Genre

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This essay addresses the affordances of genre fiction for thinking the collective. Before I do so, however, let us first take a brief detour into the Mojave Desert. In Alexandra Kleeman's dystopian novel *Something New Under the Sun* (2021), a writer from New England goes to Hollywood to assist with the film adaptation of his first novel, but quickly discovers that things are off-kilter. For one, California seems to be caught in a perpetual cycle of drought and wildfires, the landscape everywhere "burning and burnt" (89). Moreover, in response to water scarcity, the real thing has been replaced by a privatized, synthetic substitute called WAT-R that monopolizes the state's water supplies. What really irks the writer, however, is neither the omnipresent fires nor that real water has become a luxury few can afford, but that his autobiographical novel, which he describes as "an exploration of how the memory of a person, which is like a ghost in its way, can live on in the present and the future" (34), has been turned into a literal ghost story by the screenwriter, replete with demons and "supernatural baddies" (58). And the writer himself fares no better than his work. Just as his earnest novel is transformed into mass market pulp, the literary writer also succumbs to a kind of horror, a mysterious dementia that appears to be a secret side effect of drinking WAT-R. At the end of Kleeman's novel, the author-protagonist is rendered speechless and near-catatonic by the new disease before disappearing into the Mojave Desert never to be heard from again.

The death of the literary author (not incidentally white, male, and middle-aged) as well as the displacement of his serious (or at least self-important) novel by genre fiction is an apt allegory of the contemporary literary marketplace. Since the turn to genre of highly acclaimed authors like Cormac McCarthy and Kazuo Ishiguro helped make popular genres newly respectable among the literary establishment, the literary field has been transformed by two developments: on the one hand, the rise to literary fame of a younger generation of writers from Colson Whitehead to Ling Ma (both innovators of the zombie apocalypse) renowned for their mixing of popular genre conventions (action-driven plots and futuristic or fantastic elements) with techniques more commonly associated with highbrow fiction (complex characters, figurative language, lyrical descriptions); and, on the other hand, the literary consecration of a number of unapologetic genre writers from Ursula K. Le Guin and

Octavia Butler to more recent authors like Paulo Bacigalupi and N. K. Jemisin, now embraced by cultural institutions that formerly shunned genre fiction.[1] While genre fiction for most of the twentieth century occupied a marginal position in the literary field as the commercial and formulaic Other to the more rarified products of modernism, this turn to popular genres has been yet another nail in the coffin of what Andreas Huyssen called "the Great Divide" between modernism and mass culture, whose boundaries had already been strained, if not abrogated, by postmodernism's playful appropriation of popular forms.[2] But unlike the postmodern use of genre conventions, the most recent turn to genre has been less about upending the hierarchies of high modernism than about challenging what counts as realism when the perceived regularities of everyday life are disrupted by the polycrisis of the present. The twenty-first-century return of geopolitical and financial instability, largescale protest movements, and rightwing populism in the wake of the relative stability of the 1990s, as well as the planetary threats of the climate emergency, the Sixth Mass Extinction, and the COVID-19 pandemic have replaced the manufactured sense of history's end with a new sense of dangerously accelerating change. And if the center cannot hold, nor can the literary strategies used to represent it. Writers today are turning to popular genres not in order to question positivistic attempts at grasping objective reality, as their postmodern predecessors did, but to represent an altered state of reality. Genre fiction no longer signifies the escapist delusions imposed on the masses by the culture industry (as it did for the modernists), nor a subversive potential for antirealism liberated from the hierarchies of elite culture (as it did for postmodernists), but "the realism of our times," as Kim Stanley Robinson says about sci-fi ("Realism"). If there is something new under the sun, as Kleeman's novel intimates, genre fiction is one of our culture's chosen ways of grappling with it.

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1 By "unapologetic" genre writers, I mean genre fiction that is not marked or marketed as a literary adaptation of popular forms, in contrast, e.g., to the marketing of Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) as a "zombie novel *with brains*" (my italics), as the tagline on the cover reads. For more on the much-noted "genre turn," see Lanzendörfer; Martin; Dorson; Hoberek, "Introduction" and "Literary Genre Fiction"; and Kelly. For a dissenting view on the genre turn that sees the divide between literary and popular fiction as still very much intact, see Rosen, "Literary Fiction". My point here is not to argue that all distinctions are gone—which clearly is not the case—but rather to address the affordances of popular genres for thinking the collective.

2 For an account of the difference between the postmodern use of genre fiction and the present turn to genre, see, e.g., Hoberek: "[T]here is a difference between the transitional but still self-consciously 'literary' appropriation of popular genres in the work of authors like Barth and Pynchon […] and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves" ("Introduction" 237–238). While McGurl describes the use of popular genre conventions by postmodernist authors as "meta-genre fiction, where a popular genre—romance, western, science fiction, fantasy and detective fiction—is both instantiated and ironized to the point of becoming dysfunctional in the production of its conventional pleasures" (217), this is clearly not the case for the "unapologetic" genre writers I will be considering here.

As I argue here, the new respectability of popular genres is not only symptomatic of a dissatisfaction with established literary strategies for representing an altered state of reality, but also suggests new possibilities for imagining collective responses to the crises we face. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh's influential censure of what he refers to as "serious" or "literary fiction," Ghosh calls the contemporary novel to task for ignoring the existential threats of climate change as well as for focusing on the individual psyche at the expense of the collective. "[W]hat is banished from the territory of the novel is precisely the collective" (78), he argues, with the consequence that "at exactly the time when it has become clear that global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike" (80). And yet Ghosh's own exiling of genre fiction as a viable alternative to literary fiction's limited range of tools for representing climate change and "the idea of the collective" required for mitigating it already seems positively dated.[3] Not only has the genre turn unsettled the rigid opposition that Ghosh sets up between literary and genre fiction, but Ghosh's desire to expand the repertoire of realism to include visions of the collective ignores how genre writing has always been more hospitable to collective imaginaries than its more reputable counterparts. By honing in on two critical aspects of genre fiction here—institutionality and different temporalities—the aim of the following is to sketch out some possibilities that render genre fiction particularly amenable to "the idea of the collective."

Institutionality

Mark McGurl has influentially described the institutionalization in postwar creative writing programs of a high modernist aesthetic centered around authorial self-expressivity, and therefore opposed to all generic forms, as the "*institutionalization of anti-institutionality*" (221; original italics). The challenge to this expressive model of writing by the genre turn in contemporary fiction consequently marks a cultural shift in our relation to institutional logics. Like the new formalism in literary criticism pioneered by Caroline Levine and others, which reconsiders the constraints of form as enabling rather than merely confining, genre theory also recognizes the productivity of constraints. Defining genre as "a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning," John Frow observes how "[g]eneric structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place" (10). The reappraisal of popular generic conventions today thus signals a shift away from a Romantic-modernist view of formal constraints as inhibiting creative expression to one that views genre as gener-

3 See Bould on Ghosh's neglect of popular genres.

ative of new possibilities. Instead of searching for new expression outside of institutionalized forms, the genre turn acknowledges that expression can be innovated from within established patterns. Self-consciously drawing on generic conventions replaces the Romantic myth of artistic genius—traditionally coded as male (with women performing the passive role as muse) and famously likened by Harold Bloom to the oedipal struggle to break with the past—with a more collaborative model of literary production.[4] In contrast to the ingrained belief in post-Romantic Western culture that authentic expression comes from within the iconoclastic subject, genre fiction entails a model of literary production that by definition is relational. Readers make sense of a detective or science fiction story against a horizon of expectations defined by conventions particular to that genre. While this may be true of any text—after all, realism also only makes sense in relation to established conventions that shape reader expectations of what constitutes reality—genre fiction, through textual as well as paratextual markers, explicitly calls attention to its kinship with a group of similar texts. Unlike realist texts that refer to a probabilistic conception of reality, or modernist texts measured by their authorial authenticity, or even postmodernist texts that indiscriminately refer to other texts regardless of their genre, genre fiction first and foremost refers to other texts of the same genre. Signifying differently than the text-reality nexus of realism, the text-author nexus of modernism, and the text-text nexus of postmodernism, meaning in genre fiction is thus primarily generated in the relationship between the particular text and the general genre to which it belongs.[5]

This constitutive relationship of genre fiction between part and whole entails a cultural departure from the "society of singularities" (Reckwitz) that valorizes the particular over the general, the individual over the institution. This is not to say, of course, that individualism is not inscribed into particular genres. The adventure story and its generic mutations into the Western or hardboiled detective fiction are all characterized by the lone hero opposed to society. Jeremy Rosen observes that "the common features that constitute a genre's central conventions convey a shared social logic" (*Minor Characters* 7). In the case of the recent genre of "minor-character elaboration" that he identifies, where minor characters of canonical texts are made the protagonists of their own story, Rosen is no doubt right to argue that it contributes to the "liberal individualist project" (26). At the same time, the "social logic" of a particular genre always also coexists with the formal logic of genre as such, in which a text is never alone but always exists within a textual community held together by shared genre markers. Genres always point "outward, toward other gen-

4 On the gendering of high culture as male and popular culture as female, see chapter 3 of Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman."

5 For how genres are further rendered legible by their differential relationship with other genres, where the whole of one genre becomes a part of the larger genre system, see Cohen.

res, kindred practices" (42), as Rosen also notes. When it comes to genre not only is there no forest without trees, but there are no trees without a forest. If individuality is inscribed into particular genres, we might then say that collectivity is inscribed into the very concept of genre. And the kind of reading practices that genre fiction demands, where meaning is produced in the relationship between part and whole, models a very different social logic than, say, the survivalism of much dystopian YA fiction today.

A form of sociality in which the part is subsumed by the whole has for good reasons been rendered suspect by the twentieth century's traumatic experiments with totalitarian forms of collectivity. But the collectivist logic inscribed into the semantics of genre is not the kind of crushing conformity that modernists always suspected to be latent in mass culture. The production of meaning within a given genre does not simply reproduce a template on the model of standardized mass production. A particular text is not determined by the genre it belongs to. Since the 1980s, genre theory has moved away from the Aristotelian model of genre as a taxonomic category into which individual texts are placed to a more dynamic model of genre as a collaborative system in which individual texts actively transform their genres in the act of performing them. Genres do not hover authoritatively above or apart from their specific instantiations, but are produced and elaborated in the process of their articulation. As Rosen puts it, genre today is regarded "not as an ideal category with static rules or criteria but as a malleable, historically dynamic kind of literary and rhetorical practice that may be manipulated according to the needs and purposes of those who adopt it" (*Minor Characters* 10). This processual view of genre radically alters its symbolic significance from the modernist stigmatization of popular genres as a passive submission to fixed templates highly compatible with totalitarian rule to a democratic model of active participation.

Skepticism toward institutions as a way of organizing and amplifying collective agency is not only a result of neoliberal ideology but of what Rodrigo Nunes calls "the trauma of organization" (112), which is to say the abuse of organizational power in the twentieth century. Accounting for the potential danger of organization, Nunes explains how "in gathering and focusing the collective capacity to act in certain points, organisation opens that capacity to the risk of its appropriation by particular interests and the transformation of power to do things into power over others, *potentia* into *potestas*" (11). To avoid this latent danger, he shifts the focus from the noun "organization," a concept in which the whole subsumes the parts, to the gerund form of "organizing" in order to recognize the mutually constitutive relationship between part and whole (17). Genre fiction models such a process of assemblage. Each particular example of a genre renegotiates the terms of generic belonging; each text instantiates and simultaneously reconfigures the relationship between part and whole. Both rejecting the anti-institutional particularism of institutionalized high modernism and no longer seen as a mindless product predetermined by formulaic

conventions, genre fiction enacts the processual mediation between part and whole in aesthetic terms that organizational theorists like Nunes take as a viable model for collective action. And while the formal logic of genre obviously does not translate directly into political practice, as no literature does, it nevertheless shapes patterns of thought that are more amenable to thinking collectivity than forms of artistic production centered around the singularity of creative expression are.[6]

Temporalities

Apart from the institutional affordances of genre fiction vis-à-vis literary realism discussed above, the untethering of literature from a probabilistic universe—from Edward Bellamy's utopian *Looking Backward* (1888) to a cli-fi subgenre like solarpunk today—has long provided a space for alternative social visions to emerge that can inspire collective attempts to realize them. As the authors of a recent manifesto for the Green New Deal write, "fighting for a new world starts with imagining it viscerally" (Aronoff et al. 173). Kim Stanley Robinson's celebrated climate novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) is a good example of how a popular genre like sci-fi may be used to challenge what Mark Fisher influentially called "capitalist realism," which is not only the inability to imagine a different organization of society, but the inability to imagine how we get there. Robinson's novel opens in 2025 as a lethal heatwave sweeps over Northern India killing 20 million people in a matter of days. This extreme weather event has a mobilizing effect, catalyzing a chain of geopolitical actions that ultimately comprise a best-case scenario for energy transition to renewables. The novel is "pragmatopian" in the sense of combining a utopian vision of planetary decarbonization with a blueprint for achieving it.[7] Like its polyphonic structure comprised of multiple voices and styles, the novel does not imagine one single exit strategy from fossil fuels but a patchwork of initiatives ranging from permaculture and ecoterrorism to geoengineering and the titular ministry with the mandate to protect the rights of "all living creatures present and future" (16). These initiatives are from below as well as from above, represented contrapuntally in the novel as it alternates between institutional and everyday perspectives. By imagining not only a postcapitalist green future but the necessary steps to get there, *The Ministry for the Future* is what Gesa Mackenthun terms a "transition story" (1). If, as Simone Knewitz

6 The fan communities generated by—and in turn generating—genre fiction is a case in point. See, e.g., Jenkins on the "collective intelligence" of media fans.

7 The term "pragmatopia" is commonly used to describe Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist novels during the 1910s. Defined as a "realizable, possible, or achievable utopia" (Kessler 7), the term is well-suited to describe *The Ministry for the Future* as well.

argues in this volume, "[t]he challenge of collective agency in the twenty-first century is not the design of new visions of an alternative, more livable future, but how to create roadmaps that will guide us from our present situation to a more desirable and sustainable one" (33), then *The Ministry for the Future* is as lucid a roadmap as fiction has yet to produce.

Yet more than providing a vision of a different world or even a roadmap of how to get there, *The Ministry for the Future* uses sci-fi to model a form of temporality that "capitalist realism" has foreclosed. After all, the imagination of a better future does not necessarily provide a sense of its possibility. Political mobilization requires a sense that social change is possible through collective action, and not just something that occurs—if it occurs at all—independently from mass movements. As Fredric Jameson writes, the absence of a sense of historical agency "is betrayed by apathy and cynicism, paralysis and depression," while "a genuine historicity can be detected by its capacity to energize collective action" ("The Aesthetics" 119). In *Archaeologies of the Future*, he argues that such a "genuine historicity" can be kindled by the proleptic structure of sci-fi: Through its use of the future-past tense, sci-fi "transform[s] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (288). This is how *The Ministry for the Future*, which not incidentally is dedicated to Jameson, is not merely a utopian thought experiment, but a way of countering the flattening of history that Jameson associates with postmodernism. As a historical narrative of the future, the proleptic structure of the novel works to unsettle a reified sense of the present as the end of history as well as to rekindle the radical notion that people make history happen. Events in the novel are arranged into a sweeping narrative of causal progression driven by multiple actors towards a decarbonized future, which fills events with intentionality and replaces what Walter Benjamin described as modernity's "homogenous, empty time" (261) with a historical sense of time as inherently meaningful. "That people can take their fate in their hands. That there is no such thing as fate" (563) is not just something that *The Ministry for the Future* explains didactically, but something it performs through its temporal structure.[8]

If the temporal organization of *The Ministry for the Future* produces a reinvigorating sense of historical agency, this is not a capacity exclusive to sci-fi. Genre fiction as such is organized by a kind of narrative temporality that makes it more open to historical change than literary fiction typically is. There are two kinds of temporality typical of literary fiction that popular genres dispense with. On the one

8 This mobilizing effect of the novel is widely attested to by the way it has been enthusiastically championed by climate activists and scholars like Bill McKibben and Andreas Malm, who describes its impact in visceral terms as "a punch in the belly of the reader." Far more than "literary" cli-fi, Robinson's novel has entered the climate activist media ecology in ways that both point to its agential capacity and to a feedback loop between fiction, science, and activism that may be crucial for collective action addressing climate change.

hand, Ghosh points out how the commitment of literary realism to a probabilistic worldview limits its capacity for representing the erratic patterns that not only define climate change but have always been a feature of a world subject to the whims of nature. Drawing on the geological distinction between "gradualism" and "catastrophism," he argues that literary realism represents a type of gradualism that rationalizes time as the orderly unfolding of predictable events through what Franco Moretti has called "fillers," which is to say descriptions of what happens between one turning point in the narrative and the next (17–20). Fillers thus not only tame the unexpected and improbable by subjecting it to rational explanation, but also significantly slow down narration. On the other hand, literature bound to representations of psychological depth is also organized by the time of individuals. In order to create the complex interiority of characters expected of literary fiction, the narrator has to flesh out the backstory and thought processes of individuals. Producing an effect of interiority therefore requires a backward-looking temporality. Through techniques like analepsis or interior monologue, readers are carried back into the memories of characters and granted privileged insight into their motivations. As the fictional novel of Kleeman's doomed author suggests, exploring "how the memory of a person, which is like a ghost in its way, can live on in the present and the future" (34), literary fiction is haunted by the past.

Restricted by neither of these temporalities typical of literary fiction—the gradualism of realistic representation and a retrospective temporality modeled on the individual psyche—genre fiction affords a much more expansive definition of time. From the evolutionary endgame of life on earth in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) to the interspecies futurism of Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild* (1995), genres like sci-fi and fantasy can range across temporal scales that exceed not just individual but human time. But beyond these speculative genres, genre fiction more broadly is oriented toward the future by the very fact that it is plot-driven. "Plots are not simply organizing structures," as Peter Brooks writes, "they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward moving" (12). Even a historical romance, which by definition deals with the past, is propelled forward by the actions of its heroes. In this way, genre fiction harks back to the roots of mimetic narrative defined by Aristotle as the "representation not of persons but of action" (24). "The point is action," as he famously put it, "not character": The story does not exist "in order to portray moral character," but characters exist "for the sake of action" (24). While detached character description has been central to a realistic aesthetic ever since Flaubert famously dreamed of writing a book about nothing, which is to say a book without a plot, genre fiction derives from the older tradition of epic romance that revolves around the narration of exceptional deeds—the very tradition so mercilessly satirized in *Madame Bovary* (1856). For Georg Lukács, this distinction between description for its own sake and narration in which characters are not mere spectators but participants in events marks a distinction between a literature which, in accordance with scien-

tific positivism, objectifies the world as existing apart from social relations, and a literature that depicts human agency as constitutive of reality (see Lukács). In contrast to the mode of impersonal description pioneered by Flaubert, where the world exists as something to be contemplated by a detached observer, the epic mode of narration that Lukács favors depicts reality as inseparable from—and therefore malleable to—social actors. And unlike fashionable accounts of distributed agency today, which displace the onus of responsibility from powerful interests to a sprawling network of "actants," the centering of action through narrative form that Lukács describes provides a sense of relationality that does not diminish the agency of social actors for the change they bring about. Not standing apart from or above the world in a position of mastery does not entail a quasi-mystical interconnectedness of all things, but a historical relationship with the world shaped by our actions. "We are the change," as the galvanizing slogan of social movements aptly puts it.

By way of conclusion, consider two brief examples of how genre fiction can employ different action-driven temporalities in the service of a historical sense of how social actors drive change. N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy (2015–2017) exemplifies the catastrophism that Ghosh calls for to help us grasp the predicaments of climate change. Set in the distant future on a continent ironically called "the Stillness"—ironic because the personified "Father Earth" has rippled angrily in seismic convulsions ever since a past civilization attempted to harness its energy—the novels use the generic hybrid of science fantasy to allegorize the interdependence of humans and their habitat in the throes of social and environmental change. Like Robinson's novel, much of the trilogy is narrated from the future after the collapse of the social order inhabited by its protagonist, a dark-skinned woman of a racialized caste of people with a special earth-moving power called "orogeny." Describing itself in the prologue as an account of "the way the world ends" (*The Fifth Season* 14), historical change is inscribed into the temporal form of the narrative. As with Robinson's novel, the trilogy uses prolepsis to transform events into the necessary steps towards the fulfillment of what has already come to pass. But if this sense of historicity in the trilogy is comparable to *The Ministry for the Future*, the allegorical work of fantasy functions on a more affective level to energize belief that another world is possible than Robinson's speculative pragmatism. If Robinson's novel is shot through with urgency, Jemisin's trilogy is charged with rage and the wish-fulfillment of dreams.[9] Apocalyptic as change in the Broken Earth trilogy is, it is not only necessary but deeply desired. As the narrator puts it: "[S]ome worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place" (*The Stone Sky* 7). Moreover, the power of orogeny that some possess not only makes them subject to racial oppression—which

9 Jemisin even claims that the trilogy's protagonist first came to her in a dream ("An Apocalypse" 476).

fuels the desire for change in the first place—but revolutionary subjects who precipitate the end of the world. True to genre fiction, the Broken Earth trilogy operates "with a minimum of exposition and a maximum of action," as one reviewer writes (O'Hehir). In contrast to literary fiction that moves backwards and inwards to produce character depth, the trilogy is driven by a mixture of fast-paced narration that centers agency and characters with fantastical powers to make and break worlds.[10] Reversing the apathy that Jameson attributes to a lack of historicity, Jemisin uses epic fantasy to reimagine revolutionary agency. As Jemisin herself puts it: "The Broken Earth books are a Black female power fantasy" ("An Apocalypse" 470).

Finally, like Jemisin, Paolo Bacigalupi's hardboiled cli-fi thriller *The Water Knife* (2015) uses genre fiction to depict a society on the brink of collapse. Only here the apocalypse descends on the near-future Southwest as it deals with the catastrophic effects of severe water shortage—a scenario extrapolated from the present unsustainability of desert cities like Phoenix where much of the story takes place. Unlike the classical detective story, which typically begins with a mystery and ends with its neat resolution, the hardboiled thriller is characterized by a messy unfolding of plot as bodies pile up and a world of corrupt interests is unveiled—in other words, an apt genre for depicting the current rush against time as the climate crisis deepens. Through its fast pace and suspenseful plot, *The Water Knife* uses the anticipatory logic of the thriller, where readers are trained to anticipate its surprising twists and turns, in order to produce a sense of urgency and hastening doom. If literary fiction is typified by narrative deacceleration through its descriptive "fillers," as well as the use of defamiliarizing language to slow down perception—techniques which perfectly align with the thriving cottage industry of attention enhancing technologies today—*The Water Knife* in contrast ramps up the pace. While fantasy and cli-fi can be used to open up history, the thriller may be used to accelerate it. Quipping on Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence," the narrator observes that "slow death didn't attract attention" (136). Using the narrative acceleration characteristic of the suspense story to bring the stakes of climate change into stark relief, the novel fosters the sense of urgency required by any mass mobilization. Moreover, by forcing readers to expect the unexpected, as double-dealing characters backstab each other throughout, the novel further rejects the probabilism that Ghosh argues has blinded us to the climate catastrophe in the first place.

The only reliable assumption in *The Water Knife* is that "everyone is out for themselves" (410), as one character remarks. Extrapolating from the worst tendencies of the early twenty-first century, the dystopian world of the novel is driven by market

10 Ingeniously, the trilogy still builds character depth, not through psychological description or analepsis, but by making the three main focalizers of the story the same character at different stages of her life, which gives readers access to her past even as the story moves forward.

absolutism, dominated by cartel states and corporate interests, and defined by climate apartheid where the rich live in luxurious arcologies while the rest scavenge for a living. Yet qualifying the rampant individualism inherent in the hardboiled tradition, the ending of the novel also offers a glimmer of hope. While one of its three main characters, the journalist Lucy Monroe, acts out of empathy to save Phoenix by returning to it a long-lost document that would give Arizona water rights to what is left of the Colorado River, the character who in the end prevails, the young climate refugee Maria Villarosa, instead decides to bring the life-granting papers to a rival syndicate out of sheer self-interest: To live the decent life that her status as a refugee has denied her. Rejecting the well-intended idealism of Lucy in favor of the self-interested materialism of Maria, the novel not only centers power struggles over resources as the inalienable reality of a world defined by scarcity, but intimates a future solidarity based not on shared feelings but on shared interests. Empathy is often hailed as a key affordance of literary fiction, as it constructs complex characters readers can identify with through a retrospective narrative that burrows into their past. In contrast, the future orientation of the thriller, but also genre fiction more generally as it centers plot action, lends itself better to thinking the collective based on shared interests that point toward the future instead of the past. Like Jemisin's world brought down by the inequality that upholds it, Maria knows that Phoenix is irredeemable. "[T]hat place ain't never getting better, and I ain't going back" (447), as she says. Like genre fiction, Maria only moves forward. And whether the world can be built back better ultimately depends on whether its Marias, and not its Lucys, can find common ground to stand on, because, as the novel puts it: "Nobody survives on their own" (398).

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