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**PLANT FIGURATIONS: A VITAL STUDY IN RHETORICAL ADDRESS
FOLLOWING THEODOR W. ADORNO**

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**PLANT FIGURATIONS: A VITAL STUDY IN RHETORICAL
ADDRESS FOLLOWING THEODOR W. ADORNO**

by

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Dedication

For Teddy
and other complex vibrancies

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Thanks for thinking I was weird too.

**Plant Figurations: A Vital Study in Rhetorical Address
following Theodor W. Adorno**

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In this dissertation, I ask the question: how is (and is not) the plant both subject and object of human rhetoric? In taking up the question, I explore an array of texts, artifacts, and encounters revealing “the plant” addressed as a vital object of subjective experience and as a subject of objective reflection. Following what Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif call “extrahuman rhetorical relations,” I demonstrate an orientation of struggle that holds the question open at its limit, by approaching iterations of “the plant” caught in motion. I apply a method drawn from Frankfurt School scholar Theodor W. Adorno’s invitation to apply negative dialectics—or immanent criticism—to everyday sites of personal encounter and interdisciplinary texts. I understand the dialectic features of human-plant relations in three chapters or figures studies. First, I examine the concept of “natural history” revealed in a site-specific experience at Red Rock State Park in California. Second, I look at the historic and contemporary texts that name a parasitic liana known as the Sipo-Matador. Third, I hear the sounding of European trees emanating through a vinyl copy of the 2012 art-album *Years* by Bartholomäus Traubeck. Approaching these figures in affirmative and negative modes, I argue that keeping the dialectic in motion instantiates a critical process—a reflection on reflective capacity—across multiple renderings of representation and structure. Writing and reading is an

essential part of this process. In understanding thinking as a movement of mediation—a dramatic journey joining the dialectic across theoretical abstraction and lived reality—I reveal a multidimensional orientation to rhetorical criticism suited to hear the plant, addressed. My approach, I argue, keeps Adorno and the plant—both subjects and objects of this dissertation—close enough to touch while at bay enough to remain mysterious. I trace a malignant structure surrounding my encounter between the human and the plant—the Enlightenment in its dominating iterations—in relief as much as I hope to leave open creative reflection and vital critique.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the summer of 2014, Peter Coffin, a New York City based installation artist, designed a series of exhibits intending to reveal a deeply complex relationship between human and botanical worlds. Coffin's aesthetic experience, which he simply titled, *Living*, played with various media and scale to bring examples of human culture into contact with nature. Built in the rooms of New York City's Red Bull Studios, an exhibition, lecture, recording and performance space in Chelsea, Coffin's project keenly featured audience interaction and interpretation.¹ In one exhibit, Coffin invited viewers to meditate on exotic anachronism by placing a bumper-sticker clad automobile, similar to the DeLorean DMC-12 from the popular time-traveling film series *Back to the Future*, next to a common houseplant. By drawing attention to collisions between the mechanical and the natural, Coffin initiated a provocative set of questions: What makes the markings on the surface of a leaf different from the bumper stickers on the exterior of a vehicle nostalgic in its futurity? How does a sense of time vary based on whether one considers the standpoint of an automobile or a fern? If there is a line to be drawn between culture and nature, how might it be described? In subtly posing these unanswerable questions,

¹ Mary Margaret Rinebold, "The Life of the Object and the Approach of the Viewer with Peter

Coffin exposed an intimate and textured relationship between a viewing audience and various objects of life.²

In another exhibit in *Living*, Coffin constructed a small greenhouse that also doubled as a recording studio in the gallery's basement. In this exhibit, Coffin composed music for an inconspicuous group of audience members: the plants for whom the basement-greenhouse was home. While the ears of human gallery-goers could certainly appreciate the sounds, the artists' collection of tracks was not designed exclusively for human consumption.³ As part of a decade long endeavor, Coffin (and other musicians including Yoko Ono, Animal Collective, Ariel Pink, and Sonic Youth) assumed plants as their primary audience of address. While implicit, Coffin asks human-audience members to approach *Music for Plants* not from a sense of personal enjoyment but rather in an imaginative mode of curiosity, hopefully leading to appreciating sounds that might motivate vegetal pleasure. Subtly, Coffin challenges us to navigate the difference between a traditional assumption of plants as static objects and an emergent understanding of plants as fellow audience members of art.⁴

As Coffin's large scale 2014 exhibit suggests, much remains to be explored with the provocative suggestions about the constitution of vegetal life and its relationship to

² Rinebold, "The Life of the Object," <http://www.redbullstudios.com/newyork/articles/the-life-of-the-object-and-the-approach-of-the-viewer-with-peter-coffin-2>.

³ Jeremy Gordon, "Sonic Youth, Ariel Pink, Animal Collective Members, Jim O'Rourke, Yoko Ono, More Make Music for Plants," *Pitchfork* (blog), August 22, 2014, <http://pitchfork.com/news/56429-sonic-youth-ariel-pink-animal-collective-members-jim-orourke-yoko-ono-more-make-music-for-plants/>.

⁴ Claire Healy, "The Secret History of Music for Plants" *Dazed Digital* (blog), August 16, 2014, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/21280/1/the-secret-history-of-music-for-plants>.

human experience of art and everyday life. For me, *Living* offers a sensorial invitation to open a curious investigative journey that asks after the ways the plant is both similar and different from the human. In asking the large question—what is the relationship between the human and the plant?—other questions also emerge. If such a relationship exists, how can it be understood? Does such a relationship have a history? Are some means more or less appropriate in ascertaining this connection? What constraints or limitations exist in seeking to place this relationship in relief? What implications present themselves in the answers, especially for the field of rhetoric, which I argue is well suited to explore some of the possibilities that present themselves in the question's address?

In asking these questions and taking seriously the challenge to answer them, I argue, that we must begin to understand the plant as a vital object of subjective experience and as a subject of objective reflection. In situating the relationship between humans and plants as a struggle between what counts as subject and object of rhetorical inquiry, I explore what Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif call “extrahuman rhetorical relations.”⁵ Defined simply, extrahuman rhetorical relations refers to a study of “the scene of responsive engagement with or among nonhuman others.”⁶ While the remaining pages will be devoted to explicating the exciting opportunities and challenges of the “extrahuman turn,” I argue in favor of considering an inquiry into the sites and situations in which human-plant relations are constituted and revealed as a unique contribution to a growing interest in the relationship between the theoretical humanities and the natural

⁵ Diane Davis and Michelle Ballif, “Introduction: Pushing the Limits of the *Anthropos*,” in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 346-353.

⁶ Davis and Ballif, “Pushing the Limits,” 348.

(especially vegetal) worlds. I also hope to consider an unanswerable, but nevertheless vital, question about the proper rhetorical and ethical response to categories of otherness and difference with the example of the plant.

I look at a broad set of artifacts that reveal the extrahuman relationship between humans and plants: state parks, nineteenth century travel logs, texts in Western philosophy, contemporary understandings of plant life drawn from biology, and various pieces of art (including poetry, sound, and science fiction). To this end I am interested in how they present a unique *figuration* of the plant. I mean figure here in multiple ways. First, I am appealing to a figure as a process of rhetoric in which, through techniques of representation, meaning is both enhanced and altered from traditional expectations.⁷ In this instance, a figure, similar to a trope, invests an active sense of play to alter the perception or reception of meaning.⁸ Personification, or the rendering of human traits onto nonhuman objects, is one mode in which the extrahuman is figured. I also use figure as a verb, to reference an act that offers significance through the tracing of contours and textures. Marc Jensen offers a helpful example in considering how the Venus flytrap is personified in the popular film *Little Shop of Horrors* by addressing the techniques of figuration and representations of race in Western culture.⁹ Assessing figuration offers an

⁷ Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 178.

⁸ Raphael Lyne, *Shakespeare, Rhetoric and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 29.

⁹ Marc Jensen, “‘Feed Me!’: Power Struggles and the Portrayal of Race in *Little Shop of Horrors*,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 51–67.

opportunity to reflect on specific instructions offered by an artifact on how to define and approach categories of otherness or *alterity*.¹⁰

I also use “figure” in another sense: to appeal to a more ambivalent scene of rhetoric articulated by Davis. Because plants do not speak the language of humans, every attempt to establish a communicative relationship is already mediated by language and structural limitations. External systems of circulation (economic and cultural) precede—(*pre-*)figure—any encounter between the human and the plant.¹¹ Thus, a figure reveals a constrained presence, or following Davis, a shared “commonality oblivious to borders that precedes and exceeds symbolic identification,” nonetheless mediated by artifacts and interests of representation.¹²

Thinking through this and related paradoxes is what philosopher and cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno calls *immanent criticism*. Adorno scholar Brian Wall describes immanent criticism succinctly as “seeking to remain within the terms of a particular film or text and fastening on the contradictions inherent there so that those contradictions

¹⁰ Stacy Alaimo understands this as a theoretical site of work, where various fields of understanding come together in one cultural body or icon. See, Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010). 19. Emmanuel Levinas describes alterity, broadly speaking, as an external presence, while unrecognizable, nonetheless calls my presence into question and being. Navigating such an encounter, paradoxical as its description suggests, is the fulcrum of what Levinas described as ethical relations. See also, Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 43.

¹¹ For use in green film studies, see, for example: Sean Cubitt, *EcoMedia* (New York: Rodopi, 2005); Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013); Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

¹² Diane Davis, *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 2.

might speak to the material conditions in which a film was made.”¹³ Following Adorno, I argue that the material conditions of concern do not exist solely at the level of production. They are also revealed in the composition of an artifact’s concepts, in elements activated in an audience, and in ongoing contributions exceeding intention. In other words, I understand “figure” to be the product or tracing of both possibility and impossibility; a form exposed and fashioned by the movement of rhetorical labor in design, structure, and reception.

In considering the figure in paradox, I am attentive to Adorno’s understanding of a relationship among an artifact’s production, formal composition, and content. As envisioned by Adorno, modes of immanent criticism examine relationships in numerous layers—what Frederic Jameson calls horizons—including the economic and political context of an artifact’s production; the reviews of audiences and critics; and its origin in broader cultural and theoretical terms.¹⁴ I will explain Adorno’s immanent criticism more fully in chapter two, placing it in relation to the history of rhetorical methods and honing in on ideological criticism before providing further detail on the steps I used to assess the disparate genre of artifacts and texts that vitalize my inquiry. Before I do, I would like to situate my question in contemporary conversation.

In the first section of this introduction, I articulate my definition of rhetoric drawn from Kenneth Burke and establish the significance of my question by introducing

¹³ Brian Wall, *Theodor Adorno and Film Theory: The Fingerprint of the Spirit* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 76. For his work on Adorno, see: Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990).

Adorno's work. In the second section, the review of literature, I situate my question in relation to contemporary philosophical and rhetorical conversations. Like Adorno, I designed the form of the literature review to match the content; I develop a conversation dialectically, by examining two approaches (and a third meeting point) in a contemporary line of inquiry known as *posthumanism*. Specifically, I examine strands of scholarship chipping away at the centrality of the human subject in their exploration of various deviations from categorical expectations. Then, I examine the contemporary speculative turn in rhetoric, specifically object-oriented ontology, especially in scholars' attempts to theorize the object as "withdrawn" or unknowable. I complete the second section by examining the affirmative qualities of new materialism as a stasis point between posthumanism and object-oriented ontology.

I. Introduction and Definitions

The overarching question of my study could be reconsidered as: How are the human and nonhuman figured rhetorically? Since my question lends itself to a number of theoretical entrance points, I would like to begin by operationalizing a definition of rhetoric. I turn to rhetorician Kenneth Burke for assistance. Second, by way of introduction, I turn to an important and popular text of Adorno to articulate an association between his scholarship and the natural world. In so doing, I articulate Adorno's theory of domination as a way of establishing significance for my question.

BUNDLING THE APPROACH: DEFINING RHETORIC AS ORIENTATION

To begin, I'd like to bundle or bring together a set of terms to help establish what

I mean by rhetoric. Kenneth Burke described the critical act of bundling terms as an *orientation*.¹⁵ This is to say, attempting to understand ones' position in relation to another requires working through a sense of where one is (*materiality*), how one got there (*history*), and where one might be going (*fantasy*).¹⁶ Understanding each sphere of sensation (and their relation to other spheres) requires an appreciation of symbols-in-use. Said differently, understanding our spheres of sensation requires a speculative but nonetheless substantive interplay of words and ideas to recount our memories, understand contemporary experience, and name things (physical and ephemeral) before us.¹⁷ Orientation appeals to a living architecture: experiences are named through words, words string together to create concepts, concepts interact with each other to construct forms, forms organize to create ensembles, ensembles play together to establish ecologies, and ecologies in action comprise the sensed and meaningful universe. Understanding an orientation requires the use of a concept of scale to trace or induce a developmental process, from the smallest unit to a (perhaps even *the*) cosmic schema.

But, we could also approach an orientation in the opposite way, that is, from how we deduce the components of the term "orientation" itself. Language names vitality or the process of organic habitation, and rhetoric is the study of various functions of

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose, Third Edition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14.

¹⁶ Adrian J. Ivakhiv, "The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema," *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (March 8, 2011): 118–39.

¹⁷ I am liberally paraphrasing here from Burke's writing about symbolic interplay between particular and universal experience. See Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 149-52.

language.¹⁸ I mean function here in at least three senses. In the first sense, language takes on a technical mode of composition and decomposition. Burke draws attention to three expressions: (1) as in the act of defining, symbol-use assembles or divides parts and processes into clear and discerning roles; (2) in arrangement in art or literature, devices or figures reveal complex associations of mode and tone; (3) in noticing repeated patterns over time, location, and genre, forms become noticeable and articulated. In a second sense, the function of language is selective. Burke noted that, like a photograph, language composes the world, and thus “directs the attention” of an audience to various details.¹⁹ In so doing, language also functions like a scope: its aperture and filter dictate composition artificially. Finally, like an “alchemic moment,” the function of language is transformative. Language can “magically” convert various organic substances and into designs or refashion previous style and experiences in entirely new ways.²⁰ Likewise, language can dissolve previous calcifications, loosely distributing the particles elsewhere.

In its broadest sense, then, the study of rhetoric appeals to an investigation into

¹⁸ I am paraphrasing here from Burke’s definition in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. He defines rhetoric as, “rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” I prefer this because it already opens up the category to non-human speculation. See: Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 43.

¹⁹ Again paraphrasing Burke’s definition of terministic screens as Kenneth Burke, *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

²⁰ Here, I am referring to what Burke calls a “contextual paradox,” which I theorize is not that far away from Adorno’s sense of dialectics drawn from the Greek term *hypostasis*. Burke noted that the process of definition involves the irresolvable struggle between creating boundaries around that which contains no boundaries; a Sisyphean struggle to offer clarity to that which by its nature, is ambiguous. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 21-4.

the various pairings of inductive and deductive approaches to understanding language-as-life and life-as-language in respect to an “orientation.”²¹ In my specific study, I propose an orientation drawn from the work of Adorno that could help us understand a specific rhetorical encounter between two entities of biological language: humans and plants. In so doing, I hope to offer a sense of the orientation I seek to transform and the various ambiguities limiting such an endeavor.²²

Borrowing another phrase from Burke, I’d like to proceed by articulating the “general schema of meanings” and accompanying motives I seek to transform through critical analysis.²³ I turn to Adorno’s co-authored monograph, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as a theoretical touchstone to quickly concretize his dense writing and to help name the orientation that needs to be challenged by means of critical force.

DEFINING THE NEED: ENLIGHTENMENT ORIENTATION AND DOMINATION

In his work with Max Horkheimer, Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a perhaps shocking characterization of the what is considered wisdom from the Age of

²¹ Following Stefan Helmreich, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that linguistic meaning defines life in various forms; see Stefan Helmreich, “What Was Life? Answers from Three Limit Biologies,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (June 1, 2011): 671–96; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

²² Burke describes all transformation as a process of dialectics. While in “a restricted sense,” dialectic appeals to the master trope of irony, in an expansive sense, “a dialectic aims to give us a representation by the use of mutually related or interacting perspectives...” See, Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” *Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 503.

²³ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 31, 169. I am also deeply indebted to Abram Anders for his careful reading of Burke and Gilles Deleuze. See: Adam Anders, “Pragmatism by Incongruity: ‘Equipment from Kenneth Burke to Gilles Deleuze,’” *KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 7, no. 2 (2011): <http://kbjournal.org/anders>.

Reason: it perfects practices of domination.²⁴ In some traditional understandings, the Enlightenment is considered a preeminent intellectual and cultural movement in Western history.²⁵ Providing a stark break with the authority of monotheistic religious organization and non-democratic government structures, Enlightenment thinkers are long heralded as trailblazers of cultivated reason, individualism, skeptical inquiry, and scientific innovation. As such, any association between the Enlightenment and domination, before Adorno and Horkheimer, seemed counter intuitive. In the Frankfurt scholars' rendering, however, the emphasis on freedom and liberty in the historical era between the 17th and 18th centuries is more complicated, especially when examining the treatment of the figure of nature in the writings of its primary philosophers. Following contemporary Adorno scholar Deborah Cook's interpretation of *The Dialectic*, the premise of Enlightenment freedom is bound to a more covert repression: humans achieve independence by "compulsively [forcing] natural objects into an explanatory schema in order to dominate them."²⁶ With the understanding of rhetoric as orientation in mind, I consider the implications of Adorno and Horkheimer's suggestion that the contemporary situation is defined not by the experience of individual autonomy, but premised on the subjugation of the natural world.²⁷ Since their intervention is complex by design, I want to use the following section to bundle together ways of understanding Adorno and Horkheimer's central thesis: While the promise of the Enlightenment aimed at ushering

²⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 39, 4.

²⁵ Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-15.

²⁶ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 5.

²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," 39.

in a space of freedom, it also carried with it (and continues to influence) an orientation of domination.

The Age of Enlightenment is often theorized as a central transformative moment in Western philosophy, socio-political organization, and rhetoric.²⁸ Drawing from new scientific discoveries, particularly Galileo Galilei's astronomical and mathematical insight and Sir Isaac Newton's explication of calculus, astronomy, and physics, Enlightenment scholars sought to articulate aspects of life in a single, unifying register of transparent language.²⁹ In philosophy, deep meditations on subjective experience forwarded by Rene Descartes, understood that form to be scientific reasoning. Descartes advanced a model based on a dualism between two "substances"—mind and matter—with distinct attributes and essences, neither dependent on the other for operation.³⁰ After Descartes, a mind/body split became a central filter for dominant Western modes of theoretical inquiry. Immanuel Kant's transcendental subject arguably unified the dualism into the concept of an individual, which, while tethered to a sense of the body in nature, nonetheless also freed itself by careful and exhaustive reasoning.³¹

²⁸ For general Enlightenment position, see, for example: Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1990). For an understanding of rhetoric during the Enlightenment, see: Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, "Enlightenment Rhetoric," in *The Rhetorical Tradition* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1990), 791-980.

²⁹ Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 41.

³⁰ See, for example: Gordon Baker and Katherine Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 65.

³¹ This understanding is under contestation in contemporary rhetorical theory. For a closer examination of this debate, see, for example: Pat J. Gehrke, "Turning Kant against the Priority of Autonomy: Communication Ethics and the Duty to Community," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 1 (2002): 1-21 and Scott R. Stroud, "Kant on Community: A Reply to Gehrke," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39, no. 2 (2006): 157-65.

New social and economic organization also emerged from the reasoning human subject. The long-standing historical political system, The Great Chain of Being (a divinely inspired organization of immutable order) was, in a sense, shattered by the Enlightenment articulation of reason.³² Political theorists like John Locke developed a theory of civil society based on principles of individual liberty, private property ownership, and freedom of mobility through social and political roles.³³ Notions of wealth accumulation and rational choice influenced changing economic organization, including Adam Smith's understanding of principles motivated by predictable distribution along the lines of individual desire and market forces.³⁴ As Charles Withers notes, the Enlightenment is "a process concerned with the central place of reason...mediated through direct encounter and not blind faith in ancient authority...."³⁵ Thus, while not to be considered a homogenous set of texts, the Enlightenment reflects a broad sweeping change in all forms of human organization based on the adoption of an orientation toward the world substantially different than that which preceded it.³⁶

The importance of the Enlightenment for rhetoric, following Barbara Warnick,

³² Allen Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

³³ For central studies, see: Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, an Interpretation; the Rise of Modern Paganism*. (New York: Knopf, 1966); Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment, Second Edition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Joel Mokyr, "Mercantilism, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution," in *Eli Heckscher, International Trade, and Economic History*, ed. Ronald Findlay (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

³⁵ Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

³⁶ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

could be understood by tracing the transformation of rhetorical style. While various classical positions sought to characterize ideas in ornate orations, Enlightenment rhetoric took up a clear and explanatory approach, emphasizing factual examples and logical reasoning.³⁷ Warnick notes that Enlightenment thinkers jettisoned previous popular rhetorical styles assuming ornamentation amounted to a kind of mystification that sullied the truth.³⁸ Kant for example is considered especially distrustful of rhetoric, famously calling it “a deceitful act.”³⁹ As Scott Stroud, Debra Hawhee, and Cory Holding caution, however, exclusively reading the Enlightenment for its stylized clarity may be one-sided, especially considering footnoted texts displaying a rich debate between scholars at the time about persuasion and material metaphors.⁴⁰ While Stroud and others have asked us to reconsider Kant from a contemporary rhetorical perspective, the need to return and re-read is consistent with a concern with the tremendous sway held by the Enlightenment.

Adorno and Horkheimer, notice a tendency for the Enlightenment writers to

³⁷ Barbara Warnick, “The Old Rhetoric vs. the New Rhetoric: The Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” *Communication Monographs* 49, no. 4 (1982): 263. See also, Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Joyce Flory, “Language, Communication, and the Enlightenment Idea of Progress,” *Central States Speech Journal* 26, no. 4 (1975): 253–58.

³⁸ Warnick, “Old Rhetoric,” 274.

³⁹ Don Paul Abbott, “Kant, Theremin, and the Morality of Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40, no. 3 (2007): 274. Once again, this is not to be received as a totalized statement. Instead, I am attempting to position the Frankfurt school critique, which in many ways, set the stage for the contemporary reconsideration advanced by Stroud and others.

⁴⁰ Scott R. Stroud, *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric* (University Park, PN: Penn State University Press, 2014); Debra Hawhee and Cory Holding, “Case Studies in Material Rhetoric: Joseph Priestley and Gilbert Austin,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 28, no. 3 (2010): 264.

conceal their use of rhetorical styles of persuasion under the guise of clarity.⁴¹ Francis Bacon, for example, exalted a style of scientific prose that concealed his understanding of rhetorical elements of persuasion.⁴² The ability of an Enlightenment orientation to render such control over rhetorical style and form of argument is precisely what troubles Adorno and Horkheimer. An exemplar piece of Enlightenment writing, Bacon's "Of Nature," forms the basis for the critique advanced by Adorno and Horkheimer. In positing the defining experience of the human as posited *against* nature, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that Bacon (and by extension, the Enlightenment orientation) established both the condition of alienation and the locus of a specific form of Western domination.⁴³ I isolate two strands of their concern: one that begins from understanding natural alienation as a site of control and the other as a figure of enmity.

Adorno and Horkheimer are concerned with Bacon's characterization of nature

⁴¹ Adorno writes a beautiful passage in *The Essay as Form*. He argues, "Thus historically the essay is related to rhetoric, which the scientific mentality, since Descartes and Bacon, has always wanted to do away with; that is, until, appropriately in the age of science, rhetoric decayed and became a science sui generis, the science of communication. Of course rhetoric has always been a form of thought which accommodated itself to communicative language. It directed itself to the unmediated: the substitute-satisfaction of its audience. Yet the essay preserves in the very autonomy of its presentation, through which it distinguishes itself from the scientific mode of communication, traces of the communicative with which science dispenses. The pleasures which rhetoric wants to provide to its audience are sublimated in the essay into the idea of the pleasure of freedom *vis-à-vis* the object, freedom that gives the object more of itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas." See: Theodor W Adorno, "The Essay as Form," trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Fredric Will, *New German Critique* no. 32 (1984): 168.

⁴² James P. Zappen, "Francis Bacon and the Rhetoric of Science," *College Composition and Communication* 26, no. 3 (October 1975): 244.

⁴³ For further reading, see: Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis* (New York: Russell F Moore, 1626/1947).

as an entity that can and should be subdued by humans.⁴⁴ In his writing, nature is at once considered an external threat from which humans must guard themselves against and at the same time a placid site of resources available for extracted use. Technological development is considered the primary vehicle to satisfy both goals. Technology then is a weapons and tool. In effecting security and production, the process of development is aggrandized as demonstrations of supremacy. Technological models of prediction and investigation explore and perfect humans' supervisory role in subduing the wild state of nature. Taken up as a form of thinking—or what Adorno and Horkheimer call a “constellation of ideas”—Bacon and others established a prime mantra of the Enlightenment orientation: “whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect.”⁴⁵ What troubled the Frankfurt writers is not just individual examples of thought-in-use, but how quickly model and mantra became abstracted into other systems of counting and control. They maintain that digestible data sets, predictable patterns, and social systems that became rhetorically appealing during the Enlightenment perversely found their perfection in fascist regimes, particularly in Germany in the 1930's. Hannah Arendt makes a clear connection in her work, understanding the Nazi regime as a blend

⁴⁴ There is a lengthy debate about how to interpret these passages. Feminist science scholars argue, along the lines of Adorno and Horkheimer, Bacon went so far as to understand all scientific discovery as an enjoyable act of violence. See for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 35-37; Sandra Harding *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 113; Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19-25. For recent work attempting to rethink Bacon's rhetoric in a more generous tone, see: Peter Pesic, “Wrestling with Proteus: Francis Bacon and the ‘Torture’ of Nature,” *Isis* 90, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 81–94.

⁴⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” 6.

of bureaucracy, managerial supremacy, and administrative counting.⁴⁶ Despite organizing centuries after Bacon's writing, Horkheimer and Adorno nonetheless argue that the Enlightenment's understanding of nature and its accompanying orientation set in motion the conditions, logical architecture, and argumentative rationale for the emergence of National Socialism.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, "nature" cannot be reduced to the Enlightenment figures of threat or resource. Instead, "nature" could also be considered as an analogy for the number of historical orientations unjustly subdued by the two Enlightenment motives of security and consumption. In other words, "nature" is figured, or substitutes for, various bodies, cultures, and orientations whose interests do not coincide with those of the Enlightenment. For Horkheimer and Adorno, to speak of "nature" not only appeals to an external world around us, but also the rhetorical ways nature is deified in myth: personified as an instructive or playful creature, grappled with as a worshipped or feared entity, or unknowable, but phenomena with which one enters a relationship.⁴⁷ Jean-François Lyotard describes a similar understanding of myth-based cultural organizations associated with nature as examples of light anthropomorphism.⁴⁸ If nature is considered *something* to control, and at once stands in for knowledge and cultural practices that affirm its reverence, then, the Frankfurt writers argue, the Enlightenment also provides rationale for subduing those bodies and orientations.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

⁴⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Concept of Enlightenment," 6.

⁴⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

What Adorno and Horkheimer suggest is not that we ought to return to an uncritical acceptance of light anthropomorphism in our everyday lives. Instead, they are concerned with the consequences of banishing any connection between myth and truth. In the move to expunge myth, the systems of Enlightenment abstraction began to assess not just nature, but humans and cultures that did not appear to fit the rational bill.

Enlightenment orientation begins to “hold sway,” or assert control over all figures of nature—anything from unconscious desire, to the bodies of women and sexual deviants, to the cultures of non-Western societies and non-white bodies. Perversely, the extent and success of the control exerted over natural objects became a requisite test of vigor and liberation of the Enlightenment subject.⁴⁹ In other words, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, a close read of the relationship to nature articulated by the Enlightenment also explains a Western penchant for and model of domination. Understood grammatically as a subject’s position over an object, human liberation became linked to the suppression of an object (and all the things and people defined by the term). Following a number of contemporary scholars on race, the grammar *of language use itself* reflects a similar logic of Enlightenment domination.⁵⁰

To summarize an already brief glance at complex historical and philosophical

⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” 13.

⁵⁰ While it is beyond the scope of this prospectus, contemporary critical race scholars interested in articulating the extent of anti-blackness in the United States and the relationship between civil society and white supremacy make this point explicitly. See, for example: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008); Joy James, “‘Concerning Violence,’ Frantz Fanon’s Rebel Intellectual in Search of a Black Cyborg,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 1 (2013): 57-70; Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737-780; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

thought, the act of subduing nature in Enlightenment thinking is correlated with two senses of freedom: first, to cultivate and experience the pleasures of civilization and second, to liberate oneself from the old orders of the past. So read as a figure with dual purpose, the object of nature is constituted in Enlightenment orientation as a contradiction embedded in the very fabric and texture of all social experience: in attempting to expand modes of production, nature is considered an absent background *and* a powerful force to fear. In attempting to justify new forms of political organization based on principles of liberation, nature is both a human instinct that must be expressed and also a perversion of previous myth-based argument that must be repressed. But, both these processes of domination that remain prevalent today begin when the subject (human) is alienated, that is separated or estranged *by principle*, from an object (nature).

It is important to note that for Adorno and Horkheimer one is not in a position to exit the Enlightenment now armed with this revelation; its structuring influence is noticed all around us and embedded in language. Unflinching support for Enlightenment recommendations, however, including idyllic belief in technological progress, a false freedom in capital accumulation, exclusive reduction of knowledge to predictive data models, and the ruthless repression of what Jay M. Bernstein calls rhetorical enchantment, ought to be challenged.⁵¹ Adorno and Horkheimer offer a more complex approach, including support for deep thinking and rigorous meditation on the historical origin of these motivations and principles. By moving outward from cultural artifacts and

⁵¹ By rhetorical enchantment, J. M. Bernstein means myth, desire, affect, and all the unexplainable phenomena that rational schemas attempt to repress or put off until later. J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

philosophical writings, Horkheimer and Adorno offer an opportunity to make explicit connections between historical and contemporary orientations and offer the opportunity to ask how we might intervene to imagine different orientations.

One such intervention seems simple, yet under explored, given the preceding short overview: placing Adorno in the context of contemporary environmental theory.⁵² As Cook makes imperative in the opening of her text, Adorno set a groundwork for a “green” reading of philosophy, and, in my case rhetoric, that has only recently been appreciated. “The rhetoric of nature,” writes Christina Gerhardt, “often neglected in studies of Adorno, is central to an understanding of his views.”⁵³ Engaging the intersection of critical theory and vegetal life in specific figures, I argue, also provides an opportunity to think through Adorno’s rhetorical, political, and aesthetic orientation in new ways.

The Enlightenment orientation—especially in its move to secure an extraordinary space for the human—can be confronted by returning to consider our primary and intrinsic connection to a natural extrahuman, established through an invigorated reading of Adorno. Before I explain Adorno’s approach in more detail, I’d like to examine some other ways scholars have tried to redefine elements of Enlightenment orientation because it will help concretize my inquiry in contemporary discussion and contrast my approach. I

⁵² For other examples, see Kevin DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999). I am less influenced by environmental social movements and more curious about theorizing encounters with the natural world at the point of object-subject relations.

⁵³ Christina Gerhardt, “The Ethics of Animals in Adorno and Kafka.” *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 159.

will now examine two different modes of criticism: the first tries to challenge the definition of the human subject as a way of opening attention to a concern for encountering the natural world; the second is an attempt to invert the logical conclusion drawn by the Enlightenment by arguing the nature is best served, not in attempts to reconcile its alienation, but to insist to ourselves it ought to remain objectively “withdrawn.”

II. Literature Review

Adorno identifies a core rhetorical problem at the onset of his foundational essay “On Subject and Object.”⁵⁴ “To lead with reflections about subject and object,” he writes, “raises the difficulty of stating what exactly the topic of discussion should be. The terms are patently equivalent.”⁵⁵ While his opening statement gestures toward an intended initial confusion over precise layer and meaning, attending to the constitution of terms—equivalent yet opposite—is another example of how crucial navigating the paradox of similarity and difference is for understanding Adorno’s thought. Such a journey begins with an appreciation of the dialectic: an approach to logic based on assessing the mutually dependent and reinforcing association of terms in polar contradiction. In a generic sense, dialectical logic may describe the structure of give-and-take in conversation or a more structured method of dispute resolution formed by two sides

⁵⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 245-51.

⁵⁵ Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 245.

contesting contrasting positions in formal academic debate.⁵⁶ In an abstract sense the dialectic refers to the existence of a process of forces that produce tension as a result of confrontation.⁵⁷ Classically, the term also has a rich rhetorical history. For Aristotle, the dialectic was a term that described a form of reasoning less preferred than the more formal logical system based on major/minor premises followed by a conclusion.⁵⁸ Plato's dialogic format appreciated dialectical logic as a form of question-and-answer to reveal a set of positions or to subtly reduce an argument to a sense of absurdity.⁵⁹ I will return to the dialectic in the succeeding method chapter more closely. For now, I argue a dialectical structure presents two contrary perspectives in conversation and crafts a new orientation in the process of considering points of convergence and divergence.

I have divided the literature review into the classical structure of dialectic to allude to Adorno's unique presentation of a central idea in concept and form. That is: I establish two competing approaches to understanding the relationship between subject and object, resting on a negation or stasis point. To this end, I first look at attempts by

⁵⁶ See, for example, a selected history of dialectical logic theorized in different forms of speech communication including: Lee Hunt, "Dialectic—A Neglected Method of Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 7, no. 3 (June 1, 1921): 221–32; Charles Tolman, "Further Comments on the Meaning of 'Dialectic,'" *Human Development* 26, no. 6 (1983): 320–24; C. Jan Swearingen, "Dialogue and Dialectic: The Logic of Conversation and the Interpretation of Logic," in *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tulio Maranhao (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47–74.

⁵⁷ I am paraphrasing from: "Dialectic, n.1," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed November 22, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/51883>.

⁵⁸ See, for example: D. W. Hamlyn, "Aristotle on Dialectic," *Philosophy* 65, no. 254 (October 1990): 465–76.

⁵⁹ See, for example: Edwin Black, "Plato's View of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44, no. 4 (December 1958): 361–74; Julius Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, vol. 62 (New York: Arno Press, 1940); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

scholars to unsettle an assumed Enlightenment orientation by challenging various approaches to the subject as the starting point or filter from which argument proceeds. Next, I examine contemporary efforts to theorize the object as an initial entrance point of critical inquiry. Finally, I situate an emerging group of scholars calling for a “new materialism” as an example of an approach that orients both preceding modes of critique.

TURNING TOWARD SUBJECT

In the “Definition of Man,” Kenneth Burke famously defined the human subject as “the symbol-using animal.”⁶⁰ As the definition suggests, while other beings might share some features of communicative expression, Burke, like many other academics in various fields of humanities, found exceptional a human’s ability to communicate using symbolic abstractions to convey meaning. Jeff Pruchnic argues that Burke’s understanding may have been motivated by a desire to protect human labor in response to increased reliance on mechanization.⁶¹ While the transformation from human to automatic task performance could offer certain benefits, for Pruchnic, Burke may have feared a deeper form of domination hidden under the guise of technological expediency. Drawing attention to a creative and communicative essence at the heart of the species—the grammar of the human form—Burke hoped to provide a challenge to the interests pressuring automation. Interpreting Barry Brummett’s exposition of Burke’s theory, reading Burke’s definition of human with Pruchnic could provided the resources—the equipment—to understand how the essence of human in language could explain and respond to anxieties presented

⁶⁰ Kenneth Burke, “Definition of Man,” *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963): 491.

⁶¹ Jeff Pruchnic, “Rhetoric, Cybernetics, and the Work of the Body in Burke’s Body of Work,” *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 3 (2006): 276.

by a specific moment of historical, cultural, and economic realignment.⁶² That is to say, only through an appeal to rhetoric, or “the resources of symbolicity,” Burke wrote, could we understand laughter or tears—the very material of life that mechanization eliminates—as the stuff that transforms the human from animal into being.⁶³ As Burke perhaps prognosticated, in a contemporary world defined less by human-to-human interaction and more by the touch of machines in numeric interlocution, the laughter and tears of the human seems frail and threatened by the accelerated landscapes of digital capture. The devices, designs, and medias of digital landscape are quickly becoming the central mediating experience at every point of human interaction, fueled, in part, by their promise to make those moments of tears and happiness more readily available.⁶⁴ The central question, however, of the critical scholars of the human subject that I will now attend to, begins from an opposite premise than the one established by Burke: How could the desire to imagine ourselves as exceptional carry with it a more nefarious and unintended set of argumentative consequences?

To be clear, I agree with Lawrence Coupe that we should avoid reading Burke’s appeal to the notable quality of human symbol use as “unapologetically anthropocentric,

⁶² Barry Brummett, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (1984): 166-8.

⁶³ Burke, “Definition of Man,” 24.

⁶⁴ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Verso, 1997); Douglas Kellner, “Virilio, War, and Technology: Some Critical Reflections,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (1999): 103-126; Robert W. Williams, “Politics and Self in the Age of Digital Re(pro)ducibility,” *Fast Capitalism* (electronic journal) 1, no. 1 (2005): http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/1_1/williams.html.

proudly asserting the distinctiveness of the human species.”⁶⁵ Careful and cautious, Burke did not intend his definition to take on a tone of absolute exception. Instead, he suggested that one way of understanding the multi-layered landscape of politics in the 20th century could begin by initiating a dialogue on key terms and examining elements of his definition “added, or subtracted, or in some way modified.”⁶⁶ I am trying to reflect, with Burke, upon some consequences of the essential relationship between humans and language. What I mean to say (and the following scholars might agree): there is a very complex happening in Burke’s bundling of terms to describe “the human.”⁶⁷

Already then, my parceling of the meaning of words (including drawing attention to various contexts and potential political investments) designates, to some degree, a moment of criticism informed by continental philosophy. While the term itself may be both dangerous and reductive, as Simon Critchley and Simon Glendinning note in their respective introductions, “continental philosophy” can be a helpful bundling device for referencing a rich orientation that draws together German and French philosophy and critical inquiry from the 19th century to the present day.⁶⁸ Critchley concisely notes (and

⁶⁵ Lawrence Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 181-2.

⁶⁶ Burke, “Definition of Man,” 491.

⁶⁷ By the end of the essay Burke argues that humans should be thought of as: “the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol misusing) animal; inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative); separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making; goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order); and rotten with perfection.” See Burke, “Definition of Man,” 507.

⁶⁸ Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy: A Philosophical Chronicle*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 2-4. For Glendinning, he believes that the term itself has no productive possibility, but rather names, in his words, “the Other” of Anglo-American analytic philosophy; Glendinning, *The Idea*, 12. While Critchley

summarily complicates) seven iterations developing over a 200 year period: German idealism and romanticism in the late 18th century; the critique of metaphysics including Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud; German phenomenology; French phenomenology; hermeneutics; Western Marxism; and French (post)structuralism.⁶⁹ Rather than explain each chronologically, however, Robert D’Amico argues that continental philosophy should include the messy work of expanding understanding and troubling modes of experience and sedimented definitions of consciousness, being, knowledge, interpretation, and politics.⁷⁰ Michael Rosen provides another helpful approach by understanding continental philosophy according to four themes of intervention: a break with natural science as the universal language or descriptive vocabulary; a preference for thick historicism and textual attention; a concern for agency and its relationship to theory and practice; and a concern for layers and scope in interpretation.⁷¹ What emerges from the historical, experiential, and thematic is not a cookie cutter explanation, but a rough sketch of a large and important series of debates that continue to provide fodder for exciting disagreement.

Continental philosophy, then, asks us to think more critically about the basic

agrees the designation appeals to a sense of a turf war over “professional self-description,” nonetheless, the field’s depth of detail, descriptive drama, and “little woes and weals to which our flesh is prone,” comprise the values motivating the interests of Continental philosophers and identifies some recuperative possibilities, Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 38,11.

⁶⁹ Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 13. While many of these terms may be familiar, it is beyond the scope of this prospectus to work through each expression. I will return to various key moments, however, in more detail.

⁷⁰ Robert D’Amico, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Gainesville: University of Florida/Westview Press, 1999).

⁷¹ Michael Rosen, “Continental Philosophy from Hegel,” in *Philosophy 2: Further through the Subject* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 663-704.

categories of existence, including, as I previewed, the contents, context, form, and motivation behind the human subject and its description. As Critchley and Andrew Cutrofello both note, much of the trajectory of scholars interested in continental philosophy begins by how much and in what ways people receive the Enlightenment tradition—most especially Immanuel Kant. One influential French poststructuralist, Michel Foucault, offered a radical description of the concept of the subject based primarily on an innovative reading of Kant. In his essay, “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault re-reads a short editorial penned by Kant, but with an attention to critiquing some of Kant’s detailed conclusions about “the human.”⁷² Foucault argued that Kant, in a minor 1784 article, established a new approach to modern thought by grounding philosophy in the search for the universal constitution of a human subject. In so doing, Kant believed humans could escape a position of mystical immaturity—that is, a tethering to nature—through use of principled reason and an assessment of law. The subject—an individual—best exercises autonomy by freeing him or herself from the natural world. In Foucault’s account of Kant, however, he encouraged us to reflect less on the universal applicability of Kant’s definition and instead on the historical aspects compelling Kant’s understanding, traced through the present, and to do so with an attention to some troubling aspects of its politics. Foucault asks us not to take an appeal to language, scientific rationality, or liberation from nature as the only way of understanding the basic question of what it means to be human. Instead, Foucault invited

⁷² Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50.

us to approach the question of the human as an aesthetic practice.⁷³ Understanding the human then as a product not of biological circuits or as universal being of reason, but as a series of textual moves, Foucault provided resources to reconsider “the human” from a situated critical and historical position, not a stable and unchanging entity.

Drawing a different critical read from Kant, some scholars critique the Enlightenment orientation by examining examples of humans who do not quite fit the principle category of reason upon which his subject is based. Contemporary thinker Avital Ronell, for example, unpacks a concern with Kant in her rhetorical study on the complex layers of the “debilitated subject” of Enlightenment. She is especially cautious of viewing the subject as both sovereign and autonomous.⁷⁴ Using various rhetorical techniques that play with scale, Ronell takes up bodily, literary, and philosophic encounters with the concept of “stupidity” and the impossible drive to deal with and eliminate it. In one formation she troubles Kant for an inability to place “simpletons” and “fools” in his philosophy of mind. “Somewhere between reason and madness,” Ronell argues, Kant could not quite make a place for “the idiot” in his rigorous empirical inquiry into the hierarchy of humans. She speculates the origin might lie in liminal form; in her words, it might be that “these figures are other, but perhaps not other enough.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Foucault is interpreted the Greek concept of *askesis*, an anti-essentialist position that took the self-as-practice, to demonstrate a concept of agency through theoretical reflection and sampling. See: Michel Foucault *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995); *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); *The Care of the Self: History of Sexuality Volume 3*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books).

⁷⁴ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 19.

⁷⁵ Ronell, *Stupidity*, 294-5.

Ronell uses these examples to trouble the categorical nature of Kant's definition of the human subject, and, as a result, open up the possibility of thinking subjects in existence beyond a rational imperative. If humans could be used to trouble Kant's schema, can other figures, beyond expressions of the human, trouble and confound the category in a similar way?

Many rhetoricians believe the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." Offered as a third example of an approach that challenges Enlightenment orientation, scholars pair the definition of the human with nonhuman animals to see if the human experience is not as central as the orientation might suggest. Steven Best, for example, asserts that animal standpoint theory has the possibility of posing a challenge to a system of human centrality built upon Enlightenment principles.⁷⁶ Debra Hawhee explores animal figures in classical rhetoric, especially focused on the relationship between intellectual capacity and theoretical assumptions made by Aristotle.⁷⁷ Diane Davis, in the spirit of Emmanuel Levinas, takes up "the extra-symbolic rhetorical appeal" that constitutes the situation exemplified by a rhetorical model of response.⁷⁸ She asks what mode of relationality constitutes rhetoric if language emerges not as a means of human persuasion, but as an affective reaction to [animal] otherness.⁷⁹ In other words, how must the terms of rhetoric be reimagined in an ethical arrangement that cannot be escaped and

⁷⁶ Steven Best, "The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: Putting Theory into Action and Animal Liberation into Higher Education," *State of Nature: An Online Journal of Radical Ideas*, (2009), accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.stateofnature.org/?p=5903>.

⁷⁷ Debra Hawhee, "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 44, no. 1 (2011): 82-83.

⁷⁸ Davis, *Inessential Solidarity*, 17.

⁷⁹ Davis, *Inessential Solidarity*, 166.

is not limited to human interlocutors? Finally, in his opening to a special issue of *Philosophy & Rhetoric* on animal address, Erik Doxtader summarizes these approaches to understanding the animal by suggesting, “the ‘animal question’ [how animals figure in rhetorical theory] remains an open and increasingly complex problem for the philosophical and rhetorical enterprise . . . teach[ing] us about our own relation to language, and problematiz[ing] definitions of rhetoric that would have us begin by presupposing a bright line between animal instinct and human thought.”⁸⁰ Insofar as an interest in the non-human and the critique of the centrality of the human unites these authors, I’m led to wonder why inquiries should end at the figure of the animal?

Perhaps one of the major problems with a limited focus on animal figures is that their form seems (almost) too human: it’s easier to “relate,” for example, to something with a face. Peter H. Raven, James H. Wandersee, and Elisabeth E. Schussler describe a possible condition of “plant blindness,” that is, the tendency for people to forget the life of plants because they do not behave or appear like their fauna counterparts.⁸¹ James Wynn argues historically, the tendency for plant life to be contained in the rhetoric of science contributes, to some degree, to a common refusal to consider plants in more

⁸⁰ Erik Doxtader, “Addressing Animals,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 44, no. 1 (2011): 79-80. For more information on critical animal studies, see for example: Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Michael Lundblad. “The Animal Question,” *American Quarterly* 56, no 4 (2004): 1128-34.

⁸¹ James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler, “Preventing Plant Blindness,” *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (February 1, 1999): 82–86; Natalie Angier, “Green, Life-Giving and Forever Young,” *The New York Times*, accessed April 17, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/17/science/17angi.html>.

ethical and theoretical terms.⁸² But, could the refusal run deeper?

Plants, often considered too “insignificant” or “mundane” a subject for critical reflection, according to Michael Marder, represent a “margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities.”⁸³ Subsumed by discourses of aesthetic landscape design, culinary recipe, and farming practice, plants are easily dismissed as “less developed” or “undifferentiated.”⁸⁴ “Vegetal beings,” for Marder, end up “unconditionally available for unlimited use and exploitation,” and not ethically or rhetorically encountered.⁸⁵ In understanding the human as addressed by plants, Marder derives a few conclusions. Since plants are beings grounded outside the assumptions of Western humanism, how we respond can provide sustenance for rethinking many of the elements of our received orientations.⁸⁶ In encountering nature, or plant life, Marder presents an opportunity for scholars to reconsider relations to otherness that navigate dual pressures of assimilation and domination.⁸⁷ Drawing upon rich readings of the Western philosophic tradition, Marder is spearheading a new intervention to theorize plant subjectivity.⁸⁸ Joined by John Charles Ryan and Randy

⁸² James Wynn, “Alone in the Garden: How Gregor Mendel’s Inattention to Audience May Have Affected the Reception of His Theory of Inheritance in ‘Experiments in Plant Hybridization,’” *Written Communication* 24, no. 1 (2007): 3–27.

⁸³ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2.

⁸⁴ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 2-3.

⁸⁵ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 3.

⁸⁶ Michael Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁸⁷ Marder *Plant-Thinking*, 10.

⁸⁸ Michael Marder, “Of Plants, and Other Secrets.” *Societies* 3, no. 1 (December 27, 2012): 16–23. In one of my favorite examples, Marder returns to the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche to

Laist, Marder's work represents a key turn in the theoretical humanities: a new approach to examining the concept of subjectivity termed critical plant studies.⁸⁹

Critical plant studies, however, could be thought of across disciplinary interests and methods. Over the last two decades, entomologist Richard Karban and others have assembled quantitative evidence supporting a limited theory of plant communication, noting specific and complex examples of care and deception in plant communities.⁹⁰

French botanist Francis Halle argues plants, not animals, could provide the central model for understanding the organization of all biological life.⁹¹ Michael Pollan's popular text,

demonstrate how the plant provided the figure for Nietzsche's theory of the will. As Marder describes Nietzsche's subject of "nutritive desire," as "overflowing will to power, the purse positivity of growth and expansion where nothing is missing," it remains difficult for me to read any text inspired by Nietzsche without recognizing its founding move in theorizing plant subjectivity. See Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 36-48. See also: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 9, 44-46.

⁸⁹ John Charles Ryan, "Passive Flora? Reconsidering Nature's Agency through Human Plant Studies (HPS)" *Societies* no. 2 (2012): 101-121; Randy Laist, *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, (New York: Rodopi, 2013). See also: James Wynn, "Alone in the Garden How Gregor Mendel's Inattention to Audience May Have Affected the Reception of His Theory of Inheritance in 'Experiments in Plant Hybridization,'" *Written Communication* 24, no. 1 (2007): 3-27.

⁹⁰ Karban is exploring a phenomenon known as "plant defense communication" in sagebrush. He clips the leaves to simulate an insect attack which caused the sagebrush to "send chemical alarms in the air" as a warning to other leaves to prepare for attack. Arguing that plants "speak" in chemical codes, or "carbon-containing molecules called volatile organic compounds," Karban could also offer instructive fodder for reconsidering both evolutionary principles and basic theories of communication. For a snapshot of scientific resource, consider examining: Richard Karban and Kaori Shiojiri, "Self-Recognition Affects Plant Communication and Defense," *Ecology Letters* 12, no. 6 (2009): 502-506; Ian S. Pearse and Richard Karban, "Do Plant-plant Signals Mediate Herbivory Consistently in Multiple Taxa and Ecological Contexts?," *Journal of Plant Interactions* 8, no. 3 (2013): 203-206. For popular press releases, see: Elizabeth Preston, "Learning to Speak Shrub," *Nautilus*, 006, accessed on October 3, 2013, http://nautil.us/issue/6/secret-codes/learning-to-speak-shrub?utm_source=Nautilus&utm_campaign=1718c2ac05-Sunday_9_8_13&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_dc96ec7a9d-1718c2ac05-57505253.

⁹¹ Francis Halle, *In Praise of Plants*, trans. David Lee (Portland: Timber Press, 2011).

Botany of Desire, traces specific examples of plants' poetic control over humans, including numerous interpretations of vegetal species integrating with humans to maintain self-existence.⁹² Finally, but not exhaustively, Anna Tsing and Eduardo Kohn take up encounters with mushrooms and forests respectively as subjects and sites of human-plant encounters in anthropological terms.⁹³ Each of these approaches emphasizes different examples of Marder's ethical posture; plant and human considered to be involved jointly in "world-construction."⁹⁴ By that, Marder may have teased out a model of shared life in the process of meaning making and exchange. While such meaning may not always be jointly legible, there exists nevertheless a deep connection binding the human and botanical worlds to each other with implications for and exposed by rhetoric.

Returning to Donna Haraway may also help expand upon the concept of world-construction, especially her text *When Species Meet*.⁹⁵ As one of the premier scholars examining the intersection of biology, culture, communication, and philosophy, Haraway understands world-construction as a specific form of interaction taking place in a site or "contact zone," where human and non-human bodies collide, reshaping meaning in a process of figuration. For Haraway, "figures" are more than just representations (as they are in the rhetorical tradition, for example). Instead, like chemical compositions or

⁹² Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

⁹³ Anna Tsing, "Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 2–3 (2014): 221–41; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁹⁴ Michael Marder, "Plant Intentionality and the Phenomenological Framework of Plant Intelligence," *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 7, no. 11 (2012): 1370.

⁹⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

botanical hybridizations, figures represent for Haraway sites where human and nonhuman co-shape one another in communicative processes, simultaneously literal and metaphoric, poetic and prosaic.⁹⁶ Haraway implores us to consider “who ‘we’ will become when species meet.”⁹⁷ In other words, what happens to the human subject if its claim to autonomy is chipped away by its connection to the natural world? In a more utopian spirit: what means to domination are available if the entity upon which domination is conditioned—nature—is considered a subject to be encountered, not an object to be repressed? To be fair, Haraway’s contact zones are endemic of human and animal relations, but the larger questions posed by her work open vegetal contact zones for interrogation.

What animal scholars present—and critical plant scholars extend—is a question figured in Haraway’s terms: what occurs in the contact zones when humans and plants meet? Such a question is likely to induce a kind of panic, for it challenges the basic “fantasy of human exceptionalism” and the “great divides” responsible for most meaning in human culture, including the grammatical slash (/) between human/nonhuman and nature/culture.⁹⁸ As Rosi Braidotti, a theorist of what has been termed the “posthuman turn,” puts it, the idea of figures work as “vehicles to imaginatively ground our powers of understanding within the shifting landscapes of the present” and past.⁹⁹ Following Stacy Alaimo, “the potent ethical and political possibilities” that result from such a retrofitted

⁹⁶ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3-4.

⁹⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 5.

⁹⁸ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 11.

⁹⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 77.

rhetorical focus provide the immediate rationale, if not explanatory excitement, that animate my inquiry.¹⁰⁰

Thinking the plant-as-figure involves a tracing of the place where the material and semiotic intertwine. I am appealing to what Burke largely suggested is valuable about rhetorical inquiry (and its study) in *A Rhetoric of Motives*: Rhetoric attempts to understand language as a process of the construction and deconstruction of orientations. As an approach or perspective, rhetoric provides resources to theorize transformation of orientations outlined in an early section of my prospectus. Yet the precise mechanism of transformation is not always cut and dry. While the “realistic” political goal of rhetoric might always be reduced to humans speaking to humans, understanding an orientation, the depth of its potential influence, and resources for transformation require considering how we have come to understand the human itself.¹⁰¹ Keeping in mind Joshua Gunn’s exploration of figures forgotten, disavowed, ineffable, and fantastic, I argue for an “affective and ethical working-through” of our secret rhetorical encounters with plants and the orientations exposed and remade in those sites.¹⁰² By secret here, I mean the discernable but often passed over form, and not the recovery or revelation of their (or our) true communicative nature.

Other scholars interested in pursuing new orientations understand the meaning of “secret” a bit differently. Following a route suggested by the “speculative turn” in the

¹⁰⁰ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 46.

¹⁰² Joshua Gunn, “Speech Is Dead; Long Live Speech,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 343-364.

humanities, plants, animals, in fact all objects, will maintain a mysterious and secret life beyond the grasp of the human subject in a universe of objects. While certainly not denied by any of the scholars I reviewed here, I argue that an over-focus on a veiled or “withdrawn” status of nonhuman entities cannot provide the resources to consider the unique expression of rhetorical figuration, world-construction, and complex co-mingling between humans and plants. So, while the speculative turn could offer a new instructive challenge to Enlightenment orientation writ large, scholars could also encourage a tendency to eliminate a specific concern for understanding vegetal existence and our unique relation with the botanical world. I’d like to turn now to a closer examination of this literature to explain why.

TURNING TOWARD THE OBJECT

Generally speaking, ontology is a philosophical inquiry into the definition and category of *being*. That is to say, thinkers who study ontology want to establish what is said to exist (and how to say it), clarify the organization of matter, and notice categorical similarities and differences among material items. In his *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger, whose philosophical approach to ontology is one of the most influential in the 20th century, created a tripartite hierarchy of being:

[1.] the stone (material object) is worldless;

[2.] the animal is poor in world;

[3.] man is world-forming.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicolas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 177.

Generally speaking, for Heidegger world-forming referred to an approach to being established by and through language (not dissimilar to what I suggested about Kenneth Burke in Part One). Heidegger noted that a specific being, or *Dasein*, was comprised of—defined by—a rich and complex approach to questioning a sense of place in the cosmos. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is a specific being displaying the capacity to meditate on existence. Since language seemed to be the vehicle for meditation, language capacity also becomes the *sin-qua-non* for assessing the *human* being for whom the world is a concern. To unpack further, since animals appeared to lack language-making ability, yet seemed to navigate the world, Heidegger considered them “impoverished,” meaning while they may display characteristics like choice-making or planning, they nonetheless do not display a capacity for language or conceptual thought. Because it appears that material objects make no attempt at contemplative thought, then they may be said to exist, but possess no world at all.

If animal scholars previously discussed could be said to challenge the second part of Heidegger’s triptych on being, then a growing literature operating under the headings of “the speculative turn” or “object-oriented ontology” (hereafter OOO) could be understood as inverting Heidegger’s placement of world with the human. In other words, OOO scholars accept vocabulary from Heidegger’s categorical criteria for being, but ponder what happens when human language makes us incapable of thinking. They might ask: What world do humans form if the secret life of objects flourish around us and we have no capacity to appreciate or understand such blossoming? They speculate an answer may be humans’ unique claims to *incapacity* rather than a claim to reason, as found in the

Enlightenment orientation. Following a trajectory of thought initiated by cybernetics (especially influenced by process-focused models and closed-loop circuits), OOO draws from Thomas Kuhn's understanding of paradigm revolutions in science and Niklas Luhmann's connections among ecology and consciousness to theorize a life world beyond the representational grasp of the human.¹⁰⁴ Drawing from and repudiating Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, OOO scholars aim to shake up thought, not by offering figures, but through argumentative inversions and playing with analytic reasoning.¹⁰⁵

Timothy Morton, a prevalent OOO scholar, draws our attention to certain objects that, in confounding traditional laws of science, cause the whole system to be re-evaluated.¹⁰⁶ Plutonium, for example, is a creation of human processes that will exist and affect its environment far beyond human dimensions of time (in some cases over 24,000 years!).¹⁰⁷ Climate change, also a process initiated by humans, will alter the very constitution of the Earth's ecosystem in ways that our conception of time and space

¹⁰⁴ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Niklas Luhmann, *Ecological Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁵ Latour is influential in asserting a radical social construction of science, stressing the standpoint and political interest of perspectives that precede and influence the assertion of natural law or predictive data models. Unlike cultural scholars who eschew science for a different metaphysics, Latour developed a holistic model, actor-network theory, to resituate science in terms of democracy and information/politics in the language of nodes and process. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Milton Keynes; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1987); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁶ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1-2; Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 126-35.

¹⁰⁷ Timothy Morton, "Zero Landscapes in the Time of Hyperobjects," *Graz Architectural Magazine*, no. 7 (2011): 78-87.

cannot account for.¹⁰⁸ Morton writes, “objects are what they are, in the sense that no matter what we are aware of, or how, there it is, impossible to shake off.”¹⁰⁹ By focusing solely on material presence beyond the basic human measurements—time, scale, and reason—OOO scholars push for a notion of world, in a sense, unreachable by humans. Such an endeavor, argues Morton, offers “not a compromise but a genuine way out of the recent philosophical impasse of essentialism versus nihilism” by considering old concepts entirely anew.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, I would suggest three key concepts define the speculative turn: (1) substituting the concept of “actancy” for agency; (2) severing the relationship between the object and epistemological representation; and (3) assuming a flattening, interacting world of circulation, similar to the digital model from which these thinkers draw.

Initiated at a conference hosted by Alberto Toscano and Ray Brassier, the speculative turn opposed traditional assumptions about human agency, emphasizing an ability to exert influence without the requisite components of “intention” or rational choice.¹¹¹ Graham Harman’s reworking of Heidegger theorized that the essence of an object’s actant world was found in its “withdrawal” from human understanding.

Harman’s interpretation hones in on Heidegger’s notion of “equipment,” what Harman

¹⁰⁸ In a nod toward the specific digital style, most of OOO theory is found and hashed out on blog posts such as: James Arran, “The Catastrophic and the Post-Apocalyptic,” <http://syntheticzero.net/2013/08/21/the-catastrophic-and-the-post-apocalyptic>, August, 21, 2013, Accessed November 25, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Timothy Morton, “Peak Nature,” *Adbusters*, (blog) <https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/98/peak-nature.html>, January 11, 2012.

¹¹⁰ Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology.” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2011): 163.

¹¹¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

describes as a process of turning phenomenon into a *readiness-to-hand*. Rather than considered open and available for human use, an object “never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness.”¹¹² So while the concept of world is often used to support a claim of unique capacity, Harman rethinks language as a limitation, not as a center point of understanding. In other words, if objects exist beyond human understanding, then the part that withdraws from our knowledge is the space of their unique singularity.¹¹³ Harman argues that theorizing from a place of withdrawal preserves a sort of dignity in mystery, undoing some of the claim to exceptionality established during the Enlightenment.¹¹⁴ Called “guerilla metaphysics,” Harman speculates that placing objects in a total material context, that is to say, in a context completely outside of human thought, offers a sufficient and new challenge. Objects have a flexible pull on human perspective, for as they withdraw from our understanding, their mystery forces a full collapse of all being(s) into one material plane.¹¹⁵ To help concretize these claims, I’d like to draw out these scholars’ appreciation of withdrawal a little further.

In his 2006 foundation text *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux challenged the concept of Cartesian duality by asking whether the capacity for thinking preceded bodily existence. In so doing, he offered a critique of correlation that severed the relationship

¹¹² Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 1.

¹¹³ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 1.

between mind and body entirely.¹¹⁶ Thus, objects need not be thought in relation to subjects, but could be considered to exist separate from human epistemological experience.¹¹⁷ In attempting to undo the Kantian position (transcendentalism), Meillassoux argued that letting the object's lived experience exist separately or outside of human perception referred to an ontological position, a space prior to language and outside the humans.¹¹⁸

Levi Bryant extends Meillassoux's critique even further. If, speculates Bryant, the co-dependent relationship between subjects and objects could be severed, then humans would be situated more equitably among them, and thus lose access to any anthropocentric claims to being.¹¹⁹ Seeing all objects in arrangement and in material terms, an "ontological realism" in Bryant's vocabulary, challenged the core epistemological debates characterizing the theoretical humanities in the late 20th century. For Bryant, concerns over representation or constitution in discourse, popularized by Foucault, would be replaced by a sole focus on "what objects are."¹²⁰ In other words, an object's essence exists alongside, yet nonetheless very outside, the architecture of human understanding. He cites four primary characteristics of a speculative "flat ontology." First, he argues that a flattened ontology rejects an understanding of the world from

¹¹⁶ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, (London ; New York: Continuum, 2008).

¹¹⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/9750134.0001.001/1:10/--democracy-of-objects?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

¹²⁰ Bryant, *Democracy of Objects*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/9750134.0001.001/1:10/--democracy-of-objects?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

primary origins or transcendent premises. Second, he argues that “the” world does not exist, but in fact many worlds interact. Third, Bryant argues that object-object relations exist outside of and independent from human-nonhuman and subject-object relations. Finally, he argues that reducing all objects to the same plane ensures all begin and remain on the same footing or grounding.¹²¹

Bryant draws upon Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology*, who argued, “all things exist, yet they do not exist equally.”¹²² Using a number of examples, including Pollan’s work on plant seduction, Bogost argues that a “flat ontology” offers the invitation “to suspend our own human ways of operating and encountering the world so as [to] investigate non-human ways of encountering the world.”¹²³ The benefits, he argues, consists in developing a method of mapping relations among larger “assemblages,” resituating an ethical openness to otherness, and sidesteps what he considers to be failures of liberal remedies or legislative victories.¹²⁴ He argues that the result of “alien phenomenology” is a “thermodynamic politics,” or “a form of political engagement that targets a machine’s source of energy and capacity for work.”¹²⁵ If Bogost’s philosophy is to be accepted as a political suggestion, as Bryant argues, then OOO pedagogy provides students a new repertoire for thinking and offers a set of language and principles for how

¹²¹ Bryant, *Democracy of Objects*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/9750134.0001.001/1:10/--democracy-of-objects?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

¹²² Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It’s like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 11.

¹²³ Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 73.

¹²⁴ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 71-3.

¹²⁵ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 72.

we understand the world.

But, herein lies at least one challenge with an ontological approach to “the object.” In its attempt to efface the importance of representation for mediating an experience with the object while also establishing a political claim, OOO scholars minimize the paradox, rather than making the dialectic logic a center point, as Adorno does. For example, Bryant draws a fast and hard line between thermodynamic politics and what he describes as semiotic politics.¹²⁶ Because structures are not based on the same flows of communication as humans, he argues that the investment in rhetorical criticism is neither relevant nor successful. But, the paradox is that even as he situates himself against the practices of persuasion, the aim and effort of his critical intervention appears to be just that: semiotic politics to transform political practice in a particular way. So, while students may assume a set of new concepts with which to imagine objects (worthwhile, as it may be), OOO scholars have not discovered a new great escape promised by Morton and others. Once again we are returned to a primary antagonism or fault line: one can assert the ethics of flat ontology, but until an audience is convinced to change their epistemological practices (which OOO could very well achieve), speculative materiality is no more grounded than any other idealism.

Moreover, it seems as though the substitution of one scientific principle for another as the unifying principle of all life and politics is a move that ought to be critically assessed, rather than foundationally asserted. If the appeal of OOO is in the conceptual opening it offers, then perhaps the criticism should be taken to the very rhetorical form in

¹²⁶ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 73.

which it is presented. That is, we should understand how and in what ways the speculative turn could influence material political arrangements, which requires rhetorical investigation. Further, the unique constitution of otherness and its expression in political sites and histories is more relevant than another flattened universal schema with which to erase and efface specific difference, even in the potential speculative experience of various objects.

Despite these two basic appeals to rhetorical caution, the speculative turn has had a profound influence on contemporary rhetorical practice precisely, according to James J. Brown, because of the belief in the possibility of its potential to move past representational debates of the 20th century.¹²⁷ Alexander Reid uses OOO to bridge the divide between an understanding of composition in the analog and one in the digital. In so doing, Reid and others replace one mode of technological rhetoric (newspapers, speeches, and so on) with another (digital culture including Twitter, Facebook, and blogs).¹²⁸ With Nathaniel Rivers, Brown articulates a “new” writing process that can avoid the traditional categories of persuasion by focusing on digital attunement.¹²⁹ Finally, Casey Boyle fully theorizes a flattened world by applying the digital metaphor to

¹²⁷ James J. Brown Jr., “RSA: Toward an Object-Oriented Rhetoric,” <http://www.rsa.cwrl.utexas.edu/node/3850>, accessed on September 9, 2014.

¹²⁸ Alex Reid, *Two Virtuals New Media and Composition*, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007).

¹²⁹ James J Brown Jr. and Nathaniel Rivers, “Composing the Carpenter’s Workshop,” *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies*, 1 (2014): 27 – 36. See also: Marilyn Cooper, “The Ecology of Writing,” *College English* 48, no. 4 (1986): 364–375; Margaret Syverson, *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999).

the practice of rhetoric and actants who compose and occupy the network.¹³⁰

As I alluded to earlier, however, I am not quite ready to leave the secret life of objects to an insurmountable mystery or to a life of permanent digital circulation. Marcus Doel and David Clarke remind us that simply asserting an objects' mystical withdrawal is not that far from a political economy concerned with advertising.¹³¹ Following Jean Baudrillard here, they write, "the subject is caught up in a swarm or calculus of objects. Not even a junk shop, in which objects are simply abandoned willy-nilly, does the subject escape the multiplicity and duplicity of objects."¹³² Thus, I might speculate that without a rigorous investigation of rhetoric and material arrangement, including structural production, the opening offered up by OOO may be limited to enhancing flexible spaces for new forms of commodification, including immaterial advertisement and digital labor.

Retuning to the scholarship of Adorno could offer some insight. Cook notes that Adorno begins from an understanding that, "material object are distinct from, and not fully accessible to, the concepts we use to apprehend them."¹³³ But, as J. M. Bernstein notes, relying too much on withdrawal as a response to human-centrality (what I described earlier as light anthropomorphism) also opens the door for reason and scientific

¹³⁰ Casey Boyle (2011). *Abundant Rhetoric: Memory, Media, and the Multiplicity of Composition*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/1046>. Also see: Casey Boyle, "Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice: Writing Media in Abundance," Accessed on September 9, 2014 at 10:57am. <http://caseyboyle.net/project/rhetoric-as-a-posthuman-practice-writing-media-in-abundance>.

¹³¹ Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke, "Dark Panopticon. Or, Attack of the Killer Tomatoes," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17, no. 4 (1999), 444.

¹³² Doel and Clarke, "Dark Panopticon," 444. See also: Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2006).

¹³³ Deborah Cook, "Adorno, Foucault and Critique," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39, no. 10 (2013): 966.

rationality to *over*-determine human encounters with the world. In a sense, overreliance on a concept of withdrawal also encourages humans to withdraw unscathed from the ethical responsibility to grapple with its general (or specific) histories and futures.¹³⁴ So, while OOO uses digital culture and contemporary physics to make sense of objects, I am reminded of a section from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The ‘many things’ which, according to [Francis] Bacon, ‘are reserved,’ are themselves no more than instrumental: the radio as a sublimated printing press, the dive bomber as a more effective form of artillery, radio control as a more reliable compass.”¹³⁵ In other words, the ‘newness’ that digital life presents, and that OOO scholarship hones in on, has the possibility of being, in reality, an outgrowth of an older Enlightenment kernel, perfected but repressed, secretly operative and motivating the speculative turn. In light of Enlightenment history, object-oriented ontology risks (re)presenting an old instrumentality in new digital form.

We can speculate, contra the conclusions of OOO, that fully embracing the digital model as a space of material freedom also ushers in a full disenchantment with the natural world, an obsession with integrating the culture industry into our everyday lives, and acquiescence to a mundane but total surveillance state rendering no space free. As such, I’d like to turn to a stasis point between the subject-focused and object-oriented scholarship that takes up the difference between reason and nature, to examine human and nonhuman relationships. A refreshed interest in materialism could understand [and] situate a claim to plant vibrancy, without relying on flattened withdrawal or infatuation

¹³⁴ Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31.

¹³⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” 4.

with its digital figuration.

TURNING TOWARD A CENTER: NEW MATERIALISM

Posthumanist scholar Rosi Braidotti reminds us that if any sense of the object is to be assessed, it must be based on an understanding of vitality through which transformation occurs.¹³⁶ I interpret vitality here, following Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Jane Bennett, to mean simply an understanding of life as an “energetic,” “quivering,” or “evanescent” process of composition and decomposition.¹³⁷ Although a sense of vitality need not begin and end with the human, Carey Wolfe adds that one does not need to naively eviscerate the concept of the human subject either, as the insights gleaned from OOO might suggest. Instead, Wolfe argues that approaching the world from a place of life could enhance our notions of “communication, interaction, meaning, social significations and affective investments with greater specificity.”¹³⁸ William Connolly offers a helpful initial entrance point, noting a few converging points emerging from the body of new materialist scholarship.¹³⁹ Connolly argues that vitality offers a way of challenging a mechanist model of the universe by emphasizing energy-matter in dynamic processes of change. Humans in Connolly’s model are formative—but not the ground—

¹³⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 82.

¹³⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112. See also, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “1837: Of the Refrain,” *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 310 – 350. For a historical unpacking of the concept, see for example, Byron Hawk, *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies of Complexity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

¹³⁸ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthuman*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009) xxv.

¹³⁹ William E. Connolly, “The ‘New Materialism’ and the Fragility of Things,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (June 1, 2013): 399–412.

for thought. Connolly situates new materialism as an orientation that can be attentive to the politics of texture: scale, form, and creativity without dispensing the need for strategic or tactical interventions into structure and organization.¹⁴⁰ Culminating in a call for an “ethic of cultivation,” Connolly draws our attention to a process philosophy attuned to assessing new modes of relations. If the goal of the speculative turn could be reduced to a new interest in playing with digital argumentative ontology, then the goal of the new materialist move might be something like a generous affirmation of rhetorically informed conceptual intervention.

The first core concept for new materialists, like their OOO counterparts, is to rethink the position of objects in relation to agency or to push beyond choice and reason-based consciousness as the rubric for theorizing activity. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost note that new materialism shares a contemporary concern for submitting “objectivity and material reality to a radical reappraisal.”¹⁴¹ Inspired by a cadre of innovative philosophers including Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, Baruch Spinoza, and Deleuze, new materialists situate their intervention as one that invests new ways of thinking about the matter we interact with on a daily basis. Of particular importance,

¹⁴⁰ Heavily paraphrasing, Connolly argues these 10 key principles inform the scope of new materialist inquiry: (1) non life into life; (2); (3) struggles with vitality (energy-matter, not deity, soul); (3) dynamic metaphysics and process of change; (4) subjects matter, but are not always human; (5) humans are formative, but not ground; (6) but humans can be surprised and challenged by thinking differently; (7) scalar shifts, from micro to cosmic take on increasing reliance for research; (8) varying degrees of self organization increasingly require process-thought; (9) creative and innovative tactics require less of an emphasis on traditional scientific formulas and also on “techno-artistic tactics” p. 402; (10) politics also follow different sets of interests, that increasingly include the planet. See Connolly, “Fragility of Things,” 400-3.

¹⁴¹ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing New Materialisms,” *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

contra Thomas Hobbes or Julian Offray de La Mettrie, new materialists want to re-explain the laws of force and matter describing life-systems. Coole and Frost present examples such as quarks, Higgs-boson experiments, and black holes which act as conundrum for old laws and demonstrate the need for new concepts and methods.¹⁴² In so doing, new materialists draw from what is termed “complexity theory” as a challenge to linear cause-and-effect logic.¹⁴³ For, “rather than tending toward inertia or a state of equilibrium,” Coole and Frost argue, “matter is recognized here as exhibiting immanently self-organizing properties subtended by an intricate filigree of relationships.”¹⁴⁴ Conceived as tapping into a raw flow of energy (described otherwise as a law of motion), new materialists invest creative power in the concept of self-organizing actancy as a principle that draws the human into a similar plane as other organic beings.

Bennett, perhaps the central figure in new materialism, attunes us to the active, non-human related power of exertion that things have on the human in various publics. Assembling ideas of Nietzsche and Foucault, Bennett describes vitalism as a political

¹⁴² Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialism,” 12

¹⁴³ Complexity theory refers to a model of understanding systems as a combination of multi-actor parts interacting in various degrees of intensity. Drawing in some ways from chaos and fractal theory about a system’s sensitivity to subtle change, complexity theory also assumes either that systems tends toward self adaption and therefor exists independently of its parts. See, for example: Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1995); Leon Glass and Michael C. Mackey, *From Clocks to Chaos: The Rhythms of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Edward Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996; M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

¹⁴⁴ Coole and Frost, “Introducing New Materialism, 13. The foundations of this principle can be found earlier in the exploration of crystals and string theory. See Donna Haraway’s doctorate dissertation: Donna Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth-Century Developmental Biology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

process of self-transformation.¹⁴⁵ Drawing on Thoreau's interest in a "wild and uncanny presence" in the environment, Bennett notes that phenomena should be approached with a willingness to consider nonhuman interests beyond traditional categories of human-centered utility.¹⁴⁶ Bennett's posture is purposefully playful with its description. Rick Dolfinj and Iris van der Tuin note in their composite volume of new materialist thinkers, the playfulness of Bennett and other new materialist writers is designed to push dualisms to an extreme.¹⁴⁷ Vitalism becomes important as a concept precisely because it references spontaneous composition and organization, acknowledges a lack of predictive capacity, and focuses on the productive investment in theorizing social change as the result of openings and fissures in the smooth operation of a system. As such, understanding vitality as a rhetoric and not an ontology breathes more grounded possibility into imaginative historical and aesthetic intervention.¹⁴⁸

As pioneered in the work of Brian Massumi, new materialism also substitutes the natural sciences' penchant for classification with a metaphor of cartography, trying thereby to understand arrangements of interest or intensity.¹⁴⁹ Similar to new media

¹⁴⁵ Jane Bennett, "Thing-Power," in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, eds. Bruce Braun, Sarah J. Whatmore, and Isabelle Stengers, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 35- 62.

¹⁴⁶ Jane Bennett, "A Vitalist Stop on the Way to a New Materialism," in *New Materialisms*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁴⁷ Rick Dolfinj and Iris van der Tuin, "A New Tradition in Thought," in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, eds. Rick Dolfinj and Iris van der Tuin, (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 85.

¹⁴⁸ Ben Anderson, "Becoming and Being Hopeful: Towards a Theory of Affect," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 5 (2006): 736.

¹⁴⁹ Brian Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

technologists that charts the use of words or idea mappings, new materialism, according to Karen Barad, emphasizes affect and affirmation. In her words, “matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers.”¹⁵⁰ Barad believes these affective “intra-actions” draw attention to forms of response and configuration, especially to the interaction between the audience building connections through encounters.¹⁵¹ In a crucial difference with OOO, Barad and a rich collection of thinkers including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ann Cvetkovich, Janet Stiger, and Katie Stewart, focus on understanding relationships between subject and objects tactilely in terms of texture.¹⁵² A focus on relief, opposed to flat mappings, for new materialists is preferable because it offers a site of joining and connecting, while leaving our perceptive spaces open to different consistencies and compositions.

Like Haraway, Barad describes a textured reading as a political approach. Similar to Burke’s description of orientation, concepts develop as they become invested with power and situated in affect-based relationships with each other.¹⁵³ Affect systems can

¹⁵⁰ Karen Barad, “Interview with Karen Barad,” in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, eds. Rick Dolfijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

¹⁵¹ I alluded to this concept in the work of Peter Coffin and others.

¹⁵² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is about You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression a Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, *Political Emotions*, (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2010); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁵³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Karen Barad, “Posthumanist

be assessed, according to Fox and Aldred, as a rhetorical economy where symbols get invested with feeling and circulate in and through new media technology.¹⁵⁴ Textures approaches also resolve the tendency to omit the “economy” (as I noted in the OOO section) by describing value in affective affirmation as it appears in a medium.

I also have a sense in which new materialism, as with OOO, however, may become too flimsy or flexible in articulating an approach to politics. Following critics like Dana L. Cloud, theorists may overvalue their own conceptual labor at the expense of theorizing structural antagonism. As Cloud and others caution, if excitement for “complexity, cultural difference and postmodern sophistication” substitutes for organizing around interests of exploited people, then the result “would be a political and ethical failure.”¹⁵⁵ Instead, shifts in practical consciousness require a commitment to a politics of interests and solidarity.¹⁵⁶ While I suspect I may approach new materialism more generously than some, I am inspired by the need to attend to structures that can account for another kind of relational movement beyond the ephemeral appeal to self-organization, even as I agree that relations must be theorized beyond the human. As Justin Willford argues, new materialism could benefit from a return to the dialectic; that is, not limiting inquiry to theorizing various expressions of objects, but by examining

Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801-31.

¹⁵⁴ Fox and Aldred, “New Materialist Social Inquiry,” 4. Also see: Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Future Matters: Technoscience, Global Politics, and Cultural Criticism,” *Social Text* 22, no. 3 (2004): 15.

¹⁵⁵ Dana L. Cloud, Steve Macek, and James Arnt Aune, “‘The Limbo of Ethical Simulacra’: A Reply to Ron Greene,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39, no. 1 (2006): 77.

¹⁵⁶ Dana L. Cloud, “*The Matrix* and Critical Theory’s Desertion of the Real,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 4 (2006): 340-4.

subjects and objects with reference to orientations of domination keyed specifically by contradictions. The sense of affirmation inspiring new materialism needs to be tempered with historically inspired negation to retain an ethical dimension. I argue that a return to the work of Adorno could offer the potential for assessing vitality and affect, forged through rhetorical labor, yet avoid becoming enamored with the immaterial.

If, according to Burke, the human is unique in its capacity for affirmation and negation, then structurally I have attempted to demonstrate his finding in numerous ways throughout the literature review. I positioned two different challenges to the Enlightenment orientation to demonstrate a basic rhetorical principle of transformation best articulated by Adorno. Dethroning the centrality of the human as received by the Enlightenment, especially situating claims to ethically and rhetorically consider plants with subject capacities, can both reveal whole ongoing worlds of engagement at the same time it risks effacing what makes plants unique objects. Solely considering plants as objects withdrawn, as I have argued of OOO, wishes away the very means through which we might encounter otherness itself. New materialism could be considered a stasis point, especially because scholars acknowledge an important claim about life in the digital world, but leave open rhetorical and affective texture to explain vital relationships that exist mediated, but independent from digital models of the world. Slightly skeptical of the sense of unbridled affirmation animating new materialism, I have argued that we need to also advance a spirit of negation in order to fully appreciate a complex political relationship between the human and the plant. From this vantage point, let me offer an itinerary of the complex entanglement I will theorize.

PREVIEW OF FIGURE STUDIES (CHAPTERS)

Each chapter understands the figuring of plants in the motif of a journey. That is, each figure study explores different kinds of passages in which human and plant relations are encountered and critiqued. So while the motif may reinforce certain Enlightenment archetypes, I mean it to also confront them as well. The research is one that is not limited to one field of study or one disciplinary practice. Instead, I approach academic thought as I do the everyday encounters inspiring my writing: as multidimensional edge work and embodied experience. In this way, knowledge does not sit in agricultural silos, hoarded and isolated for further use. Rather, I aim for an understanding of thought that is ecologically shared, nourishing an orientation toward writing that is as rigorous as it is playful and performative.

In the first figure study I approach the human and plant relationship by reading a site that often stages such encounters: natural parks. I theorize a specific encounter I had with two close friends at Red Rock State Park in California. I use Theodor W. Adorno's lecture on natural history through out the chapter both to vitalize his work and also as a means to understand the dialect communicated in these preservationist settings. In taking up the park's invitation to participate in "guiding walking," the figural journey also traces two specific exhibits—a displayed piece of petrified wood and a diorama of early human tool use—to reflect on a staged relationship between humans and plants presented by the museum located in the heart of the Mojave Desert. In so doing, I amplify Adorno's concerns about keeping our sense of what counts as natural and history in conversation with the forces of Enlightenment maintaining their motion.

The second figuring approaches the study of human-plant relations by exploring a specific varietal: the Sipo-Matador, known affectionately as the murdering liana. In tracing the plant through different genres including poetry, science fiction, contemporary biology, Western philosophy and nineteenth century travel logs, I reveal the way the plant is figured in modes of affirmation and negation through historical and divergent registers. In exploring iterations of these vastly different sketches, I present opportunities to reflect on ways the plant has been figured to assist in projects of colonization, as fulcrum for a Western system of ethics, and as an actant in community formation. Using Adorno's dialectical method to understand both affirmative and negative expressions of this figure, I end with a more poetic formation of the human enmeshed with the plant.

In the third study, I offer a much more intimate odyssey through human and plant relations in the register of sound, offering a review (heavily informed by Adorno's large corpus on sound) of the 2012 art-album *Years* by Bartholomäus Traubeck. In seeking to understand a dialectical ambivalence in Traubeck's digital and fantastic rendering of tree sounds, I apply immanent criticism to my vinyl copy of the work as: as an opportunity to reflect on the contours of European woodlands but also as a specific commodity in itself. I travel through different states of the objects production, examining its relationship to other expressions of technological advancement and more well established mediums of reception. In so doing, I aim to reveal an ethical orientation of listening best suited to hear the human-plant relationship, one attuned to a rhetoric based on an Adorno-inspired ambient form of persuasion.

Ecologically read, each chapter provides a different understanding of sense, scale, and scene when considering the three distinct settings of figuration: deserts, rainforests, and woodlands. The environment subtly surrounds us in each figuration, where the endemic plant life characterized by each unique habitat is subtly imprinted in the readings. Oscillating between subject and object, the connections between human and plant becomes multidimensional when read across the figural habitats each chapter evokes.

The final concluding chapter returns to the discussion of human and plant relations more fully, looking at ramifications for understanding contemporary communication models in biology and rhetorical theory that could be more or less suited for ascertaining the extrahuman turn. I conclude with a short demonstration of my argument in application by examining a key influential artifact in the conversation: Stevie Wonder's soundtrack to the 1979 film with the same name: *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*.

Culminating from each figure study is a call to meditate on a principle of journeyed movement: how can we keep the subject-object relationship in motion, in *rhetoric*?¹⁵⁷ For me, a sense of motion—of not resting—defines both the project as a whole and the trajectory of Adorno's critical method toward which, I argue, we ought return more closely. For that, I now offer a closer look at Adorno's immanent criticism

¹⁵⁷ Justin Willford, "Toward a Morality or Materiality: Adorno and the Primacy of the Object," *Space and Culture* 11, no. 4 (2008), 409-421.

and its relation to rhetoric before I offer the case studies and a deeper return in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

The power of the status quo puts up facades into which our consciousness crashes.
It must seek to crash through them.
— Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

Reading Theodor Adorno is difficult; it's laborious in fact. Because Adorno's theory assembles many different layers of thought at once, a close reader has to stop and catch a breath. As the central figure in the Institute for Social Research (more widely known as the Frankfurt School), Adorno heavily influenced a broad range of movements in philosophy and rhetoric, including aesthetics, ideological criticism, and Marxist theory.¹⁵⁸ A Jewish exile from the Nazi regime who taught in New York and Palo Alto before returning to Germany after World War II, Adorno centered his criticism on challenging domination by understanding the relationship between content and form.¹⁵⁹ In major pieces like the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Minima Moralia*, *Negative Dialectics*, and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, he took aim at a wide array of opponents: what he termed "the culture industry"; numerous sects of philosophy; some communities of scientific researchers; and fascist political organizations. He challenged

¹⁵⁸ Adorno infused his Hegelian reading of Karl Marx with the psychoanalytic insights of Sigmund Freud. Philosopher Walter Benjamin's influence can be traced in Adorno's life long interest in historical and aesthetic perspectives. See, for example Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ Deborah Cook, "Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction," in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2008), 3-20; Stefan Müller-Dooch, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press 2005); Detlev Claussen, *Theodor Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

each for cultivating an attitude toward mindless consumption, training people to submit to violent bureaucratic administration, and for encouraging people to avoid thinking deeply about politics and history.

As Max Paddison notes, Adorno's writing is prone to provocation because of its density.¹⁶⁰ In a sense, Adorno's texts present *themselves* as an address: a challenge and opportunity for the reader to interpret and respond. In opposition to immediate and easy comprehension, Adorno's writing demands readers think deeply about the principles and assumptions that make up the current social fabric or constellation for understanding the world, its history, and their place in it. In fact, most introductions to Adorno begin, as does Alexander John Peter Thomson's, with a nod to the intensity required in reading and applying Adorno's method.¹⁶¹ Taking cues from Thomson, we can understand Adorno's method as asking readers to assume a place of rigorous reflection and deep meditative thought about the relationship between domination and language *while* reading. Especially when focused on objects of culture (from avant-garde art to technical composition in music), Adorno wrote in this way not just to reveal how an object reflected the systems of production and social life that produced it but also, in turn, how

¹⁶⁰ Max Paddison, "The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music," *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 202.

¹⁶¹ Alexander John Peter Thomson, *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 1. Important interpretations of Adorno will be more thoroughly reviewed in the dissertation. They include: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London ; New York: Verso, 1990); Christopher Menke-Eggers, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).

the object mediated and communicated those systems to an audience. Adorno's method is a form of inquiry he termed, "immanent criticism," stressing that neither object nor subject in an exchange existed 'outside' a set of structures conditioning the critical process.¹⁶² Such back and forth between "the object" and "the subject" of criticism is a process he understood as one of oppositional or dialectical encounter. At the opening of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno presents a complex, yet succinct explication. "Dialectics," Adorno argues, "is the consistent sense of nonidentity. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking."¹⁶³ What does he mean that thought is driven less by certainty and more by a knowledge of a thinker's limitation? What could he mean that guilt rather than conviction drives his thought? How do these admissions relate to rhetorical method? In exploring these questions, I will continue to explain these two important concepts, dialectics and immanent critique, which help us get closer to a clearer answer.

To this end it is necessary to rehearse a brief history of rhetorical methods to situate better Adorno's work. I will focus on one important method in rhetorical studies, ideological critique, to help make Adorno's contribution more apparent. Next, I return to the dialectic as a way to regain focus by understanding the term in its application in the field of speech, particularly in its expression in contemporary academic debate and in

¹⁶² Buck-Morss, *The Origin of the Negative Dialectic*, 32-42. For a more complicated reading on Adorno's use of immanent criticism, including evidence of a turn to more transcendental inquiry in later works, see for example: James Gordon Finlayson, "Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Criticism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 6 (2014): 1142-1166.

¹⁶³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 5.

Western philosophy. Finally, I will turn to the Frankfurt author and offer some general examinations including a closer step-by-step guide to dialectical analysis, or immanent critique, illustrating how I approach each figure study.

I. A Contemporary Story of Rhetoric

BRIEF HISTORY OF RHETORICAL METHOD

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in the opening of her “Rhetorical Criticism 2009: A Study in Method,” explains “that the persistent issue in rhetorical criticism today remains the same as it was in 1965—method.”¹⁶⁴ In other words, rhetorical method, much like the artifacts that lend themselves to investigation, as Lloyd Bitzer points out, are a unique “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations....”¹⁶⁵ As such, a standardized approach to analyzing or critiquing rhetorical phenomena is neither possible nor preferred. Contemporary rhetorical method, however, generally begins with an understanding of strategies of early 20th century innovators, including: close textual analysis drawn from the New Critics (I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt & McBeardsley); universal form analysis developed by Russian formalists (Roman Jakobson); and linguistic sign structures articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Rhetorical Criticism 2009: A Study in Method,” in *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, eds. Shawn Perry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 86.

¹⁶⁵ Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* no. 1 (1968): 1-14.

¹⁶⁶ I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism; A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Trubner, 1929); I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936); Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: H Holt and Co., 1938); Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Rhetoric* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); W.K. Wimsatt, *Explication as Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); W. K.

Rhetoricians in the early and mid 20th century took these insights and applied them to occasional speeches; their methods applied what were assumed to be universal principles of persuasion to the internal structure of a single speech. Craig Baird, Marie Hochmuth, Wayland Maxfield Parish, and Herbert Wichlens established a formal approach to oratorical persuasion, by using talent and technique to appraise a speaker's response to a local occasion.¹⁶⁷ Edwin Black developed a rhetorical method distinct from a formalist concern by stressing the importance of understanding persuasion in the context of external conditions and the composition of audience members.¹⁶⁸ Challenging the dominance of the Neo-Aristotelian influence in rhetorical methods, Black's concern was arguably cultural, centering on understanding the relationship between speech making and audience transformation.

But Campbell remains historically one of the most influential scholars of method influencing contemporary approaches by suggesting scholars examine not just the

Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949): 31–55; W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468–488; Roman Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002); Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

¹⁶⁷ Campbell, "Rhetorical Criticism 2009," 86. See also: A Craig Baird, "The Study of Speeches," in *American Public Addresses, 1740-1952*, ed. A Craig Baird (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 1-14; Marie Hochmuth "The Criticism of Rhetoric," in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, vol.3, ed. Marie Hochmuth (New York: Longmans, Green, 1955), 1-23; Wayland Maxfield Parrish "The Study of Speeches," in *American Speeches*, ed. Wayland Maxfield Parrish and Marie Hochmuth (New York: Greenwood Press, 1954), 1-20; Herbert A. Wichlens, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," in *Studies in Rhetoric and Public Speaking in Honor of James Albert Winans*, ed. A.M. Drummond (New York: Century Co., 1925), 181-216.

¹⁶⁸ Campbell, "Rhetorical Criticism 2009," 88. See also, Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

internal composition of a speech, but also the choices of selection made by the speaker.¹⁶⁹ For Campbell, merely assessing the skill or technique of an orator in response to a situation minimized the interests of a particular speaker and culture in the crafting process. By emphasizing inclusion and omission, Campbell linked a speaker to a cultural context and emphasized the responsibilities of the critic beyond technical assessment. After Campbell, the practice of rhetorical criticism became political. Campbell's groundbreaking criticisms of Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" speech and her subsequent focus on the (excluded) role of women in foundational rhetorical study, R.L. Scott's engagement with confrontational rhetoric, and Parke B. Burgess' rendering of the unique persuasive elements of Black Power movements, pushed rhetoric on the speech-side beyond the objective assessment of public address.¹⁷⁰ Instead, Campbell notes, criticism took up responsibility for advancing political concerns, especially in exploring expressions of domination in culture. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to cover all the approaches that take up Campbell's intervention, the most conspicuous kind of rhetorical approach that centers political and ethical questions has come to be known as "ideological criticism." In order to understand Adorno's method in relation to rhetorical studies, I will now turn to a focused description of one specific form: ideological criticism.

¹⁶⁹ Edwin Black, "Gettysburg and Silence," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 21-36.

¹⁷⁰ Parke B. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54 (1968): 122-33; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Radical Black Nationalism: A Case Study in Self-Conscious Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 22, no. 3 (1971): 151-60; Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55 (1969): 1-8; Molefi K Asante, *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969).

IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

According to Joshua Gunn, in general “ideology is a concept that refers to the collective beliefs, attitudes, and values of a given group of people.”¹⁷¹ In their overview to a special edition on ideology in criticism in the *Western Journal of Communication*, Dana Cloud and Gunn situate the term ideology as it is picked up and manipulated at different time periods for different interests.¹⁷² Originally understood by Destutt de Tracy as the science of ideas, Terry Eagleton, note Cloud and Gunn, argues that any scrutiny of ideology is in part motivated by an attempt to understand how “people may come to invest in their own unhappiness.”¹⁷³ As Emmet Kennedy argues, the term “ideology” transitioned from a cooperative to competitive valence around the French revolution.¹⁷⁴ Thus, in contemporary reception, ideology is broadly thought of as an umbrella term associated with the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially describing a range of methods articulating a relationship between the modes of production and the landscape of ideas and class interests which arise from economic structure.¹⁷⁵

In rhetorical studies, a criticism of ideology first emerged in two pivotal articles

¹⁷¹ Joshua Gunn, “Ideology,” in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, eds. Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009). 497-501.

¹⁷² Dana L. Cloud and Joshua Gunn, “Introduction: W(h)ither Ideology?,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (July 2011): 407–20.

¹⁷³ Cloud and Gunn, “W(h)ither Ideology?,” 407. They quote: Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991/2007), xxii. Eagleton expands this definition later, by arguing that ideology is to study the means and mechanisms of domination, including how dominant beliefs are articulated, naturalized, advanced and oppositional beliefs are reduced and omitted: Eagleton, *Ideology*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁴ Emmet Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt De Tracy to Marx,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 368.

¹⁷⁵ Cloud and Gunn, “W(h)ither Ideology,” 407. See also: Karl Marx, *The German Ideology with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx’s “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy,”* ed. and trans. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970).

by Philip Wander. Wander took up Campbell's intervention by exploring the patterns of identification in public address for the communities and groups excluded in the act of naming.¹⁷⁶ Calling it "the ideological turn" in rhetoric, Wander drew attention to the formative interests of the critic in assessing texts and understood successful criticism as those which heightened critical reflexivity (in contrast to methods aimed at clearly describing successful tactics in speech).¹⁷⁷

Operating from an explicit set of Marxist terms, Michael Calvin McGee was among the first in rhetorical studies to link rhetoric with ideology and *materiality*. "A materiality theory of rhetoric," notes McGee, "would not aim at making rules of composition, but rather at the description, explanation, perhaps even prediction of the formation of consciousness itself."¹⁷⁸ McGee encouraged scholars to explore a text from multiple layers, including: (1) the *microhistorical* (specific "speaker/speech/audience/occasion/change"); (2) the *sociorhetorical* (fantasy, role or persona acted out); and (3) the *macrohistorical* (institutional or collective organization).¹⁷⁹ For McGee, each text carried a residue of historical arrangements and could be examined explicitly to notice relations of domination operating in the text.

Attempting to forge a form of ideology critique specific to rhetorical studies, McGee

¹⁷⁶ See Philip Wander, "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 34, no. 1 (March 1983): 1–18; Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984): 197–216.

¹⁷⁷ Cloud and Gunn, "W(h)ither Ideology," 410.

¹⁷⁸ Michael Calvin McGee, "A Materialist's Conception of Rhetoric," in *Rhetoric, Materiality and Politics*, eds. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites (New York: Eter Land, 2009), 19. See also: Michael Calvin McGee, "In Search of the 'People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 235–49.

¹⁷⁹ McGee, "A Materialist Conception," 25–7.

proposed the concept of the "ideograph," (a basic "unit" of ideology) that can be used as a tool allowing a critic to draw connections from a piece of rhetoric (the artifact or expression) to its ideological constellation (the structure of ideas, interests, and economic conditions of its production). As a symbol (or unit of analysis), the ideograph stands in for a host of relations, often meaning different things to different people depending on their social location or goal (or the synchronic dimension). More importantly, ideographs exist in relation to the larger time-context and can shift over a period of time (or the diachronic dimension). According to Ronald Lee, the goal of ideographic-based criticism is to notice how antagonism—the struggle over power and control in any given context—is present in discursive residue or its representation. In this reading, the audience, assumed or actual, is also a product of rhetoric, in the sense that ideographs operate as short cuts, easily persuading audiences by subtly reinforcing interests and assumptions in the very language a text or speaker may use.¹⁸⁰

By 1993, note Cloud and Gunn, the criticism of ideology became embroiled in a wider debate about the scale, scope, and constitution of the method of rhetorical

¹⁸⁰ See: Ronald Lee, "Ideographic Criticism," in *The Art of Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Jim A. Kuypers (Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2005), 292-97; Also see: Celeste Condit and John Lucaites, *Crafting <equality>: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Also see: Philip P. Wander, "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 3-4 (1983): 1-18; Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984): 197-216. Wander also notices how prevalent is Heidegger's relation to landscape. Wander notes, following George Steiner, that landscape metaphors are used centrally in the text. But Wander returns it to a central human theme, "Heidegger" he argues spoke not just in using the themes of 'agrarian romance, but that the organizing metaphor of the land, spoke, "also of the primacy of the earth in the human world and the need to till the land that babies might not die in their mothers arms." See: Wander, "Ideological Criticism," 12.

inquiry.¹⁸¹ Critics who were interested in assessing the political and interest-driven context of ideology became aligned with a resurgent appreciation for texts as a form of public address, following Stephen Lucas.¹⁸² Critics interested in articulating a text's aesthetic elements or its place in cultural circulation (generally speaking, a Foucauldian approach) argued for a greater emphasis on power and interpretation.¹⁸³ While it is beyond the scope of my dissertation to explore the difference fully, I argue that the latter, termed "critical rhetoric," influenced by Raymie McKerrow (also Lawrence Grossberg, Carole Blair, and others), took the spirit of Wander while the former (including James Aune, Cloud, and other historical materialists), encouraged closer reading of structure and production following Marx.¹⁸⁴ While I do not claim to resolve the debate (nor do I think it is beneficial to do so), I am arguing in favor of a different return to ideological criticism. Following the Frankfurt School, I read Adorno to draw attention to the context

¹⁸¹ Cloud and Gunn, "W(h)ither Ideology," 411-12.

¹⁸² Stephen E Lucas, "The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 74.2 (1988): 241-260.

¹⁸³ Cloud and Gunn, "W(h)ither Ideology," 412.

¹⁸⁴ Raymie McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989), 91; For more reading on "critical rhetoric" see for examples: Barbara Biesecker, "Michel Foucault and the Question of Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (1992): 351; Carole Blair, "The Statement: Foundation of Foucault's Historical Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*: 51, no. 4 (1987): 364-383; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 57. For example of conjunctural analysis in use, see Suzanne Marie Enck and Blake A McDaniel, "Playing with Fire: Cycles of Domestic Violence in Eminem and Rhianna's 'Love the Way you Lie,'" *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 4 (2012): 618-644. For a historical materialist interpretation of ideological criticism, see, for example: Dana L. Cloud, "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 58, (1994): 143; Dana L. Cloud, "Materialist Dialectics and Communication Studies," in *Marxism and Communication Studies*, eds. Lee Artz, Steve Macek, and Dana L. Cloud (New York: Peter Lang, 2006). For a productive use of tension between the two schools, see: Michael Leff, "Things Made by Words: Reflections on Textual Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78, no. 2 (1992): 223-231.

and politically-situated elements of a text's production while also, following the critical rhetoricians, offer an appreciation of aesthetics and power relations. From this ground, I'd like to return to a reading of what critical theorists term "the dialectic" as way of gathering an applied approach to rhetoric and to situate Adorno's method, particularly in respect to how his mode of immanent criticism understands structure as adhering in thought and language.

II. The Persistence of the Dialectic

Fredric Jameson suggests that one of Adorno's greatest contributions to the theoretical humanities is his understanding of the term *dialectic*. Jameson writes in *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* that the "originality" of Adorno's contribution "lies in his unique emphasis on the presence of late capitalism as a totality within the very form of our concepts."¹⁸⁵ This is to suggest, "no other Marxist theoretician has ever staged this relationship between the universal and the particular, the system and the detail, with this kind of single minded yet wide ranging attention."¹⁸⁶ Against the seemingly surface play of texts divorced from lived experience in a system of domination favored by theorists more attuned to French post-structuralism, Jameson sees in Adorno a "celebration of the dialectic" influence by the German tradition.¹⁸⁷ Before I situate what Jameson detects in Adorno's sense of the dialectic, it is helpful to review the term itself. In what follows, I offer some applied examples to help get at the lived version

¹⁸⁵ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 9.

¹⁸⁶ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 11.

of the dialectic, and then examine the history of the term as told in the story of Western philosophy.

APPLIED DIALECTICS

Any introduction to “the dialectic” begins with the understanding that while the term may be easy to define it is impossibly caught in the struggle of the time period in which it is used in discussion. *The Oxford English Dictionary* directs us to understand “the dialectic” in its Platonic form, as a certain kind of logic or reasoning, an ongoing investigation into truth often through dialogue or discussion”¹⁸⁸ Media theorist Peter Lunneneffled situates the term as a nod to pragmatics or “grounding the insights of theory in the constraints of practice,” whose origin comes from a sense of “the art of conversation.”¹⁸⁹ Some forms of psychoanalysis, according to Arnold Goldberg, consider the dialectic to be “the to-and-fro exchange of information between two persons.”¹⁹⁰ What connects these approaches is an embodied practice, where the live exchange of ideas (including attempts to come to consensus or to articulate disagreement) establishes understanding and offers an opportunity to reflect.

In the discipline of speech and communication studies, many early articles from the so-called Cornell school in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, especially Evert Lee Hunt, understood the dialectic as “any process of argumentation conducted by question

¹⁸⁸ "dialectic, n.1". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.jpllnet.sfsu.edu/view/Entry/51883> (accessed October 14, 2017).

¹⁸⁹ Peter Lunenfeld, *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xv.

¹⁹⁰ Arnold Goldberg, “Deconstructing the Dialectic,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 79, (1998), 215.

and answer rather than by continuous discourse is here regarded as a dialectic process.”¹⁹¹

What Lee called cross-examination, he argued, was an applied dialectic found in academic debate clubs of the time.¹⁹² Handbooks beginning at the turn of the 20th Century [notably James A. Winans’ *Notes on Public Speaking* (1911), Albert Craig Baird’s *Public Discussion and Debate* (1928), Carrol Pollock Lahman’s *Debate Coaching: A Handbook for Teachers and Coaches* (1936), and Russell Wagner’s *Handbook of Argumentation* (1938)] also make the case for a special kind of knowledge emerging from the dialectic of debate formats.¹⁹³

Contemporary speech practices, especially present in academic forensics programs and speech and debate competitive teams, in U.S. higher education have absorbed the dialectic into pedagogy and practice. Examining the practical application of the dialectic in these formats helps illustrate its logic and use. I should also note forensics is where my personal experience with the pedagogy of dialectic is located. As a student, coach, and curriculum designer for many universities and styles of debate competition over the course of 20 years, I have both participated in and been crafted by this unique pedagogical model; It’s influence is clear in the rhetorical methods I am developing.

¹⁹¹ Evert Lee Hunt, “Dialectic—A Neglected Method of Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 7.3 (1921), 221-233. For a longer history, see also Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King, *Twentieth-century Roots of Rhetorical Studies*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2001).

¹⁹² For a more extensive history on the Cornell School see, for example: Thomas W. Benson, “The Cornell School of Rhetoric: Idiom and Institution,” *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2003): 1-56.

¹⁹³ Albert Craig Baird, *Public Discussion and Debate* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1928); Carroll Pollock Lahman, *Debate Coaching, A Handbook for Teachers and Coaches* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1936); Russel Halderman Wagner, *Handbook of Argumentation* (New York: T Nelson & Sons, 1938).

In contemporary debate, dialectic could refer to more than just the period of exchange between the participants, as assumed in the Platonic version, but to the form itself, a shift introduced in the writings of Hegel. Generally speaking, students prepare divergent argumentative strategies to a shared controversy, called "the resolution." In tournament competition, students present their strategies in two-hour rounds, the winner decided by an agreed upon judge who renders a public decision. Because students will debate numerous times in one tournament, they are required to think multiple perspectives through two primary poles: the affirmative, or side that endorses the resolution and negative, the side that challenges the affirmative. Students must be prepared to execute compelling positions over the course of the weekend that both affirm and negate a shared proposition. Dialectic helps to explain that formal debate is not similar to a pro/con book in a library or a debate around the family table. The setting, the structure, and the third-party decision on the debate by a judge make debate a distinct dialectical situation, more akin to the Hegelian tradition of thesis-antithesis-synthesis than to the dialogues of Socrates. The formal practice of affirmation and negation, performed over and over, creates a movement of interpretation in which students are asked to cultivate a perspective only to have it be altered by contingency. But in each repetition of the form, students are asked to transform their opinions of the world into public perspectives for the purpose of evaluation and judgment. In this way, the form affirmation-negation-judgment creates a triangulated understanding of argument motivated by dialectical inquiry.

Debate remains one of the few public navigations of a "dialectical triangle" with innumerable benefits to participants and to deliberation and dialogue. Often, however, debate and its accompanying term "argument" can be read with negative valence, especially to those unfamiliar or new to the activity as it is practiced in the United States.¹⁹⁴ What I have found valuable, however, is something important about the dialectical triangle I have been outlining: it contests the opinion-centered understanding of contemporary public consciousness. In his article, "Opinion Delusion Society," Adorno challenges the contemporary aversion to debate, reflected in the desire to frame public argument as a mere expression of opinion:

Opinion is the positing, no matter how qualified, of a subjective consciousness restricted in its truth content ... by proclaiming his [sic] opinion—unsound, unsubstantiated by experience, conclusive without deliberation—to be his own, though he may appear to qualify it, simply by relating the opinion to himself as subject he in fact lends it an authority: that of a profession of faith...Conversely, when confronted with a convincing and well grounded judgment that nevertheless is discomfiting and cannot be refuted, there is an all-too-prevalent tendency to disqualify it by declaring it to be mere opinion.¹⁹⁵

The problem is a narcissistic one, according to Adorno, and creates a consumptive subject. "Personal opinion becomes, as one's possession, an integral component of one's person and anything that weakens that opinion is registered by one's unconscious and preconscious as though it were a personal injury."¹⁹⁶ Here Adorno argues that, "opinion is above all consciousness that does not yet have its object," one in which opinion sutures

¹⁹⁴ See, for example: Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War or Words* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

¹⁹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 10, no. 2 (October 1, 1997): 227.

¹⁹⁶ Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," 229.

the present contradictions of society into the most palatable form and erases the structure of origin.¹⁹⁷ Adorno's solution, I will argue later, is not more dialogue based in opinion more akin to consumption than research. Instead, Adorno asks that we cultivate "an ability to make the exertion of reflection required by a concept of truth that does not stand in abstract and reified contraposition to mere subjectivity but rather develops itself through critique, by means of reciprocal mediation of subject and object."¹⁹⁸ What is to be gained by an understanding of an applied dialectic in the form of contemporary academic debate, though, is an ability to understand and challenge various forms of ideology, especially the hidden politics of common sense. To take on the practice of dialectic is to cultivate a rhetorical consciousness that mediates the individual and social dimensions of experience that are structured ideologically. Adorno argues that "opinion is not due simply to people's inadequate knowledge but rather is imposed upon them by the overall structure of society and hence by relations of domination."¹⁹⁹ And thus, the purpose of pursuing a persistent dialectic in thinking or debate is to understand the "nature of thought," as it clings to its own revelations and for whom only the thinker can undo such attachment. A strategy of challenge can be advanced through cultivating an ability to make judgments, engage in critique, and formulate different responses that challenge students to think both the affirmative and the negative.

Of course, aside from the debate practice in higher education in the United States, the dialectic has a more philosophical history that is helpful to understand for explaining

¹⁹⁷ Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," 231.

¹⁹⁸ Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," 233-4.

¹⁹⁹ Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," 242.

Adorno's critique of opinion. Taken as part of the method of immanent criticism, Adorno's critique of opinion is responding to the history of Western philosophy and its mangled story of the dialectic from Plato to Hegel and Marx. Having explained how the dialectic works in debate, I now turn toward a brief explanation of the concept in Western thought by glossing four different historical moments in philosophy: Ancient Greece, Kant, Hegel, and Marx.

ANCIENT ORIGINS

The story of the dialectic starts at the origin of Western thinking in Ancient Greece and reflects an early attempt at theorizing struggle itself. Nicholas Rescher characterizes these approaches to the dialectic broadly as “an oscillation between opposing forces in a productive tension where each turning makes a constructive contribution to the effective functioning of the overall process.”²⁰⁰ Early Greek thinking established this positive principle in two ways. For Sophists and Plato most conspicuously, the goal was to present information in the form of an intentional dialogue, that is, the asking and answering of questions in a staged practice. The hope was that in submitting a proposition to a series of questions, an internal contradiction in the heart of knowing itself would be revealed. As Rescher points out, for Plato the primary goal was more an exercise akin to the flexing of cognitive muscle than in revealing a specific kind of truth or surety of action.²⁰¹ While such approaches gave the dialectic (and by extension

²⁰⁰ Nicolas Rescher, *Dialectics: A Classical Approach to Inquiry* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Books, 2007), 120.

²⁰¹ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 120.

rhetoric) a bad rap in the name of sophistry, for Plato, a formal questioning agenda offered a fundamental experience with curiosity and creativity.²⁰²

In contrast, Aristotle had a sense of the dialectic motivated by a concern for investigative principles.²⁰³ But rather than induce principles, Rescher notes that Aristotle oriented his understanding of dialectical inquiry deductively, arguing from general agreed upon principles toward specific conclusion that emerge by comparing premises. Aristotle's syllogistic proofs, a statements building shared premises followed by a final conclusion, resemble formal logic aimed at guaranteeing confidence and mutual acceptance. In an example provided by Rescher, "in an Aristotelian dialectic we 'sweep the horizon' of plausible possibilities and show that something obtains irrespective of one's commitment to any particular alternative by identifying it as an implied commonality on all sides."²⁰⁴ Aristotelian logic, including his understanding of the dialectic, offers a similar departure for contemporary studies or persuasion and analytic philosophy.

The difference in approaches to knowledge and proof—that is, deductive and inductive reasoning—was established by the difference between Plato and Aristotle over the term "dialectic." An agreed upon premise or a shared understanding of the meaning of terms is, for Aristotle, the origin of the dialectical process and not, as an implied or

²⁰² Allan Silverman, *The Dialectic of Essence: A Study of Plato's Metaphysics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²⁰³ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 128.

²⁰⁴ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 131.

perhaps impossible outcome as argued by Plato.²⁰⁵ While both Plato and Aristotle agree that the dialectic produces “positive results,” the former attempted to arrive at “ultimate truth” while the latter hoped for a more foundational or “fundamental truth.” Other scholars built on this dilemma over the next millennia (including the skeptics, Cicero, and Tomas Aquinas for examples). But the term gets a vastly different treatment in Enlightenment thinking established by Immanuel Kant.

KANT’S CRITIQUE

Kant was suspicious of the potential for a dialectical questioning to degenerate into a series of illusions. Instead, he sought a transcendental set of terms to firmly advance a reasoning based on certainty.²⁰⁶ Rescher argues that Kant initially rejected the dialectic as a sort of magical manipulation, worried that “illusory logic prevails where one cannot settle matters convincingly with either a yes or a nay and arises whenever we inappropriately reify (hypostatize) an actual object that exist in reality as some item which in fact is a mere contrivance of thought.”²⁰⁷ The tendency for dialectical inquiry to devolve away from certainty into misreading, misidentification and obfuscation made the process established by Plato (and to a lesser degree Aristotle) prone to “deception and delusion.”²⁰⁸ For Kant, the self-contradiction inherent in the structure of the dialectic is the result of a failure, one in which thinking ought neither privilege nor sustain. Thus, the

²⁰⁵ For an interesting examination of the principles of life that emerge from this understanding of the dialectic see, for example Christopher Shields, “The Dialectic of Life,” *Synthese* 185, no.1 (2012): 103-124.

²⁰⁶ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 143.

²⁰⁷ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 143.

²⁰⁸ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 143.

project of the Enlightenment, initiated by Kant and described more fully in the literature review, hinges on his rejection of the dialectical encounter entirely.

As Diana Coole notes, however, it is impossible to understand any part of the project of thinking in the West and especially a newly appreciated sense of the dialectic without Kant.²⁰⁹ The resurgence in dialectic theory promoted one of the most important innovations in philosophic thinking, and one whom played a large role in Adorno's thought: German idealism and Georg W.F. Hegel.

HEGEL'S INFLUENCE

Considered primary in any approach to ideology, the thought of Georg W.F. Hegel established a form of modern philosophy called German Idealism. As Frederick Besier puts it, "every major philosophical movement of the twentieth century—existentialism, Marxism, pragmatism, phenomenology, and analytic philosophy—grew out of reaction against Hegel."²¹⁰ Hegel began with a philosophy and concept of consciousness initiated by a sense of wonder at encounters with the natural world. His method included the following: the assumption of a perspective human subject, capable of collecting "facts" or experiences from encounters in the world that led to generalizable conclusions followed by primary principles of change that explained those conditions. Of course, given the immensity (and density) of his writings, I'll try to offer a few of his key arguments inspiring contemporary ideological criticism and previewing his invigoration of the dialectic.

²⁰⁹ Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 5.

²¹⁰ Frederick C. Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

Hegel sought to articulate a theory of unity emergent from the division he observed in and about his surrounding environment.²¹¹ The natural world, for Hegel, could be understood as “co-existing, qualitatively distinct” from humans, but nevertheless developed progressively, “[in] mutually external stages,” through a movement of division and synthesis in a similar fashion to human history and consciousness.²¹² For example, in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel writes: “Nature confronts us as a riddle and a problem, whose solution both attracts and repels us: attracts us because Spirit is presaged in Nature; repels us because Nature seems an alien existence, in which Spirit does not find itself.”²¹³ While not a vitalist, Hegel nonetheless sought to draw from his experience with (and observations of) the surrounding world a central principle: change in the form of the dialectic.

For Hegel, contact with what he considered the natural world both explained the concept of “change” and provided the formative experience for the development of human consciousness. Since these experiences would develop and deepen over time, they provide the resources for the moments of transformation of human consciousness as well. Because one could never grasp the absolute essence of nature, to ponder on the conundrum “when consciousness asks itself what is its object, the object in itself,” is the opening and ground of thinking itself.²¹⁴ For Hegel, figuring out the difference between

²¹¹ Beiser, *Hegel*, 37.

²¹² Cinzia Ferrini, “The Transition to Organics: Hegel’s Idea of Life,” in *A Companion to Hegel*, eds. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 209.

²¹³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, ed. and trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1830/2004), 3.

²¹⁴ Beiser, *Hegel*, 59-60.

humans and the environment reveals and establishes a form of subject-object identification.²¹⁵ This equation, what counts as what, is an example of Hegel's understanding of dialectical logic. Hegel, in other words, presumes thinking to be enmeshed in a constant struggle over how to concretize the difference between "the subject" and "the object" that is, in a certain essence, defined as a dynamic process of isolating and consolidating the difference and similarity between the terms human and nature. In Beiser's terms, "both the subjective and objective are equally real, and the opposition between them is apparent from our everyday experience...."²¹⁶ As antecedent to immanent criticism, Hegel's approach emphasized the reinforcing relationship between human consciousness and the surrounding environment, as well as the noticed contradiction between the two, as a way of representing his concept of the whole.²¹⁷

Hegel opposed certain features of the Kantian reliance on a principle of transcendence. For Kant, the term transcendent aimed at expressing a type of faith, the very limit to what can be known. Hegel argued that for one to know a limit, one must have a sense of what exists beyond it and thus to have troubled the feature of a limit itself.²¹⁸ The transcendence Hegel challenged could be visualized literally as a rising up toward a different plane, most likely drawing from a resurrection myth. Hegel sought instead to relate vitality to a mundane world, and in effect, defined materiality as all the activity, including consciousness, bounded by Earthly experience. Since all of

²¹⁵ Besier, *Hegel*, 67.

²¹⁶ Beiser, *Hegel*, 69.

²¹⁷ Besier, *Hegel*, 89-90.

²¹⁸ Beiser, *Hegel*, 44, 55, 86.

consciousness is defined by an ecological encounter, then, Hegel reasoned, no such transcendence was likely to occur. In so arguing, he also affirmed the model of human reason favored by the Enlightenment and used it to systematize a world of immanence.

But, as Hegel points out, assuming that consciousness emerges from a human's encounter with nature has a tendency to remain unsatisfyingly endless. Hegel wanted to understand "change" concretely and historically.²¹⁹ Hegel placed the dialectic not in the structure of human thinking but as an explanatory form found in the natural world and inspired by a Spirit of design.²²⁰ Instead of situating dialectical thinking as structure of argument, Hegel understood a more comprehensive assessment of dialectic as that of correspondence. This is to say, humans were not absent from an involvement with nature but instead reflective of this involvement. So the contradiction brought forth by dialectical thought is one that reflects our experience: nature and thus humans are built on a contradiction that is "worked out" in experience and through reflexive thought applied to that experience.²²¹ Thus what presents itself to us, either as life or culture, is a product of the interaction of forces working an idea of contradictions out. The process connects the material world and the cognitive world jointly. Thus, even though there may be a conflict between the fact of the world and that which we perceive, Hegel understood the sequence as one that would bring closer and closer to an absolute unity, where those conflicts of contradiction would be so straining that inevitably they would be overcome through synthesis and harmonization.

²¹⁹ Beiser, *Hegel*, 30.

²²⁰ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 149.

²²¹ Rescher, *Dialectics*, 150.

What many found troubling in Hegel's writings, however, was his tendency toward totality, or a theory of unification or unity. Human-nature relations appeared naively romantic or idealist, drawn by an explained Spirit, which itself may be a mystification. Drawing out the dialectic in historical and decidedly real or material terms was accomplished by a second formative thinker of the 19th century (and ideological critic): Karl Marx.

MARX'S REVISION

Like Hegel, Marx argued that "[t]he first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature."²²² But Marx took issue with what he understood to be a fundamental metaphysics bound up in Hegel's appreciation of both Spirit and Nature. Instead, Marx wanted to articulate a theory of change thoroughly assessing modes of production and economic interest. For example, in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx meticulously examined Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Jean-Baptiste Say's *Treatise on Political Economy* in order to "comprehend" their origin in "relations of production."²²³ For example, he argued against a central assertion of Smith's, that society is only happy when the majority of its members live in a state of contentment. Instead, rather than assuming all bodies enter into the economic and social world with equity,

²²² Karl Marx, *A Critique of the German Ideology*, trans. Tim Delaney and Bob Schwartz (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968) accessed 3/10/13 marxists.org.

²²³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988) 70.

Marx argued that the proverbial deck is stacked against the individual who has to sell their labor in order to survive.²²⁴ Workers must compete against each other (and machines) for their livelihood.²²⁵ Even in “boom times,” workers uniquely sacrifice leisure.²²⁶ Such “static misery,” even under the best political economic outlook, Marx argued, demonstrates a primary, fundamental, and irreversible flaw in capitalism’s design.²²⁷

Since political economists claim capitalism maximizes “society’s interests,” Marx assumed one would deduce society itself “always stand[s] opposed to the worker.”²²⁸ Struggling against nostalgic aristocracy and urban sentimentality, Marx theorized that only the capitalist and the landowner have the ability to live without selling labor.²²⁹ For example, in “[Estranged Labor],” Marx established the significance of his thinking in the concept of alienation: workers relate to labor as a foreign object; product and process

²²⁴ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 19. Wages are the result of a confrontation between the owner of the means of production and those who provide service to initiate and maintain production. Workers will always be at a disadvantage, because they cannot negotiate fairly. Capitalists and landowners can cushion their lifestyle in a crisis and are thus at a permanent advantage.

²²⁵ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 23.

²²⁶ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 22.

²²⁷ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 27.

²²⁸ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 26. Similarly in ‘Capital,’ Marx points out a curious contradiction between a desire for monopolization (the state of highest profit based on supply concentration in one firm) and for competition (the ultimate stabilizing force for prices). Capitalists will attempt to exploit, through secrecy, the labor of workers, in order to obtain monopoly. Perversely, in either the schemas of monopoly or competition the worker is failed; devoting profits to expanding competitive capitals directly trades off with profits returned to the worker. See Marx, *Manuscripts*, 38-41. Also this section recognizes, initially, difference in capitalist interest. Based on scale and accumulation, small capitals can become workers and vice versa. Most likely this is based on industrial upgrades that demonstrate *fixed* expansions versus circulating expansions in which exchanges or manipulation (labor costs and so on) temporarily increase profits but cannot sustain themselves indefinitely. Again, the worker is denied either of these two options, unless, of course, they enhanced one of their limbs.

²²⁹ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 63.

exist independently of producer. For workers, objectification of labor is a double loss of their nature: (1) energy, the means of labor, is externalized into an object; (2) control over the “sensuous external world,” the terms of their own livelihood. Object-bondage is the only perverse gain: since the life of the worker creates the object, every time they confront an object of their labor of which they no longer control, they confront loss.²³⁰ Nature is twice alienated: first, externally as an object open to labor and then, second, swallowed up by capital interests through the process of labor.²³¹

From these two descriptions, Marx identified a third experience of alienation: “species-being.”²³² Agreeing with Hegel, Marx understood the process of identifying objects (humans, products, and nature) as central to the experience of the human. The more humans sought to distinguish themselves from objects, the larger the sphere of what counts as an object expanded. Viewed in a positive register, a process of objectification is required for any theory, science, or art. Consciousness emerges as we experience ourselves distinct from others. But, since labor also positions the worker as object, then humans also become estranged from each other.²³³ Estranged labor, in its reduction of *thought to means* and *human to need*, distorts consciousness. A principle of alienation, for Marx, explains labor relations of domination (between humans) and the paradox of

²³⁰ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 71-2.

²³¹ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 73.

²³² Marx, *Manuscripts*, 75. This is also the section that causes a major disagreement in environmental readings of Marx. I have tried to provide my own interpretation.

²³³ He writes, “Life itself appears only as a means to life...Essential being, a mere means to existence.” Marx, *Manuscripts*, 76.

private property as both “product” and “realization” of systemic alienation.²³⁴

Marx still considered an encounter with the natural world to be formative. Like others building upon Enlightenment principles, Marx hoped liberation from the three estranged modes of labor could blossom into an experience of “universal human emancipation.”²³⁵ In other words, Marx believed that in order for humans to be free, each had to have the opportunity to labor outside of exploitative conditions. Marx may have moved too quickly from an initial encounter with nature into the benefits and constraints of resource management in economic structure. Over-determining the natural world may only provide temporary liberation and, perhaps, could introduce too linear an understanding of historical change.

Thus, rather than imagine a telos or an arch of inevitability, István Mészáros argues that Marx sought to thoroughly demystify dialectical struggle.²³⁶ Creativity was understood as an expression of the human mind as it considers the physical reality and alters its contours through labor. Labor implemented ideas in a process of transformation. Eschewing the mysticism and idealism in Hegel’s notion of the Spirit, instead understanding human process in a historic moment as the result of economic contradictions. For contemporary writers, such as Bertell Ollman, this is the central contribution of Marx: “a way of thinking and a set of related categories that captures,

²³⁴ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 76-81.

²³⁵ Marx, *Manuscripts*, 82.

²³⁶ István Mészáros “The Dialectic of Structure and History: An Introduction,” *Monthly Review* 63.1 (May 2011): 17-35.

neither misses nor distorts, the real changes and interaction that go on in the world.”²³⁷

For Marx, there is no way of abstracting an Idea, concept or form from its historical period any more than a historical period can be abstracted from its economic formations.

Marx understood—hoped for?—an inevitability: the contradiction between forces compelling (over)production and the experience of alienation would create such pressure that the structure would transform into a more equitable distribution or a different and more complex form of organization. In this way for Adorno, however, traditional Marxist theory smuggled in too much optimism in its claim of inevitable transformation and placed too much faith in a conscious populace. For Adorno, who fled Nazi Germany after the rise of National Socialism, the idea that all revolutions would be leftist seemed too historically ideal. While he would retain a close Marxist understanding of the dialectic, his immanent critique, to which I now turn, would emerge from a distinctively negative mode.

ADORNO ON THE DIALECTIC

For Adorno, the purpose of investigation, and for my purposes rhetoric, is poetically articulated as a desire to understand and sustain the feeling of rhythmic pulsation in experience (from thinking, to reading, to writing). Rainer Nägele describes Adorno’s critical cadence similarly as “thinking breath,” or “a meditation through negation.”²³⁸ Motion, pulse, cadence, breathing, meditation are all descriptions of the

²³⁷ Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith, “Dialectics: The New Frontier: Introduction,” *Science & Society* 62. 3 (Fall, 1998): 333.

²³⁸ Rainer Nägele, “The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno’s Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism,” *Boundary 2* 11, no. 1/2 (1982): 66. I find this play very intriguing,

critical process for Adorno. While such depictions appeal to Hegel's sense of wonder, Adorno attempted to express the critical act as an *entwinement* between the categories of subject and object through what we might call a "rhetorical form." Said differently, what animates Adorno's criticism is also what he sets out to unravel; in order to understand the messy meshing of material and symbolic worlds, we have to loosen and clarify specific threads and the processes producing an orientation in order to balance and not dominate. The foothold for doing so is the dialectic, or contradiction not in affirmation or synthesis, but in negation.

Negative Dialectics represents the final, most theorized set of Adorno's writings, even though ideas that show up in the collection were long assembled and worked through in his previous writings. According to Adorno scholar Brian O'Connor, part of Adorno's brilliance is his ability to invert a concept in what he terms "critical appropriation."²³⁹ In this instance, O'Connor notes that Adorno makes the German Idealist affirmative understanding of dialectics (commonly understood by the terms thesis-antithesis-synthesis) into a negative formulation. That is, rather than believe a compromise that combines the useful elements of two positions into one super posture, Adorno argues that the two positions remain incommensurate until they collapse into themselves. That is, even as the subject seeks to grasp an object that it knows to be other than itself, the attempt and failure of synthesis is the instantiation of movement.

precisely because the material rhythm that defines our biological connection with the botanical world is through breath, which is the constant symbiotic transformation of oxygen molecules into carbon dioxide.

²³⁹ Brian O'Connor, "Adorno's Reconceptualization of the Dialectic," in *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 537.

Therefore, the question of what it means to “be responsive to contradiction” entails using an experience of failure to understand consciousness that does not suture the conflict in false rationalizations, but instead welcomes this struggle as a way to move through the world. In O’Connor’s reading, “the sense of the ‘thing’, the ‘matter,’ the ‘object,’ is heightened by our experience of failure to encapsulate it.”²⁴⁰ The mediation taking place is one in which we understand the world in richer and more textured ways. The end goal is not to come to a revelation of positive truth, but an on going process of disintegration, one that challenges efforts at mastery and surety, a grounding in constant movement.

While Adorno agreed with Marx that antagonism ought to be considered the cause of social problems and that criticism could and should reveal that locus as such, he considered the primary dialectic to be a relationship between subject and object that played out across various strata including form and content, particular and universal, production and reception, and many other iterations.²⁴¹ Thus, one of Adorno’s philosophical contributions is his disagreement with Hegel and Marx over the mode of the dialectic, and includes considering the question of what constitutes the absolute difference between the subject of the human and the external object that spurs reflection, often cast as “nature,” best suited for the dialectical form. While seemingly paradoxical, the very grappling with the incongruity between subject and object, according to Cook’s reading of *Negative Dialectics*, depicts Adorno’s method of understanding the unending historical contours of a subject’s complicated, often contentious, and co-dependent

²⁴⁰ O’Connor, “Adorno’s Reconception,” 539.

²⁴¹ David Sherman, “Adorno’s Negative Dialectics,” *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 353-363.

relationship with *an* object, never considered separate.²⁴² But this is not to suggest that the subject and object unify or become one. It is instead to figure out moments they are both the same *and* different. This is the crux of Adorno's understanding of dialectic form and is the crux of his process of immanent critique; this simple understanding of nonunderstanding vitalizes Adorno's complex writing.

Werner Bonefeld describes Adorno's dialectics not as a "formal procedure or method applied to reality" preferring "instead of asking what the things are, it asks how best to view and arrange them."²⁴³ One example he uses pertinent to this study is an understanding of the human, the typical subject of Western philosophy. "The Human subject does not exist for and by itself ... It objectifies itself in the object."²⁴⁴ But what might that mean? To understand the definition of human in exception is a flawed assumption. We are never free from a constant internal struggle to make sense of oneself and to situate oneself in surroundings, a conclusion a liberated autonomous subject cannot entertain. Instead, Adorno's formulation gestures to a dialectic form of the human: in an attempt to define a free subject, the subject must be an object of reflection, in a sense, already not free from constraint. In the reverberations and the constant struggle to come up with an exclusive definition and failing at that endeavor does one arrive at the constitution of human: a vital life (like other vital life) lost in the vibration between subject and object. Subject to ourselves and yet object to institutions, object of reflection

²⁴² Deborah Cook, "Adorno's Critical Materialism," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 6 (2006): 723.

²⁴³ Werner Bonefeld, "Negative Dialectics in Miserable Times: Notes on Adorno and Social Praxis," *Journal of Classic Sociology*, 12.1 (2012): 129.

²⁴⁴ Bonefeld, "Negative Dialectics in Miserable Times," 124.

and subject to that reflection, subjective object and objective subject, the thought of the human and its constitution is already bound to a dialectic encounter exposing the pretense of opinion already dependent on historical situation and economic structure.

While some may want to wish away this exercise, one might ask along with Adorno, what if that messy expenditure of energy, while inefficient, is nonetheless closest to that which is "true?" In this way, it is not only the difficulty of writing, but also taking up the edges, the moments of contradiction, or being willing to be addressed by unanswerable complexity where the power of rhetoric and the "success" of Adorno's understanding of the dialectic may lie. Real problems and real encounters must be taken up, but the need for obvious solutions and easy conclusions is foregone in the wake of the need to struggle with, and perhaps fail, takes over and is celebrated. In this way Bonefeld asks us to consider Adorno's method as a reflection not about things but how to think "out of" things.²⁴⁵

As Terrence Thomson notes this "out of" is not an exit, but a turn of orientation that makes Adorno's investigation distinct. Adorno invites us to draw from but understand a distinction between what is philosophical and what is not, that is what extends beyond the pure philosophic approach I have tracked so far in the term the dialectic and that which might be different, and that difference is what we might term rhetorical.²⁴⁶ In still other words, Lisa Yun Lee understands the 'out of-' clause

²⁴⁵ Bonefeld, "Negative Dialectics in Miserable Times," 129. See also Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Verso, 1973), 33.

²⁴⁶ Terrence Tomson, "Nonidentity, Materialism and Truth in Adorno's Negative Dialectics," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2017): 344.

methodologically. “Immanent critique” she writes, “remains what it criticizes, using the internal contradictions of a work to criticize the work itself.”²⁴⁷ And that cannot be limited to the application but also to Adorno’s work in which “to understand that some of his most shattering insights are to be found in moments of failure.”²⁴⁸ Thomson also notes this sentiment when he suggests that the work of thinking to be found in the method of Adorno “perpetually reverberates in an impasse.”²⁴⁹

Concretely, for Cook, immanent criticism represents a unique form of dialectical materialism. In Adorno’s writing, the relationship between humans and nature is reconsidered in relation to a historical materialist assessment of social structure.²⁵⁰ As I previewed elsewhere, historical materialism considers: (1) “consciousness” as the result of antagonisms located in structural design; (2) ideas (including rhetoric) emerge at the intersection of economic relations and forces of production; (3) interests drive rhetoric; (4) transformation stresses shifts in laboring consciousness to recognize an interest in asserting agency against dominant forces to gain control over production and experience liberation ²⁵¹ In other words, for historical materialists, ideological criticism must begin

²⁴⁷ Lisa Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W. Adorno* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 1.

²⁴⁸ Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body*, 13.

²⁴⁹ Tomson, “Nonidentity,” 345.

²⁵⁰ John Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 158.

²⁵¹ Cloud and Gunn - “W(h)ither Ideology,” 408; James Arnt Aune, *Rhetoric and Marxism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 11-4.

and foreground the real exploitation of real people in the world beyond the page or outside the mind.²⁵²

Some theorists, including Ernesto Verdeja, object to Adorno's theory, arguing that his approach does not achieve this goal.²⁵³ Others, including Jürgen Habermas, suggest Adorno too abstractly focuses on totality, resulting in a reinforcement of the tools of Enlightenment reason and not their dissolution.²⁵⁴ Chris Rocco challenges both these concerns.²⁵⁵ Instead of what these critics see as impossible assertions of high theory, Rocco sees as a productive "tension" that stops the systemic closure of systems. For example, often the most feared systems are ones that assert a certain sense of inevitability, a refusal to consider any alternative. Immanent critique acknowledges that such a promise offered by more oppressive systems of reason and economic exchange require a constant opening that challenges the system on its own terms, thereby in real terms displaying an alternative assumed impossible. For Rocco, "thinking must make system and perception accord by reconciling the antagonism between the general and the particular, the concept and the facts."²⁵⁶ Rocco argues that a focus of immanent criticism

²⁵² This includes a challenge to the strand of critical rhetoric that invites play language games at what they see as the expense of the necessary critical tools of judgment and allows capital interests to define truth. For example: see Cloud, "Materiality," 143-159; Cloud, "Materialist Dialectics" 65-7.

²⁵³ Ernesto Verdeja, "Adorno's Mimesis and its Limitations for Critical Social Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 4 (2009): 493-511.

²⁵⁴ See here Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1982): 777-795; Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Fredrick G Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987).

²⁵⁵ Chris Rocco, "The Politics of Critical Theory: Argument, Structure, Critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no. 2 (1995): 107-133.

²⁵⁶ Rocco, "Politics of Critical Theory," 124.

might include an emphasis on that which has been excluded from Enlightenment thought, rational activity, and profit-driven decision making. One might examine that which has been denied a status of rational recognition, which might include the representations of the enchanted, the unconscious, the oppressed (and for this dissertation, the plant), to be a place where a deep meditation on the structural contradictions might be revealed and thus develop resources for creative thinking and connection, inspire ethical categories of address, and in so doing eliminate the smooth closure of the contemporary ideological system. So while also imperfect as a solution, “the capacity to think from the standpoint” against the interests of dominant ideology is an important tool in and of itself.²⁵⁷

Adorno’s immanent critique stresses the importance of considering the human-nature connection. Adorno draws attention to a set of adversarial circumstances that emerge from encounters with nature, through and beyond the alienation in/of labor. Humans create a variety of vehicles to navigate the paradoxical state of being both subject and object, most in service of domination. Some humans exert tremendous energy designing concepts (theories of instinct, genetics and self preservation) and make equipment (framing techniques, data surveys, civil infrastructure) to demonstrate supremacy through control. Examining various artifacts around us, we notice with Adorno, as Cook does, that “we have posited ourselves throughout our history as radically other than nature with a view to dominating nature both practically and conceptually.”²⁵⁸ To understand labor alienation and transformation requires grappling

²⁵⁷ Rocco, “Politics of Critical Theory,” 125.

²⁵⁸ Cook, “Adorno’s Critical Materialism,” 723.

with a primary (and perhaps preceding) rhetorical division between the absolute externality of nature and its relationship to human consciousness formation. Central for Adorno's method—and thus, the rational for its use in ascertaining human and plant relations—is a dual imperative: first to understand how and in what ways humans figure nature as an object and what resources humans muster to understand and intervene in that relationship.

Finally though, and to return to a paradoxical note I have been carefully working through, if “instrumental orientation towards [natural] objects” is to be fully understood, as Cook argues, then inquiry must include a dual recognition of understanding nature (and domination) within our own systems.²⁵⁹ Recognition, in terms of method, might include not just the initial philosophic origins of the dialectic or as a primary division between humans and nature, but also various artifacts steeped in the contradiction between the two.

In establishing a condensed understanding of the historical origins of Adorno's thinking and some of its orienting principles, I'd now like to turn attention toward the steps of immanent critique in order to make clear how I use it in this dissertation.

III. Immanent Criticism: Steps in Constellations in Orientation

Adorno was fond of thinking "constellations," what I termed figures or figurations, as the process of tracing the connections among objects and experiences

²⁵⁹ Cook, “Adorno's Critical Materialism,” 726-8. Immediate places that come to my mind include: various techniques we use to repress the untamed wilderness of the unconscious, cultural regulations on wild desire run rampant, and the agrarian language of domestication in describing foreign threats to civil body.

through the dialectical form. Thomson argues that Adorno understood “constellations are nonhierarchical; concepts forming a constellation relate to one another in nonlinear, non-binary, horizontal webs.”²⁶⁰ I like to think of this in relation to what Walter Fischer noted about rhetoric in the narrative paradigm.²⁶¹ Fisher suggested that the work and power of rhetoric related to the stories that we tell to each other, the magic that could transform little specks of light into battles for worlds, deities struggling with desire, and great reminders of our own limited place in the universe. There is not a necessary correspondence between the placement of stars and the images they invoked in stories. Rather, it is the job of the critic to place light in conversation, in everyday moments of ritual, and bring together the audience through these stories.

Adorno’s understanding appeals to a sense of the dialectic relationship between oral and aural in criticism, even in its written form. Constellations—like speech itself—harmonize in the way they vibrate ideas together in the presence of an interpreter. The dialectic in operation here, that is to say the contradiction, is that the real image, the real stuff of stars is not at all what the image-story evokes. The subject and object collapse into each other in ways that make it difficult to say what is what, who is who and so on. For David Sherman this manifests as “a grouping of contemporary (sochiographically generated) concepts that mediate one another in the construction itself, which serves as a pedagogical device to come to new insights regarding its constituents.”²⁶² Constellation metaphors can helpfully keep the subject and object in tension without collapsing into a

²⁶⁰ Thomson, “Nonidentity,” 353.

²⁶¹ Walter Fisher, *Journal of Communication* 35, no. 4 (1985): 74-89.

²⁶² Sherman, “Adorno’s Negative Dialectics,” 361.

relativist or universalist perspective. Second, they can approach the object as a real product of history without placing it as an inalterable fate or arch. Finally they can place relations in struggle outside of a practice of domination, in that we might catch glimpses of understanding only to watch them fade away under further examination.

Like other practitioners of Critical Theory and members of the Frankfurt School, Nägele argues that Adorno was primarily concerned with explaining constellations as a process of mediation. Mediation is an explanatory term describing an artifact that reconciles a relationship among three different spheres or levels of meaning: the phenomena or the world, the socio-historical condition, and theoretical terms and conditions for individual and collective intervention. The Frankfurt School's goal, while perhaps "utopian" in desire, aims at theorizing an end to domination by examining texts of mediation.²⁶³ For Adorno, a complex rhetorical strategy of writing and reading that he called immanent criticism is essential.

As Steven Helmling notes, immanent criticism is one of Adorno's most valuable contributions because it not only tries to develop his approach in contrast to other Frankfurt scholars, but also because it tries to submit criticism to itself—that is, to critique the method of critique while using it simultaneously.²⁶⁴ Immanent means "'from the inside,' not external; all writing and production takes place inside of ideology and is

²⁶³ Nägele, "The Scene of the Other," 60, 70.

²⁶⁴ Steven Helmling, "Immanent Critique' and 'Dialectical Mimesis' in Adorno and Horkheimer's 'Dialectic of Enlightenment,'" *Boundary 2* 32, no. 3 (2005): 97.

thus implicated in it.”²⁶⁵ Unlike some connotations of contemporary philosophy (notably Object Oriented Ontology), immanent criticism does not believe in an exit or escape into a space of something like “pure” nature. Such places are already conceptual ruses; they don’t exist independent from mediation. Following the new materialists, if scholars focus on the representational encounters with nature or the vegetal world—the ideological site and connection between the two spheres—perhaps we might be able to understand the unique and formal terms of interaction.²⁶⁶ Since immanent criticism understands the practice of writing and reading as one expression of labor (although not to be vaulted or idealized), forging new theoretical connections (or divisions) may provide a means of altering the conditions of mediation. How does this work?

In addition to the style of writing, criticism for Adorno refers to an active process, or an engagement with thinking, with an attention to limited transformative possibilities available in writing, reading, and thinking. Helmling describes the transformative process as a kind of liquefying what has become sediment.²⁶⁷ For Adorno, sedimentation describes concepts that have become compacted—reified—into hardened ideological thought, *including the subject/object distinction itself*. The critical process tries to soften calcified orientations by using deep theoretical meditation to undo some of bonded connections.²⁶⁸ We should understand Adorno’s criticism as not simply descriptive, but

²⁶⁵ “Immanent, Adj.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed November 22, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/91798>.

²⁶⁶ Steven Helmling, “Constellation and Critique: Adorno’s Constellation, Benjamin’s Dialectical Image,” *Postmodern Culture* 14, no. 1 (2003): 2.

²⁶⁷ Helmling, “Constellation and Critique,” 8.

²⁶⁸ Helmling, “Constellation and Critique,” 8.

contemplative in its approach to history.²⁶⁹ By “contemplative” Adorno does not claim to have discovered an origin or revealed a hidden universal truth. Adorno instead, following Thompson, attempts “to interrogate the incapacities” of a claim to a specific form of reason to explain contemporary conditions. The method then begins by examining an existing object, and submitting it to the following steps. While Adorno would object to a clarification of his method in terms of instrumental operations, I will use this section to explain my approach for the reader.

TECHNIQUES

In the following section, I will explain my adaptation of Adorno’s method of analysis, immanent criticism. I hone in on three crucial steps: the pairing of terms to situate the dialectic, an application to a specific object or artifact, and re-reading the object in its primacy in Adorno’s unique understanding of identification.

(A) Pairing of contradicting terms

As I argued in the introduction, the pairing of terms to reveal a tension is the primary starting point for immanent criticism. Similar to Burke’s “perspective by incongruity” or Friedrich Nietzsche’s “active nihilism,” when viewed as the juxtaposing of two terms together, Adorno’s method is designed to diffuse concentrated concepts and in so doing open a space for contemplation of process and arrangement.²⁷⁰ As Ross Wolin notes, as rhetorical technique, term pairing is designed to push “the limits of

²⁶⁹ Thomson, *Perplexed*, 3.

²⁷⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 69-70; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967); 17-18. Debra Hawhee, “Burke and Nietzsche,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 129-145.

meaning making” to arrive at a different site or location of argument.²⁷¹ Thinking temporally, Barbara Biesecker notes (of Burke) that an “interval” is one in which the future no longer seems determined, but open to refashioning²⁷²

In critical research, formal interpretation and tactile experiences become *referential*, not discrete sets of experiences. That is, in order to understand how a plant “works” one would have already encountered its leaves. But, in order to give words to those experiences, one must also have a frame of reference and formal points with which to communicate those points to oneself or others. As such, neither is discrete, but co-constitutive. Put in terms of the methodological difference I traced in the previous section, the objectivity close-reading strategies require, and the specific reflexivity critical rhetoric demands, seem to appear impossible to join, and yet must be in order to make sense of the world around us. Meditating on the impossibility of reconciliation is productive for thinking, even if it does not rest on a final or finished concept.

Since each term will in some ways reflect on the grammatical difference between subject and object, one needs to look at a specific site, artifact, or entity in order to understand how the tension is revealed in its content and formal qualities. For example, in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno ponders the difference between natural beauty and a piece of art as the “paradox of aesthetics.”²⁷³ Adorno notes, on the one hand, a stark difference

²⁷¹ Ross Wolin, *The Rhetorical Imagination of Kenneth Burke* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

²⁷² Barbara Biesecker, *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric, and a Theory of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 102.

²⁷³ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Beauty of Nature,” in *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1970/1984) 91-113.

appears to exist between the feeling of wonder at witnessing nature and the experience of examining a painting in a gallery. The beauty of human products and the natural world are constituted differently, separately. Since art is premised, for Adorno, on the same sense of wonder at otherness, then each experience is also intimately tied together. A gallery participant, in other words, will often draw upon the same resources when encountering an artifact of art and those of the natural world (a site like the Grand Canyon, for example). The positioning of nature and art demonstrates two productive tensions. On the one hand, art is explicitly unnatural; an image is not the same as the thing itself. On the other, art appeals to a register of aesthetics revealed in and through encounters with nature, making the experience of receiving and interpreting art and nature joined or constitutive of one another.

To understand the relevance, Adorno offers a second step in immanent criticism: examining a specific text for the way it navigates a dialectic tension between two poles.

(B) Dialectic examination in an object or artifact

Art and nature, like subject and object, when understood dialectically, can be read not just through one level of social experience, but in multiple levels. As Helmling notes, dialectic terms “operate,” like so many of Adorno’s principles, “as functionally convertible.”²⁷⁴ How a text or object reveals dialectical tension can be read “outward” through process of production and “inward” through its technical elements and formal composition. Traditional uses of the dialectic, though, often operate in terms of binary oppositions. Traditional and contemporary uses of term assert a permanent and separate

²⁷⁴ Helming, “Immanent Critique,” 100.

division. Adorno does not deny that items may be in opposition, but instead, he believes that dichotomy, or absolute difference, is a product of ideology.²⁷⁵ Helmling understands Adorno's use of dialectic as a method of identifying poles of tension, understanding their expressions in specific instances, and then using the revealed slippage between the two to understand an orientation differently.²⁷⁶

Again to draw from the section of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, understanding the resonance of natural beauty is caught in-between two poles. On the one hand, appreciation of contact with the landscape is essential for any appreciation of art, poetic or communicative difference, and otherness itself. On the other hand, keeping nature too much at bay results in "idealist tourism," relegating nature to a diminutive status in the form of landscape paintings, tokenization in the form of natural parks, or instrumentalized as in the language of preservation.²⁷⁷ So, while it is possible to see art in nature and nature in art, often when nature is presented in the form of commodity, it loses the appeal to difference because of the form of presentation.

As I've already hinted in earlier sections, Adorno's bundling of principles already exposes a number of important reflections from understanding dialectical tensions. First, Hegel and Marx thought of history in the form of a grand narrative: two opposing positions clash and from that encounter one will emerge victorious to control the means of production. Instead, Adorno challenges a false unification; harmony is never possible.

²⁷⁵ Helmling has an excellent quote about this: "Adorno takes the dichotomy itself as an ideological problem or wound - his code word is *chorismos* (Greek "separation) - that his own critical labor will overcome or heal." Helmling, "Immanent Critique," 99.

²⁷⁶ Helmling, "Constellation and Critique," 31.

²⁷⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 97-104.

At the same time, the opposite is also untrue. To think of poles in permanent opposition or permanently separate from each other mistakes how central it might be to each constitution. So, for Adorno, a scholar of immanent criticism might look at ways the site or artifact reflects the terms of contradiction and how it oscillates between the two at various times.

Brian Wall's cinema case studies are good examples of Adorno's critical method.²⁷⁸ Wall examined at the status of objects in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), masculine materialism in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), comic form in the *Repo Man* (1984), and commodity and sexual fetish in *The Big Lebowski* (1988). In each chapter, Wall uses a variety of Adorno's theory to approach a contemporary film to understand what it says about different sets of relations in the artifact and as it relates to genre and economic culture. For example, in *The Big Lebowski*, Wall hones in on a famous utterance of "the Dude" played by Jeff Bridges. After his arrest and subsequent interrogation by the police, "the Dude" scoffs at the suggestion that Jackie Treehorn, a pornographer and villain of the film, ought be considered a more reputable community member than himself. Bridge's character exclaims: "Jackie Treehorn treats objects like women, man!" For Wall, the inverted status of subject (object) and object (women), coupled with the gendering of the police (man), demonstrates a contemporary dialectic exchange. On the one hand, postmodern identity is explicitly concerned with thinking outside of essential categories. On the other, merely altering the signifier does not dramatically alter

²⁷⁸ Brian Wall, *Adorno and Film Theory: Fingerprints of the Spirit* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

relations, because the form of domination reveals a structure beneath performative choices. What remains is a relationship defined, according to Wall, primarily by consumption of the object and the domination of women.²⁷⁹

Robert Miklitsch also applies immanent criticism to multiple mediums, film, sound, and television by tracing a series of postures and consumptive positions brought out by changes in technical and cultural production.²⁸⁰ As Wikins reminds us, each of these forays into texts of popular culture demonstrates the dialectical principles of structuration.²⁸¹ The technical means of production (instruments used, the composition or arrangement, and intended-audiences) reveal a formal structure. Examining a text, in content and context, as it struggles with and reveals dialectic logic, also exposes practices of domination in both spheres. Adorno's immanent criticism then, in a third step, theorizing social relations based on these two expressions, both revealing an emphasis on the primacy of the object.

(C) Primacy of Object

Immanent criticism is concerned with challenging identitarian logic, or avoiding "coercive homogenization."²⁸² Identification works through rhetorical means of reductive association, in Cook's terms, by "wrongly substitute[ing] unity for diversity, simplicity for complexity, permanence for change, and identify for difference."²⁸³ Relations of

²⁷⁹ Wall, *Adorno and Film Theory*, 121-2.

²⁸⁰ Robert Miklitsch, *Roll Over Adorno: Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Audiovisual Media*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

²⁸¹ Wikins, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 11.

²⁸² Cook, "Adorno, Foucault, and Critique," 971.

²⁸³ Cook, "Adorno," 10.

identification too easily slip into misrecognitions of equanimity of terms or a logic of $A=A$. To draw another parallel, Adorno understood the origin of the subject along the lines of psychoanalysis. Quickly, like Jacques Lacan's description of the mirror stage of human identification, the subject comes to know itself based on a moment of misrecognition.²⁸⁴ In Lacan's famous staging, as a baby looks at itself in the mirror (or on an iPad) s/he begins to understand its body—its shape—distinct from the environment around it. In an attempt at differentiation, the infant begins to see its discrete body *as* the projection s/he examines in the mirror. That is, the image we have of what we are, is already based on the experience of ourselves as a reflected upon object. To put it still differently, our material body collapses into the mediated image we struggle to make sense of. As such, we navigate a constant battle between the limit of ourselves as projected-object and material-operator.

To pick up Adorno here, rather than begin with the interests or identity of the subject, we should understand the primacy of the object, the image, in the production of consciousness and mediation. To once again draw attention to Adorno's discussion of the difference between art and nature may be helpful. Assuming the reader has agreed with the previous examples, Adorno concludes by suggesting we can understand nature as subject, only by first understanding its status as an object *for us*. While nature may be contained in an image (photograph, landscape painting, or park), it cannot be contained *by* the image; so much more remains. In fact all the nonidentical elements—"the spirit of

²⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2001), 1-8.

otherness” in Adorno’s words—is revealed by theoretical reflection of all elements refusing to be captured by a text. Thus, to think about the difference between natural commodity (images of the Grand Canyon) and the Grand Canyon itself (both as entity and preserve), opens not only reflection on the way humans treat nature, but also on the inevitable failure of our attempt to control or dominate the natural world. In other words, despite our best efforts, severing the subject and object is impossible; it forms the very foundation of consciousness. Since aiding efforts seeking to end domination remains the ethical and political goal, finding routes in theory and writing—in rhetoric—situates various expressions of subject and object to help offer moments of meditation and perhaps chip away at the calcification of historic orientations. While such possibility is extremely limited, it is not possible, according to Adorno, unless the primacy of the object is foregrounded. If, as Willford notes, “the object is the impetus for the normative moment - the truth of which it speaks,” then to examine the contradictions in an object or text offers “a glimpse into the state of the subject’s relationship with the world.”²⁸⁵ So, when a scholar examines a text, revealing the way an object is constituted offers an opportunity to expose the subject and contest the subject’s hidden interests. Helmling describes a final step as “dialectical self consciousness” or the undoing of ideological calcification and reestablishing of different terms with which to build new possibilities for subject emergence.²⁸⁶ If a structural relationship makes up all parts of the social world, then the dialectic struggle revealed in one artifact can be abstracted into other

²⁸⁵ Willford, “Towards a Morality,” 9.

²⁸⁶ Helmling, “Constellation and Critique,” 18.

layers of culture, including the domain of civil society and the economic base.²⁸⁷ Since subject/object, art/nature, man /woman articulate a formal grammatical relationship of domination, then understanding how the content of a text relies on a positioning of a dialectical pole (either externally as in the case of a natural preserve or internally in the form of dialogue in a film) offers the opportunity and opening to reflect on the structure itself.

Asserting the primacy of the object as a rhetorical technique offers the opportunity for readers to contest the text as well. Immanent criticism achieves success by illuminating mechanisms of (mis)recognition. Thus, an orientation assumed to be true is exposed as ideological form and becomes open to reinterpretation and (perhaps in limited moments) liquefies. Invoking what Cook refers to as “an estrangement effect,” complex language plays with accepted phrases and inverts meaning, loosening up some of those ideological threads weaving together social experience.²⁸⁸

To complete the extended reference here, what Adorno suggests is the difference between art and nature is that “art aims at realizing the articulation of the nonhuman by human means.”²⁸⁹ Since the audience is an active member of the critical process, the play with terms and layers of thought exposes transformative possibility available. It is impossible for nonhumans to communicate with humans, and yet they do. As Thomson notes, Adorno’s method is paradoxical by design, but aims “to take seriously the most

²⁸⁷ Bernstein here has just a beautiful quote: “the domination of scientific rationality in intellectual life,” with “the bureaucratic rationalization of practical life in the context of indefinite economic (capital) expansion.” Bernstein, *Disenchantment*, 3.

²⁸⁸ Cook, “Adorno, Foucault, and Critique,” 975.

²⁸⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 115.

ephemeral and supposedly worthless elements of social life,” and elevate them to a space of conceptual and philosophical complexity.²⁹⁰

I am drawn to Adorno for precisely this reason. At the origin of his thinking is a political call to understand and challenge a kernel of domination inherent in the historical constellation we did not ask for but nonetheless receive and enact. Adorno’s approach to culture, however, is complex enough to provide resources to think through the ethical requirements in the face of our dominating practices. His approach can be applied not only to contemporary media but also current philosophical movements as broad as posthumanist challenges to the subject and digital ontologies about objects withdrawn. I argue his perspective or method of analysis is flexible and methodical enough to be paired with an interrogation of plants, but offers an emphasis on retuning the efforts to theorize plant-human relations to an ambivalent (not ambient) rhetorical relationship. Thus, I’d now like to return to the call of the dissertation to demonstrate what the method in application might look like.

IV. Figural Plants: An Immanent Critique

Sigmund Freud, a primary theorist for Adorno, recounts a dream he once had about plants: “I have written a monograph on a certain plant. The book lay before me and I was at the moment turning over a folded colored plate. Bound up in each copy there was a dried specimen of the plant as though it had been taken from a herbarium.”²⁹¹ In what I

²⁹⁰ Thomson, *Perplexed*, 43.

²⁹¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Material and Sources of Dreams,” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 201-2.

argue is more than a curious coincidence, Elizabeth Grosz notes that the dream, named the *Botanical Monograph*, “is one of only two dreams that Freud elaborated in any detail and depth in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*.²⁹² For Grosz, plants provide a helpful, if not foundational, organizing figure for psychoanalysis.

“Composite figures,” wrote Freud in “The Dream Work,” were condensed illusions. Never simply random, swirling elements in dreams, but unified commonalities not always easily discernable in waking life.²⁹³ Ambiguous by definition, composite figures work by consolidating disparate layers of thought, anachronistic historical or personal experience, and disassociated scales or affects into one readable or communicable visual heuristic (both for the “dreamer” and the “interpreter”).²⁹⁴ In the *Botanical Monograph*, Freud reads a figure as an allusion, or condensation of the life experience.²⁹⁵ Freud described figures as “regular nodal points,” or symbols of complex

²⁹² Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 105.

²⁹³ Sigmund Freud, “The Dream Work,” in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1966), 171-3. Two key points to be made here. While Freud is assuredly referring to cell biology, in which the nucleus is considered the base or core of an organism that regulates behavior or activity, it is not coincidental the term, in its atomic sense, is the result of an assemblage of protons and neutrons bound by force. When orbited by electrons, the nucleus forms an atom, which might be a scalar metaphor for a figures constitution in paradigm of rhetorical ecology. Also, Freud suggests that the “creative imagination” that is responsible for composite figuring cannot create anything new, but merely combines already existing elements, it is questionable whether we shouldn’t accept the composite *as something entirely new*.

²⁹⁴ Freud here is also attuning us to something that is not mimetic, and therefor, not open to a traditional rhetorical critique. For, ‘it is not a word-for-word or a sign-for-sign translation; nor is it a selection made according to fixed rules...nor is it what might be described as a representative selection...it is doing something different and far more complicated.’ Freud, “The Dream-Work,” 173.

²⁹⁵ Freud, “The Material and Sources of Dreams,” 201.

convergence to be explored by analysis and not a dream book or astrologer's guide.²⁹⁶ As such, focusing on each figure required the dreamer to articulate, much like a critic, all the complex elements in a dream, perhaps exposing sediment experiences or patterns.²⁹⁷ Thus, in addition to the two previous understandings of figure (as rhetorical technique and scene of encounter), I'd like to refine a third. In the dialectical orientation I have advanced, "figures" compact long historical chains of signification into a singular expression and mediate between the unconscious operations at the level of the individual subject and symbol making at the level of society. I offer three figural studies of the dialectic between humans and plants.

In the first figure study, I use an encounter at the Red Rock State Park in California to understand the tension between what counts as natural and historical as revealed by experiences in the park. Using Adorno's first lecture on natural-history as an orienting point of the study, I read the two forces of nature and history through a piece of petrified wood and a tool-holding figure that capture that fantasy of human progression. I am concerned with the ways Adorno encourages us to understand the dialectical relationship between nature and history as a way of considering the dialectic between human and plant.

In the second figure study, I examine the figuration of one plant, the Sipo-Matador through various historic and disciplinary discourses. I reflect on the specific plant, constellated through travel logs, contemporary biological texts, science fiction, and

²⁹⁶ Freud, "Dream-Work," 317.

²⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "The Dream Work," in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 202-16, 311-323.

Western philosophy to understand how it is caught up in naming practices motivated by a dialectic of affirmation and negation.

In the third figure study, I take up Adorno's writing on sound understanding its grooves through a contemporary vinyl art-album *Years* by Austrian artist Bartholomäus Traubeck. In this study, I use the album as a jumping off point to examine scales of dialectical experience, from structure, to commodity, to specific object in order to reveal layers of meaning revealed in the act of listening.

Each study takes up Adorno's characteristic sense of the dialectic in the negative as a journey. Returning to this chapter's movement, I would like to recall Adorno's impetus to reflect on method. I began with a reference to Adorno's sense of guilt motivating thinking. For him, it seems, he could not capture fully and completely in more succinct terms, his experience with domination nor offer any sure fire way to eliminate its grotesque practices completely: the system, the structure, the history seemed, like a wave always ready to overwhelm him. Perhaps, like many of us, that is why he turned to rhetoric.

Adorno concludes the introduction of *Negative Dialectics* with a defense of rhetoric and its relationship to philosophy describing the work as "the carrier of the lie" the former does for the latter. He writes, "in despising rhetoric, philosophy atoned for a guilt incurred ever since Antiquity by its detachment from things, a guilt already pointed out by Plato."²⁹⁸ What did he mean by this? He writes, "in philosophy, rhetoric represents that which cannot be thought except in language." In Adorno's sense, a rejection of

²⁹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 55.

figuration in favor of the analytic is a hallmark of domination precisely because it is designed to “to punish undisciplined gestures.”²⁹⁹ But in the wake of thinking that carries us, Adorno invites us to take a different journeyed approach, to “splash around in the linguistic cascade,” and not be so held to a corrupting exactness. In Adorno’s reading, rhetoric, a “dialectics-literally” is actually figured as an important and indeed necessary counter weight to the “alliance of philosophy and science.”³⁰⁰ For Adorno, dialectics and rhetoric are momentarily one. If philosophy is “the prism in which color is caught,” rhetoric is figured, at least here, as an understanding of the present possibility of “utopia” not blocked by the moments of thinking requiring it to present and prove itself. Instead, rhetoric is the achievement of thought in which reality is what it is not: either free and blissful-like some pleasant dream or terrifying and unsettling as in waking into a nightmare.

²⁹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 56.

³⁰⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 56.

CHAPTER THREE: FIGURING NATURAL HISTORY

My aim in this first figure study is to unsettle a slippery alliance between two words that often rhetorically situate the experience of plant life: “natural history.” Most people will recognize the Smithsonian Institute’s Natural History Museum in Washington DC as an exemplar site for the term. Popular understanding of the term “natural history” is identified with such halls of scientific display and wonder. Understood by disciplinary convention to be a thick, descriptive account of wildlife based on observation not experimentation, I wonder whether an act of noticing “natural history” itself might reveal something about human habits of perception (both natural and historical).³⁰¹ In so doing, I am not taking aim at naturalist historians nor historians of nature, but rather I hope to demonstrate a need for rhetorical inquiry at sites where nature and history blend together in a more generalized sense. Inspired by Theodor W. Adorno’s posthumously published lecture “Idea of Natural-History,” I discern layers of meaning revealed when one figures the term natural history.³⁰² In other words, building on Adorno’s method of immanent criticism as an exploration of content and form, I hope to offer a critical journey through a dramatic and ongoing dialectic between the concepts of *nature* and *history* in academic and popular texts, philosophy, criticism, and everyday experience.

³⁰¹ See: “Natural history, n.” OED Online. June 2017.

³⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos*, no. 60 (1984): 111–24. Also, see Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 235-269.

Since most natural histories begin with a field guide, let me offer a few itinerant notes for our journey.³⁰³ Like Virgil, Dante Alighieri's ghostly guide through the stages of the afterlife in the *Divine Comedy*, Adorno's speech provides the poetic resources to orient my investigation of the idea of natural history. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke also performs such a role, showing up from time to time to corroborate Adorno's account.

The scene of figuration is a small museum and accompanying landscape at California's Red Rock Canyon State Park located in the hellish Mojave Desert. The form of this study aims to inspire what the park's "General Plan" proscribes: to instruct with an experience of "guided walking." As a method of constellation, patrons come close to certain notable features, explore some of their contours, and then walk toward another exhibit. Patrons may be enticed by some exhibits more than others and may wish for more detail or less. As opposed to other parks, Red Rock Canyon has no injunction to stay on the trail; patrons may wander as they please. In exploring the "Symphony of Stone," as the park's guide invites us to do, I hope to place a rigorous and enchanting understanding of life in conversation with Adorno's reflections on the constitution of natural-history as a way to unsettle thought.³⁰⁴

Welcome to this guided adventure through a theoretical abyss of red buttes framing life in the desert.

³⁰³ Itinerary, from the Oxford English Dictionary, suggests that the word entered the English language sometime around 1475 to describe a mode of transporting meaning, a course tracking the travel of thought from one aristocrat to another. It takes on a sense of a recorded travel adventure, of a journey through a landscape. From the latin *itinerarius*, of or relating to a journey particularly one that tracks a certain crossing of roads. See: itinerary, n." OED Online. June 2017.

³⁰⁴ State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, "Red Rock Canyon State Park General Plan," Unit 577 (Sacramento, CA, 1981), 1-73.

I. Natural History, Introducing an Idea

Our journey begins on July 15, 1932, the delivery date of Adorno's lecture on the "Idea of Natural History" to the Kant Society. He starts with an admonishment of origin stories:

I am not going to give a lecture in the usual sense of communicating results or presenting a systematic statement, Rather, what I have to say will remain on the level of an essay; it is no more than an attempt to take up and further develop the problems of the so-called Frankfurt discussion. I recognize that many uncomplimentary things have been said about this discussion, but I am equally aware that it approaches the problem correctly and that it would be wrong always to begin again at the beginning.³⁰⁵

By challenges, Adorno is referencing the ongoing conversation and debate about the relative merits of materialist dialectic inquiry the Frankfurt School was just beginning to popularize. But as a meditation, Adorno initiates a speculation on a mode of thinking also popularized in various discourses as natural history. Many scholars have already approached this piece with a close read and analysis.³⁰⁶ Responding to Martin Heidegger's philosophy of ontology, Adorno asked the audience to understand nature and history dialectically: that is, neither could be considered an outside essences that formed the grounding of thought but instead mutually reinforcing and contesting each other through thought. His address aimed at taking each concept to the extreme, noting the impossibility of considering nature as a pristine entity that exists outside of human concept any more than history appears to be an unending movement of forward

³⁰⁵ Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," 111.

³⁰⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2011); Max Pensky, "Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno," *Critical Horizons* 5, no. 1 (April 2004): 227-258; Adrian Wilding, "Ideas for a Critical Theory of Nature," *Capitalism, Nature, Science*, 4 (2008): 49-67.

momentum.³⁰⁷ His lecture is rich in philosophical conversation, most of which will not be explored here. Instead, I'd like to place this opening in reference to disciplinary ways of understanding natural history.

Natural history is generally characterized as the study of life within an environment. Marston Bates encourages us to understand natural history as “the study of life at the level of the individual—of what plants and animals do, how they react to each other and their environment, how they are organized into larger groupings like populations and communities.”³⁰⁸ As “an explanation of the living process,” it requires a paused observation of the forces contributing to diversity (or challenging it).³⁰⁹ Brian Ogilvie understands natural history broadly as a mode or an orientation of understanding the world steeped in a desire “to observe, catalogue, and describe.”³¹⁰ In their edited volume *The Essential Naturalist: Timeless Readings in Natural History*, Michael H. Graham, Joan Parker, and Paul K. Dayton offers an instructive overview of the field as “the systematic study of natural organisms through observation.”³¹¹ Graham draws attention to an organism that include the study of the components making up a life form and asks that the vehicle of description remain open to various descriptive genres. “Natural History writing is the description of the results of such study and that such

³⁰⁷ Pensky, “Natural History,” 230.

³⁰⁸ Marston Bates, *The Nature of Natural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 8.

³⁰⁹ Bates, *The Nature of Natural History*, 8.

³¹⁰ Brian W. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), x.

³¹¹ Michael H. Graham, “A Foundation Built by Giants,” in *The Essential Naturalist: Timeless Readings in Natural History*, eds. Michael H. Graham, Joan Parker, and Paul K. Dayton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1.

writing may take different forms: from colloquial nature writing to expeditionary reports to more formal scientific pursuits.”³¹² As such, their volume is meant to reveal a set of “collective knowledge” about the way the world is based on the collection of observation of humans. It suggests a separation between one who experiments and one who experiences, preferring a descriptive mode rather than a results-based analysis. While the contours of natural history, as I will explain, have shifted over time, the site of investigation—a pristine external world—is juxtaposed against the closed laboratory.

A quick scan of any university or public library reveals a number of texts that take up the approach based on different categorization techniques. Peter Thomas’s *Trees: A Natural History* moves deductively from the classification of species to ecological threats, asking readers to understand “the tree” in various situations.³¹³ Lawrence J. Eilers, and Dean M. Roosa present a distinct focus but similar approach, limiting their study to one geographic area, in this case, the US state of Iowa.³¹⁴ Other studies, like Richard Spellenberg, Christopher J. Earle, and Gil Nelson’s *Trees of Western North America* approach life continentally, examining the similarities and differences of vital organisms distributed across the crust of moving plates.³¹⁵ Similarly, Clarence A. Hall Jr.’s *Introduction to the Geology of Southern California and Its Native Plants* describes

³¹² Graham, “A Foundation Built by Giants,” 1.

³¹³ P.A. Thomas, *Trees: A Natural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For other examples see: H. Baillon, *The Natural History of Plants* (London: Reeve & Co., 1871) and J. G. Wood, *The Illustrated Natural History* (New York: Routledge, 1872).

³¹⁴ Lawrence J. Eilers and Dean M. Roosa, *The Vascular Plants of Iowa: An Annotated Checklist and Natural History* (Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 1994).

³¹⁵ Richard Spellenberg, Christopher J. Earle, and Gil Nelson, *Trees of Western North America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

the goal of natural history as an attempt to raise awareness of regional environmental surroundings for the everyday student, not the specialist.³¹⁶

The growing list of texts devoted to the study of natural history, from various spatial and temporal starting points, references what historian John G.T. Anderson notes in his metahistory, that “the first decade of the twenty-first century saw a growing call for a renewal of the practice of natural historians as an increasing number of authors pointed out the importance of taxonomy and better understanding of life histories and inter-specific interactions, including the critical role of multiple species in the modification and transmission of pathogens.”³¹⁷ For Anderson, there is a return to a sense of excitement in a practice that began at the origin of Western thought.

But this renewed excitement begs the question: what is the history of natural history? While Aristotle perhaps initiated the investigative and descriptive pose characterizing natural history, the Roman science-rhetorician Pliny the Elder first coined the term in his encyclopedia *Naturalis Historia*.³¹⁸ Pliny’s efforts at categorization, while limited by its anthropocentric view of nature, nonetheless, demonstrated the first “unparalleled” scope of cataloguing the complexity of the life world.³¹⁹

His encyclopedia would have been lost if not for Arabic scholars like Abu Muhammad ibn Qutayaba and Sharah al-Zaman ahir al-Marwazi, whose *The Choice of*

³¹⁶ Clarence A. Hall Jr., *Introduction to the Geology of Southern California and Its Native Plants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

³¹⁷ John G. T. Anderson, *Deep Things Out of Darkness: A History of Natural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 271.

³¹⁸ Mary Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History Book 7* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³¹⁹ Beagon, *The Elder Pliny*, 7.

Transmitted Information carried the tradition as free-thinking went underground during the European Middle Ages.³²⁰ Adding more complexity, Arab scholars began to chart not just individual species, but began noticing the struggles among various living entities and often paid special attention to plant use in medicine.³²¹ Ross Wilson notes that at the emergence of the Renaissance, Western scholars took up these texts, enchanted once again by the vital life world around them. At this time, natural history took on increasing characteristics of humanism; scholars were known to gather local and exotic collections in cabinets, displaying natural curiosities for investigation and revelation.³²²

Cabinet curiosities motivated Charles Darwin, who initiated a new kind of natural history based—not on keeping one entity under inspection—but understanding natural entities as dynamic in themselves. Darwin maintained that the beings of nature were not isolated objects but were composed of life in various states of flux and change, reacting to forces in the environment around them.³²³ Natural history in the modern era took up his process-oriented study and, as John Angus Campbell notes, was one of the rhetorical features that made the study so successful.³²⁴ It is with the attitude of “wonder and awe” with an “integrity and coherence uniquely its own” the natural world became something

³²⁰ See Frank N. Egerton, “Arabic Language Science,” *Roots of Ecology: Antiquity to Haeckel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 45-55.

³²¹ Egerton, “Arabic Language Science,” 45-55.

³²² Ross J. Wilson, *Natural History: Heritage, Place and Politics* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 28.

³²³ Wilson, *Natural History*, 36.

³²⁴ John Angus Campbell, “Charles Darwin and the Crisis of Ecology: A Rhetorical Perspective,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60, no. 4 (December 1974): 445.

to behold and not just something to use.³²⁵ Such a posture also animated conservationists in the US like those of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abby, all of whom popularized natural history as an argument for preservation against the encroachment of human domination.³²⁶

As conservationism developed beyond the need to protect pristine nature, natural history could also be said to shift toward ecological and network thinking. Particularly in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and more recently Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, strands of natural history took on an active and political demand not just to protect spaces but also to intervene and alter human behavior threatening the environment.³²⁷

In a sense, the history of natural history reveals a cycle of boom and bust. Interest in the environment and playful approaches to catalogue and display seem to show up and recede. "Time matters," Anderson curiously reminds us, "and it is important that we keep this in mind when we go to explain what people see and what they might think about history and the natural world."³²⁸ Noting that "in the contemporary period "everything is either 'recent' or 'ancient,'" Anderson laments the tendency for people to consider

³²⁵ Campbell, "Charles Darwin," 445.

³²⁶ See Henry D. Thoreau, *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*, ed. William Rossi (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002); Christine Oravec, "John Muir, Yosemite, and the Sublime Response: A Study in the Rhetoric of Preservationism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67, no. 3 (August 1981): 245–58; Mark Mossman, "The Rhetoric of a Nature Writer: Subversion, Persuasion and Ambiguity in the Writings of Edward Abbey," *Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 4 (1997): 79–85; John S. Farnsworth, "What Does the Desert Say?: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Desert Solitaire*," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 12, no. 1 (2010): 105–121.

³²⁷ Craig Waddell, *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000); Thomas Rosteck and Thomas S. Frentz, "Myth and Multiple Readings in Environmental Rhetoric: The Case of An Inconvenient Truth," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 1–19.

³²⁸ Anderson, *Deep Things*, 4.

historical investigation of the natural world as “boring.”³²⁹ And while Anderson notes a return to the principles of natural history on the horizon, one might pause here in this very brief reflection.³³⁰

Adorno asks not that we spend more time either perfecting our descriptive techniques nor in using approaches to natural history to understand epochal shifts in culture. Instead, he might ask across these fields, how is the idea of natural history in operation? When did nature shift from threatening to *boring*? How did contemporary experience of time collapse so fully that all time not present seems ancient? To return to the beginning, it may be necessary to not start with the observing eye, but the structures informing such a gaze.

II. Red Rock Canyon State Park

Kate L., a friend who works in the California State Park system, passed me a PDF copy of the 1981 General Plan for the Red Rock Canyon State Park. A 27,000-acre state park established in 1968, near the small mining town of Tehachapi and 80 miles outside Bakersfield, the hub of the agricultural empire of California’s Central Valley frames the Park. The park’s declarative purpose, according the General Plan, remains “to protect and perpetuate the spectacular high desert landscape, associated natural ecosystems, and important archeological values for public enjoyment and inspiration, and for scientific study.”³³¹ Instrumental in this regard is the creation of, “an improved visitor center,”

³²⁹ Anderson, *Deep Things*, 4.

³³⁰ Anderson, *Deep Things*, 271.

³³¹ State of California, “General Plan,” 16.

whose goal should be, “interpretation of desert ecology, history, and visitor orientation.”³³² A brochure available at the visitor’s center supports this policy agenda noting: “at times visitors may think of the desert as an empty and uninteresting badland. However, appreciation and interest grows as one becomes more acquainted with the area and the extreme conditions in which the different biotic communities exist.”³³³

Along with my two friends Alexis L. and Dom B., I entered the small museum at Red Rock State Park just miles north in the Mojave off state Highway 14 with a sense of wonder and anticipation on March 16, 2017. We happened upon the park after witnessing the super-bloom in nearby Antelope Valley, an explosion of wild flowers that happens only when the perfect constellation of conditions encourage the seed that may lay dormant for decades to cover the sandy floor with explosive hues of yellow, red, and purple.³³⁴ The super-bloom is a particular touching moment, given that the Mojave, “the high desert” is one of the driest deserts in the world. For a brief period, a space that is thought of as uninhabitable explodes with verdant challenges to that assumption. As a child of the Sonoran desert in Southern Arizona, these moments take on a particular tenderness for me. Scorching heat makes water and shade luxuries for all living beings in the desert. In Tucson, the creosote bush takes in carbon dioxide only under the wettest conditions, in the early morning and just before a mighty monsoon rain. You can know a downpour is immanent when the sweet smell of creosote “breath” hits your nostrils. The

³³² State of California, “General Plan,” 27.

³³³ “Welcome,” *Red Rock Canyon State Park*, (broucher).

³³⁴ Mary Beth Griggs, “Don’t Go to Death Valley Looking for a ‘Super Bloom,’” *Popular Science*, March, 17, 2017, accessed October 27, 2017, <https://www.popsci.com/super-bloom-desert-flowers>.

temperature drops and for a brief instant (often only 10- 15 minutes) a wall of water splashes against the chalked desert floor and provides resources for life to thrive for the dry months when no rain will fall at all.

While the Sonoran desert is iconic for its saguaro cactus, which grows barrel-like arms to store water, the Mojave is home of *Yucca brevifolia*, a monocot Agave member characterized by strong trunks made of small fibers and spindly bayonet-like needles as leaves.³³⁵ Growing from seed or rhizome, this indicator species, can live for thousands of years; since it lacks annual growth rings, it's anyone's guess the actual age of any one plant.³³⁶ It's nickname the "Joshua tree" came from Mormon missionaries who imagined the cactus as a representation of the religious figure in Hebrew texts praying for freedom from harsh conditions.³³⁷ The Joshua tree's life cycle is almost as dependent upon rain as the super-bloom making it much more at risk from climate change than almost any other entity in the region.³³⁸

It is both these two harbingers of life—the Joshua tree and the super bloom—in a stark and harsh climate that brought us, like many other travelers and settlers, to the park, the point where the Sierra Nevada and El Paso mountain ranges converge. Years of geological pressure have created majestic and towering walls of exposed rock formations.

³³⁵ Jane Rogers, "Joshua Trees," National Park Services, March 21, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/nature/jtrees.htm>.

³³⁶ For more information, see for example: Corey L. Gucker, "*Yucca brevifolia*," US Department of Agriculture, 2006, ace 15, 2017, <https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/tree/yucbre/all.html>.

³³⁷ Rogers, "Joshua Tree," <https://www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/nature/jtrees.htm>.

³³⁸ Sarah L. Shafer, Patrick J. Bartlein, Robert S. Thompson, "Potential Changes in the Distributions of Western North American Tree and Shrub Taxa under Future Climate Scenarios," *Ecosystems* 4, no. 3 (2001): 200-215.

Red and white buttes jutting up from the desert floor testify to 12.5 million years of Earth history. Whittled away in the middle from the daily grind of wind and short bursts of rainfall the formations are held together by a hard flat top crust offering 360-degree views of the endless desert in all directions. This park is on the Western most edge offering the setting sun the final look before it passes into night's oblivion. A small campsite of 50 units nestled into the side of the cliffs offers easy access to the Desert View Nature Trail and the small museum and visitors center.

Inside the small, one room museum, the human history of the park's mighty exposed exterior is recalled in various installations. The site understood historically as a water stop on Route 6, is naturally a home for the now displaced Kawaiisu Indians and Coso People. The museum would like patrons to remember the more than 100 famous films featuring the park, including *The Mummy*, *Jurassic Park*, and a host of other western-style box office draws.³³⁹ It's also fantastically the site for the 2005 music video "Cater 2 U" by Beyoncé-led 2000's musical group Destiny's Child.³⁴⁰ One poster features a colorful hand drawn desert tortoise moving through wild flowers with text above framing *Win the Race Against Extinction*. In each instance, the Park frames the

³³⁹ For an extensive list, see: Victor A. Medina, "Red Rock Canyon," 2003. Accessed December 17, 2017, <http://www.moviesites.org/redrock.htm>.

³⁴⁰ Jake Nava, "Cater 2 U," Youtube Video, 4:10, posted October 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juqws1LIH-I>. An obscure music video by George Watsky entitled "Sloppy Seconds," was also filmed at the park. I am surprised this video has been watched over 9 million times on YouTube. It is a curious depiction of fragile romance and road trips; I don't recommend watching. Watsky!, "Watsky – Sloppy Seconds [cardboard castles]" Youtube Video, 4:09, posted April 21, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCEsveSK5to>

desert dramatically, recalling, “Romance, fortune, and death are integrated parts of the American Southwest.”³⁴¹

Acting as “taste-tempter,” the museum hails visitors into “discovering the desert for themselves.”³⁴² Typical to exhibits of natural history, petrified objects and animal taxidermies are presented to peek visitor curiosity and to establish the foundation for scientific investigation of desert life. In accordance with the itinerary of natural history exhibits, the museum presents the study of life as objects on display and then invites the patron to go out and experience them in what is considered an unmediated or pure state beyond the walls of the built archive. The Visitor’s Center and gift shop hosts a number of diorama that narrates the cultural and geological history of the surrounding area. Fossilized bone and plant species ensconced in plaster, lay in unnamed homage to their former resting place of the Dove Spring Formation of the Ricardo Group, a well known former sea bed come chaparral. Two specific displays caught my attention. In one corner, an “early human” is molded into a silent and permanent genuflection, forever caught, gazing longingly in the distance, smashing pestle into mortar. On yet another side, a cross section of a local tree sits, rings exposed and sliced into a cognitive map, where people can look at great events in time mapped onto vegetal carcasses.

The site is also advertised as a perfect place for stargazing, isolated and thus insulated from light pollution of modern American settlements. It offers a natural vantage point to reflect on Adorno’s sense of rhetoric as constellation, a grouping or bundling of

³⁴¹ State of California, “General Plan,” 27.

³⁴² State of California, “General Plan,” 32.

meaning brought together poetically by an interpretive association.³⁴³ Constellation is the practice a critic makes when connecting the dots among objects to create a collective vision, in this case between the external display of the desert ecology and the narration of meaning in the specific displays. The patron-critic places the representative objects of meaning in rhetorical conversation—the songs of tree rings syncopated by the clash of early human tools can represent Adorno’s “idea of natural history.” The sound is not *just* the story of how humans and plant live and die over the years, but also the conversational exchange between concepts of what counts as “natural” and what counts as “history.”

“Extracted from a literal analysis of the term’s ambiguity,” notes primary translator and Adorno scholar Robert Hullot-Kentor, “the history of nature is grasped as historical; natural history is the historical grasped as natural.”³⁴⁴ In other words, the natural world around us is not without its own sense of time, geographic contingency, agonist life and death and antagonist struggle; plant life, indeed all of nature, tells its own historical tale. On the other hand, to speak of natural history, especially in popular television programs like *Planet Earth* or the *Discovery Channel*, the very method of presentation assumes a natural quality concealing the uniquely human techniques bringing us up close to the nature. “The idea of natural history,” according to Adorno scholar Deborah Cook in her aptly titled monograph *Adorno and Nature*, “makes visible the damage that has been inflicted on both human and nonhuman nature by our

³⁴³ Steven Helmling, *Adorno’s Poetics of Critique* (London: Continuum, 2009), 101-2.

³⁴⁴ Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction to T.W. Adorno’s ‘The Idea of Natural-History,’” in *Things Beyond Resemblances*, eds. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 235, 237.

compulsive attempts to dominate nature to satisfy imperatives.”³⁴⁵ Any time history shows up, nature is sure to follow and likewise, anytime there is a sense of nature, already there is history. Just like subject and object, or time and space, to meditate on one calls forth the other so much so that the distinctions are both seemingly firm and apparent and yet also begin to dissolve.

The befuddling contradictions in the human mind between the terms *history* and *nature* can be revealed in constellations like the Red Rock Canyon State Park, where similarities and differences are sutured together in narrative wholes. Following Adorno, Cook invites us to consider these stitches as fruitful and dangerous affinity frames. Affinity frames, for Adorno should not be considered positively charged. Instead, Cook argues that the formal abstraction of humans from the natural world represents the fulcrum of material exploitation.³⁴⁶ To separate humans from an entity of nature also encourages humans to manipulate nature for their own ends. Thus a formal relationship, which posits humans against nature, represents a rhetorical symbolic exchange in the dialectical form. That is to say, humans begin to substitute the two terms when doing so suits a specific interest. I say formal here, because Adorno’s point is that this relationship exists beyond a single individual: the dialectic is structural, expressed in economic and social terms. Let me offer a few examples.

Gregory Clark’s work on Kenneth Burke and public parks is instructive. Clark’s instructive rhetorical history of parks in the US considers the creation of public identity

³⁴⁵ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2011), 2.

³⁴⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 13.

constituted by an address of shared experiences in landscapes.³⁴⁷ The common experienced shared by patrons, scripted by the legislation keeping parks secure from development, also establishes identification through the navigation of designed paths in which travelers gaze with wonder on natural geography and share a sense of connection to each other and to the national imaginary. Public parks are on going rhetorical environments that traffic in attitudes; people can encounter them without thinking of themselves as anything other than spectators but are transformed by the experience. In that role, they are being educated in matters of individual and collective identity, civic duty, and narrations of the past. But as a way of motivating new immigrants to assimilate, to encourage westward expansion from urban areas in the East, as incentives take up the automobile through public ritual, or as a way of suturing identity after the Civil War, Clark reminds us that our experience of parks has more to do with structural interests, perhaps, than at first glance.³⁴⁸

As a uniquely American project, British historian Ross Wilson agrees that parks offer an opportunity to identify in a shared grandeur even as they erase the material structure that brings people to them (the transportation infrastructure, for example).³⁴⁹ Massive consumption, construction, and human expansion all contributing to the need to protect natural life are often not discussed. Rather, most national and state parks ask

³⁴⁷ Gregory Clark, *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004). See also, Mark Longaker, "Rhetorical Landscapes in America, by Gregory Clark (review)," *KB Journal* 1, no. 2 (Spring, 2005), <http://www.kbjournal.org/node/51>.

³⁴⁸ Clark, *Rhetorical Landscapes*.

³⁴⁹ Ross J. Wilson, *Natural History: Heritage, Place and Politics* (Milton, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 8.

patrons to appreciate nature outside these structures. In this way they function as a form of escapism. As tourist, one can enjoy the exotic views and return safely to vehicles, hotels, and homes before any true danger (any real nature) show up. Perversely, nature somehow becomes *unreal*. Parks then contribute to a *mis*understanding in that life under capitalism is mistaken as true reality and that the natural world around us becomes a place of enjoyable retreat from the harsh conditions of labor and stress of modern life. In this way, parks provide an outlet for adventure or an experience lost in the humdrum modern American world.

Part of this misrecognition may also be the result of their concealed design. Parks are manufactured—selectively pruned—yet in the process communicate and conceal deep commitments to the material structures of domination. In her brilliant, but theoretically dense essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” Donna Haraway offers an example of how to rhetorically read a typical natural history display in a way that is consistent with Wilson’s read. Haraway focuses on one installation: a great Silverback ape, stuffed and held in timeless arrest, moments before its execution by the man for whom the hall is named. She uses this now timeless encounter between Carl and the ape in Akeley African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History to understand the material and discursive networks that comprise the structure of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy made in the museums’ display of a trip on Safari.³⁵⁰ In examining the artifact, she moves scale, from

³⁵⁰ Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984): 20–64.

the perception of the seeing eye in specific design decisions as they reflect hidden histories of colonial performance related to the hunt (including the hidden exploitative labor needed to satisfy the fantasy) and finally to a scale of consciousness. Her purpose is to unify these experiences under a shared understanding of time, history, and the natural world and then to explode those notions as having never been shared at all, but rather, held, constructed, and made to serve one specific orientation.

She refuses to let the museum display, itself an everyday encounter, stand “as is.” Instead she relentlessly interrogates the display, over and over, until what once seemed hackneyed, almost kitsch, suddenly takes on grave and inescapable historical significance. Her article, impossible to read and impossible to put down, explores the nature of history and the history of nature in the stories we tell and the interests who fund the domination of both. Resting on themes of exhibition, conservation, and eugenics, the article is a cautionary tale about the assumption of neutrality in both the design and consumption of “natural history.” In the most abstract sense, structure and representation co-constitute themselves in museum displays, activated by the perception of viewers. It is difficult to encapsulate all the content and formal relations in one article, yet Haraway achieves this rhetorical feat in the activation of the critical attention of the reader. Her constant unfurling of layered meaning is also, I suspect, one of Haraway’s many important points. The rhetorical action is left to the judgment of the reader, who begins to understand the hidden agenda of conservators and historical figures.³⁵¹ It is the audience’s responsibility to constantly make and unmake these nods, whose new

³⁵¹ Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” 63.

consciousness is produced and subsequently dismantled in the process of mediation. Haraway's writing, like other forms of production, exhausts the reader with detail; her scope, like other factories, impresses in constant output; her point, like other nuclei, is desperately simple despite its complex world creation. The essay invites constant re-readings. It seems that history is naturally an endless process of production, explosion, and reconstitution. It's almost as if the process reflects a continual dialectic of life and death in a poetic permanent dance.

Reading Red Rock Canyon State Park with Clark, Wilson, and Haraway, Adorno's declarative tone makes more sense: no matter what humans attempt to do, the concepts we use to describe the natural-*ness* of ourselves in and of the surrounding world represents a formal abstraction; the displays already place us within arms reach—yet separate from—the natural world that surrounds us.³⁵² The location of displays and our yearning are not only bound to nationalist projects reflected in the constitution of the American park but also themselves a result of our place within work lives.

Adorno's recommendation is to remain faithful to a formal truth: human history is the story of the struggle of our repression of nature, yet ought to be a thoughtful reckoning with the ways we are both natural and not natural. For Adorno, this might not mean "settling" on the distinctions, but processing them again and again, unsettling them when they've become too comfortable or letting distinctions rest when imaginative momentum takes us out of a material context.

³⁵² Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 12.

This is an instructive lesson for recent communication scholarship that has sought to stress affinity frames more positively in natural parks. Kenneth S. Zagacki and Victoria J. Gallagher's "Rhetoric and Materiality in the Museum Park at the North Carolina Museum of Art" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* takes up a site specific approach to natural parks from the frame of material rhetoric, examining how spaces persuade beyond the intent of the rhetor. In examining "rhetorical enactments" Zagacki and Gallagher examine meaning-making in situations where the natural and human worlds come into contact and recede from each other.³⁵³ They argue "in a parallel enactment of the inside/outside experience, museum-goers become more actively self-conscious of human and natural history as they encounter the tensions between nature's ongoing processes and human efforts to manipulate and control these processes for human use."³⁵⁴ They recognize a process of consciousness constituted by the instruction to examine space presents itself. They also point toward a renewed interest in examining natural history in rhetorical studies. But, in their concluding sentence, Zagacki and Gallagher perhaps slip too far back into affirmation. In their assessment using the site as a way of drawing attention to environmental causes can help leap from identity to action. "By performing a particular kind of co-existence between people and nature that is both complex and hopeful," they write, "museum parks can create spaces of attention wherein visitors become more actively self-conscious of the possibilities and pitfalls of this

³⁵³ Kenneth S. Zagacki and Victoria J. Gallagher, "Rhetoric and Materiality in the Museum Park at the North Carolina Museum of Art," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 2 (2009): 171-191.

³⁵⁴ Zagacki & Gallagher, "Rhetoric and Materiality," 176.

relationship.” But what kind of structural consciousness is perhaps a more concerning question. If natural history supports a desire for ready-at-hand content and immediate action, indulgent in a demand for utility with assuaging results, then little is achieved. Following Adorno, we should struggle a little bit, reflect on portions of our stories that reveal themselves to be fictitious, and admit truths about our instinctual desires we may not yet be prepared to do. Conscious experience of history and nature is produced by our contact with objects, and yet also produces the objects that encourage us to name them.

Thus, parks are not a refuge from the material conditions, they reflect, support, and advance the ongoing material structure. For example, in December of 2017, Donald J. Trump became the first President to scale back natural parks in Utah, arguing that the land needed to become available for the energy sector, what he considered a public use.³⁵⁵ In arguing that, “your timeless bond with the outdoors should not be replaced with the whims of regulators,” Trump reinforced what public parks prepared—human control over the environment—by inverting the intended aim.³⁵⁶ Trump addressed the audience directly, caretaking the nationalist connection to land and fusing it with a preservationist spirit in a perversely ideological terms. “You know and love this land the best,” the

³⁵⁵ Catherine Lucey and Darlene Superville, “Trump Scales Back 2 National Monuments in Utah, Drawing Praise and Protest,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-utah-national-monuments-20171204-story.html>.

³⁵⁶ Lucey and Superville, “Trump Scales Back,” <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-utah-national-monuments-20171204-story.html>.

President argued, “and you know the best how to take care of your land.”³⁵⁷ In this way, he reveals perversely what may be true in the minds of natural park patrons: the bond of ownership over nature is one that can be directed toward preservation or use value depending on the operating desire of the moment. What Adorno argues is that while the goals may be radically different, the orientation is the same.

While parks may offer opportunities and openings for us to understand various affinity frames between different organic expressions of nature, they function at the same time to conceal and repress deeper senses of control and domination if not met with critical consciousness. What Adorno, Clark, Wilson, and Haraway ask is that we relentlessly examine the dimensions of parks to the point of exhaustion, so as not to get bound up in the exotic excitement of tourist adventure and all the other accompanying misrecognitions contained in the journey presented by sites of natural history.

III. Natural History, A Dialectic

If Adorno’s call could be simplified, it might be to understand ways nature is grasped historically and the way history is grasped naturally. I’d like to return to the displays of petrified trees and the tool-bearing being at the Red Rock Canyon State Park in order to demonstrate this dialectic a little more closely

³⁵⁷ Lucey and Superville, “Trump Scales Back,”
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-utah-national-monuments-20171204-story.html>.

NATURE GRASPED AS HISTORICAL

Like the stuffed owl that greets visitors as they enter the Red Rock State Park museum, a petrified black locust tree tells the natural story of the surrounding area. But while the owl tells the story of one type of historical process, petrified trees recount a sense of time according to nonhuman criteria. The petrified tree encourages viewers to be connected to history, not in the form of a line, but by undulating rings that vary in size, shape, and color, made manifest in the rock itself. This particular locust tree, unremarkable almost, stands at the corner of the museum in just such a fashion. It's intention, perhaps, to reveal an appreciation for the human experience of time or the severity of life in a desert climate. But, in terms of academic research, petrified wood, and in particular tree rings, have a long history of hindsight.

Dendrochronology, or the study of tree ring dating, establishes an interpretive ability for researchers to ascertain a level of temporal precision. The year a ring was formed reveals climate and atmospheric conditions unique to that moment or era. The practice became popularized by Jacob Kuechler's use of cross sections of west Texas oak to study climate change in the early 1800's. But, the practice of dendrochronology is much older. Greek botanist Theophrastus first noticed that one could study trees by examining slices of their body, like their layers.³⁵⁸ While he understood arboreal structure to be more akin to an onion, Theophrastus was the first to inquire about the recording of life in a ring. Like the buttes outside, cross sectionals of tree rings act as a diary of vital life on a scale lived outside human experience. What unites Theophrastus and Kuechler,

³⁵⁸ Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants and Minor Works on Odours and Weather Signs*, trans. Arthur Hort (London: W Heinemann, 1916), 423.

is a scientific assumption known as the Uniformity Principle, or a belief that understanding patterns of environmental change (precipitation, drought, seasonal change, atmospheric change) reveal the lived conditions of the past, but also establish prognostications for the future. Each ring marks a complete growth cycle of a tree's like – a seasonal rotation include age, climate, disturbance, and random error, or the principle of aggregate tree growth.³⁵⁹ These studies have been important not only for radiocarbon dating, but also play a fundamental role in the way that humans approach the study of climate and the role humans play in effecting or changing the ecology far beyond our limited body and into a wider ecological scale.³⁶⁰

The second way this sounding of the tree is captured is as a chronological way of displaying history or time. Andre E. Douglas's work on cross dating, which is "exactly synchronized" annually across large swaths of space, assigns calendar years to life.³⁶¹ Like all forms of cartographic representation, tree ring displays stand in for the mechanism of counting time. For example, a cross section of a giant sequoia display at the American Museum of Natural History is but one of many examples of using slices of felled trees to impart an understanding of history—time—in linear progression. At important intervals, the tree is marked so patrons can stand in front and appreciate the

³⁵⁹ See, for example, James H. Speer, *Fundamentals of Tree Ring Research* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

³⁶⁰ Malcom Hughes and Lisa Graumlich, "Multimillennial Dendroclimatic Studies From the Western United States," in *Climactic Variations and Forcing Mechanisms of the Last 200 years*, eds. Philip D. Jones, Raymond S. Bradley, and Jean Jouzel (Berlin: Springer, 1996), 109-124. This and many studies like it come from one of the primary institutes for studying tree rings at the unique Laboratory of Tree-Ring Science at the University of Arizona, in Tucson.

³⁶¹ David W. Stahle, "Tree Rings and Ancient Forest History," in *Eastern Old-Growth Forests: Prospects for Rediscovery and Recovery*, ed. Mary D Davis (Washington DC: Island Press, 1996), 323-4.

grandeur of the world. Time escapes our sensorial grasp and is yet captured in the display. Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton argue that tree rings truly represent an important role in establishing the concept of the timeline as an objective condition for measuring events.³⁶²

In both cases—dendrochronology and cross sectional mapmaking—the intersection between the nature and time revealed in the display of natural history constitutes the human public in the reflection upon the scale of life. I say this to underscore what Adorno meant by nature. He noted, “the concept of nature employed here has absolutely nothing to do with that of the mathematical sciences.”³⁶³ Instead, what Adorno seemed to be after was the nature worked up in the stories we tell, in the way the concept itself anchors our perceptions of time in the figural framing a tree ring provides. We share a sense of time passing, of time moving forward, of the future before us, read through our interactions with dead vegetal bodies. Yet at the same time, what can be read is something even more profound: each display is also one, specific tree, with its own specific history. Despite human attempts to capture the tale, to metonymically substitute one for the whole, the tree can be read individually as the story of a singular life. To begin from this vantage point, the tree rings can also be used to transform an object of inquiry into a subject of existence. Thus, to read the tree ring with Adorno offers an opportunity to constitute nature, historically, in three ways: as a product of the

³⁶² Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A History of the Timeline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 10.

³⁶³ Adorno, “Natural-History,” 111.

atmospheric conditions of its age; as a map of progressive time; and as a diary of the life of a subject.

HISTORY GRASPED AS NATURAL

Shifting our view in the Red Rock State Park Visitor Center, viewers see an entirely different, perhaps more familiar presentation. In an exhibit at the center of the museum, a fictionalized scene is presented of an “early man” garbed in loin cloth and in genuflected stance initiating tool use surrounded by plastic replica of the buttes and space fake shrubbery mimicking the landscape outside. His gaze though is not directed at the pestle and mortar he holds, but instead outward—past the patrons who now look upon him—toward some unknown horizon. It is unclear whether the figure is supposed to represent the Coso or Kawaiisu people who no longer live in the land the park preserves; the people are almost extinct due to federal and state policy that stripped them of their place, forced assimilation, built railroads through the desert, and inflicted disease and war upon them.³⁶⁴ Instead, alone, in the scene, the wax statue of early tool-wielding man takes on many possible reads beyond the memorialization of genocide.

I’d like to imagine first the cave scene as a fictionalized icon, an idiom of the natural progression of humans. It casts our imagination backwards to a humble beginning, demonstrating a moment in which control over the forces of nature is first

³⁶⁴ Alan P. Garfinkel and Harold Williams, *Handbook of the Kawaiisu* (Wa-hi Sina'avi Publications, Bakersfield, California, 2011), 1; Julie Turner, “Language: The Kawaiisu Language and Cultural Center,” in Alan P. Garfinkel and Harold Williams, *Handbook of the Kawaiisu* (Wa-hi Sina'avi Publications, Bakersfield, California, 2011), 5. According to Turner, there may only be five speakers of the Kawaiisu language left.

achieved. It's an old story of the use of technology, one humans enjoying reliving in its testament to our tenacity in the primordial clash with nature. In this tale, the use of tools is what sets humans apart from other members of the natural world; the exceptional ability to labor and manipulate is our greatest asset and assists humans in their struggle for survival over a natural world who wishes us dead. The effigy invites imaginative exuberance over what seems now like an inevitable victory, a past already decided and determined. As a form of identification, it unifies the audience in its absolute difference from the figures of the past. To gaze upon the body of now extinct indigenous body, what may be the last remains of the Coso and Kawaiisu people who once inhabited this site, is also to know that "we" are not "them," either because of the temporal and technological chasm that divides rhetor from audience or in the very real receptive space between fake display and living patron.

The "past," Adorno wants to remind us, however, is not over and is as contingent as both the present and the future. Presenting "time" in an enclosed way, as the figure on display at Red Rock State Park, makes it seem inevitable, far removed, and always occurring in that specific way. In unintended conversation with this exhibit, Graham Harman (whom I first mentioned in the introduction as a member of the Object Oriented Ontology school of thought) might appreciate this attention to tool use.³⁶⁵ For Harman, the story of tool use is the dramatic arch of human story and one that "ought to take

³⁶⁵ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

center stage.”³⁶⁶ The presentation of the tool goes beyond the specific practice of hammer usage or mortar and pestle practices; it describes a different kind of relationship “belonging to every entity;” that is “a continual exchange between presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand.”³⁶⁷ Harman, like most readers of Martin Heidegger, initiates his investigation of human uniqueness through tool-use. So, while he takes a critical approach, arguing that an essence of tools exists beyond human perception, that is *something* about “chisels, nuclear warheads, and sunflowers,” ought to remain mysterious, he nonetheless continues to concretize the human experience in the same way the museum invites us to consider the Coso and Kawaiisu: the specific individual remains withdrawn from our understanding but the figure remains formally within grasp.³⁶⁸ While Harman reads an incredibly powerful possibility in letting the secret lives of objects remain withdrawn, there is a sense in which the dramatic story of tool use already reinforces a calcified history one that many would prefer to remain mysterious so as not to account for the violence it reveals.

It should be no surprise that while we are asked to reflect on the beauty in a nameless Native person practicing the origin of human history, this location also prides itself as the site to a number of “western” films, whose stylistic genre is one interested in painting a much different kind of relationship to the same first people presented in the museum display. Indeed to quote the General plan again, “In the last 20 years, the desert has drawn a great deal of attention from the movie industry...Western movies and other

³⁶⁶ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 1.

³⁶⁷ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 4.

³⁶⁸ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 4.

productions like “The Vanishing Desert” have given these desolate parts an exciting feeling of worldwide renown.”³⁶⁹ One might ask after the romance of a Western genre here. Following Janice Hocker Rushing, the rhetorical form of the frontier myth is seeped in dialectic contradiction.³⁷⁰ Operating somewhere at the meeting point between rugged individual and cooperative community organizer, the romance of Western films is one in which colonial, racial, and patriarchal norms are establishing and communicated. Usually the hero is white and male, one who subdues the environment including Native Americans, women, and the harsh desert landscape, to ride off into the sunset victoriously satisfied in conquest. Indigenous people, in these renditions, become synecdochal with the environment—barriers—to westward expansion.³⁷¹ For Rushing, (as for Adorno), these linkages between Hollywood films, western frontier imaginaries, and the tool using man are familiar ideological contingencies represented here as natural inevitabilities.³⁷² They are dangerous in their allure: communicating both a historical past far away while satisfying a colonial appetite all too present.

³⁶⁹ State of California, “General Plan,” 27.

³⁷⁰ For a deeper rhetorical understanding of this relationship, see for example: Janice Hocker Rushing, “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth,” *Communication Monographs* 50 (March 1983): 14-32 and Janice Hocker Rushing, “Evolution of ‘The New Frontier’ in *Alien and Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (February 1989): 1-24.

³⁷¹ See for just some examples: Anne Marie Todd, *Communicating Environmental Patriotism: A Rhetorical History of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011); Mary E. Stuckey, “The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2011): 229-260.

³⁷² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136.

But like the rocks themselves, the Western figure is both formidable and fragile, a contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment. In this “face of nature” Adorno writes, “...all that is human” is revealed.³⁷³ “Not only the nature of human existence in general” Adorno notes, “but also the biographical history of an individual is enunciated in this figure of the most extreme subjugation to nature...”³⁷⁴ This specific tool-bearing figure, shaped from plastic, is both dignified and subjugated. The figure is dignified because it is represented, subjugated in the erasure of terms of its elimination from the space it now haunts. It sits, namelessly held and arrested like Haraway’s Great Ape, in a moment before death. Hallowed in its sacrifice, we are not asked to understand ourselves as part of the colonial enterprise—the consumers for whom expansion was built—but rather, isolated viewers consuming images of the past: devoid, detached, and unencumbered by the responsibility of our presence. Theresa M. Kelley concretizes this viewing experience within the frame of violent natural selection, which becomes an apology for colonialism. “Devouring and being devoured,” writes Kelly, “is the only game in town.”³⁷⁵ In other words, a certain constellation of frontier narratives and manifest destiny is thus glorified in the museum’s exhibit: a lone figure of early man recalls a humble origin, one that is recognized, even applauded for his innovation at subordinating the natural world, but is in fact doubly subordinated to the western imaginary, in which the progression of tool use invites a certain posture of domination. Reality check: the Kawaiisu no longer live in the

³⁷³ Adorno, “Natural-History,” 120.

³⁷⁴ Adorno, “Natural-History,” 120.

³⁷⁵ Theresa M. Kelley, “Romantic Nature Bites Back: Adorno and Romantic Natural History,” *European Romantic Review* 15, vol. 2 (2004), 193.

space in which they are represented due to removal and extinction. In a subtle way, the romantic rhetorical work being performed is one in which we come to understand our current situation as an inevitable refinement of tool use as the natural order; we are invited to erase the contingencies of decision within a frame of historical inevitability. The historical story then becomes naturalized, that is, the conflict (and thus the drive to mastery) is fictitiously installed in our consciousness as an inevitable feature of our nature.

The idea of natural-history at the Red Rock Canyon State Park is performed by patrons who watch these two tales of tree rings and tool beings as they might watch one of the many films made at the park. Both petrified tree and tool-being sit in permanent silent conversation, waiting to be remembered by tourists and naturalists on road trips through the American desert. I'm reminded of a certain colonial purgatory these ghosts share, one ushered in by the dramatic dialectic slippage between subject and object Adorno asks us to be so cautious of.

IV. Natural History, A Constellation

Red Rock Canyon State Park is certainly a typical natural history collection, in the sense that a traditional approach to rhetorical studies might understand as archival display: the petrified wood and the tool being are expressions of a struggle with how to display knowledge. The visitor's center concretizes a specific rhetorical act of which museums are designed. Nina Levant and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, understanding the museum as a crucial intersection between art and cognitive neuroscience, explain the

“experience as a multilayered journey that is proprioceptive, sensory, intellectual, aesthetic, and social.”³⁷⁶ Susan Mancino, in her review of communications scholarship dedicated to museums, argues that as memory crafters, the experience of museums is rhetorical because they frame public experience, encourage embodied experience, and encourage critical reflections on time and power.³⁷⁷ M. Elizabeth Weiser argues that museums create a physical space of instructional ambiguity that can gather and collect for public education divisive and often challenging ideas even as they create shared audiences of expectation.³⁷⁸ But it is with Barbara Biesecker’s aim in mind—to unseat what has become a, “provincially settled scene”—in human understanding of nature and history—that drives my understanding of this museum and my reading of Adorno. While Biesecker may have “opened the way toward writing a different kind of rhetorical history that will not be governed by the notion of referential plentitude and the motif of truth,”³⁷⁹ that path is difficult to traverse. It’s challenging, of course, to challenge.

³⁷⁶ Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xiv.

³⁷⁷ Susan Mancino, “A Communicative Review of Museums,” *Review of Communication* 15, no. 3 (July 2015): 258–73. For other important texts in communication studies, see also: Tamar Katriel, “Sites of Memory: Discourses of the Past in Israeli Pioneering Settlement Museums,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 1 (1994): 1–20; Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010); Brian T. Kaylor, “The Holy Land Experience: Proposing a Typology for Studying Museum Communication,” *Florida Communication* 37, no. 2 (2009): 11–22.

³⁷⁸ E. Elizabeth Weiser, “National Identity Within the National Museum: Subjectification Within Socialization,” *Studies in Philosophy & Education* 34, no. 4 (July 2015): 385–402.

³⁷⁹ Barbara A. Biesecker, “Of Historicity, Rhetoric: The Archive as Scene of Invention,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 124–31.

I am inspired by my short visit to Red Rock State Park not just because of the interesting conversation I charted in the first section of this chapter, between different ways of telling time and stories, but because I imagine (wrongly, I am sure) this to be just the sort of space the Frankfurt writer must have delivered his lecture on natural history. Surrounded by a hall of curiosity, interested thinkers (including his advisor and long time friend Walter Benjamin) were present to hear his material publicly delivered, including a performance of word plays and subtle academic burns at inspiring figures of the time.³⁸⁰ Just as this museum is a site of public speech, so too was Adorno's lecture. Who knows what casual coincidence in thinking flowed through that scene? Perhaps people used the opportunity to meet in unpredictable ensembles or randomly walked in, thinking it was some butcher or random coffee shop. Often times we think the past is so divorced from out present that it only extends its influence in the objects, the things we choose to enshrine in it.

Adorno's lecture is one of these objects. Published after his death, scholars trouble over the writing now characterizing it as an immature start. Biographer Lorenz Jäger reminds us the lecture was Adorno's "...first attempt to do systematic justice to the process of seeing nature and history reflected in a reciprocal mirror..."³⁸¹ Hullot-Kentor argues perhaps Adorno had not quite reached the conclusion of his own line of thought; he was still too open to affirmation. Not yet moved to the limit of language and

³⁸⁰ Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to TW Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural-History,'" in *Things Beyond Resemblances*, eds. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 235, 237.

³⁸¹ Lorenz Jäger, *Adorno: A Political Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 65.

frustrating his frustration, Hullot-Kentor suggests the “Idea of Natural History” lecture is a “not yet been mastered,” style, an early (perhaps failed?) attempt at what Adorno would become known for in more sophisticated works like *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, ironically because he was also “too rigid.”³⁸² Indeed Hullot-Kentor notes the essay is a failure precisely because it “decomposes” terms rather than let the terms live in a dialectical cycle; Adorno still sought a structural exit before realizing one may never appear ready-at-hand. In other words, he was too honest, approaching the writing with too much philosophical certainty. The address is still content driven; Adorno had not yet begun to reinforce those concepts in form.³⁸³ It is as if Hullot-Kentor believes Adorno's lecture failed because he performed the opposite of the characteristic pessimism driving his thinking; I think Adorno created something new, giving life to concepts rather than watching them live in death.³⁸⁴

Adorno always struggles, as Fredrick Jameson argues, to “defamiliarize” the familiar formulations of the dialectic concepts of historical knowing and natural grounding in his writing.³⁸⁵ Pensky understands “the most troubling and most resistant theoretical elements” in Adorno’s early thought was how to display the performance of the dialectical relationship, one that connotes as it denotes.³⁸⁶ In this sense, Pensky notes, “history and nature are concepts that mutually and dialectically define one another, and

³⁸² Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction,” 237.

³⁸³ Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction,” 240.

³⁸⁴ Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction 241.

³⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007) 99.

³⁸⁶ Max Pensky, “Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno,” *Critical Horizons* 5, no. 1 (April 2004): 227.

can ‘flip’ into their other at the moment of their most extreme conceptual formation,” including in the rhetorical relationship between writing and reader or speaker and audience.³⁸⁷ In attempting to challenge Nature as “that which always is...static and predetermined,” Adorno, Pensky argues, struggled with keeping that category of thought free from a certain New Age mystique (a sense of the pristine and untouched natural world against human contamination) as much as he struggled against the understanding of the natural world as totally open and available for assessment. Adorno initiates a materialist understanding of history, one that is not based on, say, a building set atop the ground, but rather as a series of events formulated through and with the substance of the natural world, including our own. Nature, in this sense, is not the raw material of use for humans, but also a player, a certain contingent set of beings caught and contributing to events. In Pensky’s understanding, Adorno offers some critical resources to help us understand how to craft orientations in “the world of shattered relationships (between subjects and nature no less than between subjects and one another) in order to uncover its characteristic pathologies and cloaking techniques.”³⁸⁸ In this way, Pensky invites us to consider investigations into natural history as “a form of shocking, disorienting, or disintegrative world-disclosure.”³⁸⁹ In the plays with the idea of natural history and human history, both become intertwined; former relevant distinctions collapse, while new and deeper ones are revealed. Each, however, are semblances built on misrecognitions of

³⁸⁷ Pensky, “Natural History,” 230.

³⁸⁸ Pensky, “Natural History,” 233.

³⁸⁹ Pensky, “Natural History,” 235.

past misrecognitions, so far abstracted we've digested them as real, forgetting their fictive origins.

Adorno's notion of "natural-history" is not that far from rhetorician Kenneth Burke's "planned incongruity" in *Attitudes Toward History*. Burke writes that it is not the shock of revelation, a sort of deity that descends upon us to impart fate, but rather, the "nature of language itself," that is, the principle of its formal constitution. It "leads us to be shocked at the idea of putting opposites together."³⁹⁰ Burke argues, like Friedrich Nietzsche, the concept of morality, taken as natural, is really a sign system composing these planned incongruities, a dialectical struggle between good and evil, bound up in the history of reception. For Burke (as with Adorno), the approach to natural history, or the dialectic represented by the placing of these two terms together, is to understand with "a firm certainty" but not the "deceptive comforts of ideological rigidity."³⁹¹ Burke is describing a critical posture of listening, hearing, and reading, that avoids "mystification" in favor of "clarification," description and not deception.³⁹²

Adorno's lecture, then, ought to be examined with other historical occurrences of structural colonialism coincidentally occurring on July 15, including: Christian forces first occupying Jerusalem in 1099; the US government's demand that Sioux nation relinquish control over what would become Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri in 1830; nuclear tests executed by the US (1957), the then USSR (1967), and France (1968, 1991); Boy George banned from British television for gender bending in 1987; a permanent

³⁹⁰ Burke, *Attitudes*, 290.

³⁹¹ Burke, *Attitudes*, 291.

³⁹² Burke, *Attitudes*, 292.

Israeli ceasefire with Egypt in 2014; and in 2016 the birth of Twitter.³⁹³ To tell this story is to understand the cumulative effect of historical contingency, a lived nature ongoing, still around us, but receding from view. The experience of recognition of this ongoing material structure is a specific kind of shock, or jolt—one that moves you from a perspective of viewership into a consideration of orientation.

At the beginning of his chapter on “Orientation” in *Permanence and Change*, Burke argued that humans and the natural world share a crucial interpretive system: “all living organisms interpret many of the sign around them,” he wrote.³⁹⁴ But humans were exceptional in their capacity to reason the difference between “the food process and the bait process.”³⁹⁵ That is to say, unlike a fish, humans can begin to discern the difference between a meal and a trap. But, he noted, we ought to be cautious of this reasoning ability, and avoid being fooled into our own stardom; we’ve created so many solutions and more problems that often, especially in cases of the environment, we’ve forgotten that our abstractions are not our meal, but our own trap. “Though all organisms are critics in the sense they interpret signs about them,” Burke writes, “the experimental, speculative technique made available by speech would seem to single out the human species as the only one possessing an equipment for going beyond the criticism of

³⁹³ “On This Day: July 15 - The New York Times,” accessed April 23, 2017, https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/on-this-day/july-15/?_r=0; “Historical Events on July 15,” *OnThisDay.com*, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.ontthisday.com/events/july/15>.

³⁹⁴ Kenneth Burke, “Orientation,” *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 5.

³⁹⁵ Burke, “Orientation,” 6.

experience to a criticism of criticism.”³⁹⁶ But this orientation, our capacity to “interpret our interpretations,” is an ambiguous property, as likely to reinforce prisons as it is to dismantle them.³⁹⁷

This is ultimately what Adorno meant by the “idea of natural-history:” an examination of the human as subject and object of history and nature as subject and object of humanity: where each vibrate across and through each other but also remain in a vastly unknowable and relatable relationship. We must be cautious about the semblances we create in working through our relationship, so that what we think of as our historical reality does not become second nature any more than our history gets separated from the nature that surrounds us. It is through rhetoric though, I argue, that we can journey dimensionally through the semblances and symphonies of our stone castles.

The call to think in this way has been sounded in a variety of ways. Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie (among countless others) who, following the spatial turn in critical thinking, asked communication studies to think ecologically, that is with a dimensionality, that looks at the phenomena of communication studies as “interaction, flows, fields, systems, and space-time as well as the private spaces, worlds, and value systems of individual organisms.”³⁹⁸ J.M. Gray prefers the discipline to consider history

³⁹⁶ Burke, “Orientation,” 6.

³⁹⁷ Burke, “Orientation,” 6.

³⁹⁸ Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie, *Eco-Impacts and the Greening of Postmodernity: New Maps for Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology* (New York: Sage Publications, 1996).

and nature as a kind of process as ushered in the performative turn.³⁹⁹ Marshall McLuhan's media ecologies and Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share's "critical media literacy" ask that we understand the exchange of information in terms of organisms competing in the situation of environmental pressures.⁴⁰⁰ As I have demonstrated, these are neither unique to communication studies nor new revelations, but instead different ways of describing the orientation towards the *idea of natural-history*. At its core, the concept of dialectic, read through nature/history and form/content is the foundation for rhetorical inquiry. It is supple enough to allow us to examine particular instances in time and space, but expansive enough to account for scalar changes and to encourage a more viable and honest relationship of judgment

In their text of correspondence on "vegetal being," Michael Marder and Luce Irigaray also notice mythic dimensions in assessing human and plant relations. Whether the stories of angry or loving deities, the stories about the natural world, the history of our encounter with it, is ripe with mythic detail. And part of its spectacular nature is one that "is always changing and becoming according to the seasons and the geographical place."⁴⁰¹ But that process of change is not one that is unstructured, even as it is chaotic. Attunement to dimensions understands multiple processes at once including: various rhythms, syncopations, and timings operating not as a chain reaction, but as a symphony.

³⁹⁹ Jonathan M. Gray, "Performing Nature/Nature Performed: A Review of Environmental Performance Praxis and Theory," *Environmental Communication* 1, no 2 (2007): 246.

⁴⁰⁰ Marshall McLuhan and Lewis H. Lapham, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994); Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, "Critical Media Literacy Is Not an Option," *Learning Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2007): 59–69.

⁴⁰¹ Luce Irigaray and Micheal Marder, "Living at the Rhythm of the Seasons," in *Through Vegetal Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 39.

The goal is neither to abandon the enjoyment of national parks any more than it is to get at the true way of representing trees or Kawaiisu people. Instead, it is a continual journey of reminding ourselves of these features and not get carried away by the false illusions designed to insulate us from brute historical realities and our participation in them. The goal is to unsettle our abstractions, our ideas, even the ones we enjoy about our nature and history.

But, I fear even now, what Adorno must have felt at the end of his lecture. In presenting “a renewed interest in reinterpreting historical material,” I too have transformed the material away from its own nature and into a myth that serves my own interests.⁴⁰² Perhaps, as Burke and Adorno note, sadly, that process is what “we” do and thus it is also the role to offer critical journeys to remind us of that. It is indeed a challenge.

V. Happy Trails

Before exiting the Red Rock Canyon State Park, a sign enclosed in glass, leaves patrons fleeing into the abyss of the Mojave with a final nostalgic injunction, borrowed from the Roy Rogers western song of the same name: *happy trails to you*. The expansive desert certainly stands ready to receive exuberant patrons as they travel back to their unnatural histories. A ghostly Adorno might recoil though at the ideological hailing: what trail is ever happy?

⁴⁰² Adorno, “Natural-History,” 124.

CHAPTER FOUR: FIGURING THE SIPO-MATADOR

I. *Strangler Fig*

Strangler Fig

Like a boa constrictor,
this gargantuan tree will squeeze
everything in its path, bore
through city blocks of concrete
sidewalks, outer walls and roofs,
crush store signs, kiosks, just to put down roots,
so strong is its longing,
its notion of place.

It's a testament to adaptation,
a monument to survival
and to a singles of desire.

No matter where we live,
we are all tourists,
we are all transients.
The only roots we put down are branches
gone crazy, like the ones on this
monster tree in Maui they call
the Strangler Fig

—Jill Jennings⁴⁰³

II. Introduction

In comparison to the “softness, earnest, and repose of European woodland scenery,” writes naturalist H. W. Bates in 1872, “tropical forests...seem to be striving to outvie its fellow, struggling upward towards light and air—branch and leaf and stem—

⁴⁰³ Jill Jennings, “Strangler Fig,” *Atlanta Review* 19, no. 2 (2013): 18.

regardless of its neighbors.”⁴⁰⁴ The ethical virtue Bates instructs his audience to learn: “live and let live is clearly not the maxim taught in these wildernesses.”⁴⁰⁵ As evidence for this claim Bates offers the Sipo-Matador, or Murderer Liana, “obliged” to exploit the trees around it for “the base of its stem would be unable to bear the weight of its upper growth.”⁴⁰⁶ Describing in some detail the process of execution, we get a sense of Bates’ own observational agenda. “The murder springs up close to the tree on which it intends to fix itself,” spreading its vines around in circular fashion up the base of the tree; its rings, choking the tree until “the victim, when it strangler becomes fully grown, collapses.” It is this ring like formation that allows the Matador to flourish: “the selfish parasite clasping in it arms the lifeless and decaying body of its victim.”⁴⁰⁷ Virtuous in its success, ruthless in its execution, for Bates the Sipo-Matador is misguided for its craving ushers in its own demise. How are we to understand Bates’ Sipo-Matador? Is it akin to Lousia May Alcott’s vampiric plant in her 1869 tale, “Lost in a Pyramid,” a mere sensation thriller and nothing more?⁴⁰⁸

In *Minima and Moralia*, Theodor W. Adorno’s soulful mediations on ethics in an age of Nazism written in aphoristic style similar to Friedrich Nietzsche, he noted that obsessions with exotic creatures (Scotland’s Loch Ness Monster, the great ape King Kong, lions and so on) serve speculative functions: “people prepare themselves for

⁴⁰⁴ H. W. Bates, “The Struggle for Life in the Vegetable World,” *Friends’ Intelligencer* (1853-1910); *Philadelphia*, September 7, 1872, p. 446.

⁴⁰⁵ Bates, “The Struggle,” 446.

⁴⁰⁶ Bates, “The Struggle,” 446.

⁴⁰⁷ Bates, “The Struggle,” 446.

⁴⁰⁸ “Lost Pyramid,” *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia*, eds. Gregory Eiselein & Anne K. Philips (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 187.

terrors by familiarizing themselves with gigantic images.”⁴⁰⁹ The structural sites for managing those terrors—zoos and gardens—perform a figural task: at once, they preserve the exotic objects for inspection and yet, in bringing the objects of terror closer, humans can begin to demonstrate control and mastery over that fear. Perversely, the sense of exoticism is heightened while the danger that animates it is held in recess.⁴¹⁰ Especially present in enclosures with “invisible barriers” (and not all garden barriers are invisible) the mechanisms of domination, not far from Michel Foucault’s understanding of the panoptic prison, remain in place but concealed, heightening the sensation even more.⁴¹¹ In noticing “the desire for the presence of the most ancient,” or the most exotic plant and animals Adorno writes, “the more implacable it is dominated.”⁴¹² Adorno understood that the desire to be surrounded by, distanced from, and in control of exotic flora and fauna as a rhetorical or symbolic vehicle through which fears and hopes are trafficked and controlled. The description of unique organic features can be an entrance point to understand human interpretative and ideological framings more broadly.

The way plants are displayed or written about, as I will theorize based on this short excerpt from Bates, reveals unnoticed detail about the dominant interests, relationships to otherness, and the edifices designed to receive or manage the world.

⁴⁰⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974); See also, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/ch02.htm>.

⁴¹⁰ For communication studies research on this point, see Tema Milstein, “‘Somethin’ Tells Me It’s All Happening at the Zoo’: Discourse, Power, and Conservationism,” *Environmental Communication* 3, no. 1 (March 2009): 25–48.

⁴¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans Alain Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁴¹² Theodor W Adorno, *Minima and Moralia*, 115.

Communication scholar Tema Milsten calls this specific practice “nature identification,” or the “specific pointing to and naming aspects of nature.”⁴¹³ As a mediating practice, Milsten argues, understanding nature identification is one of the key points where ideology, structure, discursive representation, and lived experience meet. As previously discussed in chapter two, mediation is another term in Adorno’s corpus that describes relationships between subject and object, immanent criticism, and methods of constellation.⁴¹⁴ While Milsten’s Burkean study situates itself in present Pacific Northwest tourist communities examining the exotic aquatic orca, in this chapter I am interested in contemporary and historical naming practices surrounding a curious creature: the Sipo-Matador.

This chapter constellates, or figures, around various naming practices of the Sipo-Matador across multiple historical periods. In applying the method of immanent criticism, I examine the ways the Sipo-Matador shows up in numerous texts that also span genre, approach, and goal. From disciplinary vantage points, including contemporary biology, natural history texts, continental philosophy, art/poetry, and science fiction, I examine the way Sipo-Matador mediates experience. I do not claim to arrive at the truth about the Sipo-Matador, but instead try to accomplish an ethical task recommended by Adorno: to continually know and *unknow* vibrant life (and thus ourselves) in the various ways as it is cast rhetorically and historically. To figure in this

⁴¹³ Tema Milstein, “Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 1 (March 2011): 3–24.

⁴¹⁴ For more recent scholarship on Adorno and mediation, see, for example: Margherita Tonon, “Theory and the Object: Making Sense of Adorno’s Concept of Mediation,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21, no. 2 (May 2013): 184–203.

way is to understand how the Sipo-Matador is both domesticated in rhetorical gardens and how it continues—indeed exceeds—those enclosures.

III. The Sipo Matador, by any other name

The plant goes by a variety of names, and not always in the negative. Initially, the *guaco* got its name from the aroma emanated from its cut leaves and as an antidote for poison, a property instructed by kite birds who spread it on their winds before preying on snakes, their natural food source.⁴¹⁵ In the European romantic variations, particularly Spanish and Portuguese, it's called the *sipo (or cipo)-matador*, loosely translated to an "exhausting," "killing," "horrible," or "terrible bushrope." It may also go under the nickname *mato-palo* or "woodkiller," or *mata-pau* the "woodpecker." Sometimes it's *bejuco matadoro*, a general connotation for a vine or plant with restorative or curative properties. In botany, the *ficus clusiiflora* of the *moracea* fig family is more commonly called the "strangler fig."⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ "A climbing composite of tropical America: also a medicinal substance consisting of, or an aromatic bitter obtained from, the leaves of the plant. Guaco is reported to be an antidote to the poison of serpents and was at one time considered a remedy for cholera and hydrophobia. It has been proposed as a cure for cancer." See: William Dwight Whitney, *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia: A New Atlas of the World: Work of General Reference vol. III* (New York: The Century Company, 1897), 2644.

⁴¹⁶ Carol Miranda Chor, "#13 Fleeting Parasites, bane of Greta Trees in the province of Rio de Janeiro," *Remember the Rainforest*, trans. Ben Hennelly, accessed on December 21, 2017, <http://remembertherainforest.com/shop2/rtr1/ebook/etchcoms/co13j.html>. See also: Johann Baptist von Spix and Phil von Martius, *Travels in Brazil, in the Years 1817-1820, Undertaken by Command of His Majesty the King of Bavaria*. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1824); "Guaco," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 12, ed. Hugh Chisholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), accessed on December 16, 2017, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Guaco1911.

While the Sipo-Matador may be a rare varietal, the vine is one of the most common entities in the Earth's rainforests, according to John Kricher.⁴¹⁷ Appreciative of the 130-250 days of precipitation and tropical temperatures between 88 and 72 degrees year round, various species of vine grow best in these conditions. Since all rainforests share these conditions, one might expect vines with structural similarities to exist all over the world; yet because the smallest variations in soil conditions, weather patterns, access to light, and interaction with other species involvement, the majority of vines similar to the Sipo-Matador are predominantly found in the Americas and most often in the Amazon in Brazil.⁴¹⁸

The idea of the rainforest is a catch all term for a complex forest structure, ranging from emergent trees that tower into the sky from the forest floor to epiphytes, air plants that may never touch the soil, instead drawing nutrients from surrounding plants and water from the humid air of their surroundings.⁴¹⁹ "Because of their abundance," Kricher writes, "vines form a distinct and important structural feature within tropical forests. They exhibit high biomass in some rain forests and compete with trees for light, water, and nutrients... Woody vines, called lianas, entwine elaborately as they hang from tree crowns"⁴²⁰ As such, liana is not really a specific kind of plant, but a way of denoting a type of growth structure, or a "distinctive cross sectional shapes of their stems."⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ John Kricher, *The New Neotropical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 30.

⁴¹⁸ Kricher, *The New Neotropical*, 39.

⁴¹⁹ Kricher, *The New Neotropical*, 40.

⁴²⁰ Kricher, *The New Neotropical*, 50.

⁴²¹ Kricher, *The New Neotropical*, 51.

Air plants, growing in popularity in contemporary American culture are epiphytes, meaning they gather water and resources from the environment around them (as opposed to a root structure in the ground). The Sipo-Matador is a specific type of liana hemiepiphyte: a vine organism that lives some portion of its life this way.⁴²² Seeds are dispersed and propagated by birds and wasps in tree crowns and draw on those complimentary species for the resources as their roots grow toward the soil to establish foundations of their own.⁴²³ It is also a misrecognition to suggest that only the Sipo-Matador attacks its host; half of the 750 known species of *ficus* possess the quality.⁴²⁴ David Attenborough in a BBC worldwide documentary clip demonstrates the effect beautifully.⁴²⁵ Hemiepiphytes are not instinctually vicious: they use their hosts for support. They send tendrils around the host's trunk, seeking assistance as they stage their journey toward the soil. But, the stronger the vine grows, the more it begins to inhibit the growth of the host tree. Eventually the host can no longer develop—dies and disintegrates—leaving an empty core surrounded by a complex cross-sectional of vine architecture that may last the life span of the plant, over hundreds of years.

⁴²² Gerhard Zotz, "'Hemiepiphyte': A Confusing Term and Its History," *Annals of Botany* 111, no. 6, (2013): 1015–20.

⁴²³ For essential reading on figs and strangler figs, see: Edred John Henry, *Wayside Trees of Malaya* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1952): 664-665; Daniel H. Janze, "How to Be a Fig," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 10 (1979): 12-15; Francis E. Putz and N. Michele Holbrook, "Strangler Fig Rooting Habits and Nutrient Relations in Llanos of Venezuela," *American Journal of Botany* 76, no. 6 (1989): 781-788; Vidya R. Athreya, "Light or Presence of Host Trees: Which is More Important for the Strangler Fig?" *Journal of Tropical Ecology* 15, no. 5 (1999): 589-603.

⁴²⁴ Timothy G. Laman, "The Ecology of the Strangler Fig Seedling Establishment," *Selbyana* 16, no. 2 (1995): 223-29.

⁴²⁵ BBCWorldwide, "How the Fig Tree Strangles Other Plants for Survival in the Rainforest – David Attenborough – BBC Wildlife," YouTube video, 3:39. Posted (February 9, 2007,) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCUtpmwacoE>.

All variety of liana are keystone species, including, perhaps the Sipo-Matador; they are an essential element of the ecosystem.⁴²⁶ Fruiting varieties provide sustenance for the fauna in the canopy and floor. Recent scholarship from Leora S. Ricahr and Sylvia L. Halkin, suggests that, contrary to its public image, the strangler figs could actually provide an important life-saving role supporting the trees during unexpected and extreme weather conditions.⁴²⁷ This new research has created a reinvigorated interest in theorizing entities like the Sipo-Matador. What was once considered monstrous is now thought of as necessary, friendly, and valuable.⁴²⁸ Mike Shanahan's opening blog is demonstrative of the quick language play that people take up around the new heroic frame of the strangler fig: "They are demonized as brutal killers but, as two studies published this month show, strangler figs can be lifesavers," due to their anchoring role in times of inclement weather.⁴²⁹ In another contemporary blog, *In Defense of Plants*, the unnamed author notes that "by keeping large tree species alive through devastating cyclone events, the

⁴²⁶ Susanne Schmidt and Dieter P. Tracey, "Adaptations of strangler figs to life in the rainforest canopy," *Functional Plant Biology* **33** (2006): 465-475.

⁴²⁷ Leora S. Richard and Sylvia L. Halkin, "Strangler Figs May Support Their Host Trees During Severe Storms," *Symbiosis* 72, no. 2 (2017): 152-157. "First, strangler fig aerial roots descending from the host's branches to multiple rooting points in the ground meters away from the base of the trunk could function like (somewhat loose) guy-wires to prevent the host tree from moving too far in the opposite direction from any rooting point. Second, the more complete and interconnected canopy produced by strangler figs may provide some shielding from strong winds. Finally, the attached network of roots surrounding the host tree's trunk could provide supportive scaffolding. Our data indicate that the relationship between host tree and strangler fig may be more mutually beneficial than previously thought, in a symbiosis where the host provides a structure to support the strangler fig's establishment in the well-lit canopy, and the strangler fig helps to support its host during storms and high winds."

⁴²⁸ Ian Randall, "Being Strangled Mat Save This Tree's Life," *Science* (blog), June 26, 11:45 AM <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/06/being-strangled-may-save-tree-s-life>.

⁴²⁹ Mike Shanahan, "The Stranglers that Save Lives When the Cyclones Strike," *Under the Banyan* (blog), June 20, 2017 <https://underthebanyan.wordpress.com/2017/06/30/the-strangler-fig-trees-that-save-lives-when-cyclones-strike/>.

figs are essentially keeping legacy trees alive that can then reseed the surrounding forest.”

⁴³⁰ Perhaps, they speculate, this might be a reason that host trees have not developed any evolutionary defenses to impede the vines advances. Eager to demonstrate that the plant is actually a part of a harmonious Eden, the villainous frame of the Sipo-Matador and it’s close neighbor the strangler fig, is experiencing a heroic Renaissance.

Banyan figs in India seem to have escaped this negatively-charged rhetorical scene, recognized as the national tree and as a central symbol in Hindu texts.⁴³¹ As a helpful rhetorical analogy, following Julius L. Lipner, the banyan fig describes a key complexity of Hindu practice. “As an interconnected collection of trees and branches, without an obvious center,” Lipner writes, “it is a network of variety, one complex shading into another and so forming a multi-faceted unity.”⁴³² As such, the fig, far from a strangler, provides powerful resources for mediation, instruction, and communication of one of the world’s oldest and most important religious and philosophic practices.

But, the Sipo-Matador has not always received the affirmative framing attention of contemporary biology and Hindu thought. Rather, when sifting through the historical texts of Europeans, the hemiepiphyte receives a much less charitable, anastomotic

⁴³⁰ “Parasitic Protection,” *In Defense of Plants* (blog), June 14, 2017 (accessed December 16, 2017) <http://www.indefenseofplants.com/blog/2017/6/14/parasitic-protection>.

⁴³¹ See: Julius J. Lipner, “Ancient Banyan: an Inquiry into the Meaning of ‘Hinduness’” *Religious Studies* 32, no. 1 (1996): 109-126; *The Hindu World*, eds. Sushil Mittal and Gene R. Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004); Robin Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004); Ranchor Prime, *Hinduism and Ecology: Seeds of Truth* (Delhi: Jainendra Press, 1994).

⁴³² Lipner, “Ancient Banyan,” 110.

treatment. In the travel annals of nineteenth century botanists, we find a being submitted to a far more aggressive and exotic antagonist frame.

IV. Colonial Figurations

Karl von Scherzer, an Austrian printer-cum-ethnologist and historian was tapped by Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian in the mid nineteenth century to document the *Novara* expedition as it followed the winds around the Earth globe.⁴³³ His travel text, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation of the Globe by the Austrian Frigate Novara* is an impressive tome, an almost 500 page personal account documenting his scientific voyage between 1857-1859.⁴³⁴ Upon arriving in the third port call, Rio de Janeiro, von Scherzer noted his initial impressions:

The contempt affected for everything foreign, the fretful impatience to become emancipated from the smallest resemblance to European customs, is exceedingly childish and even ludicrous in a country which can hardly yet be said to stand alone, since the pressure of circumstance is daily making them more and more dependent on other countries, and where it is necessary to import abroad not merely the evidence of high culture, but the very first necessities of life, even to obtaining supplies of foreign labour... Rio used to be, without exception, the dirtiest city in the world. As there were neither gutters nor sewers, all impurities accumulated during the twenty-four hours used, towards evening, to be carried by negroes on their heads, in pails and casks, to the bay and, singularly enough, emptied in the immediate vicinity of the Imperial palace, whereby several quarters of the city, particularly the hot season, were rendered entirely uninhabitable⁴³⁵

⁴³³ See: Karl von Scherzer, *Travels in the Free States of Central America: Nicaragua, Honduras, and San Salvador* (London: Spottiswoode, 1857); "Obituary: Dr. Karl Ritter von Scherzer," *The Geographical Journal* 21, no. 4 (1903): 463–64; John E. Fletcher, "Karl Scherzer and the Visit of the *Novara* to Sydney, 1858," *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 71, no. 3 (1985): 189-206.

⁴³⁴ Karl von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation of the Globe by the Austrian Frigate Novara, volume 1* (London: Saunders, Otley and Co., 1861).

⁴³⁵ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 151-4.

His text is littered with these colonial concerns: the need for stronger transportation systems; chagrin at exorbitant price of moving coffee from the growing region to Rio; a detailed account of local judicial prosecuting of corruption.⁴³⁶ In one passage, he describes a day-trip on an English steamer fueled by Norwegian and American lumber.⁴³⁷ On this short day excursion to Petrópolis, he introduces readers to the “idea of what constitutes a primeval Brazilian forest.”⁴³⁸ Descriptively, he notes, “The wonders of tropical vegetation, as manifested not only by vastness of form but also by gorgeous and rank luxuriance, strike the eye at first-sight almost the same way an overpowering chorus affects the ear.”⁴³⁹

In this midst of all the verdant wonders, von Scherzer hones in on one plant of chief interest: the Sipo-Matador. “It twines round the stem of lofty trees,” writes von Scherzer, “which its flattened coils gradually constrict with almost life-like cruelty! Its aerial roots run out from all parts and embrace the tree like artificial clamps, forming in some places complete rings, and in others growing into the very bark.”⁴⁴⁰ Von Scherzer notes the consequence for the host. “The tree, in consequence of this parasitic embrace, dies away by degrees, whilst its destroy continues to grow gaily on the corpse of its victim, and spreads its leafy crown until it falls and perishes simultaneously with the support that had hitherto upheld it.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁶ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 158-162.

⁴³⁷ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 156.

⁴³⁸ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 163.

⁴³⁹ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 163.

⁴⁴⁰ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 163-4.

⁴⁴¹ Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 163-4.

Von Scherzer does not stay at this descriptive moment. Instead, he uses the Sipo-Matador as an opportunity to reflect on what opportunity the plant might offer for understanding the political organization in Europe:

To what profound reflections does the contemplation of this spectacle give rise! Involuntarily our thoughts fly from the wild Brazilian forest to the plains of civilization—to the modern society where, likewise, many a noble human nature is slowly undermined by a treacherous cipo matador of flesh and blood, till too surely he falls prone on the ground!⁴⁴²

It is not clear the origin of the parasite in his passage; perhaps his contemporary readers would make the connection. But, what is clear is that, posited against the backdrop of his reception (including the unreflexive accounts of slavery in its connections to excrement removal), the Sipo-Matador offers the perfect exotic foil marking a deep divide between the “wild Brazilians” and a more “civilized” and “modern society” on the European continent. His nature identification amplifies a colonial heartbeat .

In this way, von Scherzer’s “reflections” of adventure, travel, and enterprise are a hallmark of a form of travel writing made popular in the nineteenth century. Barbara Krote notes that travel writing as a genre or form, is one of the key feature of nineteenth century European empire building. Tales of heroism and expedition activated an appetite in the audience on the European continent and thereby played a crucial role in colonization.⁴⁴³ As such, it is important to remember, following Tim Youngs that, contemporary readers should not take these accounts simply at face value, but reflect and analyze them from a critical standpoint. He writes:

⁴⁴² Von Scherzer, *Narrative of the Circumnavigation*, 163-4.

⁴⁴³ Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, trans, Catherine Matthais (Basingstroke: Macmillan, 2000), 84-88.

Travel writing is not a literal and objective record of journeys undertaken. It carries preconceptions that, even if challenged, provide a reference point. It is influenced, if not determined, by its authors' gender, class, age, nationality, cultural background and education. It is ideological. And it is a literary form that draws on the convention of other literary genres. Narrators, character, plots and dialogue are all shaped accordingly.⁴⁴⁴

The accounts are not *just* historical diaries providing documentation of travel. Instead, as noted by Kate Hill, they are written for a European audience with a specific ideological purpose. As such, the “became sources of knowledge and of new ways of knowing, sites for thrilling adventures...places where Europeans could encounter, virtually or in person,” the experience of colonization.⁴⁴⁵ To read nineteenth century travel documents is to understand the concerns as thematic encounters between self and other; perhaps more importantly as expressions of immense colonial power against those they sought to exploit.⁴⁴⁶ As Neil Safier reminds us, part of the practice of going back to these texts is to “understand the broad contours and unintended consequences of science and its representations during this period.”⁴⁴⁷ As such, “we recognize Enlightenment science in an age of imperial expansion for what it was: not omniscient universal knowledge of the natural world but rather a partial and contingent knowledge, one that silences and suppressed its sources just as often as it acknowledge and represented them.”⁴⁴⁸ In this

⁴⁴⁴ Tim Youngs, “Introduction: Filling the Blank Spaces,” in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tim Youngs (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 2-3.

⁴⁴⁵ Kate Hill, “Introduction,” *Britain and the Narration of Travel in the Nineteenth Century: Texts, Images, and Objects*, ed. Kate Hill (Burlington: Ashgate, 2016), 2.

⁴⁴⁶ Hill, “Introduction,” 2. See also, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

⁴⁴⁷ Neil Safier, *Measuring the New World: Enlightenment Science and South America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9.

⁴⁴⁸ Safier, *Measuring the New World*, 9.

way, Safier also asks us to consider “transatlantic scientific commemoration,” as a key component of colonization. By that he means, “the broad set of activities through which empirical observations were transformed into tangible, memorable products in the emerging space of a broad transatlantic public sphere, whether through printing, monumental architecture, collected specimens, or manuscript narratives,” Safier notes, the rhetorical work is understood by what is presented to the “European reading public” and thus also creates a understanding of the contours of the desire for colonization.

Roy Bridges centers the travel logs of explorers as a constitutive genre.⁴⁴⁹ Written for audiences in colonial headquarters, scientific travel logs of the nineteenth century created audiences who would then identify with the colonial enterprise. Rhetorically, the tales wetted the appetite for further expansion and provided scientific justifications for the immense resource expenditure each voyage required, and often encouraged others to take up those journeys. Mary Louise Pratt understands natural history writing as a subtle “a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence.”⁴⁵⁰ David Seed writes, “to see, in this collective view, involves incorporating a dialogical consciousness of how others have seen and also implicates the travelers gaze in the appropriations of imperialism.”⁴⁵¹ Thus, understanding small details and rhetorical

⁴⁴⁹ Roy Bridges, “Exploration and Travel Outside Europe (1720-1914),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67.

⁴⁵⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴⁵¹ David Seed, “Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing: An Introduction,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 34 (2004): 1–5.

images used in these texts assist scholars in understanding the operations of imperialism and the mechanisms that contributed to it.

While the genre of nineteenth century travel writing follows a similar form, conventions differ across geographic terrains. Voyages to tropical areas were often dialectically situated as heaven and hell, caught between being “perceived as paradise and as sites of corruption in need of cleaning.”⁴⁵² Beth Fowkes Tobin has an impressive study situating tropical accounts of European colonization of the time.⁴⁵³ Tobin offers a special reminder for the need to examine the role plant life played in these endeavors:

A combination of knowledge and ignorance about plants enabled the British to colonize huge parts of the globe, harnessing nature to serve imperial interests. The role of agriculture is undertheorized in the study of colonial expansion. The economics of imperialism is usually discussed in terms of forging trade routes, the rise of mercantile capitalism, and the concomitant military conquest of territory. This book insists that agriculture is crucial to understanding the British Empire.⁴⁵⁴

While much scholarly work exists to understand the colonial attitude toward the people of tropical locations, focusing on botanical life shifts the conversation away from “colonial and postcolonial subjectivity” deepening our textured understanding of the process of colonization and the representations that vitalize it.⁴⁵⁵ As a genre, these travel writings represented “ways of seeing, describing, and portraying tropical nature determined, to a large degree, by preexisting notions of what constituted the pastoral and

⁴⁵² Youngs, “Introduction,” 15.

⁴⁵³ Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Colonizing Nature, The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820* (Boston: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁴⁵⁴ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 10.

the picturesque.”⁴⁵⁶ They also began to shape the reception and anticipation of space itself. Participating in “genres of botanical writing,” they often “sever plants from the ecological economies and cultural contexts,” and instead are repositioned in ways that support the colonizers and expected fantasies of the audience.⁴⁵⁷ In this way, Tobin confirms what Adorno argued, that the knowledge revealed by the discursive and rhetoric practices of botanical representation is the more violent side of Enlightenment.⁴⁵⁸

Most critical work on nineteenth century texts demonstrates keen focus on India and the South Pacific. Recent scholarship by Lorelai Kury notes that similar procedures are in operation in the development of Brazil.⁴⁵⁹ Caught between the imperial interests of Britain, France and Portugal, Brazil presented a wealth of new and exotic plant life different than other colonies in Africa and India. As such, Brazil was a crucial hub in the global exchange of exotic plant life and other luxury staples like coffee. “Plants were therefore a key concern of governments and in the individual survival strategies and social status of military men, skilled workers, wayfarers, and men of science and letters.”⁴⁶⁰ Beyond commodity, examining plant varieties occupying colonial attention in Brazil, I argue, is a significant rhetorical contribution to understanding the practice of domination.

⁴⁵⁶ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 13.

⁴⁵⁷ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 25.

⁴⁵⁸ Tobin, *Colonizing Nature*, 28.

⁴⁵⁹ Lorelai Kury, “Botany in War and Peace: France and the Circulation of Plants in Brazil (Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century),” *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 16, no. 1 (2017): 7-19.

⁴⁶⁰ Kury, “Botnay in War and Peace,” 12.

When examining the travel logs of nineteenth century science expedition, the Sipo-Matador comes up again and again as one of these plants of concern. Like Bates and von Scherzer, Scottish botanist George Gardner offered one of the first brief descriptions of the plant in his late 1830's documents. "It runs up the tree to which it has attached itself, and at the distance of about every ten feet throws out from each side a thick clasper, which has curves round, and closely entwines the other stem. As both increase in size, the pressure ultimately becomes so great, that the supporting one dies from the embrace of the parasite."⁴⁶¹ French chemist and writer Louis Figuier offers a similar detailed description:

One of those climbing parasites will encircle the trunk of the largest trees to a prodigious height; the marks left by the old leaves seeming in their lozenge-shaped design resemble the skin of a serpent. From this parasitic stem spring large leaves of a glossy green, while its lower parts give birth to slender roots, which descend again to the earth straight as a plum line. The tree which bears the Spanish name of cipo-matador, the Murderous Liana, has a trunk as straight as our poplar, but so slight that it cannot support itself alone, but must find support on a neighboring tree more robust than itself. It presses against its stem, aided by its aerial roots, which embrace it at intervals like so many flexible osiers, by which it secures itself and defies the most terrible hurricanes. Some Lianas resemble waving ribbons, others are twisted in large spirals, or having in festoons, spreading between the trees and darting from one to another, twining round them and forming into mass of stem, leaves, and flowers, where the observe often finds it difficult to render to each vegetable what belongs to it.⁴⁶²

Richard Francis Burton also adds some colonial flair, noting, "the cipo-matador, or murder liana, is our old friend the 'Scotchman strangling the Creole' on the Isthmus of

⁴⁶¹ George Gardner, *Travels in the Interior of Brazil, principally through the Northern Provinces and the Gold and Diamond Districts during the years 1836-1841* (London: Reeve Brothers, 1846), 43.

⁴⁶² Louis Figuier, *The Vegetable World; Being A History of Plants with their Botanical Descriptions and Peculiar Properties* (New York: Appleton & Co., 1867), 346.

Panama and the “Parricide tree” of Cuba. Often thick as its victim, this vegetable vampire sometimes rises from the neck-compressing coil and stands up like a lighting conductor.”⁴⁶³ From these accounts, the Sipo-Matador is a recurring fixture in nineteenth century travel logs, occupying significant descriptive attention and exotic wonder. It most likely was used to hook readers into a narrative, providing more evidence of that danger that heroic travelers overcame in the name of science and country.

The obsession with the “murderous liana” also mediates the encounter between colonizers and the encounter with local indigenous people. Captain Maye Reed has a brief description about its sustainable use in construction and travel.⁴⁶⁴ But it is in Alfred Russel Wallace’s account that the Sipo-Matador is also presented as a keen object in gendering rituals. Wallace writes:

On the first signs of puberty in the girls, they have to undergo an ordeal. For a month previously, they are kept secluded in the house, and allowed only a small quantity of bread and water. All relatives and friends of the parents are then assembled, bring, each of them, pieces of ‘sipo’ (an elastic climber); the girl is then brought out, perfectly naked, into the midst of them, when each person present gives her five or six severe blows with the sipo across the back and breast, till she falls senseless, and it something happens, dead. If she recovers, it is repeated four times, at intervals of six hours, and it is considered an offence to the parents not to strike hard. During this time, numerous pots of all kinds of meat and fish have been prepared, when the sipos are dipped in them and given to her to lick, and she is then considered a woman, and allowed to eat anything and is marriageable.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶³ Richard Francis Burton, *Explorations of the Highlands of the Brazil with a Full Account of the Gold and Diamond Mines also Canoeing Down 1500 miles of the Great River Sao Francisco, from Sahara to the Sea*, (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1869), 40.

⁴⁶⁴ See Captain Mayne Reed, *Perils of a Peruvian Family and the Wilds of the Amazon*, (Boston: Ticknow and Fields, 1854), 233.

⁴⁶⁵ Alfred Russel Wallace, *Travels in the Amazon and Rio Negro with an Account of the Native Tribes and Observations on the Climate, Geology, and Natural History of the Amazon Valley* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1887), 345.

One can only speculate on the accuracy of Wallace's accounts and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the nuances that may have been lost in his rendition. However, for a European community with vastly different structures of gender, one wonders if the previous renditions of the plant also supported colonial ideas of indigenous people as primitive and in need of European assistance to bring them more fully into the moral community of the colonizer.

But, despite the numerous travel logs that mention the Sipo-Matador, it is Bates' description—whose account I used to begin this chapter—that was the most influential, at least by judging the reviews and subsequent readings it received. J.E. Taylor's *The Sagacity and Morality of Plants* replicates his passage word for word.⁴⁶⁶ Mary Swell, a nineteenth century religious scholar, used the Sipo-matador as a synecdoche for addiction.⁴⁶⁷ She writes (with perhaps the most generosity of the time), “under the power of strong temptation, they are helpless; and at last, beginning to despair, they cease to struggle. If they are not plucked out of the fire by another hand, they must sink into the fire that is everlasting” Quoting the same passage of Bates at length she asks, “Is it not worth our while to take some pains to prevent this stealthy murder from laying hold of the tree?”⁴⁶⁸ But it is in William Lonsdale Watkinson and William Theophilus Davidson

⁴⁶⁶ See also, J.E. Taylor, *The Sagacity and Morality of Plants: A Sketch of the Life and Conduct of the Vegetable Kingdom* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889): 229-230.

⁴⁶⁷ Mary Sewell, *“They Poor Brothers:” Letters to a Friend on Helping the Poor* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1864). Sewell's generous use of the figure is not routinely taken up by any other author, perhaps reinforcing the strong influence the negative figuring held sway.

⁴⁶⁸ Sewell, “They poor brothers,” 106-8.

that a more grotesque slippage between the Sipo-Matador and European colonization is made abundantly clear:

The principle of selection is strikingly illustrated in a Brazilian forest: everything strives to get upward, and with such reckless indifference to others, that a German traveller, Burmeister, has said that the sight made him quite sad, the vegetation displayed such a restless selfishness, eager emulation, and craft. The softness, earnestness and repose of European woodlands scenery and more pleasing, and form, he thinks, one of the causes of the superior moral character of Europeans. There is a parasitic tree called the *Sipo Matador* ('murderer'): it clings to its victim, gradually clasping the decaying body in its arms, until the dead trunk molds away, and (its support being gone) the murder also falls. Tis 'struggle for existence; foes on too in temperate counties, but there it is more concealed under the external appearance of repose which nature wears.⁴⁶⁹

It is clear that the accounts of the Sipo-Matador soak up and distribute colonial imaginaries. The ease with which its operations are anthropomorphized and then applied to cultural conditions of which there is no connection is stunning. That they provide support for scientific theories of variation and eugenics is terrifying. The landscape itself, scientifically divorced from any true connection to the horrifying purification efforts, none the less is the center point for both the colonial project and in the minds of nineteenth century readers reveals a fantastic and equally exotic explanation for the natural origin of European empire and the need to colonize and suppress the dangerous space of the tropics, including the indigenous people living amongst the vines.

Travel accounts figuring the Sipo-Matador provide a key element of the colonial encounter. Just as critical scholars have argued, nineteenth century travel guides used

⁴⁶⁹ William Lonsdale Watkinson and William Theophilus Davison, "*The Naturalist on the River Amazons* By Henry Walter Bates," *The London Quarterly Review* vol XXII (London: William Nichols, 1864), 65.

these tantalizing botanical tidbits to entice and entertain readers; they also began to represent and organize the audience's desires. As a form of nature identification, descriptions of the Sipo-Matador prepared a reading public to receive and enjoy colonization. These accounts reveal the inner-workings of early encounters, including the advance of shipping technology and indigenous informant practices. The descriptions themselves offered exotic frames that would interest readers at home and as a result shape their understandings of Brazil. Thus, they played a small role in cultivating in the minds of the audience an interest in exotic gardening, inspiring a new industry to sustain and advance future colonial expansion. It confirms what critical scholars suggest: botany and plants, whether exotic or cash crop, are a primary and constituent life at the heart of colonial encounters.

For scholars of rhetoric, it may also interest us to understand how the uptake of the Sipo-Matador currently, if not subtly, continues to exert its influence over our rhetorical frameworks. Mary Sewell, William Lonsdale Watkinson and William Theophilus Davidson were not the only writers to take up the fascination with the features of the Sipo-Matador. The murderous liana also shows up in one of the West's most acerbic and perhaps important scholars of the nineteenth century still influencing the minds of rhetorical scholars today. In fact, it might be argued that the plant is the central figure of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power.

V. Figuring Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the great thinkers of Western thought, the majority of his corpus occurring in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁷⁰ Best positioned in terms of his famous phrase “God is dead,” his polemic approach aimed to irritate what was considered essential truth and instead offer a complex set of suggestions based on contingent rhetorical suggestion.⁴⁷¹ He is understood as the theorist of a will to power, or following Robert Pippin, an understanding of the human and non-human world as described by “a constant zero-sum game struggle for dominance and mastery.”⁴⁷² His challenge to “herd mentality,” that is subservience to the dominant reading or interests of the time, has given charge to contemporary postmodernists in their imaginative and relativist approaches to reality.⁴⁷³ While his reception has been tainted by its uptake and misreadings by populist-driven thinkers in National Socialism, his deep aversion to Nazism also inspired the most important expressions of critical theory in the twentieth century, of both German and French varieties.⁴⁷⁴ His writing, both polemic and provocative, has inspired both

⁴⁷⁰ This section is a condensed reading based on: Robert Pippin, *Introductions to Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996); Gareth Southwell, *Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

⁴⁷¹ Pippin, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴⁷² Pippin, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴⁷³ Pippin, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴⁷⁴ Pippin, “Introduction,” 3; Gareth Southwell writes, “The bad press surrounding Nietzsche has been around for some time, but it began in earnest around the time of the First World War, as a contribution by British intellectuals to the war effort, and continued with the Second World War, as part of the anti-Nazi propaganda of the Allies. Before that, his ideas had already been distorted by his anti-Semitic sister into a form that was to appeal to the young Adolf Hitler. So, whilst his reputation among serious thinkers is well established, you can usually still find those who will happily trot out the old accusations: he was a proto-Nazi who inspired Hitler; he was a racist who hated Jews; he was a sexist who hated women; he was an atheist who proclaimed that

criticism and reflection.⁴⁷⁵ Reviled by many, his staunchest critics label his philosophy “undeniably second rate, and perhaps even downright naïve.”⁴⁷⁶ Gareth Southwell more charitably understands his corpus to be oriented toward a reader who already possesses a background knowledge of high theory, as well as intimate knowledge of art, philosophy and poetry.⁴⁷⁷ Nietzsche’s writing itself is caught, then, in its own dialectical struggle between, ironically, good and evil, often positioned somewhere between fantasy and fiction, inspired observations and systemic theoretical architecture.⁴⁷⁸

It is no surprise that he was highly influential on the thinking of Adorno, who is often caught in the same dialectic.⁴⁷⁹ For Ulrich Plass, more than just the writing style, the pessimistic and ambiguous orientation of Adorno’s philosophical thought, his admission of suffering and domination as the fulcrum and inescapable part of the human condition, and an understanding of the liberatory powers of life that exists in the working through of that suffering beyond the exercise of rational certainty are all hallmark of the Frankfurter’s reading of Nietzsche.⁴⁸⁰ Both have been given the title “great thinkers of the

‘God is dead’, and himself to be the ‘Anti-Christ’; he was an amoralist who believed that ‘might is right’, and that all morality is just ‘will to power’; he believed in a ‘Master Race’ of ‘Supermen’, whose destiny it was to rule over the genetically weak members of the ‘Slave Race’; his works stem from a deranged mind, and he wrote most of them whilst in the process of going insane. Like any good slurs, all of these accusations have a grain of truth in them – but only enough to make the untruths plausible.” See Southwell, *Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil*, x.

⁴⁷⁵ Pippin, “Introduction,” 10.

⁴⁷⁶ Conway, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴⁷⁷ Southwell, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁴⁷⁸ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3-4.

⁴⁷⁹ Ulrich Plass, “Moral Critique and Private Ethics in Nietzsche and Adorno,” *Constellations* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 381–92.

⁴⁸⁰ Plass, “Moral Critique,” 383.

critical negative.”⁴⁸¹ So central to his thinking, Adorno wrote, “to tell the truth, of all the so-called great philosophers I owe [Nietzsche] the greatest debt—more even than Hegel.”⁴⁸² Ripe with provocative persuasive power, The Frankfurt School struggled with interpreting Nietzsche, attempting to figure out what to salvage; trying to parcel out what could explain the rise of Nazism and what could be used to challenge it.⁴⁸³

More than Adorno, Nietzsche plays a crucial role in rhetorical studies. First popularized by an article by Paul de Man on rhetoric in 1974, in communication studies, Nietzsche was tacitly introduced in Samuel IJsseling’s survey in 1976.⁴⁸⁴ He became fully introduced in the translation work by Carol Blaire in 1983.⁴⁸⁵ Ron Lee’s application of Nietzschean thought to Richard Nixon provided an example of his influence in political speech.⁴⁸⁶ The debates about Nietzsche and its influence in rhetoric though started in earnest with Gregory Desilet in 1989.⁴⁸⁷ They became more sophisticated in the

⁴⁸¹ Plass, “Moral Critique,” 384.

⁴⁸² Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingston (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 172. Quoted in Plass, “Moral Critique,” 381.

⁴⁸³ Rolf Wiggershaus, “The Frankfurt Schools’ ‘Nietzsche Moment,’” trans. Gerd Appelhaus, *Constellations* 8, no. 1(2001): 144-147.

⁴⁸⁴ Paul De Man, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Rhetoric,” *Symposium; Syracuse, N.Y.* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 33–51; Samuel IJsseling *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict: A Historical Survey*, trans. Paul Dunphy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 103-1.

⁴⁸⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche and Carole Blair, “Nietzsche’s ‘Lecture Notes on Rhetoric’: A Translation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 2 (1983): 94–129.

⁴⁸⁶ Ronald Lee, “The Featuring of Will in History: A Rhetorical Exploration of Richard Nixon’s Post-Presidential Writings,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 4 (November, 1989): 453-466.

⁴⁸⁷ Gregory Desilet, “Nietzsche Contra Burke: The Melodrama in Dramatism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 1 (1989): 65-83.

exchanges among Douglas Thomas, Steve Whitson and John Poulakos in 1993.⁴⁸⁸

Interest continued into the twenty first century, notably with James W. Hikins, in concerns about relativism and the excitement of postmodernism in the field.⁴⁸⁹

As with so many other thinkers, Nietzsche also influenced Kenneth Burke. In an issue of the field's flagship *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Burke first explained his theory of dramatic criticism with an explicit exposition of Nietzsche. Burke draws from Nietzsche in understanding of the particular properties of language as negative.⁴⁹⁰ For Burke, Nietzsche's insight was central in appreciating a unique ability to examine material assumed from culture, notice its injunctions, and understand ways in which positive demands were actually negations and vice versa.⁴⁹¹ As does Carol Blair, Debra Hawhee sees Nietzsche as indeed one of the primary foundations for Burke's thinking, often overlooked because it didn't fit nicely within disciplinary conversations of the late 1960s.⁴⁹² Negation, the ability to interpret, and thus to understand encounters beyond instinct is the first brick in the house of Burke, forged through the polemic writings of Nietzsche. She notes that in Nietzsche, Burke found an inquiry that began with ethics,

⁴⁸⁸ See Douglas Thomas, "Burke, Nietzsche, Lacan: Three Perspectives on the Rhetoric of Order," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 3 (1993): 336-35; Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 2 (1993): 131-145.

⁴⁸⁹ James W. Hikins, "The Seductive Waltz: Rhetoric and Contemporary Interpretations of Nietzsche," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 4 (1999): 380-399.

⁴⁹⁰ Kenneth Burke, "A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38, no. 3 (1952): 251-264.

⁴⁹¹ Burke, "A Dramatistic View," 263.

⁴⁹² Debra Hawhee, "Burke and Nietzsche," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 2 (1999): 129-145; See also Carole Blair, "Symbolic Action and Discourse: The Convergent/Divergent Views of Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault," in *Kenneth Burke and Contemporary European Thinkers*, ed. Bernard L. Brock (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995): 119-165.

that is one dependent on variation, creative interpretation, and relationality as opposed to a staunch metaphysics or orienting ontology.⁴⁹³

Following the work of Charles E. Scott, by "ethics" Nietzsche was referring to "the body of values by which a culture understands and interprets itself with regard to what is good and bad."⁴⁹⁴ In this way, ethics were "sharply distinguished from morals, since it refers to a group of principles for both conduct and value judgment," but rather, understands how those principles are framed or put into use.⁴⁹⁵ Nietzsche's unique understanding of ethics (I argued in chapter one) opened up theory and language to an interpretive form of critique, not beholden to the dominant Christian writings of the time and as such represent one of Nietzsche's most important accomplishments. Nietzsche's ethical approach, Peter R. Sedgwick notes, is best on display in his writings about nature. While "often hyperbolic and figural," Sedgwick argues, they invite further insights and require more "explicit theorization."⁴⁹⁶ My argument, following Paola Cavalieri, understands extra-human relations as one way to figure Nietzsche's thinking and his suggestion about ethical arrangements.⁴⁹⁷

Considering public reception, his naturalist writings are a popular entrance point for Nietzschean thought as well. In consumer culture, his quotations show up on imaging

⁴⁹³ Hawhee, "Burke and Nietzsche," 132.

⁴⁹⁴ Charles E. Scott, *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 4.

⁴⁹⁵ Scott, *The Question of Ethics*, 4.

⁴⁹⁶ Peter R. Sedgwick, "Hyperbolic Naturalism: Nietzsche, Ethics and Sovereign Power," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47, no.1 (2016): 141-166.

⁴⁹⁷ Paola Cavalieri, "Do We Need Continental Philosophy?: Nonhumans, Ethics and the Complexity of Reality," *The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 2 (2011): 93.

sharing websites like Pinterest: "For a tree to become tall," Nietzsche wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "it must grow tough roots against the rocks."⁴⁹⁸ In contemplative writing, Herman Hesse picks this noble quality up in his book on trees.⁴⁹⁹ In new psychological self-help texts, Uri Wernik describes his Nietzschean approach to self management as an "advanced...manual for gardeners of the self."⁵⁰⁰ As part of the practice of his unique therapy, he asks patients (readers?) to embrace their unique individual self-drives, to understand that suffering and pain are inevitable in this world. His goal: "a mode of a state of existence, in which life is experienced intensively."⁵⁰¹ Given the popular interest in Nietzsche's ethical writings, it's vital to understand his use of natural figures. It is beyond the scope or interest of this chapter to stage a full inquiry into the tenants of Nietzsche's thought, about the position of the negative in language, about a will (or lack) of power, or about the viability of Nietzsche's work in ideology struggle. Rather, I aim to add some curious texture to the ongoing conversation by noticing an often-overlooked figure in his work.

The Sipo-Matador shows up at the end of Aphorism 258 right in the center of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.⁵⁰² He writes:

⁴⁹⁸ Unfortunately it's already an anesthetized version. In most translations, the actual line is: "Too tender, too yielding: so is your soil! But for a tree to become great, it seeks to twine hard roots around hard rocks!" Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 136.

⁴⁹⁹ Herman Hesse, "Trees," 1918. accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.arlftfoundation.org/blog/2017/04/trees-by-herman-hesse-and-advice-from-a-tree/>.

⁵⁰⁰ Uri Wernik, *Nietzschean Psychology and Psychotherapy: The New Doctors of the Soul* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 204.

⁵⁰¹ Wernik, "New Doctors," 214.

⁵⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, eds. Rolf Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Corruption as the expression of the fact that within the instincts anarchy is threatening and that the foundation of the affects, what we call "life," has been shaken: according to the living structure in which it appears, corruption is something fundamentally different. When, for example, an aristocracy, like France's at the start of the Revolution, throws away its privileges with a sublime disgust and sacrifices itself to a dissipation of its moral feelings, this is corruption: - essentially it was only the final act in that centuries-long corruption, thanks to which step-by-step it gave up its ruling authority and reduced itself to a *function* of the monarchy (finally even to the monarch's finery and display pieces). The essential thing in a good and healthy aristocracy, however, is that it feels itself *not* as a function (whether of a monarchy or of a community) but as its *significance* and highest justification - that it therefore with good conscience accepts the sacrifice of an enormous number of people, who *for its sake* must be oppressed and reduced to incomplete men, slaves, and instruments of work. Its fundamental belief must, in fact, be that the society should exist, *not* for the sake of the society, but only as a base and framework on which an exceptional kind of nature can raise itself to its higher function and, in general, to a higher form of *being*, comparable to those heliotropic climbing plants on Java - people call them *Sipo Matador* - whose branches clutch an oak tree so much and for so long until finally, high over the tree but supported by it, they can unfold their crowns in the open light and make a display of their happiness.

Upon first glance, this passage has all the hallmarks of Nietzsche's style that at once confounds, perturbs, and excites scholars. It appears as though Nietzsche claims that we ought to understand corruption as that which deviates from the principles derived from the nature. When considering an aristocratic claim to rule, it would appear from this aphorism, that the utmost corruption is ceding power to those who are not determined to wield it. Thus, to give over to the demands of the exploited is, again upon precursory read, a fundamental disservice to the natural order of life.

Certainly this read motivates rhetorician A.C. Pigou in 1908 when he first began to draw out an ethics from Nietzsche's relationship based on the Sipo-Matador.⁵⁰³ Pigou

⁵⁰³ A.C. Pigou, "The Ethics of Nietzsche," *The International Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 3 (1908): 343-355.

argues that at the core of humanity, in our “second nature” or ontological state, is a primary principle: “to promote the greatest possible amount of goodness in itself.”⁵⁰⁴ But, while the consequences cannot possibly be assured in advance, the principle could be considered absolute. “The badness of the effects may outweigh the goodness of their original cause,” writes Pigou, and, “it is this practical difficulty which Nietzsche envisioned in the concrete and from which as a center, a great deal of his teaching radiates.”⁵⁰⁵ Pigou’s consequentialist reading of Nietzsche here is more complex than traditional notions of pleasure and pain, but it is the *inevitability*, the “naturalness” that he draws from Nietzsche. Here he quotes the entire section of Aphorism 258 in order to demonstrate an ethics based on the precursory reading outlined above. In a refusal of pity for the poor or women, whose role is best to serve, he ends this part of his “practical ethics” with a Malthusian cry, reminding the reader that “to work for the preservation of all the sick and suffering, (quoting Nietzsche now), ‘means indeed and in truth to work for the deterioration of the European race.’”⁵⁰⁶ As with the colonial naturalists who preceded him, it appears as though the Pigous interpretation of the Sipo-Matador once again becomes a natural, indeed ethical justification, for structural domination.

It is perhaps unsurprising to those who are critical of Nietzsche that many readers share Pigou’s perspective, although they formulate the question differently. Nidesh Lawloo, for example, says of Nietzsche’s fascination with the Sipo-matador that the “will to power is not as human, personal, often exclusively masculinist force. But will to power

⁵⁰⁴ Pigou, “The Ethics of Nietzsche,” 344.

⁵⁰⁵ Pigou, “The Ethics of Nietzsche,” 344.

⁵⁰⁶ Pigou, “The Ethics of Nietzsche,” 349.

as a nonhuman, materialist, and impersonal energy illustrates the vitalist, brutal, yet life-affirmative power of nature itself.”⁵⁰⁷ Michael Onfray describes this as the very condition of life: the substance of battle upon which all of concepts of affirmations grow.⁵⁰⁸ Haroon Sheikh reminds us, Nietzsche is as much a theorist of the Right as he is of the left. His vision of the will to power, the plant man struggling above all else, was taken up by conservatives like Leo Strauss and Francis Fukuyama, who provided much of the architecture for the modern conservative movement.⁵⁰⁹ Part of their concern was with a retelling of the Devil’s advocate in portions of Nietzsche’s writing that promote “pride,” and “self-recognition” over equality and collective cooperation. “Morality that seeks comfort, evades danger and discipline; in such a world, man’s [sic] inner tyrants are no longer developed and capacity for striving diminishes.”⁵¹⁰ When one considers both of these scholars inspired the current system of International Relations, it’s not difficult to examine the contemporary situation and see the failed fruits of their labor.

This conservative ethics of Nietzsche also shows up in moral psychology, or the study of agency as it is executed in everyday choice. Contra Aristotle’s virtue ethics and Kant’s moral imperatives, Brian Leiter and Joshua Knobe take up Nietzsche’s concern

⁵⁰⁷ Nidesh Lawtoo, *Conrad’s Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (Lansing: Michigan State Press, 2016), 100-1.

⁵⁰⁸ Michel Onfray, *Cosmos* (Paidós: Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2016); Michel Onfray and Joseph McClellan, *A Hedonist Manifest: The Power to Exist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁵⁰⁹ Haroon Sheikh, “Nietzsche and the Neoconservatives: Fukuyama’s Reply to the Last Man,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 35, no. 1 (2008): 31-2.

⁵¹⁰ Sheikh, “Nietzsche and the Neoconservatives,” 31-2.

for a life driven by moral submission to concerns for those intended to serve.⁵¹¹ Instead, they suggest, “type-facts’ drive every human decision. Drawing from Nietzsche’s, they argue he first and foremost believes that humans are not choice makers, but driven by the natural instincts of growth and self determination, and will develop rationales for their behavior after the act is performed. They also have a subtle extended analogy about the tomato: while environmental conditions may contribute to the intensity of an organism’s development, the environment cannot change a tomato seed into an apple seed. Inevitably, they conclude, hereditary traits explain psychological behavior far more than any developmental philosophy could. So, even as Vanessa Lemm offers a more charitable re-reading, looking toward the more creative side of life affirming will to power, the notion of a human driven with unflinching drive toward the fullest expression of their own deepest desires provides the rationale for a governing system built on principles of domination.⁵¹²

Biologist Jean Gayson acknowledges this concern about the silence around the relationship between Nietzsche and Nazism in their discipline. Gayson notes that many biologists would prefer to avoid the philosophically charged understandings of Nietzsche, looking for a separate and more independent sphere of inquiry precisely because he is too easily taken up by unsavory political projects. Yet even she cannot but help to opine about the power of struggle, supplementing power with nutrition and noting a primary

⁵¹¹ Brian Leiter and Joshua Knobe, “The Case for Nietzschean Moral Psychology,” in *Nietzsche and Morality*, eds. Brian Leiter and Neil Shinhababu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 83-109.

⁵¹² Vanessa Lemm, “Is Nietzsche a Naturalist? Or How to Become a Responsible Plant,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 61.

principle of “functional assimilation” working from within the core of biological life, seeking to incorporate and dominate, as the basis of evolutionary process.⁵¹³

In another sense though, there is a different read that could be offered than the conservative ethics drawn from his aphorism on the Sipo-matador. Was Nietzsche subtly critiquing the aristocracy for “dissipating” or dissolving into consumptive pleasure? Similar to Sophia Copalla’s *Marie Antoinette*, in which the viewer never actually sees any poverty, colonial racism, or revolutionary violence, what Nietzsche may be pointing to is a sophisticated jab at consumptive consciousness, overflowing in its own gluttony.⁵¹⁴ In Nietzsche’s aphorism, is it possible he is not applauding the elite, but admonishing a group of people who “with good conscience accept the sacrifice of an enormous number of people, who for its sake, must be oppressed and reduced to incomplete men, slaves, and instruments of work?” In this instance, he is not intrigued by the life-affirming power of the Sipo-Matador, but rather, the way it stages its own death in its ultimate expression of will. To put it bluntly, the aristocrats kill themselves with their own consumption; their unending will-to-life a recipe for their own demise.

In an 1871 naturalist text by Scottish inventor Mungo Ponton, his chapter on parasites outline a peculiar property of the Sipo-Matador that I alluded to earlier: vampirism, the drawing of life, is a natural quality of all organisms.⁵¹⁵ Ponton terms “the parasitic condition,” as the special effect of the union of two opposites, when the output

⁵¹³ Jean Gayson, “Nietzsche and Darwin,” in *Biology and the Foundations of Ethics*, eds. Jane Malenschien and Michael Ruse (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169.

⁵¹⁴ *Marie Antoinette*, directed by Sophia Copalla. 2006; Culvier City, CA: Columbia Pictures.

⁵¹⁵ Mungo Ponton, “Chapter XXI: Parasitic Life,” *In the Beginning: It’s When and Its How* (London: Longmand, Green, and Co, 1871), 261-78.

destroys the host.⁵¹⁶ There is a curious caveat, Ponton notes, in a specific parasitic condition: “that of one organism growing at the expense of another belong to a species different from itself,” and from which the common understanding of the term emerges.⁵¹⁷ In fact, Ponton offers three different versions of this more specialized parasitic condition. In the first condition, a parasite germinates near a host and attacks the root system, extracting enough nutrients to keep both organisms alive. A second condition is noticed when the parasite will enter a host through its fruit and germinates from the forced conjunction. But it is the final condition in which additional variation is noticed. In this case, the plant will root near a host and attack the root system, but will also attach to the rind. In the slight variation noticed almost exclusively in the Sipo-Matador, as the plant seeks nourishment from the host’s roots, its enthusiasm causes both host and parasite to collapse and ensure both are destroyed.⁵¹⁸

It is both perverse and acute that this third variety in the parasitic condition is what constitutes Nietzsche’s principle of life, particularly that of aristocratic European men. Built into Aphorism #258, then, is a smart and subtle dialectic. It is up to the reader to decide which version to interpret. In their own naming practices, perhaps their desires and identifications are revealed in the interpretation of the interpretation.

Did Nietzsche know about the slight variation in the parasitic condition or was he too romanced by a vampire? Was he playfully aware that ultimately the gluttony of the Sipo Matador, and not its cunning, would cause its like to come crashing to the forest

⁵¹⁶ Ponton, “Parasitic Life,” 262.

⁵¹⁷ Potnon, “Parasitic Life,” 263.

⁵¹⁸ Ponton, “Parasitic Life,” 263.

floor? Is the parasitic condition “ontological” that is to say, the principle of human experience or is it in fact merely a clever myth organizing a story in a humorous of way?

Micheal Marder, one of the primary thinkers of contemporary critical plant studies, wants to understand Nietzsche’s plant ethics outside the figure of the Sipo-Matador altogether. “Perhaps, the assumption that roots engage competitive or altruistic behaviors, depending on the identity of their neighbors,” Marder writes, “is nothing but a projection of human expectations onto non-human nature. Perhaps, Nietzsche’s interpretation of the “fight” among trees growing in a jungle is also a theoretical fiction, which, in turn, naturalizes the struggle for survival in human societies.”⁵¹⁹ He figures the *cakile edentual* (a species of plants that produce more roots in shared environments with different species) to demonstrate an entirely distinct ethic drawn from plant life.⁵²⁰ Marder’s more communal frame he terms “nutritive desire.”⁵²¹ Preferring a sense of “pure positivity of growth and expansion where nothing is missing,” Marder argues that humans have been sublimated by plants not reverse as is commonly understood.⁵²² It is a similar move to that of Micheal Pollen, whose important study of plants asks how we, not they, have been domesticated. Marder goes a step further to say that Nietzsche’s problem is also ethical, that is “besides projecting anthropomorphic feelings and behaviors onto plants, he includes them under the concepts of sameness and identity. “ Instead he faults

⁵¹⁹ Micheal Marder, “Nietzsche’s Jungle *Philosoplant* (blog), May 1, 2014, accessed April 30, 2017, http://philosoplant.lareviewofbooks.org/?p=59#_ftn1; S.A. Dudley and A.L. File, “Kin Recognition in an Annual Plant,” *Biology Letters* 3 (2007): 435-438.

⁵²⁰ Marder, “Nietzsche’s Jungle,” http://philosoplant.lareviewofbooks.org/?p=59#_ftn1

⁵²¹ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 39.

⁵²² Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 39.

Nietzsche for not understanding plants in their ability to “preclude the hoarding of power. Their unique ensouled existence enjoins plants to the passages, the outlets, or the media for the other.”⁵²³ While he flips Nietzsche’s conclusion, perhaps, as I have tried to demonstrate, there is more to interpret.

In the epilogue to *Plant Thinking- A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder extends his thinking to a broad relational ethics, noting “those who are ready to practice plant thinking must be patient enough to see through the germination of a new ethics from vegetal existence itself, an ethics singularly adapted to each situation, rid of final conclusion, and in tune with our ongoing learning from plants.”⁵²⁴ He suggests that an appropriate ethical stance is not to relegate plants to the status of objects, but rather, “to cultivate a way of thinking with them... a certain intimacy with plants, which does not border on empathy or on the attribution of the same fundamental substratum to their life and to ours; rather, like all intimacy, it will take place (largely) in the dark, respectful of the obscurity of vegetable life.”⁵²⁵ He considers this situational ethics as a kind of intimacy, one which offers to engage in (rhetorical) relationships in order to contemplate the simple divisions between mind and body, life and death, theory and practice, that is, much like dialogue and debate, an on going process that twists and turns, turns back in on itself.

Marder’s is a romantic and enchanting ethics; Nietzsche has a tendency to draw that component out in thinkers. I am also not really in a rush to challenge Marder either.

⁵²³ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 42.

⁵²⁴ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 188.

⁵²⁵ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 181.

Too many people are willing to laud the will-to-power in Nietzsche without recognizing the situational context and the deep aversion the writer has to all things human, particularly the aristocracy. But, to be fair, Marder also performs a dangerous rhetorical move. He too erases the parasitic nature of the Sipo-Matador in his quest to find alternative examples of communal living. It's understandable, but again, he does a disservice to the labor and life of the plant lives he wants to venerate. Perhaps a little pessimism about the opportunities for human thinking drawn from the plant world is also in order.

Thus, in this short reading at the heart of debates between conservative and radical interpretations of the great rhetorician Nietzsche, I hope to have displayed a taste of the immense criticism upon criticism, an almost vine like structure, emerging from and developing around the thinker. As a great and influential figure, his style and philosophy continues to animate rhetorical inquiry throughout the history of the field. But, as an acerbic writer, his interpretations are prone to serious misreading which inform various attempts to derive an ethics from his work. Was he, like so many other readers of naturalist texts of the time, merely enchanted by the colonial writings of botanical life in the various colonies around the world? Is he making the case for an ontological spirit of domination emerging from the Sipo-Matador's attempt to lead its own life? Or, was he a sophisticated reader of the antagonist struggle, smuggling in a small reminder that parasitic social structures inevitably fall because they extract too much from their hosts?

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to present a rhetorical history—a naming identification—of the Sipo-Matador using the method of immanent critique. Drawing from contemporary readings in biology, I began with the current affirmation of the plant as a life-affirming agent. In exploring the annals of scientific excursions of the nineteenth century, I demonstrated that the exotic features of the Sipo-Matador play an important role in colonizer fantasies, particularly in establishing an appetite for the exotic in the structure's reception in colonial publics. I examined the Sipo-Matador's relevance to debates over ethics ranging from moral philosophy to contemporary situational ethics in extra-human relations as offered by critical plant studies. In each instance, I have attempted, following Adorno, to both know and unknow the plant – never leaving it fixed, but figured in dialectical struggle between subject and object—hero and villain—as it crisscrosses various forms of rhetoric.

Before I leave the Sipo-Matador to its ways, I'd like to offer one final approach, this time in a 1917 short story by Italian antifascist writer Luigi Ugolini simply called “The Vegetable Man.”⁵²⁶ Written as an address, readers are called to a conversation with a man, so abhorred by the green hue his skin has taken on, that he lives, it appears, in complete isolation. When approached by a neighbor who shows not revulsion but concern, Dr. Benito Olivares, *the vegetable man* shares the travel narrative at the heart of his condition.

⁵²⁶ Luigi Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” in *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, eds. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (New York: Tom Doherty, 2011) 97-100.

While working on his doctorate in natural history, the native Brazilian took to the Amazon, “with the ardor of a young pioneer and the zeal of a scientist” and “penetrated the virgin forests” to extract “countless secrets of the vegetable environment that know no bonds.”⁵²⁷ On these travels, he encountered “a silent and insidious weapon that rules the mute combat of the vegetable kingdom ... the octopus of the forest ... the Cipo-Matador.”⁵²⁸ In the midst of combat, Olivares is caught in its tentacles wherein he finds a new species of plant never before discovered. “What delight, what triumph, what delirium,” he recalled upon encountering this “living contradiction” which seemed to defy all categorization of the natural history community.⁵²⁹ A “shrub as tall as a normal man” with “palmate leaves that were thick and fleshy and two oval scuttulem had formed what looked like eyes,” the plant transfixed him with all the wonder, riches, and notoriety it might offer up to him.⁵³⁰

Olivares, upon immigrating to Italy, appears to have absconded with a specimen and offered the neighbor-narrator a quick peak. Shivering the narrator remarks upon examining the plant, caught behind a glass case: “It’s marvelous ... those eyes are remarkably real.” But, it appears that the curious plant did not give its body to Olivares so easily. With “teeth like a viper,” the plant bit the doctor when he approached it years earlier in the Brazilian rainforest. After a brief bout of “violent discomfort” Olivares

⁵²⁷ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 97.

⁵²⁸ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 97.

⁵²⁹ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 97-8.

⁵³⁰ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 98.

recalled regaining composure, gathering the plant and naming it: the *olivaria vigilans*, or verdant sentry.

Life, it seems, did not return to normal for the good doctor. Upon returning to his camp, he asked a local indigenous man about the plant; it appears the young man ran from him in terror. Cajoling more information from a local elder with promises of weaponry and riches, Oliveras was told the plant was *Inhuacoltzi*, a plant spirit, and warned to avoid it at all costs.⁵³¹ Smirking “at this strange superstition,” summoning up the false heroism of the Enlightenment, “for who could believe there was a deity of plants?” he gathered a few specimens—donating most to the Museum of Natural History in Buenos Aires—keeping a small trophy for himself.⁵³²

Slowly though, the fevers returned and Olivera’s skin tone began to turn a verdant shade of green. In an attempt to ascertain the cause, he took a slight sample of blood and placed it under a microscope. It seems, foreign cells had invaded his body and were winning the battle over his body; red cells turning to green before his eyes. After exhausting local remedies, Oliveras fled to Italy, hopeful the change in climate would eliminate the conditions of the plant’s dominant takeover.

Speechless, the narrator looked upon the doctor. “But, tell me, would you like to know everything?” Oliveras asked. Removing his gloves, the story ends with a terrifying crescendo of Oliveras’ transformation: “In place of hands, they were leaves, meaty leaves, similar to those of a prickly pear—two large green leaves attached to repulsive

⁵³¹ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 99.

⁵³² Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 99.

looking trunks like human arms without skin. And, horrifying vision, on those two short formless fleshy masses sat the same sinister and terrible eyes that I had seen on the leaf enclosed in the glass case.”⁵³³ Ugolini’s identification tale: a terrifying warning for those whose desire to name and enclose the true nature of parasitic strangler fig, the Sipo-Matador.

⁵³³ Ugolini, “The Vegetable Man,” 100.

CHAPTER FIVE: FIGURING YEARS, A VINYL ALBUM REVIEW

I. The Tree's Song

The Tree's Song

What needs to be said to
Remember the wind's inclinations?

The way the mind forgets a word midway
Between here and there syllables slipping

Gracelessly through fingertips.
Surely tomorrow the sweet notes

Will sing for the first time, the tree
Unfurling its leaves lie counterpoint.

—C Waite⁵³⁴

II. Introduction

Theodor W. Adorno got his start in the philosophy business (much like rhetorician Kenneth Burke) not in writing theoretical treatises of insight and density, but instead by penning album reviews—critiques of music.⁵³⁵ Adorno biographer Stefan

⁵³⁴ C. Waite, "The Tree's Song," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 66, no. 3 (2009): 352.

⁵³⁵ Kenneth Burke, "Towards a Post-Kantian Verbal Music." *The Kenyon Review* 20, no. 4 (1958): 529-546. For secondary literature, see, for examples: Gregory Clark, *Civic Jazz: American Music and Kenneth Burke on the Art of Getting Along* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Jeffrey Carroll, "The Song Above Catastrophe: Kenneth Burke on Music." *KB Journal* 7, no. 2 (2011): <http://kbjournal.org/carroll>; Joel Overall, "Piano and Pen: Music as Kenneth Burke's Secular Conversion," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41, no. 5 (2011): 439-454; Joel Overall, "Kenneth Burke and the Problem of Sonic Identification," *Rhetoric Review* 36, no. 3 (2017): 232; Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village: Conversing with the Moderns, 1915-1931* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); For an applied example, see: Roberta S. Maguire, "From the Blues to Jazz: Lewis

Müller-Doohm notes that while suffering with the pressure and rejection of academic production and a life lived in exile, Adorno turned to sound composition and its review as a salve.⁵³⁶ He found in music a multidimensional experience in which the practice of composition and the act of listening harmonized a unique dialectic between structural compulsion and everyday living. For Adorno, and those later inspired by his work, music requires grappling between expected form and imaginative innovation; an object caught between the pressures of industry and the possibilities latent in the act of sonic creation.

If there is any opening offered by Adorno for a more hopeful reflection on freedom and liberation, it is in his texts on aural perception of composer and listener. More than any other art, notes David Ingram, music could inspire an orientation that at its most thoughtful could craft a practice of living driven not by Enlightenment principles of utility and consumption but of community interests, shared material existence, and collective consciousness.⁵³⁷ Drawing from Friedrich Nietzsche, Ingram suggests that Adorno's interest in sound-inspired consciousness expresses a "sense of striving...for a final destination or goal that is endlessly deferred." Even with his characteristic bleakness, Adorno understood possibility at the beginning of each "album" or piece of music. The sound of the first note initiated an interpretive pilgrimage that is never fully complete, even as the vibrations from the final note settle in the ear to house themselves in memory. Adorno's mythic scene of music—akin to Homer's epic figuring Odysseus's

Nordan's Fiction as 'Equipment for Living': Document View." *Southern Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2003): 7.

⁵³⁶ Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

⁵³⁷ David Ingram, *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music since 1960* (New York: Rodopi, 2010), 12.

trials and tribulations on his quest homeward—situates the communicative power of sound as one that invites a journey in body and mind on a quest homeward.⁵³⁸ Never certain of a victorious return, a hero carries on, following the constellations as they gesture toward a return. The experience of listening to an album, for Adorno, is similar: an Odyssey.

This fantastic journey activated by the body's sensory equipment and its interplay with the apparitions in the mind is also a dialectical one, always already mediated. On the one hand, the musical composition is a reflection of the composers' orientation—including the situation of production—itself a unique map of selection, design, and dissemination. But in a more oft omitted moment of analysis, the orientation of the listener, the silent object/subject whom plays an essential role in sound's activation, is also an essential participant. Thus, the experience of sound is less about opinion or “what one likes,” and instead, reveals more about the mediation between structure and reception in an ideological sense. As a form of critique, reviews play a vital role in constellating both the affirmation of sound—the fantastic, creative and interpretive experiences it can generate—also its negation—the hidden dominance of structural pressures—impeding a full embrace of freedom that toward which sound often gestures.

From this theoretical vantage point, I offer a critique of a specific vinyl album inspired by Adorno's sense of journey through sound. *Years* is an art-piece composed by Austrian theorist Bartholomäus Traubeck in 2012. The piece performs the sound of tree

⁵³⁸ Steven Hemling, “A Martyr to Happiness: Why Adorno Matters,” *The Kenyon Review* 28.4 (2006): 156-172.

rings taken from cross sectionals of varietals found in European woodlands.⁵³⁹ I've structured my review in four broad movements, often allowing myself to get carried away, only to return to the central argument: the dialectic between subject and object, human and plant. In applying immanent criticism in this way, I reflect on what music invites us to feel—transported to a new place only to return to ourselves; the method playful in the sense one *plays* a record.

Let me offer a track list, though, to help guide the experience. First, I situate my approach more closely in contemporary writing on sound studies, returning to Adorno to more fully unpack his understanding of music. Second, I examine *Years* for its content, taking a closer look at the vibrant life of the forest subjects inspiring the piece. Next I examine the composition for some of the interpretive dialectics at play in situating the life and death of trees. Finally, I look at this specific object's relationship to the structure of production, understanding various mediums as they effect sound and reception. In some ways that is a metonym for three different positions Adorno asks us to assume about sound, understanding the album as a commodity, a composition, and a structure. In reading and auditing this way, I hope to make the album familiar and unfamiliar, getting carried away by some fantastic meditations of my own before resting and returning to argument.

⁵³⁹ Bartholomäus Traubeck, *Years*, No Label-ARM001, Austria, 2015, Vinyl LP. If you'd like to listen, its also available at Jose Rodrigo, "Year- Bartholomäus Traubeck," YouTube, February 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12dc4IQGnFc>.

III. Sound Studies

Sound studies is one of the new scholarly edges in the field of rhetoric and persuasion.⁵⁴⁰ Joshua Gunn, Greg Goodale, Mirko M. Hall and Rosa A. Eberly argue succinctly that the “sonic has wrongly taken an epistemological back seat to the scopic; sound studies is the attempt to change the seating order.”⁵⁴¹ Taking up a traditional understanding of rhetoric as the examination of elements of persuasion in speaking and writing, the authors recommend adding an aural element to rhetoric’s objects of inquiry. In so doing, the authors draw attention to “an ethics of listening” that might contribute to a deeper awareness of and commitment to understanding and strengthening “our shared predicament.”⁵⁴² Understanding the act of listening to sound in as an ethical practice draws from the rich history of public address, but deepens an understanding of persuasion beyond direct calls to action. Instead, we are invited to reflect on how sound cultivates unique publics, affects material and psychic structures, and participates in the composition and decomposition of an audiences’ orientation.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴⁰ Joshua Gunn, Greg Goodale, Mirko M. Hall, and Rosa A. Eberly, “Auscultating Again: Rhetoric and Sound Studies,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 43.5 (2013): 475-489. See also: Koushik Banerjee, “Sounds of Whose Underground?: The Fine Tuning of Diaspora in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 17, no. 3 (June 2000): 64-79.; Joel Beckerman, *The Sonic Boom: How Sound Transforms the Way We Think, Feel, and Buy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014); Christopher Cox, “Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 145-161; Veit Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

⁵⁴¹ Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Rosa, “Auscultating Again,” 477.

⁵⁴² Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Rosa, “Auscultating Again,” 477, 487.

⁵⁴³ The concept of orientation I examined in chapter one is derived from Kenneth Burke. See relevant section or, again, Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

As with most sensory-based interventions, sound studies has been cherished and reviled; on the one hand, accused of unnecessary fragmentation of the field and on the other, welcomed for opening up new and curious interdisciplinary connections.⁵⁴⁴ Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld describe sound studies as “an emerging interdisciplinary area,” examining, “the material production and consumption of music, sound, noise, and silence, and how they change throughout history, and within different societies, but does so from a much broader perspective than standard disciplines such as ethnomusicology, history of music, and sociology of music.”⁵⁴⁵ These scholars of sound studies invite us to explore what they term the auditory dimension of investigation. In 2012, in their *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, Pinch and Bijsterveld organize their inquiry around “places where sound is experienced.”⁵⁴⁶ Juxtaposed against a dominant “visual paradigm” that includes the social science and humanities, numerous volumes, including Michael Bull and Les Back’s edited volume *The Auditory Culture Reader* and *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, demonstrate the growing interest in—to borrow a phrase from critical French sound theorist and economic advisor Jacques Attali—theorizing about and through sound.⁵⁴⁷ These volumes all describe, as Michele

⁵⁴⁴ Tony Grajeda, “Introduction: The Future of Sound Studies,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (2008): 109–14.

⁵⁴⁵ Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, “Sound Studies: New Technologies and Music,” *Social Studies of Science* 34, no. 5 (2004): 636.

⁵⁴⁶ Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, eds. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

⁵⁴⁷ Michael Bull and Les Back, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 5.

Hilmes points out, the excitement in the study of sound as it attempts to appreciate traditional convergences and divergences in unexplored terrains.⁵⁴⁸

In *the Sound Studies Reader*—one of the most comprehensive collection of essays in the area—Jonathan Sterne establishes a vital overview of the growing field of academic inquiry in which the phenomena of sound drives inquiry. In his approach, “sonic practices and discourses and institutions that describe them,” create the “analytic point” for understanding human communication systems and meaning making.⁵⁴⁹ In more eloquent terms, sound studies “*redescribes* what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world.”⁵⁵⁰ By *redescribes* (opposed to mere description), Sterne argues sound studies draws on intersections among academic disciplines, publics, and standpoints to understand sound in dense creation not a more passive appreciation. As such, inquiry must include recognition of position and reflexivity, for how and what is heard is mediated by social, cultural, geographic and economic locations in which the ear is located on the body.⁵⁵¹ Such a posture also articulates a guiding force of wonder, or in Sterne’s words, “a broad transdisciplinary curiosity,” in which sound studies and students

⁵⁴⁸ Michele Hilmes, “Foregrounding Sound: New (And Old) Directions in Sound Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): 115–17.

⁵⁴⁹ Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 2. Sterne divides the *The Sound Studies Reader*, into six primary areas, which are often taken as platforms for research: hearing, listening, and deafness; space, sites, and -scapes; transduce and record; collectives and couplings; aesthetics, experiences, interpretation; and voices. As Sterne points out, the turn to sound is also driven by an understanding and appreciation of race in an American context. W.E.B. DuBois for example argues that sound and song played a key role in building resistance in the plantation system in the United States.

⁵⁵⁰ Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 2. Of course, sound is not endemic to the human world. But, Sterne leaps to anthropocentric justifications for an inquiry into sound. Humans are cordoned off as exceptional sound makers, living in exceptional sound fields- acting and acted upon, not in co-constitution not co-habitation. See Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 8.

⁵⁵¹ Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 4.

ought to be situated and whose “sonic imaginations” might be cultivated and nourished.⁵⁵² Finally, Sterne points out that sound studies is ultimately a discussion of object and method, an approach to research that tries to think through conditions and concepts, not predictions and universals.⁵⁵³ When juxtaposed against another sense—vision—Sterne makes a number of key points about what he terms “audiovisual litany.”⁵⁵⁴ While vision is directional, based on assumptions of distance and perspective, sound is spherical and immersive, placing one inside an event happening around and through a hearing (or nonhearing) subject. In this instance, Sterne is closely related to what Rey Chow and James A. Steintrager articulate as the “slide between referential and figurative registers” induced by sound.⁵⁵⁵ Chow and Steintrager remind us that “sound does not appear to stand before us, but rather to come to us or at us.”⁵⁵⁶ And in this way, sound plays between the notion of the human, as something trying to “capture” or hold onto an ephemeral, fleeting phenomena and that which surrounds one, or as a “force of capture.”⁵⁵⁷ But in this interplay, “sound is always capture, and capture is always a

⁵⁵² Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 4-5. Sterne here is also drawing from a number of important cultural references including T.S. Elliot’s “auditory imagination,” C.W. Mills’s “sociological imagination,” and Anne Balsamo’s “technological imagination.” See: T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); C. Wright Mills and Todd Gitlin, *Sociological Imagination*, (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2000); Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵⁵³ Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 5.

⁵⁵⁴ Sterne, “Sonic Images,” 9.

⁵⁵⁵ Rey Chow and James A Steintrager, “In Pursuit of the Object of Sound: An Introduction,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 22 (Summer/Fall 2011): 1-11.

⁵⁵⁶ Chow and Steintrager, “In Pursuit of the Object,” 2.

⁵⁵⁷ Chow and Steintrager, “In Pursuit of the Object,” 4.

loss.”⁵⁵⁸ By this, I interpret them to mean that there is no one static definition, instead, part of the method of sound studies itself is to grapple with the impossibility of concretizing either object or process. Instead, how one approaches, describes, positions, consumes and refines are the critical qualities that make sound a necessary object of inquiry but also a continual process of creation and discovery in criticism.

From a science studies perspective, sound is understood as intimately related to technology and the history of innovation. Some sounds, for example, are driven by major industrial transformation (a car engine or conveyor belts); others by electronic and digital advance (video games, personal computers, and Automatic Teller Machines). Specific sounds, as Pinch and Bijsterveld note, can mark major moments of change in the material structure.⁵⁵⁹ For these authors sound is a conduit for understanding the larger sociology of science and technology.⁵⁶⁰

The scientific approach to the study of sound has ancient historical origins. Pythagoras, for example, attempted to design an aesthetic taxonomy of pleasurable sounds, developing a theory of ratios and a scale of pure fifths to define experiences of pure gratification.⁵⁶¹ As such, he is noted as one of the first in Western thought to

⁵⁵⁸ Chow and Steintrager, “In Pursuit of the Object,” 4.

⁵⁵⁹ Pinch and Bijsterveld, “Introduction,” 4-5.

⁵⁶⁰ Academically, these authors understand their lineage routed through a 1996 conference in Bielefeld, Germany named “STS faces the Music,” culminating in a special issue of *Social Studies of Science* entitled “Sound Studies: New Technologies and Music.” See also Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

⁵⁶¹ Imelda S. Caleon and R. Subramaniam, “From Pythagoras to Sauveur: Tracing the History of Ideas about the Nature of Sound,” *Physics Education* 42, no. 2 (2007): 173. According to the

approach a schematization of vibration, pitch, and numerical calculation.⁵⁶² Aristotle conceived of sound mechanically like waves or “ripples of water” that fill the space around the producer.⁵⁶³ In both cases, the Ancient Greek theorists explored sound as an expression of balance, reconciling opposites into harmonious compositions.⁵⁶⁴ Ancient Romans imbedded sound thinking in spatial design, designing sites to maximize the powers of human voice. Vitruvius perfected the technical design of the forum, where the sounds of theatre and politics could be amplified by the contours of the stage and its relation to the audience.⁵⁶⁵ Indeed, rhetorical interest in Ancient rhetoric benefits by further considering the relationship between spatial design and persuasion.

Moving quickly through time, as sound does in space, Galileo Galilei and Marin Mersenne both refined the a scientific approach to sound, arguing that vibrations travel like waves from a body to a receiving instrument. The resulting stimulation is a tactile experience provoking interpretation and meaning.⁵⁶⁶ Sound reaches out to touch in nonhuman ways. One might imagine the sonic boom—or the noise of waves created by an object traveling faster than the speed of sound—as a new innovation in the thinking of

authors of this paper, Pythagoras based most of his research on the pleasure (or discord) at various durations between moments of hammers striking anvils.

⁵⁶² Paolo Gozza, “Introduction,” in *Number to Sound: The Musical Way to the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Paolo Gozza (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 2.

⁵⁶³ Caleon and Subramaniam, “From Pythagoras to Sauveur,” 174.

⁵⁶⁴ Gozza, “Introduction,” 4.

⁵⁶⁵ Richard Patterson, “What Vitruvius Said,” *The Journal of Architecture* 2, no. 4 (January 1, 1997): 356.

⁵⁶⁶ For a more complete history, see, for example: H. F. Cohen, *Quantifying Music: The Science of Music at the First Stage of Scientific Revolution 1580–1650* (Boston: Kluwer, 1984).

new objects of sound and technological impact.⁵⁶⁷ (Those of us who lived through the 1990's might appreciate the sound of AOL dialup similarly; the anticipation of receiving digital access characterized in sonic terms). Understanding scientific shifts through the sound they create presents a new and profound way of considering rhetorical experience.

In more traditional rhetorical inquiry, specific sounds are considered crucial to the cultivation publics—groups of people brought together in shared identification in the experience of hearing sound. Alain Corbin historically describes the use of church bells—in the marking of time and role—as an early example of publics established in this way.⁵⁶⁸ Phonographs and nickelodeons at the turn of the 20th century in the US also played a similar role, as described in Eric W. Rothenbuhler and John Durham Peter's study *Defining Phonography* and the collection by Timothy Taylor, Mark Katz and Tony Grajeda, in *Music, Sound, and Technology in America: A Documentary History of Early phonograph, Cinema, and Radio*.⁵⁶⁹ John Mowitt's *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception* speculates on the apparatus of the radio as a specific mechanism of production that also consecrates both a new public or audience built around and through this consumption of

⁵⁶⁷ See Jack D. Leatherwood et al., "Summary of Recent NASA Studies of Human Response to Sonic Booms," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 111, no. 1 (January 2002): 586–98; M. Berci and L. Vigeveno, "Sonic Boom Propagation Revisited: A Nonlinear Geometrical Acoustic Model," *Aerospace Science and Technology*, 35th ERF: Progress in Rotorcraft Research, 23, no. 1 (December 2012): 280–95. For a popular press approach to the term, see, for example: Joel Beckerman, *The Sonic Boom: How Sound Transforms the Way We Think, Feel, and Buy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

⁵⁶⁸ Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁵⁶⁹ Eric W. Rothenbuhler and John Durham Peters, "Defining Phonography: An Experiment in Theory," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1997): 242–64; Timothy Dean Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda, eds., *Music, Sound, and Technology in America: A Documentary History of Early Phonograph, Cinema, and Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

sonic material mediated by the form of transmission.⁵⁷⁰ This is confirmed in a number of important articles, including Susan Douglas's text *Listening In*, Hilm's *Radio Voices*, and Simon Elmes' *Hello Again*.⁵⁷¹ Public creation is not limited to radio. Other examples include Michèle Martin's understanding of worker organization caused by the telephone, in which specific gendered assumptions distribute labor around newly emergent sound devices.⁵⁷² For these scholars, the apparatus is a key entry into the rhetorical power of sound and new way of considering publics consolidated around its address.

Sound studies in rhetorical theory, however, need not be device-driven, as the previous scholarship seems to foreground. Thomas Rickert's beautiful offering *Ambient Rhetoric* situates sound in relation to rhetorical understandings attentive not just to the accepted categories of speaker, situation, and direct persuasion, but to a more immersive and enveloping condition better suited to approach human-plant relations.⁵⁷³ In understanding rhetoric situated in an immediate surrounding, his study takes up different dimensional registers of attunement, amplification, and arrangement. From this vantage, persuasion assumes a sense of invitational adjustment. "Understanding rhetoric as ambient," following Rickert, "must diffuse outward to include the material environment,

⁵⁷⁰ John Mowitt, *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁵⁷¹ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio And The American Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Simon Elmes, *Hello Again: Nine Decades of Radio Voices* (London: Random House, 2012).

⁵⁷² Michèle Martin, *"Hello Central?": Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991).

⁵⁷³ Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

things (including technology), our own embodiment, and a complex understanding of ecological relationality as participating in rhetorical practices and their theorization.”⁵⁷⁴ Asking after questions of perception, openness, and availability, rhetoric can take on more subtle shades and nuances which can inform and inspire different orientations, criticisms, and connections based on textural sensations of permeation and porousness. It is also helpful to situate dialectic understandings of rhetoric in this relief, for ambient attunement is not, for Rickert, a “subjective achievement,” but a “fundamental entanglement, with the individuation of particular facets being an achieved disclosure.”⁵⁷⁵ Characterizing a genre of music, ambient rhetoric also gestures toward “fresh ways of listening” and “can transform how music can be disclosed to us.”⁵⁷⁶ In situating the practice in this way, “rhetoric is an emergent result of environmentally situated and interactive engagements, redolent of a world that affects us and persuades us prior to symbolicity.”⁵⁷⁷ Rickert’s gesture allows us to understand the practice and study of rhetoric and sound in “its fullest flowering.”⁵⁷⁸

One obvious and direct connection drawn from Rickert is to notice the place where nature and sound seem to directly meet: in albums archiving nature sounds. Berne Kraus’s 1968 *The Great Animal Orchestra* was an early “biophony” that attempted to

⁵⁷⁴ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 3.

⁵⁷⁵ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 8.

⁵⁷⁶ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 28.

⁵⁷⁷ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 34.

⁵⁷⁸ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 36.

create a catalogue of sounds from the natural world.⁵⁷⁹ In 1977, R. Murray Schafer's *The Soundscape Our Sonic Environment and the Turning of the World* began the use of the term "soundscapes" or what became known as acoustic ecology. For Schafer, sound becomes the mechanism of communication between the human and the environment.⁵⁸⁰ That is, people surround themselves with the sounds of nature so that they can understand its language more fully. Stefan Helmreich's "An Anthropologist Underwater," figures himself a submarine, understanding a process of research and life as a form of immersion in life and sound underwater.⁵⁸¹ In another example, Ericka Pilcher and other researchers asked participants to rate sounds in national parks on a scale of annoying to pleasing.⁵⁸² More recently, David George Haskell's *In the Song of Trees* attempts to reveal a network connection in forests, one that embodies an "ecological aesthetics," where the study of sound might reveal the overall complex structure of the forest.⁵⁸³

But David Michael's "Toward a Dark Nature Recording," offers a cautionary note in his overview of traditional soundscapes. Traveling in various fields from ecocriticism through environmental aesthetics, he asks us to be cautious of approaches that claim to

⁵⁷⁹ Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places*, (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2013).

⁵⁸⁰ Raymond Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape. Our Sonic Environment and the Turning of the World* (Rochester, VA: Destiny Books, 1993).

⁵⁸¹ Stefan Helmreich, "An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive Soundscapes, Submarine Cyborgs, and Transductive Ethnography," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (November 2007): 621–41.

⁵⁸² Ericka J. Pilcher, Peter Newman, and Robert E. Manning, "Understanding and Managing Experiential Aspects of Soundscapes at Muir Woods National Monument," *Environmental Management* 43, no. 3 (November 20, 2008): 425–35.

⁵⁸³ Ed Yong, "Trees Have Their Own Songs," *The Atlantic* April 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/04/trees-have-their-own-songs/521742/>. See also, David George Haskell, *Song of Trees* (New York: Viking, 2017).

bring the natural world directly to human ears.⁵⁸⁴ He writes, “nature sound recording has been panned as kitschy New Age, accused of pandering fantasy as ‘reality’ to a naïve public, and worse, maintaining and perpetuating a picturesque, Romantic view of nature as something over there, separate from us, to be quasi-religiously revered.”⁵⁸⁵ Micheal’s caution is not one of rejection, but reminder: to listen to soundscapes is not to get closer to real nature but instead to understand how humans mediate a natural relation through technical devices of reproduction. That is to say, we are already one step removed, listening to ourselves interpret nature more than hearing the raw sound itself.

To loop fully back to the beginning then, as Hilmes notes, no matter how much proponents try to articulate the specific contours of a unique field of sound studies, it may remain, “always emerging, never emerged...doomed to the position of the margins of various fields of scholarship.”⁵⁸⁶ Too often, Hilmes argues, sound studies are relegated solely to the realm of cultural studies, most often evoking—however misguided—a sense of music appreciation. Instead, she gestures toward the need to strengthen a critical sense, one that might involve a more careful attention to the dialectic process and drives that initiate examination of sound. She suggests that we might draw from philosophical methods, in particular Adorno, as a possible way of placing sound in its historical and mediated process and not in a world “seemingly transhistorical,” defined by an

⁵⁸⁴ David Michael, “Toward a Dark Nature Recording,” *Organized Sound* 16, no. 3 (2011): 206-10.

⁵⁸⁵ Michael, “Toward a Dark Nature Recording,” 206.

⁵⁸⁶ Michele Hilmes, “Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does it Matter?” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 249.

unreflected upon sense of taste.⁵⁸⁷ Thus sounds of nature do not escape the pressures of design and production anymore than any other genre nor do our listening habits. The compulsion and desire to hear nature is as deeply indebted to structure as the studies of Pythagoras, radio, sonic booms, and the latest pop jingle. Just because it is the sound of trees does not make it any less mediated—in fact, perhaps the easy slippage makes it more ideologically primed than any other genre.

The inquiry into sound studies, as this short review attempts to demonstrate, offers a new and exciting way of thinking about rhetoric. It opens up strong interdisciplinary connections and brings into the field objects and phenomenological experiences that require interpretation and critique. Nature sounds in particular are an important object of examination. Rickert offers an opening to understand rhetoric in attunement with the natural world. Harmonizing with his call, I would like to invite Adorno's voice into the live set. His work on sound is impressive and has much to offer in complimenting and contesting the discussion by stressing the rhythm of dialectical process. As such, Adorno can provide more instructive caution to avoid the pitfalls of unreflexive listening and help adjust our ears with ethical philosophical architecture, so that we hear the structural and ideological elements coming at us as well as the songs of trees. Connecting Adorno and the sound of nature, I argue, is a vital album in this collection.

⁵⁸⁷ Hilems, "Is there a Field?" 258.

IV. Adorno and Sound

Ludwig von Beethoven occupied Theodore W. Adorno's mind throughout the corpus of his philosophical writings. Adorno left a trove of texts—a “diary of experiences”—small scatterings of thoughts, throughout his journey in homage to the composer.⁵⁸⁸ In one ensemble, *Quasi una Fantasia*, Adorno draws on Beethoven to present a composite of his theory of music.⁵⁸⁹ Adorno's title prefers the formal name of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 in C# minor, rather than the figuring offered by Ludwig Rellstab; “the Moonlight Sonata” conjured for the poet an experience of floating at night in refracted effulgence among a lit up woodland on the waters of Switzerland's Lake Lucerne.⁵⁹⁰ The formal frame—translated as “Sonata in the Manner of a Fantasy”—was more in line with Adorno's understanding of the dialectic qualities of music, one that operated more closely to music's experience of fantasy seeped in structure. Adorno theorized the dialectic encounters present in music in the creation of the object—in its composition and production—but also in the minds of those who listen, who bring their own images of theme and expectations of sound movement that could be fulfilled or challenged by the arrangement of notes, tempo, and range across the work.

To continue one of the themes I have been tracking, Adorno was concerned with a similarity and difference in the interpretive process between language and music. When

⁵⁸⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann, and Edmund Jephcott, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵⁸⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998).

⁵⁹⁰ James Attlee, *Nocture: A Journey in Search of Moonlight* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 24.

sound studies is device-driven, it can minimize an account of Adorno's dialectic orientation, often positioning the listener as receiver and not active participant in creation. In its most generous interpretations, sound can also be given too much freedom, deterred from the hidden ideological commitments its production entails. Instead, refocusing on the dialectic relation attunes us to the structural and fantastic dimension comprising our experience. That is, "music has a resemblance to language in the sense that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human." But, he leveled the difference at interpretation. "Interpretation is essential to both music and language, but different in ways. To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music."⁵⁹¹ For Adorno, the production of music, its unique quality, happens at a number of moments: in the composer's rendering and in the mind of the listener as they hear the notes. The meaning communicated does not need to be directly transmitted; music allows for a host of reflections to constellate around an object. While Beethoven never *intended* the Piano Sonata No. 14 in C# minor to conjure a sense of floating in moonlight, something about the sound created such a strong association that this misreading lives on in the popular name. The fantasy of an European woodland seemed much stronger than any funeral march for those listeners intimately involved in the making of its music.

Fantasy, in this sense, is closer to the psychoanalytic concept of "phantasy" as a reality structure than it is the more commonplace understanding of the anxiety that plagues a sleepless night or the pleasant feeling of finding oneself caught daydreaming.

⁵⁹¹ Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia*, 1.

For Adorno, a fantasy names a site where the subject and object mix. For historian and scholar Peter Gay, Sigmund Freud's greatest contribution was the recognition of ongoing psychic process that escaped reason but nonetheless still operated reasonably: "a fantasy or delusion," Gay wrote, "is a reality to those who experience them."⁵⁹² In the therapeutic context, generally speaking, the subject is asked to put into words—render in the symbols of language—the ineffable operations of the unconscious. These reflections are taken as an opportunity to reflect upon the subject as an object. In attempting to describe a daydream or a night tremor, fantasy (again, more often phantasy in psychoanalytic registers), directs us to those ephemeral symbols.⁵⁹³ But, more than read the symbols themselves for content, it is the organization itself that matters to analysts in trying to discern the psychic life of the subject. In hearing how the subject describes what is indescribable—most often memories of fear, love, anger, denial—the more one could be attuned to the pressures organizing a person's experience. For Freud, a fantasy, that is, the image of a dream or the memory of a childhood experience for examples, had less to do with the real rendition of facts and instead gave insight into how the subject organized and communicated those ongoing influences.⁵⁹⁴ In general, fantasy operates on the level of symbolic organization, functioning as method of transposing sensory or phenomenological experience into communicative terms for the purpose of an audience.

⁵⁹² Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York: Oxford Paperbacks, 1986), 119.

⁵⁹³ On the difference between the two terms, see for example Susan Isaacs, "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 29 (1948): 73-93; Thomas H. Ogden, "Reading Susan Isaacs: Toward a Radically Revised Theory of Thinking," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 92, no. 4 (2011): 925-42.

⁵⁹⁴ Jean-Michel Quinodoz, *Sigmund Freud: An Introduction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 11.

Gay wrote “it was on the ground of fantasy that the house of psychoanalysis was built.”⁵⁹⁵ Fantasy gestures toward the concept of mediation, where the contours or structure of reality meet the wishes, desires, or interpretations of the inner workings of the mind.

The work of fantasy is not typically included in music theory, a rectification Adorno hoped to perform. Broadly, music theory follows a few distinct approaches. First, in “eclectic analytic writing,” endemic in Charles Rosen’s *Sonata Forms*, where the theorist looks at each piece individually, noticing how small tonal shifts might create ripping effects through the anticipation of musical forms. The second category, more characteristic of the work of Leonard G. Ratner’s *Classic Music* is “strictly historical-evidentiary empirical” in which a piece of music is placed in its historical context and understand it from the period’s perspective.⁵⁹⁶ Music theory has its own approach, endemic of Heinrich Shenker’s *Free Composition*, in which the design of sound is understood to give the piece a new and unique dimensional texture.⁵⁹⁷ And finally, in a fourth approach, music is assumed to take on features of a grammar, the sounds placed

⁵⁹⁵ Gay, *Freud for Historians*, 117.

⁵⁹⁶ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford English Dictionary, 2006), 3-5. See also Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: Norton, 1988); Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980).

⁵⁹⁷ Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 5. See also, Heinrich Schenker, *Free Composition*, trans. Ernst Oster (New York: Longman, 1979).

into theme types allowing the theorist to arrive at a taxonomy of juxtaposition within the piece of music.⁵⁹⁸

From these more traditional approaches to music, Adorno applied his own constellating method of immanent criticism. Following primary Adorno Scholar Max Paddison, music is itself caught in an interpretive dialectic—while one might try to come at the formal components that make a piece meaningful, something about the experience of listening also creates a *meaningful* experience that always escapes formal grasp.⁵⁹⁹ Much like the difference between internal and external criticism of speech, Paddison suggests Adorno draws attention to the relationship between the components of a piece and its place in a larger cultural milieu. Such criticism requires not just formal training in musicology but also a deep understanding of culture reception, and, if I might add a bridge term, rhetoric, to fully understand its interpretative elements.⁶⁰⁰ To understand music with Adorno is to understand its mediated quality: music internally communicates the structural relations of a given society and externally—as a commodity—communicates a structure of production, distribution and consumption regardless of an artistic claim to autonomy.⁶⁰¹ Again, drawing on the constellation or figuration theme I have presented, rhetorical understandings of music stress together social structures in

⁵⁹⁸ Hepokoski and Dracy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 6. See also William E. Caplin's *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydin, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁹⁹ Max Paddison, "The Language Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno," *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 16, no. 2 (1991): 267-279.

⁶⁰⁰ Paddison, "The Language-Character of Music," 267.

⁶⁰¹ Paddison, "The Language-Character of Music," 269-70.

construction, dissemination, and consumption much more than a singular meaning contained within the work, as traditional musicological theories might stress.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully appreciate Adorno's storehouse of theories about musical constitution, composition, and industry. For example, I am not reviewing any material on his writings about jazz, perhaps the most fraught.⁶⁰² Instead, I am following Tia DeNora, in appreciating the notion that, for Adorno, sound is "at the centre of his critique...and through the manner of its consumption, affected consciousness and was a means of social management and control."⁶⁰³ Indeed for Adorno, "music is not about, or caused by the social; it is part of whatever we take to be the social writ large. Music is a constructive ingredient of social life."⁶⁰⁴ It is both discourse and action.⁶⁰⁵ Caught between labor and leisure, music sutures and conditions life lived in everyday late-capitalism.⁶⁰⁶ Thus to understand the central role of sound, following Adorno, is to understand a form of criticism, attentive to the contours of the object, including its place in processes of production, and the role it plays in either anesthetizing or moving an audience to reflect on their role in ideological activation.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰² See, for example: Lee B. Brown, "Adorno's Critique of Popular Culture: The Case of Jazz Music," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26, no. 1 (1992): 17–31; Theodore A. Gracyk, "Adorno, Jazz, and the Aesthetics of Popular Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (1992): 526–42.

⁶⁰³ Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁰⁴ DeNora, *After Adorno*, 151.

⁶⁰⁵ DeNora, *After Adorno*, 154.

⁶⁰⁶ Marek Korczynski, "Music at Work: Towards a Historical Overview," *Folk Music Journal* 8, no. 3 (2003): 314–34.

⁶⁰⁷ Stephanus J. v. Z. Muller, "Music Criticism and Adorno / Glazbena Kritika I Adorno," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 (2005): 101–16.

Like the psychoanalytic register of fantasy, the criticism of a particular album should draw attention to all these elements of this experience.

Adorno's work is at its best when, or according to Adorno scholar Robert Miklitsch, it is used to "historicize aesthetic judgment."⁶⁰⁸ Following Miklitsch that means to place the art-object and the criticism in its material context: to examine the layers one by one in order to arrive at a sense of the whole. In order to demonstrate this principle, I now offer my own Adorno-inspired review: a close read of a vinyl album *Years*, to understand how his analysis could be applied to a very specific expression of natural sound: the life of trees in a digital relief.

V. *Years*, Up Close

Years does not present itself as a mimetic—a direct rendition—of the sound of trees; it is a fantastic rendering of their experience, more akin to an art-album than soundscape. In 2012, Bartholomäus Traubeck, a trained multimedia artists and visual communication academic, took cross sectional slices from eight different Austrian trees and constructed a piece of equipment that would read the tree as a musical composition.⁶⁰⁹ His contraption essentially mimicked the operation of a vinyl record player; a digital needle translated groove depth, color, and texture of each tree into a mathematical sign-system of pre-coded piano chords.

⁶⁰⁸ Robert Miklitsch, *Roll Over Adorno: Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Audiovisual Media*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 46.

⁶⁰⁹ Benjamin van Loon, "Where Art & Technology Meet: An Interview with Bartholomäus Traubeck, Multimedia Artist," *Anobium* (blog) February 8, 2012, accessed March 1, 2015, <https://anobiumlit.com/2012/02/08/where-art-technology-meet-an-interview-with-bartholomaeus-traubeck-multimedia-artist/>.

The album cover is a marbled abstraction of grey scales, a small box cut out in the center reads in small capitalized letters the title YEARS, a contrast in design and experience with its surrounding frame, enveloping the eye as if looking up at the top of a pyramid from inside. It reminds me of an experience looking toward the sky from within a Redwood grove in a Northern California forest. Redwood trees sprout from the base of their fallen ancestors, forming perfect circles in what will become empty core (known as a fairy ring).⁶¹⁰ When a viewer stands in the direct center and looks up, a small opening reveals itself at the top of the ring. Posed in the radius in this way—with eyes directed by the encircling trunks toward the sky—at the right time of day a true clearing is revealed: the small aperture allows a radiant light to cascade around the viewer as it travels from star to floor. It's a gesture of ambient perception—beautiful in experience—warming in energetic embrace.

Years offers a different way of understanding the enveloping sound of European woodlands. The contents include simply the vinyl record, shrouded in a non-descript black sleeve. As on the back cover, each song is named for its tree of origin:

A Side:

Picea (Spruce)

Fraxinus (Ash)

Quercus (Oak)

Acer (Maple)

B Side:

Alnus (Alder)

Juglans (Walnut)

Fagus (Beech)

Fagus II (Another Beech)

⁶¹⁰ “About Coastal Redwoods,” *California Department of Parks and Recreation*, accessed January 3, 2018, https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=22257.

The back of the package acknowledges its production, reminding us that: “This record features eight compositions made from Austrian trees. They were generated and recorded on the artpiece ‘Years. Vienna January – August 2010.’ Music, Art, and Production is credited to Traubeck; Mixing and mastering with Ivo Fancz. At first glance, the object is an opportunity to meditate on the contours of European forests.

THE RETURN OF TREES: OR THE PERSISTENCE OF NATURAL HISTORY

Peter Thomas, perhaps one of the most well known translators of comprehensive knowledge of tree life to everyday audiences, notes that in our minds, trees are easily the most identifiable creatures, but often are much more varied than we give them credit for.⁶¹¹ It certainly explains why they continually show up in my journey through human and plant relations. Their life span exists in a scale far beyond human perception. Some current living trees, especially in California’s Redwood and Sequoia grooves, are some of the oldest on the planet; one organism outliving every member of the human race with a lifespan beyond embodied comprehension.⁶¹² Trees themselves claim a lineage almost 400 million years old, casting shadows on the planet as the first expressions of life.⁶¹³ According to tree geneticists Timothy L. White, W. Thomas Adams and David B. Neale, trees cover 3.4 billion hectares of the Earth (30 percent of the surface).⁶¹⁴ Humans have

⁶¹¹ Peter Thomas, *Trees: Their Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

⁶¹² Lary M. Dilsaver, "The Evolution of Land use in Giant Forest, Sequoia National Park." *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 49, no. 1 (1987): 35-50.

⁶¹³ Thomas, *Trees*, 3.

⁶¹⁴ Timothy L. White, W. Thomas Adams, and David B. Neale, *Forest Genetics* (Cambridge, MA: CABI, 2007), 25.

integrated their lives fully with sylvan beings, using their bodies for fuel, food, and building materials. More broadly, forests are scenes for play and conflict—indeed all elements—of human civilization.⁶¹⁵ Essential to all life on Earth, trees tower over consciousness, stretching our senses of time, community, and imaginations.

In Europe, according to Thomas and John R. Packham, over 44 percent of the landmass is covered by various densities of trees known as woodlands and forests.⁶¹⁶ While often used interchangeably, the difference between woodlands and forest have to do with light penetration; in the former, a substantial amount of sunlight hits the floor due to open canopy and loose arrangement of trees while in the later the dense canopy impedes light access to less than 20 percent.⁶¹⁷ European forests are distinct from their tropical counterparts due to seasonal differences resulting from latitudinal changes. Known as temperate broadleaf forests or mixed deciduous forests, one continuous forest belt across the Earth's surface develops where similar varietals of spruce, pine, beech, and oak can be seen across continents.⁶¹⁸

The body of the tree, so characteristic in our imagination, can be read as a part of its equipment-for-living, to borrow a phrase from Kenneth Burke.⁶¹⁹ “As a strategy which outgrows other plants in competition for light,” Thomas and Packham note trees developed, “a large perennial woody skeleton,” which aids in height and also seed

⁶¹⁵ Thomas, *Trees*, 6.

⁶¹⁶ Peter Thomas and John R. Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands and Forests: Description, Dynamics and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

⁶¹⁷ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands* 3-4.

⁶¹⁸ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 29.

⁶¹⁹ Abram Anders, "Pragmatism by Incongruity: 'Equipment for Living' from Kenneth Burke to Gilles Deleuze.," *KB Journal* 7, no. 2 (2011): <http://kbjournal.org/anders>.

dispersal.⁶²⁰ Trees are distinctive in both outer and inner bark; the former creating insulation from water damage and predator attack, the latter functioning as the cellular transportation system moving the life material from soil to leaf.⁶²¹ With each year that passes, a new layer of wood is added underneath the bark to maintain respiratory maintenance, expanding the skeleton and pushing the tree upward to new heights. Because of their stature and influencing effect, woodland trees create smaller ecological communities—microclimates of unique temperature and humidity—around them, hosting fungi, bacteria, flora, and fauna.⁶²² As a tree dies, it also provides fodder for new life, known as the detritus subsystem, where decomposition organisms breakdown the structure of the tree and in so doing, gain a life of their own.⁶²³

When and how leaves present themselves is also an integral aspect of a tree's life and death. "Leaves are the main powerhouse of the tree," notes Thomas, as they use the energy intake from the sun to transform carbon dioxide received from the air and water and other nutrients from the soil in a process called photosynthesis; they output oxygen and sugar in the process.⁶²⁴ The more leaves a tree produces, (and how often they fall) is determined by access to sunlight and carbon dioxide level. Evolutionary processes reflect this in the body and make up of individual species. An evergreen tree may keep its short needles for 12 years while a beech may have a higher annual rate of leaf production; both

⁶²⁰ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 8.

⁶²¹ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 9.

⁶²² Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 16-20.

⁶²³ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 23.

⁶²⁴ Thomas, *Trees*, 9.

a result of access to the raw materials.⁶²⁵ Pines, beech, and oak represent the “most economically and silviculturally [a branch of forestry aimed at understanding and maintaining the health of forest ecologies] important species’ in seasonal forests; while there are 800 species of oak there are less than 20 beech, both part of the *fagaceae* family.⁶²⁶ In particular, beech tree base and stem provide strong habit environments for lichen diversity.⁶²⁷ European forests are critical ecosystems, all trees essential keystone species for the countless flora and fauna that also grow through and around them.⁶²⁸

Given the fragile networked relationship among the woodland ecosystem, a number of threats are currently putting pressure on the lifecycle of European forests. According to current research, old-growth forests are experiencing severe strain as a result of increased human development in Europe, particularly over the last hundred years, even as a paralleled increase in new types of woodlands growth is noticed as industrial practices and former agricultural land have been abandoned since World War II.⁶²⁹ Commonly populated by beech and oak varieties, mixed with woodlands pastures, grazing land for livestock and the need for energy puts pressure on European forest growth. Massive deforestation took place both as a result of and in the years following

⁶²⁵ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 127-133.

⁶²⁶ Thomas and Packham, *Ecology of Woodlands*, 131.

⁶²⁷ Jeňýk Hofmeister, “Large Beech (*Fagus Sylvatica*) Trees as ‘Lifeboats’ for Lichen Diversity in Central European Forests,” *Biodiversity & Conservation* 25, no. 6 (2016): 1073–90.

⁶²⁸ Eckehard G. Brockerhoff, Luc Barbaro, Bastien Castagneyrol, and David I. Forrester, “Forest Biodiversity, Ecosystem Functioning and the Provision of Ecosystem Services,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 26, no. 13 (2017): 3005–35.

⁶²⁹ Anna Varga, Péter Ódor, Zolt Molnár, János Bölöni, “The History and Natural Regeneration of a Secondary Oak-beech Woodlands on a Former Wood-pasture in Hungary,” *Acta Soiceitas Bontanicorum Plonaie* 84, no. 2 (2015): 215-225.

the war. Wars, then, following contemporary interpretation of satellite aerial mapping data across decades, demonstrate a continued and ongoing detrimental effect on forest density and ecosystem health overall.⁶³⁰

Perhaps the most significant variable in the contemporary life (and death) of trees is the undisputable effect of human fossil fuel use and its alteration of the Earth. Peter H. Freer, Mark S.J. Broadmeadow and Jim M. Lynch, in their assemblage of contemporary research, put it bluntly:

There is no bigger challenge in the world today than how we respond to the scientific evidence that our climate is warming—for which the human race is responsible, climate change is not just an environmental issue, it is an economic issue a social issue, a security issue and above all, a moral issue... We will not meet this challenge without reducing emissions from deforestation. The future of the world's forests is central to the well being of the human race and to the well being of the planet. As we all appreciate forests as the worlds' 'lungs' and one of our best hopes for heading off dangerous climate change⁶³¹

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review all of the data contributing to the consensus—and the material incentives for some to disregard—on human induced climate change. Since the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1995, a global scientific call exists that confirms human carbon emissions are creating planetary effects that will irreversibly alter the environment.⁶³² European wood varieties are under

⁶³⁰ Daniel Nita Mihai, Catalina Munteanu, Garik Gutman, Ioan Vale Abrudan, and Voler C. Radeloff, "Widespread Forest Cutting in the Aftermath of World War II Captured by Broad-Scale Historical Corona Spy Satellite Photography," *Remote Sensing of Environment* 204, no. Supplement C (2018): 322–32.

⁶³¹ Peter H. Freer, Mark S.J. Broadmeadow, and Jim M. Lynch, *Forestry and Climate Change* (Cambridge, MA: CABI, 2007), xiii-xiv.

⁶³² Freer, Broadmeadow, and Lynch, *Forestry and Climate Change*, 10.

particular assault from the affects of climate change.⁶³³ Given the intimate relationship between forests and season, climate change's effect on temperatures and growth seasons, precipitation and humidity levels, and various changes to migration patterns each pose a direct threat to the forests.⁶³⁴ These patterns will also begin to integrate and create cascading effects, especially in spruce and beech trees where increases of nitrogen, ozone flux, and enhanced drought will continue to magnify the initial ecological effects of seasonal transformation.⁶³⁵

Years is a kind of specimen container—a sonic natural history—one that might be more akin to a glass case in a museum, rendering in sound a vanishing that can not be depicted visually. It is a deep mediation on time provoked by the trees themselves. Julia Norblad summates this as a problem with trying to understand the grammar of forests and how to interpret our place within it.⁶³⁶ “Since trees grow slowly, when dealing with forests, politicians and administrators are faced with a particular set of problems. The forest has its own unrushed temporality and politicians have grappled with the challenge

⁶³³ Elena Y. Novenko, Andrey N. Tsyganov, Olga V. Rudenko, Elana V. Volkovana, et. al., “Mid- and Late-Holocene Vegetation History, Climate and Human Impact in the Forest-Steppe Ecotone of European Russia: New Data and a Regional Synthesis,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 25, no. 12 (2016): 2453–72.

⁶³⁴ See, for example, Rui P. Rivaes, Patircia M. Rodriguez-Gonzalez, Maria Teresa Ferreira, and Anonio N. Pinheiro, “Modeling the Evolution of Riparian Woodlands Facing Climate Change in Three European Rivers with Contrasting Flow Regimes,” *PLoS One; San Francisco* 9, no. 10 (2014): e110200.

⁶³⁵ Sabine Braun, Christian Schindler, and Beat Rihm, “Growth Trends of Beech and Norway Spruce in Switzerland: The Role of Nitrogen Deposition, Ozone, Mineral Nutrition and Climate,” *Science of The Total Environment* 599–600, no. Supplement C (2017): 637–46.

⁶³⁶ Julia Nordblad, “Time for Politics: How a Conceptual History of Forests Can Help Us Politicize the Long Term,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 20, no. 1 (2017): 164–82.

of turning the organism and material long termism into political time.”⁶³⁷ In Germany, explains Norblad, eighteenth century management politics centered around the number 84. Trees were assumed best to be harvested 84 years; grids of forests were divided into 84 squares and managed accordingly.⁶³⁸ As such, Norblad argues, the forest and the way it is conceptualized relates centrally to Enlightenment values about time, precision and management. To speak of the forest, then, is to place short term immediate needs, within a sense of the fragile nature of the ecosystem, but also with a knowledge that forests vastly surpass human life span and thus, cannot be comprehended as such. While, “sylvan time has always been imagined as fragile and always on the brink of scarcity, a calculable and discrete realization of improvement and value growth, or as describing a decline from paradise lost caused by the unenlightened. These histories can serve the purpose of extending our political imagination in the continual deliberation and legitimation of the political long term”⁶³⁹

At first glance, *Years* (with its rendering of Spruce, Ash, Oak, Maple, Alder, Walnut, and Beech) offers an opportunity to encounter in sound what is difficult to render in words: that the life of a tree, “sylvan time,” and the deep ecological networks it connects, cannot withstand the massive industrialization caused by late-capitalism, exceeding any of the Enlightenment promise of management. Human’s perceptual impoverishment of time, and a deep desire to consume, will have long-term consequences that are indeed unimaginable.

⁶³⁷ Norblad, “Time for Politics,” 165.

⁶³⁸ Norblad, “Time for Politics,” 171.

⁶³⁹ Norblad, “Time for Politics,” 177.

But, it is important to not let our reflection on *Years* rest on the auscillating strain of the world's lungs as it attempts to breath through the smoke of human consumption. To return to the track list, I'd like to offer a reflection on other kinds of rhythms.

ETERNAL RETURN OF THE OBJECT

I'd like to draw attention to three different kinds of rhythms on *Years*.

Picea (Spruce)
Fraxinus (Ash)
Quercus (Oak)
Acer (Maple)
B Side:
Alnus (Alder)
Juglans (Walnut)
Fagus (Beech)
Fagus II (Another Beech)

The first is the obvious repletion of the Beech tree. In this sense, no two trees, even of the same genus are exactly alike. So while the criticism of natural history I offered in chapter three approaches the unique life of the subject 'tree,' the object *Years* reminds us that each tree also has its own, singular, subjective life span. This is what Adorno referenced by A is not A: even in the same field of identification no two individual utterances or compositions are ever exactly alike. Individual knots for example sound like "hitting a fist on the piano," and will produce an entirely distinct sound.⁶⁴⁰ Thus, to listen to *Years* is also to bring us closer in intimacy to the unique particularity that one tree presents. The sound of one tree will be unlike any other. To listen to *Years* is to see both forest and tree.

⁶⁴⁰ Bruce Gellerman, "Interview with Bartholomous Traubeck," *Living Earth* (blog), February 3, 2012, <http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=12-P13-00005&segmentID=7>.

The second rhythm though is subtler, and exists in the activation of each journey of play. Even though it is the same recording, it is never possible to listen to the same sound recording twice. Even when played over and over, the sound itself will emerge differently, notes resonating with different memories and experiences. That is what Traubeck considered one of his innovative contributions: the newness of repetition. He commented in an interview with Bruce Gellerman, “It’s sort of a poetic translation into music. Every time you put the record on, even though it’s the same slab of tree, it will be slightly different, because I would have to start at the exact millimeter point of the record every time, which I can’t. If I would have to say what part of the music is coming from me and my decisions and what part is coming from the tree, then I would have to say, I guess 50/50.”⁶⁴¹ For Traubeck, his work creates a harmonized relationship between the voice of the tree and the ear of the human, triangulated by the judgment of the machine. It draws attention to the practice of listening, where every subtle detail of the sonic experience is, like the life of a tree, unique.

Given that, it is important to place my listening experience in its unique context, there is a third rhythm I’d like to call into being. I experience listening, perhaps, more acutely than those who witnessed the art-piece exhibited on display at the Louisiana Art and Science exhibit “Lovely as a Tree,” or on the popular user-driven website *Soundcloud*.⁶⁴² My object mimics the design more closely than Traubeck may have

⁶⁴¹ Bruce Gellerman, “Interview with Bartholomäus Traubeck,” *Living Earth*, February 3, 2012, <http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=12-P13-00005&segmentID=7>.

⁶⁴² “As Lovely as A Tree,” *Louisiana Art and Science Museum*, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.lasm.org/exhibitions/art-exhibitions/as-lovely-as-a-tree-john-grades-middle-fork>.

intended: I own the commodity on vinyl, one of 500 copies produced. Vinyl produces its own unique sound, less clear than digital, structured by its own unique grooves. It references a personal history of listening, where a scratch marks a specific moment in time. Just as the life of the tree will display variations in the environment, so too the life of an individual record will mark personal interaction much more than the infinite mass-production of sound in the digital environment. The scratch—like a drought in the life of a tree—is a unique mark in the life of an album. It gives life to the object itself.

There are obscure sets of enjoyment practices revealed in the object that is my copy of *Years*. A young millennial friend of mine stopped by my apartment and I was proud to show him my record collection, especially *Years*. As with most album collections, most are also geared toward the appreciation of others. He looked unimpressed noting that vinyl looked “bulky” and felt “old.” I’ll leave the psychoanalysis open here, but his insight is instructive in a way he had not intended. Let me disambiguate.

First, there is a moment in which I want to champion the object of the record in a way that Adorno typically would not. Unlike a performance from a symphony, Adorno’s major concern with the phonograph (and by extension the album) is that it reflects a nostalgia that collapses the live-ness of the performance into a composed and easily repeated sound format.⁶⁴³ It steals its essence and represents it. In other words, it is already an abstraction—an alienation—consolidating experience in commodity form

⁶⁴³ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Form of the Phonograph Record,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (1990): 58.

trafficked thought market forces that render it in structural terms. Surely my experience supports his position in total.

There is a small slippage in Adorno's thought, however, that I'd like to point out and ruminate on. This record, like all records, actually provides a small moment of bodily resistance that is evaporating in the digital takeover of the lifeworld: you have to get up and flip it over. In this short moment a listener is reminded that they do not in fact get what they want endlessly; the scene of pleasure they have concocted with abstract sound is in fact not ubiquitous but limited. The revelation is instructive of all forms of desire in the smallness of scale but grandeur of explanation. Soundscapes are limited, made by subjects/objects in the world, and when they end, will demand to be played again. But the slight pause, the moment of silence in which the sound of the composition is replaced by the mechanical movement of needle to rest, offers a moment of serene tragic shock: the end of listening pleasure and the return of the pain of silence.

Finally, there is something specific about this vinyl: it looks uncannily like the object it purports to represent: a sliced tree. Of course, this substance is really an oil-based plastic (with all of the accompanying history laden into the material itself). Split into two sides, my slick vinyl is much closer to that of Traubeck's plane of the trees than any other performance. It exists for me—cut and sliced open—ready to be played. In this way, there is a sadistic tonality to the whole enterprise, one that pries open the world and makes the enjoyment available for private consumption in the form of listening.

Perversely in tune with Adorno, my specific copy of *Years* is a commodity in the truest sense and reflects the problems that currently threatening European woodlands. In

owning this bulky copy, I too have made a small contribution to the gasses suffocating the thing I am witnessing. And yet, dialectically, it also brings me closer to that suffocation than any repetition could. Rather than the endless display of commodity-fetishism that the digital music environment structurally creates, *this* vinyl copy of *Years* just like *the* specific beech is not like any other: it holds in itself the very song of life. I cannot keep either dimension at bay, but am called—indeed required—to reflect upon the condition as I get up to flip the record. The journey from couch to player can sometimes be its own Odyssey.

VI. Grammar

I began this case study with a figuration of a journey Adorno invites us to consider when appreciating sound. Rachel Ahern Knudsen notes the *Odyssey* is different from other ancient texts because the exchanges are interpersonal: the context is not occasional speeches that follow a traditional path. Instead, they are poetic utterances of casual exchange told in an atmosphere of intimacy by a third, unseen narrator.⁶⁴⁴ For classics scholar Deborah Beck, this type of song is what makes Homer unique in the rhetorical tradition.⁶⁴⁵ What Beck calls “free indirect speech,” is a specific structure in Homer representing a blended quality, where two different voices—two different formal

⁶⁴⁴ Rachel Ahern Knudsen, *Homeric Speech and the Origins of Rhetoric* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 6.

⁶⁴⁵ Deborah Beck, “The Presentation of Song in Homer’s *Odyssey*,” in *Orality, Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World*, ed. Elizabeth Minchin (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 25–53.

representations of agency—harmonize together to disseminate a curated meaning.⁶⁴⁶

Why do either of these two matter? These old canonic systems of representing rhetorical persuasion and compositional agency demonstrates two curious principles in an archetypal journey: first, that the speech of song intentionally reflects a different grammatical structure with blended rules and uncomfortable narrative positioning and it requires a judgmental stress on a specific type of playful consciousness. Often, this can make it difficult for contemporary rhetoricians, ensconced in a categorical mode of assessment, to pin it down and thus debate meaning. Stuart Hall argued that understanding song in this formal or grammatical way approached music “a ‘language’ with complex relations between different sounds and chords.”⁶⁴⁷ But like the songs of Homer, it became difficult to pin down the exact, precise, universal meaning beyond its form, because its was in a sense referencing a host of individual choices unknown to the observable world. For Adorno, the whole essence of a piece of music could be boiled down to the first note.⁶⁴⁸

Like Traubeck’s influences, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot and John Cage, whose designs reflect an interest in compositions created by the rule-structures unknown to a casual listener, *Years* is an intervention at the level of rendered livable grammar. What

⁶⁴⁶ Where the narrator, “a reporting voice” triangulates subject and object in the example, “Joe said he was not feeling well” as opposed to direct speech (Joe said, “I am not feeling well.” See: Beck, “Presentation,” 22-3.

⁶⁴⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (New York: Sage, 1997).

⁶⁴⁸ Adorno writes, “The similarity to language extends from the whole, the organized coherence of meaningful sounds, down to the single sound, the tone as the threshold of mere existence, the pure medium of expression.” See: Theodor W. Adorno, “Music, Language, and Composition,” trans. Susan Gillespie, *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (1993): 401.

this really means remains to be said. But decisively what Traubeck did not intend, is for it to be an *actual replica of tree communication*. To Traubeck's credit he is constantly insistent in most interviews that his project is not an ecological capture. He reminds interviewers again and again not to conflate his sound machine with true mimetic reproductive capacity. Instead, he told the *Huffington Post*, that he created "an input that sends a soundwave directly to a cutting machine which is using the sound as instruction for movement... My machine is rather a contraption for generatively producing music that is interpreted by the data in the year rings than an actual sonic representation of the data."⁶⁴⁹ In another, he uses the frame of coder: "I set a rule set for the compositions by programming and building this machine which has some kind of internal rules of how it works so it can't just produce any sound but then again the composition is actually then being made by the tree's data, which is not really random."⁶⁵⁰ In an interview with Benjamin van Loon, he is explicit about his intentions:

Finding an aesthetic form (visually and aurally) for it was rather hard because I wanted to avoid any implications supporting tendencies like emotional kitsch or esotericism, which wood is prone to do when presented in a certain way – especially when the combination of wood and music (which is emotional) already supported this notion. So I tried to build something very reduced and formalistic around it. I painted it completely in black to draw the focus to the matter itself: the wood and its structure.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁹ Bartholomäus Traubeck, "Interview with the Huffington Post," *Huffington Post* (blog), February 3, 2012, accessed February 8, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/01/huffpost-arts-interviews-_n_1247581.html.

⁶⁵⁰ Joe Patitucci, "Interview with Bartholomäus Traubeck," *Data Garden* (blog), February 14, 2012, accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.datagarden.org/blog/bartholomaus-traubeck-on-years>.

⁶⁵¹ van Loon, "Where Art & Technology Meet," accessed February 8, 2017, obiumlit.com/2012/02/08/where-art-technology-meet-an-interview-with-bartholomaus-traubeck-multimedia-artist/.

Traubeck settles with a precise grammatical answer in an interview with Stewart Russel, “*Years* lets us hear music based on patterns that form through an ageing process in different environments.”⁶⁵²

Three important revelations emerge for me from these interviews. First, why do all interviewers ask the same question? Many are questions that are too often asked not only of artistic process, but especially when they interact with plant material. Are they really speaking? How do we know? How can you prove it? Easily lends way to: why do we care? What did you do? What am I supposed to learn? In this instance, the constant asking after the mimetic correspondence, the one-to-one exact, direct, authoritative stake is an awful way of exerting a specific form of dominating rhetorical address. This call of the Enlightenment—an Althusserian hail—is contained in the utmost important question for some analysts is his compositional role as the auteur. That is to say, so many interviewers yearn to know if Traubeck thinks he invented sylvan voice, as if to confirm a human role in all of this. Despite his protests, it speaks to deep human fantasy resonating: that we are fully in control.

Second, it’s interesting to hear Traubeck’s grammatical agency slip in and out of a recognition of a more passive residence in his mimetic reality: *his machine lets us hear*. I say slippage, because it is true that the machine is the amplifying mechanism for a relationship with natural sound, just as Traubeck intended. However, in his positioning of the apparatus as a neutral bridge, he refuses it the object status it actually deserves and

⁶⁵² Stuart Russel, “Interview,” *KaleidoScot* (blog), September 3, 2015, accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.kaleidoscot.com/making-music-nature-bartholomaeus-traubeck-4469>.

also slightly conceals his subjective control. He is, after all, the primary programmer, inventor of a grammar of exchange between the world of artificial and natural. It is the ultimate Enlightenment trick: to mask the human programming in the passivity of the machine as it captures vibrant life for pleasurable consumption.

But there is a final grammatical trick in Traubeck's reflection on composition. In his continued insistence on understanding the growth rates of trees, he neglects often to comment on the actual reality that is presented in *Years*: it is like a great Homeric epic song, the tale of life in assumed death. We are not listening to climate change, as science is want (and right!) to do with tree ring archival study. This is much more personal, a song sung of battles fought when we already know the tragic end. In this sense, the actual sound is decidedly not to growth rates, as Traubeck would have us believe. We are listening, grammatically, to a life in reverse, a diary of lived experience of one single vibrant being in a forest of other vibrant beings in a world of breathing death. That we cannot decipher the particular struggles is irrelevant and best left for the audience to impose and ponder, muse, and fantasize about.

Yet, it is death, I offer to Adorno, that is the first note initiated in the album *Years*. We begin not *in medias res*, as with the *Odyssey*, or with birth, as traditional biographies are want to do. Rather, in *Years*, because of the specific nature of tree design, we hear their last breath, *first*. In this case, we are confronted with the death of a certain subject, this tree, and follow its life in reverse. Unlocking this fantasy is to also remind ourselves of our own impending demise (philosophical and personal): death is the great natural equalizer; no matter how much luxury we choose to surround ourselves with. Its ghost

casting a shadow on our life lived in the present. Unfortunately, the story of the present is one that is not so poetic. In the next section, I examine the operating structure, the medium, influencing *Year's* design and my reception of it.

VII. Structure

After returning to Los Angeles after a stint in San Francisco, I felt isolated and alone. Living in a street level studio apartment with no furniture and no air conditioning during the hottest weekend on record, I had only one outlet: a small radio which would blast KCRW, NPR programming, and selected sounds from notable jockeys with impeccable taste operating out of a radio station in Santa Monica. At the risk of over sharing, I recall the exact moment when I resurrected myself from death in a depressed blanket of heat overwhelming Los Angeles. I heard a new song on the radio, turned it up, and began to dance totally naked in my living room. I was able to reimagine myself in that space at that time, sharing sweat, tears, longing, and laughter—the human condition—with other imagined audiences tuning in at that exact moment. I felt like I belonged to a place and time.

Adorno biographer David Jenneman points to a concern entertained by Adorno regarding the dissemination of sound over mass channels, in particular radio, and this sense of “freedom” —or whatever it might be called—that overcame me and stuck with me at just the time. Jenneman notes that Adorno cautioned against the acceptance of radio’s ability to transform the perceptual experience of our world. Radio, not just each song, but the medium (and thereby the structure it represents) preys on these moments of

rhythmic enjoyment to create communities of connection *through* standardization. It is with the interests of the structure (that is purchase and profit) that radio is designed: the constant contact, perpetual time use, and sound manipulation cultivates in the mind of the listener an orientation toward submissive consumption.⁶⁵³ The freedom of the radio is false, for each note is not an invitation to liberate but concocts a compulsion toward repetition, toward easy sound for easy listening. In mere appreciation, morning programing, work sounds, and leisure beats structure the world for us. And yet, all the while, the structure of profit marches on.⁶⁵⁴

Scholar Keith Chapin reminds us though, that in order to understand the dimensions of the structure we find ourselves in, “a critic needs to read the aesthetic and technical components of a piece in conjunction, for...the artistic idea ...is constituted in the life of its components, in the way they form new constellations.”⁶⁵⁵ That is, we must be attentive to the medium of production to understand how it participates in this social experience. In *Years*, Traubeck combines aesthetic and technical components of dendromusicology with new digitalizing instruments of visibility.⁶⁵⁶ To read *Years* in this fashion is to understand each tree captured and integrated not by radio, but by newly

⁶⁵³ David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 72.

⁶⁵⁴ Jenemann, *Adorno in America*, 76.

⁶⁵⁵ Keith Chapin, “Labor and Metaphysics in Hindemith’s and Adorno’s Statements on Counterpoint,” in *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Bethold Hoeckner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19.

⁶⁵⁶ Henri D. Grissino-Mayer, Georgina G. DeWeese, and Dustin A. Williams, “Tree-Ring Dating of the Karr-Koussevitzky Double Bass: A Case Study in Dendromusicology,” *Tree-Ring Research* 61, no. 2 (2005): 77-86.

emergent audio-visual apparati.⁶⁵⁷ Central to his design is a video game camera.

According to Jennifer Sodni's review (which is the only one I found who mentioned it), "the custom record player takes-in data using a PlayStation Eye Camera and a stepper motor attached to its control arm, and relays the data to a computer. A program called Ableton Live then uses it to generate an eerie piano track."⁶⁵⁸ "The difference," Traubeck notes, "is that basically it's just a camera and this camera is a modified camera, a very fast one, and the camera has just moved in and it waits until there is a tree ring passing the camera's field of view and then it is translated into a sound."⁶⁵⁹ It is impossible to appreciate *Years* without spending some time discussing this apparatus.

I want to read this dialectically. In one sense like Donna Haraway suggests about National Geographic's "critter cam" there is nothing intrinsically suspect about the yearning for this form of interspecies connection through new technology.⁶⁶⁰ In fact visualizing equipment encourages us to receive a relationship with plant life we had not been able to understand without it. Most documentaries from BBC's *Planet Earth* to the *Wild Kingdom* require this kind of technology. Perfected first in the *Secret Life of Plants*, the visualization is without a doubt stunning. Its clarity captures scenes human presence

⁶⁵⁷ Traubeck, "Interview with Huffington Post," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/01/huffpost-arts-interviews-_n_1247581.html.

⁶⁵⁸ Jennifer Sodni "'The YEARS Project by Bartholomaeus Traubeck Explores How Tree Trunks Sound,'" November 4, 2016, *Phenomenalisms* (blog), accessed February 8, 2017, <http://phenomenalisms.com/the-years-project-by-bartholomaeus-traubeck-explores-how-tree-trunks-sound/>.

⁶⁵⁹ Gellerman, "Interview," <http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=12-P13-00005&segmentID=7>.

⁶⁶⁰ Donna Haraway, "Cittercam: Compounding Eyes in Naturecultures," in *When Species Meet*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 249-63.

would forbid. And in the rendition, it allows us to understand something essential about plants: we see them move. It's a witnessing that can establish a certain recognition: in noticing their growth, we understand them as life. This process would not be possible without the opportunity to visualize them. What Traubeck has done, is transform the visualization process into an auditory experience. As sound studies gestures toward, we can, in fact, begin to establish an entirely new experience based on the sense of speech and not the sense of sight. Fully integrated into the community, trees can take up a place at the table with their human counterparts, speaking to us as we might each other.

But, there is also a hidden cost associated with the digitalization of tree song in *Years*. Plant figures have always struggled with the human demand to move, as I mentioned in chapter one. In that the more they move, the more they germinate, the more they produce, and the closer they come to the commodity form of agricultural. That is, the more we see their utility, the more we will cultivate and manage their existence. So, even as the possibility exists to sit in community with plants, more often, the apparatus brings them more fully under human domination. In this way, Traubeck's digitization has not changed expectations or wants, internal conflicts and antagonist realities: it has simply accelerated them. It should come as no surprise that the same technology capturing forest sounds in *Years*, is also explicitly used in drones, euphemized as Unmanned Ariel Vehicles, in a new type of accelerated warfare.⁶⁶¹ Thus, the medium is the message: a

⁶⁶¹ Derek Gregory, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7-8 (2011): 188-215; Mark Coeckelbergh, "Drones, Information Technology, and Distance: Mapping the Moral Epistemology of Remote Fighting," *Ethics and Information Technology* 15, no. 2 (2013): 87-98; Andrei-Alexandru Stoica, "The Gamer Generation - Future Drone Pilots," *Challenges of the Knowledge Society* 7, (2017): 575-579; Jessica A. Feil,

heightened sense of close connection is part and parcel with a digital experience of war, finalizing and perfecting an expression of formal Enlightenment control and domination over bodily senses, as well as natural and human world.

Traubeck, of course, does not make this explicit. He does suggest he chose the piano to render tree songs given its sense of “familiarity,” but neglected to make the same association with the technological equipment he used.⁶⁶² He chose the PlayStation, as did the military (and as we do popular songs flipping through the radio), because of a sense of familiarity and because that level of visual perception makes the world uncannily real and similar for us, in our grasp and under our control. We should be extremely skeptical of this particular human compulsion—the need to make the world exceedingly familiar, rational and predictable. Digitalization preys upon this well curated trained incapacity: one in which the world is completely, always, and permanently available to us, yet constantly fleeting, chaotic, and out of grasp, threatening us with force or withdrawal. Not unlike the experience of social media, in which the sense of being watched is constant and the motor of the industry itself, so too the demand for immediate digital availability enhances an ongoing sense of alienation in the world. Accompanied by a total smoothening of surfaces, digital life may make experiences easier to share and archive, but with less nuance and fewer errors, the effect is one of a more permanent erasure of the tones of relationality that make life livable.

"Cyberwar and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles: Using New Technologies, from Espionage to Action," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 45, no. 1-2 (2012): 513.

⁶⁶² Gellerman, "Interview," <http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=12-P13-00005&segmentID=7>.

Since there are no scratches in digitalization, I am troubled by Traubeck's ominous recalcitrance to digital takeover in an offhanded utterance to an interviewer, "I guess nowadays, everything can be data or can be an archive or a database."⁶⁶³ It reminds me of the intrusion of television everywhere, as if it has a natural right to be in the center of it all.

THE PAINS OF DIGITAL HEARTHS

I got rid of television in my house when I left home. I felt satisfied that sound could satisfy my consumptive media habit. But, if as scholars in the edited collection by Kathleen M. Ryan and Debora A. Macey are correct, for most of the people in the American public, "television has replaced the hearth of old as the center of home life."⁶⁶⁴ In my home, as with many other (particularly) queer white affluent male Gen X–millennial, the television is increasingly replaced by these sound machines. I say this because a classic record player, bequeathed as a gag gift by my Uncle Cliff over a holiday years ago, represents my most prized object, and sits in the traditional special spot a hearth might have occupied in different rhetorical times. A tan Grosley belt-driven stand alone model that I was shocked worked and even more surprised continues through the writing of this very sentence. It outputs its own unique sound—"noise" in classic communication models—over every record it interprets. It's unique impressions ungulate outward like the crackling of a fire or the glow of a screen.

⁶⁶³ Patitucci, "Interview," <http://www.datagarden.org/blog/bartholomaeus-traubeck-on-years>.

⁶⁶⁴ Kathleen M. Ryan and Deborah A. Macey, *Television and the Self: Knowledge, Identity, and Media Representation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 4.

I'd always looked upon its hearth status as a small little moment of resistance to the colonization of television. Adorno understood the need to examine this sense of resistance though as a reaction to a "mutli-layered structure" of propaganda that is mass media, and in particular, revealed by television. Driven by constant spectacular "enthrallment," coded messages of consumption "escape the controls of consciousness" and become even more prone to fruition as they are planted and grow conceptually inside the viewer's mind.⁶⁶⁵ The experience of the media itself—a fusion of "surface content" (programming) and "hidden meaning" (narrative structure, symbolic association, network formats and so on)—which in their complex interplay nevertheless create a certain condition in the state of the watcher.⁶⁶⁶ "Repressed gratifications," expressed in "jests, off-color remarks, suggestive devices," Adorno notes, "channelize audience reaction," and "reproducing the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian."⁶⁶⁷ The audience, for Adorno, is thus "handled" and "is used in order to frame" and thus ensnare the people in a consumptive orientation, attempting to naturalize this feat "as completely as possible and in order to engage [them] psychodynamically in the service of premeditated effects."⁶⁶⁸ For Adorno, the structure is more than a single object or program (or album) but the "presuppositions [of the medium] within which the implications function before a single word is spoken." Like a stylistic "halo effect" that

⁶⁶⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1954): 213–35.

⁶⁶⁶ Adorno, "How to Look at Television," 222.

⁶⁶⁷ Adorno, "How to Look at Television," 222.

⁶⁶⁸ Adorno, "How to Look at Television," 223.

encourages the viewer to identify the story by its genre (or be pleasantly delighted by the slightest alteration or hybridization with the genre), television, Adorno argues, encourages us to map the scenes and situations in this heightened anticipated awareness onto similar situations in our everyday lives. In some cases (especially with those whom have fully substituted the screen in their day-to-day lives) all everyday experience becomes over determined, charactering, and colonizing “direct sense perception.”⁶⁶⁹ If taken to its absurd extreme (which we may have already arrived at, surpassed, and come to enjoy) Adorno notes, “people may not only lose true insight into reality, but ultimately their very captivity for life experiences may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles.”⁶⁷⁰

But, his final call at the end of this article is uncharacteristically simple and clear. “The effort” of resistance here, writes Adorno, “is of a moral nature itself: knowingly to face psychological mechanisms operating on various levels not to become blind and passive victims. We can change this medium of far-reaching potentialities only if we look at it in the same spirit which we hope will one day be expressed by its imaginary.”⁶⁷¹ In this way, challenging what I have been calling orientations, but which Adorno simply means here a fantasy, a certain set of psychological devices instituted, manipulated, and reproducing in the form of the television and its viewer, requires a perceptual comportment to transformation.

⁶⁶⁹ Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” 228.

⁶⁷⁰ Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” 230.

⁶⁷¹ Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” 235.

It doesn't always work of course. In my haste to throw out my television and "rely" on the easy aesthetic categorization of Netflix and the smooth and instant gratification of Spotify premium, I maintained the same orientation toward cultural consumption I had hoped to resist. Yet I stand, naked and caught, listening to this album *Years*, still blazing a noisy fire from the hearth in my living room. Ra Hu noted in their review of *Years* a similar curiosity. "*Years*," Hu says, "plays with the relationship between the fossil, a now inanimate representation of a vibrant being into a newly living form—sound. Thus the record player spans the natural, pre-analog world of time immemorial and the digital alchemy of transcribing visual data into sound."⁶⁷² In this way, *Years* is a bridge, harmonizing the world of nature with that of human, retroactively rendering the digital world into analog at the same time.

I am left, following Adorno, with a deep sense of dialectical ambivalence. Digitalization, reflected in the all seeing PlayStation eye camera, is as likely to present an opportunity for new community development as it does, like television, reinforce authoritarian control and accelerated warfare. It retains the position of Enlightenment consumer as much as it opens up the play of resistive naturalist. At his most negative, Adorno might dispel all attempts at considering *Years* to be anything beyond its attachment to structure. But, Adorno's call is one of complex meditation—of continual dialectic struggle through this structure. Music, especially in *Years*, makes and breaks rules, of form and content, to reveal and install the spell of the commodity form as it

⁶⁷² Ray Hu "On the Record: 'Years' by Bartholomaeus Traubeck," *Core 77* (blog), January 26, 2012, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.core77.com/posts/21601/on-the-record-years-by-bartholomaeus-traubeck-21601>.

props up the structure at the same time. But, it also leaves open the possibility of deep reflection, in which one is transformed from passive consumer into critical thinker. As this album review demonstrates, coming to terms with the failures of our fantasies places us in a more fully aware position, one attuned to the material structure and our place floating inside its emptiness.

VIII. Floating

Like the context of fantasy, arranged by this album review of European trees in the art-album *Years*, Adorno described the process of music (and its critique) as constantly caught in dialectic struggle reflected in its status as commodity, composition, and medium. Listening to music in this way is a different mode of figuration. It is also a way of reading, with Daniel Chua, Adorno's contribution to the understanding of sound. Chua considers it like floating with a message in a bottle, or what I might prefer, atop a piece of driftwood floating down the streets of Austin after a flood.⁶⁷³ "Drifting," writes Chua, "is the moral attitude required of new music, involving a kind of material agnosticism where the composing subject cedes to the tendency of the musical material. The only compass available is an internal dialectic within the historical material of new music that points to possibilities and tendencies—but there are no fixed points"⁶⁷⁴ He makes a delightfully obvious leap here:

Darkness also shrouds Adorno's text. Its obscure dialectical maneuvers do not yield the kind of clarity demanded by modern reason. There are no immediate

⁶⁷³ Daniel K.L. Chua, "Drifting: The Dialectics of Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*," in *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music* ed. Bethold Hoeckner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.

⁶⁷⁴ Chua, "Drifting," 1-2.

results. Rather it drifts, forcing a myopic tracking of its movements. Adorno's dialectical struggle is a way of conscripting the reader on an odyssey of disaster in which our survival is not guaranteed – only hoped for.⁶⁷⁵

I encourage everyone to read his beautiful reading of the Enlightenment hero and its demise and reclaimed hope for survival. It's revelatory in its understanding of the journey of the human in relation to the natural world, left to its mythic understanding, caught as we are in a perpetual journey through time and space.⁶⁷⁶

But I want to get back to the trees in *Years*, the driftwood that I have been floating with.

⁶⁷⁵ Chua, *Drifting*, 2.

⁶⁷⁶ Chua writes, “The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a map for the schizophrenic voyage of the Philosophy of New Music. The expedition that it charts for music is the legendary journey of Odysseus as he sails past the enchanted island of the sirens hoping to avoid shipwreck. In Horkheimer and Adorno's retelling of the story, the sirens' song embodies the hypnotic allurement of music prior to its 'reduction to the condition of art'; it has power to captivate the ego, filling it with both fear and euphoria of self-destruction as the subject crashes into the rocks of desire: “no one who hears the song can escape it.” The seduction of the sirens' song symbolizes an impossible reconciliation with nature, which the ego must reject in order to affirm its rational identity. But the cost of individualization is the loss of art's utopian fulfillment; the experience of freedom must be controlled. It is against this backdrop that Odysseus is described by Horkheimer and Adorno as “a prototype of the bourgeois individual”; he affirms his identity against fate through a rational mastery of the forces of nature both within himself and in the external world. To conquer the sirens song is to dominate nature. He plans to defy the sirens by cunning and deceit, so that he can enjoy their song yet escape their lure. But, unknown to him, the instrumental nature of his plan is an allegory of the dialectic of Enlightenment; he enslaves himself in search for mastery. Odysseus has himself bound to the mast of the ship and plugs the ears of his rowers with wax so that they can neither hear the song of the sirens nor his desperate cries for release. Survival is a matter of bondage: the rowers are bound to a form of rationalized labor devoid of pleasure, and Odysseus binds himself to the savor of the song – but only *distantly*. For all his cunning, this bourgeois hero hears the song merely to estrange himself from its power; he breaks its spell by imprisoning his desires, and so kills “the instinct for complete, universal and undivided happiness. He survives at the cost of an internal shipwreck. So in mastering both outer and inner natures he renders the sirens and himself important – the sirens are neutralized and the ego is alienated. In the end, Odysseus is nothing more than a visionless bourgeois attending another jaded performance of some masterpiece whose sounds of utopian promise have long been neutralized by official culture: “the prisoner is present at a concert, an inactive eaves dropper like later concertgoers, and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause.” See: Chua, *Drifting*, 6-7.

After a class conversation on the album, in his blog Jim Cotter notes, “The discussion in the Composition Seminar whirled around how much control is exerted by the creator of a piece when mapping data to the musical parameters via software and hardware, with opinions covering all parts of the spectrum. The final agreement was that ultimately the ear must be the final arbiter for the music, and the eye for the visual, and that it was entirely subjective as to how one rated the piece artistically.”⁶⁷⁷ I have to respectfully disagree with this consensus of this class regarding this read. How one comes to know the album reflects a series of productive choices that far exceed Cotter’s review. Even concretizing the piece in domains of eye and ear misses the technical construction. Finally, to render the final assessment to mere consumptive opinion, (“I like what I like,”) is the emergence of the false, fabricated, fantastic formal orientation of consumptive desire looking not for experiments in sound by the familiarity of the next dominant fix.

Judith A. Peraino reminds us, “Adorno famously championed high modernist music and eschewed popular music, arguing that difficult music requires intellectual work by the listener, and that the effort of the work brings the estrangement between music and its auditor that is needed to counter complacency and alienation from ideological superstructures.”⁶⁷⁸ Peraino offers a common misreading in suggesting that Adorno did not enjoy popular music; one must have a deep appreciation in order to offer

⁶⁷⁷ Jim Cotter, “Forest Sonata: Listening to the Music of the Trees” *The Conversation* (blog), April 12, 2012 (4:22 p.m.), accessed February 8, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/forest-sonata-listening-to-the-music-of-the-trees-6096>.

⁶⁷⁸ Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

a critique.⁶⁷⁹ As Miklitsch notes, “one recurring, enduring motif of [Adorno’s] theory is the need to historicize aesthetic judgments,” including Adorno’s.⁶⁸⁰ To do so is to bring immanent criticism into full ambient amplification: Adorno’s dialectical thought demands we return again and again to his text as well. It’s a practice he performed himself. Adorno’s confrontations with popular music and jazz, Eric Oberle notes, provided an opportunity for him to reflect and present a different and transformed thought in his later work.⁶⁸¹ Peraino’s major critique—that Adorno is too high brow, too theoretical, not everyday enough—is overly rehearsed and as such no longer allows the audience to struggle with what presents itself to them.

I have tried to demonstrate what an opportunity presents itself in reading the sound of trees with Adorno; one that brings him intimately into my own life and listening experience. I hope he helped understand an elegant everyday relationship—fraught as it is fruitful—between humans and plants. Acting as guide, I argued that Adorno helped establish an ethical orientation toward listening to the journey of a needle rehearsing the fantastic sound of trees knots as it circumnavigates a spinning piece of plastic.

⁶⁷⁹ See Richard Leppert, “Introduction,” *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-84.

⁶⁸⁰ Miklitsch, *Roll Over Adorno*, 45.

⁶⁸¹ Eric Oberle, “Jazz, the Wound: Negative Identity, Culture, and the Problem of Weak Subjectivity in Theodor Adorno’s Twentieth Century,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 13, no. 2 (2016): 357–386.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Well, wait: plants are *not* one thing, because—

-Avital Ronell⁶⁸²

I'd like to imagine this conclusion is but one possible way of filling in an ending to Avital Ronell's exchange with Diane Davis in their conversation in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. They are discussing the place of the extrahuman in contemporary rhetorical studies. By returning to the question that motivates this study—how the plant is and is not both subject and object of human rhetoric—I hope to demonstrate an orientation that holds the question open at its limit, by approaching various iterations of “the plant” caught in dialectic motion. Returning to the central thesis-as-question guiding this dissertation—how can we understand the plant (and the human) as both object and subject and what are the interpretations and critiques that mediate an encounter with the human?—I have followed Theodore W. Adorno's invitation to apply negative dialectics—or immanent criticism—to everyday sites of personal encounter and interdisciplinary texts from a range of discourses—in which this meaning making or rhetorical exchange has been figured. That is, I sought to understand the dialectic features of human-plant relations as they present themselves in the concepts of natural history revealed in an experience at Red Rock State Park, the naming identification of the Sipo-Matador, and the sounds of trees in the art-piece *Years*. Approaching these figures in both

⁶⁸² Diane Davis, “Breaking Down ‘Man’: A Conversation with Avital Ronell,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 372.

affirmative and negative modes, I argued that keeping the dialectic in motion instantiates a critical process—a reflection on reflective capacity—across multiple renderings of representation and structure. I argued the writing and reading is an essential part of this process, understanding thinking as a movement of mediation—a dramatic journey or symphony—through theoretical abstraction and material reality to reveal a multidimensional orientation to rhetorical criticism. More simply I hope my approach to immanent critique kept Adorno and the plant, both subjects and objects of this dissertation, close enough to touch while at bay enough to remain mysterious. I hope it placed the Western structure that surrounds my encounter between the human and the plant—the Enlightenment and all of its iterations—in relief as much as it leaves open opportunities for creative reflection and critique.

I'd now like to place its significance in motion one last time, in three iterations. I explore one way of thinking about the consequences for rhetoric by examining a synthesis of human and plant symbolic exchange in contemporary scientific studies of “plant communication.” Second, I explore the opportunities for including immanent critique as a rhetorical orientation for approaching plant life by situating the practice in conversation with a key *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article by Lawrence Grossberg. Finally, I'd like to conclude by offering an application of the criticism to one final figuration a short reflection on the prime mover of this dissertation: Stevie Wonder's album *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*.

I. Plant Communication Models

One variation of plant studies explores the conjunction—a cultural interface of two meaning systems—between traditional communication theory and botany, in which the relationship between predator and prey is theorized as a form of value.⁶⁸³ Best exemplified by the work of California botanist Richard Karban, generally, this approach represents an attempt to understand plant behavior in a communicative sense; he asks how plants sustain value—vitality—through symbolic exchange.⁶⁸⁴ Karban’s work is extensive, often focusing on the behavior among plant communities in ways that highlight the benefits that emerge from the exchange of toxins, rapid movement, and other chemical responses.⁶⁸⁵ Karban understands this as an expression of basic

⁶⁸³ For a detailed discussion of conjunction, see for example: Lawrence Grossberg, Carolyn Hardin, and Micheal Palm, “Contributions to a Conjunctural Theory of Valuation,” *Rethinking Marxism* 26, no. 3 (2014): 306-355. I’m using this term here as a shadow to the second section. I’d like the reader to understand this combination between biology and communication theory in this iteration of plant studies to be a type of conjunction that Grossberg and others invite. Drawn from a reading of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, conjunction is a cultural studies approach to ideological criticism that attempts to understand capitalism beyond a traditional labor theory of value. Instead, these authors propose cultural understanding of economic structures to theorize the expression of capitalism from a platform (a line of flight) of complex power relations originating from ontological obligation into social identity. Attentive to various theories of value originating from debt, these scholars argue that capitalism works by enumerating obligation into value and then captures this affect into various social formations. Decoding these receptions offers a historically contingent method for understanding economic exchange beyond a structural analysis offered by traditional Marxist interpretation. While not essential for this section, it is a playful reminder of the limits of conjunctural analysis, initiated itself by Grossberg’s understanding of rhetorical inquiry.

⁶⁸⁴ Richard Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶⁸⁵ See, for example: Richard Karban, “Plant Behavior and Communication,” *Ecology Letters*, 11.7 (2008): 727-739. “Plants anticipate future conditions by accurately perceiving and responding to reliable environmental cues. Plants exhibit memory, altering their behaviours depending upon their previous experiences or the experiences of their parents. Plants communicate with other plants, herbivores and mutualists. They emit cues that cause predictable

communication theory: “Plants emit cues that cause other organisms to respond.”⁶⁸⁶ In the exchange of symbols--visual (flowering, light manipulation, growth patterns and so on) and volatile (chemical releases)—entire communities are constructed and built around the linguistic act.⁶⁸⁷ In so arguing, Karban draws inspiration from a sender-receiver model of communication (itself a technologically mediated invention), and also one that tacitly draws from an Aristotelian approach to the rhetorical situation, in which we understand persuasion as a speaker recognizing all the abilities they have at their disposal in order to move an audience to act or respond.⁶⁸⁸ While Karban is a vocal figure in this expression of critical plant studies, historically the scientific approach could be said to begin in the early 1980’s especially with David F. Rhoades’ study of willow, poplar, and sugar maple trees.⁶⁸⁹ Rhoades understood plant communication as a type of early warning system; plants defended against attack by sending communicative counter measures—alleochemicals—to avoid detection or to deter access to predators. Edward F. Farmer and Clarence A. Ryan extended the theory to “eavesdroppers,” noticing that plants could effect or induce behavioral changes not just in plants of the same species, but

reactions in other organisms and respond to such cues themselves.” Karban, “Plant Behavior and Communication,” 727.

⁶⁸⁶ Karban, “Plant Behavior,” 734.

⁶⁸⁷ Karban, “Plant Behavior,” 734-5.

⁶⁸⁸ Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication*, 4-7. Also see Alan G. Gross, “What Aristotle Meant by Rhetoric,” *Rereading Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, eds. Alan G. Gross and Arthur E Walzer, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2000), 32.

⁶⁸⁹ David F. Rhoades, “Responses of Alder and Willow to Attack by Tent Caterpillars and Webworms: Evidence for Pheromonal Sensitivity of Willows,” *Plant Resistance to Insects*, ed. Paul A. Hedin (Washington DC: American Chemical Society, 1983), pp. 55–68. See also: I.T. Baldwin and J.C. Schultz, “Rapid Changes in Tree Leaf Chemistry Induced by Damage: Evidence for Communication between Plants,” *Science* 221 (1983): 277–279.

across varieties.⁶⁹⁰ Later studies have continued to confirm this phenomenon, and extended it into an ecological understanding of plant community development.⁶⁹¹ The importance of this analysis—in understanding the flows of communicative value between and among plants—is two fold according to Karban. First, his theory offers arguments to limit human pollutants (ozone and carbon dioxide saturation for examples) that, like noise, might negligently impede plant life by interrupting their communicative mechanisms. Second, Karban argues that it might help humans continue to “mimic” plant behavior by learning to interpret and absorb their tactics.⁶⁹² Velcro and solar power, he notes, are two kinds of technologies that emerged from plant communication analysis and could gesture toward other secrets yet to be deciphered.

There is a latent poetry in Karban’s work. For example, his study of the *artemisia tridentata*, more commonly known as the sagebrush, is a beautiful description of living and sacrifice.⁶⁹³ Sagebrush plants thrive in close proximity—communal settings—and benefit from this joint living situation. When a predator begins an assault, the injured plant will release volatile cues of methyl jasmonate, to warn other branches on its own body, but also to members of its community, of the impending attack. Sensing this, the other plants will “play dead,” encouraging the predator to pass to another grouping,

⁶⁹⁰ J. V. Lovett, M. Y. Ryuntyu, and D. L. Liu, “Allelopathy, Chemical Communication, and Plant Defense,” *Journal of Chemical Ecology* 15, no. 4 (1989): 1193–1202.

⁶⁹¹ Anurag A. Agrawal, “Communication between Plants: This Time It’s Real,” *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 15, no. 11 (2000): 446; Ronald Pierik, Carlos L. Ballaré, and Marcel Dicke, “Ecology of Plant Volatiles: Taking a Plant Community Perspective,” *Plant, Cell & Environment* 37, no. 8 (2014): 1845–53.

⁶⁹² Karban, *Plant Sensing*, 177-9.

⁶⁹³ Anna Lena Phillips, “Savory Individuals: A Field Study Reveals New Evidence for Airborne Communication in Sagebrush Plants,” *American Scientist* 97, no. 5 (2009): 380–81.

which allows the colony to thrive at the expense of one of its members.⁶⁹⁴ This communicative defense is potentially not limited to those within the similar species grouping; Karban's research suggests the sagebrush will issue the same communicative warning to nearby tomato and tobacco plants, perhaps representing a form of structural meaning-making systems in vibrant beings thought to have lacked the capacity.⁶⁹⁵ Poetically, this is a beautiful rendition of ecological conjunction, challenging many assumptions about the singularity of plants and a common trope of "survival of the fittest" archetype that has come to dominate human understanding of the natural world (including our own nature). Karban's research agenda could encourage reflection on the static notion of plant beings, ones that may have more in common with the sophisticated complexity of human meaning systems with equally important ramifications for assumptions about possible human organizations as well.

But there is also danger to reflect upon in Karban's study, beyond what many considered to be significant statistical flaws in research methodology.⁶⁹⁶ When taken to its extreme, Karban's model has been used to establish a scientific research program to initiate theories of plant neurobiology—the suggestion that plants have complex

⁶⁹⁴ See, for example: Richard Karban, Kaori Shiojiri, Satomi Ishizaki, William C. Wetzel and Richard Y. Evans, "Kin Recognition Affects Plant Communication and Defense," *Proceedings: Biological Sciences* 280, no. 1756 (2013): 1-5.

⁶⁹⁵ Vladimir Shulaev, Paul Silverman, and Ilya Raskin, "Airborne Signalling by Methyl Salicylate in Plant Pathogen Resistance," *Nature* 385, no. 6618 (1997): 718-21.

⁶⁹⁶ Simon V. Fowler and John H. Lawton, "Rapidly Induced Defenses and Talking Trees: The Devil's Advocate Position," *The American Naturalist* 126, no. 2 (1985): 181-95; For more recent criticisms, see for example: Nancy Stamp, "Out of the Quagmire of Plant Defense Hypotheses," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 78, no. 1 (2003): 23-55.

structures equivalent to brain function.⁶⁹⁷ It has been summarily rejected by over 30 scientists in an unequivocal article in *Plant Science* arguing, “simply there is no evidence for structures such as neurons, synapses, or brains in plants... We now urge the proponents of plant neurobiology to reevaluate critically the concept and to develop an intellectually rigorous foundation for it.”⁶⁹⁸ Stefan Rieger argues that it is Karban’s strategic communication model that has been the foundation for the failure of its reception; too easily the sender-receiver model transforms plants into media objects, relying on an assumption of antiquated and nostalgic technology that obscures the very vibrancy it attempts to reveal.⁶⁹⁹ “Manifest here,” he writes, “the inflexibility of a communicative paradigm so accustomed to making human beings its measure that any form of alternative understanding becomes ridiculous and esoteric.”⁷⁰⁰ Thus, it is both the lack of rhetorical sophistication in his communication models and its absorption of plant life into human terms that prevents a persuasive case to be made for considering what appears to be a network of communicative symbolic exchange beyond the human.

But, does that mean there is nothing of value in reflecting on the conjunction of plants and communication? Precisely because rhetoric offers the possibility of critical reflection, in this study I have argued that the journey is worth taking: not for what it

⁶⁹⁷ Paco Calvo, "The Philosophy of Plant Neurobiology: A Manifesto." *Synthese* 193, no. 5 (2016): 1323-1343.

⁶⁹⁸ Amedeo Alpi et al., “Plant Neurobiology: No Brain, No Gain?” *Trends in Plant Science* 12, no. 4 (2007): 135-136.

⁶⁹⁹ Stefan Rieger, “What’s Talking: On the Nostalgic Epistemology of Plant Communication,” in *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*, eds. Patricia Viera, Monical Gagliano, and John Charles Ryan (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2016), 67.

⁷⁰⁰ Rieger, “What’s Talking,” 72.

reveals about plants, but what it allows us to understand about the dialectic relationship between subject and object in relation to the way we interpret plant life. Following my extended reading of Kenneth Burke and Theodor W. Adorno, approaching plants with a sense of immanent critique could be a more appropriate and indeed important orientation for considering and contesting critical plant studies. The approach requires a text that communicates ecologically as well, referencing and returning to figures (like the tree, for example) to tease out a being in multidimensional relief. Immanent critique does not easily lend itself to one short essay, but a durational practice of the length I offered in the preceding pages. A rhetorical relationship more complex, textual, and relational than Karban's strategic communication model reveals the plant in figural not in mimetic relief. It is supple enough to understand a vital poetry that defines an intimate historic relationship between humans and plants while structurally and critically oriented to avoid turning the plant into a parascience more appropriate for the New Age.

But, the imperative for critical plant studies is also, as I have demonstrated, not a relationship that should remain unattended. This relationship is already in operation: in state parks and their museums; in natural history texts and television documentaries; in poetry and science fiction; in the canons of religious texts and philosophy of all cultures; in soundscapes and dreams. Instead, I argue, we should consistently maintain a connected-separation, for only in the reflection upon our rhetorical structures that Western human meaning making systems, including a historical drive to domination, can be revealed and criticized. This is not to suggest that plants do not effect changes in each other but rather to understand that collapsing subject and object, as Karban does, is not

the route to a political and ethical account capable of reflecting on both similarity and difference, on poetry and science, and on intra species relationality. Collapsing the subject of human communication into plants too easily renders these vibrant beings legible, metabolizing their systems into ours. Instead, we ought to let their systems, perhaps, remain illegible; to refuse to understand their systems as our own.

I have also argued that there are additional reasons to be cautious of Karban's version of critical plant studies: the hidden orientation of the researcher. Standing inside Karban's interpretation is also a secret interpreter—the scientist-critic—whose laboratory methods structures the observation of message transference and whose desire charts the change in action. Devoid of historical context, a strong understanding of structures of domination, Karban renders the plants available for use. When you consider Karban's research is being picked up in efforts to maximize pest control for ultimate agricultural perfection it's hard not to see the connection.⁷⁰¹ Karban's approach, especially in his value of mimicry (of our own discernment between self and other) is one that reveals itself as intimately attuned to Enlightenment assumptions of management, growth observation, and ultimately human supremacy that reduces the plants to a specific type of rhetorical object: the plant is acted upon, its secrets primed for human use especially in technological transformation, its body rendered totally available for us. In this conjunction where humans attempt to become more like plants, what is revealed is not just a complex network of "actants" (a phrase borrowed from "new materialists" Jane

⁷⁰¹ Marcel Dicke, Maurice W Sabelis, Junji Takabashi, Jan Bruin, and Maarten A. Posthumus, "Plant Strategies of Manipulating Predator-prey Interactions through Allelochemicals: Prospects for Application in Pest Control," *Journal of Chemical Ecology* 16, no. 11 (1990): 3091–3118.

Bennett and Bruno Latour) that humans can sit in community with.⁷⁰² The truth of the plants secrets is reduced to use-value: a desire for humans to transform that knowledge into utility, to mimic behavior to make our lives more primed to consume and maintain technological advancement. Caught in the never ending drive to understand the difference of meaning making systems is an old desire to make their secrets our own.

“On the surface, critical plant studies,” argues emergent scholar Greta Gaard, “may share a commitment to plant well being.”⁷⁰³ But Gaard shares my skepticism about Karban’s approach, which too easily slips into questions about moral consumption—“if they communicate, can we eat them?”—instead of reflections about the dialectic structuring *of* human consumption and contemporary industrial life. Instead, in reference to a much broader rhetorical orientation, Gaard argues that, “ethical practice depends not on the quality or attitude of the other, but rather on the quality of relationship and attention humans bring to the other.”⁷⁰⁴ I have argued that Adorno’s immanent criticism is a more effective way of assessing historical practices of domination in relation to plant life and returns us to an ethical place of considering our relation to plants and not an overemphasis on their use value or their mystique.

I have been arguing that we should be as poetically excited as we are pessimistically cautious about Karban’s conjunctive synthesis that attempts to understand

⁷⁰² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). See also Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰³ Greta Gaard, “Critical Ecofeminism: Interrogating ‘Meat,’ ‘Species,’ and ‘Plant,’” in *Meat Culture*, ed. Annie Potts (Boston: Brill, 2016), 273.

⁷⁰⁴ Gaard, “Critical Ecofeminism,” 281.

and read the cultural codes of a silenced subject. In the attempt to gain an understanding of a plant's different social and communication systems, we have deposited a great human capacity to be non-reflexive: to make their systems our own, in model or in use. Even worse, we have no idea to what ends this knowledge presents if captured by corporations whose interest it is to develop pathogens that cause various reactions in species for the purpose of unending growth. Thus it is at once a poetic metaphor and a cautionary tale, a dialectic struggle between subject and object at the core of contemporary research on plant and communication.

I find a similar struggle in a scholar of the curious concept of the "conjunction," and in its repudiation of a dialectic sense of rhetoric, Lawrence Grossberg.

II. Reconsidering Grossberg

At the end of his introduction of Adorno and dialectic thinking into the field of rhetoric, scholar Lawrence Grossberg, in his only submission to the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1979, argues against what I have attempted in this dissertation as impossible.⁷⁰⁵ He writes:

Consequently (and in conclusion), it seems mistaken to identify rhetoric and rhetorical criticism with critique (in the sense of a Marxian or dialectical critical reading). Because rhetorical discourse constitutes and projects a transcendental subject onto the world and into language (including its own discourse in the form of a critic who remains undetermined by a personal involvement with the discourse being read) it is unable reflexively to acknowledge its own determination. It is unable, without giving up its own concern, to question the nature and role of the subject within a particular social formation. Nor is rhetoric a general theory of the social construction of a particular social reality. Both these understandings of rhetoric are grounded in a metaphorical theory of discourse,

⁷⁰⁵ Lawrence Grossberg, "Marxist Dialectics and Rhetorical Criticism," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65, no. 3 (1979): 235-49.

which fails to acknowledge its own determination. This is not a criticism of rhetoric, however; it is only to accept that rhetoric exists only in its contradictions, i.e. only in its relations to that which it is not.⁷⁰⁶

This article is less a description and more a challenge to figure rhetoric differently, and as such, is one that is historically situated and available for reinterpretation. Grossberg, then, already demonstrates a role for rhetorical criticism as I have situated it in the terms offered by Adorno and Kenneth Burke: a practice in reflecting on reflections, or on criticizing our criticism: a dimensional mode of thought. It is true that the dialectic, as I argued in the method section, is not often considered in these terms. Relegated to the domain of analytic philosophy, it is also often positioned as too technically determined, too pessimistic, too high theory, too dismissive, too structural, as to leave little space for more artful or poetic situations. But, as I have argued by example, those traditions of dialectic thought are not an essential constitution—a natural element—of the practice. Negative dialectics in particular offers an opportunity to think through its abstraction by placing it in relation to what are considered objects—plants, in this case—and outside the spheres of traditional speech making—in sites of everyday encounter. I have argued that if the goal of rhetoric is limited to the effort to compel human action, then of course, my approach might not make a lot of sense. But we do not need to begin from this model of strategic communication. Rather than see rhetoric as a “functional discourse built upon persuasion and manipulation,” as Grossberg does by providing “a discursive defense of the possibility of creating a shared reality among free and independent human subjects,” I have attempted to understand rhetoric as a challenge and invitation to think through the

⁷⁰⁶ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 249.

terms themselves, asking tacitly about the contours of a shared reality of subjects and whether it could ever be considered free. If the human is as conditioned by the plant as the plant is the human, then I argue, perhaps the freedom is more one of responsibility, not revealed in the “articulation” and the “cultural reading of codes,” but by tracing a dialectical address between the subject and object. The misstep, if I might call it, is Grossberg’s assumption of an exceptional or privileged figure of the human subject for rhetoric: one in which the turn to the extrahuman clearly does not advance. Allow me the opportunity to explain and summarize accordingly.

“In considering three basic interpretations of the dialectic,” what Grossberg terms mode of thought, description, and discourse, he argues “each of these moments will be used to shed light on the task of rhetorical criticism: on the way in which the critic relates to the language of the text, on the nature of language which makes such a relationship possible, and on the nature of the discourses of rhetorical criticism.” To this I have focused on the term *nature* that is left unattended to in Grossberg’s article. What Grossberg believes is a function of the rhetoric (an installation of a hidden transcendental subject where one does not exist), I have argued is more an expression enacted by certain rhetoricians who feel addressed by Enlightenment understanding of the human, a subject unencumbered by natural roots making claims on the world autonomously and independently. But, to understand a relation between the human and the plant is one that asks about a different embrace: the human object enveloped by the plant subject. In other words, I have reordered the terms of Grossberg’s inquiry: I have sought to understand the language of (our) nature in various texts; a natural relationship that makes language

possible; and a criticism of the discourses of and about nature that also operates as a limit in our interpretative capacities even as it motivates it. In other words, I argued in this dissertation that immanent critique, the specific approach Grossberg argues exists at the limit of rhetoric, indeed is an opening for reconsidering the term *critique* itself. In so doing, I have considered a dimension that Grossberg leaves unattended in his well thought out essay: the way dialectics allows us to consider the role of rhetoric in nature and the nature of rhetoric; placing the critic inside rhetoric at the same time we recognize a limit to our interpretative potential.

Constituted by the primary relationship between subject and object, the contradiction experienced by humans is the “inescapable relation (opposition) between human life and the world which cannot be reduced or broken.”⁷⁰⁷ Such mode of thinking establishes itself as grounding in two ways: first, humans approach the natural world as an object of use, a scene of struggle, and as raw material for advancement. But second, an opposition between living things whose very terms of life are in relation, but remain illegible and undecipherable. That is, no matter how much mastery we display, we are forever tied to a world some wish to escape. Both this assumption reveals a contradiction in subjective experience: what is dominated is also free, what is considered free is in a relationship of domination. In order to demonstrate that principle, following Adorno, I designed each chapter as a journey through this contradiction. To that, I would like to review the contours of each adventure.

⁷⁰⁷ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 237.

The first case study examined a structural dialectic revealed in the everyday encounters with the concept of natural history in California's Red Rock State Park located in the heart of the Mojave Desert. Situated among the Joshua trees and red rock pillars, I attempted to reveal this contradiction by reading two displays in the small museum: a diorama of a tool-wielding human subject and a display of dendrochronological tree-rings. I understood these as two different ways of hearing human-plant relations: one as an archetype of domination and the other as an expression of freedom. But, the conversation between the two also exists in relation to the world around it, both rhetorical features grasping at the ineffable life in a terrain that seems to defy it and a compulsion to travel to witness it. Inspired by life in one of the driest parts of the world, I examined how the plant terrain gets worked up in a variety of ways to support a static notion of natural history, one examined through Adorno's lecture on dialectics.

In the second case study I took up a different posture: examining contemporary biology, natural history texts, and philosophical writing surrounding one plant the *Sipo-Matador*. Understanding these discourses as forms of nature identification, I traced the dialectic struggle between affirmation and negation that it seems to induce at each stage of its figurations. As a parasite, it appeals to the figure of monstrosity identified by Adorno, one that prepares us for uncontrollable accounts with (our) nature as it cautions us against the gluttony of human desire for consumption and domination. As a member of an ecological whole, it acts as an essential member of its community, inspiring creativity

and connection across cultural divides. At the same time, it is a frightening figure that asks us to pause at the delight of our revelation.

In the final case study, I took up Adorno's dialectic understanding of music to explore Austrian trees fantasized through the art-album *Years* by Bartholomäus Traubeck. I summoned reflections on the life and death of trees, the material artifact of the vinyl album, its production processes, and its participation in various forms of media to meditate on the structural possibilities and limitation present in the album. In so doing, I also contributed to a dialectical understanding of sound studies, one that can inform how to write reviews in as much as it asks us to reflect on soundscapes beyond mimetic representation. The album review itself is a practiced situation of an ethical orientation of listening, an ambient form of persuasion attentive and attending to the dialectic between subject and object in all its expressions.

All three of these cases studies respond to Grossberg's primary call: to understand how a dialectically informed rhetorical practice forecloses understanding of human social formation. He writes, "dialectics is thinking precisely about the way in which opposition or difference produces identity. That is dialectics is a reflection on the way in which something is constituted by the set of contradictions in which it exists, by which it is not."⁷⁰⁸ As I have argued in this dissertation, this is a common, but not exclusive reading. Dialectic inquiry is not a focus on binary opposition ("I understand myself because I am not a plant") but in harmony: how are both the plant and human subjects and objects of rhetoric, together. The moments of similar constitution may not be legible, but it is not

⁷⁰⁸ Grossberg, "Marxist Dialectics," 237.

the job of rhetoric to bring the conjunction into clear relief; I have understood the practice differently. How a tree, for example lives the arch of its life from birth to death is done so on entirely different terms than a human, and yet, the totality of vitality is a dimensional experience that is deeply shared. In order to appreciate this shared distance, we must take up and hold the human as both exceptional in their capacity to reflect upon the edifices of language but also in the ability to get confused, get it wrong, and perhaps misrecognize those codes. In this way dialectics is as much about the dissolution of identity—denying the strong sense of self—and its claim to clarity. This contradiction is one that may complicate Grossberg's hope for a critique that forges a free and creative human community, in that it may be Grossberg (and not rhetoricians) who is smuggling in a hidden transcendental subject. That does not suggest its goal of freedom is not shared, but has a much more complicated sense of expression.

In this regard, Grossberg argues that, “dialectical thought always relates to *human reality* (his emphasis)... More simply this can be understood as the subject-object relationship... Each is embedded within the other as that which gives it identity. This situatedness, the interaction of the subjectivity of human consciousness and the objectivity of existence, defines praxis as an essentially dialectical mode of life.”⁷⁰⁹ To stand in agreement with Grossberg is also to acknowledge the opposite of these statements as well, the negation called forth by his assertions. Human reality is constituted by a praxis: a dimension of abstract thinking that brings together a specific mode of history within a specific term of description of language. It is also to suggest that

⁷⁰⁹ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 237.

the subject of consciousness is also an object that exists outside of itself—in its status as that which is reflected upon. But, I argue here, the call to identify as human is not as appropriate a form of praxis as the negation of an exclusive claim of human to the concept of the subject. The danger of Grossberg’s identity-focus here is that it smuggles in a uniquely human understanding without reflecting on its opposite: a life lived in non-identity (which may also apply to some human identity formations). I have argued the plant is one such being. We use the plant to situate our understanding of consciousness, precisely because we think it exists outside ourselves, as in a nature park. And yet, we also integrate the plant, as in the Sipo-Matador in renditions of Nietzsche’s theory of the will, to use it as an explanatory feature for our consciousness, drives, and desires. In both instances it is not the claim to subjectivization, to a human identity, that I wanted to outline, but a claim to what Adorno refers to as “non-identity” in operation; a constant process of affirmation and negation that makes and unmakes human and plant worlds in motion.⁷¹⁰

My suspicion—which I will leave for another scholar to examine—is that Grossberg’s concern has more to do with a difference in appreciating various European traditions of cultural critique.⁷¹¹ The iteration informing Grossberg is one that emerges

⁷¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz understands this process as disidentifications. It is not appropriate for me to claim this as my own, but I encourage others to read his important work. See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁷¹¹ See: Bruce McCombskey, *Dialectical Rhetoric* (Bolder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), iii. McCombskey writes, “Rhetoric thinks dialectic will determine set procedures for their discussion, and dialectic thinks rhetoric will do all the talking. Eventually, they will realize these presumptions are unfounded, acquired from their long-associations with other disciplines and arts that do not have their best interests at heart. Wounds quickly heal, hurt feelings subside, and

from the French tradition, from Louis Althusser and his school, through Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; the other he postulates against, the German tradition and one defined by a tradition from Georg Hegel to Adorno and more recently Jürgen Habermas.⁷¹² Instead of identifying, as I have, a primary object/subject dialectic in operation between the human and the plant, he wants to take up dimensions of human cultural experience as the primary mediating principle, ignoring a structural limit in favor of a representational phenomena that he terms, “the dialectic of immanence and transcendence.”⁷¹³ He centers human agency in the factory of language, arguing that “as a social code or system,” language allows humans, “to construct a world which is not of the shared symbolic reality in which they live.”⁷¹⁴ This to me, given the vantage point of history, is a dangerous concept of freedom of code reading, embodied in the false liberation of digital life; the Internet is not free anymore than the factory is.⁷¹⁵ As such,

dialectic and rhetoric agree to explore what might result from a renewed interaction, not only as counterparts (though they both have fond memories of Aristotle), but as collaborators, as partners...”

⁷¹² See Grossberg’s choice to reference Joseph Stalin continuously throughout the essay which is a hidden code that is both unfair and unnecessary. It’s also insightful that he chooses later to reference Althusser as one who “has offered one of the core cogent and suggestive readings of the dialectic. Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 241.

⁷¹³ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 238.

⁷¹⁴ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 238.

⁷¹⁵ See, for example: Christian Fuchs, "Information and Communication Technologies and Society: A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of the Internet." *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 1 (2009): 69-87; Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, *Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism* (Boston: Brill, 2016); Trebor Scholz, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Nick Dyer-Witheford, “Digital labour, Species-Becoming, and the Global Worker,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 10, no. 3 (2010): 484-503. Refusing the ruse of digital freedom is extremely important given the rise of white nationalism and its relationship to digital organizing. See, for example: Jamie Bartlett, “From Hope to Hate: How the Early Internet Fed the Far Right,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2017,

we should also understand that natural world as a different grounding for offering resources to rhetoric for understanding forms of domination in both social formation and structural control. This is not to disagree with Grossberg's understanding of the freedom and creativity involved in the poetics of language, but it is not to rush to believe that freedom will come from understanding cultural codes as the only form of domination. Domination is as structural as it is representational, and it is not the grounding of rhetoric that imagines that structure: it exists. "Immanence-transcendence" as Grossberg argues, "points to the contradiction within language between tradition (as constraint) and creativity (as freedom)."⁷¹⁶ In one sense, for Grossberg, language escapes the limits of contemporary structural conditions. In its creative and poetic expressions, it can create new kinds of worlds of relating and perceiving. At the same time, the resources and codes of creative expression are also structural (both in design and in context); the tools are received and are limited because of the social context. What is possible to transcend is already limited, in other words, by the needs that transcendence conveys. We cannot imagine what is not possible to conceive, we cannot conceive outside the structure that makes creativity possible.

Grossberg asks that if language is both creative and constrained, involving as much in the critic as it is in the social world that surrounds us, then "how does one begin to reflect?"⁷¹⁷ He offers the motif of wager here to explain how one might enter into one

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/31/far-right-alt-right-white-supremacists-rise-online>.

⁷¹⁶ Grossberg, "Marxist Dialectics," 238.

⁷¹⁷ Grossberg, "Marxist Dialectics," 239.

side of the dialectic as an invitation to consider the other. He writes, “the weighted dialectic allows the use of contradiction as the door through which understanding must pass; it is only by wagering effort, by seeking to discover and assert some truth, that the critic can successfully create an understanding of criticism which is vital—both necessary and alive.”⁷¹⁸ But, while Grossberg interprets language to be the primary entrance point for dialectics, the object through which it struggles, I have posited structural vitality and its illegibility as the contradiction at the origin of human consciousness: who am I with and not who am I. In this instance, it is both constrained by the structural features of existence, the compulsion to live toward death, but also the poetic constraints, the fantasies, dreams, and exchanges that make that life livable. The wager in my reading is the way one embodies the contours of life and death, the dialectic, and the traditional constraints (domination) and creative expressions (freedom) that emerge from that reflection.

Each chapter attempted to demonstrate this point actively, inviting the reader into different ways of writing in order to understand the body of plants in structural relief. I used the term figure to demonstrate this point, as does Grossberg. “It is only through the use of figurative language,” writes Grossberg, “that the contradictions found in the world of humanity’s own creation can be constituted, expressed, and potentially overcome.”⁷¹⁹ This is true of both of the primary mechanisms, metaphor and metonymy, rhetoric offers for Grossberg. Metaphoric figuration is “one can appreciate the explosion of meaning

⁷¹⁸ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 239.

⁷¹⁹ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 244.

that occurs when the two discordant universes of meaning are brought together.”⁷²⁰ Out of that collision new forces are brought together. For Grossberg, this is a kind of escape, an out or exit, where “a form of creative fabrication, using language metaphorically to transcend immersion within the world of everyday life.”⁷²¹ It presents a real possibility of living differently. “Dialectical discourse is an attempt to incarnate self-consciousness, to think simultaneously about some event while thinking about it and the role one had in creating it. It is an expression in language of the situatedness of all thought.”⁷²² But Grossberg is rightfully cautious here to understand the negation in this equation—the rhetorical form of metonymy, or the “contextualization and the assertion of connection.”⁷²³ It acts as a limit, one which demands the terms do not collapse on themselves, but remain different. I made a similar claim about Karban, when we consider that making plant meaning systems look and act like ours does a disservice to their uniqueness. Thus, as much as we want to perhaps believe that singing to our plants makes them grow because they feel happy and loved, reminiscent of Peter Coffin’s work which began this piece, we must appreciate that a very real gap in the interpretative dimensions of language and meaning make that prospect both unlikely and dangerously reductive.

But, I suspect that Grossberg is up to something else here. His view of the dialectic is one that wants to take up the creative possibilities and absolute difference as

⁷²⁰ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 244.

⁷²¹ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 244.

⁷²² Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 245.

⁷²³ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 246.

one that would sever the possibility that a structural unity exists at all. He too begins with the same assumption about communicative mechanistic understanding similar to Karban. “Rhetoric is immanence because its primary concern is how the relationship of a speaker and audience is fashioned through the resources of language.”⁷²⁴ That is, he is concerned with fixing rhetorical effect, again, at a specific mode of human existence: the differing social formations and situations set up between speaker and audience. My suspicion is that his criticism is itself historical, existing at a time when speech making was the crown jewel of rhetorical theory. But, his desire, if I could claim to hear it, is one that becomes too open to the freedom of nonrhetoric, that is in the readings of cultural studies. It is one bound, like Karban’s, in a true belief that if we just heard difference enough, the conjunctions would be sufficient to perform out of the contemporary structure. It’s an ethic of an impossible escape, one cruelly hopeful.

Perhaps this is not the case. Grossberg argues that dialectics can be understood as a mode of description. Reality is structural, often hidden, but nonetheless in operation.⁷²⁵ Thus in terms of the structure of production, social relations are made up of individuals whose exchange exceeds themselves and whose value is caught in either the labor they are required to give or the labor they demand.⁷²⁶ As I have argued, this is also the condition of structural domination reflected in our relation to plant life. This is not to challenge the Marxist version nor is it to suggest that there is a more fundamental, non-economic formation at work here. What I have attempted to demonstrate is the operation

⁷²⁴ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 248.

⁷²⁵ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 241.

⁷²⁶ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 241.

of this structure, revealed in the scenes at natural parks, in travel logs, philosophy texts, and in the medium music production. I hope it reveals a deeper sense of the intensity of domination and its long historic origins.

To successfully alter these conditions, for Grossberg, begins with a push away from the mechanistic frames of transformation. “Rhetoric,” he writes, “as a field of inquiry cannot be conceived of as explicating some particular form of influence, function, or causal relation.”⁷²⁷ Thus, it is both as a style of discourse and a theory of discourse, a way of writing and a writing about ways. I interpret him to mean that it cannot guarantee a blueprint for transformation. In this way the difficulty for rhetoric is not one of revelation, where what is made clear is some secret. “Because dialectics is reflexive,” writes Grossberg, “one is already involved in the contradiction one is confronting.”⁷²⁸ Thus acts of criticism may invite the critic to step outside of themselves, only to rush right back. Unlike the approach to plant studies introduced by Karban, I have actively avoided the temptation to read the thinker inside the laboratory and instead outside as one who encounters; I have actively tried to place myself in the encounters with plants, getting carried away only to return again to the central contradiction between subject and object of knowledge at the center of investigation. In this, way, I am not seeking out what the plant says any more than I am trying to cull their resources for my own creative musings. Instead, like Kenneth Burke and Adorno, to think dialectically is to reflect on the contradictions as they present themselves to us about us, and one cannot begin any

⁷²⁷ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 243.

⁷²⁸ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 239.

more closely than the everyday encounters with plant life, either historical or contemporary. As such I sought out the contractions of human life revealed by how we bring the resources of human language to a fundamental nonhuman communicative phenomena and grapple with the moments of similarity and difference.

Grossberg does not see this potential, rather he posits a fundamental difference between the “rhetorical critic” as one obsessed with speaker and audience and a “literary critic” as one approaching a work on the intrinsic value of the work itself.⁷²⁹ I have argued for a dual reversal: to open up literary criticism to its form as address and for rhetoric to consider not just the causal effects, but also its intrinsic assumptions about the very ground itself. In other words, I have opened up the term speaker and audience (which Grossberg thinks is rhetoric’s limit) to the extrahuman, to explore ways in which human interpretation is at once limited or constrained by our interpretative capacity as it is opened up by the creative capacity to hold the plant in both those terms: it speaks to humans and as a result we are addressed by it in as much as we speak to it. The primary contradiction is one that works through the hidden structuring limitations of the Enlightenment in as much as it recognizes its ongoing influence. Thus I have hoped to offer the two correctives Grossberg sought: to reveal the hidden transcendental subject and to make the critic as implicated by the concept as it purports to escape.

Let me conclude by summarizing six principles emerging from my conversation with Grossberg’s article:

⁷²⁹ Grossberg, “Marxist Dialectics,” 240.

1. DIALECTIC MOTION

Human reality is constituted by a principle of dialectical motion, a constant struggle between subject and object. On the one hand, we seek to experience ourselves as subjects of freedom, in part because we experience ourselves as objects of domination. That could, in some instances, be described as a freedom from the domination of nature: the conditions that make humans feel exposed to threatening conditions of the elements of the world around us. It could also be a yearning for a freedom from the domination of those tools and economies designed to alleviate those risks, reflected in a contemporary antagonism between those who labor and those who exploit. In a third sense, it is also a dangerous quest to free ourselves from our own nature, to walk autonomously and independently. At the same time, it is also a freedom to embody our nature, our life, in a quest to seek the difficult truths of ourselves, to express a creativity experience, and to sit in community with all the beings in which we find ourselves in contact, and not just humans.

2. LANGUAGE AS MECHANISM

Language is often the mechanism we use to navigate this experience. It is one that allows us to address our fears and yearnings and to explain and mediate the experience we have within ourselves and the world around us. It is a desire to identify ourselves as much as it is a desire to eliminate our identifications: to be heard and to hear. It is revealed in moments of constellation or figuration, where we bring those phenomena together, as in metaphor, or break it apart as in metonymy. As particular features of language, they

reference a quality that appears uniquely human, an opportunity to reflect on these motifs and to undo them.

3. RHETORIC AS ADDRESS

Rhetoric then, as a form of address, is one committed to understanding the relationships between speaker and audience. Historically, that has been defined in one direction, as a subject-speaker enacting tools on an object-audience to compel movement to act. This history already addresses us. But, it is not determined in that it needs to be accepted as such. The speaking subject is also addressed by a preceding object: the audience. To take up the question of the extrahuman is to open up those categories to understand human experience implicated already by an address that emerges before it and to hear something as new as it is old.

4. RHETORICAL CRITICISM AS ORIENTATION

Rhetorical criticism, as an orientation, situates us at this limit: one who is responsible to speak as one who is addressed. We are addressed by the ongoing structures of violence in our world—capitalism, slavery, and colonization—and the telos of vitality—of life and death—and in our incapacity to fully grasp their gravity and yet motivated by a quest to destroy the former and fully embody the latter. The arch will not be characterized by a perfect march but better expressed by lessons from our plant companions: cycles of seasonal growth, of registers of composition and decomposition, of connection and independence.

5. AN ETHICS OF LIVING AND DYING

To situate rhetorical criticism as an ethical orientation is as much an invitation to death as an opportunity to live. That is, it asks to let the subject of Enlightenment die in order to invite a process of living differently. What that life might look like is already immediately apparent and remains to be seen: It is as individual as it is structural; as representational as it is phenomenological; as ontological as it is contingent; as real as it is fantasy. It appeals to a sense of composition and decomposition, of arrangement and entanglement, of complex scales of perception.

6. MULTIDIMENSIONAL WEATHERING

There is no exit or escape from this multidimensional experience as much as there are infinite possibilities for its expression. We ought to hear less from those who have made their experiences known and be addressed more by those who have not. We may find ourselves transformed in the process, even without knowing it. Even when we fail, the call to continue to weather the storm is perhaps the most important address to hear. Thus, I have argued we need not be afraid of this dialectic journey any more than we should be lax or overwhelmed by its daunting and unending process in rhetorical criticism. To demonstrate, let me apply these principles to one last figuration of address: Stevie Wonder's soundtrack to the film *Journey Through the Secret Lives of Plants*.

III. *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*, an Album Review

Stevie Wonder's *Journey Through the Secret Lives of Plants*, which was recorded the same year of Grossberg's essay, has been the hidden siren guiding this dissertation

from the first note.⁷³⁰ The double-sided album composed, performed, produced and arranged all by Wonder is a break with the majority of his corpus. As one of Motown's (indeed the 20th century's) greatest musical thinkers, Wonder was a prolific genius, able to play all musical instruments with ease and creative panache.⁷³¹ Picked up by Berry Gordy in 1961, at age 11, Stevie Wonder's musical career also reads like a biography of Motown, Detroit, and by extension, US culture from the 1960's to contemporary period. Because of his ability, he was one of the few Motown artists to break out of its star-making industry to gain complete creative control over his work. *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* is the first album he wrote after getting the freedom over his creative process.⁷³²

I struggle with this album, even still. Wonder put to sound what Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird's 1973 book compiled (in what they considered empirical evidence), of plant sentience and emotional-cognitive response.⁷³³ In 1978, film director Walon Green, in collaboration with Wonder, supplemented the popular book with a 97-

⁷³⁰ Stevie Wonder, *Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants - Vol. 1 & 2*. Recorded May 11, 1992. Motown, 1992, Streaming Audio. Accessed February 2, 2016.

⁷³¹ James E. Perone, *The Sound of Stevie Wonder: His Words and Music*, (Westport, CT: Praeger).

⁷³² "Wonder, Stevie - Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants - Oxford Reference," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* 2009, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195313734.001.0001/acref-9780195313734-e-91652>.

⁷³³ Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants: A Fascinating Account of the Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Relations Between Plants and Man* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974/1989).

minute documentary and art film.⁷³⁴ They hoped the aesthetic experience might also contribute evidence to support a theory of vegetal consciousness and ecological interconnection.

At first, I considered the album, along with many critics, an unenjoyable experience in its failure to meet my assumed expectations. According to the short encryption in the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*:

Released in 1979, this unusual album failed to connect with Wonder's sizable following. ... Although bizarre lyrics and sound effects occasionally dilute the impact of many of the performances, several long instrumentals like the ambient soundscape 'Earth's Creation' and the African-flavoured 'Kesse Ye Lolo De Ye' are some of Wonder's most adventurous and rewarding compositions. Presumably humbled by the poor response to this album, Wonder never again tried to make as bold an artistic statement as *Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants*.⁷³⁵

Ahmir Thompson, joint-frontrunner of *The Roots* also shared a poignant story that captures much of the audience's response:

Like every other Stevie Wonder fan who purchased *Songs in the Key of Life*, my father got *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* the first day it came out. He played it at night and I was in bed, so I could hear every song. And the first thing he said to me after he listened was, "He blew it."⁷³⁶

Ken Tucker, in his 1980 review for *Rolling Stone* wrote:

Plucking the exhilarating moments from *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* is a harrowing, highly subjective task. One person's nectar is another's

⁷³⁴ *The Secret Life of Plants*, directed by Walon Green (1978; Hollywood, Paramount), *Amazon Instant Video*. Stevie Wonder, *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*, Vinyl, Tamla Motown, B004GETXLS, 1978.

⁷³⁵ "Wonder, Stevie - Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants - Oxford Reference," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* 2009, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195313734.001.0001/acref-9780195313734-e-91652>.

⁷³⁶ Ryan Dombal, "Interviews: ?uestlove," *Pitchfork* (blog), December 16, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/8745-uestlove/>.

Karo syrup, and the stamens of Wonder's *Plants* are bursting with both.... we're left with a few lovely but overwrought pop melodies, a renewed respect for Wonder's technical prowess and an even fiercer desire to hear what he'll create when he's unfettered by the banal restrictions of a movie-soundtrack assignment.⁷³⁷

The overwhelming sense of failure is one of the first approaches to view this album: his freedom is a failure for the audience. Left without the need to produce hits, no one quite knew how to listen to what he created.

But in a second reading, I wanted to recuperate, as others do, Wonder's technical prowess. "For an album whose lyrics explore the organic imagery of plants and flowers," writes David Ingram, "*Journey Through The Secret Life of Plants* marked the first use of a digital sampling synthesizer, the Computer Music Melodian, and was one of the first digital recordings."⁷³⁸ Stephen Holden makes a similar argument:

A blind man obsessed with "seeing" through music, Wonder used synthesizers to imagine the colors of the sun. Synthetic instrumentation became an integral textural ingredient of works structured like sweeping murals which bore a humanitarian message. Wonder's most spectacular impressionistic work, his flawed but interesting "Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants" soundtrack, conjures up a magic garden, in which the notes unfurl like tendrils.⁷³⁹

But there is a danger in collapsing the plant into a technical apparatus. In making the message human, what is lost is the unique address the plant posed to Wonder. The creative meaning of Wonder's exploration of plants in technical sound is reduced by the reverie the audience holds for the technology at the same time they are left befuddled by

⁷³⁷ Ken Tucker, "Stevie Wonder's *Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants* (Soundtrack) Album Review," *Rolling Stone*, January 24, 1980, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/journey-through-the-secret-life-of-plants-soundtrack-19800124>.

⁷³⁸ Ingram, *The Jukebox*, 161-3.

⁷³⁹ Stephen Holden, "Machines as Collaborators," *The Atlantic* (1984): 102.

the composition that challenged their ear. The technical mediation is the magic, for these listeners, more than the relations it sets up to confound and transform. All the while, the mediation is one that has nothing to do with the botanical world and everything to do with the technical components that do the rhetorical work. In other words, audience members are enraptured with the digital world and the power it displays over the plant bodies.

There is also a third sense in which I hold *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*: as vehicle for the expression of and reflection upon difference. Francesca Royste's beautifully written and insightful chapter in her book on queer black sounds explores the cultural politics of the performer and his body and voice caught and compelled by structures of domination; it's one I pause my own thinking at.⁷⁴⁰ She points out that Wonder himself provides a different kind of blackness, one situated beyond the hypermasculine assumptions of black performers, even as it is constrained by the ears of white audiences, like myself. As Royster puts it, Wonder displays, "the sonic and bodily performances as opening up the spectrum of black sexuality."⁷⁴¹ As a certain kind of queer body—one existing in the conjunction among discourses of race, ability, sexuality, and class—Royste argues that Wonder's album made it okay to "take up the pleasures of listening to black music in public space," of the pleasures of feeling strange, "paying

⁷⁴⁰ Francesca T. Royste, "Stevie Wonder's 'Quare' Teachings and Cross-Species Collaboration in *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* and Other Songs," in *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 60-87.

⁷⁴¹ Royste, "Quare Teachings," 72.

close attention and getting lost in music.”⁷⁴² In this uniquely queer way of listening, the album’s failures are exactly its experiment with freedom: the freedom to be ajar from the anticipated mold of production and with slight challenges to the ear that could make listening, based on the interpretation, enjoyable for its difference. “Wonder’s willingness to reimagine that living as a sensual/erotic connection beyond species,” she writes, “is one of the ways that he expands the notion of the black genius, releasing him from the constraints of black genius and black masculinity as tragedy, as well as from the idea of blind sexuality as invisible.”⁷⁴³ In these ways, the album is a triumph in its failure, a captured sound freeing in as much as it is contained by the structures of production and listening. But, I have to ask, what disservice I might perform for hearing in this way, or ask, if really I could ever hear or be truly attuned to the message his work conveys.

In a fourth way, then, I’m arguing to view *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* in relief of each of the previous three iterations—as reception, constitution, and cultural practice—with a return to immanent criticism and rhetorical dialectics. As an address, Wonder’s reveals a capacity to reflect on human-plant connections, only to have those limited. The deeply technical form that mediates all levels of creative enterprises, acts as a constraint of freedom in as much as freedom’s expression. But, as an invitation to meditate on mediation, it opened up, for me, this dissertation project itself, a practice of rendering a multidimensional experience in contradiction.

⁷⁴² Royste, “Quare Teachings,” 63.

⁷⁴³ Royste, “Quare Teachings,” 83.

This orientation, I hope, encourages us to ask more long-term questions about the structure, compulsion to consume, and the limits of the enjoyment of the promise of rhetoric: I am, after all, a white queer listening to Stevie Wonder, caught somewhere between subject and object myself. We ought to apply a place of deep skepticism to my hearing, which is why I reveal this inspiration only at the end of this journey as a reminder that so much more is in play. It is the real constellation guiding the practice. I offer this dissertation then as my album review of the *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*, as an answer to the address to reflect on an overlooked part of Wonder's cannon and my implication in all of its productive elements.

Criticism informed by the dialectic is ultimately a dimension of balanced movement; one that continually cautions not to take too much. In one sense it imagines us grounded in a fairy grove, surrounded by the warmth of the sun's apex peaking through the arms of beings we can never understand, whose life exceeds far beyond our capacity to know. In another, it imagines us floating, on a small piece of driftwood on the sea, caught up and surrounded by a storm, at risk of drowning but clutching to stay afloat. In both, with no guide but the stars, we hold on: caught in an insurmountable current, pushing us forward and back, assured of our failure yet hopeful our embrace will be balanced enough to weather this wind and rain, grounded enough to know that the sea is moving all around us.

Our goal should be to mobilize a change to orientations of domination that brought us here. What I have tried to demonstrate is that a rhetorical orientation that acknowledges the ongoing structural elements of domination that comprise the life world,

coupled with a deep ethical devotion, might open up that possibility only to remind us not to get carried away with our own failed heroics. It attunes us to dialectical dimensions and a willingness to travel that journey nonetheless—avoiding the promises of reward and return—even if its goal or destination does not exist beyond the recognition of its failure.

Therefore, I argue, the stress of rhetoric should not be on revealing the truth of the terms *secret*, *life*, or *plant*. Instead, rhetoric is the name for the figural journey we take with each of those concepts connected to their composite opposites: *discernment*, *death*, and *human*. This journey is revealed in the pages of this dissertation figured tenderly as a shared breath with the creosote atop a red butte the moment before the cascading rain of desert storm hits our bodies, the clutching embrace of the Sipo-Matador, and the movement from death to life initiated by the sounds of an Austrian beech played on a vinyl record. Their dialectic reverberations, I have offered, is a vibrant rhetorical journey though conceptual address.

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