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# Gender in Apocalyptic California: The Ecological Frontier

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Gender in Apocalyptic California: The Ecological Frontier

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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## **Abstract**

Climate change is the consequence of ideologies that promote human reproduction and resource consumption by sacrificing human justice, nonhuman species, and the land. Both biology and queer ecologies resist this notion of human separation and supremacy by showing that no body is a singular, impermeable entity, that all beings are biologically and inexorably connected. My dissertation demonstrates that fiction writers use this knowledge to locate a utopian vision that can counteract the dystopian impotence of living within climate change. This argument is founded on novels written by women and set in California, a state that uniquely inhabits a utopian and dystopian place in the American cultural imagination. Early ecofeminist utopias depict environmentally sustainable and socially egalitarian communities that arise after apocalypse, but they are ultimately modeled on pastoral and primitivist idealizations of Indigenous societies. Contemporary dystopias reject the early model to show that pastoral fantasies are impossible in a world that has been so altered by climate change. By embracing queer ecologies to empathize more deeply with the rest of the world, characters in novels by Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin give readers a way to reconceptualize methods of ecological justice that could combat climate change. These visions of a queer ecological utopia respond to the ideological stagnation caused by climate change to provide an innovative environmental ethic that could guide humanity into surviving responsibly within and alongside the world.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, who gave me my love of reading, integrity, and asking questions. To my Nana, who would be so proud. And to Tofu, my constant companion all these years.

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## Introduction

An unusually large number of American science fiction texts have been composed in, inspired by, or set in California. Partially, this is because so many science fiction authors lived in California, including Philip K. Dick, Kim Stanley Robinson, Neal Stephenson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ray Bradbury, Octavia E. Butler, and William Gibson (Grossman). One can attribute this phenomenon to the progressive politics of the state, the expansive University of California system, the creative and productive influence of Hollywood, and the natural beauty of the region. California's rich and important history might also attract forward-thinking writers of science fiction, who understand that "no region on earth has had more to do with shaping the twentieth century than California" (Worster 53). However, these obvious attributes of California might not be the only reasons that science fiction and California have such an intertwined history.

In these chapters, I consider apocalyptic science fiction texts that are set in California. Apocalyptic science fiction appears, usually, in one of two forms: utopian, portraying utopian societies formed after apocalypse has destroyed society as we know it, or dystopian, as characters struggle to survive in their post-apocalyptic setting of social chaos and environmental destruction. California itself reflects the utopian/dystopian divide of apocalyptic narratives, as prominent Californian historian Kevin Starr writes, "There has always been something slightly bipolar about California. It was either utopia or dystopia, a dream or a nightmare, a hope or a broken promise" (Starr 343). Some critics even identify a geographical split of dystopia/utopia in the state, positing that southern California has many dystopian attributes, while the northern region is more utopian (Miller). Though I find such a stark geographical split too reductive, the twin natures of California in its history and in the American cultural imagination make it the perfect setting for apocalyptic narratives that portray both utopia and dystopia.

The first recorded mention of “California” occurred in an early fantasy novel, “First described in a bestseller, California entered history as a myth” (Starr 5). In 1510, Garci Ordóñez de Montalvo wrote a novel called *Las Sergas de Esplandian*, in which he imagined a mythical island of California, populated by a griffin-riding “race of black Amazons under the command of Queen Calafia” (Starr 5). This fantastical female utopia is an early predecessor to many of the narratives I examine here, as well as the female utopias that, while not set in California, are these texts’ literary ancestors. California started its history as a utopian fantasy, then, and that origin has characterized it ever since.

The utopian perception of California was only enhanced as the United States began to settle the continent. California was the final continental frontier for the settlement of the United States, the furthest point west. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier hypothesis insisted that American democratic identity is founded on the forward motion of frontier expansion, conquering, and settlement (Purdy 31). This forward motion, central to utopian and science fictional thinking, created a sense of never-ending possibility, of countless possible better futures for the American people. It also meant that California, the last place to be settled, was the utopian frontier. The expansion of the United States was the foundation of the American Dream that promoted the infinite possibility of improving one’s circumstances, of locating new opportunities. But as the continent was progressively settled, the possibilities for new American frontiers dwindled and Americans were left without a clear path to defining their identity as a nation. For many science fiction writers, this issue could be solved by creating new frontiers in outer space or on new planets, thus perpetuating the expansion needed to maintain American identity. Many early science fiction texts therefore have their roots in the genre of the Western; authors often set these works in space as a notion of the “final frontier” after the exploration of



the Earth's face was complete. The backdrop of outer space allowed these authors to repeat the generic conventions of the Western: plundering, exploration, high adventure, and conquering new worlds and new peoples. Science fiction set in California manipulates this tradition, then, by situating itself in a precarious location, the end of the continent, the symbolic end of American expansionism.

Because California was the final frontier of the United States, it seemingly has always retained its regional identity as a place of hope and opportunity. As the West was settled, California was the only Western state with enough independent wealth and resources to be confident that it could survive alone without the eastern United States (Worster 227). Due to this wealth and aura of promise, California was and is a place where people went to chase their dreams. The Gold Rush, a mad hunt for gold in the Western United States that occurred in the 1850s, characterized California as a place of luck and wealth. That historical moment still symbolizes California's promise to people around the world, "such a hope, such a psychology of expectation, fused the California experience irretrievably onto a dream of better days: of a sudden, almost magical, transformation of the ordinary" (Starr 81). Hollywood and the technological booms of Silicon Valley are two other examples of meccas of opportunity housed in California. California's utopian mythos encompasses all of these elements, "Not only did entry into California mark the end of the frontier as expansion confronted the limit of the Pacific Ocean, but the establishment of Hollywood on its shore cemented the image of California as a semi-surreal dream factory, a desire as much as a destination" (Vint, quoted in Grossman). For multiple reasons that have spanned centuries, California offers the promise of an easy attainment of the American Dream. California's wealth offered people the promise of striking gold or getting famous, if only they move there.

California is the perfect place for authors to imagine utopia, but despite all of these utopian characteristics, California as utopia is a precarious concept. As American history progressed, California's utopian promise was founded on the notion of moving away from the stifling civilization of the northeastern cities into an independent life within wilderness: true American freedom. As ecofeminist writer Rebecca Solnit explains in her essay "The Ideology of Isolation," "The cowboy is the American embodiment of this ideology of isolation, though the archetype of the self-reliant individual—like the contemporary right-wing obsession with guns—has its roots less in actual American history than in the imagined history of Cold War-era westerns." The romantic idea of the American cowboy imagines an individual, masculine, rugged man in control of himself and the world around him; this false narrative of being able to abscond into the wilderness and emerge, manly and victorious, has shaped our understanding of the American West throughout history. This myth is the foundation of the American Dream that promotes the myth of individual isolated success and wealth creation. Most of the people who flocked to California never struck it rich, revealing the fallacy of the promises of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and the Gold Rush as microcosms of the American Dream itself. Starr provides a succinct description of the dystopian side of the Gold Rush by writing that, "In just about every way possible—its internationalism, its psychology of expectation, its artistic and literary culture, its racism, its heedless damage to the environment, its rapid creation of a political, economic, and technological infrastructure—the Gold Rush established, for better or for worse, the founding patterns, the DNA code, of American California" (Starr 80). Californian dreams reveal that the American Dream is deceptively difficult to attain.

The settlement of California by the Spanish, Mexico, and finally, the United States, was never utopian for the Indigenous people of California; indeed, it was a genocide. For European

Americans, Western expansion offered a promise of opportunity, freedom, and prosperity. But this immigration required the genocide of Indigenous populations, the oppression of women and people of color, and the exploitation and destruction of the nonhuman environment (Aron 82). Similarly, many of the non-European immigrants to California, like the Chinese Americans who built the railroads, were met not with success but with virulent racism and violence (Starr 83). Ideologically, Turner's frontier thesis ties this expansion and exploitation to the possibility of progress itself; for Americans, then, progress has historically been rooted in the domination of nature and of vulnerable populations of humans and nonhumans (Kolodny 142). Without the killing of native people who already lived on the land, and without the destruction of nature, the settlement of the United States could not occur. As such, the dream of California and the rest of the American West as a utopian movement is fundamentally built on an ideology of oppression.

The historically diverse and changing population of California, and its oppressive history, provides a space for science fiction writers to interrogate issues of race, class, and gender. In this way, California is the perfect setting for both utopia and dystopia: dreams and their failures. Writers of Californian science fiction use this tradition, as other science fiction writers used the tradition of narratives of space colonization, "California writers of SF have long contributed to "estranging" colonial contact narratives, using the genre to question the wisdom of colonial expansion and exploring things from the perspectives of the colonized" (Grossman).

The utopian/dystopian nature of California is also reflected in its geography. California's natural beauty seems to promise paradise, with beautiful coastlines, temperate climates, and a wealth of resources. At least partially because of this propensity towards ecological security and beauty, Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel *Ecotopia*, one of the founding texts of the genre of the ecological utopia, was set in California. But the state also experiences recurring disasters of all

kinds: earthquakes, floods, fires, and mudslides. It is second only to Florida in terms of damage done by natural disasters (Baggaley). At the time of writing, California is undergoing forest fires so extreme that the effects of them are felt across the entire West Coast of the United States (Park). This tendency towards natural cataclysm has caused California to be an alluring setting for writers of science fiction, especially of an ecological bent.

California also hosts a large desert region, and deserts are a perfect setting for both dystopia and utopia. The desert's barren, otherworldly heat is a perfect alien landscape for an ecofeminist dystopia, while its connotation as a redemptive and cleansing space in Western thought can be traced back to the Bible. The desert also provides another layer of environmental instability because without the American West's intensive and extreme water-relocating technology, much of California would never have been suitable for human settlement. California, like the rest of the American West, was only made habitable by the vast relocation of water across the land. Los Angeles in particular could not exist without having won an intense legal battle over water rights, and the subsequent technological development of a complex system of aqueducts and dams (Starr 172). This inspiring feat of human technology is good fodder for utopian science fiction, as a positive model of terraforming here on Earth, as noted California science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson notes (Boom). But this improbable irrigation system also indicates the precariousness of life in California and the possibility of the land one day rejecting human life once more.

The possible failure of water resource management is particularly fraught for tales set within climate change, where rising temperatures and carbon dioxide levels deplete water resources faster than ever. Without this water, the American West and California could not support a large human population, and California is therefore a prime setting for apocalyptic

fiction. Even without the water problem, climate change would intensify California's ecological precarity. Natural disasters will be worsened by changing weather patterns, and financial redistribution will impact disaster response. California's natural flood and drought cycle makes the region susceptible to water loss as temperatures increase, and its position as the main provider of fruit and nuts for the United States means that the impact on food supply could be dire (Kahrl). The possibility of increased disaster in the era of climate change naturally sparks the imagination of authors with dystopian inclinations, while the destruction of California's utopian mythos provides a deeper level of pathos in which to situate those narratives.

As a symbol of the American Dream, California's history can also be seen as a source of climate change. The frontier hypothesis promised success by isolating oneself and one's family, dominating other lands, and maintaining borders to protect your wealth. The ideology of nonstop growth and expansion requires using resources without concern for later consequences. The genocide that allowed for the creation of the United States shows that the American Dream is founded on a disregard for the ability of others to survive, a focus on the accruing of individual wealth and property over all else. As the United States grew in population and power, it continued its tradition of using more resources than necessary and exploiting other nations to get them. The United States has the least sustainable consumption and waste-producing habits of any country (Greendex 5). Climate change is the inevitable result of that cycle of mass production and consumption, as Rebecca Solnit explains, "no problem more clearly demonstrates the folly of individualist thinking—or more clearly calls for a systematic response—than climate change." Climate change is fundamentally tied to humanity's false separation from the "rest of" nature, a worldview that validates consumption of resources without concern for other people, nonhumans, or the land. The extent of humanity's impact on the Earth has actually caused

scientists to name the current geological era, the Anthropocene, after our own species. In a way, the term indicates our level of individualism, as we once again note the impact of our single species on the entire planet, as ecological science fiction critic Eric Otto explains “for a species to achieve tectonic or meteoric weight is for that species...to behave as though it is not part of nature” (Otto 25).

Although the causes of climate change can be traced to this American ideology of individualism, climate change itself is a hugely social phenomenon that impacts all species and matter across the globe. Climate change has a vast scope over time and space, but it also manifests in sporadic and seemingly disconnected weather events. This combined nature enables climate change deniers, because the large scope of climate change and its variable markers make it difficult for individuals to perceive. Due to those two characteristics, climate change is a problem that uniquely engenders a lack of forward-thinking (Buell 52). As climate change looms in the future, humans can either ignore its danger or complacently assume it will be taken care of. This refusal or inability to act in response to climate change is an example of “future discounting,” the gap between the familiar preoccupations of everyday life and the abstract future that might be negatively impacted by climate change (Mehnert 93). Scientists have hypothesized that as climate change progresses, increasingly worse weather catastrophes will occur sporadically across the globe, increasing extreme weather events, raising rainfall in some areas and decreasing it in others, rising sea levels will affect coastal areas more than others (Meyers 346). These random and diverse weather events can be easily dismissed as unrelated to climate change, especially by communities that have not yet been affected by such an event. Privileged areas in particular will be able to deny the effects of climate change for a longer time, “Rich regions will become, to use an American image, the Los Angeles of the world’s water,

surviving on the rains of other lands, transferred across deserts by technology and wealth” but the breaking down of less privileged areas will become more invisible (Purdy 47). Without seeing concrete, immediate effects of climate change that impact their own lives, individuals don’t feel the need to act; because climate change is so large and seemingly insurmountable, it engenders an impotent acceptance of the way things are (Buell 52).

This ideological stagnation and its concurrent failure to work towards a solution to climate change can be understood as an environmental application of Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism, which argues that “dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative practices of capital and intimacy under capital” (Berlant 170). Berlant argues that late capitalism is so pervasive and also so comfortable, its dangers so difficult to perceive, that individuals see no way to resist it or indeed any reason to do so. As Kim Stanley Robinson explains,

the trauma of ecological crisis never arrives as a determinate event but remains a relatively abstract component of a quotidian reality in which (for example) even the most extreme meteorological events are read simply as evidence of the usual vagaries of the weather in any given year...the cruel optimism of typical environmental narratives generates a potential political opening that is then shoved aside because of the demands of our exuberant attachments to the mechanics of daily life (Canavan 200).

This cruel optimism causes late capitalism and its attendant ecological harm to be self-perpetuating. Individuals are so comfortable within these systems that they become ideologically sick, functionally uninterested in and incapable of ceasing harmful behaviors.

Climate change is dystopian in its very nature, then, as it opposes the forward-thinking that primary utopian theorist Ernst Bloch defines as required of utopian thought. Unable to see the cause or the solution for climate change, individuals hesitate to take any action or even to conceive of innovative ways of living within climate change. Because of the cruel optimism that

is encouraged by the nature of climate change, individuals fail to find the utopian imagination to act to combat it.

Science fiction empowers individuals in response to this collective inability to understand climate change. If “the world system is itself also unrepresentable from the perspective of the individual subject within it,” humanity requires an overhaul of its perspective, and a new way to imaginatively represent what is going on in our world (Tally 62). Scientific research on climate change is, of course, integral to our understanding of its impact on our world, but using *only* science to think about climate change perpetuates the belief that *only* science can solve climate change (Mehnert 4). This technophilic response contributes to the myth of progress which arguably caused climate change, as continued technological advances led to unconsidered resource use. Blind and passive faith in the progression of technology as humanity’s inevitable savior is part of the complacency that has discouraged large-scale action against climate change. It’s evident that a widespread change in attitudes is necessary before American politics will shift to see climate change as a problem worth considering. I insist, as Mehnert suggests, that science fiction is another path to climate change solutions because it locates new philosophies and ideologies, and inspires a change in personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The texts I discuss here argue for empathy as the route to this sort of change, using theories of queer ecologies to renounce the individualism and speciesism that have led to climate change.

Some of the authors in this study consider climate change through the lens of dystopia; the dystopian nature of climate change itself has functioned as a call to action to writers of Californian science fiction. Such dystopian texts hold a mirror up to contemporary society, revealing today’s problems by extrapolating their dangerous consequences. The near-future apocalypses created in these texts demonstrate, for example, the perils of late capitalism and “the



social disintegration brought on by a market system, based squarely on the competitive drive for profits, with all else going to the wall, leads to the erosion of moral community” (Phillips 304). These dystopias show that death and apocalypse are the inevitable result of perpetuating ideologies that promote isolation, resource overuse, human reproduction, social competition, environmental exploitation, and the destruction of other species. In many ways, writers of dystopian climate change narratives mirror the climate change scientists themselves; Cassandra-like, they warn us against what will come by showing us societies that have ignored such warnings.

Although most of the texts I consider here display dystopian futures, writers of Californian apocalyptic literature still locate utopia. Though dystopia can work as a warning against continuing in our present actions, utopian thinking is still necessary to provide hope for a future beyond climate change, “in this postmodern moment, utopia may find its true vocation, as both a critical practice and an anticipatory desire, in the literary cartography of the world system itself...a renewed, powerful, flexible vision of utopia” (Tally 5). By demonstrating the failure of individualistic ideologies, writers of apocalyptic science fiction open the door to new, more hopeful philosophies. Despite their dystopian settings, these texts suggest that locating new connections between beings can allow humanity to change the course that will otherwise lead to its own destruction and the destruction of life on earth as we know it.

The writers in these chapters use ecofeminism and queer ecologies to locate new ways of envisioning the connection of all things. As its name suggests, ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that combines the knowledges of feminist and ecological theory. In the 1970s, American ecofeminist critics like Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant, and Vandana Shiva identified the twin premises that because women are closer to nature, their relationship to

the environment is closer than man's, and that the oppression of women and the environment are interconnected. Ecofeminists diverge on the origin of women's closeness to nature: some argue that it is an inherent biological trait due to women's role in reproduction while others insist that social conditioning causes us to view women in opposition to male culture, as fertility goddesses who are less rational, more animalistic, and more primal than men. The division between nature and culture in Western thought can be traced back to Aristotle, and although this is a constructed idea, not an absolute reality, this separation continues to impact the way humanity interacts with nonhumans and nonliving things. This binary places both women and nature below men in the "natural" hierarchy and causes their similar exploitation, as "the feminized non-sovereignty of the earth serves as grounds for the development of masculine sovereignty" (Sands).

Ecofeminist theorists believed that women could use their unique relationship with nature to create unity between humanity and the environment, as well as equality among humans. Ecofeminism reveals the combined oppression of women and nature, it provides a way for women to use their closeness to nature to bring all of humanity closer to it, and it implies that women can expose and resist both oppressions by identifying their intersection. Tenets of ecofeminism are frequently used in utopian science fiction writing, especially in narratives that promote ideas of a matriarchal or female-only utopia. This was especially prevalent in American science fiction narratives in the 1970s, when ecofeminism influenced writers like Ursula K. Le Guin and Joan Slonczewski, as I show in chapter one.

Although ecofeminist critiques offered new perspectives on the relationship between gender and environment, many strains of ecofeminism are essentialist and uphold constructed social binaries (Azzarello 20). Women are not a monolith, and "nature" is not a unified entity apart from humanity, so it is theoretically irresponsible to maintain these binaries, even to

critique them. Binaries, separations between things, are central to upholding individualism. Prioritizing oneself and one's biological family, seeking success for them above all else, has resulted in the predatory capitalism that brought about the deterioration of the environment in the pursuit of wealth. As such, a philosophy like ecofeminism that relies on binaries can be used to support individualism.

Recognizing these criticisms, the authors of apocalyptic fiction I discuss here underscore the way that ecofeminism can lead to a failure of imagining possibilities beyond a world of binaries. These authors instead depict the possibilities of an ethic of queer ecologies, which seeks to abolish all binaries, including the ones that ecofeminism (perhaps unintentionally) upheld. The boundary between nature and culture validates the utilitarian destruction of nature in pursuit of human needs and desires, and queer ecologies identifies that nature has never been separate from humanity (Azzarello 15). Queer ecologies highlights "the way that queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature, and sexuality. We can also examine how persons of color are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized. Finally, we can explore how nature is feminized, eroticized, even queered" (Gaard 119). Theorists of queer ecologies, like Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, suggest that because there is no true division between nature and human, humans can only salvage the environment and, in turn, humanity by valuing nonhuman and even nonliving things as much as human beings. As Haraway explains, "If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species" (*Staying with the Trouble*, 102). As such, queer ecologies in science fiction can address theoretical problems in a contemporary era where the utopian imagination struggles in a

postmodern environment and where climate change seems an insurmountable environmental problem.

Climate change is notoriously difficult to imagine, but “not only does the Anthropocene compel us to question the literal and metaphorical place of the human, it demands that we interrogate the constitution and preeminence of the human ethos” (Sands 303). While ecofeminists have always reevaluated the human-nature hierarchy by insisting on human embeddedness in nature, theorists of queer ecologies note biological science that proves the true permeability of every individual creature, “terran critters have never been one—or two. Tubes, membranes, orifices, organs, extensions, probes, docking sites: these are the stuff of being in material semiotic intra-action” (Hird xxiv). The troubling of biological boundaries and binaries is rife for extrapolation in science fiction that seeks to prove that humanity cannot escape its place within nature. Without devaluing human life, queer ecologies seeks to reorganize human priorities, “I am not a posthumanist; I am who I become with companion species, who and which make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind” (Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19). By blurring categories and boundaries, humanity can value other humans, nonhumans, and nonliving things in the environment and reject their exploitation for the first time in human history. This questioning of binaries can destabilize ideologies that led to climate change, and perhaps even to humanity’s survival the consequences of our former behaviors.

In other words, queer ecologies can help us envision climate change as more than a strictly scientific problem, to shift human attitudes and behaviors away from those that brought on such widespread environmental destruction. By proving the futility of binaries, biological or social, queer ecologies can bring new insights into our thinking on climate change. Climate change itself unsettles the binary between nature and culture by exposing the way that humanity

has fundamentally altered the environment to the extent that geologists have identified a new geological era caused by humanity's impact on the Earth, the Anthropocene (Mehner 9). As ecofeminist theorist Solnit explains, the symbol of ecology itself opposes American individualism,

Ecological thinking articulates the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things. This can be a beautiful dream of symbiosis when you're talking about how, say, a particular species of yucca depends on a particular moth to pollinate it, and how the larvae of that moth depend on the seeds of that yucca for their first meals. Or it can be a nightmare when it comes to how toxic polychlorinated biphenyls found their way to the Arctic, where they concentrated in human breast milk and in top-of-the-food-chain carnivores such as polar bears...All this causes great trouble for the ideology of isolation. It interferes with the right to maximum individual freedom, a freedom not to be bothered by others' needs. Which is why modern conservatives so insistently deny the realities of ecological interconnectedness (Solnit).

Climate change reveals humanity's impact on the planet, but it also reaffirms humanity as inherently a part of this planet and subject to its conditions. The catastrophic weather events and temperature shifts that will change our ability to live on the Earth reminds us that we are inside our environment, no matter how we have altered it to suit us in the past. For this reason, climate change is a perfect topic for theorists of queer ecologies, who insist on this same embeddedness within environment that climate change proves.

The science fiction texts I examine depict how queer ecologies can play out on the literary stage of an apocalyptic California. These novels expose the failure of an American Dream that began with the frontier thesis and that still relies on gender binaries, class divides, capitalism, human reproduction, and environmental neglect. They interrogate what could be possible if we question the primacy of human reproduction above all other priorities on this earth. These texts argue for kin-making beyond the biological family, valuing other humans beyond differences of gender, race, nationality, and creed, and for the treating as kin of

nonhuman and nonliving things. This undoing of hierarchy requires a new way of being, a radically inclusive empathy beyond that which humanity has ever before attained. Extreme empathy allows characters to see beyond the prohibitively vast problem of climate change, to imagine new ways of being in the world, utterly different than the ones history has brought us.

Depictions of ecofeminism and queer ecologies imbue these fictions with hope for innovative possibilities even within climate change. Despite their apocalyptic and dystopian settings, these novels still reflect the utopian hope that is fundamental to California, a space that still exists in the minds of many as a beacon of social progress, environmental value, education, wealth, environmental flourishing and tourism, and yes, fame and human success. Although these texts warn of apocalypse, they also look forward to see what can still be made of this human race, how we can perhaps do better by the world.

California has a long history of supporting utopian ideologies and societies. The American environmental movement was arguably begun by John Muir, whose ethic of conservation and environmental embeddedness was inspired by his love for the Sierra Nevada mountain range (Mehnert 57). Furthermore, living in environmentally sustainable communities does not require backwards-looking and illusory pastoralism. These small ecotopias are influenced by the writings of California philosopher Josiah Royce, whose writings were deeply informed by California as a place and a community, and who was also influenced by the Christian ideation of apocalypse (Royce 124). Royce's belief in the power of community stemmed from his perception of manifest destiny as the "central moral problem" of California, and of the United States as a whole: a position I've argued throughout this introduction (Starr 64). Royce became one of the central thinkers who promoted small utopian communities in California because he was able to recognize the inherent oppression of an American ideology

that emphasized constant expansion, resource consumption, and individualism. Royce's belief in strong, local California communities has been pursued throughout California history, as the "Bay Area and the Mendocino coast [has been] one of the richest sites of common-ing and communal life since the inception of the long postwar capitalist boom" (Boal xviii). Even before this, California's history of communal living (based on varying utopian ideals) began, of course, with the California Indians, and continued with the first American settlement of Mormons in San Bernadino in 1852 (Boal 3). The communal and ecological philosophies of California make the region an obvious setting for utopian fiction. Fictional environmental utopias have been set in California since Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, possibly the first ecological utopian novel, which was itself modeled on the environmentally-minded Pinel School that Callenbach's son attended in California (Garner).

Despite the grim realities of climate change, California is still a place that utopia can form. Here, I show how even the most dystopian of apocalyptic texts can use ecofeminism and queer ecologies to look for utopian ideologies. In chapter one, I use original archival research to examine the ecofeminist writings of foremother of science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin. For Le Guin, as for many utopian authors, apocalypse holds an element of hope: with the slate wiped clean, new and better societies can emerge (Roberts 67). Her novel *Always Coming Home* shows a far-future California that has been destroyed by a man-made apocalypse. In it, different types of societies flourish: one matriarchal, environmentally sustainable, egalitarian, and utopian, and one masculine, monotheistic, reliant on technology, misogynistic, and warlike. By juxtaposing these two societies, Le Guin shows us how patriarchal ideologies have failed, and how humanity could still pursue a more utopian way of life. Her utopian society in this novel is backward-looking in its imagining of a return to nature that is heavily influenced by Le Guin's knowledge

of Indigenous Californian societies. Le Guin's Indigenous influence is also seen in her novel *The Word for World is Forest*, a typical space colonizing narrative wherein the natives of the planet settled by humans are both feminized and deeply connected to their natural world. By studying these two texts alongside Le Guin's writings on California, utopia, and Indigenous populations, I find that her writing looks backward to imagine ecofeminist utopian societies after climate change.

In chapters two and three, I shift from early ecofeminist utopian fiction to contemporary dystopian novels that critique ideologies that perpetuate climate change. Written in 2015, these two novels show the failure of systems of individualism and social binaries, as the perpetuation of nuclear families as the highest human priority results in the annihilation of climate change. Inhabiting late capitalism and climate change thirty years after the writing of *Always Coming Home*, these novels embody the dystopian futility that characterizes contemporary American society. Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold Fame Citrus* depicts the environmental destruction caused by expansion into the West and the way that perpetuating the American Dream continues to harm vulnerable populations and the land. Edan Lepucki's *California: A Novel* depicts a heterosexual couple that attempts to renounce society and live alone in the wilderness, in response to the environmental and social chaos caused by climate change. Both novels show the harmful repetition of beliefs and behaviors, as their characters cling to past ways of living despite the harm it has caused and still perpetuates. These two novels illustrate the cruel optimism of living within the slow and piecemeal apocalypse of climate change. Their characters never locate innovative solutions to living within climate change, but instead cling to outmoded and harmful ideologies. In so doing, the characters warn the reader of the failures of these philosophies. Both



novels end with the utter destruction of their female protagonists, showing that clinging to patriarchy and capitalism will only result in apocalypse.

Chapter four examines *Black Wave* by Michelle Tea, a dystopian novel that also depicts the slow apocalypse of climate change. However, *Black Wave* rejects the destructive heteronormative capitalism shown in the novels by Watkins and Lepucki. Tea's novel also rejects ecofeminism: it does not show a renewed or pure land, or a matriarchal utopia. Instead, *Black Wave* focuses on a female protagonist who does not cling to outmoded ways of living. Michelle instead inhabits a queer and urban space that rejects the notion that heterosexual reproduction and being more "natural" are solutions to climate change. Because of this, the novel can locate the utopian possibilities of apocalypse itself, as the novel ends with a moment of pure joy and hope that can only be seen through a perspective that rejects the root causes of climate change.

In chapter five, I argue that Octavia Butler anticipates queer ecologies as a possible solution to the destruction of climate change, despite writing long before the coining of the term. An early and eminent writer of American science fiction, Butler moves beyond a backwards-looking model of utopia into new futures for humanity based on the biological connections that are foundational to queer ecologies. Butler's works, particularly her *Parable* series, imagine a modification of human physiology that makes more literal and obvious the deep connections between every being. The protagonist of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* experiences hyperempathy, and her embodied empathy with other beings allows her to imagine an innovative utopian philosophy that might be the only way to survive the climate-based destruction of Earth.

My sixth and final chapter explores N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, focusing on the first novel in the series, *The Fifth Season* (2015). I argue that the fantastical world created by

Jemisin is one that expressly parallels our own world as it approaches the effects of climate change. Within this fantasy setting, Jemisin continues Butler's project of imaging extreme empathy as a solution to the American isolationism that has caused social inequality and environmental destruction. Jemisin's characters have the ability to empathize with and manipulate the land itself, expanding human empathy into nonliving matter in a way that prohibits the neglect of the land that exists in the reader's world.

Taken together, these works indicate that female authors of science fiction have located a solution to the hopelessness of climate change by illustrating the possibilities of ecofeminism and queer ecologies as social philosophies. At the same time, each novel shows the unique possibilities of California as a utopian and a dystopian place. Although climate change will certainly bring about some dystopian consequences, humanity must locate a way to survive within it, and that requires a shift in ideology away from the individualistic American Dream. Queer ecologies shows us how to model "a democracy open to the strange intuitions of post-humanism: intuitions of ethical affinity with other species, of the moral importance of landscapes and climates, of the permeable line between humans and the rest of the living world" (Purdy 282). By giving humanity an idea of what it may look like to truly empathize with each other, with nonhumans, and with the land, these authors promote the change in paradigm that humanity must embrace in order to move away from behaviors that have caused climate change.

## Chapter One: Indigenous Influences on Early Ecofeminist Utopias

Ecology has always been a central theme in science fiction. Strange environments on foreign planets, unusual alien biologies, and hybrid identities feature prominently in the imaginations of science fiction writers and readers. American science fiction is especially tied to a sense of exploring and settling new lands, as it reflects the values of American environmental philosophy that from its earliest invention embraced a pastoral dream of renewal in the wilderness (Kolodny 133). The cultural history of American wilderness is primarily a narrative of masculinity and oppression, but later writers of ecofeminist science fiction manipulated that narrative to instead depict the way that living within wilderness could lead to social and environmental justice. Ursula K. Le Guin, one of the most prominent writers of American science fiction, was one such ecofeminist writer. Her novels *The Word for World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home* portray sustainable and matriarchal ecofeminist societies influenced by Indigenous models of living. White ecofeminist authors like Le Guin often based their ecofeminist utopias on their understanding of Indigenous history, making their depictions of utopia pastoral and backward-looking. This type of ecofeminist utopia dissipated with the approach of the twenty-first century, as the need to elevate Indigenous voices arose in literary discourse. Examining the history of these ecofeminist extrapolations can help us identify the traditions of environmental and feminist thinking before and after the recognized onset of climate change.

Before the rise of ecofeminism in the 1970s, American science fiction initially depended on an early American environmental philosophy that portrayed wilderness as a symbol of “the unexplored qualities and untapped capacities of every individual,” but particularly those of men (Nash 89). Throughout this period in American history, wilderness was conceived of as a

restorative retreat for men. The transcendental movement, espoused by writers like Henry David Thoreau, and the conservation movement, led by John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, shaped the American sense of nature in the early twentieth century (Nash 85). These environmental philosophers viewed the wilderness as an opposing force to the feminizing, civilizing, unhealthy urban sphere; men could restore their masculine vigor by fleeing into isolation within nature (Nash 152).

Nature was, for many, a symbol of rugged individuality and wild masculinity, and the development of these characteristics depended on one's ability to survive in and dominate the wilderness. Movement across the American West gave Americans a sense of purpose and identity: virility and masculine strength were derived from taking over a new land and successfully building individual wealth on it. As the West was fully occupied by Americans, the loss of a continental frontier symbolized a crisis in identity for a nation that had heretofore been built on forward motion, domination, and expansion. Although the conservation movement preserved pockets of wilderness for outdoor excursions, there was no more land to conquer. In science fiction, writers found a solution to this problem by imagining new worlds that Americans could settle and dominate, "If the dream of New World frontiers lives on, it is in outer space" (Katerburg 3). Space cowboy novels proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s, showing the heroic deeds of men who colonized new worlds, conquered alien people, and settled new lands for the glory of humanity. This symbolic perpetuation of American imperialism was built on the masculinizing, dominating, and isolationist view of nature and wilderness that permeated early American environmental thought.

The link between colonialism and environmentalism came under scrutiny as ecofeminism emerged as a theoretical lens. Annette Kolodny, for example, identified the ways that the

American Founding Fathers validated their exploitation of the West with feminizing language that rendered the land passive, virginal, and ripe for the taking. This rhetoric fueled a settlement of the West that relied on domination but was still considered the natural march of progress, despite the fact that it required the oppression, exploitation, and oftentimes destruction of Indigenous populations, the land, women, people of color, nonliving matter, and nonhuman beings.

As ecofeminists began to identify the cultural link that validated the oppressions of women and of nature, writers of science fiction built on those theories to imagine better worlds not founded on human colonialism and destruction, but on sustainability, pacifism, and egalitarianism. Instead of human characters taking over new worlds, these ecofeminist utopias existed outside of the harmful influence of the patriarchy, expanding on a long tradition of female utopias that were frequently female-dominated or excluded men altogether. Novels like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) use the standard utopian format of an isolated, exclusionary society of women prospering with civilization and technology similar to contemporary society, but more egalitarian and pacifist than societies that continue under male influence. In erasing patriarchy, these worlds could portray societies with an "emphasis on feminine values and issues, commitment to communalism, and an ability to overcome male intruders through either expulsion or conversion" (Donawerth 3).

Though many early feminist utopias removed the influence of men altogether to show women prospering on their own, in the 1970s, feminist utopias began to rely on a more primitive utopian model that included "quasi-tribal elements, incorporated from pre-technological societies (particularly native Indian) promote social cohesion" (Albinski 160). These utopias were founded on tenets of ecofeminism and modeled on precolonial Indigenous societies, imagining a

return to a more natural and peaceful way of living before the expansion of technology and urbanity. The key characteristic of ecofeminist utopias is that they are built on the feminine connection with nature and they highlight the interconnectedness of all parts of ecology. James Lovelock's 1972 theory of Gaia posited that the Earth is a single, self-perpetuating living organism that has a symbiotic relationship with all other life upon it (Lovelock). This early theory of ecological balance, though later heavily critiqued, was formative for ecofeminists who shared a belief in human embeddedness in nature and in the relationships between beings, and who appreciated the embodied image of Mother Earth. In this way, ecofeminist utopias often share the technophobic rejection of civilization that characterizes the masculine environmentalism of the early twentieth century. But for ecofeminists, civilization was not feminizing but violent and oppressive. Instead, feminine unity with the land would restore balance to society.

However, it's difficult to discern the line between an endorsement of past ways of living and an appropriation of Indigenous culture by primarily white writers of ecofeminist theory and fiction. A common criticism of ecofeminist theory and fiction is that Indigenous ideas have been cannibalized by white authors who seek to create a perfected society out of the memories of the societies white settlers eradicated. Kathi Wilson's study of ecofeminist literature shows that, "In a review of Plant's *Healing the Wounds* and Diamond and Orenstein's *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Sturgeon (1999) notes that despite numerous references to Native American spirituality and writers, only three of the 47 chapters contained in both collections are actually written by Native Americans" (Wilson). These two texts are important compendiums of ecofeminist thought, so their use of Indigenous themes by white authors is indicative of an overall problem with ecofeminism. Ecofeminists did and do continue to seek

justice for Indigenous populations alongside their struggles to liberate women and the environment, “The Anglo-feminist fascination with Puebloan cultures, while on the one hand a primitivist appropriation of Indigenous cosmology in the name of a universal or archetypal feminine power, achieved an understanding that is a constructive common ground for Indigenous , feminist, and environmentalist activists and scholars” (Hunt 8). However, this usage of Indigenous symbolism and practices does not necessarily entail the promotion of Indigenous people, “Smith (1993) concludes that Native American culture and spirituality are used to further ‘white’ ecofeminism while ecofeminists themselves remain detached from Native American communities, their realities, and their struggles” (Wilson).

The belief that Indigenous populations, though primitive, were closer to the earth and therefore lived more innocently than the civilized Europeans, is a common yet oppressive trope in American literature, whose

writers return to Romantic tropes that evoke the Indigenous figure as the denizen and caretaker—whether pure or corrupted—of the garden...this is a colonial trope which risks alignment with a masculine discourse of conquest...the tendency of Modern artists to construct the Indigenous peoples in terms of a lost golden age rather than their contemporary realities (Hunt 17).

The recurring literary idealization of the noble savage makes it difficult to argue that colonizing writers can really “imagine native points of view” (Hunt 17). This coopting of Indigenous knowledge also perpetuates the notion of Native Americans as an extinct population whose culture can be mined from the past but who have no living voice. This ignorance of living Indigenous populations allows for their continued rhetorical erasure, which itself validates their continued exploitation and violent oppression (Hunt 17). The answer to this problem in ecofeminist thought is twofold: to cease using models of Indigenous histories as fictional ideals and to elevate the voices of Indigenous writers, thinkers, and activists.

To understand the development from ecofeminist reliance on Indigenous models to a more inclusive ethic of queer ecologies, it's important to interrogate early ecofeminist utopias and the way they borrowed from Indigenous histories. I explored these ideas by visiting the Ursula K. Le Guin archive housed at the University of Oregon, where I perused Le Guin's manuscripts, notes, and letters to uncover previously undocumented research on her early ecofeminist texts, such as her 1972 novel *The Word for World is Forest*. Although Le Guin noted in her introduction to the novel that the novel is meant to be an allegory of the Vietnam War, contemporary readers will easily recognize the similarities to any colonizing history, including the European settlement of the Americas. In Le Guin's novel, colonizers from Earth (Terrans) attempt to take over a planet called Athshe, which the colonizers refer to as New Tahiti: a nickname that quickly reveals the postcolonial project of the novel. Athshe is heavily forested, and the Terrans hope to mine the wood for their own planet, which has been mostly deforested. Athshe is populated by small, peaceful, green-furred humanoids with somewhat mystical powers of dream-interpreting. In the notes on Le Guin's early drafts of the novel, I found that she first imagined the world as a more explicit isolated female utopia. With the initial title of *The Little Green Men*, the world would have been populated by female humanoids who avoid sex and had "reached a neat ecological balance, living 'inside' the forest in Indigenous urbanity" (Le Guin, notes on *World*). As the novel progressed, though, the humanoid characters developed into a two-sexed species. The native population is peaceful, lives in harmony with its environment, and the colonizing military force of Terrans are hypermasculine, violent, and racist.

The Athsheans are humanoid but have different physical aspects that are honed to their environment: they are green like their forest surroundings and have a different circadian rhythm. These physical differences and their evident closeness to nature means that they are feminized by



the colonizers, who cannot recognize these aliens as real people. The feminizing of Indigenous populations echoes the feminizing rhetoric used to justify the destruction and domination of the land in the American settlement and empire (Kolodny). This misgendering of the Athsheans recalls early descriptions of American Indians by colonizers, as historian Albert Hurtado relates the written accounts of early American interactions with Indigenous Californians, “The women that Perkins described seemed to him more like mythical creatures than flesh-and-blood human beings. So little did Indian women resemble his ideal of feminine anatomy that Perkins found it ‘difficult to tell the sexes apart’” (Hurtado 174). The Athsheans are raped regardless of gender, as they all seem feminine to the colonizers, a particularly rough and violent bunch meant to allegorize American fighters in the Vietnam War.

Misgendering coincides with the hypersexualization and desexualizing that is common to racist colonizing rhetoric about oppressed people. Ecofeminists identified the way that feminizing language supports oppression of individuals and the land. Le Guin was the child of two anthropologists: her father, Alfred Kroeber, was one of the founders of American anthropology. He knew, supported, and studied, Ishi, the last surviving member of a California Indian tribe, the Yahi. Le Guin’s mother, Theodora Kroeber, wrote the first book about Ishi, *Ishi in Two Worlds*. Having such prominent scholars as parents, Le Guin surely knew much about Indigenous people and the ways they were oppressed and eliminated. She likely even experienced herself the feminizing language weaponized against Indigenous people, as Ishi himself surely did. As noted by Scheper-Hughes, accounts of Ishi’s sexuality in local newspapers showed him as an emasculated, unsocialized, and inexperienced inferior who lusted after the first “white goddess” he saw (113). Ishi’s emasculation surely gave Le Guin firsthand experience of the way that rhetoric was used to debase and discount Indigenous people.

Along with Le Guin's intended reference to the Vietnam War, the plundering of the Athshean society cannot help but recall the genocides of Indigenous populations. The Athsheans live according to many ecofeminist tenets, including pacificism and living sustainably within their environment. But their society's emphasis on "ritual, speech and writing, shared labor, polygamy, female equality, and more women than men" is clearly modeled on Indigenous societies (Le Guin, notes on *World*). To avoid the common ecofeminist pitfall of primitivism, Le Guin purposefully included technology in her fictional society. Writing about the novel, she notes that the Athsheans are "not noble savages. But would you be very scientific in a forest?" It's possible to view Le Guin's technophobia as more nuanced than that term allows; her utopian societies often embrace technology, but Le Guin makes a distinction between communication technologies and military technologies (Latham 118). For Le Guin, technology can be useful, positive, and progressive, but military technologies are unnecessary, and also the sign of a dystopian society; this is also evidenced by *Always Coming Home*, where the masculine militaristic society is violent and oppressive. It's clear that avoiding the ecofeminist trap of idealizing the noble savage was on Le Guin's mind as she wrote both novels. In the archive, I also read her notes on *Always Coming Home*, where she writes,

One thing I am trying to do in this book is to show a people with a complex, achieved, completely adequate technology—who are not subject to their technology, as we in this Industrial Age are. I am *not* going back; I am not going back to the "primitive" nor am I going back to the pre-Industrial eras, the middle ages etc. I am trying to go sideways and forward, into a "post-industrial" culture where technology has got back into its appropriate place as an element of the culture. I realize anthropologists argue over these matters! Those who feel that technology *is* culture would consider me all wrong. But as an artist I can ignore these battles and forge ahead with what feels right (Le Guin, letter to Peggy, 1983).

Le Guin's disdain for technology is founded not on the developments themselves, but the ways that humanity uses that technology. Le Guin's utopia has technology but is not ruled by it, and does not consider it to be a complete solution or a path to utopia.

The novel's portrayal of Indigenous cultures allows it to function as a postcolonial critique that builds on the ecofeminist indictment of American Western expansion. While the frontier myth assured the purity of American identity through constant renewal of place, Le Guin's novel forces the reader to confront the genocide at the heart of American expansion. Though Le Guin shows the way that destroying a planet kills the humanoid people on it, it does not extend that critique to the destruction of the land itself,

Le Guin's abiding humanism, however, makes it difficult for her to articulate an ethic of rights that does not inhere ultimately in human subjects. While the novel fudges the issue essentially by identifying the Athsheans with their habitat like the forest, they are peaceful, close-knit, and actually green -the effect is to naturalize their culture and to see the violence committed against them as an environmental desecration. The forest is their world, as the title indicates, and alterations to it are alterations to them; by the end, they have, like the trees, learned violence and been scarred by the knowledge (Latham 117).

Due to the Western tradition of conflating Indigenous people with their land, an ecofeminist critique of those dual oppressions often repeats that mistake. Ecofeminists had a tendency to use Indigenous symbolism as a shorthand for showing the interconnectedness of life on earth (Hunt 14). This tendency is akin to the rhetorical merging of Indigenous populations and nature itself, ironically used by colonizers to justify the domination of both. The conflation of Indigenous populations with the land itself that was central to the justification of their killing, as it erased the humanity of those people and portrayed both entities as intertwined and able to be tamed and dominated (Worster 242). Although the ecofeminist tradition of using Indigenous societies is not meant to be exploitative, to some degree this similarity is unavoidable.

Le Guin's novel is but one example of a trend in ecofeminist science fiction before the 1990s to plunder Indigenous histories for utopian ideals. Another novel in this tradition is Joan Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean* (1986). Published nearly a decade after *The Word for World is Forest* and Lovelock's first publication of the Gaia hypothesis, Slonczewski's novel portrays a planet called Shora that functions as a large, symbiotic network of life. All living things on this ocean world support each other in an intricate and balanced symbiosis, including the humanoid inhabitants known as Sharers. Sharers are all women; the name Sharer is an immediate hint to the reader about the feminization of these characters. Sharers embody the ecofeminist connection between femininity, empathy, and connection to other people and parts of nature,

If to be feminine in essentialist thought is to value the interconnectedness of all life, to affirm life, to nurture life, and to stress ecological communicative networks, then Sharers are a feminine culture. In addition to living in a separatist ecotopia where the absence of men permits such feminine values to thrive, the Sharers manifest specific, so-called feminine characteristics. Their science is a science of life, their intellectual supremacy in biology used not to destroy but to nurture ecological systems (Otto 121).

Sharers have purple hairless skin and webbed feet; they are perfectly adapted to life on their watery world. They survive only with the help and support of other creatures on Shora; rather than pursuing domination and exploitation, the Sharers cooperate, use resources sustainably, and contribute to their environment. The Sharers embody many characteristics of ecofeminism: they use herbal medicine, communicate by asking small organisms to carry messages for them, create no waste, live in symbiosis even with the lifeforms they consume, and accept death as a natural process. They use a natural form of genetic engineering they call lifeshaping to shape living organisms into their raft-like homes. Like Le Guin's utopian peoples, Sharers use technology only in pursuit of higher purposes like life and sustainability.

The creation of the Sharers is an example of the science fiction concept of defamiliarization: because the Sharers seem so alien to the reader, the reader can apply that strangeness to see their own society through new eyes. The Sharers function as a parallel to Indigenous American societies, and their oppression by the Valans recalls those histories. The Sharers are mainly peaceful, live in unity with their natural environment, maintain small populations, are matriarchal, and make communal decisions based on consensus. The Sharers are called “water witches” by other civilizations who fear their connection to the earth and their different skin tone; likewise, Indigenous American populations were decried as too feminine and too close to nature—witches—by colonizing Europeans (Gaard 126). The feminizing of the Sharers by a colonizing force also recalls the same treatment of the Athsheans in *World*. By using estrangement to invoke a history of feminizing and dehumanizing Indigenous populations, both novels critique the colonizing of the Americas and the continued racial oppression and genocide perpetuated by the American people.

Slonczewski’s novel continues its critique of Indigenous genocide by showing the invasion of Shora by residents of a nearby planet called Valedon. The citizens of Valedon, Valans, live in a society that is similar to the world of the reader: Valans have two distinct genders, their skin is similar to human shades, and they are invested in technology and patriarchy. Valans also embrace the human division between people and nature. Valan society is hierarchical, almost feudal, in contrast to the communal democracy of the Sharers. Valans abuse and pollute their natural resources, and waste them on displays of wealth and luxury, unlike the Sharers who use only what they need. These differences cause the Valans to perceive the Sharers as primitive and unequipped to utilize their own natural resources, mirroring the justifications of colonization in human history.

Despite the Valans' insistence on conflating the Sharers with their natural world, Sharers are not primitive; in fact, their advanced biological knowledge allows them to embody lifestyles that anticipate tenets of queer ecologies. Slonczewski, a microbiologist as well as a science fiction writer, is uniquely situated to imagine a society that reflects this biological knowledge, and as such, *A Door Into Ocean* not only embraces ecofeminist tenets, but depicts an early expression of theories of queer ecologies. While masculine environmental theories used rhetoric of individual power, superiority, and domination to justify the settlement and exploitation of the American West and its Indigenous people, queer ecologies opposes this individualism by highlighting the biological interconnection between beings. Although Darwinian ideas of evolution have long dominated American scientific discourse, later scientific research suggests that "cellular evolution occurs through symbiotic incorporation of bacterial communities, suggesting that cooperation, not competition, provides the fundamental engine of biological change (Bollinger 34). This idea of cooperation is fundamental to the survival of ecosystems, as has been further highlighted by climate change. With their extensive physical understanding of microbiology, the Sharers embody these tenets of queer ecologies, even though Slonczewski's novel was published before that theoretical model was named.

Sharers recognize all lifeforms as equally deserving of respect and life; when a Valan asks why they do not dispose of empty rafts, the response is "Every raft has inhabitants"—referring to the organisms living on the raft that a Valan would not consider important (Slonczewski 246). The Sharers also recognize that even their own bodies are not cohesive, impenetrable units; their knowledge of microbiology makes them aware of the importance of gut bacteria, for example, and they use the bacteria that turns their skin purple to enable intentional changes in consciousness (Slonczewski 206). Queer ecologies insists that "we must realize that

we ourselves are not simply individual entities: we are ecosystems, and just as we must come to a more balanced relation with the ecosystem at the macro-level, we must find such balance at the micro-level as well” (Bollinger, “Multitudes,” 396). The Sharers’ (and theorists of queer ecologies’) understanding of all life as equally important as their own opposes “theories of evolution that focus on competition suggest a definition of selfhood marked primarily by autonomy and isolation” (Bollinger, “Symbiogenesis,” 50). Accepting the inevitable relationships between individual bodies and countless bacteria, as in gut germs, refutes the individualistic premises of environmental domination. If even our own bodies are host to other organisms, how can we draw a boundary between ourselves and others? The socially primitive Valans in the novel find this visible boundary-movement threatening to their very ways of life, recognizing that such boundaries are necessary to maintain their hierarchical social structure. Valans find the Sharers’ acceptance of other lifeforms confusing and even frightening; this misunderstanding forms the basis for Valans’ hostility and feelings of superiority over the Sharers.

However, Slonczewski’s novel shows the superiority of the Sharers’ lifestyle and perspectives as the Sharers ultimately overthrow the Valan invasion, proving the efficacy of an ethics of queer ecologies. The Sharers’ knowledge of and respect for ecology is the key to their liberation from the Valans. The oxygen-providing bacteria that colors the Sharers purple also allows gives them the ability to go into whitetrance, a physical state where their body shuts down into an unconsciousness that closely resembles death. The Sharers use whitetrance as their main tactic of nonviolent resistance against the Valans. Their bacterial infection works as a symbol of their openness to cooperation with other species; contrary to the common depiction of infection as a dangerous, scary, and harmful situation, Slonczewski depicts infection as a “necessary, even

essential, means of enabling individuals to become truly human, and because her focus and sympathy remain so fully with the Sharers, readers are inevitably drawn to that definition and away from the Valans' more negative response to microbes" (Bollinger, "Multitudes," 388). The extrapolation of this biological fact into a literalized, embodied, and unavoidable depiction of it in the novel forces the Sharers to have a different mindset. The Sharers respect for other lifeforms allows them to flourish. The Valans mistake this respect for ignorance, but the Valans' ignorance of life on Shora allows for their defeat, despite their superior military technology.

The Sharers' connection to other parts of their planet is what saves them from genocide at the hands of the Valans. Whitetrance is one part of their ecosystem that helps the Sharers defeat the Valans; another part are the seaswallowers, large creatures whose mating habits bring them to destroy many of the Sharer's boats and lives on an annual basis. Despite the danger these creatures bring, the Sharers do not prioritize Sharer life over seaswallower life; they do not hunt them down or attempt to battle or eradicate them. Their settlements on Shora are not seen as more important than the other parts of the world. Instead, Sharers recognize the importance of seaswallowers to the ecosystem and thereby, to themselves. By valuing other beings, Sharers reject systems that have brought on climate change. Because the Sharers understand and respect the seaswallowers' life cycle, they know that the enormous creatures will soon visit the area of the Valan ships, swallowing and destroying them. The Valans' ignorance of the environment of Shora and their underestimation of the Sharers as primitive, trivial subhumans causes their own failure. The reader can assume that the Valans would plan to the dangerous seaswallowers if they did take over Shora, but the Sharers understand and respect their impact on the ecosystem, and do not interfere with other creatures' lives, despite sometimes losing people and ships to them. The Sharers' defeat of the Valans ultimately shows the Sharers to be more evolved than the



Valans, whose violent isolationism and colonialist tendencies are the truly barbaric ways of being, even if the Sharers seem more alien to the reader at first.

*A Door Into Ocean* illustrates the success of a lifestyle that models queer ecologies, giving the reader a new way to understand the relationship between humanity, nonhuman life, and nonliving matter. The book continues Le Guin's project of differentiating between utopian and dystopian technology. At the same time, the Sharers are clearly modeled on Indigenous societies: their pacifism, closeness to nature, and seemingly primitive technology sets them up as foils against the European-seeming Valans. The plot of the novel also works as an allegory for colonization, showing the injustice of Indigenous genocide through repeating it. Like many ecofeminist texts, it uses Indigenous tropes that idealize past ways of living, in hopes that the reader will see the goodness of former ways of being.

Le Guin's 1985 novel *Always Coming Home* is a third example of an ecofeminist utopian text built on ideas of Indigenous societies. This novel is set in California, in an unknown time but long after an unknown radioactive apocalypse has destroyed a former technologically advanced civilization. It's easy to infer that this California was decimated by nuclear war, particularly when the reader considers the novel's anti-militaristic bent. Some remnants of the earlier cities still remain in crumbling ruins. Technology still exists to some degree, but all computers and online systems are in an isolated location, away from most people. A decade after publishing *The Word for World is Forest*, Le Guin continues her attempt to segregate humanity away from the harmful effects of technology, this time by literally segregating computers away from humanity.

Le Guin's method of resetting the world after apocalypse builds on traditional views of apocalypse as renewing. After destroying an entire unhealthy civilization, there is room to recreate society in a better way. In Le Guin's post-apocalyptic world, the reader's society is

annihilated, making way for more primitive cultures to start again. The relationship between Indigenous people and minorities and apocalypse is a fraught one; while the Indigenous people in *A Door Into Ocean* and *The Word for World is Forest* are experiencing apocalypse in the attempted genocide of their people, *Always Coming Home* is set in a post-apocalypse, with the ancestors of those who survived it. Theorists have identified the way that minority cultures have often already experienced apocalypse, and the blending of apocalyptic fiction with ecofeminism parallels that experience and makes it clear (Haraway 86). Apocalyptic narratives are therefore useful ways to explore colonizing histories, but they risk perpetuating the narrative of genocide that they reflect.

The book's post-apocalyptic setting makes room for a utopian thought experiment that depicts primitive societies clearly influenced by Indigenous models. The novel also uses the standard utopian format of juxtaposing two cities against each other, one utopian and one dystopian. This division neatly parallels the split utopian/dystopian nature of California as a place. The Kesh are a society that is matriarchal, isolated, small in population, socially egalitarian, environmentally sustainable, non-polluting, and nonviolent. They follow a pagan religion that celebrates the changing of seasons and life milestones with song, ritual, and dance. In contrast, the Condor people are patriarchal and violent. Their religion focuses on a single, male deity that is embodied by their king, the Condor. They own slaves, oppress women, and use technology to build guns and other polluting machines. This hierarchical society is especially loathsome when juxtaposed against the Kesh, who center individual agency in relationships and consensus-based decision-making.

The utopian ideals of the Kesh are clearly influenced by Indigenous Californian societies. Partially, this is because *Always Coming Home* is a novel deeply concerned with place. The

divide between utopia and dystopia has always been present in California's history. As the Spanish began to settle southern California, they enslaved the Indigenous people there in missions where they attempted to reeducate them into Catholicism, away from their own culture, beliefs, and languages. While this genocide began, though, the Spanish were forced to leave the people of northern California alone due to geographical limitations, allowing the peaceful and diverse populations to continue living there unmolested for 167 years (Starr 27). In this way, genocide of some tribes existed alongside the continued peace of others; mirroring the difference between *The Word for World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home*, as well as the difference between the peaceful Kesh and the violent Condor in *Home*. This northern California region is the same one inhabited by the Kesh in the novel; the geography of California allows them to live in a utopian manner, mostly undisturbed by nearby warlike tribes.

The California setting, then, is important for its utopian/dystopian dualism as well as for its Indigenous history. California was host to the most populated and most diverse number of Indigenous Americans, hosting more than 300,000 people and 135 languages. Although every region hosted different tribes and tribal structures, these folks primarily lived in tribelets of up to 1000 people (Hurtado 15). They had more gender equality than the European colonizers who sought to eradicate them (Hurtado 17). They were not primarily warlike and therefore not overwhelmingly hierarchical; property was mostly communal, they found self-awareness through the rhythms of daily life, and internal strife or external conflict was often relieved by sweat lodges (Starr 15). These features of Indigenous society are embraced by the Kesh in *Home*. For Le Guin, *Home* used these Indigenous features to address problems in modern society: the division between humanity and nature, the patriarchal standards of monotheistic religion, and the harsh effects of technology,

Civilized people inevitably either sentimentalize or brutalize nature—the mere fact of calling it ‘nature’ is an alienation on a very deep level!...The culture of cities, and the monotheistic religions, have set a gulf between us and the animals and the plants which only children among us can now bridge spontaneously. To try to bridge it consciously, to return, is very difficult and laborious and can never be wholly successful. However I think it worth trying (Le Guin, letter to Peggy, 101.19).

By modeling sustainable lifestyles demonstrated by Indigenous Californians, *Always Coming Home* looks for a society that reinvigorates topophilia, a love of place, something that premodern people were thought to have that modern people do not, an “authentic rootedness in place—which Americans often portray as something others possess, whether they be Native Americans, Europeans, or cultures of the past” (Heise 49). For Le Guin, true rootedness in place has been lost in contemporary society that is based primarily on urban landscapes and technological solutions. Le Guin also believed that California itself was not served by American writers; that the true nature of the place, which is inherently intertwined with the land and with Indigenous histories that are usually ignored, has not yet been described in literature,

I do not know how to write about my own world—my country, my birthplace, my California and Oregon—there is nobody to show me how. Saul Bellow or Ernest Hemingway or Fitzgerald ~~Flannery O’Connor~~ are no more use to me than Cotton Mather. I do not share their experience of being an American. Their ground is not my ground. Their inheritance is not my inheritance. Cather shows me what can be done, Steinbeck and Bates at least shows what California and Oregon looks like; but there is no tradition. I have to make it all from scratch. I have to find every word I say about my country ~~California~~ for myself. And the only place I know to look for those words is among the people who lived on this land, really lived on it, ‘having made a successful adaptation to their environment and without destroying each other’—they are gone; they left very few words behind. With those words I must build my world. If I want to go to the future, I must have a past and that is my past. I am an American, a Californian. To go towards the good place, I must start from my own place. And I don’t find that place, that foothold, in the work of my own conquering culture. Until we look back we cannot go forward (Le Guin notes on *Home*, 9).

Le Guin needed to write a truer literature of California that depicted the home she knew and that she knew many others had lost.

The desire to reconnect with the land shaped Le Guin's theory of utopia, which is necessarily backward-looking, and which influenced the pastoral utopias of *World* and *Home*. Le Guin explains her idea of a Californian utopia in her 1982 essay, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be." Reading this essay reveals that *Always Coming Home* is the culmination of Le Guin's thoughts on California, Indigenous Americans, and utopia. She begins the essay by acknowledging the utopian mythos of California in the American mind: for white people, California is "the Golden Age made accessible by willpower, the wild paradise to be tamed by reason" (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 81). Le Guin knows that this understanding of California, the cultural mythos of utopia and forward progress, was founded on the expansion and exploitation of the land and its people; as such, this version of California is no true utopia. She explains that "what the Whites perceived as a wilderness to be 'tamed' was in fact better known to human beings than it ever has been since: known and named... An order was perceived, of which the invaders were entirely ignorant" (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 82). In so doing, Le Guin summarizes the cultural history of Western settlement in just a few paragraphs, acknowledging at once the ignorance of Indigenous history and the reasons why that ignorance hinders American progress. For Le Guin, the history of California necessarily includes the history of Indigenous Californians, despite the fact that their histories were not written down by themselves or by white historians.

This cultural history before colonization is the defining factor of California for Le Guin, and without it, a Californian utopia can never be complete. Through her own myth-making in the form of the novel, Le Guin creates a future history for California that feels true to her and that honors the place and people of California. In her notes on the novel, she writes that "I have to have them be where such people were, before my people killed them. But a return only on the

spiral: not on the circle” (Le Guin, Condor Valley I notebook, 107). The utopian quality of California itself calls Le Guin to look backward to establish a way of living that is correct. She insists that utopia has been yang; she wants to make it yin: “non-European, non-euclidean, non-masculinist” (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 90). Looking backwards to Indigenous cultures that were more peaceful, more matriarchal, and more attuned to holistic environmental justice allows Le Guin to develop a utopia that is not shaped by contemporary systems of oppression.

Le Guin’s insists that imagining utopia requires throwing away the map, “I don’t think we’re ever going to get to utopia again by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways” because American culture is stuck in an either-or of realistic dystopia or fantastical utopia (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 98). In this way, Le Guin seeks a non-American understanding of time as nonlinear, and a history of place that does not require delineating systems of maps and borders. This echoes Indigenous epistemologies; prominent Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, writes narratives wherein “time is not linear by cyclical, and the future is at once something new and a return” (Katerburg 96). In the same way, Le Guin does not look for “something ‘new’, her utopian hopes are for the ‘renewal’ of a tradition in a clearly identified place” (Katerburg 96). Le Guin’s refusal to look to the future is based on her belief that such orientation causes one to lose important steps in the present, “Conservatives think about the future all the time (most “futurists” are intensely conservative in temperament and opinion). They want the future to be like the past, which they idealize...they tend to ignore the present. Liberals and radicals think about the future less than they think about the past, which outrages them, and which they attempt to prevent from getting into the future by altering it now, in the present” (Le Guin, Valley notebook III, 26).

Le Guin's theory of utopia as nonlinear means that it must look backward to some degree, but the degree of primitivism in her works is arguable, and something she deeply considered,

The argument which I doubt I am making, is perhaps this: our present technological civilization is both 'barbaric' and 'primitive,' if barbaric means aggressive, negative of the civilized and primitive means irrational or of rudimentary development; actually neither word has much meaning other than a value judgment, which I am surely turning back on the judges...in the Valley a culture which the reader could not, except through stupidity, label 'primitivist,' 'regressive,' 'idyllic,' 'pastoral,' 'a simpler world,' etc., dismissively (Le Guin, Condor Valley I notebook, 107).

Le Guin herself rejects the notion that the novel is a primitivist fantasy, while still noting the utopian elements of the Kesh, especially opposed to the Condor. The utopian depiction of a primitive people who have an understanding of history and technology is central to a science fiction pastoral (Sawyer). In her notes on developing the novel, Le Guin explains the nuances of this depiction, "because the people were evidently not naïve, ignorant, or simple—but a culture in harmony with itself and its world. Am I trying to find the earthly paradise? I really don't care; that question is essentially trivial; I have no interest in romanticizing about people 'without sin.' Nobody is blameless or non-responsible. But people *need* not be as blameful and as irresponsible as we are" (Le Guin, Condor Valley I notebook, 107). Le Guin pointedly avoids characterizing the Kesh as a noble savage: here, she explains her desire to avoid the tropes of innocence and purity, or even a true utopia.

Le Guin's belief that a utopian future should move in a spiral shows the recurring nature of history but also a forward motion. Instead, Le Guin believes that a fuller understanding of utopia can only be reached by returning to access the natural and Indigenous history of a place. *Always Coming Home* recreates that history, providing a future world that has gone backward into a more peaceful relationship with each other and with the land. Her desire to write utopia in

a spiral, not a linear narrative, reflects her understanding that the California Indians had no maps (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 97). Rather than completely returning to the past, Le Guin wishes to imagine a society influenced by the past but still new,

One way to show this is to have them be highly literate. I do not, however, seem to be able to have them highly technological, and am indeed giving my 'villain,' my barbaric-primitive invaders, the wheel which the valley considers scared/taboo/sanctioned and deliberately chooses not to use except in certain limited forms. (Mills and Miller are dangerous and highly aware of the danger). Will it seem, or is it in fact, mere Luddite sentimentalism? Happy shepherds crushed by ruthless industrialists. But the Condor uses the wheel in *ignorance* and the Valley refrains from it in *knowledge* of the consequences and that needs showing more clearly (Le Guin, Condor Valley I notebook, 108).

Here, Le Guin thinks through the perils and advantages of technology; again, she displays a sense of nuance in the way that technology can advance or harm civilizations. Le Guin fears that technology is not a solution to a society that is sustainable or peaceful; instead, it exists simply to replicate itself (Le Guin, *Dancing*, 96). By setting the novel after a man-made, technologically based apocalypse, this lesson has already been shown to humanity.

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin seeks for a way to describe California as a place, a place that has always been mythological and utopian in the American mind, but also as the natural environment she knew, and the one that was known by Indigenous Americans before European colonization. For Le Guin, a past-looking utopia is the only way; similarly, the only way for her to access a deeper understanding of California is to include the perspectives of Indigenous Californians. For Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* imagined a way of life that is more utopian than the technophilic society she wrote inside. But the novel is also a way to create a true story of California as she knew it: a natural history and a future history for Indigenous Californians and the land.



Early ecofeminist utopias like Le Guin's created helpful critiques of contemporary society, brought ecofeminist ideas into the mainstream, and questioned the oppression of women, the environment, and Indigenous people. Ultimately, *Always Coming Home* and *The Word for World is Forest* identify the intertwinement of oppression and imagine ways of living that reject those systems. As Le Guin wrote in her notes,

Hierarchy of wealth and power and expansionist overbreeding and exclusivist monotheism are causes? Symptoms? Of a dissociation from the non-human—an alienation of mankind—which is really what I'm trying to get at. Man makes himself alien on his own world. It does not start with male supremacy but they are very closely linked—the first thing man becomes alien to is woman, denying common humanity. If all living beings are inferior/nonhuman then their life becomes trivial, their disobediences makes machinery preferable (Le Guin, Condor Valley I notebook, 108).

For Le Guin as for early American environmentalists, a separation from the “natural” world results in the oppression of other people as well as the land. Her these utopian narratives question colonialism and its inherent oppressions, exposing the problems of contemporary society to the reader while also looking for solutions. These two novels reject the separation between “humanity and nature, components of another modern duality, and with this unity [highlight] what in modern culture needs to be changed in order to curtail the oppressions about which ecofeminism is so concerned...Le Guin interweaves humanity and nature in a way that breaks down the human/nature dichotomy as it also condemns the patriarchal quest for dominance over women and nature that would undermine the completion that the Kesh have achieved” (Otto 111).

Le Guin's narratives stress the connection between oppressing women, Indigenous people, and the land. The exploitation of the land was just one step toward, or one part, of the violent domination and genocide of colonized people. Such narratives also provide useful models for how a philosophy of ecofeminism could truly be practiced, and imagined a hopeful world

without the oppressive systems of environmental and social oppression that we currently live in. They even began to depict utopian premises of human embeddedness within the environment. However, Le Guin was aware of the precarity of mining Indigenous cultures for utopian frameworks. Her efforts to make the Athsheans and the Kesh connected to nature but also literate and technologically advanced tried to move the narrative away from a utopian theory that was wholly backward-looking. Her vision of a spiral-shaped future meant that she sought better ways of living in the past, while also maintaining critical elements of the present.

Despite Le Guin's efforts to the contrary, her novels rely on many elements of Indigenous society to craft fictional utopias. Le Guin was aware of this common ecofeminist pitfall, and worked to refute it. Because many of these notions were founded in Indigenous thought, ecofeminist writers can begin to "heal the wounds" of Indigenous appropriation by seeking to include Indigenous voices in the conversation about ecofeminism, not simply echoing their ideas. As later ecofeminist writers identified, "it's critical not to once again raid situated Indigenous stories as resources for the woes of colonizing projects and peoples, entities that seem permanently undead" (Haraway 86). Talking with Indigenous women, and more importantly, allowing them to speak, can "demonstrate the existence of contemporary counternarratives to spiritual and social ecofeminist discourses that enhance our understanding of women-nature connections" (Wilson 350).

The contemporary criticism of ecofeminists for their usage of Indigenous models of thought and society is perhaps one contributing factor to the decrease in ecofeminist utopian fiction we encounter today. However, I argue that there are more factors to the decline in utopian imaginings that characterized *Always Coming Home* and *A Door Into Ocean*. It's plausible that the decline is also linked to a recognition that Indigenous allegory and symbolism can be

exploitative itself. Furthermore, models of apocalypse have shifted away from a singular, nuclear apocalypse able to reunite human survivors with the land after the destruction of harmful systems, as I describe in the following chapter. As such, these models of utopia are not sustainable as climate change destroys a primitive land to return to and notions of the noble savage are recognized as appropriative and also impossible. Although the myth of escaping to a pure land to start fresh is foundational to American utopian thought, it's founded on a myth about a simple rural people coming to live alone and rationally and productively, free of contaminating influences, actually ended in a west that's poisoned by nuclear fallout and a huge place of capitalist technology. Rather than a place to retreat from reality, the West brought America into contact with the wider world (Worster 6).

Scholars have argued that utopia is a modern project (Tally 4). For ecofeminists, imagining postmodern utopias in the same model is not possible when we take into consideration the changing environment of climate change, the necessity of providing agency to Indigenous people, and the shifting cultural understanding of apocalypse. These reasons, I argue, contribute to the contemporary fascination with dystopia. It is not just capitalism that has halted our utopian imagination, but a changing environment that has brought the American mind to dystopia. The history of women's utopias and ecotopias can make clear their progression into dystopia and later, into a utopian ethic of queer ecologies.

## Chapter Two: Cruel Optimism in the Slow Violence of Apocalypse

The post-apocalyptic ecofeminist utopia created by Ursula K. Le Guin in *Always Coming Home* was based on an image of apocalypse as a singular, totalizing event that destroys human society, allowing for a radical restructuring of that society in a California that has been restored to an imagined prehistoric purity. Le Guin's utopia, like many ecofeminist utopias, gave humanity a chance to return to an unspoiled nature that can once again support human life. However, climate change scientists show that there can be no ecotopia that "looks back" in the mode of Le Guin. Humanity has irrevocably altered the Earth, causing rising sea levels, higher temperatures, mass extinctions, and periodic weather catastrophes that would not have occurred without human activity (Bedford). This permanent change in our habitat means that a "return to nature" is impossible: even if apocalypse did destroy all the institutions that maintain destructive capitalist systems, the land would still be fundamentally different than what it was before humanity's existence (Mehnert 150).

This changing perspective on apocalypse may be a reason that contemporary ecofeminist writers have rejected utopian models of post-apocalypse. Climate change itself stymies the utopian imaginations of individuals: at the same time that it is incomprehensibly vast, its effects are sporadic and uncertain. It is "a problem of such complexity and so intricately intertwined with the current, globalized functioning of the world that it becomes impossible to point to its singular source of origin or to one particular weather extreme as its outcome" (Mehnert 33). Climate change occurs on a piecemeal scale; weather catastrophes and isolated changes in the land are so separate that it feels unclear if they are related, or even caused by climate change; this denial is fostered by political and capitalist systems that resist any change that threatens their unfettered operation and profitability (Nixon 40). As seen in Le Guin's novels, apocalypse is

traditionally imagined to occur as a single, totalizing event that can indeed remove harmful systems from the earth, but climate change does not manifest in this way. Rather, climate change builds slowly and impacts different geographical areas in different, seemingly unpredictable ways. This is a type of slow violence that “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). Frederick Buell argues that such a slow-moving, piecemeal apocalypse cannot result in the explosive redemption of traditional apocalyptic models. Individuals may be unlikely to even believe in climate change, much less be motivated to act, “a sense of unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, environmental crisis has become part of people’s normality today. Faith in effective action has diminished at the same time that the concern about the gravity of the crisis has sharpened” (Buell xvii). This perceived impotence means that individuals lack the motivation to imagine or act on solutions to climate change.

Climate change scientists themselves recognize that the effects of climate change are so uncertain and distant that it’s easy to delay a response to it. Even though scientists agree that ignoring climate change will worsen its effects, individuals and governments cannot seem to rally against it, “The available evidence shows that California will pay a very high price for inaction, but this evidence, which requires predicting future events, is essentially uncertain and therefore only partially effective in motivating action” (Kahrl 12). Right-wing politicians and voters in America have so far refused to acknowledge climate change as a real problem; this denial makes individuals feel even more disempowered by systems that have caused climate change and do not seem inclined to solve it. Although options exist for individual environmental action, like recycling and voting for Green candidates and referendums, it seems grimly apparent that climate change is too devastatingly large scale to be addressed by individuals alone; without

institutional, corporate, and global governmental cooperation, climate change seems unsolvable. As Rebecca Solnit writes, “No problem more clearly demonstrates the folly of individualist thinking—or more clearly calls for a systematic response—than climate change” (Solnit). Climate change itself functions as a rejection of American individualism: we caused this problem together, and we must solve it together, with eyes focused on the success of every person and every other nonhuman and nonliving part of the Earth. Without this large scale communal change, individual efforts are futile. And large scale changes are difficult to believe in when remnants of capitalism remain in society, seemingly removing individual agency to effect change.

The lack of innovative thinking in the face of climate change recalls Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism, which argues that late capitalism is so pervasive and also so comfortable, its dangers so difficult to perceive, that individuals see no way to resist it or indeed any reason to do so. Even if individuals do recognize the harm being done by current systems, “Dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of capitalism and intimacy under capitalism” (Berlant, “Nearly Utopian,” 170). In that way, both late capitalism and its attendant ecological harm are self-perpetuating. Individuals are so comfortable within these systems that they become ideologically trapped, functionally incapable of ceasing harmful behaviors or fighting for new possibilities. Climate change by its very nature shows that individual humans, on their small scale, can and did make a massive impact on the Earth. But as Christine L. Marran explains, the myth of individual power over climate change ironically instills feelings of disempowerment when individual actions are clearly not enough to stop its progression (127). Yet as we fail to locate new solutions to climate change, “the effect is to deepen disaffection with politics by increasing its sense of futility, and to amplify the notion that

a corrected market would make everything right—if only we could get there” (Purdy 45). When new options are not presented, individuals cling to the status quo, carrying on as usual in hopes that problems will eventually solve themselves.

These theories of slow violence and cruel optimism help us understand why ecofeminist science fiction no longer focuses on post-apocalyptic utopia. Novels like Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus (GFC)*, published in 2015, instead depict a dystopian California in the process of climate change destruction. Rather than using apocalypse to eliminate the harmful systems that caused climate change, texts like this focus on characters who are trapped within a slow-moving apocalypse. The characters in *Gold Fame Citrus* are stuck within Berlant’s cruel optimism, clinging to outmoded and destructive lifestyles because they cannot locate an alternative.

By depicting this stagnation, *GFC* promotes ecofeminism not by depicting its utopian possibilities, but by showing the failures of opposing environmental philosophies that perpetuate misogyny and vindicate the exploitation of the American West. The novel proves Kolodny’s assertion that “Western civilization involves a patriarchal social organization within which separate male-centered families compete, all movement into unsettled areas inevitably implies conquest and mastery” (Kolodny 133). *Gold Fame Citrus* reveals the failures of American expansion by depicting climate change; it also reveals the failures of heteronormativity by depicting the way it insidiously contributes to dystopia. Characters try to reproduce heteronormative family structures even as binaries between genders and species fall apart in an era of climate change. Watkins’ main character, Luz, attempts to isolate her nuclear family away from the rest of failing society, and in so doing, perpetuates the capitalist focus on human wealth, reproduction, and individualism that caused the apocalypse in the first place. In this way,

Watkins reveals the dangers of supporting capitalism's isolating ideology of individualism, and the impossibility of restoring an ecofeminist utopia in a world that has been so thoroughly altered by climate change. By showing the harm of perpetuating old systems that are destructive and backward-looking, these dystopias warn the reader against continuing them.

*Gold Fame Citrus* deepens the pathos of these failures by linking the slow apocalypse to the body of its female protagonist, Luz. The alignment of women and nature is common in ecofeminist science fiction, but in earlier ecofeminist texts like Le Guin's, women's connection to nature helps them form sustainable and egalitarian societies after the elimination of capitalist patriarchy. *GFC* inverts this literary tradition by linking Luz's body to the incremental apocalypse she inhabits. Rather than experiencing total destruction, Luz and the land fade away bit by bit, in a languishing deterioration that promotes stagnant behaviors because no immediate solution is found. The slow decline of Luz's hope for a future and her eventual suicide mirror the slow collapse of the environment.

Women in literature have often been depicted dying in such a lingering, painful, consumptive way; this type of slow violence is feminized in literature, in opposition to sudden deaths of men in war or violence (Jamison). The tendency of both women and the environment to slowly disintegrate is seen in Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe." Zoline's story, published in 1988, juxtaposes the piecemeal disintegration of feminine identity with the slow destruction of the world. In the story, a Californian housewife named Sarah ruminates on metaphysical concepts of space and physics alongside the tedium of housework and raising children. The unlikely parallels in her intense theoretical thinking cause her to slowly spiral into madness, mirroring the entropy of the universe. Sarah frets over her physical imperfections, dismayed at the shape of her nose. The reader becomes sucked into the myopic banalities of her



life as she worries over her cooking and the behavior of her children. At the same time, though, Sarah considers apocalypse,

she thinks of the Heat Death of the Universe. A logarithmic of those late summer days, endless as the Irish serpent twisting through jeweled manuscripts forever, tail in mouth, the heat pressing, bloating, doing violence. The Los Angeles sky becomes so filled and bleached with detritus that it loses all colours and silvers like a mirror, reflecting back the fricasseeing earth. Everything becomes warmer and warmer, each particle of matter becoming more agitated, more excited until the bonds shatter, the glues fail, the deodorants lose their seals (Zoline 3).

The imagery of a Los Angeles destroyed by heat recalls a California destroyed by climate change, but Sarah's concern for universal apocalypse is tied to her feelings of personal imprisonment in her role as mother and wife. Her stifling and small role parallels the slow destruction of the universe, an unthinkably immense event.

This juncture is precisely the birth of the cruel optimism of individuals within climate change who are unable to understand the scope of the problem, or how any individual act can alter it. Although Sarah is deeply concerned with apocalypse to the point of causing herself to mentally break from her reality, she is confined to her role as homemaker. The repetition of this role confines her creative and curious mind to a place that feels like the opposite of the universe. Without options, Sarah is stuck in a life that is meaningless to her. The story depicts how the limiting patriarchal expectations of women to be concerned solely with children, cleaning, and cereal cannot result in anything but destruction of self and society. As Berlant explains in her description of the limiting nature of heteronormativity, "In the fantasy life-world of national culture, citizens aspire to dead identities—constitutional personhood in its public sphere abstraction and suprahistoricality; reproductive heterosexuality in the zone of privacy. Identities not live, or in play; but dead, frozen, fixed, or at rest" (Berlant, "Live Sex Acts," 382). Although Berlant uses "dead" here as in the term "dead metaphor," Zoline's story and Watkins' novel both

show the literal death caused by private, individualistic, reproductive heterosexuality: apocalypse and the death of the self. The heteronormative family structure that confines Sarah is part of the individualism at the heart of American capitalism, as it restricts one's focus to biological kin. Sarah realizes the problematic nature of such a small focus, "Sarah thinks from time to time; Sarah is occasionally visited with this thought; at times this thought comes upon Sarah, that there are things to be hoped for, accomplishments to be desired beyond the mere reproductions, mirror reproduction of one's kind" (Zoline 5). Zoline's story is structured to depict Sarah's slow and incremental dissolving in numbered steps, showing that these social limitations have a slow and ordered annihilating effect on individuals, who ultimately cannot live under these confining expectations and who will eventually collapse beneath them. Just as the universe slowly marches towards its destruction, so too will individuals and society under oppressive systems that are promote only human reproduction and wealth. Zoline uses the trope of a slowly disappearing woman to highlight the dissolving and unnatural tendency of restricted gender roles.

In its depiction of ecofeminism and in its reference to the environmental apocalypse in Los Angeles, Zoline's story is a precursor to later dystopias like *Gold Fame Citrus*. In both "The Heat Death of the Universe" and *Gold Fame Citrus*, society fails to imagine alternatives to traditional models of life and family. In the ultimate doom of female characters, these dystopian texts depict "the impossibility of exercising agency if one partakes of a system steeped in reproductive futurism which permeates all social, political, and cultural structures" (Hird 63). The sole focus on human reproduction, expansion, and wealth creation is a symptom of the American individualism that has caused the human and nonhuman oppression and the exploitation of the land that resulted in climate change. While characters in these texts do not find a way to see the world differently, to value anything beyond themselves and their family, as

Buell and Berlant suggest, they implicate themselves in systems that perpetuate apocalypse. This is symptomatic of Berlant's cruel optimism, as late capitalism and climate change are crises that leave individuals feeling impotent in the face of hugely systemic crises. But because of their lack of utopian imagination, characters in these two novels and their societies are doomed to dystopia.

Queer ecologists locate a solution to the cruel optimism of climate change by suggesting that humanity must reject the supremacy of human reproduction and success and instead value other nonhuman and nonliving things. Such solutions, ways of living that are not heteronormative, financially productive, or reproductive, are the only answer to the problem of climate change, according to theorists of queer ecologies. As Donna Haraway expresses, "If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species" (Haraway 102). If only human relationships and success is valued, nonhuman exploitation in pursuit of that goal is not only acceptable but enforced. The continued exploitation of humans, nonhumans, and nonliving things can only result in continued destruction of the planet and all its species, including humans. Dystopian narratives show this fatal consequence in the end of the world and the concomitant the failure or death of their female characters. By showing the failure in repetition of these lifestyles, dystopias can lead the reader to asking what, instead, could work better.

*Gold Fame Citrus* shares with "The Heat Death of the Universe" a critique of the failure to prioritize anything beyond human wealth and reproduction. Although individual nuclear families try to survive alone within apocalypse, this traditional and isolating family structure is proven to be not only unsuccessful, but the root of apocalypse itself. *Gold Fame Citrus* is set in a near-future California which has been devastated by drought and extremely high temperatures. The

sun, traditionally understood as a masculine generative force, is overpowered and weaponized in Watkins' ecofeminist climate change dystopia. The California desert is a hot, dry wasteland uninhabited by flora or fauna, while much of the rest of the United States has so far survived climate change. Mars-like, California is now scorching hot, the air is heavy, the land is dead and uninhabited; nonhuman life is incredibly scarce, and the humans who do remain are only barely surviving. The possibility for climate change to destroy California has its roots in reality, where California aqueducts are already losing water (Board 133). The Californian cycle of drought and flood makes it prime for climate changes (Kahrl 33). California provides half of the fruit, nuts, and vegetables for the United States, and climate change will impact farms across California, impacting America's supply of fresh food (Board 134).

The novel and climate science both show that the utopia that we imagine California to be is only moments away from dystopia, making it a prime location to set ecofeminist dystopias like these books. Both dystopian and utopian, California has often been a prime setting for climate change narratives, which extrapolate the place either as an apocalyptic ruin or as a utopian escape from climate change (Mehnert 192). In *Gold Fame Citrus*, California has been sectioned off, declared ruined, and evacuated by the national government. It is shut off from the rest of the United States, and movement in or out of the state is officially forbidden, inverting its past history as the final utopian frontier of the country. In an effort to seal itself off from the effects of climate change, the United States simply abandons California. This version of California exemplifies Lerner's idea of the sacrifice zone, a place set apart and resigned to environmental destruction in the name of further human expansion, wealth, and resource exploitation (Lerner).

Despite the failure of California to continue to support human life, characters in *Gold Fame Citrus* cling to the myth of utopia that California has always embodied. Luz lives just

outside of Los Angeles in a huge mansion that was formerly owned by a celebrity who abandoned it during evacuations. Luz languishes without purpose in this starlet's home, wearing the jewelry, gowns, and furs that the starlet understandably abandoned as futile luxuries in the face of widescale environmental crisis. Luz continues to embrace American luxury culture, embodying its celebrity obsession even as the wealth and glamor of California are proven to be a façade. Indeed, the consumption of wealth on the absurd level marketed by celebrities typifies the greed that caused the destruction of California itself. Despite the obvious failure of this lifestyle, Luz remains in this space, unable or refusing to locate another way of being that might be more sustainable, or even more practical.

*Gold Fame Citrus* depicts a slow-moving apocalypse as theorized by Buell and uses its dystopian setting to show the failures of American expansion into the West. The novel's apocalyptic environmental collapse essentially depopulates California, returning it to a state of nature. This renewed frontier could mean a second chance for humanity to settle the West in a more sustainable way, learning from the mistakes that removed human society from the area. This is the way that Le Guin used California apocalypse in *Always Coming Home*, showing that people could live in more sustainable ways after apocalypse removes systems that caused the apocalypse in the first place. But in Watkins' novel, the hostility of nature inhibits the possibility for human resettlement and in this way, the novel moves desert from a redemptive space as seen in Western thought, into a hostile alien environment very at home in its science fiction tradition that also goes back to the Old Testament. Because the apocalypse was not total but incremental, segments of American capitalism continue. Humanity therefore does not seek a truly innovative way of life, instead clinging to the remnants of past behaviors. This is a depiction of contemporary life in climate change; without institutional change, individuals languish in

repeated patterns of behavior that perpetuate the abuse of the environment. By showing this phenomenon in her novel, Watkins critiques the first expansion into the American West by allowing for a second one, one that does not mark progress but still continues to destroy the environment.

The migration out of California inverts the hopeful American migrations westward, as Americans chased gold, land, fame, and social progress into America's most utopian state. However, it's precisely this migration that caused the genocide of Native Californians, the exploitation of Chinese and Black labor, and the destruction of the landscape that ultimately led to California's climate change apocalypse in the novel. The novel's evacuation of California critiques Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, the theory that American identity is founded on the possibility of expansion into new territories. This forward-motion is what gives Americans hope and agency, but it's also what removed those autonomy and even existence from Native Americans, women, people of color, nonhuman animals, and the land.

Watkins' fictional depiction of California as a sacrifice zone illustrates the way that climate change will have a sporadic effect on the planet. While some areas may remain unharmed by the weather catastrophes caused by climate change, other areas will be decimated. Whether or not areas struck by disaster will revive or remain suitable for human life depends entirely on their economic prosperity. The future destruction of areas that are less wealthy is a humanitarian crisis that indicts systems of globalizing wealth; while California might be able to financially recover from environmental destruction, other areas might be permanently uninhabitable. Environmental harm like loss of species goes ignored as it often occurs away from human populations, and because humans don't truly see themselves as part of a larger ecological system (Mehnert 57). In *Gold Fame Citrus*, though, California becomes one of those isolated

places of destruction, forcing an American reader to see the ruination of climate change in their own, formerly utopian, backyard.

However, the novel suggests that even the loss of California could be shrugged off by the rest of America, who simply continue living and abandon its failed utopian experiment. The sporadic destruction of climate change is enabled by systems of globalization that allows developed countries (including America) to adopt a globally adapted form of feudalism, luxuriating in wealth created by the land and labor of underdeveloped nations (Purdy). An inevitable effect of this system is that these underdeveloped areas will be the ones that are most devastated by climate change. Meanwhile, more developed nations will have the technology, resources, and money to remain relatively unharmed by climate change disasters and to ignore the disasters that occur across the globe and out of sight (Purdy). Or as Kim Stanley Robinson succinctly explains, “That being said, fifty years later, people are going to be coping with the situation” (*On the Media*). That America will survive climate change is casually taken for granted; however, the fantasy that we have “mastered nature” in the first world can be successfully walled off from a “posthistorical” and dead third world but “many environmental problems don’t respect boundaries” (Buell 174). Clinging to the harmful ideologies that caused climate change, America repeats its mistakes, attempting to isolate areas away from the consequences of its expansion, emphasizing the way that “fear of penetration and the fantasy of impenetrable isolation are central to both homophobia and the xenophobic mania for ‘sealing the border’” (Solnit). In response to the way that America still feels protected from the worst effects of climate change, Watkins depicts the deep injustice of trying to isolate oneself from the social, global, and environmental impacts of climate change by imaginatively sacrificing America’s most utopian state. It’s clear to the reader that abandoning an entire land and populace is not a

positive solution to climate change, but this sectioning off of one area also reflects the way that climate change will likely decimate some areas of the world while leaving others temporarily unaffected and able to continue on (impacted only by climate migration, of course).

In *Gold Fame Citrus*, California is wrecked by desertification, an extrapolation that Watkins uses to critique systems that have unsustainably relocated water to create a false utopia out of California and the other parts of the West that were so crucial to the development of American identity. These water removal systems have necessarily predicated the survival of some over others, repeating global feudalism on a smaller scale by removing resources from one area in order to build up cities that should not be able to exist in the desert; in other words, “the domination of nature in the water empire must lead to the domination of people by others (Worster 31). Two-thirds of the annual precipitation in California falls in the northern third of the state; to make regions in South California habitable, hydrological systems were required to relocate that water (Starr 167). But historically, the overuse of resources ended expansion in the West over and over again (Aron 82). To make California a habitat for human life, humanity depleted the land of its sustainability (Reisner). This history seems to promise disaster, making it easy for dystopian authors to imagine that once more the hubris of water relocation could result in re-desertification. In these extrapolated futures, the very technology that promised to make humanity at home in the earth is that which has depleted the earth of its ability to sustain not only human life but life of any kind (Worster 29). When the technological systems that exploit the land inevitably deplete the resources they need to continue supporting human life, ecotopias are no longer possible.

The novel’s migration out of California and border restrictions also reflects growing concerns about shifting immigration patterns caused by climate change (Wodon, Kaufman).



Although California as an American territory was only created through European immigration into the area that displaced native populations, fears about climate change have regressed into xenophobic nationalistic fearmongering. Donald Trump's political messaging relies almost entirely on stoking fears about immigrants. He has even falsely used California as an example of the alleged problem, "That's why Democrats want to give illegal immigrants the right to vote. How about in California, where illegal immigrants took over the town council, and now the town council is run by illegal immigrants in the town!" (Bump). Although Trump's story here was a completely fabrication, it demonstrates that already, xenophobic immigration fear has dominated American political discourse. It's true that climate change will impact immigration patterns across the globe. As less developed areas of the world are made too hot, too flooded, or too damaged by hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes, people will inevitably abandon those areas, just as they have left Watkins' California. These destabilized populations have become a central concern for changes that will occur due to climate change. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, Watkins depicts the possibilities of those concerns by creating a California that is no longer a desirable place to be, but instead has its borders sealed and protected by armed guards that refuse to let anyone either in or out. The U.S. has washed its hands of anyone who chose not to evacuate California, leaving them to attempt to survive in a wasteland.

This dismissal of the remaining population of California recalls the myth of uninhabited land that was used to settle the American West. By advertising the West as empty and ready for settlement, the United States government encouraged settlers to move there for a fresh start (Reisner 38). These claims were of course unfounded, as Indigenous populations lived throughout the West, especially in California, which had the highest Indigenous population on the continental United States prior to the Spanish invasion (Starr 13). This westward expansion

also ignored the importance or existence of nonhuman life, its habitats, and the nonliving environment that would be forever altered by large populations of American settlers. This history of exploiting allegedly vacant land continues into the present day. People of color and those who live in low-income areas are the most heavily impacted by environmental catastrophe and ecological damages. Because these people are not seen as politically important, these “uninhabited” areas often bear the brunt of environmental dangers brought on by natural disasters and by wastes produced by industry, agriculture, and factory farming.

*Gold Fame Citrus* continues its critique of the rhetoric of “uninhabited land” by describing fictional plans for nuclear waste storage. In the novel, Luz moves out of the starlet’s mansion and into a utopian-seeming commune run by a man named Levi, who tells her that the United States government has decided that because California has been evacuated, it can be used as a dumping ground for nuclear waste. Deemed uninhabited, the land can now be exploited to the fullest extent, poisoning the land irrevocably while ignoring the fact that humans (and plants and animals, according to Levi) do continue to live there. These humans, though, have been similarly deemed subhuman, noncitizens, unimportant to the government. Leaving nuclear waste in California would be an act of violence against Luz, Levi, and all the other people who have remained on the land, but American rhetoric obscures that fact by denying the very existence of these people. As such, the notion that *GFC*’s California is “uninhabited” is a truly dangerous idea that validates the misuse of land that has already been irreparably damaged by popular neglect.

Levi’s fear of nuclear waste has the scent of conspiracy about it, though; the text never confirms the reality of this dastardly scheme, but Levi’s unsubstantiated paranoia parallels the way that we experience environmental catastrophe in the era of climate change. We sense

changes in the weather—is it hotter, wetter, than it should be in our area? We notice catastrophic but individual weather events—is it normal to have two or three hurricanes in as many weeks? Are these hurricanes worse than they usually are? We feel that perhaps cancer is more prevalent than it should be, but illnesses caused by proximity to environmental toxins cannot always be diagnosed, their causes cannot always be proven. These feelings of uncertainty are supported by science that does not agree with experiential knowledge, and by corporate and political interests that profit off the denial of environmental risk (Tesh 100). Despite sensing these numerous and perhaps unrelated changes, it's difficult to pinpoint any of these symptoms as objective evidence of climate change as a whole. Climate change denial persists in part for this reason: sporadic weather patterns or health crises are difficult to prove as patterns. Levi's insistence on a government conspiracy also mirrors the feelings of impotence in the face of American legislators who refuse to act on climate change in the face of confirmed assertions of scientists and other nations that agree that action is needed.

But although the reader could discount Levi's fears as unfounded paranoia, the idea of shedding nuclear waste in an uninhabited space within the United States has historical precedent. Yucca Mountain in Nevada has been repeatedly proposed as such a dumping ground (Corneliussen). *Gold Fame Citrus* directly references this reality by devoting a chapter to a fictional history wherein Yucca Mountain has become a nuclear waste repository. In imagining a small town near Yucca Mountain, Watkins briefly abandons the main plot of the novel to again confront the idea that uninhabited land is safe to destroy. In this chapter, the town's fear of nuclear harm is embodied by local legends of mutants, called mole people, who have been transformed by their exposure to nuclear radiation. The townspeople reflect on how they feel about living so close to nuclear radiation,

we are soothed by the authoritative acronym-loaded binder delivered to us ages ago by the gentleman embodiment of the US Department of Energy...for since there are no people who dug the dark tunnels of Yucca Mountain, nor people working as stewards of the nation's nuclear waste deep inside, then it is only a rumor that there is a subterranean population at the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository, only local lore that below us, in a town perhaps identical to ours, move once-human creatures whose genes the department tweaked over generations until their skin went translucent, until a scrim of skin grew over their useless eyes, until two thick, cord-like and translucent whiskers sprouted from their faces, sensitive as a catfish's barbels, and their mouths gone a little catfish too, a side effect (Watkins 219).

While the whole town lives in a sense of unease despite the assurances of the government about the safety of their location, the mole man becomes an incarnated manifestation of their doubt.

The mole man is unnatural, but the town cannot define what he is or what is wrong with him. He brings a sense of unease and discomfort; he is a sign of something not right with the earth. In this way, the novel depicts the paranoia of living within climate change, as people sense environmental alterations but are unable to fix or even identify them. The mole man chapter directly confronts the history of exploiting land by first deeming it uninhabited, "Is a mole man not a man? How many times did the US Department of Energy say 'wasteland' before this became one? How many times will they chant 'unpopulated' before we disappear?" (Watkins 224). As Watkins shows, areas deemed uninhabited or uninhabitable are often not truly so. Declaring an area as useless to human resource mining, wealth creation, or habitation does not in fact mean that area is truly without value, and it does not excuse the destruction of that land.

*Gold Fame Citrus* also addresses the problem of attempting to perpetuate reproductive futurity in climate change. In the starlet's mansion, Luz languishes, unable to think of or care about a future at all until she and her boyfriend Ray find an abandoned child at a party. They name the child Ig, and Ig functions as a catalyst, finally giving the couple an incentive to seek a better, more sustainable way of life. Luz thinks, "It had been such a long time since she believed in anything" (Watkins 45). This dead California is no place for anyone with a future, and

children are one of the most prolific signifiers of a future (particularly an ecological future) in American tradition. Female children have stood in as apprentice figures commonly in ecofeminist science fiction, as in the writings of Joanna Russ and in Vonda McIntyre's novel *Dreamsnake* (Barr 139). In keeping with this tradition, Ig inspires Luz and Ray to seek a better life; they decide to move eastward into the United States, reversing the path of utopian-minded settlers who moved to California. Instead, they are refugees escaping the ruins of California, hoping to gain access to better land despite the borders that have been constructed to keep them out. Again, they are forced to use outmoded technology, and use a car to get to where they're going. Despite the fact that petroleum products are a major contributor to climate change, Luz simply has no other way to escape California than driving. This dependence on fossil fuel illustrates both America's lack of utopian imagination and its reliance on cars; mobility is traditionally American, as shown by the way so many cities are reliant on cars and highways, and its reluctance to legislate any move away from petroleum or individual driving habits (Mehnert 26). Americans are the least likely to use public transportation, partially because they have the worst public transportation systems of any developed country (Greendex 13). Even in a world where climate change has advanced so much that America has lost an entire state, there is no alternative to gasoline-based cars.

Luz finally attempts to evacuate California because she wants a better future not for herself but for Ig. Relationships between mothers and daughters have long been a symbol for utopian futurity in women's writing, and this is especially true in ecofeminist fiction (Donawerth 60). Children also figure prominently in environmentally-friendly advertising. Though these ads may seem to be forward-looking, they are a symptom of weak ecology: they do not seek to overturn damaging systems but instead attempt to lessen the harm while maintaining the profits

made by these environmentally disastrous institutions (Seymour 7). Because the symbol of the child has not worked toward the necessary radical upheaval of systems, these advertisements also do not inspire activism in individuals. Seeking environmental justice only as a way to make a world for our children in fact reduces the impact of that justice; it ignores the crucial existence of nonhuman and nonliving things which also require human action to continue living, and it reduces human experience to seeking safety for our own kin. Advertisements that prioritize human children as a reason for environmental justice are failures; they have not historically been successful in preserving the environment and indeed, they are often used as vehicles to support homophobia and heteronormativity (Seymour 7). Theorists of queer ecologies identify that this rhetoric is harmfully exclusive, heteronormative, and archaic because “we take so many environmental risks precisely because we believe so fully in the reproductive capacity of human beings and ‘nature’ in general to fix the damage done. According to the logic of reproductive heteronormativity, there can be no such thing as environmental loss because the world itself is so easily replicable” (Azzarello 138). Without looking for a new way to consider environmental justice beyond the future of our own children, humanity cannot imagine a future for the rest of the world.

*Gold Fame Citrus* also shows the symbol of a girl child to be an insufficient catalyst for preserving the environment. When Luz was a child, she was made into the poster child for the environmental health of California. The first newspaper article that christened her Baby Dunn reported that Luz “has been adopted by the Bureau of Conservation, which embarks today on an heroic undertaking that will expand the California Aqueduct a hundredfold, so that Baby Dunn and all the children born this day and ever after will inherit a future” (Watkins 11). While Annette Kolodny traced a history of writers using feminizing language to justify the oppression

of the land, in this novel, that tradition is inverted. The land is feminized by naming it after a baby girl; at the same time, a baby girl infant is named after the land. In Baby Dunn's case, she is individually linked to the land, while her birth is meant to function as a beacon of hope for California.

The alignment between a female infant and the land is used by the media in *Gold Fame Citrus* in a way that interrogates the traditional use of children as symbols of environmental hope for the future. Although Baby Dunn was created as a beacon of hope, California was not saved by expanded aqueducts; in a sad twist of fate, the imagery of Baby Dunn is later used to chart California's demise. Newspapers use Baby Dunn's life to illustrate the timeline of California's demise in headlines including, "Every swimming pool in California to be drained before Baby Dunn is old enough to take a swimming lesson" and "Last Central Valley farm succumbs to salt: Baby Dunn, 18, never again to taste California produce" and "Berkeley hydrologists: without evacs Baby Dunn will die of thirst by 24" (Watkins 7). In the novel as in reality, this type of child-centric advertising does not produce the type of activism that can salvage humanity's relationship to the earth. Repeating this kind of child-based futurism failed to create a world that solved climate change or even assuaged its effects, and in the novel, this pattern reaches its necessary conclusion. Luz's later career as a model is presumably tied to her early infamy as Baby Dunn, so the sexual exploitation that she experiences as a fashion and advertising model is yet another parallel to the "rape" of California. Luz's symbolic connection to California as Baby Dunn is also part of the reason that she cannot leave it behind; the nation has failed both the land and Baby Dunn, letting them both sink into barren futility, sickness, and stagnation.

However, in the same way that Luz is tied to a dying land, unable to heal or move forward, Ig functions as a symbol of the land beyond Luz's time, within this moment of climate

change, when California was never anything but a wasteland. Ig's development does not seem to be typical of a child her age, but Luz cannot diagnose her and is indeed in denial that anything is different about Ig, "Luz saw Ig then as Lonnie must have: stunted and off, lopsided head, eyes lolling of their own accord. She had the hot urge to scream that there was nothing wrong with Ig. Nothing nothing nothing" (Watkins 70). Luz generally avoids thinking about Ig's development; her insistence on ignoring Ig's developmental differences mirror the uncertainty of illnesses that are caused by environmental toxins. The social pressure to raise a physically "perfect" child is evidenced in Luz's refusal to acknowledge Ig's difference. It also speaks to the possibility of human reproductive futurity in a world where children are born unwell; they symbolize the failing of the planet but also the failure of humanity to survive after toxifying and deteriorating their own environment.

The uncertainty of the effects of climate change or environmental damage on individuals is also an important idea here. Theorist of queer ecologies Nicole Seymour notes the way this phenomenon is captured by the film *Safe*, wherein a woman becomes ill for reasons that seem to be related to environmental toxins, but this causal relationship simply can't be proven (103). The subsequent atmosphere of paranoiac uncertainty is also seen in Luz's relationship with Ig; she does not know the child's past, she's never taken Ig to a doctor, she's never raised a child before and hasn't even seen one in years, and she simply can't be sure what, if anything, is different about Ig. The effects of climate change are similarly difficult to discern; without certainty, no action can be taken, encouraging behaviors that stymie in inertia. Luz can take no action to help Ig because she doesn't know what she needs to do, and she has no way of doing it. Luz's behavior again embodies the theories of Buell and Berlant. Without clear hope to solve a problem, there's really no point in taking steps to do so.



The failure of children to promote environmental futurity reflects the myopic individualism of the traditional family structure. Caring only for one's kin, for human children, is not a viable strategy to create environmental justice in a world that is already fundamentally altered by climate change. *GFC* also shows this in the failure of small communities to reach utopian goals or to create innovative societies beyond those which reproduce and rely on old systems. After leaving the starlet's mansion with Ray and Ig, Luz arrives at a small village of misfits run by Levi. This commune seems to form an ecofeminist utopia much like those seen in earlier science fiction texts. Despite living at the edge of the roving sand dune, Levi's found family lives sustainably, grows its own food, embraces open sexual practices and romantic relationships, shares childcare, and uses natural medicine. All of these practices are of course central to the ecofeminist traditions found in novels like Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. While Luz lived in a physical space of the past, Levi and the other villagers seem to be forward-looking, living off the land, thriving in a seemingly inhospitable environment by locating new ways of being.

Levi not only demonstrates new ways of living within their post-apocalyptic environment; he provides hope that nonhuman life can continue in California. When Luz and Ig arrive at Levi's colony, Levi shows Luz a bestiary he has created of strange animals he's found that have evolved to adapt themselves to their hostile environment. The importance of written tradition is central here: Levi's ability to draw and write this bestiary allows Luz and his other villagers to be inspired, to believe in a life they wouldn't otherwise have imagined. Levi claims these animals live in the desert and on the roving sand dune, contrary to the common knowledge that nothing can survive in the extreme heat and drought of this ruined land. The desert is so dangerous that it has gone unmapped; scientists and experts have not bothered to explore what is

truly out there (Watkins 121). Therefore, Levi's personal experience is pitted against objective scientific knowledge, exposing science as actually uninformed and incorrect in this space. Both Luz and the reader want desperately to believe Levi, to believe that the earth has indeed not been ruined beyond repair, that humanity had not wiped life off this part of the planet entirely. This bestiary gives Luz a mystical sort of hope, and gives Levi evidence that the desert is not uninhabited. Even though California has been evacuated, Levi and his village still live there, just as the animals Levi has seen still survive in a place most think of as already dead.

Soon after arriving, though, Luz realizes that Levi's utopian community is a sham. The village is not self-sustaining but actually survives by violently robbing Red Cross trucks to steal donated supplies, and Levi encourages members of his commune to become addicted to a mildly narcotic root that leaves them drugged into a false complacency. The reader feels just as duped as Luz but at the same time, it becomes terribly obvious to the reader that the hostile climate of the California desert could not support a village sustainably. As the rest of the novel has shown, the environment has been ruined beyond its ability to support human life or any kind of life at all,

Nature refused to offer herself to them. The water, the green, the mammalian, the tropical, the semitropical, the leafy, the verdant, the motherloving citrus, all of it was denied them and had been denied them so long that with each day, each project, it became more and more impossible to conceive of a time when it had not been denied them. The prospect of Mother Nature opening her legs and inviting Los Angeles back into her ripeness was, like the disks of water shimmering in the last foothill reservoirs patrolled by the National Guard, evaporating daily (Watkins 7).

Luz realizes that even Levi's bestiary is a lie, that Levi has not seen those amazingly evolved animals or any animals at all living in what remains of California. Indeed, the Californian apocalypse is complete, life there is over and humanity has failed to find a more productive way to live within nature.

With this realization, Luz's hope for the future of California is totally destroyed. She abandons Ig with Levi, and Luz and Ray decide to continue to immigrate east. However, Luz's failure to support Ig once more mirrors the failure of the land to support life, and Levi's community provided false hope but ultimately shows that humanity has not learned from its failure to settle sustainably in the West. As they drive away from Levi's commune, a sudden and unlikely rainstorm hits, creating a massive flood. Although rain has been needed in California for years and the heat and drought is what characterizes this apocalypse, this sudden deluge of rain is not healing but catastrophic. The water rises around the car. Seeing no future for California, the land, the people, the children, or herself, Luz commits suicide, letting herself be washed away in the cleansing waters that finally drench the land. Luz has lacked agency for herself throughout the entirety of her life: as Baby Dunn, she was used as a false advertisement for the environmental movement. In her pre-apocalypse career as a model, she was exploited and abused, derided for not being white enough (Watkins 167). Luz's identity as a woman of color further ties her to the land by relating her identity to the non-white Indigenous people of California. The West in particular has been conceived of as causing people to be identified with their sense of place (Worster 237). Living outside of Los Angeles with Ray, she follows him, making no decisions of her own. With Levi, she was drugged into complacency and duped into false hope. Just like the land, Luz is consistently exploited and her agency removed, there is no concern for the value of the land itself, nor for Luz's own value. Ray does survive, making it to the safety of the eastern United States, but as California dies, so must Luz; Baby Dunn finally succumbs to the same destruction that has ruined California. Losing Luz, the protagonist, feels more empathetic than simply mourning the land. Her embodied suicide allows the reader to fully grieve the land by feeling its failure more intensely.

Life goes on without Luz, however. Although Ray survives and moves across the United States into areas that are still habitable, California has been utterly discarded. There is no future for the land or for the people on it; climate change has totally ruined the possibility of an ecofeminist utopia or a return to the pastoral. There is no more life on the land, and there cannot be. In *Gold Fame Citrus*, the frontier hypothesis has been proven a failure, and this lesson has been learned at some cost: California, America's most utopian state and one that has been most constructed on the exploitation of the land and immigrants. In this way, the novel again references the piecemeal apocalypse of climate change and the way that individual weather catastrophes will affect only some regions, leaving others unharmed for a time. This acceptance of loss is another form of stagnation. While some areas will take the brunt of climate change damage, others will continue on in different ways. Luz's death mirrors the total loss of California, America's most utopian state, and this emphasizes the horror of resigning locations and lives to climate change.

*Gold Fame Citrus* argues against the perpetuation of this global neoliberalism by bringing that global scale into America's own, utopian backyard of California. Illustrating the sacrifice of America's most utopian state renders this global feudalism more evident and more personal than avoiding the sight of international weather catastrophe. By depicting what may come if society continues to ignore ecofeminist ideals, *Gold Fame Citrus* shows through repetition the failures of the systems we are currently endorsing. The novel shows us how easy it is to abandon utopian hope in the face of climate but also forces the reader to recognize the horrific tragedy of the destruction of Luz and of California. In so doing, the novel argues for utopian change, even when it is most difficult, and shows that heteronormative reproduction and capitalist consumption will only lead to a slow but total apocalypse.

### Chapter Three: Dead Citizenship in Climate Change Dystopia

In the previous chapter, I show that Claire Vaye Watkins' novel *Gold Fame Citrus* depicts a society that has failed to locate innovative lifestyles that oppose the continued destruction of climate change. Published in 2015, the same year as *GFC*, Edan Lepucki's *California* is another novel that indicts current systems of reproduction and capitalism. Both *GFC* and *California* are set in California during a late stage of climate change, and both depict characters who are trapped within the slow apocalypse theorized by Frederick Buell. Inside that apocalypse, characters languish with cruel optimism, perpetuating failed systems of capitalism and heteronormativity. By depicting this kind of anti-ecofeminist dystopia, Lepucki's *California* critiques heteronormative philosophy that promotes human reproduction and wealth creation over all else. The novel proves that abandoning society to protect one's biological family is no solution to a climate change that requires human cooperation with each other and with the land.

The fact that *California*, *Gold Fame Citrus*, and *Black Wave* (discussed in the next chapter) were all published within two years speaks to the urgency that writers see in the issue of climate change. These novels represent a resurgence in concerns that have troubled ecofeminist writers since the 1970s. All three of these dystopian novels present the problems with contemporary society: environmental degradation, repressive gender roles, and societies that fail to adapt. They highlight the continued need for an environmental philosophy that rejects heteronormativity and capitalist consumption to instead promote redistributed values among humans, nonhuman beings, and the land. As these novelists illustrate the cruel optimism of climate change, the tempting tendency to do nothing as the environment slowly declines, they use science fiction as a means of countering that same predisposition. Dystopian science fiction

shows us the perilous paths we are on, and in so doing, demands that we seek alternative ways of being.

The similarities between *California* and *Gold Fame Citrus* in particular are striking: both novels show that the repetition of isolated heteronormativity will only perpetuate climate change. But the novels take issue with different elements of environmental philosophy. While *Gold Fame Citrus* invokes an inversion of the settlement of the American West by evacuating California, Lepucki's novel reveals the fallacy of environmental philosophies that are masculinist and isolationist.

In Lepucki's novel, California in 2050 is experiencing many effects of environmental damage that are only beginning to surface in the reader's time. Dystopian fiction is especially apt for tales that extrapolate contemporary problems to show the future dangers of their perpetuation. *California* does extrapolate, but the novel's setting is only thirty-five years removed from its publication date, emphasizing the warning to the reader that climate change could create serious issues *soon*. Cities are crumbling, ecosystems and societies are deteriorating, "L.A.'s chewed-up streets or its shuttered stores and its sagging houses. All those dead lawns...the closed movie theaters and restaurants, and the parks growing wild with their abandonment...its people starving on the sidewalks, covered in piss and crying out...the murder rate increased every year, and the petty theft was as ubiquitous as the annoying gargle of leaf blowers had once been" (Lepucki 12). Paper currency is useless, antibiotics are ineffective, and food and gasoline are scarce. Extensive privatization has excluded the poor from services like ambulances and emergency rooms. When a catastrophic snowstorm decimates the entirety of Ohio, people in other areas of the United States can do nothing and must simply accept that everyone who lived there is most likely dead; they make no effort to seek out survivors or even investigate the extent of the

damage, simply writing the area off as a lost sacrifice zone (Lepucki 211). While *GFC* shows a destroyed California abandoned by the United States, Lepucki's novel depicts the way that other parts of the country could be impacted and abandoned by sporadic weather catastrophes, illustrating Buell's slow apocalypse.

Unlike in *GFC*, Lepucki's California is not evacuated; the entire state begins to fall apart slowly. Los Angeles is extremely dangerous and unstable, so main characters Frida and Cal decide to abandon the city. Their exodus requires some amount of privilege; not everyone has the resources or the wilderness training to live outside of society. The ability of this couple to opt out of what the rest of society is experiencing recalls the way that wilderness experiences are primarily consumed by affluent whites (National Park Service). While Luz's brown body in *Gold Fame Citrus* was tied to and died in the desert, Frida has the ability to enact a climate change-based white flight from the city she previously inhabited.

Frida and Cal's desire to take refuge in a solitary cabin the woods is an attempt to retreat into the pastoral fantasy of (white) American pioneers, alone in the wilderness. This abandonment of city life recalls the idealized myths of cowboys and pioneers, who moved into the Western United States to find a refreshed and invigorating life with the land (Sands 293). Those early American settlers believed that urban areas could not provide the pastoral unity with nature that rhetorically categorized the settlement of America, so their physical movement embodied their belief in the isolated individual life within nature that was fundamental to American ideology (Kolodny 114). In some ways, Frida and Cal's pastoral retreat refers to the primitivism of earlier ecofeminist texts, wherein a return to nature signified a utopian possibility for environmental and social justice. Le Guin, for example, showed the matriarchal possibilities of a return to nature as a new way of settling the wilderness in harmony with nature instead of

outside of it. But *California* does not portray Frida and Cal's move into the woods as utopian, ecofeminist or otherwise. Instead, the novel veers into dystopia, as the couple embraces an outmoded environmental philosophy that focuses on the masculine individual alone in nature, rather than a social ecofeminism. Frida soon finds that living an isolated life in the wilderness is simply not possible for women, and the novel thereby critiques the isolationism and the fetishization of the myth American West as ideologies that are ultimately masculine and antisocial and therefore without utopian possibility.

Lepucki's novel ultimately shows that this pastoral isolation is not only the providence of white people, but of white men exclusively. In the novel, Frida's husband Cal was the one who decided they should move into the woods, and his decision was heavily influenced by his education at an alternative college called Plank. Plank was a place where men lived together, learning survival skills and sustainable farming practices, learning to become someone "who could live without women, who could work a farm, who could live in the past" (Lepucki 81). The men at Plank also studied the philosophies of transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose ideas of masculine nature clearly influenced the educational philosophy there. Thoreau believed that "wilderness symbolized the unexplored qualities and untapped capacities of every individual," and that the primitive nature of man is something that could only be accessed by time alone in the wilderness (Nash 89). Plank is an institution formed on a pastoralism that is fundamentally backward-looking, anti-utopian, and patriarchal, which embodies the ecofeminist critique that "the very notion of 'wilderness' depends on a gendered frontier nostalgia" (Hunt 41). These ideas are deeply backwards-looking, stemming from a patriarchal American philosophy that saw nature as a masculinizing, healthy place to restore one's energy, away from the corrupting and effeminizing impacts of urbanity (Nash 152). While



Plank taught men that they should be able to go alone into the wilderness and survive without the help of anyone else, this very American idea is an isolating impulse that rejects the idea of community altogether: “its utopianism has been of the personal, conscientious, and unsystematic kind” (Purdy 147). This individualized natural philosophy is opposed to widespread social change, as it is a philosophy that actually opposes society itself.

Cal’s time at Plank influences his understanding of wilderness and human society, and this belief in a cleansing and separate nature influences his desire to move into the woods to escape the disintegrating city. Cal, like the philosophers he studied at Plank, sees the wilderness as a restorative place for himself. Rather than an ecology of its own, Cal’s perspective of wilderness is utterly human-centric; he’s convinced that “there was a better world beyond than the one they knew. It was untouched; it had to be” (Lepucki 74). Cal’s misguided belief in an untouched, virgin land shows that he has fully bought into the pastoral fantasies of transcendentalism and the idea that the wilderness has the ability to restore humanity to an individual, while city life drained a person of their connection to nature, themselves, and the divine. At the same time, Cal imagines nature as a hostile, separate entity that opposes human presence, “This was a brutal wilderness where people did what they had to in order to survive” (Lepucki 299). This adversarial perspective of nature supports a boundary between humanity and the “rest of” nature. Only through survival in and dominance of nature can a man prove himself and restore himself to full masculinity.

Frida does not view nature as exclusively hostile or opposed to her, as she thinks, “In the woods, there were many mysteries...she loved the hushed quality of her steps along the path—Cal was religious about keeping it clear—and the sounds of the earth groaning...If she listened closely, she could make out all the different kinds of birdsong: the beseeching, the joyful, the

forlorn” (Lepucki 78). While Frida’s attunement to nature could be read as an ecofeminist expression of her connection to the natural world, her experience of nature as apart from her, as a religious experience that she can only observe, actually removes her from nature. This sense of nature as a cathedral recalls American philosophers like John Muir, who believed that nature retreats were a way to connect with the divine. Conservation, the environmental philosophy molded on the transcendental and sublime ideas perpetuated by Thoreau and Muir, was not a useful solution to climate change, and in fact deepened the divide between human/culture/civilization and nature. In that way, Frida’s sublime view of nature does not contradict the views that Cal acquired at Plank.

In her internal monologues, Frida does critique the philosophies she and Cal base their lives on, but these thoughts remain private and she continually defers to Cal’s wishes. She once directly considers the possibility that she and Cal are simply repeating the mistakes of the American past, thinking that they

could have been pioneers, hitching their covered wagons, staking claim on a new frontier. Manifest destiny bullshit. Or the opposite...the land outside wasn’t wild and uncharted, something to fear until conquered. No, the earth was to be respected. Only then would it collaborate with you, tell you what it needed and what it was willing to give. And it was willing to give you a lot, if you knew how to ask. It was a lesson in coaxing (Lepucki 26).

This recognition recalls the frontier hypothesis that *Gold Fame Citrus* so aptly critiqued. Frida seems to have learned some lesson from history, but she still believes that she and Cal could live apart from society and with the land. They cling to the outmoded individualistic environmental philosophies of Thoreau and Muir, philosophies which led to the parceling and segmenting of nature apart from humanity.

Cal and Frida’s environmental philosophies ultimately strengthen the binary between human and nature, a false depiction of humanity as separate from an outside wilderness,

regardless of whether that wilderness is depicted as an untamable enemy or a redemptive, healthy force. Only a person who lives within a myth of wilderness built up by a society that ultimately supports and protects the individual could conceive of the wilderness as a redemptive, nurturing space (Nash 25). The way that these environmental philosophies enact binaries between human and nature does not connect women and nature, as in ecofeminist theory, but men and nature in opposition to women, queer people, and civilization. This individualistic environmental philosophy at once strengthens the binary between nature and humanity, while also dividing individuals from society, making it the practical opposite to ecofeminism, which seeks to unify human society and emphasize its embeddedness in nature. It places male individuals in opposition to nonhuman life, nature, women, and society. Upholding these binaries is the first step to human isolation and exclusion from each other and to the ecosystem that caused the exploitation of the West and led to climate change.

Because these environmental philosophies are grounded in individualism, they do not recognize the need for a communal society that would be able to support other people, women, or children. *California* emphasizes its critique of this individualism by depicting a regression in gender norms in the novel. When Cal and Frida move into the woods, they become more entrenched in their gender roles. This regression happens on a smaller scale in *GFC*; although it is not shown to be systematic, Luz lacks agency throughout the novel, and has difficulty making decisions for forward progress for herself. Ray's to-do lists always include Luz as one of his tasks; he is in charge of caring for her, procuring food, deciding what they'll do with their day (Watkins 18). But this concession of female agency is much more marked in *California*, which is set in 2050, a time that is close enough to the reader's that we may assume feminism has progressed similarly in the novel's universe. As the slow apocalypse began, though, humans

begin to cling to former lifestyles, no matter how harmful. The natural world seems to validate the outmoded gender stereotypes that Frida and Cal exhibited before leaving L.A., and Frida even comes to see them as natural, “Frida thought that the worse things got, the more women lost what they’d worked so hard to gain. No one cared about voting rights and equal pay because everyone was too busy lighting fires to stay warm and looking for food to stay alive. ‘It’s like the only thing that matters anymore is upper-body strength,’ she complained, ‘Brute force’” (Lepucki 66). Frida here rather grimly concedes to biological essentialism, claiming that feminism is based largely on society’s ability to keep people comfortable enough to seek equality.

Although Frida’s acquiescence to the gendered division of labor has a tinge of bitterness in it, neither she nor Cal really includes gender equality in the establishment of their solitary ecotopia. They do not discuss gender; they simply divide the chores and do them accordingly. This “antiquated division of labor” is validated by the only other people Cal and Frida meet out in the woods, their neighbors, Sandy and Bo Miller (Lepucki 66). Whenever Cal and Frida visit, Bo talks with Cal about hunting, trapping, and security, while Sandy talks with Frida about foraging and her period, “‘Sandy will show you how to hunt [chanterelles],’ Bo said to Frida. The subtext being: I hunt, You, Woman, shall gather” (Lepucki 30). Here, Frida’s neighbors vindicate her adherence to biological essentialism, and in so doing, they also validate the Thoreauvian masculinity of living in the wilderness. Despite their efforts to live alone as a family unit in the wilderness, though, the Millers ultimately commit suicide. Their failure to live alone highlights the failure of isolation from society. The lack of social support removes equity from the relationships: without society, the novel suggests, women cannot thrive equally, and

therefore, no group of people can. This grim outlook on wilderness living exposes the masculine orientation of transcendentalism and wilderness environmentalisms.

When Frida realizes she is pregnant, Frida's body itself becomes a place of gendered dispute. Cal at first disbelieves Frida when she tells him she is pregnant (Lepucki 105). His disbelief in Frida's experience of her body recalls the historical way that medicine has ignored, silenced, and mistreated women (Samulowitz). While Cal believes the child is a boy, Frida believes it is a girl, which highlights the distance between them as well as Cal's failure to believe what Frida knows about her own body (Lepucki 335). Feeling that he has authority over Frida's body and their child, Cal uses her pregnancy as another way to control her, as he insists she eat her vegetables after she, child-like, says she hates them, "Already the possibility of their unborn child was exerting its influence. It needed the nutrients" (Lepucki 67). Cal's desire to override Frida's bodily autonomy is yet another expression of the problematic nature of individualism in the novel. His overreaching onto her body, onto her womb, as his own property can also be read as a metaphor for American expansion into the West. Cal couches his desire for control over her body in terms of a paternalistic protectiveness, hinting at the ecofeminist critique of a patriarchy that insists men should dominate and subdue women's bodies and the land. Although Frida has heretofore been complicit in their recreation of patriarchal gender roles, her pregnancy gives Cal more reason to assert himself over her.

Frida's pregnancy forces a realization in the couple that their wilderness solitude is not sustainable: Thoreau's vision of pastoral isolation does not include children. Frida cannot imagine a way to raise children without a society around them; she worries about the medical realities of giving birth, the social isolation, and the possibility of keeping children healthy on her own. Many ecofeminist thinkers posited that women's reproductive function was one of the

major factors in their alignment with nature; because woman bear children, they embody nature's ability to create life, and this biological capacity means they are closer to nature, more animalistic (Griffin). The fact of biological reproduction proves the impossibility of a fully masculinized nature; a lone man in nature cannot create a future for humanity. This individualistic logic is therefore inherently fallacious, a dream for only a privileged few to encounter, not a sustainable philosophy for humanity to follow. Frida's desire to find a society to help her raise her child then speaks to the idea of an ecofeminist utopia. She does not want to return to the decaying remnants of L.A., but she needs more than Cal to help her family survive. Their unborn child becomes a signifier of futurity, as Frida thinks to herself, "Because that's what moms did, right? They chose to believe the future was good. To assume otherwise was to participate in a kind of despair" (Lepucki 341). Being pregnant gives Frida a previously lost utopian sentiment; she has to hope for something more for her unborn child in a way that echoes environmentalism's use of children as signifiers of a future and of the need to work towards a better tomorrow (see chapter two).

Frida does not imagine or hope for an ecofeminist utopia specifically, but she does hope for a group of likeminded individuals who might share their pastoral fantasy of wilderness living. Frida and Cal journey to an isolated village not far from their cabin to seek out the community Frida has realized that she needs. The village they find is protected by a labyrinth of gigantic, dangerous, imposing spikes, formed by the villagers out of metal scrap to ward off intruders. The Spikes seem an ominous and phallic warning to a couple who is seeking an ecotopian community for their budding family. They also recall the Landscape of Thorns depicted in *Gold Fame Citrus* that are erected as warnings against the nuclear depository at Yucca Mountain, which Watkins describes as "pan-cultural, pre-linguistic, post-linguistic, ominous and

repellent...It evinces the repository site as a non-place” (Watkins 220). These installations are based on historical fact, as world leaders considered using similar sculptures to warn future generations of the dangers of stored radioactive waste. Historically, the installations were modeled “so that anyone might understand them: the foreigner, the illiterate, the alien. Large spikes had been one suggestion. In a thousand years, the message had to be clear, so that people understood what had been left there” (Lepucki 70). The Spikes are meant to protect future generations from something their ancestors had done to ruin the land and make it truly toxic for anything that encounters it; in this way, they function as yet another method for falsely sectioning off environmental harm in sacrifice zones. Although the Spikes *might* keep people away from the nuclear storage site, there is no way to be sure that humans will get the message, and there’s certainly no way to ward off nonhuman life from those toxic areas. There’s also no way to restore a land that has been so thoroughly destroyed by radiation.

In Lepucki’s novel, the village uses the Spikes to protect itself by manipulating the myth of uninhabited land. By using a warning that was invented to signify that the land was uninhabited for a specific and fatal reason, the village protects the people who do live there. These phallic symbols of warning and violence surround the community, and their toxic connotation foreshadows the impossibility of futurity in this village in a way that mirrors the impossibility of isolating one part of the environment away from any other. Just as Yucca Mountain could never truly keep nuclear waste away from anything on or in the land, the Spikes serve as a warning that this village too is not fully isolated from the consequences of climate change. Although Frida hopes this village will be the supportive community her family needs, the Spikes warn the reader that this village is not that place. Although the village behind the Spikes pretends to be environmentally sustainable, it is not; the Spikes therefore recall the

history of Yucca Mountain by providing another example of the impossibility of isolating oneself against environmental harm. In this way, the Spikes in *California* and in *Gold Fame Citrus* critique the impulse of protecting an individual rather than the collective whole, including nonhumans and the land.

The community hidden behind the Spikes is succinctly named The Land, and similar to Levi's commune in *Gold Fame Citrus*, it proves the impossibility of a utopian ecofeminist commune in the era of climate change. The Land is housed in a ghost town that was once repurposed as a Wild West theme park, which critiques the American West. The vision of the American West that has been produced in the American cultural imagination is neither true nor productive. An amusement park based on this imagined version of the West exposes histories that glorify the rugged individuality of the cowboy and the outlaw while ignoring the oppression and exploitation required to build that myth.

The leader of The Land is Frida's brother and Cal's former classmate at Plank, Micah. Just as the Spikes are a warning against the village, Micah's past at Plank is also concerning, as he was raised on the same failed philosophies of isolation and self-sustainability as Cal. If a reader is wary of a community run by a Plank alumnus, their fears are proven correct when The Land's first utopian appearance is proven false. Though the villagers practice some farming and chore-sharing, they cling to outmoded ideals of gender and sexuality: only men are allowed to work with the security team, and The Land only includes heterosexuals (Lepucki 285, 339). Although the village purportedly runs by consensus, which is an ecofeminist as well as a utopian practice, their leader is a man who consistently withholds vital information from the community, which really invalidates their sense of communal decision-making.



Despite displaying some communal values, The Land is isolationist at heart, to the extent that children are not allowed on the compound. This strikes Cal as ominous, “A place that banned children had to have a streak of insidiousness at its center” (Lepucki 213). As it turns out, the absence of children on The Land is another hint at the sinister nature of this seemingly utopian society. Just as Levi’s commune in *Gold Fame Citrus* only survived by raiding Red Cross supply lines, The Land’s sustainability is also a farce. Unbeknownst to the villagers, Micah obtains the town’s supplies not from trading with likeminded villages, as he claims. Instead, Micah sells the children born in The Land to villainous company towns in exchange for supplies, even extravagant luxuries like cocoa powder that are not actually necessary to life in the commune. Although it exists in a physical space outside of society, The Land still depends on and contributes to the very destructive systems its inhabitants believe they have escaped. Their inability to actually live in tune with their environment shows that there is no escape from overarching systems of environmental capitalist destruction. Viewing children as a commodity emphasizes the injustice of an environmental philosophy that prioritizes individual men over any other being. The removal of children from The Land also reveals the extreme lack of futurity possible in this kind of lifestyle. It is the natural endpoint of a philosophy founded on living as a lone man in the wilderness: there is no future, and no society, in that value system. Although Frida and Cal attempted to leave behind a dangerous and destructive society, they end up in a place that even more egregiously rejects their values.

Because children are not allowed on The Land, Frida is expelled from the village when she reveals she is pregnant. Cal and Frida fail to locate a way of living for themselves that is truly outside of society. Masculine environmental philosophy failed them alone in the woods, as they had no supporting community to help with childbirth and care. Even The Land, so similar in

many ways to the utopian small communities imagined by ecofeminist writers like Butler and Le Guin, fails to imagine a way to exist that is not totally dependent on the destructive capitalism and harmful gender roles that led to apocalypse in the first place. This novel, like *Gold Fame Citrus*, shows that social isolation and individualism is no solution to creating a future within climate change.

Left with no options, Frida's brother and Cal's classmate Micah makes a deal that allows Frida and Cal to move into a company town called Pine. Company towns are gated communities that are owned, operated, and regulated by large corporations like Amazon. Everyone who lives in such a town works for that corporation and is at the mercy of their employer: currencies are limited to the town's amenities, individuals are not free to come and go as they please and are constantly monitored, and arbitrary communal standards are enforced. Company towns have always been an ominous presence in science fiction, in novels like Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (see chapter five). They reflect the dangers of increased privatization that is the hallmark of neoliberalism. In *California*, living in cities is dangerously chaotic: looters and squatters proliferate, access to food and services is restricted, and the government does not or cannot help. Therefore, personal safety can only be secured in company towns, where employment allows you to remove yourself from the outside world and be protected by corporate armies. Company towns like Pine are yet another attempt to isolate oneself away from apocalypse, but this security is only partial and temporary at best. It's also an illusion: within these towns, the fear of being expelled from the safety of the community compels extreme conformity to these social standards. In this way, dystopian corporate towns function as an extreme version of the stereotypical fears of the American suburbs. Towns like Pine are extreme examples of privatization and capitalism, and the complete opposite of the idyllic isolation in

nature that Frida and Cal sought in the beginning of the novel. These nightmarish extreme versions of the suburbs are seen as traps, yet Frida and Cal eventually join one.

Company towns are extremely capitalist, anti-environment, and anti-feminist. Pine is known for upholding strict and traditional gender roles and “was supposed to remind you of a bygone world that no one living had seen firsthand” (Lepucki 377). The whole Community is built for families of a specific type: men who work while the women stay home (Lepucki 384). In Pine, traditional American family models are repeated, recreating a society that has already failed. In their insistence on relying on old ways of living, they create a failing facsimile, desperately clinging to the past as the present becomes more insecure and unsafe. But Pine and the towns like it are only sorry recreations of a fantastical past; although the community has electricity, it also has rolling brownouts, showing how desperately unsustainable this lifestyle still is. Climate change has given this society no way to look forward, no future to work toward, so instead this community simply recreates past ways of living, trying desperately to retain some sense of security. The lack of social imagination means that they cannot escape outmoded ways of being and will continue to live in an unsustainable fashion until the world slowly peters out; this includes their reliance on outmoded gender roles.

Despite the fact that Pine symbolizes everything they attempted to escape in their move into the wilderness, Frida’s pregnancy forces her and Cal to accept this place of social regression. At Pine, Cal and Frida must take on new identities, and Cal’s new name is Gray (Lepucki 380). This name change shows the hopelessness of their move as a symbol of the failure of utopian California to thrive. To support their nuclear family, they feel compelled to contribute to the systems that cause the environmental and social harm that caused them to flee into the woods in the first place. They fail to find kin within their environment and to understand

their place in the world beyond repeating the family structures with which they are comfortable. Rather than locating an ethics based on the value of nonhuman life, nonliving things, the land, *and* humanity, these characters only prioritize themselves. Frida begins to think of her family “as special: separate from the rest of the world with all its attendant suffering and corruption” (Lepucki 388). The false borders of Pine allow individuals to strengthen the fantasy of boundaries between each other and between human and nature. Pine gives them a sense that they are sequestered away from the dangers of the outside world, and even Frida gives into this fantasy.

By continuing in a harmful and outmoded lifestyle rather than attempting new ways of being, Frida perpetuates these harmful institutions even longer and is more complicit in them. The novel’s end finds Cal working for the corporation while Frida sits at home alone, “Her job was not to ask any questions. She and the child, they would stay here” (Lepucki 389). Her life in the town is a nightmarish caricature of the feminine mystique; she is trapped, isolated in the home, barely speaks to anyone, and has nothing to do but tend house and wait for her husband to return from work. She embodies the lifestyle that occurred in Zoline’s “The Heat Death of the Universe” (see chapter two). Knowing the apocalyptic ending of that story gives the conclusion of this novel an even more terrifying feeling. This cartoonish regression to a suburban nightmare is even more shocking compared to the way that Frida and Cal first aspired to live: alone and sustainably in the woods, away from the harmful institutions of Los Angeles. Her acquiescence to this lifestyle is repeatedly attributed to her desire to protect her unborn child. Despite the fact that ecofeminist utopias frequently made childcare a major element of their innovative principles, sharing labor, opening their families, and loving all the children in the community, Frida is unable to locate or create that type of society and instead reverts to a former type of

society, one that is most characterized by the American 1950s, an exact century away from Frida's own time. Despite giving in to her own oppression, Frida thinks to herself, "She and Cal, they were lucky. Frida knew she was thinking only of her own family, that she had begun to see them as special: separate from the rest of the world with all its attendant suffering and corruption. Maybe it was wrong, but it was the choice she had made" (Lepucki 388). Frida is tragically trapped in a system she despises. In that way, the novel's project is the same as that of *Gold Fame Citrus* and "The Heat Death of the Universe." Each text shows the way that acquiescing to stagnant and oppressive systems results in the demise of a female character as an extension of the world.

The novel's dystopian conclusion critiques the cruel optimism of climate change: repeating comfortable systems can never result in a future for an individual, no matter how hard they try to isolate themselves from the death of the rest of the world. While Los Angeles itself is destroyed, unsafe, and sick, Cal and Frida can temporarily avoid those problems for the time being. They have the privilege and the money to look away from the destruction climate change has brought to much of California. However, the reader knows the extent of the destruction outside the walls of Pine, and therefore knows the immorality, falseness, and precarity of Cal and Frida's security. The social regression in the novel is a last grasp for the security of the American past, but the grim and tragic ending for Cal and Frida shows that these backwards-looking repetitions are no solution. Though Frida gains (temporary) protection for her unborn child, she loses her freedom and her principles. She also loses her partnership with Cal, which was the focus of her world when they lived in the wilderness. This is ultimately a tragic end for Frida, one that exposes the failure of utopian thinking in the contemporary imagination. Having regressed to the role of a housewife trapped in the feminine mystique and utterly alone, Frida is

futureless to a 2015 reader. Her acceptance of her erasure mirrors the way that Luz lets herself slip away into the floodwaters. Although Frida does not die, and indeed is hosting a new life, her life as an individual with agency and forward motion is over. In this way, Lepucki's novel shows that heteronormative values are apocalyptic, that they destroy everything from the environment, to society, to individual humans.

Read together, *California* and *Gold Fame Citrus* are examples of dystopian responses to an ecofeminist sentiment that is depicted as no longer workable in an era of climate change. Both novels demonstrate the difficulty of locating utopia in an era of climate change, as well as the fallacy of an ethos of individualism and human isolation as a solution to that problem. While ecofeminist utopias like Le Guin's require an apocalyptic event to wipe the slate clean for utopian possibility, Luz and Frida live in a slow, piecemeal apocalypse that does not eliminate systems of capitalism and oppression from their lives; these systems remain, tainting even the small communities that are oftentimes the ecofeminist utopian solution to apocalypse. These dystopias also showcase environments that are too far gone; the natural environment and human society are both degraded beyond utopian hope. Society in these novels is unable to look forward to find innovative solutions that will allow for survival within climate change. Instead, both Luz and Frida look backward for solutions to climate change, trying to cling to outmoded luxuries and retreating into masculine isolation. But the two novels show that one cannot ignore or run away from climate change. These novels align with queer ecologies to suggest that without innovative ways of thinking, without moving beyond stale ideologies, humanity cannot survive a global crisis that impacts all parts of the Earth's ecology. Society must begin to value something other than reproductive futurity and human progress; until that time, humans will comfortably sit within their slow and piecemeal apocalypse, becoming further entrenched in dystopia.

#### Chapter Four: Queering the Apocalypse: Urban Dreams of Utopia

The dystopian texts in the previous chapters illustrate the absence of utopian possibility when regressive social and environmental systems dominate people's lives. Because the characters in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California* embrace oppressive ideals of gender, family, society, capitalism, and environmentalism, they are unable to replace the harmful institutions that caused and sustain the apocalypse they inhabit. While still operating in the dystopian mode, Michelle Tea's 2016 novel *Black Wave* imagines characters who oppose those institutions to instead model queer ways of living that restore the utopian possibility of apocalypse. Michelle Tea is a contemporary activist and author of fiction and autobiography on the topics of sex work, queer identity, and feminism. Published the year after Watkins' and Lepucki's novels, Tea's *Black Wave* offers a compelling alternative to the failures delineated in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California*.

*Black Wave* responds to the challenge of climate change change by locating a post-apocalyptic utopia not in a practical and pastoral society that has returned to nature, but in fleeting moments of joy, connection, and hope that are found only by inhabiting a queer and urban space. Unlike ecofeminist utopias that rely on matriarchal small societies that live sustainably with the land, Michelle Tea's novel promotes a queerness that rejects both reproductive futurity and the idea of a separate natural world. The novel's main character, who is also named Michelle, does not seek a way to support a human community alongside the earth. Her disinterest in the reproductive capacity of both women and the land allows for utopian hope that does not require the repetition of those two modes of production. Rather than looking back to model a utopian society on indigenous past societies, as Le Guin did, Tea finds hope in looking beyond traditional ways of living. Heteronormativity and exploitation of the land are two

sins that *GFC* and *California* identified as reasons for climate change; by abandoning those two institutions, *Black Wave* locates a utopia that looks beyond humanity's past mistakes.

*Black Wave* moves post-apocalyptic fiction toward an ethic of queer ecologies that values non-relations as kin. Protagonist Michelle is a strange amalgamation of fiction and autobiography. Like the author, *Black Wave*'s Michelle is a white queer woman; like the author, Michelle moves from a small northeastern town to California. A migration out of the rural northeastern United States into the relative safety of urban California recalls a cultural tradition that shows Californian cities as gay American meccas; like so many Americans, fictional Michelle finds a utopia of acceptance, social progress, and community in San Francisco. She does not pursue wealth, progress, and individual success. Instead, she and her friends inhabit a queer lifestyle that is low income, diverse, nonmonogamous, and centered on pleasure and desire. In San Francisco, Michelle lives in a large house with many other queer women, not with a biological family unit. They create a found family of queer women that means so much to Michelle that when she must move to L.A. away from her friends, she feels "profoundly cut off from herself" (Tea 170).

Unlike the straight women in *GFC* and *California*, whose primary romantic relationships constitute their entire isolated society, Michelle's identity is supported by her large and diverse community. Michelle and her friends reject normative values by believing in astrology, a typically feminized belief system that is patently anti-science (Tea 49). Michelle also practices open sexuality; although she attempts to reproduce homonormative monogamy with her girlfriend Andy, she is unable to maintain that type of relationship (Tea 50). She cannot reproduce the type of hetero- or even homonormative relationship that creates the American Dream of a nuclear family, founded on marriage, reproduction, and wealth creation. Michelle



feels some guilt about her failure to be monogamous with Andy, but this residual shame does not reverberate throughout the novel. Instead, Michelle and her friends embrace their way of life even as it opposes the traditional American values that constitute the idea of success that permeates Californian mythos. In her refusal to repeat the failed lifestyles of the American Dream, Michelle's story can give the reader a perspective on more diverse social problems.

Michelle's female-oriented life recalls earlier female utopias like Marge Piercy's 1976 science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, or even the much earlier *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This long utopian tradition of voluntary and successful female isolation explores how a feminine society might succeed where patriarchy has historically failed. Michelle's rejection of the capitalist pursuit of wealth also mirrors early ecofeminist novels that modeled different systems that promote bartering, sharing, and communal resources. But unlike many of these earlier female utopias that centered on women living alongside nature, Michelle's feminized world does not rely on ecofeminist tenets like socialized childcare or sustainable environmental practices. It is queer, hedonistic, and pleasure-oriented. Children and nature are not a part of Michelle's community. Michelle's lifestyle models the notion supported by theorists of queer ecologies that "reproductive life as we normatively imagine it (insemination, growth, birth and rebirth, etc.) is not the only kind of vitality to be found in any given ecosystem, and...interactions between the human and the non-human might be reclaimed as erotic, and as queer, in the most positive of senses" (Seymour 168). For theorists of queer ecologies, thinking beyond human reproduction means that humanity can see value in other parts of experience and the world; only in so doing can humanity locate an ecological justice that would allow humanity to survive climate change, necessarily alongside other species and nonliving things on Earth. Michelle's existence in a queer and urban space is the first step to deprioritizing human

reproduction as the central endeavor of humanity, and it also allows the novel to examine a blurring of boundaries between genders and species.

Michelle's queer female utopia is located in California in the 1990s. In the fictional world of the novel, climate change has been accelerated to create an alternative speculative history that includes many of the same phenomena of late capitalism and climate change that characterize twenty-first century America: gentrification, food scarcity, social upheaval, and the gradual extinction of nonhuman life. Although the effects of climate change are extrapolated in the novel, the nineties were in fact a time of increasing concern for climate change: the first major conference on the greenhouse effect occurred in 1985, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was formed in 1988, and in 1990, the IPCC released a report confirming the warming of the planet by .5 degrees Celsius. As research in climate science progressed, mainstream Americans began to hear about the threat of climate change, so the novel's setting in the 1990s reflects the beginnings of that cultural shift.

Setting the novel in the past further disrupts and queers Michelle's environment by creating a different California than the one that is familiar to the reader. Contemporary utopian elements of California characterize the state as an environmentally "pure" natural area alongside clean, wealthy cities with rainbow-painted crosswalks. As a hub of science, technology, and academia, the state seems to be a beacon of progressive politics and environmental policies. But the California in Tea's novel is not attuned to nature, and the nature that does exist is thoroughly toxified and degraded. Although it is a social sanctuary of queerness for Michelle, she is not involved with politics or social activism, and she does not seek any solution to the impending doom that threatens to consume California.

Michelle lives in both San Francisco and Los Angeles in the novel, but her experience of both cities opposes the traditional contemporary understanding of those locations as utopian spaces where people go to pursue fame, wealth, technological innovation, social progress, or environmental harmony. Michelle works at a bookstore making very low wages. This low income lifestyle would be nearly impossible in 2019, as costs of living in San Francisco continue to skyrocket (Pogash). The novel's portrayal of San Francisco in the nineties is of a place that is gritty and diverse, where people of all types can scrounge up a living to read poetry in dirty dive bars. This gritty queer utopia opposes the urban utopia of the American cultural imagination, where cleanliness, safety, and wealth would be more welcome than drugs and chaos. Nearly thirty years later after the novel is set, San Francisco is not only more deeply gentrified but it has also become a location that typifies a severe homonormativity in a way that emphasizes white, gay, wealthy men as the most socially acceptable form of queerness. By depicting a past California, Tea emphasizes that the California of the present could no longer support the type of utopia that Michelle pursues.

Michelle's experience in Los Angeles also differs from the common perception of that city. One would normally expect a writer like Michelle to view Hollywood as the place to attain wealth, recognition, and opportunity. But for Michelle, Los Angeles is the epitome of a cultural space that can never be meaningful or authentic and that could never articulate her experience (Tea 72). Michelle has no desire to participate in the cinematic propaganda that validates the traditional ways of thinking that oppress her and indeed caused the apocalypse. Her move to Los Angeles also means she leaves behind her core group of friends that compromise her found family; alone and isolated, she becomes sick with severe alcoholism. As her body deteriorates, so does the world around her; in L.A., she witnesses mass suicides and chaos. For Michelle, Los

Angeles is dystopian, a horrific inversion of the Hollywood dream that dominates the American perception of the city.

While many ecofeminist texts tie women's bodies to nature, Michelle's queer female body is tied to urban spaces instead. Traditional American environmentalism saw the wilderness as a masculinizing, revitalizing force that could counteract the effeminate, sickening, weakening, civilizing effects of city life. Environmental critic Roderick Nash identifies the roots of this correlation succinctly, "The spectacle of barbaric hordes sweeping down on a moribund and effete Roman Empire permanently impressed Western thought with the idea that virile manliness and wildness were closely linked" (Nash 152). Throughout the Roosevelt years, then, white men with means fled to the wilderness as a form of recreation that could restore their masculinity. This tradition of the unhealthiness of the city later reappeared in the phenomenon of "white flight," perpetuating the idea that urban areas are unsafe, immoral, and unhealthy, causing white families of means to abscond to the suburbs (Kye). This isolating impulse is a symptom of the individualistic capitalism that vindicated the expansion of the American West, as Americans continually moved into the wilderness seeking a clean slate and a more hopeful future. This expansion and isolation are two causes of the climate change depicted in these dystopian novels, and these ideologies are indicted through failed repetition in both *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California*. While Luz created a family with Ray in the ruins of a remade California wilderness and Frida and Cal played heteronormative house in the woods outside of Los Angeles, Michelle refuses to enact a "white flight" out of urban space and into the safety of the suburbs. She does not isolate herself away from society to flee its destruction; instead, she remains there to witness the consequences of humanity's pursuit of wealth and expansion. Michelle does not look away; she does not try to hide from or escape the consequences of the American dream. By

disconnecting the female body from the “natural” wilderness, *Black Wave* refuses to link female bodies to untouched, virgin land. In a time when climate change has irrevocably altered the nonhuman environment, such a link would mean the necessary destruction of both women and nature, as is shown in both *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California*.

Michelle’s queer and urban social location also allows her to embrace community and society in a way that indicts the individualism that characterized the settling of the American West and ultimately led to climate change. By keeping Michelle in the city, Tea’s novel can show a wider depiction of the experience of apocalypse by society, not only by a few individuals. Michelle allows the reader to bear witness to the failure of city structures, as Michelle and the reader watch mobs of hopeless people devolve into chaos and violence. Her urban perspective also allows the reader to see how people and places with different levels of privilege experience environmental degradation. *Black Wave* moves beyond the scope of a single heterosexual couple with the means to abscond into the wilderness.

Scientists suggest that climate change will cause more damage to those who are less able to counteract, rebuild, or run away from climate change disasters (Harrington, et al.). This piecemeal destruction happens on a small scale within the city in the novel, “In San Francisco’s nicer neighborhoods people with money had converted their yardscapes to pebble and driftwood, stuck here and there with spiny succulents. In the Mission nobody could afford to uproot the giants and so they eventually would tumble...hopefully not killing anyone” (Tea 28). While people in some areas of San Francisco are able to maintain their comfortable lifestyles, other parts of it are more damaged and more dangerous for their lower income residents. The 1990s setting of the novel is therefore more effective for its irony; today, residents of the Mission District would likely have the means to escape the worst effects of climate change, at least for a

time (Pogash). By setting the novel in the past, Tea exposes contemporary problems more effectively. This indictment of gentrification and the loss of the Mission District appears in many of Tea's novels and functions as an urban expression of ecological mourning (Gano). *Black Wave* in particular illustrates how lower income communities will be the heaviest hit by environmental impacts of climate change, just as they have historically been. Because Michelle remains in the heavily populated and socially diverse environment of the city, the novel is able to explore the effects of climate change as a wider social problem, rather than a problem faced only by individuals within the land.

Rather than fleeing into nature, Michelle's queer female body remains in a queered urban location. After spending her adult life in urban California, Michelle ponders, "If nature had mostly been replaced by garbage then wouldn't a 'natural' altar be sort of phony, nostalgic even?" (Tea 104). Michelle rejects the possibility of a pure nature as a queer woman—a person who has traditionally been seen as outside of nature herself—but also as someone who is living in the midst of ever-intensifying apocalypse, who has never known a "pure" nature, untouched by human change. Queer theorists have identified the way that queerness and urbanity have been linked throughout American history; both queerness and the city were seen as unnatural, artificial, even toxic (Seymour 19). Michelle embodies the link between artificiality, queerness, and urbanity; while this has traditionally been coded as immoral or against social norms, Michelle and the novel embrace this way of life. Queer theory has always been interested in the artificial and the performative, allowing queerness to expose the way that social norms are simply repetitive performances (Azzarello 127).

The connection between Michelle and the apocalyptic city does include some level of destruction, as Michelle's descent into sickness from drug abuse parallels the destruction of the

city. After a night of heavy drinking and drug usage, Michelle refers to the inside of her mouth as “an apocalypse, same as always” (Tea 11). Michelle’s body, toxified by drugs and alcohol, mirrors the traditional conception of cities as toxic and unhealthy spaces, made literal in the novel by the encroaching apocalypse, which brings about further deterioration. Michelle’s abuse of drugs creates an artificial utopia that mirrors her artificial setting; at the same time, though, the relief of drugs and the euphoric love Michelle feels do bring her an escape from the apocalypse she experiences. Furthermore, the end of the novel does not find the same hopeless destruction as in novels that tie dystopian nature to women’s bodies, like *Gold Fame Citrus*.

Michelle’s body is not the only one linked to the apocalypse, as the novel continues the ecofeminist tradition of linking women’s bodies to the land. As the apocalypse builds, environmentally-caused illnesses are experienced by people around the world, but especially by women. Humans are slowly becoming infertile. Michelle’s mother experiences strange and unnamed symptoms as the world around her deteriorates. In this way, the novel reflects the way that climate change will cause an increase in health hazards, including escalating mental illness, across the globe but especially to certain populations that are more vulnerable (Board 144). When describing this situation, the novel explicitly reminds the reader that lesbians have always been at the forefront of advocating against environmental destruction and have always been among the first groups to attempt to track the health impacts of pollution, nuclear waste, and other environmental toxins (Tea 19). A queer woman’s perspective is that of an outsider, allowing them to understand the possibility of increased risk due to environmental damage, even against the common knowledge of patriarchal institutions that pursue wealth without regard to environmental or human risk. The unnamed and inexplicable ailments suffered by these women also reference a history of patriarchal medicine that rejects the lived experiences and pain of

women cited by feminist scholars of standpoint theory (Harding). This experience has also been documented in multiple studies of sociology and medicine (Pryma, Werner).

The unknown sicknesses experienced by women across the world are just one indicator of the incremental environmental degradation that has been ongoing for most of Michelle's life. Michelle and her fellow Californians recognize the end of the world as they watch the earth deteriorate, the oceans fill with pollutions, and species dying, as Michelle explains, "the ocean wanted only to give and had been wrecked of its ability to bring anything but regurgitated garbage" (Tea 104). This oceanic genocide recalls the reader of scientific predictions of a 30-60 percent reduction in fish populations by 2050 (Board). Even in this accelerated timeline, climate change moves slowly, so people in Michelle's world have been watching piecemeal extinctions over the span of decades, just as the contemporary reader witnesses the slow loss of nonhuman life and the toxification of the environment. Despite the realities this accelerated timeline of climate change presents in the novel, people are not inspired to act, or even feel upset about it; they are "just accustomed to the pace of its unraveling" (Tea 297). People's widespread indifference to the apocalypse in the novel is yet another illustration of Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism in the face of Frederick Buell's slow apocalypse. By mirroring the reality that the environment has been deteriorating steadily throughout modernity, the novel is set in a slow apocalypse that reflects the time of the reader in a realistic and urgent way.

It's difficult to want to change a world that has always been dying. Instead, Tea's novel revises what utopia can be: within a dying environment, an ecofeminist utopia is not possible, but by rejecting the heteronormative capitalism that brought climate change on, Tea's characters do find joy in apocalypse. Frederick Buell argued that the slow-moving apocalypse of climate change prohibits the perception of apocalypse as a renewing, paradigm-shattering event, and the



cruel optimism and stagnation of characters in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California* model that hopelessness. But because Michelle lives outside of harmful American traditions of patriarchy, capitalism, and reproductive futurity, she responds to apocalypse with more than resigned despair. Cultural theorists have posited that minority groups (such as queer people) who have experienced persecution and genocide have already inhabited a space of apocalypse throughout history (Haraway 86). In the same way that Michelle's world has been slowly dying throughout her life, her experience as a queer woman has always left her on the edge of society.

Michelle's queer standpoint allows her to see the joy in ending a world that for her, both ideologically and physically, has always been in a state of collapse. Because queerness is situated in defiance of hegemonic systems like capitalism, heteronormativity, and the gender binary, a queer perspective can help a person avoid grieving an apocalypse that destroys those systems. Michelle finds beauty in the end of nature, "Some [trees] had been eaten from the inside out by invading beetles and some of those had been burned to stumps in an attempt to stop the outbreak. Some were starved of water by the drought and some of those were so shriveled they had toppled over and smashed like plaster. Others were strangled by kudzu and Michelle at least appreciated the green gloss of their leaves" (Tea 88).

This passage can be seen as a negative image of the elegiac mourning that Luz experiences in *Gold Fame Citrus*, as she watches the fruits of California wither and decay (see chapter 2). While Luz was narratively tied to the fertility of Californian land and its destruction, Michelle's queerness puts her, willingly, outside of the ecofeminist tradition of a fertile Earth Mother. Luz grieves the "death of nature," while Michelle is indifferent to it. Michelle's acceptance of artificiality and apocalypse also signifies the realities of living during climate change; living in artificiality already, Michelle does not long for the return of a verdant natural

landscape; she is quite at home in the city and in her rejection of a heteronormative lifestyle. Some of Michelle's indifference is due to the inevitable acclimation to apocalypse that Buell theorizes, but her embrace of the apocalypse also recalls Hird's analysis of queer apocalypticism, wherein queerness "is not about realising a programme, identity, or fantasy but about disruption, disturbance and laying a challenge to the very process and desire behind the act or impetus to 'realize' anything" (Hird 67). This rejection also speaks against the possibility of Le Guin's pastoral utopia in the Anthropocene. Michelle does not attempt to build a natural, matriarchal utopia in the California wilderness; instead, she accepts and embraces her urban apocalypse as perfectly natural. Michelle worries that her experience of the apocalypse is "inauthentic" (Tea 214). But her desire for and embrace of authenticity speaks to her perception of ecological grief as strictly performance. Although Luz and Frida mourned for their destruction of nature, they still perpetuated the behaviors that caused nature's end. Michelle's casual response to apocalypse is therefore a perfectly queered response to the end of a natural world that is hegemonically opposed to every aspect of her lifestyle and identity. Michelle does not pursue human reproduction or wealth production as her ultimate goal, so she does not perceive the end of those systems as tragic. Indeed, for Michelle, the failure of systems like capitalism, patriarchy, and homophobia can be a relief: one of her primary responses to apocalypse is to feel grateful that she no longer has to worry about money (Tea 202). In this way, Michelle's lack of emotional response to the end of the "natural" world is not unusual for a queer, city-inhabiting character.

Michelle's response to increasing human infertility is another example of her queered response to apocalypse. Michelle and her community embrace a lack of reproductive futurity as their chosen lifestyle, so it's not surprising that Michelle deals with the worldwide loss of fertility with acceptance, simply stating, "no babies, no planet, *no future*" (Tea 269; emphasis

added). A loss of environmental health alongside a loss of female fertility is a common theme in science fiction, and such novels frequently emphasize the reproductive anxiety of such a future, as in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (Rose 89). But *Black Wave* resists this impulse. As humans across the world begin to lose their reproductive capacity, queer people are unable to take for granted their biological capacity for reproduction; again, what is a major loss to mainstream society is a normal feature of many queer people's experience. Michelle's response to the end of human fertility mirrors her response to the end of the natural world: her embodiment of an outsider and "artificial" space allows her to greet both conclusions with indifferent and unsurprised acceptance.

Michelle's statement about humanity's loss of reproductive futurity recalls Lee Edelman's *No Future*, in which Edelman theorizes that American society, culture, and politics are predicated on the idea that success, life, creativity, and possibility are all centered in heterosexual reproduction. The future, as American society understands it, can only exist through the production of human children. However, this focus on expanding human society has brought about the resource drain that caused climate change; furthermore, the idea that a future is only "for" our own human children is a main source of the myopia that has prioritized human progress above all else, validating human exploitation of each other and of the natural world. This part of Edelman's argument can be seen as a progenitor of queer ecologies, which insists that we must shift our value system away from human biological kin. According to queer ecologies, "we take so many environmental risks precisely because we believe so fully in the reproductive capacity of human beings and 'nature' in general to fix the damage done. According to the logic of reproductive heteronormativity, there can be no such thing as environmental loss because the world itself is so easily replicable" (Azzarello 138). The myth of inevitable human progress is

central to the American Dream of capitalism, and one that allows for inaction in the face of climate change. Focusing only on making children and wealth for those children means the sacrifice of all other elements of the world.

This cultural obsession with child creation is built upon an oppositional definition of the negative futurity of queer individuals: that queer people are by nature antisocial, selfish, unproductive, and without a future. For Edelman, only by embracing the death drive, “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability,” can queer people hope to exist within and opposed to structures of oppression (9). Although critics have critiqued Edelman’s embrace of the death drive for its nihilism, Myra Hird interprets Edelman’s theory as a form of queer apocalypticism that “encapsulates the apocalyptic moments at which the death drive becomes the destruction drive in the service of shattering an imposing illusion produced as a shifting signifier of heteronormative hegemony...it begins at the level of the self” (Hird 58). By defying systems of capitalist wealth chasing, individual isolation, biological reproduction, Michelle embodies this queer apocalypticism to instead pursue pleasure, drugs, art, creativity, love, sex, friendship, and queer family-making. Michelle’s explanation of her lifestyle reflects Edelman’s philosophy,

Being cast out of society early on made you see civilization for the farce it was, a theater of cruelty you were free to drop out of. Instead of playing along you became a fuckup. It was a political statement and a survival skill...What they excelled at was *feeling*—bonding, falling into crazy love, a love that had to be bigger than the awful reality of everything else. A love bigger than failure, bigger than life (Tea 26).

Michelle’s outsider perspective allows her to see that her lifestyle is not the artificial one, that instead social norms themselves are the performance, and one that has been damaging to individual humans as well as the environment around them. Instead, Michelle locates a joy that she has not seen embraced in mainstream society. This rejection of heteronormative malaise is also validated by the grim dystopias of *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California*, wherein such

reproduction-based futurity is proven to be false and fatal. *Black Wave* instead celebrates queer lifestyles as a way to move beyond the destructive tendencies of mainstream, patriarchal, heteronormative society.

By inhabiting an identity that mainstream American culture has decried as artificial, toxic, and futureless, Michelle can see beyond traditional perspectives of apocalypse. Instead of fear or grief, Michelle locates creativity and passion at the end of the world, and in this way the novel seems to work within the utopian possibilities of negative futurity. To embrace the death drive, that is, to embrace queer desire and its negative futurity, can be a source of a Lacanian *jouissance*, which Edelman describes as “a fantasmatic escape from the alienation intrinsic to meaning... passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (25). This ecstatic freedom is portrayed in *Black Wave* in its final depictions of apocalypse. As the end of the world fully approaches, a strange symptom begins to occur: individuals across the world begin to have strange dreams wherein they meet their future or possible lovers, lovers they will never actually meet because the end of the world will prevent their potential relationship. By some mystical power, these dreams are shared, so people begin searching for their dream-mates online. They sometimes even meet their dream partners and fall in love in waking life, as Michelle’s brother does. Through these dreams, the finality of the world brings with it moments of connection, hope, and ecstasy. Unlike Michelle’s previous attempts to escape into drugs and alcohol, these dreams are experienced by other people, and they bring not destruction but joy. Michelle interprets these dreams as a message from the Earth or the life force itself, mean to comfort humanity as it passes on. The world expresses the hope that people had to find pleasure and love, and it provides beautiful, though fleeting, glimpses of that joy in a sort of globally shared subconscious. The apocalypse in *Black Wave* is not entirely tragic, terrifying, or grim. Instead,

Michelle's inability to grieve the apocalypse is ultimately proven correct. Though the world is ending, the apocalypse come as a beautiful expression of the ultimate connection of all things, not as a sick and isolating finality.

The dreams express queer ecologies in their imagery, which often places the lovers alongside beautiful (and extinct) parts of nature. Michelle's first dream is about a boy who knows the names of plants, allowing them both to experience unity with the earth (Tea 216). In another dream, Michelle has three eyes and is covered in leaves and butterflies; her body is altered to show her physical connection with animals and plants, a connection that is missing throughout the novel (Tea 266). While trees, plants, and insects (except the incorrigible roaches) are mostly extinct in Michelle's life, these dreams restore humanity as a part of nature and dissolve the binary between them. The true and joyful love shown in these dreams can only exist within a whole nature that has never existed for Michelle. In this way, the dreams allow humanity to connect with each other and with nature in a way that has been lost to them since the slow collapse of the environment began. They are pastoral fantasies, showing a pure and beautiful nature which has never existed in Michelle's lifetime, but they provide a way for humanity to connect with other humans and nonhumans, even across the world. The interconnection between humans and nature and humans and each other, even despite national borders or geographical impossibilities, reflects the utopian dream of queer ecologies that asks humans to see value across ideological, physical, and biological divides.

These dreams form a sort of ecofeminist utopia at the end of the world, providing connection between humans and nature in a pastoral unity, but they are dreams, not reality. But they move beyond ecofeminist utopian thinking to show that such a pastoral utopia can only ever be a fantasy. Yet this fantasy is a comforting one, and one that is worth embracing, if only in

dreams. In these dreams, humans find a tenderness, a joy, and a *jouissance* at the end of the world. These dreams express the beauty of the transitory nature of being (Tea 320). Despite the fact that humanity has ravaged nature to the point of its own extinction, Michelle and her queer family have lived beyond the limits of society and therefore can see beauty even in apocalypse. Michelle's final dream is perhaps the clearest expression of the way that the novel locates beauty and hope within apocalypse. Throughout the novel, the death of the ocean has been used as a signifier of the incremental apocalypse. Water is a symbol of femininity, and the novel's focus on the ocean recalls the utopian possibilities of a watery world in Joan Slonczewski's earlier ecofeminist novel *A Door Into Ocean*. Despite this, Michelle's most intense final dream takes place in the ocean, "The person who held her in the salt of it kissed her with an open mouth, passing a golden fish between them. Their kiss was the fish, the fish their love, something wet and sleek and iridescent. Waves pushed their bodies together as if the ocean were a middling friend, a matchmaker, and when their hips bumped their cunts became luminescent and the glow was visible beneath the waters" (Tea 319). This scene depicts queer sex, certainly, but it also queers that sex by its erotic inclusion of nature. This connection is what has been lost throughout the novel; most fish are already extinct, and Michelle inhabits a dystopian, crumbling urban space that is a human-made environment, directly opposed to the cleansing and vast ocean she dreams of. When Michelle wakes up from this final dream, she feels "the ocean streaming from her eyes," aligning her body with the earth in a way the novel usually refuses (Tea 321). While Michelle typically embraces her toxified urban environment, the novel here allows her to finally experience the loss of other environments as well. Her connection to the sea is only possible in these hyperrealistic dreams; climate change has made it impossible in life. It becomes, then, a utopian impossibility that still brings the reader a sense of elegiac sadness but also hope and joy.

Through Michelle's refusal to repeat the mistakes of patriarchy and capitalism as the world disintegrates, she is granted an unusual perspective on apocalypse. This perspective lets her and the reader understand queer ecologies as a different, more utopian lens through which to view climate change. In Michelle's apocalyptic dreams, she can finally perceive the connections between humanity and nature that have never been present in her life in modern society. Her life and her experience of apocalypse work to undo the myth that heterosexual reproduction and family-making can lead to environmental futurity. While the ethics of heteronormativity fail to repair or save the land or humanity in both *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California, Black Wave* showcases a positive alternative perspective than the one the society of 2019 embraces. Taken together, these novels suggest that we must locate an environmental philosophy that does not prioritize heterosexual family relations as more valuable than other humans, nonhumans, and nonliving things on this planet. In so doing, we can locate a way to live in nature that is sustainable in an era of climate change. *Black Wave* begins this work by portraying nontraditional family-making and a rejection of capitalist systems that results in an apocalypse that mirrors *jouissance* and allows readers to locate hope for joy and pleasure even in apocalypse.

However, *Black Wave* still ends in apocalypse, suggesting that to avoid apocalypse itself, humanity must extend deeper into a queered ecology, moving beyond an embrace of negative queer futurity in order to find value in and beyond human life. Mainstream society in the novel has not adopted Michelle's queer perspective. Harmful institutions like capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental exploitation remain, despite Michelle's refusal to participate in them. And the world does end, even though Michelle is able to see the beauty in that ending. *Black Wave* constitutes, like *California* itself, a unique blend of utopia and dystopia. Through her *jouissance*,



Michelle locates moments of utopian hope, joy, and affirmation even as the world does end. But without a shift of society as a whole, apocalypse is still imminent. The novels in the following chapters continue the search for ways of revising humanity's relationship with the world in the face of apocalypse, to move beyond the death drive into radical empathy that might promote an ethic of queer ecologies that could relieve the causes of apocalypse.

### **Chapter Five: Ecological Empathy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***

Writers of Californian science fiction mirror the dual nature of the state by writing dystopian and utopian narratives set in that region. Octavia Butler, one of the most critically acclaimed authors of American science fiction, is no exception. Butler was a multiple recipient of major science fiction awards, the Hugo and the Nebula. She was also the first science fiction author to win a MacArthur Fellowship. With novels like *Kindred*, *Bloodchild*, and *Wild Seed*, Butler is well-known for using her science fiction to expose the continued effects of American racism and its historical legacy. Due to her dedication to interrogating this history, Butler's depiction of humanity is often quite pessimistic, "Octavia Butler was no utopian; in fact she rejected utopian thinking in the strongest possible terms. She believed human beings were biological organisms with sharp instincts for self-preservation that had been honed by evolution over innumerable millennia; she believed evolution had made us clever but mean, creative but selfish and short-sighted" (Canavan). Her grim portrayal of humanity means that it is difficult to locate the utopian elements of her work. But as other scholars suggest, although Butler is a biological essentialist, this does not mean she believes that humanity is limited or destined to biology (Johns, "Medusa").

Rather than showing humanity as biologically fated to fail, Butler's works expose the connection between biology and human history. As literary critic Jim Miller explains, the "careful attention Butler pays to contemporary socio-economic phenomena ensures that her novel is indeed a critical dystopia that engages in a kind of utopian pessimism. Her [characters] are not the victims of some essential flaw in human nature, but rather of clearly identifiable historical causes" (Miller 352). Similarly, Adam J. Johns argues that "Butler envisions human ethics as rooted in human biology; unlike many of them, she envisions human biology as being

genuinely fluid: humanity is likely to evolve in the face of a crisis. If communitarian values cannot arise through culture alone, perhaps they will arise through natural selection” (Johns, “Time,” 404). Humanity may be violent and hierarchical, but Butler’s fiction is hopeful as it consistently looks for ways to change that nature.

Butler’s works are often dystopian; they extrapolate the grim realities of human oppression. But her understanding of the interplay between biology and society allows her to seek utopia by using biological hybridity to expand the utopian potential of humanity. Such alien hybridity is grounded in a long tradition of science fiction by women who questioned the biological limitations of identity. An eradication of sex and gender differences in particular has always been of interest to authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree, Jr., who imagined altered human biologies that could eliminate gendered oppression. For these authors, “hope becomes possible after biological differences have been eradicated, after humankind changes into something else” (Barr 23). In many of Butler’s works, she explores the way that changing human biology might allow for an improved species. Butler’s use of biological changes in humanity shows “that to make a utopia...one must first accept the realities of the human condition: one such reality is that we are, to a great extent, circumscribed and determined by our biology” (Johns, “Time,” 409). In her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, for example, humanity can only survive by genetically melding with a benevolent alien species, making alien hybridity and physical evolution “a biopolitical strategy for adaptation and survival” (Ferreira 407). In *Wild Seed*, Butler’s main characters are immortals who take over the bodies of other people, enabling them to experience many different identities and standpoints. These biological possibilities offer a utopian aspect for a humanity whose history has been tainted by the limits of its selfish nature.

Some critics define Butler's tendency to depict hybrid identities as posthumanism (Nayar). I argue, however, that her interest in alien hybridity moves beyond posthumanism into a fiction of queer ecologies. Butler's hybrid beings depict the biological connections that already exist within human beings in a way that is more explicit than we can be aware of in our own bodies. Furthermore, her fiction expands humanity itself by imagining awakenings of consciousness through time travel, immortality, alien hybridity, and mental and biological evolution. By moving humanity forward into more utopian experiences, Butler questions the nature and possibilities of human behavior and biology, as well as the limitations of defining gender, race, class, and ecology.

To explore Butler's anticipation of queer ecologies, I focus primarily on her *Parable* series, two novels of a series that was left unfinished by Butler's untimely demise. The novels depict a near-future California decimated by climate change, where environment and society are both unraveling into dangerous anarchy. In this dystopian society, protagonist Lauren Olamina suffers from a disorder called hyperempathy that allows her to physically embody the sensations of others. Lauren's hyperempathy embodies the essential foundation of queer ecologies: no being and no thing, perhaps especially not even a human, exists without a porous physical connectedness to other beings and things on the planet. With the invention of hyperempathy, Butler shows a way that humanity could realize this idea and act on it. Lauren's hyperempathy gives her the vision to create an innovative utopian philosophy called Earthseed that provides hope for a humanity that is locked in the dystopian reality of climate change. Lauren's ability to *feel* the importance of other beings means she can implement philosophies of queer ecologies when no one else can. In the *Parable* novels, Butler imagines a biological change that can shift human nature away from dystopia into utopian hope.

This interest in the relationship between utopia and dystopia is rooted in Butler's history as a California native. Butler's use of biological and genetic alterations reflects the technological and scientific advances based in that state, but they also reflect the utopian nature of California itself. Butler was born into a racially integrated California, but her mother grew up in a deeply segregated Louisiana, which always hindered her opportunities (Butler and Rowell). The writers I discuss in earlier chapters are all white women, and Butler's experience as a Black woman fundamentally influences her writing. The migration Butler's mother experienced is a common story in the history of California, which was repeated throughout the state's history, but is a particularly common story for Black Americans who moved to California to escape heightened racism in Louisiana (Chideya). Butler's own life gave witness to the way that migration into California made the land a hopeful and utopian place where dreams can be chased. But Butler was perceptive enough to know the history of California is also the place of many shattered dreams, making it a perfect place to highlight the failure of the American Dream itself.

Published in the nineties, the *Parable* novels showcase an early concern for the effects of climate change. As also shown in Michelle Tea's *Black Wave*, the 1990s was a time of increasing awareness of climate change and its effects; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was formed in 1988, and the first Climate Change Convention was held in 1992. As knowledge about the real and irrevocable nature of climate change spread, science fiction authors recognized new frontiers for dystopian writing. Early ecofeminist post-apocalyptic novels like Ursula K. Le Guin's imagined utopia as a return to the pastoral land as it was before the Anthropocene. But climate change scientists claim that it is likely impossible to return the Earth to its pre-human conditions (Mehnert 150). Accordingly, the 1990s left science fiction authors like Butler with a deeper understanding of humanity's continued and irrevocable deterioration of the Earth. Butler

could not recreate a pastoral utopia, and this grim understanding is reflected in her novel. The ultimate goal of Lauren's new utopian philosophy Earthseed is for humanity to leave Earth and settle outer space. Lauren's beliefs suggest that Butler already understood that the Earth may not be retrievable.

Butler's *Parable* novels are set in California, and they are another example of science fiction that depicts the dual utopian and dystopia nature of the state. *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) are set in the 2020s, and extrapolate the effects of climate change by depicting increasing neoliberal privatization, a backwards-looking American regressivism, governmental impotence, and increased racist violence. Social and governmental systems have failed, and individual acts of violence escalate in response, creating a near-future America that is utterly unstable. Most areas in the novel are beset with anarchic chaos; cities have crumbled and the government has abandoned the people. The crumbling of communities leaves most people homeless, wandering, and violent, surviving only through constant rape, murder, and theft. Within this dystopian setting, protagonist Lauren Olamina invents an innovative philosophy known as Earthseed that opposes the cruel optimism of climate change and seeks a future for humanity in outer space. In this way, Butler opposes the tendency of the dystopias of Watkins and Lepucki to show the possibility of locating utopian thinking even within a dystopian setting.

By setting her protagonist's home just outside of Los Angeles, Butler depicts a California that is deteriorated and rigidly divided by class. Although the city outside of Lauren's gated community is rife with murder, rape, theft, and violence, her brother Keith clings to his desire to move to Los Angeles, "that old dream of his" (Butler 109). (All Butler citations reference *Parable of the Sower*, unless otherwise noted.) Keith often functions as a foil for Lauren

throughout *Parable of the Sower*; in this case, his continued faith in California is shown as misplaced by Lauren's more realistic perspective. California was once a symbol of wealth, hope, and progress, but in Lauren's world, that symbol has proven to be a false one. Despite advances in technology, despite liberal politics, despite the money, wealth, and fame that California is known for, the novel questions the possibility of that utopia to proceed as climate change ruins the previously idyllic (though precarious) Californian environment. Earthquakes and storms destabilize the land, as California's naturally precarious environment further destabilizes society. The reservoirs are mostly dried out (Butler 258). Lauren explains that California has become so destabilized that Californian refugees are struggling to escape it. But the refugees are not welcome elsewhere, either, "Nobody wants California trash" (Butler 82). The failure of California here recalls *Gold Fame Citrus*, as the state's cultural mythos devolves into an uninhabitable place filled with refugees. As in *California*, Los Angeles, city of dreams, becomes the exact opposite, a hellish, crowded, dangerous, impoverished, and violent place. The continued fictional depiction of L.A. as post-apocalyptic wasteland reflects its dystopian precarity in our cultural imagination (Davis). California's idyllic promise of utopia is harshly inverted, as its environment becomes unstable and inhospitable for human life and its society devolves into a human wilderness. In Lauren's world, the dream of a utopian California lingers even as its reality becomes ever more terrifying.

As in other Californian dystopias, America in the *Parable* series stagnates in outmoded and toxic systems. People are unable to locate new ways of living as the environmental destruction of climate change erodes civil and human rights. The leading political party in this near-future America relies on regressivism; here again, Butler's writing functions as an eerie foreshadowing. The American government has grown increasingly impotent throughout Lauren's

life, but as Lauren explains, electing a President is “like a symbol of the past for us to hold on to as we’re pushed into the future...make people feel that the country, the culture they grew up with is still here—that we’ll get through these bad times and back to normal” (Butler 56). As in the fictional depictions of cruel optimism that I explore in chapters two and three, Americans in the *Parable* series look backwards to find solutions to the increasing violence of climate change. Rather than innovating solutions to new problems, they cling to an imagined past of wealth and security. In *Parable of the Talents*, Presidential candidate and Texas Senator Andrew Jarret calls his followers to, “Help us to make American great again” (Butler, *Talents*, 19). Though this campaign slogan is particularly uncanny to a reader during the Trump presidency, Trump’s use of the words is itself a callback from the past, taken from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 Presidential campaign. In Butler’s novels the slogan is more than a catchy phrase: legislative policy looks to solve climate change instability by instituting failed and oppressive policies from the past. In *Sower*, President Donner has instituted a plan to provide homes for the millions of displaced homeless people that trades housing for labor (Butler 27). This reinstatement of American slavery exemplifies a common theme in Butler’s texts, which imagine fictional examples of social regression to reveal the recurrent patterns of American racism.

Lauren’s America has also embraced company towns, where individuals can live within the shelter of corporate-guarded communities, as long as they work, and live within those walls. Company towns are a feature of many dystopian narratives, including Edan Lepucki’s *California* and most recently, Boots Riley’s film *Sorry to Bother You*. Company towns are yet another solution from the past: corporate towns have occurred in the American past, leaving Lauren with an idea of what it will almost certainly become: debt slavery (Butler 121). The reemergence of slavery in these two forms calls into question the utopian possibilities of the American dream,



proving that it was always, and still is, false: American wealth was never created by individuals, but always built on the exploitation of other people and land. Thoroughly backward-looking, the social policies in the novel are regressive and indicative of most people's fear of the future and their desire to return to a past that was less uncertain. As economic and social instability increases, people look backward, hoping for a return to normalcy. In this way, *Sower* critiques "optimistic liberal humanism" that allows for such stagnation under the promise that progress is inevitable regardless of our actions when in fact, that regression might be what is truly inevitable (Johns, "Medusa," 398).

While American society as a whole fails to find ways to survive climate change that do not perpetuate and even increase oppression and violence, Lauren's own community also fails. At the beginning of *Sower*, Lauren lives in a small, gated community outside of Los Angeles, with several families who run their own farms and schools inside their walls. Although this system verges an ecofeminist utopia, as in *GFC* and *California*, the utopian characteristics of Lauren's town are soon shown to be illusory. Lauren's fellow villagers, including her family, cling to their pre-apocalypse lifestyles and therefore remain tied to the ideas that caused and perpetuate climate change and social oppression. The villagers don't work together to any large degree but remain separated by family units, racism, and gender roles. Many of them still attempt to keep their jobs, even if they're outside their walls in the ever-deteriorating city.

Lauren's father is one of the more proactive members of their community, but even he is mired in traditions of the past. He keeps attending his job at a university outside the safety of the village gates, and he is a Christian pastor for the village. His participation in failing systems of education and religion indicate his failure to find utopian solutions for humanity. When his wife complains about the worsening conditions they inhabit, crying, "We can't live this way!"

Lauren's father replies simply, "We do live this way" (Butler 75). His acceptance of their stagnant, hopeless lifestyle shows how difficult it is for people to invent a new way of life—even or perhaps especially—during apocalypse. While going to his academic job at a university outside the safety of the town's walls, Lauren's father disappears and is never seen again. His insistence on pursuing an outmoded lifestyle results in his disappearance, and the death of Lauren's patriarch mirrors the failure of patriarchal values in society. Academia, capitalism, and Christianity have all failed to prevent apocalypse, and their perpetuation cannot solve it.

The backward-looking behavior of Lauren's townsfolk indicts the complacency of the contemporary American reader. Soon after the death of Lauren's father, Lauren's village is raided by outsiders, who rape and pillage their way through the town, burning it to the ground, and Lauren is forced to flee and survive the dangerous world outside its walls. Although Lauren's father and her neighbors are well-meaning, and do make some moves towards sustainability, it is simply too late for these small measures. In this way, the novel continues its critique of late capitalism and patriarchy to show that individual efforts towards sustainability, like recycling or minor tightening of regulations, are not actions that are strong enough to stave off environmental apocalypse.

Ultimately, Lauren is proven correct: her privileged location keeps her safe only for a time, apart from the violence outside her community's walls. By showing a pocket of society that is left temporarily undisturbed, Butler shows the reality of climate change, wherein areas of the world with more resources will be able to, at least temporarily, retain their wealth and safety even as less prosperous nations are destroyed. Jedediah Purdy uses a particularly apt metaphor to explain this phenomenon, "Rich regions will become, to use an American image, the Los Angeles of the world's water, surviving on the rains of other lands, transferred across deserts by

technology and wealth” while ignoring the breakdown of the societies from which they poach their own security (Purdy 47). But *Sower* suggests that no one can hide from the environmental destruction and the social destruction climate change will cause. Though many wealthier nations will find continued stability and safety as climate change progresses, the *Parable* novels suggest that such a reprieve is both temporary and immoral.

The temporary security enjoyed by Lauren’s neighbors exposes again the impossibility of boundaries to protect any part of the global community from the ravages of climate change, as well as the artificiality of any separation between beings that is central to theories of queer ecologies. Walls in the novel are as false as any other boundary; throughout the novel, walls provide only temporary havens from the violence of the collapsing outside world. But it also inverts a tradition in science fiction that separates what Hee-Jung Serenity Joo describes as “capitalism from pre-capitalist chaos in Fordist narratives”—for Butler, walls like Lauren’s gated community, and the walls surrounding the sinister company towns that disguise slavery as a solution to climate change, actually act as a critique of late capitalism (Joo 282). As climate change continues to destroy society, capitalist solutions of increasing isolation inevitably assures death.

Despite her stagnant environment, Lauren is the only person who recognizes the need for overarching change, if humanity is to survive within climate change. Although Butler shows a “humanity as hell-bent on self-annihilation,” Lauren still seeks a way to “combat those suicidal tendencies” (Mann 62). As Ernst Bloch explains, utopian thinking requires looking forward, not back (Bloch 853). Past institutions and lifestyles caused the apocalypse that Lauren experiences, so looking backward cannot solve it. Lauren recognizes the need for dramatic social change, and is therefore the only person in the novel who can think toward utopia. She sees that her village

has not adapted to the reality of its changing environmental and social climate, and that therefore their survival is not sustainable. Cassandra-like, Lauren repeatedly attempts to warn her fellow villagers that their safety is only temporary, but they consistently ignore her warnings. Lauren's prophetic warnings parallel those of dystopian writers, and they also have precedent in Butler's fiction, mirroring Lilith's push towards utopia in Butler's novel *Dawn*, as literary critic Justin Mann shows.

Lauren's recognition that maintaining the status quo will not allow humanity to survive comes from her uniquely empathetic perspective. Through her experience as a Black woman, she is able to reject the oppressive myths that maintain racist and sexist hierarchies. Her hyperempathy, also connected to her identity as a Black woman, allows her to see a utopian path for humanity in the form of Earthseed. Some critics argue that the primary characteristic of Lauren's utopian philosophy is not empathy but the focus on the inevitability of change (Wanzo 74). But Irina Popescu demonstrates that in many of her texts, Butler identifies empathy as a means of opposition to American individualism (Popescu185). Because Lauren's hyperempathy forces her to care about other beings in a time of apocalypse, she can imagine a way to care for beings beyond herself.

Hyperempathy extends the tradition of ecofeminism that argues that women have traditionally been conceived of as more nurturing, more empathetic, and more compassionate. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant explains that historically, women have been seen as closer to nature and more closely related to animals than men. This connection has also been seen in science fiction depictions of characters who are organically connected to their planet and the other organisms on it, such as in Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* and Slocezweski's *A Door Into Ocean*, as I

describe in chapter one. These physically connected worlds are expressions of the Gaia hypothesis, John Lovelock's groundbreaking (though now controversial) idea that Earth can be thought of as a holistic, self-regulating organism and that each living and nonliving thing on Earth is integral to the survival of its other parts. Lauren's hyperempathy displays the connection of the Gaia hypothesis in an overt and physical way, as her feelings are connected to the feelings of other living things. Lauren's experience can also be understood as that of a cyborg: because she can physically feel the sensations of other people and even of nonhumans, her body rejects the binaries that divide humans from each other and from other things. Her experience crosses those boundaries to form a blended identity that melds into other beings.

The feminine embodiment of hyperempathy is emphasized by Butler's depiction of Lauren's brother, Keith. Keith is a shadow figure, an opposite to Lauren, who embodies masculine individualism. He desires more excitement than their tenuously safe gated village provides, and he wants to leave their gated community to make money by selling drugs and stealing. He leans on traditional gender roles to validate this desire, insisting that being a man means he should be able to do what he wants (Butler 92). Keith actually relishes his dangerous time outside of the community walls. When he tells Lauren how he robbed and killed someone outside their borders, he says, "after I did it, I didn't feel nothing" (Butler 110). This masculine, unfeeling violence highlights the radical nature of Lauren's feminized embodied empathy. While Lauren's hyperempathy could be understood as an extension of the compassion and the connection that women have traditionally been thought to have, Keith's violent nature and his desire to individually support his family through wealth gain is a repetition of the failed nuclear family and capitalism that led to the apocalypse. Lauren's hyperempathy moves her toward a communal society that is connected, while Keith's belief system rejects that possibility.

Because hyperempathy is a feminine-coded disorder, mainstream society stigmatizes and discounts it. Lauren knows that many people think her hyperempathy is “something I could shake off and forget about” (Butler 11). Feeling the pain of others is perceived by isolationist American patriarchal society as abnormal but also illegitimate, impossible, or unreal. In this way, the disorder recalls the many ailments suffered primarily by women that are difficult to diagnose and are frequently discounted or ignored by contemporary medicine, like fibromyalgia or lupus.<sup>1</sup> Empathy has always been coded as feminine in its existence as a movement towards caring and nurturing, but in this novel, even empathy as a simple recognition of the feelings of others is coded as feminine and imaginary.

Lauren’s hyperempathy is only one part of her outsider identity that allows her to build on her utopian vision. Lauren is Black and female in a world that social upheaval has caused to become increasingly racist, dispelling the myth of inevitable human progress. Lauren’s outsider standpoint allows her to view apocalypse differently; as I show in chapter four, historical traumatic experiences can create a familiarity within apocalypse for people with minority identities. As a Black woman, Lauren can see beyond the cruel optimism and social stagnation perpetuated by other Americans. Even before she overtly practices Earthseed, she begins to see beyond the limitations of the gender binary that are enforced in her gated community. Lauren recognizes the vast impracticality of refusing to allow women to share in labor, and the imminent obsolescence of the nuclear family; apocalypse has made older ways of living impossible. As Lauren asks, “how in the world can anyone get married and make babies with things the way they are now?” (Butler 87). Here, Lauren acts as one example of Butler’s tendency, described by Patricia Melzer, to “address issues of gender variance less in terms of playfulness and

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<sup>1</sup> See Bock for a discussion of the gendered stigma that surrounds these diseases.

deconstruction than as matters of survival and ‘livable lives’” (29). Many ecological dystopias address the problem of human reproduction. Some narratives, such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, depict the horror of increased human infertility, while others, like Edan Lepucki’s *California*, explore the difficulties of raising children as ecological resources drain and feminist justice wanes. But in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren has a practical view of gender, refusing to give in to reproductive anxiety in a time when human expansion and consumption have already made the environment uninhabitable. She is not worried about reproducing in an apocalyptic world. This rejection of gender binaries can be read as Lauren’s first steps into blurring the boundaries to build a philosophy that echoes many of the tenets of queer ecologies. As shown in the novels I discuss in chapters two, three, and four, an ethic of queer ecologies questions the ultimate value of human reproduction in a world that reproduction has fundamentally degraded, and in a world where reproducing often leaves women and children in a more vulnerable position.

Crossdressing is another way Lauren dismantles gender roles for practical reasons. After narrowly escaping the destruction of her gated village, Lauren travels on foot, seeking a safe location for the first Earthseed community. To ensure her safety on the road, she dresses like a man. For Lauren, crossdressing is a practical matter for safety, as men are less likely to be harassed, raped, and enslaved in the outside world, but it also illuminates Lauren’s continual rejection of a gender binary. Clara Agusti explains the significance of Lauren’s costume, “Butler demonstrates how Lauren is able to blur the differences between subject and Other, manhood and femaleness in herself, in a way that difference is incorporated into the self, and it can be taught to the community in the process of relating, in order to downplay the legal fictions of gender and race which distort the growth of a community and its individuals,” creating an

interior utopia rather than an outside one (Agusti 354). In Butler's novels, (seen also in the shapeshifting in *Wild Seed* and the alien hybridity in *Dawn*), moving between physical experiences is integral to understanding the perspectives of others. Crossdressing then functions as a way of crossing boundaries into embodied empathy, but it also proves the mutability of these boundaries. By rejecting gender as a means of defining the other, Lauren takes the first step to imagining a community that rejects the harmful traditions that other societies still cling to in the novel.

Another binary that divides humanity is, of course, race, and *Sower* is deeply invested in interrogating race in America, as evidenced by the reemergence of slavery in its post-apocalyptic future. Much fascinating criticism has considered how Butler's science fiction innovatively condemns America's history of racism.<sup>2</sup> Hyperempathy itself has a racial element: Butler's fictional disorder is inherited from drug abuse by a pregnant mother. The hereditary nature of the disorder references the racist hysteria around "crack babies" in America in the 1980s. The drug war spawned racialized (and now disproven) fears of inherited problems from (primarily Black) mothers who abused cocaine during pregnancy fueled the oppressive and racist legislation of the drug war (Glenn 237). By recalling this history, Butler interrogates the way that biology continues to be used in science, culture, and politics as a tool of racist oppression. The inherited nature of hyperempathy also works to critique the exaggerated negative discourse around "crack babies," as Lauren's hyperempathy plays an important and sometimes positive role in the novel. But the stigma around hyperempathy does not only critique society's mistreatment of drug users, it also functions to interrogate the way we view female pain as deserved, unsympathetic, and trivial.

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<sup>2</sup> See Dubey, Allen, and Tweedy for more on Butler's depiction of race in the *Parable* novels.



Lauren's experience of hyperempathy does not reflect its stigmatized portrayal in society as silly or unreal. Her sense of hyperempathy is not entirely positive or negative. After Lauren's village is sacked, she must attempt to survive on the streets, among the desperate masses. Despite the danger of the world outside the protection of her village, Lauren physically cannot enact violence, even in self-defense; as she says, "I felt every blow that I'd struck, just as if I'd hit myself" (Butler 7). Though hyperempathy provides Lauren a utopian perspective that can serve to save humanity, it also causes her to suffer, and puts her in constant danger. But the syndrome also allows the "sharer" to share the pleasure of others. Unfortunately, sex is about the only way Lauren can experience pleasure in this post-apocalyptic world, limiting the potential of her erotic energy. Black American womanist poet Audre Lorde theorized that erotic feminine energy can be channeled into creativity, and *Sower* depicts this theory, as Lauren uses her embodied empathy to create the utopian philosophy of Earthseed.

Lauren is only able to see and then reject the social stagnation that surrounds her because of her unique ability to empathize with others and thereby recognize the importance of the social collective. For Butler, "the dissolution of hierarchy is linked to, or identified with, the dissolution of the self" (Johns, "Medusa," 395). Although Butler's fiction often shows human society as hopelessly violent and regressive, she also locates paths for a human future through an alteration of the very nature of humanity. In Lauren, Butler alters human biology in a way that subverts the innate selfishness and greed of humanity. The utopian change of society begins with biology, as in so many of Butler's texts that argue that "if we are determined by our biology, especially in the direction of hierarchical violence...either we will die in a conflagration...or we will make ourselves into something radically new, something perhaps beyond our very understanding of self, more flexible, more oriented toward the superorganism above and the gene below, rather

than toward the self as such” (Johns, “Medusa,” 397). Lauren’s biological attunement to the other means that she can at last feel the importance of a society that values everyone and everything within it.

By showing hyperempathy to be a utopian force, *Sower* fits into a long tradition of science fiction that has historically located empathy as an important step towards a higher morality. For example, empathy is the defining element of what it means to be human in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Joo 289). Being able to care for others than oneself has often been a critical part of being “humane,” and therefore human itself. In Dick’s novel, Joo argues, being able to care for animals, for members of species other than our own, is a key element to humanity. Ironically, though, animals are incredibly scarce in the degraded dystopian environments that Dick and Butler (as well as Watkins and Lepucki in chapters two and three) imagine. Without the possibility to care, society loses its possibility for empathy. In such a world, Lauren’s hyperempathy becomes even more remarkable. As a crucial element to her humanity, then, Lauren’s hyperempathy allows her to expand the definition of humanity itself. Her extension of feeling is precisely what allows her to see beyond the binaries, boundaries, and limitations that support the violent oppression that characterizes her society and climate change.

The utopian possibilities of hyperempathy reflect tenets of queer ecologies, a theory that requires a decentering of humanity. Instead of prioritizing human wealth and progress, theorists of queer ecologies insist that true ecological justice requires humans to value nonhuman and nonliving things as much as human kin (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 102). The *Parable* series shows that prioritizing human individualism has resulted in environmental destruction and oppression caused by the separation of humans from nature and from each other. While the

dangerous perpetuation of these same harmful systems was depicted in the dystopias described in chapters two and three, the *Parable* novels depict a climate change-ravaged California to suggest “that the environmental crisis can only be resolved if the social crisis based on exclusionary practices is also addressed” (Mehnert 205). The novels show the way that social disintegration will coincide with environmental destruction, and this connection also indicts the social practices that caused climate change. This critique is in line with the ideas of theorists of queer ecologies, who agree that dividing beings by race, gender, or species allows for the subjugation, exploitation, and destruction of those considered lower in the social hierarchy.

Theorists of queer ecologies insist that radical empathy is necessary to create ecological justice, especially in our era of late capitalism and climate change, as Nicole Seymour explains: “since humans cannot always see the consequences of their actions on the environment immediately, nor the intricate interrelationships among all components in an ecosystem, they must be able to imagine them in order to act empathetically and ethically. Indeed, empathy is by definition a largely imaginative act” (12). Such imagination is crucial to queer ecologies, because understanding the connection between all things “defies our imaginative capacities and transcends iconography” (Morton 276). Science fiction like Butler’s is one way of understanding the world through this lens of queer ecologies. Hyperempathy itself is an imagined science fiction, and its strength of feeling is precisely what is required to radically restructure human hierarchies in the way that queer ecologies suggests. Because Lauren experiences empathy beyond the limitations of human feeling, she can imagine a society that is unified, holistic, and communal, rather than individualistic and capitalist. Her radical empathy bridges the boundaries between humans as well as nonhumans and the environment, embodying the fundamental tenet of queer ecologies that “all life-forms, along with the environments they compose and inhabit,

defy boundaries between inside and outside at every level...life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and nonliving, between organism and environment” (Morton 274). Lauren’s biology forces her to cross the boundaries that humanity has created between each other and between humanity and nature.

As shown in Lauren’s disruption of social hierarchies, the invention of hyperempathy allows Lauren, and through her, the reader, to see beyond essentialist ideas of race and gender (Joo 290). While ecofeminism identified the split between human and nature as the same split between man and woman, queer ecologies goes further, identifying and blurring binaries even between living and nonliving things. Lauren’s hyperempathy is just as radical: it allows her to empathize even with nonhumans, allowing her to perceive the world in an utterly alien way. Though a connection between women and nature permeates most ecofeminist science fiction, Lauren’s relationship with animals is deeper than a simple feminine understanding of the natural world—it is biological, physiological, and empathetic. When she watches a bird die, she thinks, “I had felt its pain as though it were a human being” (Butler 46). Lauren’s feelings are less acute when she witnesses the pain of smaller animals, and in that way hyperempathy does reproduce this hierarchy to some extent. But her ability to feel the pain of nonhumans is still a productive way to imagine the possibilities of queer ecologies.

Through Lauren’s hyperempathy with animals, “the undermining of the barriers that separate human beings goes hand in hand with fracturing two other separations: that between human beings and animals, and that between human beings and technology” (Stillman 29). But Stillman only takes this conclusion to state that humans in the novel are animalistic, subject to the natural laws of evolution. I argue that this separation is deteriorated even further by Lauren’s

capacity to sense the experience of actual nonhumans. The very possibility of inhabiting the experience of a nonhuman is an alien concept, but imagining its possibility is fundamental to queer ecologies, as Donna Haraway explains, “Human beings’ learning to share other animals’ pain nonmimetically is, in my view, an ethical obligation, a practical problem, and an ontological opening. Sharing pain promises disclosure, promises becoming” (“When Species Meet,” 85). Because Lauren can feel the pain of animals as well as humans, she is able to bridge the gap that separates humanity from nature to see the value of things other than human survival.

Unlike dystopian novels that illustrate humanity’s cruel optimism in the face of climate change-based catastrophe, *Sower* finds a way to allow an individual human to really experience and understand the damage done to the earth. Feeling the pain of animals allows Lauren to experience the injury humanity does to the environment in a physical sense, in a way that forbids an ignorance or ignoring of that damage. As Phillips articulates in his discussion of the novel in terms of its rejection of postmodern neurosis, “in a hyperempathetic world, the other would cease to exist as the ontological antithesis of the self, but would instead become a real aspect of oneself, insofar as one accepts oneself as a social being. Earthseed is the practical ethics of this heightened consciousness of what it means to experience being as, irreducibly, being-with-others” (306). Lauren cannot ignore or exploit the pain of others to promote her own gain, and she cannot ignore her connection to others. Instead, her hyperempathy forces her to recognize the pain of others as valid, and their exploitation and suffering as unconscionably unjust. Due to her hyperempathy, Lauren refuses to shoot small animals even though they don’t cause her that much pain to witness, “I don’t intend to shoot any more birds, no matter what Dad says” (Butler 38). Lauren’s empathy causes her to make a radical move that does not necessarily promote human success; birds are a useful food supplement, and refusing to kill them directly inhibits

Lauren's survival. Seen through the lens of queer ecologies, though, promoting the success of the nonhuman world *is* the only way for humans to survive.

Lauren's hyperempathy allows her to see beyond paradigms and beyond the limitations of human feeling into the fundamental interdependence of all parts of the environment, including humanity. From this vision, she develops Earthseed, a new religious philosophy that focuses on reality, not faith, and on attention, action, and relationships between things. Its prime directive is to honor the inevitability of change, "God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped" (Butler 76). Because Earthseed sees only change as God, and worship of change means constant revision, problem-solving, and seeking of forward-thinking new ways of being, it is utterly oppositional to the crumbling yet stagnant society that surrounds Lauren. The followers of Earthseed are called to remain dynamic and active, responding to their altered environment, rather than embracing ways of life created in obsolete historical situations.

Lauren is only able to begin living according to Earthseed after the destruction of her gated community; in this way, the narrative follows the utopian tradition of apocalypse as a means to the new. Only when Lauren's stagnant community is destroyed, can she begin to grow Earthseed. Thrust into the apocalyptic chaos of outside society, Lauren travels along the road, accumulating followers. Mostly, these are vulnerable folks, families with women and children, who agree to join with Lauren to create an itinerant community that protects and provides for each other. One of the tenets of Earthseed is to "Embrace diversity. Unite—Or be divided, robbed, ruled, killed By those who see you as prey. Embrace diversity Or be destroyed" (Butler 196). As an element of change, diversity proves not only the infinite possibilities of life but also the mutability of the human race, rejecting binaries like race, class, and language. Diversity is

inevitable but also desirable to Lauren, who sees the strength in unity between people with different talents and perspectives.

After accumulating her diverse group of followers, Lauren finds an isolated location where they can build a communal home. She describes her utopian vision for this community, “We might also provide education...grow our own food, grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new. Into Earthseed” (Butler 224). Lauren names this first Earthseed community Acorn. Butler’s inspiration for the name may be derived from the real Acorn community farm, a utopian-seeming commune that was established in Virginia in 1993. Lauren’s Acorn recalls the theories of Californian philosopher Josiah Royce, who argued for small, local, sustainable communities and the use of consensus for decision-making. During the end of the nineteenth century, Royce saw such communities work in California. Royce’s belief that California is the best place to install such societies is a contributing factor to the utopian myths of California. Royce also believed that modeling small communities after these Californian ones would create the strongest and best future for America (Starr 64).

Acorn is a model of Royce’s theories of the best way to live, and is therefore deeply Californian, but it is also an example of a feminist or womanist utopia that builds on many of the tenets of ecofeminism. Those who live in Acorn reshape relationship and child-raising roles, they divide work equally, they farm sustainably, and they make decisions based on consensus (Melzer). Such utopian communities are common in ecofeminist science fiction, and Acorn recalls the sustainable egalitarian utopian society in Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*. As I explain in chapter one, Le Guin’s theory of utopia was focused on “looking back,” as evidenced by the influence of Indigenous American cultures on much of her fiction. Although such an influence is not always as evident in Butler’s works, Lauren overtly styles her ideas of

community on Indigenous practices, using a book about the California Indians as a source of survival knowledge. Lauren names the town Acorn as a way to honor the usefulness of acorns as a food source; Lauren learned this fact in a book about the lifestyles of California Indians (Butler 59). Lauren's use of the California landscape, her demand for a respect for diversity—these are also lessons learned from the California Indians, and Butler is sure to credit them in the novel itself. Through looking back into a California history that predates American capitalism and environmental injustice, Lauren is able to recover the utopian possibilities of California, at least for a time. Although Acorn is eventually raided and destroyed in *Parable of the Talents*, its erstwhile success proves the utopian possibilities of Earthseed.

Critic Jerry Phillips argues that Acorn represents only another lifestyle focused on survivalism, but Lauren's final goal for Earthseed proves that she is attempting to build something beyond an apocalyptic bunker. She hopes to build a community of humans that are wise and strong enough to move beyond Earth and into the stars, to succeed elsewhere where humanity has previously failed. Her ultimate goal for Earthseed is "to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfilment of the Destiny...a unifying, purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy. A heaven that will be theirs to shape" (Butler 261). In settling Acorn in northern California, and in eventually settling the stars, Lauren hopes to reenact a human expansion like the one that made California a utopian dream of wealth, fame, and progress. While the history of California itself is full of individuals moving to California to pursue gold, wealth, education, fame, and social progress, its history also speaks to the many dreams that failed there, causing the region to have a strong tradition of both utopia and dystopia (Starr 343).



At the same time, California's historical location as the final continental frontier of the United States allows it to be a foundational place for the mythos of the frontier hypothesis, the idea that constant forward motion and expansion allowed the American Dream of infinite individual possibilities to flourish. Climate change, though, is the dystopian result of that unchecked expansion and resource exploitation, leaving California as a symbol of a failed utopian project. While Lauren wants to recreate the hopeful possibilities of humanity moving into a new frontier, Butler's novels still provide hope for a better outcome in the form of *Earthseed*. *Earthseed* rejects the notion that we should cling to strategies that have not worked; its insistence on evolution and adaptation are the reasons Lauren hopes humanity can live better within its world, next time.

Although the mythos of California resonates throughout *Sower* as a sense of place, history, and utopia/dystopia, it's also true that "the novel forcefully rejects localist and organic notions of community, reaching instead for more complex ways of representing communities that are not coextensive with places or with discrete cultural traditions" (Dubey). *Earthseed* focuses on diverse communities of itinerant wanderers, out of necessity—this is the main way of survival in this ruined society. But it also means that these communities are not tied by nation or type; indeed, *Earthseed* is primarily focused on moving away from Earth altogether, to colonize other planets in a healthier way. Though Lauren has always lived in California, and though she creates the first *Earthseed* settlement there, she is not tied to that land in the way many other ecofeminist characters are. Although Lauren "looks back" to craft her Earthly society in a time of environmental destruction, the ultimate goal of *Earthseed* is to settle other planets. In this way, Butler pays homage to American science fiction that dreamt of colonizing space, but she also rejects the empire-building desires behind that, like the ones that lay waste to her dystopian America. Furthermore, Butler never finished the trilogy, so whether or not Lauren makes it to the

stars is uncertain, “What the all-important dream of the Destiny offered Lauren, offered Butler—offered us—a chance not to abolish human nature but to perhaps temporarily suspend it; the extrasolar colonies are the chance to start over in circumstances whose radical hardship would offer a chance to build new practices of solidarity and collective life rather than indulge the selfish impulses the bad habits of capitalism and the bad instructions in our DNA have ingrained in us” (Canavan). What *Sower* does show us is the way that Butler used biological hyperempathy to allow for the possibility of a utopian revising of our environmental and political philosophies, that could then lead to utopian practices of sustainability and social justice.

In many ways, Earthseed’s tenets are deeply ecofeminist, but the doctrine also asks its followers to be the kind of empathetic visionaries that Lauren’s hyperempathy allows her to be: ignoring boundaries of race and gender, being in touch with their environment even as it changes, caring for a community of living things rather than just oneself. The communal and action-based nature of Earthseed means that relationships between each other and the world are centered in this philosophy; rather than individual salvation, the goal of Earthseed is to help the environment thrive and to allow humanity to continue in a time that is not hospitable to it. As Haraway suggests, sustainable relationships that are respectful of all life are only possible when assemblages of relations between all types of things, not individual identities, are the focus of justice (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 55). In keeping with this queer ecological philosophy, Earthseed is not human-centric, “Whether you’re a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true. All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth Is Change. God Is Change” (Butler 79). For Lauren, a functional system of belief must include not only humans but nonhumans and even nonliving things, focusing on the relationship between those. This builds a community not only of kin or

even humanity, but of all beings and the earth itself, and is yet another stark rejection of the patriarchal hierarchy that values individualism in Western culture that has brought about the apocalypse surrounding Lauren. It's radical shift from individual to a vast, nonhuman community is a depiction of queer ecologies, and is seen by Lauren as perhaps the only means of survival that humanity can hope for.

Lauren has lived to see the end of the dream of California, but her hope in moving beyond that dream continues even after her death, as the next novel, *Parable of the Talents*, shows Earthseed beginning to spread across the world. In California, Lauren learns how to live alongside the land, but she also learns the importance of utopia. When society is mired in apocalypse, humanity needs a way to look forward, a place to hope for. Just as California functioned in that way for early American settlers, for Earthseed, the stars promise a land that can continue to sustain them, so long as they are open to the queer ecological values that Earthseed promotes. Community, environment, nonhuman and nonliving things, all of these are integral to a human society that can finally embrace each other and avoid destruction. In this way, despite the apocalyptic setting of the *Parable* novels, "utopianism after the end of Utopia names the project that Butler explores" (Phillips 308). Unlike many ecofeminist novels, in the *Parable* texts, the creation of a utopian community within what's left of California is only the first step. Just as many authors used California, the final frontier of America, as a place to explore dystopia and utopia, Butler returns her gaze to space itself. California, Butler finds, while still hopeful, is ultimately a dream that humanity has destroyed and must now abandon. With the queer ecological vision of Earthseed, perhaps Lauren can do right by the classic frontier of science fiction: the stars.

### Chapter Six: Embodying the Land in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

As Octavia Butler's *Parable* series introduced the possibilities of queer ecologies to craft utopia in climate change, so too does *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin. Jemisin is an acclaimed contemporary author whose novel, *The Fifth Season*, won the Hugo Best Novel Award in 2017, making her the first African American writer to receive the award. The subsequent novels in the *Broken Earth* trilogy all received the Hugo, making her the first author to win the Hugo for each book in a series. In her novels, Jemisin follows in Butler's footsteps to use biological evolution as a method of utopian extrapolation and as a means of exploring contemporary issues of gender, sexuality, race, ecology, and empathy. Her works are more fantastical than Butler's, often taking place in universes and on planets other than our own. *The Fifth Season* builds on the utopian imagining of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* to show how a queered experience of physicality can lead to the sort of radical empathy that can imagine an innovative and utopian way of living, even within a deteriorated and hopeless environment.

Published nearly thirty years after *Sower*, *The Fifth Season* is the first novel of Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, which provides representation of queer bodies and relationships and imagines empathy even more expansive than Lauren's in *Sower*. The *Broken Earth* trilogy centers on characters who have an extra sense called orogeny that makes them physiologically empathetic and connected to the land. Orogeny works within the tradition of ecofeminism, as it recalls Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis: the idea that all things on Earth are part of a single, connected organism, by physically connecting individuals with the entire planet. Lovelock even imagined that humanity functions as the brain or nervous system of the planet, and orogenes' mental connection to the land is a literal expression of that theory. The orogenic ability to feel, move, and change the earth can be seen as an extension of Lauren's hyperempathy, one that fully

destroys the binary between humanity and nature by allowing an orogene to empathize not only with humans and animals, like Lauren, but with the land itself. By dissolving boundaries between gender, race, sexuality, and the land, orogeny reveals a path to an embodied ethic of queer ecologies, where hierarchies of oppression are not only immoral but impossible. Through hyperempathy and orogeny, Butler and Jemisin locate biological solutions to the failure and seeming inability of humans to truly care about the earth. Both the *Parable* series and *The Fifth Season* provide a utopian map that shows the reader that only through changing humanity's perception of and relationship with the land can humanity hope to create a utopian outcome for all species in line with that imagined by theorists of queer ecologies.

In search of utopia, Jemisin's novel depicts a slow-moving apocalypse that recalls the landscape of California and also extrapolates the effects of climate change on Earth. In Jemisin's novel, the world is composed of a single large continent named the Stillness that is extremely unstable. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions are nearly constant, and occasional periods of apocalyptic cataclysm, termed Seasons, occur. These Seasons take many different forms; in an index, Jemisin includes a history of the Seasons that details the twelve recorded seasons that have occurred over 7000 years. The recorded Seasons include an event where volcanoes cause an acidic oceanic jet stream that destroyed coastal towns, a time when volcanic ash darkened the sky and changed the climate to allow for extreme poisonous fungal blooms and famines, and a Season that caused a decade of darkness due to volcanic ash from a super volcano (Jemisin 454). (Citations of Jemisin come from *The Fifth Season*, unless otherwise noted.) Environmental cataclysm occurs sporadically, repeatedly, and in a way that leaves behind survivors who must continue to live on in this apocalyptic space.

In the final book of Jemisin's trilogy, *The Stone Sky*, the reader learns that the Seasons, like climate change, were caused by human interference with the planet. Millennia ago, humanity mined the planet's core in search of an unlimited power source, flinging the planet out of its orbit and causing the Seasons. The pursuit of this power source not only destroyed the equilibrium of the planet, but also caused the creation and enslavement of orogenes and stone eaters. This history parallels the progress of climate change, as humanity in Jemisin's fiction is so desperate for powerful resources that they torture and exploit other beings and ultimately make their own planet nearly uninhabitable. The diversity of the disasters on the Stillness is another parallel to climate change, as it illustrates the myriad and variable ways that climate change can manifest. Scientists have hypothesized that as climate change progresses, increasingly worse weather catastrophes will occur sporadically across the globe, increasing extreme weather events, raising rainfall in some areas and decreasing it in others, rising sea levels will affect coastal areas more than others (Marie Anotinette Meyers 346). In the novel, the Seasons function similarly: impossible to predict, they devastate different locations in different ways. The addition of a fifth type of season to the Earth troubles what we know to be true and unchangeable about our environment. Utterly unnatural, these Seasons were caused by human activity on the planet. As in the Anthropocene, the Seasons signal a human-created era, a new (and dangerous) season of life on Earth. While humanity is prepared for, responds to, and anticipates the changing of the four seasons, a Season is unpredictable, cataclysmic, unknown, and incredibly dangerous. Like climate change, the existence of the Seasons means that humanity must accept the consequences of its actions and change the way it lives within its environment.

The precarious environment of the Stillness also brings to mind the recurrent environmental cataclysms that threaten California, especially in the current era of climate

change. Part of the dystopian nature of California is its repeated natural disasters, including floods, mudslides, and forest fires (Park, Baggaley). California is the most likely area in the United States to experience an earthquake, with the particularly dystopian feeling southern region dealing with more earthquakes than northern California (USGS). Earthquakes are also the most common symptom of a destabilized ecosystem in *The Fifth Season*, and the ability of Californian residents to survive such disasters on an annual basis recalls the way that people on the Stillness must live within constant catastrophe. Although natural disasters are generally worsened by climate change, many of California's natural disasters are not human-caused (Arango & Kang). Despite the historical fact of such disasters, though, the California region was the most populated part of North America before the arrival of European colonists (Starr 13). The history of California is one of people who can survive nature's various events, much like the people on the Stillness.

Because the Stillness can be read as a symbolic depiction of California during climate change, *The Fifth Season* functions, like all good dystopian literature, as a warning to the reader against current behaviors—in this case, the destruction of Earth. In the novel, the land is actively hostile to the humans who attempt to still live on it, forming a stark reversal of the dominance of the land that has characterized human history. The people's stonelore, generational knowledge enshrined on stone tablets and passed down for centuries, provides an important clue as to the reason behind the apocalyptic temperament of the Stillness,

...once upon a time Earth did everything he could to facilitate the strange emergence of life on his surface. He crafted even, predictable seasons; kept changes of wind and wave and temperature slow enough that every living being could adapt, evolve; summoned waters that purified themselves, skies that always cleared after a storm... Then people began to do horrible things to Father Earth. They poisoned the waters beyond even his ability to cleanse, and killed much of the other life that lived on his surface. They drilled through the crust of his skin, past the blood of his mantle, to get at the sweet marrow of his bones. And at the height of human hubris

and might, it was the orogenes who did something that even Earth could not forgive: They destroyed his only child (Jemisin 380).

This passage presents a stark parallel to the reader's own Earth: a warning against exploiting the land beyond its limits. Because the society in the novel ignored this warning, their world became hostile to their own survival. The land is a vengeful god, seeking retribution after being ill-treated by humanity.

This personification is a fictional society's way of mythologizing its circumstance, but it also refutes the nonhuman, nonliving character of the environment. The earth is personified but not in the way that ecofeminists view as traditional, a "rich erotic relationship" between the human female and the land (Legler 232). For Jemisin, that relationship is violent. While ecofeminist utopias like those of Le Guin look backward, hoping to return to a more natural way of living in harmony with the land, this reading of "Evil Earth" opposes such regressive pastoralism. No longer a nurturing Mother Earth, the Stillness is an angry, patriarchal, violent father. Jemisin's depiction of the relationship between humanity and the land is a necessary depiction during climate change. There can be no "back to the land" in the Anthropocene, because, as ecocritic Ursula K. Heise explains, no virgin land has survived that can sustain us after the ecological destruction we have caused (Heise 54). Father Earth instead recalls Donna Haraway's updated vision of the Gaia hypothesis, an interpretation that rejects ecofeminist harmony with nature. More contemporary interpretations of Lovelock's Gaia see the organism as "a maker and destroyer, not resource to be exploited or ward to be protected or nursing mother promising nourishment" (Haraway 43).

The hostile earth in *The Fifth Season* also inverts the language that early Americans used to feminize the land in pursuit of the settlement (and concurrent exploitation) of the West. Such feminizing language rhetorically justified the rape and destruction of the land, nonhuman



species, and indigenous populations through the language of heteronormative dominance (Kolodny). The passive language historically used to characterize Mother Earth removes her agency and her ability to act against humanity, removes her possibility for self-protection and self-interest, allowing humanity to exploit her with only their own interests in mind. When we perceive the earth as passive—or as feminine and ripe for possession—it is easier to ignore, forget, or neglect its responses to human activity. Jemisin’s novel gives the land a voice, and a voice of stern, angry, masculine authority, recalling the vengeful God of the Old Testament. For the people on the Stillness, Mother Earth is not passively awaiting her consummation or her rape; instead, Father Earth torments the species that has so abused him in the past.

The hostility of Father Earth forces humanity to reject the cruel optimism depicted in *Gold Fame Citrus* and *California* to instead be aware of and respond to the earth. Because of the overarching nature of Father Earth’s vengeance on the Stillness, its people live a constant experience of paying attention to and adapting to the land itself, inhabiting a “state of constant disaster-preparedness” (Jemisin 8). *The Fifth Season* depicts an intimate environment, like the one in climate change, that is so close to humanity that it can no longer be conceived of as separate from us (Morton 274). But the people’s environmental awareness is in stark contrast to the reader’s society, which generally ignores the mounting evidence of climate change to continue business as usual. In a way, the people on the Stillness have been forced to follow Lauren’s code of Earthseed in Butler’s *Parable* series: they have to be able to adapt and change, according to the realities they face, or they will not survive in their hostile world. In Jemisin’s universe, because apocalypse is so constant and imminent, it makes humanity more aware of the land’s degradation, not less able to perceive and react to it. Rather than constant catastrophe alienating humanity from its responsibility to the land, on the Stillness, these minor apocalypses

dissolve the binary between human and nature. Humanity must live with and inside its environment, made intimate and no longer separate from humans.

Orogeny is another way *The Fifth Season* dissolves the constructed binary between humanity and the land. The physiological extension of empathy that characterizes orogeny can be read as an expression of queer ecologies, much like Lauren's hyperempathy in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Hyperempathy allowed Lauren to embody the feelings of other living things, granting her the ability to create a new and utopian way of living within the environment. Essun's orogeny expands empathy even into nonliving things and the land itself, giving her and all orogenes a unique perspective that allows them to empathize even further beyond the limitations of humanity. Orogeny is a power that allows an individual to perceive ("sess") movements of the earth's plates through an extra sensory system called sessapinae that can feel the earth's motion and manipulate energy in order to alter, redirect, or stop that motion. Infant orogenes can use this power instinctually to protect themselves from harm, but trained orogenes can control the weather and even animals by shifting the land to create fog off of water or to slightly shake the earth, causing small animals to flee (Jemisin 364). At its strongest, this ability can be honed to move molecules; in one scene, Essun combines her power with another orogene to remove poison from his body's cells (Jemisin 166). While Lauren's empathy did not extend to this microscopic level, such a concept of molecular biological power also exists in Butler's fiction, as Anyanwu in her novel *Wild Seed* demonstrated a similar physical power to intuitively focus on and heal the body on a microscopic level.

In expanding empathy beyond what humans can currently feel, Jemisin carries on Butler's project of imagining a tangible evolution of humanity into a more empathetic, and therefore more utopian, race. Essun describes the sense of orogeny as a physical sensation or

feeling: “There is an unpleasant ringing ache in her sessapinae...It’s like when she hits her elbow and shuts off all the sensation from there to the tips of her fingers” (Jemisin 260). It is also felt as a means of communication between oneself and the earth: “the stone beckons,” as Essun once thinks (Jemisin 98). This allows for an understanding and empathy with the earth itself, respecting its wishes as though it were alive, “The earth does not like to be restrained. Redirection, not cessation, is the orogene’s goal” (Jemisin 117). In the same way that Lauren’s hyperempathy allowed her to dissolve the boundaries that separate humans by feeling beyond divisions of race, gender, even species, orogenes embody the lack of separation between humans and the land. But Lauren could empathize only with humans and animals. Orogenes can feel and communicate with the land, with matter, with air, heat, and energy. This connection to the land means that it is impossible to ignore the effects of actions upon it. Orogey makes the land intimate: the land is inside you, you can actually feel it physically, can interpret its needs as though it were a person, can speak back to it, can alter, shape, and change it. In this way, the personification of Father Earth becomes literal in the text. Lauren’s hyperempathy allowed to her understand the importance of respecting the life of others and of nonhumans, but orogeny allows Jemisin’s characters to understand the effects humanity has on the land itself. There’s no way to ignore the condition of the land when you physically feel it. Orogey makes cruel optimism impossible: orogenes have no choice but to pay attention and respond to the land.

Orogenes’ link to the dangerously capricious land is paralleled by their experience in society. Essun is no exception, and her life is constantly shaken up, the course of her life changed repeatedly throughout the book, just as the land is constantly moving, breaking apart, and being shaken by disaster. The fractured land is also mirrored in the structure of the novel, which splits into chapters with three distinct narrators, all of whom are orogenes: Damaya, a young girl,

Syenite, a young adult woman, and Essun, a middle-aged woman. By the end of the novel, the reader learns that all of these characters are the same person at different parts of her life, just as the Stillness is a single, unstable continent. Jemisin's novel here references its ecofeminist roots by invoking the feminist concept of polyvocality, of understanding experiences through different voices. Essun's experiences in these three eras of her life are so vastly different that keeping her former names would simply not make sense, nor create a holistic identity. Each of Essun's names is deeply attached to major parts of her life, eras wherein she lived very different experiences and took on very different roles. The concept of fractured narration has a long history in feminist science fiction, as in Joanna Russ' 1970 novel *The Female Man*, where characters shape shift into different bodies and identities in order to more fully explore their social situations. This use of varied narrators shows the importance of listening to different perspectives, as empathy cannot occur when a reader is exposed to only one viewpoint. The different experiences of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun show the different ways an orogene can live in this society, all of which are impacted by trauma due to their systematic oppression.

The novel's change in narrators also highlights the importance of self-naming, a foundational feminist concept that functions as a means of self-knowledge and identity-creation, as well as a rejection of the standard Western naming system that is based on the patriarchal genetic line (Rom xiv). In the novel, Essun is given the name Damaya by her family before she is taken into the Fulcrum, the institution that trains and enslaves orogenes. Authorities at the Fulcrum, who mirror the control and brutality of American slave-owners, give orogenes new names to indicate their ownership of them. Their identity as parts of the land, not parts of society, is indicated by the fact that the Fulcrum-given names are always the names of types of rock. Syenite, Essun's assigned name, refers to a type of igneous rock similar to granite. Her

companion, whose skin is very dark, is perhaps ironically assigned the name Alabaster. He is incredibly powerful and strong-willed: he plans to end the world as he knows it, and he uses his orogeny to blow up the Fulcrum's main station. That the Fulcrum named him after a particularly soft and decorative type of rock becomes a joke on his namers instead; this irony is perhaps one reason why Alabaster embraces his assigned name and never changes it throughout the novels, despite experiencing life shifts and traumas. The Fulcrum has utterly underestimated him, and with his dark sense of humor, he likely appreciates that. While Alabaster's name and mission remain constant, Essun changes and controls her identity through her names. She vehemently corrects anyone who calls her Syenite after she has left the Fulcrum behind and created a life of her own. When Essun abandons her Fulcrum-given name, she rejects the identity and the duties that the Fulcrum assigned to her. Self-naming, then, allows an individual to define their own identity, but this novel also uses names to reject the patriarchal naming conventions of the reader's time. In the Stillness, last names are not based on blood relation but on home village and use caste, the job that any person undertakes. This more practical naming system reflects the practical society that has evolved somewhat beyond prioritizing the nuclear family. Essun's major periods of her life are reflected by her different names, and her growing sense of agency is reflected in the way that she ends her life with the name she has chosen for herself.

Essun's different identities also indicate her feelings of estrangement from the traumatic events of her past, again aligning her with the earth, which is also in a state of perpetual upheaval. Reaching back to the Gaia hypothesis, Western culture has traditionally pictured the earth as a woman, while also portraying women as naturally close to the earth (Rose). Essun's fractured identity ties her to the fractured land to which she is physically tied through her orogeny. It's not uncommon in literature for earthquakes to symbolize the fractured identity of a

woman who has experienced trauma (Loth). And indeed, Essun experiences deep trauma in all three eras of her life. In this way, the fractured land is a parallel to Essun's repeated experiences of trauma as an orogene in a society that rejects them. The land is made personal, and the novel uses this connection again to make the apocalypse personal. The beginning of the novel shows the start of a new Season, one that will last ten thousand years and bring about the end of humanity if it continues unchecked. This Season begins at the exact moment that Essun's son was murdered by her husband, after he discovered their son's orogeny. For Essun (and for the reader), this murder is as earth-shaking as the actual apocalypse, making the apocalypse of the novel small, personal, maternal, and emotional. The novel does not show only a mass apocalypse, an event so widespread and daunting that it may be reduced to statistical loss or numbness. Instead, the novel aligns apocalypse with the small but terrible slaughter of a child, thereby allowing the personal grief of Essun to model the ecological grief the novel hopes to instill. Essun's life and her experiences of death are so inherently tied to the land, again referencing the connection between women and nature that ecofeminists identified.

Ecofeminist ideas permeate the novel, also appearing in the communities on the Stillness, which resemble earlier science fiction utopias like Le Guin's. The constant threat of environmental upheaval forces the people on the Stillness to finally acknowledge that values of community are essential to human survival. The localized villages on the Stillness lack technology, they live in small villages, they have traveling bards, they are all assigned tasks like stone-carving, teaching, farming, and hunting. The people on the Stillness live according to tenets described as stonelore, which are rules meant to help ensure the survival of at least some of the human race even during a Season that will likely end most life on the planet. The culture of the Stillness is necessarily communal and sustainable; their stonelore mandates ways to

survive a Season, many of which emphasize the necessity of a healthy community, like a prohibition of individually hoarding supplies within a group (Jemisin 239). Their diverse and peaceful communities focus on survival, much like the way the Californian Indians lived (Starr 15). This opposes the individualistic capitalist motivations that led to the apocalypse itself, especially the desire for unlimited power. On the Stillness, individual survival is less important than the survival of a community, because in this harsh environment, communities are the only way that any individuals could hope to survive. The extremeness of the natural world forces a communal sensibility.

These ecofeminist tenets allow for a society that is more communal and never focused on individual progress, in stark opposition to the American Dream of expansion and individual wealth. The world is too unstable to allow for extended production of technology, traveling, resource mining, or wealth production. In some ways, this may be closer to the realities of settling a virgin land than the idea of the welcoming, pristine pastoral. The very bitterness of the environment is what prioritizes the survival of the community over the survival of the individual. Without the community, no individual can survive a Season; it's simply not possible. As in Edan Lepucki's *California*, community is the only way to support people who are not individual men, to allow more individuals to survive together. When Essun and her partner Alabaster settle into a community, Essun gets pregnant. She doesn't have much interest in or inclination towards child-rearing, but the community acts as an extended family, so her lack of desire to be a mother is not unusual or problematic, "When she's not around, Alabaster just takes the baby to one of the other mothers in the comm, just as [she] fed their babies in turn if they happened to be hungry while she was nearby and full of milk. And since 'Baster does most of the diaper changes and sings little Corundum to sleep, and coos at him and plays with him and takes him for walks and so on,

Syenite has to keep busy somehow” (Jemisin 362). Parenting on the Stillness is not gendered, nor are childrearing roles; even feeding duties are spread throughout the community. As Lauren recognized in *Parable of the Sower*, traditional binary gender roles are simply impractical in an apocalyptic setting.

Of course, this sort of cooperative survival is hardly exceptional in apocalyptic fiction, especially when it has an ecofeminist bent, so this is not the primary element of the novel that models the possibilities of queer ecologies. The Seasons themselves trouble the traditional knowledge of the world around us, and orogenes queer our understanding of the binaries between individual humans and society, between humans and the land, between humans and nonhuman, nonliving matter. Orogenes model this queerness through their inherent and undeniable physical connection to the land and all nonliving matter. The land is inside them; it is perceived and felt by their brains and their bodies. In the same way that Morton argues that DNA itself is not separate from other organisms, orogenes are a tangible example of the impossibility of a biological binary between things (Morton 275). The lack of separation between beings and matter is the fundamental premise of theorists of queer ecologies, who argue that all life exists within a sort of intertwined mesh, “terran critters have never been one—or two. Tubes, membranes, orifices, organs, extensions, probes, docking sites: these are the stuff of being in material semiotic intra-action” (Hird xxiv).

If the biology of orogenes proves the impossibility of binaries, then social binaries carry less weight, and *The Fifth Season* accordingly rejects social binaries of hierarchy, prejudice, and oppression. The novel is remarkable in its depiction of queered bodies, values, and relationships. Most of the novel’s characters are people of color, and contemporary Western beauty standards have been inverted to favor kinky hair and darker skin. Transgender characters are present and



are treated as not unusual, and polyamorous queer relationships are treated as utterly commonplace. By depicting an inversion of the oppressive and prejudicial social institutions that dominate contemporary American society, Jemisin forces the reader to imagine other, less oppressive possibilities.

Jemisin also follows in Butler's footsteps by using her imagined society to reflect the problems of today's, which means that despite its inclusivity, the Stillness is not without prejudice. Racism and xenophobia still exist between factions and villages, but the most common, and virulent, prejudice in this society is against orogenes. The recognition of difference between orogenes and humans without this power ("stills") allows for their treatment in the novel to function as a metaphor for American slavery, as well as a reminder of its legacy of American racism. In the same way that Butler depicted hyperempathy as a power but also a burden, Jemisin uses orogeny to critique the way that historical progress has been built on the suffering of women of color. Orogenes are prejudiced against, raped, killed, and enslaved, living outside of mainstream society with an outsider and a utopian perspective that recalls the queer apocalypticism I discuss in chapter four. They are hated and feared by most people just as the land is, meaning that individual orogenes often live lives that are characterized by trauma and uncertainty that is also the primary characteristic of the land itself.

Despite—and because of—the fact that they have a unique ability to empathize and to change the world, the possibilities of orogenes' power are denied, controlled, and extinguished; their labor is controlled and institutionalized to maintain the status quo. The structural oppression of orogenes is enforced by an organization known as the Fulcrum, which attempts to control orogenes both physically and ideologically. By assigning names to orogenes, The Fulcrum defines them, removes their agency and their identity. But this erasure of individuality is only

part of the institutional oppression enacted against orogenes: the Fulcrum takes orogenes away from their families as soon as they are recognized. The Fulcrum then trains them, eventually allowing them to leave the main facility only to undertake Fulcrum-mandated tasks, traveling to handle tectonic events, quelling shakes and preventing disasters in various communities across the Stillness. The Fulcrum uses physical abuse as a training and discipline method. Rogue orogenes are put to death without trial or fanfare; refusing to work for the Fulcrum is not an option. The Fulcrum also forces orogenes to have sex and reproduce, higher level orogenes are often used in this manner. Because orogeny is hereditary, the Fulcrum breeds orogenes like animals; again, it is not possible to refuse an order to have sex with the assigned person, or to refuse to have the baby that is conceived. Family separation, torture, violence, and rape are, of course, all methods of control and abuse enacted by American slave-owners.

The Fulcrum also controls the ideological understanding of orogenes both in still society and within the minds of orogenes themselves. The Fulcrum indoctrinates a view of orogenes not as human beings, but as tools to be used for the security of society. Orogenes have been officially labeled as not human by the government. This “official” lack of humanity recalls tools of colonization throughout history. One member of the Fulcrum tells Essun as a young girl, “you *cannot* control yourself. It isn’t in your nature. You are lightning, dangerous unless captured in wires. You’re fire—a warm light on a cold dark night to be sure, but also a conflagration that can destroy everything in its path” (Jemisin 95). This statement uses a metaphor of a separate and uncontrollable nature to engender self-hate in Essun. Just as everyone fears Father Earth, so too should everyone fear orogenes, even orogenes themselves. One of the key rhetorical strategies of racism is to dehumanized oppressed people to nature by calling them animalistic, irrational, and dangerous. Just as it occurred in human history, the idea that orogenes are dangerous and

subhuman vindicates the idea that they need to be controlled. These ideas perpetuate their oppression and rhetorically justify it.

Even orogenes come to believe this propaganda, as Essun internalizes these lessons so much that she denies herself happiness, family, and a future, believing that she does not deserve such a life due to her very nature (Jemisin 272). Essun has to make a conscious effort to believe positive things about herself, and this deprogramming process only begins when she starts to work with Alabaster, who begins to show her that the propaganda about orogenes is not true, but is actually an intentional tool of oppression. For example, orogenes are taught that they cannot harness their powers to work together, but Alabaster and Essun find that in actuality, cooperation helps sharpen and increase their power. Only after working with Alabaster does Essun come to realize the true depth of her oppression. Essun's awakening creates an overt parallel to American slavery for the reader when Essun eventually recognizes that "she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body" (Jemisin 348). Rogga is a slur term for orogenes, one that is used by people who hate and fear them; the term rhetorically even mimics the term used to dehumanize African Americans throughout the period of American slavery and for all the decades after.

An even more disturbing metaphor for American slavery appears later in the novel, when Alabaster reveals to Essun that the Fulcrum takes especially powerful and uncontrollable orogene children and lobotomizes them, sedates them, and wires them into control centers that harness their orogeny to control the minor seismic tremors that are constant on the Stillness (Jemisin 139). These children are kept bound to these machines for their entire lives, not fully conscious, bodies atrophying, and even raped. The wires that tie these orogenes to the land are

physical symbols of the relationship between orogenes and the land, but they are also a stark metaphor for American slavery. As the helpless and unconscious children are harnessed to the land through this technology, they have no agency and are forced to pour their energy and power into the land in an effort to control it and make it useful for the humans on the Stillness.

Because orogenes are so physically tied to the land, their control also works as a metaphor for humanity's attempts to control the land itself. The oppressor attempts to control orogene labor in an effort to control the land, but similarly, it sees only their use value, and that in a way that can perpetuate the status quo. People and the land both become exploitable resources. The wiring of the young orogenes to the land, draining them of their labor while binding and harming their bodies, symbolizes the exploitation of African American bodies to exploit and mine the land for its resources, building American wealth on the enforced labor of Black bodies. Without this invisible exploitation and destruction of physical human bodies, society could not flourish, but this sacrifice is an immoral bargain.

As slaves, orogenes exist on the margins of society. They are brainwashed to hate and fear themselves, and they are killed, raped, and exploited by outside society. In another parallel to the experience of the Other, mainstream language even neglects orogenes. As Essun tries to describe the sensations of experiencing orogeny, she realizes that "words are inadequate to the task. Maybe someday someone will create a language for orogenes to use. Maybe such a language has existed, and been forgotten, in the past" (Jemisin 161). The inability of language to comprehend the experience of marginalized people is central to narratives of oppression and resistance. In order to locate their own power and to pursue freedom and justice, Essun and Alabaster must reject the "master's tools"—the internalized prejudice and enslavement they have been taught (Lorde).

These examples indicate the symbolic parallels between orogenes in the novel and American racism. Couching these parallels within a climate change narrative allows Jemisin, like Butler, to critique environmental movements, including ecofeminism, that have historically ignored the experiences and labor of people of color. The refusal to acknowledge racialized elements of environmentalism means that “‘women of color’ will remain ‘natural resources’ for white ecofeminists rather than feminist environmentalists with whom we can have solidarity in political struggles” (Sturgeon 273). As a woman of color who is an orogene, Essun’s exploitation clearly indicts Americans, even environmentalists, who wish to profit from the ideas, labor, reproduction, and suffering of oppressed people. Though the connection between orogenes and the land is powerful, it is also violent. Their connection to the earth is not beautiful or peaceful, as primarily white ecofeminists might expect. Jemisin’s depiction of orogeny thereby shows that “Ecofeminism does not adequately consider the experiences of women of color; neither does it fully understand or accept the differences between white women and women of color” (Taylor 39). By depicting the suffering of Black women as the only route to utopian thinking, both Butler and Jemisin highlight the way that even utopian-oriented environmental moments have historically ignored the problems of people of color. Jemisin herself writes of this connection in her 2019 forward to Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,

This resonated powerfully with me amid the ongoing context of the American social justice movement. For every attempt made by marginalized people to express anguish and seek change for historical (and ongoing) harm, there’s always pushback from those who demand that we suffer only in the expected ways, express that suffering with an acceptable tone, and end both our suffering and our complaints on demand...maybe Butler’s message is that Marcs aren’t exactly rare in our society—so anyone who wants to understand and guide positive change, like Lauren, must also be prepared to work around them (“Three Words”).

Here, Jemisin reflects on the way that Butler depicted suffering in *Parable of the Sower*.

Although Lauren (and Essun) are the path to utopian visions in a hopeless time and place, both

Butler and Jemisin show their suffering as unfortunately central to progress for the rest of the world. Why are systems dependent on the labor, exploitation, and pain of women of color? How can utopian thinking move beyond that? Despite society's hatred of them, orogenes are actually invaluable members of society. Orogenes work to calm the constant earthquakes on the Stillness, and without their work, human life could not continue. The extraction of value from the land is only possible through the bodies of orogenes, just as American prosperity was built on the backs of slave labor.

Jemisin uses this brutal oppression of orogenes to illustrate the ways that their empathy makes them invaluable and extremely powerful. This is similar to the way that Octavia Butler often rewrote history and imagined science fictions to affirm the agency of African Americans even in a racist culture. By seeing beyond an image of themselves that was constructed by their oppressor, Jemisin's orogenes are able to recognize the fullness of their abilities and use them to pursue justice. Essun's rejection of her Fulcrum-given name is one example of her empowerment, but the power of orogenes is made clear in other ways, as well. Freed from their slavery to the Fulcrum, orogenes have the power to change the world, as Alabaster tells Essun after she begins to use her powers for herself rather than for the Fulcrum, "Well. Now you'll see how much more we're capable of when we're willing" (Jemisin 333). This empowerment speaks directly to the rejection of internalized racism. Alabaster and Essun's embrace of their own special power frees them from the ideology that they are out of control and to be feared, instead allowing them to more fully recognize, understand, and harness their powers against the will of a society that says this is impossible. This freedom also stems from the queering of the physical body that occurs with Jemisin's creation of orogeny; if they embrace their power, orogenes are simply too strong to control: Alabaster spends so much time in the earth he forgets about his

physical self and needs, limiting the possibilities of physical control over him just as he is rejecting the mental control of the Fulcrum's ideology (Jemisin 161). As he begins to reject the programming of the Fulcrum, he experiences a new reality and a new self-empowerment. He is able to move even beyond the limitations of all of humanity, finding himself unbound by physical realities, and more deeply connected to the earth than to his own body.

Just as Lauren's hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower* provides the foundation for her to create the alternative religion of Earthseed, Alabaster's outsider identity and queered physicality allow him to see beyond the unjust institutional knowledge of the Fulcrum. Gifted with the ability to see the earth as living, or if not living exactly, as willful, powerful, and valuable, orogenes can imagine a different kind of future that respects the land. In Jemisin's novel, as in Butler's novels before, radical empathy is the route to locating a new perspective on humanity within nature that reflects the philosophies of queer ecologies. Queer ecologies dictates that "humanity must find a new way to conceive of itself and nature, a way that is completely intertwined rather than outside or apart from," and to do so, we must concede that "life-forms constitute a mesh, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment" (Morton 275). Through their deep empathy with each other, the land, all matter, and even energy, orogenes are able to see beyond the binaries that create hierarchies of oppression. Alabaster's connection to the land is so deep that he is truly a part of it, that he is able to forgo the oppressive needs and limits of a human body. He has evolved beyond a value system that prioritizes human need and desire over all other elements of the world. This is a literal embodiment of the tenets of queer ecology that ask us to value things beyond human relationships and human progress. Orogey provides a connection not only to the

land but to each other; although again their training has forbidden this knowledge, eventually Essun and Alabaster realize that orogeny can even be used as a form of telepathy (Jemisin 258). The land works as a link between them, allowing orogenes to sense and communicate with each other. Even as Alabaster is more closely connected to the land, he becomes more closely connected to other beings, as well, proving the injustice of binaries that divide human from land, human from nonhuman, and humans from each other. Through this radical empathy, orogenes enact a version of queer ecologies, breaking down barriers between them through telepathy.

Orogenes are not the only beings that embody queer ecologies in *The Fifth Season*. While orogeny destroys a boundary between humans and each other, nonhumans, and the land, creatures known as stone eaters blur even the division between living and nonliving. Birthed from geodes, able to move through the earth like air, and living within stone obelisks that hover in the atmosphere above the planet, the stone eaters seem less human than orogenes and more closely related to the land. The stone eaters are genderless, demonstrating the lack of importance of gender to life as their “emulation of human gender is only superficial, a courtesy” (Jemisin 5). The stone eaters are also telepathic, showing their commonality with the orogenes and the earth (Jemisin 280). Stone eaters give life, agency, and power to stone, troubling the human understanding of ecology. Giving life to what we understand as nonliving allows Jemisin to show a depiction of life as “catastrophic, monstrous, nonholistic, and dislocated, not organic, coherent, or authoritative” (Morton 275). In a world where the land itself is personified and hostile, beings exist that are made of earth itself. The stone eaters upend assumptions about what life is, and therefore what matters. By giving agency to nonliving matter, Jemisin highlights the importance of parts of the environment beyond humanity or even nonhuman beings, yet another central tenet of queer ecologies. It is revealed in the final book of the trilogy that stone eaters



were created by humans as a means to manage energy within the earth; similar to orogenes, they were enslaved, told they were not humans, and exploited, once more paralleling the enslavement of humans, nonhumans, and the land in a history of exploitation that has led directly to climate change in the reader's world. By giving consciousness, life, and agency to stone, Jemisin reveals the true inhumanity of exploiting any part of the world, even the land itself, which seems untroubled by human misuse.

Stone eaters also trouble what it means to make kin. Long after Essun abandons the Fulcrum, and then Alabaster, she absconds into a quiet village where she hides her orogeny. She hopes to avoid the trauma her orogeny has always brought her, so she doesn't reveal her true nature even to her new husband. After having two children with him, he eventually realizes that the rest of his family does have orogeny; in a fit of racial terror, he murders their son and flees the village with their daughter. Essun begins a journey to save her daughter from her husband, and on the road she meets her first stone eater. This quest for feminine futurity within the environment shows that rather than simply giving in to the death that surrounds her in her own family as everywhere in the Stillness, Essun must keep moving to find her daughter. The novel creates a queer expansion of the ecofeminist tradition of women traveling together as Essun finds a traveling companion named Hoa, a lone boy child who is actually a stone eater. Stone eaters are creatures that differ from humans in many ways, but regardless of this, Essun cares for Hoa as she would a human child, and he protects her, too. This comradeship of travelers is part of the culture of the Stillness, and it is partly influenced by Essun's recent loss of her son. The quest that starts with the death of Essun's sons emphasizes the matriarchal interest of the novel, while also inverting ecofeminist traditions that often emphasize the narrative of a woman undertaking a long journey of self-discovery with a girl child.

The very social normality of caring for non-kin is a manner of queer family-making, the first step into creating an ethic of queer ecology. Being able to feel for beings that are not biological kin allows for a society that values things beyond human reproduction, the safety of a heteronormative, biological family and their wealth. As Essun begins to travel with and care for a person who is not her son, not human, and not even living matter, her empathy expands from simply feeling into *acting*, into seeking justice even for things that are not fully related to humanity. Her orogeny allows her a scope of empathy that is impossible to most humans. She is able to see beyond the labels of species and kind to form familial relationships even with a being made of rocks. Essun's ability to understand and make kin with nonhuman and nonliving things is a demonstration of a queer ecology that emphasizes the essential importance of finding value outside of human relationships. As Nicole Seymour describes it,

With a queer ecological perspective attuned to social justice, we can learn to care about the future of the planet in a way that is perhaps more radical than any we have seen previously: acting in the interests of nameless, faceless individuals to which one has no biological, familial, or economic ties whatsoever. This kind of action operates without any reward, without any guarantee of success, and without any proof that potential future inhabitants of the planet might be similar to the individual acting in the present—in terms of social identity, morality, or even species (Seymour 11).

Essun locates the ability to connect with beings outside of her human kin through orogeny, this novel's imaginative construct of an extreme empathy with the earth itself.

True to the literary tradition of Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin locates a solution to the cruel optimism of climate change in her creation of orogenes. Orogenes achieve the relationships needed to move past human supremacy, making kin out of others, no matter their relation or species. Their bodies are queered, too, in that their connection to everything else in this world is undeniable. Their extra sense allows them to literally feel the world around them as though it were not only around them, but in them—which, according to queer ecologies, it is. Only

through this outsider perspective are orogenes able to locate a solution to the injustices of their world. By the end of the novel, Alabaster advocates for a full apocalypse, one that will fundamentally end the world. As Alabaster tells Essun, “You can’t make anything better...The world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over again, there’s no changing it” (Jemisin 371). Alabaster is queer sexually, but he and Essun both queer our understanding of what is human, and they queer the boundaries between human and land. As such, his embrace of apocalypse as a promising utopian solution comes from his experience; queer theory “is not about realising a programme, identity, or fantasy but about disruption, disturbance and laying a challenge to the very process and desire behind the act or impetus to ‘realize’ anything” (Hird 67). Queerness rejects binaries, definitions, and limiting systems, and thus allows a vision of destruction of those systems that is utopian in nature. Mired in those systems of heteronormativity, capitalism, gender, and race, it’s difficult (perhaps impossible) for a human to see beyond them, as evidenced in the dystopias of chapter two. Accordingly, while stills (non-orogenes) in the novel are only able to *survive* on the Stillness, only orogenes can move beyond the limitations of human survival to discover a solution to the disaster that has terrorized humanity for millennia. The final two books in the trilogy show the completion of Alabaster and Essun’s plan to restore the world’s equilibrium and make it a safe place for all life on the Stillness. Only through their vision and sacrifice can true ecological security return to their planet. By using their orogeny to return the Moon to the planet, Alabaster and Essun bring an end to the Seasons, which means a more hopeful future for all of humanity, rather than the complete annihilation promised by the current Season.

In this ultimate queer apocalypse, Essun and Alabaster fight to make the world a more hopeful place for orogenes, humans, and all other things in their world. Only this holistic fight

for justice, for all types of humans and all other types of beings and things, can conclude in survival for anything as we know it, during a Season or during climate change. The series ends with a promise that the Seasons will probably cease within the next few hundred years, finally rebuilding a world that might be livable. Left with this possibility in the unwritten future of the texts, there can be nothing but looking-forward, a true utopian impulse (Bloch 853). In this way, Essun *chooses* apocalypse, the end of the world as she knows it, in hopes of creating a better future, not only for humanity but for the entire world. Seasons decimate all types of beings on the Stillness; thinking geologically, even the tectonic plates of the world are disturbed by the way the world has been altered. In this way, the novel seeks utopia beyond the reproductive futurity shown in the other novels I discuss. At the same time, life has ended for Essun—she has been forced to sacrifice herself to make a better world. Essun dies, but her daughter lives on. This sacrifice brings about ecological justice not only for Essun’s own kin, but the tragedy of Essun’s sacrifice of life, and her traumatic life building up to it, are not ignored by the novel. In this tragedy, *The Fifth Season* insists that environmental thinkers still have work to do to restore justice to oppressed people, even as they seek to restore the planet. In this utopian and dystopian ending, Jemisin reflects the dualism of a place that is very much like California, where despite a natural environment that sometimes resists, humans have flocked to for centuries to find wealth and indeed, social progress.

Taken together, the science fiction texts in these chapters posit a way forward in a time of seeming hopelessness. Their focus on California allows them to consider both the dystopian and the utopian possibilities of the American Dream, its history and its future. While early ecofeminists like Le Guin imagined a hopeful return to pristine nature, these utopian visions are not possible in an era of climate change. Instead, dystopias like those by Watkins and Lepucki

reflect the reader's reality, exploring how and why humanity clings to a cruel optimism that will doom us. These dystopias warn that by adhering to outmoded gender norms, patriarchal systems, capitalism, and environmental exploitation, humanity can only perpetuate apocalypse and survive temporarily alongside it, as the world slowly winds down. Michelle Tea shows that moving into a queer model of relationships might be a step towards restoring that utopian energy, even if the world as we know it is already lost to climate change. Finally, though, Butler and Jemisin reach out to ideas of queer ecologies. *Parable of the Sower* and *The Fifth Season* both emphasize the need for an empathetic worldview beyond that which has ever previously existed. Only with such radical empathy can divisions between humanity and everything else be erased. Only by removing those boundaries can humanity begin to value anything outside of itself, to begin to restore ecological justice. Only through these post-apocalyptic warnings can these authors show us a way to begin to think forward.

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