

NARRATIVE FUTURING

AN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE IMAGINARIES

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Volume 6, Number 1, 2021

Fiction as Research – Writing Beyond the Boundary Lines

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076948ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29554>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

2371-3771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Horst, R. (2021). NARRATIVE FUTURING: AN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE IMAGINARIES. *Art/Research International*, 6(1), 32–55. <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29554>

Article abstract

In this paper I explore the scholarly potential of a narrative futuring methodology for writing-as-becoming within the context of the future imaginary. Through an experimental bricolage of future fiction, theoretical exploration, and personal essay, I attempt to perform a methodology that troubles temporal boundaries and allows me to write my way into the new. I situate this exploratory work within a rich heteroglossia of creative futures and speculative writing that exists both in and outside the academy and informs my narrative futuring praxis. New materialism and post humanism provide the onto-ethico-epistem-ologies for this creative inquiry in which I attempt to entangle myself with rational possibility, absurd potentiality, and poetic virtuality. The future narrative here is neither predictive nor prophetic, but rather is taken up as a mechanism for doing futures-oriented theory; this is a writing-as-reaching into thick assemblages of the not-yet and storying the productive partiality of narrative (non)representation.

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NARRATIVE FUTURING: AN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING INQUIRY INTO THE FUTURE IMAGINARIES

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Author Bio: Rachel Horst is a PhD student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her research explores the confluence of digital technologies, writing-as-becoming, and narrative futuring to cultivate future imaginaries and productively engage with the ethico-onto-epistemological and aesthetic implications of (post)qualitative research.

Abstract: In this paper I explore the scholarly potential of a narrative futuring methodology for writing-as-becoming within the context of the future imaginary. Through an experimental bricolage of future fiction, theoretical exploration, and personal essay, I attempt to perform a methodology that troubles temporal boundaries and allows me to write my way into the new. I situate this exploratory work within a rich heteroglossia of creative futures and speculative writing that exists both in and outside the academy and informs my narrative futuring praxis. New materialism and post humanism provide the onto-ethico-epistem-ologies for this creative inquiry in which I attempt to entangle myself with rational possibility, absurd potentiality, and poetic virtuality. The future narrative here is neither predictive nor prophetic, but rather is taken up as a mechanism for doing futures-oriented theory; this is a writing-as-reaching into thick assemblages of the not-yet and storying the productive partiality of narrative (non)representation.

Keywords: futures; narrative inquiry; fiction as research; new materialism, post humanism

There are no Words

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling.

— Le Guin, *Left hand of darkness*

The university where I had been studying for nearly a decade was built upon a peninsula hemmed in on three sides by a rising ocean. A narrow isthmus connected the vast university complex to the mainland. Reams of old desiccated highway crackled apart beneath the transparent tubes containing transit lines now cool due to the stationary trains. Dogs and sleek-backed robots exposed to the elements, guarded the narrow throat of the isthmus. All over campus, campbots who normally moved with such precision and conscientiousness, who never cut corners, never angled across roads, were now free to move across any surface in any direction: turf and sidewalk alike. They rolled upon casters with multi-jointed chrome legs scissoring open and closed causing their bodies to glide in fluid slips and slides through the regulated air like old-fashioned teenaged roller skaters. Their new objective: to cast a net of bio-surveillance across the endomed university and hunt the infected. Nothing in this new objective required the robots to keep to the university's traditional geometries - but I thought they were a little too gleeful, a little too exuberant. Their complex curves and coils of track marks lay upon the ground like fallen streamers after everyone has left the celebration.

In the center of the university stood an enormous hourglass full of radioactive beach sand. The sand had been extracted at no small expense from the diminishing shores of Bikini Island, the last of the Marshal Islands to be swallowed up by the ocean. There was a five-minute documentary about the protests – the descendants of the people of that island thought the sand had had enough of human intervention. They demanded it be left to lay where it lay for all eternity either above or below the ocean's surface. Instead, the sand was now suspended above the concrete slabs in the central courtyard of a Canadian university. Encased in thick glass it slipped in an unbroken filament through the neck of the glass marking the passage of time. Before the pandemic, a band of disenfranchised children in motley-coloured hoodies had picketed in shifts. People would toss them granola bars, juice boxes and homework by way of support. Where were those perpetual truants now? Those angry little waifs, picketing time itself? The children were gone, and the sand flowed on without them.

My research, like everyone else still studying, was on the future and I was pretty much on schedule. No longer the domain of corporate futurists, weather forecasters, and science fiction authors—the future, now that it here, was mainstream. Each intricately entangled calamity brought consequences we ought to have seen coming and might have prepared for.

The schedule of my research was central to the work – in fact, in many ways it was the work. It was as though my life itself was the hourglass and I had accounted for each and every piece of sand. I was carefully building a proof of myself – a schematic. More than fifty years ago, Augé (2014), writing of a future that has come and gone, noted accurately that “expectation of the unavoidable has a lure of its own” (p.6). Before the pandemic you would see people lured to that hourglass in the courtyard – standing in time, wasting time, watching time, glutting in time, as the sand moved inexorably, and the children waved signs that were blank because there were no words. The unavoidable lure of expectation is sand siphoning through the waist of an hourglass. But I intended to bore holes in the sides of carefully crafted expectation. The more completely I defined myself, the more catastrophic would be my undoing. I intended, if all was to proceed according to design, to find inside my own unfuturing, the unfuturing of the world. It was merely a matter of redirected attention.

When the schedule was finally complete, right down to the minutiae of each minute, uttered with exactitude, colour-coded in exquisite detail, a schedule so fixed that one could reproduce my life down to the strength of my coffee and the length of my stride on a Saturday evening, I began to make subtle self-refutations. Last Tuesday morning, for example, before anyone awoke, I pulled down my children’s game of Trouble and while they slept, I pried open the plastic dome with a butter knife and pocketed the die. I returned the game to its cardboard box and slipped out of the apartment and into the dark of morning. I knelt at the sidewalk and rolled the die: a two and a five. Auspicious numbers. This would be an experimentation in tiny tremors that accumulate to bring the whole structure down. According to the dice, I took a different route across campus. It took ten minutes longer than usual. Things were already coming undone.

Researching the Future

The universe is made of stories,
not of atoms.

—Muriel Rukeyser, *The speed of darkness*

Figure 1



Note. All photographs were taken on a run during the initial drafting of these pages. They mark specific material spacetime entanglements in the process of writing-as-thinking-as-becoming.

The future is always just out of reach and yet it is the birthright of all who exist in time and dream of tomorrow. As an object of inquiry, the future is a shapeshifting creature; part human, part machine, part river and rock, it never stands still and puts on a fresh mirror face for each future-seeker be she scientist, novelist, business strategist, or artist. To observe the future is to (re)create it again and again. As philosopher Nicholas Rescher (2003) argued, “It is conception, not perception, that alone can reach the nonexistent, and only in the realm of conjecture and imagination can we encounter things that are unreal and do not exist as such” (p. 8). I am interested in encountering the

nonexistent future via the realm of the imagination – not to divine the way of things or make normative claims about how things ought to unfold, but rather as Grosz (1998) writes in *Thinking the new*, “to think temporality and futurity, in all their richness, as modalities of difference” (p. 38). Narrative is my investigative tool and cartographer’s compass as I attempt to map and remap a future imaginary through the gaze of subjectivities and agencies both *of* me, and *other than* me in a project of creative (un)becoming. Within the following pages you will find an assemblage of story, theory, image, and personal reflection that are entangled experiments in what Haraway (2016) describes as “speculative fabulation in the scholarly mode” (p. 12). This is my response to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) exhortation: “Experiment, don’t signify and interpret! Find your own places, territorialities, deterritorializations, regime, lines of flight!” (p. 139). It is my hope that these disparate elements will resonate backwards and forwards in the times contained within these sentences, informing without explicating— and perhaps suggesting new pathways for future-generating creative research and experimentation.

Over the course of one year, in my capacity as a becoming scholar, writer, mother, reader, and graduate student, I engaged in an emergent speculative narrative futuring methodology while immersed in the ethico-onto-epistem-ologies of new materialism (Barad 2007; Bennett, 2010), posthumanism (Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2019) and post-qualitative and non-representational research methodologies (St. Pierre, 2018; Vannini, 2015). This was an experiment in creative writing as a futuring *semiosis*, taking up Kohn’s (2013) use of the term to indicate a vibrant more-than-human semiotic chain of signals, in which “one thought gives rise to another, which in turn gives rise to another, and so on, into the potential future” (p.33). The fictions emerged in response to and as enactments of the theory and the world I inhabited during the time of the imagining. The personal, the fanciful, the theoretical, and the absurd are intentionally entangled, commingled, and co-productive within these paragraphs. I take up future story as thought experiment in confounding the boundaries and binaries of: self and other, now and then, human and other-than-human, fact and fiction, scholarship and creative writing. I am interested in how we come to know and make the world through language and how narrative, as Bruner (1991) suggests, “operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (p. 6). These experiments are a form of research creation (Truman, 2016), collectively enacting an argument for the irreverent transgression of scholarly boundaries and discourse, so that may invite the unruly, the irreverent, and the absurd into our future-forming modalities of inquiry. I take up this methodology as a futures-oriented literacy scholar interested in the entangled performativity of writing, imagining, and thinking the future. Some of the questions I will explore within these pages are: *What can be learned from taking up fiction as a technology for storying imaginative data? What does it mean to write futures informed by a posthumanist ontology? Might theory and story become performatively entangled in a praxis of future fiction as research?*

I am

a chorus at highsPEEDS. My bodies holdtogether around inner cavities, spheres of stillness, geometries marking catapulting spaces where I am not but was or might be. Within our velocity, we contain a multitude of rhythms and dimensionalities. I variously vibrate causing frequencies to ripple outwards through surfaces and unsurfaces of matter and matterings. I am replete with human organs, pulpy and glistening and basic as life: these organoids, these parts among wholes, these ornaments moving delicately: heart, lung, eye, liver, tongue. I am a body without organs though I contain organ-ful bodies. I span different times, both in and out of the future: nosediving and tailwinding. I am a bringer and receiver of flesh facts. A suture in space, carving time of air. Aft-window-backwards-gazing the never-to-be-remembered and fore-window-anticipation of the never-to-be-there. Both inside-outside and outside-inside. If I were to become unsided. If I were to clench my body and become compact, unified, undelineated, homogenized, a mixture of metalglasspolymer of signalsignexpression. Or. If I letgo of all this holding together and become vastly particulated, spangles of glitterdust reflecting sunlight. If I were to do these things. Instead I oxygenate the organs whose times are felt more quickly, though no less keenly than my times: The heart has an obvious offkilter rhythm, lumbering and mean, the seeinge eye is clocked too quickly, and the liver is slow, full as it is with thinking. Around them I gestalt: warming shades of kinetic energy, cooling gradations of stillness, colourless but replete in noise....

Figure 2



Image as Tether

The images embedded within these pages provide a tether to the world and a specific moment of self-imposed exile, during which I first attempted to assemble these thoughts into coherence. They are a reminder of the fleetingness of captured moments in a time before the pandemic when I ran upon a mountain pathway through the gorgeous callosity of a resort town— the fiction that is Whistler, BC— in the middle distance between the city and the wild imaginary and stopped, breathing heavily, feeling heavily, to capture a frame of the expanse that flooded my eyes and lungs and imagination. I held up the iPhone and filled the screen with a map of the expanse and in capturing that map, I too was mapped: my physical location along with the thoughts that were entwined with the voice in my ears, manifesting an “alterity within”— Barad coolly discussing the “radical new imaginary” of quantum field theory to a gathered audience in Amsterdam, to a running audience of one, troubling “not only a linear chronology, but even a notion of temporality where we’d have anything like one time at a time” (Barad, 2018, 6:27). These photos are non-representational mappings of a subjective vantage point; they are enactments of there being no single time or narrative at a time. They remind me that as I think forward and imagine the future, I do so in a moment that is already in the past. The images also remind me, importantly, of the layers of my privilege: that I ran, thought, read, desired, and wrote was and is a privilege that did/does not escape me. My privilege as a white, able-bodied, middle class, heteronormative female human necessarily infuses this futuring praxis. Subjective historical experience is inextricable from the creative tool of the imagination. As I imagine the future now and during the previous iterations of drafting, I have done so while standing upon lands that are the rightful territories of the St’át’imc Tmicw, Lil’wat, Skwxwú7mesh-ulh Temíxw, and the shíshálh Peoples. I offer these partial futurities, then, as a practice of diffracting settler futurity which, as Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) describe “always indivisibly means the continued and complete eradication of the original inhabitants of contested land” (p. 78). While there are no original inhabitants of the future; the future is, never-the-less, a deeply contested territory. Reality is ordered by dominant, entrenched colonialist, capitalist, and anthropocentric narratives that seek to replicate and proliferate Western order and sensibility upon the future unknown. There is, I believe, a political and ethical imperative to story against the grain— to story variously, abundantly, irreverently, and polyphonically. This is my contribution, then, to the vast collaborative project of imagining a futurity that is (also), in Braidotti’s (2019) voice, “embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others” (p. 34).

Dining on Locusts at the End of the World

When the swarms of locusts came, we ate them. We were hungry, but not so hungry as to eat them straight out of the air. I battered and deep-fried those little beauties

and tossed them afterwards in a bit of cumin and red chili paste, which was abundant at the time, for whatever reason. Those were days of strange abundancies, when we only ever had too much of a thing.

Obviously, there was talk of the apocalypse when they came swarming down from the burning mountainsides in billows of kinetic intelligence. In the terror of their coming, the taste was a grace: nutty, crunchy, complicated in the mouth. Locusts are delicious. A fine last supper, indeed. But the biblical banter was not all that funny, hitting too close to home. Because, seriously, what if on top of this, there is a Christian god? A good number of the few of us left will be doubly screwed in that case.

So much has been realized so late. Now that I am looking back upon those locust days from here, I see that I had much to be grateful for. I had a premium smoke mask with a great shield that never fogged up no matter how much I sweat. And the fires illuminating the smog created a gorgeous, ethereal backdrop to our hunt that became like a dance. Backlit figures lurching and lunging amidst an ecstatic orgy of rose-tinged locusts. Their bodies played upon my body, clicking against the screen of my goggles an other-than-human rhythm, and I chewed and swallowed, bringing outside inside, assuaging my hunger so that I might live to witness another abundance.

Now they are mostly gone, and so, for the most part, are we. The bare mountains are coals that flare up in places when the wind moves by. As I lay here dying in the soot-covered morning on this porch swing swinging, I think of all that I've lost and wonder. Is it strange that what I miss most are the locusts? Battered and deep-fried with just a hint of lime?

Situating a Futuring Practice in a World of Story

Story is the most powerful force in the
world—in our world, maybe in all worlds.

— Miranda, *Bad Indians*

Time is the water we swim in; and yet, perhaps in part because we are so utterly emersed in it, we are unable to grasp it. As Ricoeur (1990) writes, “speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond” (p. 6). This narrative activity emerges from the impulse to make coherent and meaningful sense of the events in our lives, both backwards and forwards in time. Bruner (1991) suggests that, “narrative organizes the structure of human experience” (p. 5). In the same way that art is an imitation of life, according to Bruner, life becomes an imitation of art. Our plans, dreams, speculations, hopes, fears, and ruminations are steeped in narrative futures that

connect the present moment to an imagined tomorrow and guide our actions in time with reason and purpose. Our stories have persuasive impact upon the creation of reality and are, therefore, powerful and performative tools for effecting positive change.

“[W]e continually create the world we occupy,” writes Burton (2018) in the forward to *New Suns*, a collection of short speculative fiction by people of color, “in our imaginations first, and only afterwards do we make those visions manifest in this world” (p. 9). Science fiction authors have taken up the performativity of story and are increasingly diffracting their genre through a number of different perspectives and positionalities towards effecting positive change in the world. Sci fi author George Ryman and others drafted the *Mundane manifesto* (2013) in which they argued for a science fiction that focused solely upon the future of humanity on and with planet Earth. “[M]agic interstellar travel,” he argued, “can lead to an illusion of a universe abundant with worlds as hospitable to life as this Earth” (para 4-5), thus encouraging a wasteful and wanton attitude towards the limited resources we have here at home. Martine Syms (2013) took up Ryman’s manifesto and wrote a companion piece, *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, in which she advocated “a different set of values with which to re-imagine the future” (para 1). Syms cautioned that depictions of interplanetary space travel and “the wondrous communication grid” create an illusion of cyberspace as being somehow innately egalitarian, encouraging us to forget “that cyberspace was prefigured upon a ‘master/slave’ relationship” (para 4-5). Afro-futurism as a literary genre is, according to Eshun (2003), interested in enacting performative interventions via “the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional” (p. 293). Similarly, Lempert (2018) describes Indigenous futurity as a “nexus of creative mediation, temporal reimagination, and political urgency” (p. 2) towards effecting “temporal sovereignty in relation to anachronistic pasts” (p. 173).

Narrative futuring as scholarly methodology and intervention is not new; in fact, future narrative is being taken up vibrantly and variously across the disciplines. The Queer Futures Lab, for example, describe themselves as, “a radically vulnerable and trans centered multimedia knowledge hub/activist laboratory exploring the intersections of disability studies, feminist technoscience, queer arts, transformative pedagogies, and spiritual activism in practices of Future Making” (*The queer futures collective*, para. 1). Narrative futuring as a practice and praxis is found under different names in different disciplines. For example, (but not limited to) it appears in: sustainability discourses as “science fictioning” (Beier, 2018), teacher education and curriculum studies as “rhizosemiotic play” (Gough, 2008), educational studies as “material-semiotic stories” (Adsit-Morris, 2017), science and technology studies as “worlding practice” (Haraway, 2018), technological innovation and design studies as “science-fiction prototyping” and “design fiction” (Dunne, 2013; Johnson, 2018). In the discipline of futures studies, future narrative is being operationalized both in and outside of the

academy under an abundant array of terminologies: simulation gaming, future modelling, future scenarios, and futures role play to name a few (Popper, 2008). In fact, a recent article describes how science fiction writers are being hired by major multi-national corporations like Visa, Ford, Google, and Nike, as well as governmental organizations like the French Army and NATO to write conceptual future narratives “to help them imagine the worlds in which their products, services and strategies might very soon exist” (Underwood, 2020, para. 2).

One productive difference between the uptake of futures narrative writing as a methodology and futures narrative as literature is in the materiality and positioning of the story. Boundaries are always porous; story exchanges words with neighbouring paragraphs. Various situated, the future narrative makes new kinships and alliances. As Haraway (1988) writes, “[b]oundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meaning and bodies” (p. 595). Future fiction as methodology asks that we trick the boundaries between the two cultures of the sciences and the humanities (Snow, 1959) as well as the boundaries between literature and scholarship, artist and non-artist, Truth and truth. The reader also has a role to play in these confusions: finding future fiction embedded in this present discussion, the hope is that she reads diffractively (van der Tuin, 2015), seeking the fissures and cracks, bringing her own life experience and expectations that are not (only) to be entertained and diverted but to be provoked and engaged, as she hones both an efferent and aesthetic sensibility upon the deeply transactional nature of storied meaning (Rosenblatt, 2019).

Narrative futuring is a cyborg methodology, related to but standing apart from narrative inquiry which, as Clandinin (2013) explain involves four key terms “*living, telling, retelling* and *reliving*” (p. 34). In a writing-as-becoming, the living is in the telling, and the telling is emphatically oriented towards generative newness rather than re-presentation. In fact, narrative futuring seeks to problematize any possibility in a coherent narrative ‘re-telling’ of the world as it is or was; rather story is taken up against the possibility of representation. This methodology is more aligned with Truman’s (2016) ‘expressive writing’ as a form of research creation that “can be thought of as ‘... the complex intersection of art, theory, and research’” (citing Truman & Springgay, 2015, p. 137). Narrative futuring, motivated as it is by a new materialist relational curiosity in the other-than-human, resonates with a research-creation perspective and a commitment to, as McCormack (2008) describes, “the kinds of relational matrices of which bodies are capable of becoming involved” (p. 9). Truman makes a distinction between research creation and arts-based research (with which she has obvious affinities) because arts-based research, like narrative inquiry, takes up art/story for the purpose of the representation and dissemination of qualitative research findings. Within these pages I

take up Truman's view of process; Rather than representation of the research data *via* art/story, the process of art/story *is both* the research *and* the data (p. 138).

The methodology enacted and discussed within these pages both converges and diverges with the heteroglossia of imaginative work, play, and theorizing that I have touched upon here, but also importantly with the creative futuring that exists beyond my ken. As van der Tuin (2015) describes, my thoughts and ideas are not only informed by the literatures that I know and remember, but also by those literatures that I do not know and do not remember but which, nevertheless, infuse and augment my thinking (31:08).

Figure 3



They are the culmination of all time, research, reviews, progress, regress, stress and war, peace, resistance, yearning, reading, wanting, learning and unlearning, discovering and digging, building, shaping, fixing, undoing, hemming, knitting, destroying. They are the culmination of all that was poached and unclothed, the loving and discomfort, the misplaced, the bent and disfigured, the splitting of branches, the burrowing, and the cancers, all the bad breath and broken bones, the lost bets, and the prizes, the eviscerations, the maulings and mewlings, and the birthings, the straddling of

divides and the minding of gaps, the decompressions and lamentations, the reconciliations, and all previous exhalations.

They are the culmination of all the came before them, including all that was not: the impossible architectures, the imagined energies, the agreements among nations, the knowledge systems, the mended marriages, the times traveled, the Precambrian lifeforms and the lifeforms on distant planets, the technologies that have not been thought of – all of them: the never never ones and the always already ones and the maybe someday ones and the unavoidable ones. It is all for them.

They should be so very grateful. This is a better world and we built it for them. They are free from our diseases and our diminishments of age. They will never strain to hear, to speak, to see, to lift. They will never not be seen, heard, loved, valued and desired in the appropriate contexts. Their eyes will not water in cold air. Their air will be clean. They will never be over-harvested or under fed.

The Baiji River Dolphin and the Pyrenean Ibex we brought back from extinction for them. We stopped driving cars and flying planes and instead stayed home with our children for them. We dodged a comet for them. We stayed the rising waters and agreed to live less, so that they might live more. We put things back together: the atom, the well, the mine, the genome. We filled our holes, mended our fissures, returned what was stolen and we even apologized. Our apologies were sincere, and our sincerity was for them.

We hope that they will take care of us. When we are gone, we hope they will remember us, tell stories of us, sing to us in the warm summer evenings as the light fades. And know, as they enjoy the rippling of muscles beneath their own hide, that it very likely may have been otherwise.

Truth and Fiction

I write now, at the close of the year 2020, during a global pandemic that continues to story its way into bodies, imaginations, lives, and research in infinite variation. We are living in the reality of a posthuman science fictional narrative: the pandemic moves with its own agency and purpose, repeating with difference in flesh and idea, asserting an other-than-human agency that humanity will come to dominate by way of eradication. The “new normal” is old cliché already, and there is a growing sense that it (the *new*) is almost over. An effective vaccine sweetens the onslaught of existential newsfeeds with nostalgia for prepandemic bodies and the very same old normal that “made the planetary organism so fragile and paved the way for the pandemic, to begin with” (Berardi, 2020, para. 66).

Wendy Brown (2020) asked why we are longing for the normal, “of clogged highways, filthy air, meaningless work, disorganized health provision, mindless consumption, bulging prisons, abandoned homeless populations, siloed knowledge practices...” (para. 5).

Figure 4



Let us recall, for a moment, the early pandemic days, when the world of human beings took a sudden and collective gasp and everything grinded to a standstill. It was as though the lights in our global theatre came on, causing a suspension of a suspension of disbelief in our most reliable plotlines: schooling, work, socialization, commerce, a sense of security in a chaotic universe— many of these heavily narrated genres of human-oriented continuity were suddenly disrupted and an uncanny sensation of irreality swarmed in to fill the un-storied void. Within that early aura of disbelief, scholars like Torrent (2020) announced “[t]he fiction of limitless and teleological human progress has been abruptly interrupted” (para. 7). Charles Yu noted in the Atlantic, “[h]ow fragile and rare [our] ordered structures are, our fictions” (para. 21). Disruption in the continuity of the day-to-day laid bare the inherent made-ness of not only our human lives, but also our storied bodies. Where we once were bounded and separate and private inside the solitude of our skin, now the world rushed in through pores, nostrils, eyelids. “[H]uman and coronavirus are constantly reinventing each other in power relations,” Torrent (2020)

wrote; “This is not a postmodern or metaphorical claim, it is a biomaterial affirmation” (para. 8).

In *Elsewhere, within here*, Trinh (2010) describes the experience of exile and migration as having the “potential to widen the horizon of one’s imagination and to shift the frontiers of reality and fantasy, or of Here and There. Both contribute to questioning the limits set on what is known as ‘common’ and ‘ordinary’ in daily existence, offering thereby the possibility of an elsewhere-within-here, or -there” (p. 28). It is perhaps presumptuous of me to read together Trinh’s intimate portrayal of the “boundary event” of refugeeism with my own thinking of an ‘elsewhere-within-here’ pandemic that, as William Gibson famously said of the future: is here but not very well distributed. This brings me to another difficult paradox of my own practice of writing-as-becoming: the artificial eddies of our storied lives have spared me the worst losses of the pandemic so that I may contemplate the opportunity inherent within the crisis and, as Yancy describes, “think beyond the false narratives of ourselves discrete, atomic hermetically sealed and ‘safe’” (para. 8); I am safe enough to imagine the implications of how unsafe I have become.

The synthesis of my flesh with the digitized synthetic is seamless – certainly I can’t see with my cellular eyes where I end and the new stuff begins. And I’m not complaining. My body is suddenly surprising to me. I have been fortified by twenty percent: where there was fatigue and fading, now there is a sense of vigor and potential. I am able to stand on my feet now for two whole days without the need to sit down, although the desire is always there. And that’s only twenty percent! My productivity has improved, my skin has improved, my memory is keener. I test myself: what was I doing yesterday at 6:23 pm? Easy: I was turning an obsidian stone in my palm, looking for its hole. That I am able to retrieve memories in momentary increments is nothing short of miraculous... although, now that I’ve done it, I’m not sure I’ll do it again. There is something depressing about re-living such moments of mundanity, moments that will be repeated without variation into the future, as though I will never not be turning a stone in my palm, looking for its hole. But I’m not complaining: I have a job.

I want to live up to the new stuff that is in me, is also me. At first, I was ashamed of my organic needs that still require constant attention: having to scratch an itch, for example, or eat and shit. These common human needs seem beneath the new stuff, which requires nothing and will last forever. The new stuff will not degrade even as I continue to die around it. This knowledge makes me feel queasy. There are certain thoughts I used to have in the privacy of my own skull that I have given up on: covetous thoughts, for example, or animal thoughts. I used to enjoy an imaginative lark with the head bead stringer, for example — I imagined my head in her lap, watching the loose leather pouches of her elbows and the wet concentrated pout of her mouth as she

worked her beads into my hair. I used to imagine her stringing my hairs with turquoise and silver and green cat-eye beads; carefully, gently, one at a time, drawing the beads down a single strand of hair and causing me to shiver. But I don't think those thoughts anymore. They don't seem hospitable to the new stuff. I imagine the new stuff would be confused by such thoughts. I am both myself as well as the new stuff, which is not quite me. I am still trying to accommodate the other — my brain hasn't settled into the double me. I'm feeling a bit cross-eyed. There hasn't been the psychological fusion they promised would come. But it's only been six months.

Sometimes, when it rains or when there's a sudden shift in air pressure, like when I emerge from the Market into the open and walk that short distance to the metro, even with my skin covered and my face masked, I feel, quite suddenly, all of my cellular extremities at once. I can feel each discrete cell like one among the countless glass beads I spend my days arranging onto strings. But my beads have broken and been repaired; the fissures and their subtle reparations map my entire being. I am aware that this must be an illusion, and yet the organic part of me feels it, like an intuition.

Once I have died, and all of the organic stuff has rotted away, there will always remain a partial fossil – my ghost, my imprint in the machine. But I am still comprised mostly of the stuff that will disappear. If I had gone through with the complete augmentation, I would have lost my job. At the time I cursed the Market for this paradoxical invasion. But I must be 80% organic to work at the Market. I can see now that, in time, my humanness will give me some cachet. As more and more of my friends and acquaintances make the transition, I'll become increasingly quaint and therefore popular. And for as long as made-by-human bead necklaces are coveted, I will have a job.

Story as Automobile

In these arts-based imaginings, I practice a posthuman new materialism, “which eschews the life-matter binary and does not believe in God or spiritual forces, nevertheless also acknowledges the presence of an indeterminate vitality—albeit one that resists confinement to a stable hierarchy— in the world” (Bennett, 2010, p. 63). I am under no illusion, however, nor do I suggest that these future thoughts manage to escape from the human gaze or its singularization in *me*. Even as I attempt to undo myself, step outside of my human-ness, I am also aware that this is a practice of ventriloquism, of styled caricature. While caricature is necessarily a reduction, it need not be essentialized to buffoonery. “A caricature is a rendering that captures some aspects of something else at the cost of other aspects” (Bogost, 2011, p.67). Here Bogost explores an alien phenomenology that speculates upon the “unknowable inner lives of units.” He argues

that we can both be aware of the inner lives of the non-human other without ever being able to enter into its phenomenological experience. Bogost quoting Bennet wonders if, “[m]aybe it’s worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing ... because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’” (Bennett, 2010, p. 120). I further suggest that the term anthropomorphism is a wide-lensed generality. The instantiation of Bennett’s imagined other will be far different than my own. Perhaps we can only ever engage in a kind of *automorphism*, in which we cloth the other/imaginary (whether the subject be human or other-than-human) in versions of self. Within these pages, then, I am engaged in a kind of auto-centric, auto-morphism, in which I imagine the future other via language siphoned through subjectivity. One might say the stories collected here are failures in representation, and yet, as Haraway (1990) warns “in the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection” (p. 127). Write what you know, is a familiar refrain in creative writing pedagogy; I am suggesting an ethical imperative to do exactly the opposite, but to do so variously, unflinchingly, and in full knowledge of the essential inadequacy of the imagining.

On Exactitude in Social Science

Writers like Kafka (1996) and Jorge Luis Borges (1975) use the short story as a site for the manifestation of a theoretical idea, philosophical problem, or a psychological dilemma, as in the stories of Lydia Davis (2009). Narrative can act as *gedanken*, the German word for thought experiments that become “tools for isolating and bringing into focus key conceptual issues” (Barad, 2007, p. 100). Borges’s *On Exactitude in Science* (1975) explores the impossibility of exactitude in scientific explanation or mapping. This story is a narrative manifestation of the trouble with scientific representationalism— “the belief that words, concepts, ideas, [mappings] and the like accurately reflect or mirror the things to which they refer” (Barad, 2007, p. 86). In the story, cartographers seek to delineate the empire with such exactitude that they lay the map over the land, inch for inch and mile for mile. The representation swallows that which it represents. The map becomes the exact size and shape of the empire. But the people eventually come to disdain this map, which is no longer useful to them, and leave it up to the inclemencies of the weather. Along with Baudrillard (1991) I wonder if it is not the map that has been discarded, as was the vision in Borges’ story, but rather that reality itself has been destroyed by neglect. Once our cartographers had illuminated the darkness at our periphery (upon which, Baudrillard suggests, we have projected pre-Industrial images of utopia), the mapping continued, extending beyond our physical terrain and becoming itself a new territory, which is a model of reality with no reference. We now stand, not upon the ground, but upon the map: the simulacra. “Models,” Baudrillard states,

“no longer constitute an imaginary domain with reference to the real; they are, themselves, an apprehension of the real, and thus leave no room for any fictional extrapolation” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 2). For Baudrillard (1991), there is no more fiction. Fiction must “reinvent the real as fiction.” Because the duality between the real and the unreal no longer exists – “There is no more double; one is always already in the other world.” (p. 4).

Figure 5



In that time, in that City, the Art of Cartography had surpassed Singular Perfection and found, within that perfection, a multiplicitousness of socio/material aggregates, that also demanded mapping. Each assemblage was a center of that City (“made up of ‘individuals’, ‘of organizations’, ‘of classes’, of ‘roles’, of ‘life trajectories’, of ‘discursive fields’, of ‘selfish genes’, of ‘forms of life’, ‘of social networks’”) (Latour, 2005, p.28). The City’s geography had long been mapped with such precision that the map was indistinguishable from the City. Generations lived and died within that utterly known topography, pouring the data of their lives and locations into the delicate gridwork that lay over the city with such exactitude that it was the City. Buildings and infrastructures and

coastlines grew or shrank or shifted, lungs breathing through the iterative instances of the map, charting time itself.

Now it came to pass that each aggregate instant was exploded into unfathomable and idiosyncratic psycho-geographic variation. Each actor within the City required mapping, to the exact dimensions of the twitch of an eye, or a lover's invitation. Each heartbeat, each change in pulse, each parting of lips was mapped upon the City's gridwork. Each rat tail quiver, each collision of stones, each crumbling of sandcastle, each clamour of cockroach as it sought cover from each sudden light. These psycho/bio/materio/geographies layered upon the city in infinite strata (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), "a massive overlaying of perversities" (Barad, 2015, p. 402), an accession of multiplicities. With the accumulation of each iteration, the city became increasingly various, increasingly different from itself. There was no City, only cities. My map and yours would not align – and these slight though irreconcilable differences between stratum, between instantiations, created wormholes of utter and vacuous absurdity into which fell subtle features of the world. Now a stone, now a tree, now a parked car at Walmart, now an elderly biology teacher whose son refused his phone calls of a Sunday night, now a Sunday night: these flickered, glitched, and were gone. When the park at Wellington and 14th disappeared, the only ones to notice or care were the children of the neighbourhood, whose reactions were charted accordingly and were found to be so fundamentally different as to glitch an entire city block. These glitches were "inherently amoral; they [were] neither good nor bad, but rather [were] a product of natural law" in that environment composed entirely of information (Peña and James, 2016, p. 124). These glitches, laps in continuity, became unconscionable to future Generations who came to know Cartography as witchcraft and a tool of societal attrition. They turned away from their mapped selves and took up more circular rhythms. These future Generations no longer updated their operating systems and made choices based upon oracle and divination rather than statistics. It became, for a while, fashionable to get lost in the City, for days or weeks at a time. To become flaneurs and walk at whim. To seek sameness in strangers. To eat in dubious restaurants. And so they moved into an age of supple and uncharted darkness.

Alas, though the source material had died and disassembled, the last of the mapped Generations flickered on in a digitally stuttering universe, layered in infinite regression, haunted and haunting, both within and without, by difference.

A Future for Futuring

At issue within these pages is a disconnect between the macro planetary future narratives of impending and unequivocal doom on the one hand, and the private future

narratives which we each stoke for ourselves within our hopes and dreams and savings plans on the other. “Is there a way,” Latour asks, “to bridge the distance between the scale of the phenomena we hear about and the tiny *Umwelt* inside which we witness, as if we were a fish inside its bowl, an ocean of catastrophes that are supposed to unfold?” (Latour, 2011, p. 2). This is an attempt to story the *coincidentia oppositorum* of a fish in its bowl and the vastness of the ocean, disbelief and utter certainty, immortality and finitude, utopic and dystopic thinking, present self and future other. I am aware that the stories in themselves are always merely an attempts to hold water in a the sieve of language; But the point is also to take up the generativity in the failures of futuring as a praxis and to cultivate, in the way of Anzaldúa and her queer mestizaje, “a tolerance for and even an active seeking of ambiguity” (Raskin, p. 163).

If the future is not determined, then it does not exist and cannot be represented – there is only story. Importantly, this story ought to be as abundant and various as our hope for alternative pathways forward. This work evolves out of an assumption and a belief that we do not live in a pre-determined state of affairs, but that the future is deeply, intricately and unimaginably contingent and always forever in a state of becoming. We are living in one of many possible past futures that was creatively, collaboratively, and performatively storied into being. It is with some sense of urgency that we believe (because it is a matter of belief) that things need not be so. “Method, in this context, is about turning things around: defamiliarizing them; placing them in generative juxtapositionings that allow thinking to grasp a sense of liveliness of the worlds of things anew, however modestly” (McCormack, 2015, p. 92). It is through imagining the future differently, variously, and unflinchingly, that we can confront and cope with our inheritance of the world in this moment and all that that entails – the physical, the ontological, the epistemological, and the metaphorical. We must flirt in the places of difficulty, where objects do not come clearly into view, those liminal zones between the reasonable and the unreasonable— the absurd— in order to shake off a prevailing somnambulant apathy in our ever-shifting and utterly contingent present in which both *much* and significantly *not all* is possible. On a personal level, this writing has been a methodology for me to become-with the pandemic by metabolizing the prevailing irreality through fiction. As we begin to make the slow transition into a new way of things, a narrative futuring praxis seems especially relevant and timely. We story futures into being through narratives entwined with contingency and the material world and these stories become entangled with the ever-surprising matters of tomorrow.

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