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ARTICLE

Climate Across Genre: Hyperobject Reading and Evaluating the "Use" of Climate-Fantastic Fiction

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of climate as hyperobject — described by Timothy Morton as something that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world. University of Minnesota Press*, p. 1) — in fantastique genres (inclusive of fantasy, speculative and science fiction, horror, supernatural and New Weird genres) that arguably characterised climate fiction's beginnings. By positioning such climate fictions within "the literature of the impossible" (Boucher (2024) The specificity of fantasy and the "affective novum": A theory of a core subset of fantasy literature. *Literature*, *4*(2), 101–121), I investigate the difference between what might be considered more speculative climate fictions and the increasingly common, more realist and literary cli-fi narratives. In other words, I discuss what, now, is the "use" of the speculative and the fantastic in climate fiction when climate crisis itself is indeed real and far from "impossible." Discussing N.K. Jemisin's fantasy series *The Broken Earth* (2015–2017) and Jeff VanderMeer's horror/New Weird series *Southern Reach* (2014–2024), I argue that "climate-fantastic" novels are well-positioned to narrativise climate change as a hyperobject due to the ability of speculative, fantastic genres to exceed the limitations of Western-capitalist-colonial storytelling practices. I also consider the role of speculative climate fictions in education, including the importance of reading, studying and writing into the speculative alongside the realist when it comes to climate crisis.

Keywords: Climate fiction; environmental education; ecocriticism; fantasy fiction; hyperobject; horror fiction

Introduction

The repositioning of climate fiction, or "cli-fi," within more literary, realist fiction spaces, rather than the speculative, fantastique genres that arguably characterised cli-fi's beginnings, has significantly changed the landscape of ecocritical scholarship in recent years. The obvious reason for this shift is that climate change now feels more real, urgent and of the present than it did when climate fiction as a genre first emerged. What is concerning, though, is the still-dominant emphasis on capitalist-colonial perspectives on "nature" and climate in many contemporary, Euro-Western cli-fi novels of the last decade (Kirne & Potter, 2021; Pierrot & Seymour, 2020). With this in mind, this article considers whether cli-fi texts that sit within genres of the fantastique or fantastic — often used as an overarching term to refer to the genres of fantasy, horror, science and speculative fiction, the supernatural and the New Weird — are approaching climate crisis differently. By understanding such climate fictions as positioned within "the literature of the impossible" (Boucher, 2024), I investigate the affective qualities of more speculative climate fictions in comparison to the increasingly common, more realist and literary cli-fi narratives. In

other words, what, now, is the "use" of the speculative and the fantastic in climate fiction when climate crisis itself is indeed real and far from "impossible"?

In response to this provocation, I argue that speculative cli-fi is well-positioned to narrativise the "hyperobject" that is climate change — something that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, 2013, 1). This is due to the ability of the fantastic novel, more so than the realist cli-fi novel, to exceed the limitations of Western-capitalist-colonial storytelling practices. Speaking about N.K. Jemisin's fantasy fiction, Jessica Hawkes describes how the "fantastic world" is one that is "free from the constraints of realist novels" and therefore well-placed to shift beyond "the representational challenges of the Anthropocene" (2024, 546). In this context, I analyse a selection of what I term "climate-fantastic" novels and how they represent and respond to such challenges.

While primarily situated within an ecocritical, literary studies framework, this article also considers the role of speculative climate fictions in education. I discuss the possibility that such fictions are more likely to facilitate discussions amongst readers and students that reflect what Blanche Verlie describes as a "cloudy collective" — "a moody, ephemeral, more-than-human ensemble that participate[s] in and emerge[s] from our changing climate" (2022, 93). I also offer letter-writing as a possibly transformative means through which students might better understand their own relationship with climate as hyperobject. I have chosen to focus on the work of two authors of the fantastique whose texts engage with various concerns associated with climate. Specifically, I consider N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017) as a key example of fantasy climate fiction and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* series (2014–2024) as an example of horror and New Weird climate fiction. Rather than pitting the fantastic against the realist, though, I argue for the importance of reading and studying these texts alongside each other in education settings, with the aim of better understanding the capacities and limitations of different storytelling practices to represent climate change.

Speculative literary approaches to the "hyperobject"

In their 2010 book *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton first described "hyperobjects." The term refers to "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, 2013, 1), with Morton later expanding on the concept in the book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013). Hyperobjects "involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to" (Morton, 2013, 1) and, importantly, they are "directly responsible for . . . *the end of the world*, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete" (Morton, 2013, 2. Emphasis in original). This is because, in seeking to comprehend hyperobjects, we must effectively do away with traditional, often-Western understandings of a contained and comprehensible world as we know it at the human scale. In the face of hyperobjects — of which climate change is one — we must "abolish the idea of the possibility of a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them," while also trying "to establish what phenomenological 'experience' is in the absence of anything meaningfully like a 'world' at all" (Morton, 2013, 2).

Significantly, particularly in the context of this paper, Morton argues that hyperobjects like climate change are responsible for changes to "human art and experience" (2013, 2). Developing a way of reading the hyperobject in literature is therefore vital in comprehending their impact and the human entanglement with them, especially the ways in which hyperobjects are "viscous," sticking to any "beings that are involved with them" (Morton, 2013, 1). Chingshun J. Sheu refers to "hyperobject reading" as "a mode of reading that can adequately reflect the multiple scales of the Anthropocene" (2023, 1). Building on the work of ecocritical scholar Timothy Clark, Sheu describes hyperobject reading as bringing together the more "micro" scale of a narrative (details at the more personal level for the narrator or protagonist, such as close family and friends and their

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experiences over several years) and the "macro" scale (how a broader culture is represented in the text over decades, often a recognisable historical period, and then, beyond this, at the planetary level of the earth across, for example, hundreds of years) (Clark, 2015, 99–100, cited in Sheu, 2023, 3).[1]

I believe that this kind of reading provides opportunities for readers to approach a more encompassing understanding of climate change that goes beyond the anthropocentric; one that reflects the complex connections and impacts across past, present and future planetary lives. However, many would argue that the novel form is a largely inadequate device to represent climate change as hyperobject. A hyperobject is, after all, so "massively distributed in time and space" (Morton, 2013, 1) as to render any human form of communication or narrative incapable of representing it. Diletta de Cristofaro and Daniel Cordle emphasise the limitations of literature in attending to space and time beyond the human because

> we are used to narrative trajectories . . . that operate on the human scale, curtailed temporally (usually within the lifetime of a single human being; certainly, only very rarely extending beyond two or three generations), spatially (being focused through one location at any given narrative moment) and existentially (with meaning defined in human terms). (2018, 1)

While I do not entirely disagree with this perspective, I believe that there is also potential for some novelistic approaches, particularly in the realm of popular genre, to represent the unknowability and more-than-human-ness of climate as hyperobject — even if, as a human artform, literature inevitably fails to entirely represent the hyperobject as it exists beyond the parameters of human spacetime.

My choice to focus on genre fiction in this article — namely, a work of fantasy fiction and a work of horror and New Weird fiction — reflects what I believe is a need to return to popular genre in an attempt to understand (even if in a limited way) the hyperobject. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh famously critiqued authors of literary fiction and the novelistic form itself for a failure to, until fairly recently, address climate change in any meaningful way. While Ghosh's argument has strongly directed scholarly and writerly attention to climate change in literary fiction in recent years, the result of this has perhaps been a neglect of genre fiction.

Climate fiction, including the literary realist kind, would not exist if it were not for speculative genre fiction. As Rebecca Evans asserts,

> Any definition of cli-fi that insists upon certain markers of scientific probability and literary realism elides the appearance of other genres, classifying their appearance as textual aberrations within works identified as cli-fi while entirely overlooking literary works primarily indebted to these genres. (2017, 99)

Science fiction especially is often considered the progenitor of climate fiction, given the genre's ability to engage with and, at times, predict scientific and technological progress (and devastation). Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgmann criticise Ghosh's argument for its complicity "with the binary opposition between 'literary' and 'genre' fiction it threatens to undermine" (2018, 2). While I largely agree with this criticism, Milner and Burgmann's emphasis on science fiction as the

[1]In his book *Hyperobject Reading, Scale Variance, and American Fiction in the Anthropocene* (2023), Sheu provides a far more in-depth conceptualisation of hyperobject reading, including the link between hyperobjects like climate change and the text itself as object, than I can cover within the limitations of this article. It is worth noting, though, what Sheu describes as the "motivating question" behind hyperobject reading: " . . . for a given text, how does the construction of textual objects, and of the text itself as an object, afford (and/or complicate) a coherent reading along the lines of a chosen theme-hyperobject?" (2023, 18).

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primary forebear of climate fiction undermines the role that other genres have played, and continue to play, in the popularity and diversity of fictional climate imaginaries.

The idea of fantasy fiction as climate fiction has been particularly disregarded in this respect, although recent years have demonstrated an increased ecocritical engagement with the genre. Reyyan Bal argues that fantasy's particular preoccupation with the nonhuman reflects "the desire to communicate with beings other than humans" in a meaningful way — a desire which "disrupts the reason/nature binary, subverting the contemporary culture of putting man at the centre with nature as his commodity" (2021, 1289). Similarly, Evans contends that it is not possible to provide an all-encompassing description of "the pedagogical and political potential of cli-fi" without attending to "the ways in which fantastical genres contribute to understandings of environmental futurity" (2017, 99). It is a mistake, then, to position science fiction as the sole speculative genre that has influenced the kind of realist climate fiction we know today.

Horror as a genre is also well-placed to explore the precarity of humanity's "superior" position in the face of immense environmental upheaval, often through the transformation of the human into something nonhuman, and vice versa. For example, *The Last of Us*, both the video game (2013) and television series (2023–2025), depicts the amalgamation of humans and fungi. This is portrayed as monstrous, but also reveals the intelligence of the fungi, positioning them as agential and, in turn, subverting an anthropocentric hierarchy that previously asserted humans as superior to nature and the nonhuman. As Jonathan Elmore argues, there is a significant "overlap between cli-fi and horror fiction" that provides a space for "developing the necessary societal, cultural and intellectual framework for living in a destroyed world" (2022, 159). Elmore offers the term "terrestrial horror" to describe this genre overlap (2022, 159). Phoebe Wagner identifies the "grotesque," a common trope of horror, as "a strong motivator for environmental change, since the grotesque typically involves a distortion or transformation of a way of understanding the world, which is necessary to provoke change" (2023, 911). Building on the work of such scholars, I seek to justify the value of what I classify as "climate-fantastic" fiction — climate fiction texts that sit within or utilise tropes of different fantastic fiction genres as a means of subverting the largely Western, capitalist-colonial hierarchies that still dominate mainstream environmental discourse.

More-than-human spacetimes and genre subversion in *The Broken Earth*

The two series discussed in this article exemplify wider trends in fantastic genres that demonstrate an increased attentiveness to the inadequacy of traditional novelistic approaches and the fallacy of the individualist, Western progress narrative. Their function as series rather than individual novels is pertinent in this regard, representing an assemblage of stories told from multiple points of view rather than a standalone novel, which most works of literary climate fiction generally are.[2] It is perhaps helpful, then, to begin with Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy due to its position within and subversion of traditional fantasy fiction — a genre that is well-known for long-form series.

The series made waves when Jemisin became the first author to win the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Novel three years in a row for each of the books in the trilogy. Set on the fictional continent of the Stillness, *The Broken Earth* trilogy follows a woman who goes by various names across the series (Damaya, Syenite and Essun) and who is identified as an orogene — a type of human in this world who possesses the power to connect with and control the earth's geological forces. The Stillness has been consistently plagued by periods of immense environmental

[2]Some of the most critically acclaimed works of literary climate fiction are standalone novels, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Richard Flanagan's *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (2020). While many of these novels are by no means brief, with some involving complex, overlapping perspectives of both human and nonhuman characters, they still function quite differently to long-form series such as Jemisin's and VanderMeer's, which instead allow for a level of world-building and character development that is often not possible in standalone texts.

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upheaval, referred to as "Fifth Seasons." These are characterised by highly destructive geological events, such as extreme earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The societal structure of the Stillness is therefore predicated on the inevitability of disaster. People are assigned roles in various "use-castes" and form communities called "comms," which play vital roles in keeping people alive during a Fifth Season — as long as you are part of one of this communities. The imperial governing body, the "Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation" or "Old Sanze," has ruled over the Stillness for centuries.

The aforementioned orogenes make up a small but significant percentage of the Stillness' population. They are born with the power to subdue the earth's potentially disastrous forces, such as earthquakes, but they can also use such powers against other people if they choose (or often accidentally, if they are not practiced in orogeny). Orogenes are feared by the non-magical humans of the Stillness and are ultimately controlled via centuries-old propaganda that asserts their otherness as the cause of the Fifth Seasons (despite orogenes' ability to help reduce their impact). This is tied up in the oft-repeated story that orogenes are to blame for destroying "the only child" of "Father Earth" (Jemisin, 2016 [2015], 380). This child is later revealed to be the moon, which was catastrophically pushed out of the planet's orbit at some point in the distant past.

The series primarily follows Essun (also known as Damaya and Syenite in *The Fifth Season*), an incredibly powerful orogene who discovers the ability to connect with large crystal fragments located around the Stillness, and, by the end of the second book, *The Obelisk Gate*, understands that she must use this power to somehow fix the environmental issues that have plagued the continent for so long. She is also on a journey to locate her only remaining child, Nassun, who was kidnapped by her father in the first book after he murdered their only son on discovering he was an orogene. Nassun is also an orogene and parts of *The Obelisk Gate* and the third book, *The Stone Sky*, are focalised through her as she travels with her father to the south of the Stillness to escape the most recent Fifth Season. Later, Nassun journeys to a place called "Corepoint" where she hopes to completely destroy the world, believing this to be the best and only way to properly fix it, particularly in terms of freeing orogenes from the oppressive Sanze Empire. Essun journeys to meet her daughter there so that she can instead return the moon to Father Earth and re-make rather than destroy the world.

While Jemisin's work is positioned within a genre that is indebted to the traditional novelistic form, this series strongly subverts some of the expected tropes of the fantasy novel. For example, Jemisin's fantasy does not reinscribe the pastoral aesthetic of the more traditional, Tolkienesque high fantasy which remains incredibly popular amongst readers. As I will go on to describe, Jemisin subverts fantasy reader expectations around structure and narrative voice, drawing attention to the inability of the traditional novel form to represent the complex interconnections between climate crisis and colonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism — particularly given that the origins of the novel form itself are deeply intertwined with such systems. Hawkes asserts something similar regarding the series, stating that:

> By creating a fantastic world free from the constraints of realist novels, Jemisin overcomes some of the representational challenges of the Anthropocene. Jemisin defamiliarises planetary life and change, exploring a world shaped by geological upheaval and human and more-than-human geological interventions, to make visible the otherwise often invisible human alterations to geology, and to challenge the universalising narrative of the Anthropocene. (2024, 546)

What Hawkes does not interrogate, though, is how Jemisin's work differs to other fantasy texts in this regard. There are many other fantasy series that utilise complex, fantastic world-building to challenge dominant ideologies of human exceptionalism and environmental exploitation, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's anti-industrialist *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), Brandon Sanderson's

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Mistborn (2006–2022) and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000). However, such series, including those that also feature multiple points of view, generally still rely on traditional novelistic conventions that assert the superiority of the human individual, usually through the hero's journey of the "Chosen One" that follows the protagonist's development from a young, unskilled child or young adult to a powerful, heroic adult.

Where Jemisin's series differs is in its subversion of the individualised narrative voice, best reflected by her use of the second-person pronoun throughout some of the series' chapters, as well as the narrative's non-linear chronology (particularly in *The Fifth Season*) and the estrangement of the reader via these techniques. It is therefore not enough to say that Jemisin's work "overcomes some of the representational challenges" of the Anthropocene simply because it is fantasy and not realist fiction. It is Jemisin's *particular* approach to fantasy fiction that is key here; her specific formulation of the fantasy genre — and subversion of its anthropocentric reliance on the individualised hero's journey — is what engages readers in a narrative of climate that goes beyond the individual, and towards an understanding of climate change as hyperobject.

From the very first book of the series, Jemisin's writing is preoccupied with the large-scale, long-term consequences of human influences on the planet. Significantly, it begins with a discussion of endings: "Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we?" (Jemisin, 2016 [2015], 1). This first chapter provides an explicit shift from the classic, individual hero's journey of the fantasy genre — "First, a personal ending" — to a large-scale, collective "continental" narrative — "Let's try the ending again, writ continentally" (Jemisin, 2016 [2015], 1). Significantly, this is all before the reader is even given the protagonist's name, knowing them only through the second-person pronoun of "you." The many scales and temporalities of the Stillness are also evoked immediately to the reader: "The Stillness has had other names. It was once several other lands. It's one vast, unbroken continent at present, but at some point in the future it will be more than one again" (Jemisin, 2016 [2015], 2). Additionally, each book in the series includes the same appendix at its conclusion which details the different seasons that have occurred in the past, leading up to the near-world-ending events of the trilogy. The reader is reminded here of the cyclical nature of disaster — there is vast archival knowledge of each of the Fifth Seasons, stretching back thousands of years, but this seems to have provided no assistance in averting future disasters.

There is a confusion here between what appears to be quite solid archival records that provide the reader with an established sense of the world, and the messy chronology, or non-linearity, of the series, particularly in *The Fifth Season*. The narrator of approximately one third of the chapters across the entire series — those chapters narrated in the second-person that describe Essun's journey — is Hoa, a Stone Eater. Stone Eaters are beings that can live for thousands of years, physically travel through the earth, and are involved in affecting the lives of orogenes, including the trajectory of Essun's journey. The reader encounters Hoa in the first book, although it is not made clear until later in this novel that he is the one narrating Essun's chapters.

The significance of Hoa's knowledge as a narrator across the series is often unclear; he has a vast knowledge of the past, present and possibly future, but the purpose of this knowledge is not known to either the reader or Essun until points much later in the narrative. There is an implication, though, that we are meant to understand it. For example, in *The Obelisk Gate* when Hoa describes a war in his past — the war that created him — he tells Essun that he is plotting her death — a death that will be necessary to bring about the end of the world (Jemisin, 2016, 76). The reality of this is much more complex. Hoa does not wish to murder Essun but rather transform her into a Stone Eater like himself, and she finally chooses to do this herself when she harnesses the power necessary to bring back the moon in the final moments of *The Stone Sky*. Hoa alludes to Essun's death as sitting within a bigger picture in which his betrayal and her sacrifice are necessary to re-make the world. This at times has the effect of estranging the reader from individual characters and events of the novel due to a prioritisation by Hoa of the "big picture" of the Stillness, Father Earth and the possibility of planetary apocalypse. At other times, though, Hoa is incredibly attentive to Essun, expressing guilt at using her as a "pawn" and hoping that she will

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forgive him (Jemisin, 2016, 234). This, I argue, reflects what Sheu describes as "Anthropocene scale variance" (2023, 9), which accounts for the variations in impact that actions relating to climate change have across different scales.

Adding to this sense of a bigger picture of climate change, the overarching narrative of *The Broken Earth* trilogy is focalised through a range of characters' perspectives. In *The Fifth Season*, the three differing perspectives of Damaya, Syenite and Essun offered throughout the narrative are revealed by the novel's end to all be Essun at different stages of her life. Here, Jemisin is subverting a common trope of long-form, high fantasy series that alternate between different characters' perspectives, arguably beginning with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and continuing in other renowned high fantasy series such as Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* (1990–2013), George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–2011) and Brandon Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archive* (2010–2024). The other books in the series, *The Obelisk Gate* and *The Stone Sky,* continue this trend of multiple points of view, although now spreading the narrative focalisation across *actually* different characters rather than three versions of the same character, as in *The Fifth Season*. Particularly significant is the introduction of Nassun, who shares the narrative voice in these later two books with Essun and Hoa.

Drawing on Sheu's conceptualisation of hyperobject reading as something that encapsulates both the micro and the macro of a text, it is also necessary to look towards individual characters' perspectives — particularly any character attitudes or behaviours that embody geological, more-than-human scales of space and time. As Hawkes describes, the Stone Eaters' ability to move "at speeds that are invisible to human eyes… and … their unwillingness to speak to most humans… reflect the challenges of understanding the Anthropocene timescale" (2024, 550). On the flipside of this same coin, the orogenes enact a kind of "geological agency" but they are also distinctly human (Hawkes, 2024, 550) — their actions are not just those of the earth, then, but of humans as beings that are inextricably connected with, and generated by, the earth. Kathryn Yusoff argues that "the imagined geologic subject that underpins such a collective geomorphic event remains underexamined and often metaphoric in its composition" (2013, 781). While it cannot be said that Jemisin's work is *not* metaphoric (Hawkes, for example, classifies it as "a metaphor for the Anthropocene" (2024, 559)), her characterisation of agential geologic forms (the orogenes and the Stone Eaters) is a portrayal of the very real, material embodiment of humans as part of and from the earth in a chemical, physical and evolutionary sense. One cannot exist without the other, and so the orogenes are not simply a metaphoric manifestation of the human relationship with the earth.

Relevant to this is Jemisin's attentiveness to the complex interconnections between climate crisis and colonial systems of domination; this is also an important factor in approaching climate change as a hyperobject. As Hawkes describes, "Jemisin's dehumanisation of her fantastic races points to the roles that historical and geological narratives play in such erasure" (2024, 550). The series' approach to climate and geology resists a totalising narrative of climate change in its depiction of "how the Anthropocene is always already apocalyptic for all but a privileged few" (Hawkes, 2024, 546). Jemisin's work sits within a larger tradition of Afrofuturist fiction and is concerned with the ways in which "the privileged benefit not only from the exploitation that is a pre-condition of the Anthropocene but also from how they control the narrative to efface their complicity in this exploitation" (Hawkes, 2024, 546). This politics is essential to Jemisin's approach to climate as hyperobject because it destabilises the white, Western-colonial sensibility that both racism and the environmental crisis are able to be "solved" by the same white, Western-colonial systems that have facilitated them in the first place. As Kirsten Dillender explains, *The Broken Earth* trilogy depicts a society "in which the true sources of African American persecution are still to be addressed" (2020, 132). To understand climate change as a hyperobject with vastly different effects across cultures, places and times is therefore also to recognise its disproportionate impact on marginalised groups of people that have been oppressed within the same systems of domination that prioritise (white) human concerns of ecological crisis above all else.

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The messy chronology and multiple perspectives of sometimes unidentifiable characters throughout the series subverts this hierarchy as well as the Western tradition of the novel as an individualised narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end. This influences the reader's engagement with the deep, messy temporalities of the climate crisis — a hyperobject that is difficult if not impossible to contain within the boundaries of the Western narrative of technological "progress." Technological advancement does not equal an end to climate crisis. Similarly, though, technological advancement does not necessarily result in apocalypse or an end to nature as "we" know it. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing contends in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2021 [2015]), disturbance — whether human or nonhuman — is not wholly good or bad, but is something through which one might better comprehend the ideologies behind the good and bad practices that affect both humans and environments. In fact, disturbance is arguably key to re-making the world, as evidenced by the final "Fifth Season" that is unleashed by the orogene, Alabaster (Essun's ex-partner) at the beginning of Jemisin's series, causing the chain of events that leads to Essun returning the moon. This catastrophe is key in revealing and actualising "other ways of making worlds" (Tsing, 2021 [2015], 155) that exist outside of the constraints of Western colonial-capitalism.

Knowing and unknowing in *Southern Reach*

While Jemisin's fiction explores the reasons for and consequences of climate crisis by challenging the boundary between "human" and "geologic" — what we might define as an interest in the human relationship with the *abiotic* nonhuman — VanderMeer's series is more so preoccupied with entanglements between human and nonhuman life — or at least life as defined by Western scientific standards. What aligns the two series quite clearly, though, is a shared critique of the systems of knowledge that represent and control the dissemination of anthropocentric ideologies. They therefore also share a common concern with the incomprehensibility of the immense scale of planetary climate change, alongside an interest in investigating and critiquing those parties responsible for the advent of the Anthropocene — primarily, colonial and capitalist authorities whose ideologies are largely informed by Western, rationalist forms of knowledge.

While VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* series could be alternatively classified as horror fiction, weird fiction, or science fiction, I largely consider the *Southern Reach* books as sitting within horror and the "New Weird" due to its emphasis on monstrosity, haunted and contaminated places, and psychological uncertainty. The New Weird genre, a term credited to author M. John Harrison (2002), is described by Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy as "a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming" (2016, 125). H.P. Lovecraft is generally considered the grandfather of weird fiction. It is certainly not difficult to see his influence on VanderMeer whose fiction is often preoccupied with creaturely entanglements across species lines, harking back to Lovecraft's iconic Cthulhu whose appearance combines both human and cephalopod morphologies.[3] Such morphologies also speak to Donna Haraway's related concept, the "Chthulucene": the term she gives to "the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces and powers of which people are a part" that involve "intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans" (2016, 101). Compared to Lovecraft's racist politics, though (and Haraway is also careful to separate the Chthulucene from Lovecraft's "misogynistic racial-nightmare monster" (2016, 101)), VanderMeer's New Weird fiction "adopts a more radical politics that treats the alien, the hybrid, and the chaotic as subversions of the various normalisations of power and subjectivity" (Noys & Murphy, 2016, 125). This kind of politics is key to the *Southern Reach* series' approach to climate change as hyperobject. Originally a trilogy, with

[3]Other authors who have approached the New Weird genre from an ecocritical perspective include China Miéville, Aliya Whiteley, Kij Johnson and Reza Negarestani.

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the first three books — *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* — published in 2014, VanderMeer released a fourth instalment, *Absolution,* a decade later, in 2024.

The series follows the varying involvement of a range of characters in the work of Central, a secretive authority that is responsible for controlling "Area X" — a mysterious stretch of coastline, suggested to be in Florida, which has become contaminated by an unknown entity or entities and is now contained within a border maintained by Central. Over the decades of its existence, Area X has been explored by a range of "expeditions," often made up of scientists and other specialists who are tasked by Central to investigate different aspects of the location and its flora and fauna. Most of the characters who travel into Area X or work for Central at various points in the series mysteriously disappear or die in unusual and often grotesque ways. It is both the danger of this place and Central's ongoing manipulation of its employees that result in most of the tensions and conflicts in the series. However, *Southern Reach* also explores the possibilities of radical transformation through complex more-than-human entanglements and reveals the consequences of a lack of nuanced attentiveness to such relationships. This positions the series as itself attentive to one of the primary concerns of many scholars working in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities — that the ideological separation of humans from the nonhuman, particularly in the West, remains a dominant aspect of mainstream environmental discourse. This includes the dominance of wilderness aesthetics and ideologies in places like the U.S. and Australia that continue to alienate Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, and the prioritisation of Western technological solutions to climate crisis, such as geoengineering, that reinscribe narratives of progress and human superiority which have brought us to this ecological moment in the first place.

What I would like to focus on in VanderMeer's work, then, is the series' overall critique of particular knowledge systems and their ineptitude in the face of hyperobjects. This is not just in terms of how knowledge itself is represented and communicated amongst characters, but how the reader is given or not given knowledge about characters and narrative events as they unfold. VanderMeer critiques the hierarchical superiority of Western, rationalist systems of knowledge; both the culpability and inadequacy of such systems in the context of environmental disaster is brought to the fore in different ways throughout the series. Such systems are often shown to replicate issues rather than resolve them. The use of pseudonyms and alienating job titles to identify different characters reflects this inadequacy across time, despite the characters' best efforts to try and locate, in history and in science, a distinct beginning, middle and end of Area X. Throughout *Annihilation,* the protagonist is referred to only as "the biologist," with others in her all-female expedition similarly identified as "the anthropologist," "the surveyor" and "the psychologist." It is revealed that the biologist's husband, who dies after his own expedition into Area X prior to the biologist's journey, travelled to Area X amongst a similar cohort of people, this time all men who are identified as "a psychologist, two medics . . . , a linguist, a surveyor, a biologist, an anthropologist, and an archaeologist" (VanderMeer, 2015 [2014a], 161). The biologist, or a simulacrum of her, is later referred to as "Ghost Bird" in *Authority*, while the protagonist of *Authority* is referred to as "Control" — a name that reflects his position as leader of a particular sector of Central.

Significantly, the reader gradually realises the uselessness of such titles, as each member of the biologist's expedition in *Annihilation* largely fails to attend to the primary responsibilities of their particular role, while Control is influenced by a mysterious "Voice" from the upper levels of Central, depicting him as without much control himself. This is one way in which VanderMeer critiques the capacity of these different types of (largely Western) knowledges and hierarchies to comprehend and attend to the scale of environmental change that Area X represents.

The containment of environmental disaster to Area X is ultimately revealed to be a fallacy, as shown by the inevitable spread of the area's "contamination" beyond its original borders in *Authority*. This brings us to the significance of reading VanderMeer's fiction not simply as a work of climate-fantastic, but as an example of horror fiction and the New Weird. Compared to a

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fantasy series such as Jemisin's, the conventions of horror fiction generally dictate less of a reliance on expansive and consistent world-building. The "indeterminacy of matter" (Shackelford, 2021, 124) is one of VanderMeer's primary concerns in this series, and this is a topic well-suited to the chaos and unknowing that are key themes of horror and the New Weird. As Laura Shackelford describes in her analysis of the series' engagement with "topological spacetimes,"

> [j]uxtaposing and recombining characters' experiences—their responses to tangible transformations and baffling, varied states of unknowing—as if through a kaleidoscope, the SR trilogy attends to the scientific, meta-physical, literary, and other experimental approaches we use to grapple with more-than-human processes and ecosystemic change. (2021, 125).

VanderMeer's approach to more-than-human entanglements in *Southern Reach* is not limited to his depiction of human-animal, human-plant, human-fungi hybrids, which the series is known for. He is equally, if not more concerned with entanglements between and across space and time — what Shackleford describes as new materialist understandings of "emerging, topological spacetimes" as possibly "facilitate[ing] broader efforts to reunderstand the actual and potential continuum(s) between human/nonhuman life in mutually empowering ways" (2021, 138). The reader can see this represented via different characters' "recognition that borders and boundaries of many kinds no longer contain or absolutely separate spaces in a Euclidean key" (Shackelford, 2021, 138).

Unknowability is significant in this respect, for both the reader and the characters within the narrative. The reader may be given answers to specific mysteries throughout the series, only to have such answers later challenged in some way or revealed to be completely false. In the most recent instalment, *Absolution*, the character Old Jim is tasked with sifting through the jumbled records of an expedition of biologists into the place that would come to be known as Area X, twenty years before it was formed. When he mentions the records to a colleague, Jack, who should be aware of them, he is met with "practiced puzzlement" (VanderMeer, 2024, 92), as if this first expedition into Area X had never happened. Similarly, in *Annihilation*, the biologist attempts to find concrete answers to her questions about Area X and her deceased husband within "hundreds of journals" (VanderMeer, 2015 [2014a], 108) that she finds inside a mysterious, abandoned lighthouse in Area X. Ultimately, though, these journals only serve to highlight the infinitesimal influence that human beings have had on Area X:

> Human lives had poured into this place over time, volunteered to become party to exile and worse. Under everything lay the ghastly presence of countless desperate struggles. Why did they keep sending us? Why did we keep going? So many lies, so little ability to face the truth . . . A line from a song kept coming back to me: *All this useless knowledge*. (VanderMeer, 2015 [2014a], 119)

Such examples critique the capacity of rationalist Western knowledge systems to find answers to ecological crisis, but they also imply a shared unknowability — a terrifying prospect to some readers no doubt, but arguably what is necessary to reveal the more-than-human scale of a hyperobject like climate change that exists because of human knowledges and technologies, but also extends far beyond this, affecting things at an immense planetary scale. This repeated shift across the *Southern Reach* series between perceived knowledge and alienation may therefore be disconcerting, but it is also radically transformative.

"Cloudy collectives," the climate-fantastic and more-than-human letter-writing

The Broken Earth trilogy and the *Southern Reach* series critique the dominant knowledge systems of Western colonial-capitalism, particularly their lack of — or, perhaps more

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accurately, denial of — messy relations in the Anthropocene. Both authors expound the importance of unknowing in understanding such relations and approaching a comprehension of climate change as a hyperobject. Blanche Verlie's "cloudy collective" concept bears relevance here, being "a moody, ephemeral, more-than-human ensemble" (2022, 98) that reflects the complexity of attending to climate crisis in the classroom. As Verlie describes,

> Cloudy collectives are distinctly non-anthropocentric and more-than-human . . . Climate change's affective agency influences how we feel and who we do and do not identify with, which makes it a central player in the coalitions we form . . . Attuning to the ways these climatic-affective intensities flow through and compose our transcorporeal collectives debunks both the autonomous individual and the homogenised humanity of the Anthropocene story. It curates an appreciation of the ways that climate change acts on us, including through the stories we are enabled and compelled to tell of it. (2022, 98)

Reading and studying works such as Jemisin's and VanderMeer's seems a fitting way to bring together such cloudy collectives, given the authors' attention not simply to climate crisis, but their similar debunking of "the autonomous individual" and their depiction of the planetary forces that both act on and are acted on by humans. Verlie alludes to both the importance and anxiety of acknowledging "the unknowable complexity of the climate" and, given this, the fact that "we cannot always fully understand the ways we are affected by climate change" (2022, 58). Climate-fantastic texts provide a means for readers to acknowledge and sit with this uncertainty and recognise its potential to transform human-nature relations through a deepened understanding of how more-than-human hyperobjects exist both outside of and in intimate relation to the human.

Implementing a kind of hyperobject reading in the classroom is helpful in this context — one that facilitates collective attentiveness to climate as hyperobject, enables discussions of the subversion of Western narrative structure and style, and explores texts' engagements with spacetimes that go beyond the human, but are also inclusive of the human. This is because "as it pervades a storyworld, a hyperobject will be felt on both the level of individual characters and that of the systems with which they're entangled" (Sheu, 2023, 16). Readerly engagements with this idea have the potential to shift perspectives on climate change as an isolated, albeit catastrophic, event in human time, to an ongoing, "massively distributed" (Morton, 2013, 1) hyperobject whose carry-on effects are myriad and diverse, stretching across spacetimes that are largely incomprehensible within the confines of human, particularly Western, culture and language.

There are, of course, limitations to the transformative potential of the climate-fantastic that I have speculated on in this article. In particular, there is the possibility that such texts and their often-dystopian predilections will prevent positive, meaningful reflections on climate change, demoralising readers, students and teachers in their pursuit of real action. This is supported by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, who found that "concerns about dystopian futures can lead to individualistic 'prepping' instead of engaged citizenship or political mobilisation" (2015, cited in Schneider-Mayerson, 2018, 495). Nevertheless, Hawkes makes the point, in relation to *The Broken Earth* trilogy, that " . . . apocalypse creates possibility by embedding humans in larger processes, and thus can lead to world-making" (2024, 555) rather than a more nihilistic "world-breaking" (554). This is where creative writing practice, alongside hyperobject reading, may offer a more hopeful means of understanding climate change as hyperobject by engaging students in positive world-making: a utopian envisioning, and perhaps even actioning, of a different future to the apocalyptic one that is currently considered by many to be inevitable. World-making in a classroom context may seem like a difficult if not impossible task to achieve, and so breaking down this "larger process" into its smaller components is a potentially more tangible way to facilitate this kind of thinking in education. I offer the following elements present in climate-fantastic texts as two such components that could contribute to broader world-making practices in the classroom: radical care and more-than-human meaning-making.

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Radical care is described broadly by Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese as "a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds" (2020, 2). In *The Broken Earth* trilogy, radical care is represented through the communal, albeit at times volatile, care that is shared between orogenes, non-orogenes, and the Stone Eaters as they attempt to survive an apocalyptic Fifth Season together. In *Southern Reach*, radical care is conspicuously missing, but its importance is still realised through VanderMeer's portrayal of what humankind loses when nuanced attentiveness to more-than-human relationships is lacking. Radical care looks different to different people, but, when we consider it in the context of the hyperobject, it is inclusive of care across temporalities and lifeworlds. By this I mean that it involves practising care and attentiveness not only towards humans and nonhumans in the here and now, but across time, inclusive of the hyperobjects themselves and the past, present and future beings impacted by and through them. In this sense, radical care resists the constraints of the Western progress narrative that primarily situates care as something that is only extended to certain groups of humans in the present to benefit neoliberal, capitalist interests in the near future. Comparatively, radical care for Anthropocene times involves attentiveness towards the more-than-human and the mourning of past humans and nonhumans as a means of understanding how the past, present and future converge in times of ecological crisis.

Hyperobjects also necessitate a letting go of certain forms of meaning-making, particularly the anthropocentric, Western idea that cultural expression and meaning is produced only by the individual human subject. Hyperobjects challenge this notion with the alternative idea that the more-than-human is both agential and capable of making meaning that exists beyond human conceptualisations, even if such meanings are impossible for the human to understand. As Ben Dibley describes, "one thing hyperobjects do is eliminate the ground once and for all of the pretence of the human as sovereign subject, as a privileged site of agency" (2015, 23). Hyperobjects are capable of "altering planetary boundaries" (Dibley, 2015, 24) and, in doing so, have the capacity to alter human meanings ascribed to life on Earth.

As discussed above, the orogenes of Jemisin's trilogy allow us to understand the wide-reaching impacts of a "geological," rather than human, agency (Hawkes, 2024, 550). In *The Broken Earth*, more-than-human meaning-making is depicted through the vengeful character of Father Earth who mourns his only child, the moon, thus challenging the notion that agency is confined to the human and asserting a planetary form of meaning-making that positions the human within a very different hierarchy — one that punishes humans for their naïve assumption that they are the only beings capable of complex relationships and meaningful, culturally driven interactions.

VanderMeer's series is similar in its depiction of hybrid human-nonhuman actors who influence and attempt to make sense of the ecologically devastated world around them — such as the never-ending sentence inscribed into the wall of an underground tower in *Annihilation* that carries both a human and nonhuman quality, the biologist describing it as "living words" accompanied by an "interlocking latticework" that "vaguely resembled scorpions strung end-to-end" (VanderMeer, 2015 [2014a], pp. 48–49). Reading and discussing texts like this in the classroom offers not only a different understanding of agency to students in the West, but a way to make meaning of the world that goes beyond the human.

Sarah Maree Crinall and Nicholas Richard Graeme Stanger suggest letters written both to and from the earth as a means of resisting "finite understanding" (2025, 227) — the kind of understanding that characterises traditionally structured modes of education and meaning-making in the West. I too offer the practice of letter-writing as a pathway towards both radical care and more-than-human meaning-making in the Anthropocene. Such a practice would consist of the kinds of letters that, as I have described elsewhere, "engage in a more attentive correspondence with the more-than-human" that reveals the distance between human and nonhuman experiences of ecological crisis and the need for "deeper ecological care and attentiveness" (Fetherston, 2023, 3).

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Teachers and students may, for example, choose to write letters to humans across different geographies and temporalities, discussing their own experiences of climate crisis and pondering the experiences of their addressees as well. Even more radically, though, they may instead address letters to the more-than-human species and objects — even hyperobjects themselves — or produce letters written from the perspective of the more-than-human that are addressed to the human. Crinall and Stanger suggest something of this nature in their "Earth's Love Letters" (2025), including letters addressed to, and from, Earth, as well as more specific more-than-human addressees such as the superb fairy wren and a cedar tree. A letter written to or from a hyperobject, such as climate change, nuclear waste, a planet or solar system, has the capacity to engage students, particularly in a tertiary setting, in both the academic theory behind hyperobjects and the reality of what it means to live in a world that is now governed by the hyperobjects that are the "lasting legacy" of humanity (Morton, 2010, 130).

While a practice that stems largely from Western writing traditions (Bayes et al., 2023, 1), letter-writing in the Anthropocene has the potential to challenge Western-colonial, anthropocentric worldviews through a radical engagement with more-than-human perspectives. It offers the opportunity to think beyond purely dystopian, apocalyptic imaginaries and towards more utopian visions that not only encourage but necessitate more-than-human collaboration. In her investigation of a university letter-writing project that empowered English composition students to engage in activism, Yolanda Nieves describes letter-writing as "anchored in the intersection of academia and reality" (2020, 90). This project allowed students to emphasise "their real-world concerns while encouraging them to think critically about the elliptical issues that rotated incessantly around their lives" (Nieves, 2020, 90). The letter-writing I propose here involves students writing from both their own perspective as well as from the perspectives of other people, nonhumans and hyperobjects, and thus similarly encourages a consideration of where they sit as subjective human individuals within a larger web of more-than-human entanglements. Renée Mickelburgh situates letter-writing as an important part of developing critical-creative writing practice (2023, 2), particularly in the environmental humanities. Based on my own anecdotal experiences using creative writing exercises in the tertiary literary studies classroom to encourage deeper understandings of texts and theory, I posit that critical-creative practice in the form of letter-writing is of burgeoning importance in literary studies education. It has also been identified as pedagogically valuable across other areas of study, such as social work (Frank et al., 2024), science (Burand & Ogba, 2013; Dasdemir, 2014) and teacher education (Jónsdóttir & Dyrnes, 2019). Climate-fantastic fiction and the associated hyperobject reading offer students a partial glimpse into the transformative possibilities of more-than-human entanglements, while letter-writing is a meaningful method of connecting students' own subjective experiences to the hyperobject agencies described in such texts.

This is not to say that reading and studying realist climate fiction cannot also facilitate this form of learning. Rather, I conclude that the climate-fantastic — as a "cloudy" categorisation of climate fiction itself, covering the genres discussed in this article as well as others such as science fiction, eco-gothic, and magic realism — invites and welcomes ephemerality and messiness in a way that even the most chaotic realist climate narratives cannot, while letter-writing has the potential to draw out such messiness by challenging students' assumptions about what a climate-changed future may or may not look like. To read and sit with the speculative requires the consideration of both good and bad pasts, presents and futures that have enabled and/or stood against the systems responsible for climate crisis. Jemisin's and VanderMeer's critiques of Western-colonial systems of knowledge and oppression in their respective series attends to this messiness, revealing the inadequacy of such systems to comprehend the scalar complexities of climate change as hyperobject and thus their inability to inspire action to re-make the world, as Essun finally does in *The Stone Sky*.

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