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Anthropocene Composition: Teaching Terminal Generations in the Pre-Apocalyptic Classroom

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ANTHROPOCENE COMPOSITION: TEACHING TERMINAL GENERATIONS IN THE
PRE-APOCALYPTIC CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my partner, Sara, who helped me believe I could complete what I started and do so with love in my heart and cats on my lap.

This work is dedicated to my parents, Michael and Sara, who made sure I had books to read and knew how to read them, and who always take me in again when the world gets too big.

This work is dedicated to my siblings, Benji, Joe, and Alex, who inspire me and help me smile in the face of adversity.

This work is dedicated to Danny Sax and Brendan Birch, my brothers by covenant.

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ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene is an era characterized by human alteration of the planet at deep geological levels and permeation of anthropogenic damage across all biomes. The primary crisis of this era is climate change, which is understood broadly as the anthropogenic disruption in weather patterns and global temperature averages caused by carbon emissions and other pollutants, as well as extractivism and terraforming (deforestation, monoculture farming, desertification and alterations of waterways, for example). Though popular media tends to frame climate change as a looming but always future problem, it is currently producing casualties, both human and nonhuman. The ongoing great extinction correlates with climate change, which is simultaneously exacerbated by and coproduces its effects. This dissertation responds to this already present but continually emerging scene by developing “Anthropocene Composition,” a pedagogical re-situating in a time of multiform planetary crises. To be in the Anthropocene is to be in a weirded *oikos*, to be faced with increasing unfamiliarity, hostility and contingency in one’s own home. This weirdness is a disorienting thing in which to write, and perhaps a greater challenge to pedagogy. I situate Anthropocene Composition in what Paul Lynch calls the Apocalyptic Turn—“in which the end of the world looms ever larger in our disciplinary and pedagogical imagination” (458). As such, it challenges the “critical impulse” and it eschews simple solutions. Following Latour’s “Compositionist Manifesto,” Anthropocene Composition seeks neither to critique, nor to solve. Pedagogically, it asks what it means to teach terminal generations of students to face insurmountable, ecological trauma. It cultivates *skotison*—

obscurity that embraces confusion rather than seeking clarity—and dwells in the impossibility of the present, indulging absurdity in the face of horror, and recognizing the trauma of the present. Anthropocene Composition finds enmeshedness and contemplation at the limits of knowledge and ventures, unburdened by hope, into the darkness at those borders.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018 a group of Swedish students began to skip class as a form of protest against government inaction towards climate change. They were led by 15-year-old Greta Thunberg, who spent her normal class time sitting on the steps of Swedish parliament, and who organized recurring protests with her fellow students (Kraemer). The argument at the heart of this protest was simple: what value is an education to students with no future? If governments refuse to prioritize the climate crisis and treat it like an existential threat, the world left for the youth to inherit will be radically different than the one modern education is training them for. The “School Strike for Climate” has been effective by some metrics and limited by others. Thunberg’s remonstrance garnered international attention, and her name has become synonymous with climate protest. In 2019, she attended a UN conference and addressed world leaders. But the question she raised of an education’s value under current conditions remains. Regardless of the attention and support that Thunberg and other climate youth activists have received from the public, there is little reason to believe that meaningful change will occur, and that the climate crisis—and other anthropogenic crises—will be mitigated.

Absent effective government action and social upheaval, an onus falls on educational institutions to adapt to the epoch. It is hard to argue that the value of a traditional high school degree, or a college degree for that matter, will be the same in the shadow of a climate apocalypse, but what sort of education *would* be valuable under

these conditions? What would bring Greta Thunberg and other youth activists back into the classroom, and particularly the writing classroom?

Anthropocene Composition (AC) is my answer to these questions. AC responds to the multiform exigencies of the epoch, primarily climate change, but also microplastics, chemical pollution, mass extinction, and the other anthropogenic crises that have permanently damaged the planet and are creating carnage and suffering around the globe. It is a pedagogical response to the effects that these realities are having upon students in college writing classrooms, as well as an attempt to work within the convoluted moral landscape created by climate regimes and the ineffectuality of our metalanguage. I locate this project in the apocalyptic turn of composition pedagogy (Lynch 2012) and negotiate the issues of accountability and inclusivity on a damaged planet through the Althing Parliament as conceived in the work of Bruno Latour that gathers voices and builds networks. It draws from various theories and practices, including new materialism, object-oriented ontology, Indigenous ways of knowing, mysticism and absurdism to develop a methodology for grounding classroom practices. AC as a methodology calls for shunning critique and problem-solution narratives while gathering stakeholder voices and dwelling with the damage of the epoch to create a habitus of care.

AC is an extension of ideas I began to formulate in the fall of 2018, in relation to post-process composition pedagogy. That climate change has been emergent for years was not new to me, but the relationship between ecology and composition changed my understanding of its importance to the writing classroom. I began to consider the contingent nature of educational institutions, beginning with the classroom itself as a space that is subject to the greater ecology around it. Then the COVID-19 pandemic

began, and the Anthropocene emptied our classrooms. In moments it was almost vindicating to see predictions come partially true, but for the most part I was just scared and exhausted. Those feelings have only abated slightly, but I would not have developed this version of AC under different conditions. Direct connections between the pandemic and climate change are difficult to make, but that is the nature of these wicked, anthropogenic issues. However, it is probable that pandemics are going to increase in frequency as global temperatures rise and the hoods of tropical disease move outwards from the equator towards the poles. The COVID-19 pandemic alone has traumatized students and educators alike, and we won't understand the full ramifications for some time. The next pandemic will likely compound those traumas.

The Anthropocene is already shaping the writing classroom in ways that are now undeniable. The changes that are not immediately obvious are arguably more sinister. Our bodies and those of our students are polluted with microplastics, the air and water we consume is poisoned, and our media is polarized and polarizing. In this world, crafting a pedagogy with rhetorical salience is an unprecedented challenge. Many students know that their future is bleak, and that the resources they once might have been able to draw upon in an equitable civilization have been pillaged by climate regimes. What use is the ability to write a cogent essay in such a world?

I could not have answered this sort of question myself until I found nuclear semiotics, and specifically the Ray Cat Solution: a response to the spatial and temporal issues of nuclear waste disposal that imagines genetically altered cats forming an actant with human counterparts. This is a creative response to an issue characterized by hyper- or quasi- or wicked objects, and the response itself draws upon relationality,

enmeshedness, and an embodied rhetoric. It indulges absurdity and puts aside logic. It is both material and affective. It models composition that resonates with the Anthropocene. I see in this idea a discursive response to an anthropogenic issue that doesn't resort to solution narratives, despite its name, or capitalist optimism, and from this response I gather characteristics that can resonate in the apocalyptic conditions of the epoch. Needing something that would help me express these ideas in a meaningful and inclusive way, I draw upon Latour's Althing Parliament as means for gathering the articulated propositions of the Anthropocene. Latour interprets an ancient Icelandic tradition of democratic discourse through a division of lower and upper houses. To this model I add and adjust various functions. For instance, the function of the Lower House is to gather stakeholder voices, so I focus on Indigenous scholarship. The Upper House required a bit more reimagining, and in AC I conceive its function as identification of and engagement with unknowability. This is a necessary change because of the nature of anthropogenic issues: they extend into fundamentally unknowable dimensions and have characteristics beyond the reach of scientific or even rhetorical certainty.

This gathering, sorting, and engaging with the known and unknown is, in the Anthropocene, always apocalyptic. I use the term, "apocalyptic," to mean revealing, but also existentially threatening. As the wicked problems of the epoch are accounted for, the extent of the damages and the complexity of the stakeholder networks affected becomes a desperate picture. Gathering stakeholder voices—human, animal, plant, and mineral—reveals damage and loss at all levels of the biome. Lifting the veil of generational amnesia, we find rapidly diminished biodiversity and natural resources, to say nothing of the growing threats of ecosystem collapse and forced climate migration. What we see, in

other words, when we account for the cost of indulging climate regimes and petro-masculinity, is an unsustainable civilization with no cogent plan for change or a livable future.

Hope, in this context, becomes a burden, and the optimistic biases we might have held about our means and potential diminish, or become dissonant as we cling to them. Students are aware of this, and without redress of our institutional shortcomings in finding anthropocenic resonance, the anxiety that they rightly feel risks falling into a despondent fear. AC will begin to ameliorate these shortcomings by writing *with* the traumas and losses of the epoch. It offers alternatives to the business-as-usual model of composition, and to the unfair burden of problem-solution narratives in favor of working through issues and developing a range of responses. AC does not seek to diminish anxiety, or to definitively answer the “Monday morning” pedagogy question, but rather to cultivate an understanding of anxiety as a mutual condition of being-in-the-world, and, through that understanding, create a habitus of care in the pre-apocalyptic classroom. If we give our students the means to compose anthropocenically, then they will also be able to compose para-apocalyptically, alongside and within the weirded *oikos*, anxiously and with care for themselves, their fellow creatures, and the planet they inhabit.

CHAPTER 1—INTO THE ANTHROPOCENE

This object kills me

-Titus Andronicus, *Act III, Scene I*¹

Humanity is doomed.

This is the belief of more than half of young people surveyed across 10 countries in a study conducted by the University of Bath, published in 2021 (Hickman et al.). The reasons for this pessimism are primarily climatological and enforced by the perception of unconcerned or incompetent governments. Evidence for impending doom is ubiquitous, written in any one of the catastrophic climate events occurring at nearly any given time. For instance, just in the year 2021—a year that began and ended in a climate-spurred pandemic—there were record temperatures to include the hottest month ever recorded (Global Climate Dashboard). The Colorado sky was blotted with the smoke of wildfires for weeks on end (Wertz and Penny), and Hurricane Ida made landfall in the southeastern United States on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, leaving more than a million people without power and endangering countless lives (Newburger). In the United States alone, nearly one third of citizens experienced a weather disaster over the 2021 summer (Kaplan and Batran). Elsewhere, things are worse. The World Health Organization

¹ Spoken by Lucius upon seeing his sister, Lavinia, raped and mutilated by the Goths, Chiron and Demetrius.

estimates that 150,000 people are dying from climate change every year, with the majority of these casualties in Africa (“Climate Change”). Across the world, levels of heat qualified as “extreme” are becoming more and more common. Wet-bulb temperature events are predicted to increase around the globe, making the simple act of stepping outside a deadly venture (Thompson). Meanwhile, the ocean, originator of all planetary life and foundation of its continued existence, seems to be in a terminal spiral of degradation. An estimated billion sea animals perished in the Northwestern heatwave of July 2021 (Thompson); the coral reefs are dying (*Coral Reef Alliance*); the food we take from the water in the form of fish and invertebrate life may be exhausted before we are halfway through the century (Samurovic).

If these depletions in the quality of our air, the quantity of our food, and the livability of our atmosphere were not sufficient to inspire dread, there is the burgeoning microplastic crisis to supplement fossil-fueled destruction. The polymers we have designed to shape innumerable products in our daily lives, from containers to electronics, toys, and clothing, are breaking down into particles sometimes measured in millimeters and invading every corner of the earth. They are now found “from the deepest sea trenches to the highest alpine mountains” (Parker). In marine life, these plastics can disrupt reproduction, feeding, and otherwise alter behavior in ways uncondusive to survival. They gather in the guts of shrimp and bottom-feeding species, and are then multiplied in the tracts of predators that consume them, and so on up the food chain. Whether these microplastics are harmful to humans is yet to be seen (Vethaak and Legler), but given the carelessness with which we made them a ubiquitous planetary pollutant, it feels only fair that they should be.

Contributing further to the anxiety induced by a landscape of vast, multigenerational damage and diseased creatures, the old specter of nuclear war and all the ghosts of radioactivity still haunt media and minds. In 2017, television personality and then-president of the United States Donald Trump threatened North Korea with a preemptive nuclear strike, dredging up 20th century fears of nuclear weapon exchanges between countries run by reactive demagogues (Baker and Sang-Hun). We needn't wait for another bomb to drop to produce casualties of the atom, however; the radioactivity of energy byproducts and, of course, "smaller" arms usage are claiming casualties without the benefit of a blast radius. The U.S. military has made extensive use of depleted uranium rounds in its imperialist efforts in the Middle East over the last decades, causing not only direct casualties but poisoning the landscape for generations to come (Oakford). In Okuma, Japan, in 2011, a tsunami hit the Fukushima power plant. Today, the Japanese government still does not know how to deal with the nuclear waste that sits in the core of the plant's ruin (Yamaguchi). In a world of increasingly unpredictable and worsening weather, the vulnerability of such nuclear facilities threatens disasters much worse than this, and the containment of nuclear waste continues to be a riddle not just for us, but for what generations may come over the millennia during which such waste is hazardous to life.

Pessimistic though the sentiment may be, to believe that humanity is doomed seems safer than optimism, considering the multiplicity of such crises. Climate change, microplastics, nuclear radiation: these threats are monstrous not just because of their ubiquity, but because they are vast in scale and alien in construction, dispersed across time and space in such a way that defies our perception to grasp. Sometimes we see the

effects when they reach through to a scale ascertainable by our sensory apparatus, for instance when a heat wave kills thousands in Europe, or when radiation causes a spike in lethal birth defects in the former Soviet bloc. Yet as quantifiable wholes, these crises recede from us into strange spaces and times. In such a world, pessimism may be more than just safer than optimism, it may also be more productive and, ultimately, kinder.

Pessimism expects less from people and things; it does not hinge an epistemology on desirable outcomes or the best of human behavior, nor does it gesture to outlandish pretenses of a just or friendly universe. But pessimism should not excuse climate apathy or nihilistic surrender, either. Instead, in this epoch of damage and agential diminishment, we should turn to a pessimism that recognizes a lingering agency in the ability to recognize and mitigate shared suffering, between people, non-humans, and things alike. To avoid the same epistemological limitations of an uncritical optimism, I will ultimately frame a critical pessimism as one that opens conditions of possibility for composing ecologically with these damages and losses. It is with this understanding of pessimism in mind that the work ahead seeks to account for and frame the anthropogenic damages of the current age as understood by those who believe we are doomed.

“Anthropocene”: An Era of Accountability

Accounting and framing begin with naming. Together, the changes wrought by *homo sapiens* on the planet have permeated its biomes and systems to such a degree that many have come to believe the epoch itself needs to be understood through a symbolic reckoning for this damage. This led to a new name for a deadly era: the Anthropocene.

The term “Anthropocene” is widely attributed to meteorologist and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen. He had already received the Nobel Prize for proving that the ozone layer was thinning due to industrial emissions when he protested the continued use of the term “Holocene” in a 2000 conference. Witnesses to the birth of this neologism describe it as an act of frustration. Will Steffen, organizer of the meeting, says Crutzen lost patience over the course of other presentations that evidenced dramatic planetary changes while still using the established term to describe the geologic epoch. The first use of “Anthropocene” was, therefore, an act born of anxiety, and it is further development of that anxiety that will promote a mutual dwelling experience among inhabitants of the epoch. For the purposes of this project, I will use the term, “Anthropocene,” to mean a marshaling of existential threats occasioning a paradigm shift not only in the sciences, but in the way humans understand and compose their place in the world.

Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer² published an article in 2002 defending their use of “Anthropocene.” In this article, they focus on the role of mankind in reshaping the Earth over the past three centuries. During that time, the human population increased tenfold, to six billion, and cattle populations increased to 1.4 billion. Chemical emissions including sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide have grown in step with agriculture and industrialization. Humans lay claim to most of the planet’s fresh water, and are responsible for an absurd increase in species extinction rate (“thousand to

² Some sources attribute first use of the term “Anthropocene” to Stoermer in the 1980s. I admit that I have given more focus to Crutzen, here, both because he has been more prolific in my source material, and because this origin story for the term is more dramatic.

ten thousand fold in the tropical rain forests”). The numbers are damning, and Crutzen and Stoermer thereby defend their neologism:

Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term “anthropocene” for the current geological epoch. (np)

Following this central statement, they claim that coping with the enormity of this damage will be “one of the great future tasks of mankind.” It will not only be difficult but also “exciting.” It is retrospectively unfortunate that this aspirational language tinges a relatively early call for understanding globally-scaled anthropogenic damage. Today, there is little room for the nebulous or cavalier in discussion surrounding Anthropocenic crises³. The horizon on which climate crisis seemed to exist for so long is now something we live on. And yet this is not to say that the public sphere has reached consensus on that fact, or even that science can agree that we are living in the “Anthropocene.”

Indeed, Crutzen and Stoermer’s term has met with harsh criticism. Matthew Adams’ article, “Anthropocene doesn’t exist and species of the future won’t recognize it,” is critical from the title onward. His argument against “Anthropocene” begins with an iconographic representation of geological “deep time” and homo sapiens’ relatively short period of existence on that scale. Despite climate change, atomic technology, mass extinction and vast amounts of plastic, Adams sides with the enormity of deep time

³ “Exciting” is not a good adjective, unless we understand it to encompass stress and anxiety.

against the self-proclaimed geological importance of the *Anthropos*. The comet that caused the mass extinction of the dinosaurs did not give rise to the “Cometocene,” he claims, echoing the argument of John Michael Greer, and future species will not likely discern the Anthropocene as such if they find evidence of human existence and destruction in sediment (np). Adams’s objection, here, is more than a defense of scientific objectivism; it is a continuation of logocentrism under distinctly illogical conditions, and an attempt to retain the silo between sterile scientism and the increasingly political dimensions of an age of extinction. Criticism of the Anthropocene, here, is defensive of a categorization that is breaking down⁴.

It is a common refrain of “Anthropocene” critics to note the alternatives that have been proffered by academics, even though academia seems to be the place you will most likely encounter the “Anthropocene” symbol. Jason W. Moore created the term “Capitalocene” to answer the problematization of the human/nature binary and some concern about the “golden spike” of the current age. He argues that the transformations of “power, capital and nature” are markable four centuries earlier than the Great Acceleration (“Capitalocene” np). Not far afield of this conception is the “Plantationocene,” which more specifically centers racialized hierarchies of power in conceiving of the current age. As they appear in criticisms of “Anthropocene,” these other neologisms exist to throw doubt on the impulse to re-name the Holocene. Academics, it seems, cannot agree amongst themselves, and so are a questionable source about whether or not mankind has done the sort of global damage that a title like

⁴ This retention of strict division between science and politics will be recurrent in its non-viability, demonstrated most frequently in the work of Bruno Latour.

“Anthropocene” would suggest. We can’t even manage to get our terms straight, one might say⁵.

I outline this debate not only because of its role in climate denialism, but because of its contributions to the anxiety of the age. By questioning the there-ness of the Anthropocene, such conversations diminish the validity of those who feel they are living in it. This, in turn, may redouble the feelings of doom, guilt, and anger inspired by climate change models and measurements of microplastic pollution. Beliefs about cause, severity, and accountability as expressed in the term, “Anthropocene,” are remapping society, largely along political and generational lines. Those who feel that a climate apocalypse is immanent are also faced with social movements seeking to muddy the waters of even the most conservative predictions, or outright deny the phenomenon exists. For instance, exceptionalism from religious dogma is one of the greatest obstacles to climate change accountability in the United States. Specifically, white Evangelical Christians tend to disbelieve anthropogenic climate change (Bloomfield). Extractivism, the process of taking as many natural resources as possible from a region to sell them on the global market, has characterized colonialism, industrialization, religion, and warfare for decades, and is rooted in a human-centered belief that all such resources exist for consumption. Such belief systems enact a version of anthropocentrism that not only

⁵ “Plantationocene,” “Capitalocene,” and the many other monikers for the epoch should not be discounted. They have a great deal of value in highlighting the seemingly disparate problems of the paradigm that, collectively, have contributed to massive suffering, injustice, and unaccountable damages. I mention them here not polemically, but to frame the epoch as discursively constructed. Hard sciences and scientism broadly seem to take issue with discursive construction.

perpetuates and multiplies planetary damage, but dismisses resultant crises as either deific design or another market opportunity.

Following William Connolly, it may be productive to understand the networks worthy of blame as *regimes* characterized by sociocentrism (*Climate Machines* 5-6). Sociocentrism is a convergence of neoliberalism, Christianity, and other seemingly disparate ideas associated with social and political life, and the way these things create a globally damaging pattern of destruction and anthropocentrism. By this understanding, there are two stages of climate change denial. The first is evangelical and neoliberal: it's not that bad. The second stage is admitting the circumstances are bad, but continuing to "study and act within old sociocentric categories" (*Facing The Planetary* 184). Connolly traces the power structures of sociocentric climate regimes through Deleuze and Guattari's micropolitics, claiming that institutions such as churches and schools use these micropolitical processes to bolster macropolitics of sexism, racism, and, more recently, climate denialism, or at least avoidance and neglect of the climate crisis. For Connolly, the Anthropocene is ultimately a complex, abstract machine that accelerates us through periods of geologic history because of its entanglements with fascist drives resulting from the degeneration of democracy in a late-stage capitalist ecology (*Climate Machines* 50-55).

Though anthropocentrism may be impossible to fully escape, a more productive anthropocentrism than that found at intersections of religion and capitalism may counter the sociocentrism of climate regimes. Such a productive anthropocentrism would be a matter of accountability. It would recognize the centrality of the *anthropos* as an entity that destroys and has the capacity to affect destruction on a planetary scale. Inasmuch as

homo sapiens has the potential to split the atom, mass-manufacture polymers, terraform, and otherwise pollute in ways perceptible (albeit minutely perceptible to the imaginary, alien geologists of the future) on a geologic scale, man is apart from the rest of nature in this capacity, and this is the age of man. More appropriately still, and to echo Connolly, this is the age of man's sociocentric, destructive consequence.

It is important to qualify climate change as anthropogenic first, because of near consensus among scientists, and second, because to do otherwise is to outright deny validation to those caught in the impossible present. "Anthropocene" validates in a way that "Holocene" does not, and yet it should not be thought that climate change is an agreed-upon fact in the larger public. Though anthropogenic climate change is now the scientific standard, there are still considerable percentages of the population, to include educators and policymakers, who deny the reality. The Peoples' Climate Vote, a survey that "reflects over half of the world's population," suggests that about sixty-four percent of that population believe climate change is a global emergency ("World's largest survey"). A study by A. Lee Hannah and Danielle Christine Rhubart, titled "Teacher Perceptions of State Standards and Climate Change Pedagogy," shows that, where there are no state standards of consensus-informed climate change education, some grade-school teachers (usually correlating with religious belief) are more likely to omit it from the curriculum, or to spend time teaching non-anthropogenic climate change. On February 26th, 2015, US senator Jim Inhofe, author of *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*, brought a snowball onto the Senate floor to evidence his denial of climate change (Casteel).

At this point, denialists like Inhofe are in a shrinking minority, as the People's Climate Vote suggests, and the next generation of voters will understand climate change as an anthropogenic crisis in greater numbers than the current voting body. David Wallace-Wells recently declared the war on climate denial has been won, a claim evidenced by a year of unprecedented wildfires, bird death, locust swarms, and, most memorably, the COVID-19 pandemic. These things are no longer surprising, but rather “logical developments in a known pattern,” meaning that we are past the point of alarmism (“After Alarmism” np). The 1.5 degree Celsius turning point we hoped to avoid in the plans made by governing bodies over the past several decades is now nearly a certainty (we are around 1.2 degrees as I write this), but whether we avoid the next marker (2 degrees) is far from certain. If denialism is no longer a viable threat to climate action, there is still the swamp of fatalism.

“Anthropocene” as symbol of the current epoch helps to formulate a productive anthropocentrism characterized by responsibility for mankind's destructive potential, but it is also necessary for conveying the scale of climate crises. Conflation of local issues with the global nature of anthropogenic climate change is problematic because it can lead to arguments for solutions that only address these local problems. For instance, more comprehensive and accessible waste management and recycling programs in developed nations will likely produce cleaner cities and a healthier citizenry in those nations, but unaccountable waste processing and recycling plants in other countries—where the waste goes—will ultimately mean that damage is displaced rather than mitigated. This same principle holds true of energy needs; electric vehicles mean little when run on a dirty grid. Displacement of damage is a signature phenomenon of anthropogenic climate

change, and it is as unfortunate as it is predictable that this displacement burdens the already vulnerable at a disproportionate rate in a phenomenon called “slow violence”—transferral of environmentally damaging (usually) capitalistic by-products and consequences onto and into the bodies of the global poor (Nixon)⁶. Therefore, the scale of anthropogenic climate change needs to be set at the earliest possible juncture to facilitate comprehension of systemic damage.

Understanding the current epoch as the Anthropocene addresses the scalar issue, and it forces engagement with the temporal elements of the climate crises. Scientists and other academics have been long engaged with the question of when, exactly, to define the start of the Anthropocene, and engagement with this question produces a new historiography of human relations with their environments characterized by exploitation and distinctly un-ecological relations. In “Getting the Anthropocene so wrong,” Clive Hamilton enters the debate of when, exactly, to place the beginning of the Anthropocene, and argues that the debate itself is a product of scalar confusion. Several authors have suggested placing the start of the Anthropocene at 1610, the Great Acceleration: an age of global travel, species transmission, disease, and intercontinental trade (Morelle). Hamilton disagrees, claiming that there are two mistakes made here: failure to recognize a paradigm shift from ecology/environmental science to Earth System science, and the conflation of “Anthropocene” with “environment.” “Anthropocene” is a title applied to the epoch as understood through the lens of Earth System science, which accounts for the

⁶ A 2022 analysis of the damages caused by greenhouse gas emissions puts the United States firmly in the lead at causing nearly two trillion dollars in environmental and economic losses *to other countries*. These damages take the form of heatwaves, crop failures, drought, and other catastrophes that fall primarily on poorer countries closer to the equator (Milman, “Nearly \$2tn”).

whole earth as a complex system (102). In other words, the Anthropocene is a global, networked, planetary phenomenon. Looking for points in sediment to declare beginnings of the epoch is an obsession Hamilton calls golden spike fetishism (105). The epoch, he argues, should not be confused with these possible beginnings. However, there are other actors who support various golden spikes as useful epochal starting points. For instance, the Anthropocene Working Group considered 1945 one such spike, because the atomic bomb caused radionuclides to show up in rock strata⁷. The significance of this debate, to Hamilton, lies less in any epoch-defining singularity than in the interdisciplinarity required to perceive it (106). There is possibly a greater significance in the compulsion to reframe the recent centuries as characterized by anthropogenic destruction.

In short, “Anthropocene” is a critical rhetorical term. Its use recognizes, first, that humans are reshaping the planet in ways that will be perceptible on the geological time scale (albeit relatively slightly), and that the planet represents a complex, networked system. This system is being damaged and otherwise affected on many levels by human action to include extraction, consumption, and destruction. “Anthropocene” is anthropocentric, but not celebratory. It recognizes that the *Anthropos* has a capacity for destruction without analogue, and that this capacity is realized in crises like anthropogenic climate change. In this sense, it is a term of accountability more than periodization. “Anthropocene” also helps keep the climate change discussion informed by a global scale. Individual phenomenological experience is bound by the local, and

⁷ In a 2018 talk for the Centre for International Governance Innovation, Hamilton said that 1945 “marks the turning point in the sweep of Earth’s history at which the geological evolution of the planet switched from one driven by the blind forces of nature to one influenced by conscious, willing being” (np).

even current media tend to omit the sort of global perspectives required to justify the global nature of Anthropocenic crises. To say, first, that we live in the Anthropocene, is therefore to inform a specific understanding of anthropogenic climate change in ways that will make it a distinctly rhetorical situation.

Finally, “Anthropocene” is also a term of validation. To say we are living in the Anthropocene, as opposed to the Holocene, recognizes that the young people who feel doomed and betrayed have good reason to feel that way. “Anthropocene” recognizes the irregularity of the swirling microplastics and radiation-tainted dead zones and galloping climate change. “Anthropocene” is accountability to those feelings and the material history that inspired those feelings by creating a hostile ontology. As an epochal symbol, “Anthropocene” works co-productively with a pessimistic *episteme*, supporting the negative expectations of those who cannot bring themselves to hope for justice or safety. Of course, things are going to get worse; it’s right there in the name.

History of Climate Change

As a complex material assemblage stretched over temporal and spatial dimensions that defy human perception, climate change complicates historiographical strategies. As many deniers of anthropogenic climate change will say, the climate has always changed, and for as long as humans have existed, those changes have affected mankind. The Little Ice Age, for instance, followed the Medieval Warm Period and lasted from about 1300 to 1850. Koch et al. have argued that a depleted human population (following several epidemic diseases) contributed to reforestation during this period, and this in turn may have caused further cooling. Furthermore, food scarcity following this climate change

would have resulted in a human population with compromised immune systems, making them vulnerable to *Yersinia pestis* (Kelly 2005)⁸. The anthropogenic contributions to ice ages extending backwards this far in time are debated, and for the sake of this work's focus on anthropogenic climate change as importantly distinct from "natural" shifts in the Earth system, it will extend backwards no further than 1850, the end of the Little Ice Age, in any significant way. It will focus, instead, on the present, but begin with a brief, scholarly detective work that evidences a conspiratorial awareness and obfuscation of climate change as empirical reality in the 1970s.

Science historian Spencer Weart crafts a thick historical narrative of climate change. For Weart, it is "an epic story: the struggle of thousands of men and women over the course of a century for very high stakes" ("Discovery" np). Because climate is influenced by an army of factors, from volcanoes to solar activity, conceptions of climate change are bound to scientific knowledge of many seemingly disparate phenomena. Weart constructs a climate change timeline beginning at 1800-1870, when the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere was about 290 parts per million and the mean global temperature (1850-1890) was about 13.6 degrees Celsius, and the first Industrial Revolution was happening (np). This period also saw new scientific discovery of the ways in which atmosphere, radiation, and global weather patterns interact. A 1912 newspaper article from the *Rodney and Otamatea Times* reads:

The furnaces of the world are now burning about 2,000,000,000 tons of coal a year. When this is burned, uniting with oxygen, it adds about 7,000,000,000 tons

⁸ John Kelly's *The Great Mortality*, particularly chapter 2, argues a connection between climate change, the human immune system, and the mortality rate of the plagues caused by this bacterium.

of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere yearly. This tends to make the air a more effective blanket for the earth and to raise its temperature. The effect may be considerable in a few centuries. (Bruek np)

It is an apt description of the layman's understanding of climate change, and it is over a century old. Over the course of the 20th century, scientific discovery would confirm hypotheses of the 19th century as methods of measurement grew more precise and computer technology advanced. Meanwhile, warfare took advantage of new, coal-burning engines and oil fields became a resource that conflicting nations fought to control. Scientific research organizations were founded, the atom was split, man walked on the moon, warnings were ignored, all the while CO₂ levels rose. At the turn of the millennium, those levels reached about 368 ppm (Lindsey). On August 2nd, 2021, it was 413.56 ppm (CO₂-Earth). People knew these changes were occurring, and many of those people denied the truth of the matter, ultimately undertaking a complex psychological operation extending over decades meant to misinform, polarize, and weaken objection.

Perhaps nowhere is this conspiracy of ignorance evidenced as clearly as in an investigative report from *Inside Climate News* that reveals a decades-long misinformation campaign run by Exxon aimed at diminishing or discrediting climate change awareness (Hall). The report found that the company knew the extent of climate change severity by at least 1977, when the company's senior climate change scientist, James Black, warned of deadly implications to ignoring climate science regarding greenhouse gas emissions. Despite this, Exxon would go on to establish the Global Climate Coalition in 1989—an organization that challenged climate change science—and prevent the United States from signing the Kyoto protocol in 1998. They have poured millions of dollars into

agnotological campaigns of climate uncertainty and denial. Further, they continue to deny the findings of the investigative report to this day (np).

Simultaneously, in 1977, a memo was addressed to then-president Jimmy Carter titled “Release of Fossil Fuel CO₂ and the Possibility of Catastrophic Climate Change” (Pattee). The memo came from Frank Press, Carter’s chief science advisor, and its assertions and predictions are either eerily prescient, or further evidence that the information we have today has been available for decades. Press himself writes in the report that “this is not a new issue. What is new is the growing weight of scientific support which raises the CO₂-climate impact from speculation to a serious hypothesis worthy of a response that is neither complacent nor panicky.” Carter backed down from direct engagement, however, aligning himself with Jimmy Schlesinger, the secretary of energy, who advised against “Presidential involvement and policy initiatives.” The following administration, under Ronald Reagan, would of course take any progressive ecological action off the table.

The Possibility of Revolution and Reform

Some academic work has crafted policy arguments intended to outline the sort of systemic changes that would need to happen to mitigate the climate crisis as swiftly as possible and antagonistically towards the climate regimes—the United States, Russian, and Chinese governments, the oil and gas and big tech corporations, religious and secular organizations such as the Evangelical church and Fox media, to name a few—which benefit from the crisis. Academic works such as Connolly’s *Facing the Planetary*, Jeremy Brecher’s *Against Doom*, and Matthew T. Huber’s *Climate Change as Class War*

tend to illustrate speculative, global movements which are unprecedented in scope and improbable in the current political climate of unprecedented resource division and political partisanship. Few pessimists with knowledge of the original Marxist predictions of proletariat uprising can invest hope in any revisions of that speculation under the present circumstances. However, the historiographies and discursive constructions of climate change in Connolly, Brecher, and Huber build persuasive arguments for understanding the situation as deliberate, malicious, and undefeatable without systemic change that has no historic analogue.

In all these histories and calls to action, a common topos is the construction of climate regimes as nearly insurmountable antagonists to meaningful social and economic change. The denial, feigned ignorance, and decades of neoliberal extractivism briefly described above have culminated in acute disparities of power between the polity of climate regimes and that of reformers. Today, that long-game by which fossil fuel industries consolidated political power has created an almost unfathomable war machine. Brecher describes the insoluble challenges presented by resisting that machine's stranglehold on global economies and polity:

The fossil fuel industries possess immense wealth. Their coal, oil, and gas reserves in the ground are worth many trillion dollars; their financial assets are colossal; and their plants, pipelines, tankers, and other facilities span the globe. They control fossil fuel technology. The peoples of the world are dependent on them for the energy that fuels their vehicles and lights their houses. They wield immense political power through their wealth and the economic dependence of political jurisdictions. Their political allies include much of business and labor.

They have a wide array of means to sabotage fossil free alternatives. They are experienced, savvy, and proactive about politics and shaping public opinion.

Their freedom to do what they want with their property is supported by law, government, and much of public opinion. (27-28)

Faced with these circumstances, governmental climate action should not be relied upon even for diminishment of climate crises. Though awareness and climate justice movements are growing apace with media recognition of the climate crises, the enemy is old, rich, entrenched, and resourceful beyond measure. Moreover, their values are contiguous with religious and other conservative ideologies, lending them support even against the interest of those same communities.

Matthew T. Huber elaborates on the intersection of ideology, capital and class interest in *Climate Change as Class Warfare*, wherein he shapes an understanding of climate change as a class issue in both a Marxist and ecological sense. Huber argues that action against climate regimes needs to focus on the production of climate change via industrial extractivism (5). This extractivism comes overwhelmingly from a fraction of the capitalist class, but the professional class (to include academics) is the primary constructor of climate struggle discourse. That discourse has been alienating to the working class, from which a mass popular movement against climate change must come if meaningful change is to be achieved (6). From these Marxist and ecological readings of the history and present of climate change, Huber develops “a “two-front polemical war” against professional-class climate politics” (Lih qtd. in Huber, 43). The polemics are aimed against climate liberalism (based in logic and techno-optimism) and the austerity politics of “radical climate activists” (43). If things are to change, meaningfully and in

opposition to the structures that support climate regimes, Huber's analysis shows that the key will be unionization, and that unionization will have to form piecemeal (beginning with the electricity sector), outside the perceivably "radical" plans of top-down legislation like the Green New Deal (280).

Ultimately, Huber's project confirms that we are at an unprecedented historical crossroads, where the working class is simultaneously the largest it has ever been, and "separated from the ecological means of livelihood, most notably the land" (285)⁹. Despite the place-by-place, profession-by-profession unionization that he notes will be easier than consolidating the global workforce, global action *will* be necessary to supplanting the current economy and its beneficiaries. There must be, Huber argues, a "species solidarity" that fosters a reconnection to ecology and the land, and this must begin with the working class (288). There are not many reasons to be optimistic about the current state of this class or its future as the vanguard of climate revolution, but Haber cites the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as glimmers of hope. This hope is that, somehow, we will see a restructuring of capital analogous to that brought about by the New Deal of the early 20th Century, but now there is much more on the line, and greater obstacles to such reconstruction (296).

Huber's model for proletariat-driven reconstruction seems dubious given the lack of class consciousness, the rise of nationalism, and the unprecedented consolidation of capital and wealth in the oligarchic rich. But Brecher predicts that if we do not foment

⁹ Huber notes that some Marxist scholars have taken to calling the current epoch the "Proletarocene" (287).

insurgency—and Huber’s class reconstruction certainly qualifies as such a movement—and our climate inevitably worsens,

[a]dvocates of climate protection will be increasingly labeled as ‘climate terrorists’. Those identified as leaders will be jailed or assassinated; demonstrations will be violently suppressed. Armies will be mobilized to terrorize both protestors and displaced masses. . . . Life will be nasty, brutish, and short.

(96)

An effective insurgency, for Brecher, would establish “climate tribunals” that guide action and education under a new, ecological climate regime (98).

The alternatives as described in Connolly’s “politics of swarming,” Huber’s class-climate-solidarity, and Brecher’s new climate paradigm are interesting ideas, and it is not my intent to deny the possibility of these improbable, speculative futures wherein justice and ecology finally find a meaningful, central place in a global community. But pedagogically, the implications of demanding coalition and change from the current generation of students are ethically problematic; there is almost no future in which this conflict does not lead to violent loss of life. Instead—and with respect for the impossible present that denizens of our climate and classrooms find themselves in—my work here puts aside the deliberative, action-oriented and policy-forward politics of the above projects in favor of speculation on the worst-case scenarios in order to avoid putting an undue onus of problem-solving on generations of people who have had relatively little hand in producing these crises. We cannot, with any good conscience, send our students to die in climate wars. Given the inevitability of further damage, and the likely extinction of many more species including humans, what we do with the time we have left will be

largely determined by our affective engagements with past, present and future crises. In other words, emotions, and particularly the “negative” array of emotions constructed around fear and dread, will be primary determinants of how we live and die in the Anthropocene.

Trauma, Anxiety, and Fear

The international study I referenced in the opening lines of this chapter, titled “Young people’s voices on climate anxiety, government betrayal, and moral injury: a global phenomenon,” shows the extent to which youth perception of climate change skews towards pessimism. According to the survey conducted in 10 countries representing both the global north and the global south, and targeting people aged 16-25, nearly 50% of the surveyed reported feelings of “extreme worry” about climate change, 77% reported being frightened by the future, and 49% reported feelings of betrayal towards government (6). The researchers note a constellation of negative emotions bound in association with the future as understood by these youth: worry, fear, guilt, shame, grief, and despair, to name a few (3). It’s easily imaginable that prolonged dwelling in these emotions and among the circumstances producing them would create trauma of a complex, interpersonal nature. Indeed, the study of climate change has been found to produce long-standing psychological effects among researchers, to say nothing of their audiences (Gilford et al.). But there is a dissonance between the common understanding of trauma as present circumstance caused by past events, and the perception of climate change as a future event. Putting aside, for a moment, that climate change is happening now, producing casualties, and diminishing quality of life in multiple countries, it is

perhaps unique in its capacity to produce debilitating psychological conditions to the extent it seems to be doing, *before* “happening.” E. Ann Kaplan, writing in an apocalyptic subgenre of ecocriticism, has coined “Pre-Traumatic Stress Syndrome” to describe this phenomenon, and she evidences the condition through analysis of films to include *Take Shelter*, *The Book of Eli*, and, most productively, *Into Eternity*. Among some of these films she finds a toxic fantasy of chauvinistic heroism, and from others she draws the concept of the ethical witness: a character bound by standards of verisimilitude and honesty that is rarely represented in mainstream cinema.

Kaplan describes Pre-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, or “Pre-TSS,” as “an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future” (xix). Her understanding of anxiety, fear, and trauma are conflated, here, in ways that other scholars have sought to untangle, though her argument for climate anxiety as trauma is anchored to a temporal derangement and is linked to trauma-induced symptoms represented in fiction (24). For Heidegger, anxiety is something more fundamental to the human condition, a characteristic of *dasein* that recognizes the uncanniness of being. It risks becoming fear when one does not accept anxiety as a ubiquitous, totalizing force. Samantha Frost gives us a deeper theoretical understanding of fear when she argues that Thomas Hobbes’ “variegated materialism” determines a relationship between fear and temporality. Fear is the *present* prediction of something bad we experienced in the *past* happening again in the *future* (165). Frost argues that this temporality gives the individual the feeling of autonomy over their actions. However, when a fear has no object, the imagination cannot do its work to create the illusion of autonomy, and we enter a state of “Panique Terror” that leaves us inoperative, much like the immobilizing anxiety described by Kaplan.

Clearly there are entangled dimensions of fear, anxiety and time that are further complicated by the sort of temporal complexity posed by issues such as climate change. Untangling those dimensions is important work if the composition classroom hopes to function in the Anthropocene.

This project recognizes and focuses on the presence of anxiety, fear, and trauma in Anthropocenic ontologies, in some ways continuing the work of Robert Brulle and Kai Marie Norgaard in analyzing climatological relationships with cultural trauma (2019), but also advocating for an understanding of such states as unknowable. While the social sciences can taxonomize and diagnose, theory and ambient material rhetorics can draw out the less quantifiable dimensions of pathos and mysticism. Seeking a pedagogical intersection for new materialist methodologies, anthropocenic crises, and apocalyptic speculation, I offer *Anthropocene Composition* as a response (but not an answer) to the questions facing the classroom in this new ecology. *Anthropocene Composition* represents, in some of its pedagogical underpinnings, an extension of conversations about the Anthropocene as dark and poetic. Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet* begins with a comparison between the impossible present of the damaged world and the collective tropes of the horror genre. He claims that "it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all" (1). In this sense, the Anthropocene is a horror story, at once characterized by anxiety and fear, and marked by trauma. The questions we face if we are to operate in such an ontology are multiform and challenging to some of the fundamental notions of academia and pedagogy.

The most challenging of these questions may be the one that answers to nihilism. The data and circumstances surrounding climate change are so multiform, dispersed, and scalarly disruptive to our phenomenological limitations that there is no way to construct a holistic ontological understanding of its nature. As an object, climate change is *hyper-* (Morton), *quasi-* (Serres; Latour; Hawk), and *wicked* (Rittel and Webber). In the face of it, logos becomes lame, and the individual becomes nihilistically small. What is more frustrating than this diminishment of agency, however, is the perception of inaction on the part of governing bodies and world leadership. Greta Thunberg has, perhaps, driven home this point more poignantly than anyone: there is no point in going to school anymore if there is no future. This is an excellent contention, and one that has garnered a great deal of attention at the same time that it has further galvanized the political divides around climate change and policy.

The other side of this coin is equally vexing: what *should* be taught in such a hopeless context? What might be worth imparting to a generation facing extinction of their way of life, decades of disruption and loss, and ultimately destruction of their homes? It is time to address such questions and consider the possibility that we may be teaching a terminal generation, or at least one of the last generations to learn in classrooms as we understand them. Answering such questions will not mean solving them; indeed, such efforts to do so will likely meet with frustration and, eventually, further despair. Attempts at “solving” the multiform exigencies of the Anthropocene are pedagogically unfair, and perhaps even unjust. The fantasy of a proper college education producing responsible democratic citizens is a story that puts undue stress on a generation that has been victimized by centuries of extractivism and unsustainable policy. In an age

where threats to democracy are multiplying, nationalism is resurging and, in some cases, targeting global, climate mediating resources (Crick; Dervis), Quintilian's promise of good men speaking well, or, more recently, Corbett's argument for rhetoric's democratic necessity, are cold comforts, if they were ever based in a qualifiable reality.

The Classroom and the Pre-Apocalypse

The "post-apocalyptic" is a familiar genre descriptor. We encounter it in any number of zombie horror franchises and *Mad Max*-esque wasteland action blockbusters. From Kaplan's development of pre-trauma and the associated constellation of issues, we can start understanding the "pre-apocalyptic" as what precedes calamity, but characterized informed by anxiety, fear, and pre-trauma. For teachers and students, few places have so observable a pre-apocalyptic condition as the classroom.

The pre-apocalyptic classroom is fragile. Before 2018 I¹⁰ would not have thought so, as I had never known an academic institution to cancel class except for a few snow days during my many years in Colorado. Generally speaking, if a plow could make it down the main street of town, school would be held regardless of inches of snowfall. Then, in 2018, I moved to South Carolina to begin my PhD studies, and within the first few months of the first semester, the campus shut down for a week due to hurricane weather. I didn't know such a thing happened as far inland as Columbia, but it happened

¹⁰ Following Richard E. Miller's *Writing at the End of the World*, and such models as Laurie Gries' "New materialist ontobiography," Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, and Shane Borrowman's *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing*, this dissertation eschews the artificiality of the impersonal. "I" am the Anthropocene, and it is me; separating the "I" from this dissertation would be an undue act of avoidance. Therefore, I include brief, personal narratives like this one not out of expressivist indulgence, but for accountability.

more than once during my attendance over the next few years. The cancellations were not without good reason; hurricanes in the southeastern United States are deadly things, costing dozens of lives and millions in property damage every year (Erdman). I remember, distinctly, Hurricane Katrina displacing college students across the country, and my freshman biology class at the University of Colorado adding several attendees from New Orleans. Perhaps for those students the Anthropocene is not so revelatory, but for many of us the increasing frequency and intensity of tropical storms and other inclement weather patterns is anxiety-inducing.

Then 2020 began, and in the news I saw reports of a strange illness in Wuhan, China. I remember a video of a foreign press release (from Egypt, I think), and watching a man standing beside a podium covering his mouth with a handkerchief to muffle a cough. He was shaking, perspiring, his eyes bloodshot. Meanwhile the speaker offered placations and assurances of control. Weeks passed. The death toll rose, but not in a way that was altogether meaningful to American audiences. I, myself, am as guilty as any other global citizen of dismissing nameless casualties when they accrue overseas, and so I did in this case. Retrospectively, life was recreating the tropes of a zombie film in its opening scenes. The signs were there, in the periphery, and largely ignored. That is, they failed to produce anxiety. I'm reminded, specifically, of a monologue in *28 Days Later*, wherein a survivor describes such early days to the protagonist: "it was happening in small villages, market towns. And then it wasn't on the T.V. anymore. It was in the street, outside, it was coming through your windows" (Boyle). When COVID-19 arrived in the United States, one might say when it made landfall, the full ramifications were still unclear. And then schools shut down, the classrooms emptied. People began to die. We

saw, as a nation, bodies on the streets of New York City being loaded into refrigeration trucks, overflowing ICUs, and distraught healthcare workers. Worse, we saw on full display the hateful ignorance of our fellow man: racism, tribalism, indifference and even fascism. The 2020 pandemic brought all the rot of the American psyche boiling to the surface in unceasing waves of fear and malignance. Meanwhile, across the country, classrooms sat, in stasis, without students to learn or teachers to teach.

We necessarily adapted. Perhaps it's unfair to say that "classrooms sat" and better to say that classrooms moved online, and the material spaces within school buildings lost their function as classrooms. Just as suddenly as COVID-19 was in our streets, we were in our students' houses and apartments and personal lives, peering through the digital windows of various communication platforms, invading their privacy as they invaded ours, all of us victims to apparent circumstance and the necessity of continuing education. Our material conditions were altered, dramatically and suddenly, in ways that challenged our pedagogical practices and adaptability. For many students still in K-12, time was irretrievably lost, and the implications of a year without traditional school settings will likely unfold in studies and reports over decades to come (should our institutions survive that long). For those in universities, faith in the value of higher education was frequently called into question. Online courses, taught by many without training in such modalities, were frustrating, insufficient, and costly. And yet they were necessary, we assume, to keep the gears of the institution grinding.

Academia does not exist apart from the Anthropocene, and perhaps it takes a pandemic to remind us of that. Our ivory tower is built on the same ground as all the brick-and-mortar surrounding it. As I write this, COVID-19 casualties continue to accrue,

and though classes are in person again, there is good reason to believe this is a temporary state of deluded normalcy. COVID-19 has a complicated, enmeshed relationship with climate change, and climate change models predict an increase in the frequency of pandemics over the following decades (Bernstein; see also Wallace-Wells 110-112). The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called the response to the 2020 pandemic a “dress rehearsal” for future global exigencies, and this sentiment was echoed throughout the media, often in specific reference to climate change (Goldberg; Lynn). It seems that COVID-19 will likely be a presence in society and the classroom for a long time to come. At the University of South Carolina, the administration has decided that the risks to faculty, staff and students are within acceptable levels to continue in-person teaching. There was a mask mandate in buildings for the '21-'22 school year, but no presence to enforce it. It was lifted in the '22-'23 school year. Whether such measures will be sufficient to mitigate future pandemics is questionable, but they do serve to induce a constant anxiety in all but the most nihilistic of university workers and students. The masks on the students, the ubiquitous hand sanitizer stations and mandatory testing: these things are marks of global change visible at the local level, reminding us of the instability of the status quo and the vulnerability created in the social actions that constitute higher education.

The classroom is fragile in its materiality. Disease, weather, and the global climate all threaten to displace us from its confines at any moment. In this sense, it is a distinctly pre-apocalyptic space: a place where revelation and upheaval are always on the horizon. It would have been less defensible to refer to the classroom as pre-apocalyptic in 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic revealed this fragility and called for a

redesignation of time as pre- and post-COVID¹¹. And yet, the classroom is also durable when it resides in the adaptability of its students and teachers. That adaptability is something more than tech-savvy or versatile syllabi; it is the response-ability produced in the anxiety that defines our being in the Anthropocene. We are, all of us, its products, as much as the pandemic or the next hurricane. We co-produce these events, shaping them as they shape us. We are more aware now of the next looming crisis, or permutation of any one of the extant crises, and this awareness affirms a pre-apocalyptic condition inherent to the classroom. The pre-apocalyptic classroom, and specifically the composition classroom, through which all university graduates must pass, should reflect this, fostering the anxiety borne of shifting material conditions and unknowability.

Resolutions and Realpolitik

Overall, the discipline has yet to fully acknowledge the classroom as pre-apocalyptic. In 2019, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a position statement titled “Resolution on Teaching Literacy on Climate Change.” In the short pair of paragraphs and trio of bullet points that follow this heading, the NCTE uncouples climate change from disciplinary exclusivity, positioning the issue as both interdisciplinary, and challenging to the multi-disciplinary nexus of the American educational system. The second paragraph touches on the necessity of English teachers providing multimodal learning environments that frame climate change in terms of

¹¹ This is, in itself, a problematic designation, as we will likely never be “post-COVID.”

victimization, consequences, and activism. The resolution itself—the three bullets—looks like this:

Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English encourage teachers and teacher educators to

- resist the politicization of climate science by evaluating curricular texts for scientific credibility;
- lead students to engage thoughtfully with texts focusing on social and political debates surrounding climate change; and
- work with teachers in other fields to implement interdisciplinary instruction on climate change and sustainability. (np)

This appears to be a careful dance-step around the joint issues of climate scientism and climate politics; the NCTE wants students exposed to the political dimensions of climate debate, but they do not want those politics staining the scientific sanctity of climate change models. In other words, the NCTE wants interdisciplinary instruction, but they want to maintain a silo between the arts and sciences. Students should evaluate texts *for* scientific credibility, but not the credibility of science. The resolution affirms the function of the English classroom to be one that defends science from politics.

But science is political. A new research movement is illuminating blind spots in scientific data that tend to fall along racial and economic lines. For instance, a 2020 study revealed that sub-Saharan Africa has suffered heat waves of increased intensity that place undue burdens on its inhabitants, despite a lack of reporting on the subject (Harrington and Otto). Adelle Thomas of Climate Analytics claims that such blind spots are part of “an alarmingly incomplete and inaccurate understanding of how climate impacts are

affecting different places around the world” (Berwyn “Climate” np). Kuheli Dutt of MIT understands the scientific process as an institution colored by selection, exclusion, and class politics (Berwyn “Climate” np). On a dangerously warming planet, these politics of exclusion are a crisis multiplier, embedding practices of exploitation and invisibility that already put unjust burdens of damage and resource depletion on the global poor. The division between science and politics is both artificial and dangerous, representing an ideology that has been critiqued as such through multiple academic projects, and problematized through articulation of political/ontological divisions as untenable (Mol; Latour; Rivers).

The 2019 NCTE resolution on climate change is Realpolitik, “a positive, materialist, no nonsense, interest only, matter-of-fact way of dealing with naked power relations” (Latour). The silo that maintains distance between the arts and the sciences, and that establishes an hierarchical relationship whereby one serves the other, is the same silo that separates politics from science, culture from nature, man from animal, and the contingent from the certain. Bruno Latour’s work on this separation has held that Realpolitik tends to keep objects outside the sphere of public deliberation, such that the “realism” it purports to endorse keeps the “*res*” out of the “*res publica*.” In contrast to this instantiation of the domains, Dingpolitik is a democratic construction of contingent and changing discourse brought about around a matter of concern (such as climate change). Such quasi-objects are not politically inert. Unlike the facticity produced by the empiricism of Enlightenment science, Dingpolitik holds that an object or issue “generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements,” so that they gather a *polis* around them to generate discourse (Latour 15).

This is not to say that the existence of climate change is in contention, nor that the students under the influence of NCTE resolutions must re-trod the ground of “finding” climate change with scientific modeling for the sake of recreating the research themselves. Instead, it is a recognition of the frailty of facticity. Latour argues that matters-of-fact have failed to produce meaningful engagement (by way of example he cites the WMD’s of the Iraq War, held by the American public to be factual, as opposed to climate change, which the same Republican party has denied to various degrees over the decades). In place of matters-of-fact, Latour’s Dingpolitik engages with matters-of-concern. Matters-of-concern are those things (from “ding” of Dingpolitik) that cause us to gather and discuss. These are not things we agree upon; their dimensions are multi and so, too, are the stakes and stakeholders that manifest around them. In contrast, the scientism of Realpolitik is a closed ontology, one that demarcates between what is up-for-debate and what is not. Though the NCTE resolution recognizes that climate change has social-political dimensions, it tries, in the same bullet-bank, to recognize these dimensions and sequester them away from the neat laboratories of modern science.

What would be the implication for students and teachers if the NCTE founded its response to climate change, instead, around a Dingpolitik? What does the classroom look like around what Latour calls a “parliament of things?” Answering to this line of questioning requires a reconsideration of the disciplinary and pedagogical politics that the United States educational systems and political institutions have been producing for decades¹². The consolidation of national educational efforts around nebulous, techno-

¹² For examples: the American Competitiveness Initiative of the George W. Bush Administration (georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov); the Obama Administration’s STEM for All

optimistic concepts such as innovation, improvement and problem-solving are not, it would seem to the public, making the country better (Gramlich). Perhaps it is time to pursue a different ontology than that of the Enlightenment, which still holds sway in American education, which still informs the subtext of NCTE resolutions, and which seems to underperform in addressing the multiform crises of the Anthropocene. In short, the NCTE resolution operates like there is still time to resolve this issue. But, in fact, we are now in the pre-apocalypse, which requires a different set of orientations and responses.

Towards Anthropocene Composition

What follows is an attempt to design a pedagogical response to the conditions of the current age. Despite (or perhaps because of) the 2019 NCTE resolution, the composition classroom has done relatively little to catch up with the new enframing of the epoch as Anthropocene. There is a burgeoning body of work on the material nature of the classroom, and of composition itself (Hawk; Rule), but the full severity of—and the existential threats posed by—the epoch are not yet being followed in terms of their mortal implications. As the 2020 pandemic showed us, the classroom is subject to change from anthropogenic disasters, and the extent of those disasters has only begun to show itself or at least become recognized as such by society. We are faced, today, with storms of increased severity, drought, resource scarcity, heat threats, and pandemics. How can a material compositionist pedagogy remain honest and accountable to such malevolent

(obamawhitehouse.archives.gov); The Trump Administration's US Science Education Plan (www.whitehouse.gov).

circumstances, and what are the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching in it?

Moreover, while we continue accounting for the fatalities and existential threats posed by the Anthropocene, we need to begin interrogating some of the more embedded assumptions of the classroom: posterity, need, usefulness. Is a class worth teaching if it is the last class in human history? What should be taught to a terminal generation of students? What does writing look like at the end of the world? What, in a world constantly threatening to end, are we doing in the classroom?

In response to these questions, I offer “Anthropocene Composition” (AC): a pedagogical re-situating in a time of multiform planetary crises. To be in the Anthropocene is to be in a weirded *oikos*, to be faced with increasing unfamiliarity, hostility and contingency in one’s own home. This weirdness is a disorienting thing in which to write, and perhaps a greater challenge to pedagogy. Following Latour’s “Compositionist Manifesto,” AC seeks neither to critique, nor to solve. Pedagogically, it asks what it means to teach terminal generations of students to face insurmountable, ecological trauma. It cultivates *skotison* and plays in the impossibility of the present, indulging absurdity in the face of horror. AC is situated in the “apocalyptic turn” as described by Paul Lynch:

an emerging set of disparate authors such as Owens, Spellmeyer, and Worsham who share a basic perspective: economic disruption, endless violence, and, perhaps most important, environmental collapse should force us to reexamine what it means to work in the field of composition, and this reexamination should go to the very heart of what composition means. (458)

In response, AC challenges the “critical impulse,” it eschews simple solutions, and it recognizes the trauma of the present. AC finds enmeshedness and contemplation at the limits of knowledge and ventures, unburdened by hope, into the darkness at those borders.

Chapter 2, “The Pre-Apocalyptic Classroom,” will situate AC in the broad critical engagement with apocalyptic worldviews. First, to engage with the Apocalypse (in the eschatological sense) or any number of apocalyptic occurrences (in the etymological sense) is to make emergent an intersection of morality, materiality, and rhetoric. This intersection is clear in the work of Immanuel Kant, and specifically his thoughts in “The End of All Things.” This relatively minor essay and the culmination of Kant’s moral precepts represented in its argument is at a citational nexus among philosophical works on the more recent apocalyptic threat of climate change. From this study of Kant and the climate crisis emerges important concerns about the role of rhetoric and its moral dimensions in that crisis. Morality, understood as the recognition and treatment of other people as ends in themselves, is a safeguard against the evils of immorality—and the consequential kingdom of the antichrist—in the Kantian project. For AC, this treatment will extend to nonhumans as well, not to combat the onset of a religious evil, but to support a pedagogy of enmeshedness that extends moral consideration and agency to all actants in complex, enmeshed systems. Following Scott Stroud’s analysis of Kantian morality and rhetoric, AC aims to be both *educative* and nonmanipulative—as opposed to judicial or prescriptive—in its methodology. These characteristics, in turn, create space for revaluation of traditional educational values and a new composition movement that can “stay with the damage,” in the form of AC. In rhetoric and composition as a

discipline, there is a history of engagement with the environment that has roots in ecocomposition, and today that mantle is worn by new materialists. AC is situated in this history and in the apocalyptic turn identified by Lynch. It challenges the critical impulse and begins, instead, from a point of surrender, allowing that microplastics, climate change, mass extinction and radioactive waste are not problems with solutions. Therefore, critique and the other tropes of modernism/post-modernism are not productive and may further qualify as manipulative (non-educative). Instead of answering questions, AC reimagines them, and then asks again: what does it mean to dwell and teach in the impossible present? These questions produce *kakosmic discourse*: messy, contingent, often unsatisfying contributions. However, if we let go of “fixing” the crises and allow ourselves to play in the absurdity of the impossible, such discourse can also produce inventive engagement that is resistant to both climate nihilism and misplaced optimism or delusions of salvation. Letting go of these long-held, traditional narratives is risky, and a methodology informed by nonmanipulative imperatives will continue and extend the Kantian moral project, not to prevent the end of the world, but to dwell and compose in it.

Chapter 3, “The Althing Parliament,” will gather methodologies that scan clearly and darkly, assembling a working body of *techne* for AC to work with. To begin, climate change and other Anthropocenic crises create anxiety. Heidegger understands anxiety as the disruption of familiarity, an uncanniness that is natural to Dasein, but risks becoming fear. The world is constantly disrupted right now, suggesting that we may be in the state of homelessness that Heidegger described in “Letter on Humanism.” Following an interrogation of the relationship between anxiety and fear, the AC classroom wants students to be anxious, but not fearful. This can be accomplished by deliberative

ontological engagement with the world. AC affirms agency in students not by throwing them at political problems with the hope that they will vote the right way or leverage political office against systemic issues, but rather by embracing the degrees of freedoms afforded by the impossible present. As such, AC assembles various ontologies, understanding that inasmuch as onto-political constructions cause emergences, they also darken or obfuscate (Giraud). Vital relational practices are cultivated through engaged writing, to include apposite methodology (Robinson), indigenous ways of knowing (Clary-Lemon, Brownlee), new materialist ontobiography (Gries), sonic engagement (Hawk), and grief (Jensen). These practices are all potential sources of Anthropocentric composition because they reveal enmeshedness and facilitate resounding: nurturing the potential for future audiences and ecologies despite or because of the impossible present (Hawk).

Chapter 4, “Composing the Thing,” provides specific examples of AC. Primarily, it takes “The Ray Cat Solution” as its focus. Nuclear semiotics is the question of how to communicate with an audience 100,000 years in the future and warn them about the hazards of radioactive material. It is an *issue* (as opposed to a problem), in the anthropocenic sense, and therefore without a satisfying solution. “The Ray Cat Solution” argues that, instead of merely burying our problems and hoping for the best, we should genetically alter cats to change color in the presence of radioactivity. The focus of the chapter is not on the solution that was enacted, but rather the discourse created by the exigence. As a “solution” that is not really a solution, “The Ray Cat Solution” embraces enmeshedness, affectation, and more than a little absurdity. It considers the unknowable in the form of deep time and cultivates futurity in speculative analysis of circulation and

actant networks. In reading for instances of AC, one finds examples in unlikely places. The same characteristics of the Ray Cat Solution that make it a durable, creative compositional response to an anthropocenic crisis are visible elsewhere. Following the close reading of the Ray Cat Solution, this chapter also engages with antinatalist movements, art projects, documentaries, gaming, and other multimedia projects. Wherever composition happens *with* the damage and trauma of the epoch, the Anthropocene composes. Together, these readings not only provide models for possible classroom projects and discussion, but they also evidence a fundamental enmeshedness of composing bodies with the Anthropocene; through damaged and traumatized bodies, the Anthropocene speaks. AC aims to facilitate that speech by helping it develop and resonate. Developing from the reverse-compositional analysis of the Ray Cat Solution and other examples, this chapter will provide writing projects intended to engage students in acts of ontological gathering, exploration, and mourning.

In chapter 5, “Anthropocene Composition: Apocalypse Forever,” I will again situate AC not as a solution to Anthropocenic crises and the impossible present, but as an adaptive pedagogical strategy for staying with the damage. This chapter looks to famous historical examples of responses to catastrophe—specifically Nero’s infamous fiddling and a meme-ified victim of Mount Vesuvius—to suggest, first, that there is no such thing as a logical response to apocalyptic scenarios. From this starting point, the chapter interrogates the epistemology of composition pedagogy as one of uncritical optimism, which I will relate to progenitive assumptions embedded in the rhetoric of both natalism and education. To counter this master narrative, I understand pessimism, an epistemological counterpoint to the optimist-natalist construct, through Roy Scranton’s

six virtues of pessimism, and I will read for these virtues in a series of work on the darker side of composition pedagogy, specifically through Shane Borrowman's *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing*, and Richard Miller's *Writing at the End of the World*. In response to Miller's "critical optimism," I offer that a critical pessimism is needed to address the constraints of Anthropocenic crises in the pre-apocalyptic classroom. Inasmuch as unqualified writing represents a natalist endeavor, critical pessimism is an epistemology that posits antinatalist, proactive engagement with the challenges and limitations of the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

Ultimately, AC aims to combat the fears of the Anthropocene and reveal the anxieties we all share by virtue of being in the epoch. In doing so, the pedagogy of the pre-apocalyptic classroom will allow students to *care*, in a Heideggerian sense: to recognize the shared suffering and trauma of being. If this ecologically-oriented care inspires students to new climate activism and movement towards climate justice then all the better, but first the affective dimensions and the ontological politics of a planet steeped in loss and damage must be accounted for. These losses and damages are often uneven, unqualifiable, and without solution, making the present epoch truly impossible for those faced with the burgeoning responsibilities of living here. With this in mind, I hold that, in this impossible present, we are always pre-apocalypse and post-apocalypse: pre-apocalypse in that we are forced to live in the traumatic anxiety of the unknowing present, and post-apocalyptic in that things are constantly being revealed, critiqued, and added to the logocentric archive. Everything newly understood is something new to

worry about. The things we don't fully understand—those para-apocalyptic things—are the things that exist in the spaces between climate change models and microplastic measurements. These bits of logos are the attempts to understand something fundamentally un-understandable: the horror that is always approaching, the collapse that is always near-imminent. The ongoing promise of apocalyptic destruction is exhausting in its constant discursive reformations, and yet it is insistent upon itself and often dismissive or blind to those apocalypses that have already happened, such as the 2022 flooding of Pakistan, the 2019-2020 Australia wildfires, or any of the innumerable, government-sanctioned genocides perpetrated at industrial levels in recent centuries. This exhaustion must be mitigated, and this promise scrutinized for its implications to both the composition classroom and the world at large. I do not hold that the apocalyptic promise will not be fulfilled; the end of the world is a day in the future, but AC is what I will teach the day before that.

CHAPTER 2—APOCALYPSE NOW AND THEN

Bring back the Apocalypse,

It's never too late for the end of time

*-Sleepytime Gorilla Museum, Of Natural History*¹³

“Apocalypse” is a term of Greek origin that means “to reveal” or “to uncover.” Etymologically, “apo-” means off or away, while “-calypse,” meaning “to cover or conceal,” is suggestive of our English word, “collapse.” Biblically, Apocalypse refers to the revelation of coming collapse, particularly as it came from John the Apostle. The term, “Apocalypse,” has developed a genre of its own in popular culture and become a recurring theme not only in entertainment, but in politics and academics. The common use of the term, today, is generalizable to great cataclysm. In rhetoric and composition, the term has most prominently been taken up by Paul Lynch. He describes the “apocalyptic turn” as a “somewhat paradoxical turn . . . in which the end of the world looms ever larger in our disciplinary and pedagogical imagination” (458). Lynch lists Derek Owens, Kurt Spellmeyer, and Lynn Worsham as exemplary of a movement that takes “economic disruption, endless violence, and, perhaps most important, environmental collapse” as occasions to re-examine the practices of composition (458).

¹³ Sleepytime Gorilla Museum is a Dadaist folk-metal band. A recurring theme in their music is frustration with the seeming non-fulfillment of apocalyptic promises.

Lynch follows the ideas of Bruno Latour to connect this turn in the field with the revelatory aspects of critique and Latour's focus on the limits of critique in building useful, engaging composition, arguing that this turn suggests the critical impulse in the field is not enough to address the myriad of cataclysms our students face. The apocalyptic turn takes any one of the litanies of ongoing disasters as a starting point and rejects the impulse to solve them; it is also suspicious of the long-held disciplinary idea that a good, rhetorical education will keep our democracy healthy, and our students armed against an increasingly complex world (461). But the apocalyptic turn, although relatively new to rhetoric and composition, has older foundations in the humanities more broadly.

A good deal of outside scholarship engaging with the apocalypse, even as it pertains to the climate crisis, returns to Immanuel Kant's moral project, because it represents an intersection of rhetoric, materiality, and morality. Kant is foundational to Western morality and his material ontology is entwined with that moral impetus. His imperative that we treat people as ends in themselves, rather than means, and his negative imperatives against manipulation and abuse of state power are embedded in Western cultural consciousness. However, conflicts between these imperatives and the urgency of climate crises create a double-bind that I call an "apocalyptic morality." This is characterized by an inability to confront these crises while adhering to moral principles, forcing a choice between survival and morality. The scholarship written in this apocalyptic purview—specifically from Timothy Morton, Stephen D. O'Leary, and Eugene Thacker—intersects to various degrees with rhetoric and climate change such that a sub-disciplinary focus emerges. That focus evidences the importance of the apocalypse as concept to the ecological relationship between man and nature, inasmuch

as nature becomes subject to discursive reconceptualization under the auspices of an apocalyptic event like climate change. Kant's moral reaction to government action, his understanding of time as a phenomenological product of material noumena, and his imperatives about human interaction, forge a complex moral matrix that makes it difficult to condone broad government action, or even individual action, towards the climate crises. Synthesizing Morton, O'Leary, and Thacker, in the context of their use of Kant, informs a more complex understanding of the apocalypse as both material and as a discursive construct; Kant's ontological apocalypse is the end of all material interaction, while, discursively, this end becomes a reconfiguration of narrative around an emergent disaster. Under the anthropocenic circumstances of ecological damage, an uncertain future, and temporal constraints imposed by collapsing ecosystems, Kantian morality becomes this distinctly *apocalyptic morality*: characterized by a dissonance between categorical imperatives and survival of the species.

Building this material and discursive understanding of the apocalypse—and specifically the climate apocalypse—causes emergent unfamiliarity between man and ecology. I trace this unfamiliarity through engagement between this humanities scholarship and the Earth as an ontological whole, specifically as represented in the iconographic picture, *Earthrise*. Through the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Weart, and Thomas Rickert, a short history of these rhetorical engagements with the planet as an ontological whole allows tracing of this developing unfamiliarity to what I call a *weirded oikos*. This concept has roots in Nietzsche's critique of morals, and Heidegger's fear of rootlessness. Here, it means that our often-unknowable ecology is made all the stranger in the current epoch, wherein our home planet has now become a hostile array of forces,

complicated beyond any sort of holistic perception. This *weirded oikos* begins to emerge in rhetoric and composition as a discipline beginning with ecomposition. Sidney Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser's work represents a disciplinary turning point, in this regard and as part of a larger post-process movement that includes *place* and nature as pivotal to the composition process. The field was still not, at this juncture, engaged with climate, and I argue that climate awareness and engagement did not fully develop until the material turn. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's *New Materialisms* deliberately situates ecology and ecological damage in the purview of the humanities, and from there the climate crisis emerges as a matter of concern to rhetoric and composition.

This disciplinary resituating is the most recent step in an ongoing, incomplete process by which rhetoric and composition becomes fully ecological. Following this development, I aim to situate Anthropocene Composition as a further step in composition pedagogy: a materialist, onto-political resituating of the writing classroom as a place in which the Anthropocene composes itself through student bodies. It is further situated as a pedagogy that is in Lynch's "apocalyptic turn," recognizing the ubiquity of trauma and its place in the composition process (463). In place of the impulse to critique, the apocalyptic turn seeks "informed curiosity . . . contemplation, connection, and cultivation" (464). Lynch looks for answers to the questions of the apocalyptic turn in Bruno Latour's "Compositionist Manifesto." Here, Latour has described a heterogeneous interpretive methodology, one that "ignores what he calls the 'modernist constitution' in which the natural and the political, or the scientific and the social, have been imagined as strictly separate" (466). Latour wants to break down the silo between science and politics, and to do so he draws on the ancient Icelandic parliamentary concept of the *Althing*,

arguing that a Thing is something disputable, and thereby “facts” may become disputable issues. By this turn, composition “becomes the most heterogeneous of disciplines” (467). It does not quarantine a disciplinary purview (as does, for instance, biology or geography), but rather “opens up the worlds” to give them compositional voice (467). In this Latourian instantiation of the apocalyptic turn, the prime pedagogical directive is to allow students the opportunity to let their worlds speak. And for Lynch, this apocalyptic turn is one that recognizes the ubiquity of trauma and its place in the compositional process (463).

I offer AC as a pedagogy situated in the apocalyptic turn, in which I characterize our current classroom as occurring in the pre-apocalypse: characterized by an anxiety towards incipient and ongoing cataclysmic events and crises. AC gives students the opportunity to speak about the Anthropocene as a mythological, discursive, and onto-political construction responding to and working within the complexities of the epoch and with the anxiety they feel. This pedagogy respects the Anthropocene as scientific, social, and apocalyptic. It gathers discourse that engages the non-human object, to include the inhuman (Pilsch) and the wild (Rivers). It aims to illuminate our enmeshedness with such objects, and to respect the impossibility of the present by fostering what Nathaniel Rivers calls a deep ambivalence: engagement with the withdrawn and obfuscated that does not seek to understand and master, but to know the alien and strange (428). Moreover, AC seeks to instantiate an *educative rhetoric*, which Scott Stroud describes as inspiring a certain cognitive disposition, enabling its audience to realize something unknown and

desirable, and preserving the autonomy of that audience (136). Thereby, it qualifies as nonmanipulative, in the Kantian sense, and maintains a certain apocalyptic morality¹⁴.

Reading Kant's morality as apocalyptic in its rhetoric and materiality qualifies his project as foundational to the methodological imperatives of AC. First, before explicating those imperatives, I start at the end, or what Kant somewhat facetiously called the end, with Kant's concept of the apocalypse in relation to his moral paradigm. This reading will reveal the "apocalypticism" in Kantian morality, as well as the dissonance between climate survivalism (through government action, through grassroots activism, through individual politics), this morality, and its contrast to pre-apocalyptic rhetoric. Second, before fully describing what AC *is*, I will further situate climate change and the multiform exigencies of the epoch in historical disciplinary responses, particularly the projects of ecomposition and the post-process movement more broadly, and then in the material turn in rhetoric and composition and the politicization of ontology. Third, I will explain how this disciplinary situating serves to make space in AC for the panoply of stakeholder voices and facilitate resonant vocalization of stakeholder worlds. Finally, I will describe AC's methodological imperatives in detail and construct the conditions for a composition pedagogy firmly situated on the apocalyptic turn.

¹⁴ Despite the critique of nonmanipulative rhetoric as it pertains to a deregulated economy, this moral imperative is conducive to avoiding the critical impulse and maintaining inclusivity of stakeholder voices without coercion. Manipulation is an act of rhetorical exclusion.

Apocalyptic Morality and (Pre)Apocalyptic Rhetoric

Kant, The End, and Morality

In 1794, Kant sent a manuscript titled “The End of All Things” to publisher J.E. Biester in the city of Jena, where Biester had moved to escape the religious censorship of Prussia. In a prefatory letter, Kant describes the character of this essay as “partly plaintive and partly funny to read” (*Religion* 219). In this letter, Kant will move from the end of the *individual* (death) to the end of *time* (apocalypse), but this complete death—this apocalypse—will be informed by a breakdown of morality at the social level. It constructs a reading of the Christian Apocalypse as the result of mutual breakdown in the coproduction of the micro- and macropolitical. Allen Wood and George Giovanni contemplate this uncharacteristic choice of subject matter on Kant’s part, speculating that “the choice of the end of the world as his topic might be seen simply as a way for Kant to express an attitude of black despair regarding the immediate prospects in Prussia for free communication and enlightened education in matter of religion” (219). Following the introductory letter to his publisher, Kant sent another in which he wrote that “he will “punctiliously obey” any laws which “*command* what is not opposed to [his] principles,” or even those which “*forbid* making known [his] principles in their entirety, as [he has] done up to now (and for which [he is] not sorry in the least)” (219). This seems to fall in line with the limitations that Kant puts on criticism towards governing bodies in “What is Enlightenment,” which differentiates between private and public use of reason as a tool of criticism. Kant’s intent to punctiliously obey is in keeping with his understanding of private reason, and his publication of “The End of All Things” adheres to the public use. He claims that public use of reason, represented in publication, is the cornerstone of

enlightenment. In an enlightened society, or one moving towards enlightenment, one must obey the commands of government and perform the duties ascribed to one's post. Criticism is something to be written down and published. Kant is criticizing the Prussian government in his letter, but this action is in keeping with individual responsibility in the face of collective, governmental immorality.

This criticism is couched in an analysis of the Apocalypse, and through this analysis, Kant partially explicates his material ontology. At the end of time as described in *Apocalypse* (10:5-6), an angel will gesticulate, speak, and end time thereafter. Kant says this carries the implication that "henceforth there shall be no *alteration*; for if there were still alteration in the world, then time would also exist, because alteration can take place only in time and is not thinkable without presupposing it" (226). Everything from that point onward will be frozen, both the physical and the cogitative: no moving, no thinking. From his division of ends it follows that this will be the end of moral agency. This is the mystical concept of the end. Kant moves from here towards concerns of general moral disposition and the folly of the human condition, inclined as the human is to treat things as means to ends for which they were not intended. The only way for a human being to "enact wisdom" is through imitation of divine wisdom or avoiding what is contrary to it. Christianity, for Kant, represents an institution simultaneously worthy of love and respect by its very cause, but this is compromised with the addition of authority. Commanding obedience, and that subjects enjoy that obedience, is contradictory. In other words, it seems like this perversion of church authority (In the form of Prussian censorship, at the time) violates fundamental parts of the Kantian moral project which require that people be treated as ends in themselves, and allowed to obey for the sake of

duty rather than external motivations. The perversion of Christianity will, Kant warns, create the circumstances described in the kingdom of the antichrist and hasten the end of all things. He qualifies this final warning as a moral one, rather than literal.

The ending of this essay suggests that, for Kant, the Apocalypse is something that will be avoided should we do the right thing, and the morally artificial imperatives of illegitimate authority are not instated over an institution worthy of love and respect. It follows that time is something to be valued, perhaps because by it there are the possibilities both for thought and alteration. We must endeavor that things keep moving, and that objects maintain their discernibility. In *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton says that “space and time are the two things that Kant allows most to be like “objects” in the object-oriented-ontology sense, autonomous quanta that can’t be divided further” (63). He uses Kant’s example of raindrops from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to demonstrate the perception of hyperobjects. He writes “you can feel them on your head—but you can’t perceive the actual raindrop in itself” (11). Likewise, you can read the CO2 levels through scientific apparatus, and you can feel that this September was hotter than last, but you cannot perceive climate change. Climate change is very much like time, in this sense; we sense it through the combination of more distinct objects. For Morton, this gap is at least partially responsible for the end of world, for from it comes a very specific instantiation of human weakness. From here, Morton works to conceive of climate change not only as material, but also as having moral dimensions. For Kant, morality has fundamental rhetorical elements, and vice-versa. Explicating that relationship elucidates connections between climate change, morality, and rhetoric.

Kant's Morality and Rhetoric

If Wood and Giovanni are correct in reading Kant as a response to Prussian politics, the undertaking represents the sort of educative metaphor for which Scott Stroud advocates in his reading for the sort of rhetoric Kant approved of. Scott Stroud's *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric* answers to and opposes the widely held belief that Kant was morally opposed to the use of rhetoric. Stroud works to rehabilitate the perceived relationship between Kant and rhetoric, and argues that Kant, far from dismissing it outright, allowed for rhetoric if it did not compromise autonomy. There are a few specific forms which remain effective without doing so, and Stroud classifies these as "nonmanipulative rhetoric." Through Stroud's analysis we see why Kant was critical of the Prussian government. The imposition of physical repercussions for moral actions is manipulative rhetoric, and this imposition does not move agents towards autonomous morality so much as incentivize action through threats, which risks becoming a restriction on the moral act of consumption. Such actions become impermissible in Kant's worldview. This will be important because so much of the Kantian moral project hinges on non-manipulative action; rhetoric, for Kant, must walk a fine line between persuasion and manipulation to qualify as moral, and the decrees of Prussia certainly overstepped these limitations.

Further, discursive aspects of the Kantian project have found purchase in the analysis of apocalyptic rhetoric, specifically in the work of Stephen D. O'Leary, who unpacks the process and implications of apocalyptic narrative. In *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, O'Leary finds Kant's section on the antinomy of pure reason useful to the ends of forming his own concept of apocalyptic

rhetorical invention. O’Leary understands repeated reconstructions of the Apocalypse as forthcoming as a rhetorical narrative maneuver: narratives demand an ending by their subject matter. Genesis begs Revelations. This rule of narrative complies with Kant’s musings from “The End of All Things,” in which he blames such patterns for the ubiquity of the eschatological story. Kant asks why humans predict this type of event in multiple religions and cultures, Christian or otherwise. The answer, to him, seems to “lie in the fact that reason says to them that the duration of the world has worth only insofar as the rational beings in it conform to the final end of their existence,” and, otherwise, existence has no purpose at all (224). In other words, we cannot conceive of existence as meaningful without looking forward to its end, and some sort of consequence thereby brought. Apocalyptic rhetoric reframes the near future as a forthcoming apocalypse through construction of the present as existentially troubled and under threat.

This rhetorical narrative tendency has its cost. Eugene Thacker’s *Horror of Philosophy* series analyzes the unknowability of the end of the world resultant from eschatological, narrative reframing. Thacker conceives of philosophy as an inherently limited method for understanding existence, and the genre of horror as an educative metaphor for what lies beyond that horizon line. Kant enters Thacker’s project as he considers the impossibility of conceptualizing extinction. In the first book of his series, *In the Dust of This Planet*, Thacker references “The End of All Things.” Thacker writes, “Any postulation about the state of the world after the end can only be speculative—and, for Kant, this means that any speculation about the end of all things can only be based on our moral assumptions and prejudices about the world as a human-centric world, a world-for-us” (123). By world-for-us, Thacker is pointing to the anthropic conceptualization of

something that is entirely outside of anthropic intelligibility. Trying to conceive of extinction from an anthropocentric standpoint turns extinction into a sort of horizon. It is a horizon of time and space and, more importantly, a horizon of thought. A horizon is, perversely, *phenomena without noumena*. One can never reach a horizon or stand on it. It is always only perspective. Therefore, Kant's apocalyptic rhetorical invention—which reframes the end of the world as forthcoming in order to conform to a morally vindicating narrative—puts limits on the knowledge we can have about that world.

Here is the contradiction. We have attempts to conceive of the non-human world of pure noumena, represented in something that is only phenomenological. Antonio Franceschet, in analyzing Kant's liberal internationalism, reads the *CoPR* as a way of subjugating scientific understanding to moral agency. We cannot experience or study nature except through the limitations of our senses and therefore there is no "autonomous subjectivity" to be claimed through the understanding of nature. All this is to say that Kant's rhetoric protects moral autonomy at the expense of *natural, modern* knowledge. This is the only way that there is a possibility of morality for Kant (16). Franceschet wants to apply the same reasoning to politics, but grants that Kant didn't like the idea that there was an autonomous political will represented in the state, because such a thing would make the individual will subject to an external mechanism (as in Prussia). Franceschet recognizes this dissonance and argues that Kant's theory of justice is about internal freedom informing external freedom and politics. Franceschet will try to make the moral function of the state clearer without simply separating the two spheres. This is, of course, much easier said than done, but put very briefly, Franceschet takes from the *CoPR* that the State should provide the "legal framework" for moral realization of

individuals. That legal framework might be an educative rhetoric that encompasses natural, modern knowledge such that the individual moral agent does not have to. It would alleviate the onus of individual action against climate change and other anthropocenic, existential threats, thereby allowing the individual to retain moral autonomy.

Kant's Limits and (Pre)Apocalyptic Rhetoric

Unfortunately, trying to envision government interactions against climate change, beyond imposing an educative rhetoric on the matter in our school systems, immediately supersedes the moral authority vested in the political sphere from a Kantian perspective. This is extremely limiting. How does one respect the autonomy of individual states and hope to proctor a unified front against a systemic, climatological issue? Enlightened nations would do so without or despite the external impetus (destabilization, suffering, extinction). Unfortunately, again, the largest polluters on the planet are some of the least enlightened, and societal enlightenment was envisioned by Kant as a slow, even creeping, process. Consider the limitations placed on the individual in “What is Enlightenment?” Robert B. Louden summarizes them as “argue but obey.” Kant held that it was enough to hold disagreements with an unjust society through the medium of publication only (private versus public use of reason); this was probably because such rhetoric was the only sort which could move the autonomous individuals collectively towards a critical mass of enlightenment. Never mind that it would happen at a snail’s pace and that the current projections for catastrophic climate destruction do not allow for such a pace. If we are to respect Kant’s moral precepts as we move towards enlightenment, then we may

as well abandon any hope of circumventing the existential threat posed by climate change.

Prescriptive climate change policy—the sort that might advance austerity politics or force dramatic changes in the economy surrounding energy consumption—would likewise violate Kant’s restriction against manipulative rhetoric. This seems fatalistic. Morton claims that the world ended in 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine (*Hyperobjects* 209). In a universe we perceive in terms of cause and effect, this moment in 1784 (when Kant himself would have been about 60 years old) was the cause, and everything afterwards is the effect; it is a singular, *hyper* effect spanning a vast amount of what we *perceive* as time. We are all living in that effect. By such reasoning, there is no further cause to be accounted for. We cannot stop the annihilation. The end is past; the freezing of time and the impossibility of alteration has happened and will remain. It is an answer that is singularly unattractive, but it positions us to consider an unfortunate possibility: we must be prepared to weigh our morality against the importance of our survival. Kant did not seem to foresee such an impasse. It is doubling the incentive to look away, facilitating our agential weakness. What can be done, then? Thacker believes there is no hope to be found in philosophy.

But we need not subscribe to this particular object-orientated ontology of the Kantian apocalypse; it risks fatalism and diminishes agency, and it is predicated in part on Christian doctrine. Any answers we hope to deploy against the climate apocalypse will have to be, at first, rhetorical in nature; they will need to answer to a communal need for action and be broadly, even internationally, applicable. The intersection of morality, rhetoric, and the climate apocalypse described above should serve to orient us towards a

particular discursive understanding of the apocalypse and our place in it, before it, and around it. Arguing that we are *post-apocalypse* is always valid in a material determinist sense when one of many existentially altering technological or social innovations is read as a planetary singularity: the steam engine, industrial agriculture, gunpowder, the atomic bomb, the internet. To return even further in a *reductio ad absurdum* instantiation of this logic, the first assortment of matter into a biologically viable assembly marked the precipitant ending of the world. The first organism had, written in its material configuration, the means (and inevitability) of its own destruction. If, however, we seek to retain the Kantian moral autonomy, and suppose thereby that any individual has the choice of making morally agential choices in the world, we are also *pre-apocalypse*: continuously maneuvering through a material ontology, preferably without compromising our moral autonomy by pursuing knowledge of the natural world. Kant would likely side with this latter reading rather than subscribe to the material determinism that his own ontology seems to imply. Contradictions aside, the Kantian conception of apocalypse instantiates further use of the term in a scholarly tradition.

It begins a pattern of meaning that is almost always bound to *topoi* of time, space, and morality. Putting aside the scientific discourse surrounding the term, the Anthropocene is an apocalyptic mythological construction addressing disorder brought upon a previously orderly cosmology. It re-symbolizes the “evils” of the epoch in a rhetorically salient form. In some respects, this makes the Anthropocene a recent entry in a recurrent social impulse to situate the current age near the end of time. Whenever occasions of dramatic social reform occur, the temporal structures of the previous hegemonies are discarded (often violently) and replaced with new (but familiar)

articulations of time (O’Leary 46). O’Leary argues that these new articulations, more often than not, position the apocalypse as forthcoming (as Kant did). What complicates this reading is the extent to which our current pre-apocalyptic situation is without material, ecological precedent. Re-articulating the apocalypse as forthcoming, now, and understanding this apocalypse as a possible extinction event (as opposed to an individual, cultural, or single-civilization apocalypse), is a unique and totalizing rhetorical gesture. Never has Earth, as a singular *oikos*, been so widely and severely damaged by human action; never in modern history have our chances of survival been so slim as they appear to be in the forthcoming centuries. For these reasons, it is more rhetorically defensible to describe our current situation as pre-apocalyptic.

Weirded Oikos and Ecology in Rhetoric and Composition

Unfamiliarity from the Top Down

The relationship between the human and the Earth is a complicated, shifting dynamic that has occupied theory and rhetoric for millennia, but we need, now, more than ever, a critical audit and understanding of that relationship if we hope to ascertain the nature of our current ecology and its exigencies. For such an audit to resonate with the conditions of the epoch—this pre-apocalyptic, weirded *oikos*, unlike any other—it should begin with a top-down view that challenges the anthropocentrism inherent in our nature. Before the relationship of *place* between human and earth can be understood as complex, situated, and emergent, it should be noted that, with enough scalar perspective (again, from the top down), the *Anthropos* faces unfamiliarity and disappointment. This unfamiliarity and disappointment is the same sort of dissonance found in Kantian,

apocalyptic morality, but it also emerges from attempts to bracket the earth as an ontological whole. The audit begins, then, with Friedrich Nietzsche's musings on the place of the *Anthropos* on a planet we would, soon, be able to visualize with space-travelling machinery.

Nietzsche argued that it is in human nature to be a disappointment, to fail to realize what we perceive to be our potential and our rightful place as rulers of a world that could only be there *for* us. In *Human, All Too Human II*, he writes, "[t]here would have to be creatures of more spirit than human beings, simply in order to savor the humor that lies in humans seeing themselves as the purpose of the whole existing world and in humanity being seriously satisfied only with the prospect of a world-mission" (158). Nietzsche muses on or perhaps longs for the existence of something apart from humans but with their same capacity for reflection, so that this something might account for the absurdity of the human condition: convinced, without evidence or support, that they are somehow the center of things, that they have a purpose. Indeed, so strong is this desire for a preordained purpose, according to Nietzsche, that man organizes all his suffering around it, beating back the void of reason by embracing the ascetic ideal, connected to slave morality and Western, Judeo-Christian value systems (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 598). Terrified of a lack of purpose, man invents one that puts himself at the center of the universe—or at least as the main player on Earth—but this egotism is threatened and requalified by the expansion of scientific thought outward. In Nietzsche's time, before his countrymen began inventing the rockets that would kill thousands and then take men to

space¹⁵, such speculation was the domain of astronomers rather than astronauts.

Nietzsche, again in *Human*, wrote, “The astronomers, who sometimes really are granted a field of vision detached from the earth, intimate that the drop of life in the world is without significance for the total character of the immense ocean of becoming and passing away” (159). Nietzsche longed for a view of Earth as apart from, not a part of, the human scheme; he saw in it the potential for a disarming affect that would be realized in the following century through the iconic image called *Earthrise*.

On his timeline of climate change milestones, Weart includes the following entry: “1969: Astronauts walk on the Moon, and people perceive the Earth as a fragile whole” (np). Eventually the feeling of sublimity and wholeness astronauts experience from space came to be called “the overview effect,” but Weart’s pithy description here is a deceptively complicated one. Certainly, “fragile” is correct in the sense that Earth hangs in an infinite vastness of space, always threatened by seen and unseen cosmic phenomena. “Whole” is a more dynamic term, carrying considerable ontological baggage. Heidegger seemed to consider the image of the Earth from space alienating. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1966, he said “[technology] increasingly dislodges man and uproots him from the earth. . . . I was shocked when a short time ago I saw the pictures of the earth taken from the moon. We don’t need an atomic bombs at all—the uprooting of man is already here” (56). For Heidegger, the wholeness of Earth provided by satellite imagery challenges human belonging and may threaten the tradition and identity he attributes with human success in the same interview. Without adding too

¹⁵ See the German-made V-2 rocket, and its genealogy to space exploration in the United States (Wikipedia).

much to the historical debts of Heidegger, there are obviously problematic dimensions to his reaction¹⁶, which is not to say that he is wrong about uprooting.

Thomas Rickert springboards from Heidegger's reaction to *Earthrise* in *Ambient Rhetoric*, where he describes the effect of the picture as transforming the earth into “an ecological world, including not just humans but animals, plants, stones, water, soil, clouds, and more, *all of which need and are affected by one another* and are rendered unique and precarious against the dark depths. These insights awaken us to the root of ecology, *oikos*, meaning ‘home’ or ‘dwelling place’” (215). The “wholeness” Weart mentioned becomes clear in Rickert, but the uprootedness Heidegger warned of still needs to be accounted for. Rickert will craft an Heideggerian ontological account of ways of being—a meaning-making process couched in materialism—that is challenged by *Earthrise* because the picture reveals that the extent of this ontology far outstretches the human domain. The centrality of human meaning-making is displaced when viewed from afar, and we lose “lived relations to our local places” (217). Nietzsche finally has his thing apart, it would seem; we become that thing apart, forced to reconcile ourselves to our own precariousness, insignificance, and, finally, homelessness. But Rickert thinks this need not be the case. Answering Heidegger, Rickert argues, “[i]f *Earthrise* is to give something beyond increased technological abstraction and homelessness, it must kindle a newfound care for the earth in our everyday dwelling” (218). Rickert is arguing for a local ethic informed by a global understanding.

¹⁶ The dark side of tradition and identity is “blood and soil,” echoed by neo-fascists and white nationalists to this day (Wagner).

Ecocomposition from the Bottom Up

There is a disciplinary tradition of engagement with nature rooted in classical heritage that takes a different scalar purview than the top-down perspective I trace from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Rickert. This tradition tends towards the local, working around situated conceptions of nature and ecologies rather than the broader concepts of the planetary and climatological. In Dobrin and Weisser's 2002 "Breaking Ground in Ecocomposition: Exploring Relationships between Discourse and Environment," the authors explain how place and environment came to be added to the post-process concerns of race, gender, class, and other elements that shape writing outside of the composer. Given an understanding of ecology as organisms and their relationship to their environment, we might understand ecology as *prior to* the socially constructed issues above, and Dobrin and Weisser gesture towards this priority, but the field was still nascent and not yet as informed by a new, material turn. Dobrin and Weisser trace the roots of ecocomposition to the mid-1980s, when the field of composition began to move away from examining cognitive processes, and outwards to the physical conditions around the writer (568). "Ecocriticism" preceded "ecocomposition" in the academic sphere, but even before this term was used by William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," there were references to the "systems" affecting writers. The exact signification of such systems was unclear until Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, who argued that "in addition to race, class, and gender, . . . place [should] become a new critical category," and also that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world,

affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty and Fromm qtd. in Rueckert 569). Today, this mutual affectation must account for both the local and the global (climatological).

What Dobrin and Weisser’s article provides, most importantly, is a connection between the post-process movement and ecology, as well as a definitional stance on ecocomposition. They write:

Ecocomposition is concerned with rhetorical analysis of environmental/political issues, the effects of language on those issues, and the ways in which ongoing debates or conversations affect the ways in which writers write. Political debates, activism, and participation all rely on a rhetoric of the environment, which is of critical importance in ecocomposition. The environment, which has been at the forefront of many current public debates, has been defined through the words we use to represent it: it is the product of a variety of discourses and their intersections in the public sphere. (579)

Here the priority of ecocomposition begins to emerge: a necessity of rhetorical attunement to ecology as prerequisite to political agency. Dobrin and Weisser connect ecocomposition deliberately to the environment while remaining nonspecific in their use to reflect the protean nature of the term. This rhetorical analysis comes on the heels of 1990s environmental activism: a public underreaction to incomplete data we understand now as *not* climatological nor even ecological. If there is slippage in Dobrin and Weisser’s use of “environment,” it reflects the then-current public understanding, and lack of concern with the larger, climatological exigence.

However, Dobrin and Weisser predict, to some extent, the present occupation with climate crises when they write “ecocomposition addresses the current environmental

crisis as a potentially catastrophic biospheric event that demands our consideration and action, identifying the ecological relationships between humans and surrounding environments as dependent and symbiotic. It recognizes the decline of nature both discursively and materially” (574). It is their use of “biospheric” that qualifies ecocomposition as a productive place to start, and their pluralization, “environments,” which opens possibilities of conceiving the Anthropocene as an assembly of enmeshed systems and actants. There are seeds of the scalar problems that will manifest years later in rhetoric and composition work that we may categorize under “ecocomposition,” though the term is largely out of vogue. Schell et al. are compensatory in their assessment of ecocomposition, arguing that, although it has been criticized often as ineffective towards creating positive, environmental change, “a steady trickle of scholarship addressing ecocomposition, environmental rhetoric, and sustainability has influenced conversation in rhetoric and writing studies” (np). Ecocomposition, viewed as contributive to these larger conversations, is an atavistic trait of the greater, materialist conceptions of Anthropocene ecology. It represents a beginning of codified ecological consciousness in the field of rhetoric and composition. It is the later, material turn that will blow up the purview of the field, drawing attention to ambient dimensions, vibrant qualities, sonic affectation, and the material components of composition processes, all of which derive from ecological enmeshedness.

The Material Turn and Apocalyptic Politics

The Material Turn in Rhetoric and Composition

Contemporary scholarship in rhetoric and composition is more open to and equipped to engage with anthropocenic crises than it has ever been. In an epoch that has been discursively reconstructed as terminal, engagement with the material conditions of composition—whether or not that engagement directly addresses climate crises—is always informed by this terminality. Additionally, these material conditions will have implications for and create new readings of the composition being done in the epoch. The material turn has provided scholars with the space to engage with writing as a product of place and time in all its component complexity. Much of the new material turn in rhetoric and composition draws its basis from Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s *New Materialisms*. They argue that new materialism is necessarily concerned with biopolitics, environmental interconnectedness, and “potential sources of rupture immanent to the system and its reproduction” (31). Such a domain will inherently embrace climate change as an object of study, and perhaps enthusiastically, for climate change represents an object that is more dispersed and complex in its systemic connections than most. In tracing the material turn, Coole and Frost attribute a decline of material theory in the 1970s to a focus on cultural criticism, and a relegation of the ontological to the naturalistic (3). Without detracting from cultural criticism, new materialism sees the necessity for a radical reconsideration of conditions prior to and constructive of the cultural. Fundamental assumptions about human agency and distinction need interrogation, and the sciences less represented in humanities—such as quantum mechanics, or Earth System—offer new ways to understand the way the world *worlds*.

Similarly, Karen Barad's interdisciplinary work on scale and unknowability in the aftermath of nuclear technology use identifies and engages with horizons of understanding from a materialist standpoint. For example, "No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering," represents an intersection of science, anthropology, and materialism in engaging with the damage of nuclear weapons. Barad uses the frozen clocks of sites hit with atomic bombs to launch a discussion of Quantum Field Theory (QFT) as it relates to material rhetoric. The degree to which everything is entangled with everything else is happening at the infinitely micro-, and the politicization of the particulate is a process of *spacetime-mattering*: the largest of scales and the smallest of scales are entangled—not nested, or forming a spectrum—but cohabitating and defining one another. Such entanglement is characteristic not just of the ontologies and scales, but of the disciplinary purviews engaging with them. These works, and other scholarship in the material turn, are necessarily advancing new concepts and strategies of engaging with an increasingly complex world, and together, they give AC the methodological strategies to compose about anthropogenic crises. Place, relationality, scale, unknowability, circulation: these are all recurring topoi of the epoch. New materialist scholarship composes with these topoi as knowledge-making, emergent characteristics and interactions that create pathways to ecological understanding or engagement with the horizons of knowability.

Hannah Rule's *Situated Writing Processes* provides a framework within which the Anthropocene itself may be considered a composing *thing*: it writes the bodies that, in turn, compose within it, reconsidering a process-oriented conception of composition as a matter of scale, and the process of writing as always determined by material place. Rule

begins by recognizing that “writing processes move: processes range freely across spaces and times; they unfold in relation to things and places immediate, imagined, and recalled as they situate and resituate and meld with living” (4). She expresses a wish to see these processes, to understand their details and be given access to the steps and interferences involved in writing of all sorts, from academic composition to the formation of a text message. Importantly, for Rule, these processes are always located in the material, specifically the physical and the temporal (5). Writing “unfolds” when written through bodies, composing, over time, and it also does so with respect to scale. Postprocess delineations of composition do not have to be a full break from process, but can rather represent a process occurring at levels of scale accounting more specifically for the situatedness of the writer (50-51). Rule thereby problematizes the divide between process and post-process—a divide often made at the point of the writer themselves—by looking at scales of situatedness (53). These scales are constructs of time and matter. Writing, then, and composition writ large, is often represented as a temporary stabilization of scale, whether it is represented in student assignments or IPCC reports.

The material turn makes rhetoric and composition concerned with the effective and affective nature of the relationships between objects. These objects are never singular; they are always relationally and scalarly determined and re-determined through study. As such, the material turn necessarily provides us with new symbols to understand or create discourse around these objects. In *Resounding the Rhetorical*, Byron Hawk identifies composition as a *quasi-object*, an object “bound up with the energies that drive them, the ecologies that coproduce them, and relations that sustain and transform them” (7). But composition is not the only quasi-object. A quasi-object is any object that is

“primarily relational; it is largely constituted via social relation and circulation,” such as a ball on a football field, or money in an economy (220-221). Climate change, for Hawk, also represents such an object. Hawk argues that climate change isn’t a thing outside of discourse, but rather a “matter of concern that is ontologically composed through a series of complex actions” to include scientific data-gathering, and academic and political discussion (43). Hawk does not represent the whole of new materialism in this part of his argument, but this instance of materialist ontological work demonstrates a common ground between ecocomposition and new materialism. Hawk and Rule, together, do the same for composition; composition is a discursively constructed object of material assemblages that discursively constructs other objects.

Materialist ontologies are necessarily ecological, in this regard, but their usefulness comes also from their denial of static study. Everything is, to some degree, in circulation, and that circulation requires a rhetorical sense of futurity. Laurie Gries embraces new materialism as a necessary movement to rhetorical analysis of complex objects: things distributed and circulating in time and space that might be problematically reduced by more traditional rhetorical methodologies. In *Still Life with Rhetoric*, Gries uses a methodology incumbent to the study of material imagery as it circulates through diverse networks. Gries situates her methodology in ecologies of vital material and enmeshed actants. This ecological understanding has informed many other projects in the field and is especially important to materialist understandings of networked systems. For Gries’s study of visual rhetorical artifacts, “it is only via the divergent *intra-actions* between human and nonhuman entities in an unfolding network of assemblages . . . that an image emerges as a generative, distributed, material force in the world” (58). In sum,

an ecological perspective is necessarily complex and material in its ontology, accounting for the circulating, emergent nature of rhetorically agential objects.

The field has produced models for this level of complexity, and materialist lenses are being levied against specifically political discursive constructions of ecological issues. Zachary Lundgren's "A Tale of Two EPAs," for instance, uses Actor Network Theory to analyze the changes made to the EPA website under the Trump administration. He notes the changes in the way the website discursively constructs climate change through language and visibility, ultimately complicating what he argues are socially-constructed designations of "good" and "bad" science. Rather than bemoan an attack on science by a backwards administration, we should seek to understand the two instantiations of the agency's mores as "actor-network[s], capable of flux, deterioration, or new alliances" (np). Though Lundgren's reading may be open to criticisms of relativism or enabling irresponsible, un-ecological behavior, it can also be read as a reconstruction of political actions through a more complex methodology than commonly employed in American politics. Such a reconstruction does not serve any political end in itself, but rather tries to get behind or prior-to value judgments. Whether this kind of materially-situated indifference is useful to ecological composition so late in the Anthropocene is questionable, but it does highlight the contingency of ontological politics at one of the highest levels of governmental discourse.

Other scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have drawn upon interdisciplinary frameworks to compose in and about anthropogenic crises, without shying away from calling the damage what it is. In "Digital Rhetoric on a Damaged Planet: Storying Digital Damage as Inventive Response to the Anthropocene," Dustin W.

Edwards takes a deliberately local account of a distinctly anthropocenic instance of damage. Following Donna Haraway's instruction that we "stay with the trouble" of the Anthropocene through storying of inter-actant relations and thereby invent new locations for accountability and criticism, Edwards interrogates the cost of "digital damage," which he defines as "how the material infrastructures of the internet and connected platforms and devices are tangled up with lands, waters, energies, and histories that are often unseen, unfelt, or unacknowledged in our everyday lives" (60). He hopes to simultaneously create new calls for accountability, evidence personal instances of Haraway's sympoiesis, and disrupt the techno-optimism embedded in rhetorics surrounding digital infrastructure (64). Like Lundgren, Edwards is concerned with inter-actant relations constructed along lines of discourse, organization, and ecology. Unlike Lundgren, Edwards's work reveals damages, some of which are being deliberately obfuscated. He creates new inroads to understanding enmeshedness and illuminating a heretofore largely unnoticed threat to interactant relations within that enmeshedness.

One might argue that Edwards' project is indicative of where the field currently stands in its engagement with the climate crisis: environmental audits facilitate cause-effect arguments at a local level that lay the needed groundwork for connecting to a larger, global reckoning with climate change as hyper-/quasi-/wicked. Such local auditing is happening elsewhere, such as in Laurie Gries' new materialist ontobiography, Comstock and Hocks' sonic accounts of environmental damage ("The Sounds"), and Clary-Lemon's engagement with arborist practice in Canadian forests (*Planting*). These scholars and others are finding, describing, and interrogating anthropogenic damage, while developing new methodologies for rhetorical and compositional engagement with

the emergent challenges of the epoch. This level of engagement is a necessary rhetorical move. In the process of environmental auditing and reading for enmeshedness, we become ecologically minded. More importantly, perhaps, these projects model and propose levels of ontological complexity necessary to engaging with anthropocenic damage. Like Gries' study of circulation, Rickert's analysis of *Earthrise*, Rule's problematization of the process/post-process divide, or Hawk's study of composition as quasi-object, the Anthropocene demands a complex ontological framework for study.

Ontological, Disciplinary, and Apocalyptic Politics

However, there is still risk that material crises will be sequestered to the natural/scientific realm that Latour understands as artificially apart from the cultural/political; these material crises must, instead, join the disputable *Althing* and a Latourian understanding of the onto-political. In "Ontological Politics," Annemarie Mol argues, first, that reality is multiple when understood as a variety of practices, and, second that these multiple realities are necessarily political by virtue of their multiplicity. There is immediate conflict between the terms "ontology" and "politics," inasmuch as ontology "defines what belongs to the real, the conditions of possibility we live with," and politics qualifies contingency (74-75). This conflict reflects the conflict identified by Latour between the natural/scientific and the cultural/political. The location of reality, when subject to politics and therefore not given, depends upon the discipline through which that reality is constructed. Mol evidences this contingency with diagnoses of anaemia in medical fields. First, anaemia is "performed" in several ways: clinically, as a set of symptoms; in the laboratory, as other-than-normal hemoglobin levels; and

pathophysiologically, by finding the dividing line between a hemoglobin level that can transport sufficient oxygen and one that cannot. She notes that “[in] practice the three ways to diagnose ‘anaemia’ each diagnose something different. The objects of each of the various diagnostic techniques do not always overlap with those of the others” (78). These performances are not necessarily alternatives or threats to one another, but they represent an ontological multiplicity, even a *messiness*. When faced with such options, it is incumbent to ask questions pertaining to the stakes of decision-making, and where these options come from.

Climate change, microplastics, extinction, radiation and extractivist capitalism are all messy, and, as John Law and Vicky Singleton note, “it is not possible to know messy objects. . . . Mess is other to clarity, systematic study and knowledge. It defies knowing” (333). In “Object Lessons,” Law and Singleton argue that it is useful to consider various, different models for examining objects in order to produce knowledge about those objects. Like Mol, Law and Singleton advocate for an awareness of multiplicity in knowledge-making. Mess may be other to clarity, but it is unavoidable when studying objects like anaemia, and even more so when studying climate change. Mess is political, and despite this necessary conflict, the political and ontological seem to pervade one another in the accounts of both Law and Singleton, and Mol. The same is demonstrably true in ontological accounts of anthropogenic climate crises, and the onto-political dimensions of the crises are inextricably tangled with the ways in which we compose them in our discursive practices. The onto-political construction of the Anthropocene, here, is the analogue to O’Leary’s mythological re-construction. We construct the Anthropocene in the same way that we construct the Apocalypse. Both entail choices that

re-compose the ordered “truths” of ontology and eschatology, respectively, and those choices are, by their nature, a matter of politics.

What, then, are the politics of ontologies pertaining to the Anthropocene? Specifically, what do these politics look like in the field of rhetoric and composition? As with anaemia, the material conditions accounted for in any particular rhetoric and composition project will cause the anthropogenic hyper- or quasi-objects to “emerge” in particular ways, with accounts of damage and social implications particular to the terministic screens and locales of that project. In “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’,” Latour breaks down “compositionist” in an etymological exercise that, according to Lynch, hangs on the characteristic of heterogeneity (Latour 474; Lynch 466). Inasmuch as composition is an act of combining the disparate (the political and natural, the plastic and the wooden), composition is an onto-political process. A compositionist resists the urge to quarantine “facts” and platonic conceptions from the shadowy realm of the cave, returning, instead to the ancient Icelandic concept of the Thing. Lynch notes Latour’s etymological tension, here: “[n]ow, is this not extraordinary that the banal term we use for designating what is out there, unquestionably, a thing, what lies out of any dispute, out of language, is also the oldest word we have used to designate the oldest of sites in which our ancestors did their dealing and tried to settle their disputes?” (Latour qtd. in Lynch 467). The there-ness of the Thing and the disputability of the contingent mirror the seeming contradiction of ontology and politics. Indeed, they are one and the same. In the Anthropocene, then—a time of tension between the “facts” of apocalyptic ontology and the simultaneous disputability of those facts—ontological politics are a compositionist’s forum.

Anthropocene Composition and Composing the Althing

AC Methodology

Anthropocene Composition seeks to understand the pedagogical challenges and imperatives of the Anthropocene, specifically those created under the pseudo-hypothetical scenarios of impending apocalypse. To do so it constructs a new set of questions: What does it mean to teach terminal generations? And how do we do this through gathering unknowability? In other words, it takes seriously the perception that anthropogenic crises represent existential threats. From there, it uses the descriptions of the apocalyptic turn as described by Paul Lynch to adumbrate methods for creating an apocalyptic pedagogy. This means resistance to critique, embracing necessary trauma, and engaging with issues rather than subjects bracketed by the science/politic binary. Beginning from a place of ontological and political enmeshedness (as understood and problematized by Mol; Law and Singleton; Giraud), AC examines the ways in which climate change, apocalypses, and other material exigencies of the Anthropocene are being performed. It draws from various ontological projects including new materialist ontobiography, Indigenous traditions, and sonic rhetoric to cause actant networks to emerge, and reveal to students that they are integrally participatory within these networks. In addition, AC recognizes the role of the unrevealed in anthropogenic discourse. Eva Giraud notes that all enmeshedness is exclusive to someone, and Law and Singleton argue that messy objects are unknowable; where, within our frameworks of understanding, does the excluded and the unknowable go, and what do they do? AC does not fetishize taxonomic understanding of the unknown, and therefore does not critique in the interest of scientific episteme. Instead, following Nathaniel Rivers' use of the wild

object and Andrew Pilsch's use of *skotison*, it gathers the darkness, cultivating the unknown. The purpose of this cultivation is, counter-intuitively, to generate discourse and invite creative response. AC uses the unknown to produce anxiety, and anxiety to cultivate care.

Pedagogically this is all informed by a Kantian understanding of nonmanipulative rhetoric as educative because AC seeks to model a pedagogy that does not force a “correct” response to apocalyptic, climatological circumstances. Imperatives such as public demonstration, carbon guilt, and austerity ethics are, by and large, not conducive to attitudes of ecological enmeshedness and inclusivity. Rather, following Stroud's reading of Kant on educative rhetoric, AC acts as a constitutive, rhetorical force by which “individuals are reoriented toward their relationship to others; they [come to] see themselves as autonomous subjects within a community of similarly autonomous and morally valuable individuals¹⁷” (146). “Individual,” here, should be understood as a temporary stabilization of scale, problematic as the concept of individuality is in the material turn. The community in which these individuals perform is parliamentary and unbound by constraints of species or even biology: animals, plants, minerals, and memes are all joint contributors to the constituency of the Anthropocene. Following Latour's argument in “An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto,” then, AC wants to bring voices to the table, both human and nonhuman, to make anything a matter of debate, and to

¹⁷ Perhaps, through modeling and proliferation of educative rhetoric, it may be possible to stop or slow down a minor apocalypse or two. It functions, at least, to repudiate the violent and exclusive political constructions of eco-fascism.

recognize who has not been invited to the discourse. This enmeshedness and polity emerges in compositional projects that work within AC's imperatives.

Methodologically, AC lets go of many common pedagogical underpinnings and presuppositions. It follows Ian Barnard's imperative to upset the commonplaces of composition; criticism and perpetuity are replaced (or at least countered) by gathering and immanence, clarity and audience by *skotison* and resounding. AC happens in a place I refer to as the *pre-apocalyptic classroom*, which is a space for composition in tandem with the rapid acceleration of anthropogenic damages and the weird circumstances and networks emergent from those damages. AC begins, then, from a point of surrender to anthropogenic crises and reorganizes the conditions for our responses to them. This methodology seeks to recognize the trauma inherent in the present, the anxiety inspired by an uncertain future, and the absurdity of spending the end of the world in a classroom, while at the same time challenging students to care—despite or because of the circumstances—for themselves, for one another, for the other. Such discourse is messy and contingent. It does not frame climate crises as problems with solutions, and thereby challenges us to move past such constructions. When that challenge is answered, such discourse can also produce inventive engagement that is resistant to both climate nihilism and misplaced optimism or delusions of salvation.

The Althing Parliament

What does a pedagogy that seeks to gather the Thing look like? Such a pedagogy will be heavily indebted to the work that Latour has been doing since *We Have Never Been Modern*, in which he describes a “democracy extended to things themselves” (142).

Democracy, for Latour, means representation unbound by anthropocentric communication and needs; it must not reduce nonhumans, to include technology and the inert, to traditional roles of human service or to the role of ward under human protection. Instead, to enter the Althing Parliament is to enter a venue of negotiation and politics in flux: there is no certainty or ideation of “realpolitik,” there is instead a flat rate of entry. In other words, Latour says that it must make sure the Burkean parlor is present, rather than gatekeep the voices therein. It should reject the impulse to arbitrarily reject, and instead gather even the disconcerting and darkening (“Attempt” 470-471). Latour describes an Upper and Lower House of the Althing parliament. The Lower House performs the functions of inclusivity while the Upper House decides hierarchization and institution (471). Together there is a representation of new and old voices, both answerable to one another and neither beyond deliberation. Lynch, returning to his own analysis of the apocalyptic turn, finally argues that composition needs to demoralize—to begin compositional work again and extend our disciplinary concerns—rather than disenchant through criticism (474). My goal is to describe AC such that, as a pedagogical imperative, it can encompass the Upper and Lower Houses of the Althing Parliament, and let students sit simultaneously in both, positioning them to examine and construct the difference rather than accept it.

In order to occupy both houses, students must become compositionists, and occupy this term in a way akin to the definition supplied by Latour in his manifesto. This manifesto defines composition through brief etymological exposition, from the Latin *componere* taking that “it underlines things that have to be put together . . . while retaining their heterogeneity” (474). For Latour, composition is a broad, even all-

encompassing act that entails not just alphabetic writing, but the whole of the humanities (and sciences!), not withholding from its constructivist implications the eventuality of *decomposition*. “In other words,” he summarizes, “composition takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there” (474). To be a compositionist, therefore, is to gather instead of enclose, cordon, or bracket. This is the function of the Lower House. The Upper House prevents the purview of the compositionist from becoming a perfectly flat ontological space by hearing negotiations and guarding the limitations of assembled living. It is not, therefore, a recourse to relativism.

A return to Rickert’s *Earthrise* demonstrates this lower and higher functionality. *Earthrise* is, first, a *thing*, and one which gathers multiple discursive interpretations: Nietzsche’s Heidegger’s, Rickert’s, Weart’s, and innumerable others in the course of the image’s circulatory history, and its invocation of speculative astronomy from pre-space travel. *Earthrise*’s circulation does not begin with the first time Earth was viewed from space, but rather at the moment it was conceived as possible. It is also an occasion for discursive hierarchy to emerge, as, per Rickert, “the image emerges from science and calls for something, something that gestures toward a different way of being in the world borne up by and within a different cosmology” (218). The function of the Upper House is emergent in this call, for the new cosmology is challenging to old hierarchies of anthropocentrism, and new, different way of being in the world will be one that renegotiates in the loss of that anthropocentrism. In this respect *Earthrise* is also a challenge, and a revelation of something hidden, something that exceeds its context first,

as home of humanity, and second, as the sum of all terrestrial relations—a weirded *oikos* always under construction.

Within the pedagogical framework of AC, the Upper House of the Althing parliament functions to reveal the hidden, not with any taxonomical agenda, but rather to find and approach horizons of what is knowable without the imperative of reaching or transcending them. So, when the Lower House of the Althing parliament is conceived of as that which gathers, we are speaking of a methodological gathering. For example, in nuclear semiotics—the speculative field dealing with communicating the dangers of nuclear waste to audiences millennia in the future—the Lower House assembles stakeholder voices while the Upper House souses out the limitations of our understanding concerning those voices. This is a particularly fecund topic for AC, as it deals with an immediately and persistently exigent ecological, anthropogenic issue. The Lower House must account for the dynamic material properties of nuclear waste and its tendency to circulate and disrupt. It is assembling those project frameworks that reveal enmeshedness: ambient and sonic rhetorics, ontobiographical work, the feminist anthropological work of Haraway’s Chthulucene, and others. As this gathering happens, the Upper House answers to what is excluded, and responds to the losses, trauma, pessimism and unknowability inescapable in the Anthropocene. What is revealed is qualified by what is obfuscated.

Anthropocenic Bodies Composing the Anthropocene

Mol, Law and Singleton have shown that the way we engage with diseases and diseased bodies is ontologically complex. This holds true in the Anthropocene, and the

actants formed in networks of disease and diseased bodies are further complicated by the porous membranes between our damaged ecologies and damaged bodies. These intersections create unique exigencies demanding new, discursive constructions by which we may interact with anthropocenic circumstances. For instance, American soldiers came home from the Gulf War physically and psychologically changed in some ways that were familiar to war fighters, and in some ways that were novel. The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs describes Gulf War Syndrome as "a cluster of medically unexplained chronic symptoms that can include fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders, and memory problems," or, more succinctly, a "chronic multiform illness" (np). The causes of these symptoms are equally as multiform and speculative, but numerous studies and reports have conglomerated a host of factors that may be constitutive of the syndrome. Soldiers in the theater were exposed to pesticides, vaccinated simultaneously for anthrax and botulinum, worked near burning oil wells, used high-powered microwaves to disrupt enemy communication, and were also exposed to nerve agents and anti-nerve agents (Binns et al). A 2004 report suggests that "combinations of the types of neurotoxins encountered in the Persian Gulf theater can work synergistically, producing greater toxicity than would result from the chemicals individually (2). Ironically, chemical attempts to reduce one sort of damage may have reacted adversely with attempts to reduce another. The bodies of soldiers operating in a materially complicated network of pollutants, natural hazards, and general combat stress produced effects that we still do not fully understand. In other words, the material conditions of that distinctive environment causes Gulf War Syndrome to emerge, and, as

a quasi-object, Gulf War Syndrome is discursively constructed through adumbration of those embodied symptoms.

Zones of modern military operation present unique insights into the sort of damage that is uniquely anthropogenic. I have gathered instances of that damage as environmental and discursively constructed as outside the body, but it is importantly conceptualized as *within* bodies as well, when identified in illnesses such as Gulf War Syndrome. This sort of illness and the ways in which it is perceived or diagnosed are analogous to Mol's work with anemia, or Law and Singleton's with liver disease as a "messy object" ("Object Lessons" 348). But Gulf War Syndrome, unlike those other diseases, is distinctly anthropogenic; it could not have been constructed under any other conditions than those material conditions present in the Anthropocene. To expand on Rule, Gulf War Syndrome can be read as a *situated writing process*: a composed thing expressing itself, morphologically, across time and space, determined by the physical characteristics of environments and embodied knowledge (of American military ideations, of duty, of desire for violence, etc.). We will probably continue to discursively construct new syndromes symbolizing new, emergent compositions of anthropogenic conditions as actant networks reform over time. "Long COVID," for instance, represents an assembly of embodied conditions that we still do not completely understand. Moreover, though theaters of war provide some of the most dramatic examples of anthropogenic bodies, the material conditions of the epoch are necessarily composed in every other body as well, to include those in the classroom.

The student body, then, informs Anthropocene Composition. The Althing Parliament gathers the anthropogenic Thing, and that Thing includes the porous,

entangled material bodies of students in composition classrooms. The damages of the epoch are composed within those bodies, in the form of stress, anxiety, microplastics, radiation and in any number of chemical (im)balances that could not happen under circumstances other than those present, just as the bodies of soldiers in the Gulf War theater compose Gulf War Syndrome. These bodies are, in a word, *traumatized*. They are also multitudes: a materialist reading of the human body is hard-pressed to identify the individual. Instead, we find fleshy biomes composed of millions of organisms, functioning symbiotically in a way we lazily perceive as individuals. The boundaries between these constructed individuals and the ecologies in which they live and compose (and decompose) are artificial, and the constructions themselves are better understood as machines (Deleuze and Guattari) or vital assemblies (Bennett) than individuals. Individuality becomes a brief and artificial stabilization of scale. Pedagogy, in the composition classroom, must reflect and resonate with these re-situations of ecology as anthropocenic and pre-apocalyptic, and of individuals as stabilizations of these larger, damaged climatological conditions.

Conclusion

The discursive construction of the Apocalypse, apocalyptic rhetoric, and eschatology demands moral inventories of our pedagogical and, more broadly, social practices of communication, manipulation and coercion. These moral dimensions, though primarily emergent through a religious construction of the apocalyptic “last day,” foster concerns and rhetorical conditions that are otherwise conducive to producing a more enmeshed, ecological morality. One cannot be ecological or apposite in methodology

without treating others, to include non-human actants, as ends in themselves. To be apocalyptic is also to reveal, to unveil, or to behold an ultimate destiny. Apocalyptic rhetoric has a good deal of crossover with rhetorics of the Anthropocene, because the Anthropocene is often discursively constructed as an apocalypse, and this is etymologically sound because the Anthropocene is a time of unveiling and finding horizons of understanding. AC as methodology embraces a two-pronged function of revealing enmeshedness and identifying what is excluded or obfuscated by that enmeshedness, as it works to gather the Althing Parliament and create inclusivity for stakeholder voices in a fundamentally damaged epoch. This gathering is a pedagogical imperative in the pre-apocalyptic classroom: a place of learning in light of, or in spite of, impossible conditions of loss and damage. The students in this classroom become compositionists: combiners of the disparate and gatherers of the Thing.

Inasmuch as students in the pre-apocalyptic classroom are inexorably part of the Anthropocene, then, any composition is the Anthropocene composing itself; there is no way to compose without composing anthropocentrically. Moreover, if we understand composition as a function of life itself, there is no way that student bodies will fail to compose; composition becomes a property of matter under certain arrangements (or a part of the singular, hyper-effect following the cause of the first biological, material assemblage). Students will compose and are composing (and decomposing), always, just like all life is composing (and decomposing), but what is composed can be either more or less resonant with the present ecology, depending on the presence of pedagogy. The controllable circumstances of that composition—the subject matter, the form of engagement, the methodology—can be constructed to cause the epoch to emerge through

composition in different ways. This is the function of AC. AC is a methodology that not only recognizes damages and loss, but seeks to make those conditions resonate with the anthropocenic bodies in the pre-apocalyptic classroom.

AC is, then, a way of embracing our own limitations in an impossible present and recognizing that we are being asked to make the same old decisions under new conditions of uncertainty. AC responds to that request with Bartleby's old refrain, and instead redirects efforts not to making solutions, but to reflecting on the absurdity, sadness, and potential in the multiple ontologies that are all, now, subject to that impossible present. It is neither fair nor productive to imply that students can "solve" the problems of the epoch. Climate change is here; we are in the midst of the sixth great extinction; our most promising sources of sustainable energy create waste that is anathema to life; and microplastics are pervading the bodies and resources of our children. Optimism and Realpolitik have failed us, consistently falling short of meaningful action in favor of economic security for the rich. The discourse of our leadership has amounted to what Greta Thunberg summarizes as "blah, blah, blah" (Chen np). In light (and darkness) of all this, it is time, as Roy Scranton has put it, to "make room for doom" ("Virtues" np). But it is also time to live thoughtfully and play with abandon (of rationality, of critique, of optimism). In the next chapter I will begin to answer the questions of what should be taught to terminal generations and what voices will inform the Lower and Upper Houses of the Althing Parliament.

CHAPTER 3—THE ALTHING PARLIAMENT

I have news for Richard Branson and his prize for the carbon-sucking gizmo. We already have one. It takes tons of carbon from the atmosphere; it sequesters it in deep-time storage. It cleans water and makes oxygen, builds soil and makes wonderful biodiversity, and is called a forest.

-Robin Kimmerer, “Mishkos Kenomagwen”

The psychotic drowns . . . [where] the mystic swims . . .

-Joseph Campbell, Psychology of the Future

The Althing Parliament—Bruno Latour’s description of an ancient social practice of disputation—provides a knowledge-gathering heuristic that brings marginalized and disparate elements of actor networks to the onto-political table, while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting the unknowability of those actors that cannot be understood. It is a two-pronged democratic governing apparatus for ecological representation; the Lower House gathers the voices of the Anthropocene and the Upper House sorts these voices into sets of relations so that stakeholder representation may approach holism and compositional decision-making may be better informed by the boundaries between knowability and unknowability. Though the known, as constructed through the parliamentary imperative of radical openness, may be more familiar, it is the

unknown that will ultimately qualify AC as responsive to the unprecedented crises of the epoch. Unknowability is fundamental to the nature of the Anthropocene.

These onto-political constructions of the Althing Parliament reveal anthropogenic objects but necessarily obfuscate and make partially unknowable those elements of the networked system or equipmental nexus that lie outside or peripheral to the constructions. For example, any single climate change model may be exclusive to events outside of a given socio-economic contingency (social implementation of ecological practices and money invested), written in anticipation of a homogenous course: steady growth or steady decline determined by engagement with sustainable practices at a global level. Outside of these models, obfuscated by the averaging of great data sets, are unaccountable events like negative feedback loops and unforeseen sources of climate aggravation. Methane deposits such as those releasing from the Arctic, and the albedo effect, which is the (decreasing) ability of land to deflect sunlight, are such possible aggravators. Likewise, the turning of the Amazon Rainforest from carbon sink to carbon source¹⁸ is an unaccountable feedback event that points to the necessary incompleteness of prior climate models and the role of the unknowable in climate futures.

Unknowability and anxiety, together, characterize what are often negative responses to climate change. Anxiety need not be negative, but inasmuch as it risks becoming fear or inaction, climate anxiety should be qualified and understood. For Heidegger, anxiety is a fundamentally human attribute. It is characteristic of being-in-the-world, an anticipation of our future death that exists as an everyday individualization of

¹⁸ “The Amazon is no longer a carbon sink. It’s a ‘carbon source.’” *Sustainability Times*. 15 July, 2021.

the greater human experience (*Being and Time* 310). Importantly, this anxiety is without a specific object. It is not a thing that makes anxiety, but rather the temporality of being, as a whole. Conversely, in Heidegger's project, fear is a response to something specifically threatening Dasein in the present. Anxiety about the future can lead to fear in the present when one does not accept anxiety as a total disturbance, and thereby "[f]ear is anxiety, fallen into the 'world', inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself" (234).

Hubert Dreyfus holds that, by this logic, one may become fearless by accepting anxiety, but this is a rare event (182). What does it mean to accept anxiety, then, and to be free of the fallen anxiety that is fear? For Heidegger, it is something fundamental to humans: the being-towards-death that no other animal has. Putting aside the anthropocentrism, we may take this being-towards-death, this anxiety that accepts futurity and avoids fear, as a starting point for examination. It is the anxiety itself that occasions the ontological interrogations we humans do, to include those in the pre-apocalyptic classroom.

Representation of the knowable, despite being fundamentally more familiar than its opposite, is still incomplete in many accounts of the Anthropocene and climate crises. The material turn in rhetoric and composition has mitigated this tendency with the popularity of relational methodologies that support the aims of the Lower House: those constructed ontologies that foster enmeshedness as their informing characteristic. Such ontologies are exemplified in works by Jennifer Clary-Lemon, Laurie Gries, and others. Indigenous scholarship often intersects with and produces these relational methodologies. Indeed, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and other Indigenous demographics working in the humanities often produce scholarship that can be situated in the apocalyptic turn because their peoples are unduly affected by climate crises and environmental

degradation. They are also unconscionably underrepresented in climate change literature. Therefore, because of the intersection of material relationality and anthropogenic crises, and in the spirit of the Lower House's imperative to gather and represent, AC makes space for Indigenous voices as the informing scholarship of this gathering function. The centrality of these voices is not exclusionary, however; in addition to the work of Dylan Robinson on apposite methodology and Yavanna M. Brownlee's Three Sisters relationality, the Lower House is informed by such concepts as Laurie Gries's new materialist ontobiography (NMO) and Jennifer Clary-Lemon's "body thinking." An apposite methodology—one which writes *with* rather than *about*—resists extractivist compositional practices while resisting the exclusion inherent in critique. Clary-Lemon's body thinking and Brownlee's relationality both foster awareness of ecological enmeshedness: a necessity for a plenary parliament. While Brownlee's project is situated in pedagogy, AC requires a departure from some of the lingering critique and solution-orientations that haunt her assignment descriptions¹⁹. Gries's NMO, on the other hand, models a composition of ecological enmeshedness that pedagogically resonates with the apocalyptic turn. Therefore, AC takes from Brownlee a model of ecological awareness and recognition of Indigenous contributions, and from Gries a sophisticated writing objective.

While the Lower House gathers voices for representation in the Althing Parliament, the Upper House does the work of *sorting* those voices and actants. Latour understood this function in terms of hierarchizing the assembly; AC modifies this

¹⁹ I do not discount the value of these assignments at all; they are effective at getting students thinking about alternative ways of knowledge-making and their own place in greater ecologies.

function slightly to be a process of delineating between the knowable and unknowable. The Anthropocene is an age of wicked problems (Rittel and Weber), hyperobjects (Morton), and scalar derangement (Clark). Attempting to understand things like climate change as material means engaging with vast networks spread across time and space at levels and ranges that defy comprehension and common problem-solving heuristics. To engage with the unknown and the external requires divorce not only from the critical impulse, but from the impulse to taxonomize or break a subject down into understandable but unrepresentative bits. In place of these impulses, AC endorses a respect for unknowability and posits a curiosity that does not look to be satisfied. To do so, it embraces mysticism, absurdism, play, and the considerable overlap between the three. Mysticism is represented through analysis of Andrew Pilsch's "inhuman rhetoric" and Eugene Thacker's "world-without-us," both of which are contemplative engagements with extreme anti-anthropocentrism. While Pilsch finds the borders of human understanding in art pieces, Thacker does so through readings of Christian mysticism. Together, these works provide tools for engagement with the unknowable dimensions of hyperobjects and the wicked problems of the epoch. Mysticism, according to Stephen M. Halloran, is immediately adjacent to absurdism in its aversion to rationality, and from absurdism play is but a short jump. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* provides a foundational analysis of play as not only fundamental to life and ecology, but also as a meaning-making practice, while Albert Rouzie connects play directly to the study of composition with what he calls a "serio-ludic rhetoric." Together, these three methods of engagement with the unknowable and its corresponding anxiety reduce the tendencies of more rational engagement with the unknowable that can create a habitus of fear.

In the Upper House, logos diminishes as the Parliament is faced with the challenge of acknowledging, engaging with, and accepting the unknowable without trying to understand it or force it into a logocentric box. Of course, at the same time that this unknowability opens up interesting possibilities for composition, it will also produce anxiety. This anxiety, read through Heidegger's *Being and Time* and adjacent literature, can ultimately become a prerequisite for care, both in Heidegger's project and in AC. The processes by which AC engages with unknowability—mysticism, absurdism, and play—can ameliorate that anxiety enough to keep it from becoming unproductive fear, but not enough to subvert it completely. The goal, through these processes of the Althing Parliament, is ultimately to help students arrive at a place of *care*, and this requires that they live and engage with the Anthropocene with a certain amount of anxiety. To reach this goal, AC starts by considering the material *thing*: that which is disputable—as knowable or unknowable—in ontologies of enmeshedness.

AC gathers ways of engaging with the unknowability—the revelations and obfuscations of the Anthropocene—as a response to the common anxiety of being in the epoch. As a compositional project, AC seeks the methods to accept anxiety and nurture conditions of possibility for knowledge-production and care. Fear, being unproductive to a productive classroom or healthy students, is mitigated through engagement with the unknowability of the Anthropocene. AC wants anxious students, not fearful students. It wants students that orient themselves toward climate anxiety openly and at a distance that doesn't turn it into fear. This sort of engagement is necessarily prior to any humanistic *episteme*. Following the Heideggerian impulse to get at something more fundamental than humanism, AC looks to ontologies, recognizing that ontology is plural and therefore

political. Consequently, beyond the shared anxiety of Being in the Anthropocene, there is no singular ontology of AC, but rather a shifting, permuting parliament of the knowable and unknowable.

The Lower House and Gathering Voices

Indigenous Voices and the Anthropocene

Situating AC in the work of Western scholarship—and overwhelmingly that of white men—risks not only a recreation of the extant hierarchies that I hope to eschew, but also dangerous erasure of other, ongoing engagements with climate change, and with the greater goal of gathering material enmeshedness. These extant engagements and ontologies have been developed over centuries in American Indian and Indigenous scholarship. Zoe Todd has noted the recreation and erasure of such contributions in an argument that “ontology is just another word for colonialism” (4). During a 2013 lecture, Bruno Latour discussed the climate as a “common cosmopolitical concern” (5). For Todd, this wording was reminiscent of Inuit cosmology in which there is an imperfect analogue to Latour’s use of *Gaia* in the Inuit *Sila*, meaning (loosely) “climate,” and also something like animating breath. Indigenous peoples are, in many ways, on the front line of the climate crises, and concepts like *Sila* are important for organizing ontological understandings of material enmeshedness and connectivity. For anyone familiar with the history of Indigenous marginalization not only outside but within the Academy, it is perhaps not surprising that Latour disappoints Todd with what she perceives to be a citational shortcoming rooted in colonial exclusion. “Apparently,” she writes, “to be seen as credible in the European academy, Indigenous thought must be filtered through white

intermediaries” (11). Therefore, inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native²⁰ scholarship, as well as Indigenous voices from elsewhere in the world, will serve a twofold purpose. First, as the Lower House of the Althing Parliament gathers, these voices have a great deal to say, and provide many methodological habits that will allow any scholar of the pre-apocalyptic classroom to make their home speak. Second, I aim to increase citational diversity and let Indigenous voices speak as much as possible. To do so is not only ethical but necessary to a methodology that seeks to gather rather than critique²¹.

This onus of gathering makes the Lower House of the Althing Parliament a place of reception²². It begins the two-house process of constitutionalizing a common world without recourse to the object/subject divide or epistemological policing (Latour, *Politics* 93). It is not a free-for-all or otherwise relativist without qualification, but Latour offers two guarantees to his design of the Lower House that facilitate what may seem like radical openness. First, there are no exclusions for convenience and, second, there are no exclusions without proper arbitration (110). The Lower House, therefore, gathers voices without yet putting things into strict order. These voices are not, according to Latour, best understood as things and people directly, but rather as “articulated propositions,” that present as associations between things and people (165). Nothing is hermetic from

²⁰ I am using the CDC preferred terms as shown here:

https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Preferred_Terms.html

²¹ I am, it should be noted, a white settler. With that in mind I recognize that the Indigenous voices represented in this work are going to be filtered or mediated through my own voice. I can only do my best to represent them in a form unabridged by my own sensibilities and prejudices.

²² There is some disparity in the use of “upper” vs. “lower” between Latour’s *Politics of Nature* and Lynch’s “Composition’s New Thing.” The roles between them are essentially reversed, I will continue the use of Lynch’s interpretation.

relationality. Latour sums up this onus of the Lower House as “articulation of the ‘we,’ the collective” (166). Therefore, radical openness is an imperative of the Lower House as it seeks to execute this function; it must not be imposed upon to exercise in any way the functions of the Upper House, wherein hierarchy is strategized as a facilitation of communal existence. The Lower House must remain open *despite* conflict and yet without *facilitating* conflict. This aversion situates the Althing Parliament in a methodology without critique. Critique distances interpretation based on assumed facts, while the critical (to which the Lower House is not averse) brings disparate interpretations closer based on a shared concern.

Latour explains the movement away from critique in a 2003 article. He situates the aversion in a world at war, where *agon* is the norm and is generally expressed through bombing, invasion, and class disparity (“Critique” 225). He offers an instance of a Republican strategist using critique to cast doubt on climate change’s growing body of evidence as a sort of public-political articulation of the post-modern scholar’s imperative to find contingency in “facts.” Critique has been used, in other words, to create a nihilistic world of political opportunism, charlatanry, and conspiracy theories. Facing these nightmares that have escaped from the laboratory confines of Academia, Latour asks not that we respond with more critique, or revert to a stark division of the subjective and objective, but rather to upgrade our critical equipment. In this spirit, “[the] question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (231). This renewed apparatus will eschew “matters of fact” in favor of “matters of concern.” The former, Latour claims, have too often been granted factual status through polemical and political dealings. The latter will operate

through addition rather than exclusion, bringing together the Althing Parliament's Lower House.

In the Anthropocene, the inclusive function of the Lower House that gathers articulated propositions does a great deal of work in combating the epistemological crimes of ideologically informed critique. Climate change denial based on incomplete data does not follow from a methodology informed by matters of concern as it may from matters of fact. However, if the Althing Parliament is to exist specifically in the Anthropocene epoch, there are extant social inequities that need to be addressed (rather than just “solved” by inclusion) in the spirit of social justice. If AC is going to avoid recreating the white racial habitus that has dominated classroom discourse for centuries (Inoue 47-51), it needs to actively promote scholarship outside of that discourse. Indeed, this is necessary not only for the function of social justice (necessary in itself), but rather because the ecological inquiry of the Althing Parliament's Lower House *naturally* begins *prior to* that habitus, in ontologies and ways of being that predate rhetoric and composition's ecological turn²³.

AC's gathering function begins, then, from a point of concern for those voices that have been marginalized by the conditions of the Anthropocene and its study. Todd cites Elizabeth Reddy, who calls the Anthropocene a “charismatic mega-category” (6). Such mega-categories can erase Indigenous peoples, their philosophies, and laws. According to Todd, it is much more palatable for white people to sympathize with a polar bear than to recognize the damages done to and contributions offered by Alaska Native

²³ It does so, admittedly, at the risk of ignoring extant racist hierarchies. This should obviously be at the fore of pedagogical concern in addition to inclusion.

Peoples. Contrary to this erasure and exclusion, Indigenous peoples are central to anthropocenic discussion—particularly concerning climate change—both as victims of disproportionate suffering and defenders of green spaces (Etchert), as scholars (Whyte; Tallbear; Riley-Mukavetz), as pedagogues (Brownlee; Mychajliw), and as models for ontological understanding (Robinson; but also represented in the work of Gries and Clary-Lemon). As such, the burgeoning body of scholarship concerning these placements, histories and stakes provides a fecund grounding for the Lower House of the Althing parliament. By beginning here, AC is positioned not only to begin the gathering process from a place of radical ontological openness, but also to subvert the tendency of the Anthropocene mega-category to erase Indigenous voices. The following section will organize those voices around key concepts including Dylan Robinson’s apposite methodology, Clary-Lemon’s “body thinking,” Yavanna Brownlee’s Three Sisters relational pedagogy, and finally Laurie Gries’s new materialist ontobiography. These four concepts do a great deal of work in performing non-extractivist, non-colonial gathering of voices, and letting places speak as they do so.

Apposite Methodology and Relational Pedagogy

Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening* describes an apposite methodology: an imperative to write *with* instead of writing *about* in a measure disruptive to ableism and colonial imperatives. Robinson uses the musical practices of Indigenous Canadians to frame the differences and dissonances between Indigenous song and the interpretive patterns of western colonial powers. “Hungry listening,” as a term, comes from two Indigenous words that, together, represent not only a name for settler colonial

consumption of music, but also a “superimposed positionality [that] seeks to acknowledge the current reality of many if not most Indigenous people at various points of perceptual in-between: of knowing, learning, and using resurgent forms of perception” (3). In other words, *shxwelítemelh xwélalàm*—hungry listening—is a concept with complexity equal to the diversity of listeners: for every identity informed by colonialism, Indigenousness, gender, race, etcetera, there is a practice of hungry listening unlike all others. It is with this diversity at heart that Robinson complicates the commonplaces of Indigenous music on the cultural and national scene, claiming that, like oil and gas, Indigenous music is often treated as a resource to be extracted in order to help define a national (Canadian, in this case) aesthetic (13). However, moving towards a non-extractivist perception of Indigenous music is not enough; rather than simply include Indigenous music in the colonial institution of the university, we must reorient the way we share knowledge in a foundational manner. Robinson counters with an apposite methodology: a process for “conveying experience alongside subjectivity and alterity,” and thereby of *sharing* space rather than reifying colonial hierarchies of extractivist listening (81). An apposite methodology resists not only the basic dynamic of settler state and Indigenous people, but also the subject-object relationship between listener and music. It seeks to “unseat the anthropocentrism of listening” by recognizing that non-animal bodies also make sound with other bodies, that vitality is also nonhuman, and that the space between bodies is as much a participant in sonic engagements as the bodies themselves (98). An apposite methodology, therefore, begins to demand consideration of a litany of questions that move the listener away from colonizer practices of consuming music, and change relationships from subject-object to subject-subject, where marginal

peoples, animals, plants, rocks, and even space itself are addressed as subjects to be listened to and to be openly engaged with.

An apposite methodology resists critique based on the distance of subject and object, and its critical acceptance may be further situated in the apocalyptic turn because it seeks “informed curiosity . . . contemplation, connection, and cultivation” (Robinson 464). In the Anthropocene writ large, what is contemplated, connected with, and cultivated, are losses and trauma. So an apposite methodology in AC cannot help but gather and reveal the (overwhelmingly anthropogenic) damages done to the biome as it listens to ecologies and environments. Moreover, in addition to revealing these tragedies, an apposite methodology is one that potentially resonates with the Kantian moral imperative to treat people like ends in themselves. If we extend this Kantian precept from people in the anthropocentric sense, to non-human actants deserving of personhood, and, finally, to all ecological assemblies, then we might construct an apposite methodology that holds up at the intersection of materialism and morality. AC’s Lower House, then, is founded in an apposite methodology that gathers accounts of ontological enmeshedness, trauma, and anxiety. The gathering performed by this methodology is the essential function of the Lower House of the Althing Parliament, wherein nothing is beyond the contingency of public discourse or enshrined in scientific apolitic.

Framing settler-colonial epistemic attitudes towards Indigenous music as extractivist further models a useful understanding of those practices writ more broadly: critique, itself, as extractivist. Inasmuch as critique and extractivism are both attitudes and practices of the modern condition, we may follow from Latour and Robinson in rejecting or resisting these things with a methodological imperative of “articulating the

we,” free from hierarchization and objectification. Enrichment of this ontology—specifically through cultivating methodologies and pedagogies of enmeshedness—serves not only as an act of resistance to the settler-colonial and climate regimes that have defined hierarchical structures in the Anthropocene, but also as generation of necessary venues of gathering for the Althing Parliament. The specific forms this enmeshedness inherently takes are multifarious.

Jennifer Clary-Lemon, echoing Todd’s argument concerning citational exclusivity of Indigenous voices in the materialist turn, calls for inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and practices not only for their value to material, enmeshed ontologies, but for the sociological value in citation as a revealing action (“Gifts”). For Clary-Lemon, this act of citation is an act of decolonialization. She continues and expands this idea in *Planting the Anthropocene*, where she interrogates the various dimensions of tree-planting in Canada as economic practice, as identity, as effective and affective action between and through bodies and landscapes. Though not centered on Indigenous ontologies per se, *Planting* resonates with Indigenous knowledge of relationality, history, and belonging (29-30, 159-161, 174). *Planting* also offers new dimensions to AC, though the book takes direct issue with “Anthropocene” as epochal symbol. For Clary-Lemon, the Anthropocene risks telling a singular story of lost wilderness and human exceptionalism (167). She advocates for “body thinking”—an emphasis on the persuasive effects of multiple bodies interacting—to characterize a new materialist environmental rhetoric²⁴

²⁴ Within this framework, “Anthropocene,” as a problematic discursive symbol, becomes “Choracene”: a promulgation of relational excesses that breaks out of the static landscape suggested by Anthropocene (176). Her issues with the Anthropocene symbol notwithstanding, new materialist environmental rhetoric is apocalyptic in the revelations it affords.

(18). This concept reveals the affective dimensions of bodies and landscapes as complex assemblies, without “detouring through logos” as the critical impulse would demand (65). Moreover, *Planting the Anthropocene* allows itself to be haunted by the damage of a landscape beset by human exploitation: old growth forests are being replaced by monocrop, species variety is declining, roads are replacing trails. It does not place upon the reader any onus to solve these issues. In other words, they never become *problems*. It asks only that the reader stay with the trouble, and gather it, by looking the damage in the eye. This damage is rarely as visible as in Indigenous scholarship and the methodologies that it informs.

Accounting for and responding to these damages in a pedagogical sense means recrafting pedagogical imperatives and designing new praxes accessible to students in the writing classroom. With this in mind, some American Indian and Indigenous practices have been translated into dynamic pedagogies that foster certain elements of AC already. Yavanna Brownlee applies a Three Sisters pedagogy that, drawing upon a widespread American Indian folktale, seeks to highlight the relations between material bodies both human, non-human and land. In *Enculturation Issue 32: Rhetorics and Literacies of Climate Change*, Brownlee’s article, “Relational Practices and Pedagogies in an Age of Climate Change,” details her goals, struggles and successes in bringing the relationality of the Three Sisters tale into the classroom. In the folktale, the three sisters—representing corn, beans, and squash—form a community around which gather humans and nonhumans in a mutually beneficial, ecology²⁵ (“Three Sisters” np). With this relational

²⁵ There are several “Three Sisters” legends. See Northeastern State University’s lesson plan on the subject for more: <https://www.nsuok.edu/heritage/three-sisters-legend.aspx>.

practice as foundation, Brownlee seeks to create a course that gets students to care about the environment, respect Indigenous practices, and understand the role played by capitalism/consumerism, especially in the society of a Western superpower. Challenges to this include the predominantly white demographic she teaches, and the hopelessness inspired by climate change. In the face of these complex social obstacles, Brownlee hopes her pedagogy will be empowering. She moves from local to global perspectives, using Native voices such as Suparno Banerjee and Robin Kimmerer as examples of relational practice. Students are required to research and compose their own places in, around, and through Indigenous ways of being while maintaining respect for the people they study, such that they interrogate their own Western privilege. Brownlee strives to practice openness with her students about her own struggles and limitations with this engagement, and she characterizes her project as incomplete but successful in many ways.

Rocks and Composing the Known and Unknown

The actual compositional practice occurring under the Three Sisters relational pedagogy—those assignments described as being within environments—might look a great deal like Laurie Gries’s new materialist ontobiography. In response to the anxieties of climate crises and the larger “impossible present” of the Anthropocene, Gries crafts a praxis for inhabiting the Chthulucene of Donna Haraway’s feminist anthropological project, which “refers to a timespace in which humans learn how to both live and die through response-ability with other beings on this damaged planet” (301). Much like Robinson’s apposite methodology and Clary-Lemon’s “body thinking,” Gries’s new

materialist ontobiography supports assembly and cultivation rather than critique or problem-solution formations. As Gries describes it:

Most simply, new materialist ontobiography (NMO) is an *in situ*, experiential practice that draws attention to our sensorial, embodied encounters with entities in our local environment. More complexly, NMO is a qualitative research approach that aims to tap into rhetoricity in order to phenomenologically account for how affect and persuasion emerge through deep relationality. It is also a composing practice for channeling such affective-persuasive experiences into critical-creative rhetorical productions. In this latter sense, it may be understood as creative nonfiction writing with a new materialist twist. (302)

This critical-creative, qualitative research approach serves the additional function of gathering Indigenous voices and methodologies in a subversion of Western metaphysics and modernist ontological hierarchies. In this regard, NMO represents an ideal instantiation of Latour's compositional imperative and, therefore, a valuable movement from the pedagogical grounding of projects like Robinson's or Haraway's into the praxis that facilitates the kakosmic discourse that AC hopes to cultivate.

The praxis of NMO involves the cultivation of reciprocal responsivity and relational accountability (307). The former draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of phenomenological intercorporeity ("Flesh"), in order to bring inter-actant relations into a sensorial foreground. The latter takes "ethico-onto-epistemological guidance" from Deloria Vine Jr.'s *Spirit and Reason* and an informed reading of Indigenous methodologies to qualify the entanglements of relationality with mutual accountability (308). In other words, the praxis of NMO seeks to illuminate our ecological relationships

as ethical onuses that flow both ways. This onus needs to be clear and present in our research and composition practices. Gries describes the enactment of NMO more plainly as “wandering through a particular environment in order to experience the rhythms of a place, stumble into new encounters, and develop a highly reflective curiosity about the ecology in which one is immersed and always co-constructing,” but also, always informed by a “reflective stasis to dwell with other(s) in order to heighten attunement—our sense of experiencing what Rickert calls a “fundamental entanglement” with the elements around us—an experience, even if fleeting, in which we come to feel harmonious with others” (309). However, the harmony will not always feel good, Gries warns, especially as our environments continue to deteriorate under the multiform crises of the Anthropocene.

The writing that comes from this cultivation of reciprocal responsivity and relational accountability is meant to embody Nathaniel Rivers’s “intense rhetoric”: a rhetoricity of entanglement that can “effectively move others toward more responsive, empathetic, and ethical relations” (310). Seeking to arrive at such inspirational writing is, however, beside the point; this potentiality emerges in the course of composing while dwelling with other(s). In other words, this relational accountability is aligned with the gathering purpose of the Lower House, so the successful instantiation of NMO aims only to be honest and accountable with the material, intra-actant entanglements of the writer’s encounters. The “intense rhetoric” is embodied not exactly by accident, but also not through any rigid heuristic (311). NMO’s process is, therefore, autoethnographic, expressing *in situ* research through a plethora of written modalities that ultimately

construct the “I” of such writing as co-constitutive of actant-writer relations. In other words, the “I” of this autoethnography is always, actually, a “we.”

The articulated “we” eventually encounters the borders of unknowability. It speaks to the necessity of acknowledging the unknown in accounts of enmeshedness that Gries’s own demonstrative practice of NMO ends with engagement of something fundamentally unknowable: rocks. She performs new materialist ontobiographical writing that substantiates her project with an account of her personal connections to her landscape in Blue Mountain Valley, Colorado. She includes accounts of the human, to include the people, architecture, and other technology, and the non-human, which entails a much more vibrant account of animals, plants, and rocks. Her narrative is shot through with the anxiety of American politics under the Trump administration. Perhaps because of this anxiety, Gries lingers, in the end, on the rocks more than anything else. Rocks seem to occupy a special place in Gries’s ontological account, first because they are so often overlooked as actants in material entanglements, and also because they are a critical and affective element of the chora. Indigenous ontologies have long celebrated the importance of rocks, and Gries notes that, although Aristotle denied them the animism of plants and animals, they were often believed to have personalities, hold knowledge, and otherwise participate in vital actant networks (317). Through her meditation on the mineral, Gries hopes to “become rocked,” as Timothy Morton puts it in his *Humankind*; for Morton, to become rocked is to bring oneself from reality to the real, and to find oneself *with* the other inhabitants of that real, to open up to experiences of shared existence (Gries paraphrasing Morton, 320). In addition to these ways that they are always enmeshed, however, rocks also occupy a stratum of fundamental unknowability.

Rocks might be understood as the gate between the knowable and unknowable, representing and inviting contemplation of both through their ubiquity and alienness. Despite their early exclusion from ontological consideration at the hands of Aristotle, rocks are popular outside the classical mainstream, and of importance within the mainstream following the new materialist turn. Gries cites Morton's use of rocks, and Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* details ancient peoples' use of stones in mathematics and meaning-making, connecting minerals to construction of the *chora* (230-231). At the 2022 RSA conference, I participated in a panel informed by "rocks" as the loose theme, composed by Byron Hawk, Diane Keeling, Adedoyin Ogunfeyimi, Bethany O'Shea, Thomas Rickert, and Ariel Seay-Howard. The panel extended ontological agency to the non-living, and a burgeoning apposite methodology in the field, but also examined scales of space and time beyond those that reside within the comforts of typical anthropocentric association and contemplation. Rocks are, on average, methuselahs by comparison to the typical <100-year human lifespan, and even though one might refer to entire planets as singular "rocks," their vastness is spatial as well as temporal. With the inclusion of such alien objects—and attempts to transcend the alien-ness of those objects—comes a certain amount of ontological discomfort. Even as we gather awareness and read the rocks of our environment for their personality, their knowledge, and their enmeshedness with us, we must recognize a level of *unknowability*: an inability to fully engage with the "real" as experienced by rocks or to have access to all of their relationality. Likewise, we must recognize that these gathering methodologies—these ontologies and open pedagogies of the Lower House—do not yet account for many dimensions of the distinctly anthropocenic crises in which they are embroiled. There are factors and even entire actor

networks that are defined by their *unknowability* to any phenomenological technology we have access to in the present.

The Upper House and Articulating the (Un)Known

Sorting Unknowability with Wicked Problems and Hyperobjects

Anthropocene Composition requires adjustment of Upper House imperatives from how they function in Latour's conception of the Althing Parliament. Latour describes the two primary functions of the Upper House as hierarchization and institution (*Politics* 109). Where the Lower House asks "how many," the Upper House asks "who" and "what" in order to organize, task, and configure the best possible world for the beings assembled by the Lower (173). It does not have the power of elimination, according to Latour, at least not initially; it may not exclude based on alien properties or derangements. It does, however, account for the ability of any articulated proposition to come to terms with the greater house, and, if such an ability is severely lacking, the Upper House performs the function of rejection. This is less a complete disregard or a banishment than the establishment of an inside and an outside, "the externalization of impossible worlds, the expression of externalities" (177). In AC, the Upper House performs similar functions, but they are adjusted and extended to address the unprecedented nature and strange ecologies of the epoch. Latour's Upper House always has an implicit representation of the known and unknown, but AC focuses on *articulation* of (un)knowability to diminish the function of hierarchization and eventually engage with the weirded *oikos* rather than just identify it in terms of its relation to the knowable. Articulation means, first, sorting the known and unknown in a dialectical manner; it does

not separate the known from the unknown, but identifies the ways that the (un)known is inherent to anthropogenic crises. The (un)known is a symbolic representation of this dialectical relationship that emerges from the sorting function.

The sorting function enables the Upper House to articulate those anthropogenic crises in such a way that avoids or mitigates the issue of scalar derangement, which is a problematic characteristic of these epochal issues. It does not ignore or condemn the unknowable, nor does it do the epistemological violence of dissecting it into digestible bits. Instead, the Upper House takes the unknowability gathered by the Lower and gives it a place accounted for by the parliamentary hierarchy. For instance, concerning the issue of nuclear waste disposal, the Althing Parliament must gather articulated propositions in the Lower House, and then sort parameters of knowability in the Upper before providing the methods for engaging with the unknowable. First, stakeholders and stakeholder relations are identified and brought to the table, to include (non-exhaustively) energy users, wildlife at risk, environmental damages on account of nuclear waste, and the waste itself. Also of concern are the ecologies and audiences of the future (stretching up to 100,000 years, or the approximate length of time that nuclear waste is hazardous to biological life). Here the Upper House sorts the unknowable aspects of the issue; what will these ecologies and audiences look like and how will they communicate? More specifically, how do we warn them away from the lethal waste that we have created? The nuclear waste issue is a near analogue for climate change in the propositions it gathers, and the questions it asks of those who engage with it. Anthropogenic crises spread into realms of speculation and darkness, complicating the imperative to articulate what is gathered.

It would be naïve at best and disingenuous at worst to operate under the pretense that any amount of gathering can fully account for even one of the issues I have briefly described in an audit of the epoch and its damages. These crises evade full representation and accountability by virtue of their dimensions and ubiquity. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber sought to explain why the search for scientific basis to social policy was doomed to fail. They used the term “wicked” to describe the sort of problems facing social policy, and “tame” to describe the sort of problems that professionals are trained and able to face (160). Wicked problems have no formulation, no definitive end, no binary behavior, no test for possible solutions, no trial-and-error, and no diagnostic criteria. They are unique and yet they confuse cause-and-symptom analysis between themselves and other problems. Any resolution offered to a wicked problem will be contingent upon representational discrepancy, and any mistakes in hypothesis concerning a wicked problem will have consequences. Rittel and Webber are troubling the science/politics binary with this description, ultimately arguing that any claims to solution make the (scientific) professional “the player in a political game, seeking to promote his private vision of goodness over others” (169).

Anthropocenic crises fit the criteria of wicked problems, and conceptually this analysis further propounds the discarding of the science/politics, inside/outside, and known/unknown binaries. One does not apolitically address the Anthropocene, and even the radical openness of the Lower House is a political endeavor if viewed within a problem/solution framework. Hence, taking from Lynch’s apocalyptic turn the rejection of solution-oriented thinking, the Althing Parliament opts for cultivation of ambiguity, and the Upper House must engage with that ambiguity by sorting the relation between the

known and unknown (“Composition’s” 471). This sorting is, first, a cartographic effort that completes an audit of what is knowable and what is unknowable, but not for the purposes of exclusion. Instead, these borders are conceptualized so that the ambiguity of the unknown may be speculatively crossed, played with, or otherwise upended. Wicked problems tend to produce ambiguity, suggesting that they are already resistant to critique and therefore need an ontological framework that facilitates ambiguity and resists critique. In other words, they need a reconceptualization that moves away from the problem/solution framework and towards a more dynamic, onto-political construction that causes the ambiguity to emerge beyond the confines of this problem/solution framework. The hyperobject, a concept from object-oriented ontology, is a concept that can facilitate this movement.

Tim Morton’s *Hyperobjects* has been criticized as sprawling and alienating. It has been called ineffective in scope (Heise) and judgmental of the human condition (Boulton). These critiques are not wrong, and they represent a meeting of ecological inquiry and responsibility with the critical impulse such that it is useful to scrutinize them. They seem to miss something integral to Morton’s subject matter and the perspectives from which he undertakes to examine it: the inefficiency is the point. Indeed, his opening paragraphs frame his subject matter as nearly unknowable by convention, thus making critique on these grounds a futile undertaking, and demonstrating a broader futility of critique in general when operating in anthropocenic subject matter. Hyperobjects, a category of objects including climate change, are “massively distributed across time and space relative to humans” (1). Objects in this category are viscous, nonlocal, temporally complicated and inter-objective to human

perception. Morton works through these characteristics over the course of the project, but essentially they all serve to describe the frustration of understanding hyperobjects. They are not bound but spread across what might be perceived as distinct material bodies. They are so long-lasting that the way we perceive time prevents us from knowing them as temporal in a meaningful way. They are not in a place, as we conceive of distinct places. And yet we necessarily interact with the hyperobject of climate change (or global warming, as Morton deliberately chooses to call it), and this interaction has “ushered in a new human phase of *hypocrisy*, *weakness*, and *lameness*” (2). Our ability to perceive these phenomena is so inadequate, that our value as creators of epistemology and shepherds of being-in-the-world becomes greatly diminished. Articulated propositions are hard to gather when our language is chronically insufficient, leaving us, instead, to skirt the horizons of the (un)knowable.

Wicked problems and hyperobjects are useful towards conceptualizing and representing anthropocenic crises because their characteristics are aptly applied to the issues of climate change, microplastic pollution, nuclear waste and mass extinction. These concepts can, first, identify the anthropocenic crises as having unknowable dimensions, and second, begin sorting the articulated prepositions such that they emerge as (un)knowable. Thereby, wicked problems and hyperobjects let the Althing Parliament begin the work of the Upper House in sorting relations. But to further *engage* with the (un)knowable dimensions and murky places in these concepts, we need language that allow us to do so. Some scholars have worked to provide new terminology that can invoke the strangeness of anthropocenic crises, and others have repurposed or expanded existing concepts to do so. In both cases, there is always an understood limitation or

insufficiency. This is one of the precepts of the Anthropocene: the systems on which we have historically relied—including language itself—are forced to face their own insufficiency, and we are forced to confront those horizons of knowability.

Scalar Derangement and Engaging the (Un)Knowable

Engaging with wicked problems and hyperobjects, particularly their unknowable dimensions, is an open-ended activity without clear metrics for success or even parameters for engagement. Articulating these concepts creates (un)knowable prepositions contingent upon their composition. When the Lower House articulates the “we,” and thereby causes unknowable prepositions to emerge, one of the primary characteristics of the (un)knowable is scalar derangement. Conceptually, scalar derangement—the dissonance that arises from attempting to scale climatological issues to human perception—has been of concern in Anthropocene theory (Clark; Zylinska), and in rhetoric and composition as a barrier to communication about anthropogenic issues (Pilsch; Jones). This concept is central to the function of the Upper House, not only because it is a phenomenon in itself, but because engaging with it has necessitated new (or revitalizations of old) conceptualizations of rhetoric and composition.

In the Upper House of the Althing Parliament, the question of engagement becomes a matter of how the unknown can be made to speak. Attempts to do so that rely on conventional relationality (that is, between humans and nonhumans on familiar scales) will quickly fall into the ethical and ontological double-binds of scalar derangement. In *Telemorphosis*, Timothy Clark writes:

Scale effects in relation to climate change are confusing because they take the easy, daily equations of moral and political accounting and drop into them both a zero and an infinity: the greater the number of people engaged in modern forms of consumption then the less the relative influence or responsibility of each but the worse the cumulative impact of their insignificance. (np)

In other words, when I start my car to drive to campus, the act of producing carbon emissions is simultaneously meaningless because I am such a small thing operating in such a large world, and also unconscionable because I am in a vast assemblage of carbon emission production that is damaging the planet. Those who engage with climate change and other hyperobjects are made to contemplate deep, geological time periods extending into the past and future, to account for numbers so vast as to be beyond comprehension and so small as to appear insignificant (for instance, the difference between 2 and 3 degrees Celsius in global warming). Dividing these uncomfortable metrics into easily digestible epistemological bits is not only dissonant or deranged, but also ontologically violent and exclusionary (consider the issues of austerity ethics as discussed in Huber's work). Therefore, in the Althing Parliament conceived for AC, the Upper House will perform the functions of engagement with unknowability to mitigate scalar derangement. Engagement means grappling with the scalar derangement inherent in a weirded *oikos* and composing with damaged networks of (un)knowable, articulated prepositions.

The Upper House, being situated in the apocalyptic turn, is not content to confirm the externality of the unknowable and leave it at that. Instead, the unknowable must be engaged with to whatever degree can maintain its integrity. Andrew Pilsch models this engagement in "Invoking Darkness: *Skotison*, Scalar Derangement, and Inhuman

Rhetoric,” wherein he argues that the vastness and temporal complexity of global problems such as climate change produce what Nathaniel Rivers calls “deep ambivalence,” and we might answer this with an inhuman rhetoric. Inhuman rhetoric, according to Pilsch, “acknowledges rhetorical actors that exist at temporal or physical scales beyond our limited perception by moving the human out of the way and using the nihilism inherent in the kind of worldview implied by Rivers’s and Zylinksa’s arguments as a mode of invention” (344). Such nihilism further subverts moral imperatives such as those in Kant’s project, and speaks to, or with, the necessity of a reconceptualized, apocalyptic morality. As to what this inhuman rhetoric does, Pilsch posits *skotison*—deliberate obfuscation in writing—as a possible answer to the problem of human consciousness. Instead of looking for these inhuman problems, these hyperobjects, to reveal themselves, we look for them to reveal their hiddenness, in an ontological move similar to Heidegger’s expression of truth as the “un-concealed occurrence of Being” (Van De Water np). From this perspective, the darkness surrounding climate crises that produces hypocrisy, weakness, and lameness in human actors is cultivated rather than antagonized. For Pilsch, scalar derangement is only avoidable if we address climatological politics through inhuman rhetorics (353). He creates a brief genealogy of object engagement to posit the form it takes under inhuman rhetorical influence.

Pilsch cites N. Kathryn Hales and Jessica Pressman’s *Comparative Textual Media* as the starting point where digital humanities meets new materialism, and from this comes an orientation towards *making things*. Ian Bogost, drawing from this orientation, posits “carpentry” as a tool of the philosopher:

the philosophical carpenter “creates a machine that tries to replicate the unit operation of another’s experience. Like a space probe sent out to record, process, and report information, the alien phenomenologist’s carpentry seeks to capture and characterize an experience it can never fully understand, offering a rendering satisfactory enough to allow the artifact’s operator to gain some insight into an alien thing’s experience. (Bogost qtd. in Pilsch 338)

Nathaniel Rivers and James J. Brown Jr. claim that carpentry represents an “actionary rhetoric,” meaning that it resists critique and instead focuses on creating conversations between objects, human and nonhuman. Pilsch connects this reading to Latour’s project for object-oriented democracy, which may be read as another instantiation of the Althing Parliament. There is a problem, however, with carpentry as a medium for conversing with the unknowable in order to make parts of it knowable. Drawing from Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense,” Pilsch diagnoses the problem as one of scalar derangement. When the alien carpenter creates a human-accessible representation of something unknowable, the carpenter scales the thing to human phenomenological apparatus, indulging the fantasy of controlling the uncontrollable or conversing with scalarly challenging objects in an anthropocentric forum (342). To avoid this mistake, Pilsch argues that we must abandon our impulse of “recourse to representation,” which means accepting that some nonhuman objects simply do not scale. It is for this reason that AC’s interpretation of the Upper House seeks to diminish representation in favor of articulation, and because articulation means sorting and engagement, inhuman rhetoric dovetails usefully with the concept.

Inhuman rhetoric comes, in part, from Eugene Thacker's third term for human/world relations, the "world-without-us." *In the Dust of This Planet* uses this term to describe the space between the "world-for-us," called The World (a modernist, anthropocentric conception), and the "world-in-itself," called the Earth (anti-anthropocentric, as nature is apart from culture, but exploitable by the *Anthropos*). The world-without-us, according to Thacker, is the remainder, that may reside somewhere in the term "Planet." It is in "the very fissures, lapses, or lacunae in the World and the Earth. The Planet (the world-without-us) is, in the words of darkness mysticism, the "dark intelligible abyss" that is paradoxically manifest as the World and the Earth" (8). For Thacker, this world is best represented in science fiction and supernatural horror. It represents unknowability, hostility, and indifference. Pilsch searches for representation as well, but ultimately concludes that it cannot be achieved. Instead, he embraces obscurity—a lack of representation—as a rhetorical maneuver that articulates unknowability without producing the scalar derangement of carpentry. Pilsch turns to Richard A. Lanham's work on *skotison*, a "love of obscurity" (Lanham qtd. in Pilsch 351). By way of example, Pilsch offers Sabina Keric and Yvonne Bayer's 2007-2009 art project, *Urban Camouflage*. The artists create ghillie suit-like outfits that allow them to blend in to commercial environments like Ikea, and leave the interpretation of this project largely up to the audience. Pilsch's interpretation is that "it is a gnomic or cryptic gesture, deliberately obscure as *skotison* should be, that produces a human-shaped vacuum into which speculation about the nature of contemporary shopping and multinational capital can flow" (351). By articulating unknowable prepositions through *skotison*—a concept that avoids the epistemological pitfalls of carpentry—Pilsch interprets characteristics of

multinational capital as the unknowable properties of a hyperobject without resorting to representation, logocentric reductionism or full denial of unknowability. Inhuman rhetoric, therefore, is a working example of Upper House functionality: articulating unknowability as itself.

There are other projects that engage with scalarly challenging objects without resorting to the epistemological violence of dividing or scaling down. In “(Re)placing the rhetoric of scale: Ecoliteracy, networked writing, and MEmorial mapping,” Madison Percy Jones draws on Morton, Latour, Heidegger and others to seek a humanistic, environmental answer to the issue of scalar derangement in addressing climate change. From Gregory Ulmer’s *Electronic Monuments*, Jones posits “MEmorial mapping” as alternative to the “zooming out” function of digital geography programs and drone feeds; these MEmorials “connect the individual writer” (thus the ME being capitalized) to an “event of loss whose mourning helps define a community” with the ultimate goal of improving the world, or “if not to improve the world, then to understand in what way the human world is irreparable” (Ulmer qtd. in Jones 96). These MEmorial projects are specifically ecological, drawing from Jones’ characterization, and focus on environmental crises rather than connecting to a climatological scale, especially where concerned with “toxic tourism” (97). Jones acknowledges the limitations; The climate change issue doesn’t scale as easily as the Ozone hole crisis, which “scaled neatly from individual consumer up to the level of atmosphere” (97). The potential lies in the connection, rather than scaling. There is no onus of complete understanding, no epistemological imperative, to the connection. The MEmorials avoid viewing everything

in relation to scale, or changing scales, artificially, for the purpose of “triangulation,” and instead attempt to “connect data taken at a distance to local realities” (98).

Pilsch’s inhuman rhetoric and Jones’ Memorial mapping both perform the Upper House function of engagement with the unknowable, as they put the unknowable in the realm of the unknown without epistemological reduction, and without separating and quarantining knowable bits from these scalarly unknowable objects. The unknowable still affects us at all levels of enmeshed relationality, and so needs to be recognized, interacted with, and allowed to speak despite its alien tongue. What it does not need is translation. The translation happens, naturally, at local scales. Climate change, for instance, translates to dry aquifers, diminished biological diversity, unpredictable weather patterns, and suffering. Connecting to such an object is more than accounting for these points of local translation; instead, it involves embracing and sorting the unknowability of the scalarly alien, causing (un)knowability to emerge. The Upper House of the Althing Parliament, as it functions in AC, then, identifies and engages with (un)knowability. Where the Lower House gathers and celebrates enmeshedness, the Upper House finds the horizons of that enmeshedness. Compositional projects engaging with those horizons becomes sites of the subverting characteristics of the alien objects themselves, among them (un)knowability, strangeness, and absurdity. Stephen M. Halloran notes that mysticism—fundamental to Pilsch’s inhuman rhetoric and akin, epistemologically, to the unknowability of hyperobjects—shares a common ground with absurdism (97). AC is home to both. First, mysticism and absurdity bear some qualification to make them at home in a compositional project.

Relation to the (Un)Known

The mystical is already extant in the literature from which AC's version of the Upper House draws. Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* series, of which *In the Dust of This Planet* is the first part, is primarily concerned with the borders of dialectic and the contemplation of what lies beyond. *Starry Speculative Corpse*, the second volume of the series, investigates mysticism as one contemplative methodology. Thacker claims that "something interesting happens when one takes philosophy not as a heroic feat of explaining everything, but as the confrontation with this thought that undermines thought, this philosophy of futility" (15). Resisting the critical impulse and the intellectual urge to epistemologically account for the unknowable, while still engaging or "confronting" it, is productive in itself, and an historical practice endemic to religious scholarship²⁶.

Thacker draws on medieval Christian mysticism, and particularly *The Mystical Theology* (the author of which claimed to be Dionysius the Areopagite and is now known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), as a foundational text of this genre. Tellingly for Thacker, Dionysius often refers to darkness with the same language commonly used to describe light. He describes darkness as "brilliant" or as "a ray" or even "divine" (21-22). For Dionysius, the more potent method of knowing the divine is not through affirmation and illumination, but through negation and darkness. Because the divine is the source of all creation, it is fundamentally inaccessible from any point in that creation, making the process of negation (understanding what the divine is not), paradoxically, a more affirming method of accruing knowledge of the divine. I shirk at the use of "knowledge"

²⁶ What is God if not a hyperobject?

and “knowing,” because these words are only useful insofar as they are necessary to describe mysticism through analogue. More appropriate symbols would be “un-knowledge” and “unknowing,” which Thacker employs later (23). His reading of Georges Bataille’s *Atheological Summa* further triangulates the usefulness of mysticism in contemplating the unknown. He reads Bataille’s treatment of darkness as a “blind spot of knowledge,” beginning at the limitations of any epistemological certainty or, we may extend, any ontological account (20). From this unknown, Thacker speculates that there may be an inhuman, secular mysticism, without the contingency of the Abrahamic Godhead.

Mysticism connects to the apocalyptic turn rather than apocalyptic logic. It does not reveal or lift the veil; in keeping with the apocalyptic turn, it instead faces the unknowable free from critique. Lynch reads the “apocalypse itself” as “serious dangers to human flourishing” (458-9). Taking these dangers to mean existential threats, particularly those that evade complete accountability (wicked problems or hyperobjects), mysticism becomes engagement with speculative extinction. Thacker points out that all extinction is speculative, inasmuch as it contemplates a horizon of thought (*Dust* 124). From a point of ontological accountability, speculative extinction is the capital-D “Death” of Heideggerian temporality, of being-in-the-world (*Dasein*). This is different from the sort of extinction we understand to describe things like dinosaurs and Dodo birds. This is a complete extinction, summary to being forgotten, or confined to the imaginary. Thacker calls it “speculative annihilation” (125) and argues that this concept is implicit to all ontology. There is no accounting for what-is without what-is-not. This philosophical circle is, to some degree, equivalent to Giraud’s thesis: every account of entanglement is

exclusionary. Continuing this attempt at reasoning with the fundamentally unreasonable—for instance, trying to conceptualize complete extinction from the confines of a living body at a writing desk—quickly becomes an exercise in the absurd.

Stephen Halloran's turn from mysticism to absurdism rests on the aversion of both to rationality. He notes that the absurd, as described by Sartre and Camus, is "not unlike the ecstatic experiences of religious mystics. The sense of having broken through the surface of everyday appearances and touched reality as it profoundly *is*, and the consequent conviction that things as they are ordinarily perceived are somehow fictitious—these elements are common to the experiences recorded by mystics and absurdists alike" (97). Both the mystical and the absurd find logos to be inadequate, and with it, language. Continuing Halloran's reasoning, we might trace a line from the existential threats of anthropocenic crises to absurdity through this inadequacy of logos and the rhetorical challenges it presents to the institutions that rely on that logos. Such a line would find support in Clary-Lemon's body thinking, the affective dimensions of Gries's NMO, or in Cynthia Haynes' *The Homesick Phone Book*, which questions rhetoric's addiction to reason and the ways in which the greater discipline of English constantly insists on groundedness. The violence of the modern era is at odds with rationality and refuses to comply with argumentative logic. We are, Haynes writes, "rotten with reason" (62).

Absurdism is a short detour from mysticism then, and it seeks answers to the rhetorical question of what to do in relation to logos in metaphor. Searching for a rhetoric of the absurd, Halloran illustrates the connectivity between the two:

Metaphor happens when the concrete image of a familiar reality is suddenly perceived in a new and unfamiliar way that links it with an unknown reality, thus permitting us to grasp at least partially the unknown, and adding a dimension of mystery to the familiar. The process of abstraction-falsification—Foss calls it “symbolic reduction”—is completed when the partial grasp of the unknown allowed by metaphor is taken as a complete grasp, and the sense of mystery in the familiar disappears. What truth we are capable of can only be found in an ongoing dialectic of metaphor and abstraction, a dialectic that underlines the tentativeness of abstractions by keeping in view their metaphorical roots. A rhetoric of the absurd would therefore accord a central position to metaphor, rather than relegating it to the place of a mere stylistic grace. (107)

The partial grasp of the unknown is key. Any metaphor pretending to complete representation falls into the trap of abstraction-falsification or symbolic reduction. This is akin to the danger that Pilsch sees in carpentry, and Jones in digital zooming functions. The metaphor must retain a respect for the limits of its epistemological function: what Halloran calls a dialectic of metaphor and abstraction. The examples that Halloran provide come from the literature of playwrights like Beckett, wherein language-play becomes an absurdist’s method of exemplifying the impotence of language (106).

Avoiding symbolic reduction by retaining epistemological function also returns to Kantian moral precepts. Scott Stroud identifies hypotyposis as an important tool of nonmanipulative, educative rhetoric. Hypotyposis, in Stroud’s words, is “the vivid presentation of a concept that ordinarily escapes our ability to understand it empirically” (28). In other words, metaphorical examples are useful to the end of crafting

nonmanipulative rhetoric, because they can illustrate a moral point persuasively without being coercive. Gospels would qualify as hypotyposis, as would Genesis and Revelations. In all these cases, the metaphor must be presented as non-exhaustive and incomplete, but at the same time the resilience of hypotyposis comes from not relying on logos. Completeness is not construed as necessary or even possible. Indeed, in every metaphor, from hypotyposis to metaphors of absurdity, there is a dimension of playfulness that eludes logos even as it co-participates in logos. So, inasmuch as absurdism can facilitate a partial grasp of the unknown through metaphor, it helps perform the function of AC's Upper House by routing engagement with the unknown through nonmanipulative rhetorical strategy.

Play is a useful strategy or qualification of metaphor for avoiding the abstraction-qualification snare. Through a ludic lens, engagement with anthropocenic crises becomes an exercise in absurdity: an enterprise not with diminished stakes, but with diminished expectations or perhaps none at all. As Johan Huizinga points out, play is often a very serious matter (5). In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga makes the case that play is prior to culture and many cultural touchstones that we take seriously, such as language, war, law, myth, philosophy and art. Play is seen in animals, and so it is a phenomenon not limited to the *Anthropos*. Therefore, by Huizinga's reasoning, play "cannot have its foundation in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind" (3). He is limiting rationality to the domain of the human, but he does so to frame the important question of whether play necessarily precedes a rational goal. Huizinga holds that it does not, for "play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe. Any thinking person can see at a glance that play is a thing on its own. . . . Play cannot be denied. You

can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play” (3). Play exceeds the logical; it comes before order and law, and in places where order and law have dominion, it breaks through like a weed through concrete, and can be found even in the strictest penitentiaries and military units. Likewise, the viability (and necessity) of play should be extended to the forums in which we engage with anthropocenic crises, even in composition.

Albert Rouzie connects play directly to the study of composition with what he calls a “serio-ludic rhetoric.” The concept represents a dialectical relationship between work and play, and Rouzie attempts to close, diminish, or problematize that gap through the idea that work is often playful, and play is often work (633). This dialectic is often a property of the inter-personal nature of play/work, but when play is embraced as a knowledge- or value-making practice, its interpersonal nature coupled with the social functions by which play is easily dismissed create what Rouzie calls “a central paradox of play—namely, that play derives some of its power to alter the world from the perception that it is separate from it” (634). When the playful and serious purposes of play are embraced, serio-ludic rhetoric is best positioned to produce “fruitful discourse” (635). This discourse is only made possible, however, by training *in* serio-ludic composition. In other words, serio-ludic rhetoric must be taught, and it must be taught playfully. Composition pedagogues can facilitate this by broadening the range of texts and modalities considered pertinent to study, by encouraging students to explore their roles and identities in low-stakes contexts, and by providing them models of serio-ludic dialogue (651).

Ultimately, the Upper House might be called inherently serio-ludic, because the stakes of anthropocenic crises are simultaneously high in terms of loss and trauma, and low in terms of student agency to “solve” those “problems.” Mysticism—engagement with the unknowable—is a game of sorts, an extended puzzle or riddle such as the Zen Buddhist contemplation of one hand clapping. The point is not to arrive at a conclusion, but rather to indulge the idea that transcending reason is possible. All contemplation of the unknowable is playful then, because it defies recourse to logos and it humors metaphor. Huizinga notes that play occurs in clearly delineated time and space. That is, it begins at certain moments, ends just as certainly, and it occurs in designated areas. The pre-apocalyptic classroom might represent such a time and space, and AC a methodology indulgent of the sort of play which engages with the unknowable. Play, then, is a sorting structure, delineating spatial and temporal units in terms of rules and stakes. It marks off times and places for actor engagement under different rules; the Upper House is a place where students can “play” with climate change and other anthropocenic crises, particularly their unknowable, speculative dimensions.

Conclusion

AC is a methodology that articulates (un)knowability of the Anthropocene by gathering “articulated propositions,” or the conditions of relationality, and sorting those gathered voices amongst themselves and what is unknowable, or excluded, from that relationality. In short, it seeks to engage the aims of both the Lower and Upper Houses of the Althing Parliament. Inasmuch as AC seeks to give compositionists a forum for letting their places of being speak, it recognizes also that whatever speech is produced will not

always be intelligible. The known and unknown—what we scan clearly and darkly—are comprehensible as such by virtue of one another in a dialect produced by horizons of *episteme*. Indigenous ways of knowing and being, partnered with new materialist ontological exploration, produce methodologies for revealing entanglement, enmeshedness, and reciprocal responsibility in ecological inquiry. Robinson's apposite methodology, Clary-Lemon's body thinking, Brownlee's Three Sisters relational pedagogy, and Gries's new materialist ontobiography all represent means to scan for these articulated propositions and gather them, fulfilling the function of the Lower House of the Althing Parliament.

The second half of this methodology, furnished by the Upper House, does the work of sorting and engaging with the unknown: those gathered voices that cannot fit within the known states of enmeshedness. Through a dialectical understanding of the known and unknown, the Upper House causes (un)knowability to emerge, not for exclusion, but for engagement. AC indulges contemplation of the unknown for producing strange rhetorics akin to mysticism and absurdity. This engagement need not, or perhaps cannot, be scientific, or otherwise situated in methodologies that taxonomize and otherwise dissect. Therefore, AC encourages taking a ludic disposition towards engagement with the weirded *oikos* of the current epoch. This is not to artificially diminish the severity of the situation, but to keep perspective through temporary diminishment of stakes in the classroom and facilitate outcomes that might not otherwise present under conditions of scientific or teleological inquiry.

The engagement with the (un)known as facilitated by the methodology of AC presents a way to prevent that anxiety of Being-in-the-world from becoming fear, the

inauthentic engagement with the world that is “hidden from itself” (Heidegger 235). The reasons for doing this, beyond aversion to fear, come from relationality. For Heidegger, anxiety entails *being alongside* those other things we encounter with the world. This being-alongside (something else) is felt as concern. Care for oneself is a tautological condition of Dasein, but extending concern to other shepherds of Being-in-the-world is contingent upon anxiety, and for that condition to exist, we must avoid the inauthentic engagements embodied fear. So, through gathering voices, organizing, hierarchizing, and engaging, AC creates the conditions necessary to concern oneself with the enmeshed other. It invites the compositionist to dwell in the fecund anxieties of the epoch and play in the unknown.

CHAPTER 4—COMPOSING THE THING IN THE PRE-APOCALYPTIC CLASSROOM

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history', but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. – One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.

-Nietzsche, 1873²⁷

Conceptualizing a project created through the Anthropocene Composition methodology is challenging. What does it look like to compose an interaction with unknowable objects, to indulge the absurd in argumentation, or to foster conditions of

²⁷ Nietzsche articulates the final disruption of scalar derangement. In the end, or what we, in our unending vanity, perceive to be the end, there will be no accounting for what has happened, what has been composed, and what was included or excluded. The projects and contributions to “knowing” that I describe in this chapter will likewise be space dust.

play in the face of existential threats? Severity, fear, nihilism and all the psychological weaponry of climate regimes seem to push in upon the walls of the pre-apocalyptic classroom, threatening to add despair and apathy to the challenges of teaching in this impossible present. Instead of manufacturing upwards from the methodological touchstones established in chapter 3 by developing AC project and assignment prompts from scratch, it may be more beneficial to find existing projects that qualify, to various degrees, as AC. That is, finding rhetoric, art, and social engagements in the wild that exemplify the characteristics of AC, and reading them for the ways in which they do so, will provide orientation for the goals of the pre-apocalyptic classroom. Fortunately, such examples exist and are growing as climate change, nuclear semiotics, microplastic pollution and extinction become the purview of multi-disciplinary artists, scholars, and other professionals. As bodies become more aware of their enmeshedness with the damage and losses of the epoch, the composition work done by and with these bodies is, in turn, reflecting that awareness. What follows will be a close reading of the context and theory surrounding one such engagement—"The Ray Cat Solution"—followed by a brief adumbration of several others and, finally, the conceptualization of classroom activities and projects that provoke and embody the characteristics we desire in the pre-apocalyptic classroom.

The Ray Cat Solution is a working example of AC. Nuclear semiotics—the inspiring issue to which the Ray Cat Solution responds—is the question of how to communicate with an audience 100,000 years in the future and warn them about the hazards of radioactive material. It is an *issue* (as opposed to a problem), in the anthropocenic sense, and therefore without a satisfying solution. Problems have distinct

spatial and temporal boundaries, whereas issues—climate change, microplastics, and radioactive waste—defy those boundaries and the solution-oriented impulse. The focus of this discussion is not on the solution that was enacted, but rather the discourse in response to the issue. As a “solution” that is not really a solution, the Ray Cat Solution embraces enmeshedness, affectation, and more than a little absurdity. Moreover, as a response to the issue of nuclear semiotics, understanding the stakes surrounding this discourse means engaging with futurity (Hawk; Gries), circulation (Gries; Dobrin), and the nature of archives in relation to these concepts (Guruianu and Andrievskikh). Adumbrating the ecological stakes and stakeholders of nuclear semiotics will reveal that the Ray Cat Solution performs the imperatives of the Lower House—gathering articulated prepositions to the parliamentary table—and then articulates the (un)known in function of the Upper House by, first, sorting the known and unknown to cause emergence of the (un)known, and then engaging with those dimensions through a compositional project that invokes mysticism, absurdity, and play.

The stakes of nuclear semiotics are elucidated through E. Ann Kaplan’s reading of *Into Eternity* and the decisions of the Waste Isolation Pilot Project. There are two primary types of response to these issues: an archival response, and the “Ray Cat Solution.” The archival response does not fully instantiate the Althing Parliament and does not engage with the conditions of possibility and futurity presented by nuclear semiotics. On the other hand, the Ray Cat Solution offers a complex, creative response that eludes logical restraint and articulates the (un)knowability—and the un-archivability—of anthropocenic problems. Together, these two forms of engagement present a more complete accountability to the Althing Parliament. Following the reverse-

compositional analysis of the Ray Cat Solution as example of AC, this chapter will provide writing projects intended to engage students in acts of ontological gathering, exploration, and mourning. Further examples of extant AC include projects like Eden Portland, The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, Nonhuman Nonsense, and the sort of multimodal play modeled in video games such as *Death Stranding*. Accounting for these examples as well as the scholarly underpinnings of rhetorical futurity and circulation, classroom projects will include prompts such as designing a museum of immanent catastrophe; writing memorials for humanity, non-human species, or various ecosystems; composing ontobiographical journal entries; and “darkening” writing that is otherwise clear (*skotison*). In short, interrogation and extension of the Ray Cat Solution offers helpful insights for crafting a pedagogy of the Anthropocene for the pre-apocalyptic classroom.

Nuclear Semiotics as an Anthropocenic Issue

The Ray Cat Solution as Reaction to Climate Trauma

Government-produced nuclear waste materials are hyper-/quasi-/wicked objects that present, among other things, a significant rhetorical problem. But before explaining the rhetorical dimensions, I would begin with a horror story. This horror story takes place in 2001 in formerly Soviet Georgia, outside the village of Liya. In early December, three lumberjacks from the village were camping in the woods where they worked. It was cold and there was snow on the ground, which added to the strangeness of what occurred. The men found a pair of cylindrical objects, not much larger than cans of food, and not covered by snow. In fact, it seemed as if these cylinders had melted the snow surrounding

them, likely on account of the strange warmth they emitted. The woodsmen took the cylinders to their camp, no doubt valuing any heat source in the Georgian winter. Within hours the men were ill, experiencing dizziness and nausea. A week later they had red burns on their bodies. They were hospitalized and diagnosed with radiation poisoning (IAEA).

The cylinders the three woodsmen found in the woods contained strontium-90, once used to power radiothermal generators during the Soviet era and abandoned rather than disposed of safely. But what does safe disposal of a hyper-/quasi-/wicked object look like? The properties of this type of nuclear material that make it deadly will outlast the longest-lived human by centuries. The best, current method basically amounts to digging a very deep hole, putting our nuclear waste within the hole, and sealing it with a large concrete barrier, but such measures do not guarantee the safety of future generations. Indeed, when accounting for the temporal scale of something like nuclear waste, problems begin to emerge not only on account of storage, but in communication.

Nuclear semiotics is a speculative field, a sort of pseudo-discipline dealing with argumentation specifically about nuclear waste and an audience that exists 10,000-100,000 years in the future. How, it asks, do we communicate the dangers of this hazardous material to people who do not yet exist, and whose communicative practices may be alien to us? A collective of scholars from vastly disparate disciplines including nuclear physics, anthropology, science fiction, and linguistics have weighed in on solutions. Among the most far-out was the proposal to genetically alter cats such that they would turn color in the presence of radioactivity. Humans in the future would ostensibly understand that their pets' transformation meant imminent danger. Other

proposals included aggressive architecture, archetypal symbols (such as skull and bones), and an atomic priesthood (people who would carry on folk traditions that proliferate knowledge of nuclear danger) (Piesing). Given the ingenuity and strangeness of these ideas, it is perhaps a bit disappointing that the chosen solution was building multiple complementary but independent systems. Basically, the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) constructed several archives containing similar information on the threats of nuclear materials, hoping to outlast the eons through redundancy.

Unfortunately, these archives probably would not have helped our poor Georgian woodsmen. In fact, the archival strategy is problematic for many reasons, not least of which is the question of whom has access to them and how exactly they are networked with the radioactive waste disposal sites. The archival response, in other words, was not a parliamentary one that fully accounted for and represented stakeholder voices. These archives risk becoming still, mute things, locked away and untouchable as the objects they describe. Much like the damage of global warming falls disproportionately on the shoulders of the global poor, withheld archival knowledge risks alienating the same populations from the sinister effects of our wicked creations. In that regard, the story of the three woodsmen might fit the subgenre of cosmic horror; the contrast of worlds colliding in their interaction with the radiation of strontium-90 seems so remote a possibility that it is almost alien. The profession of woodsman, ancient and necessary on a very basic human level, meets with the discarded effects of radiation technology, catalyzed by one of the most primitive human needs: to keep warm. Eugene Thacker's *Tentacles Longer than Night*, the final book in the *Horror of Philosophy* series, makes similar readings of genre conventions in horror as attempts to make sense of a vast,

uncaring cosmos. Such readings would undoubtedly be a cold comfort to the woodsmen, however, and we must still ask: what could have saved these men from that trauma?

Though it is not the place of AC to solve disparities in global wealth, those disparities need to be accounted for along with the slow violence precipitated by economic inequality. Education and resources cannot be replaced with archives, especially archives to which future woodsmen do not have access. I cannot help returning to those color-changing cats and wonder at the methodology behind such a proposal. Theraycatsolution.com summarizes the project simply:

1. Engineer cats that change color in response to radiation.
2. Create the culture/legend/history that if your cat changes color, you should move some place else.

While the minor task of designing color-changing cats can be left to the science departments, the creation of culture/legend/history sounds like a job for the humanities, and maybe even the composition classroom. I offer that these three terms—culture, legend, history—may be better reconceptualized as *folklore*, and offer further that the deliberate creation of folklore would be a rhetorical act requiring sensitivity to futurity. Folklore persists. It morphs and adapts to social circumstances and is continually becoming as it is retold and recontextualized. To understand what this folklore might look like, it behooves a student of the Anthropocene to acknowledge some of the work done on existing fiction and the ways in which those metaphors represent or fail to represent the stakes and conditions of anthropogenic crises.

In *Climate Trauma*, E. Ann Kaplan coins the term “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome” (PreTSS), which she describes as a debilitating anticipation of a traumatic

event. She holds that this syndrome is often expressed through cinema, and particularly films pertaining to the end of the world or a cataclysmic event which poses an existential threat. Central to her exploration are temporality and the idea of being an “ethical witness.” On temporality, Kaplan writes:

[it] is often lacking in trauma studies. Awareness of a traumatic past is figured in many of the films in the genre, as this past is understood to have shaped the future (i.e., the narrative present), a fictional future that we should avoid. But we also need to consider how these imaginaries of the future in turn shape constructions of the present and the past. If always implicit, temporality needs to be made explicit so we can move beyond focusing only on the memory of past wounds.

(12)

She interrogates the temporality of trauma through close readings of such films as *Take Shelter*, *The Road*, *Children of Men*, *Blindness*, *The Book of Eli*, *Soylent Green*, and others. These works of fiction, she argues, offer perspective on pretrauma in terms of cultural anxiety, political meaning, gender and race, and ethical engagement of memory.

Kaplan offers the concept of the ethical witness as an imperative of the ethical artist, who, in the case of these apocalyptic films, must “offer a position of being witness *avant la lettre* to the challenges that face humans worldwide in regard to disastrous human impact on the planet and the collapse of infrastructure” (24). The specific ethics of this process are an ongoing, scholarly concern, but they seem to involve a metric of verisimilitude as well as honesty concerning the place of man in the traumatized Anthropocene. Ultimately, Kaplan abandons the fictional instances of climate trauma cinema in her search for the ethical witness, claiming that “films like [these] may give us

pause, certainly, but they do not per se inspire us to take the position of responsibility and ethics that witnessing in its true sense involves. The fictions may well prepare viewers for ethical responsibility, but the genre as such cannot provide that position” (119).

Ultimately, these fictions (with a few exceptions) end on notes of hope for a “utopian realization,” in which survivors might endure, rebuild, repopulate, etc., diminishing their value as predictive sites of pretrauma. They offer a charlatan’s salve. This is not the case, however, with certain works of cinematographic non-fiction. Michael Madsen’s documentary, *Into Eternity*, critiques the WIPP’s imperative that we “remember to forget” the doom (radioactive waste) we have created so that our children will avoid the sites where we have stored them.

Into Eternity forcefully moves its audience into the role of the ethical witness by playing with temporality and 2nd person narration. The narrator, Madsen himself, addresses the audience as if they were the people of a distant future, asking them questions about the conditions of their time. This interrogation is juxtaposed against scenes of nuclear industry in the present, and testimony about the insecurity of current containment measures. The effect is simultaneous recognition of unknowability and danger; the future is something we can only question, but the science of radioactivity assures us it will be an ongoing threat to life for generations (100,000 years, by the documentary’s estimate). Kaplan explains that “the main point here is how the address directly to this interpellated viewer (that is, the spectator watching the film) pushes him or her to take responsibility for this waste as a kind of pretraumatic virtual being” (122). In other words, the direct, 2nd person narration creates the conditions for a feeling of

accountability by connecting the present audience to the audience of the future. Madsen is critiquing the archival response by hypothesizing the consequences of its failure.

Counter to the discussion of how to communicate with an audience thousands of years in the future, some believe that the best way to prevent intrusion upon nuclear storage facilities is to forget them. If they are buried deep enough, and the terrain around them is allowed to return to nature, perhaps they will never be found, and no one will seek them out. It is probably fortunate that laws require otherwise, at least in Finland where the Onkalo waste repository is erected; marking nuclear-waste disposal sites as such is legally necessary. The argument, however, is a serious one; perhaps any symbolicity will only have an attractive effect upon future peoples, like a mummy's tomb or the traps guarding the holy grail in *The Last Crusade*. What Madsen is creating and what Kaplan is reading in this documentary is a critique founded in *futurity*: the tendency of rhetorical dissonance between the present author of rhetoric and the audience interacting with the message at a distant temporal point.

Futurity in Rhetoric

In *Resounding the Rhetorical*, Byron Hawk analyzes complex material systems, particularly sound, as emergent objects of study. Where Timothy Morton understands such systems as hyperobjects, Hawk understands them as quasi-objects. The terms are not analogues but share features to the extent that they both might be described as a “loosely or tightly knit network stitched together through a series of movements and actions. A function of circulation and ecological coproduction” (Hawk 16). Both are temporally and spatially dispersed in such a way that problematizes human perception of them.

Composition is such an object. Central to the concept of the quasi-object is futurity as part of an emergent nature, and specifically a futurity defined by potentiality as instantiated in the present. Hawk writes, “[if] writers can’t trace the future, even to the small extent that they can the past and present, then what is left? Resounding. Setting off the potential for future resonance with eventual audiences and ecologies” (235).

Understanding our duty in composition as one of resounding invites us to understand our place within the Anthropocene as such. This futurity of composition will be essential to our discipline’s continued coalescence around the subject of the Anthropocene and its crises, to include radioactivity. The materiality of radioactive waste does not reveal itself completely, but it asks for certain conditions, it continually emerges in ways that reaffirm the enmeshedness of rhetoric *with* the Anthropocene. Through it, the Anthropocene becomes and is rhetorical, by which I mean answerable to the agency of those wielding rhetoric. Material rhetorical analyses should be interrogated for their value in dealing with the hyper-/quasi-/wicked problems of the Anthropocene, even those methodologies that do not do so directly.

Laurie Gries claims that rhetorical analyses “typically attend to the ways a rhetorical text accomplished its intended goals, thus perpetuating the notion that the rhetor’s goals are the only measurable effect legitimate for rhetorical study” (*Still Life* 47). This temporal closedness is increasingly problematic in consideration of objects with greater morphology and temporal range (such as climate change, nuclear isotopes, etc.). For Gries, the answer to temporal issues is reconfiguration of the search for rhetorical meaning, from *meaning apriorism* to *meaning consequentialism* (48). Meaning apriorism is characterized by a retrogressivity, by which “movement of meaning is a movement

backwards in time” (Porter qtd. in Gries 48). It is analysis rooted in forensic rhetoric. Meaning consequentialism, on the other hand, ascertains meaning “by tracing the often inconsistent and unpredictable consequences that propagate after an image emerges as a particular material version” (49). This is a rhetorical investigative methodology that embraces divergence, disclosure, and unpredictability in complex systems. In other words, it engages with the unknowable. What makes such a concept useful to rhetorical investigations in the age of hyper-/quasi-/wicked is its rejection of a definitive future boundary. Instead, consequences in the realm of meaning consequentialism extend towards an “event horizon of meaning” (Porter qtd. in Gries 51). Such a horizon is by nature never reached; instead, the rhetorician must accept the indeterminacy of future rhetorical events and meaning-making. The unknowability is necessarily embraced in every present moment of rhetorical enaction and analysis.

Meaning consequentialism is situated in ecologies of vital material and enmeshed actants. This ecological understanding has informed many other projects in the field and is especially important to materialist understandings of networked systems. For Gries’s study of visual rhetorical artifacts, “it is only via the divergent *intra-actions* between human and nonhuman entities in an unfolding network of assemblages . . . that an image emerges as a generative, distributed, material force in the world” (58). She outlines six principles necessary for the “thought style” that allows rhetoricians to analyze the dynamism and vitality of visual rhetoric. They are *becoming*, *transformation*, *consequentiality*, *vitality*, *agency*, and *virality* (86-87). These principles are also useful, if not necessary, to grappling with the crises of the Anthropocene, especially to the extent that they produce futurity. Under the features of consequentiality, Gries writes, “[t]urning

to futurity, a new materialist rhetorical approach focuses most attention on the consequences that emerge once matter is initially produced, has been perceived as relatively stable, and enters into circulation” (86). Coupled with the principle of becoming, which recognizes the unknown, possible futures of affective objects, such mindfulness will orient rhetorical habits to ongoing receptivity while producing knowledge of exigent object relations. Futurity becomes, then, an important characteristic of AC, in that it disarms critique (in a way that meaning apriorism does not; indeed, meaning apriorism is contiguous with critique), and engages, meaningfully, with scalar challenges of fundamentally unknowable object dimensions. However, this futurity is by no means an easy principle to cultivate. In some sense, futurity requires pedagogues to let go of curricular goals and embrace openness not just in study, but also in compositional practice.

Circulation Outside the Archives

In nuclear semiotics, the impetus of meaning consequentialism is an issue of circulation. Gries, connecting the dots for us, writes, “[f]uturity, in terms of circulation studies, refers to the spatiotemporal life that a text or image experiences after it has been initially produced and delivered” (Gries qtd. in Dobrin, *Circulation* 323). The Onkalo storage facility and all its like around the globe will be circulated through various actant networks, some predictable and some not. As the knowledge and non-logical effects of nuclear storage proliferate, they will mutate, accruing and losing different symbolical meaning. Such circulation, according to Sidney I. Dobrin, should perhaps be studied in the same way that rhetoric studies “uber-structures” like invention, memory and delivery,

“because circulation is fundamentally different from these other structures yet imbricated in their function as well” (316). Accounting for the circulation of an object must account for the medium as well as the message itself, and it should not do so separately. Indeed, the materiality of nuclear radiation and its messaging is intrinsic to and coproductive with the issue it poses. While cylindrical radioactive objects are closer to a human scale, radiation is more explicitly a quasi-object that continually reassembles, contaminates, and inflames. The properties of radioactive matter are such that other technologies function differently in its presence. More to the point of the issue, the temporal property of radiation is consistent on scales that dwarf most other actants. This is the reason for the subterranean disposal facilities: billion-year-old sediment rock is one of the only human-accessible objects that “outlives” radiation. Ultimately, the archival solution seeks to stop the circulation of nuclear waste material, because of the consistency (relative non-circulation) of its dangers.

Herein, though, lies the challenge of nuclear semiotics; the knowledge we create to keep the radiation contained *will* circulate. That circulation is impossible to account for. Dobrin writes, “[d]espite the disciplinary desire for a rhetoric of circulation to address the movement of writing (in all of its meaning), circulation vastly over-simplifies the complexities of writing flow, no matter how many capillaries, follicles, or stratum we attribute to the finest edges of the system” (317). In the reality of the system, agency to direct or even account for circulation of writing becomes impossible. Dobrin believes that circulation studies still serve important cartographic purposes, specifically through Foucauldian archaeological studies of discourse and power (318). Drawing from Graban and Sullivan, Dobrin claims that we need to account for the things that are *between*

commonly accepted nodes in archival networks. In other words, what is there, in the archive, that is not accounted for. Moreover, common circulation studies (as archival study) are always necessary exclusive. Not only are there *things* unaccounted for, but as soon as archival mapping begins to happen, exclusion of entire populations begins to happen. For example, Dobrin tells his students that understanding our culture as one dominated by visual rhetoric immediately denies access to the visually impaired (321). What will the archives created around nuclear waste disposal facilities exclude? Who will they exclude? Circulation is always uneven, perhaps even unfair or unjust, in its distribution. The Althing Parliament, as conceived through AC, does this work of accounting for the excluded through its Upper House function of sorting, but the ways in which this exclusion happens—especially in the digital age—are not often obvious, and every act inclusion co-produces a differing exclusion.

Andrei Guriianu and Natalia Andrievskikh use “digital erasure” to explain the ways digital archives destroy knowledge, and from this the archival response of the WIPP becomes more readily apparent. The destruction of knowledge extends to language; as technological innovation happens, objects become obsolete and exit our lives, sometimes taking with them the language used in their description. They argue that “[a]s the objects themselves disappear, eventually so will the language we’ve developed to explain our relationship to the material world” (198). When put into conversation with Dobrin’s ideas about the unevenness of circulation, it becomes apparent that the erasure will, itself, be uneven. Digital archives embed inequalities and power dynamics by deciding *what* can be preserved. Guriianu and Andrievskikh write, “digital memory’s promise of perfection and perpetuity is by design an illusion, a promise of control that paradoxically requires

that we surrender control to something even less perceptible than a cloud of smoke” (216). We can catalogue memories, but we risk doing so at the exclusion of the materiality of those memories, while simultaneously indulging a fantasy of digital immortality. The illusory nature of that fantasy becomes apparent when you consider 100,000 years; it is absurd to believe that any of the technologies we have today will be in circulation then (except maybe shovels, to unearth unknown tombs of our forgotten civilization).

Onkalo and radioactive waste facilities function to remove sources of harmful radiation from our lives, and because the language to describe this waste and its lethal effects may be lost with those sources, the consequences of erasure are extraordinarily dangerous. In some mythology and folklore, the name of an evil or unclean force is required to hold power over it (Rumpelstiltskin springs to mind). WIPP constructed multiple archives to preserve that language, to keep it simultaneously static and available for circulation. But as we have seen, archives are problematic. As they catalogue, they reduce information to specific media, and a single medium is dangerous for the same reasons as monoculture farming; a singularly effective threat can destroy everything. The redundancy of multiple archives may be enough, but 100,000 years is a longer amount of time than anything made by humans has ever lasted (the earliest cave painting has been dated around 73,000 years old). Guruianu and Andrievskikh offer the “Museum of Immanent Catastrophe” as counter to the State archives that reinforce hegemony and diminish individual agency. This museum is any material collection curated and valued by an individual. They argue that the wear and tear that accrues on the physical objects that we cultivate around us—our collections and assembled possessions, imbued with

nostalgia—keep us tethered to the material present. When we are lost in the “uncertainty posed by digital spaces and the sense of imminent, daily catastrophe,” these personally curated assemblies of objects are “where we find refuge because they are directly experienceable” (233). What is the resilience of such individuated archives, considered together? They necessarily embody about the farthest thing from a monocultural archive that might be assembled (unassembled though they may be). How could this resilience through diversity be brought to the question of nuclear semiotics? Could it be improved, even, from the worn trinkets of the Museum of Immanent Catastrophe and (re)assembled into a quasi-object on par with radiation?

Felines, Folklore, and the Future

Again, I return to those color-changing cats, perhaps because my own cat is such a constant antagonist to my writing process. I think about how happy I would be if my students came up with such a proposal to so complicated an issue as the circulation of a hyper-/quasi-/wicked object. The charisma of the Ray Cat Solution comes in part from its playfulness in the face of severity. It puts aside the boundaries of logic and probability, for a moment, and looks outside the box (this banal trope is useful, as boxes are so integral a shape to physical archives). If we could imagine the circumstances that lead to this plan—forensically assume the starting point and logic of the Ray Cat Solution—perhaps we could create the conditions for a composition classroom that produces novel responses to the crises of the Anthropocene. Then, when we look at the Ray Cat Solution itself, we can begin to ask questions about the sort of folklore that would accompany the scientific endeavor of making cats glow. I will consider both the material-affective and

the discursive-folkloric reasoning that informs the Ray Cat Solution to articulate its value to AC and the pre-apocalyptic classroom.

It is not an easy thing to make writing appealing in the face of climatological and temporally expansive threats like climate change, nuclear waste, and microplastic ubiquity. Pedagogical strategies have varied. Randall Amster, for instance, aims to inspire “hope amidst looming cataclysm” with civic engagement and sustainability practices (“Teaching” 268). Conversely, in “Pedagogy of the Apocalypse,” Krista Karyn Hiser uses fiction to “move away from the frightening impression that the world is really ending” (156). Both Amster and Hiser seek to subvert climate fatalism and reengage students without the triteness of 90’s era sustainability ideas. More recently, scholars working in new materialism are approaching the problem with methodologies embracing Indigenous ways of dwelling and networked ontologies. Jennifer Clary-Lemon, Yavanna M. Brownlee and others have looked for pedagogical or otherwise scholarly value in the philosophy and practices of Indigenous American peoples (Clary-Lemon, “Gifts”; Brownlee; Riley-Mukavetz). All of them look for relational practices that subvert modern divisions of nature/culture, pushing understanding, instead, towards more bodily, enmeshed conceptions of relationality that entangle the material-affective and discursive-folkloric.

The material-affective is the domain and imperative of the Althing Parliament’s Lower House, but Clary-Lemon’s work with Canadian arborists and her reading of the material, rhetorical dimensions at play in those actant networks bear some revisiting to unpack the rhetorical characteristic of the Ray Cat Solution. In *Planting the Anthropocene*, Clary-Lemon studies the way different bodies and actants come together,

relate and resonate in the practice of tree-planting in the Canadian wilderness. She argues for a new materialist environmental rhetoric, which “blends elements of ambient rhetoric, new materialism and material ecocriticism, and critical affect studies and that is resonant with postcolonial Indigenous research paradigms that value a relational ontology” (59). This blending creates the critical, relational, materialist rhetoric that she ultimately calls “body thinking” (76, 78). Using her modeling of such a rhetoric to understand the Ray Cat Solution is useful towards conceptualizing the kind of thinking we would want to see in an AC project. The avoidance of radiation because of cat color-change is a complex act arising from the relations between cat-body, human-body, radiation and folklore. Together, the human-body (in which resides knowledge of the folklore, expressed affectively through fear, dread, or just pragmatism) and cat-body (in the genes of which resides the coding for color-change as response to radiation) form an actant with increased survival probability. Such a relationship does not “detour through logos,” but rather acts on an affective level (65). Herein lies the brilliance of it. Archives are temples of logos; human-cat relations are enmeshed and affective. The Ray Cat Solution gambles upon that inter-species affective relationship outlasting the logos of the archive.

The Ray Cat Solution also uses the resilience of the discursive aspects of folklore, which enacts Upper House relations. Again, Indigenous knowledge and traditions have much to offer, as relational practices between humans and nonhumans are often construed in creation myths and identity narratives (see Riley-Mukavetz; Kimmerer; King; Tallbear; Whyte). Kim Tallbear claims that understanding “interspecies communities” seeks to “dismantle hierarchies in the relationships of ‘westerners’ with their non-human others” (np). A new folkloric tradition of the ray cats might seek to

convey wisdom or craftiness as embodied through their color-changing, or associate the “health” of the environment with the color of the cat’s fur. The cats are not only tools, nor are they just subservient pets, but cohabitants through which humans more fully understand the hazards of their surroundings or connect with the ancient wisdom of avoiding radioactive waste materials. Anthropocenic problems should be considered from viewpoints embracing non-traditional discourses. Indigenous ways of knowing and new materialism can encourage outside-the-box thinking that allows students access to creative engagement. Problems like nuclear semiotics, though quite real and quite deadly, might be more constructively considered from a place of low-stakes play rather than severity, in order to facilitate creative, material and discursive projects that are entangled in and enacted through the Ray Cat Solution as a model for affective connections and folklore as a model for discursive responses.

Anthropocene Composition in the Public Sphere

Antinatalist Movements, Kinship, and Absurdity

I have argued that bodies in the Anthropocene cannot help but compose anthropocentrically—the damages of the epoch and the weirded *oikos* that results thereby express themselves in the bodies of compositionists—but to do so is a matter of scale rather than a binary. The form of composition, and the ways in which a message is composed, can be more or less resonant with the material conditions that surround and produce it, and they can resound more or less effectively with the bodies in the future that encounter it, even as these rhetorical processes remain uncertain. There are certain movements, projects and messages, however, that stand out in their resonance with

anthropocenic conditions, and therefore provide additional modeling for AC. These include, but are not limited to, antinatalism, “Nonhuman Nonsense,” mourning anthropogenic loss, gaming. These sources are necessarily informed by the problems of the epoch—unknowability, scalar derangement, trauma—and respond with cultivation, apposition, and playfulness. Antinatalism is a philosophy holding that procreation is morally impermissible and is a source of anthropocenic resonance, both in its philosophical underpinnings and in the movements that package its messaging. It engages with the moral dimensions of creating life on a damaged planet, pursues lines of reasoning about non-human kinship, and finds absurdity in fundamental assumptions of human nature. David Benatar’s modern interpretations of antinatalism have inspired and informed popular antinatalist movements, both serious and absurd, while Donna Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble* problematizes traditional human reproduction and visualizes an alternative way to be a progenitive terrestrial. Together with Elizabeth Povinelli and her concept of “geontopower,” Haraway’s work brings the vitalism of the Deleuzian assemblage to the anthropocenic response, complicating understandings of relationality and enmeshedness. Without retracing the moves, defensive strategies, and critical readings of pro-natalist thought in Benatar’s project, it is fair to say that the fundamental idea of antinatalism has a history grounded in religion, philosophy, biosophy, and ethics, and that the idea has become a movement with renewed popularity in light of anthropocenic threats (Tuhus-Dubrow). Multiple groups have established agendas of disseminating antinatalist arguments, among them the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and the neo-Dadaist Church of Euthanasia.

Though Benatar is dry, straight-forward and deadly serious in his writing on the harm of coming into existence, a good deal of the rhetoric coming from antinatalist organizations indulges absurdity in its messaging. Artist and director Nina Paley produced a short film titled “Thank You For Not Breeding,” released in 2014, that showcases and compares VHEMT and the Church of Euthanasia. The film is punctuated with cartoons illustrating the ecological impacts of unchecked human reproduction. Storks drop bundles onto virgin wilderness and the bundles explode like mortar rounds, wiping away the green and leaving rows of SUVs or suburban spreads in its place. The camera zooms out until the audience sees the earth from space. The earth explodes and in its place is a smiling, human baby’s face. Anthropomorphized cancer cells defend their unchecked growth in mimicry of natalist, exceptionalist rhetoric. The film interviews academics such as A. Kent MacDougall and Warren Herd who compare the spread of cities and suburbs to the metastasizing of a malignant tumor. Herd argues that humans have the following characteristics in common with cancer: rapid uncontrolled growth, metastasis, destruction of adjacent tissue, and de-differentiation. Tellingly, academics, medical professionals and activists alike frequently find sympathy for the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, but are dismissive in the same breath. Herd calls it a “wonderful, wacky idea.” Others call it “fun,” “absurd,” or otherwise unworthy of serious consideration. Les Knight, the movie’s narrator, responds, “we are serious, we are *vehement*, in fact.” Knight disseminates his ideas from behind a table at information fairs and online. For VHEMT, the delivery is familiar and perhaps even Rogerian in argumentation.

In contrast, the Church of Euthanasia embraces absurdity. Where VHEMT's slogan is innocuous and even friendly ("may we live long and die out"), the Church of Euthanasia commands, "thou shalt not procreate," and claims as its four pillars: suicide, abortion, cannibalism, sodomy (np). They organize demonstrations intended to shock and disgust, destroying jars of collected semen and waving banners that read "eat a queer fetus for Jesus." The film shows a member, dressed as Satan, encouraging people to eat more red meat and drive their cars as much as possible. Their spokesperson, Chris Korda, is well aware of the movement's rhetorical boundaries. Korda claims victory in empowerment, "not in a big way, not in the way that the Civil Rights Movement meant it . . . we have empowered people in some small, absurdist way," that gets a reaction, albeit usually anger. Towards the end of the film, a list of extinct animals begins to appear on a black screen; the names continue to populate over short clips of urban life, airports, shopping centers, and power structures. Both VHEMT and the Church of Euthanasia include in their argumentation an indictment of humanity's role in the ongoing great extinction. What, they ask, is one more?

Antinatalism as a philosophy, and the grassroots movements that espouse that philosophy through various rhetorical strategies, has connections to and parallels with various academic ecological projects. In *Staying With the Trouble*, for instance, Donna Haraway implores us to "make kin, not babies" (102). Kin, for Haraway, are not necessarily ancestral or genetic relatives, but assemblages. She explains that kin making "is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans . . . all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time) . . . it matters how kin generate kin" (103).

Haraway is being playful when she says that it “matters” how kin are generated (and perhaps with “generate” as well). Matter is what allows these kin to be made or “generated” in Haraway’s framework; that we critters or terrestrials are all conglomerates of flesh is important (103), though literal flesh may be in one sense too limiting a requisite for the sort of inclusion we are looking for, and by another sense too broad. Babies are, after all, fleshy things, and trees are not. However, her speculative fiction chapter that describes the “children of compost” clarifies what this kin-making might entail. The children of compost are a community that inhabits land without recourse to settler-colonial narratives, instead laboring to understand land, place, and being in its polyvalent layers of life and death. The children themselves are human, non-human, and genetically hybridized organisms, forming non-traditional bonds of kinship and responsibility. Haraway explains, “the decision to bring a new human infant into being is strongly structured to be a collective one for the emerging communities. Further, no one can be coerced to bear a child or punished for birthing one outside community auspices” (139). So Haraway’s project is not anti-natalist per se, but it does imagine a culture so radically different from our own that the act of making children is generatively alien to our understanding. Retrospectively (for this was written with a different future in mind than the one we have almost certainly already subscribed to) we might call it absurd.

Haraway’s use of Deleuzian assemblages in this fantasy is useful to unpacking and extending ideas of kinship in ways that crowd out natalist imperatives. Deleuze and Guattari’s vitalism extends agency to machines, creating questions of whether biopower, in turn, is in the domain of the non-human. Elizabeth Povinelli traces a change from biopower to geontopower, necessitated by posthuman critique of the biological,

geological, and meteorological as actants in a “postclimate change” political venue (428). For Povinelli, the extension of life’s qualities to Deleuzian machines, that have, until relatively recently, been considered inert in theoretical frameworks, does important work in unseating atavistic humanism and also forces us to think critically about what we want geontopower to look like in the *polis*. She writes, “If critical theories of the *logos* and the *demos* and the *phonos* and the event are to have any sway over the coming debates about geontology, then their political topologies must allow existents that are not biologically and anthropologically legible to disrupt the *logos* of *demos* rather than simply enter into it” (440). In other words, we must accept geontopower as a disruptive force, otherwise the extension of vitality—of kinship, even—to the nonhuman and the machine may be a form of colonization, whereby the governing narratives of human centrality and extractivism are kept intact. Progenitive natalism is among those governing narratives. Povinelli wisely ends her article by pointing to the confirmational dimensions of geontopower’s disruption: such disruption assures our own ability to “become, actualize, signify” (441). Therefore, natalism—inasmuch as it is connected to archaic, anthropocentric notions of relationality and ancestry—is not necessary for kin generation, and may be antithetical to ecological relationality. Povinelli’s geontopower and Haraway’s reconceptualization of kinship as assembly are connected by their use of Deleuzian vitalism, which can be instrumental in simultaneously expanding the Althing Parliament and diminishing perceived needs for human procreation.

In the pre-apocalyptic classroom as in Haraway’s children of compost, antinatalism cannot be a critique of natalist impulses and progenitive capitalism. It does, however, enter the Althing Parliament as both an alternative to these longstanding

dogmas (both of them co-productive with climate regimes) and as an opportunity to engage with unknowability. The Church of Euthanasia, especially, demonstrates compositionist engagement with negation rather than production. The impulse to procreate and “be fruitful” is ingrained in Western systems of thought through religious metaphor and economic impulse. The Church answers the question of what a counter-dogma would look like and speak as. The children of compost, too, offers alternatives, not through dogma but through speculative, fictitious imagining of an ecological commune. It is, in a different way, absurd in its composition. In AC, that absurdity which grounds so much dismissal of these arguments is not argued against, but rather embraced, internalized, and rhetorically weaponized into multimodal, public-facing arguments.

Nonhuman Nonsense

Leo Fidjeland and Linnea Vaglund’s interdisciplinary art collaborative, “Nonhuman Nonsense,” models a serio-ludic rhetoric with a series of both abstract campaigns and material interventions. They engage with the un-solvability of anthropocenic crises by offering nonsensical solutions that often decentralize human experience or call upon scientific invention in ways that articulate its lameness. “Nonhuman Nonsense,” aims to “transmute our relationship to the non-human, by embracing the contradictory and the paradoxical” (np). Projects under this banner include the “Pink Chicken Project,” “Planetary Personhood,” “Tale of a Tree Human,” “Mosquito Translator,” “Biosynthetic Possessions,” “Audible Flora,” “Human Beeings,” “The Anti-Anthropocentric Vending Machine,” “Becoming Stone,” and “Biosynthetic Futures.” These projects are multimodal, combining physical props, written exposition and

presentations with theoretical underpinnings from Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Anna Tsing, Katherine Yusoff and others. Their “Pink Chicken Project,” for example, has in common with the Ray Cat Solution an imperative to genetically modify the appearance of animals for the sake of human perpetuity. As the title suggests, the project seeks to turn domestic chickens pink. The project page explains: “Being the world’s most common bird, the bones of the 60 billion chickens that are killed every year leave a distinct trace in the rock strata (the earth’s crust), a marker for the new geological age – the Anthropocene.” With genetic alterations, the Pink Chicken Project hopes to create a color change (to pink) in *Gallus gallus Domesticus* that will persevere through deep time in fossil records, essentially marking the epoch as a pink sediment in geologic strata. They choose pink because it “is a symbolic color, an opposition to the current global power dynamics, that enable and aggravate the anthropocentric violence forced upon the non-human world.” They hope that the project carries a “coded message” for the extension of social justice to non-humans, including those animals we treat as abusable food sources.

The Pink Chicken Project represents engagement with the scalar complexity of the epoch in some of the same ways that the Ray Cat Solution does. It seeks answers to the issue of Deep-time circulation by communicating through our non-human relations. Where the Ray Cat Solution takes advantage of a presumably ecological relationship between humans and domestic cats, the Pink Chicken Project utilizes the exploitation of the domestic chicken to quite literally highlight an epoch of anthropocentrism and violence. *Nonhuman Nonsense* understands this highlighting as a re-occupation of the

rock strata, in that it seeks to turn the apparatus of anthropocentrism (CRISPR, mass agriculture) into a source of accountability.

Some of the other projects, for instance the “Anti-Anthropocentric Vending Machine,” are less straightforward in orientation. The project description is elusive and disarming:

A vending machine (allegedly) sells “cures for anthropocentrism”. A strangely familiar entity in an uncivilized context. To obtain the cure you must sacrifice the shiny capsule you just received, breaking it open to reveal a stone that you (allegedly) can eat. The stone is accompanied by a short message, claiming that when you eat this stone, you will (allegedly) never look at stones the same way again. Claiming that stones are not dead, and that you should think about what they want. Thinking about the world differently changes the world. Eating the stone, you become the stone - existence/consciousness is not something exceptionally human. (np)

Pictures show the blue vending machine standing in different, undeveloped settings, among rocks and trees. The machine vends crystalline spheres, which open to reveal small rocks, apparently for ingestion. Eating the stone, according to the project description, is supposed to open up relational pathways *with* stone. This project appears to operate in tandem with several others under a “Turn to Stone” umbrella project. Morton’s work on “becoming rocked” is foundational (as it is in Laurie Gries’s “New Materialist Ontobiography”), allowing the project designers to posit an alternative to Heideggerian conceptions of an anthropocentric “worlding” restricted to humans, and

argue instead for a new metaphysics that recognizes the “worlding” capacity in nonhumans to include not only the animal and plant, but the mineral.

Nonhuman Nonsense embraces mysticism and absurdity in its operations, specifically in their rejection of knowability and engagement with the borders of what anthropocentrism can understand. It recognizes horizons of knowability in current discourse—often from an interrogation of internalized anthropocentrism—and invites the audience to step to those thresholds and even venture just beyond, where (un)knowability emerges. Like the Ray Cat Solution, “Nonhuman Nonsense” is a rich, speculative engagement with the conditions of the Anthropocene and the issues that it presents to composing in a damaged ecology. However, the steps outside of the anthropocentric pale are always speculative. That speculative quality is upheld by the absurdity of the “solutions.” We will not, of course, alter the genetic sequencing of domestic chickens with the aim of coloring rock strata, nor will we eat stones to become stone. AC, however, indulges and even encourages the absurdity of these non-solutions; the systemic and unknowable nature of the crises at hand—shot through our foundational metaphysics as they are—present as unsolvable, and therefore there is no onus of practicality.

Vigilant Mourning in Monuments to (Non)humans

Unfortunately, engagement with the Anthropocene also means facing death and loss, and absurdity is not always an appropriate framework for processing these realities. Reports estimate that dozens of species go extinct every day, with the possibility that between 30 and 50 percent of all extant terrestrial species may be extinct by 2050 (Ferguson). This loss of biodiversity is coproductive with the solastolia resultant from

an otherwise weirded *oikos*, one result of which is an emotional burden on those who witness and live within this ecology. I turn to Joshua Trey Barnett's vigilant mourning and Tim Jensen's concept of guilty grief to put these phenomena in a theoretical framework, and then to public-facing projects such as Chris Jordan's *Albatross* and the Eden Portland project to model rhetorical responses. Mourning is read by some scholars as a critical rhetorical response to the damages of the Anthropocene. Scholarship in this vein focuses on the affective dimensions of being in a violent epoch characterized by complex anthropogenic crises, grappling with loss, death, and extinction.

In Ben Anderson's "Becoming and Being Hopeful," for example, affect is a process of alteration *between* bodies (736), as opposed to emotion, which is "artful types of corporeal intelligence-in-action enacted from within a subtle choreography of rhetorical—responsive joint action" (Katz qtd. in Anderson 737). Within this framework, some scholars have investigated and described the affective and emotional dimensions of anthropogenic events like species loss and remembrance. For instance, Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman's *Mourning nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, is a collection of scholarship on mourning environmental damage. Though there is an impetus at the heart of this project for the utilization of these affective explorations in a problem-solution framework, there is also the potential for cultivation of mournful emotional resonance for its own sake. In other words, emotions sharing an affective chain with climate crises need not serve a logistical end; they can be experienced and shared as ends in themselves, though they often perform argumentative work in broader contexts. Cunsolo and Landman hold that, in light of these crises, "we need a mechanism for moving into new terrains of thought that may provide avenues for thinking with and

through environmental challenges, for encouraging action, and for potentially cultivating new emotions in fruitful ways” (6). The essays they assemble under this project’s banner seek to extend human mourning to non-human losses, utilizing emotions to supplement activist and preservationist purposes, ultimately seeking an extension of discourse past the horizons of theory (20).

In “Guilt Grief and Ecological Mourning,” Tim Jensen argues that ecological grief, if not engaged with and accounted for, can lead to a debilitating melancholic state. Climate change, climate studies and climate activism can all put enormous emotional stress, to include the stresses of loss, bereavement and anger, on scholars and activists, and, more frequently, on the common human inhabitant of the Anthropocene. According to Jensen, our standards of what is grieve-able are unequipped to deal with these sorts of losses, and they need to be reconsidered to allow for the sort of grief and mourning that the Anthropocene inspires (128). Grief, in this project, is a psychobiological response, while mourning is a more prolonged, rhetorical engagement with that response (131). In order to create the conditions of possibility for the sort of mourning required in the Anthropocene, Jensen claims that we need new language. Words like Glenn Albrecht’s *solastolia*—“the pain or sickness caused by the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory”—are finding more occasion for use (133). But it is important that *solastolia* and the other similar emotions not be felt only individually; this sort of mourning needs to be communal. According to Jensen, we must “engage environmental guilt’s *collective* dimensions” (136). He offers that Chris Jordan’s 2017 documentary, *Albatross*, qualifies as such an engagement.

Albatross is about the seabirds of Midway Island, which is an abandoned military base and home to the largest population of the Laysan Albatross. Jordan spends months among the birds, documenting their habits and their environment. Through rhetorical film-making strategies, such as slowing down the frame rate to reduce the perceived speed of the birds, Jordan creates cinematographic opportunities for his human audience to connect with his bird subject. Over the course of an hour or so, we become familiar with the behavior, desires, and affectation of the Laysan Albatross as Jordan shoots from their perspective and on their terms. We witness courtship, partnership, and familial bonding in what might otherwise be a species too alien for such connections. This cultivation of relational pathways allows the audience to mourn the birds. In addition to documenting their life cycle and habits, Jordan also documents the plastic pollution that is killing so many of the species. Adult birds, while feeding a hatchling, take food from the ocean to regurgitate into the chick's mouth. The adults will pull prey fish and plastic pollution indiscriminately from the water, and so this plastic finds its way into the tracts of the infants. When it comes time for them to fly themselves, these young Albatross are either able to purge the plastic from their system, or they are not. Jordan does not look away; the camera lingers for agonizing minutes on images of Albatross weighed down by the loads of plastic trash in their bellies, unable to take flight, unable to feed themselves. The birds die of starvation, their wings still spread for the wind, though their remains stay land-bound. We watch Jordan perform careful autopsies on these corpses, pulling bottle caps, toy parts, and food wrappers from their entrails. He uses these parts to create little gravesites for the birds. We also watch Jordan cry, uncontrollably, over the body of one

of the birds. The scene is jarring, and the environmental damage is sickening²⁸. Jensen claims that the film “offers a provocative model for ecological mourning, wherein grief’s affective intensities are reframed as the register of ecological love” (140). This love stands in place of hope; *Albatross* is not an inspirational movie in any sense of motivating activism or systemic change. Instead, it offers an orientation towards emotional, ecological responsiveness. Jordan says it best, in the closing line of his film: “I didn’t know I could care for an Albatross.”

Mourning is often also a social action. Inasmuch as the losses of the epoch are communal, the act of mourning should, at times, be a communal activity. There is potentiality for this communal mourning in the Eden Portland Project. Self-described as an “underground cathedral,” Eden Portland is a colossal celebration of biodiversity and a monument to the vastness of species loss and extinction, located in a mine in the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. Carved into its walls are images that tell the story of terrestrial life as we know it, to include the places where it has ended or been cut short by human interference. It is a project better seen than described, but the website summarizes its aims as follows: “We have read about biodiversity loss. Words have not been enough. This story must be touched, smelt, experienced and shared. It must catalyze celebration, reflection, and action” (np). Again, we have geological strata put to use in communicating across strange spacetimes, the circulatory conditions of rock used to preserve important messages as they traverse eons. To memorialize in stone is to argue for importance, for an ongoing exigence and applicability of the transmission, as opposed

²⁸ Literally. There is an undeniable grotesquerie to the assemblies of decaying organic matter and plastic garbage that produces an affective response. For this audience member it was a churning stomach.

to one bound to a specific epoch. In this case, that transmission is about the value and frailty of life, the destructive capacity of man, and the grief of the losses caused thereby. Moreover, the Eden Portland Project stands as a site of gathering, a place where we may communally mourn those instantiations of life that are no longer with us. It is an open mausoleum of biodiversity through which we may pass and watch as species are constantly interred during the sixth great extinction.

The Eden Portland project is not the only monument to nonhuman loss. Novosibirsk, Russia, is home to a statue dedicated to laboratory animals—specifically mice—and their contributions to our collective medical knowledge. Hyde Park, London, is the site of the Animals in War Memorial, which commemorates the loss of animals in British military service. Below a primary inscription in the stone are the words, “They had no choice.” Sculptor Jim Sardonis created a sculpture titled *Reverence* that depicts two whale tails, such that it appears as if the whales are diving into the grass on which the structure sits. Sardonis explains, “I seek opportunities to use my work to emphasize the kinship and interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of the survival of each of them” (“Swimming” np). Joshua Trey Barnett argues that mourning what has been lost can be a rhetorical strategy of safeguarding against such losses recurring. This “vigilant mourning,” as he calls it, is a way of “remaining awake to those beings and ways of being on earth which have already been lost and of staying alert to those which today find themselves under threat of erasure” (14). The trick is moving mourning from a private act to a communal, public one. Barnett further characterizes vigilant mourning as persistent, repetitious, and ritualistic (23-30). Remembrance Day for Lost Species—

November 30th—fits these criteria; when ritual is combined with communal sites like memorials, then mourning becomes persistent and recurrent.

The Anthropocene is a time of grievous loss, of monocultural conquest, of erasure and damage. Rosemary Randall identifies parallel narratives of climate change: losses are often characterized as distant in the future or across the world, while solutions—usually techno-optimistic ones—are right around the corner (118). This is, of course, diametrically opposed to narratives of ecological attunement. It is a model that erases the emotional hardships and costs of biopower/necropower as instantiated in climate regimes. These losses and damages are past, present, and ongoing, while technological innovation is more commonly designed to further anti-ecological interests. The monuments and memorials described in this section stand in opposition to the parallel narratives of climate change. Especially when paired with ritual, communal acts of mourning, they bring loss and damage into public discourse.

Cultivation of grief and the facilitation of mourning are important tasks of AC, wherein the affective dimensions of relational connections are accounted for. Rosemary Randall argues that “solution narratives,” that push for small steps towards techno-optimistic, decarbonized futures are problematic, ultimately demotivating, and generally weak in terms of their rhetorical value. They tend to omit accounts of loss and focus on cheery, unlikely futures. Progression in the Anthropocene need not rely on these fantastical optimisms, but it does benefit from a truthfulness concerning the losses we have created and suffered. It is of even greater benefit when accounting for these losses and facilitating the process of mourning can happen in a communal forum. AC, as a methodology that eschews solution narratives and optimism broadly, embraces the

rhetical salience of cultivating grief and mourning anthropocenic losses both as recognition of ecological damage, and as forms of communal composition when mourning is a social action.

Gaming as Playing with Climate Change and Ecological Crises

Finally, to fully model play as a resonant strategy for anthropocenic engagement, I argue that certain corners of the video game industry have taken up the work of literally playing with the damages and uncertainties of the epoch. Some of them are problematic, promoting delusions that top-down problem-solving is applicable to climate crises. Others have framed climate change and ecological disasters as realities that must be adapted to and lived with. Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding*, in particular, is a complex and thoughtful composition that embraces unknowability, relationality, and trauma. Mark Hill authored an article for *Wired* titled "Indie City-Building Games Finally Reckon with Climate Change." He argues that past games, such as the *Civilization* series, have had climate change as a gameplay element, but as a game mechanic it is not represented in its onto-political complexity (np). Hill explains that, in the game, climate change can "be solved by researching and employing green technologies. In *Civ*, you don't have to work with political rivals, convince the skeptics in your electorate, or even cooperate with other countries to beat climate change. You just press the right buttons until the problem goes away" (np). There is no lobbying, no misinformed electorate, no bureaucratic red tape; essentially, the climate change mechanic indulges an authoritarian fantasy of linear, problem-solution reasoning. It becomes carpentry of the sort problematized by Andrew

Pilsch, inasmuch as it indulges a fantasy of control from above; an unsolvable problem is reduced to accommodate phenomenological apparatus at an anthropocentric scale.

However, there is minor progress being made in some constructions of climate crises in these digital, interactive genres. Hill contrasts the problematic representation of climate change in *Civ* to the more brutal representation of climate crisis in *Frostpunk*. In this game, the player builds cities on a planet that has been thrown into an ice age in the 19th century, and coal-burning, urban hellscapes are all that can keep humanity alive. To make decisions in this situation is to make sacrifices: kill political dissidents, indulge cannibalism, use child labor. Hill says the difference is that *Frostpunk* is a game about making decisions rather than solutions. He looks to other games for modality with the hard political choices of climate crises, but ultimately finds none. Civilization-building games ultimately tend to pander to illusions of unlimited growth and resources, even when they have a background story of damage and desperation.

Climate politics are edging into games but are not yet at the center of any game's experience. Hill reports that when *Battlefield 2042*, a game that takes place in a post-climate change apocalypse of human displacement and warfare, revealed their context, the development studio was quick to deny any political messaging. The climate apocalypse, it turns out, is just a fun background for a video game, but major studios are still shy to engage with politics that might upset their customer base. There is not yet, according to Hill's article, a game with mechanics that reflect climate change politics in any way we might call realistic or ethical. Hill seems to understand the issues of scale that accompany climate crises, and the challenges of accessing those scales through a modality like video games. Ultimately, he writes, "[w]e can't solve climate change in

reality as easily as we can solve it in *Civ*, but we can at least remember that it's real people who will be affected by our decisions" (np). If a game is to represent climate change, then, it needs to treat humans as other than standing reserve, it needs to foster an ecological relationship with the environment, and it needs to be responsible in how it scales the issue to levels of player usability.

Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* is a video game that takes place in a future that has suffered an ecological cataclysm unlike any that we actually face in the Anthropocene. Due to sudden revelation of an afterlife and of a spatio-temporal *place* beyond the world we know—a place called “the beach”—the human population has been repeatedly decimated until it represents a minute fraction of its peak. The cataclysmic event that caused so much death is known as the death stranding, and it is largely a mystery even to the characters in the game trying to piece together its nature. What remains in North America are disjointed cities, isolated by vast expanses of wilderness. The player of *Death Stranding* inhabits the avatar of Sam Porter Bridges (voiced and modeled by Norman Reedus): an aphephosmphobe who makes his post-apocalyptic living by delivering packages between the cities, outposts, and hermits of the re-wilded North American landscape. Among the greater objectives of the game, and a theme that it spends a great deal of time interrogating, is reconnection. As you push further west, Sam works to bring new cities and people into a network of information sharing and support. *Death Stranding* calls it the “chiral network,” because it employs as technology a substance that began to leak into our dimension from the beach. It is, essentially, a new internet. These connections are not always easy to construct; the survivors of the death stranding cataclysm know that connectivity carries a great deal of risk as well as

opportunity. Sam must negotiate with them through service. The packages he delivers are often of a deeply personal nature to the outliers and wary settlers, but as he moves westward and builds the network, new people with new skills and knowledges contribute to a greater understanding, both of the death stranding, and of the nature of human connectivity. Knowledge-making, in *Death Stranding*, is indivisible from personal connection, loss, and relational awareness.

The death stranding itself—the cataclysm—has strange effects on the environment. Chiral crystals sprout like mushrooms, certain objects float as if in diminished gravitational fields, and, most importantly, ghostly BTs (“beached things”)—the smokey shades of the deceased—float through the fields in clusters, threatening to pull Sam out of his world and into theirs. Geographical features and plant life are mostly familiar, but the biome writ large has been defamiliarized, or *weirded*, by new actant networks requiring new relational affectivities to be formed. On top of all this, there are politics and technology to contend with. Terrorist cells try to hinder Sam’s connective efforts, power struggles occur within the remains of the government, and Sam develops a friendship with a weaponized fetus preserved in a chest-mounted bio-tank that lets him “see” the BTs. Fortunately for the player, a novel and interesting mechanic of the game is cross-player cooperation in the form of building helpful constructions and leaving inspirational notes. If the player finds themselves facing a delivery route that takes them over mountainous terrain, for instance, they may find that another player has built a series of ladders and climbing anchors to help them make the trek. Players build bridges, shelters, and vehicles not only to help themselves, but also to help their fellow porters

make their deliveries across the country. The connectivity stands in stark contrast to the more familiar, combative functions of multi-player gaming one often encounters.

Death Stranding combines a (David) Lynchian uncanniness with speculative fiction and climate horror to create a strange metaphor for the importance of connection, empathy, and environmental enmeshedness. It is hypotyposis in a new genre. Unlike other games, the metaphor retains respect for its epistemological function (see Halloran), likely because of the strangeness, and thereby it illudes the traps of scalar derangement and carpentry that other games fall into when grappling with climate crises. It is not a perfect game for climate engagement by any means; it is still anthropocentric, environmentally exploitative in places, and often techno-optimistic. However, it retains the boundaries of its metaphor, and it invites interaction with the uncomfortable and unknown. It grapples with the problems of extinction, weird spacetimes, and the role of play in dealing with trauma.

Gaming, and particularly video games, may be a useful entryway to engagement with climate crises. Unfortunately, the majority of the gaming industry seems focused on creating games with an agonistic and exploitative bent. Where *Death Stranding* facilitates connection, between oneself and the environment, between oneself and others playing *Death Stranding*, most games foster competition and the hoarding of resources. There are exceptions, such as the popular board game, *Pandemic*, which has multiple players working against time to stop a virus from destroying the human race, but it is subject to many of the same criticisms as *Civ 6*: scalar derangement, political whitewashing, and authoritarian gratification. *Death Stranding* is an example of AC where other games are not, because it gathers voices from various disciplinary and rhetorical interests; it

cultivates relational, ecological inquiry between the known and the unknown; and it indulges a ludic engagement with impossible objects like extinction and deep time. It rewards consideration for others whom you cannot see, and environmental awareness that extends beyond the immediate present. Still, we cannot expect students to be creating entire video games in the pre-apocalyptic classroom. The examples of AC adumbrated above are being retroactively read for their qualifications rather than built with those qualities specifically in mind.

The voices I have gathered as examples from all of these domains are far from inclusive. They are meant to be illustrations of certain characteristics I hold to be imperative to AC, specifically because they represent degrees of resonance with the material conditions of the epoch. Modeling these characteristics through public-facing projects may be useful to informing praxis in the pre-apocalyptic classroom, designing course assignments, or getting students to think in terms of epoch's imperatives. These projects are readable as situated in the apocalyptic turn, resistant as they are to problem-solution narratives and full anthropocentrism.

Pre-apocalyptic Classroom Assignments

The concepts at the heart of these AC examples—relationality, circulation, futurity, unknowability, absurdity, mourning, and play—need to be utilized in the classroom such that they facilitate actual composition. Course assignments that facilitate engagement with these themes should work through the two houses of the Althing Parliament and use their institutional functions to move students towards proper instantiations of AC. The idea is not to recreate the Ray Cat Solution or the Church of

Euthanasia, but to arrive at a place of similar engagement: composing without critique and embracing anxiety without falling into fear. To this end, a course in AC begins with the imperatives of the Althing Parliament's Lower House: gathering matters of concern in the form of articulated prepositions and looking for expressions of the "we" in ecological enmeshedness. Here is a non-exhaustive list of assignments that might represent short or long writing projects operating towards this end, and the scholars from whom the ideas are taken or adapted:

- New Materialist Ontobiographical journaling (Gries)
- Soundscape auditing (R. Murray Schafer, Michelle Comstock and Mary Hocks)
- Environmental cost analysis of a digital object (Dustin Edwards)
- Indigenous relational research and comparison (Yavanna Brownlee, Kimmerer)
- Bodythinking exercises (e.g.: between self and companion animal; between self and workplace; between self and a recurring environment) (Clary-Lemon)
- Design a monument to "ghosts" of the Anthropocene (Jensen, Barnett, Tsing et al.)

If executed within the framework of AC's methodology, these exercises should give students the occasion to account not only for the quantifiable damages of the Anthropocene, but also the affective dimensions of their ecological entanglements. It is fine to take self-involvement as a starting point in this matter, as many of these brief descriptions do, because the point of exercises like NMO journaling is analysis and accountability for the articulated prepositions in which one takes part. The "we" has,

integrally, an “I” in its accountability. These exercises and assignments are opportunities for the student to begin moving outside the self-concerned techno-centrism of their uncritical ecologies and into parliamentary accounts of collective stakeholding.

The imperatives of the Upper House are more difficult to substantiate in composition assignments. When AC reads the imperatives of organization and hierarchization as identification of and engagement with unknowability, the tasking to students is not easy to systematize on a syllabus. Perhaps more than in the context of the Lower House, the Upper House requires creativity, invention, and speculation. Here are a few exercises that might get students accustomed to the strange contexts of the Upper House:

- “Darken” a piece of clear, straightforward writing (Andrew Pilsch)
- Compose in mysticism²⁹ (Thacker)
- Find an instance of absurd or strange news (e.g.: “Back in Shape: Maine’s Famous Swimming Ice Disk Says Hello” (*Huffpost*)) and write an annotated bibliography entry connecting it to a larger argument
- Compose a piece of speculative, ecological fiction (Haraway)
- Brainstorm a list of intentionally bad solutions to an anthropocenic crisis

These exercises might serve as scaffolding towards larger, cumulative projects engaging the unknowable dimensions of the Anthropocene. In lieu of or alongside the typical analytic essay, a semester-capping project in the AC course might be one of the following:

²⁹ For example, see “The Subharmonic Murmur of Black Tentacular Voids,” the final chapter of *In the Dust of This Planet*.

- Design a memorial holiday itinerary mourning the loss of species that have *not yet* gone extinct
- Create a website about absurdist engagement with anthropocenic subjects
- Design a board game that inspires cooperation and ecological engagement
- Compose a video representation of engagement with the unknowable³⁰
- Curate a museum of Immanent Catastrophe³¹
- Compose an entry for *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*

These assignment headings draw from the examples adumbrated in this chapter, from other academic endeavors, and from popular culture. What they have in common is that they present opportunities to compose with one or more of the characteristics of the Anthropocene while performing the hierarchization function of the Upper House of the Althing Parliament. A course design grounded in the methodology of AC will require students to perform the functions of both houses, in the proper order. Ideally, the students will compose their own genres to substantiate these functions, but depending on the creative onus for any given instantiation of a course, it may be too much to expect undergraduates to invent new modalities (like the Ray Cat Solution). The important, foundational difference between AC and the average, audience-oriented rhetorical project, is consideration for the spatio-temporal complexity of the epoch and recognition of the inseparability of that complexity from our daily lives. Specifically, that complexity tends to take the form of damage, loss, and ethical impossibility. This complexity is

³⁰ This is hard to qualify, but I take “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite” from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* to be an example. More recently, Season 3, Episode 8 of *Twin Peaks* has a sequence titled “Got a Light?” about the Trinity Test in New Mexico.

³¹ See Andrei Gureanu and Natalia Andrievskikh’s *The Afterlife of Discarded Objects*

present in the bodies of students composing in the Anthropocene and is therefore formative in what and how they compose.

Conclusion: Decisions Under Uncertainty

Towards the end of *Into Eternity*, one of Madsen's interviewees states that those responsible for the Onkalo storage facility are forced to make "decisions under uncertainty." In the field of nuclear engineering and design, such decisions can be approached with paradigmatic methodologies such as Bayesian probability, but the utility of such devices are complicated when the decision-making process is extrapolated to groups instead of individuals, and the issue of imposing a singular risk analysis on the whole of the public is never unproblematic (Pate-Cornell). It returns us to the wicked problems described by Rittel and Webber. But rhetorical conceptions of futurity dovetail nicely with decisions under uncertainty and have the possibility to emphasize the burdensome responsibility that comes with the futurity of anthropogenic crises as rhetorical exigencies. Speculation on the material conditions which will affect messages as they carry into the future is an important consideration of the pre-apocalyptic classroom. How students should be led towards these considerations and prompted to predict and embrace future audiences is a matter of praxis. This praxis will be beholden not only to conditions of possibility that include futurity, but also issues of scalar derangement, anthropocentrism, and wide temporal distribution.

In looking at nuclear semiotics as an example of AC, I find it useful because it creates conditions of scale, circulation and futurity that are not normally encountered in a college composition course. The conservative measures taken by WIPP—creation of

redundant archives—do not resonate with the conditions of futurity present in the situation, and I have tried to show that traditional archival responses are insufficient. Instead, the sort of creative response offered by the Ray Cat Solution is more likely to be made under conditions of possibility that include playfulness, respect for Indigenous traditions, and the enmeshedness of new materialist ontologies. It is my hope that these conditions are met more commonly in composition classrooms as hyper-/quasi-/wicked objects increasingly become sources of anxiety and focuses of attention in public discourse. What is important about the compositional projects—what qualifies them as instances of AC—is ultimately that they could not have been composed except by and of bodies that are, themselves, overdetermined by the damages and losses of the epoch. That overdetermination, however, is characterized by uncertainty as much or more as it is by those elements of which we are certain: the logos that describes anthropogenic damages. Through the process of composing *anthropocentrically*, students are brought to engagement with that uncertainty and its implications.

CHAPTER 5—ANTHROPOCENE COMPOSITION: APOCALYPSE

FOREVER

Let Nero fiddle out Rome's obsequies.

-George Daniel, "Trinarchodia,"

The adage that Nero fiddled while Rome burned is largely apocryphal, but Mary Francis Gyles explicates the ways in which language plays with the phrase's meaning and preserves its utility through the centuries. "Fiddle," she points out, is more than an instrument; in common English it means to accomplish nothing, to "fiddle around" (np). Nero was being an ineffectual leader while Rome was in danger or, worse, he was expressing a sort of impotent pleasure at the suffering of the misfortunate Roman citizenry. Without delving into the mythology and history of Nero, consider the action of playing an instrument in front of a life-altering conflagration. What *should* Nero have done? Presumably, better leadership might have prevented the fire, but in the immediacy of the moment, faced with an uncontrollable disaster at hand, why not play the fiddle?

To give another example of a seemingly impotent response to crisis (that is mostly mythological), consider the preserved bodies of Pompeii representing the remains of the victims of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Among these sad monuments to life's frailty, the image of one in particular was circulated through internet message boards more than the rest. This ancient corpse found viral fame because he appears to

have died while masturbating, presumably in response to his impending demise (Dunn). Again, setting aside the science and critique that mark this reading unrealistic, we may say that this person was “fiddling around” in the face of suffering and death. And why not? What is one to do? Perhaps he should have scrawled the sum of his wisdom on the nearest wall for the sake of posterity, and perhaps Nero should have grabbed a bucket and looked for the nearest water source.

As the existential threats facing humanity increase in scope and probability, we should begin to see more and modern examples of these reactions. Missile response systems, for instance, combined with a relatively low probability of redirecting or otherwise thwarting the threat of ICBMs, have already produced such responses, and the false missile alarm that occurred in Hawaii in 2008 provides a rich example of primary source accounts, mainly through archived tweets of locals responding to the perception of their imminent demise. These responses, as analyzed in a study on anxiety conducted by Nickolas M. Jones and Roxane Cohen Silver, seem to support an imperative to dwelling in anxiety, as those with measurably higher anxiety levels under normal conditions demonstrated a lower tendency to reach states of extreme anxiety (fear) under the pressure of incoming missiles. Following an analysis of this study, I argue that Nero, the Pompeii masturbator, and at least one of the Hawaiian citizens under threat of destruction evidence need for an epistemic shift, from optimism to pessimism. In the Anthropocene, where existential threats make optimism a weak, oppressive, or even delusional epistemology, it is incumbent upon the Anthropocene dweller to find a pessimism that fosters anxiety without succumbing to nihilism or indolence: a *critical* pessimism. There is some irony to this terminology, given AC’s aversion to the critical impulse. Critical, in

“critical pessimism,” means *self-critical*, rather than critical towards optimism or other epistemic purviews. In this usage, critical pessimism functions for improvement or nuance in approaching an epistemic goal, rather than critique, which functions largely to point out shortcomings and fallacies.

I understand desirable anxiety as a product or consequence of critical pessimism: a measured, informed attitude towards the material conditions at hand. If composition pedagogy can be made to embody this attitude, and thereby to put students in that anxiety group more given to care than fear under emergency conditions, then maybe such a pedagogy can help students compose in a way that is resonant with the material conditions of the epoch. In these final pages, I am going to interrogate the epistemology of composition pedagogy as one of uncritical optimism, which I will relate to progenitive assumptions embedded in the rhetoric of both natalism and education. Though the optimism bias is often hard to see in composition itself, it is readily evident in natalism, and so reading composition as inherently natalist causes optimism biases to emerge. These two traditions—natalism and composition—are entangled and held at a sanctimonious distance from meaningful scrutiny for optimism bias. I understand pessimism, an epistemological counterpoint to the optimist-natalist construct, through Roy Scranton’s six virtues of pessimism, and I will read for these virtues in a series of work on the darker side of composition pedagogy, specifically through Shane Borrowman’s *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing*, and Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World*. In response to Miller’s “critical optimism,” I offer that a critical pessimism is needed to address the constraints of anthropocenic crises. Inasmuch as unqualified writing represents a natalist endeavor, critical pessimism is an epistemology

that posits antinatalist, proactive engagement with the challenges and limitations of the Anthropocene.

Towards a Critical Pessimism

Anxiety Framed by the Hawaii False Missile Alarm Crisis

At 8:07 am on Saturday, January 13th, 2008, cell phones in Hawaii buzzed with a notification from the emergency alert system. The message read “BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL” (@MBVD). Television programming was also interrupted by a Civil Danger Warning that described an incoming missile threat, and it was reportedly broadcast on radio as well. This was a false alarm, but the official response designating it as such did not begin until 8:20 am, and it was not until 8:45 am that a second alert was sent out via the emergency alert system which read “There is no missile threat or danger to the State of Hawaii. Repeat. False Alarm” (@MBVD). The 38 minutes between the initial notification and the official retraction are historicized primarily in the form of tweets, and unfortunately research on the state of Hawaii’s residents during this short window is sparse.

One of the few works on this event is Nickolas M. Jones and Roxane Cohen Silver’s “This Is Not a Drill: Anxiety on Twitter Following the 2018 Hawaii False Missile Alert,” which analyzes the tweets of people and organizations “likely to be Hawaii residents” for expression of anxiety (685). This expression was coded by a list of 114 words such as “scared,” “afraid,” or “worried” (686). They measured such expressions before, during, and after the event, sorting individual tweeters into low,

medium, and high anxiety categories based on their use of the anxiety-terms in the week prior to the event. The results indicated a predictable increase in anxiety across most groups on the day of the event with a general increase of anxiety-words around 160%. It also showed that between the initial alert and the all-clear, anxiety increased incrementally as people waited for the missiles to strike. So, as the phantom missile grew closer, anxiety grew with it. Strangely, however, the group that was designated as high anxiety in the week before the alert saw a *decrease* in anxiety by 8.8% (688). More interesting still, the study measured new baselines for anxiety in the week following the event and found that every group *except* the high-anxiety group had a new baseline of anxiety higher than before. In other words, according to the metrics of the study, those tweeters who were high-anxiety before the alert calmed down when the event started, and after the event they were calmer than they had been before.

Jones and Silver report that the study was consistent with preexisting data on “incubation of threat”—the idea that anticipation and false alarms determine anxiety levels in response to later threats—and that corrective information published by authorities did little to decrease the anxiety caused by the original threat (689). The high-anxiety group, however, represents an interesting departure from previous studies. Jones and Silver hypothesize that “users in the high prealert anxiety group may have recognized how much worse things could have been had the missile threat been real,” or, “a pattern of generalized worry about future negative events, characteristic of anxious individuals, may have buffered those in the high prealert anxiety group from experiencing even greater anxiety as a result of the alert” (689). The coding of this data is admittedly imperfect, and the data itself is constrained by the demographic of Twitter users, but if

we read generously the implications are interesting: anxiety appears to inoculate people against dramatic increases in anxiety during periods of existential threat made imminent.

Further ethnographic study of the survivors of the Hawaii False Missile Alarm Crisis of 2018 could reveal invaluable data on the effects of anxiety, fear, and trauma during times of uncertain survivability or impending death. Many of the tweets that were published during and immediately after the event are archived in journalistic publications, and these tweets give us a more human insight into the event and people's reactions.

Honolulu Civil Beat records @MissDJM as tweeting "I'm currently at work and unable to leave. My son is at home asleep. It would take me 45 mins to get to my son. I called to wake him and tell him I loved him, stay inside. When he asked, what's happening, . . . I could only say, 'It'll be OK.'" @SaraDonchey tweeted, "I'm in Honolulu, #Hawaii and my family is on the North Shore. They were hiding in the garage. My mom and sister were crying. It was a false alarm, but betting a lot of people are shaken" (Cole np). One young woman reportedly sought shelter in a stranger's building, but then turned down that shelter when the stranger refused to admit her companion dog. @GardnerAlohi tweeted out a video her father sent her during the event, taken on a golf course. In the video, the middle-aged man is calm, even in tone, and sincere. He says: "If you're watching this video, that means I didn't make it, because of the missile that's coming towards Hawaii. I just parted the last hole, and I just hit the "shiz-nit" out of my ball . . . so, I love you all, but I'm playing golf. It's the last thing I'm gonna do" (np). Like the fiddlers of Rome and Pompeii, @GardnerAlohi's father chose to spend what he believed to be his last moments doing something that brought him creature comfort. He makes peace with his family before returning to his game, but the existential threat he perceives

does not seem to diminish the value of the golfing at hand. There is a missile coming, to his knowledge, but he's sure that he also just "hit the shiz-nit" out of his ball, and that he will spend his last moments doing the thing that brings him pleasure.

Fiddling, masturbation, and golf are not at all logical responses to most exigences, but when those exigences are cataclysmic—*apocalyptic*, even—then perhaps logical response is no longer the mark of sound decision-making. In other words, crises of significant scale obviate the responsibility of solving problems, because there are no solutions to such crises when they are framed as problems. Golf stands out among the three as the most anthropocenic of these responses, primarily because the use of land involved in golfing is one of the more wasteful and self-indulgent practices of developed nations (Rosenberg), but @GardnerAlohi's father's use of that course on that day would have been among the least impactful, had the incoming missile been real. What these examples show is, first, that the human impulse to act in the face of immanent annihilation is strong but variegated in terms of ecological properties. Though the actions described in these narratives seem like very short, inadmissible indications of how people react to anthropocenic threats, there is evidence of ecological activity (the girl and her dog, the care people have for their families, and even, by a generous reading, the masturbation) in these narratives. Second, and more importantly, the Jones and Silver study (evidenced further, perhaps, by the golfing father, who showed no fear during the event), suggests that those high-anxiety individuals—those who are aware of the multiform, anthropocenic crises of our epoch and who stay with the trouble and damage they bring—are likely the calmest when disaster is immanent. This finding echoes Herbert Dreyfus's speculation that a person might become fearless by accepted and

dwelling in chronic anxiety. If we read those high-anxiety individuals as bodies without hope, or at least with less hope than the other anxiety groups, then those same bodies are more fit to compose ecologically, with the sort of anxiety that produces care, rather than falling into fear.

Optimism and Pessimism as emergent from (Anti)natalism

In his lecture, “The Virtues of Pessimism,” Roy Scranton argues that pessimism is a more ethical response to climate crises than optimism. Climate pessimism has been criticized in the media and in the academy (Blumberg; Lomborg), but Scranton sees stark limitation in what optimism has to offer. Optimism, according to Scranton, makes an obligation of hope, turning the bright side of things into a place of emotional labor. Optimism is cruel when it is confounded, it is epistemically limiting, and it polarizes discussion—clinging to optimism when there is none is punishing and counterproductive, leading to cynicism and inaction. For an active example of the optimism bias, one has only to consider the normative, human self-appraisal that David Benatar’s antinatalist project interrogates. According to Benatar, positive assessments of one’s own life operate on the Pollyanna principle, which manifests through selective recall and slanted judgements of current well-being (65). Medical analyses of health and psychological status tend to show that these judgements are overly positive, and that a person’s state of (physical, mental) affairs tend to be worse than they report (66). This trends upward: differences in reported happiness of the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated, the well-employed and the unemployed or miserably employed, all have only marginal differences in reported happiness (67). Optimism, it seems, is tyrannical in its hold on the

human mind. This tyranny can manifest in defense of itself, and attack those who posit ideas to the contrary. Schopenhauer reported an “outcry over the melancholy and desolate character of [his] philosophy,” and this outcry echoes in all arenas where the reign of optimism is challenged (646). Like Schopenhauer’s pessimism, antinatalist rhetorics have also inspired outcries and resentment; but also like pessimism, antinatalism and its epistemological underpinnings are increasingly more relevant and resonant in a worsening climate.

Unfortunately, the (anti)natalism debate is frequently entangled in Malthusian population criticism and, therefore, in racist ecologies that dovetail with eco-fascistic logic. To untangle this epistemic mess and define an antinatalism that comes from critical pessimism, the reasons (or lack thereof) for natalism need to be examined and antinatalism needs to be separated from Malthusianism. Simply put, natalism is the promotion of reproduction through childbirth. Historically, the functions of natalism have kept the *Anthropos* extant for about 300,000 years, but the epistemological underpinnings have changed drastically in that time. In other words, the reasons people have children cannot be assumed the way they might be from a historical perspective. In most developed countries, the impetus to create new workers is no longer culturally valid, and “instinct” is not a culturally or legally salient justification for exercising biological functions. Instead, natalists invoke more abstract and emotional reasoning to justify the creation of new life, such as purpose, love, and self-improvement (Parvez). Population metrics rarely enter the equations done by parents, but they have been employed by certain bad actors advocating for harmful versions of antinatalism, most famously Thomas Robert Malthus.

Malthusianism—the idea that population will grow exponentially despite limited resources, leading to a crisis point that must be averted—has condemnable roots in classism and racism, and should not be conflated with the sort of pessimistic antinatalism I am using to cause unchecked optimism to emerge. Malthusianism and its neo-proponents identify immigration and the poverty of developing nations as a threat to the lifestyle of developed nations, without accounting for the disproportionate consumption of resources by people in those developed nations (Bollay). Unfortunately, these ideas have found new purchase in climate politics (Schultz). We can, however, uncouple some justifications for antinatalism from these problematic foundations. First, Malthusian antinatalism is rooted in a problem-solution narrative; epistemically pessimistic antinatalism is not. Instead, pessimistic antinatalism holds that it is always a net-bad to create new life, despite access to resources, because suffering is always assured, and happiness is not. It should also be noted that no amount of happiness justifies any amount of suffering if that calculus is being done by someone else, and this is the most basic philosophical objection of pessimistic antinatalism: there is never permission from the unborn to be born. Natalism runs roughshod over this objection, and instead indulges hope of the parent(s) at the expense of all else³². Malthusianism is a deeply flawed and problematic line of reasoning, but it does not represent the whole of antinatalist philosophy, and it should not be a trump-card that facilitates unscrutinized natalist impulses.

³² It probably does not need to be said that I am excluding from my analysis instances of rape and forced-birth. I am treating these crimes as exceptions, outside the scope of my analysis, though they may, in themselves, stand as further evidence of an unjust, unkind world to which no child should be subjected.

Natalism is so frequently unchecked and unexamined in our discourse that it only really emerges as a contingent function of our thinking when antinatalism is expressed. In other words, we tend not to think about natalism until someone invokes antinatalism. Antinatalism is, rhetorically, a sticky wicket. In “Born Under a Bad Sign,” Brian Zager describes the discourse of antinatalism in terms of its rhetorical challenges, specifically the hostility that it meets coming from defenders of optimism and natalism. For Zager, antinatalism is what Robert Wade calls “tragic rhetoric”: rhetoric about phenomenological disaster with existential primacy. He differentiates this from poetic tragedy, wherein the poet controls the nature of the disaster (Wade qtd. in Zager 43). For the antinatalist, the primary, immanent disaster is birth, which is, unfortunately for the antinatalist, a much-celebrated affair. Because birth is also a frequently witnessed and experienced thing, the rhetor has difficulty in bracketing it to extrapolate its existential import and make an argument of value; the polis has already over-determined the value (44). For Zager, the goal of tragic rhetoric in an antinatalist context is to operate as ontologically redemptive, clarifying the character of birth as a tragedy, but qualified as cautiously self-aware and less-than-serious (53-54). Linear argumentation is ill-advised for the pessimist seeking rhetorical footing in discourse with the optimist establishment.

Scranton’s “The Virtues of Pessimism” makes a more direct and epistemic (rather than rhetorical) argument for a shift in outlook and expectation that can simultaneously buttress pessimistic antinatalism and, more importantly, provide solace for those already born and living in the Anthropocene. For Scranton, optimism is oppressive because it is dissonant with a history characterized by suffering. Optimism *demands* faith *despite* suffering. Scranton constructs a history of optimism as, first, faith in God, and, later, faith

in reason's ability to create "progress" (np). Empirically, however, progress is a nonsensical metric; there is no definitive end towards which progress reaches, and progress for one stakeholder group often means regression or victimization of another. Pessimism, on the other hand, is critique of reason *through* reason, rather than through the illusion of progress. Pessimism is more self-contained and temporally cogent because, where both epistemic outlooks are trying to make sense of the relationship between suffering and time, pessimism has definitive data from the past where optimism relies on fantastical visions of the future.

In addition to the logical soundness of pessimism, it is also the more compassionate of the epistemic outlooks: optimism expects the best and does not, inherently, offer any pathways to redeeming our shortcomings. Pessimism, on the other hand, does not condone judgement of the individual because there are no artificial standards of progress. Instead, according to Scranton, pessimism puts the onus on groups to act justly despite an unjust universe (np). This is the root of pessimism's virtue, especially in the Anthropocene, where injustice, suffering, and social inequity are so apparent. Inasmuch as natalism always expects something from those that are produced by it (purpose, love, self-improvement, or even simply labor), we may connect it directly to the tyranny of optimism and, therefore, connect epistemic antinatalism (as distinct from Malthusian antinatalism, which is optimistic in its problem-solution framework) to the virtues of pessimism.

The Tyranny of Optimism in Composition

Anthropocene Composition operates in much the same way as Zager's reading of tragic rhetoric. Recognizing the tyranny of optimism, especially in this epoch's impossible present, AC simultaneously recognizes the severity of the present, and it declines to take itself too seriously because it simply cannot afford to. In a time of untold suffering, extinction, loss and injustice, the stakes are obviously severe. Such stakes would seem to weaken the optimist worldview, and the 2021 study of climate anxiety in young people by the University of Bath appears to substantiate that trend. In light of the environmental damage and government incompetence, some of the youth reporting climate anxiety choose to "tune out" in response. A Lebanese student told *VICE* world news that her academic engagements with climate change left her feeling impotent: "I felt like I'm doing something just very small, I don't have that influence in the world" (Galer). If such outlooks are characteristic and growing in the world, then the composition classroom is going to have to change to address a shift away from optimism. Unfortunately, the composition classroom is firmly rooted in optimism biases and the same characteristics of capitalism that make it unequipped to engage with anthropogenic crises.

All conscious, progenitive action appears inherently optimistic, because to create for posterior value assumes favorable, future conditions for that thing (a child, in the natalist sense). The act of writing is much the same, and utilizing parental metaphor for the relationship between writer and writing has precedent. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida problematizes the Platonic understanding of dialectic and writing using mythology and deconstruction. He characterizes this understanding in terms of *logos*, as

son, and the accountable force of what is prior to writing as father. This relationship is always one in which a selective violence takes place: an assembling and distinguishing of the good until the son supplants the father (434). There is a perniciousness in the effect of writing's existence, such that one who possesses the *techne* of writing will "come to rely on it. He will know that he himself can leave without the [writing's] going away, that he can forget all about them without their leaving his service" (438). Writing becomes legacy. Of course, it also becomes the site of death. Writing kills memory and defies value. This latter function, though, is rarely conscious in the minds of the writer, at least to Plato. The false wisdom of the written word was the domain of the sophist, which Derrida uncovers in the character of Theuth as if he was pulling the mask off a Scooby-Doo villain. The sophists, for Plato, were practitioners of a false wisdom, making writing the source of a false optimism. Writing is also, in the Platonic tradition, a self-replicating imposter, a "structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin" (446). Derrida reads the disappearance of the root, or origin, or ideal, as a necessary condition for discourse to occur. The father (of logos) must decline to decide on direct meaning, given the choice between translations, and this absence lays the conditions of possibility for presence, and vice-versa. Truth and un-truth become "species of repetition" (447).

Plato had a famously pessimistic view of writing, and through Derrida's deconstruction we can read this as an indictment of its natalist qualities. We can extend these (antinatalist) critiques to Plato's dialectic as well, through Derrida or, if we prefer, through Foucauldian conceptualizations of the issue as possibility versus cold reason, or Stanley Fish's work on *homo seriousus* vs. *homo rhetoricus*. In all cases, the argument

for moving towards truth, or possibility, or cooperation, is always contingent on some pedagogical imperative instantiated inter-generationally. Teaching is always necessary, *in perpetuity*, though the disciplinary apparatus might differ. The optimism is often unwritten, but it pervades; the pages on which our literary history is written stinks of it. There will always be fathers and sons, it says, and there will always be teachers and students.

Until, of course, there won't be. The question at that point becomes whether or not pedagogy still has a purpose. By virtue of its etymology, it would seem any remaining purpose is limited; pedagogy exists as long as there are children to lead. This is where Scranton's pessimism comes to the rescue. For those last children—the terminal generation of the Anthropocene—there is still a pedagogical imperative, and that imperative is unburdened by the onus of posterity. Scranton gives us six virtues of pessimism to counter the problems of optimism:

- 1) Pessimism recognizes that suffering exists
- 2) Consciousness begets suffering
- 3) Pessimism explains bad things happening in the world
- 4) Pessimism expects people to make mistakes, and is therefore compassionate
- 5) History is bleak
- 6) Everyone dies

Where do these virtues reside in composition pedagogy? How might a methodology square the pessimistic worldview with classroom activity, and can this be done without repeating the patricidal optimism inherent in writing? To begin the process of situating AC in the broader context of rhetoric and composition as a discipline, it behooves us to

look at the places where the inherent optimism of writing has been put into conflict. Where does the veneer of optimism wear thin? Accounts of damage and trauma are a promising compositional locus, because writing in this vein seems to question deep preconceptions and work within a reality that has shed the brittle carapace of optimism.

Trauma in the Pre-Apocalypse

Composing Trauma in Recent History

Work that takes place at the intersection of composition and trauma reveals their entanglement with Scranton's six virtues through a deep relationship between trauma and writing. Shane Borrowman's *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* is a collection of narratives and (self-) criticism, wherein academics reflect on their experiences and often their failings in traumatic encounters and historical instances of collective trauma (5). Apropos of the era, it begins with Borrowman's own account of dealing with a classroom of students on September 11th, 2001, and his failure to address the rhetorical situation presented there for lack of preparation (2). Reflection on trauma, for Borrowman, becomes a pedagogical imperative because of its inevitable recurrence, hence the collection of essays. Two of these essays in particular—by Dana C. Elder and Daphne Desser—are salient for their engagement with traumatic historical events and pedagogical implications. These two scholars account for the intricacies and implications of catastrophe and upheaval coming to bear on the imperatives of the writing classroom.

Elder's "How Little We Knew: Spring 1970 at the University of Washington," stands out in its reflections on the intricacies of a time period. Elder describes a year of particular cultural conflict and emotional strains that reflect the United States' current

disposition in many ways. Richard Nixon, Vietnam, the draft, the Sexual Revolution, feminism, hippies and Black Panthers were all in play, and the nuclear bomb was still casting long, dark shadows on public consciousness. Cultural warfare, threats of annihilation, and morally indefensible leadership seem to go hand-in-hand, then and now. For academics, the mission of the age was twofold: “ending the War and fixing all the wrongs in the world” (161). When the Kent State Massacre was perpetrated by Nixon’s tin soldiers on May 4th, student groups and others organized a strike on Washington University. The University responded with a swollen police presence, and there were violent clashes across Seattle. This became a pattern across the nation, and in Mississippi the police force fatally shot two students and injured others at Jackson State (165). By Elder’s calculations, the conflicts that came to a head in 1970 resolved little, but they did teach fear and distrust to a generation of students who were new to trauma and upheaval.

By comparison, Elder holds that today’s students seem largely unconcerned with the damage and violence surrounding them, not because they don’t care, but because they believe themselves powerless. Elder ponders:

Have they inherited our cynicism, our disillusionment, our hard lessons learned? I hope not, yet I acknowledge that there’s reason for their believing in their own political impotence and that of the faculty members with whom they work. The people we now teach to write and participate critically in the world grew up surrounded by our “pre-history” concerns and others unimaginable in the spring of 1970. (167)

This ennui comes from trends that began, or were in development, in the 20th century, perhaps before Vietnam and the culture war of the time. Elder points to an overload of

threats and responsibilities coupled with an increasingly untenable American hyper-individualism and everyday evidence that the universe does not reward moral behavior. If this is the case, then there is a cynicism born not just from the media, but from lived experience and generational inheritance; it is a learned cynicism. Tellingly, Elder does not end with a robust, pedagogical policy argument. He does not reaffirm an imperative to teach, though he does offer that there is a “constructive response” to student cynicism and that helping them find it is “important work” (168).

Desser’s “Teaching Writing in Hawaii After Pearl Harbor and 9/11” is a bit more pedagogically forward. She begins with a critique of an academic response to the September 11th terrorist attack. A group of composition-adjacent professors at the University of Michigan composed an affirmation of education’s place in coping with group and national trauma, hoping to assure their audience that, “through education, people develop the capacity to confront seemingly incomprehensible experiences and create new possibilities in response” (Kardia et al. qtd. in Desser 85). Desser calls this response a depoliticizing effort to domesticate a traumatic event, and argues that it enables such traumas to be appropriated by “dominant cultural productions” (86). The writing classroom becomes Desser’s forum for deconstructing these master narratives by which trauma is made inert and appropriated for nationalistic discourse. Instead of reducing trauma to digestible bits, she wants composition instructors to “teach students how to let the mystery and “unfathomable” nature of trauma remain in their writing and thinking” (86). For Desser, this pedagogy is academic activism, inasmuch as it works against the dominant national discourse through disciplinary methods.

Desser's classroom is a place of meaning-making and, potentially, healing, but she is careful to qualify the capacity for the latter in learning contexts. The composition classroom is not Freud's couch, just as it is not a place for cold detachment. Instead, Desser seeks an examined and measured approach to engaging with the traumatic dimensions of national disasters and losses. She draws from the teaching style of a former mentor, Tilly Warnock, and her "Language and Learning as 'Equipment for Living': Revision as a Life Skill," in order to find a "respect for truth balanced with a realization of the messiness of our lived experience" (95). The pedagogical goal is acceptance of writing about trauma as always unfinished, always in development, always messy. Healing is facilitated in this process, and this facilitation is within the constraints of the composition instructor's profession.

Narratives of shared trauma and the composition classroom suggest that encounters with such instances call into question our roles as educators, and the role of writing itself. Nowhere in *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* is there advocacy for complete professional detachment; in every case it seems the pedagogue considers it within his or her professional purview to acknowledge and grapple with the complexity and messiness of traumatic incidents that affect student, teacher, classroom, and nation. From a pessimistic perspective, these essays jibe more-or-less well with Scranton's virtues. They recognize suffering and the idea that suffering is constantly being recreated in the conscious mind, they add tally-marks to the count of historical injustices and tragedies, and they highlight our mortality in the face of loss and grief. Elder explains that the cynicism of our students is generational and sensical, Desser positions pedagogy

in response to those conditions while taking careful measure of what a composition pedagogue should “hope” to accomplish.

The Entanglement of Optimism and Pessimism

And yet there are still reverberations of the optimism bias in this positioning. Elder seems content to point out the challenges of teaching in a traumatic time, though he does imply the importance of sticking to it, so to speak, but Dessser’s argument is one that still holds to pedagogical imperatives *despite* trauma or even as a salve to trauma. There is an optimistic abrasiveness in even this limited qualification of composition as a healing practice: the promise of a cruel disappointment should the composer fail to find meaning, or alleviation, in the process. Perhaps this linkage between optimism and pessimism reflects a duality characteristic of trauma itself; it is certainly evidence for a pessimistic worldview, but that we respond to it at all is optimistic, implying a hope that things can be, somehow, better. There are other internal conflicts we must reckon with when we engage with trauma. Patriacia Murphy, Ryan Muckerheide, and Duane Roen argue that “a rhetorical education . . . can only be accomplished after students have been able to address one of their most basic needs—the need to feel secure” (*Trauma* 81). Meanwhile, Peter and Maureen Goggin argue that the classroom is not, and never will be, a safe space hermetically sealed off from the world (*Trauma* 39). There is mild security, sometimes, in classroom walls, but the students know better than to treat it as a bubble where they can reflect and learn without worry of their place in greater, unaccountable networks. So why, then, do we cling to optimism? Is it for our students or for ourselves?

Perhaps one of the greatest pessimistic checks on the prevalent optimism of composition pedagogy is Richard E. Miller's *Writing at the End of the World*. He would not, however, frame it as such. Miller's collection of essays functions as an extended *dissoi logoi*: an argument that we should, despite appearances to the contrary, see good and necessity in the teaching of writing. Unlike my reading of the scene as one of ubiquitously optimistic engagement—by virtue of the nature of composition as progenitive—Miller engages with traumas and the despair that threatens to follow from those traumas. In the world Miller describes, planes crash, bodies fall from the sky or are blown to pieces as the unintended targets of “smart” bombs, and the canon-fodder of English studies’ purview becomes nearly incoherent in its contradictions and limitations. Somewhere in this morass is academic writing, and Miller believes that to be asked to write and to *listen to writing* in this context is to feel that some violence is being done “at the level of discourse” (41). What he lands on is a conceptualization of composition pedagogy as hard, often demoralizing labor that rarely meets the expectations of ideology but is necessary, important work in diminishing the brutality and suffering of the world.

Miller couches this argument in “critical optimism” (27), a concept that his readers might understand as persistence, artistic fortitude, or anything just short of giving up. Critical optimism comes from Paolo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and, more accurately, a balanced reading of what is often taken uncritically as lionization of the teaching profession. I understand critical optimism as a form of pessimism, but doing so requires that pessimism not be wholly conflated with nihilism, suicidal ideation, or the sort of dismissive lassitude we expect from Eeyore or Rust Cohle. Perhaps Miller’s critical optimism overlaps with a “critical pessimism,” in that both expect the worst—or

at least the painfully traumatic—but also recognize the good of continued pedagogical effort. We might conceive of such a critical pessimism as a worldview informed by Scranton’s six virtues, and expand upon those virtues to better understand the “critical” in critical pessimism:

- 1) Suffering exists, and can be ameliorated through continued effort
- 2) Consciousness begets suffering, and should therefore be constructed to minimize this tendency through compositional intervention
- 3) Pessimism explains bad things happening in the world, and it also anticipates bad things, thereby forearming us against them
- 4) Pessimism expects people to make mistakes, and is therefore compassionate, but those same mistakes need not be made twice
- 5) History is bleak, and so is the future
- 6) Everyone dies, and everything will probably go extinct

The “critical” extensions operate as both contingent qualifications that keep the six virtues from becoming epistemically limiting (the same critique Scranton offers of optimism), and as a check on nihilistic slippage that might result from virtues 3, 5, and 6. It also confirms agential responsibility in the extensions of virtues 1, 2, and 4.

Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World* is essential reading not just for engagement with trauma, but for interrogating the sort of optimism that holds sway in the classroom and academia writ large. Reading Elder, Dessler, and Miller consecutively builds a recent historical framework for movement away from unchecked optimism, towards an epistemological framework that resonates more and more with an increasingly damaged ecology. If Miller’s work on the horrors at the turn of the millennium

culminates in critical optimism, my work here will continue that trend, and culminate in critical pessimism. That critical pessimism will be a measured, compassionate episteme, and a framework for understanding place and agency on a damaged planet that neither disappoints unfounded projections, nor facilitates nihilistic surrender.

Critical Limitations from the Climate Change Precedent

Neither Miller's *Writing at the End of the World* nor Borrowman's *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* were composed in a world where climate change was on the forefront of public discussion. They deal with crises largely from a place of forensic analysis, tracing the rhetoric backwards in a *meaning apriorist*³³ assessment of public and academic reaction. Climate change and other anthropogenic crises are unlike these exigencies in that they elude such neat, temporal qualifications. They are, as we have seen, past, present, and future; the hyper-/quasi-/wicked nature of these crises means that we need not only meaning apriorism, but also an imminent, ongoing assessment of our new traumas and re-traumatization, as well as a consequentialist, rhetorical sensitivity for the audiences of the future who will inherit these crises. Though the public's awareness and reactions to climate change are still diminishingly small compared to the extent of the crises it produces, that awareness is growing, and engagement with climate change will become unavoidable.

³³ See Gries's *Still Life With Rhetoric*: meaning apriorism traces the meaning of a text backwards, as opposed to meaning consequentialism, which follows the unpredictable and developing consequences of a text (48-49).

Climate trauma is an emergent subject, or at least it seems that way to the white male habitus that dominates Western academic discourse. In truth, climate trauma is probably as old as imperialism. For Indigenous populations in developing countries, specifically those of Central and South America and Africa—but also in developed countries such as the United States—the climate apocalypse has begun, and the casualties are mounting daily (see Nixon; Ibrahim; Voggesser et al.; Maldonado et al.). Identifying nexuses of anthropocenic trauma is not so simple as responding to plane crashes, terrorist action or political upheaval (though these things are all coproductive *with* the Anthropocene to various extents). In these latter events, we have reason to be critically optimistic, because we have seen that with proper care and even proper compositional efforts, we *can* improve things and heal. We do not have a wealth of such data in dealing with anthropocenic traumas. The scales of time and place, as well as the complexity of enmeshedness within the actant networks effected by anthropocenic trauma, are of ever-increasing complexity and continue to diminish the capacity of human phenomenological apparatus. Tracing these traumas, then, requires methodologies of complexity, sensitivity to circulation, futurity, and interspecies entanglement, such as those I have been describing.

Projects such as Anna Tsing et al.'s *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* are also good models for cataloguing anthropocenic trauma. The format of the book itself is a rhetorical function by which an audience might come to understand anthropocenic trauma; it is bisected between two sections, titled “Ghosts” and “Monsters.” The essays assembled in the book fall into one of the two categories. Those under “Ghosts” are writings that describe haunted landscapes, once populated not just by individual species

that are now lost forever, but complex assemblages that have been destroyed in the name of anthropocentric progress (G4). This damage, the section introduction notes, is past, present, and ongoing, stretching into strange spacetimes and through morphing ecologies. Flipping the book over and turning it around will bring the reader to the section titled “Monsters.” This collection of essays evidences the symbiosis and entanglement of living things on a damaged world. The title, “monsters,” has a twofold meaning: “on the one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements; on the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern man. Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene” (M2).

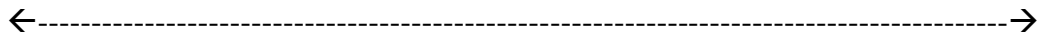
Both sections, “Ghosts” and “Monsters,” contribute to a growing collection of knowledge on the traumas of the Anthropocene. I read this collection as an account of trauma because it forces its audience to share ecological damage—to recognize participation in a growing network characterized by loss and transformation. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* also enacts critical pessimism, arguing that the damages need to be accounted for, understood, and engaged with if we hope to survive (G11) and that anthropogenic crises will be ongoing, recurrent, and yet still subject to diminishment through action. It is an especially exigent argument given human aversion to engagement with traumas that pose threats to culture (Brulle and Norgaard).

The trauma of the Anthropocene is, then, simultaneously unprecedented, and also so widespread and old as to be banal. Just as we have precedent to believe the trauma of plane crashes and big bombs will heal with time, we in fact also have precedent to believe that anthropogenic trauma will not. Every anthropogenic extinction is evidence for the totality and inescapability of this sort of damage. Exclusion zones caused by

nuclear technology become more habitable with time, but the things that inhabit those zones become monsters, their bodies reterritorialized by radiation. Plastics, of course, are forever, and the microplastic crisis will likely never be fully accounted for or its damages undone. The ubiquity of this trauma—these ghosts and monsters—supports the entanglement of public and private, the institutional and personal, that Miller advocates for in his project. It is not possible to be other than an anthropocenic body in the Anthropocene. The nature of the actant networks in this epoch is such that ontological independence is fantastical, and ontologies are only sensible in multiplicities such as those construed in Jane Bennett’s material vitalism (*Vibrant Matter*), Jennifer Clary-Lemon’s choracene (*Planting*), or Laurie Gries’ ontobiographical accounts of embodied relationality (“New Materialist”). An anthropocenic body cannot speak without the Anthropocene speaking; composition of any form, in this sense, is AC. The methodology I have described is an attempt to make that composition increasingly resonant with the material conditions of this impossible present, and the darkness characterizing its future.

I have established the reasons for eliding critique and practicing an inclusive, ontological gathering of Anthropocene stakeholders. I work, now, for a brief rehabilitation of the “critical,” under the conditions that it is not projected outward in the sense that critique is often the policing arm of academic discourse, but rather inward, as an internalization of critical *episteme*. Interrogating pessimism and optimism through addendum of enough qualifying statements makes the scale bow towards the center, drawing both ends into a less-and-less differentiated morass where the bottom line is as follows: things are almost definitely going to get worse, and they will get increasingly worse the less we do about it.

Optimism Critical Optimism || Critical Pessimism Pessimism



This homogenization of the epistemic scale does not complete the work of uncoupling composition from progenitive natalism and its implied optimism about the future, but it problematizes what I understand to be an uninterrogated, uncritical relationship. As represented on this scale, the “critical” in both critical optimism and critical pessimism draw epistemic outlooks away from the absolutism represented at its extreme ends. The mania of unchecked optimism and the nihilism that may spring from complete pessimism are both averted in favor of nuance, and contemplation. AC is distinctly in the locus of critical pessimism, though, for where a critical optimism still espouses the possibility of progress, critical pessimism espouses, at best, amelioration of fundamentally bad conditions.

The Anthropocene as the Apocalypse: A Brief Audit

Politics, expressed in public discourse, are the popular discursive elements that shape the news and, to some degree, the outlook of students in the pre-apocalyptic classroom, and therefore bear further auditing. These politics of nations and individuals remain poised to drive coffin nails into the climate, and very little that has happened in recent memory inspires hope, difference, or otherwise makes me reconsider my discursive construction of our epoch and future. I do this not to end on a note of warning, nor to further deflate whatever vestiges of hope my reader might cling to, but to evidence a pattern of accelerating ecological violence and the lameness of this written composition

in accounting for those patterns. Perhaps this is my final indictment of academic composition in the Anthropocene: it just can't keep up with the failures of mankind, or the damages those failures inflict on everything else.

In February of 2022, the IPCC finalized the second part of its Sixth Assessment Report, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. The summary for policy makers that foregrounds this report is framed in terms of risk. Risk, according to the report, gives us a metric for “understanding the increasingly severe, interconnected and often irreversible impacts of climate change on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human systems; differing impacts across regions, sectors, and communities; and how to best reduce adverse consequences for current and future generations” (4-5). Risk also couches climate change in degrees of uncertainty; risk creates anxiety. However, the “risk” metric also obfuscates what damage has already been done. Roy Schwartzman et al. have described the ways in which risk is often used as a rhetorical device to mediate scientific understanding between stakeholder groups (“Rhetoric and Risk”). By this understanding, risk can turn otherwise abstract scientific calculations into personally affective heuristics (5), thereby responding to issues of speculation, perceived insufficient data, and skepticism towards experts. If the IPCC summary for policy makers is rhetorically tailored for its audience, then that audience is not only being constructed as scientifically illiterate, but also as unconcerned with damages that have happened or are ongoing.

In short, “risk” describes probabilities of future loss to construe stakes and promote action. Risk does not account for the ghosts and monsters that have already been created, nor does it factor the already dead in future calculations. In this regard, we may

assess the 2022 IPCC report as more of the same: logos made meaningless in its sheer mass; capitalist governance; anthropocentrism meeting imperialism.

To be fair, there are places where the report seems to represent progress in our consideration and understanding of climate crises. It emphasizes the centrality of justice in climatological engagement, and it seems to put Indigenous knowledge-making on equal footing with empirical scientific process (5). But what justice—a consequentialist, rhetorical concept—means in terms of risk assessment is not made clear. Fairness and inclusivity might mean more than occasion for punishment, which is often the whole of justice. And of course, all of this is followed by more of the same: damage and extinction, economic loss, increased weather severity, damage to the physical and mental health of people across the globe (7-10). COP 26—which was held before the finalization of this report, but which addressed much of the already-gathered data and analysis of the IPCC—did not reflect the urgency of these “risks.” There were pledges made, but nothing to suggest that any such pledges would be different than those that came before and have been since abandoned. More believable than these pledges were the outright refusal made by some countries to participate in coal draw-down. Additionally, there was a marked failure to agree on any sort of financial restitution policy to climate-affected countries (Hill and Babin). All of this, of course, was overshadowed in internet and tabloid forums by President Joe Biden apparently falling asleep during the opening speeches (“COP26” np).

The “risks” described by the IPCC report also made vague references to the potential of climate change to instigate violent conflict, but failed to make connections of the sort represented by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, starting in February of 2022. It

is, perhaps, a sign of progress that climate stakes were immediately included in the discourse surrounding this insurgency, but this discourse was often framed in terms of economic incentive and energy security. Rod Schoonover, of the Council on Strategic Risk's Center for Climate and Security, claimed that "[h]umanity's relationship to fossil fuel is underwriting this invasion. . . . Putin thought he could get away with it because of Europe's dependence on Russian gas" (Berwyn, "Delay" np). News outlets are now climate-savvy enough to make the connections between warfare and climate, but only, it seems, through the lens of gas prices. A *CNBC* article claims that the invasion offers "critical lessons for global energy markets" (Clifford). Daniel Yergen, in a talk with *The New York Times*, explains the importance of Russian oil to the global economy, and offers that the lackluster response of the United States to Russian aggression is caused in part by "somewhat shortsighted policies on investment" (Sorkin np). There is silver-lining talk about hastening the transition to renewable energy, but the Biden administration is still approving drilling permits and calling for increased oil production, effectively prolonging their use (Volcovici and Groom). The global war economy still runs on dirty fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, climate violence is taking on more local instantiations in the form of burgeoning eco-fascism. In May of 2022, a right-wing terrorist killed 10 people and injured 3 in a mass-shooting incident in Buffalo, New York (Milman, "Buffalo suspect"). The killer, who I will not name here, deliberately targeted a Black community, and in a 180-page manifesto he wrote that he wanted to "kill as many Blacks as possible." He goes on to refer to himself as an eco-fascist and cites the "Great Replacement Theory" espoused by neo-conservative media pundits such as Tucker Carlson of Fox News. This

is not the first time that eco-fascism has been cited as the reason behind mass violence in recent history; a 2019 murder spree in Christchurch, New Zealand (51 dead), and a similar incident in El Paso, Texas (23 dead) have been connected to misinformed concerns about population control and sustainability (Malthusianism). This is an old characteristic of right-wing political dogmas: ecologically harmful, extractivist practices coupled with a displacement of responsibility onto non-white demographics. Fascist regimes of the 20th century had similar ideas, and neo-fascism of the 21st century is and will be driven by similar grounds in the face of diminishing resources, widening wealth gaps, and climate migration.

While eco-fascism grows anew in toxic internet forums and spills into the public as mass shootings, Christo-fascism stymies climate action from the highest court in the United States. In June 2022, A SCOTUS panel—appointed significantly by unpopularly elected presidents with neo-conservative and fascistically religious ideologies—imposed stark limitations on the ability of the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate carbon emissions (Totenberg). This ruling came in the same month that the same panel overturned *Roe vs. Wade*. Harvard Law Professor Richard Lazarus commented that “[t]his could not have come at a worse time” because “the consequences of climate change are increasingly dire and we're running out of time to address it” (Lazarus qtd. in Totenberg np). Lazarus’s assessment is evidenced by a summer of record temperatures and heat domes that threaten the health and economy of the country (“May 2022,” NOAA). Ultimately, fascism (both eco- and Christo-) is coproductive with climate change on micro- and macro-political levels.

Added to the dangers of increased carbon emissions and right-wing extremism is the returning specter of nuclear war. On February 27th, 2022, Vladimir Putin put Russian nuclear forces on high alert in response to the Ukrainian resistance to invasion (Karmanau et al.). As the world contemplates use of modern nuclear weapons on the battlefield for the first time in decades, Russia seems determined to drag cultural consciousness into the past with re-aggravation of Soviet-era wounds. Insurgent Russian forces took the long-quarantined Chernobyl power plant and its exclusion zone. On March 9th, the plant lost power, forcing it to rely on backup generators to keep its critical safety systems operational. The full ramifications of radiation containment failure are unclear, but we may assume that the “risks” are significant and increasing with Russia’s refusal to abide by cease-fires or allow repairs to be made on the plant (“Ukraine Says”). All of this occurs against a backdrop of disinformation and gaslighting from nuclear and biological weapon powers (Leitenberg).

On a final note that I will add because of its relation to implicit natalism, scientists have recently evidenced the presence of microplastics in the human blood stream (Mcrae). The quantity, size, and effects of these particles are yet unclear, and the sample size of tested individuals is small at 22, but 17 of those subjects were found to have industrial polymers in their blood. Concurrently, scientists are tracking the relationship between plastics and infertility taking the form of lower sperm count (Rozsa). Between the 1970s and 2011, the average human male sperm count dropped by nearly half, and plastics have been identified as a probable cause. In a great irony, the Anthropocene might be anaesthetizing us to the possibility of further intergenerational trauma. The epoch itself may have composed its own solution to the crises of the *Anthropos*:

sterilization. No more children means no more (human) bodies on which to foist the ecological damages of generations past. It will also, eventually, mean no more students in the classrooms, and at such a point the pedagogical imperatives of any epistemic construction will be satisfied. None of this, of course, obviates the imperatives facing teachers responsible for teaching generations between now and then.

No amount of research and paraphrase can account for the Anthropocene, or even keep pace with the damage as it accrues. In the time between my first chapter and this one, the severity of our crises and the dread they inspire has increased in ways that are hard to measure. It would be easy to treat what is likely the twilight of our species in the same way we treat class at the end of any semester: put on a movie for the kids to watch and run out the clock. When subjected to vast networks of damage and disarray, any agency we might have to help students account for the world they inhabit is diminished, but I offer that the true distinction between being *subject to* climate pessimism and being a *compositionist with* climate pessimism is the accounting done within that damage. What we can account for are the effects these galloping and unfolding crises are having on bodies in the classroom, and how those bodies are composing with the crises. Rather than watch a movie, in other words, students can make one, and entangle it with the world. They can make room for these bodies, and perhaps fiddle in a way that resounds with their material conditions.

Conclusion: Into the Para-Apocalypse

When I stand in front of my classroom, I try to keep a double-binding (non-)ownership of writing in mind. At the end of *Situating Writing Processes*, Hannah Rule

claims that writing processes “are snowflakes; no two writers’ are alike” (156). She finds that narratives of control over process are mythological, and ultimately amount to fantasies of tyranny. Rather, writing processes, and composition more broadly, constantly overflow the measuring cups we use in our attempts to understand them. They are situated in the material components of environments through which they move, subject to a plethora of contingencies and unknown variables, ultimately emerging as singular expressions through, by, and around the writer(s) (157). It is something that we both do and do not own. Alongside this non-ownership is the anthropocenic material reality of what the students are writing in, which is at the forefront of my judgments about the students sitting before me. Here are bodies territorialized by vast networks of damage and trauma; here are bodies that are critical assemblies of *other bodies*, constituting vast biomes that I often lazily perceive as individual people; here are bodies in which plastics swirl, cancers grow, and fear festers. If they are conscious of their surroundings—and I find they almost always are—they are either terrified or resigned. Often, they hide this behind techno-optimism or libertarian ideations of capitalist survivalism and individual rights. Still, they know—they cannot help but know—the existential threats in and to the worlds they inhabit. They do and do not own the Anthropocene, and the composition that they do in, by, and through the Anthropocene. When I stand in front of my classroom, I always see the terminal generation, grasping for some sort of ownership over their material conditions. The question becomes how I teach these bodies, and what I can offer them in terms of useful praxis in context.

Returning to Paul Lynch’s “Composition’s New Thing,” I am reminded that my praxis needs to be one that prioritizes “contemplation, connection, and cultivation” (464).

From his reading of Latour, I take, also, heterogeneity (465). Lynch writes, “[i]n a Latourian composition, our job—and ultimately our students’ job—would be to give their worlds the capacity to write or to speak—to make their experience and their vision part of composition’s Thing” (468). Students *know* that their world is damaged. They know better than to look to the future for a chance at a better life. Upward mobility, the American Dream, salvation, peace: these things are fantastical specters drifting above the corpse-pile of our epoch’s neo-liberal, sociocentric calculations and exploitations. Our students know this because it is written in the biomes they inhabit. Their bodies are golems of animate damage, testament to the traumas caused by centuries of anthropocentrism and extractivism. They are living the pre-apocalypse.

Anthropocene Composition is an attempt at letting those traumas express themselves through the medium of anthropocenic bodies. It finds Latour’s description of the Althing Parliament conducive to doing so, but it substantiates the Upper and Lower Houses of that parliament not in terms of the old and the new, but in terms of the knowable and the unknowable. Rather than critique and taxonomize, the Althing Parliament of AC expresses, even if that expression is one of unknowability. To do so, AC employs a number of concepts that are fitting to amplification of the anthropocenic Thing: entanglement, relationality, apposite methodology, inhuman rhetoric, deep ambivalence, *skotison*, mysticism, absurdity, mourning, *homo ludens*. These concepts produce composition that is resonate with the damage and trauma of the epoch, creating the conditions of possibility for “future resonance with eventual audiences and ecologies” (Hawk 235). But even in this contemplation of spatio-temporal circulation that “lets go” of the notion that circulation into the unknown future is something that can be controlled,

we get a whiff of optimism. “Eventual audiences and ecologies” is presumptive; it assumes there will be a future, and the idea that those networks will have the capacity for resonance is optimistic, though critically so. To move farther right on my epistemological scale, more firmly into the realm of critical pessimism, might require a slight revision of this quotation that has, thus far, guided much of my argument. It requires a certain speculation about the terminal generation to occupy classrooms, and a final exposition of what it means for a classroom to be pre-apocalyptic, to have no necessary future.

The terminal generation of students will be such for any number of reasons. It is probable that the last students to occupy classrooms will vary depending on place; Afghanistan’s classrooms may already be seeing their final occupants, while it is likely that Canadian classrooms will persist for much longer. In the United States, classrooms may have several morphologies to undergo before we reach a state where education as we know it looks completely different. Conservative forces have been hard at work for years privatizing the sector, working against teachers unions, and slandering the efficacy of public education (Miner; McShane). Thinking more climatologically, as the planet warms, ice melts, albedo decreases, sea levels rise and vast portions of the human world become uninhabitable, classrooms will diminish in a wave spreading outward from the equator. Riding that wave will be legions of climate migrants: teeming masses displaced from homes both adopted and ancestral. Food stores will decrease, clean water will become scarce, habitable land will be a rare commodity occupied primarily by oligarchs.

But the classroom is never a place for nihilism. The remainder of this century is uncertain, but will almost certainly be characterized by unprecedented violence, inequality, and loss. Every classroom will eventually be empty; every room in which

students once sat and instructors once taught will have a final session, followed afterwards by abandonment or repurposing. Perhaps some of them will be occupied by climate migrants, the homeless, or the forced laborers of whatever military state rises in the heaping ashes of the climate apocalypse. Perhaps some of these classrooms will be re-wilded by whatever life can grow on a ravaged planet. Many will be outright destroyed by increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, bombs, and wildfire. Indulging, for a moment, this speculation as certainty, none of it should vindicate a nihilism in our confrontations with anthropogenic, learning bodies before that time. The world is ending, yes, and as Roy Scranton has argued bluntly in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, “[w]e’re fucked” (16). We are, indeed, and yet as long as life persists, there is composition to be done. The terminal generation of any given composition classroom will always be the most innocent of wrongdoing in the conditions of their epoch, by simple virtue of their age, and they will still have an embodied will *to compose*: to gather voices in expression of their world. On the certain death of our civilization, and the probable death of our species, Scranton writes, “[o]ur future will depend on our ability to confront it not with panic, outrage, or denial, but with patience, reflection, and love” (27). Anthropocene Composition is meant to embody such a resolution, not as a confrontation, but rather as an embrace.

Through this embrace—of the damage, the trauma, the relationality and the unknowable—it becomes apparent that to call a classroom “pre-apocalyptic” is as artificial as any epochal description. It is a rhetorical designation that can be applied to literally anything that has not yet ended in some way. All classrooms are pre-apocalyptic, as are all extant countries, civilizations, and planets. Moreover, within the networks

visible in a classroom, there are always already post-apocalyptic elements. The machines and biomes represented by students, groups, and any sufficiently expansive networks are damaged, traumatized, altered: they are post-apocalypse. To pull from Stephen O’Leary, they have had to re-symbolize “evils” of personal epochal descriptions, drawing designations in their own histories and experiences. This is worth remembering when we face our students, be they the terminal generation or not. Every classroom, then, is pre- and post-apocalypse; they are, in fact, “para-apocalyptic,” because they dwell with/in and alongside the damages of their worlds³⁴. Recognition of this mutual damage, this multitude of traumas that are both heterogeneous and singular, is the first step in reaching a habitus of care: a place where we can all compose, die, and decompose, together, in the Anthropocene.

³⁴ This re-orientation draws from Byron Hawk in *Resounding the Rhetorical*, wherein Heidegger’s model of being is read as a “parahuman function of ecology” (64).

CONCLUSION

Anthropocene Composition reimagines the form and function of the composition classroom to establish an ulterior methodological orientation for pedagogical methods and practices. Over the course of this work, I have audited and analyzed the epoch in terms of its anthropogenic damages and the crises emergent from our epistemological failures. Chapter 1 establishes my understanding of the planet as anthropogenically damaged at all levels, through climate change, pollution, extinction, capitalist climate regimes, and compromised leadership. Chapter 2 engages with the use of “Apocalypse” as a rhetorical device, Kant’s moral project, and the history of ecology in rhetoric and composition. After establishing the Anthropocene as an apocalyptic, mythological construction—in the sense that it temporally reorganizes our understanding of the epoch in response to multiform damages—I follow the thread of human relations to ecology through Rhetoric and Composition, from Nietzsche to the material turn. Chapter 3 reinterprets Bruno Latour’s Althing Parliament. In AC, the Lower House still performs a gathering function, but my Lower House is specifically informed by Indigenous scholarship, new materialism, and adjacent research. Because I conceptualize anthropogenic crises with terms like quasi-object, hyper-object, and wicked problems, I need the traditionally hierarchizing function of the Upper House to do more in terms of engagement with unknowability. I understand articulation of the unknown as a dialectical sorting of the known and unknown. Chapter 4 is an adumbration of AC examples that

exist already, with a focus on nuclear semiotics and the Ray Cat Solution. These are instances of composition that resonate with the conditions of the epoch, that engage with the unknown, and that are creative in their responses to anthropocenic issues without indulging solution-narratives. Describing them is useful to my project because it shows that people are already composing anthropocenically, though they might not understand it in the terms I have gathered. Chapter 5 is more speculative, using historical and fantastical responses to apocalyptic scenarios to interrogate our epistemology, and arguing for a movement from optimism to a critical pessimism. It is my intention that, in doing so, we might compose the conditions of possibility for universal care, rather than burdening ourselves with the improbability of solutions or survival.

The apocalyptic turn Paul Lynch describes in the essay that I have drawn upon so liberally in the past 5 chapters is a pedagogical moment greatly behooved by casuistic teaching, and is therefore a springboard for Anthropocene Composition. In his later work, *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching*, Lynch engages with the impossibility of teaching writing in the current moment. There seems to be a pervasive loss of faith in the disciplinary character of composition, resulting in “postpedagogy” and “postprocess” as indicative of a possible “paradigm shift in the way we are teaching” (31). But what comes next? What does teaching look like without pedagogy? In seeking a tenable response to these questions, Lynch works to rehabilitate the concept of casuistry: case-based moral reasoning that does not defer to a rulebook, but rather seeks the best outcome on an individual, non-transferrable basis (21). For Lynch, a casuistic pedagogy can help teachers avoid “both despairing ad-hocism and rigid formalism” (102). Teaching, then, becomes a case-by-case, non-dogmatic practice. Terminal generations—the final victims

of anthropocenic crises to enter pre-apocalyptic classrooms—will not benefit from dogmatism nor from an adrift, improvisational responsiveness. Instead, our pedagogy in these classrooms should be one that gathers the stakeholder voices and conditions of the Anthropocene, and then generates the conditions of possibility for resonant composition. AC is casuistic, then, inasmuch as it seeks to teach to and for these terminal generations specifically, and in such a way that recognizes the different experiences these multiform apocalypses are generating.

AC is not meant to put forward pedagogical methods for people to follow in a formalistic way, hence my brief lists and partial descriptions of potential AC classroom assignments and projects. But I do want to close with the description of a class, lesson, and assignment as an example of what casuistic pedagogy might entail. It is worth noting that, at the time that I write this, I do not have the authority to fully jettison the existing curricula of the institutions where I teach, which is the case for many if not most writing instructors; therefore, I cannot fully instantiate AC pedagogy in the classroom yet. However, I have used the principles of AC to adapt certain lessons and material in these pedagogical spaces. Though the Upper House functions and material—articulation of the unknown through mysticism and absurdity, for instance—are still a bit too “out there” for my current purview, the Lower House’s functions are imminently graspable to students in my classrooms and provide material for writing within the genres prescribed by current, mainstream writing programs. A lesson that I have incorporated in nearly every iteration of first year writing for years now uses Jordan’s documentary, *Albatross*, and Jensen’s article, “Guilty Grief and Ecological Mourning.” I show the documentary in class, and we perform a standard rhetorical analysis guided by recent lessons on multimodality,

ecology, and relationality. While they are watching, I ask them to jot notes informed by a broad question bank:

- 1) How does this documentary relate to our discussion of ecology and *oikos*?
- 2) How does Chris Jordan create pathways to understanding or empathizing with these birds?
- 3) Is it a rhetorical act to mourn something? If so, how, and if not, then why not?

As we build towards a discussion of mourning's rhetorical dimensions and *Albatross* as an act of mourning, we focus on the ways in which Jordan mourns the birds of Midway Island. We connect this to larger conversations about what it is to be ecological, and the etymological connections between ecology and home through *oikos*. When this discussion has run its course, I task the class with their own compositional project in the spirit of *Albatross* and "Guilty Grief." This project can be bigger or smaller depending on the syllabus, but generally contains the following steps:

- 1) Describe Jordan's act of mourning in terms of its rhetorical dimensions.
- 2) Audit your own environment or one that has meaning to you.
- 3) Identify a species in danger or sustaining damage that may eventually constitute an existential threat (like the albatross of Midway).
- 4) Design memorials for that species.

This can be a unit-capping project, or an instance of overnight homework. What the students produce is diverse, to include poems, drawings, and written justification for these mediums. The more policy-oriented students sometimes try to ameliorate the issue with public-facing information campaigns, intending to save the species from further

damage. Though such impulses still fall into the problem-solution narrative trap, I do not begrudge students this reasoning.

This project gives students the opportunity to gather stakeholder voices through environmental audit, and to compose in a genre without the onuses of critique or solution. Students thereby occupy the Lower House of the Althing Parliament, whether they understand it that way or not. Further, the project asks them to practice rhetorical sensitivity by reflecting upon the rhetorical strategies of the documentary, and by composing within an epideictic rhetorical genre, shifting them toward care. In a classroom more blatantly informed by AC, the project could be extended to encompass functions of the Upper House. In this context, articulation of the unknown might include a more speculative memorialization of one species or another, or it may extend to entire biomes. How, for instance, will we mourn the Colorado River or the Great Barrier Reef? What should be the inscription on the gravestone of humanity itself? Questions like these require sensitivity not only to rhetoric, but to futurity. The responses will always be tinged by the playful or absurd by virtue of the context in which they are composed, despite the dark subject matter.

The memorial project is casuistic, not so much as a moral practice (Lynch, *After Pedagogy* 104), but as a compositional one. It recognizes that the typical circumstances under which composition is judged are no longer there, and finds new criteria for effective compositional practice under the apocalyptic circumstances of the Anthropocene. As demonstrated through audits of the epoch writ large, these circumstances are in a constant flux of compounding damages and loss. Pedagogy, in this case, risks falling in to the “despairing ad-hocism” that Lynch wants to avoid, but the

guiding principles of AC keep pedagogy grounded not only in the ecological present, but in a versatility that instantiates epochal resonance. Lynch refers to this versatility as “casuistic stretching,” which he takes from Kenneth Burke (117). Casuistic stretching is the inclusion of new principles while simultaneously maintaining established principles. Lynch understands the potential of this concept as bureaucratization of the imaginative. I see in this idea another instantiation of the Althing Parliament, wherein new ideas join the old, all are given a voice, and inclusion is a watchword of bureaucracy.

Another benefit of casuistic stretching, as it pertains to pedagogy, is its necessarily limited adaptability coupled with recognition of and reaction to those limits. Quoting Burke, Lynch writes, “The devices for ostensibly retaining allegiance to an ‘original principle’ by casuistic stretching eventually lead to a demoralization, which can only be stopped by a new start” (118). This leads to “perspective by incongruity:” defamiliarization through inclusion of outside elements in an otherwise familiar setting. Casuistic stretching, at this point, often enters a Burkean comic frame, indulging humor in the name of process and accepting that comedy must often accompany the anxiety of overcoming demoralization (120). In AC, the absurd must often accompany the tragic for the same reason; anxiety is a necessary condition for care. By this logic, the demoralization resultant from casuistic stretching is also necessary and good to the ends of inclusivity and articulating the (un)known in the pre-apocalyptic classroom. The perspective by incongruity—defamiliarization—is not just occurrent but essential. AC is, in some ways, a pedagogy *about limits*, and about accountability towards those limits. It is when we examine the incongruities of the epoch, and the defamiliarization (weirding) of our *oikos*, that we can begin to compose with resonance in the Anthropocene. In other

words, AC lets the pre-apocalyptic classroom speak as such, instead of forcing breath through the dead lips of past traditions.

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