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SLOW VIOLENCE, CLI-FI, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE HOW BIPOC FUTURISMS PROMOTE ACTIVISM

Francisco Baeza

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SLOW VIOLENCE, CLI-FI, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE
HOW BIPOC FUTURISMS PROMOTE ACTIVISM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English and Writing Studies:
Literature

by
Francisco Aviles Baeza
May 2022

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ABSTRACT

The threat of anthropogenic climate change is discussed almost exclusively in terms of “scientific” data to the exclusion of the humanities. For some worlds, climate change has already destroyed their ways of life and forced them to adapt. Climate fiction – or cli-fi – written by BIPOC authors is one way we can begin to think of how the planet is not just one *world* but a plurality of *worlds*. This project centers authors and world-makers who come from communities that have been left at the margins of the science fiction and cli-fi genres. By looking at fictions from a multitude of authors with various epistemological backgrounds, it may be possible for students to experience these texts as transitional objects. Doing so can help them renegotiate their relationship with anthropogenic climate change and the communities that are rendered invisible as a result of neoliberal hypercapitalism. One goal is to have students begin to challenge whether ideas of “green capitalism” are capable of the radical change that climate catastrophe demands of us. These authors all create imaginary worlds that are informed by their authors’ present. In this sense, their futures are inextricably linked to the pasts. Creating new classrooms that are informed by these epistemologies and that push students to think critically about the connections between environmental justice and social justice, then, is something that I believe should be sought after. College classrooms are a great place to get students ready for these conversations that they will inevitably have in the public.

Keywords: cli-fi, atopia, transitional object, BIPOC futurisms, slow violence

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the generations of people that we will never meet. It is also dedicated to the kids that I work with every day because they will be the ones to create new worlds in the future.

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JOURNAL ARTICLE:

SLOW VIOLENCE, CLI-FI, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE: HOW BIPOC FUTURISMS PROMOTE ACTIVISM

Introduction

It is not surprising that young people have typically been the ones to demand structural change in the world. Environmental justice¹ is no different. Young climate activists such as Greta Thunberg, Isra Hirsi, and Ruth Hopkins have combated climate change through direct action². From local organizing to online summits and international gatherings, these young activists and many others have used non-violent direct action to bring attention to the climate crisis we find ourselves living through. They find their purpose in the fact that they will be the ones living in the climate changed world that world leaders create for them. Many people who currently hold political and economic power will not live to see some of the worst effects of anthropogenic climate change. There is a large age disparity between those who benefit from the environmentally destructive industries and the youth who see the long-term effects of such business models. Activists also consider the ways that climate change has affected, and continues to affect, non-human life on the planet.

¹ The phrase “environmental justice” has had multiple meanings throughout time, but is contemporarily thought of as “spontaneous movements and organizations that resist extractive industries and organize against pollution and climate change anywhere in the world. It also includes the networks or coalitions they form across borders” (Martínez-Alier, 51).

² *No Planet B: A Teen Vogue Guide to the Climate Crisis* is a collection of articles from *Teen Vogue* edited by Lucy Diavolo, an editor for the *Teen Vogue*. Diavolo’s book shares research conducted by younger people (between their teens and late 20s) about anthropogenic climate change, activists, and how the effects of climate change are felt unequally around the world.

Climate change is affecting our world in ways that were once only imaginary. The rising sea levels, the intense droughts, the flooding of coastal cities – all things that people would write stories about possibly happening in the future. The future is now for us and we have to contend with the decisions made by people before our lifetimes. Whether people “believe” that climate change is real or not is not relevant – it acts on the world regardless of whether we recognize it.

For this article, I am interested in looking at literature written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) authors to see how their worldviews shape their theorizations of climate-changed futures. I focus on BIPOC authors because the knowledges of these communities have typically been left at the margins. Environmental justice is not separate from social justice. The people who are most affected by climate change are the poorer communities of color around the world. Throughout history, communities of color have been ignored or disregarded when thinking of environmental issues. Indigenous knowledges, for example, have historically been undermined by a “Western” understanding of the world. How do we go about creating a world that is more open to these different epistemologies? This paper is interested in looking at various BIPOC authors and how they envision future worlds. This paper is also interested in how such theorizing can help us combat climate change in our present moment – as people living through the effects of anthropogenic climate change at this time.

Some of the texts discussed throughout this project portray worlds in the near future (Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*) while others are many generations removed from our lives (Simon Jimenez's *The Vanished Birds*, Lilliam Rivera's *Dealing in Dreams*). All of these texts are written by BIPOC authors and the majority are written by women authors – another group who has been historically marginalized by the dominant, patriarchal culture. In this way, the approach to this project considers the intersectional identities of writers and readers who hope to combat climate change. One limitation of this project is the focus on authors from the global North. The authors discussed in this project wrote primarily from North America and have set their fictions in similar geographical locations. A future project could look at how these texts are in conversation with authors from the global South and how these representations of anthropogenic climate change and its effects are similar or different.

All of the texts for this project are theoretical in their own right. The individuals who created them did so while informed by their own previous knowledge and lived experiences. Barbara Christian states this thought in a more succinct way than I could hope to: “For people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create... since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (“The Race for Theory,” 52). Literature

is a form of theorizing that has typically been devalued in the academy. These texts have the ability to teach the reader about different experiences even when they are read outside of the context of the classroom. However, if we are able to utilize the classroom as a space where students can interact with these cultural objects, then it would be in our best interest to think of how working with these texts can help them develop critical understandings of the world around them.

If we are to think of these texts as capable of teaching students, then another aim of this project is to consider the pedagogical affordances of these texts. Are there any benefits or disadvantages to teaching these climate fiction (cli-fi) novels to students? Teaching at a university or college means teaching to a diverse student body – race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, and other factors all vary amongst the students who fill the seats of these classrooms. I had an opportunity to teach a diverse class at California State University – San Bernardino during the Fall of 2021. Many students told me they left the class more aware of social justice issues surrounding them, but it is unclear if any were moved to *act* as a result of reading the texts for the course. Is it possible for literature to have that sort of effect on people? Is that even something that instructors want from students in their courses? Enacting climate justice requires the involvement from many people from various backgrounds. The climate justice movement is intergenerational as well. With so much social injustice in the world, it is hard for students to keep track of the various issues affecting themselves and the communities close to them. Climate change is one result of social

injustice that goes by unnoticed by many because there is no large, climactic event – there is no spectacle.

For many students and people, climate change is viewed as a problem being resolved *over there* and not something that needs their direct attention. “Green capitalism” has been cited as a meaningful way of combatting the climate crisis and it does not require the same dramatic changes that some climate change movements currently do. However, neoliberal ideologies that produced “green capitalism” are the same ideologies that still allow major wealth inequality in the world, racial inequality, and other forms of discrimination for the sake of “middle-of-the-road” practices. The texts discussed in this article reflect where such approaches may lead us and why we need to think about making radical changes to our current world.

Looking Back So We Can Look Ahead

Fictions as Transitional Objects

People are sometimes quick to dismiss the power of reading a piece of literature and how that may affect a person’s perception of the world. The vast majority of people have begun to favor the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) over the humanities because of the supposed “practicality” of such fields. The amount of people pursuing degrees in the humanities has dropped consistently throughout the last decade (Schmidt, 2018), but STEM majors are still required to take some humanities courses as part of their university’s breadth requirements. Like most universities, California

State University – San Bernardino (CSUSB) requires that students take courses from a variety of disciplines before graduating (<https://bulletin.csusb.edu/general-education-program/#text>). I had the opportunity to engage with a diverse body of students – students who came from various backgrounds, disciplines, and had varying perspectives – while teaching a course at CSUSB titled “Diversity Literature and Social Justice.” Of the twenty-six students enrolled in the course, only three were English majors and only one of them was on the “literature track.” Overall, fourteen students were from various social sciences, eight from the field of STEM, and the remaining four from the humanities. When instructors are given the opportunity to work with students from such a wide variety of perspectives in the classroom, it is imperative that these students are shown the affordances of the discipline.

When teaching a class such as the one that I taught at CSUSB, there is an expectation that students will be asked to read something that the instructor classified as “literature³.” The word is in the title, so it would make sense that students would be asked to engage with literature in some way. One of the hardest parts about designing such courses is assigning texts that will elicit critical engagement from the students. Rita Felski’s modes of textual engagement are useful here. In *Uses of Literature*, Felski identifies recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock as four ways that readers engage with a

³ Literature as a signifier means different things across time. In *The Uses and Abuses of Literature*, Marjorie Garber writes that “*literature* is a status rather than a quality. To say that a text or a body of work is *literature* means that it is regarded, studied, read, and analyzed in a literary way” (116).

text, but recognizes that these are not the only ways for a person to do so and that they are not always experienced independently of each other. (14) For this project, I am interested in Felski's definition of "knowledge" and how Felski understands literature as something that can advance our understanding of the world around us. (103)

Thinking of literature as a cultural object with its own knowledge, it is also helpful to think of literature as a "transitional object" as Cristina Vischer Bruns defines it in their book titled *Why Literature?* According to object-relations theory, a transitional object allows a person to reenter "transitional space" – a space that is usually only accessible to one during their early development and where one creates boundaries between Self/Other. Transitional space is a part of one's subconscious that becomes closed-off as a person matures, but interacting with transitional objects allows a person to reenter it. Bruns states that "literary works as transitional objects benefit the reader through her experience of the text, an experience of a way of being in the world, which leaves its effect not only on her understanding but, more influentially, on her own way of being in the world" (35). One claim of this project, then, is that the fictions created by these authors are all capable of functioning as transitional objects for readers. Instructors are capable of teaching students how to *read* literature, but this interaction with a text as a cultural object is a deeply intimate experience that cannot be taught. These texts by various BIPOC authors all use different elements identified by Felski which deepens the affective impact they can have on readers. If students are capable

of experiencing these texts as transitional objects, they will be able to rethink their own relationship to anthropogenic climate change and the world around them. Within transitional space, readers are able to reorient themselves and recognize what issues are most directly related to themselves and future generations within this field of renegotiation.

Atopic Literature

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson recently published a survey where interviewees were asked how influential different cli-fi texts were to their understanding of the climate crisis. Of the nineteen novels used in the survey, only one was written by a self-identified BIPOC author. Science fiction, as a genre, has a history of being dominated by white authors, but recent history has seen many more BIPOC authors contribute to the field. Schneider-Mayerson claims the authors used in this survey were ones who had been cited in recent scholarship, had the most reviews on the website Goodreads, and those recommended by other scholars and critics. (“The Influence of Climate Fiction,” 477) My project, then, can be seen as participating in the conversation that Schneider-Mayerson is interested in. The goal is to take these BIPOC authors away from the margins (or, from the footnotes where Schneider-Mayerson mentions that Octavia Butler’s work may have also been a good text to use in their survey) and into the center of conversations about climate change. This is not to say that the works of the authors in “The Influence of Climate Fiction” have no value, but that BIPOC authors have historically been left out of the

conversation. The ways that members of these communities challenge, narrate, and theorize climate change offers new perspectives that may otherwise be inaccessible to people – especially because of the saturation of the genre in general.

Literature that theorize climate changed futures are typically described as “apocalyptic” or “dystopian” futures since they imagine the long-term effects of anthropogenic climate change. These texts depict a world that has been devastated by climate change and portrays the survival of humanity through and after this “event” occurs. Angel Galdón Rodríguez states that “most of anti-utopian novels place their characters in a different age from the author’s own present. This device is used to make readers contemplate the scenery shown as a distant reality, so that we can judge its virtues unbiasedly” (166). I agree that some of the texts discussed in this project follow the exact lines that Galdón Rodríguez describes, but that *all* literature has the ability to be atopic as well. One person’s utopic vision could be another person’s dystopic vision. Amy Hollywood, in an article titled “Dystopia, Utopia, *Atopia*,” shows how subjective dystopia and utopia are as concepts. They describe literature as atopic as it, and other cultural objects, may be “the necessary non-place, or place without the limitations of place, for thinking pasts and futures that are literally uninhabitable – and yet whose temporary psychic, imaginative, intellectual, and affective inhabitation is vital for human life” (33). Since the lines between utopia and

dystopia can be blurry and inconsistent, atopia⁴ acts as an in-between – as a place that the reader is unable to inhabit because it does not exist besides on the page. The atopic space is a safe (non)place where students, readers, instructors, and other interlocutors can interact with imaginary futures that portray possible effects of anthropogenic climate change while recognizing that these are informed by different world knowledges. Atopia activates the imaginary capabilities of students and pushes them to reflect on the world around them. The fictions⁵ examined in this article are capable of providing such spaces for students and readers where they are able to cocreate more just futures.

Worlding and the Atopic Space of Cli-Fi

Slow Violence and the Environmental Writer-Activist

Slow violence⁶ has been occurring for a long time but has just recently entered mainstream conversations. The real magic of slow violence is its ability to remain invisible to those unaffected by it – to create distance between the

⁴ Here is how Hollywood theorizes atopia: “The political critique of the saturation of human life by political-economy both required by the present moment push beyond the distinction between dystopia and utopia, yet without relinquishing the hope that there might be an *outside* to the condition in which we find ourselves now. This is also the non-space – the cusp between the political-economic and what might be irreducible to it – in which the power of apophysis might best be deployed... Atopia signals the place that is both a place and the undoing of the limitations of place, not a ‘no place’ but ‘a place unconstrained by the limits of place’” (46). The atopic only exists within the limits of the page while dystopias and utopias have the ability to exist outside of the page. Some communities would say that they have been living in dystopias for quite some time.

⁵ I borrow Rousell et al.’s understanding of “fiction” as something distinct from novels because fictions “do not obey any of the literary constraints that place a novel in the phenomenological realm of human experience” (657). In doing so, the fictions examined in this paper allow the reader to experience a world from new perspectives that may otherwise have been inaccessible.

⁶ I borrow Rob Nixon’s definition of slow violence here: “By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).

inhabitants of international superpowers and the rest of the world that *has been* dealing with the consequences of anthropogenic climate change. Rob Nixon's work about slow violence has been influential to our understanding of the disproportionate distribution of harm that occurs as a result of neoliberal governments. In their book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon explores and theorizes how this created distance has activated the poorer communities around the world to push back against the effects of slow violence. For many BIPOC communities around the world, the "projected" effects of anthropogenic climate change are their reality. The disastrous futures that we are warned about are a harsh reality for many people living in Africa, South America, and other parts of the world.

While much of the environmentalism of the poor takes place in what is considered "the global South," the fictions I look at all were created by authors from "the global North." However, I believe they are all what Nixon would define as "environmental writer-activists" that can "help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation of even the physiological life of the human observer" (15). The atopic spaces that authors create become safe imaginaries where students, instructors, readers, and other interlocutors can discuss the anxieties around anthropogenic climate change and theorize new ways of being. Geographically, all of these authors bring the effects of climate

change to North America. Settings within these texts would be familiar to most people in the global North. The authors also offer worlds where neoliberal responses to climate change can lead us but they also offer attempt to theorize alternatives. Having students engage with these imaginary (non)places that are familiar can help close the gap between themselves and the communities rendered invisible by neoliberal ideology.

Schneider-Mayerson mentions that reading within the academic context should be considered anecdotal,⁷ but the classroom may be the only space where students can get information about environmental issues. If making students literate about a variety of topics and discourses is part of teaching, then why should we not consider the benefits of teaching ecoliteracy? What ecoliteracy is can be confusing but here, I borrow my definition from McBride et al.'s article titled "Environmental literacy, ecological literacy, ecoliteracy: What do we mean and how did we get here?" The authors provide a survey of the different definitions over time of environmental literacy as well as of ecological literacy and ecoliteracy. Ecological literacy focuses on the "scientific" understandings of nature through observations. Environmental literacy and ecoliteracy, in contrast, focus much more on the affective side of the environment. They also differ from each other, though, because of ecoliteracy's focus on the creation of societies with principles "for creating sustainable human

⁷ In a footnote of Schneider-Mayerson's article, they write that "classroom reading experiences are not considered generalizable because they occur within the context of a sustained and directed learning experience" (481). They also note how confirmation bias may work to the detriment of instructors.

communities and societies” (14). I struggle to agree with the term “sustainability” here, but the authors write that “The idea of using resources in such a way as to ensure future availability was an essential element of ecoliteracy” (14) which is the type of future-considerate mindset students should develop if we hope to create a public that can challenge neoliberal responses to climate change. Just as instructors and teachers are tasked with making students aware of history, mathematics, and other subjects and literacies, it would seem uncontroversial to say that students should also learn how the world around them is affected by the people living on this planet. Environmental education has been focused almost exclusively on scientific knowledge to the detriment of the humanities. The *accepted* scientific knowledge is also almost exclusively presented through Western forms of knowing which devalues the Indigenous and other knowledges about the world that could be essential to our understanding of the planet.

Teaching students to be ecoliterate does not necessarily ensure that they become climate *activists*. However, the goal is to have students think of what activism means and how they can enact change. Learning about climate change can be depressing. It requires that we theorize *an end* of the planet. Historically, such a cataclysmic imaging of the end of *the world* was only possible during the Cold War. The threat of an end coming but not arrived. Karen Pinkus discusses how nuclear criticism developed in the 1980s but has since been forgotten.⁸

⁸ Writing this project in 2022, I recognize that we currently live under the threat of nuclear war as a result of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. A future project may look into how nuclear criticism can be useful to our understanding of immediate destruction of all lifeforms.

Pinkus's introduction to the 2013 edition of *Diacritics* discusses how nuclear criticism went in and out of fashion, but how the new climate change criticism deals with a threat that is all around us all the time – anthropogenic climate change does not strike the way a missile does. While comparing the threat of nuclear annihilation to the effects of living through anthropogenic climate change, Pinkus writes that “climate change has always taken place. And it is not at all clear what forms of talking and writing might be commensurate with climate change. The Anthropocene – or, better, our very recent collective consciousness of it – has ushered in strange and chaotic temporalities” (3). How do we confront a destruction that is constantly around us? How do we also address the fact that many worlds have already been destroyed as a result of inaction?

Worlds Have Always Been Under Threat

By understanding literature as a transitional object and the worlds of these texts as atopic (non)spaces, the possibilities for student and reader engagement becomes limitless. Atopic climate fictions have imagined settings that take place within worlds similar to the reader (such as *Parable of the Sower*, *The Marrow Thieves*, and parts of *The Vanished Birds*) or vastly different (as in *Dealing in Dreams* or the intergalactic space travels in *The Vanished Birds*). All of these texts can be fictions that allow students and readers to come in contact with transitional space and redefine their ways of being in the world – to rethink of climate change as something that is happening *here and now* but also as something that has *been* happening. As atopic literature, the fictions also invite

students to theorize new ways to address anthropogenic climate change and take note of how BIPOC communities have already been doing so.

Each fiction examined for the purpose of this project has its own capability to teach readers about how anthropogenic climate change affects and has affected different communities. All of the stories shared by these worldmaking authors offer unique understandings of the world and different *worlds* inhabited by peoples around the world. Such a capacity is promising because it offers students perspectives that may have otherwise been inaccessible to them. BIPOC futurisms incorporate histories of past violences (such as settler colonialism, racism, and environmental justice) to imagine different futures for those living in the present. Sci-fi has historically been dominated by white authors and so has cli-fi. As Audrey Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury state in their article, “Worlding beyond ‘the’ ‘end’ of ‘the world’: white apocalyptic visions and BIPOC futurisms⁹,” the existing dominant literature that discusses “human extinction” and other great catastrophes claim to be universal, but “despite their claims to universality, we argue that the ‘end of the world’ discourses are more specifically concerned about protecting the future of *whiteness*” (310, original emphasis). The authors are pointing towards the fact that much of the preoccupation with *the end of the world* is actually concerning the destruction of institutions that keep

⁹ The authors aim to show how International Relations (IR) has been influenced by white futurisms. They claim that BIPOC futurisms offer a challenge to the idea of a singular world that needs to be defended. People interested in IR could, according to the authors, benefit from seeing how BIPOC futurists subvert dominant ways of thinking about “the end” of “the world.”

whiteness as a symbol of dominance in the world. The goal of centering BIPOC authors is to bring the people typically relegated to the margins into the center of our classrooms. Even when experienced outside of the classroom, these and other cli-fi novels have the capacity to drastically change the worldviews of readers or push them towards taking direct action¹⁰ against anthropogenic climate change.

Another claim of Mitchell and Chaudhury's article is that the authors reject the idea of a *single* future – of a *single* world:

In contrast to white futures... these narratives center diverse, plural subjectivities and forms of agency, undermining homogenous notions of 'humanity'; attune to nonlinear temporalities; and embrace lively practices of mobility and hybridity. In doing so, they imagine *multiple* futures and alternatives to apocalypse. They also re-frame the possible end of whiteness, as a structure of domination, as an opening for the emergence of plural worlds. (321)

Each of the fictions explored in this project enact these same practices. They also theorize how communities have changed in response to the historical and consistent environmental injustice endured. These imagined futures portray the consequences of slow violence – consequences that people are currently living through in different countries around the world as a result of the unequal distribution of harm that results from unfettered capitalism fueled by extractive energy companies. From lack of access to necessary resources to the toxins

¹⁰ Direct action as political practice has ties to Indigenous movements throughout history and also Black freedom struggles. Such action can take the form of sit-ins, protests, and other forms of engagement that promote different social movements.

released by non-compostable, these fictions provide imaginary spaces that lead to *possible* worlds. The fact of the matter is that these worlds are not set in stone – students, readers, instructors, government officials, and everyone else still has time to act. Combating anthropogenic climate change may seem like an impossible task, but the authors of these fictions write with the hopes of breaking the pessimism typically associated with the poor job of mitigation¹¹ done in the world thus far.

World-making is one of the ways that BIPOC communities theorize and push back against the hegemonic understandings of climate change. Cli-fi allows the author an opportunity to show histories of their community while also creating imaginary futures where they have normally been excluded. Afrofuturism, Chicanafuturism, and other creative forms of thinking imagine worlds assert the place of different BIPOC communities in *the world* that constantly Otherizes and delegitimizes their existences. World-making is the process through which these authors create futures centered around the knowledges of marginalized communities. Shelley Streeby, in their book, *World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, prefers the idea of world-making to world-building because it centers “the transformative dimensions of the worlds and futures imagined by Indigenous peoples and people of color in confronting settler colonialism,

¹¹ I want to provide the level of nuance that Anders Nordgren writes about in their article, “Pessimism and Optimism in the Debate on Climate Change: A Critical Analysis.” These concepts are nuanced and especially so when thinking of climate change. Someone may be optimistic about certain ways the issues are being addressed while pessimistic of others.

environmental racism, and climate change” (149). World-making takes place outside of the realm of the imaginary as well because direct action can be seen as world-making. This is the bridge between the atopic place of literature and the world that people inhabit.

These world-makers theorize futures where people can see the possible effects of inaction and reconsider their relationship to past and future generations of people as well as to the planet that is shared between both human and nonhuman subjects. Streeby writes about when they visited the Huntington Library where all of Octavia Butler’s notes about climate change were kept after her death in 2006. Butler’s notes began before *Parable of the Sower* was published in 1993 as Butler was extremely concerned with the evident climate catastrophe that the world was allowing to pass by. Streeby writes of how authors like Butler and Samuel Delaney theorize of science fiction as a genre that is not about *predicting* the future. Instead, science fiction “can help us take hold of the present and think about where things are heading rather than just letting time pass by as our unconscious surround” (25). All of the fictions in this project base their outlook on the future from their authors’ perspective on the present and their relationships to past traumas. The following sections will show how world-makers do this and promote activist attitudes in their interlocutors.

Theorizing through *Parable of the Sower* and Graphic Fictions

This project will be using the graphic novel version of *Parable of the Sower* that was adapted by Damian Duffy and John Jennings. I chose this version as opposed to the traditional novel because it is imperative that we show students the different affordances that unique modes can offer. Facing climate catastrophe requires that we engage in new modes of thinking and therefore graphic narratives may provide the necessary atopic space for students to reconceptualize Self/Other boundaries. There is also the fact that some students learn better through visual means than others so this choice is meant to be cognizant of that. Courtney Donovan and Ebru Ustundag authored a paper titled, "Graphic Narratives, Trauma and Social Justice," in which they explore how graphic narratives can help people experiencing trauma or other medical conditions. The purpose of their article is to "explore the potential of graphic narratives to convey the complexity of trauma as a particular social experience" and they argue that "graphic narratives are tools that effectively communicate what are often unrepresentable and unspeakable traumatic experiences" (222). People are all experiencing environmental trauma as a result of anthropogenic climate change. Whether it be the constant reminder of "record-breaking" heats that we experience year after year, the increase in extreme disasters around the world, or that less and less people are able to access vital resources as a result

of anthropogenic climate change, the threat of an unlivable planet is terrifying¹², yet it is already a reality for poorer communities. Graphic narratives, literature, and other cultural objects can help people express and work through this environmental trauma collectively.

Parable of the Sower is renowned as one of the greatest science fictions ever written and Octavia Butler – the author – is known for being a pioneer in the space for Black authors. The story was first published in 1993 when environmentalist issues were not necessarily at the forefront of conversations. During this time, however, Butler was actively tracking how the United States government was being influenced by multinational oil companies to be more lenient towards fossil fuel extractions and other extractive industries. Butler was particularly critical of Ronald Reagan’s administration and the neoliberal politics that he and his government championed. Graphic narratives are also helpful because they are capable of *showing* what a possible future effected by slow violence could look like. Futuristic texts are never meant to be prophetic, but seeing how worlds like those of Lauren Olamina’s can be so drastically changed as a result of neoliberal responses to anthropogenic climate change can cause students and other interlocutors to question how the inadequate response to the ongoing climate crisis may turn out for future generations. Slow violence is

¹² E. Ann Kaplan, author of *Climate Trauma*, theorizes what they call “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome” but I hesitate to use this as some communities – specifically Indigenous and Black communities – have already experienced these traumatic world-destroying events.

powerful because of its lack of representation in the *here and now* but cli-fi fictions are able to show what some of the long-term effects could mean for future generations. The future of *Parable of the Sower* is perhaps the uncanniest because it takes place in an imagined 2024 – two years from the time of this project – and ends in 2027.

For Butler, this imaginary Southern California was supposed to be 30 years away. Butler built Lauren’s world by extrapolating from the neoliberal ideology that surrounded the 1980s and 1990s. While imagining what the 2020s may look like, Streeby writes that such neoliberal governments “led Butler to predict that the 2020s would be the decade of collapse in which humans would witness sea level rise, dryness, heat, crop failures, institutions no longer working or existing only to collect taxes and fees and to arrest people to exploit their labor” (*Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 98). Even though the text was not written to be prophetic, it is difficult *not* to note how familiar these topics are. The graphic novel edition of the text also is capable of illustrating what such a dry future might look like. Much of the novel is tinted in brown, red, or yellow which gives the reader a sense of this dryness. Southern California is notorious for being a dry part of the state, but the depiction by the authors makes this dryness even more evident. This helps drive the point that this imaginary is based on reality – this is Butler’s working of being a HistoFuturist¹³ at play.

¹³ Streeby writes that Butler called themselves a HistoFuturist – someone who builds from both the human and technological pasts and presents to imagine futures. (72)

Lauren Olamina is diagnosed with hyperempathy. People tend to inherit it from their mothers if their mothers were also addicted to the same drug - Paracetco. Her mother passed away after giving birth to Lauren and her father then got remarried to a woman named Cory. Lauren has three half-brothers as a result and she was taught Spanish from a young age. Lauren was also taught that her hyperempathy was a burden and something that needed to remain hidden from other people. Doctors in the fiction describe it as an “organic delusional syndrome” (11) and Lauren’s father believes that it is something she “beat” or overcome. Lauren mostly experiences hyperempathy through other peoples’ pain but it can also be experienced as pleasure. Duffy and Jennings show how the painful side of hyperempathy syndrome is experienced by Lauren through the use of color and imaginary scenarios. While riding through a community of unhoused people in Robledo, Lauren observes all of the medical issues these people experience and feels them herself – from boils on her face to amputated limbs. The authors signal when these experiences happen by coloring the panels red to indicate the intense emotion experienced by Lauren. They also draw Lauren without those same limbs as the people within the encampment they are riding through. This emotion sharing is not limited to humans though as Duffy and Jennings illustrate the pain Lauren experiences when she sees dying animals as well.

The atopic space of the text – a (non)place that exists only within the pages – is where readers are able to think through how we might address these

future issues that Butler theorizes. When combined with the idea of Lauren's hyperempathy – something that is devalued in Lauren's world because it makes a person *feel* – the atopic space can help readers think of their own learned numbness to the world around them. One of the consequences of slow violence is peoples' desensitization to ongoing catastrophes not in their immediate communities. Lauren's hyperempathy only triggers when she sees the pain or pleasure of another being. However, it makes her more cautious when engaging in emotional conversations with others. It forces her to be more thoughtful of others feelings. The world typically punishes such openness of emotions – but why? Lauren and her crew find a man named Grayson Mora after their neighborhood in Robledo burns down and discover that Grayson is also a hyperempath. It is unclear how much his lack of emotions has to do with the learned internalized toxic masculinity, but such a fear of emotions devalues the usefulness of affective responses in their world. Kenneth Carano and Jeremiah Clabough cowrote an article titled "Images of Struggle: Teaching Human Rights with Graphic Novels" where they claim that "[graphic novels] allow students to empathize with the human toll taken by human rights violations. Students are able to better internalize the impact of events on individuals through the images and texts of a graphic novel" (17). Seeing and imagining this future trouble connects us to the next generation. While we may be living through some of the effects of anthropogenic climate change, future generations may be forced to adapt to what we call an "unlivable" planet. This disconnection through time,

however, allows people to disconnect emotionally from those peoples who *will* be living in such a world. The space of the graphic fiction and fictions in general can be where readers connect and think about these future generations who will be forced to live without guaranteed access to basic necessities that we take for granted.

When people talk about the long-term effects of anthropogenic climate change, they mention the fact that natural disasters will occur more frequently. Scientists predict an increase in droughts, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, and other forms of environmental destruction that will make living on the planet more difficult for peoples around the world. Another affordance of the graphic fiction version of Butler's story is its ability to show what such catastrophes look like and what they mean for the people living through them. Lauren mentions an early-season storm passing through Mexico towards the beginning of the narrative. She says that "More than 700 known dead so far. Mostly the street poor. That's nature. Is it God? Is it a sing against God to be poor?" (13) Lauren makes herself seem very detached from this event. It is almost as if this is what people expect to happen during these storms. At this point in her life, such death and destruction is normalized. In the next few panels that follow this scene, Lauren is at a neighbor's house who has the only working window wall television in the neighborhood. Duffy and Jennings use this moment to illustrate what some of the news headlines of this imagined future would be – something that Butler's original novel could not do. One panel shows two children happily playing in front

of the large television while a dried dam and the headline “WATER PRICES AT RECORD HIGH” shows in the background. (15) The very next panel shows a pile of dead people while the children continue to run by. Lauren does not mention any of these events as she watches which signals how desensitized she and others are to such topics at this point. For the reader, though, this visualization can be helpful as it pushes them to think of how such a possible reality may be inherited by future generations of people. Many people are currently desensitized to catastrophic events, but Butler wants us to reconnect emotionally with future peoples who will live through the consequences of our decisions in the present.

Another forward-thinking aspect of *Parable of the Sower* is Butler’s emphasis on multicultural coalitions. The community of Robledo where Lauren and her family lives is full of families from different ethnic and racial groups. When Lauren and others from the community leave the walls of Robledo, they are stared at because of their mixed heritages. Lauren narrates that “people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind. Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games” (29). On these panels, the authors illustrate a person who stares at the Robledo community as they ride by on their bikes. Butler’s point is to critique the people who preached that racism was over once the Civil Rights Act was signed. This is still repeated to this day as people constantly tell themselves that they are “better” than such ideologies of the past. Butler builds from the information of her present to create this future space and it is obvious that she still sees racism as a powerful force in the 1990s and one that

can – and does – continue to wreak havoc in the 2020s. Mitchell and Chaudhury address how white futurists fear the idea that white spaces will be “mixed with, and ultimately overwhelmed by spaces they associate with BIPOC suffering or degradation” (320). For Butler and other BIPOC authors, however, this hybridity is a strength. Once Robledo is burned down, Lauren finds two members of the community – Zahra, a Black woman, and Harry, a young, white man – and travels with them along the highway to escape to Northern California. They find people from various backgrounds along the way and create a new community that is both multiethnic and multiracial.

Duffy and Jennings also illustrate the power of multicultural coalitions as they show the reader an image of citizens from Olivar who actively resist the incoming megacorporation that threatens to turn their city into a company town¹⁴. Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company (KSF) sees that Olivar is suffering as a result of its proximity to the ocean so the company decides to “save” the citizens by offering jobs and housing to citizens and those they deem qualified to move into the city. As Lauren states, “Something new is beginning – or something old and nasty is reviving” (93). Butler shows again how deeply

¹⁴ Company towns were infamously cruel to the workers and families who inhabited them. Some were fenced in and made it difficult for workers to leave. They would also force families to stay because they would not pay employees with money. Employees were paid with a currency that was only usable in the company towns. An article from PBS claims that “without external competition, housing costs and groceries in company towns could become exorbitant, and the workers built up large debts that they were required to pay off before leaving” (“Slavery by Another Name,” <https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/company-towns/>)

connected the past is to our imaginings of the future¹⁵. On the same page, Duffy and Jennings show the representative of KSF to be a person with short, blonde hair and wearing a suit – something that may seem inconsequential but that is deeply rooted in how whiteness and white people in this world still hold the power. Underneath this panel, the authors illustrate a multiracial group of protestors with signs that say “JOBS DON’T ROB” or “KEEP OLIVEROS FREE” and a variety of other phrases. The authors illustrate what direct action looks like. They provide a model for readers who may have never seen or been introduced to what protests are or can look like. These signs do not appear in Butler’s original novel, but they add a layer of complexity that is helpful for the reader. The fact that the group resisting this new form of colonization was also primarily BIPOC members of the community confronts the ideas that white futurists want to protect.

Confronting Ecocide through BIPOC Futures

Many of the conversations introduced by Butler’s text are readdressed in the other BIPOC fictions and written after Butler’s passing in 2006. The worlds of *The Marrow Thieves* and *Dealing in Dreams* take place in the near future as well. Frenchie – the protagonist of *The Marrow Thieves* – finds his mother’s medical ID which states that she was born in 2027 while Nalah – the protagonist of

¹⁵ In a recent article titled “Amazon’s New ‘Factory Towns’ Will Lift the Working Class,” Conor Sen writes about how these new versions of company towns could be *good* for the economy (<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-09-16/amazon-s-new-factory-towns-will-lift-the-working-class>). This echoing of the past is extremely unsettling but it is exactly the type of neoliberal response that Butler warns about.

Dealing in Dreams – mentions the “Great Shake of 2060” that another character’s ancestor lived through. Parts of *The Vanished Birds* also takes place in the early 2100s which is a century that climate scientists theorize will be drastically different from the planet we currently find ourselves on. Whereas the planet is still habitable in *The Marrow Thieves* and *Dealing in Dreams*, the world of *The Vanished Birds* moves into space – the stars where Lauren hopes humanity and Earthseed will be at the end of *Parable of the Sower*. Adeline Johns-Putra writes that cli-fi depictions of climate change are shown “not just as an internal or psychological problem but for its external effects, often as part of an overall collapse including technological over-reliance, economic instability, and increased social division” (“Climate change in literature and literary studies,” 269). These fictions also focus on survival and the intergenerational obligation that transcends understandings of unidirectional time. The atopic spaces of these fictions allow readers to confront the long-term effects of ecocide that some communities are already currently living through or will be faced with in a not-so-distant future. Bringing the far-off future into close proximity can be a helpful way of getting readers and students to think intergenerationally about the effects of neoliberal policies that result in ecocide.

All four of these fictions feature chosen families¹⁶ that provide different subjectivities within the text. For Lauren, it is the people she recruits to join

¹⁶ According to Nina Jackson Levin et al., a chosen family is “a term employed within queer and transgender (Q/T) communities to describe family groups constructed by choice rather than by biological

Earthseed as they travel to Northern California. For Nalah from *Dealing in Dreams*, it is her crew – Las Mal Criadas – that she patrols the streets of Mega City with. Nalah’s family is similar to Lauren’s and Frenchie’s – the protagonist of *The Marrow Thieves* – as they are brought together by the need to survive. In *The Vanished Birds*, characters are brought together on Nia Imani’s ship because they are working to complete intergalactic jobs for the Umbai Corporation. *The Vanished Birds* is the only fiction of these to move between different protagonists to show different lived experiences and to jump between different times. In all of these imagined futures, the nuclear family structures imposed on BIPOC communities by the dominant white society is replaced and characters create chosen families with other disconnected members of their worlds. This not only resists the dominant structure of family that has been forced on BIPOC communities for generations but also highlights how powerful a chosen family can be as a resource for survival.

The chosen families that each world creates highlight the significance of historical knowledge. All of the texts look back at the histories of their communities and reincorporate it into their imagined futures. Lauren constantly brings up the fact that adults like her father and other leaders in Robledo are longing for a “return to normal” that will never happen but still relies on her

or legal (bio-legal) ties. Chosen family implies an alternative formulation that subverts, rejects, or overrides bio-legal classifications assumed to be definitive within an American paradigm of kinship” (“We Just Take Care of Each Other,” 1).

father's books to prepare for the world outside of their gated community. Lauren states that "To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days... Adults never miss a chance to relive the good old days or tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet" (5-6). This internal monologue signals to the reader that there already at least two worlds in this fiction – the world of those who hope to go back to the way things were and the world of people learning to survive with how things are now. Similarly, Frenchie's world also had a similar belief. His father and other Indigenous peoples originally believed that they could convince the government to stop extracting the marrow from Indigenous peoples' bones but were later detained and nearly killed. Miigwans (Miig) – a parental figure in Frenchie's chosen family – retells the history of Indigenous peoples and of the water wars and other atrocities that have occurred so that everyone in their family can pass on their knowledge to future generations. This is repeated in *Dealing in Dreams* where Nalah ensures that all members of Las Mal Criadas learn the history of Mega City. She states that "We make every potential soldier study up on the history. No one is exempt. If you don't know your history, then you have no power" (4). While Nalah still remains ignorant to the histories of other worlds, these words still ring true within Nalah's world and the worlds of the other fictions. Within their chosen families, characters share different knowledges about their worlds that can empower them to push back against the hegemonic powers that continue to otherize their experiences. Even Nia and Sartoris from *The Vanished*

Birds see the importance of knowledge and history and make it a point to teach the young boy left in their care how to speak and write. Knowledge, in each of these worlds, moves intergenerationally so as to highlight the mistakes of the past world – our worlds that the authors are building from.

Knowledge and history also effect how the authors create the worlds where the characters live. This is because, as HistoFuturists, these authors make worlds that extrapolate from their own present and their communities' past. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, writes that “The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of postwar migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*” (original emphasis, 9). Indigenous peoples became climate refugees as a result of colonization. The intergenerational trauma caused by Canadian and U.S. residential schools still has not been adequately addressed by either government. The atopic (non)space of the story is where Dimaline wants people to confront the history of this community that has historically been ignored. Dimaline shows that the haunted history of residential schools will continue into the future because it is still ongoing in Dimaline's present. For Rivera, the destruction of patriarchy and replacement of it with the matriarch is an important question posed for the audience to discuss. This reversal, however, is also something rooted in history amongst Latinx and other communities around the world. For some, this is not a reversal at all, but a destruction of Western ideology's emphasis on patriarchal structures. The imaginary spaces of these

fictions serve as safe imaginaries where readers can confront such controversial pasts and think of ways to create more just futures that are aware of their histories.

Time is something that each of these stories address as they bounce between present moments and the past of their characters. Mitchell and Chaudhury state that BIPOC futurisms “draw on multiple cosmologies, including those that embrace deep time, temporalities in which the Western concepts of ‘past’, ‘present’, and ‘future’ are interwoven; and the coexistence of multiple intersections of time-space” (324). *The Vanished Birds* is the only novel that has two unique narratives play out across different millennia but it helps highlight the interconnectedness of the past and future. In contrast to dominant Western ideas of time, the past and future can never be disconnected – they operate dialogically as the past builds the future and the ideas of the future inform how we interpret past actions. Fumiko is a scientist who created the Pelican that people find themselves living on in the distant future that Nia Imani lives in. She is the literal connection between these two times. The narrative bounces between Fumiko’s experiences in the 2100s and Nia’s journeys through space 1000 years later, but Fumiko also exists in this future as she was cryogenically frozen after the construction of the Pelican. The decisions made by Fumiko and others in the year 2136 have dramatic effects on Nia’s life one thousand years later.

Hybridity¹⁷ is another important factor that each of these fictions contend with. Whereas white futurists see the idea of hybrid cultures as abject – a thing to reject – BIPOC futurists embrace the cultural hybridity that their communities have been passed down. In *Parable of the Sower*, this takes form in Lauren’s step-mother, Cory, who she states is Mexican-American. Cory teaches Lauren and her other children to speak Spanish. There are scenes where Lauren and Cory speak to one another in Spanish rather than English and this is signaled by the use of italics in the text. In this way, language is still Otherized to the audience even if it is not something to be rejected. Whereas the “foreign” language is signaled in Lauren’s world, the worlds of *Dealing in Dreams* and *The Marrow Thieves* both feature multiple languages that they do not signal with italics. Rivera’s Latinx future is filled with Spanglish – a mixture of English and Spanish – while Dimaline’s imagined world mixes English, French, and Indigenous languages throughout the narrative. Both authors are theorizing characters who embody a mestiza consciousness. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, the mestiza person must constantly cross the borders of culture. Anzaldúa writes that “the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions” (*Borderlands / La Frontera*, 103). This is a result of

¹⁷ I borrow Homi Bhabha’s understanding of cultural hybridity here. Bhabha writes that “Such cultures of a postcolonial *contra-modernity* may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate,’ and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (9).

colonization – the colonization of BIPOC bodies by white Western society for countless generations.

The mestiza person is one that is resilient and designed to survive because they are *here* and *alive*. Language is one of the forms that cultural hybridity can take. Each protagonist in these stories embodies the mestiza person as they are *alive* in a (white, heteropatriarchal) world that constantly rejects them. To them, the mixing of these languages is not to be rejected because it is part of their history – part of who they are. Something as subtle as a shift away from using italics can be a powerful way to imagine a future where the borders between languages begin to fade away.

Something that makes climate destruction seem so distant is the fact that it requires us to imagine what such a world would look like. How do we imagine the unimaginable? Slow violence is so destructive because of our inability to see its immediate effects. Although some communities throughout the world live through the effects of slow violence every day, the distance (both physical and temporal) between those communities and the ones destroying them results in an emotional disconnection. These fictions all have the ability to give form to the unimagined effects of slow violence. Many of the reports by the IPCC and other agencies predict that the future will see an increased number of natural disasters. Governments and large corporations commit ecocide as they continue to enact laws and use business practices that have been shown to contribute to

anthropogenic climate destruction. This time between the us of the now and them of the future, however, creates distance between our lived experiences and future generations. These stories take time to show us how the projected effects of climate change may look like – such as the drying of dams discussed earlier in *Parable of the Sower*. For Frenchie’s future, this was the water wars, the oil spilled into the Indigenous waterways, an event called “the Melt” where polar ice caps began to melt and rising sea levels flooded coasts. Miig states that “Half the population was lost in the disaster and from the disease that spread from too many corpses and not enough graves. The ones that were left were no better off... They worked longer hours, they stopped reproducing without the doctors, and worst of all, they stopped dreaming” (26). Environmental catastrophe not only means destruction of geographies, but the destruction of persons as well.

Neoliberalism and Western hegemony have constantly undermined the validity of non-Western knowledges and ways of being. One of the results of this is the normalization of violence. *Parable of the Sower*, *The Marrow Thieves* and *The Vanished Birds* extend this violence to its natural conclusion – the normalization of human bodies as crops or objects of consumption. Capitalism naturally is an extractive industry as it extracts the labor of workers, but what happens when the body itself is what is extracted? Governments in Frenchie’s world can justify the genocide of Indigenous peoples because it means harm-reduction for the majority. This idea is in itself a utilitarian view of justice that makes the genocide of Indigenous peoples justifiable. Ahro, the young boy that

Nia and her crew are tasked with raising, has his blood extracted by the Umbai corporation to make intergalactic transport possible for more people. Part three of the books begins by stating, “His name was the first thing they took. He was the same as the eel inks and dhuba seed that they extracted from their Resource Worlds; he was an Acquisition. That was what he was named, before they took his body” (323). Anthropogenic climate change, mixed with late-stage capitalism, has led to humanity seeing the human body as a crop for production. Typically, under capitalist ideology, the human body is seen as profitable based on the work that it is able to produce. Ahro is not producing anything of value by the labor he performs - his body is the valuable object. The point of such imagery is to shock the reader and make them reflect on how the many parts of the world are already operating on this destruction of human bodies – specifically those of the poor BIPOC communities that typically face the consequences of slow violence.

These fictions build on their authors’ presents and to create such worlds. As such, Cherie Dimaline, Lilliam Rivera, and Simon Jimenez are doing the same work as the HistoFuturist described by Butler. They all engage in the various world-making practices that Mitchell and Chaudhury identify: they center plural subjectivities, challenge linear temporalities, and embrace hybridity. On top of this, the fictions all engage in a critique of the neoliberal response to anthropogenic climate change and act as imaginary spaces where readers can interact with the unimaginable destruction that is looming as a result of inaction.

Showing such futures will task readers with facing the numbness to future generations that neoliberal ideologies require. In doing so, these atopic spaces can provide opportunities for readers, students, and other interlocutors to theorize new ways of being in their worlds.

Opening Discussions on Climate Justice

What can we do in our classrooms that centers these BIPOC authors and the knowledges that they share? Where else can productive conversations about climate justice take place? How do we get our students and other interlocutors to understand the unequal distribution of consequences resulting from anthropogenic climate change? If our goal is to make students who will be well-rounded citizens of the public, then it would seem that centering topics about climate change would be essential to any curriculum. The most recent IPCC report states that “education that is designed to specifically inform decision makers of the impacts of their decisions and provide behavioural nudges can be a way to reduce emissions” (67). Ecoliteracy, then, should be a goal of any educational institution that aims to create students capable of addressing issues regarding the planet. We should aim to have classrooms that are conducive to conversations about climate change and how our (in)action may affect future generations. This requires a shift away from the banking model of education and a shift towards dialogic learning with students. Students should be empowered in our classrooms so that they are more confident in their ability to face adversity in the public sphere.

We should not, however, ignore the fact that large corporations and world superpowers have disproportionately contributed to the greenhouse effect. Creating safe classrooms that are open to conversations with students and values their ability to think of more just futures should be a goal for all classrooms that address environmental concerns. Concerns about climate justice have become politicized so as to make the issue divisive. A curriculum about environmental justice, then, will likely receive backlash from those who believe that climate change is *not* a threat or is not as threatening as the experts claim it is. Aside from ecoliteracy, it is important that we teach students about the importance of trusting experts in areas that we may not be familiar with¹⁸. The fictions examined thus far can serve as appropriate in-betweens for students to engage with these conversations about climate justice as it creates a more immediate bond between themselves and these possible worlds.

The facts about climate change have real consequences and knowing about them helps make the reality of climate destruction even more tangible for the peoples who are distant from it. Western ideas of knowledge are privileged in much of the world while story-telling and creating is viewed as less important. However, as we continue into the future where anthropogenic climate change is viewed as a future problem to be solved by not-us, there are many instructors

¹⁸ Howard Curzer and Jessica Gottlieb theorized expert-consulting closed-mindedness (ECCM) where students and the public in general should not abandon doing research about different topics, but should “trust the right experts” when one cannot adequately do so. (“Making the Classroom Safe for Open-Mindedness,” 391).

and activists that are attempting to elevate the knowledge that such creative forms can create. Mike Hulme writes “To shed new light on the multiple meanings of climate change in diverse cultures, and to create new entry points for policy innovation, the interpretive social sciences, arts and humanities need new spaces for meeting as equals with the positivist sciences” (“Meet the Humanities,” 179) The goal of this article has been to bring the power of storytelling to the center of conversations about environmental justice.

The Person as Geologic Agent

What does it mean to live in the age of the Anthropocene? The term was originally introduced in 2000 by Paul Crutzen – a chemist – and Eugene Stoermer – a former biologist. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty writes that “[m]any students of the Earth’s climate argue that, in view of human effects on the biosphere... we may have entered a new geological epoch when humanity acts on the planet as a geophysical force: the Anthropocene” (*Anthropocene 1*, 39). When the Anthropocene began is still contested¹⁹ but the consensus is that the Holocene has ended. Introducing students to these concepts about the environment can help catalyze their involvement or interest in these discussions. Even having a general sense of such topics can prepare them to engage with others in conversations about how to address the Anthropocene. If the goal of instructors is to prepare students for engagement in the public sphere, then it

¹⁹ Some have claimed that the Industrial Revolution was the beginning of the Anthropocene while some believe that the development of agriculture is what led to the Anthropocene. There are more supposed starting points than these. See Chakrabarty’s “Anthropocene 1.”

would make sense to introduce students to these concepts during their education. Using literature as an introduction to these ideas about the environment can help get students more emotionally invested in such conversations.

The term “Anthropocene” has not entered public discourse nearly as much as the idea of climate change has. Most people would know what climate change is if asked, but the idea of *anthropogenic* climate change may seem strange to people not already invested in the conversation. Both terms – the Anthropocene and anthropogenic – focus on the idea of “man-made” change. Doing so erases the unequal contributions by different communities to these changes in the Earth’s climate. Rob Nixon poses a question for how to deal with this reality: “How do we tell the story of *Homo sapiens* as an Anthropocene in the aggregate, while also insisting that the grand species narrative be disaggregated to reflect the radically divergent impacts that different communities have had on planetary chemistry?” (“Anthropocene 2,” 44) Recognizing the different impacts that communities have made to the climate crisis is important for environmental justice. The authors discussed in this article all come from historically marginalized groups and have different ways of understanding anthropogenic climate change. Generalizing all peoples to the singular “humanity” or “*Homo sapiens*” also erases the disproportionate contributions that global powers have made to speeding anthropogenic climate change along. Nixon reports that the 85 richest people in the world hold as much wealth as the poorest 3,500,000,000

people of the world and that the 1,200,000,000 people of low-income countries were only responsible for 3 percent of CO₂ emissions in 2009. (44) As economic inequalities continue to widen, the amount of emissions contributed by different parts of the world continues to grow as well. This also highlights how conversations of environmental justice cannot be separated from issues of social justice in general. Addressing the climate crisis requires that we also address economic, racial, and gender inequality.

Co-opted Language and False Accountability

The promise of profits has led companies and governments to ignore these possible dangers and continue with a “business-as-usual” politics that ignores the possibilities of worlds without fossil fuels and other nonrenewables. The “degrowth” movements are influential, but they are not nearly as prominent as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars have recently called for the revival of the degrowth mission in the hopes of averting climate catastrophe. Joan Martínez-Alier wrote an article titled, “Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth: An Alliance between Two Movements,” where they discuss how environmental justice aligns with the goals of economic degrowth and how the two communities can work to resist the power of neoliberalism that is so pervasive. Martínez-Alier writes that “economic growth, especially in the high-consumption countries of the North, is not compatible with environmental sustainability... The planet is being plundered because of economic growth, the search for profits, and high levels of consumption by parts of the population using

current technologies” (64). Major international corporations are and have been the main contributors to CO₂ emissions. Tess Riley, a previous editor for *The Guardian* online news site, writes that 100 companies are responsible for 71 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions²⁰. From 1988 to 2015, these 100 companies have contributed more to the climate crisis than any one person’s individual actions could ever hope to combat²¹.

The language of sustainability has been coopted by governments and corporations to the point that it does not mean anything other than the sustainability of the status quo. Even worse, governments and large corporations have shifted responsibility to individual people. Slogans such as “save the turtles” live vividly in the public imaginary. When people talk about the environment in the global North today, they are usually talking about sustainability – but what does that even mean? Beatriz Santamarina et al.’s article, “The Sterilization of Eco-criticism: From Sustainable Development to Green Capitalism,” tracks how the world superpowers foresaw the possibilities of these environmental movements in the 1960s and 70s and actively worked to appropriate those discourses. In this way, ideas of sustainability shifted from being subversive to systemic.

(Santamarina et al., 14) There was a notable shift in language during the late 1970s and early 80s where people stopped referring to environmentalist efforts

²⁰ In an article titled, “Just 100 companies responsible for 71% of global emissions, study says,” Riley discusses the findings of the 2017 *Carbon Major Report* where the 100 companies are listed.

²¹ I do not want to forget the amount of CO₂ emitted by militaries around the world that goes unrecorded. Military vehicles are notoriously wasteful as, for example, some jets need roughly two gallons of gas to travel one mile.

as “degrowth” or net zero growth movements and instead began talking about “sustainable development” and eventually this becomes the sustainability that is widely discussed today. Through this transformation of the discourse, the authors write the following:

It is our contention that sustainability, in its mainstream formulation, has been redefined to cover the fractures generated by the capitalist appropriation of the world. It has become, in fact, a tool that facilitates exploitation of natural resources and the generation of even deeper social inequalities. (22)

Such a neutralization of sustainability requires that people theorize new ways of existing in the world that can truly subvert the dominance of neoliberalism.

Teaching students about this history of sustainability could help prepare them to be citizens that challenge the threat of “business-as-usual” politics and the business practices that place the onus on individuals to combat climate change rather than looking at the systemic problems that are constantly brushed under the rug. Lauren’s world and the worlds in *The Vanished Birds* both illustrate how such responses to the climate crisis may affect future generations. Getting students emotionally invested in conversations about climate justice is crucial to minimizing as much damage as possible.

Towards Climate Activism

The class I taught about social justice was not focused on issues of climate per say. Instead, we read *The Marrow Thieves* over the course of a few weeks and would discuss the different social injustices that students identified.

Students would constantly point out how Indigenous communities have historically been disenfranchised and that Dimaline's story was an act of resistance. My pedagogy is influenced by Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning. In their book, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, Fink states that significant learning occurs when "some kind of lasting change that is important to the learner's life" occurs. (34) Although they viewed the desolate imaginary world as sad, they saw the hope that Frenchie and his family represented as empowering. Some students chose to write about *The Marrow Thieves* for a writing assignment and used the space of their assignment to think of how such an imaginary future is not far from our reality. This is the type of engagement that with difficult ideas that can be helpful for building coalitions to act against climate change.

One assignment for the course followed the conventions of most writing assignments that one would see in an English class. Students were given points for completing the assignment and there was a prompt that directed their attention. In this way, some of my interpretation of what they shared may be viewed as confirmation bias. The thing that truly matters is that students are getting involved in these conversations. Although they may not act on the issues that they wrote about, they may think back on it in the future or it may help them when discussing issues of environmental justice down the line. Students who were able to experience the fiction as a transitional object could use the atopic (non)place of the novel to renegotiate their relationship between themselves and

other living beings on the planet. This also lets them reevaluate their abilities to confront issues of injustice. There were a handful of students who spoke with me about how reading about Frenchie and his family made them more interested in social justice issues. Although this may not necessarily be activism itself, it means that students could leave our classrooms with new activist attitudes or thoughts. Fink writes that “College students frequently report that learning about themselves and about others is among the most significant experiences that they have during college” (50-51). Helping students develop a sense of ecoliteracy can be influential on their lives outside of the walls of our classrooms. The multicultural, multiracial, multigenerational coalition building that takes place in these novels can serve as models for students. The imaginary atopic settings of fiction can help students theorize the benefits of these combined efforts. How can we relate this to agency? If students see the fictions as transitional objects – objects where the lines between Self/Other are blurred – then it is possible that students can reimagine their relationship and ability to enact action with other people and against climate destruction.

Another way that we could have students engage with environmental justice issues is through simulating imaginary futures that are informed by our present. Lisa Propst and Christopher Robinson coteach a class where the final two weeks are dedicated to a similar simulation. In their article, “Pandemic Fiction Meets Political Science,” the authors write the following:

[Students] apply moral imagination as they reconsider the webs of relationships that connect them to one another within the world of the simulation, challenge us-versus-them views, think creatively about ways to redress histories of violence, and risk putting themselves in unfamiliar positions with experiences different from their own. (341-2)

This assignment could be adapted for an English class as well where students imagine themselves in the future worlds depicted by the BIPOC authors read throughout the class. Peta Tait looks at how drama and performance can raise emotional awareness and I would say that the fictions examined in this article have this ability as well. Their analysis of climate change in one drama leads them to conclude that “the text shows that persons do not necessarily know what to feel. *Love and Information* depicts a gap between a socially acknowledged fearful future and uncertainty in individual feeling” (1504). Dramas – and, in the case of this article, fictions – can serve as inspiration for readers to acknowledge these this shared lack of feeling. Tait also writes that “The possibility that individuals do not know what to feel about climate change undermines any social message about taking action” (1504). Affective responses to the fictions by these BIPOC authors could promote students to further engage with the texts as transitional objects where they reconsider their relationships with the peoples that they will never see – whether it be the poorer communities living through the effects of slow violence now or the future generations that will have to answer for the inaction of the few people in power.

adreinne maree brown and Alexis Gumbs led a symposium about Octavia Butler’s work in 2010 at the Allied Media Conference of in Detroit, Michigan. They

collected questions and ideas about Butler's work and created the "Octavia Butler Strategic Reader" that can be used outside of academic contexts. The questions posed on the reader could be helpful for book clubs or people looking to develop an even deeper understanding of Butler's work on their own. It is important to recognize that learning does not just occur in our classrooms. Having resources such as this can help create a more ecoliterate public outside of the context of academia. When it comes to Butler's work specifically, it is obvious that her way of thinking and theorizing about *Earthseed* have been influential to many peoples. The first *Earthseed* community has been founded in North Carolina by a group of BIPOC individuals who view the values of *Earthseed* as essential to planetary survival. None of the other novels have had such a profound effect as *Parable of the Sower* but if this is any indication of what fictions can do, then perhaps we can be more hopeful. Streeby writes that "For brown, direct action means living and cocreating the world you want to see" (115). While I may never know whether the students from that class have become climate activists, I have hope that they are more cognizant of their relationship to climate change and the world around them.

Conclusions

The fictions chosen for this project can help students and readers theorize other ways of being in the world by providing perspectives that may have otherwise been inaccessible to them. Writing about the Anthropocene, Donna Haraway states that "we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to

gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (“Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” 159). I argue that the fictions by these authors are capable of doing just this very thing so that students and readers can see the intersectionality of climate justice and the importance of action in a world that has constantly excused the same violence to be repeated throughout history.

Johns-Putra writes that ecocritical analysis of climate change in literature brings up two concerns:

[W]hether ecocritical literary studies and scholars should play an active, even activist, role in educating or advocating on behalf of the environment, or whether they should maintain a conventionally objective stance and work to probe and reveal the complexities in the relationship between literature and the environment, a stance that some argue is – in its own way – profoundly educative and political. (274)

My thesis project situates itself in the first conversation. Although I may not identify as an ecocritic in the traditional sense, I believe that there is value in teaching students and the general public about the environmental risks involved with continuing neoliberal practices. In the past, ecocritics have focused on “literary texts” rather than literary theory. I argue that the texts themselves *are* theoretical and that postcolonial, Marxist, and other theories can be helpful to our understandings of climate change. Reading cli-fi novels is one way students can be introduced to discussions about the environment and gain entry to those conversations that have historically been reserved for the “hard” sciences. BIPOC communities and women have historically been excluded from these

conversations and involvement in this field. The goal of reading the
aforementioned cli-fi fictions, then, is to bring BIPOC communities and other
disenfranchised peoples into the center of a conversation they have been
undervalued in.

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