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Worldless futures: on the allure of 'worlds to come'

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Abstract:	This paper is concerned with the conceptual, discursive and political inclination within spatial and social thought towards enacting 'new worlds', 'worlds to come' and 'possible worlds'. Against the backdrop of this diffuse habit, which I refer to as 'worldly futuring', I call attention to the ongoing challenge posed by worldlessness. It asks: what is lost, existentially or politically, in prioritising world-building over world-ending? Articulating a response to this question, the paper examines how the investment in future worlds functions, what it secures, and what it indemnifies against. Definitionally, 'world' lacks the ethical designation required to explain its signalling function as a positive horizon of futurity. Worldly futuring instead relies on three connected affirmations: world presents the promise of (meta)stability, of commonality, and of meaning. In prioritising these affirmations, worldly futuring immunises itself against the possibility of their radical absence or violent undoing, thereby working around, against, or sublating the threat of wordlessness. However, building on the scholarship of Derrida on worldless alterity and theorists of black negativity's political calls for the 'end of the world', the central argument of the paper is that working-away worldlessness is neither inherently possible, nor is it necessarily desirable. Despite any attempt at immunisation, worldlessness haunts any project of worldly futuring, showing us that the assumed connection between world and futurity may well be an obstacle to radical futures.

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"[N]othing is less certain than the world itself." (Derrida, 2011, p. 266)

1 WORLD AS HORIZON OF FUTURITY

Geo-graphos, as the 'writing of the earth', has long been associated with the *building* of the earth. Geographers write the world into being. That ours is a discipline of world-making is a generalised, if often implicit, disciplinary maxim. Nowhere is this maxim more certain than in the following phrases handpicked from within contemporary geographical scholarship. Cultural geographers speak of "openings to other worlds" (Thrift, 2011, p. 21), "bringing worlds into being" (Collard et al., 2015, p. 326), "producing [new] worlds" (Oliver, 2020, p. 2), "worlds to emerge" (Banfield, 2021, p. 152), and "enabling [...] new lived worlds" (Gabrys & Yusoff, 2012, p. 17). Similarly, political geographers advocate "mak[ing] other worlds possible" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 623), "enacting new worlds" (Dawney et al., 2016, p. 22), "a world to come" (Castree, 2014, p. 451), and "making new worlds rise" (Blencowe, 2016, p. 200). Urban geographers, amongst other phrases, propose bringing new "worlds into being" (Rosewood et al., 2017, p. 12; Williams, 2020, p. 6), while some geographers of race and decoloniality speak of the need to "imagin[e] other worlds" (Hirsch and Jones, 2021, p. 798) and to make "many worlds become possible" (Sultana, forthcoming, p. 9). Across these texts, we encounter a cluster of expressions – 'worlds to come', 'other worlds', 'world-making', 'worlds to emerge', 'new worlds', 'possible worlds – indicative of an investment in future worlds.

The gesture towards 'worlds to come', we might argue, has become, at least in certain strands of contemporary geographical thought, somewhat of a diffuse (if largely unacknowledged) habit, one that we think is worthy of admiration. It encapsulates a shorthand for the refusal to take the present world for granted, to be stifled by it, and instead promises the capacities for tracing and pursuing world-making where it enables alternative futures. After all, what do political geographers, feminist geographers, digital geographers, decolonial geographers, and others share if not this urge to push their worlds of interest into a better version of themselves? This is a habit that I trace not only in others' work, but also in my own. In a paper critiquing [ANONYMISED], for instance, I ended on the uplifting, hopeful note that "[ANONYMISED]" ([ANONYMISED]). Indeed, as a geographer, I have felt the pull of worldly futuring and its promise of imagining, inhabiting, and producing alternative worlds.

But perhaps this investment in 'world-building' and 'world-making', quiet yet omnipresent, also warrants a pause. How, exactly, does this investment function, and what are its implications? What is secured, and what is indemnified against, in taking 'world', singular or plural, as the horizon of futural possibility? In other words, what is lost, existentially or politically, in prioritising world-building over world-ending? The aim of this paper is to articulate initial responses to these questions. It argues that the assumed link between world and futurity undertakes important conceptual and political labour through which worldlessness appears as either impossible or undesirable. Investigating theories of worldlessness, the paper argues that the incessant challenge posed by being without world cannot be easily rendered defect.

In asking, and exploring responses to, questions around worldly futuring, this paper enters into conversation with a small number of explicit engagements with geographical

conceptions of 'world' (Harrison, 2008; McCormack, 2017; Shaw, 2010) and geographies of futurity (e.g. Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; MacLeavy et al., 2021). Curiously lacking across these two sets of literature, and picked up in this paper, is the relationship between worlds and the singular possibility of worldlessness. Where this thematic does appear, most commonly through the image of 'the end of the world', in geographical scholarship, it is in the context of work around anthropogenic climate catastrophes. Worlds' endings are, here, usually sublimated – in a dialectical gesture – as an occasion for the spawning of alternative worlds; as perhaps most apparent in geographers' uptake of Anna Tsing's argument for world-making amidst ruins (Tsing, 2015). This paper stays instead with the challenges posed by worldlessness, and identifies how, according to which structuring devices, these are indemnified against by worldly futuring. As we will see, worldly futuring may be described, first and foremost, as a set of mechanisms for working around, against, or sublating the threat of wordlessness. Its assumed capacity to immunise against impossibilities of worldliness is what enables worldly futuring's allure: the promise of a life without the challenge of being without world, that is, without the challenge posed by those moments when the ability to connect with a world, to be in a world, to have access to it, begins to break down, ceases to exist, or fails to emerge in the first place. Acknowledging these moments as occasions of Derrida's claim that "there is always the possibility that there is no world," (Gaston, 2013, p. 113) this paper argues, forces us to hesitate in the face of calls for future worlds. The proposition that takes the transformation of world-as-given into world-as-possible as a desirable necessity cannot be taken for granted.

This paper will show how, despite its commonplace appearance, this call for 'future worlds' is qualified by a lack of specificity, with 'world' standing in for an open-ended future that is, loosely, a site of (meta)stability, meaning, and commonality. However, the aim is not to fill a

conceptual gap, to finally give future worlds a sufficiently precise definition or form. Nor,

unlike McCormack's original treatment of 'worlds' in geography, does the concern lie with

articulating "a more affirmative account of world" (McCormack, 2017, p. 10). Instead, the

paper works through the very impulse of investing in new worlds, critically unpicking its

origins, grammar and implications, and asks what we may find outside of its purview.

To this end, the paper proceeds in four sections. The next section shows how, despite the lack

of conceptual clarity, 'world' functions as a ground around which ontologies, epistemologies,

and methodologies are oriented. Drawing a distinction between shifting geographical

imaginations of 'world', the section reveals worldly futuring as the spatial configuration of

hopeful futurity. Section 3 argues that the established connections between world and futurity

need to be understood from the perspective of three affirmations that underpin them: world as

(meta)stable, world as shared, and world as meaningful. Worldlessness, as the absence or

radical undoing of these affirmations, is immunised against within worldly futuring,

rendering it as an outside that continues to trouble it. Refusing to follow the logic of

immunisation, Section 4 takes seriously the possibility of worldless futures. To do so, it

showcases how Heidegger's taxonomy of world(lessness) (stone as wordless, animal as

world-poor, human as world-forming) has been variously critiqued and reworked to present

worldlessness as the unavoidable encounter with the other (Derrida), and as simultaneously

conditional to, and a possible political horizon for, black life. Across these two conceptual

configurations, worldly futuring's favouring of (meta)stability, meaning, and commonality is

not a lever for, but an obstacle to a radical futurity. 'Future worlds' begin to lose their status

as metaphysically attainable and politically desirable; the connection between world and

futurity begins to frail.

2 WORLD: ABSTRACTING, PRESENCING, WORLDING, FUTURING

The concept of 'world' has never had a fixed status in the history of geographical thought. As Derek McCormack (2017) has carefully shown, rather than being approached directly as a self-referential term that undertakes clearly-defined conceptual labour, world has functioned as a derivative notion variously linked to and at odds with more precisely theorised geographical conceptions of 'space', 'territory', 'nature', and 'assemblage'. World emerges as "a background, potentially palpable, that shapes how things show up, how they are sensed, and how they become intelligible" (McCormack, 2017, p. 2). It has been taken, in other words, as the backdrop against which to discuss other concepts or empirical material, rather than as a concept itself worthy of investigation. As a result, world variously stands for the earth itself, human affairs on earth, or the purview of one individual, human or non-human. Despite this lack of definitional clarification, and the subsequent capacity of latitude, it remains a central pivot around which geographers position their ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. Most importantly, for our purposes, it functions as a grounding logic of futurability. The idea of such futurability – what I call 'worldly futuring' – needs to be understood within the wider shifting imaginations of 'world' within geographical thought. To this end, and before explicitly examining the link between futurity and world, this section begins by outlining the most prominent worldly imaginations within geographical scholarship.

The first imagination is centred around the idea of a *worldly abstraction*. The world is taken as the 'kosmos' – literally an 'ordered whole' – that operates by a logic of containment (Gaston, 2013). The universe contains the world which, in turn, contains beings and things.

This is the world as the distinct realm of the earth or globe as a human concern that can be grasped objectively from a vantage point. The 'whole-earth' vision of the world has long been critiqued within geographical scholarship. Drawing from Haraway's work on the lure of disembodied objectivity, feminist geographers have shown how such "a detached view into a separate, completely knowable world" is tied up with masculinist modes of knowledge production (Kwan, 2002, p. 647). Additionally, for Cosgrove worldly abstraction has long functioned both as an emblem, and a legitimiser, of European and American imperialism, where it becomes part of "a transcendental vitalism as a basis for universal order and harmony." (Cosgrove, 1994, p. 290) Despite the prevalence of such critiques, worldly abstraction continues to have purchase in geographical scholarship on world-systems analysis and world-cities (see McCormack, 2017). The world, here, functions simultaneously as an empirical designator – all substance and thought contained within that sphere called the earth – and as an epistemological designator – to know that earth one needs to move beyond it.

The second geographical imagination of the world is based on a conception of *worldly presencing* largely inspired by phenomenological thought. Because we cannot have any direct experience of the world as a totality, phenomenological geographers suggest, it cannot be taken as ultimately knowable. In response, humanistic geographers dismantled the epistemological grandeur of 'world', proposing instead the idea of 'lifeworld' – "the prereflective, taken-for-granted dimensions of experience, the unquestioned meanings, and routinized determinants of behavior." (Buttimer, 1976, p. 281) This claim is important because it complicates the problematic assumption that a vantage point from which to grasp the world as a 'whole' is both possible and desirable, instead "privileg[ing] the mortal, the finite and the fleshy as they are expressed in the rhythms of embodiment" (McCormack, 2017, p. 4). Importantly, in doing so, it pluralises 'world' into 'worlds'. Because the fact that

"all people are located in a world" is "an irreducible characteristic of human existence,"

David Seamon (1980, p. 148) writes, rather than *the* world of worldly abstraction, there is a

multiplicity of worlds, each arranged around a particular spatio-temporal setting that, at once,

conditions us and is conditioned by us.

The third worldly imagination - which we may call *worlding* - both extends and complicates

the emphasis on worlds as produced by and producing bodily presence. On the one hand,

worlding continues the humanistic attention to the pre-reflective and pre-linguistic

entanglement between body and worlds, even if it does so through divergent – and largely

non-representational – philosophies of affect and emphasises absence alongside presence

(Anderson & Harrison, 2010; McCormack, 2017). On the other hand, this tradition troubles

those same accounts by expanding the agential logic of worlds. The human ceases to be the

sole agent with access to worlds, as it had been in Heidegger's declaration of animals as

world-poor and stones as world-less. For Heidegger, as we will see in Section 4, non-human

life is merely *in* the world, rather than *having* a world. Therefore, he suggested, "the animal is

separated from man by an abyss" precisely because it is, unlike human life, dependent on and

limited to that which is present-at-hand (Heidegger, 1995, p. 264). Detaching worldly access

from the prerequisite of human language, meaning, and cognition, geographers of a "more-

than-human world" situate animals, objects, and signs as, themselves, creators of worlds, and

as co-fabricators in human socio-material worlds (Whatmore, 2006, p. 604; Anderson &

Harrison, 2010). Against the premise of a "one worldist metaphysics" (Hinchliffe, 2015, p.

34) or "one-worldism" (Cosgrove, 1994), geographers do not encounter a single world

inhabited by all beings, human and non-human, and instead witness a series of "worlds-for"

that are at once distinct and overlapping (Thrift, 2005a, p. 465; Massey et al., 1999). Across

the human-nonhuman threshold, these worlds are arrangements of forces, bodies, meanings,

and objects held together by their shared capacities to affect one or more agents, and to be affected by them.

If worlding extends the spatial accessibility of worlds, then the fourth, and final, geographical imagination of worlds – *worldly futuring* – distances itself further from worldly abstraction and presencing by disrupting its dependence on the temporal present. World emerges as a desirable formation cast into the future. We encounter worldly futuring first in the discipline in the 1990s with the embrace of post-structuralist thinkers, most notably Gilles Deleuze, and more precisely, within the push towards an ontology of becoming that takes world-making as an inevitable process that emerges from the excessiveness of life. In geographers' readings of Deleuze – commonly via DeLanda, Latour, or Massumi – concepts of 'the virtual', 'the event', 'assemblage', 'affect', and 'difference' each pertain to the contingent nature of the world. Because it is laced with virtual potential, each moment "can spark performative improvisations which are unforeseen and unforeseeable" (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 4). As Dewsbury summarises: "there is always a remainder" (Dewsbury, 2010, p. 150). But geographers are taking up Massey's claim that for the future to be genuinely open-ended, space must be open too (Massey, 2005). World becomes the spatial configuration of futurity.

Greenhough explains this when writing that geographical scholarship requires "a focus not on the way the world *is*, but on how the world is *coming to be*" (Greenhough, 2010, p. 46; italics in original). This temporal extension of worlds amounts to its futuring. Within a metaphysics centred around becoming, there is always an inexhaustible 'more to come' to that which has become actual. For Cockayne et al (2017, p. 594), Deleuze underscores that "there may be other worlds available and possible, that difference need not always be tied to representation." Against the ancient Greek understanding of the world as 'kosmos',

prominent in the imagination of worldly abstraction, Deleuze indeed posits, alongside

Guattari, the idea of 'chaosmos' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6): fractured by divergences,

bifurcations and incompossibles, worlds are always leaking from all directions. Other worlds

are always possible, if not already in the making.

Within the futurability of worlds, geographers have rightfully claimed a position of

hopefulness. Inspired by the work of vitalist scholars and affect theorists, worldly futuring

separates its own critical projects from those who they take to be preoccupied first and

foremost with denouncing injustices in this world, often referring to 'critical' figures such as

Hegel or Adorno. In this view, negative critique needs to be replaced by an ethics of

affirmation that prioritises the tracing, imagining, and enacting of future worlds (see

Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021; Ruez & Cockayne, 2021). Donna Haraway, for instance, claims

herself to be "allergic to denunciation" and, on those grounds, confirms the ethical task of her

project: "building networks, pathways, nodes, and webs of and for a newly habitable world."

(2016, p. 137) Building on Haraway's earlier work, and Spivak's writings, some scholars

concerned with decolonial geographies propose the need to foreground those "ambitious

practices that creatively imagine and shape alternative social visions and configurations – that

is, 'worlds'" (Ong, 2011, p. 12). It is only by paying attention to such practices of worlding,

and thereby by opening up to the 'pluriverse' (Hope, 2021; Oslender, 2019), it is argued, that

we can depart from that bleak vision of the world that takes it as always-already universally

pre-ordered and pre-stabilised (Ong, 2011). In a similar gesture, Jane Bennett (2011)

embraces a stance of generosity as an antidote to *ressentiment*. Against indifference, a desire

for destruction, or despair, which according to Nigel Thrift (2005b, p. 355) constitutes "the

ultimate political sin", worldly futuring heralds and prioritises a call to believe, if not in this

world, then, at least, in the potential of other worlds. This is not to imply that critique is

circumvented altogether. As Anderson (2006, p. 705) confirms, "hope does not, despite embodying an openness that trusts, make peace with the existing world." But in this work, a refusal to accept the existing world is, however, necessarily followed by calls for, and enactments of, other worlds.

This is what, following Daniel Barber (2016, p. 183), we may identify as the "release valve of possibilisation": the transition from world-as-given to world-as-possible is taken both as necessary and as good. Our critique of the present world builds up, the pressure heightens, before being released via an auxiliary route: the call for different worlds. To stay within the negativity of the present would be a sign of personal, political, or professional resignation. Within the logic of this release valve, without a claim to worlds, we lose the compulsory promise of futurity. We fall into the trap of creating an over-critiqued world, a world that is deflated – a world not simply tired, but exhausted.

3 THE CIRCULAR ALLURE OF WORLDLY FUTURING

At this point, we have arrived at the premise of worldly futuring – as a desirable deterrent of exhaustion – by working through the varying geographical imaginations of world. What remains unclear, however, is how world attains its status as not just a placeholder of futurity, but of *desirable* futurity. As we have seen, in the geographical work concerned with practices of worldly futuring, world itself lacks the conceptual specificity one would expect of a term laden with the promise of a future superior to the present. Within the context of worlding and worldly futuring, world is defined – more often implicitly than explicitly – according to a vaguely determined and broadly applicable set of conditions of arrangements merging as capacities to affect and be affected by more-than-human forms of life. By this very definition,

world does not, by any means, automatically imply an increase in capacity to affect, to be

affected, or any augmentation of will to power. Some worlds are energising, caring, or

supportive, others the stuff of destruction, death. "No one in the world is innocent, not even

the world itself," writes Derrida (2005, p. 157). As quickly as they *nourish*, worlds slip into

the terrain of *nocēre*, of hurt and harm. By the above-mentioned imagination of worlds, a

poisonous world is still a world; that is, is still a coalescing of more-than-human

arrangements into a particular affective affordance. We need to ask: why does the argument

for world-making tend to bleed into an ethical gesture? New worlds, different worlds, do not

guarantee, in any straightforward or self-explanatory manner, an improvement of conditions

for forms of life. We must question, then, what it is that world proposes, indirectly, that

pushes geographers, again and again, to make use of its futurity. To begin to appreciate the

appeal of worldly futuring, we need to look at its conditions of emergence. As I will now

argue, world is marked by a tripartite affirmation that helps render it alluring.

3.1 Affirmation 1: world is (meta)stable

World is, first of all, a manner of ordering. With their emphasis on a multiplicity of worlds,

with worlding and worldly futuring we are far removed from the 'ordered whole' of the

ancient Greeks. Instead, McCormack (2017) argues, worlds appear as '(meta)stable'

arrangements temporarily and spatially held together. They are, following Lingis' definition,

the contexts and fields that make "the multiplicity of beings about us an order, a cosmos" (as

cited in Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 9).

The uptake of world as a (meta)stable arrangement needs to be understood against the

backdrop of the non-representational – and more precisely, the post-phenomenological –

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displacement of fixed ideas of a pre-formed subjectivity, agency, and intentionality (Ash &

Simpson, 2016). But these critical displacements, as they emerged within geographical

scholarship, do not necessarily work away fixity per se. Arguably, they sometimes displace

fixity only for it to emerge elsewhere, often under the guise of 'world'. Indeed, world may

appear as an enticingly solid ground from which to pivot life, experience, and affect – a small

island, a patch of territorialised land, from which to encounter and observe the incessant

becoming of life. Like earlier calls to rematerialize geography (Anderson & Wylie, 2009),

worlding and worldly futuring hint at a remaining desire for an ordering, a cohesion, and a

consistency, amidst the post-phenomenological argument for process and hybridity. World is

a pulling-back, however temporary, from disintegrative logics. If all else is in flux, as per the

absence of transcendental terms of orientation, at least there is still a world or worlds from

which to orient ourselves, and from which to build a future. Here, world is, paradoxically,

both an element of and a securing against ontologies of becoming. From within this paradox,

worldly futuring is alluring precisely because it presents the promise of a life-vest in the

porosity of becoming.

3.2 Affirmation 2: world is shared

World is never a solitary endeavour. For Hannah Arendt, worldlessness is the reduction of the

social individual into the private, solitary components of existence. Public life is the

prerequisite for a having a "place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others" (Arendt,

1976, p. 475). Loneliness, by contrast, is the experience of worldlessness, of not "belon[ing]

to the world at all." (1976, p. 475) Geographers dedicated to worldly futuring would likely

denounce the human-centricity alongside the centrality of 'recognition' in Arendt's public

worlding, but would maintain the emphasis on worlding as a matter of collectivity (Sultana,

forthcoming), however fragile. Worlding, as an active proposition, entails first and foremost

the coming-together of objects, forces, and bodies into a capacity for affective affordance. It

presents precisely the unavoidable point at which any object, force, or body ceases to have an

individual life and enters into the sphere of collective becoming. Worlds are always instances

of co-existence, of instantaneous presence and absence, and of multiple agential forces

participating in the emergence of worldliness. There are only "*common* worlds" (Braun,

2009, p. 31; italics added). Without relationality, without becoming-*with*, there would be no

world.

3.3 Affirmation 3: world is meaningful

Worlding has a contested relation to 'meaning', 'signification', and 'representation'.

Influenced by non-representational theory, these have come to be challenged as categories

over-determined by social constructivism. The latter, in this argument, centralises symbolic

order as "the ideas and meanings cited by and projected onto […] bodies, habits, practices

and behaviours," (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 5) and takes this order as central to how

people make sense of the world, come to act in it, and justify their actions. As a result, "too

often word and world get segued together." (Dewsbury, 2010, p. 148) Instead, refusing the

separation between world and meaning, worlding and worldly futuring attend to the

immanent actions and interactions that make up worlds, taking "meaning and value as

'thought-in-action'" (Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 6). Dethroned, symbolism and meaning

are now simply a part, rather than the driver, of the ongoing movement and action that makes

up worlds.

Critically, meaning does not disappear from worlding's agenda. Its coming-into-being, grammar, and functionality is instead titled away from human cognition and intentional activity, away from the certainty and calculability of a symbolic order, and towards the registers of more-than-human mixture of performances, actions, objects, and affects. For instance, Thrift suggests that "objects are increasingly allowed their own place in the solicitations of a meaningful world." (Thrift, 2004, p. 49) Likewise, for Dewsbury, bodily events need to be taken "as an opening up of meaningful spaces and a meaningful world" (James, as cited in Dewsbury, 2010, p. 147). Worlding displaces a concept (meaning, representation, signification), but lets it come back in, via the backdoor, under the guise of alternate terms (body, affect, sense). A world is still able to (must still be able to) be thought, to be conceived, to be sensed; it is still a "regime of the thinkable", a "question of phenomenality" (Dewsbury, 2010, p. 148, 149). Indeed, worlding signals a move towards a 'metaphysics of feelings' where the "meaning of the World is felt rather than logically deduced through the operations of reason" (Palmer, 2020, p. 258). Worlds continue to present, in the last instance, the possibility of signification.

3.4 Circles: Mechanisms of immunisation

Worldly futuring aligns these three affirmations – world as (meta)stabilising, sharing, meaning-making – with the promise of futurity. Worldly futuring is alluring insofar that it presents us with the promise of worlds to find meaning in, to hold onto, to share in, or to arrive at. By logical extension, the lack of one or more of these affirmations poses the threat of worldless futures. Before we venture into this terrain of worldlessness, via Heidegger and his reluctant heirs, we need to consider that while worldly futuring is not a singular process – marked as it is by varying theoretical legacies and political trajectories – what holds it

together is the implicit commitment to immunising itself against this challenge of worldless

futures. What is protected against is not the undoing of worlds directly, but the annulation or

absence of the affirmations ((meta)stability, commonality, meaning) that underpin them.

Worldly futuring functions as a mechanism that renders inoperative the "violent undoing of

meaning," "the loss of identity and coherence", and the cancellation or impossibility of

being-with (Edelman, 2004, p. 132). To activate this immunisation, worldly futuring pursues

mechanisms of making productive, rendering harmless, or blocking worldlessness.

These work across one or more of the following acts. The first act transforms worldlessness

into a resource for new worlds. This act accepts worldlessness – e.g. the possibility of a

climate-apocalyptic world-without-us – but only to the extent that it can be resolved as an

exit; death as the re-birth of life (e.g. Gabrys, 2018; Tsing, 2015). The second act operates

according to an alternative logic: rather than making-productive worldlessness, it streamlines

it in order to render it harmless. Worldlessness, such as a being ontologically without-world,[i]

is contained within a historically-determined situation rather than as an ontological position.

By this logic of containment, worldly futuring can co-exist with worldlessness without its

project being functionally threatened. The third act is both the most common and most

resolute of all three: the uptake of a series of ontological and epistemological principles and

concepts that render worldlessness illegible. As a result, the possibility of worldlessness (i.e.

the threat of radical instability, meaninglessness, and isolation) simply does not enter into the

vocabulary and imaginations of worlding (e.g. Collard et al., 2015; Thrift, 2011). In

overemphasising the possibility and desirability of future worlds, worldlessness is unthought

and unthinkable.

Three mechanisms of immunisation, then: resolution, containment, and blockage. Each time, we may argue following Derrida, the word 'world' – in our case, 'future world' – functions as a defence mechanism destined "to protect us against the infantile but infinite anxiety of the fact that *there is not the world*, that nothing is less certain than the world itself, that there is perhaps no longer a world" (Derrida, 2011, pp. 265-266). We return to this claim below. For now, what is important is how, collectively, these mechanisms enable what Derrida elsewhere refers to as the 'circular'. Through mechanisms of immunisation, it is hoped, world will always return to world, like "the roundness of a rotating movement, the rondure of a return to self […] toward the origin itself" (Derrida, 2005, pp. 10-11) This is its autotelic nature: like a circle, it curves around, only to coincide with itself, to close itself: "the completion, the fullness and unity (The one) of the circle." (Li, 2007, p. 145; Odello, 2017) The origin and end are tied together (Derrida, 2005). In worldly futuring, world beckons both that which may be critiqued (present world), and that which has rid itself from the critiqued, from the world it has been (future world). These worlds are therefore constitutively intertwined: "the world's welcoming (of critique of the given world) already provides the first fruits of a possible (and even more welcoming) world that is yet to come. […] the world welcomes critique of the given in order to welcome itself as the (name of the) possible." (Barber, 2016, p. 182) The productive relation between realised and possible worlds, their implied analogy, enables 'worlds' to survive as the beacon of possibility. However much it may be critiqued, world always returns to itself, like a "circular eternity" (Derrida, 2005, p. 15).

Worldly futuring takes pleasure in this promise of an eternal return to worlds, in this being immanent to itself. As long as there are worlds, there will remain (the promise of) meaning, commonality, and forms of (meta)stability. But whether circles actually achieve this return,

coming out of it unscathed, is for Derrida a different question. He reminds us that, in turning

around itself, the circle has always already derailed itself. He considers it a 'lure' because it

"must allow itself to be traversed by an alterity that structurally constitutes it." (Odello, 2017,

p. 151) From this viewpoint, worldly futuring is both dependent on modes of worldlessness

for its power, if only to resolve, contain, or block them, and is threatened by them. As its

constitutive other, worldlessness haunts the edifice of worldly futuring itself. This threat of

worldlessness, the next section discusses, brings us away from the terrain of circles, and into

that of their sad or violent distortion.

4 ABSENT WORLDS, ENDING WORLDS

So far, this paper has traced the diffuse habit of worldly futuring, alongside the affirmations –

future (meta)stability, commonality, and meaning – that co-constitute it. Worldly futuring is

composed by the promise of circularity: of, finally, arriving home in a world. Enacting on this

promise by way of mechanisms of immunisation (resolution, containment, blockage),

worldlessness appears as a threat to be cast off. But the threat of worldlessness is not so easily

removed – it plagues any project of worldly futuring. Taking seriously the challenge of

worldlessness forces a number of questions into view around the consideration of 'future

worlds' as possible, and as desirable.

Martin Heidegger was one of the first philosophers to explicitly engage the possibility of

worldlessness. We have already briefly seen above how Heidegger, in *The Fundamental

Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995), produces a comparative investigation into worldly access:

"the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming" (Heidegger, 1995,

p. 176). Both the stone and the animal, in Heidegger's framing, are without world, but this

withoutness takes on a particular form in each case. The stone is without world in its having "no possible access to anything else around it, anything that it might attain or possess as such" (1995, p. 197). Lying upon earth, the stone never 'touches' or 'senses' it. Thrown into a ditch, and at the mercy of external force, it simply sinks until it's lying on the bottom. The animal, by contrast, is without world not because of an inherent inaccessibility to world, but as the result of its accessibility being one of internal absorption. Heidegger explains this via the example of bees. He acknowledges that bees are intent in the particular routes they follow from blossom to blossom, in want of honey, but he adds the question: has "the bee recognized the honey as present?" (1995, p. 241) Because it is incapable of accessing honey *as honey*, the animal lives in what he calls 'captivation': the inward-facing absorption in which, "driven from one drive to the other," (1995, p. 249) there is no apprehension of the world that constitutes it. For a lizard lying on a rock, a rock is "not given for the lizard as rock, in such a way that it could inquire into its mineralogical constitution for example." (1995, p. 197) Animality sustains only "an instinctual and subservient capacity for the same;" (1995, p. 240) it behaves, rather than apprehends. In short, what the stone lacks in access to the world tout court, the animal lacks in *rational* access. By contrast, humans have world insofar that they do not remain enclosed by their environment – having "access to entities as such and in their Being" (Derrida, 1989, p. 51), they are able to inquire into, and form, worlds.

Heidegger's thesis – that the possibility of access to world is determined metaphysically by one's status as stone, animal, or human – has long served as a point of departure for varying investigations into the relation between worlds, objects, and (non)human life. The logic of worldly futuring we have been describing in this paper challenges the idea of "human-exceptionalist Heideggerian worlding" (Haraway, 2016, p. 11). The animal, nor the stone, are ever without world. Instead, they are embedded within the richness of world: what Haraway

calls the "web of always-too-much connection" (2016, p. 11). Worlding ceases to be species- or subject-specific and becomes the generalised logic of (non)life.

Derrida equally departs from Heidegger's taxonomy, and would agree with theorists of worlding that the distinctions found therein are, partially, metaphysically and ethically defective, acknowledging that they are underpinned by "a certain anthropocentric or even humanist teleology." (Derrida, 1989, p. 55) However, Derrida's response it to pull the taxonomy into a reverse direction. Extending and complicating a metaphysical claim made elsewhere in Heidegger's work – that human Being-in-the-World is always uncanny because its relation to a world is never fully familiar or secure (Gaston, 2013) –ii Derrida argues that it is not worldliness, but worldlessness itself, that permeates all (non)life. He writes that "the worlds in which we live are different to the point of the monstrosity of the unrecognizable, of the un-similar, of the unbelievable, of the non-similar" (Derrida, 2011, p. 266). This radical alterity, what he calls "the abyssal un-shareable," (2011, p. 266) is a difference that is uncrossable. Its nature is that of a terrifying cavity "incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge, an isthmus, all attempts at communication, translation, trope, and transfer that the desire for a world or the want of a world, the being wanting a world will try to pose, impose, propose, stabilize." (Derrida, 2011, pp. 8-9) This is "the time of the inexplicable; […] an unworldly or unworlding time, a diachronic splintering which resists the integrative nature of representation." (Harrison, 2010, p. 172) Faced with the alterity of the other, there is no ontological ground required for the constitution of a shared world (Végsö, 2020). All we are left with is the relation to the other *as other*: the disorienting opening onto worldlessness. Derrida (2011, p. 266) stresses that this disorienting experience constitutes the impossibility of not just *the* world (singular), but *any* world (plural). "There is no world, there are only islands." (Derrida, 2011, p. 9) This insistence of the constant and fundamental

worldlessness of human (and animal) life complicates not only Heidegger's human as world-

forming, but, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, presents a threat to the securities

of (meta)stability, commonality, and meaning promised by worldly futuring. We are drawn

into an alterity that cannot be easily bridged, worked-away, in the construction of new

worlds; it is world-destituting – 'apocalyptic' even (Derrida, 2008, p. 12) – rather than world-

constituting. We cannot, then, take worldly futuring – and its affirmation of commonality,

meaning, and (meta)stability – for granted. We are compelled to ask of worldly futuring:

what happens to uncrossable differences when we seek out 'common' worlds? What is

forgotten, both existentially and politically, in the immunisation against the unavoidable but

radical undoing of commonality, and by extension, of (meta)stability and meaning, that

marks being-with? What is lost in the implicit desire to sidestep, rather than confront, the

problem of the unshared and unshareable that resists exactly such sidestepping? And are the

infinite differences Derrida speaks of not merely displaced only to re-emerge elsewhere?

Derrida himself refuses to live up to the challenges presented by his own emphasis on an

originary worldlessness. He carves out his own tools of immunisation: in his view, we need

to act *as if* there are worlds (Derrida, 2011). Even if the effort will ultimately fall short, it is

only by perpetuating the fiction of worlding, he argues, that we are able to sustain the

multiplicity of possible worlds. To glimpse what it might mean to circumvent this

recuperative attempt, we need to look to yet another reworking of Heidegger's taxonomy of

(un)worldliness.

For Calvin Warren (2018) and Tyrone Palmer (2020), worldlessness and world-poverty are

not simply the condition of objects and animals (Heidegger), nor of all (non)human life

(Derrida), but are lines that cut through each of these categories. These lines are not simply

metaphysical, but thoroughly historical: they emerged at particular point in history – the

violent arrival of the transatlantic slave trade. The 'foundational violence', to use

Hawthorne's term (2019, p. 5), that marked the European enslavement of Africans from the

16th century onwards is as much ontological as it is material. Imported, sold, and forced to

work on the plantation, the black subject became literally severed from their physical place in

the world. Scholarship in Black geographies has been essential in foregrounding what

McKittrick (2017, p. 98) calls this "nowhere of black life": labouring under bondage in the

plantation economy, black working bodies are those 'without' – "without land or home,

without ownership of self" (McKittrick, 2011, p. 948). Denied a geography of its own, the

black worker is an "a-spatial figure" (Bledsoe, 2015, p. 324).

Rendered placeless, this figure is detached from their very status as world-forming humans

(Wynter, 2003), "bordering on something between the worldlessness of the object and the

world poorness of the animal" (Warren, 2018, p. 180). Worldlessness became the condition

of "quintessential non-being" (Bledsoe, 2015, p. 325): the thingified (Warren, 2018), the

commodified (McKittrick, 2014), the animalised (Jackson, 2020), the waste (Wright, 2021).

As Wright (2021) argues, humanness and Blackness are mutually exclusive. Blackness may

be 'human' biologically, but not ontologically; it has 'existence' but no 'being' (Warren,

2018). This "refusal […] of both black humanness and the praxis of being human"

(McKittrick, 2017, p. 98) enacts a violent fracture of Heidegger's world-forming category of

the human: on the one hand, the European human as capable of world-forming; on the other,

the abjection of black humanity – or more precisely, black *in*humanity – as an emblem of the

unworldly, as that "without the capacity for World." (Palmer, 2020, p. 260) Enslaved,

objectified, and commodified within an antiblack world, blackness has little hope of gaining

access to, let alone forming, worlds. Starting from these ontological lines drawn by the

concept of world involves stepping away from the assumed universality of world-forming we

encounter in worldly futuring. Despite the latter's insistence on universalising 'worlding' to

all objects and (non)human life, there is still an overlooked outside.

But this is more than an ontological erasure. Within its exclusion, blackness forms the

constitutive outside of the world, serving as an 'anchor' that makes it possible (Bledsoe,

2015). While in Heidegger the worldless stone and world-poor animal were operationalised

in this manner, here it is blackness that functions as a ontological outside from which to erect

the Human, giving form to world by tracing what it is not. Without such a limit-concept,

world would be all-encompassing to the point that it would fail to provide any worthwhile

conceptual labour. This is the foundational paradox of blackness-world relations: blackness is

both erased from, and enables, worldliness.

Rather than trying to resolve this paradox by tracing the possibility of future shared worlds,

thereby restoring relational capacity, a number of scholars – but by no means all –[iii] within

the black tradition take blackness and world as irreconcilable (Barber, 2016; Palmer, 2020;

Warren, 2018; Wilderson III, 2010). Instead of seeking inclusion, they claim their without-

ness as their own. To those already occupying it, the space of worldlessness loses its position

as the ontological threat it had been in Heidegger where stone and animal present the

daunting possibility, metaphysically and historically, of a withdrawal away from the

authenticity, from the 'extendability', of human Dasein into "the face of the 'not-at-home'"

(Derrida, cited in Gaston, 2013, p. 78; Végsö, 2020). It becomes, by distinction, the terrain

from which to deepen the rupture: the task of ending this world. This should not be conflated

with surrendering in the face of terror, with those modes of thought, carefully argued against

by McKittrick (2011), that settle on black death and the foreclosure of black geographies.[iv]

Instead, this call argues that because there is no earlier capacity for world-making to restore

or redeem (Bledsoe, 2015), only within the unimaginable act of destroying this world – a

world so invested in, and reliant upon, black worldlessness – may liberation become

imaginable. But these calls should also not be confused with the arrival of a revelation, as in

Christian eschatologies, that would finally separate out the Evil from the Good, or with a

concrete material end of the earth. By contrast, it signals a radical uncertainty, an event which

lacks the language to be articulated (Palmer, 2020; Wilderson III, 2018). As Palmer (2020, p.

252) writes, paraphrasing Aimé Césaire, "All that is known of the End of the World is that it

is 'the only thing' worth beginning".

At odds with the worldly futuring we have been detailing in this paper, the call for the end of

the world is not one for a future coming-together, along mutated paths, of objects,

(human/animal) subjects, affects, representations, and technologies, into (meta)stable

configurations that would circumvent the horrors of our present. Instead, it opens the thought

of "a refusal of relationality" that deepens the irreconcilability of world and blackness

(Colebrook, 2019, p. 185). The productive desire of building new worlds is replaced by an

altogether negative force: a passion towards undoing. As such, there is little promise of future

meaning. The call limits itself to termination only. There are no future worlds (singular or

plural) to be imagined or carved out since 'world' is no longer the neutral – let alone

inspiring – nomer of futurity it had been in worldly futuring. Rather, there is only the impulse

towards abolition: "the end of all possible worlds, the end of worlding as a project of Human

ontogenesis." (Palmer, 2020, p. 267; Barber, 2016) Calls for the end of the world do not

immunise against worldlessness, as worldly futuring might. Worldlessness is not resolved in

a dialectical gesture towards novel worlds, nor is it contained within a manageable mutation,

or simply blocked out by overlooking its presence. Instead, it confronts worldlessness head-

on, letting it rush in from all directions, undoing not just Heidegger's clean taxonomies, but threatening the premise of future worlds itself. The circular return to other worlds has been broken up, and loses its appeal as a logic of futurity. In its place we encounter only the ruins of a world that is no longer.

5 CONCLUSION: WORLDLESS FUTURITY

This paper has unpicked what it calls 'worldly futuring': the diffuse tendency towards presenting 'worlds' as the horizon of future possibility. While diffuse – with geographers rarely conceptually unpicking the foundations and implications of their calls for 'making new worlds', 'enacting novel worlds', and 'imagining worlds to come' – worldly futuring, this paper has argued, undertakes significant conceptual and political work. The paper started from the insight that the gesture away from current world towards 'future worlds' does not, in itself, signal an improvement of conditions. Its allure lies instead with the three affirmations that underpin it: the promise of (meta)stability, commonality, and meaning. Whilst prioritising these affirmations, worldly futuring both excludes and immunises itself against the possibility of worldlessness. The absence or active undoing of (meta)stability, commonality, or meaning, as a result, are barred from narratives of futuring.

But what do we lose in prioritising worldliness over worldlessness as the site of futurity? The central argument of the paper has been that working-away worldlessness is not inherently possible, necessary, or even 'good'. To make this argument, the paper first turned to Derrida to argue that worldlessness, as the experience of the encounter with radical alterity, can not be easily, nor should it be, cast away. The paper raised questions regarding the dangers of hoping to remove, by default, the incommensurable, unshareable, and incommunicable from

aspirations towards the future. It then paid attention to calls for the 'end of the world' within

black studies, asking: is worldly futuring ever a source of inspiration for those who have,

historically, been expelled from the category of world-forming humanity? If, as work on

Black geographies has poignantly shown, blackness continues to be cast outside of, in order

to ontologically anchor, white space-making and world-building, then we must ask: for whom

does an emphasis on the creation of worlds, or on the 'pluriverse', present a tenable horizon

of emancipation? Rather than hoping to carve out a space of agency within ontological

erasure, one may find inspiration in another erasure: "a total end of the world" (Wilderson III,

2018, p. 51; Wright, 2021). Refusing to cure the world, or establish new ones, this call

weaponises blackness' position of exteriority (Wilderson III, 2018). In their own ways,

Derrida's worldless alterity and calls for an ending to present and future worlds work against

the erasure of worldlessness as sites of experience and the political. They show how the

privileging of meaning, commonality, and (meta)stability may, in fact, get in the way of

radically different futures. What we encounter is a unique counterpoint – the necessity or

desirability of worldless futures – to geographers' calls to believe in the potential presented

by novel worlds.

How geographers may respond to the challenge of this counterpoint remains an open

question. One approach would be to widen the scope of futurity to include both novel worlds

and world-endings. We encounter this already within those approaches to a geographical

ethics that aim to undo certain worlds whilst hinting at the possibility of more nourishing

others. The possible danger in such a dual account of futurity lies, first, in sublimating and

redirecting the threat of worldlessness, and in doing so, rendering it once again harmless in

the search of an equilibrium (Palmer, 2020), placing it in service of the comforting image of a

'better world' (Wilderson III, 2018). Second, in remaining attached to worlding, there

remains the risk of reproducing the violence of the constitutive exclusion that worlding always requires.

An alternative response to the challenge of worldless futures would be to stay with the threats it entails. This would necessarily involve taking worldly futuring not as an independent problematic that can be resolved, but as one component of a wider emphasis on productivity, novelty, and generativity that geographers have argued permeates certain strands of geographical thought (Dekeyser et al., 2022; Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021; Harrison, 2015; Rose et al., 2022). In light of geographers' discussions of 'affirmationism', worldly futuring is both constitutive of, and constituted by, the wider disciplinary "inclination to embrace – ontologically, politically, and/or ethically – the productive forces of inciting, sustaining, and cultivating existence" (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2021, p. 318). For that reason, the ontological and political embrace of worldlessness, as the break with producing and sustaining worlds, needs to be accompanied by a deeper hesitation in the face of affirmationism. Perhaps then, we should be wary of 'applying' worldlessnes in service of world-building and world-writing, merging it seamlessly into the canon of human geography. Instead, we may need to deepen the force that propels it: an outside that is proud of its excluded position as "a contestation that effaces." (Foucault & Blanchot, 1987, p. 22) Not the comfort of circularity, then, where one world can always be replaced by one or more others, but a confrontation with the unknown and unknowable, with the unshareable and the incoherent. We may need to follow Derrida who, after a comical passage in which he recalls being seen naked by his own cat and describes it as an unworldly experience of the wholly other, tells us that there is only one step he can take: "I am (following) it, the apocalypse" (Derrida, 2008, p. 12). Whether any such pursuit of worldlessness will engender conceptual or political fruits remains (and will likely continue to remain) unknown. The question is, instead, whether we have any other option.

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i I return to this below within the argument for blackness as the ontological exclusion from the 'world'.

ii I wish to thank [ANONYMISED] for drawing this connection.

iii As King (2019, p. 17) has carefully observed, there remains a tension between those scholars for whom the Black takes up a degraded position on "the bottom rung of the human chain" (e.g. Wynter) and those who take the Black as outside of the human chain altogether

(e.g. Wilderson III, Palmer, Warren), occupying the space of Fanon's 'zone of nonbeing'.

This tension, I would argue, translates into another one playing out within, and beyond, Black

geographies scholarship: between those who emphasise Black world-making (see Hawthorne,

2019; Hirsch & Jones, 2021), and those who settle with the impossibility of Black wordliness

(see Warren, 2018; Wright, 2021), leading to a differing conceptual horizon for political

praxis.

[iv] Here my argument departs from those studying Black geographies for whom it is precisely

those arguments that take the black as a 'zone of nonbeing' (e.g. Palmer, 2020; Warren,

2018), and thus, that centre the impossibility of black world-making, that "efface a Black

sense of place" by overemphasising the body in anti-Black violence (Hawthorne, 2019, p.5).

My argument is closer to that of Palmer (2020) for whom calls for world-ending are precisely

the opposite of "a reading of Black life as […] reducible to racism, violence, and death"

(Hawthorne, 2019, p. 5). For Palmer, these calls function as an antithesis to giving-up. By

refusing to accept the claim of "renewal and transformation – that there will and can always

be another world" that drives the anti-Blackness of the world, its aim is precisely to identify

and work-away black death (Palmer, 2020, pp. 266-267). Without this labour, Warren (2018)

suggests, ending black death remains but a dream.