

Identity Politics and Climate Change: An Essential Rethinking of Collective Action

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Nicholas Hamilton Rapp has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Identifying Our Situation	1
I. The Advent of Intersectionality	5
Essentializing Identity	5
Relational Ties	13
II. Anxious Displacement	22
Location Within Collectives	22
Boundaries and Scale	34
The Techno-sphere	42
III. Abundant Possibilities	52
Returning to the Individual	52
An Issue of Imagination	57
Bibliography	66

Introduction: Identifying Our Situation

“Never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever.” – Marc Augé¹

Choice is a fraught concept. Growing up, adults gradually grant children more choice in their actions until there they are, alongside each other, in the adult world. When working with children, in fact, you are commonly taught to offer them two choices when you want them to achieve a certain behavior. Instead of saying “we are leaving in fifteen minutes,” you give the child an option, asking “would you like to leave in ten or fifteen minutes?” and they are more likely to pick one and leave when the time comes. So, they unquestioningly choose one of the illusionary choices offered by others. But these restrictive choices are not left behind in childhood. Humans are always navigating socially constructed choices of how to identify, grasping for the right words to convey their experiences to other people within vocabularies defined by others before them. It is through the choices we make in our language that we learn to live together. We depend on each other for recognition, but are also diminished by one another—ignored, not understood, and erased. The formation of one’s individual identity depends on what is deemed coherent, or acceptable, by the people who make up one’s surroundings. Upbringing, cultural norms, friendships, opportunities, and a myriad of other factors all play a role in constricting how individuals understand and perform their identities. The language people use to identify themselves often fails to capture all of these factors.

¹ Augé, *Non-Places*, 30.

Language shapes the possibilities of human lives. We are all connected via language and it is primarily through the ordinary, daily language of our lives that we make sense of each other. But it is also a mistake to assume that there is a common language we all speak, on the same page, with one another in complete understanding. Language is merely the ordinary means of human expression and signifying meaning. So, how might the ordinary conceal the specifics of individual lives? In recent years, I have found myself obsessing over the construction and constraints of my own identity. I have wondered how I came to be the person that I am, whose influence mattered most, and what parts of the construction were of my choice. I wonder, how have my choices impacted others? More so, in my life decisions, whose choices have I diminished? These questions stem from what I like to think of as an identity confusion of sorts. In questioning one's impact on others, one must ask what *kind* of person they are. It is a question of ethics, but also of deep reflection on the ways in which we are always tied to each other in strong and subtle ways.

At our current moment of political and climatic precarity, I feel connected to the world in ways that are difficult to grapple with. The threat of global climate change feels like a wake-up call, the world turning mirrors in on all of us, asking what we will do about the problem that we collectively created. It is looming, large, and beyond comprehension in its entirety, but I believe that its terrifying realities may assist in shifting our understandings of identity to bring us back to our positions on Earth, back towards each other. In acknowledging the climate crisis, we are unifying as one planet of fragile and vital interdependence.

My motivation for this project stems from a deeply-embedded fear of climate change, but also from fascination with how my peers understand our shared and largely uncertain future. What I have noticed most frequently within my age group in dealing with climate change's looming threat is a tendency to desire instant gratification alongside a fast-growing disbelief in the power of individuals to enact any sort of change under large-scale systemic power and oppression. At the same time, mainstream social movements are beginning to adopt frameworks that take environmental inequalities and injustices into account. It is widely recognized that wealth inequality correlates with environmental inequality, since the world's richest countries and individuals are responsible for the majority of carbon emissions and environmental degradation with the bulk of negative impacts falling on members of the global south. No social or political approach to addressing inequality can enact meaningful change without attentiveness towards the growing environmental burdens of modern life.

The stress of dealing with climate change comes alongside quickly evolving notions of identity and the individual in the United States. Individual identities are used as qualifiers for discussion, introductory tools, coalition building devices, and often determine the approaches that individuals bring to the table when discussing social issues, including climate change. Identities are also a driving force of social entanglement, locally and globally, but recognition of this entanglement often yields to rigid views of identities; individuals make assumptions and definite claims about identity that are damaging to social unification. Identity is something that develops over time, never understandable by mere definition, always changing through experience. It is

impossible to come together in groups without understandings of each other as greater than the sum of the words we use to identify ourselves.

In my project, I am not striving to achieve a bullet-point list of actions individuals can take to best combat climate change. I do not intend to offer easy solutions to global issues. What I am arguing, instead, is this: the climate crisis offers humans new opportunities to see each other not as mere individual collections of categories, but rather as bounded beings—we are bound to each other, to the spaces we occupy, and to the language we use to describe ourselves and understand one another. This language restricts us and cannot fully capture us. Furthermore, working on this project in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized even more so that we depend on each other in novel ways, and the world that we have built is increasingly fragile and uncertain. Rarely before now has our occupation of a shared planet been so prominent and so terrifying. Fighting climate change begins with developing adaptable understandings of each other. How we choose to acknowledge our relations to one another is vital to fostering a world that we can all justly cohabitate.

I. The Advent of Intersectionality

Essentializing Identity

Unfortunately, there is no nail-on-the-head answer to the question of who I am. It sometimes seems to be the task of a lifetime to understand what one's importance to and position towards the world may be. However, I have a few options in painting a partial picture. One is a personal approach, detail-laden and experiential: I have a very expressive face, do not play many video games, enjoy working with children, cannot draw a straight line, love to cook, and sleep past my alarm almost every day of the week. I like going on walks and hate self-help books.

But none of these facets are confined within myself as standalone features of my identity that exist aside from culture, society, and politics in self-determination. None of this is purely *me*. Maybe my face is so expressive because my mom's is, and the pressure she feels to be nice and accommodating causes her to overemote for the sake of making others' lives easier. Or maybe I hate video games because when I was younger, other boys made me play them when we hung out and I felt inferior, judged, and like any other activity would make me feel better about myself. But maybe neither of those is true in a causal sense. Regardless, these descriptors matter because they are how I understand myself to have a sense of individuality and personality in relation to what (and who) is around me. Even if I cannot come to terms with why I am the way that I am, I have the ability to acknowledge things about myself that feel a part of me. But there are other

ways to introduce oneself that extend far beyond the personal, into the unequal, the ethical obligation, and the stratified experience that is social identity.

A more political approach to introducing myself may go somewhat like this: I am a white, twenty-two year old, queer, cisgender, able-bodied man, born in Palo Alto, California, raised in the suburbs first there then in Louisville, Colorado, with parents from the Eastern and Western United States and a strong lack of a cultural background. I might even introduce myself in conversation, highlighting these social identity categories as a means of levelling with my audience and showing that I am qualified to speak of the matters I am discussing (e.g. “as a queer man, I feel conflicted about the terms available to me to define my sexuality”). But this introduction feels clunky, loaded, and prone to misinterpretation, as my group affinities often fail to capture all of the other aspects of myself that make me feel like *me*. I resonate with shared group aspects of these identity categories but have a different relationship to language in my employment of the terms.

I use these terms to describe myself in the fittest way I see possible, but their individual histories and associations sometimes fail to line up with my experiences. The changes in my sexuality over the course of my life make it difficult for me to pick gay or queer as a term I see fit for myself. Being raised Catholic had an impact on my identity in ways that I am still renouncing. To identify as a man, for me, is largely different than my dad’s definitions of masculinity, and we occupy two very different planes while still using the same word to define ourselves. These categories fluctuate, rupture, and are always subject to an opening-up of meaning, so my interest in their political efficaciousness is one of sheer curiosity and hope that humans can unify even if their composites are vastly different. When we take identity labels as face-value descriptors,

we often forget that one's lived experience beneath the labels has its own unique voice—an individual's relationship to these labels is just that: a relationship.

As British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests in a meditation on how his identity is socially interpreted by others, “until the middle of the twentieth century, no one who was asked about a person's identity would have mentioned race, sex, class, nationality, region, or religion.”² He claims that antiquated ideas of identity were more concerned with relationships, personalities, and generally less politicized aspects of individuals. It is not that cultural markers and social customs did not exist before the mid-twentieth century, but rather that they were not the firstly-acknowledged aspects of who a person *is*. A person is a lot of things, and, notably, is always wholly unique in their own personhood. On the subject of using identity categories for conversational clout, Appiah argues that “while identity affects your experiences, there's no guarantee that what you've learned from them is going to be the same as what other people of the same identity have learned.”³ He encourages everyone to speak for themselves to avoid mistaking an individual point of view as a cultural belief of all those who share a certain identity category. Words used to identify are more than descriptors; they are lived, understood, and learned from on a case-by-case basis.

Though trends and commonalities undoubtedly exist between members of different groups (to think this false would be to deny group identities outright), the truth of the matter is that different people experience oppression and privilege differently. It is commonly stated that it is the responsibility of privileged groups to educate themselves on the marginalization of those less privileged than them (e.g. white people should read

² Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, 3.

³ Appiah, “Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself.”

up on anti-racism, cisgender people should learn about transgender history, etc.). But this rests in the “speaking as a” mindset, assuming others’ experiences based off of the literature and theory one has read, which can erase nuance and presume to know full stories that are actually incomplete. Beyond equating one member of a group to all members of that group, the “educate yourself” tactic can aid people in reading one story and not listening to another; it is of little use for individuals to learn about marginalized groups, feel guilty, and treat them *as marginalized individuals* before treating them as *human beings*. Simpler yet, learning about the group experience of another and blanketing that as their end-all-be-all self is patronizing. This mode of recognizing others stunts individuals from companionship, reinforcing difference instead of respecting individual lived experience. It takes identity as static, removing experience and interaction from our understandings of each other to try to reduce individual experiences to something easily digestible.

Much of the complexity of conveying identity in modern times comes from the emergence of theories about the intersections of varying categories. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, bridging feminist and race theories in an attempt to comprehensively discuss the identities of and discrimination against Black women in the United States.⁴ The theory of intersectionality has been appropriated from its Black feminist roots to constitute the modern political left’s understanding of identity within varying levels of social stratification. Crenshaw identified the term to ensure Black women were not “theoretically erased,” leading to “the operative conceptions of race and sex [becoming] grounded in experiences that

⁴ Carbado et al., “Intersectionality,” 303.

actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.”⁵ The acknowledgement of the importance of intersectional activism has allowed for more equitable aims toward liberation for marginalized groups ever since its introduction. Today, affinity groups for queer students, people of color, women in STEM, etc. abound to honor the intersections of one’s social identity without erasing vital combinations that differ from one category to the next. Intersectional activism brings about visibility for people who occupy categories that have been historically erased, unacknowledged, and misunderstood.

Ergo, calls for intersectionality are the product of prior political movements being grounded in essentialism, or, the age-old philosophical belief that things have qualities that are essential to their coherence as themselves—e.g. a tree must have leaves to be a tree. While scientifically useful, essentialist readings of identity categories and social norms have serious potential to lead to exclusion of certain groups or individuals by misrepresenting aspects of identification. Three succinct arguments summarize the problematization of essentialism in feminist movements: (1) “the exclusion argument,” which holds that “essentialism in feminist thought excludes certain groups of women”; (2) “the instability argument,” which “argues in principle against the stability of all linguistic categories including the category of gender”; and (3) “the power argument,” which “seeks to expose the conditions under which a system of categories emerges in society” to begin with.⁶ All of these categories work together to deconstruct the concreteness of the language of identity. They lay the groundwork for criticism to

⁵ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” 139-140.

⁶ Witt, “Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,” 322-323.

illustrate what (and who) is concealed in everyday language and how language separates things that are not so plainly separate in reality.

Acknowledging intersectionality often relies on pointing out the exclusion argument. Historically, mainstream feminist movements have failed to acknowledge and combat the intertwined struggles of queer, disabled, transgender, and/or non-white people. Women are consistently referred to from a particular level of privilege that is not the shared experience of marginalized people feminism should be fighting for. Attempts to label exclusion take shape in terms like “TERF,” or “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” brandished against those who do not think that the category “woman” should extend to those who were not born “biologically female.” The instability argument reinforces the exclusion argument by pointing to linguistic problems in claiming identity categories as definite for individuals. Identity categories are unstable because of their lived dimensions, and the fact that different people live identities differently. Being a “man” means something different to myself than to others of different nationalities, households, sexualities, etc., and is also rooted in a definition of the male that come from outdated notions of the rigidity of biological sex and gender roles. When one inspects an identificatory binary long enough, stability of its categories loosens up, and the lived experiences beneath the words beg to differ from their placement in one category as a fixed means of identification.

These negotiations over the specificity of identity for political recognition have come to be known as identity politics, a phrase used by the political left and right in many different contexts. Those on the left commonly defend identity politics, arguing from protection against discrimination for different marginalized groups, to equitable access to

resources, down to conversational respect for individuals who are traditionally spoken over. Right-leaning individuals tend to mock identity politics for being a part of political correctness (PC) culture, wherein “feelings matter more than facts” and “identity is weaponized” in unreasonable ways.

In commentary on rights-based, left-leaning identity politics, Judith Butler contends, “when we argue for protection against discrimination, we argue as a group or class...[presenting] ourselves as bounded beings—distinct, recognizable, delineated, subjects before the law, a community defined by some shared features.”⁷ Some refer to this tactic as “strategic essentialism,” or, the mobilization of movements grounded in essentialized traits of a group to achieve political progress. Strategic essentialism motivates the efforts of all activist groups fighting for changes in particular circumstances. For example, queer liberation movements need to settle on a definition of what being “queer” is in order to secure more equitable access to resources. Though by settling on a definition, those who that definition fails to encompass will not gain proper recognition. So, while strategically employing identity language to secure rights and equity is invaluable, its limitations are the road-blocks that occur when one group gets complete attention under a concrete definition, leaving many at the margins feeling unrepresented. The definitions we fight with must capture groups worth fighting for but cannot be taken as the entirety of groups that must be represented.

This lack of completeness rendered political in the exclusion argument manifests linguistically in the instability problem, as the intersections of identities are unstable in and of themselves. What it means for *me* to be *myself*, in all of my categories, differs in

⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

many ways from another's read on their identity; language is not a concrete, meaningful object, but something that is appropriated and performed contextually in all sorts of different ways. Focusing on the instability and exclusivity of language sheds light on its everyday usage and the power structures that go unchecked without a critical relationship to language. One must be attentive to the history and usage of language, recognizing how the structures it developed from tend to squander possibilities and establish normative notions of identity.

I draw from the language of theorists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler as their work focuses on individual subject's relationships to language, and how those relationships reflect different realities that cannot be taken as objective. Butler takes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the individual's relational understanding of self in a world of others and renders it political, exhibiting how these relationships are the result of long-standing power structures and histories that cannot be erased, but must be kept at a critical distance from one's self in order to open up new identificatory possibilities. If one fails to pay attention to the power structures that language develops from, they have less opportunity to be recognized to the fullest extent.

Relational Ties

In the shift from essentialism to intersectional understandings of identity, the political and the social have become inextricably linked. Though, arguably, politics has always been of and for the everyday, many individuals now have a more hyper-aware sense of the categories they occupy (and those occupied by others) in their daily interactions. This newfound awareness can come at the cost of blanket assumptions and erasure of the person beneath the categories. It is at this junction—between important newfound visibility for marginalized groups and a lack of critical distance from the words used for identification—that many politically left-leaning Americans lie today. Echo chamber discussions on college campuses, news media platforms, Twitter, online forums, and in all places where likeminded people discuss politics encapsulate the tendency of mere dialogue between people with similar intents to not tear down the larger, more important power structures outside of their bubble. This is nothing new. But the colloquial appropriation of identity discourse as a lived and communicated necessity in everyday life is what I argue to be a uniquely modern facet of life, brought on by unlimited access to information that is unstable, information that comes from all directions in an onslaught of shoulds, woulds, and coulds.

As the average American is barraged with media daily, the accessibility of others' stories is greater than ever before. People from all over the world can freely share their stories in a space constituted by unlimited global access, causing many individuals to feel overwhelmed by the sheer scope of a community they are now part of via technology. Further explication of technological story-sharing and community are to follow, but in terms of identity categorization, my point is to highlight how this ease of hearing other

human's stories does not often get interrogated at the level of language. The language we use to communicate our everyday existences often goes unchallenged, read through lenses of familiarity when it deserves a more critical approach. We go about understanding identity too *easily*.

In defense of difficult language in theoretical texts, Judith Butler voices her concern that there are “occlusions or concealments that take place when we take ordinary language to be a true indicator of reality as it is and as it must be.”⁸ Taking ordinary language as reality demonstrates an important facet of the power argument of essentialism: language was developed under power structures that tend to suppress whatever cannot be expressed by the language itself. As I engage in dialogues with my peers, read op-eds on the internet, and scroll through activist accounts on social media, I wonder alongside Butler if “critical relation to ordinary grammar has been lost in [a] call for radical accessibility.”⁹ Obviously the writings of many are inaccessible to those with barriers to entry for education, and some texts are written with such insular language that their meaning is obscured to no avail. The radical accessibility Butler attacks is not in defense of difficulty for difficulty's sake. It is more pointing towards a tendency for everything to need to be easily digestible. From the news, to the language of everyday encounters, contemporary discourse is expected to make sense immediately, causing the representation of events and individuals to be dumbed-down.

Many members of my generation feel overwhelmed by the complexity of problems facing each other and the world encountered in daily reports of violent acts of racism, climate change predictions, off-the-cuff war announcements by the US president,

⁸ Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 327.

⁹ Ibid.

and so forth, as global politics become commonplace information thanks to the widespread distribution of the news. Many stress the necessity of accessible language to advocate for marginalized groups and those facing the ugliest of problems in current events. Activist efforts focus largely on representation, or, bringing forth the stories of marginalized groups to counter narratives that dominate public discourse (i.e. white, straight, cisgender, male, upper-middle class narratives). In these efforts to represent the experiences of marginalized groups, the pressing question is: whose stories are heard in an era of an overabundance of systemic oppression? And who really benefits from activist efforts?

Large terms get appropriated to mean things their authors did not intend to say, and identity is watered down to a categorical term-war of who can come up with the most succinct, intersectional definition of current political situations. Butler argues that we tend to yearn for accessibility to unify under “common sense,” or “the public sphere,” in order to “allow us to think and feel for a moment as if we all inhabit the same linguistic world.”¹⁰ But herein is the problem with discourse that revolves around who can use the best language to wholly encompass issues facing humanity. There is no common language that summarizes different human identities because the terms we use to describe identity categories do not account for individuality. Language neglects the other aspects of being human that mean just as much as how people identify themselves. Ironically, it is only through critical distance from and strategic mobilization of language that we can escape the conundrum that is language never being enough to capture the sum of all of our parts.

¹⁰ Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 329.

The urge to make activism as accessible as possible stems from the urge to abandon power structures altogether, which proves to be more utopian than realistic when the baggage of language is considered. Destroying power structures and starting anew, with total accessibility to all, implies a baseline human condition where we are all the same and all on the same page, something that a simple attempt at understanding other cultures immediately dismisses as not just impossible, but instinctively wrong. In understanding one another and minimizing identity-language constraints, one would be more inclusive to recognize that large-scale change comes from “resignification” of what is already written, or “replaying power” by “restating it again and again in new and productive ways.”¹¹ Instead of yearning for a common language that is accessible to everyone in order to completely eradicate power of one human over another (no small task by any definition), pragmatic identity politics necessitates always staying critical of the terms one is using to describe their identity and those of others, subverting expectations in recognition of the uniqueness of every individual, culture, group, and definition.

When I think of interpersonal ties, I think of my family members, close friends, and others influential to me through the channels of school, work, or what I involve myself in. These ties shape how I view myself and who I want to be. But the unacknowledged ties are just as strong as the ones that I hold near and dear in the everyday. I idolize certain celebrities for their impactful media contributions. I have an understanding of the lives of many authors to better interpret their work and attempt to understand where they are coming from. I relate myself to political figures, activists,

¹¹ Butler, “Changing the Subject,” 335.

those I dislike, workers I encounter, those driving past me on my way to the store, and everyone I am involved with in my daily life. I understand myself as a member of different communities, large and small, and see the sharedness of our experiences as ways in which we are the same. But I still have a sense of myself that I want to hold as my own, and this tension between personal and collective is also a tension between self and other. I can never escape my own mind and inhabit that of another, so it is difficult to ascertain what unifies us all as humans in ways that do not assume a similarity that I cannot confirm.

In staying partially distant from the terms one identifies with, individuals gain practice in relational understandings of themselves in a world composed of others. To say “my terms mean something unique to me,” or “my group identities mean something different to everyone else who uses the same terms” is the first step in acknowledging the social necessity of identity labels, while yielding to their ability to connect us with others and separate us from ourselves. The tension between identifying with a label and seeing how it is lived differently by all who occupy it points to the fact that we all grow up defining ourselves in ways that attempt to make us socially and politically recognizable, and our accrued understandings of selfhood are not completely our own. Identity formation begins with the actions of others and our positions in relation to them. Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the childhood learning of basic behaviors to ground the intersubjectivity of identity in the body. He states:

A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine. The fact is that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my

jaw, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of the same intentions. ‘Biting’ has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance.¹²

The baby will undoubtedly not remember the moment it learned to bite, or that the experience was fundamentally rooted in mimicking the actions of another. While taking analysis back to the time of early childhood may seem fruitless for understanding the ways individuals identify themselves and are identified by others in adulthood, they both stem from relational understandings of the world around one’s self.

When children learn behaviors through mirroring, they begin to identify as beings surrounded by other beings of the same species, who have similarities that allow them to stay alive and live with one another. Their lens of intersubjectivity widens year after year, coming to understand their senses of self as socially grounded and rooted in the story, or account, of their lives thus far. In developing a narrative account of one’s self, “the singular body to which a narrative refers cannot be captured by a full narration, not only because the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection, but because primary relations are formative in ways that produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves.”¹³ Butler’s “primary relations” define moments when one adapts intersubjectively to the world around them. Mimicking biting as a baby; others questioning “what kind of person are you?” or “why did you do that?”; the period of childhood when one’s parents are responsible for their entire life—they are the ties that, while not recoverable in memory, establish a dependence of self on others and render all understandings of one’s self to this dependency. To understand oneself, one needs to be able to deliver a narrative to others, though paradoxically this narrative is rooted in the

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 352.

¹³ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 20-21.

inability of the individual to fully acknowledge where their understanding of self comes from. The opacity is obvious when linked to moments one was too young to remember but becomes trickier to pin down when interrogating one's relationship to categories of social identification. How did I begin to understand that certain terms were my own? How do I understand myself in relation to others and their identity-groups?

Judith Butler responds to the schism between human and group-member by recognizing the political importance of identities alongside the more universalizable human condition of sorts that is all of our dependence on one another. Beginning with what humans all share in common—loss—she posits that “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed.”¹⁴ In uniting humans via loss, identity can have a base level of shared experience, where people understand what it is to have lost someone or something, and realize their potential for elimination at the hands of another. For while violence is unequally distributed, the base of everyone's identities rests in their capacity to be undone by others and the need to understand our lives as coherent narratives in address to others.¹⁵

Identity's potential rests in “the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain...that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide...that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”¹⁶ For we are not ever fully in control, however badly disillusioned narratives of the American Dream and rugged individualism cause many to

¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

¹⁵ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 30-40.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

think we are. More so, “because norms emerge, transform, and persist according to a temporality that is not the same temporality of [one’s] life, and because they also sustain [one’s] life in its intelligibility, the temporality of norms interrupts the time of [one’s] living.”¹⁷ Personal identification of all human beings depends on deeply embedded cultural norms—identity is negotiated within many different human histories, making it impossible to stray too far from norms without becoming unintelligible to others. While humans aspire to express themselves with words and descriptive categories, these subjective claims to language do not belong, individually, to each person who uses them.

All that we can know for certain is our dependence on that which is outside of us; our lives hinge on the physical and emotional vulnerability of exposure to each other—we are built off of one another. Furthermore, the ties we develop and stumble upon extend further than mere human relationships; crises in identity are crises of relations in space with other beings. Consequently:

...although this language may establish...legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally.¹⁸

The extra-bodily, empathetic binds that language fails to encompass in strict categories of identity are precisely the domain in which a potential for a universal human condition is waiting. For while one cannot *speak* for another, or even truly *understand* another based on their group identities and experiences, one can *be tied to* another, which, in a modern globalized context, is a powerful tie indeed. How can lines between communities be crossed in acknowledgment of our dependence on one another without the false pretense

¹⁷ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 35.

¹⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 25.

that we must first fully understand each other? In an era defined by the ungraspable scale of market-power, global warming, political instability, and wealth inequality, it seems to me that a reasonable starting point for personal meaning and coherence is the acceptance of the fallibility of shared identities. Climate change is, in many ways, all about making do with uncertainty, which has no basis if not in the mind of the individual. My personal stakes in identity discourse as vital to modern understandings of self are composed of many questions and a sense of ambivalence towards the inundation of ways in which one can understand one's self to be a part of a community. How can precarity in the Earth's climatic future turn us towards one another in reciprocal care and recognition—and how do we ensure shared understanding of a crisis that extends beyond the borders we have become so comfortable demarcating?

II. Anxious Displacement

Location Within Collectives

“I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is,” exclaimed Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, in her speech at the 2019 World Economic Forum.¹⁹ This is the problem with global environmental changes: *our* house is on fire, but *mine* (or *yours*) may serve more as kindling for future devastation. Some 2,000 houses were destroyed in the months-long Australia bushfires,²⁰ not so long after Californians lost around 11,000 homes in the Paradise wildfires.²¹ These are personal homes, lost at least in part due to the hotter, dryer climate of the entire planet in which every human has contributed to (our collective home). The concept of the ecosystem denotes homeliness in its etymology. “Eco-” comes from the Latin root “oeco-,” meaning “household”, and the Greek prefix “oiko-,” or, “house.”²² In the case of “system,” it roughly traces back to the Greek roots of “syn-” and “histanai,” forming “to cause to stand.”²³ Therefore, an ecosystem is a house and those things which make it stand. So, in a way, yes, our house is on fire, and this fire takes a large toll on the humans, animals, and life that keep it standing. But how can we stand on the frontlines minimizing the damages when the destruction is on such a scale that it is not feasibly placeable in our immediate surroundings? I unfortunately know as

¹⁹ “Our House is on Fire.” (speech, World Economic Forum, Davos, January 25, 2019).

²⁰ “Australia Fires,” *BBC News*.

²¹ Siegler, “The Camp Fire.”

²² “Eco-,” *Merriam-Webster*.

²³ “System,” *Merriam-Webster*.

little about Australian geography as the average American, and even though I grew up in Northern California, I cannot even begin to fathom the horrors of the Paradise fires, as I am not intimately acquainted with that specific area. Though, I did see aerial footage of the bushfires that glowed red from outer space. And my social media feeds were flooded with photos of devastation in Paradise, including a GoFundMe link to donate to a family friend whose entire house was lost to the flames. I am virtually in these places and I feel the events of the photos unfold in front of my eyes. I view them inside of my own home, but they are not *my home*.

Climate change brings with it this peculiar issue of placeability; I know I have a part in it, I know it is impacting me already, and I know it will only get worse, but I cannot place the specifics. The panoptic threat of destruction triggers a specific anxiety in me, a feeling some have coined the term “climate dread” to describe, though this dread represents much more than not knowing how the specific impacts of the crisis will impact me and those whom I love. It threatens my ways of identifying as a member of my communities, small and large, and showcases the schism between individual and collective in novel ways. The scale of potential global destruction will require new modes of recognizing each other and the new world we are inhabiting.

The blurry dissonance between personal and global homes characterizes what philosopher Timothy Morton refers to as a hyperobject, or, a thing that is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” Along with climate change in general, examples of hyperobjects range from “the Florida Everglades...the biosphere, or the Solar System,” and even “the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the

plutonium, or the uranium.”²⁴ These examples exhibit astonishing variation in scale, indicating that to examine the hyperobject is a task that confounds measurement, which is humankind’s idealized means of understanding the world. We measure to make clear. Upon further inspection, the clarity that measurement brings us is only clear in particular contexts. The hyperobject spans many different contexts, forcing us to acknowledge that the clarity produced through measurement is not an end-all-be-all understanding of the object at hand. Take plutonium for example; it is a radioactive element used for atomic bombs, and also for electricity. It eviscerates lives, changes the course of wars, impacts the health of nuclear power plant workers, lingers in soil for many lifetimes, and refuses to stick to a single scientific narrative. So, while humans can deduce its half-life, we cannot understand it as something that behaves within scientific and observational boundaries. In many ways, it confounds measurement.

Hyperobjects are distinctly human-involved, but not placeable as mere human influence on “nature”—an amalgam of agential forces acting on one another in ways that evade typical human understandings of time, matter, and scale. The hyperobject that is Earth under global capitalism and environmental devastation is on fire; it is our home. Yet the individual components of this fire that are and are not our fault are impossible to place on a micro level. Morton’s usage of “nonlocality,” appropriated from the realm of quantum mechanics, illustrates how climate change events dislocate individuals from the spaces they occupy and from their places within a global community. I argue that in this act of dislocation, humans are removed from the certainty of objective measurement, destabilizing binary-laden thinking about the social and environmental world.

²⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

Put in as simple of terms as possible, nonlocality is the reality made clear by physicist Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle wherein "an 'observer' ... makes an observation," and "at least one aspect of the observed is occluded."²⁵ Occlusion occurs because of the natural state of human interactions with quanta, a state of selective focus; when an observer focuses in on one quantum, it "comes into sharp definition at the expense of others."²⁶ As mind-boggling as it is to focus on the entirety of the climate crisis, quantum mechanics make clear the equally hazy task of becoming attuned to what goes on at the most micro-level of micro-matter. A quantum is defined as "any of the very small increments or parcels into which many forms of energy are subdivided."²⁷ Quanta are not just "very small;" they are the smallest observable particles in scientific reality. When even the smallest observable particles fail to yield to essentialism and expectation, the largest collections of matter (e.g. habitats, atmospheres, the world) become incoherent—this is precisely the characteristic of the climate crisis that leads to apathy and anxiety in the individual.

Exploring the modes of operation for quanta opened up the can of worms that is scientific uncertainty. But if essentialism never captures the whole of the individual within social identity labels, does an anti-essentialist approach to the climate crisis open up new possibilities for understanding and defining the world we inhabit? Scientific uncertainty necessitates critical distance between the observer/scientist and that which they are studying, indicating that viewing the results of experiments as objective scientific truths essentializes matter. An essentialist view of matter as a definite product

²⁵ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ "Quantum," in *Merriam-Webster*.

of its defined categories stems from essentialist views of the scientist as someone with proper training that can describe an objective reality through disciplined experimentation. One's identity as a scientist cannot be understood as an objective describer of reality; scientists come from many different backgrounds, social histories, and personal experiences which all play into how they denote the outcomes of their experiments. Nonlocality strains notions of localized, scientific truths, fighting essentialism in our understandings of the environment.

As a mode of conceptualizing space, nonlocality “deals a crushing blow to the idea of discrete tiny things floating around in an infinite void, since there is strictly no ‘around’ in which these things float: one is unable to locate them in a specific region of spacetime.”²⁸ When one observes a quantum, others blur into its surroundings. Superposition means that quanta exist in multiple states until they are observed, illuminating one quantum in a set of possibilities that is and is not happening all at once. In this sense, quanta cannot be located in spacetime because they are all a part of the observer-observed collective—locality identifies a part of a whole in one of its states, mistaking the locally observable for something discrete in one position. The lack of specifics in quantum observation point to the abstraction that is matter in space and time itself. Locality is a strategic assumption that one can look at the entirety of a thing, and that this thing can exist in one state, separate from all else:

Nonlocality means just that—there is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local. Locality is an abstraction. Metaphorically this applies to hyperobjects. The wet stuff falling on my head in Northern California in early 2011 could have been an effect of the tsunami churning up La Niña in the Pacific and dumping it on the land, La Niña being a manifestation of global warming in any case.²⁹

²⁸ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 42.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 47.

The California rain exists in the same limbo state as the Australian bushfires and our collective burning house: as climate change worsens, so do extreme weather events, but climate change is only a driver of extremity, not the creator of storms in their entirety. Natural disasters are caused by climate change in ways that are difficult to discern as in the end, there is no way for them to be localized as one thing or another.

In a confounding flip, Morton contends that “when it comes to hyperobjects, nonlocality means that the general itself is compromised by the particular.”³⁰ Though the particular is not the local, the particular is the manifestation of the general, meaning discrete “things” embody the climate crisis while not being placed solely within its bounds. Thinking without hard-and-fast boundaries is exactly the kind of thought that hyperobjects like the climate crisis necessitate. Where do boundaries matter? Better yet, why do boundaries matter?

Karen Barad, physicist-cum-feminist theorist, represents a unique social-scientific revolution in and of herself. After earning her PhD in theoretical particle physics and quantum field theory, she began to use her physics education to understand how the identity category of scientist has material and social baggage of its own.³¹ As a practicing “agential realist,” Barad wants to argue for an understanding of reality that reinstates the importance of matter itself. She states, “language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter.”³² By calling attention to matter itself, then utilizing it as a transitive verb, Barad illuminates matter’s role in determining what matters. In linguistic and

³⁰ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 54.

³¹ “Karen Barad.”

³² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 132.

cultural criticism, representationalism has been shunned in order to bring attention to performativity, which, “properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.”³³ Yet, in cultural conversations of performativity, still too much certainty is placed in the language we use to describe the roles we perform, and their histories.

In identity politics discourse, representation is appreciated as a political advancement (e.g. more women of color in elected office); more underrepresented points of view are a step in the right direction of giving everyone a voice. This is not mere representation by discrete individuals within concrete social categories—it is rather a collection of individuals with their own personal and collective identities working linguistically to fight the power structures that attempt to determine their possibilities. Performativity “challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things.”³⁴ The movement from representation to performativity illustrates the “power argument” of essentialism outlined earlier. When we do not let words and categories have concrete realities that they represent, we allow them to make clear the possibilities that exist outside of definite understandings of things. People have varying relationships to their categories; scientific outcomes are only the results of situational experimentation.

Bringing particular focus to measurement as a means of understanding the world, Barad posits that it reduces one to “a distinct individual, the unit of all measure, finitude made flesh, [one’s] separateness is the key.” In measuring the world, “nothing is too vast

³³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

or too minute,” and “man is an individual apart from all the rest.”³⁵ Through measurement, the line between nature and culture is clearly demarcated, and cultural affairs hold sway over any notion of the natural having a history and influence alongside the human. Barad interrogates the “division between nature and culture, calling for an accounting of how this boundary is actively configured and reconfigured.”³⁶ In honing in on matter itself, I am arguing that our cultural identity affairs will remain in the linguistic realm indefinitely unless we interlace concerns of physical matter with those of social equity. The climate crisis is the intra-action (to borrow Barad’s terminology) of naturalcultural forces put clearly in front of our faces, forcing us to come to terms with the ways in which we focus on human affairs at the expense of the world they occur within. Neologisms coined by Barad and Morton exhibit the instability of categories they aspire to make visible. They use language to deconstruct language and open it up to new meaningful possibilities. These are precisely the uses of language advocated for in Butler’s defense of difficult texts. By using new vocabularies to understand scientific realities, theorists perform what they are arguing. New ways of understanding the world must be somewhat difficult, because the easy, everyday language of science, identity, and the environment conceal the fact of the matter: most descriptive language that humans use attempts to make categorization stable and easily knowable. If we do not criticize the language we use to describe our world and each other, we remain in a static representation of the world, viewing things from one point of view instead of in flux.

In her definition of agential realism, Barad makes clear that “it is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena

³⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful.”³⁷ Her insistence on *intra-* instead of *inter-* hinges on *intra-*’s capacity to make things real via their connections, instead of as discrete objects that exist without each other. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle forever tied the observer to the observed, marking what is real as a combination of the two, not merely an observer and an observed phenomenon. With quantum mechanics, a common stance is not that nothing is real because classical physics is unstable, but more so that our definitions of “real” rely on the insistence that there is an objective, measurable world that can be studied, learned, and known by the human as observer. Much like relational understandings of identity, agential realism takes the knowable to be an *intra-active* force, with both sides composing one another in understanding. Agential realism merely takes relationality one step further by presupposing a connection between physical matter and matters of identity as foundational. In Butlerian terms, there is no “I” without a “you,” as my “I” is constructed in an account I must give to another.³⁸ But in the same regard, there is no “us” without a proliferation of matter around us that composes us as we compose it. In opening up the possibilities of matter, identificatory possibilities open up concurrently, and environmental and social realities unify in mutual establishment of one another.

The root of concerns over identity rests in essentialism; my categories are not strictly me, and my appropriation of them cannot capture the whole of what it means to be a person of “x” category. We argue politically for equity across the spectrum of categories (e.g. gay rights, latinx rights, etc.) and for the consideration of the environment in categorical terms as well (e.g. the clean air act, disaster relief, carbon emission in ppm,

³⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139.

³⁸ Butler, *Giving an Account*

etc.), but both are rooted in the materially essentialist definitions of these categories. Barad takes Niels Bohr's definition of apparatuses to be "macroscopic material arrangements through which particular concepts are given definition, to the exclusion of others, and through which particular phenomena with particular determinate physical properties are produced."³⁹ Our production of categories stems from our tendency to delimit the "real" through objective, categorized existence. This categorization is a product of an observer/observed binary in which we separate ourselves from phenomena as if they have an objective reality outside of ourselves. Bohr argues that "the cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation is enacted rather than inherent," meaning that humans decide where an object ends and they begin, or where one object differs from another. When one observes quanta, they are seeing a particular assemblage in space and time, not the whole of the phenomena at hand, which includes their ties to the object via observation in the first place.

Barad's simplest representation of agential realism takes the famous Stern-Gerlach experiment as an example. In the experiment, physicist Otto Stern attempted to pass a "beam of silver atoms" through an "external field created by magnets" in order to see if the "two possible orientations of the electrons orbiting the nucleus of the silver atoms would follow separate paths," one up and one down. In running the experiment, the results were not visible to Walther Gerlach (i.e. the path of the electrons was not visible on the plates past the magnets) until Stern looked over his shoulder, unintentionally breathing cigar smoke onto the plates. Stern smoked cheap cigars with a high sulfur content and the sulfur residue on his breath left "jet black silver sulfide

³⁹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 142.

traces” in the ending positions of the electrons.⁴⁰ Barad argues that the residue makes clear that “the outside boundary of the apparatus [does not end] at some ‘obvious’ (visual) terminus,” but rather boundary-making is a practice that involves “other apparatuses, including class, nationalism, economics, and gender, all of which are a part of this Stern-Gerlach apparatus.”⁴¹ The combination of Stern’s individual and collective identities generated scientific results in ways that typical understandings of an “experiment” do not allow for. Furthermore, it is not that his identity “caused” the experiment to go a certain way; the scientist and experiment, both a part of the apparatus, influenced each other’s possibilities through material interaction. On a working class salary, with scientific access to experimentation as a man, funding from the German government, and a smoking addiction indicative of his class status (cheap cigars have the highest sulfur content and were commonly smoked by working class individuals), Stern was more than just a scientist observing experimental variables. An outside variable (i.e. the cigar) that functioned as an extension of Stern’s being physically interfered with the experiment, generating unexpected results and, in turn, becoming a part of the experimental apparatus itself.

By looking at scientific experimentation as a form of knowledge-making that is enmeshed in social categories, individuality, and unexpected results, the role of the human learning things about an outside environment becomes muddled by their influence on one another. Science, through this lens, becomes much more about contingencies and interconnectedness than linear experimentation, causing traditional notions about the role of science in “studying the environment” to become unstable. Environment has as much

⁴⁰ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 165.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

sway and influence on identity as social categories and social interaction with other humans, bringing spatial influence into the conversation on identity as an equally influential category. In Barad's reading of the Stern-Gerlach experiment, "gender performativity, among other important factors including nature's performativity, was a material factor in this scientific outcome."⁴² She illustrates the lack of barriers between social identity and materiality, positing that identity-making is performative in more than the social realm. When one sees the performativity of identity as mere social reality, one reinforces the divide between nature and culture, failing to recognize how they are forces that enact one another.

Morton's notion of nonlocality takes the scale of Barad's observer/observed enmeshment to that of the climate crisis, showing how in issues of environmental concern there is not an objective standpoint from which to observe clear cause and effect within set boundaries. Barad's opening-up of science as a performative space where possibility comes from intra-actions between nature and culture helps locate the human's role in the climate crisis as more than a cultural plague against the natural. Humans, their relations to one another, and to the environment, have the potential to act as a generative force that defies boundaries and opens up new spaces for identification. What (and who) matters is always made clear by defining boundaries; the climate crisis serves as a wake-up call to essentialist categorization that only serves to isolate humans from one another and nature from culture. It is through the interplay of the two that new possibilities for viewing each other and the environment can focus on co-constitution.

⁴² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 168.

Boundaries and Scale

The nine planetary boundaries defined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre are as follows: (1) stratospheric ozone depletion (2) loss of biosphere integrity/biodiversity loss and extinctions (3) chemical pollution and the release of novel entities (4) climate change (5) ocean acidification (6) freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle (7) land system change (8) nitrogen and phosphorous flows to the biosphere and oceans and (9) atmospheric aerosol loading.⁴³ They represent roughly defined “boundaries” because in the event that certain thresholds are passed for each of them, uncertainty abounds for life on Earth. They are all sides of the same nine-sided die that when rolled may land with one side facing up, while the other sides remain intact demanding recognition in their own right. The die exhibits nonlocality in environmental change: interrogating one of the sides does not discretely change one aspect and not the others; the sides are all manifestations of environmental change in their own rights but remain an inseparable part of the whole upon observation.

As an example, look at stratospheric ozone depletion, where the key concerns to humans are a warmer planet and an increase in UV rays, which lead to higher rates of skin cancer, among other unfavorable results. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFC’s) were the leading cause of ozone depletion in the late 1980’s, so limits were set in the Montreal Protocol to ensure the ozone would heal to our benefit. The Protocol was successful in many regards, but the new class of chemicals that has replaced CFC’s—hydrofluorocarbons (HFC’s)—contributes to climate change by trapping heat in the

⁴³ “The Nine Planetary Boundaries.”

atmosphere via the greenhouse effect.⁴⁴ In dealing with the particular issue of ozone depletion, it leeches into the issue of climate change, which in turn impacts the remaining seven planetary boundaries. When we roll the die and choose what to focus on, it is often at the expense of all of the other sides. Since we set clear boundaries for each side and its unique issues, we forget that these boundaries are not physical barriers; we cannot work one issue at a time in a world run by interconnected systems. If humans see environmental change as a set of “boundaries” with “thresholds,” they see environmental issues as observable events within contained, natural systems, which can limit creativity in approaches to prevent further damage from being done.

The planetary boundaries are also occurring at a scale so large it is near impossible for an individual to wrap their head around them. And when one cannot understand the entirety of an issue, it feels futile to take individual action towards mitigating it, because alone one may be essentially powerless against the forces of systemic and collective damage. The most common discussion that I have with friends about the climate crisis usually spirals out of control from an initially individualistic standpoint. Take, for example, one’s dietary choices. There are strong ethical arguments for environmental veganism, as the animal agriculture industry is responsible for a large percentage of GHG emissions and deforestation. Beef alone “creates 1,984 pounds of CO₂e [carbon emissions] annually,” and “replacing beef with plants would reduce that figure 96 percent, bringing it down to just 73 pounds of CO₂e.”⁴⁵ But alternatives to meat consumption, namely soy and tofu, are also responsible for large amounts of deforestation, and the land required to sustain the entire world on vegan diets would call

⁴⁴ Nunez, Christina. “Ozone depletion, explained.”

⁴⁵ “Animal Agriculture’s Impact.”

for agricultural reform beyond an imaginable scale. So, yes, buying plant-based products may be a viable way to reduce one's individual carbon footprint, but what is its true salience in taking down systems that are so much larger and more complex than the individual that they would require legislative action to change? So, then, many return to the same conclusion that there is "no ethical consumption under late capitalism," or that the individual has no power under oppressive systems that are outside of their control. Furthermore, the transition period from an animal agriculture-based food economy to a plant-based food economy would move at a glacial pace—it almost seems a more daunting shift than from fossil-fuels to renewables.

This consistent guilt of the individual followed by overwhelming doom categorizes the sort of "loop form" that Morton put forth in an effort to describe modern ecological awareness. He states, "every time I start my car or steam engine I don't mean to harm Earth, let alone cause the Sixth Mass Extinction Event in the four-and-a-half billion-year history of life on this planet...[and] furthermore, I'm not harming Earth! My key turning is statistically meaningless." He is right in the notion that individually, actions cannot be seen as contributing to the greater issue of global climate change. But "when I [Morton] scale up these actions to include billions of key turnings and billions of coal shovelings, harm to Earth is precisely what is happening."⁴⁶ These variations in scale of participation by humans in driving global warming cause the individual to become "the detective *and* the criminal," aware of their complicity in this human-driven catastrophe yet guilty and confused as to how they could participate less to at least mitigate the damages.

⁴⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 8.

Scale broadens and shrinks in the mind of the individual facing climate change like sea water during high and low tides. Though in this rising and falling of pressure towards action the literal sea level is rising. Its urgency exacerbates all of the issues that feel at once distant and present to think about. Some figures count that over 22 million climate refugees have been pushed into exile since 2008, so this problem of scale is already immediately displacing many in ways unseen by most.⁴⁷ Individual guilt and inaction stem from the realization that climate change is at once happening and going to happen in new and unexpected ways, always spiraling out of control; the line between individual and collective is not just a matter of personal identification anymore. The largest cultural border permeated by climate change is that of the nation-state, a key identifier for humankind. With an impending climate refugee crisis of “between 25 million and 1 billion people by 2050,” humans are faced with new boundaries of national identity and what it means to be a member of a nation.⁴⁸ As entire populations may be displaced in the coming years, access to the land that is embedded in cultural histories may vanish forever for some, forcing (predominately) countries of the global south to migrate into the global north in search of semi-permanent relocation. Settlement outcomes of migrants range from “rejection” to “assimilation;” or “separation” to “integration;” indicating that relocation efforts lie on a spectrum of possibility.⁴⁹

As the category of climate refugee moves from concept to reality, it occupies new territory in the language of identity. Climate refugees force us to reconcile the instability of identity categories being rooted in deep senses of place, cultural history, and ethnicity.

⁴⁷ Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 131.

⁴⁸ “Migration and Climate Change.”

⁴⁹ McLeman, *Climate and Human Migration*, 39.

It is a category that forces us to take intra-active forces seriously, as stable living environments and groups of people generate culture together, shaping identity through community under rapidly-shifting circumstances. It is impossible to focus on assisting or relocating climate refugees without also focusing on ways to keep cultural identities intact. What it means to be a part of a certain culture will inevitably shift with movement, but these shifts can illustrate the co-constitution of nature and culture in profound ways.

The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe of the Louisiana Gulf Coast are the first climate refugees in the United States that are undergoing federally-funded relocation. Their home on the Isle de Jean Charles faces complete submersion due to climate change driven sea-level rise. The only path to and from their home is a road that sits precariously on top of the water, subject to flooding during any and all large storm events. It will soon be completely submerged. The island people started their home in the Bayou via exile when their ancestors fled the Trail of Tears, so the collection of tribes that reside there already had to relocate an entire history due to multiple displacements.⁵⁰ Now, an environmental equivalent of the Indian Removal Act is forcing them to relocate under life-or-death circumstances, and the question of maintaining culture and history remains open. As they negotiate with the Department of Housing and Urban Development over relocation funding, questions of what is to be preserved and how it will be remembered as tribal history in a new location are difficult to answer.

In 2018, some of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe met with the Smithsonian Institute to look over artifacts on display and review their purpose in tribal history. Tribal secretary Chantel Comardelle commented on the experience of reviewing cultural

⁵⁰ “Bienvenue, Halito, Welcome.”

artifacts, stating that they “had four generations there... [and Comardelle’s] kids traveled up with us, seeing this dugout canoe from our ancestors. With all the storms and such, we’ve lost a lot of things, including pictures. So, to see something of that magnitude that was preserved there, that was just amazing.” But these lost relics stretch further than a single recent history; Comardelle claims that along with “displacement of [their] tribe [from the Bayou],” their whole tribe already suffers from ways in which they were previously “displaced from [their] parent tribes.”⁵¹ The climate crisis poses a compounding dislocation from culture for all demographics facing instability in their living conditions. All that is held as stable and culturally sound is subject to disorientation under rising temperatures and extreme weather events that threaten to move large portions of the global population into exile. The main challenge of the climate change era will be recognition and justice for communities that are uprooted due to forces within and outside of our control.

While the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw people are forced into new settlements, they will have to negotiate their identities as collective histories and lost geographies all under the forces of settler colonialism. Their place in the precarious outskirts of the Bayou was already the result of westward expansion that exterminated many and pushed their people onto land that was not originally where they called home. And now the effects of emissions from largely imperialist, capitalist, and colonial nations are causing even the climate of the planet to force them to move. We need to accommodate this movement and mitigate its effects. But on a personal level, our task is to extend grace to communities facing a complete uprooting of the ways of life they know and have

⁵¹ Herman, “Prospects Are Looking.”

identified with. To face the crisis together, we will need to collaboratively redefine our borders and relationships with one another.

To comprehend this information from the position of an individual in the United States that is far removed from this history and physical location is no easy task, as the natural/cultural forces at play span many timelines of American history. The shifting of all nine planetary boundaries plays a part in the totality of destruction and displacement on earth, but the macro-level invisibility of this boundary-shifting is near impossible to acknowledge at the level of the individual. This inability to imagine stems from the fact that “for most of us as individuals, to leave the places that are linked to our memories and attachments, to abandon the homes that have given our lives roots, stability, and meaning, is nothing short of unthinkable,”⁵² argues author Amitav Ghosh. When your home is not literally being uprooted, the only way many carry on is by completely ignoring the possibility that it could be them who have to move. Portrayals of human strife, struggle, and perseverance tied into fictional accounts are what Ghosh focuses on, claiming that “the irony of the ‘realist’ novel [is that] the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real.”⁵³ This concealment, written through normalization of “the regularity of bourgeois life,” is referred to by Ghosh as “the Great Derangement,” which he notes will be the defining factor of the years leading up to the apocalyptic effects of climate change—deranged because, how are we managing to ignore all of the facts and realities of climate change unfolding right in front of our eyes? Literature, film, and media in general tend to portray events that seem dystopian and distant (sci-fi) or capture parts of the human condition by focusing on a main character

⁵² Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

going about their life in a certain time and place. It is very infrequent that stories take a more collective approach to understanding the world and not just its people.

If humans share identities via Barad's notions of "co-constitution" under "boundary-making practices," then the realities of climate change are already a part of us. The tamer effects of the climate crisis have been upon us for years, yet we discuss them like some distant fog, building up force until its final catastrophic attack. In the same way we approach identities as histories dislocated from the individual, we approach our individuality as a presence dislocated from our collective impact on the world around us. Setting thresholds distracts us from the fact that we have already surpassed those which are already incredibly alarming: 400 ppm of CO₂, nearly 1°C warmer than the mid 20th century, 8-inch higher sea level since 1880—the list goes on. Every decision that we make, on an individual and collective level, contributes to the change on a planetary scale; yet, the ways in which we interact with one another and the surrounding world still reinforce the notion that at the core of all interaction is an individual, surrounded by what is other. We are not *going to experience climate change*; we *are* climate change in all of its slow-burning terror.

The Techno-sphere

As individuals gain more access to information online every day, the public sphere of civic engagement broadens to a scale that, much like the climate crisis, is difficult to grapple with. Younger generations have adopted terms like “slacktivist,” or the ironic “social justice warrior” to attempt to encapsulate the anxious, content-sharing individual that takes to social media as a form of protest. People are so ambivalent about how involved they should be with social issues that many choose to shame those who broadcast their efforts instead of figuring out how best to personally participate. The line of thought for slacktivism goes something like “it is so easy to just share an article with your sphere of influence. Why not just do it?” But cynicism rules online spaces because many have lost faith in the individual’s capacity to enact any level of meaningful change. But the techno-sphere is largely concerned with virtue signaling, as people share posts largely to their own echo chamber of like-mindedness, with occasional disagreement that gets shut down in the name of morality. Ghosh states:

For the body politic, this vision of politics as moral journey has also had the consequence of creating an ever-growing divergence between a public sphere of political performance and the realm of actual governance: the latter is now controlled by largely invisible establishments that are guided by imperatives of their own. And as the public sphere grows ever more performative, at every level from presidential campaigns to online petitions, its ability to influence the actual exercise of power becomes increasingly attenuated.⁵⁴

Oligarchy, oligopoly, and corporate power structure the mechanics of the United States, wherein a handful of [rich, white] men control the entirety of the government and industry (and have larger carbon footprints than the majority of the world). Hopelessness

⁵⁴ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 129.

commonly lies in the fact that no matter one's own opinion, democracy is not alive in the sense that was promised to Americans. A vote can only influence a small cog in a giant capitalist machine, built to consume more and more until there is nothing left. Like the effects of climate change, these rich few feel distant, looming, and untouchable by the hands of the individual; they are largely invisible and difficult to locate.

All of the information available on global inequality to anyone at any time typically drives people towards either an ethical approach of "I have to learn as much as I can about as much as possible or else I am behaving immorally," or an apathetic approach of "no matter how much I read, I have no impact on issues as large as oligarchy and climate change, so I might as well stay disengaged." These polarizing approaches are inherent to the dynamic of internet space itself. French philosopher Marc Augé coined the term "non-places" to describe those zones in which the individual is radically removed from anthropological, or cultural, place. Non-places are characterized by "the acceleration of history" wherein many global events and many forms of information are accessible at any given moment.⁵⁵ The "mediation of words, or even texts," and the ways in which they conjure up "images" establishes "the link between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place."⁵⁶ Non-places contrast the traditional notion of anthropological place and in order to understand how they function, an adequate definition (and complication) of anthropological place must be given.

Though anthropological places are meant to be definite sites of discrete cultures, norms, and individuals who follow them (e.g. an island community in an ethnographic study), "to substantify a singular culture is to ignore...[the] complexity of social tissue

⁵⁵ Augé, *Non-places*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

and a variety of individual positions which could never be deduced from a cultural ‘text.’”⁵⁷ This is the standard identity issue of individual versus collective, and how the two relationally shape one another in their positions towards each other and towards outside cultures. I am myself, an individual, not completely because of the cultures I was brought up within, but also as a result of those surrounding me that were other than myself. But, the “element of reality” inherent to anthropological places is that “organization of space and the founding of places, inside a given social group, comprise one of the modalities of collective and individual practice.”⁵⁸ Though anthropological places do not have cut-and-dried boundaries, their influence is a part of the identity formation of individuals within their collectives. It is when places emerge that rupture a sense of standard cultural norms that the notion of the non-place takes shape.

Non-places consist of a removed sense of individual place and self, wherein “the individual can thus live rather oddly in an intellectual, musical or visual environment that is wholly independent of his immediate physical surroundings.”⁵⁹ Be it cell phones, large televisions in restaurants, wireless earbuds, or video chatting, technological spaces offer respite from the immediacy of daily life in places of social significance. I can be in my home watching videos of events happening anywhere in the world, or scrolling through news sites, learning about current events in another hemisphere. Immediate access to technology “decenters” individuals from themselves, generating new anonymous spaces with a lack of traditional cultural features. Augé characterizes this newfound awareness as a:

⁵⁷ Augé, *Non-places*, 41.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

“planetary...ecological...anxious one, that we all share a restricted space that we treat badly. At the same time, we are also aware of the gap, growing by the day, between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor; this planetary awareness is a social awareness, and an unhappy one.”⁶⁰

His dealing with the global as social, riddled with anxiety, encapsulates the daily lived fear of those not living in outright climate denial. All of the woes of nonlocality and scale plague the internet; personal blog posts share individual experiences, Facebook connects people globally with the click of a button, and news stories capture events subjectively at varying scales. At internet scale, the sheer insignificance of the individual manifests in the “acceleration of history” online. Videos go viral for a week, then largely disappear, one fad to the next. Hip issues to become informed about spread from profile to profile, becoming subject to ironic distance after their threshold of circulation is reached. Memes have made it possible for individuals to primarily interact with the news comedically instead of tragically, as many headlines now feel stranger than fiction. From banning plastic straws to movements encouraging shorter showers, the impact of the individual finds new ways to feel pertinent then promptly get shut down as inaccessible (e.g. many people with disabilities need straws) or unimpactful (e.g. eating less meat saves water at a rate tenfold that of shorter showers). Consistent online discourse and media surrounding how to be the most ethical in the precarious times of the climate crisis is rooted in notions of each individual “saving the planet” by any means possible.

But perhaps these means of resistance seem futile because they are initiated in a web of information far too large for authentic interpersonal relations. On the internet, one can see virtually anything, be and encounter anyone, with new information spreading every second of every day. The fluctuation of what “goes viral” and instability of what

⁶⁰ Augé, *Non-places*, x.

“takes up space” in the internet juxtaposes traditional senses of the passing of time and human history in social spaces. In actual places on Earth, “the social space bristles with monuments — imposing stone buildings, discreet mud shrines —...[that] give every individual the justified feeling that, for the most part, they pre-existed him and will survive him. Strangely, it is a set of breaks and discontinuities in space that expresses continuity in time.”⁶¹ On the internet, a viral article spreads like a wildfire, spreading to all corners of social media, news publications, and the general attention of individuals. But these articles are short lived, providing momentary education on important factions of individual lives, only to be subsumed by further content posted by the next person. There is a sense that monuments cannot live on the internet, as they get washed away in new swells of stories, data, and news reporting. Furthermore, literal monuments, the things that stand tall in historical significance, are threatened in areas subject to demolition and abandonment because of the climate crisis. Like the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, all groups with tethers to their cultural heritage will face questions of how to recover and move forwards when they are forced to move. Environmental displacement and uninhabitability threaten structural elements of human history, erasing parts of the past and causing a confusion in our sense of time and the notion of progress.

The most difficult aspect of the technological sphere to comprehend is that, although its presence is spectral and not physically a part of landscapes, the internet cannot escape a carbon footprint of its own. As cloud data storage becomes ever more popular, its environmental impact rivals that of other more obvious means of destruction. Contrary to its ephemeral nature, “the digital cloud has a physical substance: thousands

⁶¹ Augé, *Non-Places*, 49.

upon thousands of computer servers, which store the data that makes up the Internet,” and the power sources for cloud storage are primarily generated by fossil fuel outputs.⁶² Even the most conceptual usage of space (i.e. online storage space) has a physical presence on Earth, serving as testament to the footprint of human communication, history, and commerce. Reading an article on the internet about climate change causes spikes in emissions on a micro level, ironically reinstating that no matter how hard one tries to comprehend and mitigate their place in the climate crisis, *there is no escape*.

In zeroing in on technological communication and information circulation, I am arguing that the place in which concerned individuals primarily visit to educate themselves—and find out how to best get informed on individual experiences and points of view—falls prey to the exact same unfortunate reality as their actions and communications in literal, physical, spaces. Though the internet seems like an encyclopedic reference for the details of everything, it often acts as an informational conveyer belt, passing one piece of information after another off to the individual without leaving meaningful historical landmarks along the way. It is the embodiment of Augé’s “acceleration of history” in its sheer speed and magnitude, overwhelming individuals into inaction while alienating them from one another due to its virtual nature. Political engagements, dating arrangements, classroom lectures, job interviews, and many other forms of interpersonal interaction occur on the internet, streamlining human history and culture into one monolithic collective experience, separate from any physical remnant of anthropological place. In a sense, humans are already connected as one cultural collective under the lack of boundaries inherent to internet usage. But this collective serves to

⁶² Walsh, “Your Data is Dirty.”

assimilate everyone into mainstreamed modes of communication, nixing any chance of individual identification. We are not connecting with and understanding one another; we are communicating as summations of our online activity and accrued knowledge.

Photographic and video journalism are particularly abundant online, especially of images depicting atrocities and injustices. Major social turning points (e.g. 9/11, the Occupy Movement, Hurricane Katrina, etc.) are largely remembered through their presumable objective visual documentation, which is a defining aspect of life in modern times. Susan Sontag argues that photography has become “a global enterprise,” as “the photographer could be from anywhere,” with photographs capturing much more than an individual’s point of view from a specific place. In the advent of war photography, “the photographer was a rover, with wars of unusual interest (for there were many wars) a favorite destination.” However, Sontag also brings to light that “memory of war, ...like all memory, is mostly local.”⁶³ Again, the issue of documentation of oppression manifests in issues of individual versus collective. As soon as a war is photographed, and those photographs dispersed globally, the viewer is left to synthesize, sympathize, and take a side, regardless of the experiences of those on the frontlines. War becomes a universalized atrocity, where everyone is simultaneously desensitized and overwhelmed by the capacity of humans to incite violence on one another. Photography and other journalistic efforts of documentation essentialize interpersonal and national violence through their efforts of representation, mistaking journalistic point of view for a complete encapsulation of individual experience in times of turmoil.

⁶³ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 35.

The root of representational strife online can be identified as spectacle—human suffering, environmental degradation, immigrant rights violations, natural disasters, political proceedings, interpersonal activist interactions, and many other broadcasted events as spectacle. The phrase “performative wokeness” has garnered much attention in recent years, capturing actions taken on by individuals in an attempt to broadcast their moral sanctitude by publicly eschewing their knowledge about social justice issues. Millions of people share media depicting suffering and injustices every day, and these images do a lot to inform many online. But they also risk mistaking knowledge on issues for understanding of individuals, as there is no way to completely bridge representation and reality. Environmental disasters illustrate the complexity of portraying multi-faceted events as universal experiences. An event like the Chernobyl meltdown demonstrates that the fallout from disasters impacts individuals in irreducible ways. While some died of acute radiation sickness, others slowly lived the effects of high levels of radiation that seeped into their soils, crops, and lives. The instability and unique impacts of radiation are testament to the power of large-scale atrocities to unfold individually across a wide spectrum of narratives. There is no one takeaway that matters most and holds the most truth when examining atrocities.

The age of the internet is that of individual exposure to almost the entirety of the world, but also of each individual attempting to find their place within an intangible technological realm. Instagram is flooded with content encouraging disordered eating.⁶⁴ Facebook is home to hateful arguments regarding social issues. Twitter encourages headline-only reading, pushing users to soak up more and more content in its least

⁶⁴ Crawford, “Instagram eating disorder content.”

detailed forms. Even large, mainstream news sources like The New York Times encourage subscribers to read short daily briefings to “stay informed,” even if at a minimal level. Consistent bombardment of the individual with events in everyday life results in a general feeling that one should always know *more*, but also that one can never know *enough*, which, in a general sense, is true. One cannot be omniscient in regard to current events. But the pressure to be informed ties into a pressure to occupy the correct position within one’s own identity categories.

Yearning to become informed is a privilege in many senses; those whose struggles the news documents do not have the choice to observe events from an outsider’s perspective. Not being “into” politics is often lauded as privilege in action, as if you do not have to, it means you are probably pretty well-off to begin with. However, framing media consumption and levels of being informed on current events always as a matter of the intersections of privileges and forms of oppression never identifies the ways in which all of these issues are happening at the level of daily, lived experience for everyone. While countries of the global south are hit the hardest by the effects of climate change, members of the global north also do not have completely safe spaces to run to when their emissions catch up to them. Some of the wealthiest citizens of countries of the global north are already engaging in apocalypse preparation. As a New Yorker piece from 2017 explains, there are already private Facebook groups in which “wealthy survivalists swap tips on gas masks, bunkers, and locations safe from the effects of climate change.”⁶⁵ These one-size-fits-all privileged solutions to the personal impacts of climatic instability illustrate that while there are places to run to, there are not permanent solutions to the

⁶⁵ Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super Rich.”

devastation wreaked by global warming. This issue is one of community, national, and global concern, and unless we find new ways to identify it collectively, no amount of individual preparation will stave off its terrorizing impacts.

III. Abundant Possibilities

Returning to the Individual

Instead of relying heavily on micro-level practices to stave off the effects of climate change, individuals may be better suited to address their relationships to each other, collaboratively re-envisioning the world that we will all occupy together. Social identities generate from collective and systemic gatherings of knowledge and power. Their influence touches every facet of humanity, so their role in forming solutions to global crises will largely determine our future. Barad's reading of the scientific apparatus links individual agency, social identity, scientific practice, and objective reality in an intersubjective flux of determining what matters. It is indistinguishable from the scientist, as their individual positionality and material impacts (e.g. cigar smoke) influence the outcomes of experimentation. Bridging the social to the scientific begins to unravel the conflation of identity with an essential category of individuals with a concrete meaning and purpose. In a broad sense, the individual is always negotiated within collectives, whether these collectives are composed of other people, material places, or collections of matter. Watered down, collectivity represents all of our inescapable dependence on that which is outside of ourselves; it was never really outside—we are composed of it. The problem of comprehending global climate change is not an issue of correct terminology and quick-fix solutions but is deeply entrenched in the knowledge-systems we compose with one another. How can we call on our identities to make sense of the problems we face and take action in caring for the planet as one large collective?

Global-solution-gearred communist, abolitionist, and black liberation activist Angela Davis consistently refers to all issues of concern in the United States as issues of global concern. In an interview focused on framing issues of American racism globally, she contends, “racism is so dangerous because it does not necessarily depend on individual actors, but rather is deeply embedded in the apparatus.”⁶⁶ She goes on to explain that “initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences,” but now asks, “how do we talk about bridging various social justice struggles together, across national borders?”⁶⁷ And this particular question is what the climate crisis makes all too clear: if we are to take action against global change on an unprecedented scale, we must recognize the ways in which individuals can band together to form creative solutions. While there are never-ending suggestions as to how nations can strengthen infrastructure to prevent further warming (e.g. high-speed railways, transitioning to renewable energy, etc.) and to mitigate the effects of ongoing displacement (e.g. better levee systems, immigration reform, etc.), the climate crisis requires individual action at the level of understanding one’s place within the whole of global issues.

In approaching the position of the individual facing impending climatic catastrophe, I am not making a sweeping argument for a form of individual action that can prevent certain forms of inevitable change. Regardless of what we do, there will be sea-level rise, temperature rise, glacial methane release, deforestation, and general devastation beyond the capacity for human imagination. But herein lies the exact position from where the individual, inundated with information, can choose to broaden their understanding of collectivity on our shared planet. The position of the individual is of

⁶⁶ Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 17-18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

social commitment, bonds, and identificatory understanding, and these are arenas where we must band together on a daily basis to make sense of our shared, precarious existence.

Alongside arguing for individuals to speak for themselves, Appiah contends that “our largest cultural identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves.” He continues, “you do not get to be Christian or Buddhist, American or Ghanaian, gay or straight, even a man or woman, without recognizing that each of these identities can be lived in more than one way.”⁶⁸ Though challenging, for an individual to claim any identity categories for themselves (or have them as labels forced by others), they must recognize that although the terms have social and political histories, they cannot diminish the person underneath their descriptions. While each word means something different to the individual that uses it, each word also holds the potential for an opening of new possibilities. Appiah claims that “identities without demands would be useless to us,” as they “work only because...they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too.”⁶⁹ What the climate crisis makes all too clear is that we are not free from constraints, small or large, environmental or social, but that we have the potential to negotiate boundaries in ways that enrich the planet collectively, including all of its communities.

To mobilize a movement for more freedom regarding a specific identity subgroup means one must acknowledge the limits of language in depicting the whole of individual experience. Collective action needs definitions, but these definitions need not explain the entirety of a faction of people. The aim of a more just, more climate-crisis-

⁶⁸ Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*, 216.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

attuned movement that mobilizes identity as its fighting factor means aiming for recognition, not mere representation. Because, to get to the heart of the matter, when one represents an identity group, *what* are they representing? Namely, they are representing their desire to be acknowledged, for their voice to be heard, for a seat at the table in discussion, and for the valuing of their individual life and those around them. Perhaps the only thing humans are in control of is the ways in which we represent our experiences to other people and the forms of collective action we can take together to counter threats to individual freedoms and lives. But this representation gets more difficult as one focuses on the spaces individuals now have to identify themselves within. The precarity of the world under climate change, the vastness and lack of cultural place inherent to the internet, the futility of echo chamber political discussions in the everyday, and the theatrical performance of political turmoil via news media all encourage individuals to take a stance and advocate for it. Unfortunately, the climate crisis offers no such linear, progress-rooted notions of being on “the right side of history,” as the fundamental spaces in which human identities have been formed are all subject to radical alteration and relocation in the coming years.

We cannot imagine the world under four degrees of warming because change at that level would uproot almost the entirety of what it means to be a human being among others. At massive levels of climate migration, borders between nations would necessarily need to become much more permeable and divisible, destroying the notion that nations are a concrete identity category of their own. Instead of lingering in imagery and rhetoric of apocalypse, humans may be best suited to think of times when catastrophe struck at the level of their individual lives, and how community responses worked to

minimize suffering. More hope comes from recognition of the co-constitution of identity between individuals along the entirety of their lives. As Butler made clear, I am not *I* without *you*, since identificatory coherence comes from mutual dependence and intersubjective understanding. It is different for me to be queer, male, able-bodied, and white in the United states than it would be for someone else to occupy those same categories in another country, but this difference is not concrete and unrepresentable. Difference forces attempts at recognition, recognition which expands beyond representation and shatters beliefs in categorical permanence of identity.

An Issue of Imagination

The origins of intersectionality trace back to Crenshaw's foundational efforts for legal recognition, but her complication of identity through description of intersectionality as akin to a traffic intersection is also of great importance. Feminist Jasbir Puar tackles Crenshaw's traffic metaphor through the lens of intersectionality as encounter or assemblage. Puar cites Crenshaw stating that "discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them." Furthermore, the origins of causation for an accident are hard to trace, with hit-and-run situations, confusion over who "started" the accident, and sometimes abysmally confusing physical evidence of the encounter.⁷⁰ In Puar's reading, "identities are multicausal, multidirectional, liminal; traces aren't always self-evident." The "halting of motion produces the demand to locate."⁷¹ This demand for locating scenes of interaction between and across identities is what drives the continuous opening up of identity vocabulary. Intersectionality emerged as a theory in order to address identificatory aspects that are interwoven in complex ways. But in furthering the notion of individuals being formed through scenes of address, one can begin to see all of the spatial factors that play into the ways certain identities get overlooked and oppressed.

The urge to locate remains a momentous urge, as location is precisely what many contest in issues of climate change and its implications for global identity. In Morton's use of nonlocality, the micro-macro merging of environmental events can be seen as

⁷⁰ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 149.

⁷¹ Puar, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess," 59.

something not locatable, and these spaces where nonlocal environmental distress occur are exactly the places of human identity-formation; they are everywhere. How will people form national identities when nations disperse, open, and close their borders? What will it mean to be “from” somewhere that no longer exists (or at least, does not exist in the same way it did before)? What will liberation movements look like under new geographic conditions for human existence? These questions all bring to attention the importance of environment in any understanding of social identity and as the necessary context for understandings of selfhood. Climate change calls forth new ways of conceiving the makeup of matter, bridging nature and culture as material assemblages that have different possibilities through the context of different encounters. In Barad’s matter-oriented intersectionality identity is not cause and effect and has no rigid starting point, but instead develops meaning through the intra-action of nonhuman and human actors. Puar strengthens the language of intra-action by framing intersectionality as a “becoming,” where individuals “become-intersectional” through the assemblages they establish and encounter.⁷² All of these theorists’ attempts to make boundaries less rigid in thinking identity converge at a refusal to think that at any point, in any time or place, individuals can claim an identity as a specific collection of categories and nothing more. Identity is freed from constraints and encouraged to take shape continuously throughout encounters. So, what sort of implications may an encounter-based understanding of identity suggest on a larger scale?

As often as individuals use their identity as a lens through which they view personal interactions, identity is also the largest unifying tool used by collectives to

⁷² Puar, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” 63.

achieve their goals. Individual attempts at recognizing one another serve as protection from political abuse of identity categories for national benefits. Since the language of identity can mobilize the masses, it is more often than not used as a method of concealment. Governments weaponize identificatory terms to propel movements that may not be serving the communities that they are claiming to care about. In becoming an individual who views identity through encounter, one must keep a critical eye on government support for groups they claim to advocate for.

In order to bridge relations globally in mutual recognition, identity cannot be the only steadfast method of political appeals during the era of climate change. Time and time again, matters of identity are showcased as end-all-be-all issues pertaining to particular groups, erasing more global and boundary-free contexts that problematize any issue of local importance. In extreme cases of political weaponization of identity, it functions as a mobilizer for state-driven violence, like that of the war on terror or the Israeli annexation of Palestine. The phrase “homonationalism” was coined by Puar in an effort to examine how heteronormativity has created homonormativity, which allows for specific (i.e. white, monogamous) queers to be state symbols of equality to mask xenophobic, nationalist projects. Through analysis of the US’s war on terror “‘you’re either with us or against us’ normativizing apparatus,” Puar makes clear that binaried, sexualized narratives of terrorism have “rehabilitated some—clearly not all or most—lesbians, gays, and queers to U.S. national citizenship within a spatial-temporal domain” of homonationalism.⁷³ This “rehabilitation” is apparent when one walks through the downtown of their city and notices pride flags hanging in boutiques, or when large

⁷³ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 38.

corporations like Chase Bank march in pride parades. When I visited Seattle for their yearly pride parade in June of 2019, my friends and I left the parade early due to conflicting interests and a general corporate feel to the marching. There were cops marching with rainbow American flags, trailed by pride-decorated cop cars. Alaska Airlines flew a huge blow-up pride airplane alongside marching employees that were presumably largely just queer allies. The marching seemed to represent more of a rainbow corporate assimilation instead of any actual support, aid, or legitimate recognition of queer US citizens. While it is easy to glance at this growth of pride parades nation-wide as an advancement in mainstream acceptance of queer communities, what it truly represents is a phony spectacle of feigned acceptance by the government, corporations, and people who have no idea of what the actual circumstances of queer life in America are.

In a more obviously oppressive manner, the Israeli government commonly masks their state-driven violence as queer acceptance through homonationalist appeals. They advertise places like Tel Aviv as gay havens for tourism, wherein gay people can come and experience a radically accepting space in Israel. Meanwhile, Palestinian queers suffer from the theft of their land, violence towards their people, and forced assimilation as a result of the Israeli Defense Force. Their blanketing of Israel as the place to be for gay travelers and Israelites serves to create a false global image of Israel as benevolent and progressive. Furthermore, their efforts are assisted by other countries with vested interests in securing global allyship. US marketing executives assisted in the Israeli government's "Brand Israel" campaign in an effort to "depict Israel as 'relevant and

modern.”⁷⁴ The modernity they broadcast as authentic Israel does not acknowledge the actual communities that they are abusing the identities of for their own purposes. Though much of Israel could easily be read as queer-friendly, this friendliness only extends to certain demographics; it is at the expense of the Palestinian as “other,” not worthy of recognition.

Puar notes that homonationalist projects necessitate “imaginative geographies,” which are spaces where “certain desired truths become lived as truths, as if they were truths, thus producing material traces and evidences of these truths, despite what counterevidence may exist.”⁷⁵ These “truths” become common-belief descriptions of identity that restrict individuals to normative notions of freedom. The projects make possible that “the contradictions inherent in the idealization of the United States as a properly multicultural heteronormative but nevertheless gay-friendly, tolerant, and sexually liberated society can remain in tension.”⁷⁶ Liberal understandings of identity thus begin at a false promise of freedom, as this freedom is embedded in imaginative geographies formed more in US governmental and military interest than the interest of the groups that compose different identity positionalities. Intersectionality becomes locked in a framework of US-specific queerness and many are forgotten at the wayside, or falsely told they live in a country that is wholly accepting and free. It is misleading to believe that queer people are free to identify as they please and have access to the same rights as everyone else when national interests abuse their identities to invade and attack other countries or support invasion by the hands of other governments. The danger of

⁷⁴ Schulman, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing.’”

⁷⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

accepting seemingly intersectional activist efforts like those of “Brand Israel” is that they do not reflect intersectionality as an encounter. The actual experiences and needs of individuals across the globe are overlooked to create an image of national identity-acceptance.

Imaginative geographies are precisely the issue at hand when dealing with global solutions to environmental crises. In the coming years, identity-based appeals will be crucial to securing rights, cultural histories, and citizenship for those affected and displaced by the climate crisis. If we are unable to view identity through a non-essentialist lens, individuals will go long unacknowledged in their struggles and demands for recognition. The climate crisis makes all issues of human/environmental concern feel non-locatable, as it deals with scale and spatial change in a variety of liminal spaces. To negotiate proper solutions to the crisis, we must have an understanding of the needs of individuals and our relationships to one another that is always shifting. We can never accept one country as wholly accepting of different identity groups, because the nature of identity politics is critical distance to the terms we use to describe ourselves and our communities. Israel is not a radically accepting queer country, because no country is in a definite sense. There is always more that can be done to understand marginalized groups, and their identities can never be understood as stagnant aspects of the individual members that can be accommodated and supported in their entirety by collectives.

Luckily, the language of imaginative geographies can also be observed in a boundary-breaking way. Instead of succumbing to fake notions of spaces that are wholly accepting of different identities, we can put in work towards imagining a world in which individuals have the potential to live safe lives of their own choosing. We can imagine a

future world, in which the terror of climate change caused us all to work that much harder to recognize issues faced by people from every background. We can take something as looming as the impact of climate change and use it to understand our connection to one another and all of the ways that people are connected, even in our differences. If, starting at the level of the individual, we accept that our existence is only secured through others' recognition of ourselves, we can start to view the crisis not as something with one definite path towards salvation, but rather a practice in fighting for equitable living across identity categories.

Boundaries and borders are porous. They were never as rigid as humans have thought them to be, which is exactly what the climate crisis forces us to acknowledge. In order to understand each other's experiences as multi-faceted, constantly changing, and largely rooted in encountering each other, one must see past the seemingly progressive rhetoric of "intersectional" movements for global queer equality, or global feminism. Solving global problems requires encountering the people facing oppression and forced movement, whether that be human-caused (e.g. invasion) or climate-driven (e.g. migration). If climate change offers us anything in terms of global progress, it illuminates the need to not recognize one group's goals as the goals of every self-identified member of that group around the world. While largely overwhelming to think through the struggles of each individual member of each individual group, that is not the task at hand. Rather, the individual's responsibility in the climate crisis will begin in their interactions with others and the efforts they put forth to recognize different positionalities as not boundary-producing, but encounterable and ever-changing. Engaging in dialogue with anyone other than one's self requires navigating histories that far surpass each individual,

position one differently in relation to others, and do not adhere to restrictive categorization in terms of their possibilities.

Identity is largely the problem of the current time, constantly subject to critique, reshaping, and individual points of view. The big question is: what is its place in our lives? The climate crisis offers us new frameworks for understanding the boundaries we occupy and what they mean for ourselves and others. The starting point for an anti-essentialist understanding of the crisis begins with less essentialized versions of the selves we identify as. When approaching identity, we must acknowledge our own limits and possibilities. Talking about climate change necessitates different identities coming together to frame issues of global importance at the level of the local. Coming to terms with our own identities must occur as self-confidence and an extension of grace towards those we may never fully understand. Instead of attacking individual stances towards climate-driven issues, all work done to combat the issue can be appreciated. While recognizing that a small group of state actors largely determines the outcomes of our emissions and contributions to global climate change, us individuals still have the power to attempt to understand each other and share our stories with one another.

Climate change offers the world ways of seeing each other that surpass mere combinations of categories and recognize that possibility exists at the meeting point of differences. Revolutionary scientific outcomes come from accidents. We need not have blind faith in the “progress” of science, social identity, and politics, as notions of progress will rapidly shift in the unstable world that results from global environmental changes. Recognizing the issues at hand necessitates both an acknowledgement of history, and in some cases an abandonment of history in order to create a just future that extends outside

of set borders. Issues of immigration are issues of shifting identity under climate change. Thresholds of emissions are mere projections of potential outcomes of events far beyond imaginative powers. I have found myself stressed over concerns of identity because coming to certain answers about any categories ends up concealing other truths by nature. The climate crisis is a crisis of identity, showing us all that the methods of identification we have put so much stake into are subject to transformation in circumstances humans have never faced before. We must be ready to embrace uncertainty, abandoning notions of definite identity configurations to begin with. Though individually identity means a multitude of different things, the climate crisis is one of collective comradery, asking not how we can understand each other fully, but rather, can we embrace difference and re-signify what it means to live in one large place as many different people?

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