Climate Impasse, Fossil Hegemony, and the Modern Crisis of Imagination

by

Casey A. Williams

Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

Date:_____
Approved:

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Michael Hardt, Supervisor

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Priscilla Wald

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Mark Hansen

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Imre Szeman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

I argue in this dissertation that "climate impasse" — knowing much and doing little about climate change — has become a defining political, social, and cultural problem of the contemporary period (1980s to the present). Supposing that representations of impasse reveal something about the origins, features, and trajectories of U.S. climate politics, I perform close readings and historical analyses of exemplary texts across a range of media (novels, feature films, eco-political manifestos) to consider how the gap between knowing about climate change and doing something about it has been narrated in four U.S. environmental discourses: an "ecocritical" discourse that narrates impasse in terms of representational failure; an "ecofascist" discourse that closes the gap between knowing and doing by vowing to defend Northern borders against rising seas and migrant tides; an "ecofugitive" discourse that holds out the possibility of escape from the dangers of the present; and an "ecosocialist" discourse that resolves impasse by imagining decommodified forms of "social reproduction" that decouple life from fossil fuels. I find, first, that the material and epistemological dimensions of impasse arise from the ownership structure of "fossil capitalism" in the neoliberal period, which not only yokes the reproduction of waged/salaried life to the combustion of fossil fuels, but also profoundly shapes how climate change passes into the cultural imagination. I observe, second, that climate impasse calls into question the

political imaginary of U.S. liberalism, which understands social progress to be driven by cycles of revelation and reform. Finally, I conclude that the imagination has a crucial role to play in moving beyond impasse — not by making the effects of climate change more visible, immediate, or dramatic, but by illuminating concrete strategies for abolishing the political economic structures that give rise to impasse in the first place.

Dedication

For T.G.

Contents

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Introduction: At an Impasse

"Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a liveable place… and yet we are powerless."

— Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (2019)

"Climate impasse" — knowing much and doing little about climate change — is a defining political, social, and cultural problem of the contemporary period. Supposing that representations of impasse reveal something about the origins, features, and trajectories of U.S. climate politics, this project considers how the gap between knowing about climate change and doing something about it has been narrated across a range of late-20th and 21st-century U.S. media: environmental literary theory, borderlands novels, disaster cinema, and eco-political manifestos. My aim is to better understand the underlying causes of impasse as a material and epistemological condition, and to hypothesize strategies for moving beyond impasse, towards forms of praxis that might draw thought and action closer together.

It is widely understood that planet-warming fossil fuels, prime movers of the global economy, are driving temperatures to deadly heights. Largely unabated by domestic policies or international accords, rising temperatures are supercharging heatwaves, hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, and floods, scrambling the poetics of disaster. Such disasters are now both foreign and familiar, at once abstract and viscerally felt. Their causes, too, are both far away — in the slave-powered plantations of the

antebellum South and the "dark satanic mills" of Blake's England — and close by, in London, New York, and Washington, in the multinational corporations and banks and hedge funds that own the capital whose relentless extraction of land and labor accumulates surplus carbon as it accumulates surplus value. Ending such accumulation, however, can seem hopelessly out of reach. However much one knows about climate change — or might want to live in a world freed from the pressures of an exploitative, extractive, expansionary political economy — "fossil capitalism," and its attendant modes of social life and cultural mediation, remains the dominant mode of organizing resources, labor, space, and power in the 21st century. Thus an "impasse:" from the personal to the geopolitical, there seems to be a "gap between insight and involvement," between knowing what ought to be done and actually doing it.[1] As a protagonist in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) puts it, "Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a liveable place… and yet we are powerless."[2] Or, at least, it can feel that way.

I argue that impasse is a primary way the U.S. cultural imagination has mediated the contradictions of fossil capitalism since the late 1980s, when history was simultaneously ending and reasserting itself in the form of rising temperatures. Since then, artists and critics have churned out countless texts reflecting on the tension

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1 Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman, "Breaking the Impasse: The Rise of Energy Humanities," University Affairs, The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, February 12, 2014.
2 Amitav Ghosh, Gun Island (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019), 237.

between knowing about climate change and doing something about it. Literary, or realist, fiction like *Gun Island* or Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), which I discuss in Chapter 1, often frames this tension in terms of mediation itself — as a conflict between the familiar sense of reality given to us in realist novels, films, and reports and an increasingly unfamiliar world of frequent heat waves and wildfires and hurricanes. The exploding literature of climate apocalypse, meanwhile, blasts right through impasse; texts as diverse as *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *Zone One* (2011) all imagine what it might be like to hurtle wide-eyed into a broken future. On the other end of the generic spectrum, eco-documentaries compile painstaking exposés of fossil capitalism's horrors only to conclude with thin calls to action, supposing that arming viewers with facts might unstick the wheels of progress.[3] Non-fiction writers, obliged to end every sober report on a happy note, likewise resolve narrative stuckness with flimsy optimism. "Now we've found a way to engineer our own doomsday," writes David Wallace-Wells in the final lines of "The Uninhabitable Earth" (2017), which I also take up in Chapter 1. "Surely we will find a way to engineer our way out of it, one way or another."[4] Hollow confidence aside, Wallace-Wells brushes against an important point. Whether or not "we" manage to "engineer" a fix for surplus carbon, the present impasse cannot last forever. The future is very much up for grabs.

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3 For more on this point, see Imre Szeman, "Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries," Journal of American Studies 46, no. 2 (May 2012): 423-439.
4 David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth," New York Magazine, July 10, 2017, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html.

Anchored in readings of exemplary texts, most of the project examines how impasse has been staged and resolved in four environmental discourses: an "ecocritical" discourse that narrates impasse in terms of representational failure (Chapters 1 and 2); an "ecofascist" discourse that closes the gap between knowing and doing by vowing to defend Northern borders against rising seas and migrant tides (Chapter 3); an "ecofugitive" discourse that holds out the possibility of escape from the dangers of the present (Chapter 4); and an "ecosocialist" discourse that resolves impasse by imagining decommodified forms of "social reproduction" that decouple life from fossil fuels (Chapter 5). Each of these discourses represents a way of making sense of impasse; each also prefigures a regime of political economy, governance, and sensibility that might succeed the fossil-fueled status quo.

As I investigate these discourses, I make several arguments. First, both the material and epistemological dimensions of impasse arise from the ownership structure of fossil capitalism in the neoliberal period — including fossil capitalism's regime of "social reproduction," which not only yokes the reproduction of waged/salaried life to the combustion of fossil fuels, but also profoundly shapes how climate change passes into the cultural imagination. Second, climate impasse indicts the naive but influential idea that knowing more means doing better. This view is central to the political imaginary of U.S. liberalism, which believes in social progress driven by cycles of revelation and reform. This belief animates the anti-denialism of the mainstream climate

movement as well as the "imaginative failure" thesis taken up in the environmental humanities. Against this view, I argue, finally, that the imagination has a crucial role to play in helping us move beyond impasse — not by making the effects of climate change more visible, immediate, or dramatic, but by illuminating concrete strategies for abolishing the political economic structures that give rise to impasse in the first place.

In the remainder of the introduction, I analyze several causes of impasse, situating my account in extant theories of fossil capital, social reproduction, and petrocultures. I begin, however, by appraising the idea, influential among environmental humanists and popular climate writers, that impasse arises because climate change exceeds the aesthetic forms conventionally used to represent the world.

Crisis of Imagination

Since at least the mid-2000s, influential literary theorists and climate writers have accounted for climate inaction by arguing that the public, especially in the Global North, suffers from a "failure of imagination" when it comes to climate change. Even when one accepts the facts, the argument goes, the enormity, slowness, and causal complexity of climate change make it hard for human beings to wrap their head around the problem, to feel its urgency, and act to address it. In the environmental humanities, this view arrives by way of Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), which argues that environmental crises tend to have certain spatial and temporal

features that elude the narrative forms readily available to modern writers.[5] These crises often unfold over years and decades, making them hard to capture in succinct linear stories, especially when they must compete with social media for a share of readers' shrinking attention span. Drawing on a rich tradition of critical thought, Nixon develops the more ambitious claim that forms of violence which inhere in the structure of a given society — that are, in other words, not tied to punctual events — are difficult to represent as *violence* using realist forms. Such "slow violence" is therefore hard to remediate, since the western legal imaginary demands proof of injury before ordering reparations. Nixon's proposal, which he describes as "action by disclosure" (a phrase borrowed from Sartre), involves finding ways to tell stories of environmental degradation as stories of violence, to read *event* back into *setting,* and by doing so secure redress.

Nixon's account dominates the humanities' climate analysis. It is almost taken for granted among environmental humanists that climate change is so geographically and temporally dispersed that it cannot be represented with inherited aesthetic forms — that it amounts to a kind of "slow violence" that defies response. For instance, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016), which I consider in Chapter 2, argues that climate change is so hard to confront, imaginatively and politically, because global warming's

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5 Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

distribution of bad weather (flooding in Manhattan!) conflicts with realist fiction's conventional ratio of setting and event.[6] Central to this argument is what I call the "distribution of the probable." A temporal corollary to the spatial schema of Jacques Rancière's "distribution of the sensible" — where a dominant regime of sense governs, say, who belongs to the demos — the distribution of the probable describes the rhythm of social life, the ratio of exposition to event that gives the event its special status, and which establishes the likelihood of another event occurring at some future time.[7] Like Rancière's distribution of the sensible, the distribution of the probable mediates between aesthetic and social forms, between literary genres (defined by expectations about what happens when) and genres of real life. In both cases, distribution is determined by prevailing social relations. These are very often crystallized in infrastructure: physical infrastructures, like levees, regulating physical events; digital infrastructures, like social media platforms, regulating many aspects of contemporary sociality; more traditional social infrastructures, like gendered divisions of labor, regulating behavior; and symbolic infrastructures, like fiction, that cement cultural expectations about what is likely to happen where, to whom, when.

What is considered likely is not the same for all people in all places. In the cities and suburbs of the Global North — where electricity, highways, digital media and other

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6 Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
7 Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, trans. and ed. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 152.

"petromodern" infrastructures are taken-for-granted features of everyday life — one expects a high degree of spatio-temporal regularity across real and fictional worlds.[8] This expectation follows from capital's two-centuries-long remaking of "the real" in its own image, a history that includes English "enclosures" (Marx); the "abstraction of time and space" embodied in the steam engine (Malm); mechanical and bureaucratic "rationalization" in 19th and 20th-century Europe and its colonies (Weber); and the "time-space compression" of neoliberal accumulation (Harvey) — the cumulative effects of which are visible today in everything from interstate highway systems to real-time stock trading to instantaneous digital communication to one-day Amazon delivery.[9] On the one hand, petromodernity's physical, social, and cultural infrastructures, which flatten the world into so many inert settings, invite people to see fossil energy as a condition of freedom, defined in narrow bourgeois terms as freedom from the constraints of the Earth, the body, and history. On the other hand, the spatio-temporal regularization of the world is despotic, experienced by the vast majority as the requirement to conform one's activity to the demands of a globalized, 24/7, flexible regime of accumulation, emblematized in precarious work regimes enforced by the looming threat of regularization's opposite: unemployment, incarceration,

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8 The concept of petromodernity comes from Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!" American Literary History 24, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 60.
9 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), ch. 25; Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming (New York and London: Verso, 2016); Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," Daedalus 87, no. 1 (Winter 1958): 117; David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

homelessness, illness, injury, death. More, as I discuss in each chapter, the regularized worlds of the bourgeois imagination exist, figuratively and in real life, at the expense of many other past, present, and future worlds — especially the racialized worlds made into "sacrifice zones" for the sake of extracting wealth and discarding waste.[10]

The distribution of the probable is, in this sense, closely related to fossil capitalism's distribution of life and death — i.e., its "biopolitical" regime governing the production and reproduction of labor, the ultimate source of value within a capitalist mode of production. I explore this issue at length in analyses of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) in Chapter 4, and of *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) in Chapter 5. My main observation is that the reproduction of fossil capitalism requires the strict division of habitable (regularized, exploitable) from hostile (wild, disposable) space — a division maintained by infrastructures which distribute the probable in determinate ways. This observation underpins the primary argument of the project's first half: climate change passes into the U.S. cultural imagination as "the unrepresentable" not because it portends the extinction of the human species (as is commonly suggested), but rather because it challenges the normative distribution of the probable cemented by the physical, social, and cultural infrastructures of fossil capitalism.[11] In challenging this

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10 Naomi Klein, "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World," London Review of Books 38, no. 11 (June 2016).

11 "The extinction of homo sapiens, along with other animal and plant life, is persistently knowable but unrepresentable, no less so than the aesthetic problematic of globality in postmodernism that Jameson describes and names the 'postmodern sublime,'" writes Natalie Melas, "Out of Date: David Harvey's the

distribution, climate change stages a threat to fossil capitalism's division of habitable from hostile space, its biopolitical regime, and, ultimately, its capacity to accumulate private wealth indefinitely.

The Great Derangement, which is in many ways the project's point of departure, illustrates this point clearly. Writing in the postcolonial tradition, Ghosh stresses that the literary novel's distribution of the probable is historically specific, registering the aspirations of a 19th century Anglo-European ruling class, who sought to construct a cultural imaginary commensurate with the rationalizing thrust of coal-powered industrialization and imperialism. Climate change violently upsets this imaginary. The conflict between extreme weather and literary realism is thus a conflict between this class's worldview and the actual worlds it has created. One solution to the conflict is to make the ruling class's provincial forms of representation adequate to this new content (climate change), without abandoning the forms entirely. This is tricky, however. Insofar as the reality mediated by realist forms is one cemented by fossil capitalism — whose physical and social infrastructures determine the distribution of the probable across social space — significantly altering the formal conventions of literary fiction risks making its realism unrealistic, i.e., no longer in step with fossil capitalist social

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Condition of Postmodernity and the Postmodern Condition," Post45, May 19, 2020, https://post45.org/2020/05/out-of-date-david-harveys-the-condition-of-postmodernity-and-the-postmodern-condition/.

expectations, which pass for the real full stop. Because what it means to imagine climate change often involves simply representing extreme weather using bourgeois literary forms, climate change does indeed entail a crisis of imagination: within this provincial conception, imagining climate change either means "weatherizing" the literary novel by fitting extreme weather into its formal conventions, or else giving up the illusion that the ruling class's projection of the real corresponds to reality *tout court*.

Ultimately, Ghosh chooses the former: he calls for a literary climate fiction that can integrate the changing probabilities of a burning planet into the regime of sensibility cemented over 200 years of fossil capitalist development. Such fiction would not radically transform but weatherize the petromodern imaginary by aligning old narratives with new probabilities. It would, in a sense, do what the steady drumbeat of extreme weather reports is already doing: make the everyday horrors of climate change "the new normal." In addition to dulling the sense of radical contingency that always accompanies a moment of danger, normalizing climate catastrophe is, as I argue in Chapter 2, a corollary and adjunct to the U.S.'s preferred policy response to climate change: not decarbonization, but adaptation.

Insofar as it sees faithful representation as a condition of salutary action, Ghosh's argument also aligns with an enduring but now definitively outdated politics of anti-denialism. Reflecting the persistence of postwar environmentalism's "testimonial style," which imagines reform to follow revelation, opposing climate denial has been a key

tactic of the mainstream climate movement from its origins — and a useful tactic, given that the managers of fossil capital and their paid-for scientists have spent billions sowing doubt about anthropogenic warming in a successful bid to stall decarbonization policy. However, as I detail in Chapter 3, which shows how some right-wing discourses accept climate science to advance a nativist "politics of antagonistic reproduction," denial is only one weapon in the fossil fuel industry's arsenal, not the ultimate source of its authority. Countering denial with awareness thus turned out to be a tactical error for the climate movement, akin to slashing repeatedly at just one of the hydra's many heads. Indeed, the most enduring effect of anti-denialism has not been weakening the power of fossil capital, but rather cementing the climate issue as a question of knowledge rather than a contest over competing visions of the future. Even as social movement pressure pushes climate debates towards questions of power and ownership, the questions at the heart of U.S. climate discourse mostly remain epistemological and rhetorical: How do we know climate change is real? How can we represent climate change in a way that will rouse the public to action? Consequently, the presumption underlying much climate change writing and scholarship — especially research that sees itself as contributing to climate action — is that representing planetary warming better is a condition of breaking climate impasse.[12] As cli-fi novelist Paolo Bacigalupi put it, summing up a widely held

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12 As Matthew Schneider-Mayerson puts it, "Part of the explanation for this artistic and scholarly attention lies in… the hope that these plays, novels, short stories, poems, and children's stories might lead to a wider and deeper climate consciousness and thereby contribute to more progressive environmental policies and

view among humanists, "the value of writing a broken future… is that storytelling and fiction are those paths to empathy, connection and visceral experience that are lacking from a policy discussion" — the implication being that a more empathetic, connected, or visceral discussion would produce better policy.[13]

Bracketing the complexity of this sort of claim, which I explore in Chapters 1 and 4, it is easy to want this to be true, to hope that the work one spends years doing — whether expository or critical or dramatic — contributes to making an unprecedented planetary calamity a little less calamitous. At the heart of impasse, then, is a desire for literature and literary theory to do something about the climate crisis. One sees this desire in the early formulations of "ecocriticism," which emerged in the 1990s as an action-oriented correction to literary criticism's heady postmodern turn, and in contemporary environmental and energy humanities, whose scholars labor under the unspoken (and sometimes explicit) expectation that their work contribute to mitigating the problems they study. Yet political claims made on behalf of literature and criticism sometimes go beyond what either can reasonably deliver. Energy theorists Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel "worry," for instance, "about these ways in which literature and

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politics." Schneider-Mayerson, "The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers," Environmental Humanities (2018) 10 (2): 473-500.

13 Maddie Stone, "'The Water Knife' Pictures a Drought-Ravaged Future That Cuts Too Close to Home," Motherboard, May 26, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en/article/wnjaq9/the-water-knife-pictures-a-drought-ravaged-future-that-cuts-too-close-to-home.

literary criticism imagine for themselves a lead role in the game of politics that is almost in inverse proportion to their actual social import at the present moment — wanting, like Mungau in Borges Coelho's *Campo de Trânsito,* to see the world with bigger eyes than those we possess."[14]

Szeman and Wenzel advocate a kind of humility, emphasizing the small but important ways critics contribute to climate justice. Another response has been to find new eyes — to supplement literary ways of seeing with methods more closely associated with science and policy making. For instance, the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* dedicated a portion of its Spring 2020 issue to "empirical ecocriticism," showcasing work from literary theorist Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, who uses quantitative methods to assess how well climate fiction impels readers to action (not very well, it turns out).[15] Schneider-Mayerson's work exemplifies both the tenacity and limitations of the field's commitment to representation as a form of social action — whether that looks like criticism's "action by disclosure" or fiction's lessons in empathy. Since Ghosh published *The Great Derangement* (and since I began my PhD) in 2016, there has been an explosion of what we might consider *literary* climate fiction, including an entry from Ghosh himself: *Gun Island* (2019). And yet the despair expressed

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14 Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, "What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Extractivism?" Textual Practice 35, no. 3 (2021): 505-523.
15 Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, and W P Małecki, "Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Texts and Empirical Methods," ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, 27, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 327-336.

by that novel's protagonist — "and yet we are powerless" — remains widely felt. In his survey of cli-fi readers, Schneider-Mayerson finds that climate fiction not only does little to change reader behavior, but can also provoke "demobilizing" feelings of helplessness.[16] It would seem, then, that having more or better representations of climate change circulating in Northern literary culture not only fails to overcome impasse, but can in some cases intensify it — heightening a tension between knowing and doing that cries out for resolution.

Yet the failure of certain representational forms to push people to, say, start blowing up pipelines need not cause us to abandon the imagination altogether. Rather than make bourgeois forms adequate to climate change's new content, I would suggest, very simply, that different forms are needed. A long line of theorists from Lukács to Fredric Jameson has made this sort of claim, sometimes looking to Science Fiction's potential to gesture beyond the ideological constraints imposed by realism.[17] By contrast, I am interested in the moments of unreality that appear in otherwise realist texts — how the appearance of the improbable can challenge expectations, enforced by the material and ideological infrastructures of fossil capitalism, about what is likely to happen to and by whom when. By the improbable I do not mean random or aleatory events, like the freak tornado Ghosh describes in his book, which have no necessary relationship to plot.

16Schneider-Mayerson, "The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers," 490.
17 Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (New York and London: Verso, 2007).

By improbable, I mean events that are possible given a text's narrative constraints but unlikely because they defy readers' expectations about how characters are supposed to act in given conditions. The primary example I give in this project is Estrella in Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, who, in militantly refusing the double binds of commodified social reproduction, defies the reader's expectations not only about how a teenage farmworker might behave, but also about how such a plot ought to resolve.[18] Estrella's improbable protest is the text's (and this dissertation's) utopian moment because it imagines what *could* happen within the social relations of the present. As I write in Chapter 5, I align the improbable's utopian impulse with Marx and Engels's scientific socialism, which predicates its vision of a just society not on an abstract idea of what should be, but on a concrete sense of what could be given the specific conditions of the present.

The other chapters are, by contrast, notably gloomier. They reflect on narrative resolutions that suppress (Chapter 3) or sublimate (Chapter 4) the improbable, and in doing so decline to imagine a reality beyond that furnished by fossil capitalism's physical and imaginative architectures. Before previewing these chapters more fully, it is important to provide an account of why a certain amount of gloom may be warranted — and why impasse seems to be such a defining feature of climate change in the U.S.

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18 Helena María Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus (New York: Plume, 1996).

Fossil Capital

Who or what is responsible for today's overlapping material, epistemic, and affective impasses? One answer looks to the hundred or so biggest fossil fuel producers, the so-called majors like Exxon and Saudi Aramco, who have used their power to block emissions cuts (to say nothing of climate justice) at every turn. Another answer has to do with how the fossil capital owned and managed by the majors — whose infrastructures, products, and organizing logic are increasingly central to the reproduction of real life — have shaped modern social and cultural practice, so much so that abandoning fossil fuels is tantamount to abandoning a "whole way of life."[19] By this, I emphatically do not mean to suggest that fossil fuels are hard to abandon because they fuel "luxurious," high-carbon lifestyles ordinary people are loath to abandon. My claim, following Marxist cultural critics and the "petrocultures" school, is rather that fossil capitalism has made modern subjects precariously dependent on the real and imagined worlds fossil fuels create, locking ordinary people into a suicide pact with substances that invariably contradict the expectations of stability, mobility, and futurity which fossil fuels have come to signify.

In making this argument, I build on three contributions Marxist theorists have made to the critical study of energy and climate. The first is the "metabolic rift" theory

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19 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), 37.

elaborated by John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett, Kohei Saito, and others.[20] This theory holds that the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe — a process of primitive accumulation that alienated producers from the products of their labor, forcing them to reproduce themselves by working for a wage — disrupted the metabolism coordinating relations between people and nature, creating a "rift" that not only thrust people into new relations of exploitation, but also threw ecosystems into destructive disequilibrium. This disruption's form — relations of production organized around accumulating privately held surplus value — required producers to overexploit natural resources (extractable resources, like minerals and knowledges, as well as disposable resources, like the carbon capacity of the atmosphere) in a way that produced both local and planetary crises. The moment of "primitive accumulation" was also the moment when life became *commodified* and, as such, tied to the realization of capitalist value as profit.

The "metabolic rift" theory opens onto a second crucial insight: capital accumulates not just by exploiting the labor of waged workers (a narrow reading of Marx), but also by extracting labor and energy from unwaged workers and the socio-natural environments that sustain life. Indebted to Marxist-feminist theories of feminized "social reproduction" (Federici, Dalla Costa and James, etc.), as well as analyses of "new enclosures" (Midnight Notes, Harootunian, etc.), this line of thinking

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20 John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," American Journal of Sociology 105, no. 2 (Sept. 1999): 366-405; Paul Burkett, Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective (Chicago: Haymarket Books,1999); Kohei Saito, Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).

sees capital as a regime not just of labor exploitation but also "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey), "energy" extraction (Brennan), and "eco-regulation" (Benton) characterized by cyclical crises.[21] Crystallizing this position in the 1980s, James O'Connor theorized a "second contradiction" of capital: capitalist production creates crises for itself not just by overproducing (i.e., the classic capitalist "realization" crisis), but also by destroying the ecological conditions for further accumulation, leading to crises of underproduction.[22] Jason W. Moore, Nancy Fraser, and Romain Felli extend O'Connor's argument in recent work, suggesting that modern capitalism, via carbon emissions and other forms of toxification, is systematically destroying the frontiers of "cheap nature" it has so far relied on to reproduce and expand, setting up a potential "terminal crisis" for capitalist political economy.[23]

The third, more recent Marxist contribution to climate and energy studies is the theory of fossil capital developed by Andreas Malm and refined by Cara Daggett,

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21 Silvia Federici, Re-enchanting The World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons (Oakland: PM Press, 2018); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community (Falling Wall Press, 1975); Midnight Notes Collective, "Introduction to the New Enclosures," Midnight Notes 10 (1990): 1-9; Harry Harootunian, Marx After Marx: History and time in the Expansion of Capitalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," Socialist Register 40 (2004): 63-87; Teresa Brennan, "Why the Time is Out of Joint: Marx's Political Economy Without the Subject," South Atlantic Quarterly 97, no. 2 (1998): 278; Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction," New Left Review 178 (Nov.-Dec. 1989): 51-86.

22 James O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," Capitalism Nature Socialism 1, no. 1 (1988): 11-38.

23 Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift:" A Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World-Ecology," The Journal of Peasant Studies 38 (2011): 1-46; Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital: For a Trans-environmental Eco-socialism," New Left Review 127 (Jan/Feb 2021): 94-127; Romain Felli, The Great Adaptation: Climate, Capitalism, and Catastrophe (New York and London: Verso, 2021).

Matthew T. Huber, Imre Szeman, Brent Ryan Bellamy, Jeff Diamanti, Jennifer Wenzel, and others.[24] On the one hand, fossil capital names privately held assets coordinating the extraction, refining, circulation, consumption, and waste of fossil energy. On the other hand, fossil capital describes the social relations of capital in general, insofar as capital accumulation necessitates expanding fossil energy use and, consequently, rising greenhouse gas emissions. The theory of fossil capital rebuts dominant "Anthropocene" accounts of planetary heating, which blame climate change on "human" activity in general. Against the latter view, Malm and others observe that at a crucial moment in the history of capitalism — the industrial revolution in early-19th century England — capitalists began using coal-powered steam engines to overcome land constraints and discipline unruly workers. Coal use in England drove further colonization in the New World as capitalists extended control over large areas of agricultural land, and large pools of enslaved laborers, to supply the raw materials for textile production (cotton for the mills, sugar for the spinners).[25] A pattern was established. Repeatedly stepping up as a "material solution" to periodic crises of capital, fossil fuels supplemented spatial fixes

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24 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming, (New York and London: Verso, 2016); Cara Daggett, The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work (Duke University Press, 2019); Matthew T. Huber, Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Imre Szeman and Petrocultures Research Group, After Oil (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2016); Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, "Phantasmagorias of Energy: Toward a Critical Theory of Energy and Economy," in Materialism and the Critique of Energy (MCM' Press, 2018); Jennifer Wenzel, "Introduction" in Fueling Culture, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
25 "The system's built-in tendency to ecological crisis is… tightly linked to its built-in tendency to create racially marked populations for expropriation," writes Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital," 97.

(allowing capital to operate as if it has access to massive forests or far-flung colonies), sped up temporal fixes (allowing capital to extend the working day, speed up production, and shorten the accumulation cycle through quick access to labor, resources, and markets), disciplined labor (turning workers in appendages of machines, really subsuming their labor), and absorbed challenges to its hegemony (via material and ideological plasticity).[26] Put more simply, for over two centuries, capital has used coal and oil to expand to new resource frontiers and exploit labor more efficiently, expropriating the global commoners and submitting waged workers to the rigid time discipline of fuels that burn day and night. As workers resist despotism, and commoners resist death, capital reacts with new techniques of control, each time applying more and more fossil energy to defer the problem of people struggling to be free.

This account is powerful on its own, drawing a clear causal connection between capital's internal dynamics and the planetary crisis currently unfolding. It is useful to add, however, that this theory hinges on a specific reading of what Marx called capital's "moving contradiction." Put schematically, the moving contradiction holds that capital's internal tension between forces and relations of production pushes capitalists to mechanize production wherever possible. For most of modern history, this has meant burning fossil fuels; ergo, capitalism's internal dynamics are directly responsible for the

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26 Andreas Malm, "Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital," Mediations 31, no. 2 (2018): 17-40.

climate crisis. Beyond this, the moving contradiction is a contradiction for two reasons. First, mechanization pushes workers out of the production process; and because workers are the ultimate source of capitalist value, shedding labor causes the rate of surplus value creation to fall; this manifests as an “overproduction, or "value realization," crisis as producers flood the market with more goods than can be purchased. This contradiction contains another: insofar as mechanization represents the increasingly social character of production, it tends toward a mode of production that cannot be contained by capitalist relations of production (namely, private property). Automation is perhaps the clearest example: as capitalism creates increasingly social and efficient (i.e., less labor-intensive) forms of production, it becomes harder to rationalize a system of property that concentrates social wealth in private hands and, in doing so, demands *more* work, not less.

I want to suggest that capital’s moving contradiction operates in the sphere of social reproduction as well. Workers in the Global North have relied on fossil fuels, especially gasoline and coal-generated electricity, to reproduce themselves since at least WWII. This is one reason the 1970s gas price shocks were so consequential: they imperiled the ability of the normative worker (a white, male, socially ascendant breadwinner) to reproduce his “way of life,” provoking intense anger suffused with

racial resentment ultimately captured by the "Reagan revolution."[27] Reagan-era reforms, meanwhile, further shifted the burden of social reproduction to workers, while weakening labor's ability to demand its share of the economic surplus. This created what Nancy Fraser calls a "crisis of care:" workers found themselves increasingly responsible for things like health care, even as they were increasingly unable to buy social reproductive commodities, or do the necessary care work themselves.[28] Debt was one way to defer this crisis.[29] Cheap fossil fuels were, and remain, another. As in the postwar period, fossil fuels enable the mechanization of social reproductive labor, allowing people (especially women) to take care of themselves and others even though they have less and less time off the clock. This is the conceit, for instance, of Disney's *Smart House* (1999) (a paradigmatic entry in a well-stocked genre), which mediates the withering Keynesian state, elimination of the family wage, and subsequent entry of women into the workforce by imagining a fully automated (and constantly surveilled) house personified by a holographic mother, Pat. Like cars or microwaves or smartphones, Pat can only defer the crisis of care she is enlisted to solve, not eliminate it altogether (indeed, she can do nothing more than simulate care, which has been undermined by social reproduction's commodification). This totally automated and surveilled domestic space, moreover, aids the direct appropriation of everyday life as

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27 Huber, Lifeblood, 99.
28 Fraser, "Climates of Capital," 95.
29 Susan Soederberg, Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline, and the Surplus Population (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

economic value by making social reproductive activity legible to capital — dramatizing what Hardt and Negri call the "real subsumption" of life by capital in the era of biopolitical production, which relies on electronic information architectures that allow for the inscription of life as data.[30] And so the moving contradiction returns: in the home as much as in the factory, fossil-fueled machinery promises to eliminate work even as it deepens subjection and, in doing so, further weds the reproduction of social life to the combustion of planet-heating fossil fuels.

Contradictions notwithstanding, the mechanization of social reproduction means neoliberal subjects perform their daily labors enmeshed in the fictions of oil's power — to save time, extend the body prosthetically, move through space, communicate instantaneously, etc. This has profound ideological effects. If the moving contradiction plants a dream in the brain of capital — that capital might free itself from its dependence on living labor, and become a "motive power that moves itself" — it lures workers with a hollowed out version of the same dream: cars, Roombas, and iPhones promise flexibility, ease, and productivity "hacks." Such dreams smuggle a distinctly modern disgust with the laboring body into everyday cultural practice. In the postwar years, the ambiguous technological advances of the "Great Acceleration" — metonymized in the atomic bomb, the automobile, the synthetic pesticide — confirmed for Hannah Arendt that modernity had succumbed to a troubling "desire to escape from imprisonment to

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30 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 402.

the Earth."[31] Sixty years later, freedom is still seen precisely as liberation from the prison of material existence, from the body and the Earth, vouchsafed by fossil fuels' remarkable power to transform matter into its negation. New today, perhaps, are neoliberal governance strategies which shift the burden of personal welfare onto workers and in so doing invite working people to see themselves, paradoxically, as entrepreneurs or investors — bundles of human capital whose choices about how to invest their time and energy determine their fate. It is as human capital that workers are now encouraged to share capital's zeal in eliminating constraints thrown up by time, space, Earth, and the body — capital's dream of "complete liberation from matter, from nature" and from labor, a dream realized (only ever partially) by the tendential substitution machine power for human labor.[32]

What one ends up with is a narrow view of freedom as the negation of bodily, environmental, and historical necessity. On this view, enforced by petromodernity's spatio-temporal regularization of real and fictional worlds, the free subject is the subject who does more work in less time, triumphs over biological, ecological, and geographical constraints, and self-actualizes by transcending the past. Just as exchange turns the commodity into a fetish, fossil-fueled production composes a fetishized picture of freedom: total independence, self-reliance, bootstrapping. This picture creates the sense

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31 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 2.
32 Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 383.

both that motion, including class mobility, is self-engendered and that eliminating necessity through technology is the meaning of liberation. Such thinking seeps into critical theory, as well, from Foucaultian celebrations of formlessness to accelerationism's pollyannaish enthusiasm for automation. "The movement towards a surpassing of our current constraints," Srnicek and Williams write in their "accelerationist" manifesto, "must also include recovering the dreams which transfixed many from the middle of the Nineteenth Century until the dawn of the neoliberal era, of the quest of Homo Sapiens towards expansion beyond the limitations of the earth and our immediate bodily forms."[33] It is hard to imagine such dreams coming true without massive expenditures of energy.

Given the current energy mix, weighted heavily towards oil, posthuman dreaming asks modern subjects to go all in on fossil fuels while doing little to eliminate the aspect of modern life that most makes subjects unfree: the requirement to sell one's labor for the means of life. Barring the abolition of the capitalist wage-commodity system, the flip side of posthuman dreaming is always a threat. If fossil fuels promise liberation, their absence threatens bondage. And if fossil fuels power social reproduction, their disappearance entails the impossibility of performing any number of

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33 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, #Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics (Mexico City: Gato Negro Ediciones, 2016), 151.

essential reproductive tasks: getting to work, buying food, communicating with family. Fossil fuel advertising perhaps puts it best: no fossil fuels, no life.

The result is what I call "fossil hegemony." Wielding both promises and threats, fossil capital coordinates the "lived common sense" of the neoliberal period, making it hard to imagine, much less struggle for, alternative social arrangements.[34] I am hardly the first to point out that fossil fuels support ways of living, socializing, and thinking that reflect and enforce fossil capital. This is, in some sense, the premise of "petrocultures" scholarship, which investigates how fossil energy systems shape culture in ways that maintain (and sometimes contest) elite power. Malm writes about a fossil capitalist "ideology," which ties modern culture to the illusory promise of progress, and Huber uses the concept of hegemony to analyze how fossil fuels underwrite a postwar "American way of life" organized around car-centric privatism that prepares the ground for neoliberalism. My point here is, first, that "fossil hegemony" arises out of fossil fuels' centrality to "social reproduction;" fossil fuels are hegemonic because workers depend directly on fossil-generated electricity and petroleum fuels — and on commodities produced and transported by fossil capitalist value circuits — to make themselves whole. My second, related claim is that fossil hegemony operates principally on the level of form, rather than content; the social relations of fossil capital are powerful not because of what they encourage people to think (fossil fuels are good!), but because of how they

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34 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), 37.

condition access to survival on the adoption of fossil-fueled ways of relating to oneself, others, and the world — both materially and imaginatively.

The upshot is two-fold. First, fossil fuels' centrality to social reproduction throws up an immediate barrier to decarbonization: ordinary people cannot give up fossil fuels so long as they depend on those fuels to survive under conditions of economic precarity and ecological turbulence, a dynamic Viramontes's novel clarifies (Chapter 5). Policies like carbon pricing that demand consumer "sacrifices" breed popular resentment against elites, who are seen as prioritizing an abstract "environment" over the needs of ordinary people. Such resentment, I argue in Chapter 3, is easily captured by right-wing currents. Second, fossil fuels' centrality to specifically neoliberal forms of social reproduction — which requires workers to behave like capital, and to view capital's interests and obstacles as their own — implicates fossil fuels in the very ideological transformations that have made organizing a coordinated opposition to fossil capitalism so difficult. Fossil capitalism's "moving contradiction," which tends towards the substitution of machine for human power across all realms of life, thus not only ties the reproduction of life to fossil energy systems, but also confirms form's colonization of content in a way that defangs protest and heightens the profound sense of stuckness attending impasse. Attempts to overcome impasse with more or better representation risk heightening this tension, which must then be resolved aesthetically. This dissertation catalogs some of those resolutions.

Aesthetic Resolutions

How has climate impasse been staged and resolved imaginatively? What vision of the future do different imaginative resolutions to impasse propose? In asking these questions, I am drawing on Fredric Jameson's theory of aesthetic resolution, which itself draws on Louis Althusser's famous definition of ideology as "the Imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence."[35] For Jameson, narrative art stages the "Real conditions of existence" as narrative conflicts, resolving them in ways that shed light on the fears, hopes, aspirations, commitments, etc. of the social groups from which a text emerges and for whom it is written. Resolutions always have diagnostic value; to resolve a contradiction, a text must first identify it, and in doing so give voice, however obliquely, to some kind of collective hopes. Resolutions are not always utopian, however. Imaginative resolutions to real contradictions can gesture beyond the social relations of the present — by affirming the possibility of social transformation — but they can also capitulate to those relations by tying up in a neat bow threads that, in reality, remain firmly knotted. If we think of the U.S. climate imaginary as telling a story about climate change, we might say that this story's conflict is approaching a climactic point: most people know about climate change, and many have experienced its effects directly, and yet little is being done to

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35 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 90.

stop carbon from accumulating in the atmosphere. This conflict between "knowing" and "doing" registers deeper contradictions between capitalism's ideology and its outcomes, and between the energetic bases of the capitalist mode of production and life on Earth. The Jamesonian question then becomes: How are the social contradictions of climate change, distilled into a conflict between awareness and action, resolved aesthetically? What political commitments are expressed by different resolutions? What do they mean for explicitly political efforts to resolve climate change's contradictions?

I dedicate chapters 1 and 2 to analyzing the "imaginative failure" thesis circulating in what I am calling "ecocriticism" — a somewhat clumsy designator for a wide range of academic and popular texts that understand climate impasse primarily in terms of representation and its inadequacies. The conclusion I draw about ecocriticism, gestured at above, is simply that knowing better, on its own, does not mean doing better. In some cases, knowing better heightens the tension of living in a world on the brink of disaster, calling forth more potent resolutions.

Largely under-studied by literary theorists, the second narrative I consider might be summed up as "defend the borders" (Chapter 3). The right-wing, or ecofascist, environmental tradition — which has roots in the settler environmentalism of Henry David Thoreau and today includes both loose affinity groups and institutional parties — narrates environmental change as a threat to white futures and resolves that threat by violently defending white settler society. I tease out the conventions of this narrative

through a close reading of an ethnonationalist manifesto that distills the key conventions of ecofascism's defend the borders response to climate change. Understanding climate change chiefly as the specter of Global South immigration to the Global North, defending the borders abandons the denialism of the mainstream right, instead proposing to resolve impasse with xenophobic population controls that reproduce fossil capitalism's racist distribution of the probable: a stable, regularized, linear time-space for white citizen-workers; constant crisis for everyone else. No longer concerned with maintaining the neoliberal fiction that unfettered markets can deliver peace, progress, and plenty for all — a fiction that sustains liberalism's commitment to revelation as a condition of reform — ecofascism proposes to secure fossil capitalism's distribution of the probable not through adaptation but open violence. This position has the potential to march from the ethnonationalist fringes to the conservative mainstream across the Global North as the contradictions of climate change intensify.

The third narrative I consider might be described as a "return to nature" (Chapter 4). Through a close reading of Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), a magical realist film in which a hurricane devastates a multi-racial community outside Louisiana's coastal levee system, I consider how a vision of sustainable, fugitive forms of life is undermined by climate change's effects, which forcibly reincorporate fugitive

communities into the fossil capitalist relations they are trying to escape.[36] Even as it stages a utopian vision of a multi-racial subsistence society, Zeitlin's film uses the figure of the levee — an ambiguous climate adaptation technology that, in materializing a certain distribution of the probable, protects people on the inside at the risk of flooding those who choose to live on the outside — to dramatize the limits of ecofugitivity as a response to climate impasse. I suggest that *Beasts*, in exposing these limits, gestures towards an environmental politics that can contest fossil capital from within the levees. To clarify this point, I read the film alongside Marxist-feminist theories of social reproduction to consider how fossil capitalist relations, whose climate change effects make it increasingly difficult to live outside market society, enlists the climate itself in new forms of "accumulation by dispossession." To understand the levee's particular significance in this process, I also read Zeitlin's film alongside other filmic depictions of the Gulf South, including the Standard Oil-commissioned *Louisiana Story* (1948).[37]

The fifth and final chapter takes up the ecosocialist response to impasse, summed up as the narrative/injunction to "decommodify everything." This narrative treats impasse as a consequence of waged workers' dependence on fossil capital and proposes to resolve impasse by abolishing that dependence. I consider Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) as an exemplary text of working-class

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36 Beasts of the Southern Wild, directed by Benh Zeitlin (Century City, CA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).
37 Louisiana Story, directed by Robert J. Flaherty (New York: Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, 1948).

environmentalism and a work of climate fiction *avant la lettre*. Focalized through young migrant farmworkers in 1990s' southern California, one of whom is poisoned by pesticides in the fields, *Under the Feet of Jesus* shows how the fossil-fueled infrastructures that regularize life for some (highways, synthetic pesticides, supermarkets, air conditioning) destabilize the conditions of life for others — in this case, Chicanx migrant workers whose dependence on these infrastructures to work, cook, clean, and stay healthy exposes them to a range of dangers. Because Viramontes narrates environmental racism as a product of the fossil economy's reconfiguration of life and work, her characters are able to plot responses to environmental racism that make use of their power as workers — specifically, through a riot which decommodifies the means of life. *Under the Feet of Jesus* challenges a certain distribution of the probable governing the genre conventions of petromodernity — not by describing chaotic weather, but by narrating an attack on capitalism's wage/commodity system from below.

1. Climate Change and the Problem of Unrepresentability

"When it comes to contemplating real-world warming dangers, we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination."

—David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019)

Towards the end of Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014), as Hurricane Sandy whips through Manhattan, the narrator and his friend encamp in a hospital room on New York City's Upper East Side.[1] They study the television, consuming images of the hurricane as it floods subway tunnels only blocks away. "We watched… the coverage of the storm we kept failing to experience," the narrator recalls. Insulated from the hurricane's worst effects by cushions of class and race, the narrator experiences disaster through its televisual mediations — images he feels are somehow inadequate to the catastrophe unfolding around him. "We talked constantly about the urgency of the situation," he says, "but were still unable to feel it."[2]

And yet of course, the narrator does feel it — he is there, after all — just not as he expects to. The issue is not that the narrator's mediated experience of the hurricane fails to square with an unmediated experience of the storm, but rather that his experience fails to square with what he believes catastrophe ought to feel like. This is the basic logic of climate change's "unrepresentability" in the 21st century: the web of causes and effects collected under the sign of climate change seems to defy the genre conventions

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1 Ben Lerner, 10:04: A Novel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).
2 Lerner, 10:04, 231.

typically used to represent environmental catastrophe. Staged by Lerner's narrator as a conflict between expectation and experience, this problematic reminds readers that the material features of climate change — from hydrocarbon combustion to shifting weather patterns — receive meaning from the images, tropes, narratives, and other aesthetic forms used to make them present to thought. These aesthetic forms are, moreover, social and historical; experience is in a very real sense constructed through a sensibility produced and shared by others. The problem of climate change's mediation is thus also a question of community, a question of shared ways of seeing and making sense of "the warming condition."[3]

Concerns about sight, sense, media, and community express a familiar postmodern anxiety — the worry that, as Guy Debord put it, "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" — which Lerner rehearses formally by blurring the text's factual and fictive elements.[4] Yet the equivocations of postmodernism take on new meanings here, as fossil-fueled warming alters the climate, and therefore the socio-natural conditions of experience, in unprecedented ways. We might think of Lerner's narrator, an avatar for the author, as a stand-in for a class of professional writers and scholars for whom this reconfiguration of experience compels some kind of response. These professional intellectuals, especially in the sub-fields of Environmental and

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3Andreas Malm, The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 1.
4 Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1967; Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1994), 12.

Energy Humanities, have begun to ask questions of practice: What is to be done about climate change? And what role does, or should, humanistic inquiry play in projects of carbon mitigation, climate adaptation, energy transition, and more?[5] These crucial questions are in many ways the point of departure for this project. For many humanists, I argue, answering questions about what to do begins with the problem of unrepresentability: global warming's spatial and temporal scales exceed the aesthetic forms typically used to mediate experience; dominant aesthetic forms therefore block climate change from view, compelling a search for images and stories adequate to global warming's devastations — a search humanists appear well-suited to lead.[6] This line of thinking, organized around the "trope of unrepresentability," as I call it, is the dominant way humanists have theorized climate change since the consolidation of ecocriticism in the early 1990s. This trope's persistence clarifies how much political power the environmental humanities attribute to various modes of representation (visibility, exposure, revelation, etc.), while highlighting the limitations of a climate politics

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5 See Poul Holm et. al., "Humanities for the Environment: A Manifesto of Research and Action," humanities 4, no. 4 (2015): 977-992; and Subhankar Banerjee, "Building Bridges and Connecting Dots: Apprehending Multi-species Futures," keynote lecture at Beyond Despair: Theory and Practice in Environmental Humanities, National Humanities Center, April 3-5, 2019.

6In addition to Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), discussed in this chapter, see: Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Greg Garrard et al., "Introduction: 'Imagining Anew: Challenges of Representing the Anthropocene,' Environmental Humanities 5, no. 1 (2014): 149-153; Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys, "Climate Change and the Imagination," Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change 2, no. 4 (2011): 516-534; Mahlu Mertens and Stef Craps, "Contemporary Fiction vs. the Challenge of Imagining the Timescale of Climate Change," Studies in the Novel 50, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 134-153; and Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism," Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change 2, no. 2 (2011): 185–200.

organized around making climate change legible as catastrophe, disaster, violence, crisis, or emergency.

Indeed, concerns about the unrepresentability of climate change testify to a more general impasse, or a sense of stuckness, settling over climate change scholarship, especially but not exclusively in the academic humanities. Following Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman, impasse names "the gap between knowledge and action, insight and involvement" — the space between knowing there is a problem and doing something about it.[7] Framing climate change in terms of unrepresentability narrates impasse as a consequence of representational failure. In response to political questions — like, Why have U.S. lawmakers failed to begin a program of total decarbonization in line with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change? — a diagnosis of unrepresentability suggests that perhaps key actors — "world leaders," "consumers," "the public" — are not perceiving the problem clearly enough. Briefly and tendentiously, I want to suggest that the trope of unrepresentability, or "crisis of imagination" as it is sometimes described, is a key way both the scholarly and vernacular humanities have mediated impasse since the early 1990s, when global warming was becoming a household phrase.[8] I also want to suggest that if certain representational forms are indeed inadequate to climate change, one can best

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7 Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman, "Breaking the Impasse: The Rise of Energy Humanities," University Affairs, The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, February 12, 2014.
8 Stephanie LeMenager, Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

understand why by analyzing the social contradictions such inadequacies index. Like "the environment" as a whole, climate change appears to thought already invested with social significance, always enlisted in a particular configuration of power, to which its representational challenges point. Given this, the relevant cultural blockage — "impasse," to follow Boyer and Szeman; "derangement," to follow Amitav Ghosh, whose work I examine more carefully in Chapter 2 — may not be global warming's resistance to representation, but rather how the social relations of fossil capitalism deepen subjective investments in fossil fuels, cementing what I call a "fossil hegemony" wedding ordinary people materially and ideologically to fuels that invariably break the promises of speed, progress, power, and futurity made on their behalf.[9]

In what follows I aim to establish the dominance of the trope of unrepresentability, or imaginative failure, in scholarly and popular accounts of climate change in the U.S., tracing this trope back to the "testimonial style" of the postwar North American environmental movement and the development of "ecocriticism" in the early 1990s. The trope of unrepresentability historicized and elaborated, I argue that invoking representational failure to explain the relative absence of global decarbonization programs (to say nothing of a "just transition") supposes that more or better representations of climate change promise to resolve climate impasse. The result is a preference among both environmental humanists and popular climate writers for a

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9 LeMenager, Living Oil, 67.

politics/aesthetics of naive realism that not only fails to account for climate change in terms of *totality* (an immanent, evolving whole composed of historically specific relations), but which also reinforces the hegemony of neoliberal reason by supposing that individuals, armed with the truth, can spontaneously aggregate into a "public" capable of shaping policy without politics — i.e., without engaging in coordinated struggles over the distribution of material power.

1.1 Ecocriticism, Immediacy, Neoliberalism

Questions of mediation are as central to climate change as they are to any other set of social relations. Hydrocarbon combustion, carbon dioxide emissions, rising planetary temperatures, shifting weather patterns: the material features of climate change are organized and given meaning by the media used to make them available to thought. Yet like nuclear warfare in the immediate postwar period, climate change has in recent years provoked anxiety about the "imaginative" or "representational" limits of human sense and media.[10]

Such concerns frequently appear in social scientific and humanistic writing on the Anthropocene — a new geological epoch marked by the human's detectable

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10 Nuclear and climate fears are closely related. As Joseph Masco notes in "Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis," Social Studies of Science 40, no. 1(2010): 7-40, a 2003 climate change report from the US Department of Defense asks military leaders to "imagine the unthinkable" as they prepare for the effects of planetary warming. The report quotes Herman Khan's 1960 injunction to imagine the "unthinkable" consequences of nuclear war during the protracted standoff with the Soviet Union. This phrasal correspondence suggests that Cold War-era nuclear logics endure and proliferate in contemporary invocations of the "unthinkable" or "unrepresentable." See also: Frances Ferguson, "The Nuclear Sublime," Diacritics 12, no. 2 (1984).

presence in the stratigraphic record.[11] For instance, in *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin write, "the idea of the Anthropocene is so immense it can be debilitating. It is hard to comprehend a geological epoch."[12] In her contribution to *Life Adrift*, Wendy Brown writes, "the Anthropocene poses the problem of humanity in a novel way: as the unprecedented effect of *the species* qua species on the planet on the one hand, and the near impossibility of apprehending this effect at the level of individual consciousness on the other."[13] Similarly, David Wallace-Wells writes in his best-selling non-fiction account of climate change, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, "When it comes to contemplating real-world warming dangers, we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination."[14] The Environmental Humanities, meanwhile, has grown increasingly "attuned to '[r]epresentational obstacles' and 'imaginative shortcomings' in the literary engagement with climate change."[15] "Imaginative failure" is also the central conceit of Amitav Ghosh's popular environmental humanities text, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). For Ghosh, global warming's *unthinkability* is its signal challenge: he writes that the question of "why today's culture finds it so hard to deal with climate

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11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Futures," Critical Inquiry 35, no. 2 (2009): 197-222.
12 Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 5.
13 Wendy Brown, "Climate Change, Democracy, and Crises of Humanism" in Life Adrift, ed. Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 28.
14 David Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming (Tim Duggan Books, 2019), 143.
15 Pieter Vermeulen, "Beauty That Must Die: Station Eleven, Climate Change Fiction, and the Life of Form," Studies in the Novel 50, no. 1 (2018): 9-25.

change… is perhaps the most important question *ever to confront culture* in the broadest sense."[16] Concerned, specifically, that literary fiction has failed to account for the size and complexity of climate change (thus relegating climate narratives to marginalized "genre fiction"), Ghosh calls for literary novels that can make the changing probabilities of a warming world easier to see, feel, and understand. The flip side of rising panic about imaginative failure is a growing call for, and celebration of, representations that stage climate change in immediate and visceral terms.[17]

Ghosh is hardly alone. Journalist Nathaniel Rich writes in his 2018 history of failed climate policy that early efforts to curb carbon emissions stalled not because global warming was hard to prove, but because it was hard to picture. Comparing climate change to the hole in the ozone layer, a problem more or less addressed by legislation, Rich writes that in the case of the ozone hole, an abstract, atmospheric problem had been reduced to the size of the human imagination. "The hole evoked a violent rending of the firmament, inviting deathly radiation." The "greenhouse effect," by contrast, evoked nothing so terrifying.[18] Climate doomsday scenarios have flooded U.S. popular culture since the late 1980s, circulating in fiction films like *The Day After*

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16 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 9. Ghosh continues: "let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination."
17 Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, and W. P. Małecki, "Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Texts and Empirical Methods," Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 27, no. 2 (2020): 327-336.
18 Nathaniel Rich, "Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change," The New York Times, Aug. 1, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/01/magazine/climate-change-losing-earth.html.

Tomorrow (2004) and non-fiction accounts like Wallace-Wells's bestseller. Yet even richly detailed visions of warming's effects tend to pitch themselves as antidotes to the climate's fundamental unrepresentability. "Even when we train our eyes on climate change, we are unable to comprehend its scope," Wallace-Wells declares. For him, the solution to incomprehension is fear. "It's worse, much worse, than you think," Wallace-Wells writes in his book, an inventory of unfortunate events, forgotten feedback loops, deadly data points on a curve whose upper bound is given to us as a litany of ways we might die. While Wallace-Wells claims not to privilege alarmism ("Any story that sticks is a good one..."), he happily plays Cassandra in the hopes that a sober inventory of global warming's coming horrors will provoke readers to action. If Wallace-Wells sounds hysterical, it's because "the facts are hysterical," he claims. "Fear can motivate, too," he insists.[19]

While such fearsome accounts have perhaps provoked alarm, they have stopped very little carbon from entering the atmosphere. The grim vision of catastrophe limned in these texts heralds, more than any specific future, the lack of serious alternatives to the status quo. So, while the widely circulating language of unrepresentability stages the epistemological conflict at the heart of impasse (we may know about climate change, but we cannot "comprehend it," as Wallace-Wells writes, or "feel it," as Lerner puts it, and so remain unmotivated to act), the revelatory gesture prompted by invocations of

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19 Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth, 28.

unrepresentability ultimately fails to resolve impasse. If anything, it heightens the tension.

Even so, the trope of unrepresentability remains a dominant way of mediating climate change in the U.S. cultural imaginary— of establishing climate change as a social fact, narrating its trajectory, and organizing its meanings. In the Environmental Humanities, especially writing on the Anthropocene, the trope of unrepresentability attaches to at least three arguments. The first is an argument about spatial and temporal scale: climate change is too massive, slow, spread out, and unpredictable to fit neatly into the cultural forms with which Euro-American societies typically think, speculate, deliberate, and plan for the future.[20] The second argument, closely related to the first, is more explicitly about the future: climate change poses an unprecedented and catastrophic threat to contemporary modes of socio-environmental organization, and its attendant cultures, such that imagining what a climatically altered future looks like proves difficult, if not impossible, with available cultural forms.[21] The third argument holds that the representational challenges posed by climate change do not simply index a mismatch between the objective properties of planetary weather and the formal conventions of particular cultural objects, but rather suggest that dominant habits of

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20 Nixon, Slow Violence, 2; Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Mertens and Craps, "Contemporary Fiction vs. the Challenge of Imagining the Timescale of Climate Change," 137.

21 Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," Mediations Journal 24, no. 2 (2009). Medovoi observes that the "trope of eco-catastrophe," which names an anxious view of the future, is an essential feature of ecocritical thinking across the decades.

thought are so shaped by prevailing forms of reason (specifically, techno-scientific and/or neoliberal forms of reason) that climate change's mediations are necessarily a kind of obfuscation.[22] In these three cases, which overlap in practice, the language of unrepresentability articulates both a descriptive and normative claim: the relationship between fossil fuel combustion, planetary warming, and macro-ecological change confronts concerned authors as an imaginative challenge that either must be overcome, via specific representational strategies, or which can never be overcome, because of a fundamental incompatibility between human cognition and what Timothy Morton calls "hyperobjects."[23] These positions roughly correspond to the two poles of Anthropocene discourse, which holds that the human is both god-like and completely powerless, author of planetary ecologies and yet completely dissolved in nonhuman networks which determine and exceed it.[24] Like the Anthropocene concept, the discourse of unrepresentability rehearses certain gestures of human mastery, while also compelling a retreat from mastery, and in some cases from responsibility.

On the one hand, this dialectic of retreat and mastery restages Romantic ideas about the "sublime" — that which exceeds human cognition or, as Kant believed, confirms the thinking subject's power to compress infinity into a tractable unity. On the other hand, the re-emergence of this dialectic in contemporary climate discourse is

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22 Yusoff and Gabrys, "Climate Change and the Imagination," 517.
23 Morton, Hyperobjects, 1.
24 As Wallace-Wells writes in The Uninhabitable Earth, the Anthropocene "counsels both human humility and human grandiosity, each drawn from the same perception of peril."

symptomatic of certain ways neoliberalism has reconfigured social and cultural life in the Global North. Nearly fifty years of neoliberal reforms, enforced by cultures of economism and investment, have narrowed the space of political action even as they have ostensibly invested the "individual" with unprecedented agency (responsibility) and freedom (choice). Like the Anthropocene concept, the trope of unrepresentability registers the neoliberal sense that politics (including the struggle to define and respond to climate change) operates on a scale that vastly exceeds the limited capacities of the atomized neoliberal subject, while at the same time holding out hope that this subject might yet be able to compress a complex political problem like climate change into a knowable, and therefore, manageable unity. Thinking about unrepresentability in this way helps to account for efforts by novelists like Lerner, and photographers like Edward Burtynsky, to represent the more-than-human scales of planetary ecology through works that stage their own aesthetic incompleteness.[25] In Lerner's novel, for instance, the invocation of medial insufficiency — the failure of particular media to make climate change present to sensation or thought — is precisely the technique used to make climate change thinkable. I contend that this technique is a distinctly neoliberal form of "action by disclosure" that has proximate roots in, first, the "testimonial style" of postwar U.S. environmentalism and, second, the hermeneutic practices of

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25 Edward Burtynsky, "The Anthropocene Project" (Edward Burtynsky, 2018). https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/the-anthropocene-project.

"ecocriticism," a dominant current within the Environmental Humanities from the early 1990s onward.[26] I devote the remainder of the chapter to situating the trope of unrepresentability in the overlapping histories of postwar environmentalism and academic ecocriticism, showing how each frames macro-ecological crisis as a consequence of representational failure to be countered by forms of representation that can make environmental changes *immediate* and, therefore, worthy of concern.

1.1.1 The Testimonial Style

The trope of unrepresentability's privileged place in contemporary climate discourse reflects, first, the legacy of the modern environmental movement in North America. Born in the 1950s as a protest against modernization's undesired byproducts (pesticide pollution, nuclear contamination, oil spills), and closely associated with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the postwar environmental movement operated principally through a politics of exposure — or, what Mark Dudzic calls "the testimonial style of politics" which holds "that just by speaking, bearing testimony, bearing truth to power, you start transforming the world."[27] The "testimonial style" came easily to postwar scholars and activists who, as members of a "professional-managerial class," found themselves at a remove from traditional levers of material power (the economy,

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26 Nixon, Slow Violence, 279.
27 Raymond Williams, "Socialism and Ecology," in Resources of Hope (New York and London: Verso, 1989); Mark Dudzic, "What Happened to the Labor Party?" Jacobin, Oct. 11, 2015, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/tony-mazzochi-mark-dudzic-us-labor-party-wto-nafta-globalization-democrats-union/.

military, etc.), and so tended to view education as a privileged mode of political intervention.[28] The testimonial style also seemed to work. Scientific evidence carried considerable weight in the knowledge-power formation supporting the Keynesian and technocratic postwar order, and environmentalists seemed to win legislative victories on the basis of scientific authority, including a ban on DDT and a suite of environmental rules supported by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s.[29] The mythology around *Silent Spring*, in particular, which credits the text with sparking the movement against DDT, emphasizes the political power of good storytelling backed up by strong scientific evidence.[30] The enduring view that *Silent Spring* "changed the course of history" by deftly using narrative to leverage the wisdom of "citizen science" against the violence of industrial excess is a key reason that environmental and climate movements have remained invested in the "testimonial style" in the 20th and 21st centuries.[31]

Though associated with the "left," this style has a distinctly liberal character. The conflation of truth and right underpins liberal political theory, which holds that, "given

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28 "By the 1960s, the ecology movement not only proposed a particular kind of politics against environmental destruction, but also a mode of critique which situates knowledge and science at the core of struggle. Today this is fundamentally how climate politics is presented — a battle between those who "believe" and those who "deny" the science," argues Matthew Huber, "Ecological Politics for the Working Class," Catalyst 3, no. 1 (Spring 2019).
29 Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, "Climate Change Denial: Sources, Actors and Strategies," in Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society, ed. Constance Lever-Tracy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 242. See also Boyer, By The Bomb's Early Light, 50; 60.
30 The credit given to Carson in this mythology is immense. For instance, historian Linda J. Lear writes, "There are very few books that can be said to have changed the course of history, but this was one of them." Lear, "Rachel Carson's Silent Spring," Environmental History Review 17, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 23-48.
31 Linda J. Lear, "Rachel Carson's Silent Spring," Environmental History Review (1993).

freedom of thought, speech, and inquiry, our common human reason leads us toward increasing agreement on truths and rejection of falsehoods."[32] This view of social advancement as a cycle of revelation and reform, where public reason selects for true ideas, borrows its ruling images from the capitalist market and the early modern laboratory: on the one hand, utterances enter a "marketplace of ideas," where the invisible hand of deliberative reason separates true from false; on the other hand, utterances are "experiments" whose social value is determined by their practical success in "democracy's laboratory."[33] Liberalism's equation of truth with progress presumes the existence of a space of public reason, or a "communicative sphere," that binds individuals into a "society" that can be governed through popular consent.[34] Liberalism's investment in the maxim that truth makes right is thus also an investment in social order. The postwar environmental movement was liberal both in the sense that it aimed to preserve modern social relations by minimizing the harms of production (Carson famously calls for more rational, "biological" forms of pest management at the end of *Silent Spring*), and in the sense that it assimilated liberalism's association of truth with social advancement as its key theory of change.[35]

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32 Gerald F. Gaus, Contemporary Theories of Liberalism: Public Reason as a Post-Enlightenment Project (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2003), 2.
33 Gaus, Contemporary Theories of Liberalism, 4.
34 Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
35 In his biography of Carson, Mark Hamilton Lytle writes that Carson "was convinced that the weight of her scientific evidence would defeat the skeptics"— i.e., scientists who downplayed the harms of pesticides. Lytle, The Gentle Subversive (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

By the 1970s, left critics had written off the environmental movement as a bourgeois pursuit. "Insofar as it can be considered a source of ideology, ecology is a matter that concerns the middle class," Hans-Magnus Enzensberger wrote in 1974.[36] There are at least three reasons to think this claim is true. First, as Enzensberger observes, the universalizing thrust of Northern environmental theory, which very often tells a neo-Malthusian story about "human beings" pushing beyond the limits of "spaceship Earth," elides the class relations distributing power, property, and responsibility in a globally integrated capitalist economy. Second, environmentalist prescriptions for man's "overshoot" of ecological limits tend to revolve around pulling back, giving up, or scaling down — an ethics of "renunciation and sacrifice" that not only speaks exclusively to a class wealthy enough to give something up, but also fits neatly with the austerity measures emerging among early neoliberal reforms.[37] Finally, liberal environmentalism, inheriting a "wilderness ethic" from nineteenth-century settler naturalists, casts the environment as something categorically different from everyday conditions of life and work — conditions relegated to the category of "occupational health and safety," and only re-integrated into Northern environmentalism by environmental justice campaigners in the 1980s.

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36 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," New Left Review 84, no. 1 (March/April 1974): 10.
37 E.F. Schumacher, Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973); Matthew T. Huber, "Ecological Politics for the Working Class," Catalyst 3, no. 1 (Spring 2019)

Aspirationally universal but actually provincial, the liberal environmental movement deliberately shied away not only from open class conflict, but also from any real contestation of polluters' entrenched power. This aligned the movement with the common sense of the postwar era, which held that "there were no classes, only contending interest groups," as historian Kim Moody puts it.[38] Environmentalism's early victories reflect the limitations of a depoliticized approach. After its founding, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) not only did little to address the structural causes of industrial pollution, but also enshrined in U.S. environmental law more or less conservationist principles that would put "the environment" in conflict with "jobs" in the years after it was passed — a conflict seized on by the U.S. right to drive a wedge between the labor and environmental movements. Meanwhile, the working-class environmental programs pushed by radical labor leaders like Cesar Chavez and Tony Mazzochi were not thought of as environmentalist at all, even though their victories — pesticide bans and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, to name only legislative accomplishments — put limits of capital's use and disposal of the environments where ordinary people live and work. Unlike these working-class movements, which contested for power well into the 1980s, liberal environmentalism had by the 1970s morphed into a middle-class lifestyle politics wholly compatible with

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38 Kim Moody, An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism (New York and London: Verso, 1988), 52.

the highly atomized forms of neoliberal subjectivity.[39] At the same time, capital countered whatever threat environmentalism still posed by normalizing "cost-benefit" analyses in environmental rulemaking (an approach that favored industry) and co-opting the aesthetics of conservationism in corporate branding (a trend that reached a kind of telos when British Petroleum renamed itself Beyond Petroleum after its 2010 Gulf oil spill).[40]

By the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, alarmism about nuclear power, pollution, and "limits to growth" had generally given way to regimes of environmental management that sought to make capitalism not only compatible with environmental protection, but also the only "realistic" solution to environmental harm. Even though the "testimonial style" had run into the hard limits of neoliberal policymaking, its emphasis on representation and the uncoordinated activity of market subjects ensured it would remain a privileged tactic of the U.S. environmental movement into the 1980s and 1990s, as history was ending, as Fukuyama put it, and climate change was becoming the central concern of environmentalists everywhere.[41]

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39 Ted Steinberg, "On The Origins of Green Liberalism," Radical History Review 107 (Spring 2010).
40 Joseph Conley, "Environmentalism Contained: A History of Corporate Responses to the New Environmentalism" (doctoral dissertation, Princeton, 2006), 144.
41 Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free Press, 1992).

1.1.2 Ecocriticism

At precisely this moment the sub-field of literary studies known as "ecocriticism" was consolidating in North America. Its influence within and beyond the North American academy helps to explain why climate change has passed into vernacular and academic cultural theory as a "crisis of imagination."[42] In their authoritative survey, Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."[43] Its practitioners generally agree that ecocriticism emerged in the early 1990s in response to two historical developments: the intensifying ecological crises of the 1970s and 1980s (including specific crises like acid rain and ozone depletion, as well as a more general condition of environmental degradation) on the one hand, and the so-called poststructuralist turn in the academic humanities, on the other.[44] For "first-wave" ecocritics like Lawrence Buell, ecological crisis and poststructuralist theory together constituted a "crisis of the imagination;" they

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42 My characterization of ecocriticism is indebted to Rob Nixon's account in Slow Violence, 255: "[F]irst-wave ecocriticism was skewed toward matters of genre and philosophy at the expense of environmental justice concerns, and showed scant interest in either the environmental social sciences or international environmental history."

43 Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii. See also Christopher Cokinos, "What is Ecocriticism?" in Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice, roundtable at the Western Literature Association Meeting, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 6, 1994.

44 Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The Ecocriticism Reader, xv; and Ursula K. Heise, "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies," American Literary History 20, no. 1-2 (2008): 381-404. Heise writes that ecocriticism's various strains "share a deep-seated suspicion of large-scale social structures such as the nation or modern society, an ambivalent perspective on abstract and intellectual forms of knowledge, and an emphasis on the body and sensory experience, as well as on small-scale communities and economies," 385.

threatened literature's representational authority, challenging the ability of literary texts to represent the natural world and, consequently, to cultivate in readers a place-based ethics attuned to nonhuman nature[45] Insisting on literature's representational authority was therefore a way to position ecocriticism as "fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy."[46]

Inheriting elements of both Romantic and postwar environmentalism, which understood preservationist attitudes to derive from the individual's encounter with nature, ecocriticism continues to celebrate direct contact with the nonhuman environment and to privilege objects that render the nonhuman world present to readers. In this way, ecocriticism's ethical project, positioned against the denaturalizing tendencies of modernization and later of postmodernity, blurs with its interpretive orientation: its method demands attention to the referential authority of language, as well as to that which resists representation, as a means of cultivating good "conduct" towards the nonhuman environment.[47] In works by Buell, Garrard, Glotfeltly and Fromm, and Ursula K. Heise — as well as in the 1994 Western Literature Association Conference's roundtable discussion, "Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice" — one

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45 Lawrence Buell, The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2; 111. See also: Greg Garrard, "Introduction," The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
46 Cokinos, "What is Ecocriticism?"
47 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 2; See Leo Marx, Machine in The Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

sees concern for nonhuman nature, place, wilderness, and conservation take the form of various efforts to overcome mediation: the gap installed between subject and world by textuality.[48] Such efforts include various forms of "ecomimesis" — especially "nature writing" and "narrative scholarship" — which aim not so much to represent the environment but "to feel it," as Lerner puts it.[49] The invocation of unrepresentability promises access to such feeling through the performative disavowal of mediation: to gesture at a text's inability to make the world sensorily immediate is to hold out the promise of closer, more authentic contact with the "real world" — the ostensible basis of environmental ethics.

Concerns about mediation and representability accompany ecocriticism as it matures in the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon argues that the unevenness, slowness, and geographic diffusion of environmental degradation thwart efforts to narrate it as a form of violence. Nixon draws on the intellectual and activist tradition of environmental justice to foreground the unspectacular violence visited upon the poor, and routes his analysis through first-wave ecocriticism's concern with representational failure. For

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48 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 6; Garrard, "Introduction;" Glotfeltly and Fromm, The Ecocriticism Reader; Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," PMLA 121, no. 2 (2005): 503-516; Cokinos, "What is Ecocriticism?"

49 Timothy Morton, Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 151; Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 6; Scott Slovic, "Narrative Scholarship as an American Contribution to Global Ecocriticism," Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology, ed. Hubert Zapf (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 315.

Nixon, "a major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects."[50] As his title suggests, Nixon focuses primarily on efforts to reduce, in narrative representations of environmental crisis, temporal displacement, by which he means the time lapse between violence's cause (toxic waste dumping, say) and its effects (cancer). Quoting George Perkins Marsh, Nixon observes that "the power most important to cultivate, and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him" — a power which certain "writer-activists" enjoy.[51] Their "narrative imaginings… may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen."[52] Like many environmental scholars concerned with justice, Nixon is invested in historicizing the differential violence meted out by extractivism, especially in its settler colonial and neo-imperial guises. And yet he also defaults to the vocabulary of sight and visibility — a vocabulary that imports early modern colonial associations of sight with mastery — to develop diagnostic categories that compel *making visible* as an ethical practice.[53] "How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and

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50 Nixon, Slow Violence, 3.
51 Ibid., 14.
52 Ibid., 15.
53 Early modern scientific investigation and European colonization, each advanced as part of an expansionary project, privileged sight as a condition of knowledge and power — an idealist association that persists in Euro-American culture, including in the academic humanities. See: Denise Albanese, New Science, New World (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Carolyn Merchant, Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

warrant political intervention…," Nixon asks.[54] Nixon's answer, which is both emblematic of and more carefully developed than much of ecocritical scholarship that precedes his work, goes something like this: if we can represent environmental violence better — make its spectral presence visible, solid, fleshy, present, urgent — we might be able to convince those who are not yet convinced of its seriousness that something ought to be done. Nixon describes this work as "action by disclosure."[55]

Nixon's thematic framework — geographical and temporal dislocation, the violence of environmental crises, the representational difficulties facing writers concerned with environmental justice, "action by disclosure" — informs contemporary attempts to theorize literature's relationship to climate change. Amitav Ghosh's theory of "the great derangement" — the idea that literary novels have failed to provide adequate representations of global warming's effects, which I take up in the second chapter — is perhaps the best-known of these attempts.[56] But as literary theorist Pieter Vermeulen writes, "it is a commonplace that climate change constitutes a formal challenge to the customary rhythms, patterns, and scales of the novel."[57] Rather than suggest that climate change is, in a sense, determined by its literary and other mediations, ecocritical literary scholars tend to presume that the objective features of planetary warming exceed the representational capacities of available literary forms.

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54 Nixon, Slow Violence, 3.
55 Nixon, Slow Violence, 279.
56 Ghosh, The Great Derangement.
57 Vermeulen, "Beauty That Must Die: Station Eleven, Climate Change Fiction, and the Life of Form," 9.

"When climate change is understood, with Timothy Morton, as a hyperobject, it is defined as something that eschews representation, and that is intimated precisely in the breakdown of literary form," Vermeulen writes.[58] The novel's failure to represent climate change is, in other words, precisely what conjures it up. And yet, Vermeulen continues, "Planetary change remains fundamentally unrepresentable, and… literature must first of all register the insufficiency of traditional modes of expression and representation."[59] Vermeulen's insistence that literature should emphasize its inability to represent "planetary change" underscores the degree to which the trope of "medial insufficiency," or "representational failure," continues to organize literary theoretical writing on environmental crisis, especially climate change.

To make sense of this trend, it helps to flesh out one of ecocriticism's founding gestures: the rejection of poststructuralism.[60] Poststructuralism is of course a heterogeneous and complex intellectual tradition, and while early ecocritics do not always provide uniform definitions of poststructuralist theory, they tend to position their work against any theoretical emphasis on the determinations of language, culture, discourse, and images over the force of material things, physical systems, and immediate experience. Summarizing this position, Christopher Cokinos writes that

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58 Vermeulen, "Beauty That Must Die: Station Eleven, Climate Change Fiction, and the Life of Form," 9.
59 Vermeulen, "Beauty That Must Die: Station Eleven, Climate Change Fiction, and the Life of Form," 9.
60 Heise, "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies," 384. Heise writes, "a great deal of first-wave ecocritical work focused either on historical or on textual analyses so as to foreground the importance of nature-oriented writing for the American literary canon and the urgency of ecological issues without any explicit theoretical framing, or with clear resistance to poststructuralism."

"[e]cocriticism necessarily entails a shift away from approaches that strictly privilege language and the difficulty of referentiality."[61] Responding to what Jacques Derrida calls the loss of the "transcendental signified," or the reduction of language to signification without referent, ecocritics challenge the idea that language does not enjoy a stable relationship to things in the world, or that truth claims are always called into question by the system of knowledge used to make them.[62] Such ideas, which advance a suspicion of referentiality, pose a threat to both literary criticism and environmental ethics because they call the categories of "nature," "world," and "environment" into question. "To posit a disjunction between text and world is both an indispensable starting point for mature literary understanding *and* a move that tends to efface the world," Buell writes in *The Environmental Imagination*, adding that such an effacement risks "marginaliz[ing] literature's referential dimension" and ejecting "the world" from the sphere of ethical concern.[63]

This view trafficked well beyond the academy. In this 1989 book *The End of Nature,* climate writer Bill McKibben compares the time-delayed effects of historic carbon emissions to "hanging Rembrandts next to Warhols," aligning postmodern aesthetics (pastiche, ahistoricity, artificiality) with modernity's colonization of nature:

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61 Cokinos, "What is Ecocriticism?"
62 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 114.
63 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 5, 86, 102. Buell takes particular aim at strong constructionist theories, writing that "we have derived our critical skepticism or disdain for the notion that literature does or can represent physical reality from the idea of writing as a construct," which undercuts the referential authority of texts which serve as evidentiary ground for environmental ethics, 85.

"By changing the weather, we make every spot on Earth man-made and artificial."[64] Fleshing out this sort of argument, Ursula K. Heise observes that poststructuralism, "premised on an overarching project of denaturalization," places discussions of nature off limits, or else figures "'the natural' as an object of suspicion, discouraging ethical projects rooted in attachments to 'nature' or 'place.'"[65] Transposing both Romantic and postwar anxieties about the effects of industrial development to the late-twentieth century, Heise writes that "environmentalism and ecocriticism aim their critique of modernity as its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled 'progress."[66] Against such progress, ecocriticism celebrates the local as a site of resistance to the dematerializing tendencies of postmodernity.[67] Like nineteenth-century pastoral literary cultures studied by Leo Marx, contemporary U.S. nature writing and ecocriticism look to nature as a refuge from the encroachments of post-industrial societies as well as poststructuralist theories that reduce world to text.

What links the targets of ecocriticism's critique, in Heise's account, is a preference for the human — and therefore, the social or cultural — over the natural, which is defined negatively, as that which resists human interference. This preference

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64 McKibben, End of Nature, 68, 58.
65 Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," 505.
66 Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," 507.
67 Heise, "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies," 383.

often looks like a critique of "anthropocentrism," which endures in Environmental Humanities scholarship under the rubrics of "speculative realism" and "New Materialism."[68] In *Bodily Natures*, for instance, Stacy Alaimo observes "a troubling parallel between the immateriality of contemporary social theory and a widespread, popular disregard for nonhuman" — a diagnosis that could issue from any number of ecocritical accounts from the early 1990s to the present.[69] In the case of New Materialism, the "immateriality" of social theory applies also to historical materialism, which is seen as imposing anthropocentric and teleological schema onto materials that are, according to New Materialists, self-organizing and aleatory.[70] Against the anthropocentric grain, these theories seek to legitimize the nonhuman as an object of literary concern and analysis, as well as a ground of aesthetic and ethical judgment.[71] If poststructuralist theory elevates the suspicion of nature to a kind of critical commonsense, ecocriticism expresses a countervailing desire for *belief and sincerity,* for the closure of the distance instituted by critical suspicion and irony. Ecocriticism's "ultimate interest is the remediation of humankind's alienation from the natural world," Buell writes.[72] Buell's word choice is telling: closing the gap between the human and the natural is understood

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68 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 7.
69 Stacy Alaimo, Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.
70 Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," Signs 28, no. 3 (2003): 801-831; 818.
71 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 7.
72 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 8.

to be a problem of mediation, of establishing appropriate channels of contact. In both its hermeneutic and ethical dimensions, ecocriticism aims to reduce the distance between the body and environment, text and world in order to institute a place-based ethics of stewardship and care — to "remediate" the human's estrangement from nature. Such remediation is also a kind of re-naturalization, insofar as the privileged vectors of remediation are often works of "nature writing."[73]

Stylistically, ecocritics and nature writers favor what Timothy Morton calls "ecomimesis" or "ambient poetics" — a kind of ekphrastic writing that seeks to erase the distinction between subject and object to manifest an unmediated relationship with nonhuman nature.[74] Ecomimesis, Morton writes, "wants to go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether," a desire informed by the eco-ethical presumption that "it would be better for the reader to experience [reality] directly rather than just read about it."[75] While ecocriticism coheres around shared themes more than shared methods, early theorists sought to formalize the ekphrastic method with the concept of "narrative scholarship" — a method of analysis and presentation that resists formal argumentation

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73 Ralph W. Black, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ecocriticism," in Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice, roundtable at the Western Literature Association Meeting, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 6, 1994. It is worth noting that second-wave ecocritics, like Joni Adamson, American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), have mounted a robust critique of ecocriticism's canon for privileging the work of white men, often capitalists and colonists, sometimes eugenicists and ethno-nationalists.
74 Morton, Ecology without Nature, 151.
75 Morton, Ecology without Nature, 31; 30.

and emphasizes "experience" over exegesis.[76] Though ecocriticism has diversified considerably, critiqued and complicated by succeeding generations of theorists, narrative scholarship remains a privileged method. In April, 2019, the National Humanities Center hosted a conference titled "Beyond Despair: Theory and Practice in Environmental Humanities," where writer and photographer Subhankar Banerjee delivered the keynote lecture.[77] Banerjee, well-known for his environmental activism, described the moment his commitment to environmental remediation became absolute: he encountered a dead bird outside his home in New Mexico, picked it up, and allowed himself to experience the tragedy of a single bird's death. For Banerjee, it is this moment of unmediated, private contact with the nonhuman world — the encounter that looses unprocessed affects: grief, despair, anger, commitment — which inaugurates environmental ethics. After holding the dead bird, Banerjee takes its photograph, composing an image on the model of nineteenth-century American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder's "Dead Bird."[78] In turning the immediacy of direct contact into an aesthetic object, Banerjee not only reminds us that environmental humanism inherits many of its aesthetic forms from various nineteenth-century naturalisms, but also rehearses the disavowal of mediation via mediation that lies at the heart of early

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76 Scott Slovic, "Narrative Scholarship as an American Contribution to Global Ecocriticism," Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology, ed. Hubert Zapf (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 315.
77 Banerjee, "Building Bridges and Connecting Dots: Apprehending Multi-species Futures."
78 Albert Pinkham Ryder, "Dead Bird" (The Phillips Collection, 1890s).

ecocriticism's method: a brief moment of private contact quickly becomes a work of art, to see and to study.

The disavowal of mediation registers the failure of available cultural forms to establish contact between the subject and "the environment" in a way that might remediate nature's erasure by society — either physically, by pollution and other forms of degradation, or socio-culturally, by the poststructuralist tendency to collapse the nature into the social. Naming the unrepresentable is thus a way of mediating the nonhuman world; it is the first step in an aesthetic process that culminates in texts, like Lerner's novel or Banerjee's photograph, that disavow their own mediacy as a form of ethical practice. Indeed, taking Banerjee's narrative as a case study, it seems that unrepresentability does not name an enduring condition of knowledge, but rather a challenge to be overcome through specific practices of remediation. Misgivings about mediation betray, paradoxically, faith in the power of certain cultural forms to reduce the distance between text and world to the point of near-total collapse. Such misgivings are necessary; they serve as a provocation and pretext for projects of renaturalization.

Banerjee's story contains another lesson: committed to an ethics of encounter, yet dependent on specific aesthetic forms to establish contact, ecocriticism's practice obscures the mediations that structure ostensibly immediate experience — the social relations that give form to perception and thought. In this sense, ecocriticism shares

features with the "post-critique" school of contemporary literary theory.[79] Exemplified by the theory of "surface reading" elaborated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, post-critical reading involves trading a "hermeneutics of suspicion" for a more immediate attention to a text as it appears.[80] While the view that criticism can, or should, do more than catalogue the ways a text is ideologically captured is widely shared (Fredric Jameson, for instance, calls for a "positive hermeneutic" that can tease out utopian impulses lurking with even the most ideological texts), treating texts as transparent bearers of meaning disavows the historicity of form.[81] It denies, in other words, the fundamental critical insight that socially constituted forms condition how words, images, and narratives hang together, mistaking immediacy for authenticity. As Marxist theorist György Lukács writes, "thought which begins in immediacy can only lead to abstraction."[82] Since one's immediate experience of the world is already *informed* by the social relations which present experience to thought, paying attention only to the content of experience — the dead bird, for instance — configures the world as a set of abstract images divorced from the relations that define them. Abstract images are precisely what ecocritics often find as they pursue contact through forms of simulated

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79 See Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).
80 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," Representations 108, no. 1 (2009): 1-21.
81 Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 286.
82 György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in Aesthetics and Politics (New York and London: Verso, 2010), 38.

immediacy — i.e., descriptions that seek to overcome medial insufficiency via *ekphrasis*. Consider "the grove of second-growth pine trees that sway at this moment of writing, with their blue-yellow-green five-needle clusters above spiky circles of atrophied lower limbs," Buell writes in *The Environmental Imagination*, stressing the inadequacy of his "writing practice" compared to the (simulated) immediacy of the pine forest.[83] Jane Bennett, whose version of New Materialism inherits ecocriticism's preference for immediacy, offers a similar inventory of her surroundings in *Vibrant Matter*: "Glove. pollen. rat. cap. stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing... objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics."[84] Both descriptions are concrete, yet they mistake concreteness for reality. In Marxian terms, these critics encounter a fetish: an object's manifest appearance is mistaken for its actual essence, abstracted from its social histories of production.[85]

Bennett takes the logic of fetishism further, arguing that objects she encounters exhibit a "thing-power" that cannot be accounted for by their social relations.[86] Recall that, for Marx, capital mystifies capitalist social relations by investing the products of

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83 Quoted in Morton, Ecology without Nature, 33.
84 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4-5.
85 See Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), 163.
86 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 6.

social labor with the appearance of objective power, giving them a "mystical character."[87] Bennett's "thing-power" exhibits precisely this sort of mystical character. Before Bennett arrives at "thing-power," however, she must establish the insufficiency of mediation — language's inability to fully capture realities "never entirely exhausted by their semiotics" — in order to claim privileged access to the Real.[88] Here and elsewhere, the trope of *unrepresentability* is precisely what demands immediate forms of aesthetic contact: the diagnosis of medial insufficiency compels a search for the Real beyond what is made available by socially constituted cultural forms. For Banerjee, Buell, and Bennett, this search begins and ends with appearance: "Dead Bird," "blue-yellow-green five-needle clusters," "[g]love. pollen. rat. cap. stick." Such images divorce phenomena from their social relations, encouraging a kind of abstraction, or fetishism.

Suspicion of mediation, then, should be understood not as a rejection of all forms of textuality, but rather as a disavowal of the systematic mediations of history: the material arrangements, social conventions, and forms of imagination that constitute social groups and define their role in society's reproduction. Post-critical theorists Best and Marcus explicitly disavow reading for such "political" determinations, aligning their "surface reading" practice with a "political realism" that accepts the minimal agency of the critic.[89] Ecocriticism's efforts to overcome mediation — understood to

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87 Marx, Capital Volume 1, 164.
88 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 5.
89 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," 15.

mean the historically determined cultural forms that structure people's relationship to experience — likewise amount to a repudiation of systematic analyses of society, class, and history. Such a repudiation appears clearly in New Materialist work like Bennett's, much of which boils down to the claim that matter is self-organizing and self-signifying — i.e., *not* historically determined. Karen Barad, whose work on "agential realism" is foundational to this tradition, writes:

> The primary ontological units are not 'things' but… dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations. And the primary semantic units are not "words" but material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted… Matter, like meaning... is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories.[90]

Materiality and intelligibility are mutually produced and implied in an autonomous process of material self-organization, Barad suggests. On this view, theories about how and why matter is organized and signified would seem to be prospectively ruled out, since matter's properties and meanings are coterminous and resist, or exceed, theorization. Such a view elides the ways matter carries meanings impressed upon it by its historical and enduring social conditions of production, distribution, and use. That these meanings are not immediately apparent is a consequence precisely of fetishism — the abstraction of objects from their relations, a constitutive feature of capitalist production — and is reason neither to impute autonomous meaning to things, nor to

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90 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," 818.

deny their meaningfulness altogether. It is, rather, a call to reconstitute the social relations that give these objects meaning, a hermeneutic procedure that is also a political act.

1.2 Naive Realism and the Hegemony of Neoliberal Reason

The argument so far is that the trope of unrepresentability circulating in U.S. climate discourse, adapted from the rhetorical tactics of postwar environmentalism and privileged by literary ecocritics, encourages a naive realism that underestimates the degree to which ostensibly "natural environments" are made and mediated by social forces and, in doing so, conceives environmental ethics in terms of "remediation:" shrinking the gap between subject and world. Even through ecocriticism's second wave, characterized by a greater concern for social justice, ecocritics tends to view environmental ethics as originating in the personal encounter with nature, or else in ekphrastic representations of nature that simulate encounter, and which provoke ethical response.[91] Yet lacking a theory of collective action — a mechanism for turning ethical response into social change — environmental ethics inevitably routes itself through available methods of political intervention. Such methods are highly marketized in the contemporary period, as Wendy Brown observes, because several decades of neoliberal reforms have not only narrowed the space of political action, but also recast the political

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91 As Medovoi writes in "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," "If ecocriticism can inculcate an appreciation for the intrinsic value of the environment, its transformation of people's 'hearts and minds' promises to liberate nature from our degradation of it," 130.

subject as an economic agent.[92] "Neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities," Brown writes, "and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*."[93] Market actors relate to the social through market activities — buying, selling, investing — or through political processes, like elections, that resemble market activity.[94] Environmental writers thus confront with all neoliberalized subjects, institutions, and associational groups the difficulty of mounting a properly political, meaning collective, challenge to the organization of resources and power responsible for planetary warming and its uneven effects, precisely because the neoliberal imaginary recodes political agency in terms of individual action or action undertaken by an unstructured, aggregate "we."[95] This is the hegemony of "neoliberal reason."[96]

The hegemony of neoliberal reason in contemporary life, work, politics, and academic study registers the ongoing privatization of resources — including bodies,

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92 Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
93 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 31.
94 Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Eva Cherniavsky, Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy (New York: NYU Press, 2017).
95Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2015); Matthew T. Huber, Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). In Anthropocene discourse, this "'we" is the "species." Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," The Anthropocene Review 1, no. 1 (2014).
96 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 170. The contract, which enshrines relations of exchange, is the only relationship possible in a community that shares nothing in common.

knowledges, and capacities — once held in common.[97] While privatization has taken many forms — from the English enclosures to the parceling of online activity onto marketized "platforms" — it has always involved expropriating the commons and, consequently, the possibility of community as such.[98] Because "the commons, which once were considered the basis of the concept of the public, are expropriated for private use... the public is thus dissolved, privatised, even as a concept," Hardt and Negri write.[99] In the postwar U.S., as Matthew Huber has shown, the geography of the postwar city — defined by the car-centered suburb and high levels of private consumption fed by a postwar oil glut — cemented a culture of privatism among normative (white, hetero, home-owning) citizens that, by the oil shocks of the 1970s, supplied crucial ideological ballast for the neoliberal reforms of the Reagan era.[100] Those reforms traded a Keynesian commitment to social welfare for a *laissez-faire* tolerance of corporate asset stripping that, as Jennifer Wenzel argues, closely matches the "resource logic/aesthetic" of fossil fuel extraction, which treats everything that cannot be profitably extracted as "overburden."[101] The ongoing crisis of climate change can be understood partly as a

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97 For a summary of Marxist analyses of capitalism's developmental tendencies, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Hardt and Negri describe "a continuous movement throughout the modern period to privatize public property," 300.
98 Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (Autonomedia, 2004); Adam Arvidsson and Elanor Colleoni, "Value in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," The Information Society 28, no. 3 (2012): 135-150.
99 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 301.
100 Huber, Lifeblood, 108.
101 Jennifer Wenzel, "Afterword: Improvement and Overburden" in Postmodern Culture, eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O'Driscoll, and Mark Simpson, 26, no. 2 (January 2016): unpaginated.

consequence of the expropriation of the commons across the modern and postmodern periods: the private appropriation of mineral resources, water, and other necessities for life, coupled with the wasting of everything deemed "overburden," have contributed significantly to planetary warming and its unevenly distributed effects.[102] These crises have also, consequently, fragmented publics and destroyed the "common wealth" on which communities ground themselves materially and culturally, and from which they draw collective power. Environmental ethics, as articulated by certain ecocritical scholars and environmental movements, registers the privatizing tendency of capitalist development, insofar as it simultaneously presumes and legislates the fragmentation of the commons, and communities, into so many private properties and subjects. In the same way that an aesthetic preference for *immediacy* leaves unexamined the social relations that mediate experience, a politics which begins in personal ethics, but which articulates no theory of collective intervention, is forced to rely on ready-to-hand forms of political mediation to move from the individual to the general, from personal belief to social transformation. For the same reason that ecocriticism conceives representation as *mimesis* (because it is always "better… to experience [reality] directly,"), mainstream climate movements tend to conceive collective action through the mediating structures of neoliberal modernity: the market and the representative structures of the state, which

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102 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming (New York and London: Verso, 2016), 22.

alchemize individual preference into a simulation of political will. Indeed, a number of the Environmental Humanities's core philosophical concepts — "assemblage," (Latour/Bennett), "entanglement" (Barad), and "trans-corporeality" (Alaimo) — articulate a theory of scale that corresponds, formally, to the theory of scale underpinning neoliberal political theory: the particular relates to the general through a mystified process of self-organization that mirrors the work of Smith's "invisible hand."[103] Under the sign of matter's self-organization, such theories understand the molecular to become molar through a spontaneous leap of scale, just as individual consumer, investor, and voter preferences sum to a force capable of adjusting material relations, even though such preferences are not conscious of themselves as a material force. In lieu of "consciousness" — which, in the Marxian tradition, names a class's recognition of itself as a historical agent — ecocritical analyses substitute "disclosure," "conduct," and "choice" as key vectors of political change.

This situation expresses a paradox: an environmental ethics based on unmediated contact with nonhuman nature props up a political theory based on a mediate relationship to power — that is, political intervention mediated by the market or marketized procedures of representative democracy. This paradox intensifies impasse. Planetary warming articulates a collective problem in a moment when

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103 Bennet, Vibrant Matter, 21; Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity;" Alaimo, Bodily Natures, 10.

collective responses are constitutively ruled out by the hegemony of neoliberal reason and the material organization of neoliberal fossil capitalism. When authors describe a "crisis of the imagination," they are perhaps unintentionally pointing to this fact: the lack of a collective subject capable of sharing in a collective imagination and collective politics — the lack, in other words, of a class conscious of itself as a class. In the absence of a collective subject, the only available response to planetary warming is one that begins from an individual effort to make the temporally, geographically, and causally distributed problem of climate change somehow tractable. This helps to explain why "action by disclosure" is a privileged mode of political intervention for mainstream climate movements, as well as why such intervention invariably stalls out.[104] Since immediate experience is closely associated with ethical practice, claims of medial insufficiency tend to express anxiety about the impossibility of environmental ethics, which is itself figured according to a liberal ethics of revelation and reform, or else a neoliberal ethics of personal choice. Unrepresentability is thus a privileged trope because it registers a crucial contradiction: as a hermeneutic and ethical practice, neither nature writing nor ecocriticism nor contemporary climate alarmism can effectively confront the kinds of problems they emerge in response to — namely, macro-ecological change stemming from the fossil-fueled modes of accumulation on which modernity's

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104 For an account of the limitations of "disclosure" as a vector for climate politics, see Imre Szeman, "Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries," Journal of American Studies 46, no. 2 (2012): 423-439.

basic social and cultural forms depend. The trope of unrepresentability registers this impasse, which emerges when an ethical orientation confronts a political problem, and a hermeneutics of immediacy confronts a mediate relation —namely, fossil capital.

1.3 Interlude: Easier to Imagine the End of the World than the End of Cheap Labor

The trope of representational failure remains central to the Environmental Humanities as its practitioners claim relevance for their work in an era of rapid and dramatic shifts in the planet's climate. While scholars invoke representational failure in response to climate change's spatial and temporal scale, as I noted in the first chapter, they also rehearse their anxiety in a prophetic register: ecological catastrophe is coming, and our cultural forms block it from view. Such anxiety features centrally in ecocritical analysis. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell writes that ecological crises of the 1980s portend future catastrophes that can only be prevented by making catastrophe present to thought. For Buell, environmentalism's privileged narrative strategy is thus the apocalyptic prophecy, which holds out the impossibility of imagining future catastrophe as a provocation to, and pretext for, action in the present.[105] Declarations of impending disaster, invisible to all but the ecological Cassandras, organize the writings of Rachel Carson, M. King Hubbard, Paul Ehrlich, Bill McKibben, Al Gore, and numerous others, and are today commonplace as the brute facts of planetary warming become impossible

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105 Buell, The Environmental Imagination, 285.

to ignore. For Leerom Medovoi, "eco-catastrophe" is to be understood not as one among many stories about "the environment," which is also a contested site of discursive and political practice, but rather as a trope that emerges during crises of capital accumulation to signal the need for a new regime of "biopolitical" management — that is, new ways of organizing the relationship between "populations" and "environments" to guarantee the reproduction of labor power, the availability of production inputs, and the accumulation of surplus value into the future.[106] Intimations of apocalypse, especially when they manifest as concern about media's inadequacies, register anxiety about capital's productivity under new environmental conditions, Medovoi argues. To predict the annihilation of the biosphere is to say that the environmental conditions that make "populations" healthy and productive — clean air and water, decent food to eat, shelter, mobility, etc. — are imperiled. When the health of the population is imperiled, so too are the stores of labor power from which capital draws surplus value.

Medovoi helpfully observes that apocalyptic predictions register a threat to accumulation. Yet he does not speculate about what, precisely, that threat might look like today. If the trope of eco-catastrophe declares the unrepresentability of impending environmental cataclysm to signal the need for a new biopolitical regime capable of reproducing labor power under changed environmental conditions, then key questions become: How is labor power reproduced in today's capitalist societies? What features of

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106 Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," 125.

contemporary biopolitical management does the trope of eco-catastrophe suggest may be imperiled by climate change? What responses emerge to address this ostensible threat?

In *Undoing the Demos*, Brown inventories the neoliberal reforms that have produced the social arrangements of today's leading capitalist nations: "deregulation of industries and capital flows"; a shrinking welfare state; "privatized and outsourced public goods;" regressive taxes; wealth redistribution to the rich; "the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise;" and "the financialization of everything."[107] To this list we might add offshoring, the flexibilization and casualization of labor, as well as the economization of subjectivity, which Brown sorts under the heading "neoliberal reason."[108] Taken together, these reforms have exposed the environmental commons to enclosure and toxification. They have also made workers increasingly responsible for the reproduction of their labor power as the welfare state unravels, work becomes more precarious, environmental conditions deteriorate, and basic requirements of life are commodified. For Marxist "crisis theorists," neoliberal reforms must be seen as responses to *realization crises* which strand capital with excess capacity as profit rates decline.[109] Historically, capitalists have overcome realization

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107 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 70.
108 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 10. See also David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
109 See Robert Brenner, The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005 (London: Verso, 2006).

crises by using more energy (for instance, by increasing relative surplus value through automation), as Andreas Malm has shown.[110] Specifically, Malm observes that capitalism develops in "waves," with upswings and downswings. Each "upswing" corresponds to intensifying energy use, often as a means of controlling labor and driving down wages. To make use of spatial and temporal "fixes" like offshoring and automation, which weaken labor's ability to demand a higher share of surplus value, capital needs machines, planes, ships, trucks, computers, etc. Consequently, upswings produce a certain amount of "carbon lock-in:" capital invests in fossil infrastructures, "technomass," that cannot easily be cleared away, as well as in procedures of direct production and social reproduction that rely on increasing quantities of fossil fuel.[111]

"Carbon lock-in" also appears in the sphere of social reproduction: the uncompensated work people do to reproduce themselves and others as workers. In the context of neoliberal policy regimes, carbon lock-in in the sphere of social reproduction is a consequence of lock-in elsewhere in the system. Neoliberal reforms not only increase greenhouse gas emissions (by encouraging the adoption of various fossil-fueled technologies to decrease the turnover time of capital), but also demand the rollback of social and environmental protections, including efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The result is that workers' socio-natural environments are increasingly hostile to

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110 Andreas Malm, "Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital," Mediations 31, no. 2 (2018): 17-40.
111 Malm, "Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital," 20.

life. To make hostile spaces habitable, workers (a category that is always internally divided by "real abstractions" like race and gender) must spend a higher proportion of their wages on commodities designed to regulate their environments: air conditioning and heat, disaster insurance, healthcare, and drinking water, in some cases.[112] Workers must also buy or rent cars, mobile phones, internet access, and airline tickets to remain reasonably healthy, travel to and from work, and maintain fragmented kinship networks.[113] While not all forms of social reproduction require intensive energy use, the kinds of reforms pursued by capital under neoliberalism often force workers to rely on energy-intensive technologies and infrastructures to reproduce themselves as habitable environments, labor protections, and public goods and services simultaneously vanish.[114] The growing reliance on fossil-fueled strategies of individualized social reproduction under conditions of environmental instability suggests that capital seeks to overcome barriers that capital has itself erected by increasing workers', and therefore the overall system's, dependence on fossil fuels. Petrocultures scholars describe situations

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112 See, for instance, Somini Sengupta, "Black Environmentalists Talk About Climate and Anti-Racism," New York Times, June 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/climate/black-environmentalists-talk-about-climate-andanti-racism.html.

113 The idea that fossil fuels are essential for social reproduction in the Global North — at the level not only of material practice, but also of collective self-knowledge and subject formation via the mediations of a hegemonic culture — is more or less axiomatic in "petrocultures" research. Fossil fuels power domestic labor saving technologies, communications systems that support social bonds, defenses against climatic variability, and technologies that allow labor to adapt to increasingly mobile and flexible production regimes (e.g., cars and highways), while shaping peoples' desires, expectations, and values. Imre Szeman and Petrocultures Research Group, After Oil (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2016).

114 See Nina Power, "Decapitalism, Left Scarcity, and the State," Fillip 20 (2015).

like these as "energy deepening" — a deadly feedback loop of fossil fuel combustion and environmental unraveling — that cements a "fossil hegemony."[115]

Put another way, fossil fuels enable the reproduction of labor power in the neoliberal period. For this reason, planetary warming poses a "biopolitical" threat — i.e., it threatens the availability of labor power — not only because it makes environments less habitable, but also because it demands a transition away from an essential input of labor power reproduction: fossil fuels. If climate change means the end of intensifying fossil fuel use, then perhaps contemporary invocations of "eco-catastrophe" signal the end of an "accumulation regime" that relies on the accelerating use of fossil fuels to overcome the barriers to labor power reproduction partly created by those very fuels. In other words, perhaps the trope of eco-catastrophe mediates climate change as a cascading crisis of social reproduction and capital accumulation.

I flesh out this hypothesis by looking more closely at the work of Amitav Ghosh, who argues in *The Great Derangement* that the tidy, predictable worlds of literary fiction no longer match the "real worlds" of our climatically altered present, amounting to an imaginative deficit that is also a political failure. I suggest that, whether or not the real world is ever actually regularized, its regularization in the literary novel suggests that a certain kind of environmental stability — a certain sense of place as setting — remains an essential cultural attachment of fossil capitalist, or petromodern, social relations. For

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115 Szeman and Petrocultures, After Oil, 18.

Ghosh, what constitutes an impasse, a cultural and imaginative block, is not so much the dawning awareness that climate change destabilizes previously regularized settings, but rather that the conditions of environmental regularization, as a material and cultural practice, are becoming impossible to sustain in a moment of energy transition, deliberate or forced.

2. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and the Problem of Impasse

"The bourgeoisie can conceive of its own imminent collapse only as the end of the world."

—Hans Magnus Enzensberger[1]

The previous chapter treated accounts of "imaginative failure" symptomatically, as indications of the limits of neoliberal agency, on the one hand, and anxiety about the reproduction of labor power, on the other. But what if we were to take accounts of imaginative crisis seriously? What is it that cannot be imagined? And what are the stakes of imaginative failure? Against the fetishism of ecocriticism's diagnoses, I begin from the "petrocultures" premise that energy, and specifically fossil energy, names a taken-for-granted condition of modern social and cultural organization.[2] Like the commodity in Marx's account, fossil energy obscures the histories and social relations that define its substance, in part by substituting surface appearance — "the dark black, inky liquid that we sometimes encounter as oil" — for the thing itself.[3] Fossil fuels thus articulate a different problem of "unrepresentability," one that is not about hiding phenomena from view, but rather about abstracting phenomena from the relationships that give them meaning and force. Might ecocritical and popular accounts of media's

1 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," New Left Review 84, no. 1 (March/April 1974): 17.
2 Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, eds., Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).
3 Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, "Introduction to Energy Humanities," in Energy Humanities: An Anthology, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,) 2017, 7.

inadequacy in the face of climate change point, however obliquely, to this other form of unrepresentability? In this chapter, I look more closely at an influential account of global warming's imaginative pressures — Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) — to ask if what is unthinkable might be the end of cheap, energy-dense fossil fuels.[4] And if so, so what?

To get a better handle on the relationship between representation and reality (an endlessly complex and contested subject), I begin from the historical materialist observation that the dominant social relations of a given period distribute the sensible in a particular way.[5] Speaking in the most general terms, the social relations of the modern period take their shape from the mode of production tendentially dominant since the early-nineteenth century: industrial, or "fossil," capitalism. Following Andreas Malm and Cara Daggett, I define fossil capitalism as a self-expanding, class-based system for organizing production, circulation, distribution, waste, and social reproduction in which owners of capital rely on fossil energy (coal, oil, gas, etc.) to extract surplus value from workers and consolidate political power as a class.[6] As a mode of production, fossil capitalism produces not only much of the physical world — commodities, bodies, spaces

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4 Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
5 Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, trans. and ed. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 152.
6 Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming, (New York and London: Verso, 2016); Malm, "Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital," Mediations 31, no. 2 (2018): 17-40; Daggett, The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work (Duke University Press, 2019).

— but also subjectivities, relationships, forms of mediation, imaginaries, and entire ways of life. Its operations have therefore become "hegemonic" in the sense theorized by Raymond Williams: the social relations of fossil capital coordinate "a whole body of practices and expectations… the limit of common sense for most people under its sway, [such] that it corresponds to the reality of social experience."[7] With Stephanie LeMenager, I describe the period over which fossil capital came to define the "reality of social experience," especially since the turn of the 20th century, as "petromodernity," which I sometimes also refer to as fossil-fueled modernity.[8]

The social relations of petromodernity distribute the sensible in numerous ways. In narrative art, distinguished from certain other art forms by its temporal component, the distribution of the sensible is a distribution of the probable — a formal correspondence between expectations about what happens where, when, and to whom mediated by, on the one hand, social infrastructures (money, the urban factory, the city grid, flood protection systems, a gendered division of labor, etc.), and, on the other hand, aesthetic infrastructures, like novels. Like any formal relation, the distribution of the probable is a hinge connecting the social and the aesthetic. Literary setting, because it establishes the background conditions for narrative action, is one place where this hinge appears clearly — where the distribution of the probable associated with fossil

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7 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), 37.
8 Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!" American Literary History 24, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 60.

capital "passes into textuality."[9] Indeed, we might say that it is fossil capital's drive to eliminate the improbable — the abstraction of time and space already present in capitalism's founding gesture: enclosure — that transforms place (dynamic, historical, specific) into the predictable, stable, and abstract worlds mediated by literary fiction as setting.[10]

Climate change represents a kind of derangement, Ghosh argues, because it upsets the correspondence between real and literary settings connected by the hinge of petromodernity's distribution of the probable. Put otherwise, representations of the climate in fiction strike readers as unrealistic because the increasingly carbonized atmosphere distributes climatic events according to a probability distribution that differs from the distribution proper to the literary novel.[11] What this suggests — and what Ghosh misses, I argue — is that the social forms underpinning the literary novel's genre conventions (i.e., the distribution of the probable proper to a historically specific set of social relations) are straining under the pressure of new material conditions. Climate change is turning settings back into places and, in doing so, challenging fossil capitalism's ability to settle anyplace at all. One might take this as an invitation to imagine new aesthetic forms adequate to, or prefigurative of, material conditions freed from the pressures of an expansionary, extractive, and exploitative fossil economy.

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9 Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," Mediations Journal 24, no. 2 (2009), 132.
10 Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious," 133.
11 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 7.

Ghosh does not accept this invitation, however. Rather than search for new aesthetic forms, Ghosh proposes to adapt the old formal conventions of the literary novel to new content furnished by a changing climate. He wants to weatherize the bourgeois novel.

2.1 The Great Derangement

No writer has proved more influential on the question of literature's imaginative limits with respect to climate change than Ghosh. In *The Great Derangement,* Ghosh argues that literary fiction — defined at various points as "realist" and "modern" fiction, and explicitly opposed to "genre fiction" — lacks the representational tools to figure the size, complexity, dispersed consequences, and socio-political implications of climate change.[12] Defined as an aesthetic problem related to the constraints of literary form, climate change is simply too big, too geographically and temporally dispersed, to think or mediate in a holistic way, such that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination."[13] Concerned that literary fiction's formal shortcomings obscure the realities of planetary warming, Ghosh writes that future historians who survey early 21st century literature will "conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight."[14] The stakes of such concealment are high: "If certain literary forms are unable to negotiate [global warming], then they will have

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12 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 6.
13 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 11.
14 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 11.

failed – and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis."[15] Like certain ecocritics before him, Ghosh maintains that literature's responsibilities in moments of ecological crisis involve making such crisis easier to see, understand, and feel.

Ghosh's argument centers on questions of realism and probability. Borrowing explicitly from Ian Hacking's writings on probability and Franco Moretti's work on narrative construction, Ghosh argues that the realist novel, which matured during the 19th century in Europe, is defined by a particular method of world building: novelists push the improbable into the background while pulling the mundane to the fore to create stable settings in which the exceptional can sometimes appear as dramatic inflection.[16] The literary novel must create a sense of plodding everydayness before it can shock or surprise. Writing in the post-colonial tradition, Ghosh understands that the domesticated settings of the literary novel do not appear *ex nihilo* but rather register the values, desires, expectations, and self-conceptions of an Anglo-European (and later American) bourgeois culture as it developed from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century — the period of petromodernity's coalescence. Following Moretti, Ghosh correlates novelistic world building specifically with projects of imperial world building undertaken by the 19th century's emerging capitalist nations, who exerted

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15 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 7.
16 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 18.

domestic and foreign control through techniques of social control designed to "rationalize" economic and social life at home and abroad; this was of course also a process of world ending for specific groups: peasants, Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, etc.[17] Such world building/ending techniques included the use of fossil-fueled technologies like steam ships and trains to domesticate socio-natural environments (to annihilate space and time), as well as the replacement of human workers with fossil-fueled machines in production and social reproduction, cementing the conflation of freedom with the absence of physical labor.[18] Such rationalization and replacement inflects the bourgeois novel in numerous ways, but is especially visible in literary settings, conventionally figured as stable backdrops for personal and social conflicts. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, with modernization "nature became, by and large, a setting for action, its backdrop; it was turned into a landscape, it was fragmented into metaphors and comparisons serving to sublimate individual and private affairs and adventures not connected in any real or intrinsic way with nature itself."[19] Weber describes the transformation of place into setting, both materially and in

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17 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 18;
18 For further discussion of mechanization and freedom, see Jennifer Wenzel, "Introduction" in Fueling Culture, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
19 Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 217.

the modern imagination, as a kind of disenchantment.[20] For Ghosh, it is the origin of derangement.

If modernity deranges it does so through an uneven and incomplete elimination of the aleatory, deviant, and unruly aspects of life and nature, resignifying "the incommensurable" as the appropriable, easing its entry into circuits of surplus value creation.[21] Historically, capital owners and capitalist states have regularized the nonhuman world, as well as human groups arrayed under the sign of nonhuman nature, through physical projects of colonization, extraction, dispossession, commodification, and waged production, all enforced by cultures that naturalize their adoption. Silvia Federici invites us to think of these processes as modes of enclosure. In medieval Europe, enclosure involved not only fencing off the commons, but also turning bodies, relationships, knowledges, and practices into quantities to be appropriated and exchanged in the service of value accumulation.[22] European colonization in North America likewise required the enclosure of indigenous lands, which created the conditions for slave-powered plantation agriculture in the South and industrial manufacturing in the North.[23] Formally speaking, enclosure's key feature is abstraction

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20 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," Daedalus 87, no. 1 (Winter 1958): 117.
21 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, eds. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.
22 Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (Autonomedia, 2004)
23 For an introduction to this topic, see Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

— imposing stability on movement, replacing relations with ratios, quality with quantity. Abstraction, moreover, lies at the heart of the capitalist value-form: abstract labor time, exchangeable as a commodity.[24] The use of coal-powered steam engines in manufacturing advanced the abstractions begun with the enclosures. Steam engines physicalized the principle of "universal convertibility" at the heart of both the value-form and the thermodynamic reconceptualization of qualitative effort in terms of abstract quantities of energy, while elaborating what Marx called the "inherent tendency of capitalist production:" global, 24/7 commodity production.[25] Fossil-fueled machinery also allowed capital to discipline workers. As Malm observes in *Fossil Capital*, British textile manufacturers traded water for steam (coal) as their primary energy source not because coal was cheaper (it was not), but because the work regimes coal made available (centralized, nonstop production) afforded capitalists greater control over labor.[26] The adoption of the steam engine in early-19th century Britain thus made it possible to imagine the near-total subjection of labor, as fossil fuels afforded capital owners unprecedented power to manipulate the spatial and temporal contours of the nonhuman world — landscapes, distances, seasons — to meet the requirements of surplus value accumulation. By adopting a prime mover (coal) that stood "outside the landscape" and

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24 For a comprehensive analysis of time, labor, and capitalist value, see Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
25 Daggett, The Birth of Energy, 22; Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), ch. 10, sec. 4.
26 Malm, Fossil Capital, 22.

"outside of time," as Malm puts it, British industrialists produced new ways of structuring space and time that would govern the development of fossil capitalism for the next two hundred years.[27]

Conceiving setting as a time-space that can and ought to be regularized, the literary novel projects the social relations of fossil capitalism onto the screen on 19th-century Anglo-European bourgeois culture. As a bourgeois art form, novels offered "narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life," Moretti argues.[28] Such "regularity," which was as much an expression of bourgeois desire as an honest account of bourgeois experience, rehearses the abstractions of fossil capitalist production — investments in linear time, Cartesian space, and material fungibility, among others — as well as the temerity of fossil imperialism. Indeed, Ghosh's insistence on distinguishing literary realism from "genre fiction" — as though literary realism does not also name a particular genre — highlights the degree to which fossil-fueled modernization involves universalizing the provincial norms, values, expectations, and attachments of a particular bourgeois culture.

To the extent that he provincializes literary realism, Ghosh advances a materialist thesis: he traces the formal conventions of the literary novel — which, he argues, remain more or less unchanged despite two centuries of stylistic mutation — to the conditions

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27 Malm, Fossil Capital, 193.
28 Franco Moretti, The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 81, quoted in Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 19.

of their emergence: capitalism and empire in the 19th century. From these conditions emerged a literary form which defined *place* as *setting*, such that the insertion of chaotic weather events into the narrative sequence of the literary novel today strikes readers of Anglophone fiction as unrealistic. It does so both because it deviates from the consensus dictating what the novel form is, and also because the distribution of the probable which governs the novelistic world is seen to be out of step with the distribution governing everyday experience. In a world defined by climbing temperatures and routine disaster, the real, physical world appears much less restrained than the novelistic universes of literary fiction, Ghosh suggests. "The calculus of probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel is not the same as that which obtains outside it," Ghosh writes. "The modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel," Ghosh argues, stressing, once again, the centrality of probability to his account.[29] Today the improbable is becoming increasingly less so, Ghosh writes: "The wild has become the norm."[30]

But the norm for whom? And what does it mean to normalize wildness? Or to integrate the improbable into a "calculus of probability" tied to specific genre

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29 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 23.
30 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 9.

conventions? As Kyle Whyte, Kathryn Yusoff, Nick Estes, and others have observed, worlds have ended before, and in their dust certain elite worlds have been made possible.[31] The "real world" is only stable or predictable for those whose social worlds are organized by infrastructures designed to minimize contingency, risk, and work. For most people, precariousness is very much the norm. Crucially, the distribution of regularity/precarity is a *biopolitical* process. Biopolitics names, very simply, the power relations governing the management of life and death. For Foucault, modern states exert power over life and death not only through the direct control of human bodies (*discipline*) and the management of human populations (*regularization*, carried out via public health projects, penal reform, etc.), but also through the manipulation of environments, "the relationship between resources and inhabitants."[32] Drawing on Foucault, Medovoi observes that the concept of "the environment" emerged in the mid-nineteenth century alongside efforts by capitalist states to manage the productivity of laboring populations. During this period, Medovoi writes, "the environment becomes something that may be studied and manipulated for its regularizing effects in exactly the same way as the population itself. To study the health of the population, one must

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31 Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," English Language Notes 55, no.1-2 (2017): 153-162; Kathryn Yusoff, A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Nick Estes, Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance (London: Verso, 2019).

32 Foucault identifies "discipline" ("an anatamo-politics of the human body") and "regularization" ("a biopolitics of the population") as dominant strategies of power in nineteenth-century Europe. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139, 140.

study as well the 'environmental factors' with an eye to governing and adjusting them so as to optimize the population itself as a productive force."[33] On Medovoi's account, environmental regularization contributes to the management of biological life, both directly and indirectly, as a strategy for maximizing inputs to surplus value creation, namely the labor power stored in human populations. While physical infrastructure projects are of course central to such efforts, so too are media infrastructures designed to manage climatic uncertainty — "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures," as Foucault puts it — as well as other aesthetic infrastructures that install regularity as a taken-for-granted cultural value.[34] As aesthetic infrastructure, the literary novel plays an active role in the biopolitics of the modern period.

Viewed through the lens of political economy, biopolitics is about getting some people out of the way and putting other people to work — i.e., reproducing sufficient labor power for capitalist production. It is also about securing the political legitimacy of the modern state. Producing stable settings in which human dramas can unfold is a key task of modern polities, whose legitimacy is understood to hinge partly on the state's ability to minimize risk, i.e., to regularize everyday life, for citizens. As Louis Althusser writes of Hobbes's famous account, the risk of violence hangs over individuals in the state of nature like "the threat of an outbreak of foul weather;" the function of the state is

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33 Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious," 128.
34 Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Mackey (New York: Picador, 2003), 246.

to manage this risk, to provide shelter from "foul weather," and trade the state of nature for a fully rationalized society mediated by strong state institutions.[35] Althusser's account here is illuminating not only because it suggests a connection between environmental regularity and political legitimacy, but also because it indicates that modern political philosophers have conceived of political legitimacy in explicitly climatic terms since liberalism's earliest days. This helps to explain why, as I argue later in the chapter, the changing distribution of probability represented by climate change poses such a threat to the modern imagination.

Putting the point even more philosophically, Hannah Arendt observes in *The Human Condition* that the life of the citizen (*bios*) is founded on the exclusion of bare life (*zoe*) from the political community.[36] Citing Aristotle and anticipating Agamben, Arendt suggests that biopolitics, defined as the management of life, is always therefore a politics of both incorporation and exile — of "making live and letting die," as Foucault put it — predicated on minimizing natural constraints for some, while exposing others to environmental dangers.[37] That biopolitics is always also a "biopolitics of disposability" is everywhere evident in the neoliberal period, made brutally plain by environmental disasters that physicalize the violent exclusions of class, race, gender, and other relations

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35 Thomas Hobbes, quoted in Louis Althusser, Philosophy of the Encounter, eds. Oliver Corpet and Francois Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2006), 180.
36 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
37 Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 240-1.

of difference.[38] Beyond this, one can read Arendt's diagnosis as an account of how fossil-fueled modes of production and social reproduction condition the forms freedom is imagined to take. Though its roots are ancient, the modern conception of freedom as the elimination of natural constraint gained particular resonance during the mid-nineteenth century, at a moment when the ruling classes in Europe and the U.S. had to imagine the negation of *zoe* and the triumph of *bios* without slave labor, as Jennifer Wenzel observes.[39] From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Wenzel writes, fossil fuels came to be understood by elites precisely as a replacement for the unpaid labor of enslaved workers.[40] The substitution of machines for slaves in the elite imaginary not only rehearses the association of the good life with freedom from material necessity, but also provides imaginative cover for what Wenzel calls "an economy and infrastructure of the as-if" — a world organized *as if* the land and labor which oil is seen to replace are not necessary for capital accumulation.[41] The "as-if" figures the absence of fossil fuels as the absence of freedom, chaining fossil capitalism and human liberation together in a kind of suicide pact: if one goes, so goes the other. The ideology of as-if is also an ideology of commensurability, of ratios and substitutions, which expresses and enforces the logic of the capitalist value-form. Echoing Wenzel and Arendt, Moishe Postone

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38 Henry A. Giroux, Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
39 Jennifer Wenzel, "Introduction," in Fueling Culture, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
40 Wenzel, "Introduction," 12.
41 Wenzel, "Introduction," 13.

writes in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* that "The dream implied by the capital form is one of utter boundlessness, a fantasy of freedom as the complete liberation from matter, from nature. This 'dream of capital' is becoming the nightmare of that from which it strives to free itself — the planet and its inhabitants."[42] The value form promises total commensurability, total abstraction. Fossil fuels help make good on this promise by affording capital owners more control over human labor, as Malm describes, and by redescribing effort in terms of quantities of energy, divorcing these from their material conditions, from concrete work regimes, and from the various "nightmares" created by the pursuit of surplus value.[43] The paradox of any (including a Marxian) productivist account of technological development as a condition of human emancipation in the context of climate change is that relying on fossil energy regimes to escape natural constraints — to divorce value from usefulness, to replace human labor with machines, to rationalize natural cycles, etc. — only intensifies those constraints.

The ideology of the *as-if* goes hand-in-glove with oil's ascendance in the 20th century, which deepens collective investment in fantasies of accelerated mobility, communication, prosthetic extension, and compensatory consumption.[44] Such fantasies again hinge on the regularization of space and the elimination of labor — the manual

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42 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, 383.
43 For more on this topic, see Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, "Phantasmagorias of Energy: Toward a Critical Theory of Energy and Economy," in Materialism and the Critique of Energy (MCM' Press, 2018).
44 Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman, "Nine Principles for a Critical Theory of Energy," Polygraph: Marxism and Climate Change 28 (2020): 137-159.

energy required to reproduce oneself directly, through subsistence work, or mediately, through waged or collectivized production — as a condition of freedom, further hitching the project of human emancipation to fossil fuel combustion and, consequently, to planetary warming. In wedding freedom to fossil fuels, these biopolitical fantasies reinforce a logic of "energy deepening" in both material and ideological registers.[45] Energy deepening names capital's tendency to overcome barriers to accumulation — especially rising labor costs and militancy — by increasing its reliance on fossil fuels, either directly or indirectly via automation, offshoring, financialization, autophilia, etc. The stakes of such deepening are high: The more capital replaces human labor with fossil energy — and the more the absence of human labor comes to appear as a guarantor of freedom, even when it manifestly is not — the deeper our collective attachment to fuels that, at least in the elite imaginary, are understood to be the only thing standing in the way of slavery.

Returning to Ghosh, we can expand our contention. Literary setting, in Ghosh's account, expresses the basic contradiction of energy deepening: the procedures used to regularize modern worlds, real and literary, make those worlds impossible to sustain. Insofar as realist setting, defined as a particular ratio of activity to inactivity within a narrative sequence, registers and advances the regularizing project of petromodernity,

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45 Jeff Diamanti, "Energyscapes, Architecture, and the Expanded Field of Postindustrial Philosophy," Postmodern Culture 26, no. 2 (2016).

any threat to setting's coherence is also a threat to its underlying social forms — to the procedures of abstraction that make possible the real and imagined regularization of bourgeois worlds.

It is clear today that the technologies used to regularize planetary environments for some are undermining the very project of regularization by deteriorating planetary ecosystems to the point of collapse. If we take Ghosh's diagnosis at face value — the probabilities that govern real-life weather differ from those that obtain in literary fiction — we can thus read him as suggesting that the regime of biopolitical management which regularizes bourgeois worlds, reproduces the labor power sustaining bourgeois societies, and guarantees bourgeois freedom (i.e., freedom from material constraints), cracks under the pressures not of climate change per se, but of intensifying fossil energy use. There are two alternatives: transition away from fossil fuels, and fundamentally reorganize modern society and culture, or fail to transition, and witness not the planet but the world as conceived by modernity collapse under the pressures of catastrophic climate change. Either way, at stake is the endurance of contemporary social and cultural arrangements, including the conditions which give the literary novel its coherence as a cultural form and physical object — i.e., the abstractions of petromodernity, summed up as a world without surprises.

Ghosh brushes up against this conclusion, but does not get there. As Ghosh intimates throughout the text, any "failure of imagination" expressed by the literary

novel names the failure of a particular class's imaginative resources. The bourgeois novel projects "a colonial vision of the world," Ghosh writes, and is an aesthetic complement to the presumed "regularity of bourgeois life," built on labor/land exploitation, slavery, and colonial plunder.[46] The "unrepresentability" of climate change therefore indexes the limits of what a particular class can make available to thought in a particular place and time using a particular aesthetic form. What Ghosh does not suggest, however, is that if the literary novel cannot capture the dynamics of global warming, it is perhaps because bourgeois thought cannot assimilate, in its totality, a phenomenon whose economic and social implications undermine the foundations on which bourgeois thought stands: namely, a fossil-fueled mode of production and social reproduction that erases from consciousness the fact that the capitalist class has made the deteriorating planet, which they cannot help but perceive in reified form, as a set of images flashing across the celluloid scrim of U.S. petroculture. Quite a few novelists — Dave Eggers, Barbara Kingsolver, T.C. Boyle, John Steinbeck, Ghosh himself — have managed to do the "unthinkable," by Ghosh's rubric, and write literary novels about changes in the weather. It is harder to imagine a novel that conforms to the genre conventions of literary fiction about a world without fossil fuels (although, of course, speculative texts abound). The medial insufficiency of the specifically literary novel, a stand-in for the middle-class cultural imagination writ large, ultimately registers the

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46 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 24.

unraveling of hegemonic social relations around which the middle-class cultural imagination coheres. To this imagination, what resists representation is not environmental apocalypse but the gradual disintegration of the socio-material regime which encouraged the dubious fiction that the environment could be regularized at all.

2.2 Naturalizing Capitalism, Weatherizing the Novel

Climate change becomes a metaphor for capitalism, a fossil-fueled mode of production and reproduction whose operations have become atmospheric, inescapable to the point of colonizing every outside, including the future. In *The Great Derangement*, the continuities and disjunctions of nonhuman ecosystems replace the continuities and disjunctions of the global production relations that preoccupy Marxist theorists. One vast network is traded for another. Ghosh writes:

> The earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast. The waters that are invading the Sundarbans are also swamping Miami Beach; deserts are advancing in China as well as Peru; wildfires are intensifying in Australia as well as Texas and Canada.[47]

Whereas Marxist critics might scan social systems, capital circuits, or geopolitical antagonisms for a legend to this cartography of disaster, Ghosh looks to the indecipherable logic of matter's self-organization. Citing Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour, and thus aligning his work with "speculative realist" currents in the environmental humanities described in the first chapter, Ghosh suggests that nonhuman

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47 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 62.

forces have begun not only to intrude in peoples' daily lives, but also to penetrate human thought, making themselves felt as uncanny presences. Literature can only gesture at such presences, Ghosh argues, adopting speculative realism's fascination with medial insufficiency, i.e., the gap between the human subject and its nonhuman others which media both registers and endeavors, unsuccessfully, to overcome.

Kant looms large here. The environmental humanities have struggled to shake the influence of the Kantian sublime, to which any invocation of the "unthinkable" necessarily alludes. As with sublimity, unrepresentability names one moment of a cognitive process, not an enduring condition of knowledge. Specifically, unrepresentability poses a challenge: it is either a problem to be solved in and by particular medial strategies, or else it is a trans-historical feature of "texts" in the abstract, demanding the subject's withdrawal. The unthinkable will either confirm the mastery of the thinking subject — as Kant's sublime object ultimately does, by provoking reflection on the categories of thought themselves — or it will compel epistemological humility. Recall that first-wave ecocritics explicitly position themselves against the tendencies of post-structuralism and literary postmodernism, which replace the realist theses of structuralism/modernism with a suspicion of referentiality that manifests, especially in literature, as irony and cynical detachment. In response to these tendencies, ecocritics and the environmental authors they favor seek the closure of the referential gap instituted by anti-foundationalist suspicion. Above all, their work

manifests a desire for contact between the human and nonhuman nature. Yet as Morton writes, "[a]lthough it tries with all its might to give the illusion of doing so, ambient poetics will never actually dissolve the difference between inside and outside."[48] It will never achieve contact, in other words, because it remains a mediate relation. For his part, Ghosh conceives the unthinkable as the "sacred," meaning it demands attention to cognitive limits and the autonomy of objects.[49] In general, the speculative realist current with which Morton is associated, which includes New Materialism, treats medial insufficiency as a reason not only to question the determinative role of the social, but also to attribute to nonhuman matter a certain margin of agency.

The Great Derangement articulates both currents with no apparent contradiction. On the one hand, Ghosh concurs with the New Materialists that the Anthropocene demands humility in the face of the unknowable. "It is impossible to see any way out of this crisis without an acceptance of limits and limitations, and this in turn, is, I think, intimately related to the idea of the sacred," Ghosh writes.[50] Yet one cannot help but read Ghosh's diagnosis of literature's medial insufficiency as a call for what we might call, following Lukács, a more naturalistic literature — that is, a literature that re-presents the experiential features of climate change to contemporary readers. "By naturalism Lukács means that distortion of realism," Terry Eagleton writes, "which

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48 Timothy Morton, Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 52.
49 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 161.
50 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 161.

merely photographically reproduces the surface phenomena of society without penetrating to their significant essences."[51] The "significant essences," for Lukács, are the social and historical relations of production that govern society's development and which are constitutively effaced by procedures of abstraction that divorce commodities from their social relations and which figure capital, and not labor, as the "lifeblood" of the economy. Ignoring these essences, naturalistic literature adopts the viewpoint of capital in representing the effects of capitalist production, and not its causes.

We observe such a procedure in Ghosh's work. For Ghosh, literary fiction's failure to account for the improbabilities of climate change amounts to a "cultural failure" that makes literature complicit in planetary destruction. Naturalism names a bid to rectify this failure. While Ghosh declines to provide examples of "good" climate fiction (the only texts he discusses in any depth are the 2015 "Paris Accord" and *Laudato Si*, the Pope's 2014 encyclical on climate change), Ghosh suggests that only novels committed to representing global warming's effects could hope to overcome derangement. In *The Great Derangement's* first section, as Ghosh sets up the problems of representability and concealment, he describes a tornado that hit New Delhi in 1978, nearly killing him.[52] Try as he might, Ghosh never manages to weave this real-life incident into a novel. It feels too contrived. It is telling that Ghosh chooses for his

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51 Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 14.
52 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 14.

primary illustration of the novel's representational shortcomings a weather event that, as he acknowledges, cannot be attributed to anthropogenic warming. Such a choice suggests that Ghosh is less interested in narrating why nasty weather recalibrates climatic probabilities than in describing how such probabilities appear to be changing. For Ghosh, it is not important that the 1978 tornado has no decidable relationship to carbon dioxide emissions. The point is that equally improbable events are becoming more and more common. "We are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normalcy, highly improbable," Ghosh writes.[53] When Ghosh asks novelists to make visible the climatic shifts usually concealed by the conventions of literary setting, he is asking for novel worlds to conform more closely to the world as it appears, or will appear, to specific people on a warming planet. He is not asking novelists to articulate the relationship between "surface phenomena" and their "significant essences," which would mean narrating the relationship between climate change's signal effects and fossil energy use that both guarantees capital accumulation and warms the planet. The irony of the "realist novel," Ghosh writes is that "the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real."[54] While Ghosh's argument mirrors the logic of the Marxian critique of fetishism — that is, reality, defined as manifest appearance, obscures the Real — he departs from this critical

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53 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 24.
54 Ghosh, The Great Derangement, 23.

model by arguing that what must be brought to the surface is not the underlying logic of capitalist production, but rather the signal effects of climate change: storms, droughts, floods, and other "improbabilities" concealed by the literary novel's tendency to make its settings boring, or at least predictable. It is hard to think of a better expression of naturalism, which, rehearsing the basic gesture of fetishism, abstracts phenomena from the social acts which produce and inform them.[55] Deploying the language of fetishism's critique, Ghosh argues for, precisely, fetishism.

In these passages, Ghosh declines an invitation to extend his own provincialization of the literary novel to account for the intra-species differentiations which distribute environmental health and hostility unevenly, thus making any "calculus of probability" highly group-specific. While at times Ghosh essays a plausible, historical and materialist argument about the novel, this argument breaks down the moment he seeks to salvage a particular genre — not the realist but the *naturalist* novel, which stands in for literary fiction as a whole — from falling through the widening gap between the real world and the novel's traditional material bases. In the story Ghosh ends up telling, modernity is progress, and its *telos* is the transformation of place into setting — the rationalization of the real world on the model of Austen's Pemberley or

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55 Naturalism is another way of saying Ghosh is only interested in the thematic content of the literary novel — i.e., the way the climate enters into the text at the level of image or theme. It is true that probability names a formal issue, but, Ghosh presents the problem of probability as a peculiar kind of formal issue that refers only to what gets thematized within a novel.

Flaubert's Paris. Climate change poses a problem because it disrupts this progress, delays arrival of its *telos*.

Ghosh's investment in naturalism has several consequences. On the one hand, his call to end derangement — which resonates with liberal denunciations of climate denialism in the U.S. — overlooks the fact that manifest appearances are always informed by social relations, such that re-presenting them in literary texts risks naturalizing the social conditions that give these appearances shape and meaning. On the other hand, Ghosh's repeated lamentations of literature's representational inadequacies function as an invocation of sublimity that reduces a genuinely complex set of socio-ecological issues to a tractable, if not directly representable, whole. In other words, Ghosh poses the problem of climate change in a Kantian way — as a pure limit of subjective cognition thrown up by the sublimity of a new "hyperobject" — that nonetheless confirms the capacities of the thinking subject to conceive infinity.[56] Matthew Taylor describes this update to the Kantian sublime as "planetarity," which he considers to be first and foremost a mode of extending human rule over the Earth.[57]

On the Lukácsian view, the problem with naturalism is simpler: it reproduces the distribution of the visible associated with capitalist modernity. It amplifies derangement, and rules out political transformation. Ghosh's interest in a climate-sensitive literary

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56 Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
57 Matthew Taylor, "At Land's End: Novel Spaces and the Limits of Planetarity," Novel 49, no. 1 (2016): 115-138.

fiction expresses an attachment to old cultural forms — forms that, as he acknowledges, register the expectations and ambitions of a bourgeoisie made powerful by fossil-fueled modes of enclosure, settlement, accumulation, and waste. His attachment to literary fiction thus extends the modernizing project of fossilized accumulation into the climate era, as he searches for new ways to recode specific, historical, dynamic places as knowable, predictable, and manageable settings. This effort to recalibrate literary settings according to "real world" probabilities neutralizes the transformative potential of climate impasse via a procedure of aesthetic containment. It neglects to ask a set of powerful questions: What if, instead of doubling down on the literary novel, Ghosh concluded that his privileged genre is not compatible with a climatically altered world? What would such a conclusion reveal about the socio-material regimes that underwrite the novel's endurance? Might it attest to a more general contradiction between the endurance of petromodernity and the requirements of a just transition? What then?

In its flexible inflexibility, the aspirational category of literary climate fiction — fiction that can account for the changing contours of planetary weather, without abandoning the form of the realist novel — attempts to weatherize the literary novel against the threats signaled by climate change. It attempts, in other words, to represent new content with old forms. Literary climate fiction is, in this way, a metaphor for and adjunct to U.S. climate policy in the contemporary period, summed up as a policy of adaptation without transformation. Scientists and policymakers typically define climate

adaptation as adjustments to real or expected climatic changes, done to minimize harm or exploit potential opportunities.[58] In the absence of national plans to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) call to limit planetary warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, climate adaptation has become a core plank of climate policy in the U.S. and internationally. If a certain degree of disruptive warming is inevitable, the thinking goes, the choices are adapt or die. This logic seems sound enough, even self-evident. But insisting on the need for adaptation by casting destructive climate change as a *fait accompli* obscures the multiple dangers of a discourse that not only risks putting the burden of action on vulnerable populations (as opposed to responsible parties), but also has a built-in tendency to preserve the status quo. As Marcus Taylor writes, "the problem is that adaptation seems a natural and inevitable response to change in our lived environments."[59] And when the effects of climate change are seen as external shocks that disrupt the normal state of things, the most adaptive responses become those that preserve or restore the normal functioning of a given community. Adaptation discourse tends, for this reason, to be conservative. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that, first, rhetoric accompanying international climate negotiations tends to have a catastrophist bent and, second, eco-catastrophe rhetoric often registers, as Medovoi argues, hopes that the status quo might be saved

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58 For a comprehensive history of adaptation as a concept, scholarly field, and policy regime, see Romain Felli, The Great Adaptation: Climate, Capitalism, and Catastrophe (New York and London: Verso, 2021).
59 Marcus Taylor, The Political Ecology of Climate Change Adaptation: Livelihoods, Agrarian change, and the Conflicts of Development (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 51.

from danger. Invocations of eco-catastrophe signal the need for a "regulatory transition between accumulation regimes," Medovoi writes, meaning they signal the need for adaptations that can preserve the basic form of capitalist social relations under changing ecological conditions.[60] This is adaptation without transformation. Applied to climate change, it looks like programs one might expect to find sorted under the adaptation heading — infrastructure projects designed to protected threatened coastlines, for instance — as well as mitigation programs that presume the legitimacy of market-based policy tools: cap-and-trade, carbon taxes, carbon capture and sequestration, etc. Literary climate fiction, which Ghosh implies might adapt the novel to changing socio-environmental conditions without giving up its basic form, is an aesthetic corollary to such proposals.

Ultimately, political and aesthetic adaptation strategies foreclose the future by prospectively defining its contours. What Ghosh identifies as a "challenge to the imagination" is, for him, not really a problem of imagination at all. It is a problem of mimesis and prediction, which is mimesis in the future tense. This is what distinguishes naive analyses of medial insufficiency — which are chiefly concerned with adequate representation — from Marxist analyses, which insist that the identification of constraints is a necessary condition of their collective transcendence. As Lukács writes,

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60 Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," Mediations Journal 24, no. 2 (2009), 136.

"If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface."[61] If Marxism posits a situation of representational failure, it is to gesture towards the totality of social relations that structure the world's manifest appearance in the hopes of transforming them.

2.3 Marxism and the Unrepresentable

On the Marxist view, the social relations of capitalist production create a "disjunction between experience and abstraction" that inhibits attempts to relate one's experience to the totality of social relations that structure perception and thought.[62] The capitalist value form contributes to this disjunction, as does the global scope of production. For theorists like Fredric Jameson, the problem is not just one of size or scale — Kant's "mathematical sublime" — but also of intricacy and obfuscation.[63] As capitalism transforms every aspect of social life, it becomes difficult to "see," both because networks of exchange expand and because the real abstractions that govern the former are normalized. In this sense, the capitalist mode of production names a social whole that is "unrepresentable" because it corresponds to the entirety of social life, and

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61 György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in Aesthetics and Politics, ed. Ronald Taylor (New York and London: Verso, 1980), 33.
62 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute (London: Zero Books, 2015), 17.
63 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

because the basic structure of the value form, as described by Marx, buries the real processes of reproducing the world under a fetishized collection of things disarticulated from each other and their history. Summing up this view, Toscano and Kinkle write that "capitalism as a totality is devoid of an easily grasped command-and-control-center. That is precisely why it poses an aesthetic problem."[64] The aesthetic challenge involves integrating disparate images into a coherent whole, as opposed to making those images easier to see. And yet it is not just making the whole visible that is at issue: David Harvey writes of the dialectical method that "it is neither the parts nor the whole, but the relationships between the parts which are regarded as fundamental."[65] Famously, Lukács privileges narration as a strategy for articulating these relationships, and their histories of emergence, while Jameson calls for "cognitive mapping."[66]

Despite methodological differences, Lukács, Harvey, Jameson, and others contend that adequate representations of totalizing phenomena are not strictly mimetic, but dialectical, meaning they create a sense of systemic causality in which the reader is implicated not as a reified individual but as a member of a history-making class. Partial, dialectical representations of totality — Jameson's "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" — establish this sense of systemic causality, this articulation of subject and system, through

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64 Toscano and Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute, 24-5.
65 David Harvey, "Population, Resources, and the Ideology of Science," Economic Geography 50, no. 3 (July 1974): 256.
66 Jameson, Postmodernism, 54.

the narrative production and resolution of structural contradictions.[67] The presence of antinomy, revealed through narrative conflict, is evidence of structural constraints. Such constraints do not correspond in a homological way to the totality of society, but rather alert readers to social structures that condition the conflict at hand. A dialectical method of narrating and reading is another way of looking at a situation, asking why it is the way that it is and finding at least provisional answers in an organizing logic that produces antagonisms and double binds.

The distinction between naive and Marxist accounts of representational failure is the difference between "derangement" and "impasse." Whereas Ghosh's notion of derangement is almost entirely about what is blocked (from view, from happening), impasse names a dialectical perspective on constraint: the experience of impasse demands reflections on the structures inhibiting transition, and so enables a more systematic and strategic analysis of what must change for a just transition to take root. One can think of impasse not as a hard limit, but rather as a condition of possibility. "Impasse is a situation of radical indeterminacy where existing assumptions and material relations can no longer hold or sustain us," the Petrocultures Research Group writes in *After Oil*.[68] Impasse, in other words, cracks the inevitability of the status quo, and opens the possibility for new, more humane configurations. As it throws into

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67 Jameson, Postmodernism, 416.
68 Imre Szeman and Petrocultures Research Group, After Oil (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2016), 16.

question modernity's endurance, impasse creates opportunities to intentionally and reflexively posit new ends and strategies of social organization. While such a project demands material intervention — in the form of pipelines blockades, sabotage, strikes, and riots — it is also about chipping away at the prevailing sense of "the given."[69] If politics is, as Mark Fisher writes, about transforming "the taken-for-granted into the up-for-grabs," the political promise of a Marxist analysis of petrocultures lies in its ability to unsettle the material, social, and cultural infrastructures which cement the paradoxical belief that there is no alternative to a fossil-fueled world in the face of a climate crisis that demands precisely such an alternative.[70]

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69 Diamanti and Szeman, "Nine Principles for a Critical Theory of Energy," 159.
70 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 79.

3. Beyond Climate Denial and Acceptance: Ethnonationalist Responses to Climate Impasse

Since the late 1980s, denying the existence of climate change has been something of an eleventh commandment for the U.S. right. What then to make of the fact that certain far-right groups in the U.S. and globally now take the science of planetary warming seriously, treating it as a provocation and pretext for ethnonationalist violence?[1]

From conservative media personalities like Tucker Carlson, worried that climate migrants will "despoil" American landscapes, to white terrorists who treat predictions of climate-related migration as further license to brutalize immigrants, more and more voices on the right are trading climate denial for strategic acceptance to advance a "politics of antagonistic reproduction" — the reproduction of *us* and not *them* — as planetary warming calls the future into question.[2] Sometimes described as "ecofascist," the most extreme advocates of such a politics anticipate that shifting weather patterns will drive more black and brown people to the Global North, where whites face a choice: stem the migrant tide, or be "replaced."[3] The seriousness with which some take this choice was on display on August 3, 2019 in El Paso, Texas, where white nationalist

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1 Casey Williams, "What Happens When the Alt-Right Believes in Climate Change," Jewish Currents, Aug. 13, 2018, https://jewishcurrents.org/what-happens-when-alt-right-believes-climate-change.
2 Alberto Toscano, "Notes on Late Fascism," Historical Materialism, April 2, 2017, https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism.
3 For a potent contemporary version of this thesis, see Renaud Camus, Le Grand Remplacement (Camus, 2011).

Patrick Crusius murdered 23 people, mostly Mexican and Mexican-American, in a crowded Walmart. Inspired by a self-described ecofascist who killed 51 worshippers at two New Zealand mosques, and who declared "there is no nationalism without environmentalism," the El Paso shooter wrote in his manifesto that, in the face of environmental destruction, automation, and non-white migration, "It makes no sense to keep on letting millions of illegal or legal immigrants flood into the United States."[4] Sea-level rise and nonwhite migration become metaphors for each other, as border walls in Texas blur with seawalls in Miami and elsewhere. The former are designed to keep out non-white people; the latter, rising seas.[5] But they defend the same interior: a capitalist state founded on eliminating racialized subjects and putting them to work in a twinned process of exclusion and integration.

The first lesson to draw from right-wing acceptance of climate science, in both its institutional and terroristic guises, is that "climate denial" is not a defining but rather a strategic position for the U.S. right. Although the right's position on climate change has long been reflexive denial, the predicted effects of planetary warming — especially dispossession and displacement imagined to follow quickly on the heels of deteriorating environments — have more recently been seized on by right-wing think tanks,

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4 Patrick Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," post to /pol/, 8chan, Aug. 3, 2019, https://8ch.net/pol/res/13561044.html.

5 David Theo Goldberg has observed that the ocean has long been mediated as a site of race, as images of dinghies crammed with black and brown migrants stage the sea as a kind of beachhead for a coming invasion. Goldberg, "Parting Waters: Seas of Movement," in Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique, eds. Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (Washington: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

institutes, and regimes as opportunities to advance hardline positions on issues like immigration and population control.[6] The second, related lesson is that simply asserting the "facts" of climate change is not enough to provoke salutary, much less just, responses to global warming. Decontextualized and depoliticized, the facts of climate change can invite "solutions" that, in their inadequacy, function more like aesthetic resolutions than material remedies. Such resolutions preserve the contradictions of fossil capitalism in a more mystified form.

3.1 Resolving Impasse by Defending the Borders

This dissertation attempts to make sense of climate impasse: how is it that fossil capitalism endures despite widespread awareness of climate change and a growing sense that something ought to be done about it? In the first two chapters, I interrogated an ecocritical perspective that mediates climate impasse in terms of climate change's unrepresentability, which I argued registers a contradiction within petromodernity's aesthetic forms and entails a politics of "adaptation without transformation" that seeks to weatherize fossil capitalist social relations in the face of changing environmental conditions. In this chapter I ask: How do ethnonationalist responses to climate change — expressed not just in uncoordinated acts of nativist violence, but also in policies proposing to protect a narrowly defined nation from the effects of planetary warming —

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6 I take the distinction between regimes and movements from Robert O. Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," The Journal of Modern History 70, no. 1 (March 1998): 1-23.

stage and resolve climate impasse? More specifically, how does an ethnonationalist environmental politics reconcile the conflict between fossil capitalism's climate change effects and the expectations of environmental regularity installed by petromodernity?

As I attempt to answer these questions, I consider Crusius's manifesto as an exemplary ecofascist text. Although innumerable risks attach to studying a manifesto written by a mass murderer (doing so might amplify or appear to legitimize vile and dangerous views; analysis might erase real violence as it turns suffering into text; such erasure in turn risks laundering death into professional capital), reading this text is important for two reasons. First, it tells us something about how a powerful political formation (the ethnonationalist right) responds to the social and environmental effects of climate change; and, second, it exemplifies a way of thinking about a climatically changed world that traffics well beyond the right-wing fringes. Taken seriously by center-right think tanks, neo-Malthusian environmentalists, and U.S. military planners, this way of thinking boils down to a zero-sum logic of antagonistic reproduction: in the event of disaster, scarcity, and conflict, some will have to die so that others can live. If climate change is understood principally in terms of threats to territorial sovereignty — namely, migration from the Global South to the Global North — answering climate change can easily come to mean defending the borders of the U.S. state, thereby protecting citizens against racialized invaders. Already, the U.S. state, fueled by predictions of climate migration from Central America, is spending billions more to

militarize the border than to curb emissions.[7] Offering an especially potent expression of climate migration anxiety, Crusius's manifesto clarifies that anxieties about climate migration mediate deeper anxieties about white reproductive futurity. Lamenting widespread environmental damage in the U.S., Crusius writes that non-white migration threatens to overburden scarce resources, inhibiting white citizens' ability to maintain their demographic majority. Because Americans will never abandon wasteful "lifestyles," he adds, "the next logical step" is to reduce the non-white population.[8] Condensing the suite of possible horrors associated with climate change into the figure of the "climate migrant," Crusius's manifesto suggests that nativist environmental politics bridges the gap between knowing and acting on climate change with proposals aimed not at ameliorating planetary destruction or mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, but at protecting the conditions of social reproduction for a privileged group. Down this road is more violence and, ultimately, climate apartheid.

The manifesto also manifests some risks latent in emergency rhetoric. Crusius is confused about a number of issues — environmental change, migration, automation — but he is convinced the situation is urgent: one must take action now or consent to the annihilation of the future. The sense of urgency running through the text resonates with some of the crisis rhetoric circulating in mainstream climate discourse, which uses the

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7 Todd Miller, Nick Buxton, Mark Akkerman, "Global Climate Wall," The Transnational Institute, Oct. 25, 2021, https://www.tni.org/en/publication/global-climate-wall.
8 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated.

language of "emergency" ("alarm," "code red") to insist on the need for immediate, drastic climate action.[9] While the two types of emergency talk imply vastly different goals — one champions xenophobic violence; the other aims to curb greenhouse gas emissions — their resonance is a reminder that casting climate change as an emergency demanding immediate response comes with the risk of providing cover to actions that would be considered unacceptable in non-emergency conditions. In a state of emergency, where *something must be done* to avert catastrophe, actions normally seen as intolerable can appear acceptable, even necessary. Beyond immigration, talk of climate emergency arguably makes it easier for Elon Musk to treat workers like dirt; multinational mining corporations to trample on indigenous sovereignty in the hunt for lithium; and banks to push for the privatization of publicly owned utilities in places like South Africa. This is not to say climate change is not shaping up to be catastrophic. It is just to say that crisis talk, especially talk that writes off a timely end to fossil capitalism as a fantasy, can easily provide rhetorical cover for violence.

Ecofascism is ultimately a form of protectionism and, as such, can appear to conflict with capital's interest in the relatively free movement of people.[10] In fact, however, ethnonationalist resolutions to climate impasse — nativist violence, border

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9 Tal Axelrod, "Omar: Next President Should Declare National Emergency on Climate Change 'On Day 1,'" The Hill, Feb. 15, 2019, https://thehill.com/homenews/house/430252-omar-next-president-to-declare-national-emergency-on-climate-change-on-day-1.
10 See Michael Lind, The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution (New York: Free Press, 1995).

tightening, limits on the fertility of non-white women, apartheid — aid capital accumulation under conditions of ecological turbulence in several ways. They do so, first, by presuming the immutability of capitalist property relations: anti-immigrant violence, especially when framed as a response to overpopulation and resource scarcity, reinforces capitalism's sustaining fiction — that there is not enough to go around — and in doing so naturalizes the distribution of property and power specific to fossil capitalism today, in what many scholars describe as the neoliberal period. Second, nativist violence directly reproduces capital's labor power inputs by enforcing the division of habitable from hostile space that enables the super-exploitation of racialized workers. Supplementing state violence meted out by Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, civilian attacks on climate migrants keep the price of immigrant labor low, aiding the transfer of wealth from the periphery to the imperial core.[11] Third, far-right environmentalists capture legitimate frustration with neoliberalism's broken promises and route it towards violence that terrorizes surplus workers. Like racial hierarchies in general, ethnonationalist environmentalism maintains "differences and divisions" within the working class, throwing up blocks to class consciousness, working-class solidarity, and coordinated anti-capitalist politics.

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11 Michael Pröbsting, "Migration and Super-exploitation: Marxist Theory and the Role of Migration in the Present Period of Capitalist Decay," Critique 43, no.3-4 (2015): 329-346.

But can such a politics be described as "fascist"? European fascism was, at its core, a mass politics. Neoliberalism's relentless fragmentation of social life would seem to rule out the reemergence of anything resembling fascism's affectively charged, highly stylized, and meticulously coordinated forms of mass organization (although this is not for a lack of trying on the part of far-right groups). Given this, the "fascism" in ecofascism refers not to a mass politics but to what Alberto Toscano, paraphrasing Adorno, calls "a conservative politics of antagonistic reproduction," by which he means a politics that promotes the reproduction of some and not others.[12] While such a politics is perhaps endemic to the nation state as a social form (as Cedric Robinson, Balibar and Wallerstein, and others have argued), ecofascist terrorists enforce the "antagonistic reproduction" of the capitalist nation-state by supplementing pro-capital policies (subsidies, tax breaks, licenses, land grants for corporations, etc.) with civilian violence that protects the material conditions of reproduction for citizen "producers," while removing, excluding, and denying benefits to racialized "parasites."[13] In this sense, ecofascist violence enforces contemporary capitalism's "biopolitical regime," defined as the regime coordinating reproduction of life in the service of capital accumulation.[14]

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12 Alberto Toscano, "Notes on Late Fascism," unpaginated.
13 Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1983); Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities (New York and London: Verso, 1991). I take the producers/parasites framing from Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes, Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
14 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 23.

I begin this chapter by further defining capitalist biopolitics and describing how it operates today. I historicize two biopolitical procedures — getting out of the way (expropriation) and putting to work (exploitation) — and show how "eco-catastrophe" narratives mediate the contradictions these procedures entail.[15] I argue that contemporary ecofascism conforms to the genre conventions of one catastrophe narrative in particular: neo-Malthusian population alarmism and its attendant politics of "social triage." Finally, I theorize how ecofascist responses to planetary heating provide an aesthetic and material resolution to climate impasse that supports capital accumulation under conditions of climatic uncertainty.

3.2 Ecofascism's Background Conditions

Put very simply, biopolitics names the "production and reproduction of life."[16] In capitalist states, as even Foucault recognized, life is produced and reproduced with an eye towards the production of the labor power necessary to accumulate surplus value for capital's owners. The nature of capitalist biopolitics has, of course, changed dramatically since, say, the 18th century, when early demographers like Thomas Robert Malthus introduced techniques for measuring and regulating the size, health, and productivity of laboring populations.[17] On the one hand, biopolitical procedures have

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15 I take the distinction between expropriation and exploitation from Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital: For a Trans-environmental Eco-socialism," New Left Review 127 (Jan/Feb 2021): 94-127.
16 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 24.
17 Robert Thomas Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population (1798; repr., Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project, 1998).

become more intensive: the passage from "discipline" to "control" as the hegemonic form of labor-power regulation has opened nearly every aspect of somatic, intellectual, and affective life to their productive integration in circuits of value accumulation.[18] On the other hand, biopolitical procedures have become more extensive: disciplinary techniques aimed at managing bodies within fixed institutions (the prison, the clinic, etc.) have given way to techniques geared towards reproducing not only populations but also the environmental conditions that make populations productive. Biopolitics, in other words, now clearly entails an ecopolitics. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's work, Marxist-feminist Nancy Fraser describes capitalist ecopolitics in terms of the maintenance of life's "background conditions." These include unwaged and traditionally feminized work collected under the sign of "social reproduction," as well as the capacities and energies of nonhuman environments.[19] Capital appropriates environmental energies directly, through enclosure, and indirectly, as capital vacuums up free or cheap air, water, land, etc. to aid workers' reproduction. As Jason W. Moore puts it, capital accumulation always depends on "the repertoire of capitalist and territorial strategies that seek to take advantage of, build upon, and feed upon the unpaid work of humans and the rest of nature outside of capital's reproduction costs,

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18 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 24.
19 Fraser, "Climates of Capital," 105.

and yet inside the dynamic of advancing labor productivity."[20] Moore's argument is not that work performed outside the wage relation creates surplus value and should therefore be waged (this would be the naive reading of "wages for housework" or of Teresa Brennan's "energy theory of value," for instance), but that the creation of value, which capital defines narrowly in terms of abstract labor time, is itself dependent on unpaid activity outside the workplace, including work done to maintain nourishing relations with socio-natural environments. Climate change is a crisis of capitalism, in part, because it destroys those relations.

Capital's tendency to undermine its "background conditions" is one reason capitalist states have historically sought to study, manage, and promote the health of environments. Drawing on Foucault's history of biopolitics in *Society Must Be Defended,* Leerom Medovoi observes that capitalist states in the mid-nineteenth century enlisted the emerging concept of "the environment" to manage the productivity of their laboring populations.[21] In this period, Medovoi writes, "[t]he environment becomes something that may be studied and manipulated for its regularizing effects in exactly the same way as the population itself. To study the health of the population, one must study as well the "environmental factors" with an eye to governing and adjusting them so as to

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20 Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft, and Casey Williams, "Capitalism and Planetary Justice in the 'Web of Life': An Interview with Jason W. Moore," in "Marxism and Climate Change," eds. Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft, and Casey Williams, special issue, Polygraph 28 (2020): 161-182.
21 Leerom Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory," Mediations Journal 24, no. 2 (2009), 128.

optimize the population itself as a productive force."[22] Environments are like wombs: "factories for producing workers," as Silvia Federici puts it — and, at a different scale, factories for producing factories for producing workers.[23] How capital manages these factories defines its ecopolitical regime.

Capital's modern ecopolitical regime has at least two, integrated aims: putting people to work and getting them out of the way. These aims roughly correspond to what Fraser considers to be capitalism's two socio-ecological regimes — expropriation and exploitation — as well as Foucault's formulation of biopower as "making live and letting die."[24] In the case of the El Paso massacre, ecofascist violence gets people out of the way by policing the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state — which, from its origins, has

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22 Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious," 128.
23 Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004). Others disagree; cf. Imre Szeman, "Conclusion: On Energopolitics," in "Energopower and Biopower in Transition," special issue, Anthropological Quarterly 87, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 453-464. Szeman argues that climate change is evidence that capitalist states pay too little attention to the environmental background conditions of life. In Szeman's view, "States can manage populations, but not species, which exist outside of their political authority, physical capacities, and conceptual imaginaries; and if energy has been missing from the way in which biopower has been conceptualized, it is certainly the case that 'all of life's biodiversity' is just as fully absent from the historical emergence of state power and from the disciplinary mechanisms through which it has established and managed the principal subject of its power: populations."
24 Fraser, "Climates of Capital," 106; Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Mackey (New York: Picador, 2003). In making this argument, I recognize that I am departing from Foucault's original formulation of biopower as the production of subjectivities via institutions of "discipline" which exercise power over the body. Hardt and Negri observe that Foucault theorizes a passage from "disciplinary society" to the "society of control." Whereas disciplinary society operates through fixed structures which regulate bodies, the society of control names postmodernity's indirect, dispersed, immanent mechanisms of social regulation. "Disciplinary power rules in effect by structuring the parameters and limits of thought and practice, sanctioning and prescribing normal and/or deviant behaviors," while "control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks," write Hardt and Negri, Empire, 23. With an eye towards a positive and revolutionary project defined by the cooperative production of life by the "multitude," Hardt and Negri characterize biopolitical production as the reproduction of life, which is appropriated by capital (control society, real subsumption, extraction), in Empire, 402.

depended on the discursive and physical depopulation of indigenous populations — and it puts people to work by enforcing the precariousness of immigrant labor and the docility of the white citizen-worker. If climate change shrinks habitable space, ecofascist terror ensures that the remaining zones of habitability are reserved for workers who conform to the racialized, producerist rubrics that have long linked citizenship with work. Whatever the intentions of its adherents, then, the effect of ecofascist violence is to materialize the threat at the heart of all waged labor — work or die — by enforcing the distribution of habitable and hostile space that organizes the capitalism's ecopolitics in a moment of planetary crisis. If as I argued in the previous chapter, fossil capitalism implies a regime of environmental management that depends on dividing habitable from hostile space — separating the regularized "settings" of monocrop agriculture, air-conditioned malls, and professionally managed national parks from "sacrifice zones" — ethnonationalist violence enforces this division by separating workers into two, racialized camps: those "made to live" and those that can be sacrificed.

3.2.1 Getting People out of the Way

From its origins, the coherence of the U.S. state has depended on getting people out of the way: first depopulating the continent for Anglo-European settlers, and then

cordoning off national space to prevent overpopulation by non-white immigrants.[25] Extermination was an essential procedure of nation-building as the state pursued genocidal "Indian Wars" into the nineteenth century, while forced migration became a central feature of the conservation movement during the turn of the twentieth century.[26] In both cases, depopulation took place under the aegis of a discursive erasure which cast the Western frontier as empty and in need of settlement. An emerging national literature portrayed the frontier as ready to be enclosed by the white settler whose productive labor would make him worthy of citizenship and canonized a distinctly colonial conception of nature: wild, untouched, and yet awaiting the settler's plow.[27] Most famously, Romantic naturalists like Henry David Thoreau depicted "nature" as a refuge from the corrupting, feminizing effects of an industrializing society.[28] Such a refuge — a space of revitalization for white men, to be found on the Western frontier — aided the development of Euro-Atlantic civilization by providing an enlightened European society a motive for expansion. "From the East light, from the west fruit" Thoreau writes in his

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25 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995): 69-90.

26 James L. Huston, "Theory's Failure: Malthusian Population Theory and the Projected Demise of Slavery," Civil War History 55, no. 3 (Sept. 2009): 354-381. Westward expansion was seen by Jefferson and Madison as a way to resolve problems caused by overpopulation in U.S. cities (i.e., surplus labor, wage depression, and immiseration).

27 These conceptions organize the mythology of European settlement in North America, which was not a one-off "event" but a "structure" of accumulation, to use the formula from Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 388.

28 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," The Atlantic Monthly, June 1862.

1862 essay "Walking," neatly summing up the logic of European colonialism in North America.[29] Thoreau continues:

> The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bushwhack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field.[30]

It is precisely this patrimony — guaranteed not by birth, but by the naturalization of whiteness through productive labor, to which Thoreau's agricultural "heirlooms" attest — which U.S. ethnonationalists seek to defend against territorial incursions. Indeed, like early European settlers in North America, contemporary ethnonationalists stake the legitimacy of their project on their ability to conquer and defend territory. "I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion," Crusius writes in his manifesto, invoking the lethal principle of "Stand Your Ground."[31] While Crusius suggests that "some people" will consider his interest in repelling an "invasion" "hypocritical because of the nearly complete ethnic and cultural destruction brought to the Native Americans by our European ancestors," he concludes that "Native Americans" suffered genocide because

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29 Thoreau, "Walking," 12.
30 Thoreau, "Walking," 12.
31 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated. "Stand Your Ground" derives from the "Castle Doctrine," a provision in English Common Law which licenses extrajudicial killing when an "intruder" violates the territorial sovereignty of one's home. See Denise M. Drake, "The Castle Doctrine: An Expanding Right to Stand your Ground," St. Mary's Law Journal 39 (2007): 573.

they "didn't take the invasion of Europeans seriously."[32] American Indians slaughtered by white settlers deserved their fate, Crusius suggests, because they failed to defend their territory. This is a striking claim. On the one hand, Crusius identifies with Indian-as-victim and, on the other hand, rationalizes his violence not because he is "native," but because he is a settler — a subject whose right to the land follows from his ability to seize and hold it by force.[33] Unlike European fascists who assert legitimacy by claiming indigeneity (like Nazis who invoke "blood and soil," for instance), Crusius is all-too-aware that European settlers cannot claim North American territories as their birthright. Their right to the land derives not from inheritance, but from the fact of settlement (of seizing and "improving" land Indigenous peoples were presumed to "waste"). Such a right expresses the enclosure logic of John Locke's "improving eye" — which defines ownership as seizure ("mixing" one's labor with the land) — and of Thoreau's "walks" (each of which "is a sort of crusade"), which figure the natural world as a "wild" place that both resists civilization and invites conquest.[34]

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32 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated.
33 Here, the ethnonationalist's nation is not the ideal nation theorized by Hegel, which "sustains the concept of sovereignty by claiming to precede it;" it is instead the avowedly settler nation which makes its own sovereignty by claiming to take it. See Hardt and Negri, Empire, 101.
34 John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). In "Walking," Thoreau writes, "The farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow."

3.2.2 Putting People to Work

Insofar as it articulates a model of distributive justice based on value-producing work, both Crusius's manifesto and Thoreau's justificatory account of colonial extermination in "Walking" clarify that getting people out of the way is always about putting others to work. As Locke writes in *Two Treatises of Government*, a person creates private property when he mixes his labor with nature, taking it "out of that common state" and making it productive.[35] Like Thoreau, Locke associates value-producing labor with virtue, and wastefulness with vice, suggesting that one's ability to make the land productive is the measure of his worth. As Hardt and Negri write, this association establishes the parameters of citizenship in modern capitalist states: "the fundamental modern constitutional principle… links right with labor, and thus rewards with citizenship the worker who creates capital."[36] Providing the basic justification for "enclosure," this principle grounds contemporary "producerist" rubrics, which reserve social protections for "hard working Americans" and deny them to racialized "parasites."[37] It also clarifies the class character of ethnonationalists' violent defense of U.S. territory. From Locke to Thoreau to contemporary American nativists, the separation of producer/citizen/white from parasite/foreigner/nonwhite unites capitalist

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35 John Locke, Two Treatises, paragraph 28.
36 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 400.
37 HoSang and Lowndes, Producers, Parasites, Patriots, 16.

class relations, U.S. colonial ambitions, and environmental protection in a single ecopolitical logic.

Capitalism's basic biopolitical imperative is pro-natalist, and the U.S. state has encouraged population growth in a variety of ways over the last 200 years, including importing immigrant workers and criminalizing birth control and abortion domestically — key means of controlling fertility going back centuries.[38] Capitalist development tends to stabilize population growth, however: in England and the U.S. in the 19th century, industrialization driven by the development and application of fossil-fueled machinery (steam engines, especially) enabled capitalist states to meet white citizen-workers' demands for a greater share of production's surplus as they transitioned from unskilled to skilled work, slowing population growth.[39] As birth rates stabilized, imperialism and immigration became crucial means of securing labor inputs for U.S. production and markets for U.S. products. Fossil fuels provided decisive on this count, as well: coal and oil fueled U.S. imperialism in the Pacific and Latin America at the turn of the century, and, after WWII, the widespread application of fossil fuels in global agriculture — the so-called Green Revolution — enabled population growth in regions previously

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38 Laura L. Lovett, Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). See also Bonnie Mass, "An Historical Sketch of the American Population Control Movement," International Journal of Health Services 4, no. 4 (Fall 1974): 651-676.
39 Daniela Danna, "Population Dynamics and World-Systems Analysis," Journal of World Systems Research 20, no. 2 (2014): 207-228.

dependent on small-scale farming.[40] Population growth in the Global South meant a growing pool of potential workers for domestic export economies and Northern manufacturing.[41] At the same time, these workers' struggles for higher wages, political rights, national self-determination, and, in some cases, social revolution previewed looming economic, social, and political crises for leading capitalist states. By the late 1960s, the basic biopolitical contradiction of capital — capital needs surplus workers; workers always carry the threat social revolution — had passed into popular culture as widespread anxiety about ecological apocalypse.

3.3 Bomb Threats

The late 1960s and early 1970s were awash in predictions of eco-apocalypse. Registering growing uncertainty about capitalism's long-term survival, these predictions often appeared as warnings about unchecked growth (e.g., the Club of Rome's 1972 report *Limits to Growth*) and, more concretely, human overpopulation.[42] Recycling the theories of Malthus and Progressive Era conservationists, neo-Malthusians like Donella Meadows, Garrett Hardin, and Paul Ehrlich published best-selling tracts blaming a range of crises on *too many people*, whose resource demands threatened to blow past the

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40 Danna, "Population Dynamics and World-Systems Analysis," 216.
41 Danna, "Population Dynamics and World-Systems Analysis," 216.
42 Donella H. Meadows, et al., The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind (New York: Universe, 1974).

"carrying capacity" of "Spaceship Earth."[43] Perhaps mostly famously, Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* (1968) — which opens with brown bodies mobbing in Delhi's streets, seen from a taxi window — cast explosive population growth in the Global South as a harbinger of global resource over-consumption and ecological collapse, figuring racialized populations as a threat not only to their own reproduction, but also to the survival of the "human" in general.[44]

The solutions favored by neo-Malthusians like Ehrlich involved austerity for U.S. citizen-workers and population reductions, sometimes coerced, for workers and peasants in the Global South.[45] By the late 1970s, as Paul Volcker announced declining "living standards" in the U.S., "in the semiperiphery and periphery the core's racist worries about the multiplication of Black and colored people in postcolonial countries spurred the diffusion of birth control methods, sometimes via coercive means."[46] Both strategies sought to manage capitalism's biopolitical contradictions without altering its basic model of ownership; austerity helped restore U.S. firms to profitability, while population control promised to relieve pressure on scarce resources without sacrificing

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43 Meadows, The Limits to Growth, 91; Kenneth E. Boulding, "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth," in Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy, ed. H. Jarrett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).
44 Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, The Population Bomb (New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books, 1968).
45 Danna, "Population Dynamics and World-Systems Analysis," 216. For more on coercive population control in the Global South, see Jade Sasser, On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women's Rights in the Era of Climate Change (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
46 Danna, "Population Dynamics and World-Systems Analysis," 213.

economic growth.[47] As Romain Felli writes in *The Great Adaptation*, the logic of "catastrophist predictions in these years, was to suggest measures to preserve resources and reduce the population in order to save capitalism from itself."[48]

Saving capitalism from itself is always the unspoken aim of eco-catastrophe narratives. As Medovoi observes, such narratives register anxiety not about the environment as such, but about capitalism's environmental background conditions — specifically, capital's ability to reproduce the labor power necessary for surplus value creation. Medovoi writes that "at every single step in the history of biopolitics, the trope of eco-catastrophe serves as a mechanism for insisting upon biopolitical reform, calculated change to the environment (and/or to the population) before it is too late. This was true for Malthus, for the late-nineteenth-century reformers, for the environmentalists of the 1970s, and is also the case today."[49] One can detect the desire for biopolitical reform in work by postwar environmental writers, most notably Rachel Carson, for whom catastrophe appears first and foremost as a threat to the status quo, making the future to be saved a temporal extension of the present. "There once was a town at the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings," Carson writes in *Silent Spring*.[50] But "there was a strange stillness. The

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47 Romain Felli, The Great Adaptation: Climate, Capitalism, and Catastrophe (New York and London: Verso, 2021), 109.
48 Felli, The Great Adaptation, 56.
49 Medovoi, "The Biopolitical Unconscious," 136.
50 Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (1962; New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 1.

birds, for example — where had they gone?"[51] Invoking the peculiar temporality of environmental risk, Carson conjures an apocalyptic future both to dramatize the violence of the present and to prospectively mourn its loss. Rob Nixon describes this temporality, so common in environmental nonfiction after Carson, as "blended elegy and apocalypse, lamentation and premonition, inducing in us a double gaze backward in time to loss and forward to yet unrealized threats."[52] It is both an activist and conservative gesture: imagining a future destroyed by crimes in the present, Carson's text calls for interventions that would avoid such a future; and yet the future she desires is one where the basic shape of the present endures in perpetuity.

But what future, exactly, are we to avoid? For postwar environmentalists, the answer was often a future where the "human" is replaced by some "other-than-human" being. For scientists opposed to nuclear weapons, for instance, the atomic bomb's destructive power suggested to their horror that man was mutating into something both more and less than human.[53] For Carson, chemical contamination contained the threat of "genetic mutation," presaging a non-future in which the human would give way to an other-than-human species of its unintentional making. Priscilla Wald summarizes *Silent Spring*'s chemical catastrophism: "Permeating the fundamental substance of humanity

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51 Carson, Silent Spring, 2.
52 Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 64.
53 Paul Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1985).

— blood, bones, sinew — the chemicals are colonizing the future, seeping into genes and 'mother's milk, and probably into the tissues of the unborn child.'"[54] These chemicals "have the power to strike directly at the chromosomes," contaminating "our genetic heritage."[55] Like the nuclear threat and the "population bomb," mutation fears presage the replacement of the human species by a nonhuman other — a horror brought about by the species' own reproductive practices.

Since Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, overpopulation, genetic mutation, and nuclear apocalypse have blurred in environmentalism's visual grammar precisely because they express the irony of self-sabotage. This irony appears not only in *The Population Bomb*, but also in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) and later Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men* (2006), in which universal infertility provokes the kind of racialized social collapse film viewers are trained to associate with nuclear conflict. To take an example from the "cli-fi" genre, the mechanism of human extinction in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is a pill that both arouses and sterilizes, prompting a kind of world-wide orgy that renders everyone infertile. Here, again, the engine of life becomes an instrument of death. Within the imaginary of liberal environmentalism — where the child remains a central figure,

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54 Priscilla Wald, "Science, Technology, and the Environment," in The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction, eds. Eric C. Link and Gerry Canavan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 179-193.
55 Wald, "Science, Technology, and the Environment," 183.

standing in for the possibility of a future — nothing could be more perverse.[56] For Carson, the possibility that contamination might warp the reproductive mechanism to write the human out of the future puts it on par with nuclear war. "Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances [that] alter the very material of heredity on which the shape of the future depends," Carson writes.[57] Her fear is not death in the abstract, but the human's perverse unmaking of itself. Such fear is easily, and often, racialized. Recall the Charlottesville chant: "Jews will not replace us," a slogan pulled from the movement's foundational text, *The Great Replacement*.[58]

Terrifying for North American environmentalists — and, in a different way, for nativists — the prospect that the human might make itself otherwise held liberatory promise for those peremptorily excluded from the category of "the human," Wald notes, citing Frantz Fanon's suggestion that decolonization demands "a new Species of Man."[59] The prospect of speciation, whether through genetic mutation or revolutionary struggle, transposes to the world of sex, bodies, and babies a basic insight of historical

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56 For a discussion of liberalism's attachment to the child as symbol of heteronormative "reproductive futurism," see Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). This attachment is equally strong for anti-gay religious conservatives, who see the rectum as the species' grave, as well as for U.S. ethnonationalists, whose ultimate fear is annihilation through non-white reproduction.
57 Carson, Silent Spring, 8.
58 Camus, Le Grand Remplacement.
59 Wald, "Science, Technology and the Environment," 182.

materialism: fundamentally contradictory, capitalist political economy creates the conditions of its supersession; or, following the autonomist's inversion of the capital-labor relationship, we might say that the conditions of supersession precede capital's attempt to contain them. We might then understand the postwar fear that capitalism's reproductive regime would paradoxically imperil "the human" to mediate a deeper fear — that the womb-as-factory might become a factory for producing saboteurs, strikers, unionists, decolonizers, communists, or terrorists.[60] Put differently, if a central anxiety underpinning postwar environmental thought is that the human's reproductive mechanisms will bring about the replacement of the human by a non/sub/posthuman "other," this is because the reproduction of the expropriative and exploitative social relations in which U.S. environmentalism developed contains a contradiction: this society's ruling classes must reproduce their others in order to reproduce themselves. A ruling class that reproduces itself through the production of exploitable and disposable subordinate classes is always vulnerable to strikes, riots, and rebellions — to the rise of a "new species of Man" born in the struggle against oppression.

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60 On the other hand: the womb might not produce any workers at all — or worse, it might cease to be merely a womb and become a fully realized subject who organizes with other people to refuse to produce workers in a kind of late capitalist Lysistrata (recall that Rosa Luxemburg proposed a "birth strike" in the early 20th century). On the "birth strike," see Angela Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights," in Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 353-367.

3.3.1 Not Resources, but Revolutions

The upshot: any rhetoric that frames environmental degradation as a threat to the reproductive capacities of a dominant group fears revolution.[61] For much of the U.S.'s history, population control has proved a reliable answer to such fear. In the antebellum U.S., southern planters actively regulated the reproductive capacity of enslaved women not only to guarantee sufficient labor power for their plantations, but also to hedge against the threat of rebellion, Angela Davis observes.[62] Describing anti-slavery rebellions between 1708 and 1862, Davis notes that among those killed in "counter-insurgency" attacks were numerous Black women, many of them pregnant, suggesting that slave owners sought specifically to destroy the reproductive capacities of rebel communities. Such efforts were "uncamouflaged," as Davis puts it; owners needed to reproduce workers while stamping out rebellion and they did so without appealing to pretextual justifications.[63] Efforts to curb the revolutionary potential of

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61 In other words, population anxieties testify to a more general concern, always hovering over capitalist production relations, that the strategies used to reproduce workers will somehow undermine that very project, leaving capital with too few workers, threatening surplus value, or with too many workers, creating conditions for mass revolt against commodified forms of subsistence. For a growth-based economic system that depends on human labor, either too few or too many people is untenable: if workers do not reproduce in the correct way, the global capitalist economy cannot reproduce itself in the correct way.

62 Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," The Massachusetts Review, 13, no. 2 (1972): 7-8.

63 "[W]hen it as profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusive female roles. […] They were 'breeders' – animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers. […] Rape, in act, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers," Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class (New York: Vintage, 1983), 6-7.

"free" workers, on the other hand, often passed through Malthusian appeals to conservation. Predicting the labor unrest that would accompany the eventual closing of the Western frontier, Thomas Dew wrote:

> But the time must come when the powerfully elastic spring of our rapidly increasing numbers shall fill up our wide spread territory with a dense population — when the great safety valve of the west will be closed against us — when millions shall be crowded into our manufactories and commercial cities — then will come the great and fearful pressure upon the engine — then will the line of demarcation stand most palpably drawn between the rich and the poor, the capitalist and the laborer — then will thousands, yea, millions arise, whose hard lot it may be to labor from morn till eve through a long life, without the cheering hope of passing from that toilsome condition… When these things shall come… can you expect that they will regard as sacred the tenure by which you hold your property?[64]

As the working class grows and space diminishes, in other words, class conflict will erupt into all-out class warfare.

When the frontier finally did close in the late 19th century (at least in the elite imagination), ruling-class anxiety about the rebellious masses was again couched in Malthusian language — this time dressed up with concepts from evolutionary science. Fears that immigrant workers might flood the US with people "unfit" to reproduce gripped elites in the 1890s and then later in the period after WWI (and the October Revolution in Russia), as immigrant workers comprising the most radical currents of the U.S. labor movement threatened to topple the class hierarchies of a nation in need of a

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64 Thomas Roderick Dew, "An Address, on the Influence of the Federative Republican System of Government upon Literature and the Development of Character," Southern Literary Messenger 34 (March 1863): 261-282; 277.

docile labor force.[65] Conservationists like Madison Grant couched fears of social revolution in the language of ecology and heredity: lamenting the declining fertility of America's "Nordic stock," Grant warned that overpopulation by Eastern and Southern Europeans would imperil the nation's territorial and genetic heritage.[66] Grant successfully lobbied for the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924, which restricted immigration from southern Europe, and pushed unsuccessfully for a eugenics program that would forcibly sterilize the "bottom fifth" of the U.S. population.[67] Angered (ostensibly) by Italian immigrants hunting songbirds for food, Grant proposed a bill in the New York state legislature barring non-citizens from owning guns.[68] Given Italian immigrant workers' active participation in socialist politics at the turn of the century, and concomitant paranoia about Italian "anarchists," Grant's proposal offers a striking example of how concerns about environmental degradation and social revolution merged in the elite imaginary of the early 20th century.[69]

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65 Thomas C. Leonard, "Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era," Journal of Economic Perspectives 19, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 207–224.
66 For a comprehensive account of Madison Grant and his role in the U.S. conservation movement, see Dorceta E. Taylor, The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
67 Garland E. Allen, "'Culling the Herd': Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900–1940," Washington University Biology Faculty Publications & Presentations 6 (2013): 19.
68 Allen, "'Culling the Herd,'" 14.
69 It was not just immigrants: beginning in the 1930s, state governments in the U.S. South turned to eugenic science to justify sterilizing black Americans by force. In North Carolina alone, the state's Eugenics Commission sterilized 7,686 people, 5,000 of them black, between 1933 and 1973, per Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights," 361. See also Gregory Michael Dorr: "Support for implicitly and explicitly eugenic population controls emerged from the concern that the nation faced a demographic explosion among the underclass, a "population bomb" that threatened to destroy civilization in either a hail of welfare claims or violent social revolution. Politically, the Nixon administration used population anxiety

By the mid-20th century, communism provided another reason to fear the growing masses. In his 1974 essay on Malthusianism, David Harvey observes that Malthus wrote his 1798 *Principles of Population* against the proto-socialist writings of Godwin and Condorcet, and amid the revolutionary stirrings of the English working class. The neo-Malthusians likewise published their treatises — *Road to Survival*, "Famine 1975!," *Limits to Growth*, *The Population Bomb*, "The Tragedy of the Commons," etc. — just as powerful decolonial and communist movements were challenging the hegemony of the U.S. state, and the legitimacy of capitalist political economy, across the globe.[70] It was taken for granted at the time that modern population control programs existed to counter this threat. As a pamphlet published by the Population Policy Panel, funded by Dixie Cup magnate Hugh Moore, put it in 1969, "There will be 300 million more mouths to feed in the world four years from now — most of them hungry. Hunger brings turmoil — and turmoil, as we have learned, creates the atmosphere in which the

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to harmonize the demands of welfare activists and the New Right on one hand, demographic alarmists and the emerging anti-abortion lobby on the other — all in the name of reelecting the president. This political opportunism had far-reaching consequences," in A Century of Eugenics in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 162.

70 Neo-Malthusian theories "originate almost exclusively from… when the liberation movements in the Third World began to become a central problem for the leading imperialist power," observes Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," New Left Review 84, no. 1 (March/April 1974): 17. Geographers Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini likewise observe that Harvey wrote his 1974 essay "amid and against what he saw as a Malthusian revival occurring at a tumultuous time in the West when various societal transformations, including the Civil Rights movements, calls for Indigenous self-determination, decolonization and student protests, all threatened elite rule," in "Introduction: Life Adrift," in Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique, eds. Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 7.

communists seek to conquer the Earth."[71] Also worried that swelling Third World populations would bolster communist movements, John D. Rockefeller founded the Population Council in 1952, which, with the Ford Foundation, the Hugh Moore Fund, and other capitalist philanthropies, poured millions into efforts to slow population growth abroad.[72] Population control became national policy under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and greatly expanded under Lyndon B. Johnson, who made contraception a condition of foreign aid under the anti-communist "Food for Peace" program.[73] As Fidel Castro was declaring "we shall never be too numerous" at the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba in 1966, President Johnson proclaimed before the United Nations that "five dollars put into birth control is more useful in Latin America than a hundred dollars invested in economic growth."[74] At home, the Johnson and Nixon administrations oversaw population controls in black communities, including sterilizations in exchange for government support.[75] Meanwhile, the rise of neo-Malthusian theory in the U.S. academy (especially Berkeley and Stanford) granted

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71 Famine Stalks the Earth… The Population Bomb Keeps Ticking (New York: Population Policy Panel of the Hugh Moore Fund, 1969). Accessed in the Ecology Center of Louisiana, Inc. Papers at Loyola University, Monroe Library, Special Collections and Archives.
72 Steve Weissman, "Why Population Control Is a Rockefeller Baby," Ramparts 8, no. 11 (May 1970).
73 For an account of the 1959 "Draper Committee" report which advocated funding population control programs in developing countries, see Bonnie Mass, "An Historical Sketch of the American Population Control Movement," International Journal of Health Services 4, no. 4 (fall 1974): 651-676. See also Jade Sasser, "From Darkness into Light: Race, Population, and Environmental Advocacy," Antipode 46, no. 5 (July 2013).
74 Quoted in Enzensberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," 14.
75 For an analysis, see Ronald Walters, "Population Control and the Black Community," The Black Scholar 5 no., 8 (1974): 45-51.

legitimacy to these Johnson and Nixon-era population policies, whose ultimate aim was, again, to "save capitalism from itself."

Class warfare waged on the battlefield of demography endured as the Cold War came to a close. Several years before the Berlin Wall fell, U.S. officials articulated the threat of "global terror" in demographic terms, warning that "population pressures create a volatile mixture of youthful aspirations that when coupled with economic and political frustrations help form a large pool of potential terrorists.'"[76] Sometimes described as a "youth bulge," concerns about violent eruptions of disaffected youth in the Global South rehearsed Cold War fears that a surplus of young men in the former colonies, deprived of waged work, will turn to violence. As the former Chief Economist of the World Bank put it, "if a large cohort of young people cannot find employment and earn satisfactory income, the youth bulge will become a demographic bomb, because a large mass of frustrated youth is likely to become a potential source of social and political instability."[77] On the other hand, if young people can find employment, "the youth bulge will become a demographic dividend," as youth populations in the Global South are productively integrated into the global economy as "human capital."[78]

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76 Office of the Vice President of the United States, Public Report of the Vice President's Task Force on Combatting Terrorism, 138790 (Washington D.C.: National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 1986), https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/138789NCJRS.pdf.
77 Justin Yifu Lin, "Youth Bulge: A Demographic Dividend or a Demographic Bomb in Developing Countries?" Let's Talk Development (blog), World Bank, January 5, 2012, https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/youth-bulge-a-demographic-dividend-or-a-demographic-bomb-in-developing-countries.
78 Lin, "Youth Bulge."

Ultimately, the youth bulge and demographic dividend are a "euphemism for surplus population," as Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock write.[79] Surplus populations must either be integrated into the global economy as productive workers — or as a "reserve army of labor," driving down wages — or they must be contained.[80] The criminalization of racialized surplus populations, especially young black and brown men, has become a reliable pretext for their containment — often through mass incarceration, as is common in the United States, or through extrajudicial killings carried out by Northern militaries, nominally to combat terror. Taken together, concepts like the "youth bulge," "demographic bomb," and "demographic dividend" — all of which seek to account for the productivity and restiveness of national populations — highlight the enduring links between labor-power management, population control, and environmental protection in the Northern environmental imagination.[81]

3.3.3. Social Triage

Eco-catastrophe narratives mediate ecopolitical concerns about labor-power reproduction. But how do such narratives pass into the cultural imagination? I argue that eco-catastrophism, and especially neo-Malthusian resource and population alarmism, tends to pass into postwar U.S. culture as a kind of ecological nativism —

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79 Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, "The Global Securitisation of Youth," Third World Quarterly 39, no. 5 (2018): 854-870.
80 Sukarieh and Tannock, "The Global Securitisation of Youth," 855.
81 Anne Hendrixson and Betsy Hartmann, "Threats and Burdens: Challenging Scarcity-driven Narratives of 'Overpopulation'" Geoforum 101 (May 2019): 250-259.

rooted in the fear that racialized others are coming to rob white Americans' share of a shrinking pie. Exacerbated by lax immigration policies intended to slow wage inflation, and fueled by accounts of looming "limits to growth," the ecological nativism of the early 1970s reprised conservationist discourses that cast non-white immigration and fertility as chief threats to U.S. environments and, beyond these, white reproductive futurity. Arguing "that the root cause of environmental destruction is overpopulation by the wrong sorts of people," mid-century eco-nationalists successfully endeavored to make immigration restrictions a central part of the U.S. environmental agenda.[82] By the 1970s, population control was a mainstream environmentalist position, and in many cases, "'population control' was tantamount to border control."[83] Openly nativist groups like The Federation of American Immigration Reform sought to limit Mexican immigration to the U.S. in the name of environmental protection. Meanwhile, major organizations within the mainstream environmental movement, like the Sierra Club, supported population control and immigration restrictions well into the 1990s. The Sierra Club's "framing of environmental crisis in terms of 'scarcity' and 'overcrowding' was an important factor in building a public consensus for population control

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82 Betsy Hartmann, "The Ecofascists," Columbia Journalism Review, Spring 2020, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/ecofascists.php.
83 Sarah Wald, The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming Since the Dust Bowl (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 15.

interventions in the US and overseas," writes Betsy Hartmann.[84] It also lent credibility to an emerging discourse of "social triage."

The idea of "social triage" held considerable sway among environmental thinkers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "Limits to growth" predictions inevitably raised questions of distributive justice: as available global resources dwindle, how should food and other essential goods be rationed? William and Paul Paddock's *Famine, 1975! America's Decision: Who Will Survive?* (1967) answers this question in a fairly typical way.[85] Written by an agronomist and a U.S. diplomat, the influential pamphlet argues that, as a world food crisis approaches, the U.S. will have to decide which countries to aid and which to leave to die. They propose leaving to die the "hopeless countries" — Haiti, India, Egypt — which they consider unlikely to adopt strict birth control measures (the go-to prescription for neo-Malthusians), unable to coordinate food distribution, or, worse, likely to succumb to communist influence.[86] Lending theoretical heft to the Paddocks' speculations, Berkeley ecologist Garrett Hardin's very popular essay "Living on a Lifeboat" (1974) develops the social triage thesis into a "case against helping the poor."[87] "Each rich nation amounts to a lifeboat full of comparatively rich people," Hardin writes. "The poor of the world are in other, much more crowded lifeboats.…

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84 Betsy Hartmann, The America Syndrome: Apocalypse, War, and Our Call to Greatness (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017), 182.
85 William Paddock and Paul Paddock, Famine, 1975! America's Decision: Who Will Survive? (Boston: Little and Brown, 1967).
86 Felli, The Great Adaptation, 51.
87 Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," BioScience 24, no. 10 (Oct. 1974): 561–568.

What should the passengers on a rich lifeboat do? This is the central problem."[88] For Hardin, the facts of environmental degradation, exacerbated by overpopulation in the Global South, compels those on the "rich lifeboat" to resist the temptation to invite the poor aboard, or to throw supplies to their boats. Hardin's "harsh ethics" migrated into federal and international policy discussions in the late 1970s, as the U.S. confronted not food scarcity but food surpluses, which gave U.S. diplomats power to dictate policy to food-importing countries.[89] Triage means leverage when you control the resources. As Walter Orr Roberts, the Aspen Institute's director of "Food, Climate, and the World's Future," wrote in a 1977 memo outlining possible responses to global food shortages, the state's options are: "a. Triage? (Let the poorest third die in order to save the middle third.) b. Food only in return for population control measures?"[90] Here, Roberts clarifies how the logic of social triage not only foreclosed an investigation into the causes of global inequality, but also gave the U.S. a way to extend biopolitical control globally.

Borrowed from battlefield medicine, triage names a practical ethics; it presumes scarce resources and brackets the causes of injuries it aims to treat. Social triage brackets history in much the same way: it presumes inequality and naturalizes the conditions in which geopolitical tradeoffs are made. These conditions are neither natural nor

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88 Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," 564.
89 Emma Rothschild, "Food Politics," Foreign Affairs 54, no. 2 (Jan. 1976): 285-307.
90 Walter Orr Roberts et al., "Sociopolitical Impacts of a Carbon Dioxide Buildup in the Atmosphere Due to Fossil Fuel Combustion," in Report Prepared for Inexhaustible Energy Resources Planning Study Energy Research and Development Administration, Washington, DC: Business Intelligence Program, SRI International, July 1, 1977.

inevitable, however; an unequal distribution of property within a nation is the essence of the wage system, which is the engine of capitalist growth. Inequalities between the U.S. and other nations, meanwhile, vouchsafe U.S. hegemony, as Roberts's memo clarifies, because it gives the U.S. leverage to dictate national policy to dependent states. Invested in maintaining capitalist growth and U.S. hegemony, Hardin's social triage explicitly pushes the causes of inequality to the background: "We are all the descendants of thieves, and the world's resources are inequitably distributed. But we must begin the journey to tomorrow from the point where we are today," Hardin writes.[91] Like all social triage theories, Hardin's account naturalizes conditions of scarcity, competition, and emergency, while glossing over the class relations that shape the distributive priorities of the U.S. state. Delivering his argument as a parable — "a schematic genre denuded of historical content," as Rob Nixon describes it — Hardin rewrites a story about class conflict as a tale of scarce resources and tragic tradeoffs.[92] Like the Paddocks' pamphlet, and Roberts's policy memo, the ultimate lesson of Hardin's lifeboat parable is that some must be sacrificed, us or them. Insofar as it is they who are sacrificed, Hardin's practical ethics gives way to a politics of antagonistic reproduction that reappears in the climate imaginary as an obsession with "climate migrants."

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91 Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," 565.
92 Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, Genre, and the 'Tragedy of the Commons,'" PMLA 127, no. 3 (May 2012): 593-599; 595.

Elite concerns about migration have defined the climate issue since the 1980s. In his reply to a U.S. government committee's 1983 projections of climate-related migration, physicist Alvin Weinberg asked, "Does the Committee really believe that the United States or Western Europe or Canada would accept the huge influx of refugees from poor countries that have suffered a drastic shift in rainfall pattern?"[93] That there would be a "huge influx of refugees" was more or less taken for granted by adviser to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Crispin Tickell, who warned that climate migrants from England's former colonies would enter the country as resource competitors, cause social conflict, undermine national security, and potentially replace the white population (the specter of ethnic replacement that looms so large in the ethnonationalist imaginary). Flipping Weinberg's question into an ominous hypothetical, Tickell asked, "Is it going to be possible to resist this movement of refugees, of people looking for food and water and support and jobs and somewhere to put their families?"[94] The answer implied in the question is: not unless we tighten our borders.

Anatol Lieven's *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World* (2020) offers a more recent version of this argument.[95] Writing that "the single most important threat posed by climate change to the security of the Western

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93 Quoted in Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, Merchants of Doubt (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 131.
94 Quoted in Felli, The Great Adaptation, 252.
95 Anatol Lieven, Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

states and Russia is likely to be... further increases in migration," Lieven argues that "civic nationalism" is the only "realistic" response to catastrophe, scarcity, conflict, and displacement.[96] While not explicitly racist, and xenophobic only in the way nationalism often is, Lieven's vision of "climate nationalism" shares a reactionary premise with ecofascism — that there is not enough to go around; that some will win and others will lose. Foundational to the social imaginary of capitalist states, the presumption of material scarcity lends itself to a liberal ethics of sacrifice, on the one hand, and a conservative ethics of "antagonistic reproduction," on the other. The former's maxim is, *I must consume less so that others have enough*; the latter's is, *I must take what I need to save myself and my people*. The conflict between these two positions structures countless eco-dystopia plots, as well as much of the mainstream climate debate, increasingly reducible to a contest between eco-austerity and climate apartheid. Both positions naturalize the distribution of property and power specific to fossil capitalism in the neoliberal period. And in doing so, they not only weaken support for alternative models of distributive justice (e.g., spreading the wealth of capital's owners to ensure a more equitable and sustainable material abundance), but also foreclose properly political struggles to determine how, and to what end, wealth is produced in the first place.

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96 Lieven, Climate Change and the Nation State, 35.

3.4 The Political Economy of Ecofascism

3.4.1 Naturalizing Scarcity, Dramatizing Triage

The presumption of material scarcity — the idea that "there is not enough to go around" — is both the mystificatory premise of neoclassical economics and the animating fiction of capitalism in the neoliberal period. Claims of resource scarcity rationalize various forms of disingenuous belt-tightening: from corporate wage suppression to immigration restrictions to the state's refusal to institute public health programs. Meanwhile, neoliberal policy makes scarcity a lived reality for many. As wages stagnate, and as more and more of the basic requirements of life come with a price tag, capitalist economies careen towards a limit point where workers cannot afford to maintain some minimum standard of living and capital can no longer reproduce a labor force (the 2021 labor shortages resulting from the pandemic suggests what it might look like to arrive at this limit point). Put more technically, neoliberal deregulation and disinvestment— consequences of declining output growth and capital concentration among the ultra-wealthy — create a situation where the costs of social reproduction increase at the same time as the state withdraws support, resulting in a tendential "crisis of care."[97]

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97 Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," New Left Review 100 (July-Aug. 2016): 99-117.

One organic response to this crisis is an impersonal social triage coordinated by capitalist markets. As always, this triage follows a racial logic of antagonistic reproduction. For instance, of the more than 200,000 El Paso residents who lack health insurance, 87 percent are "Hispanic," according to 2018 health data.[98] This number does not paint a comprehensive picture of life in El Paso, but it indicates that the market for commodified healthcare reinforces "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" just as surely as border agents or white terrorists do.[99] In a sense, ethnonationalist terror both dramatizes and naturalizes the impersonal, racialized violence of austerity. Crusius offers several motives for murder, but he returns to the issue of scarcity — of resources and jobs, worsened by the twinned processes of automation and environmental degradation. Citing Dr. Suess's children's book *The Lorax*, Crusius writes that "our lifestyle is destroying the environment of our country. The decimation of the environment is creating a massive burden for future generations."[100] Faced with the prospect of environmental "decimation," figured explicitly as a threat to white futurity, Crusius turns to the question of distributive justice — who deserves access to an

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98 Matthew Buettgens, Linda Blumberg, and Clare Pan, Characteristics of the Uninsured in Texas, 2018 (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute, 2018).
99 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
100 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated. Crusius continues: "Water sheds around the country, especially in agricultural areas, are being depleted. Fresh water is being polluted from farming and oil drilling operations. Consumer culture is creating thousands of tons of unnecessary plastic waste and electronic waste, and recycling to help slow this down is almost non-existent. Urban sprawl creates inefficient cities which unnecessarily destroys millions of acres of land. We even use god knows how many trees worth of paper towels just wipe water off our hands."

American "lifestyle" as resource pressures intensify. Crusius singles out the "Hispanic population" for death in part because he considers them to be "invaders," and so considers their claim on the products of U.S. economic production to be illegitimate.[101] Beginning from the premise that there is not enough to go around, Crusius authorizes himself to make life-and-death decisions by invoking the sovereign's failure to do so, and justifies his distribution of death according to the rubric of racialized producerism already present in Locke and Thoreau: white settlers work and so deserve labor's products; non-white foreigners are idle and so deserve nothing. This familiar producerist rubric denies the productive labor performed by non-white workers, as well as their structural exclusion from the wage, and in doing so exposes them to precisely the punitive violence which compels their labor.

3.4.2 Keeping Immigrant Labor Cheap

In addition to naturalizing capitalist property relations, then, ecofascist violence keeps the price of immigrant labor low. Urban theorist Romain Felli observes that responses to climate migration are often sorted into two camps: economic neoliberalism, which advocates open borders in the name of labor mobility, and populist nationalism, which calls for closed borders in the name of "the people."[102] In reality, however, these two positions are wholly intertwined; capital benefits most from migrant labor when

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101 It is important to note that Crusius offers several explanations, not all of them coherent
102 Felli, The Great Adaptation, 285.

border policies heighten their precariousness. "The insecurity of labour creates security for capital," Felli writes.[103] Labor insecurity — and, more concretely, the violent disciplining of racialized surplus populations — has always played a key role in capital accumulation, as Marx's analysis of England's "bloody legislation" attests.[104] To take one piece of bloody legislation in the postwar U.S., the 1965 Hart-Celler Act imposed quotas on Mexican immigration despite labor market demand for low-waged workers, creating a large population of undocumented immigrants, as R. Andrés Guzmán writes.[105] Even as the U.S. was encouraging Mexican immigration to break the strength of U.S. labor, the threat of deportation and violence hanging over undocumented workers made these workers highly vulnerable to exploitation. More recently, the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 90s — which hobbled Latin American economies, sending migrants to the U.S. to fill low-waged jobs in agriculture and elsewhere — have enabled capital to absorb huge numbers of surplus workers at low cost. Throughout this history, institutions of state repression, including border agents and detention centers, have proliferated to contain workers who are "perfectly redundant" and, as such, extremely exploitable.[106]

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103 Felli, The Great Adaptation, 285.
104 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), 897.
105 R. Andrés Guzmán, "Criminalization at the Edge of the Evental Site," Theory and Event 19, no. 2 (April 2016).
106 In addition to ensuring their exploitability, "incarceration and deportation seek to arrest the disruptive potential of the masses," argues Guzmán, "Criminalization at the Edge of the Evental Site."

Marxist economists describe this dynamic as "super-exploitation:" the suppression of immigrants' wages in the Global North supplements the transfer of wealth from "semi-colonial" states in the Global South (i.e., states that are formally sovereign but economically dependent on developed capitalist states) to the imperial core.[107] Super-exploitation both fuels and is fueled by anti-immigrant violence. Political theorist Chris Chen writes that, as states in the Global North transition to neoliberal modes of political economy, "the surplus capital produced by fewer and more intensively exploited workers in the Global North scours the globe for lower wages, and reappears as the racial threat of cheap labour from the Global South."[108] State and civilian terror not only position themselves against this "racial threat," but also in a sense constitute it. In doing so, they keep racialized immigrant labor cheap. They also keep workers divided.

3.4.3 Dividing Workers

Otis Madison observed that the aim of white supremacist ideology "is to control the behavior of white people, not Black people. For Blacks, guns and tanks are

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107 Pröbsting, "Migration and Super-exploitation," 329. See also Vladimir Lenin: "The exploitation of worse paid labor from backward countries is particularly characteristic of imperialism. On this exploitation rests, to a certain degree, the parasitism of rich imperialist countries which bribe a part of their workers with higher wages while shamelessly and unrestrainedly exploiting the labor of 'cheap' foreign workers. The words 'worse paid' should be added and also the words 'and frequently deprived of rights'; for the exploiters in 'civilised' countries always take advantage of the fact that the imported foreign workers have no rights," in "Revision of the Party Program," Lenin's Collected Works, trans. Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna and ed. George Hanna (1917; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972).
108 Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism," Endnotes 3 (Sept. 2013).

sufficient."[109] Over the last four decades, white workers have seen material evidence of their ostensible supremacy go up in smoke. Wages have fallen, health outcomes have worsened, public goods and services have disappeared, air and water quality have deteriorated, social life has fragmented — partial consequences of the U.S. economy's neoliberalization, itself a partial consequence of what Robert Brenner calls the "Long Crisis" of declining U.S. output growth, which has destroyed the commons, shuttered key industries, and contracted social protections.[110] If the social category of "whiteness" is a designation of desert predicated on the imagined productivity of white workers, and which has traditionally promised certain benefits — the family wage, social security, environmental safety, etc. — then the growing precariousness of white workers in the neoliberal period destabilizes the very meaning of whiteness.

The "white genocide" thesis animating Crusius's ecofascism locates the destabilization of whiteness in migration and "the birthrates" — i.e., perceived imbalances in fertility among white and non-white populations. But it registers a more general "crisis of care." As the social realities of neoliberal fossil capitalism — alienation, environmental degradation, rising costs of reproduction, indebtedness, the loss of authentic local cultures, spatial fragmentation and isolation, etc. — come into conflict

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109 Cedric Robinson uses this quote as an epigraph for chapter two in Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 82.

110 HoSang and Lowndes, Producers, Parasites, Patriots, 16; Robert Brenner, The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005 (New York and London: Verso Books, 1998).

with neoliberalism's ideological promise of self-actualization through individual effort and wise investment, ethnonationalism promises both an explanation for and temporary relief from the resulting dissonance.[111] One consequence of neoliberalization, then, is the resurgence of compensatory forms of white identitarianism, evidenced by rising membership in various ethnonationalist groups, mounting violence against non-white people, as well the elevation of exclusionary nationalism in U.S. federal policy.[112]

Any psychic or social relief offered by white identitarianism is, of course, illusory.[113] Like all politics rooted in theories of racial hierarchy, nativism disciplines workers by dividing the working class into "hostile camps," as Marx and Engels called them.[114] In doing so, racial hierarchies mystify the contradictions of what Cedric Robinson calls "racial capitalism." Racial capitalism is a complex and contested concept, but Robinson's key observation is that capital's early procedures of accumulation depended on slavery in the Americas and ethnic divisions in Europe, such that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was not to homogenize but to

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111 Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, "Making Sense of Populism," Catalyst 3, no. 4 (Winter 2020). Writing about the rise of right populist parties in Europe, Jäger and Borriello observe that because "states have ceded many of their interventionist capacities and cater to capital to an irrational degree," for citizen workers "the management of a labor supply now appears to be the only viable substitute for wage bargaining.

112 Phil A. Neel, Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict (Chico: Reaktion Books, 2018.

113 Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation" Critical Inquiry 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 551-574.

114 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978).

differentiate…." Robinson writes.[115] The differentiation of people according to racial categories not only facilitated "primitive accumulation," but also enabled capitalists to drive down the price of labor by enforcing racialized wage differentials. Beyond this, Chen argues, capitalism's "racial basis" lies in the production of racialized surplus populations that compose a "threat" which must be policed and contained.[116] Just as capital requires the reproduction of workers who can shovel and build and clean and distribute the commodities that earn capitalists profit, it also demands the production of surplus bodies and spaces that can be wasted: evicted, neglected, displaced, dispossessed, imprisoned, even killed. The ideology of racial hierarchy, in other words, shores up (racial) capitalism's key biopolitical operations — putting people to work and getting them out of the way — while limiting workers' ability to organize themselves into an effective counter-force.

Accumulating capital has of course always involved pitting workers against each other. Silvia Federici teaches that primitive accumulation not only entailed the accumulation of dead and living labor through enclosure, but was "*also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class*."[117] Such divisions "mystify the

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115 Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1983) 26; Marx: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moment of primitive accumulation," in Capital Vol. 1, 915.
116 Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality."
117 Federici, Caliban and the Witch, 63-64. Emphasis in the original.

contradictions built into" capitalist social relations: while owners enjoy real material power, workers are invited to cobble together an ersatz freedom by dominating fellow workers. And while owners amass capital, workers fight over the crumbs, which can mean that the most violent repression issues from workers defending their position in a fragile hierarchy. Class solidarity fractures. Whether directed against black citizen-workers or immigrant laborers from Central America, the ideology of racial hierarchy obscures the material interests working-class whites share with fellow workers of all racial ascriptions. In all of its guises, a nativist white working class, Toscano writes, is not a stepping stone to revolutionary politics, but a "racialized simulacrum of a proletariat" that poses an obstacle to genuine class politics: it limits workers' ability to understand their collective oppression and their collective power.[118]

3.5 Closing the Gap between Knowing and Doing

Perhaps ecofascism's most significant feature is that appears, quite explicitly, as a resolution to impasse — a way to bridge the gap between knowing and doing. "INACTION is also a choice," Crusius writes, expressing the emergency logic that subtends even the most well-intentioned efforts to the raise the alarm about the climate crisis.[119] Nativist violence is presented as an immediate, personal way to quiet that alarm, at least temporarily. Inviting a fragmented working class to respond to ecological

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118 Toscano, "Notes on Late Fascism."
119 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated. Emphasis in the original.

degradation by scapegoating displaced and dispossessed workers who appear to be the cause of labor market competition, dwindling state benefits, blight, pollution, and other forms of scarcity, an ecofascist politics of antagonist reproduction offers precarious white workers a course of "action" that promises to defend their position in a fragile social hierarchy. And yet ecofascism is, ultimately, quietist. In responding to social and environmental degradation by attacking other workers, ecofascists concede that they can do nothing to combat the root causes of exploitation and environmental degradation. This concession to the immutability of capitalism occurs over and over again in the El Paso shooter's manifesto. "Continued immigration will make one of the biggest issues of our time, automation, so much worse," Crusius writes. "Some sources say that in under two decades, half of American jobs will be lost to it."[120] For Crusius, immigration must be blocked because automation cannot be stopped — because fossil capital's tendency toward energy deepening represents an inexorable logic of replacement. Where luddites might have found a reason to burn machines, ecofascists see a reason to attack immigrant workers — non-white replacements viewed as competitors for scarce work hours, wages, space, provisions, and power. Even in its most horrific gestures, then, ecofascism concedes to the pervasive sense that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism.[121]

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120 Crusius, "An Inconvenient Truth," unpaginated.
121 See Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (Washington: Zero Books, 2009).

Far-right groups sometimes recruit by "red-pilling." The term alludes to a scene in *The Matrix* (1999) in which Neo is invited to learn the truth about his computer-simulated world by taking a red pill. In right-wing discourse, "red-pilling" describes an analogous process, where a potential recruit, usually online, elects to discover the "truth" of various racist views, which he understands to have been covered up by a conspiracy.[122] Though he does not use the phrase, the El Paso shooter rehearses the gesture of "red-pilling" when he describes the demographic effects of climate migration as "an inconvenient truth" (this is also the title of his manifesto). The phrase also alludes to the 2006 documentary by the same name, which features Al Gore, and which tried to counter climate denialism in the U.S. by hammering home the facts of anthropogenic climate change. The reappearance of this phrase in an ecofascist text points to the limitations of anti-denialism as a Left strategy. Simply highlighting the "facts" of climate change, without situating them in an analysis of climate change's material causes, can create a kind of impotent urgency which breeds hard-nosed, "realistic" responses from the extreme right and neoliberal center. Even in progressive discourses, anti-denialism can compel a search for "actions" which end up reinforcing the sense that the current organization of resources and power cannot be meaningfully altered.

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122 Robert Evans, "From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were "Red-Pilled," Bellingcat, Oct. 11, 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2018/10/11/memes-infowars-75-fascist-activists-red-pilled/.

In sum, climate impasse has been met by an openly conservative perspective that interprets the contradictions of fossil capitalist development as a threat to *white reproductive futurity*, and which seeks to resolve those contradictions by limiting non-white peoples' capacities for reproduction. On this ethnonationalist view, the primary threat of fossil capitalism is not ecological collapse or species extinction, but "climate migration" — the addition of non-white resource competitors in the Global North — which can only by addressed by defending the territorial boundaries of a "nation" that is imagined to be white. The nation's imagined whiteness is confirmed not by an appeal to white indigeneity (e.g., "blood and soil") but by an appeal to Lockean conceptions of ownership as enclosure and a Thoreauvian understanding of the "natural" as "wilderness." Thus, the ethnonationalist view responds to the urgency of impasse — the sense that climate change is an occasion for "action" — in a way that not only capitulates to the immutability of energy-intensive capitalist production, but also materially aids the reproduction of fossil capitalism in a moment of crisis by keeping Latinx immigrants' wages low, and all workers' solidarity broken, through racist terror. If fossil capitalism implies a regime of environmental management that depends on dividing habitable from hostile space — separating the regularized "settings" of monocrop agriculture, paved interstates, and air-conditioned malls, from spaces that can be wasted and destabilized, including via carbon dioxide emissions — ethnonationalist violence shores

up this division by enforcing the division of workers into two, racialized camps: those "made to live" and those allowed to die.

Such a division, though not new to capitalist production, portends a possible *modus operandi* for fossil capitalism under conditions of increasingly widespread ecological breakdown. As the effects of planetary warming become increasingly frequent and costly to bear, capitalist states like the U.S. may abandon pretensions to inclusion, multiculturalism, and social progress — the telos of a neoliberal self-narration that associates, ideologically, the expansion of free-market capitalism with the progressive inclusion of various "others" in civic life — and discipline states and civilian groups into adopting a more aggressive "politics of antagonist reproduction" that is capable of securing the conditions of capital's reproduction as the contradictions of such reproduction become increasingly obvious. This may mean building walls against those dispossessed by worsening weather, as well as enlisting various forms of xenonationalism to enforce the disposability of non-white and non-citizen laborers. A weak hegemony is a violent hegemony, Gramsci teaches. Ecofascists, though occupying a largely uncoordinated minority position in global politics, nonetheless offer a glimpse into both the forms of racialized violence currently meted out by fossil capitalism, as well as the more openly hostile guises capital may adopt to preserve the current balance of forces as the planet warms.

4. Fixing the Broken Piece: Fugitivity, Sabotage, and Sublimation in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

"Any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. The ice caps gonna melt, the water's gonna rise, and everything south of the levee's going under."

—Bathsheba, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

For a film with a hurricane at its heart, Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) draws surprisingly little on the image repertoire of American disaster.[1] No palm trees doubled over in the wind, few tarpaulined houses, only one bloated body (a cow). The storm itself gets almost no screen time. The sky darkens. Thunder crashes. Rain sloshes into the camp where Hushpuppy waits, arms squeezed into plastic floaties, while her father pumps shotgun shells into the night. A heaving boar appears on screen. And then, morning. There is damage. Water has swamped their outpost on the far side of the levee, aptly named the Bathtub, and several residents have gone missing. But it is not until days later, as salt water trapped by the levee refuses to subside, killing fish and fowl, that the storm's effects become clear. No fresh water, no food. No food, no Bathtub. Like many of the more and more places wrecked by climate disaster, the Bathtub's residents have a choice: relocate or rebuild. Rebuilding means first draining

1 Beasts of the Southern Wild, directed by Benh Zeitlin (Century City, CA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).

the Bathtub — or as Hushpuppy says in a voiceover, sententious in the way children sometimes are: "fixing the broken piece" and restoring coherence to the universe.[2]

The broken piece is the undisputed villain of post-Katrina discourse: the levee. And as in much post-Katrina fiction and criticism, the levee enters *Beasts* as a figure of both world-making and world-ending. Dividing a rationalized "dry side" from a wild "outside," the levee allows the Bathtub to cohere as a rare, pre-modern space — a self-contained magical universe beyond the market's reach — while simultaneously offering up the Bathtub as a commons to be sacrificed. By using the term "sacrifice," I intend not only to invoke Naomi Klein's theory of "sacrifice zones," which describes how fossil capital destroys "othered" spaces to extract raw materials or dump waste, but also to suggest that the Bathtub's destruction does not exclude it from the symbolic regime of the dry side.[3] Neither the Bathtub nor its residents are Agamben's *homo sacer*; their exclusion is ultimately incorporated not negatively, as a kind of exception, but positively, as an expiatory image of a *once there was*.[4] In the mold of the Standard Oil-commissioned *Louisiana Story* (1949), which casts southern Louisiana as a *primordial bayou* to provide cover for oil extraction, *Beasts* incorporates the Bathtub into the

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2 *Beasts*, 00:49:00.
3 Naomi Klein, "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World," London Review of Books 38, no. 11 (June 2016).
4 Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazan (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).

symbolic regime of the dry side even as it wipes it off the map.[5] With aesthetic incorporation comes material subsumption. Trapping water in the undrainable Bathtub, the levee narrows residents' post-storm options until they must choose either to adopt the dry side's forms of life (waged labor and commodified social reproduction, enforced by the threat of violence, imprisonment, and death; getting "plugged into the wall," as Wink puts it), or to find some other way to make the universe cohere.[6]

The plot to restore coherence is ironic, tragic, and doomed. Their land submerged, the men of the Bathtub plan to blow up the levee, and Hushpuppy pulls the wire that trips the bomb. The water recedes, but the salt remains, and state agents take Hushpuppy, her father, and everyone else to the dry side. A fugitive tactic, sabotage is precisely the sort of guerilla maneuver scholar-activists like Andreas Malm insist are urgently needed to slow planetary catastrophe.[7] It bypasses paralyzed institutions, refuses the politics of recognition, and strikes a blow proportional to warming's deadly stakes. So what does it mean that here the maneuver fails? The film offers the possibility that fossil capitalist infrastructure has remade the world so completely that its relations can neither be escaped nor resisted. The Bathtub's bind is everyone's bind: dry side or outside, no one can live with fossil capitalist infrastructure, nor can anyone live without it. This reading no doubt invites accusations of fatalism. But I would argue that the

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5 Louisiana Story, directed by Robert J. Flaherty (New York: Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, 1948).
6 *Beasts*, 01:05:42.
7 Andreas Malm, How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire (New York and London: Verso, 2021).

film's depiction of failed sabotage helpfully clarifies why, as Malm bewilderedly wonders, there has been no mass effort to tamper with fossil capitalist infrastructure: first, in a world remade by the social relations of fossil capital, there are few defensible outsides — few spaces not somehow dependent on pipelines, levees, and the like; second, the realities of state violence mean that sabotage, even as a survival tactic, comes with risks few are willing to bear on their own. *Beasts* does not light a way out of this bind, but it provokes a thought: perhaps refusing fossil capitalism in the 21st century does not look like running away from or monkeywrenching with petromodern infrastructure, but rather strategizing ways to take it over and make it do something else.

The film gestures in this direction but, in the end, does not go there. Instead, *Beasts* stages the impasse looming over U.S. climate politics — "the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled," as Bathsheba puts it; stitching it back up feels impossible — and answers with a prospective elegy for a doomed people.[8] Reprising the "machine in the garden" plots of nineteenth-century pastoral fiction, this prospective elegy for the climate change era mediates the effects of planetary heating as the tragic but perhaps preventable loss of non-modern places and ways of life.[9] The resilient Cajun and other personifications of "authentic" non-modernity have become familiar *dramatis personae* in

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8 *Beasts*, 00:09:08. The archetype of this genre is Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (1962; New York: Mariner Books, 2002).
9 Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

climate declension narratives, their near-inevitable erasure standing in for the profound cultural loss caused by rising global temperatures as well as the urgent need to *do something* to stem the bleeding.[10] When represented from within these ostensibly non-modern perspectives, climate change registers as an "onslaught from without," standing in for the genocidal thrust of an imperializing capitalist modernity.[11] When represented from outside these perspectives, climate change looks like the loss of a constitutive outside, a "wilds" that sustains progress and development.[12] *Beasts* combines these two perspectives. Even as it puts the narration in Hushpuppy's voice, the film is addressed to "dry side" audiences; for these viewers, the flooding at the heart of the film reads as a metaphor for the destruction of modernity's outsides, the southern wilds which capital both needs and relentlessly plunders as it charges across the globe. The film ultimately preserves these wilds as an aesthetic ideal. In doing so, it answers the insolubility of impasse with the immortality of art — summed up by Hushpuppy's faith that, whatever happens, at least everyone will know that "once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub." On the one hand, we might read this move as another kind of enclosure; the film's aesthetic preservation of a threatened culture repackages

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10 For a fairly typical example, see James Fletcher, "The Washing Away of Cajun Culture," BBC News, Aug. 27, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34053365.
11 Samir Amin, Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism, trans. Brian Pierce (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1976), 200.
12 For an overview of the role of "wilderness" in colonial expansion, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995): 69-90.

destruction as a commodified image of loss, whose tragic beauty promises to dull the anxieties of dry side audiences aware that the fuels sustaining their lives condemn others to death. On the other hand, following Hushpuppy's interest in inscription as memory, we might read the film's attempt to preserve the wilds in art — to act as a kind of social memory unsettling the hegemony of the present — as a source of art's modest but real political power in the climate change era.

It is important to note here that *Beasts* depicts a complex, fictional place. The filmmakers never expected the film to attract the audience it did, nor did they intend the film to make a point much grander than the simple, almost folkloric observation that "everybody's daddy dies."[13] At the risk of flattening the text, then, I am here treating *Beasts*, first, as a kind of vernacular social theory — a way to think about how a politically engaged, broadly liberal U.S. audience might think through the effects of climate change in south Louisiana, an outpost of the Global South in their own backyards. Second, given that the film features mostly nonprofessional actors and enjoyed a jubilant reception in the region, I think it is also fair to treat *Beasts* as a meditation on cultural loss by and for the people of south Louisiana, a metonym for nothing except itself. Before exploring in more detail how *Beasts* treats such loss, I consider how the film mediates the political economy of climate disaster, putting the

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13 Nathan Harrison (Associate Producer, Beasts of the Southern Wild), interview with the author, Sept. 2021.

film in conversation with the huge corpus of Katrina literature and film produced since 2005, as well as some theories used to make sense of fossil capitalism's tendency to destroy places figured as "outside" petromodernity's normative economic structures and regime of sense.

4.1 The Political Economy of Slow Violence

Beasts is at once a singular and fairly typical post-Katrina artifact.[14] Released seven years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated New Orleans and points along the Gulf Coast, and filmed shortly after BP's Deepwater Horizon blowout began gushing crude into the Gulf, *Beasts* largely resists the temptations of apocalypse so common in climate fiction. Instead, it supplements familiar representations of environmental crisis with images of a slower and more sustained tragedy, one that not only inflicts bodily suffering, but also threatens a whole way of life. This approach places the film among an extended family of post-Katrina fiction and documentary films, television shows, and novels that elaborate an "environmental justice" analysis by dramatizing how industrial pollution, state neglect, structural racism, and infrastructures built for industry, not people, turn natural disasters into, as *Treme's* first-season protagonist Creighton Bernette puts it, "a mad-made fucking catastrophe"

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14 Although post-Katrina texts mostly set their action in New Orleans, the obvious focal point of post-Katrina analysis, Beasts is more or less alone in transposing concerns about structural catastrophe to the other side of the levee — in this case, the vanishing lowlands of southeastern Louisiana (notably, Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones (2011) is also set away from New Orleans, in Mississippi)

unfolding over years and decades rather than days or week. These include Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* (2006), David Simon's *Treme* (2010), Dave Eggers's *Zeitoun* (2009), Dan Baum's *Nine Lives* (2008), Josh Neufeld's *AD: New Orleans after the Deluge* (2008), Martha Serpas's *The Dirty Side of the Storm* (2007), and Jerry Ward Jr.'s *The Katrina Papers: A Journal of Trauma and Recovery* (2008).[15] Critical analyses in academic and popular media have likewise treated Katrina as revealing America's "dark side" — an event laying bare the systematic but obscured violence embedded in the social geography of the U.S.[16] Riffing on Foucault's "biopower" concept, Henry A. Giroux's influential essay on the "biopolitics of disposability," for instance, takes Katrina as evidence that the evisceration of the welfare state has made a racialized logic of *letting die* at least as central to neoliberal governance as *making live*.[17] This sort of argument enters the Environmental Humanities with books like Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* (2011), which observes that environmental disasters inhere in the social geography of modernity, meting out violence on timelines hard to capture in succinct narrative arcs.[18] Reading "event" (disaster) into "setting" (the social geography of everyday life) has since become the Environmental Humanities' *de rigueur* critical move.

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15 I am indebted to Stephanie LeMenager's catalogue of post-Katrina art in Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
16 Jonathan Freedland, "Receding Floodwaters Expose the Dark Side of America— But Will Anything Change?" The Guardian, Sept. 4, 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/05/hurricanekatrina.usa5.
17 Henry A. Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," College Literature 33, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 171-196.
18 Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

In step with the post-Katrina analytical turn, *Beasts* registers a shift from an event-based conception of disaster to one that observes disaster in everyday life.[19] Yet whereas post-Katrina accounts tend to dramatize how social institutions distribute disaster's effects — especially how New Orleans's geography of racialized neglect heightens flood risk for the city's black majority — *Beasts* asks not just how but *why* disaster is distributed unevenly, and with what effects.[20] The Bathtub faces ruin when the levee works as designed, not when it breaks, suggesting that socially differentiated exposure to risk is not an unfortunate but a functional component of the region's political economy. More, "slow violence" appears on screen not simply as flooding — as it does in much Katrina fiction, where it strikes audiences as a "dark" byproduct of state neglect, racism, climate change, etc. — but as a transformation in the characters' mode of social reproduction. The lingering water undermines what we might call the Bathtub's non-commodified care economy, as well as the forms of life this economy sustains: social interdependence, a mix of common and personal property, a relative absence of racial hierarchy, gender fluidity, closeness with nature, unity of speech and world

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19 Other narratives, like Spike Lee's documentary, read event into setting by showing how modern infrastructures of enclosure and rationalization expose Black and working class New Orleanians to everyday structural violence exacerbated by punctual disasters.

20 When these texts attempt to answer questions about how and why risk is distributed unevenly, they tend to so by way of "analogy," as Adolph Reed Jr. argues. They gesture vaguely at histories of slavery, redlining, or state disinvestment, but do not attempt to explain how and why hierarchies cemented decades and centuries ago have been consistently reproduced over generations, such that they would guide the unfolding of a 21st century hurricane. Ultimately, as a I argue more fully in Chapter 5, a distributional analysis leads to a redistributive politics, rather than a politics geared towards changing the mode of production. Adolph Reed Jr., "Three Tremés," Nonsite.org, July 4, 2011, https://nonsite.org/three-tremes/.

(magic). The annihilation of the Bathtub's non-modern socio-cultural relations is the "violence" with which the film is concerned.

Formally, Zetilin marks this violence by toggling between realist and irrealist cinematic conventions. The film weaves fantastical elements into otherwise naturalistic sequences (the aurochs, especially), and bends a conventional linear arc into something more like a fable.[21] In the opening sequence, Hushpuppy builds a nest for a baby bird, eats, and joins her neighbors for a party, immediately thrusting audiences into a world organized around cycles of birth, death, and regeneration.[22] Yet the film is also "tensed toward the future."[23] The second sequence finds Wink and Hushpuppy in a boat, a repurposed pickup, floating near a concrete flood wall. Refinery smokestacks loom on the other side. "Ain't that ugly over there?" Wink asks. "We got the prettiest place on Earth."[24] Irony shadows the claim. Wink knows that not even the "prettiest place" can survive modernity's relentless forward march. Wink is dying; the climate is changing. Aurochs charge across the screen in dreamy sequences as Hushpuppy lays out the conflict: "One day the storm's gonna blow, the ground's gonna sink and the water's gonna rise up so high there isn't gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole bunch of water."[25] The tragedy here is not just that Bathtub will wash into the ocean. It is also that, as the

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21 *Beasts*, 00:02:26. Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 140.
22 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 140.
23 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 207.
24 *Beasts*, 00:04:20.
25 *Beasts*, 00:06:28.

Bathtub's subsistence economy gives way to life mediated by capital, enchantment will give way to the pale rationality of the dry side.

Beasts narrates disenchantment as tragic loss. Tragic, but not shocking. If, as Rosa Luxembourg observed, capitalism's margins exist to be destroyed, then fictions of exteriority are destruction's engine and alibi. In the early days of capital's sojourn to the New World, political philosophers and colonial administrators cast the continent as wilderness, *terra nullius*, demanding enclosure.[26] In Louisiana, it was the levee that drew the line between inside and outside, between civilization and vast wilds to be domesticated.[27] Colonial policy required levee construction around New Orleans and adjacent agricultural land as early as 1723, and throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, French and Spanish colonial administrators designated swamps beyond these settlements commons to encourage their "reclamation."[28] Landowners reclaimed Louisiana's commons throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, "improving" them by extracting timber, fur, salt, sulphur, and later oil, or by draining them for cash-crop cultivation. The 1859 and 1860 Swamp Lands Acts permitted sales of federal swamps to private buyers to fund the construction of flood control infrastructure, highlighting historical links between public infrastructure and the private improvement of enclosed

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26 For the classic account, see John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).
27 Craig E. Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana: A Historical Review," Journal of Coastal Research 33, no. 3 (May 2017): 699-711; 708.
28 Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana," 701.

territory. This was also an aesthetic effort, shifting, within the U.S. imperial imagination, the ever-conquerable outside from the West to the southern swamps: beginning in the 1880s, as the western frontier "closed," the U.S. Department of Agriculture and private land speculators drained wide swathes of Louisiana's wetlands for agriculture, replacing extensive enclosures (the West) with intensive enclosures (the coastal bayous).[29] Throughout the 20th century, those same bayous, and eventually the Gulf of Mexico itself, were opened up to oil and gas drilling, which have transformed much of the region from wasteland into "sacrifice zone."

Film has aided this transformation. *Beasts*'s most striking antecedent is *Louisiana Story*, a 1949 film about a boy and his pet racoon that immediately became a template for subsequent depictions of "Cajun country." Commissioned by Standard Oil of New Jersey, the lyrical film sought to promote drilling in Louisiana by linking oil extraction to the magic of Louisiana's backwoods. Extraction's aesthetic logic is usually thought of as a kind of invisibilizing: in order to license extraction in a particular place, private or state actors figure that place as empty — an "intolerable commons" to be enclosed or removed.[30] By contrast, *Louisiana Story* figures the bayou as full of wild life, a place of energetic but unintelligible vitality defined by closeness with nature. Extraction is not a

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29 The 1803 purchase of the Louisiana territory from France resulted in further enclosure, as the U.S. government began selling public "wastelands" to private buyers; the federal government sold Louisiana swamp land to timber companies starting in 1870, depleting Louisiana's cypress stands almost completely by the 1930s, per Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana," 701.

30 Jennifer Wenzel, "Afterword: Improvement and Overburden" in Postmodern Culture, eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O'Driscoll, and Mark Simpson, 26, no. 2 (January 2016): unpaginated.

matter of fencing off this land, but of channeling its vital force. When an oil well starts spewing crude, it registers on screen not as a disaster but an upsurging of the primordial power that makes the bayou magical. Since the film's release, the region has become a crucial workhouse of North American fossil capital — everywhere dotted with rigs, pipelines, refineries, chemical plants — as well as the continent's most valuable waste dump.[31] Dwelling on the effects of this waste, *Beasts* both trades on and defamiliarizes romantic images of the "southern wild" popularized by *Louisiana Story*. In doing so, *Beasts* helps us to see that Louisiana's "sacrificial places and people" are not an unfortunate byproduct of an otherwise progressive modernity, but a constitutive feature of a political economy that romanticizes its outsiders as a prelude to their dispossession.[32]

4.1.1 Proletarianization by Destruction

Put somewhat differently, *Beasts* suggests that destruction pays. Here the film stumbles into several fierce contemporary debates: about the nature and source of value, the limits of capitalist expansion, and the precise consequences of socio-environmental transformations — climate change, most especially — for capitalist political economy.

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31 I define fossil capital, broadly, as an "economy of self-sustaining growth predicated on the consumption of fossil fuels," per Andreas Malm, The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 21.

32 On sacrificial people, see Naomi Klein: "The thing about fossil fuels is that they are so inherently dirty and toxic that they require sacrificial people and places: people whose lungs and bodies can be sacrificed to work in the coal mines, people whose lands and water can be sacrificed to open-pit mining and oil spills," in "Let Them Drown," unpaginated.

On one side are theorists like Nancy Fraser and Jason W. Moore who argue that socio-environmental destruction creates opportunities to profit in the short-run, but threatens capital existentially over the longer term. Clear cutting, mountaintop blasting, effluent dumping, carbon burning — these all create the conditions for further accumulation by removing barriers to direct extraction, and by socializing production's costs, surpluses, and waste products. Like unwaged domestic work, environments are "background conditions" of value accumulation, Fraser writes, ensuring both "the availability of nature as a source of 'productive inputs' and a 'sink' for production's waste."[33] But there is a catch: given the Earth's finitude, capital must eventually exhaust the freely appropriable "inputs" and "sinks" it needs to expand; it will at some point run aground on its own voraciousness. Marxist theorist James O'Connor called this the "second contradiction" of capital.[34]

A newer but more orthodox school of Marxist energy theorists led by Matthew T. Huber has challenged the "second contradiction" thesis. For Huber, scholars like O'Connor, Fraser, and Moore make a fatal error when they insist that capital's ecological contradictions exist beyond the abode of production among the "background

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33 Nancy Fraser, "Climates of Capital: For a Trans-environmental Eco-socialism," New Left Review 127 (Jan/Feb 2021): 94-127; 100.
34 James O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," Capitalism Nature Socialism 1, no. 1 (1988): 11-38.

conditions."[35] While the "second contradiction" may describe capital's tendency to undermine its environmental supports, Huber writes, the most important contradiction remains internal to capital: that between the social forces of production and the private relations of production. Following Andreas Malm's analysis in *Fossil Capital*, Huber argues that this basic, internal contradiction tends towards mechanization (which expresses the socialization of labor, as the autonomists stress), which, for most of modern history, has meant burning fossil fuels.[36] The tendency of the increasingly social forces of production to come into conflict with the obstinately private relations of production, via the expansion of the "social brain" of fossil-fueled technology, is the key driver of planetary crisis.[37] One can analyze the *effects* of this crisis using O'Connor's (or Moore's or Fraser's) schema, but one can only grasp its *causes* from within the "hidden abode" of production. And if climate change's causes lie within the realm of production, the solution to climate change lies with labor militancy at the point of production.

Huber's analysis helpfully clarifies how capital's internal contradictions drive planetary heating, helping us see labor struggle at the point of production for what it rightly could be: a struggle for a livable planet. But an exclusive emphasis on production risks overlooking ways that the "second contradiction" might also be internal to the

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35 Matthew T. Huber, "Ecology at the Point of Production: Climate Change and Class Struggle," in "Marxism and Climate Change," eds. Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft, and Casey Williams, special issue, Polygraph 28 (2020): 23-43.
36 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming (New York and London: Verso, 2016).
37 Huber, "Ecology at the Point of Production," 31.

capitalist system. While liberal political economists certainly adopt a narrow view of capital's ecological contradictions — viewing carbon and other pollutants as "externalities" that could be eliminated through the internalization of pollution's costs through ecosystem pricing — a more complete analysis of climate change as a class issue would take into account the way capitalism's ecological contradictions are also internal to capital's expansionary logic, not least because treating uncapitalized nature as a "sacrifice zone" pushes people on the margins of the formal economy into the twinned system of commodified life and waged work.[38]

I call this dynamic *proletarianization by destruction*. Proletarianization by destruction is closely related to but distinct from what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" — a theory that extends Marx's account of "primitive accumulation" to describe how capital continually expropriates uncapitalized resources, integrates these resources as inputs (circulating capital) into commodity circuits, and forces "commoners" into "waged life," or *proletarianizes* them.[39] Whereas the

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38 For an overview of the liberal view, see Robert Costanza, "The Value of the World's Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital," Nature 387 (1997): 253-260. The liberal "externality" concept has the added disadvantage of lending legitimacy to cap and trade, carbon taxation, and other carbon pricing schemes that seek to disincentivize fossil fuel consumption by incorporating the externalized costs of carbon emissions into the price of various goods. As Marxist economists have argued for decades, raising prices to disincentive use tends to redistribute previously externalized costs to working people, whose demand for energy-intensive social reproductive commodities is relatively inelastic. The Gilets Jaunes movement in France highlights the injustice of carbon taxation, as well as the need for democratized systems of social reproduction that do not condition one's ability to make a living on their acceptance of a planet-destroying fossil energy system.

39 David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," Socialist Register 40 (2004): 63-87.

dispossession Harvey describes tends to follow from appropriation, where capital turns commons into private property, or the "concentration of land and capital," which drives uncompetitive capitalists out of the market, proletarianization by destruction occurs when the creation of sacrifice zones destroys a peoples' means of social reproduction, directly or indirectly, forcing populations on the margins of the formal economy into the "cash nexus."[40] In Zeitlin's film, entry into the cash nexus is the chief threat posed by the storm. After the hurricane passes, as Wink roots around for fish in salty water, his head partially submerged, Hushpuppy whispers that maybe they ought to leave the Bathtub. Wink snaps back, suggesting vaguely that he refuses to shop at a grocery store.[41] Wink's refusal implies that buying food on the dry side, where they "got fish stuck in plastic wrappers," a potent image of commodified social reproduction, would mean working for a wage — trading the relative autonomy of subsistence (however romanticized in the film) for the despotism of the capitalist work system.[42] Refusing commodified social reproduction and, therefore, the wage system, Wink reconceptualizes climate change as a process that does not just reveal, or even enforce, racial and other inequalities in U.S. society, but also plays an active role in reproducing the political economy of fossil capital in part by drawing new labor into the market.

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40 Proletarianization is, however, rarely this straightforward, and the working poor often have one foot in and another foot out of waged labor. See Charles Tilly, "Proletarianization: Theory and Research" (working paper, Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan, 1979), 5.
41 *Beasts*, 00:46:08.
42 *Beasts*, 00:06:01.

Beasts's account of proletarianization mediates a real phenomenon in the Gulf South.[43] In southern Louisiana, more than a century of coastal land loss caused by extractive industry (timber, salt, oil, gas), logistics infrastructure (pipelines, shipping channels), flood management systems (levees and spillways), and industrial pollution — all subsidized by a neo-colonial tax structure — have made resource-based livelihoods increasingly untenable.[44] Oil rigs and canals have wiped out resource bases like wetlands and oyster beds, and the state's coastal management programs have been "uprooting local residents slowly but repeatedly."[45] Fossil capitalism's climate change effects — supercharged hurricanes that collide with an already uneven social geography to devastate vulnerable populations — are likewise creating more places that are "too heartbreaking to leave," but "too expensive to stay."[46] Populations have been steadily

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43 The partial and uneven proletarianization of independent shrimpers in southern Louisiana, for instance, has followed a complicated version of this model, as persistently high operating costs combined with persistently low retail prices for shrimp (each a partial consequence of the 1979-80 oil shock) have required owner-operators (and notably, their wives and children) to rely increasingly on onshore waged labor, often in oil and gas. See Brian Marks, "The Political Economy of Household Commodity Production in the Louisiana Shrimp Fishery," Journal of Agrarian Change 12, no. 2 (April and July 2012): pp. 227–251.
44 Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana," 708. See also Barbara Allen: Petrochemical companies were lured to the Lower Mississippi River by "a lucrative government package: no local property taxes; stabilization of the riverbank by the Corps of Engineers, ensuring excellent docking facilities; new state highways, including the Sunshine Bridge, to make the small community accessible to all modes of transportation; and, last but not least, a 'no politics attitude from the governor's office,'" in Barbara Allen, "Cradle of a Revolution? The Industrial Transformation of Louisiana's Lower Mississippi River," Technology and Culture 47, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 112-119; 114.
45 Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana," 708.
46 Xander Peters, "Too Heartbreaking to Leave, Too Expensive to Stay: Louisiana Coastal Communities Left in Limbo," Southerly, Aug. 7, 2020, https://southerlymag.org/2020/08/07/too-heartbreaking-to-leave-too-expensive-to-stay-louisiana-coastal-communities-left-in-limbo/.

declining.[47] And while Louisianans displaced from coastal areas have traditionally worked in oil and gas, the kinds of jobs they work today mirrors the decades-long shift towards low-waged, casualized work in transportation, logistics, service, and care industries in the U.S.[48] Many migrants work for multinational logistics corporations like Amazon and Uber.[49] Plenty cannot work at all. Louisiana's unemployment rate consistently exceeds the national average, and the prison system absorbs an additional 50,000 surplus workers, the vast majority Black.[50]

Louisiana is just one point on a global map of proletarianization by destruction. In her study of climate change in southwestern Bangladesh, for instance, Kasia Paprocki observes that the threat of rising sea levels there has enabled the further enclosure of small rice farms by large landowners while creating a reserve army of low-wage industrial labor locally and in Kolkata and Dhaka, workhouse for the carbon-intensive

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47 Colten, "Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana," 708. The state government has introduced programs to resettle coastal residents, and while Louisianans strongly oppose relocation, many have been forced to move, per Craig E. Colten et al, "Social Justice and Mobility in Coastal Louisiana, USA," Regional Environmental Change 18 (2018): 371-383; 380.

48 On oil and gas jobs, see Julie K. Maldonado, Seeking Justice in an Energy Sacrifice Zone: Standing on Vanishing Land in Coastal Louisiana (New York: Routledge, 2019), 71. In the regional labor market area covering Isle de Jean Charles, the industries employing the most people are "health care and social assistance," "transportation and warehousing," and "retail trade;" "agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting" together employed just 507 people in 2019, according to data from the Louisiana Workforce Commission. "Employment and Wages 2019" (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Workforce Commission, The Department of Labor, 2019).

49 Will Sentell, "Bill to Expand Uber, Lyft in Louisiana Signed into Law by Gov. John Bel Edwards," The Advocate, June 11, 2019, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/politics/legislature/article_4425300e-8c59-11e9-954e-efb0f82b827c.html.

50 "Louisiana Profile," State Profiles, Prison Policy Initiative, updated 2021, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/LA.html. This figure does not include those who cycle into and out of county jails and so does not capture the full scope of the carceral system in the state.

international garment industry.[51] Displacement and proletarianization in Bangladesh are caused not by climate change in the abstract, but by the interaction of climate change effects and coastal infrastructure developed during British colonial rule and World Bank-imposed structural adjustment in the 1980s and 90s.[52] In Louisiana and Bangladesh — two very different places linked by a shared deltaic geography and a neo-colonial political economy — sea-level rise, coastal erosion, intensifying storms, salinization, and subsidence collide with colonial and capitalist infrastructures of regularization/exclusion to drive new rounds of accumulation that proletarianize workers as much through the *destruction* of land as through its enclosure. The now-familiar choice — relocate or rebuild — is thus really a choice between bearing the socialized costs of fossil capitalism or becoming integrated in its modes of life: moving to a city, working for a wage, paying rent, buying groceries and air conditioning and, if you are lucky, debt-financing a car and an iPhone. Whether these "mobile dispossessed" (Chapter 5) ever get jobs is almost beside the point: their presence in urban labor markets drives down wages, increasing the absolute surplus value generated through commodity production, while worsening conditions for all workers, employed or not, as production heats that planet.

This creates another contradiction, however. Capital's incorporation of its outsides — whether non-proletarian workers or the ecological commons — necessarily

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51 Kasia Paprocki, Threatening Dystopias: The Global Politics of Climate Change Adaptation in Bangladesh (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 54.
52 Paprocki, Threatening Dystopias, 55.

transfers a greater share of the burden of social reproduction to capital, threatening long-term profitability. If workers have no resources except what they receive in wages, firms must pay wages that are high enough to buy "fish in plastic wrappers" and reproduce workers' labor power.[53] Given this, Marxist social reproduction theorists have identified a "crisis of social reproduction" among the overlapping crises caused by rising planetary temperatures (a crisis I also address in Chapter 3).[54] In the neoliberal period, capitalist economies in the Global North have dealt with the threat of rising social reproduction costs in at least two, interdependent ways. On the one hand, lowered expectations combined with the proliferation of cheap commodities, largely underwritten by cheap oil and easy credit, have allowed capitalist economies to privatize social reproduction even as real wages stagnate and decline.[55] "Fish in plastic wrappers" is a fitting image for this phenomenon. On the other hand, the growth of the "prison-industrial complex" has given states a way to warehouse both surplus capital and surplus labor, turning social reproduction from a cost to a potential revenue source for investors, construction companies, and private prison operators, while also sustaining a pool of super-exploited, racialized workers for a variety of industries.[56]

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53 Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift:" A Theory of Crises in the Capitalist World-Ecology," The Journal of Peasant Studies 38 (2011): 1-46.
54 Fraser, "Climates of Capital," 95.
55 Tim Di Muzio, Carbon Capitalism: Energy, Social Reproduction and World Order (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
56 For an overview, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Beasts figures its characters' incorporation into dry side society precisely through images of repression and warehousing: the police descend on the Bathtub from helicopters, figures of panoptic surveillance, and take them to a clinic, a space of Foucaultian discipline. The clinic scene sets up the film's final act, in which the characters, faced with a choice between two equally untenable forms of "organized abandonment" (the sacrifice zone vs. the clinic/prison) elect to die on their own terms.[57]

The point here is not to adjudicate theoretical, much less empirical, debates on proletarianization in a warming world. Rather, the first point is that *Beasts* asks audiences to think about climate disaster not simply an "environmental injustice," which might reveal the deprioritization of non-white and poor people in the U.S. social imaginary, but rather as an opportunity seized on by capital to compel labor after slavery by eliminating non-commodified modes of social reproduction. Sacrifice zones are not, to put it more theoretically, Agamben's outside. Petromodern society requires spaces that can be sacrificed — wastelands that ratify the coherence and authority of fossil capital and its state supports, who derive legitimacy from their ability to protect citizens from death. And like the prison, the wasteland is not totally excluded from the material and symbolic regime that makes death legible as sacrifice. Such spaces of "organized abandonment" are incorporated into global political economy as dumping grounds and reserves for capitalism's surpluses — populations, capital, commodities,

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57 The term is from Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 28.

industrial waste, greenhouse gases — rather than simply as *dispotifs* of normalization, discipline, or subjectification. The second point is that *Beasts* mediates capital's tendency to run up against geographic limits — the "fundamental contradiction of capitalist expansion" — by dramatizing a transformation of the mode of social reproduction for a group of people figured as *outside* capitalist modernity.[58] In *Beasts*, the threat posed by climate change is not planetary annihilation but the destruction of non-marketized lifeways and, consequently, the subsumption of non-capitalist subjects into an economy already struggling to reproduce itself. The film's interest in the social reproduction of capitalism's outsiders thus mediates concerns about the reproduction of the fossil capitalist economy more generally, as the proliferation of sacrifice zones and proletarianization by destruction not only eliminate frontiers, but also force capital to internalize the costs of reproducing its productive forces to the point of threatening its long-term survival. If capital is, as Marx observed, "vampire-like," constantly in search of new outsides and fresh blood, Zeitlin's film imagines a future in which the blood has begun to dry up.

Beyond this, *Beasts* is unique among post-Katrina fiction in that it tries to give viewers a picture of fossil capitalism as a totality — as a set of relations that structures society in general, but which cannot be grasped completely or all at once. In thinking about climate change in terms of changing modes of production, the film encourages

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58 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 227.

audiences to locate the effects of planetary warming within the relations of production and social reproduction that are responsible for accelerating emissions, as well as the capitalist geographies that distribute waste according to a racialized logic of habitability and hostility. Thinking in terms of political economy — in terms of histories of production — is condition of moving beyond impasse.

4.2 Infrastructure, Genre, Fugitivity

As I suggested above, a changing mode of production entails a changing aesthetic regime.[59] The levee is a useful figure for thinking about the relationship between productive and aesthetic modes: on the one hand, the levee physically divides the dry side (petromodern) from the outside (pre-modern), and, on the other hand, figuratively cuts off the Bathtub from the "real world," rehearsing the foundational gesture of the classical utopia (the island or walled city). This division allows the filmmakers to indulge a kind of communitarian fantasy in their depiction of the Bathtub — to cast it as a near-utopian, pre-modern, multi-racial subsistence society fully independent of the dry side. Like all utopias, however, this one is ambiguous: the wall that allows the Bathtub to exist as a bounded community also threatens its survival. The levee is thus both the constitutive piece and the "broken piece," as Hushpuppy calls it. This contradiction offers another perspective on impasse: in the world of the film, the

59 This is a key point made by Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

conflict between knowing about climate change and doing something about it is staged as an impossible project to make the universe "cohesive," as Hushpuppy says, as outside forces begin to fracture and destroy it.[60] The impossibility of cohesion suggests the impossibility of escaping the ordering logic of petromodernity — an escape attempt we might call "eco-fugitivity" — as planetary warming pulls even the most distant outside into the churn of fossil-fueled production and reproduction.

To make sense of this claim, it is helpful to consider how, exactly, material and aesthetic infrastructures articulate to one another. Put schematically, material infrastructures like levees coordinate forms of social existence that are mediated by literary/cinematic genres: the set of expectations governing what happens to whom when in a work of narrative art. Literary genres of course have their own internal histories, but the key point from a historical materialist perspective is that genre, like all aesthetic form, enjoys a complex but ultimately necessary relationship to social form, itself structured by the dominant "mode of production." Jacques Rancière describes the relationship between social and aesthetic forms as a "distribution of the sensible."[61] In narrative art it is more precisely the distribution of the probable — the pattern of "events" that determines the likelihood of a given narrative action to occur; the space-

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[60] *Beasts*, 01:12:57.

61 Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, trans. and ed. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 152.

time of a text, its "chronotope," or rhythm.[62] Both materially and generically, the distribution of the probable is coordinated by infrastructure — technologies which both *express* and *regulate* the abstract, or formal, organization of a given time-space.

The levee is a specific type of modern infrastructure designed to minimize risk in particular spaces by submitting nature to rational control. Although river embankments predate modernity, and are not always constructed or maintained by the state, the flood management system maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expresses the social priorities of the modern U.S. state (disciplined by capital) and advances those priorities by regulating the world according to the state's interests. This state stakes a portion of its legitimacy on its ability to minimize risk effectively for certain populations — to banish the wild, dangerous, aleatory, and unpredictable from productive space — meaning that the political priorities expressed and advanced by flood infrastructure include displacing risk from the inside (or dry side, in the film) to the outside. Specifically, the flood control system built along the lower Mississippi River in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries distributed flood risk according to a racialized geography of settlement that expressed the priorities of an emerging fossil capitalist state, as well as the settler colonial, slave-powered economy out of which fossil capitalism grew.[63] Such priorities are expressed in the language of genre.[64] Flood

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62 Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 84.
63 Craig E Colten, "An Incomplete Solution: Oil and Water in Louisiana," Journal of American History 99, no. 1 (2012): 91-99.

measurements that describe a flood's severity based on how often it is likely to recur in a given period (e.g., a "500-year flood"), define severity with reference to a probabilistic accounting of disaster based on infrastructures designed to minimize flood risk in industrial, commercial, and urban zones. In the Lower Mississippi River, a 500-year flood is only a 500-year flood in relation to a complex, fossil-fueled system of hydrological management designed to protect sugar cultivation, oil extraction, petrochemical production, and commercial shipping.[65] This system "powers the rhythm of Louisiana," as a Shell billboard on Interstate-10 puts it. Without it, one would expect the river to overflow its banks at different intervals, and the "rhythm of Louisiana" would have a different feel. Narrative conventions always exist in relation to such rhythms, and texts that make claims to realism in the contemporary period mediate the abstract, imperializing rhythms of petromodernity, i.e., the combined and uneven rationalization of time and space.

If petromodernity's rationalization of time and space establishes the parameters of the real mediated by realism, then petromodernity's constitutive exclusions determine what lies beyond the real — what is fantastic, wild, magical, and mediated by *magic*

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64 Colten, et al., "Social Justice and Mobility in Coastal Louisiana, USA," 374.
65 Neither would there be high cancer rates, devastating downriver flooding, or towns abandoned to coastal erosion.

realism. Magic or magical realism is a contested concept with a long history.[66] I am drawing here on Fredric Jameson's account, which locates magic in those spaces not yet disenchanted by modernity, such that magic realism mediates "a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic."[67] On this view, it is not the eponymous beasts that enchant Zeitlin's filmic world but the improbable existence of a place so out of step with modernity — a place beyond the levee. In the Bathtub, relations between people and the land are unmediated by petromodern forms — neither the money and commodity forms, nor specifically neoliberal "entrepreneurial" and "financial" forms. In one scene, Wink pulls a catfish from the river with his bare hands, eschewing even the minimal mediation of a net or hook, and shares his catch freely with his neighbors. For viewers accustomed to supermarkets, there is something magical about this easy abundance, about a group of people sitting around a table overflowing with crabs, or a smoke-filled brothel where women dance with children in nightgowns. What is magical, in other words, is the film's richly articulated vision of a non-commodified care economy, exemplified by Wink, King of the Bathtub. Although, as King, Wink embodies patriarchal rule, roundly criticized by bell hooks for trading on racist stereotypes of abusive Black fathers, he is more often an avatar for solidaristic care than a swaggering

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66 The best overview is perhaps Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
67 Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," Critical Inquiry 12, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 301-325; 311.

exponent of rugged libertarianism.[68] It is always "feed up time" at Wink's place, and when Hushpuppy feeds Wink fried alligator in the film's penultimate scene, it is the assumption of her father's caregiving duties that ratifies her succession as King of the Bathtub.[69]

Jameson observes that the *punctum* in magic realist films is the thing that looks the newest — a shiny metal object, say, that breaks the spell.[70] The *punctum* in cinematographer Ben Richardson's images might be whatever reminds you most of "real life" in America: a truck bed from the early 2000s, a Miller High Life, hundreds of chicken biscuit wrappers. The levee is a punctum, too, casting the film's spell and breaking it. "They built the wall that cuts us off," Wink tells Hushpuppy early in the film, establishing the levee as a technology of real and literary world-building that divides inside from outside, real from magical, civilized from savage, industrious from

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68 bell hooks, "No Love in the Wild," NewBlackMan (in Exile), Sept. 5, 2012, https://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html.
69 This succession plot is part of the film's broader, and more complicated, exploration of gender, staged as a conflict between masculinized self-sufficiency and feminized interdependence, and narrated through Hushpuppy's coming into gender as both a feminine subject of care (as when she is "lifted" by her proxy mother) and a masculine agent of provisioning ("I'm the man," she shouts at Wink's urging). Yet the characters' relations of mutual dependence, combined with a sometimes masculinzed relationship to nature, hails the Bathtub's residents as something else entirely: "beasts," a description that characterizes their non-commodified care economy as both extra- and pre-modern, while evoking the racist classification of non-white people as other-than-human. "Beast it!" Wink demands, forcing Hushpuppy to crack open a crab with her bare hands. This association with animals dehumanizes Hushpuppy, but it also hides her from the state. "All the time, everywhere, everything's hearts are beating and squirting and talking to each other in ways that I can't understand," Hushpuppy narrates, noting that the animals with which she identifies speak a language that makes no sense to her, just as her existence makes no sense to people on the "dry side."
70 Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," 306.

idle, sensible from wild.[71] It also collapses these categories, making the Bathtub cohere and collapse at the same time. In this way, the levee not only rehearses the formal structure of the classical utopia, but also recalls Ursula K. LeGuin's specific attempt at utopian world-building in *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, which imagines a city protected by a single wall.[72] The central paradox of this "ambiguous utopia" is that it cannot exist without an outside that both provides utopia's condition of possibility and threatens its coherence.

The ambiguity of the Bathtub's utopia is figured in explicitly political terms. Part of what makes the "southern wild" magical is its illegibility — the incompatibility of its utopian vision with the petromodern imaginary, which registers the strangeness of non-commodified reproduction as a kind of nonsense. We might think of this vision in terms of what Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, in *The Undercommons*, call "fugitivity".[73] Discussing the 2009 film *Where the Wild Things Are,* Jack Halberstam writes in the book's introduction that fugitivity names a kind of "wild place" that "continuously reproduces its own wildness," existing as a utopian horizon "beyond" the "walls" of the modern.[74] *Beasts* invites audiences to view the Bathtub as such a wild place, a "southern wild" inhabited by "beasts" that defy modernity's rationalizing conventions. Like Louisiana's

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[71] *Beasts*, 00:04:20.
72 Ursula K. LeGuin, The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 1.
73 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
74 Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons," in The Undercommons, 7.

19th-century maroon communities, the Bathtub's wildness makes it (partly) invisible to state power.[75] "They think we all gonna drown down here," Hushpuppy narrates over an aerial shot of the Bathtub: ramshackle houses pressed up against open water. Inhabiting the state's perspective, the shot figures the Bathtub as empty, vulnerable, moribund. The camera cuts to the settlement below, where Hushpuppy dances and shouts with her neighbors, revealing the liveliness of the camp and the blindness of the aerial perspective. "We ain't going nowhere," Hushpuppy narrates.[76] The film's only real establishing shot of the Bathtub thus establishes nothing so much as the dry side's inability to see the fugitive community beyond the levee.

Following the black radical and postcolonial tradition of Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Moten and Harney (and Nietzsche, for that matter), one might view the Bathtub's relative invisibility as a starting point for liberatory politics. As Moten and Harney write, illegibility refuses the politics of recognition, finding self-determination in flight, always already in motion, from an oppressive, exploitative modernity.[77] For people and places already made wild or magical by their exclusion from capitalism's regime of sense — the politico-aesthetic conventions of universal translatability that make capitalism make sense, while consigning the subaltern to senselessness — Moten

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75 Patrick Nichols, "Freedom as Marronage as Anti-capitalism," Black Perspectives, Dec. 8, 2016, https://www.aaihs.org/freedom-as-marronage-as-anti-capitalism/.
[76] *Beasts*, 00:05:42.
77 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 11.

and Harney suggest that the best counter-attack is to double down on wildness, muteness, invisibility, non-compliance.[78]

Like utopia, illegibility is ambiguous, however. As the history of flood control infrastructure in Louisiana attests, designating a place *terra nullius*, depopulated or inhabited by "beasts" whose inability to speak confirms the illegitimacy of their law, can precede enclosure and genocide.[79] In the end, the utopian vision composed by *Beasts* — a totally self-sufficient, social reproductive economy free from the coercion of capitalist labor markets and the discipline of the state — is belied by the relations of dependence that link the Bathtub to the "dry side," however illegible its residents may be to state power. Residents of the Bathtub cannot survive the levee, which accelerates the flooding and land loss that will eventually submerge the Bathtub. Nor can they destroy the levee without destroying the thing that makes the Bathtub what it is: a place outside modern time and space. They try it anyway.

4.3 Sabotage and Sacrifice

I suggested earlier that *Beasts* mediates challenges to capitalism's expansion under conditions of planetary change. Crucially, the first challenge to the dry side — the

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78 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 50.

79 To give another example, Silvia Federici describes how European colonists in North America mistook Indigenous practices of common ownership for the absence of ownership altogether. "Thus, when the colonists came to New England they assumed that Indian territory was terra nullius, because they saw that the inhabitants had a loose attitude toward personal possessions and periodically moved their grounds. In reality, Indian families had a guaranteed use of their fields and of the land where their tents stood. But these were not permanent possessions," writes Federici, Re-enchanting The World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 80.

film's stand-in for the petromodern world writ large — arrives as an attack from below. After the storm, floodwaters trapped by the levee linger in the Bathtub, killing their food sources. This threat the community's coherence demands a quest to restore cohesion — to fix the broken piece. To that end, the men of the Bathtub stuff gas canisters into a hollowed out alligator gar fish, hook it up to a tripwire, float the makeshift bomb up to the floodwall, and swim back to their boat, tripwire in hand. In a moment of levity at the film's climax, one of the men drops the tripwire as the Bathtub's teacher, Bathsheba, drives up in another boat, demanding they call off the plot, warning (correctly) of retributive state violence. Stowed away on the men's boat, Hushpuppy finds the lost tripwire and, torn between her teacher's warnings and her father's exhortations to pull, trips the bomb that blows a hole in the levee. As debris rains, the camera cuts to receding water.[80]

For viewers familiar with the visual history of Louisiana, the scene reads as a dramatic restaging of the 1927 levee bombing, this time from below. During the Great Mississippi Flood of April, 1927, the governor approved the demolition of a levee in St. Bernard Parish, flooding the area to spare New Orleans; several famous photos captured the explosion.[81] The visual allusion to the 1927 bombing may remind audiences that capital, too, makes and unmakes the world as it pleases, with the explosion standing in

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[80] *Beasts*, 00:50:53.

81 Chris Dier, "When the Levees Blew Up: A 'Public Execution' of a Community," Chris Dier (blog), Feb. 16, 2014, https://chrisdier.com/2014/02/16/when-the-levees-blew-up-a-public-execution-of-a-community/.

for the structural violence baked into the architecture of modern political economy. Even so, blowing up the levee — the only depiction of infrastructure destruction carried out by "non-state actors" in U.S. cinema, as far as I can tell — is not figured as an overtly political act. Rather, like Estrella's riot in *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Chapter 5), punching a hole in the floodwall is an act of necessity — a last-ditch effort to keep the Bathtub whole in the face of slow but certain death. Indeed, the filmmakers modeled the scene not on the high-gloss theatrics of eco-terrorist monkeywrenching, but on everyday acts of rebellion in south Louisiana (one producer cited the case of a local fisherman, angered by an Army Corps embankment killing fish in his area, who simply bulldozed the embankment).[82] Like Estrella's riot, blowing up the levee is also an improbable act — unlikely but eminently possible — and as such a utopian gesture illuminating what *could* happen given conditions in the present. The bombing not only gives voice to universal hopes for self-determination, but also models one strategy for realizing such hopes: find your enemy's weak points and blow them up.

Sabotage has recently become a major topic in political theory, and Marxist theorists have developed several useful accounts of sabotage in response to pipeline blockades, valve shutoffs, and militant attacks on fossil fuel infrastructure, as well as the perceived decline of organized labor's power in the Global North. For Evan Calder Williams, sabotage mediates and disrupts the impersonal domination of capitalist

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82 Harrison, interview with the author, Sept. 2021.

infrastructure, "an enormous inhuman and self-drafting design project," that extends the pressures and constraints of capital accumulation to places far from its chief sites of production.[83] Figuring sabotage as a "contest over world-making" in a post-industrial economy whose power is dispersed by the fluidity of oil, Jeff Diamanti and Mark Simpson "begin with the premise that the reigning condition of productivity gains — achieved in industry by increasing energy input while decreasing human-labour input — minimises the political consequences of wage-based struggle, yet, simultaneously and paradoxically, exposes capital to non-wage-based forms of struggle."[84] Like other tactics outside "wage-based struggle," sabotage strikes at capital in the moment of circulation, challenging the conditions that compel waged labor and realize surplus value.[85] Indeed, the film's depiction of sabotage from below, an act of commoning that is more about survival than symbolism, resolves the core narrative conflict by attempting to restore conditions of non-commodified social reproduction — again recalling Estrella's riot, which aims to abolish marketized social reproduction and, therefore, the compulsion to labor for a wage.

Drawn from Wobblie accounts of gear jamming and manuals for anti-Nazi resisters, critical theories of sabotage tend to view the sabot as a disrupter of flow: the

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83 Evan Calder Williams, "Manual Override," The New Inquiry, March 21, 2016, https://thenewinquiry.com/manual-override/.
84 Jeff Diamanti and Mark Simpson, "Five Theses on Sabotage in the Shadow of Fossil Capital," Radical Philosophy 2, no. 2 (June 2018): 3-12; 3.
85 Diamanti and Simpson, "Five Theses," 8.

temporal flow of the assembly line; the lubricated movements of the war machine; the pipeline's circulation of oil.[86] Yet in *Beasts* sabotage aims not at "the negation of flow" but its reversal.[87] After the levee explodes, the camera cuts to a shot of stagnant water receding. The image of water flowing back to the dry side, leveling out, getting even, ruptures the fetishized image of modernity as a bounded sphere of ordered life destined to endure indefinitely. Reversing the flow, putting space into time, defetishizing the image, sabotage challenges the sense of inevitability projected by petromodernity, which coordinates flows of energy, materials, capital, and populations to make frenetic movement appear like an ordered march into the future. And so, even as "post-industrial" capitalism is made "flexible" by the liquidity of fossil capital (oil, debt, mobile workers, etc.), the film's moment of sabotage reminds us that capital's flows always depends on things that can break. Like riot, sabotage is about exploding petromodernity's order of things — here represented by the levee, the boundary object which makes everything inside real and reasonable, and everything outside wild and disposable. While exploding this boundary object eliminates the conditions of the Bathtub's "ambiguous utopia," it also abolishes the standpoint from which the distinction between real and magical appears meaningful at all.

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86 Williams, "Manual Override."
87 Diamanti and Simpson, "Five Theses," 8.

The state descends quickly, however. Helicopters appear; agents take the characters to a clinic on the dry side. In a heavy-handed scene of Foucaultian discipline, Hushpuppy and Wink are estranged from the land, each other, and themselves (Hushpuppy's hair is braided, feminizing her practically beyond recognition), as they are separated, served rubbery pancakes, and, in Wink's case, given an IV and "plugged into the wall."[88] Wink receives medical treatment and food in exchange for his freedom, rooted in the land. The viewer understands that whatever advantages attach to living on the dry side — the regularization of diet and health made possible by a petromodern governmentality, figured by the grocery store and the clinic — are outweighed by the forms of domination they entail. These include not only the discipline of the clinic, but also the "unfree labor" implied by Wink's allusion to "fish stuck in plastic wrappers," which clarifies that the freedom from dependence promised by petromodernity comes at the price of dependence on fossil capitalist relations of production and social reproduction. The characters eventually break out of the clinic, setting Hushpuppy on a journey to find her absent mother. It is a pyrrhic victory. The Bathtub can no longer sustain life. Wink, unable to live inside the state (hooked up to life support machines, a metaphor for commodified life) and unable to live outside it, embodies the tragedy of the Bathtub. In the end, sabotage fails.

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[88] *Beasts*, 01:05:42.

How does the film treat the failure of sabotage? How does it resolve the tragic story of a place destined to die? The film's aesthetic resolution is *aesthesis* itself — the sublimation of loss as historical memory, as inscription, as art. In a final voiceover, as the Bathtub's residents walk along a crumbling highway towards a new life on the dry side, Hushpuppy addresses future scientists: whatever happens, she says, at least "scientists of the future" will know that "once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub."[89] Here, the Bathtub is sublimated as an aesthetic object — an image of a *once there was* that memorializes the place whose death it confirms. Memorialization grounds the film's theory of art. A cave painting tattooed on her teacher's thigh comes alive in Hushpuppy's mind as fearsome aurochs, transmitting knowledge across time. And as the storm approaches, Hushpuppy draws her own cave paintings on the inside of a cardboard box. Like the Bathtub, the cardboard will wash away, but Hushpuppy's insistence on leaving a record attests to the film's investment in art as social memory, inscription as immortality. To the extent that it commits itself to real people and places — to south Louisiana, and perhaps any place on the verge of disappearing — the film becomes a prospective memorial, a sympathetic record of what will have been wiped off the map.

It is easy to read this as an unsatisfying, even naive, conclusion to a film depicting the profound cultural loss caused by planetary heating. Viewed skeptically,

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[89] *Beasts*, 00:17:29; 01:27:21.

the ending is not just a cop out, blunting the violence of cultural death, while leaving the revolutionary potential of sabotage unrealized. Worse, it is a new round of symbolic enclosure, which, like *Louisiana Story's* channeling of the bayou's vital force, licenses the destruction of the wilds while incorporating wildness as an aesthetic artifact, a fossil, that signifies what *was* but not what *could be*. Such aesthetic incorporation is central to a newer mode of extractivism in the region: "urban redevelopment," or gentrification, which is at its core a kind of colonialism and ethnic cleansing. Reviewing several post-Katrina films, including David Simon's *Treme*, historian Adolph Reed Jr. notes that post-disaster depictions of certain Louisiana neighborhoods as self-contained, coherent, and culturally distinct units perform the sort of "touristic mystification" that allows real estate financiers and developers to cash in on the imagined "authenticity" of certain districts to the detriment of their current, often long-time residents. "In this domain, as in tourism and many others, market forces depend on the fiction that there is a territory of culture that lies pristinely outside the market," Reed writes.[90] Incorporating the outside as an aesthetic ideal, in other words, is a key maneuver in replacing real social and cultural networks with their marketable simulacra. Insofar as *Beasts* derives its sense of magic through depictions of a self-contained, cohesive, and authentic Louisiana community "pristinely outside the market," the film clearly advances the kind of

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90 Reed Jr., "Three Tremés."

aesthetic incorporation that is, as Reed argues, central to the political economy of post-disaster development — which, as the film dramatizes, always involves cultural loss.

This is perhaps a risk latent in film as a medium. The defining feature of the photographic image, the building block of cinema, is sublimation: the essence of every photograph is indexicality, its physical relationship to a really existing past, a "that-has-been."[91] Yet in certifying that something has been, the photograph both vivifies the past and kills it, replacing real life with its trace.[92] Alone or in sequence, what the photograph finally indexes is the passage of time, the inevitability of death, which it momentarily suspends by making present as image that which is no longer there. Rehearsing thematically the formal logic of the photographic image, *Beasts* both enlivens and kills its characters; it casts their death as an inevitable, tragic effect of time's relentless passing, while turning death into art. This sort of aesthetic sublimation is one way to read the film's ending: after staging the impending annihilation of a people, a place, and a way of life, the film offers audiences the flimsy hope that maybe someday other people will know that *once there was a Bathtub*, giving death a cohesion in art that it lacks in real life.

But maybe flimsy hope is better than none at all. The ability of photography to act as social memory — to confirm that, yes, *once there was* — gives it a certain power. Photography and film can not only record the casualties of modernity's genocidal

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91 Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
92 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 89.

expansion — collecting evidence needed to demand redress — but also, at their best, articulate the material processes by which history is made and, in so doing, keep alive alternative trajectories and possible futures. Treating film as social memory is one way to preserve such possibilities — so that, like Raymond Williams's "residual forms," they might constantly unsettle the hegemony of the dominant order.[93] More, if film teaches that everything becomes a *once there was*, this lesson applies equally to the social relations of the present; glimpses of alternative paths, however moribund they may seem, break the sense of inevitability that so often attaches to the social relations of fossil capitalism. And so, even if a film like *Beasts* is easily incorporated into an imperial imaginary as a sublimated image of loss, it also keeps alive a vision of non-commodified care and cooperative self-determination in a world hostile to both. Perhaps this is the most anyone can ask it to do.

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93 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), 40.

5. The Moving Contradictions of Fossil Capitalist Social Reproduction: Mobility and Stuckness in *Under the Feet of Jesus*

"If we don't have oil, then we don't have gasoline.
Good. We'd stay put then.
Stuck, more like it, stuck.
Aren't we now?"

—Estrella and Alejo, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996)

At the climax of Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), a crop duster poisons a young farm worker in California's San Joaquin Valley. Picking peaches to sell at a flea market, Alejo notices a shadow cross over him "like a crucifix." "White pesticide" rolled "down his face in deep sticky streaks." He "couldn't breathe" and "imagined sinking into the tar pits" in La Brea, California, "black bubbles erasing him." Horrified by Alejo's poisoning, his friend Estrella persuades her family to take Alejo to a rural clinic. Once there, Estrella realizes they cannot afford the nurse's fee and also to buy gasoline for the station wagon to take Alejo to a hospital in Corazón. Left with no good options, Estrella smashes the nurse's desk with a crowbar and retrieves the family's money. They drive Alejo to the hospital and leave him there.[1]

Crucified by pesticides, Alejo plays an abject Jesus. Under his feet are resources — land, water, oil — he does not own and to which he is made equivalent by the abstractions of capitalist production. Like California's white settlers, Alejo works in the

1 Helena María Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus (New York: Plume, 1996).

fields, but when he mixes his labor with the land, he does not make it his property, playing out a Lockean drama of enclosure, but rather becomes like oil, energy to be extracted and used up. When he steals the fruit he is paid to tend, Alejo is subject to the "slow violence" of toxic pollution that, as Priscilla Ybarra argues, confirms his status as a racialized and therefore disposable subject.[2] To make this point, Viramontes invokes the imagery of pestilence used by genocidal regimes throughout the 20th century to dehumanize their victims — and alludes to Rachel Carson's landmark protest against pesticide use in *Silent Spring* (1962) — showing how industrial farms discipline racialized workers, many of them migrants from Mexico and their children, by ensuring that the alternative to work is injury or death. Writing in and about 1930s' California, Carey McWilliams described this situation as "farm fascism."[3] In Viramontes's 1990s' California, farm fascism is embedded in the landscape: the industrial farm's division of habitable from hostile space turns workers into exploitable resources when they obey the labor contract, and into killable nuisances when they refuse to. Such fascism also extends into domestic spaces: responsible for every aspect of their care, including treating injuries sustained in the fields, Viramontes's characters run up against the limits

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2 Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Priscilla Solis Ybarra, Writing the Good Life: Mexican American Literature and the Environment (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).
3 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California (1935; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

of a neoliberal economic system that, as Nancy Fraser writes, "externaliz[es] carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it."[4]

Under the Feet of Jesus is, then, a useful text for considering the dynamics of fossil capital in the neoliberal period (roughly 1973 to the present). Written and set during a high point of neoliberal globalization in the early 1990s, as multinational corporations were using vast amounts of fossil energy to scour the post-Cold War globe for profit, the realist, Chicanx novel narrates a specific case of environmental racism (Alejo's poisoning) as a local consequence of fossil capital's global operations. *Under the Feet of Jesus* is a work of *climate fiction* insofar as its narrative action unfolds within twinned systems of energy and labor exploitation that simultaneously carbonize the atmosphere and make workers precariously dependent on fossil fuels. In what could be read as a metaphor for climate change, Viramontes's novel shows how the fossil infrastructures that circulate capital and commodities (cars, highways, tractors, pesticides, grocery stores) undermine the ecological conditions of workers' survival and, in the long run, capital's own reproduction. An example of what Fredric Jameson calls "cognitive mapping," the novel compresses a key contradiction of fossil capital into a single, dramatic moment of environmental violence.[5] Doing so offers a proleptic response to Amitav Ghosh's suggestion that the absence of literary climate fiction testifies to the

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4 Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," New Left Review 100 (July-Aug. 2016): 99-117.
5 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

unrepresentability of the climate crisis.[6] Viramontes shows that it is possible to represent the systemic features of fossil capital, including its crisis tendencies, using partial, perspectival accounts. What resists representation is any suggestion that the fossil-fueled mode of production that shapes the realist novel's distribution of sensibility might be on its last legs.

A story of racialized labor exploitation, *Under the Feet of Jesus* is, as Ana Sandoval theorizes, an heir to *campesino* novels like Tomas Rívera's *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra* (1971), as well as Chicana novels like Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) and Lucha Corpi's *Cactus Blood* (1995).[7] It is also a work of vernacular Marxist theory in the tradition of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Herbert J. Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* (1954). Like Steinbeck, who maps predatory capitalism from a migrant family's perspective, Viramontes puts migration at the center of her novel. Instead of patterning migration on the linear trajectories attributed to capitalist development — westward expansion, forward progress, class ascendance — Viramontes charts her characters' elliptical migrations through a series of flashbacks. These flashbacks upset the hegemony of linear time, which, as capitalism's critics have long argued, sustains the fiction that modern social relations deliver a progressively better future, even as they destroy futures in the present. Against linear temporalities, or what queer theorists have

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6 Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
7 Ana Marie Sandoval, Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression and Resistance in Chicana and Mexicana Literature (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

usefully termed "straight time" and "reproductive futurism," Viramontes's narrative moves elliptically, mimicking patterns of itinerant labor, charting the nostalgic movement of return: Estrella's substitute father, Perfecto Flores, dreams of returning to Mexico; a train's whistle reminds the *piscadores* of "other destinations;" and Estrella addresses the stars in the final scene to "summon home all those who strayed."[8]

More often than not, however, the novel leaves characters stuck, in the fields, on the side of the road, out of gas, out of options. Viramontes rehearses narrative interruptions thematically as she describes the family's Chevy Capri station wagon stuck in the mud ("the tire only spun deeper into the hole… all of them watching as the tire spun and spun without moving an inch"), and as she narrates Perfecto's inability to produce a living child, his misplaced sperm and stillborn baby standing in for the future's non-arrival ("the glossy semen had flashed out of her and into him and out of her…; "they returned the blue silenced baby to the soil").[9] Interrupting forward momentum, these warped images of reproductive futurism contrast with the generative movement of white Americans. In one scene, Estrella's mother Petra watches a white man fill up his "lime green Bermuda" at a gas station. "The driver of the Bermuda cocked the trigger of the dispenser and the old gas pump began rotating clackety numbers," Viramontes narrates. For Petra, who has had to walk across "the hump and

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8 For an overview of queer theories of temporalities, see José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: NYU Press, 2009) and Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
9 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 130; 77-78.

tear of stitched pavement" to get to the gas station, which doubles as a grocery store, this image ironizes the Kerouackian association of automobiles with freedom, leisure, and male sexual power, while reminding Petra that fossil-fueled machines, like the "smooth black lines" on her Phillips 66 road map, ultimately mystify the labor of movement and reproduction, the work of bringing a future into being.[10]

This is a crucial reminder. The tension between the kinds of movement promised by the automobile (forward, indefinite, ascendant) and the kinds of movement, and non-movement, experienced by the characters (cyclical, stuck, subterranean, interstellar) is a primary way Viramontes narrates the contradictions that frame her characters' action. Rewriting class position as a relationship between automobility and "stuckness," scenes of thwarted movement dramatize the unfreedom of "free labor," the annihilation of oppositional futures implied by reproductive futurism, as well as the contradiction between oil's promised mobility and the immobility it inevitably entails. References to the La Brea tar pits, which Alejo believes contain the bones of a young girl, restage this contradiction by highlighting a paradox embedded in oil's material features: oil is packed with enough energy to get men to the moon, and yet sticky enough to freeze movement altogether. Taken together, these images of *stuckness* refract the economic questions driving Viramontes's novel forward — How can a poor, migrant family save the life of a young man sickened by the environmental violence that compels his labor?

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10 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 103.

How can they maintain the body of a worker whose conditions of work impose extra, and unbearable, costs of reproduction? How can the capitalist economy, in turn, produce enough labor power to reproduce itself over time? — through the visual grammar of "fossil capital."[11] Doing so suggests that the high-carbon fossil capitalist relations that destroy planetary environments also expose racialized workers to a range of local dangers, framing the solution to environmental racism as fossil capital's abolition. Indeed, the novel's resolution is an act of anti-capitalist militancy — threatening the nurse, Estrella retrieves money needed to buy gasoline — that gets the family, briefly, unstuck.

Stuckness is a key concept in "petrocultures" scholarship.[12] Capitalist production, which has historically relied on fossil fuels to expand accumulation and defer crises, undermines the ecological conditions of capitalism and life on Earth. Yet fossil capital remains the hegemonic mode of organizing resources, space, and power in the 21st century. Petrocultures scholars have described this contradiction as a kind of stuckness, or impasse, defined materially as the conflict between capitalist accumulation and a habitable planet, and epistemologically as the gap between knowing there is a conflict and doing something about it. Viramontes's novel casts light on the conditions

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11 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming (New York and London: Verso, 2016).
12 See Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman, "Breaking the Impasse: The Rise of Energy Humanities," University Affairs, February 12, 2014; Imre Szeman and Petrocultures Research Group After Oil (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014).

of impasse by showing how fossil fuels power the social reproductive infrastructures that shape life and work in the neoliberal period. Social reproduction names "the various systems — formal and informal, waged and unwaged — that make capitalism possible by raising, socializing, educating, healing, housing, and otherwise sustaining the workers whose labor power it runs on."[13] Social reproduction relies on fossil fuels in the neoliberal period, in part, because the privatization of carework puts the burden of reproducing labor power onto workers themselves, who rely on cars, highways, electricity, plastics, digital communications, and other fossil-fueled commodities to cook, shelter, travel, and maintain kinship networks under conditions of increasing social alienation and ecological turbulence.[14] Crystallizing a more general contradiction of neoliberalism, which dresses up precariousness as a kind of freedom, fossil fuels afford workers mobility, flexibility, and ease, while holding them hostage to a fossil energy system that subjects them to danger.

Fossil fuels' centrality to social reproduction means that the average worker, i.e., anyone who does not own capital and therefore must work to sustain themselves, cannot simply give up fossil fuels, however much they might want to. It is worth stressing this point because much of the literature on energy transition, especially in the social sciences, centers on questions of whether and how to encourage consumers to use

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13 Ben Tarnoff, "These are the Conditions in Which Revolution Becomes Thinkable," Commune, April 7, 2020, https://communemag.com/these-are-conditions-in-which-revolution-becomes-thinkable/
14 Matthew T. Huber, Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

less energy.[15] Instead of asking what kinds of choices people should make as fossil energy consumers, Viramontes's novel encourages readers to consider what options are available to them as workers in a fossil economy. Dependent on cars to work and supermarkets to eat, most workers have little choice but to consume fossil energy. "Fossil infrastructures double as social infrastructures" in the neoliberal period, Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman write, and these infrastructures overdetermine people's choices, making fossil fuel demand, to borrow a term from neoclassical economics, inelastic.[16] Prefiguring aspects of France's 2018 Yellow Vest protests, *Under the Feet of Jesus* shows that fossil fuels are so essential to the fossil economy's infrastructures of social reproduction that energy transition without social revolution is bound to be incomplete, heightening neoliberalism's contradictions and provoking popular backlash easily captured by neofascist elements. Any serious response to climate impasse — any serious strategy for advancing a *just* transition to a post-fossil economy — must therefore attempt to completely transform the productive and social reproductive infrastructures that shape contemporary society.

And that is, in a sense, what the characters try to do. Estrella menaces a white nurse with a crowbar because the conditions of fossil-fueled social reproduction leave

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15 For a recent example, see Julien Gattaciecca et al., "Electricity Conservation During Critical Times: Identifying and Shaping Effective Demand Response Programs for Residential Customers" (briefing paper, Luskin Center for Innovation, University of California, Los Angeles, March 2021).
16 Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman, "Nine Principles for a Critical Theory of Energy," in "Marxism and Climate Change," eds. Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft, and Casey Williams, special issue, Polygraph 28 (2020): 137-160

her with few options; she is stuck. The experience of getting stuck clarifies Estrella's leverage, however, effecting a dialectical reversal rooted in Estrella's apprehension of her power as a worker. Unable to purchase healthcare for Alejo, whose poisoning is figured as a kind of ossification, a becoming-bone, Estrella realizes that "It was their bones that kept air conditioning in the cars humming, and kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map."[17] Estrella's recognition of her "constitutive power" ("constituent power," *potentia,* in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's schema) illuminates a strategy: "Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her."[18] As she reaches for the crowbar, Estrella not only replaces capital's representation of labor (pure energy, abstract labor time) with a poetic rendering of labor's concrete components (bones); she also identifies the social character of labor, alienated in the energy commodity, and seeks to liberate it through an act of *decommodification*. If Alejo's theft is a risky refusal of "farm fascism," Estrella's reappropriation of money for medical services/gasoline amounts to a militant refusal of the commodification of social reproduction which enforces fossil capitalist production as a total system.

I argued in the first chapter that ecocriticism confronts climate change as an "unrepresentable," or sublime, object because the aesthetic forms it uses to mediate

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17 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 148.
18 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 148.

climate change bear the imprint of fossil capital, making contradictions within fossil capitalism appear like the end of the world. By contrast, *Under the Feet of Jesus* narrates ecological crisis as a consequence of the material and cultural infrastructures that make the vast majority of people dependent on fossil fuels for survival and, therefore, stuck in the fossil economy whether they like it or not. Viramontes zeroes in on capitalism's central threat — work or die — by showing how racialized workers are made into energy through the wage relation and permitted to die if they transgress it. Establishing a formal parallel between the characters' work — cyclical, repetitive, dangerous — and the novel's trajectory — episodic, elliptical, organized around an insoluble conflict — *Under the Feet of Jesus* narrates its formal contradictions as a consequence of fossil-fueled modes of production, while modeling a practice of militancy that breaks its narrative form (taking the reader from the realistic into the fantastic) and in so doing gestures at a world beyond the impasse of the rapidly warming present.

5.1 Production and Reproduction

In the novel's opening pages, a family of seven arrives at a run-down bungalow in southern California to pick grapes on an industrial farm. Two young men — Alejo and his cousin Gumecindo — are already there, picking peaches in a nearby field, watching the family arrive. A barn on the property becomes the figural heart of the novel. It appears in the first sentence as a kind of destiny ("Had they been heading for

the barn all along? Estrella didn't know.") and in the final scene as a kind of home.[19] The family believes the barn to be haunted by La Llorona — a figure from Mexican folklore, depicted as the ghost of a woman who killed her children — and this haunting takes the form of a hare-lipped boy who sneaks among the rafters, barely seen. The hare-lipped boy returns throughout the novel, as Petra, often referred to as "the mother" (the definite article casts her as a kind of universal mother, whose carework propels the novel), warns Estrella that her child will have a hare-lip ("a child born sin labios") if she does not obey her mother's orders.[20]

Literary theorist Dennis Lopez suggests that the barn stands in for the "dead labor" of capital.[21] Citing Raul Williams, Lopez notes that Chicanx literature has long drawn on images of ghosts and haunting "to reclaim and give voice to the lived experience of racial and economic domination commonly omitted from the official annals of American history and culture."[22] More, Lopez suggests that Viramontes's frequent allusions to ghosts, haunting, and "spectrality" invoke the "phantasmagoria" Marx associates with the value-form, which transmutes "dead labor" into "supra-sensible" commodity relations that acquire a mystical character by effacing the labor that produces them. Personifying "dead labor" as a hare-lipped child, itself an avatar for the

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19 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 173.
20 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 69.
21 Dennis Lopez, "Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena Maria Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus," Twentieth Century Literature 65, no. 4 (2019): 307-342.
22 Lopez, "Ghosts in the Barn," 311.

infanticidal La Llorona, Viramontes suggests that the social conditions which compel her characters to *produce* commodities paradoxically threatens their ability to *reproduce* their own bodies.

Pesticides embody this reproductive threat: a crop duster poisons Alejo, and, in an earlier scene, as Estrella and her white friend Maxine consider drinking from a creek near their labor camp, Estrella says she "knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch." Estrella does not drink. "You think 'cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something?" Maxine asks.[23] Pesticides have injured and killed California's farm workers since the early 20th century, and farm worker movements, including those organized by the United Farm Workers (UFW), have long used opposition to pesticides to anchor more expansive struggles for liberation. In 1933, twelve thousand cotton pickers in the San Joaquin Valley, 95 percent of them Mexican, went on strike — the largest agricultural strike in U.S. history.[24] They were joined by socialists, communists, and New Deal Democrats in a "Popular Front" that successfully took on the Associated Farmers, an industry group.[25] From the 1940s to the 1960s, Mexican workers brought to California through the "Bracero" program organized against pesticides and for dignity and higher wages, and throughout the 1960s and 1970s Latinx and Filipino organizing produced labor leaders like César

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23 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 32.
24 Sarah Wald, The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming Since the Dust Bowl (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 27.
25 Wald, The Nature of California, 27.

Chávez and Dolores Huerta, the Delano grape boycott, and significant changes to chemical use in commercial agriculture.[26] Although the UFW won important gains through the 1970s, thanks in part to solidarity boycotts from consumers worried about chemicals on their fruit, three hundred thousand farm workers are still exposed to pesticide poisoning each year, resulting in "birth defects, and infant and childhood mortalities in the fields."[27] Like Petra's warnings about a child born "sin labios," Maxine's question (will our "babies come out with no mouth"?) alludes to the medical consequences of pesticide poisoning, as well as its political effects — namely, that one might lose the ability to speak. Lopez writes, "Viramontes's spectral allusions to La Llorona and the phantom child register the systemic political silencing of (im)migrant communities of color ("without a mouth")."[28] In other words, the novel invites readers to view pesticide poisoning as an expression of a more fundamental threat always hanging over racialized workers: exclusion from the political community, the future, and the normative category of the human.

This threat differs from those usually described in U.S. environmental narratives. At least since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* pesticide pollution appears in environmental texts as a threat to the human species *qua species*, dangerous because it imperils the

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26 Mireya Loza, Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2016); Laura Pulido, Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1996).
27 Lopez, "Ghosts in the Barn," 309.
28 Lopez, "Ghosts in the Barn," 309.

genetic material that defines the "human" and therefore the "reproductive futurism" sustaining the hetero-patriarchal family and the capitalist social relations it anchors (see Chapter 3). Viramontes nods to Carson in a scene preceding Alejo's poisoning: "When she noticed the silence of the birds in the quiet trees, she realized the plane had stopped its fumigation."[29] Yet *Under the Feet of Jesus* trades a Carsonian story about the species' replacement — the idea that, through genetic mutation, the "human" will be supplanted by a non-human other, annihilating the future — for one that emphasizes how racialized subjects face threats to reproduction as a condition of work. Rather than stage a replacement plot, Viramontes simply asks: How do migrant workers survive when accessing the means of survival requires submitting to a dangerous, fossil-fueled system of production and social reproduction?

Viramontes answers this question by narrating workers' attempts to reproduce themselves outside of fossil capitalist relations. Estrella's clearest memory of her absent father is of "an orange" he plucks from the ground while they "were alone with no foreman to tell them the fruit they picked wasn't free."[30] Rewriting the Lockean property story from a farm worker's perspective, Viramontes describes a man who does not enclose the commons but *commons* property, to use Peter Linebaugh's formulation.[31] Estrella remembers how her father's "thumbnail plowed the peel off the orange in one

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29 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 75.
30 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 12.
31 Peter Linebaugh, Stop Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014).

long spiral, as if her father plowed the sun."[32] Repeating "plow," a familiar symbol of agrarian virtue, Viramontes underscores the injustice of a property system that denies workers the fruits of their labor. Literally disfigured by exchange, "Only the relics remained [in the grocery store]: squished old tomatoes spilled over onto the bruised apples and the jalapeños mixed with soft tomatillos and cucumbers peeked from between blotchy oranges."[33] Prefiguring Alejo's theft and Estrella's riot, the father's decision to return the orange to the commons, rather than buy it back as a "blotchy" commodity, undermines the commodification of subsistence that compels waged labor in the first place.

Yet while Estrella's absent father models militant decommodification, it is women who generally perform such militancy in the novel, echoing the often overlooked feminism of communist texts like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Salt of the Earth* (1954). In Steinbeck's novel, for instance, Rose of Sharon's final act of maternal charity (her child dead, she feeds a dying man her breast milk) dramatizes the coercion entailed by commodified social reproduction and models anti-capitalist and queer, if highly gendered, relations of interdependence and solidarity. Similarly, in *Salt of the Earth*, which fictionalizes a strike waged by Mexican and Chicanx miners in 1940s' New Mexico, it is the miner's wives who first urge a strike, figuring challenges in the

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32 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 12.
33 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 110.

domestic sphere (evictions and repossessions) as reasons to struggle at the point of production. Extending this tradition, Viramontes's novel shows not only how the privatization of carework compels field labor, but also how women's refusal of such privatization in the moment of social reproduction (the clinic) strikes a blow at capitalism's conditions of reproduction.

Perhaps because the novel focuses on social reproduction, Viramontes's characters do not adopt the tactics most closely associated with farm worker organizing: the strike and the solidarity boycott (Dan Latimer notes that, when Estrella receives a United Farm Workers flier, she folds it and puts it in her pocket).[34] Nor do they target familiar villains: property owners, police, white citizen-workers. Such villains haunt the pages as sirens in the distance, whispered rumors of "la migra." Their absent presence requires readers to attune to the structural features of subordination, and to view the novel's few antagonists — namely, the white nurse who charges the family for a fruitless doctor's visit — not as oppressors themselves but as vectors of a more systemic domination. Such domination traps and surrounds. It registers a set of environmental constraints theorized by Marx as the "abstract domination" of fixed capital and accounted for by critical theory's shift from a Foucaultian "disciplinary" account to a Deleuzian analysis of "control" in the 1970s. Thought of as a kind of *stuckness*, the

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34 Dan Latimer, "The La Brea Tar Pits, Tongues of Fire: Helena María Viramontes's 'Under the Feet of Jesus' and Its Background," Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 85, no. 3/4 (2002): 323-346.

experience of control, backed up by the threat of physical violence, resonates with postmodernity's defining aesthetic — novelty without change in a "continuous present" — and its hegemonic form of political reason: "capitalist realism," which compels acquiescence to the status quo not because the latter is "good" but because "there is no alternative."[35] Through her analysis of domination's abstract features, Viramontes lights on a revolutionary politics whereby racialized subjects, in their role as producers and reproducers, transform relations of power by reproducing themselves on their own terms.

5.2 Fossil Fuels and Borders

The modern history of fossil fuels begins with the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, a moment of energy-intensive, capitalist growth dependent on coal at home and slavery and colonial plunder abroad. During the transition to neoliberalism in the 1970s, as capital struggled to extract surplus from "living labor" in the U.S., capital owners turned to fossil-fueled "fixes" to defer overlapping crises of profitability, hegemony, and energy resourcing.[36] They used fossil fuels to increase control over labor productivity, replace labor in the production process via automation and offshoring, increase capital and labor flexibility, add efficiency gains in logistics and communication, and power an increasingly high-speed financial system.

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35 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (Washington: Zero Books, 2009).
36 Andreas Malm, "Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital," Mediations 31, no. 2 (2018): 17-40.

Meanwhile, as the Cold War came to a close, the U.S. state's deregulatory agenda freed capital to roam the globe, expanding regimes of "accumulation by dispossession" across the Global South.[37] Financialization produced bubbles and crashes, and globalization rebounded to the U.S. in the form of immigration from Mexico and Central America, as dispossession sent "super-exploitable" workers North.[38] Meanwhile, Mexico's ruling class privatized public enterprises, loosened labor protections to lure transnational capital, and "enclosed" communal landholdings known as *ejidos*, forcing millions of debt-burdened peasants to sell their land and enter capitalist labor markets in Mexico and the U.S.. Described by the Zapatista National Liberation Army as a "death sentence for indigenous peoples," the proletarianization of Mexican peasants, later intensified under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), created a reservoir of racialized labor for rapidly expanding border economies.[39]

In principle, U.S. capital welcomed these surplus laborers. Capital has always relied on "reserve armies" of unemployed workers to keep wages low, and by the 1990s, as U.S. capital sought cheap labor abroad, neoliberal policy makers sought to "address the contradiction between the free flow of capital and wage differentials between

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37 David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," Socialist Register 40 (2004): 63-87.
38 Michael Pröbsting, "Migration and Super-exploitation: Marxist Theory and the Role of Migration in the Present Period of Capitalist Decay," Critique 43, no.3-4 (2015): 329-346.
39 Michael Dreiling, "Remapping North American Environmentalism: Contending Visions and Divergent Practices in the Fight over NAFTA," Capitalism Nature Socialism 8, no. 4 (1997): 77.

countries by encouraging a free flow of labor."[40] Enthusiasm for open borders was reflected in the business press; the *Wall Street Journal* proposed adding "There shall be open borders" to the U.S. Constitution.[41] In practice, however, borders were being swiftly closed. Federal programs like "Operation Gatekeeper" (1994) increased Border Patrol funding in California, while the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) prohibited employers from hiring undocumented immigrants. In a telling loophole, the IRCA included provisions indemnifying employers who "unknowingly" hired undocumented workers, foreshadowing the expansion of a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" agricultural subcontracting which would come to define farm work after NAFTA's passage in 1994.

Borders, in other words, were open for capital and closed for migrants. To cross the border — even legally, in many cases — was to enter the U.S. as an already racialized, criminalized, and hyper-exploitable subject.[42] State and civilian border violence enforced this arrangement, allowing U.S. firms to exert greater control over migrants from states impoverished by neoliberal privatization and "ravaged by Reaganite terror."[43] Distributing the protections of the U.S. state, including the right to

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40 Michael Lind, The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution (New York: Free Press, 1995), 542.
41 Editorial Board, "In Praise of Huddled Masses," Wall Street Journal, July 3, 1984.
42 Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, "The Costs of Contradiction: U.S. Border Policy 1986–2000," Latino Studies 1(2003): 233–252.
43 Edwin Ackerman, "NAFTA and Gatekeeper: A Theoretical Assessment of Border Enforcement in the Era of the Neoliberal State," Berkeley Journal of Sociology 55 (2011): 40-56; Noam Chomsky, "The Unipolar

fair wages and collective bargaining, based on interlocking designations of citizenship, race, and productivity, U.S. border policy conditioned migrants' survival on their participation in the labor market as second- or third-tier workers, just as it had through the WWII-era Bracero program, and as it continues to do through the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker visa program and ICE's selective enforcement of immigration restrictions. To make sense of these contradictions, Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra have theorized borders as relations — "methods" for organizing social life.[44] Throughout its modern history, the U.S.-Mexico border's "method" has been to admit Mexicans and Central Americans to the U.S. as "abject aliens," as Sarah Wald puts it, "whose labor is desired by the nation while their humanity and subjectivity are rejected."[45] The economic principle indexed by the figure of the abject alien — capital moves freely; people do not — highlights a simple strategy of accumulation: when capital is mobile, and workers' mobility is restricted, capital wields more power over the price and conditions of labor.

Alejo's poisoning in *Under the Feet of Jesus* shows how the border relations that produce "abject aliens" also govern the production of space within national boundaries.

Moment and the Obama Era," lecture given at Nezahualcóyotl Hall, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), University City, Federal District, Mexico, September 21, 2009.
44 Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra, Border as Method, Or the Multiplication of Labor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
45 Wald, The Nature of California, 20.

For Alejo, who migrates to California not from Mexico but from Edinburgh, Texas (an ironic allusion, perhaps, to the West's settlement by Scottish and other European immigrants), maintaining himself as a worker means obeying the terms of his labor contract, including its prohibition against stealing fruit. The border, in a sense, follows Alejo into the fields, dictating where he can go, when he can go there, and on what terms, restaging the "farm fascism" McWilliams observed in 1930s California, where state and private police conspired to brutally discipline migrant workers. Like Estrella, whose citizenship papers are stashed "under the feet of Jesus," Alejo is a U.S. citizen. And yet stepping into the fields after hours, transgressing the temporal borders staked by the labor agreement, Alejo forfeits the protections of citizenship. The crop duster, as it literally and metaphorically expels him from the social contract, thus affirms that citizenship is not only, or even primarily, a legal designation, but rather a racial and economic category whose boundaries are maintained by capital's division of habitable from hostile space — a border that shifts over time. When Estrella scratches a ring around the family's bungalow to ward off scorpions, she too acknowledges that her right to survive is not guaranteed, but must be asserted by carving out pockets of safety within a fundamentally hostile world. Like her father's orange, Estrella's enclosure is thus kind of *commoning* — the reappropriation of stolen territory and its products.

Viramontes wrote *Under the Feet of Jesus* during the 1994 passage of California proposition 187, which "disqualified any undocumented persons from public education,

health care, and other social services."[46] Known as the "Save our State" law, proposition 187 was fueled by white resentment toward Mexican and Central American migrants, Sandoval notes, whom some whites saw as parasites on underfunded public services.[47] Legal challenges and demonstrations eventually overturned the law, but it had lasting effects, modeling similar legislation in states across the South and Southwest and paving the way for surging deportations during the Obama and Trump administrations. The prop 187 fight provides useful context for reading *Under the Feet of Jesus*, since it highlights how neoliberalism's destruction of non-commodified means of survival (public schools, clinics, etc.) intensifies racialized groups' reliance on highly exploitative forms of waged work, as well as the energy-intensive fossil infrastructures that make such work possible (cars, highways, air conditioning, supermarkets). Today, as climate change destroys subsistence and semi-proletarian livelihoods across the Global South, workers are made even more precarious, intensifying migration and anti-migrant border violence. Setting the stage for "ecofascism" theorized in chapter two, the social relations enforced by the combination of "free trade" programs like NAFTA and nativist measures like Prop 187 — fictionalized in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as reproductive threats lurking in the environment itself — illustrate how liberal and xenophobic border policies

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46 Sandoval, Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas, 67.
47 Sandoval, Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas, 67.

have worked together for decades to sustain a pool of racialized, criminalized, and precarious workers who can be maximally exploited by capital.

Incidentally, NAFTA proved to be a turning point for humanities scholarship in the U.S. American Studies took a "transnational turn" in the mid-1990s, as the Soviet Union collapsed and neoliberal regimes in the Global North sought to reduce barriers to global capital mobility through free trade. The U.S. literary canon was likewise becoming "transnational," as anglophone literature from the Global South and diasporic communities in the U.S. gained greater institutional recognition. Ecocriticism also emerged as a discrete literary sub-field in this context. Its theorists responded to the "transnational turn," in part, by interpreting global flows of capital and people through analogies of biological diversity, rationalizing economic liberalization on the grounds that diverse and open ecosystems are healthier than monocultural and closed ones. Contesting this interpretation, Ursula K. Heise has encouraged environmental humanists to question "attempt[s] to derive ethical principles from the functioning of ecosystems," noting that such attempts minimize the often-destructive economic consequences of globalization.[48] In a similar vein, Leerom Medovoi has argued that the "transnational" turn in the U.S. academy proved to be less radical than some scholars

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48 Ursula K. Heise, "Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies," American Literary History 20, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 381–404.

hoped, as celebratory narratives of transnationalism (globalization by another name) provided an alibi for neoliberal capitalism by mimicking its basic logic.[49]

At the same time, Rob Nixon has argued, the transnational turn had "the potential to shift the intellectual centers of gravity away from the in-turned American exceptionalist tendencies of wilderness literature and Jeffersonian agrarianism and toward more diverse environmental approaches that are, crucially, more compatible with the impulses underpinning environmental justice movements around the world."[50] Debates over NAFTA, smuggled into ecocritical scholarship through proxy debates over cultural and biological diversity, clarified where these "centers of gravity" were. While a number of environmentalists supported NAFTA, in line with an ideology of "free-market environmentalism" developed in the 1980s, the nascent environmental justice (EJ) movement strongly opposed the trade agreement, fine-tuning its analysis and tactics in local struggles against environmental and labor exploitation at the U.S.-Mexico border.[51] *Under the Feet of Jesus* belongs to this latter tradition of U.S. literature, theory, and activism which includes figures like Robert Bullard, Ynestra King, William Cronon, Carolyn Merchant, Giovanna DiChiro and others active during the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Under the Feet of Jesus* neither celebrates globalization nor dismisses it as a threat to the "nation." Rather, as Christa Grewe-Volppe argues, the novel contests both

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49 Leerom Medovoi, "Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies," Interventions 7, no. 2 (2005): 162-179.
50 Nixon, Slow Violence, 261.
51 Dreiling, "Remapping North American Environmentalism," 78.

neoliberal and nativist images of the U.S. by offering a detailed portrait of the racialized labor regimes that sustain such fantasies.[52]

Yet *Under the Feet of Jesus* does not totally fit the EJ mold. EJ texts published in the 1980s and 90s, like the seminal 1987 United Church of Christ report on "environmental racism," tended to emphasize industrial production's uneven distribution of toxicity, noting that racialized "fence-line" communities generally suffer pollution's worst effects.[53] Similarly, Rob Nixon's literary account of environmental violence, though centrally concerned with temporality (namely, the *slowness* of environmental violence compared to the speed of the media spectacle), emphasizes the "stationary displaced" — those who are excluded from modernity's promise of mobility, and condemned to remain in places made increasingly inhospitable by extractive industry, like Bhopal and the Niger Delta.[54] By contrast, *Under the Feet of Jesus* invites readers to consider how the effects of "slow violence" register histories of compulsion and constraint not always visible in maps of environmental racism. Instead of showing how the effects of such racism are distributed at a single point, *Under the Feet of Jesus* asks how geographies of violence are produced over time. The distinction is subtle but significant. Narrating how fossil capitalism produces space — via the automobile, tractor, crop-duster, private

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52 Christa Grewe-Volppe, "The Oil Was Made From Their Bones," Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 61-78; 66.
53 United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987).
54 Nixon, Slow Violence, 7.

medical clinic, etc. — the novel recasts the "stationary displaced" as the *mobile dispossessed*. In doing so, the novel moves beyond a politics of distribution that defines much environmental justice literature (which focuses, interpretively, on the uneven distribution of environmental toxicity and, politically, on equitably redistributing the surplus generated by capitalist production), instead imagining a militant politics of decommodification as part of a larger anti-capitalist struggle.

5.3 Mobility and Stuckness

Since the mid-nineteenth century, fossils fuels have promised to liberate modern subjects by replacing physical labor with machine power. This promise, made on behalf of fossil fuels by bourgeois intellectuals, public officials, advertisers, and works of popular culture, is the flip side of "energy deepening" in the sphere of production, which seeks to reduce the "socially necessary labor time" required to produce commodities for profit.[55] Summarizing Marx, Moishe Postone writes in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* that "the dream implied by the capital form is one of utter boundlessness, a fantasy of freedom as the complete liberation from matter, from nature" and from labor — a fantasy likewise implied by fossil fuels, as Andreas Malm, Jeff Diamanti, Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Jennifer Wenzel have shown.[56] As Marx himself

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55 Jeff Diamanti, "Energyscapes, Architecture, and the Expanded Field of Postindustrial Philosophy," Postmodern Culture 26, no. 2 (2016).
56 Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Malm, Fossil Capital; Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, "Phantasmagorias of Energy: Toward a Critical Theory of Energy and Economy," in

writes in the *Grundrisse*, capitalists use machinery to reduce "necessary labor time," and increase "relative surplus value," often by speeding up the labor process. Technological "speed up" reduces the portion of time a worker labors for a wage while increasing the portion of time he labors for the capitalist for free. "Capital employs machinery, rather, only to the extent that it enables the worker to work a larger part of his time for capital, to relate to a larger part of his time as time which does not belong to him, to work longer for another," Marx explains. The upshot is that fossil-fueled machinery does not free workers, who act as "watchmen and regulators" of automated systems, but deepens their exploitation — a paradox Marx calls the "moving contradiction of capital."[57]

Marxists tend to locate the "moving contradiction" in the production process, on the shop floor or in the fields. E.P. Thompson theorized the stultifying effects of mechanical "clock time" in English factories, and Carey McWilliams described how the

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Materialism and the Critique of Energy (Chicago and Edmonton: MCM' Press, 2018); Jennifer Wenzel, "Introduction" in Fueling Culture, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

57 Karl Marx, "The Grundrisse," in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978). "Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition – question of life or death – for the necessary. On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value."

mechanization of California agriculture set up repressive "factories in the field."[58] Describing how such mechanization affected Mexican, Chicanx, and Filipino workers, Ernesto Galarza's *Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947–1960* argues that "agribusiness corporations mechanized production in order to discipline farm workers and destroy their unions."[59] Curtis Marez builds on Galarza's analysis, observing that technology, specifically visual technology, has been a key site of struggle between agribusiness firms and farm workers since WWII, in some cases adding to workers' repression and in other cases offering opportunities for resistance. Echoing Malm's autonomist Marxist account of British industrialists' use of steam power in the early 19th century, Marez writes, "Investments in the research and development of new labor saving machines were often spurred by periods of farm worker unionization and vice versa, as farm worker unions responded to new forms of mechanization with renewed organizing efforts."[60] Viramontes's novel extends this line of analysis, characterizing pesticides as a technology of "abstract domination" that forces Chicanx workers to submit to the "farm fascism" of industrial agriculture, and complicates it. Emphasizing how fossil-fueled machines *beyond* the fields, especially automobiles, simultaneously eliminate labor and intensify its exploitation, *Under the Feet of Jesus* asks readers to

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58 E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," Past & Present 38 (Dec. 1967): 56-97; McWilliams, Factories in the Field.
59 Ernesto Galarza Farm Workers and Agri-business in California, 1947–1960 (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977). Paraphrase from Curtis Marez, Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3.
60 Marez, Farm Worker Futurism, 20.

consider how Marx's "moving contradiction" multiplies constraints in moments of *social reproduction* as well.

The automobile represents the combustion engine's migration from the industrial factory to the postwar home, extending capital's "real subsumption" of life into the domestic sphere, where the fossil-fueled machine reorganizes social life according to the same principles of efficiency, privatism, and investment that dominate in the postwar factory, as Matthew T. Huber argues in *Lifeblood*.[61] Yet perhaps beginning with Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), fossil-fueled machines pass into U.S. culture not as a source of constraint but as the fantasy of "complete liberation from matter" described by Postone: the promise, as Wenzel puts it, of "wealth without work, progress without the passage of time."[62] In the decades following the U.S.'s postwar oil boom, for instance, novels like *On the Road* (1957) and films like *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) associated gasoline, cars, and highways with freedom and ease, even when they exposed oil's "hidden costs."[63] Cementing "a persistent association of driving with being alive," the postwar "road-pleasure complex" distilled a more general enthusiasm for oil: television shows like "The Jetsons" depicted flying cars and robot maids zooming around a fully suburbanized cosmos, while "futurologists" like Buckminster Fuller cast Cold War-era

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61 Huber, Lifeblood, 108. Specifically, Huber suggests that the automobile and the infrastructures it entails (the suburb, the freeway, the gas station, etc.) form the material basis of the "enterprise form," which Foucault and Brown suggest organizes life in the neoliberal period.
62 Wenzel, "Introduction," 13.
63 Graeme Macdonald. "Oil and World Literature." American Book Review 33, no. 3 (2012): 7-31.

machines as "inanimate energy slaves" that would soon free the world from manual labor, as Wenzel has theorized.[64] Predicting the "end of work," the mid-century imagination reveled in oil's promise of leisure and plenty.

Yet by the late 1960s, U.S. manufacturers struggled to turn profits, consumer prices spiked, and the era of "wealth without work" seemed to be ending. Capitalism underwent a paradigm shift during this period, according to Marxist political economists, as U.S. capital moved away from industrial production towards various forms of direct accumulation, ushering in a "post-Fordist" regime oriented toward value creation outside the factory.[65] Although political economists theorized this shift in different ways, capital's apparent inability to extract surplus value from living labor suggested to a number of theorists that Marx's labor theory of value (i.e., waged labor is the source and measure of capitalist value) needed to be revised. One revision, developed by Andre Gorz, held that capital's abandonment of commodity production in the industrial core heralded the "end of work" and, therefore, the end of the working

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64 Stephanie LeMenager, Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80; Wenzel, "Introduction," 12.
65 For an overview, see Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra, Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 28. See also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Assembly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 112: Capital responded to the 1970s' crises by making social life productive; t did this largely through automation, which expelled industrial workers from the factories and reorganized life outside the factories in ways capital could exploit for its own gain; "in order to re-establish profits that could no longer be obtained in the factories, capital had to put the social terrain to work, and the mode of production had to be interwoven ever more tightly with forms of life."

class.[66] Marxist-feminists like Silvia Federici drew attention to value-producing, "reproductive" work of unwaged women workers, while Antonio Negri and the Italian post-workerist tradition likewise developed concepts like the "social worker" and "social factory" to extend a Marxian critique of political economy to account for the real subsumption of social life by capital.[67] In a different vein, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argued that Marxism's premise — that there "are overarching, total explanations of social reality" — had by the 1980s been thoroughly shaken by "the fragmentary nature of society" characteristic of post-Fordism.[68]

Each of these theories responds to fundamental economic, political, and aesthetic questions: What is value? Where does it come from? And how is it determined? Such questions had become pressing by the late 1970s. On the one hand, nearly three decades of technological development underwritten by cheap oil (as well as state spending on foreign wars and domestic social programs) had come close enough to delivering "wealth without work" that, by the early 1970s, Marxist economists like Ernest Mandel wondered whether capitalism's "permanent technological revolution" had written labor out of the production process for good.[69] On the other hand, as Mandel observed in *Late*

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66 Andre Gorz, Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism (London: Pluto Press, 1982).
67 Silvia Federici, Wages Against Housework (London: Power of Women Collective, 1975); Antonio Negri, Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse, ed. Jim Fleming and trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991).
68 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (New York and London: Verso, 1985).
69 Ernest Mandel, Late Capitalism (1974; New York and London: Verso, 1999).

Capitalism, capital's replacement of living labor with machines not only intensified exploitation but also pitched the capitalist system into a protracted crisis of profitability — mechanization generated more production capacity than could be absorbed by effective demand — which seemed to confirm living labor's status as the ultimate source and measure of value.[70] Even so, capital and its state allies responded to declining profit rates by doubling down on labor's effacement. In a bid to devalue the U.S. dollar, and therefore reduce capital's overall debt burden, President Richard Nixon abandoned the gold standard in favor of "floating currencies."[71] The federal government's abandonment of a stable referent of monetary value, combined with the flood of "petrodollars" on the world market after the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, kicked off a wave of financialization that sought to restore profitability not by destroying excess capacity and increasing employment, but by expanding speculation and other forms of rent-taking.[72] Deferring U.S. capital's overlapping crises of profitability, hegemony, and energy resourcing, financialization propped up capitalism's fossil-fueled fantasy of "utter boundlessness" at precisely the moment the system seemed most stuck.

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70 Elaborating on this contradiction, Mandel writes in Late Capitalism, "All the historical contradictions of capitalism are concentrated in the twofold character of automation. On the one hand, it represents the perfected development of material forces of production, which could in themselves potentially liberate mankind from the compulsion to perform mechanical, repetitive, dull and alienating labour. On the other hand, it represents a new threat to job and income, a new intensification of anxiety, insecurity, return to chronic mass unemployment, periodic losses of consumption and income, and intellectual and moral impoverishment," 215.
71 David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
72 Giovanni Arrighi, "The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence," New Left Review 20 (2003): 5-71.

Randy Martin argues that financialization, and specifically the introduction of financial instruments called "derivatives," sought to create value by turning volatility into tradable or "securitized" assets.[73] By turning volatility into a source of value, derivatives posited that instability, or even uncertainty, might replace labor as the ultimate referent of capitalist exchange. Financialization thus corresponded to a more general "crisis of representation" in the neoliberal period.[74] This crisis manifested in politics as waning class consciousness, complemented by the rise of "new social movements" rooted in identity performance, and in art and criticism as a critique of stable foundations of knowledge, judgment, and selfhood.[75] Questions about what value is, where it comes from, and how it is measured passed into "postmodern" culture as an aesthetic interest in fragmentation, pastiche, and self-referential performance, and into "postindustrial philosophy" as a theoretical emphasis on instability, dynamism, flows, intensities, and referential chains that, as Jeff Diamanti theorizes, expressed the "effacement of labor" made possible by the simultaneous intensification of financialization and fossil energy use.[76] Projecting a fetishized vision of capital (a

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73 Randy Martin, "After Economy? Social Logics of the Derivative" Social Text 31, no. 1 (2013): 83-106.
74 Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 298-9. Carlo Vercellone makes a similar observation about "cognitive capitalism," describing it as "a crisis of measurement that destabilizes the very sense of the fundamental categories of the political economy; labor, capital and obviously, value." Carlo Vercellone, "The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit," in Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios, eds. Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 90.
75 Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, 302.
76 Jeff Diamanti, "Energyscapes, Architecture, and the Expanded Field of Postindustrial Philosophy," Postmodern Culture 26, no. 2 (2016). See also Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the

"moving power that moves itself"), and a financialized theory of value (volatility itself), postmodern art and theory thus came to reflect and enforce an "aesthetics of a vanishing labor force" grounded in the twinned abstractions of fossil energy and capitalist exchange.[77]

Yet as the "moving contradiction" suggests, while capital's response to the overlapping crises of the 1970s eliminated jobs (especially the urban manufacturing jobs on which the U.S. labor movement based its strength from the 1930s to the late 1960s), it did not do away with work. As the capitalist system neoliberalized, it reorganized work according to a new global division of labor, a new privatization of social reproduction (making workers increasingly responsible for maintaining themselves), and a proliferation of what David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs" in the Global North.[78] Far from liberating people from toil, Graeber writes, neoliberalization "created 'flexible' work regimes that have both destroyed traditional job security and increased working hours

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Anticipation of Disaster," South Atlantic Quarterly 106, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 805-823. Szeman argues that neoliberalism's effacement of labor already exhibits an awareness of the end of oil: "The ferocious return of primitive accumulation, now directed not only toward the last remaining vestiges of the public sector (such as universities and hospitals) but also inward into subjectivity, announces, too, a temporal recalibration of capital away from the future to the present. There is no longer any wait for surplus or any attention to the reproduction of capital for the future; instead, as if the future of capital is in doubt, profit taking has to occur as close to immediately as possible, whatever the long-term consequences," 818. On the one hand, the shift to finance capital (M-M') seems to confirm Szeman's suggestion that capital is no longer interested in waiting out the cycle of commodity production to turn a profit. On the other hand, the financial system only works if most players believe in the likelihood of future returns — or, perhaps more accurately, if most player believe most other players believe in such a likelihood.

77 Diamanti, "Energyscapes, Architecture, and the Expanded Field of Postindustrial Philosophy," unpaginated.

78 David Graeber, Bullshit Jobs: A Theory (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

for almost everyone."[79] In the call center as in the mechanized fields, capital's moving contradiction meant that fossil-fueled technologies did not eliminate work but intensified it. That the aesthetic effacement of labor has remained a core feature of postmodern culture speaks to fossil fuels' hold on the modern imagination: fossil fuels inspire compensatory visions of power, mobility, and independence, even as nearly every aspect of work, paid and unpaid, becomes more and more exhausting.

Italo Calvino (1974), Karen Tei Yamashita (1997), Viramontes (1995), and many others have thematized this contradiction in their fiction, dramatizing the many ways that fossil fuels, though promising power, mobility, and independence, constrain, interrupt, and control. In Viramontes's California, fossil fuels organize life in the fields, where mechanized harvesting systems align human effort with the churn of industrial production. "The vast field of grapevines was monotonous — without beginning, without ending — always the same to the piscadores and then to their children," Viramontes writes.[80] On the highways, cars smooth out seasonal rhythms by shuttling migrant workers from farm to farm in an unbroken circuit of production. Trucks ship capital to Mexico's cities and labor from it — along with produce, textiles, cars, and much more. Fossil-fueled machines, or "fixed capital" in Marx's account, thus reorganize not only work routines, but also *social existence* to maximize logistical

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79 David Graeber, The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy (New York, Melville House, 2015), 129.
80 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 50.

flexibility. Like steam engines in Malm's account, which brought capital to workers in English cities, automobiles are literal vehicles of proletarianization in Viramontes's novel, shuttling people dispossessed by enclosure to new sites of accumulation, while embedding rising carbon emissions, and thus ecological turbulence, into the infrastructure of global trade. This infrastructure both moves and constraints. "After this one," Petra instructs her children as they wait to cross a busy freeway. "Vámanos, Petra decided," before changing her mind. "After this one, Petra said again."[81] Describing the freeway as "knots and asphalt and cement," Petra not only struggles to cross, but also imagines a "car wreck waiting to happen."[82] Which, in another scene, it does: "Car brakes screeched and bumpers crushed, and headlights exploded like furious tempers."[83] Trading images of pleasure and speed for images of halting, interrupted movement, Petra's encounters with the freeway rewrite the story of auto infrastructure as a tale of hazards, constraints, and unrealized futures.

From the novel's first pages, then, mobility is stuckness. As Estrella's family pulls up to their new camp, they glimpse it through the car window: "The barn had burst through a clearing of trees and the cratered roof reminded her of the full moon. They were seven altogether — their belongings weighed down an old Chevy Capri station

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81 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 104.
82 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 16.
83 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 20.

wagon, the clouds above them ready to burst like cotton plants."[84] Juxtaposed against the barn, whose association with lunar cycles and "bursting" cotton plants codes it as a transient site of migrant labor, the Chevy Capri is figured as a domestic space.[85] Though mobile, the car is home: its roof carries the characters' belongings; its windows frame their view. Recalling Steinbeck's "jalopies," which also house dispossessed tenant farmers, the family's Capri is a means of movement and stability simultaneously. And yet stability "was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing."[86] Like the conditions of migrant labor more generally, the protection afforded by the station wagon both enables survival and holds it in the balance.

If driving means "being alive" for heroes of postwar car culture, driving at best means *staying alive* for Alejo and Estrella, and even then maybe not. "If we don't have oil, then we don't have gasoline," Alejo tells Estrella. "Good. We'd stay put then," Estrella retorts. "Stuck, more like it, stuck," Alejo responds. "Aren't we now?" Estrella asks.[87] For Estrella, oil's contradictory status as necessity and constraint not only highlights the enduring threat of immobility which fossil fuels both necessitate and

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84 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 1.
85 The trucks carrying piscadores to and from the fields are also domestic spaces; a truck shades Alejo and Estrella from the sun as they hold hands.
86 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 4.
87 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 86.

conceal, but also shows that, even when it *makes things go*, oil gets people *stuck*. Contesting fossil capital's justificatory self-narration, Estrella makes the simple point that the infrastructures which promise mobility (e.g., the highway) keep people trapped, and the domestic spaces which promise stability (e.g., the station wagon) are subject to the terrorizing mobilities of transient, casualized labor regimes. Her observation, that mobility is stuckness for the working classes, puts Marx's "moving contradiction" in vernacular terms, while adding that it applies equally at home as in the fields.

Estrella's critique also challenges the "aesthetics of a vanishing labor force" theorized by Diamanti. Registering both the "end of history" and the supposed "end of work," postmodern culture mediates an experience of novelty without change — what Jameson calls the "continuous present" — by recycling old images into novel combinations without creating anything truly new (Jameson calls this "pastiche").[88] The absence of genuinely new forms, in turn, registers a moribund class consciousness in the U.S., where people do not experience history as something they play an active part in making. At worst, history is cast as a collection of media spectacles, flowing past like a movie; at best, history is something that happens every now and then, in dramatic events understood to have "historical significance." In general, though, history is experienced as a highway: active but fully inert, an illusion of movement masking a kind of stasis. Stuckness is a familiar postmodern trope for this reason. For instance, J.A.K

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88 Jameson, Postmodernism, 64.

Gladney, the protagonist in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), is trapped by social scripts mediating his experience (including his experience of death, a condition of absolute immediacy), just as postmodern antiheroes from Pynchon's Oedipa Maas (1965) to the Coen brothers' "The Dude" (1998) languish (or revel) in the knowledge that amid the novelties of consumer culture there is really nothing new under the sun. Karen Tei Yamashita (1997) literalizes this stuckness when she describes the Western hemisphere converging around a permanent Los Angeles traffic jam, dramatizing the total annihilation of time by space suggested by Fukuyama's "end of history."

Estrella, too, is a postmodern antihero in a certain sense. Like her fellow *piscadores*, Estrella is trapped in a kind of continuous present: her family moves from farm to farm to pick fruit and vegetables in an endless cycle of migrant work. Estrella's experience is likewise overdetermined by social scripts (Estrella's teachers read her skin color as evidence that she cannot be educated). Yet her stuckness is also deeply material. Unlike characters such as DeLillo's Gladney, for whom the "white noise" of postmodern media culture proves inescapable, Estrella experiences the replacement of reality by its simulation primarily as *misrecognition*. Contemplating the figure on the cover of a Sun Maid raisin box, smiling under a load of grapes and a brilliant sun, all Estrella sees is a woman who has never picked grapes. Estrella's misrecognition both alludes to and challenges Ester Hernandez's "Sun Mad" print (1982), which replaces the Sun Maid woman with a skeleton and reads: "Unnaturally grown with insecticides, niticides,

herbicides, fungicides."[89] Like Hernandez's print, Viramontes's narration performs a kind of ideology critique, asking readers to peel back capitalism's self-serving images to witness the real conditions of labor underneath. The difference is that Viramontes's critique does not perform a dramatic unmasking addressed to consumers, but rather stages a conflict between how a worker (Estrella) experiences her work and sees it represented. Estrella's misidentification with the Sun Maid woman provokes dissonance within her *own* perception of the world, and this dissonance in turn produces something like revolutionary consciousness — an intuition that the world could, and should, be different.

Estrella develops this consciousness more fully as the novel progresses. After Alejo is poisoned in the fields, Estrella insists that the family take him to the doctor — a service she gets Perfecto to consent to by agreeing to help him tear down the barn (symbolically destroying the "dead labor" that haunts them). When the bill is more than the family can afford (ten dollars, a sum that will leave them with no money for gas to get Alejo to the hospital in Corazón), Estrella resolves the conflict by threatening the nurse with a crowbar and demanding the money back. Estrella's threat is an act of labor militancy that we might call a "riot," to use Joshua Clover's schema.[90] Drawing on Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the "mass strike," Clover defines riot as a form of class struggle

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89 Ester Hernandez, Sun Mad, 1982, screenprint on paper, 22 x 17 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum.
90 Joshua Clover, Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings (New York and London: Verso, 2016).

that seeks to reduce the price of social reproductive commodities to zero through direct appropriation; the strike, by contrast, seeks to increase the price of labor through the withdrawal of work. Riots are neither "spontaneous" acts of violence, nor simply subaltern speech acts (c.f., "riot is the language of the unheard…"), but rather expressions of class struggle that emerge during periods when production is declining, unemployment is high, and commodities cannot realize their value at market. Through Estrella's riot, the real contradictions present in 1990s' Chicanx migrant labor — workers are alienated from the land, their home, and the products of their labor; their work exposes them to environmental violence; the costs of social reproduction are greater than workers' wages; their wages do not reflect their value — is resolved aesthetically through the fantasy of righteous violence. This violence reduces the price of an essential commodity — healthcare — to zero.

Crucially, Estrella riots because she "remembered the tar pits…:"

> Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway…. It was their bones that kept air conditioning in the cars humming, and kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones.[91]

Piercing through the illusion of petromodern freedom, Estrella comes to understand that fossil fuels do not eliminate labor — nor do they create the conditions

91 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 148.

for independence — but rather intensify exploitation, and multiply constraints, by replacing the commons with a fossil-fueled "second nature" of highways, automobiles, and supermarkets which demand labor as the price of access.

How does she come to this understanding? Identifying with "energy matter," Estrella recognizes that she and oil are both doing work, that she is more or less equivalent to oil from capital's perspective, and that fossil-fueled machines (like the automobile) subject workers to the "abstract domination" of fixed capital, which transforms the qualitative features of work into fungible quantities. While her labor moves certain people along "the long dotted line on the map" (a description of highway infrastructure that ironizes fossil capital's effacement of labor), it thrusts Estrella into an impossible dilemma. As she contemplates this dilemma, Estrella identifies with fossil fuels' constitutive power ("their bones… kept them moving"), and on the basis of this identification militantly refuses the conditions of stuckness. Put another way, in a world made foundationless by capital's ruthless effacement of labor, Estrella and her family rediscover that they are in fact the foundations — that their labor makes the world possible. On the basis of this discovery, Estrella defies the social and genre conventions that govern the novel up to this point by resolving the impossible conflicts of poverty through righteous violence. And as she brings the crowbar down onto the desk, smashing a framed picture of the nurse's son, the spitting image of white reproductive

futurity, Estrella dares to imagine a world where the means of survival — and of joy, leisure, curiosity, and love — are not privately held but commonly enjoyed.

Estrella's daring seems to pay off in the final scene, as she uses the "thick-linked, long and rusty" chain hanging from the barn's rafters to climb to its roof and stand among the stars. Scrambling up the chain, Estrella becomes dependent on the linked metal for her survival — if it pulls through the rafters, she will fall and die — even as she uses it to complete her journey to the roof, where, addressing the stars, she calls "home all those who have strayed." Departing from the novel's image repertoire of frustrated mobility (spinning tires, stopped cars, jammed highways), Estrella's journey to the roof nonetheless reaffirms her contradictory status as a farm worker in an economy whose infrastructures of mobility create conditions of dependence and independence simultaneously. Yet the fact that Estrella makes it to the roof — that she uses the chain in a barn haunted by the "dead labor" of capital, on Lopez's reading, to complete her journey to the stars — suggests that capital's infrastructures can be repurposed for emancipatory ends. Like the crowbar, the chain gives Estrella a kind of leverage she can use to plot her movement toward liberation.

In another sense, however, the novel's resolution fails: Estrella uses her leverage against the wrong target. While the nurse is a convenient symbol for racial hierarchy (she is dressed in white, has to pick up her white children from a school called Daisyfield), she is neither responsible for the commodification of social reproduction nor

in a position to undo it. She "just works there," and while could perhaps waive the clinic fee, does not have the authority to relieve Estrella's family of the double burden of obtaining medical treatment and buying gasoline. Viramontes' refusal to close the novel with an image of either white villainy or white charity forces the reader to confront the "absence of a clear command-and-control center" in the fossil capitalist economy.

In yet another sense, the resolution works: Estrella gets the family's money back, allowing them to take Alejo to the hospital. This resolution is properly dialectical insofar as it overcomes the phantom problem of ethics — there is no *right* thing to do in this impossible situation — by showing the double bind imposed by racial capitalism to be inescapable. It is both fantastical — because it transgresses the boundaries of what is understood to be possible — and instructive, since its answer to the question of what to do when you face an impossible choice is both irrational and totally serious: blow up the system. Estrella's riot is "irrational" in a colloquial sense — for a racialized worker to threaten a white professional is to defy reason in a racial caste society — and in the sense that it disrupts the rationalization of life by capital. As Viramontes highlights with images of tar pits and bones, the labor process turns Estrella into an energy commodity, and, recognizing this, Estrella becomes conscious of her constitutive power. Yet it is only by going beyond such recognition, by refusing the formal equation of human labor with fossil energy — and thus refusing the commodity's aesthetic of "universal convertibility" — that Estrella is able to assert her political agency. To revolt, Estrella

must identify with the energy commodity *and* assert her non-identity with it, rejecting the commodity form's rationalization of life.

Literary scholars generally classify *Under the Feet of Jesus* as a work of political fiction, observing, as I have suggested, that the central conflict revolves around Estrella's proletarian identification with oil as a store of value. Yet scholars have also described *Under the Feet of Jesus* as a Kunstler-roman, a tale of literacy-as-freedom. For instance, Paula M. Moya and David James Vázquez read the novel as Estrella's journey toward "critical literacy."[92] Similarly, Dan Latimer notes that Estrella, struggling to build a "house of words," is an author learning to speak for her class.[93] *Under the Feet of Jesus* certainly takes up questions of literacy, but focusing exclusively on the discursive aspects of Estrella's politics misses its material dimension, inviting the kind of misinterpretation Latimer ultimately indulges in when he describes the novel as a "proleptic American success story" that "celebrate[s] upward mobility" even as it exposes the injustices of farm work.[94] Performing a moral inversion unsubstantiated by the text, Latimer projects capital's sins onto its subjects: he describes Estrella as a "climber," recounts a racist joke about Mexican selfishness, and concludes with "*sauve*

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92 Paula M. L. Moya, Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); David James Vázquez, "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism," Contemporary Literature 58, no. 3 (2017): 361-391.
93 Latimer, "The La Brea Tar Pits, Tongues of Fire," 342.
94 Latimer, "The La Brea Tar Pits, Tongues of Fire," 343.

qui peut," recasting Viramontes's working-class novel as a celebration of immigrant bootstrapping and neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

Contrary to Latimer's influential misreading, *Under the Feet of Jesus* neither celebrates bootstrapping nor casts speech as a privileged mode of political intervention. Mostly the novel does the opposite: Viramontes resolves the text's central conflict not by making Estrella speak but by giving her a crowbar. If Estrella develops a "critical literacy," it is by learning how to use language like a tool. Indeed, when Estrella first peers inside Perfecto's tool chest, the objects "seemed as confusing and foreign as an alphabet she could not decipher."[95] Perfecto teaches her what the tools are called and do, and as Estrella "lifted the pry bar in her hand, felt the coolness of iron and power and function, weighed the significance it awarded her… That was when she began to read."[96] As she "weighs" the tool's "significance," blending a verb suggesting manual labor with a semiotic descriptor, Estrella offers a materialist account of aesthetics (symbolic forms derive from material practices of making the world) as well as a functional account of language. Estrella begins to read not when she begins to match signifiers with referents, but when she begins to understand the social relations that give objects their "significance" and "function." Words are tools and vice versa for Estrella, "essential" not because they represent, but because they do.

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95 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 24.
96 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 26.

What words do, the novel suggests, is create the conditions for new social relations by enabling the construction of new aesthetic forms — new ways of making sense of experience. In Estrella's case, words create the conditions for *class consciousness*, defined in the Marxian sense as a lived understanding of one's necessary role in reproducing social relations over time, or making history. In her essay "The Role of Black Women," Angela Davis develops a formula that could describe the consciousness of any subordinated class: "a practical awareness of the oppressor's utter dependence on her."[97] Turning the experience of stuckness (in the mud, out of gas, in the La Brea tar pits) into fodder for just such an awareness of dependence, Estrella uses a practical relationship with language to replace capital's representation of value (abstract energy) with a poetic, proletarian representation ("our bones") that licenses revolt. Marxists have long argued that this kind of practical, proletarian consciousness can better grasp the reality of the social totality than "mere description," as Lukács put it, since workers do not *contemplate* objects but relate to them through use.[98] Attaining self-consciousness as laborers, as subjects whose collective labor daily reproduces society, workers become conscious of the structure of the social world in its entirety.[99] Insofar as it dramatizes this process of coming to consciousness, *Under the Feet of Jesus* offers a vernacular Marxist

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97 Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," The Massachusetts Review, 13, no. 2 (1972): 6.
98 György Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in Writer and Critic and Other Essays, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin press,1936).
99 Fredric Jameson, "The Case for Georg Lukács," Salmagundi 13 (1970): 3–35; 23.

rejoinder to currents within ecocriticism that seek to understand the nonhuman world from the perspective of an individual *encountering* nature — a perspective that is, ultimately, blinkered by the individual's alienation from the natural world. In Viramontes's novel, characters develop something like an "ecological" sense of the world's interconnectivity, but they come to this understanding intuitively, through their work. Theirs is not a gauzy ecologism (hinging on the speculative assertion that everything is connected to everything else), but rather practical consciousness based on their experience as laborers.

Such experience enables *praxis*: the unity of knowledge and action, or "activity conscious of itself."[100] The crowbar typifies such activity. An instrument of everyday labor, the crowbar helps Estrella's family get their car unstuck from the mud, a symbolic emancipation from constraint. Later, Estrella seizes the crowbar as a weapon, allowing her to get the family's money from the nurse. Crowbars work by transferring and amplifying force from one position to another, using the mechanics of leverage to give an operator the strength to lift objects that would otherwise be impossible to move. Similarly, Estrella's riot works by transferring and amplifying force, as Estrella uses her leverage as a reluctant purchaser of social reproductive commodities (mobility, energy, healthcare) to seize those goods on her terms. Standing in for the amplifying force of a class, Estrella's riot models a form of strategic militancy that uses workers' leverage in

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100 Jameson, "The Case for Georg Lukács," 23.

the sphere of social reproduction to create the conditions for new forms of social organization.

Estrella's riot thus produces a crisis, a split, opening up new directions for movement. Lukács observes, as many Marxists do, that capitalism's rationalization of life is historically contingent: the commodify-form governs experience in capitalist societies, but there is no reason it must do so. The contingency of capitalist social and aesthetic forms results in periodic "crises," moments when the internal coherence of society's "laws" breaks down, illuminating alternative paths. "In moments of crisis the qualitative existence of the 'things' that lead their lives beyond the purview of economics… suddenly becomes the decisive factor... Or rather: these 'laws' fail to function and the reified mind is unable to perceive a pattern in this 'chaos'," Lukács writes.[101] Lukács is writing about economic crises, when objects reassert their use-value in defiance of exchange, producing confusion for the "reified mind" (i.e., most people). Yet he could just as easily be writing about political crises, when subjects assert agency in defiance of their subordination. Estrella's militancy provokes just this sort of crisis: her defiance of social and genre expectations cracks the illusion that there is a necessary, rather than strictly contingent, relationship between capitalist social forms and the world as it is. Readers accustomed to mimetic representations of farm work may be

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101 György Lukács, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (1923; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

"unable to perceive a pattern in this 'chaos,'" since riot is not usually expected from a young Chicana farm worker. Expectations become clear in the breach, however, and by using an non-realist plot device (riot) to resolve the narrative's central conflict, Viramontes reminds readers that, while genre conventions give the impression of naturalness because they make literary worlds cohere, they are just as contingent as any other form — any other mold used to give shape to experience.

Simply showing aesthetic forms to be contingent is not enough to make a work of art political, however. Anna Kornbluh makes this point clearly in *The Order of Forms*.[102] Observing that critical theorists have long "celebrated forms that undo their formedness and have imagined politics as demolition," Kornbluh suggests, by contrast, that literary realism's political potential lies in its ability to *construct new forms*.[103] Kornbluh thus extends a long tradition of constructive reading practices that includes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "reparative reading," Fredric Jameson's "positive hermeneutic," Carl Freeman's politics of "inflation," and Antonio Gramsci's positive ideology.[104] For Gramsci, an ideology that affirms the collective power of the working

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102 Anna Kornbluh, The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). Andreas Malm also identifies in many contemporary critical theories, especially those descending from Latour, a persistent "dissolutionism" that blunts analytical equipment and destroys prose. Malm, The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 186; 197.
103 Kornbluh, The Order of Forms, 3.
104 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You," in Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 286; Carl Freedman, "Marxism,

classes can combat the self-serving ideology of the ruling classes. Yet such ideology can neither be fixed nor willed, meaning it cannot be what Frederick Engel's called "utopian socialism:" speculation about a "better world" divorced from an analysis of the real historical processes that might bring such a world into being. Rather, positive ideology must be "scientific."[105] It must be "hypothetical," "educational" and "energetic," meaning it must aim at creating the material conditions that would validate its truth.[106] In practice, this looks like modeling a possible world with the goal of illuminating the mechanisms by which it might be created — for instance, highlighting how workers have collective power by virtue of the ruling class's dependence on their labor, as *Under the Feet of Jesus* attempts to do. In its attempt the novel affirms what Curtis Marez calls "farm worker futurity," which "both posits and performs the future as given possibility" in order to "enact the future in the present."[107]

What future does the text enact? Estrella's militant refusal to pay for lousy medical care is, put simply, an effort to *decommodify* the relations of social reproduction that compel waged labor. Long a feature of workers' struggles against exploitation

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Cinema, and Some Dialectics of Science Fiction and Film Noir," in Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction, eds. Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 72; Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks Volume 1, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg and trans. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

105 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978).

106 Michele Filippini, Using Gramsci: A New Approach (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 17.

107 Marez, Farm Worker Futurism, 11.

(though not always theorized as such), decommodification begins from the premise that commodification — or, more fundamentally, enclosure, as Silvia Federici, Peter Linebaugh, Michael Denning, and others theorize — is the fundamental engine of capitalist accumulation. "Capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living," as Denning puts it, as the separation of the "direct producers" from the Earth makes possible the commodification of labor power and subsistence simultaneously.[108] Refusing commodified healthcare, Estrella refuses precisely this imperative. Her resistance clarifies a key contradiction of capital in the neoliberal period: in privatizing social reproduction, neoliberalism paradoxically illuminates the interdependence of different sectors of life — working, eating, resting, caring for the body, etc. — such that the more one is responsible for their own labor power reproduction, the clearer it becomes that the struggle over wages is not distinct from the struggle over prices at the clinic or gas station, or over rent payments, school debt, etc. In Viramontes's novel, Estrella highlights this interdependence by locating labor struggle at the clinic; in contemporary U.S. politics, one sees class struggle moving from the individual firm to the sector to the municipal government to state and federal governments and beyond, precisely because enclosure creates collective problems that have to be addressed at scales other than the firm.

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108 Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," New Left Review 66 (2010): 79-97.

Yet enclosure and the concomitant imperative to live by selling one's labor is always backed up by the threat of force — for instance, England's Bloody Legislation, or California's Prop 187, which penalize dependency with imprisonment or deportation — meaning that Estrella's riot risks being nullified by state violence ("The authorities would come as they did for years, and pull their hearts inside out like empty pockets.").[109] What's more, Alejo's poisoning shows that coercive violence, at least in 1990s' California, is also embedded in the geography of industrial agriculture, which selectively pollutes the spaces that might sustain non-commodified life. The upshot is simply that, because police, prisons, and wastelands always accompany enclosure, a politics of decommodification must also be a politics of abolition.

Viramontes does not offer a vision of what abolition might look like (though many others have). Her treatment of decommodification nonetheless remains instructive. As students, workers, environmentalists, scholars, policy makers, and many others seek remedies for the climate crisis, the consensus developed by liberal politicians, think tanks, and media corporations tends to hold that publics in the Global North (as well as in rapidly developing countries like India and China) must consume *less* — hydrocarbons, meat, plastics, etc. — to slow runaway warming. Yet as Huber has pointed out, the vast majority of Earth's inhabitants have barely enough to get by, and

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109 Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 163.

certainly not much to give up.[110] Unlike the austerity politics that dominates mainstream environmental discourse, a politics of decommodification insists that mitigating environmental crisis does not require ordinary people to sacrifice what little they have, but rather requires the abolition of fossil capital, whose infrastructures of production and social reproduction embed rising carbon emissions into everyday life and work. Instead of asking "the poor to abandon distant expectations," as energy theorist Ivan Illich put it, a politics of decommodification authorizes the poor to demand more.

Such a politics thus moves beyond social democratic calls for redistribution, including Green New Deal plans favored by environmental justice advocates, which propose reallocating the surplus generated by exploited labor toward federal spending on renewable energy infrastructure. By contrast, decommodification articulates a politics of liberation that seeks to improve people's material conditions by eliminating the conditions of labor exploitation altogether. Decoupling survival from work, decommodification "is a politics of building and enlarging the zone of social life where capital is not allowed," Huber writes. Contrast this with fossil capitalism, which, as Alejo's poisoning shows, enlarges the zones of accumulation and waste where *people* are not allowed. Expanding the zone of self-determined social life not only loosens capital's control of space, time, and energy, but also promises to replace the high-carbon, planet-

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110 Matthew T. Huber, "Ecology at the Point of Production: Climate Change and Class Struggle," in "Marxism and Climate Change," eds. Michael Gaffney, Claire Ravenscroft, and Casey Williams, special issue, Polygraph 28 (2020): 23-43.

warming geography of privatized social reproduction with a low-carbon geography of what Mike Davis calls "public affluence."[111] This is the world Estrella's riot brings, briefly, into view.

111 Mike Davis, "Who Will Build the Ark?" New Left Review 61 (2010): 29-46.

Conclusion: Planning for the Future

"Faith in linear progress and its romantic rejection [expresses] a historical antinomy which, in both of its terms, is characteristic of the capitalist epoch."

— Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993)

I have argued that the tension between knowing and doing, which clings to climate politics like a shadow, endures not for lack of information, imagination, or vivid storytelling, but because today's systems of social reproduction — systems for producing objects, spaces, bodies, habits, affects, and entire ways of life — run on coal, oil, and gas. Run in two senses. Concretely, fossil fuels dominate the global energy mix, powering everything from farms to factories to the digital platforms with which we entrust relationships, identities, and sense of the world. More abstractly, but no less importantly, fossil fuels coordinate petromodernity's forms of social existence, forms that organize life so completely they pass for life itself. Conceptions of time, space, good/bad, norm/deviation, freedom/constraint, ruler/ruled, sign/referent — all of the real abstractions ordering experience owe something to how and why the owners of modernity's most important fuels have put them to work. To me, this is the key insight of research in the Energy Humanities: fossil fuels are not just quantitatively dominant but hegemonic; they set our expectations about how the world is and might be.

This means that moving away from fossil fuels cannot simply be a matter of swapping solar and wind for oil and gas. A just energy transition must also transition

away from social forms cemented over centuries of fossil dominance. Because energy powers the metabolic exchanges that sustain life, this means transforming relations of social reproduction in general. The energy transition — a generous phrase to describe the limp gestures at decarbonization we have seen so far — is mostly not moving in this direction. For the most part, renewables' advocates seek to replicate the social relations of modernity, forged in a great fossil-fueled blaze, with energy sources that do not emit carbon. Grid-scale batteries like the kind Tesla has built in Australia are a good example.[1] Clean tech boosters consider massive energy storage projects to be a linchpin of power grid decarbonization because batteries solve problems like solar and wind intermittency; they can, for example, store solar energy captured during the day and send it to the grid at night. Like a magician yanking away a tablecloth without disturbing the silver, these sorts of projects aim to draw fossil fuels painlessly from our lives while preserving the basic shape of the fossil energy status quo. The desirability of the status quo is rarely questioned. Why is 24/7 power good? And 24/7 power for whom? Who decides how energy is produced, distributed, and used? Do alternative energy sources open new ways of relating to time, space, governance? Are these necessarily bad? My point is not that we should ignore problems like intermittency, or that the temporalities suggested by solar cycles and wind currents are somehow

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1 Laura Kolodny, "Australia Switches on Victoria Big Battery Powered by Tesla Megapacks," CNBC, Dec. 8, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/08/australia-switches-on-victoria-big-battery-powered-by-tesla-megapacks.html.

preferable to those of coal or oil. My point is that the common sense view of energy transition mostly sidesteps key questions about how energy relates to the organization of social life. It takes the social forms of petromodernity entirely for granted and treats them as the blueprint for a post-fossil future.

For anyone hoping to transition away from the fuels *and* forms of petromodernity, crucial questions immediately emerge: What might post-fossil social forms look like? And what would it take to create them? More specifically, how should intellectuals and movements for a just energy transition deal with the mass of fossil-fueled machines, infrastructures, and ways of life that organize production and social reproduction in the present? Are there ways to push forward the potentially liberatory tendencies of fossil capitalism — its tendency to replace human labor with machine power, most especially — without damning the Earth to ruin? Should a just transition accelerate or abandon the "productive forces" of fossil capitalism? What would social reproduction look like in each scenario?

The way I have posed these questions presupposes two responses from the Left: develop or ditch fossil capitalism's productive forces. These are by no means the only possible responses, but they track with what Raymond Williams, in a 1982 pamphlet on "Socialism and Ecology," saw as two enduring tendencies in socialist thought:

"prometheanism" and "primitivism."[2] The former corresponds to the view, sometimes called "productivist," that history develops through definite stages, and transitioning from the capitalist to the communist stage requires the full development of capitalism's increasingly social forces of production and their seizure by the working class. By contrast, "primitivism" describes the view that capitalism's productive forces destroy life, and so ought not be developed and socialized but abolished and replaced with something resembling pre-capitalist modes of production. For Williams, these two positions compose a powerful dialectic running through anti-capitalist theory, dividing socialist speculation between nostalgia for pre-industrial harmony, on the one hand, and devotion to technological acceleration as a means of "creating plenty as the answer to poverty," on the other. The political landscape of the 1970s sharpened the contrast between these two positions as the renewed utopianism of the 1960s, distilled in the spirit of '68 ("Be realistic — demand the impossible!"), clashed with the austere pronouncements of the ecological scolds ("Limits to growth!" "Small is beautiful!"). Where some saw the conditions for post-work socialism, others saw the need to purge Marxism of the productivist tendencies that had, in their view, "glorified the technical

2 Raymond Williams, Socialism and Ecology (London: Socialist Environment and Resources Coalition, 1982).

domination of nature" and made the Soviet Union as hostile to life as the industrial West.[3]

Climate change has brought a version of this debate back to life. At the extremes are neo-Ludditism and "fully automated luxury communism," but these are boundary positions, not widely held views. The real clash is between more conventional positions. On the one hand, theorists like Leigh Philips and Matthew Huber (sometimes called "ecomodernists") argue that socialist struggle must remain committed to socializing the (fossilized) means of production and using them to produce more, not less, wealth for the working class. Climate change should be addressed at the root — abolishing fossil capitalism — and any talk of "limits" or "degrowth" simply concedes to the neoliberal status quo which enriches capital's owners while subjecting the majority to artificial scarcity. Exhibiting fairly orthodox Marxist tendencies, ecomodernism shares the accelerationist view that, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams put it, automation has the potential to usher in a "world without work" — a vision they say is more consistent with the aims of emancipation, as well as Marx's understanding of history, than various

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3 Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction," New Left Review 178 (Nov.-Dec. 1989): 51-86. Kathi Weeks has described these positions as the "two faces of modernity:" "an ideal of social and economic progress grounded in the continuing development of science and industry and the romantic revolt against the forces of rationalization accompanying that ideal." Kathi Weeks, The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 86.

"folk politics" that attack technology, modernity, and progress.[4] While they acknowledge that technical systems are "social relations," in the Marxist idiom, meaning that "power relationships are embedded within technologies," Srnicek and Williams speculate that replacing human labor with automated systems can achieve, on a social basis, human society "beyond the limitations of the earth and our immediate bodily forms."[5] Even though modern technology's reliance on fossil energy seems to put it on a collision course with ecological limits, "Through rational, democratic planning," Philips argues, "there are in principle no limits. *Let's take over the machine, not turn it off!*"[6]

On the other hand, strong currents across the Left spectrum demand greater reverence for natural limits. There is the soft primitivism of the liberal environmental movement, which calls on "global Northerners" to consume less. The more properly Left view is "degrowth." Degrowth theory maintains that Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a primary measure of economic growth, cannot increase indefinitely without exhausting the planet's resources. Degrowth policies would therefore reduce "material and energy throughput of the global economy," especially in wealthier nations.[7] Certain strains of degrowth thought stress "renunciation and sacrifice," and have drawn fire from

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4 Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, #Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics (Mexico City: Gato Negro Ediciones, 2016), 151.
5 Srnicek and Williams, #Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics, 151.
6 Leigh Philips, Austerity Ecology & the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defence Of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff (Washington: Zero Books, 2015), 62.
7 Jason Hickel, "Degrowth: A Theory of Radical Abundance," Real-world Economics Review 87 (2019): 54-68; 56.

prometheans for suggesting that people with relatively little must "abandon distant expectations" to solve an ecological crisis they did not cause.[8] More sophisticated degrowth proposals thread the needle between sacrifice and decadence by arguing that slowing the rate of GDP growth would generate a more equitable distribution of wealth under certain conditions. Specifically, degrowth theorists like Jason Hickel argue that capitalism is fundamentally a system of scarcity (despite ideologies that suggest otherwise), and slowing capitalist growth could, if coupled with strong redistributive measures like a basic income guarantee, prepare the ground for equitably distributed, sustainable sufficiency for all. This would not be a socialist program *per se,* since it proposes redistributing the economic surplus created by waged labor, as opposed to abolishing the class system altogether, but it is an egalitarian vision of sufficiency that takes seriously the biophysical limits of the Earth.

Historicizing both positions, Moishe Postone writes that "faith in linear progress and its romantic rejection [expresses] a historical antinomy which, in both of its terms, is characteristic of the capitalist epoch."[9] To me, this antinomy looks very much like the cultural logic of fossil capitalism. Since William Stanley Jevons published *The Coal Question* in 1865, and likely well before, fossil fuels have represented both the promise of abundance and the threat of exhaustion. For Jevons (and Émile Zola, whose *Germinal*

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8 Ivan Illich, Energy and Equity (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 5.
9 Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36.

reads like a literary account of Jevons's Paradox told from the miners' perspective), abundance promised by increasingly efficient fossil-burning machines — steam and then internal combustion engines — implied the inevitable, rapidly approaching exhaustion of coal.[10] Anyone familiar with the energy politics of the 20th and 21st centuries will recognize this contradiction. Global oil politics of the 20th century regularly toggled between conflicts over surplus, on the one hand, and scarcity, on the other — a dialectic that endures in debates over "energy independence," "peak oil," and of course climate change.[11] A dialectic of surplus and scarcity is, moreover, how a normative U.S. culture mediates its relationship to oil. Writing about postwar literature and film, Stephanie LeMenager develops the concepts of *petrotopia* and *petromelancholia* to describe oil's double role in the American imagination: bringer of everything new, shiny, and good; source of present and future devastation.[12] From *Mad Max* (1979) to *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), countless eco-dystopia plots trade on this contradiction. So too do ecological critiques of modernity, which simply modify the traditional terms of anti-capitalist critique: class society ensures surplus for some and scarcity for many. Whereas the traditional critique of capitalism casts the contradiction of plenty and poverty in geographical terms (surplus in the C-Suite, scarcity in the streets, etc.), the ecological

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10 For an account of Germinal and the dialectic of abundance/exhaustion, see Karen Pinkus, Fuel: A Speculative Dictionary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 49.
11 Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil (London and New York: Verso, 2011).
12 Stephanie LeMenager, Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

critique adds a temporal dimension. When it comes to burning coal and oil, abundance now means exhaustion later; or, conversely, sacrifice now means surplus later. Especially now that climate change plays a starring role in U.S. politics, how we think about the future has much to do with how we have made sense of fossil fuels' place in society. This goes for socialists too: prometheanism and primitivism pick up terms of a debate fossil politics left lying around.

I want to dig a little more into this debate and propose a truce via a discussion of socialist planning. But I first want to detour through Postone's reading of Marx's *Grundrisse*, which has become, without question, the favored citation for Marxist theorists of climate, energy, and work.

Climate Politics Are Energy Politics Are the Politics of Work

In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993), Postone observes, first, that Marx's *Grundrisse* describes the development of capital's productive forces in terms of two contradictions: (1) mechanization reduces the need for human labor *and* deepens exploitation; (2) mechanization expresses the socialization of production *and* the reification of sociality (the "real subsumption" of labor). Energy theorists like Daggett, Bellamy, and Diamanti have shown how the social relations of fossil energy, in particular, drive these contradictions; substituting fossil fuels for human labor physicalizes the logic of capitalist value by making incommensurable qualities

commensurate as quantity: energy, or "work over time."[13] The tendential goal of such substitution is the effacement of labor from production; yet so long as labor remains the source and measure of capitalist value, this can only ever result in a contradiction. At various points in this dissertation, I have tried to show how the neoliberalization of political economy — defined principally by the redistribution of social reproductive costs away from capital (via the family wage) and the state (via welfare and industrial regulations) — pushes fossil-fueled technology and its contradictions deeper into the realm of social reproduction. The result is the effacement of social reproductive labor and the conflation of mechanization with liberation full stop. To me, the risk in treating mechanization as the path to freedom is that, at least within the social relations of the present, doing so weds freedom to combustion.

Brushing up against this line of thought, Postone argues, second, that it is a mistake to equate socialism with the abolition of work. Postone cites (and slightly amends the standard translation of) Marx's most famous statement on the question: "The realm of freedom actually begins only where labour, which is determined by necessity and external goals, ceases."[14] Whereas post-work theorists sometimes take Marx to mean that freedom consists in pure leisure (or "play," as Fourier put it), Postone insists that total freedom from necessity is neither totally possible nor entirely desirable.

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13 Cara Daggett, The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work (Duke University Press, 2019); Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, "Phantasmagorias of Energy: Toward a Critical Theory of Energy and Economy," in Materialism and the Critique of Energy (MCM' Press, 2018).
14 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, 381.

Marx identifies "two different sorts of freedom," Postone writes: freedom from natural necessity (absolute freedom) and freedom from socially imposed necessity (historical freedom).[15] One can never be absolutely free of natural constraints; so long as the body must be fed and sheltered, there will be work to do. But one can imagine liberation from the historically specific constraints imposed by class society — namely, the requirement to work for a wage creating abstract value for someone else, as well as the relations of domination based on ascriptive identity. "Complete liberation from matter" is capital's dream, not labor's. For ordinary people, freedom from necessity cannot mean rejecting the body and the Earth. But it can mean freedom from the domination of the capitalist work system as well as freedom to decide what kinds of work are truly worth doing.

This insight leads to Postone's third observation: if capital's tendency to mechanize production holds liberatory potential, it is due not to how automation works in the present but how it *could* work if workers controlled production. The crux of Postone's argument throughout the book is that socialism does not simply mean the redistribution of surplus value from capital to labor but, rather, the seizure and complete transformation of production by the working classes who, in abolishing capitalist relations of production, abolish "labor" itself. Postone writes:

> Marx's analysis thus implies a notion of overcoming capitalism that entails neither uncritically affirming industrial production as the condition of human progress nor romantically rejecting technological progress per se. By indicating

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15 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, 381.

> that the potential of the system of production developed under capitalism could be used to transform that system itself, Marx's analysis overcomes the opposition of these stances and shows that each takes one moment of a more complex historical development to be the whole… More generally, his critical theory argues for neither simply retaining nor for abolishing what was constituted historically in capitalism. Rather, his theory points to the possibility that what was constituted in alienated form be appropriated and, thereby, fundamentally transformed.[16]

Capital's "moving contradiction" — its tendency to squeeze labor from production while preserving labor as the source of value — proves that society can function without certain kinds of hard labor. But automation does not on its own end the tyranny of capitalist value and so cannot be the basis of "historical freedom." Ultimately, historical freedom depends on ordinary people controlling what gets produced, how, by whom, and to what end. Rather than allow capital to determine the course of mechanization, a socialist political economy would entail the selective application of the accumulated forces of social knowledge crystallized in technology to satisfy social needs that have been consciously and democratically determined. To their credit, ecomodernists like Huber tend to arrive pretty close to this position, even if they also throw their weight behind energy-intensive technology.[17] As Huber writes, seizing the means of production should "entail restructuring industrial systems to *keep* the labor

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16 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, 36.
17 Matthew T. Huber, "Fossilized liberation: Energy, Freedom, and the 'Development of the Productive forces,'" in Materialism and the Critique of Energy, eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti (Chicago: MCM' Press, 2018): 501-524.

saving aspects but discard the ecologically destructive aspects."[18] This gets fairly close to Marx's vision of socialism, in which people decide what is valuable and, consequently, what kinds of work are truly necessary.

Planning

For Marx, socialism (or, really, communism) means ordinary people "rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature."[19] This requires planning. From a Marxian perspective, the goal of planning is simple: the production of society as an end in itself. Making social reproduction the point rather than simply an input or incidental effect of production would obviate the imperative to accumulate surplus value and, in principle, create conditions in which work can become more like art — not play, exactly, but work done for the sake of personal, social, and ecological flourishing. The need for socially-oriented planning seems almost self-evident in the climate change era. The plans drafted and executed by fossil capital are making the planet unlivable. The fate of billions of people depends on coming up with a better plan.

But what exactly does planning entail? And how can "the plan" be drawn up and executed without becoming another instrument of domination? Stalin's ghost

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18 Huber, "Fossilized Liberation."
19 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1992), 820.

haunts “the plan,” after all. So too does Hayek’s neo-Smithian mantra, zealously adopted by the neoliberals, that the “spontaneous order” of uncoordinated market activity creates better outcomes than coordinated industrial policy. The temptation to see a clean distinction between the “spontaneity" of capitalist markets and the “command" of state socialism lures Marxists too. The adjective “rational” often precedes “planning" in Marxist accounts to signify a repudiation of the anarchy of capitalist markets. The “metabolic rift” school, for instance, grounds its case for communism on the idea that the “conscious and rational treatment” of the Earth as communal property is more sustainable than capitalism's unconscious and irrational pillaging.[20] Yet even when the case for “rational treatment” is sound, it is a mistake to see the planned economy in opposition to the market economy. Capitalist economies are very much planned. They are also rational, insofar as they obey the specifically capitalist rationality of value. Ultimately, the distinction between capitalist and socialist political economy turns not on whether there is a plan, or how rational it is, but on who is doing the planning. "The state is an organization of the class in power,” Lenin reminds us.[21] In a capitalist state, responsibility for organizing production resides with capital’s owners, who, in defiance of forked-tongued talk about competition, collude to defend shared interests. In the ideal socialist state, responsibility for organizing production rests with

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20 John Bellamy Foster, “The Crisis of the Earth: Marx's Theory of Ecological Sustainability as a Nature-Imposed Necessity for Human Production,” Organization and Environment 10, no. 3 (1997): 278-295; 287.
21 Lenin quoted in Lenin and the Trade Union Movement (The Trade Union Educational League, 1924). Accessed via the Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lozovsky/1924/14.htm.

working people, direct producers of goods and the social relations they coordinate, who, if unencumbered by attachments to *laissez-faire* ideology, can consciously determine how and why to manage production. Socialist planning, in other words, is a political exercise designed to advance the interests of the many, rather than a managerial exercise meant to replace an "irrational" system with a more "rational" one.

Socialist planning seeks to align democracy's content with its form. Rancière describes a "paradox of democracy:" the creativity of democratic life threatens democratic governments, whose institutions inevitably repress the vital, irreverent force of the masses.[22] In capitalist states, specifically, the principle of democratic life — namely, popular self-legislation in all realms — is hollowed out by democracy's practice: propertied classes substitute their particular interests for the interests of the people as a whole. By contrast, the ideal socialist state seeks "to give the democratic forms a new social (class) content" by exerting democratic control over not just civic institutions but also the production, distribution, and disposal of wealth.[23] Whether it looks like collectivization or state ownership of land, machinery, etc., democratizing production seeks to unite the practice and principle of self-rule.

Represented by "the plan," the democratization of production is a fundamentally aesthetic procedure. "The plan is not a rationalization of resources, it is a revelation of

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22 Jacques Rancière, Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, trans. and ed. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010).
23 Hal Draper, "Marx on Democratic Forms of Government," The Socialist Register 11 (1974): 101-124; 121.

values," as Perry Anderson writes.[24] In its ideal form, the plan records and enforces popular decisions about how the economy ought to work and to what end, answering questions about how to organize the production, distribution, use, and disposal of resources, people, capacities, etc. such that each person might live a good life, free to develop their powers without fear of want, domination, or exploitation. Like any aesthetic object, the plan is a "model of social consensus;" it represents a common way of seeing, a set of shared judgments, a collective assessment of value.[25] As such, the plan offers an alternative to the politico-aesthetic tendencies of both prometheanism and primitivism. Fundamentally modern, prometheanism grounds its aesthetic, its judgement of value, on the relativistic foundation of what Deleuze and Guattari might call *constitutive desire:* what is good, beautiful, and true is whatever the endless creativity of the multitude affirms.[26] Meanwhile, primitivism grounds its aesthetic on the absolute standards of *ecologism*: what is good, beautiful, and true is whatever conforms to eco-aesthetic principles of balance, harmony, flow.[27] By contrast, democratic planning is an exercise in forging absolute evaluative standards from relative judgments. Planning is not just about deciding what gets produced, but also about creating a new way of

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24 Perry Anderson, "Sweden: Study in Social Democracy (Part 2)," New Left Review 9 (1961): 44.
25 Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (New Jersey: Wiley, 1990), 332.
26 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
27 For one example, see E.F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973). Distilled in the title, the book presents a unified aesthetic and political vision grounded in the principle of "smallness."

seeing, a new culture, a new hegemony wherein ordinary people see their interests and aspirations reflected in a society's assignments of value.

The plan should therefore model the aesthetic as such — "lawfulness without law" — and abide a materialist theory of change.[28] The strength of historical materialism lies in the very simple observation that human life is social and historical. The present always bows to the force of history, its accumulated conventions, which limit autonomy and frustrate identity. The fact of language means your thoughts are yours and also not yours. Sociality negates the individual and is at the same time the condition of life, joy, freedom. Sociality likewise prescribes the future and confirms its openness. With no God to legislate its development, a "society" consists only in its constituent parts, whose relations shape and are shaped by society's overall form: an immanent, ever-changing totality. Liberation is not about rejecting the social inheritance that shapes human life, and which makes society possible, but about making a society's ruling forms as evident, equal, consciously determined, and revisable as possible. To me, economic planning, which crystallizes a struggle to collectively decide the goals and means of reproducing everyday life, is a matter of making the principles of historical materialism the organizing principles of the state.

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28 Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (New Jersey: Wiley, 1990), 332.

To these lofty ideas, Sam Gindin poses a sober question: "Can the concentrated power that comes with planning be democratized?" Behind this question are once again questions of aesthetics: How to represent the popular will in the plan? And, conversely, how to represent the economy such that the people can decide the whys and hows of production? The economy is an abstraction, a totality available only in fragments and analogies. Capital wields totality like a weapon: on the neoliberal view, especially, the economy is too complex to be known by any but the priesthood of credentialed economists. When the economy speaks to the masses, it speaks in code: price signals for investors to divine and consumers to sheepishly obey. Against the opacity of capitalist planning, which mystifies domination under the guise of spontaneity, socialist planning is understood to take place out in the open. As Toscano and Kinkle write, "Conceived of in terms of planning, rather than as a messianic social vision, 'transparency' ties together the questions of class consciousness, economic control, and political direction."[29] But transparency is a slippery concept. One can neither grasp nor prescribe every facet of economic activity. Even sophisticated computer modeling, to which certain socialists have long pinned their hopes, can only offer simulations, analogies, whose usefulness depends entirely on the data and assumptions used to build them.[30] More generally, the fact of particularity, of both individual perspective and social position, rules out total

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29 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute (Washington: Zero Books, 2015), 86.
30 Sam Gindin, "Socialism for Realists," Catalyst 2, no. 3 (Fall 2018).

knowledge. It is not clear that total transparency ought to be the goal anyway. There is nothing wrong with abstraction on its own; compressing knowledge into signs, images, formulas, procedures, technical systems, etc. is a condition of scientific and social development. Perhaps the politico-aesthetic question of planning is not how to collapse totality into a fully transparent unity, but rather how to mediate totality in a way that is self-reflexive, keeping alive the possibility of revision.

I do not have space here to flesh out what this might look like. I just want to suggest that taking planning seriously shifts our sense of what is possible. The two poles of the Anthropocene are mastery and humility. Depending on who you ask, climate change means that humans are either gods or tiny parts of a vast actor-network. Planning challenges both views, offering an at once more sober and more optimistic take on our power to legislate the future. Against mastery, freedom within historical constraint. Against humility, the audacity of collective knowledge.

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Biography

Casey Williams graduated *summa cum laude* from Duke University in 2014 with a B.A. in Literature. Since beginning his doctoral work, he has published several scholarly articles on energy and climate, including "Politicizing Climate" in *Bare Life Review,* and his writing on Energy Humanities will appear in the forthcoming *Johns Hopkins Guide to Critical Theory and Cultural Studies (*JHU Press) and *The Humanities Division* (Parlor Press). In 2020 he co-edited and contributed to a special issue of the journal *Polygraph* on "Marxism and Climate Change," which collected research and critical analysis from leading scholars of energy, climate, and Marxism. He has also published numerous book reviews, essays, and reported articles in popular outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Jewish Currents*, and *In These Times*. Invited to join Phi Beta Kappa after receiving his B.A., Casey earned a 2014-2015 Hart Fellowship for research in Bangladesh, as well as a 2019 Facing the Anthropocene Fellowship from Duke's Kenan Institute of Ethics and a 2020 BrainCultures Fellowship from Duke's BrainCultures Lab.