Ghosts, spectres, revenants
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Hauntings from the Future: Ghosts, Time Travellers, Extraterrestrials

Esther Peeren

Ghosts ... are weeds that whisper tales of the many pasts and yet-to­comes that surround us.01

The usefulness of the figure of the ghost as “a figure of return” and “present absence” that offers “a critique of the ‘un-mixed’”02 for conceptualising how forgotten, overlooked, repressed or denied histories of violence and oppression linger, only partially materialised, in the present, and how such histories, once their remaining traces have been acknowledged, should be addressed has been established in a myriad of contexts.03 The same goes for the ghost’s ability to shed light on unseen, disavowed or obfuscated aspects of the present, from the workings of global capitalism04 to what I have elsewhere called, following Achille Mbembe’s work on necropolitics, “living ghosts” – people like undocumented migrants “who, already in their lifetime, resemble dispossessed ghosts in that they are ignored and considered expendable, or, sometimes at the same time, become objects of intense fear and violent attempts at extermination.”05 What has only recently begun to draw attention, and what I will focus on here, is what the ghost, in its peculiar temporality and materiality, and its potential haunting force has to say about our relation to the future, particularly when, as the editors of Futures and Fictions insist, in the

face of “the spectre of all kinds of futures likely being curtailed” it is becoming more and more urgent to think of the future beyond the linear and the singular/unitary.06

According to the introduction to Ghosts of the Anthropocene, one part of the anthology Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, we, humans of the Anthropocene, live in a time in which we are constantly encouraged by the precepts of capitalism “to keep moving forward, to get the newer model, to have more babies, to get bigger,” despite an increasing awareness that this moving forward, if it continues at the same rate as today and yesterday, will result in rendering our planet unliveable for humanity and possibly for all known lifeforms. Mary Louise Pratt poignantly summarises the paradox of moving into a future that may well not include humans when she asks: “How will we slouch toward our deep future, toward an almost certain demise whose script we are writing but cannot imagine?”08 This question at once indicates our responsibility for this future of likely expiration (it is “our” future, “written” or shaped by human activities), our inability to picture it (we cannot imagine demise on a scale that includes all of us), and our resulting hesitancy, incompetence and unwillingness to act upon it. While the capitalist-colonialist-modernist narrative of the future, under the banner of “Progress,”09 allows us, or at least the privileged among us, to move unalteringly into the future, confident that it will keep stretching out in front of us, the “deep future” of a possible no future, of our probable end, inclines us, in Pratt’s words, to “slouch” toward it, ungenerously, uncertain, unprepared.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet proposes a turn to ghosts and monsters, which, according to the editors, “cannot be segregated as an alternative to either continuing to embrace the (fantasy of the) future of Progress or approaching the “almost certain demise” of our own making without facing it (through denial or defeatism).10 Ghosts, as remnants of the past in the present, are seen to undo the “refusal of the past, and even the present” promoted by capitalism, which fixes our attention on “the immediate promises of power and profits.”11 At the same time, “ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present – a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction.”12 Here, what haunts is not the past but a possible, probable (no) future that, just like ghosts from the past (if they manage to capture our attention), moves “what’s been in your blind spot ... into view” and imposes a “something-to-be-done” in the present.13 Crucially, however, since “indeterminacy” is “a quality of ghosts,” no haunting can offer absolute certainty about what should be done to address the pasts and futures that trouble the present.

Dealing with ghosts or hauntings then is about dealing with uncertainty, with not-knowing, and hence about what Donna Haraway (who contributes to Monsters of the Anthropocene, the second part of Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet) calls “staying with the trouble.”14 In her eponymous book, Haraway posits this attitude as an alternative to “futurisms” that respond to “the horrors of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene” with either “a comic faith in technofixes” or “salvific futures, but as mortal creatures entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”15 Her notion of “learning to be truly present” has nothing to do with a present conceived as isolated from the past and the future; rather, being “truly present” means being aware of and acting upon one’s entanglements in the present with other “places, times, matters and meanings,” or with what Karen Barad, in her contribution to Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, calls “spacetimemattering” and defines as “not a set of static points, coordinates of a void, but a dynamism of différancing.”16

staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing point between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal creatures entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.17

Her notion of “learning to be truly present” has nothing to do with a present conceived as isolated from the past and the future; rather, being “truly present” means being aware of and acting upon one’s entanglements in the present with other “places, times, matters and meanings,” or with what Karen Barad, in her contribution to Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, calls “spacetimemattering” and defines as “not a set of static points, coordinates of a void, but a dynamism of différancing.”18

13 Gordon, Ghostly Matters (see nt. 3), p. xvi. Whereas Gordon sees the ability to haunt – to impose a “something-to-be-done” through their disruptive presence – as an inalienable attribute of the ghost, I would contend that not all ghosts are able to haunt with the same force, and that there are also ghosts that cannot haunt at all. After all, haunting requires an apparition to be insistent and captivating. If a ghost is present without seizing anyone’s interest and attention, there is no haunting – a situation forcefully explored in films like Beetlejuice, directed by Tim Burton, Warner Bros 1988; and A Ghost Story, directed by David Lowery, A24 2017.
16 Ibid., p. 3.
17 Ibid., p. 1.
Barad's reference to différence brings me to Jacques Derrida. He, most notably in *Specters of Marx*, explores ghosts or spectres as embodiments of différence. As such, they disturb any sense of a stable, singular origin; hence his replacement of ontology with 'hauntology'. They also challenge notions of the discrete and homogeneous, being "the more than one/no more one [le plus d'un]." 19 And, by putting time out of joint, they refute any clear separation between past, present and future. While Derrida's thoughts on ghosts and haunting are, rather surprisingly, not referenced in the Ghosts part of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, they arguably haunt its pages. A turn to his thoughts can elucidate what is gained by conceptualising the relation between past, present and future as a haunting one, especially "in troubled, illegible times" 20 that portend a probable end of (human) times. Three of Derrida's ideas are particularly productive in this respect, as I will show in what follows. First, his elaboration of the spectre as both 'revenant' (that which returns from the past) and 'arrivant' (that which arrives from the future). Second, the indeterminacy with which he invests the spectre by associating it with a messianic future-to-come that has to be awaited without a horizon of expectation and without knowing exactly what it is that will arrive. And third, the notions of "living 'with' ghosts" and "learning to live, finally." 21 Living 'with' ghosts envisions being haunted not as a finite condition, to be ended through exorcism or assimilation of the ghost, but as an ongoing one of continued troubling. Learning to live, finally, in turn, proposes a living towards finality (death) that does not separate that finality from living, but rather places it 'within' life.

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It seems more challenging to produce an effective haunting (in the sense of a temporal disjunction that is attended to and as a result can impose a something-to-be-done) from the future than from the past, perhaps because a haunting from the past has perceptible detrimental effects in the present, whereas with a haunting from the future such effects can only be announced as yet-to-come. This difficulty is demonstrated by the case of the spectre of climate change, which is bearing upon us with increasing urgency and insistence, but which does not seem capable of prompting a generalised sense that something must be done now to address it, before it fully materialises and it becomes too late. The spectre of climate change is an arrivant, much like that of the spectre of communism haunting Europe evoked by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. As Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*:

> that of which it was the specter, communism ("das Gespenst des Kommunismus"), was itself not there, by definition. It was dreaded as communism to come. It had already been announced, with this name, some time ago, but it was not yet "there". It is only a specter, seemed to say these allies of old Europe so as to reassure themselves; let's hope that in the future it does not become an actual, effectively present, manifest, non-secret reality. 22

Like climate change, communism as a 'geo-political' movement raised the disturbing question of "whether there would still be any future and any history at all for Europe" (and the rest of the world it dominated through colonialism). 23 In the face of this question, with which they did not want to engage seriously, the allies of old Europe clung to the "sureness of this certainty" that a spectre is not real. 24 Similarly, the spectre of climate change is conjured away through climate change denial as well as through a milder form of disavowal that defers the real calamity - the actual, effectively present, manifest reality of climate change - to a future considered still safely separate from the present. Both are forms of exorcism that allow climate change, in its fully-fledged reality as no future for the earth, to continue to be conceived as "improbable." 25 For a haunting from the future to be taken seriously and impress upon us the need to act in the now, we have to be willing to face the questions it poses to us and to let go of the idea that "between a spirit and a 'Wirklichkeit', the dividing line was assured" or "ought to have been assured." 26 We (and this "we" is a notion that should also be problematised) have to recognise the arrivant as a haunting presence 'in' the present, as something we cannot ignore but have to live 'with' here and now, even if it has not yet fully arrived.

For Derrida, the futural dimension of the ghost as arrivant refers most concretely to the fact that a ghost always announces its next appearance; without implied re-appearances in the future, there would be no haunting. The ghost, therefore, arrives as much from the

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20 Gan et al., "Introduction" (see nt. 1), p. G10.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
future as it returns from the past, drawing attention not just to what was, but also to what is to come. With regard to the past, the ghost –
signifying an inheritance we cannot refuse, but which simultaneously
is always multiple, heterogeneous and formed around a secret that
cannot be deciphered – imposes a responsibility to select and then
take responsibility for that selection. At the same time, Derrida em-
phases that the ghost “signals toward the future” or perhaps more
accurately, ‘from’ the future:

Given that a revenant is always called upon to come and to come back,
the thinking of the specter, contrary to what good sense leads us to
believe, signals toward the future. It is a thinking of the past, a legacy
that can come only from that which has not yet arrived – from the “ar-
rivant” itself.27

Here, the ghost as revenant/arrivant is what thinks the past from the
future, with this past also including the present (which, for the arriv­
ant, is part of the past). The legacy in question then is that of the past
time traveller confronting us in the present with what we will have left
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When a haunting from the future is perceived as involving not
something distant in time, but something already ‘there’, acting in
the present, however indeterminately (in that it is also still to-come),
it becomes possible to see the present as the site to address this
something. Thus, Haraway’s “staying with the trouble” is not about
“stopping something from happening that looms in the future,”32 but
about realising that other futures can be made in the present, which
also contains the resources of the past. Barad similarly argues that,
within the structure of haunting,

injustices need not await some future remedy, because “now” is al­
ways already thick with possibilities disruptive of mere presence. Each
moment is thickly threaded through with all other moments, each a
holographic condensation of specific diffraction patterns created by
a plethora of virtual wanderings, alternative histories of what is/might
yet be/have been.33

By mobilising these alternative histories/presents/futures in their
complex intertwinements, new ways of living on a damaged planet
in a state of impending demise may be devised. These new ways of
living, however, should replicate the logic of haunting in eschewing
certainty and clarity for speculation and ambiguity.

Derrida goes as far as to advocate, in relation to the spectral fu­
ture-to-come, an attitude of absolute hospitality, which entails a “mes­
ianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be
awaited ‘as such,’ or recognized in advance.”34 The messianic here is
without Messiah in that it does not entail any knowledge as to who or
what will come, or as to what this coming will mean. Instead, it focuses
on the activity of ‘awaiting,’ which, crucially, is not a passive resigna-
tion to the future as already determined but an active anticipation that
prepares the ground for the arrival of whatever is to-come. For Derri-

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27 Derrida, Specters of Marx (see nt. 19), p. 196, nt. 39.
28 Ibid., p. xix.
29 Donna Haraway, “Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for Staying
with the Trouble,” in: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, ed. Anna Tsing, Heather Swan­
31 Ibid., p. G114.
32 Haraway, Staying (see nt. 15), p.t.
34 See Derrida, Specters (see nt. 19), p. 25.
The need to know not only leads to exorcisms but can also pre-empt hauntings altogether. Whereas an exorcism presumes an acknowledgment of the presence of the ghost and some kind of engagement with its disruptive power (after all, if this power were not acknowledged, it would not be thought necessary to exercise the ghost), potentially disruptive pasts and futures are often not recognised at all, preventing them from acquiring a haunting force in the present. Thus, many have chosen to ignore, dismiss or explain away the traces of impending environmental disaster in the present rather than allowing themselves to be disturbed by them in a way that would require a something-to-be-done. One strategy of dismissal adopted by climate sceptics is to argue that until science can offer absolute certainty and consensus about what is/will be happening to the planet and who or what caused it, no action can or need be taken. Here, the lack of certainty about the future-to-come becomes a pretext for inaction: the demand is for the ghost to become fully present, which would make it no longer a ghost, or, in other words, for the future to be encountered as it will definitely be rather than as it might be, which makes it no longer the future (as a spectral-to-come).

Notably, from Derrida’s perspective, opposing this dismissal of a haunting from the future with an insistence that there ‘can’ be absolute certainty about climate change and its consequences would entail a similar refusal of the ghost as ghost and the future as future. The future, Derrida insists, can only appear to us as a ghost, in all its ambiguity and unknowability: “One does not know: not out to know it. One has to know. One has to have knowledge [If faut le savoir],” which is the impulse that drives the haunted to attempt to exorcise the ghost, to lay the past or the future to rest so that it no longer disrupts the present.

Derrida’s arriver then has to be seen – and welcomed – as an inevitably unreliable time traveller. The presumption is that time travellers possess absolute, indisputable knowledge about the future, which they are able to certify by predicting events to-come in the present to which they have returned. Unlike ghosts, who put time out of joint, time travellers are believed (and believe themselves) to be capable of mending timelines to prevent disasters, restoring the future to what, according to the time traveller or whoever sent them, it was meant to look like. However, because it is impossible to truly know the past and its relation to the present – “one always inherits from a secret” – the time traveller can, in fact, never be sure if they have identified the right event(s) to stop from happening in order to restore the desired future. Moreover, by travelling back in time and intervening in the past, the time traveller risks changing this past in unplanned ways, which, in turn, will affect the future. This means that the time traveller may not actually know the future and becomes, like Derrida’s spectre as arrivant, capable only of figuring an uncertain future-to-come.

In her article “Haunting from the Future: Psychic Life in the Wake of Nuclear Necropolitics”, Gabriele Schwab, on the basis of Derrida’s “No Apocalypse, Not Now” and Mbembe’s work, elaborates on how we are haunted by scenarios of nuclear apocalypse that we can never be certain will actually occur. Schwab writes:

Imagining nuclear war seems to become a precondition for (collective) actions that may be able to avert it. Yet the imagination of a remainderless destruction depends upon the performative and persuasive power of texts, discourse, and figurations.

Here, imagining replaces knowing (for sure, for certain) as a requirement for establishing a something-to-be-done in the face of a haunting from the future.

According to Schwab, however, the particular forms taken by the texts, discourse and figurations that make a future of nuclear war present in the now may also work to neutralise the arriver. Thus, the future of nuclear war as a remainderless destruction (which, as such, would be unable to produce a post-apocalyptic time traveller,

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36 Ibid, p. 9, emphasis in text.
37 Ibid, p. 16.
38 For examples of time travellers caught in this paradox, see: La Jetée, directed by Chris Marker, Argos Films 1962; Twelve Monkeys, directed by Terry Gilliam, Universal Pictures 1995; and Terminator Genisys, directed by Alan Taylor, Paramount Pictures 2015.
at least not one from Earth) is, as it were, de-imagined by the
 commodification of sites of isolated nuclear disasters such as Cherno-
 byl and Fukushima; further, the association of these sites with idyllic
 notions of freedom and the recovery of natural ecosystems works
to disavow both the vast destruction that occurred and the even
vaster destruction that might take place in the future.41 According
to Schwab, “apocalyptic texts and films, and the apocalyptic imaginary
more generally, inevitably entail a form of symbolic domestication of
the ultimate threat of nuclear destruction,” since they avoid figuring
war could result in.

the future without human life (or any earthly life) that global nuclear
war, especially when these routinely elide the possibility of a remain­
ning destruction, neutralise and domesticate apocalyptic futures
by making them knowable and, unrealistically, survivable. What is
needed instead, and what Schwab finds in the work of authors like
Samuel Beckett, is a figuration of an apocalyptic future as feared in
the present, an inconclusive evocation of an arrivant that is actually
able to haunt – to disturb, to unsettle, to prompt a something-to-be­
done to ward off the apocalypse that may be not at some point in the
future but now.

Effective hauntings from the future in the present are not only
needed to change our relationship to “our deep future” of “almost cer­
tain demise,”44 but also to reconfigure our relationship to the present
and the past, especially for those “groups of people [for whom] the fu­
ture was/is already foreclosed,”45 those caught in what Mbembe calls
“death-worlds, forms of social existence in which vast populations are
subjected to conditions of life that confine upon them the status of
living dead (ghosts).”46 Whereas Mbembe concentrates on detailing
how such death-worlds, forms of social existence in which vast populations are
subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of
living dead, specifically those from Africa and its diasporas, is taken on by Afrofuturism.

According to the editors of Futures and Fictions, Afrofuturism
“points to an engagement with the future that ceases to devalue the
present and the past.”47 By presenting “a science-fiction story, a story
about the future, which very often involves technologies yet to come
alongside technologies that are already here,”48 it does not endorse
accelerationism’s fetishising of speed and the machine,49 but instead
establishes a haunting from the future capable of providing redress
in the present for the exploitative past and present. This presenting
of another future also challenges the narrative of “no future” that has
been ascribed through colonialism and other violent forms of nec­
ropolitics to Africans and Africa.

Kodwo Eshun, in “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” imagi­
nes a team of African archaeologists from the future, from an age of
total recall in which forgetting has become impossible (a fantasy that
highlights the virtual “no recall” of African histories in Eshun’s past
and present), excavating a museum from the twenty-first century and
noticing “how much Afrodisporic subjectivity in the twentieth centu­
ry constituted itself through the cultural project of recovery.”50 This
recovery project, conducted through the forging of counter-memories
to the colonial archive, was eventually displaced by the work of
Afrofuturists, who chose to focus not only on the past, but also on the
“not-,” both with respect to how this not-yet is exploited by those in
power to dispossess Africans and how it might be mobilised strategi­
cally as a form of emancipatory agency.51

What Afrofuturism exposes first of all, according to Eshun, is the
predictive aspect of the power of neocolonial capitalism, which works
by controlling not only the memory of the past (the archive), but also
the way the future is configured and who has a place in it. As Eshun
writes,

the powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they
endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past.
The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday,
reaching for others into tomorrow.52

41 See, for example, the Japanese film Iiji, directed by Nao Kubota, Bitters End, Pony
Canyon 2014, set during the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster.
42 Schwab, “Haunting” (see nt. 39), p. 95.
43 Ibid., p. 97.
44 Pratt, “Cella” (see nt. 8), p. G173.
45 Gunkel et al., “Futures and Fictions” (see nt. 6), p. 8.
46 Achille Mbembe, “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola, in:
47 Gunkel et al., “Futures and Fictions” (see nt. 6), p. 2.
(see nt. 6), p. 97-121, here p. 99.
51 Ibid., p. 289.
52 Ibid.
From the perspective of the disempowered, what haunts them from the future is the fact that they are not seen as having a future (or even a present), whereas for those who are seen to belong in the futures of Progress endorsed by neocolonial capitalism, there is no haunting from the future, only a certainty that their comfortable place in it is guaranteed.

Echoing Schwab’s denunciation of figurations of nuclear war that envision it as survivable and thus repress the possibility of remainderless destruction, Eshun condemns science fiction for evoking in an inconclusive manner not possible futures-to-come in which anyone could have a place (or from which everyone could be eradicated), but acting, in a deterministic way, as a “research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow.”53 Any sense that the future is spectral and can therefore only be anticipated and awaited inconclusively, under the sign of the perhaps, is disavowed, preventing the future from emerging as a haunting structure in the present. What science fiction does instead, Eshun argues, is “preprogram the present,” investing it with a sense of order, stability and certainty.54

Africa’s present and future are preprogrammed – and thus robbed of possibility – not just by science fiction but also by global scenarios of capitalism which centre on “making futures safe for the market” and configure the continent as irredeemably dystopian, destined for certain environmental, political, economic and cultural disasters.55 At the same time, there is a “focus on ‘Africa rising’ and an ‘African twenty-first century’” that incorporates Africa into the teleological capitalist logic of progress and exploitability.56 What Afrofuturist thinkers and artists seek to do is to counter this positioning of Africa as having a determined future, whether as excluded from or part of the narrative of Progress, by exploring “the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional.”57 Such interventions, I want to suggest, are aimed at creating a haunting from the future that would open up Africa’s – and, by extension, the rest of the world’s and the planet’s – future to the indeterminacy of the to-come, multiplying its possible shapes.

An explicit connection between Afrofuturism, haunting in the Derridean mode as I have been discussing it, and Haraway’s and Barad’s emphases on intertwined pasts, presents and futures, emerges in Eshun’s description of Afrofuturism’s focus on establishing a different temporal logic:

[B]y creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infilrate the present at different rates.58

Here, as in Derrida, Haraway and Barad, past, present and future are no longer seen as singular, separate realms that causally determine each other, but as multiplicities, as pasts, presents and futures brought together on the same plane, albeit “at different rates” or, in Barad’s terms, “differently weighted.” On this plane, they can inflect each other and open up new ways of being African, past, present ‘and’ future. Like Derrida’s ghost and the invariably unreliable time traveller from the future, the extraterrestrial invoked in many Afrofuturist imaginations – including John Akomfrah’s film The Last Angel of History,59 discussed in Futures and Fictions60 – replaces a linear narrative (taking Africans from past enslavement to expendability in the neocolonial capitalist present and future) with a speculative, strategic vision. Thus, The Last Angel of History, by presenting a Data Thief capable of “processing data and reading images at post-human speeds”61 and by giving the future a nostalgic gloss while the past is presented in futuristic cool blue, creates “a way to think about the future in a way that is code-switched with history, that creates a kind of remembering that is shot through with the future.”62 In this way, both the past and the future are opened up to the perhaps and become haunted/haunting realms capable of prompting action in the present.

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As Gayatri Spivak points out in a discussion of the Native American Ghost Dance as aiming to “make the past a future" that forms part of her critical response to Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, the counter-futures conjured through strategic acts of imagination – or, as the editors of *Futures & Fictions* call it, “fictioning” – which are always also political acts, appear in the mode not of the future present (the future as it will be) but of the future anterior (the future as it might or could be, what Eshun calls the “future conditional”) and rely on a “surrender to undecidability.”

Such a surrender is not without risk, as the fate of the ghost dancers in nineteenth-century America (and the dismissal of the ghost dances as delusional) shows. However, if we do not allow ourselves to be truly haunted from the future in disturbing ways that open us up to harm and potentially even death, we can never learn to live finally in Derrida’s sense of “learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality (that is, without salvation, resurrection, or redemption – neither for oneself nor for the other).” Only this kind of living finally (living towards the end that is certain but can never be known with certainty), which is a haunted living but also a mode of being finally truly alive (finally living), is a fitting way to live on a damaged planet, in that it would enable us to “navigate the dangers of the present and the threats of futures that will be continental, oceanic and archipelagic in their scale and their scope.” In the end, we – a spectral, shifting, open entanglement capable of accommodating non-human lifeforms and things, as well as the possibility that humans may one day no longer be part of the world – can only face the future in a way that could make it otherwise if we allow ourselves to be haunted by a to-come that we can never be entirely sure of.

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64 Gunkel et al., “Futures and Fictions” (see nt. 6), p. 13.
65 Spivak, “Ghostwriting” (see nt. 61), p. 71.
67 Haras et al., “Spectrality” (see nt. 58), p. 265.