

Here Comes the Sun!
Toward a Critical Ecological Rhetoric for the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

The geologic epoch of the Anthropocene, or the age of human domination, is a metacondition animated by unprecedented planetary change. Global warming, regular mass extinction events, and ecological disaster wrought from human activity spell crisis for all planetary life while exacerbating dominative relations among the human species. Thus, the Anthropocene may be viewed as an age wherein spheres of precarity widen and (in)direct impacts of ecological disaster differentially harm populations predicated upon their predetermined social location under dominative governmental, economic, and social structures. This metacondition poses a challenge for activists, critical scholars, and critical pedagogues working toward social emancipation.

To interpret and combat the complex and scalar logics of power in the Anthropocene, this critical/cultural, rhetoric, and performance project advances a turn toward what I term critical ecological rhetoric. Drawing inspiration from Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* and Raymie McKerrow's critical rhetoric – two modes of theorizing which sought to articulate dominative relations under the metacondition of neoliberal hegemony – this critical ecosophical turn seeks to address power as dispersed across material, social, and psychological registers and as complexly entangled within the metacondition of the Anthropocene. An integral element of critical ecological rhetorical practice is demystifying the presence, construction, and defense of borders imposed within and between ecological registers, as such bordered constructs of difference serve to justify violent domination while concealing ecological logics of interconnectedness.

Across three case studies which differently privilege one of three ecological registers, I demonstrate the dynamism of critical ecological rhetoric. In “Pyropolitical Phoenix,” materialist, elemental implications of governmentality in the urban ecology of Phoenix,

Arizona are examined as a rhetorical circulation synecdochic of repressive relationships in urban ecologies under worsening conditions of climate change. In “I’m Real When I Shop My Face,” the circulation of glitch feminism by pop artist Sophie across digital media ecologies is examined to demonstrate capacities for queer worldmaking within cisnormative algorithmic architectures. In “All My Happiness Is Gone,” I examine my ecology of depression as enmeshed in complex genetic, social, and material entanglement.

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CHAPTER 1

TOWARD A CRITICAL ECOLOGICAL RHETORIC FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

In 1989, Raymie McKerrow sought to advance a critical rhetoric that demystifies conditions of domination. Privileging the role of the discursive in shaping dominative relations, McKerrow argued, “Discourse is the tactical dimension of the operation of power in its manifold relations at all levels of society, within and between its institutions, groups and individuals.”¹ For McKerrow, who drew heavily upon Michel Foucault’s treatment of power relations, the discursive was the power-laden connective tissue organizing material and social realities. If the critical rhetorician could discover how power weaves through discourse and disentangle the ruling class’ mystifying rhetorical practices, then they could perform a truth about power’s role in social organization and, thus, speak back to it with emancipatory purpose.

This emancipatory volition would also require a dialectical counterbalance which demystifies the potential for newer forms of domination to arise in efforts toward freedom and justice. Thus, McKerrow’s critical rhetoric pairs its critique of domination with a self-reflexive critique of freedom, one that “turns back on itself even as it promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations.”² In doing so, McKerrow captures how domination operates as a relational dynamic reified not by the qualities of bodies, but through the discursive construction, maintenance, and defense of hierarchical difference between bodies. It therefore became the task of the critical rhetorician to not simply critique the discourses which uphold domination in a given context, but to look for

¹ Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 98.

² *Ibid.*, 91.

dominative capacities that may arise elsewhere and/or within themselves. While McKerrow's initial arguments have been developed and critiqued with good reason, a point to which I will turn later in this chapter, they provided a broad theoretical platform from which investigations about the role of rhetoric, in the maintenance of power and the capacity for rhetoric to challenge power, could flourish.

That same year, French post-structuralist philosopher Félix Guattari published the political manifesto, *The Three Ecologies*.³ In it, he confronted the problem of “Integrated World Capitalism” (IWC)— a term we can liken to globalized capitalism, late capitalism, or post-industrial capitalism—with an ethico-political articulation intended to meet IWC at its level of complexity: the three ecologies, comprised of the *environmental ecology*, *social ecology*, and *psychological ecology*. While a concept of ecology may be most readily associated with the biological science seeking to interpret the organic distributions of an environment, Guattari abstracts these scientific logics to account for the relationships between all manner of matter and meaning. For example, according to Guattari's ecological philosophy (or, ecosophy), a hegemonic ontology of mind-body dualism, or the persistence of a social construct of race, would be considered as enmeshed in ecological processes as are environmental concerns of organic distribution. Against ecologically harmful stratification, the qualities and intensities of the three ecological registers are not discrete, but are complexly networked and occurring at different scales – from the subatomic to the cosmological.

Guattari's ecosophical model seeks to demonstrate how IWC has evolved in such a way as to bend ecological capacities toward its own logics, a dominative process which contains the acceleration of planet death as its largest scale implication. Literally materializing

³ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989).

Karl Marx's claim that, under capitalism, "all that is solid melts into air,"⁴ IWC produces crises of injustice across the three ecological registers: its extractive, destructive, and wasteful treatment of earthly matter has resulted in the fundamental alteration of the planet's atmosphere toward increased and differential unlivability for most of the planet's species; it has organized interpersonal and global social relations among human existents through dynamics defined by exploitation, consumption, and competition; and it has rendered the hyperindividualism of the consumer subject hegemonic through a near monopolization of, for example, mass media, public education, and sweeping spatial development. Addressing capitalism's viral integration across ecological registers, Guattari outlined a critical ecosophical project at the end of a world by embracing the solidarities inscribed in a recognition of ecology's interconnectedness while outlining a dynamic critique of human regimes of power which seek to sow division for personal consolidation.

For both scholars in 1989, from different realms of knowledge production and toward different ends, the objective of their respective work was to engage the advent of newly mutated articulations of power with the theoretical tools necessary to demystify and, in turn, dismantle them. We can, perhaps in hindsight, interpret McKerrow and Guattari's theoretical advocacies as in direct response to the rapid advance of neoliberal hegemony in the 1980s. Political theorist Jodi Dean defines neoliberalism as "a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action," one which redefines "social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations," while holding "that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets."⁵ In practice, neoliberal austerity

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin, 1848/2002).

⁵ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics* (Duke University Press, 2009), 51.

measures—in the form of governmental projects such as Reaganomics and Thatcherism—began to shape the social organization of the planet’s most uninhibited colonizers, while an economy of transnational business built on exploitation by these empires began to redefine labor practices throughout the world. That an ideology of neoliberalism situates the liberal subject’s freedom as an ever-present potential under capitalism, and one which rests upon an individual’s supposed capacity to successfully navigate a marketplace of free-reign capitalism, the structural machinations and implications of capital are less obvious to the liberal subject trained from early childhood to internalize their consumer and worker roles in a competitive marketplace. Systemic privilege and disadvantage—the capacity to enable the unbridled consolidation of wealth, resources, and influence, including the outsourcing of forced labor and ecological destruction—are concerns which extend beyond the purview of a subject reliant upon strategic navigation within a system of capital to survive. Steadily, shifts toward capitalist subsumption of much about earthly existence arrived alongside the seeding of a now largely naturalized mythos that not only is capitalism the best option, but, as Margaret Thatcher historically asserted, “there is no alternative.”

The development of neoliberalism into a hegemonic economic logic provided a system of innovations for the ruling class’ dominative techniques, and these are clearly reflected in the critiques posed by McKerrow and Guattari. For McKerrow, power circulated via discourse in ways not immediately obvious to the subject, as neoliberal subjects are themselves unavoidably bound up and defined through dominative discourse. It thus became the work of the critical rhetorician to demystify the otherwise mystifying conditions of domination while self-reflexively interrogating how the rhetorician themselves may be inadvertently (re)articulating the very logics of power which they seek to dismantle. For Guattari, power circulated ecologically through and across ecological registers. It thus

became the work of the ecosophical activist to move beyond exclusively environmentalist orientations to ecological justice and address power through a widened sphere of concerns, including matters of social worlds and psychology. For both scholars, power under neoliberalism was viewed as a strategically elusive, differentially distributed force with governing logics not immediately obvious to the subject, a system only further entrenched in social life through a stunning ability to adapt to changing conditions by absorbing all rising social concerns not directly harmful to the economic structure.

Roughly thirty years on, Thatcher's assertion that there is no alternative to capitalism has become so sedimented that Fredric Jameson famously argued that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine an end to capitalism.⁶ And, for many liberal subjects, the end of the world is becoming easier and easier to think. Deepened wealth and resource inequality, newer shades to the mystifying tactics of neoliberal subjectivation, and worsening planetary ecological conditions wrought from extractive industrial practices structure the shape of power and mass death in the 21st century. Yet, downstream from such rapidly reshaped and unprecedented material conditions, McKerrow and Guattari's critiques have managed a sustained relevance alongside alterations and adaptations to their advancements. For example, over the past thirty years much-needed interventions seeking to center marginalized histories and perspectives in critical rhetoric has demonstrably reshaped the practice toward deeper emphases on the co-constitutive dynamics between rhetoric, power, and intersectional identity, which will be discussed later. Ecosophy, too, gained significant transdisciplinary traction due to the ontoepistemological rupture imposed by the advent of the concept "Anthropocene," a term coined in 2000 by

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The seeds of time* (Columbia University Press, 1994).

scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stormer to define our historic shift into a geologic epoch “of the human,” one characterized by the alteration of earth systems due to human organic domination, and which is animated by such large scale ecological crises as climate change, mass extinction, and earth strata of plastic waste.⁷

It is with an appreciation for the intellectual, activist, and pedagogical capacities of critical rhetoric and ecosophy, and against a backdrop of the Anthropocene that I seek to outline a distinctly ecological form to critical rhetoric, a critical ecological rhetoric. This mutation of a critical rhetoric will take seriously McKerrow’s initial call for a critique of domination and a critique of freedom while reorienting theoretical and practical concerns of a critical rhetoric in accordance with the shifting logics of power in the Anthropocene. Because it can no longer be so simply argued that the social is downstream from the material (global warming discloses that it also works the other way around), any broad examination of contemporary power formations must reckon with how power intertwines with the ever-changing material context of the Anthropocene. Thus, the requirement for a critical ecological rhetoric should rest upon the assumption that the Anthropocene, both the ecological crises defining the epoch and the potential for thought and action that the term helps disclose, should prompt a reformulation to how we understand and resist dominative power relations. Outlining a logic to this necessary reformulation is the project of a critical ecological rhetoric.

To offer an example of how the broad workings of dominative power relations have changed in the Anthropocene, consider that in 1989 Guattari’s concept of IWC was meant to describe a then-contemporary economic situation wherein capitalist exploitation

⁷ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "Global change newsletter," *The Anthropocene* 41 (2000): 17-18.

intensified as a globalized project alongside the most widespread effort to naturalize the market paradigm among consumer subjects up until that point. While the abstract structure to capitalism may have changed very little since Guattari's IWC framework, the context of Anthropocene marks a significant recontextualization for how to interpret the economic formation. In the Anthropocene, IWC has transitioned from a process of unfettered economic absorption to a process which maintains itself within the destructive repercussions of that absorption, surviving in the face of a planet death that it both wrought and continues to accelerate. It is a process which will continue until capitalism is either abolished or until the diminishment of human life renders its reification impossible. In this way, a critical analysis of power in the Anthropocene would call us to more vividly interpret dominative relations of capital as defined through differential proximity to death—a formation some have aptly referred to as *necrotic capitalism*.⁸

Akin to Achille Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics," a term itself extending Michel Foucault's concept of "biopolitics"⁹ to describe how "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die,"¹⁰ a theory of necrocapitalism seeks to describe how "contemporary capitalist practices contribute to dispossession and 'the subjugation of life to the power of death' in a variety of contexts."¹¹ Fusing concerns of imperialism, colonialism, and global capitalism, Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's theory addresses how dominative state and corporate structures collude to produce death worlds, citing the "the organization and management of global violence

⁸ M. I. Asma, "Prologue," *On Necrocapitalism* (blog), WordPress, April 10, 2020, <https://necrocapitalism.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/prologue/>

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality, vol. 2: The use of pleasure* (Vintage, 2012).

¹⁰ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019): 66.

¹¹ Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "Necrocapitalism," *Organization Studies* 29, no. 12 (2008): 1542.

through the increasing use of privatized military forces and conflicts over resources between transnational corporations and indigenous communities”¹² as prime examples of the necrocapitalist form. It is not difficult to see how the crisis-laden conditions of the Anthropocene render such death worlds more inclusive. As ecological disasters wrought from anthropogenic climate change, oil spills, and deforestation accelerate mass extinction rates and bodily exposure to unlivable climates and conditions—consider regularly record-setting summers and winters, floods, fires, and their ensuing infrastructural effects as synecdochic of future crises—death worlds and spheres of precarity widen.

This widening is a process of differential exposure to death worlds according to the hierarchical logics which undergird a system of capitalism, wherein those most vulnerable are sacrificed (either directly or indirectly) prior to those who wield the power to escape such violence. This logic extends all the way up the social hierarchy to a billionaire ruling class who, having destroyed the earth, are now showing signs that they are more prepared to colonize space than justly address earth’s ecological crises.¹³ Critically distinct from white settler mythologies of the apocalyptic (colonial empire is generated through an apocalypse for indigenous communities), necrocapitalism is the slow, steady unfolding of endings even as specters of unshelteredness, imprisonment, and starvation loom over the subject’s capacity for productivity.

If we take seriously the altered conditions of the Anthropocene and accept that the context requires a reorientation to concepts of livability, power, solidarity, and freedom, then we would require a model which reflects the complexities of the Anthropocene to become fused with a model of critical rhetoric. That is, we would need to examine how formations

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bruno Latour, *Down to earth: Politics in the new climatic regime* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

of power, such as necrocapitalism, are expressed, maintained, and resisted through material and discursive relations.

Following many scholars of the Anthropocene, I argue that ecosophy (and thus, an ecosophical model) provides a vital lens for critical thought befitting the Anthropocene. While ecosophy's relevance may have been justified prior to the swarm of concerns wrought by the epoch (Guattari's frequently premonitory *The Three Ecologies* clearly demonstrates this), conditions of the Anthropocene now render ecosophical thought and ecosophically-inclined praxis vital to the ongoing existence of much species life on earth. That is, a response to the ecological crises of the Anthropocene necessitates a way of thinking and doing ecology which structures itself according to the interconnected dynamics between environmental, social, and psychological registers under necrocapitalism and necropolitics. Core to this project is the need to both demystify the ecological circulations of power in the Anthropocene and to create political and intellectual solidarities unlike the human species has ever required. In this sense, a critical ecological rhetoric is not only a useful lens for engaging in critical thought in the Anthropocene, it contains a liberatory politic infused with vital utopian thought. While my model for a critical ecological rhetoric will draw from the logics undergirding McKerrow and Guattari's work, it will also expand and amend some of these logics as it advances its own.

My attempt throughout the rest of this chapter—to articulate a critical ecological rhetoric—is not meant to ignore the wealth of scholarship differently confronting the same concerns. It is, rather, to outline the contours of a critical ecological rhetoric which encapsulates ideas explored across much existing scholarship in ecological rhetoric and critical rhetoric, provide a theoretical grounding upon which a critical ecological practice of rhetoric may be adopted, and to advocate for a turn toward ecology in critical rhetoric and

critical thought in ecological rhetoric. By forwarding a practice of critical ecological rhetoric, I hope to provide the framework for a critical practice, across varying levels of abstraction, which demystifies the conditions of domination and updates a critique of freedom in the context of the Anthropocene. I will do this by first reviewing relevant literature in ecosophy, critical rhetoric, and ecological rhetorics. Then, I will explicitly outline a critical ecological rhetoric and warrant its utility through an expanded articulation of the Anthropocene as context. Finally, given this recontextualization, I will freshly outline a critique of domination.

The Three Ecologies

Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* serves as the analytical model structuring the ecological orientation I advance in this essay. Here, I situate the text in relation to contemporary interdisciplinary turns toward ecology as well as more longstanding ecological knowledges, summarize Guattari's text, and amend certain elements of his three ecologies for the purposes of a critical ecological rhetoric.

No doubt, recent decades have borne witness to interdisciplinary turns toward ecological thought. Consider the extent to which intellectual investment in concepts of the Anthropocene by some of the most popular living philosophers, the popularization of ecological philosophy and philosophers outside of the academy, and transdisciplinary calls to blend the sciences with the humanities to address issues of climate change have become part and parcel of academic conferences, academic journals, and even undergraduate curricula.

Thinkers like Donna Haraway,¹⁴ Timothy Morton,¹⁵ Vandana Shiva,¹⁶ Bruno Latour,¹⁷

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *The ecological thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Vandana Shiva, *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and development* (North Atlantic Books, 2016).

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Politics of nature* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

Achille Mbembe,¹⁸ Kathryn Yusoff,¹⁹ and Elizabeth Grosz,²⁰ to name just a few prominent scholars dealing in ecosophy, have contributed to rendering the concept largely unavoidable in contemporary Western philosophical thought. Exemplifying the multitudes of intellectual investment in this turn is the striking degree to which scholars have critiqued the “Anthropocene” neologism and, in turn, revised the term to implicate the structural (rather than species-wide) forces contributing to climate change and mass extinction.²¹ It is, perhaps, not difficult to see why recent decades would see such investment in ecological philosophy as ecological conditions worsen and material devastation expands to include those composing the ivory tower, those whose privilege rested on the ongoing exploitation of Others forced beneath them on the social ladder.

Critically, histories of ecological thought extend far beyond Western projects of philosophy and find significant resonance with, among a broad host of examples, more longstanding Indigenous knowledges. For example, one parallel between contemporary ecosophy and Indigenous ecological practice can be gleaned in the Nez Perce practice of weyekin, a ritual practice of embodied listening of/with lived environments to seek sensory resonance among bodily and natural rhythms and then embodying these resonances through performance.²² Not unlike what contemporary ecosophers refer to as ecological attunement, weyekin demonstrates that ecological thought can and should be recognized as a deeply

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A billion black Anthropocenes or none* (U of Minnesota Press, 2018).

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Chaos, territory, art: Deleuze and the framing of the earth* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

²¹ Franciszek Chwałczyk, "Around the Anthropocene in Eighty Names—Considering the Urbanocene Proposition," *Sustainability* 12, no. 11 (2020): 4458.

²² Michael Salvador and Tracylee Clarke, "The Weyekin principle: Toward an embodied critical rhetoric," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2011): 243-260.

embedded cultural knowledge, rather than a Western philosophical project prompted only through ecological crisis.

While it would be antithetical to an ecosophical ontology to conceptualize ecosophy as containing either correct or incorrect strains of knowledge, it is necessary to point out a kind of irony about explorations of ecological thought in Western traditions of rhetoric: that because Western ecosophy largely arrives only in light of ecological crisis, this Western interest is, also, causally predicated upon the colonial and imperial genocide of Indigenous peoples whose ecological knowledge resists those logics which guide colonial capitalism. Therefore, to “turn” to ecological thought due only to realizations about anthropogenic climate change should also call on settler scholars to realize how planetary crises are, themselves, byproducts of genocidally violent imperialist domination and the exploitative organizing principles imposed therein. A critical historicization of ecological thought such as this should only further warrant an explicitly critical application of ecology to rhetorical practice.

Considerations of embedded cultural epistemologies and crisis-inspired trends in contemporary academia render *The Three Ecologies* a uniquely situated text through which to model a critical ecological rhetoric. For one, *The Three Ecologies* is a political manifesto that, while preceding Anthropocene discourse by more than a decade, centers issues of politics, psychological conditions, and entrenched social hierarchies in addition to environmental concerns—a justice-oriented move many contemporary ecosophers and environmentalist groups still seem to avoid. While the text is ontologically aligned with much of the thought which characterizes Guattari’s work, this ontology is translated into critical praxis in *The Three Ecologies*. Guattari himself advanced the ecosophical politics explored in the text as a policy platform during his run in France’s governor race, while his ecosophical framework

informed the structuring of his La Borde clinic, an experimental psychotherapy center co-facilitated by patients and staff that is still in practice as of this writing. That *The Three Ecologies* extends from a mutual appreciation for the need for both philosophy and praxis in efforts toward systemic change, it is organized through a relatively coherent model with room for extension and (re)modeling, and which is directed toward a conceptualization of ecological justice suited for the dominative conditions of the Anthropocene positioning it as a useful analytic for a critical ecological rhetoric.

Guattari's ecosophy, which he frames as an "ethico-political" articulation, addresses three interconnected ecological registers which have become increasingly consolidated under Integrated World Capitalism (IWC): the *environment*, *social relations*, and *psychology*. I will hereby proceed through, and occasionally amend for the purposes of a contemporary critical ecological rhetoric, the ecological model outlined in *The Three Ecologies*. My occasional amendments will, I hope, aid the ecosophical model's translation to a contemporary context while integrating convincing ecosophical advancements since 1989.

First, an *environmental ecology* is perhaps the most immediately resonant of Guattari's three registers for those primarily familiar with ecology as a biological science. An environmental ecology is concerned with the relationship between species and habitat, and with the interdependent nature of various habitats. Thus, crises of the environmental ecological register would include habitat destruction which renders species life unlivable in a particular environment. Deforestation, pollution, siphoning of fossil fuels and natural resources, and effects of climate change serve as defining examples of human environmental effects on this ecological register.

Without altering the ecological concerns at the core of this register, I believe an amendment to Guattari's notion of an *environmental ecology* which reframes this register as a

material ecology is in order. Even prior to Guattari's advancement in ecosophy, ecosophers have productively critiqued constructs of "nature" and "environment" as they can imply the existence of a difference between nature and culture or the environment and the organic matter (such as bodies) which co-compose it.²³ A shift from an *environmental ecology* and toward a *material ecology* helps to resolve the Anthropocentric logics at play in a binary thought by abstracting the register to include everything contained in the category of the material. Further, this amendment maintains a concern with planetary crises of resource extraction and climate change but may also incorporate critically relevant and intersecting concerns of, for example, bodies, vibrant matter,²⁴ hyperobjects,²⁵ earth, organisms, evolutionary change, cities, sea levels, DNA, drugs, and a consideration of material conditions such as levels of access to life-sustaining resources. Only a few of these material concerns might fold into the concerns under the still-broad "environmental" umbrella.

Second, Guattari's *social ecology* refers to the complex ecologies of social relation, ritualized practice, and organization among and between members of a social reality. While Guattari's explanation of the social ecology tends to exclude the social realities of nonhuman animals and between humans and nonhuman animals, this register should include relationalities among all existents which participate in social life. Therefore, considerations of this ecology might involve constructs of language, logic, economics, interspecies dynamics, posthuman relations, and politics which both frame how animals relate with one another and, under IWC, which categorically stratify value based upon the regulation of social constructs of difference.

²³ Raymond Williams, "Ideas of nature." *Nature: Thinking the natural* (1972).

²⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Third, an ecology of human subjectivity, or a *psychological ecology*, describes the interior network of an individual's subjective sense of self and interpretation of reality.

Considerations of the psychological ecology might include the subject's internalization of identity, understanding of body, phantasm, the passage of time, 'mysteries' of life and death,²⁶ psychoanalysis, phenomenology, spirituality, psychopolitics,²⁷ and habit. Beyond merely situating the subject within wider social and material ecological networks, the psychological ecology accounts for the ways the subject is also an ecology unto itself, bound up in complex entanglements of memory, ideology, perspective, and sense. In the context of IWC, Guattari crucially notes that our current economic formation "tends increasingly to decentre its sites of power, moving away from structures producing goods and services toward structures producing signs, syntax and—in particular, through the control which it exercises over the media, advertising, opinion polls, etc.—subjectivity."²⁸ Thus, psychological ecologies under IWC serve as sites available for immaterial colonization, challenging and opening up modes through which power's exertions may be interpreted and resisted.

While organizing ecosophy into three distinct ecologies may antithetically imply their separateness, the three ecologies should, rather, be conceptualized as an analytic which arranges the vast complexities of a single interconnected ecology into three enfolded registers, such that all things (the material, the social, and the psychological) are viewed as complexly bounded. The three registers, then, provide intersecting avenues of theoretical and practical exploration through which to interpret and demystify a site of focus, but which are always already layered and co-constitutive. An analysis employing the three ecologies

²⁶ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 22-23.

²⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Translated by Erik Butler (Verso Books, 2017).

²⁸ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 31.

would therefore attend to these relationships. Just as the turning of a kaleidoscope cyclically alters the appearance of an object, helping the viewer to orient toward that object in dynamic ways, the three ecologies offer a means to interpret the multidimensionality of the ecology that they and their site of focus are captured within.

Critical Rhetoric

In the years proceeding McKerrow's advancement of a critical rhetoric, critiques of the practice's core assumptions swiftly emerged.²⁹ One critique relevant to the development of a critical ecological rhetoric engaged the theory's departure from more materialist, Marxian modes of analysis and toward a more postmodern emphasis upon discourse. Most notably, Dana Cloud argued that a turn away from material forces and conditions of domination and toward a demystification of the discourses of domination was not so simply mended by the poststructuralist assertion that "the discursive is material"—which Cloud figured as an oxymoron—and can, rather problematically, detach the critic from an attendance to material violences implicated by the structures of power in question. For Cloud, McKerrow's form of discursive critique would become absorbed by, and thus reproductive of, a postmodern cultural logic without coherent material consideration.³⁰

While the model for a critical ecological rhetoric will expand upon an ecological orientation to the discursive, material, and psychological, it is perhaps helpful, here, to demonstrate how a critical ecological rhetorical practice intervenes with McKerrow and Cloud's seemingly-incommensurable ethical investments. In short, for a critical ecological

²⁹ Maurice Charland, "Finding a horizon and telos: The challenge to critical rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 71-74.; Robert Hariman, "Critical rhetoric and postmodern theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 67-70.

³⁰ Dana L. Cloud, "The materiality of discourse as oxymoron: A challenge to critical rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 58, no. 3 (1994): 141-163.

rhetoric, the discursive and material should be understood as in complex relation, with analyses tending to a text's disclosure of their (in)congruencies. That is, any tenuousness about how to orient to the discursive and material should be resolved through a centralization of this tenuous relationship. Certainly, at an abstracted level we can view the relationship between the discursive and material as akin to the ouroboros in their ongoing, co-constitutive production—one element cannot exist without the other for the human is enmeshed simultaneously in both. However, any claims that “the discursive is material” deprives us a practical consideration of the ways that impacting material rhetorics seem to tentatively dissolve amidst the collaboration between discursive spectacle and socially alienated conditions of the Anthropocene.

To offer an example of this dissolution, consider that as material conditions worsen for most existents, the spectacle of mass media will often retrigger unhappy affects wrought from the liberal subject's material conditions toward ever-changing iterations of the ‘Other’—a construct produced and reified through discourse. We liberal subjects, so the narrative goes, may derive simulated nourishment from channeling such affects against an ‘Other’ in our practice of media consumption³¹ (with the added satisfaction of being a member of an imagined community³² “correctly” positioned in the war for the future) but lack a coherent recognition of the material logics at play in the scene, including in relation to our own lives. It is no coincidence that the endless production of culture war fodder in the U.S. ramps up during times of material social instability or in the immediate lead-up to a

³¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Buchet-Chastel, 1967).

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso books, 2006).

midterm or presidential election³³ as the maintenance of the reigning structures rely upon the detachment of spectators from a recognition of the causes to their daily woes.

Certainly, while spectacularized media discourse and its circulation are not untethered from material concerns, their (in)congruencies should be demystified in a critical ecological rhetoric. This demystification is especially necessary in a context in which the maintenance of a disparity-producing system contains such violent repercussions that it literally requires a massively diminished capacity among subjects to attach grievances to structural conditions, the endless production of absurd explanatory logics befitting the absurd depths of material disparity in the Anthropocene, and a militarized police state to persist. Thus, a critical ecological rhetoric should neither seek to dissolve nor territorialize differences between the social and material, but to draw out a grammar through which to describe the complex coordinations between registers.

Of additional concern is how a logic of critical ecological rhetoric should recognize issues of identity and social (in)justice now central to critical rhetorical practice. Since 1989, rhetorical conceptions of whiteness,³⁴ race,³⁵ postcolonialism,³⁶ queer/quare theory,³⁷ and intersectionality,³⁸ to name a few, have aided the project of recognizing and calling into the

³³ Meagan Day, "Trump's culture wars were meant to distract from the crisis. It didn't work," *Jacobin*, November 6, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/11/donald-trump-culture-wars-crisis-2020-elections>

³⁴ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 291-309.

³⁵ Lisa A. Flores, "Between abundance and marginalization: The imperative of racial rhetorical criticism," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 4-24.

³⁶ Raka Shome, "Postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon: An "other" view," *Communication theory* 6, no. 1 (1996): 40-59.

³⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, "Quare" studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 1-25.

³⁸ Karriann Soto Vega and Karma R. Chávez, "Latinx rhetoric and intersectionality in racial rhetorical criticism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2018): 319-325.

question the dominant paradigms by which rhetorical criticism functions. Criticism which centers theories of identity may employ standpoint epistemology and/or models of social theory to challenge traditional rhetorical paradigms, uproot Western philosophical assumptions undergirding rhetorical practice, or reveal how texts reify and/or challenge dominative politics. While the fabric of identity upon which these practices operate may be socially constructed, critical rhetoricians are typically concerned with how these constructions are reproduced or challenged to (re)shape material dynamics of domination, repression, and exploitation.

For a critical ecological rhetoric in the Anthropocene, it is necessary to recognize how the ongoing reification of identity produces material consequences historically entrenched in our social ecology and which hold differential capacities for survival under worsening planetary conditions. While ecological sciences and much discourse about the Anthropocene may relegate the human into a broad category of species, a distinctly critical ecology should recognize that the human species has become organized through relations of power predicated upon particular social stratifications (of class, race, ability, gender, documentation status, nationality, etc.), and that these stratifications organize systems of access and violence. Thus, critical theories of identity should not be viewed as separate from theories of critical ecology, but as fundamental to them.

It is also necessary to recognize that while constructs of identity have differentially shaped material conditions in the Anthropocene, a critical ecological orientation should also avoid interpreting identity as an ontological truth which takes for granted the technologization of identity by dominative structures. Certainly, our internalization of identity is part and parcel of incorporation into liberal subjecthood, and we would do well to recognize the impossibility of fully thinking outside our standpoint as subjects. However, a

critical cognizance of this subjectivation and its technologized constructedness will be critically useful as capitalist logics continue working to conceal the role of the capitalist economy in immiseration and ecological destruction.

This logic of concealment can be briefly gleaned through a consideration of the corporate appropriation of the activist demand that Black Lives Matter. In the wake of the lynching of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, public support for protests against racialized police violence reached an all-time high in the United States.³⁹ In response to this public support, corporate performances of solidarity began to trickle into mass marketing campaigns. While one might argue that corporate support of the protests helped to normalize the racial advocacy in much the same way that increased diversity in advertising can help destigmatize bodies marked by difference, it also conceals how capitalism reproduces and preys upon stratifying markers of identity to maintain historically exploitative dynamics, and, in the case of #BlackLivesMatter, the extent to which capital requires the persistence and threat of state violence, coupled with literal Black death, to maintain itself. As conditions worsen in the Anthropocene, it will be necessary to interrogate mechanisms by which capital absorbs the rhetoric of social justice—“Invest in Black-owned companies!” “Invest in Green companies!”—while maintaining a social order built on exploitation and differential exposure to unlivability.

In sum, critical rhetoric’s concerns with the material and discursive, and its concerns with identity as a social construct containing material consequences are resolved in a critical ecological rhetoric through an ecological investment in their dialectical relationality.

³⁹ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black lives matter may be the largest movement in U.S. history,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

Thinking Rhetoric Ecologically

In recent decades, scholars have explored the vast potentials for thinking rhetoric ecologically. In this section, I will outline some of the primary modes through which this intersection has been engaged and articulate the relevance of these approaches to a critical ecological rhetoric. Helpfully, the introduction to the 2017 collection *Tracing Rhetoric and Material Life: Ecological Approaches*⁴⁰ by Bridie McGreavy, Justine Wells, George F. McHendry Jr., and Samantha Senda-Cook outlines four major strains of rhetoric's ecological turns which finely capture its ecological developments. I will proceed to describe these four turns and situate them in relation to a critical ecological rhetoric.

First, constitutive rhetorics are explored through concepts of articulation and transhumanism. Authors of *Tracing Rhetoric and Material Life* argue that these turns “provoke ecological transformations in what it means (or does not mean) to be human, what it is to exert power with/in the world, and, also, how fundamentally flawed the conceit that humans make the world through communication turns out to be.”⁴¹ Core scholarship within this strain includes Michael McGee's urgency to examine rhetoric's material reality (rather than, exclusively, its ephemerality),⁴² Maurice Charland's, following Stuart Hall's, notion of articulation⁴³ (a term which “enabled cultural theorists to speak of elements articulating, or linking together in creative ways, without a single origin or fixed endpoint”⁴⁴), and Barbara

⁴⁰ Bridie McGreavy, Justine Wells, George F. McHendry Jr., and Samantha Senda-Cook, “Rhetoric's Ecologies,” *Tracing rhetoric and material life: Ecological approaches* (Springer, 2017).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴² Michael Calvin McGee, “A materialist's conception of rhetoric,” *Explorations in Rhetoric: Studies in Honor of Douglas Ehninger* (1982): 23-48.

⁴³ Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Quebecois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

Biesecker's examination of how texts, audiences, and contexts articulate with subjects.⁴⁵ These philosophies of rhetoric highlight the ways rhetoric calls subjects (including the rhetorician) into being through a recognition of the more-than-humanness of rhetorical circulation, or, that which goes beyond traditional conceptualizations of rhetorical production as a practice to direct influence. Here, I would also include Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy's effort to dissolve traditional rhetoric's notion of *actant* into the more ecological notion of *capacity*. Rather than imagining rhetorical force as deployed by a seemingly detached actant upon another, a notion of capacity understands rhetorical force as a complex circulation whose ability to access bodies is predicated upon a body's pre-originary capacity to become affected. The authors argue, "By shifting the focus from agency to capacity, we revise the commonplace for discussing qualities that empower rhetoric, emphasizing the ecology of entanglements between entities over the abilities that are inherent to humans."⁴⁶ For a project of critical ecological rhetoric, a philosophy of rhetoric as constitutive is fundamental and, as will be unpacked in later sections, core to the fusion of critical rhetoric and ecosophy.

A second turn toward ecological rhetoric refers to ecological models of composition, which through "rhetorical invention prompted scholars to attune to how all sorts of things are called into being via complex compositional processes and systems."⁴⁷ Scholars familiar with eco-composition, for example, may seek to show relationships between subjects and larger systems by writing about their place in/as environment. Here, Edbauer Rice's

⁴⁵ Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from within the Thematic of 'Différance'," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22, no. 2 (1989): 110-130.

⁴⁶ Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy, "Thinking ecologically about rhetoric's ontology: Capacity, vulnerability, and resilience," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 5.

⁴⁷ McGreavy, Wells, McHendry, and Senda-Cook, 17.

exploration of the fluidity of public rhetoric through a case study centering the ecology of Austin, Texas' rhetorical circulation of "Keep Austin Weird," performs the ways rhetorical situations bleed beyond simplistic notions of text and context, and are, rather, ecologically dispersed across space, time, and social worlds.⁴⁸ Within this turn I would also include Raymie McKerrow's explanation of a corporeal rhetoric which challenges binary differences between body and mind, emotion and reason, nature and culture, and private and public spheres.⁴⁹ In dissolving the binaries of ontologically embedded social constructs, McKerrow writes toward a form of rhetoric which explicitly addresses the challenge of thinking in terms of interconnection. Given that the dissolution of elusive binaries is fundamental to the project of critical ecological rhetoric, ecological models of composition may also serve as a necessary form through which to express a critical ecology in Rhetorical Studies.

A third ecological turn takes the form of rhetoric in situ. Enjoining qualitative field methods with rhetorical analysis, rhetoricians performing rhetoric in situ attune to and even affect the unfolding and emergent production of rhetoric within ecologies of analysis. This practice encounters rhetorical production as an immersive, ever-unfolding, sensorially experienced relationality between body, Other, and environment. Scholars including George F. McHendry Jr. et al.,⁵⁰ Leslie A. Hahner,⁵¹ and Bernadette Marie Calafell⁵² capture this

⁴⁸ Jenny Edbauer, "Unframing models of public distribution: From rhetorical situation to rhetorical ecologies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 5-24.

⁴⁹ Raymie E. McKerrow, "Corporeality and cultural rhetoric: A site for rhetoric's future," *Southern Journal of Communication* 63, no. 4 (1998): 315-328.

⁵⁰ George F. McHendry Jr, Michael K. Middleton, Danielle Endres, Samantha Senda-Cook, and Megan O'Byrne, "Rhetorical critic (ism)'s body: Affect and fieldwork on a plane of immanence," *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 4 (2014): 293-310.

⁵¹ Leslie A. Hahner, "Constitutive Intersectionality and the Affect of Rhetorical Form," *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies*, Edited by Cindy L. Griffin and Karma R. Chavez (State University of New York Press, 2012): 147-68.

⁵² Bernadette M. Calafell, "Rhetorics of Possibility," *Rhetorica in motion: Feminist rhetorical methods and methodologies* (2010): 104-117.

vision of rhetoric in their demonstrations and imaginings of rhetorical practices which embrace the ways rhetorical criticism is always already an ecological project. Importantly, however, Calafell's work in theories of the flesh is a form of ecological scholarship particularly attendant to the relationship between intersections of subjectivity—specifically, women of color—and dominative structures. Rhetoric in situ acts as a kind embodied engagement reflective of some of the ontological concerns of the critical ecological rhetoric that I will describe, and thus serves as a valid mode through which to engage critical ecological rhetoric.

The fourth and final turn toward ecological rhetorics refers to projects which seek to foster ecological care. Given that a need for care implies the immanence of threat from an external force, this turn may ebb the closest to a critical orientation to ecology.

Encapsulating this turn is the work of George Kennedy whose notions of rhetoric as an energy circulated among and between species aims for a kind of interspecies rhetoric exposing overlooked ecological relationalities and responsibilities. In 1992, Kennedy wrote, “Rhetoric in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: The emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message.”⁵³ Here, Kennedy explicitly attached the concept of rhetoric as an inherently communicative energy to lifeforms outside of the human, reshaping the rhetorical form as bound up in evolutionary processes of selective variation. In addition to Kennedy, I would also figure the work of Joshua Trey Barnett as a contemporary advancement of this turn, whose explorations of

⁵³ George Kennedy, “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25, no. 1 (1992): 2.

texts⁵⁴ and rhetorics of mourning,⁵⁵ which facilitate ecological attunement demonstrate the capacity for rhetoric to challenge human senses of being and relationality in the Anthropocene.

While concern for lives harmed and immiserated in the Anthropocene is central to an ethic of critical ecological rhetoric, projects in Rhetorical Studies which seek to incite ecological care or attend to texts which facilitate attunement, are not inherently critical. Without explicitly implicating the structural forces which contribute to suffering and death, an ecological ethic of care may even become co-opted by neoliberal organizing tactics. Consider, for example, how instantaneously discourses of self-care, diversity, or antiracism are absorbed into vocabularies of corporate management.⁵⁶ While these discourses are not problematic in and of themselves, their neoliberal formations tend to pathologize issues experienced by workers, rather than dismantle the structural causes of such problems. Similarly, rhetorics of ecological care might help to elevate one kind of critical consciousness—an attunement to the more-than-human world and its crises – but neglect to address the systemic problems which contribute to such domination. Given these potential pitfalls, a critical ecological rhetoric would couple ecological care with an explicit attendance to the power-laden dynamics inscribed upon ecologies.

This brief overview of rhetoric's ecological turns make two aspects of my critical intervention clear. First, already existing notions of ecological rhetoric may become meaningfully fused with my articulation of a critical ecological rhetoric. Rather than seeking

⁵⁴ Joshua Trey Barnett, "Impurities: Thinking ecologically with Safe," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10, (2017): 203-220.

⁵⁵ Joshua Trey Barnett, "Naming, mourning, and the work of earthly coexistence," *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 3 (2019): 287-299.

⁵⁶ Adolph Reed, "Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left," *Dialectical Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (2018): 105-115.

to contribute an additional ecological turn to the expanding strains of rhetorical practice, I hope to offer a critical layer for existing ecological and rhetorical practices. Second, this overview demonstrates the need for a distinctly critical ecological rhetoric in the context of the Anthropocene. While constitutive rhetorics, ecological models of composition, practices of rhetoric in situ, and attendances to ecological care may (or may not) contain a critical ethic in individual expressions of the practices, I believe that the immiserating conditions of the Anthropocene and the changing shape to dominative relations warrants a broad call for an explicit attendance to power for such already existing models, practices, and philosophical orientations. What follows is my attempt to describe a theory of critical ecological rhetoric which may become appropriated for such already existing practices or inspire new modes for critical rhetorical engagement.

Critical Ecological Rhetoric

A collaboration between critical rhetoric, ecological rhetoric, and ecosophy for the construction of a critical ecological rhetoric must ultimately wrestle with the complex relationship between ontology and praxis. This relationship is not the easiest to disentangle. While praxis-centered efforts toward social justice may be organized around a political philosophy, rarely will such efforts draw upon philosophical questions regarding the nature of being. And for good reason: when lives are on the line in activist labor, it becomes strategically necessary to organize around galvanizing points of shared immiseration and strategically choose to assume or ignore undergirding ontologies rather than complicate the firmament upon which praxis takes shape. However, I believe that the context of the Anthropocene invites a unique call to question the fundamental logics which guide our critical projects and to directly engage the incommensurability of reigning dominative and ecological ontologies. Not only are the material conditions which shape critical efforts

changing, but the scale at which this change occurs relative to how it is differentially and immediately experienced warrants a remodeling to our understanding of, for example, dominative discursive structures. Further, provided that the Anthropocene involves the literal dissolve of planetary life and threatens ontological constructs whatsoever, it becomes pivotal to merge critical praxis with an ecosophical orientation to power. That is, the Anthropocene requires, among a host of other efforts, a reorientation to the actors composing the scene of life on earth, a challenge to neoliberal hegemony at the level of the ontological, and new ways of recognizing rhetorical forces composing enfolded planetary, social, and psychological ecologies.

The philosophy underpinning a critical ecological rhetoric is one which embraces the constitutive notion of interconnectedness core to ecology, thereby enlarging rhetoric's definitional bases away from more traditional conceptualizations and toward broader notions of rhetoricity. Beyond Guattari's ecosophy of three enfolded ecologies, the premise of an ecological state of interconnectedness has been dynamically explored by many ecosophers. For example, Timothy Morton writes of "the mesh," a conceptual fabric for ecology which shows how ecology "consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences" and where "scale is infinite in both directions: infinite in size and infinite in detail. And each being in the mesh interacts with others."⁵⁷ Simply, an ecological philosophical orientation involves recognizing the ever-present interconnection between places, beings, thoughts, and dynamics at all manner of scale. This ecological fabric, however, is not a static one, but ever-changing and cyclically (re)arranged by forces. When describing the ecological thought through which her concept of geopolitics forms, Elizabeth Grosz explains, "The earth, the

⁵⁷ Timothy Morton, *The ecological thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010): 30.

world, the universe is made up not only of objects but above all of forces, forces that interact, clash, and coexist, creating both stable, predictable orders of organisation—objects and their relations—and zones of indeterminability—events and their singularities.”⁵⁸ It is through this consideration of the forces which weave, reproduce, and transform reality that a notion of rhetoric as ecological—or, as a structuring variable to ecology—enters.

Grasping toward rhetoric’s ecological ontology, scholars have framed rhetoric as “the energy inherent in communication,”⁵⁹ as “ambient,” “of the earth,”⁶⁰ and as “the always ongoing disclosure of the world shifting our manner of being in that world so as to call for some response or action,”⁶¹ and as requiring a consideration of the “qualities of relations between entities, not just among humans, that enable different modes of rhetoric to emerge, flourish, and dissipate.”⁶² Far beyond a limited, anthropocentric orientation to rhetoric as “the art of persuasion,” an ecological philosophy of rhetoric dissolves its notion as a practice arranged by cause and effect, attends to a prior capacity for energy to circulate, assumes more-than-human involvement, and resists the restrictiveness of tidy definitions because the rhetorical situation bleeds⁶³ in an interconnected ecology. In this way, the priorities of an ecological rhetoric should have less to do with what rhetoric *is*, and more to do with what rhetoric *can become* when we release constructs of separateness and begin to think about everything as interconnected.

⁵⁸ Kathryn Yusoff, Elizabeth Grosz, Nigel Clark, Arun Saldanha, and Catherine Nash, “Geopower: a panel on Elizabeth Grosz’s Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30 (2012): 973.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, 2.

⁶⁰ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient rhetoric: The attunements of rhetorical being* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013): x.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶² Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy, “Thinking ecologically about rhetoric’s ontology: Capacity, vulnerability, and resilience,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 3.

⁶³ Edbauer, 9.

A critical layer to an ecological rhetoric, then, necessitates recognizing how domination operates in this framework and then seeking to respond with an emancipatory politic, an intervention which necessarily involves praxis. I will argue that, at the most abstract level, this domination occurs through the antithesis of ecology's core assumption of interconnectedness and that such dominative forces are accelerated under and compose the material conditions of the Anthropocene. Most broadly, I will argue that a construct of *borders* serves as the technology most prevalently employed to maintain and accelerate dominative relations in the Anthropocene, and that a critique of domination for a critical ecological rhetoric fundamentally involves demystifying the presence of borders defined through domination and, in turn, working to strategically dissolve them.

A Critique of Domination: Borders

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.⁶⁴

While the articulation of borders and borderlands which opens Gloria Anzaldúa's pivotal Chicana Feminist text may take as its focus the racialized and gendered body politics of the U.S.-Mexico border, it also suggests a broader conceptualization of borders as a kind of stratifying technology constructed for the articulation and maintenance of power. That is, the border does not merely mark the boundaries between governmentally defined territories, it is rhetorically entangled in the Othering production of "us" and "them," and, even, of

⁶⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 3.

difference whatsoever. As D. Robert DeChaine states, borders are “a bounding, ordering apparatus, whose primary function is to designate, produce, and regulate the space of difference.”⁶⁵ Perhaps an ecological interpretation of borders would challenge Anzaldúa’s binary distinction between natural and unnatural, however, this frame points to critical aspect of borders as a logic: that they are socially constructed impressions which must be cyclically reified for their ongoing maintenance. There is nothing inherent about borders and the logics employed to maintain their use hardly hold up to ecological scrutiny (scientific, philosophical, or otherwise), but they do hold significant ideological power with implications for social organization, violence, and hegemonic ideologies and ontologies. In this way, the border plays antagonist to an ecological recognition as it grafts an illusion of separateness upon that which is interconnected for the purposes of control. For this reason, a critical ecological rhetoric might be viewed as a kind of mutation of border rhetorics – one which seeks to disentangle how borders structure material relationships, social worlds, and, even, thought itself.

To explicate how dominative logics of the Anthropocene are structured by the technology of borders, I will address their production across the three ecological registers. While a practice of critical ecological rhetoric may focus upon the production of borders primarily in relation to one register—for example, conducting a critical ecological analysis of discourses about the U.S.-Mexico border—it is also necessary to address how borders are employed to ontologically separate the three registers such that material concerns are rhetorically constructed as separate from social and psychological concerns. Therefore, to

⁶⁵ D. Robert DeChaine, “Introduction: For Rhetorical Border Studies,” in Calafell, Bernadette Marie, Karma R. Chávez, Josue David Cisneros, Anne Teresa Demo, Lisa A. Flores, Dustin Bradley Goltz, Michelle A. Holling et al. *Border rhetorics: Citizenship and identity on the US-Mexico frontier* (University of Alabama Press, 2012): 1, 2.

demonstrate the distinctly ecological orientation to border rhetorics, I will connect each section with its fellow registers to both represent the complexly enmeshed approach to a critical ecological rhetoric and to preview the proceeding chapters which compose this dissertation project.

Material Borders

The material border is a construct reliant upon an ontology of *(un)belongingness*. For example, given my U.S. citizenship status I know where I do and do not belong by virtue of borders which structure an outside to my belongingness. The material borders structuring that logic are fundamentally spatial, and much historical literature has traced the early emergence and development of such spatial borders whose mutations deeply structure material (in)access today.⁶⁶ From the advent of agrilogistics (an early precursor to capitalism)⁶⁷ to the emergence of private property⁶⁸ to empire⁶⁹ and colony,⁷⁰ the spatial border has become a defining material logic and politic among the human species.

Then, material borders also shape *what belongs to me*. My apartment, my things, and my body are bordered through a material logic which supposes that what distinguishes this place, commodity, or body from all other organic material is that they belong to me and *not you*. However, because borders rely upon the reification of their discursive constructedness, they tend to bleed. Consider all that is bound up in claims of *my country* while settling upon

⁶⁶ D. Robert DeChaine (ed.), *Border rhetorics: Citizenship and identity on the US-Mexico frontier* (University of Alabama Press, 2012).

⁶⁷ Christopher Isett and Stephen Miller, *The social history of agriculture: From the origins to the current crisis* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁶⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The origin of the family, private property, and the state* (New York University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of empire: 1875-1914* (Hachette UK, 2010).

⁷⁰ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States. Vol. 3.* (Beacon Press, 2014).

stolen land, *my body* when one spends so much time producing surplus value for another, *my apartment* when rent is due, or *my things* when ownership is impossible outside of our reigning economic structure. For a critical ecological rhetoric, it becomes necessary to not only attend to how material borders shape life and death in the Anthropocene, but also to attend to the ontology which borders rely upon for their reproduction—that a stratified ordering which designates the space of difference is possible.

It is no question that dominative, material bordering logics are productive of ecological crisis in the Anthropocene: a direct line from the conquest of land, extraction and manipulation of raw material, and mass exploitation of bodies can be drawn to the present climate change-inflected conditions of the Anthropocene. But these conditions may also render bordering logics more vivid as material changes brought on by ecological crises layer upon the defense of our constructed borders. Consider the intensification of border politics, animated by crueler securitization practices and the belligerent construction of border walls, as climate conditions become more unlivable around the world and the necessity for mass migration grows.⁷¹ It seems that, in the face of worsening ecological conditions, dominative practices at the spatial border must accelerate to match the reality imposed by geographically determined unlivability such that the ‘Other’ appears a greater threat than ever before.

Consider, too, the ongoing development of smart technologies which rely upon not only the violence of forced labor carried out by the ‘Other’ for consumption practices by occupiers of rich nations, but also the extraction of precious earth metals which toxically contribute to landfills and energy practices. Framed by Jussi Parikka, this practice entails that “the geological material of metals and chemicals get deterritorialized from their strata and

⁷¹ Nancy Tuana, "Climate apartheid: The forgetting of race in the Anthropocene," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-31.

reterritorialized in machines that define our technical media culture.”⁷² At every step material borders signifying where matter belongs and on which side of the border it is extracted from, regardless of ecological implication, structure the dominative material practices of the Anthropocene.

In “Chapter 2: Pyropolitical Phoenix,” a critical ecological rhetoric is employed to examine how the geography stratifying border separating the United States and Mexico is employed to justify the Phoenix Police Department’s violent and racialized governmental practices and collaboration with harsh climatic conditions in Phoenix’s urban ecology. While the material border structuring the space of difference between the United States and Mexico may largely frame the analysis for this chapter, the enfolding of social and psychological borders also operationalizes the analysis toward an ecologically-oriented practice. The social borders of concern rely upon a construct of racial and class difference to justify police shootings and the use of concentration camps to punish those targeted by the Phoenix Police Department. Perhaps more complexly, the collaboration between the Phoenix Police Department and climatic conditions are enabled through a psychological border which positions issues of the governmental as separate from the elemental and climatic. By examining the relationship between the governmental, the geographic, the elemental, and the climatic, I demonstrate how dominative relations in Phoenix’s urban ecology are organized through a *pyropolitic*, and how this pyropolitic may be viewed as a synecdochic governmental practice in the Anthropocene, illuminating how such governmental formations may occur in other cities already disciplined by a police state.

Social Borders

⁷² Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 16.

It is perhaps most useful to begin an explication of social borders by articulating a distinction between a critical ecological orientation to social borders and Kent Ono's social framing of "the border that travels."⁷³ For Ono, the power of the border which separates geographic territories is not limited to its function as a spatial governmental stratification, but can carry implications for how that designation follows a person—"travels"—through their body's navigation of a territory's reigning cultural, governmental, and economic structures. For example, undocumented immigrants in the U.S. experience certain forms of precarity (surveillance, difficulty navigating legal, health, and economic structures) differently than U.S. citizens due to the range of structural mechanisms which uphold the spatial border. While it is critical to consider how spatial borders structure social organization, an ecological orientation to social borders would further abstract the border construct to signify how the "space" of difference itself constitutes social life in the Anthropocene – with the force of the spatial border serving as one kind of intersection animating the bordering logics pervading social worlds. Through a critical ecological lens, social borders may be understood as the space of difference between bodies which extend from and are regulated by dominative forces. Importantly, difference itself does not constitute a social border, but the (re)production of that difference to maintain a particularized social hierarchy premised upon that difference does.

Social borders stratify difference across a range of scales. Territories designate who does or does not compose a social world, the production and maintenance of social categories such as class, race, gender, ability, and education regulate social borders of identity, and under a socioeconomic logic of neoliberalism the individual is bordered from all

⁷³ Kent Ono, "Borders that travel: Matters of the figural border," *Border rhetorics: Citizenship and identity on the US-Mexico frontier* (University of Alabama Press, 2012).

other human existents in their quest for singularity. The further out, the broader the bordering logics; the closer, the more individualized and layered. Social borders also designate the space of difference between human and other-than-human animals, especially in the context of the human-dominated Anthropocene. In this way, the social border regulating speciesism is premised upon an anthropocentric orientation to planet life which assumes that humans (and, really, only a relative few humans) are entitled to fully dominating the earth, while nonhuman animals (being lesser-than as constituted by a social border), either do not matter or should only exist for the purposes of consumption.

While markers of social difference are both reified to maintain social hierarchy and only come into existence through a dominative constitution of separation, the widening sphere of bare life and precarity in the material conditions of the Anthropocene recontextualize social borders. In their article “Theorizing Race and Gender in the Anthropocene,” Reyes and Chirindo explain, “In the Anthropocene, the precarity that had been the nearly exclusive preserve of people occupying the bottommost rungs of human society is becoming generalized to most if not all humans—though not in equal measure.”⁷⁴ Thus, while social borders persist and will likely continue to differentially expose humans to the violences of the Anthropocene (climatic, governmental, [in]access to necessary resources), the reality of planetary ecological crisis is that its violences will inevitably expand to also include those at the topmost rung of the social hierarchy. Recontextualizing the borders which segment the social ecology in light of the Anthropocene helps to reframe their logics and discourses toward a recognition of the differential harms of the Anthropocene, the source of fear which undergirds the intensification of bordering logics,

⁷⁴ G. Mitchell Reyes and Kundai Chirindo, “Theorizing Race and Gender in the Anthropocene,” *Women's Studies in Communication* (2020): 436.

and the histories that ecological crises in the Anthropocene are predicated upon. This series of recognitions enable a kind of ecological reflexivity about identity in the Anthropocene, one succinctly captured by Kathryn Yusoff when she reminds us of the relationship between race and ecological crisis:

If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence.⁷⁵

Indeed, the racial subject is intimately tied to the histories of capitalism,⁷⁶ and a critical ecological rhetoric must reckon with, alongside synecdochic and premonitory expressions of domination through social bordering, how histories of exploitation across subject categories contribute to the differentially distributed nature of newly experienced ecological crises.

As is already transparent, the implications of social bordering in the Anthropocene are fundamentally necropolitical. The structures of hierarchy which have culminated in our present ecological crises are also determinative of the structure to death in the epoch. While rhetorical scholars such as Allison Rowland have initiated critical discussions of the

⁷⁵ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019): xiii.

⁷⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of black reason* (Duke University Press, 2017).

relationship between rhetoric and necropolitics—her compelling articulation of *zperbetorics* as “discursive and material practices that transvalue lives across a particular public”⁷⁷ is useful here—a critical ecological rhetoric would configure such bordering logics in the crisis-laden context of the necropolitical and necrocapitalist Anthropocene and in relation to relevant intersections of a rhetoric’s ecology.

In “Chapter 3: I’m Real When I Shop My Face,” a critical ecological rhetoric is employed to analyze three performances of glitch feminism⁷⁸ incited by the late Scottish-born pop artist Sophie which, together, tell a complex story of neoliberal subjectivation under necrocapitalism. Analyzing Sophie’s triptych as a sequence of feminist glitches simultaneously affirms the liberatory potentialities of glitch feminism, while also demonstrating how the construction of our media ecology enables and constrains these potentialities. While material concerns (of the body, technology, and violence) and psychological concerns (of sensation and metanoia) are explored in relation to Sophie’s triptych, the social border stratifying transness and cisness serves as the primary site of critical ecological analysis.

Psychological Borders

Following Anzaldúa’s claim that the border is an unnatural boundary operationalized through a construct of difference, the logics which undergird the production and maintenance of borders extend from the psychological, the subjective, the affective, the mental—they are derived of the interior network that is the psychological ecology. While the human’s interior network may rely upon psychological borders to function—separating out experiences, memories, logics, understandings, interpretations, ideologies—relevant to a

⁷⁷ Allison L. Rowland, *Zoetropes and the Politics of Humanhood* (Ohio State Press, 2020): 2.

⁷⁸ Legacy Russell, *Glitch feminism* (Verso Books, 2020).

critical ecological rhetoric is how the regulation of psychological borders are imposed by external dominative technologies. That is, how relations of power are made possible due to the non-resistance of a subject's internalization of their subject position and the mass naturalization (a social-psychological process) of particular constructs of separateness which reify power-laden relational dynamics. For a critical ecological rhetoric, psychological bordering projects determine constructs of separateness, the extent to which a person can come to know their ontological capacities, and the extent to which a subject can come to recognize how these capacities are regulated by an external system of control. It is, thus, the work of the critical ecological rhetorician to grasp toward the co-constitutive dynamics between ecological registers and within the psychological ecology in order to demystify the borders which reify dominative relations.

An example of psychological bordering fundamental to ecosophy is that which naturalizes the separation between the human and the rest of planetary life, or, that which detaches the human from the ecology it is enmeshed within. While we can scientifically recognize the human's organic composition as made up of the same raw materials which elsewhere compose the earth, and while we can easily challenge any appeals to so-called "nature", an ontological binary between nature and culture dominates much thought in the Anthropocene. No doubt, this supposed distinction is so deeply entrenched that an interpretation of earth as *for the human* acts as a kind of sensemaking lubrication to rationalize the structure of life on earth in the Anthropocene. To think about earth more ecologically, to dissolve the psychological border between nature and culture, is to render vivid the horrific fabric of material relationality in the Anthropocene.

The regulation of psychological borders is also exemplified by much literature concerning control societies, a line of theory often associated with some of the final

premonitory essays composed by Gilles Deleuze.⁷⁹ Anticipating how the digital would come to shape social relations and the subject's psyche for the purposes of social control, Deleuze's control society is one animated by borders: algorithmic mazes, echo chambers, proxy wars, particularized circulation of thought and image, and a sense of action detached from material consequence. Extending this work is Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of *noo-politics*, which "involves above all attention, and is aimed at the control of memory and its virtual power"⁸⁰ and Byung-Chul Han's *psychopolitics*, which involves the inversion of panopticon surveillance in social-digital spheres.⁸¹ Situating theories of psychological borders in constellation with techniques of necrocapitalism and necropolitics—and thus establishing connections between the psychological, the material, and the social—begins to attend to the ecological nature of power.

In "Chapter 4: All My Happiness Is Gone," a critical ecological rhetoric is employed to perform the dissolution of psychological borders – specifically, those which seek to detach a subject's emotional distress from their material conditions. Here, I perform what I call an *ecology of depression* to demystify the connections between genetic inheritance, environment, and activism to argue for a more expressly political rhetorical frame of depression. One which depathologizes experiences of distress and aims to, instead, discover means by which to alter immiserating material conditions toward livability.

Conclusion

⁷⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (Routledge, 2017).

⁸⁰ Maurizio Lazzarato, "The Concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control," *Deleuze and the Social* (2006): 186.

⁸¹ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power* (Verso Books, 2017): 8.

Unprecedented times call for radical changes in thought and action. My articulation of a critical ecological rhetoric for the Anthropocene is an attempt to outline one such shift for the discipline. It asks, what can an attendance to rhetoric as ecological do to our understanding of power in the Anthropocene? How might the performance of a critical ecological rhetoric demystify conditions of the Anthropocene toward ecological justice? How might experimentation in critical ecological rhetoric enable the solidarities necessary for earthly coexistence under worsening conditions? While the remaining pages of this dissertation seek to respond to such questions, this project also hopes to prompt fellow critical scholars, artists, and activists to join the project of critical ecology by, in part, embracing their ecological situatedness and seeking means to press against our time's unprecedented dominative relations.

However, a critical ecological rhetoric is not contained entirely by its critique of domination in the Anthropocene. The merging of ecosophy and critical rhetorical practice also carries potential for utopic imagining and worldmaking. Thus, "Chapter 5: Here Comes the Crack-Up!" will seek to outline a few strains toward the critical ecological project of freedom which centers material praxis for scholars, activists, artists, and pedagogues.

CHAPTER 2

PYROPOLITICAL PHOENIX

Phoenix, Arizona is an ecology governed by heat. To experience the 115-plus degree summers, which characterize the city's national identity is to make intimate contact with a force far greater and more ancient than the human. In Phoenix, energy depletes, breath is taken away, trains of thought are erased, only to become replaced by the simple sense that *you have never felt so hot before*. It is a heat unmatched in the United States, and it is a heat that is progressively record-breaking.⁸² Year after year, one seems to think, *how could it get any hotter than this?* And, yet, year after year ... *here comes the sun*.

However, to describe how heat acts as a governing force to the ecology of Phoenix exclusively through a discussion of the city's (albeit remarkable) weather would be only partial. What is more: heat courses through the city's discursive ecologies, shapes its social organization, and structures its governmental logics in such a way that the apolitical nature of climate in the Anthropocene is rendered vivid. That is, in Phoenix, the political and the climatic merge in curious formations with a capacity to reveal how other urban ecologies may respond to worsening climate conditions in the Anthropocene. While I have elsewhere scaled the necropolitical Anthropocene through an autoethnographic account of my heat-laden experiences in Phoenix,⁸³ I would like to argue here that heat is particularly deployed in a fashion synecdochic of governmental heat logics of the Anthropocene.

⁸² Michael Donohue, "Phoenix temperatures break another heat record, marking 4 consecutive days above 115," *Arizona Republic*, 18 June 2021, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix-weather/2021/06/18/heat-records-broken-phoenix-hits-117/7749633002/>

⁸³ Tyler S. Rife, "Scaling the necropolitical Anthropocene," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 4 (2020): 77-91.

To explore this governmental heat logic, I will perform my critical ecological analysis of Phoenix through a theory of pyropolitics. Broadly understood as a politics of fire, Michael Marder's conceptualization of the politic as woven through the elemental is a logic which may be traced throughout the history of the human species,⁸⁴ but whose contemporary explorations enable analyses of the Anthropocene's climate change-inflected politics. Thus, I employ a critical ecological lens to suture the elemental and discursive rhetorics constituting a classed and racialized political formation in the city of Phoenix, Arizona. Specifically, I approach the ecology of Phoenix as rhetorical text and argue that it is organized by a pyropolitic operating on both elemental and metaphorical registers. I will primarily attend to one of the urban ecology's rhetorical entanglements: the deployment of heat against Black, Brown, and poor bodies by Phoenix's structures of domination to maintain the white supremacist status quo power formation. This critical ecological analysis discovers how the elemental, the governmental, the capitalistic, and the racialized organize in concert to enact a lethal politic which functions synecdochally, intensifying resonances in the context of planetary climate change. In this way, my analysis seeks to articulate a premonitory elemental rhetoric for the end of a world.

To tell the story of Pyropolitical Phoenix, I will first compose the city as an ecology organized through environmental racism and environmental degradation, I will then trace notions of governmentality from biopolitics to pyropolitics, before finally, drawing together the seemingly disparate rhetorics which produce Pyropolitical Phoenix.

Urbanocene Phoenix

⁸⁴ Michael Marder, *Pyropolitics: When the world is ablaze* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014).

While named after a mythological bird cyclically (re)born from ashes upon its own fiery demise, the major metropolis of the U.S. Southwest may be more akin to the Greek God Icarus whose ego-driven flight toward the sun ended in flames. In the hazardscape of Phoenix, Arizona, unsustainable energy practices contribute to a form of environmental degradation characterized by historic and ongoing environmental racism. This toxic collaboration serves as the context upon which Pyropolitical Phoenix is organized.

Environmental racism is fundamental to the design of Phoenix's urban landscape. In their analysis of Phoenix's formation of environmental racism, entitled "The Geography of Despair," Bob Bolin, Sara Grineski, and Timothy Collins define the concept as "a complex of social and spatial practices which systematically disadvantage people marked by certain racial categories."⁸⁵ Devoid of considerations regarding racist intent, environmental racism accounts for instances of negligence, omission, and unwanted land use which differentially harm raced bodies. In Phoenix, environmental racism is most prevalently illustrated by the developmental differences between the affluent North Phoenix and the low-income South Phoenix. It is a divide which, according to data derived of the 2017 census, sees a difference of \$112,000 in median household income between the poorest zip code of South Phoenix and the richest zip code of North Phoenix.⁸⁶ This class divide, unmistakably infused with discriminatory racialized dynamics, is a form of urban design tracing back to the city's founding in 1881 as well as its boom in the latter half of the 20th century following the popularization of air conditioning. Racial division in the city took shape formally

⁸⁵ Bob Bolin, Sara Grineski, and Timothy Collins, "The Geography of Despair: Environmental Racism and the Making of South Phoenix," *Human Ecology Review* 12, no. 2 (2005): 158.

⁸⁶ UnitedStatesZipCodes.org, Highest Household Income Zips in Arizona, https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/rankings/zips-in-az/median_household_income/

(containment of Mexican barrios by an all-White police force⁸⁷), discursively (through a popular ascription of filth and disease to racialized categories⁸⁸), and existentially (efforts to ‘Americanize’ Indigenous and Latinx people in the Salt River Valley by, for example, training Latina and indigenous women to be domestic servants to White occupants of North Phoenix⁸⁹).

Complicit in the oppression of non-white people is the role of privilege, which Laura Pulido argues is “particularly useful in the study of urban landscapes because it is simultaneously historical and spatial” and whose examination “must be rooted in the past, precisely because of the absence of a hostile motive or single act.”⁹⁰ That is, the privilege of those in North Phoenix relies on the ongoing marginalization of those in South Phoenix. This intersubjective relationship is exemplified by the spatial containment of industry, and thus, pollutants in South Phoenix which massively harm those nearby while fueling unsustainable energy uses for those up North. Like other major U.S. cities, Phoenix’s foundation was designed through the control of Anglo business and political elite whose overt anti-Blackness and anti-indigeneity helped foster hostile and unequal social relations within the city.⁹¹ The spatial inscription of this violent dynamic is over a century old: Even prior to the Great Depression, South Phoenix was referred to as the ‘shame of Phoenix’ in a 1920 community report due to its contaminated air and water supply, high concentrations of smoke and odors, severe poverty,⁹² and resultingly high infant mortality rates and rates of

⁸⁷ Bolin, Grineski, Collins, 159.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁹⁰ Laura Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 16.

⁹¹ Bolin, Grineski, Collins.

⁹² Ibid., 162.

heat-related death relative to occupants of North Phoenix.⁹³ Environmental and policy-driven racism prevalently loom over the city today in the form of vindictive xenophobic figures such as Joe Arpaio, anti-immigration policies such as SB-1070 and discriminatory educational policies Arizona House Bill 2281,⁹⁴ and an alarming rate of police violence directed toward people of color and poor people throughout the city. Pervasive, historical, and ongoing, anti-Mexican, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Black racism seep through Phoenix's social and political culture through "racial exclusion, class domination, political disenfranchisement, and a racially segmented economy."⁹⁵

Extending from this fraught social landscape are environmental concerns impacting not only the residents of South Phoenix, but the future of the city itself. In his book, *Bird on Fire*, Andrew Ross examines how a libertarian frontier mentality, a capitalistic ethos of infinite growth, and climate change denialism by Republican political leadership and corporate elite in the context of an arid desert have constructed an apocalyptic cocktail: the world's least sustainable city.⁹⁶ Literalizing the city's namesake, Phoenix's development practices are self-immolating. Citing dependency on a water supply pumped 300 miles uphill from the Colorado River (currently entering its third decade of drought⁹⁷), the development

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁹⁴ SB-1070, also known as the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act," was a strict anti-immigration law passed in the Arizona Senate in 2010. It received widespread attention for both criminalizing the act of not carrying immigration documentation at all times and for encouraging racial profiling by Arizona law enforcement. Arizona House Bill 2281, passed in 2012, prohibited schools from "advocating ethnic solidarity," outlawing and/or heavily censoring, for example, Mexican-American Studies courses and removing banned books from classrooms.

⁹⁵ Bolin, Grinseski, Collins, 157.

⁹⁶ Andrew Ross, *Bird on Fire: Lesson's From the World's Least Sustainable City* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ Bureau of Reclamation, "Another dry year in the Colorado River Basin increases the need for additional state and federal actions,"

<https://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/newsrelease/detail.cfm?RecordID=62170>

of a billion-gallon lake in Tempe, the fast employment of fossil fuel pollutants, and a vastly disproportionate consumption of energy relative to cities of similar size, Ross vivifies the city's vulnerabilities, which some view as creating entirely unlivable conditions by 2050.⁹⁸

Extinguishing efforts toward a paradigm of sustainability rather than growth is Arizona's particular strain of conservatism which ontologically neglects scientific realities by either dismissing climate data as communist propaganda⁹⁹ or imagining that technoscientific fixes will solve future problems.¹⁰⁰ The tensions between scientific reality and the capitalistic paradigm which led Phoenix to become a metropolis in the first place are at odds, leading the city toward slow-motion disaster. Meanwhile, it will assuredly be those already marginalized who will face the greatest repercussions most immediately. Ross warns:

If resources tighten rapidly, a more ominous future beckons in the form of triage crisis management, where populations are explicitly selected out for protection, in eco-enclaves, or for abandonment, outside the walls. The anti-immigrant mood that has sharpened during Arizona's recessionary years stands as a harbinger of the hoarding mentality that may well govern such a desperate future.¹⁰¹

Indeed the divisions which have long organized Phoenix into an exploitative relationship of toxic-haves and polluted-have-nots is indicative of how Phoenix's endgame will accelerate once the well runs dry.

⁹⁸ Climate Central, <https://www.climatecentral.org/outreach/alert-archive/ShiftingCities.php?market=phoenix>

⁹⁹ Ross, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17.

Phoenix exemplifies the Urbanocene, a term coined by Geoffrey West in his book *Scale*¹⁰² to signify the inextricable link between the long term sustainability of the planet and the fate of cities.¹⁰³ According to estimates, more than half of the planet's human population live in cities (with that portion only continuing to grow), while 80% of greenhouse gas emissions are generated from cities.¹⁰⁴ In this way, cities, which simultaneously act as cornerstones of innovation and environmental degradation, must be critically examined alongside concerns of the Anthropocene. Thus, Phoenix, a city with accelerationist tendencies toward death, must be framed within the larger Urbanocene discourse and as a kind of organism defined by inherent finiteness rather than a mythos of endless economic growth and innovation.

Undetachable from these considerations of the Urbanocene is the biopolitical nature of the modern city. "Urbanocene" implicates the power relations which compose the urban environment, including but in no way limited to, uneven and racialized development dynamics such as environmental racism. While scholars have recently engaged the critical intersection of Anthropocene theorizing and race¹⁰⁵ in order to account for the 'forgetting' of racialized dynamics in discourses of planetary destruction, mass extinction, and climate change, far fewer have examined the ways that racial formations in urban environments can signify the racialized dynamics of the Anthropocene. Certainly, the exploitative energy practices of the global North toward the majority South and forced migration amidst

¹⁰² Geoffrey West, *Scale: The Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, Sustainability, and the Pace of Life in Organisms, Cities, Economies, and Companies* (Penguin Press, 2017).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Eric Swyngedouw, "Urbanization and environmental futures: Politicizing urban political ecologies," *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* (Routledge, 2015): 609–619.

¹⁰⁵ Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*; Nancy Tuana, "Climate Apartheid: The Forgetting of Race in the Anthropocene," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-31.

intensifying xenophobic border laws indicate an unmistakable and ongoing form of racialized slow violence, a dynamic critical to any climate change discourse.¹⁰⁶

From Biopolitics to Pyropolitics

In a follow-up to her essay on environmental racism, Laura Pulido implicates the complicity of the state in the environmental racism gap. Far from recognizing the state as a neutral force, Pulido argues:

The state is deeply invested in not solving the environmental racism gap because it would be too costly and disruptive to industry, the larger political system, and the state itself. Instead, the state has developed numerous initiatives in which it goes through the motions, or, ‘performs’ regulatory activity [...] without producing meaningful change. The problem is not a lack of knowledge or skill, but a lack of political will...¹⁰⁷

For Pulido, the state’s negligence exacerbates ongoing material conditions which harm raced bodies in the urban environment – thus, the state should not be viewed as an ally in the effort to alter said conditions. And yet, we might take her argument even further. In his book, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime*, Bruno Latour hypothesizes a more insidious politic of the ruling class amidst climate catastrophe: that increasing inequity is not channeled through negligence, but, rather, is a primary component of the political operation. Tethering the events of Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and “the resumption, extension and amplification of migrations”¹⁰⁸ as interlocking rather than discrete, Latour

¹⁰⁶ Raka Shome, "Thinking culture and cultural studies—from/of the Global South," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (2019): 196-218.; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Laura Pulido, “Geographies of race and ethnicity II: Environmental racism, racial capitalism and state-sanctioned violence,” *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 4 (2017): 529.

¹⁰⁸ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime* (Polity Press, 2018): 4.

suggests that the ruling class has always taken climate change seriously, but has decidedly dismissed the potential of a shared world in order to, instead, consolidate power and control without inhibition. Much of this political operation can be demonstrated through the charade of a “climate change debate,” whose presence muddies an otherwise unifying scientific discourse while exploiting the ways climate change is experienced via complex, indirect, and slow impacts. Whether we interpret governmentality under worsening climate conditions as deployed with negligence or insidiousness, it becomes critical to examine this emergence of a climate/elemental-politic coordination.

Foucault’s tracing of governmental discipline from public exhibitions of torture to increasingly private operations of control in prisons¹⁰⁹ demonstrates a development in biopolitics, his term for a mode of theorizing about the ways power works upon and regulates the human subject’s body both within and outside prison walls. Since the theory’s widespread adoption across the humanities, biopolitics has also been inventively reframed in myriad forms to address the ever-mutating contexts, tactics, and power formations enacting social control upon subjects. For example, Gilles Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” examines the dissolution of organizing boundaries by the corporation such that surveillance becomes both ever-present and internalized,¹¹⁰ while Maurizio Lazzarato’s “noo-politics” describes “the control of memory and its virtual power” through the capturing of attention.¹¹¹ Relevant to my analysis is Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics.” For Mbembe, grafting biopolitics to a postcolonial context shifts the politic from mere governmental regulation on the human subject’s body to the body’s limit: death. He

¹⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1999).

¹¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3-7.

¹¹¹ Maurizio Lazzarato, “The concepts of life and the living in the societies of control,” *Deleuze and the Social* (2006): 186.

characterizes necropolitical sovereignty thusly, “The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die.”¹¹² This politic finds expression in a range of political enactments ranging from healthcare policy to police brutality, but finds its absolute form in the space of the concentration camp. In my analysis, orienting toward a classed and racialized necropolitics through a lens of critical ecological thought allows for the examination of a peculiar, though contextually significant governmental formation in pyropolitics.

Akin to necropolitics, pyropolitics is a resonant governmental politic of the Anthropocene. However, rather than attempting to mutate biopolitics toward a threshold of livability, pyropolitics experimentally navigates the relationship between the political and the elemental in order to demystify the connections between power-laden social organization and the organic, elemental matters which structure such organizational processes. Michael Marder develops this case in his book, arguing:

If, in physics, the dominant paradigm has shifted from the solidity of matter to the volatility of energy (which is, itself, matter), then, in the political sphere, there has been an analogous transition from the clarity of geopolitics, broadly understood as ‘the politics of the earth’, to the explosive ambiguity of pyropolitics, or ‘the politics of fire.’¹¹³

Marder explains that his term functions both literally and metaphorically. In a literal sense, we might examine pyropolitics relevant to the Anthropocene (the use of the atomic bomb, the burning of fossil fuels, forest fires, global warming) or as “indicators pointing to what

¹¹² Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019): 66.

¹¹³ Marder, xiii.

makes political phenomena visible in the first place,”¹¹⁴ (politics involving self-immolation, molotov cocktails, firearms, concentration camp genocide machines, burning effigies, burning crosses, burning books, etc). Metaphorically, we might view pyropolitics as an intensification of the political scene through rising fascism, war, a destabilization of mass consciousness, and a race toward all available oil and gas reserves to lead in the energy wars at the end of a world. Rather than seeking deeper ecological consciousness at a time we need it most, a globalized ruling class races to burn up all that remains.

Following the 2019 release of an International Labour Organization text entitled “Working on a warmer planet: The impact of heat stress on labour productivity and decent work,”¹¹⁵ journalist Vann R. Newkirk II sought to examine the world’s “heat gap.”¹¹⁶ In the article, Newkirk discusses how heat already dramatically impacts global and local populations differentially. Access to shade, exposure to heat waves, proximity to industrial sites, and working-class jobs requiring laborers to stand in the sun mark the majority conditions of this heat gap that we can only expect to widen and become increasingly deadly as climate change resculpts the planet. It is, in part, the pyropolitics constructing this heat gap that I will examine as a rhetorical circulation composing Pyropolitical Phoenix.

Pyropolitical Phoenix

In my analysis of Phoenix’s governmental deployment of pyropolitics, I will explore two main perpetrators: Joe Arpaio (and his Tent City) and the Phoenix Police Department. Then, I will scale up to a broader examination of pyropolitics in the context of the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., xv.

¹¹⁵ International Labour Organization, “Working on a warmer planet: The impact of heat stress on labour productivity and decent work,” *International Labour Office* (2019).

¹¹⁶ Vann R. Newkirk II, “Earth’s New Gilded Era,” *The Atlantic*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/heat-human-rights-issue-21st-century/616693/>

Anthropocene to demonstrate the utility of examining local rhetorical circulations as synecdochal of wider governmental operations.

Arsonist Arpaio

Simmering at the core of Phoenix's pyropolitic is the xenophobic legacy of former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. Self-fashioned as 'America's Toughest Sheriff,' Arpaio's tenure from 1992 to his conviction for criminal contempt in 2015 not only exemplifies Phoenix's radical approach to governmentality, but its elemental form. And it is Phoenix's infamous outdoor prison camp, popularly known as 'Tent City', which performs pyropolitics in its absolute.

Initially intended as a temporary holding area due to overcrowding in other Maricopa County jails, Arpaio's Tent City remained in operation for nearly a quarter of a century just ten miles outside of downtown Phoenix. Assembled from leftover Korean War tents and with just \$80,000, the prison would become, for Arpaio, as much an economically efficient solution to crime in Phoenix as a spectacle from which wider discourses of criminal justice could polaristically organize around Phoenix's particular brand of it. Tent City's infamy is made possible through visual markers and containment practices which provide the structure a disciplinary aesthetic ripe for global media attention. For example, Tent City: hosted the first all-women chain gang in the United States; distributed exclusively hot pink clothing and underwear to men in the prison so that "prisoners wouldn't try to steal them"; aired live webcam footage of prisoners, including in a women's facility¹¹⁷; and a massive sign reading, "Vacancy," was hung cryptically outside the prison's entrance – a perfect site for Arpaio's

¹¹⁷ Jeremy Stahl, Ex-sheriff Joe Arpaio wants to bring back his brutal tent city, *Slate*, 26 August 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/08/trump-pardon-sheriff-joe-arpaio-wants-tent-city.html>

seemingly-constant photo-ops. From a Foucaultian standpoint, these aesthetic disciplinary tactics may appear to nostalgically echo the more public forms of humiliation, torture, and execution which structured governmental punishment throughout Europe in the 18th century. However, it is the camp's cruel collaboration between design and climatic context which organize its uniquely pyropolitical practices.

Phoenix is the hottest city in the United States with temperatures reaching 120 degrees and average summer temperatures rising. Under these conditions, heat-related deaths in the city have also been on the rise.¹¹⁸ The fact of Tent City's design as an outdoor prison in Phoenix structures its forced occupation as an indirect violence. Rather than exclusively controlling inmates through direct forms of physical abuse, it is the very ground upon which Tent City is constructed which serves as a pyropolitical disciplinary technology. This climatic violence is exacerbated through the 'sheltering' of inmates in tents which could reportedly reach 145 degrees¹¹⁹ by, ironically, trapping heat. Whether incarcerated for a major or minor offense, Tent City's solar relationality did not discriminate – the number of those incarcerated at any one time peaked at 1,700 inmates, and the prison would engage half a million prisoners across its near 25-year existence.¹²⁰

However, Arpaio's approach to criminal (in)justice did discriminate. In the border state of Arizona, and with animosities toward undocumented migrants prevalent in both local and national discourse, Arpaio chose to channel Tent City's disciplinary tactics toward

¹¹⁸ Priscilla Totiyapungprasert, "Heat deaths in Phoenix reached record high in 2018," *Arizona Central*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2019/05/07/heat-deaths-phoenix-arizona-reached-record-high-2018/2539975002/>

¹¹⁹ Stahl.

¹²⁰ Maya Salam, "Last inmates leave tent city, a remnant of Joe Arpaio," *The New York Times*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/us/arpaio-tent-city-jail.html>

undocumented migrants. This targeted imprisonment occurred in a few ways, including the detainment of immigrants during traffic patrols who, without having committed any crimes, were subject to Tent City's violences based exclusively on racial appearance. Arpaio's eventual indictment stemmed from this ongoing racial discrimination after federal orders to cease the discriminatory practice in 2011.¹²¹ While the use of stun guns on prisoners strapped to restraint chairs led to multiple deaths in custody,¹²² and while multimillion-dollar settlements were distributed to victim's families after surveillance footage revealed "fourteen guards beating, shocking, and suffocating the prisoner, and after the sheriff's office was accused of discarding evidence, including the crushed larynx of the deceased,"¹²³ Tent City's brutal violences were also racially targeted. Slurs such as "wetbacks," "Mexican bitches," and "stupid Mexicans" were frequently deployed, non-English speaking prisoners were placed in hot solitary confinement cells,¹²⁴ and Latinx folks with uteruses were often denied sanitary items and would be "forced to remain with sheets or pants soiled from menstruation."¹²⁵ While charged for racial profiling, and with ongoing deaths of prisoners in custody alongside massively circulating video footage detailing gruesome violences by Tent City law enforcement, Arpaio proceeded to relish opportunities to shock the public and elevate his celebrity status. Arpaio advertised a separate outdoor unit in the prison as specifically

¹²¹ Valeria Fernández, "Arizona's 'concentration camp': Why was Tent City kept open for 24 years?," *The Guardian*, 21 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/aug/21/arizona-phoenix-concentration-camp-tent-city-jail-joe-arpai-immigration>

¹²² Stahl.

¹²³ William Finnegan, "Sheriff Joe," *The New Yorker*, 13 July 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/07/20/sheriff-joe>

¹²⁴ Stahl.

¹²⁵ Salam.

designated for “illegal aliens” and even came to refer to the prison as a “concentration camp” to a cluster of political supporters.¹²⁶

In a historical register, pyropolitics finds overlap with articulations of necropolitics which designate the camp as the absolute political space.¹²⁷ That is, the necropolitical logics which structure social life find their most direct and intensified form in the space of the camp. Perhaps most obviously in connection to pyropolitics, Nazi employment of crematoria ovens in concentration camps to efficiently enact their “final solution” was a direct embrace of the ways heat can render the bodies of particular subjects ash, reduced to indistinguishable matter. While comparing contemporary ideologies, events, and tactics with those of Nazi Germany can unhelpfully diminish the particularities of that history (if not downplay its violences), Arpaio’s invocation of concentration camps warrants a brief examination of their similarities.

In addition to their pyropolitical dimensions, both sites were initially promoted to the public as temporary solutions to practical problems before mutating into the violent logics which define their legacies. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Holocaust Encyclopedia, the first concentration camps in Germany were established “to handle the masses of people arrested as alleged subversives.”¹²⁸ Without active promotion as genocide machines, concentration camps could efficiently enact a pyropolitic under the guise of necessity. Similarly, Tent City was designed merely as a

¹²⁶ Fernández.

¹²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford University Press, 1995/1998).

¹²⁸ Holocaust Encyclopedia, “Concentration Camps: 1933-39,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camps-1933-39>

temporary solution to overcrowding in Maricopa prisons before becoming a central feature in Phoenix's circulation of pyropolitics.

Tent City and Nazi concentration camps also relied on unbridled social stratification and resentment to fuel their dehumanizing practices. In their article "The System" published in *The New Yorker*, Adam Kirsch describes the logic by which concentration camps were provided their function:

The concentration camps make sense only if they are understood as products not of reason but of ideology, which is to say, of fantasy. Nazism taught the Germans to see themselves as a beleaguered nation, constantly set upon by enemies external and internal. Metaphors of infection and disease, of betrayal and stabs in the back, were central to Nazi discourse. The concentration camp became the place where those metaphorical evils could be rendered concrete and visible. Here, behind barbed wire, were the traitors, Bolsheviks, parasites, and Jews who were intent on destroying the Fatherland.¹²⁹

Complicity is crucial in the development and maintenance of the camp. It only becomes possible for Arpaio to express, "But even if it was a concentration camp, what difference does it make? I still survived. I still kept getting re-elected"¹³⁰ if the "illegal alien" of Pyropolitical Phoenix has been discursively constructed as parasitic to the city as well as the country's imaginary. This frame allowed migrants to become subject not only to prison time, but public humiliation, abuse, and even death. Because Arpaio promoted a persona, polarizing as it was, that he was only tough-on-crime to protect the innocent from evil-doers,

¹²⁹ Adam Kirsch, "The System: Two new histories show how the Nazi concentration camps worked," *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/the-system-books-kirsch>

¹³⁰ Fernández.

the “burn the witch” barbarisms of those politically aligned were fueled alongside ongoing racial antagonism. Thus, in Arpaio’s choice to refer to his own Tent City as a concentration camp, we can read a fantasy. Arpaio is prevented from enacting the totalizing logic of a fascist camp in Tent City due to the same federal oversight which would result in his arrest in 2015, but he can help render an imaginary for the public which enables the vision: *Imagine if we could do with them what we wanted?*

“If it’s so bad,” Arpaio argued in reference to his racial profiling and abuse tactics at Tent City, “why would everybody running for president want to come to the tents and visit me?”¹³¹ Rather than conceptualizing his actions as exclusively bound to the quasi-supervillain persona of “America’s Toughest Sheriff,” Arpaio implies that we should also realize his situatedness in the context of a wider system: a far-right political network within which Arpaio merely plays a part, a secondary character. Yes, like an arsonist, Arpaio spreads an accelerant of xenophobic resentment throughout Maricopa County and fans the flames – but the fire did not begin here. Fire does not ignite without the alchemical interactions which enable it. Rather, it is through complicities (of oxygen, heat, and fuel; of media spectacle, policy, and (re)produced ideology) that flames ignite.

While comparisons between the concentration camps of Nazi Germany and Maricopa County stop short of the 11 million deaths incurred by the Holocaust, the similarities between their structuring logics is crucial to mark when Tent City is seen to structurally foreshadow migrant camps on a wider scale in the United States. Both Tent City and the migrant camps along the U.S.-Mexico border were and are extremely costly spectacles (the intentionally cheap Tent City would ironically cost taxpayers tens of millions

¹³¹ Salam.

of dollars in legal fees – incurred through Tent City’s abuses – to stay open¹³²), suggesting that the concentration camps and border wall are intended to, primarily, serve a symbolic function. Further, like Tent City, migrant camps along the border wall have been known to expose those interned to extreme temperatures, bodies are contained in cages akin to logics of containment for the incarcerated, and children have been denied access to food, water, and basic hygiene,¹³³ aligning with the abusive tactics which animated Tent City’s history of physical and sexual abuses alongside the withholding of basic survival necessities.

Necropolitically, as of 2019, it was reported that at least 7 children have died while in the conditions imposed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection,¹³⁴ while there are an unknown number of total deaths.

Arpaio, the arsonist, and his prison camp Tent City may function as the intensified core to Phoenix’s pyropolitics, wherein governmental violence securely enacts its purest form, but this is a fire that spreads. The logic of the camp extends beyond prison walls and shapes the broader ecology of Phoenix. In mutually constitutive fashion, the dominant and xenophobic discursive formations which enabled Arpaio to hold the position of Maricopa County Sheriff and deploy the Tent City’s pyropolitics for nearly a quarter-century bleed into governmental logics carried out throughout the city itself, most prevalently by the Phoenix Police Department.

Pyropolitical Police

¹³² Megan Cassidy, “Maricopa County’s Tent City jail officially shut down,” *The Republic*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2017/10/09/maricopa-countys-tent-city-jail-officially-shut-down/748348001/>

¹³³ Stahl.

¹³⁴ Cynthia Pompa, “Immigrant kids keep dying in CBP detention centers, and DHS won’t take accountability,” *ACLU*, 24 June 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention/immigrant-kids-keep-dying-cbp-detention>

On material and metaphorical registers, the Phoenix Police Department (PPD) acts as the primary technology through which the ecology of Phoenix's pyropolitics are enforced – lending 'the heat' a more literalized meaning. However, before examining how the PPD enact a pyropolitic, it is necessary to contextualize the unit in two main ways: their unique status as the most violent police department in the United States and their non-unique status as a law enforcement unit which serves to protect the ruling class by, in part, upholding white supremacy.

PPD is unusually violent even relative to the normalized violence of law enforcement units across the United States. According to data gathered by Arizona newspaper *The Republic*, from 2011 to 2018 police officers in Arizona fired at 627 people and killed just over half of them,¹³⁵ with the highest concentration of shootings occurring in Phoenix's Maricopa County. In 2018 alone, PPD fired at its public 44 times and killed 22 people, a higher rate of police shootings and deaths by police than any other city in the United States.¹³⁶ This includes New York City, home to 7 million more residents than Phoenix.¹³⁷ While *The Republic's* investigation included data on police shootings not compiled in official PPD records (such as, tellingly, the race of victims and victims' histories of mental illness), a clear articulation as to what variables contribute to PPD's violence is not formally outlined.

¹³⁵ Uriel J. Garcia & Bree Burkitt, "Shots fired: Every 5 days, an Arizona officer shoots someone, a Republic analysis finds," *The Republic*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/in-depth/news/local/arizona-investigations/2019/06/19/arizona-phoenix-police-shootings-officers-record-levels/3029860002/>

¹³⁶ Bree Burkitt and Uriel J. Garcia, "Phoenix police shot at more people than NYPD did in 2018. Will that change?," *Arizona Central*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/in-depth/news/local/arizona-investigations/2019/06/20/phoenix-police-shootings-outpace-other-major-us-cities/3651151002/>

¹³⁷ Jessica Swarner, "Record number of Phoenix police shootings add fuel to the fire of protests," *The Copper Courier*, 17 December 2020, <https://coppercourier.com/story/history-police-violence-phoenix-george-floyd-dion-johnson/>

Is the PPD simply composed of trigger-happy ‘hotheads’ uniquely poised to shoot on sight those who are enacting antisocial behavior? While causes are never rendered explicit by either local investigations or by a costly National Police Foundation study (which also did not examine race as a variable in police shootings), Ken Crane, president of the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, offered the following reasoning:

We are in a border state which allows criminals to enter and exit our country without being properly vetted. We have seen an increase in the number of homeless people in all areas of the city. We are handling more calls involving mentally ill individuals, many who are not taking medications or are self-medicating with alcohol and/or illegal drugs.¹³⁸

For Crane, the problem of Phoenix’s police violence lies not in PPD policing practices, but in Phoenix’s public. Incidentally, if Crane’s justification signifies the presence of an ideology underpinning policing biases and behaviors throughout the city, then it may be the case that Crane’s response actually helps to explain the strains of dehumanization which both enable and justify that violence by the PPD. Inferred in Crane’s analysis is that one’s status as citizen (or not) is correlative with one’s obedience (or criminality) within the neoliberal state, a logic which also implies that U.S. citizens have somehow been ‘properly vetted’ unlike their undocumented peers. But beyond this transparently xenophobic reasoning (and marking United States exceptionalism), it bears reminding that Crane was attempting to justify shootings and deaths caused by the PPD. Crane suggests that simply *because* there are undocumented immigrants, *because* the city has a higher unsheltered population than in the

¹³⁸ Ken Crane, “Chief Williams and PLEA respond to NYT hit piece,” *Phoenix Law Enforcement Association*, 14 December 2018, <https://azplea.com/2018/12/chief-williams-and-plea-respond-to-nyt-hit-piece/>

past, and *because* there are high rates of mental illness, these facts alone can justify the city's rate of police shootings and resulting deaths. Apparently, the very existence of undocumented, unsheltered, and disabled populations arrives alongside a certain rate of collateral to human life as dictated exclusively by the PPD.

Of course, missing from Crane's logic is any accountability to the structures which produce problems of non-citizenship, unshelteredness, or mental illness in the first place – namely, hostile territorial politics and a lack of support mechanisms for precarious populations. Even if we are to take Crane at his word that the real problem of police violence lies in the makeup of the public, then perhaps more comprehensive assistance for those populations would emerge as the obvious mechanism by which to minimize such violence. Predictably, however, self-immolating Phoenix enacts the exact opposite distribution. In 2020, a \$745 million budget was allocated for the police department by Phoenix City Council, an increase of nearly 25 million from the previous year despite mass community protests to defund the police.¹³⁹ As Phoenix's infrastructure deteriorates and the quality of life of its residents becomes increasingly immiserating, city priorities focus upon more purchases of riot gear, flashbang canisters, and high-tech weaponry training.

Obviously, at this point, PPD non-uniquely discriminates against subjects marginalized by categories of race and class. On the same day that George Floyd's murder ignited the largest and most long-lasting Black Lives Matter protests throughout the United States until that point, Phoenix's Dion Johnson, a 28-year-old Black man, was killed by a member of the PPD after sleeping in his car on the side of the highway. This police officer held a record of over a dozen infractions, used his department-issued taser to 'train' his dog,

¹³⁹ Swarner.

and engaged in a record of abuse and stalking behavior toward an ex-girlfriend,¹⁴⁰ and was cleared of all criminal charges following the murder. Echoing governmental protections of criminality by law enforcement officers across the United States, the officer was seen by activists in Phoenix as emblematic of Phoenix's form of racialized abuse. According to *The Republic's* investigation, which identified the race of 96% of the people Phoenix police shot from 2011-2018:

“Hispanic people were shot most often. They make up 43% of Phoenix's population and 42% of those shot. White people make up 42% of the city's population and 38% of those shot. Black people make up 7% of the city's population and 14% of those shot. Native American people made up 2% of the city's population and 6% of those shot.”¹⁴¹

Attending to the rate of shootings relative to population size reveals the racially skewed approach to police interactions with the public. Simply, PPD are more likely to use force against people of color than white people. More than subconscious bias, members of the PPD openly embrace their racism. In 2019, the Plain View Project “revealed nearly 100 current and former Phoenix officers who had made racist, violent, or otherwise offensive posts and comments on their personal Facebook pages,” which included posts referring to Black people as ‘thugs’ “as well as encouragement to shoot or run over [Black Lives Matter] protesters with vehicles.”¹⁴² This culture of the PPD may indicate why the department commonly distributes only false or misleading information about police activity and refuses

¹⁴⁰ Ray Stern, “Dion Johnson died as he lived, in a world of crime and harsh punishment,” *Phoenix New Times*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/dion-johnson-phoenix-background-george-cervantes-11496625>

¹⁴¹ Burkitt & Garcia.

¹⁴² Swarner.

to log the racial identities of its victims,¹⁴³ and why it was only after sustained organizing efforts by abolitionist organizations that the PPD became obligated to report each time they unholster their guns.¹⁴⁴

Through the PPD, pyropolitics become governmentally infused through physical and systemic tactics, with an overlooked physiological component. Much like Arpaio's direct deployment of heat against bodies deemed criminal in Tent City, PPD physically deploys heat against bodies it deems unworthy of life. In one interaction during the Summer of 2020, a man died in custody after being held down on asphalt by the PPD in 100-degree weather.¹⁴⁵ According to the National Weather Service, when exposed to direct sunlight, asphalt can reach temperatures of up to 60 degrees greater than outdoor temperatures, while second-degree burns occur at 131 degrees.¹⁴⁶ However, direct deployments of heat by the PPD are most pervasive among Phoenix's unsheltered population. At the whims of city regulation and private business, PPD's regular dismantling of shelters throughout the city (three times a week) exposes unsheltered people to the harshness of the sun.¹⁴⁷ That this dismantling occurs during daylight hours imposes a risk for those whose lives are threatened

¹⁴³ Richard A. Oppel Jr., "How Phoenix explains a rise in police violence: It's the civilians' fault," *The New York Times*, 10 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/us/phoenix-police-shootings.html>

¹⁴⁴ Jason Hanna, "Phoenix police must now document each time they point their gun at someone," CNN, 20 August 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/20/us/phoenix-police-policies-guns/index.html>

¹⁴⁵ Tim Stelloh, "Phoenix police release bodycam video of man who died after being restrained on asphalt in 100-degree heat," *NBC News*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/phoenix-police-release-bodycam-video-man-who-died-after-being-n1237360>

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Audrey Jensen and Chloe Jones, "Houseless not hopeless': Groups protest the criminalization of homelessness in Phoenix," *Arizona Central*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix-breaking/2020/12/07/groups-protest-criminalization-homelessness-phoenix/3852195001/>

by heat exposure, such as those with asthma¹⁴⁸ or familial melanoma. And death due to heat exhaustion is not uncommon in Phoenix. From 2016 to 2020, an average of 175 people per year in Maricopa County died due to heat exhaustion with most cases taking place outdoors. In the span of just two weeks during the summer of 2020, 4 unsheltered people in an encampment died.¹⁴⁹ As though in coordinated lockstep, as Phoenix's average temperatures increase, so too does its rate of police violence and deaths due to heat related causes.

More systemically, pyropolitics are enacted through and exacerbated by environmental racism. As previously explored, Phoenix's spatial development situates its low-income residents in South Phoenix, and its high-income income residents in North Phoenix. However, beyond differential exposure to toxic pollutants (wherein those who benefit most from toxic energy practices live further away from its environmental repercussions than those who benefit less), a politic of shade dictates the degree to which residents are exposed to harsh sunlight. Throughout North Phoenix, neighborhoods such as Paradise Valley or Desert View are designed with an explicit acknowledgement of Phoenix's climatic context. Trees maintained through wasteful irrigation practices provide coverage from the sun and animate North Phoenix's neighborhood blocks, while outside gated mansions, signs warn trespassers of private surveillance technologies, dictating who is and is not allowed to enjoy respite. Meanwhile, in South Phoenix, sprawling industrial districts

¹⁴⁸ Steven Hsieh, "As COVID-19 threatens homeless, Phoenix cops force them to break down tents," *Phoenix New Times*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/covid-19-homeless-phoenix-tents-police-coronavirus-distancing-11464801>

¹⁴⁹ Jessica Boehm, "More people are dying from heat in Maricopa County, data shows," *Arizona Republic*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2020/06/11/maricopa-county-sees-spike-heat-related-deaths-risk-homeless-coronavirus/5342494002/>

animated by struggling small businesses provide little to no shade.¹⁵⁰ This relationship is maintained by a PPD who ensure the protection of those living in North Phoenix while regularly incarcerating residents of South Phoenix. Much like Phoenix's organized consolidation of capital, opportunities for education, and health and wellness resources, shade, too, is distributed through politics which toss those on the margins into the fire. PPD ensures that they keep burning.

This parasitic relationship among Phoenix's public and maintained by the PPD situates on a climatic ambient which may also contribute to the city's pyropolitics in a physiological register. More than a weapon deployed by Phoenix's governmental technologies to maintain relations of capital and white supremacy, heat also bakes into the fabric of felt experience in Phoenix toward necropolitical ends. In the wake of differentially impacting climate change, scientists have begun to examine heat's physiological implications, attending to the ways heat can reduce cognitive functioning,¹⁵¹ negatively impact memory and spatial recognition,¹⁵² and lead to sleep loss¹⁵³ as well as higher rates of suicide.¹⁵⁴ And for those with already existing "psychotic or mood disorders, substance abuse disorders, or

¹⁵⁰ Sharon L. Harlan, Anthony J. Brazel, G. Darrel Jenerette, Nancy S. Jones, Larissa Larsen, Lela Prashad, and William L. Stefanov, "In the shade of affluence: The inequitable distribution of the urban heat island," In *Equity and the Environment* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2007).

¹⁵¹ Jose Guillermo Cedeño Laurent, Augusta Williams, Youssef Oulhote, Antonella Zanobetti, Joseph G. Allen, and John D. Spengler, "Reduced cognitive function during a heat wave among residents of non-air-conditioned buildings: An observational study of young adults in the summer of 2016," *PLoS medicine* 15, no. 7 (2018).

¹⁵² Peter A. Hancock and Ioannis Vasmatazidis, "Effects of heat stress on cognitive performance: the current state of knowledge," *International Journal of Hyperthermia* 19, no. 3 (2003): 355-372.

¹⁵³ Nick Obradovich, Robyn Migliorini, Sara C. Mednick, and James H. Fowler, "Nighttime temperature and human sleep loss in a changing climate," *Science advances* 3, no. 5 (2017).

¹⁵⁴ Robinson Meyer, "Climate change may cause 26,000 more US suicides by 2050," *The Atlantic*, 23 July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/07/high-temperatures-cause-suicide-rates-to-increase/565826/>

cognitive impairments,” research has shown that these conditions may be exacerbated in heat, wherein those affected “can lose their fragile ability to make plans, have good judgement, and effectively care for themselves.”¹⁵⁵

Layering physiological effects of extreme heat into contexts involving armed law enforcement further complexifies our understanding of those already tense, and often brief, interactions. Returning to Crane’s diagnosis of the PPD’s violence as a result of the makeup of the public (undocumented immigrants, unsheltered people, mentally ill people), for example, illustrates how the conditions of the latter two populations are impacted by severe heat. Both interactions with law enforcement as well as behaviors which resulted in the presence of law enforcement might have been diminished if the outdoor temperature were not high enough to result in a heat stroke. Due to intense heat conditions, the cognitive functioning of the already vulnerable can result in deepening behavioral deviations from the norm, crossing a threshold for those on the opposite end of the gun who have extracted their victim from all context. And then, of course, these conditions not only physiologically impact those pursued, shot at, and killed by the PPD, but members of the PPD itself. Physiological effects of heat conditions on the PPD contain two primary intensifying variables. First, PPD uniforms, especially riot gear, heat up law enforcement officers and exacerbate any physiological effects of heat. Second, the physiological effects of heat merge, for the PPD, with the physiological effects of carrying and using a gun. Simply interacting with a gun can increase testosterone,¹⁵⁶ the mere presence of a weapon can heighten senses

¹⁵⁵ Xiang Wang, Eric Lavigne, H el ene Ouellette-kuntz, and Bingshu E. Chen, "Acute impacts of extreme temperature exposure on emergency room admissions related to mental and behavior disorders in Toronto, Canada," *Journal of affective disorders* 155 (2014): 154-161.

¹⁵⁶ Jennifer Klinessmith, Tim Kasser, & Francis T. McAndrew, "Guns, testosterone, and aggression," *Psychological Science* 17, no. 7 (2006): 568-571.

of aggression,¹⁵⁷ and carrying a gun can increase paranoia toward those around you.¹⁵⁸ If we consider the physiological effects of gun carrying and gun presence alongside the ways in which heat alters judgement, it seems highly probable that a conjoining of these variables, of heat and weapon use, collaboratively intensify the already existing biases which result in such high levels of violence by law enforcement in the United States. Of course, this reasoning cannot account for the violences which extend from racisms pervasive in the PPD nor the ideologies required to desire joining a law enforcement unit in the first place, but it may provide an overlooked variable ecologically contributive to these encounters.

Through the governmental technology that is the PPD, pyropolitics circulate through a range of ecological dimensions. Phoenix's increasingly hot climatic context is both a weapon directed toward those deemed unworthy of life by the PPD, as well as an ambient force physiologically contributive to subject encounters with the PPD. Meanwhile, the city's classed spatial demarcations, which differentially privilege or harm subjects relative to their class status and via exposure to the elements, are maintained by the PPD. The enactment of this elemental pyropolitic is justified for the public through the reproduction of an ideological formation which generally degrades poor, Black, and Brown subjects as a threat to the public. This ideological formation is distributed locally through resentful border discourses, transparently disclosed in Ken Crane's statement, as well as through broader national discourses animated by racism, xenophobia, and classism under imperial neoliberal capitalism. This ecological arrangement reifying the status quo power formation sets the

¹⁵⁷ Leonard Berkowitz & Anthony LePage, "Weapons as aggression-eliciting stimuli," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 7, no. 2 (1967): 202-207.

¹⁵⁸ Jessica K. Witt & James R. Brockmole, "Action alters object identification: Wielding a gun increases the bias to see guns," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 38, no. 5 (2012): 1159-1167.

stage for a metaphorical pyropolitic wherein those deemed threatening or useless can simply burn.

Ignition

“Rhetorical situations involve the amalgamation and mixture of many different events and happenings that are not properly segmented into audience, text, or rhetorician,” Edbauer argues toward the conclusion of their rhetorical ecological analysis of “Keep Austin Weird,” “We must therefore consider whether our popular models reflect the fulness of rhetorics operation in public.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, rhetoric complexly circulates and can challenge the stratifications employed to demarcate this subject from that object, this science from that affect, this politic from that climate. Thus, akin to Edbauer’s analysis, it is only through an ecological exploration of the ways in which Phoenix’s elemental, discursive, and spatial variables entangle, that its governmental deployment of pyropolitics be analyzed and bounded within wider ecologies of the Anthropocene.

In examining Phoenix’s pyropolitics through the lens of critical ecological rhetoric, I have sought to centralize rhetoric’s inherent connectivity across the often culturally segmented registers of the social, environmental, and elemental, as well as the exploitation and manipulation of these connections by those with power. I argue that this orientation to rhetoric is necessary for the end of a world. In light of a changing planet, accelerating necrocapitalism, mass extinction, and intensifying precarity in the Anthropocene, it becomes critical to demystify the ongoing mutations of governmentality and the discourses seeking to justify their politics. Pyropolitics is just one such governmental formation to attune to as climatic contexts which warrant forced migration, press up against (perhaps increasingly

¹⁵⁹ Edbauer, 20.

stringent) border policies. As previously discussed, pyropolitical tactics in Tent City have already iterated in undocumented migrant containment camps along the U.S.-Mexico border. Though, the elemental politics and attending rhetorics which result from ongoing climate change, such as hurricanes, drought, or agricultural disasters, should also be examined through the lens of critical ecological rhetoric as the indirectness of their governmental form can easily be overlooked in service of elite interests.

CHAPTER 3

I'M REAL WHEN I SHOP MY FACE

To think ecologically is not to collapse distinctions between worlds, as though the virtual and the actual were really the same thing. Media ecologies and planetary ecologies are differently fragile, their communicative technologies differently enabled and constrained, their bodies differently composed, assorted, circulated. However, thinking ecologically should not impose borders either; it should rather move to see how these worlds weave into and inflect upon one another in complexly entangled, cyborg assemblages. The worlding in a virtual ecology may illuminate possibilities in its materialist counterpart; code defining space, algorithm defining politic, network defining movement. In this way, the ecological thought is intensely (im)material.

The scientific field of cybernetics explicitly examines the relay of one world upon the other, tending to how social organization and communication are programmed through inputs and outputs, akin to a computer. If we accept the cybernetic hypothesis for human social organization under neoliberal necrocapitalism, then notions of the Anthropocene should prompt us to acknowledge that the computer has entered its inevitable state of overdrive. Those viral networks which carry out dominative violences are conjoining and globalizing, both in response to and in the ongoing production of anthropogenic climate change. Global circulations of capital and their requisite exploitations (harvesting of human energy and more-than-human bodies; burning of vibrant matter) have resulted in our planet's sixth mass extinction event and a carbon emission limit break against the very concept of world whatsoever. In this, our post-future context, we bear witness to a cybernetic death spiral wherein the program dissolves itself, plagued by the outputs of its insidious code.

As the system dissolves, reigning beliefs that capitalism should not be held responsible for such large-scale problems (as if there is no alternative) instead scapegoat the individuated subject, a body already forced into increasing precarity and alienation. Trapped in the matrix, the subject is differentially situated relative to constructed identity markers which code the subject's engagement with intersecting spectrums of oppression, relative privileges, and placements within a target consumer category. In the matrix, the subject's body and energy become mere binary code, reflect algorithm, replicate the market structure, while dominated and surveilled under what Maurizio Lazzarato calls "machinic enslavement."¹⁶⁰ Designed to foster endless competition between subjects, the matrix conceals its underlying function: to maintain lifelong servitude of all subjects at the hands of a smaller and smaller ruling class. When operating smoothly, deep code renders it difficult to tell we are even trapped in the matrix at all, implying that all failures are individual failures even as everything continues to melt.

If only we could jam the system...

A glitch is a failure, a rupture, a distortion of a system function disclosing imperfect design. When video games glitch, non-playable characters float above the ground, cars twitch across landscape, and faces horrifically morph inside out. What was once an immersive simulation is demystified as a mere toy constructed by humans also exploited in the glow of computer screens. A glitch renders supposedly natural functioning highly unnatural. By definition, glitches are *weird*.

Sometimes, a glitch results in a crash – a total system failure requiring reboot. And sometimes it reinterprets our sense of control over technology: am I working the machine or

¹⁶⁰ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and machines: Capitalism and the production of subjectivity* (Semiotext (e), 2014).

is the machine working me? If we abstract glitch from an exclusively technological frame and apply it more broadly to our cybernetically organized material ecology, then glitch may be interpreted as a rupture to governing design, a kind of opening toward critical consciousness which discloses how one might distort the matrix and reveal its constructedness in light of newly realized possibilities. Thus, glitching our cybernetic social reality contains liberatory potential because it can demystify the matrix's seemingly natural operations as carefully orchestrated control maintenance, and perhaps even stall the system's oppressive functions through acts of resistance and worldmaking solidarities. One mode of glitch necessary for system failure is the circulation of transgressive art which, like a virus, exposes all those infected to both possibilities external to the status quo as well as the contradictions inherent to the governing system's design principles.

In this analysis, I explore three glitches incited by Scottish-born pop artist Sophie. Akin to a triptych whose three interlocking parts are viewed as a cohesive composition when taken together, Sophie's album *Product*, music video for "It's Okay To Cry," and music video for "Faceshopping" tell a cohesive, yet complex, story of neoliberal subjectivation under necrocapitalism. Each component glitches subjectivation in unique ways and at different levels of intelligibility, but together, their individual parts coordinate to devise a unifying image which traces Sophie's subject from unintelligibility to intelligibility to enraged response at subjectivation. Analyzing Sophie's triptych as a sequence of feminist glitches simultaneously affirms the liberatory potentialities of glitch, while also demonstrating how the construction of our media ecology enables and constrains these potentialities. Before analyzing Sophie's triptych, a tracing of cyberfeminism to glitch feminism and their relevance to critical ecological rhetoric will be reviewed.

Glitching The Normative

Donna Haraway's posthuman theory of cyborg feminism is a major precursor to glitch feminism. In her *Cyborg Manifesto*,¹⁶¹ initially published in 1985, Haraway defined the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."¹⁶² Metaphorically, the cyborg transgresses boundaries and constructs an alternative imaginary to our own in which "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."¹⁶³ Through an embrace of always already melded identities and forms, Haraway also embraced the contradictions inherent to strategic essentialism within the feminist movement by historically constituted bodies, theorizing an exploratory means around binaries, the limitations of language, and the embeddedness of habituated constructs. Cyborg feminism attempted to circumnavigate cultural prisons through language that "cannot be coded as natural," wherein "representation" becomes "simulation", "organism" becomes "biotic component", and "heat" becomes "noise".¹⁶⁴ These translations of dominating discourse into science-fiction imaginary enable a realization not about the fiction of one, but the fantasy of both. Ironic dreams of cyborg feminism are just as possible as the world constructed against that potential. Ultimately, Haraway's manifesto facilitated an explosion of critical cyborg art and scholarship in the decades that followed. This includes Sadie Plant's theory of cyberfeminism,¹⁶⁵ a liberal strain of feminism which affirms the capacity of the digital to challenge the gender binary and patriarchal logics, but which also

¹⁶¹ Donna Haraway, "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century," In *The international handbook of virtual learning environments* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2006): 117-158.

¹⁶² Ibid., 291.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 295.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 301.

¹⁶⁵ Sadie Plant, *Zeros and ones: Digital women and the new technoculture* (Vol. 4. London, 1997).

tends to relegate non-Western, non-white, and non-economically privileged feminist concerns to the background.

Against this background, Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*¹⁶⁶ offers a necessary update to concerns of the cyborg and cyberfeminism through a more explicitly intersectional framework and embrace of failure inherent to queer existence under neoliberal subjectivation. While scholars in the communication discipline have productively interrogated glitch as a musical form,¹⁶⁷ Russell's text orients to the concept as a means to address art, rhetoric, and feminist activism which rupture the normative system's inherently oppressive functions through the capacities disclosed by their breakage. According to Russell:

Within glitch feminism, glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body. In glitch feminism, we look at the notion of glitch-as-error with its genesis in the realm of the machinic and the digital and consider how it can be reapplied to inform the way we see the AFK [Away From Keyboard] world, shaping how we might participate in it toward greater agency for and by ourselves.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Legacy Russell, *Glitch feminism* (Verso Books, 2020).

¹⁶⁷ Scott Haden Church, "Against the tyranny of musical form: glitch music, affect, and the sound of digital malfunction," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 4 (2017): 315-328.; Greg Hainge, "Of Glitch and Men: The Place of the Human in the Successful Integration of Failure and Noise in the Digital Realm," *Communication Theory* 17 (2007): 26-42.

¹⁶⁸ Russell, 8.

Indeed, while glitch feminism is predominantly enacted within online media ecologies, its critical implications and potentialities extend far beyond that space of virtual worldbuilding and into the realm of material politics necessary for survival AFK. Like the cyborg, glitch feminism works against the binary-laden trappings of the body's normative social constitution, but here, reflects the problematics of those binaries by disrupting their function – a performance of failure within the system.

Throughout Russell's text, she centers the work of queer scholars of color who resist normative constructions of sex, gender, and public expression. In this way, glitch feminism finds some resonance with Jack Halberstam's concept of queer failure¹⁶⁹ and Lore/tta LeMaster's explorations of failure in relation to performance studies, intercultural communication, and pedagogy¹⁷⁰ in that the act of glitch renders validity to the failing subject through an art of disclosure about the constructedness of a system which designates, through a logic of normative obedience, what constitutes a pass or fail state. Aligning with Russell's theory of glitch feminism, Sophie's art glitches neoliberal subjectivation under capitalism by distorting symbols and logics of subjectivation and consumption – even, occasionally, through glitch-like signifiers.

Glitch feminism enacts its liberatory politics through circulation within, and distortions of, our media ecology. That is, our media ecology functions as the territory within which media and their glitches circulate to shape human ideology. First explored in length by Marshall McLuhan in his text *Understanding Media*¹⁷¹ before going on to form an

¹⁶⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁷⁰ B. LeMaster, "Embracing failure: Improvisational performance as critical intercultural praxis," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 14, no. 4 (2018): 1-21.; B. LeMaster, "Pedagogies of Failure," *Critical Intercultural Communication Pedagogy* (2017): 81-96.

¹⁷¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (MIT Press, 1994).

interdisciplinary subfield, media ecology “looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival,” while structuring “what we can see and say and, therefore, do.”¹⁷² In this way, media ecology refers both to uses, circulations, and boundaries of media, as well as their corresponding social impacts. While distinct from the matrix of neoliberal individuation under necrocapitalism, the construction of our media ecology is shaped by neoliberal capitalism in significant ways. Similar to how the circulation of material bodies within our planetary ecology are enabled and constrained by spatial limits imposed by development upon and regulation of space, circulations within a media ecology are bounded by their limitations within an attention economy unevenly organized by algorithm, censorship, corporate consolidation, and, of course, all manner of normative ideology and bias that its participants (re)produce within the virtual space. To attend to glitch feminism in the context of media ecology is to trace the potentials and limits of liberatory expression in the information society, and to engage with the role of power in shaping, distributing, interpreting, and blocking bodies which bleed beyond binaries and borders across the vast expanse of the digital realm.

My examination of how glitches circulate in media ecologies to affect human percepts and potentialities AFK is organized through critical ecological rhetoric. While ecosophy attends to the ways all bodies of matter and meaning interconnect, my theory’s critical component centralizes the ways in which power is entangled within, enforced, and resisted ecologically. Thus, my analysis recognizes Sophie’s glitches as more than resistant texts, but virtual circulations ecologically entangled with the body politics of the material

¹⁷² Neil Postman, “The reformed English curriculum,” In *High School 1980: The shape of the future in American secondary education* (Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1970).

world. If our media ecology facilitates (even elevates) organizing efforts of aggrieved far-right communities who violently protect normative identity, then affective circulations, which glitch against these oppressive politics, contain mortal implications.

What follows is an analysis of Sophie's triptych which conjoin to tell a story of neoliberal subjectivation and resistance. Given that my analysis seeks to reflect how Sophie's art circulated online temporally, resulted in (for some) revelations about Sophie's identity, and relied on the form and contexts of prior releases to build rhetorical claims for later releases, each section of analysis is primarily contextualized through its temporal situatedness, rather than in retrospect.

Product

The songs on *Product*, Sophie's compilation of singles, entangle the seemingly disparate musical styles of bubblegum pop and industrial noise. While bubblegum pop has been used to describe simple, synthetic, radio and commercial-friendly popular music, industrial noise describes harsh, often drone-like and/or atonal music that would, outside of a very few instances (including Sophie's music), never receive time on popular radio. Take, for example, Sophie's single "Hard". Pitched-up vocals ride squelching horror music strings with frequent cuts to queasy basslines, hi-hats, claps, and the sound of skin rubbing against latex. It is a song that shakes us into the rhythms of the plastic neo-material – ticks, slaps, smacks, and pops nearly qualify as playground musique concrete, a compositional form which employs found sound as its base. Like the minimalist artwork of her single covers, each featuring a playful plastic object, the noises lacing through *Product* contain their own plastic space which enclose us in, for example, 18 seconds of *buzzzzzz* which open "L.O.V.E." The compilation is libidinal friction. It's sounds are at once hostile and catchy, spiked earworms crawling through dense seas of post-human affect.

With *Product*, Sophie destabilizes the listener's sense of musical style and popular song structure through a meshing of pop and noise trademarks, consumer product and art, artificial and real. In harmony with its album title, many lyrics across the album describe a sadomasochistic play of products: "*Latex gloves, smack so hard / PVC, I get so hard / Platform shoes, kick so hard / Ponytail, yank so hard*" (from "Hard"); or contort the human body into an object itself: "*You've got to twist your body / Twirl it all around / Make it pop and sizzle / Now squish it on the ground*" (from "Vyzee"). The dissolution of binaries between bodies and technology extends toward Sophie's use of voice modulation technology. In *Interview Magazine*, Sophie expresses, "I'm always trying to encapsulate how we, as emotional beings, interact with the world and the machines and technology around us – being able to emote through those things. They're not antithetical or mutually exclusive."¹⁷³ By embracing the technological extensions which compose the human's cyborg form, Sophie reframes that which is often relegated to a construct of "unnatural" as valid, real, and necessary, utopically building binary-less futures through arts-based means.

This fusion of human and product carries through to the ways Sophie's art was materially distributed: a special edition of *Product* was released with a phallic "silicon product"; an independently produced energy drink called "QT" was released for "\$20 a pop" at her shows under the moniker QT¹⁷⁴; she paired with Red Bull Music Academy for a live concert and visual performance exposition¹⁷⁵; and when asked in an early interview what

¹⁷³ Cedar Pasori, "Pop wunderkind Sophie synthesizes human and machine voices," *Interview Magazine*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/sophie-its-okay-to-cry-interview>

¹⁷⁴ Simon Vozick-Levinson, "PC Music are for real: A.G. Cook and SOPHIE talk twisted pop," *Rolling Stone*, 22 May 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/pc-music-are-for-real-a-g-cook-and-sophie-talk-twisted-pop-20150522>

¹⁷⁵ Sasha Geffen, "SOPHIE can show you the world: And she's changing pop music in the process," *Vulture*, 7 December 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/12/profile-sophie.html>

genre Sophie would claim to work within, she simply responded “advertising.”¹⁷⁶ In this hilariously neutralizing response, Sophie, in trickster-like fashion, makes an appeal to the oft-maligned relationship between artistic integrity and the corporate appropriation of art by explicitly mainlining her absorption into the capitalist enterprise. When McDonalds featured Sophie’s “Lemonade” in a television advertisement for its new beverage product, the ultimate realization of consumerist objectification seemed almost inevitable. By “selling out,” Sophie could glitch capitalist normativity from the inside.

Throughout the period that Sophie released the singles which would make up *Product*, and during that album’s rollout, Sophie remained anonymous. In press releases, Sophie disclosed no markers of social identity and explicitly rejected the use of gendered third-person pronouns. Her anonymity even extended into live settings, wherein she often hired drag performers to dance and lip-sync to her music as she stood toward the back of the stage dressed as a bouncer.¹⁷⁷ This non-disclosure of social identity enacts a particular kind of glitch to celebrity culture under a system of neoliberal subjectivation. If the corporate institution of popular music even partially relies on markers of identity to attract listeners and establish brand recognition of music idols, then the unintelligibility of Sophie’s identity through decisive anonymity creates a rupture to more traditional practices of circulating music as aesthetic commodity. Instead of developing listenership through the facilitation of idol fandom or parasocial encounter, Sophie’s *Product* was more akin to the faceless consumer-commodity interactions of, for example, Netflix or Amazon. Consumers were left

¹⁷⁶ Kristin Westcott Grant, “U.K. producer SOPHIE Q&A: On secrecy, synthesis & what’s next,” *Billboard*, 19 August, 2014, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/6221915/sophie-producer-interview>

¹⁷⁷ Pasori, 2017.

alone with the *Product*, while her songs could be, in turn, read as corporate jingles: “*I can make you feel better / if you let me / I can make you feel better / If you want to*” (from “Bipp”).

However, due to the unintelligibility of Sophie’s subject in a culture reliant upon social categorization for sensemaking, authors of Sophie’s discursive narrative (music journalists, art critics) began to forward their own stories regarding her identity. Namely, they outright posed that Sophie was a man operating under a feminine moniker. Here is how the very first interview with Sophie began on BBC Radio 1 in 2013:

“We have Sophie on the phone. How you doin’?”

“Good thank you, how are you?” Sophie replies through voice modulation technology.

“There’s an actual rumor that you’re a grown man called Sam from Scotland. What’s going on with your voice?”

“I’ve got a cough.”¹⁷⁸ A playful reply without hesitation.

Following this brief radio appearance, writers continued to interrogate Sophie’s murky gender intelligibility, frequently characterizing her through cissexist assumptions, as in “Sophie – who is assumed to be male”¹⁷⁹ despite Sophie’s efforts to control her representation through anonymity. To this, Sophie replied:

The music is not about where someone grew up, or what they look like against a wall [...]. Therefore, you should try to use every opportunity

¹⁷⁸ BBC Radio 1, “History of bass double bill with Annie Mac and Sophie,” *BBC Radio 1*, 14 September 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01gq9kv>

¹⁷⁹ Larry Fitzmaurice, “SOPHIE,” *Pitchfork*, 10 October, 2013, <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/9237-sophie/>

available to say what you're trying to say, instead of saying, 'Here's my music and this is what I look like.' Nobody cares.¹⁸⁰

But commentators did care. Eventually a scrutinizing focus upon the relationship between Sophie's gender-identity and the art itself emerged within online discourse. *The Fader* wrote in their article "Feminine Appropriation Was 2014's Biggest Electronic Music Trend" that Sophie's obscuring of identity in service of a "hyper-feminine aesthetic that teeters towards parody" is a "schtick" made possible through white, straight, male, educated privilege.¹⁸¹ In spite of her anonymity, Sophie's work was questioned through a critique mirroring the troubling logics of trans exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), a white supremacist feminist formation which argues that "...physical transitions to female and our expressions of femininity represent an appropriation of female culture, symbolism, and bodies."¹⁸² Doubting the subject's capacity to determine their own gender, TERFs and commentators relied on logics of biological determinism to situate Sophie's subject in the neoliberal matrix, ordered by relative adherences to normative identity constructions, even while deploying critical terminologies of "white privilege".

Writing about the complex relationship between self-identity and music, Julia J. A. Shaw offers:

Only by assuming both a subjective and collective identity is it possible to make sense of a musical encounter, because as listeners we experience not only the world but ourselves in an often unexpectedly different way; drawing

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Steph Kretowicz, "Feminine appropriation was 2014's biggest electronic music trend," *The Fader*, 31 December 2014, <http://www.thefader.com/2014/12/31/feminine-appropriation-2014-electronic-music-trend>

¹⁸² Julia Serano, *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (Hachette UK, 2016).

our sense of self from the collective cultural and group identities that surround us. This constructivist dimension helps us to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, gendered and class-bound subjects. We enjoy music precisely because it can supply the answers to fundamental questions about our identity.¹⁸³

Extending Shaw's account to include the identity of the artist might help to explain both the desire for and resistance to inscription upon Sophie's body, despite the fact that Sophie's unintelligibility was, in itself, a means of communicating identity. Through the very cultivation of a lack, Sophie glitches the intelligibility requisite to subject surveillance ordered by neoliberal capitalism. Sasha Geffen succinctly captures Sophie's intent about this glitch, explaining in *Vulture*, "The loosening of gender boundaries feels central, not incidental, to Sophie's music, which is maybe why she doesn't feel the need to talk about it."¹⁸⁴

While Sophie would not remain anonymous for long, her brief glitches of unintelligibility and commodity fetishism disclose a system function reliant upon subject categories to render discourses of art meaningful in a normatively organized consumerist landscape. Given this, Sophie's glitches were made possible due to, rather than despite, her aesthetic embrace of mass consumption. The radio-friendly inflections of *Product* enabled Sophie to access an audience of those grazed on the chart-topping sounds which defined the pop music sphere of the late-1990s to early 2000s. The songs on *Product* certainly disperse familiar affects of this style of pop music to lubricate their circulation – autotune, synthetic instrumentation, thin production designed for car radios, and traditional verse-chorus song

¹⁸³ Julia Shaw, "From Beethoven to Bowie: Identity framing, social justice and the sound of law," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue* 31, no. 2 (2018): 309.

¹⁸⁴ Geffen, 2017.

structure – but they also arrived with a harsh new aesthetic edge and, at least initially, undisclosed implications. Like unassumedly opening an Amazon package that suddenly bursts into showers of glitter, *Product's* accessible affects also discretely widened listener's musical palette – sense of sound, taste, and auditory potential – while generating implicit questions of the artist's subject: *Who is Sophie?* This glitch to the system further demonstrates how glitch feminism requires an appropriation of the “master's tools”¹⁸⁵ to enact its distortions; first, pass as an integral component to the matrix, and then tear a hole in *its reality's* fabric. All that seemed to be missing was the figure, the pop idol's humanoid form with which to scissor from magazines and then litter the bedroom wall.

“It's Okay To Cry”

“The pop-music video is one of the most powerful communication tools we have. Most people have access to a phone, and you can click a video and absorb it in three minutes. If it's potent enough, you can take in the message or have some sort of experience in multiple dimensions.” - Sophie¹⁸⁶

Integral to the event of “It's Okay To Cry,” Sophie's first music video, is her presence. Physically represented to a popular audience for the first time, Sophie sings directly to the viewer, her sensuousness and expressions of catharsis all-consuming in front of rapidly shifting skies. Red curls, dark red lipstick, large cheekbones, and blemishless porcelain skin render Sophie doll-like, an aesthetic she would continue to explore on the cover of her debut album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un – Insides* (say it out loud: “*I love every person's insides*”) and in future promotional photos cropped to depict a mannequin arm as one of her own. Aligning with her commentary on using voice modulation technology, Sophie's

¹⁸⁵ Audre Lorde, *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* (Penguin UK, 2018).

¹⁸⁶ Geffen, 2017.

performance is cyborg-like in its dissolution of binaries between body and technology, authenticity and inauthenticity.

Then, contained in the music video's release is a double-gesture toward vulnerability: at the same time that we see Sophie's physical appearance for the first time (her nude body further intensifying the choice to premier herself to an audience via a public video platform), her lyrics vulnerably embrace inner worlds and outward worldbuilding. Peppering the lyrics are expressions of consoling affirmation ("*I accept you*"; "*It's okay, it's okay, it's okay*") coupled with lyrics privileging the relative freedom of internality over the more publicly constructed interpretations of externality ("*I think your inside is your best side*"; "*There's a world inside you / I wanna know what it feels like / I wanna go there with you [...] I want to know those parts of you*"). In "It's Okay To Cry," Sophie glitches the oppressive relegation of bodies to their system function premised upon biocultural institutions, showing us that beyond the code is another kind of world wherein souls can be anything they want and where, at last, it's okay to cry.

Addressing the video's themes, Sophie stated, "It's about this idea of the richness and complexity of our inner and outer worlds [...]. The video encapsulates the quiet, internal world flatly on top of or inside these universal, shifting landscapes, and contemplates how they are related."¹⁸⁷ This inner/outer world dichotomy, demonstrated by Sophie's body in front of a green screen, is paralleled by the relationship between Sophie and the viewer affectively transported through the screening device. When witnessing the music video, one may even experience what Lisa Perrott refers to as *cultural alchemy*. Writing on the cultural alchemy produced through the music videos of David Bowie, Perrott describes the concept as "the playful process by which Bowie synthesized disparate cultural elements, triggering a

¹⁸⁷ Pasori, 2017.

seemingly combustive, alchemical reaction, which produced new cultural elements [...] fecund with the potential for new ways of thinking and being.”¹⁸⁸ If “It’s Okay To Cry” glitches the normative cultural landscape, it is because Sophie addresses her audience through a vulnerable alchemical synthesis of inner and outer worlds, marked importantly by her transness and in tension with narratives that framed Sophie’s art as a form of feminine appropriation acquired through cisgender male privilege.

This glitching, however, is differentially distributed and, ultimately, dependent upon the viewer’s orientation toward and station within subjectivity. For example, cisgender audiences who have internalized neoliberal subjectivation and perhaps, following cissexist music coverage, assumed Sophie was appropriating feminine aesthetics while anonymous, may have had their norms glitched upon viewing “It’s Okay To Cry.” Those who chose not to recede into transphobic interpretations of her work were provided an opportunity to reinterpret prior constructions of Sophie’s subject by music journalists, such that all prior attempts to relegate Sophie’s body to a normatively defined category became, in retrospect, intrusive and callous, while containing violent implications.

For the worlds of queer and trans audiences, however, “It’s Okay To Cry” seemed to offer affirmation and a sense of empowerment. Perhaps Sophie’s transness was even anticipated prior to the release of the video for queer audiences who better understand the need to pass in a cissexist social world, wherein Sophie’s prior coupling of anonymity and “hyper-feminine aesthetic” was correctly interpreted as a means of passing through the device of anonymity. Much of the comment section for the video evidences this reading. One highly-upvoted comment expresses:

¹⁸⁸ Lisa Perrott, “Bowie the cultural alchemist: performing gender, synthesizing gesture and liberating identity,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 31, no. 4 (2017): 530.

everything ive known about sophie up to this point reminds me so much of what it was like for me and other trans people when we come out. Before she felt like she could, she hid herself, stayed in the background of things [...] now that she feels comfortable and confident and who she is, she's front and center, close up, with the glossiest lips, dancing topless. you can see it in her eyes, how much she loves herself. She's feeling it more than any of us (and i know ya'll are feeling it, too)¹⁸⁹

The largely supportive feed of comments showcases the potential for a glitch to open space for sharing personal accounts of gender expression, a site for validation and representation, and a mode of engagement with trans-affirming representation. By reducing the barriers between the viewer's experiences and her artistic narrative, Sophie's work establishes a digital space for trans and queer worldmaking.

Though, in an ironic turn, the normatively produced architectures that allow virtual space for this digital haven are challenged to surveil Sophie's body in the same ways they would a cisgender woman's body. That is, Sophie glitches YouTube by showing her breasts in the video for "It's Okay To Cry." While some breasts may appear on YouTube alongside age-restrictions and content warnings, videos teetering toward the pornographic persuasion (i.e., *nudity meant to induce pleasure...*) can be removed from the platform for their so-called graphic content. But gender is an even fuzzier cultural logic and any obligation to check a box denoting one's "gender category" impossibly reduces gender from its lived (re)productions. Fortunately, YouTube cannot seek from its accounts gender disclosures of those bodies depicted on screen; rather, it (and its users) can only censor bodies rendered

¹⁸⁹ L F. Re: SOPHIE, "*SOPHIE - It's Okay To Cry (Official Video)*." Directed by SOPHIE. October 19, 2017. Music video, 3:51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_S0qCeA-pc

intelligible under YouTube policy. Sophie's glitch, then, exposes how these policies of censorship and age-restriction lack an account for their normatively imposed framework against non-normative bodies. In this sense, transness itself offers a loophole through which to exploit the system's design (community guidelines for nudity and sexual content) and glitch cisnormative constructions of surveillance. The tidiness of 'policy' is revealed as organized by ideology after all: "*I can see the truth through all the lies / And even after all this time / Just know you've got nothing to hide / It's okay to cry (it's okay to cry)*" (from "It's Okay To Cry").

Like *Product*, "It's Okay To Cry" as glitch feminism relies on a medium's normative design to disrupt a normatively orchestrated system function. Glitching both cultural inscriptions of gender and the technologies through which we engage gendered representation, Sophie's body and presence announce errors in the matrix through an exploitation of their code. But Sophie's vulnerable disclosure of self through "It's Okay To Cry", post-anonymity, also arrives at a cost. Even as non-normative gender expression acts as glitch, it, too, may now fold into the neoliberal matrix of subjectivation—a consumer category to occupy, a finely disciplined politic, an inscription with which to co-opt for capital gain. How could this not be met by glitches wrought from trans rage?

"Faceshopping"

Released 6 months after "It's Okay To Cry," Sophie's music video for "Faceshopping" is pure glitch: glitching body, glitching video format, glitching body politics, glitching sound. From all angles, "Faceshopping" seeks to affectively embody system malfunction to contort the senses toward total submission. This is enabled through such rapidly paced sound production and visual editing that many images in the video are near-subliminal interjections. The viewer becomes prey to an onslaught of information that, in triangulation, form a cartoonish cocktail of capitalist critique.

Here, Sophie's body becomes plasticized product as we watch her head twist, fold into itself, bubble up like a balloon, slice into pieces, bend, and melt. At turns both ghastly and playful, these contortions situate Sophie's representation of self in a markedly different way from the rhetorics of self-affirmation that course through "It's Okay To Cry." In "Faceshopping", Sophie suggests that the body is a site of consumption. To render explicit this critique, depictions of Sophie's warping body are temporally juxtaposed with images of cosmetics, social media iconography for Instagram and Twitter, and Coca-Cola logotype reappropriated to correspond with the song lyrics, "*Artificial bloom / Hydroponic skin / Chemical release / Synthesize the real / Plastic surgery / Social dialect / Positive results / Documents of life / Scalpel, lipstick, gel / Action, camera, lights,*" amalgamating the human body with consumerist circulation. When Sophie sings, "*I'm real when I shop my face,*" she is glitching capitalist realism by confessing her function within a system that requires humans subjects for the consumption of intelligible art. Then, the video's images of sweating skin and slabs of uncooked steak demystify the body as anything less than organic matter. Eventually, Sophie's boneless form, the body *reduced to nothingness* that we have witnessed endure a kind of body horror throughout the video, melts like candlewax to the floor, facial features slipping away into a shapeless puddle of random chemical substance.

In "Faceshopping" Sophie glitches capitalist normativity by exposing its treatment of the human subject as an object open for manipulation and, even, pulverization. For example, in a warped reflection of Sophie's nude form in the video for "It's Okay To Cry," the video's halfway mark displays Sophie's fully nude body, rubberized, flailing, and falling endlessly through void. As if plucked straight from the set of "It's Okay To Cry", magically rendered into malleable object, and then cast like garbage into space. In reading these two texts together, encouraged through recurring motifs of nude representation and aesthetic bodily

representation (cheekbones, hairstyle, lipstick color), we trigger two sides to the expression of vulnerability. On the one hand, an exit from public anonymity and an affirmation of internal worlds can result in the achievement of catharsis such that *to cry* feels and becomes *okay*. On the other hand, vulnerability is public exposure, enabling public scrutiny. Sophie's body is no longer simply hers, but a body to-be-consumed by a wider social world.

While Sophie's work progressively affirms the dissolution between binaries of human/object and real/artificial, here she critiques the imposition of the body as a use for others. In an interview with *Jezebel*, Sophie explicitly distinguishes between the social consumption of bodies from one's self-augmentation, explaining:

[With] things like body augmentation, you can find something that's actually more real, which was my experience with electronic music and synthetic materials. That's something I always want to try and communicate, deconstructing this idea of authenticity which you see so much in music industry especially. An acoustic or electric guitar is meant to signify authenticity, but it's like, what's the real relationship?¹⁹⁰

In deconstructing authenticity in her work, Sophie opts out of imposed constructs that relegate particular bodies and modes of expression as more real than others, then, in "Faceshopping," she glitches deterministic forces which prey upon bodies.

Relevant to this glitch's context is its release after Sophie de-anonymized herself in the video for "It's Okay To Cry." While that prior video is fundamentally undergirded by an ethic of queer affirmation, its release also allowed for Sophie to become folded into a subject position. That is, Sophie's identity and gender intelligibility rendered her subject open to a

¹⁹⁰ Hazel Cills, "SOPHIE is an immaterial girl in a material world," *Jezebel*, 4 April 2018, <https://themuse.jezebel.com/sophie-is-an-immaterial-girl-in-a-material-world-1823883163>

cavalcade of cisnormative discourse that situates transness as deviant and, thus, compelling fodder in art discourse. In an interview with *Crack*, Sophie responded:

It's tough when firstly you want to be seen as a woman, and you want to be seen as an artist and an individual. So to have something like your gender identity preceding everything that's written about you is difficult.¹⁹¹

Never in control of her own representation, “Faceshopping” can be interpreted as an enraged response to subjectivation, affectively relaying how it feels to have one’s identity spliced into pieces, folded and contorted for mass consumption; how it feels to be constituted as subject.

In this sense, “Faceshopping” glitches us. When Sophie melts, we, too, melt into chemical substance, cyclically recomposing our subject-selves into affectively circulating deposits within digital landscapes. At turns necessary for queer worldmaking and affirmation (the fact of trans representation is, after all, a glitch), and newly troubled by normative logics that govern the structures of materialist and media ecologies, the non-normative body, necessarily, freaks out.

(Im)material Worlds

On January 30th, 2021 at roughly 4 a.m., Sophie died. Of the event, the record labels Transgressive and Future Classic wrote on Twitter: “True to her spirituality she had climbed up to watch the full moon and accidentally slipped and fell. She will always be here with us.”¹⁹² That something so random and human as a slip is what brought Sophie across life’s

¹⁹¹ Chal Ravens, “SOPHIE: Earthly pleasures,” *Crack*, 5 January 2018, <https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/sophie-earthly-pleasures/>

¹⁹² Transgressive, “True to her spirituality she had climbed up to watch the full moon and accidentally slipped and fell. She will always be here with us”, 30 January 2021, <https://twitter.com/transgressiveHQ/status/1355485915892703240/photo/1>

threshold reminds us of the fragility of the human body, as well as what distinguishes life AFK from its virtual circulations: even as Sophie no longer lives, her art lingers on, glitching the phantom space of online realms. In this deeply ecological sense, even the supposed binary division between life and death gives way to a murkiness as traces of the past forever-mutate the present like matter's slow and endlessly expanding dissolve. Of course, bodies in their material form do not glitch. When bodies glitch, they break, they die.

In the wake of Sophie's death, countless biographical essays, tributes, and fan art circulated in online music and trans and queer spheres, demonstrating the impact of her avant-garde approach to pop music. If Sophie's work left an impact for its inventive, queer, utopic, (im)material worldmaking, this success relies upon her utopia's contrast to the present state of affairs. That is, Sophie's impact is orchestrated around showing us how things could be different. While reported as purely accidental, Sophie's death at 34 reminds us of the extent to which trans lives are put in danger by a system coded to relegate the non-normative and non-white to the margins of society. According to a December 2020 report by the Human Rights Campaign, factors such as a hostile political climate, a lack of family acceptance, and cultural marginalization and invisibility contribute to an overwhelming anti-trans social stigma. This stigma allows for discriminatory public practices such as setbacks in education, barriers to immigrant, refugee, and asylum seekers, unequal policing and criminal justice treatment, employment discrimination, exclusion from health care and social services, and barriers to legal identification, as well as an array of increased risk factors to trans folk, including youth, such as unshelteredness, engaging in survival sex work, intimate partner violence and sexual assault, and physical and mental health disparities.¹⁹³ These intersecting

¹⁹³ Human Rights Campaign Foundation, "Dismantling a Culture of Violence: Understanding Anti-Transgender Violence and Ending the Crisis," *Human Rights Campaign*

codes of marginalization are unsurprisingly reflected in the mortality rates of trans folk and, in particular, trans women of color who are nearly obligated to face anti-trans as well as racist violence. In a staggering statistic, “4 in 10 transgender adults report having attempted suicide, the majority having done so before age 25.”¹⁹⁴ In this context, Sophie’s affirming, glitching affects of breakdown and failure, her utterances that “It’s Okay To Cry,” extend beyond a counter to our cybernetic social reality; they reveal a space affirming of life for those told not to live.

Critically, however, Sophie’s glitches were mediated by a particularly constructed media ecology that differentially affords space and circulation to bodies relative to their subject status. That is, the productivity of Sophie’s transness perhaps conceals the enablements of her whiteness and economic privilege. With the privileges that arrive with whiteness, Sophie was able to harness her craft, take up a residency with Red Bull Music Academy while remaining “anonymous” to the public, and circulate her queer art without living with the racist biases of either audience or YouTube algorithm. In this sense, Sophie’s glitches productively expose audiences to the constructedness of gender normativity and possibilities outside that matrix, but they also required use of the master’s tools, i.e., adherences to pop music tropes, whiteness, and wealth. This bourgeois access to trans creative expression in the public sphere is replicated in the media circulations of white, millionaire celebrities like Christine Jorgensen, Laura Jane Grace, and Kim Petras, whose visibility as trans folk overshadow the codes of privilege that allowed their work to circulate. This begs the question: to what extent can glitch feminism challenge the status quo if it

Foundation, December 2020, <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/Dismantling-a-Culture-of-Violence-010721.pdf>

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

always relies on the enablements of the system itself? Then, more than glitch, how might the system be hacked by queer, trans, disabled people of color who explicitly reject the system's economic architectures to work toward a more intersectional form of liberation? Ongoing rhetorical examinations of glitch feminism should seek to further map the contours of its economic and racialized formations and material implications.

This critical ecological analysis of Sophie's triptych sought to explain how the circulation of glitch feminism within media ecologies can rupture social borders defined by capitalist normativity and cisnormativity toward critical consciousness (in this case, trans affirmation) and material ends. In the introduction to *Glitch Feminism*, Russell argues, "Glitch feminism urges us to consider the *in-between* as a core component of survival—neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves."¹⁹⁵ In this sense, glitch also becomes an aesthetic technology that reveals the dynamic, interconnectedness of the social ecology by attending to that which lies between and beyond socially constituted borders, and that which is possible for queer (im)material worldbuilding.

¹⁹⁵ Russell, 11.

CHAPTER 4

ALL MY HAPPINESS IS GONE

“*The presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual’s capacity to function.*”

– The common features of all depressive disorders as outlined in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*¹⁹⁶

“*It is no longer the end of time and of the world which will show retrospectively that men were mad not to have been prepared for them; it is the tide of madness, its secret invasion, that shows that the world is near its final catastrophe; it is man’s insanity that invokes and makes necessary the world’s end.*”

- Michel Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*¹⁹⁷

“*Little darling, I feel that ice is slowly melting*”

- The Beatles, “Here Comes the Sun”¹⁹⁸

I suffer from what is clinically considered *depression*. Less clinically, I am *unhappy*. More relationally, I am a *killjoy*.¹⁹⁹ However, I do not understand this orientation as exclusively bound to a biological trait nor as entirely wrought from the circumstances of

¹⁹⁶ The American Psychiatric Association, “Depressive Disorders,” *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013).

¹⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and civilization* (Vintage, 1964): 17.

¹⁹⁸ The Beatles, “Here Comes the Sun,” track #7 on *Abbey Road*, Apple Records, 1969.

¹⁹⁹ Sara Ahmed and Oristelle Bonis, “Feminist killjoys (and other willful subjects),” *Cahiers du Genre* 2 (2012): 77-98.

agential choice, but more: my depression is substantively derived from social and environmental conditions that warrant this disposition. This is an orientation to mental illness which challenges, even subverts, more popular, corporate, and clinical understandings of depression as a deviant psychological condition of unreason. Let me illustrate this logic:

In antidepressant advertisements, the depressed person is often depicted as consumed by a veil of sadness, an aesthetic trope suggesting that depression is a foggy lens that conceals an actually existing reality. In these advertisements, the *real world* is depicted as colorful, affirming, and livable. If only the otherwise-smiling individual could look beyond gray skies and storm clouds that animate their psychological disorder they would come to realize the innate beauty about the human experience. Or, at least, they might begin to experience life in ways that everyone else seems to. But for many a depressed person, things seem to work the other way around. The smiling, colorful life is real only in the fictions proposed by corporate imagery, though they may be intermittently s(t)imulated through the consumption of over-priced-if-uninsured mood-altering pharmaceuticals. Those smiling faces merely represent a circus of s(t)imulations to be bought and sold in an immiserated marketplace. In this way, the problem is not that the depressed person is unable to realize the truth of their condition; it is that they realize it all too vividly.

Compellingly, recent decades have witnessed a scholarly psychological address to the above logic through a concept tagged *depressive realism*. The hypothesis suggests that those who are considered depressed are able to make more realistic inferences (for example, about the relationship between an action and an outcome) than those who are not.²⁰⁰ In this way, a

²⁰⁰ Lauren B Alloy and Lyn Y. Abramson, “Depressive realism: Four theoretical perspectives” In Lauren B. Alloy (Ed.) *Cognitive processes in depression* (Guilford Press, 1988): 223-265.

construct of psychological *normality* ironically involves a *detachment from reality*, while psychological deviancy through a clinical frame of “disorder” involves a closer approximation to reality’s provable functioning. Giving leverage to the hypothesis is a meta-analysis of 75 studies that showcase the concept’s empirical validity.²⁰¹ This hypothesis has also found philosophical exploration in the work of the late Mark Fisher who argues that depression offers a demystifying form of insight, one that can be performatively translated, artfully explored, and philosophically useful. In writing about the performance of depression in the music of Joy Division, he describes depression as a “(neuro)philosophical (dis)position”²⁰² and its performances as demonstrating a kind of inner death wrought from disenchanting insights about life. While both Ian Curtis of Joy Division and Fisher ultimately chose suicide, a framing of depression as a neurological technology for productive, demystifying critique and artistic practice is perhaps validating for the depressive whose experience with a depressing social reality is, at minimum, not false, and at best, tactful for sensemaking and critical consciousness raising.

Of course, to introduce the concept of depressive realism here is not to ‘turn-the-tables’ and privilege the perspective of one segment of people over another—we will challenge the binary that separates the depressed and non-depressed subject categories in a later section. It is, rather, to offer a compelling empirical ground upon which to enact two interconnected critical gestures. The first involves the disclosure brought on by depressive realism’s challenge to the very concept of ‘depressive disorder’: that this disorder involves less a negative deviation from a capacity for reasoning (depressive realism demonstrates that

²⁰¹ Michael T. Moore and David M. Fresco, "Depressive realism: A meta-analytic review," *Clinical psychology review* 32, no. 6 (2012): 496-509.

²⁰² Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* (John Hunt Publishing, 2014).

the opposite is more likely), but more, a negative deviation from a *capacity to function* due to how a particular set of characteristics (sadness, emptiness, irritability) overwhelm the subject. But if we take *to function* at even its basest interpretation—to perform the necessary actions for survival—we avoid accounting for the broader context within which our tasks of functionality must take place. We avoid interrogating, for example, that an individual’s ability to meet their bodily needs within a capitalist economy is predicated upon the subject’s capital value and value to capital. That is, to consume food and access shelter and healthcare hardly relies upon the fact of one’s needs, but almost entirely upon their inheritances within or adaptability to a hierarchically organized economy reliant upon social stratification. Far from a neutral concept, functionality is intensely power-laden due to the context it requires to constitute itself, while depressive realism partially discloses the rationality behind a depressed response to the coercive material structures that must be navigated to maintain functionality. To modify a popular anti-capitalist meme: it is not Monday’s that give you the blues, it’s capitalism.

A Foucaultian attendance to the co-constitutive structural context for which a construct of depression relies²⁰³ aids our expansion toward the second critical gesture invoked by depressive realism. For, something strange starts to happen when we adopt this practice of contextualization: we draw out connections between the small scale (bodies, spaces, immediate conditions) and the large (organizing structures, climate, metaconditions) such that problems which occur *in the world* begin to reveal themselves as problems *of the world*. Seemingly external crises find resonance with seemingly internal crises. The politics of depression itself vivify as a problem of the relationship between the individual and their

²⁰³ Foucault, 1964.

externalities. In essence, depression and anxiety shift from qualities of a *pathological* nature to problems of an *ecological* kind.

There is no way around it: the Anthropocene is depressing. On the one hand, it is depressing as a geohistorical discourse. Simply take stock of the epoch's defining characteristics. Climate change, disappearance of non-human animals, environmental devastation, strata of plastic waste, infrastructural disaster, drought, and famine riddle any summary of our planet's epochal state. Meanwhile, the roles of dominative economic and governmental systems in accelerating such devastation seem increasingly difficult to ignore, even for those who recently held the privilege of inheriting that capacity for ignorance. To merely think in terms of the Anthropocene is to wrap oneself up in these earthly traumas and wither under their foreboding shadow.

Then, as a metacondition shaping earthly relations, the Anthropocene facilitates unprecedented mass immiseration. It is an epoch defined—above all else—by a loss of what remains: of life, place, livelihood, futures, ways of relating, ways of being. Consider, for example, how the prevalence and rise of depression around the world²⁰⁴ or suicide rates among particularly precarious laborers²⁰⁵ may flow from the immiseration of immediate conditions, but that these conditions, then, may flow from the metaconditions of the

²⁰⁴ Spencer L. James, Degu Abate, Kalkidan Hassen Abate, Solomon M. Abay, Cristiana Abbafati, Nooshin Abbasi, Hedayat Abbastabar et al., "Global, regional, and national incidence, prevalence, and years lived with disability for 354 diseases and injuries for 195 countries and territories, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017," *The Lancet* 392, no. 10159 (2018): 1789-1858.

²⁰⁵ Dominic Merriott, "Factors associated with the farmer suicide crisis in India," *Journal of epidemiology and global health* 6, no. 4 (2016): 217-227.

Anthropocene. While planetary loss may occur on a massive scale, this does not mean that their material impacts are not also indirectly felt at the level of the deeply intimate.

There may not be a way around the depressing nature of the Anthropocene, but perhaps there is a way through. In this chapter I explore the experience of depression as an ecological phenomena and argue for this politic's vitality in the context of the Anthropocene. Specifically, through a performance method of collage, I demonstrate how my own experience of depression is produced through and circulates across psychological, social, and material registers, and then deploy this experience to argue for a discourse of depression that is critical, ecological, and rhetorical. However, before delving more deeply into my approach and performance, it is necessary to review critical literature that also investigates the relationship between psychology and material conditions.

Depression situates at the intersections of disability politics and discourses of emotion due to its construction as both a clinical disorder (it is listed in the DSM-5; prescriptive treatments exist; it situates within a history of pathologization) and its loose construction as a type of emotional experience (consider the range of negatively perceived emotions of unhappiness, the blues, existential angst, etc.). Certainly, expressions that "*I am depressed*" imply something different from, "*I have depression*," while each are distinct from "*I am unhappy*." These articulations differently organize into distinct, though fuzzy, discursive realms – the first invoking bodily experience, the second a clinical diagnosis, and the third an emotional state. However, a demystifying ecological lens would allow us to consider human psychological experience as an impossibly vast range of potential, form, and capacity constituted through relationships to conditions and sociality, thus framing such psychological orientations as a discursive spectrum organized into particular thresholds of

determination. *Are you in a near-constant state of unhappiness?* Well, then you must *have* depression. While strains of critical literature on disability and emotion contain unique histories and investments, their common politic lies in how they each seek not to describe natural states of being, but rather, discursive concepts organized in relation to, if not predicated upon, dominative politics.

Scholars of critical disability theory have marked how the production, reification, and utility of the disabled person as a subject category furthers dominative colonial-capitalist interests. The most popular text in this regard is likely Michel Foucault's ambitious *Madness & Civilization*, which traces the historical development and governmental regulation of madness as a construct from which civil society defines itself.²⁰⁶ Much critical disability theory has expanded upon Foucault's historicization, drawing upon biopower and the importance of normalized classification, including internalization of one's disabled status, to regulate and consolidate hegemonic structures.²⁰⁷ Further, recent years have witnessed socialistic expansions of this argument. For example, in their historical materialist analysis on the production of disability under capitalism, Marta Russell and Ravi Malhorta argue that "disability is a socially-created category derived from labour relations, a product of the exploitative economic structure of capitalist society," and that this structure is "one which creates (and then oppresses) the so-called 'disabled' body as one of the conditions that allow the capitalist class to accumulate wealth."²⁰⁸ Here, the authors extend beyond a recognition that disability is constructed in relation to a capitalist economic structure and that inequities

²⁰⁶ Foucault, 1961.

²⁰⁷ Shelley Tremain, "Foucault, governmentality, and critical disability theory: An introduction," *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. Edited by Shelley Tremain (The University of Michigan Press, 2005): 1-24.

²⁰⁸ Marta Russell and Ravi Malhorta, "Capitalism and Disability," *Socialist register* (2002): 212.

faced by those considered disabled are wrought from an incapacity to as efficiently contribute to that system, but further argue that it is the specter of that incapacity's entailment (indebtedness, impoverishment, ongoing reliance upon a precariously designed safety net) which haunts the capitalist subject and allows the economic structure to persist. The authors expand upon the insidiousness of this logic, expressing, "If workers were provided with a social safety net that adequately protected them through unemployment, sickness, disability, and old age, labour would gain a stronger position from which to negotiate their conditions of employment."²⁰⁹ In essence, to dissolve the disability construct and shape labor practices through a logic of equity, such labor power would threaten the mystifying social control mechanism of "work ethic" that the ruling class relies upon to maintain its dominative status.

The logics that guide critical disability theory align with my articulation of depression as an ecological phenomenon and can further expand through an understanding of depression as emotional state: *I am unhappy*. The work of Sara Ahmed is especially instructive in this regard. In her book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed argues that "attributions of happiness might be how social norms and ideals become affective, as if relative proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness," and that "rather than assuming happiness is simply found in 'happy persons,' we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable."²¹⁰ In this sense, happiness is an emotional designation laced importantly into one's existence as a social being organized and organizing social markers of difference. With this, we cannot accept a construct of happiness as a baseline human emotion for which everyone has equal access *because* it is a construct designated toward

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 215.

²¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The promise of happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010): 11.

particular states of being. In turn, Ahmed explores the intellectual history of happiness to consider those bodies relegated to its outside, perhaps most notably the *feminist killjoy*.²¹¹ In flipping the script of human emotion away from a pathology to show how it becomes attached to particular subjects, Ahmed affirms the dissenters of the construct's enterprise—those who kill joy in the face of oppression. Fellow scholars have taken a similar approach to this identity-emotional construction analytic in the form of afropessimism,²¹² trans monstrosity,²¹³ and the depressive position of brownness.²¹⁴ These insights as to how emotions and subjects become stuck to one another further disclose the depressed person's ecological constructedness, at once marked as the victim of psychological deviance and produced into relation through immiserating material conditions.

Because the conditions of the Anthropocene expand the field of material precarity, they may also expand the potential for considering how emotion is discursively grafted and ecologically experienced. Scholarly notions of *ecological grief*²¹⁵ and *Anthropocene horror*²¹⁶ define well the emotional responses to the Anthropocene. While ecological grief describes “grief for the loss or threatened destruction of a specific landscape, place or species,” Anthropocene horror describes “a sense of horror about the changing environment globally, [...] giving a sense of threats that need not be anchored to any particular place, but which are

²¹¹ Sara Ahmed, “Killing joy: Feminism and the history of happiness,” *Signs*, 35, no. 3 (2010): 571-594.

²¹² Frank B Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (Liverlight, 2020).

²¹³ Benny LeMaster, “It’s a ... [inaudible blood-curdling screams, chaos]!”: Gender reveal party fails as ideological rupture,” *Peitho* 22, no. 4 (2020).

²¹⁴ Jose Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling brown, feeling down: Latina affect, the performativity of race, and the depressive position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-688.

²¹⁵ Joshua Trey Barnett, “Naming, mourning, and the work of earthly coexistence,” *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 3 (2019): 287-299.

²¹⁶ Timothy Clark, “Ecological grief and anthropocene horror,” *American Imago* 77, no. 1 (2020): 61-80.

both everywhere and anywhere.”²¹⁷ I argue that these emotional orientations are really two sides of the same coin in that they each seek to describe the affective and emotional response to consciously engaged devastations in the Anthropocene. Ecological crisis is the cause, and grief/horror the effect. However, I would like to suggest that, while each term is useful in thinking about particularized mutations in human emotional experience in the context of the Anthropocene, neither quite captures the more ambient affective circulations *of the Anthropocene*. The vast (though shared), indirect (though responsive) realism of our depressive conditions. That is, the Anthropocene describes our time’s metacondition, wherein everything extends from and becomes organized via the material conditions of the crisis-laden planet, and even our most intimate experiences may be traced to that source. There is certainly grief and horror to be experienced at its visible traumas, but there is also all of the pain that arrives from how social worlds, culture, and relationality are reshaped by the effects of and corporate and governmental responses to large-scale crises. Our awareness about environmental devastation may figure into our emotional response but play only a small part.

Building upon the intersection of critical disability theory and intellectual engagements with the discourses of emotion, I advocate for a political orientation to depression as ecological. In this ecology of depression, the connections between psychological states, material conditions, and social worlds activate against depoliticized and individualized orientations to depression. We turn away from a strict belief that *there is something wrong with me*, and instead turn toward the ways our environment or social worlds co-facilitate my experience. Of course, many critical scholars have already, though perhaps

²¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

indirectly, advanced this politic. For example, when Sara Ahmed outlines her cultural politics of emotion, she explains that her aim is to “explore how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies. Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others.”²¹⁸ Put differently, Ahmed’s aim is to engage in a process of detachment from pathologization of emotional experience and provide an ecological reorientation wherein bodies, objects, and conditions entangle to co-constitute states of being. The work of radical clinical psychologist David Smail also contains a distinctly ecological politic by demonstrating how the advent of neoliberalism contributed to the pathologization of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and stress.²¹⁹ Smail, alongside fellow radical psychologists, furthered much of this thinking in a manifesto demanding a “social materialist psychology of distress.”²²⁰ In it, the authors announce the following twelve logics that govern their call:

1. Persons are primordially social and material beings
2. Distress arises from the outside inwards
3. Distress is produced by social and material influences
4. Distress is enabled by biology but not primarily caused by it
5. Distress is influenced by biological variation to the extent that this variation provides non-specific capacities
6. Distress does not fall into discrete categories or diagnoses
7. Distress is an acquired, embodied way of being in the world

²¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion* (Routledge, 2013): 1.

²¹⁹ David Smail, *The origins of unhappiness: A new understanding of personal distress* (Routledge, 2013).

²²⁰ John Cromby, Bob Diamond, Paul Kelly, Paul Moloney, Penny Priest, David Smail, and Jan Soffe-Caswell, "Draft manifesto for a social materialist psychology of distress," *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counselling and Psychotherapy* 12, no. 2 (2012): 93-107.

8. Social and material influence is always contingent and mediated
9. Distress cannot be removed by willpower
10. Distress cannot be cured by medication or therapy
11. Medication and therapy can make a difference, but not by curing
12. Successful psychological therapy is not primarily a matter of technique

Refusing the naïve (though politically and capitalistically useful) separation between the individual and their outside and dominant clinical practices, the authors engage in an ecological politic against borders and corporate consolidation of wellbeing. It is a politic which implicates social organization and material conditions in our psychological experiences and, thus, implies the need for their reformulation in grasping toward the utopic ideal of social wellbeing.

What follows is a performance of depression *as* ecological through a representation of *my own depression's ecology*. In this performance, I collage autoethnographic writing, poetry, creative nonfiction, performative theory writing, photographs, and my own visual art in order to make manifest the embodied experience of my depression and to extend the logic of my depression outward into ecological relation with intimate and familial others. Specifically, I employ a performance method of collage to facilitate the logic of interconnectedness between accounts, experiences, and artistic explorations of depression. Amy Kilgard argues that, with collage, “The thesis is in the gaps, in the juxtapositions, and in the (perhaps miraculous) possibilities of the meaning-making process. It is in the crisis of collage.”²²¹ For this performance, the crisis lies between vignettes, in the gaps and fuzzy

²²¹ Amy K Kilgard, "Collage: A paradigm for performance studies," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 3 (2009): 2.

logics of (dis)connection which coordinate the strange composition of my depression's ecology. Through this composition, I hope to enmesh the reader in my personal ecology of depression such that depression's role in the wider planetary ecology may be productively complexified against feelings of shame and toward political potential for reshaping the world we live in. Akin to Michael Broderick and Sean Gleason's collaged performance of a material ecology of farm life,²²² I offer an ecology of unhappiness with which to complexify our orientation to that alienated, affective, political space.

Note: my writing unshyly (though, not lightly) engages with suicide. Not only do I draw heavily upon the writing of authors who committed suicide, but my performance is haunted. Haunted by the insights of deceased scholar-artists who have transformed my thinking about mental health, haunted by the presence of absence of intimate and familial others who have chosen to exit early, and haunted by a specter of happiness always out of reach. Without promoting the act of suicide, I seek to validate the feelings of those who are depressed while implicating those systems that seek to alienate senses of depression as, exclusively, an individual problem in need of fixing.

All My Happiness is Gone

²²² Michael Broderick and Sean Gleason, "We kill our own: Towards a material ecology of farm life," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2016): 250-264.

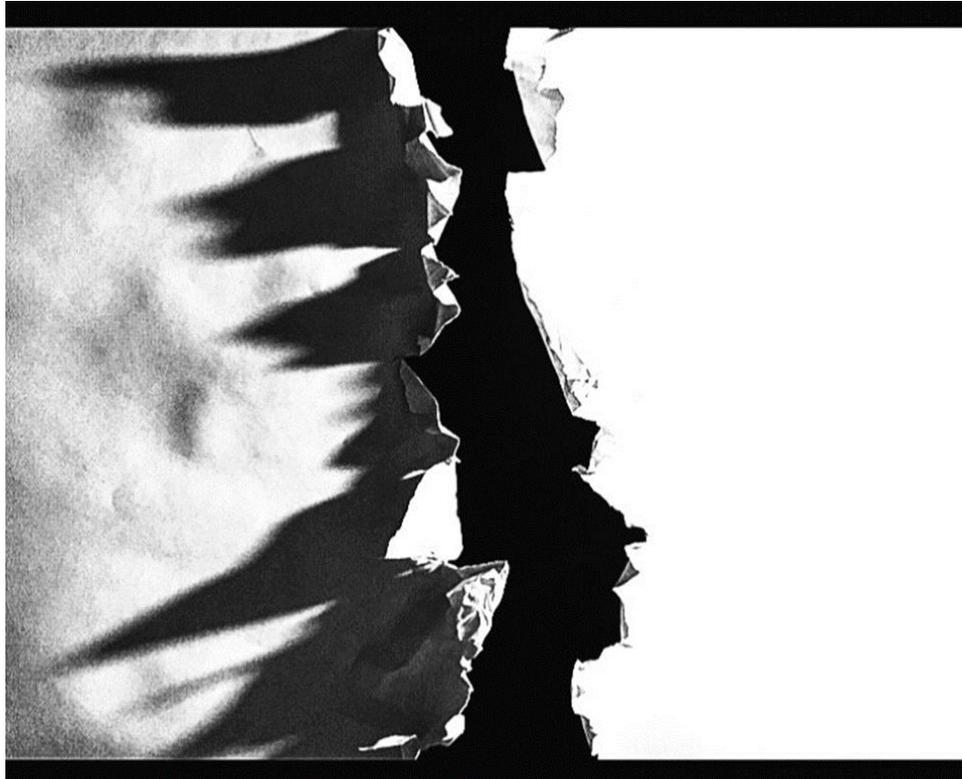


Figure 1. Sketches.

Dorothy stood and watched the garden from her kitchen window. It was how she set the day. She liked to watch it change with time. The blossoming, the changing colors. The dancing bees and hummingbirds, the flowers stretching toward the sun. Things were alive out there. Dorothy's view reminded her of the cycle of things, and their underlying changes. Their flow. The sun greeting landscape. The wind waving the flowers.

Dorothy's view was a cropped image. Through this image was a reminder of life's innate beauty, but forces outside were less predictable. Less decent. Inside her house was a sadness. An atmosphere of despair. For moments, the garden seemed to cut it. Just the beauty of those flowers. That old oak tree. The sun.



Figure 2. Untitled photograph by Marion Rife #1.

"It's not the purple hills

It's not the silver lakes

It's not the snowcloud shadowed interstates

It's not the icy bike chain rain of Portland, Oregon

Where nothing's wrong and no one's asking

But the fear's so strong it leaves you gasping

*No way to last out here like this for long*²²³

My sadness is not a place I wander off to. It is an unmistakable fixity in the present wherein time seems to drip without meaning, save for its steady crawl toward its own abolition—at least for me. A ticking into the next workday, year, and on and on... In depression you can feel time in your heart and on your skin. You are intimately aware of the rolling waves and the big one.

When I seek a snap out of this mortal-temporal problem, I find respite in music and solace in its artfully mutated expression of feelings I will always be challenged to convey. The lyrics above are from the track “All My Happiness Is Gone” by the band Purple Mountains. In it, singer-songwriter David Berman describe what *it is not*—the attributions, the solutions. To suffer in the ways that Berman and I do is to not just feel emptied out, but to exist in a world that is alien and seems to have also been emptied. For me, this sensibility has lent itself to panic attacks: *a fear so strong it leaves you gasping.*

Way deep down at some substratum

Feels like something really wrong has happened

*And I confess I'm barely hanging on*²²⁴

In the weeks following the release of *Purple Mountains'* self-titled debut and sole album, I again immersed myself in Berman's artistic output as lead singer of the Silver Jews and as a poet. Discovering his book of poetry *Actual Air*²²⁵ produced a similar zone of depressive affirmation in me. In his words I found a dreamy orientation to one's boundedness in a life horrifically organized. Private property, inscrutable dictates of social

²²³ Purple Mountains, “All My Happiness Is Gone,” track 2 on *Purple Mountains* (Drag City Records, 2019).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ David Berman, *Actual Air* (Open City, 1999).

organization, and power-laced relational mystifications affectively lace through his writing. During that time, Berman helped me to find my own poetic voice, showing me how to artfully translate that which so resists it.²²⁶

Though, Berman's suffering is different from my own. In a post on his blog announcing his retirement of Silver Jews, he confessed that his father was a prominent Republican strategist in D.C. who he referred to as 'despicable' and a 'human molester', while U.S. media literally gave him the moniker "Dr. Evil"²²⁷ for his work as a gun and liquor lobbyist. I imagine the traumatic insights derived such intimate association with violence.

'Cause everywhere I go, I know

Everywhere I go, I know...

The album *Purple Mountains* was released on July 12th, 2019 to reception which largely overlooked its artistic sleight of hand: the beloved songwriter's artistic return concealed the album's form as suicide note. Berman hung himself on August 7th 2019.

All my happiness is gone

All my happiness is go-o-o-o-one

It's all gone somewhere beyond

All my happiness is go-o-o-o-one

Unfolding echoes, (un)natural chemical loops, traumas imparting trauma.

I text my father:

²²⁶ Tyler S. Rife, "Melting mutating territory," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, forthcoming.

²²⁷ Sean Michaels, "Silver Jews reveal cause of split: 'My father is a despicable man ... a human molestor,'" *The Guardian*, 26 January 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/26/silver-jews-david-berman-father>

I am writing a chapter of my dissertation that deals with the relationship between depression and social conditions and want to learn more about what exactly happened with your grandfather.



Figure 3. Whose Afraid of 1, 2, 3?

The haunt of depression is of happiness. In much the same way that Derrida's specter of communism quietly haunts life under capitalism,²²⁸ the potentiality of happiness haunts a social world deprived of its potential and organized through the endless production of hollow fulfillment.

When the object of seeming desire is obtained, desire seems to reveal itself as a ruse and dissolves, becoming displaced elsewhere. Object-attachment can have a funny way of failing to meet expectations. No wonder consumerism smartly maintains this feedback loop of desire: satisfaction is never salvaged, but the possibility for satisfaction is perpetuated.

²²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf (Routledge, 1994).

The trope of the depressive’s experience is that they can’t find the energy to get out of bed. For the depressive, the day offers nil—its activities offer little more than the potential for ongoing survival: perform work, joylessly consume, repeat. From this angle, time is a measurement of countdown. From this angle, *why should I get out of bed?* When dreams disclose a different way of being, offer a space where there *is* more to life than this, why should I not just keep dreaming?

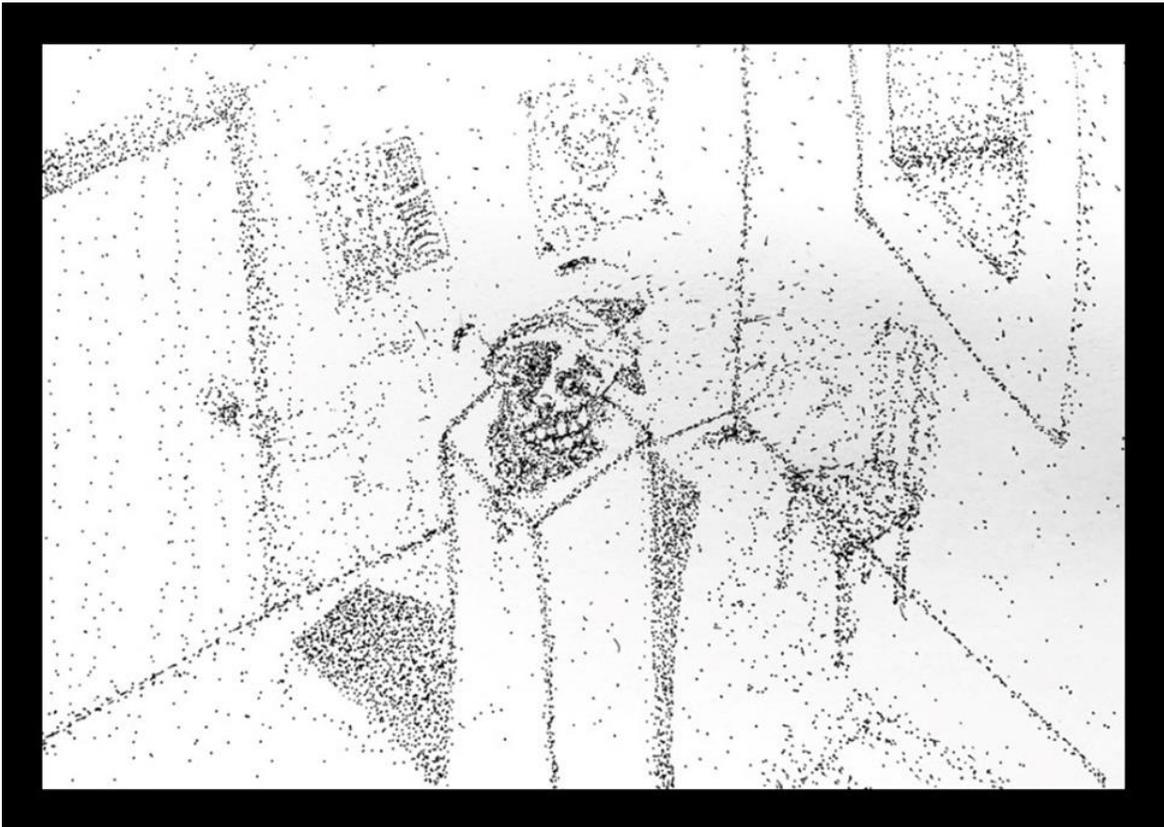


Figure 4. Head.

Dorothy’s husband Ferris was always good with his hands. He played saxophone, cut and furnished tables, crafted and sold violins—an instrument their son, Marion, would come to master, playing second chair for the Ohio State University Orchestra before being drafted into the Second World War. Ferris, though, was a farmer by trade.

In the latter point of his agricultural career, industry was mutating. Just as assembly lines gave way to more efficient machines, harvest production began to rely on newer, more efficient technologies. Those unable to keep up were inevitably left behind. So, Ferris adopted the latest machinery out of necessity. Some summer day, Ferris was handling a piece of equipment and it tore off his arm. Like so many farmers, factory workers, and coal miners of the time, Ferris' body became collateral to the technologies of efficiency. Collateral to the biopolitical demands of capital.

With disability and near total loss of those skills that seemed to define him, Ferris fell into emotional distress. He grew resentful of Dorothy and their son, coming to view the pregnancy out of wedlock as a forced disturbance to the life he imagined he would come to build. As though these figures were thrust forth to seed his eventual destruction. A life routed into. A life ruined. Ferris' alcoholism eventually resulted in Marion's removal from the home and into an upbringing with Dorothy's parents.

As Dorothy and Ferris' marriage dissolved, Ferris moved into a trailer on the opposite side of the highway from which their farmhouse stood. Over the years, the trailer became Ferris' primary shelter. A place where he would drink until the sun singed the Ohio landscape. At twilight the fields of corn seemed to catch fire. Dorothy peered out at the sunset too, from the kitchen window of the home they purchased together. That plot of land. That stake in the American Dream.

In 1965, Ferris wandered over to Dorothy's garden, rigged a self-fashioned shotgun to an old oak tree and, with a strange pulley system linking trigger to remaining arm, shot himself in the face. My father tells me Ferris committed suicide in this fashion so that Dorothy would think of him every time she looked out at her garden from the kitchen window.

On the walking trail near my small apartment in Santa Fe I notice a stranger staring up. A giant white owl perched in a Cottonwood tree stares down. Its ears are daggers and so are its eyes. *Magnificent isn't it?*

I think of the tattoo I received when I first moved to Phoenix in 2017 and wanted to mark the change in my flesh. The change was of place and self. I had just exited a lonely life next to a cemetery. I wanted to commemorate the completion of that period by forever augmenting my bodily form. The tattoo is just two words running down my arm. It reads: *Look up*. I have come to think of the tattoo as uncool in its lack of subtlety or beauty. I have come to like it more for this. My tattoo is big and bold and unavoidably *there* with short sleeves, seeming to prompt others to wonder, “is that directive for him or for me?”



Figure 5. Look up.

The title of my grandfather Marion’s book of short, reflective, philosophical essays inspired the tattoo: *Look up*. My grafting the words into/onto/across me was a way of both remembering his impact on my life – the slices of wisdom in those stories, the encouragements in my artistic endeavors – as well as its (in)corporeal prompt. To look up

can of course mean to physically *look up from the ground (or phone) when you walk and try to appreciate what is around you* (as in the owl perched above the trail), and it can also mean to detach from those troubling minutiae, those bad thoughts. *Look away from the unhappiness and toward more livable and affirming horizons.* There is a reason the tattoo stretches toward my wrist.

My father is telling me of his father Marion's role as a documentarian during World War II. The U.S. Army handed him a camera and gun. He was to capture the events as they appeared to him. *None of the images were supposed to be seen by others after the war, they belonged to the U.S. government, my father explains, but that doesn't mean your grandfather didn't sneak some film stock back home in the bottom of his duffle bag.*²²⁹

My grandfather's black-and-white photographs animate my apartment. They are eerie and evocative: cyborg-like mannequins congregating in a darkened mall, aged fingers laced through white hair, a haunted house on a hill with gray sky, spidery architectures extending behind a human silhouette such that the body appears monstrous, Cthulhu-like. I come to learn the silhouette is hosted by my grandmother. The one who died before I was born. I've never seen the photographs my grandfather took during the war. *Did you?* I ask.

Other than some images I'd seen of him in the back of caravans, there was just one other photograph. It was a mass grave. These piles of people. My father's voice clicks up an octave.

That would change you, I say.

My father goes silent for a minute. The silence cuts into the signal that connects us.

²²⁹ Characterizations of the conversation between my father and I are fictionalized representations that “blur ‘the real’ and ‘the imaginary’ but are no less truthful in communicating human experience.” That is, my account of this conversation is an approximation which gestures toward a nonfictional account.; Leavy, Patricia, *Methods meets art: Arts-based research practice* (2nd ed.), (The Guilford Press, 2015): 39-40.

Then, *There's something I've been meaning to tell you.*



Figure 6. Untitled photograph by Marion Rife #2.

My visual art is black and white. Every time I try to break from this practice with multicolored acrylics or colored pencil, I seem to immediately revert back for the next one. I am drawn to how the stark, monochrome contrast functions as an imposed limitation, yet ironically contains a world of vivid exploratory potential. I want to rediscover it again and again. I love finding the emotional balance, the uncanny representation, the quivering movement, the sickness in space, the horror in gesture.

How can my naïve art haunt? What are the fewest steps I can take to render the image ill – give it a sickness? How can I represent depression? The people I draw often have

lines under their eyes and on their foreheads when I put black on white. They're tired and just trying to get by.

I can never know whether it was my grandfather's black and white photography that inspired my draw toward its contrasting intensity, or even some genetic predisposition, a generational echo skipping a step. An orientation to the world wrought through linking. My black and white is about a haunted kind of negative space. There is less clarity in darkness – and whiteness for that matter. There is room to imagine what lurks in the corners. So much emotional intensity in this underworld.



Figure 7. Two.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, I picked up a copy of David Lynch's first film *Eraserhead* from the local library. *Eraserhead* is quintessential arthouse—confident, cheap, transgressive. I knew it was a film that would not match the tastes of my immediate family

and that I would need to watch it alone. DVD in hand, I crept into the basement and turned the volume low. I was keeping a secret, avoiding judgment.

In minutes I was engrossed in the surreal, horrific imagery. The industrial, white noise. The story of a sad sack who unwantingly stumbles into companionship and fatherhood. A life routed into.

Then, the basement door creaks open. To my surprise, it is my grandfather. We exchange some words before he sits next to me and we proceed to watch the film together from start to finish. He loves it, and the next day he stops by again to lend me his copy of the film *The White Ribbon*. A black and white film entailing a village's miserable sadness. There is a kind of local haunting of depressive ontology, as though sadness cloaks the air.



Figure 8. City.

Your grandfather also committed suicide.

Just like that.

My father gives me all the details of Marion's death. That he and my mother were the ones who found the body, reminding me how I was visiting home during my freshmen year of college. That my grandfather had shot himself in the head *cleanly*, unlike his father before him. That they found how-to guides for killing oneself in a safety deposit box. That my grandfather had, over the years since his wife's passing in 1989, talked in coded terms about

his desire to die. That my aunt had to flush what remained of my grandmother's pain medication upon my grandmother's death so that my grandfather would not *do something stupid in his grief*. That a neighbor who stopped by at his wake mentioned how they *always thought he was bipolar*. That they *were worried about him*. It all comes out now in choking detail.

Then my father explains why it took so long to tell me the secret. It had been approximately ten years since Marion's death, but I was always sold a loose narrative – something about heart troubles, something something. The grief and trauma amidst my mother's cancer treatment rendered details needless at that time.

It was too much at first, my grandfather and now my father.

I didn't want you to be afraid I would do something like that to you.

We didn't want suicide to seem like an option.

Then, I don't think I can ever forgive him.



Figure 9. Untitled photograph by Marion Rife #3.

In depression, there is a life under life. Down past the surface intensities (but above the ecological mesh) is a coordinated orchestration of life and movement. An organized control felt only through its translation. It is only once the tool breaks that we can realize it is a tool; it is only upon transitioning out of a disciplinary society that we can fully recognize it as such. In deviance, we discover form—the underworld of things. This explains why we can never know the furthest depths of our anthropocentrism, or the ways the world is becoming a projection of the human nervous system.

My depression is like wandering into this underworld, wherein the joys intended by their surface are discovered to be puppet plays and rotting zombies—dolls from *It's a small world after all!* breaking down and melting. Odd manipulators of this plane. But find the tear or the peeling edge, and the machinery behind the appearance becomes more vivid. Critical scholarship seeks to engage in a similar act of exposure, to perform a demystifying function and reveal structures of power and their intersecting technologies of class status, race, gender, ability, territory, difference, etc. My depression, then, is a kind of critical praxis to the machinery of these conditions, wherein the practice of demystification is always already central to interpretation. Even when it does not arise from a consciousness of the machine, it is certainly an indirect response to it taking form as a sense of lost potential: *There has got to be more to this.*

Fisher notes, “Depressive ontology is dangerously seductive because, as the zombie twin of a certain philosophical wisdom, it is half true.”²³⁰ As a lens, depression is a cropped image, an incomplete story...but it is also bound to an actually existing social reality that

²³⁰ Fisher, 2014, 61.

undoubtedly (re)produces that unhappiness. Thus, to be tasked with looking at the *glass half-full*, *putting on your rose-colored glasses*, or *Looking up* is alienating because the gaps that expose the underlying machine contradict the story others seem to have received. So, you simply proceed, falling through the cracks.

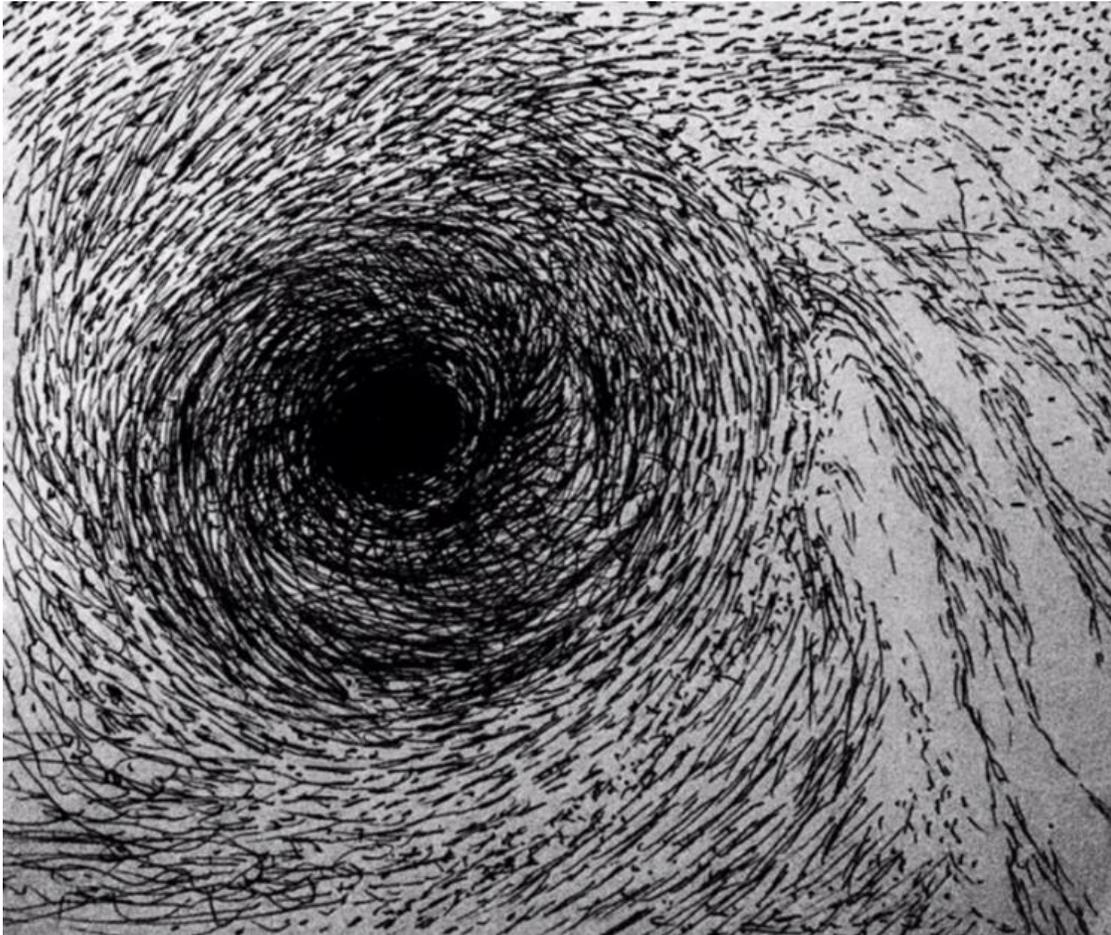


Figure 10. Spiral.

Rhizomadness:

A dissonance between supposedly stable structures and logics

(nature is *there*; that's *outside*; the change is *knowable*)

and what lies beneath that shimmering surface of

total instability, quietly quaking into the peripheries of
tethered mass subconscious; loose threads of psychedelic
daymares
unspooling into scattered messes
and masses.



Figure 11. Stairs.

Inside my father's disclosure of family secret, a splintering:

In one direction, a clarification about the genetic derivatives of my own body. In discovering the act of suicide in my grandfather (like his father before him), there is a simultaneous discovery of his misery and, therefore, its potentiality for genetic implantation.

Does he indirectly plant the misery in me? Is there a ripple in time and chemistry? What mutates into the abyss of the future and what is left behind, forgotten? Is this what we mean when we use the word nature? All I can know is that between my father expressing *There's something I've been meaning to tell you for a long time* and *Your grandfather committed suicide*, I uttered the words: *I know*.

In a second direction, the fact of the 10-year-old secret performs a socially conditioned mechanism: the scandal of desperation; the wrongness of talking about one's desire to no longer exist. Stated differently: Marion's choice to commit suicide would not have been kept secret were it not for social forces that situate suicide as shameful. Alternatively, if suicide were socially interpreted as a valid expression of human agency, or better yet, if suicide prompted a critical consideration of the social conditions that facilitated the act, rather than prompted analyses of the psychic state of the dead, would the secret have existed?

Then, suicide is merely a threshold crossed in the ecology of depression that enacts another splintering in suicide itself. Suicide is marked as shameful in social life because *your misery may be thrust upon others*. Debt, trauma, body, archive, story, labor, and mess have been dispersed from their bodily container not by accident, but by choice of the now-dead. Someone else's problem to clean up, body to find, horror to learn. The spectacle of this dispersion allows the stigmas surrounding unhappiness in life to reintegrate, newly-interpreted, in death. Your unhappiness may be undesirable (and render you undesirable to others), but *don't take it out on us*. Stay here. Stay alive. Keep performing the duties endowed by your inheritances, your lot.

Then, suicide is also fetishized because *it is the existential operation of power*: For once, you got to play God and end the world. Kill time. Part of the reason why the suicide note is

spiked with a mystical aura is because it offers you the transcendence of the last word. In withering away, the archive of one's life also withers. But in suicide, the archive acquires an essence that newly interprets that life. Would we experience those Joy Division records the same way if Ian Curtis had not committed suicide, or if the irony haunting the lyric from "New Dawn Fades," *a loaded gun won't set you free*, were instead to be taken as wisdom?²³¹

This splinter of suicide is, of course, not polaristic – shame, stigma, power, and God complexes ecologically coordinate – but it can reveal only in death social orientations toward life. We are forced to interpret the blankness, the *there* and the *them* which is no longer. In the re-oriented space-time, we grow meaning about what a life is, who gets to say so, justifications for hanging around, all while standing in the blast-zone sifting through piles of another's financial documents and licenses. Folded jeans and jars of ashes.

In another direction, the genetic is social, while the social is genetic. Ferris and Marion were not unhappy for/from nothing. Their 'chemical imbalance' was not derived of anomalous accident. Ferris' body was traumatized and rendered obsolete by a machine of capitalism long before he committed to isolated resignation in a trailer by the highway. Marion's psychology was altered through proximities to mass death, not merely genetic traits derived of familial histories. Scientists have shown that the ancestors of holocaust survivors are more vulnerable to effects of stress and are more susceptible to post traumatic stress disorder due to genetic mutations derived from that social trauma,²³² so why should depression at large be imagined through a case-by-case basis and not also as an evolutionary

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Tori Rodriguez, "Descendants of Holocaust survivors have altered stress hormones," *Scientific American Mind* 26, no. 2 (2015): 10.

trait wrought through genetic-political traumas? Those disorders that take hold of my body are more complexly rooted than chemical accident.



Figure 12. Psychosynthesis.

I want to hold two images next to each other. In one hand, a short, dense, darkly premonitory essay by Gilles Deleuze entitled, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” published in 1992,²³³ and in the other, Gilles Deleuze leaping from the window of his Paris apartment on November 4, 1995, ending his life. It is presumed that Deleuze committed suicide due to a practical assessment about the worth of living with the physical pains of

²³³ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the societies of control,” *October 59* (1992): 3-7.

tuberculosis rather than due to the emotional pains of depression.²³⁴ Still, I maintain, holding these two images.

Deleuze's theory of control describes how we have transitioned from a disciplinary society²³⁵ to a society governmentally organized through control. If disciplinary societies had been organized through spatial containment, control societies have dissolved the boundaries between spatial categories of school, workplace, home, etc., such that machinic subjectivation is not only always present, but willingly opted into. Here, the panopticon has been inverted. *We should take pride in our work, we should configure a branded presence on social media, we should be seen, we should fold into the network.* Control societies are cybernetic. Not that they are about computers, though the role of always-surveilling technologies is a major component of this new shape to social life, but they are about the human programmed into an unending, additive, computer marked by incompleteness. The terror of control societies is how this logic extends psychologically: the call is coming from inside the house! Tellingly, Deleuze attributes the concept to beat writer William S. Burroughs, an artist who, when asked why he named his most popular text *Naked Lunch*, replied, "It's the frozen moment when everybody sees what's on the end of every fork."²³⁶ Here, Burroughs is gesturing to the underworld of things, to the life under life and the sickness which comes from its exposure.

No wonder our age is marked by anxiety and depression. In the essay "We Are All Very Anxious",²³⁷ Plan C authors describe how mass anxiety is a perfect execution of control

²³⁴ Finn Janning, "Happy death of Gilles Deleuze," *Tamara: Journal for Critical Organizational Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (2013): 29-37.

²³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (Vintage, 1975).

²³⁶ Jan Herman, "Lunchtime for Burroughs," *The Huffington Post*, 16 July 2008, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lunchtime-for-burroughs_b_113012

²³⁷ WEAREPLANC, "We are all very anxious: Six theses on anxiety and why it is effectively preventing militancy, and one possible strategy for overcoming it," *Plan C*, 4 April 2014, <https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/>

by the ruling class. While control, like every other form of governmentality, “blames the system’s victims for the suffering that the system causes,” it has uniquely transformed all social life into a workplace (a “social factory”) through a diminishment of boredom and neoliberal enablement of self-control and surveillance, such that all failure, stagnation, or unhappiness is a problem of the individual. In this way, anxiety and depression become a public secret. Massive portions of the hive may experience these problems, but internalize and individualize them while simultaneously drifting further into a life of exploitation. One might think that in the Age of Mass Extinction, in the Necropolitical Anthropocene, in a moment of planetary inequality like never seen before there would be even greater mass resistance.

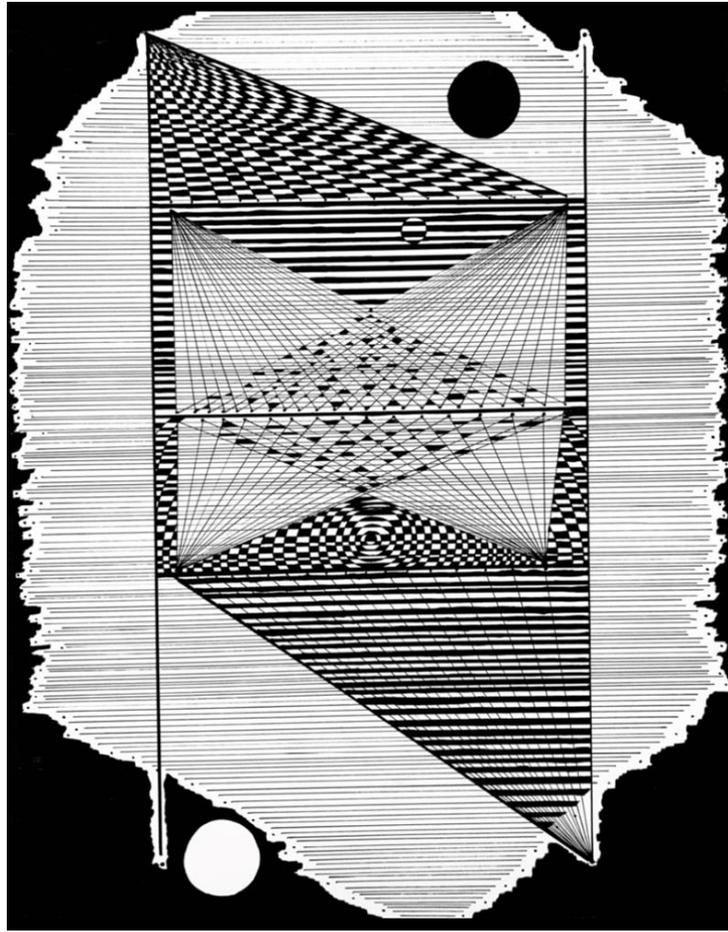


Figure 13. Here Comes the Sun!

Wonder at the shape of future life.

If crisis-laden conditions of the Anthropocene exacerbate the violences of necrocapitalism wherein spheres of death and precarity steadily expand to include larger swaths of planetary life, then the shape of future life might just be that of a spiral we zoom into. A circling of the drain. At its center are those already most exposed—those who define sovereignty through a forced relegation to its exterior—the hyperexploited, the object for colonial capitalism, the Other. Then, further from the center are those precarious bodies perhaps new to the logic of the spiral, perhaps attempting to claw their way out, perhaps not.

What does it feel like to glide along this section and sense the churn quicken?

To sense it all get hotter, stranger, worse. Even those surfing the crests of the spiral must feel it too, for even they, despite their best efforts and their rocket ships, won't be able to hold out for much longer.

How does life in the Anthropocene feel?

Trace the strains of affect that pass from its matters through your body like so much gamma radiation. Describe your body as a stone. As moss or weeds. Smoke. Discover more metaphors that describe the sickness of your body and anticipate the decision to never really get up today. Amble this flesh packet through corridors of s(t)imulants. Make another pot of coffee for the both of you. Step out of your box and into the sun. Write. Play your part. Hold on to her and cry together again: *"you being here being you's enough for me"*²³⁸ and drift in and out of recognition about what it means to take place in, *what are we calling it?*, this life. This clocking in and clocking out. This production.

²³⁸ Modest Mouse, "Wooden Soldiers," track 5 on *The Golden Casket* (Epic Records, 2021).

Now wonder at the disappearing faces of those who killed time. Think of Ferris, think of Marion, think of classmate Chris, think of teammate Alexis, think of friend and mentor Dan. Wonder at how they differently run through you. Think of the mess of ecology and how it bristles against a logic of finiteness. How ecology is more reintegration than beginnings or ends. How it is a compostist logic.²³⁹ Now feel them run through you. Now think of the moon, the stars, the sun. Now think of where this is all probably going. Know, now, of what you are surrounded by. Know that there is always more to this than that. Find your breath. Now breathe.



Figure 14. Drip.

²³⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

CHAPTER 5

HERE COMES THE CRACK-UP

Listen. Suppose this wasn't a crack in you – suppose it was a crack in the Grand Canyon.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*²⁴⁰

“End-Times” / “Crack-Up”

I was recently in conversation with a geologist whose team has been conducting seismological research on Alaskan earthquakes. During the summer of 2021, the state of Alaska witnessed a magnitude 8.2, making it the most powerful earthquake in the United States of the past fifty years.²⁴¹ While the sheer scale of such tectonic force might be terrifying for some – consider fears of ‘the big one’ in southern California – he and his research team were excited to learn about what the planetary ruptures might help disclose about the inner workings of the earth. Amidst such large-scale change, there was an opportunity for revelation.

Our conversation steadily crept toward the topic of our epoch. I expressed that, in the humanities, scholars have been productively challenging the signification of the term “Anthropocene” as it can be both fallaciously totalizing and politically neutralizing to frame the epoch’s conditions as derived of the human species generally, rather than wrought from the more particular structures which most devastate the earth. He nodded, laughed, and then responded, “Well, the debate in the field of geology surrounds whether or not we can call

²⁴⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The crack-up* (New Directions Publishing, 2009).

²⁴¹ Sarah Knapp, “Biggest U.S. earthquake in more than 50 years strikes Alaska—here’s what we can learn,” *National Geographic*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/biggest-us-earthquake-in-more-than-50-years-strikes-alaska-heres-what-we-can-learn>

this a distinct epoch at all.” While I was initially taken aback, wondering at the impossibility that there was some strain of climate denialism in the field of geology, the tenuous discourse among geologists is a debate far more scientifically grounded. “We are trying,” he explained, “to understand the working of organic processes on massive scales of space and time. Across millennia. And so, a concept of ‘Anthropocene’ is contentious because it seeks to mark as an epochal shift that which might amount only to a marginal footnote in the timeline of earth history.” For some scientists, the very presence of a human species and its impact is just a blip, an almost-nothing, to geologic time. The waves of time may simply wash away traces of the species existence. For many geologists, the epochal designation is simply predicated upon how long it will take for that extinction to occur and how much of an impression humans can still leave upon the planet.

Here, at the end of this project, I will suggest that we crack apart our critical sensibilities about the Anthropocene and hold in our minds multiple, seemingly-conflicting ideas at once. In one sense, the Anthropocene is a politically useful discourse to contextualize the metacondition of our time. It teaches us how things are interconnected – how large-scale crises shape small scale miseries, and how a depathologization of our miseries may help turn us toward concerns of material conditions. It points to the differentially impacting violences of our age and how survivability and freedom rely upon both the long-term project of dismantling the dominative structures steering us into extinction and the small-scale capacities for change in our local communities. It can show us the systems of relation between ecological crises and social impacts organized through regional, economic, racialized, gendered, and species stratification. In this sense, the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ is a political technology that we must continue discovering how to

orient in relation to so as to demystify the conditions of domination, break things down, develop solidarities, and build something that is not fueled by death and misery.

In another instance, the Anthropocene is just *so human*. No, it is *so* of the anthropocentric, hyperindividual subject. There can be a kind of narcissism to thinking in terms of the Anthropocene because it may allow us to assume that what is unprecedented in human history is also unprecedented for an earth history that will certainly maintain orbit and continue to facilitate life long after our imprint has dissolved. There is no end of the world, just past endings, *our* ending, and their ongoing mutations. Perhaps a necessary humility arrives with this recognition of smallness and insubstantial temporal situatedness that helps us to shift our priorities as political bodies and scholars toward what is possible and open for transformation.

As much as the Anthropocene alludes to monstrously large-scale threats and the extent to which material, social, and mass psychological conditions will continue to deteriorate for the rest of our lives, a recognition of its political construction may refigure our immediate, local, and interpersonal labors toward justice. That is, while the formation of large-scale revolution may not be possible, small-scale resistances to increasingly insidious logics of domination may be. And like that daily dose of delusion which allows us continued volition in the face of imminent death, it is through small-scale address to large-scale planetary problems that we create utopia – but we must hold both large and small scale, both Anthropocene horror and utopic imaginary, both the weight of finiteness and compostist mutation in our minds at once.

It is here that we explore meaning in unprecedented, tectonic rupture. Here that we attend to the rhetorical dimensions of domination to better the lives of those most marginalized. And here that we stand in the crack-up with an ecological ontology.

A Critical Ecological Rhetoric for the Anthropocene

A critical ecological rhetoric for the Anthropocene offers one of the necessary rhetorical turns of our time as it, like critical rhetoric, engages power-laden material and discursive dynamics, but further contextualizes such dynamics within the uniquely crisis-laden metacondition of the Anthropocene alongside the ecological insights rendered differently vivid in this age. Merging a framework of critical rhetoric as initiated by Raymie McKerrow with an ethico-political articulation of ecological philosophy as outlined by Félix Guattari, scholars who each sought to critically address the material conditions animating their time, a critical ecological rhetoric offers a theory and practice to address the rhetorical dimensions of domination distinct to our time. Because domination in the Anthropocene is marked by how dominative structures are configured by widespread ecological crises (and also contribute to such crises), a critical ecological rhetoric aims to demystify or disentangle linkages between dominative structures, their material capacities, and the power dynamics woven between ecological registers.

Through a critical ecological rhetoric, rhetorical capacities are framed as more-than-human circulations across material, social, and psychological registers. Much as the Anthropocene brings forth recognitions about how ecological devastation, structural domination, differential social impacts, ontological rupture, and mass psychological transformation are complexly interconnected, a critical ecological rhetoric seeks to reflect this logic of interconnectedness. In this sense, a critical ecological rhetoric focuses as much upon the communicative dynamics which constitute rhetorical encounters as it does the grounds upon which such encounters are made possible – scaling up to the metacondition of the Anthropocene. For a critical ecological rhetoric, the circulation of rhetoric within wider ecologies, and thus, the complicated links between large- and small-scale forces, become the

very subjects of analysis rather than an implication detachable from the actual subject of analysis.

Core to a theory and practice of critical ecological rhetoric is reflexive analytical engagement with the rhetorical construction of dominative borders against the possibilities for connection that such borders close off. This dynamic is seen as the primary means by which dominative power constitutes and persists – imposing, reifying, and violently defending difference in order to maintain itself and consolidate capacities for action. For the critical ecological rhetorician, the practice is to employ critical thought and ecological philosophy to demystify the presence, constructedness, and logics of such borders and reveal the possibilities that may flow from their dissolution.

Across this dissertation, three case studies dynamically performed a practice of critical ecological rhetoric. While each analysis centered a text tangled up in all three ecological registers, the material, social and psychological, each case study particularly attuned to one of the three ecological registers, respectively. In the following section, I will briefly summarize each case study and then describe some threads that weave through all of them.

Threads Across Analyses

In chapter 2, “Pyropolitical Phoenix,” I examined the pyropolitical governmental logics structuring the ecology of Phoenix, Arizona, primarily analyzing the relationship between material impacts of heat and governmental violence. While Phoenix is located within a state that geographically borders Mexico, and while this territorial relationship is employed by the Phoenix Police Department to justify racialized terrorism in the city, social and psychological borders also operationalized the analysis. Constructs of racial and class difference justify police shootings and the use of concentration camps to punish those

targeted by the Phoenix Police Department. Further, the collaboration between the Phoenix Police Department and climatic conditions are enabled through a psychological border that positions issues of the governmental as separate from the elemental and climatic. Ultimately, I explored how dominative relations in Phoenix's urban ecology are organized through a *pyropolitic*, and how this pyropolitic may be viewed as a synecdochic governmental practice in the Anthropocene, demonstrating how pyropolitics may organize other urban ecologies in the worsening climatic conditions of the Anthropocene.

In chapter 3, "I'm Real When I Shop My Face," I examined the circulation of glitch feminism by pop artist Sophie. Here, a critical ecological rhetoric was employed to analyze three performances of glitch feminism incited by Sophie that, together, tell a complex story of neoliberal subjectivation under necrocapitalism. Analyzing Sophie's triptych as a sequence of feminist glitches simultaneously affirms the liberatory potentialities of glitch feminism, while also demonstrating how the construction of our media ecology enables and constrains these potentialities. While material concerns (of the body, technology, and violence) and psychological concerns (of sensation and metanoia) are explored in relation to Sophie's triptych, the social borders stratifying gender identity as well as artist and audience served as the primary site of critical ecological analysis.

In chapter 4, "All My Happiness Is Gone," a critical ecological rhetoric was employed to perform the dissolution of psychological borders – specifically, those which seek to detach a subject's emotional distress from their material conditions. Here, I perform what I called an *ecology of depression* to demystify the connections between genetic inheritance, environment, and activism to argue for a more expressly political rhetorical frame of depression - one which depathologizes experiences of distress and aims to, instead, discover means by which to alter immiserating material conditions toward livability.

While the distinctness and diversity of each chapter sought to demonstrate the dynamism of a critical ecological rhetoric, a few obvious threads emerged. First, each chapter explicitly attended to how dominative forces become constituted through borders, and the extent to which violence must be enacted in order to regulate such borders. Borders that separate territory, human subjects, and the relationship between bodies and their environments are not neutral and require varying levels of force to maintain their constructedness. In “Pyropolitical Phoenix,” spatial and social borders were seen as constructs employed to justify overt, racialized police violence, whereas, in “I’m Real When I Shop My Face” and “All My Happiness Is Gone,” the hegemony of bordered constructs were seen to result in forms of social violence such as anti-trans violence and the indirect violence of pathologizing constructs of illness toward alienated immiseration. Together, these bordered logics and implications showcase the dynamic means by which dominative structures reproduce and consolidate power in the Anthropocene: by exploiting and nurturing the space of difference.

Second, each case study was infused with an emancipatory politic seeking to reveal utopic possibilities for solidarity. If a critical ecological rhetoric is fundamentally concerned with demystifying dominative bordering logics, it is also invested in discovering the possibilities for what may be disclosed as always already connected upon the dissolution of such borders. When the borders distinguishing imperial territory, racialized bodies, gendered bodies, and what might be considered as productive of immiseration are interrogated through an ecological lens, systems of connection may form among suffering bodies alongside a greater cognizance of the forces which press upon those bodies.

Third, by contextualizing each critical ecological essay through the concept of the Anthropocene, they are each shown to contain synecdochic and premonitory potential. That

is, each case can be seen to suggest something about wider ecological systems while looking toward future possibilities predicated upon anticipated future conditions of the Anthropocene. Governmental responses to worsening climate futures, capacities for individual and collective affirmation of identity via cultural circulation in media futures, and psychological responses to worsening climate futures establish a critical ecological rhetoric as particularly concerned with the future directionality of all manner of material, social, and psychological change.

Each of these threads demonstrate how a critical ecological rhetoric may be employed to rethink dominative material, discursive, and psychological dynamics of the Anthropocene, while showcasing the immensely broad application for such projects. Further scholarship in critical ecological rhetoric should either look toward how already existing knowledges critically transform when newly examined through an ecological ontology or foster a critical ecological lens to inspire new points of focus entirely. Further, as outlined in the following section, a critical ecological rhetoric offers pedagogical potential beyond rhetorical scholarship.

Pedagogical Implications

Beyond implications for the fields of critical rhetoric and performance studies, a critical ecological rhetoric also contains pedagogical implications. During the fall 2020 and spring 2021 academic terms, two semesters temporally defined by their station amidst a global pandemic, I designed and taught an original upper-level undergraduate course entitled “Communication at the End of the World” which drew heavily upon concepts and ethics of a critical ecological rhetoric, while also serving as a form of critical ecological rhetoric. I was seeking to work with students to complexify popular and highly rational orientations to large-scale problems as signifying “the end of the world” by calling into question *what,*

exactly, *is coming to an end?* For whom? And, *who (or what)*, exactly, *invoked this ending?* In this way, the course title might provoke students to sign up for a course bound up in contextually relevant discourses of apocalyptic projection, while the semester would, ironically, be spent challenging and deconstructing those discourses through ecological philosophy and a deeply intersectional orientation toward future horizons. The course was organized through practices of critical communication pedagogy²⁴² to ground an understanding of “endings” in the Anthropocene as differentially produced and impacting, as occurring through both human and more-than-human systems of exploitation, and while affirming performance and arts-based research methods as valid and necessary approaches to engaging such subject matter.

“Communication at the End of the World” also embraced the necessity for problem-posing as a critical pedagogical practice. According to Freire, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world in which they find themselves [...] not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”²⁴³ Our in-class dialogues, readings, and performance prompts reflected this mode of knowledge production through a recurrent pedagogical vehicle of ecological thought. By thinking of all manner of matter and meaning as ever-mutating, interconnected, and occurring at various scales, all subjects (including ourselves) are ever-changing and incomplete, yet complexly bound up in wider social, material, and psychological ecologies. For example, meaning making in our classroom was viewed as an ecology of thought and performance enmeshed in, and thus implicated by and containing transformative potentials

²⁴² Deanna L. Fassett and C. Kyle Rudick, *23 Critical Communication Pedagogy* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2016).

²⁴³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Routledge, 2013): 83.

for, wider discursive ecologies. The critical implication, here, is that the discourses we draw upon or (re)produce are always capable of transformation toward liberatory justice – the classroom serves as a relational ecology through which to practice that transformative potential.

Given this, “Communication at the End of the World” also embraced the transformative potentialities of standpoint epistemologies, opting for course assignments which enabled students to creatively explore course subject matter through their own perspective and experience, (de/re)constructing theories of the Anthropocene toward their own ends. Nearly every assignment in the course took the form of a performance. The more heavily weighted assignments took the form of a eulogy, an etymology of place, and a speculative fiction – all of which were performed in-class, while students also composed and performed poetic responses to weekly topics throughout the semester, constructing poems centering or inspired by, for example, “Anthropocene,” “The Sonoran Desert,” or “Queer Ecology”. Both the eulogy and etymology of place assignments were inspired from Joshua Trey Barnett’s syllabus and assignment documents for his original course “Ecological Communication,”²⁴⁴ but, in “Communication at the End of the World,” were distinctly animated by a critical orientation to the social politics of our so-called ending. With performance coupling critical theory in the Anthropocene, students more explicitly drew upon their subjective experiences of ecological crisis while developing a liberatory politic, resonating with bell hooks’ argument, that, “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists

²⁴⁴ Joshua Trey Barnett, “Ecological Communication,” (syllabus, University of Minnesota, Spring, 2020).

between theory and practice.”²⁴⁵ In this way, the budding critical and performative ecology of “Communication at the End of the World” acted as a space for worldmaking, sensemaking, and liberatory practice for wider ecologies beyond the classroom.

While anxieties about post-future horizons contain highly rational validity for students, I hope that a coupling of critical pedagogy and critical ecological rhetoric offers a means to complicate these anxieties toward liberatory thought and practice which ultimately prompt change beyond the classroom. Imperative to this project is the demystification of large-scale ecological crises as products of and productive for structural forms of domination that can be both explicitly critiqued in the classroom and discovered in their local, even intimate, manifestations. By naming the structures of the Anthropocene and scaling down ecological crisis to the level of the individual’s capacity for response, sites of meaningful organization and resistance become more readily apparent, rather than hopelessly overwhelming.

Here It Comes

As we stand in the crack-up, watching and anticipating endings, let us take stock of all that remains. Now:

How might we begin to nurture a different rhetoricity built upon complexly dispersed entanglement and mutual recognition?

How might this facilitate necessary solidarities in an Anthropocene whose dominative relations bend us toward alienated difference?

How might we start to dissolve the idea of the individual in service of the collective?

²⁴⁵ bell hooks, “Theory as liberatory practice,” *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

How might ecology necessarily clash against neoliberal strains of critical thought and practice which ironically nurture individualization, alienation, even domination?

How might ecology brilliantly radicalize?

How might ecology help us think Other?

How might ecology help us think future?

Now:

It's morning. Here it comes.

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