Forms of Estrangement: Speculative Storytelling and the Contemporary Literary Imagination

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Introduction

Reading science fiction in an estranged world

> --"He liked to say that she was beyond redemption, reading those trashy science fiction novels. But sometimes she wanted to ask him, quite seriously, how to explain the way she felt in the mornings: that even the most familiar thing felt strange, that she had to—almost—learn the world anew."
>
> ~Vandana Singh, "Hunger"

I often begin my science fiction classes with Vandana Singh's short story, "Hunger." The first story in Singh's collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet,* "Hunger" challenges students' assumptions about what counts as science fiction (SF) while simultaneously suggesting a method for reading science fictional stories.[1] The story follows Divya, a young Indian housewife, as she prepares to host a party. Ostensibly a celebration for her daughter's twelfth birthday, the party is actually an important networking opportunity for her husband and his business associates. Divya's party turns out to be a failure. Indeed, the untimely death of a homelessman outside of the apartment abruptly breaks up the party, and her husband, losing the esteem of his colleagues, does not get the promotion he was so close to achieving.

Aside from the Divya's self-disclosed penchant for reading "trashy science fiction novels" (her husband's phrase) and her tendency to describe her house and her mundane activities through science-fictional metaphors—the apartment as though "it had been travelling through alien universes all night" and the kitchen as belonging "to the denizens of another world"—the story does not seem, at first glance, to be a work of science fiction at all (1-2). In

[1] Throughout this project, I use the standard abbreviation for science fiction, SF.

fact, after reading the story, our class discussion tends to begin with a debate about *if* and *when* the story *becomes* science fiction. Some point to a moment in the second to last paragraph of the story, when Divya acknowledges a change in her senses, an ability to sense the needs of others "before there was any evidence of them" (17). For others, it is not until the final paragraph of the story, when we learn that this heightened sensory perception is perhaps most pronounced when she ventures out into the city: "Even in the great tide of humanities that thronged the pavements, amidst busy office-goers and college students with cellphone, or in the shadows of the high-rises and luxury apartment blocks, she could sense the hungry and forgotten, great masses of them, living like cockroaches in the cracks and interstices of the new old city" (18). Others do not buy my suggestion that the story is science fiction at all. Where are the alien invaders, the time machines, and the generation ships? For these readers, "Hunger" cannot be considered SF because it does not describe a world drastically different from their own, and it does not contain any overtly science fictional content. In other words, there is no easily identifiable *novum,* Darko Suvin's phrase for the "strange newness" or "cognitive innovation" that distinguishes the science fictional world of Singh's story with the realistic world that we, as contemporary readers, currently inhabit. In short, "Hunger" leaves its status as science fiction open to interpretation.

Though this is where our discussions often begin, what is most interesting to me about Singh's story is actually not whether or not it fits some preestablished notion of what counts as "science fiction." For me, what is innovative about the story is its *form*. Singh's story introduces the world through the perspective of Divya, and in doing so, Singh turns the story's readers into science fictional readers themselves. Perhaps somewhat didactically, the last paragraph of the story suggests what science fiction makes possible:

> Meanwhile, she [Divya] continued to read her science fiction novels because, more than ever, they seemed to reflect her own realization of the utter strangeness of the world. Slowly the understanding came to her that these stories were trying to tell her a great truth in a very convoluted way, that they were all in some kind of code, designed to deceive the literary snob and waylay the careless reader. And that this great truth, which she would spend her life unravelling, was centered around the notion that you did not have to go to the stars to find aliens or to measure the distance between people in light-years. (18)

Coming as it does at the conclusion of the story, Divya's understanding of science fiction invites readers to reconsider their own expectations of genre while also imploring them to *read the story again*, this time, with an eye towards the science-fictionality of the text in question. In short, the story's form—its style, its shape, its presentation of content—estranges readers from the genre of science fiction while offering its own suggestion as to what the genre makes possible. And in doing so, "Hunger" posits that science fiction might be just the genre contemporary readers need to understand the estranged nature of the world around them. Such a world, the story suggests, might actually already be more like science fiction than they realize.

Forms of estrangement

To say that we live in a science-fictional world has become commonplace. From literary critics to scientists, historians, and business leaders, people from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and institutional contexts seem to recognize the cultural relevance of science fiction. In the United States, recent political issues and events propelled dystopian classics like George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* back to the top of

bestsellers lists, and the market for new SF has also remained steady. "Pick your present-day dilemma," Jill Lapore writes in a 2017 issue of the *New Yorker*, "there's a new dystopian novel to match."[2] Or, perhaps, a new dystopian television show. Indeed, the list of SF content – whether in the form of adaptations, remakes, or new material – currently being produced by network television and streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime contains too many titles to name.

Importantly, the recent surge of interest in SF is not limited to popular culture, entertainment, or even to dystopian SF. In a 2017 issue of *Harvard Business Review,* Eliot Peper urges business leaders to "consider leaving the latest white papers, industry rundowns, and management hot takes at the office" and instead "pick up a paperback in the Sci-Fi section." In addition to name-dropping a number of tech companies – Google, Microsoft, Apple – that have recently invested in "science fiction prototyping," a process where science fiction writers consult with businesses to help them imagine innovative ways that consumers might engage with their products in the future, Peper points out that "exploring fictional futures frees our thinking from false constraints. It challenges us to wonder whether we're even asking the right questions. It forces us to recognize that sometimes our imagination is more important than analysis."[3] Such an attempt to harness the imaginative potential of SF has also extended beyond the corporate economic sphere. For Ari Popper's consulting company, SciFutures, the U.S. Military provides his writers with "the most freedom to imagine negative outcomes," giving them leeway to

[2] See: Jill Lapore. "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction."

[3] For more on science fiction prototyping see: Merchant, "Nike and Boeing Are Paying Sci-Fi Writers to Predict Their Futures," Romero "Better Business Through Sci-Fi," Marinova, "Why This VC is Pouring Millions into Startups Building 'a Sci-Fi Future,'" and Gunn, "How America's Leading Science Fiction Authors Are Shaping Your Future."

imagine stories that feature smart guns, gamified war scenarios, genetically modified soldiers, and creative forms of bio-terrorism (Romeo). From a variety of contexts then, SF seems particularly well-suited to capture the rapidly shifting technological landscape of contemporary globalization and for helping readers grapple with the vast scale and complexity of issues like bioterrorism, global warming, and anthropogenic climate change.[4]

Within the field of literary studies, perhaps the most well-known declaration of the science fictional quality of postmodernity comes from Fredric Jameson's repeated insistence on the importance of SF to the contemporary imagination.[5] Whereas the popular examples cited above tend to emphasize SF's predilection for predicting the future, this common articulation of SF's prognostic, future-oriented quality represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what Jameson identifies as the "historical function of present-day SF." ("Progress versus Utopia" 151). "The apparent realism, or representationality, of SF," Jameson explains, "has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us 'images' of the future...but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*" ("Progress versus Utopia" 151, emphasis original). So, while SF is often championed for its ability to "predict the future," for Jameson this contention is ironic given that most science fiction is not about the future at all.

[4] For one recent discussion of the relationship between SF and climate change see, Diego Arguedas Ortiz, "How science fiction helps readers understand climate change."

[5] In this project, I follow Jameson's lead in using the term "postmodernity" to describe the historical period post-1980, when "all kinds of things, from economics to politics, from the arts to technology, from daily life to international relations, had changed for good" on account of a shift to a *global* form of capitalism that has come to be known under the term "globalization." (see Jameson "The Aesthetics of Singularity, 104-105). Throughout, I will use the terms "postmodernity" and "globalization" interchangeably in reference to this particular historical period, one in which we are still living today.

Instead, SF offers a narrative mode that provides access to an otherwise incomprehensible and inaccessible notion of the *present*.

Jameson's claim comes as no surprise to SF writers. As Singh herself puts it: "Reality is such a complex beast that in order to begin to comprehend it we need something larger than realistic fiction" (203). Similarly, influential SF writer William Gibson surprised readers by setting his 2004 novel, *Pattern Recognition,* in the present rather than the future. For some critics, this shift marked Gibson's turn to more "mainstream" fiction and for others, it represented an affirmation of Jameson's then recent diagnostic of the postmodern condition as one characterized by a notion of a "perpetual present," by which he meant that postmodernity's signature feature might be described as a failure to imagine any sense of futurity. [6] [7] However, in a talk for a book expo in New York, Gibson explained that in shifting to the present:

> I found the material of the actual twenty-first century richer, stranger, more multiplex, than any imaginary twenty-first century could ever have been. And it could be unpacked with the toolkit of science fiction. I don't really see how it can be unpacked otherwise, as so much of it is so utterly akin to science fiction, complete with a workaday level of cognitive dissonance we now take utterly for granted. (46)

If SF seems to speak so well to the contemporary condition, might it also be relevant to those who study contemporary fiction outside the genre of SF? Might we take Gibson's suggestion

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[6] For a critical stance suggesting that *Pattern Recognition* should not be considered SF, see Graham Sleight, "Review of *Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson."

[7] This reference to Jameson's notion of the "perpetual present" comes from Jameson's essay "The End of Temporality." For two readings that link Gibson's shift to the present to Jameson's theory, see Veronica Hollinger, "Stories about the Future: From Patterns of Expectation to Pattern Recognition" and Phillip E. Wegner, "Recognizing the Patterns."

seriously and use "the toolkit of science fiction" to unpack the complexities of contemporary literary production?

By pulling together science fiction written in English from around the world and drawing from the fields of narrative, postcolonial, and world literary studies, this project intervenes in discussions about the relationship between colonialism, empire, and science fiction while also considering what science fiction might have to teach readers and scholars about contemporary literary production at large. Specifically, "Forms of Estrangement" shows how authors from a variety of cultural and national contexts employ a common aesthetic practice that I term *formal estrangement*. This term captures the process by which authors leverage the estranging capacity of literary form to disrupt hegemonic notions of time and space while pushing the genre in new directions. My use of the term *formal estrangement* is strategic. On the one hand, I am alluding to the notion of *formal realism* theorized by Ian Watt as the defining convention of the realist novel; I am offering an alternative but comparable concept for science fiction.[8] At the same time, my use of the term suggests that there is something distinct about an estrangement explicitly initiated by form rather than content. A decidedly *formal* version of estrangement suggests an aesthetic-practice that can transcend the historical specificity of genre. Indeed, forms of estrangement can travel; they can be picked up by other literary genres and modes of narrative.[9] Thus, *formal estrangement* captures a defining convention—in the Wattian sense—of global science fiction, but it also names a specific literary-aesthetic practice. Thus, "Forms of

[8] For Watt's discussion of formal realism, see *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1967).

[9] For this distinction between the mobility of forms and historicity of genres (and for inspiring the title of this project), I am indebted to Caroline Levine's recent *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015).

Estrangement" nuances those discussions that link science fictional estrangement primarily to the genre's imaginative content. By foregrounding form, I offer a critical method for reading the literary aesthetic practices of science fiction while also illuminating how the aesthetics of science fiction have begun to infiltrate the formal frameworks of literary works outside the genre.

Theories of estrangement

Discussions of SF estrangement inevitably begin with Darko Suvin's influential definition of science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement."[10] In Suvin's analysis, proper science fiction is simultaneously estranged from and consistent with the cognitive logic of the author's contemporary world, and it is this sense of "cognitive estrangement" that distinguishes SF from both "mimetic" or realistic fiction and other fantastic genres (such as fantasy). As he puts it, SF is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (20, emphasis deleted). Carl Freedman usefully explains the Suvinian relationship between estrangement and cognition as dialectical in nature:

> The first term [estrangement] refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter. But the *critical* character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science-fictional text to account rationally for its imagined

[10] See Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979).

> world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world. (17, emphasis original)

By conceptualizing Suvin's framework dialectically, as Freedman does, it becomes easier to see how Suvin distinguishes SF from other genres of the fantastic. "If the dialectic is flattened out to mere cognition," Freedman explains, "then the result is 'realistic' or mundane fiction, which can cognitively account for its imaginings but performs no estrangement" (17). In contrast, a text that relies solely on estrangement results in fantasy, a genre that "estranges, or appears to estrange, but in an irrationalist, theoretically illegitimate way" (17). Though extremely influential, Suvin's definition has been repeatedly challenged and revised, especially in relation to this notion of "cognition."[11] Less attention, however, has focused on the estrangement aspect of Suvin's model. To understand the stakes embedded within the concept of *formal estrangement* requires a closer look at the critical lineage of Suvinian estrangement.

Suvin derives his notion of estrangement from two related but seemingly oppositional schools of thought: Russian Formalism and Brechtian theater. As Suvin explains, the "concept was first developed on non-naturalistic texts by the Russian Formalists ('ostranenie,' Viktor Shklovsky) and most successfully underpinned by an anthropological and historical approach in

[11] Most of the objections have to do with the apparent correlation between Suvinian cognition and scientific plausibility as well as the hierarchical distinctions that Suvin makes between SF and other genres of the fantastic. One such revision comes from Freedman himself, who expands Suvin's idea of cognition to a broader understanding that he terms the "cognition effect" (See Freedman 18). China Miéville's "Cognition as Ideology" offers perhaps the most far-reaching and devastating critique of both the traditional Suvinian model and the Freedman update. Finally, Rhys Williams offers a discussion that attempts to mobilize Freedman's "cognition effect" while also leveling out the distinctions between fantasy and SF as Miéville suggests (See Williams, "Recognizing Cognition: On Suvin, Mièville, and the Utopian Impulse in the Contemporary Fantastic"). Williams does this by suggesting a new categorical distinction—that of the post-genre fantastic—but as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, I prefer not to think of these works as existing outside of the genre, but rather as works that expand our notion of what counts as science fiction.

the work of Bertolt Brecht, who wanted to write 'plays for a scientific age" (18). Here, Suvin is most interested in *Verfremdunseffekt*—or the *v-effect*—as it applied to Brecht's innovative form of "epic theatre." Although Suvin spends more time discussing the work of Brecht than he does the Russian Formalists, I want to consider both in a bit more detail.

In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky developed the concept of "ostranenie" or "defamiliarization" in order to theorize both the function and purpose of art. In direct opposition to imagist understandings of art, Shklovsky argues that art interrupts "automatic" or unconscious perceptions of reality. "The purpose of art," Shklovsky writes, "is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (22). Within the context of fiction, this process of defamiliarizing the familiar is itself embedded into formal style and narrative technique. For instance, a tale might be narrated from an unexpected point of view, familiar objects may appear out of context, or everyday events might be described as if they happened for the very first time.[12] In each of these cases, the form of the fiction forces the reader to encounter the familiar from a new perspective. In other words, the familiar becomes strange.

Brecht's *Verfremdunseffekt* or "alienation-effect" forces a similar kind of estranging response. Rather than use fiction, Brecht's *v-effect* is produced by a theatrical performance. According to Brecht: "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (192).[13] More explicitly than Shkovsky's

[12] Shklovsky uses excepts from Tolstoy's fiction to provide detailed examples of these different techniques of defamiliarization. (See "Art as Technique" 22-24).

[13] Suvin uses this same quotation in *Metamorphoses*, but translates *Verfremdung* as "estrangement" instead of "alienation." (See Suvin, note 2, 19).

defamiliarization, Brechtian alienation serves a particular historical and sociological function: "to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (192).[14] This "free[ing] of socially-conditioned phenomena" can be accomplished largely through stylistic changes to the production itself. In particular, Brecht describes adjustments that range from alternative acting techniques to changes in stage design, choreography and musical arrangements. Together, these modifications prevent the audience from being drawn *into* the world of the performance, and instead *distance* them from it by making visible the performative nature of the performance. For this reason, the "epic" nature of Brecht's theatre "comes to mean simply that the tangible, matter-of-fact process is no longer hidden behind a veil," but placed in view of the audience (195). What is striking about the similarities between Shklovsky's defamiliarization and Brecht's alienation-effect is how much they both focus on the presentation of content, or what we might call *form*.

Moving from Shklovsky and Brecht to Suvin's notion of SF estrangement, this focus on form becomes much less pronounced in the latter. For Suvin, SF estrangement centers around the *novum*, the "strange newness" or "cognitive innovation" that distinguishes the science fictional world from the "mimetic" or natural world of the writer's contemporary moment. While the *novum* is historically determined, Suvin provides examples varying in scope from the minimal

[14] That Suvin leans more towards Brecht in his theorization of "cognitive estrangement" makes sense given his Marxist sensibilities. The Russian Formalists were widely criticized for the seemingly apolitical and ahistorical nature of their theory of art, and their reputation still suffers from this perception by critics today. As Tony Bennett points out, however, "in the actual conduct of their criticism, the Formalists were not so apolitical, ahistorical, or asociological, so 'formalist', as the stereotype would have us believe" (24). In particular, Jurij Tynyanov's and Roman Jakobson's, "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language" reveals a turning point in the Formalist's view of the relationship between the history of literature and the historical development of economic, political, and social processes (Bennett 28). For a full account of this history, see Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (2003).

insertion of a new invention or gadget, to more all encompassing alterations to setting, character, or relations within the reader's environment (80). Despite their variation, all of these examples situate the *novum* as an estranging aspect of content. And although Suvin suggests that SF estrangement "has grown into *the formal framework of* the genre," his notion of estrangement remains largely content-driven (19, emphasis original).[15] By introducing the concept of *formal estrangement,* I aim to interrogate the genre's "formal framework" differently by reconnecting SF estrangement explicitly to *form,* and thus to its critical roots in "ostranenie" and *"verfremdunseffekt."* By form, I mean to focus on *how* the content is conveyed rather than simply what the story is about.[16] And by *estrangement*, I suggest that we might read the critical impact of SF based on the influence of these estranging aesthetic practices. *Formal estrangement* thus fuses together the Formalist's emphasis on literary technique with the Brechtian attention to audience engagement via alienation.

I also consider *formal estrangement* to be deeply connected to what Istvan Csicsery Ronay Jr.'s theorizes as *science-fictionality.* In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery Ronay Jr. describes science-fictionality as both an attitude for approaching the technologically

[15] Noting the same phenomenon, Simon Spiegel proposes the term "diegetic estrangement" or "the collision of contradicting elements on the level of the story" to capture the kind of estrangement that Suvin seems to *actually* mean in *Metamorphoses* (375). Spiegel differentiates "diegetic estrangement" from defamiliarizing stylistic techniques (i.e content vs. form) in his analysis of SF; however, to me, "[t]he collision of contradicting elements on the level of story" suggests an estrangement elicited by plot or plotting. Following Peter Brooks, I consider plot as the *shaping of content* and therefore, an aspect of form. Thus, *formal estrangement* accounts for diegetic as well as stylistic versions of estrangement.

[16] Though I do not mean to disagree with Suvin's emphasis on the historical determinacy of the *novum*, a focus on formal estrangement helps to make sense of that fact that even when a SF *novum* ceases to be "new" (the technological innovation is actually invented or the social alteration becomes realized in a later historical moment), these SF texts often still elicit estrangement.

advanced world of the twenty-first century *and* as a "constellation" of literary conventions or expectations that readers bring with them to the genre of SF; as he explains:

> At this moment, a strikingly high proportion of films, commercial art, popular music, video and computer games, and nongenre fiction are overtly sf or contain elements of it. This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat sf as purely a genre-engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call *science-fictionality*, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction (2).

As a "kind of awareness," *science-fictionality* captures the ubiquity with which science fiction has become integrated into contemporary culture and connected to the way that individuals interpret and interact with that culture. "It is from sf's thesaurus of images" Csicsery-Ronay suggests, "that we draw many of our metaphors and models for understanding our technologized world" (*Seven Beauties* 2). Thus, science fiction's style of estrangement has become a primary component of the contemporary cultural imagination. But *science-fictionality* also suggests a framework or "mode of thought" for categorizing the particular kind of fiction that readers expect to encounter within a work of science fiction. These characteristics or the so-called "seven beauties" of Csicsery-Ronay's title, make up, not a definitive list, but a sampling of the essential features associated with the fictionality of the genre. To this constellation of literary conventions, I add the notion of *formal estrangement*.

From postcolonial to global SF

The project considers a corpus of fiction categorized by some critics as "postcolonial science fiction," but identifies the limitations of a particularly "postcolonial" rendering of the SF genre. While the emergence of an explicitly *postcolonial* science fiction has only recently been discussed among scholars, this critical conversation has its roots in a rich literary history and nascent interest in the intersections between postcolonial studies and the genre of science fiction. Early critical texts such as Suvin's aforementioned *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) and Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986) paved the way for more serious critical study of science fiction; however, Carl Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000) specifically linked the study of science fiction to theoretical frameworks for examining literary history and form. For Freedman, reading science fiction and critical theory alongside one another enhances our critical understanding of them both, and one way this pairing has been taken up is through postcolonial studies.

Early theorists working at this intersection usefully identify the overlapping concerns that scholars of postcolonial studies share with writers of science fiction; however, most of these theorists limit their analyses to archives of American and British science fiction. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s "Science Fiction and Empire," attuned scholars to science fiction's explicitly colonial tropes by critically examining the genre's relationship to European imperialism. Similarly, Patricia Kerslake's *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007) and John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) advanced critical considerations of the relationship between postcolonialism and science fiction. Whereas Kerslake applies postcolonial theory to science fiction, Rieder provides a historical account of the emergence of a science fiction aesthetic alongside the expansion of colonial and imperialist projects. Rieder's analysis suggests,

"many of the repetitive motifs that coalesced into the genre of science fiction represent ideological ways of grasping the social consequences of colonialism" (21). Thus, he concludes that science fiction became a mode of discourse for understanding, questioning, and in some cases, rationalizing both the positive and negative byproducts of colonial projects. Rieder's project was particularly influential because it illuminated how some writers of science fiction used the genre as a mechanism for conceptualizing and critically examining the residual effects of colonization. Importantly, while Rieder interrogates western science fiction with questions concerning colonial and imperialist projects, his work opened up space for critics to begin analyzing how these questions play out in SF written from the perspective of those whose cultural histories placed them on the receiving end of colonial oppression. This corpus of science fiction that privileges the perspective of the colonized have been labeled "postcolonial SF" by a number literary critics.

Theorists of postcolonial SF often consider their work as either recovering a counter-canon of previously marginalized writings of science fiction or identifying a shift in the development of the genre of SF itself. In the former, scholars fill gaps within the often-Eurocentric discourse of science fiction production and scholarship, while in the latter, critics theorize the emergence of postcolonial SF as a generic shift corresponding with or reacting to changes in the socio-economic or political make-up of the world.[17] Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) and Eric Smith's *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction* (2012) consider postcolonial science fiction as a nascent phase within the genre's development. In Langer's analysis, postcolonial science fiction both captures

[17] For the former, see Ralph Pordzik's *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia* (2001) and Amy Ransom's *Science Fiction from Québec: A Postcolonial Study* (2009).

and participates in the process of decolonization through the *subversion* of science fictional tropes. Such subversion, Langer suggests, allows postcolonial writers "to explore the ways in which Western scientific discourse, both in terms of technology and in terms of culture, has interacted with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples" (9). In contrast, Smith theorizes postcolonial science fiction as a *mutation* within the genre that corresponds to the movement away from the transitory period of decolonization. Here, postcolonial science fiction appears *after* decolonization, as a discourse arising with the postcolonial era to replace magical realism.[18]

Rather than characterize a set of texts as marking a subversion, a mutation, or a break from science fiction as these and other critics suggest, I prefer to think of our understanding of the genre itself as undergoing a change that is long overdue. A global approach to science fiction studies demands a more far-reaching understanding of the so-called genre of "cognitive estrangement." As a genre that depends on historically specific modes of estrangement, science fiction necessarily changes shape and appearance as it is taken up across cultural contexts and enters into new national spaces. Thus, in dropping the term "postcolonial" I do not mean to move away from its political implications, but rather, I want to allow for the inclusion of texts produced by authors whose work might not easily be classified as postcolonial. While Langer and Smith account for the postcolonial nature of their texts based on forms of identity or points of origin, I am more hesitant to do so. As the rise in popularity of categories such as the "Global Anglophone" attest to, the literary marketplace, even when limited to the English language, is

[18] Here, Smith is building off of Jameson's characterization of magical realism as a mode of narrative discourse that arose during an economic moment of decolonization (when alternatives to capital still existed). Smith sees postcolonial science fiction as the emergent literary form most capable of responding to the saturation of the world by capitalist globalization.

deeply complex and intricately global in nature. For me, the turn from "postcolonial SF" to "global SF" allows for a more fruitful comparative framework, one which avoids categorization based solely on questions of authorial identity or geographical origin.

Finally, some may rightfully suggest that the texts included within my analysis might be better classified as "speculative fiction" rather than "science fiction," however, I have chosen to maintain use of the term science fiction throughout this project. This decision was made both to preserve a link to the theoretical discussions of science fiction and empire to which my project owes its critical lineage and also to denote a common science fictional awareness with the works themselves. As I theorize it, *formal estrangement* is intimately tied to a text's underlying adoption of science-fictionality; thus, science fiction seems to be the most apt terminological distinction for the present study. I hope that readers will see my use of global SF, not as an exclusionary practice, but as an attempt to denote a commonality between literatures of estrangement from around the world.

Speculative storytelling

Within each chapter of the project, the methodological approach and scope of the critical intervention varies significantly. However, a thread that links all of the chapters together is the desire to explore the formal features and effects of speculative rather than realistic or mimetic forms of storytelling. In the first chapter, I explore the figure of the storyteller within SF written by Nalo Hopkinson and Nnedi Okorafor. Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and Okorafor's *Lagoon* each incorporates narrative techniques from the oral tradition, featuring a trickster-spider as the narrator of their respective tales. By making the storyteller visible via the narrative's formal

construction, both novels estrange readers from science fiction itself while simultaneously offering revisionary updates to well-known sub-genres.

In the second chapter, I explore the affordances of time-travel as a storytelling practice. Moving from earlier works by H.G. Wells' and Edward Page Mitchell to narratives written by Vandana Singh, Octavia Butler, and Kevin Baldeosingh, I consider how the time-traveler's movement between time and place estranges contemporary readers from familiar reference points, forcing them to confront the way that systems such as American slavery, European imperialism, and global capitalism have had rippling effects that extend across centuries and impact national spaces in different ways. My readings here suggest that time-travel can be theorized as both a plot-device and an aesthetic practice. And, as an aesthetic practice, we might consider how time-travel can be used to read contemporary fiction outside the genre of SF.

While still invested in speculative storytelling techniques, the third chapter of the project marks a move away from SF and towards other genres of fiction. In readings of recent works of literary fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yaa Gyasi, I demonstrate the usefulness of a time-travel aesthetic for describing how contemporary literature conveys via its form multiple and sometimes simultaneous temporalities and perspectives. These texts mimic the time-travel aesthetics of SF by formalistically moving the reader quickly through time and space, thereby offering an extended view of history.

In the final chapter, I return to where we began by foregrounding the figure of the storyteller. Whereas I previously considered literary texts that combined science fictional tropes with culturally specific forms of oral storytelling, this time, I look beyond the genre of science fiction, turning to a recent trend in contemporary literary production towards "autofiction." Autofiction, a genre that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, has been taken

up by contemporary writers such as Ben Lerner, Mohsin Hamid, Ruth Ozeki and Charles Yu among others. The authors of these texts collapse the distinction between themselves as author and the author-narrator of their novel, which creates a work of literature that is not-quite fiction or non-fiction but somewhere in-between. As this last chapter suggests, autofiction and science fiction have more in common than one might initially expect.

Chapter 1

Reimagining Genre via Form

> --"My science fiction has different ancestors..."
> ~Nnedi Okorafor, TEDtalk 2017

In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" Walter Benjamin famously laments the decline of a uniquely transhistorical and cross-cultural form of artistic expression: storytelling. Historically, Benjamin tells us, the storyteller was either a traveler or a collector of local histories, a figure defined by a kind of wisdom cultivated in stories and transmitted to listeners through telling. According to Benjamin, "the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest of our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (362). The decline of storytelling, Benjamin suggests, began with the rise of the novel and continued to be eroded by the domination of mere information, which he links specifically to the newspaper. As Benjamin points out, these latter two forms find their origin in print forms, but storytelling comes from an explicitly oral tradition:

> What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition or goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And in turn, makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. (364)

While it might be tempting to read this essay as expressing a sort of nostalgia for an archaic narrative form, Benjamin's choice of Nikolai Leskov as his exemplary an author suggests otherwise. A lesser-known contemporary to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Leskov often wrote within the genre of *Skaz,* a Russian form of *oral writing*. According to Richard Pevear, a recent translator of Leskov's fiction, "Skaz is not merely an imitation of old-fashioned storytelling; it is a new form of written expression, even a 'modern' one, which draws on the qualities of oral recitation" (xxiii). By foregrounding the storytelling experience and including the teller within the story itself, *Skaz* facilitates a particular kind of reading experience: the reader becomes more like a listener than an idle consumer of the text. And as reader-listener, the language of the tale is foregrounded and made a conscious part of the reading process. With this in mind, we might consider Benjamin's storyteller essay as not only a warning against the rise of information, but also a call for new forms of narrative expression and particularly for more writers to incorporate features of the oral tradition within their works.

Benjamin's reflections on Leskov offers a useful place to begin "Forms of Estrangement" for it is a project which takes speculative storytelling as its central motif. In this first chapter, I consider Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) alongside Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), two SF texts, which, as I will show, are infused with formal features drawn from the oral tradition. While there are many differences between the cultural influences of these particular texts—Okorafor engages West African folklore while Hopkinson draws from a Caribbean-inflected cultural background—the similarities between *Midnight Robber* and *Lagoon* make for an important comparison. In these works, the act of storytelling is placed at the center of the narrative process, with each text dramatizing the "telling" of their narrative by making the narrator a character in the story. In Hopkinson's version, the storyteller is a combination of Eshu

and Anansi, two tricksters associated with West African culture and its diaspora. And in Okorafor's tale, the narrator is Udide Okwanka, a story-weaving trickster from Igbo mythology. In both cases, the narrator is excessively present throughout the tale, repeatedly breaking into the narrative frame of the story, and in some cases even interacting with the very characters whose story they are telling. I propose that we consider these narrative breaks as an example of *formal estrangement.* By making the storyteller visible via the narrative's formal construction, these novels force readers to recognize the novel as itself a mediated form of narration. And, in the case of *Midnight Robber* and *Lagoon*, they become estranged from SF itself.

One way to explain this genre-estranging effect is by briefly turning to Rhys Williams' recent reassessment of Suvin's foundational model of SF estrangement. Responding in part to China Mièville's well-known critique of the Suvinian model, Williams offers an update to Suvin's theory of SF estrangement, one that retains the utopian impulse of Suvin's limited definition of SF while at the same time making space for the other fantastic genres foregrounded in Mièville's critique.[1] Williams (glossing Mièville) shows how Suvin's definition of SF relies on a notion of cognition, which is itself dependent on a particular understanding of scientific rationality (626). This dependence becomes problematic when we consider how those forms of scientific inquiry and rationalism might serve capitalist-ideology. As Williams (and Mièville) points out, SF that weds itself to an idealized understanding of scientific enlightenment risks *failing* to estrange us "from the hegemonic discourse for which it operates as ideological cheerleader" (626). For Mièville, this is precisely why Suvin's definition of SF needs to be expanded to include other genres of the fantastic, especially those which illuminate alternative forms of rational thought. Whereas Mièville calls for a move away from SF and utopian

[1] For more information see introduction, note 10.

literature (and towards fantasy), Williams suggests that contemporary SF is already changing the parameters of its own constitution through an interrogation of SF discourse itself. "The creative and utopian energy in genres of the fantastic," Williams explains, "is currently manifesting itself in the erosion and destruction of the false, self-crowned purity of that discourse" (626). And it does this through an interrogation of its own *form.* Indeed, Williams ultimately concludes that "the utopian impulse is to be found today in the breaking down of traditional forms and the taking of form as object. The modes of the post-genre fantastic, as much as the new manifestations of political resistance, express cognition and the utopian impulse at the level of form" (627). While Williams offers a new category of description for these texts – the "post-genre fantastic" – I prefer to think of this foregrounding of form as a tendency of much global SF in general. In other words, not only does global SF have the capacity to estrange us from the present world, but it also calls into question the parameters by which the genre of cognitive estrangement has been historically defined. Put differently, by estranging readers from traditionally established conventions of SF, global SF creates the possibility of revising those conventions to accommodate alternative forms of narrative discourse.

Just such a revisionary project, I argue, is exemplified in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014). As I will show, through their use of a trickster narrative framework alongside features characteristic of traditional sub-genres of SF, Hopkinson and Okorafor revise and reimagine those sub-genres within specific cultural traditions. In *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson crafts a new kind of cyberpunk tale, one that reclaims the improvisational structure and fluidity of the oral tradition. And in *Lagoon*, Okorafor reimagines the first-contact formula to a twenty-first century context, a reformation that exposes the very mechanisms by which stories about "the other" are produced and consumed in

contemporary society. When read together, these two texts demonstrate the resiliency of the trickster tale, highlighting how this narrative framework has maintained its political importance even while traveling to new cultural and generic contexts. At the same time, we can see how these two authors use the form of their fiction to estrange readers from genre itself. In both cases, the narrator's visibility foregrounds the folktale framework while simultaneously drawing attention to the generic conventions of well-known SF formulas. The result is a revisionary update to both frameworks. I will begin my analysis with *Midnight Robber* for it offers an explicit integration of a folktale framework with that of a well-known subgenre of SF, cyberpunk.

Cybernetic anancy: Or, Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

In *Midnight Robber,* Nalo Hopkinson weaves together science fictional tropes and Caribbean folklore to create a futuristic setting where artificial intelligence has agency, nanotechnology flows through human veins, and worlds exist in multiple dimensions. *Midnight Robber* tells the story of a young protagonist, Tan-Tan, as she matures from child to adult, first on the planet of Toussaint and then, after she is exiled to the prison-planet, New Half-Way Tree. The narrative begins in Toussaint, a capitalist-utopia where industrial-society has reached the pinnacle of progress: the world is completely subsumed by an artificial information-system that maintains civil order and eliminates the need for physical labor.[2] Indeed, Toussaint's daily activities are run by a seemingly benevolent form of artificial intelligence, "Granny Nanny," an entity that controls the corporate created "'Nansi Web." Although the A.I. clearly replicates the cybernetic structure of the Internet, Hopkinson's version is even more invasive for 'Nansi's

[2] The planet's name is a reference to Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.

nanomites infiltrate city infrastructure, invade human bodies, and are even integrated into the planet's soil. Indeed, the extent to which the nanobites collect and circulate information about Toussaint back to Granny Nanny is made quite explicit in the text:

> The tools, the machines, the buildings; even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites—Granny Nanny's hands and her body. Nanomites had run the nation ships. The Nation Worlds were one enormous date-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi's Web. They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people. (10)

Each inhabitant carries within them a microchip linked to their own personal "Eshu," a "protective off-shoot" of Granny Nanny, which provides instant access to all the information within the 'Nansi Web. While the Eshus are forms of artificial intelligence separate from Granny Nanny, they ultimately connect back to her server. In this way, Granny Nanny is able to keep constant surveillance and control over her inhabitants, tracking their every move and mediating sources of conflict.

Meanwhile, existing alongside but never in direct contact with Toussaint is the prison-planet of New Half-Way Tree. Referred to as simply the "mirror planet" or "dub version" of Toussaint, New Half-Way Tree serves as the depository for Toussaint's excess.[3] Whereas Toussaint functions as a capitalist-utopia, New Half-Way Tree depicts a pre-industrial society where physical labor is the norm, corporations and artificial intelligence do not yet exist, and urban settlements occupy only a small portion of the wild landscape. As some critics have

[3] For an important interrogation of the significance of this reference to "dub"-music, see: Leif Sorensen, "Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson."

pointed out, Hopkinson's two planets form a dialectical relationship, one relieving the burden of its excess while supplying the other with new forms of productive labor.[4] Thus, through the conceptual structure of these overlapping worlds, Hopkinson explores the limits of industrial capitalism.[5]

At first glance, Hopkinson's text seems to offer a refreshing contribution to the SF sub-genre of cyberpunk, a genre that emerged in the mid-1980s with the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). For Larry McCaffery and others, cyberpunk was a distinctly 1980s phenomenon that offered both "an intense, vital and often darkly humorous" representation of late capitalism and an artist response to the "technological milieu that [was] producing postmodern culture at large" (12, 14). Cyberpunk artists used their art to respond to the fast-paced technological development characteristic of postmodernity (14). As Bruce Sterling puts it in the preface to *Mirrorshades*, the cyberpunks were "perhaps the first SF generation to grow-up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction, but in a truly science-fictional world" (344). Because of this explicit historical link, many discussions of cyberpunk remain rooted in the cultural production of the 1980s. However, in *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction*, Eric D. Smith offers a different avenue by which to study contemporary cyberpunk with his discussion of "postcolonial cyberpunk":

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[4] For one such reading, see Eric D. Smith's *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (2012), Ch 2.

[5] Such an exploration, Smith argues, marks Hopkinson's intervention "into the utterly novel epoch of globalization" (53). In his reading, the dimension veil literally and allegorical represents the barrier which prevents the inhabitants of Toussaint from being able to fully conceptualize the relationship between the two worlds. Such a barrier, Smith suggests, is analogous to the disorienting effects of contemporary globalization; thus, Hopkinson's work offers a "conceptual instrument" for grasping an understanding of the world under late capitalism.

> Cyberpunk might thus be regarded as the colonization of science fiction (SF) by globalization itself and of the exhaustion of the estranging capacities of the former. What happens to this genre, however, when global saturation of capital and techno-culture formations that are at once the latter's conditions and foremost effects expand beyond the *developed/developing* binary that implicitly informs McCaffery's model? (159-160).

In other words, how does our present form of globalization complicate the defining characteristics of the cyberpunk genre—a genre that emerged over three decades ago in response to a then newly forming notion of late capital? While Smith emphasizes the value of postcolonial cyberpunk for its metaphorical ability to conceptualize advancing forms of global capitalism, I wonder how the genre responds as it follows the flows of capital across national boundaries and into new cultural spaces. Put differently, what happens when cyberpunk is reimagined within other cultural traditions? Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* helps to answer such questions. With its hyper-powerful artificial intelligence, technologically-enhanced human bodies, and direct references to multinational corporations, *Midnight Robber* seems to adopt a thematic structure that fits neatly alongside other works of cyberpunk; however, the novel's formal elements quickly distance the reader from the commonly cited characteristics of a cyberpunk narrative. Indeed, *Midnight Robber* is narrated by "Eshu," an intrusive narrator who announces its presence from the very beginning of the novel, explicitly establishing *Midnight Robber* as the tale of its telling. A protective off-shoot of the all-controlling artificial intelligence Granny Nanny, the Eshu also immediately alerts us to the particular kind of tale it is going to tell. To read Hopkinson's text *only* through the lens of cyberpunk is to miss another important intertext: the Anansi folktale tradition.

In what follows, I want to suggest that by merging the conventions of cyberpunk with that of a trickster-folktale framework and infusing the text with references to the Caribbean tradition of carnival, Hopkinson repositions artificial intelligence within a culturally specific narrative structure. Such a move estranges readers from the genre of cyberpunk while at the same time imagining a technologically-enhanced version of the Anansi-framework. The resulting narrative captures the dynamic mobility of the oral tradition and translates this fluidity to a cybernetic rendering of the future. In Hopkinson's hands, the Anansi tale rescues cyberpunk from its traditionally bleak depiction of the future and leaves space for the possibility of hope, even from within an otherwise dark rendering of that future.

To fully appreciate Hopkinson's unique intervention with *Midnight Robber* requires an understanding of the social, political, and formal features of the Anansi storytelling tradition. A common figure of West African and Caribbean folklore, "Anansi" is a trickster who often appears as a spider and thus a "weaver" of tales (Leech et al., 54).[6] Anansi tales originated as an Akan-Asante cultural tradition of the peoples living within the Ghanaian region of West Africa, and they provided specific social and political functions within Asante villages. With the forced relocation of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade, this Anansi folktale tradition traveled throughout the African diaspora and specifically into the Caribbean. In *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance*, Emily Zobel Marshall traces this movement, showing how the Anansi framework morphed and shifted as the tales moved from the West African environment to the plantation setting of the West Indies. In Marshall's telling, Anansi tales

[6] Although there are several alternative spellings of this West African trickster spider, I follow Marshall's lead in using "Anansi" as opposed to "Ananse" in this paper because the former is the spelling most often associated with Caribbean iterations of the trickster.

originally served a political function, providing an acceptable space for political critique and dialogue, which ultimately improved community cohesion. As she explains:

> There were certain rules to be adhered to if one wanted to complain about or mock the powerful in a tale what would protect the teller from causing offence. First, the tales must only be told after nightfall. Second, there must be a public disclaimer made before the start and at the end of each story to show that the tales were not strictly true [...] It was in this way that the tales played a vital political role as a medium for members of the Asante community to air their issues publicly. This public airing could end in resolution or simply diffuse negative emotions into laughter and mockery, thus avoiding the buildup of resentment and retribution" (*Anansi's Journey* 22).

As a liminal figure, Anansi could move outside the bounds of social norms, and through the telling of the trickster's transgressions, Anansi stories enabled societies to confront, reassess, and in some cases re-create those communal expectations (Marshall, *Anansi's Journey* 32). Historically, then, the stories cultivated community cohesion by initiating dialogue and creating an acceptable space to air grievances, voice concerns, and formulate collective responses to problems. When the tales reappeared within the Caribbean, their status shifted from being a force of re-creation to that of disintegration. "On the Jamaican plantations," Marshall explains, "Anansi had the potential to function as a character who could destroy an enforced and abhorrent social system rather than just test the boundaries..." (*Anansi's Journey* 48). In the context of the Caribbean, the Anansi framework became a source for channeling disruption and resistance.

In addition to serving social and political functions, Anansi tales also share similar formal features. In the introduction to his edition of *West African Folk Tales*, a collection of folk tales

transcribed and translated by linguist Jack Berry, Richard Spears offers a description of the typical scene of storytelling practice:

> The actual setting typically includes a group of people who take turns telling tales. Each storyteller beings the tale with an opening formula, essentially announcing that a tale is about to be told, and the audience follows with some sort of response. At the end of the tale, the storyteller brings the tale to a formal close, usually with an ending formula, and may call upon the next storyteller to begin. During the telling of the tale, it is not uncommon for someone to interrupt with some totally irrelevant remark, or perhaps a correction. Many tales include songs that are sung by the storyteller or by the entire group. (2)

Spears's description echoes Marshall's identification of several important features of the Anansi story, including the framing of the narrative with a public disclaimer. Spears furthers our understanding by describing a storytelling experience that is at once fixed and dynamic. Despite the fact that the tales typically follow a formulaic structure, the storyteller's oral performance also leaves space for improvisation and audience interaction. Unlike the static nature of a written narrative, the oral narrative is contextually determined: each telling is necessarily different as the teller responds to and alters the narrative according to interruptions, asides, and interventions made by an actively participating audience. Although it may be difficult to imagine what this oral form might look like if incorporated into fiction, it is precisely this improvisational method that comes closest to articulating the formal structure of *Midnight Robber*. [7]

[7] Marshall also has a reading of Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* that foregrounds the novel's debt to the oral tradition. See Emily Zobel Marshall, "Resistance through 'Robber-Talk': Storytelling strategies and the Carnival Trickster." Here, Marshall argues that the figure of the Midnight Robber "is the twentieth- and twenty-first-century *carnival* manifestation of the traditional West African-rooted Caribbean trickster figure; a post-emancipation performance of phenomenal

At its basic, formal level, *Midnight Robber* is an exchange of storytelling between a speaker (the Eshu) and its unnamed listener. The novel begins with the Eshu declaring: "Oho. Like it starting, oui? Don't be frightened, sweetness, is for the best. I go be with you the whole time. Trust me and let me distract you little bit with one anansi story" (1).[8] And the novel ends with the Eshu's final proclamation: "Call that George, the story done. Jack Mandora, me nah choose none!" (329). Recalling Marshall's discussion of the Anansi tale's tendency to provide a "a public disclaimer" at the beginning and end of the story to indicate their status as fiction, I read these two moments as serving just such a function (*Anansi's Journey* 22). As opening and closing injunctions, these formal features establish the Eshu as storyteller and position the novel as the Eshu's tale. The Eshu-narrator begins by launching into the Anansi-story of Tan-Tan on New Half-Way Tree, but the tale is quickly interrupted by the narrator's realization that the listener does not have any of the context needed to understand the story. The teller is forced to begin again: "New Half-Way Tree is where Tan-Tan end up, and *crick-crack*, this is she story" (3). This complex opening already begins to mimic the non-linear, improvisational method of the

power and skillful oratory played out on the streets rather than in the storytellers' circle" (211). Thus, it is through this performative figuration of the trickster that Marshall reads Hopkinson's narrative. In Marshall's reading, Hopkinson "rework[s] the old Midnight Robber mas to create trickster narratives which help readers envision a more equitable and Caribbean future" (214). Marshall's reading is a useful companion to my own for while I focus more on Hopkinson's fusion of the Anansi folktale with cyberpunk, Marshall provides an insightful discussion of Hopkinson's deep engagement with the specifically Caribbean mas tradition alongside that of the trickster tale.

[8] That the telling of this Anansi tale is spurred during a moment of trauma (as Tan-Tan begins to give birth to the child) demonstrates another instance of alignment between Hopkinson's narrative framework and that of an Anansi tale structure. According to Marshall, "Anansi, because we can always find ways to overcome the most seemingly insurmountable challenges, is conjured in life-threatening situations when food and water are in short supply, and death is imminent" (*Anansi's Journey* 27).

oral tradition, but the oral quality of the text only intensifies as the Eshu-narrator continues with the tale.

Over the course of the narrative, the story continues to be interrupted, side-tracked, or infused with other stories facilitated by the narrator. For example, several times throughout the text, the Eshu interrupts its own narration to tell Anansi stories about "Tan-Tan the Robber Queen," a fictional persona adopted by Tan-Tan during her time on New Half-Way Tree. These moments of interruption are written in bold-face type, which immediately alert the reader to the digression and serve as a simultaneously reminder of the Eshu's narrative presence. More importantly, these stories, which begin as tangential moments of narration, bleed back into the main frame, altering the narrative arc of the Eshu's tale. The most obviously example of what we might call the improvisational quality of *Midnight Robber* is the Eshu's digression into the tale, "Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf." Put quite simply, this story tells how Tan-Tan the Robber Queen takes in and domesticates a monstrous animal (a baby rolling calf), so as to save it from perishing in the wilderness. Once the story is over, the Eshu plants the reader back into the overarching narrative of Tan-Tan's life, and miraculously, Tan-Tan is now traveling with a baby rolling calf. Here, the storyteller's improvisational digression immediately impacts the original tale. The two tales become intermixed in *Midnight Robber,* one bleeds into the other, the original story mobilizing the digression and the digression revising and reimagining the original tale.[9]

At the end of the novel, the narrator breaks through the frame one last time to offer a final, story-altering reveal: that we (the readers) are not the only ones listening to the tale. In fact,

[9] One of the other Anansi story-digressions tells the story of Tan-Tan's capture and subsequent enslavement by "Dry Bone" (See *Midnight Robber,* "Tan-Tan and Dry Bone" 198-212). In Hopkinson's version, the plot follows the traditional version of "Anansi and Dry Bone" almost verbatim but with Tan Tan occupying the role of Anansi. (See Marshall, *Anansi's Journey* 66-70).

the entire storytelling exchange has been directed *not* at the reader, but at an unborn child, the same child that Tan-Tan has been carrying within her womb for the majority of *Midnight Robber*. The novel, then, is not simply the narration of Tan-Tan's maturation from child to adult, but rather, it is the Eshu's *re*telling of Tan-Tan's life story to her unborn son as he prepares to enter into the world. As readers, we also become listeners, beholden to a narrative that is mediated to us through technology. If we read *Midnight Robber* from this vantage point—the reader as listener—then, we can see how the text adopts a narrative structure more akin to the oral tradition than that of traditionally written narrative discourse. In particular, *Midnight Robber*'s status as an Anansi tale conditions its adoption of the structures that allow space for narrative improvisation, including digressions, interruptions, and the infiltration of alternative voices and experiences into the framework of the original tale.

From this perspective, we can trace the various other instances of storytelling that are picked up, reshaped, and incorporated in *Midnight Robber's* improvisational form. Though not always explicitly explained to the reader, many of the characters of the story are named after traditional figures from Carnival. Quashie, Mako Jumbie, and the Midnight Robber are all characters from Traditional Mas performances during Carnival, and each of these figures carry a particular story and history that is attached to their name. To take the most explicit reference as our example, the Midnight Robber is a performer who is known for his wide-brimmed hat, long cape, and elaborate tales of mischief and adventure ("Midnight Robber").[10] During Carnival, Midnight Robbers give impromptu street performances, spinning tales to be randomly judged by

[10] Midnight Robber is not the only Mas character represented within Hopkinson's text. "Moko Jumbie" appears as well. This is the wild beast on New Half-Way Tree that threatens Tan-Tan's life most often when she is traveling through the wilderness. Supposedly, these creatures, like the Douen, also became extinct in Toussaint after the corporate takeover of the planet.

the crowd ("Midnight Robber"). In the novel, Tan-Tan uses this Midnight Robber persona as a disguise when traveling through New Half Way Tree. But in enacting this character, she inadvertently creates a fictional persona that takes on a life of its own. As she travels from town-to-town, so do the stories of "Tan-Tan the Robber Queen." These various articulations of the "Tan-Tan the Robber Queen" become another prominent narrative that infiltrates the formal frame of *Midnight Robber*, interrupting and conditioning the novel itself. As the Eshu remarks: "What a thing those Tan-Tan stories had become...they had grown out of her and had become more than her" (299). Like the various iterations of Anansi stories that interrupt and influence the narration of *Midnight Robber*, the stories of "Tan-Tan the Robber Queen" also begin to shape Tan-Tan's understanding of herself. As the Eshu puts it, Tan-Tan "kept trying to discern truths about herself in the Tan-Tan tales, she couldn't help it," but it "seemed like every time she heard the stories they had become more elaborate. Anansi the Trickster himself couldn't have woven webs of lies so fine" (299). It is only after Tan-Tan participates in a scene of improvisation – by performing the role of the Robber Queen – that she is able to reclaim agency over her identity. Through the retelling of her personal history, "power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen's power—the power of words" (319). Here, Tan-Tan's storytelling practice enables her to air grievances, challenge authority, and ultimately reconcile the contradiction present within her personal narrative. Such a restorative process resembles the original political and social functions of the improvisational method of the Anansi storytelling experience.

Finally, even the novel's textual features betray the difficulty involved in conveying narrative features that do not so easily translate from oral to written form. As Spears explains, **"**one may note with some regret that typical Western literature excludes almost all of the storytelling devices found in West African spoken art. Westerners are obliged to indicate these

things through choice of vocabulary, style, metaphor, and other literary techniques" (1). For Hopkinson, the use of bold-face, alternative text helps her to signal the storyteller's voice and presence within a storytelling experience. Curiously, this same type-face is also used to capture the tonal-based programming language of the 'Nansi Web, "nanny-song" (51). Like the standard practice of *italicizing* untranslated words within a multi-lingual document, the bold-faced font of the Eshu's direct address to the unborn child might be read as signaling the untranslatability of the oral-language of nanny-song to written-discourse.[11] There is, however, one group of people in Toussaint who can speak and (theoretically) can translate nanny-song, the pedicab runners. As descendants of the original programmers of Granny Nanny, the runners are the only inhabitants of Toussaint who can still speak and decipher the tonal-based language of "nanny song" (51). As one of the runners explains: "We just know more nannysong than the rest of oonuh, we more fluent, seen? If you sing the right songs, so long as Nanny don't see no harm in life nor limb, she will lock out all but she overruling protocols for a little space" (52). This fluency in nanny song enables the runners to ask Granny Nanny "to do things nobody else could even think of" (52). In their role as computer-programmers, the pedicab runners bear resemblance to the hacker-protagonists of traditional cyberpunk. But here, in a narrative that privileges the improvisational quality of the oral over that of the linear-progressive nature of the written, what is striking is the fact that it is the runner's ability to shift between the two forms of communication that provides them with individual agency. Indeed, because they know nanny song and have the ability to

[11] Such a conclusion becomes more important as we consider the one other voice captured in the text via this bold-faced type: that of the Douen. The Douen are a bird-like species who inhabit the planet of New Half-Way Tree. Originally a native species of Toussaint, they supposedly became extinct on that planet after the corporate takeover of Toussaint. That their speech is also glossed via the same font as the Eshu suggests that they are also speaking in nanny-song and that the Eshu is switching back-and-forth between human-language and nanny-song as it tells stories to the unborn child.

compose "headblind" words on old-fashioned paper, the runners are privy to a form of privacy that no one else in Toussaint is even capable of imagining. When they offer to "bring an carry private messages," on "handmande paper, not datastock," Antonio is amazed (10-11). As the Eshu explains, "what the runners were offering now was precious beyond description: an information exchange system of which the 'Nansi Web would be ignorant. The possibilities multiplied in Antonio's mind" (10). The runners' knowledge of both nanny song and written discourse privilege them to space outside of Granny Nanny's surveillance.

Because the runners exploit these private networks of exchange in order to set-up the transfer of Antonio and Tan-Tan to New Half-Way Tree, we might read them as the unexpected ghostwriters of *Midnight Robber*. In other words, the runners are the actors who create the conditions necessary for the Eshu's narrative act to happen in the first place.[12] This transfer of agency to the runners represents an important revision to the hacker-protagonist role of traditional cyberpunk. As Jillana Enteen explains, "The ability to hack is a prerequisite for the cyberpunk protagonist" (265). Taking the protagonists of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* as the quintessential examples of cyberpunk's hacker tradition, Enteen offers a detailed description of the typical cyberpunk formula:

> Without the intervention of the code-savvy hacker/cracker, world domination might be achieved by *Neuromancer*'s incestuous upper-class clan of cyborg executives or *Snow Crash*'s malicious, power-hungry tyrant, but in both novels a lone cyberjockey crashes the system, upsetting the convergence of corporations

[12] The runners provide Antonio with the poison that leads to his arrest and they give Tan-Tan "a small playback machine" that allows her to make the jump from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree. The full significance of the runners' plan does not become apparent until the last few pages of the novel, but these events suggest that the runners' use nanny-song to intentional set up the transfer of Tan-Tan and Antonio to the alternate dimension.

> and nations in a capitalist frenzy where humans would be consumed by codes gone awry. (266)

For Enteen, Hopkinson unsettles this vision of a solo-hacker by presenting "a hacker community that calls on the reader to decipher codes and create meaning" (266). However, I think we might alternatively consider Hopkinson's text as making space for an entirely new kind of cyberpunk protagonist. In *Midnight Robber*, we are presented with a cyberpunk hacker who is not the story's main protagonist, but rather is a character on the margins. The pedicab runners are the sole laborers on the planet of Toussaint, and they provide the *invisible* labor that creates the conditions necessary for the emergence of the novel's actual protagonist. Indeed, the cyberpunk protagonist in *Midnight Robber* is not the hacker, but the Eshu.

The relationship between *Midnight Robber* and the Anansi framework is complicated by the fact that the tale is narrated by another trickster-character, Eshu. By its name alone, Hopkinson's Eshu is positioned as a form of artificial intelligence aligned with this divine trickster and narrative mediator of Yoruba mythology; however, the Eshu self-identifies with the story-weaving figure of Anansi. Indeed, like Anansi, Hopkinson's Eshu calls itself "a master weave," declaring, "I spin the threads. I twist warp 'cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui?" (3). Although this reference aligns the Eshus with Anansi, and thus with the "Grande 'Nansi Web" of Hopkinson's all-powerful Granny Nanny, the distinction that remains is important. Indeed, although the Eshu-narrator works as a storyteller on behalf of Granny Nanny, the two figures are not one and the same.

Whereas Granny Nanny's actions are motivated by a desire to preserve the integrity of the entire system, the Eshu's seem to possess some individual agency. The Eshu tells us that Granny Nanny "had been designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even

dissension, so long as it didn't upset the balance of the whole" (10). In other words, Granny Nanny was programmed to allow for mild forms of dissension to exist within her operating structure, so long as the system stayed intact. But, when confronted with any perceived threat to her framework, Granny Nanny immediately eliminated the threat from the system, dispelling it to another dimension. In contrast, throughout the narrative, the Eshus are depicted, though subtly, as having an agency that is independent from the operating structure of the 'Nansi Web. Such agency is revealed in the nurse's remark to Ione that "You know it [the Eshu] does make mischief sometimes," (30) but it is also confirmed in the Eshu's unsolicited attempts to teach Tan-Tan about the inhabitants of New Half Way Tree prior to her exile (32-33). The significance of this difference – that of the preservation-programming of Granny Nanny versus the disruptive agency of the Eshus – can be further understood through the figures to which their names allude.

An eighteenth-century Obeah-woman known for her bravery and brute resistance to British forces, Granny Nanny was a maroon leader, who is celebrated as one of Jamaica's national heroes (Marshall, *Anansi's Journey* 102). According to Marshall, "During the eighteenth-century Nanny's Windward Maroons formed a cooperative federation famous for its ruthless raids on whites. Her Maroons frequently descended from the mountains armed with knives and cutlasses to attack the settlements below" (*Anansi's Journey* 104). This history of Granny Nanny and the maroon wars serves as another intertext to Hopkinson's novel as many of the events captured within the legends of Granny Nanny reappear within *Midnight Robber*.[13] Historically, Granny Nanny and the maroons have been criticized for their tendency to preserve

[13] Although I do not have space to elaborate here, I think that the relationship between the Douen and the history of Granny Nanny and the maroons deserves more attention. In particular, I suspect that a case could be made for reading the Douen as themselves figurations of the maroons.

their own interests over that of the nation. Indeed, much like the preservation-programming of Hopkinson's Grand 'Nansi Web, Granny Nanny and her maroons were known to cooperate with the British if it meant that their own settlements would be left unharmed.[14] In contrast, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains in *The Signifying Monkey*, Esu-Elegbara is a trickster figure of Yoruba mythology who appears in tales throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and South America (4). He is often seen as a mediator, a messenger of the gods, and the guardian of the crossroads; he is also known for his skills as an interpreter and translator of sacred texts (5). With this in mind, Eshu seems to be an appropriate figure to represent the narrator of *Midnight Robber.* As storyteller, Hopkinson's Eshu is both a translator of "nanny-song" and a mediator between the reader, listener, and text. The Eshu is also a link between the planet of Toussaint and the future of New Half Way Tree. In *The Trickster in West Africa*, Robert Pelton describes Eshu as "the master of the sacred language of Ifa, in which all human possibilities are contained. He destroys normal communication to bring men outside ordinary discourse, to speak a new word and to disclose a deeper grammar to them" (163). Read in this way, the Eshu's narration of *Midnight Robber*, the telling of the tale itself, becomes a significant act of opposition, even of possibility.

This sense of possibility is established by *Midnight Robber*'s unexpected ending. For the first time, the Eshu names its intended listener as Tan-Tan's unborn child, Tubman. With this surprise ending, the curious temporality of *Midnight Robber* is revealed to the reader, and it is a notion of temporality linked explicitly to the Yoruba figuration of Eshu. As Gates explains, "The most fundamental absolute of the Yoruba is that there exist, simultaneously, three stages of existence: the past, the present, and the unborn. Esu represents these stages, and makes their simultaneous existence possible" (42). With her Eshu-narrator then, Hopkinson crafts a narrative

[14] See Marshall's *Anansi's Journey*, Ch 3.

that collapses three seemingly distinct temporalities. However, this collapse is only realized when the reader arrives at the last few pages of the novel, and this unexpected temporal turn contributes an added level of readerly estrangement to Hopkinson's ending. The focus on the unborn child at the end of *Midnight Robber* also reveals that the child will be the first inhabitant of New Half-Way Tree seeded with Granny Nanny's nanomites. As the Eshu explains:

> [Nanny] instruct the nanomites in your mamee blood to migrate into your growing tissue, to alter you as you grow so all of you could *feel* nannysong at this calibration. You could hear me because your whole body is one living connection with the Grande Anansi Nanotech Interface. Your little bodystring will sing to nanny tune…You will be a weave in she web. (328)

It is clear that Tubman will understand and respond to "nanny-song," but the Eshu's explanation does not indicate whether this transfer of technology will be positive or negative. It could be that Nanny's expansion to New Half Way Tree is simply the outcome of capitalist exhaustion on the planet of Toussaint, that this moment is the beginning of the colonization of New Half Way Tree by the corporate created 'Nansi Web's nanomites. And if this is the case, then we might read the future of New Half Way tree as simply a repetition of the cyberpunk nightmare that is Toussaint. Importantly, this dark rendering of the future is not certain; rather, Hopkinson leaves open an alternative space of possibility. Indeed, we might alternatively read Tubman's birth as suggesting a more hopeful future for New Halfway Tree, one where technological innovation enters into a world that is not already subsumed by capitalist ideology. In this second version, Tubman is provided with the knowledge of nanny-song without the oppressive and destructive history of its creation. Hopkinson's narrative offers a cybernetic rendering of the future that does not leave the

reader with the traditionally bleak depiction of cyberpunk futurity. Instead, its open-ended narrative structure leaves the future of New Half-Way Tree open to possibility.

The recognition of *Midnight Robber* as drawing from both the SF sub-genre of cyberpunk *and* that of the Anansi folktale framework reveals the importance of Hopkinson's narrative project. Ultimately, my reading suggests that with *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson achieves what Kamau Braithwaite once suggested no West Indian author had yet been able to do: create an aesthetic that captures and privileges the folk tradition over that of a European cultural form.[15] For Braithwaite, jazz is one of the few cultural forms that can capture the kind of improvisation that the Anancy story privileges in its oral narrative mode. However, with its trickster-storyteller, multiplicity of narrative frames, incorporation of traditional Anansi story tropes, and open-ended conclusion, *Midnight Robber* offers a Caribbean novel that features improvisation and Caribbean cultural forms at its core. And in the process, it offers a culturally-specific rendering of the cyberpunk genre, one that creates a space of possibility within cyberpunk's usually dark projection of the future.

Trickster invasion: Or, Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

Whereas Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* combines the Anansi tale with many of the generic characteristics of cyberpunk, Okorafor's *Lagoon* brings together an alternative trickster figure with that of the SF sub-genre of "first-contact." Like Hopkinson's text, Okorafor adopts a

[15] In his "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" Kamau Braithwaite theorizes a "jazz aesthetic" as a way of thinking about an alternative narrative framework to that of the western novel, one that could capture a method of "improvisation" in the Caribbean novel. He turns to jazz partially because "no West Indian novelist has, as far as I know, attempted yet to incorporate the Anancy story structure in the form of his work...to find 'written' examples of improvisation similar to the Anancy story, we have to turn to those few poets who have remained working in the West Indies...and who have had...to come to grips with the oral tradition in the region" (338-339).

trickster-narrator as the teller of her tale; however, in *Lagoon*, this trickster remains relatively invisible until it abruptly breaks through the narrative frame in the novel's final act. Whereas the constant presence of Hopkinson's Eshu keeps the reader formally estranged throughout *Midnight Robber*, in *Lagoon*, the sense of estrangement is delayed until a rupture in narrative form compels readers to reassess their experience thus far. The result is a revised first-contact paradigm, one more suitable for the technological prominence of the 21st century where our first-contact with others is often initially mediated by forms of technology.

Otherwise known as alien invasion stories, first-contact narratives come in variety of forms, but central to the plot of these narratives is an encounter between humans and an alien life form. As Booker and Thomas point out, "narratives involving the invasion of Earth by alien forces from outer space are among the oldest forms of science fiction" (28). Although we can point to examples earlier in history then the end of the nineteenth-century, H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898) established many of the characteristics that would come to shape these narratives. Importantly, Wells's text demonstrated the potential of first contact narratives to offer social commentary and political critique (Brooker and Thomas 28). As Brooker and Thomas explain,

> *The War of the Worlds* was written as British colonial expansion around the globe proceeded at a rapid pace, often leading to the violent destruction of the peoples and cultures being colonized. It is a powerful critique of British colonialism that works through the reversal of asking British readers to view colonialism from the point of view of the colonized, rather than their accustomed position as colonizer. (28)

For Wells, first-contact provided a mechanism for imagining a scenario of reverse-colonialization, a situation where the power of empire was flipped back on itself. Despite this progressive critique of the British colonial project, *War of the Worlds* still depicts the alien's aggression in a negative light, and ultimately allows the British to win the battle, even if by a fluke. Thus, we might read *War of the Worlds* as falling short of its critical potential. Although Wells' text helped inspire a large number first-contact narratives to appear in the early twentieth century, of these, many failed to channel the same sort of social and political critique. In fact, many even served as reinforcement for the practices of the British colonial project (Booker and Thomas 28).

Aside from the thematic emphasis on practices of colonialization, first-contact stories also share similar formal features. According to Brooks Landon, "first-contact stories have always been important to science fiction, in no small part because they explore a fictional novum—the existence of other intelligent life forms in the universe—that many SF writers and readers see as more probability than fiction" (*Science Fiction* 81).[16] The fictional novum—a SF concept that denotes the drastic disruption of "newness" into the realm of the real—is what sets the science fiction world apart frm our own reality. And in first-contact narratives, we typically characterize the primary novum as the introduction of an alien life-form itself.[17] Like other first-

[16] For a full discussion of the SF *novum*, see my introduction.

[17] In one of the few critical readings of Okorafor's *Lagoon*, Hugh Charles O'Connell reads *Lagoon*'s use of the first-contact novum as radical for its transformation into a Badiouan event, or "that which is alien, unknowable, or unlocatable to the ideology of the contemporary world-system" (309). For O'Connell, the novum as event represents the utopian promise of African futurity, a futurity that though impossible to narrate in the present, represents the utopian potential of the futuristic project of African SF. While O'Connell's reading posits this evental transformation of first-contact as the novel's primary intervention, I see Okorafor's engagement with the novum differently. Instead, I suggest that Okorafor's novel makes use of the ubiquity of first-contact in order to create an innovative and genuinely *new* intrusive effect. That is, in my

contact narratives, *Lagoon* imagines how such a life-form would impact the city of Lagos, but it adds to this by exploring how information about the event would travel through the city.[18] By formally estranging readers from the established characteristics of first-contact, Okorafor's text complicates the relationship between first-contact, technology, and human experience. Indeed, in *Lagoon*, Okorafor uses the form of the novel to alter the readers' perception of how they make-contact with *all* the subjects and narratives that they encounter on a daily basis.

At first glance, *Lagoon* follows a fairly typical plot structure for a first contact narrative: it begins, as one would expect, with an alien invasion. In Okorafor's version, the extraterrestrial visitors first contact the *non*-human animals populating the lagoon outside Lagos, Nigeria before shifting their focus to the people living in the city. The novel loosely follows the actions of three protagonists—a marine biologist named Adaora, an army officer named Agu, and a famous musician named Anthony. Strangers prior to the aliens' arrival, these three are brought together when they are abruptly pulled into the lagoon and abducted by the alien ship. Once they are thrown back to shore, they encounter Ayodele, a mysterious, shape-shifting woman who claims to be an ambassador from outer space. As word of the alien invasion begins to spread throughout

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reading there is a secondary novum, apart from that of first-contact, that is particularly effective at estranging SF readers themselves, and this novum is built into the novel's form.

[18] Another critical piece of interest is Esthie Hugo's "Looking forward, looking back: Animating magic, modernity, and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*." Like, O'Connell's emphasis on Okorafor's ability to conceptualize African-futurity within *Lagoon*, Hugo also illuminates the future-oriented potential of *Lagoon.* However, in Hugo's analysis, *Lagoon's* tendency to both speculate on the future while also reaching back to the past situates it as a novel that destabilizes the linear temporalities associated with modernity, offering a form of narration with a truly post-colonial orientation. This, Hugo suggests, is a particular feature of African SF and one that makes it such a useful narrative form for "reversing the temporality of Western modernity" (56).

the city—largely through the use of personal recording devices and individual posts to Youtube—Lagos erupts into chaos and violence.

Lagoon's formal structure disorients readers in multiple ways. Each chapter shifts between different points-of-view and various parts of Lagos, which, to some extent initiates a kind of formal estrangement. But Okorafor takes this estrangement one step further. Indeed, part way through the novel, the narrator breaks through the narrative frame with a series of interjections. The first occurs in a chapter entitled "Narrator's Welcome." Here, the reader is introduced to Udide, "the narrator, the story weaver, the Great Spider" (228). This moment is particularly important because it serves as an explicit announcement that the tale is being mediated by one particular voice, Udide, and that this voice is formally registered within the novel through the use of italics. This chapter makes apparent that this is not the first time the narrator has interrupted the story for littered throughout the opening pages of the novel are scattered phrases or paragraphs written in italics that either directly address the reader or reveal what characters are thinking.

As the novel continues, the narrator momentarily recedes back into the text, only to resurface several chapters later in a much more intrusive fashion. Here, as the three protagonists are conversing in an underwater enclosure, the narrator abruptly enters into the action of the story:

> They saw it all at once.
>
> Adaora screamed.
>
> Anthony whimpered.
>
> Agu began to cry.

> The spider standing above them was the size of a mansion. Rough hair covered its eight endlessly long legs and bulbous body. It—*she,* Adaora instinctively knew—was looking right at them, down at them. With all eight of her intense black eyes. "*Even in the corners of palaces, spiders dwell,"* she said. *"Remember that, if you ever find yourself walking the halls of the great and powerful."*
>
> Then she was gone. (258)

The narrator's earlier appearance alerted the reader to her presence, but here, she enters into the diegetic world of the novel itself, and the characters respond with disorientation. Whereas the previous example simply announced the narrator's presence, this one implies that she is actively shaping the events in the story. That is, not only are readers getting a mediated version of the narration, but the narrator is also participating in its creation. As before, the narrator quickly recedes from view.

The final chapter of *Lagoon* initiates a narrative break so invasive that it forces the reader to re-evaluate the entire reading experience thus far. Here, the narrator resurfaces and officially reveals herself as "Spider the Artist," both the teller and the creator of this tale, but also a historian of the city of Lagos:

> I am the unseen
>
> […]
>
> I am the spider. I see sound. I feel taste. I hear touch.
>
> I spin the story. This is the story I've spun.
>
> I am Udide Okwanka. (290)

This chapter ends with the spider's retreat back into the narrative space only this time *not* as the elusive narrator, but as a participant in the action. She writes: "For the first time since the birth of

Lagos, my glorious city, I will pause in my storytelling, I will leave my web. I become part of the story. I will join my people" (291-292).

We might think about this series of formal gestures in terms of what Graham Sleight calls "breaking the frame." With this concept, Sleight imagines stories "that exist within a clearly defined genre and then break that frame so absolutely that it is impossible to imagine the whole story existing in that genre" (38).[19] Unlike the open-ended conclusion of Hopkinson's novel**,** these types of narratives break with the formal frame at the end of story, leaving the reader uncomfortable, disoriented, and forced to reexamine both the genre itself and the particular story they have just encountered. After the narrator reveals herself as storyteller, author, and historian, this new knowledge sheds light on some of the more peculiar and disorienting aspects of the novel. In other words, the novel's end implores us to *read* Lagoon *again*, this time from a new perspective.

When read through the lens of the novel's end, we must reassess our understanding of Okorafor's alien life-form. Adaora recalls her initial meeting with Ayodele: "She had piercing brown eyes that gave Adaora the same creepy feeling as when she looked at a large black spider. Her mannerisms were too calm, fluid, and…alien" (17). When Ayodele meets with the Nigerian president, she explains, "We *are* technology, Mr. President. And no, we are not easily manipulated" (218). When read with the knowledge of our spider-narrator, these two passages retain a bit more significance. A second reading brings to light the convenient alignment between the networked mechanism of the internet, the aliens' declaration of themselves as masters of

[19] In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* Clute and Langford also refer to this as a "slingshot ending," or one in which the narration is "left incomplete, with the conclusion to be supplied by the reader." Such an ending resists narrative closure and offers the reader a number of possible scenarios from which to choose.

technological change, and the narrator's status as a master weaver of webs. This interweaving or merging of the spider-narrator and alien-technology asks us to re-see the generic structure of the novel. Indeed, what began as an innovative but seemingly commonplace narrative of first contact must be reassessed after the intrusion of the spider-artist. *Lagoon* is a first contact narrative, but it is also a trickster folk tale.

It may be tempting to collapse Okorafor's narrator with Hopkinson's Eshu as both figures of the Anansi storytelling tradition, however, Udide Okwanka and Anansi are two *different* trickster-characters. In *The Trickster in West Africa,* Robert Pelton explains that "all tricksters are foolers and fools, but their foolishness varies; sometimes it is destructive, sometimes creative, sometimes scatological, sometimes satiric, sometimes playful" (16). Because of this, Pelton suggests that instead of "impos[ing] the trickster pattern on any likely candidate," we should aim to understand "the specific creative discovery disclosed by any one instance of the trickster" (16). In other words, rather than compare Okorfor's Udide with Hopkinson's Eshu, we might instead consider Udide within her specific cultural context. In this case, we can look to Okorafor's own work.[20] Well before writing *Lagoon,* Udide began appearing within Okorafor's fiction. In her 2008 short story, "Spider the Artist," Okorafor's protagonist befriends an artificially intelligent robot naming it "Udide Okwanka." As the protagonist explains, "In my language, it means 'spider the artist.' According to legend, Udide Okwanka is the Supreme Artist. And she lives underground where she takes fragments of things and changes them into something else. She can even weave spirits from straw."[21] And in a 2010 interview, Okorafor

[20] Although much has been written about the West African trickster figures of Anansi and Eshu, the only references to the Igbo trickster Udide Okwanka I was able to find come from Okorafor herself.

[21] See "Spider the Artist" published in March 2011 online edition of *Lightspeed Magazine.*

explicitly distinguishes Udide from Anansi, as the "lesser-known but equally formidable Nigerian story-spinning spider" who "possesses the power to gather fragments of any object and shape them into a new object."[22] Udide's status as both a West-African trickster spider and a figure known for the capacity to construct new objects from fragmentary pieces of the old helps to shed light on the creative impulse and importance of Okorafor's *Lagoon.*

With its episodic, perspective shifting formal structure, *Lagoon* reads more like a collection of fragmentary tales than a novel with a cohesive linear structure. In light of what we know about Udide's story-weaving trickster status, we might think about these fragments as working to produce something new. In this case, *Lagoon* offers a new kind of first-contact narrative, one that seeks to represent the various ways in which information travels through society. For example, Ayodele's initial speech to the inhabitants of Nigeria appears in segments over the course of a single, short chapter of the text. And interspliced between each of Ayodele's lines are snapshots of different viewer-listeners as they watch the broadcast over television screens and mobile devices from all across the country. Within the city, listeners tune in from internet cafés, restaurants, and from the Lagos Expressway. The broadcast also extends outside of Lagos, reaching the city of Abuja's open-air market, individual family homes throughout the country, even finding the President, who is recovering from heart surgery in Saudi Arabia. The message is thus sent out across the web to a silent audience and immediately begins to spread throughout the city.

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[22] This interview, "The Big Idea: Nnedi Okorafor," appeared on John Scalzi's well-known SF blog, *Whatever*, on June 17, 2010.

This initial presentation of the speech produces still images of the many people tuned into the broadcast, however, throughout the rest of the novel, Okorafor continues to return to this speech, offering more in-depth information about the immediate and often opposing responses to it by individual viewers. For example, subsequent chapters focus on the individual experiences of the speech by an unnamed, young boy and a prostitute called, Fiasyo. In the case of the former, even though the boy does not have access to a device of his own, he overhears the audio from the devices of those around him. Immediately following the speech, the boy has a feeling of hope and possibility, but this is immediately interrupted by rioting and gunfire all around him (123-127). In contrast, Fiasyo watches the speech on her "cheap mobile phone" in the middle of Bar Beach, and for her, the speech takes on religious connotations—it is the beginning of the end, "the rapture, the apocalypse," and she vows to spread the news to all she encounters (129-133). These individual responses are in stark contrast to the glimpses we get of how groups experience the speech together.

Later in the novel, a series of chapters shift to first-person perspective and provide accounts of how groups of people in different public spaces respond to the broadcast. We view the aftermath of the broadcast within the Testament Cyber Café, from the Lagos Expressway, and from the streets surrounding Bar Beach. While those within the Cyber Café are largely unconcerned and focusing on individual business, the expressway is jammed full of people fleeing the city in panic. And, it is not just human-responses that are chronicled within Okorafor's text. Individual chapters capture the responses of non-human animals (a swordfish, a bat, and a tarantula), and we also get glimpses of spirit-figures not of this world, namely the Masquerade spirit Ijele, a road monster known as the Bone Collector, and Old Scratch himself (198-212). More than just adding another layer of the fantastic to the already genre-estranging

practices of *Lagoon*, these multiple, often competing, and sometimes fantastical accounts of the same event leaves readers with a picture of Ayodele's opening address that has been filtered through the experiences of countless others. In this way, information about the alien invasion is continually mediated through technology.

Throughout the novel, this speech as well as other video clips of Ayodele's interactions with the inhabitants of Lagos continue to reappear throughout the text as they are repeatedly viewed by a variety of characters. As readers, we bear witness to all of the ways in which this and other technologically mediated events impact viewers and listeners as the digital information circulates around the city via the internet. Often, once the message is sent across the web, there is no control as to how it will be received. For instance, early in the novel a video of Ayodele shapeshifting into an old woman goes viral and is watched by a group of teens: "All of them watched the footage, even Fisayo. After it finished, none of them said a word, yet in their minds, they saw plenty. Jacobs saw an end to living with parents who refused to accept him. His sister Fisayo saw all of Lagos in flames. Seven saw infinite possibilities and a people from outer space that could make the world embrace and love everyone. Rome saw the rise of Rome" (75). Here, each person experiences the sight of Ayodele's transformation, but they all *see* something completely different. Each viewer takes the evidence of Ayodele's transformation out of its original context and develops an interpretation of the event. They each develop their own personal narrative of what the alien invasion might mean for the city, however, not a single one of them was actually in the presence of Ayodele at any time. Indeed, none of the people experience the alien invasion first-hand, but they base their understanding on their own individual interpretation of video footage. In this way, Okorafor uses first contact as a mechanism for articulating both the danger and promise of technologically mediated forms of

interaction. It is not just viral information that influences individual interpretations. Okorafor's text also reflects on the way in which stories shape perceptions.

The novel begins as first-contact narrative and ends as trickster tale, but it is also deeply intertextual. It contains countless fragments and allusions to texts from both Nigerian and western science fiction canons of literature. For example, the novel's three-act structure and narrative arch about the effects of imperial invasion recall that of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a connection made explicit through multiple references to the text and one of the main characters of *Lagoon* being named after Achebe's protagonist. The plot of *Lagoon* also recalls moments from many science fictional texts as well. The most invasive narrative presence is that of H.G. Well's *War of the Worlds*, but the novel also makes reference to scenes from texts written by Jules Verne (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*) and George Lucas (*Star Wars*).[23] SF is known for its referencing of a "megatext," but the presence of the referents in Okorafor's novel seem to serve a particular purpose, one apart from simply nodding to SF history. As an example, we might consider that peculiar moment when Adaora witnesses a meeting between the alien-Elders and the president of Nigeria:

> [The president] hung before five humanoid figures that reminded her of something out of *Star Wars.* She frowned. Hadn't she read somewhere that the president loved the *Star Wars* movies? Adaora did too, thought she preferred the earlier films. But she'd watched the later films enough to recognize the aliens she was seeing. All of the creatures she saw now were whitish-blue-skinned, with

[23] There are explicit invocations to the red-vines from *War of the Worlds* and the octopus battle in Jules Verne.

> huge black eyes and long long arms, legs, and necks. They even moved with the same fluid motions as they had in the movies. (251)

This moment is less of a clever allusion to the Kaminoians from *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones* than the actual intrusion of the movie's representation of alien-life into fabric of the narrator's imagination. As Adaora slowly realizes, the aliens do not just mildly resemble the Kaminoians, in terms of physical make-up, they *are* the Kaminoians.[24] When this is read a second time with the knowledge of our narrator as artist, the reader also arrives at the same realization. This is just one of the many textual fragments that Udide brings together to create something new. In this case, the inclusion of Lucas' now inescapable depiction of the Kaminoians also offers commentary on the way that stories shape our perceptions. Such an example demonstrates the way stories travel cross-culturally and influence the way we perceive that which is outside of our intimately known experience.

In *Lagoon*, Okorafor combines two different storytelling practices in order to create something new. By focusing on *Lagoon*'s formal structure, and reading it from the end, we can begin to see that in merging a trickster-narrative framework with that of the SF sub-genre of first-contact, Okorafor takes the reverse colonialization formula and repositions it within an alternative cultural history, context, and narrative structure. In doing so, Okorafor estranges readers from the genre itself while at the same time offering a revisionary update. In Okorafor's hands, first-contact offers a way to foreground how even our most immediate interactions are always already mediated through technological, cultural, and sometimes even generic lens. By exposing the ways in which stories about others are produced and consumed within

[24] The Kaminoians are an alien race first introduced in *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones*. They live on the ocean-planet of Kamino and are responsible for assembling the clone army that will be used throughout the rebooted *Star Wars* prequel series.

contemporary society, *Lagoon* demonstrates the danger and promise of how quickly (mis)information can spread throughout the world.

In the preface to *So Long Been Dreaming*, the first published anthology of "postcolonial science fiction," Nalo Hopkinson identifies the importance of a decidedly *postcolonial* science fictional aesthetic for both its subversive and revolutionary potential. These stories, she explains, "take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things" (9). Hopkinson's vision of a version of SF that both revises the devastating history of imperialist projects and imagines future histories seems to capture the hopeful possibility inherent within both her own and Nnedi Okorafor's revisionary SF. While both authors use their fiction to imagine alternative visions of the future, they also remain deeply rooted in cultural traditions of the past and present. In this way, they offer science fictional worlds that are at once deeply familiar and radically estranged.

Chapter 2
Towards a Time-Travel Aesthetic

> --"I have already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling..."
> ~H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

In this chapter, I read Octavia Butler's *Kindred* alongside Kevin Baldeosingh's *The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar* and Vandana Singh's "Delhi" to show how these authors use the time-traveler's movement between time and place to estrange contemporary readers from familiar reference points and force them to confront the way that hegemonic systems such as American slavery, European imperialism, and global capitalism have had rippling effects that extend across centuries and impact national spaces in different ways. In these texts, time-travel is variously marked as a physical malady, a mental illness, or a special power; and in all cases, the time-traveler's movement is involuntary and unwanted. Moreover, time-travel is encoded within the respective narratives' form. That is, it is not simply the content or plot of the story that creates a time-travel narrative, but it is the way that the story is told.[1] Thus, this chapter argues that when theorized as an aesthetic practice as opposed to a technological innovation, time-travel becomes a mode of narration that captures both a method for thinking temporality in the present, and an aesthetic that resists or complicates hegemonic narratives of experience.

I begin by briefly turning to Vandana Singh's unconventional time-travel story because of the way it foregrounds the type of thinking time-travel fiction makes possible. "Delhi" follows

[1] It is important to note in passing that when I talk about reading form, I'm talking about a more explicit consideration of how that content is delivered to the reader—visually, chronologically, typographically—and what that particular mode of delivery does to the narrative itself.

a wandering protagonist, Aseem, through the city as he tries to understand and cope with a peculiar malady: an involuntary propensity for seeing apparitions. When Aseem was younger he thought the apparitions were "ghosts of the dead" or hallucinations, but now, "he has a theory that his visions are tricks of time, tangles produced when one part of the time stream rubs up against another and the two cross for a moment" (20). He is convinced that his "brain is wired differently from others, enabling him to discern these temporal coincidences" (20). Far from a symptom of insanity, Aseem's visions function as a form of enlightenment: they offer him glimpses of the past and visions of the future, the ability to look across time and into far off historical epochs. With this special power, Aseem is a time-traveler, even if an unconventional one.

Although Aseem never physically leaves the city of Delhi, his temporal visions dislocate him from his present and allow him to see history from a different perspective. Indeed, while his visions often leave him confused or disoriented, this disorientation leads to insight. Put differently, Aseem is temporally *estranged*, or momentarily placed in a cognitive space where the city of Delhi is at once familiar and unfamiliar, new and old, the same but different. And it is this estrangement that enables him to become a critical observer of the past, present, and future. The visions offer him an extended view of history: glimpses of Delhi that stretch as far back as the medieval period and extend forward to some unknown future city with jeweled towers and flying ships. Unfortunately, these visions tell him that there are aspects of the future that "he'd rather not think about" (33). Superimposed upon his present, the visions leave Aseem in a state of critical discernment, deeply concerned about the terrible visions of inequality that he believes to be images of the future. "It is a terrible future," he reflects, "there is a city below the city

where the poor live" (34). He vows that "one day...he will write a history of the future" (23). Such a history, we might speculate, will take the formal shape of a time-travel narrative.

Like Aseem, whose "brain is wired differently from others," time-travel fiction also participates in a sort of "rewiring" enterprise (20). As a plot device, time-travel dislocates fictional characters from a particular historical context, creating a figure capable of exploring temporal registers beyond the scope of a single human lifespan. But, as a formal mechanism of storytelling, time-travel becomes an aesthetic practice conducive for charting the historical and global impact of systemic structures over long periods of time. This form of narration also facilitates a particular mode of thinking: rather than being bound to linear or totalizing frameworks, time-travel narratives employ a method of storytelling that makes it possible to convey multiple and sometimes simultaneous narratives of experience, even when they stretch across time and space.

Time-travel, world literary studies, and formal estrangement

Central to my reading of a time-travel aesthetic is the concept of formal estrangement. In time-travel narratives, we *could* categorize a story's method of estrangement solely based on the existence of a time-machine; however, such attention tends to foreground time-travel as a fundamental aspect of content. What if we instead paid more attention to form? We might, like Veronica Hollinger, see time-travel as a way for authors to reinterpret time into a structure of space. For Hollinger, the time travel narrative is itself a deconstruction of human interpretations of time, and H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* offers its own deconstruction of Victorian era scientific positivism. Through her reading of Wells, she suggests that "to write about time travel is always already to have performed a reading; that is, it requires that the writer has first interpreted time in

order to structure it as space" ("Deconstructing the Time Machine" 205). Rather than foreground a spatial model, however, I wonder if we might instead consider how *time* translates into literary form? In other words, if the act of writing is itself an act of time travel, how do authors encode that experience *formally*? And more importantly, what is the result?

Much of the critical work on time-travel focuses on hard-SF, or on those texts that attempt to use SF to extrapolate from, or explore within narrative, theories of relativity and other scientific concepts related to time travel.[2] These scientifically-motivated time-travel stories explore commonplace generic conventions such as time loops and time paradoxes, or use time-travel as a mechanism for imagining alternate histories. Constance Penley offers a helpful distinction, explaining that a time-loop paradox is one where "cause and effect are not only reversed but put into a circle: the later events are caused by the earlier events and the earlier by the later" (71). [3] In contrast, alternate histories focus around the idea of going back in time in order to act in the past and change the future. [4]

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[2] Here, "Hard SF" refers to works of SF that are based on established principles of science and/or use the SF genre to extrapolate from scientifically proven ideas or concepts. As the SF-encyclopedia explains: "While a rigorous definition of 'hard sf' may be impossible, perhaps the most important thing about it is, not that it should include real science in any great details, but that it should respect the scientific spirit; it should seek to provide natural rather than supernatural or transcendental explanations for the events and phenomena it describes" (Nicholls). While much discussion of time-travel focuses on this type of SF, we might also consider works of time-travel fiction that are motivated by historical or social concerns rather than driven by science.

[3] This type of time-travel story is also sometimes called the "Boot-straps paradox" after Robert Heinlein's well-known short story "By the Bootstraps." For a detailed discussion of the different structures for time paradox stories, see Burling, "Reading time: the ideology of time travel in science fiction" and Slusser and Chatelain, "Spacetime Geometries: Time Travel and the Modern Geometrical Narrative."

[4] Quite a bit of scholarship has been written on time-travel and film. For these discussions see Penley, "Time travel, primal scene, and the critical dystopia,", Sobchack, *Screening Space*, and Landon, *Aesthetics of Ambivalence*. For more on alternate history, or what she terms the

Unlike the criticism which focuses on these examples of hard-SF, I'm less interested in the philosophical or scientific underpinnings of time-travel than in the type of thinking that time-travel makes possible. Thus, my reading builds upon David Wittenberg's study of time-travel and narratology: *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (2013). Here, Wittenberg proposes that we reconsider our conception of time-travel as not simply a minor subgenre of popular fiction, but instead, as a form of literary expression that is fundamental to our understanding of literature itself. As he points out, "since all narratives do something like 'travel through time or construct 'alternate' worlds'—one could arguably call narrative itself a 'time machine,' which is to say, a mechanism for revising the arrangements of stories and histories" (1). In other words, studying time-travel is akin to studying narrative itself. Time-travel makes the temporal estrangement embedded within the reading process visible and renders explicit how narrative can provide insight into our critical interpretations and conceptualizations of history.

For Wittenberg, time travel fiction is unique because it functions as a "narratological laboratory," a literary form where "many of the most basic theoretical questions about storytelling…are represented in the form of literal devices and plots, at once both convenient for criticism and fruitfully complex" (64). Because of this, his analysis intervenes in discussions related to narratological method and philosophy. Moreover, he relies on a corpus of American and British time-travel narratives that tend to fall neatly into the more scientifically motivated category of hard-SF. As a result, Wittenberg's method tends to privilege content over form. However, focusing on other of modes of time-travel fiction allows for analysis of literature from

"undoing" plot, see Catherine Gallagher's "Undoing" in *Time and The Literary.* Also important to note is Elena Gomel's *Postmodern Science Fiction and the Temporal Imagination*. Here, Gomel theorizes the concept of a "timeshape" as a way to conceptualize the various ways that texts attempt to capture experiences of time in narrative.

different cultural and historical backgrounds alongside one another. Much like time-travel itself, this chapter suggests an approach to literature that allows for comparisons across time, genre, and nation.

Taking for granted Wittenberg's foundational conceptualization of time-travel as narrative, my analysis moves the discussion away from hard-SF and towards SF written by Anglophone authors from around the world.[5] For this global approach, I draw from the field of world literary studies, specifically from those theorists attempting to circumvent the familiar divide between world and national literatures. Rather than think of time-travel fiction as only a sub-genre of SF, it is possible to consider these stories as travel narratives in their own right. Indeed, these texts are filled with various mechanisms of movement: between different times, places, and literary forms. And it is through this movement that science-fictional estrangement becomes a mechanism of both the content *and* form of the narrative. Thus, critical attention to movement illuminates the way that formal estrangement functions within time-travel fiction. For this reason, I turn specifically to the Ottmar Ette's concept of "Literatures without a fixed abode." In his theorization of this particular literary phenomenon in *Writing-between-Worlds*, Ette offers a "poetics of movement," which helps to establish more precise terminology for discussing the dynamic mobility represented in late twentieth and early twenty-first century literary production.

[5] One of the few critical works that takes on a similar corpus of texts is Rudyard Alcocer's *Time Travel in the Latin American and Caribbean Imagination*. Here, Alcocer considers fiction that either creates imaginative representations of the hemisphereic Americans or is written from the perspective of an author whose cultural roots link them back to the aforementioned constructions of individual self-identity. For Alcocer, "fictional time travel within Latin American and Caribbean contexts is motivated largely *because* of a lack or a perceived lack of practical, political agency in the present day" so his analysis focuses on time travel fiction that imagines alternative histories (xiv, emphasis original).

Before turning to the narratives themselves, it is important to first situate Ette's work within the larger field of world literary studies. David Damrosch's 2003 address to the field, *What is World Literature?* captures perhaps the single most common line of inquiry within discussions of world literature since Goethe first announced its arrival. Despite the introspective nature of his title, Damrosch is quick to offer a very particular understanding of the parameters of the field: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language…In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base" (4). For Damrosch, world literature describes networks of relation: literary works that travel across borders, appear in different languages, and have cultural impact outside a single national audience. This view of world literature as focused on exchange is often seen as synonymous with the field of world literature; however, the discourse within the field of world literary studies is much more diverse.

One such alternative is offered by Ottmar Ette's *Writing-between-Worlds.* Rather than conceptualize world literature in relation to patterns of exchange, Ette abandons the familiar divide between world and national literatures altogether in favor of an alternative paradigm, a literary phenomenon he calls "Literatures without a fixed Abode." Developing out of a "dialectics of homelessness" that was first theorized by literary scholars in exile during the mid-twentieth century, Ette's Literatures without a fixed Abode describes a global literature that does not easily fit within familiar frameworks of national or world literature.[6] According to Ette, the emergence of this literary phenomenon can be mapped on to a progressive literary-historical

[6] Here, Ette builds off both the seminal work on realism and the novel by Erich Auerbach (*Mimesis)* and the historical account of the novel form by Georg Lukács (*The Historical Novel)*.

narrative of globalization, specifically corresponding to globalization's fourth phase of development (27). According to Ette, this fourth phase is "characterized by the increasing globalization of the financial markets, the construction of new, planetary communication systems in real time, and the relinquishment of binary, ideologically motivated bloc systems" (26). And this phrase is accompanied by the emergence of a literary aesthetic that gains its strength "not in the attachment to a certain place but in movement" (83). As he explains, "the point, then, is not to deploy a (territorializable) counter-concept to the idea of national literature but, rather, to account for the geocultural and biopolitical changes, and for the literary-aesthetic developments that accompany those changes" (8). Thus, by developing a more robust understanding of the patterns of motion characteristic to our current moment, Ette provides new "terminology for [studying] movement, dynamics, and mobility" (31). This poetics of movement offers an alternative analytical method for studying the literature of the present, one that combats the universalizing impulse of world literature while simultaneously circumventing the exclusionary tendency of national literary frameworks (9).

In short, Ette's "poetics of movement" enables a more nuanced vocabulary for studying contemporary literature and for discussing time-travel fiction in particular. By differentiating between prefixes of multi-, inter-, and trans- when analyzing cultural, linguistic, spatial, temporal, or media interfaces, Ette's poetics allows for analysis of global literatures engagement with simultaneous movement across a variety of boundaries. Such a poetics creates a vocabulary for describing the type of "transtemporal" and in some cases "transcultural" thinking that time travel narratives make possible. Ette's framework distinguishes between the "side-by-side-ness of different cultures that reside, say in different urban spaces (neighborhoods or districts)" and the "living-with-one-another" that "define encounters of all sorts among the members of cultures

who interact with one another without questioning that they belong to a given culture or cultural group" (33). While the former exchanges can be considered *multi*cultural and the latter *inter*cultural, a third level, the *trans*cultural, "encompasses movement and practices that cross very different cultures: that is, people oscillate between cultures" (33).

While these prefixes are useful for drawing distinctions between cultural exchange, they can also be applied to movement between different languages, geographic spaces, literary forms, and most importantly for this chapter, registers of time. As Ette explains:

> If *multi-temporal* processes concern themselves with the side-by-side-ness of different temporal levels that exist independently of each other, then *inter-temporal* processes define the ongoing communication among different temporal dimensions that neither blend nor fuse. In keeping with this, *transtemporal* processes or structures refer to a ceaseless crisscrossing of different temporal dimensions. Such movement creates a highly unusual kind of temporality whose transtemporal nature brings to the fore specific transcultural and trans-lingual phenomena. (34, emphasis original)

Because time travel narratives produce confrontations between multiple, simultaneous, and often intersecting timelines, Ette's taxonomic characterizations help to distinguish exactly how those timelines interact with one another. For example, we might consider H.G. Well's well-known time-travel story, *The Time Machine,* as charting an *multi*-temporal relationship between the "Time-Traveller" and those civilizations he meets in the future. Well's protagonist interacts with and learns about the Eloi and the Morelocks, but he never actually succeeds in meaningful communication. Moreover, the novel's resolution, the scientist's failure to return to the present,

forecloses any future interaction between the present and the future. These timelines exist side-by-side, but independently of one another, without any generative interaction. The novel ends in the present, with no way to access the information gathered from the alternative, future temporality. In contrast, in a less-conventional work like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, the protagonist's encounter with the alternative utopian temporality might be categorized as *inter*-temporal: the two temporalities live-with-one-another, in constant communication via Bellamy's unusual man from the past. By waking up in the future and immediately beginning to generate comparisons between his new present and his old past, Bellamy's narrator uses such comparisons to diagnosis social issues within each temporality. So, while these two timelines inform one another, they never explicitly blend or fuse together. Here again, the novel's ending actually never resolves the dilemma of how to account for the narrator's presence in the future. He exists as an anomaly, a refugee from another time.

Ette's framework opens up new ways for us to analyze and interpret all kinds of time-travel fiction, but I am most interested in expanding upon his theorization of *trans*temporal processes and structures. In this analysis then, I consider time-travel narratives that use movement-between-time to elicit formal estrangement, a process that ultimately creates *trans*temporal awareness. In part one, I contextualize Butler's well-known time-travel novel, *Kindred* (1979), within a longer history of time travel fiction.[7] This reading highlights Butler's use of movement between the present and the past to trouble the distinction between these two seemingly disparate temporalities, creating a time-travel narrative attuned to the form's historical

[7] The archival material I draw from in this chapter comes from the Huntington Library's "Octavia E. Butler Collection." The citation information for these archival materials will be footnoted from here forward. The copyright for this information is owned by the Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

as opposed to scientific imaginative capabilities**.** In part two, I turn to Kevin Baldeosingh's *The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar* (2004) to demonstrate how the text creates a similar sense of transtemporal awareness, even when the narrative's content is less explicitly driven by the SF sub-genre of time-travel. Although Baldeosingh's work exists outside the conventional generic frame of time-travel, his narrative approach produces a similar aesthetic effect. Thus, my analysis of this less conventional time-travel story, allows me to begin conceptualizing of a time-travel aesthetic.

Early figurations of time-travel

Any discussion of time-travel fiction undoubtedly begins with a consideration of H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* (1895). While successful in its own historical moment, Well's story gained renewed attention when Hugo Gernsback chose to reprint it within in the May 1927 issue of *Amazing Stories.* Gernsback's introduction to that issue included a discussion of the importance of "good science" to those stories published in the pulp magazine. In Gernsback's opinion, if an SF story employed a technological innovation that was too far-fetched, then it did not belong within the genre of what he then termed "scientification." Under this logic, the machine was what tied the concept of time-travel to scientific plausibility and Einsteinian theories of relativity. Thus, Gernsback's reprinting of Wells' time-travel story helped to reignite an interest in stories about traveling through time, and as a result, the two earliest phases of time-travel fiction paid much attention to the time machine itself.[8] Indeed, the idea of developing a

[8] Despite Wittenburg's focus on hard-SF, his theorization of three distinct phases of time-travel fiction is useful for thinking about how time-travel functions in the last few decades of the 20th-century. Wittenburg's three phases correspond to significant scientific/technological innovations with each marked by distinct literary conventions. The first phase encompasses much of the late-19th and early 20th century time travel fiction that was informed by Darwinian science. This

technology to manipulate time and space quickly captured the imagination of fiction writers and scientists alike.[9] It is no surprise then that much of the time-travel fiction that appeared in the pulp-magazines throughout the 1940s and 50s adhered to Gernsback's strict definition. However, not all time-travel stories can be categorized within these constraints.

Even before Wells invented the mechanical device that allowed his scientist to travel to the far-future, utopian writers of the Victorian period were also creating scenarios for their protagonists to visit future civilizations.[10] In an 1881 issue of *The Sun*, Edward Page Mitchell anonymously published, "The Clock That Went Backwards," a short story that imagined travel through time *without* the help of a machine.[11] Although it is unlikely that Wells was aware of its existence when writing *The Time Machine*, the two texts provide an interesting point of comparison.[12] Whereas Well's novel was influential for its melding of scientific developments with literary techniques, Mitchell's earlier story was much more attentive to how time travel might impact the conceptual understanding of historical events. Moreover, because it was driven

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phase includes evolutionary time-travel fiction with Bellamy-esque utopian fiction occupying a prominent place. In these stories, travelers are transported into the future and their movement through time functions to reinforce an evolutionary understanding of progress. Beginning in the 1920s, the second phase of time-travel fiction is marked by developments in theories of relativity. As such, the signature narrative structure of this phrase is that of the "paradox story." Finally, the third and current phase follows developments in multi-verse and multiple world theories (82).

[9] For more on this see Paul Nahin's *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction*.

[10] See Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, (1890) and William Henry Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887).

[11] For more on this see Clifford A. Pickover's *Time: A Traveler's Guide*.

[12] Pickover xiv.

by technological innovation and scientific reasoning, Wells' time-travel story would later be labeled "science fiction," while Mitchell's story, containing only a broken clock, would not be worthy of such a label.

This juxtaposition between the scientifically-motivated version of time-travel in Wells and the historically-inflected style of Mitchell demonstrates the stakes of reading time-travel from the perspective of formal estrangement. By shifting the focus away from the machine itself, we can begin to see the affordances that time-travel provides as a storytelling device. In other words, if we move from *content* to *form*, we can begin to ask what time travel as a *form of narration* does when it is not trying to extrapolate from any scientific concept of relativity. Moreover, in contrast to *The Time Machine*, Mitchell's text was not widely read until it was rediscovered and reprinted by Doubleday in 1973.[13] By reading Mitchell's narrative alongside Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred,* I will offer an alternative interpretation of Butler's well-known and peculiar ending. Such a reading sheds light on Butler's own interest in the time-travel form and highlights the importance of her visionary update to the sub-genre of time-travel fiction.

Reconsidering Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* remains one of the most influential works of non-machine oriented time-travel fiction that was produced in the late-twentieth century. In brief, *Kindred* tells the story of Dana, a struggling fiction writer whose life is turned up-side-down when she unexpectedly disappears from her California home in 1976 and reappears outside a Maryland

[13] Mitchell's time-travel story was printed in *The Crystal Man,* a collection edited by Sam Moskowtiz, which brought together several of Edward Page Mitchell's short stories. All of these stories were originally published anonymously in the New York daily newspaper, *The Sun,* in the late nineteenth century.

plantation in the year 1815. Over the course of the next several weeks, Dana continues to involuntarily travel back-and-forth in time, experiencing the harsh reality of American slavery from a first-person point-of-view. Throughout the novel, Butler draws extensively from other literary works: namely, the 19th century slave narrative tradition *and* early examples of time travel fiction. In the process, she crafts a novel that incorporates the content of a slave narrative within the formal logic of the time travel story. Indeed, *Kindred* is *both* a novel about emancipation from slavery, *and* one of Dana's struggle to free herself from the paradox of time-travel. What drives the plot is Dana's struggle to end this involuntary time travel, to remain firmly planted within the present. And what drives the novel's *form* are the generic characteristics of both the slave narrative and the time travel story.

In considering *Kindred*'s explicit ties to the SF sub-genre of time travel, we can begin to see the way that Butler harnesses the potential of both literary genres. Indeed, while much has been written about Butler's invocation of the slave narrative in *Kindred,* less attention has been paid to her use of the formal characteristics of time-travel fiction.[14] This is surprising given Butler's own interest in the time-travel form. In drafts notes for a 1986 speech titled "Why I wrote Kindred," it becomes clear how Butler was attempting to imagine a version of time-travel that was unique. Rather than use the trope to explore some far-off future or visit an exciting moment from the past, Butler's version takes readers to a time they would rather forget. But combining the time travel story with a slave narrative proved to be an arduous task. In the same

[14] For discussion of the relationship between *Kindred* and the nineteenth century slave narrative tradition see: N. Flagel's "'It's Almost Like Being There': Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Sandra Goven's "Homage to Tradition; Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel," and Sherryl Vint's "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives," among others.

essay, Butler reflects on how difficult the writing of the novel turned out to be. It was not simply the research that Butler wished to avoid, but the thought of *becoming* her main character, of traveling back in time to the days of American slavery.[15] This struggle suggests what a mechanism such as time-travel makes possible. In Butler's version, it is not simply that time-travel enables her to explore two histories as once, or what Ette would refer to as the side-by-side-ness of a multi-temporal process. In Butler's hands, time-travel enables a *trans*temporal narrative creation, one where continuous movement between different temporal dimensions actually creates a new temporal experience, a temporality where the past and the present begin to merge, informing, changing, and directly impacting one another. The risk with writing (or reading) *Kindred* is that in moving between the past and the present, the novel challenges singular interpretations of those competing temporalities. For Dana, her trips to nineteenth-century Maryland challenge her prior understanding of the Antebellum South while simultaneously forcing her to reconsider her own family history. Ultimately, movement between these two temporalities is what creates new knowledge and understanding about the present.

It is not surprisingly then, that Butler turned to time-travel as a formal mechanism useful for initiating movement across time and place. Choosing a version of time-travel that fit her critical project did not prove easy. From 1974 to its eventual publication in 1979, Butler's conception of *Kindred* continually changed shape, but her interest in time-travel remained constant.[16] In one of the early draft versions titled "Canaan," time-travel is foregrounded through

[15] Octavia E. Butler, "Why did I write Kindred?:" speech: draft, 1986, OEB 2927, Octavia E. Butler Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. © The Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

[16] Octavia E. Butler, "Canaan: Novel": notes and fragments. 1975, OEB 274 Octavia E. Butler Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. © The Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

the use of a technological gadget that both facilitates the protagonist's travel through time and marks his location for those monitoring his temporal location.[17] And in later drafts, Butler continued to explore the possibilities of technological time-travel, brainstorming scenarios where time machines have become as common as spacecraft, where time-travel is used as a mechanism for revenge, and where photographing the inventor of a time machine inadvertently activates the machine's capabilities. As these ideas continued to evolve, the novel changed titles several times, the protagonist switched from male to female, and the time-travel moved from a technologically initiated phenomenon to one that was both involuntary and mysteriously provoked.

By the time Butler had arrived at *Kindred*, she had developed a version of time-travel that was her own. Unlike other common time-travel stories, Dana's trips to the past are not caused by experimentations with a time machine, nor are they motivated by her desire to visit a time different from her own. Instead, Dana experiences time-travel as an unexpected onslaught of nausea and disorientation, a sickness that she neither wants nor can control. The novel's central conceit is Dana's paradoxical dilemma of whether to kill her great-grandfather to prevent his growing up to become a slave master like his father or to preserve his life and in the process to preserve her own. Indeed, Dana concludes: "If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (29). Thus, if we look beyond the centrality of the slave narrative to *Kindred*'s thematic content, then we can identify that the novel's formal logic follows that of a paradoxical time-loop, often referred to as the "grandfather paradox."[18] Whereas common renderings of the grandfather paradox follow protagonists who choose to travel back in time for

[17] Octavia E. Butler, "Canaan: novel": draft. ca. 1975, OEB 275 Octavia E. Butler Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. © The Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

[18] See Footnote 3 for more on the literary structures of the time paradox.

entertainment or to attempt to alter the past, Dana is involuntarily forced to travel through time.[19] She is thrown into a paradoxical time-loop that she cannot escape and is thus trapped within the time-travel narrative itself. While the many characters on the Weylin plantation remain trapped within the system of slavery, Dana herself is caught in a perpetual time-loop. The only way she can be set free is to break the rules of time-travel: that is, to confront the paradox without changing the past.

By attending to the novel's explicit invocation of time-travel, we can begin to trace similarities and differences between Butler's version of time-travel and those better-known models that came before. One important intertext to *Kindred* is H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine,* but I am also interested in thinking about the similarities between Butler's vision of time-travel and that of Edward Page Mitchell. By reading these particular narratives alongside the content and structure of *Kindred,* it becomes clear that with *Kindred*, Butler offers a revision to the time-travel form itself. Indeed, rather than end the story with the main protagonist perpetually trapped within a repeating time-loop or with her characters returning to discover the rippling side-effects of a change they made to the past, Butler's revision exposes the revolutionary potential of time-travel fiction, a potential that demands readers to confront both the past *and* the present through a more critical lens. Like Mitchell, Butler's *Kindred* uses time-travel to expose the connections between the present and the past, while also asking readers to consider what debt they owe to their ancestral forebearers. In this way, Butler's version highlights the historical rather than the scientific possibilities of time-travel fiction.

[19] In the former category, we might consider Bradbury's well-known "The Sound of Thunder," or Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore's "Vintage Season" as just two of the most well-known examples. For the latter, an example could be the entire sub-genre of alternate history narratives centered on a protagonist's attempts to go back-in-time to kill Adolf Hitler.

Recalling the formal structure of Wells' *Time Machine*, *Kindred's* storyline is organized through a series of complicated narrative frames. The outer frame of both novels situates the reader in the present, and the inner frame follows the protagonists as they travel to alternative temporal spaces. While Wells' traveler goes to the future, Butler's goes to the past. In *Kindred*, the outer frame consists of a "prologue" and an "epilogue," which explicitly locates the reader in time. However, rather than offer a narration of events that *precede* the action of the novel, the prologue places the reader in a particular present—Los Angeles in 1976—in a moment *after* the narration of the events that will follow. Thus, the prologue establishes the relationship between itself and the story as not the causal relationship that we would expect (not before, but after), immediately estranging the reader from a progressive narrative that moves from past to present to future. This organization sets up the inner narrative as one that will give meaning to the outer frame. Put differently, the formal frame suggests that the aim of Dana's story is not to shed light on the past, but rather, to help us understand the present.

Movement between these various frames elicits estrangement to a variety of effect. In one sense, the narrative oscillates between two very different temporal registers: Los Angeles of the present and antebellum Maryland. Although only absent from the present for seconds, minutes, or hours at a time, Dana struggles to survive days, weeks, and sometimes months in the antebellum south. So, while time in the present seems to be slowing down, time in the past is accelerated. On her fourth trip back to the present, Dana reflects on her experiences while listening to a news program on the radio:

> I had been away for only a few hours. Kevin had been away for eight days. Nineteen seventy-six had not gone on without us.

> The news switched to a story about South Africa—blacks rioting there and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government. (196)

In this passage, Dana and Kevin return from their traumatic encounter with America's troubled past, only to realize that the time they left is much the same as they found it. The difference is that their view of present events looks slightly different now. As Dana puts it, "South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth…They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. Tom Weylin would have felt right at home." (196). Here, turning the radio on does not reorient Dana to the present, but instead, it brings the two temporal registers together. Thus, movement between the past and the present forces Dana to acknowledge the similarities between the two.

This critical project is furthered through the series of flashbacks that begin several chapters of the novel. These flashbacks provide insight into the early years of Dana and Kevin's relationship, demonstrating the struggles they have faced as an interracial couple. From a co-worker who would routinely ask them if they were going to write "chocolate and vanilla porn" together to Kevin's sister who threatened to disown him if he married a black woman and Dana's aunt and uncle who were only ok with the marriage because they would produce "light-skinned" children, each flashback reveals ever-present racial tension within the seemingly progressive space of contemporary Los Angeles (56; 111). In all of these instances, the flashbacks draw connections between the two temporal registers, revealing deeply embedded forms of systemic racism that continue to exist within Dana's present.

The movement between the past and the present also causes physical disorientation for the characters in the novel. Each time that Dana returns back to the present, it seems more and more unfamiliar. As Dana explains: "Today and yesterday didn't mesh I felt almost as strange as I had after my first trip back to Rufus—caught between his home and mine" (115). As the novel progresses, her place within the Weylin plantation continues to become more real:

> I could recall walking along the narrow dirt road that ran past the Weylin house and seeing the house, shadowy in twilight, boxy and familiar, yellow lights glowing from one of the windows…I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home" (190).

Like Aseem, of Vandana Singh's "Delhi," Dana becomes critically estranged from her own present and is thus forced to inhabit an alternative temporal scope. By her fourth time traveling to the past, she reflects: "I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time" (191). While this experience provokes a critical discernment of the present, it also changes the way she thinks about the past. What is most surprising to Dana in this passage is her ability to feel comfort within the antebellum south; that as a slave, she could feel "relief" at seeing a plantation, and even feel at home in such a place. This experience helps her to understand a bit more about how her ancestors were able to survive such a traumatic period of American history.

Finally, Dana's final return to the present is worth exploring at length. This experience is captured within the prologue and epilogue to the novel. The opening scene of *Kindred* is one of the most widely discussed aspects of Butler's novel, but it is not usually read within the context of other works of time-travel fiction. Doing so elucidates Butler's own intervention within the

genre. The novel begins with Dana's matter of fact declaration of a physical trauma: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (1). We must read the entirety of Dana's tale before we can fully understand the cause of this physical trauma. On her return, Dana's arm painfully becomes one with the wall of her living room. As she explains:

> From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped.
>
> I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard.
>
> And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed. (261)

For those attentive to a longer history of time-travel fiction, this ending might appear slightly familiar. Indeed, reading Butler's ending alongside Mitchell's "The Clock That Went Backwards," offers us a new way to think about Butler's revisionary project.

In brief, Mitchell's story follows two young boys who are mysteriously transported back to the 16th century Dutch city of Leyden, right in the middle of a besiegement by the Spanish. Prior to their miraculous time-travel (the travel is never explained) the boys' professor tells them: "History records the explosion of the mine under the city wall on the last night of the siege; it does not tell the story of the defense or give the defender's name. Yet no man that ever lived had a more tremendous charge than fate entrusted to this unknown hero" (454). Thus, when they later find themselves as spectators to the historical breach of the city wall, the boys become witness to an event that was hitherto unaccounted for in the history books. Moreover, this event also serves to preserve the each of the boy's own future survival. "We owe to him our presence here today," their professor tells them, "Nay, you owe to him your very existence" (454). Here, the boys find

themselves in a situational paradox similar to Dana's. While this paradoxical condition occurs regularly in time-travel tales, in this version, the main protagonist's return to the present resonates with Butler's version in *Kindred*. Mitchell's narrator recalls his last few moments within the past as well as his transportation to the present:

> The Spaniards, who had overthrown the wall of brick and stone, found the living wall impregnable. They could not even maintain their position in the moat; they were driven off into the darkness. Now I felt a sharp pain in my left arm. Some stray missile must have hit me while we watched the fight.
>
> [...]
>
> I was becoming dizzy. The faces around me seemed unreal…'Harry!' I said, 'come back to our rooms.' But though he grasped my hand warmly his other hand still held that of the girl, and he did not move. Then nausea overcame me. My head swam, and the breach and its defenders faded from sight. (458)

Recalling Butler's own beginning, the superficial similarities are explicitly apparent: Mitchell's narrator also experiences time-travel as an onslaught of "dizz[iness]," disorientation, and "nausea." And, both he and Dana fail to escape from the past unscathed, each injuring their left arm while traveling. However, through a closer look at Dana's return to present, we can begin to see a repetition with a difference. She recalls her peculiar return to the present in detail:

> Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving.

> Something…paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped. (261)

Both accounts feature a clash between the human and the domestic. In Mitchell's version, the time-traveler witnesses his ancestors save the city of Leyden through the creation of a "living wall." Such a wall proves "impregnable" to the advancing Spaniards and thus serves to preserve the future of the nation and ultimately the narrator's existence. In contrast, Butler's reinterpretation features the time-traveler not as a witness to the preservation of history, but as intimately entangled within it. As she recalls: "I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it" (261). While Mitchell's narrator bears witness to the forming of a living wall to preserve his ancestral history, Dana *becomes* part of "something cold and nonliving" and finds herself painfully attached to her living room wall. The implications of these differences become clearer as each story comes to a close.

Each narrative goes on to provide one final glimpse of a moment *after* the time-travel adventures have ceased, and ultimately, while Mitchell's ending leaves us with a question, Butler's provides an answer. "Three days later," recalls Mitchell's narrator, "I sat with one arm bandaged in my accustomed seat in Van Stopp's lecture room. The place beside me was vacant" (459). Still grieving for the loss of his traveling partner, the narrator is posed a question by his professor:

> We hear much [...] of the influence of the sixteenth century upon the nineteenth. No philosopher, as far as I am aware, has studied the influence of the nineteenth century upon the sixteenth [...] Does the descendant owe everything to the ancestor, and the ancestor nothing to the descendant? (459)

With Mitchell's version in mind, Dana's final trip to the present takes on new meaning. In both stories, the protagonist must live on, their ancestors lost to the perils of history. However, for Mitchell's narrator, the wounds of history will heal. Despite the loss of one, his other ancestors will go on to defend the breach and thus establish power and control for generations to come. But in *Kindred,* the narrator's wound is permanent. Whereas Mitchell's narrator is bound to forget, Dana's missing arm serves as a constant reminder of her loss. Moreover, she loses the record of her entire family line. Indeed, Dana finally lands firmly within her own present on July 4, 1976, the bicentennial celebration of American independence. The irony is quite telling. While parades of people participated in celebratory events to honor America's bicentennial, Dana's encounters remind readers of another aspect of American history, one far less removed than the signing of the Declaration of Independence. There are no events in 1976 to commemorate the lives lost within the so-called land of the free, at least not those lives lost at the hands of slavery. In fact, at the end of Butler's novel, Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland in search of historical documents or artifacts with information about the Weylin plantation. They find themselves standing at the site where Dana's own family history began, a place that no longer exists. Even within the archival material that Dana seeks out to learn about her family history, Rufus's name is the only one preserved. His death is acknowledged while the lives and deaths of all who lived on the Weylan plantation are lost to history. Dana and Kevin may have escaped their own time-loop, but the America they return to seems to be within a perpetuating loop of its own creation. It is

only through the writing down of her experiences, of penning this particular account of her time-travel adventures, that she is able to preserve their story. Butler's innovative version of time-travel answers the call that Mitchell was only beginning to explore with his early time-travel story. Namely, how might we use time-travel to think more critically about what we owe to those that came before us? In *Kindred,* Butler demonstrates just how time-travel can help us reestablish and reimagine our connections to the past.

With *Kindred,* Butler crafts a speculative version of the slave narrative while simultaneously reinventing and repurposing the time-travel narrative from within the form's own historically rigid formal structure. The novel estranges readers from these two forms. For those readers familiar with time-travel, *Kindred* breaks its rules, resolving what is supposed to be an unescapable paradox. And for those coming to *Kindred* in anticipation of a slave-narrative, the novel becomes momentarily disorienting as it offers not an autobiographical rendering of a past life, but a slave narrative of the present. Indeed, despite its overtly fantastical implementation of time-travel, the power of this novel is its familiarity. Dana's narrative invites the reader, not to someone else's remembrance of the antebellum South, but to urban-progressive space of present-day Los Angeles. It is from here, far from the historic markers and visible reminders of American slavery in the South, that Dana must struggle to free herself from the legacy of her past.

At the end of the novel, Dana's escape from the antebellum South is simultaneously Butler's breaking free from the traditional rendering of the time-travel form. In her pursuit of the latter, Butler demonstrates the affordances of time-travel as a power mechanism of formal estrangement. In *Kindred*, it is movement, between different times, spaces, and literary forms, that elicits estrangement. For Dana, movement across time and space, dislocates her from the

present, forcing her to confront the past by living it over and again until she arrives at a new, and more robust understanding of her present. And for Butler herself, movement between different narratives forms, enables her to revise and remake these forms to an alternative purpose.

Time-travel as form in Kevin Baldeosingh's *The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar*

While Butler's *Kindred* calls us to consider how time-travel can be a useful mechanism for the exploration of historical change over time, the work of Trinidadian author Kevin Baldeosingh moves the discussion in a slightly different direction. In his *The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar* (from here on *Adam Avatar*), Baldeosingh crafts a speculative narration that while not specifically a time-travel story, utilizes a similar aesthetic practice. Despite the fact that Baldeosingh's protagonist is never explicitly named as such, throughout the novel he *functions* as a time-traveler. Baldeosingh harnesses the power of a time-travel aesthetic to narrate the story of the seemingly immortal Adam Avatar—a multi-national, transracial, gender-shifting character who appears across time and space throughout the Caribbean. The text is overflowing with movement—across space and time, between textual genres, and in-and-out of competing systemic structures—and this movement serves as a mechanism for a transgressive telling of history. Here, Ette's framework becomes incredibly useful because it elucidates how movement is encoded into the novel's form. Ultimately, *Adam Avatar* offers an otherwise unnarratable version of Caribbean history, a version that chronicles the traumatic impact of the European imperialist project on the region. Such a narrative account extends across historical periods and between various island spaces. Thus, if we read Baldeosingh's text *as a time-travel narrative* we can see begin to see time-travel as an aesthetic practice as opposed to simply a plot-device, as an aspect of *form* as well to content.

Through a complicated storytelling technique, Baldeosingh's text engages readers in a process *like* time-travel, creating a kind of transtemporal and transcultural awareness spurred by movement. Similar to *Kindred, Adam Avatar* contains an overarching structure that recalls that of a frame-tale: the outer frame encompasses psychiatrist session notes recording ten meetings with a patient named Adam who claims to have lived several lives, while the inner frame contains the written stories of Adam's supposed incarnations. As the novel moves between this inner and outer frame, it shifts the reader temporally. While the session notes capture Adam in the present, each of his incarnations take the reader to a point in the past. Thus, the movement between stories and session notes capture Adam jumping forwards and backwards in time and landing within different socio-economic levels of the world system. This specifically transtemporal movement offers different, simultaneous snapshots of *time*. So, while each story is historically and contextually constrained to a particular time and place, the entire novel exists *outside of time*. In this way, the novel offers a planetary-like view of history, capturing a view that spans several centuries and multiple continents.

Despite the diverse range of life experiences and historical conditions within Baldeosingh's narrative, all of Adam's lives share some connection to imperialist practices. Adam's various incarnations convey, among others, the experiences of indigenous peoples, slave-masters, prostitutes, slaves, ship-captains, and pirates. These competing narratives reflect the rippling effects of the imperialist project from a variety of different perspectives. For example, chapter one narrates the story of a 15th century Amerindian, Guiakan, the Taino. When he is young boy, a prophecy is made that foresees both the destruction of the Taino land and peoples by the *guamikinas* (the white men), and Guiakan's own status as the keeper of the Taino people. "He is the preserver of the Tainos," the prophecy states, "not protector, for none can

protect against the guamikinas" (24). Adam as Guiakan becomes a major player in the early history of the Spanish West Indies.[20] In Adam's recollection, his time as Guiakan sees him traveling alongside Christopher Columbus both around the islands, but also back to the metropolis, where he is baptized and christened as Diego Colón. Upon their return, Guikan is responsible for Columbus's more direct route to the islands, and he ultimately causes Columbus's death.

While at first glance, Adam's travel back in time seems to suggest an attempt to narrate an alternative history, one in which the Amerindian Guiakan is given more direct agency and representation within the historical accounts of the Spanish colonization of the West Indies, this reading is not entirely accurate. Adam's account actually does not alter or significantly impact the result of the colonial enterprise at all. Indeed, Guiakan's immediate influence on Christopher Columbus's trade routes and deadly intervention on Columbus's life does absolutely nothing to change the destructive course that history would take. Rather, as the prophecy indicates, Guiakan can do nothing to protect the Tainos from the Españols; he can only preserve the narrative of destruction. So, whereas many alternate histories attempt to change the past in order to alter the present, Baldeosingh's text intervenes in the historical narrative only to reinforce the hopelessness of the Taino's fate. That reinforcement comes in the form of Adam's rewriting of his life as Guiakan, which preserves Taino history. In the process, this new version of history condemns European imperialists to atone for the legacy of their violent conquest.

[20] Not only was he one of "the first Tainos to meet the covered men" (29), but he was also among the first to encounter Christopher Columbus. Indeed, in this alternative rendering of the Spanish explorations to the New World, Guiakan takes on a fundamental role within the colonial expansion process.

Each of the subsequent chapters capture an alternative experience of Adam's centuries-long lifespan. While each story moves between different times and locations, the narratives also appear within different forms of written discourse. From diary entries to songs, letters, meta-fictional interludes, and short-stories, these incarnations variously move between different types of textual production. Thus, in *Adam Avatar*, formal movement is what creates meaning and a sense of coherence, but that movement is not linear or unidirectional, so it is simultaneously estranging. For example, Adam's seventh life is conveyed in the form of a diary, but it is a diary that has been self-consciously edited by a later incarnation of Adam. And within this diary, Adam reflects on passages of political philosophy (306-350), the act of translation (306) and the dreams he has of past lives (322). Many incarnations begin with meditations on the act of writing, so it becomes difficult to distinguish between the different forms of textual media. The diary from one story reappears within another, letters from one life are left-behind and rediscovered two lives later, and texts appear inside of other texts.

Through this focus on writing, editing, and translation, Baldeosingh's novel calls into question the various forms of written discourse that are often used to preserve historical narratives. As each written account is proved "authentic" by Adam's psychiatrist, Dr. Surendra Sankar, that authenticity is eventually rendered uncertain. As early as Adam's third incarnation, the session notes reveal that everything written so far has been mediated through an act of translation by Dr. Sankar. "I should note," Sankar off-handedly admits, "that I am reconstructing these sessions from audio recordings and notes taken during the consultation. The accounts are accurate, but have been edited for clarity" (88). In some cases then, the stories have been doubling translated: first by Adam and then by the doctor. Such a revelation immediately renders the notes suspect. However, on a meta-narrative level, this moment also breaks the narrative

frame and calls attention to the fictionality of all narrative accounts—no matter the generic form. As the doctor suggests: "You realize, Adam, that there is nothing in these accounts that could not be the result of good research, hard work, and a vivid imagination" (88-89). In questioning the truth of Adam's personal histories, Sankar draws attention to their subjective nature.

Such a proposition suggests one possible reading of Baldeosingh's project as a whole. Because Adam often carries with him memories from past lives or leaves artifacts for his future incarnations to find, he is able to exist both inside and outside temporal and spatial constraints. This mobility situates Adam in a position to chart how ideological structures continue to impact individual people and nations over the course of multiple generations. He is able to see "history" from a different perspective. By making visible how economic, religious, and/or cultural beliefs can impact individual thoughts and sometimes historical accounts, Baldeosingh's text exposes the harsh effects of ideological systems on the lives of those enmeshed within them.

In this way, if we read Baldeosingh's text *as time travel*, then we can begin to see time-travel itself as a demystifying aesthetic. In other words, time-travel offers a narrative method capable of making visible the seemingly unrepresentable aspects of contemporary society. Moreover, such a reading helps to make sense of one of the most peculiar aspects of Baldeosingh's tale: the Shadowman. This particular figure is a mysterious and elusive character who is responsible for Adam's death in each life. In fact, his presence is one of the only narrative threads that weaves each of the incarnations together. Described as always wearing a brown tunic, leather sandals, and metal armbands, the Shadowman appears in each narrative and provokes each of Adam's various incarnations to begin remembering their past lives. While the Shadowman has been read as the embodiment of the "subaltern" or simply as a convenient narrative device, I suggest that we might alternatively read him as representation of ideological

constraints.[21] Read ideologically, the Shadowman's presence and varied appearance throughout each of Adam's lives begin to make sense, as does the Shadowman's conspicuous absence from Adam's final incarnation.

Examining Adam's last incarnation—the only story where the Shadowman does not appear—provides insight into this mysterious figure's purpose in the narrative. In this last life, Adam is both aware of the Shadowman's existence and indifferent to his attack. This newfound contentment stems from Adam's realization that ideologies hinder people from being able to create meaning from the world. His thoughts on the subject are worth quoting at length:

> It is true that ideologies are, and always have been, immensely popular. It is also true that ideologies shape our world. Religions are the favourite ideological systems closely followed by absolute political creeds…but people do not turn to ideologies for meaning, but for the comfort of certainties. Once they adopt the ideology's beliefs, however, they conflate certainty with meaning. As long as ideology remains separate form action, not much harm is done by this. But, as I have pointed out, most of the evil in this world has been caused by persons who are absolutely sure of their beliefs (382).

With this in mind, we might consider how each of Adam's lives exposes the harsh effects of a particularly prevalent ideological apparatuses: feudalism, capitalism, slavery, religion,

[21] In one of the few critical discussions of Baldeosingh's work, "The Caribbean Avatar: Kevin Baldeosingh and the Fate of the Caribbean," Rudyard Alcocer usefully suggests that the Shadowman could be "the embodiment of the 'subaltern,' would look like: black, silent, deadly," yet ultimately resigns this figure to that of simply "a narrative tool meant to ensure the arrival of Adam Avatar, the final incarnation," which also "provide[s] some coherence to the narrative and the flux of the incarnations" (88). While a compelling suggestion, we might usefully shift Alcocer's suggestion away from the embodiment of the subaltern subject and instead read the Shadowman as an attempt to conceptualize the all-invasive, but equally elusive force of ideology itself.

patriarchy, etc. It is only those characters who allow themselves to see through these systems of rules or beliefs that are able to fight back and/or survive the Shadowman. However, even if Adam is able to see through the ideological apparatuses controlling the world at the end of the novel, it is unclear whether or not the reader can achieve the same feat. As Sankar states on the last page of the novel: "As Adam correctly pointed out, my own beliefs are no more amenable to argument than were his. So I do acknowledge the possibility that I am, in a technical sense, deluded" (386). Perhaps, we are all deluded—so entrenched in our own ideological beliefs that we are unaware of their influence. By dislocating characters and thus the reader from a particular historical context, time-travel usefully offers a narrative method capable of breaking free of ideological constraints to conceptualize something like the seemingly un-representable historical impact of systemic structures over time.

In her recent *Empire's Crossroads*, Carrie Gibson off-handedly suggests: "If all the Caribbean could be amalgamated and anthropomorphized, the resulting person would have been taken from the African coast, worked as a pirate, been forced into slavery, toiled in a cane field, fought in a war, been freed, squatted on land, become a unionized labourer, and run a tourist resort" (xx). Interestingly, her description of an "amalgamated and anthropomorphized" Caribbean subject actually aligns fairly closely with Baldeosingh's characterization of Adam Avatar. The time-traveling, shape-shifting protagonist of Baldeosingh's text embodies the dynamic mobility of Ette's analysis, a mobility he describes as "never-ending, bouncing back and forth between places and times, societies and cultures." As a result, Adam's incarnations move him in and out of history and in the process, infuse him with transtemporal awareness. The result is a narrative of Caribbean history that charts the harsh and long-lasting effects of the European colonial enterprise on the region. In the process, Adam forces the reader to glimpse

through him individual experiences within the larger framework of western imperialism. These accounts are not always easy to encounter. Indeed, with *Adam Avatar,* Baldeosingh dramatizes his transgressive retelling of Caribbean history by channeling it through the confidential sessions-notes of a psychiatric patient. By publishing Adam's account, Baldeosingh's psychiatrist violates his own professional code of ethics. Thus, Baldeosingh leaves us to consider whether this is a history that *should* be told, or whether it is a history that is better left unsaid. Either way, in Baldeosingh's hands, time-travel offers another version of history that we would rather forget.

When read as an aesthetic practice as opposed to a mechanical device, time travel exposes fissures within dominant narratives of experience and allows for a transgressive telling of history, one that charts the effects of ideological structures over long periods time. Moreover, reading Butler's innovative approach to time-travel within *Kindred* alongside Baleosingh's rendering of a less explicit time-travel narrative in *Adam Avatar* opens up the possibility for reading other works of contemporary literature through an SF lens. Through an analysis of Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah,* the next chapter will consider how a time-travel aesthetic may be useful for analyzing contemporary world literature.

Chapter 3
Time-Travel as Narrative Practice

> --"Science fiction is more than a literary genre or a social passion. It is a way of organizing the mind to include the contemporary world."
> ~Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*

> --"We might then see the 'accordionising' or 'telescoping' function of combined and uneven development as a form of time travel within the same space..."
> ~Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development*

Curiously, although world literary theorists routinely describe texts or methods of analysis that facilitate the exchanging, circulation, or manifestation of divergent worldviews, only recently have discussions of world literature and science fiction begun to intersect. This is surprising given SF's status as a literary aesthetic explicitly invested in the creation of new worlds. Because SF aesthetics have the capacity to facilitate imaginaries not bound by the constraints of contemporary globalization, SF seems to be an ideal starting point for engaging in discussions of world literary production. In the introduction to a 2017 special issue of *Fantastika Journal* on the "Global Fantastika," Mark Bould maps the "global turn" in SF studies alongside "instructive and overlapping developments in American Studies, Comparative Literature, and World Literature" (13). Bould points out that although the field of science fiction studies has long been dominated by discussions of American and British texts, the field has been "always open to Anglophone and non-Anglophone sf from continental Europe (especially France) and beyond" (12). However, since the turn of the millennium, and especially within the last decade, the field has turned more intentionally "to postcolonialism, to race and ethnicity, and to a broader range of sf – a turn signaled by several conferences, and by the appearance in quick succession of a number of monographs, edited collections, journal special issues, and book series" (12). For

Bould, one of the most useful new models for world literary studies is the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) world-systems approach, which emphasizes the value of the Marxist theory of combined and uneven development.

WReC proposes both a new term – world-literature (with a hyphen, to signify a *single* world-literary system) – and an alternative method for studying world literary production (16). Following Jameson's insistence on a *singular* modernity, WReC conceptualizes world-literature as "*the literature of the world-system*—of the modern capitalist world-system, that is," and one defined by its systemic production of "*unevenness*" (8; 12, emphasis original). Such unevenness manifests within "the literary forms, genres, and aesthetics" of world-literature (17). WReC's explanation of this literary manifestation is worth quoting at length:

> To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar – as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies. A typology of combined and uneven development will offer a catalogue of effects or motifs at the level of narrative form: discrepant encounters, alienation effects, surreal cross-linkages, unidentified freakish objects, unlikely likenesses across barriers of language, period, territory – the equivalent of umbrellas meeting sewing machines on (animated) dissecting tables. These are, in essence, dialectical images of combined unevenness requiring not just simple decoding but creative application. (17).

Importantly, evidence of such unevenness manifests within the "the literary forms, genres, and aesthetics" of world-literature (17). That Bould, an SF scholar, should be persuaded by such a model makes sense given the explicit turn away from realist literary-practices that WReC identifies as "irrealism" within their conceptualization of world-literature. WReC suggests that these "irrealist" techniques and devices of world-literature – anti-linear plots, metafictional techniques, and unreliable narrators to name a few – can be understood "as the determinant formal registers of (semi-) peripherality in the world-literary system" (51). In other words, within the realm of literary representation, it is only by turning *away* from realist narrative practices that world-literature finds expression capable of registering the combined unevenness of the world-system. Put simply: to represent the complexity of "lived reality" under global capitalism requires aesthetic-practices not generally found within realist fiction. Importantly, while Bould maps WReC's theorization onto Muthi Nhlema's "One Wit' This Place," a 2015 SF story about climate change, WReC places less emphasis on SF within their analysis. If, indeed, there is only a single literature of the capitalist world-system, might not that literature also include SF?[1] Moreover, because SF aesthetics have the capacity to facilitate imaginaries not bound by the constraints of contemporary globalization, SF seems to be an ideal starting point for engaging in discussions of world literary production.

[1] WReC does, albeit briefly, mention the possibility that the irrealist practices of world-literature might also appear in global SF (17). Of literary production such as graphic novels (of both the 'serious' and the 'superhero' type, 71) and Kim Stanley Robinson's SF novel, *2312* (71-72), they suggest these forms to be "peculiarly metropolitan variants of irrealism or magical realism" (71). They do not go on to actually analyze science fiction in detail. While WReC does devote an entire chapter to the speculative fiction of Russian author Victor Pelevin, much of this analysis emphasizes the "literariness" of Pelevin's particular brand of speculative fiction. In fact, much of the supernatural features of Pelevin's fiction – the werewolves, vampires, spectres, etc. – are read as allegorical representations of capitalist consumption. Thus, there remains much room within the WReC analysis for discussion of science fiction, especially in relation to the scholarly work that has already been done to link SF to critiques of contemporary globalization.

In this chapter, I bring to discussions of world literature both a consideration of science-fictional reading practices and an alternative theorization of world literary production, one that complicates WReC's very useful world-systems approach. By approaching world literature from the perspective of science-fictionality, I posit that we read those formal features identified by the WReC as "irrealist" instead through the lens of science-fictional estrangement, and in particular, through the lens of *formal estrangement.* Read alongside WReC's theorization of world-literature, we might consider *formal estrangement* as itself one of those "aesthetic strategies" or "effects" at the level of narrative form that emerges within contemporary SF to register the unevenness of contemporary modernity. Moreover, because *formal estrangement* can also be found within literary production outside the genre of SF, it is possible to read world literature through the lens of SF.

In what follows, I suggest that SF initiates a mode of reading that can be used to read contemporary world literature.[2] As a case study for such an approach, I consider how the time-travel aesthetic discussed in the previous chapter might offer an alternative way to conceptualize the complex temporal structures of several works of contemporary fiction. While time-travel fiction often foregrounds multiple or simultaneous registers of time, such a preoccupation with temporal multiplicity is also shared by those works of contemporary fiction that explore the temporal relationship of the modern individual within the fast-paced, technologically advanced landscape of contemporary globalization. For Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, the terms

[2] I want to be clear that by "mode of reading," I am *not* referring to the reading practices that David Damrosch has used to define and characterize his particular theorization of so-called "world literature." For Damrosch, world literature is "not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike" (5).

multiplicity and simultaneity best capture the experience of living within the the twenty-first century:

> Over the course of modernity, and with continued momentum in our time, the present has emerged as an experience of simultaneity in which temporalities multiply because they are synchronized as simultaneous on economic, cultural, technological, ecological, and planetary registers. Thus, while simultaneity is often understood as a reduction of that multiplicity, creating a singular time beholden to capital, the present is actually animated by a tension between the simultaneous and the multiple, variously contracting and protracting a sense of contemporaneity in which times conjoin. (3)

This description of a capitalist contemporaneity that constructs the *illusion* of simultaneity suggests a singular notion of time that aligns itself with the demands of an accelerating and expanding global market. For Burges and Elias, the counter to this illusion is the actual experience of temporality, and this experience can be best described as the movement between simultaneous and multiple forms of time.

If this is indeed the case, how does contemporary literature represent this tension and movement between a multiplicity of temporal registers? As the previous chapter showed, time-travel fiction offers one narrative mode capable of facilitating complex temporal experiences. While time-travel narratives are often aided by a time-traveling protagonist who serves as a plot-device for facilitating temporal mobility, we might consider how other works of literature might use literary form to achieve a similar effect. As before, if we read time-travel as a storytelling technique or a narrative practice, we can find it at work in texts that do not contain any fantastical content.

In what follows, I show what a focus on time-travel makes possible by analyzing two recent works of contemporary literature—Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah.* To be clear, I am not arguing that we read these texts *as* science-fiction, but rather, I am suggesting that these texts employ an aesthetic practice common to time-travel fiction. To the science-fictional reader, one particularly attuned to the forms of estrangement common to the language of SF, these texts begin to *feel* like SF. A time-travel aesthetic can thus be thought of as a storytelling practice capable of capturing the modern sense of time theorized by Burges and Elias. For the novels discussed within this chapter, their authors use an aesthetic-practice akin to time-travel in order to connect characters across normally disparate geographical spaces or to extend temporal boundaries beyond the confines of human experience. Such an aesthetic offers an alternative depiction of the world, one where seemingly incomprehensible networks of global relations and ideological developments are made more fully visible.[3] Moreover, by providing an alternative temporal framework, a time-travel aesthetic exposes the fictitious nature of the temporal and spatial markers that we rely so heavily on to order personal and collective narratives of experience. Like the utilization of a time-traveler, a character whose ability to move outside the constraints of history makes it possible for time-travel fiction to offer new critical perspectives, Gyasi's and Adichie's narratives each employ a temporal aesthetic that highlights each text's own defiance of those spatial and temporal categories most often used to classify literary production. In other words, by resisting neat categorization within either preestablished historical framework, the authors of *Homegoing* and *Americanah* challenge the

[3] Like these novels, my emphasis on time-travel offers a methodological approach to literature that allows for comparisons across time, genre, and nation. In this case, I turn to time-travel as a way to name a common aesthetic practice that is increasingly being employed by contemporary fiction writers in a variety of genres.

universalizing impulse of paradigms of world literature *and* circumvent the exclusionary tendency of national literary frameworks.

Before turning to the time-travel aesthetics of Gyasi and Adichie, we must first consider what it means to read contemporary fiction through the lens of SF. Central to my methodology in this chapter is the contention that reading science fiction demands an inherently different kind of reading process. In *Science Fiction After 1900,* Brooks Landon offers a useful summation of critical discussions on so-called "science-fictional" reading practices. **"**Most SF writers, readers, and critics," he explains, "would agree that there is something different about the way we read science fiction, a difference divorced from standards of 'literariness' that keeps some very sophisticated readers from making much sense at all of SF" (*Science Fiction* 7). Many of these readings consider what it would mean to read other forms of literature *as* science fiction.[4] These discussions attempt to unearth the reading practices and/or generic assumptions that readers bring to a text that has been identified as science fiction, or they ask what happens when we analyze a literary text according to competing sets of generic conventions. [5] Rather than focus on

[4] For example, by juxtaposing two readings of E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," one by SF scholar James Gunn and another by Forster scholar Wilfred Stone, Landon shows how reading a text *as* science fiction produces a different result than reading the same text as realism: "It's almost as if these two readers confronted two different stories, Gunn seeing a warning about progress, Stone seeing a castrating mother and her 'maimed and impotent prophet' son" (13). Similarly, Brian Stableford suggests that "there is an important difference between an act of reading in which a book is read *as science fiction* and an act of reading in which a book (whatever its content) is read *as a novel*" (68). See Landon, *Science Fiction After 1900* and Stableford, *The Sociology of Science Fiction*.

[5] A recent scientific study suggests that generic bias has a statistically significant effect on reading practices. In short, the study found that if readers are given contextual clues that indicate an excerpt is from a work of science-fiction, those readers who hold bias against genre fiction will demonstrate significantly poorer reading strategies when analyzing works of SF than they do when analyzing those works which present themselves to be more "literary." The hypothesis is that readers deem the genre fiction less important and therefore they do not read with the same attention to detail. To read the entire study, see: Chris Gavaler and Dan R. Johnson. "The Genre

genre, however, I want to instead suggest that SF provides readers with particular kinds of reading experiences that are themselves pedagogical in nature. Landon gestures to this when he posits that "it may be useful to think of SF as a language that must be learned or as a mode of writing as distinctive as poetry, complete with its reading protocols quite different from those used for reading other kinds of fiction" (*Science Fiction* 7). He goes on: "In this sense, the stories of SF are not just 'about' new ways of seeing, new perspectives, but actually demand new ways of seeing from its readers" (*Science Fiction* 7). In addition to challenging readers to imagine to new worlds, new social situations, and new forms of existence, SF also privileges new kinds of reading practices. In other words, reading SF is a fundamentally different experience than reading other forms of fiction.

Samuel R. Delany explains this difference through the notion of narrative subjunctivity, a term which highlights the unique relationship between a reader's given environment and the process of reading SF.[6] For Delany, the language of SF initiates a form of reading that is distinct from other genres of writing. Whereas journalism and realism work within the subjunctive mode, SF and fantasy function according to a "reverse-subjunctivity." This means that while the language employed by the former two genres generates images that correspond to the reader's given environment (the images produced are of characters, events, and circumstances that *have* or *could have* happened) the language of the latter two genres create narratives that encourage readers to imagine circumstances that *could not* or *have not* ever happened ("About Five Thousand" 61-62). Thus, while Stableford and Landon categorize science-fictional reading as

Effect: A Science Fiction (vs. realism) Manipulation Decreases Inference Effort, Reading Comprehension, and Perceptions of Literary Merit."

[6] See: Samuel R. Delaney, "About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy Five Words."

largely dependent on an individual reader's approach to genre, Delany focuses much more on how the language of SF initiates a reading experience distinct from other forms of fiction. Citing Delany in her own discussion of science-fictional reading practices, Ursula K. Le Guin offers the following example: "In a story where only what ordinarily occurs is going to occur, one can safely use such a sentence as, 'He was absorbed in the landscape.' In a story where *only the story* tells you what is likely to happen, you had best be careful about using sentences like that...Realistic fictional context keeps such imagery safely dead; science-fictional context revives it, re-embodies it" (30).[7] Le Guin's example showcases how the language of SF reanimates much of the imagery taken for granted within realist fiction. Perhaps most importantly, SF demands that its readers become more attuned to language itself and particularly to how that language facilitates their own readerly estrangement from the real. In an SF text, anything can happen, so there is potential for readers to become aware of their own individual assumptions, whether those are conditioned by language, personal experience, or cultural knowledge. And it is this metacognitive awareness, I want to suggest, that makes SF an important lens for interpreting contemporary fiction at large. SF requires one to enter into situations utterly unfamiliar, to feel completely estranged from one's sense of objective reality, and yet, continue to move forward with a curious but critical gaze. As we will see, such an ability to move in and out of situations of estrangement has become an increasingly valuable skill for living in the present.

One of the most useful tools for articulating the value of science-fictional reading practices is Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's Jr.'s theorization of "science-fictionality." In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction,* Csicsery-Ronay reiterates the ubiquitous with which science fiction

[7] Ursula K. Le Guin's introduction to the *The Norton Book of Science Fiction: North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990.*

permeates the contemporary imagination, but he also goes on to explain the effect of this pervasiveness:

> This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat sf as purely a genre-engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call *science-fictionality*, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction." (2, emphasis original)

This conception of science-fictionality captures the realization that our contemporary world has "grown into sf," that the feeling of cognitive dissonance once unique to SF is now elicited in the estranging practices of contemporary reality itself. Put simply, the present has become akin to sf. As a mode of response, science-fictionality impacts individuals in different ways. Some turn to SF as a tool for predicting the future or anticipating profitable investments, including technological advancements. However, as Ciscsery-Ronay points out: "Most people merely bracket difficult-to-process, incongruous moments of technology's intersection with everyday life as science-fictional moments" (*The Seven Beauties*, 2). While we might, as Ciscsery-Ronay does, use this notion of science-fictionality to help define the features that readers expect of the genre of SF (the so-called "seven beauties" of his title), we might also consider the implications that science-fictionality might have on contemporary literature itself. In other words, if everyday life is now filled with "science-fictional moments," what does this mean for the novel?

The answer to this question requires that we linger a bit longer on the latter term of the construction: fictionality. As a term, fictionality is one of those concepts that seems to elide clear definition. Historically, the concept can be linked to a shift in cultural understandings of fiction

itself. In "The Rise of Fictionality," Catherine Gallagher considers fictionality to be a fundamental and defining feature of the realist novel, but one that has been conspicuously undertheorized. "No feature of the novel," Gallagher writes, "seems to be more obvious and yet more easily ignored than its fictionality. Like *prose*, *fictional* is one of those definite terms ('a novel is a long, fictional prose narrative') that most historians of the form have tacitly agreed to leave unexamined" ("Rise of Fictionality" 336). For Gallagher, the eighteenth-century offers the most useful place to study this feature of the novel because "the nature of fictionality changed so dramatically in [the] mid-eighteenth-century British narratives" that they began to "constitute a new form" ("Rise of Fictionality" 336). And it is this eighteenth-century discourse of fictionality that became the norm for novelist fiction over the past two centuries. Gallagher links the change in meaning to a shift in the etymology of the word "fiction" at the turn of the seventeenth-century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, fiction went from being a "device" for "the purpose of deception" to one "concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters" (qtd in Gallagher, "Rise of Fictionality" 338). In other words, while most early fictional narratives might be said to "deceive" because they use fiction allegorically to mask true accounts, with the development of the novel, fiction began to denote the creation of a truly imaginary narration, one with no direct claim on truth besides that of mimesis (Gallagher, "Rise of Fictionality" 338-339).

Replicating Gallagher's etymological method but shifting the focus from "fiction" to "science fiction," more evidence can be found to support the emergence of the "science-fictional moments" characteristic of Csicsery-Ronay's theorization. According to the *OED,* within the second half of the twentieth-century, "science fiction" is increasingly used in its adjective form to denote something as "relating to, or characteristic of science fiction," and these examples are

not always referring to characteristics of genre (*OED,* "science fiction" 3B). For example, while the idea of a talking computer was a "science fiction dream" in the early 1970s, just a decade later the "long open-plan newsroom" can give a character a "science fiction feeling of being the last man alive" (*OED,* "science fiction" 3B). These two examples demonstrate two elements which contribute to the prevalence of science-fictionality in present. On the one hand, many of the science-fictional "dreams" of the past have, in the twenty-first century, become actualized through advancements in technology. Moreover, the "feeling" of science fiction, that sense of being momentarily estranged from the world or from humanity itself, has become so commonplace that it can, like the previous example, be triggered by something as mundane as the layout of an office building. This is less a result of the wide-spread popularity of science fiction as genre than it is evidence of science fiction's usefulness as a postmodern heuristic device.

In fact, Fredric Jameson uses science fiction in just this way – as a heuristic device – in the opening to his 2004 essay, "The Aesthetics of Singularity." "An ontology of the present," he begins, "is a science-fictional operation, in which a cosmonaut lands on a planet full of sentient, intelligent, alien beings..." (101). He goes on to describe the absurdity by which an alien being might view practices such as modern philosophy, postmodern novelistic conventions, contemporary politics, and the immense inequalities that categorize the distribution of global wealth. Based on this brief science-fictional vignette, Jameson concludes: "It is a world which does not require a Brechtian *V-effect* since it is already objectively estranged" ("Aesthetics of Singularity" 101). As we have seen, Suvin's categorization of SF estrangement assumes a reality that requires a version of Brechtian alienation in order to become the object of analysis. However, in a world that is already objectively estranged, SF becomes a useful narrative tool for

depicting the newly normalized forms of estrangement that have come to categorize the everyday. In other words, SF teaches readers how to respond to situations of estrangement. Rather than become uncomfortable, defensive, or alarmed by moments of defamiliarization, SF readers are trained to linger within strangeness, to explore and ultimately to learn from unfamiliar experiences. Put differently, SF encourages readers to be curious and critical inhabitants of estrangement.

Such a proposition brings me back to WReC's discussion of "world-literature" and finally, to my readings of Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Adichie's *Americanah*. In discussing the *singular* nature of the world-system under capitalism (via Fredric Jameson's concept of singular modernity[8]), WReC identifies world-literature's attempts to capture the temporal complexities inherent within that world-system. As they explain, "To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar – as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies" (17). Interestingly, as a way of explaining these so-called modes of "spatio-temporal compression," WReC uses a science-fictional metaphor: time-travel. "We might" they posit, "see the 'accordionising' or 'telescoping' function of combined and uneven development as *a form of time-travel within the same space*, a spatial bridging of unlike times...that leads from the classic forms of nineteenth-century realism to the speculative methodologies of today's global science fiction" (17). Temporality, it seems, is one of those concepts that defies easy representation, especially under the modern world-system. But, as WReC offhandedly suggests, time-travel

[8] See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present.*

offers one way to conceptualize the time-space compression that categorizes contemporary globalization.

Attention to time-travel as an aesthetic practice offers new insight into works of contemporary world literature. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, when used as a plot device, time-travel dislocates fictional characters from a particular historical context, creating a figure capable of exploring temporal registers beyond the scope of a single human lifespan. But, as a formal feature, time travel appears within works of literature outside the genre of SF. Thus, rather than think of time travel as simply a sub-genre of SF, I consider time-travel to be a formal-aesthetic practice, one that is preoccupied with movement between time and space. This form of narration makes it possible to convey multiple and sometimes simultaneous narratives of experience, even when they stretch across time and space. With this in mind, I turn to a reading of Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, a novel that foregrounds temporal multiplicity as part of its narrative structure.

Capturing the "feeling of time": Temporal multiplicity in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

In her debut novel, *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi attempts to unpack the lasting effect of slavery on both African and African-American families in the United States today. In its formal construction, Gyasi's novel offers a methodological approach to storytelling that provides the groundwork for the novel's critical accomplishments. The novel consists of a series of short narratives that lead the reader through seven generations of a familial line. Alternating between the family lines of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, each chapter of *Homegoing* offers a glimpse into the life of a single family member before moving on to the next generation. The two sisters are born into different villages in Ghana in the mid-eighteenth century, and thus, the family lines

of each take off on two very different trajectories through history. While one sister marries an Englishman and moves into the Cape Coast Castle, the other is imprisoned in the dungeons of that same castle and eventually sold into slavery. In its composite-like structure, *Homegoing* exposes the reader to a multiplicity of interconnected narratives, narrating many versions of individual experience in order to create a more nuanced picture of collective existence. A far cry from the time-travel narratives of the previous chapter, Gyasi's narrative approach nonetheless *feels like* time-travel. Indeed, the novel and particularly Gyasi's turn towards the generation as both her temporal measure and organizational metric position the reader in a role akin to the time-traveler: that is, in a position to view human history outside the constraints of a single generation. The result is a temporal aesthetic capable of capturing the immediacy of subjective experience while also making visible the impact of long-lasting forms of systemic oppression.

The most straightforward reading of *Homegoing* would position the novel as contributing to a long and culturally diverse history of literature that concerns itself with several generations of a family line. These "family sagas" or "genealogical fictions" are often discussed in relation to the nineteenth-century novel. Writing in the early part of the twentieth century, A.E. Zucker described the genealogical novel as "a new genre" that could be linked directly to "the widespread discussion of Evolution during the third quarter of the nineteenth-century and the new interest aroused in the doctrine of heredity" (551). Unlike the biographical novel or what we might refer to today as the *bildungsroman*, the genealogical novel does not follow a single protagonist's arch of development, but rather "affords a panorama of several generations, which link together the leading figures in the story" (Zucker 551). While Zucker credits Emile Zola and Samuel Butler with the creation of this novelistic genre, the appearance of the genealogical novel

was not limited to French and English literary traditions.[9] In *Genealogical Fictions,* Jobst Welge offers readings of family sagas from Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese literary traditions while also pointing out the important influence of American regionalism and especially the plantation sagas of William Faulkner to many Latin American generational stories. Indeed, largely due to the influence of Faulkner, the generational novel has a strong presence within twentieth-century American literature of the South.[10]

Given the generational-structure of *Homegoing* and Gyasi's own biographical links to the South, it is reasonable to consider the novel as contributing to this particular literary lineage. However, the manner by which the novel contributes to an already established canon of genealogical fiction proves to be a bit complicated, especially in relation its temporal structure. Of the genealogical novel's relationship to temporality, Welge points out that "insofar as genealogical narratives are necessarily developmental in nature, they are oriented toward both the past and the future, and thus they often take on a certain recursive direction, where, for instance, decline is the flip side of inheritance" (2). Such a double temporal orientation, what Albrecht Klobucka categorizes as a type of "double movement," conditions these narratives to be organized "simultaneously forward and backward, toward the imagined endpoint and away from it" (qtd in Welge 2). This temporal duality best captures the organizational framework for many nineteenth century generational tales, however, Welge identifies a different relationship between temporality and narrative organization within the genealogical fictions of the twentieth century:

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[9] Another important nineteenth-century English writer of genealogical fiction was Thomas Hardy. For more on Hardy's family sagas see Tess O'Toole, *Genealogy and Fiction in Hardy: Family Lineage and Narrative Lines.*

[10] For more on the importance of family to Faulkner's fiction and to other writers of southern fiction see: Gwendolyn Charbrier, *Faulkner's Families: A Southern Saga*, and Michael Wainwright, *Darwin and Faulkner's Novels: Evolution and Southern Fiction*.

"The genealogical novels of the twentieth century rest on a different understanding of history; they emphasize the importance of individual memory in the representation of collective history" (15). So, whereas nineteenth-century genealogical narratives tended to follow the progressive development (or decline) of a family based on generational inheritance, twentieth-century narratives foreground memory as essential to the preservation of family history.

At first glance, *Homegoing*'s ending *seems* to align with Welge's description of the twentieth century genealogical novel's emphasis on individual memory and collective history. This reading holds weight largely due to the fact that readers are introduced to a character who is actively pursuing his own genealogical research. The final chapter of the novel focuses on Marcus, a first-generation college student who is conducting sociological research related to his family history. Of his research, we learn:

> Originally, [Marcus] wanted to focus his work on the convict leasing system that had stolen years off of his great-grandpa H's life, but the deeper into the research he got, the bigger the project got. How could he talk about Great-Grampa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and the millions of other black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow? And if he mentioned the Great Migration, he'd have to talk about the cities that took that flock in. He'd have to talk about Harlem. And how could he talk about Harlem without mentioning his father's heroin addition—the stints in prison, the criminal record?... (289)

To even begin to understand a single instance of the black experience in the United States, Marcus must delve into a chain of interrelated experiences that reach all the way back to eighteenth-century Ghana. Later in the novel, Marcus puts it this way:

> How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was *the feeling of time*, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside of it. (295-296).

Marcus's desire to narrate a phenomenon so vast and so inextricably tangled with his own experience manifests as a seemingly impossible narrative act. He strives for a discourse that would allow him to step outside his lived experience and view the world from a far. In essence, Marcus is trying to write *Homegoing*.

In this sense, *Homegoing* is both genealogy *and* fiction, but it is not *genealogical fiction*. To understand what I mean, it is useful to consider Patricia Drechsel Tobin's notion of the "genealogical imperative," a metaphor that "equates the temporal form of the classic novel—the conceptualized frame within which its acts and images find their placement—with the dynastic line that unites the diverse generations of the genealogical family (6-7). For Tobin, time is often difficult to analyze within the modern novel (by which she means the realist novel) precisely because it is hidden within the organizational structure of the novel form itself (4). Rather than mirror the way in which we actually experience time, the realist novel of Tobin's analysis structures time according to a linear, progressive narrative of events. In doing so, it actually shares with its readers a conception of "Time as linear unity" (5). As Tobin explains:

> The novel offers...not a mimesis of undeliberated, organic life-in-time, but a homologue that enacts a privileged conceptualization of human life as purposeful and therefore imbued with meaning. Its rhythmic patterns, which give rise to the notion that art is lifelike, are not those we discover in the work of fiction, but rather those which we remember from our own lives; and what we remember

> from the rhythm of our lives is how one event gave birth to another, in *an imitation of genealogy*. (5-6 emphasis added)

According to Tobin, the realist novel *mimics* genealogy in its tendency to represent events in a neatly progressive, linear structure. A true genealogy, however, would represent events as they occur in actuality: as a chaotic, sequence of semi-related but not always causal series of events. In the case of *Homegoing*, the novel's structure does not offer the *feeling of time* that Marcus desires because it fails to present an origin story that neatly captures the casual relations between subsequent generations. Instead, it offers a family history that proves unpredictable.

Homegoing aligns itself more with the somewhat less conventional notion of genealogy laid out by Foucault. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," he describes genealogy as "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary... operat[ing] on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (139). While those discussions of genealogical fiction by Zucker and Welge describe a genre that neatly categorizes development from one family line to the next, their description stands in opposition to Foucault's account of the unstable, recursive, and muddy process of the genealogist. In Foucault's analysis, genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" for the "genealogist finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms." (140;142). Indeed, "what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (142). In other words, a true genealogical fiction would not seek a single origin-point, but rather would offer a snapshot of a multiplicity of foundational events or experiences. By refusing to

conform to the "genealogical imperative" of the novel, *Homegoing* actually exposes the fictive nature of the genealogical enterprise.

To read *Homegoing* in relation to time-travel asks us to consider how the novel's temporal aesthetic changes the nature of its status as genealogical fiction. In many ways, *Homegoing* appears to be genealogical fiction while actively resisting any of the formal mechanisms that would make it so. Recall that for Octavia Butler, the risk in writing (and reading) time-travel fiction is that one is forced to travel back in time *with* their characters. And for Butler, this meant traveling back to "a backward time" in American history.[11] *Homegoing* asks the same of its readers. Like Butler's time-travelling protagonist, the readers of *Homegoing* are thrown back-in-time and with each successive tale, they enter a related, but equally unfamiliar landscape. As Delany puts it, the aesthetics of SF require the reader to create a world out of nothing ("Some Presumptions" 29). And this is precisely the task of Gyasi's reader. Like the time-traveler, thrust into a new world, the reader of *Homegoing* enters each chapter of the novel in a state of complete temporal estrangement. For example, despite its structured movement between alternative family lines and subsequent generations, the text preserves a sustained presence of unpredictability. While the novel announces its form through the inclusion of a family tree prior to the beginning of the first chapter, the gaps between each chapter force the reader to reorient themselves as they enter each new narrative frame. Take, for instance, the first chapter of the novel, which introduces Effia, one of the first women from her Fante village to marry a British officer and move to the Cape Coast Castle. The narrative captured within this chapter chronicles Effia's struggles in moving between two very different cultures while also

[11] See my discussion of *Kindred* in Chapter 1. Also: Butler, Octavia E. "Why did I write Kindred?:" speech: draft, 1986, OEB 2927, Octavia E. Butler Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

exposing the changing nature of the colonial project. At the end of the chapter, Effia is pregnant with a child, but readers are left with little knowledge about the future of that child, the village, or Effia. It is not until chapter three – when Effia's family line continues – that readers are presented with the continuation of that story. The main protagonist of chapter three is Quey, Effia's 20-year old son. Here, readers are presented with a 20-year gap in family history that can not be retrieved. Moreover, the continuation of Effia's family line is further delayed by the intrusion of an alternative narrative, one that is interspliced between the novel's chapters on Effia and Quey. Indeed, throughout the course of *Homegoing*, the story of Esi's family line interweaves itself through Effia's familial line, both complicating and further disorienting the novel's status as genealogical fiction. Thus, to read *Homegoing* through the lens of time travel draws attention to the particular way that the novel's temporal aesthetic repeatedly disrupts the narrative process, estranging the reader from both the narrative's form and content.

The only way to read *Homegoing* as genealogical fiction is to read it as Marcus does: with a clear finale in mind and a desire to uncover a series of interconnected events that when refashioned and narrated in a particular way, produce the novel's conclusion. In other words, to read *Homegoing* as genealogical fiction requires us to read it from the end. This is not to say that there are not any overarching conclusions that can be drawn from viewing Effia and Esi's family lines from a distance. In fact, built into the structure of *Homegoing* is another formal feature that highlights an insight to be gained from reading the novel as Marcus does. Aside from the individual chapters that subdivide the narrative into generational stories, *Homegoing* is also separated into two parts, which loosely coincide temporally with the abolition of slavery following the American civil war. Thus, in addition to charting over seven generations of a single family line, *Homegoing* also traces a history of slavery as both a state apparatus and as a

lingering, oppressive ideology. In the first part of the novel we glimpse the workings of slavery as a repressive state apparatus, one implemented primarily through violence but also through ideology in order for countries or tribes to experience economic gains. This economic foundation of the slave trade is implicit throughout the entire first half of the novel; however, it comes up explicitly in Quey's chapter when Fiifi tells him:

> Quey, this village must conduct its business like that female bird. You want to pay more for slaves, pay more, but know that the Dutch will also pay more, and the Portuguese and even the pirates will pay more too. And while you are all shouting about how much better you are than the others. I will be sitting quietly in my compound, eating *fufu* and waiting for the price I think is right. (53)

Whereas here the driving force behind slave trading is couched within the language of business transactions and financial advancement, this does not remain constant over the course of the entire novel.

In the second part of *Homegoing*, the abolition of slavery marks the end of its use as an official economic apparatus of the state; however, this abolition fails to destroy the ideological framework that slavery helped establish within the United States. For Esi's family line, life in the United States after reconstruction is filled with experiences that capture an account of the exclusionary practices of the Jim Crow era while also highlighting the harsh realities of an exploitive convict leasing operation and a racist incarceration system. For Effia's descendants, immigration to the United States introduces them to a very different awareness and conception of racial history. These two parts of the novel offer a history of slavery that registers a shift in the way ideology functions in the lives of individual characters over time. While in the first part we glimpse the workings of slavery as a legal, economic system, in the second half, the institution of

slavery is replaced with a form of racial discrimination that repeatedly exerts violence and uneven opportunity. It is only through a compilation of these many subjective experiences that a full account of slavery's lasting effects becomes visible. And if we consider this structure alongside the actual experience of reading *Homgoing,* we glimpse how the novel's temporal aesthetic captures this view of history through its piling on of a multiplicity of perspectives. To read the novel from the end is to encounter a narrative that captures the long-lasting effects of slavery on the black experience in the United States. However, to read it only through this lens, risks missing the glimmers of hope or forms of resistance embedded within Gyasi's narrative account. While the former is a valuable and important historical enterprise, so too is the latter.

In the last few pages of *Homegoing*, Marcus and Marjorie return to the place where the entire story began: Cape Coast Castle. As they are touring the building together, their guide explains, "this is where the church was…It stands directly above the dungeons. You could walk around this upper level, go into that church, and never know what was going on underneath" (298). This statement unsettles them both, making them realize: "It was the way most people lived their lives, on upper levels, not stopping to peer underneath" (298). Like the harsh realization exposed by the guide, *Homegoing* also unsettles. It unsettles the novel form by peering underneath a single story, peeling it back to reveal a multiplicity of other stories that brought the original into being. By providing this particular and extended *feeling of time,* we ultimately come away from *Homegoing* with a deeper understanding of how present circumstances are influenced by forces past. At the same time, *Homegoing* exposes the fictitious nature of any attempt we make to organize an historical account of individual or collective trajectories from the past to the present. Such constructions risk becoming genealogical *fictions*. However, to read it as time-travel better represents the actual experience of reading *Homegoing.*

Homegoing resists any representation of the cause/effect relationships between the events captured in one text to the next. As the novel's title suggests, it is *not* a story of home*coming* or of a return to one's origins, but rather, a story of perpetual movement forward, of home*going.* And its readers are not genealogists, but time-travelers.

With its narrative structure and specifically its temporal aesthetic, *Homegoing* offers us a novel form capable of narrating a multiplicity of experiences while also capturing how forms of systemic oppression persist and reproduce over long periods of time. Like Ette's "Literatures-without-a-fixed-abode," discussed in the previous chapter, Gyasi's novel also offers a kind of "poetics of movement," in this case, one of temporal mobility. Such a narrative method makes it possible to convey temporalities both close-in-proximity and vast in scale, and to do so simultaneously. The result is a temporal aesthetic that resists the universalizing impulse of world literature while maintaining the particularity of lived experience that is central to national literary frameworks. By inhabiting and maintaining the tension between the two, *Homegoing* models an emergent form of the contemporary novel, one that in refusing to succumb to a simplified totality, actually offers a more nuanced depiction of the contemporary world. While Gyasi's construction seems to privilege time-over-space, I will now turn briefly to a novel that foregrounds the reverse. In the next section, I consider Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's much discussed novel, *Americanah,* through the lens of time-travel aesthetics.

Temporal and spatial mobility in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

In her 2013 novel, *Americanah,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie abandons the historical and national frameworks of her previous work and turns to a transnational story set in the present. In this new contemporary setting, Adichie's novel charts the movement of characters within and

across national boundaries. The novel follows two protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze, high school sweethearts who choose to leave Nigeria when recurring government shutdowns and the resulting campus protests interrupt their postsecondary education, threatening to make finishing a degree impossible. Ifemelu secures a partial scholarship and student visa to attend a university in Philadelphia while Obinze finishes university in Nigeria and then heads to London to try his luck at obtaining a legal work-permit. As the story shifts between Ifemelu and Obinze, readers become privy to the struggles faced by immigrants in each national space. While abroad, both experience financial hardship and persistent threats of deportation, and each encounter different experiences of racism and sexism. In London, Obinze is repeatedly scammed and eventually deported because of attempts to arrange a green-card marriage. Meanwhile, in America, Ifemelu is tempted into prostitution to pay tuition and maintain her student-visa status. Each character becomes, for the first time, a racialized subject; however, this means something different in each space. In America, Ifemelu endures the same exclusionary treatments as her black classmates, but these experiences remain invalidated because she is not African American. In London, Obinze encounters the hypocrisy of an urban center that resents his presence in the metropolis even though his nation helped create Britain's wealth. Interspersed throughout are flashbacks to Ifemelu and Obinze's shared upbringing in Nigeria. Thus, the text moves between these different layers of story, simultaneously capturing the experience of what it means to be black in England, America *and* Nigeria. The novel also narrates the struggles of immigrant life in different national spaces while simultaneously providing an account of growing up in the post-independence economy of Nigeria.

At first glance, *Americanah* may seem to be an odd textual choice for a discussion of science-fictional aesthetics. After all, Adichie's work in general, and *Americanah* in particular,

has been championed by critics explicitly for its "stripped-down," "descriptive" realist style. In Ian Baucom's view, *Americanah* brings together Georg Lukács' more historical vision of the realist novel with Ruth Yeazell's account of realism's attention to the everyday.[12] Similarly, Ulka Anjaria reads *Americanah* as participating in a larger trend in twenty-first century postcolonial literature that adopts what she terms the "realist impulse," an aesthetic marked by "a transition in representational mode, style, and/or medium that entails a new textual engagement with the contemporary world" (278). In Anjaria's view, this impulse is "evident in gestures such as stories set in the present rather than the past and the trimming of modernist, metaphorical, and metafictional language for a more stripped-down and less ostensibly self-conscious aesthetic" (278). Caroline Levine uses *Americanah* to show how the narrative techniques of literary realism can be used to demystify the intricacies of contemporary social structures. For Levine, it is Adichie's use of "longstanding realist traditions of description" that helps her to defamiliarize complex social structures and infrastructures such as racism and electricity. ("The Strange Familiar" 588). Each of these readings offer useful insight into Adichie's use of realism, but they do not fully account for the formal complexity of Adichie's text. To read *Americanah* thought the lens of time-travel, however, highlights how the novel's storytelling apparatus deliberately moves the reader through time and space. Adichie crafts a narrative that both calls into question the category of world-literature *and* imagines a literary-aesthetic capable of responding to the particular demands of representing the present.

Early reviews praised the novel for its frank representation and provocative exploration of the immigrant experience while also registering the novel's abrupt shift from Adichie's earlier

[12] Here, he is referring to Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (1964), and Ruth Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (2008). For full review see: Ian Baucom, "A Study in African Realism." *Public Books.* Public Culture, 1 Nov. 2013.

work. For many, this shift manifested in relation to both content *and* style.[13] In regard to the former, Ian Baucom put it this way:

> This new work...effects a pronounced change in her writing by adding 21st-century England and America to her historical canvas. Most simply put, this change has to do with what readers should expect from an "African" novel's encounters with history. *In Half of a Yellow Sun* what counts as history is the unfinished business of empire, the crisis of the postcolonial state, war. But in *Americanah* the agonies of the post-independence nation, the mass-historical violence of war, are no longer the "moving centers" of African lives. ("A Study in African Realism" n.p.)

According to Baucom, Adichie's novel registers a change in the historical condition of postcoloniality itself. No longer tightly focused on the violence of war or the struggles that come with the rise to independence, the postcolonial story of *Americanah* instead highlights transnational movement, cross-cultural contact, and the strange experience of return. And rather than linger on the past, Adichie chooses instead to focus on the present. In Baucom's view, "having established itself as a major American novel, *Americanah* reminds us that it is also an African novel, or, indeed, that it is neither one nor the other but both" ("A Study in African Realism" n.p.). This plurality, or tendency to be both an African *and* American novel, is mimicked in regard to the novel's style. One can hardly overlook the series of blog posts woven

[13] For a few positive reviews, see: Elizabeth Day, "*Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – review," Mike Peed, "Realities of Race," and Jennifer Reese, "A Different Kind of Immigrant Experience In 'Americanah.'" For a few more critical reviews, see: Alex Clark, "*Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – review," and David Fish, "Book Review: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie."

into the narrative that interrupt its otherwise linear flow. *Americanah* is both a novel *and* a series of observations about race relations in the United States. And these observations take the form of entries on the main protagonist's blog: "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness is America." Anjaria reads these blog entries as evidence of *Americanah*'s shift away from the high "literariness" associated with the "classic" postcolonial novel (283). For Anjaria, because these blog entries often appear out of context without any sort of stated "diegetic justification," they serve to illuminate "the illegibility of the phenomena the blog describes and the epistemic struggle required to render it part of a coherent narrative" (285). Levine also considers the abruptness of blog entries, but she reads them as a deliberate strategy of realist defamiliarization in the form description ("The Strange Familiar" 594). In Levine's view, "Adichie repeatedly values the plainness and straightforwardness of descriptive prose as politically effective" ("The Strange Familiar" 594). While compelling, these readings do not fully account for the presence of the blog in relation to Adichie's transnational content, nor do they account for the movement between different forms of written discourse that routinely appear within the novel. However, by considering the novel in relation to the movement-oriented, non-linear structure of time-travel, I offer a reading that more fully accounts for these structural features of the novel.

Americanah is a narrative infused with spatial, temporal, and discursive movement. The novel's fifty-four chapters are divided into seven distinct, but uneven parts. While the early sections correspond to different geographic spaces and character perspectives, the boundaries between each part remain blurry. For instance, Part I focuses on the early relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze in high school and University in Nigeria, Part II follows Ifemelu to the US, and Part III shifts to Obinze in London. These parts quickly move the reader from place-to-place,

however, even when the narrative focuses on one of the protagonists, the other is never left completely behind because each section is interspersed with flashbacks to the protagonists' shared experiences in Nigeria. It is not until Part V that the two stories come back together, largely through email exchanges between Ifemelu and Obinze. And, it is only in the final section of the novel that the two finally meet again in Nigeria. As the novel unfolds, *Americanah* moves the reader between different national spaces, but it also abruptly jumps through time. Whether through character movements, flashbacks, blog posts, or email exchanges, readers travel with the narrative to different moments in the individual lives and shared experiences of Ifemelu and Obinze. All the while, within the diegesis of the novel itself, barely any time passes at all. Indeed, when the story begins, Ifemelu is on her way to a salon in Trenton to get her hair braided, and it is not until 452 pages later that she finally leaves the salon. Thus, a full three-quarters of the novel take place over the course of only a few hours.

This discrepancy between an almost dizzying spatial movement and the very slow progression of actual time within the novel creates a temporal aesthetic that is circular in nature. It is possible, I argue, to read the first three-quarters of the novel in relation to that stereotypical formal feature of time travel fiction: the time loop. While Adichie's novel does not repeat the same events over again like in time travel fiction, the conceptual apparatus of a time loop offers a useful image for understanding the temporal structure of *Americanah.* During the majority of the novel, the salon serves as the fixed-point of the narrative-present. So, while the story takes readers back and forth across time and space, Adichie repeatedly returns them back to the salon for brief moments of reorientation. This repeated reentry into the salon jolts readers back to the present, disrupting the otherwise linear flow of Ifemelu's and Obinze's interweaving narratives of development. Moreover, just as readers have settled into this temporal movement between

Ifemelu in the salon and her experiences of the past, the novel changes pace. Parts V and VI take place over just fifteen pages and these few pages loosely account for several weeks of time in the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze. All of this movement between time, space, and character facilitates an estranging experience similar to the actual movement of characters within the story. Much like traditional time-travel stories then, *Americanah*'s formal movement elicits a sense of defamiliarization, which compels readers to new critical understandings.

One way to think about the effect of this formal estrangement is through Ottmar Ette's notion of transcontinental awareness.[14] Ette's literatures without a fixed abode describes a global literature that complicates even WReC's world-systems approach. Recall that for Ette, the emergence of this literary phenomenon can be mapped on to a progressive literary-historical narrative of globalization, specifically corresponding to globalization's fourth phase of development (27).[15] "Characterized by the increasing globalization of the financial markets, the construction of new, planetary communication systems in real time, and the relinquishment of binary, ideologically motivated bloc systems," this fourth phase of globalization looks very similar to WReC's notion of the capitalist world-system's pervasive replication of unevenness (26). Moreover, like the "irrealist" practices that WReC identifies as a manifestation of that unevenness, Ette also registers the emergence of a new literary aesthetic: one that gains its strength "not in the attachment to a certain place but in movement" (83). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter on time-travel fiction, one byproduct of this movement-oriented literary

[14] Transcontinental awareness is a term used by Ette to capture the effects of passing between multiple continents and yet never feeling at home in any (36).

[15] As Ette explains, "The current and as yet incomplete *fourth* phase of accelerated globalization spans the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first" (27).

phenomenon is an increase in transtemporal and transcultural awareness. Within *Americanah*, transcultural positionality allows marginalized characters to critique the exclusionary practices they encounter during cultural contact and enables Adiche to deviate from prominent early cultural-contact narratives of postcolonial literary traditions.[16]

This transcultural positionality is also reinforced by the novel's content. The novel features a number of characters (besides Ifemelu and Obinze) who migrate across national borders. While at NYU, Ifemelu joins a club of African and Afro-Caribbean students, and back in Lagos, she attends a meeting of the "Nigerpolitan Club," a group of people who have recently moved back from England or the U.S. (499). In both spaces, Ifemelu lives a "transcultural" existence that leaves her feeling excluded from the national culture around her. In America, this is manifested most explicitly in her interactions with her African-American classmates, and in Lagos, she feels this defamiliarization and estrangement most strongly after her return home. Readers discover that "she ached with an almost unbearable emotion that she could not name. It was nostalgic and melancholy, a beautiful sadness for the things she had missed and the things she would never know" (478). Such a feeling estranges Ifemelu from those around her, and yet, it also puts her in a position to critique both spaces. These critiques appear most often within the entries that Ifemelu posts to her blog while she is in America.

[16] To explore this idea in terms of colonial discourse, it is useful to briefly compare Adichie's novel with Chinua Achebe's oft-canonized *Things Fall Apart*, which was published during Nigeria's transition towards independence. Although *Things Fall Apart* does chart instances of cultural clash, it does not depict the transcultural awareness of Adichie's novel. The comparison between these two novels is significant because while they might both be considered part of a homogenized "world literature" canon, only Adichie's could be placed within Ette's "Literatures-without-a-fixed-Abode." It would be difficult to place Adichie within a national literature canon; however, by focusing on an aesthetics of movement, we can see the usefulness of Ette's framework for contemporary literary works that might be less usefully termed "world" literature.

Contrary to Anjaria and Levine, I read the blog as a fundamental feature of the novel's structure. And once again, the notion of a fixed-point time loop provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the blog's position within the overarching structure of the novel. The blog posts interrupt the novel flow, even if briefly, to offer a seemingly disconnected rumination on the roll that race plays within American culture. At first, the blog posts have a singular, ephemeral quality to the them, but as the novel continues, they begin to lose some of that singularity. In fact, these breaks in the narrative are at once disorienting *and re*orienting. Disorienting because they disrupt the novel form—by abruptly shifting tone, genre, and font. Through this disruption, the blog posts also perform an important reorientation: readers become more acutely aware of their own surroundings, including those surroundings that are most conditioned by an uneven, world-system. Indeed, the posts call into question those cultural behaviors and norms surrounding race in the United States that risk becoming invisibly ingrained within societal structures and expectations. As one character puts it, the blog posts push people "out of their comfort zone," explicitly naming the ways that race and racist ideology infiltrate American systems (403). When we first encounter the blog posts, they forcibly disrupt our reading experience, break into the main narrative frame, not only stalling Ifemelu's story, but also resisting novelist uniformity. By breaking into the progressive-narrative structure of the novel, the blog posts essentially perform the same aesthetic function of the time-traveler, but they do so by interrupting an otherwise predictable linear-progressive narrative.

Even as the novel attempts to avoid being pigeonholed into a particular category—as "world literature" or as a part of a national framework—the blogs represent a form of writing that actually does defy categorization. The posts are not bound by the covers of a book or restrained to a single time or space. While the blog posts initially appear out of context, they

actually prepare or preview for the reader those scenes that have yet to come. Like a feedback loop, the blog adds to the circular structure of the novel: readers are introduced to Ifemelu's reflections about race early in the novel only to encounter the narrative context for those reflections many pages later. Thus, the blog posts provide both knowledge of the past and knowledge of the future. Many of the posts are presented out of context, which forces the reader to engage with them in the moment. However, as the context for each post is introduced later in the novel, the posts are repositioned within a situation of Ifemelu's past. Meanwhile, towards the end of the novel, Ifemelu terminates the blog, but sends an archived copy to Obinze that he will read several months later (464). In a way, blog posts are themselves outside of material history because they exist outside the standard temporal taxonomy of past, present, and future: they are not fixed to a single point in time but can exist instead in all three temporal dimensions at once.

The blog might also be read as an embedded form of Ette's movement-oriented category of literature. Throughout the text, the blog is in constant circulation, and it is read by people all over the world. For some posts, Ifemelu will never meet her readers or even know that they exist at all. While for others, the comments reveal something explicit about the audience and their engagement with the text.[17] As a form of contemporary written discourse, the blog also embodies that tension between multiplicity and simultaneity that Burges and Elias suggest epitomizes the condition of the present. The posts appear in and across continents and time zones, on different

[17] For instance, after Ifemelu moves back to Lagos, she starts a new blog called "The Small Redemptions of Lagos." After a deeply poetic rumination on sights outside her window, Ifemelu receives a comment that simply says: "This is like poetry." Though the comment is anonymous, Ifemelu knows that it is from Obinze (584). Another time, after posting a story about "the expensive lifestyles of some young women in Lagos," Ifemelu is surprised by the number of women who say in the comments how much they can relate to the story, but she is equally surprised that her friend Ranyinudo is convinced that Ifemelu's audience is going to know that the blog post is talking about her (520).

devices, and in different contexts. The most obvious example of this is a scene where one of the blog posts is read aloud within a room of Ifemelu's close acquaintances. After Paula informs Ifemelu that she is having her students read the blog post titled, "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking about Blackness" for class, someone in the room suggests that they would also like to read the post. So, Paula pulls up the post on her phone and reads it aloud to the entire group (403-406). Unlike many of the other posts in the novel, this one appears in the middle of a chapter, directly intersecting with Ifemelu's remembrance of the dinner party. This scene of communal reading offers a glimpse of the many different ways that individuals and groups interact with the virtual content. Those in attendance at the party receive the post as a live-reading, but Paula also mentions that her students interacted with the post in the past as part of an assignment for class. In this way, *Americanah* demonstrates how the immaterial, virtual nature of the blog makes simultaneous readings and multiple forms of engagement possible.

Throughout much of *Americanah*, Ifemelu is reading a particular novel: Jean Toomer's *Cane.* At one point, a young woman points to the book asks: "It's a novel, right? What's it about?" (233). Rather than answer, Ifemelu wonders why people even ask the question to begin with – "as if a novel had to be about one thing" (233). We might ponder a similar question in relation to both in relation to both Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Adichie's own *Americanah.* Rather than simply ask what these novels are about, we might instead consider *what they do*. In other words, we might consider their content in relation to their innovations in form. In incorporating a time-travel aesthetic within realistic fiction, both novels estrange readers from contemporary reality, challenging them to confront elements of the world-system that produce inequality and oppression. And in both cases, they demonstrate a literary space where it is possible to write

between worlds—between genres, between cultures, between canons, and in some cases, between time and space. And it is this *betweenness* that reveals new critical understandings about individual and collective experiences.

Chapter 4
Autofiction and Science Fictionality in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

> --"We are now living in a science-fiction novel that we are all writing together."
> ~Kim Stanley Robinson[1]

Early in Robert Zemeckis's 1985 film *Back to the Future,* the young protagonist, Marty McFly, inadvertently finds himself in a time machine on a one-way trip back to the year 1955. Upon first arriving in the past, Marty crashes into a barn, startling awake a family from a nearby farmhouse. The father, slowly approaching the DeLorean-turned-time-machine and with his shot gun raised, questions: "What is it? An Airplane?" He is quickly corrected by his son, who, after handing his dad a colorful copy of the pulp magazine, "Tales from Space," simply asserts, "That is no airplane."

I begin with this seemingly random scene of Zemeckis's well-known film for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it offers a very literal conceptualization of science-fictionality at work in the fictional world of *Back to the Future*. As the time machine—the classic novum of most time-travel fiction—erupts into the world of 1955, the characters turn to science fiction as a way to make sense of their new reality. At the same time, *Back to the Future* serves as an important intertext for the novel at the heart of my discussion in this chapter: Ben Lerner's *10:04.* The title of Lerner's novel refers to that climactic moment within Zemeckis's film when lightning strikes Hill Valley's central clocktower creating enough raw energy to send Marty and his DeLorean back to the future. Despite its science-fictional title, Ben Lerner's *10:04* is not

[1] Taken from a 2017 article in *Nature* that collected brief columns from science fiction writers from around the world. See Beukes et. al "Science Fiction When the Future is Now: Six authors parse the implications of our unhinged era for their craft." *Nature,* vol. 552, 2017, pp. 330.

often read in relation to science fiction. The categorical label most attributed to Lerner's text is that of autofiction, a genre that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. I, however, see Lerner's science-fictional title as an invitation: *10:04* invites us to consider what reading the novel, and perhaps autofiction in general, through the lens of SF makes possible.

In this chapter, I use the term autofiction to describe novels that collapse the distinction between author and narrator while simultaneously chronicling the writing of themselves. A close relative to both metafiction and the autobiographical novel, autofiction does not fit definitively within either category. Ruth Margalit usefully describes these novels as "an X-ray, or a negative, of the book-within-a-book device." These novels tempt readers to ponder the relationship between fact and fiction, and unlike traditional metafiction, which tends to focus attention on *writing*, the autofictional texts that I have in mind foreground the act of *reading.* As Maraglit explains:

> [T]he author details the existence of *another* novel – one that, for the most part, hasn't been completed and perhaps never will. [...] In this sense, the act of writing about not writing has a direct relation to the reader, not a self-referential one. The author, who struggles and fails to produce, doesn't have the upper hand here. The reader – entrusted with the entire frustrating process – does.[2]

In what follows, I propose we read the formal complexities of autofiction through the lens of *formal estrangement*. I offer an extended reading of Ben Lerner's *10:04,* which demonstrates how the autofictional novel's form estranges readers from those expectations that they bring with them to the reading process. This formal estrangement destabilizes the novel form, calling to

[2] In her review of *10:04* for *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Ruth Margalit refers to these texts as a "a new tradition of sorts," one "of Writing About Not Writing Something Else."

question the realist novel's ability to narrate the normalized conditions of estrangement that now characterize the contemporary world. My reading will also return us to the genre of science fiction, suggesting that it is precisely because of *10:04*'s science-fictionality that the novel, and perhaps autofiction in general, offers an ideal representational apparatus for the emerging sub-genre of climate fiction.

Ben Lerner's *10:04* is just one example of a recent trend within contemporary literary production towards autofiction.[3] Coined in 1977 by French writer Serge Doubrovsky, the term describes a genre of texts that straddle the boundary between autobiography and fiction.[4] Most critical attention to the genre has remained within the context of French literary production, and these discussions tend to situate autofiction in relation to autobiography and to what Phillipe Lejeune has theorized as "the autobiographical pact."[5] According to Lejeune, autobiographical texts initiate a "pact" between reader and writer: an explicit understanding about the correlation between the author and the protagonist of a narrative. In Lejeune's reading, the *title page* of the text often initiates such a pact (13-14). The title either announces the fictionality of the narrative with the subtitle "a novel," thereby creating a *fictional* pact, or the title initiates an

[3] Here, I am thinking of Karl Ove Knausgârd's *My Struggle* (Six novels, 2009-2011), Charles Yu's *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and Mohsin Hamid's *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) to name a few.

[4] According to Claudia Gronemann, the term originally appeared on the cover of Doubrovsky's novel *Fils*, "where it was defined as 'Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement reels; si l'on veut *autofiction'* ['Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like'], which for Doubrovsky was no contradiction." (241, translation Gronemann's). Groneman goes on to explain that Doubrovsky's works employ a "poetics of an existential writing-about-the-self that developed out of psychoanalysis," which explains why self-writing, for Doubrovsky, is always inherently an autofictional practice (241).

[5] For a useful summary of this critical conversation see Rosmarin Elfriede Heidenreich's *Literary Impostors: Canadian Autofiction of the Early Twentieth Century* 15-16.

autobiographical pact by attributing the narrative to the authorial identity of the individual whose name appears on the cover (Lejeune 13-14). Autofiction, however, deliberately questions both by *appearing* to represent referential characters and events while refusing to disclose or make any claims to the veracity of those real-world referents. Autofictional writers accomplish such a task by "fictionalizing the biographical self and inserting true, or ostensibly real, biographical elements into fiction" (Kim 560). Thus, autofiction teases the reader by offering a narrative that *might* be true but is decidedly not.

This deliberate refusal of the autobiographical pact distinguishes the fictional genre from autobiography; but, autofiction is also distinct from another even more closely related genre—that of the autobiographical novel. According to Lut Missine, "Shortly after the term 'autofiction' had been introduced by Serge Doubrovsky in France in the 1970s, it quickly spread throughout the French-speaking world and seemed to eradicate the older and often criticized term 'autobiographical novel.'" (468). For many French critics, the distinction between the two genres—autofiction and autobiographical novel—is not significant enough to justify autofiction's value as a unique signifier. Indeed, if defined in its broadest sense—as a literary text that contains both a fictional and an autobiographical pact—a work of autofiction seems very similar to an autobiographical novel. Missine, however, offers a narrower definition of autofiction that I find useful for capturing the genre's distinctive features; as she puts it: "[A]utofiction is a special kind of fictional narration in which the protagonist who bears the name of the author exists in an evidently fictional world" (469). Whereas an autobiographical novel might be said to create a fictionalized account of a real-life, an autofictional one places a seemingly real-life in a fictionalized world. Admittedly similar, autofiction represents a shift in focus. While the autobiographical novel remains invested in exploring individual subjectivity

and the construction of the self, autofiction foregrounds the fictional world of the author's creation. In other words, autofiction imagines the construction of individual subjectivity within the context of *a new world*.

With its emphasis on an author-protagonist's response to a wholly fictional world, autofiction actually mirrors the formal tactics of much science fiction. Both are genres invested in the creation of fictional worlds. Juxtaposing science fiction with "mundane" or realist fiction, Samuel R. Delany explains: "The writer of mundane fiction tells a story against a more or less vividly evoked section of the given world [...] The SF writer, however, *creates* a world—which is harmonized with (or contracted with, or played off against) both the story's characters *and* the given world in a much freer way" ("Some Presumptions" 29). This shift in focus makes science fiction a more inherently "writerly" genre than traditional realism because "[t]he reader of the SF story must create a world that operates by new laws for each SF story read" ("Some Presumptions" 29). This extra burden of creative energy causes some people to struggle to comprehend SF. Indeed, it is much more difficult to get "lost" in the world of a science fictional novel because the reader must continually oscillate between their world and the science-fictional one. Although autofictional texts are still set in a world that is ostensibly the same time and make-up as our own, that world does not recede from view in the fashion of traditional realism. In preventing the reader from sliding in behind a conventionally fictional protagonist, autofiction keeps its fictionality on display, forcing readers into a similar kind of oscillation between the fictional and the nonfictional. Ben Lerner's *10:04* is a useful text with which to begin a consideration of the similarities between these two genres because, as I will show, it is an autofictional novel that is deeply engaged with science fiction. While the first part of this chapter

with examine the formal structure of *10:04* and its relationship to autofiction, the second part will consider the novel's engagement with science fiction.

The Autofictional fictionality of Ben Lerner's *10:04*

Ben Lerner's *10:04* follows a self-conscious, poet-turned-novelist as he struggles to write his second novel. Within the first few pages, readers encounter this author-narrator and his agent enjoying a celebratory meal, and the opening scene sets up the context for the novel to come:

> A few months before, the agent had emailed me that she believed I could get a 'strong six-figure' advance based on a story of mine that had appeared in *The New Yorker*; all I had to do was promise to turn it into a novel. I managed to draft an earnest if indefinite proposal and soon there was a competitive auction among the major New York houses and we were eating cephalopods in what would become the opening scene. (4)

This passage offers a summative glimpse of both the central plot and the formal structure of *10:04*. The novel's protagonist, an author who happens to be named Ben, confronts the pressure of having received an advance for a novel he has yet to write. More than just concern over the daunting task of writing a novel, the author seems particularly apprehensive about the thought of such a large investment being made on the future. Such apprehension is unsurprising given that the two other plotlines, which intersect the author's novel writing, are similarly preoccupied with the instable nature of futurity. On the one hand, the author's best friend Alex has asked him to act as a sperm donor so that she can have a child. At the same time, the author has recently been diagnosed with Marfan Syndrome, a dangerous and potentially fatal heart condition, which could put an end to his life at any moment. Importantly, this opening passage also reveals that we, the

readers, are in fact reading the very novel that the author has been commissioned to write. Although subtle, this metafictional moment represents just one of the many instances throughout the novel that the author-narrator draws the reader's attention to their own positionality as the consumer of his text.

Rather than construct a novel that follows a singular and conventionally linear formal structure, Lerner instead produces a narrative with a structure that demands to be noticed. The novel is divided into five parts, each containing self-referential texts or experiences that correspond to Ben Lerner's own life. Parts One, Three, and Five loosely follow the relationship between the "author" and his best friend, Alex. Readers become privy to the struggles that each character faces, from the mundane to the serious. Parts Two and Four, however, formally disrupt this overarching plot, calling to question the very fictionality of the novel. These parts incorporate previously published work and easily verified experiences of the "real" Ben Lerner. For instance, Part Two offers a verbatim reprint of Ben Lerner's short story "The Golden Vanity," which appeared in a June 2012 issue of *The New Yorker*. Similarly, Part Four follows "the author" to a residency in Marfa, TX where he completes a poem rather than the novel he is supposed to be writing, and these events in Part Four loosely correspond to actual experiences of Ben Lerner (He completed a Lannan Foundation residency in Marfa, TX during the summer of 2011, and the poem included within Part Four closely resembles Lerner's 2011 poem, "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also").[6] The integration of these autobiographical moments into the middle parts of the novel blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, equating the author-

[6] Lerner's poem, "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also" appeared in *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion*, no. 6, 2013, and it was also reprinted in his 2016 collection *No Art: Poem*s. My references to the poem within this chapter come from the latter reprint edition. Later in this chapter, I will discuss Lerner's use of this poem within *10:04* in more detail.

protagonist of the novel with the actual author of "The Golden Vanity" and "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also," an author who readers know to be Ben Lerner. Coupled with the author's disclosure on the first page that the novel at the center of the plot will in fact be the one the reader is currently consuming, the formal structure of *10:04* thoroughly disrupts the conventional narrative apparatus of the novel. Such disruption calls to mind the now familiar structures of metafiction; but, as Ruth Margalit suggests, "rather than stressing the distance between himself and the reader by alluding to the artificiality of his novel—meta-fiction's very conceit—Lerner tries to nullify this distance altogether: he lets the reader in on his novel's innerworkings and on the project he abandoned in the process." Put differently, Lerner uses formal estrangement to turn the novel inside-out, exposing the narrative's formal construction, and revealing the author's own biographical links to his fiction.

While some critics read the novel's lack of "an overarching stabilizing plot," and its movement between poetry, prose, and fiction as evidence of its *formlessness,* I consider the same features as producing a novel of formal-excess.[7] The novel's form does not recede from view behind a single plotline, but instead remains excessively present, continually disrupting the reader's engagement with the text. Whether through authorly asides, direct addresses to the reader, incorporation of images, or movement between written discourses, the novel contains various methods of formal estrangement. As we have seen, the novel estranges readers via its overarching formal structure, but at times, it also does so at the level of the sentence. For instance, when describing Marfa, the town in Texas where the narrator completed a five-week residence, he recalls:

[7] Clare Ralph's discussion of the novel's so-called "formlessness" offers a useful counterpoint to my theorization of the novel's repeated instantiation of formal estrangements. See Clare Ralph, "Freedom and Formlessness: Ben Lerner's *10:04* and the Affective Historical Present."

> I remember the address (you can drag the 'pegman' icon onto the Google map and walk around the neighborhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate window now) because I had to have my beta-blockers mailed there twice during the residency, pills I take to reduce the vigor of my heart's contractions, and which have the paradoxical effect of causing a minor tremor in my hand (163).

Here, the parenthetical interrupts the narrative description, both directly addressing the readers—"you can"—while simultaneously drawing the author into the novel—"I'm doing that in a separate window now." This passage also perfectly captures the intermingling of fact and fiction that is characteristic of Lerner's autofictional text. The metafictional parenthetic phrase joins together a known fact with a supposed fiction, calling into question the veracity of both. It doesn't take much for readers to verify that Lerner did in fact attend a 5-week residency in Marfa, TX, and it is reasonable to assume that he remembers the address. However, here his *reason* for remembering is presumably a fictional one. By reassigning the biographical detail onto his author-protagonist, Lerner succeeds in estranging readers using the formal construction of a *single* sentence. All at once, readers are reminded that they are reading a novel about an author named Ben, which was written by Ben Lerner, an author who also attended a residency in Marfa, and who may or may not be suffering from a fatal heart condition. The novel tempts readers to fall into the autobiographical pact, while also reminding them that they are in fact consuming a narrative created by the author—both the fictional one and the factual one. We might say that while the novel traditionally asserts its fictionality by emphasizing its status as a unique creation of the author's imagination, Lerner's text resists this feature of fictionality by suggesting that his "novel" might be about someone in particular—himself.

Here, it is worth turning briefly to Catherine Gallagher's work on fictionality and the history of the novel to recall the traditional relationship between authorship, originality, and fictionality. As discussed in the previous chapter, in "The Rise of Fictionality" Gallagher identifies an important shift in the etymology of the word "fiction" in the eighteenth century that corresponds to a change in novelistic discourse. In Gallagher's analysis the status of fiction went from denoting those novels that simply purported to be fiction so as to mask real identities to those that consisted of pure invention ("Rise of Fictionality" 338-339).[8] In *Nobody's Story,* Gallagher nuances this analysis, linking this changing notion of fictionality specifically to the way that writers fashioned their protagonists within a newly emergent discourse of the novel. "The most radical and least explored distinction between prenovelistic and novelist narratives" Gallagher claims, "is that the former often claim particular extra-textual reference for their proper names and the latter normally do not" (*Nobody's Story* 165). In other words, as the title of Gallagher's study suggests, while the prenovelist narratives purported to be about *somebody*, the novelistic fictions from the middle of the eighteenth century onward were about *nobody* in particular (*Nobody's Story* 165).[9] And it was this discourse of fictionality that would dominate the nineteenth-century realist novel and beyond.

[8] For a fuller discussion of this shift in the meaning of fiction, see my elaboration in Chapter 3.

[9] That the novelistic discourse of Gallagher's analysis highlights the tendency for novelists to write about nobody *in particular* is important. This is not to suggest that eighteen-century novelists reverted back to a model of fictional representation that privileged universal or "everyman" type of characters. In fact, Gallagher's point aligns with Ian Watt's emphasis on the realist novel's use of proper names to establish characters as "completely individualized entities." Gallagher nuances Watt's analysis by pointing out the fictionality embedded within the novel's shift to proper names. For Watt's discussion of proper names within the realist novel, see Watt's *The Rise of the Novel,* 18-21.

This particular novelistic history—the shift to a dominate practice of writing novels about nobodies—is interesting to consider in relation to Ben Lerner's *10:04* and more generally to the apparent trend towards autofiction within contemporary literary production. What does it mean to revert back to fiction that purports to be about *somebody* as opposed to nobody? In Gallagher's analysis, stories about nobody better facilitated the kind of sympathetic development that was believed to be a positive outcome of reading fiction: "[A]fter all, if we can sympathize with nobody, then we can sympathize with anybody" (*Nobody's Story* 172). More importantly for our discussion here, stories about nobody simultaneously reinforced a new cultural understanding of fictionality itself. "[T]he writers of the first genre to mark itself 'fiction,'" Gallagher explains, "had to teach their readers to presuppose and appreciate fictionality" (*Nobody's Story* 175). In fact, many early novels sought to reeducate readers as to this new nature of fiction: authors had to dispel any assumptions that readers might bring to the novel about the referentiality of the tale. Within the context of contemporary autofiction, this phenomenon reverses: autofiction destabilizes the fictionality normally associated with the novel. By seeming to write about *somebody* rather than nobody, writers of autofiction implore readers *not* to presuppose or assume fictionality—at least not the fictionality normally associated with the realist novel.

How, then, to approach the writing of contemporary fiction? Such is the dilemma presented to the writer and immediately shared with the reader in the opening scene of *10:04*. The opening scene of the novel gives us some sense of the author's planned methodology: in response to his agent's inquiry into how he would expand his short story into a novel, the author *thinks*: "'I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously,' I *should have said*, 'a minor tremor in my hand; I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a world-be

Whitman of the vulnerable grid'" (4, emphasis added). The retrospective nature of this statement is important. It is only after finishing the novel—the one that we are reading—that the author knows that he *should have* described the project in this way. Within the diegetic moment of the agent's asking, the question goes unanswered: it is only through the writing of *10:04* that the author arrives at such a description. What we actually get with *10:04* is the author's struggle to figure out exactly how to write the contemporary novel. As Magalit would say, *10:04* is "writing about not writing." Indeed, the first three-quarters of *10:04* charts the author's failed attempts at accomplishing such a task, and this failure comes precisely because of the author's over-reliance on traditional conventions of literary realism.

For his second novel—the one that does not yet exist—the author plans to rely on a form considered by many to be one of the originating formats for the realist novel—the epistolary form. The plot of the novel-in-progress revolves around an author's plan to fabricate letters between himself and other (recently diseased) authors and then sell the fabricated archive to a library. He explains: "It starts off as a kind of fraud but I imagine he [the author-protagonist] might really get into it, might really feel like he and the dead are corresponding. Like he's a medium. But you wouldn't know, even at the novel's end, if he really planned to sell the letters or if he was just working on an epistolary novel of some sort" (118-119). When read in relation to the history of the novel, the author's turn towards the epistolary form makes sense. Early practitioners of the realist novel turned towards the epistolary form for its ability to capture a more authentic notion of the present-tense. For Samuel Richardson, the turn to letter writing allowed for what he termed a "writing to the minute" technique (qtd in Watt, 192). As Ian Watt explains it, "the use of the epistolary method impels the writer towards producing something that may pass for the spontaneous transcription of the subjective reactions of the protagonists to the

events as they occur" (192). The problem for the author of *10:04* is that the letters that he actually writes for his novel do not offer the instantaneous, spontaneous notion of the present that he desires. This is because they don't exist. "Instead of fabricating the author's epistolary archive, earning my advance," he admits, "I was writing a poem, a weird meditative lyric in which I was sometimes Whitman, and in which the strangeness of the residency itself was the theme" (170). Because of its relationship to fictionality, it is poetry—not the novel—that brings the author closest to a narrative of the present. As he explains: "It occurred to me—not for the first time, but with new force—that part of what I loved about poetry was how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn't obtain, how the correspondence between text and world was less important than the intensities of the poem itself, what possibilities were opened up in the present tense of reading" (170-171). But the author has been paid to write a novel, not a poem. So, eventually he abandons the epistolary novel of fraudulent letters in favor of the novel we are reading, *10:04*, a work of autofiction.

A closer look at this scene of abandonment reinforces my reading of the author's explicit break from the fictionally normally associated with realist tradition—at least the historical tradition theorized by Watt and Gallagher as emerging within the eighteenth century. The author finds himself standing on a platform, staring off into the darkness searching for the "Marfa Lights," bright "glowing spheres" of light that people have reported seeing in the Marfa desert for over a hundred years (192). He never actually sees the lights, but instead, imagines Whitman, "looking out over the East River," thinking of his "impossible dream" to write as an everyman for the future (193). It is standing there, that he makes "if not a pack, a kind of peace" with Whitman, and decides to stop trying to write the novel in the everyman style of Whitman's poetry; he decides *not* to write about nobody in particular (193). As he explains:

> Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an *actual present* alive with multiple futures (193, emphasis added).

Earlier, we learned that the author regarded Whitman's memoir, *Speciman Days*, as a kind of "interesting failure," because in order to write as a sort of "democratic everyman," (like he does in his poems) Whitman is forced to write as "nobody in particular [...] to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a textual commons for the future into which he projects himself" (168). With this in mind, the author's decision to replace his original novel with "the one you're reading now," exemplifies an explicit refusal of Whitman's everyman-persona. Here, the author decides not to write a deliberate fiction but rather "an actual present," one embedded within a fiction. If we read *10:04* as the novel that the author eventually produced – not the novel about literary fraudulence that he began, but the novel about the present – it becomes clear that despite its apparent realism, *10:04* is a novel of full of estrangement.

Throughout *10:04,* the author has a series of interactions with various art forms, and each of these experiences facilitates a moment of estrangement.[10] For instance, early in the novel the author goes to see Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, a 24-hour video installation that was first on exhibit in New York in the winter of 2011.[11] The artwork pieces together a montage of video

[10] This tendency towards artistic encounters is characteristic of Lerner's fiction. His first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) is a novel preoccupied with the search for "profound experiences" of art.

[11] The installation was exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery from January 21-February 19, 2011. See: "Press Release: Christian Marclay The Clock."

clips—various scenes from film and television—that show images of clocks or characters announcing the time. Edited together, these clips serve the dual function of creating an artwork that invites viewers to reflect on the conscious and unconscious temporal patterns of everyday life while simultaneously functioning as a working timepiece. Viewers of *The Clock* are both estranged from time and staring directly at a piece of artwork that is synchronized to real-time so as to offer a near constant reminder of the actual time-of-day. As the narrator recalls from his experience:

> At some point in the second hour of watching with Alex, I noticed she had drifted off, and I surreptitiously checked the time on my phone. Half an hour or so later, I did it again, realizing only then that the gesture was absurd: I was looking away from a clock to a clock. I was a little embarrassed to realize how ingrained this habit of distraction was for me, but decided it revealed something important about the video that I'd forgotten it was telling me the time. (54)

This film of clocks that is also a clock creates a peculiar form of disorientation. For the narrator of *10:04,* the estrangement produced by viewing *The Clock* forces him to confront his own unconscious preoccupation with time itself. The artwork helps the narrator become aware of the way his everyday actions are conditioned, even if unconsciously, by a deeply ingrained desire to know the time. In synchronizing so many narrative experiences of time together, *The Clock* also reveals a corresponding communal adherence to temporal constraints. The author reflects:

> [A]s you spend time with the video, you develop a sense of something like the circadian clock of genre: the hour of 5:00 to 6:00 pm...was dominated by actors leaving work; around noon you could expect an uptick in westerns, in shoot-outs; etc. Marclay had formed a supragenre that made visible our collective,

> unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day—when we expect to kill or fall in love or clean ourselves or eat or fuck or check our watch and yawn (53).

In each of these examples, *The Clock* is effective precisely because it produces estrangement: it makes visible how much individual actions are conditioned by socially constructed norms of appropriate and temporally determined daily activity.

This episode—the author's encounter with Marclay's *The Clock*—becomes even more interesting when read in relation to the formal complexities of *10:04.* In his detailed review of the piece, art critic Daniel Zalewski suggests that Marclay's goal was to produce exactly this sort of "estranged abstraction" (52). According to Zalewski, "Marclay wondered if he could fashion from familiar clips a genuinely unfamiliar film, one with its own logic, rhythm, and aesthetics" (52). While for Marclay, *The Clock*'s peculiar construction results in "an unorthodox anthology of cinema," for the narrator of *10:04*, the viewing of *The Clock* provokes him to consider the importance of *fiction* (52). As the author explains,

> ...while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock*'s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds. I watched time in *The Clock*, but wasn't in it, or I was experiencing time as such, not just having experiences though its medium. As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, *I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction*. When I looked at my watch to see a unit of measure identical to the one displayed on the screen, I was indicating that a distance remained between art and the mundane. (54, emphasis added)

Here, the author seems to be discovering and describing the *effect* produced by formal estrangement. In his engagement with *The Clock*—particularly the relationship between its contents (the film clips themselves) and their arrangement (as synchronized with "the duration of a real minute")—the author "watched time [...] but wasn't in it." It is at this distance, apart from but connected to, that the author is able to enter a space of critical contemplation. Perhaps more interestingly, however, is how this experience draws the narrator to contemplate the "utopian glimmer of fiction." From the author's perspective, *The Clock* allows for a distanced and critically estranged experience of individual and communal experiences of time, but *fiction* offers a space of endless possibility. In viewing *The Clock,* the author is inspired to return to fiction writing. "I think it was while looking from *The Clock* to my cell phone and back again" he reflects, "that I decided to write more fiction—something I'd promised my poet friends I wasn't going to do—and over the next week I began to work on a story, outlining much of it in my notebook while sitting in the theater" (54). This story would become the one published in *The New Yorker*, the seed of the hypothetical novel that the author was celebrating at the beginning of *10:04.* So, at this moment, readers learn the origin story for the novel they are currently holding in their hands.

That the author's encounter with *The Clock* offers readers a window into the formal construction of *10:04* is not surprising given the fact that this episode represents a moment of literary ekphrasis. According to Mack Smith, the novelist history of ekphrasis uses the term to denote "a descriptive scene within the novelistic text in which there is a representation of *any* work of art" (12, emphasis added). [12] These ekphrastic encounters within both poetry *and* fiction

[12] Although I use the term here solely in reference to the detailed descriptions of various artforms—paintings, photographs, films—that are included within the narrative of *10:04*, ekphrasis does not necessarily have to be limited to visual art. It is often discussed as a rhetorical

offer "implicit, didactic commentary upon the narrative within which they are incorporated," but in fiction, they tend *not* to occur in isolation (11; 35). Smith's definition of the so-called "ekphrastic system" is worth quoting at length: "An ekphrasis relates with other ekphrases in a novel to compose a systemic meaning of a text's formal and mimetic norms. Thus an ekphrasis is a sign that achieves meaning like any other sign—in a signifying system of similarities and differences" (35). This notion of an "ekphrastic system," or a series of artistic descriptions that provide critical commentary on the formal construction of the novel in which they exist is particularly useful for interpreting Lerner's *10:04.* Within the novel, the author's engagement with Marclay's video installation is just one of several "scenes" of ekphrasis considered within the novel, and each of these moments serves as an instance of formal estrangement. In other words, the ekphrastic system within *10:04* demonstrates an instance of content mirroring form. As the author reflects on each piece of art, it is the *form* of the work that produces estrangement. And if only for a moment, this estrangement allows the author to experience the world differently, making space to reflect on that difference. Moreover, because these moments are described verbatim within the text, the novel actually reproduces the character's experience of estrangement for the reader. Put differently, the novel didactically reenacts the estrangement so that it is *as if* the reader experienced it as well.

One such scene of ekphrasis occurs during the author's residency in Marfa. A few weeks into the residency, the author finally visits the museum that houses the work of Marfa's famed installation artist, Donald Judd. When he had first seen Judd's work in New York, he had never had "a strong response," but in Marfa, his encounter is much more memorable (178). "Things

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and poetic device. For a general encyclopedic explanation see G.G. Starr, "Ekphrasis," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.*

were different," he explains, "when I was an alien with a residency in the high desert entering a refashioned artillery shed that had once held German prisoners of war" (178) The installation consists of a series of silver, reflective boxes, positioned within an artillery shed that has been refashioned to include vaulted ceilings and walls of "continuous squared and quartered windows" (179). It is not so much the installation itself that leaves an impression on the author, but the *effect.* As he explains:

> Although the material facts of the work were easy to enumerate...they were obliterated by the effect. The work was set in time, changing quickly because the light was changing [...] All those windows opening onto open land, the reflective surfaces, the differently articulated interiors, some which seemed to contain a blurry image of the landscape within them—all combined to collapse my sense of inside and outside, a power the work had never had for me in the white-cube galleries of New York. At one point I detected a moving blur on the surface of a box and I turned to the windows to see two pronghorn antelope rushing across the desert plain (179).

The effect of the installation is one of both defamiliarization and estrangement. The work offers a reflection of reality that renders that reality strange and different. However, reality also reacts to and changes the impression of the work of art. The viewer is formally estranged while also estranged from the form. This double-version of estrangement extends to what is perhaps the most unconventional scene of ekphrasis captured by the novel.

The most important scene of ekphrasis is one that occurs just before the author decides to discard the epistolary novel in favor of *10:04.* This time, the ekphrasis appears within the poem that the author is composing during his residency. Unlike the other ekphrastic scenes, the

estrangement produced by the poem does not exist within the diegetic level of the story. Instead, the estrangement is felt only by the reader. Indeed, the work of art described by the author's poem is *10:04* itself. Although the lines of the poem appear scattered throughout Part IV of the novel, all of them capture scenes that describe previous moments within the novel. For instance, a few lines echo a passage I quoted earlier: "I am an alien here with a residency, light/ alien to me, true hawks staring from the trees/ at my footfall on gravel, sun-burnt from reading/ *Specimen Days*..." (171). The entire poem works in this way, capturing poetic glimpses of moments encountered earlier in prose. In this way, the poem works as its own ekphrastic system, offering critical commentary on the form of the novel itself. Taken together, all of these scenes suggest a novel that breaks from the conventions of realism in favor of an aesthetic more centered on estrangement.[13] While I am reluctant to begin a definitional argument about whether or not *10:04* should be considered a work of science fiction, I do think it is useful to consider more explicitly the text's direct engagement with SF. Such an analysis reveals that although we may choose not to read Lerner's text *as* SF, we might alternatively suggest that in its adoption of science-fictionality, *10:04* seemingly reads *like* science fiction.[14]

[13] I should note that the estranging nature of the poem extends beyond even what I have described here. The lines included within *10:04* come from a previously published poem by Ben Lerner called "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also." The poem was first published in 2011, so for those familiar with the poem, I would guess that their first encounter with *10:04* felt a bit like déjà vu. For those who read the novel first (like me), the experience of reading the poem is quite odd as well. The best way to describe it would be as a poetic rendering of the novel. It is beyond the scope of my analysis here, but much more could be said about the relationship between the novel and the poem.

[14] One of the other literary forms embedded within *10:04* is a children's picture book. A narrative that the author composes with the young boy he has been tutoring, the book offers a revisionist history of the Brontosaurus. The book serves as a sort of historical corrective, narrating the way in which paleontologists miscatalogued this particular species of dinosaur and the misinformation was taken up and spread rapidly through cultural imaginations. While we

Estrangement and science-fictionality in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

Despite its apparent realism, *10:04* is a text that is deeply engaged *with* science fiction. Within Lerner's text, science fiction is an absent presence, always on the margins, and periodically entering into the novel's form and content. In short, *10:04* can also be read with an eye towards its science-fictionality. And when read through this perspective, it becomes clear that Lerner's novel uses science fiction and science-fictional aesthetics as a way to make sense of the present.

As in my previous chapter, I invoke the concept of science-fictionality to capture both the use of science fiction as a heuristic device and as a collection of literary techniques characteristic of science fiction. Recall that for Csicsery-Ronay Jr., science-fictionality captures a kind of science-fictional awareness that coincides with the rapidly changing social conditions that result from accelerated technological development. As the social and material conditions of the world shift, science fiction becomes an important tool for making sense of contemporary reality. As Csicsery-Ronay puts it: "It is *from sf's* thesaurus of images that we draw many of our metaphors and models for understanding our technologized world, and it is *as sf* that many of our impressions of technology-aided desire and technology-riven anxiety are processed back into works of the imagination" (*Seven Beauties* 2, emphasis added). Science-fictionality functions within Ben Lerner's *10:04* in each of these ways. Throughout the novel, characters repeatedly turn to SF as way to understand and articulate events—whether mundane or extraordinary—happening around them. Lerner also employs a formal aesthetic that relies on science-fictionality. Indeed, reading *10:04* through the lens of SF reveals a text that collapses distinctions

might read *10:04* as a novel seemingly *becoming* science fiction, the picture book documents a related subversion of this process: a scientific fact *becomes* a fiction produced by science.

between literary and novelistic genre categories and exposes the various forms of science-fictional estrangement that have begun to permeate contemporary fiction *and* reality.

Characters throughout *10:04* repeatedly invoke science-fictional images or metaphors to help make sense of the world. For instance, throughout the text, characters routinely refer to figurations of the "alien" or "time-traveler" to explain otherwise inexplicable modes of feeling or situations of dislocation. While the concept of *alien-ness* or *alienation* does not necessarily refer to the science-fictional notion of a being from outer-space, in *10:04*, the term often *does* invoke this science-fictional meaning. On the very first page of the novel, after eating "baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death," the author describes the peculiar sensations provoked by this unusual culinary experience: "We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited *an alien intelligence*, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me" (3). Later, while working on an art project with the young boy he tutors, the author describes "an increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes *an alien artifact*, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration" (13-14). While at other moments, the author invokes the concept of alienation to simply describe situations of strangeness, these initial examples condition the reader to an awareness of alienness as also science-fictional in nature. Indeed, throughout the rest of the novel, the author describes everything from the natural environment (74) to mundane objects (163), works of art (152, 180), Brooklyn architecture (236), and even himself (178) as *alien.* By the end of his residency in

Marfa, this terminology has seeped into his own art as he uses the concept to structure several stanzas of his autobiographical poem (171, 193).

In the same fashion, Lerner invokes the concept of time-travel in a number of very literal and metaphorical ways throughout the novel. While some of these moments are in relation to Robert Zemeckis's film *Back to the Future* (more on this important intertext shortly), most of the references to time-travel within Lerner's text relate to the way characters *feel* as they move through time. For example, after that narrator stumbles upon "a small cobblestone street that dead-ended unexpectedly" in Brooklyn Heights, readers are told: "some conspiracy of brickwork and chill air and gaslight gave him the momentary sense of having traveled back in time, or of distinct times being overlaid, temporalities interleaved" (67). While this metaphorical reference to time travel is not unusual for a work of literary fiction, it is Lerner's repeated use of the metaphor that makes time-travel a strong presence in the novel. Indeed, just a few pages later, sitting in the doctor's office, the author rattles of the list of symptoms he has been instructed to watch for as a sign that his medical condition as worsened: "Headaches, disordered speech, weakness, visual disturbances, nausea, numbness, paralysis. Prosopagnosia, Pareidolia. The softening sky reflected in the water. Silver but appearing rose gold in that light. *The momentary sense of having traveled back in time*" (74, emphasis added). As before, these references continue to multiply, referring to bar décor (135-136), character motivation (118), and even a possible plotline for his future novel (157). What is most interesting about these science fictional references is not simply that they exist, but that they exist in equal proportion or in some cases alongside other more "realistic" frames of reference. Within the world of Lerner's novel, science fiction is just one of many contemporary art forms that facilitate the author's engagement with the world.

This tendency to flatten hierarchies between science fictional and other forms of art is perhaps most apparent in the novel's repeated invocation of Zemeckis's 1985 film, *Back to the Future*. As previously mentioned, the novel's title is a direct reference to the film: 10:04 is the exact moment when time-travel back to the future becomes possible. The film also enters into action and form of the novel in a number of other ways as well. Within the first ten pages of the novel, Lerner's author is reminded of *Back to the Future* as he stands in front of Jules Bastien-Lapage's painting, *Joan of Arc*. "Instead of grasping branches or leaves," the author observes, Joan's hand "seems to dissolve" (9). This "dissolving hand," makes him think of "the photograph Marty carries in *Back to the Future,* crucial movement of my youth: as Marty's time-traveling disrupts the prehistory of his family, he and his siblings begin to fade from the snapshot" (9). While in *Back to the Future,* Marty's dissolving hand represents an erasure of the future, in the Joan of Arc painting, "it's a presence, not an absence, that eats away at her hand: she's being pulled into the future" (9). This juxtaposition highlights the competing forms of temporality associated with mythic and science fictional works of art, but it also captures the author's own uncertainty about this future. While the mythic representation of Joan of Arc represents a fixed and immutable future, the science fictional world of Marty McFly suggests a future that has yet to be decided, one that could even cease to exist at all. That the author turns to science fiction in this moment, both to help him understand Lapage's painting, but also as a way to process the possibilities of his own future offers further evidence of the novel's engagement with science-fictionality.

The novel is also bookended by two different viewings of the Zemeckis's *Back to the Future*.[15] The first occurs while the author waits out a hurricane with Alex. Projecting the movie on the wall in the apartment, the author tells us:

> I plugged earbuds into the storm radio and put one in my left ear and listened to the weather reports while Marty traveled back to 1955—the year, incidentally, nuclear power first lit up a town: Arco Idaho, also home to the first meltdown in 1961—and then worked his way back to 1985, when I was six and the Kansas City Royals won the series [...] In the movie they lack plutonium to power the time-traveling car, whereas in real life it's seeped into the Fukushima soil; *Back to the Future* was ahead of its time. As I watched the silent film I began to worry about the Indian Point reactors just upriver (22).

Superimposed upon the action of *Back to the Future,* the weather report seamlessly integrates into the science-fictional world of the film. In the earlier scene, the author turned to SF in order to make sense of his present, but here, the relationship is reversed: the events within the film prompt the author to make connections and correlations to his own reality. The second viewing occurs at the very end of the novel, as they prepare for yet another anticipated super-storm:

> ...we got into bed and projected *Back to the Future* on the wall [...] Branches scraped against the windows, casting their shadows in the 1980s, the 1950s; a couple of plastic trash cans were blown down the street, and rain hit the skylight

[15] Pieter Vermeulen points out an alternative reading of the text's references to *Back to the Future* suggesting a double-meaning to the phrase "back to the future" as also referencing the positionality of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, another of the novel's explicit intertexts. See: Pieter Vermeulen's "How should a Person be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future."

> hard enough that it sounded like hail. By the time the storm made landfall, Marty was teaching Chuck Berry how to play rock and roll in the past [...] when I woke, I walked to the window, it was still raining hard, but the yellow of the streetlamps revealed a mundane scene; a few large branches had fallen, but no trees. We never lost power. Another historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time (230).

Whereas during the first storm, the science-fictional world of Marty McFly seems prescient to the external stimuli of the author's world, this second viewing suggests a much different scene. Here, the presence of the superstorm has become normalized, overshadowed by the disappointment of "another historic storm [that] had failed to arrive" (230). Surprisingly though, the scene referenced from *Back to the Future* does still resonate with the after effects of the second storm. Indeed, like Marty, oblivious to the ramifications of his intervention within the musical history of the past, the author and Alex are oblivious to their own privileged place within Brooklyn. Shortly after this passage, the author realizes that the storm had arrived, "just not for us" (230). While at first glance these references to science fictional texts, concepts, and forms of estrangement might seem like inconsequential aspects of Lerner's fictional world, I want to suggest that it is precisely because of their ubiquitous that they demand to be noticed. Throughout *10:04* characters repeatedly turn to SF to help make sense of everyday encounters. Moreover, SF is placed alongside other works of art, emphasizing that where the realist novel fails, the estranging aesthetics of SF seem to succeed.

Autofiction, Science fiction, and climate fiction

In *The Great Derangement,* novelist and critic Amitav Ghosh offers a diagnosis and critique of the contemporary literary mainstream for seeming to lack the imaginative frameworks needed to address the ever-deepening and global crisis of climate change. "The mere mention of the subject" Ghosh writes "is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel" (7). Ghosh's main concern with science fiction and the basis for his contention that "the Anthropocene resists science fiction" is that, in his view, science fiction focuses on the future, on other times and other places, on worlds other than our own. But the Anthropocene, he warns, "is precisely not an imagined 'other' world apart from ours" (72). While Ghosh's discussion of science fiction warrants further engagement, his point is less about furthering a divide between so-called literary fiction and science fiction than it is a call for contemporary writers to find new ways to represent, address, and imagine the climate crisis within their fiction. Ghosh's call is an important one, and it becomes even more interesting when read in relation to Rebecca Evan's suggestion that we consider the Anthropocene itself as akin to science fiction.[16] "Terms such as 'Anthropocene,'" she posits, "produce estrangement by positing the hegemonic and imperialist history of western modernity as *itself* a fabulation (and a dangerous and inaccurate one at that)" (485). She goes on: "Climate change periodization does not depict an other and unfamiliar world; it depicts our own world as something other than we thought it was. It depicts the strangeness of the stories that modernity has told (about) itself, estranging us from where we thought we lived by announcing our actual location in an

[16] For the full reading, see Rebecca Evans, "Nomenclature, Narrative, and Novum: 'The Anthropocene' and/as Science Fiction."

unfamiliar world" (485). Put differently, the idea of the Anthropocene estranges us from an understanding of our own history, and thus, exposes the fictionality of that history. With this in mind, I can not help but think that there seems to be something similar about the fictionality associated with autofiction, climate fiction, and science fiction. In each genre, the focus shifts from the fictional protagonist to the fictional world of the author's creation. In each case, the work reveals to the reader an alternative vision of reality. And with *10:04,* Lerner offers readers a unique intersection of all three modes of fiction.

The vast majority of critics read *10:04* within the context of literary realism. In particular, the novel is often included on lists cataloguing a newly emerging category of literary fiction—"climate fiction" or "cli-fi"—that seeks to engage in questions concerning the climate crisis. Such readings tend to stem partly from the fact that the novel is bookended by scenes of extreme weather. Most readers take the novel's opening and closing storm scenes as explicit references to Hurricane Irene and Hurricane Sandy, two storms that made landfall in New York in 2011 and 2012 respectively; this assumption, however, is never *completely* verified by the text itself. While the first storm is indicated to be Irene—the narrator quotes from a radio broadcast which references Irene being downgraded before making landfall (23)—Lerner does not name the second storm. On the surface, such a detail might seem inconsequential, but when read in relation to the novel's conclusion, this absence becomes a bit more curious. Unable to secure a taxi or take the subway because of the storm, the author and Alex are forced to walk from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn. At first, this particular walk is narrated to the reader in past tense: they "passed City Hall," "approached the Brooklyn Bridge," "had already walked seven miles" etc. However, although the past tense walk through New York stretches across several pages, in the last two paragraphs of the novel, the prose abruptly shifts to the future tense:

> In Brooklyn *we will catch* the B63 and take it up Atlantic. After a few stops, *I will stand* and offer my seat to an elderly woman with two large houseplants in black plastic bags. *My feet will ache* only then, my knees stiffen a little. A snake plant, a philodendron. Everything *will be* as it had been. Then, even though it would sound improbable in fiction, the woman with the plants *will turn* to Alex and say: Are you expecting? *She will explain* there is a certain glow. *She'll guess* it is a girl (239, emphasis added).

What might this abrupt switch from past to future tense signify? We might read this final scene as shifting into prognostic myth or science fiction. Is this a future that *will* happen, whether we want it to or not? Or, is it a future that *has not* happen *yet*?[17] In other words, is it the future of Joan of Arc or Marty McFly?

While science fiction has long been exploring the social and material effects of climate change, *10:04* tends to be viewed as a form of climate fiction distinct from science fiction.[18] In this reading, *10:04* is unique for its ability to depict a representation of our present world that is attuned to the effects of climate change but not explicitly about them. In other words, like the

[17] Recall Delany's notion of science fiction's style of reverse-subjunctivity: while realist fiction narrative experiences that *have happened* or *could happen*, SF captures the reverse: stories that *have not happened yet* ("About Five Thousand").

[18] Ben De Bruyn reads Ben Lerner's *10:04* as developing a sort of "anthropocene realism" (following Trexler) or "realism 4°" (following Baucom): a realist mode capable of responding to and representing the challenges of narrating the present within the context of climate change. In De Bruyn's view, the novel does this by drawing readerly attention to global commodities, planetary memorials, social infrastructures, and new forms of community and cultural memory. While De Bruyn thinks about Lerner's novel as a form of climate fiction that exists outside the genre of science fiction, I am interested in the ways in which *10:04* engages *with* science fiction. See Ben De Bruyn's "Realism 4°. Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's *10:04*." Also: Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions* and Ian Baucom, "History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time."

text's engagement with SF, climate change is also an absent presence in *10:04*, always on the margins, but never in center view. Like good realism, it shows rather than tells.

What if, however, *10:04*'s success as climate fiction comes not from its "realist" portrayal but from its failure to maintain its realism? That is, rather than position *10:04* as climate fiction based solely on its content – the two superstorms and the various references to human-induced global warming that are sprinkled throughout the novel – what if we did so based on its form? My reading suggests that the novel does speak to the climate crisis, but not primarily through direct references to the weather. With *10:04* Lerner dramatizes the challenge that the climate crisis poses for the contemporary fiction writer. Tasked with the challenge to write a novel about the present, the poet-turned-novelist of *10:04* inadvertently writes a novel of *formal estrangement* as opposed to one of formal realism. Perhaps this is because SF is no longer simply a genre, but as Csicsery Ronay Jr. suggests, an attitude, a mode of thought, or "a way of organizing the mind to include the contemporary world" (*Seven Beauties*, x). Perhaps, we are – whether we realize it or not – all already readers and writers of science fiction

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