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FROM PAGE TO PLACE: SPECULATIVE FICTION, FUTURE SPACE- MAKING, AND COMMUNITY FORMATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Victoria L. Haynes entitled "FROM PAGE TO PLACE: SPECULATIVE FICTION, FUTURE SPACE-MAKING, AND COMMUNITY FORMATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Geography.

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**FROM PAGE TO PLACE: SPECULATIVE FICTION, FUTURE
SPACE-MAKING, AND COMMUNITY FORMATION IN THEORY
AND PRACTICE**

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Science
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Victoria Haynes
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To everyone who made this possible: Thank you.
All the love to my committee, my fiancé, my best friends, and my dog for supporting me
these past two years.

ABSTRACT

This thesis shows how Black and queer-authored Southern climate fiction can serve as a guide for constructing better futures. Established as two separate academic papers, the first chapter analyzes two climate fiction novels set in the U.S. Southern landscape: Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and Tenea Johnson's *Smoketown*. Through this analysis, I name three key commonalities between both narratives that I believe are critical to facilitating future change: creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability. My identification of these three themes and discussion of their articulations is grounded in the work of Black geographies and queer ecologies, and my examination of these texts continually moves alongside the literature of these subfields. The first theme, creating community, identifies how these novels show community formation and solidarity in their narratives. The second theme, envisioning resistance, examines how communities then push back against and upend the hegemonic expectations of their geographies. The final theme, fostering empathy and accountability, breaks apart the relationships between humans and nonhumans, revealing an ethics of care through predominantly land-based practices. My second chapter seeks to put the principles I identify in these novels into practice by observing how they manifest in the space of the independent bookstore. I focus on the bookstore specifically because of its explicit connection to fiction and literature more broadly. In this chapter I suggest that these bookstore spaces are ones of collaboration, community, solidarity, and care – emerging as spaces of strength and hopefulness within and beyond the context of the current political and environmental climate. I spoke with eight owners and employees of

bookstores across the U.S. South. Using narrative analysis, I examined commonalities that led this second chapter, similar to the first, to use the three key themes of creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability to analyze and synthesize these conversations and the literary geographies of the U.S. South.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2020, I read an article by Elizabeth Catte titled, “How *Fallout 76* Can Help Us Rebuild West Virginia”. Catte reflects in the article on the potential of video games to bring attention to and help reconstruct places ecologically devastated by fossil fuel, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries. The key to creating a more just future, Catte implies, is through the imaginative possibilities that fictional worlds, like *Fallout*, present: “This adventure begins when we confront the catastrophe we are living in and imagine ourselves as architects of something better” (Catte 2018). Catte’s piece resonated strongly with me because it asserted the power of fiction, of worldbuilding, to confront the oppressive conditions of the present. Moreso, it showed the strength of those fictional practices in the South, a region I see changing through firsthand experience. Indeed, fiction has the strength as a medium to process complex feelings that come along with a changing world. But can fiction help us then push further, to also be a catalyst for organization, a way to collectively overcome what Catte calls “the most brutal manifestations of capitalism” (Catte 2018)?

The U.S. South is not an area lacking in imaginative possibility. For BIPOC and queer people, life in the South has demanded an alternative way of living in and imagining space, a practice which has become increasingly urgent in the face of rapid climate change. The birth of the environmental justice movement in the United States began in Warren County, North Carolina, when the predominantly poor, Black populace was subjected to toxic amounts of PCB-filled soil dumped in a landfill adjacent to their

town (Skelton & Miller 2016). These kinds of racial and environmental injustices in the South are continually enabled by the dominating presence of fossil-fuel infrastructure, conservative legislatures, and lax labor and environmental laws in the region. The community of Warren County's resistance against environmental racism sparked the imagination of other people in the United States facing similar violence and forwarded a movement that continues to build momentum in the country as climate change's effects worsen and are felt at a disproportionate scale. Additionally, recent climate research has revealed the unequal distribution of risk across the country, with existing economic inequalities projected to widen across the Southern U.S. region as climate conditions worsen, more than previously anticipated (Hsiang et al 2017). For those communities who disproportionately experience environmental racism daily, organizing and activism efforts require speculative practices of imagining the future that become part and parcel of everyday living in the South.

In a reflection on his life growing up Black and queer in the Tidewater region of Virginia, J.T. Roane explains how “this landscape in which I was reared, inhabited by the past and present, offers me... the opportunity to envision futures outside the historical matrix of dominion, slavery, and ecocide” that has often been used to define Southern life (Roane 2020). Roane explains the necessary process of creating a world where he could “feel alive,” despite the restraints that rural Virginia imposed on his race and sexuality (Roane 2020). Further emphasizing the importance of a Black queer South, LaToya Eaves, in an #iaarchat (Institute of African American Research @iaarunc) on Twitter, wrote: “In a society that tends to produce and privilege binaries and categories

(black/white), focusing on the queer South mandates we reconsider everything we thought we knew...The South is inherently a queer subject because it is socially understood that the South does not fit neatly in social norm expectations” (2020). As Roane and Eaves show, it is both possible and necessary to arrange and imagine Southern space differently. This is part of a project in search of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “an unknown that does not terrify” (Gilmore 2017: 23).

With Catta’s, Eaves’, and Roane’s arguments in mind, this thesis project began as a way to understand how Black and queer-authored Southern climate fiction could serve as a guide for constructing better futures. In my first chapter, I analyze two climate fiction novels set in the U.S. Southern landscape: Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and Tenea Johnson’s *Smoketown*. Through this analysis, I name three key commonalities between both narratives that I believe are critical to facilitating future change: creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability. My identification of these three themes and discussion of their articulations is grounded in the work of Black geographies and queer ecologies, and my examination of these texts continually moves alongside the literature of these subfields. The first theme, creating community, identifies how these novels show community formation and solidarity in their narratives. The second theme, envisioning resistance, examines how communities then push back against and upend the hegemonic expectations of their geographies. The final theme, fostering empathy and accountability, breaks apart the relationships between humans and nonhumans, revealing an ethics of care through predominantly land-based practices.

My first chapter begins by identifying points of contact and commonality between Black geographies and queer ecologies which serve as the theoretical underpinning for my argument. What follows is a brief discussion of climate fiction and a few key examples of “mainstream” climate fiction which have broken into the public eye more recently – attesting to the critical importance of these stories proliferating through various forms of popular media. Following those examples will come an explanation of what research has already been done in the realm of climate fiction, specifically in the fields of geography and sociology. That section briefly considers several articles that have been key to my analysis of climate fiction and articulate the necessity of focusing on the experiences of marginalized authors, protagonists, and communities in their narratives. These scholars also question notions of futurity, temporality, and colonality in their works. Then, I will follow with a brief explanation of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *Smoketown* in order to establish a narrative basis for the remainder of the analysis. Finally, I will break down the works into the three thematic sections discussed above.

My second chapter seeks to put the principles I identify in these novels into practice by observing how they manifest in the space of the independent bookstore. I focus on the bookstore specifically because of its explicit connection to fiction and literature more broadly. In this chapter I suggest that these bookstore spaces are ones of collaboration, community, solidarity, and care – emerging as spaces of strength and hopefulness within and beyond the context of the current political and environmental climate. I spoke with eight owners and employees of bookstores across the U.S. South, Bookmarks in Winston-Salem, NC; Firestorm in Asheville, NC; Avid Bookshop in

Athens, GA; Tombolo Books in St. Petersburg, FL; Tubby and Co's Mid-City Bookshop in New Orleans, LA; The Bottom in Knoxville, TN; Hub City Bookshop & Press in Spartanburg, SC; and Violet Valley Bookstore in Water Valley, MS. Following each interview, I noted topics that continually emerged in my conversations, taking particular notice of how bookshops curated their content, conducted events, and collaborated with their communities. After my interviews concluded, I looked for collective sentiments and strategies that emerged throughout the transcripts and field notes. These commonalities led this second chapter, similar to the first, to use the three key themes of creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability to analyze and synthesize these conversations. I focus more closely in this chapter on the theme of community. Going into my analysis, my key research questions were: Do bookstores serve as centers of community? Through events, initiatives, and intentional actions, how are bookstores central spaces where just futures are imagined, felt, and realized?

I approach this project as a queer geographer living in the U.S. South. This project has gone through many manifestations. At its heart is a love letter to science fiction and a reflective surface to understand my own experiences with queerness and belonging. Along the way of my academic trajectory, Black geographic practice became integral to how I understood geography and justice – and began seeing its manifestations in everything, recognizing the strength it lends to pulling out what has been occluded and what is possible if we shift which knowledges and worldviews we privilege. Fundamentally these stories encourage a flipping of the narrative, upending power

structures which persist into the near and far future, which continue to dominate and resist a more equitable and justified way of living. What both Black geographies and queer ecologies have been grappling with for decades have profound commonalities. Approaching questions of climate justice and futurity intersectionally (Crenshaw 1991; Eaves & Al-Hindi 2020) provides an incredibly powerful way to approach not only the future but demand recognition for struggles of the present. By thinking through and with these perspectives I began to understand why my project both matters personally and contributes to current literature. We must continue to see how these interconnected struggles reveal alternative pathways, and at best, solutions to complex problems, within and outside of the realm of climate justice that I engage.

My goal in this project is to show the importance of recognizing fiction as fundamental to environmental justice struggles; to show the interrelated nature of climate justice and racial justice, racial justice and queer justice, and their many intersections. It is impossible to imagine a future without climate change, just as it is impossible to have justice that does not confront racism, sexism, and homophobia. Only when considering these factors simultaneously can we begin to convey and create futures beyond white, heterosexual, capitalist violence and into collective liberation.

In the words of Jamie, owner of Violet Valley Bookstore, a queer-affirming shop in Water Valley, Mississippi, who articulates the power of fiction and literary spaces alike:

“When you’ve got to read books about yourself that didn’t have tragic endings, you’re allowed to have sex and companionship and happiness. They read those

books and are excited to make the world look like the book. And so what you see especially in a lot of queer science fiction and trans science fiction, right, we are reimagining what gender looks like, reimagining what relationships look like. I think you can argue that those are really those queer worldmaking spaces that then bleed over or become part of the real world.”

(Jamie, Zoom interview, January 2022)

Fiction is part of imagining the pathways to get there. This thesis is a celebration of the imaginative visions authors and readers practice that work toward liberatory geographies.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACK QUEER CLIMATE FICTION

Introduction

Climate fiction has only recently become a point of scrutiny within academia and geography more narrowly. The emergence of the open-access academic journal *Literary Geographies*, specifically their special issue on the political and geographical exercise of worldbuilding, has contributed to bringing literary scholarship about environmental change to a position of recognition in the discipline. The special issue, guest edited by Jeff Martin and Gretchen Sneegas, stemmed from three sessions held on critical worldbuilding in Boston at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (Martin & Sneegas 2020). The issue opens with an assertion that the worldbuilding inherent in fiction provides geographers with a lens through which to investigate sociopolitical and environmental struggles and their connections to lived worlds. This issue, released as the sixth volume of the journal, contends that speculative fiction is both a valuable and generative object of study within geography and its adjacent fields (Martin & Sneegas 2020). Foundational to much contemporary work in literary geographies is a focus on the imagination and its capacity to connect readers with pressing geographic issues.

This work speaks to other concerns in geography, where Jennifer Gabrys and Katherine Yusoff have specifically written about the connection between fictional works and environmental awareness. They observe: “imaginative practices from the arts and

humanities play a critical role in thinking through our representations of environmental change and offer strategies for developing diverse forms of environmental understanding from scenario building to metaphorical, ethical, and material investigations" (Yusoff & Gabrys 2011: 516). The power of imaginative possibility within literature and other media is key to my analysis of how climate fiction authors see within and beyond the present climate crisis. Climate fiction novels employ these imaginative practices not only to inform a broader audience about the influence of environmental change, but also to build worlds which confront the crisis. Geographers within the *Literary Geographies* special section and beyond have begun to investigate climate fiction and the worldbuilding therein as an inherently geographical and political exercise (Martin & Sneegas 2020, Harris 2020). However, there is less engagement with looking specifically at these exercises through a queer ecological and Black geographic lens.

In this chapter I explore how Black queer works of speculative fiction, specifically in the cli-fi, or climate fiction, genre, present imaginative possibilities for confronting climate change by exhibiting three key elements: **envisioning resistance, creating community, and fostering empathy and accountability**. Speculative fiction is a genre of possibility, often combining the technical aspects of science fiction with the more imaginative practices of fantasy and other genres. I am most intrigued by the hybrid nature of speculative fiction and its basis in our own world, tending to focus on the “what if” scenarios of the future: who and what become primary actors in creating these futures and how is this connected to our present? The genre has long been a medium through which to imagine and reimagine our own world as well as fantastical settings beyond it.

What becomes most important, then, is the ability for fiction not only to construct and envision climate changed futures, but to reveal the injustices exacerbated by this change in the present. In this chapter, I examine the geographies of climate fiction in River Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and Tenea Johnson's *Smoketown*. I ground this analysis within the geographical context of the United States South and the work of both queer ecology and Black geographies. These two selected stories create space for just futures that privilege the experiences and imaginaries of queer people and people of color, experiences which have often been excluded from popular narratives of the environment (Finney 2014, Seymour 2013). Spanning from the Appalachian Mountains to a "generation ship" hovering above Earth, the narratives are salient examples of how storytelling practices can uncover the difficult truths of both currently existing and impending climate disaster.

I focus specifically on *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *Smoketown* to demonstrate these traits of resistance, community, empathy and accountability. By closely reading and examining these texts and others like them, and considering climate fiction as a legitimate medium through which climate realities and futures can be conveyed and explained, the ideas presented within these narratives can be seen as new ways of confronting and constructing the future. *An Unkindness of Ghosts* is set in the far future while *Smoketown* takes place in the drastically-changed present, demonstrating the breadth and depth of climate fiction offerings and the ability of the genre to bring attention to already existing injustices; allowing readers to recognize the immediate and unequivocally current nature of the climate crisis. By focusing on these four elements mentioned above, I also hope to

show how the chosen literature (and others like it) reveals the intersectional struggles of environmental, racial, and queer injustice, among others. I consider each of these struggles to be deeply reflective, connected, and mutually constitutive of one another, and approach my analysis from this intersectional perspective.

Black Geographies, Queer Ecologies

The binding principles of queer ecology and Black geographies, from my perspective, are deeply connected to one another. However, I also recognize that queer ecology scholarship is itself complicit in an overwhelming culture of whiteness. Because of this, I focus primarily on the works of queer scholars who are specifically attendant to the intersections between queerness and race, contributing to the discipline in critical ways and rethinking what a queer future can look like outside of whiteness. Combatting a dominant culture of whiteness within environmental discourse is necessary, as Carolyn Finney points out, to dismantle “whiteness as a way of knowing...our environment” (Finney 2016: 3). Notions of what is “natural” and who belongs to nature have been weaponized against both Black and queer communities for centuries (Moore et al 2003; Seymour 2013). A reclaiming of these definitions, with the intention of uprooting and unknowing the racist and imperialist frameworks which created them, has begun to occur on a larger scale. As well, concepts of futurity in both Black and queer communities have been hotly contested, as much future language has never truly included the lives of either group – even in science fiction, where the question of who “belongs” in the future and who is left out of these scenarios is left wanting. Fundamentally, the concept of

speculation in general has been a key principle for both Black and queer communities – imagining more just futures in which racism and homophobia are not the dominant lenses through which the future is constructed. That is not to say that these futures are necessarily utopic; rather, these critical imaginaries have often been and continue to be essential for survival in a deeply flawed and often violent world. I believe Black geographers and queer ecologists, most practically, align when considering who most frequently face and bear the disproportionate impacts of a changing climate. My goal is to show points of convergence between the two theories.

Walidah Imarisha, in her introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, describes how “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” (Imarisha & Brown: 3). The act of imagining a just future is in itself a speculative practice, one that has been both critical and necessary for Black geographers carving out a space in a historically white field that often appears unconcerned with addressing geographic problems intersectionally (Eaves & Al-Hindi 2020). The same holds true for queer theorists who have combatted the strong hostility towards futurity against queer people and within the queer community. Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong'o, and Ann Pellegrini (2019, xiii) reflect on the inherently queer practice of speculation in their foreword to Jose Esteban Muñoz's work *Cruising Utopia*: “Queerness is essentially about a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world”. However, Muñoz also warns against “disappearing wholly into futurity,” grounding this speculative practice in an engagement with the present: “When the acute failures and dangers of the present threaten us, we turn to the

utopian imaginary in order to activate queer and minoritarian ways of being in the world and being-together” (2019, xiv). The speculative practices of queer people, people of color, and queer people of color present methods of resisting the straight, white, capitalist expectations of the present and create alternative pathways for approaching and imagining the future. As Muñoz, Imarisha, and maree brown assert, the future has been and continues to be the domain of both Queerness and Blackness (Muñoz et al 2009, Imarisha & brown 2015).

Asking how this reworks our practice of environmental ecology, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* by Nicole Seymour is a key text from which I draw my understanding of queer ecology. Seymour discusses the contentious history that queer theory has had with conceptions of the “natural” and the relationship of queer people to the environment. However, Seymour pushes queer theory scholars to acknowledge the non-heteronormative ways that “oppressed humans (including working-class individuals and people of color, in addition to queers) and oppressed non-humans (degraded landscapes, threatened natural resources, and other flora and fauna)” are deeply, and politically, connected (Seymour 2013: 1). While anti-LGBTQ rhetoric continues to position queer people in direct opposition to the natural, Seymour insists that there are ways to combat “the kinds of naturalizations and denaturalizations that enable exploitation and discrimination, or that deny the complexities of humans and non-humans” (Seymour 2013: 5). In this way, queer ecology deviates from other forms of queer theory in its embrace of the link to the environment,

and, as Seymour points out, can work closely with anti-racist and environmental justice movements to confront concerns of racism, classism, and colonialism.

I align with Seymour's argument that "future-thinking is crucial to queer ecological thought" (Seymour 2013: 180). This, specifically, is where queer theory links closely to literature and its ability to imagine equitable futures beyond, and within, climate change. Queer ecological futurity, employed in the literature that I examine, follows Seymour's assertion that "attends to the present and future health and safety of the biosphere as it encompasses the human, the non-human, and everything in between" (Seymour 2013: 184). The kind of empathy that queer ecology employs acknowledges queerness as an environmental justice issue, and argues for a perspective that must be "at once ecological and queer...we cannot adequately address oppression, especially interrelated oppressions; and we cannot effectively interpret a great deal of the cultural and artistic output of the past several decades," without their collision (Seymour 2013: 17). Rebecca Evans picks up this issue specifically through a queer ecological analysis of two recent climate change novels in her work *Fantastic Futures* (2017). By approaching her analysis with a lens of queer ecological empathy and futurity, she points out how the cli-fi genre "does more than extrapolate into the future," it also connects the present to the future, the text to the present realities of oppressed communities wrought by current climate change (Evans 2017: 104). The key arguments of queer theory surrounding futurity, ethics, and empathy inform my project and how I approach both the texts I unpack here.

Climate Fiction

Much fiction could be said to consider the environment in their narratives, but climate fiction, or “cli-fi”, specifically has been defined as dealing with issues of environmental change, where the environment plays a primary role in the story, rather than as a background component. Fiction is a medium in which it is possible to inhabit different timelines, experiences, and geographies – this capacity makes fiction a compelling source of transformative actions and ideas (Jordan 2019). Not only is fiction a transgressive medium through which to tell complicated, compelling stories, the act of reading fiction can be a deliberately political and knowledge-forming act as well. The ability for fiction to connect one’s own story to that of the protagonist, or lift ourselves out of our own lives and into the experiences of others, is central to much of the empathy building that needs to occur in order for the wider public to contend with the principles of environmental justice. While science fiction is needed less now for imagining climate change itself (change is already happening around us in excess), the current task, in most climate fiction, is to provide an environment in which the reader can imagine possibilities for both coping with and changing future outcomes. This act requires a myriad of diverse storytellers and stories to depict even a fraction of the landscape of experience. How are different people learning to adapt to a changing world, and how do their own experiences, identities, and geographies influence that process? How can the act of reading another’s experience fill in the gaps in our knowledges, and bring us closer to an engagement with environmental justice?

Media continues to be used as a lens through which to view our futures, pasts, and present, and confront pressing issues such as climate change. The speculative sub-genre of climate fiction takes this to task, depicting stories with settings in “near-future anthropocene worlds” (Martin & Sneegas 2020: 16). Adeline Johns-Putra refers to cli-fi’s body of work as “no longer a marginal topic in literature and literary studies” that spans across literary genres, constituting its own category (Johns-Putra 2016: 266). Well-known speculative authors such as Margaret Atwood have supported the definition, with Atwood in 2013 tweeting how these new stories “concentrate not only on hideous political regimes...[but] take place in a challenging landscape that no longer resembles the hospitable planet we’ve taken for granted” (Scientific American 2013). J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) is largely considered to be a founding text of climate fiction, a near-future story where most of the Earth has become uninhabitable and submerged in water. Written in 1962, this narrative shows evidence that climate concerns have long been a topic of conversation in literature. However, the past twenty years has shown a substantial uptick in novels whose settings are influenced by climate change, and there has been a considerable increase in content even in the past five years. Much more recently in her article from *The Guardian*, Claire Armitstead labels cli-fi as “stories to save the world,” outlining recent additions to the genre that have received much coverage in popular media and other authors’ critical engagement with the genre (Armitstead 2021). Climate fiction authors are continuing to tell stories about climate futures and communicate those narratives convincingly, while also centering stories that hone in on adaptive *possibility* rather than complete destruction.

Climate fiction has been continually called upon in the past several years in the face of rapid climate change, an ongoing global pandemic, and a national reckoning with racial injustice. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* saw a resurgence of engagement upon the election of former president Trump, and again during the emergence of the pandemic, landing on the New York Times bestseller list in September 2020 (Cox 2020). Butler's prescience has made a salient example of the predictive capacities of science fiction and its ability to effectively imagine the future. Iossifidis' "Reading *Parable of the Sower* Online in A Pandemic," discusses how fiction like Butler's can serve as a catalyst for engagement online, leading to the creation of collaborative spaces that encourage hopefulness in the time of a global pandemic (Iossifidis 2020: 156). In the introduction to "A History of Environmental Futurity" a special section within *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, O'Brien and Lousley focus on how *Parable of the Sower* is an example of Afrofuturist writing which challenges the "spatiotemporal limitations of conventional (i.e., white, [post]colonial) narratives of the future" (O'Brien & Lousley 2017: 14). More recently, author N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, which concluded in 2017 and won three consecutive Hugo awards, has served as a contemporary example of climate fiction that centers racial and ecological injustice in its narrative. Alastair Iles, in "Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on Race and Environment in Transitions," focuses on how Jemisin's trilogy pulls out connections between "racial and social subordination" and the degradation of the environment, as well as ethical ways to live in a climate-altered world (Iles 2019: 2).

Fiction can serve as a pathway to understanding and engaging with environmental justice. Specifically in the Southern United States, which is facing increasingly intense major storms and lacks the infrastructure necessary to adapt to a changing climate (Smith 2021), fiction's ability to imagine future landscapes is an essential component of addressing and communicating environmental issues to the public. The increasing popularity of climate fiction directly responds to a collective search for safety and solutions in a rapidly changing climate. The works of speculative authors like Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin has helped bring an intersectional perspective to the discussion of climate justice, bringing to the fore the experiences and creative capacities of marginalized communities in their narratives. These stories are essential ones; foregrounding Black and queer environmental narratives fundamentally helps reshape the way the environment is "represented, constructed, and perceived" in day-to-day life (Finney 2016: 3).

Literature Review

Numerous scholars within and tangential to the discipline of geography have focused on the ability for fiction to create visions of just futures, with climate fiction in particular serving as a genre of possibility (Evans 2017; Harris 2020; Iossifidis & Garforth 2021; Martin & Sneegas 2020; Whyte 2018). However, these scholars have also problematized common practices within climate science and speculative fiction and pointed toward more equitable ways of both writing, consuming, and reading this fiction, as well as reconsidering our own notions of apocalypse and dystopia. In conversation with these authors, I hope to add to a rich body of scholarship which considers the

strengths of viewing climate fiction as a powerful source for reimagining just futures which consider the lives of queer people, people of color, and all of their interconnections.

As Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte has demonstrated in his work *Science (Fiction) For the Anthropocene*, a sole focus on futurity overlooks the importance of considering both the past and present experiences of marginalized groups in the context of crisis, specifically the popular notion of “apocalypse” and community collapse. Much speculative fiction, as well as climate science, centers on images of dystopian futures that we will inevitably inhabit if we do not take rapid environmental action. However, many of these notions fail to recognize what dystopia means to those who have already endured centuries of colonial occupation and violence. These narratives erase the experiences of Indigenous people and communities who have already experienced the hardships envisioned in these narratives: “ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (Whyte 2018: 226). Whyte, among other Indigenous scholars, then suggest that it is more productive to confront climate change from the perspective of those who have “already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the impacts of colonialism” (Whyte 2018: 226). Colonial thought is part and parcel of the onset and continued exacerbation of climate change. Perhaps engagement with the future becomes more generative when possibilities are examined through the lens of Indigenous experience. Before we address climate justice, we must first reflect on how the language of apocalypse begets continued colonial violence.

Rebecca Evans, in her work *Fantastic Futures*, echoes this sentiment through the experiences of queer people in the past and present. Evans argues that considering cli-fi as a definitively scientific (factually-rooted) genre reduces its creative capacity — its use of multiple genres is essential to how images of the future are created, especially those futures which engage with climate justice and queer futurity. Climate fiction must not only engage with possibilities of the future but acknowledge how environmental injustices are already perpetuated and ongoing in the present (Evans 2017: 95). Evans points out how it also is essential to construct narratives which question and ultimately upend heteronormative systems of reproduction — identifying climate fiction as a key site for engagement with queer temporality and ecological ethics. Evans uncovers the tendency for climate futures and cli-fi narratives to focus heavily on a concern for children and familial ties – directly othering queer experience and positioning queerness as counterintuitive to questions of futurity. Focusing on the purely scientific nature of science fiction and climate fiction obscures the ability for fantastical renderings of the future to provide ideas and possibilities just as worthy of note. They also dismiss and occlude how speculation and fantasy worlds have served marginalized communities who are at the forefront of environmental injustice: “are we, further, to accept the dismissal of “escapist” genres without considering the raced and gendered nature of that dismissal?” (Evans 2017: 99).

Asking how these questions of speculation are discussed through reading practices, Iossifidis and Garforth’s *Reimagining Climate Futures: Reading Annihilation* examines how reading speculative fiction can be a generative act in itself; helping readers

come to terms with the realities and experiences of the climate crisis (Iossifidis & Garforth 2021: 1). The authors, using Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation* and subsequent Southern Reach trilogy, examine how experiences of the uncanny elicit an affective response from the reader which directly links them to the uncomfortable task of both experiencing and imagining climate futures. The focus for these two authors is less on the engagement of the scientific or academic community with climate fiction and more with the experiences of what they call "nonprofessional readers" and their engagement with these narratives. The authors "suggest that the medium of [science fiction] reading can constitute a rich and generative way to understand and live with the climate crisis" (Iossifidis & Garforth 2021: 1). The authors assert that experiencing the uncanny feelings associated with works like *Annihilation* can help readers come to terms with the uncomfortable realities that are part of living in a currently existing and already worsening climate altered world. Iossifidis and Garforth mention how the imagination is central to projects which focus on creating a more "diverse, sustainable and socially just future in response to escalating climate threats" (Iossifidis & Garforth 2021: 2), detailing how the "scenario building, modeling and foresight practice" of speculative fiction becomes an essential part of how positive images of the future and action towards environmental justice can be constructed (Iossifidis & Garforth 2021: 2).

This practice of scenario building and modeling proves useful in imagining possible climate futures in Dylan Harris' work, *Expanding Climate Science: Using Science Fiction's Worldbuilding to Imagine a Climate Changed Southwestern U.S.* Harris further examines the speculative practice of worldbuilding in the context of climate

literature and building climate futures. Harris focuses on two novels, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* and Claire Vaye Watkins' *Gold, Fame, Citrus* as examples of climate fiction which focus on adaptive futures which look beyond a climate crisis that produces an apocalyptic dead end (Harris 2020). Harris explains how storytelling is central to making the realities of climate change known beyond experts and overcoming the misconceptions of the public: "A deeper consideration of the role of storytelling in both constructing and communicating climate knowledge provides insight towards imagining different kinds of climate futures, a task especially needed within the echo chamber of doomsday stories" (Harris 2020: 61). Harris describes how climate science itself is speculative, sharing a kinship with the stories that take on this same practice of imagining what an altered future will look like. Science fiction storytelling, then, adds an extra layer to this future-building by inserting an engagement with the "lived reality of climate change" and by contending with the sociopolitical asymmetries associated therein (Harris 2020: 61).

Ultimately, the work of speculative fiction is not only a process of simply imagining but an act which addresses the social and political issues of the present. Martin & Sneegas, in their introduction to the *Literary Geographies* special issue, begin by arguing that speculative worlds invoke a politics, implicitly or explicitly, that "inform and are informed by our histories and the political present" (Martin & Sneegas: 16). They explain how "ideas, concerns, and controversies in our lived worlds are embedded within and reproduced through imagined ones," (Martin & Sneegas: 16) meaning that often, fictional stories and worlds are reflections of the prescient social, political, and cultural

issues of the time. In seeing worldbuilding as a social actor of struggle and a place for exploring alternative social and ecological possibilities in the real world, the authors argue that “these fictional worlds can have material consequences,” (Martin & Sneegas: 17) where what is written in narrative can directly influence actions of the present and reconsider our relationships to one another and the natural world. These stories matter outside of themselves, capable of both imagining post-colonial, anticapitalist futures as well as working to enact them, and are serious sites of academic and cultural engagement. The authors draw out the question of what it means to read speculative fiction and speculation as action, with worldbuilding inherent within them creating both metaphorical and concrete places where this change can occur (Martin & Sneegas: 21).

The previous work done by these scholars, inside and outside of geography, form the basis of how I understand and approach climate fiction and its possibilities. By considering the past violence that has been done to Indigenous communities by speculating “end of the world” scenarios, as Whyte discusses, has informed my decision to focus on images of the future constructed by Black communities who have faced similar dispossession through the legacies of colonialism and slavery (Whyte 2018; Roane 2018). *Fantastic Futures*, paired with Whyte’s work, brought forth the interconnections between queer and Black experience. The reading practices exhibited in Iossifidis and Garforth’s work aiding my understanding of empathy and affective response that I discuss later in the chapter (Iossifidis & Garforth 2021). The special issue of *Literary Geographies*, including Martin and Sneegas and Harris’ work, was my

introduction into the political capacities of worldbuilding and its growing connections to geographical scholarship (Martin & Sneegas 2020; Harris 2020).

An Unkindness of Ghosts and Smoketown

Both *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *Smoketown* occur in an indeterminate time in the future, where anthropogenic climate change has rendered some or all of the landscape of earth uninhabitable and fundamentally altered. Both books use emotional calls and practices of living which are not fully entrenched in the methods and ethics of their colonial environments and reproductive futurity. Rather, they contend with queer ecological care by heavily privileging both human and nonhuman communities in their narratives. The narratives address questions of community health, ecological preservation, and bodily and sexual autonomy through the intimate experiences of the protagonists. The protagonists of the stories belong to communities that form through mutual struggle, kinship, and love, participating in everyday acts of resistance that range from drastic to quotidian. The characters of the novels develop deep relationships with their communities and ecosystems, engaging in acts of reciprocity and accountability that shape the worlds they inhabit and wish to create. *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *Smoketown* are examples of Black, queer speculative fiction that navigate the landscape of the future South through speculative acts of community, resistance, and accountability.

Rivers Solomon's novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, takes place on a "generation ship," a starship with a social structure organized similarly to that of an antebellum plantation. The setting attests to the ways that Katherine McKittrick describes present and

future landscapes being inextricably tied and influenced by the past racial hierarchies: “Our present landscape is both haunted and developed by old and new hierarchies of humanness. If past human categorization was spatialized, in ships and on plantations, in homes, communities, nations, islands, and regions, it also evidences the ways in which some of the impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference” (McKittrick 2006: xvii). Aster, the protagonist of the novel, works as a doctor on the lower decks of the spaceship, and is both neurodivergent and genderqueer. While set several hundred years into the future, there has been a regression of social relationships which mirror that of the antebellum South, explained away by the ship’s “Sovereign,” or leader, as a necessity in the face of resource scarcity and to maintain order. Much of the ship’s militant force that operates under the Sovereign does so through an insistence of divine right. Each “deck” of the ship corresponds to a letter of the alphabet, with wealthy white residents, as well as guards, residing on the A-M decks and laborers of color living in the subsequent decks, with limited mobility for lower deck residents. Aster serves as a doctor on the lower decks of the ship, learning much of what she knows from Theo, or “The Surgeon,” a young man born as the illegitimate son of the sovereign and with an incredible aptitude for medicine. Aster’s relationship to Theo allows her relative freedom throughout the ship, as opposed to other lower deck residents. The protagonist defines the ship as “divided by metal, language, and armed guards,” with each deck having its own unique language and subculture (Solomon 16: 2017). Aster, Theo, and many of the other children on the ship were raised by Melusine, an elder and critical part of the lower-deck communities. The reader finds

out bits and pieces of how the ship, named Matilda, came to be. For the communities living on the lower decks, called Tarlanders, a focus on a return to Earth, or “the world that existed before this world,” is the primary hope. Aster’s mother, Lune, was a physicist who killed herself shortly after Aster’s birth. Aster and her best friend, Giselle, work to decode her mother’s notes which hint toward the cause of the previous Sovereign’s death and the destination of *The Matilda*. Aster eventually discovers that her mother hoped to turn the flight path of the ship back toward Earth, with dreams of seeing how the land has recovered in the absence of humans and hopes of a new life for the dispossessed lower deck communities.

Smoketown is a multi point-of-view narrative, focusing on protagonists Anna, Eugenio, and Rory. The story takes place in Leiodare, a metropolis in the Appalachian mountains which has been transformed by drastic climate change. The city is surrounded by jungle, nestled in a crater created from an asteroid, its residents still recovering from the memory of a plague they call “The Crumble” which decimated the local population, thought to be transmitted by birds. During The Crumble, one quarter of humans died, and birds were relentlessly poached, leading to the city eventually banning birds inside its walls. The city, although seemingly utopic in the beginning, has begun to deteriorate, “abandoned by the outside and left to its own devices” for decades (Johnson 2011: 18). The city is rife with social unrest, a group called “The Starlings,” often protesting. The group resists the deterioration of the city and the continual destruction of the environment which puts their futures in jeopardy, their actions heavily suppressed by the city’s overwhelming police force. Ecosystems within and outside of the city have been

disrupted, leading to different ecological crises which influence life there. Anna, an artist and factory worker, is searching for her lover, Peru, who has long been missing, but Anna continues to hope that she will return to the city. Anna becomes involved with a Starling named Seife, in order to find out a secret Anna's mother, Bly, was hiding at the point of her death — a secret which could help rebuild the damaged environment and relating to the origin of The Crumble. Eugenio is a member of the Mendejano, a spiritual community with a deep connection to land and wildlife and a researcher in the Office of Emergency Management, a task force dedicated to managing the ever-growing ecological crises in the city. However, Eugenio has a personal interest in the onset of the Crumble epidemic and seeks out information from the elusive Rory McLaren, the only surviving member of the largest corporate family in the city. The intertwined narratives of the three protagonists navigate the deteriorating city of Leiodare and its numerous communities. Anna has a special gift where she can create life out of art— a gift passed on genetically from her mother and cultivated throughout her childhood. Through charcoal drawings, Anna can breathe life into species long thought extinct. After she meets Seife and finds out about Peru's death, Anna draws dozens of birds and sets them free within the city, causing it to shut down due to the “avian invasion” and panic to set in. Fires burn throughout the city and the electric grid goes offline. People panic, fleeing and burning buildings, including Anna's apartment complex, as the militant police force moves throughout the city. Anna escapes with Seife to Smoketown and amidst the chaos, ultimately finds a solution for rebuilding the city among the ashes.

Creating Community

An Unkindness of Ghosts opens with Aster amputating a child's leg, unable to be saved due to a scarcity of medical resources. There is very limited access to formal medical care on the lower decks, and the inhabitants have to rely on one another for survival. There is a lack of many critical resources on the lower decks, despite the inhabitants being the main form of labor in the Field Decks, the middle section of the ship where crops are grown. This scarcity makes clear the unequal distribution of resources on the ship and the consequences of dangerous working practices on the lower deck workers. The lower-deck communities rely on a trade/bartering economy among themselves. Through this description, Solomon immediately sets up the similarities of the ship's layout with the Antebellum period of the South, when plantation power was at its peak.

Despite this, there is a thriving community on the lower decks, with their own language, culture, and lifestyle. The narrative draws similarities between the enslaved communities of the U.S. South and the ship inhabitants of the *Matilda* – through Solomon's writing, the reader realizes the persistence of white supremacy, even intergalactically, and the reliance on old methods of racial domination and hierarchies far into the future. The novel, while often focused on the hardships and violence faced by the lower deck inhabitants, primarily Aster, Giselle, and Melusine, teeters back and forth between individual setbacks and the strength and resilience that the community of the lower decks has developed. Solomon's depiction of the ship, from its parallels to plantation life and description of Black medicinal practices and healing in the U.S. South

during and after the formal end of slavery, point toward the importance that community plays in the development of the story and for Black life in general. Solomon's depiction of the lifeways of the Black inhabitants of the Matilda – a reliance on one another for care, and an ethic of reciprocity dismissed or unrecognized by the police force and upper deck inhabitants as barbarism and an excuse for racial dominance – shows the way that these communities work to create a future for themselves outside of the normative hierarchies and oppressive conditions of the larger ship. The creation of a unique language is one way in which the community ensures their survival and is able to transcend the brutal treatment of the police on the lower deck – a form of communication that cannot be recognized or infiltrated by the militant force or the leaders of the upper decks.

Alexis Lothian talks about the need for imagining popular futures during a time of racial reckoning in the United States in which Black life continues to be devalued, where "racialization in general and Blackness in particular continue to define who is meant and not meant to survive" (Lothian 2018: 100). In Solomon's book, written in 2017, the community on the Matilda is envisioning and working towards a future that ensures their own ability to survive and flourish, despite the determination by the white Sovereign and his government that Black life is nothing more than a tool for production. Solomon's writing assures readers that the future imagined in the story can be changed, the oppressive conditions of the ship overcome, a feat that eventually is accomplished later in the story. Similar practices are seen in Tiffany Lethabo King's, *The Black Shoals*, which examines the speculative work *Daughters of the Dust* and concludes that the

representation of Black folks in the story “visualize Blackness as an open state of possibility to transform conditions of subjection,” a method that can be extended to the work Solomon does through the relationships between members of the lower decks in the novel (King 2019: 122). King describes how the noxious spaces that Black people have been confined to in the film are transformed into thriving places of Black life and humanity, refashioned into places where life can grow and exist (King 2019: 122) – this same practice applies to the communities of the lower decks, areas which the residents work to maintain and make home throughout the story.

Community resilience is showcased in the narrative of *Smoketown* through members of the Mendejano and Smoketown communities. Similar to Solomon’s characters, the protagonists of *Smoketown* are members of communities that exist despite and against oppressive governments and policing in power. The spiritual community of the Mendejano is a group of people with a close connection to the land and predominantly live outside the city of Leodaire. Mendejano beliefs hinge on the idea of fixing things, repairing what has been “broken” by extraction and environmental negligence. This belief came about as a way to combat the severe ecological damage that the world of the novel has undergone. One of the key beliefs of the group is that “a soul without a bird to carry it beyond is doomed to forever walk the streets of its regrets” (Johnson 2011: 30). In this way, the Mendejano beliefs of ecological repair are in direct contest with the culture of fear and resultant species destruction of Leodaire. Eugenio and Lucine, the woman who introduced him to the group, are both members of the Mendejano and throughout the novel attempt to dismantle the avian barrier in the city in

order to set the souls of the birds and people who died free. The beliefs of the Mendejano relate closely to the values of reciprocity and gratitude of many North American Indigenous groups (Kimmerer 2015). Their information is passed down through oral storytelling, even in a future where technological dependence is ubiquitous; in one instance, Lucine, a storyteller in the community, states: “my knowledge is old, passed from mouth to mind” (Johnson 2011: 57).

Seife lives in Smoketown, a historically Black area of Leiodare, the community more adaptive to the changing environment than the rest of the city. The residents of the small community are laborers who are tasked with burning the bones of birds trapped in the avian barrier into charcoal for the rest of the city. Johnson has said that Smoketown is modeled after a historically Black town her grandparents lived in. Seife describes the history of Smoketown to Anna, describing how the community was once thriving before the epidemic: “People used to live on the ground here. It was once the largest Black neighborhood in the old city, and they made bricks here so they lived in squat, solid houses a tornado couldn’t touch. My great uncle used to have printouts from photos – actual photos – in black and white. It looked like another planet, but the faces were the same” (Johnson 2011: 115). However, Smoketown soon became an impoverished area partially abandoned by the city. Despite the popular assumption that Smoketown has been left abandoned and underdeveloped, the community continues to thrive and maintain strong internal bonds. Similar to the practices of community formation in *Unkindness*, *Smoketown* showcases the strength and resilience of community bonds and

spaces in the narrative. At the end of the novel, Smoketown is one of the only areas of the city left surviving from the fires, partially due to Anna's abilities.

The communities formed in both narratives are also the groups which push back against and resist the dominant regimes they live within. The next section, "envisioning resistance," reveals how the communities in both narratives personally and collectively resist their oppressive circumstances, embodying queer and Black geographic acts of radical reimagining.

Envisioning Resistance

Everyday geographies of resistance against policing are practiced in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* by Aster, who constantly fights to secure her freedom to travel throughout the ship, a freedom she is tentatively granted because of her medical knowledge learned from Theo. Aster, described as stubborn by nearly every character in the novel, continues to fight for her free mobility against the oppressive conditions imposed by the guards, sneaking past or physically fighting them in order to maintain her freedom. She continually is punished and beaten, but never stops struggling against the overseers, bolstered by the image of a world where she is free, a world that her mother had searched for: "They can beat me and beat me and beat me until every bone in my frail little body breaks, but until they kill me, I am glad. I am so glad...But what if my mother really found a better world? What if they could never lay a hand on us again?" It sounded like a dream, but Aster believed" (Solomon 2017: 154).

As the story progresses, Aster begins to recognize the strength of her feelings for Theo. Theo is the bastard child of the previous Sovereign with one of his servants and is

able to travel through the different decks because of his title as The Surgeon and his white-passing appearance. Theo teaches Aster what he can about medicine and encourages her to help tend to the community of the lower decks who are often not provided sufficient medical care and are seen as disposable. Aster struggles with her feelings for Theo and tries to rationalize abandoning them because a future together on the ship is not possible due to their racial and class differences. However, as the story progresses Aster begins to see the possibility of their union as the creation of a different world, one she aches to pursue. “Different worlds, worlds opposite the one in which Aster lived, teased and beckoned her. She had to remind herself that those worlds were not possible,” although Aster and Theo continue to become closer and eventually come together after the fall of the militant regime (Solomon 2017: 221). Aster and Theo’s relationship is an example of love as a force of resistance (Cahill 2021).

An Unkindness of Ghosts demonstrates the most powerful example of resistance at the peak of the story, when the lower-deck workers, spurred by Theo’s assassination of the Sovereign, facilitate an insurrection on the ship against the militant police force and wealthy upper-deck elites. Aster and Theo decide collectively to kill the current Sovereign and gain control of the upper decks. They have a conversation about Aster’s hatred for the Sovereign, who hates her in return and continually orders for his guards to be violent to her: “I know you. You will not become some silent, sweet thing, no matter how many bones he breaks. You will get hurt again, You have already been hurt so much” (Solomon 2017: 306). In response to this, Aster tells Theo that this hatred is not unique to the Sovereign – it is to all kings and the kingdoms they create (Solomon 2017:

306). This is the moment where Theo decides to help her, both out of love and realization that the injustice taking place on the ship will not stop until the current regime is dismantled.

Solomon's story resists dominant understandings of gender and sexuality by describing from the beginning how Tarlanders are born exhibiting no clear sex or gender. Aster identifies as genderqueer but chooses to use she/her pronouns as a way to avoid people's deliberate or unintentional misgendering. Despite this, the narrator mentions how the bodies of Tarlanders "did not always present as clearly male and female," and Aster presents more masculine despite "being born without the external organs that produce testosterone" (Solomon 2017: 20). Although the bodies of the Tarlanders typically tend toward androgyny – "Tarlanders did not come in male and female – anything but" (Solomon 2017: 20) — guards on the lower decks continue to strictly enforce cisnormative and heteronormative presentation, punishing those who express outside those boundaries. Solomon's focus on queer, gender nonconforming characters throughout the novel, insists that, as Lothian writes, "heteronormativity is not the only way to breed a future" (Lothian 2018: 127).

It is discussed how Aster had Theo remove her uterus in order to resist the expectation of being a mother from her: "There was a reason she had Theo remove her uterus. It was a rejection of motherhood in general, and tangentially, a rejection of her own mother" (Solomon 2017: 161). While this takes place in the past, Aster continually reflects on the importance of her decision as she continues to look through the notes her mother left her and contemplates the future on a healed Earth. Aster sees a future for

herself outside of reproduction, separating Aster's hopes from gendered biologies of reproduction. Solomon's choice to describe Aster and her actions in this way echoes Lothian's examination of Butler's work *Fledgling*, where she states the oppressive expectation of the future "where Black women's bodies bear the weight of reproducing futures to which they rarely uncomplicatedly consent" (Lothian 2018: 119).

Theo himself grapples with his own sexual and gender identity throughout the story. Although he uses he/him pronouns, his identity isn't closely tied to expectations of masculinity on the ship. Melusine, Theo's caretaker as a child, described his relationship with his family and gender identity: "His father beat him, and when I tried to stop it, he beat me too. He called Theo sissy because Theo was small and only liked to read and listen to stories. He called him worthless and a word I don't like to say that starts with an f and rhymes with the word for fly larva. The same kind of names folks would later come to call my Aster, though not exact" (Solomon 2017: 232). While Theo's relationship with his body and sexuality is not the same as Aster's, they both embrace the titles of "monsters" or "aberrations," but instead of thinking of these labels as derogatory, use them as a way to navigate their own oppression and resist the violence against them. This is best exhibited in a conversation they have on the ship, when their romantic relationship begins to develop:

(Aster) "I have been called an aberration before."

(Aster) "You are an anomaly of a man."

(Theo) "Perhaps because I'm not a man at all."

(Aster) “Aye. You gender-malcontent. You otherling. Me too. I am a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one strange, flimsy, indecisive body. Do you think my body couldn’t decide what it wanted to be?”

(Theo) “I think it doesn’t matter because we get to decide what our bodies are or not”

(Solomon 2017: 238)

The fluid expressions of gender and sexuality that Theo and Aster present are validated and supported through their love for one another and the lower-deck communities where they find belonging. In *Smoketown*, Anna becomes a part of the insurgent community of the Starlings through her love for Seife, a Starling that she meets and falls in love with at the beginning of the story, and ultimately uses her special gift of ecological recreation to assist the group in liberating the town and creating an ecologically just future.

The Starlings, an insurgent group in Leiodaire, opposes the banning and killing of birds from the city. The Starlings, aptly named, take up space in the city and, like birdsong, sing their resistance and teachings to the public. The Starlings formed, according to Anna, in order to quell their own anxieties about a future they may or may not have: “An anxious generation looking for a way to take their mind off the weather and how much habitat would be left as they aged – same as everywhere in North America, and she expected, everywhere else” (Johnson 2011: 18). They assert that banning birds from the city by reasoning based solely upon fear further damages the surrounding ecosystem, evidenced by the frequent species unrest and invasions in the city. Near the beginning of the story, Anna is stopped in her tracks by one Starling, named Seife, whose singing voice Anna describes as unique and captivating. Anna’s

relationship with Seife grows throughout the story, and Anna eventually learns to sympathize with the Starlings and use her own fantastical power of creation to bring different species of birds back to life in the city.

Eugenio and the rest of the Mendejano also exhibit a form of resistance through their way of life. Katherine McKittrick in her book *Dear Science* explains how “Black cultural producers reconfigure normative understandings of race by producing works that are in tandem with, yet imagine our past-present-future outside, colonial logics” (McKittrick 2021: 50). Johnson exhibits these anti-colonial logics through the resistance practices of the Mendejano community in the novel. In a post-climate changed world which continues to be ruled by the principles of greed and human dominance over the ecological world, the Mendejano focus on cultivating a community intent on fixing and treating the damage humans have inflicted on the environment. Their outlook, ruled by the phrase “Mendejano fix things, not study them” prevails throughout the book as an example of universal care for plants, animals, and humans alike (Johnson 2011: 58). The work of Eugenio and Lucine to free the souls of the birds who have been trapped and killed by the electrified gate that surrounds the city throughout the story is a reflection of this core Mendejano belief of returning the world to its previous ecological balance. As mentioned previously, the Mendejano are a reflection of many North American indigenous populations valuing reciprocity, a principle that takes the form of returning what has been destroyed in a world fundamentally altered by extreme climate change. This resistance takes the form of healing, a focus on recovering what has been ecologically lost.

Practices of resistance in *An Unkindness* and *Smoketown* take the form of the radical and everyday. Many of these practices emerge from relationships of love between characters and within their communities. Loren Cahill, in her article “Love Space, or How to Recognize Blackgirl Spatialities,” describes “radical love” as “a regular praxis through which Blackgirls create spaces that center themselves and their community” (Cahill 2021). This radical love is a means of resistance that strengthens the bonds of communities and individuals throughout these stories – not only a love for other humans, but of the land itself. My next section, “fostering empathy and accountability,” observes how these narratives employ an ethic of care for their communities and landscapes.

Fostering Empathy and Accountability

Solomon’s protagonist, Aster, expresses a deep connection to the landscape of the ship throughout the story. Theo reflects on Aster’s care for the natural world around her, focusing on her tenderness for the creatures of the Field decks: “Then she kisses the caterpillar as it sits on my palm. She does that. Kisses bugs. Leaves of plants. Microscopes. Paper. The muzzles of the draft horses” (Solomon 2017: 105). Aster’s love and connection with the wildlife and plant life of the ship shows an empathy and connection with the natural world that has been lost for many residents. Aster functions on a lingering hope of a future where she can live on a reclaimed Earth free from the constraints of those leading the ship, a hope for a relationship to Earth which transcends colonial relationships to land which hinges on conquest and settlement (King 2019). Aster finds solace in the Field Decks, frequently sleeping there rather than in the shared sleeping quarters of the lower decks. Aster brings Theo to the field decks and it is there

that he sees future possibilities for a world he has never experienced: “Though I have never been “outside” of course, it is here that I can begin to imagine what it’s like” (Solomon 2017: 106). Through her intimate relationship with the flora and fauna that continue to live on the ship, Aster fosters and encourages an empathy beyond her fellow humans and to the plant and animal life that also shares the space.

Relationships to the land and food run in the novel deeper than Aster’s singular experience. The community in the lower decks bond through food, despite its state-imposed scarcity. The relationship that lower-deck Tarlanders have with food relates closely to the experiences McCutcheon (2021) writes about Black agrarian communities: “In the face of oppression, Black people and communities have always been active agents of change, working to ensure that their families and communities have access to safe and healthy food” (McCutcheon 2021: 888). The communities of the lower decks seek comfort and liberation through the food they prepare and preserve, despite being faced with what McCutcheon identifies as “an agrarian food system that has historically been and continues to be marred in systematic racism” (McCutcheon 2021: 894). The members of the lower decks emphasize remembering as a tool for moving forward despite the oppression they face: “We must try to remember even that which has been forgotten” (McCutcheon 2021: 59), including the healthy, positive relationships their ancestors had with food, replicating them on the generation ship landscape. Despite and within the confines of the plantation landscape that the lower deck residents live and work on, their dedication to each other and resistance against their circumstances is reflected in their living and working spaces. Most lower deck residents are subject to sun-

up to sun-down labor on the Field Decks, the main source of food production on the ship. The communities of the lower decks do not come to resent the natural landscape preserved on the ship, showing instead an understanding of the complexity of the space. The spaces of the field decks are simultaneously places of nourishment, comfort, and resistance. McCutcheon echoes this, describing “food/agrarian spaces as more than static spaces, but also spaces where some people have prayed, practiced, and fought for liberation in the most oppressive of conditions” (McCutcheon 2021: 889). The members of the lower decks show both a care for the land they work upon and the food they eat while also using these landscapes as spaces of hope and possibility.

In Smoketown, the actions of the Mendejano community are steeped in the values of empathy and reciprocity to the environment, their religious symbol of concentric circles representative of the intertwined relationship between the human and nonhuman. Once a group dedicated to healing through herbs and plants found in the natural environment, the Mendejano have shifted to a dedication to “fixing” what has been lost. In one of her storytelling sessions, Lucine explains: “Now those herbs are harder to come by as the pharmacy took what they wanted and the world poisoned the rest. So we have evolved... We Mendejano cannot heal, but we can fix. As people have come to worship things, some can only be reached by fixing their things. The healing is the part that comes after. It has to happen in their hearts” (Johnson 2011: 58). As Lucine explains, the Mendejano have shifted to a culture of repair, one that asserts fully understanding a problem before taking the steps to fix it (Johnson 2011: 27).

Eugenio comes to join the Mendejano community after a near-death experience in the jungle outside of Leodaire. As a privileged child who grew up with technocrat parents, Eugenio conducted research on “traditional communities” outside the city walls, and focused on the assumed estrangement that came with a lack of advanced communicative technology. On one trip Eugenio takes, the transportation pod he takes down the river malfunctions and ends up spilling him over a large waterfall. Eugenio makes it to the shore alive but with a severe leg wound, and is found by Lucine, a member of the Mendejano. Eugenio is brought to a Mendejano city close by, and his stereotypical assumptions about the inhabitants are immediately disproven. Shocked by the thriving community he finds there and being told the story of the community’s creation by Lucine, Eugenio decides to join the Mendejano and pursues a different direction with his research. Upon discovering the deeply flawed nature of his original studies and in falling in love with Lucine, Eugenio engages in a form of accountability, recognizing the indirect violence he has caused to the Mendejano community with his research. Eugenio, recognizing the damage to the ecosystem done by the city in their fear of birds, dedicates himself to researching The Crumble epidemic and restoring the land, an act of empathetic reciprocity not only to the environment but also to the Mendejano people.

In *Smoketown*, Anna’s power in itself is a recreation of what has been lost for the world due to climate change. At the beginning of the novel, Anna, frustrated by the celebration which commemorates the deaths of those lost during The Crumble, draws two cygnets with charcoal in her sketchbook, bringing them to life. These cygnets are the first

full living creature Anna has created, using an ability she inherited from her mother. Anna's power to create is fueled by despair and is often triggered by her anguish over losing Peru. The cygnets stay with Anna throughout the rest of the story. Surrounded by a society paralyzed by their fear of birds, Anna immediately finds a kinship with the two animals and begins to care for them deeply. Through this relationship, an ecological empathy is developed that eventually moves Anna to the point later in the novel where she creates more birds and releases them into the city. Anna's mother sees her gift as a method of giving back to the world, a gift which creates a space of possibility for future generations by restoring what has been lost.

Conclusion

Thorough analysis of two texts illustrates the prefigurative potential of climate fiction to show us pathways to a more just future. Climate fiction presents an opportunity to imagine alternate possibilities beyond the doomsday outcomes often posed by popular media when it comes to radical environmental change. The genre's future generative possibilities are drawn out even further when they engage closely with the principles of queer ecology and Black geographies. Contemporary Black and queer authors are contributing to the genre in innovative ways that transcend both heteronormative and capitalist conceptions of future relationships, reproduction, and overall worldly care. By examining the work which has already been done by contemporary authors within the genre, scholars, and above all, readers, can work towards building equitable climate futures. As I have argued here, speculative fiction is a powerful tool for thinking through questions about queerness, Blackness and climate change together, and provides an

alternative way in which it is possible to envision, in the words of *Octavia's Brood* authors Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, "newer, freer worlds" (Imarisha & brown 2015).

CHAPTER THREE

BOOKSTORES

Introduction

In this chapter, I link the principles of resistance, community, empathy, and accountability discussed in my chosen climate fiction texts to community counterparts. While it is valuable to examine, as I have shown, the instructive nature of climate fiction and its ability to unveil the realities of environmental justice, it is equally important to transfer the qualities of these fictions to the tangible world – in other words, to the communities created around literature and speculative fiction. For this chapter, I examine how bookstores similarly exhibit the three key traits outlined in my previous chapter: creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability. I particularly focus on the unique ability of these literary spaces to create community and serve as instructive hubs for activism and support causes which are fundamental to environmental justice movements. I suggest that these bookstore spaces are ones of collaboration, community, solidarity, and care – becoming spaces of strength and hopefulness within and beyond the context of the current political and environmental climate. While the beginning of my project focuses on specific speculative texts, this second chapter will assert the centrality and importance of local literary communities which grow alongside these authors and texts. I focus specifically on the region of the U.S. South and have sought out independent, sometimes self-proclaimed “radical” bookstores throughout the region to showcase both the regionally-specific concerns of these spaces as well as their perceived collective responsibilities. The U.S. South, aside

from being a region that I call home and has incredible personal significance to me, is also a critical area of geographic importance in social and environmental movements (Skelton & Miller 2016; Smith 2021). My key research questions for the chapter ask: Do bookstores serve as centers of community? How do these literary hubs reflect the themes of resistance, community, empathy and accountability discussed in my first chapter, forging them into spaces of solidarity and possibility.

Literary geographers have asserted that “geographies of fiction co-produce the real and imagined places around us,” through reading and writing practices, speaking to how real and imagined worlds are always in flux, converging and diverging with one another. How do our lived and fictional geographies link together and bleed into each other? Most crucially, I am interested in how fictional geographies influence the everyday practices of resistance in our lives, specifically cultivated in the space of the bookstore. This relational thinking is critical to how I see bookstore communities and literary texts working across, alongside, and through one another. Miranda Iossifidis, in her article “Reading Parable of the Sower Online in a Pandemic: Imagining Different Futures with Octavia E. Butler’s Speculative Fiction,” specifically addresses how online communities seek connection and possibility through speculative works, specifically that of Black, queer speculative author Octavia Butler. Not only do these groups come together to discuss their personal reflections on the speculative text but they are also often members of community organizing groups which use these texts as new spaces of possibility for organizing efforts (Iossifidis 2020, 156). I support and work alongside Iossifidis’ investigation of the “everyday, grounded and speculative practices of

alternative worldbuilding” realized through collective reading practices (Iossifidis 2020, 157). However, I differ in my analysis by looking at how the physical space of the bookstore, rather than the digital space of the online forum, is (or can become) a space of both community and activism.

I use the term “literary community” to describe the formation and togetherness of individuals around a love and care for the importance and power of literature in shaping futures. I do not wish to assert that those who make up these communities are homogenous or necessarily work towards the same futures; after all, a just “future” includes a multiplicity of spaces which account for the variety of experiences and needs of an incredibly diverse range of individuals and communities. Black speculative author and editor of “Dark Matter: 100 Years of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora”, Sheree Renee Thomas, evoking James Baldwin, describes how a vision of the future is valuable only when it makes the conscious effort of respect for others: “our communities must make a sustained and concentrated effort to create societies that reflect the same sense of respect and meaning” expected in our pursuit of social justice (Thomas in Imarisha & Brown 2016: 2). The authors of speculative texts and their requisite readers and communities are critical to, as Thomas describes, “expanding the notions of solidarity and community, redefining service, and exploring and rediscovering the human spirit in baffling times, under challenging circumstances” (Thomas Imarisha and Brown 2016: 2). My focus on the importance of community, resistance, empathy and accountability comes at a time of racial reckoning and worsening climatic conditions in the United States, particularly the U.S. South. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19

pandemic continues to require more unique ways of approaching social justice and community formation.

Methods

In order to understand how literary communities are formed, I began my analysis by searching for radical, feminist and queer bookstores throughout the South. There are dozens of radical, independently-owned bookstores throughout the South, and my initial search required multiple processes in order to narrow down potential relevant interlocutors. I first began this work by using IndieBound's indie bookstore finder, which allowed me to search by zip code, city, or address, and find relevant results within a 10 to 400-mile radius (Indie Bookstore Finder). Using this tool, I searched within a 100-mile radius of several key Southern cities: Knoxville, Atlanta, New Orleans, Baltimore, Greensboro, and Tupelo. I then created a spreadsheet to further analyze results based on four different categories of events and programming related to science fiction, environmentalism, gender/sexuality, and race/racism. If each bookstore had programming readily apparent on their website which addressed all of these categories and were still active in the past three months, I chose to include them in my research and reach out to them for potential interviews. That search left me with 15 results that were most relevant to my project and had a host of regular events, including but not limited to book clubs, seminars, and social activities. While some choices were based upon personal connections and geographic convenience, most were based upon relevance to my project, specifically stores which are heavily focused on activist work. Meaning, stores which

define themselves as queer, feminist-owned, Black-owned, anarchist, or, more broadly, radical.

My interview process began with reaching out to owners and employees of these stores to inquire about the conversations they are having with their readers about how their bookstores serve as centers of community and activism. I recruited interview participants through initial email contact, and conducted phone, Zoom, and in-person interviews, taking proper COVID-19 precautions. I conducted my interviews across three months, beginning in November 2021 and completing in January 2022. I spoke to eight bookstores in total and continued to look into the events and work of other Southern radical bookstores that I could not contact but still considered to be doing critical work within the region. The eight stores I engaged with were Bookmarks in Winston-Salem, NC; Firestorm in Asheville, NC; Avid Bookshop in Athens, GA; Tombolo Books in St. Petersburg, FL; Tubby and Co's Mid-City Bookshop in New Orleans, LA; The Bottom in Knoxville, TN; Hub City Bookshop & Press in Spartanburg, SC; and Violet Valley Bookstore in Water Valley, MS.

Throughout my interviews I asked employees about the programming of their stores, what events they hold, what authors they highlight, how they define the community they belong to and serve, and how they work to facilitate and build community in their stores (see Appendix A). I was also particularly interested in how regional concerns differed between the chosen bookstores and sought to address how each store specifically chose their activities based on their geographies and demographics. However, the trajectory of each conversation often depended on the

passions and interests of the owners and community members I spoke to. My goal during interviews was to facilitate discussion which privileges the perspectives of owners, employees, and readers, with little intervention of my personal opinions which could influence the responses of participants.

Creating Community

In this section I provide an overview of how the bookstores I interviewed cultivate community. The discussion begins by focusing on how these stores define community and what communities they identify as serving. The analysis then shifts to how these spaces create and support their identified communities through events, partnerships, and intentional actions.

Fundamentally, the question of whether or not these stores served as centers of community was answered affirmatively — bookstore owners, workers, and members consider the store to be a space of profound belonging and connection. Several of the conversations I had surrounded how these spaces are not only bookstores but “community centers.” The Bottom, a Black-owned Bookstore in Knoxville, Tennessee, positions their role as a community center as primary to their role as a bookstore. The Bottom, created by sociologist Enkeshi El-Amin, was established as a remedy for the widespread feeling of displacement and placelessness felt by Black elders and youth in Knoxville. The Bottom asserts themselves as a “space for building community, celebrating culture, and engaging the creativity of Black people through curated events, ongoing projects, shared resources and physical space,” considering themselves to be not simply a bookstore, but a space to “plug into the local Black community” in Knoxville.

Similar identifications come from spaces like Violet Valley, a queer-owned bookstore in Water Valley, Mississippi, and Firestorm Co-Op, an anarchist bookshop in Asheville, North Carolina. Violet Valley was a project that started when owner Jamie Harker, an English professor at the University of Mississippi, saw a lack of welcoming spaces for queer people in the town of Water Valley. Acknowledging her dedication to the work of Southern lesbian feminists in the book trade and her access to the resources and means to start a bookstore, Harker decided to create her own space. Violet Valley serves as a space to showcase and cultivate queer Southern culture in the state of Mississippi and in the book trade at large. “All of a sudden, what had been kind of a speculation became this real thing,” Harker said. For those with the means and ability to take the leap, Harker encourages the creation of future spaces like Violet Valley:

“What I always say to folks is, look, if I can open a feminist bookstore in a small town in Mississippi, you can do it. If I can do it, anybody can do it. So figure out how to do it. Don't bemoan the things you wish were there, you can create those spaces. And that's always been the genius of the queer community, is to create supportive spaces in a generally hostile culture, often violently hostile culture, right? We need to go ahead and build these things for our community, [make] the world what we need it to be to create those spaces as utopian spaces of possibility.”

Creating these “utopian spaces of possibility” emerges not only in the Gulf Coast, but in Western Appalachia, where Firestorm, a bookshop in Asheville, North Carolina, is

located. Originally a vegan cafe that shifted to a bookstore focused on “cooperation, connection, and collective liberation,” the 13-year-old cooperative, which bases its values in anarchism, is a small, largely queer group of individuals. The collective is dedicated to “the needs of marginalized communities in the South” through the creation of a safe, anti-oppressive space. While the bookstore outwardly markets themselves as general-interest, the group caters their projects and events around the queer community that finds a home in the space. Esme, part of the team at Firestorm, expresses how events stem from the needs and interests of the community and particularly an interest in social justice:

“The values of the cooperative are very much shaped by who's involved.

Something that is not stated in the mission statement is that all of our collective members are queer. You know, we all consider ourselves feminist, a majority of us are vegan. So a lot of those [identities] shaped who we are as a collective as well, and sort of more depending on what the collective makeup looks like at the time. And then the hub for anarchist thought and culture in Western North Carolina is really where our events piece comes in the most. And having events that sort of speak to that part of our mission. We have really sort of settled into a bit of a [queer] niche with our events, just observing what folks sign up for and what seems to resonate most most with folks.”

Luis, operations manager for Avid Bookshop in Athens, Georgia, describes how his decision to join the organization was influenced by not only the political climate at the time but when hope surrounding the continued existence of bookstores began to

wane. Avid, which opened in 2011, began at a time when Georgia passed legislation barring Latinx students from attending several public universities in the state (Luke & Heynen 2021). The organization also was born during a time of great doubt over the survival of print media, with the popular assumption being that brick-and-mortar bookshops had little chance of survival. Luis reflects on reading an interview with Janet Geddis, Avid's owner, when the organization began: "Janet was really trying to buck the trends with a small independent bookstore that had curated offerings and hosted events and was just a welcoming place for people to come in. Reading that interview, I just felt like I needed to be a part of it." Similar to Jamie from Violet Valley, Luis saw the opportunity to contribute to a space dedicated to serving marginalized communities: "I would go to some bookstores and just be like, oh my God, where are your people of color? You look at our [Avid's] selection, and it's definitely current new releases with a wide variety of voices. And that's what our community treasures."

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has influenced how these shops connect with their community, forcing the organizations to turn to innovative and nontraditional methods for maintaining these relationships. Tombolo Books in St. Petersburg, Florida, began as a pop-up shop that shifted to a brick-and-mortar location in December 2019. Candice Anderson, co-owner of Tombolo, expressed the frustration she and her partner, Alsace Valentine, felt when the shop they opened had to be closed 90 days later due to COVID. From nearly the start, Tombolo had to adapt to running a bookstore and cultivating community within the confines of the pandemic. Throughout almost every conversation, participants asserted how they believed the bookstore to be an essential part

of their community, especially in the environment of isolation in the spring of 2020. Candice expressed her belief in the critical importance of bookstores throughout the pandemic:

“Around that time, everybody was throwing around [the question], ‘what’s an essential business?’ [We had] that sense of like, asking ourselves, do we believe we are essential? We believe that what we’re offering is really critical to people in isolation. Whether or not the government thinks so.”

Candice’s assertion of literature’s critical importance during the pandemic is echoed by Iossifidis’ work, which hinges upon how “online reading spaces created as collective spaces to discuss fiction are “forms of psychological, social, and collective sustenance and care, which are generative of ambiguous hopefulness in the current context of a global pandemic” (Iossifidis 2020: 156). Kate Storhoff from Bookmarks in Winston-Salem, North Carolina echoed this hopefulness, expressing that, while the pandemic was an unprecedented hardship for the shop, it was also an opportunity to provide new ways of connecting with a community of readers on a larger scale.

“As we closed our doors and went to, at the beginning, just one person meeting in the building at a time, we never felt like we lost that sense of community and our community grew in different ways. We’re really invested in the people who shop with us and support us. And we know some of them face to face. And we know some of them just via online and email. They’re all part of our community.”

Bookmarks tactic was to maintain a sense of community across distance. Before the pandemic, the shop had never tried using Zoom or Crowdcast to host virtual events – now those are the platforms where they maintain the largest attendance. Storhoff saw the virtual shift as a way to “adopt” more members into their small community. For Candice and Alsace of Tombolo, they met the isolated environment that dominated the early months of their organization with creative marketing strategies that brought books to the community while simultaneously garnering visibility for the bookstore.

“She [Alsace] started doing bicycle deliveries because St. Petersburg is so flat. She jumped on her bike and delivered in addition to curbside pickup. That did a lot for that sense of service to the community, to be like, don’t sweat it, we will come to you. And of course, it was very recognizable. It was great marketing. And so, she ran around on her bike and took books to people’s front porches. You know, bookstores are very romantic to a lot of people. And it certainly hit a chord with helping us continue to get our name out there.”

Other bookstores, like Tubby and Co’s Mid-City Bookshop in New Orleans, Louisiana, ramped up their online visibility to put a face to the owner (and only employee!) of the shop during the pandemic. Tubby and Co’s maintains a near-constant twitter and Instagram presence. As a queer-owned, science fiction and fantasy oriented shop, the owner of Tubby and Co’s, Candy, uses Twitter as a platform to communicate the store’s values while the storefront remains closed for browsing. Until they meet their personal goal of opening when 70% of New Orleans residents are fully vaccinated,

Candice uses Twitter to outwardly support queer and trans rights and combat racial inequality and Instagram to recommend books that are transparent about and speak to these struggles. The Bottom in Knoxville also maintains a strong social media presence – starting off as a pop-up shop before acquiring a physical space in the community required a robust online presence. While they opened a brick-and-mortar location in 2021, The Bottom continues to maintain a balance between their online and in-person bookstores. Their Instagram presence is particularly oriented toward informing the community of upcoming events and everyday happenings at the store – The Bottom is one of the few shops using video updates within their Instagram to update viewers live about their events.

Although most store owners and operators that I spoke with looked for the silver lining through the hardships of the pandemic, there was still a universal lament about the missing “sense of place” that came with losing out on in-person contact. As establishments that served as physical pillars to the community through their storefronts, interacting online was, as Storhoff from Bookmarks expressed, “a facsimile of being at the store.” Margot, Events Coordinator for Hub City Bookshop and Press in Spartanburg, South Carolina, equated the decrease in physical presence as a missing of the “ineffable” sense of belonging:

“I think, almost, so much of the difference lies really in the ineffable elements of not just bonding, but person-to-person sharing, the run-ins, coming in for events on a repeated basis, getting to know the booksellers, and then feeling like you have a stake. And once people feel like the shop is their shop, people are plugged

into the community in a way that I think is really important, especially in moments of transition in the country. I think that [belonging] creates a sense of place and a sense of dignity and rootedness that bookstores do very uniquely.”

Luis from Avid supported this sentiment, describing how the camaraderie from being physically in the store was essential for building relationships within and outside of the space. He insists that “people have always used books as a way to connect with other people,” and that “magical” quality is strengthened by being in the space of a small, independent bookstore. This feeling is something that drew many to work in bookstores to begin with. Jamie from Violet Valley reflected on her first time reading queer literature and entering a queer bookstore, and the safety that came with that experience.

“I still remember the first time I went into the bookstore. And I had never been in a space that had books and acceptance. I remember feeling like, wait a minute, I don't feel stressed out about what's happening. There was something about that space that let me imagine a future that was not the one that my very religious upbringing told me I had to have. And they're [bookstores] important for that reason. You know, I mean, for me, if one kid comes into my bookstore and feels better about being queer than then we've met our mission. That's what we're here for.”

What came across as fundamental to every bookstore I spoke with was the indispensability of community to their missions. Every store insisted on a “feeling” unique to a bookstore – an ineffable sense of belonging present in these spaces. Many of

those feelings came from a recognition of safety and understanding projected by the shops, especially for queer people and people of color in their local communities. The primary goal of each store was to create a space that catered to the regional concerns and needs of their communities, and during COVID-19 especially, maintaining these spaces required immense time and creativity from each shop.

Envisioning Resistance

Resistance does not always take forms that are dramatic or pronounced – within the space of the bookstore, resistance happens through incremental changes, through reflecting the world back in a more recognizable way. After all, Octavia’s Brood author Walidah Imarisha asserts that: “because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world” (Imarisha & Brown 2016: 4). The partnerships and efforts of bookstores contribute to these practices of resistance in unique ways.

Most commonly this practice takes place through book clubs and conversations that focus on justice – addressing the intersections between environmental, racial, queer, and labor struggles. For those organizations who carefully curate the content of their store, resistance can take the form of refusal to display, recognize, or discuss certain authors or subjects. Luis from Avid Bookshop describes the deliberate choices the organization makes when curating their content and the trajectory of their book clubs:

“I run the paperback book club, which we, after March 2020, decided that we would only read BIPOC authors. I haven’t changed the title of the book club – it’s

just the paperback book club. But we haven't read any white authors [since the change]. It's been great, because I think a lot of people are reading new authors that they haven't experienced before. And we've had such great discussions. It's not all just centered around race either – we're also talking about the environment, the patriarchy, misogyny.”

Luis described how Avid also actively avoids stocking transphobic authors on their shelves – his example being J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, or any books published under her pseudonym. While they don't stock the book in their stores, any proceeds from direct orders of the book are donated to the Athens Queer Collective, to “offset the damage that supporting a terrible person like that does,” Luis said. Instead, the members of Avid encourage young readers and those buying for young readers to consider authors who have written books that can serve as alternatives to the series – books with valuable and genuine queer representation. Avid hasn't shied away from controversy in the past that comes from their refusal or insistence to stock certain books. While sponsoring a book fair at a Christian academy several years ago, a parent in the school complained about the shop's decision to stock queer authors writing stories with young queer characters. Luis describes how the parent kept returning to the fair to hide the book selections from the public:

“The parents objected to Avid carrying it and the booksellers who were working that event refused to not sell it. After that, the booksellers were just like, we're packing up and leaving, because this isn't going to stand. And so then Avid

posted a response to that situation, saying how Avid was a welcoming place, and that includes LGBTQ youth. And that's why we offer the books that we offer.

That weekend, they [Avid] decided that part of the proceeds [from the fair] would be going to the Athens Queer Collective.”

Luis describes other ways that Avid has actively responded to the political climate. After the Pulse nightclub shooting, he describes how he wanted to go somewhere “nice, quiet, and gay,” and came to Avid for comfort. Upon arrival, he saw that Avid had displayed an array of books focused on gay experiences in response to the violence. Avid's focus is overt in its defense and support of marginalized communities. While the organization doesn't have a concrete mission statement, Luis described how Avid takes pride in being a welcoming safe space that takes their position as an activist bookstore seriously. Avid's “Racial Justice, Labor, and the South” book club, which partners with the United Campus Workers on the University of Georgia campus, focuses on how the principles of books they read can be translated into collective action in the region. The club has a fund that pays for the books if a member wishes to contribute to the group but doesn't have the financial ability to purchase the book independently.

Firestorm in Asheville is also a space that makes their political stance actively known. As an anarchist store, Esme describes how Firestorm's mission is to:

“Demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of a workplace based on free cooperation. We seek to sustain and nourish our collective through fulfilling

work, personal empowerment, and equitable compensation while providing a hub for anarchist thought and culture in Western North Carolina.”

Firestorm, while considering themselves a general interest bookstore, responds to the needs and desires of their community by choosing to stock their inventory with a majority marginalized authors. Esme described how the inventory of the store is a direct reflection of the types of books that the people who work there see themselves in and are excited to sell and discuss. Firestorm stocks very few works of fiction written by straight cisgender men, and has a strong focus on queer speculative fiction and speculative fiction by people of color. The Bottom, a bookstore explicitly catered to the Black community, stocks only books written by Black authors or affirming and empowering for people of color. In their annual report for 2020, The Bottom outlines the importance of the existence of a Black bookstore in a Southern city like Knoxville.

“In the present moment when people all over the country are reconciling with and addressing generations of racial inequality, Black bookstores are particularly crucial. In addition to making Black history, culture and experiences accessible to the general populations, Black bookshops cater to the community and provide a space to not only read, but to also discuss literature.”

Other stores, like Hub City and Bookmarks, struggle to balance making explicit political statements and catering to the community at large. While Bookmarks defines themselves as community-minded, their position as a nonprofit makes them wary of expressing what some may consider political stances. Kate from Bookmarks describes

how Bookmarks “never wants to push one side over the other in a way that makes our customers feel like they are not welcome in that space. But there’s a lot of ways to talk about anti-racism without ever getting political about it.” Bookmarks first annual Book With Purpose program began last year and was focused on the principles of antiracism. The summer-long program is focused each year on a different social justice theme and takes a multi-tiered approach to create opportunities for conversation across all age groups. The program in 2021 focused on the nonfiction title *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi, along with its counterparts *Stamped for Kids* and *Antiracist Baby*. The goal of the Book With Purpose program is to “unite the community” and have conversations about social issues that are important and visible in the local community. Other events presented by Bookmarks involved donating diverse books to local schools and organizations and working with the Delta Art Center in downtown Winston-Salem to sponsor a community event on inclusivity. Bookmarks is also a major sponsor and contributor the “Jump for the Sun” book drive and initiative, which focuses on addressing the implicit bias and discrimination in K-12 history curriculums in the city.

The internal debate about the purpose of the store and its responsibility to readers didn’t influence Margot’s assertion of the organization’s dedication to diversity, especially when it came to redefining Southern literature in a more inclusive way. The purpose of the press side of Hub City is to “create new opportunities for thinking about the South in a way that is future looking,” by being committed to diverse voices and perspectives throughout the South that aren’t often showcased. Hub City’s initiative “Books as Mirrors” aims to give every elementary school child access to a diverse

library. The organization has donated over 200,000 books authored by or are affirming people of color. Kyla Burwick, outreach assistant and leader of the bookshops “Books as Mirrors” initiative, explained the fundamental importance of reading diverse books for elementary-aged children: “It’s just allowing books to be used by kids for years to come and allowing especially African American and Hispanic kids to see themselves in the books when they normally don’t see someone who looks like them or hear a story that reflects your life.” The initiative is dedicated to providing books that are a reflection of the identities of children in schools, with a particular focus on the topics of diverse family representation, identity, crossing borders, making a difference, and mental health.

Bookshops like Violet Valley and The Bottom exist as pillars to queer and Black communities, respectively. Both shops came about at a time when their communities felt they needed a space to feel safe and thrive. Jamie from Violet Valley spoke about how upon moving to Mississippi, the need for a queer affirming space was evident.

“There were political things happening in the state that made it [opening a bookstore] feel important to do. There was a, what was called a religious freedom bill that was passed in 2016, which basically allows discrimination against gay people based on religious principles that people felt very disheartened about, and a lot of people really pushed back against. And so it felt important to do something to stand up for queer youth, especially in this state. And at the time it didn’t make a lot of sense to try to open a bookstore when I was working full time

and doing all this other stuff, but it didn't feel like it could wait. So we just took the plunge.”

Enkeshi from The Bottom also expressed the critical importance of opening a Black-affirming bookshop in Knoxville during a period of ongoing racial violence against Black communities in the United States. As a sociologist at the University of Tennessee, Enkeshi's work is focused on Black dispossession and displacement in Knoxville. The Bottom, in its early stages, came about as a way for Black Knoxvilleans to come together and reclaim space:

“The Bottom was conceptualized as a justice and equity project centered on space reclamation, reimagination and transformation. Given the historical obstacles for Black Knoxvilleans to claim space, a collective effort is required to hold Black space in Knoxville and to engage in place making practices. Recognizing historic and systemic injustices that have indirectly impacted Black people and places is also required to respond and heal from related trauma.”

The Bottom also seeks to increase the prevalence of Black voices in media and share stories of Black Appalachia with their Community Podcast Studio. Located in the same building as the bookshop, the studio is a space for Black creatives to tell their stories and introduce counternarratives to the overwhelmingly white media voice in Knoxville and the larger South. By fronting the costs of podcasting and other media technology, as well as training in interviewing and sound design, The Bottom helps to

create an accessible studio that can be used by anyone in the community who wants their voice to be heard and create a network of support among creative voices in the city.

Resistance takes on varied forms throughout Southern bookstores. For shops like The Bottom, Firestorm, and Avid, creating safe spaces where queer people and people of color can exist vitally is part of their project, reflected in the book clubs, events, and spaces created there. While bookshops like Hub City and Bookmarks see themselves as conflicted about their space in activism, the projects and events the shops invest their time in reflect a care for the values of equity, education, and antiracism, attempting to broaden the community of people engaging in reading. Fundamentally, efforts from each bookstore reflected a feeling of responsibility and accountability to the communities they served, and reevaluating who makes up those communities.

Fostering Empathy and Accountability

Every bookstore interviewed said they operated out of a sense of service to their community and believed in the ability of literature to expand the imaginations and sensibilities of their community. For Luis of Avid, Margot of Hub City, Esme from Firestorm and Kate from Bookmarks, their relationship to their bookstores began as a consumer before shifting into the role of an employee. Each person started as a community member with a personal stake in the organization who became more and more involved over time with their bookshops. For owners of bookshops like Enkeshi of The Bottom, Candice of Tombolo, and Jamie of Violet Valley, the process of starting a store began with the support and investment of the surrounding community.

Both Tombolo and The Bottom started out as pop-up shops in their respective cities. For Candice of Tombolo, beginning a store in St. Petersburg meant creating a relationship with the community based on accountability and reciprocity. Along with a GoFundMe campaign to garner funds for a physical space, Candice and Alsace began a community lending program to establish monetary support for Tombolo.

“We approached people who we felt were going to be core supporters and also might have money to give to the bookstore. We took loans that sort of created their long term commitment to the project. You know, so they’re saying, ‘we’re really gonna stick with you, we’re going to push in the same direction that you are.’”

By building that reciprocal relationship with the community, Tombolo established itself as a store dedicated to serving St. Petersburg, rather than their own self-identified interests. When they found a brick-and-mortar space to set up the shop, it was among other businesses that believed in the critical importance of a bookstore in the city. “It was really perfect for us to find a landlord that believes in our project, you know. He’s not looking to just rent the space, he believes in the project, and he really cares about the businesses in his space and wants them to succeed. And he feels personally invested in us, and that little corner where we are.” Surrounding Tombolo is also a coffee shop and juice shop, both which are also dedicated to creating inclusive spaces in the city.

Other bookshops have remained accountable to their communities through constant internal work and reflection. While most bookshops have “mission statements”

that outline their values and what benefit they hope to bring to the community, Avid Bookshop's mission is a work in progress. Amidst the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and the fight to reveal and combat racial injustice in the United States, Luis said that Avid decided to reconsider their purpose as a space:

“Looking at the makeup of our staff [of six], it was clear to us that we're not as inclusive, diverse or equitable a place as we could be. So Janet [Avid's owner] signed us up for a racial diversity roadmap with a DI [diversity and inclusion] specialist. And she's been guiding us through a year-long training where we learned techniques on how to audit our own stores and politics, but also just to look inward and really grow ourselves. Pick out what's important to us that we're able to really then call upon in moments of facing racism, or making mistakes, that we're able to look at what's important to us and then pause and respond in a way that is aligned with [those values]. She calls it an anchor.”

The diversity and inclusion specialist working with Avid encouraged the staff to devise their own “personal anchor,” definitions, phrases, or mantras defining what is important to each member of the shop. Luis' personal anchor is “a better world is possible. The goal at the end of the year-long training is for each member of the staff to come together and figure out, based on their personal anchors, how the intersection of those values come to form Avid's own anchor. Luis said that while Avid has always considered themselves to be a safe space for marginalized communities, constantly reconsidering the work they are doing and internally reflecting is essential for spelling

out their mission: “I think part of our mission statement will be that we’re constantly a work in progress.” Part of that internal work, too, is a care for your employees, Luis said. “If you’re curating your shelves for your community, you also have to look at your employees because they’re a big part of that community.” In the ongoing pandemic, that care manifests as ensuring the safety of both staff and customers. Luis was frustrated with how many bookstores, while acknowledging the danger of the pandemic, sacrificed the safety of their staff and visitors by reopening for the sake of profit.

“No, you’ve got to value your community, you’ve got to value the people that work for you! And I think that we [Avid] have done a really good job with that. And listening to each other has been a really important part of the last couple of years.”

The work of providing and caring for the staff of the shop foremost is supported by Candice from Tombolo, who sees the staff as the face and frontline to the community:

“It’s so important to me, and more deeply so during COVID. [The staff] that’s our first extension to the community, right? They’re there when [visitors] come in, we need to take care of them. We need to make sure their mental health is okay during this time. We need to make sure that – the rents here have gone up astronomically – we can’t give people raises at the pace the rents have gone up. So what are other ways that we can just try and make their lives better, you know?”

Empathy and accountability to the community stretched further than just potential visitors to the shop. Defining a community for these bookshops also meant considering the needs and wants of their employees and other community members invested in the bookstores. Accountability also came in the form of constantly reevaluating the stock of the store and looking internally to identify problems and areas of improvement within. Whether through service to the community or careful curation of stock and events, bookshops remain sites of constant change, adapting to and addressing the needs of their communities.

Addressing Climate Change

Over half of the bookstore owners and operators I interviewed spoke about the critical importance of addressing climate change and environmental justice in their stores. Candice and Alsace from Tombolo talked about how moving from Asheville, North Carolina to St. Petersburg, Florida, made explicit the far-reaching effects of environmental change. Candice references Jeff Vandermeer, a Florida-based climate fiction author, to describe the undeniable presence of environmental change in St. Petersburg:

“He talks about the porosity of Florida. It feels like there’s just, wherever you are, such a thin veil between you and the wild, you know. Living where we live in Florida, on the Gulf Coast, you’re on the bleeding edge of that. And you see it at the beach. You see it, like, the people here have the sea rising at their property, whether they’re going to talk about it or not. It’s not just the hurricanes, it’s the

everyday. I'm not going to [explicitly] say that people here have any special kind of urgency or awareness, but there's a real in-your-face-ness about the climate crisis. You believe the planet is warming because you're in the middle of it."

For Candice, the effects of climate change on Tombolo's coastal community is undeniable. Consequently, this creates a responsibility for the store to curate sections that show care and awareness about the environment. The section of the store that Candice and Alsace have named "nature and climate" attempts to strike a balance between what she calls the "beauty" sections and the "freak you out" sections:

"We put books about climate crisis, climate activism, also shelved amongst books about, just beautiful writing about the Earth, like *Braiding Sweetgrass*. And how we should care for the Earth, the history of the planet. Putting all of those things together to say, here's the beauty that you need to be reminded of, and here's the complexity. And then here's the 'freak you out'. This is the urgency, right? So the beauty and the urgency side by side."

Speaking to the growing urgency of addressing climate change in the South, Jamie from Violet Valley mentioned how contributions from the community led the store to begin considering the importance of addressing climate change in their space.

"I don't think there's anyone [in Water Valley] unaffected by [climate change] whether they want to talk about it or not. We have a failing [power] grid, you know, we had a massive blowout of the entire grid system and it was 20 degrees.

There's a huge chicken plant in town that poisoned the local water. There are a lot of health concerns about all of those things in town. It's hard to have those conversations, but I think they are interconnected. And I'm seeing my students and younger folks drawing those connections in explicit ways. So I'm really interested in bringing folks in to talk about [climate change]. Because I see the younger generation really foregrounding that.”

For shops like The Bottom, connections to environmental justice are explicit in their projects. For the past six months, Enkeshi has worked with geography graduate students at the University of Tennessee on an archival and mapping project that addresses the detrimental effects of urban renewal on Knoxville Black communities in the past fifty years. Urban renewal, or “slum clearance” projects that displaced Black communities in Knoxville were often justified as a way to prevent further flooding in the area. The project is a way to reclaim Black space in East Knoxville by recovering the names and spaces of people displaced during these projects and dedicating commemorative plaques and signposts throughout the city. The Bottom also partners with a local Knoxville farm and Knoxville Community Action Committee to create the “Green Thumb Project,” an initiative to distribute seeds and plants to the community. Any individuals and families in the area that need or want access to seedlings can come to The Bottom and fill out an application. The program is a way to build connections through community gardens and combat food insecurity in the city.

Through my conversations it became clear that stores are deeply involved with concerns of environmental justice and climate change. This sentiment particularly came

through for shops in the Gulf Coast like Tombolo and Violet Valley, where climate effects are reflected back to the community on a daily basis. The Bottom, whose mission is directed towards addressing the needs of the Black community in Knoxville, environmental justice conversations are often interconnected with conversations about racial justice. Each shop's methods for addressing environmental justice embodied different regional concerns and desires, but there was a common thread of universal care for working toward an environmentally just future.

Future Directions

Bookstores themselves must engage in speculative practices in order to ensure their continued survival and adaptation to tenuous circumstances, a fact which has become doubly evident with the compounding stressor of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For largely brick-and-mortar spaces which depend on physical engagement to function and grow, COVID-19 introduced an element of uncertainty which required these spaces to find imaginative ways to maintain their community connections. Candice from Tombolo reflected on how the pandemic forced bookstore owners and employees to reconsider where and how bookstores belong in the future.

“How do we envision bookstores being not just this historical artifact, but also being something in the future? Certainly during the pandemic, we've thought about it a lot, right? How do bookstores continue to be? How do we fit into the future? I definitely want to sit on a barstool behind the counter and hand out

books to young people for the rest of my life. But we have to expand people's imaginations about what bookstores are."

Luis at Avid described how his "personal anchor," or goal for the organization, is the sentiment, "a better world is possible." How can bookstores continue to be part of reaching that world, those worlds? These literary spaces are helping to reimagine and reconfigure what the South looks like and create a South that is future-facing for marginalized communities. For Jamie at Violet Valley, carving out a queer space in Mississippi proved the power what is possible, creating hope for future change:

"What I hope is, someone will build on what our queer forebearers have done and do something really cool and new. What I mainly hope for is that the people who come into Violet Valley will get a sense of possibility, do something really cool and radical and badass on their own. And there's things that they probably never imagined that are possible if you take the leap. [The bookstore] is a great way to think about, not just what used to be, but what you can build now for the future."

Esme from Firestorm echoed Jamie's comments about possibility, expressing how the bookstore is a site of science fiction, creating space for queer, anarchist futures:

"I think we talk about what we are doing in the world that we're all working for as being science fiction. Or like, I speculative fiction in a lot of ways. And like we are attempting to run a workplace in the way that we hope to see free cooperation and consent driven collaboration in the future. And we're like, trying to live that

now. And envision what that might look like, and the speculative fiction books on our shelves, especially ones written by queer authors, and authors of color, really inspire that vision that we're working on.”

If, according to adrienne maree brown, the work of fiction is to help us develop “tools, frameworks, and principles that would help us to bring the work off of the page and into our lives” (Imarisha & Maree Brown 2016: 279), then bookstores are a unique space to put those frameworks and principles into practice. As evidenced through my conversations and analysis of the work bookstores are doing to cultivate equitable and diverse communities through practices of resistance, empathy, and accountability. Bookstores have the ability to act as spaces of radical possibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Queer-authored, Black-affirming climate fiction novels like *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *Smoketown* provide us with the examples and tools necessary to create futures that confront the culture of violence against Black and queer communities that emerges within and beyond the climate crisis. These narratives offer alternative pathways to futures that are not entrenched in the practices of accumulation and dispossession and colonial-racial legacies that exacerbate existing inequalities and contribute to ecological destruction (Davis et al 2019). The way forward for imagining just climate futures is through an engagement of Black queer ecologies and geographies. Operating within this framework recognizes “the ongoing reality that Black communities in the U.S. South...are most susceptible to the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, subsidence, sinking land, as well as the ongoing effects of toxic stewardship,” (Roane & Hosbey 2019), inequalities which intersect with the experiences of queer community (Seymour 2013). However, Black and queer ecologists and geographers are also producers of what Roane and Hosbey call “insurgent knowledge...which we hold to have bearing on how we should historicize the current crisis and how we conceive of futures outside of destruction” (2019). My analysis considers this insurgent knowledge through the three themes of creating community, envisioning resistance, and fostering empathy and accountability. The narratives of *An Unkindness* and *Smoketown* exhibit powerful examples of community resilience and vitality, addressing questions of health, ecological preservation, bodily and sexual autonomy through the acts of their protagonists. Both

stories, transposed onto near and far-future Southern landscapes, show an ability to dream beyond and overcome oppressive circumstances.

My second thesis chapter follows these fictional examples of community resilience by showcasing the imaginative capacity of the bookstore in the present. I assert the importance of thinking how the values shown in these stories can translate to the space of the bookstore. Everyday acts of resistance and knowledge formation occur regularly in the bookstore, particularly in the form of community formation and resilience. Particularly for queer and Black-owned bookstores, an engagement with community involves a dedication to creating queer and Black-affirming spaces built on the values of antiracism, self-reflection, and ecological justice. Bookstores create a space where just futures can be imagined and practiced beyond the environment of speculative texts. Bookstores facilitate passage between multiple worlds, connecting fictional future-thinking strategies to acts of Black and queer worldmaking and resistance in the present.

Through my work, I hope to encourage further engagement not only with speculative climate texts but the ways in which they connect to present spaces and communities. I hope to show the deeply intertwined struggles of queerness, Blackness, and environmental justice, presenting pathways to a more equitable future. Katherine McKittrick expresses the possibility of such a future, waiting to be realized: “But this future, as we know, has not arrived yet. We are still waiting” (McKittrick 2021: 56).

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol and Verbal Consent

My work seeks to reveal how the imagination and popular culture, namely literature, play an essential role in shaping social change, and provide key texts and inspiration for activist movements. I am most specifically interested in the prefigurative capacities of post-climate change speculative fiction futures that have been imagined and written by queer authors.

Do you consent to taking part in this interview? If at any time during or after our conversation you change your mind and want to withdraw, all recording and transcription evidence will be destroyed.

How did [your store] get started?

What is the philosophy/mission of [your store]?

Do you consider [your store] to be a center of community?

Could you tell me a bit about what types of events [your store] holds?

What types of communities do you engage with and/or work with through [your store]?

Do you see a responsibility in [your store] to take on social issues?

What is the primary focus of the books that you sell?

What genres are an important part of your collection? Science Fiction? Queer authors?

How has COVID-19 affected [your store] and how you connect with readers?

VITA

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