How to Imagine the End of the World: Narratives of Disaster in Speculative Fiction

by

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Abstract

Speculative fiction, a genre rooted in envisioning the future, is an ideal site through which we can both investigate the limitations of our imaginations and study authors who provide more liberatory constructions of alternative futures. In this project, I explore how disaster is a purposeful feature of neoliberalism that allows for constant capitalization and profiting from destruction. Specifically, my dissertation examines representations of disasters from the 1990s on to show how disaster can use spectacle to represent economic anxieties while also a form of creative destruction that clears the ground for more radical ways of envisioning the future.

Then, I engage with neoliberalism not just as an economic system but a form of governmentality that creates new subjectivities. Imagining new futures outside of neoliberalism is therefore not just a matter of envisioning an alternative economic system but also conceiving of radical relational models that go beyond the neoliberal focus on individual exceptionalism and personal responsibility.

I highlight the various sociopolitical moments and historical contexts of each text in order to demonstrate how speculative fiction, even with its emphasis on futurity, is also always engaging with issues and anxieties of the present day. Specifically, my last two chapters turn toward 1990s Los Angeles as a case study that exemplifies the economic impact of globalization and subsequent deindustrialization. Additionally, the city's diverse and multicultural population as well as its natural disaster prone geography make it a generative site through which to analyze how uneven geographical development can cause the effects of disaster to be distributed in varying ways.

Introduction

It is easier today for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism — this statement from Fredric Jameson has circulated widely since its first articulation in 1994. In the years since, as neoliberal economic development has continued to accelerate, this assertion has been quoted often and held up as an example of the pervasive nature of capitalism.

However, the latter half of Jameson's declaration is less quoted but in my estimation, equally important in considering the role that literature can play in narrating futures outside of neoliberalism: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; *perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations*" (Jameson xii, emphasis mine).

Speculative fiction, a genre rooted in envisioning the future, is therefore an ideal site through which we can both investigate the limitations of our imaginations and study authors who provide more liberatory constructions of alternative futures. In this project, I explore how disaster is a purposeful feature of neoliberalism that allows for constant capitalization and profiting from destruction. Specifically, my dissertation examines representations of disasters from the 1990s on to show how disaster can use spectacle to represent economic anxieties while also a form of creative destruction that clears the ground for more radical ways of envisioning the future.

I draw my definition of disaster from postcolonial scholar Pallavi Rastogi, who in *Postcolonial Disaster* examines real-life disasters and the way these disasters are depicted in postcolonial disaster fiction. While acknowledging the slipperiness of the term, Rastogi broadly defines disaster as "a cataclysmic event or process, either a singular occurrence or a concatenation of linked catastrophes in which the totalizing scale of its effects is

important...Disaster terminates normalcy for the individual and for the social collective, often creating a new-normal condition for existence" (15). I use this definition to separate narratives of disaster from post-apocalyptic narratives; in this project, because I am interested in how act of disaster disrupt neoliberal ways of life, I specifically engage with texts that represent singular or ongoing acts of disaster rather than post-apocalyptic texts where a disaster has taken place offscreen and society has adjusted accordingly.

It is no coincidence that *The Seeds of Time*, the text where Jameson articulated the difficulty of imagining life outside of capitalism, was published in 1994. This was a moment where neoliberal economic development intensified, resulting in the uneven geographic development that continues to be felt in our present moment. In the section that follows, I provide a brief history of neoliberal economic development up until the 1990s, the historical context in which several of my texts are situated, in order to emphasize how neoliberalism can be interpreted as a disaster unto itself that has precipitated natural disaster and exacerbated its aftereffects. Then, I engage with neoliberalism not just as an economic system but a form of governmentality that creates new subjectivities. Imagining new futures outside of neoliberalism is therefore not just a matter of envisioning an alternative economic system but also conceiving of radical relational models that go beyond the neoliberal focus on individual exceptionalism and personal responsibility.

In the second section, I elaborate on why speculation is a vital mode of engaging with disaster and how speculative fiction provides a site to engage with questions of race, gender, and disability within representations of disaster. I highlight the various sociopolitical moments and historical contexts of each text in order to demonstrate how speculative fiction, even with its emphasis on futurity, is also always engaging with issues and anxieties of the present day.

Specifically, my last two chapters turn toward 1990s Los Angeles as a case study that exemplifies the economic impact of globalization and subsequent deindustrialization. Additionally, the city's diverse and multicultural population as well as its natural disaster prone geography make it a generative site through which to analyze how uneven geographical development can cause the effects of disaster to be distributed in varying ways.

The Social Governance of Neoliberalism

Since the 1973 U.S. backed coup in Chile, neoliberalism has been a dominant global economic policy and has shaped the way that populations have been unevenly affected by disaster. In *Spaces of Global Capital*, David Harvey identifies the Chilean coup and the subsequent installation of Augusto Pinochet as president as one of the earliest experiments with neoliberalism. After the coup, the United States government was advised by the Chicago boys, so called because of their staunch belief in the free market economic policies of Milton Friedman, an economist at the University of Chicago. This led to the "privatizing of public assets, opening up natural resources to private exploitation and facilitating foreign direct investment and free trade." These policies led to a short-term revival of the Chilean economy which "provided evidence upon the subsequent turn to more open neoliberal policies in both Britain (under Thatcher) and the U.S. (under Reagan)" (12).

Harvey continues with a survey of the way that U.S. economists profited off disaster and in fact utilized crisis as a way of further cementing neoliberalism. In 1979, with high inflation rates plaguing the country, Paul Volcker, Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank, raised the rate of interest to close to 20 percent overnight. This was a deliberate move that plunged the U.S. "and much of the rest of the world, into recession and unemployment. This shift, it was argued,

was the only way out of the grumbling crisis of stagflation that had characterized the U.S. and much of the global economy through the 1970s" (17). The United States then capitalized on the Volcker shock; the high interest rates caused Mexico to default on loans in 1982. The Reagan administration, in conjunction with the U.S. Treasury and the International Monetary Fund, then offered Mexico debt rescheduling only if it implemented institutional reforms such as "cuts in welfare expenditures, relaxed labor laws and privatization…Mexico was thereby partially pushed into a growing column of neo-liberal state apparatuses and from then on the IMF became a key tool in the promotion and in many instances forced imposition of neo-liberal policies throughout the world" (23). The U.S., then, was able to continually use international economic crises in order to deregulate economies and reduce welfare programs worldwide, leading to the uneven geographical development that places wealth in the hands of the few while the masses struggle with increased precarity in the face of ongoing economic, political, and environmental disaster.

Other scholars such as Naomi Klein and Marcus Taylor also identify the Chilean coup as an illustrative example of how disasters can be used to shape neoliberal state formation. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein also reflects on the coup as an example of what she calls disaster capitalism, in which U.S. politicians and economists use "moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering" (8). As Klein notes, this type of economic "shock therapy" capitalized on political disaster and instability in Chile in order to introduce neoliberal economic policies. Klein's concept of disaster capitalism presents disaster not as merely natural but rather as inherently political, as an opportunity to exploit vulnerabilities and present new ways of structuring society. Marcus Taylor also highlights the way that the Chicago boys embraced creative destruction in order to impose their own economic policies on developing nations. Taylor defines creative destruction in this context as a strategy of

"manipulating economic policies in a coercive manner to destroy established institutions and productive structures" and which relies on "systematic state interventions that seek simultaneously to reshape social institutions while mediating the political and social tensions that arise from this restructuring" (56). Both Klein and Taylor touch on the way that neoliberalism seeks to destroy previous economic systems in order to impose its own will, one that will open up markets and thus concentrate wealth in the hands of a small number of corporations. I argue that their analyses of the Chilean coup demonstrate that there is no distinction between disaster capitalism and neoliberalism itself; because neoliberalism as it operates today is so deeply rooted in creative destruction and purposeful dismantling of existing social structures, we can perceive neoliberalism as a disaster within itself, one that radically changes worlds and therefore also presents openings for imagining new futures. My project looks at neoliberalism not as merely an economic policy that creates more precarity and poverty while taking away economic safety nets, but as a system that forces the production of new social relationships and a new relationality itself.

Scholars such as Wendy Brown and Henry Giroux have articulated the ways that neoliberalism works as both an economic project as well as a political and social mode of governing. In *Against Neoliberalism*, Giroux describes neoliberalism as "not only a system of economic power relations, but also a political project of governing and persuasion intent on producing new forms of subjectivity and particular modes of conduct" (1). Similarly, in "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," Brown delves into the way that neoliberal rationality is emerging not just merely as a mode of governance that is limited to the state but rather "one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social" (37). Expanding further, Brown explains that "neoliberal rationality, while

foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (39). This articulation of neoliberalism as infiltrating all aspects of social life by attributing market value to seemingly un-economic factors is core to my exploration of neoliberalism throughout this project. In the chapters that follow, I look at the various ways that social life is transformed through this fixation on market value and increasing profit and investigate the ways that speculative representation of disaster can bring into focus the different ways that relationality has been impacted by neoliberalism.

One of the ways that neoliberalism has imposed market value onto social actions is through the valorization of the individual and the emphasis on personal responsibility. As David Harvey notes, neoliberalism has been dismal at stimulating economic growth yet it is presented as the only feasible economic system. Harvey identifies two reasons for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism; the first is the way that the "volatility of uneven geographical development has accelerated permitting certain territories to advance spectacularly at the expense of others" (42). Secondly, "neo-liberalism has been a huge success from the standpoint of the upper classes." Because of these two "successes" of neoliberalism, media can propagate the myth that "territories failed because they were not competitive enough" and "if conditions among the lower classes deteriorated, it was because they failed for personal and cultural reasons to enhance their own human capital through education, the acquisition of a protestant work ethic, and submission to work discipline and flexibility…Systemic problems were masked under a blizzard of ideological pronouncements and a plethora of localized crises" (42). Harvey's analysis demonstrates the way that neoliberalism has evacuated governmental responsibility for economic hardship and placed responsibility squarely on the individual, thus disseminating market values

onto individual relationships and actions. This, in turn, demonstrates the way that neoliberalism can shape our everyday social relations and turn a focus away from the harms caused by the state and turn them instead into moral and personal failings.

Wendy Brown expands on this idea of neoliberalism as a method of social organization and increased individual responsibility, noting that the "model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded; indeed, it would barely exist as a public" (43). The impact of neoliberalism, then, is a turning away from community-oriented relationality and a hyperfocus on the individual, at the sake of the larger local community. As I will note in my chapters, much of the speculative fiction that I close read will challenge this idea of personal responsibility, using speculation to investigate a world where people are more public-minded, interdependent, and community-oriented even in the face of rampant neoliberalism and uneven geographic development.

Neoliberalism's ability to not only shape economic activity but to also re-organize social life has led to its perception as an inevitable economic system, making it difficult to imagine alternatives. Brown continues her analysis by explaining the way that "the extension of economic rationality to all aspects of thought and activity" can be seen as a stage of capitalism that "underscores Marx's argument that capital penetrates and transforms every aspect of life—remaking everything in its image and reducing every value and activity to its cold rationale" (44). The pervasive aspect of capitalism is the central focus of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism.* Fisher defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a

coherent alternative to it" (2). He reads a dystopian film, Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men*, as indication that "the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation" (3). Fisher reads the film in a decidedly hopeless light and as part of an assertion that capitalism and the neoliberal economics of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher (Fisher draws on Thatcher's assertion that "there is no alternative to capitalism" for the subtitle of his book) have left people with little ability to imagine other political and economic systems. If capitalist realism is the dominant ideological framework that threatens to absorb all other alternative frameworks, then reading science-fictional representations of disaster allows for more generative possible counter sites to capitalist realism, spaces to imagine otherwise. To me, it is no coincidence that Fisher opens his book with a reading of a dystopian film — I think this points to the richness of possibility that emerges post-disaster and post-apocalypse.

Because neoliberalism is an all-encompassing economic structure that affects populations unevenly, it is crucial to investigate the way that race, disability, gender and other identity categories can intersect with race and produce differing experiences of life amidst disaster. For example, it is significant that countries such as Chile and Mexico served as some of the earliest sites of neoliberal economic experimentation before nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom decided to embrace such policies. By first trying out neoliberal policies on sites in the Global South, countries such as the United States were able to analyze the effects of such policies while also capitalizing on economic crises in order to cement control in these spaces. Additionally, the United States and the International Monetary Fund used the 1997 Asian financial crisis to implement neoliberal policies in countries such as South Korea. As a project that is concerned with concentrating wealth in the hands of the few, neoliberalism by itself may

not have an explicitly racial agenda but due to the nature of economic power, the wealth that is consolidated is overwhelmingly in countries such as

Additionally, neoliberalism has often been employed along with racial liberalism and multiculturalism in order to preserve its insidious and pervasive nature. As Jodi Melamed explains, neoliberal multiculturalism is a "central ideology and mode of social organization that seeks to manage racial contradictions on a national and international scale for U.S.-led neoliberalism" (3). In later chapters, I will explore this concept more fully, but for the purposes of this introduction, it is crucial to understand how the social organization of neoliberalism thus necessitates the creation of governing other forms of identity such as race through apparatuses such as neoliberal multiculturalism.

Speculative Disruptions of Neoliberal Futures

Speculative depictions of the future are able to engage with race as well as neoliberalism's pervasive mode of economic, political and social governance; the texts surveyed in this dissertation examine the ways that race can express itself in similar forms as well as new imaginings through speculative fiction. Speculative fiction has often been criticized for its historical focus on whiteness. André Carrington notes that "the Whiteness of science fiction functions…as a source of alienation for Black people. To identify with Blackness in and through one's relationship to science fiction entails seeing one's racial background represented only rarely, typically at the margins, seldom in the person of an author, and awkwardly positioned as a consumer" (17). Carrington explains that Afrofuturism allows for a "positioning science fiction authors as constituents of a Black expressive tradition, rather than viewing them as isolated

minorities within a predominantly White community of writers, performs reparation vis- à- vis the alienating effects of the putative Whiteness of science fiction" (24).

Afrofuturism is a cultural mode of engaging with futurity that counters the erasure of African Americans from representations of futurity. The term was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery, who defined it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture— and more generally African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Other scholars such as Alondra Nelson and Kowdo Eshun build on this definition. In her article "Future Texts," Nelson defines Afrofuturism as a form of cultural production that explores "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora" in order to tell other stories about "technology and things to come" (9). Eshun characterizes Afrofuturism as "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (301). Afrofuturism therefore disrupts the idea of blackness as oppositional to technological progress by presenting a vision of futurity that acknowledges how the history of the African diaspora is constantly transforming the African diasporic experience today.

On the other hand, Asia in speculative fiction has not so much been erased but more so fetishized and even over-represented. As Mark Jerng explains, "from the late nineteenth century to the present, prominent strains of US and British imaginaries of the global have overrepresented the Asiatic in order to imagine the future" (173). Examples of this fixation on Asia/Asians within speculative fiction range from yellow peril fiction written by the likes of Jack

London to cyberpunk representations of Japan in works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*.

Technological representations that center on Asian bodies have been such a fixture in 20th and 21st century media that the term techno-orientalism arose as a way of describing this mode of representation. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu define techno-orientalism as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo-or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse. Techno-Orientalist imaginations are infused with the languages and codes of the technological and the futuristic…Techno-Orientalist speculations of an Asianized future have become ever more prevalent in the wake of neoliberal trade policies that enabled greater flow of information and capital between the East and the West" (2). Aimee Bahng also acknowledges the myriad of representations of Asians in the future; she notes that while Afrofuturism and Chican@futurism write against different forms or racist primitivism. Asian futurism can be trickier to fabulate, given science fiction's persistent fascination with techno-Orientalist themes and landscapes. When it comes to futurity, it's not so much that Asians have been written out of it. We've become the sign of it, the backdrop to it, and the style manual for it" (10). Bahng's work provides me with an important critical framework for thinking through the relation between global capitalism and speculative and science-fictional narratives. Bahng notes that "simultaneously filled with corporate fantasies of limitless profit and leftist anti-hierarchical possibilities, the future — or rather, the endless multiplicity of futures — can never be fully colonized" (12).

Similarly, this project acknowledges representations of Asians/Asian Americans in techno-orientalist works while also engaging with representations of Asians/Asian Americans in speculative fiction that engage with alternative depictions of futurity. While the resonances of

yellow perilism and techno-orientalism can certainly be read in the texts that I engage with, my specific interest in disaster means that I am also often analyzing narratives where the future is not rife with shiny robots and time travel machines but instead filled with decay and destruction. Through these speculations, we can read texts for both the continuation of racial formations such as yellow peril but also as a critique of progress narratives.

In *Contesting Genres*, Betsy Huang also grapples with the relationship between Asian American literature and genre fiction. Huang foregrounds "genre as the site for developing a transformative Asian American politics of form" and notes that a "a restructuring of genre leads to nothing short of the restructuring of the knowledge it produces about the world and the people it depicts" (3-4). This restructuring of genre also ties in to my larger project about speculative fiction's ability to portray the restructuring of social organizations to disrupt neoliberal social governance. In her work specifically on Asian American science fiction, Huang explains that "the genre not only offers a new set of tropes and metaphors with which to trouble the generic waters of Asian American literary production, the very essence of the genre is its deconstructive impetus" (9). My project is similarly interested in the way that speculative fiction can deconstruct notions about techno-orientalism while providing new ways of looking at social governance and relations.

As I am interested in the ways that neoliberalism and other disasters impact social organization and relationality, this project also investigates how race can intersect with other social forms such as disability and family formation and how those intersections reveal anxieties about the future as well as new ways of thinking through human connection. For example, race and reproduction come into play when thinking about futurity and more specifically, reproductive futurity. Several of the texts studied in this dissertation feature some sort of

commentary on reproduction and the family unit and this connects to neoliberalism because of the way that neoliberalism assigns market value to all aspects of social life, including family formation. As Susan Koshy notes “the neoliberal understanding of human abilities as sources of potential income redefines child-rearing by treating a broader range of activities of care and cultivation, and not only educational and professional training, as potential "investments" in the human capital of children” (345). Using Amy Chua’s *Hymn of the Tiger Mother* as an example, Koshy notes that “Asian Americans have not only become exemplary neoliberal subjects defined by flexibility, high human capital, and opportunistic mobility, but the Asian American family has also come to be identified as an intimate form ideally equipped to reproduce human capital” (346). In some of the chapters that follow, I look at the various ways that family formations play out in narratives of disaster and how they reveal certain anxieties about Asian economic activity in relation to U.S. power. Just as neoliberalism is a pervasive structure that reorganizes intimacy and social relations, so too does speculative fiction have the ability to construct futurity in ways that both reinforce and challenge ideas around kinship and family formation.

The difference between African American and Asian/Asian American representations of the future are also deeply linked to neoliberal economic factors. Helen Jun notes that “the neoliberal theory of human capital and its notion of individual enterprise and self-regulation are not merely evident in Asian American model minority discourse but are also key tenets by which Asian American racial difference came to be defined in the post-1965 period” (130). Thus, the abundance of techno-orientalist representations that show Asia/Asians in the future can be linked to the model minority projection of Asian subjects being closer to the ideal neoliberal subject. In our current racial matrix, African American and Asian American subjects are often pitted against

each other in order to subjugate both groups and to continue the consolidation of capital into the hands of the few elite under neoliberalism.

I now turn to a brief discussion as to why Los Angeles serves as a productive case study to analyze African American and Asian American race relations under a neoliberal system and how speculative representations of the city can serve as a staging ground for new conceptions of community and relations amidst disaster.

Case Study: Los Angeles

The Los Angeles of the 1980s was a place of great fascination for postmodern thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. By the 1990s, however, I argue that there is a distinct shift from Los Angeles as the epitome of postmodern theorization of the city to Los Angeles as a site where the economic and social effects of neoliberal development can be keenly observed.

Los Angeles in the 1990s was the site of great economic and racial upheaval. Automobile and defense manufacturing, which had been one of the central aspects of economic activity in the region, began to relocate overseas. Published in 1990, two years before the acquittal of Rodney King and the subsequent explosive uprising in much of central Los Angeles, *City of Quartz* is Mike Davis's seminal work on urban life in Los Angeles. Davis, one of the most influential observers of life in Los Angeles, details the economic shifts, demographic changes, and policing strategies that led to increased racial tension in less affluent Los Angeles neighborhoods; Davis sums up the work as "in a nutshell, about the contradictory impact of economic globalization upon different segments of Los Angeles society" (x). More specifically, the changes that Davis details are part of neoliberal economic development, which began in earnest in the 1980s under

the Reagan administration but became fully felt within Los Angeles by the 1990s. By 1990, fourteen of the largest non-defense plants in Los Angeles had shut down and been moved to China (xvii). Additionally, after the 1965 Watts Rebellion, the LAPD embarked on Operation Hammer, a large-scale push to police gang violence in South Central Los Angeles. Davis notes that "given an open season to terrorize gang members and crack dealers, the LAPD predictably began to exceed the call of duty, shooting unarmed teenagers and storming into wrong addresses in search of 'rock houses'" (244). Additionally, "LAPD introduced the first police helicopters for systematic aerial surveillance. After the Watts Rebellion of 1965 this airborne effort became the cornerstone of a policing strategy for the entire inner city" (226). Davis portrays a Los Angeles that is fraught with racial tension and economic disparity, with these frictions exacerbated by rampant police profiling and brutality. It is against this backdrop that the Rodney King riots erupted in and it is the same backdrop that makes Los Angeles in the 1990s an ideal case study for the effects of neoliberalism — both in terms of economic impact and social reorganization.

*Excavating the Future in Los Angele*s, the subtitle of *City of Quartz*, reveals much about the way that concepts of futurity, utopia, and dystopia have shaped imaginings of the city. Although Davis presents an apocalyptic portrait of Los Angeles, particularly for African Americans, he also investigates the way that labor organizers have "revealed the social power of the city's blue-collar neighborhoods and suburbs" (xxxvi). Davis is cautiously optimistic about the way that community organizing and sustained forms of local connectivity can bring about lasting social change in a city that has suffered much urban decay and economic stagnation. I see a similar connection between economic hardship and hope for a better future in the texts that I will survey in this dissertation; by harnessing the power of speculation, these texts criticize the uneven economic development wrought by neoliberal economic policies while placing a cautious

hope in the ability of new forms of intimacy and interdependence to eke out survival and life in inhospitable climates. In other works such as *Ecology of Fear*, Davis also notes the way that Los Angeles has been simultaneously held up as a dystopia as well as an idyllic beach paradise. These dual impulses of utopia and dystopia also animate the texts that I survey in the second half of this dissertation which focuses on representations of disaster in Los Angeles.

This compact context of Los Angeles in the 1990s will be expanded upon in later chapters but I include an overview here to emphasize how socioeconomic and historical contexts are crucial in my readings of narratives of disaster. In the section that follows, I provide a brief overview of each chapter, taking care to mention the specific historical context surrounding each group of texts because a study of narratives of disaster and the effects of neoliberalism must also be closely attuned to the historical contexts in which disasters take place.

Chapter Overview

In my first chapter, I explore the genre of disaster movies in order to demonstrate how they promote a neoliberal multiculturalism that reveals anxieties about continued U.S. hegemony in Asia. The main two movies surveyed in this chapter — Guillermo Del Toro's 2013 *Pacific Rim* and Gareth Edwards's 2014 *Godzilla* — were released at a moment when the United States was lessening its presence in the Middle East and shifting foreign policy priorities to maintaining U.S. influence in Asia. I frame the chapter with an op-ed from then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that details these foreign policy priorities in order to show how disaster narratives reflect the specific political and historical contexts in which they are released. I also briefly read films that depict climate disaster to show how those films, along with *Godzilla* and *Pacific Rim*,

demonstrate a certain arrogance about the way that humankind can handle disaster and more broadly, nature itself.

Although the bulk of this project is invested in literary analysis, I open my dissertation with a reading of disaster movies for two reasons. The first reason is that disaster movies are undoubtedly one of the most common and popular ways that audiences engage with representations of disaster; collectively, the four films examined in my chapter have grossed over a billion dollars at the box office and each year, new movies about the destruction of the world continue to captivate audiences. Therefore, I assert that it is important to consider the popularity of these films and why they have an enduring mass appeal. Second, my project is interested in the way that neoliberalism re-organizes or promotes certain forms of social intimacies and how the speculative mode can provide alternatives to these forms of social organization. The social forms presented in the movies represent neoliberal ideals about individualism and personal responsibility and thus provide a contrast to the social forms in the speculative fiction I explore in later chapters.

In chapter two, I close read two novels about how pandemics transform life in Manhattan: Ling Ma's 2018 *Severance* and Colson Whitehead's 2011 *Zone One*. These two texts have striking similarities - both depict a Manhattan that has been ravaged by a fast-moving disease. In both books, the disease has also resulted in hordes of zombies haunting New York, repeating mundane actions for all of eternity; this figure of the zombie is also significant to the economic and historical context of the texts. The specter of the 2008 economic recession looms large in both texts; Ma's text, although published in 2018, is set in 2011 and references the Occupy Wall Street movement. However, instead of reinforcing neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility amidst disaster like the movie surveyed in the previous chapters, these two novels

employ racial forms such as the zombie and yellow peril to show how racialization impacts neoliberalism and to comment on the way that neoliberalism and disaster results in the dehumanization of the workforce.

In chapters three and four, I turn my attention to Los Angeles as case study for neoliberal restructuring. In the third chapter, I read Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 *Tropic of Orange*, a sprawling polyvocal text that captures the varied experiences of Angelenos in this time period. With a particular attention to the form of the novel as well as the way that the various characters in the text interact, I analyze how Yamashita uses speculative representations of disaster as a way of envisioning a life in Los Angeles that is more attuned to the way that people are connected in expected ways. In chapter four, I compare Octavia Butler's 1993 *Parable of the Sower* and Cynthia Kadohata's 1992 *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, two novels that feature a dystopian Los Angeles. My reading of the texts is framed through a feminist disability studies understanding of interdependence and debility and which is attentive to the way that the dystopian genre can provide new forms of social organization and intimacies that are outside of the main project of neoliberalism. Again, as mentioned above, the historical and economic moment of these texts is significant; they are all published in the 1990s, at a moment where Los Angeles was experiencing a significant amount of social, racial, and economic turbulence. All three texts use the mode of speculation in order to imagine how Los Angeles - both in the present time period and extrapolated decades into the future - can reckon with the effects of disaster without merely capitulating to the insidious pervasiveness of neoliberalism.

As a project centered on representation of disaster, this dissertation engages deeply with the ends of things, with tremendous superstorms and population-decimating pandemics, with dystopias and apocalypse. But this is also a project that takes seriously the ability of speculative

fiction to imagine new beginnings that arise out of these disastrous ends and to envision new relational models that prioritize interdependence, community, and local connection over the rampant individualism and exceptionalism promoted by neoliberalism. In the pages that follow, I attempt to show how even amidst dystopia, speculation can be harnessed to show us worlds beyond our wildest imaginations.

CHAPTER ONE

"Canceling the Apocalypse": Disaster Movies in the Pacific Rim and Beyond

In a 2011 op-ed published in *Foreign Policy*, then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton declared that as the wars in the Middle East were winding down, "one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment - diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise - in the Asia-Pacific" (57). While Clinton couches her op-ed in the language of diplomacy and partnership, she also notes that America's "strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership" (58). Clinton explains that "[our] alliance with Japan [is] the cornerstone of peace and stability in the region…We share a common vision of a stable regional order with clear rules of the road - from freedom of navigation to open markets and fair competition" (58). Clinton's foreign policy prioritizes maintaining U.S. global ascendancy in Asia through strategic alliances, a fixation which stems from anxieties about China's rising economic power and influence. Clinton goes on to highlight the United States' military presence in Japan, another key component in maintaining influence in Asia. However, she concludes by emphasizing that "even more than our military might or the size of our economy, our most potent asset as a nation is the power of our values - in particular, our steadfast support for democracy and human rights. This speaks to our deepest national character and is at the heart of our foreign policy, including our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific region" (63). The op-ed is the epitome of what Jodi Melamed calls neoliberal multiculturalism, "a central ideology and mode of social organization that seeks to manage racial contradictions on a national and international scale for U.S.-led neoliberalism" (3).

Melamed develops the term to trace how post-war racial liberalism developed to embrace the language of anti-racism as a tool for the implementation of neoliberalism amidst globalization. Melamed explains that "concepts previously associated with 1980s and 1990s liberal multiculturalism — "openness," "diversity," and "freedom" — are recycled such that "open societies" and "economic freedoms" (shibboleths for neoliberal measures) come to signify human rights that the United States has a duty to secure for the world" (16). This language is reflected in Clinton's op-ed; Clinton denounces those who question the United States' ability to enforce its ideological missions, stating that "whenever the United States has experienced setbacks, we've overcome them through reinvention and innovation. Our capacity to come back stronger is unmatched in modern history. It flows from our model of free democracy and free enterprise, a model that remains the most powerful source of prosperity and progress known to humankind" (63). Of course, what Clinton fails to mention is that the United States' ability to constantly reinvent and innovate is predicated on a system of creative destruction that profits from crisis and disaster and uses it to reinforce neoliberal ideology across the world.

In this chapter, I look at the way that contemporary disaster movies exemplify the idea of neoliberal multiculturalism while also examining how the representations of disaster address histories of nuclear contamination and climate change. The movies, released in the 2000s and 2010s, are part of a moment in which many are grappling with the environmental effects that decades of unfettered economic development have wrought. Rob Nixon's work on slow violence accounts for the relationship between neoliberalism and Anthropogenic climate change, illustrates the disastrous effects that neoliberal policies have on vulnerable populations. Nixon calls for a reconceptualization of violence, a "violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out

across a range of temporal scales" (2). Nixon's formulation of slow violence differs from the concept of structural violence because of slow violence's focus on temporality. To Nixon, "the explicitly temporal emphasis of slow violence allows us to keep front and center the representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by imperceptible change whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time" (11). To this, I add that neoliberal multiculturalism can be considered not just a form of structural violence but slow violence as well because the violence of neoliberalism is often decoupled from its origins by the distraction of multiculturalism and its co-opting of a language of antiracism.

In this chapter, I propose a method of analyzing contemporary disaster movies that views as neoliberal multiculturalism as its own form of slow violence that begets spectacular disaster. This method allows for the simultaneous reading of fast and slow violence, one that is attentive to the way that neoliberal multiculturalism obscures the environmental impact of global development. Popular American disaster movies, although often criticized for being riddled with scientific inaccuracies and for depicting disaster in an cartoonish and over-the-top fashion, are nevertheless an important conduit for understanding neoliberal multiculturalism because they demonstrate how certain values around freedom and U.S. exceptionalism can endure even amidst ongoing disaster. Additionally, while documentary films about climate change exist, the speculative nature of popular disaster movies provide an opportunity to portray the imagined impact of disaster on iconic sites such as the Golden Gate Bridge and the Statue of Liberty, two national landmarks that are imbued with their own political resonances.

In the sections that follow, I provide a brief outline of neoliberal multiculturalism in order to further emphasize the way it operates as a form of slow violence. Then, I close read two

contemporary kaiju movies, *Godzilla* (2014) and *Pacific Rim* (2013) to demonstrate how the films address U.S. anxieties about control in Asia-Pacific. Films about kaiju, the Japanese word for "strange beast," are enduringly popular and reveal much about the relationship between the human and non-human. Lastly, I will close by looking at the way kaiju movies fit into the larger trend of disaster movies from the 2000s on. These contemporary disaster movies, released in a moment where society at large was beginning to recognize the effects of climate change, demonstrate a rigid belief in humanity's ability to band together to prevail over natural disaster and thus provide a rich site for analyzing how neoliberal multiculturalism impacts our relationship to the environment.

The Slow Violence of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

In her work on the spirit of neoliberalism, Melamed traces the relationship between race and capitalism after World War II to the contemporary moment. Melamed identifies postwar racial liberalism as the first phase of the historical development in which the government co-opts the language of antiracism to distract from the workings of capitalism. Although the United States and its allied forces emerged victorious after World War II, the war also exposed racial contradictions; African-American soldiers fought against fascism and prejudice abroad but returned home to a country where they were legally segregated from their white counterparts. Additionally, as Melamed notes, "racism in the United States and other Western capitalist societies became one of the chief propaganda weapons in the Soviet Union's arsenal" (4). Thus, "in order to define successfully the terms of global governance after World War II, U.S. bourgeoisie classes had to manage the racial contradictions that antiracist and anticolonial movements exposed" (4).

Racial liberalism, as expressed through U.S. governmentality, subsumes any discussion of the relationship between race and capitalist exploitation by using the language of antiracism to achieve U.S. global ascendancy. Analyzing passages from *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Gunnar Myrdal's influential text on racial liberalism, Melamed notes that "official antiracism now explicitly required the victory and extension of U.S. empire, the motor force of capitalism's next unequal development" (6). The conjunction of U.S. democracy with government-approved antiracism is the historical foundation of modern day multicultural neoliberalism.

Melamed identifies many similarities between racial liberalism and neoliberal multiculturalism, explaining that both "suture official antiracism to state policy in a manner that hinders the calling into question of global capitalism, produce new privileged and stigmatized forms of humanity, and deploy a normative cultural model of race" (14). However, in order to bolster the logics of global neoliberalism, multicultural neoliberalism also "deracializes official antiracism to an unprecedented degree, turning (deracialized) racial reference into a series of rhetorical gestures of ethical right and certainty" and emphasizing the importance of open markets in preserving racial freedom and equality (16). To Melamed, neoliberal multiculturalism also employs the language of diversity and representation to divert attention from the exploitative and imperialist logics of U.S. governmentality; "Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice have served as human symbols of the presumed "achievement" of a multiracial, multicultural democracy in the United States. As African American secretaries of state, they have distracted from deployments of U.S. state power to enforce the biopolitical restructuring required by neoliberalism and its negative effects on the racialized poor in target countries" (18).[1] As I will

[1] For more on the relationship between black women such as Condoleezza Rice and the U.S. imperialism, see Erica Edwards' *The Other Side of Terror*.

demonstrate in my close readings, many disaster films utilize this logic in order to present ideals about neoliberalism's ability to maintain freedom and bravery in the face of disaster. This gradual development from racial liberalism in the postwar moment to neoliberal multiculturalism in our current moment demonstrates that neoliberalism is not just a form of structural violence but a form of slow violence as well.

The temporal and geographic dispersion of neoliberalism has been an effective strategy of implementation; in addition to the development of neoliberal multiculturalism, the administration of neoliberalism itself was a highly strategic process that took advantage of a variety of crises over a significant period of time. By creating and profiting off political and economic crises in countries such as Chile, South Korea, as well as natural disasters in the U.S. such as Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. has gradually reaped the benefits of lower barriers to trade and the removal of social safety nets. Neoliberal multiculturalism is a particularly insidious form in that it weaponizes the language of anti-racism in order to distract from the way that U.S. state power enacts neoliberal policies.

The stealthy nature of neoliberalism thus aligns it with Nixon's description of slow violence as a violence which is deferred, often invisible, and hard to combat. To Nixon, the insidious nature of slow violence requires that "we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time...to intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (11). In disaster movies such as *Pacific Rim* and *Godzilla*, kaiju are a way to give figurative shape to the deferred nature of neoliberal multiculturalism. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the monsters become

symbols for the slow violence of nuclear contamination while addressing U.S. anxieties about global ascendancy.

My project diverges from Nixon's call for representations of slow violence, however, by focusing on the way that both slow and spectacular violence intersects in these movies. By looking at the slow violence of neoliberalism and nuclear contamination alongside the more sensational action scenes that are indicative of fast violence, we can understand how disaster movies are imbued with the rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism and see how this rhetoric persists even in the face of fantastical disaster and apocalypse. The fast, spectacular violence of these films are useful sites of analysis because the subsequent responses by the U.S. government demonstrates how enduring the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism are even in fictional representations of disaster.

The Strange Beasts of the Pacific

The kaiju movie, a particular genre of disaster movie that was originated by the 1954 Japanese film Godzilla, is an ideal site through which to investigate the impact of neoliberal multiculturalism as slow violence because it is a genre rooted in the gradual violence of nuclear contamination. Additionally, the Japanese origins of the genre necessitate visual representations of disaster and destruction in Japan and the Pacific Rim region, providing opportunity to further discuss how U.S. economic anxieties about Asia lead to representation of the region that reify neoliberal multiculturalism. The two films studied in this chapter were released in 2013 and 2014, just a few years after Clinton's declaration that the U.S. would focus foreign policy efforts on maintaining economic hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. These films were also released just a few years after the 2011 meltdown at the Fukushima Daichii Nuclear Power Plant, the

most severe nuclear accident since Chernobyl and a disaster which reignited dialogue around nuclear power and the risk of nuclear contamination. Thus, it is no coincidence that these two kaiju movies were released at this time and they provide avenues of analysis into the current contemporary political and economic moment.

Additionally, as Godzilla is one of the longest continuous running film franchises of all time, highlighting some key differences between the original Gojira movie and the recent 2014 American Godzilla film, as well as analyzing other representations of kaiju, show how conceptions of nuclearism have changed over time and across countries. In her article about the Godzilla franchise, Yu-Fang Cho analyzes the ways that different adaptations of Godzilla have engaged with nuclearism. Cho refers to nuclearism as "the dominant ideology that has defined the global geopolitical landscape since the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This ideology legitimizes the use of nuclear weapons for imperial domination and mass destruction in the name of assuring world peace and achieving other political objectives" (220). Using this definition of nuclearism, it is clear to see how nuclearism in the Godzilla movies can function as a form of neoliberal multiculturalism; U.S. neoliberal multiculturalism uses antiracist language and ideology to legitimize militarization and economic austerity in the name of preserving global freedom and stability. Looking at the different ways that Godzilla adaptations grapple with nuclearism, then, allows us to understand how approaches to nuclear weapons can change based on geopolitical strategies and trends.

Cho provides background on the origin of the monster, which originally did serve as a warning against the potential of nuclear weapons and unfettered nuclear testing. The inspiration for Gojira came about after the Castle Bravo nuclear test. This nuclear test "had a total yield over 7,200 times more powerful than the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" and fallout from the

explosion showered Lucky Dragon No. 5, a Japanese tuna fishing boat (221). The entire crew suffered from acute radiation sickness and several months after the detonation, one of the members passed away from complications from radiation poisoning. This incident and the subsequent "scare over radioactive tuna elevated anti- American hostility and antinuclear sentiment across Japan and crucially informed the making of *Gojira*" (222). In this original 1954 movie, Godzilla is awakened by underwater hydrogen bomb testing and wreaks havoc on Japan until scientists develop the Oxygen Destroyer, a superweapon which kills an organism by starving it of oxygen. While there is hesitancy around the ethical and geopolitical consequences of using such a weapon, the Destroyer is ultimately used to kill Godzilla. At the end of the film, one of the scientists expresses a belief that continued hydrogen bomb testing will lead to the awakening of more creatures like Godzilla.

Clearly, this film is rife with antinuclear sentiments as well as anxieties about the creation of superweapons that can be utilized for great destruction, viewpoints that reflect the impact that the atomic bomb had on Japan during and after World War II. However, Cho notes that the 1956 Americanization of Gojira eliminated many of these antinuclear ideas. The "dubbed version cuts almost one- third of the original film (about thirty minutes), removing or neutralizing sections that highlight antinuclear messages and the antagonism between the United States and Japan." Additionally, "sequels were further altered to fit the Hollywood monster film genre of that period, and particularly to appeal to the US consumer market of young adults and children" (222). The commercialization and sanitization of the Godzilla franchise over the decades is evidence of the gradual entrenchment of racial liberalism and then neoliberal multiculturalism from the 1950s forward.

In “Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When Them! Is U.S,” Chon Noriega analyzes the difference between American monster movies in the 1950s such as *Them!* and Japanese ones such as Godzilla. Using a psychoanalytic lens, he examines how American monster movies emphasized the otherness of monsters through their impersonal names “Them” and “It.” In these movies, “the monsters are hated, feared, and eventually destroyed through force, often a variation of the technology that created them…freed from implication in the monster's threat, [Americans] can now use nuclear or other force to destroy it” (67). On the other hand, Japanese monsters such as Godzilla have personalities and names. To Noreiga, because “brute force cannot affect the monster, the search for a solution becomes equally as fascinating as the spectacle of mass destruction. In later films, the search becomes the central plot element, a sign that these films are serious attempts at dealing with trauma therapeutically” (68). Noriega’s distinction is interesting because over time, as Godzilla and kaiju in general have become more popular outside of Japan, the distinction between how Japanese and American filmmakers approach the tropes of kaiju films becomes blurred, especially as American disaster movies become an ideological site for the representation of the slow violence of neoliberal multiculturalism.

The original sentiments of the 1954 film are further complicated and muddied in the 2014 adaptation, revealing contemporary U.S. anxieties about hegemony in the Pacific Rim region. The 2014 *Godzilla* movie centers around Ford Brody (Aaron Taylor Johnson), an explosives specialist in the U.S. Navy. Ford returns to his childhood home in Japan when his father, Joe (Bryan Cranston), is caught trespassing at the abandoned Janjira Nuclear Power Plant, which suffered a collapse 15 years earlier. When Joe accompanies his father on a visit to the power plant to retrieve data from the accident, they discover that a creature has been feeding off the

plant's reactors since the accident; this creature is later identified as a MUTO (Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism) who is trying to reach a female MUTO in the United States in order to mate with it. The awakening of the MUTOs also brings forth Godzilla, who attacks Oahu while Ford is there, traveling back to San Francisco via Hawaii.

The rest of the film follows Ford as he tries to return home to San Francisco. There are various scenes of spectacular destruction as Godzilla and the MUTOs battle each other across the Pacific and into San Francisco. Eventually, Ford, using knowledge about explosives that he gained while in the military, destroys the MUTO nest in San Francisco, Godzilla defeats the two MUTOs, and Ford is reunited with his family.

The choice to center a white American family in a movie about a classic Japanese monster is a pointed one which reveals the film's neoliberal and multiculturalist ideas about the management of disaster. Cho criticizes the choice to center the Brody family, noting that "the emphasis on the Brody family's self-sacrifice, strong moral principles, and traumatic loss adds a heavy dose of nationalist, white, heteroreproductive sentimentality to the previous Godzilla narratives, which tended to portray all of humanity as under threat" (226). In a review of the movie for *Salon*, Nico Lang describes Ford Brody, "a character whose name appears to have been constructed as a masculinity Mad Lib," as a "vaguely comatose white savior." Indeed, the white savior aspect of Ford's character is hammered home throughout the film, starting from a scene in Hawaii where Ford rescues a young boy.

When the male MUTO and Godzilla converge in Hawaii, Ford is in a tram en route to an airport in Honolulu, trying to catch a flight home. A Japanese boy gets separated from his family and using limited Japanese, Ford explains that he will bring the boy back. He then gives the boy

a figurine of a soldier (seen in the still below) and later, when the kaiju fight reaches the airport, he saves the boy from falling off the tram.

This exchange is another example of the way the film co-opts a classic Japanese monster film and reinscribes it with the overtones of American militarism and white saviorism in the service of neoliberal multiculturalism. It is significant that Ford saves a young boy as the emphasis on the nuclear family unit and the reproduction of this unit is one of the key undercurrents of the film. It is the MUTOs desire to reproduce that propels it to America and it is Ford's desire to reunite with his family that prompts him in the same direction. By handing the boy a toy soldier, Ford is reproducing the idea that the American military will protect the boy against threats such as the MUTO and Godzilla. The scene is also meant to cement Ford's status as a family man; even though he is separated from his biological family, he still selflessly looks out for children and attempts to reunite other families. This emphasis on the nuclear family is representative of the larger values that underscore neoliberal multiculturalism; that is, Ford's commitment to saving the Japanese boy signals the United States' commitment to making sure that open markets and other "freedoms" will prevail in Japan and throughout Asia. Additionally,

we see here how neoliberalism itself reproduces certain kinds of organizing logics about family and social orders more broadly speaking; under neoliberalism, a certain type of nuclear family is valorized as the ideal neoliberal subject.

Additionally, the fact that Ford, a member of the United States Navy, gives a toy soldier to a young Japanese boy speaks to the history of American militarism in the Pacific. Since 1945, the United States Navy has maintained a base in Okinawa. In her op-ed, Clinton references the U.S. military presence in Japan, stating that "Asia's remarkable economic growth over the past decade and its potential for continued growth in the future depend on the security and stability that has long been guaranteed by the U.S. military, including more than 50,000 American servicemen and servicewomen serving in Japan and South Korea" (62). This idea that peace and economic growth in the region has been ensured by a U.S. military presence is thus implicit in the scene between Ford and the Japanese boy; Ford protects the boy against dangers that originated in Japan and the boy walks away safe and with a toy soldier to remind him of the stability brought about by a U.S. military presence. By making a member of the military the main character, the film tacitly acknowledges the history of U.S. militarism in the Pacific Rim while consciously choosing to gloss over the horrors inflicted by the U.S. military in the region. As noted above with the 1956 release of Gojira in America, this can be read as a larger trend of American adaptations of Godzilla erasing certain histories. The 2014 Godzilla movie is strategically political in what it does and does not acknowledge in terms of the U.S./Japanese history and certain choices are made that emphasize U.S. hegemony while downplaying the consequences of U.S. imperialism.

The fact that the MUTO is awakened in Japan and then begins to travel to Hawaii and the continental United States reveals anxieties about dangers originating in Asia that then threaten U.S. peace and stability. This can be seen in a scene in Oahu, where the MUTO and Godzilla first converge. Godzilla's surfacing in Hawaii causes a tsunami. We see this act of destruction through the lens of a white family who are presumably visiting the island on vacation. A young white girl wearing a lei turns to the ocean because she hears a sound and moments later, a huge wave sends everyone on the beach running (see still below). The fact that the first sighting of Godzilla arrives on Hawaii is significant because it invokes the history of nuclear testing in the Pacific. By focusing on scenes of destruction that impact white tourists, the film is participating in the erasure of indigenous presence in the Pacific Islands. Additionally, Hawaii and other islands in the Pacific have often been portrayed as lush paradises that wealthy mainlanders use as their personal playground. The film centers whiteness by depicting a white family attending a luau and then fleeing in terror from a developing tsunami.

Specifically, the film's centering of whiteness in Hawaii speaks to a key difference from previous Godzilla films. As Cho notes, "unlike previous Godzilla films, set mainly in locations outside the United States, the 2014 *Godzilla* stages combat scenes in US territories, first in Hawai'i and finally in San Francisco, while the Philippines and Japan serve as the backdrop" (227). This difference in setting shows how the 2014 Godzilla movie is first and foremost preoccupied with the futurity of the United States and neutralizing any potential threats to the country. In the context of neoliberal multiculturalism, the MUTOs, which emerge in the Philippines and Japan, represent threats to not just the U.S. territory of Hawaii but specifically white tourists in Hawaii. This shows that despite neoliberal multiculturalism's outward insistence on the importance of diversity, "official liberal and nationalist antiracism tied to U.S. ascendancy itself has become one of those liberal freedoms that works to designate some forms of humanity as less worthy than others" (Melamed 2). The film's erasure of indigenous Hawaiians during the attack is also in line with previous Americanized versions of Godzilla, which seek to downplay histories of U.S. imperialism and nuclearism in the Pacific Rim region.

The continued focus on children, especially white children, as well as the resonances of U.S. relations with Asia are seen again when Godzilla makes landfall in San Francisco. Despite the efforts of the U.S. military to defeat Godzilla in Hawaii, he makes his way toward the continental United States, in pursuit of the male MUTO who is attempting to join his mate. In an attempt to flee the coastal region of San Francisco, hordes of children, including Ford's own son, are bussed out of the city. However, as they are crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, Godzilla suddenly emerges from the depths of the ocean and masses of U.S. soldiers begin firing upon him. This scene works twofold in presenting a neoliberal multiculturalism that has deep-seated anxieties about maintaining global ascendancy in Asia. First, the staging of the battle on the

Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, a prominent city on the Pacific Rim and a region where many Asian immigrants were initially processed upon arrival to the United States, is a significant choice that reveals anxieties around protecting U.S. borders from foreign threats. There is also a grand sense of spectacle to be gained from the visual destruction of the bridge, an iconic American landmark. Fast violence is definitely at play here, as the terror of the scene is palpable, with the piercing screams of the children ringing above the sound of gunfire. Additionally, the swarms of U.S. soldiers that surround Godzilla speak to the ideas expressed in Clinton's op-ed and the significant role that the U.S. military can play in ensuring peace and stability at home and abroad in Asia. The fact that the military is ultimately unable to harm Godzilla with their artillery demonstrates anxieties about the strength of the U.S. military force. After this fight on the Golden Gate Bridge, scientists at Monarch, an international organization dedicated to the tracking and research of monsters such as Godzilla, urge the U.S. army to fall back and let Godzilla and the MUTOs battle each other. Instead of acquiescing to the demands of the Monarch scientists, the U.S. army general decides that because gunfire and bombs have proven useless against Godzilla, they will try to defeat him with nuclear weapons. The decision to escalate to the deployment of nuclear weapons demonstrates anxieties about the U.S. role in promoting peace and stability; the army was unable to protect the children on the bridge from Godzilla and this demonstrates a failure to protect the very children who will inherit the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism.

However, these anxieties are assuaged at the end of the movie, which signals a return to stability and safety, a peace in part won by the U.S. military. The movie concludes with Ford activating a nuclear warhead to destroy the MUTO nest in San Francisco, while Godzilla defeats the two MUTOs. The portrayal of the United States Army in the movie and the Army's ultimately futile insistence on attacking the kaiju with nuclear force demonstrate anxieties about the strength of the U.S. military against potential threats arising from Asia. Although the MUTOs are eventually destroyed by Godzilla himself, the presence of the U.S. military in the movie is enough to demonstrate a U.S. response to threats from the Pacific is rooted in militarism and displays of nuclear force.

The destruction of the MUTOs nest through nuclear weapons demonstrates the film's ongoing anxieties about reproduction, children, and futurity. Although the nuclear weapons could not defeat the MUTOs and Godzilla themselves, by successfully destroying the MUTO nest with a nuclear warhead, the U.S. military can claim a reproductive and moral victory; the MUTOs will not live to reproduce but the various human children who have shown to be saved will live on and ostensibly have positive views of the military and their role in protecting

them. The reliance of nuclear weapons to use against the MUTOs also demonstrates a general arrogance about humankind's ability to control nature, another common theme in disaster movies that I will investigate in a later section.

The 1954 Godzilla movie ushered in the genre of kaiju movies, which have remained popular since its inception. The 2013 film *Pacific Rim* is another contemporary kaiju film which engages with questions of U.S. hegemony in Asia as well as the slow violence of climate change. *Pacific Rim* depicts a world where humanity is threatened by kaiju who are emerging from a breach in the Pacific Ocean. The countries of the world band together to construct jaegers (German for "hunters"), which are giant robots piloted by two people who control the machine by sharing a neural link (this process of sharing a neural link is called "drifting"). Raleigh Becket (Charlie Hunnam) is a successful pilot of the Gipsy Danger jaeger. After an accident in which his co-pilot / brother is killed, Raleigh leaves the jaeger program. Five years later, the program has been defunded in favor of a coastal wall project that supposedly will be cheaper and more effective against kaiju. However, when a section of the coastal wall is easily destroyed by a kaiju, Marshal Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba) invites Raleigh to re-join the jaeger program in Hong Kong as they attempt to seal the breach once and for all.

As Erin Suzuki notes, "the oceanic setting of *Pacific Rim* is particularly apt" as " the Pacific figured as a theater of war in the U.S. imagination for a large part of the twentieth century, but in recent political discourse it has been invoked primarily as an economic zone" (21). Indeed, similar to Godzilla, the setting of *Pacific Rim* engages with the history of U.S. imperialism in the Pacific region while also using the Asia-Pacific region as a staging ground for the spread of American neoliberal ideology. The oceanic aspect of the kaiju in this film also allows for a pointed metaphor about climate change. The kaiju in this movie are similar to the

monsters in Godzilla in that they give figurative shape to slow violence. The kaiju are rated on a category 1-5 scale, evoking the same scale used to categorize hurricanes. Although the first kaiju landing causes great destruction, the world simply mourns their dead and moves on. Another kaiju attack hits and again, there is a brief period of mourning and no action taken. It is only after several kaiju attacks that the world begins mobilizing in response. This delay in response can be read as commentary on climate change in real life and the lack of urgency from world leaders. The comparison to hurricanes is further seen when a category 4 kaiju breaks through the coastal wall that was thought to be unbreachable. This evokes the destruction of the levees during Hurricane Katrina, another instance where human engineering failed in the face of a tremendous natural disaster. The kaiju then represent a way to metaphorize the slow violence of climate change and also to critique the responses (or lack of responses) from the world.

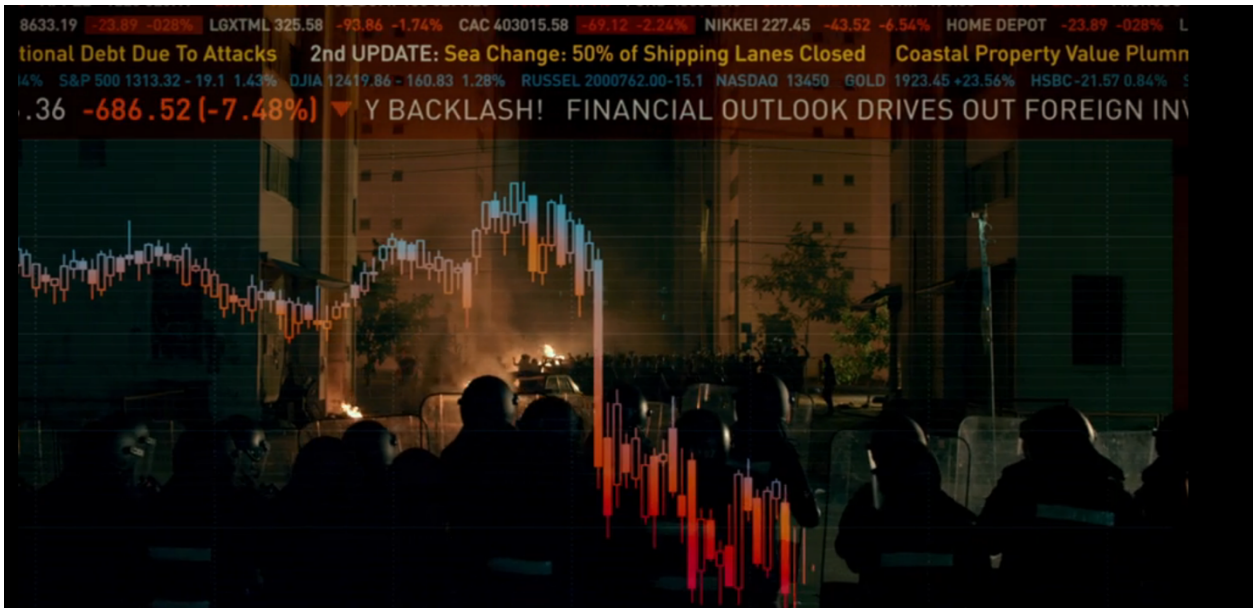
The emergence of kaiju themselves are also tied to climate change. A scientist specializing in the study of kaiju, Dr. Newton Geiszler (Charlie Day) explains that the kaiju are colonists that overtake worlds, consume them, and move onto the next. The kaiju had been on Earth during the time of dinosaurs but are now returning because ozone depletion and polluted waters have made Earth an ideal habitat for them to live in. This origin story shares some similarities with the origin of Godzilla - the attacks wrought by Godzilla and the *Pacific Rim* kaiju did not come about naturally but rather are the respective consequences of nuclear testing and environmental pollution. The story also invites parallels to the real life history of U.S. involvement in the Pacific; much like the kaiju are colonists in the human world, the U.S. colonized much of the Pacific in the 20th century and are still actively engaged with maintaining military and economic power in the region. In this way, *Pacific Rim* can be seen as engaging with Nixon's concept of slow violence while also presenting visual spectacle to appeal to wide

audiences. The origin of the kaiju is the epitome of slow violence; they left millennia ago but only returned because increased human activity and consumption caused anthropogenic climate change that has rendered Earth once again an ideal habitat. Given that kaiju are stand-ins for both hurricanes and human colonization, I argue that the film is critiquing the slow violence of climate change by insinuating that the relentless pursuit of profit has brought about increased natural disasters.

The kaiju attacks bring great destruction to cities but they also leave behind an excrement called kaiju blue, which renders waters and surrounding areas toxic wastelands (see still below). As Danielle Crawford notes, the toxicity of the kaiju attacks evoke the 2011 nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Station in Japan; "Del Toro's film was released just two years after this nuclear disaster, during a time when an estimated three hundred tons of contaminated water were being leaked per day into the Pacific. As such, the kaiju of *Pacific Rim* seem to be a figurative warning of the dangers associated with both climate change and oceanic toxicity" (234). The kaiju serve as an effective metaphor and critique of climate change as well as evidence of the risks involved with nuclear power. The film's opening scenes documenting the kaiju attacks and their aftermath seem to signal a more measured critique of nuclear weapons than the 2014 *Godzilla*.

However, although the film begins to represent the slow violence of climate change and seems critical of the role that humankind has played in causing the kaiju attacks, it ultimately reinforces neoliberal multiculturalism by expressing an inherent belief that U.S. militarism and nuclear power will save the world from destruction and lead to the stabilization of U.S. economic power in Asia. Economic anxieties and motives are displayed in the still below, which depicts the stock market crashing as a result of continued kaiju attacks in other Pacific Rim cities such as Manila. Headlines such as “Sea change: 50% of shipping lanes closed” and “coastal property value plummets” also demonstrate the economic impact of kaiju attacks. This demonstrates how, even in the face of devastating attacks from giant monsters, the world is still most concerned with upholding capitalism and protecting profit. Additionally, as noted above, the world does not even begin to take action until several kaiju have already made landfall; this fact coupled with the still from above imply that world leaders only take the threat of climate change seriously when it begins to seriously threaten profits and property. As Erin Suzuki notes, “the focus is not

so much on containing an established threat but on developing and evolving technologies and strategic alliances to master and outmaneuver an ever-changing economic environment" (20).



The global response to the threat of kaiju demonstrates a similar belief in the idea that innovation can prevail over nature; rather than focusing efforts on containing anthropogenic climate change, the world gathers together to develop technology to demonstrate mastery and dominance over nature, as represented by the kaiju. The jaeger program itself is also an example of global powers using environmental threats to develop technology rooted in militarism. The building of the jaegers is an intensive process that requires cooperation from many different countries; this cooperation is demonstrated as a positive win for humanity. Many jobs are created through the jaeger manufacturing process, and this is also seen as In this way, the kaiju attacks and the subsequent production of the jaegers can be seen as evoking the history of World War II, in which the U.S. was propelled out of The Great Depression in part because of the increased manufacturing of weapons and other war-related products. The economic benefits of the jaeger program can also be read as a type of disaster capitalism, a way for the rich to continue to profit

from the disaster of the kaiju. Additionally, the fact that other attempts to subdue the kaiju such as coastal walls have proven futile and the jaeger program is presented as the world's last hope to defeat the kaiju reveals the overwhelming value and faith placed in the military - the only way to defend against the effects of climate change, the movie implies, will be giant technological soldiers.

U.S. economic anxieties about Asia's growing influence in the global sphere are reflected in the fact that the first kaiju attack happens in San Francisco (see still below). In the still below, we see the complete destruction of the Golden Gate Bridge. As noted earlier in the section on *Godzilla*, San Francisco, and specifically Angel Island, was the first landing point for hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants in the early to mid-20th century. By staging kaiju fights on the Golden Gate Bridge, the movies express the significance of San Francisco as a meeting point between the West and the East. Given the United States' fears about China's growing economic influence in the 21st century, one can also read the destruction of San Francisco as a manifestation of American anxieties regarding China. It is this anxiety that is reflected in the climax of the movie when the kaiju breach is sealed using nuclear weapons.

The conclusion of the movie and the victorious allied efforts of American, British, Japanese, and Australian forces is indicative of the neoliberal multiculturalism that takes precedence over any environmental themes within the film. When Raleigh arrives at the last jaeger base in Hong Kong, he sees that the mission to seal the breach is one that is supposedly marked by international cooperation. There are jaeger teams from Russia, China, Australia, and Raleigh, representing the American team, must find a new co-pilot. Raleigh decides that he is most "drift-compatible" with Mako Mori (Rinko Kikiuchi), the adopted Japanese daughter of Marshal Pentecost. All four teams are set to participate in the mission to seal the breach; however, the Russian and Chinese team, along with one Australian pilot, are quickly killed trying to protect Hong Kong from two category 4 kaiju. Thus, Raleigh and Mako, assisted by the remaining Australian pilot and Pentecost himself, are tasked with sealing the breach. Ultimately, Raleigh and Mako are able to send a nuclear warhead through the breach, thus stopping any kaiju from attacking Earth.

It is significant that a team composed of Americans, Japanese, and Australians is the one that saves the world and that the Russian and Chinese team are destroyed relatively early into the main plot of the film. The Chinese jaeger, Crimson Typhoon, is described as extremely technologically advanced, especially compared to Raleigh's older Gipsy Danger, which an Australian pilot refers to as a "rust bucket." The fact that the Russian and Chinese crews are the first ones killed demonstrates that the movie is still invested in maintaining an image of the United States as a superpower while making any rivals seem weak and ineffective. The technological prowess of the Crimson Typhoon also reflects American anxieties about China's growing influence in the field of technology. And, as shown in the Clinton op-ed, Japan is seen

as a valuable ally to the United States and a key linchpin in the continuation of open markets in the region.

The inclusion of Mako Mori, Raleigh's Japanese co-pilot, plays a significant role in presenting the sort of diversity and embracing of other cultures that defines neoliberal multiculturalism while simultaneously acting in service of the jaeger industrial complex. Mako Mori seems to offer a subversion of techno-orientalist tropes. In their edited volume on techno-orientalism, David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu define the concept as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo-or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse…Techno-Orientalist speculations of an Asianized future have become ever more prevalent in the wake of neoliberal trade policies that enabled greater flow of information and capital between the East and the West" (2). Using this definition, we can read the depiction of Crimson Typhoon as an example of techno-orientalism; the Chinese team is described in hypertechnological terms while the American and Australian pilots are presented as rugged and masculine. As Roh, Huang and Niu note, "Western nations vying for cultural and economic dominance with Asian nations find in techno- Orientalism an expressive vehicle for their aspirations and fears" and that is precisely what is occurring with the representations of the Chinese jaeger team (3). However, Mako Mori subverts the typical techno-orientalist representation of Asian women because we gain access to her interiority and backstory through her drifting with Raleigh.

Roh, Huang and Niu pose the question: "If technology has come to mediate "contact" between East and West through techno- Orientalist discourses, how, then, might we fashion representational technologies that engender "encounter" rather than empty contact" (10). The neural link technology employed by jaeger pilots is an excellent example of a speculative

technology that does not reinforce techno-orientalist tropes but rather provides a source of genuine encounter between the East (as represented by Mako) and the West (as represented by Raleigh). The glance into Mako's memories humanizes her and provides an emotionally resonant reasoning for her desire to pilot jaegers and defeat the kaiju. Additionally, as a highly competent pilot whose body is automatically sexualized, Mako subverts traditional techno-orientalist representations of Asian women. In "Reimagining Asian Women in Feminist Post- Cyberpunk Science Fiction," Kathryn Allan notes that Asian women in speculative fiction narratives are often "'Orientalized,' rendered as 'meat' and objects of white, Western male desire" (151). *Pacific Rim* reverses this gaze in a scene where Mako comes across a shirtless Raleigh. Embarrassed, she rushes back to her room across the hall but continues to watch him through her door's peep-hole. In a genre where Asian women are objectified, this scene, along with the fact that there are no scenes of gratuitous nudity featuring Mako, demonstrate the film's reversal of a techno-orientalist gaze.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that while Mako Mori does provide a counterpoint to stereotypical representations of Asian women in speculative fiction, her Japanese nationality and the U.S. strategic interest in Japan is a key reason for her characterization. Once Mako is selected as Raleigh's co-pilot, they have a test run in Gipsy Danger. Because they are

changing a neural link, Raleigh is able to access Mako's memories and sees that she is revisiting a childhood memory from the day Tokyo was destroyed by a kaiju (see still below).

Indeed, although the movie is titled *Pacific Rim*, the film focuses primarily on an alliance with one Pacific Rim country, Japan, while glossing over the U.S. history of nuclearism in Japan and the Pacific Islands. As Crawford notes, "*Pacific Rim* curiously omits how the Coastal Wall Program would protect Pacific Island nations, like the Marshall Islands, from the threat of kaiju—as the proposed wall simply stretches across the continental borders of the Pacific, such as the wall from Alaska to California" (223-4). The focus on Japan and the still from above is reminiscent of the way that Asia is figured in *Godzilla*; both films feature scenes where young Japanese children in distress are saved by Americans who are associated with the U.S. military. This positions the United States as the savior for countries like Japan and the arbiter of peace and stability in the Pacific region.

Additionally, I read the portrayal of Mako Mori as a form of neoliberal multiculturalism because even though she is not depicted with techno-orientalist stereotypes, she is still a key

figure in the nuclear sealing of the breach and thus, part of the larger military industrial complex that supports neoliberalism. As noted earlier, Melamed explains that the government uses multiculturalism to distract from the deployment of neoliberal policies. For example, "a multicultural, multiracial U.S. Armed Forces is symbolically counterposed to the figure of the monocultural Arab or Muslim terrorist. Alberto Gonzalez, a Mexican American U.S. attorney general, serves as a kind of signpost for multiculturalism by virtue of his racialized body and his Mexican descent. As such an embodiment, he obscures the otherwise clearly racist implications of a renewed assault on Mexican and Arab 'illegal aliens'" (18). Similarly, the multinational jaeger force of which Mako Mori is a part obscures the history of U.S. militarization in the Pacific. Thus, *Pacific Rim* is ultimately not an indictment of the slow violence of climate change but an idealistic and multicultural idea of what a neoliberal future amidst disaster could look like.

Godzilla and *Pacific Rim* are part of a larger trend of disaster movies, especially disaster movies post-9/11, that depict neoliberal and multiculturalist ideas about international cooperation and humankind's ability to control nature and protect economic assets from disaster. *Pacific Rim* involves a multinational group of jaeger pilots who band together to, as Pentecost puts it in perhaps the most infamous scene from the movie, "cancel the apocalypse." The idea that the end of the world, especially one that has been brought about because of human degradation to the environment, can simply be canceled with enough military might and a can-do spirit, is indicative of the rhetoric espoused by U.S. officials such as Clinton. The rhetoric of "canceling the apocalypse" also aligns with Melamed's observation that "a language of multiculturalism consistently portrays acts of force required for neoliberal restructuring to be humanitarian: a benevolent multicultural invader (the United States, multinational troops, a multinational

corporation) intervenes to save life, "give" basic goods or jobs, and promote limited political freedoms" (3). With the U.S. and Japan at the forefront of canceling the apocalypse in Pacific Rim, we see this idea of the benevolent multicultural invader intervening to save the world from itself.

In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), another disaster movie that engages with ideas around climate change, the idea of international cooperation is also emphasized. In the film, Sam Hall (Jake Gyllenhaal) is in New York City competing in an academic decathlon when a superstorm hits Manhattan. He and his friends seek shelter in the New York Public Library. Sam's father Jack (Dennis Quaid) is a paleoclimatologist and realizes that the melting polar ice caps shifted the temperature of the Atlantic Ocean, resulting in a shift in the Atlantic Current that is causing the storm. The storm will cause a new ice age in much of the northern hemisphere. After consulting with scientists in Scotland and other countries, Jack embarks on a daring mission to rescue Sam in New York. Although scientific cooperation is also emphasized in this movie, ultimately it is Jack who is depicted as the hero for braving intense cold and snow to rescue his son. Again, we see an emphasis on children and heroic men who will protect children from disaster at any cost; this demonstrates a fixation on reproductive futurity as well as the transmission of neoliberal values through children. The film's thesis about the brave and enduring spirit of the United States is embodied by the still below, a now iconic depiction of the Statue of Liberty buried under hundreds of feet of snow. This scene demonstrates the impact of climate change but the fact that the Statue of Liberty still remains standing implies that one

day, the snow will melt and the Statue of Liberty — as well as the values of freedom that she embodies — will rise once again.

In *Geostorm* (2017), a series of natural disasters spurs the international community to unite and create "Dutch Boy," a group of satellites that control the climate. The creation of the satellites is heralded as an example of the world coming together to defeat environmental threats but significantly, the American Jake Lawson (Gerard Butler) is identified as the mastermind behind the technology. When the satellites start malfunctioning, Jake travels into space to sacrifice himself and fix the satellites to restore balance to nature. Again, this example demonstrates how disaster movies commonly espouse ideas about international cooperation but ultimately, depict the heroic American as the one that will save us from destruction. And it is also important to note that despite the various international collaborations depicted in these disaster films, countries such as Russia and China are never the ones that are actively engaging in the collaboration. Instead, countries such as Japan and the United Kingdom are the most

common collaborators. Of course, this is no coincidence and evidence of U.S. anxieties around China and a desire to create strategic alliances that will help the U.S. achieve its neoliberal goals.

Geostorm, with its system of satellites, also represents a belief in the ability of humankind to control the consequences of climate change with technology. This belief is of course also seen in *Pacific Rim*, where jaeger technology as well as nuclear weaponry are credited for saving the world. This belief in the all-mighty power of technology distracts from the fact that neoliberal desire for continued economic growth and development has led to the depletion of resources, pollution of land and sea, and other environmental consequences that the world faces today.

Many of these films do make an attempt at representing the slow violence of climate change — whether it be through the use of kaiju as metaphor for ocean toxicity or scenes of the next Ice Age to warn us about the dangers of melting polar ice caps. However, the environmental consciousness of these films is ultimately overshadowed by the neoliberal multiculturalism that celebrates the use of nuclear weapons and humankind's ability to prevail over climate change.

This is why it is important to also engage with representations of disasters that inherently critique neoliberalism and which envision alternative futures and speculative worlds where disaster is not merely co-opted in the name of neoliberal disaster capitalism. In the chapters that follow, I turn to literary works to see how authors of speculative fiction represent disaster in ways that engage more deeply with issues of racialization, gender, and class than neoliberal multiculturalism does.

CHAPTER TWO

Narrative Closure and Redemption in *Zone One* and *Severance*

The Neoliberal Zombie

In October 2011, during the third week of the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City, protesters dressed up as zombies and stumbled through Lower Manhattan. The zombie walk was meant to evoke the idea of "corporate zombies" and to show financial workers the effects of unbridled capitalism (Neza, "Zombieland"). The protest was part of Occupy Wall Street's larger mission of bringing attention to economic inequality; the movement's slogan "We are the 99%" famously highlighted the severe income disparities present within the United States. It is no coincidence that the Occupy Wall Street movement came just a few years after the Great Recession, the worst economic downturn for the country since the Great Depression; unemployment during the recession reached a high of 10% and millions of homes went into foreclosure ("Starting Over: Post-foreclosure Outcomes"). Meanwhile, large banks were bailed out and income disparity continued to increase - in 2010, Reuters reported that the world's wealthy became even wealthier amid the recession. It is against this economic backdrop that the protesters in New York donned suits and white face paint and took to the streets to demand change ("World's rich got richer amid '09 recession").

This economic backdrop also animates the two novels analyzed in this chapter, *Severance* by Ling Ma and *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead. These novels depict the ways in which global capitalism and neoliberal economic policies have caused devastating pandemics and how the rhetoric of neoliberalism continues even after the destruction of modern society. The two texts, both set a few years after the recession, depict a Manhattan ravaged by a pandemic that has decimated most of the world's population.

Both texts invoke historical racial forms — yellow peril in *Severance* and the zombie in *Zone One* — in order to demonstrate how racialization endures, even at the end of the world, and how these racial forms shape one's relationship to global capitalism. How do Ma and Whitehead take these established racial forms and adapt them to apocalyptic settings and what can these post-disaster representations of race tell us about racialization in our own setting? In what ways do the logics of global capitalism persist even when most of the world has been ravaged by disease and in what ways do these novels resist these logics and provide new ways of thinking about community and race? What can a comparative approach tell us about the ways that Asian Americans and African Americans experience racialization amidst disaster? These are the questions that animate my reading of these two texts.

There are also striking similarities between the infected in *Severance* and *Zone One*; the "fevered" in Ma's novel and the "stragglers" in Whitehead's novel seem motivated by nostalgia and are drawn to objects and rituals they enjoyed in their pre-pandemic lives: the living room sofa, the ritual of setting the table and eating dinner as a family, etc. I will analyze nostalgia in these texts in two different ways. My first reading of nostalgia will examine the commodification of nostalgia and the way that this commodification ruptures the ability to accurately parse history. This reading is informed by the work of scholars such as Jameson and his analysis of "nostalgia films." My second reading of nostalgia in these texts will take the word's etymology as a starting point — nostalgia is a combination of the Greek words *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (pain) and thus, literally translates to painful return home and evokes the concept of homesickness. It is particularly interesting that nostalgia figures so heavily in the diseases that ravage humanity in both *Zone One* and *Severance* given that the very consequence of the disease — the way it so completely destroys existing ways of life — also destroys the possibility of

returning home. The ways that Candace Chen and Mark Spitz, the protagonists of these two novels, process their nostalgia for the past and how their differing ways of experiencing the past are linked to the different ways they experience racialization. Again, as noted above, a comparative racial approach will thus allow me to shed light on the ways that Asian Americans and African Americans process the meaning of home and how similarities and differences in the configuration of home influence the sorts of nostalgia experienced by the main characters in these novels. Additionally, as the larger framework of this project engages with the way that neoliberalism reorganizes social life and how speculative texts provide alternatives to that social reorganization, I read nostalgia as a way to both reinforce neoliberal social orders as well as a mode to speculate other ways of connecting with one's family and past, specifically in *Severance.*

That is to say, I interrogate how nostalgia functions in these novels as both a sentimental and recuperative structure that impacts the way that Candace and Mark interact with commodities, the metropolis, and reproductive futures. By looking at the role that nostalgia plays in both pre- and post-apocalyptic New York, we can further understand the relationship between racial forms, disaster, and neoliberalism.

The sentimental and nostalgic nature of the zombies in *Severance* and *Zone One* set them apart from previous iterations of zombies. Building on Fredric Jameson's assertion that nostalgia films lack political consciousness and historicity, I argue that the sentimental mode that the fevered and stragglers continually operate in is a commentary on the banality and dehumanizing features of neoliberalism. However, my argument diverges from Jameson's because I also want to recuperate nostalgia as not merely an ahistorical mode of remembering the past but as a

necessary conduit for connecting with kinship and culture, especially for Candace, an immigrant who has no immediate family in the United States.

While nostalgia is often regarded as an overly sentimental way of engaging with the past, nostalgia is also an inherently science fictional structure of feeling in that it is rooted in world building and utopian desire. As John J. Su notes, "nostalgia encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia – lost or imagined homelands – represent efforts to articulate alternatives" (5). This view of nostalgia as an imaginative exploration of what would have been is relevant to *Severance* and *Zone One* because both texts are speculative works that also engage with what the future could be. Nostalgia is therefore a mode of thinking about the past, present, and future that encourages further reflection on the failures of society and the consequences of these failures. Additionally, as Rita Felski explains in her chapter on nostalgia and modernity, "the yearning for the past may engender active attempts to construct an alternative future, so that nostalgia comes to serve a critical rather than a simply conservative purpose" (59). I see nostalgia then as a type of world-building; nostalgic fantasies present a way for people grappling with loss and displacement to remember what was but also what could have been. In my readings of *Severance*, in particular, I will analyze how Candace's imagined conversations with her late mother represent this type of nostalgia.

This more recuperative treatment of nostalgia in *Severance* also emphasizes the different way the two novels engage with the relationship between disaster and race. Candace is a first-generation immigrant from China whose parents have died years before the onset of Shen Fever. Pre-pandemic, she expresses feelings of loss and grief for both her parents and is nostalgic for her past life in Fuzhou. Post-pandemic, because Candace has no living family in the United

States, when the pandemic strikes and everyone around her leaves work in order to spend whatever time is left their families, she stays on and continues going into the office. Nostalgia is not merely an ahistorical look at the past but for Candace, a way for her to feel connected to a history and a place during a time when she feels isolated and adrift. Thus, I argue that nostalgia in her case allows her to connect with her family and her heritage, especially amidst the cognitively estranging landscape of post-pandemic New York. On the other hand, Mark is a black man who has been born and raised on Long Island. Obviously, the transatlantic slave trade that brought black people to the Americas is a marked difference from the immigration patterns experienced by post-1965 Asian American immigrants such as Candace's parents. *Zone One*, then, is a novel that engages with nostalgia in a more cynical way because of the history of social death experienced by black people in the Americas. Any sentimental longing for the past is neutralized by the understanding that African Americans have been ontologically characterized as commodities. In the introduction to *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, the editors explain that the slaves "are not recognized as a social subject and are thus precluded from the category of "human" and that the "non-event of emancipation" has not changed this fact (8). An Afro-pessimistic view of Black liberation is understood as "a negative dialectic, a politics of refusal, and a refusal to affirm; as an embrace of disorder and incoherence and as an act of political apostasy" that "takes to task any movement invested in the preservation of society" (11). Additionally, as Frank Wilderson III notes in his work on Afropessimism, "A Black radical agenda is terrifying…because it emanates from a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption" (15). As a work of post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, *Zone One* then represents an opportunity to imagine the Afro-pessimistic view of Black liberation in its most extreme and radical iteration.

The complete annihilation of established society limits the recuperative power of nostalgia - there will be no one around to remember the past, after all - but in an Afro-pessimistic sense, signals an embracing of disorder and narrative closure which necessitates the complete and utter destruction of our current way of life before the true liberation and new systems can emerge.

Zone One invokes the racial form of the zombies by portraying a Manhattan whose population has been wiped out by a fast-spreading disease. The protagonist, Mark Spitz, is a survivor who has been sent to New York as part of a Reconstruction effort organized by American Phoenix, a quasi-government entity based in Buffalo. Spitz, along with his co-workers Gary and Kaitlyn, systematically enter buildings in New York to dispose of skels and stragglers. Skels are zombies — they are the living dead who try to eat the living and pass on the plague. Stragglers, on the other hand, are zombies of another sort; they do not move to attack but rather pick a gesture that was meaningful to them before the plague and occupy this position for eternity. As the book puts it, "their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment" (62). The stragglers in *Zone One* are motivated by nostalgia for past lives.

Zone One is both a continuation of and a subversion of traditional tropes regarding zombies. The zombie is a figure rooted in slavery and thus deeply related to economics and global capitalism. As Camille Fojas notes in *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers*, the zombie has roots in Haitian folklore as a former slave that had risen from the dead and haunted plantations. Additionally, as Haiti was the site of a successful insurrection against French colonial powers, the form of the zombie is also imbued with ideas about revolution. Thus, like yellow peril, I see the zombie as a form that is inherently contradictory; the figure emerges because of the brutality of slavery but also becomes a symbol for resisting this brutality and successfully revolting. In

The Transatlantic Zombie, Sarah Lauro interrogates the dual facets of the zombie myth, coining the term zombie dialectic in order to describe the way that the zombie represents both a history of oppression and rebellion. Lauro notes that "two aspects of the zombie mythology—those inseparably woven together as strands in our knot, forming the center of the zombie myth: the specter of the colonial slave and that slave's potential for rebellion. These two lines provide the tension of what I am calling the zombie's dialectic; and when it is a mode for thinking, zombie dialectics" (5). To Lauro, "the zombie myth is not just concerned with the disempowerment of the colonial subject but equally the dialectical exchanges between masters and slaves, between the colonized and the colonizer; and as such it is also about the cultural powers of the entirely real domain of the imaginary, as retained even by those who are described as socially dead" (6). Because of the dialectical nature of the zombie, the myth can serve dual functions with a novel such as *Zone One*. There is the history of slave labor and oppression connected to the zombie and we see that history reflected in the connection the novel makes between the zombified skels and wage laborers under late capitalism, as I will demonstrate in later readings. However, there is a sense of hope that is inherent in the zombie figure because of its connotations with successful Haitian slave rebellions. As I will touch upon, this sense of hope comes across in a way in *Zone One*, where the end of the world signals the beginning of one that is freed from capitalism, anti-blackness, and other such systems rooted in inequality and exploitation.

Additionally, the socially dead nature of the zombie connects the figure to the field of Afro-pessimism and provides a way of looking at a race in a novel that features a protagonist whose race is not revealed until the end of the novel. Even then, the fact that Mark Spitz is black is treated as an offhand matter in the book. Some have read the seemingly ambivalent reveal of Mark's race as Whitehead signaling the arrival of a post-racial society. For example in *Colson*

Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature, Kimberly Fain argues that because Whitehead does not live in "a segregated America like [Richard] Wright and [Ann] Petry…he has the opportunity to fictionalize a world in *Zone One* where he may reject the contemporary issue of racism in post-apocalyptic society. Color is ambiguous in the future. Everyday survivors are unified by a common state of disenfranchisement" (149). However, just because Whitehead delays the reveal of Mark Spitz's race in the novel and *on the surface*, the novel does not seem intimately concerned with race, does not mean that race is a non-factor in this text. The novel is narrated in a cynical and ironic tone and therefore, necessitates more careful attention to how race operates in a post-apocalyptic setting. Indeed, I would argue that the timing of the reveal coincides with the destruction of the "reconstructed" Manhattan. I read this timing as a distinctly Afro-pessimistic understanding of the role that blackness plays in the construction of society. To Frank Wilderson, "what Black people embody is the potential for a catastrophe of human arrangements writ large" (30). The following is an exchange between Wilderson and journalist C.S. Soong, as published in *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*:

> CSS: Well, let's engage in a thought experiment. I'm thinking back to your claim about the master in the master/slave relation: unless they dole out violence to Blacks, they can have no psychic or psychological integrity or security. Let's posit that all Blacks are wiped out. There is a genocide and all Blacks are removed. In that case, in a sense, you are saying by implication that humanity would cease to exist because the conceptual coherence that it needs would be absent.
>
> FW: Exactly, and that will never happen. (26)

The idea that blackness is integral to the conceptual coherence of humanity and that humanity would cease to exist if black people ceased to exist is a thought experiment to Wilderson and Soong, a hypothetical scenario that could not happen. However, through speculative fiction, thought experiments can be carried out to their extreme fictional ends. The reveal of Mark Spitz's race at the end of the novel, closely followed by the fall of Zone One, is a

marked choice that I will argue is indicative of an Afro-pessimistic way of engaging with apocalypse and race.

By comparing these two novels and the way that different racial forms operate in them, I also hope to excavate how yellow peril and zombie have endured into modern times in relation to each other. In *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-emancipation to Neoliberal America*, Helen Jun explains that "by engaging how Asian Americans and African Americans have engaged with discourses of US citizenship, it becomes clear that the production of racial meanings is a relational process in which differential inclusions and exclusions are endemic to the institution of citizenship itself" (4). Similarly, while I am not necessarily interested in interrogating the institution of citizenship, I am interested in the relationship between racial meaning and global capitalism and what is revealed about the production of these racial meanings in a world where capitalism as we know it has been destroyed. In what ways do these racial meanings still persist and in what ways do these change once the institutions that birthed them have become irrevocably different?

Additionally, in her explanation of her comparative methodology, Jun emphasizes the importance of reading a text for "the inevitable contradictions it attempts to manage or reconcile. This more supple methodology can reveal how historically specific contradictions inherent in the institution of citizenship take shape and are negotiated in Asian American and African American cultural production" (5). Like Jun, I am interested in the contradictions inherent in forms such as the zombie and yellow peril and what these contradictions can reveal both about historical and speculative cross-racial relations.

The Nostalgic Zombie

The stragglers in *Zone One* make up less than a percent of those infected with the plague and unlike the normal skels, the stragglers remain frozen in one position and are therefore less threatening to the living. However, sweepers like Mark Spitz are still instructed to shoot the stragglers, record their demographic data, and dispose of their bodies. I argue that the stragglers and their nostalgia for pre-pandemic life produce anxieties in the living because these repetitive actions remind the living that they are not far removed from the stragglers themselves.

When we are first introduced to the aberration that is the straggler, the examples that the narration chooses to highlight are all related to work and thus, demonstrate that life post-pandemic is merely recreating the patterns and loops of pre-pandemic life. Stragglers are described as "a succession of imponderable tableaux." There is the "former shrink, plague-blind, in her requisite lounge chair…the pock-faced assistant manager of the shoe store crouched before the foot-measuring instrument, frozen, sans customers, the left shoes of his bountiful stock on display…The vitamin-store clerk stalled out among the aisles, depleted among the plenty, the tiny bottles" (60). It is significant that these first examples of stragglers are all people who became infected with the plague while at work. The shrink, the assistant manager, the vitamin-store clerk — for some reason, they have all chosen a work scene as the tableau to live out the rest of their undead days. This demonstrates the crushing necessity of labor; under neoliberalism, people are working more hours for fewer wages and naturally, one ends up spending most of one's life at work which is why so many stragglers seem to gravitate to these scenes. Additionally, the descriptions of these stragglers emphasize their immobility and lifeless nature compared to the commodities surrounding them. The stragglers in this passage are

"plague-blind" and "frozen" and "depleted" but are surrounded by "bountiful stock" and "plenty, tiny bottles." Here, the commodity is valued and gleaming, at the expense of the worker.

Yet, these stragglers are not so different from the way that Mark and the rest of his colleagues live out their lives. Mark and the rest of the sweepers of Zone One are also reduced to repetitive patterns of labor; Monday through Saturday, they plod through Zone One rounding up skels and stragglers, recording their data, dragging their bodies down fifth-floor walk-ups. With only one day of rest on Sunday, their lives are just as dominated by work as in before times. The only noticeable difference is that it does not appear that Mark is paid for his labor; in fact, in a manner recalling slavery and thus again invoking the form of the zombie, it seems that Mark and the rest of the sweepers receive room and board in exchange for their work cleaning up Zone One. Of course, in a world decimated by the pandemic, printed money would have little to no value but there are still echoes to previous systems of slavery and indentured servitude.

Like the regular skels, the stragglers are portrayed as dehumanized monsters but the stragglers are perhaps even more threatening to the living because they show that there was only a thin line separating the straggler and any other living person. As Sarah Lauro notes, "the zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains. Therefore, unlike the vampire, the zombie poses a twofold terror: there is the primary fear of being devoured by a zombie, a threat posed mainly to the physical body and the secondary fear that one will, in losing one's consciousness become a part of the monstrous horde" (397). Because the straggler is frozen and not bloodthirsty in the same way as a skel, the threat here is not that the straggler will turn the living into part of the monstrous horde; rather, the anxiety lies in the fear that under late stage capitalism, we were all already part of the monstrous horde of dehumanized worker "zombies." The nostalgic, repetitive actions of the

stragglers — especially those who choose a tableau related to their work — provoke these anxieties in the living, particularly the elite leaders of American Phoenix who benefit from the same hierarchies that existed pre-pandemic.

Indeed, the mere existence of the stragglers also highlight economic inequities within the city, thus requiring the remaining living to face another uncomfortable truth that this elitism persists even after the end of the world as they know it. Mark notes that "the rich tended to escape. Entire white-glove buildings were devoid, as Omega discovered after they worried the seams of and then shattered the glass doors to the lobby…A larger percentage of the poor tended to stay, shoving layaway bureaus and media consoles up against the doors" (163). This description echoes real-life inequities in response to disaster. People who have more access to wealth are able to access resources to evacuate more easily while people in the working-class have fewer options to escape disaster. This further cements the idea that disaster in *Zone One*, although speculative and involving monsters such as zombies, is not radically different from the disasters we live out every day under neoliberalism.

This thin line between human and straggler is emphasized in a scene where Mark, usually cynical and reserved in the face of catastrophe, demonstrates a rare nostalgic sentimentality for the past. On his way back to the headquarters of Zone One in New York, Mark comes across a franchise of a chain restaurant that his family frequented:

> The restaurant was his family's place for the impulse visits and the birthdays and random celebrations, season up on season…replicas of gold and platinum records, momentous front pages, concert posters, and sports trophies tracked across the walls. He didn't recognize any of the celebrities, the historic occasions or bands or teams, the backstories of the big playoffs and names of the pop hits. But they had to mean something if they were up on the walls. Why else would they be there? He was crestfallen when he ate at another location for the first time and saw the same stuff on the walls. His introduction to the nostalgia industry. Memento factories overseas stamped out these artifacts utilizing cheap unregulated labor, his sitter explained. (189)

This passage is significant because it exemplifies the sort of pastiche and corporatized nostalgia that leads to a glossing over of historicity. It also demonstrates how Mark becomes more cynical as he becomes more knowledgeable about the world; as a child, he believes that any memorabilia on walls must be significant but the introduction to the nostalgia industry begins to show him the realities of life under late capitalism. It is realizations such as this, along with his own subjectivity as a black man who is always hyper-aware of his surroundings, that both make Mark pessimistic and enable his survival in a world that demands this hyper-awareness.

Mark's nostalgic fixation with the restaurant also demonstrates the thin line between surviving humans and stragglers. As he gazes upon the empty tables, he recalls the various iterations of himself: "a five-year old lump of boy-matter; the slovenly tangle of him at sixteen; some vague creature attending his parents' thirtieth who pinched balloons when he thought no one was looking. He grew dizzy in his mesh. He felt like a little kid who'd split for the restroom and then forgot where his parents were sitting…He was a ghost. A straggler" (191-2). The descriptions of Mark at five, sixteen, and thirty all use language that implies a lack of a sense of self: he is a lump, a tangle, vague. He is never described as fully human - he is boy-matter and a creature. This passage demonstrates that although a paradigm-shifting zombie plague has set in, there is still continuity between the past and present because the logics of capitalism are still operating through the figure of the straggler, and to an extent, Mark himself. In this moment at the restaurant, he is a straggler because he is using nostalgia to relive years past and this is why he is described as non-human and unformed. In fact, despite so much changing in Mark Spitz's life, in another way, the basic facts of his existence have not drastically changed. He performs monotonous routine tasks while reporting to his supervisor and living in New York. I read this as aligning with Afro-pessimist theories about the "non-event" that was emancipation. As the

editors of *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* explain, after emancipation, the "same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained" (9). The only event that will change everything is the actual ending of the world, which Whitehead signals at the very end of the novel.

The novel's commentary on the enduring nature of neoliberalism is also seen through the sardonic tone it takes toward advertising and corporate jobs. In one scene, as Mark reflects on his shared interests with Mim, a survivor he meets in a toy store, he thinks about the television shows he used to watch. He imagines reruns of police procedurals playing on in a "survivalist's underground rec room or a government facility" and "the commercials were the new commercials, he imagined darkly, for lightweight kerosene canisters (When You Need to Burn the Dead in a Hurry!)" (157). Mark's nostalgia for the bland yet comforting entertainment of hospital dramas and crime procedural shows is also connected to the barrage of advertisements that accompanied these shows, demonstrating the way that nostalgia is tied to consumerism. His wry imagining of what post-apocalyptic commercials might advertise shows a belief that capitalism could still endure even after so many other aspects of pre-pandemic life have collapsed. When reminiscing about his job as a customer relationship manager at a corporate coffee company, Mark has similar thoughts about the continuity of consumer capitalism. His job entailed monitoring the internet for any mention of the coffee company and dispatching bots to "nurture feelings of brand intimacy" (184). After the zombie apocalypse, Mark speculates that his "social media persona probably continued to punch the clock, gossiping with the empty air and spell-checking faux-friendly compositions, hitting Send. "Nothing cures the Just Got Exsanguinated Blues like a foam mustache, IMHO. Sucks that the funeral pyre is so early in the morning - why don't you grab a large Sumatra so you can stay awake when you toss your

grandma in" (187). We see Mark again imagining that new opportunities to "nurture brand intimacy" can exist even at the end of the world; neoliberal capitalism has continued to endure because it so ruthlessly pursues these opportunities for profit even at the sake of humanity. This example also once more demonstrates the way that everything has changed and yet stayed the same. Mark's job at the corporate coffee company can be read as dystopic in and of itself as his sole purpose is to utilize bots in order to create a sense of intimacy to encourage consumers to buy more product. Thus, Mark is able to seamlessly envision the way that his corporate job could fit into the current day zombie apocalypse. Again, the novel continues to suggest post-pandemic Manhattan represents more of the same and that the only way to end systems such as anti-black racism and neoliberal capitalism is the complete annihilation of humanity itself.

Published in 2018, *Severance* similarly takes place in a New York ravaged by a pandemic but provides a more recuperative idea of nostalgia and the role that neoliberalism plays in facilitating nostalgia. The protagonist, Candace, is a Chinese American immigrant who has survived the initial wave of Shen Fever, a fungal disease that has ravaged the entire world. The novel switches between Candace's present-day experience traveling with a group of Shen Fever survivors led by Bob and her life before the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, Candace is a recent college graduate who works in Manhattan as a product coordinator at a multinational publishing group, supervising the manufacturing and distribution of Bibles. Post-pandemic, even though New York City has been decimated by Shen Fever, Candace continues to report to work. Eventually, as infrastructure continues to break down and she can no longer commute from Brooklyn to Manhattan, she simply moves into the office. Her behavior begs the question: In a world where money has ceased to have any value and where her supervisors have either perished or evacuated the city, why does Candace continue to show up to work?

I believe the answer to this question can be found by looking at racial forms associated with Asian American racialization. In *America's Asia*, Colleen Lye excavates the racial forms of "yellow peril" and "model minority" by tracing the form throughout the first half of twentieth century. To Lye, "yellow peril and model minority are best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of economic efficiency" (5). By steadfastly clocking in and out after the world has ended, Candace takes the trope of economic efficiency to its satirical extreme**.** However, Ma complicates this trope by demonstrating the ways that Candace takes pleasure in her labor, and how her monotonous routine connects her to her mother.

Additionally, the racial form of yellow peril is present in the very form of Shen Fever itself. The disease is named after Shenzhen, a massive manufacturing metropolis in China and home to the factories that produce the Bibles that Candace's company distributes. The fever originated in Shenzhen and is thought to have spread to the rest of the world via shipments of goods. In response to this, the United States institutes a travel ban to prevent citizens of Asian countries from visiting America. Ma seems to suggest that late capitalism has resulted in the continued proliferation of yellow peril as a racial form. Global capitalism is undone by globalization itself but China is viewed as the threat and cut off from the rest of the world.

Therefore, I see a connection between yellow peril and Shen Fever in that both demonstrate the contradictory impulses that animate racialization of Asians in the United States. Yellow peril in the 19th and early 20th century was contradictory because it stemmed from a fear of Chinese economic dominance as a result of China's high birth rate. However, the United States also relied on cheap Chinese labor, made possible by China's high birth rate and the

multitude of men leaving China in order to seek fortunes in America, in order to realize their own plans for expanding the frontier and fulfilling "manifest destiny."

The world responds to Shen Fever primarily as an "Asian disease" and blocks Asia off from the rest of the world. However, it is no coincidence that the disease originates in one of the largest manufacturing hubs in the world, especially given the fact that Candace was already having difficulty fulfilling Bible orders due to a spore that had been created in the factory. Thus, yellow peril (and Shen Fever, as an extension of Yellow Peril) relies on both the exclusion and fear of Asian bodies as well as a dependence on these alienated bodies for the continued production of consumer goods and commodities.

Nostalgia, with its own criticisms for participating in the commodification of history, can be read as a conservative mode which Candace engages in as a distraction from her own position in the production of commodities for a large corporation, but nostalgia can also be read as a recuperative force that gives Candace a sense of purpose and connection. The fevered represent the lack of distinction between those infected by Shen Fever and those carrying out their daily lives under late capitalism. Candace describes the fevered as "creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years, decades…they were more nostalgic than we expected, their stuttering brains set to favor the heirloom china, set to arrange and rearrange their aunts' and grandmother' jars of pickles and preserves in endless patterns" (28). There are differences in the pandemics in *Severance* and *Zone One* that should be noted here; in *Zone One*, one can contract the plague by being bitten by a zombie (skel). In *Severance*, the transmission of Shen Fever is a little less clear; they know that the disease is transmitted via a fungal spore that is inhaled but there is no clear reason why Candace and others can survive exposure while others become fevered. This distinction is important because the fact

that there are survivors of Shen Fever should indicate that the fevered post no significant threat to the living; ostensibly, they were exposed and would have contracted the disease but have some sort of immunity. Yet Candace and the group of survivors she travels with always shoot the fevered whenever they come across them. This demonstrates that there is something threatening about the nostalgia of the fevered; I argue that the fevered remind the living of their own repetitive lives under neoliberalism.

The connection between the fevered, commodification, and neoliberalism is exemplified by the mall, the place where Bob, the leader of the Shen Fever survivors that Candace has been traveling with, imprisons Candace after finding out she is pregnant. Bob explains to Candace that he brought everyone to this mall because it "holds a great deal of sentimental value" (246). Bob explains that parents would drop him off at the mall when he was younger and he would spend hours roaming the stores. He then reveals that his parents sold his childhood home after they divorced, and "it was razed to build a retirement home. So there's nothing left" (246). Shortly after arriving at the mall, Bob contracts Shen Fever. The fact that he becomes fevered in the mall, which he views as more of a home than his own childhood home, signals that there may be a connection between the onset of Shen Fever and nostalgia. In an earlier scene, Candace accompanies some group members - Janelle, Ashley, and Evan - to Ashley's house. Ashley appears perfectly healthy on the journey there but Evan discovers her in her childhood bedroom, repetitively going through her closet and trying on clothes. She has become fevered. After this incident, Candace "wondered what would happen if I myself returned home, to Salt Lake, I mean. I wouldn't know where to go" (120). As an orphan and an immigrant, Candace lacks a definitive home base - however, it may be this very fact that saves her from becoming fevered

like Bob and Ashley do when they return to their childhood "homes". This seems to imply that nostalgia is a harmful force, something that literally causes people to succumb to disease.

However, when Candace says she wondered what would happen if she returned home - "to Salt Lake, I mean," the qualifier after Salt Lake reveals something about what she considers to be home. She says "I mean" because she has had several different places that she considers home. A dream she has reveals that perhaps she views Fuzhou as the place where she was happiest in the past. Candace's dream is the following: "I return from New York. I do whatever my uncles say. I relearn Mandarin. I relearn Fujianese. I get married to another Fujianese. I live here, in beautiful, sunny, tropical Fuzhou, Fujian, fenced in by towering mountains and bounded by a boundless sea through which everyone leaves, where the palm trees sway and the nights run so late. I am so happy" (98). This dream shows an imaginary Candace at her happiest; she is fully able to enjoy the pleasurable weather that Fuzhou offers and reconnects with her heritage by relearning languages. However, because she is unable to return to Fuzhou due to the pandemic shutting down travel, Candace can merely enjoy the nostalgia of her memories without fear of becoming fevered. In a way, then, her identity status as a Chinese-American immigrant saves her from meeting the same fate as others in her group.

However, although Candace never succumbs to Shen Fever herself, she does find the repetitions of the fevered entrancing, as they bring to mind associations with her own family and past. When Candace and the other survivors enter the home of the Gowers and find the entire family fevered, Candace watches Mrs. Gower set the table, noting that "you could lose yourself this way, watching the most banal activities cycle through on an infinite loop. It is a fever of repetition, of routine. But surprisingly, the routines don't necessarily repeat in the identical manner. If you paid a little attention, you could see variations. Like the order in which she set

down the dishes. Or how sometimes she'd go around the table clockwise, other times counterclockwise" (62). Shen then goes on to describe how she "used to watch my mother go through her daily facial routine. She subscribed to the Clinique 3-step skincare regimen…Every morning and evening, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror, going through this process. It wasn't always the same. Sometimes, she'd wash her face in circular clockwise motions, other times counterclockwise" (62). This excerpt demonstrates that at times, it can be difficult to distinguish between the living and the fevered, even in pre-pandemic times. Just as the fevered family that Candace observes sets the table clockwise, other times counterclockwise, so too does Candace's mother wash her face clockwise and sometimes counterclockwise. The fevered are systematically killed because they signal to the living that perhaps they are just as dehumanized, desensitized and zombie-like as the living dead.

The connection between repetitive labor and the fevered is made even more explicit when we take into account Candace's own satisfaction in repetitive work. As she goes through the Gowers' possessions, she describes how she became "lost in the taking of inventory, with the categorizing and gathering, the packing of everything into space-efficient arrangements in the same box…It was a trance. It was like burrowing underground, and the deeper I burrowed, the warmer it became, and the more the nothing feeling subsumed me, snuffing out any worries and anxieties. It is the feeling I like best about working" (65). In this passage, Candace almost sounds fevered herself, taking great pleasure in the repetitive motions of sorting through the family's DVDs and embracing being subsumed by nothingness. There are also resonances of yellow peril and techno-orientalist ideas about Asian bodies in this passage as Candace's repetitive actions seem almost robotic and machine-like — she de-emphasizes her own emotions (snuffing out her worries through labor) and emphasizes her ability to pack everything away efficiently.

Yet when read with other parts of the book, we see that repetition is not just Candace embracing labor at the own cost of her humanity but also shows a way for Candace to connect with her the nostalgia of her early childhood years. Recounting her years in Fuzhou before moving to the United States, Candace happily describes how she and her mother filled their days. Candace was "calm and obedient in my earliest years; even my mother attested to this. I could sit by myself with a book for an hour, going through the pages over and over. I seemed to lack all neurosis or anxiety…It had to do with the way [my mother] managed our days, so steady and constant and regulated. I have looked for that constancy everywhere" (183). This description echoes why Candace finds labor peaceful and gratifying. As a child, the structure of her days allowed Candace to lack "all neurosis and anxiety." As an adult, torn from this structure, she seeks solace in labor and repetition precisely because it reduces her anxiety. Candace repetitively flips through the pages of a book "over and over" but this is a testament to her mother's steadiness and parenting. Thus, repetitive motions do not invoke repetitive labor but rather, represent a strong sense of connection between Candace and her mother.

The source of tension then is not just the neoliberal economy that dehumanizes workers but also the immigration to America. Candace is separated from her parents for a few years as her father and mother move to Utah so her father can pursue a PhD. When they become settled, they bring Candace over but her mother, struggling to adapt to life in the U.S., is no longer the bastion of stability that Candace remembered and Candace acts out accordingly. Thus, labor, order, and nostalgic repetition become ways for Candace to return to her idyllic childhood in China and recover from the trauma of her separation from her mother.

These conflicting feelings around labor, the neoliberal economy, and Candace's culture are exemplified in the shark fin soup dinner party that she throws in New York. After Candace's

mother dies, Candace receives a box of her mother's possessions. Among them, she finds a plastic Ziplock filled with dried shark fins and her roommate, Jane, suggests throwing a dinner party centered around shark fin soup. Because Candace notes that shark fin soup is "so outdated, like banquet hall food," the dinner party becomes a themed party centered around nostalgia, with an emphasis on 1980s nostalgia (39). Their friends come to the party in costume, "guys in skinny ties and suits, girls with big Aqua Net hair and acrylic nails" and "someone came dressed as Ronald Reagan, pelting girls with jelly beans from his suit pocket." As Claire Gullander-Drolet explains, while yellow peril is often associated with the early 20th century work of writers such as Jack London and Sax Rohmer, "these economic anxieties reached a peak in the 1980s, which saw the rise of the four Asian Tiger economies (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea), as well as the Japanese technology boom" (104). The shark fin soup party then represents a connection between yellow peril and nostalgia - although Candace and her friends find enjoyment in dressing up in silly costumes and consuming outdated food, this pleasure obscures the economic histories that led to a resurgence of yellow peril rhetoric in the 1980s. This rhetoric can be traced to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese man who was beaten to death by two auto-workers in Detroit who resented the success of the Japanese automobile industry. The reference to Ronald Reagan is also deliberate and relevant, especially given that Reagan's presidency coincided with aggressive pushes in neoliberal policy such as attacks on the welfare state, privatizing industries, and more. The shark fin soup party thus represents the conservative side of nostalgia that Jameson lays out in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson, looking at nostalgia films such as *Chinatown* and *American Graffiti*, argues that real historicity becomes lost when such films present pastiches of the past. He notes that "this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the

waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (21). To Jameson, this is problematic because this new category of nostalgia films attempts to "lay siege either to our own present and immediate past or to a more distant history that escapes individual existential memory" (19). This concept of the waning of historicity is further exemplified through the references to Donald Trump at the shark fin soup party.

Candace and Jane create "a makeshift Trump-themed dining table in [the] living room by arranging collapsible card tables end to end…On the table were ironic pre dinner canapes: salmon mousse quenelles with dill cream, spinach dip in a bread bowl, Ritz crackers, and a ball of pimento cheese in the shape of Trump's hair" (45). Though the novel is set in 2011, it was published after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, which makes Ma's references to Trump in the dinner party seem to be a pointed commentary on the way that neoliberalism, conservatism, and nostalgia can go hand in hand. There are also direct links to be made between Reagan and Trump; though Trump famously campaigned with the promise to "Make America Great Again," Reagan also ran on a similar slogan in 1980. The similarities in these slogans indicate the palpable economic anxieties in both 1980 and 2016; Asia become an easy target to blame and there are also parallels to be made between the rise of anti-Japanese rhetoric in the 1980s and Trump's weaponization of anti-Chinese rhetoric during the Covid-19 pandemic. With the shark fin soup party, we can extrapolate about the drawbacks of nostalgia as articulated by Jameson; there are clear links to be made between Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump but the waning of historicity and prioritization of nostalgia renders these two figures into harmless caricatures and not the dangerous neoliberal politicians that they are. Additionally, a lack of understanding of history, especially of the history of neoliberal economic development, can lead to the repeated

rise to power of figures such as Trump, who echo the rhetoric of earlier neoliberal politicians such as Reagan.

However, the party is not just merely an exercise in ahistorical nostalgia but rather a way for Candace to connect with the memory of her dead mother. The shark fins were sent to Candace because they belonged to her mother, who had died several years earlier as a result of complications from early onset Alzheimer's. As the Alzheimer's progressed, Candace describes how her mother was "given to strange, sensuous pursuits like rinsing our silver coffee pot under a cold tap faucet for abnormally long periods of time, or ordering fifty entrees of mapo tofu, her favorite thing to eat, for some imaginary dinner party…those parties, if they actually happened, would've been amazing, like a cross between a classic Chinese banquet-hall dinner and eighties-era Studio 54" (64). Candace's own shark fin soup party then, with its own mix of Chinese banquet-hall dinner and eighties-era touches like Aqua Net and outdated canapes, becomes her own way of remembering her mother and attempting to connect with her own heritage. Candace is particularly isolated in New York because her parents are both dead by the time she moves there and she is disconnected from her family in Fuzhou. Nostalgia is thus not a simply inherently conservative impulse but as a genuine way for Candace to try to honor her mother and continue serving traditional foods from her childhood. This idea of carrying on tradition and passing something down becomes more crucial when we find out that Candace is pregnant.

Disaster and Reproductive Futurity

Pregnancy and children feature in both novels, although *Severance* takes a more hopeful view of the role of children than *Zone One*, which overall eschews the idea of hope and embraces narrative closure associated with the end of the world. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty of

reconstructing America post-zombie apocalypse, the Tromanhauser triplets in *Zone One* represent hope for the majority of survivors. At a weekly meeting, when it is announced that the triplets are out of the ICU "everyone applauded" and Kaitlyn, Mark's co-worker, thanked God (50). Meanwhile, Mark "clapped his hands desultorily…he didn't want to get too invested. He was a firm believer in the reserve tank. It was important to maintain a reserve tank of feeling topped off in case of emergency. Mark Spitz was not going to spare any for these cubs" (50-1). The amount of emotional investment (Mark aside) for the triplets demonstrates the inordinate level of hope that is placed in the child, particularly when catastrophe is at hand. In *The Child to Come; Life after the Human Catastrophe*, Rebekah Sheldon notes how in speculative fiction, "saving the child appears tantamount to saving the future" (25). The triplets are not just tied to hope for the future but are also critical to the rebranding of the future that is being carried out by powers that be in Buffalo.

Those in Buffalo "agreed early on in the wisdom of rebranding survival…some of them were hard at work crafting the new language" (98). Part of this new language is dubbing the survivors of the plague "American Phoenix" or "pheenie" for short. Survivor camps receive cheerful new names like New Vista and Bubbling Brooks; "Mark Spitz's first civilian camp was Happy Acres, and indeed everyone's mood did brighten a bit on seeing that name on the gate next to the barbed wire and electric fencing. Mark Spitz thought the merchandise helped out a lot too, the hoodies and sun visors and such" (99). Whitehead's description of the rebranding efforts, dripping with irony, demonstrate the book's inherent mistrust of the branding efforts and imply that even at the end of the world, we are simply subjected to more of the same in terms of late capitalist marketing techniques. This echoes Mark's earlier ideas about how the social media persona of the corporate coffee company he worked at before the pandemic might continue to

exist and send out advertisements into the void. To Leif Sorensen, the portrayal of Buffalo demonstrates its "lack of confidence in ends is buttressed by late capitalism, which normalizes, precipitates, and capitalizes on crises. Moreover, late capitalism insists that the future will be an endless repetition of its cycles of creative destruction" (562). Mark Spitz's first face-to-face encounter with the bureaucracy of Buffalo comes when he runs into Ms. Macy, a public relations professional from Buffalo who has been sent to Manhattan to find an adequate meeting place for the next global summit. He accompanies Ms. Macy to a hotel because she is scoping out for the summit. Ms. Macy requests that the existing art in the hotel lobby be torn down and replaced with "pictures of pheenie kids in the camps, cavorting and pitching in. Pressing seeds into the soil and sharpening machetes. No machetes - kid stuff. Smiling and laughing and doing kid stuff. They're the future after all. That's what this whole thing is about, the future" (207). The image of children planting seeds in the soil is the epitome of reproductive futurism; Ms. Macy wants pictures of happy children but she specifically wants to depict them planting crops - another investment in the future. The emphasis on "pheenie kids" is also commentary on how nostalgia can elide history and reality; the photos would not represent the camps as they actually are but would be a staged opportunity to signal the success of reconstruction efforts, even if that success is purely imaginary.

At the end of the novel, when Manhattan is being overtaken by hordes of skels, Ms. Macy Buffalo acknowledges that Zone One itself is just a part of rebranding efforts. She says that Buffalo is "not going to send out a gunship to clean up a public relations stunt when they got camps falling right and left…This is PR. It'll be years before we're able to resettle this island. We don't even have food for the winter" (311). Just as the Tromanhauser Triplets represent Buffalo's efforts to create and rebrand hope in a time of utter hopelessness, the entire project of

cleaning up Manhattan is revealed to be a mere PR stunt to generate hope. In an ironic twist, it is also significant to note that real-life Buffalo is a Rust Belt city that has struggled with the economic impacts of deindustrialization and urban decay. However, in *Zone One*, Buffalo is represented as the site where the best and brightest minds in the country congregate in order to restore humanity to its future glory and Manhattan is the abandoned, desolate, and once-great metropolis. This adds to the overriding sense of cynicism and pessimism that permeates the novel and makes the fall of Manhattan not so much a surprise as much of an inevitability.

Conversely, in *Severance*, Candace's pregnancy allows her to connect with her dead mother and escape the toxic environment that she has been trapped in post-pandemic, suggesting that nostalgia and pregnancy can become a way to speculate outside of neoliberal social organization. After grouping up with a band of survivors led by Bob, Candace travels with them to a mall in Illinois. There, she is held against her will by Bob who believes her pregnancy is a miracle and does not want Candace to leave his supervision. During her imprisonment, Candace begins having dreams where her mother visits her in the mall and shares advice on escaping her imprisonment. In one such dream, Candace questions whether it is the right time to try to escape and her mother scoffs and replies, "Ai-yah, yesterday was the right time, last week, last month. Things will change for you after you give birth" (269). The precarious position that Candace is in because of her pregnancy allows her to reconnect with her mother years after her death; there is also the sense that her mother appears because she wants to protect not just Candace but her unborn granddaughter as well. Thus, pregnancy becomes not just an empty beacon of hope for the future but a more positive attempt to imagine a livable future for generations to come.

After Candace escapes the mall, she drives toward Chicago, the former home of the father of her child. Candace says "I have been an orphan for so long I am tired of it, walking and

driving and searching for something that will never settle me. I want something different for Luna, the child of two rootless people. She will be born untethered from all family except me, without a hometown or a place of origin. I want us to stay in one place. Maybe Chicago, the city her father loved, in which he once lived, could be the place" (287). Again, *Severance* provides a more hopeful view around pregnancy, the child and the future by connecting it to Candace's past life and her hopes for her child amidst a new city.

The End or An End: Narrative Closure, Narrative Redemption

The city, specifically Manhattan, looms large in the imagination of both novels and presents an productive site through which to look at the intersection of race, disaster, and capitalism. In *Zone One*, the fall of Manhattan signals the failure of Reconstruction efforts as well as the end of humanity itself, and the timing of this event with the reveal of Mark's identity as a black man emphasizes the Afro-pessimistic nature of the novel's ending. Mark Spitz is revealed to be a black man on page 287, out of a total of 322 pages. Shortly after this, hordes of zombies begin marching toward Zone One and it quickly becomes clear that the survivors will be overtaken by the sheer number of skels. Mark watches from a rooftop over Broadway as "the damned bubbled and frothed on the most famous street in the world, the dead things still proudly indicating the tribes to which they had belonged, in gray pinstriped suits, classic rock T-shirts cowboy boots, dashikis, striped cashmere cardigans, fringed suede vests, plush jogging suits" (303). This observation of the skels demonstrates how categories of identification persist even after conscious human life is destroyed; even as the undead, the skels keep their clothes as markers of class, race, gender, and other identity categories. This idea of the persistence of identity is seen in Mark's continued narration of the zombie onslaught. He observes that "all the

misery of the world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which the human race was being transformed person by person. Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. As it had been before, per the myth of this melting-pot city" (303). This quote both acknowledges the concept of New York City as a great melting-pot, invoking the history of immigration via Ellis Island and criticizes the reality of this idea by calling it a myth. It is fitting, then, that just as Reconstruction efforts first began in the so-called greatest city in the world, so too does humanity finally fall in Manhattan, as the wall protecting Zone One collapses and the remaining survivors scramble. As Ramon Saldivar explains in his article on the postrace aesthetic in contemporary literature, *Zone One* "proposes that it may well be necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism" (13). This quote brings to mind Jameson's assertion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism; Saldivar's reading then highlights both the inevitability of neoliberalism as well as anti-black racism and emphasizes the way the two are intrinsically linked. Instead of basking in the nostalgia of the bustling metropolis that was New York City, the novel embraces narrative closure in the form of total destruction. I argue that Whitehead suggests that this annihilation of humanity is the only way to completely destroy structures of anti-blackness.

While *Severance* also depicts a desolate, post-pandemic New York City, the novel diverges from *Zone One* in that it also portrays the city as a regulating system that produces a sense of pleasure in monotony. After everyone she knows has vacated Manhattan, Candace continues to report to work at Spectra and fills her days taking photos of post-pandemic New York for her old blog, NY Ghost. Having done a thesis on Rust Belt post-industrial towns, Candace finds a certain striking beauty and pleasure in photographing a deserted New York. She

is reminded of the “Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre images of Detroit, the images of abandoned auto plants and once-grand theaters. And the Seph Lawless images of the vacant, decrepit shopping malls that closed after the 2008 crash” (255). These references to Detroit and vacant shopping malls demonstrate the relationship between urban decay and neoliberal economic policies. Candace’s photographs seem like a natural sequel to these other portrayals of cities in decline, further evidence of the end of the world brought on by disease that spread quickly because of the neoliberal globalized economy. The photographs can also be seen as a type of sentimentalizing of former industrial towns - what Tim Strangleman terms as “smokestack nostalgia.” He notes that “the urban explorers' focus on aesthetics and the beauty of ruins, while acting as a selective obituary, equally ignores the people who once populated them” (29). Candace is accused of the same thing, with viewers on the blog leaving comments accusing her of “posting disaster porn” (259). However, Strangleman also notes that this nostalgia can be viewed in a different light, and that although “highly aesthetic images of abandoned industry when stripped of its social and cultural context can degenerate into "ruin porn," it is important that we pay attention to abandoned spaces” and to appreciate that “space is not simply a boundary or a box in which work is done, but rather that work makes space and space in turn makes work” (35). And Candace does the work of contextualizing New York City as she walks around the city and truly gets to know it. She states that she has “always lived in the myth of New York more than its reality…but toward the end, in those weeks of walking and taking pictures, I came to know and love the thing itself” (257). It is only through the desolation brought on by Shen Fever that Candace is able to appreciate the city for what it is, instead of understanding it through its mythos, demonstrating that while smokestack nostalgia can be

harmful way of viewing decay, there is also important work to be done in documenting the end of certain worlds.

Additionally, Candace also clearly takes pleasure in reviving her old blog. In a world where Manhattan's population has either succumbed from Shen Fever or fled the city, Candace's work gives her a sense of structure and routine, things that she expressed lacking even in her pre-pandemic life. As stated, she had previously done a whole photography series on similar cities and had planned to do more after graduation, so clearly, NY Ghost is a real interest and passion of hers. At the end of the novel, after Candace has left New York and escaped from Bob, she ends up in Chicago. She feels comforted by the familiar signs of a sprawling metropolis and muses:

> To live in a city is to live the life it was built for, to adapt to its schedule and rhythms…To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out? (290)

Candace's observation on the role of the city sums up one of the major points of the novel; although she is living in post-apocalyptic times, she still manages to find pleasure in routine and labor. And although pre-pandemic, she was an employee of Spectra and thus recognized that she played a role in the production and circulation of commodities within a neoliberal economy, she still also found pleasure in the routine of that logistical work. Candace's ability to derive pleasure within these unforgiving systems is related to the novel's deployment of nostalgia as something that is both sentimental and recuperative. *Severance* therefore retains a hopeful quality that separates it from *Zone One*, which closes with the utter destruction of humanity.

Conclusion: Pandemics and Our Current Moment

The coronavirus pandemic spurred newfound interest in outbreak narratives. As people struggled to adapt to the new rhythms of life amidst the pandemic, they turned to movies such as Steven Soderbergh's 2011 *Contagion* for some sign of what to expect. *Contagion* and other similar movies such as the 1995 *Outbreak* suddenly experienced a resurgence of popularity on streaming sites.

Similarly, speculative fiction about pandemics and outbreaks became the focus of numerous thinkpieces. What could literature tell us about our own outbreak? Had previously published novels predicted our current predicament? *Severance* itself became the focus of a *Post-45* cluster of essays.

As Priscilla Wald notes in *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative,* outbreak narratives are riveting to the general public because they draw out "a fascination not just with the novelty and danger of the microbes but also with the changing social formations of a shrinking world…disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact" (2). The covid-19 pandemic has certainly highlighted ways in which our world has become increasingly connected and how one infected person can easily spread a virus all over the world, just by going through their normal life. This pandemic demonstrates not only the way that disease dramatizes the necessity and danger of human contact but also exposes the way that our globalized economic system makes such pandemics even more volatile and contagious. Both texts invoke historical racial forms — yellow peril in *Severance* and the zombie in *Zone One* — in order to demonstrate how racialization endures, even at the end of the world, and how these racial forms shape one's relationship to global capitalism. However, while *Zone One* presents a future devoid of hope, *Severance* offers a more recuperative reading of nostalgia and a belief that home can be

reimagined after disaster. These different approaches are informed by the distinct racial positions of the characters but both texts compellingly demonstrate how outbreak narratives can help us reflect on the uneven ways that disaster affects society, and how certain structures can persist even after the supposed end of the world.

CHAPTER 3

Alternative Cartographies: Mapping Los Angeles Via *Tropic of Orange*

"A city named after sacred but imaginary beings, in a state named after paradise that was the figment of a woman's dream; a city that came to fame by filming such figments; a city existing now on sufferance from the ever-hotter desert and the ever-rising sea, and that feels every day, to so many of us, like a mirage as it waits for its great quake."

This epigraph from Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* pointedly captures two vital aspects of Los Angeles: the ever-looming sense of disaster and doom that pervades so many representations of the city counterbalanced against the idea of Los Angeles as an Edenic paradise. This duality of utopian and dystopian impulses characterizes many popular representations of Los Angeles.

For example, Ridley Scott's 1984 *Blade Runner* depicts a dystopian, grimy multicultural 2019 Los Angeles. In a wholly different cinematic representation, Spike Jonze's 2013 *Her* features a clean and bright future LA - an idyllic metropolis where one can hop on the subway downtown and arrive at the beach 20 minutes later. Roland Emmerich's *2012* features a dramatic destruction of Los Angeles through a series of catastrophic earthquakes while films such as *Gidget* portray LA as a sunny utopia.

But such representations often flatten the experience of Los Angeles residents while paying little attention to the economic and political systems that create dystopic conditions or which profit on portrayals of L.A. as a sunny paradise. In this chapter, I will use the city of Los Angeles as a site to examine the effects of global restructuring and uneven economic development, and specifically, look at representations of disaster in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* as a prime example of how disasters in Los Angeles exacerbate existing social

problems while emphasizing how globalization has led to increased levels of interconnectedness and interdependence.

I will read *Tropic of Orange* alongside *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, two of Mike Davis's influential accounts of contemporary Los Angeles, as well as other more contemporary works of urban geography that situate Los Angeles as the epitome of a globalized city. I argue that while Davis's urban studies approach highlights important realities of life under neoliberalism in Los Angeles, the affordances of speculative fiction and Yamashita's use of fantasy and magical realism in *Tropic of Orange* allow for a more expansive understanding of disaster and displacement as well as a fleeting look at what life post-disaster can look like for those who have existed on the peripheries of modern society. *Tropic of Orange*, concluding with an epic disaster on the freeway, both represents how disaster is exploited by the neoliberal powers that be but also how disaster can bring about new communities and systems of living that provide alternatives to the neoliberal social order that emphasizes individual responsibility. Disaster also provides an opportunity for the citizens of Los Angeles to interact with each other in new ways, forcing residents to find new forms of mobility that prioritize connection over the speed of traveling via a freeway.

Additionally, while Mike Davis's works on Los Angeles do provide a view of the city that is frank about climate change and the consequences of de-industrialization in the city, as an urban studies scholar, Davis's work naturally take a more macro look at systems that have led to structural inequities in the city rather than representing the varied and diverse perspectives of the residents of Los Angeles. The form of Yamashita's novel as well as the medium of literature itself offers a new approach toward mapping Los Angeles that Davis's works of nonfiction cannot offer. The form of *Tropic of Orange*, unique in its polyvocal nature and the sprawling

HyperContexts that opens the novel, presents a cartography of Los Angeles that emphasizes connection in unlikely places and highlights the layered and multiple ways that people can be linked. Reading *Tropic of Orange* alongside other critical works theorizing Los Angeles as a global and postmodern city, it becomes clear that Yamashita is presenting her own conception of Los Angeles, one that is in conversation with writers such as Davis and Soja but which also emphasizes the role of imagination and movement in region making. The formal aspects of the novel and the perspectives from the wide cast of characters shows how disaster unevenly impacts residents of Los Angeles, and on a larger scale, marginalized people everywhere.

Why Los Angeles as a case study for representations of disaster in a neoliberal system? Along with the aforementioned position of Los Angeles as a site frequently represented and reimagined in popular film and literature, specifically speculative fiction, Los Angeles in the late 1980s and 1990s was a pointed example of the impacts of global restructuring and uneven economic development. The rapid shifts experienced in Los Angeles's economy during this time led to increased levels of precarity for populations that were already most vulnerable to "natural" disaster. Speculative fiction written during this time skillfully captures the feelings of hopelessness experienced by real-life Angelenos while using extrapolation and science fictional tropes to more spectacularly represent these feelings of despair in order to demonstrate the consequences of continued neoliberal austerity measures. For example, in a subsequent chapter on Octavia Butler's 1993 dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower a*nd Cynthia Kadohata's 1992 *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, I will examine how the two authors project decades into the future to show how Los Angeles's present-day problems have set the city on a path toward utter dystopia and apocalypse. *Tropic of Orange* differs from these two novels in that it is actually set in present-day Los Angeles and is less traditionally science fictional but more experimental in its

usage of magical realism and fantasy. But Yamashita's novel still highlights how the shifting of long-profitable industries in Los Angeles and new economic developments such as the 1994 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement have dramatically impacted the lived experiences of Angelenos.

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of how the economy and landscape of Los Angeles shifted post-1965 and how this changing landscape has made it a site of interest for various urban studies scholars. I provide this overview to both explain why I am focusing on representations of Los Angeles in these last two chapters and to demonstrate how my interest in representations of disaster are related to but necessarily diverge from the work of urban studies scholars such as Mike Davis and Edward Soja as well as postmodern theorists such as Fredric Jameson who have taken an interest in theorizing Los Angeles as the epitome of the postmodern city. Although the fictional works I will examine were published in the 1990s, in my overview of Los Angeles economics, I focus on the larger period after 1965 because of the influx of Asian immigration brought on by the 1965 passing of the Hart-Cellar Act and because the 1965 Watts Rebellion marked a significant moment for the black community in Los Angeles who had been long subjugated to housing discrimination, police violence, and limited employment opportunities. Thus, by looking at this larger period of economic development post-1965, we can gain a better understanding of the socioeconomic conditions that led to an influx of dystopian portrayals of Los Angeles in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Economic Restructuring of Los Angeles

In the introduction to *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich and Lucie Cheng astutely explain how new economic

developments reshaped the economy of Los Angeles and subsequent waves of immigration as well as the racial makeup of the city. Written amidst a 1990s economic downturn that significantly affected California, and specifically Los Angeles, Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng note that there is a "chronic condition of anarchy in capitalism as a system" and describe how global restructuring results in "tremendous social costs, not only in terms of abandoned capital but also in the dislocation of workers and the disruption of communities. This 'creative destruction' is occurring on a grand scale today as capitalism reconstitutes itself" (5-7). The idea that creative destruction and anarchy is inherent in capitalism is an interesting concept when read alongside texts that focus on representations of disaster. As shown in both Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear* and in *Tropic of Orange*, the response and aftermath to a disaster is exacerbated by social and economic inequality.

In the chapter entitled "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," Davis compares the disproportionate response to fires in the wealthy neighborhood of Malibu as opposed to the working-class Westlake district in downtown Los Angeles. He notes that "Westlake has the highest urban fire incidence in the nation" and that "all of the deadly tenement fires in Los Angeles since 1945 have occurred within a one-mile radius" encompassing the Westlake district. On the other hand, "Malibu is the wildfire capital of North America, and possibly, the world...the rugged 22-mile-long coastline is scourged, on the average, by a large fire (one thousand acres plus) every two and a half years" (97). Yet, despite the frequency at which both neighborhoods experience fires, the much wealthier Malibu homes have had the privilege of much more dedicated fire response; according to Davis, they were "defended in 1993 by the largest army of firefighters in American history" and "benefit from an extraordinary range of insurance, land use, and disaster relief subsidies." Meanwhile, "most of the 119 fatalities from tenement fires in

the Westlake area might have been prevented had slumlords been held to even minimal standards of building safety" (99). The difference in the way that fires are addressed in two wildly different neighborhoods shows that there is nothing inherently "natural" about disasters and their aftermath. While disasters are often believed to be unpreventable and tragic acts of God, this example demonstrates that the reality is that appropriate measures are often not taken in order to mitigate or prevent disasters.

Additionally, Davis explains that the geography of Malibu — its position in a canyon overrun with dry brush and vegetation that is battered by the dry and hot Santa Ana winds that blow through Los Angeles each fall — make the region incredibly susceptible to more devastating fires, especially as climate change renders natural weather patterns such as the Santa Ana winds even more unpredictable and erratic. Again, Davis demonstrates that wildfires are not tragic, apolitical accidents but rather disasters that can be reduced in scale through human intervention. The risk of increasingly more intense fires also endangers those who fight the fires. In California, incarcerated firefighters make up 30% of the state's firefighting forces, meaning that exploited and underpaid workers are putting their lives on the line to fight fires in places such as Malibu. In light of this information, Davis poses the provocative question: should we simply let Malibu burn? Why devote resources to fighting fires in a place that seems almost perfectly made to burn?

Tropic of Orange also addresses Malibu wildfires in a way that acknowledges how different neighborhoods receive different responses to disaster. When describing a horrific freeway crash, Japanese-American reporter Emi notes that there is "an entire mile of cars trapped between two dead semis, not to mention two craters, fires and the debris from the blast...Worse yet, the Santa Anas are blowing through like the one-ten was a canyon in Malibu." Her

boyfriend, journalist Gabriel, notes that "there's a homeless encampment in the overgrowth around there" to which Emi responds: "It's not Malibu. It's gonna burn" (98). This exchange between two Los Angeles residents demonstrates the way it is implicitly understood that disaster response is connected to wealth and power — Gabe and Emi understand that the state will probably never allow wealthy area of Malibu to burn, while the homeless encampments near the freeway will certainly not be treated with the same level of attention and resources as a fire in Malibu.

These examples show that while "natural" disasters such as wildfires and earthquakes do occur, there are often disproportionate response and recovery efforts based on social, racial, and economic lines. Because capitalism and neoliberalism are a major source of inequality due to the inherent creative destruction, anarchy, and disaster inherent within a capitalist system, the disaster that should be reckoned is not a wildfire or an earthquake but rather capitalism itself. Resources abound for those wishing to learn about earthquake preparedness or how to protect one's house from a hurricane — how does one prepare for the disaster of neoliberalism? *Tropic of Orange* suggests that in the face of such a disaster, alternate ways of mapping can lead to new connections and forms of community building. In light of neoliberal reductions in social safety nets, people increasingly turn to mutual aid as a way of surviving post-disaster.

Capitalist restructuring has resulted in the rise of conservative politicians who use disaster aid as a bargaining chip in their quest to further introduce neoliberal austerity measures. Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng note that globalization has produced "economic chaos, policy confusion, and heightened social tensions." For example, "the growing penetration of imports, the bulk of which come from East Asia" has forced the United States economy to adapt and innovate in order to survive (14). This adaptation has come in the form of attacks on labor as

well as slashes to the welfare state. As the editors of *The New Asian Immigration* note, reducing labor costs "involves laying off redundant workers, lowering wages, lengthening the working day, and generally squeezing the workers harder. One clear effect of restructuring is the large number of workers dislocated when capital abandons plants and industry...during the back to back recessions of 1980 and 1981-81, 5.1 million workers were displaced" (15). The impact of this restructuring and displacement of labor can be acutely felt in Los Angeles. As Mike Davis notes in *City of Quartz*, "as the Los Angeles economy in the 1970s was 'unplugged' from the American industrial heartland and rewired to East Asia, non-Anglo workers have borne the brunt of adaptation and sacrifice. The 1978-82 wave of factory closings displaced 75,000 blue collar workers [and] erased the ephemeral gains won by blue collar Blacks between 1965 and 1975" (275). These displaced workers are further marginalized because as Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng notes "the political response to the crisis has been a shift away from the welfare state" (20). The character of Buzz in *Tropic of Orange* illustrates the way that the social welfare state has failed everyday citizens and how new forms of social services have emerged to fill the gap. Buzz walks around his neighborhood every day, handing out cards with his pager number to the point where everyone in the neighborhood has "his calling card with something jotted down on the back: rehab number, free clinic, legal services, shelter, soup kitchen, hotline. He was walking social services" (26). In the wake of both heavy worker displacement and cuts to social services, Buzz decides to step in and make himself available to serve his neighborhood.

The opportunistic neoliberal approach to economic crisis and disaster is cruelly exemplified by an example described in Davis's *Ecology of Fear.* After the 6.7 Northridge earthquake in 1994, a contingent of anti-relief politicians in Congress were reluctant to provide federal aid to Los Angeles. Then, "with Machiavellian cunning, the new Republican Speaker,

New Gingrich, defused this potential disaster-aid war between the states by proposing to finance the final installment of Northridge aid with counterpart cuts in social spending." Earthquake victims did continue to receive relief payments which were "financed by cutbacks in low-income housing and environmental protection programs, as well as the termination of 'unnecessary spending' on rural health grants, the urban parks and reaction program, and summer youth employment funds for 1996" (50). Gingrich's use of the Northridge disaster in order to further erode the welfare state is a prime example of what Naomi Klein terms "disaster capitalism." Again, through the example of the Northridge earthquake as well as through the broader concept of disaster capitalism, we see capitalist restructuring goes hand in hand with disaster and its aftermath in Los Angeles and beyond. Disaster not only unevenly affects the most vulnerable members of society but serves to add to the wealth of the most privileged.

Of course, Los Angeles is not the only city that has been significantly reshaped by globalization toward the end of the 20th century. Certainly, rustbelt cities such as Detroit, whose economy suffered when automobile manufacturing began relocating to lower-cost states and countries, show similar patterns of deindustrialization and racial inequity. But, as Edward Soja notes in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Los Angeles is a compelling case study because the city represents "vivid exemplifications of many different processes and patterns associated with the societal restructuring of the late twentieth century." For example, "one can find in Los Angeles not only the high technology industrial complexes of the Silicon Valley and the erratic sunbelt economy of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighborhoods of rust-belted Detroit or Cleveland" (193). This is also seen in the heterogeneous spread of characters and perspectives represented in *Tropic of Orange*: we have the high-powered executive Emi, the lifelong South

Los Angeles resident Buzz, the white-collar Gabriel Balboa who invests in foreign property, the immigrant Bobby Ngu working low-wage jobs, and so on. Los Angeles thus remains a productive site to study the uneven ways that global restructuring has changed the local economy.

Additionally, because of this dissertation's comparative approach to multiethnic literature, with a focus on Asian American and African American literature, Los Angeles is an interesting site of study. The city's population of African Americans swelled during and after World War II, as the defense industry transformed the city's economy and created thousands of stable defense and aerospace manufacturing jobs. Twenty years later, the Hart-Cellar Act ushered in a new influx of Asian immigration to Los Angeles, because of the city's location in the Pacific Rim. Again, the span of characters in *Tropic of Orange* represent the varied history of migration and immigration to Los Angeles; we have Emi, a sansei (third generation American) presented alongside Bobby Ngu, a "Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown" (16). The editors of *The New Asian Immigration* state that they focus on Los Angeles because "it enables us to link macro- and microlevel forces...we can combine the global or regional level with the local level and consider how the two interact" (ix). Similarly, in this chapter, I am interested in looking at macro-level perspectives of Los Angeles under neoliberalism (as elucidated by Davis, Soja, and others) as well as the micro-level interactions and interdependencies of subjective experiences (as represented by the characters in *Tropic of Orange*) to consider the multiple ways that people experience life under neoliberal capitalism.

The work of Mike Davis and Edward Soja in theorizing a postmodern Los Angeles is part of an academic movement that has been termed the Los Angeles School of Urbanism, in contrast

to the Chicago school of the 1920s and 1930s. As Michael Engh notes in "At Home in the Heteropolis: Understanding Postmodern L.A." the L.A. school proposed that Los Angeles had "become the archetype of the postmodern city, an urban form and dynamic vastly different from the modernist metropolis exemplified by New York or Chicago" (1678). Perhaps the most influential idea to come out of the Chicago School was Ernest Burgess's concentric circle model of cities (depicted in diagram below):

As Michael Dear and Steve Flusty lay out in "Postmodern Urbanism," their comparative overview of the Chicago and L.A. school, "much of the urban research agenda of the twentieth century has been predicated on the precepts of the concentric zone, sector, and multiple nuclei theories of urban structure. Their influences can be seen directly in land-rent models, studies of urban economies and diseconomies of scale, and designs for ideal cities and neighborhoods" (51). The L.A. school emerged in the 1980s out of a desire to produce a different, more well-suited model for explaining and theorizing Los Angeles, which does not necessarily fit neatly into Burgess's concept of urban concentric circles.

One such model of mapping or describing Los Angeles came from Davis's *City of Quartz*, in a chapter where he highlights the hypersecure state of Los Angeles. Davis, observing the proliferation of "Armed response" security signs outside of wealthy Westside homes in Los Angeles as well as the "homeless-proof" benches and designs that dot Downtown Los Angeles, explains how "this obsession with physical security systems, and collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries, has become a zeitgeist of urban restructuring, a master narrative in the emerging built environment of the 1990s" (200). He goes on to note that "in cities like Los Angeles, on the bad edge of postmodernity, one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single,

comprehensive security effort" (200). Thus, one proposed alternative model to the Chicago School's concentric circle model is Davis's concept of the fortress city.

Dear and Flusty also lay out Soja's theorization of postmodern L.A:

> Peripheralization, post-Fordism, and globalization together define the experience of urban restructuring in Los Angeles [to Soja]. Three specific geographies are consequent upon these dynamics: Splintered Labyrinth, which describes the extreme forms of social, economic, and political polarization characteristic of the postmodern city; Carceral City, referring to the new "incendiary urban geography" brought about by the amalgam of violence and police surveillance; and Simcities, the term Soja uses to describe the new ways of seeing the city that are emerging from the study of Los Angeles-a kind of epistemological restructuring that foregrounds a post-modern perspective. (58)

The various urban studies models of Los Angeles that I have surveyed do capture the ways that racial and socioeconomic lines are drawn across the city and the ways in which these inequities are exacerbated by the architecture and design of the city itself. *Tropic of Orange*, which addresses issues of homelessness, the police state, displacement of low-income workers and minorities, and urban sprawl, is concerned with many of the same issues as Soja and Davis. Yamashita even references Davis's *City of Quartz*. In one chapter, Buzzworm is staring at a picture mapping the territories of the Crips and Bloods gangs in South Los Angeles. He shakes his head, "even if it were true. Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyway?...Somebody must have the big map. Or maybe just the next map. The one with the new layers you can't even imagine. Where was his house on this map? Between Mrs. Fields's and the Footlocker? Somebody's parking lot? Somebody's tennis court?" (72-3). Buzz's reaction to the map from *City of Quartz*, a seminal piece of cultural criticism about L.A., demonstrates that Yamashita is placing herself in conversation with urban theory about Los Angeles and that her novel is presenting her own mapping and region making of the city.

Other works of urban theory as well as scholarly works on *Tropic of Orange* reference Soja and Davis while asserting that Los Angeles can be viewed and mapped as something other than the epitome of the postmodern city. In "The Ends of America, The Ends of Postmodernism," Rachel Adams compares *Tropic of Orange* to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in order to argue that Yamashita's novel is not a representation of postmodern LA but rather an embodiment of the globalization of American literature. While *Tropic of Orange*'s "structural and thematic concerns may seem quite postmodern", Adams views the novel as precisely situated "in relation to the vast inequities, economic interconnections, and movement of people and goods associated with globalization" (249). Although Yamashita's work has qualities of postmodern literature such as its experimental form and polyvocality, Adams argues that "Yamashita's technique, which is clearly inspired by her ambivalent experiences as an ethnographer, seems designed to channel the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record" (264). She notes that "Yamashita's imagined geographies are informed by a heightened awareness of how America is being transformed by the massive demographic and perspectival shifts wrought by globalization" (268). Similarly, my reading of the novel contextualizes it not as an example of postmodern aesthetics but rather as one that reckons with the transformation of Los Angeles through globalization.

In "Mapping the Global City and the Other Scene of Globalization," Xiaojing Zhou also looks at the ways that Los Angeles has been affected by globalization. While acknowledging the work of scholars such as Edward Soja in theorizing postmodern geography, Zhou identifies the Los Angeles of *Tropic* as a global city, nothing that "Yamashita weaves multiple interconnections between the local and the global and enacts the political and epistemological challenges from the global South through innovative narrative strategies of magical realism

characterized by a politics and poetics of space" (262). Using magical realist narrative strategies, Yamashita enacts "through the major characters, a kind of "genealogy" of places, which disrupt the urban geography mapped by global capital and local corporate and nation-state powers" (265). My reading, through an analysis of the formal elements of the novel, also prioritizes the role of the characters in forming their own genealogy of Los Angeles that disrupts urban theorists' understanding of the region.

Building on the economic frameworks and critiques laid out by L.A. school scholars such as Soja and Davis and also taking into account other scholarly works that engage with *Tropic of Orange*'s approach to geography and globalization, I argue that the novel should be read as its own unique theorization of urban spaces, specifically Los Angeles, because of the novel's ability to represent voices traditionally left out of macro-level studies of cities. The speculative nature of the novel creates an opportunity to envision different reworkings to the social issues presented in these aforementioned postmodern examinations of L.A. Additionally, the formal aspect of the novel - best demonstrated by the HyperContexts graph that comes after the more traditional table of contents - represents a new form of urban modeling and a mapping of Los Angeles that moves away from a strictly geographical sense of connection and remains open to the way that globalization and technology impact our relationships with one another.

As a sprawling text with a variety of characters with different perspectives, critical approaches to *Tropic of Orange* have explored a range of topics. Most relevant to this chapter are critical approaches that examine the way the novel engages with environmental issues, critiques of neoliberalism and globalization, and generic examinations of the novel.

The environmental aspect of *Tropic of Orange* pertains to my larger argument about the novel as engendering new perspectives on life after "natural" disaster and new ways of thinking

about one's relationship to the environment. As I will demonstrate in my close readings of the novel, characters such as Buzz and Manzanar present alternatives to mainstream environmentalism because as those on the peripheries of society, they necessarily have different relationships to the environment than other residents of Los Angeles who primarily navigate the city in their personal automobiles.

Chiyo Crawford's article on environmental justice and Japanese American internment is a productive critical lens that I will build on in my own analysis of Manzanar. Crawford's article explores the way that *Tropic of Orange* highlights the uneven way that people of color, the poor, and women suffer from environmental disaster. Specifically, Crawford's interrogation of environmental justice in the novel focuses on "the past trauma of Japanese American internment and the contemporary homelessness of sansei Manzanar Murakami, who is named for one of those internment camps" (86). The article's focus on Manzanar and Emi, the two Japanese American characters in the novel, "make[s] clear that the battle against environmental degradation demands a comprehensive, humanistic approach that recognizes the lasting effects of race-based environmental inequality" and highlights the way the novel epitomizes the new pluralism of environmentalism, a movement which "maintains the interconnectedness of various environmental and social events" (87). Crawford's reading of the novel as presenting a new pluralist approach to environmentalism will be crucial for my reading of Buzz and Manzanar as environmental pluralists who use their unique vantage point in the community in order to present new forms of resisting climate change.

Other ecocritical approaches focus on the novel's portrayal of the vast Los Angeles freeway system. For example, in "The Great Arrangement: Planetary Petrofiction and Novel Futures," Shouhei Tanaka draws attention to "petroleum's intertwined geological and

geopolitical forces" to demonstrate how Yamashita's novel "envision[s] energy justice by locating oil's multiscalar forms across geopolitical and geological histories" (190-1). Tanaka notes that Amitav Ghosh, who coined the term petrofiction, is skeptical of the novel's ability to adequately capture the scale of environmental disaster wrought by the world's overdependence on petroleum. However, Tanaka argues that "Yamashita's planetary petrofiction unsettles Ghosh's contention that realist and speculative fiction are limited by their respective inability to imagine the otherworldliness of ecological catastrophe" and that "Yamashita's novels conjure wondrous, more-than-human natures that materialize across actual geographies and histories" (192). As I am similarly interested in the ways that *Tropic of Orange* operates as both a piece of magical realist fiction and as a new way of theorizing the geography of Los Angeles, I see Tanaka as a key interlocutor, especially in my close readings of the massive freeway crash that Buzz and Manzanar are both intimately connected to.

Tanaka's work also brings to light another important critical aspect of the novel: its use of magical realism and experimentation with genre as a whole. As much of Yamashita's work experiments similarly with the speculative and the realist, much has been written about literary genre and literary boundaries as it pertains to *Tropic of Orange*. For example, in "Magical Realism in the Peripheries of the Metropolis," Hande Tekdemir examines the form and genre of Tropic of Orange in order to differentiate it from other novels which focus primarily on one city (such as James Joyce's work on Dublin). Tekdemir argues that magical realism "can be seen as a fictional survival tactic employed to describe the real-life experience of the underrepresented of the city" and "becomes an apt technique for filling in the gap between real life and its representation in language" (42). This approach is significant for my own work because of my interest in disaster and necessarily, survival post disaster. If we take the assertion that magical

realism is a fictional survival tactic, then we could also argue that magical realism, and the speculative genre as a whole, is perhaps the most apt way to approach and grapple with representations of disaster, especially representation of disaster from those most underrepresented and marginalized within a geographical location. Magical realism, and genre fiction as a whole then, is not just a form that allows the reader to envision spectacular disaster that has not yet occurred but also a way of processing the paradigmatic shifts that occur post-disaster, post-the destruction of everything one has ever known.

Anne Mai Yee Jensen's article "(Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper," similarly investigates the role of literary form and magical realism in Yamashita's novel. Jensen notes that "authors of color in the United States are engaging with magical realism in order to explore alternative political realities" and that magical realism "simultaneously destabilizes both fictional and real-world borders in the social and historical moment" that the novel is written in (105-6). Again, similarly to Tanaka's argument, I will use Jensen's reading of magical realism in the novel as a jumping point to think about the lines between reality and fantasy as I argue that the novel is a theorization of the geography of Los Angeles as well as a theorization of what Los Angeles could become.

Lastly, because of the scope of this larger project, I am necessarily interested in critical approaches to *Tropic of Orange* that examine the novel through the lens of neoliberal economic production and global restructuring. As Robin Blyn notes in "Belonging to the Network: Neoliberalism and Postmodernism in Tropic of Orange," the novel depicts a "well-policed mobility as an essential requirement of neoliberalism's success. The devastating scene in which the National Guard restores traffic on the freeway is the most obvious case in point" (208). This concept of well-policed mobility is a key aspect of my reading of the way that Buzz and

Manzanar interact with the city. But even in the face of the police state, Blyn explains that "because the material conditions of neoliberalism are themselves unprecedented, they both necessitate and enable ways of being and belonging that we have yet to conceive" (192). Similarly, in "Orange County: Global Networks in Tropic of Orange," Sherryl Vint explains that *Tropic of Orange* articulates "another kind of governance, not a biopolitics based on building the world around what serves the economy and controls people that it regards only on the aggregate level as populations, but instead a network of solidarity that builds a world around real people's material needs and that governs human beings" (411). Thus, while the dire and austere economic conditions of neoliberalism are very much at the forefront of the novel, so too are the networks of solidarity that can envision new conditions post-disaster. The different readings of globalization in *Tropic of Orange* will be productive as I develop my own reading of the novel as an alternative mapping of life under neoliberalism.

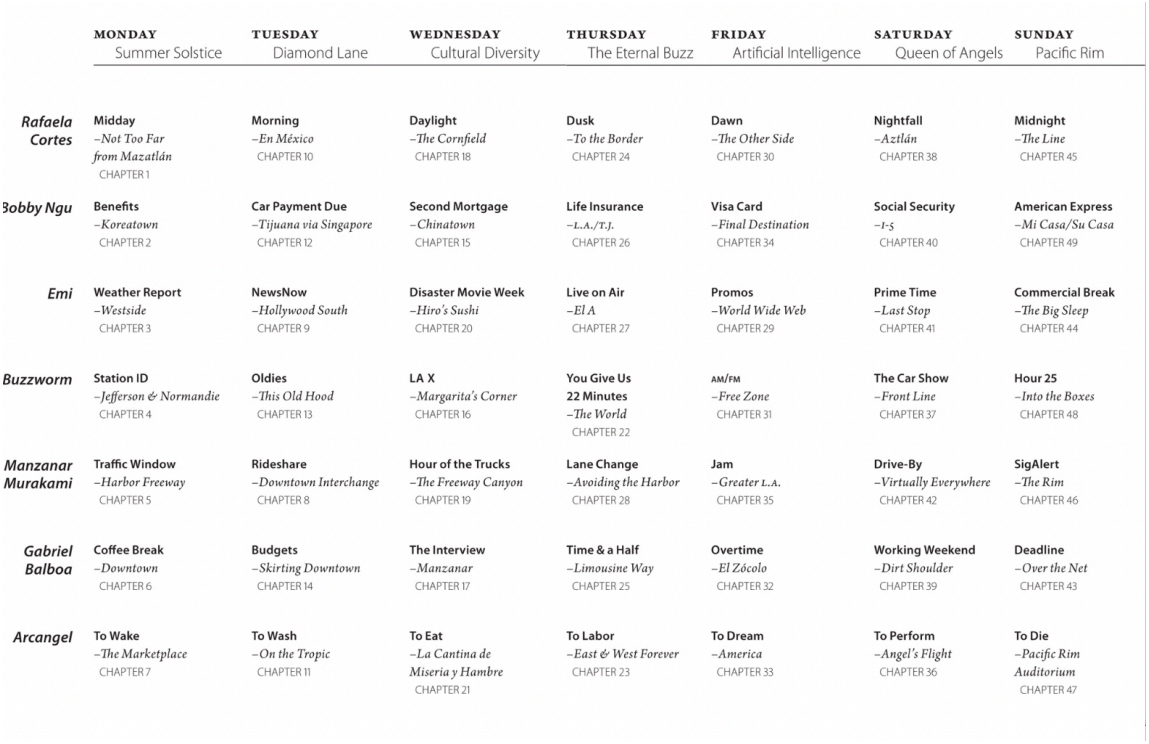
HyperContexts and Alternative Cartographies

Tropic of Orange both resists summary and welcomes it. Focusing on seven characters over seven days in Los Angeles, the structure of the novel is clearly delineated and even conveniently mapped out in a grid in a beginning section titled HyperContexts. Yet, when summarizing the novel, one runs into the more difficult task of trying to accurately capture the way in which each of the seven characters are connected to each other and depend on each other in various ways.

For example, Emi, a Japanese-American news executive is dating journalist Gabriel Balboa but when Gabriel goes down to Mexico to investigate a story about drug-laced oranges, Emi find herself navigating the aftereffects of an epic freeway crash alongside Buzzworm, who

was formerly Gabriel's tip for stories affecting those in South Central Los Angeles. While at the freeway producing news stories with Buzz, Emi sees her grandfather, Manzanar Murakami, for the first time since she was a child. This one example demonstrates the multitude of interconnected relationships and run-ins throughout the book and begs the question: are the connections among all the characters merely meant to be taken as serendipitous and coincidental or is Yamashita demonstrating the ways that, even in a metropolitan area of nearly ten million such as Los Angeles, we all more interconnected and interdependent than modern-day life would have us believe?

One answer to this question lies in the formal organization of the novel, which is guided by the HyperContexts graph. *Tropic of Orange* is a novel that is intimately concerned with the process of region making and mapping in Los Angeles. As Henry Yu explains in his article on Los Angeles and Pacific migrations, "Migrants create geographic space. Spatial imaginings are the product of movement" and "a region is an act of imagination, an organizing and categorizing of a smaller subset of the ideas generated at these nodes of intersection, reflecting the pattern of connection between places" (540). The act of world building and region making is thus inherently an imaginative process that requires speculation and forward thinking, something that Yamashita acknowledges in her epigraphs, which paint Los Angeles as a place that has been defined by different sets of dreams over the years. If *Tropic of Orange* is an act of imagination that strives to re-map the region of Los Angeles, HyperContexts and the broader form of the novel is the way of organizing the sprawl of the city and presenting this formal re-mapping of the region.



	MONDAY Summer Solstice	TUESDAY Diamond Lane	WEDNESDAY Cultural Diversity	THURSDAY The Eternal Buzz	FRIDAY Artificial Intelligence	SATURDAY Queen of Angels	SUNDAY Pacific Rim
Rafaela Cortes	Midday –*Not Too Far from Mazatlán* CHAPTER 1	Morning –*En México* CHAPTER 10	Daylight –*The Cornfield* CHAPTER 18	Dusk –*To the Border* CHAPTER 24	Dawn –*The Other Side* CHAPTER 30	Nightfall –*Aztlán* CHAPTER 38	Midnight –*The Line* CHAPTER 45
Bobby Ngu	Benefits –*Koreatown* CHAPTER 2	Car Payment Due –*Tijuana via Singapore* CHAPTER 12	Second Mortgage –*Chinatown* CHAPTER 15	Life Insurance –*L.A./T.J.* CHAPTER 26	Visa Card –*Final Destination* CHAPTER 34	Social Security –*I-5* CHAPTER 40	American Express –*Mi Casa/Su Casa* CHAPTER 49
Emi	Weather Report –*Westside* CHAPTER 3	NewsNow –*Hollywood South* CHAPTER 9	Disaster Movie Week –*Hiro's Sushi* CHAPTER 20	Live on Air –*El A* CHAPTER 27	Promos –*World Wide Web* CHAPTER 29	Prime Time –*Last Stop* CHAPTER 41	Commercial Break –*The Big Sleep* CHAPTER 44
Buzzworm	Station ID –*Jefferson & Normandie* CHAPTER 4	Oldies –*This Old Hood* CHAPTER 13	LA X –*Margarita's Corner* CHAPTER 16	You Give Us 22 Minutes –*The World* CHAPTER 22	AM/FM –*Free Zone* CHAPTER 31	The Car Show –*Front Line* CHAPTER 37	Hour 25 –*Into the Boxes* CHAPTER 48
Manzanar Murakami	Traffic Window –*Harbor Freeway* CHAPTER 5	Rideshare –*Downtown Interchange* CHAPTER 8	Hour of the Trucks –*The Freeway Canyon* CHAPTER 19	Lane Change –*Avoiding the Harbor* CHAPTER 28	Jam –*Greater L.A.* CHAPTER 35	Drive-By –*Virtually Everywhere* CHAPTER 42	SigAlert –*The Rim* CHAPTER 46
Gabriel Balboa	Coffee Break –*Downtown* CHAPTER 6	Budgets –*Skirting Downtown* CHAPTER 14	The Interview –*Manzanar* CHAPTER 17	Time & a Half –*Limousine Way* CHAPTER 25	Overtime –*El Zócolo* CHAPTER 32	Working Weekend –*Dirt Shoulder* CHAPTER 39	Deadline –*Over the Net* CHAPTER 43
Arcangel	To Wake –*The Marketplace* CHAPTER 7	To Wash –*On the Tropic* CHAPTER 11	To Eat –*La Cantina de Miseria y Hambre* CHAPTER 21	To Labor –*East & West Forever* CHAPTER 23	To Dream –*America* CHAPTER 33	To Perform –*Angel's Flight* CHAPTER 36	To Die –*Pacific Rim Auditorium* CHAPTER 47

At first glance, the HyperContexts graph seems to divide rather than connect — it highlights the ways that the characters are geographically spread out by listing their locations across Los Angeles and Mexico and separating each character into their own column and row along an axis. However, as the book continues from Monday onward, the categories in the axes become more abstract and the characters become less entrenched from the geographical location that they started in in the first column. For example, Emi's first chapter on Monday is titled "Weather Report" and places her on the Westside, an affluent area of Los Angeles. Emi begins as the epitome of the successful and bourgeois Westsider - she has her life planned down to the minute on her Palm Pilot-type device, urges Gabriel to at least order a Perrier or sauvignon blanc to blend in with the white studio executives that surround them at lunch, and drives a sports car. But as the week stretches on, her locations become less concrete: World Wide Web, Last Stop, The Big Sleep. As the disaster on the freeway forces Emi to encounter people outside of her typical circle, the geographical boundaries of her neighborhood become less important and there

is more emphasis placed on other forms of connection and identification. Yamashita presents a different cartography of the city, one that does not strictly use race or class as its defining factor but instead emphasizes the multiple layers of connection that link the characters in the novel.

By focusing on the lives of these seven characters over seven days, Yamashita is keen to demonstrate how, in the era of globalization, every action and person intimately is connected to another action and person and any disturbances among these connections results in a domino effect that inevitably leads to disaster. This is further highlighted by the two main conflicts in the story: 1) a mystery about drug-laced oranges that appear to have originated in Mexico and travelled to Los Angeles, killing multiple residents and sending the city into an anti-orange, pro-passion fruit frenzy and 2) a multiple vehicle pile-up on the Harbor Freeway, a major artery in the Los Angeles freeway system, that grinds car travel to a halt in the city and leads to homeless residents claiming the freeway and abandoned cars as their property, however briefly. These two plotlines demonstrate the way in which even a large and highly populated city such as Los Angeles can be brought to a screeching halt by one or two opportunely timed accidents.

Yet, many of the characters in *Tropic of Orange* initially lack the ability to perceive the way all life is connected or they believe that their own desires and interests should supersede the forces of nature. For example, Gabriel purchases a home in Mexico after he is struck by a "spontaneous, sudden passion for the acquisition of land, the sensation of a timeless vacation, the erotic tastes of chili pepper and salty breezes" (8). He employs Rafaela Cortes to maintain the property and oversee its transformation into the romantic hacienda of his dreams. But Gabriel "insisted on planting trees that couldn't survive in this climate" (13). Gabriel is driven by his desire to transform his property into the lush vision of his dreams, despite repeated signs from

the land itself that it is rejecting his imported trees. By ignoring the land, Gabriel displays an overconfidence in humankind's ability to dominate over nature.

While Gabriel's trees are of course planted in Mexico, his insistence on trying to overpower the land and shape it to his will could also be seen as commentary on the way that Los Angeles has been willfully transformed from a desert climate to a sprawling metropolis kept alive by water that has been diverted from the Owens Valley. As Chiyo Crawford explains in an article about environmental justice and *Tropic of Orange*, the Owens Valley (sites of the Manzanar Concentration Camp where Manzanar Murakami claims to have been born) is a site of repeated displacement and theft of natural resources. Starting with the forced removal of Paiute Indians by white settlers, continuing with the way the City of Los Angeles "deceitfully purchased and stole land and water rights from those white settlers for the construction of an aqueduct to carry water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles" and concluding with the incarceration of Japanese Americans at the Manzanar Relocation Center (Crawford 89). Additionally, as Mike Davis notes in *Ecology of Fear*, "Los Angeles has deliberately put itself in harm's way...historic wildfire corridors have been turned into view-lot suburbs, wetland liquefaction zones into marinas, and floodplains into industrial districts and housing tracts" (9). In the same way that Gabriel insists on planting an orchard full of trees that will die in order to fulfill some romantic vision he has for his property in Mexico, so too did the architects of the Owens Valley aqueduct insist on altering nature in order to serve the purposes of a growing city in the desert, with little regard for any future environmental impacts on both the Valley and the city of Los Angeles. This passage about Gabriel's trees occurs in the very first section of the novel, which I believe is a deliberate choice on Yamashita's part in order to immediately draw

awareness to the way that nature is manipulated by those who have the money and power to do so.

Additionally, Gabriel's citation of "survival of fittest" as justification for his continued attempts to grow northern trees in his property reads as a neoliberal understanding of competition, growth, and success. Gabriel is not discouraged when his fruit trees die, telling Rafaela that "'they gotta take care of themselves. Survival of the fittest.'" Despite the "evidence of their dried twigs supporting creeping vines" Rafaela is determined to "make some miracle happen in this orchard, just to surprise Gabriel. Produce from his exotic northern trees. A sweet gooey marmalade from his orange trees" (13). Gabriel's offhand remark that the "strongest" trees will survive demonstrates a misguided belief that life, be it a human being or a fruit tree, will just naturally compete and the most able will flourish.

This speaks to Gabriel's inability to understand or fully comprehend the way that all life is connected and interdependent on each other. In "Toward an Infrastructural Sublime: Narrating Interdependency in Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles," Jina B. Kim expounds on the way that *Tropic of Orange* highlights the interconnectedness of modern life. Kim explains that in the context of feminist disability studies, interdependency is a term that "issues a challenge to dominant understandings of dependency, which frame it pejoratively as a parasitic relation abused by certain populations" (2). Kim argues that *Tropic of Orange* presents a new "paradigm [that] posits the impossibility of anyone's self-ownership, reaching beyond the liberatory telos of protest and recuperating the condition of dependency. It does so by highlighting the overlooked infrastructural networks that underpin fictions of self-sufficiency" (2). Indeed, as my later readings will show, the novel demonstrates how disaster can shatter our typical routines and ways of life and force us to examine our relationality to our neighbors. Even the most seemingly

self-assured characters such as Emi find themselves having to trust and work alongside people who had once been strangers. Similarly, in *Ecology of Fear*, Davis notes that the environmental disasters of Southern California are often dependently linked. For example, drought "dries fuel for wildfires which, in turn, removes ground cover and makes soils impermeable terrain. This increases the risk of flooding in areas where earthquakes may have already exposed new surfaces to erosion...consequently [L.A.] is at risk from multiple, interlinked disaster" (18). The rhetoric of "survival of the fittest" feels inadequate in the face of casual chains of disaster and the network of interdependencies that make up Los Angeles.

Gabriel's assertion that the trees will simply take care of themselves also negates the considerable labor and effort that Rafaela exerts into maintaining the trees and Gabriel's property as a whole. Because Gabriel has the luxury of mobility and the ability to travel back and forth between Mazatlan and Los Angeles, Rafaela's labor is almost invisible to him. Yet, Rafaela, as an employee of Gabriel's, feels compelled to make Gabriel's dreams happen. As Kim notes, "workers such as Bobby and Rafaela are not external to the system or parasitic on it. Rather, they provide the manual labor that enables it to run. Furthermore, they are part of a longstanding history of racialized infrastructural labor central to LA's growth" (12). Thus, this seemingly innocuous story about dying trees signals the interdependent webs of labor that allow Los Angeles to continue functioning.

Buzz, who for the first half of the novel, provides news tips to Gabe, represents a different way of looking at the environment and community because of his vantage point walking in his neighborhood. In a city defined by freeways and personal automobiles, Buzz walks. One day, "he was walking his block like always, and he suddenly noticed that row of poles planted every so many yards...his eyes followed the gray-brown poles up to the sky, and

for the first time, he recognized what he believed to be a tree" (30). Palm trees are so ubiquitous in the Los Angeles skyline that many people walk by them without noticing or take them for granted; indeed, many of the people Buzz tries to talk to about the wonders of palm trees are confused by Buzz's respect for the trees.

But because Buzz's mobility is limited to walking around his streets, serving as a walking social services and becoming intimately connected to his neighborhood, he is able to take the time to appreciate his environment, especially because the palm trees come to represent Buzz's desire for recognition. Buzz recalls a time when he "got taken for a ride on the freeway. Got to pass over the Harbor Freeway, speed over the hood like the freeway was a giant bridge. He realized you could just skip out over his house, his streets, his part of town. You never had to see it ever. Only thing you could see that anybody might take notice of were the palm trees. That was what the palm trees were for. To make out the place where he lived. To make sure that people noticed" (31). The fact that Buzz "got taken" on the freeway indicates a passivity that implies that while millions of Angelenos use the freeway every day for various purposes, freeway rides are a rare occurrence for Buzz himself. This is an important moment of realization for Buzz, though, because it ignites a desire for recognition of his neighborhood. Although he is working day and night to serve as social services, the freeway ride provides him an alternative perspective, a zoomed out look at where his home fits in the larger sprawl of Los Angeles. He realizes that despite his efforts to provide resources to his neighborhood, to everyone else driving by, the only thing they notice about his home are a cluster of palm trees. This realization leads Buzz to connect with Gabriel in the first place.

At the beginning of the novel, Buzz serves as a news tip for Gabriel, providing him with interesting leads. But Buzz is also Gabriel's harshest critic; Gabe notes that "Buzzworm had a

stake in my stories, deeper and hungrier than that of the most competitive reporter. He wanted desperately to see in print the stories of the life surrounding him, to see the wretched truth, the dignity despite the indignity. When I first met him, I had no idea that I was making a pact with a taskmaster more demanding than any editor. He was ruthless in his criticism, his disdain for my soft educated style" (40). After his freeway ride, Buzz realizes that many people drive through his neighborhood, never having to stop or learn more about it. Thus, he turns to Gabriel to act as a conduit for his voice. Yet, despite his lack of traditional newsroom experience, Buzz turns out to have a keener sense of what makes a captivating story and is harder on Gabriel than his actual newsroom editors. The fact that Gabriel is surprised that Buzz has such a rigorous demand to see the best stories written shows the way that particular voices are underrepresented or obscured in traditional news.

The Harbor Freeway crash and the ensuing changes that happen in Los Angeles allow for unexpected connections to be made between characters, a shift that is reflected in the HyperContexts graph. Gabriel learns that Rafaela is in danger in Mexico, so he asks Emi to fill in for him on his coverage of the homeless community that has started living on the freeway. When Gabe introduces Buzz and Emi, the "two contradictions sized each other up. There was no way in hell they could see eye to eye" (142). Buzz finds Emi's Westside affectations pretentious and patronizing and Emi finds the news production setup on the freeway to be beneath her standards. However, as they spend more time together, they begin to find common ground through television production. Buzzworm sets up a makeshift office in a gold Mercedes and even employs a secretary because his "Cellphone didn't stop. Messages were piling up. Pager was going every five minutes" (160). He becomes a full-fledged producer of "TV in the FreeZone. TV from the bottom. Aspirations of the lowest bum on skid row. Lifestyles of the poor and

forgotten. Buzzworm was producing the hottest property on the net. Baby sister said it was a Hollywood wet dream" (165). The freeway crash and subsequent community that emerges on the freeway thus leads to an unexpected friendship between Emi and Buzz. Despite their belief that they would never see eye to eye, their mutual interest in television news production provides common ground that allows them to begin to understand each other.

As the days pass on the freeway, Emi also begins to shed her cynical view of the world and starts to confide in Buzz. He finds her tanning on top of the news van one day and she explains to him she is working on her New Age tan: "A New Age tan's like this: You take up yoga, do a thorough detox, and go macrobiotic: miso, tofu, and brown rice. You become religiously organic. You join an animal rights support group to heal your inner animal…It's total bullshit. I just needed to get away" (201). This passage shows Emi's hyperawareness of her social status and the stereotypical qualities that make up a typical privileged Westsider, while also showing her outspoken rejection of this life. Before this, Emi has rarely shown vulnerability or weakness, preferring to trade quick jabs with Gabe or Buzz. By admitting to Buzz that it's all "bullshit," she also reveals how disappointing and shallow she finds this world. She continues her confessional streak by telling Buzz a secret: Manzanar is her grandfather. Buzz then urges her to go meet him, explaining that "the connection begs to be understood. I can't say I knew my grandma, but when she died, she left me everything she had…Maybe you get lucky. Get the baton and the overpass to boot" (202). Buzz's mention of connection emphasizes the idea that one can find shared understanding in unlikely places. Emi has not seen her grandfather in years but Buzz urges her to go re-meet him and to gain a new understanding of him. Unfortunately Emi is killed on the freeway by the military before she can reunite with her grandfather, but this entire exchange between Buzz and Emi demonstrates how interconnected and random life can be

- had someone not started lacing oranges with drugs in order to pass them across the border, there would not have been a series of accidents that shut down the freeway. And had Gabe not already been working with Buzz on news stories, he never would have been introduced to Emi on the freeway. This interconnection is expressed on a formal level through HyperContexts and on a personal level through relationships such as the one that develops between Emi and Gabe.

The series of events that brings Emi and Buzz together also invokes the ways that nations are connected because of economic globalization while also questioning the very nature of national borders themselves. The orange that kills the driver of a red Porsche, which then crashes and triggers another crash, is laced with concentrated cocaine in Mexico and has been smuggled north to Los Angeles. This demonstrates that, despite the man made borders that separate the two countries, the movement of products from one place to another will always have some material effect. Oranges play a significant part in the novel; apart from the cocaine-laced oranges, the Arcangel takes an orange that has come from Gabe's orange tree. As he moves north, the Tropic of Cancer also moves north, shifting borders and boundaries along the way. Borders are also called into question during a conversation that Buzz has with Margarita, a local fruit vendor in his neighborhood. She asks him if he is interested in oranges imported from Florida and he explains: "If it's Florida, it's not imported. Same country, see. If it's Mexico, it's imported." She responds: "Por que? Florida's more far away than Mexico" (75). Margarita questions the idea of imported and exported goods because it seems arbitrary to her that they are defined by national borders, given Mexico's proximity to Los Angeles and Florida's longer distance from the city.. This exchange demonstrates the artificiality of borders that Arcangel's journey also seeks to make more visible. As John Gamber notes, "Yamashita's novel challenges absolutes of purity as they relate to space and place (especially as examined by borders, boundaries, and cartography),

while examining the interrelated role of time, individuated selves, and waste, toxicity, and castoffs" (122). Thus, the oranges are further related to the way that *Tropic of Orange* presents a new view of mapping Los Angeles, one that recognizes boundaries as porous and constantly shifting. This constant reworking of boundaries allows for new ways of interacting with a city and its citizens.

The connection between Buzz and Emi that comes about as a result of the freeway crash is also seen on a more macro level across the city of Los Angeles. Because the freeway is so central to the mobility of vehicles in Los Angeles, the crash brings everything to a halt. Everybody in Los Angeles began walking because "they just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was a big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. The whole system was coagulating right then and there. Some of the broadest boulevards had turned into one-way alleys" (187). The language of this passage describes the crash and its consequences in terms of health, which evokes the sense that a city is not a static entity but rather a living, breathing system. The language also emphasizes the idea of interdependence within a city; because the Harbor Freeway is connected to so many other freeways in Los Angeles, the crash has vast unintended consequences. But, as Adams notes in her article on *Tropic*, "being stuck in traffic does not mean they are immobile. Rather, they are confronted by circumstances that force them outside the enclosed boundaries of the stories that they know, causing them to see and feel the world differently" (266). We see this happening after the crash, when freeways are rendered useless and Angelenos have to walk around their city. Suddenly, "everybody in L.A. was walking…streets'd become unrecognizable from an automotive standpoint. Only way to navigate was to feel the street with your own two feet so people were finally getting out." Buzz even sees "a couple examining the base of a palm tree,

then looking upward with some kind of appreciation (187). This contrasts with an earlier scene, where Buzz explains that people never slowed down to see the palm trees and that the trees are the only visible marker of his South Los Angeles neighborhood from the freeway. The fact that he now can see people appreciating the palm trees shows how the freeway crash becomes an event that shifts paradigms and causes people to re-evaluate their city, to force them to take routes they never traveled before and to see Los Angeles in a new light.

This way of seeing Los Angeles is one that Manzanar has been practicing throughout the novel via his conducting; the Harbor Freeway crash brings about a new group of conductors that are able to begin to create a new grid and mapping of Los Angeles. Buzz's vantage point in his neighborhood provides him a keener sense of how life in Los Angeles is interconnected, and the crash allows others to see Los Angeles through Buzz's perspective. Similarly, Manzanar's position on the periphery of society - a homeless man on a freeway overpass - allows him a different view of Los Angeles that more people are able to see after the crash. Although the social experiment of the homeless taking over abandoned cars on the freeway was brief, the shock to the system allows others out there to take up the mantle of conductor. The homeless are even able to recycle a disaster on the freeway into a new, albeit brief, communal structure of living. There are "washed baby socks and panties hanging out of the window of a Chrysler van. More wash sunning out on the ivy" and some residents even fill up a van with dirt to start an "urban garden here on the Fast lane" (163-4).

Evidence of this new mapping can be seen in the new grid that Manzanar spies from his vantage point near the end of the novel. One of the grids that is visible to Manzanar before the freeway crash is "his map of labor…it was work that defined each person in the city, despite the fact that almost everyone wanted to be defined by their leisure" (203). This brings to mind

Wendy Brown's definition of neoliberalism as a system in which "all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of market rationality." To Brown, neoliberalism means that "all human and institutional action [is viewed] as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality" (40). Certainly, Manzanar's map of labor reduces people to their labor value and places them on a grid according to the logics of market rationality. However, after the freeway crash, "little by little, Manzanar began to sense a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or living but by himself and others like him" (203). This new sort of grid diverges from the neoliberal mapping based on market rationality and economic value and rather prioritizes human beings themselves instead of their labor. This demonstrates how speculation can result in new ways of social organization and mapping a city, new grids that do not reduce people to what they can offer an economy but rather takes them as they are. Near the end of the novel, Manzanar decides to stop conducting because "there was no need to conduct the music any longer. The entire city had sprouted grassroots conductors of every sort" (218). Although the freeway community meets a sad end, they represent an alternative way of life and engaging with a community that inspires other conductors, not just Manzanar, to begin thinking about alternative ways of mapping and seeing Los Angeles.

Even characters such as Gabriel, who as previously mentioned demonstrated a colonialist desire to plant non-native trees on his property in Mexico, is able to understand more abstract and open-ended ways of being at the novel's conclusion. He explains that he "no longer looked for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off my storylines. If I had begun to understand anything, I now knew they were simply the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger and larger…The picture got larger

and larger. I could follow a story or I could abandon it, but I could not stop" (213). The fact that Gabriel, who was beforehand so focused on tidy resolution and neatly wrapped up stories, now embraces the idea of loose threads and unresolved storylines, demonstrates the transformative effect of the week and gestures towards the novel's larger themes about mapping Los Angeles. Gabriel understands that the universe is only getting larger and more expansive. This shows that as economic globalization continues, Los Angeles will continue to change and evolve and an alternative to the neoliberal mapping of the city requires an expansiveness and following threads where they may lead because they will provide new ways of understanding community and providing care within a brutal neoliberal system. Ultimately, while the experiment in communal living on the freeway was brief, it did provide a vision of alternative ways of living that prioritize community and mutual aid. And while Buzz and Emi's budding friendship was cut short by Emi's brutal death on the freeway, their connection also demonstrates that there are generative relationships to be made by looking outside of one's neighborhood and expanding boundaries.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dystopian Imaginings in *Parable of the Sower* and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*

In 1992, political economist Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*, claiming that the ascendance of Western liberal democracy constituted "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government, and as such constituted the end of history" (xi). Fukuyama's steadfast belief in the power of liberal democracy to preserve freedom, equality, and liberty has been of course widely challenged, but his pronouncement does reveal the way that capitalism, and specifically neoliberalism, has been accepted as the default mode of operation.

Mark Fisher defines this acceptance as capitalist realism, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Opening *Capitalist Realism* with a close reading of the dystopian 2006 film *Children of Men*, Fisher notes that while dystopian films and novels once felt like "exercises in acts of imagination," today, they seem "more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of our [world] than an alternative to it " (2). Neoliberalism has become such an all-encompassing structure in our everyday lives that even in speculative fiction, it becomes hard to imagine alternative ways of being.

In this chapter, I will examine two dystopian visions of the future: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) by Octavia Butler and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992) by Cynthia Kadohata. Published in 1992 and 1993, in the same historical and economic moment that Fukuyama made his bold declaration about the end of history, these two novels utilize dystopia to reflect on the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism but also to provide alternative visions of the future as well

as extrapolatory warnings about our present behavior and consumption of environmental resources.

Beside their publication within one year of each other, there are many striking similarities between the two novels. Both novels are set in a dystopian near-future Los Angeles ravaged by climate change and both are narrated by teenaged women of color. As I will explain further and as has been noted in my chapter on *Tropic of Orang*e, these similarities are not mere coincidences but rather reflect the specific socioeconomic moment of Los Angeles in the early 1990s. The early 1990s were a period of economic restructuring in Los Angeles, brought on by neoliberal economic policies such as opening borders to trade and outsourcing labor overseas in order to maximize profits. This restructuring resulted in loss of manufacturing jobs within the most precarious populations in the city.

Additionally, the 1991 beating of Rodney King and the 1991 killing of Latasha Harlins at the hands of a Korean American convenience store owner escalated racial tensions in the city. Koreatown's proximity to predominantly black communities as well as the worsening economic conditions in these communities also contributed to tensions between the two racial groups. The 1992 acquittal of the officers involved in the Rodney King beating set off a series of riots across the city that were rooted in feelings of powerlessness and frustrations that had both racial and economic underpinnings. It is within this socioeconomic context that Kadohata and Butler crafted their own dystopian depictions of Los Angeles.

The two texts also differ from each other in ways that reveal different investments in the portrayal of race within speculative fiction. I read *Parable of the Sower* as a distinctly Afrofuturist text, one that demonstrates a keen awareness of the history of African American enslavement within the United States and which routinely references this history even in its

depiction of a futuristic Los Angeles. *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, on the other hand, is more ambiguous in its representation of race in future Los Angeles as well as its engagement with the historical past. There are far fewer historical references in Kadohata's novel, a purposeful absence that I read as indicative of the reflexive impotence that neoliberalism engenders.

However, despite these differences, the novels ultimately converge in their representation of how disability operates in a dystopian setting. Using a feminist disability studies lens, I argue that the way that disability and debility operate in dystopic Los Angeles is both a consequence of uneven geographical development as well as a way to generate hope and new systems of interdependent care. Utopia and dystopia, as I will demonstrate, are contradictory modes of looking at the future and can therefore help us begin to think about the contradictions inherent within a modern neoliberal society.

In this chapter, I begin with an outline of critical dystopias and feminist disability studies to provide a critical context for how the two are connected and why speculative fiction is a productive site through which to analyze the way that disability operates. Then, I close read scenes from *Parable* that demonstrate how the text deploys Afrofuturism as a mode of generating hope in dystopia and how the main character, Lauren Olamina, demonstrates community organizing at the intersections of race, gender, and disability. I will also analyze scenes from *In the Heart* that exemplify how disability and debility leads to a more resigned attitude toward disaster amidst neoliberalism. Next, I compare the two novels and the way they represent interdependent modes of care that allow for survival within a hostile neoliberal system. Finally, I conclude with a brief comparison of these two texts with the disaster movies analyzed

in the first chapter in order to highlight how the two forms diverge in their response to neoliberal multiculturalism.

Critical Dystopia and Disability

In his previous work, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Impulse*, Moylan coined the term "critical utopia" to refer to a specific burst of utopian works that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. Critical utopias are inherently political works that embody various opposition movements. These movements reject the dominant capitalist systems and ideological structures in favor of "the politics of autonomy, democratic socialism, ecology, and especially feminism" (11). However, in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia*, Moylan turns his attention to more recent science fictional representations of dystopia and defines critical dystopias as narratives which "give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations)" and which "explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health" (189). Moylan's definition also takes into account the economic context of the 1990s, noting that "the new hegemonic constellation generally succeeded in shifting from a less profitable centralized mode of production to a more flexible reign of accumulation that took full advantage of technological developments in cybernetics and electronics" and it was in "this era of economic restructuring, political opportunism, and cultural implosion that dystopian narrative reappeared within the formal parameters of science fiction" (184,186). *Parable of the Sower* and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, both published in the early 1990s, are critical dystopias that

are productive sites to analyze how disability, race, and gender impact the ways that disaster is experienced in a neoliberal context.

Disability studies as a scholarly field grew out of the disability civil rights movement. As Alice Hall notes, the campaign for disability rights can be traced back to the period after World War II, where many soldiers returned home with physical and mental disabilities and found that their everyday lives were hampered by infrastructures that were hostile to those with disabilities (20). Given this history of disability rights, disability studies as a field has often been critiqued for overemphasizing the subjectivity of white cisgender men while overlooking the way that class, race, gender, and other identity categories can intersect with disability (insert footnote with references). Building on the work of Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk, I use the term feminist disability studies broadly, not just to consider disability studies' intersections with gender but also to analyze how race and class can create disability and affect the way that disabled people interact with the world.

In "Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies," Kim and Schalk acknowledge the previous critiques about the whiteness of disability studies and propose a "feminist-of-color disability studies method [that] highlights the ideological and rhetorical deployment of ableism within legacies of eugenics, colonialism/neocolonialism, counterterrorism, welfare reform, war, urban redevelopment, and other oppressive practices and structures that route life-sustaining resources away from populations of color" (38). This method of deploying disability studies allows for textual readings that do not merely identify disability as a marginalized position but take into account the violent structures that both create disabled people and relegate them to marginalized positions within society.

When utilizing a feminist-of-color disability studies framework, I argue that it is crucial to account for the way that neoliberal economic development impacts disability and to attend to how state structures create disability and debility as a method of discipline and control. Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim* provides an incisive account of debility and how it has become endemic under neoliberalism. Puar notes that Israeli Defense Forces have demonstrated a pattern of sparing Palestinian life, instead choosing to maim them in order to debilitate them and enforce perpetual control over debilitated bodies. Debility in this form can be traced through many other geographical and social contexts; Puar identifies the mass incarceration of African Americans and the injuries sustained by miners in Botswana as other expressions of debility. To Puar, "debility addresses injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional, and reflects a need for re-thinking overarching structures of working, schooling, and living rather than relying on rights frames to provide accommodationist solutions" (xvii). Uneven geographic and economic development results in the endemic nature of debility in certain populations, to the point that it becomes "a banal feature of quotidian existence that is already definitive of the precarity of that existence. The conditions that make disability endemic as opposed to exceptional are already ones of entrenched economic, racial, political, and social disenfranchisement" (16). Puar's description of debility is certainly a bleak one and suggests that one need not look toward speculative fiction to find dystopia; in places such as Palestine, where the debilitating maiming of bodies has become endemic, perhaps dystopia and the end of a world are already here.

This idea that present day conditions can be dystopic for certain populations can also be seen if we look more deeply at the economic and racial landscape of Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Min Hyoung Song's *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* argues

that the riots have become a "cultural-literary event, an important source of tropes for imagining the seemingly endemic social problems plaguing the United States and the country's possible futures" (3). Song paints a picture of the socioeconomic and racial conditions that led up to the riots as well as the issues that persisted post-1992. He explains that "the economic losses of a capaciously defined white middle class, the daily misery of poor blacks abandoned in urban islands of poverty, and the influx of nonwhite immigrants" (6). The aerospace industry, which had boomed in Los Angeles since World War II, contracted following the end of the Cold War and as corporations moved their manufacturing to places with lower costs of living and fewer environmental regulations. This shift affected the white middle class and exacerbated the poverty in predominantly black neighborhoods. The prominence of Korean American business owners in predominantly black neighborhoods also placed these "merchants at the interstitial joint between white holders of power and a black underclass (the middleman theory), in effect operating to uphold in the popular imagination a black- white racial order that mirrors an extremely reductive class bifurcation" (9). As I will demonstrate in my readings of the two novels, *In the Heart* and *Parable of the Sower* counter these reductive approaches to racial relations by demonstrating the ways that people can cross racial lines in order to share resources and survive amidst dystopia. That is not to say that racial animosity is absent in these works but that Kadohata and Butler represent ways that multiracial communities can use class as a form of solidarity rather than as a wedge that drives them apart.

Los Angeles in the early 1990s was also a society increasingly segregated by race and class. Song explains that as manufacturing jobs began to dry up in Los Angeles, the city's economy trended toward expansion in two areas: "the increasingly technology-dependent business of manufacturing culture—movies, music, fashion, industrial design—for an

increasingly global clientele, and the labor-intensive business of manufacturing garments in ethnically marked sweatshops and the flipping of burgers in fast-food restaurants" (56). People who worked in the former category tended to live in the affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods on the city's Westside while people working in service jobs lived in "the older, dilapidated, and increasingly isolated suburbs of South Los Angeles and the Inland Empire" (57). Song also cites a series of propositions that were passed in California in the 1990s - propositions that ended affirmative action, ended bilingual education in public schools, deprived undocumented immigrants of basic social services - as ways that "wealthy suburbanites had literally voted to secede from the poor" (57). These geographical borders within Los Angeles are fictionalized and expanded upon by Kadohata and Butler. In *In the Heart*, the protagonist works as a delivery driver and often ventures into the "richtowns" of the Westside to make deliveries. In *Parable of the Sower*, walled communities have become commonplace and certain communities offer security and protection specifically for white, educated individuals. However, as I will demonstrate in my close readings, the novels do not represent the "richtowns" of the city as aspirational places to live; the narrators of both novels express that their desire for freedom and self-determination is more important than living in wealthy, protected bubbles.

Mike Davis's *Ecology of Fear* puts the economic anxieties of the 1990s into conversation with the environmental disasters that battered Los Angeles in the same time period. Between 1992 and 1995, Los Angeles suffered through three floods totaling $500 million in damage, a series of firestorms causing $1 billion in damage and a 6.7 magnitude earthquake that resulted in $42 billion in damages. As Davis puts it, "middle class apprehensions about the angry, abandoned underclasses are now only exceeded by anxieties about blind thrust faults and hundred-year floods" (8). This directly links environmental disasters with issues of the economy.

Additionally, the slew of disasters that struck Los Angeles and the subsequent recovery and relief efforts created opportunities for the rich to profit from disaster. Thus, natural disasters serve to exacerbate economic disasters for those in lower socioeconomic brackets while the rich continue to accumulate wealth through disaster capitalism.

Using a feminist disability studies perspective to analyze speculative fiction and specifically, speculative imaginings of critical dystopias, can highlight the banal, precarious existence of our present day by representing an extrapolated future in which life is even more desolate, a future in where droughts last longer and where fires burn longer, and where more of the world's population lives under debilitating circumstances. Speculative fiction's ability to represent extrapolations and imaginings of the future allows for a dramatic representation of debility and disability, one that has the possibility to shock and upset a reader into taking action to prevent such a future from ever existing.

Additionally, speculative fiction allows for the imaginings of worlds that present alternatives to neoliberalism even if they cannot wholly escape the totalizing power of neoliberal structures. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder write in *The Biopolitics of Disability*, "what is often lost in relations of neoliberal normalcy are ways in which disabled people's openly interdependent lives and crip/queer forms of embodiment provide alternative maps for living together in the deterritorialized, yet highly regulated spaces of biopolitics. The preservation of disabled bodies in these spaces depends on managing to invent forms of culture that operate as alternatives to the principles of neoliberalism" (3). In the section that follows, I demonstrate how the protagonists in my two objects of study navigate debility and disability in different ways and provide alternate maps for living.

Taking Root Among the Stars: Race, Disability, and Gender in *Parable of the Sower*

Parable of the Sower portrays Los Angeles several decades into the future. Beginning in 2024 and ending in 2027, the novel is structured as a series of journal entries written by the main character, Lauren Olamina. At the novel's start, Lauren is fifteen and living in Robledo, a suburb of Los Angeles, with her father, step-mother, and three half-brothers. Because of the violence and chaos in Los Angeles, Robledo is surrounded by a wall that protects its citizens. Outside of the wall, there are constant murders as well as fires set by pyros, people addicted to a drug that compels them to start fires. The economy is collapsing, jobs are hard to come by, and Los Angeles is plagued by a drought so persistent that it has not rained in six years. To add to these struggles, we quickly learn that as a result of her mother's drug use when she was pregnant with Lauren, Lauren has hyperempathy, a syndrome that forces her to experience the feelings of those around her. Because of the hyper-violent world in which they live, hyperempathy causes Lauren to often experience excruciating pain and she keeps it a secret from everyone except her family.

However, the relative peace of Robledo is soon disturbed when a group of people from outside the wall set a series of fires in the community and pillage their resources. Lauren's family and most of Robledo is killed so she decides to venture north with Zahra and Harry, two survivors from her community. During their slow trek up through California, they find various travelers and Lauren continues writing in her journal about Earthseed, a new religion that she has been developing since she was fifteen.

Lauren's hyperempathy becomes even more disabling on their journey north because of the violence they all experience, but I argue that her hyperempathy also makes her the ideal person to lead a new, hopeful movement for change in the future. At first glance, hyperempathy disorder seems to be based on stereotypes of women as being overly emotional and sensitive.

Lauren has “never told anyone” besides her family that she has the disorder because “sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret” (178). To appear stronger, Lauren has to hide her emotions and her reactions to pain because in a patriarchal society, showing emotion is coded as an overtly feminine and weak trait. Indeed, the feminine stigma attached to sharing is made clearer when Lauren discovers that one of her fellow travelers, Grayson Mora, is a sharer. She realizes that he remains so aloof because “sharing would be harder on a man” and he is “desperate to hide his terrible vulnerability” (324). Lauren’s belief that sharing would be harder on a man reinforces the idea that hyperempathy disorder is seen as an implicitly feminine disability, which shows how damaging sexist ideas about who can and cannot express emotion are; Grayson not only has to take great care to hide his disorder but he also has to assert his aggressiveness to compensate for his disability.

Although hyperempathy is presented as an overtly feminine form of frailty, this disability does not prevent Lauren from achieving her goals; instead, Butler shows how the intersection of Lauren’s gender, race, and disability make her the very person who has the drive and resilience needed to grow Earthseed into a nationwide religious movement. In many ways, Lauren’s position as a disabled black woman leaves her highly vulnerable in such a violent world but her vulnerability also allows her to understand the importance of community and drives her need to create a more livable world through her Earthseed movement.

Parable of the Sower, as it depicts Lauren’s steadfast belief in her Earthseed movement and its ability to bring hope and salvation in a dystopian world, is a distinctly Afrofuturist text. “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine,” said Greg Tate in an interview with cultural critic Mark Dery in 1993 (212). It was Dery who first coined the term Afrofuturism, defining it as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and

addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (180). Using this definition, I see *Parable* as an Afrofuturist text because it clearly acknowledges the history of slavery and subjugation of African Americans while using science fictional imagery to envision liberation.

The town of Olivar demonstrates Butler's constant engagement with the history of slavery, as well as an example of how neo-slavery has become an option in Los Angeles because the government has loosened regulations around labor and climate change has made certain places more dangerous to live in. Before Robledo is attacked and destroyed, Lauren details the election of President Donner, who runs on a campaign to deregulate and privatize services. She notes that his plan for putting people back to work is getting laws changed to "suspend 'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board" (27). The suspension of worker protection laws allows KSF, an international company, to purchase the town of Olivar, a coastal town where "parts of the city "crumble into the ocean, undercut or deeply saturated by salt water. Sea levels keep rising with the warming climate and there is the occasional earthquake…[Olivar] can't protect itself from the encroaching sea, the crumbling earth, the crumbling economy, or the desperate refugees" (118-9). The company opens a desalination plant in Olivar and provides the current citizens a small salary, guaranteed food, and protection from the violence of the outside world. Climate change has created inhospitable environments that companies seize upon to increase their profits while gaining a workforce that is desperate enough to work for low wages and security.

Although Lauren's mother is keen to apply to work and live in Olivar, Lauren and her father immediately recognize the setup as a regressive way of life. Lauren realizes that "anyone

hired would have a hard time living on the salary offered. In not very much time, the new hires would be in debt to the company. That's an old company-town trick - get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery. That might work in Christopher Donner's America. Labor laws, state and federal, are not what they once were" (121). Lauren, as a black woman who is keenly aware of the history of the United States, is able to recognize that Olivar is the result of unbridled neoliberalism which only considers profit and not the well-being of laborers. Lauren's father shares her sentiment, describing Olivar as "half antebellum revival and half science fiction." He explains that freedom is precious and one "can't sell it for bread and pottage" (122). The word "pottage" evokes the Biblical story of Esau, who sells his birthright for a mess of pottage. Additionally, I see it as a reference to the ending of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; after witnessing a lynching, the titular character decides to pass as white but ultimately concludes that he regrets giving up a side of his ancestry and heritage for the privilege of passing. Both of these examples depict someone selling something that is inherent and core to their identity in exchange for something that only brings fleeting gratification. Similarly, Lauren and her family have the chance for safety by applying to live in Olivar but Lauren and her father recognize that the system would be another form of slavery, and that the safety will probably be short-lived anyway, as conditions continue to worsen in the country. Instead of choosing safety as the ex-colored man does, Lauren and her father refuse to sell their birthright of freedom in order to live securely behind the walls of Olivar because they recognize that as a short-sighted decision. Lauren, in particular, consciously seeks to build Earthseed, a society that will not be rooted in exploitation and profit but rather in community.

The way that hyperempathy as a disability is exploited also demonstrates how the history of slavery continues to haunt the futuristic Los Angeles depicted in *Parable*. As Lauren travels through California, she meets various travelers and invites them to join her group traveling north. One of these people is an older man named Bankole; when Lauren discovers his name, she notes that "our last names were an instant bond between us. We're both descended from men who assumed African surnames back during the 1960s" (230). As Edward Onaci notes, during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, activists "developed strategies intended to overcome past and present racial oppression" and "many Black men and women made decisions about personal identifiers and surnames that reflected the complicated pursuit of self-determination" ("Black Power"). Thus, Butler's inclusion about the significance of Lauren and Bankole's last names is a callback to the Black Power movement, demonstrating an Afrofuturist awareness of historical activism and movements for self-determination. The self-determination of the Black Power movement is also linked to Lauren's own quest to establish her Earthseed religion and movement. Like the activists who came before her, Lauren seeks her own self-determination outside the bounds of what she has been born into. This mentioning of names then gestures toward the past while gazing toward the future in a distinctly Afrofuturist manner.

Butler further draws the parallels between the modern day debility of labor to historical instances of slavery. Emery, another one of the travelers that they encounter, is a former farm worker who also has hyperempathy. Emery explains that when the farm she was working on was purchased by an agricultural conglomerate, she began receiving wages in company scrip, fell into debt, and was not permitted to leave until she worked off the debt, which would be impossible given the wages she was paid. Emery had two sons, which were sold into slavery because they also had hyperempathy: "sometimes they pay more for people who have it.

Especially kids," she explains (305). While the town of Olivar presents an idealistic idea of working in a company town, Emery's situation demonstrates the realistic end result of such a setup: crippling debt and the return of slavery practices such as selling children for profit, especially those who have the disability of hyperempathy and therefore will be easier for slave drivers to control. This example demonstrates how debility becomes endemic to life amidst neoliberalism. As Puar explains, "poverty itself may well be thought of as a form of debilitation…The concept of "crippling debt," for example, reveals the ways in which fiscal "health" is a form of capacitation or capacity. Theorizing debt as bodily vulnerability recognizes the historical and structural relationships between poverty and disability—engendered by colonization, occupation, environmental degradation, war, biomedicine, and labor exploitation" (73). Using this idea of debt itself as debility, as disabled hyperempaths who had to work to pay off an insurmountable amount of debt, Emery and her children are therefore doubly disabled and marginalized within this dystopia. Lauren's own hyperempathy allows her to connect with Emery and her racial position as a black woman allow her to understand that what happened to Emery's children is yet another example of neo-slavery. Lauren's ability to make these connections and her recognition that the country is reverting to ante-bellum conditions drives her to continue to recruit followers to Earthseed.

Although Lauren encounters countless horrors during her travels, she remains hopeful that Earthseed will provide an answer to the current state of the country, a belief that makes this a critical dystopia as well as a distinctly Afrofuturist text. When asked about what heaven looks like within the Earthseed religion, she decides that "The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars…beyond Mars, other star systems. Living worlds" (222). Since the beginning of the novel, Lauren has displayed a fascination with outer space. Back in Robledo, when she learns

that an astronaut on a Mars mission has been killed, Lauren decides that the astronaut "can be a kind of model for me. She spent her life heading for Mars - preparing herself, becoming an astronaut…beginning to create sheltered plates where people can live and work now…Mars is a rock - cold, empty, almost airless, dead. Yet it's heaven in a way" (21). Her belief that Mars and other planets in space will provide a fresh start for humanity and a place for her to help lead a more just society make this an Afrofuturist novel, one that uses technology (in this case, space travel), as a method of salvation and liberation. In the sequel, *Parable of Talents*, we learn that Lauren does ultimately achieve her goal of seeing her followers take root among the stars; she dies while watching space shuttles leave Earth on their way to the Christopher Columbus starship, which is filled with settlers who will attempt to start the first human colony on another world.

Reflexive Impotence in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*

While *Parable* uses Afrofuturism to provide hope of liberation amidst disaster, *In the Heart of the Valley of Lov*e presents a less optimistic view of humanity's ability to create just futures. *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is set in 2052 and unfolds through a series of vignettes narrated by Francie, a nineteen-year-old multiracial woman. At the start of the novel, she is living with her aunt and her aunt's partner, Rohn, and works for her aunt's delivery business.

In 2052, Los Angeles is a bleak dystopia, a place that takes present day concerns about climate change and extrapolates them fifty years into the future. Anxieties about climate change become extreme droughts and shortages of natural gas in Kadohata's Los Angeles. The government controls such resources by issuing gas and water credits to citizens. The economic recession of the early 1990s becomes an economy in total collapse — everyone who lives

outside of the richtown area of Beverly Hills and Brentwood find creative ways to earn an income. For example, Francie accompanies her aunt and Rohn on a trip to the desert to make a delivery of black-market Japanese electronics, cigarettes, and other hard to obtain goods. When they come across two police officers shining flashlights into their car, Rohn "handed each of them a ten-gallon gas cred and they took the creds nonchalantly" and left (5). As the police are not a source of safety or protection, the citizens of Los Angeles take security into their own hands. Francie visits a house for work and notes that it is in a camp - "one of those communities enclosed by tall metal fences and guarded by uniformed, armed men and women. Camps had become more and more popular over the years, not just for the wealthy but for everyone" (124). The setting of the novel is similar to that of *Parable of the Sower*; in both novels, the poor and marginalized are forced to fend for themselves and protect themselves from the disasters that neoliberalism has wrought.

Unlike the characters in *Parable*, though, the characters in *In the Heart* demonstrate less obvious acts of resistance or active desire to change their circumstances. After experiencing two traumatic events — Rohn's disappearance while on a work trip and a car accident that leaves her hospitalized for months — Francie moves out of her aunt's house and decides to enroll in community college. She meets a group of friends while working at the college's newspaper and the rest of the vignettes detail her experiences with her friends and boyfriend, Mark. Although Francie decides to enroll after her accident, her specific plans and hopes for her time at community college are ambiguous; she enters the college newsroom on a whim and explains that "several people had been in the two-year journalism program for as long as ten years. I could see how it would be hard to leave, unsure as we all were about what we were in school for in the first place" (35). Francie's vague attitude toward her schooling can be read as what Mark Fisher terms

reflexive impotence. Fisher describes reflexive impotence as the knowledge that things are bad but more than that, knowing that there is nothing one can do about one's situation. This feeling of powerlessness relates to Fisher's broader argument that it has become difficult to imagine a viable alternative to capitalism amidst increased implementation of neoliberal policies. Observing the students he teaches at university, Fisher remarks that "none of the students I taught had any legal obligation to be at college. They could leave if they wanted to. But the lack of any meaningful employment opportunities, together with cynical encouragement from the government means that college seems to be the easier, safer option" (26). This description also fits the actions of Francie and her friends, who seem to have ended up at college because it was an option that was available and who have stayed on without graduating because of inertia. Unlike Lauren who actively seeks out ways to not just survive but to push forward her Earthseed movement, Francie and her friends operate under this sense of impotence, preferring to work in the comfortable, if stagnant, environment of the newsroom instead of making clear efforts at trying to act against the system of neoliberal governance.

In terms of disability, reflexive impotence can also be seen as a form of debility and specifically, slow death, as articulated by Lauren Berlant. Berlant defines slow death as the "physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. The general emphasis of the phrase is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality" (754). Building on this, Puar sees slow death as "a mode of neoliberal and affective capacitation or debilitation as mediated by different technological assemblages" (2). The apathy that Francie and her friends demonstrate in various aspects of their lives can therefore be read as a form of debility that has become endemic

because of the effects of neoliberalism on the economy. This attitude toward life is not just confined to Francie and her circle; near Mark's apartment, Francie observes some children sleeping beside their parents, who are selling goods on the street. The neighborhood that Mark lives in is not "affluent enough to support a supermarket, so there were only a few *grocerias* and *carnicerias* where the good were overpriced," so people occasionally sell goods on the street. Gazing at the children, she "ached with the thought that the odds were worse for them than they had been for my school friends, that one day when they were older many of them would up in the middle of the night with the certain knowledge that the world was too hard for them; and yet the next morning they would get up again and go about as usual" (120). This passage captures the essence of the debilitating nature of slow death; Francie recognizes that the children will eke out an existence in the future but because the sense of disaster and lack of economic opportunity is so pervasive, she cannot imagine a future where life improves for them. Instead, they will get up and live their lives because there is no other alternative that they can envision. There is a resigned tone in this passage that is present throughout the novel; Francie and her friends do not actively try to improve their position in life, mostly because they know there is little opportunity to do so. Because they are denied access to stable careers like the people in richtown have, they are more focused on survival and getting through each day.

For example, Francie's boyfriend, Mark, is constantly looking for odd jobs and opportunities to make extra money. One day, he goes to a store near UCLA to liquidate its fixtures; "It was a Saturday night, and there were students all over going to movies or restaurants. They were in such a different world from [Francie] that [she] barely noticed them." Francie describes how she felt like a "different species" from the UCLA students - "girls and boys with tank tops, tanned arms, and blond hair" (58-9). Francie is biracial but compared to

Parable, race is rarely mentioned in this novel. Therefore, it is significant that certain racial markers are mentioned when Francie visits UCLA, which is located on the Westside of Los Angeles in richtown. The blond hair and tanned arms of the students imply that they are white and Francie feels alienated by both their whiteness and their wealth. This passage, along with the previous passage at Mark's apartment, demonstrates the stark wealth divide in Kadohata's Los Angeles. One neighborhood is too poor to even have a grocery store while the other is full of university students who have the discretionary income to spend on movies and restaurants. This illustrates the way that debility and disability are distributed unevenly within a society and why it is important to account for race within discussion of disability.

Disability and Interdependence

However, despite the lack of outward resistance shown in *In the Heart*, I argue that Francie and her friends form interdependent communities that are rooted in the pervasive debility they all experience under the bleak conditions of Los Angeles in 2052. For example, after Francie is hit by a car, she is temporarily disabled and permanently scarred. The bonds that Francie forms while working at her community college's newspaper are facilitated by her experience being temporarily disabled in the hospital. She befriends Jewel, Lucas, and Mark at the paper but becomes especially close to Mark, who is also nineteen. Mark asks her why she went back to school and Francie tells him about her hospital stay. Mark then looks at her arm and Francie feels "as if he could see [her] scars through [her] sweater sleeve." She is "torn between pulling up [her] sleeve and showing him, or pulling [her] arm away" but ultimately decides to show him her scarred arm (41). I read Francie's decision to show Mark the scars and indentations of her injured arm as a moment where disclosure of disability serves as a way to

express vulnerability and develop intimate social connections, especially in a part of Los Angeles where debility takes varied forms — continued physical abuse, bodily injury, poverty. When Francie then asks Mark why he is in school he says: "'When I was a kid and I used to talk back to my parents, they would say you never knew when life was going to peak. My dad used to say it could happen tomorrow, maybe it happened yesterday, So don't be smug.' Then he'd punch my face in." Francie then says "I can't explain how that answered my question, but I felt it did" (42). Francie and Mark are both connected by traumatic experiences that leave them feeling isolated and helpless. College then provides a sense of community that was earlier denied to them The fact that Mark opens up to Francie about the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father after she shows him her arm demonstrates the feelings of affiliation can arise through disclosure of disability, especially among those whose lives are marked by debility. This is not to say that Mark himself is disabled but rather to emphasize how, in this scene, shared experiences of disability and debility in various forms serve to deepen Mark and France's connection. From this point on in the novel, Francie and Mark remain inseparable and look out for each other and their friends through an interdependent system of care.

For instance, when Jewel asks Francie to accompany her to bail out a friend from jail in the middle of the night, Francie obliges. She does this partly out of friendship and partly because she had accompanied her parents to bail people out of jail as a child. Francie explains that "the fear that someone you knew would be arrested was pervasive in most communities, but the fear became just another part of your life, like, say, arthritis becomes part of the larger life of an arthritic" (64). It is significant that Francie uses arthritis as a way of describing the pervasive fear of living in a police state; by comparing the experience to a chronic and disabling condition, she cogently captures the constant disabling and debility that the poor citizens of Los Angeles

experience under their dystopian governance. Thus, Francie accompanying Jewel can be seen as an interdependent act of care - something that Francie does out of kindness because she recognizes that this is both a banal and stressful experience for Jewel. When Francie realizes that Jewel is bailing her abusive ex-boyfriend out of jail, she questions why Jewel is doing this. Jewel responds by saying "If I didn't help him, who would?" Francie accepts this explanation, noting that even if she had a "worst enemy, [she] would bail that enemy out of jail if no one else would. It was the way [she] was raised to think about jails" (71). Like Mark, Jewel's experiences with abuse put her in situations where she has to trust Francie and Francie openly meets these requests with care and kindness, not judging Jewel for what she is doing but rather seeking to understand Jewel's position.

Indeed the dystopian conditions of *In the Heart* mean that the characters have to fashion new ways of interdependent care and understanding in order to ensure everyone's survival. The continued environmental degradation of Los Angeles has resulted in increased rates of cancer and other disease. Francie is orphaned at a young age when both her parents die from lung cancer and one day, Francie accidentally stumbles upon Jewel in the bathroom urinating blood. Francie guesses that the cause is cervical cancer, explaining that she "read in the newspaper recently that seventy percent of women under the age of forty got cervical cancer. For some reason, more younger women than older ones got it" (177). The causes for the high rates of cancer are not directly named but it is easy to infer that the causes are environmental; the fact that cervical cancer rates are so much higher in women under forty implies that an environmental factor in the last several decades is contributing to higher rates of cancer. Because the environment itself is literally disabling, relying on a support system is key for ensuring survival. Francie explains that

although both her parents passed away from lung cancer when she was thirteen, she was lucky that she was taken in by her aunt and Rohn.

The highly polluted air of Los Angeles also causes a skin disease that looks like black pearls on the skin, but despite the socioeconomic and political implications of this disease, Francie explains that "the disease wasn't fatal or really even harmful, but there was something profoundly disturbing about it" (12). The impact of environmental disaster not only results in high rates of cancer and the rationing of resources such as gas and water but also physically marks one's skin. Nguyen notes that the pearls "are a marker of poverty and exclusion, of the inability to fight off the contamination of the earth and the destruction of its resources; they mark the bodies of the nonwhite as political, as different, as poor and marginalized" (151). Thus, I read the scene where Francie and Mark go to get tattoos as a sign of reclaiming their autonomy over their skin. Francie decides to get a tattoo of a "flowered vine from an ancient Japanese panel," which I see as a reference to her position as a half Asian American woman (127). Though race is not often mentioned explicitly in the novel, the reader does know that Francie is part-Japanese and her choice in tattoo design is then a quiet but clear sign of further identification as Japanese. As this is Francie's first tattoo, Mark holds her right hand as moral support. This gesture reminds Francie of "the way a nurse had pressed [her] uninjured arm in the hospital when [she'd] been hurt. And it had the same effect, giving [her] a visceral feeling of comfort. There's something hypnotic about someone's touch when you're hurting" (129). The reference to Francie's disabling stay in the hospital during her tattoo session shows how far she has come in building her community after her accident. While it was comforting for her to be offered physical support in the hospital, she is now being comforted by her boyfriend, whom she met as a direct result of enrolling in community college after her accident. Additionally, while she was trapped in the

hospital for five weeks and feeling isolated, by choosing to get tattooed, Francie and Mark, whose bodies have previously been injured and abused because of situations outside of their control, are attempting to exert a new sense of ownership in their bodies and more specifically their skin.

Likewise, Lauren's hyperempathy disability allows her to understand the importance of interdependence for building community within a dystopian world. Lauren's hyperempathy can also be read as a literalization of interdependence as articulated by scholars in feminist disability studies. As Alexis Shotwell explains, interdependence emphasizes how we are "entangled, coproduced beings. We should care about others because the entanglement of ourselves is simultaneously an entanglement with other beings' pain…This kind of reliance can also be a site for responsibility; because we are constituted in relation to our world, we also must take responsibility for that world" (177). The idea that we should take care of others because we are all entangled in each other's pain is literally manifested through Lauren's hyperempathy as she actually does feel the pain of those around her. Because of this, Lauren takes care not to engage in any unnecessary acts of violence; though she comes across people on the road north that she could attack and rob for resources, she only uses her weapon in times of self-defense. This is significant because in a world where so much violence is constantly occurring, her decision to commit as little harm as possible to the world is a radical and revolutionary act.

Indeed, by contrasting Lauren's approach to violence with that of her brother Keith, the novel itself seems to suggest that Lauren's approach to violence is the one that is most sustainable and which will create enduring communities of care. Of her three brothers, Lauren is most at odds with Keith. She notes several times that he is selfish at home; when Lauren makes a stew, she takes it upon herself to serve Keith's portion herself because she knew "he would

spoon all the meat out of the stew and leave nothing but potatoes and vegetables for the rest of us" (108). This may seem like a harmless example of selfishness but because resources are so scarce in Robledo, Keith's self-seeking actions are detrimental and also go against the values of interdependent community building. After a fight with their father, Keith abruptly runs away from Robledo and decides to take his chances living outside of its walls. Keith returns intermittently to bring gifts of money to his mother and when Lauren asks about what he does to survive, Keith confesses to killing a man he met on the road in his sleep and stealing his money. Lauren is disgusted, telling Keith: He talked to you. He was friendly to you. And you shot him" (109). Lauren is aghast at Keith's actions because she herself would never engage in such a gratuitous and unprompted act of violence, partly due to her hyperempathy and partly due to her own moral values. Lauren's approach to violence also echoes that of Francie's in *In the Heart*; Francie also never engages in unnecessary acts of violence, preferring to rely on the company and support of her partner and friends. Additionally, as we see once Lauren has to live outside the walls herself, Lauren sees a friendly stranger as a potential ally rather than someone to kill and steal from. Keith eventually dies a gruesome death outside the walls, while Lauren goes on to found a prosperous community in northern California in the book's sequel, signaling that Lauren's method of interdependence and care are more sustainable ways of living in dystopia.

Lauren unequivocally rejects "solutions" such as Olivar and I argue that it is her disability as well as her race that instill in Lauren a desire to maintain her freedom at all costs. Lauren refuses to consider Olivar as an option because as a disabled black woman whose people have historically been denied autonomy, she values freedom above all else. Lauren's younger brother, Marcus, is surprised at Lauren's unwillingness to join this community. He tells her, "Lauren, you ought to want to go to some place like Olivar more than anyone...there'd be a lot

less pain in Olivar" (121). It may seem counterintuitive that as a sharer, Lauren would not want to live in a seemingly more secure place like Olivar, but I argue that examining the intersection of Lauren's disability and blackness shows precisely why freedom is so valuable to Lauren. Lauren understands that going to Olivar would just be another form of slavery and to her, it is more important to survive and thrive on her own terms rather than sacrifice her freedom for security. Additionally, as Megan Obourn notes, *Parable* asks us to "recognize how a more communal, more interdependent model might take away a liberal American ideal of individual choice but also offers structures for family and community that are more accepting of bodily difference, more flexible, and more humane" (126). The community that Lauren cultivates by the end of the novel, when her group reaches northern California and decides to settle on the farm owned by one of their members, Bankole, is an example of this interdependent model of community and offers an alternative both to the neoliberal idea of individual choice as well as the dystopian examples of neo-slavery previously discussed.

When the group arrives at Bankole's land in Mendocino County, they find his sister and her family murdered. The group is at odds about whether they should invest time and energy into cultivating a homestead on that land or whether they should continue north. One of the group members, Harry, is hesitant to settle on Bankole's land, expressing that he wants land of his own and a job. The other group members explain that job opportunities are so scarce that his only choices would be working as a slave driver or a factory job near the Canadian border. However, the workers in the factories "are more throwaways than slaves. They breathe toxic fumes or drink contaminated water or get caught in unshielded machinery. They're easy to replace, thousands of jobless for every job" (324). As labor laws continue to be abolished and environmental regulations over working conditions are loosened, the state of wage labor in the country grows

bleaker and bleaker. Yet because of neoliberal ideas around individual responsibility, Harry is still tied to the narrative that he should pave his own way and not rely on Bankole's land to make a living, despite the dearth of opportunities available to him. Eventually, though, Harry decides to stay on the land with the group - Lauren explains that they will all work together to plant the seeds she brought from Robledo and defend their community: "if people threaten us or our crop, we kill them. If we work together, we can defend ourselves and we can protect the kids" (321). Abandoned by the government and faced with discouraging job opportunities and a corrupt police force, Lauren and her group realize that their best chances for survival lie in trusting each other and working together to cultivate their own community. Instead of waiting or relying on the government to protect them, they take their security into their own hands.

Conclusion: The End of the World as We Know It?

As I write this, we are approximately one year out from July 2024, the date of Lauren's first journal entry in *Parable of the Sower.* As I write this, much of Quebec and Ontario is on fire and the smoke from these massive wildfires has spread down to Washington D.C. and as far west as Minnesota. Much of New York City is engulfed in smoke and residents have been to remain inside and to don N95 masks. It is easy to look at this and other events and think that Butler was not far off in her dystopian predictions of the future. However, the way these novels present disaster provides a hopeful look at the way that communities can come together and exercise localizing power.

The two novels analyzed here bear some striking similarities to the disaster movies surveyed in the first chapter of this project. Both sets of texts engage with the ideas about neoliberalism and multiculturalism, albeit in vastly different ways. Disaster movies such as

Godzilla and *The Day After Tomorrow* place much hope in the way that individual heroes can save the world; both films feature fathers who escape obstacle after obstacle in order to reunite with their children. These disaster movies place more emphasis on the ability of an individual to persevere through natural disasters, rather than investigating the ways that human actions have brought about these natural disasters in the first place. These films therefore represent a neoliberal, individualist approach to representing disaster and its aftermath.

On the other hand, *Parable of the Sower* and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* acknowledge the way that neoliberal policies and human consumption have created a dystopian Los Angeles. The novels do not valorize the individual actions of a white masculine hero but instead center the experience of young women of color and their circles of support. By emphasizing the role that communities can play in creating networks of support amidst disaster, the novels model an alternate, interdependent mode of living than the ones depicted in disaster movies.

In the Heart of the Valley of Love depicts Los Angeles in the year 2052. Perhaps if we heed the extrapolatory warnings presented by these authors, perhaps if we become more attuned to the was that we can care for each other and the environment around us amidst economic disaster, the future that Kadohata portrays might remain simply a vision of the future and not our lived reality.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation explores how neoliberalism operates not merely as an economic structure but as a mode of governance which assigns market values to all social actions. By analyzing different representations of disaster, I have demonstrated how some narratives reinforce neoliberal ideas about U.S. exceptionalism and individualism which some authors have attempted to imagine new ways of social organizing amidst the persistent debility wrought by neoliberalism. As the consequences of climate change and neoliberal economic policies continue to reveal themselves in the form of more intense "natural" disasters and increased economic stratification, it seems inevitable that the 21st century will continue to bear witness to catastrophic disasters.

This project was initially conceived in 2020, amidst the peak of the coronavirus pandemic. This pandemic was a disaster that laid bare many of the consequences of neoliberalism: the lack of social safety net, the erosion of public health measures, the increased privatization of healthcare, and more.

As such, the covid-19 pandemic highlighted the way that disaster impacts people unevenly, depending on a myriad of factors such as class, race, gender, disability, and so forth. For example, some were able to work from the safety of their own home while other workers were forced to labor in person, leading to higher rates of exposure to the disease.

As a disease that originated in China, Covid-19 also heightened anti-Asian racism in the United States and beyond. Then-President Donald Trump embraced anti-Asian rhetoric, repeatedly referring to coronavirus as the "Chinese flu" or "Wuhan flu." Over the course of a one month span in spring 2020, nearly 1,500 incidents of anti-Asian related coronavirus

discrimination were logged by Stop AAPI Hate (“Incidents of Coronavirus-related discrimination”).

Racial disparities can also be seen in data on the rate of hospitalization and death from coronavirus. The Center for Disease Control’s data shows that compared to white, non-Hispanic persons, indigenous people were 2.4 times more likely to be hospitalized from Covid-19 and 2 times more likely to die from it. African Americans were 2 times more likely to be hospitalized and 1.6 times more likely to die, while Latinos were 1.8 times more likely to be hospitalized and 1.7 times more likely to perish from Covid-19 (“Risk for Covid-19’).

However, for all the tragedy and destruction it brought, the pandemic also resulted in individual acts of solidarity and community efforts. Teens organized to help elderly people learn how to use Zoom and to deliver meals in a social-distancing friendly manner (Shirvell, “Teens are helping”). Organizations such as Send Chinatown Love developed out of a desire to support businesses in Manhattan’s Chinatown.

The rise of anti-Asian racism also led to more conversations about anti-Asian racism and a reckoning with the history of Asian exclusion and hate. The nonprofit organization Stop AAPI Hate, which tracks incidents of hate crimes in the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, was created in response to the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes.

This is not to say that community action should replace governmental responsibility or that nations can simply be absolved of their inaction and participation in neoliberal governance simply because some communities came together to support each other in times of need. However, the examples mentioned above can serve as a starting point for organizing across class and racial lines, a way to imagine more intimate models of care and survival.

The novels analyzed in this project similarly present speculative imaginings and alternatives to our current systems. Again, this is not to say that the novels portray utopias that ignore the real material consequences of materialism. The texts that I have gathered together in this project do not shirk from the realities of neoliberal economic development in the United States; however, they also share a belief that, even if briefly, something *else* can be envisioned. In *Severance,* Candace endures a pandemic but still resolves to escape her imprisonment, spurred on by her dead mother and her unborn child. *Zone One* presents a different sort of hope, a belief that the actual end of the world as we know it can perhaps bring about the catastrophic disaster needed for real change to occur. *Tropic of Orange* shows us how a community can rise out of the rubble of a violent freeway car crash; although this community is short-lived, it nevertheless provides a glimpse of what could be. And the dystopias of *Parable of the Sower* and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* portray a bleak futuristic Los Angeles while still demonstrating how interdependence can thrive amidst debility.

Speculative fiction is often characterized as a genre that looks at what is to come, presenting extrapolations decades into the future. However, it is at its core, a genre that is most concerned with the issues of the present. The speculations in this dissertation have contended with the pressing disaster of our time — the debilitating effects of neoliberal economic development — and imagined otherwise, demonstrating that other ways of care and community can still remain a distinct possibility for our future if we take action in the present.

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