

## SPACE, ASSEMBLAGE, AND THE NONHUMAN IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

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## ABSTRACT

Ongoing scholarship on the impact of speculative fiction demonstrates how science fiction and fantasy are fundamentally concerned with interrogating the socio-political networks that define contemporary life, and in constructing alternative environments that both critique and offer solutions to present-day inequalities. This project contributes to scholarship on the politics of speculative fiction by focusing on the ways in which recent speculative fiction re-envision space—including urban sites, new architectural forms, and natural landscapes—to theorize innovative forms of socio-political organization. This work draws from the spatial turn in cultural studies and critical theory that has gained popularity since the 1970s, and which takes on assumption that space and politics are always intertwined. Drawing predominantly from assemblage theory, assemblage urban theory, and new materialist theory, this project examines how human and nonhuman agents—including space itself—interact to create new spaces and relations that resist hegemonic neoliberal modes of spatial, political, and social organization. Chapter Two analyzes utopian assemblages and spaces in Bruce Sterling's novel *Distraction*, deploying Noah De Lissovoy's concept of "emergency time" and David M. Bell's theories of place-based and affective utopias. Chapter Three examines place-making tactics in Lauren Beukes' novel *Zoo City* through the lens of Abdou-Maliq Simone's concept of people as infrastructure, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadology, and Jane Bennett's theory of "thing power." Chapter Four uses the work of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett to explore the thing power of the nonhuman and nature in China Mieville's *Kraken* and Jeff Vandermeer's Southern Reach trilogy. In sum, this work attempts to demonstrate how examining speculative spaces through the lens of assemblage theory can illuminate new paths for political resistance.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER ONE

Speculative Fiction, Spatial Politics, and Assemblage Urbanisms .....	1
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### CHAPTER TWO

Utopian Assemblages in Emergency Time: Utopian Mobility in <i>Distraction</i> .....	30
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### CHAPTER THREE

Urban Assemblages, Nomadic Mobility, and the Nonhuman in <i>Zoo City</i> .....	76
--	----

### CHAPTER FOUR

Lively Spaces and Thing Power in the Area X Trilogy and <i>Kraken</i> .....	127
---	-----

### CHAPTER FIVE

Spaces of Today, Spaces of Tomorrow .....	182
---	-----

WORKS CITED .....	188
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Speculative Fiction, Spatial Politics, and Assemblage Urbanisms

Speculative fiction—an umbrella term that encompasses science fiction, fantasy, and the various weird and fantastic genres that engage with genre conventions in a more slippery fashion<sup>1</sup>—has always been concerned with critiquing and analyzing contemporary socio-political conditions. As science fiction writer Samuel Delany writes, “[Science fiction is] a tool to help you think about the present—a present that is always changing, a present in which change itself assures there is always a range of options for actions, actions presupposing different commitments, different beliefs, different efforts ... different conflicts, different process, different joys” (*Starboard* 34). Speculative fiction writers construct and explore imagined worlds not as an escapist response to the present, but to serve as an instrument for thinking about contemporary issues and for constructing imaginative alternatives to current circumstances. Darko Suvin’s highly influential article “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre” put forth the theory of SF as the “literature of cognitive estrangement,” meaning that speculative fiction estranges us from our present day reality so that we can better examine and understand it; indeed, [speculative fiction] “distances us from the contemporary world-system only to return us to it, as aliens, so that we can see it with fresh eyes” (Canavan xi). In this sense, there is always

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the terms “speculative fiction” throughout this work, as well as the shortened form “SFF” to indicate science fiction and fantasy. There are many debates surrounding the use of this term to replace “science fiction,” “fantasy” or both, but I find that the term “speculative fiction” is particularly useful for covering the full range of texts that fall somewhere on the fantasy or science fiction spectrum. This term is also particularly useful now that the distinction between science fiction and fantasy is so often blurred.

both a critical, heuristic function to speculative fiction, but also a strain of hope. The fundamental aim of the genre of cognitive estrangement is to provoke the imagination, to think creatively about the present and how we might transform it.

Our current political reality is, in large part, defined by specific kinds of capturing flows and networks of power. Neoliberal capitalism has strengthened income inequality, consolidating the majority of the world's wealth into the hands of the few at the top of the social ladder; market logic infiltrates all areas of life, becoming the dominant mode of social organization; financial deregulation and international, 'open' markets have produced new forms of colonialist and imperialistic governance over humans and nonhumans; the prioritization of profit above all else has led to an ecological crisis with irreversible effects.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as Ursula LeGuin stated in a powerful 2014 speech for the National Book Award, although the power of capitalism "seems inescapable," so, too, "did the divine right of kings... Power can be resisted and changed by human beings; resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art—the art of words." LeGuin's sentiment echoes the strain of hope that runs throughout the fictional and theoretical texts that I examine here. Speculative fiction, through its creative envisioning of alternate futures, provides a lens to think and act differently, to forge new kinds of collectives, spaces and socialities that push against current political realities that often appear (or are represented as) inevitable, all-encompassing, and apocalyptic.

One of the central ways that neoliberal capitalism has infiltrated the everyday is

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<sup>2</sup> See *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* by Wendy Brown, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, by Loïc Wacquant, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, as well as *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, both by David Harvey, for recent critical analyses of neoliberal capitalism.



through its colonisation of space. Foucault's now famous statement that, while the great obsession of the nineteenth-century was history, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" ("Of Other Spaces" 22) has been born out by the proliferation of texts on the topic of space in the age of neoliberalism. This text is inspired and follows from Doreen Massey's assertion that "attention to implicit conceptualisations of space is crucial...in practices of resistance and of building alternatives to neoliberal globalisation, which is a "material practice and [a] hegemonic discourse...that attempts to tame the spatial" (99). In the face of these attempts to colonize and territorialize, this work employs several theoretical toolkits, focusing predominantly on assemblage theory to examine how speculative fiction writers represent space and politics. A secondary, though in no way less important concern also animates this study: the examination of the nonhuman. My theoretical approach assumes that space is itself a kind of posthuman or nonhuman agent, a "sphere of relations, negotiations, practices of engagement, power in all its forms" (Massey 99). Insofar as this project considers *how* bodies come *into* matter through relational assemblages, it is also equally committed to expanding the scope of *what* bodies *matter*, deprivileging humanity as the locus of agency.

This introductory chapter has several aims. First, I provide a brief overview of the historical importance and centrality of space to speculative fiction and summarize the major approaches and concerns that have animated theoretical examinations of science fiction film and literature. Subsequently, I provide an overview of the theoretical framework that I will be employing throughout this work, situating assemblage-oriented approaches in relation to the more well-known and hegemonic approach to spatial studies

in the humanities and social sciences: Marxist political geography. To conclude, I extrapolate the basic premises of assemblage-oriented approaches and articulate how this approach is particularly suited to analyzing contemporary socio-political conditions.

### **Speculative Spaces: A Historical Outline and Literature Review**

Speculative fiction provides a rich resource for studying the ways in which historically-specific representations of and productions of space reflect socio-economic and political conditions. As Rob Kitchin and James Kneale note, representations of space in speculative fiction are particularly useful “when they are used as a foil for thinking about present-day geographies, their construction, reproduction and contingency, and thinking through how we theorize and comprehend a range of concepts such as space, nature, subjectivity and reality” (9). Fantastic fiction becomes a lens, a “useful cognitive space” for “opening up sites from which to contemplate material and discursive geographies and the production of geographical knowledges and imaginations” (Kitchin and Kneale 9). Growing interest in spatial politics over the last few decades has resulted in a significant body of scholarship that explores the unique ways that speculative fiction writers have imagined future and contemporary spaces. References to more recent treatments of this field will be addressed below. A sizable portion of the scholarship focused on speculative fiction and spatial politics fit into one of three ‘orientations’ that I will address here: science fiction cities (and in particular, cyberpunk and/or postmodern cities), natural spaces in ecological science fiction and climate fiction, and utopian/dystopian spaces. These categorizations are in no way intended to be exhaustive or totalizing, and each of the ‘orientations’ below are extremely heterogeneous in

approach and focus; however, these groupings allow me to paint, in broad strokes, the dominant concerns of this field of scholarship, and situate this work in relation to these explorations.

One need only mention ‘science fiction cities’ to conjure up the now-ubiquitous images of streamlined skyscrapers peppered with neon signage, gritty, dark streets teeming with people distracted by immersive technologies, and chaotic traffic jams of hovering vehicles. These iconic images—which now inform what we mean when we discuss and imagine ‘cities of the future’—were popularized in the 1980s, with the rise of cyberpunk.<sup>3</sup> “The central ‘generic’ feature of cyberpunk,” writes Veronica Hollinger, is its emphasis on “the potential interconnections between the human and the technological” (31), which is evident in its various deconstructions of subjectivity and explorations of the “oppositions between the natural and the artificial, the human and the machine” (Hollinger 30). Also central to cyberpunk, in my estimation, is its frequent representation of urban space and city life, and its attendant explorations of the politics of urbanization and the corporate control and surveillance of cities. Although cyberpunk gained popularity in the 1980s due to writers like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, and with films such as *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element*, the now iconic cyberpunk aesthetic remains pervasive to this day, as is evidenced through the films *Blade Runner 2049* and

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<sup>3</sup> The rise of cyberpunk spurred an outpouring of scholarship on the genre and its themes. In addition to the texts mentioned above and below, see *Cyberpunk*, by Andrew M. Butler, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson*, by Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, *Virtual Geographies: Cyberpunk at the Intersection of the Postmodern and Science Fiction*, by Sabine Heuser, *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction*, edited by Larry McCaffery, and *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint.

the television series *Altered Carbon*. The centrality of urban space as a feature of cyberpunk fictions and speculative fiction generally has resulted in a plethora of scholarship on spatial politics in the city. These studies have focused on the co-evolution of the city and posthuman bodies (see Orbaugh; Shaw), representations of cities in science fiction film (see Milner; Sobchack; Yuen; Staiger; Gold), issues of race and urban environments (see Avila; Desser; Tran), and the relationship between science fiction cities and urban planning (see Abbott; Stephen Graham; Hewitt and Graham; Collie; Childs). Additionally, since the rise of cyberpunk, a complementary body of scholarship has focused on the potentials of virtual spaces as represented in speculative fiction (see Chernaik; Holz; Johnston; Bukatman), although the topic of spatial politics in these works is secondary to considerations of how the human body and human subject has been reconfigured by technology and postmodernism.

Cities and cyberspaces in speculative fiction cities may be the most recognizable representations of fantastic spaces, but speculative fiction has its share of ‘natural’ landscapes, as well—whether pastoral, alien, or hostile (or, commonly, a combination of all three, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four). The past decade has witnessed a sharp increase in ecocritical scholarship on science fiction that explores the politics of natural spaces, and the disjunction between natural and urban space (see E. Otto; Lafontaine; Pak; Canavan and Robinson; Baratta; Bernardo). These critical concerns have emerged along with new speculative fiction subgenres like eco-fiction and climate fiction (or ‘cli-fi’) that, in combination, demonstrate a growing interest in the role of speculative fiction to reflect

on the relationship between humans, nonhumans and nature in the Anthropocene era.<sup>4</sup> Depictions of ‘natural’ landscapes have been a staple of utopian and dystopian fictions, which frequently deploy “the pastoral, the exotic, the sublime, and the picturesque” (Pordzik 20) to explore social and spatial systems resistant to capitalist modernity. Natural, pastoral settings are also frequently employed in utopian fiction to situate nature in opposition to the rise of modernity and its alienating urban spaces, as is evident in William Henry Hudson’s *A Crystal Age*; furthermore, as in Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door into Ocean* and LeGuin’s *The Word for World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home*, this retreat from urban sites and into nature is linked to a refusal of capitalist patriarchy. In recent dystopian fictions such as Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife*, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2140*, decimated natural landscapes are featured to expose and critique inevitable results of capitalist development. Explorations of utopianism and dystopias have been an ongoing focus of speculative fiction literary criticism, though the explicit role of spatial politics in utopias and dystopias has only recently begun to gain attention (see Pordzik; Kilgore; Smith; D. Bell, *Rethinking*; Tally, Wegner). I provide a more thorough overview of utopian and dystopian theory in the following chapter.

In sum, these studies demonstrate that space has *always* been a pressing concern for speculative fiction writers, but that the political dimensions of fictional spaces have only recently, in the last several decades, become a topic of interest in the field of sf

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<sup>4</sup> The Anthropocene—a term first introduced by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000—describes the period from the 18th century onward, in which ecology and geology have been intensely and irrevocably altered by human activity.

literary criticism. Studies exploring anticapitalist politics in speculative fiction are pervasive (see Tally; Wegner; Paik; Weldes; Hassler and Wilcox; Bould & Miéville; Hassler-Forest); and increasingly more attention has been paid to postcolonial readings of speculative fiction, particularly, its engagement with globalization, imperialism, colonialism, and cosmopolitanism (see Raja, Ellis and Nandi; Smith; Langer; Hoagland and Sarwal; Kerslake). While this work is certainly indebted to this body of scholarship, this text centers the importance of spatiality to anticapitalist politics from an assemblage-oriented perspective. Studying speculative fiction spaces is particularly fruitful because speculative spaces offer us new visions of how to organize, occupy, and live together in specific time-spaces. Where so often fictional—and real—spaces are conceived as a mere backdrop to politics, my study takes on principle that space is not merely an inert container for human activity and politics, but rather, is shaped by and shapes the intersecting actants—material and immaterial, human and nonhuman—that intersect with their environment. Indeed, space—as particular organization of materiality, affects, and relationships between humans and nonhumans—actively contributes to how we engage with the world, and in the work of politics. While this work focuses on anticapitalist politics and spaces, I depart from a more conventional Marxist approach and engage, instead, with assemblage theory (which overlaps with ‘non-representational theory,’ or ‘new materialist’ theory). In the section that follows, I outline the central tenets of assemblage-oriented approaches and contextualize these developments within the larger field of spatial theory that has developed over the past several decades and conclude by articulating the ways that combining speculative fiction studies with assemblage theory

provides new, fruitful tools for imagining resistance and the emergence of socio-political alternatives to capitalism.

### **Theoretical and Historical Context: Spatial Theory**

Michel Foucault's famous statement that the present epoch is "the epoch of space" is perhaps confirmed by the sheer quantity of scholarship that has been produced on this topic since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This shift—frequently referred to as the "spatial turn"—was characterized by a revitalization and intensification of interest in spatial politics in the humanities and social sciences. A concern with space—and especially the dynamics of the new urban mode that emerged in modernity—is visible in the earlier work of Walter Benjamin and other modernists (see Gilloch; Thacker). In the following decades, Michel de Certeau articulated how cities are composed through tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Guy Debord and the Situationists studied what they called psychogeography—the social and psychological effects of geographical organization on individuals and communities—and developed the concept of the *dérive* (literally, "drifting")—"a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances ... [that] involve[s] playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects" (Debord 70)—to articulate forms of resistance against capitalistic arrangements of urban space. These writers responded to the transformation of the urban sphere that occurred in tandem with—and as a result of—the emergence of late stage capitalism.

Foucault was one of the first theorists to explicitly address the spatial aspect of disciplinary structures, perhaps most clearly in his history of the emergence of the prison system and panoptic surveillance in *Discipline and Punish*. In his employment of the

concepts of biopower, discipline, and governmentality throughout his works, Foucault frequently considers the spatial component of disciplinary techniques and practices intended to create “docile bodies.”<sup>5</sup> Foucault’s lecture entitled “Of Other Spaces” that was published in *Diacritics* in 1986 introduced the term heterotopia to describe “counter-sites” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 24) within the hegemonic socio-spatial order that challenge the status quo by virtue of their “otherness,” enabling different forms of social and political activity. This work has been hugely influential in cultural studies, spawning an ever-growing body of spatial theory committed to studying heterotopias.<sup>6</sup> Although Foucault was certainly a leader in this regard, Frederic Jameson was one of the first to argue the link between postmodernism and late capitalism in his text *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where he dedicates several chapters to analyzing the specifically spatial dimension of this cultural and economic shift. Jameson argues that postmodernism has resulted in the dominance of “hyperspace” which is characterized by the “absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation ... the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their ‘place’” (117-118). Jameson’s views on space reflect his general theory of postmodernity as characterized by a new “depthlessness”—the proliferation of signs without a foundation or ground—that results in a depreciated understanding of history and the mechanisms of

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<sup>5</sup> While discipline focuses on the individual, and functions, spatially, through “centripetal” forces that “enclose” and “circumscribe a space” (Foucault, *Security* 44-45), biopower focuses on people as a species, seeking to regulate the population through state controls; it acts through centrifugal rather than centripetal forces to create a milieu that affects the population in general (Foucault, *Security* 20-21).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, edited by Michiel Dehaene, and Lieven De Cauter, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* by Kevin Hetherington, and *The Globalization of Space: Foucault and Heterotopia*, edited by Mariangela Palladino and John Miller.



late capitalism.

Furthermore, a specific field of Marxist geography emerged due to the influence of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre's articulation—in his ground-breaking text *The Production of Space*—that “every society—and hence every mode of production with its subvariants ... produces a space, its own space” (31); or, put even more simply, “(Social) space is a (social) product” (26) has been hugely influential to this body of work. Edward W. Soja—like Lefebvre, a fellow Marxist geographer, urbanist, and political theorist—argued in a similar vein in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989) that we must remedy the common tendency in social and political theory to conceive of space as “fixed, dead, undialectical,” in opposition to time as “richness, life, dialectic, the revealing context for critical social theorization” (11). Soja calls for a “critical spatialization” of the historical imagination (12) to reassert the importance of spatial concerns in the study of socio-economic phenomenon. Perhaps the most well-known of these critical Marxist geographers is David Harvey, whose is widely known as one of the most important Marxist political theorists of the neoliberal age. The pivotal works *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *The New Imperialism*, and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* outline a Marxist theory of neoliberal capitalism, while texts including *The Limits of Capital*, *Spaces of Capital: Toward a Critical Geography*, and *Social Justice and the City* focus on developing a theory of the spatiality of capitalism, particularly in relation to urban sites, and the “right to the city.” Manuel Castells was also a pivotal figure in the resurgence of space in Marxist geography. Castells is specifically interested in how technology changes our collective and individual experiences of space

within the era of globalization. Manuel Castells' concept of the "space of flows" describes these new arrangements of capital and labour made possible by telecommunications networks and rapid global transportation (see Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* and *The Informational City*). Saskia Sassen focuses on related topics in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, where she elaborates the concept of the global city to describe how globalization has resulted in the emergence of a new kind of international network economy. These developments in urban theory clearly paved the way for thinking about space differently, and for popularizing a new notion of spatiality and its relation to temporality. In recent years, a new branch of spatial thought has emerged that—while clearly indebted to Marxist geography and urbanism—approaches studies of space from an alternative angle: assemblage, new materialist, and non-representational theory. In the section that follows, I provide an overview of the origins of assemblage theory, a summary of its main theoretical positions and focus, and how these approaches depart from traditional Marxist geography.

### **Theoretical Framework: Assemblage Theory**

Assemblage theory is not a clearly defined field with a unified purpose; rather, assemblage theory provides an ontological framework for understanding the relationships between social, economic, and political components that has been applied to studies of geography, space, gender, race, ecology, science, and the nonhuman. Assemblage theory has its roots in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—and in particular, their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* which also includes *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Deleuze and Guattari's use of the concept

“agencement” in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* was translated as “assemblage” by Brian Massumi in his late 1980s translation of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth 227). When interpreted within their philosophical oeuvre, John Phillips argues, it is clear that the term *agencement* “implies specific connections with the other concepts. It is, in fact, the arrangement of these connections that gives the concepts their sense” (108). The term *agencement* is utilized, throughout the works of Deleuze and Guattari, to focus on the connections between concepts and how these relationships change their function. The term *agencement* in French is also used to indicate “arrangement,” “fitting,” or “fixing” (Phillips 108); this meaning is also clear in Deleuze and Guattari and beyond, in contemporary assemblage theory, to indicate the fitting together or arrangement of parts. In both senses, the use of the term prioritizes the connections between parts that result in certain effects, rather than solidified identities.

Deleuze defines assemblage as

A multiplicity which is made of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them ... the assemblage’s only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics. (Deleuze and Parnet 69)

Assemblage is thus a way of thinking about the connections between heterogeneous parts and the effects of these relationships. Assemblage is a “relay concept” (Venn 107) that “focuses on process and on the dynamic character of the inter-relationships between the heterogeneous elements of the phenomenon” (Venn 107). In this sense, assemblage is a term and ontological framework that largely opposes a structuralist mode of understanding privileging a “logic of stability and linear causality” (Venn 107) as well as Hegelian

dialectics, in which particularities are subsumed within organic totalities (DeLanda *New Philosophy* 10-11). Assemblage theory departs from this structuralist model in order to better account for “change, resistance, agency and the event: that, is the irruption of the unexpected or unpredictable” (Venn 107).

Manuel DeLanda is the theorist responsible for extrapolating the most comprehensive assemblage theory from the works of Deleuze and Guattari in *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* and *Assemblage Theory*. For DeLanda, there are a few essential characteristics of assemblages:

1. Assemblages are opposed to organic totalities (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 10-11, 18). Components within an assemblage are defined by relations of exteriority—they retain their own identity and a degree of autonomy—rather than interiority (DeLanda, “Assemblage Theory, Society, and Deleuze;” DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 10-11, Müller 28). In other words, individual components are not subsumed and extinguished by their participation in assemblages. There is no synthesis of parts into a larger whole. Further, the relationships between these parts create something new in their interaction (this, DeLanda argues, is what distinguishes an assemblage from a mere collection [“Assemblage Theory, Society and Deleuze”]). As a result, an assemblage is a combination of relations in which the whole is irreducible to its parts (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 10-11). In this sense, assemblage theory is concerned with the *capacities* of components in *relation*, rather than identifying and stabilizing the identity of wholes.

2. Assemblage theory is anti-essentialist. The effects of various components in combination are what DeLanda calls “emergent properties,” a “property of a whole that arises from the constant interactions between its parts” (“Assemblage Theory, Society, and Deleuze”). This means that assemblages are always capable of fluidity and of producing different emergent properties as the constituent components change (or are reconfigured in new relations). The relationships between components “are not logically necessary but only contingently obligatory” (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 11). DeLanda offers a helpful way of thinking about this when he argues that “a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different” (*New Philosophy* 10). In this sense, assemblage theory prioritizes the emergence of the new; it focuses on the “always-emergent conditions of the present” (Markus and Saka 101-102), and how new configurations of forces can lead to political and social change.
3. Assemblages are defined by relative degrees of (de)territorialization and (de)coding. Territorializing processes are those which “stabilize the identity of an assemblage, by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries” (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 12), while deterritorializing processes “destabilize spatial boundaries or increase internal heterogeneity” (DeLanda, *New Philosophy* 13). Coding is related to the extent to which certain behaviours, relationships and processes are programmed by

and reinforced by formal and informal codes; to use DeLanda's clearest example, social encounters are always governed by either explicit or unspoken rules and regulations, and "the more formal and rigid the rules, the more these social encounters may be said to be coded" (*New Philosophy* 16). In this sense, assemblage theory offers a model for understanding the fluid and shifting processes of power and resistance as they are enacted in various situations. Power is not perceived as a top-down force, but, in a manner akin to Foucault, as a series of processes that circulate and reinforce specific kinds of relations.<sup>7</sup>

Notably, DeLanda's use of the terms "territorialisation" and "deterritorialisation" departs somewhat from Deleuze and Guattari. Whereas for Deleuze and Guattari, strata indicate a particularly dense consolidation of forces that are highly territorialized and densely coded, assemblages are de-coded and deterritorialized, meaning that they are defined by rhizomatic (rather than arborescent) and smooth (rather than striated) relationships. In this sense, for Deleuze and Guattari assemblage and strata are in binary opposition. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, DeLanda argues that assemblages are stratified, territorialized, and coded to various degrees. Assemblages are not necessarily deterritorialized, but rather, are formed on a continuum that is more or less territorialized and coded. In this sense, assemblages are characterized as *phases* of relative (de)territorialization and (de)coding. As such, DeLanda articulates a more relational and flexible model, establishing a

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the affinities between Foucault's work on biopower and assemblage theory, see Stephen Legg's article "Assemblage/Apparatus: Using Deleuze and Foucault" where he outlines the similarities and divergences of Foucault's use of the term "apparatus" and Deleuze's use of the term "assemblage" and "apparatus."

parametrized version of the concept of assemblage in which each assemblage has two “knobs”—one for territorialization, one for coding—in which increases in either change the phase of the assemblage (i.e. This is a qualitative rather than quantitative change).

This work follows DeLanda’s usage of the terms, insofar as DeLanda’s appropriation of the Deleuze-Guattarian concepts departs from what has been interpreted by some as the establishment of problematic binaries in the latter’s works. This is to say that, in what follows, although deterritorialization is often used to describe the loosening or opening up of disciplinary power, deterritorialization is not always related to freedom and antifascist or liberatory flows. Disciplinary power can function through oppressive territorializing forces and arborescent structures; however, for example, neoliberal capitalism also often functions through deterritorialization. Similarly, there is always some degree of territorialisation required in order to form collectives, even those based on non-hierarchical models. The dismantling of this binary is visible in much contemporary assemblage-oriented social and urban theory, including in the pivotal works of feminist geographer Doreen Massey who argues that “both openness and closure, and both classic territory and rhizomatic flow, can be the outcome of sedimented and unequal power-relations” (174). In other words, she cautions against an a priori political valuation of different types or “thicknesses” of power relations on/in space, instead calling for a particular analysis of each site.

The theory of assemblage articulated by DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari is a political ontology—although they gesture towards the importance of spatial concerns, they do not specifically elaborate a theory of spatiality or the urban. However,

assemblage-oriented ontology has been taken up by a new generation of urban theorists, geographers, and cultural theorists in many ways. What I will refer to as “assemblage urbanism” is not a clearly defined discipline, but rather, a collection of theories that analyze space, urbanity, architecture, and built environments from the perspective of assemblage-oriented ontology. Assemblage urbanists argue that urban political economy—which envelops the Marxist geographical texts mentioned above—remains too committed to modernist notions of temporality, to a teleological narrative of progress and revolution, and to reified terminology such as the State and Capitalism. Colin McFarlane argues that assemblage theory is not intended as a replacement of urban political economy but rather signals a reorientation in how those terms are typically employed and conceptualized. In what follows here, I articulate five ways that assemblage urbanism departs from Marxist geography and urban political economy—the latter being, until recently, the dominant frameworks for understanding the intersection of politics and space in cultural studies. At the conclusion of this section I outline two other essential features of assemblage-oriented approaches—the prioritization of affect, and the deprivileging of anthropomorphism—that, throughout this growing body of scholarship, help frame the way assemblage-oriented thought conceptualizes spatial politics, and which are a vital concern for non-representational theory generally, as well as this project.

*Rejection of Grand Narratives, Teleology, and Static/Unified Systems*

Assemblage approaches are concerned with processes rather than with formal identities (Dovey, “Uprooting” 348). Rather than perceive environments as closed, static systems that merely reflect socio-economic systems, assemblage urbanism is concerned



with examining how capitalist power penetrates and contributes to the construction of environments. Rather than analyze (for example) the city as an example of how capitalist logic is imposed onto and structures socio-spatial environments, assemblage urbanism examines the multitude of flows and emergent processes that result from certain arrangements of human and nonhuman actants, and how these configurations simultaneously reflect capitalist forces and subvert them. As Ignacio Farías argues, assemblage theory eschews “general theor[ies] of the social ... based on fixed concepts” (Farías 367) and believes critique should start with the empirical rather than from fixed theoretical frameworks (Farías 367). In this sense, assemblage-oriented approaches align with Marxist geography insofar as they are based on a materialist, empirical approach; however, they do not subscribe to the view of capitalism as a monolithic, unified system that merely imposes power onto spaces and social sites. Rather, “capitalism is structured ... by multiple logics that interact with one another and are entangled in and entrench social hierarchies” (McFarlane, “On Context” 378). Assemblage-oriented urbanism is productive because it challenges a perspective of neoliberal capitalism as a unified, prevailing logic in which all flows are “captured.” Alternatively, assemblage approaches consider power in a Foucauldian vein, as a network of circulatory processes and forces, or, to quote Kim Dovey, as “distributed micropractices that are insinuated within the field of operations rather than simply held by agents [...] In assemblage theory power is immanent to the assemblage, it operates and mutates through the connection between sociality/spatiality, people/buildings (“Uprooting” 349). In this sense, he emphasizes assemblage’s focus on power as a series of capacities—as “power *to* rather

than power *over*” (Dovey, “Uprooting” 349; see also Dovey, *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power*). This description of power is characteristic of assemblage-oriented approaches and captures the essence of this theoretical movement. Assemblage-oriented approaches thus conceive of capitalism as an assemblage capable of being destabilized as new actants and new forces intercede. In this sense, assemblage urbanism

Describ[es] the multiplicity of processes through which formations like 'value' or 'work' are differently brought into being, held stable, are ruptured through new socio-material agencies and are reassembled. It focuses on thick description of how value or work are actualised and enacted in different sites, it seeks to describe the labour through which relations are held together and how novelty emerges through interactions, and aims to identify the potential for those relations to be otherwise. (McFarlane, “On Context” 378-9)

In their eschewal of pre-given causal accounts of phenomena and socio-political orders, assemblage approaches also allow for a more fluid perspective of resistance movements, embracing a more open and processual understanding of both capitalist and anticapitalist flows and their relationship (Featherstone 3-4; McGuirk and Dowling 184; McFarlane, “On Context” 380).

### *Multiscalar Approach*

Assemblage urbanism also prioritizes a multiscalar analyses of the socio-spatial. Kim Dovey critiques traditional urban studies approaches for “focus[ing] on hierarchies of scale and ... [its] valorization of the large scale over the small ... Within such a framework the microscale specificities of urban space, public/private interfaces, pedestrian networks and urban experience are often reduced to epiphenomena of larger scale processes and structures” (“Uprooting” 348). Alternatively, assemblage urbanism

does not prioritize one scale over another; activities, affects and materialities of all types are equally capable of affecting assemblages (that is to say, of territorializing and deterritorializing or coding and decoding the assemblages of which they are a part). Assemblage urbanism thus revalorizes the everyday and focuses on the specificities of material and affective networks, rather than the overarching systems that penetrate them. It focuses on the interaction of the micro and the macro, the private and the public, without reducing the micro to overarching narratives.

#### *Anti-Dialectics*

Assemblage urbanism denies the presence of dialectical forces that will, at some critical point, be resolved to create new forms of socio-spatial organization (Legg 129). Massey argues that “the frameworks of Progress, of Development and of Modernisation, and the succession of modes of production elaborated within Marxism, all propose scenarios in which the general direction of history, including the future, are known” (Massey 11). Massey provides an eloquent critique of this mode of discourse, which she associates with structuralism and modernity:

There is one narrative of space and one narrative of capitalism, a narrative that dominates sociopolitical discussions of capitalism on both the right and the left, and everyone in between; as assemblage theory demonstrates, dialectical Marxist political economy is also committed to its own 'one narrative' of revolutionary change, of an eventual resolution of the contradictions inherent in capitalism. This same commitment to a singular, homogenizing narrative is also present in visions of neoliberal capitalism as an inevitable force of development (Massey 4-5, 11).

In opposition to this model, the benefits of assemblage-oriented theory, as Massey and others elaborate, is that it offers a perspective of the “future as open,” (Massey 11). The potentially disruptive capacity of space, Massey argues, is its “juxtaposition, its

happenstance arrangement-in-relation-to-each other, of previously unconnected narratives/temporalities; its openness and its condition of always being made” (39). In fact, she argues that this sense of “openness” is a prerequisite for engaging seriously in politics (Massey 11). Assemblage perspectives thus start from the assumption that there is no clear, teleological narrative of progress, and take for granted a certain amount of unpredictability and changeability.<sup>8</sup> They imagine space and time as open to change, of space as processual rather than a predetermined surface (Massey 9-11). Assemblage urbanism is not committed to grand narratives; rather, it describes the emergent potentialities contained within assemblages at multiple scales and seeks to locate the resistant potential of various everyday assemblages.

*Prioritization of Potentiality and the Virtual*

Assemblage theory focuses on both the actual and the virtual: the potential for becoming and the activation of new processes and relationships (Dewsbury 151-152, Dovey, “Uprooting” 348, McFarlane and Anderson 163). Because assemblage theory focuses on describing the specific historical, political, social, and material processes that enable certain configurations to emerge, assemblage approaches focus on how these same forces can be made to “disperse or realign through contestations, shifting power relations

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<sup>8</sup> Brenner et al. (2011) critique assemblage urbanism on these grounds, arguing that when it is used as an alternative ontological approach (in opposition to [Marxist] urban political economy) it is too amorphous, becoming a “naive objectivism” (pg. 234) that lacks the critical tools and terms through which to understand the historical-geographic specificities of urban development. I would argue, however, that Brenner et al. misinterpret what assemblage theory does. Assemblage thinking does not do away with terminology and concepts that describe these “thick” relationships; rather, it refuses to take these as objective facts or frameworks and perceives them, instead, as emerging conditions constantly open to change. Thus, instead of imposing those theories onto empirical conditions, assemblage theory starts from the empirical conditions to see how those theories are in fact, flexible and constructed. It doesn't do away with those theories altogether, just the dialectical approach and its focus on immanent qualities.

or new contexts” (McFarlane, “Assemblage and Critical Urban Praxis” 209). The emphasis on the inherent fluidity and changeability of assemblages means that no system, individual or space is “locked in” to a particular logic: there are always ways for the assemblage to produce new affects and new effects with a potentially revolutionary content.

### *Anti-Anthropomorphism and Affective Relations*

While the primary focus of this text is spatial politics, a complementary concern of this project—and the field of assemblage-oriented thought in general—is the reconceptualization of subjectivity, and a renewed appreciation for nonhuman agency. Recent works including *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* by Vinay Gidwani and *Hybrid Geographies: Nature, Culture, Spaces* by Sarah Whatmore in the fields of geography, and the works of Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour studying nonhuman-human assemblages, deprivilege the liberal humanist subject as the locus of agency, and call for an ethics and mode of sociality that fosters affinities with the nonhuman. The goal of these works is to extend the social and political realms to include the nonhuman as agents within assemblages who exert forces and capacities to the same extent as humans.<sup>9</sup> Thus, assemblage-oriented approaches deprivilege anthropocentric perspectives of phenomena and extend the social

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<sup>9</sup> In this thesis, I frequently employ Bruno Latour’s term “actant” to describe human and nonhuman entities. An actant is anything that “...modif[ies] other actors through a series of...” actions (Latour *Politics*, 5); i.e. a being that exerts force on other entities to affect the configuration of an assemblage. I use the term “agent” interchangeably with actant, due to the frequency with which the term “agent” is employed within assemblage-oriented theory and new materialist theory. Both terms indicate that nonhuman things and creatures can possess agency; however, agency here is uncoupled from a liberal humanist understanding of agency as linked to language and cognition. Following assemblage-oriented theoretical approaches, I conceive of agency as the ability to affect assemblages; to exert forces that reconfigure socio-political networks. This conception of nonhuman agency is elaborated below in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

and political to include the interests of the nonhuman, and, as the growing body of scholarship in this vein demonstrates, provide an urgent and valuable approach to the socio-spatial in the Anthropocene era.

Furthermore, there is a strong affiliation between assemblage theory and affect theory,<sup>10</sup> due to the fact that both are committed to “de-privileg[ing] the human as the reservoir of agency in the world, instead founding action upon a series of bodies-in-moving-relation that incorporates both the human and the ‘more-than ‘human’ (Woodward and Lea 157). Thus, considerations of affective relations and circulations will also be a feature of this thesis, as, like material forces and interactions between humans and nonhumans, affect, too, circulates within and contributes to the production of assemblages; affect contributes to the “becoming and the taking-place of life...all processually enacted through coagulations of the human, inhuman, more than human, and nonhuman” (Woodward and Lea 157). Affect is productive—it produces certain kinds of relationships and allows for the emergence of new affinities and social relationships. Affect is material as well as social, and its circulation contributes to the (re)surfacing of particular spaces.

### **Why Assemblage Theory, and Why Speculative Fiction?**

Why use assemblage theory to analyze speculative fiction? Narratives of resistance that rely on structuralist models of progress and revolution are no longer viable

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<sup>10</sup> Affect theory centers on the experience of affects, or emotions, focusing on embodied experience and the socio-political elements of affect. See *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* by Sara Ahmed, *Cruel Optimism*, by Lauren Berlant, *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, and *Ordinary Affects*, for recent discussions of affect theory.

given the flexibility and adaptability of contemporary neoliberal processes. Assemblage theory provides a poststructuralist approach to analyzing and describing these variable processes, and of locating sites and flows of resistance that cut through and deterritorialize capitalist flows, without reducing those flows to functions of a larger system. Assemblage urbanism is not only a theory of space: assemblage-oriented approaches propose that any consideration of politics is always already a consideration of space (and vice versa). Neil Brenner goes so far as to argue that

The urban can no longer be viewed as a distinct, relatively bounded site; it has instead become a generalized planetary condition in and through which the accumulation of capital, the regulation of political-economic life, the reproduction of everyday social and relations and the contestation of the earth and humanity's possible futures are simultaneously organized and fought out. In light of this, it is increasingly untenable to view urban questions as merely one among many specialized subtopics to which a critical theoretical approach may be applied ... instead, each of the key methodological and political orientations associated with critical theory ... today requires sustained engagement with contemporary worldwide patterns of capitalist urbanization and their far-reaching consequences for social, political, economic and human/nature relations (206).

In sum, Brenner argues that thinking politically also requires thinking spatially, and vice versa. Urban studies scholarship is thus not an isolated or distinctive area of study, but a series of discourses that allow us to engage with the pressing concerns of contemporary life. The importance of space and politics has been reinforced by many theorists, including Massey, who argues that “any notion of sociability, in its sparest form simply multiplicity, is to imply a dimension of spatiality ... the very acknowledgement of our constitutive interrelatedness implies a spatiality; and that in turn implies that the nature of that spatiality should be a crucial avenue of enquiry and political engagement” (Massey 189). Assemblage-oriented urbanisms are thus vital because they assume the

inextricability of space and politics and are able to offer complex accounts of how power functions at multiple levels. Following Peter Adey, this work thinks of assemblage as an ethos, an orientation, not merely a mode of “thinking, writing, doing” but also as a “susceptibility” and mode of engagement (198). For my purposes, assemblage-oriented thinking ethos is productive because it focuses on capacities rather than definitions and identities. In this sense, the ethics of assemblage is located in its commitment to defining processes and relationships, to dismantling hierarchies between actants, and for taking for granted the potential of these relationships between active bodies and materials to produce new assemblages and types of coming-together. Furthermore, while this project interrogates the production of space, and how communities can work together to create new kinds of space, I believe that this is only possible if we broaden the social field to incorporate those who have typically been excluded by Eurocentric, cartesian, liberal humanist conceptions of subjectivity, and who have been oppressed by classical conceptions of space as a fixed, inert, homogeneous surface. Assemblage-oriented thought provides tools and frameworks to open up this field of relations, and to foster a sense of ethical responsibility to those individuals and groups who have been oppressed and subjugated, and to nonhuman actants who have been excluded from the realm of the social entirely (a topic that I will address in further depth in Chapter Four).

To summarize, assemblage-oriented approaches have been at the forefront of anticapitalist social and political theory since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and recent speculative fiction has become increasingly focused on spatial concerns not yet addressed widely in literary criticism. This work brings these two movements—assemblage-oriented



anticapitalist theory and speculative fiction focused on socio-spatial concerns—into conversation. By reading speculative fiction through the lens of assemblage theory, my aim is to illuminate how speculative fiction critiques current neoliberal socio-spatial practices and envisions alternatives that move beyond a purely Marxist urban economy perspective of political activity and resistance.

Following Brenner and Massey, therefore, I focus on spatial politics in speculative fiction because space and politics are always already tied together, and to consider the political content of speculative fiction requires an analysis of how writers choose to describe and imagine space. I consider the political content of these texts to be explicitly concerned with spatial concerns, and argue that these writers address political concerns through spatial metaphors and the (re)imagining of imaginative spaces. As I previously noted, speculative fiction is not only about the future, but is concerned with critiquing and finding solutions to the present, and in particular, to locate and extrapolate potential sites and processes of anticapitalist resistance. In this sense, I read speculative fiction not only as fiction, but as a kind of theory that can pose questions and potential solutions to political issues. The best speculative fiction concerns itself with identifying inequalities *and* identifying “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 3) that point towards better, more equitable futures, at multiple scales. Assemblage thinking allows us to locate the affirmative possibilities embedded in speculative fiction works and spaces.

## **Chapter Summaries**

This work is organized into three main sections. Chapter Two examines Bruce Sterling’s novel *Distraction* through the lens of what I call utopian assemblages. I begin

the chapter by drawing from Noah De Lissovoy's concept of "emergency time" to make sense of the present political order, arguing that capitalism's emergency time functions through its cannibalization of time and space, distracting us from developing alternatives, and (re)appropriating revolutionary flows that might fracture and circumvent the hegemonic capitalist order. I provide an overview of utopian theory and suggest that a new orientation or reclamation of utopianism is necessary in order to infiltrate and subvert capitalism's emergency time. Drawing from David Bell's articulation of "place-based" and "affective" utopianism, I develop a theory of utopian assemblages that recasts utopian flows in a new light, as partial, provisional mobilities that allow for the emergence of new kinds of spaces and collectives. I interpret *Distraction*'s representation of alternative social modes, economic systems, and utopian spaces through this lens to suggest that the novel illustrates how 'utopian assemblages' might function and emerge in the here-and-now.

In Chapter Three, I examine "place-making" tactics in Lauren Beukes' novel *Zoo City* through the lens of Abdou-Maliq Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of nomadology. By exploring informal urban spaces and communities, and the novel's representation of subterranean urban spaces, I articulate how forms of disciplinary power are inscribed into the spaces of the neoliberal city, as well as how individuals and communities in the novel use innovative spatial tactics and forms of social organization that resist and subvert these flows of power. In the final section of this chapter, I move in a slightly different direction to set up several of the ideas that are central in Chapter Four, namely, the novel's depiction of human-animal

relationships, and the spatial metaphors employed to articulate this connection. I draw from Jane Bennett's theory of "thing power" to examine how the novel recasts the relationship between humans and nonhumans and reimagines a new kind of social "collective."

Chapter Four takes this a step further, exploring the thing power of nonhuman actants and space itself in China Mieville's *Kraken* and Jeff Vandermeer's Southern Reach trilogy (which consists of *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*). I argue that these novels illustrate the breaking down of what Bruno Latour calls the "two-house model," which cordons off nature and the nonhuman from human culture. These literary strategies emphasize the necessity of reconfiguring relationships between the human and more-than-human beings and worlds in the Anthropocene era. The use of gothic tropes and cognitive estrangement defamiliarizes the landscapes and 'things' that normally go unnoticed in our daily lives. Embedded in these stories is an ethical imperative to deprivilege anthropomorphic perspectives and broaden the social and political field to accommodate nonhuman or more-than-human agency.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Utopian Assemblages in Emergency Time: Utopian Mobility in *Distraction*

In his 2008 article “Dialectic of Emergency/Emergency of the Dialectic,” Noah De Lissovoy argues that capitalism functions according to a logic of “emergency time:” an “orientation to time dominated by emergency thinking [that] neglects our responsibility to the future” (27). The crux of his position is that the dominance of emergency time prevents individuals and communities from being able to envision effective forms of resistance or imagine alternatives to the current order. The characterization of capitalism as “crisis-prone” is not unique to De Lissovoy; indeed, Marx and Engels describe how capitalism creates crises because of its inherently untenable nature and internal contradictions. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels describe the cyclical crises brought about as a result of capitalist over-production – either the excess of commodities or the excess of money – and how each consequent crisis challenges the existing order:

How does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented. (42)

Capitalism learns to manage the crises that emerge out of its own internal contradictions, but it does, in some senses, thrive off this chaos. Whereas for Marx and Engels, the very crisis-prone nature of capitalism reveals a structural instability to the system that can ultimately be exploited by the working class, De Lissovoy’s theory of emergency time reflects a fundamentally less hopeful period in the development of global capitalism, where

alternatives seem out of reach, if not impossible to realize. De Lissovoy's articulation of emergency time resonates with the message of anti-utopianism: that we have reached the "end of history" (Fukayama 1992) and there is no possibility for transformation. This position not only forecloses the possibility for utopianism, it operates by removing space from the equation – it "operates through 'non-place,' a space in which there seems to be nothing for resistance to gets its teeth into" (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 41). Thus, utopianism—a mode of social dreaming that has, traditionally, been used to imagine better futures—is no longer entertained in a period in which our experience of temporality has been leveled, and we can no longer imagine what a 'good' space might look like.

Bruce Sterling's *Distraction* explores the effects of capitalism's crisis-prone nature, providing readers with a dire vision of the future that, though published in 1998, accurately predicted socio-economic conditions that have emerged in the United States over the last two decades. Embedded within the novel, however, is an inspiring vision of a re-configured utopianism capable of responding to capitalism's emergency time, and that employs space differently to facilitate the production of a new social mode. *Distraction* illustrates a new kind of utopian politics that suggests the vital importance of both reconfiguring and rehabilitating utopianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite—in fact, as a necessary response to—the "continuing state of emergency" presented by neoliberal capitalism. Drawing from *Distraction*'s depiction of utopian spaces and communities, this chapter puts forth a theory of *utopian assemblages* to consider how assemblage-oriented politics, combined with a renewed sense of utopian dreaming, could provide new orientations and

approaches to remedying social and spatial injustice, and new pathways for considering what constitutes resistance to neoliberal capitalist flows.

*Distraction* is set in 2044 in the American South after a global market crash that, despite being represented as more catastrophic in the novel, parallels the 2008 financial crisis and the resulting global economic downturn and recession. In *Distraction*, climate change has led to widespread flooding in many parts of the world, and the ocean has risen two feet in the past fifty years (Sterling 118), causing the destruction of many coastal settlements, and making relocation necessary for others (Sterling 118). Largely set in Louisiana, the novel's description of the desolate and ruined beaches along the Gulf of Mexico and in New Orleans now recalls the desolation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and more recently, the destruction caused by Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma in 2017. Our current knowledge of climate change indicates that Sterling's prescient vision of rising ocean levels and environmental devastation is a realistic depiction of what is in store for our planet. In some cases, *Distraction* predicted changes that are already occurring, including increasing global temperatures and rising sea levels. Despite being published in 1998, 2 years before the term "Anthropocene" was coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, *Distraction* is particularly conscious—and critical—of the ways in which human behaviour has permanently shaped our planet, and its representation and critique of ecological and political conditions is astonishingly relevant to contemporary circumstances.

For example, in the novel, the United States government no longer properly funds many of its scientific or military projects, prompting these groups to take creative ap-

proaches to receive funding. For example, a military base enacts a road block, compelling drivers to buy from their bake sale in order to pass state lines (Sterling 44). Reading *Distraction* in 2017, it is difficult to avoid comparing Sterling's depiction of a nation deprived of governmental funding with the budget cuts that President Trump has proposed and is steadily implementing.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, any semblance of a traditional public sphere has been eroded by surveillance technologies, causing one character to comment that that "the modern legal meaning of 'public' meant camera coverage on a net-accessible address" (Sterling 6). Once again, Sterling—like many other speculative fiction writers—accurately predicted the degree to which surveillance technologies have penetrated everyday life in the West, and the extent to which this is a key feature of neoliberal forms of biopolitical governance and discipline. Additionally, the middle class has eroded, providing another accurate prediction of the rise of socio-economic inequality that now characterizes life under neoliberalism. In the novel, large segments of the population live as squatters, or have joined tribes of nomadic "proles"<sup>12</sup>—groups of working class people who have withdrawn from normative society and created new kinds of mobile communities.

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<sup>11</sup> See "Trump Tracker: How Much Has the President Achieved So Far?" *BBC News*, 4 Aug. 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38663043>, and Soffen, Kim, and Denise Lu, "What Trump Cut in His Agency Budgets." *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-presidential-budget-2018-proposal/?utm\\_term=.e7d496b69fec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-presidential-budget-2018-proposal/?utm_term=.e7d496b69fec).

<sup>12</sup> The term "prole"—a shortened version of "proletariat"—was popularized in George Orwell's *1984*, and Sterling's use of the term pays homage to this text. At the same time, while the proles in *1984* are often represented as depoliticized and incapable of revolution, the proles of *Distraction* are the source of revolution and political change. In this sense, Sterling reemphasizes the revolutionary socio-political potential of the proletariat when it is mobilized as a collective, and when that proletariat is conceived of in a new light (as I will address later in this chapter).

After an official declaration of Emergency is confirmed in the United States, Congress cedes authority to a group of “emergency committees”<sup>13</sup> that attempt to manage various crises as they arrive (which is constantly). The protagonist, Oscar Valpraiso, is the leader of one of these committees. Notably, Oscar’s reputation as a suave political strategist offsets the discrimination he experiences due to his “personal background problem” (Sterling 64): he is the product of the infertility black market,<sup>14</sup> grown in an artificial womb in a Colombian embryo mill. The discrimination Oscar experiences is analogous to the racial discrimination experienced by people of colour in our present. Individuals with questionable genetic origins have become the target of social anxieties in a world that is now predominantly composed of mixed-race individuals, and in which white Anglo-Saxons are the racial minority (Sterling 64).

Oscar has built a career as political strategist and policy analyst, and he is frequently called upon in times of crisis to make order out of chaos. Oscar refers to the current state-of-affairs as the “Continuing Emergency” (Sterling 12), making the connection between *Distraction* and De Lissovoy’s “emergency time” particularly apt. The novel’s title also suggests an interesting connection: neoliberalism’s establishment of emergency time as the status quo results in both a sense of collective disorientation and disconnection from the sense of a coherent future, but also, neoliberalism’s crisis-prone dynamic distracts us from thinking historically, in the sense of thinking forward towards large-scale

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<sup>13</sup> “Congress had signed over its birthright to a superstructure of supposedly faster-moving executive committees [...] The country now had two national governments, the original, halting, never-quite-superseded legal government, and the spasmodic, increasingly shrill declarations of the State-of-Emergency cliques” (Sterling 120).

<sup>14</sup> The novel mentions “hormone pesticide disasters” that resulted in male infertility across the globe, and the resulting increase in demand for adoptions.



solutions. And yet, the inherently unstable quality of capitalism is also, according to Marx and Engels, its primary weakness. In Marx and Engels' valuation, capitalism's crisis-prone nature is what makes the possibility of resistance possible, precisely because these crises provide a potential opening or rupture through which the proletariat can act and revolutionize the mode of production. The novel engages with this strain of hope, so that although Valpraiso starts off as the leader of an emergency committee, he gradually experiences a paradigm shift that results in him catalyzing a revolution amongst various disenfranchised groups and participating in the establishment of a quasi-utopia in the city of Buna. Before expanding on how this happens, however, I turn to the theoretical frameworks through which I will be exploring these movements, and in particular, how *Distraction* can be read in relation to utopian theory.

### **The History of Literary Utopias**

*Distraction* is one addition to a long and rich history of utopianism in speculative fiction. More so than any other genre, speculative fiction has the capacity to imagine new worlds and new futures, and therefore provide blueprints for social and political alternatives. In the text now known as *Utopia*,<sup>15</sup> Thomas More coined the terms “utopia” from the Greek *οὐ* (“not”) and *τόπος* (“place”), and “eutopia” from the Greek “eu” for “good” or “happy” combined, once again, with *τόπος* (“place”) (Sargent, *A Very Short Introduction* 2). Currently, in English the term utopia has replaced eutopia to describe ideal societies; and yet, the ‘good’ place is also always-already the ‘no’ place: the good place that

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<sup>15</sup> Originally published in Latin, the English translation of the original title is *Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining*.

can never be. The word ‘utopia’ tends to conjure images of naïve and idealistic communities that we accept, from the start, as unrealizable (Freedman 62), but literary utopias also serve as critical interventions and reflections on contemporary political realities, providing oppositional frameworks and visions for a more equitable organization of society.

As many utopian theorists note, utopian thought and fiction did not start with More (see Sargent; Garforth). Visions of idealized communities are present in “the traditions of Edenic and Golden Age myths, millennialism, Cockayne fantasies, and the Arcadia or pastoral” as well as in “classical models of the ideal society” like Plato’s *Republic* (Garforth 7). Thomas More’s *Utopia*, however, sparked a utopian tradition in speculative fiction that continues to the present. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, literary utopias were often inspired by technological optimism and the belief that scientific progress could lead to improved societies (Moylan, *Demand* 4). Early utopias were inspired by the kinds of social and economic opportunities that appeared to be offered by the developing capitalist system, even if those visions sought to remedy certain inequalities that were perceived as correctible within, rather than inherent, to the emerging capitalist world order.<sup>1617</sup>

After 1850, as the capitalist economic system become pervasive, and as writers took note of the sedimentation of structural inequalities produced by that system, literary

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Moylan argues that “More welcomed the new paradigm and described his ideal commonwealth in humanist terms current to his day; but he also attempted to imagine a way to secure justice and a good life for those peasants, unattached serfs, and craft workers who were being displaced from land recently enclosed by profit-oriented landlords...*Utopia*...drew on the contradictions of the time and anticipated a response to the conflicting needs of dominant and subordinate classes” (*Demand* 3).

<sup>17</sup> This is made visible by the focus, of early, pre-1850 utopian visions, on promoting scientific advancement as capable of transforming social relations, as is visible in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* and L. S. Mercier’s *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*.

utopias shifted their tone and focus. Texts such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia*, *Men Like Gods*, and *The Shape of Things to Come*, and the emergence of feminist utopias such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* represent the "heuristic utopia" that emerged post-1850, and which "offered a strength of vision that sought to subvert or at least reform the modern economic and political arrangement from within" (Moylan, *Demand* 6).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the utopias most familiar to readers of speculative fiction are those produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Texts such as Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* are representative of what Moylan calls "critical utopias," which challenge the "cooptation of utopia by modern structures" (Moylan, *Demand* 10), and create radical new visions that "reject the notion of utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream" (Moylan, *Demand* 10). In other words, these texts employ utopianism as a heuristic tool that compels readers to examine and critique current socio-political systems.

What remains of the utopian vision in contemporary works is often mingled with dystopian elements, making it difficult to draw the line between ideal forms of socio-political organization and dystopian ones. As Lucy Sargisson notes, "utopias of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century are often marked by incompleteness, offering just a glimpse of the good life...[and] may include a dystopia as well as a eutopia" (*Fools Gold*, 26). Indeed, contemporary speculative fiction demonstrates the inherent messiness in attempting to articulate this distinction, particularly in our current political

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<sup>18</sup> The resulting literary utopias of this century were frequently set in idyllic pastoral settings, as in W. H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age*. These works suggest that the only escape from the current system requires extracting communities from the existing world order, and tend to view scientific progress as alienating and dehumanizing, revealing a marked shift from attitudes represented in early literary utopias.

climate. *Distraction*, itself, is a dystopic novel with a utopian force at its core. The popularity of dystopias reflects an increasing suspicion of utopian programs, as well as prevailing skepticism and disbelief in the viability of socio-political alternatives. As Moylan writes in his preface to *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), the utopian writing of the 1960s and the 1970s gave way, in the early 1990s, to the emergence of dystopia as a distinctive literary genre (xi-xii) responding to a “new phase” of capital characterized by the “onset of monopolized production” and the extension of the imperialist state’s “internal and external reach” (xii). The popularity of dystopian fictions reflects anxieties that there is no “outside”—no feasible alternative—to the increasingly pervasive network of neoliberal capitalist flows. Dystopias in fiction, in film, and in television,<sup>19</sup> attest to the difficulties of recuperating utopian desire and utopian dreaming in our current political climate.

### **Utopian Theory: The Function-Based Approach**

The historical development of the utopian form in speculative fiction literature developed alongside a thriving body of utopian theory that has both informed the development of how we perceive and employ utopia and expounded how literary utopias responded to specific historic and political conditions. Although I do not have the space here to provide anything close to a comprehensive study of utopian studies, in this section

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<sup>19</sup> In the last few years, dystopias have become ubiquitous. Films including *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016, based on the 2014 novel of the same name by M.R. Carey), *Elysium* (2013), *The Hunger Games* (2012), and *The Bad Batch* (2017), provided viewers with dystopias of varying quality; sales of classic dystopian novels like George Orwell’s *1984*, Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here*, and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* soared after Trump’s inauguration (Wheeler, n.pg.). Dystopian television has experienced a renaissance in the last few years, delivering audiences shows like *The Leftovers*, *3%*, *The 100*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *The Last Man on Earth*, *Black Mirror*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Colony*, and, of course, Hulu’s critically lauded television of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

I outline the dominant, “function-based” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 3), or heuristic approach, to utopian theory, so as to better articulate how my own theory of utopian assemblages departs from this model.<sup>20</sup>

The “function-based” approach to utopian theory is, as Lisa Garforth argues, dependent on “developments within post-war cultural/humanist Marxism [that] tend to identify utopianism as a mode of liberatory and critical thinking whose function is to open up the possibility of apprehending another way of being” (Garforth 7). The “function-based” approach employs utopianism as a heuristic to better understand and critique our present, and to provoke critical thought. Frederic Jameson, for example, argues in favour of anti-utopianism, articulating that imaginative utopias always fail, in that they never provide us with alternative societies that we can actually envision coming into being. This failure estranges us from our present and makes clear the extent to which our visions of the future are always delimited by present conditions. Thus, utopia is an “operation calculated to disclose the limits of our imagination of the future” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 413). Their *failure* provokes a desire to imagine the possibility of imagining a future, rather than merely remaining mired in the immediacy of the present, and thus continue to strive to envision alternatives.

Like Jameson, Darko Suvin argues that utopia is a “formal inversion of significant and salient aspects of the author’s world, an inversion which has its ultimate purpose the recognition that the author (and reader) truly live in an axiologically inverted world”

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<sup>20</sup> David M. Bell provides a succinct survey of utopian studies scholarship in chapter three of *Rethinking Utopia*. Amongst the plethora of texts that address the history of utopia, “The Three Faces of Utopianism, Revisted” and *Utopia: A Very Short Introduction* by Lyman Tower Sargent, “No Intentions? Utopian Theory After the Future” by Lisa Garforth, and *The Concept of Utopia* by Ruth Levitas were also very helpful in writing this chapter.

(236). Thus, for Suvin, utopia is a method of cognitive estrangement, enabling the writer and the reader to perceive the present through a critical lens. Ruth Levitas similarly argues that utopia is “better understood as a method than a goal” that “provides a critical tool for exposing the limitations of current policy discourse ... [and] facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures” (Utopia as Method, xi). For Levitas, utopia is linked to desire; a desire for alternatives that can reorient us to new futures. Likewise, the critical, hermeneutic function is emphasized in Thomas Moylan’s elaboration of the terms “critical utopia” in *Demand the Impossible* and “critical dystopia” in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. According to Moylan, critical utopias and dystopias express oppositional thought, actively critique hierarchies and domination, and explore alternatives (Moylan, *Demand* 10). For both Levitas and Moylan, it is vital that utopianism engages with and speaks to ‘real’ politics; however, their works reinforce the function of utopianism as method.

There is also, as David Bell notes, a tendency within utopian studies to associate utopianism with temporality, and to dismiss the spatial aspects of utopianism (*Rethinking* 5, 41). The tendency to conceive of utopia as a “temporal tendency” is representative of the influence of Ernest Bloch, whose three-part text *The Principle of Hope* explores concrete eruptions of utopianism into everyday life, but who, nevertheless, focuses largely on temporality rather than spatiality when articulating the importance of utopia. For Bloch, utopia is linked to futurity. The utopian impulse indicates a longing-for the Not-Yet that can never be fully realized except through a collective reconfiguration of the present socio-economic system, but which lingers in cultural artifacts, and points towards new

forms of socio-political organization (Freedman 62). This approach has been taken up by numerous scholars, perhaps most notably by Angelika Bammer in her work on the feminist utopian impulse in the works of Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, and Christa Wolf, where she argues for a view of utopia as an “open-ended process” rather than a “predefined state;” the utopian, she argues, is “more anticipation than antithesis: a movement toward the Not-yet” (Bammer 147). Although important, the focus on temporality in contemporary utopianisms shifts the focus away from the here-and-now, and specific, material practices that could produce a “good” place. This is, as David Bell notes, “utopianism without a utopia” (*Rethinking* 5).

What is common to these approaches to utopian studies is that the “focus is largely on their function as forms that ‘educate our desire’ for a better world, and/or estrange us from that which exists. Utopias are thus positioned as texts and read hermeneutically” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 6). Utopianism is perceived as “‘method’ (Suvin),” an “‘operation’ (Jameson),” or an “‘imaginative reconstitution of society (Levitas),” which “leaves utopia as a function of thought or a temporal process” (D. Bell, “Playing” 130). Clearly, conceiving of utopia through a ‘function-based’ or heuristic lens is urgently important, and this orientation to utopianism is politically valuable because it calls on readers to think differently—and think beyond—what currently is, and conceive of alternative futures. The function-based approach is a tool for identifying the utopian impulses that emerge within, at the interstices of, or at the borders of neoliberal flows, and for continuing to produce models for better societies. And yet, when confronted with what seems to be a monolithic network—a system without borders capable of appropriating utopian dream-

ing, of folding utopian impulses into its reach—utopian hermeneutics can seem like a futile, abstract and academic exercise. To return to De Lissovoy, being caught in the endless cycles of capitalism's emergency time renders traditional utopianism ineffective as a real source of critique or political resistance.

### **Assemblage-Oriented Utopian Thought**

Following Delany, however, I would argue that it is “only by problematizing the utopian notion, by rendering its hard, hard perimeters somehow permeable, even undecidable, that you can make it yield anything interesting” (“On Triton” n.pg). Thus, a new orientation to utopianism is necessary given the predominance of emergency time under neoliberal capitalism, given its cannibalization of space and time in service of pervasive crises. While my own approach to utopianism does not dismiss the function-based or heuristic approach, in what follows, I draw from Bell's theory of “place-based” utopianism to articulate how utopianism can emerge as a result of specific, material engagements between human and nonhuman actants to create what might be called “good” places; new types of collective life. In this model, utopianism can no longer be seen as a stable space or universalist network; rather, it involves “moment[s] of deterritorialization” that “work against the representation of a unified reality or an idealized space...in their constant search for the livable” (Mittag 260). This approach thus displaces the focus of utopian studies from producing and analyzing secessionist, purely future-oriented blueprints of the “good place,” and from focusing on utopia as an interpretive or heuristic method, to foregrounding utopianism as processual, heterogeneous, and forged out of assemblages established between individuals, communities, and their lived environment.



For Bell, the heuristic or function-based approach to utopianism is limited because it renounces place and wrongly equates space with stasis (*Rethinking* 5). He argues that removing considerations of place “removes utopia’s specificity, which comes from the production of place” (*Rethinking* 5). Instead of eschewing place, Bell considers how politics— “of embracing the unknown, of utilizing improvisation, of opening up new horizons for action”—might “create place,” and aims to produce a concept of utopia that moves beyond the “dichotomy between placeless utopia-as-process and place-bound utopia” (*Rethinking* 5). Rather than conceive of place as static, however, Bell argues that utopias must be thought of as “places-in-process” (*Rethinking* 14), in which specific relationships between humans and nonhuman actants produce what can be thought of as “good” spaces that “increase the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 14). Thus, Bell reinvigorates the notion of utopia to focus on content—the place of utopia—and the affective relations that circulate within that utopia. Utopia is not merely as a textual or abstract imaginative and critical method, but can be analyzed as a means to theorize grounded, material alternatives, to valorize situated spatial practices with a utopian operation. In other words, instead of treating utopia as an abstracted operation that functions textually, purely at the level of the writer and/or reader and their engagement with the text, it is politically fruitful to conceive of utopias as situational assemblages of humans and nonhumans that carve out spaces where new forms of life can foster that resist and subvert the dominant organizing logics of neoliberal capitalism. Utopia can no longer be conceived as distinct from the here-and-now, but must be salvaged from the material realities of the present and conceived of in more partial terms, in

relation to specific socio-spatial practices. This theory of utopia thus considers how specific material and affective forces can be reconfigured to create more equitable spaces; however, these spaces are always in process of being (re)made.

The theory of utopia that I put forth, therefore, focuses on reconceptualising the concept utopia along two axes. Utopia as blueprint (or program, to use Jameson's term) is discarded, and utopia as heuristic or hermeneutic is secondary to considering utopian assemblages—place-based, material, and affective ecologies—that allow for the emergence of socio-spatial collectives that intervene into capitalist flows. Essential to this theory of utopian assemblages is an acceptance of fluidity, contingency, and heterogeneity, as assemblages are always potentially open: open to transformation, open to creating new connections and new linkages, across multiple systems. Finally, this reconceptualization of utopia requires a renewed appreciation of place, and how utopian assemblages emerge as a result of specific spatial practices, as well as *produce* new kinds of spaces. If, in fact, we can no longer productively image utopia as a new, comprehensive and solidified system and space to replace the old, it may be more useful to consider how utopian strains infect or penetrate everyday life. Thus, the notion of utopia developed here involves developing alternative strategies for navigating space, organizing social and political flows, and, essentially, employing mobilities. Rather than establish a roadmap for change, *Distraction* represents utopian assemblages: partial, deterritorialized, and flexible networks capable of reacting to the “speed-up” caused by neoliberal capitalism and intervening into prevailing patterns, which allow for the emergence of new kinds of places with a decidedly utopian intent. *Distraction*, insofar as it describes a political, cultural, and environmental situation

that eerily parallels our present, is a particularly apt and fruitful lens through which to critique contemporary conditions. The novel's representation of new kinds of communities, commons, and spaces that enable new forms of social life demonstrates the vital importance of speculative fiction as a critical tool.

Utopian assemblages or utopian mobility emerge as a viable oppositional force within *Distraction* when Oscar reaches his limit as a political strategist and begins to think tactically in a new framework. Significantly, at the start, and arguably throughout the entire novel, Oscar isn't attempting to stage a resistance against capitalism; rather, he is attempting to reinstate political order and a more stable status quo. However, once he realizes this isn't possible with more conventional management techniques, he begins to use more chaotic, less organized strategies to fight back against disorder, and eventually gets caught up in the flow of these new networks. What begins as an attempt to reinstate order gets taken in a new direction, veering away from Oscar's original goals (and, importantly, from Oscar's control). Thus, while *Distraction* begins with Oscar attempting to regain political order and reinstate a traditional type of political democracy, about halfway into the narrative he—almost against his own will—becomes caught up in various networks, takes certain strategic risks that transform his tactics from that of management to mobile disruptions. In what follows, I examine three central strategies employed by the communities in *Distraction* that deploy assemblage-oriented utopianism: the decentralized mobility and assemblage-oriented politics of the prole groups (particularly, in their riots); the creation of alternative economies and marketplaces; and, most significantly in my view, the creation of utopian community spaces and architecture.

### **Prole Nomadism and Utopian Mobility**

Although Oscar is the protagonist of the novel, the countermovement against neoliberal networks is instigated by the proles: nomadic communities of varying sizes that have opted out of normative society and organized themselves based on entirely new principles. As Oscar puts it: “these were people who had rallied in a horde and marched right off the map. They had tired of a system that offered them nothing, so they simply invented their own” (Sterling 61). Although there are multiple prole groups, Oscar eventually aligns himself with one group in particular—the Moderators—whom he describes as a “nongovernmental network organization ... an entire alternate society for whom life by old-fashioned political and economic standards was simply no longer possible” (Sterling 368-369). Our initial introduction to the proles is in the first pages of the novel, as Oscar watches – for the “fifty-first time”—the video of a riot that took place in Worcester. In this section, I follow De Lissovoy and Jasbir Puar to articulate the difference between traditional oppositional movements and/or subjects and an assemblage-oriented perspective of identity, and argue that the latter provides us with more effective tools to resist and subvert neoliberal flows. I then demonstrate how the proles—and the kinds of mobilities and networks they employ—provide an example of this new kind of revolutionary assemblage that is necessary to resist neoliberalism, and which makes possible the creation of utopian assemblages.

Traditional resistance movements have relied on a consolidated group, with a consistent identity, to present a coherent revolutionary subject against what is perceived as a clear antagonist. For example, De Lissovoy notes that traditional forms of opposition be-

tween the proletariat and the bourgeoisie have followed this pattern. He argues, however, that these forms of organization are no longer effective because they work within the structure of a “class contradiction that capitalism has learned to manage [and thus] do not primarily threaten the legitimacy of power within the rational economy of communicative action” (De Lissovoy 34). In other words, the deterritorialized nature of neoliberal capitalism limits the efficacy of a unified revolutionary class, because that class has not been able to develop at the same rate as neoliberalism: it has not been able to “keep pace with” the development of capitalism itself (De Lissovoy 30). De Lissovoy is effectively critiquing the traditional form of oppositional movements, arguing that attempting to form a revolutionary movement based around “organized identification” (36) is no longer effective. Alternatively, De Lissovoy argues that what is needed “is more a situation than an antagonist, an intractable tendency toward disequilibrium, a menacing environment that responds in ways that cannot be predicted” (38). This new “situation”—a deterritorialized, decoded assemblage of actants that uses contingent, flexible relationships to effectively circumvent and strategically confuse capitalistic flows—resonates with assemblage theory’s focus on situated networks, connections between parts, and *situations* rather than *subjects*.

A distinct, though compatible perspective is presented by Jasbir Puar in her analysis of identity politics. For Puar, there is a productive tension between “theories that deploy the subject as a primary analytic frame, and those that highlight the forces that make subject formation tenuous, if not impossible, or even undesirable” (49). As an alternative, Puar calls for conceiving of politics within an assemblage framework, in which “catego-

ries—race, gender, sexuality—are considered events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects” (Puar 58). Thus, instead of the promotion of what Deleuze and Guattari call “molar” categories— “unifiable, totalizable, organizable” (*Thousand Plateaus* 33) arrangements of bodies—assemblage theory focuses on “the patterns of relations” and how different, human and nonhuman bodies, “are arranged with each other” (Puar 60-61). In this model, identities are not pre-given, but emerge as a result of “particular relations of force, connection, and resonance” (Puar 57). Unified identity categories result in territorializations of the social body, in which differences are extinguished in the totality. In assemblage theory, individual differences are not expunged in favour of unity, as each component (person, nonhuman, material, affective force) can shift and change at any time.

Both Puar and De Lissovoy, though speaking from different disciplines and to different contexts, promote a politics that does not remain committed to solid subject positions, or a coherent revolutionary identity, but rather, embraces heterogeneity, change, and provisionality. An assemblage-oriented approach provides a framework for understanding and analyzing how the meaning and substance of bodies change over time, as a result of their positionality within particular networks of forces. Further, and most importantly, by conceiving of identities in this light, and by prioritizing the relations and forces that create certain identities rather than remaining committed to maintaining the integrity of coherent identities, assemblage theory also gives us a new way to think about how communities—of humans and nonhumans—can work towards transformative social and political change. Thinking in terms of assemblages—precisely because the parts are

not reducible to the whole—allows for the emergence of unforeseen events and becomings (Farías 15). This allows us to focus on how new arrangements and forces emerge between and across traditional identity categories, creating surprising affiliations.

Thus, the oppositional movement articulated here is not rooted in identity politics, but neither does it disavow identities or suggest that we should somehow reach a stage of being ‘post-identity.’ Rather, it posits that identities are always-already intersectional and open to flux, precisely because of the various networks of affects, relations, materiality, in which we find ourselves. As Bell argues, “the utopian project is therefore not one of feeling from fixed identities but working from and with unfinished fluid assemblages” (*Rethinking* 147). Thinking in terms of assemblages allows us to see novel “cartographies” (Guattari 26); to come up with new ways of enacting political resistance, precisely because it focuses on the relationships between parts, and thus, potential reconfigurations of those components.

Sterling’s vision of the proles throughout the novel illustrates what it might mean to establish resistance movements around an assemblage-oriented, rather than identarian, politics. The riot is the first example where we witness the proles in action. As Oscar watches the footage, he notes that, at first, the video seems to show an everyday Massachusetts street crowd, populated by ‘regular’ citizens who would normally go under the radar: “the thing that truly roused his admiration was the absolute brilliance of the way they were dressed, the utter dullness and nonchalance of their comportment...each and every one was a cunning distillation of the public image of Worcester” (Sterling 2). Suddenly, this group of seemingly unremarkable individuals “explode[s] into action” (Ster-

ling 4), taking control of the street and destroying the Worcester bank. Rather than commit to a unified identity, the proles adopt ‘non-identities’ that take the powers-that-be by surprise precisely because they cannot predict how or when or who will spring into action. They denature how and why ‘regular’ citizens should act, thus interfering with the social, spatial, and economic patterns normativized by neoliberalism.

Furthermore, the proles “didn’t fit any known demographic profile of a troublemaker, or a criminal, or a violent radical. Any security measure that would have excluded them would have excluded everyone in town” (Sterling 4). Again, by functioning as an assemblage rather than a solidified antagonist to capitalism, the proles effectively function ‘under the radar’ of the various disciplinary controls employed by neoliberal flows, and this is what enables them to effectively disrupt those flows. In this riot, the coalition of multiple groups, the heterogeneity of the community, makes them illegible to these networks. In this sense, the proles present themselves as a situation, as assemblage of heterogeneous parts, rather than a codified group, and this situation threatens the stability of neoliberal spaces by virtue of its unpredictability.

The proles also function according to a different spatial and political logic. Indeed, the riot represents how utopian assemblages function spatially and temporally. Consider the pace of a city street on a regular work day: pedestrians stay in line, following the paths laid out for them through infrastructure and urban design principles. Spaces are delineated neatly into private and public, and the tempo of commerce guides pedestrian movements. The riots disrupt these spatial-temporal paradigms. The prole riots create a kind of provisional utopia by engaging in a series of spatial and social activities that open



up new rhythms and engagements with space and time than run counter to the tactics of neoliberal capitalism and its use of emergency time. The riot is an “event”—the emergence of new deterritorializing flows that “disrupt patterns, generate new encounters with people and objects, and invent new connections and ways of inhabiting urban life” (McFarlane, “Assemblage and Critical Urban Praxis” 209). Utopian mobility emerges as a form of discontinuity within the dominant system “that distributively and intensively multiplies as it moves throughout the social body” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 39), un-locking bodies from particular disciplinary arrangements to increase the possible range of interactions. Here mobilities offer the potential to open utopian strains or becomings that have the capacity to rupture the existing political order. This rupturing is not only conceptual; it also literally necessitates taking momentum into an entirely unforeseen direction, engaging processes in unpredictable ways. What Oscar describes as a “startling explosion” is a precise representation of the way that utopian mobilities rupture neoliberal capitalism space-time in service of new goals, new forms of organization. A new rhythm, a tempo of bodies in motion, emerges as out of place within the surroundings, disrupting the way that it has been organized. The proles make use of the local surroundings to continuously deterritorialize and reterritorialize space.

This strategy reflects De Lissvoy’s argument that we must create a new kind of historical agent which “does not belong to a single consolidated representative of the totality” but rather, can be conceptualized as a “continuous condition” (36) – a flexible network of forces that use space and time in alternative ways. In other words, they work together for a common cause, without coalescing into a solidified group in which differ-

ence is subsumed for the sake of coherence. This is a “condensation of standpoints, different from both unification and simple coalition” (De Lissovoy 37). These everyday citizens organize themselves in a manner that circumvents and functions according to an entirely different logic than neoliberalism. The proles deploy a kind of nomadic mobility that is incompatible with these patterns, and which disrupts the strict division of public and private space.

Although the proles disrupt the normative socio-spatial order of public space, it is, of course, highly significant that their main target is a bank—one of the great symbols of capitalist ideology. As Oscar describes it, the crowd “deliberately punishes” (Sterling 3) the bank: supergluing doors shut, shattering windows, severing power and communication cables, etc.” (Sterling 4). Here the goal is disorganization, a productive kind of chaos that is “resistant” rather than merely “destructive” (De Lissovoy 38). In other words, the overcoded, territorialized space of the bank is deterritorialized by prole mobility to make visible and disrupt the various powers that create and perpetuate certain spatial logics. The proles destroy the bank’s invisible communication networks, as well as its physical structure, presumably interrupting the flows of exchange and capital that the bank hosts and represents. The space of the bank—ordered according to certain principles, and representative of how neoliberal flows insert themselves and impose a certain spatial logic into particular places—is disrupted and transformed. The riot acts as an interruption into the everyday rhythms of neoliberalism, and in this sense, the riot makes visible how certain spaces come to be ordered, and denaturalizes the socio-spatial order imposed by neoliberal flows. The ultimate effect of the riots confirms this goal: the riots resulted in the expo-

sure of a “number of grave financial irregularities” at the Worcester bank, leading to the “resignation of three Massachusetts state representatives and the jailing of four bank executives and the mayor of Worcester” (Sterling 4). The role of the riots in the novel can be linked to real-world protests, demonstrations, and walk-outs that are politically efficacious not only because of their opposition to neoliberal ideologies that continuously subjugate bodies and groups, privileging market logic above all else, but because they disrupt the normative space-times upon which neoliberal forms of governance depend.

This event haunts Oscar throughout the novel and causes him to rethink the nature of politics in this landscape. Traditional forms of politics can be described as ‘black-and-white’ in the sense that there are two coherent political sides, employing familiar strategies, on a measurable and knowable ‘board.’ The proles function as an assemblage, non-hierarchically, in a non-unified manner, ‘beyond’ the board, and beyond the limits of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie. The difference between these two modes aligns with Deleuze and Guattari’s explanation of the contrast between the state apparatus and the War Machine. The state apparatus is composed of traditional forms of political, economic and social power that favour the organization and management of flows (*Thousand Plateaus* 352, 355). They use the metaphor of chess to articulate how power is employed by the state apparatus: chess pieces are “coded” and have circumvented “qualities” (352). Chess pieces are determined by relations of interiority; they have fixed relationships defined within the structure of the game, and have no meaning or capacities exterior to these predetermined associations. Further, chess takes place on a “closed space” with set points, and in this sense, is highly striated. In this sense, chess is an “institutionalized, regulated, coded

war” (Deleuze and Guattari 353). Oscar, channeling Deleuze and Guattari, also uses the chess metaphor to describe how he once perceived politics, thinking that “he had once imagined politics as a chess game...pawns, knights, and queens, powers and strategies, ranks and files, black squares and white squares” (Sterling 4). Oscar once thought of politics as a coded game, a game in which individuals have clear trajectories, and in which there are clear sides.

However, the more he witnesses the activities of the prole groups, the more Oscar is compelled to reconsider this perspective. Indeed, he notes that “studying this tape [of the riots] had cured him of this metaphor. Because this phenomenon on the tape was not a chess piece. It was there on the public chessboard all right, but it wasn’t a rook or a bishop. It was a wet squid, a swarm of bees (Sterling 4). What Oscar is describing here recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the War Machine, and how it functions like the game of *Go*. *Go* pieces are simple pellets with “no intrinsic properties, only situational ones” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 353). The function of each piece is not determined in advance, but shifts depending on the nature of the game. Thus, the *Go* pieces are not defined by relations of interiority, but exteriority (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 353): the pieces are not coded in the same way, and are not constrained by the predetermined structure of the game. Rather, the pieces take on new functions as needed, and have a shifting relationship to one another. *Go* also functions differently in a spatial manner; it involves “arraying oneself in open space ... the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without departure or arrival...Chess codes and decodes space, whereas *Go* ...territorializ[es] and deterritorial-

iz[es] [space]” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 353). Thus, this metaphor depends not only on two competing perspectives of the game pieces, but it also depends on two opposing perspectives of space. Whereas the chess board is conceived as a solid surface upon which clearly defined subjects fulfill their prescribed roles, moving from one block to another, the space of the *Go* board is a smooth expanse that does not determine in advance how the pieces should or can be arranged. Therefore, in order to successfully compete with the prevailing order, it is not enough to merely take up one side or another, to assume the position of ‘black’ or ‘white’ on a board that will determine in advance what moves are possible for both sides. Rather, it is necessary to play an entirely different game, to engage the ‘enemy’ through new tactics and orientations.

Within *Distraction*, the proles function in a manner reminiscent of the *Go* pieces; indeed, Oscar describes the proles as “a new entity that pursued its own orthogonal agenda, and vanished into the silent interstices of a deeply networked and increasingly nonlinear society” (Sterling 4). If politics-as-usual functions like chess, in service of the state apparatus, the proles function as a war machine, engaging in horizontal, nonlinear (de)territorializations of the socio-spatial milieu. The proles fundamentally rupture the disciplinary power of the state apparatus, and create what Foucault calls “horizontal conjunctions” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 219) to cut through these “compact hierarchical networks” of disciplinary power (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 220). This deterritorialization of the political sphere is the first step towards the creation of the utopian assemblage.

### Alternative Economies

The bank riot is only the first example of utopian mobility as it is exemplified in the prole groups. The proles have developed their own economic systems entirely distinct from capitalist relations of exchange, not least because they have eliminated money and use barter and trade, as well as reputation points, in lieu of traditional currency. Prole groups function as salvage societies, creating spontaneous communal markets depending on where they are located at any one point in time. The proles *redeploy* the chaotic flows inherent to capitalism in order to resist capitalist flows. Oscar and his krewe drive into one of these flea markets and notice that “the huge crowds of proles seemed extremely well organized. They were serenely ignoring traffic lights but they were moving in rhythmic gushes and clumps, filtering through the town in a massive folk dance (Sterling 326). This fluidity is made possible by earbuds that pedestrians are given upon entrance. As Oscar inserts the bud into his ear,

The device emitted a little wordless bubbling hum [...] as long as he moved with the crowd, the little murmur merely sat there at his ear, an oddly reassuring presence [...] However, if he interfered with the crowds flows – if he somehow failed to take a cue – the earcuff grew querulous. Stand in the way long enough, and it would bawl. (Sterling 327)

The kind of ‘crowd control’ described here is particularly interesting due to Sterling’s personification of the device, which gets angry when individuals disrupt the spatial order, which calls to mind Jane Bennett’s articulation of thing-power and her argument that “the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group” (*Vibrant* xvii).<sup>21</sup> The market assemblage, therefore, is constituted as much by humans as it by technologies, eco-

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Bennett’s notion of thing-power will be addressed further in the following chapter.

conomic flows, and the materiality of the space itself. This image succinctly depicts the alternative mobilities of urban assemblages; the market is a “collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro groupings” (Grosz 108). The market does not have an “identity” so much as it produces a distinctive mode of relating between humans and nonhumans, establishing a particular kind of space in the process.

Elizabeth Grosz’s description of cities as involving “interrelations” between a “disunified series of systems, a series of disparate flows, energies, events or entities,” and the “bringing together or drawing apart their more or less temporary alignments” (108) beautifully encapsulates the kind of organized chaos of the prole market, in which space and social relationships are fundamentally reorganized. The proles and their visitors are “extremely organized,” but their flow is more akin to a “dance” than a striated pathway. Indeed, they seem indifferent to official markers of place, such as the traffic lights, and move instead according to collectively organized rhythms that are fundamentally ‘other’ to the striations of neoliberal enclosure. In this sense, prole mobility represents the possibility of re-deploying flows inherent to neoliberal market systems, in order to create new kinds of mobile assemblages.

The unconventional modalities of space-time developed by the proles, exemplified by the way they organize movement in their markets, echoes and reflects their alternative economic structures. They repurpose the “detritus of dead American computer and phone industries” (Sterling 328) in order to serve their own goals, making laptops out of straw, communication devices out of defunct military equipment. Oscar and his companion,

Greta, note with surprise that “new nomad manufacturers were infiltrating this jungle of ancient junk. They were creating new, functional objects that were not commercial detritus – they were sinister mimics of commercial detritus, created through new, non-commercial methods” (329). The proles recycle and repurpose what, within the capitalist paradigm, would be considered garbage, in order to further disrupt the capitalist system. Indeed, these appropriations allow them to develop the earbuds and the other communication technologies which facilitate their alternative social networks.

The proles’ alternative economic systems, coupled with the way they use space and time differently, activating mobile networks of forces in new ways, demonstrate how the prole groups do not function according to the same market or commercialized discourses of value. They are figures that have been robbed of identity by capitalism’s violence only to return with a vengeance as precisely those *non*-identities that “challeng[e] capital’s own sense of itself as accomplishing the perfection and culmination of human history” (De Lissovoy 36). The attack on the bank reinforces this challenge, particularly because of how each prole is described as ‘unremarkable’ in appearance; indeed, they all appear incredibly normal, and thus, unrecognizable to the system. The proles are these “non-identities” indecipherable to capitalism because they have revoked identity categories and identity politics in favour of new types of movement, new rhythms, that are de-territorialized in different ways than capitalism itself. They are those who have been disenfranchised by the system, and those who make use of the commodities that have been similarly discarded, in order to challenge the flows of that system.



### **Utopian Assemblages and Spatial Politics**

The prole groups and their communities eventually collaborate with Oscar and his krewe, as well as the local population, to take over the Collaboratory and the surrounding city, Buna, to create an alternative community. At the beginning of the novel, once Oscar has been instated as a policy analyst for the U.S. Senate Science Committee, his first assignment is to evaluate and restructure the Collaboratory, including its staff and financial resources. The Collaboratory receives no federal funding, but the senator of Louisiana, a charismatic and bombastic man named Green Huey<sup>22</sup>, continues to fund the Collaboratory for his own projects. Eager to stop internal corruption, Oscar attempts to take the Collaboratory out from under Huey's control and to establish a more fiscally responsible budget. As Huey continues to interfere with his plans, Oscar eventually cedes to his colleague's suggestion that they stage a takeover by collaborating with the prole group called The Moderators.

The takeover begins with Oscar aligning himself with the current Moderator chief, Burningboy, and forcefully removing Huey's on-site police presence using Moderator troops, and, most notably, a powerful group of teenage girls led by elderly women. These women, who are treated as expendable, and perceived as non-threatening, by normative society, become an essential resource to the resistance, and thus reflect how the utopian assemblage results in new social configurations that are fundamentally illegible to capitalist values.<sup>23</sup> Following their intervention, the Collaboratory is left "with no working

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<sup>22</sup> The character is clearly inspired to some extent by Huey Long, the controversial politician who served as Louisiana's governor from 1928-1935, and served on the United States Senate from 1932 until his assassination in 1935.

<sup>23</sup> A similar dynamic is visible in the film *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in which a group of elderly women known

budget...or police force...Everyone was working for no pay. They were living off of barter, back gardens, surplus office equipment, and various forms of left-handed pin money” (Sterling 366). What started as an attempt to regain political order by re-establishing the Collaboratory as a non-partisan governmentally-funded research center becomes the creation of an entirely new space. The Collaboratory becomes a public space with no property distinctions; it makes use of economies based on barter and reputation, communal gardens and public and free access to hacked governmental networks.

And yet, this first takeover is only a partial victory. The deterritorialized, nomadic mobility demonstrated by the prole groups is eventually coopted by traditional sources of power. Ironically, in order to put an end to the official Emergency, the President of the United States declares war on Holland, one of the most powerful nations in the novel.<sup>24</sup> Declaring a state of war puts power back into the hands of the national government, and automatically dissolves the Emergency committees. The President coopts a sect of Moderator proles to force reluctant emergency committee members to step down. These proles become the CDIA – Civilian Defense Intelligence Unit – and, lacking the authority to arrest people, “pursued Emergency committee members with nonviolent ‘body pickets’”

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as the Vuvalini join forces with the Five Wives—young women who were previously held in captivity to serve as breeders—in order to fight despotic villain Immortan Joe and his War Boys. While the War Boys and Immortan Joe are representative of toxic masculinity and the links between patriarchy, environmental degradation, and capitalist destruction in general, the Vuvalini and Five Wives represent how the forces and groups that are typically degraded and oppressed can return with a vengeance and become the catalyst for forging new societies.

<sup>24</sup> Thank you to Anne Savage for pointing out that this appears to be an homage to Leonard Wibberly’s 1955 Cold War satire, *The Mouse That Roared*, in which a tiny European nation called the Duchy of Grand Fenwick defeats the United States by stealing the most powerful bomb in the world from under the noses of the United States. They are able to do so precisely because they are considered insignificant amongst the world’s superpowers.

that involve “methodically stalk[ing] committee members for twenty-four hours a day” (Sterling 452) until they step down out of pure annoyance. Simultaneously, a rift breaks out between the Governor of Louisiana, Green Huey, and the President, prompting both to align with prole groups and use their guerilla tactics to sabotage one another.

Oscar, in conversation with Greta—a former Collaboratory scientist with whom he begins a romantic relationship, and who begins to take on a larger role in the organization of the community—notes that “the President is imitating us. That is exactly what we did, right here [...] people think it is exciting to seize power with prole gangs, and to throw all the rascals out. It’s a very slick move” (Sterling 454). This development demonstrates how capitalism thrives off the conflict that is inherent to its own processes, reiterating its own hegemony as it manages and reorganizes the flows produced by its own internal tensions as a socio-political system. The deterritorializing, nomadic forces of the proles are appropriated by the state apparatus to fuel their development and affirm its hegemony.

And yet, despite the appropriation of prole nomadism to further traditional political powers, events escalate, and a new strain of utopianism emerges, yet again, to challenge these appropriations. The conflict between the President and Huey results in the bombing of Buna, the city surrounding the Collaboratory, with a black substance, causing widespread panic and then, more significantly, a strengthened “will to resist” (Sterling 465). While initially the population believes the substance is a chemical agent, tests reveal that the black substance is only paint. Notably, Sterling does not make clear who is responsible for the bombings. Whether it is Huey, the President, or another unnamed

force who is responsible becomes insignificant. Revealing that the bombs are only paint, and keeping the identity of the bombers under wraps, emphasizes the carnivalesque absurdity of the political climate. What becomes significant is how citizens resist this absurdity, rather than the individual actors who are responsible. In this world, echoing our real-world political climate, political actors are all providing ‘more of the same’ despite their superficial differences.

In response to these events, the citizens of Buna align themselves with the Collaboratory population (of Moderators and scientists) creating an “architectural sortie,” a “fortress [...] extended over the entire city” (Sterling 464). In order to achieve this, the community makes use of a new ‘smart’ architectural technology designed by Massachusetts Senator Albert Bambakias. Although the process is not made entirely clear, the construction system uses “complete algorithms for assembling the building from component parts” (Sterling 71). The program starts with a basic prefabricated model, then the “plans are always adjusted by the system to fit the exact specifics of the site” (Sterling 72). The system then keeps track of every component ‘tagged’ in the project and directs whoever is involved to complete the construction. Bambakias originally designed this system to create disaster relief buildings, but never achieves success because “there’s no *money*” in disaster relief” (Sterling 393) and “no market-pull” (Sterling 394) for the project. Within the capitalist system, the idea doesn’t sell, because no one wants to invest in a technology to aid ‘expendable’ populations. Ironically, this technology is repurposed by those very ‘expendable’ communities in order to help them fight back against the system that defined them as such, and to create new types of communities that challenge this system.

This innovative technology allows for the creation of a novel socio-spatial form and the emergence of a utopian assemblage. In order to analyze this development, I turn to Alejandro Zaera-Polo's theory of the "politics of the envelope," an analysis of the political agency of architecture inspired by the assemblage-oriented works of Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze. Zaera-Polo's argument centers around the concept of the "building envelope," which, he argues, "materializes the separation of the inside and outside, natural and artificial and it demarcates private property and land ownership" (Zaera-Polo 77). The building envelope has traditionally been understood as a "surface" (Zaera-Polo 77), which has reinforced the function of the envelope as representational. In fact, however, the "building envelope forms the border, the frontier, the edge, the enclosure and the joint: it is loaded with political content" (Zaera-Polo 77). Rather than conceive of the envelope as a representational surface, Zaera-Polo argues that we must "frame architecture not merely as a representation of the interests of a client, of a certain political ideology or an image of utopia, but as an all-too-real, concrete, and effective political agency able to assemble and mediate the interests of the multiplicities that converge on the architecture project" (79). In other words, Zaera-Polo argues that architecture is not merely an object, but, to use Bruno Latour's term, architectural structures are a "matter of concern" — "they too act, they too do things, they too make you do things" (Latour, "Why Has Critique" 242-243), and have "the capacity to produce effects that may actually destabilize power regimes rather than functioning as mere representations of politics" (Zaera-Polo 79). Architecture is one component within an assemblage composed of humans and non-humans, culture and technology (Zaera-Polo 76) capable of producing material, political

effects. Thus, Zaera-Polo's theory elaborates the political effects of architecture, and the capacity of architecture to be both effected by political activity, and produce political activity, as well as facilitate new socio-material arrangements between actants (80).

The Collaboratory takeover, and the architectural innovations employed by the new residents, exemplify Zaera-Polo's statement that "the relationship between politics and architecture is one of mutual influence" (80). They employ Bambakias' architectural system to create large-scale 'smart' buildings that extend from the original Collaboratory structure to cover all of Buna with a protective layer. As Oscar describes it: "This was architecture as airtight ephemera: structure like a dewy spiderweb, smart, hypersensitive, always calculating, always on the move...the dome could become a living fluid, a kind of decentred, membranous amoeba" (Sterling 464). The envelope of the building becomes destabilized; it is not a solid, representational surface reflecting a new socio-political order, but a kind of living, breathing thing that is both a product of new socio-spatial relations and a facilitator of these new relations. This is architecture as utopian assemblage: there is no unifying structure or logos to the environment; rather, space is "decentred" and "hypersensitive" to the human and nonhuman components that occupy it. Matter is not fixed, but emergent, as the nature and function of the space is always shifting given the various constellations of forces at work in the milieu.

This description of a new type of architectural and urban design echoes Oscar's original description of prole mobility during the riots, once again demonstrating a kind of affinity and mutuality between the Collaboratory-as-agent and the humans who dwell within. The proles are like a "squid" or "swarm of bees" (Sterling 4): they are not a uni-

fied whole, in which difference is extinguished within a unified representational totality. Indeed, Oscar notes that “all these factions had different ideas of how to tackle the problem [of how to secure the Collaboratory]” (Sterling 464); and yet, despite their differences, when confronted with the threat of another attack, “everyone simply began contributing everything they could all at the same time” (Sterling 465), and work together to develop the new pseudo-city.

The development of the Collaboratory is described in much the same terms: it is a “living fluid,” “decentered” and “ephemeral”; the new structure “is always on the move” so as to better accommodate the shifting needs of the assemblage. The structure does not have a unified appearance or function, but rather, is composed of a series of heterogeneous parts that all, somehow, function together: “the dome metastasized; it sent out giant filmy buttresses on Daliesque walking stilts. The greenhouses of Buna linked together spontaneously into endless ramparts and tunnels... airtight brick crypts and bomb shelters sprang up everywhere, like measles” (Sterling 465). Sterling’s comparison of the Collaboratory development to a spreading cancer and measles is somewhat ironic; these “growths” are spatial as well as social and political, and they are dangerous, not to the (physical and social) body (of the Collaboratory) itself, *per se*, but to the prevailing neoliberal order. This metaphor is also particularly effective because it emphasizes the organic, rhizomatic nature of these developments, as well as their unpredictability and precarity.

The population of the Collaboratory—at this point, consisting of proles and regular citizens, scientists and artists—function according to the same nomadic, mobile, net-

worked rhythms of their architectural technologies. The new Collaboratory is a “combined effect of the construction technology of the building’s skin and the specificities of its massing” (Zaera-Polo 77). There is no predetermined logos to which the building must submit; rather, the meaning and purpose of the building is transformed depending on the specific arrangement of the overall assemblage. There is a mutual interaction between the space and its occupants that illustrates their interrelation, and the extent to which spatial structures and social and political activities inform the production of one another. Both eschew the logical, organized strategies that Oscar compares to chess, in favour of nomadic, nonlinear, decentred, fluid and trajectories and tactics.

The interrelation between space and politics becomes clear here as both the social agents and spatial environment are activated in tandem, providing an example of what De Lissovoy argues is one of the most important components of a new revolutionary subject in the age of emergency capitalism, that it functions as “the outgrowth and action of an environment. Rather than simply taking place in it, praxis is the materialization of as many of that environment’s potentialities as possible” (39). In other words, the way that space is activated and used is an integral component of this new kind of oppositional force. The utopian assemblage enables the materialization of novel social forces in new types of spaces that are not utopic in a traditional sense, but rather function as ruptures in neoliberal forms of spatial organization and enclosure.

In this sense, Sterling’s imagining of the Collaboratory demonstrates how architecture is not merely surface (that is, architecture does not have a merely ‘iconographic’ function), but also an “organizational” function (Zaera-Polo 78): the structure of the Col-



laboratory makes possible certain kinds of social flows and circumvents others. As Sterling notes, “ancient social boundaries snapped” (Sterling 466) leading to “wartime affairs [breaking] out like chicken pox” (Sterling 466). Here, Sterling’s description of sexual liaisons erupting amongst and across these social boundaries is a humorous commentary on how the new spatial order makes possible new kinds of social affiliations, and subverts typical social hierarchies and forms of organization. The affairs, he writes, were a “suddenly public declaration of their society’s unsuspected potency. Of course they were breaking the rules; that was what every sane person was doing, that was what the effort was all about” (Sterling 466). While the occupants of the Collaboratory all come from various professional, personal, and political backgrounds, there is no traditional hierarchy, and instead of one group or individual governing the rest, coalitions are created between the various groups. Traditional forms of socio-political organization collapse in tandem with the intentional destruction of traditional forms of spatial organization.

The breaking of social taboos and social categorizations is directly linked to the new, permeable, rhizomatic structure of the Collaboratory, and its subversion of private and public; as Zaera-Polo remarks, “a more permeable definition of the property boundary is more likely to affectively accommodate a fluid relationship between private and public in an age when the public realm is increasingly built and managed by private agents” (79). An essential aspect of this Collaboratory transformation is that envelope that previously separated the privately-owned Collaboratory structure is ruptured, and the structure spreads to extend over the entire city (Sterling 464). This event thus represents the breaking down of the traditional architectural envelope-as-surface, and the dissolution

of the public-private dichotomy that often partitions space, and determines how we engage within particular places. Therefore, the eruption of sexual activity across social boundaries not only represents the capacity of architecture to restructure political relations, but to make possible new forms of intimacy as the division between public and private is rendered permeable.

Within the Collaboratory commons, traditional sources of identity are dismissed in favour of a mobile network that focuses on collective multiplicity as a force of change. The prole groups are not a unified coalition of like-minded people. As Oscar notes, The Collaboratory becomes

An intellectual magnet for every species of dreamer, faker, failed grad student, techie washout, downsized burnout; every guru, costumed geek, ditzy theorist, and bug-collector; every microscope peerer, model-rocket builder, and gnarly simulationist; every code-dazed hacker, architectural designer; everyone, in short, who had ever been downgraded, denied, and excluded by their society's sick demand that their wondrous ideas should make commercial sense. (Sterling 468-9)

This list emphasizes the difference, diversity, and disunity of the Collaboratory population. To return again to Puar, identity politics are secondary to creating affiliations across and between normative social categorizations. In their analysis of “technosociality” in the novel, Eva Cherniavsky and Tom Foster argue a similar point, noting that the adoption of technologies allows the Collaboratory community to “reconstitute all social bonds as relations of perceived affinity, rather than more traditional modes of social affiliation, such as kinship, ethnicity, or geographical proximity” (722). These new forms of social affiliation are more “more provisional and open-ended formations whose value lies in their flexibility and responsiveness to popular needs” (Cherniavsky and Foster 722). Here Cherniavsky and Foster are drawing from Donna Haraway's influential theory put forth in

“The Cyborg Manifesto,” that the present political landscape requires forming “coalitions” based on “affinity” rather than “identity” (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 155). Basing politics on affinities rather than identities involves the creation of “conscious coalitions” of “political kinship” based on choice rather than blood (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 155). Traditional identities are not extinguished into a new totality, but rather, new types of alliances and connections are developed that allows the group to collectively respond to the variable needs of the community. Precisely because the internal tensions of these ‘dreamers’ are not resolved to create a monolithic oppositional totality allows this new community to remain incompatible with—in a sense, ‘unreadable’ by and *illegible* to—neoliberal capitalism and its mechanisms of spatial and ideological capture. While neoliberalism can understand (and indeed even thrives off the tension produced by) a unified oppositional class, the makeshift community of the Collaboratory exists at a conceptual and material periphery that cannot simply be reincorporated into the logic of neoliberalism’s representational codes.

Simultaneously, however, the benefits of these provisional affiliations also make them weaker and more temporary compared to the social bonds produced by earlier social modes (Cherniavsky and Foster 722). Eschewing identities in favour of affinities—or embracing assemblage-based politics rather than identity politics—is potentially risky, precisely because of the inherent provisionality of these assemblages. This risk is addressed by Bambakias, who notes, in conversation with Oscar after his tour of the facility: “How long do you expect all this to last, Oscar... Is it a political movement? Maybe it’s just one big street party” (Sterling 473). He laments the fact that the Collaboratory com-

munity “[doesn’t] fit in the rest of American society...they don’t have any way to properly dead with the rest of society” (Sterling 474) and points out that “looking at the structure critically...there’s nothing holding it up” (Sterling 475). Oscar doesn’t have much to say in response, except to acknowledge that the community was designed not to fit in with the rest of society (Sterling 474), and that he is unsure about its future (Sterling 475). On the one hand, Bambakias’ comment that the Collaboratory-Buna community has no way to properly engage with the rest of society reveals the most significant problem with conceiving of the Collaboratory as utopian. Their version of utopia remains relatively sealed off from the rest of the world (despite initially rupturing the barrier between the private Collaboratory and the surrounding environs), and the socio-political arrangement is isolationist, intended to keep out the rest of the world, rather than transform it. As Bell notes, “the operation of the common good cannot be confined to utopia’s immediate internal organization, but needs to be considered in utopia’s relationship to the social milieu in which it is situated” (*Rethinking* 120). The fact that the Buna-Collaboratory utopia is sealed off from the rest of the world indicates one way that it has failed as a utopian project. In this sense, it seems like utopianism either fails because it is reincorporated into capitalism (for example, the ways that feminism, punk, and counter-culture have been commodified), or it fails because it can only exist in micro form, as an isolationist project that dissipates or is reappropriated at the moment it opens itself to the outside world.

Sterling never provides readers with a clear answer, but this is addressed later in the novel during a conversation between Greta and Oscar. Oscar wants to solidify their power within the Collaboratory by establishing Greta as its leader, and he asks, simulta-

neously, that they get married. In his efforts to convince Greta of the political benefits their marriage could have, he notes that “marriage is a great institution. Marriages are a great symbolic theater” (Sterling 491), recalling monarchical systems in which power was consolidated through marriage. Further, Oscar’s adamance reflects his commitment to heteronormative social institutions as a stabilizing force. Greta refuses both proposals, and takes issue with the implication that any one person should take over and serve as a leader to the community. She argues:

Something is going to work here. Something of it will last. But it’s not a whole new world. It’s just a political system. We can’t close it off in an airtight next, with me as the Termite Queen. I have to quit, I have to leave. Then maybe this thing will shake down, and pack down, and build something solid, from the bottom up. (Sterling 492)

In this passage, Greta suggests that in order for the utopianism of the Collaboratory and the proles to persist, they have to resist simply re-establishing the hierarchies that they originally set out to deconstruct, and, further, they must not rely on normative social institutions—like marriage—to solidify the community. Greta’s increasingly central role to the novel, as well as her dismissal of and outright rejection of heteronormative, patriarchal social systems implies that if a sustained utopianism is possible, it will need to be a feminist, intersectional project. Furthermore, Greta’s statement reveals a commitment to breaking down the barrier between the utopic community and the outside world. In other words, the dissolution of the envelope between the Collaboratory and the surrounding city was only the first step. Further transformations, and further activities are necessary, in order to avoid recreating a utopia-as-program, and maintain a spirit of assemblage-oriented utopianism that continues to open itself to new forces and open up a new future.

This passage and the conversation of which it is a part is also significant because it further demonstrates that the Collaboratory community is not an idealistic or static socio-spatial entity. In this sense, this passage differentiates the utopian practices of the Collaboratory community from traditional programmatic utopias. As Sterling reflects:

Living [in the Collaboratory] was going to involve a lot of work. The mere fact that money was not involved did not signify that work was not involved; the truth was the exact opposite. This congelation of science and mass economic defection was going to require brutal amounts of dedicated labour, constant selfless effort. (Sterling 487)

This passage demonstrates the extent to which utopian assemblages are never finished; rather, they must be constantly (re)produced through the labour of the actants that occupy it. The assemblage of humans and nonhumans that make up the Collaboratory assemblage work within the here-and-now to create a space that, as much as possible, strives to be the “good” place. They create, from the materials at hand, a provisional utopia that is not closed, but open. However, by virtue of that fact, their utopianism retains its deterritorializing political power, but is also always threatened with collapse. This is the irony of assemblage-oriented utopianism, that, by “operat[ing] first and foremost within the here-and-now” to “creat[e] the future as an open, yet-to-be-determined space unfolding from the here-and-now” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 11), there is always the potential for failure, for lines of flight to be reincorporated back into prevailing disciplinary systems. However, this is the only way to avoid the pitfalls of ‘closed’ utopias that have, historically, always resulted in further oppression. As Bell notes, “utopia can never settle into a final form” without transforming into a dystopia” (*Rethinking* 7).

Whereas Oscar wants to create a new solidified, stable system, to “put down roots” (Sterling 491), Greta argues that “we don’t have roots. We’re network people. We have aeriels” (Sterling 491). While Oscar wants to re-establish a closed utopian program, Greta embraces the utopian assemblage. The tension between their views resonates with Bell’s articulation of the contrast between traditional conceptualizations of utopia as closed programs in space conceived of as static, and his own place-based, assemblage-oriented notion of utopianism. He writes that “Those who enter a place following the ossification of these supposed ‘goods’ are then ‘bound by what has already been established as good...the state form emerges: the utopia becomes dystopia” (*Rethinking* 150). Bell is cautioning against the tendency to conceive of utopias as “finished” and to attribute an a priori value to any one particular notion of the “good.” What is “good” for one person or segment of a social body will, invariably, result in the oppression or exclusion of another.

In order to avoid this state of affairs, it is necessary to “[keep] place open, creat[e] an intra-active circulation between the good, the no and place. Dissonance is productive” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 150). Indeed, “utopia...is constituted by ‘ambiguous’ oscillatory intra-actions between its...constituent terms. This is productive, and means that an immanent form of continuously ambiguous evaluation is needed, taking into account messiness, complexity and multiplicity” (D. Bell *Rethinking* 155-156). Rather than seek to close off the utopia and establish a program, to seek stability, it is necessary to keep the utopian assemblage open, to allow new forces to enter or exit, and to transform what the assemblage can do. In fact, “Utopia(nism), then, cannot simply see the enemy as external

to itself but must operate against itself” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 150) in the sense that it must always fight against the tendency to stabilize into a concrete form.

Therefore, the establishment of an idealistic space where everyone gets along, and living is easy, is *not* the task of utopianism. Utopianism is a continual process of (re)making that involves the sustained and ongoing labour of multiple groups working together. Further, precarity is an essential characteristic of this socio-spatial arrangement, which, I would argue, does not cancel out its utopianism. What is created here is a utopianism in the here-and-now, which necessitates a certain amount of precarity. If we are to reinvigorate the associations between utopia and place, while attempting to “get beyond the dichotomy between placeless utopia-as-process and place-bound utopia” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 5); if we are to “embrace[e] the unknown...utiliz[e] improvisation...open up new horizons for action to “create place,” (D. Bell, *Rethinking* 5), this process requires a certain acceptance of provisionality and risk, and acceptance of the possibility that the places produced in this process may, at any moment, become something else.

*Distraction* illuminates the necessity of a different kind of oppositional identity in the face of our current socio-political environment. The events in *Distraction* suggest that utopianism can be resuscitated, but only if we leave aside the commitment to utopia as program and begin to see how utopia can be imagined as ruptures, movements, and reorientations of the relationships between existing actants. Sterling provides a vision of a provisional utopian commons that reveals that utopia can be activated as a game of movement that requires constant reconfiguration against neoliberal forms of spatial and ideological capture. If we articulate utopia as an assemblage of forces rather than a desti-



nation, it is possible to deploy utopian mobility in everyday life, at a micro level as well as in the formation of collective commons. *Distraction* is thus one example of how speculative fiction can help us imagine socio-spatial alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, resist and reconfigure the oppressive systems that currently exist, and look forward to a better future.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Urban Assemblages, Nomadic Mobility, and the Nonhuman in *Zoo City*

The previous chapter explored utopian assemblages and capitalism's emergency time through an analysis of Bruce Sterling's novel *Distraction*. In *Distraction*, the collective activities of the prole groups, Oscar and his krewe, and local communities allowed for the creation of 'good' places characterized by alternative economic and social structures, and the emergence of partial, processual, heterogeneous utopian assemblages. In this chapter, I turn to Lauren Beukes' 2011 novel *Zoo City* to examine how specific kinds of mobilities and affinities between human and nonhumans (re)structure urban space.

*Zoo City*, which won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award in 2011, is a superb blend of urban fantasy and magical realism. Set in a near-future Johannesburg, South Africa, the city and its various neighbourhoods—and in particular, Hillbrow—become the backdrop for a neo-noir narrative (Dickson 67) that examines the socio-spatial (de)territorialisation of the neoliberal city. Protagonist Zinzi December, a black South-African woman, is one individual amongst many who has procured “Acquired Aposymbiotic Familiarism” or “AAF” (individuals living with AAF are known as animalled, or “zoos”). Individuals acquire AAF when they commit serious crimes, which causes them to gain an animal familiar (the exact process by which these familiars appear and become connected to their human counterparts is not made explicit). The animal has a dual function: while the familiars are a public and literal signifier of criminality, the animal also bestows their human companion with a unique psychic power. Beukes' representation of

the aposymbiot population—their pathologization by the rest of the population and the ways in which they experience prejudice—makes visible the extent and intensity of spatial oppression and the legacies of apartheid in present-day Johannesburg.

As an aposymbiot, Zinzi's special power is her ability to find lost objects with the help of her animal, Sloth. Close to the beginning of the novel, Zinzi is approached by two aposymbiot strangers, Marabou and Maltese (nicknamed after their familiars), who enlist her help finding a missing person despite Zinzi's initial protestations. Zinzi finds out that Marabou and Maltese work for Odi Huron, a wealthy and reclusive music producer responsible for the trendy pop duo Ijusi, composed of twins S'bu and Songweza. Songweza—known as "Song"—has gone missing, and Huron needs Zinzi's help to find her. When Zinzi finds Song, the latter has gone into hiding, insisting that someone is trying to kill her. In the meantime, Zinzi has become increasingly suspicious of her employer, and begins to consider the links between her case and a series of recent aposymbiot disappearances. At the conclusion of the novel—which I address in detail below—Zinzi uncovers who is responsible for the murders with the help of her animal, Sloth, and her boyfriend, Benoît. Although *Zoo City*'s story certainly interrogates and critiques socio-spatial hierarchies, the novel's representation of urban space, and in particular, the ways in which Zinzi and her companions navigate that urban landscape, is the focus of this chapter. *Zoo City* explores the multilayered history and complex present of Johannesburg through its representations of Zinzi's forays into the city's sewers and drainpipes, its peripheral suburbs, and its financial districts whose glistening skyscrapers obscure mining tunnels beneath. Zinzi's trajectories take us on a tour of the city that illuminates the social and eco-

conomic networks that intertwine with and make possible the distinctive spatial contours of the city and its surfaces, depths and edges. Johannesburg is represented as an assemblage, an interface composed of “linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro groupings” (Grosz 108) in which bodies and the city itself are constantly (re)produced and co-produced through interrelations and circulations of a “fundamentally disunified series of systems, a series of disparate flows, energies, events or entities, bringing together or drawing apart their more or less temporary alignments” (Grosz 108).

As others have argued, *Zoo City* is an example of postcolonial science fiction that reflects on violent colonial histories and how they infiltrate the present (Dickson, 2014; Shane Graham, 2014; Stobie, 2012). And yet, as Stobie argues, following Ralph Pordik’s definition of “postcolonial dystopias,” *Zoo City* can also be categorized as “post-apartheid utopia fiction” that “engages with issues of national and cultural identity obliquely, eschewing extremes of the rigid utopia or the grim dystopia, [in order to] regain fictional space for a transformational understanding of futurity” (Pordik 2001a in Stobie 370). In other words, *Zoo City* is situated within a tradition of postcolonial speculative literature; however, the specificity of its concerns and locale—apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa—position the text outside of traditional speculative fiction categorizations. Rather than employ representations of dystopias as a means to critique historical injustices, or present a clear utopian alternative, *Zoo City* spans the edges of these two modes, representing a dystopian situation while also illustrating the utopic strains of social and economic operations. In the same way that, in *Distraction*, utopianism is conceived of as emergent, deterritorializing fractures within a highly coded and territorialized space, in

*Zoo City* “the utopian has changed its state from solid and stable to gaseous and dispersed, infecting the dystopia as much as it is infected by it” (Mittag 253). While *Zoo City* interrogates and critiques the socio-spatial boundaries that perpetuate ongoing racism and colonialism in the city, *Zoo City* also proposes and represents a new kind of (South-African) space-time with the potential to open up new futures. These strains are not external to the existing order, but rather, emerge due to inconsistencies and gaps within that very condition, demonstrating how “subtle, hidden or indeed confrontational forms of resistance may appear...fracturing the facade of totalising power” reproduced by institutional power and institutions (Sharp et. al 22).

In this chapter, I examine the novel’s representation of Johannesburg as a socio-spatial assemblage, examining in particular the ways that power “circulates” (Foucault 1980) within the city. I examine power not only as disciplinary mode, but rather, “power as an effect of (spatial) entanglements (Sharp et. al 24), “emerging from the spatial assemblages rather than somehow pre-existing them in disembodied but coherent units” (Sharp et al. 24). I examine how power emerges as a result of particular circulations of affects, materials, and actants, both human and nonhuman, and how power is inscribed into the spaces of the city and onto stigmatized bodies. Further, and more importantly, I argue that this space is constantly de- and re-territorialized by both dominating power and resisting power (Sharp et al. 3). Space cannot be envisioned as always-already territorialized (Massey 99); rather, I examine how Zinzi and the marginalized communities of which she is a part are “simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98), making use of spatial strategies and social affiliations to deterrito-

rialize the ‘official’ striations of the city. Lauren Beukes writes into being a mode of African urbanity with a new texture, a modality that challenges dominant frameworks through which to analyze and read African cities, and which opens up Deleuzoguattarian lines of flight. As Zinzi cuts through these striations, those that delimit movement and repress hidden (material) histories through disciplinary modes of socio-spatial organization, she engages in acts of excavation that function to critique socio-spatial inequality and reveal the scars and ongoing violence of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. In this manner, Beukes’ novel demonstrates the critical function of speculative fiction as a genre that reflects on and lays bare histories of oppression in order to make space for alternate modes of socio-spatial organization and activity in the future. Further, the novel demonstrates how assemblage-oriented urbanism can serve as a framework for reconceptualising and analyzing the constellations of power that structure urban life and delimit and/or open up new types of places, mobilities, and collectives.

### **Johannesburg: City of Surfaces and Depths**

Johannesburg is a city quite literally built upon what lies ‘below the surface.’ Established in 1886 as a mining camp, Johannesburg was built by the labour of migrants from across the globe (Hyslop 122), and was characterized by “extreme social inequalities, turmoil and conflict” (Hyslop 122) that demanded its citizens find creative ways to establish a sense of social community. When the city was originally settled, workers were allowed to live close to production sites; however, this changed after the Boer War as a result of increasingly segregationist policies, implemented by the British government, that expelled black people to peripheral urban centers. By 1933, the whole city of Johannes-

burg was proclaimed white, and by 1938 the majority of the black population had been relocated to new townships (Tomlinson et al. 5-6). Beginning in the 1970s, a combination of grassroots democratic and civic movements, policy and constitutional amendments, eventually resulted in the first multiracial national election in 1994 and the official end to apartheid. As to be expected, efforts to integrate the city proved challenging. Segregation still exists due to a confluence of factors involving housing, job availability, and existing tensions between ethnic and racial communities.

Since the end of apartheid, neoliberal building typologies and uneven urban development have continued to etch and demarcate the city. In his preface to *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*, Martin Murray notes that after apartheid officially ended in 1994, property developers and city officials invested large sums of capital into reinvigorating certain areas of the city at the expense of others. These developments predictably corresponded with a rise in “security-conscious building typologies” (Murray xii) intended to further protect the barriers between affluent and poor areas. Beukes representation of private and state police and surveillance throughout the novel reflects the extent to which this reality persists. At one point, in her effort to enter a gated community, Zinzi notes that it took “ten minutes to get past the gate guard,” who “grill[ed]” her and her acquaintances and “insist[ed] that we all step out of the car to be photographed by the webcam mounted on the window of his security booth” (Beukes 99). Neoliberalization has also resulted in the clear segregation of the city; residential development has focused on the northern and western edges of the city, and although these areas are “increasingly mixed racially,” they remain “mainly upper/middle class” (Todes

159). The result is that, to quote again from Murray, “Johannesburg remains a deeply fractured city, divided between two highly unequal and spatially disconnected worlds” (xii). The city is persistently (de)territorialized by neoliberal capitalist flows, resulting in uneven spatial development at regional and national levels, and the creation of highly fractured neighbourhoods defined by socio-spatial inequality.

*Zoo City* illuminates the ways in which neoliberal socioeconomic systems and their associated urban policies introduce a spectrum of disciplinary techniques that render certain types of bodies ‘out of place’ in spaces throughout Johannesburg. One of the most important of these urban sites in the novel is Hillbrow: an inner-city neighbourhood nicknamed “Zoo City” due to its high population of aposymbiots. The real Hillbrow—the most densely populated neighbourhood in Johannesburg and South Africa in general (Matshedisho and Wafer 68)—has one of the highest populations of immigrants from across Africa, and of migrants from other parts of South in the country (Matshedisho and Wafer 68). This feature of contemporary Hillbrow is reflected in the novel through Zinzi’s network of friends and acquaintances, including her Congolese boyfriend, Benoît. The novel reflects the real Hillbrow’s status as a diverse, “primarily young, entry-port neighbourhood, with a significant degree of diversity” characterized by high degrees of crime, poverty, and informal economic networks (Matshedisho and Wafer 68). New migrants to Johannesburg, or South African, in general, often find themselves in Hillbrow by default. *Zoo City* accurately reflects this reality, as Zinzi’s network of friends and acquaintances hail from across the continent.



Like all South African spaces, Hillbrow has been transfigured by apartheid, and this is evident throughout *Zoo City*. During the 1950s and 1960s, Hillbrow was considered a “space of cosmopolitanism and diversity” (Matshedisho and Wafer 72), predominantly occupied by European immigrants and middle-class white residents (Matshedisho and Wafer 75). Simultaneously, Hillbrow was one urban site where “greying” occurred, and it was possible to observe some degree of racial diversity. In this sense, Hillbrow “was an exception in the urban life of (white) middle-class South Africans;” however, “this form of urban living was progressively discouraged during the 1960s and 1970s, as the growing Fordist economy sought to induce the outward expansion of the white suburban dream” (Matshedisho and Wafer 72). With white communities migrating from inner-city areas initially reserved for whites under apartheid to suburban areas on the fringes of the city, spaces like Hillbrow became “important locales for the settlement of black low-income and often migrant populations” (Todes 161). *Zoo City* reflects these developments, representing Hillbrow simultaneously as a kind of prison and a haven for low-income and migrant communities excluded from other spaces in the city.

Beukes explores the socio-spatial segregation and discrimination experienced by these marginalized groups through the figure of the aposymbiots, who, like migrants and low-income people of colour, are excluded from many of Johannesburg’s spaces. This is particularly the case because animalled individuals cannot be separated from their familiars without experiencing The Undertow, which is described as a kind of physical and psychological torture (that is, unsurprisingly, used to the advantage of law enforcement during interrogations [Beukes 95]). The presence of an animal familiar is a kind of scarlet

letter signalling social transgression (Beukes 60), and thus symbolizes, in extreme fashion, the ways that certain bodily signifiers are used to classify—and justify the policing and disciplining of—certain populations. Although they cannot separate from their animals without experiencing severe discomfort, some aposymbiot individuals are able to hide their animals when necessary, allowing them to pass as regular citizens. Others are less lucky: examples of animal familiars used in the novel span from butterflies to crocodiles, and each animal obviously offers its own challenges. The novel uses the speculative aspect of the aposymbiots to reflect on the politics of passing. The relative difficulties of aposymbiots to pass as ‘normal’ serves as a commentary on how people of colour and gender non-conforming individuals are compelled to manage their public visibility and identities in order to survive. In this sense, the novel explores the effects of being unable (or unwilling) to pass and the extent to which one’s visibility in public can result in both spatial and social discipline when individuals cannot properly perform normative, socially-acceptable identity categories.

Access to particular spaces is determined, to a large extent, by individuals’ ability or inability to pass as ‘normal’ (i.e. non-animalled). For example, as Zinzi reflects on her search for decent and affordable housing after being released from prison, she notes, “It was inevitable I’d end up in Zoo City. Although I didn’t realize that until after the fifth rental agency had sneered over their clipboards at Sloth and told me they didn’t have anything available in the suburbs—had I tried Hillbrow?” (Beukes 60-61). As this scene demonstrates, aposymbiots have limited access to safe housing, and also find it difficult to achieve secure employment and daily provisions (much like the migrants and working-

class poor in the real Hillbrow). Uneven urban development coupled with social and political boundaries established between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ citizens territorializes and striates the city, making certain spaces inaccessible—if not outright hostile—to marginalized people. This is made evident through frequent depictions of the difficulties Zinzi faces when she attempts to enter certain spaces. At one point, her friend suggests going to a club called “Reputation” in the ritzy area Rosebank, and Zinzi responds by saying “they have a policy” (Beukes 127), indicating the club’s hostility towards animalled people. She experiences similar difficulties when attempting to visit Mayfield’s, the club at a suburban golf course with her animal (Beukes 115). These kinds of spatial demarcations in the novel reflect how urban assemblages are controlled through city planning that seeks to lock down provisionality and flexibility in favour of highly sedimented territories. Neoliberal biopower functions to “grid and organize, to hierarchize and coordinate the activities of and for the city” (Grosz 107), bending and “generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 136) in that same way that bodies are ordered.

Despite the extent to which the city of the novel is segregated along racial, ethnic and class-based lines, Beukes also represents the city as fundamentally permeable and vulnerable to rebellious mobilities that refuse to stay in their ‘proper place.’ Beukes employs numerous strategies to demonstrate how different populations can engage with urban space in creative, oppositional ways. Thus, although disciplinary power is always “already there” (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 141), producing certain relationships and delin-  
eating movement, resisting power is always already immanent within any assemblage.

The marginalized populations largely contained to inner-city Johannesburg employ their own tactics and socio-spatial strategies to create a different kind of urban life. In the sections that follow, I explore how these socio-spatial strategies are employed throughout the novel, starting with an exploration of how urban informality, Simone's concept of people as infrastructure, and assemblage theory can illuminate a different side of the city.

The notion of informality has frequently been applied to describe the economic, social, and spatial networks that compose inner-city Johannesburg. As Lindsay Bremner notes,

Capital disinvestment has created a space for those excluded from formal economic activity to gain a foothold in the urban system. Micro-enterprise, survivalist trade, illicit economic activity, and, more particularly, migratory economic activity, cross-border trade and the presence in the city of immigrant entrepreneurs, are becoming significant and possibly structural features of the inner-city economy. (Bremner 191)

And yet, these developments and the populations that partake in informal economic arrangements “have been well-used by the popular media to construct new urban imagery of the inner city as diseased, crime riddled, dangerous and disordered” (Bremner 191). Neoliberalist urban planning and urban regeneration plans cannot accommodate these modes of urban life, and thus, informal economic models and modes of sociality must be rendered invisible in the event that they cannot be sanitized or obliterated entirely. The concept of informality employed here has been used in urban studies to describe how are—as typically referred to as ‘slums’ function according to alternative social and economic logics that cannot—and should not—be ‘fixed’ through the top-down imposition of modernist urban planning strategies or neoliberal economic reforms. As Justin McGuirk states, “the slums are not defined as informal because they have no form, but because

they exist outside the legal and economic protocols that shape the formal city. But slums are far from chaotic. They may lack essential services, yet they operate under their own self-regulating systems” (24). Rather than conceive of the informal city as a “city-in-waiting”—i.e. to perceive informal urbanisms as a transitional form of urbanism, waiting for formalisation—it is necessary to acknowledge the informal as a “vital component of the city’s ecosystem” (McGuirk 24). This involves neither romanticizing poverty, nor attempting to transform the informal through forces of neoliberalisation. Rather, it is necessary to collaborate with the communities who live there to “insert necessary services and improve quality of life,” and “create the connections and flows” that will “dissolve the lines of exclusion and collision” in the urban fabric. (McGuirk 24)

McGuirk’s insistence that collaboration and collective politics is necessary to strengthen, rather than sanitize and/or reform urban informality is reflected in Simone’s analysis of people as infrastructure in African cities. While the notion of infrastructure traditionally solely applies to the physical systems, the series of highways, pipes, wires, or cables intended to support and make possible life within urban spaces (Simone, “People as Infrastructure” 407), considering people as infrastructure expands the notion to examine the “incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used” (Simone, “People as Infrastructure” 407). These activities, writes Simone, become “an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (“People as Infrastructure” 408). As neoliberal modes of governmentality increasingly “secure particular kinds of life through embodied regulatory techniques” (Simone, “People as Infrastruc-

ture” 280; see also Amoore 2006), imposing official planning onto certain geographical sites, people as infrastructure reveals how different groups use those spaces differently than was intended, activating and engaging a heterogeneous assemblage of social and material forces to articulate an alternative form of community. These practices can also be conceptualized through the lens of “relational place-making” (Pierce et. al 2010) which describes the “iterative...processes through which social and political negotiations result in a strategic sharing of place,” and in which these modes of collective “place-making” are “tactically deployed toward strategic (not perhaps not always conscious) political aims” (Pierce et. al 60). In other words, social, material, and affective networks are brought together to create contingent, provisional places that open up new social modes and new political strategies. Place is built *collaboratively*, and although these processes may not be directed by explicitly political goals, these kinds of practices can create ruptures within the normative socio-political and socio-spatial order.

These ruptures can be conceived as deterritorializations or lines of flight; a kind of nomadic orientation to space that “foster[s] sensitivity to the spaces that might disrupt processes of [...] ‘territorialization’ that homogenise heterogeneous blocks of space-time into the regulated units of social space” (Lorraine 160). Typically, when we picture individual spaces, we come to ‘know’ or identify that space by examining how it is organized. The sequence of sidewalks, roads, advertisements, etc. determine in advance how people should engage in the space, and how individuals and groups can engage with the other actants in space. For the nomad, space is not pre-given; space is a plane of intensities, an *open* plane, that is not defined by these pathways and routes. Conceiving of space

in this manner means that there is always the potential for ‘leakages,’ for eluding or circumventing the striations that attempt to determine in advance the way that space ‘should’ be occupied and traversed, and which delimit what kinds of social activity are possible and permissible in specific spaces. Nomadology thus involves employing alternative mobilities and orientations, trajectories that “open to unconventional spatial orientations [that] can make new connections in keeping with the movement of life as it unfolds” (Lorraine 160). In this sense, nomadology is articulated as an alternative way of engaging with space and time, contrary to the configurations of molar institutions and powers, that is to say, forces concerned with unifying, totalizing, and organizing space (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 33), with “locking down” and “capturing” movements (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 40) in order to create a striated, highly-coded grid of socio-spatial discipline.

Whereas an “official” map of Johannesburg might look like a grid, a series of organized sectors designed to “stop up flows” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 276), framing the city through the lens of informality and people as infrastructure provides a view of the urban fabric as constituted of nomadic flows or molecular becomings, which privilege heterogeneity, becoming (emergent properties rather than essential properties), and continuous variation (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 363)—rather than static forms that subsume difference within an totalizing system. Various components—people, infrastructure, physical sites, objects—are brought into relation to create provisional orders that suit the needs of the population at specific times. These components are not consolidated into a formal order, but rather, the informal city depends on a

certain degree of making-do, of bringing different components into conversation as required. People as infrastructure allows us to see the city as an assemblage of social and material forces, to conceive of "space as the sphere of relations, negotiations, practices of engagement, power in all its forms" (Massey 99), in which different objects, people, and pieces of the city are brought into contact with one another depending on the needs and desires of specific groups.

One of the places in the novel that exemplifies people as infrastructure is "Makha-za's Place" or "Mak's," a club where the diverse occupants of Hillbrow congregate for conversation and its famous Lagos-style chicken. Here, Zinzi's boyfriend Benoît, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, meets with his community of friends, who hail from different economic and ethnic backgrounds. This meeting place is one of many in the novel that exemplifies the ability of residents to create social affinities across difference, and to "generate concrete acts and contexts of social collaboration inscribed with multiple identities" rather than reinforce social divisions along racial, ethnic, and familial ties, and "enforce[e] modulated transactions among discrete population groups" (Simone, "People as Infrastructure" 419). Significantly, Mak's is "situated on the second floor of what used to be a shopping arcade back when this part of town was cosmopolitan central, with its glitzy hotels...and malls packed to the skylights with premium luxury goods" (Beukes 51). Mak's is frequently threatened by talk of "comebacks and gentrification," yet, as Zinzi indicates, "the squatters always found a way back in" because they are "an enterprising bunch" (Beukes 51). Mak's is a makeshift and provisional meeting place, an example of how the "informal flourishes in the spatial interstices of the city and produces



urban phenomena with a potent impact on the streetscape" (Dovey, "Uprooting" 352).

Although Mak's is undoubtedly, like other informal urban sites, "rendered invisible to the gaze of the formal city (Dovey, "Uprooting" 351), it is demonstrative of a resisting power that works against official urban planning, that employs "situations, groupings, and actions" (Sharp et. al 3) to undermine dominant forms of disciplinary biopower to create new kinds of spaces and forge new kinds of sociality. The city is pock-marked with liminal spaces re-made by marginalized people to suit the needs of their diverse communities. These spaces are foraged out of the detritus of the colonial, capitalist order, and are exemplary of forms of place-making. However, as threats like gentrification makes clear, these spaces are always provisional, and require ongoing collaboration. As David Harvey notes, "the process of place formation is a process of carving out 'permanencies' from the flow of processes creating spaces. But the permanencies – no matter how solid they may seem – are not eternal... They are contingent on the processes that create, sustain and dissolve them" (Harvey, *Justice* 261). In other words, spaces like Mak's—which function as informal incursions into formal space—are kept in place through the constant social and material labour of marginalized communities. This is, in fact, an essential component of place-making, insofar as place-making is always "ongoing" process (Pierce et al. 60), and places will inevitably change over time as the aims and needs of the people who construct them also change (Pierce et al. 60).

Spaces like Mak's are set up in stark opposition to the sites representative of ongoing colonial violence, such as the The Rand Club, a "relic of Johannesburg's Wild West days, when it was frequented by Cecil John Rhodes other colonial slumlords who

would sit around divvying up diamond fields and deciding on the fate of empires. A hangout for power people” (Beukes 42). Characterized by an “aura of clingy colonial nostalgia” with “mounted buck heads and faded oil paintings of fox hunts” (Beukes 42), The Rand Club is a highly coded<sup>25</sup> and territorialized space that recalls the “‘golden era’ of Hillbrow” that many look upon with fondness (Matshediso and Wafer 72). It is in The Rand Club that Zinzi meets the white, Mid-Western American couple that she has been scamming with her boss Vuyo, where she is compelled to perform a specific type of respectability politics, performing an appropriate style of blackness in order to make a living. The couple treats Zinzi like an exotic prize, which is symbolically reinforced by the man’s admiration of the real ivory chess pieces displayed in the club library (Beukes 44). The juxtaposition of these two spaces—Mak’s, a highly informal and provisional meeting center created by and for the marginalized people of Hillbrow, and The Rand Club, a highly coded space where only certain kinds of relationships are permissible—demonstrates how “particular spaces are linked to specific identities, functions, lifestyles, and properties so that the spaces of the city become legible for specific people at given places and times” (Simone, “People as Infrastructure” 409). The Rand Club is an exam-

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<sup>25</sup> Whereas Deleuze and Guattari use the terms “coding” and “territorialisation” interchangeably, for DeLanda, these terms describe two different phases or densities within assemblages. Territorialization refers to the extent of the striations, and coding refers to how sharply defined those territorializations are, i.e. coding indicates the extent to which the strata are unified and fixed into one identity. Mak’s is not a deterritorialized space, because it is defined by a series of territorializations: negotiations of masculinity and gender identity within and between groups, lines of affiliation between certain patrons and hostilities between others, degrees of legality in the economic transactions that take place there, negotiations between humans and animals, etc. However, these territorializations are not highly coded, because they are not fixed or unified; at any moment, the relationships between these forces can shift to change the nature of the assemblage. A mongoose and a Sloth might meet and strike up a new friendship, compelling a convivial meeting between people who might not have spoken otherwise. Shared admiration of the famous chicken could spark a new romance. The Rand Club is highly coded, because these kinds of chance encounters are improbable given the centrality of strictly delineated identity categories within the socio-spatial assemblage.

ple of a space coded to promote spatial discipline, insofar as multiplicity is reduced to codes and labels, encouraging “the differentiated elements of society...to assume their own places and trajectories and become the vectors through which social power is enunciated” (Simone, “People as Infrastructure” 408). Both Mak’s and The Rand Club are territorialized by different flows; however, whereas Mak’s is highly de-coded, in the sense that affinities and collaborations across multiple identities are made possible and perhaps even encouraged in this public space, The Rand Club is highly coded. The space is constructed in such a way to reinforce stable social categorizations, foreclosing the possibility of encounters that might cut across traditional lines of identity such as race, class, and nationality.

Additionally, the marginalized communities in *Zoo City* must, out of necessity, use space in a creative way as a result of the physical degradation of their environment. White flight from Johannesburg’s inner city in the 1980s, and the corresponding decline of Fordist capital being invested into these sites, resulted in a “dramatic and rapid degradation of the built environment in Hillbrow in the 1990s” (Matshediso and Wafer 73). One of the effects of economic restructuring and uneven urban development is that housing for the urban poor is frequently constituted of “backyard shacks and informal settlements” (Todes 159); in fact, as of 2008, “18.8% of [Johannesburg] households live[d] in informal housing, including 10.4% in 180 informal settlements across the city” (Todes 160).<sup>26</sup> Although post-apartheid shifts from a master planning approach to a strategic spa-

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<sup>26</sup> Housing for the urban poor is also provided by detached ‘RDP’ housing—the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme—through the national Department of Human Settlement’s capital subsidy scheme (Todes 159).

tial planning approach focused on infrastructural development were intended to reduce spatial inequality within the city as a whole, these efforts have proven largely unsuccessful at deterritorializing the class-based spatial segregation of Johannesburg (Todes 164).

The degradation and lack of traditional infrastructural supports of the inner city is evidenced throughout *Zoo City*, particularly during moments when Zinzi reflects on the state of her Hillbrow apartment building, Elysium Heights, which rarely has electricity or functioning utilities. The pathways through which one would normally navigate a building—hallways, doors, elevator, intact stairways—are mostly destroyed. Significantly, however, the Elysium Heights residents further deterritorialize the building structure in order to suit the needs of their communities. The contours of Elysium Heights are always being redefined with the addition of makeshift rooms or the destruction of old hallways or stairways. Zinzi notes, for example, that the building complex is connected both by “officially constructed walkways [and] improvised bridges to form one sprawling ghetto warren” (Beukes 61). These kinds of spatial improvisations create a new kind of porous, deterritorialized domestic space that is neither fully public nor fully private. The deterritorialization of the building’s architecture is a powerful symbol of the deconstruction of spatial codes that reinforce social hierarchies and shows the extent to which “buildings are assemblages or heterogeneous materialities which (re)produce circulations of matter, labour and knowledge” (Edensor 240), combining human and non-human agencies (Edensor 240). This kind of porosity between the public and private, and the creation of new kinds of structures, opens up new possibilities for collective engagement, resonating with Jane Bennett’s concept of “presumptive generosity,” which requires “rendering oneself

more open to...other selves and bodies and [being] more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them" (Bennett, "Enchantment" 131). In this sense, these kinds of spatial assemblages, which require the collaborative place-making efforts of communities, also provides an example of Simone's people as infrastructure made visible, as "most of the tenants shared illegal hook-ups, jerry-rigged wiring running between flats, sometimes between buildings – flaccid tightropes for a decrepit circus" (Beukes 64). In order to survive and cultivate a liveable existence, the residents *must* "engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" (Simone, "People as Infrastructure" 408) to create new styles of urban organization.

These kinds of informality are necessary as a result of poverty and uneven spatial development; however, they are not chaotic or disorderly. Rather, they demonstrate the ways that populations employ informal urbanism to further their own needs, deploying networks of people, objects, and space to meet the needs of the community. In fact, for Simone, it is precisely the residents' embrace of flexible and provisional engagements within urban space that makes possible an "experience of regularity" that anchors the residents (Simone, "People as Infrastructure" 408). This is a form of regularity opposed to that reproduced by neoliberal urban planning and disciplinary techniques that striate and territorialize space. Whereas the latter seek to "stabiliz[e] a social field of interaction" (Simone, "People as Infrastructure" 409) so as to further control marginalized people, these groups embrace deterritorializing spatial practices so as to establish, as much as possible, a version of stability that simultaneously accommodates heterogeneity, both spatially and socially. These places are not chaotic or disordered; rather, they are "constituted

from intricate constructions of multiple routines, rhythms, and well-worn paths—ordering systems” (Massey 112) that demonstrate the capacity of communities to engage with space creatively, to work against forms of spatial oppression and forge lives of value despite their disenfranchisement.

The alternative social modalities are made evident by Zinzi’s depiction of a typical Zoo City evening:

People who would happily speed through Zoo City during the day won’t detour here at night...they’re too scared, but that’s precisely when Zoo City is at its most sociable. From 6 pm, when the day-jobbers start getting back from whatever work they’ve been able to pick up, apartment doors are flung open. Kids chase each other down the corridors. People take their animals out for fresh air or a friendly sniff of each other’s bums. The smell of cooking—mostly food, but also meth—temporarily drowns out the stench of rot, the urine in the stairwells (Beukes 132).

Though this scene represents the extent to which the very porosity of the space simultaneously provides opportunities for forging new kinds of affinities across boundaries, its stark representation of poverty and drug use also warns against fetishizing these developments. Spaces are not inherently liberatory or utopic by virtue of being deterritorialized, and indeed, it is important to avoid “elitist assumptions about the spontaneity of the life of the lower [classes]” (Massey 112). Although the informal developments of Elysium Heights and Zoo City in general provide examples of how this community deterritorializes normative blocks of social space, adopting creative measures to repurpose space to suit their own needs, they do so out of necessity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Further, as Massey elaborates, informal community practices are often produced and made necessary by deregulation and privatisation; neoliberal systems embrace their own chaos that is much less frequently subject to the same attention or critique as the informal community practices of marginalized groups (Massey 112).

Thus, it is vital to remember, that although the porosity of space brings people into frequent contact with others across lines of difference, this is not to say that the affective landscapes produced by these socio-spatial practices could ever form “any imaginary, friction-free regime of absolute freedom of thought or action. The power emerging from relations of force is always conditioned by the situatedness of their localized interactions...[which] will always incorporate zones of limitation—even self-limitation (Woodward & Lea 162). These flexible interventions, adaptations and re-appropriations of the spatial assemblage intersect with, and run contrary to, other flows and striations within the space, demonstrating how power often functions in “conflictual and fragmented ways,” and resisting power “can interact with power/domination/the state in interesting ways (Sharp et al. 22-3). While in some ways, Elysium Heights functions in a highly de-territorialized fashion, allowing for the emergence of new kinds of collectives and social life, the capacities of the inhabitants are also limited by various striations of power that fluctuate within the space. For example, Zinzi notes that Zoo City is overrun with private security, even though “they’re only interested in protecting their own buildings” (Beukes 233). This reflects the reality in the real Hillbrow where, as Matshedisho and Wafer note, “despite its bustling informality and its reputation for vice and violence, Hillbrow is nevertheless a highly policed and controlled space” (Matshedisho and Wafer 79). Furthermore, the violence and illicit economic networks of Hillbrow constitute alternative forces of territorialisation that constrain activity and potential becomings. At one point, for example, Zinzi notices a “small group of men, teens really, sitting on the steps leading up to Aurum Place opposite. Spare time and beer make them dangerous” (Beukes 195). In the

distance, she hears “sirens, and the occasional gunshot” (Beukes 195). The novel also mentions gang wars and fighting between groups largely divided based on nationality and ethnicity (Beukes 234). Disenfranchisement, poverty, and racism and prejudice against migrants, for example, are all systemic issues that contribute to the reproduction of social problems, and the prevention of coalitions across lines of difference. Thus, while Zinzi and the communities of which she is a part employ creative place-making techniques that allow them to improve their quality of life, it is important to avoid generalizing informality or poverty as an inherently politicized act, or as a fundamentally more ‘free’ way of life. Indeed, while oppressed groups do find creative ways to make-do and resist dominant forms of neoliberal discipline, they often do so out of necessity. Further, informality is also often produced by neoliberal urban policies that result in drastically uneven urban development. Thus, there is not a clear binary in which deterritorialization and informality are always already anti-capitalist spaces of freedom, while territorialisation and formal urban development are exclusive characteristics of neoliberalism in flows. As the novel demonstrates, these binaries are often subverted, and these spatial assemblages are inherently messy and tangled arrangements of both territorializing and deterritorializing forces.

### **Mashavi and Alternative Spatial Mobilities**

Despite the extent to which animalled people are contained to inner-city areas like Hillbrow, the novel also represents how Zinzi’s magical power allows her to engage with the spatial assemblage in novel ways. Beukes uses the expression “shavi” (singular) and “mashavi” (plural) to describe these powers throughout the novel, incorporating these terms from existing indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices first used by the Shona peo-



ple in Zimbabwe (Shobie 377). Mashavi refers to homeless spirits of the dead seeking a living host. If a living human accepts the lost spirit, they become blessed with a special power (Shobie 377). The incorporation of mashavi folklore in *Zoo City* is a creative remix and material rendering of indigenous African belief systems, and metaphorizes how indigenous spirituality can be employed to empower post-colonial subjects. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Zinzi and marginalized people in Johannesburg are subject to disciplinary power that constrains their movements and capacities for action. Systemic injustices and inequalities “distribute forces and blockages distribute forces and blockages amongst the social field in ways that...systematically disempower groups of bodies by excessively delimiting their capacities” (Woodward and Lea 163). And yet, while individuals like Zinzi are subjected by specific techniques and technologies of power, Zinzi’s shavi reveals another form of resisting power, a widening of the affective field that demonstrates the extent to which life constantly escapes the techniques that seek to govern and administer it (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 143). Zinzi’s deployment of her shavi is representative of how the broadening of an affective vector can “cultivate ‘turning points’ through which new potentialities for life and living may be witnessed, invented and acted on (Ben Anderson “Affect and Biopower” 29).

The relationship between Zinzi, her animal, Sloth, and her shavi (the power he grants her) changes how she moves across the city and between its surfaces and depths. Although she works for an underground organization developing internet scams, Zinzi’s main source of employment entails finding lost things with the help of her shavi. When she touches people or items, she observes psychic threads linking them to assorted items

they have lost over the years. For a fee, she follows these threads in order to recover and return these objects to their owners. This description of Zinzi's shavi and the ways in which it connects her to things resonates with Jane Bennett's theory of "thing power" elaborated in *Vibrant Matter*, which calls on us to consider the vitality of things, that is to say, "the capacity of things...not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Bennet draws from Bruno Latour's term "actant" to describe a "source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii). Importantly, however, actants are defined through relationality, rather than posited in advance of the action" (viii). The thing power of objects is on display throughout *Zoo City*, as Zinzi's shavi enables her to see psychic "threads" connecting lost objects to their owners. Her encounters are compared to experiencing "the filmy cling of a dozen strands of lost things...like brushing against the tendrils of an anemone" (Beukes 12). These objects, like the spaces in which they dwell, are not inert commodities; rather, they often call out to Zinzi and direct her movements, entering into relations of force with Zinzi, the urban space, other humans, and animals, creating a vital assemblage that fundamentally re-orient's Zinzi's engagement with her environment. Zinzi's shavi thus activates new orientations and engagements with space and other actants, as being mindful of these "threads" requires her to follow novel, deterritorialized trajectories throughout the city. While on the one hand, Johannesburg is often described in the narrative as being constituted of clearly demarcated areas, Zinzi's shavi increases her capacities for action,

and provokes urban nomadism. Rather than “orient herself with respect to conventional notions of space and time,” she “experiences and thinks space and time in terms of blocks of spacetime that are not necessarily linked into a rational whole of measurable units” (Lorraine 159). Objects take on their own lives throughout the novel, which is emphasized by the anthropomorphizing language Zinzi uses to describe them; at one point, she notes that “objects want to have a purpose” (Beukes 133), and, later, describes the threads connecting her to lost items as giddy, “like an excited toddler” (Beukes 246) when she gets close to uncovering important information.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Zinzi experiences a sequence of visions of lost objects and the spaces in which they were lost: a “flash of an old movie,” “an artificial fingernail, half an inch long...lying in a gutter,” a “supermarket trolley brimming with white plastic forks” (Beukes 282). With her growing suspicions of Odi Huron and his associates the Maribou and the Maltese, and eager to discover the meaning behind her visions, Zinzi’s first step is to use her shavi to recover the acrylic fingernail. The thread emanating from the fingernail “is black and withered, but still traceable,” and she recruits a photojournalist acquaintance to help her follow the thread. Her shavi, and the fingernail that she keeps on her dashboard, lead them to the south of the city, “where the last of the mine dumps are—sulphur-coloured artificial hills, laid waste by the ravages of weather and reprocessing” (Beukes 287-288). Zinzi breaks through the fencing into the private property of the mining companies, where they find the body of a murdered sex worker—a trans woman—with one ruby red acrylic fingernail missing. This scene demonstrates how the objects ‘call to’ Zinzi and possess their own life-force; in collaboration with these ob-

jects, she opens up new routes and pathways for engaging with space that function against-the-grain of neoliberal socio-spatial codings and territorializations. Zinzi refuses to respect the portioning of space into public and private. Her deliberate disregard for material barriers that divide the city is an act of resistance against the corporate power. Further, the significance of the nonhuman in this situation stems not merely from the thing-power of the lost objects. Setting the murder scene in a landscape devastated by mining implies a connection between how the earth has been “laid waste” (Beukes 287) and how marginalized bodies are, similarly, destroyed, objectified, and treated as disposable. The fact that the murder victim is dumped in a former mine links the different forms of devalued labour that go into solidifying and creating cities. The mine symbolizes the oppression, exploitation, and colonialism that stain Johannesburg’s history; the murdered sex worker represents how these systems of oppression continue in the present.

As Zinzi continues her investigations, she discovers that each of her visions links to a murdered aposymbiot. The murderer has been targeting “Zoos, especially homeless ones, streetwalkers...the ones nobody will miss, probably won’t even notice they’re gone” (Beukes 301)—such as the trans sex worker noted above—and stealing their animal familiars. With the help of her network of friends and acquaintances, Sloth, her shavi, and creative sleuthing strategies, Zinzi eventually reveals that Huron is responsible for the murders. It is not Zinzi, as an individual, who finds the murdered woman and brings Odi Huron to justice (as I will address below), but rather, a whole assemblage of objects, animals, affects, spaces, and humans that “form alliances” to “enhance their power of activity” (Bennett, *Vibrant* x). Agency, here, must be understood as “congregational” (Bennett,

*Vibrant* 20), rather than stemming from an atomised individual. Further, Zinzi is able to uncover Huron's corruption because of her ability to make use of people as infrastructure, engaging "a specific economy of perception and collaborative practice...to circulate across and become familiar with a broad range of spatial, residential, economic, and transactional positions" (Simone, "People as Infrastructure" 408). Indeed, Zinzi deterritorializes social and class relations as much as she deterritorializes space, often calling on favours from past friends or co-workers, and forging alliances with new people to facilitate her entry into highly-coded sites.

In sum, the assemblages forged between human and nonhuman actants open up new forms of activity, new kinds of movement, that correspond to nomadic lines of flight, and lead to a fundamental new way of engaging in space. These relationships give Zinzi the power to engage with Johannesburg's urban spaces in a deterritorialized way; rather than experience the city as a series of calculated maps or grids segregated along racial, ethnic and class-based lines, the threads of her shavi, the atypical relationships she develops across lines of difference, etc., allow Zinzi to "rethink the space-time coordinates of the conventional reality through which normative subjects orient themselves (Lorraine 159). While neoliberal striations cut across and segment the city space, Zinzi's shavi opens up new thresholds and ways of engaging with space that dislodge and cut through the neoliberal tactics of socio-spatial organization. This is yet another example of a juxtaposition between neoliberal capitalist techniques of biopower and alternative mobilities that cut through these disciplinary striations. Whereas the former seeks to control and order life—delimiting what kinds of movements are possible for whom, and in what spac-

es—these alliances exemplify how life always exceeds attempts to control and order it (Ben Anderson, “Affect and Biopower” 28-29). Further, Zinzi’s improvisational navigation of the city reveals the extent to which the delineations between striated and smooth space are disruptable. She deterritorializes certain spaces, making them work differently, giving areas of the city a new function. In this way, Beukes demonstrates that the material territorializations of the city are socially produced rather than neutral developments, and how social oppression is reproduced through spatial discipline.

### **Surface and Depths**

In addition to the spaces above—Elysium Heights and Mak’s, for example—the networks of tunnels and sewers beneath Johannesburg are frequently featured, and are exemplary of spaces constituted by both deterritorializing and territorializing flows. In their introduction to *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe argue that the history of Johannesburg can be mapped alongside the dynamic interplay between surface and the underground, the structuring of the city above in relation to its own subterranean depths, the “originary tension [...] between the life below the surface, what is above, and the edges” (Nuttall and Mbembe 18). This interplay between surface, depth, and edge is, they argue, the defining metaphor through which to understand contemporary Johannesburg and its history (Nuttall 90). Indeed, the city’s continuing history of racial and ethnic segregation is embedded in and under its streets. Conceptualized in light of its historical foundations, Johannesburg’s play of surface, underground and edge is both a concrete expression of how labour contributed to the founding of the city, and a reflection of how the city is etched —comes into being— as a result of

social networks and assemblages. *Zoo City* reveals that the demarcations between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ spaces and modes of sociality are always-already leaky; the urban assemblage and the social codes that are simultaneously embedded in and productive of those material divisions are constantly (de)territorialized and (de)coded. In this sense, the novel explores consistent boundary-crossings and the ways that nomadism creates and (re)produces these ‘leaking’ sites. *Zoo City*’s subterranean sites symbolize the subaltern histories, people and processes that have been suppressed, and deploys representations of the dichotomy between surface and depth to reflect on the competing circuits of power that constitute the city.

Zinzi’s first foray underground occurs after she accepts a job to recover a ring for Mrs. Luditsky, a woman who, like her luxurious apartment, “had been subjected to one ill-conceived refurbishment too many” (Beukes 15), revealing her upper-class status. The woman removed her ring – which was made with her dead husband’s ashes – while hiding in the bathroom of a store during an armed robbery. She explains, “‘I hid in the bathroom and took all my jewellery off because I know how you people are – criminals, that is,’ she added hurriedly” (Beukes 15), exposing her prejudice against aposymbiots. While Mrs. Luditsky was removing her ring, it slipped away from her and fell into the drain. Zinzi grasps the woman’s finger and catches “a flash of the ring, a blurred silver-coloured halo, somewhere dark and wet and industrial [...] I snagged the thread that unspooled away from the woman and ran deep into the city, deep under the city” (Beukes 17). A few paragraphs later and Zinzi is “shin-deep in shit in the stormwater drains beneath Killarney Mall. Not actual shit, at least because the sewage runs through a different system, but

years of musty rainwater and trash and rot and dead rats and used condoms make up their own signature fragrance” (Beukes 17). The “shit” of the stormwater drains beneath Kilarney Mall stands in stark opposition to Mrs. Luditsky’s apartment, adorned with “exotic plastic orchids” (Beukes 14) and displays of “china figurines [...] cute shepherdesses and angels and playful kittens and a chorus line of flamenco dancers” (Beukes 17). The juxtapositions established in these early pages between Mrs. Luditsky’s fancy apartment and the sewers underneath resonate with Nuttall and Mmembe’s argument that African cities can best be understood through the metaphor of surface and depth, visible and invisible (18). The superficial veneer of Mrs. Luditsky’s apartment is made possible by the abject and ‘unsightly’ infrastructure obscured underground, just as the socio-economic privilege of the upper classes is made possible by the exploitation and labour of the working classes who are frequently subject to stigmatization. Mrs. Luditsky, like The Rand Club, represents the decaying apartheid-era order that, despite being officially obliterated, still lingers and inscribes itself onto the social networks and spatial contours of the city.

The second excursion below the surface occurs when Zinzi is forced to confront a group of squatters who have stolen her phone. She follows the perpetrators into their makeshift home: a maze of tent-like structures covered in tarps. Once she enters their home and confronts the group, however, she quickly realizes that, in addition to the smell of decay and dirt, “there’s another smell in here too, one that’s all too familiar – drains...I realize that the shelter extends much deeper, that whoever lives here has burrowed under the rubble to extend their den” (Beukes 204). When the squatters attack her, Zinzi is forced to move deeper into the tunnels that they have excavated, and which lead to the



underground corridors previously used for mining. The ensuing chase forces Zinzi and Sloth to move from the pathways that run along the edges of underground river, and which are “crumbling and slick with slime” (Beukes 209), and “into the rush of water...hip-deep and horribly warm, like someone peed in it” (Beukes 209). As they travel deeper into the tunnel, they come upon an alcove “a place for the storm water to back up before the artery turns the corner. The scenery has changed, the modern cement giving way to ancient brickwork here, a Victorian relic from the town’s golden days” (Beukes 209). Later, they become caught up in the rush of the water, and eventually washed up in one of the arteries, lost and surrounded by darkness. Zinzi notes,

The worst is that I don’t know where we are. It’s not like I’m the world authority on Joburg’s storm drains, but I’ve been down here enough times looking for lost things to know the basic lie of the land. This is all unfamiliar. The tunnels are a scramble of pitch-black termite holes, some of them narrowing away to nothing, like whoever was digging them got bored and wandered off. The original gold diggings maybe, when Johannesburg was still just a bunch of hairy prospectors scrabbling in the dirt. (Beukes 212-213)

This experience in the storm drains becomes a tour of the overlapping histories of Johannesburg that remain buried beneath the surface, but which continue to inform how the city ‘above’ functions and is segregated. As Shane Graham notes:

The phrase “golden days” has the figurative meaning of “in its prime,” but of course, it also reminds us of the town’s name in the African languages—“city of gold”—and its history as a place where vast riches are literally pulled from the earth through mines that perforate the city’s underneath [...] This would seem to be a metaphor for the city itself, which is haunted by the subterranean spaces it is so eager to disavow. (9)

The tunnels represent the material and ideological foundation of the city, and its history of exploitation and racism. Maintaining the image of the “Golden City” and the memory of the “golden days” depends on repressing and obscuring these histories so that places

like The Rand Club, and people like Mrs. Luditsky, can sustain themselves and their wilfully ignorant belief that ‘the golden days’ were, in fact, golden, and not founded on violence and exploitation. The tunnels, therefore, become a reservoir of repressed histories, which is reinforced by the fact that the lost items that Zinzi is hired to recover, more often than not, find their way to the drains, tunnels and abandoned mining shafts. Thus, Zinzi’s journeys into Johannesburg’s underground spaces are acts of excavation that make visible those spaces, histories, and (social) infrastructures that have been obscured.

Zinzi’s final excursion into the tunnels of Johannesburg occurs at the denouement of the narrative, when we discover that the murderer is the wealthy tycoon and music executive Odi Huron. Keeping his own animalled status under wraps, Huron has been killing aposymbiots in order to steal their animals for rituals to strengthen his own shavi. He has been hiding his aposymbiot status in order to maintain his reputation as a normal, well-adjusted member of Johannesburg society. When Zinzi discovers that Odi Huron is responsible for the murders, she employs the aid of her boyfriend Benoit, who dons a security uniform and distracts the guard so that Zinzi can enter Huron’s well-maintained gated community, located on the periphery of Johannesburg, and infiltrate his private estate. Here, Zinzi and Benoît confront Huron’s animalled accomplices, the Maltese and the Marabou, but Huron is nowhere to be found. In the shuffle, Benoît falls into the pool housing Huron’s crocodile, which grasps Benoit in his jaws and pulls him under the water. Diving after him in an effort to save his life, Zinzi discovers that the pool opens up to a large grotto, where Huron is conducting a ceremony using the muti (magic energies) of stolen animals to attempt to spiritually detach from the crocodile. Zinzi manages to save

Benoît and hide herself and Benoît from Huron and his accomplices, who are now helping him conduct the ceremony. The ceremony is successful, but when Huron leaves, Zinzi speaks to the crocodile, telling it that Huron will undoubtedly kill it, and asks it for help. When Huron returns to the surface of the grotto, the crocodile reaches up and folds its jaws on Huron, pulling him under the water to drown.

This concluding scene deploys similar imagery as the scenes addressed above, employing the metaphor of surface and depth to comment on the historical and ongoing social, economic, and spatial inequalities that structure South Africa. Zinzi's navigation of the tunnels beneath Huron's home is a form of historical excavation, exposing the literal seedy underbelly of the urban planning process, and the extent to which the glittering surface of the neoliberal city obscures the violence beneath that makes such public representations possible. Like Mrs. Luditsky's apartment, Huron's estate appears beautiful and well-maintained on the surface, with its "rolling lawns" and "Sir Herbert Baker stone house...dating back to the early 1900s" (Beukes 79). The reference to Sir Herbert Baker—a prominent British architect whose work dominated the architectural scene in South Africa from 1892-1912—is a subtle reminder of the ways that colonialism transforms and inscribes itself into natural and urban spaces. Significantly, however, upon closer observation, the property is "practically derelict," and appears abandoned, reinforcing both the decay of the colonial order and the extent to which the shiny veneer obscures an inherently corrupt core. The pool where, as we discover later, Huron's animal lives, is another sign of the decay of the capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal social order: "the tiles are chipped, the lapis-lazuli blue faded to a dull glaucoma. The brackish water is a file

green, a skin of rotting leaves cloying the surface” (Beukes 85-86). This imagery, in addition to critiquing the colonialist forces that remade South Africa, also reinforces the moral decay of the upper classes, whose material security and affluence depends on the marginalization and disenfranchisement of certain populations. Significantly, however, the description of Mrs. Luditsky’s apartment, The Rand Club, and Huron’s estate as musty and putrefying also suggests that different futures are possible.

And yet, it is Zinzi’s ability to navigate the city’s subterranean depths that ultimately allows her to free her friends and achieve some modicum of justice. Her shavi directs her to Odi’s underground hideaway and gives her the strength to fight back against Odi and expose his plan, resulting in his eventual imprisonment. The victory is a partial one, as, in the concluding chapter, we discover that Zinzi’s role in uncovering Odi’s corruption has only made her more suspect to official authorities. As a result, she is back on the run, heading to Zimbabwe with a fake name and only Sloth and counterfeit money to her name. What Zinzi’s subterranean explorations make clear is not so much the liberatory nature of urban nomadism but rather, its ability to unsettle and uncover the striations that differentiate surface from depth. As Mbembe and Nuttall note,

In the case of Johannesburg, the underground is not simply a technological space empty of social relations. It does not exist only in an abstract realm of instrumentality and efficiency. In fact, it was always a space of suffering and alienation as well as of rebellion and insurrection [...] the work of apartheid was to make sure that these lower depths of the city, without which modernity was unreadable, were made to appear as strangers to the city, apart from the city. (21-22)

Zinzi’s victory, then, lies not only or primarily in the act of exposing Odi Huron’s corruption, but rather, in using nomadic trajectories to uncover the extent to which “there is no metropolis without a necropolis,” (Mbembe and Nuttall 21); to expose the hidden and ug-

ly suppressed (material) histories upon which Johannesburg was, and in many ways continues to be, founded.

### **Zoos and the Human-Animal Boundary**

A final spatial aspect of the novel that I want to explore here is Beukes' use of the term 'zoos' to describe Aposymbiots, and how the theme of the 'zoo' runs through the novel. The use of the term to describe Hillbrow *and* Aposymbiots compels readers to consider both the relationships between humans and animals—and how the differences or similarities have been used discursively—and how we negotiate relationships between the human and nonhuman in urban spaces. Sheryl Vint's suggestion that SFF representations of human-animal relationships sometimes “link the mistreatment of women, non-whites, and the working classes to the mistreatment of animals” (Vint, “The Animals in That Country” 177) certainly applies to *Zoo City*, and the novel draws a parallel between the ways in which animals have been domesticated and 'othered', and the colonial, racist discourses through which marginalized people—specifically, in this context, criminals, immigrants, and people of colour—are dehumanized.

People of colour, colonized populations, and marginalized people in general have often been compared to animals as a means to legitimize discrimination, colonialism, and spatial segregation. Historically, “reified notions of race and outsider subjects were part of national projects to shape human nature and who counted as human. As such, concepts of race and culture depended on ideas about animality and humanity” (Dechka 539). Across the globe, the “adoption of animal terminology in descriptors of colonized people” justified slavery, racism, and colonialism (Dechka 539). Further, individuals were encouraged

“to view their victims as animals in order to execute the violence” (Deckha 539). Thus, the process of ‘othering’ permits and legitimizes the attendant social violence and spatial discipline that results. These groups are dehumanized to justify their mistreatment by the state and other social agents, and to legitimize the acts of socio-spatial discipline to which they are frequently subjected.

Beukes’ incorporation of the aposymbiots, and the novel’s representation of the prejudice they experience, clearly engages with and critiques these narratives. Aposymbiots are aggressively dehumanized and ‘animalized’ throughout the novel. For example, while she is being interrogated by Inspector Tshabalala at the police station following her client, Mrs. Luditsky’s, murder, Zinzi insinuates that the former is breaching her constitutional rights due to a particularly invasive line of questioning. In response, the inspector tells Zinzi to save her complaints for the animal rights people (Beukes 33), explicitly implying that Zinzi is an animal, and less-than-human. This dehumanization is reinforced by religious groups in the novel, like the Neo-Adventists, who Zinzi visits in prison because attending the services means prisoners get a full meal after (Beukes 62). The Neo-Adventists refer to the animals as “the physical manifestation” of sin; as Zinzi notes, summarizing their views, “apparently we attracted vermin because we were vermin, the lowest of the low” (Beukes 62). These opinions are echoed by the population in general, as is evidenced by Beukes’ interspersed blog posts, movie reviews, and online articles into the narrative. One such break in the narrative comes in the form of an IMDB page for a documentary entitled *The Warlord and the Penguin*. One of the reviews states:

Get it together, people, apos aren’t human. It’s right there in the name. Zoos. Animalled. Aposymbiots. Whatever PC term is flavour of the week. As in not hu-

man...It's in Deuteronomy: Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction...They're scum. They're not even animals. They're just things. (Beukes 76)

The integration of these snippets from multiple sources further emphasizes the widespread adoption of these perspectives, and the extent to which discourses which objectify and animalize the Other are constantly reinforced, becoming embedded in the cultural and political framework.

These attitudes legitimize the spatial and social oppression and segregation of aposymbiots as well as their subjection to experimentation and surveillance. As Zinzi notes, "In the US, Australia, Iran...they do a full head-to-toe, CAT scans, brain scans, endocrine system analysis, the works. In South Africa, we're protected by the constitution. And the prohibitive costs of all that invasive testing...mainly they rely on reports from the social workers and cops" (Beukes 147-146). This is an example of what Foucault calls the "normalizing gaze," a "surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (*Discipline and Punish* 183), as well as biopower, a series of state controls intended to control and manage populations (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Populations* 1). This reference illuminates the interlocking disciplinary controls through which bodies are produced, dominated, and categorized. Biometric technologies—"the application of modern statistical techniques to measure the human body, and the science of using biological information for the purposes of identification" (Magnet 8)—are used to "enact institutionalized forms of state power upon vulnerable populations" (Magnet 9). These surveillance techniques, though presented as apolitical and neu-

tral technologies, reproduce a particular social order through acts of classification and taxonomic ordering, locking bodies into a field of visibility and power relations. The extent to which biometrics seeks to understand the body through biological markers harkens back to the pseudoscientific discourses of physiognomy and phrenology, which assessed character types based on essentialized biological markers, supporting theories of racial difference, and legitimizing the stigmatization and disciplining of racialized bodies in the process. In fact, these discourses, “formed part of the ideology of industrial capitalism, allowing the propertied classes to make assessments of those they deemed employable, criminal or deviant” (Meek 37). This reference to biometric classification once again demonstrates the extent to which aposymbiots are captured in a mechanism of objectification: reduced to data that defines them according to “types” that can then be subject to further disciplinary and biopolitical control.

### **Zoos, Spatial Containment, and the Neoliberal Prison Industrial Complex**

As I addressed earlier in this chapter, *Zoo City* engages a series of binaries, including animalled/non-animalled, surface/depth, black/white, and public/private, to name a few examples. Another binary that is subliminally hinted at, and interrogated and deconstructed throughout the novel, is the dichotomy between domesticated “animality” and feral animality. Given the widespread dehumanization of Aposymbiots in the novel, reading the novel’s spaces through the lens of the zoo metaphor illuminates the ways that cultural anxieties emerge when those who are animalized cannot be properly ‘contained,’ either specially or socially. In order to analyze the novel’s construction and interrogation



of this binary, I examine animality in the novel through the lens of zoo animals and feral animals, and, further, by examining the role of zoos in containing the ‘other’ and mitigating social anxieties about racial and ethnic ‘mixing.’ I then connect the role of zoos to the role of prisons in the novel.

Although literal zoos are not represented in the novel, various forms of spatial enclosure, and forms of spatialized discipline reflect the role and development of urban zoos in the last century. Zoos—and the history of zoo design—demonstrate how humans have constantly renegotiated their role and relationship with nonhuman animals, and how we have attempted to manage the border between human and nonhuman. As Kay Anderson notes:

In terms of its changing animal composition and visual technologies, its exhibition philosophy and social function, the zoo inscribes various human representational and material strategies for domesticating, mythologizing and aestheticizing the animal universe...Zoos ultimately tell us stories about boundary-making activities on the part of humans. In the most general terms, western metropolitan zoos are spaces where humans engage in cultural self-definition against a variably constructed and opposed nature. (276)

Zoos are highly coded and territorialized sites that allow nature to be represented and controlled in a manner that maintains a safe boundary between human and animal, providing a sanitized, controlled vision of nature. This controlled representation and engagement with nature sustains the official classifications that allows humans to feel comfortable in the face of the nonhuman other. In this sense, zoos offer a form of spatial discipline of what is conceptualized as an unruly ‘other’ that echoes how marginalized groups are spatially segregated through process of gentrification, dispossession, police surveillance and private security protocols.

When encounters with animals happen outside of the highly-controlled framework of the zoo, the carefully-established boundary between human and nonhuman becomes leaky, causing cultural anxieties. For example, in his study of human-nonhuman interactions in Seattle during the 1960s and 1970s, Jeffery C. Sanders contrasts positive public responses to the newly designed Seattle Zoo with the concurrent social anxieties that emerged in response to the incursion of feral animal populations into the urban fabric. Whereas the redesign of the Seattle Zoo epitomized what was perceived a ‘successful’ integration of the human and nonhuman, creating a static ecology and "fixing naturalized categories" through their representation and maintenance of "ideal urban ecosystems" (Sanders 251), the incursion of wild animals into urban spaces was perceived as a threat to the social order. Further, the "fear of polluted categories" spurred by the infiltration of feral animals and wildlife into Seattle's urban spaces mirrored "other urban and human landscapes in need of policing" (Sanders 246), as many people believed that the feral animal “problem” was linked to poor people (249). In other words, the anxiety about fluid boundaries between the ‘wild’ natural realm and the ‘civilized’ human realm epitomized in the city paralleled anxieties about the mixing of social groups, and the shifting demographics of urban and suburban Seattle. These conflicts are also animated by discourses of literal and social ‘hygiene,’ as both animals and the poor are conceived of as abject, and in need of sanitizing and/or civilizing.

To apply these lessons to an analysis of *Zoo City*, the fact that Hillbrow is nicknamed “Zoo City” in the novel has a double significance. On the one hand, it indicates how marginalized populations are spatially segregated, and how cities are designed to re-

inforce social hierarchies. The striations of Johannesburg keep aposymbiots contained in a metaphorical zoo, which is made evident by Zinzi's frequent mention of feeling on display. Throughout the narrative, zoos are leered at, scrutinized, and generally treated as second-class citizens. For example, Zinzi is subject to leers while walking through a suburban neighbourhood: "I walk up on Empire through Parktown past the old Johannesburg College of Education, attracting a few aggressive hoots from passing cars. I give them the finger. Not my fault if they're so cloistered in suburbia that they don't get to see zoos. At least Killarney isn't a gated community. Yet" (Beukes 18). Zinzi's description of receiving "hoots" from passing cars as she walks through Killarney is reminiscent of a literal "zoo" scene: Zinzi's race, gender and animal mark her as a dangerous other, treated as public property to be gawked at from the sidelines as though in a real zoo. This is further reinforced in a ritzy area outside of Zoo City, where passerby give Zinzi "the sliding glances reserved for people in wheelchairs and burn victims" (Beukes 127), and the "rapt attention" of Goth kids who don't care for subtlety (Beukes 172) causes Zinzi to feel objectified and out of place. The network of social relationships within this space objectify her and discipline her body and activities in a way that mimics material enclosure. Thus, when Zinzi's colleague comments that the animalists would "bring back the quarantine camps if they could" (Beukes 99), Zinzi notes, "What do you call Zoo City?" (Beukes 99), implying that, though not a literal concentration camp or prison, the city is designed in such a way to keep certain populations isolated and contained within certain spaces. Socio-spatial discipline is still at work to reinforce feelings of belonging and non-belonging, and to regulate the function of public space, so that even when physical barri-

ers are not present, certain spaces are organized to produce certain types of social relationships. As a result, Zinzi's presence in many spaces is highly policed, both by law enforcement and by her fellow residents. The disciplinary controls imposed by social networks and the police reinforce sociospatial blockages that delimit who can access or enter specific public spaces and represent striations or codings within the sociospatial assemblage. Beukes' deployment of these representations further emphasizes the link between how both disenfranchised human groups and animals are treated as threats to urban and civil order; racialized, gendered, and class-based conceptualizations of the rational, civilized subject have been articulated in opposition to both animals and a constructed vision of the dangerous 'Other.' By extension, urban spaces must be protected from the intrusion of these supposedly 'feral' or 'abject' actants.

### **Zoos and Prison**

Whereas aposymbiot's experience of discipline in public spaces demonstrates how certain bodies become legible, and how the circulation of power relations results in the materialization of particular social realities, even in ostensibly 'public' spaces, the novel also critiques sites of literal enclosure, commenting on the role of the neoliberal prison industrial complex. Prisons are themselves a kind of zoo that allows the maintenance of the boundary between proper subjects—granted the full status of humanity—and marginalized others. Since the role of the state has shifted from being a provider of public services, to a "facilitator of market solutions" (E. Bell 4) under neoliberalism, the criminal justice system has also been transformed, resulting in the emergence of a new kind of penal system and new forms of biopower and discipline. For example, Zinzi's comment that

while she was detained in Sun City Prison for three years, they referred to prisoners as “clients” (Beukes 60), reflects how market logic has infiltrated into, and redefined, the function and aims of the penal system. Zinzi’s memory of sleeping “fifty-seven to a room designed for twenty” (Beukes 60) further reinforces the extent to which, as prisons are increasingly being privatized, and thus run for profit, the wellbeing of prisoners is secondary to considerations of cost (Pemberton 258-259), frequently resulting in substandard or unsafe conditions (Sinden 2003).

Additionally, the neoliberal reconceptualization of the subject, framed in terms of “autonomy, choice, and self-reliance,” has resulted in the view of criminal behaviour as “an expression of rational self-interest” rather than as a problem requiring state intervention (Pemberton 259, see also Reiner 2007, and Garland 2001). This has resulted in what Emma Bell refers to as “govern[ance] through crime,” in which social problems are redefined as crime problems” (168), and social problems like rising economic inequality are thus “addressed by government not through welfare and social policy but rather through crime policy” (E. Bell 168). In other words, the trend towards harsher penal policies and punitive sentencing that has, since the 1980s, replaced reintegrative welfare-oriented approaches to incarceration (Reiner 2007, Garland 2001, Wacquant 2009, Holleman et al. 2009) reflects the view that crime is a result of a diminished capacity for reason and self-control; that crime is the fault of the individual rather than reflective of structural injustices and disenfranchisement. This has resulted in the criminalization of poverty, as “prisoners come almost entirely from the poor and working class,” illuminating “a close relationship between inequality, joblessness, poverty, crime, and incarceration (Holleman et al.

8). Further, as has been widely discussed in recent years, the criminal justice system is a “system of racialized social control” (Alexander 4) that reveals new state strategies for marginalizing and oppressing people of colour in the United States and beyond (see also Gabbidon and Greene 2005, and Bhui 2009). In fact, “neoliberal techniques of government include the use of risk-based strategies for criminal justice that target populations instead of individuals...[and] risk is often understood in racially defined terms” (Pemberton 262), demonstrating the perpetuation of racial biases that structure the criminal justice system. In sum, these shifts in the functioning of the criminal justice system further demonstrate the ways that bodies are subjected to various forms of biopower and discipline, categorized and policed. Poverty and racial inequality—no longer seen as the result of structural or social problems, but rather, the inevitable product of individual choices—are believed to reflect a ‘truth’ about the individual that legitimizes further surveillance and discipline of subjugated persons. I have provided a summary of this shift, here, because it connects back to my previous discussion of the ways in which marginalized groups—particularly, people of colour and the working class—are coded as less-than-human through forms of institutionalized power, as well as the circulation of discourses that stigmatize certain bodies. If, to reiterate Kay Anderson’s point, “Zoos ultimately tell us stories about boundary-making activities on the part of humans...where humans engage in cultural self-definition against a variably constructed and opposed nature” (276), the criminal justice system is similarly concerned with erecting boundaries, where the ‘upright,’ ‘rational’ citizen can be defined against constructed visions of abject criminali-

ty that reinscribe racist and classist stereotypes, and that legitimize both social and spatialized forms of discipline.

### **Human and Nonhuman Affinities**

*Zoo City* thus critiques the ways that animal metaphors have been deployed to legitimize various forms of violence against marginalized groups. As the previous analysis demonstrates, *Zoo City* is clearly committed to critiquing the ideological discourses and material forms of power that objectify and oppress marginalized populations by constructing them as less-than-human. At the same time, however, the novel's depiction of animals, and in particular, its representation of human-animal affinities, also deconstructs the human-animal binary that deprivileges nonhuman life. Thus, the novel is not only committed to critiquing the ways that humans are animalized, it is also fundamentally concerned with challenging the very premise of such comparisons, which depends on a view of animals as fundamentally inferior to humans. In the same way that the novel challenges perceptions of space and things as static, passive, and inert—challenging the assumption that agency is unique to humans, while matter merely waits to be inscribed by human activity—*Zoo City* also critiques the instrumentalization and objectification of nonhuman animals.

The novel achieves this, first, by critiquing the ways that animals have been domesticated and controlled to suit human needs. Odi Huron was not just killing humans, after all – he was killing humans to abduct their animals and use their body parts for magic rituals. This plot point illuminates the novel's critique of the way that animals are in-

strumentalized and treated as consumable commodities on the one hand, or on the other hand, as exotic, fetishized objects. Furthermore, the animal familiars in the novel function not only as metaphors of otherness, but as actants with their own desires, personalities, and aims. This is made most visible through the novel's depiction of Sloth, who sulks and holds a grudge after Zinzi indulges in a drug and drink-fuelled evening (Beukes 265), who communicates his relative displeasure, anxiety, or pleasure through sequences of chirps and squeaks (Beukes 213), and whose hypervigilance is what allows him and Zinzi to escape from various dangerous situations (Beukes 213).

Perhaps more significant than Sloth, however, is Huron's crocodile. In the final scenes of the novel, once Huron has successfully completed the magical ceremony and been released from his bond to the crocodile, Zinzi comes face-to-face with the creature. Although it initially approaches her in an aggressive fashion, "swing[ing] its bulk between me and the stairs in a rapid jerk, faster than should be allowed for something that big" (Beukes 340), Zinzi holds up one hand in surrender, and warns it, telling the crocodile that she will help it if it spares her life. In response, the crocodile "jerks its head...motioning towards the stairs" (Beukes 340) to signal agreement. Zinzi escapes, still in stealth-mode and miraculously sneaking under the radar of Huron, the Maltese, and the Marabou, and the crocodile murders Huron. The crocodile, like Sloth, is represented not just as a mindless and violent creature, but rather, an actant with its own agency. Odi's downfall is not purely the result of Zinzi's actions, but rather, a result of her encounters with and collaborations with nonhumans.



These representations of animal agency call on readers to reconceptualize the kinds of boundaries we usually erect between ourselves and nonhuman life, as well as illuminate the potential inherent in speculative fiction, which, because it can stretch (or rather, completely disregard) natural laws, can provide readers with fertile images and characters that approach ethical questions from a new perspective. It is productive to view *Zoo City*'s human-animal encounters through Haraway's term "companion species;" to "knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming-with, where who and what are is precisely what is at stake" (*When Species Meet* 19). The term "companion species" indicates a desire to reconceptualize the social realm as a sphere of relation between human and nonhuman, to expand the sphere of responsibility and encounter to allow for new cross-species affiliations. The novel challenges not only what constitutes "human"—as Aposymbiots themselves occupy a precarious position in relation to the 'human,' and perhaps, can be said to be more-than-human due to the supernatural powers granted to them by their familiars—but how we should treat those actants that traditionally fall outside the definition of life that matters.

To add another dimension of the zoo metaphor deployed in the text, it critiques how zoos—structures designed to place animals on display for human entertainment—reinforce the illusion of a strict delineation between humans and civilization, on the one hand, and animals and wild nature, on the other. Zoos depend on a static, idealized "framing" of the human-nonhuman relationship, and nature in zoos is acceptable because it sticks to the script (Sanders 252). In reality, however, just as the striations and territorializations of the urban fabric intended to exclude and discipline marginalized populations

are, in fact, always-already leaky boundaries, the borders between human and animal are always-already permeable (Vint, “The Animals in that Country” 178). In this sense, despite the lack of real ‘zoos’ in the novel, Beukes’ appropriation of the term can’t help but remind readers of the parallels between the ways animals are disciplined (spatially and culturally), and the ways that marginalized people are similarly disciplined. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the novel is also fundamentally concerned with showing how, to some extent, these territorializations always fail; the boundaries established between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are unsustainable. Thus, in order to foster more livable cities, it is not only necessary to consider how humans work together to foster new socio-spatial collectives. Rather, “urban liveability” always also involves “civic associations and attachments forged in and through more-than-human relations” (Hinchcliffe and Whatmore 124).

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, *Zoo City* illuminates and deconstructs a series of binaries through which cities and social modes are typically conceptualized: black and white, surface and depth, rich and poor, animalled and non-animalled, human and animal. Beukes exposes these boundaries established to perpetuate certain socio-spatial orders and reveals them to be inherently leaky. The ontological boundaries established to maintain a particular political and social order are always porous to some extent, and this leakiness can be strategically deployed by those who find themselves slotted into the ‘wrong’ side of the binary.

*Zoo City*'s speculative fiction tropes excavate and critique the forgotten histories of Johannesburg, illuminating the networks of capital, labour and culture that constitute this volatile yet vibrant city. While Zinzi's experiences are obviously fictitious and incorporate fantastic elements, her trajectories can nonetheless serve as an example of how informal developments, urban nomadism, and assemblage-oriented reconceptualizations of urban infrastructure can provide marginalized people with new tactics for navigating the neoliberal city. The way that she bypasses security, mobilizes different space to new ends, and challenges socio-spatial barriers that reinforce social categorizations are all significant political strategies that assert her right to the city. Furthermore, a vital component of Zinzi's nomadology is that she makes visible the striations and power structures that compose the material city. Often these forces and their effects have become naturalized over time and thus remain invisible. *Zoo City* makes visible these power structures and the effects of uneven urban development, as well as the networks of humans that constitute what she calls the "invisible-tribe-of-behind-the-scenes" – those individuals who are dismissed by normative society, but whose labour and/or exploitation allows the affluent areas of the city to maintain their shiny veneer. Further, as Simone's concept of people as infrastructure reveals, these networks are not only constituted by humans; rather, the "invisible-tribe-of-behind-the-scenes" is also constituted by webs of nonhumans and objects, including the informal city itself. Awareness of the forms of injustice inscribed onto global and local space is the first step towards resistance and advocacy. Lauren Beukes reveals that there are always ways to tap into the virtual, the potentialities inherent in the current state of affairs. As Simone writes:

If urbanization also entails the ever thickening and indeterminate intersections of bodies, materials, spaces and thing, then even as they exist with particular values, abilities and potentials within the dominant logic of capital, their enactment – their very ability to perform for capital – brings with them virtual potentialities and concrete histories of unanticipated, if nevertheless, 'shut-down' meanings of what they could be and are, no matter the extensiveness of control. (“The Surfacing” 357)

This is to say that despite the extent of the territorializations that striate space, it is impossible to reduce space to the economic conditions and cultural practices that produced them. Space is never fully ‘locked down’ or reducible to the logic of any particular system, regardless of the density of its territorializing powers. The assemblages of channels and circuits that operate on any surface are always capable of being rearranged, of opening up new affects, materialities, relationships, of incorporating new powers or rearranging the associations between forces (Simone, “The Surfacing” 357). Resistance, therefore, requires finding these fractures, experimenting at the seams of these leaky boundaries, to find new ways of making and dwelling in space and with others.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Lively Spaces and Thing Power in the Area X Trilogy and *Kraken*

The previous chapter explored various spatial politics in Lauren Beukes *Zoo City*, articulating the networks of humans and nonhumans that compose urban spaces. I focused on how marginalized groups of humans and nonhumans create new socio-spatial assemblages that work against and resist the disciplinary forces of neoliberal capitalism. An underlying concern of the prior chapter is the ways in which assemblage-oriented approaches, particularly those concerned with space and geography, can extend our political concerns to nonhuman actants, including animals and objects. These concerns are taken up more specifically in this chapter, where I examine speculative representations of nonhuman agency: things, animals, and space itself.

While speculative fiction has always been concerned with challenging perceptions of otherness, assemblage theory and non-representational theory, coupled with posthuman theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and critical geography, have all been instrumental in “challeng[ing] the categorical cordon that has marked off the 'nonhuman world' and the grounds for understanding it” (Whatmore, “Rethinking” 337). They achieve this by dissolving the binary between Nature and Culture that positions nonhumans as static objects of human study, insisting, alternatively, that “social relationships include nonhumans as well as humans as socially...active partners” (Haraway, *Modest\_witness* 8). As Whatmore notes, this is “more easily said than done” (“Rethinking” 339); and yet, speculative fiction is a critical tool for thinking through and imagining

these new configurations between human and nonhuman assemblages.

Whereas the focus of the previous chapter was to interrogate the coming-together of human and nonhumans to create new kinds of spaces, this chapter interrogates the nonhuman agency of *space itself*, and the political implications of such representations. In a manner similar to Beukes, China Miéville's *Kraken* and Jeff Vandermeer's Southern Reach trilogy, which consists of *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*, expand the attention of speculative fiction to assemblages of human and nonhuman actants. I begin this chapter by introducing and providing a brief summary of the aims of the new weird, a sub-genre of speculative fiction, followed by an exploration of nonhuman agency within *Kraken* and the Southern Reach trilogy. I extend and elaborate on my arguments in the previous chapter by drawing from the works of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Sarah Whatmore, and, once again, Jane Bennett, to articulate how assemblage-oriented theory dissolves the binary between Nature and Culture. I argue that the novels under examination here represent the productive effects of deconstructing this dichotomy. In the latter half of this chapter, I shift to analyze how Vandermeer and Miéville represent space itself as possessing thing-power, and ask: what happens when the very ground upon which we walk is exposed as a source of uncanny, vital life, as the source of an incompressible power? These representations render *strange* the spaces within which we live, making visible the striations of power and the liveliness of spaces that are typically rendered inert and invisible because of their ongoing, (supposedly) stable presence in everyday life. In sum, representing space itself as monstrous, uncanny, and numinous (by virtue of its 'liveliness') estranges us from our everyday reality to expose the forces that

result in the constant (re)making of those spaces. Further, the fear and uncertainty of characters confronted with sublime and/or numinous spaces is not necessarily a result of active hostility from those spaces, but rather, is a reaction of individuals and communities whose normal frameworks for understanding the world are coming under attack.

Speculative fiction's use of the numinous/sublime, then, can be interpreted as a means to make visible human dread when confronted with the unknowable, but it can also be a catalyst for changing how we engage with and think about ecological and geographical assemblages of human and nonhuman forces. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on how these representations can encourage more fruitful engagements with space and nature, and the urgency of such an approach in the Anthropocene era.

### **Introducing the New Weird**

The new weird, a subgenre of speculative fiction that has developed since the mid-1990s (Vandermeer, "Introduction" x), has been instrumental in producing representations of posthumans and nonhumans that thoroughly eschew liberal-humanist representations of subjectivity—defined as "a coherent, rational self...linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest" (Hayles 85-86)—and that valorize nonhuman agency. The new weird's focus on the nonhuman indicates a broadening of political concerns within the genre of speculative fiction and an engagement with recent bodies of theory including new materialist and assemblage theory. The oeuvres of Miéville and Vandermeer are exemplary of the new weird, as their work consistently resists superimposing models of liberal humanist subjectivity onto various nonhuman actants in their fictions.

Alternatively, their works feature agentic spaces, landscapes and cities that are active

contributors within assemblages of nonhumans and humans. New weird authors envision liminal beings and “non-traditional alien monsters” (Miéville, “New Weird” 510) that blur the distinction between human, animal, machine, and landscape.

In his introduction to the edited collection *The New Weird*, Jeff Vandermeer charts the development of the sub-genre, arguing that it has its roots in three literary traditions: weird and pulp fiction (by the likes of H. P. Lovecraft), New Wave science fiction writers of the 1960s, and transgressive horror of the 1980s (Vandermeer, “Introduction” x). New Wave is a term attributed to the work of writers from the 1960s and 1970s who “reacted against the conventions of traditional [Golden Age] sf to produce avant-garde, radical, or fractured science fictions” (Roberts 334), and represents “the moment when sf decisively shed its pulp heritage and began to adopt the aesthetic modalities of ‘mainstream’ literature” (Latham 83). New Wave writers like Judith Merrill, John M. Harrison, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard pushed the generic conventions of speculative fiction, often engaging in formal experimentation that borrowed from ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture (Vandermeer, “Introduction” x). In Vandermeer’s estimation, the new weird borrows from New Wave a commitment to blurring genre boundaries and exploding the fraught distinction between science fiction and fantasy, a sentiment echoed by China Miéville’s characterization of the new weird as “generically slippery macabre fiction” (“New Weird” 510). Like New Wave, the new weird interrogates and subverts traditional generic expectations. New weird writers are as likely to draw influence from pulp fiction and pop culture as they are from high culture and literary fiction.

Importantly, new weird texts—including those under consideration here—often



present this relationship between humans and lively spaces through gothic and horror tropes. Nonhuman actants –the spaces in each novel as well as the animals, detritus, and commodities that occupy these spaces – are often represented in an uncanny light. The new weird’s fascination with “visceral horror,” bodily transformations, and “unsettling grotesquerie” of the Lovecraftian variety demonstrates its affinity to late 20<sup>th</sup> century horror such as Clive Barker’s *Books of Blood* (Vandermeer, “Introduction” x). Whereas the new weird shares with the “old” Weird a focus on “supernatural and fantastical element[s] of unease [...] combined with a visionary sensibility” (Vandermeer, “Introduction” ix), the old weird—epitomized by Lovecraft—was resistant to ‘showing’ its monsters. Alternatively, starting in the 1980s, horror shifted from obscuring its monsters to visualizing the monstrous in gruesome detail. In this case, it is the transformation, rather than the scare that is featured (Vandermeer, “Introduction” x), indicating a reorientation of how speculative fiction employs and engages with concepts of monstrosity.

Drawing connections between new and old weird, China Miéville argues that, at the heart of both is, a “focus...on awe, and its undermining of the quotidian;” an “obsession with...numinosity under the everyday” (Miéville, “New Weird” 510). He relates the weird’s interest in the numinous to the sublime, which was first defined by Edmund Burke as a feeling of overwhelming astonishment, reverence and horror at the site of a fundamentally unknowable object (Burke 40, 41). In confrontations with the sublime, human senses are overwhelmed in the face of a potentially dangerous force (Burke uses the ocean as the prototypical example). The obscurity of the object, and the

inability of the human mind to comprehend or grasp the object in its entirety, is at the heart of the sublime experience (Burke 42). The numinous possesses a similar quality but is linked to a sense of the religious or spiritual. First defined by Rudolf Otto in his 1917 German text *The Idea of the Holy*, the numinous is a feeling of awe and sometimes dread at the awareness of a divine or spiritual presence outside of ourselves. Significantly, and as will be discussed later, both the sublime and the numinous are feelings that defy—and in some senses obliterate—human rational faculties. Furthermore, for Miéville, what is essential to the new weird is not only the presence of the numinous and the sublime, but the way that the weird “punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday – into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc. The weird is a radicalized sublime backwash” (Miéville, “New Weird” 511). In other words, Burke’s sublime presupposes a certain distance; the sublime is dangerous, but it is also *out there*; in the new weird, this barrier is crossed and the everyday is infected with sublime and numinous otherness.

Moreover, an essential feature of the ‘new’ (and ‘old’) weird is the extent to which space is represented as fundamentally unstable. Normative spatial and temporal frames employed to orient subjectivity (and the reader) are fractured and deconstructed, a feature reflected by Adam Roberts’ comment that “the new weird “demonstrate[s] a restless fluidity of situation” (22). Concerns with the politics of space and landscape are characteristic of the sub-genre. as Roger Luckhurst notes, the weird demonstrates an “obsessive evocation of non-Euclidean geometry, a disturbing disruption of the space-time-continuum that marks the intersection of possible planes of existence” (“American

Weird” 201). In this sense, the (new) weird visualizes the shift from a classic conception of space—epitomized by Euclidean geometry—to a postmodern understanding of space, which is often characterized as a more fluid topography rather than a grid. Whereas Euclidean geometry reinforces a view of space as universal, regular, measurable, and axiomatic—in other words, an a priori system, a unified totality and stable plane (Grosz 94, 95)—in the nineteenth century this understanding was supplanted by non-Euclidean theories of space inspired by Einstein and Reimann (Burgin 44, Grosz 95-97, Lefebvre 25) in which “space is n-dimensional, curved and relative to the objects within it. The mass or energy of objects is relative to their position within space (and in relation to other objects) at a certain time” (Grosz 7). In other words, conceptualizations of space as a bounded, measurable totality and a stable frame of reference were supplanted by a perspective of space as relational. This perspective of space is epitomized by Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the rhizome to describe networks “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion...when a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well...the rhizome pertains to a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits” (*Thousand Plateaus* 21). This is not to say that space is now a free-flowing, undifferentiated expanse upon which ‘anything goes’; rather, these perspectives, rather than presuppose space as a stable and measurable grid, conceive of space as a network that is constantly reproduced depending on the forces that constitute it. And, as Grosz notes, this reconceptualization of space has corresponded with a reorientation of “the ways in which subjectivity represents itself” (97). New representations of space that correspond with the rise of postmodernity

similarly entail new representations of subjectivity, now uncoupled from the liberal humanist model and its association with Cartesian dualism. These new orientations are, without a doubt, disorienting, and, I would argue, one of the aims of the new weird is to grapple with these more fluid, decentralized notions of both bodies and space, as well as the relationships between them.

In sum, the new weird is characterized by, first, its challenge to traditional conceptualizations of human subjectivity and the anthropocentrism that underlies such concepts; next, by its representation of space (and time) as fundamentally unstable and ungrounded, and, finally, by its strategic deployment of the uncanny, the gothic, and the sublime and/or numinous to explore the political and social implications of the deconstruction of the latter concepts. The new weird—like all speculative fiction—uses cognitive estrangement to provide readers with a new vantage point that compels us to think differently about the world in which we live. In the new weird, cognitive estrangement functions through the deployment of the numinous, the sublime, and the uncanny; these features ‘denature’ *Nature*, and force us to think differently about the landscapes and nonhuman actants that are normally relegated to the background of our experience. My interpretation of the texts, below, will provide concrete examples of this, and expand on the kinds of political and ethical questions that are addressed by the new weird. First, however, in the following section, I expand on the initial characteristic of the new weird that I have addressed here—its challenge to anthropocentric perspectives—and how recent critical theory exploring the nonhuman can provide a framework for better understanding the political function of new weird texts.

### **Modernist Scientific Rationality vs. Assemblage**

Recent scholarship in the fields of new materialist theory, assemblage theory, and posthuman theory deconstructs the binaries that distinguish the Social realm from Nature, and the human from the nonhuman. These theories can help make sense of the kinds of political content and questions posed in the new weird, and speculative fiction more generally. In this section, I engage primarily with the work of Bruno Latour and his concept of the collective and Jane Bennett's notion of thing-power, which was introduced in the prior section to discuss *Zoo City*'s representation of human and nonhuman engagements. These theoretical perspectives provide a new way of conceptualizing the relationships between humans, nonhumans, and space itself, and help contextualize both the anxieties and strains of hope that emerge in the new weird texts addressed below.

In *Politics of Nature* and *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour provides a critique of modernist Science and the “two-house model” (*Nature* 18), his description for the dichotomy “that sorts humans from nonhumans, subjects from objects” (Luckhurst, “Scientification” 9). The two-house model positions Nature in one realm and Culture or politics in another, rendering the two spheres inaccessible to one another. Capital-s Science conceives of the materials it studies as “matters of fact”—classifiable, objective Truths—that are taken to be “pre-given and extra-discursive” (Luckhurst, “Scientification” 10). Any impact or consequence derived from the production of “matters of fact” are conceived as occurring in that ‘other’ realm, the realm of the social. Further, matters of fact remain unchanging; they can be extracted from their socio-political and historical contexts and retain clear-cut boundaries (Latour *Politics of Nature* 23). Latour

challenges this model, arguing that Nature should neither be conceptualized as an objective fact inaccessible to and barred from the social, nor should it be conceived as a social construction. Notably, Haraway similarly argues against both relativism and “totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority,” arguing that “both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective, both make it impossible to see well” (“Simians, Cyborgs, and Women” 191). In fact, these claims to a rational, objective, scientific gaze both exclude perspectives “from below:” the “subjugated knowledges” of those who, due to gender, race, sexuality, or nationality, are treated as *objects* of knowledge rather than subjects. Further, the claim of scientific objectivity is often used to reduce actants into “fixed and determined” things exploited for the “instrumentalist projects of destructive Western societies” (“Simians, Cyborgs, and Women” 197). In other words, both Latour and Haraway expose the power relations that fix Nature into certain representational models, and describe how normative systems of knowledge employ totalizing, universalizing perspectives to legitimize the further subjugation and exclusion of both Nature and marginalized populations.

Latour’s response to these dominant orientations is to deconstruct the binary between Nature and culture. Rather than see Nature and culture as two distinct realms, or collapsing one into the other, Latour offers a vision of political ecology, or “the collective.” Thus, the two-house model representative of Scientific modernity – in which the objects studied by Science are treated as stable objective truths extracted from any sociopolitical context – is contrasted with an alternative framework: political ecology, or

the collective, constituted by “matters of concern” (Latour, *Politics*)<sup>28</sup> and actants. Latour argues that these objects of Science, “the risk-free objects, the smooth objects to which we had been accustomed up to now, are giving way to risky attachments, tangled objects (*Politics* 22). Whatmore describes actants, following Latour, as reflective of assemblage-oriented theory’s “decoupling of human/agency...signalling a methodological commitment to treating any distributions of authority and intentionality amongst actants and practical achievements to be elucidated” (“Rethinking” 340). Rather than conceive of nature as a set of essences external to the social, Latour demonstrates how Nature and Culture are always-already in contact; that the world is constituted of heterogeneous assemblages of human and nonhumans that influence one another. The collective is constituted of messy, contingent relationships and encounters between human and nonhuman components that may produce “unintended consequences” that “disrupt all orderings, all plans, all impacts” (Latour, *Nature* 25). This view thus presents a vision of the world as constituted by potentially unruly and unpredictable assemblages of human and nonhuman forces that constantly reinscribe one another.

Haraway, in a parallel fashion, calls for “situated knowledges” (1991). Rather than assume an objective view “from above,” situated knowledges acknowledge the partiality, the power relations, and the limits and collisions that characterize and define scientific perspectives. Nature, in this view, is no longer an abstract object that can be captured through a disembodied scientific gaze; rather, nature constantly slips from our grasp, showing the extent to which “human relations with ‘nature’ must be...imagined as

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<sup>28</sup> In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour uses the terms “parliament of things” to indicate a similar concept.

genuinely social and actively relational” (Haraway, “Simians, Cyborgs, and Women” 3). Haraway introduces the term “material-semiotic actor” to describe how bodies as objects emerge as a result of particular ideological and material structures and historically-specific forms of knowledge production (“Simians, Cyborgs, and Women” 200). In a manner similar to Latour, Haraway calls for a consideration of “objects as actors,” (“Simians, Cyborgs, and Women” 197), deprivileging human subjectivity and systems of knowledge production.

The Southern Reach trilogy and *Kraken* stage a conflict between these two ontological and epistemological frameworks. The protagonists within these works are initially committed to the two-house model, in which Nature occupies a realm distinct from the social; however, their encounter with agentic nonhumans – space and discrete things – results in their gradual adoption of a different stance, one that embraces the politics of the collective. Inspired by both Latour and assemblage theory in general, Jane Bennett’s theory of thing power can help us elaborate on the significance of the nonhuman – including space itself – in both novels. As I elaborated in the previous chapter, Bennett’s notion of thing-power considers “the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (*Vibrant* xvi). Bennett’s ontology challenges an anthropocentric perspective of the world, arguing instead that “materiality [...] is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension” (*Vibrant* 20). In this model, things are not merely inert containers of human intention or tools for human agency; rather, things have their own intensity, contributing



to and (re)formulating assemblages. What *Kraken* and *Annihilation* demonstrate is another thread of speculative fiction's engagement with the 'other,' with thing-power that is manifested in objects as much as in space itself. This occupation is a logical extension of speculative fiction's historical and ongoing interest in the posthuman, now extended to the nonhuman and space itself.

Set in London, Miéville's *Kraken* begins with the theft of an "eight-point-sixty-two metres long" (*Kraken* 8) giant squid lovingly known as Archie (a truncated version of its taxonomic name, *Architeuthis*). *Kraken* follows Billy's journey to rediscover Archie as he navigates a secret London populated by assemblages of humans and nonhumans that exert their own power onto the city. The city is populated by numerous cults and religious sects, and one in particular – the Krakenists – who worship squids and consider Archie a deity. Most importantly, the city is frequently represented as possessing its own agency and is figured as a protagonist. Vandermeer's Southern Reach trilogy – composed of the novels *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* – similarly focuses on space with uncanny agency. Whereas *Kraken* is concerned with urban space, the Southern Reach trilogy takes place in Area X, a remote and mysterious area of wilderness occupied by uncanny nonhuman actants. The landscape and the nonhumans that occupy it begin to exert strange forces on the humans who enter. A woman known only as the biologist is at the center of these narratives, as she struggles to come to terms with Area X and its affront to the scientific narratives through which she is accustomed to understanding the world.

When we are introduced to Billy, the protagonist of *Kraken*, and the biologist, the

protagonist of *Annihilation* and a key character throughout the trilogy, they are both committed scientists whose adherence to the two-house model is indicated by their reliance on taxonomic ordering. At the beginning of the novel, Billy is revealed to be a curator at the British Museum of Natural History responsible for “preserving” and “cataloguing” (*Kraken* 21). Billy is a master taxonomist; he deals with the representation and preservation of taxonomies that, earlier in the novel, he likens to “bottled Platonic essences that define everything like them” (*Kraken* 22). Taxonomy represents rationalist, scientific narratives and the dominant bourgeois ideological framework through which the world is rendered comprehensible. The taxonomic categorization of the giant squid, for example, acts as a means of locating the animal within a human historical and scientific narrative. Its categorization is a baptism heralding its entry into Enlightenment modes of knowledge and conceptual frameworks.

In *Annihilation*, the biologist is a member of a group of scientists – “expedition twelve” – studying Area X. The fact that the protagonist is known only as “the biologist” suggests that she represents a similarly hierarchical, rational, scientific worldview. When encountering uncanny forms of life, the biologist fights to regain her sense of control in the face of chaotic nature: “it was a feeling I often had when out in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity” (*Annihilation* 30). Several early encounters provoke the biologist’s anxiety, such as the following confrontation with a boar-like animal. Soon after arriving in Area X, the biologist watches through her binoculars as it barrels towards their camp, reflecting:

Its face became stranger and stranger. Its features were somehow contorted, as if the beast was dealing with an extreme of inner torment... whatever was consuming the boar also soon consumed its desire to charge. It veered abruptly leftward, with what I can only describe as a great cry of anguish, into the underbrush.  
(*Annihilation* 16-17)

The biologist's close encounter with the boar is one of the first indications that something might be amiss in Area X; that Nature is not behaving in predictable ways. Further, her characterization of the boar invokes the numinous, insofar as the creature appears to be motivated by something intangible, potentially supernatural.

The feeling of the uncanny provoked by the boar, however, is insignificant compared to the disorientation induced by their discovery of the "topographical anomaly" - a tunnel-like structure with a stairway that descends into the earth. Whereas to the other expedition members, the topographical anomaly is experienced as a tunnel, the biologist insists that the topographical anomaly is, in fact, a tower. This disjunction is disorienting for both the expedition members and the reader and links the disintegration of spatial orientation to the collapse of language and signification. When the biologist first descends into the tunnel/tower, she discovers that the walls of the tunnel/tower are covered with fruiting bodies that spell out (English) words. The biologist's first instinct is to process the information and situate the tower and its ecosystem into existing frames of knowledge, but her gradual acknowledgement of her own ignorance—that she possesses "inadequate data" to access the situation and its risks—provokes severe anxiety and vertigo: "a kind of panic for a moment, in which the walls suddenly had a fleshy aspect to them" (*Annihilation* 27). After returning to camp, the biologist mitigates this feeling of the uncanny by reassuring herself that strange things can be controlled; "the beast in the

marshes now seemed like an old friend compared to the tower. We were confident that eventually we would photograph it, document its behaviour, tag it, and assign it a place in the taxonomy of living things” (*Annihilation* 31).<sup>29</sup> The biologist’s response to both phenomena represents a compulsion to classify and slot these organisms into existing taxonomies, in the same way that Billy depends on taxonomic categorization to provide him with a supposedly ‘objective’ perspective of the world.

At the beginning of both novels, therefore, taxonomic classification replaces and obscures the historical, social, and scientific processes through which species come to be known and interact with human systems, but it also attempts to “purify” Nature through its classification and ordering, through discourses that “legitimize the domination of nature” (Luckhurst, “Scientification” 9) and treat nonhumans as “simple mute agents” (Luckhurst, “Scientification” 11). Thus, the biologist’s deference to Science and taxonomic classification to make sense of these encounters is demonstrative of an attempt to control what are, in fact, messy, hybrid “matters of concern.”

The correspondences between assemblage theory and Haraway and Latour’s theories are made apparent by Manuel DeLanda’s critique of taxonomic ordering. DeLanda critiques taxonomic organization because it “starts with finished products [...] discovers through logical analysis the enduring properties that characterize those products, and then makes these sets of properties into a defining essence (*New Philosophy* 28). What he describes here is akin to Latour’s “risk-free objects:” objects of Nature are rendered reified, objective Facts defined within a vertical hierarchy, possessing “*clear*

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<sup>29</sup>The tower, however, resists this kind of comprehension: “it [the beast in the marshes] would become known in a way we feared the tower would not” (*Annihilation* 31)

*boundaries*, a well-defined essence, well-recognized properties” (Latour, *Politics* 22). The problem with this model, DeLanda argues, is that it fails to account for the historical processes that (re)produce these actants, and, further, delimits in advance the range of activity possible to these objects. He presents assemblage theory as an alternative:

Assemblage theory [...] avoids taxonomic essentialism through this maneuver. The identity of any assemblage at any level of scale is always the product of a process (territorialization and, in some cases, coding) and it is always precarious, since other processes (deterritorialization and decoding) can destabilize it. For this reason, the ontological status of assemblages, large or small, is always that of unique, singular individuals. In other words, unlike taxonomic essentialism in which genus, species and individual are separate ontological categories, the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled individual singularities (or hacceties). As far as social ontology is concerned, this implies that persons are not the only individual entities involved in social processes, but also individual communities, individual organizations, individual cities and individual nation-states. (*New Philosophy* 28)

This distinction maintains the possibility that actants possess a set of capacities, a range of potential modes of plugging into machinic assemblages, rather than circumscribing and foreclosing the possible affective and material forces of those components. As opposed to situating non-human actants within a hierarchical, reified framework, conceptualizing these components as part of a horizontal assemblage allows them to *act*, to engage with various assemblages, rather than be reduced to stabilized categories of understanding. Of course, this is easier said than done. The biologist’s deference to these frameworks is representative of an attempt to articulate mastery over phenomena that appear threatening due to their incomprehensibility.

A similar dynamic is visible in *Kraken*, as, at the start of the novel, Billy unquestioningly relies on taxonomic frameworks to frame his experience of Nature. Archie, the preserved giant squid, is initially the de facto representative of scientific

mastery over nature, a perfectly preserved organism with “enduring properties” and a “defining essence” (DeLanda *New Philosophy* 28). The ability to locate and stabilize nonhumans within taxonomic structures is challenged, however, when Billy realizes Archie’s significance to London’s secret communities. The occupants of the alternate London, especially the Krakenists (squid worshipers), perceive nonhuman agents as possessing different kinds of power that allow them to exceed and circumvent the normative scientific frameworks in which they are frequently positioned by humans.<sup>30</sup> For them, Archie is not merely an object, but an agent with thing-power. Archie’s theft unsettles this mode of ordering and makes visible the power of non-human actants to exert their own influence on the city assemblage, resulting in a feeling of uncanniness, reflected in his commentary that “the light in that early evening was wrong. Everything’s screwed up, [Billy] thought. As if the fat spindle of the Architeuthis’s body had been slotted in and holding something in place. Billy felt like a lid unsecured and banging in the wind” (*Kraken* 19). At the introduction of the novel, Archie is “pinned into” these taxonomic frameworks; as the prototypical Matter of Fact, Archie represents the stabilizing effect of these systems of knowledge-power. The events of the novel, however, make it necessary for Billy to reject his one-dimensional perspective of Archie. Archie, originally symbolic of the power of taxonomy and Science to control Nature, becomes

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<sup>30</sup> In *Kraken*, Miéville critiques modernity and Enlightenment rationality by incorporating a worldview that accommodates magic, folklore, and spirituality. Magic is used to render visible another mode of occupying and engaging with the world. In my reading, the magical components of the novel serve to represent the novel’s assemblage-oriented perspective of the world. Speaking of radical fantasy, Jameson argues that magic in fantasy is not always “some facile plot device” but rather “a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualisation of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present” (“Radical Fantasy” 278). I would expand this to suggest that magic in critical fantasy is used, as in the example of *Kraken*, to indicate the “enlargement” of powers of not only human agents but nonhuman agents.

representative of the disruption of that same ontological framework when he becomes “unslotted” from his place in the taxonomy. He is revealed as a “matter of concern” with “no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences; “Archie is revealed as a “tangled being, forming rhizomes and networks” (Latour, *Politics* 24); as catalyzing “numerous connections, tentacles, and pseudopods that link [it] in many different ways to beings as ill assured as themselves and that consequently *no longer constitute another universe, independent of the first* (Latour, *Politics* 24, original emphasis). With Archie removed, the whole system becomes disrupted. Archie, initially playing the role of a highly coded and highly territorialized mode in the machinic assemblage, changes form, becoming a highly decoded and deterritorialized force that transforms the entire composition of the assemblage.

Like Billy, the biologist is gradually compelled to reorient her understanding of Area X and the creatures within it; in this sense, like *Kraken*, *Annihilation* represents a breakdown of modernist scientific frameworks of understanding. The expedition’s continued interaction with the topographical anomaly coincides with the increasing breakdown of their group, until only the biologist is alive (the other members are either killed or go missing). Near the conclusion of the novel, the biologist enters the tunnel one last time to encounter a creature she refers to the Crawler. During this confrontation, the biologist simultaneously recalls a past experience while conducting field work at Rock Bay, when, during a nighttime expedition, she discovers a “rare species of colossal starfish,” noting that “most of us professionals eschewed its scientific name for the more apt ‘destroyer of worlds’” (*Annihilation* 174). She notes:

The longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, and the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all – about nature, about ecosystems. There was something about my mood and its dark glow that eclipsed sense, that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in the taxonomy – catalogued, studied, and described – irreducible down to any of that. (*Annihilation* 175)

This experience is communicated in a flashback sequence that occurs in tandem with her encounter with the Crawler: “turning that corner, encountering the Crawler for the first time, was a similar experience at a thousand times magnitude. If on those rocks those many years ago I could not tell sea from shore, here I could not tell stairs from ceiling” (*Annihilation* 175). Both organisms provoke a sense of the sublime or numinous; the biologist, when confronted with something radically other, realizes that these organisms cannot be contained within human frameworks of understanding. She reflects: “what can you do when your five senses are not enough? Because I still couldn't truly see it here, any more than I had seen it under the microscope, and that's what scared me the most” (*Annihilation* 178). This moment is the culmination of the breakdown of the two-house model; “matters of fact” that can be identified and classified through scientific techniques are revealed to be “matters of concern,” “material-semiotic actors” with “no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and their environment” (Latour, *Politics* 24). The Crawler, like the “destroyer of worlds” starfish, exceeds and circumvents human classificatory systems. Although this is a horrifying moment, the biologist nonetheless makes an interesting and important observation:

I once again recognized that the Crawler was an organism. It might be inexplicable. It might be beyond the limits of my senses to capture [...] I believed that it might be pulling these different impressions of itself from my mind and



projecting them back to me, as a form of camouflage. To thwart the biologist in me, to frustrate the logic left in me. (*Annihilation* 179)

The thing power of the Crawler becomes clear in this moment; the Crawler is *active* in this process of breaking down systems of human comprehension and is speaking *back* and speaking *against* these narratives, as though calling for a new kind of relationship between human and nonhuman.

The novels thus challenge the objectivity of Scientific rationality in favour of a “collective” or assemblage which does not necessarily abolish categorizations but rather, gives nonhuman actants new powers by focusing on the acts of “linkage, association, and heterogeneous assemblage” (Luckhurst, “Scientification” 11) that position nonhumans within assemblages with humans. As these examples demonstrate, to grant nonhumans thing power opens up an inherently messy way of viewing the world; to quote Bennett, thing-power posits these forces as composing “a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate” (*Vibrant* xi). Thing-power is also turbulent because it dissolves vertical hierarchies privileging human agency, promoting a distributive model of agency in which non-humans exert their own power within assemblages. Both Miéville and Vandermeer use the language of the sublime, the uncanny, and the numinous to describe the angst provoked by the dissolution of these normative systems of understanding. Further, as Vandermeer’s characterization of the topographical anomaly demonstrates, the destabilization of these frameworks also results in the unsettling of space. If normative scientific frameworks are a grounding foundation that orients humanity in relation to Nature and nonhuman, the destabilization of this foundation is visualized through spatial disorientation.

### **Uncanny Spaces: Spatial Disorientation**

In the previous section, I analyzed the novels' representation of the breakdown of the two-house model and argued that the Southern Reach trilogy and *Kraken* introduce an alternate ontological framework for engaging with nonhuman actants, as well as for refiguring the relationship between nature and culture. I began this chapter with 'things' rather than 'space' because it provides a foundation for thinking about space differently, as an agentic assemblage that engages with other nonhumans and humans. In other words, before jumping from humans to space with agency, it is important to address the role of lively objects in that network. Here I turn to the explicitly spatial and its role in these weird texts. In this section, I explore how the dissolution of the two-house model results in spatial disorientation that reflects the loss of ontological and epistemological certainty. Furthermore, the spatial disorientation experienced by the protagonists also hints towards space 'talking-back,' rebelling against the ways that it has been relegated to the background. Instead, space itself, along with the nonhuman forces that traverse it, is reconceived as a material-semiotic actor, a Latourian actant, a component within a turbulent field constantly (re)constituted through material, affective, and ideological relations. In this sense, the novels defamiliarize space to provoke readers to think differently about how we engage with both built sites and natural landscapes.

In *Kraken*, Billy's increasing involvement with the 'alternate' London (as a result of his involvement with the police following Archie's theft) results in a feeling of uncanniness. When Billy travels to the outskirts of London for questioning by the police, the city takes on a strange quality; places he has never been feel "tuggingly familiar"

(*Kraken* 19), and instead of returning home, Billy goes to the centre of London, perusing cafes and bookshops, feeling all the time that he is under surveillance (*Kraken* 25). Billy's sense of unease peaks as he travels home by public transit:

It was as if he were watched by the city's night animals and buildings, and by every passenger. I shouldn't feel like this, Billy thought. Neither should things [...] A gust of pigeons shadowed the bus. They should be sleeping. They flew when the bus moved, stopped when it stopped [...] They were on the top deck, above the most garish of central London's neon, by low treetops and first-floor windows, the tops of streets signs. The light zones were reversed from their oceanic order, rising, not pitching, into dark. The street on which lamps shone and that was glared by shop window fluorescence was the shallowest and lightest place: the sky was the abyss, pointed by stars like bioluminescence. In the bus' upper deck they were at the edges of the deep, the fringe of the dysphotic zone, where empty offices lurked up out of sight. Billy looked up as if down into a deep-sea trench. (*Kraken* 26)

Ordinary objects and animals take on an eerie presence, becoming uncanny. The natural order is disrupted, symbolized by the gust of pigeons following the bus and their ignorance of normative temporality. Billy's initial inkling that the nonhuman occupants of the city may not be as ignorant as he assumed occurs in tandem with the peeling back of the city's normal layers to reveal a more agentic concatenation of forces underneath. Further, the use of oceanic metaphors in this passage emphasizes Billy's sense of spatial disorientation and the reversal of the natural order.

This scene deploys uncanny imagery to make visible Billy's sense of spatial and intellectual disorientation. In his playful, tongue-and-cheek essay "On Monsters," Miéville argues that the new weird does not only present readers with the uncanny, rather, the new weird makes use of a family of "abcanny" figures. The two most interesting here are the subcanny and the katacanny. The former term describes monsters beneath the surface, but with an important caveat. Using the film *Jaws* as an example, Miéville notes

“it is the image of Jaws below the water rather than Jaws breaching the surface that provokes the most horror in us” (“On Monsters” 382). More terrifying than the subcanny, however, is the “katacanny” (“On Monsters” 386): “tellurian presences that chew through earth and nestle in burrows and reach up and snag and snare and pull back down into shifting dirt” (“On Monsters” 386). These tunnelers terrify us because of their “destabilization of the very ground on which we walk;” they make visible the extent to which “the ground beneath our feet, the literal grundnorm of our conception of things, of the everyday, is swiss-cheesed...the terror is in the rebuke to our complacent ground-walking swagger” (“On Monsters” 386). In *Kraken*, Miéville makes use of both the subcanny and the katacanny when he describes Billy’s feelings of disorientation and dread. Billy becomes subsumed into the “known unknown” (Miéville, “On Monsters” 386) of the oceanic depths, but with an interesting twist: he is not watching subcanny monsters from above the surface but is compelled to confront and mingle with those shadows. Miéville’s combining of the subcanny with the katacanny – rendering the ground itself an underwater surface – further emphasizes Billy’s sense of unease with the landscape and his new reality, as the ground literally and figuratively falls out from beneath him. In combination, this use of metaphor emphasizes the loss of certainty, of “ground,” both in the sense of spatial certainty – of feeling oriented within a familiar place – but also in the sense of intellectual assurance, of possessing tools to understand the world.

Throughout *Annihilation*, spatial disorientation is represented by a landscape increasingly resistant to normative mapping and measurement techniques. The role of

maps is significant throughout the novel, and initially, the official map of Area X provided to the expedition by Southern Reach is a source of comfort. The map is organized to focus on human-made structures, featuring the location of various ruins, the base camp, and the lighthouse, the only intact remnant of human interference in Area X. Natural phenomena discovered by prior expeditions is described in relation to these human settlements. The importance of the lighthouse is frequently emphasized; as the biologist notes, “the lighthouse was a symbol, a reassurance of the old order, and by its prominence on the horizon it provided an illusion of safe refuge” (*Annihilation* 116). In this context, the lighthouse is the tether around which the rest of Area X is mapped; it is a solid representation of human power and symbolic of the development of naval progress, mastery over nature and thus different forms of colonization.

The biologist notes that, upon approaching the lighthouse, the other expedition members display relief: “its appearance on both the map and in reality reassured them, anchored them. Being familiar with its function further reassured them” (*Annihilation* 21). The sense that reality – the material landscape – coincides with the constructed representation – the map – gives the other expedition members a sense of control. As Massey argues, maps represent “space as a flat surface, a continuous surface. Space as the completed product. As a coherent closed system... the map works in the manner of the synchronies of the structuralists. It tells us an order of things” (106). The correspondence between the map and the lived reality of the expedition members is a reassuring sign that their tools can be trusted, that the world can indeed be pinned down within these representational systems.

The biologist, on the other hand, feels increasingly suspicious of the map and her growing distrust is paralleled by a mounting sense of spatial disorientation. The discovery of the topographical anomaly initiates this sense of disquiet, as it is not included on the map. Where the lighthouse anchors the expedition, suggesting a comforting symmetry between the landscape and human attempts to measure it, the biologist notes that, regarding the topographical anomaly, “we knew none of these things. We could not intuit its full outline. We had no sense of its purpose” (*Annihilation* 21). The anomaly represents the resistance of the landscape to being mapped; it is a symbol of the breakdown and inadequacy of human systems of control and measurement to fully accommodate the heterogeneity of nonhuman actants.

As the landscape becomes increasingly uncanny and the expedition breaks down, the biologist begins to suspect that the official map was created to intentionally misdirect them from more important forces at work:

What was a map but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible? [...] Our instructor, who remained nameless to us, drilled us for six long months on the position of the lighthouse relative to the base camp, the number of miles from one ruined patch of houses to another [...] We became so comfortable with that map, with the dimensions of it, and the thought of what it contained that it stopped us from asking *why* or even *what*. (*Annihilation* 67, original emphasis)

Here the biologist is suggesting that the official maps are tools constructed to delimit in advance how the expeditions engage with Area X. This passage emphasizes the constructed nature of space and the historically and socially specific methods humans have developed to master and calculate space, and reflects Massey’s observation that mapping is a “technology of power” that functions through “codes,” “conventions,” and “taxonomic and ordering procedures” (Massey 106). Mapping is not inherently

problematic (Massey 107); it becomes problematic “if you fall into thinking that that vertical distance lends you truth” (Massey 107). Maps do not reflect a stable reality but rather impose order onto a constantly changing assemblage, and this process is always political; what is or *who* are excluded from mapping processes are just as important as what is included. The passage, above, demonstrates the biologist’s increasing awareness of maps as “technologies of power.”

The map thus represents human attempts to control and measure Area X, but as the novels demonstrate, Area X exceeds these methods of control. The dissolution of this order is represented by the biologist’s feeling of spatial disorientation; for example, when she is inside the topographical anomaly, she feels a sense of “vertigo despite being in such an enclosed space” (*Annihilation* 27), a feeling that persists even when she is outside the topographical anomaly (*Annihilation* 14). The topographical anomaly itself defies measurement and mapping; while some members of the expedition experience the anomaly as a tunnel, the biologist finds it difficult to consider the anomaly as anything but a tower, noting, “I don’t know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground” (*Annihilation* 6); later, she notes that she tried “to turn the tower into a tunnel, or even a shaft, but with no success” (*Annihilation* 15). This represents the anomaly’s nonhuman agency, and the inability of humans to understand structures not created by humans; the biologist, as she considers the anomaly, can’t help but think of “the inside of nautilus shells and other naturally occurring patterns” (*Annihilation* 14), indicating the biologist’s suspicion that the topographical anomaly is not a human creation. The expedition, save the biologist, can only understand the anomaly when it is

situated within their existing knowledge paradigms, and the biologist's insistence that the anomaly is a tower suggests that she possesses the capacity to think outside of these frameworks.

Furthermore, one of the first indications of Area X's thing-power occurs in *Annihilation* when the biologist encounters the journals of past expedition members. In one passage, the author provides an account of their trek to find the border of Area X, noting that they started to follow the coastline up from the lighthouse, but soon gave up and turned back. They note in their abandoned journals that the trip back took four days instead of seven, "as if the land had contracted" (*Annihilation* 163). This sense of spatial disorientation is compounded by the psychologist disclosing to the rest of the expedition members that "the border [of Area X] is advancing...a little more every year" (*Annihilation* 157). This indicates either that normative temporal and spatial frameworks are breaking down, or that space itself is actively evolving, recalling Miéville's notion of the katacanny as the feeling that space is destabilized, that the ground upon which we walk is no longer a solid and certain foundation.

Within both novels, the breakdown of the two-house model positioning human culture on one side and nature on the other results not only in existential disorientation, but spatial disorientation. Space itself begins to feel uncanny (or "katacanny"), like a monstrous other intent on confusing and destabilizing humans. The use of language that invokes the numinous, the sublime, and the uncanny to describe the protagonists' encounters with space has an estranging effect for both the characters and the reader, as we are compelled to look at space differently, to consider space as an actant rather than an



inert object. Although at this point in the narrative, these shifts provoke horror, the destabilization of space itself comes to have a more political function as both narratives progress.

### **Deterritorialization of Institutionalized Spaces**

The initial breakdown of the two-house model results in uncanniness permeating the spaces in both narratives, as the protagonists find it difficult to orient themselves in relation to their environments. These developments—both the dissolution of the two-house model and the realization that space itself is an actant, rather than an inert surface—though initially represented as frightening, are eventually revealed as productive. Both novels feature depictions of the deterritorialization of highly structured, institutional spaces, which function as a critique of how knowledge is produced and reified, and how humans privilege certain ways of knowing the world. The focus on these sites also illuminates how spaces are imprinted with specific power relations, further emphasizing how space is not neutral but constantly (re)produced.

In *Kraken*, the Museum of Natural History is an important character; amongst other buildings with their own personalities, the Museum of Natural History represents the supremacy of Science, Enlightenment rationality, and, by extension, serves to represent how the UK upholds those tenets, while erasing the various forms of power and domination that allowed such knowledge to be established and solidified. The museum is a reservoir of reified knowledge that, in presenting these “matters of fact” as decontextualized and objective, erases the historicity, the messy trajectories that facilitate

these processes of knowledge creation. Billy has a special relationship with the Museum of Natural History, and the Darwin Centre in particular. Prior to Archie's theft, Billy was accustomed to following time worn paths, "walk[ing] the route he used to take as a boy" (*Kraken* 31) from the Darwin Centre to the main museum building. He is comforted by the familiarity of this route. After Archie's theft, however, this route is disrupted by a faint sound, the "noise of a jar rolling" (*Kraken* 31). Billy senses that the noise emits from a "door off-limits to visitors, that led downstairs to storage areas and undercorridors [...] He entered the keycode and descended" (*Kraken* 31). Old patterns and routines developed and sedimented in childhood are interrupted by this sense of the uncanny and of an aural interruption into the spatial order. Similar motifs are present in both *Annihilation* and *Zoo City*, as, like Billy, the biologist and Zinzi frequently descend into underground spaces that represent the dissolution of solid foundations from which to understand the world, as well as the excavation of repressed power relations.

Any remnant of spatial solidity – of knowing where he is and where is going, of possessing familiarity with *his* surroundings, *this* London – dissipates when Billy descends into the tunnels underneath the Museum of Natural History. While he initially follows the worn paths in the tunnels, observing preserved animals and other unused detritus, soon enough "Billy stepped off the path" and "pressed through unyielding antique bodies, shouldering deeper into the little forest of animal remains. He glanced up as if at birds and pressed toward the whitewashed walls" (*Kraken* 32). Here again Miéville offers another natural metaphor to indicate a sense of the uncanny and the nonhuman infiltrating a known, mappable London. The official facade of the city is

stripped away, and new layers of urban space and meaning are exposed. Ironically, when above ground, on the streets and on the bus, Billy uses oceanic metaphors to describe the landscape, whereas here, underground, his experiences recall a forest.<sup>31</sup> This suggests further disorientation, as surface and depths become confused. In this sense, the breakdown of ontological certainty is reflected in the distorted and defamiliarized landscape. The *katacanny* emerges once again as the foundations of the museum are exposed as literally holey; instead of solid ground the museum lies on a bed of tunnels.

Any remaining sense of orientation and control dissipates when Billy, having wandered into an isolated area of the tunnels, discovers a human corpse preserved in a jar: “what he had thought pelt was a ruined shirt, what he had though peeled was hairlessness and bloat...what stared deadly at him in broken pose pressed up and misshaped against the bottle's inside was a man” (*Kraken* 32). The museum—a repository of human knowledge, representative of scientific mastery over nature—becomes instead a site of decay and repressed secrets that threaten to encroach upon and usurp fragile human frameworks of understanding. This scene is exemplary of the political use of the uncanny, which, as Sigmund Freud notes, has a double meaning, signifying both that which is “concealed and kept hidden” (132), and to what was “intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (132). In this scene, Billy’s exploration of this subterranean space represents the “intrusion of irrational forces into the order of the

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<sup>31</sup> Miéville’s use of forest imagery to indicate feeling spatial disorientation is a reversal of how wilderness and/or natural imagery is often employed. Massey describes how “nature” and the “natural landscape” have come to represent solid grounding, fixed spaces outside of messy human trajectories: “we use such places to situate ourselves, to convince ourselves that there is indeed a grounding” (131). She argues, however, that “natural” spaces are just as mobile and active: “In the end there is no ground, in the sense of a stable position, and to assume there is to fall into those imaginations [...] celebrating a mobile culture while holding (or trying to hold) nature still” (137).

metropolis” (Maczynska 59), which results in “uncanny readjustments of perspective or proportion” (59) linked to a critique of the contemporary metropolis (Maczynska 59). On the one hand, the uncanniness of this passage derives from witnessing what was previously solid and impermeable become leaky and destabilized. On the other, this passage is a metaphor for exposing the subterranean foundations—political, ideological, material—upon which the city is constructed. In our day-to-day experience of urban sites, the power structures that assemble the city, and which seek to promote the image of the city as a coherent, solidified identity, are typically obscured from sight. This scene is thus uncanny, in part, because it brings to light the circuits of power, oppression, and labour that construct urban spaces. The uncanniness is also derived from the reversal of the ‘natural’ order: the corpse is, ironically, preserved in a giant jar typically used to preserve, catalogue, and display animal specimens. The observers become the observed, the perpetrators of taxonomic ordering, of scientific filing, become the victims of this same process. The underbelly of the museum reveals the mechanisms, the erasures and the violence, that are necessary to the creation and maintenance of these stable representations of national power and authority.

Like *Kraken*, the Southern Reach trilogy also interrogates and destabilizes spaces representative of institutional knowledge, power, and authority. The second novel in the Southern Reach trilogy, *Authority*, takes us from the wilderness of Area X to the Southern Reach headquarters, a site representative of institutional control, bureaucracy, and official Science. *Authority* follows the newly appointed director of Southern Reach, John

Rodriguez, who prefers being called by his nickname, Control.<sup>32</sup> The building that houses the Southern Reach is U-shaped monument of “stacked concrete” that, with intimidating “ridges and clefts” looks more like “performance art or abstract sculpture on a grand and yet numbing scale” (*Authority* 27). The building appears to be in eternal conflict with the swamplands and old-growth forest that surrounds it and are prevented from infringing upon the headquarters by a human made pond in the building’s courtyard. As he tours the exterior of the building, Control is disquieted by the natural surroundings, feeling the swamp as a “weight, a presence. Another kind of enemy” (*Authority* 31). Control establishes himself in his new office, ostensibly the center of the Southern Reach and, one would expect, a symbol of central power and authority; however, the office, which belonged to the former director, “seemed to indicate a director who had gone feral” (*Authority* 42). He continues to discover secrets within the office that represent Area X’s infection of the Southern Reach building and the institutional power it represents. In a desk drawer, he discovers “something dead inside” and “something living” – a plant, with “crimson roots attached to a nodule of dirt” and a dead mouse. He notes that “the plant had the look of a creature trying to escape, with a couple of limbs, finally freed, reflexively curled over the edge of the drawer” (*Authority* 87). Control continues to

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<sup>32</sup> The combination of the book’s title – *Authority* – with the protagonist’s chosen name – Control – is a heavy-handed indication of the novels themes, including its critique of patriarchal authority. Concurrently, Vandermeer also complicates this reading by presenting a multi-faceted portrait of Control and masculinity. Control is a disgraced CIA field agent controlled by his mother, a high-ranking bureaucrat in the CIA and one of the central figures responsible for the maintenance of the Southern Reach. Throughout *Authority*, Control struggles to establish his authority within Southern Reach and is confronted with powerful women who refuse to follow his agenda. Thus, the use of the name Control refers to patriarchal power, but it is also ironic because Control is constantly seeking, and struggling to achieve, control over the Southern Reach and the more competent and informed women in this network. In this way, Vandermeer circumvents a one-dimensional portrayal of gender relations and, instead, offers an interesting representation and critique of constructions of traditional masculinity.

discover aspects of the building that encroach upon his sense of security – a hidden sequence of text written on a wall behind a locked door, a trapdoor leading into an attic crawlspace covered with horrific paintings of previous expeditions – until the conclusion of the novel, when the building itself is colonized by Area X: There were no doors where there had always been doors before. Only wall. And the wall was soft and breathing under the touch of his hand. He was screaming, he thought, but from somewhere deep beneath the sea (*Authority* 290). Like Miéville, Vandermeer employs deep sea imagery to reflect on the loss of stability, to visualize the feeling of the ground literally ‘falling out from under’ the protagonists. Both the Museum of Natural History and the Southern Reach building are exemplary of spaces held in place as stable by totalizing disciplinary forces; however, they are ultimately challenged by the fractures within those very systems that open up onto new forms of life and agency. These spatial destabilizations thus simultaneously represent the fractures within the two-house model that lead to its exposure as untenable, as well as the new forms of transformative agency that can emerge and alter those systems. Area X’s incursion into these institutional sites is symbolic of the “revenge of the world made over as mere reflection and objectively mapped” (Coley and Lockwood 31), and of Nature’s attempt to exceed its status as “matter-of-fact.” At this point in both narratives, the possibility of both—that, first, the systems through which the protagonists have come to know the world are unstable, and, second, that there are agentic forces at play that demand a new orientation to being in the world—provokes anxiety and fear. Yet, as the narratives progress, the protagonists experience a shift in worldview. The change in tone in *Kraken* and the Southern Reach trilogy represents a

transition from experiencing these destabilizations as a threat, to embracing the transformative potential of a “collective” of human and nonhuman actants.

### **Thing-Power and Urban Deterritorializations in *Kraken***

The following two sections extrapolate on these transmutations and their political content, both as metaphors for envisioning new kinds of social and political collectives, and as a means to revalorize nonhuman, including spatial, agency. Within *Kraken*, Miéville’s reimagining of urban space achieves two main goals: first, by illuminating a parallel urban order to the normative one, Miéville suggests that an alternative, transformative socio-political and spatial order is possible that runs contrary to the neoliberal capitalist order. Second, representing urban spaces as assemblages of nonhuman and human flows indicates that the latter goal is only possible through the recognition of nonhuman agency, and a reorientation of how we conceive of both space and the nonhuman. Alternatively, in the Southern Reach Trilogy, the emergence of new kinds of thing-power, and the tactics employed by nonhuman actants to deconstruct the two-house model, demonstrate a kind of reverse colonization, in which nature fights back against humanity’s exploitation and territorializations of space and matter, resulting in the “emergence of a genuine transformative agency” (Coley and Lockwood 31). While *Kraken* focuses on the transformation of the urban order, and the Southern Reach trilogy focuses on natural landscapes, both narratives demonstrate that the emergence of a new socio-political order is dependent on reconfiguring the ethical relationship between human and nonhuman.

Prior to Archie’s theft, Billy experiences the city in structured, organized ways. He

moves from his apartment to work, from work to familiar bars, and imposes order onto the space of the city in a manner that mirrors his taxonomic ordering of natural specimens. The city is initially experienced as an inert surface where humans like Billy exert their power and go about their daily routines. Archie's theft, however, provokes expressive deterritorializations of the urban assemblage. This event dissolves the fine barrier enabling the illusion of "normal" London as distinct from the "magical" London. An assemblage-oriented conceptualization of space is evident through Miéville's playful description of London, which is not just alive, but is represented as an assemblage of multiple, competing agencies propelling the city's development. Massey's indication that "sometimes you have to blow apart the imagination of a space or place to find within it its potential...to challenge the class politics of London the city itself has to be reimagined as a clash of trajectories" (158) is realized in Miéville's representation of the city as possessing "needs, urges and insights" (*Kraken* 195). The city is described as a "gestalt metropole entity" with different suburbs and regions warring amongst themselves: "regions like Hoxton and Queen's Park cosy [sic] up to the worst power, Walthamstow [is] more combatively independent, Holborn [is] vague and sieve-leaky, all of them bickering components of a totality, a London something" (*Kraken* 195). This representation of urban geography disrupts the "geometric configuration of the world as a single grid-like surface – a tabula rasa which invites the inscription of general theoretical claims as omnipresent, universal rationalities" (Whatmore 343). Further, these representations emphasize the conflicting trajectories of power that striate and territorialize the city in a particular fashion. While cities are often represented as coherent totalities defined under



the umbrella of a single identity, here, the city is represented as a dense assemblage of forces and flows. This is not *London*, but a “London something” (*Kraken* 195) – a curious turn of phrase that de-emphasizes London as a totality and reinforces a view of urban life as constituted by a “simultaneity of multiple and partial space-time configurations of social life” (Whatmore 343). London, in this case, is not *one* space but multiple spaces visualized as actants in relation, whose anthropomorphization (the representation of their competing, aims, goals, and desires) reinforces a view of space as a fluid topology or body constantly redefined by connections and variable power relations, rather than stable and fixed, with one primary identity.

Here the city of London is anthropomorphized, but for good reason. In her chapter “The Agency of Assemblages,” Bennet outlines a theory of “distributive agency” through an analysis of the 2003 power blackout that affected 50 million people. Bennett argues that the power grid itself can be conceptualized as an agentic assemblage (*Vibrant* 21). She analyzes the popular rhetoric used to describe the event, reflecting that “to say that the grid’s ‘heart fluttered’ or that it ‘lives and dies by its own rules’ is to anthropomorphize” (*Vibrant* 25); however, she suggests that anthropomorphizing can be useful “to gesture toward the inadequacy of understanding the grid simply as a machine or a tool, as, that is, a series of fixed parts organized from without that serves an external purpose” (*Vibrant* 25). In *Kraken* Miéville uses fantastic literary devices to achieve a similar effect; anthropomorphizing the city of London dissuades the reader from perceiving the city (and space more generally) as merely an “expanse we travel across,” (Massey 4) or a “surface on which we are placed” (Massey 7); alternatively, the space of

the city is revealed to be a vital component in multiple heterogeneous assemblages.

Miéville's description also emphasizes the structural inequalities between these various regions of London, drawing attention to the unequal condensation of economic and social forces amongst London's districts.

Notably, London is anthropomorphized but only to a certain extent. The components that make up the city of London possess a form of agency that is largely undecipherable to humans; however, the various regions employ humans to 'translate' their intentions to the rest of the city and its occupants. These translators are a heterogeneous group of humans and nonhumans known as the Londonmancers, who are described as "conduits for the flows gathered by the streets" (*Kraken* 195). The Londonmancers achieve this through "urbopathy" (*Kraken* 195), which includes different methods of communicating with the city. In his quest to recover Archie, Billy encounters a Londonmancer named Fitch who reads entrails of the city to discover its ailments and determine the current state of affairs. Billy is astounded when,

With a groan of metal and cement, [Fitch] drew a line across the pavement. Behind the blade welled up blood [...] Fitch drew the cutter again along the split. A spray of concrete dust and blood mist dirtied him. He put the angle grinder down, dripping. Put a crowbar in the red-wet crack and levered harder than it looked like he could. The paving stone parted. Guts oozed from the hole. Intestinal coils, purple and bloodied, boiled up wetly in a meat mass. (*Kraken* 197)

This evocative scene, and the relationship between the Londonmancers and the city itself, reinforces the image of the city as a rhizomatic organism, an active contributor to current events able to 'speak' its own story and aid others. This reimagination of the city as a living entity achieves several things. On one hand, this metaphor encourages us to see space as active rather than inert, as *producing* as well as *produced*. This passage also

emphasizes how cities are constantly reproduced through interaction, that the city is “a place that is not just inhabited but which is produced through that inhabiting” (McFarlane, “City as Assemblage” 651). In other words, humans do not merely exert their influence onto space; space, its organization and constant (re)production by both human and nonhuman powers also contributes to the production of human alliances and systems. This is a creative metaphor for illustrating assemblage theory’s focus on space as *processual* rather than as multiple stable sites and reinforces the view of the city as a kind of living body rather than an inert ‘thing.’

The perspective of the city is further emphasized by Miéville’s frequent articulation of how events in one area of the city, or events that take place in the ‘alternate’ London, cause reverberations across the human and nonhuman population and in the ‘normal’ city. Archie’s theft instigates a widespread deterritorialization of the city assemblage felt by magical and non-magical occupants alike: “Urban ructions were growing harder to ignore by selecting banalising notice. Fuel would hardly burn in domestic fireplaces. There was nervous speculation about atmospheric conditions. Every flame was grudging” (*Kraken* 274). This emphasizes the extent to which the city – and space generally – is ‘plugged-in’ to larger machinic assemblages in which various affects, materials and social networks collide and intermingle. This demonstrates that there are not two Londons, as though the magical is a distinct layer below the everyday, but that London is an assemblage of flows and forces that are constantly shifting and coalescing into relative states of stratification. The rhizomatic and porous nature of the urban assemblage is revealed as Billy and Dane migrate from one interstitial space to another.

The city is pock-marked with “trap streets” – streets and pathways that only to certain people, at certain times, and only on specific ‘unofficial’ maps circulated by occupants of the magical London (see also pages 264-267). These images of the ‘official’ London in conflict with magical London emphasize how alternative social and spatial practices infiltrate the official ‘orderly’ city. *Kraken*’s envisioning of a magical city that exists in the interstices of the everyday serves as a metaphor for alternative forms of dwelling and alternative social and political arrangements that run against the grain of the “official” neoliberal city. Like the disenfranchised groups in *Zoo City* and *Distraction*, who redeploy human, nonhuman, material, and affective flows to engage in creative ‘place-making’ practices in the city, various human and nonhuman actants within the ‘London-something’ represented in *Kraken* find ways of circumventing the ‘official’ city and resisting the forms of disciplinary power that structure it.

The magical London and its heterogeneous community of actants represents not only an alternative form of urban organization, but the emergence of different modes of power that threaten capitalist modes of social and economic production. The character Wati, who takes on a vital role in this assemblage and helps Billy on his quest, is symbolic of the power of ‘things’ to disrupt the systems of knowledge that position nonhuman actants as inert objects. Miéville provides a brief history of Wati’s origins: from the Eleventh Dynasty, Egyptians created figurines that were buried with the dead to act as their servants in the afterlife. Wati was one these, buried with his master, intended to continue to labour the fields of the afterlife. However, Wati staged a resistance and escaped from captivity, setting his spirit free from his physical form. In the present, Wati

moves across London: “with some somatic nostalgia for his first form he entered the bodies of statues [...] Wati sought out those like he had been. Those constructed, enchanted, enhanced by magic to do what humans told them” (*Kraken* 154). Wati becomes the organizer of nonhuman agents, forming the Union of Magicked Assistants, who are on strike throughout a large portion of the novel. Miéville’s representation of Wati acts as a playful metaphor for the progressive politics embedded in assemblage theory. Wati is a posthuman figure who dwells in and renders lively (or rather, channels the liveliness) of the city. He metaphorizes the extent to which cities are not merely inert containers for human activity but have a liveliness and agency of their own. The statues and figures that he occupies – everything from stone riders in a park, to religious icons, to mannequins and dolls (157) – represent the ongoing activation of historical narratives that continue to thread themselves through daily life; however, they also literalize the liveliness of commodities – materializations of human labour power – normally taken for granted as inert, acted *upon* rather than contributing *to* the power of urban assemblages. When he shifts his consciousness into discarded toys in garbage bins, into kitsch figures on car dashboards, Wati makes visible the extent to which objects actively contribute to (re)making the texture of the urban, not only due to their psychical presence, but because of the material networks that they represent and embody.

The strike of the Union of Magicked Assistants further emphasizes the agency of nonhuman actants in creating the city. The union members, both human and nonhuman, are conventionally employed to help their magical owners, and this arrangement is often oppressive. Familiars of all sorts – “magicked slaves; brooms forced to carry water

buckets; clay men made to fight and die; little figures made of blood” were “choiceless about what they did” (154)<sup>33</sup>. Miéville transplants the Marxist narrative of bourgeoisie-proletariat conflict onto the relationships between human and nonhuman. As the proletariat are rendered serviceable productive tools in service of capitalist forces, so, too, are nonhuman objects treated merely as inert matter, as vehicles of human intention, rather than as actants contributing to the (re)creation of assemblages. The familiars in *Kraken*, like the familiars in *Zoo City*, are symbolic of the ways that nonhumans are exploited and instrumentalized; however, both novels also illustrate the correspondence between the ways nonhuman life is colonized and the subjugation, colonisation, and exploitation of certain human groups based on their perceived difference.

*Kraken*’s visions of nonhuman actants possessing force and expressive capacities within urban assemblages exemplifies Bennett’s call to formulate an “ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable or mineral” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 116-117) as opposed to “an environment that surrounds human culture” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 116). This is a vision of the world in which “*all* forces and flows (materialities) can become lively, affective and signaling” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 117), and human bodies are “not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which [they] coexist, host, enjoy, serve, consume, produce, and compete” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 117). Thus, instead of viewing capitalist forces, material or historical developments as purely the result of human intention, we must take a view of our

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<sup>33</sup> Other interesting examples are provided on page 22: “pickets of insects, pickets of birds, pickets of slightly animate dirt [...] in Spitafields, where the financial buildings oversplit like vulgar magma onto the remnants of the market, a group of angry subroutings performed the equivalent of a chanting circle in their facety iteration of aether. The computers within the adjacent building had long ago achieved self-awareness and their own little singularity” (*Kraken* 211).

environments as equally created by the forces and interactions of nonhumans.

The novel exposes the extent to which “London is composed of multiple layers, histories, groups, and cultures that operate as a sequence of incongruent yet overlapping and converging social strata within the city” (Colebrook 220). Importantly, this representation of a destratified London – and its increasing exposure as a city of multiple surfaces and depths, a city “Swiss-cheesed” – is a result of human and nonhuman activity. The novel thus suggests that, in order to think differently about how cities are organized and how social and political activity emerges in the city, it is vital to also consider how human activities intersect with the thing power of nonhuman actants, some which are quite literally a part of the flesh of the city, and some which occupy and engage its streets. This re-envisioning of the city thus achieves three things: it emphasizes space as processual, it privileges alternative kinds of collectives and urban dwelling, and it does so, at least in one sense, by valorizing the productive interactions between human and nonhuman.

In his examination of Miéville’s text *Looking for Jake* and the confluence between Miéville’s new weird fiction and the works of H. P. Lovecraft, Martyn Colebrook interprets Miéville’s representation of “zones of hybridity” as “transform[ing] the Lovecraftian ghettoization of the foreign, the disparate and the heterogenous, the heterotopic into a space for redemption, potential, and rebirth (220). The contagion that threatens social collapse in Lovecraft is transformed into a potentially revolutionizing force in Miéville’s works. Miéville treats the alien, lively city as a force of change, a means of destratifying socio-material assemblages in order to make way for new,

productive political alliances. Defining the new weird, Miéville argues that “[t]he great weird Fiction writers are responding to a capitalist modernity entering [...] a period of crisis in which its cruder nostrums of progressive bourgeois rationality are shattered (Miéville, “Weird Fiction” 513). The exposure of the alternate London symbolizes how these systems of power are always-already leaky; to use a metaphor from the novel, the city is “Swiss-cheesed with moral [but also material, literal] holes” (*Kraken* 181). For example:

In the headquarters of the Confederation of British Industry was a hallway between a much-frequented toilet and a small meeting room, that, if most members of the organization noticed, they do so to briefly wonder why they had never done so before; and they tended not to again after that first time. (*Kraken* 108)

The space of an institution representative of the cogs of capitalist industry and bourgeois rationality, including its organization and stratification of space, is exposed as literally, materially *unstable*, representing the usurpation of this power and the illumination of alternative social histories and agents, an alternative history quite literally inscribed into the city itself. These are “alternative pathways to the official ones” (*Kraken* 181), and the hidden room in the headquarters of the Confederation of British industry is only way example of the “back streets and hidden histories” (116) that penetrate London's urban fabric, acting, as the narrator puts it, as “pentacles in the banalities of town planning” (*Kraken* 116). The presence of these spatial and social eruptions disrupts the bourgeois rationality of urban planning that establishes particular urban patterns, defining in advance how citizens can move within the city. Clive Bloom's argument that, in the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, “social factors [are translated] into black magic and occult



forces which because they are about to return suggest they are outside human (therefore bourgeois) control” (202) can equally be applied to Miéville’s representation of social and material forces in *Kraken*. These magical ruptures are representations of the way that differential social forces rupture and deterritorialize the fabric of urban life, exposing the importance of those forces that occupy the interstitial, heterotopic spaces of the city.

### **Nonhuman Thing Power and Agentic Spaces in the Southern Reach Trilogy**

While *Kraken* addresses urban space, the Southern Reach trilogy focuses predominantly on nature throughout; however, space is represented as similarly ‘lively’ in order to pose a different (though complementary) set of questions about spatial politics, and the relations between human and nonhuman actants. At the conclusion of *Annihilation*, the biologist descends into the topographical anomaly and encounters the Crawler. As I previously mentioned, the biologist’s narration of this event is paralleled with her recollection of a prior encounter with a starfish that shocks her with its immediacy, its peculiar presence. The moment when the Crawler turns and sees her is the penultimate sublime, an encounter with the numinous:

I felt the impression from behind me of hundreds of eyes beginning to turn in my direction, starting at me. I was a thing in a swimming pool being observed by a monstrous little girl. I was a mouse in an empty lot being tracked by a fox. I was the prey the starfish had reached up and pulled down into the tidal pool. (181)

In this confrontation, the hierarchies that position humans as arbiters of knowledge and wardens of the nonhuman are abolished. The biologist’s feeling of being observed, of being subject to a scientific gaze rather than the one looking down from ‘above,’ implies the breaking down of the two-house model. In confrontation with this unruly actant, the

biologist is compelled to reconsider not only the subjectivity of the object under observation, but her own positionality within the fields of knowledge that seek to pin down and locate tangled objects within a taxonomic framework. This reality is linked to Haraway's call that scientific inquiry requires being "at risk" – to open oneself to the surprises and unpredictability of matter, and the reality that beings are not just produced by history, they also capable of producing history. To be at risk is to be confronted with "serious non-identity that challenges previous stabilities, convictions, or ways of being of many kinds" (Haraway, *Modest\_witness* 191), which is what we observe here, as the biologist's sense of identity disintegrates along with a sense of reality as stable and calculable. *Annihilation*, as the first novel in the trilogy, is aptly named: the biologist's sense of subjectivity is 'annihilated,' along with solid frames of reference that would allow her to make sense of the world. This transformation, however, is represented as a productive development. At the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist narrates:

The terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can no longer say with conviction that this [Area X "rousing itself from slumber, changing, becoming different"] is a bad thing... Before she died, the psychologist said I had changed, and I think she meant I had changed sides. It isn't true – I don't even know if there are sides, or what that might mean – but it could be true. (*Annihilation* 192)

The dissolution of the two-world model—with 'Nature' on one side and 'Culture' on the other—was initially coded as a kind as an anxiety-inducing development in *Annihilation*. However, as "the risk-free objects, the smooth objects to which we had been accustomed up to now...[give] way to risky attachments" (Latour, *Politics* 22), the biologist becomes suspicious of this way of understanding the world, which is reflected in her revelation that perhaps there "are no sides." In the context of the novel, it is implied that 'picking sides;

requires either aligning oneself with humanity, or aligning oneself with Area X as the ‘monstrous other’; however, this reference to ‘picking sides’ can also be interpreted through the lens of the two-house model: will the biologist retain her commitment to this binaristic view that organizes the world into Nature and Culture, or will she reject this choice entirely, and thus challenge the very premise upon which it is founded? For the biologist, this binary no longer holds up under scrutiny.

In the final book, *Acceptance*, we return to the biologist, who has become increasingly immersed in the landscape. This transformation is hinted at throughout *Annihilation*, as the biologist senses her body being taken over by a “brightness” that changes her relationship to the landscape, making her more attuned to natural processes and hostile to human interference. When Control and several others trek into Area X, however, they discover that the person who used to be the biologist has transformed into something else, a creature that exceeds linguistic attempts to define it:

[There was] the suggestion of a flat, broad head plunging directly into torso. The suggestion, far to the east, already overshooting the lighthouse, of a vast curve and curl of the mouth [...] It had many, many glowing eyes that we also like flowers or sea anemones spread open, the blossoming of many eyes – normal, parietal, simple – all across its body, a living constellation ripped from the night sky. (*Acceptance* 195)

The reliance on the phrasing “the suggestion of” indicates a certain slippery, anomalous quality to the creature, who cannot be pinned down within existing human systems of categorization. The description of the creature’s body as “extending east, overshooting the lighthouse” suggests that the body of the creature is not contained in the way we normally think of organisms as being sealed, organized matter; rather, the border between body and landscape is blurred. The creature also “overshoot[s] the lighthouse,” indicating a

blocking or erasure of human-made structures and modes of organizing space. The person encountering the creature, Ghost Bird, “saw that the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes, those other horizons gathering in a blurred and rising wave...There was connection, there was recognition. Nothing monstrous existed here – only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning (*Acceptance* 196). The biologist forgoes her human subjectivity to become a part of the landscape, a highly anomalous figure that blurs the boundary between landscape and subject, human and nonhuman. The Southern Reach trilogy thus represents a reversed colonization, “as [the biologist] says at the beginning of her quest, ‘Desolation tries to colonize you.’ The very notion of colonization is inverted: instead of space being taken over by humans, space takes them over” (Gomel 10). The dissolution of the normative human subject represents the novel’s critique of anthropomorphic engagements with landscape, space, and the nonhuman in order to forge new heterogeneous collectives.

One analysis of this development is elaborated by Elena Gomel, who draws examples from the works of Neal Stephenson, William Gibson, and Jeff Vandermeer to analyze posthuman characterization. Elena Gomel argues that the biologist is one example of a SF’s representation of new kind of character that,

In its radical break with the Newtonian architecture of humanism, [...] inscribes an attempt to go beyond the anthropomorphism of traditional narrative discourse. This discourse is no longer adequate either narratively or politically. The ‘everted’ characters, fading into the alien landscape, offer a revolutionary, if unsettling, view of the possibilities of interaction between humans and other living creatures: surely an important subject in the Anthropocene age. (Gomel 11)

I disagree with Gomel’s interpretation of the biologist as “flat,” an example of what she calls “character degree zero” drawing from Barthes’ notion of “writing degree zero”

(1968); however, Gomel's central argument is a valuable one, that the "fusion between place and character in SF" can be read as a political statement calling for an increased "eco-consciousness" and a "more capacious and inclusive sense of belonging" (11).

Whereas Gomel maintains that human characters must be expunged of a complex interior life for SFF writers to critique liberal-humanist subjectivity and anthropomorphism, I would argue that Gomel's argument reinforces a subject/object binary in which humans are in battle with objects and only one or the other can be given "subject" status.

Alternatively, an assemblage-oriented perspective dissolves the subject-object binary embedded in Gomel's reading, positioning humans, nonhumans, and space on a horizontal plane, contributing heterogeneous forces and powers. Her analysis moves in a productive direction when she speaks of a "fusion" between place and character (Gomel 10); however, this, too, suggests a dialectical resolution rather than the maintenance of tension between heterogeneous parts that is so essential to assemblage ontologies. The biologist does not fuse with nature so much as *shift modes*, becoming a different component (and a component with different expressive capacities than those normally associated with the 'human') of the machinic assemblage that includes herself, Area X, other humans, animals, the lighthouse, etc. Humanity and nature do not fuse together; rather, the biologist-Area-X assemblage is defined by haecceities—characteristics and intensities that are irreducible to the larger system of which they are a part (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 253). The biologist-Area X assemblage is not a well-formed subject, but a concatenation of lines, forces, and affects that form a rhizomatic cartography (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 243, 263). In this sense, the

biologist is not subsumed into Area X as a totalizing, coherent space, nor is Area X extinguished through an integration into the subjectivity of the biologist. Alternatively, both the biologist and Area X are transformed through their interrelation. Thus, the breaking-down of the two-house model entails a reconfiguration of how we conceive of the relationship between actants and their role in reproducing the historically and culturally-specific categories of ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’ “The actors are not all ‘us’...nature is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans (Haraway, “Promises” 66); it is a relational achievement between actors, “not all of them organic, not all of them technological” (Haraway, “Promises” 66). This visualization thus deprivileges anthropomorphic perspectives of nature and subverts liberal-humanist subjectivity as the primary, most important node in assemblages of human and nonhuman forces. Whereas many of the human characters in the Southern Reach trilogy conceive of the dissolution of the barriers between nature and culture as a threat that must be destroyed, as though the world can only one kind of agency—the human kind—the trilogy ultimately argues for a new understanding and engagement with the nonhuman, and for an acceptance of space as constituted through the disorderly relations between nature and culture. Space is conceived as possessing a kind of vital force that consistently unsettles categorical distinctions between the wild and the cultivated; geographies are always-already relational and mobile (Whatmore “Rethinking” 344). To reiterate Whatmore, space is constantly reproduced through relations: spaces of relation – “in place of a straight line from here to there, or a relation rooted in the same spot, the wild and the domestic get swept up in the volatile eddies and

flows of socio-technical networks that bring people, living organisms and machines together in new and particular ways” (“Rethinking” 344). To summarize, the Southern Reach trilogy uses cognitive estrangement to compel readers to rethink our relationship to space and the nonhuman—and in particular, natural spaces. As long as nature is conceived as somewhere ‘out there,’ as a “physical place to which one can go...a treasure to fence in or bank...or an essence to be saved or violated” (Haraway, 126), we fall back into the two-house model that separates Nature from the social, and leads to either the reification and fetishization of wildlife and Nature, or legitimizes the objectification of both to serve human ends. Rather, perceiving Nature, as an “always already inhabited achievement of heterogeneous social encounters (Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies* 3) calls on us to take accountability for the ways in which we intersect with and contribute to the constant (re)production of these assemblages.

## **Conclusion**

In Miéville’s *Kraken* and Vandermeer’s Southern Reach trilogy, the authors provide us with representations of monsters that initially provoke horror. This sense of the uncanny emerges precisely when nonhuman actants and concepts like ‘nature’ or ‘the wilderness’ become slippery, and when the boundary between human and nonhuman is rendered porous. In the old weird—exemplified by Lovecraft, for example—the uncanny monsters represent fears of contamination and contagion; Lovecraft’s xenophobia and racism was well documented (Houellebecq 2005, Lord 2004, Miéville 2005, Simmons 2013). In the new weird, feelings of sublimity, uncanniness, and/or the numinous are understandable responses to monstrosity; however, the terror provoked by boundary-

crossing nonhuman forces eventually gives way to a *celebration* of spatial and social hybridity. Luckhurst notes, “it may be that the horror of transgression that has powered the Gothic and the Grotesque would have to be wholly reconceived once the modern obsession with sorting, categorizing, and purifying has been displaced” (“Scientification” 14). If we let go of our human compulsion to ‘capture’ and locate the nonhuman within taxonomizing and categorizing frameworks, we can start to see these monsters differently. These novels demonstrate a shift in how we conceive of monstrosity, by illustrating an initial sublimity or noumenal experience provoked by the dissolution of barriers, of “matters of fact”, followed by an acceptance (however gradual and however partial) of the nonhuman as possessing its own agency. This is not to say that our monsters are tamed, or somehow become less horrifying—these works are wary of simply anthropomorphizing or humanizing their monsters—rather, they are concerned with how to accept and embrace that monstrosity, and the horror that it provokes, in order to adopt a new stance towards the world and the actants that occupy it. In *Kraken*, Miéville’s representation of hybridity – both hybrid subjects and hybrid spaces – valorizes alternative forms of socio-spatial organization and activism, and suggests that alliances between the human and the nonhuman can result in productive alternatives to dwelling and occupying contemporary urban spaces. The use of magic represents the alternative socio-political currents that always-already run through the city and can be tapped into to create new socio-spatial collectives.

In the Southern Reach trilogy, Vandermeer explicitly critiques the colonization, instrumentalization, and domestication of nature and wildlife, but, more than that, the



representational strategies employed in the novels suggest that an entirely new approach is necessary to reconfigure the relationship between humans, nonhumans, and ‘Nature’ in the Anthropocene era. Dwelling in the Anthropocene entails a new understanding of ‘nature’; indeed, the fact that the world has been irrevocably transformed by human activity demonstrates the extent to which the two-house model is no longer a viable framework for solving or mitigating the current global ecological crisis. In other words, acknowledging that we live in the Anthropocene means acknowledging the extent to which Nature and Culture have never been separate. Whatmore, for example, criticizes conventional environmentalist narratives and strategies, arguing that environmentalist concerns fall into a problematic bind because they continue to separate nature from culture, and promote discourses like “‘global environmental management’ [that] police the place of nature by means of territorial archetypes – like biodiversity reserves – that enact a scientific blueprint of who and what should live there” (Whatmore 343). Whatmore is similarly critical of tactics used by environmental groups “which reinforce the place of nature by means of iconographic landscapes – like ‘the rainforest’” (Whatmore “Rethinking” 343)—that “cordon off” wildlife and natural landscapes, positioning them as “exterior” to the social (Whatmore *Hybrid Geographies* 34). A traditional environmentalist approach to nature attempts to politically regulate or territorialize and codify what are in, fact, “mobile lives” (Whatmore, “Rethinking” 343), and reinstates the two-house model by positioning nature and the nonhuman as a static realm that must be protected by being ‘cut off’ from the social in order to be saved. This view, therefore, is founded on a fundamental misrecognition of what nature is: ‘nature’ is

not a realm cut off from the human, but an always-already intricate plane of relations; a realm that is “[not] fixed at a distance but emerges within the routine interweavings of people, organisms, elements, and machines as these configure the partial, plural, and sometimes overlapping time/spaces of everyday living” (Whatmore, “Rethinking” 343).

Vandermeer’s representation of the biologist’s transformation and eventual ‘fusing’ with Area X, as well as the representation of Area X as a fluid topology constituted of networks of human and nonhuman actants, dissolves the Nature/Culture binary. These images symbolize the necessity of reconfiguring the relationships between human and nonhuman, human and Nature, in order to adequately respond to the crises of the Anthropocene. The view of nature and space represented here calls for the cultivation and embrace of “more intimate, lively, and promiscuous geographies than these quarantined fragments of a too precious nature” (Whatmore, “Rethinking” 343). Thus, the monstrous liveliness of space on display throughout the *Southern Reach* trilogy serves as a metaphor for more productive ways of thinking through our engagement with nature, not as a commodity or inert object but as an assemblage of actants, materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension” (Bennett, *Vibrant* 20). Assemblage oriented geographies allow us to “re-cognize nature not as a ‘physical place to which once can go’ (Haraway, “Promises” 65) but as an active, changeable presence that is “always already in our midst challeng[ing] spatial, as well as social (pre) dispositions” (Whatmore, “Rethinking” 342).

There are several implications of this perspective. First, by acknowledging that our engagement with Nature and the nonhuman is always-already situated, we can

become more attuned to the ways that human perspectives and priorities monopolize the conversation, and limit in advance what are considered viable responses to environmental crises. Next, this view expands the sphere of the social, which results in new ethical imperatives. When ‘things’ become ‘actants’ it becomes our responsibility to attend to the ways that human behaviour infringes on or instrumentalizes the nonhuman. In this sense, anthropomorphizing the nonhuman can, occasionally, prove to be politically productive, because, as Bennett notes, anthropomorphizing actually “works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’” (*Vibrant* 120). Finally, as I illustrated in Chapter Three, the same justifications employed to instrumentalize and objectify nature and the nonhuman have, historically and in the present, been employed to further the exploitation and colonization of subjugated people. Continued interrogation and critique of these kind of binaries also delegitimize and provoke resistance against the kind of discursive frameworks that legitimize violence against those who are oppressed due to race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or class. In sum, the new weird, in its celebration of hybridity, its representation of uncanny spaces and agentic nonhumans, and its interrogation and dissolution of binaries, defamiliarizes readers from everyday reality so as inspire new, critical orientations to the world. Most importantly, the new weird provides models for new ways of engaging with ‘others,’ whether those ‘others’ are human, nonhuman, or space itself.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Spaces of Today, Spaces of Tomorrow

In her text *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway notes that “SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice...SF is practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays” (3). For Haraway, it matters what stories we tell ourselves, what stories we choose to make sense of the world, and what kinds of ethical encounters are made visible by those stories. Stories not only follow threads, and traces; they produce new lines of flight that can inform new ways of being in the world, and of being-with others. Each of the texts I have explored here tells stories about the kind of world we live in now, and tells stories about the kinds of worlds that are possible. I have chosen these texts in particular because they each display a preoccupation with spatial concerns, and represent space as an assemblage in which humans and nonhumans, and the relations between them, are constantly reconstituted and reconfigured. Conceptualizing space in this manner demonstrates the extent to which spatial practices are always political; space both contributes to the formation of society and is (re)inscribed through specific socioeconomic systems. In Chapter Two, I focused on representations of utopian assemblages in *Distraction* that reconceptualize the utopian impulse in terms of contingent, partial coalitions between subjugated populations that allow for ‘openings’ and ‘ruptures’ in the social and spatial networks coded by neoliberal capitalism. The novel provides

models for thinking differently about how to organize space and social collectives that serve the needs of populations disenfranchised by hegemonic socioeconomic systems. Chapter Three analyzed how *Zoo City*'s depiction of alliances forged between humans, and between humans and animals, enables new strategies and tactics for engaging with urban sites that resist and subvert racist codings of space. The novel's visualization of how Zinzi navigates Johannesburg's literal and symbolic 'underground' symbolizes the ability of speculative literature to make visible the repressed material and social effects of colonization so as to better critique those systems, and to visualize alternative ways of engaging within social and spatial assemblages. *Kraken* and the Southern Reach trilogy subvert binaries that oppose human and nonhuman, human and space, and society and nature, to expose the power relations inherent in human attempts to classify, categorize, and cordon off nonhuman 'others.' These novels employ cognitive estrangement to defamiliarize the landscapes and 'things' conventionally relegated to the background of our experience in order to foster increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, the relationships between humans, landscape, and the nonhuman.

Each of these stories is caught up in the "risky game of worlding and storying" (Haraway, *Staying* 13); to use Haraway's term, they are committed to "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, *Staying* 13). If, as China Miéville writes, the weird (and, I would argue, speculative fiction in general) "can be understood as a 'sleight of mind' by which deadlock and stasis in the world can be imaginatively countered (Miéville, "Editorial" 45), "staying with the trouble" entails making messes, countering "deadlock" and "stasis" by exhuming and excavating foundations that, for too long, we have accepted as stable,

persistent, and complete. Speculative fiction is a prime tool for engaging in these excavations, and for staging new encounters with the ‘monsters’ unearthed in this process. As Haraway notes, “staying with the trouble” necessitates “making oddkin”—forming collaborations that cut across human and nonhuman barriers. This process involves inserting oneself into tangled and messy assemblages, while remaining aware of one’s own positionality and power in those assemblages. It means decentering the human, and the privileged identities that are treated as more human than others, and in this sense, this work is thus deeply indebted to the feminist, postcolonial, and anti-racist projects that were instrumental in illuminating the constructedness of the liberal humanist subject, and the exclusions upon such notions of subjectivity depend. “Oddkin” are the new cyborgs, the new monsters: they call on us to forge affinities (Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, Women* 155), to focus on how certain bodies come to matter more than others, and call on us to foster more ethical engagements across lines of difference. Each of these stories is an example of what it means to “stay with the trouble.”

Of course, fiction might not change the world in any simple, straightforward way. But Haraway’s characteristic of speculative fiction is echoed by Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood’s articulation that speculative fiction is “political heuristic”—“it can call upon radical powers of invention hidden in perception and language, ordinarily pressed into an instrumental orientation to a world posited as always already there, complete as it appears” (27). Speculative fiction provides models for new kinds of worlds, the emergence of new forms of socio-spatial organization that illustrate, if not ways to fully circumvent capitalism and supplant it with a new system, then strategies and tactics for fracturing the

disciplinary forces that seem to suggest, in their seamless penetration and dense coding of the world, that alternatives are not possible. These texts indicate that anti-capitalist alternatives require moving beyond the traditions of liberal humanism, and the kinds of subjectivity, relationships, and space-times that liberal humanism privileges and reproduces. As Hassler-Forest notes, “neoliberalism...teaches us to be an entrepreneur of the self while systematically demonizing all forms of collective organization. Therefore, only by ridding ourselves of the binaries of anthropocentric subjectivity can we move beyond capitalism’s exploitative forms of oppression” (200). In this sense, speculative fiction can challenge the anthropomorphism our perspectives, and encourage us to think more broadly about what ‘collective action’ entails. Solutions to neoliberal capitalism require new forms of collective organization, and new kinds of alliances.

I have used an assemblage-oriented perspective because, like speculative fiction itself, assemblage theory is, on a fundamental level, about hope in new futures, on becoming and emergent forms of social life and spatial organization. It is “marked by an attention to events and the new potentialities for being, doing and thinking that events may bring forth” (Anderson and Harrison 19), and thus can highlight the strains of hope inherent in the “worlding” and “storying” of speculative fiction. The ultimate goal of assemblage-oriented approaches is not only to prioritize relationality over stasis, to valorize materiality and affect in addition to ideology and language, but to understand how reconceiving of the world in this way privileges the possibility of new, open futures. If the world is not always-already ‘given,’ if space is not merely an expanse upon which we construct various edifices and go about our daily lives, then there is always the potential for new

becomings, new events, virtual forces, to emerge out of the concatenation of flows in relation. An event, in this context, describes the “escaping edge of any systemisation or economisation; the effects or affects of any ‘line of flight’” (Anderson and Harrison 20). Attending to ‘the event’ offers a way of thinking about “how change occurs in relation to the on-going formation of ‘the social’” and how “events break with their extant conditions, forcing or inviting us to act differently” (Anderson and Harrison 22). If, to reiterate Haraway, speculative fiction is engaged with “tracings” and “following threads,” these are tracings that do not follow the prescribed or official maps. They consist of tracings that veer off the page, and threads that, when pulled, begin to unravel accepted bodies of knowledge, hegemonic modes of relating, and conventional understandings of space. Events are ruptures, “‘turning points’ through which new potentialities for life and living may be witnessed, invented and acted on” (Anderson and Harrison 22). The various ‘events’ that I have explored in these texts are all exemplary of the ways that affective, material, and social forces always, to some extent, exceed the regulatory forces that seek to confine and limit them. By exploring the lines of power that structure and assemble collectives of humans and nonhumans in particular situations, speculative fiction exposes and critiques the hegemonic systems that structure both our experience of space and the socio-political. Beyond critique, speculative fiction provides us with creative visions of what the world can be, and of how space can be redeployed and activated by marginalized communities to create more convivial places and modes of life. In these uncertain times, speculative fiction continues to provoke, to engage in the tangled work of “storying” and



“staying with the trouble,” to compel us to think differently about the present, and imagine new, more equitable futures.

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