tumbling toward the seafloor" (274). And yet, for them it represents freedom, the same carefree time as any other summer vacation. The "Netherworld" of the title is a place they are perfectly comfortable in. The grief of the adults is their own problem, and not sharing that grief is key to the children's happiness and sense of identity. When their passenger asks to go by her parents' old house, they make up a reason why it is not possible to do so, and the narration says, "She doesn't know it, but we're doing her a favor" (281). Instead, they take her on a different route:

> The tide will soon be washing out. The waterline will slowly lower. The golden tips of submerged pagodas will again greet the sun. We'll pass by tidal flats that will soon be crawling with mudskippers, thousands of spherical eyes poking from puddles on what the old ones say was the roof of a supermarket. Then we will show Big Sister the hollowed-out building where bats have taken over, their screeching noisy even well before the darkening hours, when they'll pour into the sky like smoke. We'll visit the windmill with its turret barely above water and its sails now turned by currents. We should pass by a sundries raft, and we'll tell them to make us iced coffee, to go. The ice will be cold, and we will hardly take a break between sips.
>
> We will ask Big Sister if she has enjoyed her afternoon. We expect a good tip. (282)

These sights are meaningful to the children, not to the adults, but they are part of this new Bangkok that the children inhabit willingly. That they expect a good tip indicates they believe their passenger, Big Sister Juhn, will also enjoy and find meaning in these new landmarks. Not only do the children not miss the old world, but they have full confidence that this new present will be appealing even to someone who remembers the past. Those who do not have the ability to disconnect from the past and appreciate the present earn the children's ire for being weepy. This disconnection from the past enables the children to live fulfilling lives despite being in what some adults would consider a post-apocalyptic world.

The point of this text is not to say that the solution to grief is to simply stop caring about what one has lost. Rather, the children dislike those who refuse to see what exists in the now, who look at the present and only see what is not there. Extrapolating somewhat, it seems to indicate that loss and mourning become excessive when they become exclusive. While we undertake the work of mourning that which is lost, we must still be able to attend to what surrounds us in the present, not only to make use of it but to

genuinely appreciate its virtues. The cheerful heartlessness of the children seems aimed to slap sense into those who believe climate change will "end the world." Whose world? What world? Things will change, and some things will be lost, which is worth mourning. But there will also be new things, and if one is too lost in grief to acknowledge that, one has already chosen obsolescence for themselves. This outlook underscores the importance of the duality of mournful futurism; although the children do not experience the mourning aspect, the adults around them do. It shows that mourning must be future-oriented or else it becomes melancholia. It is the opposite of cruel optimism, which promises that things will be better in the future, somehow, even if the present is barely tolerable. Instead, mournful futurism promises merely that there will be a future that has continuity with the present.

Planetary Hospice

These five texts provide an array of affective orientations toward climate change, from acceptance to grief to anger to love to resignation. All of them portray possible responses to grief and loss, even in "Netherworld" where the grieving process is treated disdainfully by the next generation. Willox writes that grieving "holds potential for expanding climate change discourse in politically and ethically productive ways" (137), and these texts form part of that expanded discourse. In sociological work in Australia, Petra Tschakert, Chantal Bourgault de Courdray, and Pierre Horwitz found "evidence for emotional complexities of solastalgia where pessimistic outlooks for the future are

wrapped up in prefigurative visions of a better world" (1). The loss and grief are part of the pessimistic outlook that seems to be part and parcel of processing climate change, and also processing that whether we like it or not, human life is likely to continue, and it is likely to continue under increasingly difficult circumstances, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is not a defeatist attitude—an accusation that comes from those who believe it is still possible to carry on "as usual"—but part of an affective climate of its own, one that is frankly contrary to Western culture as it asks us to accept or at least acknowledge that if we define defeat as failing to maintain the status quo, defeat has already come and gone.

We have entered a period that some regard as "planetary hospice," as in Carolyn Baker's essay in which she characterizes planetary hospice as a time in which

> we should ask … are we willing to put love into action even if we ourselves don't physically survive? If the answer is 'yes,' then two things are essential. First, bearing witness to the deepening horrors of climate chaos; and second, committing ourselves to compassionate service to all other living beings — since they are going to suffer with us.
> By practicing 'good manners' toward all species, we can make their demise easier along with ours.

She decries "heroic activism" as

> activism in which we do not grieve. It invariably leads to burnout and compromised bodies and psyches. Rather than being self-indulgent, conscious grieving and other forms of self-care are important spiritual practices that honor and protect the bodies and minds required to advance the work that needs to be done to prepare society for the end of life as we know it.
> With practices like these, the coming catastrophe does not have to result in widespread fear, panic, dread or hostility. Instead, we should think of ourselves and the Earth as entering a hospice.

This is a radical expression of an affective orientation toward the climate change crisis that is likely alien to many people, not just Westerners. It is an attempt to put into action a type of grieving for climate, as Willox suggests, but it is a grief with no future; it assumes that everyone is a member of this hospice ward, and everyone is terminal. It is precisely the kind of grief that Sudbanthad's characters have no use for. It assumes that the death of the current global biological system means the death of all ecosystems, all species, all environmental patterns, and does not allow room for mourning work that also embraces a life after grief. Baker consigns the planet to hospice, but the planet will not die. Many organisms will, but not all. Baker has confused the all-consuming nature of grief for reality—it feels like everything is dying, because grief robs one of the ability to imagine a future without its pain. But Willox's work of mourning does not entail constant grief. It calls for mourning, which is different. Mourning allows for pain around the loss, but also acknowledges the existence of the rest of life here in the present. Differentiating between grief and mourning is vital to navigating the affects of climate change, because deciding to enter planetary hospice means making a choice not to see a future, and thus not to bring any future about. It also means giving up on improving life for the generations which will follow, even in the worst-case scenarios, for decades after this one—the extinction of humanity that Baker imagines is not a quick process.

Taken all together, the affective orientation of these climate change stories seems to be one of mournful futurism; the exact future orientation that Baker's vision lacks. The situation is bad, there will be loss, there will be pain. But there will also be some things that remain, and some things which are new that are worth existing, even if they are not

an equal trade for the things which were lost. It is not quite an optimistic outlook. It is, instead, a kind pessimism, as I said before. Things will get worse, and we will be able to bear it. This perspective speaks volumes about the current understanding of climate change. There are fewer fiery calls to action, as regular people realize that government and corporate leaders will not make the radical decisions necessary to avoid climate change's worst effects. Instead, there is a quieter reckoning as we figure out how to feel about and through this new situation, this new vision of the future. The difficulty of doing so is clear from the confusion of *Weathering With You*'s messaging, the anger of *Waste Tide*, the heartlessness of the "Netherworld" characters, the depression of *Highwater*, and even the abstraction of *Scattered All Over the World*, which cannot quite bring itself to face what it is about. Nonetheless, creators from around the world are treading that difficult and unclear path, as we learn more about what the planetary future likely holds.

Chapter 4. Forced Migration and the Creation of Empathy

The previous two chapters concerned themselves with the depictions of global crises in speculative fiction, and found that within fictional works, these crises are often best handled within small affective communities—communities of people that are affectively oriented toward the crisis in similar ways. In the third and final chapter, I wish to turn outward, and focus on how speculative fiction creators address crises by attempting to establish affective communities between the characters and the audience through use of empathy. The texts I have examined have political dimensions due to their choice of material and theme, regardless of the creators' intent, though I suspect most fully intended their political messages. Ultimately, however, any political message they might have is moot if that message does not reach any audience members. Accordingly, in this chapter I explore how different texts might attempt to influence the emotions of their audiences.

I do so while analyzing speculative fiction concerning a third global crisis: migration. The way we define migration as a crisis is a political choice; author Mohsin Hamid, whose novel *Exit West* (2017) is discussed below, sees migration as part of the human experience, saying, "if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience and universality of the refugee experience … then the space for empathy opens up" (*The Nation*). According to this point of view (and the writings of many others), migration is no more a crisis than the need to eat is, or the impulse to make art. However, migration is not widely viewed as a human universal, or if it is, it is one to be

corralled and even feared. In *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), David Wallace-Wells explains the impact of a migration wave on Europe: "[b]eginning in 2011, about one million Syrian refugees were unleashed on Europe by a civil war inflamed by climate change and drought—and … much of the 'populist moment' the entire West is passing through now is the result of panic produced by the shock of those migrants" (7). In the United States, migration from Central and Southern American countries through the southern border has been a source of extreme political tensions, and the justification for multiple, systemic, and grave human rights abuses. Jolanda Jetten and Victoria M. Esses point out that "debate about immigration is not limited to those countries that experience the highest intake of immigrants and refugees. For example, the Brexit outcome, which surprised the world, was largely driven by concerns about open borders and immigration" (663). The modern fear of migrants is not consistent throughout history—as Hamid said in another interview, "A great global migration is underway and, in fact, has been for millennia. What we must resist is the idea that this is not the case, that migration is something new, unprecedented, dangerous, bad" (*Berkeley News*). Our current system of nation-states and national borders is what gives rise to the particular notion of the migrant as we now understand it, and more specifically what gives migration its fearful tenor in media and politics. Given that it does now have this character, and that fear of the outsider-migrant is fueling a number of populist and right-wing changes across the global North, we can speak of migration as a contemporary global crisis—not because migration has in of itself a crisis nature, but because it has been treated as such. In the United States

specifically, there was no such thing as “illegal” migration prior to the immigration act of 1924.

Even in countries that receive a significant number of migrants, most individuals in those countries do not interface with a large number of migrants. Nonetheless, migration, migrants, and socioeconomic (and demographic, but we will discuss that further below) impacts from migration are endlessly discussed in media and politics. In fact, “To a significant extent, the battle around migration takes the form of representation in different venues and formats, notably in the broadcast and social media and in political pronouncements” (4, Brownlie and Abouddahab). This is particularly troubling given that

> The media tend to portray migrants and refugees as either helpless victims to be pitied and helped or lawless threatening people to be feared and repudiated with a gender bias in images where helpless victims are associated with women and children and potential threats with men. Migrants are both feared as the ‘other’ or even the criminal and welcomed in a spirit of human generosity; they are both subject to restrictive sovereign authority and to the hospitality of human rights conventions (5, Brownlie and Abouddahab).

Even this statement seems generous in the face of recent attempts to restrict or deny the obligations of host/destination countries to refugees. It does mean that representations of migrants and migration are a primary battleground for political aims around migration, whether progressive, conservative, or otherwise.

It might seem surprising to some to choose speculative fiction as a venue for representing and discussing migration, as there are so many compelling stories of and by real migrants unfolding in current spacetime. However, in addition to the arguments I have made previously made as to speculative fiction’s power to depict and analyze crises, Gül Yaşartürk argues that speculative fiction is particularly suited to address migration.

Yaşartürk traces science fiction's development from travel writing and its encounter with the foreign other, then explains, "Given that there is physically nothing left today that has not been known or discovered in the geographical region/world where we live, the answer to the question 'Who is the other in science fiction films?' is quite simply; uninvited guests that we are unwilling to share our peace and well-being [with], namely refugees and migrants" (1). Migrants from other places are often treated as uncertain threats that bear strange cultural assumptions and social behaviors, as aliens from our own planet. In *The Wall* (2019), John Lanchester underscores this point by having his characters use the term Others for anyone outside the barricaded English island (which would include North Ireland, currently part of the UK as much as England, but it is unclear in the novel if the Irish island still exists). In E. Lily Yu's short story "The Wretched and The Beautiful" (2017), humanity's first contact with intelligent aliens comes in the form of interstellar refugees, who bring neither threats nor gifts of incredible technology, and are treated accordingly—with disdain and deferred responsibility. The editor's note before the story reads in part, "Refugees are the most vulnerable aliens. Our ability to demonstrate meaningful compassion for aliens of unfamiliar culture is one of science fiction's oldest subjects, and is one of our greatest challenges as humans." Speculative fiction has a long tradition of exploring otherness in its many forms, and promoting compassion and empathy as well as hostility and aggression towards othered subjects.

In this chapter, I also wish to avoid speculation regarding actual migrant experiences. I do not believe I am the person most well-equipped to discuss narratives

from the migrant perspective, especially as there are plenty of migrant-scholars who are able to do so themselves. Speculative fiction allows us to investigate the multiple perspectives from which migration can be experienced, without risking speaking over the voices of actual migrants, or exploiting scenes of personal trauma. Michael Rothberg's theory of the "implicated subject" plays a crucial role here. Oftentimes discussion of political injustice involves apportioning roles of victim and perpetrator. As Rothberg points out, however, these binary categories often fail to accurately describe participation in complex, historically-rooted, and ongoing systems of oppression. Rather, "[i]mplicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (1). One can be a perpetrator, victim, and/or implicated subject in different context at different times. Rothberg explains the concept further by touching directly on the subjects of the two previous chapters:

> For example, the workings of contemporary capitalism at a global scale depend on relations of exploitation that systematically produce inequality as well as psychic and physical harm. Privileged consumers in the global North are not, however, best described as "perpetrators" of exploitation, but rather as implicated subjects, participants in and beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously. Such an approach also helps us conceptualize collective responsibility in the age of what many have called the Anthropocene: we citizens of the Global North are not precisely perpetrators of climate change, yet we certainly contribute disproportionately to current and future climate-based catastrophes and benefit in the here and now from the geographically and temporally uneven distribution of their catastrophic effects. (12)

My intent in marking this distinction is to open up the possibility for looking at narratives about *migration* as well as those about *migrants*; to recognize that while some people

believe it is problematic to write about migration if one is not a migrant, in fact we are all implicated in the systems that produce involuntary migration and that treat migrants as aliens when they arrive in our countries of residence. The modern story of migration does not exist without a corresponding willingness on the part of residents to create, perpetuate, or allow border regimes meant to restrict the flow of resources and well-being to certain populations and not others.

Additionally, while understanding one's self as implicated in a system of oppression does not mean one is an expert on that system, it does imply a burden of responsibility—and a space for coalitional political action. Rothberg explains, "The framework of implication de-moralizes politics and encourages affinities between those who are positioned as victims and those who have inherited and benefited from privileged positions" (21) in part because "it both draws attention to responsibilities for violence and injustice greater than most of us want to embrace and shifts questions of accountability from a discourse of guilt to a less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility. If the former action seems to increase our ethical burden, the latter loosens the terms of that burden and detaches it from the ambiguous discourse of guilt, which often fosters denial and defensiveness in proximity to ongoing conflicts and the unearned benefits that accrue from injustice" (20). This in turn leads to the possibility of "long distance solidarity," Rothberg's term for "solidarity premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification" (12). While it is unquestionably vital to listen to those most impacted by regimes of oppression, Bruce Robbins has underlined what he calls "the paradox of empowered dissent," meaning that

in the effort to improve human conditions globally, we "cannot afford to do without the input of those who are empowered (that is, who *are* beneficiaries) and yet who also dissent from and even denounce the system that empowers them" (page number). The implicated subject is a necessary part of the fight for justice, not in spite of their implication, but because of it. Accordingly, in this chapter I examine narratives about migrants, residents, and those in between; all of them are relevant to addressing the crisis of migrant treatment today.

It is also worth noting that the primary drivers of current migration are the subjects of the two previous chapters: climate change and capitalism. In "The Great Displacement," Ben de Bruyn points out that "One of the ways in which climate change manifests itself in contemporary culture, and contemporary culture shapes our understanding of climate change, is through real and imagined stories of human relocation" (1). In slightly more dramatic fashion, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) predicts that "The tasks of the nation-state . . . will be those of keeping 'blood-dimmed tides' of climate refugees at bay and protecting their own resources . . . The outlines of an 'armed lifeboat' scenario can already be discerned in the response of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to the Syrian refugee crisis" (143–44). Climate change lurks on the boundaries of migration stories, even when it is not explicitly included in the text. In *The Wall*, the distance between England and other lands indicates that the other British islands have probably largely disappeared due to sea level rises, and utter collapse of other countries is also likely due to drought, famine, and disaster related to climate change. In the interest of prioritizing migration in

this chapter, I will not be fully exploring the climate and capital implications in these texts, but the throughlines are very much present. Similarly, whether it is a matter of telling migrant stories in order to more fully render them as grievable subjects, or of reckoning with the way in which cruel optimism keeps people on the move in search of a better form of capitalism, the theoretical concerns we have dealt with thus far continue to motivate this discussion.

A Quick Note on Terms

There are legal, political, and semantic distinctions between the words refugee, migrant, immigrant, and so on. In this chapter, I refer to people on the move as migrants. As a term of art, this is strictly neutral—it refers equally to refugees from persecution, legal immigrants with visas, people moving within their own nations, and more. However, I am generally focusing on involuntary migrants, which here covers any way in which one is forced to leave one's home for other locations. Emigration and immigration both depend on one's perspective, and refugee status is a matter of technical and legal definition. I do not wish to label people based on which direction they are moving, to or from what place, nor on whether their experiences meet the accepted legal standards for requiring asylum. Therefore, in this chapter involuntary migrants include those who are fleeing violence and persecution, but also those who have been driven from their homes by depleted resources, climate, lack of economic opportunities, and more. Whatever

situation makes someone feel that they have no choice but to leave is covered under "involuntary migration."

As many theorists have noted, we often lack a word to describe the opposite of a marked category, the unmarked "normal" or default position – so it is with the counterpart of migrant. Oftentimes this will be a citizen of the country to which the migrant has come, but not always; people who reside in a given place are not necessarily citizens, and even the word citizen has its own complexities. In stories of migration, we often imagine the non-migrants to be secure members of whatever group is in power, living in a state that does not threaten them (at least not overtly), who believes that their life will not be disrupted in such a way as to require involuntary migration. This is not necessarily true. Even citizens or other long-term residents are subject to manifold systems of oppression and privilege. Rather than make assumptions about the political position of the migrants' counterparts, I will simply use the term "resident." A resident is a person who is not on the move at this time; a migrant is a person who is currently on the move. "On the move" still includes short-term and intentionally temporary stays; one does not become a resident of a place during a week-long hotel stay. A resident is typically someone who has an expectation of remaining in place for a long, potentially unending duration. Such a position often entails attendant privileges, but not always. They are generally implicated subjects, and their choices about how to approach migration often play the largest role in determining what kind of reception migrants experience.

Narrative Empathy and Its Uses

Empathy is a surprisingly contentious topic in both narrative and political justice circles. It is both claimed to be the root of human altruism, and a distraction from real issues that merely soothes the conscience of the spectator without helping the victim. In *The Great Displacement,* De Bruyn writes, "Vulnerable people do not need our emotions, as elicited by scenes of suffering, but our rights" (12). By "emotions," he presumably means empathetic emotions experienced as part of viewing people in distress. It is true that people in crisis do not directly benefit from others' feeling of empathy toward them. On the other hand, empathy has been linked with altruistic and pro-social actions, and seems to provide at least one of the reasons for people to engage with the suffering of strangers in the first place. Alexa Weik von Mossner writes that "The assumption that empathy and emotional engagement promote moral development and prosocial action dates back at least to the eighteenth century" and even that perhaps "empathy and emotion are needed as motivation for people to act on cosmopolitan moral principles" (78). Literature is an important part of this equation – Martha Nussbaum argues that literature can help us develop empathy for people who are not like ourselves, as it can "wrest from our frequently obtuse and blunted imaginations an acknowledgement of those who are other than ourselves" (111-12). Von Mossner adds to this that it implies "a direct link between our empathic engagement with literary texts and the empathy we employ in our interactions with actually existing Others" (78). However, Sue J. Kim warns that

> Empathy can serve a normative function that not only prescribes what one should feel but also defines who can feel, or who constitutes a subject capable of feeling. […] That is, notions of empathy that are limited to the lyric individual run the risk of exacerbating structures of oppression and exploitation by failing to locate the sufferings of others in those structures and histories, and by failing to recognize the distinctions as well as the connections between the lyric, legal, and embodied subjects. (150-151)

The potential good of empathy may be overcome by the ills of the subject making assumptions about the object of their empathy, or failing to understand the context in which their suffering occurs. It also, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi notes, risks establishing sympathy for single subjects without enabling a generalizable empathy for others in those circumstances, reducing the possibility for effective solidarity actions (59). Nonetheless, Ritivoi also writes "Difference is a major obstacle to empathic understanding, but it is also an inevitable feature of intersubjectivity. […] What pulls us out of the confines of our own world and makes us more aware of others (and of their needs) is a feeling of recognition, and with it, commitment, that stories can convey more masterfully than any other form of argument" (52). Empathy is not a guaranteed result of encountering difference, of course; the first text examined below goes further into the complexities of creating narrative empathy with a character who likely differs profoundly from the reader. However, it is also possible, as Ritivoi argues, that narratives provide the potential to "promote a compassionate politics" (52) that can familiarize us with experiences we do not share, and with the people who experience them.

This chapter will proceed on the assumption that it is possible to stimulate empathy via narratives, and furthermore that doing so creates a possibility for prosocial action, such as inspiring people to act through political organization, mutual aid, and

direct assistance. Both are only possibilities; the conditions must be right to create either, as we will explore further. I am also interested in engaging with the theory put forward by Shaun Gallagher, that empathy is not only stimulated by narrative but takes the form of narrative itself; that rather than being a specific sort of empathy, narrative empathy is the core of the empathetic process, by which we understand others through referencing not only our own experiences but the diverse narratives we have been exposed to. Gallagher arrives at this theory by countering a more common theory of empathy-by-simulation; that is, the existence of mirror neurons which fire upon observing behaviors means that our ability to empathize consists of our ability to mentally simulate the same experience for ourselves, then generalize outward to others. As Gallagher points out, however, "it seems presumptuous to suggest that one's own limited first-person experience is capable of capturing th[e] diversity [of human experience]. […] Consistent simulation would introduce a consistent first-person bias into our understandings of others, i.e., we would be led to think that they must do what we would do, or experience what we would experience. […] Our own experiences, no matter how extensive, can never meet the diversity of experiences had by the many others that we encounter, even in our own culture" (364). A simple "gut check" or reflection on one's own experiences with empathy should provide proof that we do indeed empathize with people in situations we have never ourselves experienced. It is true that it may be easier to empathize with people who are in some way similar to us. Gallagher explains this as a result of narrative empathy, too, saying "we can more readily empathize with those who are close and similar to us [because we] already know the general lines of their stories. We have an

easier time placing them in a narrative framework" (370. Conversely, "it is possible in some cases to empathize with those who are not like us. We can empathize with monsters or aliens from other planets, as portrayed in film, and we can empathize with humans who live in far away lands and who are very different. This is possible, however, only when we know their stories" (370). Speculative fiction provides ample narratives to fit both cases. If empathy does indeed work this way, then reading narratives about migration can only help us understand and then empathize with the experience of migrants.

However, as Suzanne Keen has explored the concept of empathy in fiction, she writes in detail about the ways in which the reader's empathy is less reliable than often assumed. She writes, "No specific set of narrative techniques has yet been verified to over-ride the resistance to empathizing often displayed by members of an in-group regarding the emotional states of others marked out as different by their age, race, gender, weight, disabilities, and so forth" (214). Although authors and critics typically prefer complex, layered characters as more realistic and interesting, she also points out that flat characters "may play a greater role in readers' engagement in novels" because they are "easily comprehended and recalled" (218). And even in the case of a more complicated character, the readers may not automatically empathize with them—"sometimes the potential for character identification and readers' empathy decreases with sustained exposure to a particular figure's thoughts or voice" (219), as may happen when a reader encounters a character with a trait or behavior they find irritating or worse. While research seems to point to readers typically experiencing some form of empathy, it is not

guaranteed, and we do not fully understand what techniques or content may promote or inhibit that empathy. Yet empathy is still worth discussing as a part of the reading experience. Keen proposes concentrating on "strategic empathy," a type of empathy wherein "authors attempt to direct an emotional transaction through a fictional work aimed at a particular audience, not necessarily including every reader who happens upon the text" (223). Similar to Stuart Hall's theory of audience reception[25], Keen proposes three types of empathy: bounded strategic empathy, which is addressed from in-group members to other in-group members, and "familiarity may indeed prevent outsiders from joining the empathetic circle" (224); ambassadorial strategic empathy, which is addressed from one group to specific others, hoping to cultivate their empathy for the in-group; and broadcast strategic empathy, which "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes" (224). In the texts I cover in this chapter, I will examine how stylistic qualities as well as narrative content are deployed by authors to create these forms of authorial strategic empathy.

Submission and Difficult Narrators

The first text I want to examine may appear initially as an odd choice. *Submission*, the English title of the novel *Soumission* (2015) by Michel Houellebecq, is a

[25] In brief, Hall proposed that there are three primary ways in which an audience interprets a work: the intended reading; an oppositional reading in which the audience, perhaps due to being outside of the audience the author had imagined for their work, interprets the work contrary to the intended or "preferred" way; and negotiated reading, which blends the two. See "Encoding and Decoding Television Discourse," 1973.

near-future work of speculative fiction that imagines the French government "taken over" by the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to rapid social change in France. It is a divisive novel. Critics have called it racist, Islamophobic, misogynist, and more; *The London Review of Books* calls it "reactionary—indeed, delusional," and its publication prompted the French prime minister at the time, Michael Valls, to announce "France is not Michel Houellebecq… it's not intolerance, hatred, fear" (*Irish Times*). On the other hand, Rob Doyle remarks that the book could be interpreted as saying that Islamic rule is a cure for a listless and declining Europe; Lydia Kiesling focuses more on its rather extraordinary degree of misogyny; and Steven Poole argues that it is a satire on modern men rather than Islam. For our purposes, it possesses two useful traits: tight focalization on an unreliable narrator, and a peculiar view of migrants that demonstrates strategic narrative empathy as addressed only to a specific bounded group of people.

In brief, the novel follows a Parisian professor, François, who enjoys nothing much in his life except sleeping with his students and studying the author Joris-Karl Huysmans (who is notable in part for his conversion to Catholicism, which comes up frequently). He observes in surprise as the Muslim Brotherhood, led in France by charismatic Mohammed Ben Abbes, takes over the country, installs a form of sharia law, privatizes education, forbids women from teaching at the university level, and grants cooperative men multiple teenage wives, among other things. The novel ends as François joins in, lured by the promise of a cushy job and effort-free polygamy.

The novel is entirely in a close first-person perspective, internally focalized through a rather off-putting man's perspective. For example, while considering an

outbreak of violence in Paris, he muses, “If there was an ethnic conflict, I’d automatically be lumped together with the whites, and for the first time, as I went out to buy groceries, I was grateful to the Chinese for having always kept the neighborhood free of blacks or Arabs—of pretty much anyone who wasn’t Chinese, apart from a few Vietnamese” (53). Because we see his internal thinking, we see thoughts that he would be unlikely to share with anyone aloud. If he did, he would likely be called out for racism, but also his interlocutor might point out that he was a non-Chinese person living in the neighborhood, or that it is possible for Asian people to be Muslim, or a variety of other objections. However, this internal monologue goes unchallenged. Similarly, he declares confidently that Ben Abbes was the only possible political candidate able to campaign on traditional morality and family values, because “the left, paralyzed by his multicultural background, had never been able to fight him, or so much as mention his name” (115). His diagnosis of the political situation is likely inaccurate (at least it has not proven to be the case in the U.S. that conservative candidates of color were immune from the left), but not only is he not contradicted in the text, there is no real evidence on the matter because Ben Abbes does not exist. The first-person narration presents François as our “expert” on the political dynamics at hand. No one knows this situation better than he does, because it is only through his perspective that we see the world. There is no separate narrator to cast doubt on his thoughts and interpretations, though the reader may come to realize that François is not typically well-informed on the matters at hand.

For instance, one scene in particular shows how François’s personality affects the novel’s depictions of the Muslim takeover of France. At the beginning of the novel,

François observes that two women (though he calls them girls) wearing burkas are in his university class, though he can't imagine why: "what did those two virgins in burkas care about that revolting queen, the self-proclaimed analist, Jean Lorrain? did their fathers know what they read in the name of literature?" (26, emphasis original). He does not consider that the women may care about literature, or be interested in learning. Instead, he details an encounter with the women and three men, "two of them Arab, one black" (24), in which the men are speaking with the women and blocking the entrance to the classroom. François approaches them, thinking "They weren't armed, at the moment… Nothing about them was overtly menacing. All the same, they were blocking the entrance. I needed to say something… They had to be under orders to avoid provocation. At least I hoped so" (24). The men leave, with a parting "peace be with you, monsieur," but the atmosphere is tense. From the moment he sees them, François is threatened—because of their race, but also because they are physically controlling a space that he believes he should control. They are blocking the doorway to his classroom. He asks them to move and they do, but the encounter takes on the tone of a hostage negotiation, wherein François anticipates that violence may break out in response to his request to retake his space. Like a conspiracy theorist, François sees intention where most people would see casual happenstance. In his narration, men standing in a doorway is the precursor to a violent struggle for dominance.

The degree to which this is solely an artifact of François's perception is unclear, however, because as the plot unfolds, François does not become any less pathetic, but he also is consistently proven right. The Sorbonne (where François works) is taken over

completely by “Islamists,” controlling the university and academic space to the point where women are not allowed to enter. At no point are there any Muslims who profess an interest in the existing educational system. No Muslim person, no immigrant, seems to be interested in literature, art, the sciences, or any of the rest of the curricula previously offered at the Sorbonne. The takeover of the university is merely a precursor to the takeover of the rest of France, and, ben Abbes says, to the creation of a new empire which would abolish France in favor of one Muslim country comprising the territories of current-day southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

This combination of the plot and François’s perspective paves the way for a progressive decrease in François’s empathy for other people—and by extension, perhaps the reader’s, for the length of their stay with him. As the “takeover” escalates in Paris, François leaves for the countryside in a fit of existential malaise, but it does not help. He thinks, “The mere will to live was clearly no match for the pains and aggravations that punctuate the life of the average Western man. I was incapable of living for myself, and who else did I have to live for? Humanity didn’t interest me—it disgusted me, actually. I didn’t think of human beings as my brothers” (155). This applies to the French, to Muslims, to everyone. It expresses a deep cynicism about the value of human life. However, it also implies that specifically the condition of the average Western man is perhaps the most miserable of all. We see François’s suffering up close; we see his suicidal impulse, driven by the “pains and aggravations” the Western man is heir to. Through his perspective, the reader is encouraged to meditate on the hardships of the Western man, to invest emotionally in the brutal ennui and misanthropy that François

experiences. This is specifically the white Western man's province—the Muslims in the book suffer from no aimlessness, but rather act with a deliberate and (to François) threatening sense of purpose. It indicates that François is addressing other white Western men, the only people with whom he could expect to share this experience.

François is at this point likely to be experiencing a different state of being than most readers, who hopefully do not share his suicidal misanthropy. Henry F. Smith has written about the "dissociation, disavowal, and despair" of the narrative voice in *Submission*, due to which "the reader is placed in the position of being ushered through impending dangers to both François and to France – no coincidence that the narrator's name stands, everymanlike, for the country – by someone who does not share the reader's concerns" (175). This is both due to the misanthropy and racism which one hopes the reader does not share, but also due to a strange back-and-forth pattern in the narration that Smith characterizes as "build[ing] the narrative on a series of reversals" (175). In greater detail:

> For the author, they serve as narrative devices that allow him to reverse himself, disconfirm expectations he has just planted, and juxtapose contradictory voices without integrating them, which some critics suggest is a disavowal of his responsibility as an author. Moreover, there is danger in the air, to which François responds with what we will come to recognize as characteristic indifference. Shortly after a brief encounter with two Arabs outside the university, which feels menacing to the reader, François says, "That went well … This time anyway." He then tells us teachers have been attacked in four French cities, before dismissing it: "but I had never met a colleague who had been attacked, and I didn't believe the rumors" (Submission, 21). Now the reader realizes the immediate danger, which, unless we dismiss it, as François does, or dismiss François by mocking him, is the more frightening because of François's apparent disavowal of that danger. (179)

This is not simply a case of an unreliable narrator, though it is certainly that as well. It means that it is difficult to tell what one is supposed to think about the situation at large. It produces "sense of dislocation within the reader, alone in a dangerous landscape with no familiar political or emotional landmarks, and without a reliable guide" (176). The reader's sense of trust in the narrator is certainly abrogated, but they have no access to a more "objective" narrator—in essence, one is forced to take François's word for what is happening, all the while knowing that he is not perceiving events in a consistent manner. While François is far from the only unreliable narrator in literature, the events he unreliably perceives are uncommonly politically turbulent, and understanding them as a warning of a future danger, a preposterous racist fantasy, or something in between is genuinely a matter of interpretation. So it is all the more destabilizing to have the only interpreter presented be François, a man possessed of rather less than usual interpretive skill—as Douglas Morrey puts it, "François has a fatal tendency to read his own, often rather pathological, perception as universal" (10). It produces uncertainty about what the novel, and Houellebecq, are trying to say. One could see it as also producing a kind of plausible deniability—whatever opinion François, and through him Houellebecq, are seen to express, they are also able to demonstrate expressing the opposite. This is the "disavowal" Smith speaks of.

Submission is relevant for our discussion of migration because it offers a peculiar case of utilizing a kind of negative strategic empathy; that is, it aims to *reduce* one's empathy rather than increase it. Its depiction of Muslim migrants, mostly North African, "appears faithfully to parrot the ideology of white nationalist conspiracies of the

replacement of indigenous Europeans by an immigrant other" (10), as Morrey and plenty of other critics put it. It is, in fact, remarkably similar to Islamophobic rhetoric in the United States as well—the anti-Islamic group ACT for America expresses similar concerns to François about the ability of Muslims "invad[e] and coloniz[e]" space previously belonging to the white residents, including a fear that the federal government will be the vehicle for such an invasion (Gorman and Culcasi, 172-3, 175). However, Houellebecq consistently undermines François's credibility, making the "threat" of the Muslim-French government seem both overwhelming and of little concern. Contrary to what one might expect, François expresses approval of the new regime, noting that crime and unemployment go down under their leadership, and eventually converting to Islam himself. And yet his approval is also repugnant, as he focuses overmuch on polygamy, and his view of Muslim women: "Under an Islamic regime, women—at least the ones pretty enough to attract a rich husband—were able to remain children nearly their entire lives. […] There were just a few years where they bought sexy underwear, exchanging the games of the nursery for those of the bedroom—which turned out to be much the same thing" (169). To be clear, François thinks this is a good and even attractive thing, leaving the reader repulsed by both the inaccuracy and the desire François expresses. When François expresses approval of the Muslim migrants' culture, it is repugnant and pushes one away from both François and from this depiction of Islam. When François expresses fear of the migrants, it again shows his unlikable prejudices—but, crucially, does not restore the reader's empathy for the Muslims that François fears. The only Muslim François engages with at any length is a white convert who started as a white

nationalist before realizing his affinity with specifically patriarchal Islamic practice. Morrey writes that this character (Rediger) either must "satirize [white nationalists] as gullible turncoats or invite them to see unsuspected similarities between their own beliefs and those of their supposed foreign invaders" (10). I argue that the effect of the novel is to do both, to draw a clear comparison between French nationalists and Muslim migrants, and show that even if they are opposed to each other at the moment, that in the future they may find they share a common vision of France: patriarchal, religious, traditional.

The ultimate irony of François's unreliable narration ends up being that, like a white nationalist, he likes the ideas of Houellebecq's version of Islam, and yet is afraid of the brown people who carry the message. His conversion at the end symbolizes his realization that this Islam is in fact the answer to his desires, and he overcomes his xenophobia to be able to embark on a new, happier life—one which the reader is unlikely to applaud, but which François eagerly embraces, remarking "I'd be given another chance; and it would be the chance at a second life, with very little connection to the old one. I would have nothing to mourn" (227). Throughout the novel, he expresses disdain for Europe's contemporary situation, and contrasts it to the greater vigor of Islamic cultures, at one point thinking, "This wave of new immigrants, with their traditional culture—of natural hierarchies, the submission of women, and respect for elders—offered a historic opportunity" (208). Ultimately, whether one perceives the novel as pro- or anti-migrant depends largely on how one feels about the return of traditional culture and religion to Europe. Houellebecq has declined to clarify his stance as pro- or anti-migration, but does reveal a certain alignment with cultural conservatism. In an interview

with the Paris Review, Houellebecq opines that "the return of religion is not a slogan but a reality, and that it is very much on the rise." The interviewer responds:

> That hypothesis is central to the book, but we know that it has been discredited for many years by numerous researchers, who have shown that we are actually witnessing a progressive secularization of Islam, and that violence and radicalism should be understood as the death throes of Islamism. That is the argument made by Oliver Roy, and many other people who have worked on this question for more than twenty years.

Houellebecq simply says, "That is not what I have observed… This is not a French phenomenon, it's almost global." Houellebecq claims that his writing is apolitical. He admits "I use scare tactics" in the Paris Review interview, but also says, "I am not an intellectual. I don't take sides, I defend no regime. I deny all responsibility[.]" The interviewer Bourmeau asks, "Have you asked yourself what the effect might be of [this] novel?" and he responds, "None. No effect whatsoever." This seems disingenuous; he goes on to explain his ideology and opinions on the nature of religion, Islam, gender, and Europe, so one is hard-pressed to take him at his word. Nonetheless, in the absence of authorial clarity, I am forced to conclude that the novel aims to reduce empathy for Muslim immigrants by correlating them with white nationalists.

In the *London Review of Books'* article on *Submission*, Adam Shatz reminds readers that Muslims in France "are a population, not a community, and they don't vote as a bloc," and that Houellebecq has no "curious[ity] about the lives of actual Muslims in France." He "doesn't mention the history of colonization that brought Muslims to France, or the racism and inequality that is still the lot of third-generation 'immigrants'." All of these omissions make perfect sense if the goal is to block the possibility of readerly

empathy between reader and Muslim character, and concentrate any potential empathy on François, who is not reticent about his sufferings or the reasons for them. Submission is an example of bounded strategic empathy. It features a white French male novelist and protagonist, speaking to other white French people and appealing to their empathy as well as to their fears of the other. The close focus on François, cutting out any input from Muslim characters, and the imputations of violence and pedophilia to Muslim culture, demonstrate that the novel is primarily aimed at other in-group members, sharing a common concern. It is a showcase of the fears of the resident-citizen, deliberately restricting empathy to other resident-citizens. François's fears are not precisely to be taken seriously, because of his clear status as an unreliable narrator; but we are given no access to any other perspective, certainly not a Muslim one. The actions of the Muslim-French government in the book are reprehensible even if François approves of them; they outlaw women in the workplace and assign teenage girls as brides to middle-aged government workers as loyalty rewards, among other things. They are not available as empathetic characters.

A more straightforward story might encourage the reader to empathize with a character that then carries the narrative's normative weight; e.g., a story wherein readers are encouraged to empathize with a migrant character as a way of encouraging overall empathy to migrants as a group. *Submission* shows that the opposite is also viable--discouraging empathy with a character so as to create distance between the reader and what the character represents. What makes this a peculiar novel is that Houellebecq does this through precisely the methods that theorists have hypothesized to lead to *more*

readerly empathy. Keen writes that "Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques—such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states—as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers' minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism" (213). In some novels this might indeed be true. But I argue that Houellebecq is, in essence, speaking out of both sides of his mouth. For readers who already have a strong value of not supporting Islamophobia or white nationalism, they may read François as a pathetic, dislikable character whose eventual embrace of Islam shows nothing but his lack of conviction. They may see the book as a satire, as some critics have. Those who are less committed may empathize with François's initial fears and unhappiness as he perceives Muslim migrants as a threat, then eventually lose their empathy for him as the narrative increasingly reveals his unreliability—conveniently, decreasing empathy with François just as he becomes more open to Islam. Finally, for a small group of readers, it is possible they may genuinely empathize with François. His pronouncements on the weakness of modern Europe, the difficulty of being a straight man in the sexual marketplace, and so on, are ideas shared by certain right-wing reactionaries. For those people, *Submission* is a warning of the danger of Muslim migrants, not only because of demographic replacement, but because the seduction of Islam might convert even their own.

I argue that *Submission*, while initially difficult to understand through the lens of strategic authorial empathy, is actually a subtle example of bounded strategic empathy—

subtle enough to be unclear to people outside of the group it is addressing. Smith offers, "we can align ourselves with François and disavow the importance of the social events; we can feel the danger and horror of the events and dismiss François; we can take François as an object of ridicule, or of sympathy; or we can tell ourselves a story about him as a failed and embittered aesthete. But much as any of these positions may appear to be justified at any given moment before they are negated by the author, we cannot do all of them simultaneously" (181). This is true only if one is not comfortable inhabiting the mind of the conspiracy theorist, where it is simultaneously possible to fear the violent takeover of a country, and to feel that the problem of acquiring sexual favors is just as important, to name an example. Ultimately, *Submission* is a cleverly written book made to appear as different things to different people, but whose efforts at strategic empathy are directed toward a small audience, the only people who could reasonably understand and empathize with a man like François.

Submission is the only example of bounded strategic empathy that I will explore here, largely because I wish to focus on works more explicitly sympathetic to the plight of migrants, texts which generally use broadcast or ambassadorial strategies. But I chose to discuss it first so that as the discussion continues, we might keep in mind that empathy is not necessarily a force for good, but rather a force for association and fellow feeling whose moral qualities depend on what kind of association and with whom the empathy is encouraging.

Exiting West: Broadcast Empathy

Exit West is in many ways the inverse of *Submission*. Written by Pakistani-American author Mohsin Hamid, it follows the journey of migrants Saeed and Nadia, from an unnamed majority-Muslim country across the world. It uses a broadcast empathy strategy, bringing in not only the perspectives of the two main characters, but also of migrants and residents from around the world. Hamid's intent to use *broadcast strategic empathy* is clearly articulated in a 2017 interview:

> The movement of people, of migrants and refugees, has always been part of the human condition. What is perhaps different is the relatively recent notion about the boundaries of nation-states. In some ways, the borders of Pakistan or Britain or Germany or America are unnatural. The current crisis isn't about people being refugees and migrants. The crisis is that we think of such movements of people as a crisis (*New Internationalist*, 2017).

The quote itself seems to imply that the solution to the "migration crisis" is not a change in migration flows, but an alteration in the resident-citizens' perception of events. There is nothing threatening about migrants, but rather the existence of nation-state borders artificially creates concerns for migrants and residents alike. Hamid appeals to the reader to change the way they understand the entire system of migration, regardless of their position within that system. His use of changing perspectives in *Exit West* is crucial to his political project. The majority of the chapters are from a third person perspective that freely dips into both Saeed's and Nadia's thoughts, though typically a given chapter focuses more on one of them than the other. Between these chapters, short vignettes provide the perspective of other migrants, but also of residents who take up the cause of

migrant rights, or even of residents who simply make friends or fall in love with the people who arrive through the doors. These vignettes are of unnamed people, who are described minimally, setting the stage for reader identification. The vignettes invite readers from many different life experiences to see themselves as part of this story of migration, and more specifically to see themselves as part of a story where migration turns out to be a global good, a net social gain for everyone involved. *Exit West* does not present a utopia per se, but offers a vision of a utopia starting to be built, one where migration is both logistically painless (the doors cut out weeks or months of hazardous travel) and politically condoned.

To further invite empathy from a wide variety of people, Hamid also takes care to ascribe the dangers that face Saeed and Nadia as not emerging from residents, but from identifiable and commonly disliked systems: capitalism, federal bureaucrats, police, militia groups, and so on. For instance, Saeed, Nadia, and their fellow migrants receive the most virulent pushback when they travel to London. Although they are staying in an uninhabited mansion, these empty spaces are fiercely protected, because in a place like London, empty spaces belong primarily to the wealthy:

> It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard-hit, their absentee owners often discovering the bad news too late to intervene, and […] the great expanses of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens (Chapter 7).[26]

In a place like London, the only "empty" spaces are empty because they have been reserved for use by the mega-wealthy. Fifty-odd migrants, including the main characters,

[26] The e-book copy does not come with page numbers, as is often the case.

occupy a single mansion that was intended as a single-family home, but remained empty except for the visits of the housekeeper before the migrants arrive. The migrants who occupy it use the space far more practically, navigating around each other and even setting up a democratic council of older women for the migrant population in the area. Capitalism, specifically the very wealthy, are clearly blamed for both this preposterous empty space, and for the migrants' eventual eviction into "dark London," an encampment on the outskirts of London with no access to basic services like electricity.

Once in "dark London," Nadia and Saeed still fear violence and anti-migrant action, but they do not blame Londoners, the national character of the English, or the selfishness of residents. Instead, they discuss the different conditions that lead to differing responses to migration:

> Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them, and Nadia said once again that the natives were so frightened that they could do anything. "I can understand it," she said. "Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived." "Millions arrived in our country," Saeed replied. "When there were wars nearby." "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose" (Chapter 8).

Once again, the characters demonstrate empathy for even those who would eject them from the country, redirecting any sense of injustice toward the zero-sum game that is capitalism. When individual residents of London are shown, they are friendly and well-meaning, such as the resident who is so kind in providing medical care for the migrants that Saeed and Nadia accept vaccines they have already gotten, in order to not disappoint him. The narration says, "there were volunteers delivering food and medicine to the area, and aid agencies at work, and the government had not banned them from operating, as

some of the governments the migrants were fleeing from had, and in this there was hope" (Chapter Seven). Even as the tensions escalate for a moment,

> the natives and their forces stepped back from the brink. Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants, and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one. And so, irrespective of the reason, decency on this occasion won out, and bravery, for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid, and the electricity and water came on again, and negotiations ensued. (Chapter Eight)

It would be very easy to write a story in which there was a violent confrontation (indeed, one of the other texts below features a violent confrontation in London). Instead, Hamid provides a way in for the reader who is a resident, by portraying residents who are reasonable, who help the protagonists, and who make the right decisions. The novel is not without conflict, or without people that have ill intent, but in this moment a population with a great deal of power and a great deal of fear choose to act calmly and ethically. This is part of the negotiation with the reader, who is invited to imagine themselves in Nadia and Saeed's shoes, but who also do not have to accept that residents are the enemy, a perspective which might strain their empathetic engagement if they are themselves residents.

Hamid's project seems to be to connect readers of any type with a vision of a positive future for migrants and migration: the definition of broadcast strategic empathy.

Saeed and Nadia end up in Marin, California, a place which Hamid describes: "It has been said that depression is a failure to imagine a plausible desirable future for oneself, and, not just in Marin, but in the whole region, in the Bay Area, and in many other places too, places both near and far, the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic […] and plausible desirable futures began to emerge" (Chapter Eleven). In order for a broadcast strategic empathy approach to work, the narrative must allow for emotional engagement by people whose circumstances are most similar to residents, rather than migrants. Hamid notes in the interview:

> One thing that art and literature can do is imagine futures for us. At the moment, we are seeing a failure of imagination. No-one is articulating plausible desirable futures for us as human beings. What we are hearing articulated is dystopias – that life will be terrible in the future – or vehemently nostalgic, divisive, chauvinistic visions from the likes of Donald Trump or the leaders of ISIS. (*The New Internationalist*)

The majority of stories of migration have been subject to either anti-immigrant rhetoric, or pleas for empathy that use the horrific conditions and experiences migrants undergo as proof of the humanitarian need for migrant support—but which may alienate residents as they are asked to sacrifice their own comforts for others. Hamid provides a rare story in which Saeed and Nadia's lives are improved by their migratory journey, as are the lives of many other tertiary characters we glimpse throughout the novel, including residents. An intercalary story shows a young woman resident fighting bravely for the rights of migrants; another shows an old man falling in love with a migrant he likely never would have met without the doors' transporting ability.

By encouraging empathy for everyone involved, Hamid's novel embraces the potential of broadcast empathy to create the desirable future that he has called for. Crucially, he does not aim to write over differences – Saeed and Nadia often disagree about their culture, religion, and ideologies, in addition to the other perspectives presented in the novel. Instead, as Stefano Bellin writes, "By eliciting empathy across social difference, Exit West asks its readers to imagine themselves as potential refugees and urges us to critically examine our subject positions" (8). The narrative

> foregrounds how similar Nadia and Saeed's aspirations, habits, and emotions are to those of other young people around world, calling the novel's readers to identify with them. On the other hand, the novel uses a set of narrative strategies to disorient potential Western readers: it breaks widespread stereotypes on the black robe (which can take on different meanings, even playful or emancipatory); it intersperses the narrative with a series of vignettes from all over the world that yield a multifaceted picture of global migration; it exposes the radical dissonance between a privileged white subject's and a racialised subject's experiences of migration; and it inserts descriptions of terrible atrocities in the texture of a city that could be ours. (Bellin, 7)

Broadcast strategic empathy risks erasing differences; it is easy to mistakenly "dra[w] analogies between the experiences of privileged and subaltern subjects, risk re-centering dominant frameworks of knowledge and perception, and end up obliterating the subjectivity of person who suffer" (8). Hamid is careful to avoid doing so. The narrative encourages empathy with the two main characters through close focalization and sharing their emotions and thoughts, and then reminds the reader of difference by moving on to other characters, who themselves are in turn humanized and made available for readerly empathy, without being similar to Nadia or Saeed. M.J. Perfect asserts that "the novel clearly attempts to make its readers empathise with its refugee protagonists" (21)

resulting in *Exit West* constituting "a literary affirmation of human beings' ability to identify with each other" (5). This affirmation only works because Hamid is able to include both similarity and difference in his depiction of optimistic global change. He does not require every person to be able to understand the other perfectly; the novel instead includes many examples of people working together across differences of personality, belief, race, class, nationality, and more. To identify with someone does not require erasing difference, because at the core, humans are more similar than they are different.

Just as important as what Hamid includes is what he does not include. Because of its novum, *Exit West* also elides the most common feature of migrant stories: the journey itself. As Ewa Kowal notes, migrants "are usually presented, firstly, on the move, in a boat or a dinghy, across a fence, on a road, in fact, fully identified with the motion, the flow (even when its current stage is stagnation and waiting), and, secondly, as a mass, without a past, and certainly without a future – or with both of them uniformly grim" (31). This is not to say that it completely elides any of the difficulties that migrants undergo; Nadia and Saeed are subjected to violence, hunger, and more, and they struggle to find a place to settle. However, they are also not reduced to the fact of their migration. They are not just "people on the move" but individuals who are making do in multiple locations. Each location they are in could end up being a home, and when they move it is a conscious decision to look for a better future. Thus, they are presented as empowered subjects with difficult circumstances but without reduced agency.

The difficult circumstances aspect is, I would argue, necessary for a politically relevant narrative, however. I would like to touch on another example of a utopian migrant story, and compare it to *Exit West* in terms of its efficacy at promoting real-world empathy-across-difference. *The Best of All Possible Worlds* (2013), by Barbadian author Karen Lord, takes place on another planet, "Cygnus Beta, a galactic hinterland for pioneers and refugees" (9). The inciting incident of the plot is the destruction of the homeworld of another people, the Sadiri, whose remaining survivors come to settle on Cygnus Beta. The main character, Grade Delarua, is part of the governmental team assigned to assist the Sadiri in resettlement; the novel proceeds in episodic fashion as they search for an appropriate solution to not only physical settling but cultural acclimatization amid recovering from genocide.

Cygnus Beta is a migrant's utopia. While people certainly disagree, and there is some violence, over all it is a post-scarcity society that freely accepts difference of all kinds, and happily gives up land and resources to the Sadiri without question. Delarua narrates:

> Cygnus Beta isn't a rich colony by any means, but we understand fleeing disaster and war and disease and struggling to find a place where you're wanted. A lot of people act like misfortune is contagious. They don't want to be exposed to it for too long. They'll take you in and make all the right gestures and noises, but when the months wear on and you're still in their house or their town or their world, the welcome starts to wear a bit thin. So we understood, and maybe we were making a point, too. There isn't a group on Cygnus Beta who can't trace their family back to some world-shattering event. Landless, kinless, unwanted—theoretically, the Sadiri would fit right in. (9)

It does not take a particularly close read to deduce that this is as much a reflection on migration in the real world as a description of Cygnus Beta. During the initial years of the refugee "crisis" in Europe, it was "framed as a crisis for the receiving country rather than a crisis for the people seeking protection" (Gustafsson and Johansson, 983), and while countries like Germany and Sweden were initially welcoming of refugees, they became less welcoming shortly thereafter, passing legislation to restrict migration. A public employee in Sweden remarked:

> The government wanted to send a signal internationally and to countries that produce refugees and migrants, telling them that they are not welcome to Sweden. Instead, they have sent an internal signal to the nation of Sweden. I believe that the changes in legislation have had more impact on our willingness to receive refugees and migrants than on the willingness of refugees and migrants to come to Sweden. Now, we are used to not wanting to receive refugees and migrants (Gustafsson and Johansson, 987-989).

It is the patience, openness, and resources of the receiving communities that determine the outcome of migration efforts. In Sweden, Germany, and other nations that welcome has "worn thin," as Lord predicts. This is due to both the legislative signaling, as the above research participant said, but also due to fears, whether justified or unjustified, about the allocation of resources including jobs, space, and welfare.

On Cygnus Beta, there appears to be no shortage, nor any fear of shortage, of anything. None of the residents object to the resettlement; there is no language barrier, nor are there clashes over religious, cultural, or ethnic differences. All of the things which motivate anti-migrant sentiment have been removed. Thus, the narrative ceases to have much relevance to real-world migrants or residents. To be fair, this is the promise of speculative fiction: to be able to present a storyworld to be considered on its own merits,

without the historical and logistical baggage of the real world. What if the prospect of migration was not about the race, religion, and economic status of the migrants, or about the historical power relations between nations and communities, but rather the question of how best to provide a reception for strangers in distress? However, answering this question seems to mostly hinge on bureaucratic proceedings – if there is no reason to oppose migrants, then the only thing left to do is to have governmental representatives work on allotting resources and space, which is in fact what happens during the rest of the novel. Ultimately, Hamid strikes a careful balance between realism and optimism in order to propose a future in which migration is no longer perceived as a crisis; Lord portrays such a future, with the result that it seems completely unconnected to the real world at this time. As such, there is a limitation to how utopian these speculative futures can be—Keen explains that while empathy can occur in many narrative situations, "empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or not a match in details of experience exists" (214). It is in their struggles that characters most often win our empathy as readers.

This is one of the core ethical dilemmas of migrant/migration fiction – how to represent the difficult circumstances and experiences of migrants without fetishizing violence or its representation. In *Representations of War, Migration, and Refugeehood*, editors Daniel H. Rellstab and Christiane Schlote open their volume about representations of such circumstances by giving an overview of the ethical objections to it, which range from a concern for retraumatizing victims with further narration or even with committing violence as a part of representation (5-8). They quote *Violence in American Drama:*

Essays on Its Staging, Meanings and Effects, "Is violence itself despicable only or is its representation even more despicable? What is more callous, a violent act or the often desperate need some people have to represent it […or] consume it?" (Muñoz, Romero, and Muñoz Martinez, 6; quoted page 6). By this measure, Lord's work is a better way to consider migration, as it completely avoids depictions of violence and does not gain any narrative propulsion or spectacle from the unethical allure of violent representation. However, Rellstab and Schlote eventually counter this argument, choosing instead to center the potential for cross-group solidarity that arises from thoughtfully-made art, such as narratives that "create a sense of cognitive and emotional involvement among participants and audience members" (10). Susie Linfield asks in her book *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, "[is] there an unproblematic way to show the degradation of a person? Is there an untroubling way to portray the death of a nation?" (45). In this spirit, the violence of representations of migration and war are not evidence that they are unethical, but rather are appropriate to the deeply troubling nature of the subject. I argue that in the light of Linfield, Rellstab, and Schlote's arguments, it is not more ethical to avoid portraying violence, but rather it is important to portray violence in such a way as to make clear the audience's implication in it. Revealing the audience as implicated subjects, creating "cognitive and emotional involvement," and not shying away from the truth—that migrants experience violent treatment as a result of artificially constructed border regimes—is the most important task for those who would create narratives about migrants and migration.

In order to explore this further, the next section features two works which clearly implicate the audience and call for their involvement, both through rhetorical strategies and through technological affordances as games.

Participating in Migration Conversation

First person and close third person narration has, as stated above, been correlated with increased readerly empathy. E. Lily Yu's short story "The Wretched and the Beautiful" tries another perspective to involve the reader: the plural first person. The entire story is narrated with "we" pronouns, implicating the reader in the actions of the narrative group. In the short story, an alien ship arrives on a beach on earth, disgorging sixty-four refugees that no human wants to take on as their responsibility. The scene of first encounter sets the tone:

> "Is there a place we can stay?" the aliens said.
> Hotels were sought. Throughout the city, hoteliers protested, citing unknown risk profiles, inadequate equipment, fearful and unprepared staff, an indignant clientele, and stains from space filth impervious to detergent. Who was going to pay, anyway? They had businesses to run and families to feed.
> One woman from among us offered to book a single room for the aliens for two nights, that being all she could afford on her teacher's salary. She said this with undisguised hope, as if she thought her offer would inspire others. But silence followed her remark, and we avoided her eyes. We were here on holiday, and holidays were expensive.

All the hoteliers' concerns are real, but nonetheless should pale in comparison with the level of need. The only person who does volunteer to take care of the new arrivals does not have sufficient resources. It is the bystander's dilemma writ large: surely, someone

else will take responsibility for this. And the buck is passed throughout the story, from the first witnesses to the police, to the media, to heads of city and province, to NGOs and nation-leaders. All the while, the reader is included in the "we" group which refuses to take action, focusing instead on their own difficulties or on why it would be unreasonable to expect them to contribute. The day after the aliens land, they are huddling for shelter under their crashed ship, while the beach-goers try to ignore them: "Most of us averted our eyes from that picture of unmitigated misery… This was no longer our problem; it belonged to our governors, our senators, our heads of state. Surely they and their moneyed friends would assist these wretched creatures." The reader is implicated as one of these ignorers, not as a head of state who might solve the problem, but as someone who has chosen to give up any power they might have had to assist, along with any desire to do so.

This perspective choice is a core part of the narrative's satirical political effect, refusing the reader the plausible deniability of first- or third-person point of view, in which the choice to ignore the refugees could be imputed to a particular character rather than a general tendency. Uncomfortably, it asks the reader to remember a time they had seen someone in need and made that same decision: to ignore the need and assume someone else would take care of it. As the story continues, the inaction of the narrators is revealed as more and more harmful. Although the alien refugees explain they are fleeing a genocide (not dissimilar to the Sadiri), when another alien race appears to remand them back to their home system, everyone on Earth breathes a sigh of relief. It makes it easier that these new aliens are beautiful and good at politics. They have the appearance of

wealth and the attendant privilege: “the most gorgeous beings we had ever seen strode down extruded silver steps and planted themselves before the houses of power, waiting to be invited in. And they were.” Earth is told that the refugee aliens are actually war criminals, and will be brought back to be properly imprisoned in their own system. Again, one lone person questions the narrative, and she wonders how children can be considered war criminals, but she is shot down:

> "Still," she said, this lone woman, "I think of them as children. I have seen the grown ones feeding and caring for them. I do not know what crimes they have committed, since our languages cannot describe your concepts. But they have sought refuge here, and I am especially unwilling to return the children to you—"
> The whispers of the assembly became murmurs, then exclamations.
> "Throw her out!"
> "She does not speak for us!”

And so they do, and the beautiful aliens take away the refugees, and the story ends on the line “All was well.” The reader, of course, easily understands that Earth has given the refugees back to be murdered. It turns out that the question to be solved was never “how do we help these people” but “how can we make this problem go away.” Yu’s provocation is that this is the ruling question for most refugee situations, rather than any concern for genuine aid or assistance. Just as the choice of first-person collective voice demands that the reader consider themself part of this group, the lack of real-world identities for either the speakers or the refugees does not allow the reader to make exceptions for their own identities and communities. They cannot combat the message of the story by insisting “Americans would not behave this way,” or “Ghana would never act like this,” and so on. Similarly, they cannot blame other groups for not caring for the aliens. Yu is speaking to all of humanity, no exceptions. Yu steers empathy toward the

refugee aliens by exposing the thin veneer of the excuses "we" give in order to avoid helping others. Through provoking disgust at the negligence and banal evil of the "we" narrators, Yu uses not just empathy with the aliens to motivate pro-social actions, but also reduced empathy with the residents to motivate us to want to differentiate ourselves from them.

The audience members are similarly asked to reflect on their actions in a trio of micro-games released by company Far Few Giants, with art by Chard, music by Richard Campbell, and writing by Antony de Fault. Originally intended to be part of a twelve-part social commentary game series called The Sacrifices (2020), only these three were ultimately released: *The Night Fisherman, The Outcast Lovers,* and *The Change Architect*. All three take place in a near-future Britain with a dramatically increased anti-immigration apparatus, brought in by the ruling party headed up by Baron Sugar (likely a euphemistic nickname). A civilian militia, named the English Protection Group (EPG), has appointed itself to be border patrol. All three games are approximately ten minutes, and deal with an immigration-related confrontation. In *The Night Fisherman*, a fisherman hiding a migrant child in his boat is stopped by Churchill, an EPG member who shoots the fisherman for smuggling but spares the child. In *The Change Architect*, a protest for migrant rights turns violent as the police and army turn out to oppose them, but the violence is halted when an activist live-streams the conflict. In *The Outcast Lovers*, a couple decides whether to shelter a traumatized migrant child they find alone on the beach, knowing the risk to themselves if they do, and the risks to him if they don't. In each case, the player controls a character who is not a migrant themselves, but who is

assisting or encountering migrants. This shows the intent of the game series—to work through ambassadorial strategic empathy, addressing residents, especially British citizens, in an attempt to persuade them into pro-migrant action.

In *The Change Architect*, the player character is a woman who is coordinating a peaceful protest for migrant rights, when the opposition turns nasty. Counter-protesters, police, and finally military corner the protesters. As the player, you give them instruction on how to stay safe, but the circumstances do not allow the protesters to flee or retreat. Even then, the player character has the confidence in legal protection of a resident and citizen; she confidently says that the military won't fire on British citizens, right before it does.

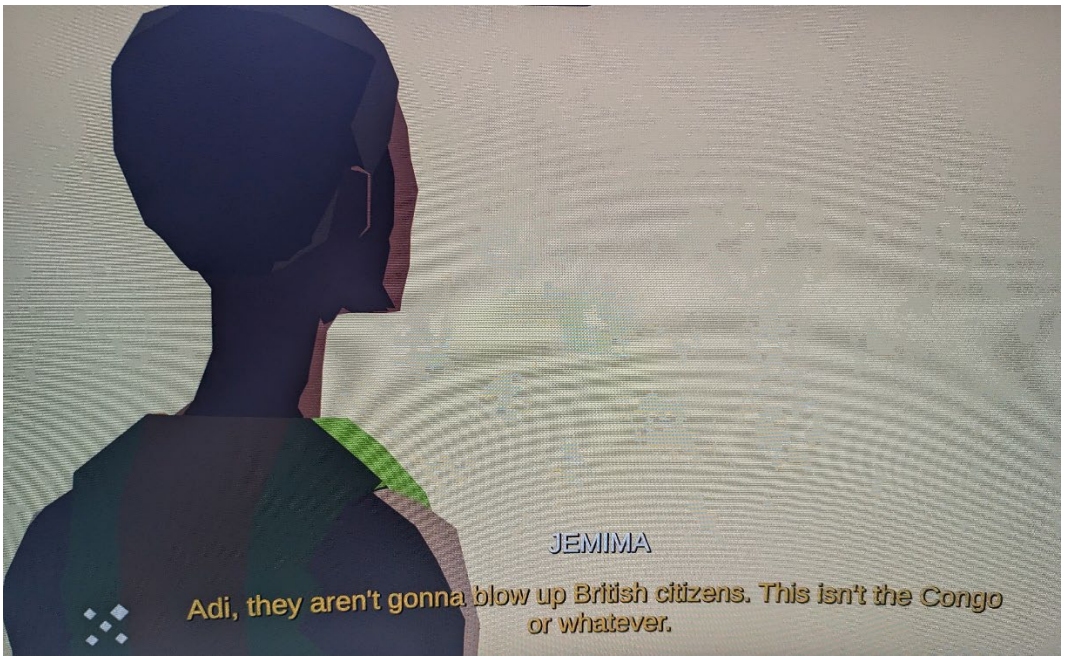

Figure 8: The player character of "The Change Architect" expressing her confidence in the state before they are fired on by tanks. The visual texture is an artifact of the camera, not part of the game.

The people you work with are injured and scared, and even the soldiers are appalled by their orders—the narration notes “a few officers lay down their weapons. A soldier removes his riot helmet to vomit” when your co-coordinator approaches with his hands up and a phone camera broadcasting (which is only possible because he is connected to satellite internet, as the officials have shut down wireless in the area). The player is implicated in the outcome through their guidance of the player-character Jemima, who is responsible for ensuring the safety of the protestors under unjust fire. The game does not ask players to imagine being a migrant, a stretch of imagination for the average resident, but instead pushes them to consider how strict anti-migration policies can even harm residents. While no one dies in the initial explosion of fire, the window shatters and people are injured. Jemima’s co-coordinator Adi risks his life to livestream the incident, halting what might have become a deadly incident. The player has the option to follow him out the window and assist, or to remain safely in the office. The game ends the same either way—Adi’s livestream is a success, and no further violence takes place. The only change is whether Jemima is part of that story or not, but that is in fact a meaningful change. Rather than depict the resident as a white-knight type, upon whose heroics the success of the mission rests, the narrative shows Adi, a migrant, as capable of acting on his own beliefs and agency. Jemima chooses, however, whether she is too

afraid to stand with someone brave, or whether with her presence she supports Adi's actions. Jemima does not determine if Adi succeeds or fails, but she does determine if he knows he is supported by allies, or if he is left alone in a dangerous situation. The player-character, the player, the resident: all are given the choice to be on the right side of history, so to speak, or not. The message is that action to support migrants in general means actively supporting migrants as they organize for their own freedoms.

Jemima is already an activist, but the game series addresses the motivations of non-activist residents as well. In *The Outcast Lovers*, the main character's spouse, Mary, suggests turning a migrant child they find into the authorities, not out of anti-migrant sentiment, but because "they'll keep him safe from the EPG once he's in the system," and "He's too fragile to go his own way. If we take him directly to the police we can at least make sure he's provided for, and safe." These are reasonable concerns and arguments, and the game provides responses that allow the player character and Mary to talk through what is the best option for the child and for themselves, without shutting Mary down for not instantly supporting radical action. Rather than insisting on the worthiness of certain migrants, a strategy which is always vulnerable to failure when a migrant turns out not to be an unrealistically perfect person, the games depict migration as an issue of the moral worth of the receiving community instead—a community which the player is more likely to belong to than that of the migrants. However, it also asks the player to empathize with the player-character's position of arguing *for* sheltering the child. By putting the player in the position of arguing for keeping the child, against Mary, but without rancor, the game allows the player to process their own impulses against sheltering the child, and also to

imagine themselves in a more active position where they are willing to take radical action on his behalf.

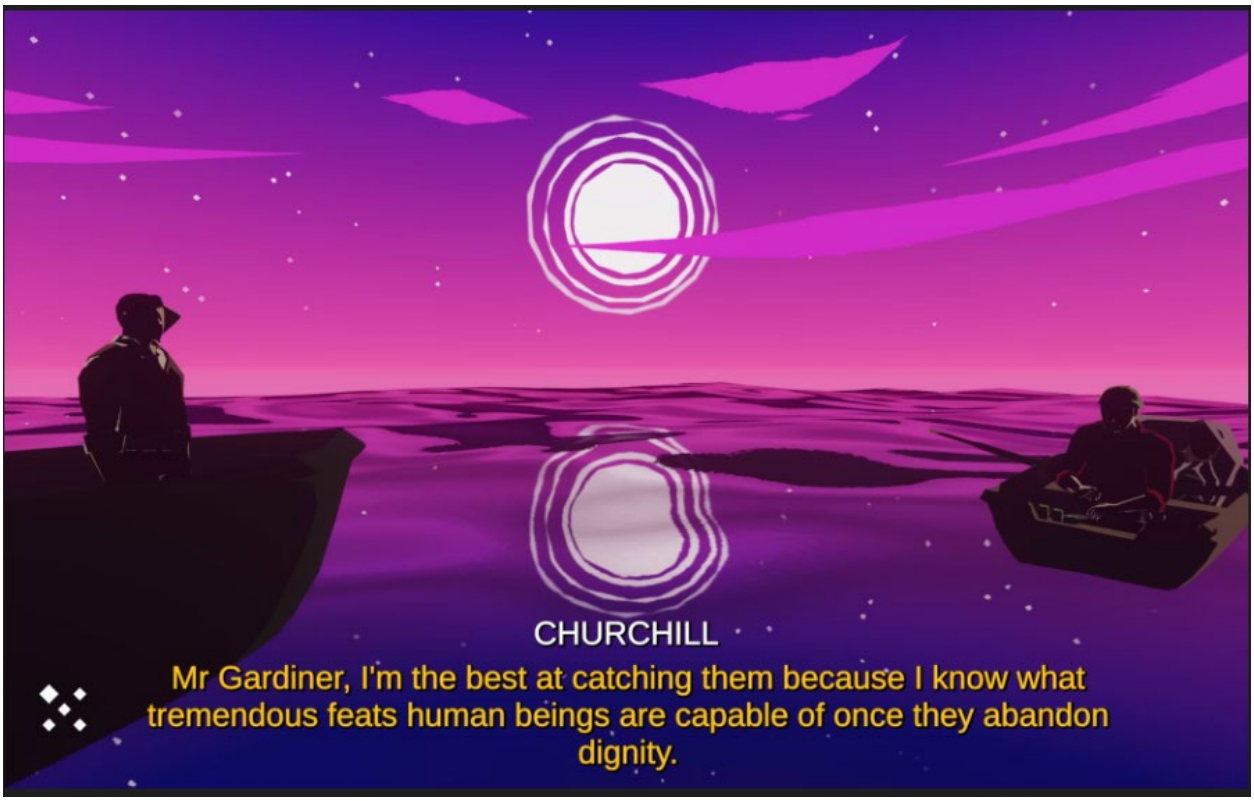

Figure 9: A screenshot from *The Night Fisherman*, where a member of the EPG monologues.

The last game, *The Night Fisherman*, expands on the idea that residents are also at risk when intense anti-migrant sentiment is allowed to run amok. The player controls a fisherman named Mr. Gardiner, who is hiding a migrant child under the tarp in his boat when he is stopped by Churchill, a member of the EPG who is known for his skill at

finding migrants. In an homage to a scene from *Inglorious Basterds*, Churchill forces Mr. Gardiner and the child to listen to him explain his philosophies about migrants, threatening them with a gun all the while. Mr. Gardiner and Churchill are neighbors in the same small town, both longtime British residents, both married white men. One might expect them to have at least some expectation of being in community with each other, through proximity if nothing else. Thus it comes as surprise when Churchill shoots Mr. Gardiner dead, leaving the player adrift without a character to control, helpless as they watch the child desperately swimming away. Implicitly the game warns against assuming solidarity based on common demographics. The migrant child poses absolutely no danger to Mr. Gardiner, but he is shot dead by an anti-migrant militiaman, simply for the crime of being associated with a migrant child. Anti-immigration rhetoric, the game hints, quickly turns into persecution of wrong-thinking, and "no true Scotsman" fallacies.

While *The Night Fisherman* explicitly pays homage to *Inglorious Basterds*, it also bears a notable resemblance to another film: *Children of Men*. In the final section, I discuss *Children of Men* and *The Wall*, two examples of narratives about residents "converting" into migrants.

Becoming Others

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is a critically-acclaimed blockbuster, an adaptation of a novel (P.D. James' 1992 *The Children of Men*), and a film whose innovative camera work remains impressive almost twenty years later. In it, Theo (Clive

Owen) is a disenchanted government worker in London in 2027, after two decades of human infertility have left society outside of the U.K in ruins (so we are told) and life inside the U.K a totalitarian police state. His estranged wife, a migrants-rights activist, kidnaps Theo to force him to help Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), a refugee pregnant with the world's first baby in eighteen-plus years, to escape the U.K. and meet up with a ship run by the mysterious Human Project. The film follows Theo and Kee as the two of them, joined on and off by others, make their way to a migrant detention camp, through outright war with the government, and to a small rowboat to meet with the ship; along the way multiple groups try to use Kee and her daughter for political ends, which Theo is responsible for preventing.

The world of the film is characterized just as much by fear of immigrants as it is by the infertility epidemic. Right at the start of the movie, the camera follows Theo through his morning as he is subjected to constant audiovisual noise, mostly alternating between ads for Quietus, the government-sponsored suicide kit, and reminders of Britain's anti-immigrant policies. As Ewa Macura-Nnamdi writes:

> We can see hundreds of [migrants] locked in cages and policed by the military; we can hear from megaphones about their ubiquity across national spaces and households; we see regular transports bringing them to a refugee camp. The reiterated announcements define the refugees as a ubiquitous threat to be contained through common forms of vigilance and in the name of a nationalized safety: "She's my house cleaner. He's the plumber. He's my dentist. He's the waiter. She's my cousin. They are illegal immigrants. To hire, feed or shelter illegal immigrants is a crime. Protect Britain. Report all illegal immigrants." (342)

To report immigrants is to protect Britain, according to the state. Ironically, as Britain's population shrinks due to the cessation of births, it refuses to allow new population to

enter in the form of migrants—a dramatization of the near future for many wealthy countries, as dropping birth rates in places like Japan, the U.S., and the U.K. are poised to have a dramatic economic impact even as immigration laws are tightened. Theo's morning commute involves passing cages full of crying migrants; getting snapped at by a K9-unit and its handler; riding a train with thick metal mesh over the windows to protect against the swarms of people throwing rocks outside; and narrowly escaping being killed as a bomb goes off inside the coffee shop he just left. The world of 2027 London is certainly apocalyptic, but it is not clear that migrants are the reason why.

The constant diegetic media provides exposition, but it also aligns us with Theo as a character. Samuel Amago writes, "As co-viewers (along with the film's characters) of the various audiovisual stimuli that saturate the film's mise-en-scène, we are drawn into the dystopian world envisioned, so that our own perspective on events resembles that of the characters" (213). The film's audience does not know anything before Theo; the camera follows him closely—"[t]he only point-of-view shots of the film come through Theo, who functions as an identificatory nexus for the viewer" (Amago, 220). The viewer is encouraged to identify with Theo, whose emotional journey is the focus of the film even as Kee is the more important person in the world of the narrative. Owen's acting contributes to his role as an audience surrogate, providing appropriate but toned-down expressions that allow audiences to project imagined thoughts and feelings onto Theo. Theo is not a migrant, but because of his role as Kee's protector, he enters into migrant space, fleeing the police and the military, risking his life in the detention camps, and trying to make a safe space for his "family" (Kee and her daughter) as the government

treats them as contaminants or viral threats. Through his journey, we see an apathetic "normal man" transformed into a man capable of saving the future through his care for Kee and her daughter.

Children of Men does run into the trope of centering a white man as the hero, bravely saving the people of color. Arguably, Kee's vulnerability is slightly different, because she is vulnerable due to pregnancy, a condition which would leave anyone vulnerable. However, I would argue that Cuarón very much intended to provide Theo as an audience surrogate. In an act of ambassadorial strategic empathy, Cuarón centers Theo as the representative of the white and privileged world, who is changed by having to undergo a migrant experience. The film does not hold back in depicting violence; the military beat, strip, shoot, and torture migrants freely. Theo and Kee's companion Miriam, a white woman, is brutally murdered for irritating a detention camp guard by praying. Theo and Kee escape the same fate only by using the guard's preconceptions against him, claiming a migrant peed on the floor between him and them so that he does not come closer. Throughout the film, tableaux of violence echo Nazi prison camps, Abu Ghraib, and more. Similar to *The Night Fisherman*, Cuarón uses strategic empathy to address white audience members, warning them implicitly that the violence of the film is what awaits at the end of the anti-migrant rhetoric train—and that by that point, it will not spare white people either. In fact, in both the film and the game, the white man dies, leaving the migrant child (and her mother, in *Children of Men*) to carry on: the boat floats on a seemingly endless sea, "adding a touch of hope and of mythical regeneration to the general dystopian panorama" (151, Julia Echeverría Domingo).

John Lanchester's *The Wall* follows a similar trajectory, albeit with a few key differences. Kavanagh, a young man in a future Britain entirely surrounded by a coastal curtain wall, begins his mandatory two-year stint as a Defender, responsible for preventing migrants from reaching British land. The punishment for failure is harsh: for every "Other" that makes it through the Wall, one of the Defenders is exiled, a permanent removal of every right as well as the possibility of contact with loved ones or even civilization. Kavanagh is a relative everyman; although he is in an unusual situation, Lanchester grounds the experience in a chatty first-person narration and relatable details, such as the pleasure of a hot cup of tea after a cold shift. Kavanagh is not particularly political, but grows irritated with the anti-migrant rhetoric of the politicians—just in time to run afoul, due to no fault of his own, of the one-in one-out policy on the Wall. He and his partner are exiled, and the second half of the book shows their struggle to survive on the ocean outside the wall. Rising sea levels have erased nearby land, and the exiled characters must try to eke out a life permanently at sea (literally and figuratively). This reversal of fortunes accomplishes a similar goal as Theo's journey through the detention camp; it forces a privileged white man to reckon with the true difficulties that refugees face by becoming one of them, rather than perceiving them from afar. Kavanagh muses:

> I'd been brought up not to think about the Others in terms of where they came from or who they were, to ignore all that—they were just Others. But maybe, now that I was one of them, they weren't Others anymore? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us. It was confusing. (133)

He delivers the message of the book cleanly. Instead of perceiving any one group as others, the reader is encouraged to perceive themselves and the disadvantaged as an "us," a form of solidarity across difference.

Kavanagh and his partner Hifa make several attempts to realize this new solidarity and join in community with other exiles. They spend some time as members of a floating community, who have managed to figure out how to survive on rainwater, fish, and gulls. Without joining this community, both of them would probably have died before they were able to figure out how to live at sea, and they are only accepted because one member takes a chance on them, extending a gesture of solidarity to fellow sufferers. Kavanagh thinks, "they, we, were safe in the calm. It was nobody's fantasy of an ideal life but it was a life that could be lived" (133). Once they have found a community, their likelihood of survival increases dramatically, as does their emotional and mental wellbeing. Establishing community with other exiles is one of the only good things that happens to either Kavanagh or Hifa in the entire book.

When that community is forcibly broken up, Kavanagh and Hifa search for another one. In the end, they find a lone man in an outpost that could easily be secured against them, but he lets them in. When they ask why, he gestures in a way that Kavanagh is able to interpret:

> "He's lonely," I said. And then to the man: "There used to be people here, but they all went away, and now you're on your own, and you got tired of it."
> I saw something flare in his eyes: the first moment I'd really felt contact with what was in the mind of our hermit.
> "That must have been hard," said Hifa. He looked at her: Yes. (176)

Despite all of the hardships they undergo—and they are formidable—in the end, Kavanagh, Hifa, and the hermit all want the same thing: community. In the last pages of the book, Kavanagh lights a lantern and sits in this remote outpost, and thinks that things have turned out all right. It is a peculiar "all right," to be sure, but Kavanagh is no longer living a life of Us versus Them, nor is he being attacked as one of the Others, and perhaps the simple fact of having found a community, even just two other people, is enough to live on.

In this chapter I have shown how establishing empathy between the reader and the characters is a key part of a narrative's ability to advocate for political solidarity. I have also shown, through *Submission* and "The Wretched and the Beautiful," that the practice of strategic empathy can be used to distance readers from particular groups and to implicate them in something they might rather not associate themselves with. Just as being part of an affective community provided challenges and opportunities for the characters in chapters one and two, the communication between creators and audience members is fraught and not without risk. Nonetheless, speculative fiction is a powerful tool for imagining political affinities, solidarities across difference, and empathy with people unlike ourselves. It is, therefore, no surprise that it continues to be deployed to address the world's greatest crises, to imagine dystopias and utopias alike, and to advocate for political change in the here and now.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have argued for the relevance of speculative fiction through the real world, as it shapes our understandings of global crises as well as of potential approaches to amelioration and even solution. However, the three main chapters are also increasingly pessimistic about the influence speculative fiction has. In the first chapter, I covered media which straightforwardly opposes the exploitation of workers under capitalism, and which offers potential methods of resistance. In the second, there is no escaping climate change, nor indeed escaping significant loss, but it is still possible to have a fulfilling future. In the third chapter, some works argue persuasively for greater acceptance and even embracing of international migration, but we also saw the possibility of using those same rhetorical techniques to promote fear, prejudice, and xenophobia. As I conclude this project, I want to offer a reflection on speculative fiction's power to create sociopolitical change. After all, not all change is a change for the better, and speculative fiction can be used for ends that I oppose just as much as ends that I endorse.

In an article titled "An Anti-Defense of Science Fiction," Jake Casella Brookins responds to the provocation that science fiction has affected the world primarily through inspiring tech-sector billionaires to create dubious and unethical new technologies.[27] Though Brookins is a dedicated reader and writer of speculative fiction, he notes that the pushback to this provocation made him uneasy, as it expressed "the desire to claim a

[27] The article is published on The Ancillary Review of Books website. In the interest of transparency, I will state that I am a regular editor for that site. However, I had no input whatsoever about this article before or after its publication.

connection to SF's supposed power—on minds, on technology—while also needing to claim that it's 'just' entertainment." The same people who claim speculative fiction has the power to support leftist political projects turn around and deny that it also has the power to support less-liberatory schemes. Unfortunately, as Brookins writes, "he vaunted prophylactic prophecy of science fiction—the ability to prevent an undesirable future by loudly predicting it—has consistently proven false: most humans live in surveillance states that would make Orwell blush, and they followed up Squid Game with…non-fictional Squid Game." Speculative fiction has failed to warn us sufficiently insistently of these futures, or perhaps the warning did not reach the right years. Or, perhaps, it was written in such a way as to make the undesirable future sound desirable to certain people who do not keep the wellbeing of the general population close to heart.

Likely because of the humanities' ongoing battle for funding, literature and media scholars love to argue that reading and encountering narratives is beneficial for the intellectual, moral, and social development of the audience. But we are forced to admit, as Brookins points out, that 'If we're going to give science fiction credit for solar power and electric cars, then it's only fair, unfortunately, to give science fiction credit for child slavery in the cobalt mines. If we want to claim that science fiction inspired reusable spacecraft or even the lowly Roomba, we must also reckon with the fact that it inspired the gun-wielding drones sniping hospital patients and staff in Gaza." I have made my own claims to the benefits of speculative fiction media in this dissertation—I am not above attempting to either secure a reputation of importance for the humanities, or to specifically try to pinpoint what it is about media that seems to make it a natural vehicle

for sharing moral, social, and philosophical points. But I am forced to admit that it also frequently leads to negative consequences for the world at large.

This is not only true for technology. As we saw in chapter three, texts like *Submission* work to inculcate bigoted attitudes and assumptions, which certainly can be considered a negative impact on the world even if it inspires no new inventions. I am not completely pessimistic about the real-world impacts of speculative fiction, but it is not only technologies that serve as potential vehicles of influence. Fiction can portray possible technologies, governments, economic systems, forms of intimacy, cultural mores, and so much more, all of which are capable of being used to deliver a political message. Books like *Submission* deliver a nativist, conservative message without inventing anything more than a fictional series of government policies.

The three crises I have focused on through this project are global crises of such a level as to require multiple angles of approach to address successfully. Often speculative fiction has focused on the invention of new sciences and technologies—but I do not think these are the best things to turn to in order to solve these particular problems. Science and technologies are neutral tools which can be used for social good—as they have many, many times before—but which can also be used for ill, and are easily instrumentalized and co-opted by capitalism. In this dissertation, I have attempted to show how speculative fiction can approach these crises from a different angle, utilizing relationships of mutual assistance and trust, including across human and nonhuman lives. Affective communities and their commitments to each other and to weathering the storm (literally or figuratively) can be modeled in speculative fiction in ways that are engaging and

encourage audience members to consider their own affective communities and how they might form or identify them. These models for social relations that are implementable in this moment, by the vast majority of readers, can create change and address crises that are ongoing through the present and into the hypothetical future of the narratives.

This, then, is the power of speculative fiction to address crises: not to inspire the creation of new tools, but to inspire its audience to change their current modes of relating to one another. It is, after all, in these modes that we have created a world in which cruel optimism reigns, in which climate change threatens all life on earth, in which migrants are forced to leave home and then prevented from making a new home. It is in these modes where we find the potential to change these circumstances.

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