

Wading Through the Weeds

ANTH 3605 AGAINST DYSTOPIA



Speculative Climate Justice Futures

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Maia Laitinen, Barnard '24



Rinka Tonsho, Barnard '24



Lela DeVne, Barnard '25



Isabel Halama, Barnard '24



Aza Roche, Barnard '25



Joshua Yong, Columbia '26

EDITORIAL
COLLECTIVE
SIGNITURES

LAND Acknowledgements

Columbia University is located on the unceded and occupied lands of the Wappinger, Munsee Lenape, and Lenni-Lenape people in Lenapehoking. The university, like many universities in settler colonial contexts, has been an agent of displacement, land dispossession, and gentrification since its founding in 1754 as King's College. The injustices of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery continue to shape the contemporary world (see Táíwò 2022).

This land and labor acknowledgement aims to highlight the labor of enslaved people who built New York City as well as Columbia University, and to emphasize ongoing dispossessions and labor exploitation within Lenapehoking. Being “against dystopia” also means working against these and other contemporary forms of injustice.

This zine seeks to critically explore the historical legacies and present-day realities of colonialism as they relate to contemporary inequalities, taken-for-granted social, political, and economic norms, and the climate crisis. The reflections in this zine also offer other ways of imagining what transformation, being in relation, and solidarity with one another can look like. To this end, it is important that a land acknowledgement go beyond a simple statement to incorporate sustained commitment and action.

Resources for further engagement, education, and action:

The Lenape Center, based in Manhattan since 2009 and led by Lenape elders, enacts its mission of “continuing Lenapehoking, the Lenape homeland, through community, culture, and the arts.” You can learn more about The Lenape Center’s ongoing leadership, organizing, and advocacy, and contribute resources or other forms of support at thelenapecenter.com.

American Indian Community House (AICH), founded in 1969, is a non-profit organization serving Native peoples living in New York City. You can learn more at aich.org.

The African Burial Ground National Monument in lower Manhattan is the country’s largest and earliest known burial ground for free and enslaved Africans (1600s-1796). You can learn more about the monument and memorial at <https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>.

The NDN Collective’s perspective on LandBack, or the decolonizing strategy of returning land to Indigenous stewardship, can be explored at ndncollective.org and landback.org.

Further discussion about going “Beyond Land Acknowledgement in Settler Institutions” (Stewart-Ambo and Yang, 2021) can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8750076>.

Contributors

06	Shailee Sran
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Foreword

Wading Through the Weeds brings together work in multiple genre forms created by students in the Autumn 2023 interdisciplinary Anthropology course, “Against Dystopia.” Over the semester, the authors of these essays, letters, artworks, short stories, and poems have grappled with the big questions of what is possible to imagine otherwise given the crises and inequalities of the present. Apocalyptic imaginaries frequently invoke individualist politics oriented around struggle over scarce resources. But what about those for whom the apocalypse has already occurred, who are nevertheless surviving and flourishing despite structural constraints? What about political configurations that insist on solidarity, interdependence, mutuality, care, and justice to create liberatory futures? Just solutions to the climate crisis and the nested crises borne of the extractions of colonialism and capitalism are only as capacious as understandings of what the problems are, how the present came into being, who is most affected, and who gets to decide what futures are created. The works in this collection are engaged in worldmaking against dystopia – showcasing the generative possibilities and politics of collaboration, creativity, and the speculative in reimagining what the world can be.

I am writing this after class last week.

I thought about talking about Waste Siege, but I think that we covered that topic really thoughtful and well in class, so anything I discussed here would mostly be a review. Instead I'm going to focus more on the Salton Sea piece (and waste in reference to it) because I loved it and used it in my midterm essay. I'm fascinated by the idea of the Salton Sea as something that destroys all the binaries that we typically apply to the environment. I think that Fiskio's piece was interesting, but hard for me to understand, and it was Voyles's piece that really made me comprehend the cultural limitations of holding up purity v. pollution, sickness v. health, validity v. invalidity, etc. as dichotomies. Nature versus culture is the most obvious binary, and one that I've been thinking a lot about as I research my thesis. I'm writing about coastal resilience. Going on, I focused solely on infrastructural and community resilience, but I realized I was leaving out ecological resilience. It's funny – saying that 'the separation of nature from civilization is a colonial and cultural concept' is so easy in class, but keeps tripping me up when I try to do research myself.

I also think the Salton Sea is interesting in how tangible its pollution is. I think a fundamental part of waste and pollution in the experience of Westerners or settlers – or maybe, people who just benefit from the functioning of the state that handles waste – is that it's not visible. As an American, I know that my country is producing obscene amounts of greenhouse emissions and waste, but all of it happens in places I don't see. The Salton Sea is a denial of that waste power dynamic – the pollution doesn't get swept away by currents, or buried in out-of-the-way landfills, or dispersed into the air or large bodies of water. Generally, waste is moved in a way that makes it look like it's vanished. In the Salton Sea, it's the water that moves, and the waste that accumulates. The Salton Sea isn't actually unique in terms of the processes and perspectives that led to its creation, it's only unique in that now Americans are experiencing their own pollution.

The Second Cave (Ode to a Monk and the Sea)

The boy rolled up his jeans. Blue jeans. Two hundred-year-old regenerated denim made in 1957 in somewhere called El Paso, Texas. Today was his day off from working the Land; to go down to the dark, muddy caves in the Restricted Place. There were two of them, one smaller and darker. Both were covered in moss, trees, things greener and darker and wetter and mushier than anything he'd seen before. The boy liked visiting in the evenings, just as the green flash lit up his lashes and when the fish danced in the SunShine's shadows.

Today was partly cloudy, as it was most Mondays; there had been a slight glitch in the atmospheric control system as of late. He approached the cliff, where a tall metal fence stood - the only piece of metal for miles and miles, which blocked off the Restricted Place (they would learn more about it in school next year; his older sister told him the teachers waited until the children were 'mature enough to understand'). What most people didn't know, and that the boy did, was that the fence had been neglected for years and could easily be twisted to allow a small person to slip in and out. So under he went, the rusted steel leaving a cinnamon colored mark on his hands.

Down he marched. Old stairs, wooden stairs. Purple, green, and blue with moss, kelp, algae, sand, muck, mud, and sediment. They were rotted from years of misuse, and the boy carefully avoided the mushier spots. It was a long, steep trek down to the abandoned caves, and it felt as if eons had passed as he twirled down and down and down.

The boy could smell the caves before he saw them. One couldn't properly describe the sublimity of the stench if you asked them; how it wafted into every synapse, somehow rewiring your brain, transporting you to a different time.

It wasn't like the crisp sea breeze the boy had felt off the coast of the Land; it was denser and foreboding, like how he imagined a blue whale would've smelled.

The bottom of his jeans seeped with salt water as he stepped onto the rocky beach. It was his first time in the second cave today, but he was not scared. In its solemn way, it welcomed him with a whisper of wind and an echoing of the waves.

"Hello, cave," he whispered. And he dipped inside, light shining brightly against the black stone.

Thirty-four paces in, the boy saw another light, the color sharper and fuller than any Sunshine he's seen. He took ten more paces and it grew larger.

Twenty, thirty more, and on his seventy-first, he stopped. The light surrounded him in full; the cave was not a cave but a pit of golden light, warmer than he had ever felt. In the pit was a shallow pool, dark and mossy but clear enough to see that it was only a few inches deep. The boy reached for something glimmering in the marshy water, a piece of wood. A frame, a large one, sitting just above the surface on a soft-looking rock. And inside the frame, another world. A canvas with dark greys and blues and browns and greens. Colors the boy had seen before but never felt or smelled, or touched like he could here. A painting? At the bottom, peaking through large clumps of scraggly kelp, were miniature sand dunes, lightly dusted with swaying green grass. Above them was a sliver of sea with white patches of wind whirling about. The water surrounding the painting was almost the same shade if the boy looked at it from a certain angle. The sky appeared to be cloudy and menacing, paint blossoming from the ocean. The golden light illuminated every stroke, preserved by some miracle, overridden by moss and kelp. Yet its beauty was still intact.

The boy sat there for a long time, forgetting his paces, forgetting the steep stairs home, forgetting his sister and mother and friends and the Land, forgetting it all.

And then, as if from nowhere, a man stood in front of him, plain as day in the center of the painting. He did not face the boy and blended in quite well with the sand, water, and misty waves. His tiny head floated in the blue, a minute hand supporting it as he watched the storm come ashore. But as quickly as he appeared, the golden warmth was gone, and a flash of green brightened the space for a millisecond. The painting became harder to see. Less clear, more like blobs of color, parts of the rock. The water was less brilliant, a fuzzy turquoise.

The boy gathered up his things. He would come back tomorrow. How many steps back? He thought to himself. Seventy-eight? Ninety-two? Maybe the fish would be dancing outside. He turned his iLight on, adjusted his El Paso jeans, and stepped back into the dark.



It's a needful week, I think, to be engaged in conversations about speculative futures.

It's a needful week to think about storytelling, about who is invested (maybe to the tune of billions of dollars in military support) in what narratives, and oriented towards what outcomes. I've spent a lot of time on social media this week, seeing stories of stories, hearing people trying to think through what decolonization looks like and how beautiful the process must be. It is a complicated issue and also so wildly simple. I have felt waist-deep in frustration this week, partly because my Jewish ancestry has been conflated with a neo-fascist military powerhouse and I am told by so many that to question or refuse that conflation is to be anti-semitic. (Which, like, ...) I am frustrated that people who call for justice call also for obedient submission. I am frustrated that the collective (or dominant, or most vocal) is so allergic to thinking critically about why certain violences/victims matter to them more than others. I am frustrated that we (which we, I'm still parsing) are short-sighted, both in evaluating the past that has culminated in this moment, and in looking towards the future and what liberation and safety could look like.

In Brandel and Khan's piece, they suggest an anthropology of the obvious. Critiquing the "ease" and "insidiousness" of the obvious, they write, it is "one of the ways popular memory culture prevents other stories from entering into the conversation." I am taken with this. As a writer I think I am always, or often, trying to find new ways into the known and unknown worlds, circumventing convention. Moving towards something that isn't yet, or wasn't before, and learning about it feels like a beautiful, hopeful, and deeply creative exercise.

We need new stories, always. As M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi's speculative fiction ethnography makes plain, when we imagine different and just worlds, we are also building maps towards them. I was and am moved by the visions they offer of life post-capitalism, post-colonialism, post-family. It was so affecting because it felt real, close, and also very far and scary.

It is peculiar to me that speculative fiction is so caged in genre, that it is held in a separate section from Fiction (where the invisible modifier Literary hovers by). Isn't all fiction speculative, in that it pushes against this world into another? Something about the redundancy of the name—speculative fiction could be simplified as, made-up fiction, or, really, fake fiction—betrays the publishing industry's sneering down at the form of imagination engaged by writers like Butler, who was pioneering in being recognized not just as an excellent speculative fiction writer but as a literary figure; Still, the literary/genre fiction debate still rages on. Anyway, it is a way to keep certain kinds of stories in a different realm—these are make-believe, impossible, dreamy, where other fictions are more real. Down with genre, with borders, with open-air prisons. There are so many kinds of mobility I dream of.

This leads me to think about this week's readings on abolition as a praxis.

Throughout the readings, the notion of abolition as a form of worldmaking created connections in my mind that I had not had before. In our make-up class on Monday, we focused on “abolition-as-healing: accountability and transformation” (192) from the gears of abolition introduced in Shange’s work. The section explains the importance of collaboration and collective care in healing justice. This goes against the traditional process of “healing” established by the state, where people get isolated in cells and are left to come to terms with their wrongdoings (defined by the state) individually. Although I did raise questions as to how the abolition of the status quo would happen in reality versus in theory, come to think of it now, abolishing current systems and erecting new social systems may be the ultimate option for an equitable option for all, encompassing diverse voices in the process. This is because our system today has become the way it is built on older systems. We are building on top of systems that were decided and implemented by an unrepresentative group of people. The way our society looks is different from when these systems were created, and social systems should reflect to serve society today. Alongside this, our understanding of the best practices for social systems has evolved through the development of academia, including anthropology. It doesn’t sound so bad to gather the knowledge we have now to erect new and inclusive social systems.

More on science-fiction, come to think of it, the word ‘science-fiction’ is an oxymoron. Science is something that is supposed to be objectively true. Fiction on the other hand is something that is made-up or imaginary. I want to hear your opinion on this.

*The following erasure poem was written in a workshopping session led by Grace Zhou, a phenomenal anthropologist, poet, and author of the chapbook *Soil Called a Country*.*

The poem was written on November 4th, 2023, almost one month after the start of the most recent war in Gaza. The original text of the poem is an excerpt from an email sent out to members of the Barnard community by President Laura Rosenbury on October 26th, 2023 titled “A Time for Action.”

During class on November 4th, my classmate Shailee shared that she considered creating an erasure poem from a similar piece of text, but decided not to because of an apprehension about covering up harmful rhetoric. She remarked that she did not want to absolve people of due blame or allow them to shirk accountability. In thinking about Shailee’s wise words, I am including the text of the original email alongside my erasure poem. As a student, I refuse to give my institution a pardon for their “both-sides” approach. Their clearly-stated support of Zionism, and thus lack of genuine support for the Palestinian people, should be remembered and unabashedly critiqued.

This poem is the result of a moment of frustration and disillusionment with both my university and with my country. It is a revision or reimagining of Barnard’s email– words I wished were said and sentiments I wish were expressed. That being said, I must acknowledge the incredible activist work of many students, faculty, and staff. The calls to action against anti-semitism and islamophobia alongside the mass mobilizations for the liberation of Palestine have been moving to say the very least, and I am in awe of the courage and dedication of organizers on this campus. I urge my university to publicly call for a ceasefire, halt their censorship of students & faculty, and provide meaningful support for those most affected on campus and abroad.

Dear Members of the Barnard Community,

This weekend will mark three weeks since the terrorist organization Hamas massacred more than 1,400 innocent Israeli civilians. The ensuing war has led to more tragic deaths of Israelis and Palestinians, and there is no end in sight. The Barnard community is global and diverse, and our hearts are heavy as we watch the conflict unfold. Some of us grieve the loss of loved ones, and many of us fear for the safety of family and friends in Israel, Gaza, and surrounding areas.

The war is also taking a toll on our campus. I am appalled and saddened to see antisemitism and anti-Zionism spreading throughout Barnard and Columbia. The massacre resulted in the largest single-day slaughter of Jewish people since the Holocaust, but I have encountered posters in our halls and tunnels that justify the deliberate murder of innocent civilians, employ racial slurs, espouse misinformation, and call for the elimination of entire groups of people. I see students walking to class with bowed heads in fear of what and who they will encounter. I have learned about what is happening on social media and especially on Sidechat, where members of the Barnard and Columbia communities anonymously attack one another using profanity and death threats.

I am also appalled and saddened by the anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim rhetoric on our campus. I have heard members of our community group all Palestinians with Hamas and use dehumanizing language toward Arabs and the people of Gaza. I have learned that students are being doxxed simply because they belong to our Muslim Students Association or other student groups.

The safety and well-being of our students is my top priority, and we must do better. Hate speech and discrimination are unacceptable anywhere on our campus, and we will continue to remove hateful posters, encourage our community [to report hate and discrimination](#), and investigate and respond to all such reports. But we must do more. We must develop a proactive approach designed to prevent such hate and discrimination in the first place. Only then will we be able to strengthen our community of care and respect and be a place where all students feel safe and experience a strong sense of belonging.

This is a time for action. Here are some of the concrete steps that I have taken and will soon take to strengthen our community:
soon take to strengthen our community:

The original email, as detailed on page 13.

*Honeyland (2019) is a documentary that follows
Hatidze Muratova,*

a beekeeper who lives in the rural village of Berkilija in North Macedonia. Through Hatidze's story, which unfolds over the course of three years of filming, *Honeyland* tells a real-life climate narrative that contains themes of capitalism, coloniality, indigeneity, agency, reciprocity, and ecological balance. The main conflict of the film is between Hatidze and her neighbor, Sam, who attempts to learn to beekeep to make money for his family. Hatidze explains her crucial beekeeping principle of relationality: "half for us, half for them" (leaving half of the honeycomb for the bees so they do not die or eat other hives' honey). Despite this, Sam's greed and desperation for a larger quantity of honey push him to harvest too much and preemptively. This causes his bees to attack Hatidze's bees in the search for honey.

The camera lingers on a close-up shot of a bee carrying a dead member of its hive. The bee moves frantically, desperately, before it flies off and leaves the dead bee behind. Close-up scenes of bees such as this one are common throughout the film, forcing the viewer to inhabit the insect's point of view for almost uncomfortably long moments. One clip shows a half-way underwater view of bees climbing up a partly-submerged leaf in order to climb out of a puddle, and another shows a row of bees drinking from another body of water. There are countless camera angles and sounds that make the viewer feel like a part of a hive. This choice parallels the video work of a "Fish Eye Episteme" that Gomez Barris describes in *Submerged Perspectives*. Barris describes that in order to counteract the idea that dams silence rivers, "allow for its rushing sound and the gurgling voice of Yuma to emerge" and how "through edits that literally submerge the camera into the mucky brown water below the surface, Caycedo lifts submerged perspectives within the extractive zone" (Barris 92).

In *Honeyland*, Berkilija can be seen as a mini “extractive zone,” as it becomes a site of extractive capitalism with Hussein’s arrival. By showing the perspective of the bees, the directors shift focus to the submerged perspectives of this extractive zone, shifting the dominant narrative away from solely human agency.

Through this methodology, we as viewers see (and feel) from the point of view of the bees, getting an insight into not only Hatidze’s pain but the pain she feels for them. The bees are the actors in this relationship with the least agency, and it is only by acknowledging their agency and showcasing it that we can fully understand the balance of the land that Hatidze attends to so carefully.



Hi Ava,

I too resonate with what you quoted about not just visionary fiction and art but also those who descended through collective trauma as being science fiction –

as planes where different times intersect and mingle in shared existence. Its something I've consistently noticed – and am still learning about – as defining and differentiating the way people who have been born of and through hardship move through this same world, not only in the first authors we read who conceptualized their lives in 'spiral time' but also in those friends and acquaintances I've gotten to know as uniquely grounded in making their life their art. The sort of people who live in broad strokes which reach back to very present past contexts, to arc through a directed and envisioning present, into a revolutionary future brought within a step ahead, who really inspire at least myself and surely others to live in a similar space-time web of deeply alternative yet intimately everyday reality, if that makes sense. So I guess my more direct answer to your question might be that I admire this approach to not just understand but living within a radically different and more liberating structure of times and histories, and that in my experience it has been powerful to encounter the formulation of buried histories and radical futures in their most real form: that of someone already living and being within and based upon them.

This was the way in which Carcedo's film uniquely struck me too. Where the overarching – arching over circumstance and history with a linearizing view from above – narratives into which most films condense themselves always give me a dissatisfying 'sense of an ending', the raw, unearthed, experiential content – literally from the earth and the immediate moment, figuratively previously buried and thus literally unprocessed – of her film had an immensely generative affect on me.

Joshua Yong

It felt like time does not pass for the river and the multifarious sprawling essence of the socio-ecological community it grounds, such that every encounter with it through the film was in the present, its eternal present, into which past and future are drawn and encounter the viewer in no less an instance of science fiction than the literature and persons I referred to above.

In contrast to these rather representative themes from our previous two weeks, I couldn't help but feel the dull lifelessness of nature, no longer the life-giving agent in a socio/eco-system or agentive setting in a radical spatio-temporal reality, but reduced to the frustrating subject of various interpretive attempts or denatured into the broken shoes and used plastic bottles which 'agentively' shove along a system of waste that embodies more the devaluation and besieging of life than life itself. Yet that is the reality much closer to increasingly many people today – both the presumably more privileged like ourselves situated amidst its profits as well as the increasing body of the disenfranchised who in its negative side find themselves at the lowest point of the arc of justice, with the last indigenous peoples joining them in their struggle as their socio/eco-systems get demolished and the radical futures envisioned by science-fiction not yet being open to many to realize, stuck in a post-demise, pre-deferred-restoration state like the statehood of Palestinians... I suppose that is why I personally keep tending back towards more practical solutions as at least the necessary tunnel to more 'interesting' possibilities, towards the pragmatics and ideology-jumbling of subtle economic innovations (such as selling plastic bottles for recycling by the Israeli mafia with the help of Authority officials) as the material reality we can first build to get to seemingly more distant things like realizing the agentiveness of nature or making our lives the art of science-fiction.

That's why I've gone the path of exploring the alegal world of blockchain and other nascent technologies, labor organizing, efforts to innovate human organization, etc. ... But that's the path that occurs intuitively to me, and it can feel quite limited at times. What about you? What sort of steps forward come intuitively to you? Perhaps underlying that answer, you'd have a very different analysis than myself of where we, or most of the world, or its most generative fringes, are currently at – the circumstances they are in and the possibilities that thus follow? I am truly curious to hear back from you!

Best,

Joshua

Dear Fellow Humans¹,

I have a disability. Some call people with my condition *crazy*, but the medical name for it is [redacted] disorder². You've probably met a few [redacted] people at this school, but you likely didn't realize. We hide it quite well. You won't find many of us at this school taking on the mantle of disability justice. "*Oh but Victor, your job and school can't legally discriminate against you if you tell them you're [redacted].*" Once the cat is out of the bag, people treat you differently. Instead of just wondering whether you're having a bad day, they'll guess whether you're Jekyll or Hyde today. Sometimes you'll get the question, "*If you could swallow a pill and be cured, would you?*" Underlying this question is the assumption that I'll choose to munch on some magical antidote and merrily skip into my *now-normal* future.

The gene for [redacted] disorder runs in my family. When I have kids, it'll be a fun game of "*I wonder who will inherit my crazy.*" Except, I've lowkey been thriving. Instead of focusing on the fact that I've successfully navigated life like others, I know people will always wonder if I'll pass on this *so-called curse* to my adorably-cherubic-hypothetical-children.

When we imagine our utopian future, will we choose to excise the [redacted] gene from existence? As scientists find ways to cut and paste genetic material, will our genes be discarded so that future generations won't inherit [redacted] disorder? Or will we choose a future that tolerates us? Will society embrace our differences as a strength? ~~When will we as a society draw a line that limits genetic manipulation? Do we think that we are prepared to undertake gene editing and risk sliding down the slippery slope of eugenics? Whose traits won't make the cut, and who will be deemed normal enough?~~

Sincerely,

Your ~~Genetically Compromised~~ Fellow Classmate

Footnotes

1. This definition of humans may include different *genetically tainted* varieties of human.
2. I know it's frustrating that I redacted my disorder, so I'll give you a hint: what does the mother of lambs and English Woolf have in common?

“Science Fiction Poetry” is a poem by Franny Choi,

from their book *The World Keeps Ending, and The World Goes On*, published in 2022. This poem discusses the unbearability of the dystopia of everyday life under the system of racial capitalism, and searches at the end for a different world. The repetition of “dystopia” at the beginning of every line, except for the last ten lines, is a very important device, structurally and affectively. It reinforces the overwhelmingness of each dystopia and all of the dystopias combined, with the repetition wearing down on the reader. When read out loud, it feels tiresome for the reader to constantly repeat dystopia at the beginning of each line, but this mirrors the feeling of inescapability from these dystopias for the author, as well as potentially the reader. However, when read silently, the reader begins to expect “dystopia” at the beginning of every line, and doesn’t fully focus on or read the word; they become somewhat desensitized to the dystopia of the everyday and of the system¹. At the end of the poem, this structure breaks down, first for two lines, then for the last seven lines. The lines that don’t begin with “dystopia” differ in punctuation from the “dystopia” lines. While “Dystopia” is capitalized, and each line ends with a semicolon, the non-dystopia lines are not capitalized, and flow into each other, with some having a semicolon or a comma in the middle of the line, and a few, but not all, having a semicolon at the end. The poem ends with a semicolon, implying the continuation of the ideas, and inviting the reader to imagine alternate worlds, and what could be possible in these worlds². The use of a semicolon at the end of each “dystopia” line emphasizes that all of these dystopias are connected to one another, come from the same root cause, and influence each other.

They are not discrete events, but exist in relation to one another. Choi begins the poem with lines that on the surface seem to be individual or personal dystopias, such as “Dystopia of the ankle prone to getting sprained again;” or “Dystopia too sad to shower;” (Choi 2022, 17). Although these are often understood as individual problems, part of what makes them dystopian is the way in which societal structures increase the difficulty and weight of these problems.

1 I wasn’t sure how to cite a class discussion, but I wanted to be clear that this point is not my own, and give credit to my classmates. In the small groups during poetry week, my group discussed the way in which silently reading the poem leads to the reader skipping over or filling in dystopia in their head, not focusing on it as much as when read out loud. I can’t remember exactly who brought up this point, but I believe it was Erin or Lela.

2 Additionally, I lived in Greece for two and a half years as a teenager, and in Greek, they use semicolons instead of question marks to indicate a question, so I read the last few lines not only as a potential opening for continued imagining of possible worlds, but also as direct questions to the reader about these worlds, asking “what’s the other opposite/world; if we knew its name/could we call it; if we called it would it come;” (Choi 2022, 22). Although I don’t know if Choi is at all familiar with the Greek language, these lines are phrased as questions, just without the question marks.

Ramblings about the letter A

Dear [REDACTED],

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED], I feel that I am in a very interesting position.

For the sake of this letter, I'm not going to go into much detail, but [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

on the first day of class, when I saw that our final project could be something creative and of our own design, an idea immediately popped into my head. During study abroad [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I got to do a final creative project on pretty much anything I wanted. I was hesitant at first as to how people would receive my topic [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The overarching theme was to choose [something] and explain how it was liberatory or could be used as a tool of liberation. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I finally got a chance to explore something that I've been holding onto for a while.

[REDACTED] my project [was] on asexuality. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] my central argument was essentially that asexuality is inherently radical and should be used as a key framework for liberation. Although I've identified as asexual since 2020, it wasn't until this year that I actually started to read books on it. Now, most people don't figure out their sexuality and immediately turn to academia. However, for me, I actually [REDACTED] got to see that the things and thoughts floating around in my brain were not unique, which was wildly reassuring that I wasn't crazy for feeling the way I saw things. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] As someone who is ace-spec, I don't really have to put the [a-spec glasses] on [REDACTED] But for others, trying to understand the world from the ace perspective can require some extra thinking and reimagining of the world.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I believe that being ace (and aromantic [REDACTED] makes me extremely well suited to look at the broken, stupid system that we exist in and go, yup get rid of it! All of it! We don't need literally any of it! Which is why I think I take to very radical world making ideas so

easily. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I think for a lot of people, the biggest obstacle that they face when it comes to truly working to dismantle a system is that they can't see an alternative or don't know how to live a different way. When you literally exist in a different way than others within a system, it's actually not that hard to picture. Also, it's pretty easy to see that everyone else is the problem, not you.

It's been really interesting to see the ways that people will call out capitalism and individualism and then, in the same breath, talk about wanting to live in a house alone with their partner, white picket fence, suburbs, two kids, dog, away from literally all friends and family and all. Listen, if that's what you want, fine. But you have to see how you are a product of a system, in this case, the system is capitalism (which you were just critiquing like 5 seconds ago).

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I will be attempting to make connections from sexuality to climate change. Some might see these two topics as unrelated, but they aren't! What you can learn from queerness can easily be applied to climate justice. It's all intersectional.

[REDACTED] it's always nerve-racking when you decide to take something as personal as sexuality and put it into an academic assignment, but what I'm learning is that people actually want to hear what I have to say [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I

just need to do it more. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I know you know a lot of this from simply being my friend, but thanks for letting me say it all again!

XOXO,

Lauren [REDACTED]

Urras and Anarres, the twin moons of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed—

one Edenic dystopia and the other Utopian wasteland—present narratively the theory that “the modes of apocalypse and pastoral are mutually constituting” (Fiskio 19). While the border between them is strictly enforced, the two worlds are locked in each other’s orbit physically, economically, and symbolically. A trade agreement between the societies—ships that come to Anarres bearing “fossil oils and petroleum products, certain delicate machine parts and electronic components that Anarresti manufacturing was not geared to supply, and often a new strain of fruit tree or grain” and leave with “a full load of mercury, copper, aluminum, uranium, tin, and gold” (Le Guin 1974, 92)—is the basis of Anarresti existence and Urrasti wealth. The Utopian experiment needs life-sustaining organic material and so cannot fully leave behind the Earthly paradise. And for its part, the profit machine needs an extractive frontier—a wasteland.

...

Anarres is Bill McKibben’s “barren edge of the lifeless moon” (quoted in Fiskio 2012, 25), that “has begun to eclipse the Earth” (Fiskio 2012, 25). According to McKibben, capitalism-fueled environmental destruction makes Earth “every day less the oasis” of Urras “and more the desert” of Anarres (quoted in Fiskio 2012, 25). If we read *The Dispossessed* as climate fiction, the pastoral beauty of Urras becomes “a past state of purity that has become irrecoverable under the new climate regime” (Fiskio 2012, 26), an imaginary oasis preserved for the more fortunate. But this “desire for earlier and unspoiled forms of landscape...contains a desire for a pure and unmarked body” (Fiskio 2012, 28).

For example, Traci Brynne Voyles (2017) has observed how the polluted Salton Sea of the Southern California desert becomes an “environmental invalid” (449) within a “Western, settler colonial, and deeply ableist environmental epistemology that is of a piece with the notion that all human bodies are able and normative” (467). Barren, arid, inhospitable Anarres becomes a symbol of the environmentally invalidated places on Earth, many of which were destroyed by processes of settler colonialism. ... Dispossession then carries profound and multiple meanings here. Le Guin’s mapping of Utopia onto wasteland and her collapsing of dispossession (capitalist/colonial extraction) and dispossession (anarcho-communist anti-propertarianism) is a worldbuilding project. The *Dispossessed* is science fiction as an imaginative exercise in building revolutionary worlds of communal care out of the uninhabitable, the invalid, the wasteland, the apocalyptic. The story of these two faraway moons is in fact essential to understanding how to survive on our own increasingly inhospitable world.

Finally, in This Changes Everything,

Santos Perez comments on the success of the documentary and general media surrounding the climate crisis in inciting a sense of urgency and agency in their audiences. He discusses how they shed light onto white people's comprehension of the climate crisis and how it impacts Indigenous communities. Santos Perez describes how "when the documentary shows polluted native lands, the white people gasp extra-loudly. / I hate it when white people gasp extra-loudly. / 'Stop gasping so loudly!' I shout in my head. 'Everything already changed for native peoples centuries ago!'" (lines 19-21). The described dramatic gasp captures the shock of the audience—showing that prior to the film they were not properly informed about the gravity of the situation and the impact climate change and colonization have already had on Indigenous communities. This highlights the ignorance of white people as they are unaware or have failed to truly conceptualize how climate change is already affecting/has affected others because they themselves have not been impacted yet. Santos Perez then further captures this extreme excitement and unawareness as he says, "we sneak out of the theatre during the post-documentary discussion, when the first white person exclaims extra-loudly 'WE MUST SAVE THE PLANET!!!!!!' / I whisper to my wife: 'The Geological Society should refer to this era of human destruction as the Wypipocene'" (lines 23-24). The extreme emotion captured shows that the documentary was successful in inspiring a sense of urgency in the audience to care more about the environment and working towards saving it. However, it also strengthens the unawareness of white and non-Indigenous people of how the planet and ways of life have already drastically changed for some people.

Renaming the Anthropocene to Wypipocene emphasizes this, suggesting that white people are the center and most vocal and powerful voices within this movement. Shifting the name from Anthropocene is then fitting as “Anthro” acts as a generalizing prefix, implying that climate change indiscriminately and uniformly affects all populations rather than disproportionately impacting Indigenous peoples and populations of color. This shift to reflect the focus of white people within the movement and climate change discourse is important as it captures how white people are only now beginning to care about the environmental crisis because it has begun to affect them and their ways of life. Táíwò touches upon the disproportionate impact of climate change on Indigenous communities and people of color as he describes how “to this day, in any country shaped by the global racial empire —people racialized as Black or Indigenous can expect exclusion or unequal inclusion in the formal economy. They can expect the concentration of vice, pollution, and mismanagement in poor neighborhoods of color” (Táíwò, page 62). Based upon this, it is unsurprising that white and non-POC are just now starting to experience the impacts of climate change as pollution accumulation has become so concentrated in Indigenous communities and neighborhoods of color that it has started to affect previously unaffected areas.



With Santos Perez’s proposed shift to rename the Anthropocene to Wypipocene, it is important to consider the origins of the concept of the Anthropocene—Maynard very eloquently tackles this task as she says

“...yet even as the final assault of the viability of the earth is being authored on the many Bay Streets of the global north, this is being called the Anthropocene: a crisis caused by human activity that puts human life at risk. This is an affront! Because it is not ‘humans,’ is it? The Human has never been a politically neutral category. In this anthropocentric framing of the climate crisis it is important to ask: Who, exactly is imagined as a human?... Because as Black and Indigenous communities have long understood and insisted, the Industrial Revolution...was not forged by humans in any even sense of the word. It was forged, in fact, by the violent ejection of some, most, of the world’s inhabitants from the conception of who is considered to be a human” (Maynard, pages 17–18).

In this, Maynard criticizes the blanket assignment of blame for the current environment crisis through the name ‘Anthropocene’ and asserts that the mere concept of the Anthropocene and the climate crisis is predicated on the exclusion and dehumanization of Indigenous, Black, and brown voices—similar to themes explored by Santos Perez in this poem. This foundation of exclusion then makes the transformation from Anthropocene to Wypipocene very fitting as it has the same meaning—who the subjects of focus are if only white people are considered to be human—while making its purpose more abundantly clear.

Craig Santos Perez. This Changes Everything. April 22, 2018.
<https://craigsantosperez.wordpress.com/2018/04/22/this-changes-everything-earth-day-poem/>

In Reconsidering Reparations, Olúfemi O. Táíwò conceptualizes the world system as

“a set of inertias, gravities, pressures, and bottlenecks that bound and channel the endless flow of the present: material, money, media, violence, advantage, disadvantage” and their analysis that “It is their motion in time that makes the system of the world, and we can map the system to the extent that we can predict the direction of motion” (2022, 21). In considering how we might ‘map the system,’ I turn to Dhillon’s challenge to her reader to consider how Indigenous scholars think of land as **“more than a site upon which humans make history or as a location that accumulates history”** (2021, 900). If Táíwò insists that the temporal flow of advantage and disadvantage constitutes the system of the world, Dhillon builds on this argument in her assertion that indigenous knowledge is **“produced in a collective process that is fundamentally centered on the way one relates”** (2021, 900). This knowledge is situated by the complexity of storied land, and necessitates experiencing the present with a clear grounding in the past and sight of the future horizon. Being in good relations, I believe, means here a careful consideration of the relations –past present and future– that have set in motion the system of the world.



Táiwò really hits the nail on the head for me: “Much of political discussion in the world’s rich countries—whether about the country’s own racial politics or its relationship to the “developing world,” simply prefers not to explain what our present social reality is built to do. The conversation just maps a simple space onto a narrow present: here’s some poverty, there’s some wealth, **it’s a shame that things somehow ended up this way**”(2022, 66). Settler notions of time and history are fundamentally blank.

I was reminded of a quote from Maynard and Simpson’s *Rehearsals for Living*, “We have never had the privilege of imagining our presents as magically divorced from the past” (2022, 114). As has been made clear by both Táiwò and Dhillon, fighting for decolonization and Indigenous futurity must commit to a radical critique of the temporal orientations of violence and development.



Related to critiquing the temporal orientations of violence and development...

(as described by Isabel, my lovely letter-writing partner), I also ask the question: How could one reframe America's 30x30 conservation initiative (and policy) for something more productive in the climate space?

For me, this begins at the writing table. Reshaping who is prioritized at the table naturally plays a substantial role in the language and framing of the underlying principles that shape this work. To truly achieve this from a decolonial perspective, I look to the work of Jaskiran Dhillon, who emphasizes that while indigenous and front line communities should be showcased in terms of the most immediate and the most visible harm, there should also be concern surrounding whether this representation alone risks obscuring the contexts in which extraction has historically taken place – reducing the far-reaching power of settler colonialism to isolated locations and states where the effects can most visibly be seen.

The integration of a decolonial ecologies approach at the writing table will **directly acknowledge the racialized and the colonized** – rather than simply coining/ assigning racism and colonization as distant entities, not addressed at the root of the issue. **This type of rebuilding effectively disables the double colonial and environmental fracture of modernity.**

As emphasized by Ferdinand, **decolonial ecologies mean world-making.** Creating and implementing a restoration plan for the United States needs to be considered something that is actively taking shape and being made, not something that will freeze us where we are in time – as the term “conservation” insinuates.

This is why the power of personal testimony, story-telling, and providing a breadth of anecdotal evidence from states, towns, and regions throughout the U.S. would be far more effective in 30x30, rather than taking calculations from science and attempting to string them together with “providing indigenous people voices” and “finding tools for the solution”. With that, there’s no humanity behind the action taken behind grappling with our temporality (or terminality) in this space.



The Arctic has long served as a, “ mirror or—perhaps more accurately—a bellwether...

an example of what could be (or what will become of) the so-called First World” (Hobart, 3). Its surface waters contain, “the most plastics of any ocean basin”, displacing numerous Indigenous communities that rely on the marine ecosystem to survive (Katz, 1). Notably, its struggling native populations receive little to no coverage in Western media. Let us examine this ‘bellwether’, where Indigenous, marginalized communities bear the weight of the rest of the world’s environmental atrocities to paint a larger picture of the world at large. The lack of care and exploitation of Indigenous people and their resources by the Western world is a pattern that can be exhibited through space and time continuously, through: The Salton Sea, Puerto Rico, The U.S Virgin Islands, The Colorado Desert, The Marshall Islands, Greenland, the list is never-ending (Navarro, Hobart, Nixon, Voyles).

Understanding the narrative of ‘invalidity’ is essential to understanding this scope of the marginalization and mistreatment of Indigenous people in relation to the environment. This epistemology, which is explained through Voyles’, “The Invalid Sea”, is a concept omnipresent within society, and key to conceptualizing continual Indigenous mistreatment (Voyles, 448). A reading regarding the mistreatment and dismissal of the Salton Sea, and its relation to many other forgotten places, people, and things that are discarded when they are deemed “polluted”, “sacrificed”, or impure (Voyles).

The term ‘Invalidity’ is described by Voyles as, “ a kind of Western, settler colonial, and deeply ableist environmental epistemology with the notion that all human bodies are able and normative; those bodies, both human and more-than-human, that exist outside of this social construction are invalidated, and deemed unworthy of inclusion” (Voyles, 450). Through this quotation, Voyles explains how people, places, and things that do not fit into the constructive box of ‘normative’ are ostracized by society, whether that be through generational gentrification, excessive pollution, misleading portrayals of modernity, or sacrifice zones. Viewing Indigenous injustice through this framework is only one of the countless ‘conceptual tools’ that are helpful in understanding the ongoing effects of colonial ideology that permeate our environment as we know it today. One must comprehend the ideology of ‘invalidity’ of humans, animals, and the environment alike to reflect on both self and others. Furthermore, ‘invalidity’ feels less like an accidental process, and moreso a **choice** made by those in power. Geographic areas that have been heavily damaged by environmental destruction or economic disinvestment, often benefit economic activities elsewhere.

These zones are typically inhabited by marginalized communities who bear the brunt of harmful environmental and health impacts due to policies or practices that "sacrifice" their living conditions for the sake of supposed greater economic goods. There is a “deeply human realm of pollution that is much more ripe for analysis”(Voyles, 451). This human realm of pollution due to the capitalist consumer mindset has plagued the U.S since its annihilation of the majority of its original inhabitants, and is partially due to the societal idea of who is considered *valid* to protect, and who is not. These, “binaries of civilized/savage and culture/nature continue to inform theorizations of the built environment as marks of modernity” (Hobart, 9).

As such, the notion of ‘invalidity’ carries unique implications concerning gender, ethnicity, and the specificities of social and ecological setting- which in this context is the Indigenous communities invalidated and displaced time and time again-, as colonialist systems, “operate on oppression of others, particularly Indigenous communities whose homelands have been discarded by consumerist practices” (Hobart,13). This epistemological pattern can be traced all over the world to support Hobart’s claim. For example, “Northeastern Indigenous settlements of Uummannaq and Pituffik included the forced removal of eighty-seven Inuktun and the demolition of their homes. The Inuktun were first brought to temporary housing and, next, to hastily constructed housing developments in Qaanaaq; the Danish government would go on to characterize Inuktun relocation as voluntary” (Hobart, 6). Through questioning this theory of justification in relation to Indigenous communities throughout the expanse of space and time, we are propelled beyond recognition into the realm of action, as it is only through a heightened historical and political literacy that one can catalyze the resiliency found in “trans-Indigenous Kinship” (Hobart,15). Such literacy does not end at awareness, rather this is where it begins, demanding a reconstruction of the narratives that have long governed us. The vastness of our world demands a reassessment of our individual and collective impacts, as we are all interconnected and agents of change (Hobart, 15).

As we stand at this juncture, I ask, what legacies do we choose to create, and how will our actions echo through the continuum of history?



Dear Shailee,

Thank you, as always, for your letter.

The readings this week were a ceremonious continuation of our past few exchanges. In talking about the creation of stories, Fiskio is more obviously discussing imagination and creativity, whether that imagination creates something horrific (the land of asexually-producing “perfect” Aryan women) or something beautiful, like the works of Octavia Butler. But further than that, imaginations communicate the worlds that have been imprinted on the individual, and how they have managed to escape that box, or not. I don’t mean to be bestowing all blame on some “they” or “the world”, but no one exists in a vacuum. Fiskio also quotes Solnit saying, “a renewal of the imagination [is] central to the creation of social change,” which I thought perfectly summed up our conversation.

My initial reaction to *Rise: From One Island To Another* was founded upon my previous knowledge, which was bolstered and continued by Hobart’s piece. I had not previously heard of Camp Century or Project Iceworm, and this makes me think about all the other violence’s I have never heard of (surely more than I have heard of). But I wrote the following in direct reflection to the short film prior to my reading of her piece:

The use of the Marshall Islands and Greenland in *Rise* as homes, both ancestrally and currently, seemed especially poignant— called to by their condemnation: “before you sacrifice us again”. Both places are and have been disregarded as homes, where they cannot offer any benefit (as homes) to the US as the metropole. The Marshall Islands and the Marshallese were decided as inconsequential to the desires of the metropole via Castle Bravo (and other nuclear testing). And then, the US lied about what they had done while simultaneously catastrophically failing to remediate Bikini Atoll and its surrounding islands as they were

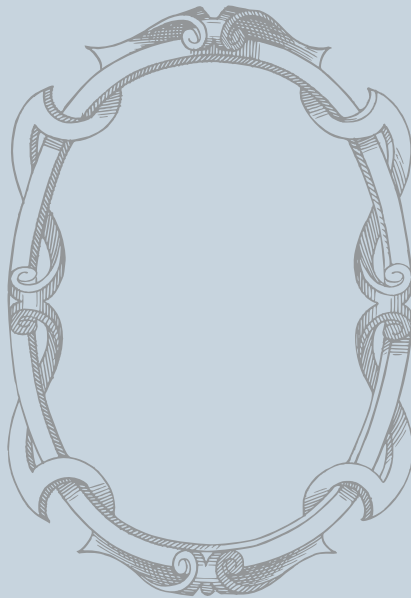
tasked to. Its service was not as a home, but as a space which could be exploited without worrisome response (meaning the US gov. and military are not worried about the Marshallese's response) and as a space where a study-able population lived. Greenland, as part of the remote and removed Arctic, is useful only to the metropole as a tool to enact climate fear and global responsibility through images and rhetoric of the melting ice caps and the dying polar bears. We explored this a lot in my Arctic Cinema's class (highly recommended).

Even though Greenland isn't entirely defined by the Arctic Circle, the fact that this all still applies is part of the point. The life and living on these places which have been ascribed to the past, or to magazines, or to the distant imagination is disregarded, which, as is part of the message of *Rise*, is as important as ever to wake up to given the situation the metropole and its co-conspirators have put them in. The women in the video inspired a feeling of solidarity. Some combination of their words, the rhythm of their poetry, the music, and their voices created a harmonious and potent call to action. I jotted down a line that called to mind our conversations about avoiding apocalypticism.

"We will not leave. . .from these islands, we ask for solutions. . . we demand that the world see beyond [. . .] their oil slicked dreams, beyond the belief that tomorrow will never happen. That this is merely an inconvenient truth."

Hobart discusses these places and spaces as mirrors or bellwethers. They are spaces where the Western imaginary can point to and revel in their climate anxiety- while doing nothing to prevent it- and displace their fear. I think they are spaces where we are taught we can place our fear and leave it there under the guise of “those poor people” and “isn’t it just so sad”. I think this line says part of what I mean: “Casting climate change relative to domestic American impact reveals the ways in which whiteness remains the unmarked center of apocalyptic anxiety by setting up false distinctions between drastic climate change “over there” to its pending encroachment “over here.”” (4). I am eager to hear your thoughts.

All my best,
Lexi



Afterword

Teaching this particular course at this particular time has felt necessary in ways I could not have anticipated. What does it mean to be “against dystopia?” The dedication, erudition, and care that my students demonstrate each week in the classroom and in their work — on the page and in the world — has been a continual answer to this question. The art and writing in this collection showcases the critical thinking, creative envisioning, and expansive imagining that is needed for transformation at every scale. Thanks are due to the Editorial Collective for their leadership in bringing this beautiful zine into being. To my students: your brilliance is undeniable and your generosity with each other and with me is something I remain grateful for. I look forward to seeing what you build, and to continuing to learn from you.

– Dilshanie Perera

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dilshanie Perera".

Some recommendations for repair & recovery:

Adele Carcano, Barnard '24: Podcast: *Nice Try!* Movie: *First Reformed* (2017). Book: *The Vaster Wilds* by Lauren Groff.

Alexandra Kaminski, Barnard '24: *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save our Earth* (The Red Nation). *Pollution is Colonialism* (Max Liboiron). *Fresh Banana Leaves* (Jessica Hernandez)

Ava Roche, Barnard '25: Use this website to educate your friends & family on the true history of the land you inhabit. <https://native-land.ca/>

Erin Ikeuchi, Barnard '24: "Agape" by Nicholas Britell (from the If Beale Street Could Talk soundtrack). *After Yang* by Kogonada (film). *Soft Science* by Franny Choi (book).

Isabel Halama, Barnard '24: ACQ BREAD CO. in Brooklyn. adrienne maree brown's "Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good." Maggie Rogers *Different Kind of World*. feeding your friends.

Jesse Pearce, Barnard '24: *The Traitor Baru Cormorant*, by Seth Dickinson. "Letter to the Local Police," by June Jordan. "How to Let Go of the World," by Franny Choi.

Joshua Yong, Columbia '26: Postapocalyptic Art Exhibit - Korakrit Arunanondchai: A Machine Boosting Energy Into the Universe

Laura Torre, SEAS '24: Downloading (and using!) TooGoodToGo. boygenius' *the record*. "This Changes Everything" by Dr. Craig Santos Perez. joining Columbia's Women's Rugby.

Lauren Zakari, Barnard '24: Cook with your roommates. listen to/read *Sounds Fake, But Okay*. try seeing the world from a new perspective for a day.

Lela DeVine, Barnard '25: *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson.

Maia Laitinen, Barnard '24: *Proof of Life* by Joy Oladokun (album). thinking critically through, with, and about weeds. apples from the farmers market. playing rugby.

Margaret Cavanaugh, Barnard '25: Sarah Jaquette Ray's *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*. sit-on--floor-pillows potluck dinners with your friends and your friends' friends. "Eulogy for you and Me" by Tanya Davis (song).

Marion Linde, Barnard '24: *Let This Radicalize You* by Kelly Hayes & Mariame Kaba. joining a local farmshare. "Wild Geese" poem by Mary Oliver. dinner parties with all of your friends.

Olivia Treynor, Barnard '24: Colons (the grammar kind, not the body kind, get your head out of the gutter). Also: Putting your head back into the gutter. Talking back; taking back; talking about what's back, behind us, where we're moving towards:

Rinka Tonsho, Barnard '24: *The Boy and the Heron* by Hayao Miyazaki

Shailee Sran, Barnard '24: Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*. Ursula Le Guin, "A Left-Handed Commencement Address." Chobani's "Dear Alice" solarpunk ad, preferably the decommodified version.

Victor Jandres, Columbia '24: *Strangers in their Own Land* by Arlie Hochschild.

Works from the syllabus

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