Speculating on an Afrofuturist Anthropocene

Estrangement and Disruption in Afrofuturist Climate Change Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a theoretical alliance made up of three parts to the end of furthering the thinking on genre flailing and estrangement in an Anthropocene context. It advocates a combination of Afrofuturist science fiction studies, ecocritical literary studies, and new formalism, and sees in this threefold perspective a productive way to explain what estrangement can do in speculative and critical literature about environmental destruction. It seeks to re-emphasize the political potential of Afrofuturist engagements with a changing climate, not only to apprehend the structural workings of racialized climate suffering, but also to provide a template of entangled human adaptation to environmental and social change.

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Introduction: Estrangement, Fictionality, and the Realities of Climate Suffering

> To this day these books, and others like them, lead a nomadic existence, filed under whichever category seems most appropriate at any given moment.
>
> Kalí Tal - "That Just Kills Me: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction" (66)

In his 2019 book *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, U.S. journalist David Wallace-Wells extrapolates from an extensive collection of quantitative data on climate change to present a worst-case scenario of apocalyptic environmental destruction (Watts). Enclosed in the work is a painstaking index of climate suffering in chapters titled "Heat Death," "Unbreathable Air," "Climate Conflict" and "Crisis Capitalism." It was sold and packaged as a work of non-fiction, a chilling reminder of a present slowly but inevitably crawling into being. Less than a year after its publication, media production company HBO Max purchased the rights to the book with the intention to reshape it into "a fictional anthology series that examines what our future may look like as climate change progresses" (Funes). The intention of *The Uninhabitable Earth* appears unchanged across the two projects: to present a frightening vision of climate collapse to a didactic end, hoping it is not yet too late for humanity to collectively turn the tide on climate disaster. Nonetheless, their respective genres exist at opposite ends of a spectrum, and carry a distinctly different set of connotations for a climate change warning narrative, in terms of style, entertainment value, and implied truthfulness. One could say, somewhat reductively, that the difference is one of inviting the audience to imagine versus imploring them to prepare for a two-degree rise in global temperatures.

The example of *The Uninhabitable Earth* is illustrative of a collective uncertainty on genre in the face of exacerbating climate change. It denotes a state of "genre flailing" in the words of Lauren Berlant: a sudden unsettlement in the stability of cultural objects, their sensemaking structures, and categories, muddling the "patterns of expectation" that have

come to be associated with the object (157). Genre, here, denotes something that far extends the straightforward index of literary categories. It covers the interactions between readers, aesthetic objects, the wider socio-political reality, and the personal and cultural expectations all brought into this dance. Understood in this vein, genres provide templates for experience, against which readers test their lived realities, fitting them into pre-established narrative schema which afford easier communication of one's immediate reality. In the example of *The Uninhabitable World*, the collective flailing manifests in the similar empowerment of a fictional and non-fictional mode to present a cautioning vision of environmental collapse, and the consequent blurring of the boundary that separates the two genres of writing. Yet, it implies, beyond the confusion on literary terms, an anxious search for a new narrative equilibrium in which one can confidently tell fiction from reality, and is able to engage with either along a comprehensive pattern of expectation.

Similar and persuasive arguments on generic uncertainty in the face of a changing climate currently saturate the literary environmental humanities, articulated by scholars like Amitav Ghosh, Timothy Clark, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Stephanie Lemenager. Ghosh's 2016 book *The Great Derangement*, for one, focuses on the foreclosure of established generic conventions by climate change and the obsolescence of the western literary category of the realist novel (15). Ghosh considers realist writing profoundly unfit to capture the threat of climate disaster, as it continuously premises human exceptionalism through its sole concern with the moral and emotional adventures of a human character (12). The ringing absence of a new genre to counteract this and apprehend climate change more effectively, Ghosh argues, constitutes our "imaginative and cultural failure" (8), or "crisis of the imagination" (9). Lemenager makes an analogous point in "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," in which she approaches the realist novel more abstractly as an artefact of the everyday, and climate change as a suspension of the everyday thus bringing about a crisis of genre (267-

268). Chakrabarty abstracts from this even further, and examines the way rapid environmental change troubles the anthropocentrism at the heart of the western cultural imaginary at large (*Climate* 201).

The remedy to this foreclosure of a realist register, these theorists find, lies in its expansion to include the speculative and non-naturalistic modes of writing that can figure the non-human environment as a protagonist, an intervening force into the human-centred story. Ghosh raises the concept of uncanny writing, for which he sees his own literary production to be a template, and argues that uncanny speculative writing is uniquely capable of drawing out the latent knowledge of human ontological entanglement with the agentic natural world. Straddling the line between mimesis and metaphysics, uncanny writing might aptly remind of inextricable ecological relationality before climate disruption forces this acknowledgement collectively. Lemenager focuses instead on the genre of cli-fi (climate fiction) as something which claims to be the way across the stringent bounds of realism, and ascribes to it a similar function of ontological realignment towards entanglement (268). Theorists like Timothy Morton, lastly, argue for the valency of weird fiction, which both expands the realist register and symbolizes the weirdness with which climate change occurs to a human observer (*Dark* 5-6).

As climate change presents an unprecedented intervention into the human(-centred) story on a planetary scale and by previously overlooked non-human agents, the fevered amalgamation of fiction with non-fiction is no unreasonable development. And while the echoing, captivating uncertainty on genre provides a significant part of the backdrop and urgency of this project, it is not the key issue to be distilled from the example. Indeed, Wallace-Wells' predictions and their subsequent remediations also symbolize a pervasive continuation of speculation on climate change in a futuristic mode and from a universalized planetary perspective, and raises the pivotal question of who gets to claim the authority of

representing and thus determining the *real*. Such anticipatory and generalized modes of narrating climate change are a second object of critique in Ghosh's thinking. He underscores that abstracted ways of writing climate futures obfuscate the fact that environmental damage is already affecting human communities significantly, and crucially, that it is doing so asymmetrically, along the flows of colonial structures of exploitation (145).

In a cruel continuation of colonial violence, communities in the Global South who carry the smallest responsibility for global emissions and human-made climate change due to histories of exploitation, and who have the least amount of resources to protect themselves against it, are set to suffer the earliest and worst consequences of environmental degradation. This is a point also argued by Rob Nixon in his theory on climate suffering and/as slow violence (Nixon 5). Following from this, is the assertion that warnings of collectively unliveable climates in the future must reckon with the always already disproportionate dispersion of climate suffering both in the past and present. Closely related here are the works of scholars who underscore that disruptive climate change should not be understood as a radical break from contemporary circumstances, but rather as the logical continuation or intensification of the intermeshed forces of extractive global petrocapitalism and neocolonial racial and gendered oppression (Whyte 153, Chakrabarty 7-8). In light of these critiques, it is interesting to consider who exactly Wallace-Wells' book, with its stirring opening line: "It is worse, much worse, than you think" (1), is intended to interpellate.

One consistent aspect across this discussion, foregrounded in both the reductively universal and more situated arguments on narrating climate suffering concerns the embrace of creative, literary production as something with an inherent multiplicity that holds the power to blur genre boundaries. In an Anthropocene context, finding a way to effectively envision the future is a political exercise with potentially life-affirming capacities, and while there is a

leading assumption that this mode of envisioning is a non-naturalistic one, all further specificities appear to be up for discussion until the emergence of a new generic equilibrium.

It is to the scholarly reflections on our collective literary floundering that this project seeks to contribute, by reminding of the existence of speculative writing that has long been engaged in restating these exact boundaries between fictional and non-fictional genres, decades before the wider literary imagination tumbled into crisis. This genre concerns Afrofuturist science fiction, extrapolative speculations on the future intersections of race, technology, and power. It has decentred whiteness as the marker for the capital 'H' Human story in ways that should enshrine it as seminal Anthropocene reading, but it continues to be side-lined for its alignment with a science fiction imagery. Thinking with two speculative Afrofuturist works on climate collapse, this project seeks to push back against the tendency, of which Wallace-Wells' work is made to be symbolic here, to think and theorize on climate suffering as an abstraction unbound by geography or global power structures. Second, it hopes to nuance the often reductive understandings on the basis of which science fiction is disregarded as an appropriate mode of Anthropocene writing, by reminding of the rich and layered genre of Afrofuturism. It thus makes an argument against re-inventing the narrative wheel for Anthropocene times, and rather for looking to the creative contributions of those authors who have never dealt with notions of progress, destabilization and apocalypse as inevitable or universal markers.

This project reads two works of Afrofuturist science fiction on climate collapse from different time periods and taking different forms: Octavia Butler's paradigmatic 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' 2018 narrative poem *M Archive*. The reason for reading these works in tandem here is twofold. First, both works are emblematic of the generic flux that inevitably saturates a literary work on climate collapse in times of genre flailing. *Parable of the Sower*, which has defied genre limits since its first publication,

continues to be categorized as science fiction (Joo 280, Papke 79), realist writing (Menne 716), and, retrospectively now, as cli-fi (climate fiction) (Lemenager 270, Clausen 283). This signals the significant and lasting multiplicity of *Sower*, which provides part of the reason for including this much-interpreted novel in the analysis undertaken here. *M Archive* paratextually designates its own multiplicity before it does anything else, with the very first line on the back of the book identifying *M Archive* as “poetry/black feminist theory/science fiction.”

Alongside their generic heterogeneity, these works also stage a collision of different narrative forms, like the archive, the journal, the religious text. This facilitates a reading of them through a new formalist lens, a point which is explicated later in this text. The formal multiplicity not only allows the two case studies to be read as symbolic manifestations of genre flailing, but also as highly experimental works asserting the agency of creative literary visioning to determine the conditions on which genre flailing occurs. They provide, not the way out of the collective literary predicament, but certainly a way forward from generic stasis.

Afrofuturism and Climate Change

In the introduction to “That just Kills Me: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction,” of which a passage is taken up in the epigraph, Kalí Tal speaks on the “nomadic existence” of Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delaney’s novels across different categories on her bookshelf. Tal explains how these novels, written by two paradigmatic Black American science fiction writers, migrate from the African American section to the science fiction shelf as the interpretive lens cast on them changes. These travels resonantly exemplify the way different genres co-exist and necessitate their own reading strategies, as well as the variety of appeals made of works of Afrofuturist science fiction already. It shows these novels in their incredible

richness and multiplicity, and, lastly, further strengthens the argument for properly considering Black science fiction in the space of genre flailing outlined earlier.

Butler and Delaney are seminal presences in the genre of Afrofuturism, a branch of science fiction that gained academic recognition in the 1990s but, of course, existed long before. It is structured by a self-aware engagement with the white, mostly North American SF (science fiction) canon and demarcates a distinct space in which SF's revolutionary potential is articulated from a Black perspective, as a means for "social dreaming" into the future (Sargent 11). Afrofuturism considers the future and the march of technology and society from "a Black cultural lens" which redefines the axis of Blackness and futurity. It reframes Black life beyond the reductive connections to essential precarity in the past and present or as something soon to be dated when virtual identities erase racial difference (Womack 9, Nelson 1), and helps to reconsider the future in a non-linear, non-teleological way.

Afrofuturism poses a critical intervention into the past of SF's canonization, and the future as it is imagined within the genre. On this first point, it should be noted how the tropes and conventions of science fiction have traditionally echoed colonial rhetoric and reinforced a pervasive assumption of western cultural hegemony. John Rieder, in his extensive study of the entanglement of colonialism and science fiction, outlines the influence of these colonial discursive resonances as an inextricable "part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable" (15). Rieder considers SF a "palimpsestic" genre (15), which exposes in an otherworldly narrative the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of anti-Black colonial rhetoric, with the palimpsest analogy also inviting a consideration of science fiction as governed by a process of continuous redefinition and adaptation.

Afrofuturism simultaneously engages with future and past in a way that acknowledges the unceasing co-constitution of temporalities. Following the cultural critic Kodwo Eshun, Afrofuturism should be understood as a "chronopolitical intervention" into "the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" ("Further" 462). When looking proleptically and retrospectively, Afrofuturism undertakes a project of countermemory, attuning itself to Black voices that were silenced or forcibly excluded from the historical archive. Relatedly, Henriette Gunkel and Kara Lynch define it as "excavation and confabulation of the archive" (27).

Focused on the present and future, Afrofuturist authors speculate on the roles and intersections of Blackness, technology and society in modes that range anywhere from bleakly dystopic to utopian. These futures visions are always both disruptive and constructive, leading Samuel Delany to characterize them as heterotopias; places out of place which simultaneously expose and disrupt the logic of political reality. Closing his 1976 *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia,* Delany quotes Foucault on heterotopia as follows, underscoring the dual capacity: "[Heterotopias] make it impossible to name this and that, […] they shatter or tangle common names, […] they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things […] to 'hold together'" (Foucault, qtd in *Triton* 292). In Afrofuturist speculation on the future, then, a lasting awareness of the workings of anti-Black racism provides an informative source but not a thoroughly determining one, leaving space for future visioning of resistance and positive change.

It should be emphasized here that there is also a flourishing strand of Black feminist and queer speculative writing engaged in troubling the same distinctions – that is, those between temporalities and between self and other – but which maintain a larger distance to the science fiction label. The biomythographical writings of Black queer poet and critic Audre

Lorde are a paradigmatic reference point here, as well as Lorde's call, closing *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*, to "liv[e] the old in a new way" (255). Lorde's concept of biomythography shares intimate territory with Afrofuturism, in that it superimposes myth, magic and speculation in an attempt to represent analogously the harms of forced erasure from the archive and the future vision, and venerates the poetic as a political, life-affirming tool. Poetic speculation, as Lorde asserts, "is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives" ("Poetry" 356), echoing Berlant's thinking on genre. Poetry functions as a vehicle for self-narration and our communication of it. Afrofuturism and Biomythography should thus be viewed as embroiled in a generative mutual conversation, and while their intersection is a unquestionably a rich space for interpretation, it is left in this introductory chapter as an invitation to further reading.

Afrofuturism not only subverts the science fictional disconnection of temporalities and its entanglement in colonial rhetoric, but also remobilizes its leading trope of estrangement to a more explicitly critical end. In a literary studies field, the concept originates from Russian formalists of the early 20th century who defined estrangement (*Ostranenie*) as an effect of all art, achieved through style and form, which breaks automatic and unconscious perception and rhythms of everyday life (Shklovsky 11-12). It was taken up by SF studies in the 1970s as an essential part of the generic makeup. It was defined as something contained in the fantastic SF storyworld, which disorients the reader and creates the grounds of comparison of the narrative to their lived reality (Suvin 7). This comparison, while infused by the theorists behind it with the potential to social critique, is only critical in a highly abstract way, as a latent capacity. At the basis of the argument, there is an assumption that each estranging science fiction is similarly estranging for every reader, generating the same shock for the same reasons. The 1970s definition of the concept, then, assumes a homogenous authorship and readership living similar realities, which necessarily makes for a reductively abstracted conceptualization of SF.

The concept of estrangement is inverted by Afrofuturists, not as a means of departing from reality but of approximating it. This is a key inversion that guides the thinking on Anthropocene writing and the crisis of imagination in this project, and lays the groundwork to properly consider the works of Afrofuturist science fiction in context. The argument is made beautifully in multiple texts by a host of scholars, of which only a few can be mentioned here. Generally, the argument poses that in Afrofuturist writing, estrangement is not an effect on the reader enacted by the unrecognizable storyworld, but rather a circumstance inhabited by the character, as alienation, that generates recognition in the diasporic reader of science fiction. On this point, Kodwo Eshun, mentioned earlier, states: “Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same” (466). Black diasporic existence, living a history of forced removal and a present of alienation from one’s body, culture, and history, seems to find a strange narrative ally in science fiction. To this same point, Alondra Nelson argues that the SF trope of fractured and dividuated selves, or the “flux of identity […] has long been the experience of African diasporic people” (3). Thus, the ominous future visions presented in normative, western science fiction are exposed by Afrofuturism to be white anxieties of a loss of power and subalternity already experienced by many, rather than the universal human fears they are framed to be.

Rephrasing estrangement in this way, as something that grounds pointed critical thinking on the workings of racial exclusion and exploitation, opens the floor to more actively consider how speculative future visioning relates to socio-political realities and oppressions. A final set of definitions, from the introduction to the Black SF anthology *Octavia’s Brood*, further centres the capacity of Afrofuturist or Black speculative writing to enact an emergent, prefigurative anti-racist politics: “All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists

dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds—so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories?" (Imarisha 3).[1]

Despite the assumed severity of the Anthropocene narrative crisis, and the continuous critical work done by Afrofuturist writers and scholars, the question remains why science fiction, operating a distinct critical lens onto the future which estranges to analyse the present, gets to be so easily disregarded as eccentric stories of time travel and interplanetary existence. It helps here to reemphasize the urgency that animates the desire for a refreshed narrative toolbox to capture climate change by restating a point made earlier; that apocalyptic environmental disruption is anything but abstract or fictional for many global communities already. This renders the pervasive idea "that climate change 'changes everything,'" entirely reductive, if not also harmful, as "for many subjects of colonial power the world has already ended" (Clausen 284). Related here are the variety of academic works pointing out how a normative white notion of apocalypse, as a breaking open of western comforts, disregards the everyday and lasting apocalyptic circumstances faced by Black and Indigenous communities in the past and present (Hurley & Jemisin 469, Whyte 159, Roanhoarse et al). What this urgency signifies, then, is the need for an Anthropocene reading strategy less concerned with keeping alive a distinction between mimesis and speculation in any genre, and more with keeping alive the possibilities of living otherwise on a degrading planet.

Genre Flailing as a Collision of Forms

This thesis proposes that we consider the Anthropocene crisis of representation, not just from the generative and critical thematic lens of Afrofuturism, but also along the lines of a different methodological vocabulary: that of new formalism, and specifically the version of

[1] This point is extended in Caitlin O'Neill "Notes Towards a Feminist Afrofuturist Manifesto," stating that, if Imarisha's point rings true, "the act of a black woman choosing to enact self-care and advocacy, however, briefly is an act of speculative and science fiction" (63).

it articulated by Caroline Levine in Forms: Whole Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network. This framework helps to consider the different genres, modes, and novels considered in this thesis all as forms, patterns of ordering that afford the foregrounding of some meanings at the expense of others. It also provides an additive means for representing the richness of the Afrofuturist science fictions considered, in the sense that it allows for a more thorough view on how these works subvert not only SF tropes, but SF form and materiality. The works break open linear narrative structure to present a *bricolage* of different forms and narrative registers, ranging from diary to archive to poetry to scripture. They contain a collision of forms that can help understand the collision of forms occurring in the wider literary field.

Broadly understood, new formalism poses an academic intervention into the new historicist literary studies paradigm, which, the argument goes, reduces literary works to the role of mirror images of wider ideological frameworks, and reads them symptomatically for their poorly hidden ideological assumptions. In response, scholars of new formalism propose a "rededication to form" (Levinson 561), a renewed acknowledgement of the complexity and multiplicity of literary narrative, and its capacity to outlast or affect ideological paradigms, rather than only being determined *by* it. A rededication to form thus requires a rededication to the agency of the novel to escape the supposedly totalitarian determining clutches of ideology, suggesting that "no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others. […] Literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own" (Levine 28). New formalism stages a mutually influential conversation between ideology and literature, and elevates literary interpretive projects above the textual.

Caroline Levine takes new formalism a step further by proposing to read all organizing patterns and structures on a level plane, as form. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, she argues that all form, literary and social, functions to pattern, structure and accommodate meaning-making, and that an analytical strategy attuned to the ubiquitous

working of form across social and aesthetic categories more thoroughly captures the complex interplay of literature and society (29-30). Her methodology is spearheaded by the concept of affordances, defined as the latent capabilities inherent to form, the experiences and patterns they facilitate (19). Second, Levine is especially interested in the productive collision of multiple forms, attuning herself to moments in literature where two misaligned ordering structures come into contact, and produce unexpected results. This focus highlights the new formalist premise that social and political power is necessarily composed of plural and complex systems, rather than abstract determining forces.

The reasons for considering the moment of Anthropocene genre flailing with a new formalist lens are multiple. First, Levine's focus on the affordances of form reframes genre flailing from being only a state of anxious floundering, and emphasizing how it might also be a productive space for creative innovation and critical thought, albeit one with significant stakes. Most importantly, however, new formalism opens the floor to consider the answer to the crisis of representation as something multilateral and intersectional, which acknowledges the multidirectional ways power manifests. This further facilitates a nuanced reading of Butler and Gumbs as works of feminist Afrofuturist science fiction, poetry, and critical theory all at once. Lastly, new formalism's eye to the complex network helps reject reductive and essentialist understandings of climate fiction, science fiction, and of the looming spectre of climate collapse.

This Project

This thesis interprets two seminal works of Black feminist science fiction through the methodological lens of new formalism and the thematic lenses of Afrofuturism and Ghosh's crisis of representation. It also gestures more implicitly in the direction of several other strands of theory and criticism, which bear explicit mentioning here nonetheless. These

include ecocritical theory, specifically on the speaking power of the non-human and critiques of the nature/culture demarcation, as well as Indigenous critical theory and writing, and affect studies. It remains acknowledged here that these theories, examined to different extents in this thesis, provide equally generative avenues of thinking in extension of this project. Nonetheless and unfortunately, they will have to remain acknowledged only.

This project contributes to the search for a new generic equilibrium by gesturing towards the long and innovative tradition of critical science fiction, specifically by non-white, non-male authors writing against the normative waves of the SF tradition. The question that guides this project is the following: How do Black feminist science fictions of climate disaster, through their engagement with form and genre, relate estrangement as a narrative strategy to speculative narratives? At the hand of this question, this thesis argues for a larger awareness of racial and gendered processes of exclusion in the collective embrace of speculative and climate fiction, and helps realign the focus in this academic discussion towards the historic leading role of Black female writers in the speculative literary tradition, and in science fiction especially.

The first chapter of this thesis presents a conceptual map of estrangement as a literary interpretive concept throughout the past century. It first outlines Levine's concepts utilized in this project, which allows for the understanding of estrangement as an affordance of certain modes of writing, whose definition shifts along with its generic context. In drawing this map, the chapter further contextualizes the intervention of Afrofuturist science fiction with regard to how estrangement was utilized in literary criticism, and traces an almost continuous line from Afrofuturism to the ecocritical genres such as weird fiction and the uncanny. Lastly, the chapter ends on the identification of a tension between ecocritical and Afrofuturist animations of estrangement, which sets the stage for the subsequent close readings.

The two chapters that follow operationalize the joint theoretical frame of new formalism and Afrofuturist science fiction, reading the two case studies for their specific ways of achieving estrangement through a constructive disruption of narrative form. Chapter two examines Butler's *Parable of the Sower* through the twofold lens mentioned above, reading for form and fracture. This chapter reckons with the rich history of scholarly analysis of Butler's oeuvre, and of *Parable of the Sower* specifically, and illustrates how contemporary Afrofuturism has come to embrace Butler as an ancestral figure. From there, a close reading of the novel's form, composed of the autodiegetic narrator's journal entries, demonstrates how estrangement, as a sudden disruption of linear form, enacts approximation of the reader to the storyworld, thus subverting the notion that estrangement is a process that widens the distance between the fictional storyworld and the reader's experiential reality.

The chapter that follows performs a similar analysis on *M Archive: After the End of the World*, but inversely, in the sense that a continuous narrative never manifests in the fractured story made up of a constellation of single paragraphs. Where estrangement is not found in sudden moments of rupture, the close reading nonetheless finds it front and centre in the story, as the catalyst for a new human ontology that encapsulates not just the non-human affected by climate change, but also the disproportionate colonial flows of environmental collapse. All in all, this thesis hopes to further the understanding of Anthropocene writing by helping to decolonize the index of genres being flipped through in search of the most appropriate representative strategy in the face of climate change. It aims to help make sure that those communities who have been and will once again be the first to suffer dystopic social, political and environment circumstances, are not left out of the conversation, because a future vision of climate collapse is nothing if not deeply situated in political, geographical, and temporal spheres.

Chapter 1: Estrangement as an Affordance of Form

"Genre itself is an intertextual phenomenon, always formed out of resemblances or oppositions among texts[…] to speak of a genre is always to speak of a system of genres"
John Rieder - *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (18)

This chapter draws a conceptual map of the literary interpretive notion of estrangement, from its origination in Russian formalist critique to its recent employments in an environmental literary studies sphere. In doing so it illuminates the ground on which the anxious search for a genre of Anthropocene writing transpires. Additionally, this conceptual map outlines more extensively the critical interventionist project undertaken by Afrofuturism, into the normative white SF register already, as well as, latently, in this genre flailing index. The approach towards the form of Afrofuturism aims to capture the genre's simultaneous emphasis on rewriting the historical canon, and on presenting an emergent perspective that decentres the colonial gaze and "aims to liberate the possibilities that open up when blackness is linked to futurity" (Morris 153). The theoretical framework drawn in this chapter closes on the identification of a crucial tension regarding estrangement that sets the stage for the close readings of *Parable of the Sower* and *M Archive* that follow. At the foundation of the argument, however, is a brief contextualization of the notion of genre, which constructively amalgamates its conceptualizations by a number of SF critics, as well as Lauren Berlant, and Caroline Levine, outlining a working concept of genre in reference to all three.

In his seminal study, published in 2008 with the title *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, literary critic John Rieder charts the entangled development of colonial discourse and Anglophone science fiction published in Europe and North America, examining how the ontological presumptions of colonial rhetoric have impressed themselves onto the SF genre as it emerged in the 1920s (15). He sees a resonant overlap between the two discourses

in their unquestioned preoccupation with expansion and adventure, their fascination with evolutionary theory and anthropology, and their linear view of civilization advancement structured by the markers of race, technology, and mastery over nature (3-6). A compelling undercurrent to Rieder's argument concerns his view on genre, already signalled in the epigraph. He emphasizes the hybridity that necessarily animates both colonial and science fictional discourse in their sustained mutual constitution. Rieder's definition of SF is a fluid one, phrased in reference to fellow SF scholar Paul Kincaid, as a set of texts unbound by a shared essence, and instead held together by expectation (16-17). We see SF when we expect SF. [2] Related to this relativistic and perspective-bound understanding of genre is science fiction writer and critic Samuel R. Delany's definition of genres as "reading protocols" between readers and literary works ("Some Reflections" 236-237), foregrounding neither the creative license of the author nor the interpretive agency of the reader, but rather the implicit agreement that connects them, which is steeped in political and cultural norms.

In this collected view, genres are made to be instruments of mediation facilitating the movement of cultural artefacts across audience groups as well as the stabilization of readers' expectations regarding these objects. They epitomize flux and interaction, and speak closely to Lauren Berlant's examinations of genre and genre flailing, which spearheaded the thinking on collective Anthropocene stories and the suspension of previously viable cultural imaginaries in the introductory chapter. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant defines genre as that which "provides an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art" (6). Genres stabilize something imminent but in doing so reduce and reframe it, enclosing immediate experience into pre-existing narrative schema that accord with larger cultural narratives: They both facilitate and foreclose signification.

[2] The well-known idiom of SF author and critic Damon Knight: "science fiction is what we point at when we say it" fits this bill also (1).

Genres understood in the above way allow communities to pose the question of what story they are living through in the immediate present and what the future might look like. These stories, in turn, solidify the scope of possible responses to the present and hypothetical future in an affective and actionable sense, shattering the question into a threefold one: (1) what story are we in? (2) how will it feel? (3) how can we respond? At this point, the connection to Amitav Ghosh's crisis of imagination, and the ringing gap in the storytelling repertoire his concept is predicated on, should be drawn explicitly, After all, the uncertainty on genre is, at its heart, an uncertainty on what the future under climate change is going to look like and what narrative scheme it must be poured into to achieve the greatest persuasiveness in spurring action. He critiques the pervasive echoes of the 19th century Realist novel in the present, framing the genre as an archaic remnant of early modern industrial European society in which the natural world was nothing but an outside theatre for exclusively human stories. The confusion on genre, finally, then, becomes a confusion on the claim to realism, and, subsequently, on the relative competencies of estrangement as a narrative or an aesthetic strategy.

While Berlant and Rieder's definitions of genre both foreground expectation, Berlant extends the view articulated by Rieder, Delany, and Knight by proposing to read colonial, humanist, and capitalist discourses as genres – and thus an arrangement of affective expectations – too. A colonial discourse, understood in this way, must be seen as a narrative arc of the past, present, and future structured by an unquestioned longing for discovery and uncompromising progress, which crystallizes as well as normalizes expectations of what it feels like to inhabit countries existing on either side of the exploitative colonial interaction *now*. Capitalist and humanist discourses, in turn, work together to construct a view of the human as hierarchically removed from the ecological world, and authorized, if not obliged, to instrumentalize it for financial gain.

Rieder and Berlant maintain an attentiveness to the determining workings of discourse to structure our engagement with literature *and* to the capacity of literary works to slip away or speak back. This makes a core premise of their argument a new formalist one; that literary genres are always already embedded in a larger field comprised also of those genres flowing from social, political, cultural or discursive reality. This understanding of genres and of the mutually influential relation of aesthetic or cultural objects such as novels to the world around them also highlights the agency ascribed in both contexts to aesthetic form. Moreover, it functions here to reframe genre flailing, not necessarily as a hesitance on the viability of our literary forms, but of our collective stories.

New Formalism

Caroline Levine's new formalist methodological system, which was already shortly touched upon in the introduction, provides us with the additional means to not only examine the relation of objects to forms and forms to objects, but between forms – as objects – themselves. Subsequently, this allows for a deepening of our understanding of political reality as an assemblage of different forms which interact both destructively and symbiotically to create the experiential world. The social and political world is best understood as a varied configuration of different forms, and can be effectively captured by Levine's concept of "productive conflict" (48), lifted from her 2015 book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Productive conflict affords a layered framing of the interplay of forms which is characterized simultaneously by competition, critical intervention, and disagreement, but also by co-existence and productive exchange, thus staging a generative conversation with the question that plays on the background of this project: if we are all in the same story, what story are we in? and what forecloses the possibility of it being an Afrofuturist science fictional one?

New formalism belongs to a series of contemporary disciplines within philosophy and literary studies that critically reflect on multiple decades of new historicist cultural analysis. In this undertaking, it is allied to postcritique and certain strands of affect studies, of which Berlant's, Isobel Armstrong's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's are only a few examples. In this space defined by an emphasis on going beyond the suspicion hermeneutics paradigm, new formalism, as the name suggests, is particularly interested in the ways in which it can add to new historicist literary scholarship that employs analysis of an aesthetic object's form only to the end of ideology-critique, interpreting narrative techniques for how they either undermine or reinforce hegemonic discourses and institutionalized powers. From this vantage point, new formalist analysis does not reject the suspicious reading paradigm, but rather seeks to complement it by emphasizing the inherent complexity of form (Levinson 559), which in turn informs a more precise understanding of the relationship between literature and the associate forms that together constitute the socio-political reality.[3]

The new formalism that grounds the following overview of Afrofuturism is structured by a series of key concepts, which are visited here shortly. First, the notion of form deserves some more extensive explanation. Levine defines it in such a broad manner as to lose the relative particularity with which Berlant infuses genre, but which aligns various forms with each other productively. She understands forms as "*all* shapes and configurations, *all* ordering principles, *all* patterns of repetition and difference" (16, emphasis added). These patterns organize the movement of bodies, influence the distribution of objects and information, and help to shape cultural processes of signification. To this point, Levine raises the concept of affordances as a means to consider which meanings and movements a form allows for, and which it forecloses. Each form, Levine presumes, carries a set of latent capacities, arguing here with a specific but not an exclusive eye to literary form:

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[3] Nonetheless, new formalist critique seeking to decentre politics and discourse in service of a purist view on aesthetics also exists (Levinson 559-560)

> Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, 'a moment's monument,' while the tripledecker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are limiting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much. (16)

Levine simultaneously emphasizes the importance of outlining relative differences between forms, and their portability into new and unexpected contexts (where they produce new and unexpected results). This combines to reframe any choice of form into an unmistakably consequential one, troubling the idea of form as an unsignified container, Forms, then, not only say something on their own accord but also illustrate a history of productive collision that has led to a contemporary index of forms to be perused by any instigator of fixity and organisation: "A school borrows the idea of spectators in rows from ancient theatre. A novelist takes from epic poetry the narrative structure of the quest" (Levine 20). Across these translations, the affordances of forms remain; spectators in rows continue to organize the audience body for the sake of space, visibility, and in service of a social hierarchy between the performer and their audience, but the changed context denotes an interaction with other forms, such as the school timetable and the curriculum, which alters all forms entering into this interplay and makes for the creation of unprecedented experience.

Levine distinguishes between four categories of forms in particular: wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks, all of which deserve a brief visitation to the faithful construction of Levine's overarching argument, even though, out of the four concepts, the notion of the whole is the only one activated in the close readings. Wholes concern groups in an abstract as well as distinct sense: communities, nations, and institutions like the household or the workplace.

The affordances of wholes are containment, unification, stability, safety, as well as forceful normalization at the threat of being excluded. The self-contained duality that characterizes wholes, with enclosure posing as safety and as threat when its embrace is withheld, pervades the other categories similarly: rhythm affords repetition and remembrance, communal solidarity and pleasure, but can also function as a forceful mechanism of control, as manifested, for example, in the enforced temporal flows of factory labour or through an employment of its absence; the diffused temporal schemata of remote work. Hierarchies, perhaps the most straightforward ordering form, function less distinctly across a spatial or temporal axis, like wholes and rhythms respectively, and are instead concerned with the mechanisms of social connection. The forms of hierarchies and networks provide the instruments to examine processes of exchange and interpersonal influence. They thus afford connectivity and the dissemination of information, but also exclusion and oppression.

In the new formalist framework outlined above, estrangement must be understood as an affordance of one form in particular, the productive conflict. "These formal collisions can produce strange and aleatory possibilities" (100), Levine argues, in such a way as to implicitly designate estrangement as an affordance not contained in one single form, literary or otherwise, but rather latent to collision in a more general sense. This last point is mobilized over a great distance in this chapter, as the guiding principle along with the travels of estrangement in a literary context are outlined, in a mostly chronological sense with but a distinct eye to the call-and-response happening between the different iterations. It is tested against the Russian formalist and German Marxist treatments of estrangement in the early and mid-20th century, and made to bear on estrangement's subsequent scholarly embraces, explicitly by science fiction studies and Afrofuturism and implicitly analyses of cli-fi, weird fiction, as well as in the ecocritical writings of Amitav Ghosh. In doing so, this chapter gestures towards a map of genres distributed according to where each finds its designated

locus of estrangement, which, in turn, contextualizes and informs this project's affinity with the Afrofuturist form, with affinity being understood in Donna Haraway's sense, as a solidarity which rejects essentialist identity politics and centres responsibility and coalition across pleasurably confused categories (Haraway 2044, 2050).

Estrangement Revealing Constructedness

Literary scholarship on estrangement originates in Russian formalism, a strand of criticism which was influential between the 1910s and the 1930s. Attempting to formulate a scientific and more universal method for studying literature (Petrov 1), the Russian formalists infused literary language with a universal and timeless set of rules and conventions that render it an autonomous object of analysis and open the floor, presumably, for objective reading and reproducibility. Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 essay "Art as Technique" outlines the main arguments for this premise, and hinges it strongly on the concept of estrangement or defamiliarization (*Ostranenie*), understood as a latent capacity inherent to all art, achieved through its use of style and form, which breaks automatic and unconscious perception and habitually performed rhythms of everyday life (Shklovsky 11-12).

Shklovsky anchors the definition of estrangement in perception, in the sense that estrangement denotes a complication and lengthening of the process through which one perceives. Shklovsky explains as follows: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (16). According to Shklovsky, literary texts throw a spanner in the works of habituated sensory practices, which is precisely what makes them estranging. As aesthetic language has a different goal than practical language, be it spoken or written, and is more deliberate in style

and presentation, it requires a different style of observation to understand, which generates estrangement from everyday engagements with language.

Shklovsky's approach implies an exposure of its own artificiality to be one of poetic language's primary effects, which reveals the linguistic register it estranged *from* to be constructed too. It is here that the latent poststructuralist application of Russian formalism comes to light, as it highlights the contingency of language, not necessarily in the sense that it is an expression of discursive power, but in that it is open to change more generally. It is in the next iteration of estrangement, by Bertolt Brecht, that this constructivist potential is explicated fully. He rephrases estrangement in conversation with a multitude of different scholarly works, such as Marx and Hegel's thinking on *Entfremdung* as alienation from one's labour in a capitalist system, and delineates the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* in reference to it. In "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948), Brecht understands estrangement as follows: "a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (8). This definition connotes a placement of representation and estrangement on a shared continuum, rather than as polar opposites. Instead of realism or representation, Brecht opposes estrangement with identification, specifically that of the audience with the actors on stage, and frames estrangement as the suspension of this link (9).

Verfremdungseffekt is an affordance of the theatre as a form, but is achieved usually through a manipulation of one of its enclosed forms, like the staging, music, or the costumes. In doing so, Brecht detaches estrangement from the allegiance to poetic language. Brecht names characters wearing animal masks in medieval plays as an example (8), who achieve defamiliarization by staging a discordant encounter between two distinct, different points in theatrical history. Brecht thus closely approximates the new formalist notion of estrangement as a possibility contained in the productive collision of two different forms (Levine 100), and, also much like Levine, gestures towards the term's socio-critical potential. Brecht politicizes

estrangement to a Marxist end, teasing out the constructivism latent in Shklovsky's *Ostranenie* and placing it at the foreground of *Verfremdungseffekt*. The estranged, as a presentation of things being otherwise, helps "to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (8), and opens these phenomena to "suspicious inquiry" and attempted intervention (9). A defamiliarized present thus facilitates critical citizenship, as it refuses to present an entirely coherent, recognizable world on the stage, and shows experience, the structuring of the "historical present" (Berlant 4), the currently hegemonic answer to the question of what story we are in, to be both arbitrary and "profoundly political" (4).

The philosopher Ernst Bloch continues in Brecht's path in his article "*Entfremdung, Verfremdung*: Alienation, Estrangement." In this text, Bloch distinguishes and compares the concepts of alienation and estrangement, starting off from the premise that both rely on a notion of externality. Bloch interprets alienation (*Entfremdung*) in a Marxist vein as a characterization of a capitalist system, which not only alienates workers from their labour but sell them back the promise of wholeness in the guise of commodities (122). Estrangement, then, is understood by Bloch to be an affect, rather than a fixed state of being. it denotes the representation of an unrecognizable externality in a work of art, which effects in the viewer or reader feelings of "shock" (123), "surprise" (123), and "amazement" (124). For Bloch, the presented externality is, somewhat unfortunately, a cultural one, figured along a temporal or spatial axis (124), and betraying his normative white European perspective. His insistence on estrangement as something enacted by novelty, however, remains crucial, as it informs Suvin's engagement with estrangement as a distinctly science fictional affordance.

The oppositional term Bloch finds, and against which he distinguishes his understanding of estrangement, reveals a crucial tension between his and Brecht's theories. Instead of identification, Bloch places estrangement in a dialectical relation with recognition,

which he describes as "an 'Aha!' experience" that casts the familiar into a new and revealing light (124). Both estrangement and recognition, of course, rely on a notion of the familiar, with estrangement being a step away and recognition a step closer. Even further, Bloch sees his dialectical concepts to be mutually reliant, as well as actively working together to constitute a renewed and deeper insight into one's lived reality. In making this point, Bloch is actively relying on the specific echoes of recognition in comparison to the earlier antithetical concepts, automation and identification, due to the fact that the latter two suggest a stable and continuous process of perception, whereas the former connotes a perspectival shift and the re-emergence of a knowledge which had lain dormant. Ghosh, whose *The Great Derangement* will be examined in detail later in this chapter, evocatively draws out this semantic difference as a starting point to his argument, asserting that "a moment of *re*cognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of what is beheld" (Ghosh 4-5, emphasis added). Recognition thus presents a shift, a move from one position to another, whereas identification and automation suggest a continuity only problematized by the estranging factor.

In this point of the tentative academic chronology being drawn here, estrangement is made to encapsulate a moment of suspension, as something that breaches the ordinary and exposes it as a contingent state of being that was only masquerading as self-evident. The next section outlines the ways in which the concept got transposed into the field of science fiction studies, where it grounded a temporarily paradigmatic definition of the genre, and more importantly, got placed in direct opposition with realist writing for the first time.

Estrangement in a Science Fictional Framework

Estrangement's next iteration in a literary scholarship sphere comes at the hand of Darko Suvin, who, in the 1970s, uses it to outline a "formal framework" of the science fiction

literary genre (*Metamorphoses* 7). Suvin's conceptualization of estrangement stands in close proximity to both Bloch and Brecht's earlier engagements with it, signalled also in the texts examined here: "The Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" (1972) and *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979).[4] Suvin specifies estrangement in an SF context as "*cognitive* estrangement" and essentializes all "serious" science fiction writing on the basis of this concept ("Poetics" 372). The capacity of estrange cognitively, Suvin poses, is a consequence of the SF storyworld being extrapolative from "one's empirical reality:" but nonetheless structured by technoscientific logic (375). The unrecognizable nature of the SF storyworld is conceptualized as its "novum;" a "strange newness" (373), in reference to Bloch, which Suvin sees this to be the most significant driver of estrangement in science fiction writing.

Suvin utilizes estrangement to hierarchically separate the SF genre against other modes of speculative writing, such as fantasy, myth, and fairy tale, as well as non-speculative writing he terms "naturalistic fiction" (*Metamorphoses* 18), and which is defined as the kind of writing that seeks to "reproduce empirical textures and surfaces vouched for by human senses and common sense" (18). He then continues by asserting that all literatures can be understood as some combination of estranged/naturalistic and cognitive/noncognitive (20), with SF being the only genre that traffics in *cognitive* estrangement. In "Poetics" Suvin further delineates what he understands to be naturalistic writing, asserting: "The estrangement differentiates [science fiction] from the 'realistic' literary mainstream of 18th to 20th century" (375). The quotation marks used by Suvin around "realistic" illustrate his hesitance towards the term, which he explicates when he states, in a justification for his use of the designation "author's empirical environment" (373), that he would happily use the term realism "if one had first persuasively defined what is 'real' and what is 'reality'" (373). When Suvin uses

[4] Suvin also helped translate Bloch's "*Entfremdung, Verfremdung*: Alienation, Estrangement" into English around the same time as writing texts "The Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" and *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction.*

realism, then, he refers to a historical genre of literature that goes by the name of realism; a period of literary writing in western Europe, in response to the embellished fabulations of Romantic writers, which emphasizes the mundane and everyday lives of mundane and everyday people (Coyle et al. 1000).

For Suvin, it is not only the self-satisfied claims on approximating *the real* that makes "realist" fiction a reductive genre. He also underscores, in a point echoing Ghosh, the sightless centrality of human characters which obfuscates questions on asymmetrical power and ideology influencing the unremarkable characters as they navigate the storyworld around them. "The basic rule of naturalistic literature is that man's [sic] destiny is man" (*Metamorphoses* 11), poses Suvin, adding that, in the realist genre, any recognition of out-of-reach yet pervasive power structures is seen as an infringement on the agentic self-fashioning of the human character (11). Aside from this definition, in which estrangement functions as a formal condition of SF writing, Suvin also defines estrangement as an affect in the readerly body, when arguing for the genre's supposedly unique socio-critical potential. This potential is also what makes the distinction between SF and other types of speculative writing a hierarchical one. Cognitive estrangement, echoing Brecht, allows for a defamiliarized look onto the socio-political reality inhabited by the reader, as the science fictional text provides its extrapolation and highlights the contingency inherent to both. The estranged text is a distorted lens to look questioningly back onto the present and mobilize towards a project of intervention (378-379).

While his definitions are anything but the final word in SF scholarship, Suvin's additions to the thinking on estrangement as a literary concept remain influential points of reference. Most importantly, in the context of this chapter, Suvin is the first to place estranged writing in opposition to an empiricist or naturalistic mode, and enshrined estrangement as a function of speculative writing only, which is where Suvin departs from the multiple scholars

he builds on. Since his first publications on cognitive estrangement, Suvin's theories have springboarded a heterogeneous array of thought inhabiting a wide range of agreement, or disagreement, with his conclusions. These continuations are visited in the sections that follow, and starts with Afrofuturism, a strand of criticism which immediately inverts Suvin's essentializing connection of estrangement and speculation.

Estrangement Restated: Afrofuturism

` The term Afrofuturism was coined by the cultural critic Mark Dery, in his 1994 text "Black to the Future." In the article, Dery interviews four influential Black figures engaged critically or creatively in thinking through the connections of Blackness, technology and speculative writing. Dery defines the genre as "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). He signals an adoption of the generic science fictional conventions of futurity and speculative technologies by Black American authors, with "appropriates" suggesting critical intervention. Dery phrased the concept with an exclusive eye to African-American cultural production, but this was subsequently expanded to include Black diasporic experience more broadly. For example, the term was rephrased by Kodwo Eshun in his 1998 *More Brilliant than the Sun* as "Black Atlantic Futurism" in reference to the work of cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (-001), and by writer and critic Sheree Thomas as "speculative fiction from the African diaspora" in 2000 (3).

Afrofuturism can be understood as a twofold creative-critical project that seeks to reinscribe the historically obscured presence of Black authors of speculative writing into the white SF canon, and simultaneously aims to offer a critical toolkit for imagining the intersections of race and technology in the past, present, and future from an Afrodiasporic perspective (Nelson 9, Yaszek 42). Combined, the two projects constitute a reconsideration of

the entanglements of racial and gendered power in the SF canon and, more broadly, in our collective conceptions of time and futurity. It speaks, therefore, against the western notion, forever informed by humanist and colonial ontologies, that time is both linearly progressive and somehow also internally disconnected, with each present and future offering itself as a blank canvas for individual human inscription. Man's destiny is man. In response, Afrofuturist literary visioning poses a "chronopolitical intervention" (Eshun "Further" 462) into the SF canon by transgressing the rhetorically and materially enforced separation of past and future and by troubling the relative innocence ascribed to the present as nothing more than a waystation into the future. It is thus involved in a project of "correcting the history of the future" (466),

Afrofuturist creative production is situated at the intersection of the future conceived of as a referent for social dreaming by Black communities, and as a vision solidified by a "futures industry" (Eshun 461), which sustains a western optimism on technological progress is envisioned, and which comes at the expense of designated earth and human others. Alondra Nelson's 2002 "Future Texts" echoes this point, critiquing the futures industry visions of the future as fully digitized and thus raceless, as they reinscribe codifications of Blackness as a problematic complication that will eventually be solved, and must, until then, be tolerated (1-2). She asserts that these visions destructively extend the discourses of white superiority into the imagined future. To counteract this danger, Nelson advocates, through a close reading of Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, a stronger acknowledgement of the past as something that impresses itself influentially as a blueprint onto the present and future, but not deterministically or inescapably so, which leads Nelson to also highlight the constructive imaginations of Afrofuturism as futures signified otherwise. Afrofuturism thus speaks back but also on its own terms, amplifying a counterpoint to the perpetual association of Blackness with suffering in the futures industry, and opening a space for "authors to create complex

futures in full colour rather than ones that are either simply white washed utopias or black dystopias" (Yaszek "Race" 3).

Afrofuturism not only restates the ways in which cultures can engage with the future, it also rephrases estrangement, as a means to approximate the lived experience of Black individuals and communities in a (post)modern world. This point was already made in the introduction, but it deserves some more extensive explanation here. The remobilization of estrangement in an Afrofuturist context was already signalled prospectively by Dery, who wondered why so little Black authors were engaging in speculative writing, especially given that the experience of Black diasporic communities presents what he calls a "sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements" (180). Dery's framing is obvious, here, and questionable for how it equates Blackness and nightmarishness, but he articulates an affordance of Afrofuturist SF as a form, namely that of analogous representation of the experiential reality of racialized bodies in a technoscientific world. In a 1991 interview quoted by Kodwo Eshun in "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," the author Toni Morrison makes a resonant observation to this same point, arguing:

> the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. (Eshun 458)

It is on this convergence of estrangement and Black existence in the (post)modern world that Afrofuturism speaks more strongly with and against the academic contemporaries in science fiction studies in the late 20th century, who were raising estrangement, as alienation and diffused identity, to be symbolic of postmodern human existence universally. The SF scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, for example, insisted that SF should be understood as a discourse –

science fictionality – that can be employed in writing of all kinds, mentioning the theoretical writing of Haraway and Baudrillard as examples. He outlines how science fictionality can function as "a mode of awareness" (Csicsery-Ronay 388), or an allegory for postmodern reality, as Veronica Hollinger poses in a contextualization of Csicsery-Ronay's work (Hollinger 258). While these arguments already gesture towards the Afrofuturist alignment of estrangement and representation, they wash away all particularity and draw a picture of a homogenous postmodern existence, in which everyone is similarly nudged by powers that are nothing if not a further sharpening of racist- and heteropatriarchal structures of domination.[5]

Afrofuturist scholars rephrase estrangement, then, not as continued *Verfremdung* from one's labour in a late capitalist system, or as the loss of stable identity in a postmodern society, but in a way that is more distinctly aware of the particularities of Black diasporic existence: embodying a history of forced removal and dehumanization and living in a postmodern neoliberal society in which these histories are overshadowed by the notion that each day is a new one, and that, somehow, a shared precarity forecloses considerations of particularity in subjectification. A musical metaphor might offer a more precise way of apprehending the Afrofuturist remobilization of estrangement in reference to the earlier iterations and the contemporaneous one by Csicsery-Ronay. If estrangement is the radical rupture of the automated continuity that normalizes white, male, heterosexual experience, Afrofuturism engages with it, not as a rupture or absence pure and simple, but rather as "the representation of an absence of representation" (Armstrong 123), or, as Kodwo Eshun puts it in *More Brilliant*: "[Sonic Futurism] uproots you by inducing a gulf crisis, a perceptual daze rendering today's sonic discontinuum immediately audible" (-001). Understood as an affordance of Afrofuturist form in particular, estrangement denotes the representation of a gap

[5] It should be noted here that Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" uses a science fictional mode of writing, not to universalize postmodern experience, but exactly to warn against essentializations of identity, particularly in progressive feminist and Marxist politics in the 1980s.

in the archive, which allows for focused projects of recompletion, or for the creation of a completely new archive. The discontinuum presents a ringing critique of normative SF imaginaries and, simultaneously, an invitation to speculate, which turns estrangement from the driver of narrative rupture and audience shock, to the facilitator of representation.

From here, the combined question becomes one of the role of estrangement in Afrofuturist works that deal specifically with vectors of race in a context of climate collapse. It stages a conversation, in the final sections of this chapter, between estrangement understood in Afrofuturism and estrangement understood by Amitav Ghosh and in related Anthropocene literary genres.

Estrangement Re-Abstracted: Anthropocene Writing

In the 2016 book *The Great Derangement*, which was already mentioned multiple times throughout this text, Amitav Ghosh advocates a new kind of writing for Anthropocene times, and sets this prospective genre off against 19th century realism. Ghosh criticizes realism for its humanist ontological underpinnings as well as its problematic emergence as the literary manifestation of early industrial and colonial western societies, in which the global north not only felt the duty to perfect themselves, but also to force others into the bounds of their image. Realism sustained these assumptions by inscribing the human character as the architect of the world around them, and centring, in the realist Bildungsroman, the advancement of the self-contained individual human consciousness into adulthood (Birch). Ghosh finds that a continued hegemony of the realist genre now forecloses the possibility of representing climate change as something serious in literature (7), as there is no vocabulary within the Anthropocene, no genre, in which to capture non-human expressions of agency.

Ghosh provides one answer to this lack of narrative tools both in *The Great Derangement* and in his own creative writing, such as in *Gun Island* (2019) and *The Hungry*

Tide (2004). To synthesize the tension on claims of apprehending *the real*, as well as the contestation of whose real is to be represented, Ghosh raises the concept of the uncanny (30), which he aligns with his concept of *re*cognition outlined earlier in connection to Bloch. Ghosh borrows the concept from Freud and Heidegger, in whose writing it connoted to mystery and anxiety caused by simultaneous unfamiliarity and recognition (30). The uncanny, for Ghosh, denotes something similar but in the face of climate change distinctly. He defines it as a disruptive strangeness accompanied by recognition of familiarity, which has to do specifically with an acknowledgement of life beyond the human. Ghosh explains:

> No other word [uncanny] comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, *the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors*. (30, emphasis added)

What makes the uncanny an effective genre of Anthropocene writing, for Ghosh, concerns its ability to engage with "nonhuman interlocutors" (30) as presences that were always there but were structurally removed from the scope of concern. At this point, he converses implicitly with ecocritical theorists seeking to clarify that the difficulty of fully apprehending climate change is due to its more-than-human scale and duration (Morton *Hyperobjects* 2, Mertens & Craps 137, Clark "Derangements" 153). This argument suggests that the zooming out required for a project of representing climate change infuses this project always with an unmistakable speculative dimension, and Ghosh brings in the uncanny here to centre climatic and animal interventions into the humanist narrative alongside the questions of time and scale. Speculation does not merely go beyond the limits of individual human perception, but also re-activates the notion of human entanglement in and with ecological structures.

It is worthwhile to briefly expand on the notion of ontological entanglement, as it is a crucial underpinning to Ghosh's argument as well as a guiding concept in the subsequent close readings. As part of a larger post-humanist project of decentring of the human, the theorists on ontological entanglement seek to restate human experience as always already in contingent relation to the 'natural' as well as the 'machinal.' Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" is a paradigmatic reference point in writing on ontological entanglement, and contains a call to redefine the human, no longer as a self-contained individual defined by capacities considered essentially human-like, but as a collective fiction assembled out of parts both technological and organic, always contingent on the world around one. More recently, a project of blurring the boundaries circumscribing the image of the human has been taken up in new materialist and ecocritical fields of study. Stacy Alaimo, for example, outlines the notion of "thinking as the stuff of the world" to trouble the line between human self and non-human other (14). Alaimo argues, instead, that the subject must be understood "as already part of the substances, systems, and becomings of the world" (14). Other, similarly new materialist approaches include Karen Barad's intra-action (Barad 228), and the conceptualizations of kin by Zoe Todd and Donna Haraway, among others (Todd 103-104, Haraway *Trouble* 4). Altogether, ontological entanglement must be understood as a political proposition to think the human in radical relationality with those beings and structures it had placed beneath itself, consequently advocating a renewed sense of responsibility and environmental ethics.

In raising uncanny writing as the means of apprehending entanglement, Ghosh folds decades of scholarship on estrangement in on itself. That is to say, Ghosh aligns the concept with recognition in one overarching term, rather than figuring them as opposites. He finds in the uncanny a persuasive strategy to represent a collective disorientation regarding contemporary and exacerbating climatic disruption. In his fiction, then Ghosh mobilizes the uncanny as an affective instrument to capture both the spectre of environmental destruction,

and the centuries of colonial oppression that have functionally underpinned it (Nayar 90), framing both as structures the global north has been implicitly aware yet pleasantly ignorant of.

In lockstep with Ghosh's uncanny environmental writing is the emergence of multiple related genres of writing with their own answers to the question of how climate change is to be properly apprehended, including, most prominently, weird fiction and cli-fi. The first genre, weird fiction, similarly blurs the boundary between realism and speculation, and, out of the two, is most closely allied to Ghosh. With roots in horror and Gothic writing, weird fiction is framed as a highly appropriate mode of capturing the unprecedented environmental circumstances effected by climate change, and the ominous unfamiliarity with which they appear to human observers (Ulstein 19-20). It also denotes, following Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology*, an embrace of non-empirical modes of signification "that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed" (Morton *Ecology* 5), a return to the sensory or intuitive also connoted by Ghosh's uncanny. "Ecological awareness is weird," the argument goes, so fiction that aims to represent this awareness must also be weird (6, Ulstein 20). Estrangement, in this genre, thus provides the narrative means of representation in the face of climate change and human/non-human entanglement.

The second genre departs more from the uncanny, and sets the stage for the question to return to Afrofuturist science fiction. Cli-fi, termed in direct reference to sci-fi, but not defined as such, was coined in 2007 by journalist Dan Bloom and rose to prominence in 2013 when it got adopted into publishing and literary criticism circles. There is little consensus on what the genre's main conventions are, other than some engagement with climate change in the story (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2, Trexler 15), thus denoting a thematic coherence rather than a formal one. Alongside this thematic interconnection is the critical and didactic, sometimes even activist, capabilities ascribed to cli-fi. According to Stephanie Lemenager, cli-fi holds

the power to reassess the assumptions of human exceptionalism prevalent in contemporary genres echoing realism. Lemenager sees in cli-fi a possible "project of paying close attention to what it means to live through climate shift, moment by moment, in individual, fragile bodies […] and preparing, collectively, a project of […] making home of a broken world" (272). In Lemenager's view, cli-fi employs a speculative mode of narration to a didactic, representational end, which is where the genre finds significant overlap with both Ghosh and weird fiction.

Nonetheless, the non-scientific, non-empirical dimension is less pronounced in cli-fi. It is engaged in a project of narrating a new "everyday Anthropocene" (Lemenager 273), rather than upending western empirical epistemology, and thus allies itself more to established and recognizable narrative registers. This tension leads to the identification of a similar generic disconnect: between Ghosh's uncanny writing and science fiction. Ghosh mentions the genre twice in *The Great Derangement*, in a diagnosis of how writing on climate change is relegated to absurd fictionality to the end of sustaining the ontologies of the realist genre. He asserts: "the mere mention of the subject [climate change] is enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel" (7). Ghosh places science fiction writing on the environmental crisis on a spectrum with non-fiction scientific writing occupying the other end (7-8), suggesting that it is only in between those poles that one can faithfully engage in Anthropocene writing.

Science fiction, in Ghosh's above definition, seems disanalogous to the mission statements outlined by Afrofuturism, which is to say that Ghosh relies on a definition of the genre as purely extrapolative, guided by its novum rather than its sociocritical potential. Furthermore, it disconnects Ghosh's thinking from a conversation with Afrofuturism, which is remedied in the final sections here, because the two hold a compelling symbiotic potential to

the end of constructing a genre that not only deals with ecological exploitation, but with racialized, neo-colonial climate suffering too.

This combined potential, of uncanny climate writing and Afrofuturist SF, can be explicated by returning shortly to a quote by Suvin, in which he implicitly signals the ecocritical potential of SF. In his critique of realism in *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin argues: "Modern mainstream fiction is forbidden the pathetic fallacy of earthquakes announcing the assassination of rulers or drizzles accompanying the sadness of the heroine" (11). Suvin suggests here that SF has long been capable of staging the interaction of environmental, organic, and technological characters.[6] Nonetheless, he figures non-human agencies only as the accompaniment to human dramas or emotions, which is where Ghosh is needed to explicate a critique of the realist genre as a literary manifestation of colonial and humanist discourses. Read together, Ghosh and Suvin's thinking on speculation complements each other to set the stage for Afrofuturism, as the genre which melds SF conventions and critical Black theory to apprehend, speculatively, how climate change influences structures of anti-Black racism and neo-colonial practices of exploitation. It facilitates a critical eye to the universalizing tendencies of SF and ecocritical discourses, and presents the tools for articulating a future vision that utilizes estrangement as a way to make a constructive point on the highly differential ways environmental degradation manifests across communities, and to speculate on the way forward from there.

Conclusion

Invited into productive conflict, uncanny writing on climate change and Afrofuturist science fiction can provide a more thorough view on the capacities of Afrofuturist science fiction in the collective genre flailing. With a new formalist lens, lastly, this combined view

[6] This is further illustrated by the publication of Ursula le Guin's novel *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and Arthur Herzog's *Heat* (1977), both of which are SF novels engaging with climate change speculatively.

allows readers to foreground questions of how this collision helps in the articulation of radically new forms, and with that, radically new ways to think emergent politics in the Anthropocene. This helps any approach of a text on climate change to not just be governed by the search for hidden powers and further centralized domination, but also to be an invitation to explore different ways of being in a decaying climate. In the following chapter, the Afrofuturist notion of estrangement as representation of rupture is tested against Octavia E. Butler's 1993 climate collapse novel *Parable of the Sower*. It seeks to demonstrate, first, how this theoretical strategy, which is embedded further in new formalist theory in the beginning of the chapter, gets mobilized in literature and to what effect. Additionally, it speculates on the multiple ways in which the novel has been framed into certain genre configurations, and presents, through the close reading of form, an alternative way to consider *Parable of the Sower* as Afrofuturist writing allied to science fiction and engaging with climate change.

Chapter 2: *Parable of the Sower* and the Request for Knowledge

The struggle along genre lines manifests in this chapter in the multiple concurrent framings of Octavia E. Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* in the literary field. In an attempt to further deepen the discussion on what boils down to this text's sustained imaginative and political significance, these competing framings of *Sower* are examined in tandem with close readings of the novel itself. This twofold analysis is guided by the questions on estrangement and form that were crystalized in the preceding chapter, and takes as its main premise the specific valency of *Parable of the Sower,* as a narrative form, a patterning of knowledge and meaning, to help set the terms on which the Anthropocene genre flailing occurs. The chapter begins by interrogating how and on what grounds *Sower* has simultaneously been embraced as a key referent in the Afrofuturist canon and the emerging genre of climate fiction. It reads these framings against each other to distil a tentative outline of what the scholars, critics and reviewers believe *Parable of the Sower* does for the respective genres, and what aspects of the novel are made to be representative to the end of their framing.

From there, the focus shifts to the novel in service of three key points, before bringing it back to the dancefloor refreshed, to partake in the flailing. First, the close reading examines how *Parable of the Sower* already signals an engagement with certain science fiction tropes, such as empathy and the company city. This is done to further contextualize the novel in a long and extensive history of literary criticism which as characterized the novel alternatively as sci-fi or naturalistic writing. Furthermore, this contextualizing reading seeks to re-animate the novel as a rightful agent in the conversation, as a driver of theory as well as a receptacle. The second section takes a new formalist approach to the novel on a surface level, demonstrating how it can be read as a sequential interplay of bounded communities, or wholes in Levine's terminology. The purpose if this section concerns the mobilization of the method

and its key concepts: the form, the whole, the disruption, and the request for knowledge, and lays the groundwork for the new formalist reading that follows in the third chapter. In the final section, the novel is close read for moments of estrangement effected through form. It begins by demonstrating that, despite the enduring canonical status of the *Parable* series and the exhaustive academic examinations of its subversion of genre conventions, the formal characteristics of the novel continue to be overlooked when arguments of this kind are made. A close reading of the novel's form, especially represented in the fruitful combination of the chapter headings and the journal-like structure of the narrative, works towards remedying this and shows how *Sower* elevates and reframes estrangement as a means of affective representation. The textual and formal analysis concludes that, in *Parable of the Sower*, formal estrangement functions primarily in reference to disruption, which brings the narrative eye closer to the experience of the narrator by inviting speculation on the part of the reader. Brought back to the question of genre, then, this chapter concludes that the specific claims of speculative climate fiction to estranged approximation actually have a history in Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, two seminal works of Afrofuturist science fiction written in the 1990s.

Parable of the Sower is a novel set in a speculative 2020s in which climate change, present in the novel only implicitly, as risen temperatures and sea levels, has exacerbated social and economic inequalities, concentrated resources in the remaining upper class enclaves, and tumbled the rest of society into an anarchic world governed by scarcity and unchecked violence. It follows Lauren Oya Olamina, a Black teenage girl and the novel's autodiegetic narrator, as she grows into a young adult over the course of four years in this uncompromising environment. To add to the adversity, Lauren suffers from hyperempathy, a condition caused by her mother's drug addiction which leads her to physically emulate any suffering she observes in others. The first year of the story takes place in Robledo, a city made

up mostly of Black and Hispanic Americans. While they are relatively safe compared to the world outside of the city, Lauren suspects their sanctuary will be short-lived and the people of Robledo are ill-prepared for its collapse. When Robledo is eventually pillaged and destroyed, and most of the inhabitants are murdered, Lauren and two other survivors escape, prepare, and head north.

The novel mirrors a Bildungsroman, defined in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as novels that "relate the experiences of a youthful protagonist in meeting the challenges of adolescence and early adulthood" and which centre the themes of (loss of) innocence and the achievement of self-knowledge (Birch). *Sower* charts exactly this, Lauren's moral and emotional journey into adulthood, away from the established opinions of her elders in Robledo and towards her calling to be a community and religious leader. This coming-of-age is intimately approximated in the narrative made up of Lauren's date-marked diary entries. In them, Lauren paints a picture of the world as precarious and rife with suffering, but refuses to give in to the nostalgic regression into twentieth century social modes that surround her, which are explicitly racist, heteropatriarchal, and destructive to the environment. Rather, she advocates and practices survival by learning to live with the land, growing and scavenging edible plants, and building durable, diverse communities, while also learning to use weapons to defend herself against hungry, desperate, or simply malevolent external forces.

Lauren founds and preaches a religion called Earthseed in which god is change, and starts a community of followers by the name of Acorn. In her Earthseed texts, Lauren reimagines survival as a process of acknowledging and adapting to change, and of working towards building something that lasts, which, in her view, is a space programme that can go in search of other hospitable planets. Earthseed, therefore, rethinks survival as something constructive rather than as the mere continuation of biological life and its defence against hostile elements. Importantly, the story ends in *Parable of the Talents* with Lauren's ashes

being taken on the first Earthseed spaceflight. This ending signals the completion of Earthseed's aims to reach beyond the terrestrial bounds, but simultaneously complicates this dream-vision, which drove Earthseed along since the beginning of *Sower,* in its naming of the spaceship after Christopher Columbus.

Ambivalence is a key idea to help understand the critical project undertaken by Butler in her *Parable* series, in the sense that the novels complicate reductive yet canonical images of apocalyptic end-times, but also the contrasting utopian rhetoric of harmonious community. For this reason, the *Parable* novels are often characterized as critical dystopias; texts written in a dystopian mode but subverting its tropes of powerlessness and suffering and leaving space for hope (Miller 336, Chang). The novels insistently critique the lasting effects of racist, sexist discourses, and envisions evocatively how they might become more pervasive in a context of environmental turmoil. Simultaneously, Butler takes aim at the pervasive utopian image of uncomplicated peace, community, and solidarity, problematizing them at every turn, but, crucially, never discarding them entirely. With the novels, then, Butler presents a world in which survival is laborious yet essential.

While *Sower* predates the emergence of the cli-fi category, the work is retrospectively being taken up as an inspiration to or template of the genre in both academic and popular criticism contexts. Stephanie Lemenager, for one, evocatively states that "cli-fi begins […] in the *Parable* novels of Octavia Butler" (270). It is no surprise that Lemenager, who delineates a set of literary works that reinscribe survival as an everyday practice into cli-fi, looks to Octavia Butler. She argues that "the cultural work of the Parable novels involves reconciling the crises of dystopian story structures with the habits of living on" (Lemenager 271). Casper Bruun Jenssen similarly characterizes the *Parable* texts as a precedent to the cli-fi genre, specifically as "an imaginative template" (Jenssen 151). He alludes to the novels, alongside N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, as works that "offer powerful testimony to the political,

social, economic, racial, and gendered consequences of living in highly unstable environments" (150-151). Like Lemenager, Jenssen ascribes to Butler's novels the ability to represent the reality of living in the Anthropocene, which is what qualifies the novel as cli-fi. Lastly, the Anglophone literature scholar Daniel D. Clausen categorizes the *Parable* novels as "cli-fi georgic" (271), in that it "presents a vision of Anthropocene survival and perhaps flourishing" by centring human embeddedness in ecology and teaches scavenging and crop cultivation (282). Clausen's argument is aligned with Lemenager, in the sense that he constructs a critical layer in *Sower*'s engagement with cli-fi, not just as a work that meets the genre's conditions, but also helps to restate what these conditions are. Nonetheless, the designation of the novels as representing analogously life in the Anthropocene saturates the georgic characterization too.

Other literary scholars are less inclined to take up the *Parable* diptych as climate fiction, with many analyses of the genre leaving the two novels out of consideration. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra's 2019 handbook *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, for example, contains no mention of Butler, and instead gestures towards J.G. Ballard's 1962 *The Drowned World* as the seminal "proto-climate change novel" (2). In popular criticism, on the other hand, the work is taken up as essential cli-fi more easily, although in these texts there is also a less stringent concern of how cli-fi should be defined exactly, leading to the use of alternative and equally nonconcrete terms like "eco-fiction" and "climate writing." Nonetheless, there are a number of articles that connect *Parable of the Sower* to cli-fi specifically. The novel spearheads the list of "essential works of climate fiction" on *Outside magazine* (Dries), and is mentioned as a "seminal cli-fi novel" by *Grist* in a listicle where, interestingly, the writers note how the book has "moved from fiction to reality" in recent times since its original publication ("Definitive"). In these articles, cli-fi is defined as an activist instrument, seeking

to raise awareness and "spark change with [its] vision of what the future could be" ("Definitive").

These characterizations of *Parable of the Sower* as climate fiction, while of course not entirely determining of the novel's placement on the wider constellation of genres, are nonetheless illustrative of the way the emerging genre looks to earlier texts which have been characterized along different lines and retrospectively declares them part of the climate fiction repertoire. This signals, in true new formalist fashion, how literary texts, categories and interpretive strategies perpetually co-constitute each other to create a literary field that is continuously in flux. However, the seemingly symbiotic multiplicity contained in this view of co-existing literary genres does not mean that generic framing is not in some way competitive, which is to say that characterizations of a novel also hold a negative charge, taking attention away from the ways in which a literary work can be put to work in another context and for different aims.

To this point, literary criticism which takes the *Parable* novels to be climate fiction must also acknowledge their continued valency as a compelling referential index for Afrofuturist literary thinking and criticism. Moreover, the advocates of aligning *Sower* with cli-fi must reckon with the crucial importance of Butler's entire oeuvre to Afrofuturism since its inception and throughout its many academic reiterations. Butler is one of the four Black authors, and the only female one, whose work provided the inspiration for the coining of the term Afrofuturism in 1994, and her literary production has lost none of its relevance to the genre and the abundant criticism produced around it. The connection between contemporary Afrofuturist scholarship and Butler is far from limited to the *Parable* novels only, and includes both her other canonical works, such as *Kindred* and "Bloodchild" and lesser known ones. Butler's contemporary, the science fiction writer and critic Samuel Delany, for example, hinges his proposed redefinition of Afrofuturism contained in the 2020 article "The Mirror of

Afrofuturism," as a critical mode of writing rather than science fiction produced by Black authors, in large part on Butler's short story "Amnesty" (183-184). Relatedly, Susana M. Morris, reads Butler's entire oeuvre as a blueprint for Afrofuturist feminism (154), in the sense that, in its creation of various ambivalent futures, Butler's fiction "consistently advocates transgressing repressive social norms and rejecting heteropatriarchy, while centring [sic] (or creating) a variety of experiences from across the Afrodiaspora" (155).

Caitlin O'Neill looks to Butler to make a similar connection between literary Afrofuturism and anti-racist feminist practice in the 2019 "Towards an Afrofuturist Feminist Manifesto," presenting an interpretation of Butler's much-lauded time travel slavery memoir *Kindred* to inform

> an Afrofuturist feminist *manifestary* sensibility that adequately addresses the uniquely combined needs that black feminists and black women writers have for future images that do not distract from the pressing demands of the present, but are instead weaponized to galvanize movements for material change across the globe. (66, emphasis added)

Manifesto, in the above quote, is made analogous to manifestary, which is what places the science fiction output of Butler resolutely at the intersection of Black feminist action and Black creative visioning, or rather, at the point where one folds into the other as imagination comes to be understood as prefigurative practice. The connective tissue provided by Butler concerns, in the above examples, the toolkit of imaginative instruments that are not only empowered to envision change and a just world for Black women, but also to actively pursue it. Aside from being a resounding call to action, the citation from O'Neill already signals productively the point where the mutual embrace of Butler and Afrofuturism diverges from the retrospective cli-fi discourse on *Sower* mentioned earlier, in the sense that Afrofuturist readings of the author are more directly engaged in the process of uncoiling decades of

gendered and racialized oppression, and are more hesitant to raise the image of a future characterized by a universal human precarity, of which, in cli-fi, the heating planet is the agent.

Butler also signals an Afrofuturist sentiment in "Positive Obsession," an autobiographical text from 1989, in her rhetorical reflection on the valency of the overwhelmingly white genre of science fiction for Black communities. She argues:

> What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking — whoever "everyone" happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people? (731)

In the quote, Butler echoes the Afrofuturist critical project of simultaneously adopting and critiquing normative SF conventions. She asks, rhetorically, "what good" the genre is for the Afrodiasporic readers and writers nudged outside of its established scope of concern, and answers that it is a valuable genre only when, "at its best," it presents itself as a driver of imagination on how things can be otherwise.

All of this is not to say that recent Afrofuturist criticism does not also engage individually with *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. In the introduction to the 2019 anthology *We Travel the Space-Ways: Black Imaginations, Fragments, and Diffractions*, for example, editors Kara Lynch and Henriette Gunkel assert being "inspired specifically by the tools and maps that a visionary author like Octavia Butler provides in books like *Parable of the Sower*" (30), casting the novel in a didactic and realist light as "a checklist of our

survival kit for the 21st century" (30). The connection between the *Parable* novels and Afrofuturism does not require a climate axis, and generally the environmental collapse element of the novel is made to be of secondary importance, which again demonstrates the connection, drawn by Butler, between climate change, racist and heteropatriarchal discourses, and social, political, and financial crises. Chris Sneed's contribution to the 2020 *Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia Butler*, for example, reads *Sower* as a critical Afrofuturist intervention into human rights discourse and racist ontologies that ushered the situation of looming environmental collapse into being (182-183).

In the context of Afrofuturism, then, the continued analyses of the *Parable* novels do not subscribe strongly to an idea of the presumed political relevance or mobilizing power of representing climate change futures in the abstract tense, but rather hone in on *Sower* for how it imagines the ways in which destabilizing climates can work to bolster the exploitative forces of racist and neocolonial global petrocapitalism, and for how it envisions an emergent political and philosophical practice towards a more just future. Critics doing this work, some of whom are mentioned above, read Butler for her critical and layered vision of a climate change future that keeps an eye to how any vision of a climate future is also always a vision of a racialized future and a vision of a gendered future. Afrofuturist engagements with the *Parable* series in particular thus concretize even further the different approaches taken by cli-fi and Afrofuturism towards Butler's climate collapse narrative.

Parable of the Sower's Reflexive Engagement with Science Fiction

This section demonstrates the ways in which Butler, in *Parable of the Sower,* signals a reflexive engagement with established science fiction tropes, illustrating how she both embeds the book in an established SF register and simultaneously sets her fiction off against it. It engages primarily with the tropes of the company city and empathy, and ends on a

proposition of how to read for estrangement outside of the SF scope, which the final section then fulfils.

The dual engagement with SF tropes by Butler is a point already made by literary scholar Hee-Jung Serenity Joo in "Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler's Parables Series," which outlines Butler's strategic employment of science fiction conventions and demonstrates, through a deconstructive reading of multiple passages, how it uncovers the racial politics that have always quietly underpinned them (281, 286). For example, Joo interprets the hyperempathy suffered by Lauren and several other characters as the science fictional "novum" of the story (288), but one steeped in awareness of the tradition it is writing in reference to. Empathy generally functions in SF to distinguish a novel's human characters from its non-organic or mechanical ones, Joo argues, but for Butler it provides the locus for a politics of mutual aid (280-290). Nonetheless, hyperempathy is characterized by an inconclusive multiplicity that sees Butler's treatment of the trope fall in line with the wider ambivalence that characterizes her writing. Rather than reinforce a narrative in which empathy inevitably effects social change, hyperempathy actively "pathologizes" this conclusion, and insists that solidarity is difficult, political and processual, and that structural change may require (violent) struggle (Joo 290, see also Stark 153-154).

Joo also notes how Butler extends and nuances the archetypical SF walled societies in her treatment of Robledo, the middle class cul-de-sac in which the narrative starts. The city, according to Joo, critiques the more traditional encased cities found in works like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* by having Robledo denote both safety and precarity (283), troubling the binary distinction of either having everything and being in danger or having nothing and being *a* danger, which governed the earlier walled cities. Butler nuances the trope by figuring precarity along multiple lines. Robledo is mostly made up of Black and Hispanic communities, who are, in *Sower*'s dystopian world, at even more of a

disproportionate disadvantage, with environmental instability legitimizing further oppression instead of urging solidarity. The city suffers violence, theft, and hunger aggravated by the further concentration of resources in the remaining upper class communities. Yet, at the same time, Robledo's inhabitants are privileged because they have houses, some access to food and money, and are able to maintain a relatively safe and stable environment.

There is one moment in the novel in which Butler signals the critical engagement with this walled city trope explicitly. It concerns Lauren's description of Olivar, another walled city, but a company-owned one, to which a Robledo family eventually moves to work for room and board. The company behind Olivar offers clean water and guaranteed employment, which, to many, make for an attractive offer, but, as Lauren notes, it will distribute salaries in such a way that citizen-employees inevitably accumulate a debt and lose their freedom attempting to pay it off. In the following passage, Lauren compares Olivar to the company-cities found in the SF books on her grandmother's bookshelf, and identifies a ringing discrepancy:

> Maybe Olivar is the future – one face of it. Cities controlled by big companies are old hat in science fiction. My grandmother left a whole bookcase of science fiction novels. The company-city subgenre always seemed to star a hero who outsmarted, overthrew, or escaped 'the company.' I've never seen one where the hero fought like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company. In real life, that's the way it will be. That's the way it is. (116)

The passage above disconnects Olivar from the company-city trope on the basis of how they interpellate the hero character. Whereas in both instances, the company-city is a force of control and oppression, it is only in Lauren's grandmother's books that the hero can attempt defiance. In "real life," a characterization which inevitably designates the SF company city as unreal, all power rests in the hands of the company, with the hero fighting other people for a

chance to be subjected by it. Joo notes how Olivar is not only a rich and privately protected but also, crucially, a white city, highlighting the racist underpinning in the science fictional company-city trope (Joo 286).

The above passage on Olivar as "old hat in science fiction" also contains an intricate play on temporalities which further complicates the position of Olivar in reference to an SF canon, outlined here to extend Joo's interpretation. Many words in the passage contain temporal designations: "future," "old," and the final juxtaposition of "will be" and "is." The opening sentence of the passage, which wonders: "Maybe Olivar is the future – one face of it'," denotes the removal of the city from the temporal scope of the narrative present. It connotes innovation and progress, in the sense that "this is the future (of)" is usually said in praise, but this characterization is immediately and ironically inverted with the further characterization "one face of it" which connotes a moral judgement in much the same way, gesturing towards a future which is Janus-faced or two-faced. It thus suggests that the relative safety offered by the company must necessarily have a price.

Olivar is then compared to science fiction company-cities, which, through the analogy with Lauren's grandmother's bookcase, are relegated to the past. Lauren's description satirizes the genre's visions of successful revolt in a hypothetical future by connecting them resolutely to the past, as a failed prediction that, once its foreseen future time is reached, can only seem silly and uninformed. The final sentence, "that's the way it will be. That's the way it is" moves Olivar back in time from the future to the present, and constitutes an interlacing of the two temporalities that disconnects it from the "old hat" company-city resoundingly. Olivar thus presents an image of the future and the present which acknowledges the existence of a white SF tradition of speculation on future oppressions but refuses to ascribe to its terms, and rather turns the trope on its axis to show the profound misunderstanding that lies at its core. Interestingly, then, Olivar occupies the intersection of science fiction and not science fiction.

According to Joo, Butler's treatment of walls and company-cities in *Sower* also symbolizes Butler's structuralist understanding of race as an imposed, artificial "category of division and exclusion within late capitalism" (286), and a means for dispersing and controlling bodies and their movements, which Joo then approaches deconstructively to a generative end, teasing out the hidden mechanisms that enforce the whiteness of Olivar and sustain a racial hierarchy in Butler's dystopian world. This interpretation, while significant and informative, frames the novel as a distorted reflection of socio-political forms like racist hierarchies, and not as a form in itself, relating, reflecting, and responding to them in its own right. This is ameliorated in the next section, through a short supplemental new formalist interpretation of the company city Olivar.

On Olivar as a Social Form

The thinking on Olivar and Butler's (re)inscription of race and history into a sanitized, raceless SF canon can be deepened by employing a new formalist lens, as it allows one to stage a conversation between the forceful orderings found in aesthetic, social, and political forms. It opens the floor for questions of how the rules and conventions of SF have historically disallowed questions of racial justice or speculations on Black feminist futures, and enables the rightful, generative intrusion of these questions into the canon. As material and highly present ordering principles, the cities, communities and neighbourhoods present in *Sower* provide a fruitful starting point to consider the interplay of different forms in the novel, and to familiarize the methodology. In the terminology offered by Levine, these cities and communities must be understood as wholes, which carry a twofold set of affordances.

First, the affordances of social forms like these materialize in a poststructuralist or deconstructive vocabulary, as instruments of containment, normativity, and forced unity. Such approaches underscore the normative violence authorized by the hierarchical separation of the

community and its outside. Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida concretize this approach in different yet equally important ways. Nonetheless, they both premise that a social whole, such as a national or political community, is only empowered to claim unity by the forced removal of the non-aligned. Butler, in *Bodies that Matter,* raises the figure of the abject to concretize this non-alignment within gender and queer studies. The abject denotes those bodies rendered culturally unintelligible by the norms of gender self-fashioning (xii), which imperils transgression and sustains a community's inner limits of bodily and experiential legibility. Related is Derrida's concept of the *plus un*, the supplemental or no longer one (Derrida, Fathaigh). This figure, exemplified in his text "The Other of Democracy" as the enemy state, is neither entirely connected nor rendered fully outside, and illustrates the contradictory nature of any rhetoric of political community. Derrida argues that any social whole requires the outside, which is never truly outside but rather actively necessary for the experience of unity at the centre (34-35).

For Butler and Derrida, community limits are kept in place and in power from both the in- and outside. Communities are governed by a norm which violently enforces an artificial unity, making it up to the critically minded reader to look for the decomposing edges where the outside is shown to be a necessary counterweight driving the continuation of the bounded whole, and the hierarchy is suspended (xiii). In such deconstructive analytical strategies, there is a legitimate focus on problematizing the unquestioned status of norms and binaries, but, as Levine argues, they tend to shelve analysis of these forms' productive power to instead centre the moment when "form [turns] into something more ambiguous and ill-defined—*formless*"(Levine 21, emphasis added). In response, then, the interpretive approach offered by Levine advocates spending more time to consider the affordances of a whole at its centre (38). While she also recognizes the risk inherent to overemphasizing the unity and centrality offered by social and aesthetic wholes (42), Levine asserts that a reading practice only

focused on subversion is equally reductive in its framing of an aesthetic whole as a symptom of powers existing outside the text. In an attempt to revitalize form then, Levine poses reading for affordances of wholes in both the unifying and constraining vein, in order to get a more complete view of the way aesthetic forms "encounter or reflect or enact political ones" (43). Moreover, it can provide the better tool to represent the resonant ambivalence on power with which Butler has infused *Parable of the Sower*.

The company-city Olivar, examined in the previous section, presents an informative reflection of this tension between containment as safety and containment as oppression. Olivar is an obvious means of exploitation and containment, and a remnant of a society organized by racial and class hierarchies, as Lauren explains: "It's an upper middle class, white, literate community of people who once had a lot of weight to throw around" (Butler 111), yet at the same time, it is these same walls and paramilitary protection agencies that seemingly assert themselves to the Garfields, as well as to Lauren's stepmother Cory, as safety. Olivar affords both, as illustrated by the following conversation between Cory and Lauren's dad, when Cory makes the following argument: "We could be safe in Olivar. The kids could go to a real school and later get jobs with the company. After all, where can they go from here except outside?" to which the response is: "There is nothing safe about slavery" (113). Related is Lauren's comparison of Olivar with "old hat" science fiction company-cities. She compares the science fictional cities as affording disruption, in the sense that the hero always "outsmarted, overthrew, or escaped" the city's control (116), overturning, in deconstructive fashion, their totalitarian claims and exposing their vulnerabilities. Olivar, on the other hand, affords a sense of security which is so strong it leads to a competition between the city's prospective inhabitants.

Seemingly, it is a fear of the outside which overrules the fear of containment in Olivar for Cory and the Garfields, the latter of whom end up being accepted into Olivar. This outside,

interestingly, is steeped in an anarchic formlessness, signalled by Cory in the lack of "a *real* school" with which she means to say an institutionalized one, and not the one offered in Robledo by the remaining educated adults. The use of the adjective "real" is incredibly important here, and leads to the identification of an additional critical layer in the description of Olivar, which concerns a tension on realism and speculation present in both Lauren's comparison and the discussion between Lauren's dad and Cory. The social whole offered by Olivar not only permits bodily legibility – that is, if you are white, cisgendered, and heterosexual – as one would argue in a Butlerian vein, but also access to reality. Lauren signals something similar in her ending of the comparison with: "That's the way it will be. That's the way it *is*" (116, emphasis added), suggesting a move from a speculative futuristic outlook to a mimetic, present-oriented one. Both passages from *Parable of the Sower* also simultaneously problematize this access to reality, however, as they question the terms on which the access to realism is seen to be granted. This troubling of the supposed restorative capability of the social whole of Olivar is most strongly asserted by Lauren's dad, and his questioning of the connection between safety and indentured labour.

Both passages contain an explicit designation of "real" which can only fulfil an ironic function in the narrative, as it, crucially, is a speculative one. *Sower* is not concerned with asserting objective factuality in its gesturing towards something real, or to pointing towards something in empirical reality. Instead, it exposes a self-referentiality in the narrative, in the sense that it implies the existence of different layers of speculation, as well as the perspectivism inherent to the different understandings of Olivar by the characters, and, by extension, their specific conflations of reality with different understandings of form, as either a well-guarded city or a dressed up labour camp. In this intricate employment of references to realism, then, Butler shows reality to be a forceful political category necessitating scrutiny in its own right.

At first, this argument might appear to be a return to a new historicist outlook that foregrounds positionality and context at the expense of aesthetic or narrative form. But, as the next section demonstrates, *Sower* also centres critical questions of estrangement and realism as political forms in the structure of the narrative, through its continuous interplay of wholeness and disruption as affording realism. It arrives to the overarching question on genre, and finds, thinking with Isobel Armstrong's new formalist affect, that *Sower* already inverts estrangement in the way that ecocritical scholars outline weird fiction and uncanny climate writing do.

Narrative Form, Disruption, and Intimacy

As evocative as the suggestions in *Forms* are for literary criticism inhabiting a new historicist paradigm, Levine refrains from outlining how the concepts can be mobilized as tangible reading strategies. It follows, from this open-endedness, that the notions of forms, wholes, and affordances can be animated in a host of different ways, To the end of analysing estrangement in *Sower*, as well as in *M Archive* later, Levine's concepts are transmogrified into reading protocols here in association with Isobel Armstrong's new formalist affect outlined in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000). This conglomeration of new formalist theories aligns estrangement fully with disruption and provides a comprehensive toolkit to interpret estrangement as an affordance of Afrofuturist science fiction on environmental collapse.

Armstrong starts off from a point very similar to Levine, wondering how we can move past a paradigm in which text are little more than "objects of our knowledge" (91). To achieve this, as well as subvert the Cartesian split between mind and body – cognition and emotion – that safeguards the flattening of texts into objects, Armstrong proposes to read for affect, which she understands as structures of attachment between text and reader. She proposes to read with an eye to the moments when this attachment is severed, as a moment of high

affective charge, utilizing concepts such as erasure, shock and projection, and indebting herself to a psychoanalytic tradition. Approaching a work in search of rupture not only does more justice to the agency of the text, Armstrong finds, but also aligns the study of affect away from the body exclusively and towards the "the prosody of the gap, the blank space, articulation through the pause, the moment of void" (124).

Armstrong takes the Kleinian concept of epistemophilia as a guiding principle, arguing that texts of any kind, including literature and poetry, fulfil a reader's "request for knowledge" (126). It presumes that reading continues because readers want to know what happens next. A disruption of this steady flow of information that constitutes the narrative, then, causes anxiety and shock (126), and invites projection on the part of the reader in order to revive their attachment with the text. In literature and poetry, then, critics should be aware of the resonant power of emptiness and erasure, not as a lack of signification but rather as a void pervaded with meaning, a sonic discontinuum rendered audible, to echo Eshun. In a sentence quoted in the chapter before, but worth repeating nonetheless, Armstrong emphasizes reading emptiness "not [as] the absence of representation, but the *representation of the absence of representation"* (123, emphasis in original). In the context of Afrofuturism then, a disruption in the fulfilment of the reader's request for knowledge provides a compelling means to symbolize the historical archive emptied of Black voices and the western future imaginary emptied of Black bodies. Nonetheless, as the following reading of *Sower*'s narrative forms demonstrates, disruption does something beyond exemplify a ringing absence: it enacts a radical reversal of estrangement as a move towards the storyworld, rather than away from it (and towards the empirical world of the reader).

The first part of the above argument, that estrangement as disruption is symbolically representative of white-centric discourses on the past and future, is strangely aligned to a number of academic texts which interrogate the ironic or strategic employment of a claim to

realism in the *Parable* novels. Jeff Menne's "'Octavia Butler and the State of Realism," for one, argues that *Sower* "execute[s] the realist function in better faith" than genres in a more obvious alignment with objective reality. Through a comparative close reading of Robledo and the journalistic and documentary coverage of the LA riots that it was inspired by, Menne finds that, in *Sower*'s capacity to speculate, it actually approximates reality more closely than the other genres, which are prevented from admitting any stylistic or fabulist properties but still rely on spectacle (728). Mary E. Papke makes a similar point but substitutes the term realism for naturalism. Her text "Octavia Butler's Naturalist Science Fiction" (2013) poses that Butler has fruitfully connected "naturalism as the ground for critical examination and extrapolation" (83), the latter of which is a key term in science fiction criticism. Papke argues that the *Sower* novels trouble what she sees to be the deterministic fixation on the flesh in naturalism, while refusing to regress into magical or overly idealistic thinking (88). Joo's point on Butler's strategic employment of SF tropes, which was explored in the previous section of Olivar, should also be read in line with Papke and Menne's analyses. Joo sees Butler inscribe SF modes "onto the realist landscape of California" (295), rather than impress a realist layer onto a science fictional text, as Papke and Menne argue. The effect is much the same, however, signalling a co-constitution of traditionally science fictional and realist registers to the end of constructing a critical perspective onto the empirical world and the hierarchical discourses that structure it.

Nonetheless, these interpretations should not necessitate a return to thinking SF in Suvin's way, as diametrically opposed to and hierarchically centred above realism, the latter of which continues to be an undefined category in the above analyses. Rather, a closer consideration of the specific strategies used in *Sower* pertaining to form illuminates how the novel actually enacts estrangement as a narrowing of the affective distance between text and reader. This connects Armstrong and Levine productively to Ghosh's point on the capacities

of the uncanny, agreeing with his premise on the illustrative capacity of speculation but nuancing his conclusion that this potential is exclusively contained in the uncanny. Evidencing this argument takes up the remainder of the chapter, and focuses mainly on the ways in which Lauren's journal entries and the Earthseed verses function, or refuse to function in presenting a coherent narrative whole. The concept of realism is thus consciously abandoned at this point of the argument, for the sake of a closer affinity with estrangement as dialectically related to approximation.

The rich constellation of narrative registers in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* provides a compelling starting point to the new formalist reading undertaken here. In *Sower*, the narrative is organized in the shape of diary entries that are always marked with the date and day of the week. It contains two primary narrative forms – scripture and diary – neither of which are traditional novelistic, linear narrative. The different formal elements of the novel work to constitute an essential intertextuality, not only in its use of different writing formats, but also along a temporal layer. The novel is divided into numbered chapters which always contain a section of Earthseed verse as an epigraph. The Earthseed texts exist in the novel in two different manifestations, as informal notes, or sudden thoughts scattered throughout Lauren's journal entries, and as deliberately formatted official chapter epigraphs. The Earthseed quotations accompanying the chapter headers are always credited to "Earthseed: The Book of the Living." The accreditation suggests that the quotations are lifted from Lauren's journal, and then compiled into an officialised text by an obscured editor or curator. The different narrative forms thus present separate temporalities and perspectives.

Earthseed verses presented as notes are more immediately connected to the narrative presence, and reflect on the chronological story presented in the journal entries. The entries provide the real-time context within which Lauren comes up with certain verses, such as the argument between her and her father that spurred the lines:

A tree Cannot grow

In its parents shadows. (78)

and which are followed by the question: “Is it necessary to write things like this?” (78). The intertextual charge is furthered by Lauren continuously referencing other texts which are neither present nor accessible to the reader. Yet, they are always taken up into the flow of the narrative and thus pose no disruption. This flow is further aided by the substantial length of most of the diary entries, inviting the reader to forget that they are not reading a novel, but rather a journal and a bible expertly braided together into one story.

Nonetheless, for all its continuance of linear novelistic narrative form, there are also moments where the story wears thin evocatively, when the referent of an intertextual allusion suddenly reveals itself to be a void rather than another text. The first of these concerns a moment at the latter stages of the novel. As Lauren leaves Robledo behind and the arduous, dangerous journey to Acorn begins, some days’ entries are introduced, not in the familiar way with date and day of the week, but followed by the evocative line:

Monday, August 2, 2027

(*from, notes expanded* SUNDAY, AUGUST *8)* (163, italics in original)

The continuous inclusion of dates in the narrative is significant in itself. It suggests, in line with the journal style of the novel more broadly, an intimate and immediate access to the experiential and psychological world of the narrator, as well as a stable rhythm. It affords a sense of safety understood as predictability regarding the tempo of the story, which further speaks to the crucial importance of interpreting those few sections in the novel where this safety is (implied to be) suspended. On the way to found Acorn, then, some entries are introduced like the quote above, suggesting that, for some reason, Lauren’s regular way of writing was impeded. This disruption is never acknowledged in the actual text of the journal entries, and invites readers into the speculative process to complete the story of why the linear

story was disrupted and what additive information is present in the expanded journal. Moreover, the suggestion of there being another text from which the journal is copied further urges projection on the part of the reader. Disruption, here, can be understood as an estrangement that manifests as approximation, a process by which the reader approaches the storyworld more closely.

It is in the next example that this estrangement achieved through disruption becomes more strongly affective, not just as anxious projection but as representation of the characters emotional state. It occurs in an earlier part of *Parable of the Sower*, still in Robledo, when Lauren's brother Keith is found dead after being missing for several days. The entry for this day contains only one line, which reads, along with the header:

> *Wednesday, August 26, 2026*
>
> Today, my parents had to go downtown to identify the body of my brother Keith. (106, italics in original)

Keith's death disrupts the narrative, leaving a literal empty space on the page. It is accompanied by longer journal entries preceding and following it. The one-sentence entry, however, not only presents as a ringing emptiness. It also concerns a moment with a high affective charge, which suggests that the formal disruption of the linear story stands analogously towards Lauren's emotional disruption, as in the section after she admits "I don't know what to write" (106). Interestingly, disruption here connotes, rather than estrangement from the narrative enacted by its suspension, a further intimacy with the narrator, an approximation to her mental state. The reader is left with only the one sentence, whereas in the preceding 100 pages the text had set a precedent of expanding on days over the course of multiple paragraphs if not whole pages, a discrepancy which implicitly urges the reader to do some of the speculative work themselves, to fill in the void left in the short entry.

The August 26, 2026 entry takes disruption beyond shock, by leading into approximation. The “represented absence” poses an infringement into the previously coherent narrative whole of the story, and, at first, this causes an estrangement from it in the sense that the reader is momentarily torn out of the linear story. Nonetheless, estrangement is quickly replaced with a deeper understanding of the narrator signified only through the form of the journal entry. The reader is thus brought closer to the narrative world and its inhabitants through the use of estrangement, rather than disconnected from it because it is not analogous to empirical reality or the self-enclosed reality of the journal entries. The relative emptiness of Lauren’s description of August 26 thus reframes estrangement to mean, not fabulism, but conglomerated disruption and approximation. Additionally, in Lauren’s journal, the moments of erasure get an even stronger affective dimension because the entries are the only sign of Lauren’s survival in a highly precarious environment, which means that suspension contains the threat of the character dying and disrupting the knowledge transfer indefinitely. The request for knowledge becomes a lifeline, and renders its threatened disruption existential.

The two passages present disruptions of the wholeness and rhythm of the narrative, showing the crucial part played by both narrative form and its disruption in *Parable of the Sower*. Also, to the larger question on the role of estrangement in speculative narratives, the close readings evidenced how *Sower* utilizes erasure to invite the reader into a closer relation to the characters and the storyworld. This speaks partially to the estrangements found in other Afrofuturist writing, a discontinuum rendered legible, but draws it further by asking a question on form simultaneously

Conclusion

Returning to the questions of genre and the specific and continued relevance of Afrofuturist literary imagining in an Anthropocene context, this chapter sought to crystalize

the particular way in which *Parable of the Sower* enacts the claim of representation through speculation that grounds the existential urgency of weird fiction and the uncanny. It also demonstrated that Butler's subversion of genre conventions has never been limited to the content of the novel only, but can also be seen signalled in its deliberate engagement with form. In the following chapter, the question of estrangement is furthered by transposing it to a recent Afrofuturist work in which formal experimentation is much more strongly foregrounded, and which adopts different writing styles other than scripture and diary. It asks if and how estrangement figures as a consequence of the artistic conflation of poetry, verse and archive, in Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *M Archive*.

Chapter 3: Form and Rupture in *M Archive*

> Imagine a team of African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking discs are identifiable as belonging to our present, the early twenty-first century
>
> Kodwo Eshun - "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (458)

In Alexis Pauline Gumbs' poetic work *M Archive*, which succeeds *Parable of the Sower* as the primary conversation partner in this chapter, Octavia Butler's thinking resonates on the foreground and behind the scenes. Gumbs acknowledges *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* in the closing list of works which had "an elemental impact on this archive" (227). Butler's oeuvre is also alluded to more directly in the story itself, when it speculates on the possibilities of universal human solidarity enacted by "what the Black speculative feminists called 'the *Butlerian moment.*' the more musical among them said '*Octavian Overture*.' that moment when it was time to leave. when the true others finally arrived" (171, emphasis added). Overture, here, suggests a radical opening up of possibilities brought into being by the suspension of those ontologies that convinced the human they were the sole author of the world around them. It is also the beginning of a musical composition, an invitation to keep listening, an ode to those things that are set to become otherwise.

This chapter continues the point on estrangement made in the chapter on *Parable of the Sower*. Informed by the previous identification of estrangement as something enacted by disruption of form, this chapter reads *M Archive*, an experimental poetic work on climate collapse and subsequent adaptation, for similar moments of fragmentation. Hoping to deepen the alignment of disruption with estrangement, the close reading of *M Archive* hones in on the ways in which the scattered narrative pieces not only urge an approximation to the storyworld, but also how they work together to reassemble a tentative, scattered wholeness. It then

speculates shortly on the political consequences of this reading, thinking along with Sylvia Wynter and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The reparative interpretation undertaken in this final analytic chapter speaks to the ways in which Alexis Pauline Gumbs redefines climate collapse as a catalyst for change and adaptation, in resounding allyship with Butler's Earthseed idiom: "The only lasting truth is change" (*Sower* 3).

First, this chapter briefly contextualizes *M Archive* with regard to Gumbs' practice as an independent scholar and critic and the text's position as the second piece in an experimental poetic triptych, as they are important for understanding the rich intertextual makeup of *M Archive*. An analysis of the formal structure of *M Archive*, a prose/poetry work cut through with citations, empty spaces and differently stylized images of the periodic table, follows. The examination, in turn, sets the poetic strategies in *M Archive* off against the formal register in *Sower*, and allows for a generative comparison that seeks to further the question on estrangement in an Anthropocene literary studies context and from a Black feminist perspective.

Altogether, this chapter finds that *M Archive* centres formal disruption, not at moments of high intensity allowing the reader closer to the experiential world of the story, but foregrounded as the catalytic/cataclysmic moment that suddenly allows for the sheen of supposed realism to fall away. The rupture then reveals the survival strategies of Black women in the face of present and historical apocalypses to have been crucially informative from the start, and continually determines the rest of the narrative. It reminds one, in acknowledgement of Caitlin O'Neill's "Notes Toward a Feminist Afrofuturist Manifesto" that Black women's speculative writing is particularly educative for its ability to underscore that "we will never be free until the most embattled of us are free" (78), and thus articulate a call to entangled mutual aid. The speculative vision of *M Archive*, in O'Neill's frame, is an

example on how we can use a speculative mode to think on "coping with injustice by directly addressing disparity rather than creating escape hatches around systemic oppression" (78).

Building on a close reading of the rich, multi-layered formal construction of *M Archive*, this chapter outlines how Gumbs uncoils the reductive connection of Blackness to (climate) suffering, and, in doing so, expands the Afrofuturist capacity beyond analogous or metaphorical representation of the structural alienations experienced by Black communities. The analysis decentres this framing of Afrofuturism, which arguably helps foreclose any consideration of the genre as persuasive Anthropocene writing, by highlighting how *M Archive* constructs a ringing template of ethical conduct in relation to structurally underserved human communities as well as Earth others. It demonstrates how *M Archive* thinks along with late capitalist subjects of all material compositions and constructs out of them a tentative political collective, thus re-emphasizing the enduring political valency of works like *M Archive* and *Parable of the Sower* within and beyond an Afrofuturist science fiction context.

M Archive: After the End of the World is a prose/poetry story narrated from the perspective of a Black female anthropologist examining the artifacts of a twenty first century society brought to ruin by an amalgamation of environmental, financial and social crises provoked by a late-capitalist ideology of growth and accumulation run to a fully unsustainable extreme: the point where the earth surface splits open. Aside from building an archive to reconstruct a view of the pre-rupture society, the archivist-narrator documents the ways in which humans adapted to the radical suspension of their modi operandi. *M Archive* is the second in Pauline Gumbs' triptych in which she pays homage to several Black feminist critics and scholars; it is preceded by *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (2016), in conversation with Black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers, and followed by *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020), Gumbs' poetic response to the work of critic and novelist Sylvia

Wynter. *M Archive* stages a conversation "after and with" M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, as stated on the work's title page. Gumbs explains being inspired by *Pedagogies of Crossing* as an "ancestrally cowritten text and an ancestor" to *M Archive* (xi). She sees her contribution to Alexander's thinking being the inclusion of "the far into the future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse" (xi) as ancestral cowriters, which are human and more-than-human.

"Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings," reads the opening line of Gumbs "About" page ("Sista Docta"). It is a self-descriptive idiom which she also uses in interviews (Jafri 124, Rasheed). Gumbs writes in a resolute solidarity with Audre Lorde, as well as Black feminist authors and thinkers like June Jordan and Dionne Brand ("Sista Docta"). Having studied Lorde's poetry when completing her English Literature PhD, Gumbs' poetic work echoes biomythography, similarly emphasizing the role of poetry as an elemental building block, a force with an existentially political, life-constructing capacity. Additionally, working as an independent scholar not tied to any university institute allows Gumbs' practice to be that of a "community accountable scholar" (Jafri 124), whose work is funded by and returned to Black North-American and Caribbean feminist communities. Her work has inspired a host of artistic responses in many different forms, including operas, processionals, divination practices, and quilts, providing a suitable mirror of the experimental nature of Gumbs' poetic works.

M Archive builds on Gumbs' short story "Evidence" which was published in the Black feminist SF anthology *Octavia's Brood* in 2015. In the short story, which is made up partially of letters sent from the main character Alandrix to their aspirational ancestor from five generations before, the author Alexis Pauline Gumbs herself. Alandrix is interested in the moment of societal rupture the fictional Gumbs lived through, defined throughout the story as

"the moment the silence broke" (31). Alandrix researches this historical moment, and comes to understand it as a seminal paradigm shift in how humans treated each other and the non-human world around them. The times "BSB (Before Silence Broke)" (32) are silent in the sense that it was governed by a large-scale internalization of capitalist rhetoric to the cost of human and non-human lives: "We had been wrong all along" Alandrix quotes from a notebook found around the time when silence broke, "Blood is not money. Money is not food" (32). Additionally, the silence alludes to the ways gender and racial violence are structurally excused, overlooked, covered up, or stifled through shame.

Setting the stage for the moment of silence-breaking is what Alandrix terms the "long broke open" (33), the structural intrusions into the non-human environment that "have a causal relationship to the silence breaking" and which include "the oceanlogging of the digital infrastructure, the shrinking of populatable land and many other factors" (33). These developments aided in showing the increasing untenability of the neoliberal ontology of human freedom and exceptionalism up until its breaking point, and should thus be considered part of the silence breaking in their own right, "Evidence" asserts. In this treatment of rupture as both momentary *and* processual, Gumbs echoes the Afrofuturist point that the notion of apocalypse, rather than a looming vision on the future, can be used to describe the circumstances of Black and Indigenous existence in the present and past, offsetting the overdetermination of apocalypse steeped in white, heteropatriarchal fears of the loss of power (Roanhoarse et al., Hurley & Jemisin 469).

Another point of connection between "Evidence" and *M Archive* concerns their layering of different formal registers. "Evidence" is made up of five sections titled "Exhibit A" through "E" and are a part of Alandrix's enacting of justice for the ancestors who were alive in the BSB Era through narrative, governed by the knowledge that "the story is the storehouse of justice" (30). Beneath this overarching structure are the several letters sent

backwards in time, from Alandrix to Alexis as well as from Alexis "after capitalism" to Alexis "during capitalism" (34). Alongside the letters are Alandrix's research notes composed of snippets of writing, testimony and poetry. The conglomeration of poetic or literary registers with more officialised ones, such as the judicial storytelling modes of evidence and testimony included in the short story, is one of Gumbs' key poetic strategies that she also mobilizes in *M Archive*. This observation is further elucidated in the close readings that follow, which set the stage for the articulation of an Anthropocene politics in reference to Gumbs: one that centres the survival strategies of Black feminist writers and thinkers and restates the notion of solidarity to denote shared, entangled ontology rather than ethical conduct towards those designated as other.

Gumbs' Poetics as Decolonial Anthropocene Theory

This section briefly contextualizes *M Archive* with regard to Afrofuturist theory, and outlines the critical readings already performed of Gumbs' triptych. It acknowledges that the reading undertaken in this chapter is anything but the first to interpret *M Archive* from the combined perspective of ecocritical and Black theory. It also identifies an absence of formalist analyses of Gumbs' texts to the end of constructing this combined anticolonial and ecocritical perspective. In the 2020 article "Blackness after the End of the World: Alexis Pauline Gumbs's Dub Ecologies" Henry Ivry and Max Karpinski approach Gumbs' poetic triptych as a generative restatement of universalist tendencies in what they call "Anthropocene criticism" (78). They are engaged in uncoiling the white-centredness of the arguments, also mentioned in the theoretical chapter, that climate change disrupts everyone's lives similarly, and that notions of universal and solidarity must be articulated on this basis. Ivry and Karpinski see in Gumbs' work an exemplary way to frame Black studies and ecocriticism as mutually constructive, rather than competitive. To this point, they argue that, throughout the texts, the

two "animate one another through co-constitutional inflection points, making it clear that to imagine blackness requires ecology and, more importantly, ecology requires an understanding of blackness" (78).

Related to this point is Kathryn Yusoff's 2018 book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Both argue evocatively that there can be no environmentalist critique of human exceptionalism that does not deal with the way humanness is employed as a sliding scale to excuse disproportionate environmental suffering and structural exploitation of communities in the Global South both in the past and the present. Yusoff's particular intervention concerns a critique of the generalizations of Anthropocene discourses in the humanities by focusing on how geology functions in it as an unsignified, seemingly objective category. Much like Ivry and Karpinski, Yusoff advocates reinscribing race into the universalizing narrative of a single humanity facing an existential climatic threat, arguing:

> As the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life—anthropos—through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations. The racial categorization of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus for colonialism in the first instance. (12)

The category of Blackness is intimately embroiled with notions of void and emptiness, to which a practice of bringing into the light was made necessary by self-congratulating colonists. This makes the conception of race a conception of human ontology, and inversely, poses a question of racialization in conceptualizations of human/non-human entanglement in ecocritical discourse.

This connection, between Black criticism and Anthropocene scholarship in the humanities, can also be drawn inversely and with a stronger eye to a literary studies interpretive toolbox. That is to say, the fact that environmentalism must necessarily be anti-

racism, and vice versa, would suggest that Afrofuturism holds a particularly significant capability to engage in questions of justice for the non-human and the environment. It suggests that Afrofuturist literary visioning might be the way to restate universalist yet exclusionary categories of the human, and "attempt to represent the fullness of Black ontologies" (Ivry and Karpinski 79) *as ecocritical practice*. Ivry and Karpinski reach a related conclusion, close reading the three texts as ringing examples of a Black dub ecology. In doing so, they pay specific attention to the rhythmic and dub elements of the poems. While they acknowledge the use of form in *Dub*, they leave a space to consider the axes of *M Archive* and formal, climatic rupture to the supplementation, or complication, of their conclusion.

To recapitulate, Afrofuturism is understood as a mode of cultural production that takes on a Black diasporic perspective and centres questions on the intersection of race and technology in past, present, and future speculative worlds. It moves science fictional registers away from a white rhetoric of settler colonialism in space and highlights the radical possibilities of speculation as prefigurative anti-racist practice. In the chapter before, *Parable of the Sower* was read as an illustrative work of Afrofuturism in its layered form, and treatment of estrangement as the designated critical tool for apprehending the possible continuation of racism in a climate collapse context. *M Archive* furthers the thinking on Afrofuturism in an Anthropocene context by figuring estrangement as a fundamental part of the vocabulary that constructs a resonant argument on the existential necessity of combined solidarity with Black and Indigenous, and non-human ancestors.

The above assumptions animate the close reading of *M Archive* contained here, seeking to uncover how the work estranges as Afrofuturist science fiction does, and what the additional layer of considering the work Afrofuturist means for its response to universalizing, white Anthropocene criticism. The concept of estrangement will, once again, be guiding, as it facilitates a foregrounding of rupture as a key turning point in the narrative, questioning the

universal wash of Anthropocene discourse and proposing a remedy. In short, it allows one to raise the question: Does the attempted articulation of an effective, collective Anthropocene politics always require us to strategically misconstrue one particular story as universal?

Form in *M Archive*

M Archive is not just a work of poetry, a work of science fiction, or a work of science fiction poetry. Rather, Gumbs proclaims the status of *M Archive* as a formal experiment operating at the intersection of multiple generic lines. The back cover contains the designation of the work as “poetry/black feminist theory/science fiction,” and in the introduction it is characterized as a “speculative documentary” (xi). On top of these categorizations is the invitation, which closes the introductory text “A Note,” to “consider this text an experiment, an index, an oracle, an archive” (xii). While different in their respective connotations, these characterizations share an ambition of interrelating knowledge – as something bound by cognition and objective observation – and speculative poetics. Gumbs claiming the text as an “oracle” signals this even more strongly, in that it opens the floor to reappreciate lost modes of knowledge accumulation alongside the established empirical methods of experiment, the index, and the archive. In the context of *M Archive*, oracle provides an especially generative concept, allied as it is, in its connotations, to speculative documentary. Oracle connotes both divination and magical thinking, and underscores that *M Archive*, as a story on the future, is neither merely a thought experiment nor an extrapolation of present socio-political and environmental circumstances. Rather, the characterization of the text as oracular enshrines *M Archive* a force of divination that actively helps set the terms for how the future will get to be experienced, and what the possible adaptations to this future are.

Alongside the formal designations made in the work’s paratext, there is also formal framing to be found in the first chapter, which speaks on the materiality of the work as an

archive. From beginning to end, *M Archive* is composed of single self-contained paragraphs, some longer and more coherent than others, that together function as an archive of the years preceding and following climate collapse. The fact that the objects of information are short paragraphs is explained in the story and made to be significant, as Gumbs writes in the first chapter, "From the Lab Notebooks of the Last Experiments."[7] It was spurred by a practical joke instigated Google, who announced that they would replace all digital communications facilitated by them with their new service, "paper." It refers to an April fools joke made by Google in 2007, in which they advertised a service that would print out and send people their requested e-mails via postal service (Limos). Although the joke was relished and then forgotten about by April 2nd, *M Archive* states, one woman felt "compelled to make the joke real" (29). She begins an archive seeking to reinscribe the material traces of digital transfer onto one of the most pervasive byproducts of the digital age:

> on pieces of used paper, discarded clothes, trash of all kinds, mary started making a tangible and dirty archive of the clean digital world. (29)

This practice of mobilizing trash as archive of the digital then-present was quickly taken up by mary's contemporaries, and the archive that emerged from this provides the foundation for the rest of *M Archive*. The narrator signals this explicitly, when she states, following the description of the trash archive: "this is how the story of the apocalypse ultimately got into our hands" (30). The trash archive wields a distinct narrative agency within the context of *M Archive*. It facilitates the story in a fundamental sense, and is contingent only on the curatorial decisions of the archivist. This foregrounds the archive as a material presence which enables the story being told. Furthermore, the archive's function as witness and evidence empowers it as the fundamental connective tissue between the pre-rupture society and the moment inhabited by the archivist.

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[7] In *M Archive*, this title contains an asterisk with underneath it "Last is a verb"

The archive-framing is drawn further in the titles of the four chapters that follow "From the Lab Notebooks of the Last Experiments." They are designated as archives, titled: "Archive of Dirt (What We Did)," "Archive of Sky (What We Became)," "Archive of Fire (Rate of Change)," and "Archive of Ocean (Origin)." This characterization suggests that *M Archive* is not only a speculative but a literal archive; a piece of speculative documentation claiming both the real and the divinatory.

Related to the composition of *M Archive* as a collection of material archive scraps are the images of the periodic table directly following the title page of each chapter. The image is stylized differently with each new iteration, showing sometimes only the even or odd elements, and at others only a select few. Due to constraints of time and space, the images of the periodic table in *M Archive* remain regretfully underinterpreted in their specific manifestations per chapter. Instead, they are contextualized here as a more general presence – a form – that pervades *M Archive*. The images of the periodic table provide context for each chapter, as Gumbs explains in the paratext: "periodically, then, in my text you will be confronted with the periodic table of elements, interacting with the organization of this text based on the impact, difference, and transformative potential of the material trace of this moment" (x). The elements provide a continuous reminder of the material reality *M Archive* speaks towards, and a further blending of differing claims to objective, empirical knowledge and a claim to reality, which connects *M Archive* again to its ancestral short story "Evidence," which integrates poetic and legal language to the end of finding justice by reanimating the stories of the silenced.

This blending of registers can also be concluded via a new formalist analysis, as the juxtaposition of the text with the periodic table image provide a literal collision of forms in the Levinean terminology. The collision is also one of affordances with an incredibly significant consequence. Poetic form, in the case of *M Archive*, allows for associatively

connected representation that steps away from linear narrative. It also allows for a foregrounding of figurative speech, repetition, and disruption. The affordances of the periodic table are, in terms of style, a radical counterpoint. The periodic table connotes empiricism and complete human comprehension of the natural world's structures and processes. But it contains something besides this flattening of the world and our ways of apprehending it: the understanding that what we inhabit is an assemblage of different parts working with and against one another to create the sense of a coherent experiential reality. Reality functions as a continuously shifting assemblage of forms. The periodic table also foregrounds the intervening force of material, presented as full-fledged part of the narrative amid pages of poetry.

The inclusion of the periodic table in *M Archive*, inversely, allows for the characterization of poetry's function as elemental, a building block of the worlds that are and those that are yet to be. This expansion of the stuff of being to include poetry already signals, along with Gumbs' designation of *M Archive* as a speculative documentary, a complete and ringing disregard for the limits on supposedly objective, realist, naturalistic epistemologies. Rather, it emphasizes how the exalted designation of the real has always been sustained on the structural disanimation of both colonial subjects and non-human beings. More importantly, it finds a more precise mode of approximation in the speculative poetic.

Rupture, Estrangement, Wholeness

Taking the formalist reading of *M Archive* contained above as a vantage point, the remainder of this text close reads two passages from the work in tandem to the end of articulating a closing point on estrangement, disruption, and wholeness. It finds that, in *M Archive,* estrangement-as-disruption not only manifests as an approximation to the speculative

story world, but also as an urgent restatement of the ontological category of the human towards something more entangled with ancestors of all kinds.

Building on the analysis in the preceding chapter, it serves to reiterate that literary and poetic texts are considered as a "request for knowledge" with the potential to adhere to or depart from reader expectations (Armstrong 126). It locates an affecting agency in the poetic work, and highlights the personal and cultural determinants of expectations. In the analysis before, *Parable of the Sower* was read as a journal-style novel in which disruption engendered an anxiety for the narrator's survival which brought the reader closer to the story rather than away, as estrangement had connoted before. In Butler's seminal work, the disruption of the textual information stream is affective in its invitation to project, urging the reader to keep the fractured story going or attempt to complete it.

M Archive functions as a "request for knowledge" in two ways (Armstrong 126). First, much like *Sower*, it concerns a request made by the reader of the text. However, in *Sower* disruptions were significant because they were sporadic interventions into an otherwise continuous linear story. *M Archive* differs from *Sower* significantly on this point, as its narrative form is scattered and diffuse. As already outlined, it is assembled out of single paragraphs that follow each other associatively rather than (chrono)logically. Sometimes, one paragraph of five lines claims an entire page (118), and sometimes the page is full of writing (129). This prevents an expectation of continuous narrative from ever concretizing, and seemingly troubles Armstrong's notion of disruption. Nonetheless, as already signalled in the introduction, disruption also plays a crucial role within the narrative of *M Archive*, as it is a literal request for knowledge by the narrator, made of her archive, which is made up of scraps of inscribed, discarded material. On the basis of this archive, the narrator attempts to recreate a narrative of the time of rupture and its aftermath, describing people adapting to the wholly unliveable surface by moving underground, to the ocean floor, or taking to the sky.

M Archive centres the request for knowledge similarly to *Parable of the Sower*, but inverts the idea that disruption is its suspension. It achieves this inversion by foregrounding disruption, figured as the earth surface ripping itself apart, as the fundamental condition on which the request of knowledge can be made. The moment of rupture figures early in the story, in a way that frames it as simultaneously estranging and revelatory. The section reads:

> they never proved it, but we know, some of the hand-waving women had
> always known. some of the metaphysicians had been trying to say. no one took
> them literally. until the earth broke apart.
> […]
> the cracks where the earthquakes expressed themselves were exactly the same
> contours of the fissures in our minds and the breaks. all the breaks. in our
> hearts. (9)

The splitting open of the earth is rendered even more significant in that it is made to mirror "the fissures in our minds and the breaks. all the breaks. in our hearts" (9). It suggests an entanglement of human and earth materialities, wherein the mental fissures that allowed for structural environmental exploitation are now visible in the splitting open of the earth. Simultaneously, it underscores that for some communities, the cracks in the earth were perceptible long before, but "no one took them literally" (9). In this view, exploitation of racialized bodies does not stand in allegorical relation to the alienations faced by the postmodern subject in any abstract sense. Rather, both are inextricable, in that Blackness provides the essential condition of the operations that drove humanity to the moment where the combined discourse of capital accumulation and antiblackness became fully untenable; "the story we had used to justify the full-scale destruction of the world outgrew itself at last" (15).

The passage facilitates a framing of estrangement, enacted here by rupture, as the instigator of *re*cognition in Ghosh's terminology. The rupture is followed by knowing, a realisation of the things that had been forcibly removed from collective memory and consideration. It concerns a rejuvenated acknowledgement of the enmeshed developments of colonial violence and environmental destruction. One archival scrap explaining this remembrance highlights how the rupture allowed for Black and Indigenous ancestors to reassert their presence screaming as the stuff of being, the true modernist subjects, now rising up out of the split-open ground. It is included, in its entirety, below:

> after it happened it was hard to remember how we had walked on this land and breathed this air before without the thickness of knowing. they had always been here. every indigenous community massacred, every single prophet assassinated, every child sacrificed to colonialism, every slave rebel shackled in their grave, every unassigned body piled as refuse somewhere, has never disappeared. whatever part they burned into air, whatever part they buried underground, whatever part they threw in the sea, came whole again in every breathing growing thing. and when the warning time came they were all of them (all of them) screaming. (75)

This passage contains a heterogeneous play on wholeness and fracture, in which fullness, or the "thickness of knowing" is only possible through rupture. The voices of those ejected from the story of the capital 'H' Human as it made the world, torn away from their capacities to teach or warn, are "coming whole again." But the thickness of knowing not only pervades the pores of those apocalyptic human subjects who retreated underground and found themselves looking history in the face. Rather, the knowledge is contained in "every breathing growing thing."

M Archive envisions a community held together by this thickness of knowing, which leads again to a question of wholes in the new formalist sense. In the preceding chapter, the concept of the whole was utilized to show an alternative to the interpretation of cities in *Sower* as exclusively constraining. Bearing on *M Archive*, the concept is necessary to understand how the fractured formal makeup of the work symbolizes the restatement of political community it advocates, the one governed by recognition. Thus far, wholes, understood as communities across a range of abstractions, from a friend group to the concept of a body politic, afforded an experience of connectedness, mutual intelligibility, but also forced unity. *M Archive* expands the whole's connectedness beyond the human and more squarely in a political or actionable vein. This is evidenced in the many references to collectivity in the above quotes, or rather, the move from an emphasis on difference to collectivity, a shift engendered by the urged reanimation of a knowledge lying dormant.

The two paragraphs of the first quote comprise a movement from external knowledge held by others to a recognition of one's own predicament as something shared, which occurs at the hand of disruption. The first paragraph contains mentions of "they" and "them" in reference to the Black female metaphysicians who had always known but were not "taken literally." Moreover, "they" is the leading term of the entire page, and is directly followed by the assertion that empiricism – the need for proof – foreclosed the recognition of their experiences-slash-speculations as knowledge. The use of "them" is juxtaposed in the second paragraph by a double inclusion of "our" when referring to "our breaks," "our fissures." The antithesis of the two paragraphs explicates a collective aligning with the knowledge of Black female metaphysics to the recognition of a shared ontology and urgency to act.

The second quote contains a conflation of "them" and "their" which is fully achieved in the final sentence's repetitive "all of them (all of them)." The 3rd person plural is used throughout the quote in reference to both victims and perpetrators of colonial violence, a

distance violently brought together in the "coming whole again" of the murdered bodies in "every breathing, growing thing." The parentheses around the latter "all of them" echoes deconstructively, symbolizing the point that any unified whole always has an outside inhabited by another, who is part of the inside more than anything. Regardless, the double iteration contained in "all of them (all of them)" signals a collectivity of in- and outside, instead of a focus on either the outside or the demarcating line, as a deconstructive approach would suggest.

Important to remember is that the whole is governed by politics; the "thickness of knowing" and whatever it implies for subsequent ethical conduct in relation to other beings. It denotes new ontology and a new scope of habit. This collective, made up of "every breathing, growing thing," grants the whole with another affordance, the emphasis of ontological entanglement of human and more-than-human beings, to the distinct end of changing normalized human behaviour in regard to fellow earth inhabitants. This interpretation of *M Archive* is related to the thinking of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sylvia Wynter, both of whom underscore the importance of creating and sustaining a mobilizing notion of political collective in the face of environmental degradation. In "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Chakrabarty advocates "a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity" (222), which is to say a sense of a political collective as a mobilizing rather than an essentializing category. Chakrabarty voices a similar hesitance to a suspicion hermeneutics approach in the face of encroaching environmental destruction (221), which allies him to a new formalist vocabulary. Chakrabarty's notion of "a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe" (222) echoes the Levinean concept of the whole, with its affordances of shared experience and solidarity in response to it.

Sylvia Wynter makes an analogous point in an interview with *Proud Flesh*. In her work, Wynter intertwines colonialism, global capitalism, and environmental destruction all to

a collectively internalized notion of Man as an enshrined biological entity. This notion of Man continuously excuses racist exploitation and individualist practice, leading to the degradation of the planet. In the face of the spectre of continued destruction, Wynter advocates a “struggle for an entirely new definition of what it is to be human” (15). She envisions a new human collective possibly enacted by the teachable capacity to “*feel-with*” (16, emphasis in original), rather than universality, which echoes the “shared sense of catastrophe” imagined by Chakrabarty (222).

M Archive mirrors the conclusions of Wynter and Chakrabarty, but adds to them by taking the image of the human out of the equation entirely in favour of “thickness of knowing” as the connective tissue. This troubles the hierarchical separation of human and non-human as subject and object of knowledge, and restates knowledge as action. In doing so, Gumbs supplements the human-decentring process instigated by Chakrabarty and Wynter.. All three are embroiled in articulating a collective made up of fractured parts, but it is only in Gumbs’ vision that political collectively is achieved by gazing into the factures in the earth surface, and engages specifically with non-human participation in the strategic collective.

It should be acknowledged that this argument runs the risk of reaffirming that one should only concern themselves with their fellow community members, however wide-spanning this community may be. Furthermore, it leaves entirely implicit the deconstructive question of locating the outside to the whole of ontological entanglement. Keeping these in mind, one should be careful but insistent when arguing that *M Archive* can be read in support of a point that acting in solidarity does not always demand essence, but can also be informed by shared politics. Our breaks. Our fissures. Rather than foreground sameness as the object of ethics, then, Gumbs’ work emphasizes how rupture symbolically opens a space to reconsider entanglement in a way that leads it to centre Black feminist speculation as a vital conversation partner.

Conclusion

M Archive was published fifteen years after Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and one could argue that much has changed in those years with regard to Black voices in science fiction, as well as the planetary circumstances under climate change. Nonetheless, the connection between Afrofuturist science fiction and ecocritical literature remains a generative space for attempting to relate Black diasporic SF to the thinking on climate disruption. This chapter has outlined the ways in which, in Alexis Pauline Gumbs' 2018 work *M Archive,* the science fictional and formalist notion of estrangement provides a new way of thinking ethical, entangled conduct in Anthropocene times. To the end of speaking back to this, this text has outlined a tentative concept of the human without essence, but rather assembled of ruptured parts. This not only speaks to the incredible richness of *M Archive* specifically, but also more broadly, to the political force of Afrofuturist thinking to apprehend the realities of racialization, and as a template for addressing structural injustices of all kinds.

The final chapter of this thesis compares *M Archive* and *Parable of the Sower* against each other in more detail, and speculates on the implications of both approaches before attempting to harmonize them into an overarching restatement of Afrofuturism, which functions simultaneously as call to action with regard to Anthropocene theory and science fiction studies simultaneously.

Comparison and Conclusion: Towards an Anthropocene Afrofuturism

> "The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself."
>
> Amitav Ghosh - *The Great Derangement* (5)

This thesis proposes a theoretical alliance made up of three parts to the end of furthering the thinking on genre flailing and estrangement in an Anthropocene context. It advocates a combination of Afrofuturist science fiction studies, ecocritical literary studies, and new formalism, and sees in this threefold perspective a productive way to explain what estrangement can do in speculative and critical literature about environmental destruction. It thus seeks to re-emphasize the political potential of Afrofuturist engagements with climate suffering to provide a template of human adaptation to environmental and social change.

One of the questions that preoccupied this project is that of realist or mimetic representational capacities ascribed to unquestionably speculative narratives. In response, this thesis sought to contextualize the question as one that predates the moment of Anthropocene genre flailing, rather than attempt any definitive answer to the how or why of it, given also the contested status of the concept of realism. It has been treated differently across the different works mentioned in this thesis, but a critique of its universalizing force is prevalent throughout. From Ghosh and Suvin's criticism of the 19th century realist novel's connection to human exceptionalism and colonial rhetoric, to the analyses of *Parable of the Sower* as strategically naturalistic SF, the category of realist representation is consistently troubled as limited at best and harmful at worst.

Rather than realism, then, or any inevitably reductive claim to the real, this thesis takes estrangement as a guiding concept, and traces its procession into an environmental humanities context. It jumped off from the assertion that the Anthropocene "genre flailing" gestured

towards by a number of scholars of literature and ecocriticism, such as Ghosh, Lemenager, and Clark is not a question on genre pure and simple but a question on the structures of expectation maintained towards speculative writing on climate change. More precisely, it is a question on how estrangement functions as an affordance of speculative writing. After all, the futures outlined in such works are disinterested in objective fact but, as informed, critical extrapolations, might nonetheless be ahead of the curve on what human communities will be facing in the future or already in the present, but which lack collective acknowledgement. In reference to this uncertainty and the tension it creates on our established reading protocols, this project proposes a reconsideration of estrangement that tailors it to the literary analysis of Anthropocene genres like weird and uncanny fiction, *and* demonstrates the continuity of these genres with Afrofuturist speculative climate writing, which has long been engaged in widening the political scope of speculative writing.

The overview of estrangement given in this project illustrates how the concept was consistently figured in an oppositional relation to knowledge received analogously, through mirroring or representation. That is to say, in its early iterations, estrangement was considered a route to the achievement of knowledge and critical readership, but only in the sense that it spurred reflection on the part of the reader. This characterization of estrangement was paradigmatic until the 1990s, with the advent of literary and cultural studies analyses of Afrofuturist science fiction, in which estrangement was inverted and infused more strongly with a mimetic capability. In this context, estrangement is understood as a critical tool to apprehend, in speculative literature, the structural alienations suffered by Black diasporic subjects, and provides the key point where Afrofuturism enacts a suspension of the demarcation of realism and non-realism.

In tune with an Afrofuturist inversion of estrangement are the ecocritical genres that see a rehabilitation of the weird, the uncanny, or the magical as a way to apprehend the

affective state a recognition of climatic agencies entails. What the weird storyworld estranges *from*, much like in Afrofuturism, is the set of ontological presumptions that legitimated the combined exploitations of the natural world and the global south. This reframes the concept, not in reference to knowledge acquired, but to knowledge *reanimated*. This critical reversal of estrangement was provided with a methodological force at the hand of Levine's new formalism and Armstrong's new formalist affect, and aided in the construction of a reading strategy honed in on estrangement as disruption and emptiness, allowing for the analysis of formal fractures in the two case studies. In this new formalist context, estrangement denotes a shock response to a sudden disruption of textual flow, to which the reader might respond in multiple ways, of which only two are examined in this thesis, and which can broadly be understood as emotional and strategic, political enmeshment of reader, storyworld, and empirical reality.

The close reading chapters depart from the above point on estrangement, Afrofuturism and ecocriticism, and construct an argument on the specific valency of the Afrofuturist genre to respond to the climate crisis. The first chapter undertakes the essential work on the way to answering the research question – on the role of estrangement in Afrofuturism and its relation to speculative climate writing – by setting up the combined methodological apparatus. The analysis it contains of *Parable of the Sower* demonstrates the capabilities of a new formalist reading strategy, and activates its key concepts- forms, affordances, and the request for knowledge – as interpretive tools. It shows how Butler's seminal work of climate collapse SF utilizes disruption of form to further heighten moments of emotional intensity in the novel. The instances of sudden and ringing emptiness in Lauren's journal, when interpreted from the perspective of the request for knowledge, bring the reader in closer to the ambiguous dystopian storyworld and invites them to partake in the speculative project. This denotes an emotional intimacy between the narrator and the reader, which blurs the boundary between

the narrative world of *Sower* and the one inhabited by the reader. Moreover, it demonstrates that estrangement, showing here as a fevered completion of the story by the readerly imagination, the response to the text running out but the story not being finished, does anything but enforce distance between text and audience, as estrangement would have suggested in earlier definitions.

Because the novel is an assemblage of different textual forms, it directly presents a productive collision in a Levinean terminology. This allows for the analysis of formal affordance as well as the affordances of formal collision and fracture, and facilitates the conclusion that in *Parable of the Sower*, an Afrofuturist work speculating on climate collapse and social disruption in the future, enacts estrangement in disruption. Nonetheless, the moments of disruption of *Sower* can only be as significant as they are because they are sporadic, which makes estrangement the affordance of experimental *but* linear and continuous narrative.

The subsequent reading of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *M Archive* continues the argument set up thus far, interrogating the work of poetry intermeshed with theory and science fiction imagery for its treatment of formal disruption. It searches, once again, for the affordance of Afrofuturist form in the face of a collective embrace of speculative climate writing. In the space of this second analytical chapter, estrangement continues to be understood as an effect of formal disruption driving an intensification of the intimacy between text and reader, but intimacy takes an ecocritical turn toward a recognition of entangled ontology and ethics. It denotes a concern, not just for the life of the human narrator, but of the earth and human ancestors that had been structurally dis-animated in service of a late petrocapitalist ideology.

Before this conclusion is expanded on further, a few additive points should be made regarding the comparison of the two case studies, in order to explicate how these specific texts help conceptualize estrangement as more-than-mimetic. First, the forms that make up the

works, and with that, their affordances, differ significantly. *Parable of the Sower* is made up of journal and scripture, whereas *M Archive* provides an interlaced ensemble of poetic text, archival scraps, and images of the periodic table. While different in their respective collisions of affordances, both works engage knowingly in a project of entwining epistemologies to the end of decentring empiricist or humanist ones. *Sower* attempts this in the elevation of an emergent religious discourse standing alongside the more objectivity-grounded register of the journal, whereas *M Archive* blends symbolic images of empiricism, such as the periodic table and the archive, with poetry and divination. Both works, therefore, trouble the lines between the poetic, the literary, the metaphysical, and the scientific. This infuses artistic narrative with the affordances of scientific discourse, which are claims to a knowledge that is precise and universal. Inversely, it ascribes narrativity to scientific discourse, in an echo of Sylvia Wynter's homo narrans, and places both alongside each other as world-making storytelling modes.

Another resonant point of convergence between the two works, related to this intermingling of discourses and epistemologies, concerns the role of the narrator. *Parable of the Sower* centres Lauren Oya Olamina as the narrator and protagonist, who is not only the author of the journal entries but also of the Earthseed verses. A similarly embodied narrative is presented in *M Archive*, in which the unnamed narrator is the agent of assembly, having distilled the story of climate collapse out of a presumably much larger archive. Their respective impact on the story is significant, but the narrator present only in *Sower*. This difference leads to a third point concerning the works' strategic conflation of temporalities. *M Archive* performs a recovery of the present of its publication, the early 21st century, from the perspective of a far future. The fact that the archivist-narrator looks into the past facilitates reflection on the moment the earth split open; it allows her to centre the acknowledgement that humanity survived and to emphasize the adaptive processes that underpinned it. *Parable*

of the Sower, in comparison, presents a more immediate story of everyday survival pervaded with anxious insecurity. The temporal layering occurs in the thirty-year distance between the time of publication and the narrative present of the novel, spanning from 2024 until 2027. Butler speaks to the future by extrapolating from the early 1990s, but the work reads, in the early 21st century and when placed alongside *M Archive*, as an ominous analogy of the present.

The observation that *Parable of the Sower* and *M Archive* afford, respectively, immediacy and reflection, enacted by their different temporal perspectives, is a crucial point taken into the final analysis of both works, as it influences the role of the request for knowledge differently across the two case studies. The temporal immediacy of Lauren's journal nudges the request for knowledge onto the reader, as also implied in Armstrong's use of the concept. It allows for the boundary separating the two worlds – narrative and experiential – to fall away at moments of disruption. In Gumbs' work, the layering of perspectives and narrative times distances the reader, and instead casts the archivist-narrator in the role of the observer, relegating the reader to a vantage point that is another step away. The audience of *M Archive*, then, observes the request for knowledge rather than internalizes it, which facilitates the call to recognizing an ontology of entanglement.

The final close reading chapter jumps off from the assumption that disruption of form is foregrounded more significantly in *M Archive*, as it is composed of single paragraphs. While this forecloses an interpretation of the rare moments of sudden disruption, it facilitates a more figurative reading of disruption in the text. After all, the story of *M Archive* revolves around a symbolic rupture, which materializes the unsustainability of neoliberal neo-colonial progress narratives and the violence it authorizes. As the turning point of human conduct in the face of silenced Black and Indigenous ancestors and Earth others, the estranging rupture is not only representational but revelatory. It enacts an intimacy understood as a widening of the

self and, with it, the scope of concern, and creates a collective-as-ensemble that is informed by politics rather than any centralized essence. Interpreted in this vein, *M Archive* presents a political argument on entangled being and adaptation in the face of climate change informed by Afrofuturist literary conventions. It continues a path charted by *Parable of the Sower* but also diverges from it in its more rigorous, interwoven concern with uncoiling the exploitation of the non-human alongside the structural violence of racialization. It poses that decentring the human is, crucially, also a work of decentring whiteness, as well as masculinity and heterosexuality.

Returning to the genre flailing question, then, draws the argument to a close. Through the close readings undertaken in this thesis, a threefold point was made to the end of furthering genre flailing. The first of these concerns an inversion of how estrangement is understood and utilized in Afrofuturist and ecocritical literature. The second argument functions in remedy of the observation that, while this inversion of estrangement was already charted in analyses of ecocritical literature, be it cli-fi, weird fiction, or uncanny writing, the understanding of Afrofuturist climate writing remained allied to a 1970s conception of estrangement as a science fictional affordance that removes the reader from the storyworld. Lastly, then, a reconsideration of Afrofuturism as a genre that can not only estrange as any other Anthropocene genre does, but also articulate a politics of entanglement that interweaves environmental activism and anti-racist politics, leads to a refreshed generic index to flail on.

Troubling and Supplementing Wholeness as Assemblage

This section outlines a resounding ambivalence regarding one of the conclusions in this thesis; that there is a profound political valency in recognizing and acting on a notion of a more-than-human collective, as an assemblage of fractured parts, in the face of exacerbating climate change and racialized and gendered climate suffering. This argument was

underpinned by Levine's outlining of the whole, a common form that affords exclusion and forced assimilation to a norm, but can also facilitate community, mutual aid, and solidarity. In addition, it was connected to one of Dipesh Chakrabarty's conclusions in his 2021 book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* and the 2009 article of roughly the same name, and to the thinking of Sylvia Wynter. It should be emphasized again that this new formalist reading does not presume any vision of collective humanity to inevitably wash away structural oppressions along racial, gender, heteronormative or other lines, at least not without sustained effort and awareness. Given this fact, it is crucial work to continue to trouble the line where the human collective is inevitably marked off at the exclusion of people, communities, and non-human entities, in order to propel this political undertaking forward.

Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that the notion of a universalized political category empowered to speak against interconnected structures of oppression is not immune to the danger of re-obfuscating human entanglement with non-human and ecological entities. This is in spite of the fact that *M Archive* articulates a relational ontology that resoundingly captures non-human agencies and intelligences. The fact that this risk remains undertheorized in this thesis signals the fact that, naturally, the argument presented here can be supplemented and complicated along a host of theoretical and analytical avenues. They are listed here, to the end of expanding the scope of this thesis, and of attempting to reckon with the necessary constraints imposed on it. First, a more thoroughly situated ecocritical or posthumanist lens provides an incredibly informative perspective for further reading. The notions of non-human agencies and ontological entanglement are taken somewhat at face value in this project, not to do any injustice to the concepts, but rather to connect them to a wider repertoire of literary writing. Nonetheless, this thesis leaves a space, and with it, an invitation, to further speculate on the connection between Afrofuturism and entangled thinking that embraces the non-human as a vast repertoire of knowledge as well as a storytelling agent and companion. Additionally,

the concepts used, especially entanglement and ancestry, can be illuminatingly connected to Indigenous thought and criticism. This would create an added layer of interpretation, that speaks to the project here but is also highly particular. It is due to the latter fact that an Indigenous perspective is only a suggested presence in this thesis.

The second omission concerns the fact that the two literary works analysed were only read as *feminist* Afrofuturist science fiction implicitly, eclipsed by the focus on estrangement in a climate context. Suffice it to say that the two literary works as well as the theoretical framework called upon in this thesis would lend themselves to an incredibly rich feminist or queer reading.

Conclusion

As the proposed theoretical/methodological unity of this thesis ends on new formalism, this concluding section ends on a new formalist point too. As advocated in both the introductory and theoretical chapter, new formalism is engaged in a project of deepening the symptomatic reading paradigm by drawing attention to the agency of literary works, to influence political and theoretical forms. This broadens established reading practice, as it rejects the exclusive connection of literature with discursive power, in the sense that novels are made to be the textual manifestations of the ruling cultural forces of a certain time, not just reflecting but normalizing and reinstating the status quo. As new historicist methodologies assume literature to always be slippery enough to escape of the clutches of discourse, it is only through careful close reading that these moments of fissure are exposed, and the discursive powers can be shown to be constructed, arbitrary, and open to intervention.

As informative as a symptomatic reading of *Parable of the Sower* and *M Archive* would be, troubling, for example, the pervasive whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity of dystopian climate collapse narratives, the new formalist lens facilitated a supplemental

reading to disconnect Afrofuturist from exclusively anti-racist critique. A formalist reading of the case studies afforded, beyond the critique of white-centric Anthropocene writing, a constructive reading of the novels as a template for our politics. This underscores that Afrofuturism is not only the anti-racist critique voiced by Black diasporic creatives, but, more importantly, their creative visioning for an emergent, collective humanity.

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