

Speculative Child Figures at the End of the (White) World

Emily Ashton

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Article abstract

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Speculative Child Figures at the End of the (White) World

Emily Ashton

Emily Ashton (she/her) is an assistant professor of early childhood education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. Emily situates her work in the interdisciplinary field of early childhood studies. As such, she is able to draw on speculative fiction, Black studies, environmental humanities, and critical feminist theory to think through ideas related to children, childhoods, and climate futurities. Email: Emily.Ashton@uregina.ca

The child-future join is pervasive in childhood studies and popular culture. Instead of disavowing the relation, I consider what might be generated if we “stay with the trouble” of its cocomposition in the making of worlds. To do so, I turn to a zombie child named Melanie from The Girl with All the Gifts to grapple with how the end of the world might not be a cause for mourning, how fiery landscapes can allow for species regeneration, and how viruses might incite counternarratives of community amid contagion.

Key words: child figures; speculative fiction; anti-Blackness; apocalypse; survival; virus; regeneration; fire

An important collaboration of environmental humanities scholars names the Anthropocene “a science-fiction concept” that “pulls us out of familiar space and time to view our predicaments as if they belonged to a distant land ... as if we were explorers from the far distant future” (Swanson et al., 2015, p. 149). Chair of the Anthropocene Working Group Jan Zalasiewicz (2008) travels millions of years into the future in *The Earth After Us* to raise concerns about anthropogenic climate change now. In this remote future, alien scientists return to Earth and piece together a story of what happened through the fossilized evidence of human impact—something that will only be discernible in a layer of stratigraphic rock many human lifetimes from now. From these brief examples, we can begin to appreciate how the

Anthropocene invites a speculative thought experiment that engages the future by describing the present and not stopping there. I consider this invitation alongside Ruha Benjamin’s (2016) description of speculative fiction as apportioning “windows into alternative realities, even if it is just a glimpse, to challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability” (p. 19). The future is not yet written in stone.

While some scholars link the Anthropocene to the speculative, it is an area outside of traditional academia where I think the relation is strongest. Contemporary speculative fiction abounds with imaginaries of climate futurities. This is especially noticeable in the deluge of postapocalyptic films that imagine not whether the end of the world is imminent but how exactly it will play out (Colebrook, 2017). These catastrophe stories of climate disaster form a key part of the “public pedagogy of the Anthropocene” (Sheldon, 2016, p. 150). The typical plotline involves a white, cisgendered, able-bodied male hero narrowly averting planetary disaster through some feat of human ingenuity and techno-fix. The apocalypse in such stories is an opportunity to build a new world, only what happens is usually more of the same world “centered on white male power fantasies in some way” (Hurley & Jemisin, 2018, p. 470). However, not all postapocalyptic texts follow these trends. Many Black and Indigenous writers are storying otherwise worlds where the systems, subjectivities, and relationships that are tantamount for survival only faintly resemble Westernized humanistic values (e.g., Dillon, 2012; Dimaline, 2017; Jemisin, 2015; Okorafor, 2011). These are speculative engenderings of *not this*, as in a refusal of present arrangements, *not yet*, as in what might be to come, and *what if*, as in generative possibilities for rethinking the present.

Many of these speculative stories feature a child figure as the main protagonist. In some ways this is familiar

territory for the child figure. A dominant image of the child has long been “a redemptive agent ensuring futurity” (Sellers, 2013, p. 71). This image also reflects Rebekah Sheldon’s (2016) noticing, “why, when we reach out to grasp the future of the planet, do we find ourselves instead clutching the child?” (p. vii). The child-future join has been problematized in childhood studies (e.g., Barnsley, 2010; Kraftl, 2020; Taylor, 2017), including how “children of color are not fetishized in the ways white children are in hopeful imaginations of the future” (Joo, 2018, p. 5).¹ Nevertheless, just like the kind of postapocalyptic blockbusters alluded to above, it is “not sufficient to renounce or denounce the child” because the child figure continues to do important work in the making of worlds (Sheldon, 2016, p. 21). Instead, we might “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of the child-future relation and see what emerges when the speculative is engaged “as a mode of inquiry” to think-with challenges of contemporary childhoods in anthropogenically damaged worlds (Kupferman & Gibbons, 2019).

In this article, I turn to Melanie from the speculative novel and film titled *The Girl with All the Gifts* (hereafter *Gifts*) to engage with urgent problems of the present (Carey, 2014; McCarthy & Carey, 2016). Melanie is a zombie child called a “hungry,” who, unlike the prototypical zombie, is both conscious and caring. Nevertheless, Melanie and her kin-kind are imprisoned and experimented on because their bodies might hold a cure for the pandemic. Following an overview of *Gifts* in the next section, I structure the remainder of the article by way of three overlapping considerations. First, I explore how the end of the world for Melanie is the end of the racialized and militarized systems of oppression that did her violence (Ziyad, 2017b). Melanie invites me to consider a series of questions about the end of the world: For whom might the end of the world not be a cause for mourning (Wilderson, 2015)? What if the end of the world is a renunciation of anti-Blackness and “settler futurity” (Tuck & Yang, 2012)? What possibilities emerge when “refusal and resistance” are the child figure’s response to saving the world (Hartman, 2016, p. 166)? Second, the end of the world in *Gifts* also happens to be a world Melanie sets on fire. As such, I aim to think with the potentiality of fire to both destroy and regenerate worlds (Tsing, 2015). What kind of “piracy future” (Taylor, 2020) is possible for Melanie and her kin?² Third, as a figure of both child and virus, Melanie troubles divisions of life/nonlife, immunity/exceptionality, and innocence/responsibility that govern the present and are put under increasing pressure by the Anthropocene (Povinelli, 2016). Melanie and the pathogen exist in a symbiotic relationship wherein each needs the other to thrive. This seems particularly prescient given the contemporary moment. How might the child-hungries and the pathogen generate possibilities for the kinds of “viral pedagogies fit for these times of COVID-19” (Flynn, 2020)? I end by offering a final provocation about how speculative fiction might expand our imaginaries of survival in the Anthropocene.

Melanie’s gifts

For the most part *Gifts* plots along like any other postapocalyptic zombie film, that is, until the very end. The setting is a world much like this one, London specifically, in the near future. A mysterious fungus has infected nearly everyone on Earth, turning them into mindless, flesh-eating zombies. The few remaining humans—mostly female scientists and military men—have gathered on an armoured base where the scientists among them search for a cure. Everyone who comes into direct contact with the pathogen becomes a zombie, except for a mysterious group of children who were born to infected mothers. Melanie and these other “second-gen” hungries have retained the ability to think and feel. They attend school and are learning to read, compute sums, and write imaginative stories. However, they are also locked in cells at night and have their heads, arms, and legs strapped to chairs when outside solitary confinement. If these child-hungries smell or touch humans they transform into ravenous, instinctual zombies just like the others (there is a blocker ointment that humans smother on their skin to prevent this transformation). They are kept captive because their biology holds the possibility of a vaccine. The research process, however, entails dissecting their bodies in ways they cannot survive. The day Melanie is taken for experimentation, a large horde of hungries attacks the base, allowing her to break free from the operating table. Dr.

Caroline Caldwell, Miss Justineau, the sergeant, and a handful of soldiers manage to escape with Melanie in tow.

The debate about whether or not the child-hungries are human or monster continues throughout the duration of both the novel and the film. Never is it considered that there are possibilities of existence outside this constructed opposition. If there is any lingering doubt about the child-hungries' species status, it is because they outwardly resemble any other young child most of the time. In spite of their appearance, however, the sergeant is keen to remind his colleagues that "not everyone who looks human is human" (Carey, 2014, p. 29). The publicity posters for the movie feature Melanie wearing a full-faced, clear muzzle type of mask, which the survivors insist she wear for their protection once they flee the invaded base. This mask serves as a persistent reminder of Melanie's nonhuman status. As such, Melanie's "form remains identifiably human, but recognizably monstrous" which is a tactic of "making killable" in contemporary culture (Gergen et al., 2018, p. 11).

The lead scientist in charge, Caldwell, takes a hard-line approach to making killable but disguises it behind the neutrality of science. Caldwell exhorts, "the subjects aren't human; they're hungries. High-functioning hungries" (Carey, 2014, p. 80). Anaesthetic is not used for the medical dissections because Caldwell does not believe the child-hungries have the physiological capacity to feel pain. For Caldwell this is a clear indication "that the subjects' ontological status is to some extent in doubt" (p. 80). Her view is that "the moment of death"—meaning zombification in this context and not metabolic death—"is the moment when the pathogen crosses the blood-brain barrier. What's left, though its heart may beat, and though it speaks ... is not the host" (p. 63). The species battle line is thus drawn between human and fungus, despite their coexistence in the child-hungries. The difference between the first- and second-gen hungries is that their bodies have formed a symbiotic relationship with the pathogen—the fungus and the child body collaborate to survive. Melanie and the fungus have found ways to work together, not always in equal or nonviolent ways, but not always in conflictual ones either. Child and fungus are a practice of "becoming with" that challenges discourses of bio-ontological purity that delimit figurations of being human / human beings (Haraway, 2008). On this note, the last conversation Melanie has with Caldwell is telling. Melanie asks, "We're alive?" and Caldwell responds, "Yes. You're alive" (McCarthy & Carey, 2016, 1:36:05). The admission of aliveness from Caldwell does not mean she thinks the child-hungries should be exempt from the scientific experiments that end their lives. One can be alive—can be Life—without being human, which is why the ability to feel pain is important to keep in mind, especially with regards to anti-Blackness and the delimitation of who counts as human.

In the transition from page to screen a few characters in *Gifts* "racebend," meaning the characters' race changes as the medium does (Racebending.com, 2011). This includes the two principal characters of Melanie and Justineau. Their race is reversed in the film: Melanie (played by Sennia Nanua) is Black and Justineau (Gemma Arterton) is white. Typically, racebending involves casting decisions that have a "discriminatory impact on an underrepresented cultural community and actors from that community" (para. 2). I write *typically* because, at least in the case of Melanie, the change makes *Gifts* something more than a traditional zombie story. Novel and screenplay writer M. R. Carey repeats in interviews that the casting choices were race-neutral, meaning that the parts went to the best actors for the job (Reddit AMA & Carey, 2016; Weisberger, 2017). Carey insists that race is inconsequential. I disagree. In the first chapter of the novel are multiple racialized descriptions of the two protagonists. On the first page, Melanie is described as "ten years old, and she has skin like a princess in a fairy tale; skin as white as snow. So she knows that when she grows up she'll be beautiful" (Carey, 2014, p. 10). This phrase is loaded with racialized tropes that I think matter a great deal. I sincerely doubt the child-hungries are afforded the movie-going privileges of Disney consumption on the military base, yet white-princess power still somehow becomes a point of self and societal worth in a zombie story. A few pages later is a description of Justineau from Melanie's point of view: "Miss Justineau's face stands out anyway because it's such a wonderful, wonderful colour. It's dark brown, like the wood

of the trees ... or like the coffee that Miss Justineau pours out of her flask" (p. 23). This metaphoric description is how Carey alerts the reader to Justineau's Blackness without ever having to write out any racially explicit terms. The up-front textual position of both these racialized descriptions—whether positive or negative—conveys to me at least some significance. My stance is that race and racebending, especially in the film, are pivotal to the story's overall impact.

After the military base is attacked, the humans who escape must rely on Melanie to guide them undetected through the hordes of hungries in the city centre. While out collecting food for her captors, Melanie makes two important discoveries. The first is that fungal seed pods that house the pathogen have grown to cover one of London's highest and most phallic-shaped buildings. The second discovery is a group of feral child-hungries much like her, only they have not yet learned to speak. Returning to the temporary shelter, Melanie learns that if the seed pods were to open then the pathogen would become airborne and infect all remaining humans. After some careful thought, Melanie decides that she does not want or need to die to save a few remaining humans who have treated her as nonhuman, instrumental other. To quote a particularly powerful moment, Melanie says to Caldwell: "Why should it be us who die for you?" (McCarthy & Carey, 2016, 1:36:10). Melanie then leaves the lab and sets ablaze the fungal tower of spores. The fire opens the seed pods thus effectively ending the world, or, more carefully stated, ending *a* world. As the pods burn and the fungal spores take flight, Melanie has one last conversation with the sergeant, who has been injured nearby. The sergeant wails, "It's over. It's all over." Melanie responds, "It's not over. It's just not yours anymore" (McCarthy & Carey, 2016, 1:41:05).

The end of the (white) world

Melanie chooses to destroy the world instead of sacrificing herself and her hungry-kin to it. In doing so, she brings possibilities for a new world into existence. Hari Ziyad (2017b) shares their surprise and delight at the ending:

Because I am so used to humanity being granted a sanctity it does not deserve, I fully expected Melanie ... to sacrifice herself for her human captors.... When juxtaposed with the argument put forth by some Afro-pessimists that humanity is reliant upon the subjection and enslavement of Black people, Melanie's refusal of humanity is in clear contrast to what we are taught about Black people's possibilities. We, the living dead in America (for what else but death is a life that doesn't #matter?) are told that we can only try (and always fail) to become more human or sacrifice ourselves and our communities for the continuation of human society. (para. 9)

Instead of a limited form of inclusion in a white-supremacist-militaristic-capitalist-humancentric society, Melanie sets in motion a more "liveable world" by "fac[ing] up to the outrage of human exceptionalism" (Haraway, 2008, p. 106) and delivering a deadly blow. The liveable world for the child-hungries has to be the end of the human-exceptional world; otherwise, they will remain hunted specimens for a potential cure. If the humans were to find an antidote, all indications suggest that the child-hungries would be eliminated once and for all. They would be of no more use. The humans never considered the coexistence of humans and hungries as a viable option.

Joy James (2013) offers the Black rebel cyborg as a figure that, drawing on Franz Fanon, "sets out to change the order of the world" (p. 65). To be a Black rebel cyborg means to no longer seek inclusion in the white supremacist state. The Black rebel cyborg "relinquishes the unachievable goal: striving for a socially recognized humanity" (Vargas & James, 2013, p. 200). This was one of the lessons Melanie learns. For much of the film, she longs to be accepted by her captors—to be counted as human just like them. In ultimately refusing to sacrifice herself and her hungry kin, Melanie comes to understand her captors as a figure of "Settler/Master(Human)" that is never going to be otherwise given the current arrangements of power (Wilderson, 2010). In setting fire to the world,

Melanie comes to “refuse blackness-as-victimization and reconstitute blackness-as-resistance” (James, 2013, p. 68). This refusal adds a layer to Sheldon’s (2016) proposal about a slide in the dominant image of the child that has coemerged with the Anthropocene: a shift from the one who is protected to the one doing the saving. Rather than saving the world, however, Melanie generates another option—she refuses, resists, and destroys.

Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) writes about “grammars of suffering” that violently and perpetually unmake Black and Indigenous lives in the making and sustaining of the human. The human “as an exclusive category demands an outside and requires the death of Indigenous and Black people” (p. 20). The human *is* because Black and Indigenous *are not*. Melanie is able to refuse this grammar and flip it—suffering is not her end story. She repudiates the outside. Melanie ends up potentiating a world that, unlike this world, does not require Black death in order to exist. Melanie puts in motion an end of the world as an end to “humanity as whiteness,” as Ziyad (2017a) phrases it, meaning that the end of the world for Melanie is the end of the scientific and militaristic systems of oppression that did her violence and that elevated the human above all other forms of existence (p. 143). The end of the world is not the end of life in *Gifts* but its refiguration—it is a regenerative reworlding.

Kathryn Yusoff (2016) argues that the dominant subject emerging from the Anthropocene discussion is “a mythic Anthropos as geologic world-maker/destroyer of worlds” (p. 5). Yusoff’s figuration understands the human as wielding damaging yet generative force. The use of *mythic* further alludes to the Anthropos as a “genre” of Man rather than the human itself (Wynter, 2003). When Sylvia Wynter (2003) writes of “overrepresentation of Man as the human” (p. 260), she has a particular referent in mind. In generalized terms, the figure of Man is white, colonial, anti-Black, capitalist, heterosexist, and techno-arrogant, much like the protagonists of the save-the-world films that I described earlier. While I am quick to criticize the damage Man has done to this world, Melanie puts a shudder into my singular condemnation of destruction. Elizabeth Povinelli (2013) insists that potentiation and extinguishment go hand in hand, so what needs to be destroyed in order for the child-hungries to become free? Is it possible to create a world without racism, capitalism, sexism, ableism, militarism, and whiteness if this world is not first destroyed (Imarisha & Maree, 2015)? Melanie incites a series of events in which human and planetary extinction do not parallel each other. As I discuss in later sections, the end of Man is not the end of the planet or its other-than-human earthbound existents.

I am not promoting *Gifts* as some sort of manual for revolution. I share it as a thought experiment. I am not advocating for the genocide of humans—any humans. For me, *Gifts* is not about there being no humans in this world, but it is about humans as an exceptional species and about the structures and institutions of systemic oppression that keep whiteness at the top by way of rendering others inhuman, nonhuman, less-than-human, not-quite-human, or any other arrangement that maintains white supremacy as the hierarchical referent (Weheliye, 2014). An articulation I am leaning on here is the vision proposed by the Black Lives Matter Global Network: “We fight for our collective liberation because we are clear that until Black people are free, no one is free” (as cited in Morrison, 2016, para. 11). This is, of course, much different than #AllLivesMatter or some similar white fragility fabrication, but it nevertheless points to how liberation is a collective undertaking. Melanie rearranges the world in ways in which Man is no longer omnipotent; she is free and so are her fellow child-hungries. In ending the human exceptional world of whiteness, not only does Melanie achieve freedom from incarceration and experimentation but so do her kin-kind and some other existents as well.

Regeneration in the ruins

In my reading, *Gifts* subverts the postapocalyptic blockbuster trope in which the destruction of a major city—typically London or New York—equivocates the end of the world. These global centres of capital stand as

“synecdoches for humanity” (Colebrook, 2019, p. 265). Claire Colebrook (2019) writes that “when such ‘worlds’ end they depict a life without urbanity, global media, and consumerism as the last of days” (p. 265). In such scenarios, the “end of capitalism is the end of the world” (p. 265). A related interpretive frame that I want to engage is how a “privileged place” of capitalistic excess becomes a fiery “shadow place” (Taylor, 2020), or, as I will further explain, *Gifts* illustrates how the distinction between the two place-based imaginaries no longer holds as much weight. Instead, the end of capitalism and its related systems in *Gifts* allows for regeneration of multispecies worlds. The fire Melanie sets not only releases the pathogen from the seed pods but clears landscapes overdetermined by humans, institutions, and industry. The aerial views that close out the film reveal a nonhuman world reviving. As such, *Gifts* provides visuals of what Alan Weisman’s (2007) nonfiction bestseller *The World Without Us* might look like. Weisman’s text is a scientifically based thought experiment where, once there are no longer humans, then grass will poke up through pavement, vines will cover skyscrapers, tunnels will flood, fungus will flourish, and forests will replenish. Every building will eventually have the highly sought-after rooftop garden.³ *Gifts*’ fade-out, wide-panned camera shots of a hungry-filled London cityscape show greenery already taking back space in abandoned streets and concrete structures. These images happen to be actual drone footage of the “ghost town of Pripyat” near Chernobyl—a literalization of Weisman’s speculative nonfiction experimentation (IMDb, 2016).

In *Alliances in the Anthropocene*, Christine Eriksen and Susan Ballard (2020) map interrelations of people, plants, and fire under conditions of climate crisis. One story they tell is of the Red Forest near the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ). This is one of the world’s most contaminated areas and humans have long abandoned the place. The bulk of radioactivity is concentrated in the soil, and pine forests have been planted to absorb the nuclear chemicals. The 30-square-kilometre area is now over 70% forest (Wendle, 2016). Radiation contamination has made adaptation and mutation normal course for the plants and animals that still live there: Certain plants grow differently, some birds grow tumours, and several species of small animals no longer grow babies. However, many larger animals have found refuge in the CEZ, including moose, deer, beavers, and wolves. Without humans around to hunt, build, or clear-cut, the Przewalski horse has come back from near extinction and much flora and fauna has flourished (Wendle, 2016). Eriksen and Ballard (2020) note that “surreal as this increase in biodiversity may seem, the Chernobyl disaster has created what science fiction author and environmentalist Bruce Sterling calls an ‘Involuntary Park’—previously inhabited areas that have ‘lost their value for technological instrumentalism’” (pp. 187–188). Capitalism and its humans have little place in this radioactive wasteland, and the result has been booming density rates for many nonhuman species.

Another conceptualization of worlds displaced from capitalistic centres is Val Plumwood’s (2008) notion of “shadow places.” Finding inspiration in Plumwood’s writings, Affrica Taylor (2020) picks up this concept to tell stories about care and commitment for “blasted places” (Kirksey et al., 2013). Her stories involve first-hand engagements with the bushfires near her home in Australia and a road trip to the Athabasca tar sands in Canada. For the most part, shadow places are physical sites that remain out of sight and out of mind for those who live in capitalist comfort. Shadow places are the lands and communities most severely impacted by anthropogenic climate change, exploitative capitalism, and extractive settler colonialism. According to Plumwood (2008), shadow places are “the multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological support” (p. 139). Yet, while they may be overlooked, sacrificed, and ignored, shadow places are everywhere: “These places are not outside ourselves, but implicated in the very constitution of our embodied, habitual and social lives” (Shadow Places Network, n.d.). Shadow places also make privileged places possible.

Taylor (2020), however, challenges any strict separating off of privileged places and shadow places. She puts forth that Anthropocene-related events like mass bushfires have made the division impossible to maintain. The Anthropocene is a “tipping point” in “privileged-sacrificial place relations,” even as those communities least

responsible for anthropogenic climate change and capitalist exploitation continue to be most negatively affected. In evoking the interconnectedness of place, people, and fire, Taylor suggests that the “sacrificial order of carboniferous capitalism seems to be on the rebound.” Previously privileged places are increasingly vulnerable to the very forces that were manipulated, extracted, and otherwise outsourced to sacrificial places in the first place. Nowhere, and no one, is immune anymore. This year alone, fire has ravaged Australia, Siberia, the west coast of the United States, and even the Arctic Circle: “Wild, feral and fossil-fuelled, fire lights up the globe” (Pyne, 2019, para. 1). This reality leads Taylor (2020) to conclude, “Our piracy future is now.” With worlds on fire, Taylor claims that we have no choice but to abandon the “progress fiction” of human exceptionalism and human insularity from other species and elements. Fire demonstrates that “human life is just as vulnerable and tenuous as other life; the fire doesn’t care.” Welcome to the Pyrocene (Pyne, 2015).

Anna Tsing (2015) writes of disturbance as “a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem” (p. 16). Mass wildfires are a prime example, as was seen speculatively in *Gifts* and materially in Taylor’s stories. Disturbance is not inherently negative for Tsing either, as it “can renew ecologies as well as destroy them” and, importantly, open “the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible” (p. 160). Taking *Gifts* seriously, as I have endeavoured here, calls for recognition of symbiotic becomings that transform human and pathogen into hungry, and of new landscapes that potentiate in the ruins of white supremacy. Furthermore, disturbance is a problem of perspective in Tsing’s formulation, “a matter of point of view” (p. 160). From the point of view of the humans and the scientific, militaristic industrial complex that supported them, the fiery disturbance in *Gifts* was world ending. For Melanie, the hungries, the pathogen, and other nonhuman species, the fire was world beginning. The “power of fire” is “life-threatening and life-giving” (Eriksen & Ballard, 2020, p. 8). As such, “whether a disturbance is bearable or unbearable is a question worked out through what follows it: the reformation of assemblages” (p. 160). This is where *Gifts* does not go—which assemblages endure are unwritten and its audience must speculate on what might be possible in the fiery aftermath. The Chernobyl disaster, on the other hand, was a mass disturbance whose effects have not been equally distributed or subsided. Over the last 30 years, the reformation of assemblages in that landscape has brought together forests, plants, and animals in unexpected formations. From the point of view of many humans, the abandoned buildings, businesses, cars, and homes in the CEZ fits Tsing’s noticing of people collapsing disturbance into damage. On the other hand, ecologists understand disturbance as “not always bad—and not always human” (Tsing, p. 16). Even though they inherit and inhabit a world of radioactive decay, some species in the CEZ have not only survived but are thriving.

Community, contagion, and coronavirus

While Melanie may appear to commit an act of solitary heroism when she sets the seed pod tower ablaze, her each movement and thought depends on a synergetic relation with the pathogen. The Melanie-pathogen relation helps me appreciate Taylor’s (2013) assertion “that no one stands or acts alone, that all human lives are inextricably enmeshed with others (human and more-than-human) and that all human actions are implicated with and have implication for others (including nonhuman others)” (p. 117). This is especially evident today in consideration of the ravage wrought by the coronavirus, including how marginalized communities have been further disadvantaged and disproportionately infected/affected. COVID-19 makes clear that humans are not the only actors on the stage and that survival is difficult, necessary, and never enough (Shotwell, 2020). As a mass disturbance, perhaps COVID-19 will force us to abandon “the illusion of immunity” (Taylor, 2020) once and for all. In this section, I want to linger with the enmeshment of human and virus. All humans, despite purity imaginaries, are part virus—it has always been in our DNA (Tsing, 2015, p. 143). “Everyone carries a history of contamination,” Tsing insists, and “purity is not an option” (p. 27). The virus is both “natural and manufactured ... alive but incapable of reproduction on [its]

own” (Vint, 2013, p. 139). The virus is entangled with other species; it needs an other to endure.

Povinelli (2016) theorizes the virus as a figure of geontology that disrupts and confuses the antagonism of life versus nonlife amplified by the Anthropocene.⁴ For Povinelli, the virus is not definable by either term because each uses the other to extend itself. The preeminent pop culture formation of the virus is the zombie, which Povinelli summarizes as “Life turned to Nonlife and transformed into a new kind of species war—the aggressive rotting undead against the last redoubt of Life (p. 16).⁵ To this, *Gifts* adds a complex layer as Melanie is not in a state of either existential or corporeal decomposition but is reenlivened through an imaginary I see take form in Ashleigh Wade’s (2017) theorizing of viral Blackness. Wade proposes a “theory of world making through viral blackness” (p. 34) that challenges associations of the virus solely with the spread of harmful pathogens. Instead, Wade figures virality as the transmission of “generative products, such as political movements” like #BlackLivesMatter (p. 34). In today’s anti-Black and settler colonial world, Wade points out, “containment is extremely important for maintaining control, but the viral cannot be contained” (p. 35). The viral moves, it spreads, and it mutates. Andrew Baldwin (2016) argues that “the guarantee of white supremacy lies in its capacity to contain the excess” (p. 84), and since viral Blackness exists as something constantly shape-shifting, it has “world-making capacities” that are in excess of repossession (Wade, 2017, p. 38). Despite scientific and militaristic efforts in *Gifts*, neither the child-hungries nor the pathogen can be fully controlled. Thought with current events, this is not meant to suggest that that a viral pandemic is a desirable way to challenge current power structures and distributions of humanness, or that those humans typically associated with the virus automatically achieve liberation. To be the virus, Povinelli (2016) explains, is to always be “under attack” (p. 19).

For me, the pathogen in *Gifts* is especially intriguing as a figure of contagion because it interrupts the colonizing cycle of virality as something inherently malicious or oppressive. Melanie and the pathogen need each other in a relational equation not set on conquest. Additionally, Wade (2017) importantly moves the figure of the virus from individualized bodies to collective ones. With the protests that followed Michael Brown’s murder in Ferguson as her case study, Wade traces how viral Blackness moved from online spaces to the streets and back and forth again and again. Viral Blackness configures community in ways supportive of the viral as a “deterritorializing mode of subversion to white supremacist systems” (p. 36). I read this notion into Pricilla Wald’s (2008) work on contagion, which reframes the virus as “not inherently about killing but rather about changing” (p. 139). This perspective understands the virus as an embodiment and enactment of “group belonging” (p. 139).

The main focus of Wald’s (2008) work on contagion is unpacking the taken-for-granted literariness of the “outbreak narrative,” which includes attention to its rhetorical devices and storytelling strategies in the scientific press, news articles, and blockbuster films. Wald notes a dominant pattern whereby “conventions of horror and myth” reduce the complexities of pathogenic emergence to “an apocalyptic battle between heroic scientists and the hybrids who embody the threat” (p. 257). The outbreak narrative follows a predictable pattern that includes identifying the virus, naming the disease, outing its carriers, tracing its travel routes, developing prophylactics, and curing the disease and dis-ease. What starts as an “epidemiological horror stor[y]” of human versus pathogen ends as a “timeless and ritualized story of renewal in which Humanity is reaffirmed as it is redeemed by Science” (p. 260). Not all pandemics fit this narrative structure, however, especially epidemics that do not have a cure and/or cannot be easily contained. In these cases, for example SARS and HIV/AIDS, responsibility gets recirculated from “science to society” (Wald, 2008, p. 255).⁶ The dramatic structure of the outbreak narrative is replaying with COVID-19: Trump repeatedly calling it the China virus, claims of the virus being produced and released from a Wuhan lab, the animalization of suspected consumers of bat soup, the global race for a marketable vaccine, increased anti-Asian racism, and disproportionate mortality rates in Black, Indigenous, and poor communities—this is a horror story in real time.

As documented earlier, *Gifts* has the lab, scientists, and hybridity of the outbreak narrative but also challenges many of the conventions outlined by Wald, especially the triumphalism of science. Nevertheless, it is from science that part of *Gifts*' horror emerges. The scientific story of the *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* fungus provides a realistic, scientific frame in which the speculative story in *Gifts* grounds itself. Known colloquially as the zombie-ant fungus, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* takes over the central nervous system of bullet ants in tropical rainforests, causing the ants to leave their colony, bite down in a "death grip" on a leaf, which induces paralysis, and then sprout fungal stem-like spores from their exoskeleton (Hill, 2013). In *Gifts* this real-life fungus has found a way to jump the species barrier, which makes it new yet still familiar (recall the "making killable" discussion). Melanie and her hungry friends have similarly broken the species line: Both fungus and child have mutated—are mutants. While the child-hungries are pathologized, they are also protected because they are necessary for a cure. Like Ziyad cited earlier, my film-spectatorship training led me to assume that science would triumph, and humanity would defeat the zombie threat. I fully expected a vaccine to be forthcoming. Wald (2008) cites this form of anticipatory confidence as a means of "sanction[ing] the status quo" so that "social existence" does not have to be significantly rearranged (p. 268). Both the Anthropocene discussion and the outbreak narrative pull on "the promise and authority of science in the heroic service of a threatened 'Humanity'" (p. 257). This is where *Gifts* makes another impact: The status quo is challenged, science fails to provide a solution, humanity does not survive, and a serious refiguration of global existence and existents is set in motion.

In charting tropes of contagion narratives, Wald reveals a history of racism, xenophobia, and cruelty directed to those figured as strangers. Coinciding with an increased alarm about outsiders is a search for something or someone to blame. This is palpable with COVID-19 also. Sandra Hyde (interviewed by Neale McDevitt) voices that "in times of uncertainty" it is "common for people to place blame elsewhere, and to blame people who are different from them, or that they read as different" (McDevitt, 2020, para. 6). Calling COVID-19 the China virus is to misleadingly attribute blame to a place and people—it is not as if viruses know or are governed by borders. Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres (2020) recently released a video recognizing that "the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering" toward the Asian community, and he pleads for governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate." Guterres flips the inflationary language of contagion for social justice purposes: Racism is the disease and community is the cure. In response to the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd by police, Roxane Gay (2020) reflects: "Eventually, doctors will find a coronavirus vaccine, but black people will continue to wait, despite the futility of hope, for a cure for racism. We will live with the knowledge that a hashtag is not a vaccine for white supremacy" (para. 22). In another response piece, filmmaker George Clooney calls anti-Black racism "our pandemic. It infects all of us, and in 400 years we've yet to find a vaccine" (para. 8). I am sympathetic to these arguments, and I recognize that the people just cited are differently positioned in the discussion, but I am nevertheless troubled by the equivocation. Does racism need euphemisms? Racism is not a virus you can catch if someone sneezes, or, in the cringe-worthy sound bite of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, "speaks moistly" (CBC Kids News, 2020). I also wonder if disease provides a cover of innocence: Can I be accountable for racism if I am sick with it? Racism and COVID-19 intersect when it comes to mortality rates, treatment availability, prophylactic affordability, social distance accessibility, essential workers, and a host of other issues. While this tangent may seem a diversion from my main argument, my point is that while there are now COVID vaccines and related treatments, neither a shot nor a pill will do anything to end racism. That requires a different sort of collective intervention altogether.

With these concerns expressed, I am still not willing to completely shut out the generative possibilities of thinking with the virus and contagion. In making apparent the narrative organization of pandemic performances, Wald (2008) highlights shared links between communicable, communication, and community, which could be used

to “evoke a profound sense of social inter-connection” (p. 12) instead of racialized and sexualized fears and stigmatizations that protect an idealized humanity. Neither disease, sickness, nor infection were the original associations with the term contagion. Wald points out that contagion literally means “to touch together” and it first “referred to the circulation of ideas and attitudes”; for example, “revolutionary ideas were contagious” (p. 12). This connects again with Wade’s (2017) theorizing of viral Blackness that moves between virtual spaces and physical places in the constitution of resistant communities. There is a disruptive and transgressive potential inherent to the virus: The virus needs others to endure and ultimately relies on the others for its existence. Contagion has similar qualities: transformative, fluid, hard to control, and disrespectful of boundaries. With contagion, human individualism and exceptionalism are challenged. For me, COVID-19 isolation has fully and finally debunked any fantasy of self-reliance. To repeat something similar to what I wrote earlier, the coronavirus pandemic is not something I wish for as a driver of change. But COVID-19 is here, and how we engage with the virus and each other will have long-lasting consequences. Tsing (2015) expresses that we are undoubtably “contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge” (p. 27). What might be possible if we grab onto the notion of “contamination as collaboration” in ways that remake community and care for those humans and nonhumans most vulnerable (Tsing, 2015, p. 27)? What tentative “alliances in the Anthropocene” might allow for “collaborative survival in precarious times” (Tsing, 2015, p. 2)? How can these relationships be cultivated in ways that respect difference, diversity, and incommensurably?

Speculative survival

The contaminated collaborations that Tsing (2015) theorizes move beyond survival imaginaries defined by “conquest and expansion” (p. 27). Survival must be collaborative; survival is never enough; “survival pending revolution” (Alkebulan, 2012). “Survival should be our starting point, always, but we deserve so much more,” offers Alexis Shotwell (2020) in a recent blog post about COVID-19 and its unequally distributed impacts (para. 9). In this article, I have tried to spotlight how *Gifts* gestures toward what *otherwise survival* might look, feel, and be like. As explained, this otherwise is not an innocent undertaking in *Gifts* and involves a world on fire. Thinking-with Melanie and the pathogen has been an effort to grapple with anti-Blackness, questions of the human, damaged landscapes, and the coronavirus in this world while staying open to *not this*, *not yet*, and *what if* of speculative possibilities. Again, this effort is not without its dangers. While I have tried to highlight Melanie’s becoming-with pathogen in ways that trouble the image of the child as an innocent, individualistic hero figure, I am aware of slippages. My worry is that conceiving of Melanie as a “brave survivalist” (Brown, 2017, para. 4) places undue responsibility on a Black female child figure to end the (white) world and ensure the survival of her kin in a new world (Cecire, 2015; Nyong’o, 2015). A concern emerging from this work that requires sustained pedagogical engagement is how we might think with speculative child figures at the end of the world in ways that grapple with the kinds of conditions, resources, and imaginaries required to capacitate lives actually capable of flourishing in this one.

As the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs and flows there is a heightened interest in speculative texts about the end of the world (Chakravorty, 2020; Schwetz, 2020; Tennant, 2020). Anishinaabe writer Waubgeshig Rice (as quoted in Theriault, 2020) advises turning to Indigenous writers for guidance, inspiration, and direction:

Many communities around the world have already endured apocalypse and they’ve rebuilt. They’ve found ways to start over and I think it’s comforting as well, and maybe a little hopeful, to think about what is possible on the other side.... So it is possible to rebuild. That’s why we need to look to Indigenous people and their stories about the end of the world. (paras. 21 & 27)

To rebuild is to move beyond survival. It is to emerge from “blasted landscapes” stronger and more response-able than before (Tsing, 2015, p. 3). I hope the takeaway from this article is not that speculative fiction (or figures) can “save us—but it might open our imaginations” (Tsing, 2015, p. 19). What is most generative about speculative fiction, Benjamin (2018) asserts, is its capacity to “experiment with different scenarios, trajectories, and reversals, elaborating new values and testing different possibilities for creating more just and equitable societies” (para. 31). This is an otherwise survival worth pursuing.

- 1 Important work that troubles the racialized constitution of childhood includes Robin Bernstein's (2011) historical work in *Racial Innocence* that maps the division of childhood into white and Black tracks in the early 19th century. At that time, “black children were labeled as unfeeling, noninnocent nonchildren” (p. 33). Additionally, Christina Sharpe (2016) articulates how “Black children are not seen as children” (p. 89). Black children are either animalized, objectified, sexualized, and/or adultized; they are positioned “outside of the category of the child” (p. 89; see also Dancy, 2014; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2011). For a critique of how reproductive futurism distinguishes white childhoods from Indigenous childhoods, see Andrea Smith's (2010) challenge to Lee Edelman's *No Future*.
- 2 Citations marked Taylor, 2020 denote a keynote presentation by Affrica Taylor at the “Responding to Ecological Challenges with/in Contemporary Childhoods” colloquium. While no page numbers can be provided for direct quotations, a video of the keynote is now available and can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/iZ4kwfyGbgE>
- 3 Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury (2020) importantly complexify Weisman's contribution to end-of-the-world discourse. They read in his popular texts a racialized nostalgia for “white possessions, including empire, territory, and the biological and cultural capital of whiteness” (p. 314).
- 4 According to Povinelli (2016), geontology is a contemporary mode of governance that breaks with a biopolitical assumption that power works via tactics of making live and letting die and is instead concerned with maintaining the division of life from nonlife. This perceived rift is under increased pressure in the Anthropocene, which is to say that geontology is not so much new as newly visible. The three figures Povinelli finds illustrative of this modality of power are the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. For Povinelli (2014) these figures are not escapes from power but symptoms of it. Povinelli's three figures “represent the nodal points in contemporary struggles to make sense of a current destabilization of this foundation division” between life and nonlife, including the Anthropocene defining proclamation of humans as a geologic force (Povinelli, 2016, p. 16).
- 5 While the pathogen in *Gifts* is fungal rather than viral, that detail is not impactful to the analytical import of my argument that follows. What could be called into question is that the fungus is a living organism and the virus is indeterminate in this way of thinking (e.g., needs a host to replicate), but that is an argument for another time.
- 6 Without a cure or scientist hero, the outbreak narrative pulls on racialized and sexualized imaginaries not based on scientific fact. Wald (2008) gives an example from the early days of HIV/AIDS diagnosis when a persistent rumour circulated, with no scientific basis but big anti-Black racist appeal, that the species barrier was broken when Africans raped monkeys (p. 260). When scientific success is not forthcoming, the outbreak narrative names and shames particular figures as Patient Zeros or “superspreaders” (p. 4). The history of HIV/AIDS again provides a representative case. Gaëtan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant, was wrongly assumed to be Patient Zero for many years. In the 1980s the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in California tracked the sexual partners of gay and bisexual men diagnosed with HIV. Along the way Dugas' medical chart was misread—the letter O for “out-of-California” was mistaken for the number zero, and Patient Zero was born.

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