

Speculative Fiction, Catastrophe, and the Devolutionary Imagination in Postwar Britain

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Abstract

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The reemergence of catastrophe as a dominant theme and figure in British speculative fiction after the Second World War coincides with a devolutionary turn in British politics and culture. In a moment when the British Empire is collapsing and the imperial state is reconfiguring around social democracy and managerial state culture, British speculative fiction utilizes catastrophe in order to explore the complex and often ambivalent narrative space in which interrogations of imperial Anglo-British history and culture open onto articulations of possible post-British futures. This dissertation explores how three sets of British sf catastrophe texts model this devolutionary imagination from historically situated English, Scottish, and Black British perspectives. Methodologically, it attempts to bridge a critical gap between devolutionary British literature and criticism and speculative and science fiction literature and criticism. I argue that

juxtaposing the two modes illuminates overlap between the dimensions of British speculative narrative and devolutionary culture, where the former becomes the terrain on which the latter is enacted. I advance this claim first through a series of critiques specific to English, Scottish, and Afrofuturist genre history and literary criticism. The dissertation then explores the devolutionary imagination as rendered in the novels of the English catastrophe novelist John Wyndham, whose respective catastrophes of collapse and invasion index both a challenge to, and a reaffirmation of, imperial English culture in the 1950s. I trace the development of a Scottish postcolonial personalism in the 1980s fictions of Alasdair Gray and Iain Banks, whose novels engage with and overturn the ideological assumptions of English catastrophe fiction. I conclude with an analysis of the affective catastrophism embedded in the pulp and genre sf fictions of the British black diaspora in the 1990s writing of *Two Fingers* and James T. Kirk and China Miéville.

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Chapter One: Speculative Fiction, Catastrophe and the Devolutionary Imagination in Postwar Britain

Introduction

We re-create the horizons we have abolished, the structures that have collapsed; and we do so in terms of the old patterns, adapting them to our new worlds.

—Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

This dissertation explores how British speculative fiction narratives of the postwar period index a turn in Anglo-British culture against the historical and cultural ideology of imperial Britain on the one hand, and toward the articulation of possible post-British, or ‘devolutionary,’ futures on the other. The decades immediately following the Second World War saw Britain relinquish its once considerable Empire while simultaneously reconsolidating national identity around consensus politics, Keynesian economics, social democratic reform, and the institutionalization of the modern Welfare State. This had a profound and dialectical impact on the constitution of postwar British society and culture. The End of Empire deprived imperial Britain of its primary economic, political, and subjective *raison d’être*, leading the UK’s sub-national communities to interrogate the legacy and future of the Union. Similarly, the reconstitution of a modernized and highly centralized Anglo-British state after 1945 motivated articulations of devolutionary ‘post-British’ cultural consciousness among the UK’s constituent nations.

‘Devolutionary’ in this context meant the rise of a heightened political proto-nationalism among the formerly united nations of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. By the close of the Second World War, the tendency to rethink union from sub-national perspectives had been visible at a party-political level since the Irish Home Rule debates of the 1870s and ‘80s, though English devolutionary consciousness can be traced back as far as the isolationist ‘Little

Englander’ movement of the 1850s and ‘60s.¹ Following Irish independence in the 1920s, Scottish nationalism, unevenly expressed during the long nineteenth-century era of Liberal Party dominance (1832-1914), arose in full force with the formation of the National Party of Scotland and the emergence of the first ‘Renaissance’ in Scottish literature and art. While the postwar years saw an immediate consolidation of British national sentiment which built on the wartime experience of shared struggle and common sacrifice, devolutionary rumblings—often cultural, but sometimes political in nature—began to creep across the UK as the nation’s economy began to falter in the 1960s. By the 1970s the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the rise of the Scottish National Party and the Welsh Plaid Cymru party signaled a staunch turn away from a faltering British state toward political self-determination.

While this historical narrative provides crucial texture to the project, the primary concern is with the phenomenon of *cultural* devolution, by which I mean both a tendency to critique orthodox Anglo-British state culture from the perspective of sub-national cultural and ideological difference, as well as a marked turn toward articulations of national consciousness couched in and reflective of a post-colonial perspective on those differences. Of the three ‘national’ cultures discussed in this project, the most blatant repository of devolutionary culture lies in Scotland. As a major player in the formation of the 1707 Union, the development of its philosophical/ideological underpinnings, and the material construction of modern Britain’s scientific, technological, cultural, and imperial identity, Scots have long existed in an uncomfortably close relationship to imperial an Anglo-Britain from which they have also often been excluded on the basis of their Scottishness. As scholars such as Murray Pittock, Cairns

¹ The ‘Little England’ movement was founded in the late 1850s by Mancunian manufacturers resentful of Britain’s economic ties to its Empire and supportive instead of a focus on the improvement of English society. In the 1880s it would become associated with William Gladstone’s wing of the British Liberal Party, which also espoused support for Irish Home Rule after 1885.

Craig, and Michael Gardiner argue, Scottish intellectual and creative culture has been pushing back against the ideological norms of imperial British culture since the Act of Union, whether in the philosophy, history, and social science of the Scottish Enlightenment or in the modern Scottish novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²

Given how central English culture has historically been in the construction of Anglo-British national identity and state culture, a devolutionary Englishness removed from that paradigm has often remained nebulous and difficult to define. As Gardiner contends, modern Englishness has, since the time of Edmund Burke, been defined in largely ahistorical, ‘stretchy’ ways associated with the need to extend it in universalizing fashion over the whole of the Empire. This has led to a neglect of the minor, more particularized form of Englishness we today associate with the speculative proposition of a devolved, independent England.³ Despite brief bursts of English national consciousness in the interwar writings of Orwell and Auden, it is only since the Second World War initiated a period of terminal imperial decline that cultural Englishness has returned as a subject of literary exploration, often in conversation with forms of racial and cultural difference foregrounded by the significant colonial and EU-affiliated migration to the UK which has occurred since 1950.

To speak of ‘black British’ devolution is to speak of that which, at present, has no identifiable political face, there never having been any attempt to ‘devolve’ sovereign authority to Britain’s black diaspora population. Nonetheless, as Onyekachi Wambu writes in his introduction to *Hurricane Hits England: An Anthology of Writing about Black Britain* (2000), “Over the last fifty years, a new consciousness has come into being. The people who carried it

² See Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain* (1997); Craig, *Out of History* (1996), *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999), and *Intending Scotland* (2009); and Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (2004).

³ Gardiner, *The Return of England in English Literature* 1-16.

were settlers...most stayed, transforming themselves and the British island which they began to call home” (19). Whether one can call this consciousness ‘national’ remains uncertain in most situations, at least at a political level. Nonetheless, articulating that black British consciousness has, if nothing else, always meant confronting naturalized British habits of mind about nationality, about blackness and colonial history, and about the politics of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion which have defined black life in a Britain seen as white and culturally ‘English.’ Since the arrival of the famous Empire Windrush in 1948, black Britons such as John Agard, Samuel Selvon, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Roy Heath, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Nichols, Beryl Gilroy, and Jackie Kay have explored the fault lines surrounding the concepts of Britishness and blackness, tracing the difficulty—if not the outright impossibility—of existing as both simultaneously. To see these explorations as devolutionary is not to commit a category error, but rather to widen the aperture of conceptual analysis to include the insights of black Britain in the larger discussion and to examine the contributions made by black thinkers to the evolution of national consciousness in postwar Britain.

Speculative fiction currently occupies a marginal role in academic analysis of the postwar devolutionary turn. This is in part due to the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries between sub-formations within English Literature. The development of both SF studies and studies of British devolutionary cultures were enabled by the birth of British cultural studies in the 1950s⁴ and both coalesce into institutionalized disciplinary formations during the 1970s. Despite the simultaneity of their emergence, each field—or collection of sub-fields—became part of the same auto-deconstructive disciplinary project while also remaining strangely isolated from one another insofar as each maintained its own independent, and often defensive, relationship with canonical

⁴ Both by the foundational work of scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall, but also by later influential imports such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci.

English Literature. As critics and artists within each field debated what made science fiction science fictional or, for example, what made Scottish culture Scottish, far less attention was paid to intersections between these two sets of questions. This project aims to redress this gap in the scholarship by focusing on how sf aesthetics intersect with and provide grounding for the representation and critical interrogation of British devolutionary cultures and their varying visions of the future.

The ‘postwar’ period covered in this dissertation begins with the institutionalization of the Anglo-British postwar settlement in the years 1948-1956 and extends approximately to the election of Tony Blair’s New Labour government in 1997.⁵ Within this timeframe certain eras are privileged over others. First, I ground Chapter Two’s analysis of the catastrophe novels of John Wyndham in the context of the immediate postwar period, and particularly in that era’s dominant narratives of austerity and Welfare State formation, imperial decline, and reverse colonial migration to the imperial metropole. While close attention needs paid to the evolution of devolutionary culture in the 1960s and ‘70s, especially in England, I focus on the 1950s because it is in this decade that the seeds of later devolutionary paradigms first emerge, often indirectly, in the fiction of English catastrophe writers. Chapters Three and Four are considered most directly in relation to the rise and consolidation of Thatcherism as a political and cultural ideology between 1979 and 1997. This is in part because it is during the Thatcher and Major eras that these texts emerge and it is to this context that they most directly respond. When possible,

⁵ There is a very good argument to be made for extending this timeline to cover the period between 1997 and 2009, when New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ program consolidated and extended, rather than challenged, the fundamental tenets of Thatcherite doctrine and policy. One might also argue that by capping the timeline in this way, I split the ‘devolutionary era’ in half, including only its early stages and leaving to the side the years after 1999 when devolutionary thinking began to take more conscious shape across Britain. However, whenever possible I attempt to extend my historical contextualization backward to demonstrate that many of the devolutionary contexts shaped during the Thatcher years have roots in prior decades and prior iterations of catastrophic English, Scottish, and Black British narrative and culture.

however, I have attempted to extend my discussions both backward and forward, to the decades which led up to the period of neoliberal restructuring on the one hand, and into the twenty-first century's recent expressions of economic and social crisis on the other.

My definition of speculative fiction (sf) remains necessarily broad and grounded in the exigence of this project. For my purposes, speculative fiction texts are those which represent worlds beyond the consensus reality in which we operate, whether those worlds be fantastic, based in or extrapolated from hard science, or derived solely from the manipulation of human consciousness. I employ this flexible meaning for a number of reasons. First, theories of science and speculative fictions are legion; there exist almost as many definitions as there are writers, readers, and critics of the genre. As Paul Kincaid argues, many if not most of these are ultimately self-referential.⁶ The two most influential definitions of science fiction within academia—Samuel Delany's analysis of sf as literary discourse and Darko Suvin's rendering of sf as the 'literature of cognitive estrangement'—are, while suggestive, also narrowly conceptual or formalist.⁷ However, genre history does play a role in my formulation of speculative fiction. This is particularly true insofar as the 'speculative fiction' has been used in the postwar period by British writers such as John Wyndham and J.G. Ballard as a way of consciously positioning texts against—and, in the case of the British New Wave, ahead of—American genre sf's traditional fascination with science, technology, outer space exploration, and the various subtexts which underlie the pulp genre's roots in colonial history and imperial ideology.

⁶ See Kincaid, "On the Origins of Genre" 412-13

⁷ For a brief rundown of Delany's position, see "Reading Modern American Science Fiction" 517-28. See also Delany, "Science Fiction and Literature or, the Conscience of the King" 95-117. Suvin's canonical definition can be found in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the poetics and history of a literary genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.

It is in this positioning where we begin to see a more conscious historical and ideological overlap between the speculative dimensions of narrative and devolution, where the former becomes the terrain on which the latter is imaginatively enacted. I thus use the phrase ‘devolutionary imagination’ to name attempts made in British speculative fiction in the postwar period to explore a complex and often ambivalent narrative space in which interrogations of imperial Anglo-British history and culture open onto articulations of possible post-British futures. Following the work of Frantz Fanon, Michael Gardiner, and Cairns Craig, I read the national dimension of this concept as a historical, dialectical framework, and therefore see national consciousness as an ongoing process of debate and exchange between free, mutually related persons engaged in the necessary conflict and community of human life.

However, while this definition may lend itself to utopian connotations, I should be clear that I do not see the devolutionary imagination as an inherently radical or liberatory space. Like the nation form in which it operates, the devolutionary imagination can and often is coopted by and transformed into a reactionary ideology of ethnic nationalism. While each British nation possesses a long and complex pre-modern history, each has nonetheless been formed in the crucible of modern imperial British history; thus, there can be no romanticizing of a devolutionary Scotland or England somehow safely removed from the imperial capitalist paradigm. As Gardiner sagely notes, “as part of putting the empire state out of its misery, the national specificity of each nation should be recovered in full view of how its national polity has been shaped by its own position as British coloniser” (*Roots*, x). The texts I read in this dissertation, whether seen from English, Scottish or ‘Black British’ perspectives, all struggle to assert a vision of collective life in opposition to the representative domination of Anglo-British imperial nationality. While some frame this opportunity as liberatory, I remain sensitive at all

times to the axiom, articulated by the French philosopher Louis Marin, that utopian representation must at all times be subject to ideological analysis.⁸

Finally, I argue that one of the most useful and un-examined metaphors for understanding the relationship between speculative narrative and British devolutionary politics and culture is catastrophe. While most often understood in contemporary English parlance as a cataclysm, I instead deploy one of the term's lesser used meanings, where it names the dynamic final destruction and subversion of an existing political or social order.⁹ The usefulness of the figure as an interpretive tool lies in the irony of its operative contradictions. Catastrophes traumatically shatter narrative and historical momentum, disrupting social and subjective certainties and remaking worlds. In certain situations catastrophes enable ideological demystification by splitting survivors off from the normalized material and ideological terrain which grounds the formation and reproduction of social and subjective identity. At the same time, catastrophes do not mark the 'end of the world' but rather the end of *a* world and the coming of another. It is for this reason that Evan Calder Williams's Marxist analysis denigrates the concept, arguing that it denotes "a historical void, an end of the road that cannot point beyond itself" (4). For Calder Williams the problem is ideological continuity; the form of the catastrophe is not final enough, but rather only simulates the final tearing of reality associated with the concept of apocalyptic revelation (4-5). Yet my analysis in this project reveals catastrophe to be a more historically ambiguous figure which may, but is not necessarily bound to "[point] to a post-world desperate to shore up the remnants of an outmoded status quo" (Calder Williams 4). Rather, like devolution, catastrophe names a dramatic shift in social, cultural, and historical relations that chisels out a neutral space within which ideological conflict is illuminated and debated.

⁸ Marin, *Utopics* 195-6

⁹ "catastrophe" (OED)

Catastrophe is both the narrative mechanism by which that space is created and the dynamic historical process by which social agency is either enabled or evaded within it.

As an event which must necessarily produce traumatized, alienated survivors who critically reflect on past and future in the act of narration, it is catastrophe's tendency to interrogate the legacy of 'an outmoded status quo' which aligns it both conceptually and historically with devolution. Tom Nairn famously argues in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977) that the imperial capitalist British state represents one of the oldest and most stubborn 'outmoded status quos' in the modern world. As he argues later in *After Britain* (2000), the imperial British nation has always been haunted by the ghosts of its own catastrophic fracture and devolution. In Nairn, catastrophe and devolution are bound up together, one implying the other and vice versa. While he does not frame it in catastrophic terms, Michael Gardiner argues that an auto-deconstructive devolutionary cultural revolt has been embedded deep within Anglo-British culture since the 1707 Act of Union, and that, echoing Nairn, "devolution represents the endgame of a growing ambivalence deep in the British management of culture" (*Roots x*). The postwar British catastrophe narrative remains one of the most important literary forms in which this ambivalence is mediated, and through which expressions of devolutionary culture are expressed, resisted, and reflexively examined.

Devolutionary Englishness and the British Disaster Novel

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, critical discussion of the historical, sociological, and cultural phenomenon of British devolution emphasized the United Kingdom's peripheral nations, often leaving England—the only of the four currently without a devolved

parliament—to the side.¹⁰ There is some sense to this, given how closely allied the English nation and body politic has traditionally been with the Anglo-British state. Moreover, because devolutionary consciousness reflects crisis and breakdown in a UK state politics and culture heavily influenced by the ideological and material contributions of eighteenth-century Scots, it has often been treated as a particularly Scottish problem.¹¹ Yet, as Vernon Bogdanor writes, the almost total absence of England from late-1990s British devolution legislation is both peculiar and telling, insofar as it reflects the erasure of England as a political entity within the larger historical phenomenon of imperial Anglo-Britain.¹² It is only in the last three decades that scholars have begun paying closer attention to the crucial role England and Englishness must eventually play as the largest and most powerful participant in the imminent ‘break-up of Britain.’¹³

Yet, while recent studies on England and Englishness abound, few frame their object of inquiry as a consciously devolutionary site of critical reflection on, and sometimes opposition to, Anglo-British history, politics, and culture. To do so would be to see England and Englishness as a field of representation independent from the related domain of Anglo-British identity; yet, the

¹⁰ Vernon Bogdanor’s seminal *Devolution in the United Kingdom* (1999), for example, devotes only eight pages to ‘The English dimension’ while Ireland, Scotland, and Wales receive chapter-length treatments of their own. Far too many comprehensive Readers and guides to British history and politics in the twentieth century reduce devolution to a chapter or two on Scottish and Welsh nationalism from 1970 onward. For an example of this, see *Modern Britain Since 1979* (2003) and *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939-2000* (2005). Scholars who do a better job of highlighting the importance of the English role in and after devolution include Mitchell, *Devolution in the UK* (2009); Aughey, *Nationalism, devolution, and challenges to the United Kingdom state* (2001) and Pilkington, *Devolution in Britain Today* (2002).

¹¹ See Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* 156-160.

¹² Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom* 264. The question of England’s role in a devolved UK has, since the late 1990s, moved a bit closer to the center of public consciousness. In the wake of the failed Scottish independence referendum of 2014, for example, Prime Minister David Cameron instigated a campaign known as ‘English Votes for English Laws.’ This, Cameron’s response to the so-called West Lothian Question, ultimately led to the passing of a bill on 22 October 2015 which created an extra stage in the lawmaking process wherein issues decided to directly affect England would be first scrutinized by English MPs before facing a full vote.

¹³ See in particular Doyle, *English and Englishness* (1989); Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution, and the Challenge to the United Kingdom State* (2001) and *The Politics of Englishness* (2007); Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (1999); Corbett, *The Geographies of Englishness* (2002); Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness* (2004); and Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (2003).

common conflation of English politics and culture with imperial Britishness has produced a situation in which England alone has historically remained paradoxically central and invisible.¹⁴ If, as Linda Colley has influentially argued, Britishness was collectively superimposed over the UK's internal heterogeneity after the 1707 Act of Union, then one of the component pieces lost in that transformation was Englishness itself.¹⁵

England's strangely spectral identity can be difficult to pin down because it has remained speculative for so long, buried beneath centuries of Anglo-British nationalist consolidation at home and imperial diffusion abroad. As Ian Baucom writes, this has produced an Englishness that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, a blank slate which can be lamented passively as historical loss or reconstituted actively through cultural contact and regeneration.¹⁶ As Arthur Aughey observes, commentary on cultural and political Englishness over the last three decades often problematically begins from the assumption of English absence: "what is thought to be lacking is a politically significant national identity. At the centre of Englishness there seems to be a void" (*Englishness* 19). Hewison reiterates this point when he writes that, since 1945, "an empty space has opened up which demands to be filled by a secure sense of Englishness" (9-11). This position overlaps with and is complicated by parallel critical tendency to read postwar cultural history in terms of national decline and simultaneous Anglo-British cultural regression.¹⁷ Framing a missing England as void or symptom of degeneration has too often led to cultural histories which operate in an elegiac mode, mythologizing decline from previous eras of

¹⁴ For more on the politics of devolution as representation, see Scott Hames, "Scottish Literature, Devolution, and the Fetish of Representation."

¹⁵ Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* 6.

¹⁶ For more on the imperial dislocation of English identity, see Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* 3-7.

¹⁷ See Esty, *A Shrinking Island* 2; Brannigan, *From Orwell to the Present* 73-97; and Gervais, *Literary Englands* 270-271.

supposedly stable and identifiable English identity.¹⁸ Such analyses risk disabling the historical dimensions of Englishness, locating its defining characteristics in idealized and unattainably nostalgic terms, and prompting a melancholic and self-serving quest to rediscover a ‘greatness’ too often tied to exclusive ethnic and cultural standards.¹⁹

However, postcolonial readings of Englishness which conceive the national context as a hybrid, heterogenous, and historically dynamic space helpfully reframe the problem by emphasizing the mutual co-creation of national identity formations. The work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Simon Gikandi, for example, presents Englishness as a hybrid zone of creative instability rather than a totalizing imperial construct. In these readings, Englishness results from a contested back and forth between imperial Anglo-Britain and the colonial Others which dialectically shape the imperial nation.²⁰ One of the effects, possibly unintended, of this postcolonial push to deconstruct the imperial Anglo-British nation has been the reconceiving of devolution as a postcolonial process and the articulation of Englishness as an active, dialectical opportunity to rethink devolutionary nationhood as a creative and open-ended pattern of historical transformation.

The historical possibilities implied by ‘the English question’ make it one of the most pertinent and pressing issues raised by the specter of British devolution. As Tom Nairn predicted in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977), “the restoration of the English political identity” remains key because “Upon its character—conservative-nationalist reaction or socialist advance—will depend the future political rearrangement of the British Isles” (305). Nairn’s reductive opposition

¹⁸ Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution*, 166-172; Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art, and Politics since 1940* 9-11.

¹⁹ See Paul Gilroy’s discussion of English nostalgia, mourning, and melancholia in *Postcolonial Melancholia* 87-106.

²⁰ I am here thinking primarily of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Simon Gikandi’s *Maps of Englishness* (2003).

between ‘conservative-nationalist reaction’ and ‘socialist advance’ may have seemed naïve or quaint during the nearly thirty years of neoliberal managerialism under consecutive Conservative and New Labour governments. However, the Great Recession of 2009, the austerity measures which followed under the Brown and Cameron governments, and the emergent European migrant crisis have brought the opposition into stark contrast. Indeed, with a reactionary ethnic nationalism ascendant in post-‘Brexit’ Britain, the question of how and why England is to find its national voice remains as relevant as ever. At the heart of the issue is whether contemporary articulations of Englishness can move beyond the passive, reactive position with which it has historically been expressed and into a more active, participatory, and civic conception of post-British national community.

In this dissertation I read the question of a nascent English devolutionary consciousness back into the immediate postwar years of 1948-1957, when, as both Craig and Gardiner observe, there was a marked consolidation of Anglo-British national identity around the demands of the Second World War for cohesive patriotism. This wartime narrative, maintained through the early 1950s era of austerity, ultimately merged with discourses of political consensus and the management of British state culture.²¹ However, while the 1950s are primarily understood as the decade of consensus politics, recent scholarship casts doubt on the era’s dominant narrative of state-managed political and cultural stability, highlighting the many cultural challenges to state cultural orthodoxy during the period.²²

Indeed, it is in the 1950s that some of the most direct articulations of an English devolutionary imagination were first issued by writers and thinkers who challenged the

²¹ See Craig, *Out of History* 140-142 and Gardiner, *The Return of England in English Literature* 59.

²² See in particular Gardiner, *The Return of England in English Literature* 76-109.

hegemony of official postwar culture and consensus politics from a perspective grounded in English cultural antecedents. In the late 1940s George Orwell memorably used an idiosyncratic amalgam of radical socialism and popular English patriotism to critique the co-optation of a progressive English working-class destiny by an instrumentalized managerial class in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). This literary turn was interrogated and extended by the work of New Left critics and early British cultural studies figures such as Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Richard Hoggart, whose work mined the English cultural tradition for signs of deeper historical patterns of radical resistance to capitalism and state authority. The British ‘Establishment’ associated with the postwar consensus was also challenged in turn by the dissident drama, film, and fiction of the so-called ‘Angry Young Men,’²³ whose attacks on the British status quo suggested “that social and constitutional stasis [was] suffocating the creation and recreation of community” (Gardiner, *England* 86). Additionally, writers such as Samuel Selvon and Colin MacInnes challenged and reconfigured the Englishness embedded within Anglo-British imperial culture from the perspective of newly arrived Caribbean and West African immigrants.²⁴

Each of these examples might be seen to participate in a broader ‘anthropological turn’ in twentieth-century English culture Jed Esty describes as “the discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture” (2). Esty’s reading of Forster, Woolf, and Eliot argues for a turn in high modernism from “the redemptive agency of art, which, because of its social autonomization, operates unmoored from any given national sphere...instead [toward] the redemptive agency of culture, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders” (2-3). Yet, while Esty claims that this turn exerted significant

²³ This uncomfortable and not very explanatory moniker was applied most often to the fiction of Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, and John Braine, the drama of John Osborne, and the films of director Tony Richardson.

²⁴ See Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and MacInnes’ *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959).

“influence on broader cultural formations that have come to define postwar, postempire England,” he generally neglects to deconstruct the High-Low literary binary which ensures that ‘broader cultural formations’ ultimately mean those cultural formations which the literary establishment have agreed are valuable (3). If, as Gardiner contends, “English Literature is not the literature of England,” but rather “an absorptive, universalizing principle it stands to reason that one must reach outside the universalizing sanctum of the English literary canon in order to see how ‘Englishness’ has been positioned both within *and against* Anglo-British culture (*England* 1) . Giving Esty the benefit of the doubt and assuming this to be an oversight rather than a deliberate obfuscation, we can extend his insights into the realm of popular culture, where I would argue the British Disaster Novel can be seen to advance similarly anthropological concerns about the nature and use of the English devolutionary imagination.

It is unremarkable to argue that the British Disaster Novel has, since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, remained closely allied with expressions of Anglo-British imperial anxiety and thus, with the uncertain future of imperial state culture. As both Dodd and Colls argue, the construction of English national identity in the era of high imperialism went hand in hand with the expansion of imperial state culture, national educational reform, and the burgeoning of new print technologies and reading audiences.²⁵ Nascent forms of the genre, like Sir George Tompkins Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking* (1871), emerge during a period of pronounced economic recession and heightened European capitalist competition after 1870 which weakened national confidence and hinted that Britain’s global dominance might be in decline. Imperial expansion after 1875 brought Anglo-Britons into contact with an increasing number of so-called primitive peoples, whose very existence, when read in light of recently

²⁵ *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (1986). See in particular Dodd’s “Englishness and the National Culture” 1-28 and Colls’ “Englishness and the Political Culture” 29-61.

popularized Darwinian theories of adaptation and evolution, led to a pervasive ambivalence about the role of English civilization relative to the larger world. On the one hand, the colonial encounter justified the imperial civilizing mission; from their perch atop the pecking order, the English tasked themselves with bringing light to the supposedly uncivilized. On the other, Darwin's theories suggested that social evolution did not necessarily equate to historical progress; a society, like a species, could also decline. If Anglo-Britain was among the most powerful of nations at the close of the nineteenth century, it could only fall from that apex.

The British Disaster Novel's depictions of catastrophe—whether man-made or natural—expressed and mediated these imperial anxieties. Future war novels like Chesney's—which depicts a successful German invasion of England—were joined by others which charted the effects of rapid technological evolution in an increasingly militaristic Europe.²⁶ If, as Dodd writes, “the power of the dominant version of Englishness [between 1880 and 1920] lay in its ability to represent both itself to others and those others to themselves,” the catastrophe novel form expressed an anxiety that such power was in decline.²⁷ Novels such as Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), Richard Jefferies' *After London, or Wild England* (1885) all dramatize Britain's ongoing negotiation of its own imperial identity relative to both external and internal colonial others.

The catastrophe narrative's intimate relationship with English self-definition relative to Anglo-British culture is perhaps most clearly and profoundly expressed in the early novels of H.G. Wells, whose *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1899) fuse the nineteenth-century romance with modern scientific discourse and evolutionary theory to produce

²⁶ For more, see I.F. Clarke's *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (1966).

²⁷ Dodd, “Englishness and the National Culture” 2.

new narrative catastrophes which foreground “a progressivist, utopian hope always haunted by...devolutionary decline” (Luckhurst, *Science* 46). This pronounced tension in Wells works its way through most catastrophe novels of the period, producing both implicit criticism of imperial Britishness and also a demystification of that totality in the reduction of the imperial nation to a minor, particularized Englishness.²⁸

Most salient to this dissertation is how this tension between the imperial/universal and the national/particular was translated purposefully into a postwar context in the explosion in British—and particularly English—catastrophe fiction after 1950. During the decade, writers like John Wyndham, John Christopher, Eric Charles Maine, and S. Fowler Wright sought to consciously revive the Wellsian disaster story’s focus on Englishness and market it to a bourgeois readership, turning noticeably away from the expansive space-opera adventure stories of the American pulp market. This pivot away from the openly imperial American form corresponds with an insular, inward turn in Anglo-British sf toward a recognizably ‘English’ idiom and a focus on the effects of disaster and collapse on an ordinary English society and culture interpreted by intellectuals during the decade as in permanent decline.²⁹ Framed against the narrative of decline, then, the catastrophe novel can be seen as a legitimizing force with a very particular historical mission: to reexamine and reanimate Englishness in light of the looming dissolution of imperial Britain.

The catastrophe form’s sudden resurgence during the decade has, given its nineteenth-century antecedents, often been interpreted as allegorizing anxiety over the weakening of British

²⁸ For more on this tension in Wells, see Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., “Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations” 222-223.

²⁹ Paul Kincaid, *A Very British Genre: A Short History of British Fantasy and Science Fiction* 22. See also Esty, *A Shrinking Island* 1-2.

power during the era of decolonization and American military and cultural hegemony.³⁰

However, few have sought to contextualize the form's evocation of English culture in the postwar period, or to consider how it might operate parallel to, or even overlap with, established literary-critical debates about the relationship of England and Englishness to Anglo-British state culture after 1945. If the English catastrophe novel of the 1950s allegorizes an abstract loss of imperial prestige and power in the British—and particularly English—consciousness, often criticizing the imperial project in the process,³¹ it also acts as a valuable site of critical reflection on the meaning of English culture.

Sandwiched by Wells and the interwar writers on the one hand, and by the self-consciously literary catastrophes of the 1960s British New Wave on the other, the 1950s catastrophe has often been read primarily in terms of its ideological affirmations, rather than its social critique. Yet, like many popular cultural objects, both of these sides remain essential to any understanding of the cultural work the catastrophe novel can be said to perform. If we look closely at the form we can see it eating away at a universalizing Anglo-Britishness, at the same time tracing early fault lines around an emerging, if broad and barely conscious English devolutionary imagination linked to social class. In this the form can be seen to operate in tandem with Esty's 'anthropological turn' from empire to Englishness, but from a non-literary realm of popular culture whose distance from canonical modernism has intellectual antecedents in earlier debates between modernists like Henry James and Virginia Woolf and middle-class writers of popular genre fiction such as H.G. Wells. In fact, class remains an important category

³⁰ For more on the assumed relationship between the catastrophe narrative and the imperial context, see Kincaid, *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction* 54; Nichols, "Jerry Cornelius at the Atrocity Exhibition" 26; Wagar, *Terminal Visions* 27; and Priest, "British Science Fiction" 195. For a more sustained critique of this connection, see Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls* 40-45.

³¹ As Luckhurst reminds us, "The British disaster narrative always addressed disenchantment with the imperialist 'civilizing' mission" (*Science* 131).

of analysis here insofar as the genre has often been tied both to a bourgeois readership and to a tendency to both rudely disrupt and then reinforce the dominant middle-class status quo.³²

My analysis in this dissertation reads the catastrophe novel's emergent Englishness in the 1950s relative to two historical frames of reference: English middle-class radicalism and popular socialism on the one hand, and English cultural essentialism and ethnic nationalism on the other. In *The Break-up of Britain*, Tom Nairn writes retrospectively about an undefined English national culture rising to the surface after the Second World War:

From the late 1950s onward there has emerged...a gathering momentum of historical revision and socialist culture...Odd as it may seem, the deformation of Englishness by her state-history has generated a late but unmistakable variety of left-nationalist popular culture. Equally naturally, this is a cultural nationalism which has not yet come to consciousness of its own nature and purpose. Hence, it has remained closer to ideas of a rather undefined socialism, politically, than to ideas of England. (303-4)

While Nairn here intends to reference the radical English politics in the culturalism of the British New Left—and particularly in the pages of *New Left Review*—it is worth recognizing that popular challenges to the British imperial capitalist Establishment occurred across the class and culture spectrum after the war. For example, Meredith Veldman has argued for an ideological correspondence between English Romantic middle-class protest, the fantasy writing of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Mervyn Peake, the middle-class radicalism of the postwar Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and the postwar small living movement. Within this nexus

³² For more on this, see Parrinder, “H.G. Wells and the Fiction of Catastrophe” 52-3.

Veldman locates an urge to, as Nairn puts it, articulate a cultural nationalism opposed to postwar consensus politics and the official state-national culture designed to legitimate its authority.³³

However, critics have been so concerned to read the English catastrophe novel as symptomatic of a British postcolonial melancholia that few, if any, have ever attempted to historically situate the form's Englishness within a devolutionary paradigm. Speaking of the catastrophes of John Wyndham specifically, the English sf writer Brian Aldiss notes that the catastrophe's popularity among middle-class audiences during the 1950s was "Either...something to do with the collapse of the British Empire, or the back-to-nature movement, or a general feeling that industrialisation had gone too far, or all three."³⁴ Dismissive though this comment surely is, it nonetheless accurately identifies the ideological vectors of a certain strain of middle-class revolt against a modern Anglo-British capitalist modernity seeming to grow frighteningly out of control. For writers such as Wyndham, regaining control over one's life and community is part and parcel of regaining control over the popular, middle-class English values which are seen to shape the contours of that community.

In this sense we might see the catastrophe novel piggybacking in some ways on the more general middle-class revolt against the Establishment in the 1950s and the catastrophic shaking up of the British midcentury status quo as a means of resisting and reframing a static British culture of consensus from the perspective of an active middle-class individualism. In this the catastrophe novel supplements similar foci on the lived experience of working-class life detailed before the war in works such as Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and continued in the

³³ For more on this, see Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: romantic protest 1945-1980* (1994).

³⁴ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree* 294.

postwar period by the likes of Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson.³⁵ The novels of a writer like John Wyndham dovetail with this excavation of a kind of grassroots, ordinary Englishness from below, but from the perspective of the bourgeois individual. The English catastrophe novel of the 1950s represents a kind of middlebrow rejection of official state cultural orthodoxy, a revolt against the co-optation of everyday life by state processes, vast bureaucratic structures, and the exercise of power beyond individual consciousness or control.

At the same time, we must return to Nairn's remark above about the strict separation between 'a rather undefined socialism'—which I have attempted to disaggregate above—and 'ideas of England.' Nairn sees, or, rather, hopes he sees, the first as the initial signs of an awakening in the second, and that the two will eventually come to mutually reinforce and determine one another in a new definition of socially and historically conscious Englishness. However, my reading of the 1950s English catastrophe demonstrates that bourgeois radicalism operates in uncomfortable proximity to parallel discourses of English cultural essentialism and ethnic nationalism. In a writer like John Wyndham in particular, a middle-class critique of British capitalist modernity too easily bleeds over into assumptions about primal connections between English culture, race, and territory. As I argue in Chapter Two, this is in part because Wyndham partakes of a common 'English ideology' which reads English popular—and particularly bourgeois—culture as central to any transformative political project. My critique in that chapter focuses on how this maneuver reaffirms not an open and inclusive civic Englishness, but rather an exclusive, territorially based ethnic collective which remains "unable to escape the habit of thinking of [themselves] as the world's default economic and cultural center," and thus

³⁵ See in particular Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

attempts to paper over the gaps between this perception and less comforting post-imperial realities (Gardiner, *England* 141).

Unmaking Scotland: Catastrophe and Postcolonial Personalism

To make a new Scotland, the old one must be unmade. Perhaps the same might be said of any other decolonized, liberated or newly emancipated society. However, the Scottish example of national liberation does have one important peculiarity not replicated anywhere else. This is something easily overlooked or taken for granted. Yet it should always be kept in mind, since it conditions everything else. For the Scots, the ‘old’ society—the one needing renewal or replacement—was largely their own work.

—Tom Nairn³⁶

Since the 1970s the interdisciplinary field of Scottish Studies has produced a more reflexive and dialectical reading of devolution which mitigates the narrow ethnic/cultural boundaries my analysis reveals in expressions of English devolutionary consciousness in the postwar catastrophe novel. By contrast, the Scottish devolutionary imagination theorized by scholars such as Craig and Gardiner names the tendency in Scottish philosophy and culture toward self-reflexive critique of the dominant modes of Scottish Enlightenment thought—among them the universalized concepts of progressive history and the reflective subject-self—underlying British capitalist modernity. Not only a form of critique, the Scottish devolutionary imagination also describes attempts made in Scottish culture to envision alternative values and worlds beyond the limitations of the subjects and histories constituted in and by the Anglo-British imperial paradigm.

Scotland’s peculiar variant on the devolutionary imagination proceeds in part from the anomalous historical, cultural, and political role the nation has played as part of Great Britain in the modern era. On the one hand, as Christopher Harvie writes, “The Scots have, man for man,

³⁶ *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* 223 (Nairn’s italics).

probably done more to create the modern world than any other nation. They owe it an explanation” (8). This claim is in many ways true, given the influence of Scottish philosophy, science, industry, and technology on British and European social evolution in the post-Enlightenment era. As Gardiner observes: “From this overadaptive Enlightenment moment come modern economics, exportable narratives of civility (and therefore imperialism), knowledge as a principle of mass arrangement, social anthropology, the subject-self, ‘good English’, and English Literature” (*Roots* xi). If the Scots have done more than most to ‘create the modern world,’ this is in part because Scottish thought generated the rationales by which it has been organized. Moreover, Scots were not only the master ideologues of Anglo-British capitalist modernity but also its active agents, playing a central and disproportionately large role in the material construction of the Anglo-British Empire as inventors and scientists, doctors and missionaries, soldiers and traders. Scots helped legitimate and executive the global slave trade and the violent excesses of industrial capitalism, spreading them around the world via British colonial expansion.³⁷

But if the Scots owe the modern world an explanation, they also owe one to themselves. It is well documented that the intellectual ferment of the British Enlightenment was largely an effect of attempts by mid-eighteenth century Scots to adapt to the new sociocultural conditions following the 1707 Act of Union with England.³⁸ The particularly British form of Scottish self-fashioning which motivated the intellectual ferment of the Scottish Enlightenment simultaneously alienated Scots from the modern world they helped create. As Scotland’s role

³⁷ A brief litany of influential eighteenth and nineteenth century Scots might include David Hume, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, Joseph Black, William Robertson, James Clerk Maxwell, Andrew Lang, John Ferguson McLennon, John Playfair, Dugald Stewart, and James Burnett (Lord Monboddo).

³⁸ For more on this, see Beveridge and Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (1989) and *Scotland After Enlightenment* (1997); Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland 1685-1789* (1997); Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (1999); and Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707-1994* (2004).

was accompanied by the “[incorporation] into a British history of which Scots could never fully be a part” (Craig, “Reason” 254), Scottish intellectual and creative culture remained both intimately involved in and alienated from European capitalist modernity, central to its making but highly suspicious of the truths on which its power rested.

If Scots possess an answer to Harvie’s charge, it emerges from the self-reflexive compulsion to understand the various inside/out relationships—to self and society, to narrative and art, to history and national identity—the historical experience of capitalist modernity has made central to Scottish existence. The focus in Scottish culture on these pairings derives from conflicts between opposing cognitive models developed by Scottish philosophers in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era. For example, one prominent aspect of what Gardiner calls the British “colonial mindset” was enabled by the models of subjectivity and the universalizing narratives of civility and historical progress generated in the work of Scottish philosopher-historians David Hume, William Robertson, and Adam Ferguson.³⁹ This framework spatializes peoples and societies on a linear continuum, thus creating distance between that zenith and those lower on the spectrum.⁴⁰ The spatial and primarily visual nature of this empirical modeling was in turn related to Hume’s philosophy of mind, which, was grounded in an inherently distant idea of “the scientist as a spectator of another person’s acts.”⁴¹ Both of these structures of thought were themselves tied to ongoing debates about the nature of the self which arose from the work of René Descartes. While Hume would transform the Cartesian subject into

³⁹ Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* 2.

⁴⁰ Like many things to do with the Scottish origins of the post-Enlightenment world, there is something ironic in this. Pittock notes that the historiography of progress was itself “a historiography of accommodation with Britain” undertaken by Scots anxious to create space for Scotland within the new post-Union dispensation. Because the Union was taken as an emblem of social progress, this narrative ultimately enabled Whig readings of history which relegated Scotland to a backwards, barbaric position relative to the universalized trajectory of Anglo-British nationhood. For more, see Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain* 140-145.

⁴¹ See Broadie, “The Human Mind and its Powers,” 64. See also Broadie, *Why Scottish Philosophy Matters* 59.

a skeptic with no ultimate basis for rational knowledge, he maintained that subject's role and function, thus preserving the dominant structure of thinking subject and passive object. These models are colonial precisely because they enable patterns of human alienation and reification, social hierarchy, and ideologies of British white supremacy over colonized peoples.

At the same time, Scottish philosophy's inside/out relation to British capitalist modernity has also promoted a pattern of dialectical critiques and correspondingly anti-/post-colonial mindsets, in part by framing life as inherently social and interdependent. Pittock observes that "The nature, as well as the theory, of the Scottish Enlightenment was social," derived as it was from "the social interchange of a small world in cheek-by-jowl living conditions" in eighteenth-century Edinburgh (*Inventing* 137). As early as the mid-eighteenth century, philosophers associated with the so-called Common Sense Realist School, and particularly Hume's contemporary Thomas Reid, had marshalled a communitarian perspective in order to push back against the isolation of the Humean skeptical subject. Reid argued against philosophical systems altogether, positing the fundamental role played by tactile sense and memory, "which teach us that there is more to the world than just things in our mind" (Klemme 128). Reid was emblematic of a tradition within Scottish philosophy which elevated social connection, common sense, and action over the distant reflections of the isolated subject-self.⁴² Berry clarifies that what was most important here was not that Scottish philosophers took sociality for granted as a philosophical first principle, but rather that they rejected abstract reason as the origin of truth, substituting for it a "commitment to actual human experience as the touchstone of true knowledge" (47). Most

⁴² Brodie *Why Scottish Philosophy Matters* 91.

resisted the reduction of human societies to the isolated individual, laying the groundwork for later Scottish readings of social life as grounded in contact and mutual relation.⁴³

The philosopher primarily responsible for developing this latent social aspect of Scottish thought in the twentieth century was John Macmurray (1891-1976), who, in his early 1950s Gifford lectures at the University of Glasgow, offered a stark rebuttal to both Cartesian and Kantian theories of the subject as an isolated, reflective ego.⁴⁴ In *Persons in Relation* (1961), Macmurray demonstrates how Descartes and Kant reduce the person to a subject-self locked away from any experience of the object-world.⁴⁵ Additionally, he argues persuasively against the spatial and predominantly visual orientation of the Humean subject, and consequently against the linear historical models to which it gives rise.⁴⁶ Against this monism Macmurray posits a theory of the self as both an agent, characterized by the foundational capacity to act in and thus alter the world (rather than just reflecting on it),⁴⁷ and a person, constituted primarily by relation with the Other.⁴⁸ The person, Macmurray argues, contains both subject and object, and is defined by a search for mutual recognition.⁴⁹ Moreover, the personal relationship demands the experience of

⁴³ Between this paragraph and the next I leapfrog more than 150 years of intellectual history in Scotland and Britain so as to arrive more quickly at the work of John Macmurray. A brief comment here on the interim will have to suffice. Gardiner demonstrates how Enlightenment thought, including the social-personal aspects described above, was eventually subsumed within the larger trajectory of Anglo-British philosophy, and how it came to underpin the development of philosophical Empiricism and logical positivism well into the twentieth century. It is to the evolution of post-Enlightenment thought into empiricism and logical positivism that Macmurray most immediately responds (*Cultural Roots* 80-85).

⁴⁴ Macmurray gave the 1953 and 1954 Gifford lectures, which were later published as *The Self as Agent* (1957) and *Persons in Relation* (1961).

⁴⁵ *Persons in Relation* 62-83.

⁴⁶ *The Self as Agent* 110-114.

⁴⁷ *The Self as Agent* 84-98.

⁴⁸ *Persons in Relation* 91.

⁴⁹ For Macmurray the self is both subject and agent, with agent playing the more pervasive and foundational role. As he asserts, "The Self, then, is not the thinker but the doer. In its positive doing it is agent; in its negative doing it is subject" (*Self* 90).

resistance from the Other, which is the very basis of action,⁵⁰ and without which persons cannot access direct experience, subsequently retreating into a defensive, fearful existence.⁵¹

To think critically about devolutionary nationhood is to see it defined by these dialectics and to conceive of such a transition is to envision a kind of catastrophe, a disastrous shattering of the myth of subjectivity in favor of a new world of interrelated persons. Macmurray extends his reading of interpersonal relations outward into the arena of societies and nations, where catastrophe, devolution, and selfhood assume a reciprocal valence. At present, he argues, nations and their attendant social structures are defined by their fearful, negative relations with the world, where the national Other becomes means to an end rather than a mechanism of mutual self-realization. Against this sickly, disfigured model of social relations Macmurray poses a counter-Enlightenment ‘community’ of persons defined by “mutual affection” and a ‘heterocentricity,’ or mutual being-together-for-one-another, which depends for its truth on intended action and agency rather than matter of fact organic identity (*Persons* 157-8, 127). Action is once again critical here, as nations are defined not as static entities waiting to be reborn, but rather a form of communion wherein “Each remains a distinct individual; the other remains really other. Each realizes himself in and through the other” (*Persons* 158). To talk about the nation or the society is thus to talk of its internal structure of selves and relations.

If Macmurray provides the conceptual apparatus necessary for moving beyond logical positivism into a post-catastrophic community of interdependent personhood, his junior contemporary, the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927-1989), extends this framework into the

⁵⁰ “The resistance of the Other is not merely a negation of the act of the Self, it is necessary to the possibility of the act, and so constitutive of it. For without a resistance no action is possible. To act at all is to act *upon something*. Consequently, the Other is discovered in tactual perception both as the resistance to, and the support of action” (*Self* 110 Macmurray’s italics).

⁵¹ *The Self as Agent* 122.

realm of psychosocial pathology. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) follows Macmurray in arguing that the origin of human experience and knowledge lies in "the original bond of *I and You*" rather than "a single man in isolation...abstracted from his relation with the other in his world" (19 Laing's italics). Also like Macmurray, Laing sees the latter abstract relations as generating crippling dualisms of subjects and object-things.⁵² Laing, who specialized in the treatment of schizophrenia, frames that particular condition as a natural defense mechanism against a society which values the objectively valid over the subjectively real. Here, schizophrenics are selves locked into the fortress of their subjectivity by a depersonalizing relation with the Other.⁵³ Feeling as though living entirely as the object of another, and thus divorced from the immediacy of their lived experience, Laing's schizophrenic suffers from a crippling ontological insecurity, one of the primary symptoms of which is an inability to feel their embodied self as real. Though engaged less directly than Macmurray, Laing allows us to see catastrophe, devolution, and the self in commensurate relation, the middle former term naming the break in the latter which forces a new devolved world into being.

Insofar as the devolutionary personalism of Macmurray and Laing can be seen responding to a legacy of Scottish thought, it effectively provides the foundation for a specifically Scottish expression of late twentieth-century postcolonial theory. Their varying strains of personalism are remarkably similar, for example, to the anti-colonial theory of Frantz Fanon. For Fanon, as for Macmurray, the nature of the self is social, predicated on the constant back-and-forth between a negatively figured subjectivity and affirmative encounters with the Other, which prove the reality of experience as lived-in, affective, and mutual, rather than theoretical. Subject to the objectification of the post-Enlightenment world, both the colonized

⁵² *The Divided Self* 19-22.

⁵³ As he puts it in *The Politics of Experience*, "We attempt to live in castles that can only be in the air" (108).

and colonizer remain locked into mutually exclusive citadels of inactivity—“A world compartmentalized, Manichean and petrified, a world of statues”—which naturally, within the asymmetrical systems of colonial power, descends into patterns of dehumanization and racial horror (*Wretched* 15). Not unlike Laing’s schizoid patients, Fanon’s colonized subject is “locked in [a] body” from which he or she remains necessarily estranged and subjected to a fearful identification with a false self—Fanon’s titular ‘white mask’—to which is assigned all the frustrating transactions with the demands of the colonial world (*Black* 200). Against “the immobility to which the colonized subject is condemned,” Fanon positions “a world of reciprocal recognitions” between fully actualized persons capable of realizing that “I am not only here-now, locked in thinghood. I desire somewhere else and something else (*Wretched* 15, *Black* 197, 193).” That ‘something else’ is for Fanon—as it is for Macmurray—the flexible and open-ended potential of personal and communal life to constitute the object of intentional agency. As Fanon puts it, the former mirrors the latter in exhorting “man to be *actional*, by maintaining in his circularity the respect of the fundamental values that make the world human” (*Black* 197 Fanon’s italics).

Importantly, for all three thinkers the agency involved in ‘making the world human’ must also entail contact and conflict; freedom cannot be attained without the struggle which comes of needing to recognize the Other as an autonomous person and, in so doing, recognizing autonomy in oneself. For the Fanon of *Wretched*, the turn from subjection to personhood, from man the subject to “man in his totality” (62), is inextricably entangled with the historical process of decolonization and national liberation. Fanon’s famous first chapter, “On Violence,” makes clear that it is only in the course of an active collective struggle for recognition—effectively, the catastrophic dissolution of the known world—that the colonized can liquidate his or her

alienation and engender a truly novel historical condition. Similarly, Macmurray ends *The Self as Agent* by evoking “The World as One Action,” calling for us to pursue “the map of a new landscape” in which we “think the world in which we act, and of which we are constituents, as a unity of intention” (203, 221). Laing’s more dramatic catastrophe goes so far as to flip the polarity of sanity and madness such that he can assert that “True sanity entails...the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality” (*Politics* 119). In each the subjective and sociohistorical domains overlap and inform one another, both self and society framed as disasters through which we must struggle in the hopes of moving onto a new stage of personhood and community.

In Scotland, where the Manichean colonial subject positions identified above are less stark—and indeed actually conflated—the nature of postcolonial/devolutionary catastrophe is murky. This is in part due to the fact that in Scotland devolution has primarily meant formal political divestment from the imperial British state, either as Home Rule or full political independence. However, the pragmatic realities of a potentially independent Scotland matter less in an ethical framework than the idea that formal independence would not rid Scotland of the cognitive models which underlie its colonial past. This is to say that devolution in fact is not synonymous with decolonization in practice and that the imperial capitalist system is perfectly adept at absorbing ‘catastrophe’ without fundamental change. The work of Tom Nairn—effectively a long treatise on British state politics as catastrophe management—makes this abundantly clear. Nairn’s *After Britain* is filled with direct and implied references to a

catastrophic ‘Break-up of Britain’ not yet achieved despite the façade of constitutional change entailed in Tony Blair’s reformist New Labour ascendancy after 1997.⁵⁴

Thus, while formal devolution might superficially solve the ‘colonial’ relationship between England and Scotland, it does nothing to address the philosophical underpinnings of Scotland’s own colonial history. Gardiner contends that “one major blockage to the properly democratic break-up of [imperial Britain] has been nations’ inability to grasp their own complex histories *as colonisers*” (*Roots* x author’s italics). The key phrase here is ‘properly democratic.’ The ‘Break-up of Britain’ is one thing, the dissolution of the colonial mindset another. A superficially democratic politics may be achieved by political machinations alone, but not a ‘properly’ democratic one, which would demand that the form and content of democratic life intermingle with and reinforce one another. We can extend the idea of propriety here to encompass a ‘properly’ postcolonial Scottish theory, which, like that promoted by Macmurray and Laing, is one which complements political praxis with an emphasis on transforming the cultural and epistemological foundations by which Scots ‘created’ the modern world, and by which they must unmake it.

The Scottish novel has been hailed by critics of Scottish literature as one of the primary sites of political contestation in which this unmaking occurs. The critic most concerned to reconnect the Scottish novel with the legacy of Scottish theory is Cairns Craig, whose work has helped revolutionize the critical conversation about Scottish literature by producing a significant cultural transvaluation and reorientation of Scottish culture’s relationship to British capitalist

⁵⁴ Nairn makes use of the theme and figure of catastrophe with telling frequency in the book, at one point even drawing direct attention to one of England’s earliest and most famous novels of a post-catastrophic Britain, Richard Jeffries’ *After London* (1885). See Nairn, *After Britain* 1-18, 40, and 58.

modernity.⁵⁵ Craig frames the Scottish novel as a privileged site of reflection on the nature and use of history, realism, and subjectivity—the very same issues foregrounded in Scottish theory. If Scottish theory frames a catastrophic dynamic around subjects and nations removed from the dialectical relations, Craig extends that same rubric into the domain of the novel, where he uses it as a methodology for reading cultural and political critique and subversion. Harking back to the thinkers introduced above, Craig reads the Scottish novel as interrogating the twinned catastrophes of history and subjectivity and, furthermore, as gesturing toward a heterogeneous personhood, an ongoing dialectic between nation and world, self and Other.⁵⁶

Expressions of this catastrophe form the crux of Craig’s argument—developed throughout *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999)—that Scottish fiction generates a variety of powerful intra-textual critiques of modern European narrative culture. Taught by history to distrust the false power of homogenizing standard languages and their pretensions to universality, ‘schizophrenic’ Scottish texts undermine them by speaking in a web of dialects and modeling “dialogue with the other, a conversation in different dialects, a dialectic that is the foundation not only of persons but of nations” (115). Conditioned by a Scottish intellectual tradition to be skeptical of aesthetic realism’s claim to represent history, and of historical narrative’s claims to represent reality, Scottish texts generate subversive narrative forms designed to “defy and deny the primacy of the historical” (166). Seeking to escape the fixed world of standardized type, the typographical experiments of Scottish fiction demand that “typography itself [become] the medium of creation rather than simply the frame that holds the

⁵⁵ The paradigmatic text in this regard is *Out of History* (1996), though Craig further develops arguments contained therein in *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999) and *Intending Scotland* (2009).

⁵⁶ Craig writes that “The ‘person’, like the culture, is not the unitary identity of the isolated ego but a continual dialectic with its own otherness; exploration of the ‘divided self’ is not simply exploration of the sickness of the culture, but exploration of the sickness of the notions of culture by which a culture that recognises its own involvement with the ‘other’ is assumed to be as sick as the self which has withdrawn from its relationship with the other into a self-enclosed and divisive self-identity” (*Novel* 114).

outcome of creation in place” (169). Faced with the domination of an aesthetic Imagination aligned with historical narrative, and thus imperial world-construction, the ‘self-doubting’ “art of the Scottish novel [becomes] the refusal of the temptations of art” (234). The power of Craig’s Scottish text thus lies in this self-reflexive critique of the form, style, and material conditions of creative communication. If Scottish texts seem ill at ease, uncertain, or contradictory, this is because they are struggling against narrative style and form, every act of creation an act of interrogation of the means through which creation occurs.

At the same time, Craig’s assessment of the decolonizing energy of the Scottish novel also looks beyond the moment of critique to the possibility of new worlds. This rests on his theorization of Scotland’s hybridized “double perspective—within history, without history”—which allows for the articulation of “values which stand outside of history as we define it: not *after* history, or *before* it, but *beyond* it...*across* the boundary between that world and a relentlessly returning alternative world” (*Novel* 239; *Out* 224, 72 author’s italics). It is in this indeterminate middle ground that “the condition of ‘being between’ is not the degeneration of a culture but the essential means of its generation,” and thus a creative, visionary force capable of imaging ‘otherworlds’: “not [worlds] of decline and oblivion but of energy and creativity, not [worlds] of submission and defeat, but of potential and liberation” (*Out* 205; “Otherworlds” 273). Such alternative spaces are ones in which the subjective and the social overlap. For Craig, the Scottish novel’s tendency to focus simultaneously on damaged subjects and the damaged socio-historical paradigms inherited from the Enlightenment frame self and society as ambiguous ciphers for one another, breakdown in one mirroring and/or commenting on similar patterns or symptoms of disaster in the other and vice versa. In this sense, then, revolutions in the sociohistorical are made contingent on the transformation of subjects within those worlds, just as

the transformation of the world is made contingent on the liberation of the self from the subject-forms on which those social worlds rely. Restless returns to these undefined counter-modern spaces name the repeated attempts made by Scottish protagonists or texts—and repeated because often failed or uncertain—to imagine, often against great odds, a more human world driven by mutual recognition between independent persons rather than the multiple alienations of imperial History and Subjectivity. Rather, the hero is forced to consider whether there might be something beyond the patterns of thought and perception to which they have grown inured, some alternative world toward which they might direct their intentions.

However, Craig's reading of Scottish narrative is limited by his reliance on exceptionalism paradigms which dehistoricize Scotland and Scottish culture. While I agree with Craig's general position on the Scottish novel's catastrophic enactment of interpersonal relations and national dialectics, I disagree with how he situates Scotland and Scottish culture as the object of an ahistorical and ideal exceptionalism. His need to defensively insulate Scottish culture from the critics who have judged it so harshly leads him to frame Scotland and Scottish narrative as an independent source of modern critique, removing it, in the terms set forth in his own analysis, from dialogue with the Other, and thus from a healthy personhood. In *Out of History*, Craig frames Scotland's situation with characteristic irony. Borrowing from both Macmurray and Laing, he suggests that it is not Scotland who is the sickly divided self, but rather the world by which it is judged. For him, the real issue is not that politics, literature, education, or art are threatened by a sickly Scottishness, but rather that a robust Scottishness is threatened by the falsely universal—and thus insalubrious—categories of Politics, Literature, Education, and Art as they are understood in Anglo-Britain.⁵⁷ For him the problem lies in the construction 'Scottish

⁵⁷ Craig, *Out of History* 11-14.

X,' wherein, because the variable is defined externally, in relation to a powerful 'major' tradition—in this case an Anglo-British tradition—it takes precedent over and disfigures the Scottish modifier.

The complication occurs when Craig attempts to reassert the priority of 'Scottish' over the variable, in the process working within a kind of historically insular 'Scottish Ideology.' As I understand it here, the latter phenomenon is a primarily defensive maneuver derived from the need to make Scotland not only critically reflexive but also inviolable. What needs safeguarding is the exceptionalism granted Scottish culture by its exclusion from the Anglo-British formation. Both AJP Thomson and Eleanor Bell correctly target Craig's reliance on the nation as a concept, but because they are more concerned to position Craig against globalized critical discourses such as postmodernism, they overlook that what is so important to Craig is not only 'the nation' as such, but rather Scotland's exceptional position as an oddity among nations.⁵⁸ As Thomas Docherty argues, because Craig ultimately accepts imperial history as "a neo-Hegelian tale of victors and victims," his approach succumbs to "the fatal strategy that is victimhood" (241, 246). What Docherty helps us see is that, for Craig, Scotland's exceptionalism and its victimhood exist in circular and self-reinforcing relation. Victimhood reinforces claims to exceptionalism and exceptionalism reproduces the power of victimhood. This is why one of the least noticed but most powerful effects of Craig's theory of the Scottish novel is that it ensures Scotland is both subversive and safe, open to and productive of the counter-narrative generated by its historical victimhood, but insulated from the world in which that dialogue actually occurs, and thus from the potentiality of its own dialectical transformation.

⁵⁸ Thomson, "Phrasing Scotland and the Postmodern" 81; Bell, *Questioning Scotland* 2.

In making Scotland exceptional, this pose threatens to isolate and dehistoricize Scottish culture. In order to protect it from being interpreted as a second-hand iteration of global critical discourses with origins elsewhere, Craig maintains that Scottish narrative and theory does what it does first and foremost because it is privy to Scotland's unique historical heritage, idiosyncratic literary tradition, and progressive intellectual culture.⁵⁹ Because this exceptionalism is exclusive and self-generating, it removes the nation from dialogue by cutting it off from the world by whose standards it has traditionally been found lacking. In these terms, Scotland becomes the same self-referential subject inherited from the Anglo-British Enlightenment and identity becomes similarly circular: Scottish texts are subversive because they are Scottish and they are Scottish because they are subversive. If, on the one hand, Craig is interested in addressing charges of parochialism and opening Scottish culture to the world, he also ironically transforms it into a world apart.

Craig's Scottish Ideology is of primary concern to this dissertation because it has been influential in the recent push within Scottish Studies to articulate the relationship between Scotland and science fiction. In her introduction to *Scotland as Science Fiction* (2013), Caroline McCracken-Flesher situates Scotland against Anglo-American sf and sf criticism by channeling the Craig of *Out of History* and *The Modern Scottish Novel*. "What might we say," she asks, "to a genre [sf] that by scientific transformation projects itself across other times and spaces, yet seems fixated on the North Atlantic linguistic margin, and whose criticism simultaneously and assertively divorces it from such geographical and political parameters?" (1). One need only tweak the object of the sentence—replacing 'a genre' with 'major cultures'—to arrive at Craig's

⁵⁹ Scott Hames states the situation clearly when he writes that "Scotland turns out to have privileged access to the energies of theory, so long as these are understood to affirm precisely the Scottish exceptionalism which theory would challenge were it encountered as an extrinsic discourse." For more, see Hames, "Editorial: Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism" 3.

earlier conclusion: science fiction, like English Literature, is thoroughly ideological because driven by a false universalism and a reliance on post-Enlightenment thought which reproduces imperial hierarchies.

This charge against science fiction is a valid and often repeated one, but the manner in which it is made repeats the same ideological gesture as Craig's earlier position, strategically distancing the specificity of 'Scotland' from the generality of 'science fiction' and subsequently disabling dialogue between the two. In this relationship Scotland is granted a full and complex individuality, which is then opposed to a reductive category—science fiction—which acts as an oppressive form of totalization sweeping away any trace of what makes Scottish texts unique. Once again, the implied problem is 'Scottish X,' or, in this case, Scottish *science fiction*. Predictably, the response is to defensively transform the relationship into, as the title states, Scotland *as* Science Fiction. While 'Scotland *and* Science Fiction' would imply a degree of dialogue between two autonomous but conversant positions, 'Scotland *as* Science Fiction' subordinates the latter to the former by investing 'Scotland,' via the simile, with the critical power of sf. Contrary to Craig's arguments about a Scotland rooted in heterocentric models of personhood, the 'Scotland-as-Science Fiction' arrangement reaffirms the Anglo-British model of thinking subject and passive object: it is the 'Scottish' in Scottish science fiction which is responsible for the reflective thrust, the 'science fiction' aspect of the construction playing the role of the imperial megatext on which the first exercises its critical faculties. If, as Craig contends, all cultural formations are inherently hybrid, open, and dialogic, it makes little sense to frame science fiction as a closed incubator of imperial ideology, even if this is the way its writers and critics have sometimes constructed it. It makes equally little sense to construct Scottish fiction as a perfectly reflexive—and therefore imperviously positioned—vehicle of critique.

Doing so denies the very possibility that Scottish fiction and science fiction could ever produce the mutual relation Craig—following Macmurray, Laing, and Fanon—insists is the base condition of all communities, traditions, and genres.

This ideological blind spot affects any conversation one can have about Scottish catastrophe fiction. The catastrophe novel is necessarily subsumed under the above formulation's overly broad reading of sf and is thus rendered suspect by Scottish critique for the same reasons. The British catastrophe novel is perhaps even more worthy of Scottish suspicion than sf as such, given that it is has historically been a profoundly parochial genre concerned at heart with 'the Condition of England.' This is one of the reasons why Craig's critical perspective works so well as a methodology for reading 'the catastrophe of Englishness' in Chapter Two—it is calibrated to locate instances wherein texts code English cultural superiority, via narrative, as universal truth. At the same time, because he so insistently insulates Scottish culture from the post-Enlightenment world which has belittled and disfigured it, he leaves us with two equally untenable options. We can either read *Scottish* catastrophe, wherein a defensive and dehistoricized Scottish exceptionalism is the driving force behind a text's self-reflexive critique, or we can read Scottish *catastrophe*, wherein that critical energy is, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, part and parcel of a genre which more often than not reaffirms Anglo-British imperial ideology.

However, I would suggest that we can transcend or at least mitigate this impasse by returning to the insights offered by the Scottish post-Enlightenment thinkers examined above, and to Craig's own perceptive reading of the Scottish novel. This means framing catastrophe fiction and Scottish fiction not as monadic subjects, one Enlightenment/imperial and the other counter-Enlightenment/decolonizing, but rather as relational and interdependent. Reading novels

which rework catastrophe narrative themes and tropes in Scottish contexts means recognizing that Scottish fiction is in dialectical relation not only to the imperial values of the Anglo-British world against which Craig positions it, but also to itself, as a foundational component of that world. If a Scottish perspective can help decolonize catastrophe fiction by calling attention to the latter's embedded ideological content, then in doing so it must also imply its own decolonization, its own transformation.

Second, any such analysis must be historically and culturally situated, meaning that we must determine how and why specific Scottish novels work with and against specific iterations of science fictional catastrophe at specific historical conjunctures. In this I follow the sf critic Roger Luckhurst in asserting that the political value of any grouping of texts does not reside in the texts themselves, but rather “from attending to the ways in which generic tropes are re-configured by context” in ways that make political meaning available (“Cultural Governance,” 425). As I see it, we cannot understand the cultural and political work Scottish novels do with catastrophe simply by bringing a broad theory of the personalist and communitarian Scottish novel to bear on textual analysis, nor can we determine what such texts mean simply by applying a rubric designed to describe and elucidate the genre of the English catastrophe. Thus, the historically situated literary analyses which follow in Chapter Three focus less on definition, on whether *Lanark* and *The Bridge* ‘are’ Scottish novels or catastrophe novels, and more on the nodal points across which we can see communication, contact, and regeneration in both forms, and in the characters and worlds with which they engage.

The Devolutionary Diasporic Imagination: Catastrophe and Black British Futurism

Turning from the Scottish devolutionary catastrophe to cultural expressions of catastrophe in Britain's black diaspora population can at first seem counter-intuitive. While Scots may have experienced partial exclusion from Anglo-British capitalist modernity, the black diaspora's exclusion from Anglo-Britain has more often been experienced as totalizing and complete. Paul Gilroy influentially argues in *The Black Atlantic* that modern European nation-thinking has been primarily defined by a 'cultural insiderism' which "[constructs] the nation as an ethnically homogenous object and [invokes] ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content" (3). Such formations have tended to include the black diaspora in the life of the nation, but primarily as racialized labor, simultaneously excluding blacks culturally and politically from that life.

It is thus important to consider that Scots played a disproportionately integral role in the creation and expansion of the British Empire, a position which accorded them a significant degree of power and privilege relative to the colonized peoples subject to their control. As Michael Gardiner rightfully argues, in thinking through issues of cultural devolution, it is paramount that we consider each British nation relative to how its own national position has been shaped by participation in the imperial project.⁶⁰ While the dominant discourses of Anglo-British identity might rank cultural Scottishness as 'minor' relative to a robust and fully human Anglo-Britishness, one cannot validly compare this with the British black diaspora's historical experience of complete exclusion.

That said, suggestive points of reference linking the two formations exist, across which experiences shared by both groups can be examined. For instance, both Craig and Gilroy have argued that we should see Scottish and black diasporic culture respectively as politically resistant

⁶⁰ Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution*, x.

‘countercultures of modernity.’⁶¹ Similarly, both contend that this historical positioning afforded by exclusion affords an exceptional perspective from which Scots and diasporic blacks can critique imperial capitalist modernity, and from which they can envision outer-modern utopian futures. While such futures remain abstract in the work of both scholars, we can narrow our focus a bit by returning to my discussion above about Scottish personalism and the postcolonial theory of Frantz Fanon, who argues that it is only in coming together in acts of active, mutual recognition and resistance that it becomes possible to “help...rehabilitate man...man in his totality” (Fanon, *Wretched* 61-2). For Craig, rehabilitating man means coming to terms with how the human has been constructed as a function of British imperial ideology; for Gilroy, it means moving beyond the nation and its associated Enlightenment-era constructs towards a qualitatively new condition.

Each of these might be considered a form of devolutionary thinking insofar as both frame political devolution in terms of postcolonial culture, as a tearing down of established modes of consciousness rather than simply making a show of the formal transfer of political power, as in the political process of Scottish devolution or the granting of the franchise or qualified citizenship to black Britons. Additionally, each thinker indirectly frames their object of study in catastrophic terms, where Scottish and black diasporic culture is seen to speak back to the modern era from a place of post-catastrophic alienation, but also one of privileged clarity and creativity. If we must qualify that clarity and creativity in a Scottish context by reading it relative to Scottish participation in the Empire, the comparison also illuminates how the positioning of the black diaspora might have devolutionary implications.

⁶¹ See Craig, *Out of History* (1996) and *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999), as well as Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

Indeed, if we follow my lead and see the British catastrophe narrative as a proto-devolutionary genre, then the black diaspora's foundational role in its emergence and evolution helps bridge the gap between black Britons and the devolutionary processes from which they have too often been excluded. The black diaspora has figured in the history of British catastrophe narrative since the latter's emergence in the late nineteenth century. Recent scholarship suggests that speculative fiction, catastrophe, and race are complexly implicated in this emergence.⁶² As Louis Chude-Sokei argues in *The Sound of Culture*, the racialized histories of slavery and colonialism provide historical and semantic context for the rise of narrative catastrophe.⁶³ Whether expressed as lost race narratives, future war narratives, or natural or cultural catastrophes, Chude-Sokei reveals how this literary trend reveals a fundamental reliance on discourses of race, particularly where the primary dyad of race/technology is seen to structure adjacent anxieties about racial degeneration and national decline. As a negative counterpoint to linear models of European history and Darwinian narratives of biological/social progress, the black diaspora remains a central, if too often neglected, frame of reference for understanding how narrative catastrophe operates as a specifically racialized expression of British imperial anxiety.

For a variety of black thinkers, artists, and scholars, the historical experience of slavery is best described in terms of catastrophic metaphors and science fictional tropes. In an interview with Gilroy collected in the 1993 anthology *Small Acts*, Toni Morrison fuses black experience, modernity, and an image of catastrophe. She frames the African slave trade as the ultimate modern catastrophe and argues that "modern life begins with slavery" because all of those

⁶² For more, see Rieder, "Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion" (2005) and *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2009); Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (2005); Bould, *Science Fiction* (2012); and Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture* (2016).

⁶³ *The Sound of Culture* 86-91.

abducted, sold, and forced into servitude in the course of the African slave trade were the first to undergo “Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability,” as well as the experience of dislocation, alienation, and dehumanization European philosophers and artists have ascribed to the experience of modernity (qtd. in Gilroy, *Acts* 178). African American writer and musician Greg Tate extends Morrison’s catastrophic metaphor into the realm of science fiction, noting that “black existence and science fiction are one and the same” insofar as the former’s experience of “cultural dislocation, alienation, and estrangement” models the latter’s reliance on these themes and the sf forms to which they give rise (*Last Angel*).

Coming as it does in response to the intergenerational historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, black experience confronts existence ironically, after ‘the end.’ Afrofuturist scholarship from the 1990s onward has illuminated the figurative dimensions of this condition. For Mark Dery, whose definition of the field remains canonical, “the African diaspora quite literally “are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassible force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies” (Dery 180). Taking figures of contact, conquest, and abduction inherent in the cultural history of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade as central metaphors, Afrofuturist thought reads Anglo-European sf’s traditional fascination with exploration and conquest, aliens and fantastic technology, as indicative of a deep current of ignored or repressed violence and domination in the history of European modernity: the space ships are slave ships, the robot workers slaves. In this formulation, all black experience is already articulating a form of alien narrative and all Anglo-European sf modeling the alienation of black subjectivity.

Even though sf purports to deal with the future, and should thus offer a liberating imaginative vantage point from which to critique the present, some Afrofuturist criticism perceives it rather as a futuristic repackaging of the African diaspora's catastrophic experience of slavery. Rather than a medium for imagining possible futures, sf is then seen as a return to a present which has already been 'preprogrammed' in chronopolitical terms as space-time in which the African diaspora is always alien in relation to the categories of white imperialist modernity.⁶⁴ In other words, the past is continually reframed as sf in the present and then projected into the future, where it serves as a focal point toward which history seems to be moving, all the while repeating itself. As Dery wonders, "isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?" (180). To write in the genre, therefore, is potentially to confront the present in alienating terms already dictated by the catastrophic colonial fantasies of the past and to face a future already made safe for their continuation.⁶⁵ Given this conundrum, it is unsurprising that few black Britons have chosen to write sf catastrophe, even though the form seems well suited to the expression of black experience, and despite the fact that it has been central to the historical evolution of British sf since the late nineteenth century.⁶⁶

However, a paucity of black British sf catastrophe does not mean that no such impulse exists, but rather that black artists have historically expressed it elsewhere, most noticeably in the realm of sound. Reading the black diaspora culturally as a diffuse, interconnected network,

⁶⁴ As Eshun puts it, paraphrasing Samuel Delany and William Gibson, "science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian," but rather "a means through which to preprogram the present" ("Further Considerations" 290).

⁶⁵ This conclusion is similar to the one reached by the British sf writer and critic Gwyneth Jones, who argues that the genre is often nothing more than a coded history of Euro-American capitalist expansion into 'other realms' and 'other times.' The problem for Jones is that sf's imagined places and times are never that far from the real histories and ongoing legacies of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism in our realms and our times. For more on this, see Jones, "Metempsychosis of the Machine: Science Fiction in the Halls of Karma" (1997).

⁶⁶ Nicholas Ruddick's *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction* (1993), for example, devotes more than half of its four chapters to the theorization and analysis of British catastrophe narrative.

Chude-Sokei argues that in order to understand this formation we must see it as a process, and moreover that “sound is the primary technology structuring this cultural sprawl” (“Dr. Satan” 6). The nature of this transatlantic sonic discontinuum has been generally theorized relative to Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’ thesis and extended more specifically into the realm of sound by Mark Davis. Gilroy rejects the ‘arboreal’ logic of the ethnically particular models of belonging associated with the nation, Western rationality, and liberal humanism, offering in their place the image of the ship—“a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion”—as the chronotope most capable of conceptualizing the transnational dynamics of the African diaspora.⁶⁷ Davis’s innovation on this concept is to frame it as a virtual domain—‘the Black Electronic’—which he establishes as an alternative, non-visual, and non-narrative cyberspace. Fusing Marshall McLuhan’s conception of acoustic (versus visual) space with Gilroy’s reading of the black Atlantic as a global counterculture of modernity, Davis’ ‘Black Electronic’ names “those electro-acoustic cyberspaces that emerge from the historical-cultural context of the Black Atlantic” (“Black”).

However, this formation is not only black and electronic, but also catastrophic. In *The Last Angel of History* (1995), a documentary essay on the intersections between science fiction, technology, and black sound cultures in the twentieth century, director John Akomfrah and writer Edward George sketch a virtual cartography of the Black Electronic, drawing a discontinuous line between early twentieth-century American blues and the most futuristic black electronic musics of our contemporary globalized era. As one of the critics involved in the project, Kodwo Eshun, has argued, Afrofuturist aesthetics collectively signify “a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic

⁶⁷ *The Black Atlantic* 3-4.

projection” (Eshun, “Future Considerations” 301). In other words, the virtual projections of Afrofuturist art call backward from the future, from after the end, hoping to reverse-engineer time in a disaster-simulating feedback loop capable of creating a present more hospitable to black existence. Thus, we can see the Black Electronic as a global culture of sonic catastrophe, calling out in a variety of historically and culturally discontinuous voices for both our recognition of a profound trauma and hope for a more fully human future.

However, this formulation comes packaged with a problematic assumption which mistakenly frames the national and transnational as binary opposites, such that the experience of the black diaspora comes to be seen as either one or the other. A great deal of Afrofuturist theory partakes of this assumption, in part because much of it incorporates the conscious or unconscious acceptance of Gilroy’s argument that the black diaspora ought to be seen first and foremost as a transnational formation. So dominant has Gilroy’s reading of black vernacular musical cultures been that few avoid it altogether and, when it comes to the black electronic musics discussed in this dissertation, most accord it a central place in their critical framework.⁶⁸ While Gilroy is right to draw attention to how transnational vectors have shaped and reshaped black cultures across ethnically and culturally particularized frontiers, we need not turn the decentered figure of passage into the apotheosis of black cultural practice. This approach neglects to sufficiently consider the specifically rooted dimensions of that practice which emerge at the origins and termini of such voyages.

To remedy Gilroy’s privileging of the universal at the expense of the specific we need only look to Eshun’s definition of Afrofuturism, which locates “the appeals that black artists,

⁶⁸ For examples of this, see: Reynolds, *Energy Flash* 258; Quinn, “Rumble in the Jungle: The Invisible History of Drum ‘n Bass” 3-5 and 8-11; Jonker, “Black Secret Technology”; Ferrigno, “The Dark Side: Representing Science Fiction in Drum ‘n Bass” 96; and McLeod, “Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism, and Meaning in Popular Music” 342.

musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments where any future was made difficult for them to imagine” (“Future Considerations” 294). Even if we see such ‘moments’ in primarily transnational terms, we cannot avoid the national conditions and specific histories which circumscribe and enable black cultural production. Whether we are talking about Kingston in the 1960s, New York City in the ‘70s, Detroit in the ‘80s, London in the ‘90s, or Lagos in the new millennium, understanding Afrofuturism conceptually as a network of sonic processes is only one part of illuminating the moments to which these processes give rise as they accrue at specific sites in historically particular ways.

As Chude-Sokei argues, in order to make itself known in specific national contexts, Afrodiasporic culture often masks its inherent cross-cultural hybridity, disguising the transnational as the national.⁶⁹ Following from this, however, we must recognize how diasporic concepts like the black Atlantic run the risk of similarly obscuring the national dimensions which give shape to the ‘moments’ described by Eshun. Doing so does mean we need reassert the ethnic primacy of ‘roots’ over dispersed ‘routes,’ but more that routes do not matter unless we consider them to be lines drawn between places. Instead, I suggest we see global patterns of migration and transnational hybridity—such as those which brought thousands of black colonial migrants to Britain in the thirty years following the Second World War—relative to how that experience has been shaped as a more localized form of creative expression.

It is with this perspective in mind that we arrive at one of those ‘moments’ mentioned above—1990s London and the emergence of Jungle/Drum ‘n’ Bass (JDB). JDB is a genre of electronic dance music which emerged in inner-city London in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

⁶⁹ Chude-Sokei’s example here comprises the cross-cultural currents between African, Jamaica, and the US which produced, among other things, the sonic forms we have come to know as ‘Jamaican’ reggae and ‘American’ hip-hop. For more on this, see “Dr. Satan’s Echo Chamber” 8.

On the one hand, JDB is the syncretic amalgam of a diffuse and undeniably transnational process of black musical innovation and cultural collaboration. While undeniably linked to its birth in London's inner-city neighborhoods, its core elements generally derive from outside Britain and can be traced to patterns of migration and syncretism within Gilroy's black Atlantic. On the other, JDB is undeniably an example of Britain's own black sonic catastrophism. It is, as Simon Reynolds notes, often juxtaposed in terms of its cultural history as a counterpart to American blues, jazz, and hip-hop, as "the first significant and truly black British music" (*Energy* 247). This sense of national ownership can be seen in the way the scene's enthusiasts and artists discuss it as 'their own.' As British DJ, journalist, and avowed junglist Brian Belle-Fortune remarks, "It was important that [JDB] was made here. Rather than trying to get your head around another language, different names, and unfamiliar geography, it was all here..." (31). JDB was first and foremost a sound which brought together multicultural British communities whose subcultural and sonic affiliations underlined an alternative national mythos around which a broader and more inclusive reading of British nationality coalesced.

Indeed, the evocation of the nation in JDB subculture has much to do with the revision of the dominant terms of imperial British nationalism's focus on indigeneity and belonging. For example, in a 1994 BBC 2 documentary called *Jungle Fever*, jungle MC UK Apache articulates precisely this sense of organic national belonging as one of the main attractions of JDB subculture: "The jungle, 'cause it's from England, right, I can really relate to it. It's important to me because I'm born here in England and London and nobody can tell me that I'm not from here... and it's like the jungle is drawing me back into my roots, where I'm from...you're born in England, be proud of it, and don't nobody tell you no different, no BNP or anything like that" ("Jungle Fever"). Apache's resistant statement of belonging perfectly embodies the

transnational/national dynamic. His well-known “Original Nuttah,” (for instance, features a man of ethnic Indian origin performing in the style of Jamaican ragga, set to a compound of breakbeats and bass emerging from the British inner city, and situated socio-historically as a marker of British national belonging. It is in this way that JDB functioned as a means of thinking the future of the nation in terms free of the cumbersome baggage of racial and ethnic particularity and traditional nationalist narratives of kinship and indigeneity. All of this is tied together first and foremost by the combination of, as Simon Reynolds often describes it, JDB’s very British baseline combination of ‘roots ‘n’ future,’ a grounded landing zone for diasporic expression that is rooted in past histories of migration, but which also provides a creative departure point for a futurism that is both ‘black’ and multicultural and channeled through its own specifically British ‘moment.’

Having arrived at JDB as a form of British sonic futurism, we must still make the much more difficult leap between the idea of a sonic futurism—which in the case of JDB is almost entirely non-narrative—and a science fiction. Doing so means engaging with the concept of ‘sonic fiction,’ developed by Eshun in his idiosyncratic 1999 opus *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. Attempting to revise understandings of both ‘black’ and ‘music,’ Eshun suggestively closes the gap between fiction and sound, reconceiving the sonic (dis)continuum of black Atlantic futurism as a diffuse constellation of black ‘sonic fictions.’⁷⁰ In order to think ‘fiction’ in Eshun’s terms, however, we must reject most of what we know about the fictional. For one, because sonic fictions exist in and as sound, they are necessarily beyond representation. Bypassing both texts and ‘social texts’ (such as subcultures), Eshun instead

⁷⁰ Discontinuous in the same way that Gilroy’s Black Atlantic cultural formation is discontinuous, spread out unevenly in the ‘rhizomorphic,’ non-arboreal structure Gilroy borrows from Deleuze and Guattari. Also like Gilroy, Eshun opposes this synthetic discontinuum with the supposedly natural linear traditions conventionally associated with both white imperial and black anti-colonial nationalisms.

focuses on the sounds around which such texts agglomerate, leaving the social behind. Such dissident musics, he suggests, are precisely those which call out to the future, which remap and rezone white European representations of futurity in ways more amenable to Afrodiasporic experience.

Being ‘grabbed’ by sound—what Eshun elsewhere refers to as ‘audio abduction’—is key to understanding how sonic fiction produces this effect, ‘triggering the body,’ or ‘switching it on.’ Whereas early critics of the culture industry railed against the way music worked to dupe the consumer’s consciousness by aligning his or her identity with the capitalist system in which they were ensnared,⁷¹ Eshun reverses this focus by reorienting the listener’s relation to sound, moving from consciousness to embodiment. Rather than grabbing your mind and absconding with it in alienation, sound abducts your body, “because sound is literally articulating you as a kind of exoskeleton. It’s almost like your feet are gaining an intelligence at the expense of your head... Anywhere you have a sense of tension, that’s the beginning, that’s the signs of a bodily intelligence switching itself on. And that’s what rhythm is doing. (“Abducted”). So accustomed are we to thinking about music, Eshun argues, that we entirely ignore what music is actually doing to us when we listen to and feel it; it’s switching our bodies on, making consciousness tactile and knowledge sensual. Importantly, this shift in bodily perception does fracture and alienate us, severing the subject from self and society.⁷²

Like the Black Atlantic conceptual model to which his reading remains indebted, Eshun’s formulation situates sonic fictions as catastrophic portals onto “[an] Outer Side” (6) beyond the

⁷¹ This is a simplified version of the argument made about ‘the culture industry’ by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 120-167.

⁷² Simon Reynolds recognizes the power of this vital moment when he writes of listening to JDB at London’s AWOL club that “At massive volume, knowledge is visceral, something your body understands as it’s seduced and ensnared by the music’s paradoxes” (*Energy* 354).

alienating social constructs of Western modernity. “Sonic Futurism,” Eshun writes, “doesn’t locate you in tradition; instead it dislocates you from origins. It uproutes you by inducing a gulf crisis, a perceptual daze” (*Brilliant* 1).⁷³ This ‘outer’ is similar to the vernacular modernism of Gilroy’s ‘counterculture of modernity’ but with the emphasis on the recovery of the past seemingly disavowed and an increased attention to the future as a site of liberating alienation. “[Sonic fiction],” Eshun writes, “alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future...amplifying the rates of becoming alien” (*Brilliant* 5 *my italics*). Eshun’s sonic fiction model is therefore an intensification of Gilroy’s reading of black vernacular cultures which not only analyzes and critiques the irony of double consciousness and the ‘ethnic insiderism’ of national cultural formations, but severs all connections with the past in a frantic race to “[assemble] conceptual approaches and counter memorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations” (“Future Considerations” 298). Like catastrophe narratives, Eshun’s sonic fictions question the human by making aliens of their ‘readers’ through the purposeful production of existential crisis. Those who participate in this process are offered a glimpse—or, more accurately, a ‘feeling’—of hazy not-yet worlds beyond the totality of ‘the world’ in which they are embedded.

My extension of Eshun’s theory into a British context enables a devolutionary reading of catastrophic JDB sonic fictions, but also exposes a crucial problem within the larger Black Atlantic futurist model he develops. On the one hand, the devolutionary potential is clear where his emphasis falls on the transcendence of existing categories—the nation, the subject—through which the hierarchies of white imperial privilege and capitalist power are reproduced. In this, Eshun’s theory—like Gilroy’s—begins to follow a similar path to that taken by the Scottish

⁷³The replacement of the word ‘roots’ with routes signifies, as it does for Gilroy, a deliberate substitution of ‘ethnic insiderism’ for decentered, transnational cultural formations.

postcolonial personalism of Craig. Such correspondences must, of course, be carefully qualified insofar as there has never been any formal attempt to ‘devolve’ power to a black British political constituency. If the tendency in the Scottish devolutionary imagination has been to explore the nature of the human as it intersects with interpersonal relations, the corresponding tendency in Afrofuturist criticism—which works in less certain relation to the category of the human—has been to highlight how artists and thinkers question the category of the human altogether. This can be seen in the consistent reference, both in the music and the theory, to the tropes of darkness, mythology, and alienation. Responding to the black diaspora’s exclusion from liberal humanism and capitalist modernity, Afrofuturist sonic fictions of the black Electronic operate by embracing that exclusion, foregrounding the alien or cyborg as a posthuman construction. This orientation changes a discussion of devolutionary catastrophe implicitly because it transforms disaster from a catalyst for the devolutionary rejuvenation *of* the human to a mechanism for liberation *from* the human.

The first of these formulations insists on the centrality of human survival in any possible devolutionary future, on the rehabilitation of the human rather than its transcendence. If we return to the dialogue explored above between the black Atlantic school of thought and its linked Afrofuturist current, we can see that a culture of survival comes to play an extremely pivotal role in both articulating alienation and making sense of possibility and hope. Gilroy writes that “In the shadow of catastrophe, luminous *survivor* testimony and morally contested memory...culture had to be salvaged and made anew from the ashes of horror, destruction, and loss” (“Civilisationism” my italics). Black diasporic culture bears the imprint of its catastrophic origins: on the one hand it traces the connections between a past that is always influencing social alienation in the present; on the other, it offers up the byproduct of this process—a kind of

utopian yearning for something beyond—in the expression of survival.⁷⁴ It is in this act of survival that the human is reframed and reconstituted in connection with an evolving historical consciousness rather than banished entirely.

However, Eshun also problematically implies a darker and less historical form of black British devolutionary imagination in JDB, one which emphasizes not survival but a nihilistic reliance on death as aesthetic liberation. While the aesthetic dimension is absolutely essential in, as Gilroy notes, supplying the courage and rationale for action, it is not a substitute for action. Laura Chrisman has cogently pointed out that one of Gilroy's major theoretical miscues is to make his vanguard black Atlantic counterculture the apotheosis of a utopian black politics of transfiguration and, furthermore, to aestheticize that politics as a transcendental death-drive in black Atlantic slave culture.⁷⁵ For Gilroy, "only the principle and representation of negativity and the rejection of a possible 'afterlife' or future earthly life...can gesture toward an 'authentic' emancipatory future condition of being" (Chrisman 84).⁷⁶ Gilroy's stance therefore separates critique from action, politics-as-aesthetics from politics-as-praxis. Because he brackets off the grand political narratives of European modernity (particularly Marxist models of history and a socialist future), Gilroy's lived-in present lacks a future outside an aestheticized 'not-yet' of "qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association" (*Atlantic* 37). While he may solve the problem of closed, entropic national cultures dominated by exclusive

⁷⁴ Mark Sinker writes that "Part of the story of black music (the affirmative, soul-gospel aspect) has always been...that losing everything except basic dignity and decency *is potentially a survivable disaster*" ("Loving the Alien" my italics).

⁷⁵ For more, see Chrisman, "Journeying to Death: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*," in *Postcolonial Contraventions* 73-88.

⁷⁶ Gilroy himself outlines this argument in *The Black Atlantic* 37-38.

constructions of roots and tradition, he leaves us with yet another closed system, a pool full of ships sailing in circles, “journeying to death.”⁷⁷

Given the centrality of Gilroy’s conceptual model to Eshun’s argument, it is no surprise to see this assumption in play there as well. Eshun’s theory seems at first to reanimate Gilroy’s emphasis on aesthetic death by reframing the terms of the debate. If Gilroy looks upon the cultural life of the black diaspora as an alienated counterforce that can only exist as a negative remnant or ghostly construction haunting global capitalist modernity, Eshun’s reading of Afrofuturist sound cultures attempts to revitalize this moribund reality by deemphasizing the African diaspora’s historical experience of catastrophe and framing it relative to the future. For Eshun, black Atlantic futurism is not about catastrophe but *anastrophe*; rather than a sign of the past come apart, it is a marker of the future coming together. Likewise, the symbolic aesthetic death entailed in the process of sonic fiction and ‘audio abduction’ isn’t a virtual simulation of the human dying as much as it is of the inhuman living. While this certainly puts a sunnier spin on Gilroy’s romanticization of aesthetic death, it does not do away with his fascination with mortality as a mode of transcendent liberation. More accurately, it argues that death works perfectly well as political resistance, partly because it does not actually involve dying, but evolving into a new posthuman, alien being rooted in negativity. If Gilroy can offer utopia only in a deathly aesthetic negativity, Eshun can offer life only as inhuman dystopia.

Eshun’s technologically mediated alien future is ultimately far too closely allied with the very forms of capitalist domination it would seek to escape. We can see this by framing Eshun relative to the accelerationism embedded in his argument, which can be traced to his involvement in the short-lived Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a philosophical

⁷⁷ This is Chrisman’s phrase.

collective formed in the mid-1990s at England's Warwick University by philosopher Nick Land and technoculture theorist Sadie Plant. Two points emerge from CCRU thought which are important here. The first is the idea that crisis and disorder are productive conditions insofar as they unsettle sclerotic social structures and promote radical change. The second is that capitalism, and particularly the chaotic disposition of unregulated market forces, is the ultimate driver of crisis and disorder. The greater body of CCRU thought, but that of Land and Plant in particular, drew upon the way these points emerge from the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and read them as exhortations not to fight capitalism through direct social action or ideological critique, but rather to accelerate it, to promote disorder and chaos through capitalism's 'deterritorializing' tendencies, to bring the capitalist future closer as fast as possible.⁷⁸

With this in mind the group investigated how micro-economies and cultures were reaching out to the future in ways enabled by capitalist systems of exchange, commodification, and desire. Focused around this philosophical base and a host of new technologies and popular culture (information technologies, virtual reality, rave music, and cybernetics) the CCRU attempted to creatively jumpstart and/or internally combust what seemed to them like a society which had ground to a halt.⁷⁹ The social alienation long critiqued as a defining characteristic of modern capitalist societies by Marxists was for the CCRU a source of irreverent pride; the

⁷⁸ This theoretical orientation has taken on a new name since its inception in the heady days of the CCRU and is now most often described as 'Accelerationism.' In 2014 former CCRU member and philosopher Robin Mackay edited *#Accelerate: The Accelerationism Reader*, an intellectual history of accelerationist thought from Marx to the present day. For more on the CCRU's history and politics, see Reynolds, "Renegade Academia", and Berger, "Acceleration Now, or how we can learn to stop fearing and love chaos."

⁷⁹ In this, as Simon Reynolds implies, CCRU discourse mirrored and affirmed Thatcherism's rhetoric of national decline and its insistence that history was to be read in evolutionary terms as an inevitable march towards a capitalist future ("Renegade Academia").

group's collectively authored essay "Swarmmachines" ends with the gleeful boast "alienated and loving it!" (qtd. in Reynolds, "Renegade Academia").

Eshun's particular intervention into this larger discussion is to suggest that the musics associated with black Atlantic Futurism occupy—much as Gilroy might have it— a kind of vanguard position within capitalist modernity's global narrative. Because always already split by a historical double consciousness, the African diaspora's existence is always already alienated. Because always already looking to the future for reprieve from their own alien existence, black futurists in Eshun's CCRU-influenced reading have always already been fighting for the future on the same ground as capitalism, by trying to retrospectively pre-program the present within the virtual space of the future conditional tense, to make it a space safe for a black alien dispensation. If capital tends to do so in order to make the future safe for capital, then Afrofuturism does so as a means of imagining a world safe for the African diaspora. While the intended outcomes are different—I am not, for example, dubbing Eshun a defender of neoliberal capitalism—each mechanism depends upon an acceptance of crisis and disaster as the means by which this future will arise. This becomes a problem precisely when, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, the forms of capitalist and Afrofuturist subjectivities overlap with and enable one another, simultaneously freeing characters while locking them into a historical stasis beyond which no devolutionary imagination can proceed.

Chapter Summaries

In the following chapters I explore three sets of British devolutionary catastrophe narratives in a historical sequence which begins in the early 1950s and extends into the late 1990s. I do this for a number of reasons. First, while I concede that the emphasis on catastrophe in British fiction

predates the postwar period by at least eighty years, it is in the 1950s that the form experiences a pronounced resurgence which I assert structures how the devolutionary imagination and Anglo-British imperial ideology is conceived, reframed, and resisted by subsequent texts in the ensuing decades. Second, while the form is reconstituted and reframed to suit postwar conditions during the decade, this repurposing camouflages what I assert is a deeper ideological continuity across the twentieth century. While I do not follow the ‘English devolutionary catastrophe’ through its various permutations between 1950 and 1980,⁸⁰ I nonetheless treat the genre implicitly as a baseline site of critical reflection on the development of a nascent English national consciousness. In beginning with the novels of John Wyndham, I elect to start with the writer who, more than any other, was responsible for the resuscitation of the form and the instantiation of its ideological value in the second half of the twentieth century. Even when trying consciously to break or interrogate Wyndham’s mold, few writers who followed him were able to ignore his paradigmatic example.

I also choose to move historically across decades because the texts I examine all, in some way or another, operate in opposition to the Anglo-British model of capitalist modernity which underlies our official understanding of historical progression. The historical conditions which shape Wyndham’s iteration of English devolutionary imagination are in turn reframed by his novels before blending in with and informing the larger Anglo-British structure of feeling to which later English, Scottish, and black British texts respond. Moving chronologically illustrates the shifting manner in which this process occurs while also allowing for greater understanding of how an English devolutionary imagination in the 1950s can produce effects in a Scottish

⁸⁰ From the novels of Wyndham, Christopher, Fowler Wright, and Maine into the ‘60s, where it is reconceived by J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, and Michael Moorcock, and later, into the 70s, when it is revised once again by the likes of Doris Lessing, Christopher Priest, and Angela Carter, and where the basic outline of the disaster novel pops up across the media spectrum in television shows like *Survivors* (1975-77).

devolutionary imagination in the 1980s and a black British devolutionary imagination in the 1990s.

I read Scottish fiction from the 1980s not only because that decade saw the first major flowering of Scottish devolutionary culture since the 1920s and '30s, but also because it is from this moment that Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and Iain Banks' *The Bridge* look both forward and back simultaneously. Moving from the first to the second, I show how both texts, clearly in conversation with one another, also frame their interventions against earlier English sf catastrophe narratives which have themselves contributed ideological support to the rising tide of Thatcherite neoliberal economic and social reform against which both Scottish texts position themselves. My readings of black British fictions of sonic catastrophe in the 1990s move both with and against Scottish and English catastrophes insofar as they trouble the closed Anglo-British historical narrative from a complex perspective inside a changing, multicultural Britain, but also from outside the embedded assumptions which frame British multiculturalism in racially dominating ways.

My second chapter, "John Wyndham and the Catastrophe of Englishness," analyzes two catastrophe novels by the English sf writer John Wyndham: *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). The chapter explores how Wyndham's novels mediate the collapse of Anglo-British cultural and political paradigms, but also how they participate in the affirmation of an English devolutionary ideology expressed as territorially bound and racially and culturally white. *The Day of the Triffids* was published four years after Indian independence initiated the formal dissolution of Britain's colonial empire, and in the midst of the consolidation of social collectivism as the basis of modern British democracy. These two tectonic shifts in modern British history—one predicated on the figure of national collapse and the other on

national reconsolidation—form the core dynamic driving the text’s narrative momentum, as well as its central thematic and critical imperatives. I follow how the text moves from a pointed devolutionary critique of British capitalist modernity to the promotion of a liberated and radical bourgeois ethic, and then on to an inherently problematic naturalization of that ethic—and the radical freedom it provides—as fundamentally English.

My reading of this tendency in *The Day of the Triffids* sets up my investigation of the dynamics of race, citizenship, and postcolonial nationality in Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). Situating the text against reverse colonial immigration in the 1950s and the politics of racial nationalism it engendered, I explore the text’s use of the trope of invasion to critique the unacknowledged but fundamental role played by race in the mediation of the relationship between cultural Englishness and social and political Britishness. Through this analysis the chapter illustrates how catastrophe figures figure not transformation or the construction of space for productive political dialogue and progressive devolutionary culture, but rather a pessimistic historical stasis and an ultimate reaffirmation of white English supremacist ideology.

Chapter Three, “Scottish Catastrophe, Science Fiction, and the Devolutionary Imagination,” explores how two Scottish speculative novels of the 1980s, Gray’s *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) and Banks’ *The Bridge* (1986) engage with, reframe, and ultimately reject the imperial values embedded in British narrative catastrophe. The chapter investigates how these texts express a complicated struggle with not only a shifting British capitalist modernity as a historical reality, but also with the literary realism, linear history, and Enlightenment models of an isolated, reflective subject-self in and by which that reality is lived as historical experience. I seek to understand how both bring a history of Scottish personalist thought to bear on their readings of self and society and how, more specifically, both novels frame human life as

inherently social and how, working from this conclusion, they suggest we begin to form devolved, postcolonial communities grounded in the immediacy of mutual recognition and common relation.

This chapter demonstrates how both novels reflexively challenge the Anglo-British ideology embedded in earlier iterations of catastrophe by internalizing disaster within a broader framework of interpersonal metaphors. I do this by situating both novels relative to the respective generational eras they cover—the 1940s and ‘50s for Gray; the 1960s and ‘70s for Banks—but also to the specific socio-political conditions of the Thatcherite 1980s in which they emerge, and the specific dialogues with English devolutionary catastrophe they enact. Reading *Lanark* relative to the 1950s catastrophe novel and juxtaposing Banks with the form’s revision by New Wave writers in the 1960s allows me to explore how each text’s rejection of Anglo-British capitalist modernity proceeds not only from idealized Scottish antecedents, but also from historically specific, and inter-generic—dialogues with sf catastrophe. My analysis reveals how each text criticizes and ultimately rejects the catastrophic as a self-serving and ahistorical form of imperial cultural narcissism.

Chapter Four, “A Whole New World Under the Cover of Darkness: The Microcatastrophes of Black British Sonic Fiction,” examines two popular fictions of the 1990s which deal with black British sonic culture as an alternative form of catastrophe fiction: Two Fingers and James T. Kirk’s pulp novel *Junglist* (1995) and China Miéville’s urban fantasy novel *King Rat* (1998). I situate both relative to the historical conjuncture of early to mid-1990s multicultural London, where each text’s drama plays out against the after-effects of the Thatcherite turn to neoliberal capitalism, white English heritage culture, and the renewed racialization of black Britain. Effectively reading textual depictions of both social and sonic

experience, I trace how the texts present sonic fictional experience as an internalized catastrophe expressive of the historical experience of social exclusion and political and cultural ambivalence of Britain's black diaspora. Building on the discussion above about Afrofuturist aesthetics and the 'microcatastrophes' of Jungle/Drum 'n Bass music, I read each text for how it presents sonic fiction as a form of liberating catastrophic limit experience I link to devolutionary tendencies in JDB's specifically British form of black Atlantic sonic culture.

My primary argument in this chapter is that both texts present sonic fictional catastrophe as a hinge point between worlds. The first is the world of Anglo-British history and social relations, from which the black diaspora has only ever been uncomfortably included, and the second is an aesthetic realm of metaphysical liberation into which subjects fall when affected by the alienating bodily experience of JDB. I explore how *Junglist* problematically segregates the two worlds, posing them as an either/or option. This leads to a debilitating condition in which aesthetic death-as-devolution becomes the only possible means of social transformation and catastrophe becomes yet another way of reaffirming, rather than challenging, the imperial capitalist ideology embedded in the Anglo-British devolutionary imagination. However, I also show how *King Rat* turns against this separation, upending and critiquing the earlier text's insistence on separating the historical, changing world from a liberating, transcendent one.

Chapter Two: John Wyndham and the Catastrophe of Englishness

Introduction

Midway through the English speculative fiction writer John Wyndham's most famous novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, the middle-class everyman narrator offers the reader an apt metaphor for the catastrophe unfolding around him in the streets of central London: "we danced, on the brink of an unknown future, to an echo from a vanished past" (105).⁸¹ On the one hand, this remark dramatizes the particularly British experience of capitalist modernity in the middle of the twentieth century, when the collapse of the formerly vast British Empire and the metropolitan transition to the social democratic welfare state reorganized the country's material and ideological status quo. On the other, the remark mediates this historical transition by framing it in catastrophic terms, foregrounding the destruction and subversion of an established order and the imminent onrush of an uncertain future. Perhaps most importantly, however, is Wyndham's emphasis on the structural primacy of those historical 'echoes,' ideological specters of the past which resound throughout and inform the creation of a new, post-catastrophic order.

Catastrophe, a theme and figure with a long history in English Literature and popular culture, is an apt concept with which to examine the socio-cultural life of midcentury Britain.⁸² For one, the material and ideological structures underlying Anglo-British society were transforming dramatically after 1945 in ways which evoke the catastrophic. Exhausted and bankrupt following the Second World War, the British government spent much of the 1950s first defending its erstwhile role as an imperial power, and then, following the deflating

⁸¹ Hereafter, all references to the text will be indicated by the condensed *DT*.

⁸² For more on the history of catastrophe in English Literature, see Parrinder, "H.G. Wells and the Fiction of Catastrophe" 40-58 and Ruddick, *Ultimate Island: On the Nature of British Science Fiction* 97-171.

embarrassment of the 1956 Suez Crisis, tacitly relinquishing that authority to ascendant American hegemony. On the domestic front, the national experience of wartime privation and social cohesion—crafted into a patriotic narrative of Britishness during the war⁸³—ultimately led to the embrace of the social democratic provisions laid out in the 1942 Beveridge Report, which promised widespread social reform rooted in common sacrifice. Following the landslide victory of Clement Attlee’s Labour government in the General Election of 1945, such reforms—including the National Insurance tax system and the National Health Service—were implemented as keystones of the British Welfare State.

Moreover, this dynamic of imperial contraction and reconstruction highlighted crucial issues of citizenship and national belonging during the period. From the close of the war onward tens of thousands of European refugees and formerly colonized peoples immigrated to the United Kingdom. This prompted legislation like the 1948 British Nationality Act, which delineated colonial ‘subjects’ from British citizens, in part by making ethnicity, culture, and territory markers of national belonging.⁸⁴ Whether seen from the left or right of the political spectrum, each of these transformations evokes catastrophe insofar as they denote an abrupt turn or destruction of existing modes of social and ideological relations, and their subversion by alternate forms.

Catastrophe also provides a suggestive methodology for understanding the more specific cultural reactions to these historical phenomena. Particularly, looking at these transitions from the vantage point of catastrophic themes and metaphors illuminates the groundswell of cultural blowback against the official forms of Anglo-British state consciousness through which these

⁸³ For more on this, see Angus Calder’s *The Myth of the Blitz* (1992).

⁸⁴ For more on the specifics of the British Nationality Act, see Baucom, *Out of Place* 7-14 and Hepburn, *Around 45: Literature, Citizenship, Rights* 11-16.

transformations manifested. It is commonly understood that the period immediately following WWII was one ruled by narratives of British unity, political consensus, and economic stability, wherein the modernization of British state and society was undertaken in part as a means of consolidating political change around a centralizing ideology of Britishness.⁸⁵ However, as Michael Gardiner argues, it is precisely at this moment of presumed uniformity in British politics and culture that the very idea of modern Britain, soon to be deprived of its imperial *raison d'être*, begins to disintegrate in what he calls the “post-British moment of the mid-1950s,” when “the knot of ‘British state/English culture’ could no longer be exported into empire, with ‘English’ as an ideal cultural-linguistic form.”⁸⁶ This is to say that, after a pronounced ‘Britishing’ period during and immediately following the war, a state-managed myth of what it meant to be British slowly began ceding ground, in the face of economic, cultural, and constitutional crisis, to resurgent forms of devolutionary culture and civic nationhood.

Chief among these was what Tom Nairn calls ‘the English Enigma,’ the undefined and miasmatic sense of Englishness that had not spoken outside a British context in more than two hundred and fifty years.⁸⁷ In naming this nascent devolutionary Englishness, I follow Gardiner’s demarcation between an official, instrumentalized Englishness seen as state-managed, or ‘disciplined,’ often for imperial ends, and an Englishness grounded in lived experience, in the process and feeling of being English and of making the national culture.⁸⁸ The first of these constructions is largely ahistorical, reliant on organicist paradigms of an everlasting English state fortifying the national culture from time immemorial. The second, however, is defiantly historical, driven from below by popular contestations of national identity and mediated by

⁸⁵ See Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace: British History Since 1945* 3-28.

⁸⁶ Gardiner, *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature* 2, 1.

⁸⁷ Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* 291-305.

⁸⁸ *The Return of England in English Literature* 1-12.

complex discourses of class, race, and culture. What makes these latter articulations of national culture devolutionary is their embeddedness in and against official formations, where they denote not only a chronologically posterior evolution of Britishness, but rather a sub- or counter-disciplinary alternative to imperial Anglo-British values and material social relations. Because such forms also function as “[critiques] working within various forms of empire,” they are by nature postcolonial in terms of their challenge to the material relations and epistemological structures of imperial state culture (Gardiner, *Scottish Literature* 1).

Yet, because this emergent Englishness remained inchoate and ill-defined, it was by nature inaccessible directly and remained instead the province of a specifically English speculative culture. This chapter situates the postwar English catastrophe novel as a site of critical reflection on this tension between instrumental British formations and counter-disciplinary forms of sub-national culture. More specifically, I read the postwar catastrophe novels of John Wyndham at the confluence of imperial decline, national reconstruction, and the evolving ideological discourse of citizenship in order to trace the formation of a complex, conflicted, and indirect expression of devolutionary Englishness after 1945. Like Jed Esty in *A Shrinking Island*, I read this devolutionary impulse as corresponding to a broader ‘anthropological turn’ in Anglo-British intellectual and creative culture, wherein “English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture” by turning from the abstract realm of aesthetics to the ethnolinguistically and territorially bound realm of the nation (2). However, I extend Esty’s discussion of late modernism and the postwar rise of British Cultural Studies into the realm of genre fiction, where Wyndham’s novels can be seen to perform similar ideological maneuvers.

In one sense this arguments corresponds to a broader concern with genre. Much as they had in the nineteenth century, British catastrophe narratives proliferated in the postwar period at a time of pronounced imperial instability. This fact has often led sf writers and literary critics alike to assume that such novels—which depict the ultimate collapse and/or invasion of the imperial metropolis—should be read as anxious fables of collapsing civilization, imperial power, and cultural authority. Despite the tenacity of these readings, however, which occur frequently enough for Paul Kincaid to refer to them as “the common view” (*Read* 54), few have ever satisfactorily explained how English catastrophe novels during the 1950s mediate the experience of imperial decline or, as Jordanna Bailkin puts it, how they contribute to the rearticulation of empire in a new form, as a kind of ‘afterlife.’⁸⁹

In another sense, the argument proceeds from what I see as flawed readings of John Wyndham, who has too often been read by sf critics and writers as an atavistic conservative pandering to the stale tastes of a middlebrow readership desperate for feel-good stories about punchy Britons enduring in the face of traumatic change. Therefore, so the received interpretation goes, Wyndham should be understood primarily as a proponent of recrudescant middle-class mores and values, and as an apologist for the disempowerment of imperial Anglo-Britain.⁹⁰ This argument has kept critics largely focused on repeating such truisms and it has obscured any recognition of the more nuanced and socially critical representations of the class, race, and gender dynamics present in the texts themselves. Recent Wyndham scholarship has begun to rightfully recuperate the progressive dimensions to his work, among them challenges to British imperial humanism and imperial ideology, to the instrumentalism of industrial capitalist

⁸⁹ Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* 1-22.

⁹⁰ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree* 293-6; Ruddick, *Ultimate Island* 140; Scarborough, “John Wyndham” 219-223; Priest, “British Science Fiction” 194-5.

modernity, and to a similar instrumentalism inherent in the British postwar settlement.⁹¹ Yet, though nearly all agree that Wyndham's novels are "very, very English" (Kincaid, *Read* 54), few have yet explored the intersections between the social critique in Wyndham's fiction and "Wyndham's fascination with Englishness" (Slattery 39), nor have any really attempted to see Wyndham as advancing arguments about English culture that might be construed as devolutionary.

My close reading of catastrophe in Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos* reveals that these two concerns are conjoined and inseparable. Indeed, Wyndham's novels are 'very, very English' because the social critique embedded in the act of everyday, ordinary English citizens rebuilding a freer and more just post-catastrophic society is tied to the novels' insistence that we see this practice in terms of its connection to an inborn respect for freedom, self-reliance, and resistance to authority. Wyndham's novels mark as exclusively English. This requires a subtle ideological maneuver, what Cairns Craig refers to in discussions of the period as 'the English Ideology.'⁹² The strategic value in the English ideology is in the way it manages to remove England from the destabilizing forces of capitalist modernity—which threaten to erode its cultural centrality—while simultaneously maintaining that centrality. Its major effect is defensive and tinged with imperial implications insofar as it frames English culture as both historically radical and also as ahistorical and untouchable, capable of affecting change but always insulated from its effects.

⁹¹ The last twenty years have seen something of a renaissance in Wyndham studies. Since the last major negative evaluation of Wyndham's work in Nicholas Ruddick's *Ultimate Island* (1993), scholars have made a concerted effort to revisit his novels and revise the series of unflattering depictions which began in 1973 with Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree*. For more on this, see James (1994), Langford (1999), Parrinder (2002), Wymer (2005), Luckhurst (2005), Hubble, (2005), Ketterer (2005), Roberts (2006), and Gochenour (2011).

⁹² See Craig, *Out of History* 119-172.

Wyndham's novels both interrogate and enact this ideological maneuver, mediating the end of empire while simultaneously shaping the nascent rise of devolutionary cultural politics from the perspective of English cultural centrality. Read together, the novels produce a dual sense of modern catastrophe oriented around the poles of collapse and invasion. This structure reads modernity in direct relation to contemporary British history. It embeds *The Day of the Triffids* against the inevitable decline of colonialism and the transformation of Britain's relationship to global capitalist modernity in the postwar period. If the novel reflects postwar pessimism by reading global capitalist society as inherently self-destructive and doomed to collapse, it does so in order to open new spaces in which to imagine progressive bourgeois culture and English national formations. However, these devolutionary imaginings are undercut by a simultaneous emphasis on the ahistorical value of an English culture linked tacitly to the exclusionary categories ethnicity and territory. Moving a few years down the line, *The Midwich Cuckoos* presents an invasion narrative which comments on postwar colonial immigration and the politics of racial nationalism it engendered in postwar Britain. Framed as an act of narrative anthropology, the novel critically examines the relationship between a racially-defined English culture and an official Anglo-British humanism, calling in to question the reliance of the second on the first. However, in identifying this contradiction the novel also refuses to challenge it, ultimately enacting what it seeks to challenge.

Therefore, on the one hand, the novels present a pertinent challenge to capitalist modernity, British state authority, and imperial ideology, and do so through negative critiques which promote progressive English culture and challenge established morals, ethics, and modes of cultural belonging. As fictions working within the catastrophic dimensions of 'the English ideology,' however, they turn on these progressive critiques, reestablishing the authority of an

Englishness based in a territorially defined, racially inflected understanding of national community. Inevitably, they read catastrophe as ahistorical tragedy, as a fundamental limit beyond which no change, and thus no devolutionary culture, is possible.

Catastrophe, Middle-Class Radicalism and ‘the English Ideology’

In the Britain of the fifties, along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting.

—Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*⁹³

I read Wyndham’s novels as riven by a tension between a progressive critique of an instrumental British capitalist modernity on the one hand, and an essentially conservative, regressive understanding of English national culture and tradition on the other. I suggest that we can better understand this dynamic by reading Wyndham alongside his contemporary, the leftist critic and writer George Orwell. As Raymond Williams notes, Orwell’s idiosyncratic blend of leftist critique and popular patriotism cast a wide shadow over British intellectual life in the 1950s. Craig argues in *Out of History* that the most influential of those shadows was an ‘English Ideology’ that emerged as a direct result of the usurpation of working-class English progressivism by the managerial culture of the social democratic state from the 1940s onward. For Craig, Orwell’s fear that “history stopped in 1936”⁹⁴ stemmed from an Anglocentric understanding that “English history had ceased to be the paradigmatic exemplar of the process of human development” (120). Lacking an articulated historical consciousness as the absent center of the British nation, the idea of England offered writers and intellectuals such as Orwell a

⁹³ *Politics and Letters* 384.

⁹⁴ Orwell *A Collection of Essays* 197.

“neutral site” (160) or void space onto which new “alternative histories” (163) of oppositional politics could be etched. For Orwell, the nightmare was that the civilization to fall in this mythical account was English civilization, and with it, as sections of the British New Left would later argue, “a specifically English mode which drew its resources from sustained resistance to established authority...and from the gradual undermining of the power of capitalism over people’s lives” (Craig 148). However, because the very notion of a turbulent, uncontrollable history puts this condition at risk, it must be insulated from the very change it seeks to produce. The fundamental role of the English ideology is therefore to, on the one hand, present a radical critique of capitalism grounded in English popular culture and, on the other, to preserve that critique’s origins in cultural Englishness by turning it into an oppositional ‘alternative history,’ insulated from the effects of historical rupture.

It is no coincidence, then, that both Orwell, in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and Wyndham, in *The Day of the Triffids*, attempt to contribute their own ‘alternative histories’ to the larger template on which English cultural and political identity was debated after the Second World War. The contestation of this alternative space revolves around vacillates between pessimism and optimism as regards the class identity to which each author saw the ‘stopped history’ of England attached. Orwell—reliant on a narrative of progressive English socialism—pessimistically reads alternative history as the *death* of history, a failure reflected in the expropriation of English socialism by the managerial state in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Wyndham, however, reads the future of modern England as tied to the historical development of an empowered, progressive middle class. No less pessimistic than Orwell about the future of industrial capitalist society, Wyndham nevertheless employs the latter’s inevitable downfall precisely in order to bring about the end of history. This is to say that Wyndham’s novel reveals

in the breaking of the old pattern, and with that order subverted, it sets about exploring “what mode of life is best suited to the new” (*DT* 99). In doing so Wyndham provides an ambivalent corrective to Orwell’s pessimism. While the text seems to participate in the assumption that capitalist modernity must, and will fall, it also mitigates the horror of this conclusion by envisioning the potential for the dialectical rise of new forms of Englishness tied to progressive bourgeois culture.

Wyndham’s critique of modern capitalist culture is inseparable from the radical bourgeois narrative which motivates it. Nick Hubble contends that, like Orwell, Wyndham’s novel is motivated by a rejection of the politics of social collectivism as embodied by the British Postwar Settlement. While derived from the same general protest as Orwell’s (the displacement of a progressive English class at the head of modern Britain), Wyndham’s challenge proceeds not from the displacement of the socialist destiny of England, but rather the perceived disenfranchisement of the progressive, modernized, and individualist middle-class which had, by the mid-1930s, self-consciously assumed the mantle of English modernity.⁹⁵ For Hubble, Wyndham balances a utopian narrative structured on the ethics and morals of this rising middle-class against a pessimistic reading of Western Civilization’s inherent ‘death wish.’ Hubble’s reading is compelling and extremely useful. But in refusing to link capitalism to that ‘death wish,’ as I argue Wyndham does, if obliquely, it deprives us of the ability to mark the specifically anti-capitalist strain of middle-class radicalism Wyndham opposes to it.

Wyndham’s radical bourgeois critique is in large part a moral and ethical one, motivated by a rejection of the principles of British society’s functional instrumentalism, and of that

⁹⁵ Composed in large part of scientists, technicians, and various trade professionals, this reconstituted bourgeois bloc “came to think of itself as ‘modern’; perhaps the most modern of England’s social classes” (McKibbin 68) and therefore as the vanguard of British modernity.

society's attendant political structures. It turns on an expressive politics concerned with the rehabilitation of radicalized bourgeois principles—among them individualism, intellectual independence, responsibility, and self-control—that have been submerged and disfigured by what Max Weber calls the capitalist “ethic of ultimate ends” (120).⁹⁶ Wyndham reads the inevitable downfall of capitalist modernity as the natural endgame of a functionally rational and instrumentalized system that reads ‘ends’ in terms of profit. Just as for Marxists, the means necessary to producing these ends in *The Day of the Triffids* result in the profound alienation of individuals from their labor, communities, and ultimately from their own humanity.

Much like Orwell, Wyndham viewed both capitalist society and the British state as motivated by instrumental politics and the production of power for specific ends. Furthermore, as I argue, Wyndham viewed both—as well as the British empire—through a critical lens informed by an ecological localist ideology that read mass society and modern political structures as unsustainable and directly inimical to the maintenance of free individuals and direct participation in human communities.⁹⁷ In ‘stopping history’ and undermining capitalism in *The Day of the Triffids*, Wyndham manufactures a narrative context in which the radical values of localist ideology, bourgeois individualism, and an ‘ethic of responsibility’ can be tested and approved. Isolating his bourgeois protagonists in a post-national, post-capitalist England, he simulates historical evolution, bringing a ruthless social Darwinian critique to bear on his characters’ ingrained habits, values, and naturalized modes of thought.

⁹⁶ Frank Parkin writes in *Middle Class Radicalism* (1968) that “Expressive politics is that which is mainly concerned with the defence [sic] of principles, even if this means relinquishing power.” He opposes it to instrumental politics, “that primarily concerned with the attainment of power to bring about desired ends, even if this means some compromise of principles” (34).

⁹⁷ For more on this ‘Green Movement’ in 1950s Britain, see Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain* 246-299.

For Wyndham, as it was for his hero H.G. Wells, the social and historical are always mediated by the discourse of the biological. William Masen's admission in *The Day of the Triffids* that "my struggle was all a personal conflict with the instincts of my kind" thus reads, on the one hand, as a species-wide statement about biological human instincts (170). On the other, however, 'instincts' and 'kind' operate here in very particular social and cultural contexts, such that what one does instinctively signifies not biological instincts, but social and cultural ones, and 'kind' registers family not in terms of species, but rather of national belonging. As such, Wyndham reads his characters' socially produced and historically contingent assumptions and ingrained habits of mind as biological traits which can then be tested, not in terms of 'fitness' (as in eugenicist readings of Darwinism), but rather as regards their adaptability to dramatic and greatly reduced circumstances. What is revealed, in both *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, is that the seemingly commonplace shape of things at the British midcentury is, in fact, only a naturalized, complacent understanding of what Wyndham otherwise terms 'the natural law,' history's intrusive but inexorable tendency to produce change.

Working parallel to, though not within, Marxist critiques of capitalist 'Second Nature,' Wyndham's novels reveal the various layers of naturalized social truths modern societies erect in place of those natural structures they have theretofore done away with as irrational. In *The Day of the Triffids*, the narrator's qualified opening declaration that "the way I came to miss the end of the world—well, the end of the world I had known for close on thirty years—was sheer accident: like a lot of survival" (3) neatly encapsulates the mechanism behind Wyndham's Darwinian method. Having survived the literal mass-blinding of the earth's human population by an ironic accident, the narrator endures not by dint of this accident alone, nor simply because he

possesses the now-advantageous sense of sight.⁹⁸ Rather, he survives because he is eventually able to make a social distinction between, as it were, the literal ‘end of the world’ and the end of the socially produced world as he has known it. This distinction conditions the novel’s treatment of the metaphor of sight, naming an ability to not only literally see, but to discriminate between the ‘the world’ and “the shape of things” as a socially produced totality, “not the sum of all things but the ordering of those things in a particular historical shape” (Calder Williams 5). The cataclysm that ultimately overthrows both the global capitalist order and its specifically British variant in *The Day of the Triffids* is one that forces Wyndham’s characters to recognize their own blindness and the structural myopia of the larger modern capitalist and national narratives which shape their perspectives. Those which emerge as inherently flexible—and therefore adaptable—are the radical bourgeois principles upon which he founds his critique.

However, this historical process, because it might mean the England’s destruction, demands an insulating and organic mythical structure which can protect England from the vagaries of catastrophic change. Therefore, Wyndham grafts this progressive narrative of radical bourgeois individualism onto an ahistorical interpretation of English national culture that had been revived in the interwar period by none other than the Orwell himself. In “England Your England,” Orwell writes that though England is “the most class-ridden society under the sun,” it is nonetheless a complex and dynamic hierarchy “bound together by an invisible chain” which “stretches into the future and the past...as in a living creature” (*Essays* 266, 254). The visible symptoms of this historical continuity are, for Wyndham as much as Orwell, the fundamental decency and gentleness of the English people, a predilection for independence and the private life, and a cohesive emotional unity. Because “the genuinely popular culture of England is

⁹⁸ The echoes of Wells’ well-known short story “In the Country of the Blind” here are made concrete later in the novel when the narrator, conversing with an acquaintance, name-drops the story (65)

something that goes on beneath the surface,” (256) these characteristics cannot be obviated by historical dynamism and remain an inviolable cache of dissident culture which can be drawn on in times of crisis. They arise naturally within the territory of England, and from within the lived experience, common institutions, and cultural continuity of the English people.

The Day of the Triffids ideologically reads English history and identity only in relation to itself, such that it evolves purely and autonomously without recourse to position, power, or productive difference. However, cultural evolution does not occur in a vacuum, and by cutting the English off from both its global empire and Greater Britain, Wyndham problematically reinscribes the ideological argument—common in postwar popular culture—that England could very easily disengage from its role as an imperial power while maintaining a fundamental sense of its own private, inviolable identity.⁹⁹ This is why catastrophe as a semantic figure provides such a fruitful way of both producing and reading for the fault lines of ‘the English ideology.’ As a symbolic vocabulary mediating between the dual meanings of disaster and transformation, pessimism and hope, it bids us take notice of instances when “profound historical ruptures...enter collective memory as exemplifications of English tranquility and continuity” (Schwarz 6). This is to say that both catastrophe and the English ideology point us towards an end while still maintaining the appearance of historical dynamism. Because Wyndham permits no significant difference to emerge which might challenge a homogenous interpretation of Englishness, he leaves open the potential for the regressive naturalization of the relation between English territory, English culture, and—as I argue in relation to *The Midwich Cuckoos*, the English ‘race’.

⁹⁹ Schwarz, “End of Empire and the English Novel” 5-6.

The Catastrophe of Collapse: *The Day of the Triffids*

Wyndham's critique of British capitalist modernity in *The Day of the Triffids* derives from an implied argument about space and scale, and specifically from an interpretation of the modern world as having grown beyond sustainable proportions. As Meredith Veldman asserts, this position was, in the Britain of the 1950s, primarily associated with a strain of middle-class ecological criticism which perceived a vast, overly complex, and mechanized world standing on the brink of disaster precisely because its institutions had grown beyond human proportions.¹⁰⁰ This putatively 'Green' ideology, which found expression in the work of economists Leopold Kohr and E.F. Schumacher and the clergyman John Papworth, contended that "only when these structures were rebuilt to human scale could individuals truly participate in the decisions which shaped their lives, and only then could true community emerge (Veldman 246). To this intellectual current Veldman convincingly links two other forms of middle-class protest in the postwar period: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and, more importantly, the fantasy writing of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. It is through the work of the latter in the fantasy genre that we can draw connections to Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, where one can discern movement from a similar critique of modern capitalist society to the liberation of the individual from the constraints of that society, and then to the reintegration of the individual with more human forms of community. In fact, reading Wyndham in this context helps explain why the most distinctive function of catastrophe in *The Day of the Triffids* is the swift and total reduction and disintegration of a broad and interconnected capitalist world system to the level of sub-national micro-communities. In the novel such groups stand as direct challenges to the

¹⁰⁰ Veldman 245-272.

suppression of individual agency by the scope and complexity of modern state structures and global industrial society.

Like the British Greens, Wyndham's novel turns to a specifically English reading of history for these modes of smaller and more sustainable sociopolitical organization. This is to say that it looks backwards in time in order to locate such modes in the pre-industrial past. Crucially, however, it does so without nostalgically and unproblematically idealizing those forms, separating Wyndham from Tolkien and Lewis, who rejected the modern world in favor of a return to an idealized rural England. As I will suggest, post-catastrophic community emerges in Wyndham as a way of thinking through modernity's evolution, rather than its exhaustion or demise. Indeed, the core challenge for Wyndham is to imagine the shape a radically decentralized, post-capitalist and post-imperial England might assume, not to glorify its pre-industrial antecedents. The function of civilizational collapse is thus to explore the potential for cultural transformation, to examine the role of the ordinary middle class individual in that transformation, and to envision that individual's reintegration into more localized and human forms of communal belonging.

Much as it was for the Greens, the text's critical posture revolves around a double movement, what I am referring to in this section as the catastrophe of collapse. On the one hand this movement critiques the alienation and dysfunctional social and cultural effects of industrial capitalist society. In reading *The Day of the Triffids* as a critique of capitalist modernity it is important to understand that, despite its early 1950s date of publication, Wyndham's protest is against industrial capitalist society *tout court*, and one which purposefully evades direct engagement with the ideological dimensions of the Cold War. This is why there is little to no mention in the text of either capitalism or communism and why both are treated with a kind of

ironic detachment.¹⁰¹ Because the problem concerns the relationship between function and scale, it matters little whether global modernity is organized around putatively ‘capitalist’ free-market principles or ‘socialist’ state-capitalist ones: the novel views both as too large.¹⁰² What matters is that “in an overly large society...the powerlessness of ordinary people increase[s], and the modern industrial world accelerate[s] towards its final destruction” (Veldman 250). In *The Day of the Triffids*, Wyndham’s catastrophic imaginary turns on this premise, dramatizing that final destruction as the natural endgame of an expansive global state-capitalist culture ultimately subverted by its own bureaucratic complexity, functional rationality,¹⁰³ and the inherent violence of its competitive technological obsession.¹⁰⁴ The catastrophe of collapse, however, is for Wyndham not only a means of critically envisioning the potential form capitalist disaster might assume. It also offers a counter-movement to this critique that explores the dynamic potential inherent in destruction.

¹⁰¹ This satiric treatment of The Cold War is most evident in Wyndham’s *The Kraken Wakes*, which details the invasion of Earth by alien ‘bathyspheres’ which can only exist under the conditions of extreme pressure found at the bottom of the earth’s oceans. The global scope of *Kraken*, and the long duration between the arrival of the aliens and the eventual flooding of the earth at their hands, produces a protracted period of international crisis that plays directly into the paranoia of Cold War politics. This allows Wyndham to poke fun at both Soviet power politics, but also American military and political adventurism, not to mention Britain’s increasingly dependent role in the Atlantic Alliance.

¹⁰² *The Day of the Triffids* avoids outright the question of whether or not the Soviet Union ought to be considered a form of ‘Communism,’ ‘socialism,’ or ‘state capitalism.’ Distinctions are, of course, made between Soviet and ‘Western’ cultures, namely in terms of Russian state secrecy. In later works Wyndham would also comment wryly on Soviet intransigence (in *The Kraken Wakes*), and solemnly on the pragmatic viciousness of the Soviet State (in *The Midwich Cuckoos*). What is clear, however, at least in *The Day of the Triffids*, is the primary distinction drawn between the so-called 1st and 2nd Worlds in terms of economic and social organization, with Russian state authority on the one side and the otherwise hegemonic “interlaced-company system” (23) standing in for the global capitalist market on the other. For the purposes of this chapter, I read Wyndham’s interpretation of Stalinist Russia as consonant with what has come to be known as ‘state capitalism.’ This assertion rests on the assumption that after 1929 or thereabouts, the Russian state bureaucracy, “acting as the agent for the accumulation of capital...emerged as the collective capitalist at the same pace as the economy itself took on the same features of the giant corporations in the nations of the West against which Russia was competing” (Binns 88).

¹⁰³ Barry Langford has plausibly argued that Wyndham’s critique of capitalist modernity in *Triffids* resonates with both Weberian readings of modern technocracy and Frankfurt School analyses of instrumental reason (Langford xv).

¹⁰⁴ Wyndham’s disaster scenario derives from three main sources: a mysterious ‘meteor shower’ which blinds all those who witness it; the subsequent rise of the ‘the triffids,’ carnivorous, perambulating plants traditionally farmed for their valuable oils; and the spread of a devastating plague, which finishes off nearly all who choose to remain in the country’s urban centers. The overdetermined nature of the catastrophe thus points to much broader concerns with the instrumentalism which acts as the driving force behind all of these causes.

This counter-movement explores the liberation of the individual from the overly complex, bloated economic and cultural formations of the modern world and attempts to envision that individual's reintegration into more sustainable, democratic, and human forms of communal culture. As Veldman notes, this critique works within a long tradition of English middle-class protest to capitalist modernity, and particularly to the idea that the development of industrial capitalist society alienates individuals from the communities in which they operate, and "threaten[s] to engulf the value and structures by which individuals [make] sense of their lives" (245). Wyndham's particular intervention into this longstanding English tradition is to rehabilitate oppositional and progressive bourgeois cultural values and structures—among them individualism, intellectual independence, self-reliance, and personal responsibility—expropriated by and subsumed within larger narratives of socioeconomic and political power.

My interpretation of the novel stands in stark contrast to received readings of Wyndham as providing a safe, 'cozy' apology for British imperial decline, or else a more generic British "loss of power," in the postwar period. What these readings miss is the way Wyndham seems to welcome the collapse of the old order, and the reduction of power and privilege that accompany it, as both necessary and beneficial. While his characters are often ambivalent about the loss of the "conditions which framed and taught [them their] standards" (99), they nonetheless find solace and even pleasure in that destruction. Despite his initial, desperate hope that "as long as I remained *my* normal self-things might even yet...return to *their* normal" (39 Wyndham's italics), the narrator of *Triffids* must ultimately admit upon realizing "the world [he] knew is gone" (98) that:

curiously, what I found I did feel...was release...All the old problems...both personal and general, had been solved by one mighty slash. Heaven alone knew as

yet what others might arise...but they would be *new*. I was emerging as my own master, and no longer a cog. (46)

To experience catastrophic disempowerment at the level of social and economic collapse in the novel is thus to experience empowerment at the level of individual being. While this process can at first seem entirely abstract—a release of ‘the individual’ from the historical narrative of ‘modernity’ as such—*The Day of the Triffids* juxtaposes this universal dimension against a British historical context by mediating “the end of the world” through the individual perspective of an English everyman narrator, the biologist William “Bill” Masen. As Masen admits, to experience the end of the world is more accurately to confront “the end of the world as [he] had known it for close on thirty years” (3). Insofar as one cannot be said to ‘know’ modernity as a philosophical abstraction, Wyndham’s critique of capitalist modernity also becomes a critique of British capitalist modernity, and individual liberation a particular resistance to global capitalist society *and* narratives of British state authority and empire.

Nevertheless, Wyndham’s challenge to industrial mass society is first concerned to mark the suppression of individualism and “the alienation of such intellectual faculties that are not required by the worker in his productive role” (Thompson 294). As such, the novel’s representation of the destructive tendencies of industrial society thrives on the contrast between the articulation of a free individual subject and the naturalized, functional role that subject is expected to play in a capitalist economy. This tension permeates the retrospective descriptions of Masen’s narration. As a survivor who endures precisely because of his ability to retain a sense of himself as a free, self-reliant, and intellectually independent individual, Masen’s hindsight critically shapes the world he describes in accordance with those values.

Looking back with the goal of describing the complexity of modern life for his future readers, Masen can't help but form, through a kind of negative critique, both the positive forms that society assumed and the individualism it systematically excluded:

It is not easy to think oneself back to the outlook of those days. We have to be more self-reliant now. But then there was so much routine, things were so interlinked. Each one of us so steadily did his little part in the right place that it was easy to mistake habit and custom for the natural law...Looking back at the shape of things then, the amount we did not know and did not care to know about our daily lives is not only astonishing but somehow a bit shocking. I knew practically nothing, for instance, of such ordinary things as how my food reached me, where the fresh water came from, how the clothes I wore were woven and made, how the drainage of cities kept them healthy. Our life had become a complexity of specialists, all attending to their own jobs with more or less efficiency and expecting others to do the same. (12)

The primary tension in this general description of modern life is between two competing sets of perspectives, each comprising an individual identity in relation to a larger group. The first is Masen's immediate narrative voice, which establishes his author-voice in relation to his future community ("It is not easy to think *oneself* back to those days. *We* have to be more self-reliant *now*.") This relationship frames the contrast between the remaining two perspectives, a past "I" and "We," ostensibly his old self and its relative position within the greater past society as a whole. Most important is the contrast between the first person narration, where Masen's 'present' voice reads against his past self, producing a strange sense of individual evacuation, as though his former self were nothing more than a disembodied component piece of a functionally

rational and technocratic modern society. But it is precisely through the tension produced by these contrasting voices—between the subject as a functional ‘thing’ and the individual narrator as a distinct individual—that Wyndham enables an oppositional perspective to emerge. Indeed, most important here is not the articulation of that collective alienation, but the implied bourgeois values that emerge in contrast around the edges of Masen’s description.

This contrast revolves around Wyndham’s characteristically Darwinian distinction between ‘habit and custom’ and ‘the natural law.’ Probably unwittingly, Masen here seems to read modern capitalist society much like Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), as producing an artificial ‘second nature’ within which socially and historically variable norms come to take on a seemingly biological inevitability.¹⁰⁵ In the society outlined in *The Day of the Triffids*, that second nature rationalizes the existence of a composite industrialized personhood of ‘interlinked,’ utterly reliant pieces (not persons). It names “the muddle, the frustration, the unaimed drive, [and] the all-pervading clangor of empty vessels” whose smooth operation relies only on specialized function (192). From his post-catastrophic vantage point, however, Masen, as a proxy for the progressive English survivor community to which he belongs, can only imply the proven value of their opposites: self-reliance, general, rather than specialized knowledge, the ability to maintain intellectual independence, and the necessity of a de-linked and decentralized freedom. As the remainder of Masen’s narrative makes clear, these seemingly radical values coalesce as an oppositional moral ethic and code as inherently flexible—and therefore adaptable—in the post-catastrophic world that emerges from the collapse of the capitalist order.

¹⁰⁵ As Lukács argues, “men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them the ‘natural’, irrational and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and ‘made’, a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form)” (128).

These values emerge primarily from the text's challenge to particularly British iterations of capitalist modernity. One of the most over-attended, yet unexamined of these formations is the text's critique of British imperialism. While it is important to acknowledge standard readings of empire in *The Day of the Triffids*, which generally focus either on the text as allegory for British imperial collapse or else as a cultural representation of metropolitan subjects figured in terms defined by imperial discourse,¹⁰⁶ such readings divert attention from the negative critique the text implicitly levels on empire as a function of the larger modern capitalist civilization of which it is otherwise so critical. In this context the individual's relationship to empire emerges much as it does in the text's critique of capitalist culture, as an atomized particle in a vast and overwhelming system.

Using the same retrospective and descriptive register, Masen's brief snapshot of the globe at midcentury must be read as ironic in the context of the novel's larger critique:

The world we lived in was wide, and most of it was open to us with little trouble. Roads, railways, and shipping lines laced it, ready to carry one thousands of miles safely and in comfort. If we wanted to travel more swiftly still, and could afford it, we traveled by airplane. There was no need for anyone to take weapons or even precautions in those days. You could go just as you were to wherever you wished, with nothing to hinder you—other than a lot of forms and regulations. A world so tamed sounds utopian now. (21)

¹⁰⁶ The standard critical move when discussing empire in *The Day of the Triffids* is to either position the novel's civilizational collapse as reading the "loss of power" entailed in the British retreat from empire allegorically or to focus on the power relations inherent in imperial discourse and to note the way the novel seems to turn the civilized/savage dichotomy back onto its respectable middle-class characters, humbling the mighty British and their pretensions to universal cultural centrality. While both of these readings are tempting, they are also tenuous and difficult to convincingly extrapolate from a reading of the text. For representative readings, see Chapter One, n. 37.

Masen's retrospective portrayal seems to offer a triumphant depiction of the *Pax Britannica*, open and developed by capitalist modernization, the enlightened diffusion of science and technology, and the fulfillment of the European civilizing mission. As Masen notes, the placid and postcard-like serenity of this surface description, at least from the metropolitan bourgeois perspective he models, "sounds like a golden age," but he is quick to note that "it wasn't quite that to those of us who lived in it" (21). Those who lived in it are, in fact, those same rationally functional pieces that remain locked into global mass society. Therefore, the falsity of this description indicts the perspective of the fallen world as myopic and deluded, a cultural fantasy of capitalist globalism rendered complete by the absent yet unmistakable imperial history lurking beneath it.

Moreover, the novel's titular villains, the triffids, seem linked not only to capitalist culture in general, but to British capitalism's expansion across the globe as colonialism and imperialism. On the one hand, *The Day of the Triffids* echoes Wells' critique of British colonialism in *The War of the Worlds*, reversing the polarity of colonial invasion by figuring the colonizer as the colonized. Working within another of the novel's dominant thematic concerns—environmental degradation—this colonial critique is figured in explicitly ecological terms. The triffids externalize the invasiveness of global capitalism and imperial culture, expressing an essentially acquisitive, dominating ethos in ecological terms, as an invasive species. Just as colonial culture inserted itself into indigenous ecosystems that were, for native cultures, both substance and self, so too, do the triffids disrupt ways of knowing the self in and by the land. At one point Masen even provides an analog for the arrival of Europeans in the colonial world when he remarks that "it is difficult to recall how odd and somehow *foreign* the first ones appeared to us" (25 Wyndham's italics). In the ecological terms favored by British Green ideology, we can

see that the triffids embody the separation of the social and the natural and reveal such separation in the lives of their hosts, for whom the rise of the triffids marks the recognition of their own foreignness and dehumanization. In this Wyndham actually extends Veldman's analysis of the Green critique of capitalism by figuring this ecological dehumanization as a form of imperial conquest and domination turned back on its perpetrators.

This critique of imperial capitalist modernity functions parallel to a secondary challenge to the dominant domestic narrative of postwar British modernity: the rise of the British Welfare State. While the text is critical of social collectivism as embodied by the Postwar Settlement, its criticism derives from the fact that that ethos is expressed as *forced* collectivism, another of those bloated and alienating bureaucratic systems which inhibit, rather than enhance, the ability of the individual to independently and critically engage with the community at a human level. This is why Jo Walton is ultimately incorrect in arguing that *The Day of the Triffids*, should primarily be understood as an expression of "middle class resentment towards the newly empowered working class in postwar Britain" (38). There is a certain truth to this claim, expressed, as Walton notes, by the image of a bewildered and resentful Masen kidnapped and forcibly shackled to a blinded gang of working-class men, for whom he is forced to provide (106-122). Furthermore, Masen's cultural understanding of the working class is clearly regressive and resentful: he marks all working class characters by their Cockney slang and interprets them variously as comic simpletons, irresponsible louts, or thuggish 'goons,' fit mostly to follow the orders of others. However, the mere existence of this resentment is not adequate evidence of Wyndham's endorsement of it. Instead, read in the context of the novel's larger critique of naturalized social structures, Masen's 'middle class resentment' towards the working-class becomes another of "the bad old features" (215) that prove so inadaptable in the new dispensation precisely because

they constitute a “mentally lazy” form of second nature, reliant “on a bolstering of maxim and precept” (99) rather than a cognitive flexibility and intellectual independence.

Wyndham emphasizes this point in the figure of the working class orator Wilfred Coker, a self-described class hybrid whose radical humanism and unflagging independence mediates between Masen’s entrenched class prejudice and the working class men at which it is directed. Equally at home quoting Marvell and Milton as he is “ranting in a kind of dockside lingo” (133), Coker is the text’s most radical voice. This is not because of his previous involvement with socialist politics, from which he ultimately distances himself, but because, as Raymond Williams put it in *The Long Revolution* (1961), he works “from the conviction that men can direct their own lives, by breaking through the pressures and restrictions of older forms of societies, and discovering new forms of common institutions” (347).¹⁰⁷ While the more nostalgic and intractable Masen retains a fundamental ambivalence as to “how much we had lost,” (192) Coker, who has already worked to break through those older forms in his previous life, enthusiastically embraces the suggestion that “with the old pattern broken, we have now to find out what mode of life is suited to the new” (99). The release of the individual from the various bonds of capitalist modernity and the possibility of imagining new and progressive ‘modes of life’ in the wake of its destruction represents the natural endpoint of the first major critical phase in *The Day of the Triffids*. It untethers the individual from the dominant narratives of the modern capitalist world and frees him to seek decentralized forms of community envisioned by Green thinkers in postwar Britain.

Individualism, Communal Culture, and the Myth of Englishness

¹⁰⁷ Coker notes that it was his confusing hybridity, not his politicized class status, which ultimately drove him to embrace social protest: “It made me kind of sour about things when I was a kid, and when I left school I used to go to meeting—more or less any kind of meetings as long as they were protesting against something. And that led to me getting mixed up with the lot that used to come to them” (133-4).

If *The Day of the Triffids* is at first concerned to liberate the modern individual from the systems of capitalist subjection to which he is tethered, its second move is to then question the viability of radical individualism itself. From this second challenge the text produces a counter-movement toward the reintegration of the individual into a more functional and viable micro-community. Separated from both Coker and Josella, Masen glumly notes that “The prisoner and the cenobite are aware that the herd exists beyond their exile; they are an aspect of it. But when the herd no longer exists, there is, for the herd creature, no longer entity. He is part of no whole, a freak without a place” (170). The specificity of Masen’s word choice is significant here: gone is the metonymic construction that would relate the idea of a person in the modern industrial world to a functional role in a larger machine. Instead we have the territorially defined notion of individual identity as inherently linked to a location, to a specific place. This counter-thrust ultimately reveals a pronounced tension in Wyndham’s imagining of progressive post-catastrophic individualism and communality defined by historical processes. It does this by searching not simply for new communal forms of living, but for an ahistorical structure of essential cultural Englishness which underwrites and complicates the historical dynamism of the text’s first movement.

Just as it rehabilitates a radical bourgeois individualism negatively from a critique of British capitalist modernity, the text also promotes and produces an alternate and oppositional space in which to imagine progressive English culture. It accomplishes this by critiquing the traditional forms of English social and cultural organization which arise in the wake of catastrophe. Thus, the individual hero-quest Masen undertakes as a function of the novel’s romance plot initiates a condensed, microcosmic process of social and political evolution, the ultimate purpose of which is to test and validate the forward-thinking tenets of progressive

bourgeois individualism. Predictably, Miss Durant's quasi-Victorian "clean, decent community with standards—Christian standards" (141) at Tynsham is immediately rejected as form of ahistorical fantasy, complicit with atavistic moral codes and characterized by what Coker exasperatedly labels an irresponsible social variety of "mental laziness and parasitism" (*DT* (1954) 175). Likewise, the fascist Torrance's neo-feudal chauvinism, which would turn the countryside into a pattern of interdependent serfdoms in the name of a resuscitated national glory, is rejected as a maladaptive step toward tyranny (219-223). Finally, Bill and Josella's retreat from community altogether into the privacy of their familial farm at Shirning, while evocative of a historical strain of radical English resistance to authority and state intervention,¹⁰⁸ is ultimately abandoned as too insular and ultimately unsustainable in the face of the encroaching triffids.

By dint of this condensed historical evolution, the concept of adaptability at the level of character development becomes synonymous with political viability at the level of social organization, and cultural viability at the level of ideology. What is most important is that the shape of "the new state of things" (101) be natural to the new historical conditions prevailing, which is to say flexible, future-oriented, and capable of producing an active, participatory political culture based in independence and communality.¹⁰⁹ Read in the context of the text's biological interpretation of social evolution, the novel's retrograde 'variations' on English community are indexed as unnatural precisely because nostalgic and ahistorical. While Wyndham may look backwards towards romantic models of smaller and simpler living, his

¹⁰⁸ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* 132.

¹⁰⁹ As Coker argues to a member of Miss Durant's conservative community at Tynsham, "the point is we'll all have to learn not simply what we like, but as much as we can about running a community and supporting it. The men can't just fill in a voting paper and hand the job to someone else. And it will no longer be considered that a woman has fulfilled her social obligations when she has prevailed upon some man to support her and provide her with a niche where she can irresponsibly produce babies for somebody else to educate" (*DT* (1954) 177.)

critique of British modernity is future-oriented and intent on avoiding “that sort of inferiority complex which has sunk into lassitude on the tradition of a glorious past” (*DT* (1954) 244). Not only does this critique challenge the conservative, traditionalist narratives of Englishness that arose in the postwar period as a response to the perceived decline of British power and culture, it also generates oppositional and potentially subversive forms of alternate community in its wake.

The first and most important of such communities is the one attached to the Beadley group, which Bill and Josella eventually join, and which loosely organizes itself around libertarian principles, most notably personal independence and free choice, but also communal responsibility. As representatives of the group explain to Bill and Josella, there is no compulsion to join (101), but those that do must agree to leave the systems of governance, modes of thought, and morals of the former world to the past: “We aren’t out to reconstruct—we want to build something new and better” (215). Around the country various other, approved but lesser examined, groups arise in the absence of centralized government to establish forms of community which “resent the idea of any organization except the minimum they’ve set up for themselves...they’d escaped from being governed, and in spite of all their troubles they didn’t want any more of it” (213). Such communities represent the endgame of Wyndham’s Green critique of industrial capitalist modernity. Much like those proposed by the early eco-critic John Papworth, Wyndham’s preferred communal models “return to smaller organizational structures designed to foster, rather than deny the participation of ordinary individuals” (Veldman 251) and hold out the promise of an elective, independent culture of “mutual approval” (*DT* 215).

If the novel’s preferred form of decentralized community thrives on the freedom to define oneself independent of state authority, it also celebrates the collapse of imperialism and the culture it sustained. While most of Wyndham’s characters are slow to shed the cultural

conditioning of British imperialism, the catastrophic collapse of the imperial relationship, and the new conditions which emerge in its stead, mark imperial discourse as effectively outmoded, but also flexible in terms of value and meaning. Early on, Masen notes that “in an environment reverting to savagery, it seemed that one must be prepared to behave more or less like a savage” (127). While this would appear to participate in the imperial dichotomy of civilization and savagery, the context in which it occurs—Masen raiding a gun shop in order to take responsibility for his own defense—turns on the earlier meaning by marking ‘savagery’ as an approved—if distasteful—form of self-reliance. Much the same can be said of the text’s deployment of the theme of tribalism, from the clearly approved celebration of independent “tribal communities” (213) to Josella’s remark that “those of us who get through are going to be much...more dependent on one another—well, more like a *tribe* than we ever were before” (104 Wyndham’s italics). In the context of the text’s celebration of social and political decentralization, the value of the term no longer connotes inferiority as a function of imperial discourse. Instead, ‘tribal’ living is approved as a positive and historically viable form of culture. It is opposed to an imperial British culture which locks subjects into seemingly fixed binaries and restricts the free ability to maneuver around and within those relationships. Unlike the atomizing and routine mechanization of “the system that had nourished [him]” (39), tribal living represents the ability of communities to freely develop their own models of sociopolitical organization.

However, the seemingly radical cultural dynamism embodied by these communities is complicated by their superimposition onto static, essentialist narratives of English culture and civilization. Much as Orwell would have it, the content associated with Englishness remains in Wyndham precisely because its qualities are structurally encoded into the everyday lived

experience and common institutions of a timeless national family. As such, Wyndham can be seen to map a socially progressive conception of bourgeois culture—evolved historically through the lens of the novel’s Darwinian critique—onto an eternal structure of inviolable English cultural value. This structure generates the submerged impulse that compels Bill to naturally head for the first pub he sees upon exiting the hospital, not because he so desperately needs a drink, but rather because “It was prosaically and *familiarly* like dozens of others” (15 my italics). This same habitual motivation undergirds his retrospective depiction of his own family:

When I, William Masen, was a child we lived, my father, my mother, and myself, in southern suburb of London. We had a small house which my father supported by conscientious daily attendance at his desk in the Inland Revenue Department, and a small garden at which he worked rather harder during the summer. There was not a lot to distinguish us from the ten or twelve million other people who used to live in and around London in those days. (19)

Read for surface detail, the passage provides nothing more than a brief snapshot of modern life in midcentury suburban London. More important than these topical social markers, however, are the deeper structures of belonging that cluster around “the *privateness* of English life,” (Orwell, *Essays* 255 author’s italics) particularly as ranged against competing markers of modern industrial Britishness (suburbia; a 9 to 5 job; the IRD). In fact, the perennial icon of the average middle-class Englishman pottering about in his garden, a dominant narrative of private English culture revived in the interwar period,¹¹⁰ here acts as a resistant buffer between Masen’s father and the mundane, routinized nature of his everyday British life. Though perhaps commonplace, it

¹¹⁰ In *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965*, Wendy Webster notes that “a domesticated version of Englishness, emphasizing hearth, home, and herbaceous border, was developed between the wars. This version of Englishness not only highlighted the female sphere of domesticity, but also the quiet, pipe-smoking Englishman, tending his garden” (9).

is precisely the quotidian nature of this “genuinely popular culture...that goes on beneath the surface” that makes it so tenacious and oppositional for Orwell and Wyndham alike. Because unarticulated yet embodied, it endures; because linked to “the common people,” who “must live to some extent *against* the existing order,” (256 Orwell’s italics) it carries inherently dissident potential; as long as the people exist, it exists, and no manner of catastrophic social shift, it would seem, can suppress it.

Thus, even more important than the potency of common institutions are the values—among them decency and gentleness, intellectual independence, privacy, and emotional unity—embodied by Wyndham’s characters themselves. While the text never explicitly draws the reader’s attention to these values, nor are they consciously articulated by his characters, it explicitly links those who survive—and thrive—to their inherent virtue. Bill’s seemingly inborn restraint, decency, and gentleness are on display throughout the novel, from his natural instinct to help the blind in a paralyzed central London (38-47), to his tender treatment of the girl to whom he is assigned by Coker’s humanist rescue operation (123-26), to his rescue of the little girl, Susan, to whom he becomes a surrogate father (171-78). Likewise, both his and Coker’s strong sense of individualism and intellectual independence, which produces “[the] damnable ability to see the points on both sides” (*DT* (1954) 145), and which allows them to critically examine and reject the varying retrograde forms of English culture to which they are exposed. Bill’s desire for a private life fuels his quest to locate Josella and found the family they eventually build together at Shirning farm. Finally, the novel as a whole seems to rest on the assumption that, whatever political differences emerge on the road to a redesigned Englishness, what binds the like-minded survivors together is an unshakeable emotional unity upon which they can draw in times of crisis.

As the texts present it, these values exist as an organic outgrowth of the ordinary Englishness of ‘the common people,’ a myth that gained popular currency in the years following the Second World War. As Cairns Craig argues, this myth—originally generated as an ideology of “Britishness” intended to mobilize popular support for the Second World War—read the English as “uniquely the representatives of the traditions of liberty...the inherent liberty of those who are ‘free born’ because they are born English...the liberty that knows it is rooted in centuries of tradition and that it is the guardian of that tradition” (*Out* 142). It also presents a mythical Englishness as accessible to the common people because of a continued connection with the English land, an eternal repository of self-knowledge where, unlike the decaying urban jungles of modern Britain, “one could work and tend and still find a future” (*DT* 135). The problem with this is that it seems to turn around on the social production of radical individualism and bourgeois ethics that the novel is otherwise so interested in promoting as specifically historical forms of progressive culture.

While this latter cultural paradigm rests on the assumption that “we have to start *thinking* again” (99), and that those modernized bourgeois free-thinkers which have survived have done so because such qualities have naturally evolved in the extant conditions, the grafting of this social process onto an asocial one that requires no thought or historical motion indicates that for Wyndham there are two forms of the natural. The first form seems socially progressive, historical, and most importantly, deterritorialized. It is untethered from the bounded spaces traditionally used to naturalize national formations as commensurate in place, people, and culture. The second, however, is immutable and essential and connected inherently to place. It requires no Darwinian threshing to emerge and no conscious choice or articulation. In other words, it is entirely mythical, lying outside the novel’s otherwise transformative biological

criticism. While the first emerges from a massive historical rupture, the second signifies only tranquil continuity. It is Wyndham's reliance on this continuity that ultimately works within 'the English ideology.' While the novel clearly works to liberate individual subjects from dominating narratives of British capitalist modernity, its reliance on the centrality of this insular mythical Englishness in the formation of post-catastrophic communities ultimately turns that individual back into an instrument. But rather than an instrument of capitalist society, the free individual in *The Day of the Triffids* once again becomes an instrument of national destiny.

“Our hopes all center here”: Space, Time, and The English Ideology’

I delayed to take one more look around the square, as if it were a page of history I would learn before it was turned. And as I stood there I heard the gritting of footsteps on the road...Crusoe was no more startled at the sight of a footprint than I at the sound of a footfall...”¹¹¹

The image Masen provides here of a page of history being turned makes it clear that what the text depicts is not ‘the end of history,’ as Orwell would have it, but a pivot point upon which a new, progressive English history can be established. It is in this context that we must understand the allusion to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Masen's journey from confused and existential bewilderment to liberated, transformed individual survivor in many ways mirrors that of Defoe's titular character, except that the world from which Masen and company are freed is the very capitalist, colonialist world for which Crusoe's story provides a foundational Ur-myth.¹¹² This produces one of the novel's driving ironies: the freedom, technological mastery, self-reliance, and domination of nature that Crusoe the individualist survivor enacts are the modern capitalist values from which Mason the survivor flees in *The Day of the Triffids*.

¹¹¹ DT 130.

¹¹² John Richetti writes that “Crusoe's transformation from terrified and confused survivor to colonial master and avenging overlord of his island marks *Robinson Crusoe* as one of the key modern myths of English and even of European culture. Having experienced the compulsions and mysterious drivings of fate, Crusoe now acquires and indeed embodies freedom and domination of nature and of others in his powerful and confident actions” (xxvii).

Yet in fleeing from this modern nightmare the individual flees back into a new national mythology and subjectivity. If the turning of a page from one history to another indicates a profound historical rupture, the image of those pages existing in a book that includes further pages—past and future—lend the image a biblical, typological character. While these pages await inscription, the book upon which that inscription will occur exists precisely so that it can be shaped by these new individuals into the “something new” embodied by the progressive island society Masen, Josella, and Coker all join on the Isle of Wight at novel’s end.

In order to do this, however, Wyndham must first clear the temporal and spatial coordinates in which this modern mythology can arise. In a recent book, Adam Burrows argues that the establishment of Greenwich Mean Time in 1884 generated a productive contrast between conceptions of universal, ‘cosmopolitan time’ linked to the imperial standardization of the global world economy, and a spatially situated, ‘contextually embedded time’ associated with the remote regions and spaces then in the process of subjection to capitalist penetration and market integration.¹¹³ I would suggest that *The Day of the Triffids* purposefully collapses and devalues this conception of global standard time as part of its larger critique of capitalist modernity, and that it does so precisely so that it can do away with the need to “conceptualiz[e] and manag[e] the relationship between global and local spaces” entailed by Britain’s ongoing imperial relationship with the global imperial economy (Burrows 8). This is to say that, in formulating a new conception of Englishness, Wyndham is concerned with de-linking England from its overseas attachments, just as he is in disassociating it from its British peripheries. The way he goes about this is by spatially and temporally isolating England, removing it from the current of history.

¹¹³ *The Cosmic Time of Empire: Modern Britain and World Literature* (2011).

The point for Wyndham seems to be the collapse of a temporal model linking England—via imperial capitalist modernity—to the remainder of the modern world precisely because those links limit the ability of England to define its own value. Upon preparing to finally leave a dying central London, Masen pauses to look back at perhaps the most potent symbol of Anglo-British imperial power:

And so I came to Westminster.

The deadness, the finish of it all, was italicized there...Above it all rose the Houses of Parliament, with the hands of the clock stopped at three minutes past six. It was difficult to believe that all that meant nothing any more, that it was now just a pretentious confection in uncertain stone which would decay in peace...Alongside, the Thames flowed imperturbably on. So it would flow until the day the Embankments crumble and the water spread out and Westminster became once more an island in a marsh. (128)

The transitory historicity of modern Britain, crumbling through the passage's first four lines, is then clearly linked to, but also separated from, the eternal English icon of the river Thames flowing placidly and continuously on in organic continuity. While the Houses of Parliament and the modern civilization they represent might once have imposed meaning on the mythical symbol of the Thames, they now wait to "decay in peace." The Thames, however, retains its ability to be formed into new attachments, new national configurations, and new meanings.

The artificiality of imperial global standard time, clearly marked as arrested on the face of Big Ben, simultaneously indicates the resumption of what Henri Lefebvre calls in *The Production of Space* (1974) "natural time": "time...inscribed in space, and natural

space...merely the lyrical and tragic script of natural time” (95). Nevertheless, the potential for a slow devolution into deep ecological time is deflected and reformed into a new modern impulse where time carries national connotations. The collapse of space and time in the text ironically transforms English space and time into a version of the same indigenous ‘contextually embedded time” that British imperialism sought fit to integrate into “a system of Greenwich precision” (Burrows 3) in the name of global capitalist efficiency and military synchronization.

On the one hand, this move can certainly be read as a challenge to British imperial ideology—it essentially indigenizes the English, figuring them in the role of the colonized. However, the function it serves, namely the promotion of the ability of Wyndham’s progressive protagonists to first dissociate from, then reintegrate into, a model of national belonging, also works to reinscribe that ideology. Notably, the novel’s final triumphant declaration of war against the triffids marks a significant departure from Masen’s otherwise conscious and deliberate intellectual independence throughout:

And there my personal story joins up with the rest...Our hopes all center here...we must think of the task ahead as our alone. We believe now that we can see our way, but there is still a lot of work and research to be done before the day when we, or our children, or their children, will cross the narrow straits on a great crusade to drive the triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped out the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped. (228)

This, the novel’s concluding articulation of revived national consciousness, marks Masen’s final reintegration into a reconsolidated, re-centered, and ideally sustainable form of English

community. Unlike his earlier ironic articulations of collective modern identity, ‘we’ and ‘us’ are here meant to indicate a viable national continuity between the individual and the community.

Tellingly, however, the language used to describe this continuity is strikingly similar to that used to illustrate the instrumentality of modern capitalist society before the fall. Gone is the devotion to principle which defines his earlier moral and ethical opposition to capitalist modernity. What remains is once again an evacuated individual voice serving as the instrument of a greater power, the individual as agent of national destiny. Most compelling, however, is the final repositioning of cultural Englishness as peripheral to its erstwhile spatial and historical frontiers.

Having abandoned modern Britain’s “old Center of things,” Wyndham’s reconditioned survivors bide their time at the margins of a new history, in which Masen now plays—ironically—an instrumental role (41). The quest that will define future history, as the passage makes clear, is the reintegration of this natural English community with a land from which it has been unjustly and unnaturally ejected, and over which it assumes a natural right. The implication seems to be that, while their right is not a natural right in the fallen liberal humanist sense, it is nonetheless a natural right in the new Darwinian world whose mythology they will ostensibly help shape.

The problem with this form of Englishness is that it ultimately permits no productive difference, no spatial or temporal limit experience or boundary against which English self-identification and belonging can be measured and defined. All space in *The Day of the Triffids* is English space and all time English time. For Wyndham, as it would have been for Orwell, this situation can still produce meaning because English space and time are self-referential categories. Yet, as Craig avers, this is precisely how the English Ideology masks its imperial prerogative. On the one hand, it erases positionality such that “Englishness is regarded as self-

generating, or as generated out of England's historical priority over the rest of the world" (*Out* 168). On the other hand, in establishing its centrality through this process (as the only modern nation capable of such self-generation) it repositions the various others whose productive difference actually constitutes Englishness in a peripheral and asymmetrical relationship. Therefore, what, in *The Day of the Triffids*, seems like a potent critique of imperialism in the ejection of the English from their traditional base of cultural authority (Southern England) is actually a reinscription of imperial ideology. In a world in which all spaces are English, there can be no periphery and no center because each is each. In collapsing all spaces and times, space and time lose their productive value; in reducing the world to England, England becomes the world, the original source and essence of history meant to fill all other non-generating spaces with the power of its self-validating legitimacy.

This is ultimately why the last image we see in the text is a group of English survivors indignantly eyeing their erstwhile homeland from the defensive redoubt of an island refuge. As Paul Kincaid argues, the island is one of the most enduring icons in both English Literature and British Science Fiction. Its deployment historically revolves around two contrasting treatments: "Islomania: the island as dream state, the object of desire, the ideal, and insularity: the island as prison or fortress that holds us apart from the rest of the world" ("Islomania?" 142). While it is tempting to view the final retreat to the Beadley group's colony on the Isle of Wight as collapsing Kincaid's distinction into one contradictory image—a fortified prison containing an idealized English utopia,¹¹⁴ it is more accurate to say that this retreat splits the image of the island between the fortified colony and the idealized mainland against which it is ultimately ranged. Bill and Josella's retreat is indexed as a "Strategic Withdrawal" based in the future hope

¹¹⁴ Nick Hubble argues that the Beadley colony represents an idealized bourgeois utopia "representing the ideals and aspirations of a new middle-class" (6).

that “one day you’ll show us how to wipe out every one of those foul triffids and get *our land* back from them *for us*” (217 my italics). The retreat is a defensive maneuver explicitly designed to produce a counter-maneuver: re-colonization. Cleansed by catastrophe and overrun by the unnatural triffids, the British mainland is idealized precisely because empty and neutral, awaiting mythical re-conquest by a people whom the novel establishes as having, in more way than one, a natural right to reside there.

The Day of the Triffids, because it does not allow for any actual racial difference, insulates itself from the chilly biological determinism of the Beadley group, whose invocation of an “*autres temps, autres mœurs*” philosophy allows them to organize the colony around the “one primary prejudice that “*the race is worth preserving*” (98-9 Wyndham’s italics). In the context of Wyndham’s Darwinian symbolic economy, this imperative could very well hold that any and all actions which would allow for the preservation of the English race are acceptable—a decree tantamount to structural racism. Nick Hubble argues that it is precisely the radical individualist dissidence of Bill, Josella—and especially the tenacious Coker—who will ultimately confront the ahistorical dimensions of this rhetoric, imposing a measure of internal political opposition to the racial connotations of the island colony’s intentional utopian community.¹¹⁵ But because there are only white English subjects in the text, and therefore no race to preserve, the text seems to evade this speculative possibility.

The Day of the Triffids sets the stage for the racial invasion which occurs in *The Midwich Cuckoos* by clearly legitimating the connection between biology, culture, and territory. As I suggest in the next section, this move draws comparison to the simultaneous avowal of English space and disavowal of the empire that characterized the successive waves of citizenship and

¹¹⁵ Hubble 7.

nationality laws that accompanied the postwar period, culminating in the British Nationality Act of 1981, a law “designed to divorce England from its ‘overseas’ history” and “defend the island kingdom against its erstwhile empire” (Baucom 7). In this, the English ideology returns as a catastrophe of invasion structured by terms that defined the discriminative rhetoric of the so-called ‘new’ British racism in the postwar period.

The Catastrophe of Invasion: *The Midwich Cuckoos*

Britain at this moment is under attack. It is not surprising if many people still find that difficult to realise. A nation like our own, which has twice in this century had to defend itself by desperate sacrifice against an external enemy, instinctively continues to expect that danger will take the same form in the future. When we think of an enemy, we still visualize him in the shape of armoured divisions, or squadrons of aircraft, or packs of submarines. But a nation’s existence is not always threatened in the same way...Indeed the danger is greater today, just because the enemy is invisible or disguised, so that his preparations and advances go hardly observed.

—Enoch Powell, Speech at Northfield, June 13 1970¹¹⁶

Published a year after the Suez Crisis ended lingering British pretensions to imperial world power and one year prior to the Notting Hill race riots of 1958, *The Midwich Cuckoos* emerges at the confluence of three dominant historical and cultural narratives of the British postwar period. The first was the continued retreat from empire and the breakdown of the imperial mythos, the latter of which had seen its tolerant, liberal façade shattered by anti-colonial violence and political nationalism in the Mediterranean, Asia, and Africa.¹¹⁷ The second was the rise of a resurgent narrative of British decline,¹¹⁸ which marked the fall from imperial economic and cultural centrality by reading British culture and social practice as *démodé*, parochial, and

¹¹⁶ Qtd. in Schwarz 13.

¹¹⁷ And particularly by nationalist uprisings in Cyprus (1955-1960), Palestine (1947-8), Malaysia (1948-1960), and Kenya (1952-1960).

¹¹⁸ Declinist narratives have been part of the British cultural and political landscape since at least the 1870s, when the rise of emergent military and economic competition in Europe (Germany) and North America (the USA) caused panic and anxiety over the perceived threat to British global supremacy and cultural centrality. For a good overview of the debate on British declinism see Andrew Gamble’s Introduction to *Rethinking British Decline* 1-22.

insular. The third narrative was one of reversed colonial migration, which saw Britain's imperial subjects return in waves to the British mainland in search of work under the auspice of the 1948 Nationality Act, which assured them British citizenship.

Working in and through these contexts, the novel utilizes the trope of catastrophe-as-invasion to explore the intersections between the production of cultural Englishness, British metropolitan liberalism, and imperial humanist ideology. Structured as a form of narrative ethnography, *The Midwich Cuckoos* critiques the unacknowledged but fundamental role played by race in the mediation of the relationship between cultural Englishness and social and political Britishness. While the novel offers a pointed challenge to the inherent violence and authoritarianism of imperial British racism, the novel's conclusions ultimately reinforce and legitimate it. Catastrophe, in the world of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, then comes to figure not transformation or the construction of space for productive political dialogue and progressive devolutionary culture, but stasis, pessimism, and the naturalization of catastrophe as disaster, rather than social dynamism.

“Already I was on my way back to the primitive”: *The Midwich Cuckoos* as Narrative Ethnography

One of the most prominent systematic attempts made to understand the nature of British culture in the postwar period was the application of social anthropological practice to communal life. This conscious attention to the characteristics of British culture had been inaugurated in the late 1930s in the form of the Mass Observation organization, a project dedicated to the creation of an “anthropology of ourselves.”¹¹⁹ The psychiatrist G.M. Carstairs examines this shift towards an

¹¹⁹ The Mass Observation organization was launched in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrisson, poet Charles Madge, and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. Mass Observation employed hundreds of volunteer observers and writers whose ultimate goal was the establishment of a deep base of hitherto neglected or assumed knowledge about the British people. The project ran from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, when its focus began to slowly shift

inward-looking perspective in his 1962 Reith Lectures for the BBC.¹²⁰ In particular, Carstairs argues, social anthropology—both despite and because of its origins in colonial discourse—provided a particularly useful tool for examining the cultural and psychological effects of Britain’s fall from imperial prominence after the Second World War. For Carstairs, social anthropology opened up the seemingly cohesive and homogenous conception of the British race promulgated by imperial discourse to reveal that “one can still recognize distinctive local patterns of kinship ties, of shared experiences, attitudes, and patterns of behavior in...our society” (13). In effect, the discourse of social anthropology indigenized Britain, placing its naturalized values and ingrained cultural systems under a microscope, estranging the familiar and opening it up to criticism. This produced a potential space in which to examine the afterlife of empire, namely by considering the naturalized social and cultural structures which informed the lives of ‘ordinary Britons’ and served to support the continuation of empire as a cultural phenomenon.

The Midwich Cuckoos turns the social anthropologist’s eye to the task of critically mapping the contours of British society by taking as its primary object of analysis English life and culture, and particularly the mediated relationship between conservative narratives of ahistorical Englishness and modern liberal narratives of progressive Britishness. Much as Wyndham had suggested should be done in *The Day of the Triffids*, the text turns the rural English into a tribe, with its own naturalized habits of mind and systemic values that can be studied and understood. Yet it also performs this maneuver with modern liberal Britons, critically reading Englishness as a fundamental ideological component of British identity. By

towards investigation into the lives of consumers. It was subsequently privatized in 1949, but would later be revived in the early years of the Thatcher administration and housed at Sussex University. For more on this, see: Hubble, *Mass-Observation and everyday life: culture, history, theory* (2006).

¹²⁰ Carstairs, *This Island Now* 11-14 and 96-101.

simulating a colonial invasion, in which a seemingly superior species attempts to intervene in and undermine the habits and values natural to both sides of that complex equation, the novel pushes both Englishness and Britishness as bounded cultural systems to their limits, in the process interrogating how both react to the extreme pressure of perceived self-destruction in the form of racial contamination.

Like any anthropological study, *The Midwich Cuckoos* is troubled by inherent issues of authority, namely the degree to which any observer—particularly one so embedded and invested in the object under examination—can be said to produce an objective account of cultural phenomena. Wyndham turns our attention to this troublesome contradiction by structuring the novel as a kind of narrativized ethnographic study, patched together by a seemingly objective participant-observer, a former urban Londoner-turned Midwich resident named Richard Gayford. Channeling the voice of the social anthropologist, Gayford attempts to make it clear throughout that “[he] is not a countryman, [he] only lives there,” (14) and moreover that “this...is not my story; it is Midwich’s story. If I were to set down my information in the order it came to me I should be flitting back and forth in the account, producing an almost incomprehensible hotchpotch of incidents out of order” (54-5). For Gayford, the narrative we read, derived from observed participant data, is a conscious act of creation from the perspective of an outsider looking in at the rural English. However, for readers of *The Midwich Cuckoos* as a narrative, the main problem with Gayford’s attempt to let Midwich tell its story is that the Englishness of which Midwich is indexed as being such a definitive example is not a neutral phenomenon for him. As it had for centuries in the minds of English—and later, British—writers and intellectuals, ‘Englishness’ as a cultural signifier plays a significant role in his own self-identification, and in that of the larger modern British cultural milieu of which he is a part.

The Midwich Cuckoos is thus both the story of Midwich's own internal cultural value—of 'the English national character,' as Orwell would have it—but also of the relationship of Englishness to Britishness in the minds of those modern Britons who observe it. Because we read *The Midwich Cuckoos* as narrative and ethnography, we have a way of interpreting not only Gayford's depiction of Midwich's essential cultural Englishness, but also the manner in which the story he tells works to shape that internal narrative in relation to its own ideological priorities. The value of this is that the novel can then actually be seen to tell not one, but *two* stories. Not only do we receive the account of Midwich that Gayford sets out to tell, but also the tale of that recounting, which cannot help but interpret Midwich in relation the larger liberal narrative of modern Britain of which it is a part. As the narrative presents it, the relation of the modern British liberal vis á vis Midwich is of one paternally protecting a vulnerable but vital treasure from outside interference. As frustrating as the parochial Midwich villagers can be to their modern liberal overseers, particularly the town's resident gentleman-intellectual, Gordon Zellaby, the town as a collective subject is nonetheless indexed as an invaluable embodiment of cultural memory, a cache of organic and self-generating Englishness at the heart of modern Britain.

Midwich, both in character and location, represents all that is fundamentally organic and continuous about English national selfhood. Its inhabitants seem almost a direct translation of Orwell's depiction of the English national character in "England Your England." While certainly a form of "rather stuffy Victorian family," (Orwell, *Essays* 267) they nevertheless embody the virtues of gentleness, privacy, individualism, and emotional unity that for the latter bind the nation together "by an invisible chain" (266). Midwich is also, as Ian Baucom argues, a *lieux de mémoire*, a specifically sited embodiment of cultural memory where one goes to rediscover their

identity in those virtues. As Baucom contends, this rhetorical trope had been deployed from the late eighteenth century onwards as a means of positioning English national identity against both the metropolis, which “was regularly deployed as a province of forgetfulness,” and the British Empire, which represented the danger of racial contamination (36). Moreover, located in the idyllic ‘south country,’ the village and its inhabitants work within a ‘localist’ ideology that had in the same space of time come to project an organic sense of wholeness onto a pastoralist vision of the rural countryside.¹²¹ This popular ideological image is the vision of England that Gayford codes in the opening pages of his anthropological reading, a spatialized and sited continuity stretching from the distant past to the present: “the village church sports a Norman west doorway and font, the local manor has “Tudor roots,” while “the vicarage is Georgian; the Grange Victorian,” and “the cottages show most of the styles which have existed between the two Elizabeths” (12). Not only is a visible representation of Englishness coded into the town’s spatial features, but those who inhabit it, save for Gayford and a select few other transplants, “had most of them lived there for numerous generations in a placid continuity which had become a right” (13). Given his anthropological position, Gayford’s language here is of the utmost importance. For the residents of Midwich, if not for Gayford himself, English culture works by enacting a process whereby emplaced continuity overlaps with cultural typicality, thereby affording one territorial primacy. Most significantly, for modern Britons like Gayford, to be among Midwich folk is to participate in this process, to seek and find hope “for a cultural and spiritual renewal...in the countryside” (Kumar 213).

¹²¹ As Krishan Kumar writes in *The Making of English National Identity*, “these regions—the heart of the old Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, became the emblem of a certain kind of ‘Englishness’...It is a land of small towns and cathedral cities set among green rolling hills, interspersed here and there with the ruins of an old castle or abbey...England, in this image, was ‘the south country’...cut off not just from Britain but from much of the rest of England” (209).

However, if Midwich as a location both reproduces and preserves this potential, it also estranges it, distancing it historically from the self. As Baucom avers, the most problematic aspect of English localist ideology was that it also meant that “Even when Englishness was understood to be properly resident “here,” somewhere safely “inside” the nation, even when it was conceived as something spatially local, or near at hand, Englishness defied its suitors by greeting them across a temporal chasm” (37). Thus, in his early historical sketch of the community, Gayford also notes that the town’s existence “ha[d] never been convincingly accounted for” and that, “at some unknown time,” it seemed “simply to have occurred” (11-12). Unlike modern metropolitan London, anchored to the progressive development of the capitalist world system, Midwich “was not in a strategic position to hold a market, not even across a packway of any importance,” but had rather “drowsed upon its good soil in Arcadian undistinction for a thousand years” (12). As tangible as Midwich may seem in space, it also acts as a kind of fantasy England, a sentimentalized and two-dimensional rural idyll removed entirely from the current of modern historical development. It is unsurprising then that, upon leaving the village midway through the novel, Gayford remarks that “I had a pleasantly relaxing sensation of being on my way back to the normal world. Midwich values gave a feeling of having only a finger-tip touch with reality” (147). Both aspects of this ethnographic account play a key role in legitimating the town’s significance for Gayford, Zellaby, and the collective ‘modern world’ beyond its boundaries.

It is then both Midwich’s essential Englishness and modern Britain’s ideological relationship to it that the novel dramatizes. Much of this drama revolves around the paternal relationship established between the simple, provincial Midwich villagers and their modern liberal interlocutors, who act as both gentle benefactors and interpretive middlemen. Throughout

the novel *Zellaby* performs the role of wise paternal overseer, sheltering and protecting the villagers—and their violated morals—from “the three modern Furies, the awful sisterhood of the printed word, the recorded word, and the picture” (53). Likewise, Gayford is conscripted by Bernard Westcott, a British military intelligence officer, to “report on Midwich’s state of health, mind, and morale so that [Westcott] can keep a fatherly eye on it” (51). With the embedded eye of the anthropologist, Gayford is then meant to observe “what the village thinks” (49) and how it reacts to the shock of the intrusive alien invasion.¹²² In this Wyndham critiques one of the most popular postwar narratives of cultural Englishness, which “showed England as a domestic sanctuary threatened by violation...Reworking old ideas of ‘little England,’ they constructed Englishness against empire and particularly against immigrants” (Webster 8). What the text ultimately reveals about this ideology is that it does less to preserve the conservative “Midwich way of life” linked to that idea of ‘little England’ and more liberal Britain’s ideological relationship to that way of life. While Zellaby and Gayford’s liberal sensibilities certainly direct them to care for the wounded village when its inherent decency and moral character are compromised by invasion, their sensitivity also arises from the understanding that Midwich is not simply a population ‘out there’ among which they happen to live. Rather, as I argue, the protection of the village is necessary because the conservative vision of England it embodies overlaps with and constitutes their own liberal understanding of Britain as fundamentally and racially English.

A racial danger of the most urgent kind: Englishness, Race, and Modern Liberal Britain

¹²² Ironic because the presence of the British State in Midwich is also described as an intrusive violation of the village’s quintessentially English privacy and moral character.

As a narrative, *The Midwich Cuckoos* mediates the historical phenomenon of reverse colonial migration to Britain in the postwar period, examining the politics of belonging and identity which have characterized social and cultural debates on the nature of British nationality and citizenship since the Second World War. Since 1945 the social and political construction of Britishness has emerged from “a fundamental contradiction between an inclusive legal nationality policy—the formal definition of who [has] the right to enter the country—and an exclusive constructed national identity—the informal notion of who really [does] or [does] not belong” (Paul xxi). This contradiction works as both a continuation and extension of the cultural and political legacy of empire. It translates the liberal tenets of the civilizing mission into a broadly inclusive concept of imperial British citizenship while simultaneously racializing this social totality as an exclusive hierarchy of intra-national communities of Britishness.

As Paul Gilroy writes in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), the discourse of race, and particularly racial contamination of the homogenous white nation, re-emerges alongside a renewed focus on national decline during the era of decolonization. In particular, “the process of national decline is presented as coinciding with the dilution of once homogenous and continuous national stock by alien strains,” which then “come to embody a threat which, in turn, invites the conclusion that national decline and weakness has been precipitated by the arrival of blacks” (46). Perceptions of cultural and social decline then become a motivation for the reconsolidation of the national community—and particularly the English community—against racial Others whose merely formal membership in an inclusive conception of Greater Britishness is trumped by the mythical, naturalized link between whiteness, national territory, and the culturally constructed English race. In working to expose the ideology underpinning this naturalized construction, *The Midwich Cuckoos* dramatizes the influx of colonial migrants in the

1950s, turning the trope of colonial invasion back on Midwich's mythically located Englishness. In doing so, it reveals how modern liberal Britain locates itself in relation to a national territory and community expressed primarily in terms of the social production of racial Englishness.

Shaped by Gayford's anthropological perspective, Midwich embodies the abstractness of a bounded, culturally pure, and territorially situated model of national community. In his reckoning, due to its nearly mystical separation from the historical development of the modern world, Midwich has no need to question whether its own essential being is socially produced. Rather, it is precisely the purpose of 'the Midwich way of life' to transpose the natural (expressed in terms of biological certainty) onto the socially contingent level of culture, thereby naturalizing each as each. Midwich folk act like Midwich folk because they are Midwich folk; Nature is culture and culture nature. The cardinal virtues of the English national character—privacy, gentleness, popular communality, and emotional unity—are themselves tied to Midwich's ability to naturalize them in this particular place, the implication being that anyone resident there will embody these characteristics and, conversely, anyone found there not embodying them is not of that place—is foreign, a stranger.

This is why it is all the more shocking when, on one rather ordinary day, this naturalized sense of national community and popular Englishness is disrupted by the arrival of an unexplained and racially marked alien intruder—the Midwich 'Children'—who threaten this naturalized construction by intervening in the community's ability to reproduce itself in territory they consider theirs by naturalized right. Impregnating the village's women during an orchestrated mass trance, the aliens manipulate both innate human instincts to nurture and provide for offspring, as well as deeply ingrained liberal humanist ethics, to infiltrate and challenge the racial and cultural authority of their English hosts.

This reversal of the classic scenario of colonial conquest is one of the standards of British sf invasion narrative.¹²³ However, Wyndham's innovation is to translate invasion from a nineteenth-century model centered on dramas of military conquest into a narrative interrogating the nature of race and subjectivity, and moreover to do so in an explicitly British cultural context.¹²⁴ In so doing, he sets up the introduction of the children in terms laid out by the discourse of colonialism. Identified in biological terms as colonists (123), the fundamental threat presented by the Midwich children marks a break in the community's ability to naturalize the distinction between nature and culture, form and content. The former's xenogenetic invasion works as "a...confidence-trick...the callous exploitation of a natural proclivity" (107). But while 'nature' is here literally intended to signify formal biological reproduction and maternal instinct, it also figures Midwich's historically naturalized and immemorial ability to reproduce their own cultural content. Indeed, as we learn, the biological fact of the children's literal reproduction is easily negated by the inhabitants of an Inuit village, who murder the babies immediately upon their birth. The Midwich children, however, enact what John Rieder describes as an "invasion by a foreign totality, a transformation of signs and values, an emptying out of older cultural artifacts and rituals and their replacement by something directed by fundamentally different motives and assumptions" (Rieder "Invasion" 387). Most significant among these socially variable signs and values is the construct of race, which immediately marks the children as superficially different at birth:

¹²³ For more on sf invasion narrative, see Rieder, "Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion" 373-393.

¹²⁴ I do not mean to suggest here that Wyndham was the first to take this innovative step. John Campbell's "Who Goes There" (1938) is generally regarded as the Ur-text for the form. Most significant in Wyndham's appropriation of Campbell's model is the specific application of the invader/host paradigm to a specifically British socio-cultural context, wherein the humans invaded—and the drama that results from this invasion—are marked by particularly English characteristics.

All...had the same browned complexions. They shared the same dark-golden hair, straight, narrow noses, and rather small mouths. The way the eyes were set was perhaps more responsible than anything for a suggestion of 'foreigners', but it was an abstract foreignness, not calling to mind any particular race, or region.

(148)

While the children appear 'human' (they are born in the shape of a human being), and call to mind racial characteristics the village can link to its own self-identity, they are nonetheless constructed in terms of a dialectic of identity and difference: they are formally the same, but fundamentally different in terms of culture.

At the literal level of plot, the children's 'abstract foreignness' is clearly intended to signify their utter, irreducibly alien difference as a species, where their eventual threat will be characterized in terms of conflict with humanity writ large. In this sense they are rootless beings with no known origin that are therefore incomprehensible. However, the text complicates this simple binary in two ways. First, Wyndham's aliens confound human notions of biological reproduction, which turn on the gestation of an embryo in a host mother and, most importantly, on the eventual differentiation of new human life from that through which it is conceived. The Midwich aliens, on the other hand, reproduce xenogenetically, by invasion of an interspecies host mother, who gives birth to a component piece of a larger collective hive consciousness. By way of this process, with the active and passive roles of mother and child conflated through the mediation of a human host, the children code as superficially 'human' but essentially different.

Second, the text purposefully frames this interspecies drama in terms both national and racial, such that 'human' loses its own air of philosophical abstraction and comes to figure a

specific ideological construction of humanity as understood through British imperial ideology. As the putatively ‘English’ children grow and begin to evince signs of their cultural strangeness, their ability to signify the naturalized connection between race and culture breaks down, prompting Midwich’s quintessentially English town vicar to remark that “they have the *look* of the *genus homo*, but not the nature” (158 Wyndham’s italics). The excision of the suffix *–sapien* from the common taxonomical term used to denote human beings signifies that, for the vicar, what is most at issue here is not the children’s species difference (which is mostly undetectable), but rather their cultural difference, their characteristics *homologous* with the racially English construction of human cultural hierarchy he has been conditioned to recognize as legitimate.

Ultimately, what the novel suggests is that the categories used to mediate the village’s naturalized understanding of ‘human’ are predominately racial. That the children appear vaguely European but fail to signify a “particular race or region” suggests that their abstraction is, at least at first, entirely contingent on the racial discourse within which it operates, wherein ‘race’ and ‘region’ code as intra-European formations of cultural whiteness (as in ‘the British race,’ the French/Gallic race,’ the German/Teutonic race,’ etc). Were the children to physically appear as Asian or African, for example, it would be impossible for Gayford to characterize their foreignness as racially or regionally abstract because their appearance would link them concretely with a distinct place of origin.

Unlike the thousands of white Europeans (mostly Eastern European, but also Irish) who were encouraged to immigrate to Britain as replacement labor in the immediate postwar period and gently asked to assimilate,¹²⁵ the children instead figure the darker and more suspicious conception of racialized difference. And indeed, like the vicar, Midwich treats the children not

¹²⁵ For more on this, see Paul, *Whitewashing Britain* 64-110.

merely as another intelligible cultural category that can be assimilated into an extant hierarchy of civilizational whiteness (as they could with, say, the Polish). Rather, read in terms of imperial discourse, they are something abstract, incomprehensible, and irreducibly different, ostensibly a step down (or in this case, up) the ladder of human evolution. Racialized in order to conform to this understanding of the world, the children as a social and cultural anomaly are linguistically assimilated by village culture, transformed into proper terms as the ‘C’children.

By setting the Children up as a racial foil to their own essential community identity, both conservative Midwich and their liberal interpreters self-reflexively racialize themselves in absolute terms. Noting the uneasy integration of the children into everyday life in Midwich, Gayford remarks that “In quite a short time most people seem scarcely to have thought of them as individuals. They found them difficult to tell apart, got into the habit of regarding them collectively so that they have tended to become two-dimensional figures with only a limited kind of reality” (177). As I argue above, Midwich itself is, for all intents and purposes, a two-dimensional cultural consciousness with only a limited attachment to reality, a collective vision of self reproduced in quotidian detail on a daily basis by subjects who treat the fantasy idyll as natural. In seeing this two-dimensionality embodied by the children to whom they have given rise, and to whom they now stand opposed, the Midwich villagers catch a glimpse of the essential role race plays as the unacknowledged mediator of their own subjectivity.

Race also mediates the violence that erupts in Midwich when it becomes apparent that not only are the Children different, they are also ‘special,’ possessing a telepathic ability to compel the villagers to do their will. With some irony, Zellaby describes the beginning of the conflict between the resentful villagers and the children as a “blood feud.” What he intends as a wry comment on conflicts between intra-national families, where ‘blood’ signifies filial

differentiations within that larger unit, is otherwise better expressed by the vicar, who poses the question of whether killing one of the Children could even be considered murder, considering that “murder is, by definition, the killing of one’s own kind” (158). The ambiguity of the word ‘kind,’ which biologically signifies species-difference or ‘type,’ is otherwise inflected by the Village’s homogenous racial essentialism, marking the Children as outside and beneath an imperial reading of humanity that collapses the anthropocentric into the Anglocentric.

Resentful of the children’s ability to not only embody a sameness-in-difference that relativizes their own racial superiority, but also to interfere with the community’s cultural integrity (if you can make the villagers do culturally unnatural things, they may cease to be villagers), Midwich lashes out with a racial violence disguised as a moral and civilizational obligation to ‘defend’ themselves. In response, the Children’s retribution adapts to and works within the fundamental racial context supplied by the village. Attacked by the villagers, the Children merely turn the racial violence of the community back onto itself, compelling the locals to attack one another or commit suicide. In effect, the racial context supplied by Midwich itself allows the children to expose the ways in which, in directing violence at the Children’s difference, the villagers actually express their own outraged awareness of the fundamental similarity connecting them.

It is this racial menace—and the danger of contamination it poses—that informs the novel’s titular metaphor of the Children as ‘Cuckoos,’ birds who, by laying eggs in other species’ nests, take advantage of the latter’s nurturing instincts. Deeply disturbed by the thought that the Children do not “correspond to any known racial classification,” (106) Zellaby gravely pronounces the future death of his species: “So, like the poor hen-thrush we shall feed and

nurture the monster, and betray our own species” (113).¹²⁶ Most ironic is that the potential for this betrayal results directly from the Children’s perceived ability to infiltrate and subvert the purity of Englishness not by undermining race per se, but rather by subverting the reproduction of the mythical national characteristics Orwell attributes to popular patriotism—which are themselves racialized. Therefore, not only do the Children take advantage of the maternal instincts of Midwich women, they also manipulate the community’s famed gentleness,¹²⁷ their desire for privacy,¹²⁸ their sense of individualism,¹²⁹ and most importantly, the supposed emotional unity that allows them “to suddenly draw together and act upon a *species* of instinct” (Orwell, *Essays* 255 my italics). In referring to cultural characteristics as biologically determined and expressed, Orwell unintentionally reveals the way race intervenes in and mediates his account of popular Englishness. As he would have it, “a seed may grow or not grow, but at any rate a turnip seed never grows into a parsnip” (254). *The Midwich Cuckoos* satirically reframes this maxim: in Midwich an alien can grow into the form of a man, but never into an Englishman.

While Gayford’s ethnographic narrative pulls no punches in establishing conservative Midwich as fundamentally driven by a racial conception of national identity, his depiction of how that racism manifests in terms of his own liberal conception of Britishness is less obvious. What at first seems like the most significant problem posed by both the arrival of the Midwich children, and the community’s reaction to them is the social conundrum of how to integrate the

¹²⁶ The echoes of *Frankenstein* here are likely intentional, setting up the Children’s species identity in terms of a modern conflict between self and other also inflected by visions of the dark monster within.

¹²⁷ This gentle character keeps the villagers from immediately turning on the Children when their strange absolute difference is revealed (74-90).

¹²⁸ The Midwich villagers’ natural sense of privacy ensures that the violation of the village remains safe from the prying eyes of modern cosmopolitan Britain. This reversion to private life in the face of communal tragedy receives a full treatment in a chapter entitled “Keep it Dark” (67-73).

¹²⁹ One of the most disturbing things about the Children for the villagers is their sense of collective consciousness. Acts committed by an individual child signify not that individual’s agency, but that of the entire group. Likewise, when anything happens to an individual child, whether that thing be the imparting of information or violent aggression, it is registered by all. This issue is given a full treatment in a chapter entitled “Matters to Arise” (116-125).

former into liberal British society while still keeping them separate from the conservative and violent racism of the latter. For both Midwich and the British state, the children are “a national danger... wherever they exist, but a racial danger of the most urgent kind” (191). The irony in this construction is that it tends to enforce a distinct separation between the national and the racial. However, what Wyndham makes clear is that for both modern liberal Britain and conservative English Midwich, the children are a national danger precisely because a racial danger. Therefore, it is the racial primacy of Midwich’s cultural value that comes to define the threat the Children pose to a British interpretation of itself as essentially English. Historically defined by an ideology of inclusive tolerance, the problem for British liberal thought then becomes one of maintaining the normalized conflation between nation and race while appearing to keep both categories separate. The benefit of this is that British liberalism can then appear to reject the racism inherent in its homogenous understanding of Britishness as culturally English on the one hand, while maintaining a social hierarchy inflected by the naturalized connection between English race and territory on the other.

The novel expresses this complex ideological maneuver by figuring the Children as British imperial subjects, reading them in terms that would later come to define official British policy on immigration and citizenship. As British-born, the children are granted the formal dignity and respect that designation provides. In recognition of their inherent difference, and out of deference to the Midwich villagers,¹³⁰ British authorities thus establish a special school for the children, a kind of a “mental home without bars” (133) where they will ostensibly be both educated and studied by the amateur anthropologist Zellaby, for whom they are an exotic and fascinating alien culture. This separation ideologically invokes the unofficial foundations of

¹³⁰ Attempting to communicate to one of the villagers why the ‘school’ at the Grange exists, Westcott explains that “it’s *not* that they’re backward. The special school was opened because they are *different*” (170).

British racism in the postwar period, enacting Gilroy's dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. By setting up a state-run home for the children, the liberal state is able to include them in the larger political community as internalized imperial citizens subject to British authority. Under this dispensation, the alien foreignness of the children can operate, if somewhat uncomfortably, under the auspice of British state power. At the same time, this act excludes them from the unofficial national community defined in terms of its essential Englishness.

By locating the Children's essential difference outside Midwich, in the town's Grange, the state effectively dislocates them from the community in which they operate. Westcott all but confirms as much, noting that "They have a different sense of community—their pattern is not, and cannot by their nature, be the same as ours. Their ties to one another are far more important to them than any feeling for ordinary homes...they can't really become one of the family, they're too different" (131). Threatened by this difference, but constrained by a liberalism which would accord the children rights, the state works to contain and neutralize that difference, at the same time pacifying the protest of the villagers, to whom the children "are...strangers" (93). Despite inhabiting the same social space and biological form, the children are encoded as distinctly not of our people, a notion reinforced here in Westcott's patrilineal language: their social 'pattern' is not the same as 'our community'; their nature (what they are), here conflated with their culture (what they do), compels them to be together in a different type of 'family'; their 'ties,' insofar as they can be known, link them through foreign roots to unknown origins. The relationship established in and through Westcott's language situates the children as a fundamental 'them' opposed to an easily identified 'us' and suggests, at least obliquely, that, for both Midwich and liberal Britain, the alienating chasm of race makes non-white Britons as different as if they had been born on another planet. The deployment of this notion of the exotic alien Other, a classic sf

trope with roots in colonial discourse, reveals the central concern of Wyndham's work throughout the 1950s: a critique of British liberal humanist ideology.

'The Savage Within' and the Limits of British Liberal Humanism

"We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English, and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things."

—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

By the time *The Midwich Cuckoos* was published in 1957, formerly colonized subjects had begun to turn the tenets of liberal humanist thought on the colonizers themselves. While demanding their human rights in the form of national independence, they also expected entrance to and inclusion within the liberal framework embodied by the idea of a tolerant global Britishness. Both of these intrusions served to relativize the formerly self-evident value of British culture and intellectual profundity, initiating, as Alan Sinfield dubs it, "a crisis of self-esteem" which revealed that not only were Europeans not representative of "the apogee of human achievement," but also their presence was no longer required, nor desired (153).

It is in relation to this context that we can understand how the final confrontation between the Midwich Children and their terrestrial hosts challenges the racist dimensions of British liberal humanism, but also re-encodes the supremacy of racial Englishness in modern Britain. Once the Children are recognized as a challenge to human dominance, Gayford notes how the British establishment—represented by its proxies Zellaby and Westcott—begins to construct the Children as a "threat to the whole human race" (192). In terms of the novel's colonial subtext, this establishes them not as a threat to humanity as such, but rather to a colonial hierarchy with Europeans (and especially Britons) naturally perched at the pinnacle. As Zellaby admits with due gravity, "I now find, when I feel...my situation at the summit of creation to be threatened, that I

don't like it a bit" (113). Just as the Children decenter humanity at a literal species level from their perceived place atop the natural order, so, too, does their arrival unsettle modern Britain's perceived supremacy atop an imperial hierarchy.

The Children likewise manipulate and strategically maneuver against British liberal humanist ideology at the level of cultural reproduction, appropriating and subverting the discourse of individual liberty and natural human rights as a means of challenging the violence and authoritarianism embedded within these discourses. Contrasting British political ideology with their Cold War adversaries in the Soviet Union (who have, at this point, 'liquidated' their own group of Children), one of the boys argues that "In Russia, the individual exists to serve the State...In this case...biological duty and political duty coincided" (198). By contrast, for the British "the issue is less clear...you have the inconvenience here of the idea that the State exists to serve the individual...therefore your consciences will be troubled by the thought that we have 'rights'" (198). Unbowed, however, Westcott implores them to "consider this thing from a more civilized standpoint...this is a civilized country, and famous for its ability to find compromises...History has shown us to be more tolerant of minorities than most" (198). Westcott essentially offers the Children the old imperial gesture of British liberal tolerance and inclusion in the larger imperial formation of the Greater British nation. The Children, however, who recognize the implicit violence in this superficial gesture, have no intention of becoming a part of British history's civilized 'tolerance' of colonial subjects.

Translating the violence of colonial conflicts then raging around the world into Darwinian terms of biological struggle, the children resurrect the language of British High Imperialism and the Anglo-Saxon myth, posing the question of imperial domination in terms stripped of civilizing justification. As one of the girls drolly intones: "this is not a civilized

matter...it is a very primitive matter. If we exist, we shall dominate you—that is clear and inevitable. Will you agree to be superseded, and start on the way to extinction without a struggle?” (198). What has until this point remained a play on the dialectic of identity and difference suddenly transforms into a Manichean one of master and slave. Once again turning the community’s rhetoric back on itself, one of the children reprimands Zellaby, explaining that “it isn’t a matter of hates, or likes. They make no difference. Nor is it something that can be arranged by discussion. It is a biological obligation. You cannot afford *not* to kill us, for if you don’t, you are finished” (197 Wyndham’s italics). This final act of Gayford’s ethnographic account primitivizes both the Children and their hosts, unsettling colonial power relations by transforming the discourse naturalized by them into a Manichean standoff not unlike the one described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. However, unlike Fanon, for whom such an impasse engenders a transformative dialectic which revolutionizes the consciousness of both colonizer and colonized, *The Midwich Cuckoos* allows for no mutual recognition and no historical evolution.

Instead, rather than attempting to move beyond the ideological contradictions of imperial liberal humanism, the text merely adjusts the racialized rhetoric of imperialism, and thereby reinscribes it. Sinfield argues that one of the most influential of such adjustments in postwar British literary culture was the production of the myth of ‘the savage within,’ an explicitly ideological notion of human nature as fundamentally savage: “imperial ideology was adjusted to produce a myth of ‘human nature’: it is savage” (160). Gayford’s final restatement of the novel’s Darwinian premise, “If you want to keep alive in the jungle, you must live as the jungle does,” (219) exemplifies this adjustment. It also finally conflates his seemingly neutral anthropological perspective with that of the liberal Zellaby, who holds a fundamentally Hobbesian understanding

of Nature as inherently savage: “I wonder if a sillier and more ignorant catachresis than ‘Mother Nature’ was ever perpetuated? It is because Nature is ruthless, hideous, and cruel beyond belief that it was necessary to invent civilization” (112). If the novel’s critique of imperial liberal humanism relativizes the cultural and racial superiority of the colonizer, Wyndham’s decision to maintain the ideological centrality of inherent savagery turns around on this earlier critique, relativizing savagery itself.

For even in lowering the ladder of civilization to reveal that all Europeans are just as savage as those they had previously used to mark their own civility, by deeming all life savage Zellaby is nonetheless able to maintain a relative position of power and authority. The civilization ‘invented’ to shape and contain innate human depravity is his civilization and its invention his culture’s act of profound wisdom. That he now finds himself faced with a situation in which “the race is worth preserving” (as the Beadley group puts it in *The Day of the Triffids*) only means that he will once again be called on to demonstrate that same civilizational authority and privilege. Faced with this choice and trained to read it in terms of an imperial struggle between master and slave, absolute self and absolute difference, Zellaby can only barbarically conclude that “the Children *ought* to be eliminated at the least possible cost, with the least possible delay” (208 Wyndham’s italics), for the framework conditioning his response insists there can be no dialogue between the two. However, this conclusion is, like so many cultural dictates in Wyndham’s fiction, not a natural obstacle, but a naturalized one. Zellaby’s final act of xenocide, in which he detonates a bomb in the Children’s school, killing both them and himself, thus marks the fundamental limit of British liberal humanism’s supposed tolerance and the ideological boundaries of Gayford’s anthropological critique, which can only conclude with a

resigned pessimism: deep down, we are all primitives with an inherent instinct to self-preservation.

Either a reluctance or an inability to imagine what lies beyond the contradictions of British liberal humanism is, as Roger Luckhurst perceptively observes, the critical horizon of Wyndham's otherwise subversive novel.¹³¹ However, where Luckhurst sees eloquence in the mere recognition of this impasse, we might otherwise see a conscious refusal to constructively engage with it. Despite his uncertain gesture towards the utopian in *The Day of the Triffids*, Wyndham was not a utopian writer, and in this sense one cannot blame him for purposefully neglecting to provide a solution for one of the modern world's most complex and intractable problems. At the same time, one can explore a problem and attempt to understand it without necessarily providing a final corrective that will adhere at all times, in all situations (indeed, to do so would be to repeat a universalizing, imperialistic gesture of which Wyndham otherwise seems critical). But it is this pursuit of understanding which *The Midwich Cuckoos* ultimately withholds, and which it is important we take it to account for refusing to consider.

For all its acumen, Wyndham's novel does not attempt to understand, either historically or philosophically, the crucial racial and national limitations of its own investigation. By abstractly racializing the children, it makes no attempt to explore the specific historical dimensions of British racism in the 1950s, when white Britons were faced not with the invasion of a homogenous racial Other, but rather the complex interplay between various racialized 'communities of Britishness' that did not—and do not—correspond to a simple 'us vs them' mentality. Furthermore, *The Midwich Cuckoos* chooses not to exploit the productive potential of the trope of xenogenetic conception, which, as Patricia Kerslake notes, would at least seem to

¹³¹ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* 132.

“permit a functional hybridity or polyvalency as might eventuate from a likewise forced merging of two human cultures” (41). For Wyndham, as for William Golding, Graham Greene, and other writers and intellectuals of their generation, the spectrum of cultures inhabiting the human continuum must be kept separate precisely because bringing them together in a radical heterogeneity would challenge the implicit power relations that otherwise work to keep them separate (and thus to reproduce those relations). Rather, the implicit assumption structuring the novel seems to be, as Sinfield puts it, entirely tautological: “people do extreme things in extreme conditions” (169). And while the catastrophe of invasion may reveal the internal machinations which serve the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations, it can ultimately do nothing to challenge them.

In thinking of this, we might consider one of the novel’s final and most touching scenes, in which Gayford, breaking through his anthropological role, admits that thinking of the Children as threatening is made most uncomfortable by the idea that both human and alien share a fundamental commonality. Watching them behave as children, he observes that “For the first time...I was able to appreciate that the Children had a small “c”, too” (216). There is in this admission an echo of the racialized discourse of Joseph Conrad’s Marlow, who in *Heart of Darkness* remarks of the native Congolese that “what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship” (36). Yet Marlow, when pushed to the precipice of European imperialism’s violent contradictions, balks at the ultimate limit of his own critique, what Orwell suggests of imperial relations in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) entails “abolishing a part of yourself” (161). And like Marlow, Gayford, unable to confront this necessary self-negation, must ultimately fall back on a conclusion that is both uncertain and limiting: “this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad 5). While this

Conradian implication in Wyndham admits to the barbarity central to the imperial project, it does not go far enough.

By pulling up at the moment of critical awareness, Wyndham risks naturalizing that moment, enshrining it as a tradition in its own right. He risks normalizing a schism that is social, historical, and changeable by reducing it—and the British modernity of which it is an expression—to an immutable cosmic law. As Sinfield reminds us, the problem with this thinking is that it “means that there is no point in trying to change society: the underlying condition will remain the same and you will probably make things worse. So it seems better to submit to the world as it is, to acquiesce in existing power relations” (168). If we are to brand Wyndham a ‘conservative,’ as so many have done, then we must at least resist the facile conclusion that his catastrophic narratives are too superficially ‘Victorian,’ ‘middlebrow’ or ‘cosy,’ and focus on the fundamentally conservative conclusion, sustained throughout his work, that catastrophe denotes not dynamic change, but crippling stasis.

Wyndham ultimately leaves us with the cynical assumption that to look to the future is to glare into a horizon in which human potential is translated into an endless repetition of the same. Writing of Wyndham’s ‘post-catastrophe’ novels,¹³² Fredric Jameson notes that they present us with “a devastated and sterile Earth” (*Archaeologies* 286). For Jameson, reading Wyndham relative to a political analysis of sf aesthetics, these post-cataclysmic representations are not intended as literal predictive indicators of a world to come. Rather, following Darko Suvin, he argues that they “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present,” pointing us to the ideological contradictions of our own global capitalist modernity. In this, Wyndham is indeed successful, but his reticence is also ultimately disabling. It manages to form a critical political

¹³² I.e. *Triffids*, *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and *The Chrysalids* (1955).

inertia but does nothing to point that inertia in a productive direction. Having neutralized the progressive dynamic internal to British modernity, and to catastrophe itself, his final dour effort is to suspend us within a catastrophic order that can signify only disaster.

This is where Orwell and Wyndham ultimately overlap at their most caustic and unforgiving. While Wyndham could not, or perhaps would not, extend his reading of British modernity to encompass the horror Orwell stomps onto the closing pages of *Nineteen Eighty-four*,¹³³ he nonetheless makes a similar gesture, albeit in more ‘decent’ terms. While the novel at first asks us to consider the ongoing struggle with the “the instincts of our kind” (*DT* 170) and with the systems that constrain our ability to see beyond them, it finally leaves us with the conclusion that those instincts and systems, because naturalized, are therefore natural and impossible to change.

Conclusion

In both *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, Wyndham reads the catastrophe of British modernity as a terminal, rather than transformational, historical phenomenon. While both interrogate the way in which historicized readings of British modernity remain reliant on the social construction of ahistorical absolutes—both cultural and racial—they also reinforce the centrality of those absolutes, rendering inert the potential to confront and transform them. Although the texts contest capitalist modernity, imperial culture, and the appropriation of racialized cultural paradigms by British liberalism and state authority, they also suggest that the underlying value and ethics implied by these categories remain consistent. While the texts serve to either arrest or estrange modern history from the experience of those metropolitan subjects

¹³³ As O’Brien explains to Winston Smith near the end of that novel, “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever” (267).

who view themselves as central to its narrative, the paradigms generated as a result of collapse and invasion ultimately redeem and legitimize the exclusion of 'non-English' subjects and ratify an imperialist conception of British modernity.

In *The Day of the Triffids* Wyndham's progressive critique of the functional rationalism of British capitalist modernity, because inherently reliant on mythical models of history and culture, ironically turns a critique of the instrumental society into the production of the instrumental nation. On the one hand, in liberating his bourgeois characters and offering them the chance to meaningfully participate in small-scale democratic politics and the construction of progressive individualist culture, the texts explicitly challenge centralized models of political, economic, and cultural organization, turning attention to the inherent alienation and inhumanity they produce as a function of instrumental society. This challenge targets both the global politics of imperialism, but also the national sphere of state authority and mass society. However, individual liberation and the valorization of progressive anti-capitalist community is for Wyndham only a stepping stone towards the reuniting of a historically conditioned anti-capitalist progressivism with an ahistorical and exclusive conception of English culture. This separation of the historical and the mythical, while held constant throughout much of the text, collapses in the novel's final act, superimposing progressive dynamism onto the immutable cultural primacy of Englishness and the natural link between the English subject and the English national territory. This ironically transforms the liberated and free English dissident into an instrument of national destiny, shedding the global dimensions of imperial capitalist modernity while retaining its inherent assumptions.

This process is best explained through Wyndham's own deployment of social Darwinism as a critical framework. On the one hand, the development of Wyndham's survivors in *The Day*

of the Triffids mimics a condensed process of modern social and cultural evolution. The radical bourgeois traits of individualism, self-reliance, independence, and responsibility evolve in Wyndham's scenario as a critique of capitalist modernity, and furthermore as adaptable qualities natural to the post-catastrophic dispensation. This marks them—and the communities they inspire—as historically legitimate. On the other, in simultaneously representing these qualities as inhering in the characters because of their inborn access to a territorially situated cultural Englishness, the text conflates history with myth, 'the natural law' of social change with the unnatural law of cultural stasis and tradition. It allows for an understanding that intellectual dissidence, principled protest, freedom, self-reliance, and all other adaptable and relevant qualities actually require no evolution because they abide naturally in the English. Thus, it finally indexes English subjects as socially evolved, free individuals capable of resisting systemic domination, but only on the condition that they recognize their functional role in reproducing the national mythos as a driving engine of modern history. As such, the text trades one instrumental subject for another, transforming a dominated modern industrial subject into a new modern imperialist, waiting to one again bring historical dynamism to Britain. In this way the catastrophe of collapse opens onto the catastrophe of expansion; to move forward into history is to move progressively backwards and to repeat imperial history.

This process works similarly in *The Midwich Cuckoos* by exposing the relation between race and cultural Englishness. The novel offers a pointed challenge to the inherent violence and authoritarianism of imperial British racism, and of the roots of this racism in an understanding of modern Britishness as fundamentally constituted by racial Englishness. Ultimately, however, despite relativizing the relationship between colonial subjects and their Catastrophe, in the world of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, then comes to figure not transformation or the construction of space

for productive political dialogue and progressive devolutionary culture, but stasis, pessimism, and the naturalization of racial catastrophe as disaster, rather than social dynamism.

That England and Englishness remain central to any reading of Wyndham's work is all the more necessary when we place it—and the sites of socio-cultural and political contestation it invokes—into conversation with socio-historical developments in Britain over the ensuing decades. Englishness as a site of cultural meaning comes into play again in the era of Thatcherism, for example, when Conservative attempts to foster heritage-based conceptions of national identity activate the deeper assumptions in Wyndham's work. The promotion of the instrumentalized national subject at the close of *The Day of the Triffids* conflates easily with the market-driven economic actor in a neoliberal social paradigm. The same goes for racial nationalist assumptions in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, which frame debates about ethnicity, territory, and belonging which emerge with even greater force in the 1970s and '80s. Stuart Hall writes that Thatcherism was characterized in part by “its rooting of itself inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of ‘national identity’; and its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of ‘society’ after another from the imaginary community of the nation” (*Hard* 8). While Wyndham's novel does challenge the ‘rooting’ of British culture in racially defined models of Englishness, it also reaffirms the differences established in and by these models and validates narratives of resistance to foreign racial invasion such as those seen very recently in the discourse surrounding the United Kingdom's 2016 ‘Brexit’ vote to leave a European Union associated popularly with both a political culture of European neoliberal management and a growing immigration crisis.

Chapter Three: Catastrophe, Intersubjectivity, and the Scottish Devolutionary Imagination

Introduction

In Scottish writer James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994), a blinded protagonist named Sammy feels his way through a cold and unforgiving late twentieth-century Glasgow. In doing so he forms new associations and ways of understanding the world through personal experience. While state institutions and social forces attempt to represent and thus determine his existence, he resists, instead grounding his reality in material contact and his immediate relations to things and people. Sammy's struggle is, as he at one point puts it, "just personal."¹³⁴ The novel's emphasis on personal experience as a site of conflict between passive representation and active communal agency evokes an intellectual strain within modern Scottish creative culture which emphasizes the interpersonal domain of material social relations over the idealized determinations of categorical forms. Whereas the latter subjects and manages selfhood and society deterministically, the former enables personal and collective freedom through the knowledge gained by mutual recognition of an Other. *How Late it Was, How Late* narrativizes the tension between these opposing cognitive modes, in the process illuminating the intersections between the postcolonial, the devolutionary, and the catastrophic in Scottish fiction.

I argue in Chapter One that Scottish intellectual and creative culture has been involved in a nearly three hundred-year process of unmaking the material and ideological foundations of the imperial capitalist world it was instrumental in creating. A crucial component of this radical deconstruction can be seen in the brief outline of the 'personalist' paradigm outlined above. Scottish thinkers and writers since the Enlightenment have ranged this perspective against the

¹³⁴ *How Late it Was, How Late*, 232.

dominant cognitive modes of the post-Enlightenment era, particularly the modern-subject self and the linear, stadial notion of history through which that subject moves, perceives, and creates knowledge. Insofar as these paradigms served as ideological justification for British imperialism, validating race-thinking, slavery, and myriad forms of industrial capitalist dehumanization, their attempted unmaking at the hands of an inherently social, connected, and communitarian Scottish personalism can be seen as a radically postcolonial gesture. Likewise, the postcolonial mindset which develops out of this confrontation is by nature devolutionary insofar as it interrogates the foundations of the imperial British nation from a perspective that is markedly sub-national in character, and which at least implies that nation's obsolescence in a supposedly postcolonial world.

As expressed in Scottish fiction, this postcolonial personalism generates a catastrophic textual mode which is constantly eating away at the underside of the ideology and form of the modern British novel. As Craig argues, it is in modern Scottish fiction where this gesture has most often been expressed as a challenge to the various determinations of narrative realism, history, subjectivity, and political society. For Craig, the Scottish novel struggles tirelessly against these dominating constructions, undercutting narrative's connection with realism and history, splitting the individual self, and riotously revolting against standard English, standardized type, and the ideological conceit of a 'History' from which so many of the world's inhabitants have been excluded. Rather than marking Scottish culture as sick because aberrant relative to the normalized standard set by official Anglo-British culture, these symptoms are for Craig signs of a robust, healthy awareness of the multiple determinations which constitute active and healthy personal and communal relations. It is from this constructive tendency to imply, often indirectly, the possibility of freer and more just worlds of interconnected persons that

Scottish fiction produces a utopian devolutionary imagination as the byproduct of an internal catastrophism.

In Craig's estimation all Scottish novels are in some way catastrophic in that they internalize disaster in varying forms of metanarrative disruption, working to expose the ideological nature of narrative and history and to foreground human agency and intersubjective connection. Problematically, however, every Scottish novel which conforms to Craig's criteria turns within a reinforcing critical loop: each text's catastrophic attempts to decolonize and transform the cultural and epistemological forms of the imperial state energize the devolutionary imagination; the devolutionary imagination feeds back into the ongoing evolution of the catastrophic Scottish novel. This argument ultimately displaces the meaning of the political resistance Craig ascribes to the Scottish novel—a form spread over a variety of texts, times, and individual dialogues—into an ideal realm in which it can never be contested, changed, or reconfigured. We must therefore attend to Michael Gardiner's reminder that if "Scottish postcolonialism attempts to recover the potential for action which is buried within devolution...Scottish literary criticism must [then] be committed to socio-political contextualization rather than...timeless aesthetic standards" ("Literature" 46-7). While Gardiner is here indicating forms of criticism associated with the Great Tradition school of F.R. Leavis and the Close-Reading orthodoxy of the American New Critics, we must also apply this proviso to the Scottish narrative tradition, whose value Craig frames as equally timeless and exceptional.

Craig's position leaves the scholar of 'Scottish catastrophe fiction' in a methodological quandary. Reading such texts relative to an idealized Scottishness leads to the problems outlined above. However, as Craig has convincingly argued, reading Scottish texts relative to

universalizing genre categories tends to bleed them of their national peculiarity.¹³⁵ This is particularly true of the enigma of ‘Scottish Science Fiction,’ which often finds itself subsumed into the far more general category of ‘British Science Fiction,’ much like nineteenth-century Scottish literature ironically found itself swallowed by the emergent discipline of English Literature, to the creation of which Scots had also been central.¹³⁶ As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. writes, this is a particular problem with Anglo-American sf itself, which remained hostile or indifferent to issues of nationality for much of the twentieth century.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, this problem isn’t total; it simply requires a split optic. Understanding the political value of Scottish catastrophe narrative means understanding its interventions historically, relative not only to philosophical traditions of Scottish personalist critique expressed in a text, but also the sf catastrophe forms with which those texts are in mutually productive dialogue.

In this chapter I extend Craig’s argument about the postcolonial personalism of the Scottish novel while simultaneously challenging the ahistoricism embedded in his methodology. I analyze how two closely linked Scottish speculative novels of the 1980s, Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) and Iain Banks’ *The Bridge* (1986) utilize a Scottish personalist perspective in order to engage with, reframe, and ultimately reject the ideological maneuvering of the postwar English catastrophe novel. While neither novel is immediately identifiable as belonging to the British catastrophe novel genre—that is, neither depicts the full-scale destruction of Britain and the ensuing fallout—I suggest that both internalize and express a catastrophic dynamic indirectly, by channeling it into the realm of interpersonal relations. Here, it is the damaged human subjects, and the split narratives through which their consciousness is

¹³⁵ Craig has made this argument in a variety of forms and venues, but one could start with the opening chapter of his *Out of History* (1996) 12-30.

¹³⁶ For more on this, see Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (1992) 16-44.

¹³⁷ Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., “Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations” 217-237.

expressed, which host internalized cataclysms and post-catastrophic worlds. By splitting off subject-protagonists from the post-Enlightenment world which has conditioned their habitual modes of perception and interpersonal relation, the texts interrogate the fundamental relationship between self, society, and politics in twentieth-century Scotland.

However, it is only by examining the historically situated dialogues between these texts and their sf catastrophe Others that we can reach conclusions which are both Scottish and historical, responsive to the needs of an independent and oppositional form of Scottish devolutionary culture, but also to the historical conjunctures in which any such culture emerges and produces political effects. For instance, neither novel can be separated from the politically charged moment in which they were published. Just two years prior to the landmark 1981 publication of *Lanark* the failure of the Scottish devolution referendum of March, 1979 had temporarily averted constitutional crisis in the UK while putting a seemingly authoritative stamp on the longstanding myth of a diffident, fearful, and defeatist Scotland.¹³⁸ In a poem written shortly after the referendum, the novelist William McIlvanney compared the country to a cowardly lion who, terrified of “the emptiness where self is found” and “the bitterness where life is waged...had turned to its cage and slunk away” (25). During this time Scottish self-consciousness remained conditioned by a tenacious inferiority complex or, as Craig puts it more bluntly, “a profound self-hatred” (*Out* 12). For many, the defeat of the devolution referendum confirmed a longstanding assumption that Scotland was simply ‘too wee’ and ‘too feart’ to have a go of it outside the insulating context of the British state.

¹³⁸ See Craig’s discussion of the atmosphere in Scotland—and particularly amongst Scottish writers and critics—following the defeat of the 1979 devolution referendum in *The Modern Scottish Novel* 14-22.

At the same time, the seismic political shift which did occur in 1979—the ascension to power of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party in that year’s General Election—drove what has so far proved to be a permanent wedge between Scottish and British political identities, reinforcing Scottish claims to sociocultural difference and political autonomy. By 1979 Scotland’s once formidable industrial economy—propped up by state subsidy since the end of the Second World War—had experienced more than a decade of severe and abrupt decline following exposure to international market forces. This resulted in the decimation of several historically key industries and the weakening of Scottish working class culture. The Thatcher government’s neoliberal reforms only exacerbated this decline and Conservative Party rule subsequently proved incredibly divisive and alienating in Scotland, where assaults on organized labor and the welfare state led to crippling levels of unemployment.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the drive on the part of British conservatives—and, later, a rebranded New Labour—to articulate a neoliberal model of capitalist economy and society was seen as particularly offensive to many among a Scottish population which has long considered democratic egalitarianism a fundamental aspect of the national culture.¹⁴⁰ While the events of 1979 and their ensuing fallout did not strictly cause the politicization of Scottish culture, they nonetheless created a context in which novels like *Lanark* and *The Bridge* could assume the mantle of political resistance in a Scotland still bereft of formal political representation.

My readings frame each text relative to this context, but also to how they operate as catastrophe narratives relative to historically specific iterations of sf catastrophe rather than generic abstractions. My rationale for proceeding in this way is that, even if the postwar English catastrophe novel contains within it a devolutionary narrative which is both progressive and

¹³⁹ Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2007* 599-617.

¹⁴⁰ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland: National Identity and Liberal Culture* 1-4.

imperial, this narrative will itself shift along with historical conditions. Therefore, a Scottish text responding to the catastrophes of John Wyndham will be reacting to one potential variant of that internal contradiction. However, even if, as I argue, a novel like *Lanark* can be seen responding to the Wyndhamesque catastrophe, this does not mean that Iain Banks, a younger writer with a different experience and understanding of both Scotland and the catastrophe genre, will frame his engagement with the form in *The Bridge* in the same way.

Therefore, while both novels express personalist—and arguably postcolonial—challenges to the arrangement of modern capitalist Britain around deterministic categories and questionable histories, they do so in historically mutable ways. Gray frames *Lanark* as a modernist epic, but one in close conversation with both the European dystopia and the English catastrophe novel. Unlike the forms it critiques, Gray's self-reflexive novel offers a more liberating—if uncertain and open-ended—reading of the human ability to not only tell stories about social change, but also to affect that change in moving away from narrative toward a collective political imagination. *The Bridge*, on the other hand, represents Banks' rejection of the supposedly liberatory aesthetic death highlighted in the 1960s New Wave catastrophe novels of J.G. Ballard. Working parallel to the personalist philosophy of Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing, the novel reframes Ballard's inner spatial catastrophe as *interspatial* catastrophe. Where the former focuses on the solipsistic reaches of the individual inner mind, leading to an entropic dead end removed from relation with self and community, the latter frames the individual as meaningful because social, and suggests that we return from inner spatial disaster so that we can embrace the possibilities inherent in a the more fully human—and decolonized—future.

Alasdair Gray's Lanark: A Life in Four Books

Born in 1934, the Scottish artist and writer Alasdair Gray is a child of what he tersely calls in *1982, Janine* (1984) “forties-fifties Britain” (220), and it is in relation to this era that we must understand how the Scottish conditions in which he matured influence his encounters with sf catastrophe. Gray’s adolescence coincides with the end of the Second World War and the immediate period of reconstruction, austerity, economic growth, and political stability which followed throughout the 1950s. His was the era of the transition in Britain to the model of Welfare State capitalism encouraged by the wartime Beveridge Report and enacted by Clement Atlee’s Labour Government after 1945. While never held up by Gray as the perfect solution to indecency and inequality, Gray’s fiction nonetheless presents the values inherent in this democratic transformation as honorable, if flawed, attempts to orient political and social goals to human needs and communitarian principles. Not unlike his junior contemporary Iain Banks, Gray ultimately came to associate his commitment to a better future grounded in such goals with the lingering possibility of their actualization in the form of an independent Scottish state and society.

However, the nearly twenty-five year period (1953-1976) over which Gray composed *Lanark* was also one in which such principles were slowly eroded in Scotland in conjunction with severe industrial decline, economic and constitutional crisis, and the eventual reorganization of British society around the principles of neoliberal capitalism. Speaking of Gray’s career, Liam McIlvanney writes that his novels “undertake an impressionistic social history of post-war Britain from a Clydeside perspective,” meaning they chart the rise and fall of the British postwar settlement from the viewpoint of a Scottish socialist, tracing “the long transition...between the

Britain of full employment and free school milk and the Britain of Thatcher and Polaris” (199). The narrative of this fall, illustrated most directly by the self-hating Tory Scot Jock MacLeish of 1982, *Janine*, is one of decline from an ethos of decency and communitarian spirit to crueler and more naked assertions of corporate and state power over individual and communal life.

Thus, Gray’s political commitment is tied—for good or bad—to the early days of the British Welfare State, to the socialist ideals passed down to him by his father, and most importantly to the revolutionary opportunities for love, work, and a fair, communal existence he finds in art. Asked about the political dimension of his writing in a 1983 interview, Gray remarks that “Books don’t cause political change...Books work by putting out lives into a clearer light—if they are good books—or by imposing a mirage between ourselves and our lives—if they are bad” (“Interview with Glenda Norquay”). As is his usual, Gray is cagey here about the possible positive effects of his work (they might “put our lives into a clearer light”) but more direct about the anxiety, expressed across the bulk of his fiction, that books ‘impose a mirage between ourselves and our lives.’” Indeed, for Gray the transition from the welfare state decency of his youth to the vanishing post-industrial Scotland of his adult years is inextricably linked to narrative insofar as that transition involves a changing story—and with it changing values—Scots tell themselves about who they are, what they value, and how a defense of the personal, ordinary, and decent might shape a more hopeful future.¹⁴¹

Gray codes this tension between deceptive and illuminating power into *Lanark*’s form, which juxtaposes realistic and fantastic narratives by way of questioning the power of both to simultaneously unsettle and reclaim narrative—and thus political—possibility. On the one hand,

¹⁴¹ This sentiment is encapsulated in Gray’s often quoted exhortation to “work as though you lived in the early days of a better nation.”

the novel's realist narrative tells the story of an emotionally frigid and frustrated young artist, Duncan Thaw, whose inability to connect meaningfully with others in 1950s Glasgow compels him to escape into desperate and isolating imaginative fantasies. Ultimately losing control over the boundaries between real and fantastic, Thaw descends into madness and an ambiguous suicide in Books 1 and 2. However, the novel proceeds out of chronological order and Gray sandwiches the Thaw narrative within the disorienting story of an amnesiac named Lanark, who may or may not be a reborn version of the failed Thaw. In Books 3 and 4—which bookend the text—Lanark must negotiate his desire for a more human existence of love, fulfilling labor, and ordinary happiness in the gloomy world of Unthank, a nightmarish fantasy representation of a dying late-capitalist Glasgow. The world of Unthank is sickly and ontologically uncertain, its inhabitants marked by a variety of emotional diseases and its society dominated by the imperatives of a triad of powerful forces: the Institute (Science/Knowledge), the Council (Government), and the Creature (Capital). Driven this way and that through a series of epic deaths and rebirths, Lanark soon learns that the hells through which he has been wandering are themselves the creation of an author-figure—Nastler—who explains that Lanark's world, slowly crumbling toward catastrophe, is a figurative repetition of Thaw's inability to escape from the depersonalizing effects of his own epic fantasies.

Pace Craig, one could easily see a kind of 'Scottish' catastrophe in this outline. In the Glasgow narrative, characterized by its social realist aesthetic, the catastrophic subject Thaw lives a divided life, torn between a quest for artistic freedom and truth and the demands of a stable, but conformist and repressive, petit bourgeois society. In the fantastic narrative it is Unthank which is catastrophic, its inhabitants insular and emotionally crippled, its society divided between exploiters and exploited, and its reality dominated by institutional and economic

force. As Craig might have it, the novel focuses simultaneously on a damaged, schizophrenic subject as well as the debilitating socio-historical paradigms of the post-Enlightenment world. It thus frames self and society as ambiguous ciphers for one another, breakdown in one mirroring and/or commenting on similar patterns or symptoms in the other. In this sense, the novel offers a dual catastrophe consistent with the critical edge and progressive utopianism Craig ascribes to the Scottish novel. Revolutions in the sociohistorical realm are made contingent on the interpersonal transformation of subjects within those worlds, just as the transformation of the world is made contingent on the liberation of the self from the subject-forms on which those social worlds rely.

However, there are two major problems with this interpretation, convincing and accurate as it can seem. First, it is most persuasive at a distance, where we find the easiest symmetry between the text's formal dynamics and the application of broad concepts derived from a reading of the Scottish tradition. Second, even if we claim that what we see here is a Scottish text using sf as a literary mode, we must still think critically about what we mean when we say 'science fiction.' We must ask which science fiction, when, and why.

Lanark's Dialogues with Sf Catastrophe

An incredibly self-conscious text, *Lanark* is openly aware not only that it is a narrative construction, but also that it owes its existence to a wide-ranging collection of literary forbears and influences, including sf. Gray's unabashedly Scottish novels have maintained direct contact with modes of fantasy and sf narrative throughout his career. This is most obvious in the construction of the texts themselves, which often include fantastic settings or tropes, or formal features associated with fantastic narrative. *Poor Things* (1992), for example, revises one of science fiction's nineteenth-century Ur-texts, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, shifting the locus of

Shelley's original story to late Victorian Glasgow, where it critically interrogates the connections between science, historical progress, and narrative realism. Even more explicitly science-fictional is Gray's utopian *A History Maker* (1994), which depicts a futuristic Scotland ruled by a post-scarcity matriarchal society wherein manual labor has been rendered redundant by technology and men cathartically dispel aggression by staging battles as spectator sport. Here, Gray makes use of sf's traditional strategies of extrapolation and estrangement to critique the assumptions underlying the late capitalist world and the gendered power relations which naturalize its most violent excesses.

Like these later texts, *Lanark's* engagement with sf/fantasy is both formal and thematic. On the one hand, its juxtaposition of realism with fantasy foregrounds the ideological 'reality' embedded in every science fictional attempt to envision the future and calls direct attention to how fantastic narrative often work to naturalize capitalist and colonialist ideologies. On the other, its juxtaposition of fantasy with realism similarly denaturalizes realism's claims to represent history, displaying in brutal and amusing ways how the fantasy—in this case the world of Unthank—is often far closer to the reality realism attempts to depict. To illuminate these connections between *Lanark* and sf, however, we must understand Gray's interest in sf relative to the historical context in which *Lanark* was conceived and composed. I would argue that we ought to see *Lanark* operating as a form of Scottish catastrophe narrative, but that, rather than linking this vocation explicitly to the text's historically abstract Scottishness, we need to see that identity inflected by these dialogues with sf catastrophe and dystopia. If we do, we can see that the novel works within but ultimately rejects the catastrophic as an insular and isolating form of imaginative politics.

For example, Gray's formative period—like Duncan Thaw's—overlapped with the Golden Age of American pulp science fiction and comics, as well as the revival of British sf catastrophe.¹⁴² Thus, it is not entirely surprising when, in *Lanark*, the narrator notes that Thaw's fantasies are fueled in part by racial violence depicted in American adventure comics (159) or that Thaw's friend Coulter casually brandishes a copy of the era's most famous and influential American sf magazine, *Astounding Science Fiction* (163). Sf was everywhere in postwar Britain, and even petit bourgeois autodidacts like Gray—who turned 16 in 1950—moved in the same broad cultural formation as the sf-reading working-class youth analyzed by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957).¹⁴³

Read in light of the catastrophe form's prevalence across a broad British middle class cultural formation in the 1950s, it is unsurprising that the young Thaw fantasizes in post-catastrophe scenarios or that, come face to face with his author, *Lanark* rebuts the former's claim that “a cheap stupid *disaster* is the best ending for mankind” by recalling that “when I visited public libraries in my twenties *half* the science-fiction stories had scenes like that in them... These banal world destructions prove nothing but the impoverished minds of those who can think of nothing better” (527, 497 author's italics). Here *Lanark* critiques how the catastrophe form structures human experience as passive and pessimistic, driven by despair rather than an impulse to continually work toward a better world.

¹⁴² Sf thrived on both sides of the Atlantic in the immediate postwar period, its consumption driven by rising standards of living, full employment, increased leisure time, and—perhaps most importantly—the rise of self-conscious youth subcultures hungry for cheap and exciting forms of print entertainment. American sf and comics were particularly popular among young male readers in Britain during the period and, as Edward James notes, a postwar publishing and distribution boom enabled a flooding of the British market with mass produced sf and comic content. For more on this, see Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* 122-24 and James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* 63.

¹⁴³ See Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* 219-229.

Lanark's implied familiarity with the catastrophe novel and his charge that it entails a failure of the political imagination points us outward to Gray's own feelings on the matter.

Asked in a 2003 interview whether a political agenda informs his writing, Gray responds with a paradox, invoking Wyndham in the process:

No. I became a writer who wanted to draw attention to myself by being an entertainer, by pleasing people...So when I started writing...I was just wanting to produce the stuff I enjoyed reading, but eventually of course you get entertained by ideas, quite self-conscious ideas, and you would be an idiot if you tried to forget them...I remember at this science-fiction conference somebody asking why it was necessary for writers to have political opinions and put them into their work, and why they couldn't just tell enjoyable stories like *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham—a science fiction writer who frequently in his work explained to us that the rich and intelligent ought to dominate the stupid majority. The point is that throughout Wyndham's work there's a right-wing ideology that the reader of course doesn't recognize as a right-wing ideology. It's just business as usual, you know.¹⁴⁴

This remark confirms the central role Wyndham played as the most visible British sf writer of the early postwar period and shows Gray admitting that the 1950s catastrophe form represents a valid site of political contestation. It also suggests that a critically fruitful way to read *Lanark* is to see it as responding to and reframing the catastrophe novel's latent ideological tendencies to direct cultural and political power back toward imperial capitalist Anglo-Britain. While Gray's comment above seems content to mark Wyndham conservative in terms of the latter's bourgeois

¹⁴⁴ "An Interview with Alasdair Gray and James Kelman." *Contemporary Literature* 44.4 (Winter 2003): 564-586.

idiom and presumed class privilege, it seems unlikely that Gray, the sensitive, critical Scottish artist, would miss how Wyndham articulates those classed categories by tying them to culturally English frameworks.

We must also see *Lanark* as both engaging with and responding to the postwar European dystopia for similar reasons. Like the catastrophe novel, the dystopia experienced a resurgence after the Second World War, driven by the rise of European fascism and the technological modernization of the industrial capitalist world. Asserting that *Lanark* stages a conversation with the postwar dystopia is no stretch. Its fantastic Unthank narrative mimics dystopian form, beginning in media res with the amnesiac Lanark, whose primary role is to explore and thus illuminate the systemic conditions which produce his society.¹⁴⁵ As above, however, *Lanark*'s most significant relationship to the dystopia lies in its self-reflexive awareness of the genre's ideological limitations. *Lanark* remains skeptical of the tendency buried within the genre to pessimistically naturalize the impossibility of progressive social change. Consider, for example, the dystopian pessimism of the young Thaw's principled (if bratty) riposte to his father that "No kindly future will ever repair a past as vile as ours, and even if we do achieve a worldwide democratic socialist state it won't last. Nothing decent lasts" (295-6). Even more significant perhaps is Nastler's pessimistic explanation for why Unthank's—and therefore Lanark's—story must be catastrophic: "A conjuror's best trick is to show his audience a moving model of the world as it is with themselves inside it, and the world is not moving toward greater liberty, equality and fraternity. So I faced the fact that my world model would be a hopeless one" (493). For Gray, the concern is that narrative—in this case the postwar dystopia—naturalizes the

¹⁴⁵ In terms of periodization, *Lanark* can be situated among a raft of dystopian writing in Scotland after 1980, much of which represents the country's post-industrial decline by imagining near-future Scotlands ravaged by economic and social devastation. For more on this, see Gifford, Dunnigan, and MacGillivray, *Scottish Literature* 887.

inevitability of disaster in the modern capitalist world by erasing any frameworks in which utopian thinking or resistance might be enabled.¹⁴⁶

In attempting to escape this dystopian determinism, Lanark attempts to overturn the present by seeking his own past in a catastrophe both personal and narrative. In slithering down a tunnel into the subterranean Institute, where he locates an Oracle that can restore his past, the character manufactures a catastrophic break with his reality, forcing into being the ‘new’ world of his former life as Duncan Thaw. Lanark’s escape into the rooted, stable familiarity of postwar social realism, however, proves to be illusory. Thaw’s petit bourgeois Glasgow of the 1940s and ‘50s, while relatively stable and inclusive of ordinary human comforts like time, place, and love, proves equally as alienating for Thaw the artist, whose principled objections to the seeming misery of ordinary human life drive him to embrace an even more insular catastrophic escape into the isolating fantasies of his own disaster-plagued imagination. In one sense such internal narratives, in which the young Thaw imagines himself, for example, the exalted Prime Minister of a post-catastrophic Scottish socialist Republic, represent the character’s uncompromisingly moral attempts to imagine a better, fairer, and more just Scotland and world. At the same time, they also rehearse the ideological dynamic of the English catastrophe novel genre, clearing the modern world of its connections and contradictions precisely so that an insular and disconnected Thaw can entomb himself in a fortress of fragile, exclusive power. The Thaw narrative thus recreates in subjective miniature the catastrophic dynamic which replays itself on a macroscale in the novel’s dystopian Unthank narrative.

Lanark as Late Capitalist Dystopia

¹⁴⁶ For comparison, see Tom Moylan’s reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000) 161-163.

The dystopian genre interrogates large-scale forms of social organization. As Tom Moylan writes, “Dystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (xii) and in doing so it foregrounds the ideological identity of the world constructed within its pages. In order to do so, the genre generally foregrounds systemic forms of social organization, or what Moylan calls the ‘iconic register,’ at the expense of the ‘discrete register’ of character and plot (*Demand* 36). Thus, a character’s function in this paradigm is different than in conventional realist fiction. As Raffaella Baccolini contends, the primary job of the dystopian protagonist is to create two distinct narratives for the reader (qtd. in Moylan, *Scraps* 148). First, he or she is responsible for creating a map of the dominant ideas which underpin the dystopian society, helping the reader understand what kind of society it is and, more importantly, how it works. This ideological mapping gives rise to a second function, which is to produce a ‘counter-narrative’ through which resistance to the dominant ideology can be expressed.

Lanark begins in a similar vein, with, as Gray puts it in the ‘Tailpiece’ to *Lanark*, “a stranger arriving, making enquiries and slowly finding he is in hell” (570). True to dystopian form, the nature of this hell—its dominant narrative—is not immediately stated outright via exposition but must be strung together piecemeal as a function of Lanark’s experience of the gloomy, foundering city he quickly learns is called ‘Unthank.’ Unthank is depicted as both degraded and dying under the constant pressures of capitalist modernization. In Unthank there is no daylight and thus no time, no work and thus no security, and very little love or ordinary happiness. It is normal for inhabitants to suddenly ‘disappear’ in the middle of the night and the

existences of those who remain are characterized by the variety of emotional diseases from which they suffer, and which index their degree of social alienation.¹⁴⁷

When depicted in Book 3—begun in the 1950s—the city far more closely resembles a dark, murky, Kafka-esque ruin wherein state, market, and military power dwarf individual efforts to claim agency and political parties are at best complicit in systems of bureaucratic domination.¹⁴⁸ In Book 4, however, begun and finished in the 1960s and ‘70s, the city is in the midst of another phase of capitalist modernization, wherein “the old streets between towers and motorlanes had a half-erased look, and blank gables stood behind spaces cleared for carparks” (398). Whereas previously the city was derelict, a ruin of an earlier era of production, it now morphs into a “coldly blazing” amalgam of the old and new, a simulacrum of a living, functioning society which is otherwise predicated on the capitalization of value from a human population who sees its energy siphoned off in the process of deliberate, grotesque exploitation.¹⁴⁹

The first and perhaps most vivid depiction of this condition comes in the form of the Institute, a massive underground complex which metaphorically represents the world’s seat of scientific learning and knowledge. Here, those too consumed by their diseases are left to die and then reused as food and energy. While biding time in the Institute with a newly cured Rima, Lanark has the logic behind this explained to him by the local chaplain, Monsignor Noakes: “Cannibalism has always been the main human problem...since the Institute joined with the Council [Government] it seems half the continents are feeding on the other half” (101). While

¹⁴⁷ Rachel Falconer usefully categorizes the four primary diseases, linking them also to Gray’s evocation of Dante’s ‘bad mental states’. See Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature* 177-8.

¹⁴⁸ As one of many socially conscious mouthpiece characters puts it in response to the suggestion that politics can effect beneficial social change: “Ballocks. If we had a majority tomorrow the situation would be the same. A city is ruled by its owners. Nine tenths of our factories and houses are owned by a few financiers and landlords, with a bureaucracy and a legal system to defend them and collect the money” (43).

¹⁴⁹ For more on this, see Falconer’s solid analysis of Unthank as a ‘postmodern capitalist hell’ 175-180.

Noakes at first seems to abstract the problem by framing it ahistorically as a ‘human’ one, he then more aptly characterizes the problem as one to do with the capitalist system in which all are forced to live and survive by a casual, consumptive violence: “like all machines, it profits those who own it, and nowadays many sections are owned by gentle, powerless people who don’t know they are cannibals and wouldn’t believe if you told them” (102).

The Council (Government) and the Creature (Capital) are depicted throughout working in concert with the Institute to monetize all aspects of everyday life, capitalize on human existence by selling time back to those who need it on credit, and softening the natural misery this causes only by, as a functionary of the Council’s labor ministry puts it, “[killing] hope *slowly*, so that the loser has time to adjust unconsciously to the loss. We try to keep hope alive till it has burned out the vitality feeding it” (439).¹⁵⁰ Near the beginning of Book 2, in one of the text’s many cross-narrative nodal points, Thaw thinks to himself “of the energy needed to keep up a civilization, of the implacable routines which started drawing it from the factory worker daily at eight, from the clerk and shopkeeper at nine” (223). In Thaw’s realist narrative the parasitic consumption of labor is left as an abstract background rumination on the vague systems underlying the real world. Unthank’s dystopian representation, however, translates that iconic background into a more ghastly and discrete terror, as humans are literally stolen and consumed for the energy and sustenance their expendable bodies provide.¹⁵¹

While the Lanark narrative manages to form a fairly coherent iconic representation of the capitalist hell that is Unthank, and therefore also a savage critique of its logic, Lanark’s own ability to generate a resistant ‘counter narrative’ to that dominant logic remains limited. In one sense this is because, as Rachel Falconer notes, “the most frightening aspect of Gray’s

¹⁵⁰ While these issues crop up throughout the novel, they are addressed most directly during Lanark’s foray into “Greater Unthank” in the chapter of the same name (432-454).

¹⁵¹ *Lanark* 63-70.

postmodern Hell is that it inflicts suffering casually, without malevolent intent” (178). While the text features an expansive cast of official functionaries and leaders, none of them seem in charge of the Leviathan whose workings they each intimately understand, but which they remain unmotivated to challenge. In another sense, it is because Lanark’s quest for ordinary pleasures and stability simply do not exist in Unthank, even if he were capable of locating them in a world stripped of spatial, temporal, and even ontological certainty. Even more important for my purposes here, however, is the idea that Lanark cannot generate a counter-narrative to his dystopian world because instead of engaging with and attempting to return Unthank to the realm of ordinary life, labor, and love, he seeks out a utopian alternative in his past, and particularly by running into the catastrophic fantasy of his previously ‘real’ and rooted life lived as Duncan Thaw. In this, he attempts to overturn the dystopian hell of Unthank by retreating to the realm of realism and history, not understanding that these, too, are mechanisms of naturalization and domination.

Lanark’s Critique of the Postwar English catastrophe

Ironically enough, *Lanark’s* engagement with sf catastrophe begins in the ordinary register of its social realist narrative, where the young Thaw’s early aversion to, and eventually his intense criticism of, the world around him stems from a profound and sometimes willful misunderstanding of the categories of reality and nature. From the moment we meet him, he demonstrates an intense skepticism of reality as it is presented by authority. Drawing a crude picture on the floor of his parents’ sitting room, five year-old Thaw is gently corrected by his father for misrepresenting the sky as a straight blue line. Even after having the shape of the earth and the law of gravity explained to him, Thaw stubbornly “lean[s] over his drawing and [draws] a blue crayon along the line of the sky, pressing hard” (122). Later that night he dreams of

floating upward attached to a balloon, eventually coming to a border against which he anxiously rests before popping through and continuing the process ad infinitum. This scene is Thaw's introduction to the seemingly natural laws which shape reality and also his initial act of artistic resistance to them. Told the natural way of things and disturbed by the limits imposed therein, he reacts by 'pressing hard,' suggesting that an act of aesthetic will can replace reality with an alternate natural order. While the episode drives home the power of art to refract and reframe the natural and real in illuminating ways, it also dialectically produces his anxious dream about the inability of artifice to protect against the threatening infinitude against which art attempts to impose order.

Whether rebelling against his family, his friends and potential lovers, the Scottish education system, or greater Glaswegian society at large, Thaw tends to frame his identity in terms of the limitations placed on it by Others. As both Gavin Miller and Cairns Craig argue, reading Thaw's aversion to human connection in light of the personalism of John Macmurray and R.D. Laing illustrates the character's inherent fear of relation and of recognizing others—and himself—as fully human.¹⁵² He rejects his parents' well-intentioned attempts to persuade him to pursue a viable career path, struggles awkwardly to embrace sexual maturity, and repeatedly thumbs his nose at his state-sponsored education, which the narrator describes as permitting no room for either dreaming or an "increase in freedom or power" (151). Thaw's desire for freedom has a corollary in his desire for alienation; as his alter-ego Lanark exclaims in Book 3, "I want to be free, and freedom is freedom from other people!" (70). To concede to the

¹⁵² For more, see Miller, *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion* 16-20 and 53-85 and Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* 228-234.

power of reality is thus, for Thaw, to admit to the power of another's deterministic rendering of 'normal' to 'consume' or 'engulf' his own subjectivity.¹⁵³

Thaw's rejection of the ordinary life he associates with this threat eventually drives him to critique the imperial capitalist mode of social organization which underpins his world. In a chapter aptly titled 'Nature,' a convalescent Thaw reflects on a rural hostel garden as a metaphor for the 'natural' logic behind his society:

The whole place fascinated him with a sense of sluggish, malignant life. The hedges were half withered by the grasses pushing up among them; the grasses grew lank and unhealthy in the shadows of the hedges. With more fibrous limbs than the millipede has legs, various plants struggled in the poor soil, fighting with blind deliberation to suffocate or strangle each other. Between the roots moved insects, maggots and tiny crustaceans: jointed things with stings and pincers, soft pury things with hard voracious mouths, hard-backed leggy things with multiple eyes and feelers, all gnawing holes and laying eggs and squirting poisons in the plants and each other. In the corruption of the garden he sensed something friendly to his malign fantasies. (181)

Here, Thaw both reflects on and reproduces a philosophically capitalistic logic defined by eternal competition and consumption. Insular, fortified, and greedy vessels move insistently through a dark and twisting terrain. All creatures bend towards their own self-interested will precisely because their existence is defined by a fearful, defensive, and isolated subjectivity. Shortly thereafter, in a fit of asthmatic desperation, he condenses this nightmare once again into a slightly modified version of the novel's pessimistic refrain: "man is the pie that bakes and eats

¹⁵³ For more on the theories of consumption and engulfment, see Laing, *The Divided Self* 43-54.

itself, and the recipe is hate” (188).¹⁵⁴ This is the same sentiment expressed by the island’s Calvinist minister, Dr. McPhedron, who explains that “the world [is] is the Devil’s province, and an annexe of Hell, and everyone born into it is damned” (183). Yet, while Thaw rejects the minister’s theological interpretation, he maintains an idea of the world as a kind of modern secular hell papered over with only a thin veneer of civilized camouflage concealing the ‘natural’ way of things.

It is in this way that Thaw forms a perverse triangle of associations: that which is ordinary is naturalized; that which is natural is made hellish; that which is hellish is made ordinary. When his father, a devoted Clydeside socialist and veteran of the First World War, argues for the power of ordinary people—rather than figureheads and elites—to affect social change, his son replies with his trademark mix of principled petulance: “I’m *sick* of ordinary people’s ability to eat muck and survive. Animals are nobler. A fierce animal will die fighting against insults to its nature, and a meek one will starve to death under them. Only human beings have the hideous versatility to adapt to lovelessness and live and live and live while being exploited and abused by their own kind” (295 author’s italics). Rather than choosing to see the value in ordinary interpersonal connection, in the simple act of regular people doing things with and for one another, Thaw collapses the naturalized conditions of social existence in midcentury imperial capitalist Britain with the interpersonal dimension which he believes overlaps with and conditions it. In doing so, he comes to read ordinary human life and interpersonal relations as mechanisms of domination.

It is from this supposed truth and to the aesthetic dimension—to art—that Thaw runs, desperate to establish his own inviolable redoubt of Godly truth. “I cannot deny your truths,” he

¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere, this is reproduced almost verbatim, with the minor difference that in *Lanark’s Unthank* the remark has become “Man is the pie that bakes and eats itself and the recipe is *separation*” (101 my italics).

mutters to his exasperated father,” I can only oppose them with mine” (323). While this escape into the imaginative mitigates the terror of subjective entrapment which comes of entering into ordinary social relations with other human beings, it also ironically entraps Thaw in a self-referential castle of the imagination, the aim of which, as Laing argues in *The Divided Self*, “is to be a pure subject” removed from the dangers of interpersonal relations (95). As the narrator observes of the schoolboy Thaw, “Apparent life became a succession of dull habits in which he did what he was asked automatically, only resenting demands to show interest. His energy had withdrawn into imaginary worlds and he had none to waste on reality” (157). This removal into the realm of imaginative ‘pure subjectivity’ splits Thaw into a disembodied false self, put on for the benefit of the threatening external world, and a fantastic internal self in which he quite literally controls everything.

While there is general consensus that Thaw’s flight into the imagination represents an escape from personal relation, very few critics have sought to historically situate the content of Thaw’s daydreams and none have yet remarked on the fact that he dreams in post-catastrophic scenarios. Most, including Lanark and Nastler in the novel itself, trade in generic terms like ‘art’ or ‘fantasy’ when discussing Thaw’s imaginary worlds, as does Craig, who writes that “Thaw...must be deprived of the escape route of *the imagination, of art*, if he is to recover his humanity” (*Novel* 233 my italics). Craig astutely identifies the role imagination plays in the novel as a mechanism of depersonalization and dehumanization; it is precisely by choosing an imaginative ‘escape route’ that Thaw withdraws from the world of interpersonal relations, dehumanizing himself and others in the process. However, this remark renders the precise nature of that imaginative act too generically. Falconer comes a bit closer when she writes that Thaw “craves the power of myth and fantasy to (as he sees it) transform reality on a global, or national,

or at least city-wide scale” (185). Here, the critic accurately represents the intended effect of Thaw’s dreaming—he wants full-scale epic social and political transformation without the jostling dissensus and chaos of actual politics. But she also renders the nature of this desired transformative power in terms equally as generic as those employed by Craig.

Even if we can look at Thaw’s patterns of aesthetic escape generically, as ‘fantasy’ or ‘myth,’ or even simply as ‘narrative,’ the catastrophic form these expressions assume must also be taken into account as historically and culturally relevant. Not unlike the survivor communities of Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids*, Thaw at first uses disaster as an excuse to imagine a more just and egalitarian world removed from corrupted modes of thought and social organization. Indeed, Thaw’s most frequent daydream is of a post-catastrophic Scottish socialist utopia drawn in the style of the disaster narrative: “In two or three centuries of wandering about the shattered earth [Thaw] had become leader of a small group of people who had come to trust his gentleness and wisdom. He had brought them to the crater, protected by its walls from the envy of unhappier lands, to build a republic where nobody was sick, poor or forced to live by work they hated” (158). Befitting the young Thaw’s principled objections to his own utilitarian, instrumentalized Glaswegian society, his post-catastrophic vision seems a genuine attempt to reconceive the world as inclusive and respectful of a wider spectrum of human needs. In promoting this vision Thaw borrows liberally from the disaster novel form, allowing the apparently self-destructive logic of the modern world to perform an off-stage act of cleansing destruction for him, while he plays the part of the resilient survivor whose multifaceted talents rise to the surface in a process of Darwinian winnowing.

However, unlike the catastrophe novel, which performs this social threshing for the purpose of rooting out and questioning a society’s naturalized habits, Thaw redirects all socio-

political energy toward himself as the sole guarantor of stability, happiness, and decency. Staged entirely for his own benefit, Thaw's new world naturally installs him as a beneficent dictator whose power operates in converse correlation to the distance he puts between himself and those he rules.

If, in these early catastrophic scenarios, Thaw seems driven by an ethical social conscience, there is also a latent insularity and subjective defensiveness which blooms as the fantasies evolve. Now a young man attending art school, Thaw imagines himself the protagonist of a stock catastrophe narrative scenario: the last man in a deserted urban center. Surrounded by a deserted Glasgow seeming to operate of its own accord, he notes that:

Not everything died at once for the lowlier plants put on final spurts of abnormal growth. Ivy sprouted up the Scott monument in George Square and reached the lightning conductor on the poet's head; then the leaves fell off and the column was encased in a net of bone-white-hard fibre. Moss carpeted the pavements, then crumbled to powder under his feet as he walked alone through the city. He was happy. He looked in the windows of pornography shops without wondering if anyone saw him, and rode a bicycle through the halls of the art galleries and bumped down the front steps, singing. He set up easels in public places and painted huge canvases of buildings and dead trees. When a painting was completed he left it confronting the reality it depicted. (267)

The scene immediately evokes two major catastrophe narrative antecedents: The last man wandering the deserted shell of a major city evokes Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*,¹⁵⁵ while the encasing of the column in 'a net of bone-white-hard fibre' recalls the narrator's descriptions

¹⁵⁵ And, it should be said, pretty much every novel and film to make use of this image thereafter. It is repeated nearly verbatim, for example, in Danny Boyle's zombie apocalypse film *28 Days Later* (2003).

of Martian biological terraforming in Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.¹⁵⁶ Both connect Thaw's imaginative catastrophes with the same problematic ideology I identify in the English catastrophe novel of the 1950s. As I argue in Chapter Two, Wyndham's overdetermined catastrophic event in *Triffids* serves both as a critique of British capitalist modernity and also a cleansing act of redemption. This makes the world safe for a resurgent Englishness but more importantly makes that resurgence natural. Similarly, Wells' Martian invaders attempt to naturalize their presence on Earth by exterminating its inhabitants and transforming the terrestrial landscape. Much the same way, Thaw needs to see himself as sole creator and subject of the world, as its natural inheritor and obvious center. Giddy with the freedom of the colonizer, Thaw evades the traditional existential terror accompanying such situations because the relation-less world depicted is merely a representation of the existence he already leads.

Turning his paintings around to 'confront the reality' they depict is therefore an ironic statement. As Craig correctly observes, it is less about the reality depicted and more about the catastrophic self depicting it: "Reality comes to imitate the dead world of his painting rather than the static painting offering a monument to the living world" (Craig, *Novel* 231). This is where Thaw's moral critiques of the modern imperial capitalist world dialectically reveal their own barbaric immorality. The artist's arrogance here is to assume that the canvas he turns to the world depicts the Truth to which it refuses to admit, whereas all it can really describe is a world entombed in art for the benefit of one subject at the expense of all others, who have been conveniently removed.' Here, Thaw "was happy" because he has been removed from all affective connection, all need to mutually recognize others and, in turn, from the need to see himself in human relation to them. For example, in the next paragraph he dreams of painting a

¹⁵⁶ See the first chapter of Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, entitled 'The End Begins,' and Book 2, Chapter 2—"What We Saw From the Ruined House," in Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.

view of Arthur's Seat from the courtyard of Edinburgh's Holyrood Palace. In this scene a figure appears atop the Craggs and moves toward Thaw. Seeing the figure—a woman—"A load of depression settled on his heart" and, when she approaches him he beckons for her to be a part of the painting before abruptly shooting her, restoring an ironic equipoise to his scene (267). From Thaw's depersonalized perspective the appearance of the woman is aberrant and loathsome precisely because it denotes the need for contact with another person who must be recognized as autonomous and, ever more anxiously, must then recognize Thaw.

Thaw's decline into an ambiguous madness follows the trajectory of his entrapment in the catastrophic worlds he creates. He believes he uses art to free the world from the cruel truths it refuses to acknowledge but remains incapable of seeing his own dehumanization in the aesthetic representations by which that process proceeds. We can see this clearly as his post-catastrophic dreams evolve, blurring reality and fantasy:

McAlpin left, and after the civil war Thaw became the head of the reconstruction committee...Marjory read his name in newspapers, heard his voice on the wireless, saw his face in cinemas; he surrounded her, he was shaping her world, yet she could not touch him. Then he dozed and dreamed of a fearful twilit country dripping with rain. He was trying to escape from it with a little girl who insulted him and betrayed him...She grew tall and sat wearing jewelry on a throne in a dark ancient house. She had sent her club-footed butler to catch him. Tiny Thaw fled from room to room, slamming doors behind him...He came at last to a cupboard with no way out and clutched the doorknob, trying to hold it shut. Freezing water swirled up his legs. (289)

So accustomed is Thaw to escaping reality into fantasy that the narrator foregoes the grammar necessary to separate the two in the first sentence, McAlpin's departure in the real world bleeding into the typical sequence of disaster and rebuilding without losing a step. However, in this scenario Thaw's desire for epic catastrophe, the freedom it affords, and the detached, inviolable safety-in-exclusion it legitimates is offset by its own inversion in the passage's second half, which pre-enacts Lanark's flight from Unthank and the Institute with Rima in Book 4. As in his earlier post-catastrophic daydreams, he first frames himself in the omnipotent position of the artist-author, endowed with the power to 'shape Marjory's world' but secure in his subjective redoubt from the actual personal connection this would entail. Seen through the keyhole of a liminal half-dreaming state, though, we see him subjected to forces which instead shape his world. Here, it is Lanark, whom we later see threatened by an onrushing flood of freezing water in Unthank, who is the 'tiny,' objectified Other trapped in the catastrophic designs of his author.

These depictions undermine an increasingly desperate Thaw's attempts to detach from the world of ordinary social life through acts of artistic solipsism framed both descriptively and metaphorically as catastrophic. In Thaw's story Gray implicates such fantasies in the naturalization of the larger patterns of social and political solipsism through which imperial capitalist modernity produces damaged subjects and is reproduced by them. More importantly, perhaps, is the implication that catastrophic stories separate humans from authentic models of personhood and community precisely because they promote the same kind of cultural self-absorption which drives the national register of a novel like Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. In its search for a truly devolutionary imagination, *Lanark* forces us to reconsider the personal, social, and narrative models by which we reproduce the pessimistic dictum "man is the pie that bakes and eats itself, and the recipe is separation" (101).

***Lanark's* Rejection of Catastrophe**

This is why *Lanark* is, as a reflexive text, so critical of its own ability to naturalize hell as either dystopian pessimism or as catastrophic escape. Late in the novel, the titular character comes face to face with his author in the text's prematurely positioned Epilogue, a moment of playful metanarrative commentary on the scope and limitations of authorial power. Disturbed by the revelation of his textual existence but naturally curious, Lanark asks the author, a stand-in for Gray called Nastler, how his story will end. The latter bluntly replies: "Catastrophically. The Thaw narrative shows a man dying because he is bad at loving. It is enclosed by your narrative which shows civilization collapsing for the same reason" (484). This pronouncement derives from a pessimistic understanding of the categories of self, society, and art, each of which Nastler frames as potentially normative mechanisms of depersonalization in the modern world.

Because he speaks frankly, with the vested power of authorial control, Nastler's pronouncement of catastrophe at first seems natural, an inevitability. Yet, as we read and think back through all that has come before, we realize that this is precisely the problem. Endowed with the power to begin and end, Nastler lords over his creation with the stubbornness of a jilted God, the catastrophe maker. As he warns a resistant Lanark, "my whole imagination has a carefully reined-back catastrophic tendency; you have no conception of the damage my descriptive powers will wreak when I loose them on a theme like THE END" (498). However, it becomes clear that Nastler, like many authors before him, has merely naturalized a catastrophic ending, projecting his pessimism onto the world much as Thaw reads his insular subjective defensiveness onto the dead world his paintings face.

Effectively, Gray inserts himself into the story as an author bent on writing a socially critical modern catastrophe only to call the critical value of catastrophe into question. This is illustrated in the following exchange between Lanark and the 39th Lord Monboddo, formerly Lanark's superior, Ozenfant, from his days at the Institute. Protesting the leader's contention that the world can only be improved in direct correlation to an increase in human exploitation, Lanark asks whether this means "men lack the decency and skill to be good to each other," to which Ozenfant/Monboddo replies:

"Not at all! Men have always possessed that decency and skill. In small, isolated societies they have even practiced it. But it is a sad fact of human nature that in large numbers we can only organize against each other.'

'You are a liar!' cried Lanark. 'We have no nature. Our nations are not built instinctively by our bodies, like beehives; they are works of art, like ships, carpets and gardens. The possible shapes of them are endless. It is bad habits, not bad nature, which makes us repeat the dull old shapes of poverty and war. Only greedy people who profit by these things believe they are *natural*.'

'Your flood of language is delicious,' said Ozenfant, yawning slightly,' and can have no possible effect upon human behavior.'" (550 author's italics)

Ozenfant/Monboddo's opening position provides an implicit justification for catastrophe as the natural resolution to a stubbornly bellicose 'human nature.' It rehearses the political naturalism of the eighteenth-century social contract theorists, particularly Rousseau, who argues in *The Social Contract* that disciplinary power and social domination naturally increase with the size and complexity of societies and state structures. To this we must compare Nastler's remark

to a despairing Lanark: “It doesn’t matter how much you detest this book I am writing, you can’t escape it before I let you go” (495). Both imply that, as functionaries of natural powers larger than themselves, they cannot change the system in which they operate without tearing it down entirely. However, by framing the worlds in which they operate as systemic—either capitalistic or narrative—both also imply the possibility of a different system, a different nature, a new way of conceiving of reality.

This possibility motivates Lanark’s retort, which reframes the issue by emphasizing the human ability for purposeful and fulfilling agency. In this, Lanark channels the artisanal socialism of William Morris as well as mirroring the social critique often rehearsed in British catastrophe fiction: what we take as normal is in fact the product of human artifice and nothing more than a calcified arrangement of ‘bad habits,’ the mutability of which has been conveniently forgotten. Art once made can be made again in more humane form from the mixture of ingenuity, compassion, and pleasure in labor which even Ozenfant/Monboddo admits is natural to humankind. For Lanark at least, social regeneration is theoretically possible provided we can denaturalize our mystified reality and collectively act.

Yet, Lanark is undone by the fact that he, too, exists primarily as a character in a catastrophe narrative slowly crumbling towards disaster. It is significant that, like Nastler earlier, Ozenfant gets the last word in the above exchange, offering the multilayered rejoinder that ‘your flood of language is delicious... and can have no possible effect upon human behavior.’ The comment reverses the roles previously played by Lanark and his author, wherein the former upbraids the latter for “trying to make the readers admire your fine way of talking” (494). Here, Lanark does much the same thing, with the notable difference that Ozenfant, likely at the behest of Nastler, finds the ‘flood of language’ pleasurable rather than pedantic. Ozenfant seems

conscious of this ironic reversal when he drily observes that “At last the Common Man confronts the Powerful Lord of this World. Except that you are not very common and I am not very powerful. We can change nothing, you and I.” (550). Here, Lanark assumes the position of the authority attempting to change the world by talking at it, much as Rima earlier claims he would do to his son.¹⁵⁷ In context the idea that Lanark’s passionate defense of human values can have no effect on human life meshes cleanly with both Ozenfant’s and Nastler’s pessimism: they are simply words and can have no lasting effect. More importantly, however, is the added implication that this is true not because of what Lanark says, but because it is delivered as a ‘flood of language.’

Here, Lanark demonstrates that he has yet to learn from Thaw’s escape into the fantastic that representing change as aesthetics is not the same as enabling it in practice.

Ozenfant/Monboddio underlines this point by repeating the same warning Thaw earlier ignores from his father: “You think you can change the world by talking to a leader. Leaders are the effects, not the causes of changes” (551).¹⁵⁸ Given the consistent symbolic repetitions throughout the text we can see this as applying to Lanark’s conversation with Nastler as well, where the former’s impassioned pleas to save his fictional universe are rejected by the latter on the grounds that both author and reader remain trapped in a self-perpetuating system of fiction-making along with the reader. Even while Lanark speaks of the basic, everyday work by which social change proceeds, he does so from the vantage point of one who wishes others to see him as “a fine great special splendid man” (526), or, as the duplicitous Sludden puts it in the novel’s opening pages, from the perspective of one for whom work and love (and art) “are...ways of mastering other

¹⁵⁷ As she sourly contends, “I’m sure Alex will benefit too. Sludden plays with him. You would only explain things to him” (458).

¹⁵⁸ In Book 2, Mr. Thaw reminds his son that “It isn’t the loud men on platforms but the obscure toilers who change things” (295).

people” and “[forcing] personality on them” (6). The implication is that Lanark’s behavior echoes Nastler’s, which echoes Thaw’s, which echoes Ozenfant/Monboddo’s and so on. Each are, as McIlvanney puts it above, ‘working models of the world they seek to condemn,’ because each relies on an idea of the world which privileges hierarchies of domination and control over ordinary relational models of being.

At the same time, the very fact that the text calls this reliance into question indicates that it is not willing to settle comfortably into established patterns of apocalyptic despair and defeatism. *Lanark*’s final numbered page ends with a cryptic prose poem written all in caps and offset from the end of the text’s main narrative by nearly a full page of blank space. This mysterious entry, existing somewhere between an epigraph and an epitaph, traces fault lines around *Lanark*’s final catastrophe, where intimations of imminent destruction commingle with a hesitant hint at action:

I STARTED MAKING MAPS WHEN I WAS SMALL.
 SHOWING PLACE, RESOURCES, WHERE THE ENEMY
 AND WHERE LOVE LAY. I DID NOT KNOW
 TIME ADDS TO LAND. EVENTS DRIFT CONTINUOUSLY DOWN,
 EFFACING LANDMARKS, RAISING THE LEVEL, LIKE SNOW.

I HAVE GROWN UP. MY MAPS ARE OUT OF DATE.
 THE LAND LIES OVER ME NOW.
 I CANNOT MOVE. IT IS TIME TO GO. (560)

Understanding the origin of the passage—whether it emerges from Lanark’s flickering consciousness, the Oracle, Nastler, or Gray himself—is less important than that final contradiction, wherein the necessity of action is negated by action’s impossibility. There is a

commingling of the personal and universal here, possibly in Lanark's 'final' death, after which, as Gloopy explains to him just pages before, "nothing personal will remain of you" (599). It seems fitting somehow that this be the text collapsing its myriad voices, speakers, and agents into one final, collective enunciation: moving forward, maps must be redrawn, bearings reoriented. Though lodged in old paradigms, old 'maps' of subjective and social orientation, we must find ways to keep moving. The passage recalls the well-known finale to Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." With Glasgow rematerialized in the text's final pages, renewed afresh and waiting for a collective act of enunciation, one can't help but wonder if this isn't also Gray hinting at the coming of a new decolonized person and a new, more communitarian world.

While it would be impossible to say that the novel's tentatively hopeful conclusion does not represent any kind of gesture to the future, *Lanark* is a starting point rather than a terminal unity. Whether we see it as solving its own riddle, and therefore catalyzing an entire generation of Scottish writers to politically significant cultural action seems less the point than understanding how it serves to open a door to the possibility of better worlds and more human politics. We don't need to impose unity on the text to see that it does this in part by simply having the courage to question its own assumptions, to state baldly and without fear the cruel, consumptive logic of the world from which it emerges, and to insist in its most honest and open moments that "A good life means fighting to be human under growing difficulties" (55). If this is a struggle taken up by Lanark's son Alexander in the novel, it is also one embraced by one of the many 'children of *Lanark*,' Iain Banks' 1986 novel *The Bridge*, and it is to that text that I now turn.

Which Way to InterSpace?: Iain Banks' *The Bridge* and the Scottish Interspatial Catastrophe

The twenty year generational gap separating Gray from his younger contemporary Iain Banks stretches the net of historical, biographical, and cultural context needed to understand the catastrophe embedded in *The Bridge*. While he is often considered a writer of the 1980s, given that it was in that decade that he began publishing, Banks was born in 1954 and came of age during the countercultural revolutions and social upheaval of the 1960s and '70s. As with Gray, Banks' generational identity means a great deal when it comes to thinking about the historically situated dialogues visible in *The Bridge* between Scotland and science fiction.

For instance, it is in relation to 'sixties-seventies Britain' that Banks' understanding of the relationship between Scottish national consciousness and politics can be fleshed out. For the young Banks, connected autobiographically to the young protagonist of *The Bridge*, Alexander Lennox, the sixties were a decade in which countercultural revolts against the 'mainstream' values of postwar society drove a seeming wedge between national consciousness and progressive politics. For example, *The Bridge* shows Lennox fleeing from a dying post-industrial Scottish West "already failing, silting up with cheap fat, starved of energy, clogging and clotting and thickening and threatened," and particularly from the Scottish working-class identity of his father, which he sees as "too limited by geography, class and history" (87). It is from this dying Scottishness that he escapes to embrace a future grounded in "the new spirit of love, alternatives, and real possibility of peace and a better, less greedy and less fucked-up world" in the cosmopolitan Edinburgh of the late 1960s (87). In addition to his mainstream fictions, which often feature nonconformist male protagonists who are comfortable pushing the boundaries of the socio-cultural status quo, Banks' interviews illuminate the author's principled independence

and openness to new ideas which transcend the limitation of established ideologies.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, they paint Banks as concerned with national politics primarily as an instrument for the promotion of humanitarian values, decency, and socially progressive political policy.

However, it was the feeling that such values had been abandoned with the rise of Thatcherism after 1979 which drove the later Banks to re-politicize his connection to the Scottish identity from which he had earlier distanced himself. In the years leading up to and following the 1986 publication of *The Bridge*, Banks came to embrace Scottish national consciousness as a means of promoting socially conscious political opposition in the face of Thatcherite reform. Looking back in a 2011 interview with *The Guardian*, he remarks that:

The thing is, the Scots never fell for Thatcherism. We were always sceptical. When she announced that there was no such thing as society, most of us were, frankly, incredulous. Thatcherism, and the enthusiasm with which it was embraced by so many in England, made a lot of Scots begin to realise that we were, after all, meaningfully different en masse from the English; more communitarian, less convinced of the primacy of competition over co-operation. There was no one nation. (“Scotland and England”)

While reductive, the comment succinctly bridges the Banks of the 1970s with the later Banks, who saw Scotland as a rewritable political entity around which a progressive left politics could rally.¹⁶⁰ Like Gray, Banks also tended to look a little nostalgically back at his formative years in

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, “Most of us are indoctrinated” and “Iain M. Banks”

¹⁶⁰ Banks’ friend and fellow sf writer Ken Macleod writes that by “the early to mid-1990s, [Banks had] come around to the view that Scotland would never be safe from the rampages of Tory governments it hadn’t voted for unless it separated from England. This support for independence didn’t come from nationalism but from reformism, and from a life-long, heart-felt hatred for the Conservative and Unionist Party” (“Use of Calculators”).

the 1970s with the same respect and admiration for the lingering ethos of the social democratic culture established during the former's youth.¹⁶¹ Looking back on that decade from the post-Thatcher era, Banks sees its supposed failures in light of the more cooperative and decent values which were lost, and to which he might reattach an investment in a Scottish future where supposedly 'British' futures—coopted ideologically by Thatcherism and New Labour—have failed.¹⁶²

In many ways reflecting and extending this narrative of personal and political shifts, *The Bridge* presents a story of individual catastrophe which reframes the relationship between self and society in late capitalist Britain. Like *Lanark*, the novel is split between fantastic and realist registers, each of which presents an iteration of the text's split protagonist. Its realist portion follows a young Scottish man named Alexander Lennox from the late '60s to the mid '80s, as he moves away from his working-class Glaswegian roots to attend university in cosmopolitan Edinburgh. Over the course of the narrative he gravitates toward the life and lifestyle of his love interest, the upper-class Edinburgh native Andrea Cramond, who invites him into a world of bourgeois gentility to which he eventually, if uncomfortably, adapts. Ashamed of his working class roots and Scottish cultural identity, he begins to cling with increasing desperation to the self-aggrandizing free-market ethos of emergent Thatcherite materialism that he otherwise consciously abhors. His life full with a parade of cars and luxury goods, along with a steady diet of alcohol and drugs, Lennox grows increasingly disillusioned with his patterns of empty consumerism, with failed attempts to staunch Britain's rightward political turn after 1979, and

¹⁶¹ As Banks notes in an interview, "I thought the '70s was a pretty good time to grow up in. Back then there was a shared sense of society and the hope that things were getting better" ("Heroes and Inspirations").

¹⁶² In this regard, Banks' work foreshadows a larger rethinking of the 1970s which has occurred over the last decade or so in academic circles. Two such reappraisals of the decade can be found in Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2009) and Alwyn Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis: Britain in the Seventies* (2009).

particularly with the independent Andrea, who eventually moves to Paris to care for her dying lover. Falling into a kind of existential holding pattern wherein “He worked, he got on” (172), but at the expense of a crippling alienation, he finds himself at a crossroads. Driving home one night while intoxicated, he crashes his jaguar on the Forth Road Bridge, sustaining severe injuries which send him into a coma.

Much as with *Lanark*, the reader does not discover this narrative this until they are a third of the way through the text, which begins with the story of an amnesiac named John Orr who has awoken to find himself living on ‘the Bridge,’ a surreal representation of late capitalist Britain built into a massive gothic interpretation of Edinburgh’s Forth Rail Bridge. Rigidly divided between managerial elite and proletarian classes, the bridge society in many ways mimics in its physical and ideological structure the nature of the Thatcherite ‘real world’ inhabited by Lennox in his later years. However, conveniently deprived of his memories, Orr does not at first recognize this and initially dedicates his existence on the bridge to a kind of aristocratic leisure, as he half-heartedly works with a ‘dream doctor’ to cure his amnesia. From there on out, however, things grow increasingly unsettled, as he is unexpectedly thrust into the lower echelons of the bridge’s class structure and ultimately cast out to wander the bridge’s nightmarish, war-torn hinterlands. It is only as the narrative builds toward its conclusion, its realist voice intruding more insistently into the narrative fabric, that we come to understand that Orr—and the various alter-selves which populate his dreams—is himself the narrative production of a comatose, dreaming Lennox.

As with *Lanark*, it is not difficult to interpret *The Bridge* in Craig’s terms as a kind of Scottish interpersonal catastrophe. Like many Scottish novels, the text is noticeably

schizophrenic, its split form mirroring the fractured subjectivity of its protagonist, the healing of whose divided self ultimately becomes both the condition for and the point of the story being told. We can see Lennox's crash as an individual disaster and the ensuing retreat into the fantasy of the bridge-world as a translation of damaged subjectivity into a metaphorical representation of personal catastrophic subversion. Understood this way, the story of Orr's life on the bridge is simultaneously a critique of the power of the narrative imagination to dominate reality and a gradual recognition of the mutual entanglements which constitute personhood and community. It is only in coming to consciousness of this intersubjective truth that Orr is allowed to wake up, re-embody Lennox, and subvert the previously unconscious norms which structured the latter's real world alienation.

This 'Scottish' interpretation of the novel seems valid and generally persuasive. Yet it, too, resists opening the text's Scottishness to dialogue with sf catastrophe. We can see this clearly by examining the novel the other way round: sf looking at Scotland. The British sf scholar Paul Kincaid argues that we ought to see Banks' first three mainstream novels, including *The Bridge*, as typical of 'the Scottish fantastic,' and as thus operating in the tradition of nineteenth-century Scottish narratives of doubled selves such as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).¹⁶³ To buttress this conclusion, he also turns to Laing, and particularly to Gavin Miller's 2005 book on Laing and Gray,¹⁶⁴ which, like Craig's work, seeks to ground Scottish literature in Scottish intellectual contexts. However, while Kincaid is a trenchant and experienced reader of science fiction, he here accepts the primacy of 'Scottish conditions' without considering whether any other conditions might be in play. While Kincaid is

¹⁶³ Kincaid, "Far Too Strange: The Early Fiction of Ian Banks." 23-24.

¹⁶⁴ *Alasdair Gray: The Fiction of Communion* (Rodopi, 2005).

no more wrong in his analysis than the analysis offered above, he nonetheless clearly frames Banks' Scottishness as central to his aesthetic, as shaping the latter in some deep and historically immutable way.

Even if we take the doubling of Lennox/Orr as evidence of *The Bridge*'s Scottishness, this does not mean we can ignore other avenues of inquiry which might complicate this reading. It seems rash to interpret Banks in terms of his Scottish identity without also attending to his identity as a reader and writer of sf, which would have had at least equal—if not more—influence on the development of his fiction. The younger Banks was noticeably ambivalent about his relationship to a 'Scottish tradition,' with the noticeable exception of *Lanark*, which he acknowledged had a significant influence on *The Bridge*'s form, style, and characterization.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, from his late teenage years until the early 1980s Banks aspired primarily to be a writer of genre sf, only turning to mainstream fiction upon failing to find a publisher for his now well-known series of space opera novels.¹⁶⁶ Sf was, as he notes, his "first love in literary terms" ("Seared" 53) and it stands to reason that it would have played a dominant role in shaping his creative perspective from the 1960s onward.¹⁶⁷ If we accept this as likely, then understanding the catastrophic dimensions of *The Bridge* demands not only an understanding of the author's renewed—and clearly political—connections to Scottish conditions after 1979, but also an awareness of the larger sf cultural formation in which the young Banks operated, and against which he defined his own work.

¹⁶⁵ See James Robertson, "Bridging Styles: A conversation with Iain Banks" viii. See also Martyn Colebrook, "Reading Double, Writing Double: the fiction of Iain (M.) Banks."

¹⁶⁶ "Interview with Andrew Wilson" 55-59. By the time he came to write *The Wasp Factory* (1984) Banks had already been writing genre sf for nearly fifteen years, having drafted five of what would later become the first entrants in his 'Culture' series.

¹⁶⁷ In an interview with Paul Willetts, Banks remembers that during the 1960s "[he] would—like a lot of people [his] age, always look for the yellow spines of the Gollancz sci-fi series" ("Iain Banks Interview"). <http://www.paulwilletts.uk/2511765-iain-banks>

Banks and the New Wave Catastrophe

The specific sf context in and against which I wish to situate Banks and *The Bridge* is that of the British New Wave, a loose collection of mostly English writers associated with the London-based journal *New Worlds* from the late 1950s to the late 1960s. Like many cultural products of the 1960s, New Wave science fiction was characterized by revolt against the mainstream, and in this case against the status quo of Anglo-American genre sf. Throughout the 1960s and beyond, New Wave writers such as J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, and Michael Moorcock rejected Anglo-American genre sf's reliance on realist narration, celebrating instead an experimental, subjective aesthetic similar in ways to literary and artistic modernism. In addition, they turned their back on sf's fascination with science and technology as the engines of progressive history, instead championing themes of entropic social decline and personal disintegration. Finally, they deliberately moved away from pulp sf's historical grounding in outwardly-oriented nineteenth-century colonial romance and adventure stories. Ballard's quip in a famous *New Worlds* editorial that "The only truly alien planet is Earth" embodied a general turn toward an examination of what he called 'inner space,' the vast unexplored realm of the human psyche which had escaped the grasp of earlier sf's unqualified acceptance of the empirical world as the baseline for human reality.¹⁶⁸

Given this self-conscious break from earlier sf traditions, one of the most surprising holdovers during the New Wave era was the catastrophe novel, which underwent significant mutations during the decade. Ballard in particular made his early career on the back of a trilogy of 'inner space' catastrophe fictions—*The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964), and *The Crystal World* (1966)—which consciously upend the terrestrial near-future model

¹⁶⁸ See Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?," in *A User's Guide to the Millenium* 195-201.

reestablished in the 1950s by John Wyndham.¹⁶⁹ However, rather than foregrounding the Wellsian themes of disaster, survival, and national cultural consolidation, Ballard's catastrophes are entropic and dissociative. Psychologically disfigured survivors wander surreal post-disaster landscapes--an inundated, tropical London, a vast desert, a slowly crystallizing jungle—indifferent to the need to subvert old standards and rebuild new and improved post-catastrophic worlds. Importantly, for Ballard the nature of this passivity is liberating rather than defeatist. As Patrick Parrinder puts it, “Through a process of disaster that is itself therapeutic, [Ballard's heroes] overcome their repressions and set out on a pilgrimage leading equally to self-fulfillment and self-destruction” (“Futures” 221). True to form, each of Ballard's post-catastrophic protagonists is last glimpsed headed into the disaster, embracing the perverse pleasure and “psychic fulfillment” to be found in subjective dissolution.¹⁷⁰

On the surface, the Ballardian catastrophe seems to affect a far more radical break with the epistemological norms of Anglo-British imaginative practice. In Ballard's hands, the catastrophe ruthlessly interrogate the validity of rationalist or scientific modes of understanding the world and, to this end, frequently blur the boundaries between inner and outer landscapes, the known and the unknown, the real and the surreal. Furthermore, it pushes the implicit desire for disaster (always present in earlier manifestations of catastrophe narrative) into the open, where the death becomes the only rational response to dying, debased modernity. Ballard's most significant revision of the Wyndhamesque catastrophe is his privileging of inner space, the very terrain Wyndham and his immediate successors had declined to explore in the 1950s. Where Wyndham uses catastrophe to reframe British capitalist modernity and reorient it towards

¹⁶⁹ In *Billion Year Spree* (1973), Brian Aldiss asserts that Ballard's catastrophes “in form—if form only—owe a good deal to John Wyndham (299-300), while Roger Luckhurst calls Ballard's creative reframing of catastrophe narrative “a riposte to the insular genre of the English disaster fiction” (*Science* 149).

¹⁷⁰ Qtd. in Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* 149

narrower and more exclusive national models based on race and culture—leaving the national characteristics of his characters relatively undisturbed—Ballard uses it to reject the national altogether and focus almost exclusively on subjectivity. Gone is the comforting familiarity of the English countryside or the inherent value of self-reliance and free-thinking; while disaster might offer opportunities for social critique, it is not an instrument of cultural regeneration. Here, devolution is both figurative and literal, naming both a post-British future and the degeneration of the human. As removed from nations and cultures as the novels often are, they are still devolutionary in their embrace of this reversion to states of pre-modern—and thus pre-British—consciousness.

However, this position is problematic. As David Higgins argues, the inward turn in Anglo-American sf after 1960—and particularly in the work of the British New Wave—doesn't so much transcend imperialist ideology as it does mirror and rearticulate it, reproducing that period's articulations of capitalist social relations.¹⁷¹ Even more worrisome, I would argue, is the danger that the Ballardian embrace of innerspatial liberation risks the total abandonment of the sociohistorical dimension altogether. In his catastrophes Ballard codes the modern world as beyond recovery, its modes of techno-ideological domination total and its subjects capable only of resignation to entropic decay. All paths to regeneration or redemption in Ballard lead to death as the only choice capable of “[confronting] a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game” (*Millenium* 208). Much as Duncan Thaw seeks to do in *Lanark*, Ballard's heroes, driven by a passive acceptance of this meaninglessness, melt into themselves as though into a painting.

¹⁷¹ David Higgins, “The Inward Urge: 1960s Science Fiction and Imperialism.”

That Banks would have been familiar with Ballard and the New Wave catastrophe seems too obvious to argue. More than one reviewer of Banks' work has established the New Wave as formative in Banks early reading¹⁷² and, when alive, Banks frequently listed New Wave stalwart Brian Aldiss among his favorite living writers.¹⁷³ Additionally, British sf writer Simon Ings recalls a writer's workshop headed by Banks in which the latter specifically called out the Ballardian retreat from cultural specificity.¹⁷⁴

But the most significant—and Scottish—connection to the New Wave exists in the figure of R.D. Laing. Both Luckhurst and Colin Greenland place Laing squarely in the countercultural context of the New Wave, where his claims about the ontological insecurity of modern life and the potentially liberating nature of schizophrenic experience dovetail with similar emphases in New Wave explorations of inner space. Greenland rightly notes that Laing's prose-poem "The Bird of Paradise" (1967) "could easily appear in any issue of *NW (New Worlds)*" and that the fiction of New Wave writers like Ballard pose many of the same questions about the alienation of the modern industrial capitalist subject.¹⁷⁵ Much of Laing's later work reads at times like catastrophe fiction, his descriptions of the journey into madness evocative of the alienated experience of the post-world survivor.¹⁷⁶ Significantly, it is also in part via figures like Laing that "SF passes out of fandom's walled city and into general circulation" during the 1960s, where

¹⁷² Lipnak, "Iain M. Banks' Culture Novels" 4th para.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Willett, "Interview with Iain Banks."

¹⁷⁴ See Simon Ings's blog post, "Iain 'Menzie's' Banks (1954-2013), written shortly after Banks' death in 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition* 67.

¹⁷⁶ In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing seems to be operating in a social-catastrophic vein throughout, framing schizophrenic experience as personal catastrophe: "What regions of experience does [schizophrenia] lead to? It entails a loss of the usual foundations of the 'sense' of the world that we share with one another. Old purposes no longer seem viable: old meanings are senseless: the distinctions between imagination, dream, external perceptions seem no longer to apply in the old way" (109).

New Wave perspectives are encountered by, for example, the young lovers Alexander Lennox and Andrea Cramond in *The Bridge* (Greenland 65).¹⁷⁷

Laing's personalism is key to understanding how Banks reframes the innerspatial catastrophe in *The Bridge*. Rather than viewing inner space as a terminal locus of personal disintegration, as Ballard does, both Banks and Laing sees it as a transitional site of healing. As Miller correctly observes, "Laing...regards human life as essentially social" and the greater portion of his work is dedicated to exploring "what happens to the self when it is unable to find meaningful communion with others" (*Communion* 20). While Ballard's catastrophes might also claim to grapple with the problem of meaningful communion, they do so by accepting as first principle the very ideological claim that such communion is effectively impossible in the modern world. The Laingean embrace of innerspatial catastrophe, on the other hand, is inherently therapeutic and presented as a means of recognizing the validity of individual experience as a social fact. His concern is with *inter*-experience—"the relation between my experience and you and your experience and me"—and it is in the service of intersubjective relations that he turns to 'inner space' as a means of facilitating healthy, natural modes of interpersonal healing.¹⁷⁸

It is at this intersection between radical sixties counterculture and New Wave catastrophism that we must locate *The Bridge*, which represents Banks' attempt to create an innerspatial catastrophe capable of articulating a decolonizing turn in post-1980 Scottish culture. Here we have, rather than a Scottish man writing a Scottish catastrophe, a Scottish man looking at English catastrophe fiction and responding critically to it from a perspective informed by

¹⁷⁷ When describing Alex's first encounter with Andrea, the narrator of the realist portion of *The Bridge* notes that "When they first met at the Union they talked about Reality, mental illness (*she'd read her Laing*), the importance of geology (that was him), recent French cinema (her), the poetry of T.S. Eliot (her), literature in general (her, mostly), and Vietnam (both)" (86 my italics).

¹⁷⁸ Laing, *The Politics of Experience* 15-17.

Scottish personalism. *The Bridge* reframes Ballard's emphasis on destruction as liberation, rejecting Ballard's innerspatial framework. Instead, Banks seems to follow Laing's lead in creating an *interspatial* catastrophe. Where Ballard's catastrophes push us inexorably towards a dwindling entropic endpoint, Banks molds *The Bridge* in the shape of an hourglass and structures the odyssey of Alexander Lennox as an imaginative trial through which he must pass if he is to reenter—rather than abandon—the world and reclaim the humanity Ballard suggests is both undesirable and irrecoverable. Rather than accepting an absolute essence of the self as insular, instrumental, and alienated—and therefore in need of destruction—Banks asks us to reconceive selfhood, to work toward its liberation by seeing it as a constellation of overlapping and mutually dependent spaces and selves.

The Bridge accomplishes this turn by maintaining a contingent connection to the historical real world that Ballard's catastrophes so willingly abandon. In *The Bridge* this means representing history in realist narration, but more importantly channeling our perception of that 'real' world through the estranging lens of post-catastrophic personal fantasy. In beginning with Orr's life on the bridge, the text normalizes Lennox's insular fantasy world as the primary baseline for reality. This estranging gesture alienates reader and character alike and, when we finally encounter the realist Lennox narrative a third of the way through the text, it is difficult not to see it as lacking the depth and clarity the fantasy provides. In this sense our understanding of the truth of Lennox's real late twentieth-century Britain—and of the realist mode in which it is expressed—is mediated by and made contingent on the demystifying power of the fantasy. At the same time, any insights gained by virtue of the fantastic journey are made similarly contingent on a promised return to that changing and changeable real world. The text's final third sees the realist narrative intruding more insistently on the fantasy, pushing both character and

reader not simply to rejoin the world as passively as they left it, but to engage with and shape it in accordance with personalist values.

(Inter)Subjective Catastrophe

Whether viewed in terms of its individual or social effects, catastrophe breaks through cultural routines and material processes, inviting critical reflection and speculation about the future. This is particularly clear in *The Bridge*, which stages Alexander Lennox's crash and ensuing coma as, an opportunity to reflect on and possibly transform his damaged sense of self and, by extension, his relationship to the modes of thinking which structure his relationship to self and society in imperial capitalist Britain. Though this self-confrontation takes a variety of forms, it is primarily rooted in references to very Ballardian targets: empiricism and rationalism. Lennox's primary mode of thinking privileges "the sheer objective logic of scientific thought" (87) and reduces experience to that which can be understood in positive terms.

This perspective produces a tension between subjective and intersubjective positions that he frequently expressed in the figure of the machine—a self-contained object whose nature, needs, and power can be understood rationally. For Lennox the universe is a machine, as are the world, the human body, and the mind: "A machine within a machine within a machine within a machine..." (188). Predictably, this instrumental mode of thinking constrains his ability to comprehend the world as experienced by others: "It was a belief which would not allow him to accept anything else completely" and one which was "so obvious to him that he had a great and genuine difficulty understanding anybody else's point of view" (87, 91). Because he frames himself and others as rational subjects rather than intersubjective persons, he remains incapable not just of understanding another perspective, but of seeing how the lives and experiences of others shape and define his own in relation.

What tortures Lennox most is the idea that, while he implicitly accepts his fundamental connection to others, he remains incapable of acting on this understanding. This inability to, as Fanon put it, “be *actional*, by maintaining ...the respect of the fundamental values that make the world human,’ is a crucial tension in the novel because it situates Lennox’s retreat into the bridge-world as a flight from those values. This is intermittently visible in the conflicted shame he feels after abandoning his family’s working-class background and the linguistic-cultural markers of his ‘Scottish’ origins (87), both of which represent narratives of social connectedness he rejects in favor of individual freedom and empowerment. It is more visible still in the class guilt produced by his emergent bourgeois affluence from the 1970s onwards (173, 177). Flush with wealth gained from participation in the new fossil fuel-driven Scottish economy, he turns with increasing frustration to an empty consumerism that separates him further from the working communities on which his wealth depends (221-5).

It is perhaps most visible in his relationship with his longtime lover, Andrea Cramond, whose confident independence he finds both magnetic and threatening.¹⁷⁹ Because he sees the world in terms of subjects and objects, conquerors and conquered, his love for Andrea contains within it an implicit threat of objectification. For him there can be no dialectical understanding of self. Rather, as Laing argues, Lennox’s claim to self-knowledge is itself a defensive fortification “against the risk involved in being sucked into the whirlpool of another person’s way of comprehending oneself. To consume oneself by one’s own love prevents the possibility of being

¹⁷⁹ Duncan Petrie observes that Banks’s fiction often emphasizes the power dynamics across character relationships which turn on privileges of class, heritage, and place (123). In *The Bridge* these tensions manifest themselves primarily in Alex’s relationship with Andrea, whose determined self-confidence Alex reads as the product of both individual effort and social entitlement. Unlike Alex, who struggles with the guilt of having abandoned his father’s working class identity, Andrea seems always at home in Edinburgh, and among her family’s bourgeois milieu. I would suggest that Banks’ choice of surname for Andrea reinforces this dynamic, as it naturalizes her within the socio-geographical coordinates of the Edinburgh environs: both the village and island of Cramond are situated just to the west of Edinburgh, on the south shore of the Firth of Forth, within a short distance of Banks’ more peripheral childhood home in South Queensferry.

consumed by another” (*Divided* 51). Seen in these terms, his creation of the bridge is a narcissistic form of self-consumption driven by a desire to deflect and protect from the vulnerability inherent in intersubjective relation. Locked out of dialectical relation with others and thus incapable of meaningful action, he can only retreat further into a static and sickly self.

The catastrophe of *The Bridge* revolves around Lennox’s eventual transcendence of this subjective impasse in the fantasy world he has created. This twinned transcendence and return is what separates the text from, and provides a corrective to, the Ballardian New Wave catastrophe. In Ballard’s hands Lennox’s goal would be to discover that the bridge is an externalized manifestation of his own alienated consciousness. However, Banks holds out hope that transformation as an active, life-affirming journey is possible, that there are not only individual reasons to survive and carry on, but also that those reasons are fundamentally tied to an acknowledgement of one’s constitutive relation to others.

Rather than simply state this truth, Banks forces the reader to experience it along with his character by manipulating the novel’s form so that we first encounter Orr and must naturalize the conditions in which he exists before we can understand why they must change. Initially, we see Orr proceed with his life on the bridge as though the fantasy were—as it is in Ballard—an end in itself. Perfectly content with his new existence, Orr makes only a show of attempting to understand his relation to the bridge, searching in vain for rote facts about it by asking the type of questions the rational Lennox might also pose: “Where is it? What does it join? How old is it? That sort of thing” (19). All attempts to recover information through the bridge’s byzantine bureaucratic channels predictably fail, as does searching for an elusive library, which the bridge—read: Lennox—tries very hard to conceal. While it is difficult to see early on, the text

ultimately exposes these early efforts as an insular quest to rationally ‘know’ the bridge by collecting facts about it. Such an insular approach reproduces the conditions which lead Lennox to his subjective impasse in the first place and it leads Orr to experience the bridge-world not as the means to reestablishing a dialectical sense of self, but rather as an escapist utopian fantasy.

For much of the first half of the text the bridge serves the latter function, with a seemingly secure and indomitable Lennox dissociated from his body and ensconced in a narrative citadel from which he seems to exert near complete control: “you can’t catch me, you can’t find me, you can’t get through to me. I’m up here; in charge, in command, invulnerable” (165). In this sense Lennox is, like Thaw before him, a catastrophe maker, a narrative authority invested by his personal disaster with the power of world creation and the ability to force all others into a private system designed to mitigate his subjective anxieties. For the most part the function of this creation is explicitly cosmetic. It transforms the aging, insecure Lennox, “a rather short, gray, ordinary-looking man” (26), into the relatively confident—if often befuddled—Orr, who sports “pleasantly intense black [hair]” and a “tall and aristocratic reflection” (29). More important, however, is that the bridge function as a space in which Orr can insularly revel in his class privilege, ignore his cultural heritage, and reassert the power of his wounded masculinity without consequence.

Naturalizing and Critiquing Personal Catastrophe

Lennox’s struggle to admit to the centrality of personal relations to his own existence revolves around confronting these issues, each of which overlap with and interpenetrate one another. In the novel’s early stages it is Orr’s life on the bridge which serves as a form of catastrophic defense from these anxieties: Lennox creates the bridge world so that his alter-ego can reassert the power of his subjectivity over forces he feels threaten it. Later on, however, it grows clear

that the text itself is highly critical of this proposition, and that it pushes Lennox to reexamine his position and ultimately reject the insular, defensive catastrophe within which he's sheltered himself.

Read in the context of both Banks' own outspoken opposition to Thatcherite ideology,¹⁸⁰ as well as Lennox's passive assent to it, the bridge offers an allegory of Britain under Thatcherism that is difficult to miss. The bridge society is split symbolically by a massive railway deck into differing dimensions of human value: above it live the bridge's full persons, the moneyed aristocrats, bureaucrats, professionals, and lower order service workers which comprise the society's 'successful' social stratum; below reside "the bridge's menial workers" (29) and destitute margin-dwellers, coded as different by their uncultured and mostly incomprehensible speech, their dull, anonymous dress, by their obsession with "sport and the result of lotteries," (35) and by the vapid mass cultural products designed to reflect and reproduce their social position.¹⁸¹

Given Lennox's own class anxiety, Orr unsurprisingly finds himself a privileged member of the upper class and the beneficiary of a purposeful process whereby this status is naturalized at the expense of the erasure of those below him. Given a lavish upper-level apartment and a generous allowance while in the care of his psychiatrist, Orr's life when we first meet him mimics the consumerist fantasy Lennox lives in contemporary Edinburgh, but with the uncomfortable implications filtered out:

¹⁸⁰ When alive, Banks was a frequent critic of Thatcherism and New Labour. In fact, he manages to bring up the subject in a surprising number of interviews from the 1990s onward. For a sampling, see "All of us are indoctrinated" and "Iain M. Banks"

¹⁸¹ Orr notes of the bridge's television programming that "most of the programmes are dross, intended for the unthinking—quiz shows, soap operas, and so on" (25).

Now I'm just going to enjoy myself. I have a very pleasant apartment, a quite reasonable allowance from the hospital, which I spend on things which amuse me or which I find beautiful; I visit galleries, I go to the theatre, concerts, the cinema; I read...I play sports...I'm hoping to be admitted to a yacht club...I occupy myself...I'm right in there, having a great time. (21)

The operative phrase is the situationally ironic 'I occupy myself,' which recalls Lennox's claim to self-knowledge while similarly highlighting Orr's distance from those below decks whose class status he believes deprives them of the same privileged self-knowledge. He describes them as "[accepting] their lot...with a meekness I find both surprising and disappointing. *I* wouldn't settle for being a sewage worker or a coal miner all my life, but these people fit into the structure like happy little rivets, embrace their position with the adhesion and cohesion of coats of paint" (29). By reifying workers as 'happy little rivets' and 'coats of paint' Orr displaces his alter ego's class anxiety. Because the possibility of values outside this structure does not mesh with the common sense of the Bridge's ruling elite with whom Orr has identified, the position of the working class must therefore be one they willingly 'accept' and even cheerfully 'embrace' at the level of individual choice. While Orr, as an individual, wouldn't want to be a menial laborer, the implication is that there are some who would, and that the two types are both qualitatively different and naturally designed to accept this difference.

This process of erasure and naturalization works similarly with Orr's cultural identity, which the text presents as recognizably Anglicized. Unlike Lennox's coma-self, who narrates in educated, casual Scots, and most definitely unlike the demotic-speaking Scottish 'barbarian' who haunts Orr's dreams, Orr speaks with the seemingly natural authority of the same Standard English pronunciation Lennox is shown adopting with a measure of shame upon entering

Andrea's more highly cultivated milieu in contemporary Edinburgh. While Orr is puzzled that many of the bridge's lower class workers seem to be "using a thick dialect of [his] own tongue" (36), he is nonetheless protected from any uncomfortable implications by his acceptance of the seemingly chance occurrence that he "[speaks] the language of the Staff and Administrators: the bridge's official, ceremonial tongue" (20). It is only later, when he is cast inexplicably down among the working classes, that we recognize their speech is identifiably Scottish, and thus a representation of Lennox's repressed guilt.

The naturalization of Orr's masculine dominance of women—and the erasure of their potential dominance of him—occurs largely in his 'barbarian' dreams, in which he must uncomfortably inhabit a Scots-speaking medieval 'hard man' who rapes and plunders his way through a variety of stock sword and sorcery fantasy scenarios. In these dreams within a dream Orr—and by extension, Lennox—fuses his wounded masculinity with a caricature of the aggressively masculine working-class Scot. Virile, confident, and simplistic, the barbarian enacts fantasies of conquest and domination to which the more refined Orr and more humane Lennox cannot admit. More importantly, faced with female figures that threaten and degrade men, the barbarian overpowers and dominates them, often in explicitly sexual terms (61-67, 139-147). While unsettling to the prudish Orr, this reversal displaces Lennox's fear of male disempowerment by transferring it once again to a female object which can be known and conquered.

If, on the one hand, the bridge-world naturalizes Lennox's internal catastrophe by creating a context in which he need not engage dialectically with the problematic Other, it also forces both him and the reader to critique this condition. From the very beginning the bridge-world provides Orr a variety of clues as to the nature of his predicament, whether that be the

picture of a bedridden man which pops up regularly on his television, the trio of bizarre planes which frequently buzz the bridge trailing puffs of smoke later revealed to be Morse code, or his doctor's suggestion that "Perhaps the dream is a bridge...perhaps the bridge is a dream" (16). While he is able to ignore these signs, more troubling are the nagging indications that his existence on the bridge is fundamentally empty. As he notes while looking in the mirror one day, "I myself seem somehow clouded and formless...like the mists which curl amongst the snagging complexity of the high bridge" (43). Even the emphatic relative pronoun here cannot distract from the fear that he has no subjectivity to emphasize, buried as he is within Lennox's comatose mind.

Later, attempting to escape this insubstantiality, he retreats once again to his bathroom, where "all is white and precise and there are no windows to show the clinging fog outside; I can shut the door, turn on more lights and be surrounded by precise reflections and hard surfaces" (69). As we begin to realize, he requires 'precise reflections and hard surfaces' because they mimic the foundational role played by the Other in confirming his existence. Yet even these external verifications, as figments of the insular bridge-world, prove illusory and, with the steam from his bath filling the room, "everything becomes dark again, as if everything fades away" (69). Orr is nothing on the bridge because, though he does not understand it yet, he is simultaneously everything and the only thing. He exists as a narrativization of the impulse—identified in Laing—to create a world of pure subjectivity, protected from the perceived danger of interpersonal relations.

Importantly, it is in revealing the emptiness of the fantasy that *The Bridge* turns most noticeably from the Ballardian New Wave catastrophe. First, Orr's actual dreams grow frighteningly symbolic. In one, he is stymied in his repeated attempts to evade an ever-onrushing

train (109-110). In another, more metatextual moment he dreams he is trapped on a revolving bridge designed as part-cage, part-treadmill. While compelled to escape, doing so only leaves him running in place: “I run and run. The bridge and I are one now, part of the same great steady mechanism...I shall run until I drop, until I die; in other words, forever [sic]” (129). This dream sequence is one of the few times Orr is confronted with the true nature of the choice before him. To continue running forever as the “keystone of the bridge” (127) is to inhabit the subjective contradiction implied by the association of death with eternity, just as to remain in the bridge world is to accept his subjective impasse, to read it as terminal but ‘live’ it forever as subjective death in becoming one with the bridge.

The text also subverts Orr’s escapist fantasy by undercutting the material factors which normalize his insular position, nudging him toward inevitable connection with others. This begins in earnest when he is thrust unexpectedly down the class bridge’s class hierarchy, ostensibly for having refused to ‘get better.’ Here, exposed to the appalling drudgery of the lower classes, Orr’s position flips from the subject of the bridge-fantasy to one of its objects. Orr registers this transition not in terms of rational knowledge but rather of affect. Whereas before he could rationalize the degraded lives of the bridge’s working poor, he is now made to feel and connect with them firsthand. Handed a new pair of worker’s overalls, he feels “numb, dead, wrapped in cotton wool, all senses reduced, ground down, fuses blown,” while “[his] body seems to move of its own accord, performing the motions it is expected to; automatically, mechanically, and then stopping, waiting for a fresh order” (117). Having finally come to understand the truth behind the embracing of one’s position as a ‘happy little rivet,’ he “walk[s] to Dr. Joyce’s office like an automaton: blind, deaf, unthinking” (119).

If this reversal shocks Orr, it also exposes him to variants of communal life from which he has thus far been sheltered. This is most evident in his interactions with his new neighbor, a carriage-sweeper named Mr. Lynch. Drawn as a standard working-class Scot, Lynch is gruff but helpful, buying Orr food and helping him find bearings in his disorienting new environment. He is in some ways a facsimile of Lennox's Scottish working-class father, "A man's man...who never walked away from a fight or a workmate who needed another pair of hands" (84). More importantly, he is Orr's initial introduction to a person who, unlike the moneyed and effete "mandarins" (32) who live above deck, sees others with decency, kindness, and respect for community. As an astonished Orr thinks to himself, "In all the time I lived in the more elevated and refined levels of the bridge not one of my neighbors even wished me good-day, far less offered help of any kind" (120).

A similar reversal characterizes Orr's romantic dealings with Andrea Cramond's bridge-world alter-ego, Abberlaine Arrol. The only person on the bridge to display any human depth or real interest in him, Orr finds her both attractive and threatening, a controllable object of his affection and lust as well as an independent subject equally capable of trapping and dominating him. Young, attractive, and unequivocally interested in Orr, Arrol is a fantasy object, a projection of the woman Lennox wishes Andrea would be in his real life. During their first sexual encounter he meticulously describes her features and notes how she is 'contained' by them, "just a moving force behind those bones, that flesh, and the mind that wears and inhabits all she is" (153). Tellingly, this process "makes [him] think of the women in the barbarian's tower," whose agency and power had been limited in direct proportion to his own self-aggrandizement (153-4). At the same time, because he reads her correctly as an independently-minded subject like Andrea, Orr believes he cannot bind her in this way without risking his own

subjective entrapment: “She is beneath me. Her arms grip around my sides and back; toward the end she wraps her slim, strong legs round me... That gripping, this pressure, this containing of me as though I am the body to be dressed, enfolded, strapped and parceled, lined and laced... Trapped. Crushed. Little death, and that release. The girl holds me, like a cage” (155). Here, Orr’s objectification of Arrol flips and he is transformed into the vulnerable object of another’s perceived desire for power. Not unlike the earlier reversal of class privilege, the scene reveals the power of Orr/Lennox’s alienation to frame even the most sympathetic of possible Others as an opponent in a subjective zero sum game.

The Bridge’s Rejection of Inner Spatial Catastrophe

One of the hallmarks of the Ballardian catastrophe is the protagonist’s final march into liberating self-destruction. However, *The Bridge* reframes this conclusion as a question, thereby seeing it as a fresh starting point rather than a terminal moment of self-erasure. For Banks, the point of the innerspatial journey lies in that journey’s transcendence and in the ultimate realization that the world is always *interspatial*, always composed of a variety of interlacing subjects and stories. *The Bridge* both includes and criticizes the Ballardian catastrophe by incorporating the question of the relation between protagonist and dream world into the story, but as a choice rather than an inevitability. For example, in one of Orr’s earlier bouts of frustrating, fruitless introspection the choice remains implicit: “Here I am in a thing become a place, the link become location; the means become the end and route become destination” (160). While unable or unwilling to understand the implications of this statement at the time, the idea that he has transformed a transitional context into a terminal one sets the reader up for the larger reveal to follow.

Ultimately, Orr/Lennox is forced to admit that the nature of the bridge—“I don’t know,” he asks, “Thing or place; you tell me”—depends on how one conceives of it: “Let’s get one thing

straight: it's all a dream... We both know that. I have a choice, however" (244). If one sees "it" as an aesthetic representation, the primary purpose of which is to defensively manipulate reality to one's own ends, then accepting the bridge is the same thing as accepting death. After all, while constructed from a mishmash of real world referents, the bridge is nonetheless a singular, non-referential space populated entirely by Lennox's consciousness. It is thus incapable of producing an interrelated person because it is capable only of simulating the difference embodied by the Other. Everything in its world is composed of Lennox and Lennox composes everything in its world. There are no spaces in between, and this is precisely the problem, because such a conception refuses to acknowledge the difficult, uncomfortable, but ultimately productive terrain in which persons and communities act, in which they create themselves through the struggle for mutual recognition. The bridge is, like the Ballardian catastrophic environment, a space in which no action—and therefore no person—is possible.

The novel's crescendo instead offers a return to the compromised and uncertain real world of late capitalist Britain, a place made socially and politically inert by the dominant assumption that there is no alternative to capitalist liberalization. As a newly reintegrated Orr/Lennox moans, "Oh God, back to Thatcher's Britain and Reagan's world, back to all the usual bullshit" (254). The Lennox who chooses to return, however, does so having understood his own implication in the dreams that constitute the 'real world,' just as he understands the evasive and unhealthy nature of his own depersonalizing retreat into the bridge-world: "I know one thing: I don't need the machine to tell me the choice. The choice is not between dream and reality; it is between two different dreams. One is my own; the bridge and all I made of it. The other is our collective dream, our corporate imagery (255). While it remains unclear what he will now do with this perspective, what does seem clear is that he has grown more comfortable with

the thought of a life lived in active relation to the world: “What’s changed?...Me, then? Maybe. Who knows; could be anything, inside here. Just won’t be able to tell until I get back out again, and start living the shared dream, abandoning my own” (255).

This new perspective revises other significant aspects of Orr/Lennox’s experience, overturning long-held opinions about his relation to self and society. For one, he has learned from his experience to distrust purely rationalist methods of understanding the world. Thinking back to an acid trip on a Greek beach, Lennox remembers that “I thought I saw it all back then; the way the brain flowers at the end of its articulated stalk; the way, our roots in the soil, we grow and become” (256). This new distrust of his rationalistic mindset (“I *thought* I saw it all back then”) opens him to new possibilities regarding how ‘we grow and become’ as persons. This revised perspective is most evident in his revised relation to Andrea. At first, Lennox’s coma-self vehemently objects to his return, sourly reminding himself of the depersonalizing experience of loving her: “You always did what she wanted; she used you, not the other way round; it was role reversal all right, and you got screwed” (253). However, a chastened Orr/Lennox seems to have internalized Laing’s contention that “The capacity to experience oneself as autonomous means that one has...to realize that one is a separate person from everyone else. No matter how deeply I am committed in joy or suffering to someone else, he is not me and I am not him” (*Divided* 52). In a retort to himself, Lennox comes back in this spirit, wisely realizing that “You don’t belong to her and she doesn’t belong to you, but you’re both part of each other; if she got up and left now and walked away...even so on your deathbed you would still know she was part of you” (253). While this might reasonably be dismissed as self-indulgent sentimentalism, this is perhaps the text’s most significant personal revelation, for Orr/Lennox learns not only to love or be loved, but also that it is only in the fraught push and

pull of attraction, attachment, and conflict that his own personhood—and by extension Andrea’s—comes to consciousness of itself.

This revelation spills over into the text’s socio-cultural register, and especially into the protagonist’s understanding of his previously repressed Scottishness, which is correspondingly lent a new, open-ended vocation in the figure of Scottish industrial marvel that is the (Forth Rail) bridge: “...a thing become a place, a means become an end, a route become a destination...a quality bridge, an everlasting bridge, a never-quite-the-same bridge, its vast and ruddy frame forever sloughing off and being replaced, like a snake constantly shedding, a metamorphosing insect which is its own cocoon and always changing” (255). The death and rebirth of the Scottish barbarian in Orr’s final slog back to the bridge,¹⁸² along with the allegorical representation of the break-up of the UK in the third and final barbarian episode,¹⁸³ lends credence to the idea that the national context—what Lennox earlier shrugs off as “sentimental Scottishism” (235)—has in fact been freed of the cumbersome emotional baggage it earlier carried. Indeed, Lennox’s closing embrace of an English peppered with Scots words and phrases seems to indicate a qualified acceptance of the many complex determinants which constitute both his own personhood and the community to which he has agreed to return.

Banks ultimately withholds the meaning of this return, allowing for few concrete conclusions. Greeted by Andrea with a simple ‘Welcome back,’ Lennox responds—and the text ends—with a simple “Oh yeah?” (259). Nothing is guaranteed because nothing has happened. As with *Lanark*, *The Bridge* suggests that true freedom and liberation, whether personal or social, cannot be vouchsafed by an act of imagination. It remains for Lennox to make good on his

¹⁸² *The Bridge* 242.

¹⁸³ *The Bridge* 226-232.

resolution to engage with the world in ways which respect both his own complex selfhood, the larger community of others without which it could not exist, and, perhaps most importantly, the communal grounding from which knowledge and freedom proceed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I read Gray's *Lanark* and Banks' *The Bridge* as catastrophe narratives which critique the philosophical underpinnings of the imperial capitalist world from which they emerge. This challenge arises from a common tendency in each text to oppose a postcolonial personalist philosophy grounded in the mutuality of intersubjective and community healing to a modern imperial capitalist paradigm rooted in deterministic models of insular subjectivity, linear historical progression, and colonial domination. Each text manufactures a catastrophic identity from formal and stylistic subversions of the British novel. Both undermine and subvert status quo understandings of realism and fantasy, troubling the tendencies of both to mediate and naturalize static history, subjectivity, and culture in late twentieth-century Britain. However, each text's catastrophic effects are also the product of historically situated conversations with Anglo-American sf forms, particularly the postwar English catastrophe novel. Additionally, I suggest these dialogues produce political effects not simply in and of themselves, but because they occur in the post-1979 conjuncture, when Scottish culture was constructed as a site of political contestation over the future of a devolving and possibly disintegrating United Kingdom.

In both novels the catastrophe depicted is more metaphorical than literal; both internalize catastrophe to the individual subject, expressing disaster as a narrative schism between realism and fantasy and both mirror and interrogate how such schisms in catastrophe fiction model the isolation of individuals and nations from the others to whom they are philosophically and historically connected. By splitting off subject-protagonists from the post-Enlightenment world

which has conditioned their habitual modes of perception and interpersonal relation, the texts suggest that it is not idealistic, ahistorical truths about humans, nations, or the narratives by which they are expressed that limit political possibility, but rather the naturalized modes of thinking and seeing which lock us into deterministic patterns of domination and destruction. The devolutionary imagination expressed in both texts is thus less about what the possible future identities of a politically and culturally independent Scotland might look like and more about the transformations which must occur before a truly decolonized independence can even be conceived.

The chapter attempts to draw Scottish fiction and science fiction together in a more historically precise and methodologically productive manner, with the ultimate goal of enabling dialogue across both fields and archives. This endeavor is highly significant given recent scholarly attempts to understand the relationship between Scotland and science fiction and, furthermore, the degree to which the two fields and archives have remained isolated from one another since their respective institutional inceptions as SF Studies and Scottish Studies after 1970. While it is possible to see the restricted focus to two texts as limiting the scope of the conclusions reached in this chapter, my intention in treating these two very similar novels together is very similar to the effect of the novels themselves: I meet the fields on ground where they have most often and obviously converged and attempt to expand both the methodological and archival terrain in which future discussions of Scotland's relationship to sf might take place.

In this I reject formalist readings of science fiction or Scottish fiction—such as those offered by Darko Suvin and Cairns Craig, respectively—which too often draw strict boundaries around their objects of inquiry by effectively policing the boundaries around that which can be considered authentically science fictional or Scottish. This does not mean I reject formalism as a

potentially valuable methodological tool, but rather that I urge future scholars exploring such intersections to consider the limitations of reading the politics of narrative and the narratives of politics relative to historically absolute conditions of generic and/or national exceptionalism. Indeed, I would suggest that there is no reason to make a highly politicized choice between a Scottish science fiction and a science fictional Scotland provided we remain attentive to the historical conditions which generate shifting dialogues between the two equally shifting traditions.

This chapter's reexamination of Scottish catastrophe has additional implications for twenty-first-century reconsiderations of Scottish cultural nationalism, ongoing debates about Scottish independence, and surging British populism before and after the 2016 'Brexit' vote to leave the European Union. It has been something of a mainstay in contemporary Scottish Studies that Scottish culture—and particularly narrative culture—has often taken the lead in the articulation of devolutionary politics. However, the reinstatement of a devolved Scottish parliament in 1999 changed this dynamic somewhat, splintering Scotland's future more clearly into cultural and party-political realms. This slowly growing subdivision reached a historically rare zenith in 2014, when the Scottish electorate once again voted on—and ultimately rejected—formal independence from the UK.

Three months before that vote, Scottish sf author Charles Stross had written in his blog of an approaching 'Scottish Political Singularity' which made it increasingly difficult to envision Scotland's future(s):

...there's a point where politics impinges directly on the circumstances of my writing, and that's when it goes nonlinear, and by nonlinear I mean "depending on

the outcome of three upcoming elections, I may be living in one of three different countries in two years' time." ...It makes it *really hard* to even think about writing that next near-future Scottish police thriller when I can't predict what country it will be set in, much less what its public culture will look like or where it will be ruled from. ("Schroedinger's Kingdom" Stross' italics)

Scottish culture and politics have historically operated as estranged expressions of fracture and continuity undercut and complicated at all turns by Scotland's participation in the UK. If this fracture drives intimations of formal or stylistic catastrophe in the Scottish novel, or leads to the catastrophic theory of a Cairns Craig, it also seems overwritten here by new conditions. Stross underlines a catastrophic convergence between history and culture which has counter-intuitively disabled the devolutionary imagination. Yet, rather than erasing the role of culture in the articulation of Scottish political futures, the convergence of this twenty-first-century singularity underlines it. For, rather than relying on a concrete and easily determined near-future depiction of what Scottish 'public culture will look like,' Stross here implies that any such culture must ultimately be built from below in a complex feedback loop between culture and politics, the real and the imagined.

This is significant because it elevates the same active role both novels studied in this chapter argue must be embraced by persons and communities over ahistorical, idealistic imaginings which keep us trapped in static determinations. Michael Gardiner writes that recent Scottish fiction has begun to more actively foreground this agency,¹⁸⁴ and understanding how catastrophe fictions present the personal as a social—and thus political—fact helps illuminate what 'independence' might actually mean were we to reconceive it politically as a reexamination

¹⁸⁴ "Literature, Theory, Politics" 46-50.

of values rather than the formal separation of one state from another. Gardiner writes that “the British gifting of devolutionary powers from one region to another involves little recognition, since it is not reciprocal,” and the novels examined in this chapter foreground a devolution based instead on the pursuit of reciprocity, on the move outward from a defensive, insular, and abstract representation of politics to an involved, intimate, and mutually reinforcing one (“Literature” 45).

Foregrounding Scottish personalist catastrophe in the twenty-first century also entails reexamining the relationship between Scottish devolution and the ominous recent turn in British politics and culture toward ethnic populism. A postcolonial personalism grounded in the everyday production and negotiation of values and the fundamental necessity of mutual contact and conflict with the Other is inherently opposed to the ethnic chauvinism currently driving a virulent rightward turn in European and British politics. The 2016 ‘Brexit’ vote was driven in part by a fear of that very same Other, and by a long-simmering tension deep within British culture’s troubled relationship with race, territory, and sovereignty.

That Scottish voters chose largely to reject Brexit in favor of continued involvement in a multinational and multicultural Europe does not absolve Scots or Scotland from the larger nexus of colonial and imperial history, expressed in both foreign and metropolitan contexts, which continues to inform debates about national culture in the UK. As Scott Hames writes, echoing the work of Tom Nairn, “The Politics of devolution might be generally understood as the containment and deferral of nationalist agency; the prevention of action in favour of representation and mere ‘activity.’¹⁸⁵ That said, it is by carefully and closely reading Scottish catastrophes in context that we can begin to derive from the Scottish tradition a vein of humanist

¹⁸⁵ “Scottish Literature, Devolution, and the Fetish of Representation.”

discourse capable of opposing the dark and reactionary forces of ethnic nationalism with a devolutionary catastrophe capable of “[giving] history its human texture” (Gardiner, “Literature, Theory, Politics” 48).

Chapter Four: A Whole New World Under the Cover of Darkness: The Microcatastrophes of Black British Sonic Fiction

Introduction

The experience of the black African diaspora in Britain has been historically marked by patterns of exclusion, strangeness, and alienation. This was particularly true of black British experience in the postwar period, when reverse colonial migration saw entire generations of West Indian and African peoples purposefully uproot themselves in search of employment and a more secure life in the United Kingdom. Upon arriving in the imperial center, however, many found themselves constrained by ideological boundaries which firmly, if unofficially, rendered the new arrivals alien in cultural—and often racial—terms. Summarizing this condition, Heidi Safia Mirza states bluntly that “The construction of national British identity is built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence. We are told that you can be either one or the other, black or British, but not both” (Mirza 3). Many among Britain’s black immigrant population, coded as foreign-born ‘Commonwealth citizens’ by the 1948 British Nationality Act, were more clearly marked as alien by cultural patterns of exclusion which bordered on the science fictional. For example, Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which depicts the experience of the ‘Empire Windrush’ generation of West Indian immigrants in 1950s England, draws attention to this experience in its description of an uncannily alien London which “had a kind of unrealness,” like “some strange place on another planet” (23).

Selvon’s depiction overlaps with and is informed by a longer history of transnational black cultural expression which discusses the postslavery era in terms of science fictional tropes

of other worlds, alienation, dislocated temporality, and technological mediation.¹⁸⁶ Excavating the longer history of black expressive culture in the modern era, twentieth and twenty-first-century theorists of Afrodiasporic futurism have framed postslavery diasporic experience as both post-catastrophic and science fictional. Such arguments, made by Mark Dery, Greg Tate, Mark Sinker, Kodwo Eshun and others, explore modern black life across the transnational ‘Black Atlantic’ as deeply conditioned by twinned cultures of disaster and survival. In this narrative the catastrophic trauma of slavery and the white supremacist regimes of dispossession and domination which followed in its aftermath compel survivors to imagine liberated futures beyond or outside the white European colonial paradigm. While such dreams have often been expressed in Afrofuturist science fiction narratives, this textual tradition is most pronounced in North American post-slavery societies, particularly the United States.

In Britain, the science fictional and catastrophic imaginations embedded in Afrofuturism have more often than not been expressed in the form of black Atlantic sound cultures hybridized and reconfigured to the demands of a postcolonial British context.¹⁸⁷ One of the most science fictional of such musics is Jungle/Drum ‘n Bass, a hybridized form of electronic dance music derived from an evolving Jamaican soundsystem culture associated with the reggae and dub styles which had been transplanted to the UK by Caribbean immigrants from the 1960s onward.¹⁸⁸ Its core formal features are breakbeats, bass, and tempo, and it is these which

¹⁸⁶ See in particular Louis Chude-Sokei’s recent *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (2016).

¹⁸⁷ This is not to say that no black British sf exists, only that it is far fewer and further between in Britain than in North America. One of the most prolific Black British writers of sf and fantasy (largely for a young adult audience) is Malorie Blackman, best known for her *Noughts and Crosses* series (2002-2006). In addition, there is Peter Kalu, a rock musician whose career spans the continuum between sound and text. His near future thrillers *Lick Shot* (1993), *Professor X* (1995), and *Yard Dogs* (2001) all explore racial identity and social conflict in Britain, while 1998’s *Black Star Rising* is an explicitly science fictional space story about renegade software. Another text often mentioned in the context of black British sf is Anthony Joseph’s *The African Origins of UFOs* (2007).

¹⁸⁸ While its formal genealogy is complex, JDB’s earliest manifestations merged the ferocious tempo of European ‘hardcore’ dance music with the characteristic breakbeat percussion of American hip-hop, the forceful ground bass

distinguish it most clearly from other forms of electronic dance music.¹⁸⁹ What makes JDB breakbeats most noticeable is their tempo: created somewhere between 140-170 bpm, they offer a distinctly overwhelming sensory experience that is itself anchored by the sound's bass texture, a rumbling, rolling, sub-melodic force descended from the heavy ground bass of Jamaican dub and reggae.

In Chapter One I argue that JDB, which plays a key role in Kodwo Eshun's theorization of black diasporic 'sonic fictions,' can be read as a type of alternative black catastrophic experience. Eschewing traditional Marxist analyses of ideology and discourse, Eshun's theory foregrounds the intersection between affect, embodiment, and the material properties of sound, framing the sonic fictional experience as that which grabs or articulates a human body at a pre-representational and pre-political level. Because they operate outside of discourse, thereby evading issues of ideological subjection and social mediation, sonic fictions theoretically enable immediate access to sensations and experiences untainted by hegemonic forces.

While Eshun himself does not overtly label them as such, I contend in this chapter that these moments present as internalized microcatastrophes, or small-scale personal disasters which displace large-scale cataclysm into the subjective domain, rendering global trauma as individual breakdown. Using this framework we can see the polyrhythmic assault of JDB sonic fictions in particular as producing a kind of catastrophic trauma. As Dale Chapman argues, "the sudden brutality that manifests itself in [JDB]" is inherently traumatic, producing "the experience we have of an event so violent or disturbing that our mind shuts down in the attempt to represent it;

and charismatic MC chatter of Jamaican dub, reggae, and 'ragga', and the futuristic soundscapes of Euro-American techno.

¹⁸⁹ I list these three here because they are the elements common to all sub-genres of JDB. If there were to be a fourth element, it would be sampling, the process of inserting excerpts (often from popular culture, films, other pop songs, etc) into tracks in an act of recombination intended to create new culture from the detritus of the old.

the event creates a break that ruptures our sense of the way in which the world is organized” (11). For Eshun, this is precisely the point: sonic dissociation from the mind becomes a kind of reassociation with an imaginative vision capable of conceptualizing new worlds. Both a sonic artifact and the experience of encountering it, a ‘sonic fiction’ thus names the catastrophic interface between body, sound, and technology, where the thinking subject so central to Western philosophy is overruled by a hyper-intensification that moves the subject beyond narratives of politics and history, beyond race and class, beyond gender and sexuality, beyond ‘identity’ as such.

Because ‘Black Atlantic’ theorizations like Eshun’s can tend to obscure the defiantly rooted and localized expressions of black diasporic culture in favor of an all-too familiar emphasis on homelessness, exile, migration, and dispersal, it is important to see black sonic fiction catastrophe emplaced in the contexts where its meaning is created and contested. In *Dwelling Places* (2003), James Procter importantly reminds us that “Black British [culture] has not been satisfactorily ‘placed’ in relation to the landscapes and discourses within and alongside which it has been produced, disseminated and consumed” (4). This proviso is all the more important when it comes to thinking of black British culture as devolutionary, a framework for understanding national cultural and party political dynamics in the UK which has rarely been extended to black Britain. Procter rightly notes that a staggeringly small number of studies of black British theory and culture are theoretically ‘devolved’, most being content to reproduce the reductive conflation of black Britain with black England.¹⁹⁰ More importantly for this dissertation, too few have thought to draw connections between theories of black life in the modern capitalist era and theories of British cultural devolution. Neglecting to do so means

¹⁹⁰ *Dwelling Places* 3-4 and 160-197.

missing out on the ability to ask whether the black diasporic suspicion of Western humanism and Euro-American capitalist modernity might be seen to productively critique or dovetail with similar devolutionary challenges to the philosophical foundations of imperial Anglo-British state culture.

In this chapter I read a black British devolutionary imagination as extending from two primary historical and cultural narratives embedded in the black diasporic imagination, but which I see as conditioned by their expression as black *British* culture. First, I follow a number of Afrofuturist thinkers and writers in seeing the sonic fictional transposition between real and fantastic, present human and inhuman worlds, as participating in a longer Afrodiasporic tradition of using futurist culture as a means of survival, of carrying on amid conditions designed to deny everyday humanity in the postslavery era.¹⁹¹ Second, however, I also follow Eshun's sonic fictional theory to its natural conclusion, which I read as a fetishizing of the aesthetic dimension as a terminal location, a site in which death and liberation commingle. This second orientation changes a discussion of devolutionary catastrophe implicitly because it transforms disaster from a catalyst for the rejuvenation of the human to a mechanism for liberation *from* the human. Survival, so long the means of social critique in catastrophe narrative, is here repudiated as a regression to a world from which the black diaspora has always been excluded.

It is important to note at this juncture that this chapter both is and is not about the sonic fictions of Jungle/Drum 'n Bass music in 1990s Britain. As long as we accept that the tradition of

¹⁹¹ Academics and cultural critics would include: Mark Dery (1994), Mark Sinker (1992), Tricia Rose (1994), Kodwo Eshun (1999, 2004), Louis Chude-Sokei (2016), and Alondra Nelson (2002); Writers include Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Greg Tate, Steven Barnes, Nnedi Okarafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and many others; Musicians are too many to mention, but the core Afrofuturist musical canon comprises Sun-Ra, Lee Perry, and George Clinton, to which are often added Afrika Bambaataa, Derrick May, Juan Atkins, and Kevin Saunderson, Jeff Mills, 4Hero, Drexciya, A Guy Called Gerald, Kool Keith, Delton 3030, Missy Elliott, Janelle Monae, and many, many others.

Afrodiasporic sound cultures in the transatlantic world “have given...the black Diaspora a way to hear [its] metaphors of self, history, migration and national belonging,” (Chude-Sokei “Dr. Satan” 4), the music—the affective repository of these complex processes—must always remain the lynchpin of black science fictional experience, not to mention any notions we might form of black ‘devolutionary’ imagination. However, in this chapter I turn to fictions which engage with JDB in some way, rather than to the music itself. A number of problems attend the critical analysis of sonic fictions, not the least of which is the difficulty in analysis for a literary scholar untrained in the formal and theoretical fundamentals of sound and composition. There is also an important disjunction in attempting to translate cultural objects grounded in sense and affect into the comparatively two-dimensional world of ideas. While it does feature a great many samples of older song lyrics, JDB is in itself a largely lyric-less form, leaving the literary critic with far less to work with. Furthermore, this dissertation takes as its focus the analysis of speculative fictions, rather than sonic ones, and it is in part out of respect for sonic experience that I refrain from attempting to transform material intended to be heard and felt into an object of detached critical reflection.

Nevertheless, the novels I do engage in this chapter both concern themselves thematically and historically with JDB sound and culture, and with the lived experience of sonic affect. The first, Eddie Otchere and Andrew Green’s pulp novel *Junglist* (1995), emerges from within a mini-boom in black British pulp fiction publishing during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It depicts one weekend in the life of four young London-based junglists as they travel the city in search of both social and sonic experience. Written hastily by scene insiders, *Junglist* provides insight into the subcultural dynamics of the scene in the mid-1990s, but more importantly into the felt experience of JDB sonic fictions, which the text depicts, like Eshun does, as quasi-

spiritual flights into disembodied, posthuman realms of transcendental liberation. The second text, China Miéville's science fantasy novel *King Rat* (1999), is often associated with a 1990s 'Boom' in British sf and fantasy writing critics have positioned as responsive, and in some ways oppositional to, the ongoing ideological restructuring of British society along neoliberal lines during the years of the Major and Blair governments.¹⁹² Written as a fantastic narrativization of several key tropes in *Junglist*, Miéville's novel blends urban gothic and fantasy modes, setting a retelling of the folk tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin against a late twentieth century London suffused with both JDB sound and revolutions in the lived experience of neoliberal capitalist subjectivity and space. Situating these texts against the history of black experience in late twentieth-century Britain, I argue that both provide opportunities to analyze the fictional depiction of sonic fictional experience as internalized catastrophe and both illuminate the possibilities and pitfalls of the devolutionary imagination embedded within late twentieth-century black British expressions of cultural Afrofuturism.

On the one hand, *Junglist* juxtaposes social realist and fantastic modes, contrasting the lived experience of ideological subjection with the sonic fictional catastrophes experienced by its protagonists, framing the latter as liberating forays into post-social and post-human worlds of alienated—and therefore liberatory—existence. However, consistent with my argument against Eshun in Chapter One, I illuminate how the text, because it ultimately insists on a strict separation between the social and the sonic, purposefully reinforces subjective stasis, trapping its characters in a world in which no agency, and thus no political change, is possible.

¹⁹² See in particular: Luckhurst, "Cultural Governance, New Labour, and the British SF Boom," Andrew M Butler, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom," and Sheryl Vint, "Visualizing the British Boom: British Science Fiction Film and Television."

On the other, I read *King Rat* as providing a critical corrective to *Junglist*'s demarcation between the real and the fantastic, the human and the post- or anti-human, being and non-being. Instead of accepting these crippling binaries, *King Rat* critically interrogates them by framing them as overlapping realms capable of dialectical interpenetration and change. Whereas the sonic fictional catastrophes of *Junglist* leave us in stasis—what we might see as devolution-as-regression—*King Rat* models devolution-as-transformation, an open-ended freedom predicated on the historically situated ability of human agency to affect social change.

“A Whole New World Under the Cover of Darkness”: Two Fingers and James T. Kirk’s *Junglist*

“It’s a whole new world under the cover of darkness, hiding from the beast, tuning up in anticipation of the dance. With flow of sound hanging thick in the air, crowding you in and out of your lungs, becoming the oxygen you breathe, you realise that the youts in this for real.”

—Two Fingers and James T. Kirk, *Junglist*

Two Fingers and James T. Kirk's pulp novel *Junglist* emerged as the key text in what would ultimately be seen as the second wave of a micro-boom in black British subcultural pulp fiction during the 1990s. While such fictions were steeped in an early '90s social milieu, they emerged from an older British tradition of counterculture paraliterature which included, among others, the work of the Anglo-Irish novelist Colin MacInnes in the late 1950s and early '60s¹⁹³ and the Canadian pulp writer Richard Allen¹⁹⁴ in the 1970s. The wave preceding the appearance of JDB-fictions like *Junglist* centered on Nigerian-born writer and radio presenter Dotun Adebayo's X-Press. The X-Press years saw the publication and scandalous reception of novels like Victor Headley's *Yardie* (1992) and Donald Gorgon's *Cop Killer* (1994), both of which explored the black immigrant experience of social class and racial discrimination in Britain, and which were ultimately linked in the press to the glorification of drug use, crime, and Jamaican immigrant 'yardie' culture.¹⁹⁵ In many ways, the media hype and resulting public furor surrounding both Headley and Gorgon's novels merely repeated what had already occurred twenty years earlier in Britain during the so-called 'mugging panic' of 1972-3, when, as Hall et al. argue in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), "the themes of race, crime and youth—condensed into the image of 'mugging'—[came] to serve as the articulator of [a crisis of hegemony in the UK], as its ideological

¹⁹³ Particularly the 'London Trilogy,' which comprises *City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and *Mr. Love and Justice* (1960).

¹⁹⁴ Richard Allen was one of several nom de plumes of James Moffat (1922-1993). Writing for UK-based publisher New English Library throughout the 1970s, Moffat was a prolific producer of pulp novels dealing with topical youth subcultures of the time. Despite some detours into biker and hippie culture, he is most remembered for his novels about the lives of British skinheads, and particularly for his brash main protagonist, the skinhead Joe Hawkins.

¹⁹⁵ 'Yardie' is Jamaican slang originally used to describe the inhabitants of social housing projects—'government yards'—in West Kingston. As the projects comprising the Trenchtown neighborhood grew increasingly associated with crime, poverty, and violence, the term 'yardie' began to emerge as a pejorative (though sometimes, if used in Britain, nostalgic) descriptor for occupants of the area. The term eventually migrated to Britain along with its Jamaican users, and came to be used as a stereotype for describing West Indian drug dealers and the 'gangster' culture with which they were often associated.

conductor” (viii). As the black ‘mugger’ had been to the 1970s, so was the Jamaican ‘yardie’ one of the ideological conductors in discourses of race and nation in the early 1990s.¹⁹⁶

Junglist’s appearance in 1995 is illuminated by this context. Regardless, or perhaps because of its notoriety, the relative success of *X Press*, and especially of Headley’s *Yardie*, opened up new market space that was filled in short order by another wave of urban pulp fiction which sought to provide relatively direct access to the burgeoning and increasingly publicized world of Jungle/Drum ‘n Bass. The novel was the first in Macmillan Ltd.’s ‘Backstreets’ series, which was devoted to showcasing “the lives...of London street youths” by offering “fast-moving plots [revolving] around a night-club and the youth’s involvement with music, sex, crime, and drugs.”¹⁹⁷ If one of the primary goals of the Backstreets series was to capitalize on an unexploited niche in the publishing market, another significant motive was the opportunity to address and revise what many in the JDB community felt was the media’s insistence on reducing the scene and sound to a selection of ideologically charged stereotypes not unlike those volatile conductors—‘mugging’ and ‘yardie’—discussed above. Much as it had been during the mugging panic, the Acid House panic, and the Yardie panic, ‘jungle’ after 1994 began to function in the popular imagination as a synonym for black deviance, crime, drugs, and gang-related violence. *Junglist* seems designed in part as rebuttals to this oversimplification of JDB’s cultural politics by the media. In other words, the Backstreets series, which was itself partially responsible for publicizing and constructing the subculture,¹⁹⁸ also represented a paradoxical rearguard defense against its cooptation by homogenizing discourses which sought to reduce JDB to a ‘minority’

¹⁹⁶ For more on this see Collins, “Raggamuffin Cultural Studies” 76-78.

¹⁹⁷ Publishing blurb displayed on each of the series’ titles.

¹⁹⁸ See in particular Sarah Thornton’s important analysis of youth subcultures as internally differentiated structures predicated on the creation and transmission of ‘subcultural capital’ in *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* 1-25 and 116-162.

subculture within the larger and already publicized—and, therefore, publically intelligible—phenomenon of British rave culture.

What the novels lacked in literary style and professional polish they made up for in verve, edginess, and a kind of gritty man-on-the-street immediacy that *Junglist* co-writer Eddie Otchere once self-flatteringly compared to Walter Benjamin’s reading of the Baudelairean flâneur in *The Arcades Project*.¹⁹⁹ And indeed, one of the most underappreciated aspects of this brief burst of JDB-inspired pulp fiction is its somewhat crude attempt to grasp, in whatever rough and fleeting way, a street-level sense of the vitality and mutability of its subject matter, of subjects and communities both appearing and disintegrating under conditions of extreme economic, social, and political pressure. By emplacing the worlds of indigenous non-white Britons in the act of narration, by articulating their spatial existence and a lending them a social and historical dimension, novels like *Junglist* invert and reframe the ideological conditions of the time, naturalizing the socio-economic margins as a legitimate space within which narrative can originate.

Junglist depicts one weekend in the lives of four black London-based junglists—Q, Mr. Meth, Biggie, and Craig—as they wander the city’s clubs and parties, pontificating on the society in which they live, the finer points of drug and music culture, their lives as young black men, and the spiritual dimensions of the JDB scene’s more utopian aspirations.²⁰⁰ Like many of the novels in the Backstreets series, the novel offers very little in the way of a coherent plot, instead moving between a variety of first-person narrators, disembodied commentary and

¹⁹⁹ Speaking of the influences on the novel, Otchere sketches a wide arc through pop culture, cultural criticism, and avant garde artistry, naming not only Benjamin as a major influence, but also *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry and the African American experimental jazz composer Sun Ra (Sandhu, “The strange case of rave-culture pulp-fiction”).

²⁰⁰ Two Fingers and James T. Kirk are the non de plumes of Eddie Otchere and Andrew Green. Hereafter I will refer to them in the body of the text by these, their given names.

metaphysical rumination, and paranarrative experimentation. Though Mr. Meth receives a few more scenes than the others, his role as possible protagonist is decentered by its relation to the other characters, each of whom contributes his own vignettes to the larger narrative tapestry, destabilizing any authority one might attempt to attach to any one character.

Illuminating the text's engagement with catastrophe involves parsing this larger narrative mishmash into two distinct registers. One is grounded in the day-to-day immediacy of the characters' social reality and the realist mode by which it is expressed. The other is the more ambiguously utopian outer-social reality associated with the sonic fictional experience of JDB music. The realist register outlines the ideologically bound contexts of race, class, and nation which mediate the young men's lived experience and inflect the subjectivities available to them. This first register serves as the precondition for the second, more stylistically experimental one, which opens a seemingly liberatory world beyond these subjectivities to which the characters attempt to escape through the sonic fictional experience of JDB sound.

There is a problematic catastrophic dynamic embedded in the back and forth between these two narrative modes. On the one hand, the novel depicts its characters as subject to a variety of ideological classifications—of class, race, and national exclusion—which bind and ultimately dehumanize them in the text's social realist register. *Junglist* presents this experience, tied at times by the characters to the histories of slavery and colonialism, as a historical vortex from which escape has been made increasingly difficult by the ideological and material conditions structuring British society in the wake of Thatcherism. Ranged against this darker social text is a metaphorical 'whole new world under the cover of darkness' linked to the characters' experiences with catastrophic, quasi-traumatic encounters with JDB sound.

I read the novel as embedding these ‘sonic fictions’ in and against its social texture, framing them as liberating doorways to a transcendent otherworld beyond the ideological subjection associated with the social ‘real world.’ This process can be read as a metaphorical catastrophe, with sonic experience figured as traumatic disaster and the post-human or ‘alien’ perspectives generated therein read as the demystifying post-world vantage point so often granted to characters in conventional catastrophe narrative. The problem with this model, however, is that *Junglist* ultimately draws strict boundaries between the two worlds, valuing the subjective disidentification of the sonic fictional over the socially embedded ideological terrain of the social. This inherently disables the potential to become active, rather than passive, social agents, and to labor within and affect political change.

Cultures of Survival: Social Fiction, Subjectivity, and the Struggle for Humanity

You got to remember that 99% of the people in your book were destined for nothing. Nothing and nobody in life.

—DJ Hype²⁰¹

I begin my reading of *Junglist* with the above epigraph because of how succinctly it articulates one of the novel’s dominant questions: how and why one might be ‘somebody’ in the world. At its most general, and particularly coming from a novel of youth subculture, this might seem simply a reflection of post-adolescent angst; most young people struggle in some way or another with the question of who they are, and the novel’s four protagonists all express a sense of generational alienation at some point. The problem with this generality is that it naturalizes a material position in which everyone has the option to ‘be something’. While this is vaguely true in an abstract liberal humanist sense, Hype’s remark importantly reconfigures the issue within

²⁰¹ Qtd. in Belle-Fortune, *All Crews: Journeys through Jungle/Drum & Bass Culture* 31.

the context of poor, inner-city life to emphasize the importance not of being something, but the possibility of being at all. This philosophical distinction is subtle, but important. The first claim assumes a subject granted automatic humanity and ontological security which must then only seek specification. The second assumes no such privilege; it begins as a negative—you are nothing—and leaves open the question of whether that nothing can become something fully human.

To wrestle with this question on a day to day basis in a context in which one's humanity is rendered suspect is to participate in a culture of survival. As I see it, *Junglist* frames this survivalist imperative as a matter of subjectivity and ideology, and particularly as a tension between the need to experience oneself as a human being and the compulsion to live in the world as an object of and for others. The text figures this objectification, read through the ideological lenses of class, race, and nation, by symbolically construing it as an interlinked series of oppositions between day and night, light and darkness, normal and deviant, and, most importantly, between gravity and weightlessness. For example, considering “the beginnings of another dark Saturday morning,” Craig observes that “in go the freaks of the night and out come the good Christian folk of the city.” While the text values the subcultural dominion of ‘the night,’ arranging its young junglists in righteous opposition to the supposed values of ‘the good Christian folk of the city,’ it also aligns the former’s “whole new world under the cover of darkness” (3) with the experience of marginality and alienation. While there is strength in coming together in collective ‘freakishness,’ the category itself exists in part as a necessary statement of self-identification with the subject positions to which one is assigned. This is why the text situates social identity itself as constricting and ponderous when inflected by social hierarchies.

Despite the fact that the London-based JDB scene depicted in *Junglist* came to be increasingly associated in the media with a black urban youth identity after 1994, the factor which bound its adherents together at the most fundamental level was social class, and particularly the experience of urban poverty. The novel's immediate concern is with how its protagonists navigate their class identity in the aftermath of the Thatcher revolution of the 1980s.²⁰² Four effects of the larger Thatcherism phenomenon stand out in particular in regard to *Junglist's* reading of class. The first was the significant rise in relative poverty which occurred nationwide from 1980 onward. As Ian Gilmour writes, “a disturbing development of the 1980s was the emergence of an underclass: a group of people crippled by poverty to the extent that they were isolated, powerless to participate in the community and deprived of the opportunity to make choices” (116).²⁰³ The second, linked effect was the dramatic surge in national unemployment, which reached more than ten percent in 1984 and, after a brief upswing in the late '80s, had sunk back to that number by the time of JDB's emergence in 1993.²⁰⁴ This figure was almost double for 16-24 year-olds living in London, and even higher for the young men who constituted the core of the JDB subculture.²⁰⁵

As Simon Reynolds remarks, “Jungle's ghettocentric vibe reflected the state of the nation. The recession had hit Britain hard, inner-city youth were facing unemployment and a

²⁰² I use this term generally here to denote the widespread historical and political shift toward social and economic neoliberalism which followed the victory of the British Conservative Party in the General Election of 1979. The term was originally coined by Stuart Hall and elaborated in a series of essays between 1978 and 1988 (collected in 1988 and published as *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*). “Ideologically,” Hall writes, “Thatcherism is seen as forging new discursive articulations between the liberal discourses of the ‘free market’ and economic man and the organic conservative themes of tradition, family and nation, respectability, patriarchalism and order...Culturally, the project of Thatcherism is defined as a form of ‘regressive modernization—the attempt to ‘educate’ and discipline the society into a particularly regressive version of modernity by, paradoxically, dragging it backwards through an equally regressive version of the past” (2).

²⁰³ Gilmour notes that even by the Thatcher government's own deliberately obtuse metric, the number of ‘Households Below Average Income’ had ballooned by 1987 to more than double the level in 1981 (113).

²⁰⁴ Jenkins, “The Labour Market in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2008/09 recessions.” *Economic & Labour Market Review* 4.8 (2010): 29-36.

²⁰⁵ “Young Adult Employment,” <http://www.poverty.org.uk/35/index.shtml>

welfare system that had been systematically dismantled” during the Thatcher government’s sustained assault on the nation’s social safety net (*Energy* 249). The third effect was housing policy, and particularly the modernization of the London housing market. Following the Housing Act of 1980, which privatized large swathes of public council housing under the aegis of a ‘right to buy’ scheme, those public tower blocks and estates not included in the program were left to slowly decay beneath the feet of their poor inhabitants.²⁰⁶ Such neighborhoods, which also saw significant increases in school and hospital closures and alarming spikes in crime, came to be considered by their inhabitants as dirty, unsafe, and dehumanizing.²⁰⁷ Finally, in what Roy Porter calls “an act of Thatcherite spite,” the socially progressive and Labour-dominated Greater London Council was abolished in 1986, leaving many of London’s poorest and most underprivileged minority communities out in the cold.²⁰⁸

Junglist depicts the compound effect of these factors as inherently dehumanizing insofar as many urban youth were left feeling as though they had nothing, couldn’t realistically better their lot through employment or education, couldn’t escape the reflection of this reality in their dilapidated and dangerous environment, and couldn’t shake the identity to which, as Craig puts it in the novel, their “ghettoised state of mind” (119) too often bound them. This state of mind and the identity and perspective to which it is tethered can be traced back to the connection made by

²⁰⁶ As German and Rees explain, “The right-to-buy legislation of the 1980s encouraged council tenants to buy their homes at absurdly cheap prices. This combined with cuts to government building budgets was particularly devastating in London, with its already high property prices and recurrent overcrowding problem. One of the effects of the government’s turn away from social housing has been to allow existing stock to decay, leaving the vast majority of estates with a distinct feeling of despair and neglect” (288).

²⁰⁷ Roy Porter explains that “in the eyes of many families much of the capital—notably the run-down inner-city districts such as Walworth, Peckham, Hoxton, Dalston and Tower Hamlets—[appeared] decaying and dangerous” (371).

²⁰⁸ Porter notes that “from the late 1970s [the GLC] promoted energetic social policies, of a kind that had never even been imagined to fall within the GLC’s remit. Through its influence over employment, housing, licensing and education, and by funding new capital and community projects, Labour promoted socialist, anti-racist policies, championed ethnic and sexual minorities, and developed schemes to aid the disabled, the disadvantaged and the underprivileged” (366).

DJ Hype between having nothing and being nothing. In a 1994 Channel 4 documentary on the jungle scene, “All Junglists: A London Sumptin’ Dis,” producer Kenny Ken explains that “Jungle means to me something that came from the street. It means that people who were born with nothing have found something they can relate to. Something they can believe in.” Sitting next to him, MC Navigator adds that “It’s all about people who come from an urban background...everybody call them working class or whatever...but it’s definitely from a street level” (“All Junglists”). Both statements are notable for their refusal to participate in the ideological branding of poverty in racial terms and for their insistence on the centrality of that shared ‘urban background.’ As Simon Reynolds argues, what connected junglists in early ‘90s London was a shared sense of social and spatial marginality, a ‘freakish’ perspective to which most could relate on some level: “there’s a genuine unity of experience shared by Britain’s black and white underclass,” wherein factors like “inhabiting the same run-down tower blocks and council estates [and] being harassed by the police” (*Energy* 248) embody the frustration of everyday life lived in poverty.

Council tower blocks are among the most common signifiers of poverty, frustration, and anger for characters in *Junglist*. For example, early in the novel an anonymous DJ-narrator focuses specifically on the experience of living in a South London housing estate:

This estate...these prisons of concrete and steel. These estates which were designed for vandalism, for holding your neighbours in contempt...The ragged markings on the wall of the juvenile taggers, leaving their mark. Trying to give themselves a voice, an identity that is denied them by those who hold them in contempt...The night belongs to them. It always has since the day they built these

concrete monsters, these goliaths that split people, communities down the centre.

Nowhere to play, nowhere to meet. Just live and survive. (7)

Dense with both historical allusion and contemporary resonance, the passage situates the council housing block in its original postwar context, where one of its effects was to alienate working class people from the open communal spaces on which so much of their cultural livelihood depended,²⁰⁹ but also revises this original critique by updating the historical context and populating it with young subjects equally as alienated from their community and themselves. To feel the need to claim a voice is to have had that voice and the identity it expresses and creates already taken, co-opted, ventriloquized. To have nowhere else to turn but the street is to feel trapped in and by a prison of another's making.

Likewise, the text paints the 'the streets' as an equally dehumanized terrain, synonymous with the 'concrete jungle' and with, as the text's brief concluding epigraph reminds us, "a place of intense competition or ruthless struggle for survival." Construed as a dangerous realm where young men and women "[come] up the hard way," the street is where the aimless or desperate "wait like predators, waiting, watching. Young and fierce" (7), where you are as likely "to get your head banged up against a wall" (123) by the police as you are to find a job. As a heavily-handedly named 'Everyman' narrator claims, "The TV will only give you cartoon reflections of these streets. Being born of flesh and brought up on concrete gives your mind, body and soul a whole new function for living" (123). That function, fine-tuned to the goal of simply 'living and surviving,' entails forming a hard, toughened exoskeleton of emotionless mettle around an

²⁰⁹ Phil Cohen writes that "The first effect of the high-density, high-rise schemes was to destroy the function of the street, the local pub, the corner shop, as articulations of communal space. Instead there was only the privatised space of the family unit, stacked one on top of each other, in total isolation, juxtaposed with the totally public space which surrounded it, and which lacked any of the informal social controls generated by the neighbourhood" (qtd. in Clarke, et al 31).

otherwise human core and a defensive, sometimes aggressive relationship with society at large.²¹⁰ While all of the novel's characters show signs of "[hiding themselves] beneath layers of toughened skin" (131), that skin does not signify an essentialized existential condition tied to either poverty or their race. Rather it is a mechanism for living and surviving in response to a world that dehumanizes them by reducing their identities to stereotypes, and particularly those linking race and poverty to crime.

In fact, it is impossible to consider *Junglist's* depiction of social inequality during this period without also examining the intimate connection between social insecurity and shifting policy trends toward increasingly militarized policing and the criminalization of poverty. The issue can be summed up by Loïc Wacquant's description of "a broader pattern of penalisation of poverty designed to manage the effects of neoliberal policies at the lower end of the social structure of advanced societies" (401). The verb 'to manage' is key here, as the criminalization of poverty works to control the disorder created by the liberalization of the economy, wherein those in the working and semi-employed classes find themselves both subject to increasingly unstable employment patterns, low-paid wage labor, and without the social welfare provisions which were key features of state planning in postwar Britain. As wealth is redistributed upward, leaving those at the bottom increasingly uncertain, vulnerable, and desperate, an increase in the punitive power of the state and its legal apparatus preempts and corrals potential dissidence by branding social problems as criminal ones.

Just as it has in the United States, the unfolding of this process in Britain has also involved the de facto criminalization of race—and particularly of young black men. As both Michael Keith and Paul Gilroy contend, this is in many ways the continuation of an older racist

²¹⁰ Simon Reynolds traces the evolution of JDB's militant imagery from 1994-1998 in *Energy Flash* 352-362.

construction of black subjectivity in Britain, in which signifiers such as blackness, youth, and crime have become naturalized in the discourses of state, law, and society.²¹¹ Keith notes that the criminalization of race in Britain involves “the reproduction of a subject position which flexibly [defines] “Blackness” as constitutively criminal” (234); Gilroy’s analysis of the imagery of black criminality in Britain similarly finds that the naturalized connection between black communities and criminal deviance has underscored racialized construction of blackness as an internal threat to the imagined white British nation (*Black* 43-113). This phenomenon took on an even more combative edge during the Thatcher years, when the militarization of police precincts and a series of restrictive anti-crime acts served to strengthen the right arm of the state in response to perceived threats from political dissidence, organized labor, urban ‘rioting,’ and everyday crimes such as selling drugs, mugging, and burglary.²¹² As Keith notes, the latter two phenomena in particular were to become naturalized ideologically in terms of race.²¹³ To be young, poor, and black on the streets of London was thus to face one’s identity in terms heavily influenced by the immediate condemnation and dehumanizing gaze of others, for whom skin color, as Mr. Meth notes, is the primary determinant in the experience of “your lot” in life (131).

This is ultimately why it is important to remember that constituting the fundamental fact of *Junglist*’s social register in terms of classed spaces and subjects does not remove race as a factor in that equation. Simon Reynolds has suggested that “the true meaning of ‘junglist’ is defined not by color, but by class, insofar as all working-class urban youth are ‘niggas’ in the eyes of authority. Junglist youth constitute a kind of internal colony within the United Kingdom: a ghetto of surplus labor and potential criminals under surveillance by the police” (*Energy*

²¹¹ Keith, *Race, Riots and Policing* 231-255; Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* 72-113.

²¹² See Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, 134-137

²¹³ Keith 188-207.

248).²¹⁴ There is truth to this claim, evidenced even in *Junglist*, which features two prominent ‘colonial’ encounters with the London police. However, what a juxtaposition of these two scenes demonstrates is not only the criminalization of an unemployed class of surplus labor, but also how the ideological construction of race mediates lived experience within that class.

In the first scene, a white Irish youth named Shawn is pulled over for (genuinely) speeding, the implication being that it was not the skin color of the men in the car which proved decisive, but rather membership in an ‘internal colony’ defined by class: “Now, four boys in a Mercedes estate, smoked up windows, pumping deep Hardcore was enough to make them pounce” (39). While Shawn violently exclaims that the officer is “fuckin’ with [him] because [he’s] Irish,” it is clear from the text that what is at stake is not ‘race’ as such, but rather the ideological construction of criminality working through a coded conjunction of classed signifiers: youth, drugs, and hardcore jungle. In saying this, I am not arguing that race couldn’t play a role in what transpires. Rather, I merely wish to point out that Shawn’s ethnic Irishness—a racial category with an admittedly long and violent history in the UK—does not make itself known until the officer has already stopped the boys in the car. They are not pulled over because Shawn’s particular shade of whiteness is linked with an idea of criminality but because the secondary signifiers listed above are modifying the way he codes as symbolically black, and therefore criminal.

Unlike the first scene, which features minor players in the larger narrative, the later scene involves three of the main narrative’s four primary narrators, all young black men whose identity is experienced in light of the criminalization of their race. This time, the boys are not actually

²¹⁴ Reynolds elsewhere provides a useful example of this class-based conglomeration and displacement of racial identities in the context of JDB sonic culture when he notes how the half-English, half-Jamaican producer Goldie has come to think of his friend and collaborator, the white producer Doc Scott, as “a true ‘nigga’” (*Energy Flash* 248).

pulled over, instead only subjected to extreme anxiety as they pull level with a London police van on their way to an after party. In this scene, which seems designed to parallel the first, the deciding factor is not drugs, music, or youth, though each of these elements is similarly in play, but rather a perceived categorical distinction linking those factors naturally to a racialized criminality. Mr. Meth, performs this process in his head for the reader: “Watch his [the police officer’s] eyes narrow, see the cogs begin to churn in his head. 3 black youths in a car going where? Must have drugs on them. Must be criminals! Haul them over...Show them who’s boss” (136). Both of these incidents occur within the purview of the colonial logic described by Reynolds, but in the second it is much easier to see that the ideological construction of criminality foregrounds not youth, drugs, and music—the hallmarks of the subculture’s classed subjects—but rather the constitution of a specifically racialized class fraction within the colonial space.²¹⁵ To revisit Reynolds’ claim, in the first instance those identifying hallmarks are read in a relatively straight line, from the performance of criminality to ‘criminal,’ from the signification of ‘young troublemaker’ to ‘nigga.’ In the second this process is reversed. It begins from the ideological construction of ‘nigga’ as a racial marker of aberrance and works backwards to an assumed criminality linked to blackness.

To exist as a young black man beyond the world of JDB subculture is therefore to experience the world from the perspective of a reified object constituted by others. Though the novel does offer a glimpse of a black man apprehended and harassed by the police—Meth’s friend Raymond, who is arrested, strip-searched and locked up for a day simply because “some white youth had got mugged and said some black boys did it” (139)—the boys’ near-miss with the police is equally as telling because it expresses the colonial structure in which they must

²¹⁵ Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance” 341.

operate in relation to a white gaze, “Aryan and blue and clear” (136), which challenges them with a dictum once articulated iconoclastically by Frantz Fanon: “a Black is not a man.”²¹⁶ Fanon can advance this charge because in his reckoning ‘a Black’ is a dehumanizing construction, a signifier carrying the sinister weight of colonial culture’s metaphysical negation of black existence. Meth’s acknowledgment of this history—“I stare back, I’m not dropping my gaze. I ain’t no slave” (136)—marks his awareness of both the ideological context which would seek to structure his subjectivity, but also of his ability—however slight—to resist his own racialization and claim a sense of humanity.

There is an additional latent national dimension to subject formation which emerges in *Junglist* around the edges of its representations of class, race, and space. In one sense the text recognizes the colonial implications of conceiving of British subjects in terms of their race and supposed ethnic origin, and of including or excluding them on this basis. For instance, Mr. Meth’s remark that his dark skin makes him a de facto “second class citizen” (132) clearly indexes the degree to which he feels excluded from the life of the national community on the basis of his race. Similarly, Craig gestures toward the implicit racism in postcolonial British society when he sarcastically suggests that “if the Queen would just go on TV and say *Nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga*, the world would be an honest place. Maybe some little black kid won’t have to cry because now niggas are niggas by appointment of the Queen” (199 authors’ italics). By juxtaposing one of the most famous icons of imperial British culture against the racism which marks colonial immigrants and their children as separate and excluded from the organic life of the nation, he both dirties the pristine image of the monarch and illustrates the language of absolute difference through which he is forced to act and self-identify as one of her black British

²¹⁶ *Black Skins, White Masks* xii.

subjects. In essence, Craig points to the fact that identifying as both black and British remains extremely difficult in a world in which the two subject positions are produced and received as culturally and racially separate.²¹⁷ Both of these examples illustrate awareness on the characters' part of their 'partial' status within British society. While both actually are full citizens by birthright, their race mediates the lived experience of their British subjecthood such that they live their nationality as a form of alienation.

In addition to this personalized experience of national exclusion, the text indirectly identifies the larger ideological processes by which poor and largely non-white communities are erased from national space. Steven Quinn argues that the material patterns of JDB production and consumption in the 1990s trace a rough outline of metropolitan colonial history in cartographic terms, exposing the fault lines around the production of space and power in postcolonial London:

Drum 'n' bass in the early and middle 1990s was the music that came to represent an urban youth population whose existence was denied in the traditional mapping of the city of London. Dominant cartographic icons, such as the London Underground map, framed the capital as a well-organised and easily-navigable modernist city. What did not lie on the map geographically, did not exist socially or culturally...The uncomfortable traces of colonialism, represented by those areas and their populations that were not visible on the map, disappeared into a white-washed background. (Quinn 5)

²¹⁷ Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* 43-113.

For Quinn, the spatial representation of London—and of Britain more generally—is bound up with the contradictions of Britain’s imperial past insofar as what is granted visible social existence can only be that which fits comfortably into an ideologically-prescribed vision of the city’s gentrified social geography. The human beings inhabiting these empty or absent spaces are not simply gone; rather, they are disappeared, absented, erased, at best accepted as blights on the capital’s modernized, cosmopolitan façade and at worst entirely ignored.

Junglist reflects and challenges this erasure of humanity by remapping terrain more inclusively. In the novel’s opening pages, a DJ-narrator articulates JDB’s own postcolonial cartography:

South London. It’s my home. South London, where the estates grow lush and prominent, where the immigrants flow through...Pouring through and spreading out. Finding their niche in my eco-system. The South London eco-system. Streatham, Brixton, Dulwich, Lewisham, Battersea, Peckham, Herne Hill, New Cross, Kennington, Putney, Croydon, Vauxhall, Elephant and Castle, Tulse Hill, Crystal Palace, Sydenham, Stockwell, Clapham, Balham, Tooting Bec. The names, the places roll off my tongue, the memories spill forth as they slide smooth into conscious being. So I give loads and shout ‘em all out. (7)

If we examine the interplay between cartography and ecology in this rolling salutation to the extended environs of South London, we can see it remap the environment in such a way as to grant visible humanity to the urban ‘niches’ which, as Quinn notes, “are in many ways ‘forsaken’ because they exist in the blank spaces of the background” (6). The narrator’s claim that ‘this is my home’ extends to each of the named locations, indicating not only that he personally resides

within this larger social nexus, but also that each of the named spaces contain the homes and human lives denigrated and marginalized by omission. Read against Quinn's dominant metaphor—the map of the London Underground—the neighborhoods and attendant tube stations float into place against a blank background, each trailing a localized history suffused with the lives and labors of those poor immigrant communities for whom histories of migration have made maintaining links between memory, place, and conscious being difficult.²¹⁸

There is a latent political charge to the novel's attempts to both express and critique how ideologies of class, race, and nation structure subjectivity for its protagonists. By denaturalizing ideological links between class, blackness, and criminality, the text demonstrates how those connections reproduce and legitimate exclusion, oppression, and dehumanization within British society. As I've shown, it also indicates how difficult it can be to resist and claim one's humanity in the face of a society which seems designed to limit or deny it. One could possibly read in these critiques at least the beginnings of an attempt to think politically, to consider the modes of being and belonging which might eventually overtake and replace the imperial capitalist paradigms which the text asserts diminish and degrade the humanity of those who are deemed lesser and/or foreign to the organic life of the national community. *Junglist* certainly lends a sense of this, such as when a DJ character, Revolver, provides the text's foundational definition of JDB music and subculture:

Jungle is...more than the sum of its myriad parts. It is the lifeblood of a city, an attitude, a way of life, a people. Jungle is and always will be a multicultural thing, but it is also about a black identity, black attitude, style, outlook. It's about giving a voice to the urban

²¹⁸ What I mean by this can be explained by Paul Gilroy's claim in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* that "If these populations [post-WWII black communities in the UK] are unified at all, it is more by the experience of migration than by the memory of slavery and the residues of plantation society [as in the USA]" (81).

generations left to rot in council estates, ghettoised and neighbourhoods and schools that ain't providing an education for shit. (48)

As Revolver rightfully accepts, while the connection between the UK's African diaspora and its expressive cultures remains significant, those cultures cannot be reduced to African origins or essentialized conditions based in blackness. While the scene and sound can't be tied down to any one group or reality, what binds the overdetermined totality together is the demand for self-enunciation, the desire to announce to the world that one's being matters. The subculture thus becomes a kind of survival mechanism or way of dealing with the simmering madness of living in a world in which one's being cannot be taken for granted, and indeed, is often actively denigrated. At the same time, a political dimension is not a politics, and, as I argue in the next section, *Junglist* ultimately takes a catastrophic turn away from the real world and its black cultures of survival towards sonic cultures of disaster which collapse the alienation of lived social experience into the alienation of self-dissolution in sound.

Cultures of Disaster: (Micro) Catastrophe and the Politics of Sonic Fiction

While *Junglist*'s social realist register explores dehumanizing reduction of its protagonists to reified objects, at the same time showing how they attempt to survive by claiming their humanity, a second, more metaphysical-spiritual level of the text communicates a powerful antipathy toward the idea of the human. It is this dimension which links *Junglist* most directly to the artistic and intellectual labors of cultural Afrofuturism, which, since the days of Sun Ra, has always been extremely suspicious of the Western notions of humanism, rationality, and history from which blacks have generally been excluded. Sun Ra's position contra imperial capitalist modernity was to embrace the falsity, evil, myth, and non-being ascribed to the African diaspora,

to accept it rather than fight it, and to conceive of ways of combatting it. As he noted in a 1971 lecture at UC Berkeley, “History has been very unkind to black people, so actually what I’m always talking about is the myth, and nothing that has ever been is part of what I’m talking about, because...black folks...They’re not gonna make it in history[...]”.²¹⁹ Beginning from the same recognition of social alienation and cultural marginalization which motivates the text’s defense of its protagonists’ humanity, *Junglist* makes these ‘realities’ the precondition for moving beyond the oppressive hierarchical histories of Western humanism.

It does this through the protagonists’ forays into the estranging liberation of sound, encounters with which are presented as a means of absenting the vulnerable self from the social world. In *Junglist* the protagonists’ encounters with what Kodwo Eshun dubs ‘sonic fictional’ experience function as microcatastrophes which mimic the process of large-scale catastrophic rupture at the level of the self. By this I mean that the characters’ experience with the hyperrhythmic assault of JDB music internalizes cataclysmic destruction on a personal scale, rendering collapse and subversion much like catastrophe narratives do—as existential crisis. This moment includes the transcendence of the human and an embrace of a posthuman—or ‘alien’—perspective beyond social certainty and naturalized truths. These microcatastrophes thus promote a kind of freedom in alienation, a strategic madness of fracture and uncertainty calibrated against the common or assimilable realities of subjectivity and society in imperial capitalist Britain.

At the same time, rather than framing this liberatory break from reality as a space of personal healing and intersubjective connection with others, *Junglist* sets it up as an end in itself, as a terminal point of exhaustion with the human. This perspective, which has become known in scholarly and pop culture discourse as ‘Afro-Pessimism,’ assumes that, as one recent scholarly

²¹⁹ Qtd. in Dabiri, “My Body Full of Stars.”

essay puts it, the African diaspora have ‘no selves to abolish.’²²⁰ This framework leads to a rejection of mutual recognition, reading “any model of solidarity premised on reciprocal recognition, on empathy, sympathy or charity, or on the assumption of common interests” as impossible (Aarons 21). The post-catastrophic worlds opened by sonic fictional experience in *Junglist* thus represent a strict separation between the realm of social ideology and lived experience and a sonically mediated realm of metaphysical liberation predicated on a problematic emptying-out of subjectivity as the condition for utopian transcendence.

From the *Junglist* protagonists’ earliest depictions of sonic fictional experience, sound always comes linked with a catastrophic function. In general, it is used as a form of escape from feelings of powerlessness, marginalization, or despair, as in the following passage, where Craig situates sound as a buffer against the symbolically construed ‘noise’ of his council estate:

“Stretch and turn the amp up...until my room is throbbing with the sound. Until it blocks out all outside interference. No disturbances, no barking dogs or screaming kids...No mothers pulling trolleys or pushing prams...No buses or cars or motorbikes...Nothing but sound (29). In this context, sound clearly provides an escape vector, a tangent route to a peripheral world set in close relation to the social one which it deflects or displaces. As the sounds of the street and council estate throb in Craig’s head, so does the sound of JDB intervene, countering that social inflammation with its own frequencies, creating a safe space insulated from a world in which “the darkness of [his] skin [is] no match for the darkness outside” (27). This is similar to an earlier scene in which Mr. Meth counters the wail of police sirens, which “scream of getting the hook up, pulled over for doing nothing ‘cept being black,” by “[swirling] the volume to the right and [cranking] the sound even more,” channeling his frustration and anger: “now I’m angry and

²²⁰ K. Aarons, “No Selves to Abolish: Afropessimism, Anti-Politics and the End of the World.”

the music fuels it, slides into me and turns up the emotional intensity and I'm stamping on the floor as if to kill it" (17-18). Afterward, Meth collapses onto his bed, exhausted, his frustration cathartically dispelled.

Both Craig and Meth's experiences with sound end in an ambiguous moment of catastrophic self-dissolution, a miniature model of existential crisis. Craig remarks that "the sound would come, soft and deep, unforgiving in its intensity. Darkness surrounding me as the full sound took me away to sleep...to dream" (30); Mr. Meth, stepping back into the sonic maelstrom of London's famed Ministry of Sound nightclub later in the novel, is "immediately swallowed by sound. Slipping away into nothingness" (115). For both men, this moment of ontological abstraction—the particularity of their selves washed out against a universalizing background—functions as a way of both "putting the world on hold," and of "setting yourself free" (187). Such moments evoke the liberatory 'break' in Afrodiasporic musics, where social reality halts momentarily to reveal new horizons and express a yearning for freedom.²²¹ In *Junglist* this freedom at first seems ironic because it is not freedom of the self, but rather freedom from the socially constructed self. If the text begins with the overwhelming presence of sound blocking out the boys' subjectivities, of nothing *but* sound, we arrive at an act of self-disintegration, of *nothing* but sound.

It is certainly possible to read the social dimensions of such scenes as instances of depoliticization. For example, the experiences of both men recall Frantz Fanon's arguments about dance and possession in the colonial world in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), wherein he argues that "The colonized's way of relaxing is precisely this muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed, and spirited

²²¹ Chude-Sokei, "Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber" 10.

away” in an act of “disintegration, dissolution, or splitting of the personality” which “plays a key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonized world” (19-20). Music, dance, and possession play a regulatory role for Fanon precisely because, much like they do for Theodor Adorno, they reproduce the collective tendencies of social life and reflect the ‘objective’ character of capitalism and colonialism by affirming the ‘reality’ of the latter forces.²²²

For Fanon, the self in this condition is reduced to a reified object of colonial power; for Adorno it is much the same with subjects in industrial mass society: “Music acts as a kind of ‘social cement,’ wherein the individual sacrifices his individuality to the totality” (Paddison 87). As Adorno sees it, the issue is one of identification with and affirmation of the status quo, which expels from consciousness all that does not cleanly fit within that order. While neither Craig nor Mr. Meth consciously identifies with the dominant order, their flight into darkness is not the kind of disidentification Adorno associates with liberatory music but rather a strategic coping mechanism or ideological cleansing meant to “[return them] to serenity, peace, and stillness” (Fanon, *Wretched* 20). Read this way, the situation shapes a catastrophic social maneuver: in freeing themselves from the reality in which their selves are enmeshed, they legitimize and reproduce their own alienation.

However, Kodwo Eshun’s reading of sonic fiction—discussed in Chapter One—purposefully opposes these established perspectives on social domination in and by popular culture. Seeming to directly reference critiques like those offered by Fanon or Adorno, Eshun contends that “For a long time, people assumed that music’s job was to orchestrate a series of tensions and then cathartically release them, or to provide a respite from the modern world, from the grim world of sensory overload and information overload, but actually, no, that’s not the

²²² Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism, and Mass Culture* 86-88.

point. Part of the reason we enjoy jungle is the opposite, it increases interference, it increases tension (“Abducted”). The problem for Eshun is not whether we participate in the socially collusive practices of music and dancing, as it is for Fanon, or which forms of music are most oppositional and utopian (and which ones are not), as it is for Adorno. Rather, what Eshun does is shift the frame of reference entailed by both Fanon’s and Adorno’s ideology critique from the mind—where losing oneself in music performs a conscious, structured retreat from, and then back into, the alienating confines of what we think and know—to the body, where what is paramount is sound’s ability to hyperintensify feeling as a means of producing this sense of catastrophe as subjective disaster.

The point of this identification with the disastrous side of catastrophe lies in the way it forces one to identify with an alienated perspective and that unbound realm of mythical liberation described by Sun Ra above. As Mark Fisher asserts of Afrofuturist sonic fictions, “Identifying with the alien—not so much speaking for the alien as letting it speak through you...meant the possibility of an escape from identity into other subjectivities, other worlds” (*Ghosts* 42). Never one to shy away from an effusive description of sonic affect, Eshun evokes JDB’s tendency to produce this transcendence by ‘loving the alien.’ For him, the music, read here as a subject in its own right, transforms “your whole [body] into this giant series of alarm bells...It’s like your leg wants to head north and your arm wants to head south, and your feet want to take off somewhere else. It’s like your entire body would like to vacate. Basically, you want to go AWOL from yourself” (“Abducted”).²²³ Dancing to JDB at the Ministry of Sound, Mr. Meth describes just such an experience for the reader of *Junglist*:

²²³ Simon Reynolds concurs, noting that with jungle “knowledge is visceral, something your body understands as it is seduced and ensnared by the paradoxes of the music” (*Energy* 354).

Planes of aural sensation, overlapping subliminal bass, thumping into my chest...Rolling bass that powers over you, assaults the senses in its intensity...From back to front a wave of sound, heartbeat-stopping rumblism...Slip into overdrive. Put my head down and run. Run on the spot, arms driving loose and limp...Nothing to do but to lose myself, slip in and out of it. The bass rides hard on my heart, guiding me down paths of aural intoxication. Lost in the woods of sound. (109-110)

As one would expect, one of the most noticeable aspects of this particular sonic fiction is the focus on the interplay between sound as an active agent of subjection and the body as its willing recipient. It is no mistake, for example, that the active subject here is the music itself, with “planes of aural sensation” and “overlapping subliminal bass” which violently ‘[thump] your chest,’ ‘[power] over you,’ and ‘[assault] the senses.’ As Meth explains, “You become the music and the body you exist in becomes a vessel to be filled by it” (112). This master ‘it’ even possesses the power to stop the heart, simulating a liberating metaphorical death.

Because being lost in or alienated from the human world in this framework is the catastrophic precondition for locating oneself in other worlds outside of it, this dissociation from self and space is precisely the point. Absented from the body, the mind spins off into what we are meant to take as productively delirious realm, depicted in the novel by means of quasi-modernist stream-of-consciousness narration:

A crystallisation of thought and sound. Crystal forming, pressurised, crushed flat.
Broken. Pressure exerted, new forms created, faceted mirrorlike...Tumble frozen.
A statue in motion. Contradiction of self and space. No weight, but momentum

carrying me forward. Vacuum. No sound, purgatory. Median. Space between. Fall forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. Eternity waiting below me. Eternity covering me. (99)

The passage seems consonant with Eshun's characterization of sonic fiction and it is why I can at least tentatively understand the experience with self-dissolution in a more positive and creative light, much as Mr. Meth does later on at the Ministry of Sound: "I just want to let it all go. Let myself disappear into the abyss of sound before me, fall into it never to return. Layers of blue darkness, reaching a depth of intensity that tears the nerves apart then splices them back together with a new gene inserted" (109). While Meth articulates the very same desire for alienation here, even coming close to a wish for death, his need to escape is subsequently revised by the curious cross-pollination of sound and science fiction that appears with the figure of genetic mutation.

The 'abyss of sound' is not only somewhere one goes to merge nihilistically with darkness; rather, such conjoining is a condition for transformation, here rendered in the figure of gene splicing and cyborg embodiment. More than simply listening to music or dancing, Meth is undergoing sensory surgery, merging with the sound-tech interface and embracing an alien reality. As he describes it, "I'm falling even deeper into a substance over which I have no control. A substance that rolls forward, taking over me. My destiny is entwined with it. Its ups and downs are my ups and downs...The music entering my blood. I dream that it's spilled out thick and red, running free" (110). That 'substance over which [he] has no control' is, of course, the music, and more specifically the bass, which "is overwhelming, created on planes and levels of which [he] hadn't even conceived" (109). Importantly, bass acts in this instance as a kind of external will, "[it] overrides the heartbeat...interrupts its normal pattern, its normal rhythm, and

makes it move to the bassline” (101). While there is certainly something clichéd about this depiction, which more or less describes Meth ‘becoming one with the music,’ the experience also clearly models a moment of radical transcendence in which the sacrificial giving of oneself to the sound-tech interface becomes the condition for a posthuman awakening.

Both in the abstract, as theory, and when given shape as narrative in *Junglist*, Eshun’s conception of sonic fictional catastrophe makes a certain sense, particularly when read in relation to Paul Gilroy’s black Atlantic thesis and linked debates about sonic Afrofuturism. For example, if we read Gilroy’s ‘counterculture of modernity’ as figuring, in the most science fictional of modes, a vast transnational outerworld, then sonic fictional microcatastrophes such as the ones we see in *Junglist* become a new and useful way of accessing the critical and imaginative potential of such decentered spaces and alternative futures.

But as I argue in Chapter One, the problem for Eshun, as it is for Gilroy, is that this outerworld runs the risk of reduction to a singular, negative, and alienated counter-image of ‘the world,’ an unformed arena of pure negativity in which transcendence and death collapse into the same catastrophic figure. This aestheticization of alienation can be seen in that indeterminate space articulated in the stream-of-consciousness passage above, wherein there is importantly ‘no sound’ but rather the silence of a ‘vacuum,’ no ‘space between,’ only ‘contradiction,’ where one ‘[falls] forever and ever and ever and ever and ever,’ suspended in a state purposefully akin to death. The problem with this pursuit is that it displaces political energy onto the aesthetic realm and away from the world in which political action matters most. Structured as an escape from half-life into an aesthetic death, it precludes the ability to confront and fight and survive that half-life with human dignity.

This is made painfully clear in *Junglist*, where the embrace of figurative death collapses into a depiction of literal death. In the first of the novel's "Fight Gravity" chapters, an unnamed narrator recounts his own suicide in terms disturbingly similar to those used to discuss subjective dissolution in sound. Nameless and faceless, the young man nevertheless experiences the same "sea of iniquity" (87) as Meth, Biggie, Q, and Craig, lives in the same kind of run-down council estate, and walks the same dangerous streets. And once again, as the man contemplates fleeing the prison of his self, "Caged and weighted down" in bodily form, we see, just as Meth envisioned while dancing, "blood...spilled out thick and red, running free," symbolized here in the figure of 'the night': "*How many times in the world's history has night escaped from its cage?...The broken bars split at a molecular level, split molecules flying apart. The bonds constraining them ripped open. Night is abroad, running free...Wrists held steady under the warm water as it pools beneath*" (87 authors' italics). As though this weren't enough, the text presents further parallels. Just as a dancing Meth describes how "Fairies trapped for millennia within the bass...awaken and dance across my eyes, at the edge of my vision" (110), so, too, does the dying narrator see "*Fairies and sprites appearing at the edge of [his] vision, dangling before [his] eyes*" (87). Yet, for the unnamed young man slumped in a bathtub, these visions presage no transcendence, no transfiguration, only a static fascination with the ultimate escape of mortality: "*All I can do is wait and watch as my blood red self churns in front of me*" (88). While Meth's initial statement suggests the creation of 'new forms', that assertion is overwhelmed by indications not of creative labor or rebuilding—those acts which give shape and meaning to post-catastrophic survival—but rather of limbo, of waiting for the future to arrive, of life as permanent trauma and existential dread. Subject to this condition, human beings remain locked

in a state of perpetual non-being within which they must await redemption at the hands of a force capable of actualizing new worlds and new subjectivities. .

Sonic Fiction and Capitalist Subjectivity

While Eshun's sonic fiction argument covers a wide swathe of twentieth-century Afrofuturist music, the connections to both British capitalist modernity and catastrophe can be made in more specific terms about JDB. In his recent *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (2014), Mark Fisher maintains that JDB, and particularly its early incarnation as 'darkside hardcore' (or 'darkcore'), was importantly ambivalent in its relationship to the British neoliberal context from which it arose. On the one hand, Fisher writes, "what we were hearing was a kind of sonic fictional intensification and extrapolation of the neoliberal world's destruction of solidarity and security" (31). Born in the urban crucible of Thatcherism's liberalization of British society and economy, darkcore evokes a sense of breakdown and social disintegration, a kind of aural rendering of the infamous Thatcherite dictum that 'there is no such thing as society.' Simon Reynolds concurs, noting that "jungle paints a sound-picture of social disintegration and instability... [it] contains a non-verbal response to troubled times, a kind of warrior-stance" (*Energy* 239). Fisher's argument is that darkcore in many ways reflected this reduction of the social to a Hobbesian arena of individual, atomized combatants. It stripped away the forceful sonic rush and collective euphoria of the late '80s rave scene, transforming the latter's bombastic, sentimental, and quasi-utopian club vibe into a "world...in which entities—human as well as nonhuman—stalked each other for sport as well as sustenance" (Fisher 31). Darkcore—and many of the forms of JDB which later derived from it—was the sound of always looking over one's shoulder at a dark and dangerous unknown, of chasing and being chased. It was, in other words, a profoundly catastrophic music attempting to figuratively reflect both the

disintegration of the past—and the subjects which populated it—and the subsequent onrush of the future.

Take, for example, the Origin Unknown remix of Boogie Times Tribe's "Dark Stranger" (Suburban Base, 1993), which opens with a demented voice cackling somewhere off in the distance. Before long this macabre sound bite gives way to a series of shuffling breaks punctuated by the sound of a thudding, squeaking piston, emblematic of some nightmarishly inhuman mechanical underworld. As a sampled voice drawls the refrain 'Girl, I'm starting to lose it,' looped and escalating peals of digital waves float across the foreground, ambivalently signifying either an ethereal escape or total dissolution. Bay-B-Kane's gleefully blasphemous "Hello Darkness" (Ruff Guidance, 1992) punctuates many of the same elements with a disturbingly high-pitched sample of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence." Mutating the opening line of the latter song, itself a spare composition defined primarily by a recognizably human melody/harmony counterpoint, "Hello Darkness" recasts this plaintive humanist warmth as subhuman terror. Ruffe Kru's "Ghosts of My Life" (Reinforced, 1993) features heavy, sustained hums and throbs that pulse and recede behind a complex *mélange* of twittering, snaking beats and high-pitched synths. Shrill digital shrieks swoop across the stereosphere, evoking unavoidable airborne predators. The manic claustrophobia of these elements compounds and is only briefly illuminated by the track's two distinct vocals samples: while the titular phrase intoned by a (seemingly) male voice limps in at a drawling half-speed, a female voice briskly repeats "Every day of my life." The result is a dread-shrouded image of a wraith walking disorienting, volatile, and dangerous streets, reduced to nothing but an autonomic reflex in a human shell.

On the other hand, Fisher argues, if such tracks evoked the future, they also tended to identify with and propagate that disastrous reality, to live in and celebrate it. “Jungle,” Fisher writes, “liberated the suppressed libido in the dystopian impulse, releasing and amplifying the jouissance that comes from anticipating the annihilation of all current certainties” (31). But darkcore didn’t attempt to find the future by identifying with the destructive nature of capitalism so much as it naturalized its inevitability. Fisher argues that the music “projected the very future that capital can only disavow. Capital can never openly admit that it is a system based on inhuman rapacity; the Terminator can never remove its human mask” (31). Both of Fisher’s points here are incredibly suggestive insofar as they help us see how the music worked to both express and internalize the inhuman dynamics of capitalist transformation. If JDB was on the one hand evoking capitalism’s dystopian future, it was on the other working within the same channels by which that future might manifest itself.

While Fisher’s reading of JDB is astute, what we are to do with its implications is more problematic. For Fisher, the fact that JDB’s sonic catastrophes overlapped with and assumed the contours of capitalist alienation and a disastrous future produces an ironically utopian conclusion. In some ways echoing and defending his former Warwick University colleague Eshun, he argues that “The paradoxical identification with death, and the equation of death with the inhuman future was more than a cheap nihilist gesture. At a certain point, the unrelieved negativity of the dystopian drive trips over into a perversely utopian gesture, and annihilation becomes the condition of the radically new” (31). If the gesture Fisher describes here is not ‘cheaply nihilistic’ it is at the very best incredibly pessimistic. For one, it essentially transforms the quest for death into a form of radical politics, elevating non-being to a secure realm beyond the failings of the capitalist world and, in doing so, accepting that that fallen world cannot be

changed or survived. Rather than looking at the social world as something that is made and can thus be unmade or remade, as something that can be altered in the act of survival, he accepts the ultimate futility of change by naturalizing the centrality of destruction. If the virtual transcendence of sonic catastrophes is meant to simulate death and give us a glimpse of the inhuman future, it must also eventually return us to the present, where we have little to do in the absence of a disavowed history and politics but wait for the literal death simulated virtually in Eshun's sonic fictions.

Junglist gives us a glimpse of this condition near the end of the text, when, during one of Mr. Meth's frequent ruminations on British society, he remarks that "This is my time, my age, circling within the hearts of darkness waiting for the millennium to overtake me. Waiting for the madness to erupt again, for the fundamentalists to start us down the road to destruction with their no-compromise rantings. Just waiting" (191). Most notable is how the first sentence sets up the relationship between the text's two main registers; it first renders the alienation of contemporary subjectivity as the act of wandering in the imperial metropole (Conrad's original 'heart of darkness') and then links it to the potentially liberating rapture of 'the millennium,' a singularity analogous to the descent into the evacuated delirium of sound. The comment mirrors the theoretical articulation of sonic fictional experience in that it welcomes a vague and inevitable coming catastrophe as subversive change and identifies destruction as the force capable of producing the subject the statement otherwise lacks.

However, the statement's active verbs—circling, waiting—suggest stasis rather than dynamism, not a breakthrough or clarifying destruction, not a propulsion beyond but an entropic, muddling process of permanent breakdown. By the passage's second sentence it is clear that we're talking about social breakdown. For one, the pronouns shift noticeably, from the first

person object pronoun ‘me’ to the collective object ‘us.’ Read against this subtle change in perspective, the idea that ‘the madness will erupt again’ implies a larger pattern of upheaval and cyclical crisis which affects us all and seems to contradict the first reading’s emphasis on personal catastrophe. Yet this is less a contradiction than a symmetry, and the microcatastrophes of sonic fiction are, rather than a way out or beyond crisis and disaster, internalized enactments of them.

This is why, rather than pointing us toward an undefined space in which new worlds might be created, the microcatastrophes of *Junglist*’s sonic fictional register can ultimately only direct us back to the disaster of its social dimension, where cyclical crisis pairs perfectly well with the appearance of forward momentum, particularly within a neoliberal capitalist system predicated on an ethos of ‘creative destruction.’²²⁴ Tellingly, this contradictory state of being is linked in the passage to ‘the fundamentalists...and their no-compromise rantings.’ While the reference to fundamentalism is unclear in context and easy to misread in the post-9/11 conjuncture, the only fundamentalism likely to be accorded this degree of power and influence in mid-1990s Britain is the free-market fundamentalism which was the driving force behind the “uncompromising” neoliberal transformation of UK society from 1979 onward. Thatcher, for example, famously declared in a 1980 speech to the Conservative Party Conference that “this lady’s not for turning,”²²⁵ a reference to her steadfast refusal to retreat from early policies initiating the liberalization of the UK economy. Furthermore, while the text does not directly mention religious fundamentalism,²²⁶ it is critical of how economic policy and state authority

²²⁴ See David Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction” 21-44.

²²⁵ This phrase was used by Thatcher in her speech to the Conservative Party Conference on 10 October 1980. See “BBC ON THIS DAY 10 1980: Thatcher ‘not for Turning.’”

²²⁶ The one possible high-profile incident involving religious fundamentalism which could possibly have provoked this comment is the infamous ‘Rushdie Affair,’ wherein Muslims worldwide responded with anger and violence to

were implemented under Conservative rule in the inner-city London neighborhoods which were ground zero for the emergence of JDB.

Therefore, if, on the one hand, the passage describes a transfiguration of the self in disaster, it also suggests that this disaster has already arrived: rather than finding ourselves on the cusp of a new, posthuman world, we are actually stuck in this constantly reinvented and reinventing one, awaiting its next implosion. And while this stasis would seem intolerable to most, it is more or less welcomed by the subjects who have given themselves up to the destructive power of sound. As another of the text's anonymous narrators states a few pages earlier, in many ways prefiguring Meth's remark, "With the world coming to an end of another century the extinction agenda is almost being set, and all told you feel perhaps this is a comfortable end" (187). Once again the use of the passive voice is notable for how it positions subjects in a subservient relationship to the will of a larger totality. Individual identity is here subsumed under the general domain of the universal 'you,' which is itself positioned as a pawn in the middle of a chess board just before the endgame, with the pieces 'being set' by an external force and all remaining moves charted in advance.

The text here shifts the context from a subjective to a social one but maintains the passive model by which we come to understand the potential for human agency. Eshun would have us read this reduction of the human to an articulable 'exoskeleton' as transcendent liberation, as a purposefully unnatural gesture aimed at relativizing the power of the socially constructed world and its models of subjectivity. To have oneself filled with and embodied by sound is to open oneself up to a kind of sublime inversion beyond not only history and society, but beyond all

depictions of Islam in Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*. The incident came to an infamous head with the issuing of a fatwa (death order) on Rushdie by the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran in 1989.

possible histories and societies, and beyond all possible futures. This is why what we see at the end of *Junglist* is a human reduced to a social exoskeleton whose agency is articulated and directed toward the reproduction of a very specific capitalist Future from which we are to assume there will be no diverging. Ultimately, this makes the anonymous narrator's words ironic, for in this case it no longer matters whether the end will be comfortable, as it will be the only end available.

Rather than end my reading of *Junglist* on that note, however, I want to briefly conclude by examining the text's final two full paragraphs²²⁷ by way of finding some hope in the darkness:

What's real? In all, where is reality? Time works as we spin, what goes around comes around. When the riddim beats our hearts into propulsion, driving us closer together, forging a new consciousness in the heat of the dancehall we come back, our intentions are with love and as the riddim hits hard no one feels pain.

In the streets things are plain, clearly advertised and clearly defined, everyone knows their rights. Here you've got to live, hustle, find a gimmick, a trade and fast, before you get caught and like cattle fodder eaten, shited and left to the earth. (211 authors' italics)

In one sense, this pairing seems to leave us with two overlapping options, abruptly stacked back to back in rhetorical simulation of an ironic material and metaphysical ultimatum. I would start with the second option, which puts a stamp on the text's social dimension by reducing it to a blunt statement of fact. 'In the streets' one has to 'get real' and choose the daily inhumanity of a

²²⁷ These are technically the last two paragraphs, though a chapter titled "Monday Morning: Jimmy Crack Corn" follows them, composed of a three page stream-of-consciousness passage of alphabetized (but otherwise quite random) thoughts.

life lived in constant danger, weighed down by the gravity of subjectivity, by poverty, racial discrimination, and social exclusion. In this reality one must accept, as the text does on its final page, that ‘the jungle’ is merely a synonym for the logic of neoliberal capitalism, “a place of intense competition or ruthless struggle for survival” (215), wherein “any show of weakness and the sharks appear, ready to feast on you” (131). Live as the hunter or resign yourself to life as the hunted. Find a trick or get eaten. Embrace the future, or be churned into the refuse heap of the past.

On the other hand, as the first paragraph makes clear, referencing the novel’s forays into sonic catastrophe, you can reject this reality, ironically by embracing its inhumanity. In doing so you can ‘[forge] a new consciousness’ rooted in the ‘riddim’ and experience a liberated madness and alienation much as Craig wishes he could when he dourly pleads that “[He wants] a place to go where [he] can be mad” (118). If the second depicts social annihilation, the first models that logic on a subjective scale. Eshun and Fisher would have us believe that there is actually a choice to be made here, that amplifying insanity so that it becomes the rule rather than the exception is a liberating way forward. But choosing between two forms of inhumanity is no choice at all. Rather, it is a vacuum, an embrace of non-being which leaves behind all trace of human ability to act meaningfully in the world.

This is why it is ultimately instructive to return to the first, slightly more ambiguous option offered above, and to the questions and possibilities it poses. I find it significant that the nature of reality is posed as a question rather than a statement. For sure, if one reads this already believing that reality is a social construction, and therefore false, the question becomes moot—reality is unreal because ‘fake.’ By this logic one might also conceivably conclude that, therefore, if life is to be lived as alienation, as a kind of living death, embracing death is the same

thing as embracing life. Or, further, that embracing death is preferable to embracing life, as a fixation on non-being at the very least tells the lie to the positive value of life as it is structured in dominating or oppressive terms. But not only does the statement pose the nature of reality as a question, opening it up to interpretation, action, and change, it also suggests that in order to make this question meaningful it is essential that “*we come back*” from the brink of destruction, ask the question again and again, struggle to understand it, and in doing so maintain the possibility a more humane world.

Learning to Live with Non-Being: China Miéville’s *King Rat* and the Critique of Sonic Microcatastrophe

In the acknowledgements to his 1998 debut novel *King Rat*, English sf and fantasy writer China Miéville links his JDB-infused novel to Otchere and Green’s *Junglist*, noting briefly that “respect is especially due to Two Fingers and James T. Kirk for their novel *Junglist*. They blazed a trail.” At its most literal this simply recognizes that *Junglist* was the first published novel to stake a claim to a subcultural identity which had already been developing in and around the JDB community since 1992 and which had, by 1995, exploded into full view in the mainstream media. I would suggest, however, that there is more to it than that. More specifically, what *Junglist* does for Miéville is provide him with a social context and a cache of exploitable metaphors which can be appropriated in the construction of a new JDB fiction, one which takes the figurative language and connotations contained in the previous novel and literalizes them.

For example, in *Junglist* the idea of ‘a whole new world under the cover of darkness’ is metaphorical, a manner of investing the dynamism of the JDB sound and scene with a mythical aura typical of subcultural self-posturing. The same could be said for the dramatic collective search for the rhythm of the future or the epic conflict with a monstrous ‘beast.’ Though we later

learn that these figures are merely exaggerated representations of urban youth evading the police, congregating at clubs and parties, and seeking social and spiritual identity in music, such language nonetheless hints at another way the story could be told. It leaves an unspoken question hanging in the air: what if the metaphors were real? More specifically, what if the fantastic, aesthetic realm of the Black Electronic, accessible only as sonic fictional catastrophe in *Junglist*, were itself transformed into a setting, a virtual space within which a story could form?

King Rat—a novel which blends folklore, gothic horror, fantasy, and science fiction—emerges from a period of intense creative ferment and generic hybridization within the broad cultural field of British science fiction and fantasy in the 1990s.²²⁸ Some critics have retrospectively identified the period as witnessing a kind of ‘SF Boom,’ comparable in ways to the rise of the British New Wave in the 1960s or Cyberpunk in the 1980s.²²⁹ Most notable about the ‘Boom,’ which encompasses a vast list of writers, texts, and genres, is an emphasis on genre hybridity shared across a variety of texts. Miéville—one of the Boom’s unofficial spokespeople—has attempted to radicalize this hybridity by framing form as inherently political and science fantasy as the most relevant tool for defamiliarizing a late capitalist world in which the real has become fantastic and vice versa.²³⁰ However, Roger Luckhurst sagely warns against this reading, arguing instead that the Boom—and thus, Boom texts like *King Rat*—are best understood in historical relation to the cultural forms and historical context around them. It is when situated against these relations—particularly, for Luckhurst, the management of the British

²²⁸ Butler notes that this greater boom also encompasses an emergent horror and children’s writing industry, while Luckhurst adds a resurgence in British Gothic writing to the list of ‘Boom-worthy’ genre categories. See Butler, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Boom” 374 and Luckhurst, “Cultural Governance, New Labour and the British SF Boom” 417.

²²⁹ See Butler, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Boom” 374-375.

²³⁰ See Miéville, “Editorial Introduction to Symposium on Marxism and Fantasy” 43-46. For a theoretical-cultural analysis which correlates with Miéville’s reading of fantasy, see Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009).

‘cultures industry’ from the 1980s onward—that we can begin to see how the social and cultural critique of the Boom’s genre hybridization is made available by cultural and historical context.²³¹

While Luckhurst does a fantastic job of placing Boom texts in their 1990s historical-political context, he can’t cover everything, and one of the things he passes over is the parallel ‘Boom’ in black British/subcultural pulp fiction covered at the beginning of the last section on *Junglist*.

If one cast’s a wide enough net across the British genre fiction continuum during the 1990s it becomes easier to see how a story like *King Rat* doesn’t just hybridize science fiction and fantasy, but also how it leeches into the vulgar realism of a ‘street’ novel like *Junglist*, transposing real and fantasy, reconceiving sonic fictional catastrophe in the process. Indeed, *King Rat* both reenacts and upends *Junglist*’s strict separation between real and unreal, modern humanism and its inhuman flipside. Like *Junglist*, *King Rat* presents catastrophe as an internalized mechanism of subversion; rather than realistically depicting the destruction of the world in grandiose terms, the novel demonstrates its operation at the level of character action and development. By framing this shift as one between differing modes of perception, one visual and the other acoustic, the text’s fantastic dimension mimics *Junglist*’s sonic fictional forays into the virtual realm of the Black Electronic. Whereas *Junglist* maintains a strict boundary between social and virtual reality, *King Rat* This is hugely significant in terms of how each novel deploys catastrophe as a means of crossing between the social and the virtual realms. *Junglist* separates the ‘real’ social world from the liberating aesthetic or virtual one, in the process aligning the first with ideology, oppression, and domination, and the other with the transcendent freedom of death, inhumanity, darkness, and non-being. As I argue above, catastrophe in this model can only move

²³¹ Luckhurst, “Cultural Governance, New Labour, and the British SF Boom” 423-4.

one from alienation in life to a questionably liberating death, from disaster to disaster. In *Junglist* there is only the domination of being *or* the liberation of non-being.

In *King Rat*, however, what remains most important is not the black and white demarcation between being and non-being, but a distinction between the homogeneity of Being and the possibility for the fluid expression of alternate beings. Carl Freedman, for example, argues that “*King Rat* is above all a neo-Adornian celebration of heterogeneity and complexity, of overdetermined dialectical combination, and, correlatively, an attack on the totalitarian and...genocidal idea of *purity*” (397 author’s italics). Likewise, Mark Bould notes the text’s invocation of subjective multiplicity and ontological diversity as a subversion of the larger social totality.²³²

Working from these readings but also extending them, I argue that *King Rat* critiques the oversimplified ontological distinction made in *Junglist* between the real/human/social and the unreal/inhuman/virtual, ultimately opening it up to a more fluid and permeable continuum. The benefit in this move is in the way it maintains contact between the linked domains of the social and the political rather than displacing the latter into a separate, negative realm of aesthetic transcendence. As such, *King Rat* is in many ways a corrective to *Junglist*’s strict demarcation between the aesthetic and the political. By moving away from the death-drive and emphasizing that which can be done within an expanded scope of heterogenous being, it leaves open a space for a politics of challenge and change.

Set in late 1990s London, *King Rat* begins in the same inner city landscape depicted in *Junglist*, where “The colors and curves of graffiti mark every wall” and where “the rhythms of

²³² Bould, Mark. “Mind the Gap: The Impertinent Predicates (and Subjects) of *King Rat* and *Looking for Jake and Other Stories*.” *Extrapolation* 50.1 (2009): 307-325.

London are played out...in the sprawling flat zone between suburbs and center” (15). The novel’s protagonist, a young man named Saul Garamond, awakes one morning to find that his father has been murdered and that he is the chief suspect. Though arrested, he is quickly freed by a seemingly supernatural creature that identifies himself only as ‘King Rat.’ In due course we learn that King Rat is none other than the disgraced former lord of the rodents who, banished from the town of Hamelin centuries earlier by the infamous Pied Piper, has been on the run ever since, desperate to regain his kingdom. Moreover, as King Rat reveals, he is also Saul’s uncle, making Saul a most peculiar and powerful creature: an ontologically liminal half-man, half-rat hybrid. Under King Rat’s tutelage, Saul develops the abilities of the urban rat, among them unnatural strength and quickness, a proclivity for scaling buildings and squeezing through tight spaces, and most importantly, the ability to hide in plain sight, invisible to human eyes. While this training ultimately alienates Saul from the human world, it simultaneously makes him “giddy with rude, secular energy” (99), as he comes to see the London he thought he knew from a position of power linked to his liminal perspective between two worlds.

However, things take a turn for the worse with the return of the demonic Piper, drawn to London by the opportunity to capture the elusive King Rat and finally enslave him. After a few exceedingly violent encounters with the Piper, Saul learns he is actually the bastard child of King Rat and, furthermore, that King Rat has purposefully engineered his human-rat hybridity by way of weaponizing him for use in his war against the Piper. This revelation naturally infuriates both Saul and the megalomaniacal Piper, who is driven to make everyone and everything ‘dance to his tune.’ To ensnare Saul he manipulates Saul’s friend, a local JDB producer called Natasha, and together they produce a complex and multilayered composition that will allow the Piper to work his dark magic on all species simultaneously. The novel crashes to a close at a South London

club night called ‘Jungle Terror,’ where Saul, his friends, and King Rat all converge, none aware that the Piper now wields JDB as a sonic weapon capable of compelling their submission. While the Piper at first manages to orchestrate a bloody battle in the nightclub, pitting humans, rats, and other creatures against one another, Saul ultimately thwarts the Piper, sending him reeling back into an interdimensional slip to rejoin the lost children of Hamelin. Safe in his position as newly appointed king of the rats, Saul, now taking his dead father’s Marxist politics to heart, purposefully disassembles his own feudal authority, invoking a new ‘Rat Republic’ and proclaiming himself (and all his former subjects) free as ‘citizen rat(s).’

King Rat’s Acoustic Catastrophe

The engine behind the catastrophe of *King Rat* is the transformation in perspective granted to Saul as he undergoes shifts in ontological and social consciousness, learning to hear, see, and feel reality from a perspective in between human and nonhuman worlds. This change grants Saul a productive form of catastrophic double consciousness. While it requires no dramatic cataclysm, Saul’s evolution from an ontologically homogenous ‘human’ position to a more heterogeneous hybrid one nonetheless mimics the estrangement of catastrophe survivors from the settings and social conditions which once sustained and reproduced their identity. In retrieving Saul from prison and initiating his more literal evolution, King Rat extends a hand across a catastrophic divide, offering subversion of the old world and a gesture towards the new, noting that “We’re out of that world now. No more people and no more people things...This is where I live, get it?” (32). What matters most in this catastrophe, however, is not the sense of history fractured by disaster, where what happens in a post-catastrophic ‘now’ comes to be conditioned by its relationship to a fallen ‘then.’ Rather, as King Rat’s language here indicates, what is most important are the transitions between normative ideas of space and being, and particularly how

being differently can produce modes of seeing and feeling the spaces of the material world which are like those afforded the post-catastrophic survivor. While the life of millennial London pushes inexorably onward throughout the novel as though nothing has happened, Saul's ability to live in it from a different ontological perspective—and thus 'see' its fissures and fault lines more clearly—sharpens.

However, in order to understand what the text means by 'seeing,' and more generally how important sense is to Saul's transformation, we must significantly alter our received understanding of the word's meaning. While being carried out of the police station by King Rat, a disoriented Saul closes his eyes and describes what he 'sees':

Through his lids he could see changes in darkness and light. Unbidden, his mind drew a map of the station, rendering it a land of these stark and sudden oppositions. *Here be monsters*, he thought, and felt ridiculously close to giggling. He became acutely aware of sounds. The echoes he heard aided his helpless cartography, waxing and waning as the rooms and corridors through which he was carried grew and shrank. (37)

Saul's ability to draw a map of stark contrasts between light and dark without provocation indicates the degree to which that naturalized way of conceiving the world has penetrated his habitual perception, rendering it superficial and incomplete. The flatness of this ingrained mode of perception ultimately motivates his atavistic reference to the dark, unknown recesses beyond the cartography of early European explorer's maps: whatever cannot fit into his organized perception must necessarily be unreal, frightening, and monstrous. This reference to early modern colonial cartography also links his shift in perception to the broader field of material and

ideological relations structuring life in postcolonial London. This perceptive field is not only ‘like’ that which organized space historically five centuries earlier, but rather a contemporary extension and elaboration of it.

Importantly, however, it is not his ability to see which allows him to round the whole and fill in the blanks of his ‘helpless cartography.’ In order to access this fullness he must instead perceive his surroundings more completely in terms of acoustic, rather than merely visual space. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan argues that visual space—a paradigm he contends emerged in the early modern period with European Renaissance painting and print technologies—organizes thought and subjectivity by orienting it around a single, unified, and linear perspective.²³³ As Erik Davis explains, “Central to this visual space is the axiom or assumption that ‘different’ objects, vectors, or points are not and cannot be superimposed; instead, the world is perceived as a linear grid organized along strictly causal lines” (“Acoustic Cyberspace”). For all intents and purposes, if it does not fit into the perceptive grid, it doesn’t exist. Acoustic space, by contrast, is not only the space that we hear, as the name might suggest, but more accurately a multifarious reality which demands the attention of a variety of senses simultaneously.²³⁴

What *King Rat* suggests about Saul—and, by extension, the society in which he lives—is that his dominant mode of perception is visual and therefore normative, a condition which leaves him unable to notice a great deal of the city’s everyday reality. The difference between his pre- and post-catastrophic worlds, therefore, is one of perception rather than material reality. Seeking to explain this to him, King Rat gestures towards a man looking curiously out his window: “That

²³³*The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*, 35-48.

²³⁴“Old Messengers, New Media.”

geezer there...that's as close as you ever got to this before now. The place he's looking at now—no, he's not looking at it, he's caught a *glimpse*, a *hint*, it's teasing him out of the corner of his eye—that's your gaff now" (42 author's italics). What this 'normal' man has glimpsed is something closer to the reality of the world in which he lives, a world in which multiple spaces are superimposed upon, and interpenetrating one another. But because his linear perception does not allow it, he has no consciousness of this variegation. Saul, on the other hand, is allowed to look back on this man—essentially on himself as he previously existed—from the rounder confines of King Rat's domain and index both the paucity of his former life and the depth which has been added to it. Not unlike a catastrophe survivor, it is only in "sloughing off those layers of habit" (52) which defined the boundaries of his limited human perspective that he comes to understand the potential of the new and more complex world he has been called to inhabit.

King Rat's Critique of Junglist

King Rat approaches its critique initially by naturalizing the dual perspective offered by *Junglist* and transferring it to the character King Rat, who insists that the worlds between which Saul must transition are divided neatly by a stark difference between human and inhuman, being and non-being. Quite naturally, Saul's clumsy introduction to this latter condition initially makes him "[feel] like a tourist" (88), "a cut-out pasted ineptly onto the world" (29), "alien and out of place" (105). Eventually, however, the opacity of this early stage resolves itself into the clarity of new sensations and perceptive modes. Saul grows accustomed to living among and even eating filth and garbage, his sensations recalibrate such that he can hear and feel other creatures around him, his body grows inured to the damp and cold of the sewers, and the vertiginous angles and circuitous routes which frighten and disorient him at first become the benchmarks of a new order. Correspondingly, Saul comes to inhabit what seems like a revolutionary new perspective

on social relations in the city: “Saul saw through vulgar reality, discerned possibilities. Alternative architecture and topography were asserting themselves...Saul had seen a new city. The map of London had been ripped up and redrawn according to King Rat’s criteria” (98, 104). What this new map should allow for is an expansive and inclusive set of new perspectives and angles of perception on a now much vaster experiential field.

But there is an important ambiguity in the phrase ‘King Rat’s criteria’ and a significant difference between what Saul perceives, what King Rat wants him to see, and what he might actually see on his own. First, ‘King Rat’s criteria’ signifies Saul’s evolving ontology, including the new abilities and senses which bring his perspective into line with nonhuman creatures like King Rat. As he understands it, he perceives differently because his nature has shifted. He has crossed from one side to the other. Yet, we come to see that this understanding is predicated on the very ‘human’ assumption—fostered by King Rat—that there is a strict difference between the false (i.e. socially constituted) human world and the true (i.e. naturally constituted) animal one. It is in the service of this illusion that King Rat frames a reconceived London for Saul as a simple opposition between reality and fantasy.

This is similar to the simplistic manner in which JDB subculture is framed in relation to the ‘mainstream’ in *Junglist*. Like King Rat, the latter novel’s DJ character, Revolver, draws stiff fault lines between JDB’s metaphysical dimensions and those of other musics, like house and techno, which he claims reinforce rather than subvert consensus reality: “House is a false sound, a false consciousness, a false sense of reality...But Jungle’s truer to humanity’s real roots. It cuts away the falseness, gives you the ups and the downs, the dark and the light” (51). Residing in London’s dark sewers and abandoned subterranean corridors, eating rubbish, squeezing through cracks and crevices, taking advantage of all the city’s interstices, King Rat and those like him

literally inhabit what, from a human perspective, must be an inherently alien reality, “a whole new world under the cover of darkness,” opposed to the ‘normal’ workaday world of the metropolis.

Yet the principal irony here, as it is in *Junglist*, is that the ‘light’ to which we are meant to contrast such darkness—whether the ‘normal’ and accepted mainstream or the two-dimensional reality of the human world—is itself revealed as dark. In *Junglist* it is the ordinary middle-class ‘day’ which is revealed as the province of racism, class warfare, and police brutality; in *King Rat* it is the human world which, because it cannot see, is shrouded in darkness. Both are limited, and thus fake, while the ‘dark’ areas are actually full of life and promise and transcendental vision. *King Rat* touches on this repeatedly in the novel’s opening chapters, opposing the sensual ‘reality’ of the animal world to the mundane visual ‘fantasy’ of the human one: “All the main streets, the front rooms and the rest of it, that’s just filler, that’s just *chaff*, that ain’t the real city. You get to that by the *back* door...All the vacant lots and all—that’s your stomping ground now...That’s London” (42-3). Structured as such by *King Rat*, the sensorium of the city seems divided by a crude ideological reading of social life; on one side is the mystified, structured domain in which subjectivity is channeled into the reproduction of social reality, while on the other lies the naturally constituted ‘real’ reality, which can be glimpsed as easily as one opens a door or removes a veil. One side is real, the other an illusion.

Even more importantly, *King Rat* situates his subterranean rat-London as a catastrophic ‘other side’ from which Saul cannot possibly return. If Saul’s new condition is emblematic of a dynamic now, his former life is a fallen then: “you can’t go back *now*, can you?,” *King Rat* asks (43 author’s italics). In interpreting Saul’s transcendence as a form of irreparable catastrophic rupture, he ensures that Saul come to the carefully planned realization that his life has been

demystified by the disaster of his human ‘death,’ a reality Saul initially accommodates: “Saul had no illusions. He could never go back, he had become a rat” (109). Read against *Junglist*’s embrace of sonic fictional microcatastrophe, Saul’s conclusion here is essentially that he has been transported to the other side, that he has died, and that this is now his reality.

However, as Saul grows increasingly alienated from King Rat his ability to interpret the boundaries of his new world sharpens. This entails a heightened perception of the ideological dynamics inherent in the social production of space. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a social product which affects our practical lives and perceptions of reality. The spatial dimension closest to our perception is what Lefebvre calls representational space, which is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols... This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. *It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects*” (39 my italics). Representational space is an aesthetic dimension overlaid atop a material reality, but one which exerts significant influence on how that reality is perceived in that it is ‘passively experienced.’ *King Rat* essentially turns Lefebvre’s theory into narrative overlaying representational space on the city of London, demonstrating how we operate passively through representations which make use of material objects. King Rat makes this very clear early on, when he explains to Saul that “This is the city where I live. It shares all the points of yours and theirs, but none of its properties” (32). Saul’s transformation allows him to ‘see’ not the city in itself, which he and all those around him perceive, but rather the manner in which it is represented and, by extension, dominated.

This is one of the reasons the text so often goes out of its way to point us to ‘the city’ as though it were a character of its own. The distinction both Saul and the reader learn to make,

however, is essentially related to performance; if ‘the city’ is a role that has been written, it can still be performed and interpreted in a variety of ways. The challenge is in seeing its reality as a performance. As King Rat’s grasp on his perception loosens, Saul begins to notice that what he sees when he looks at ‘the city’ is the part, not the performance:

the walls that enclosed him were vulnerable. They constituted the buildings’ underbellies, soft underneath the aesthetic carapace...Seen from behind, caught unawares, the functionality of the city was exposed...But the city did not like to be found out. Even as he saw it clearly for the product it was, Saul felt it square up against him. The city and he faced each other. He saw London from an angle against which it had no front, at a time when its guard was down. (257)

Though ‘the city’ is personified here insofar as it can ‘square up against him,’ it is also read as an instrument, a function which is produced aesthetically. While this seems like revelation enough, the true implication is that if the city is an instrument tuned to a function, it can be tuned to a different function. If it is produced, it can be produced differently. ‘Reality,’ the text suggests, is only real because we accept it as real, and we accept it only because we unconsciously accede to the premises on which it is founded and to the powers which guide its performance.

Though staged as a contemporary fantasy reading of a medieval folk tale, *King Rat* actually depicts a political struggle for dominance in this performative dimension. Superficially, while the struggle for power between King Rat and the Piper is initially framed in simple terms of good vs bad, we eventually come to see it as a struggle over whose assumptions will underwrite the text’s fantastic register and, thus, structure the social space of the real. For their part, King Rat and his associated henchmen, Loplop (King of the Birds) and Anansi (King of the

Spiders) seek to topple the Piper and reclaim the authority divested from them. As we learn, this authority is unsurprisingly based on the feudal model of absolute kings and royal bloodlines; each of these characters sits atop a wider pyramid of loyal vassals and serfs whose reverence depends on their respect for blood purity. In this model subjects symbolize not free individuals but passive beings subjected to and by the absolute sovereign, of whom they are meant to be an extension. Each king lords over a different form of being and each possesses their own circumscribed domain.

The Piper, on the other hand, represents an entirely new historical epoch—that of capitalist modernity—and his *modus operandi* reflects the destructive upending of the medieval world's relative stasis we now associate with early modern capitalist transformation. The text constructs the “urbane” (186), cosmopolitan Piper as an analogue for the logic of global capital, a vast, cancerous force spreading, destroying, and incorporating everything into itself, leaving nothing untouched. As King Rat explains, the Piper “exists to own...He has to suck things in to him, always...He's the spirit of narcissism. He's to prove his worth by guzzling all and sundry in...He can ring anyone's bell, charm anything he fancies” (133). This last point is perhaps the most compelling, because it indicates the Piper's ability to denaturalize the foundations of King Rat's feudal authority. While all rats should naturally follow King Rat simply because they share a common being, the Piper can ‘ring anyone's bell’ and make them operate in a manner contradictory to their own nature. He relativizes the natural by turning all things inward, making them a natural extension of himself.

Even more importantly, the Piper operates primarily through the manipulation of sound. By playing his flute, he can ‘charm anything he fancies,’ filling them with sound and directing them passively, just like those empty vessels filled with the cacophony of JDB in *Junglist*.

Though ferocious and superhuman, the Piper eschews direct force unless necessary, seeking instead to control all around him more covertly, to entrance and then direct their movements into the reproduction of his own reality. Sonically, the Piper accomplishes this by manipulating Saul's friend Natasha into co-creating a JDB track for him which relies almost exclusively for its power on the dominance of high-end frequencies, the most obvious of which is the Piper's flute. This has the effect of straining the depth out of the music, creating a superficial experience, light, transferable, and ephemeral. Not surprisingly, the Piper "[loves] the track with an extraordinary passion" (211) because it allows him to unfold his singular, monotonous sound-as-reality over the sensorium of perceived life. As narcissistic as he is clever, the Piper seeks to control the form in which the world can appear by expropriating the acoustic dimension which lends it shape, turning all things back onto himself as master conductor. He must, at all times, control the performance. This is why he—the self-proclaimed "Lord of the Dance" (194)—is so adamant that "if you don't dance to [his] tune, you don't belong in this world" (188). To defy such a homogenizing diktat would be to recognize that other tunes and other worlds might exist.

However, if the Piper seductively entrances listeners and orders their reality by bleeding the world-as-sound of its dimensions, so, too, does King Rat. As Saul comes to learn more of King Rat and his motivations, it becomes clear that the latter's goal is similarly to consolidate power over others by carefully shaping and controlling the world in which they operate. Upon awakening in his prison cell prior to meeting King Rat, Saul immediately notices not only that "the sounds were changing," but more importantly that "the depth seemed to be bleeding out of all the noises in the world" (29). Much like the piper's slavish dependence on high-end frequencies, the sonic world invoked by the arrival of King Rat is defined by "sounds [which are] clear and audible, but empty" (29). King Rat's sonic universe is empty precisely because it

is a simulacrum of authority, a consent manufactured by conceit and deception. If the Piper entrances the world with his flute, King Rat does so with his voice, which “mesmerized [Saul] like a spell, as hypnotic as dance music,” such that “He could not think, he could only listen” (34, 32). Essentially, Saul is reduced by King Rat to the function of a perfect political subject: docile, easily manipulated, and willing to follow the path laid out for him. The *modus operandi* of both Piper and Rat is thus essentially the same. Both represent a tyranny aimed at first mesmerizing others into believing the world can only exist in one possible configuration and then denying that there can ever be any way of thinking differently.

This is why, with the Piper held tensely at bay and King Rat’s authority renounced, Saul is finally able to begin “a new chapter” (220) of his catastrophic tale. Importantly, his first action is to revisit his relationship with sound:

He could hear sounds from all over London, a murmuring. And as he listened, it resolved itself into its components, cars, and arguments, and music. He felt as if the music was everywhere, all around him, a hundred different rhythms in counterpoint, a tapestry being woven underneath him. The towers of the city were needles, and they caught at the threads of music and wound them together, tightened them around Saul. He was a still point, a peg, a hook on which to wind the music...He heard the music with new ears. (221)

Both King Rat and the Piper would deny Saul the ability to receive and interpret the meaning of this living multiplicity of sounds and realities because doing so would threaten their interpretation of the world as ultimately leading only to their own domination. While the Piper

exists to homogenize, to take everything in the world and claim it with his power, so, too, does King Rat wish to reduce everything to a static, feudal hierarchy, with himself naturally at the top.

Denied access to the music of human life during his time with King Rat, Saul now hears from his greatly expanded acoustic perspective, which grants him access to a teeming multiplicity of histories, locations, and subjectivities: “It grew louder and louder, Rap and Classical and Soul and House and Techno and Opera and Folk and Jazz and Jungle, always Jungle, all the music built on drum and bass, ultimately” (221). The final qualification here is meant less as a coy name drop than another in the text’s long list of metaphors for the master contradiction between difference and identity, being and non-being. Each genre is meant to indicate specific sonic expressions of self, community, place, and culture, and thus each is expressive of a different variation on being. Yet each is fundamentally tied at the root by the ‘drum and bass, ultimately,’ by the fundamental vibratory quality of sound itself.

To see the differences in each sound is to recognize their similarity. It is in recognition of this dialectical contradiction that Saul is eventually able to conclude that he actually exists in multiple worlds simultaneously, that his world is and has always been both whole and multiple: “But perhaps he didn’t live in a different world. He lived where he wanted...and even if he didn’t live in the same world as them anymore, he could visit, couldn’t he?...because he could move between the worlds” (222). The most significant thing about this revelation for Saul is that it confirms that to live in a reality wherein different beings—wherein difference itself—can coexist is not the same as splitting the world into the fake and the real, the living and the dead.

Though he does not understand it until the final moment of his undoing, the Piper’s weakness is ultimately his adherence to a conception of the world based on the same model of

absolute difference by which theories of racialization and capitalist dehumanization operate. This understanding is an extension of his magical power, which also works in this way, controlling only one species at a time with a flute melody calibrated to that species being. This is why JDB is at first so appealing to him. As he boasts to Saul during the novel's final showdown, "That's the joy of Jungle. All those layers...I can play my flute as many times as I want, *all at once*" (293 author's italics). While in context this reference is to absolute species difference, it can be extended via the text's incorporation of an undeniably multicultural JDB sound to encompass the socially constructed systems of power and privilege which work in and through intra-human constructions of absolute difference.

Because each species also conceives of life in terms of absolute difference, he is at first able to entrance them with *Wind City*, leading them into a bloody confrontation on the dance floor during the novel's concluding scene. As Natasha walks zombie-like onto the stage, now fully entranced by the Piper, the narrator notes of her mix that "it was impossible to tell where one started and the other began, the mixing was seamless" (285). In essence, the Piper commands JDB dancers to live in the break and, in so doing, externalizes the internal catastrophe which *Junglist* enshrines as inherently emancipatory. As Saul looks on helplessly, the Piper places humans, then spiders, and then rats into kind of dazed stupor. Much like those sonic fictional 'empty vessels' from *Junglist*, the human dancers are transformed into articulable exoskeletons whose energies are then violently directed against the other rats, spiders, and humans.

Learning to Live with Non-Being

Much as *Junglist* would have it, a Jungle club is where one goes to lose the maddening individuation of one's self and the pain of living. Yet, *King Rat* clarifies that there is nothing

inherently liberatory about this self-sacrifice. Because he has not yet realized the implications of this knowledge, Saul is at first equally transfixed by *Wind City* and experiences Eshun's emblematic 'abduction' moment: "his feet propelled him, he did not need to think of where to walk, the responsibility had been taken from him, he obeyed the music" (298). However, the Piper is ultimately undermined by his inability to see past the distinction between absolute and relative difference. He neglects to consider that each of the species he entrances might be bound at a deeper level, that they represent an operative contradiction, each different but linked in a more fundamental way by being itself.

This connection is symbolized in the text by the sub-bass frequencies common to JDB music. Trapped by the Piper's tune, it is Saul's awareness of the sub-bass, felt as much as heard, which ultimately releases him: "*Because the bass is too dark for this*, thought Saul suddenly, with shocking clarity, the bass is too dark to suffer this...Saul rediscovered himself. He knew who he was" (300). Fundamentally misunderstanding how JDB works and too dependent on high end frequencies, the Piper mistakenly assumes that each of his layers can operate independently of one another, that he can compose entirely from difference alone. What Saul notices is the common link tying each of the different beings together. "One plus one equals *one*," he shouts at the Piper, "I'm not rat plus man, get it? I'm bigger than either one and *I'm bigger than the two*. I'm a new thing. *You can't make me dance*" (301 author's italics). More important that the assertion of positive being in 'I'm a new thing' is the metaphorical resonance which frames being as a contingent, rather than absolute, perspective that can recognize dimensions and differences within being without needing to search outside for liberation in non-being.

In *Junglist*, as in the history of the African diaspora, or of the modern world more generally, the problem with being is that it is too often inflected by ideologies of hierarchy and

domination, of beings and sub-beings. Given this assumption, searching for freedom in the negative is understandable because it can sometimes seem like the only way out. But what *King Rat* articulates is how to conceive of being as necessarily different and whole, as internally riven and sealed at the edges, as in and out simultaneously. To adapt Saul's admonishment, being plus being is still being, no matter the hierarchy one might devise to subdivide it. The novel helps us see we need not romanticize annihilation in order to reconceive of ourselves in new terms. Catastrophe can lead to survival, even growth. It need not always curl back around and reproduce itself again and again as disaster.

As important as Saul's final revelation is to the novel, it has larger implications for this chapter's questions about sonic fictional catastrophe. It allows us to return to his earlier assertions that he can 'travel between the worlds' and also to another claim, made in a fit of anger with King Rat late in the novel: "*I am what I do*" (254 author's italics). At the figurative level the text's presentation of traveling between worlds is somewhat ironic given that its denouement reinforces that there is only one world within which one might travel. Yet there are a multitude of dimensions to it, in which we exist socially, and in which our social existence is produced for us. Saul's determined insistence that he is what he does is, in context, meant as a rebuff to King Rat's reliance on biological determinism. Yet it also extends outward over the whole of the text, bringing into relief the notion that we can and must consent to what is made, that the base form of our material reality has been made, often for us, and that we can choose to unmake or remake it as we please.

This is an inherently political statement, at odds with the mutely political thrust of a novel like *Junglist*, and with the seemingly apolitical mechanisms of sonic fictional catastrophe in general. It underwrites Saul's decision in the text's epilogue to free his rat subjects by dissolving

his feudal authority and declaring himself nothing more than a ‘citizen’ of the ‘rat republic’ (316-318). It reinforces the words of his dead father, who had attempted to explain to an adolescent Saul that “when we learn we no longer fear. This is tar, and this is what it does, and this is the world, and this is what it does, and this is what we can do to it” (27). Yet as defiant a statement as ‘I am what I do’ undeniably is, it remains incomplete without *King Rat*’s larger suggestion that *we are how we see*.

It is this insistence on the estranging potential in catastrophe which illuminates the significance not of what we know or who we are but of how we live and perceive our relation to one another. The novel ultimately concludes with the suggestion that in order to complete this transition we may have to rend the naturalized structures which govern our lives from their moorings. Yet this need not mean that we need to die, but rather, as Terry Eagleton has suggested, that “we...find a way of living with non-being without being in love with it, since being in love with it is the duplicitous work of the death drive” (213). Sonic fictional catastrophe promotes just this kind of morbid work, an emancipatory aesthetic delusion inseparable from the dour conclusion that the world is what it is and that we can make nothing of it other than that which has already been made. *King Rat* resists this conclusion, urging us to first examine how we see others, how we see ourselves, and then to explore what can be done to celebrate rather than negate being.

Conclusion

Both *Junglist* and *King Rat* enact and interrogate the uses of black British sonic fictional experience in the context of late twentieth-century neoliberal Britain. However, while *Junglist* draws limited—and limiting—distinctions between the utopian dreams of sonic fictional catastrophe and the real ‘social’ worlds in which they occur, *King Rat*’s transposition of realism

and fantasy refuses such distinctions, ultimately rejecting catastrophe in favor of a return to a world of real political praxis. Therefore, while both novels present valuable and pointed critiques of the racialized politics of national belonging in Britain, they do so with very different conceptions of what a black British devolutionary imagination might mean. For Green and Otchere, devolution means accepting a historically mutable narrative about what can and cannot be changed; by accepting the aesthetic/sonic fictional over the social/political, *Junglist* bows to an ideological pessimism from which it seems unlikely to recover. Miéville's rendering of devolution, however, remains dialectical and open to historical reconfiguration, human agency, and meaningful change. It insists on the human ability to grow aware of and reform the ideological eddies of ahistorical thinking, and to see ontology and sociology as mutually interpenetrating and constitutive fields of political awareness and action.

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