ABSTRACT

The (Re)Emergence of Eco-Fascism: White-Nationalism, Sacrifice, and Proto-Fascism in the Circulation of Digital Rhetoric in the Ecological Far-Right

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Environmentalism is no longer the sole domain of progressive and leftist politics. A recent uptick in violent outbursts by white nationalists espousing eco-fascist political beliefs indicates a troubling trend in environmental politics. Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch shooter, and Patrick Crusius, the El Paso Shooter, explicitly utilized argumentative strategies taken from eco-fascist literature bases. The virality of a misanthropic Twitter thread sparked the largest discussion of eco-fascism ever. Fascists on the platform Telegram espouse the belief fascism is inherently natural. By studying the rhetorical techniques and appeals of eco-fascist digital rhetoric, this thesis adds to an emerging conversation regarding the (re)emergence of eco-fascism.

The (Re)Emergence of Eco-Fascism: White-Nationalism, Sacrifice, and Proto-Fascism in the
Circulation of Ecological Far-Right Digital Rhetoric.

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Introduction

On March 15th at 1:28 pm, Brenton Tarrant posted on /Pol/, an 8Chan subforum

known to be a gathering place of the alt-right:

> Well lads, it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real-life effort post. I
> will carry out and attack against the invaders, and will even live stream the attack
> via Facebook.[1]

Within 12 minutes of Tarrant beginning his live stream, Tarrant listened to "Remove

Kebab," a song associated with far-right internet subcultures, and told his viewers to

subscribe to PewDiePie.[2] At approximately 1:40, Tarrant entered the Al Noor Mosque in

Christchurch, New Zealand, and started unloading bullets into innocent people, people

who kneeled praying. The atrocity was shocking in New Zealand and around the world.

It would be comforting to believe that 8chan immediately condemned this live-

streamed murder and confronted the dangerous potential of *shitposting,* turning into

"real-life effort posts," but that was not the case.[3] Anonymous commenters, colloquially

known as *anon*, responded with joy. The first anon responded with a meme captioned

"press f to pay respect;" Another anon stated, "HOLY SHIT!!! THE DIGITS OF GOD,"

referencing the 14 words written on his gun.[4] His choice in music was recognized by one

user who laughingly remarked, "HAHAHA HE PLAYED REMOVE KEBAB EN

ROUTE! I'M DYIN' OVER HERE!"[5]

News media noted 8chan's important role with headlines such as "What is 8chan,

and why did the New Zealand shooter use it to announce himself to the world?" and

"8CHAN USER CLAIMING TO BE NEW ZEALAND SHOOTER POSTED 'SEE YOU ALL IN VALHALLA' BEFORE MOSQUE MASSACRE."[6] Yet, the media did not fully realize the scope of the problem until, John Earnest, the Poway Synagogue Shooter, and Patrick Crusius, the El Paso Shooter, also posted manifestos on 8Chan.[7] Those manifestos clearly modeled what Tarrant had done on 8chan and set in motion the possibilities of further copycat murders. Yet, only the Crusius shooting forced Cloudflare, the web host broadcasting behind 8chan, to finally drop 8chan from their hosting services.[8]

After the public had a chance to read these manifestos, news agencies and investigative journalists noticed an environmental subtext in *The Great Replacement,* Tarrant's Manifesto, and *The Inconvenient Truth,* Crusius' Manifesto. Beneath blanket shitposting and rehashings of white genocide, Tarrant and Crusius argued that immigration, population growth, and even globalized capital (code for anti-Semitism) ensured environmental devastation. In the words of terrorist Patrick Crusius, "our lifestyle is destroying the environment of our country" and creates "a massive burden for future generations."[9] Tarrant ripped into conservatives for allowing the natural world to be "industrialized, pulverized and commoditized" and letting the left control "all discussion regarding environmental preservation."[10] Surrounding these manifestoes' environmental subtext is a set of grievances that could easily be copy-pasted from one shitpost to the next. Insurmountable corporate power and increasing immigration threatened the future that Crusius argued he deserved. Tarrant contended immigration was "racial replacement" because not a " single white nation" reached replacement levels compared to "higher fertility rates of the immigrants."[11]

Debates surrounding an emergent "ecofascism" emerged. Google searches focusing on "ecofascism" massively spiked shortly after both massacres.[12] Many shockingly pondered a single question: how could environmentalism and fascism intertwine to inspire a right-wing terrorist attack? Amid this shock, popular press hot-takes quickly surfaced. The *Washington Post* ran a piece in their Science section highlighting how "white supremacists have latched onto environmental themes, drawing connections between the protection of nature and racial exclusion."[13] *GQ* released an editorial suggesting, "If governments don't deal with climate change… then attacks like the ones in El Paso and Christchurch will likely come more often."[14] Naomi Klein, writing for *intercept*, emphasized a "wrenching contrast" between 'youth climate strikers who had gathered at the exact same time" and Tarrant's massacre.[15] On the opposite end of the political aisle, Alexander Epstein, the author of *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, asserted "there's no real logical reason that somebody accepting the environmentalist ideology should not endorse mass shootings," because "if you have an anti-human goal, you've eliminated any rational basis for opposing people who kill humans."[16]

Figure 1.1 Tweet from Thomas Schultz. Screenshot from Know Your Meme. March 17, 2020.

Unsurprisingly, media attention to ecofascism faded as news cycles moved on from the recent murders and mass killings—that is until a world-wide pandemic began to invoke Malthusian messaging on Twitter. On March 17th, 2020, Twitter user Thomas Schultz argued decreasing water and air pollution proved "We're the Virus" and "Coronavirus is Earth's Vaccine." Schultz's tweet quickly entered virality, acquiring over 290,00 likes and 70,00 retweets.[17] After achieving viral status, Schultz's tweet began to receive memeification and critique. Countless accounts began to post tongue-in-cheek iterations of "Nature is healing, we're the virus" with absurdist photos.[18] Simultaneously, Nick Estes, and other users, critiqued the original tweet as nothing more "eco-fascist garbage dressed in New Age clothes."[19] Afterward, Google searches involving "ecofascism" sharply rose to an all-time peak.[20]

On face, Tarrant and Crusius' ecologically justified mass-murders are categorically distinct from a viral tweet. Nevertheless, it would be naïve, disingenuous, and dangerous for any communication scholar to ignore eco-fascist trends. Seemingly disparate trends can emerge from similar social cleavages. What these moments reveal is an anxious right-wing environmentalist ideology circulating through digital ecosystems. Often-times, an essential motivator for right-wing environmentalism is an affective sense of anxiety regarding the extinction of white life. In a quintessential example, American Renaissance, a popular alt-right publication, anxiously published an article asking "What Does it Mean for Whites if Climate Change is Real?"[21] A similar question motivated Patrick Crusius to proclaim that he had been preparing his whole life "for a future that does not currently exist." In both cases, the anxious frame of questioning makes inaction unthinkable.

Violence outpouring from white anxiety will likely accelerate as climate change exceeds the realm of denial. Denial is possible when climate change is a problem for a future generation.   Millions of climate refugees displaced as early as 2035, or even at present, on the other hand, are hard to deny, even for the most devout conservative.[22] Decreasing crop yields will likely radicalize rural communities.[23] In a sense, Solastalgia, the emotional distress resulting from climate change, primes communities towards reactionary messaging.[24] Anxiousness, even when separated from explicit dog-whistles, offers up the possibility for right-wing cooptation. Even on its own terms, right-wing environmentalist messaging provides a temporal threshold for existing fears of white genocide.

As far-right rhetors enmesh themselves in environmental discourse, they draw upon a long history of conservative environmentalism to justify climate anxiety. Eco-fascism is not new. Even the current variant of overpopulation centered eco-fascism only emerged after John Tanton, the Colcom Foundation, the Weeden Foundation, The Blair Foundation, and the Smith Richardson Foundation spent millions to build the argumentative foundation for Malthusian environmentalism.[25] Prior to Tanton, Nazi Germany in the 30s and 40s and Madison Grant in the early twentieth century espoused ethno-nationalist environmentalism.[26] Jorian Jenkin was "not only an enthusiastic farmer, but also a stout fascist who became an important player in Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists during the 1930's," Mosley being someone directly referenced in Tarrant's manifesto. [27] Mosely's reference inside Tarrant's manifesto implies a need to move beyond mere historicization, and to instead trace eco-fascism into the digital sphere.

Alt-right digital communities are already a battleground to constitute the future of an ecologically centered far-right. To this day, 4chan still regularly hosts /TKG/ threads on the importance of Ted Kacyzsnki's work, most collapsing into thinly veiled invocations of eco-fascism.[28] Even the most normie of alt-right nodal points, Altright.com, released an article arguing that due to the environmental movement's overwhelming whiteness, environmentalism might be the "the last bastion of implicit whiteness," where whiteness is already assumed as a compelling rhetorical reference point.[29] The Green Brigade, "an organization consisting of openly accelerationist, militant environmentalist members focused on tearing down the system that exploits our

people, land, and animals," utilized the social media platform Telegram to recruit members for terroristic activities.[30]

For these reasons, this thesis attempts to analyze the circulatory networks wherein eco-fascism emerges in the far-right. I am interested in discovering the rhetorical arsenal of eco-fascist discourse and how the tactics developed in digital enclaves circulates to broader publics and entrenches eco-fascist goals. To do this, I study a set of manifestos, threads, tweets, and Telegram channels to chart out the circulatory processes of eco-fascism across multiple platforms. These texts will then provide a basis to draw conclusions surrounding the argumentative structure of eco-fascist discourse as it circulates across different platforms. Through these texts, I highlight how decentralized eco-fascist *adjacent* entry points are bound together through a rhetorical construction of natural law as justifying fascism. Although the particular manifestations of eco-fascist rhetoric differ slightly across different platforms, eco-fascism, as a signifier for an ideological grouping, is stitched together by ontologizing fascism as an inherent condition of the natural world. This framework offers an explanation for how eco-fascism infiltrates environmentalist messaging and white-nationalist groups at the same time while radicalizing both towards violence. Through this process, my goal is to provide the communication discipline a more thorough account of an emerging violent ideology of eco-fascism while also accounting for how eco-fascist rhetoric uniquely radicalizes members to violent responses.

Research Questions

Internal to this inquiry, this thesis asks a few foundational research questions. One, how does eco-fascist discourse draw upon already existing argumentative

infrastructure — internal to environmentalism, eco-reactionaries, and other social movements — to cohere its arguments? Two, in what ways does popular discourse surrounding eco-fascism misidentify the rhetorical strategies and origins of eco-fascism? Three, what are the enmeshed ideologies, counter-publics, and adjacent forms of discourse within eco-fascism? While this thesis is not reducible to these research questions, this prospectus offers these three questions as entry point into the study of eco-fascism, and right-wing environmentalism more broadly.

I begin from the premise that eco-fascism is not an organized movement, but an organizing point for reactionary ecological thought. Question one locates a gap between the popular press, and even academic accounts of eco-fascism and the reality of eco-fascist subcultures. Eco-fascism is simultaneously understood as "we're the virus," a cause of mass-shootings, a universal characteristic of all environmentalism, and an oxymoron. Simultaneously, eco-fascism is paradoxically assumed to be a coherent ideological movement with stark distinctions between eco-fascist and non-eco-fascist discourse. In reality, the moniker of eco-fascism is a hodgepodge of contradictory ideologies. Eco-fascist channels include messaging of anti-civilizational primitivism, over-population, the coming race war, the inherent Nazism in nature, idolization of Ted Kaczynski, and the canonization of Tarrant and Crusius as patron saints.

The stakes of misunderstanding the nature of contemporary eco-fascism are too high. One, allowing for eco-fascism to turn into an amorphous Malthusian goo, makes the term mostly pointless. Two, different understandings of eco-fascism necessitate different responses. Three, a thorough understanding of what constitutes eco-fascism is crucial to knowing and tracking eco-fascism's rhetorical appeal. Four, entry points to eco-fascism

are not necessarily the same thing as eco-fascism, and misconstruing the two is a recipe for a communication failure.

Question two highlights an essential element of eco-fascist argumentation: its reliance upon existing environmental argumentation. Shared argumentative infrastructure is essential to understand the persuasive elements of eco-fascist discourse to environmentalist audiences. Argumentation is a web of connected topoi, premises, conclusions, and suppositions that shuttle arguers towards certain arguments. While right-wing and left-wing environmentalism offers profoundly different accounts of the world, it would be disingenuous to deny any cross-over between them. As will be highlighted in chapter one, acceptance of sacrifice, misanthropy, anti-growth, and even anti-capitalist environmentalism exist to some degree inside left and right-wing environmentalism.

Question three is predominately interested in how white-nationalism, and other right-wing ideologies, refract environmentalism via explicit racialization. Insofar as the theory of white genocide is an organizing point for white-nationalism, environmental apocalypse provides a potential foil for white-nationalism to locate whiteness as derived from a pre-existing natural order. Different named groups—such as India and Jews—can, and already have begun to materialize as the collective scapegoat for white-nationalist anxiety. If this is left unaccounted for, it is likely the progressive environmentalism will be left unprepared to deal with the danger of right-wing cooptation. Together, these three research questions limit this thesis's scope to the racialized rhetorical tactics eco-fascist rhetors employ to affirm an environmentalist politics.

Literature Review

I draw on the following research fields to analyze an emerging eco-fascist ideology: environmental communication, environmental history, extremism studies, and memetic communication. Although there is little, if any, work on contemporary eco-fascism within the communication discipline, this thesis enters into a larger conversation regarding the nature of extremist communication and emerging environmentalist movements. Accordingly, I will draw upon research inside and outside of the communication discipline to sketch the parameters for understanding an emerging phenomenon of eco-fascism.

Communication scholars have robustly engaged in the discourses of an environmentally tinged far right, which situates my thesis within an ongoing and significant conversation. Environmentalist discourses often rely on nationalist imaginaries. [31] In the context of Welsh and Scottish nationalism, Paul Hamilton argues that "nature can be part of a particular civic nationalism's distinctiveness."[32] Contrary to the toxic nationalism of eco-fascists, Hamilton believes "green (civic) nationalism may represent a new and potentially helpful ally in the ongoing struggle to protect the earth."[33] Such civic nationalism emerges through what Anthony Smith describes as "ethno-scapes" where-in "terrain and people have exerted mutual, and beneficial influence over several generations." [34] Portuguese and Italian invocations of fascism invoked the land as an essential element to "regenerate the people." [35] Within this thesis, I will highlight how eco-fascist messaging relies upon "ethnoscapes" in a very similar fashion by arguing that returning to nature solidifies a white future.

Figure 1.2. Image shared in Telegram Channel Deep Ecology. Februrary 13, 2020

The historical legacy of environmentalism offers far-right rhetors an easy inroad to the hijacking of pro-environmental messaging. As Alexander Reid Ross and Emmi Bevensee contend, "leftists have proven susceptible to the false promises offered by green fascism," to such a degree, "there is a chance that a significant authoritarian shift in the green movement could take place."[36] Although an authoritarian shift has yet to occur, far-right organizations and individual rhetors have already begun mapping out the blueprint for such a shift. As Ross-Reid and Beneveese highlight, the National Revolutionary Front, an offshoot of the International Third Position, has routinely deployed "a strategy of 'entryism,' or infiltrating environmentalist, animal rights, and anarchist groups."[37] Members of the far-right have produced fake Extinction Rebellion posters, a prominent environmentalist group, espousing anti-immigrant tendencies, which

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forced Extinction Rebellion to deny their association with the posters.[38] During the 80's and '90s, Edward Abbey accumulated power with *Earth First!*, while calling for a Malthusian application of Deep Ecology.[39] Savitri Devi, a prominent deep ecologist, and animal rights activist, acted as a spy for Nazi Germany in India during WWII.[40] This thesis contextualizes this process of appropriation to an emerging ideological milieu.

Communication research studying the rise of far-right environmentalism *has* to investigate the topoi wherein eco-fascist argumentation emerges, the social conditions setting the stage for eco-fascism, and the particular rhetorical tactics utilized to radicalize. If either of these is left unquestioned, then emerging extremism is likely to slip through the cracks, as highlighted by the easy transition between Ted Kaczynski's acolytes and eco-fascism. Waiting to confront eco-fascism until it is too late is too on the nose for contemporary environmentalism. For emerging research to be useful, it must operate on a predictive and descriptive framework where the researcher accounts for a continually shifting discursive landscape. Anything else will be unable to distinguish when eco-fascist propaganda changes to fit the times.

This thesis contributes to a fledgling scholarly conversation on the emergence of eco-fascist discourse. Although small, this conversation provides analytical tools and qualitative parameters to begin the research project of this thesis. Brian Hughes' article "'Pine-Tree' Twitter and The Shifting Ideological Foundations of Eco-Extremism" provides qualitative analysis of "Pine-Tree Twitter," or a networked ecosystem of "eco-fascists, neo-luddites, radical accelerationists, decelerationists" who identify themselves to each other by placing a "pine-tree emoji in their names or bios."[41] Pine Tree Twitter was put through a "two-round snowball sample" utilizing two accounts with

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#PineTreeGang in their bios as the seed accounts.[42] 100 of 985 Twitter accounts became the sample of the study and were subsequently broke up into 5 different typologies: "(1) "'skullmasks', that is, accounts espousing the visual grammar or rhetoric of clandestine eco-fascist groups"; "(2) Ted Gang, that is, accounts that idolize the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski"; "(3) Pagan, heathen or occultist,(4) Christian Orthodoxy"; "(5) 'Channers, that is, accounts making use of the argot and iconography of the 4chan and 8chan boards." [43] Hughes argues that understanding "Pine Tree Twitter, can help to make sense of emerging extremists risks in an age of increasing environmental shocks."[44] This thesis begins with Hughes claim that "qualitative categories currently available do not fully capture whatever new ideological mixtures are to be found in Pine Tree Twitter" as a justification to analyze center research inside of the rhetorical techniques of eco-fascists rather than a sole focus on ideological commitments. Such an addition provides necessary nuance to the study of eco-fascism.

For this analysis, this thesis draws upon Michael Loadenthal et al.'s chapter "Accelerating Hate: Atomwaffen Division, Contemporary Digital Fascism, and Insurrectionary Accelerationism" to provide ample resources and tools for understanding and accounting for the rhetorical techniques of far-right digital discourse and even eco-fascism.[45] While partially in the context of Atomwaffen division, Loadenthal understands the circulation of far-right memes surrounding the concept of the "siege-pill" as a process of "memetic warfare" wherein "networks self-organize, recruit, and propagate through social media, using esthetic images and provocative language, drawing from multiple traditions (e.g., white power, skinhead, alt-right, Identitarian…), while seeking to intensify extreme violence against enemy communities."[46] Some of these processes of

memetic warfare include guides to "Siege-planting" in black and brown neighborhoods, cultivating poisonous and harmful landscapes that harm vulnerable communities."[47] Beyond the realm of the "siege-pill," this thesis extends Loadenthal et al's claim that "effect of this rhetoric aims to polarize discourse" towards "normalizing political violence" by analyzing the shifting landscape of eco-fascist rhetoric.[48]

The predominant form of communication within eco-fascist sub-cultures remains the circulation of memes. Recent work within rhetorical studies has offered memes as a necessary object of study. Memes exceed the traditional framework understood via the rhetorical situation through a continually shifting set of semiotic coordinates. Memes are remixed continuously, imitated, and circulated such that the message has been severed from an original context. Rhetorical scholar ES Jenkins states the study of memes necessitates a "shift in focus from the actual (texts and contexts) to the virtual (the capacities for affect and affection structuring an encounter)."[49] Consequently, an affective account of eco-fascistic memes offers the capacity to describe how memetic communication within specific ecosystems can prime individuals towards violence.

Memes are not merely a singular tool in the war of propaganda. Writing in the context of the Alt-Right, Heather Woods and Leslie A. Hahner argue "Memes are not simply one tactic for the Alt-right—they are the primary rhetorical mechanism grounding its broader work and linking outsiders to its radical views."[50] A website like 4Chan is a "web-based community where public culture is produced and negotiated, in large part through the creation and dissemination of memes."[51] Memetic fluency is thus the language wherein contemporary organizing emerges in the Intellectual Dark Web.[52] Said negotiation of public culture in real-time, however, allows for far right memes to "both

prey upon and redraw the lines between friend and enemy."[53] Insofar as the constant remixing and repurposing of memes is a condition of memetic fluency, a concerted effort on the part of far-right rhetors can habituate resentment by utilizing "memetic weaponry" to entrench "the lines of attachment to white resentment."[54] Alternatively, in simpler terms, memetic fluency, over time, can hijack already existing associations in meme trends towards explicit racist dog-whistles. Whereas Woods and Hahner describe memetic warfare as triggering the libs, this prospectus offers an investigation of how eco-fascistic memes can scope out the terrain of ecologically justified warfare. As the far-right becomes fluent in environmental language, memetic fluency will ensure the circulation of eco-fascism outside of the Intellectual Dark Web.

All the while, memetic fluency becomes a constitutive factor for the organization of white-nationalist affective publics, or "public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds."[55] Emergent enclaves of white-nationalist eco-fascism are constituted through affective appeals. *Nature, Community*, and *The Collapse*, as organizing points for emergent enclaves, primarily emerge through affective appeals, which are made sense of through memes. Simply put, Zizi Papacharissi argues, "structures of feeling open up and sustain discursive spaces where stories can be told."[56] At the same time, the circulation of memes can shift the affective structure of communities. In a sense, memes offer up the possibility to funnel anxiety into discrete affective publics. Nevertheless, without understanding eco-fascism as profoundly affective, rhetorical studies would lack the explanatory power to understand *what grants rhetoricity to white futurity.*

Actualize Industrial Collapse

Learn survival skills. Honour the Earth. Destroy Civilization. Bring about sustainability. Go FERAL.

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Figure 1.3. Image shared in Telegram Channel EcoGang, Originally from Channel Returning to Nature. July 18th, 2020.

Affective publics can, and are, organized around multiple affective appeals, but, for eco-fascism, none are more apparent than the apocalypse. Apocalypse, and the victimhood territorialized by the apocalypse, constitute a process of identity, as highlighted by Casey Ryan Kelley. Writing in the context of the reality tv show *Doomsday Preppers,* Kelly suggests, "envisioning the collapse of civilization offers an opportunity to reimagine the individual, the family, and the local community as the new social architecture."[58] In an affective sense, fascination with apocalyptic collapse,

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environmental or not, relies upon an understanding "that the future is indefinite but that hegemonic white masculinity — aggression, self-reliance, stoicism, competitiveness — remains necessary."[59] As an organizing point for affective publics, survivalism is "commonly associated with an array of white militias, hate groups, and other doomsday cults who gained public attention through high-profile acts of violence (Timothy McVeigh, Ted Kaczynski) or tragic confrontations with law enforcement (Branch Davidians at Waco, Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge)."[60] Memes, such as the one above, ought to be understood as a medium that appropriates rhetoric of collapse to sustain an eco-fascist affective public that mobilizes users towards violence.

As highlighted above, this thesis gestures to a developing dialogue on environmentalist tendencies in the far-right. Although it takes many forms, right-wing environmentalism poses a stark threat to environmentalism and society. Through the appropriation of environmentalist terminology, the production of memes, and white-nationalist messaging, eco-fascism can shift the conversation away from a necessary just-transition. If left unthought, the circulation and production of memetic fluency in the ecological dark web will likely expand beyond the scope of our control.

Method and Proposed Structure

The methodology of this research project begins from the supposition that effective scholarship must simultaneously account for what *constitutes eco-fascist discourse* and what *eco-fascist discourse constitutes.* These are two distinct methodological inquiries necessary to account for the rhetorical structure of eco-fascism. If either inquiry is left unanswered, then the scope of eco-fascism will be left misunderstood. My ability to answer these questions relies upon tracing disparate threads,

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even if they seem inconsequential, to provide a more thorough account of where and how eco-fascism emerges.

An essential element of this inquiry is a displacement of the rhetorical situation towards a theory of rhetorical circulation as a basis for rhetorical criticism. Catherine Chaput argues, instead of searching for a single text, rhetorical studies should move towards an understanding of circulation to "replace our liberal belief in the social world as a collection of sites that adds up to some rational whole—the rhetorical situation— with a neoliberal understanding of the social as a living totality of events which flow, change, and cohere in both predictable and unpredictable ways—a rhetorical circulation." [61] As is evident in the case of Crusius and Tarrant, extremist modes of communication are enmeshed in a web of online discourse. As McGee famously said, "the fragmentation of our American culture has resulted in a role reversal, making *interpretation* the primary task of speakers and writers and *text construction* the primary task of audiences, readers and critics."[62] An approaching focus on circulation would understand that not only were these manifestos posted on 8Chan, but their precursors and their circulatory potential were actualized across the internet. The ideological commitments of Tarrant and Crusius are a hodge-podge of right-wing conspiracy theories, white nationalism, and environmentalism — most likely acquired through presence in a litany of right-wing counter publics. Those who consume Tarrant and Crusius also do so through a similar circulatory ecosystem. Consequently, this thesis is interested in the distinguishing characteristics of those ecosystems. To perform this analysis, I have isolated three specific case studies to identify critical nodal points for the circulation of eco-fascism. In

these case studies, I highlight significant trends, nodal points, and affective publics

emerging through the circulation of right-wing imagery.

 In specific, this thesis deals with discourse in a few separate venues: Twitter,

Telegram, 8Chan, and 4Chan. Although the etiquette and norms of these four venues are

distinct in foundational ways, analyzing how eco-fascism circulates across different

platforms provides essential insight into the nature of eco-fascist discourse. Analyzing

only Telegram or 8Chan would attempt to universalize a particular instantiation of eco-

fascism into a totality. Similarly, manifestos provide important analysis, but are

constrained by narrative form.[63] As evidenced by the Alt-Right, far right arguments

changed to meet the circumstances in which they emerge. Argumentative and rhetorical

texts are anything but isolated moments of representational meaning. Texts build upon

prior-texts, and in many cases, acquires their meaning through enmeshment with other

texts. This thesis provides essential insight into the potential for eco-fascist radicalization

by analyzing the circulatory relationship between texts. In particular, this thesis will be

split into three separate chapters: Saint Tarrant and Saint Crusius: The (Re)Construction

of Argumentative infrastructure in Online Discourse; Eco-Reaction: "We're the Virus"

and the (Mis)Construction of Eco-Fascist Argumentation; and The Fascism of Nature:

The Aesthetics of Speaking for The Trees.

Chapter One begins with 8Chan, and 4chan to a varying degree, as a place to trace

the argumentative lineage of eco-fascism. Tarrant and Crusius' manifestos, alongside the

circulatory ecosystem they emerged from, provide critical information into how eco-

fascists produce environmental argumentation. In this chapter, I apply work by Scott J.

Varda and Catherine Palczewski's work on argumentation to argue eco-fascism ought to

be understood as an argument constantly negotiated through digital discourse. This argumentative negotiation then is traced from Madison Grant to John Tanton, to Tarrant and Crusius' manifesto to the sanctification of Tarrant and Crusius. Through this analysis, I hope to provide a more thorough account of Tarrant and Crusius's iconicity, or constitutive figural location, in far-right communities.

Twitter, for the purpose of chapter two, can be understood as a case study for normie discourse surrounding eco-fascism in debates over the statement "we're the virus."[64] Specifically, the sample for analysis includes both tweets arguing coronavirus reveals that "we are the virus" and those who argue "we're the virus" is an eco-fascist trope. In addition, memes mocking the original "we're the virus" tweet are also part of the analysis. Twitter, for the purpose of this chapter, represents how partial knowledge of eco-fascism, potentially from press reports on Tarrant and Crusius, misconstrues entry points with eco-fascism and the implications of that misapprehension for rhetorical processes. Although misanthropy is a part of some eco-fascist discourse, this discourse constitutes misanthropy as the defining characteristic of eco-fascism. At the same time, "We're the virus" offers the opportunity to analyze how environmental discourse can respond to eco-fascist talking points. This analysis highlights how eco-fascism, as a term of art and organizing problem, is constructed and reconstructed through virality as an ever-expanding term.

Telegram is the primary channel I will use to locate discourses related to emerging eco-fascism. Telegram is an encrypted message app supported by Pavel and Nikolai Durov. The platform ought to be understood as a unique discursive ecosystem for understanding radicalization post-8Chan. In 2020, Telegram reported upwards of 400

million users.[65] The structure of Telegram, as studied in this thesis, is a unidirectional circulation of eco-fascist propaganda. Although large portions of Telegram's organizing element exist in direct messaging uses, this thesis deals with the public-facing aspect of these communities. Public channels, generally, lack many deliberative or conversational aspects. Admins, or moderators, of public channels can post videos, images, or text posts to anyone who subscribes to their channels. Posts from other channels may be shared to an admin's channel, thus leading to a connective web between similar channels. Some bots allow a comment section on individual posts, but comments are by no means ubiquitous in these right-wing telegram channels. Some channels have public groups chats, but the membership of these chats tend to be significantly reduced — most likely due to the safety of anonymous lurking in channels.

Even with a limitation of public channels, Telegram provides ample resources for analysis. Leslie Hahner argues the alt-right, and other right-wing reactionary movements, have shifted away from hyper-visible sites, such as YouTube, towards encrypted apps like Telegram.[66] While these Telegram channels individually lack the reach that 8Chan, 4Chan, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media websites, they harbor some of the most extreme examples of right-wing reactionaries. As the admin of Terror-Wave Refined, one of the largest Telegrams channels, argues, "you would achieve a lot more" with "100 fanatics down with our cause" rather than "10.000 weekend warriors."[67] Atomwaffen, one of the most dangerous fascist groups, distributes recruiting and training videos through Telegram.[68] Slovak's Siege Shack, only accessible on the desktop version of Telegram, routinely disseminates techniques of sabotage, blueprints for weapons, guides for Operational security, and a litany of other dangerous guides

Therefore, chapter three takes up Telegram as an emerging medium for radicalization via memetic communication. Accordingly, Telegram ought to be thought of as not only a circulatory network of propaganda but also as a space for the avant-garde of far-right environmentalism. Channels such as "🌲🌲 eco-gang" 'Slovak's Siege Shack," will receive close textual and aesthetic analysis throughout chapter three. In specific, chapter three will provide a multi-modal analysis of memes constituting the eco-fascist movement.

Collectively accounting for all these ecosystems will be a difficult task; at the same time, it is a task of paramount importance. To my benefit, this thesis does not have to provide a holistic treatise on the inner-workings of each platform. My task is slightly smaller. Rather, what is required is a study of how eco-fascistic argumentation travels in digital ecosystems and how such rhetorical resonances shape broader understandings and potential mimicry. It is my hope that these three case studies will provide insight to this emerging phenomenon.

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CHAPTER TWO

Saint Tarrant and Saint Crusius: The (Re)Construction of Argumentative   infrastructure
in Online Ecofascist Discourse

Introduction

On March 15th and August 3rd of 2019, seventy four people lost their lives to

mass-shooters espousing white supremacist and eco-fascist sentiments. Sixty three more

were left injured. Countless more were left wondering if they would be the next target of

the next attack. The perpetrators, Brenton Tarrant and Patrick Crusius, respectively, were

quickly arrested without the need for lethal force, as many white-mass shooters have been

detained. Their manifestos still circulate across far-right communities, and their personas

have achieved a level of iconicity within those same online communities that molded

them.

Crusius and Tarrant quickly entered public conversation and media coverage,

resulting in eco-fascism achieving commonplace discussion for the first time in recent

memory. What once had been relegated to the domain of progressive environmentalism is

now a contested space between the far-right and the left. Traditional news media and

digital communities play a role in navigating and making sense of these fraught moments,

and the digital fragments left behind in the wake of terrorist violence. During recent

years, there has been a wealth of environmental fascist discourses that nurtured actors

such as Tarrant and Crusius. It is rhetorical scholars' role to parse out these fragments to

make sense of the effects and changes within eco-fascist argumentation. Only by

knowing the contours of eco-fascism, and our ability to make sense of them through media ecologies, can society fully grapple with the emergent threat that is eco-fascism.

It would be easy to believe eco-fascism results from opportunistic propaganda from far-right activists masquerading as genuine environmentalism. This is not the case. Environmentalism is not, has never been, exclusively the domain of progressive ideals. Indeed, eco-fascism, and conservative environmentalism, has a long and storied history dating back to the 20th century. As shown throughout the introduction, environmentalist sentiments, and environmental aesthetics, have played a key role in nationalist imaginaries. Although contemporary eco-fascist discourse departs from the benign civic nationalism of yore, it would be a misnomer to ignore the genuine environmentalist sentiments organizing the philosophy of eco-fascism.

Any scholar studying eco-fascism ought to begin from the assumption that eco-fascism has been — and continues to be — remixed, circulated, and appropriated by different groups who have very different purposes and goals. Brenton Tarrant is not John Tanton and John Tanton is not Madison Grant. Brenton Tarrant differs from even Patrick Crusius. Far-right environmental rhetoric, digital and political, tends to function as a hub, organizing an eclectic grab-bag of rhetors who might have little in common. Deep ecologists, white-nationalists, anarcho-primitivists, and even some mainstream environmentalists are bound together through shared argumentative and rhetorical threads. For example, Patrick Crusius and Paul Ehrlrich, author of *The Population Bomb*, might share similar fears of overpopulation, but likely disagree on every other political stance. Ted Kacszynski's presence within eco-fascist communities might seem to be out

of place, due to his critiques of Nazism, but his location begins to make sense when eco-fascism is understood as an organizing hub.

Nevertheless, eco-fascist argumentation is at least partially defined by its outsider status within the mainstream environmental coalition. As environmentalism has continually cemented its supposedly progressive bent, the social factors influencing what is acceptable within environmentalist coalitions has shifted. Overpopulation, immigration, explicit eugenic ideals, and the inherent unnaturalness of non-white races has been continually identified as racist and colonialist. Far-right environmental activists are simultaneously horrified by environmental destruction while also frustrated by being called racist when they decry overpopulation, immigration, and cultural differences as important issues demanding focus. This has led to figures like John Tanton to create countless non-governmental organizations with the intent to shift the dialogue towards the acceptability of these eugenics-based ideals. The idea being that these non-profits would shift the public opinion towards an anti-immigrant environmentalism.

Argumentation theory, as well, has adapted to interrogate contemporary shifts within political discourse. As Catherine Palczewski elaborates, arguments ought to be understood "as a mobile, almost living creature, a relation of a series of symbols to one another."[1] Arguments are anything but independent signifiers and are made meaningful through their enmeshment within overlapping spheres of argument, cojoined by distinct counter-publics. Based on these factors, the very same argument can have contrasting meaning when presented in different rhetorical situations. Where an argument has traveled over its collective half-life, as arguments tend to get repackaged and repurposed when the need once again arises, is profoundly important to the meaning of an argument

itself. Scott J. Varda succinctly highlights this phenomenon in the context of the debate over states' rights, "When an argument is deployed, it confers traces of itself to all other iterations of that argument." To further my analysis of eco-fascist argumentation, I forward an understanding of argumentative infrastructure by drawing upon Palczewski's contention that arguments can "be words and pictures, pictures and pictures, words and bodies, bodies and bodies, bodies within a context, contexts in combination."[2] In this case, argumentative infrastructure refers to the logical presumptions, historical events, influential figures, tropes, meme formats, argumentative topoi, and even political infrastructure to make and circulate arguments inciting eco-fascist violence. Collectively, these resources and the circulation of claims shape the argumentative infrastructure of eco-fascism.

Within the parameters of argumentation theory, this chapter is interested in the subtle shifts that have emerged between collective understandings of eco-fascism and the argumentative infrastructure employed by eco-fascist rhetors to construct their argumentative appeals. To do this, I analyze the circulation of eco-fascist argumentation in three spaces. First, I situate Tarrant and Crusius in relationship to media coverage surrounding the environmental subtext of these mass shootings. I argue the immediate knee jerk reactions provide insight into circulatory paths contemporary eco-fascism takes, as well as hinting towards its' ideological lineage. Second, I contextualize the emergence and presence of eco-fascism within Tarrant and Crusius' manifestos to a historical lineage of conservative environmentalism known as environmental restrictionism. The relationship between eco-fascism and environmental restrictionism complicates, but does not disprove, how news media have covered Tarrant and Crusius in the aftermath of their

violent mass-shootings. Third, I highlight how the digital circulation of eco-fascism preceding and succeeding these mass-shooters relies upon two distinct argumentative strategies, vilification, and sanctification. Each of these textual artifacts are themselves arguments or are implicated in the construction of argument.

Highlighting these shifts, however, requires more than a singular focus on a particular medium for argument, and indeed requires expanding the scope of argumentation theory into new mediums. To declare a singular textual artifact as the referendum on eco-fascism would only provide a myopic understanding of eco-fascism while falling prey to misdirection. The goal is not to highlight how Tarrant and Crusius are somehow exceptional, or even out of the ordinary within their own sub-communities; rather, I hope to reveal how Tarrant and Crusius represent the natural conclusion of violent ethnonationalism colluding with a hyper-naturalistic environmental ethos. For this purpose, I argue the argumentative tendencies of eco-fascism demand renewed analysis in two distinct mediums, manifestos and memes.

Eco-Fascism or Environmental Restrictionism

In the aftermath of the Christchurch and El-Paso shootings, most of the coverage focused on three elements of Tarrant and Crusius' actions. 8chan (and the inherent digital element of these murders), the inherent racist nature of these shootings (Islamophobia and anti-latinx sentiments respectively), and the environmental subtext (and its discontents). These elements are by no means exclusive, as many editorials included an element of all three. Editorials such as these are integrally important to a collective understanding of an event, as they provide members of a community an opportunity to make sense of why gratuitously violent events happen. So much so that coverage of

events provides an insight into popular conceptions of mass-shootings, and the arguments behind the shooters themselves.

In fact, the production of news implicates and takes part in argument construction. What gets reported on and what does not is informed by a litany of subjective factors — relevance, audience, newsworthiness, etc. — and frames an issue to the audience. For example, the lack-thereof a public discussion regarding 8chan prior to a mass shooting is indicative of a general disregard of white-nationalism until it bursts into public view. As well, the mass-coverage of mass-shooters might be connected to the emergence of copy-cat killers.[3] Speculation regarding the causes of events such as Christchurch and El-Paso are themselves some of the first iterations of argument regarding an event. As the decreasing distinction between editorials, reporting, talk-shows, and columns continues apace, it becomes more necessary to provide comparative analysis between coverage of an event and the truth behind the event.

8Chan and the racial nature of these shootings function in a relatively self-evident fashion in news reporting. 8Chan's role within these crises was utilized to highlight the danger of anonymous message boards. For example, the *National Post* indicated "8chan was spawned by #GamerGate" after "4chan belatedly clamped down on such hate-filled forums."[4] CNN, among others, released an article shortly after the El-Paso shootings highlighting how Crusius was the third mass-shooter to post a manifesto on the website.[5] Many of these pieces tended to be directed towards a general audience, with a general push toward moderation and regulation of online subcultures. When analyzing the racial nature of these shootings, journalists tended to separate these shooting from non-racialized shootings. The *Texas Tribune* insisted on the need to understand "the

conversation was not just focused on gun violence and a need for reform, but also about the rise of white supremacy and the urgency to address it." The *New York Times* ran an article with the headline "El Paso Shooting Suspect's Manifesto Echoes Trump's Language." These connections between white-supremacy and mass-shootings are important because they isolate El-Paso as a distinct event from the repetition of mass-shootings.

On the other hand, the coverage surrounding the environmental sub-text of Christchurch and El-Paso proves contradictory and enlightening to understanding the relationship between environmentalism and eco-fascism. Within this coverage there are two prevailing frames. First, Tarrant and Crusius are represented as the absolute perversion of environmental justice and ought to be understood as categorically separate from mainstream environmentalism. Second, Crusius and Tarrant represent the natural conclusion of mainstream environmentalism, which has collapsed into misanthropic hatred of the very thing (fossil fuels) that inaugurated a globalized world. Neither of these are holistically correct, but both provide insight into the contours of far-right environmentalism, and our collective response to it in distinct ways. Depending on which end of the spectrum the truth lies, the solution to eco-fascism changes.

The first frame of defensive environmentlaism is defined by a relatively self-evident project of damage control, wherein environmentalists view this crisis as a tragedy demanding struggle against misanthropic and racist eco-fascism. For example, editorials from Vice, The Intercept, *GQ*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and other liberal news sources tended to highlight the connections between eco-fascism and its historical corollaries — such as Madison Grant, John Tanton, National Socialists, and Deep

Ecology. GQ's piece distinguishes how "eco-fascism is not the fringe hippie movement usually associated with ecoterrorism."[6] Naomi Klein's piece in the Intercept identified a "wrenching contrast" between Tarrant's shooting and "the youth climate strikers who had gathered at the exact same time" in Christchurch.[7] The result of these argumentative threads tends to be a warning of continued violence, and the need to safeguard environmental advocacy from its racist tendencies.

On the other end of the spectrum, right wing news editorials historicizing eco-fascism, political commentators, and some technocrats, began to pounce upon Tarrant and Crusius as emblematic of modern-day environmentalism's misanthropic undercurrents. Michael Shellenberger, a founder of Environmental Progress and co-author of the *Eco-modernist Manifesto*, pointed out the hypocrisy of blaming Trump for Crusius and Tarrant, without highlighting how their rhetoric echoes "mainstream environmentalism," citing Paul Ehrlrich's *The Population Bomb* alongside anti-nuclear environmental rhetoric.[8] Kellyanne Conway indicated on Fox & Friends that Tarrant was "not a conservative, he's not a Nazi, I think he referred to himself as an eco-naturalist or an eco-fascist."[9] Texas' Lt. Governor Dan Patrick even used Crusius mass-shooting as a justification to tell ANTIFA, who had a Border Resistance tour planned in El-Paso on August 10th, to "stay out of Texas" because they were not welcome after the mass shooting.[10] In the most extreme case, Alexander Epstein, the author of *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, argued on a talk-show that,

> There's no real logical reason that somebody accepting the environmentalist ideology should not endorse mass shootings… that is if you have an anti-human goal, you've eliminated any rational basis for opposing people who kill humans and I mean this seriously. Policies they advocate are not that different from mass shootings except that if followed they would be deadly on a far greater scale.[11]

Epstein's cohost Don Watkins retorted with,

> Who has the lowest carbon footprint in the world? I mean mass murderers. I mean they're they have made up for their footprint many times over. They're preventing future children from coming into existence and people can say that's not what I mean by reducing my carbon footprint, but if you have that as an out of context goal or a primary goal, which is often presented as like this is really what we should be aspiring to, then it's perfectly logical that people think these kind of things are necessary, particularly if they've kind of failed politically.[12]

This logical chain of equivalence posed by Watkin and Epstein in the aftermath of Christchurch and El-Paso, albeit in bad faith, does pose an important question for understanding the contours of eco-fascist argument, and its parasitic relationship to environmentalism. That is, what distinguishes eco-fascism from environmentalism?

Epstein and Watkin's posture that the difference is non-existent. In their mind, eco-fascist mass murder is the natural conclusion of environmentalism. Naturally, an environmentalist who confronts the impossibility of changing consumption practices would naturally conclude mass-murder is the next step. However, this analysis of Crusius and Tarrant's eco-fascist ideology only makes sense if environmentalism is defined as an abstractly oriented process wherein carbon footprints are constructed as the sole-metric for effective actions. While this is not true for all environmentalism, Epstein and Watkin's do stumble onto the danger of framing environmentalism as solely a question of emissions. In fact, the translation of environmentalism into its' most barebone assumptions can be understood as a central element of eco-fascist discourse, as it allows racialized argumentation to be framed in bio-centric terms.

In spite of Epstein and Watkin's fumbling towards a kernel of truth, it would be more accurate to describe Crusius and Tarrant as sharing argumentative infrastructure with environmentalism — insofar as they draw upon common themes and carbon trajectories — as well as sharing argumentative tendencies with a specific brand of environmentalism, identified by John Hultgren as environmental restrictionism.[13] In

contrast to the explicit fascist inclination of Tarrant and Crusius, environmental restrictionism deploys "Nature" as "a form of walling — providing a subtle means of reinforcing 'traditional' territorial borders and national identities without having to revert to racial and cultural logics that are no longer socially acceptable within mainstream political discourse."[14] Environmental restriction-based argument often becomes an exercise in the brutalities of abstract logic.

The most prominent example of contemporary environmental restrictionism would have to be John Tanton, a long time Sierra Club member, whom the Southern Poverty Law Center described as the "racist architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement."[15] Tanton's influence emerged from the proliferation of anti-immigrant discourse from as many sources as possible. Countless non-profits with vaguely progressive sounding names were created by Tanton throughout the years. Some of these non-profits being the Progressives for Immigration Reform, Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America, NumbersUSA, and the Center for Immigration Studies. Under Tanton, nativism was branded as a benign environmental concern. As Heidi Beirich and Mark Potok discovered, these myriad attempts to shift the discourse included running ads in prominent environmental magazines on the connection between immigration and environmental degradation, a failed take-over of the Sierra Club and even the creation of a media campaign titled "Make American Green again," with an explicit point to lobby the president to apply NEPA regulations to immigration, preventing massive amounts of immigration by increasing the backlog process.[16]

This does not mean Tanton, nor his compatriots, were fake environmentalists, as that distinction is made in the rhetorical enunciation, but rather that "nature is not merely

captured to advance exclusionary social agendas; it is commitments to certain conceptions of nature that give rise to such agendas."[17] These commitments form the basis of right-wing environmental arguments. Tanton effectively constructed these commitments, so that others might pick up those commitments as a justification for nativist policies. Tarrant and Crusius' ideological commitments are, in effect, a product of those associations crafted by Tanton, among others. Indeed, from a macro-perspective, Tanton's influence might have been the subtle shift in associations between immigration, population growth and environmental destruction. This becomes even more evident when comparing the arguments made by those funded by the Tanton network to Tarrant and Crusius.

Philip Cafaro, a professor of philosophy at Colorado State University who also functions as an independent director of Numbers USA (an anti-immigrant non-profit founded by Johh Tanton), is a revelatory example for how environmental restrictions can easily morph and shift into eco-fascism. At the most basic level, Cafaro's argument can be broken down into five premises: 1) "Immigration levels are at a historic high and immigration is now the main driver of U.S. population growth;" 2) "Population growth contributes significantly to a host of environmental problems within our borders;" 3) "A growing population increases America's large environmental footprint beyond our borders and our disproportionate role in stressing global environmental system;," 4)"In order to seriously address environmental problems at home and become good global environmental citizens, we must stop U.S. population growth;" 5) "We are morally obligated to address our environmental problems and become good global environmental citizens."[18] Although simplified, these premises reveal a dehumanizing center at the heart

of environmental restrictionism. Population growth to Cafaro is an inconvenient truth that

necessitates shifting our understandings of empathy towards migrants in favor of

environmentally sound immigration policy.

Cafaro, and the Center for Immigration Studies, assert they are not heartless

monsters, nor eco-fascists, by arguing we need to "increase and better target development

aid, to help people live better lives in their own countries."[19] Nevertheless, their activism

and scholarship disproportionately leans towards targeting immigration as an easy

scapegoat for environmental destruction. For example, Cafaro has written a book titled

The Progressive Argument for Reducing Immigration into the United States, but not one

titled *The Environmental Argument for Developmental Aid.* Steven Camarota, speaking

on a panel hosted by the Center for Immigration, provided some insight into the

obsession with immigration:

> If you're asking me whether politically it's easier to reduce immigration —which
> is generally supported by most of the public when asked questions on that — or
> whether it's easier to cut our greenhouse gas emission by 80 percent… is it easy
> to fight that political battle? I don't think so. I think that if you wanted to try to
> make the case for less immigration, I think that there are a lot of interest groups in
> Washington that would line up….[20]

For environmental restrictionists, a restriction on immigration functions as a

substitute for fighting the political battle of emission reduction, to the detriment of

effective and ethical environmental activism. Immigration reform is constructed as the

easy solution, a false premise, compared to the seemingly impossible battle of changing

our consumption practices. This rhetorical choice is important, precisely because of the

stakes of the question. If they're wrong, then not only have they de-prioritized essential

changes for consumption. In fact, the inevitable and repeated failure of environmental

restrictionism to effectuate political change opens up the potential for further perversion

by fascist communities. This becomes even more evidently clear when compared directly towards the manifestos themselves. Immersed within the argumentative infrastructure of eco-fascism, Crusius and Tarrant's manifestos lay bare the stakes of restrictionism.

When comparing Crusius and Cafaro's argument, it becomes evident Crusius' manifesto follows the same argumentative logic, but is more extreme by combining environmental restrictionism with white-nationalist fascism. From the onset of the manifesto, Crusius mirrors the fascist minimum set-out by Robert Griffin, which defines the general parameters of fascism:

> [A] genuinely revolutionary, trans-class form of anti-liberal, and in the last analysis, anti-conservative nationalism. As such it is an ideology deeply bound up with modernization and modernity, one which has assumed a considerable variety of external forms to adapt itself to the particular historical and national context in which it appears. . . . [Fascism] seeks to end the degeneration affecting the nation under liberalism, and to bring about a radical renewal of its social, political and cultural life as part of what was widely imagined to be the new era being inaugurated in Western civilization.[21]

If understood within the parameters of the fascist minimum, the descriptions and metaphors Crusius relies upon the common tropes of fascism while presencing his actions as the vanguard of a renewal of American life.

In fact, Crusius begins the second paragraph of the manifesto with "America is rotting from the inside out, and peaceful means to stop this seem to be nearly impossible." Shortly after, Crusius declares that "Due to the death of the baby boomers, the increasingly anti-immigrant rhetoric of the right and the ever increasing Hispanic population, America will soon become a one party-state. The Democrat party will own America and they know it." The next page is a litany of critiques of immigration ranging from unemployment to the devaluation of a high-school degree to environmental

destruction. Most of these are not particularly expounded upon, but are thrown out there haphazardly, seemingly to see what lands.

A common thread throughout this section of the *The Inconvenient Truth* is the unsustainable nature of the American lifestyle. For example, Crusius rails against "Urban sprawl" for creating "Inefficient cities which unnecessarily destroys millions of acres of land."[22] Further, *The Inconvenient Truth* blames corporations who ensure "the destruction of our environment by shamelessly overharvesting resources."[23] Consumer culture also gets thrown under the bus due to the "thousands of tons of unnecessary plastic waster and electronic waste."[24] These are not conceptually distinct from Crusius's critique of the economic implications of immigration, as they all imply a willingness of corporations to sacrifice the welfare of Americans in the pursuit of profit. Within eco-fascist ideology, the collapsing of the *Volk, the people,* and the *Volksgeist,* the national spirit, functions through construction of blood and soil as co-terminous concepts. Environmental destruction serves a rhetorical function, in this sense, by crafting a frame to ontologize white-nationalist sentiments.

Critiques of immigration, and urban sprawl obviously do not prove fascism, but when analyzed as part of a broader politic it does reveal the dangerous possibility of a pessimistically focused environmental restrictionism. Where-as Cafaro and Camarota believe in the pragmatic possibility of immigration reform, Crusius is firmly indoctrinated into a pessimistic account of corporate control from the perspective of white-nationalism. Subsequently, Crusius sees the ingrained nature of consumption as an impossible hurdle for American society. This insurmountable situation, defined by Hispanic invasion, necessities a different solution to Cafaro's:

> The government is unwilling to tackle these issues beyond empty promises since they are owned by corporations. Corporations that also like immigration because more people mean a bigger market for their products. I just want to say that I love the people of this country, but god damn most of y'all are just too stubborn to change your lifestyle. So the next logical step is to decrease the number of people in America using resources. If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can become more sustainable.[25]

Crusius finds himself confronting the seeming impossibility of petitioning the government away from its' current apocalyptic trajectory. In this apocalyptic prediction, Crusius speculates the only other possible option might be to decrease the number of people.

In this pessimistic account, immigration restrictions are substituted for mass violence. Much like Cafaro's belief in the inherent patriotism of environmental restrictionism, Crusius' local focus on the "Hispanic invasion of Texas" results in Crusius contending "this isn't an act of imperialism but an act of preservation," while admitting although "non-immigrant targets would have a greater impact" he would be unwilling kill his "fellow Americans" because "one day they will see error of their ways.[26] Such a shift is interesting if compared to Crusius' statement that "the Hispanic community was not my target before I read The Great Replacement," implying the rhetorical importance of extremist manifestos in shifting would-be shooters towards explicit racial resentment. [27]

Tarrant shares many of the same environmental conclusions of Crusius, not surprising considering Tarrant inspired Crusius. Within *The Great Replacement*, Tarrant begins by repeating "It's the birthrates."[28] Birthrates are then connected to white genocide, corporate control, power, and even environmental destruction. Throughout Tarrant's manifesto, the term "replacement," and words stemming from it, appear 46 times. "People," "Attack," and "Culture" round out the top 3 in usage — with 171, 95, and 74 uses respectively.[29] None of these are conceptually separate as each connection

begins to mutually reinforce immigrant communities are the harbingers of destruction. In Tarrant's narrative, "we lack the time scale required to enact the civilizational paradigm shift" needed "due to mass immigration."[30] Tarrant's solution? It's simple; "Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation and by doing so save the environment."[31]

The similarity in Crusius and Tarrant's argumentative premises within their manifestos are relatively self-evident — invasion, eugenics, white genocide, and a latent internationalism. Crusius differs slightly insofar as Crusius refers to a more localistic description as he described his attack as "a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas," but still refers to "Our European comrades" who "don't have the gun rights needed to repel the millions of invaders that plague their country."[32] Brenton Tarrant invoked the need for "FULL SUPPORT FOR BROTHER NATIONS." In Tarrant 's account, Australia "is simply an off-shoot of the European people."[33] Tarrant, as well, maintained that his actions would result in the American left abolishing the second amendment, thus leading to a "a dramatic polarization of the people in the United States and eventually a fracturing of the US along cultural and racial lines."[34] These constructed interconnections are simultaneously anti-cosmopolitan, localistic, and transnational based on racial lines.

The connections between Cafaro, Crusius, and Tarrant's solutions seem categorically different if one accounts for eco-fascist interpretations of what Garret Hardin described as "life-boat ethics." [35] Penti Linkola, a commonly circulated figure in eco-fascist communities, metaphorizes "lifeboat ethics" by asking:

> What to do when a ship carrying a hundred passengers suddenly capsizes and there is only one lifeboat? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides." [36]

Within this interpretation of lifeboat ethics, the terms of the debate are already pre-scripted. There are only two options. First, let everyone die. Second, murder everyone who tries to climb on. Although Garret Hardin's original invocation of the lifeboat ethics navigated a complex discussion surrounding the tragedy of the commons, eco-fascist interpretations of life-boat ethics accept the distribution of wealth between western white-countries and developing countries as proof of social virtue. It is not just that life-boat ethics denote a harsh-reality, but instead life-boat ethics serve as a rationalization for an already chosen solution. Tarrant, Crusius, and Cafaro cannot see an alternative solution, nor even a different set of questions. A zero-sum understanding of the world has already been constructed prior to any individual choice made by Tarrant or Crusius. In fact, lifeboat ethics, as a proxy for neo-Malthusian ideology, constructs what possible solutions can be imagined by defining the terms of the debate.

The lifeboat metaphor gestures towards the danger of environmental restrictionism. In Cafaro's argument, Linkola's lifeboat is expanded to the frame of the nation state. For this purpose, Cafaro argues patriotism, defined as "love for one's country and devotion to its well-being," ought to be understood as a central environmental virtue.[37] Population growth, migration, and environmental health are translated from global questions to questions of the nation-state. National boundaries are viewed as somehow equivalent to biospheres. For these advocates, reducing immigrations effect on population inside of a single country solves population growth over-all. None of these statements are particularly compelling on their own; rather, the belief in these assertions construct the ideological scaffolding for a callous disregard for migrant life. In fact, these discussions are often centered on the idea that domestic audiences should not

have to change to protect the earth, as it is easier to target migrants as enemies.

Furthermore, the emphasis on fertility and birth-rates, in Crusius/Tarrant and Cafaro,

dovetails with a hyper-focus on immigrants, and associated tropes of "anchor babies," as

the harbingers of a non-white future. Or as Stephanie Rutherford highlights,

environmental arguments surrounding immigration construct the lifeboat by isolating

"certain kinds of bodies" as "the bearers of too much life."[38]

These associations concretized through propaganda, advertisements, positivist

academic studies, and think-tanks open themselves up to be appropriated in a litany of

different mediums (e.g., memes). In a sense, Tanton succeeded by priming individuals to

identify immigrants as threatening the environmental health of the nation. Fascist, and

far-right actors generally, prey upon divisive associations like these — citizen/foreigner,

self/other, natural/synthetic — to sustain their own argumentation. The constructed

associations between immigration, population growth, and environmental destruction

necessitate a re-raising of the stakes when traditional political solutions fail. Although

many of Tarrant and Crusius' arguments throughout their manifestos are repackaging or

white-nationalist talking points without environmental context — white-genocide, ethnic

replacement, Hispanic invasion — environmental destruction harkens towards an

objective reference point for apocalyptic fears.

The Digital Circulation of Eco-Fascism

Tarrant and Crusius' manifestos, and their rhetorical impact, are more than just

the writings of disillusioned environmental restrictionists. Tarrant and Crusius are part of

the online far-right eco-system —including 4chan, 8chan, and even YouTube — which

function to radicalize individuals towards violence. For example, Tarrant donated

"Freedomain Raid (a podcast and YouTube channel created by Canadian Stefan

Molyneux, who is prominent member of the far right) and the National Policy Institute (a

white supremacist think tank and lobby group based in the United States of America)."[39]

Organizations such as Génération Identitaire, Back the Right, TRS Radio, Smash CM,

and the Daily Stormer also received donations.[40] As Tarrant admitted YouTube was a

"significant source of information and inspiration," although Tarrant "did frequent

extreme right-wing discussion boards such as those on 4chan and 8chan" to a lesser

degree. [41]

However, 8Chan and 4Chan's role in circulating Tarrant and Crusius deserves

attention due to the interconnected nature of these murders. 4Chan is colloquially

understood as the place where civility goes to die, or the absolute cesspool of the internet.

[42] 8Chan threatens that reputation. 4chan and 8chan are anonymous imageboards with

almost no fanfare. Both are separated into sub-forums. /Pol/, short for Politically

Incorrect, houses most discussions about politics. For instance, 8chan users posted three

different manifestos directly before mass shootings. Tarrant and Crusius crafted their

mass shooting with the explicit intent to be circulated on 8Chan and beyond. Crusius

asked members of /Pol/ to do their "part and spread this," but only "if the attack is

successful.[43] Tarrant live-streamed his mass shooting with a meme-filled soundtrack,

likely crafted to incite laughs from his audience. [44] Patrick Crusius, in *The Inconvenient

Truth,* wrote, "I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto" and that Tarrant's

manifesto persuaded him to target the "Hispanic community."[45] Before murdering

members of a synagogue, John Timothy Earnest, noted that "Tarrant was a catalyst for

me personally. He showed me that it could be done. And that it needed to be done."[46]

Quickly before shooting worshipers in a mosque, Philip Manshaus posted on Endchan, "Well cobbers it's my time, I was elected by saint Tarrant after all."[47] Likewise, Vincent Fuller posted on Facebook, "I agree with what that man did in New Zealand as we will not be brainwashed," before stabbing an immigrant.[48] The argumentative connection between these reveals the interrelated nature of these acts of mass violence. A *New York Times* report indicated since 2011, "at least a third of white extremist killers" were inspired by similar attacks.[49] A rhetorical reading shows how these shooters draw on a well of argumentative infrastructure that hastens violence.

It is not just that terrorist manifestos circulated on 8Chan and 4chan, but that their ideological argumentation was very likely being constituted through discourse on 4chan and 8chan, leading to an uptake in similar acts of violence. Understanding circulation, then, must account for the argumentative strategies utilized to render Crusius and Tarrant as iconoclastic figures, as the argumentative structure of these figures reconstruct the argumentative infrastructure that digital subcultures call upon.

Groups working behind the scenes have begun to circulate Tarrant's manifesto. Bellingcat, an independent research group, reported in August 2019 that they had "found at least fifteen translations of the manifesto online."[50] All 70+ pages of *The Great Replacement* are available in "French, German, Spanish, Croatian, Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian or Russian, among others."[51] In Ukraine, a telegram channel known for sharing neo-Nazi ideals and encouraging violence circulated copies of *The Great Replacement* organized into the shape of a swastika, while selling them "for 100 Ukrainian hryvnias, or around $4."[52] Karpatska Sich, a neo-Nazi movement in Ukraine

who has been tied to attacks against kyiv pride, got ahold one of these books and implored its members in a telegram channel to "get inspired."[53]

Eco-fascist digital networks magnify the acceleration of violence. The anonymous nature of 8Chan and 4Chan is generally associated with honesty as Christopher Poole, founder of 4chan, avows "anonymity is authenticity."[54] Discussions on /Pol/ tend to evoke a sense of radical honesty even when politically incorrect, hence the name. Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner argue 4chan is a "web-based community where public culture is produced and negotiated, in large part through the creation and dissemination of memes," allowing rhetors to "both prey upon and redraw the lines between friend and enemy."[55] Anonymity allows people to separate themselves from the horrendous nature of this violence by translating violence into memes or jokes, resulting in a willing to say the *quiet part out loud*. For example, commenters on 8chan routinely remark on mass-murder kill counts in terms of getting "the high score," a quote from the thread where the Poway synagogue shooter posted his manifesto.[56] These memetic references become what some refer to as shitposting, or "the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers."[57] Anonymous comments about *the high score* become a familiar form of in-joke between users discussing mass shooters. Through repetition, shitposting creates ethical desensitization and distance from violence they are referring to.

Emergent research offers unique insight into eco-fascist circulation. Jake Hanrahan reported the emergence of digital subcultures around Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, calling themselves a "pine tree community."[58] To this day, 4chan still

regularly hosts /TKG/ threads on the importance of Ted Kacyzsnki's work, most collapsing into thinly veiled invocations of eco-fascism, as many participants of this thread likely participate in the /TKG/ threads.[59] Hanrahan described this developing group as "less a cohesive movement than a loosely connected online subculture."[60] An ex-leader of this community revealed members of the sub-culture "began flirting with fascism" as they delved into work by known eco-fascists such as Penti Linkola.[61] Brian Hughes traced this sub-culture to Pine Tree Twitter, or a group of "eco-fascists, neo-luddites, radical accelerationists, decelerationists" who identify themselves to each other by placing a "pine-tree emoji in their names or bios."[62]

Within eco-fascist argumentative discourse analyzed in this paper, two argumentative tactics drive users within such digital enclaves to justify genocide. Those tactics are vilification and sanctification. As twin poles, eco-fascists constitute corporations, immigrants, and Jews as threats to the social existence of a white future and then sanctify locales or individuals who come to stand in for the so-called natural order.

For example, in August 2019, 23 days after the El Paso shooting, one member of /Pol/ asked: "Why can't saving the environment be a universal party interest that both left and right wing agree with?"[63] In response, /Pol/ did what /Pol/ tends to do. One commenter said, "so you want to save the planet? splendid! grab your AR-15 and go to india, and empty as many mags as you can in trash people living there."[64] Many memes were shared, with the majority referencing the need to privilege the natural world over refugees. Sharing these memes was important as these forms of memetic fluency, a concerted effort on the part of far-right rhetors can habituate resentment by utilizing "memetic weaponry" to entrench "the lines of attachment to white resentment."[65] In

simpler terms, memetic interactions can help construct an argumentative infrastructure that justifies terrorism. Given that memes also circulate alongside other eco-fascist discourse, they are another source building the argumentative infrastructure employed by eco-fascists.

In the memes (figure 2.1. and 2.2), Anon's (the anonymous creator of these memes) claim to privilege the bees, the trees, and the seas over refugees constitutes a zero-sum understanding of environmentalism, wherein care for refugees trades off with the natural world. Merely existing becomes sufficient justification for vilification. Under the argumentative parameters of these memes and the comments of the thread, violence is necessary. Sara Manavis, writing for *The New Statesman,* discovered a thriving community of eco-fascists on Reddit and Twitter. One Redditor on R/Debate Fascism wrote: "the state and the state's citizens have the right to use all means necessary to save the environment, including murder and sabotage."[66] Within that understanding of the right to murder, anon's demand for the original poster to "grab your AR-15 and go to india" can be understood as central to eco-fascist argumentation.[67] When OP (original poster) asks about the reasons for the divide between the left and the right on climate change, respondents did not affirm the legitimacy of the distinction between the left and the right. Instead, respondents chastised the hypocrisy of the question, as those who virtue signal on environmentalism have failed in their own duty to the world. When asked to change their lifestyles to solve climate change, many on 4chan argued that it is not their job to change consumptive practices until someone tells "the feckless brown people on the other side of the world to get their shit together."

Figure 2.1 Meme shared on 4chan, August 2019. [68]

Figure 2.2. Meme shared on 4chan, August 2019.[69]

Emblematic of this is the way eco-fascists describe their rationale for engaging in violence. Crusius wrote, "inaction is a choice. I can no longer bear the shame of inaction knowing that our founding fathers have endowed me with the rights needed to save our country from the brink of destruction."[70] Returning to Epstein's claim that "it's perfectly

logical that people think these kind of things are necessary, particularly if they've kind of failed politically," we see Crusius taking up the same argumentative thread of the anon telling the poster of the question to "empty as many mags as you can in trash people living there."[71][72] Crusius, nor Tarrant, see the possibility of overcoming corporate power through traditional political means. Consequently, Crusius argues it is hypocritical to "support imperialistic wars," while criticizing mass-murder.[73] If there is no political solution, to quote a common statement found in far-right enclaves, then the natural conclusion of both environmental restriction and these memes is indeed the conclusion of Tarrant and Crusius. In the same sense, Tarrant wrote, "It's time to stop shit posting and time to make a real-life effort post."[74] The movement from shitposting to "real-life effort post" implies a willingness to take the future into his own hands. Thus, eco-fascism translates fascism as a project of state control to one of personal responsibility.

Due to the argumentative infrastructure Tarrant and Crusius had already aligned themselves with, each are compelled to enact violence and demand the same upon everyone else who identifies with their actions. While white nationalism already incites violence through the rhetorical invocation of a disappearing white future, eco-fascism refracts white nationalism's focus on natural hierarchies to their logical extreme by utilizing environmental destruction as the horizon of a non-white future. Crusius himself even states that due to race-mixing, immigration, and environmental destruction that he has been preparing his whole life "for a future that doesn't currently exist."

Whereas David Cisneros described how "the metaphor of immigrant as pollutant" began to infect media coverage, eco-fascist discourse requires an understanding of immigrants as more than a pollutant, but as a profoundly destructive force. [75] In this

narrative, it is not just that immigrants are a threat to the white future; the rhetorical stitching together of immigrants and pollution as coterminous frames immigrants as a threat to the conceptual idea of the future itself. The seas, the bees, and the trees are symbolically constructed as the setting by which the future takes place. White people losing status complicates white futurity, but environmental destruction fundamentally threatens existence as such for these audiences. If refugees, and immigrants more broadly, are coded as zero-sum opportunities with the existence of an ecological future, then an environmentalist must be willing to enact violence. In response, these memes construct an imaginary lifeboat where there are two groups of people in a dialectical equation: Those who are already pre-ordained to be on the lifeboat and those who would rip away the future away. Being on the boat is not enough to recognize an individual as "those who love and respect life."[76] By contrast, the choice to cut the clinging hands renders one worthy of praise. [77]

Figure 2.3. Saint Tarrant. July 5, 2019.

Figure 2.4. Saint Crusius shared on 4chan. N.d.

The second aspect of eco-fascist discourse sanctifies those who commit eco-fascist violence as stand-ins for the so-called natural order. For example, in the wake of these murders, 4Chan and Reddit circulated images and rhetoric of Crusius, Tarrant, and fellow mass-murders as saint-like figures. The original version of *Saint Tarrant* was graffitied in Melbourne, Australia. *Tarrant* was referred to as "Saint Tarrant" by fellow synagogue shooter John and users of 8Chan. In these images, Tarrant is shown holding his manifesto as if it were a bible; Crusius and Tarrant are adorned with a "Schwarze Sonn (Black Sun)," an image associated with neo-Nazi organizations that draws inspiration from "the ancient sun wheel artifacts that were made and used by Norse and Germanic tribes."[78] Although these images ought not be thought of as serious invocations of Christianity, they reveal how religious iconography is drawn upon to constitute an understanding of personal responsibility. In fact, fascist aesthetics have long drawn upon eschatological and religious imagery to craft their political ideology, even

when religion is not a central aspect of their ideology. As Palcweski maintains of all arguments, eco-fascist arguments are living entities which through repetitive usages can resignify individuals as idols which morality, responsibility, and virtue are constituted through religious iconicism.

In these memes, Crusius and Tarrant are symbolically canonized as agents of God, or more specifically avatars of the natural order and ethics itself. Michael Zimmerman contends that "acquiring mystical qualities usually reserved for divinities, the state and its leaders become the heroic manifestations of the peoples sacred blood."[79] To be rendered as a saint, one must live a life of "heroic virtue" while acting as a servant of God and perform some form of miracle after their death.[80] Ritualization of right-wing mass shootings as *Holy Terror* provides an avenue towards sainthood, or what Mircea Eliade describes as the "sacred."[81] The canonization of Tarrant and Crusius rhetorically sacralize *Holy Terror* as the "threshold" or "boundary," which "distinguishes and opposes two worlds," the sacred and profane."[82] In this sense, *Holy Terror* manifests the sacred into a racialized order, which offers insight into a rhetorically constructed "absolute reality, opposed the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse."[83]

Tarrant and Crusius, through the circulation of these images, become signified as the embodiment of taking up personal responsibility and fulfilling the world's natural order, and thus a rallying cry towards violence. If all saints are patron saints of something, then Tarrant and Crusius become patron saints of white nationalist eco-fascists, through their participation in *Holy Terror.* The sanctification began early, with an anon who responded to Tarrant's original post with "HOLY SHIT!!! THE DIGITS OF GOD?" Argumentative infrastructure is always in constant construction wherein relations

are constantly constructed through circulation of imagery and textual artifacts. For example, when crafting *An Inconvenient Truth,* Crusius himself already understood Tarrant as an organizing point of eco-fascist argumentation. Phillip Manhaus claimed the argumentative inspiration of his violent actions, an essential aspect of argumentative infrastructure, was due to him being "elected by saint Tarrant after all."[84] Seen as forms of arguments in creation, these images highlight how Saint Tarrant become an iconic figure which symbolizes the call to do your part for the white race.

Tarrant, Crusius, Dylan Roof, and other far-right terrorists have all stood trial. Those who idolize Tarrant and Crusius have the ability to mail letters, with Tarrant responding occasionally. By imagining these terrorists as living Saints, potential terrorists are able to imagine themselves. Tarrant even wrote "survival was a better alternative to death in order to further spread my ideals by media coverage."[85] Through their survival, Sainthood constructs what Graham Macklin calls "the self-referential nature of extreme-right terrorism," where-in reverence for those who have committed *Holy Terror* mobilizes those who come afterwards.[86] Textual artifacts such as the "manifesto became the baton in a relay race of extremists, passed from one terrorist murderer to the next through online communities."[87] It is not a question of when the baton will be passed, but to whom.

Conclusion

Eco-fascism circulates in online cultures through myriad ways, but draws from an already existing argumentative infrastructure. As a continually evolving set of arguments, eco-fascism is modified through digital circulation. Tarrant and Crusius do not merely draw upon prior eco-fascist argumentative infrastructure, but they build upon it. As

highlighted through this chapter, Tarrant and Crusius have become an organizing point for the rhetorical circulation of eco-fascism in digital subcultures. The contours of eco-fascist circulation highlight how eco-fascism appropriates environmental and religious rhetoric to constitute an understanding of personal responsibility as crafted through violence.

If scholars within the field of environmental rhetoric are to confront eco-fascism successfully, then the field must account for the risk of perversion. If left unquestioned, eco-fascist argumentation will continue to gain prominence as conservative parties move away from climate denial. Although an authoritarian shift has yet to occur, far-right organizations and individual rhetors have already begun mapping out the blueprint for such a shift. There is already political infrastructure constructed by John Tanton to funnel would-be denialist into eugenic environmentalism. Beyond Tanton, fascists have already shown interest in recruiting disillusioned Qanon believers. It would not be surprising to find a similar train of thought within eco-fascist communities in the coming years. Presuming the left's monopoly over environmental rhetoric will profoundly risk ceding power to the right, as the strategy of entryism offers inroads to recruitment. It is unfortunately likely that more white-men will be radicalized and called upon by Saint Tarrant to do violence.

Notes

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CHAPTER THREE

'We're the Virus' and the (Mis)Construction of Eco-Fascist Argumentation

Introduction

COVID-19 has brought to light, or more accurately made it impossible to ignore, a litany of structural problems within today's globalized society. Class divisions were cemented as essential workers were sacrificed to continue the machinations of the economy, and then given a t-shirt for their sacrifice. Already existing anti-Black and xenophobic undertones in the medical system resulted in disproportionate deaths. The already tenuous relationship between information literacy and truth was stretched to its limit. Misinformation regarding the pandemic became so prevalent that the WHO describe the crisis as an "infodemic."[1]

During the early part of the pandemic, and as part of the infodemic, a new genre of discourse coined by the *New York Times* as the "Coronavirus Nature Genre" emerged.[2] Stories highlighting the return of animals abounded. From the successful sex between the pandas Ying Ying and Le Le to urban dolphins in Venice, these stories are meant to provide moments of hope against the seeming overproduction of pessimistic sentiment.[3] Amanda Hess understands this genre of COVID-19 discourse as the images, tweets, and narratives which circulate "tales of a revived natural world" due to the pandemic.[4] Stories of renewal emerging amid massive death attempted to craft a silver lining of the pandemic, hoping that sacrifice would even the ecological scales.

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In the space produced by the emergence of the Coronavirus nature genre, anti-human misanthropic ideations couched through universalizable statements regarding the relationship between humanity and the natural world became a site of controversy. Most commonly these misanthropic tendencies utilized variants of "we're the virus," "Nature is healing," or "Coronavirus is Earth's vaccine."[1] By appealing to misanthropy, Twitter users appropriated this viral sensation to make political statements. Quickly after these misanthropic tendencies became viral, they became locus for social critique and memery. For example, Nick Estes argued the appeal to 'we're the virus' was nothing more than "eco-fascist garbage dressed in New Age clothes. There is nothing 'natural' about capitalism killing us."[2] Accusations of eco-fascism were then grounded as a justification for why this viral trend might lead environmentalists down the same path of mass-murder and eugenics Tarrant and Crusius took.

Almost in a quintessential modern fashion, the eco-fascist sentiment associated 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' reached a level of public consciousness that Tarrant and Crusius had not achieved. Google trends for ecofascism correspondingly rose to levels exceeding mass-murders by people who actually identified as eco-fascists, indicating the ability for viral trends to out-pace the supposed results of the trends itself.[3] This outpacing of virtual controversy from the material violence outpouring from associations gestures towards an important conversation regarding the nature of public understandings of eco-fascism.

It is in this association between eco-fascism, misanthropy, and the "nature is healing" discourses, that scholars can find insight into processes by which public communities understand, navigate, and politicize the circulation of supposedly eco-fascist

sentiments. In fact, the coronavirus nature genre of discourse necessitates study precisely because it reveals how crises open up spaces of deliberation over intersecting and adjacent events. This chapter is interested in three distinct questions regarding the viral moment associated with narratives of environmental renewal. First, what are the underlying assumptions inherent to the original narrative of environmental renewal, as well as the belief that "we're the virus." Second, what does the immediate response indicate about the public's collective understanding of eco-fascism as it relates to the anti-social aspects of misanthropy. Third, how did the memes mocking the virality of "we're the virus" construct an alternative account of this viral moment. By applying the scholarship of Kai Bosworth, Leslie Hahner, and Joshua Gunn, this chapter argues the coronavirus nature genre constructs a misanthropic frame rather than an eco-fascist frame.

The Anthropause, We're the Virus, Misanthropy, and Eco-Fascism

Everything came to a screeching halt in early 2020. Travel from China ended in early February, yet Wuhan had shut-down long-prior to the ban on travel.[4] In Italy, schools and universities closed on March 4th.[5] Northern provinces of Italy closed on March 8th.[6] All of Italy went into lockdown on March 9th.[7] California became the first state in the U.S. to issue a stay-at home order on March 19th.[8] Other states quickly followed suit. Around the world, the mass-movement of human beings suddenly stopped to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Such a sudden shift in resulted in the emergence and circulation of stories centered around what Rutz et Al. describe as the "anthropause," the sudden decrease in human mobility due to COVID-19.[9] Humanity, which had achieved a scale that registers

as a geological force, evacuated the spaces carved out from the natural world. Parks, cities, canals, and streets were now empty for the first time in a long time. In the absence of humanity, stories began to circulate of nature returning and animals reclaiming spaces that had once been their domain. Dolphins and swans returned to newly clear Venetian canals.[10] Elephants walked through a village in Yunnan Province, China and got drunk on corn wine before falling asleep in a field.[11] Wild pumas were sighted Santiago, Chile.[12] Jackals, who rarely ventured into open spaces, roamed through Yarkon Park in Tel Aviv. [13]

Narratives emerging in the anthropause achieved virality and became an avenue for social commentary across Twitter, Facebook and Tik Tok. Twitter user Kaveri Ahuja posted pictures of Swans in Canals with the caption "Here's an unexpected side effect of the pandemic – the water's flowing through the canals of Venice for the time in forever. The fish are visible, the swans returned."[14] @LucaXXVII posted "Venice hasn't seen clear Canal water in a very long time. Dolphins showing up too. Nature just hit the reset button us."[15] Stories of animals reclaiming spaces began to acquire massive amounts of public support with multiple posts showing over a hundred thousand likes.

Sadly, some of the stories of renewal were fake or misleading. Canals were clear because the sediment in the water was not being disturbed by boats, not any chemical difference. Fish were now visible that had existed in those canals for years.[16] The Venetian dolphins? They "were filmed at a port in Sardinia, in the Mediterranean Sea, hundreds of miles away."[17] Elephants did not walk through a village in Yunnan Province, China and get drunk on corn wine, although their presence within the area was common prior to the pandemic.[18] Kaveri Ahuja's Tweet celebrating Venetian swans was a

misinterpretation because Ahuja — a resident of New Delhi, India — was "unaware that the swans were already regulars in Burano before the coronavirus tore across Italy."[19] Even the most accurate of these, the decrease in air pollution, is not as clear-cut as it seems. Yes, air pollution in places did decrease because of manufacturing reductions during COVID restrictions. Those manufacturing plants eventually turned back on and will continue to accelerate their production to make up for lost time.[20]

These moments of renewal built up to more comprehensive political statements by utilizing metaphors, which to some veered into potentially dangerous territory. The most notable of these would be the controversy surrounding Thomas Schulz's tweet on March 17th, 2020.[21] Schulz connected assumed moments of renewal together to make a broader claim about the relationship between the natural world and humanity. In this post, Schulz argued those events were part of a bigger picture. Humanity was in fact not a victim, but rather a plague upon the earth which could be cured through the mass-death resulting from COVID-19. .Another post from a suspended Twitter account which had gone by the name "XREastMidlands," asserted that "[c]orona is the cure humans are the disease."[22] This account claimed to represent Extinction Rebellion, a prominent climate activist group, but Extinction Rebellion denied any association.[23] Quickly these metaphors, and the sentiments behind them, became points of controversy.

Figure 3.1 Twitter Post from Thomas Schulz. Screenshot from Know Your Meme. March 17, 2020

These sentiments, however, were not limited to viral Twitter users. Prominent magazines, news media, and even members of the U.N. shared sentiments implying COVID-19 might be a warning from nature. *Psychology Today* released an article titled by "The Gifts of the Coronavirus How to Find the Silver Lining in a Crisis."[24] In this article, Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler, the founder and CEO of Alignment Strategies Group, utilized the trope of "mother earth" to implore readers to slow down and "hear the other messages this virus might be trying to send us."[25] Common Dreams, a progressive non-profit news center, asked "Is the Covid-19 Pandemic Mother Nature's Response to Human Transgression?"[26] Throughout the article Michael T. Klare compared this crisis to Greek mythology to highlight how COVID-19 represents the need to "heed Mother Nature's warning."[27] Even Inger Anderson, the head of the U.N. Environment Programme, described COVID-19 as "nature is sending us a message."[28]

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The rhetorical resonance of eco-fascist viral metaphors like "we're the virus" and "Coronavirus is the Earth's vaccine" are key to show the political implications and baggage of this trend. Michael Osborn, in his germinal study of metaphors argues metaphors "clarify and vivify arguments" and thus "establish the imaginative structure of the speech, extending a dominant metaphor throughout."[29] In Schulz's tweet, humanity is constructed as the symbolic equivalent of virus — that is an infectious and destructive entity that has destabilized the balance of the world — while coronavirus is constructed as the symbolic vaccine to the destructive tendencies of humanity. If read through Paul Ricoeur's claim "metaphorical utterances brings together" disparate images, then viral metaphors shift traditional understandings of victim and perpetrator by defining humanity as the virus and nature as the victim, thus decentering humanity as the only relevant consideration.[30] Those public figures repeating the "we are the virus" discourses construct nature as a subject in varying ways — through conceptions of mother nature, virality, and the notion that COVID-19 was a message from nature — and thus generate a misanthropic frame as a corollary.

Misanthropic sentiments and viral metaphors are not new associations with environmental activism. Misanthropy, generally understood as distrust or dislike of humanity, has long been lodged as a critique of environmental activism. These accusations are sometimes accurate and other-times made in bad faith. Chapter one highlighted how Alexander Watkin's utilized misanthropy to equivocate Tarrant and mainstream environmental movements. At the same time, David Attenborough, longtime English broadcaster, was mired in controversy after he called humanity a "plague on earth."[31] In a slightly more poignant example, Gwen D'Arcangelis noted how "health

practitioners and journalists referred to a disease as old as influenza – as an example of 'nature's natural warfare' and 'Mother Nature's WMD [weapon of mass destruction].'"[32] Deep ecologists have long pushed bio-centric frames as a way to counter-balance the dangers of assuming humanity as the central point of social value.

Lisa Gerber's reading of Judith Shklar's Ordinary Vices describes misanthropy as typified by three different categories of misanthropes.[33] First, "The self-hating misanthrope" who "hates all humankind including herself."[34] Second, "The self-righteous misanthrope" who "may hate only his contemporaries and his own immediate world" because he can "think of himself as one of these purer and better" humans.[35] Third, "the satirical misanthrope" who "likes himself and rather enjoys the imbecility and evil of humans." Depending on the type of misanthrope, the political implications change. [36] Viewed through Shklar's typology, the tone and affective resonance of the Coronavirus nature genre tends to fit within the frame of "the self-righteous misanthrope," as these sentiments frame those who acknowledge misanthropy as enlightened.

The affective resonance produced via shared misanthropic ideations constructs the associations that transform environmental events, such as the return of dolphins to Venice, into a genre of stories. As Zizi Papacharissi highlights "structures of feeling open up and sustain discursive spaces where stories can be told."[37] Joshua Gunn helps to expand an understanding of affective resonance to genre theory by arguing that "Genres provide a metaphorical foothold, stabilizing feeling into meaning for the purposes of thought, reflection, and often prediction."[38] A singular story about the clearing up of canals in Venice would not produce a genre nor a political moment. It is only the repetition of similar events that then become associated with each other—associations

like these are where a genre is produced. Each then proportionately begins to affect the meaning of other events within the paradigm, or as Joshua Gunn indicates, "As genres stabilize the forms they name, they begin to accrue symbolic value, deviating from feeling over time."[39]

In this sense, the catch-all tag-lines of 'we're the virus' or 'nature is healing' houses different events, false and real, within an overarching paradigm of misanthropy. By no means is this paradigm overdetermining, as the debates over air pollution and environmental renewal offer more nuance than some might give them credit for. However, the Coronavirus nature genre is still definable by a seeming optimism in misanthropy. Through an acknowledgment of the perils of humanity, users attempt to provide insight into a "world-without-us" to shift the frame towards an environmentally friendly consciousness. Consequently, 'we're the virus'/'Nature is healing' do not fit within those most paradigmatic accounts of misanthropy. Misanthropic metaphors are different from Thomas Ligotti's pessimistic belief "humankind should go extinct" so "overpopulated worlds of the unborn would not have to suffer for our undoing what we have done so that we might go on as we have all these years."[40] Naturally, it is essential to distinguish between soft misanthropic sentiments and the most pessimistic iterations of misanthropy.

Due to the distinction between different misanthropic sentiments, there is a difference between affective experience and the hidden meaning unearthed by the rhetorical critic. Most who circulated or produced content within the frame of we're the virus'/'nature is healing' did not rely upon eco-fascists justifications. Although there is importance in unearthing the hidden meaning in memes unknown to the audience, it is

also paramount to account for the affective expectations of the producers and the audience. Without an investigation in the sentiments motivating the circulation of a particular image, or set of images, scholars can only understand the political implications of cooptation but not why sentiments are persuasive.

Coronavirus nature discourses that tout the return of the earth traffic in the sentiments of misanthropy and associated guilt. Considering affective sentiments, the persuasiveness of 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' emerges from what Susan Clayton describes as the psychological need to see nature as recovering, thus absolving individuals of their feelings of guilt.[41] It seems counter-intuitive to think of misanthropy as psychologically productive for individuals, but this is typical of Shklar's typology of the "self-righteous misanthrope" who rescues their ethical superiority by contrasting themselves to their contemporaries. Images of environmental renewal amid a crisis allow for compartmentalization of different spheres of influence. Data backs this claim up. In the context of climate change, individuals will actively not seek out information on the climate crisis because it causes anxiety. Therefore, Mathew Feinberg and Robb Willer, psychology professors at UC Berkeley, argue that "dire messages threaten individuals' need to believe that the world is just, orderly, and stable, a motive that is widely held and deeply ingrained in many people." By focusing on the moments of reprieve rather than the compounding nature of crises, 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' function to render crises more palatable by constructing a silver lining out a mixture of false and partially true facts. Insofar as the frame is shifting, the silver-lining of a picture receives more attention than the quotidian horror of a pandemic. This is an unintended consequence of 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' and makes the imagery so persuasive, precisely

because there is an enjoyment in speculating and imagining Venetian Dolphins as the announcement of the return of nature.

Nevertheless, this is necessarily the wrong focal point because it ignores the compounding nature of crises. Nature will not rise up solely because humanity is experiencing a crisis. Crises build upon other crises and accelerate each other. COVID-19 will not magically change the structure of extractive industries, and potentially might accelerate them as companies break regulations to make up for losses. For this reason, images circulating in the Coronavirus nature genre are ultimately depoliticizing. There is no call to action nor a blueprint for what these images mean. Decontextualized images of renewal float without connection to a larger paradigm. As such, they are potentially open to cooption for that reason.

In this vein, many have suggested that discourses in this vein are inherently eco-fascist, or an eco-fascist talking point, largely on the grounds of misanthropic ideation. Associations between 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' were so prevalent that Google searches with the term "ecofascism" peaked between March 15-21, 2020.[42] Tweets referencing the eco-fascist elements of these images proliferated quickly. User @olivegarden69 tweeted "you're not a misanthrope, you're an eco-fascist."[43] Another user going by the username @ChaoticThey argued 'we're the virus' was one of those "weird eco-fascist takes about how great it is that poor people are dying because (insert alleged environmental benefit that could be attained similarly by eating the rich instead of condemning vulnerable people to death."[44] Twitter user @taliavogt received 140,000 retweets and 589,000 likes for the takeaway that "the humans aren't the problem — it's our systems. we don't need to vanish to heal the earth, we need a revolution of policy and

ideology that changes the way we interact with the earth. the problem is our methods, not *us,* and to think otherwise veers into ecofascism."[45]

Academic and popular press articles have resoundingly echoed this association. Srijoni Banerjee, an independent research, writing in *The Gold* applied Michael Zimmerman's definition of eco-fascism "as a totalitarian government that requires individuals to sacrifice their interests to the well-being and glory of the 'land,'" to argue that these posts "unintentionally subscribe to the ideology of ecofascism."[46] In the *Journal of Environmental Media*, Marcia Allison argues "on a second reading, Schulz's text reveals a far more sinister foundation" of "eco-fascism."[47] WUWM, Milwaukee's NPR station, asked "Has Coronavirus Revived Ecofascism?"[48] Naturally, these accusations of sidelining anti-capitalism and prioritizing eco-fascism were shared across leftist circles.

Such accusations of eco-fascism are not without merit. The rhetorical frame of human virality transforms lives, predominantly low income and minority, into non-sentient viruses whose extermination can be lauded. Dehumanization, in a sense, is necessary for the rhetors to unearth misanthropic optimism. Even if these choices are made naively, the circulation of these images still are culpable in their underlying premises. As well, misanthropic sentiments of 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' cannot fully account for the causes of environmental destruction. Humanity does not exist as a universal abstract entity. Particular nations, corporations, and actors are responsible for the majority of emissions and environmental destruction. The United States of America, for example, has emitted 25% of total emissions across history as of 2017.[49] Americans

"use more electricity for cooling than the entire continent of Africa, home to a billion people, consumes for all purposes."[50]

In a sense, these accusations of eco-fascism rhetorically connect any invocation of misanthropy, or sacrifice, to all the potential unethical baggage of eco-fascism. Subtext is not only read into but constructed. Indeed, there is some theoretical legwork assumed when making the accusation of eco-fascism. Intentions are read into. Naivete is constructed as blanket acceptance of eco-fascism as a political ideology. Such accusations also presume a theory of eco-fascist sentiments as bound together based on a strict defense of misanthropy, which is not always necessarily the case. Not only does eco-fascism become the *red herring* for racist environmentalism, but it also becomes difficult to explain the distinctions between misanthropy and eco-fascism. Unstated subtextual references to overpopulation are defined by the mere use of misanthropic viral metaphors.

This, however, is not to say that eco-fascism and "we're the virus" do not share any argumentative similarities. Eco-fascism is indeed willing to, and repeatedly has, flirted with misanthropic tendencies. Tarrant and Crusius did rely upon misanthropic justifications to rationalize why murder might be environmentally justified. Some eco-fascists have indeed argued that a pandemic might lower the population level to sustainable levels. An avowed eco-fascist would indeed agree that the destabilization of modern industrial capitalism, no matter the political and social sacrifice, would be worth it. The willingness of right-wing populists to accept the inevitability and necessity of sacrifice is what Ruth Wodak describes as "the deliberate shamelessness," which makes right-wing populists "authentic" because they are "finally voicing what they themselves

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have always been thinking thus they feel taken seriously."[51] There have even been some avowed eco-fascists who have applied 'we're the virus' for explicitly fascist purposes, but the scope of those is shockingly tiny. Of the prominent eco-fascist Telegram channels, there have seemingly only been four posts shared with these sentiments.

Nevertheless, agreements with an argument are not a sufficient framework to identify 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' as inherently eco-fascist. Eco-fascists can and do agree with concepts inherent to mainstream environmental ideology. Mainstream environmental ideology does endorse certain presumptions that are amenable and present within fascist political thought. Environmentalism is structurally an unstable coalition with a litany of different ideological goals precisely because care of the environment is not premised upon an ethical nor political framework. Environmentalists can and do make callous arguments without being eco-fascists. The IPCC predictions for a 1.5°C threshold presume the deaths of those in precarious areas.[52] Rare earth minerals, necessary to produce renewable energy, results in deaths of workers. [53]Sacrifice is an essential element of eco-fascism but is not enough to label an argument as eco-fascist in of itself. Sacrifice is an accepted norm within many veins of political thought. While chapter one highlighted the importance of understanding the interconnected nature of environmental arguments and the possibility of those arguments turning into eco-fascism, it is not true that any argument that shares premises with eco-fascism is thus eco-fascist inherently. However, that did not stop the association of eco-fascism to spark a viral trend of memery as social critique.

One of the most long-lasting elements of the debate over 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' was the appropriation of the controversy into a meme format. Starting on March 26th, Ronnie Becker, "a design student in Minneapolis," posted an image of Lime Scooters lying in water with the caption, "with everyone on lockdown, the lime scooters are finally returning to the river. nature is healing, we are the virus." Benson's post received over 425,00 likes. Quickly, more iterations of this meme format emerged across Twitter utilizing absurd imagery with variants of 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing (including "earth is healing," "animals are returning," "skies are clear," "returning to the wild").[54] Another image showed a gigantic yellow rubber duck on the Thames captioned with "Wildlife finally returning to Thames. Nature is healing🌷."[55] These iterations ranged from jokes about the shoe-brand Crocs returning to the river to owls flying into police vehicles and attacking police officers. In totality, these memes substituted the original reference points (e.g., the return of animals or the reduction of pollution) with ironic references to popular culture. Kai Bosworth maintains the translation of the controversy into a meme relied upon "five different categories of humor": "the out-of-place in nature; nature out-of-place; naturalizing social order; naturalizing social transformation; and absurdity."[56] Each of these represents the way memes play with our understanding of the natural world. In contrast to a model of environmentalism that privileges an authentic nature, Bosworth applies Nicol Seymour's understanding of "bad environmentalism" — defined as "environmental thought that employs dissident, often-[demeaned]~~denigrated~~ affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current

moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse" — to describe the political implications of these ironic images.[57]

ron ronson @taladorei · Mar 26, 2020
with everyone on lockdown, the lime scooters are finally returning to the river. nature is healing, we are the virus.

967   76.8K   425K

Figure 3.2 Twitter Post from Ronnie Becker, March 26, 2020.[58]

Importantly, these images are as much social critique as those who voice their opinions through explicit argumentation. Like any other textual artifact, memes hold the potential to circulate and construct arguments. As Leslie A. Hahner argues in the context of the viral Riot Kiss Photographs, "the original image and its re-creations are the vehicle and the frames, or ways of seeing, are that which are replicated," allowing for the audience to construct argument over the negotiation of frames.[59] Harlow et al. indicate "memes play a key role in defining news events."[60] Apryl Williams found that "BBQ Becky" and "Karen" memes created "counternarratives that subvert White supremacist

action and call for restitution for unlawful acts and instances of racial harassment.“[61]

Memes perform a social function by providing a medium for critique. These memes are made meaningful through their enmeshment within an already existing controversy. They are funny precisely because of the presumed mockery of misanthropy. In fact, Ronnie Becker told Buzzfeed he made the meme because "[t]here were tons of posts about the Venetian canals clearing up and the dolphins returning to Italy/various animals returning to typically urban areas" and he "was annoyed by the eco-fascist statements of 'we are the virus."[62]

In Becker's original meme, the presence of Lime scooters, and their business model, construct the building blocks of the meme. Lime-scooters, an 'innovation' in the transportation sector, has acquired notoriety and venture capital support for being one of the largest e-scooter companies. Lime scooters, among others such as Bird, are dropped off daily in specific areas. Users can find a charged scooter on a constantly updating map and ride it anywhere within a few miles starting at fifteen cents a minute. Scooters can be left at the user's destination, and someone else can pick them up if there is still a charge left. Independent contractors are paid on a per-scooter basis to charge scooters and place them within designated drop-off areas.

Within the meme, Becker draws upon already existing frustration with the proliferation of e-scooters on city streets. Lime, and other e-scooter companies, are notorious for dropping hundreds of scooters without consulting city officials. Users would ride e-scooters on sidewalks, potentially causing accidents and preventing people from calmly walking on the sidewalks. As well, e-scooters tend to be left on sidewalks without care for people with baby strollers, walking aides, or wheelchairs. Sidewalk

clutter has massively increased in the aftermath of e-scooter companies. Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, described the relationship between e-scooters, users, non-users, and public space as "not far from anarchy."[63]

Whereas the original viral tweets referenced the reclamation of cities by animals — elephants, dolphins, swans, etc. — Becker's tweet substitutes the return of nature for the artificial. Lime scooters are a decided non-natural entity that has been reclaimed by the rivers, thus returning nature to an originary healed state. Through the death of the artificial, nature achieves integrity in the same fashion as when nature achieves integrity via humanity's disappearance. Becker told Buzzfeed that he "just thought of something that clearly does not belong in nature and as someone who hates the scooter share business I thought the Lime scooters in the river was perfect."[64]

However, the viral sensation of these images was not celebrated by everyone. Etsuko Kinefuchi attests the "sea of frivolous versions of the 'nature is healing' meme" could disturb the "sincere awe towards nature that the initial posts may have stirred."[65] Although Kinefuchi admits the falsity and limited scope of the original 'we're the virus'/'nature is healing' genre of posts, Kinefuchi stresses that "solely vilifying corporations and systems for the environmental degradations" can result in participants falling into the "the trap of a dualism that excuses us from doing our part in our own lives and undermines our collective actions."[66] Kinefuchi also identifies this problem with the original misanthropic associations insofar "they position the return and healing of nature against human absence."[67] This dualism ultimately reifies a diametric understanding of nature/humanity rather than an interconnected model of subjectivity.

These arguments might seem oppositional considering the celebration of irony in Bosworth's account of these events and the suspicion of Kinefuchi. However, if read together, these arguments provide insight into these memes' transformative potential. These memes are not lodged at environmentalist sentiments; they are lodged at a specific brand of misanthropic environmentalism reliant upon a mythologization of the natural world. Mockery of the misanthropic frame allows for environmentalist sentiments to be rerouted into a genuine care for the environment. It may well be true that the Coronavirus nature genre evoked a moment of affective hope. Nevertheless, that hope is ultimately meaningless if filtered through a frame that depoliticizes action.

Conclusion

Coronavirus, and the ensuing anthropause, produced a rhetorical situation wherein millions of individuals attempted to make sense of the chaotic world around them. In this moment of crisis, millions wondered if humanity's disappearance might become an avenue for the return of nature. This took many forms: stories of animals returning to reclaim the world; air pollution levels decreasing; misanthropic Ideations regarding the ontological status of humanity. A mixture of falsity and reality, these sentiments constructed an ideological frame that dehumanizes those sacrificed and forwards misanthropic sentiments as an avenue for a naive optimism.

As highlighted through this chapter, associations between COVID-19, misanthropy, and eco-fascism became a defining element of a viral controversy, spawning memes and academic criticism alike. These memes, and moments of critique, matched, and in some-cases outpaced, the circulation of the original sentiments. Google trends peaked. Leftists continued to dunk on each other on Twitter. Naturally, this begs

the question of how eco-fascism, which had not been a particularly well-known concept, became synonymous with misanthropy. Associations circulated on Twitter between eco-fascism and misanthropy highlighted how eco-fascism became constructed as an ideology defined by sacrifice and disregard for minority communities.

Although there is merit in the description of misanthropy as potentially amenable to eco-fascism, critics studying the emergence of eco-fascism in digital communities must parse out more than just the risk of cooptation. Misanthropic sentiments do not necessarily entail eco-fascism elements. Fascists do not have a monopoly on callous disregard of minority communities. To expand the scope of eco-fascism risks constructing eco-fascism as merely an antithesis to a pure-environmentalists coalition. To do so would ultimately leave the field unable to account for the rhetorical specific of eco-fascist discourse.

The line between eco-fascism and "boring old liberal capitalism," as Robert McDonald describes it, is sometimes muddled and difficult to parse out. Argumentative threads overlap, intersect, mock and sometimes masquerade as other arguments. It is only through the parsing out of controversy, affective expectations, and similarities in argumentative tendencies, that the implications of discursive trends can be understood fully. The different expectations, meanings, and referential mockery found within the coronavirus nature genre provide immense assistance in studying the interplay between supposed eco-fascist sentiments and public consciousness surrounding eco-fascism.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Fascism of Nature: The Aesthetics of Speaking for the Trees

Introduction

In the aftermath of Cloudflare taking 8Chan off of their web-hosting services (due to actions of Tarrant, Crusius, and John Earnest), the far-right has seemingly dispersed into decentralized communicative ecosystems. Public hubs, which had seemingly organized prominent aspects of the alt-right, disappeared overnight. An already fragmented social group atomized across various platforms. Neinchan and 8kun are empty shells of 8chan. 4chan has long censored too much for the far-right. Gab and Parler have substantial alt-right, conservative, and Qanon communities, but are not known as eco-fascist organizing spaces. As highlighted by Brian Hughes, Twitter has somewhat of an eco-fascist community under the moniker of "Pine-Tree Twitter," although it is of questionable scope. [1] During the period between 2019-2020, there are few apps with a thriving far-right userbase as Telegram. Telegram has become the primary site for far-right messaging and community building.

Telegram is an encrypted message app. Researchers Pavel and Nikolai Durov maintain that after the January 6th riot at the capitol Telegram had daily users upwards of 500 million .[2] As studied within this chapter, Telegram amounts to an enclave of far-right propaganda circulating according to a different set of norms and parameters. Users on Telegram can utilize the application in three ways. One, users can message individuals on the application with server-side encryption and the opportunity for secret chats with end-to-end encryption.[3] Second, users can create public or private group chats. Third, users can create channels, public and private, allowing users to share images, videos, GIFs, and

messages to anyone who follows their channels. Posts from other channels may be shared

to an admin's channel, leading to a connective web between similar channels. Private

channels require an invite. Public channels can be found through a web-link, a post being

shared on a channel already being followed, or the channel name being searched.

Consequently, no one ends up in these channels without some intentionality. Some bots

allow a comment section on individual posts, but comments are by no means ubiquitous

in these right-wing Telegram channels. Some channels have public group chats, but the

membership of these chats tends to be significantly reduced — most likely due to the

safety of anonymous lurking in channels. Public channels, generally, lack many

deliberative or conversational aspects, though these channels still participate in

circulation. While large portions of Telegram's organizing occur in the DMs, this chapter

is primarily a treatise and analysis of the platform's public-facing aspects.

Even with a limitation of public channels, Telegram provides ample resources for

understanding radicalization post-8chan. Aleksandra Urman and Stefan Katz state that

'moves by Facebook and Twitter to block their content, and the shutdown of the 8chan

image-board" have massively funneled users towards Telegram as an alternative

gathering point.[4] In these cases, waves of users migrated to the platform allowing "them

to swiftly establish the connections with each other, thus recreating the structures that

existed on the platforms from which they were banned, and quickly establishing their

dominance."[5] Leslie Hahner argues that this shift away from hyper-visible sites such as

YouTube towards encrypted applications like Telegram can result in rhetorical scholars

misidentifying a decrease in alt-right circulation. [6] While these Telegram channels

individually lack the reach that 8Chan, 4Chan, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media

websites, they harbor some of the most extreme examples of right-wing reactionaries. As the admin of Terror-Wave Refined, one of the largest Telegrams channels, argues, "you would achieve a lot more" with "100 fanatics down with our cause" rather than "10.000 weekend warriors."[7]   Atomwaffen, one of the most dangerous and deadly fascist groups, distributes recruiting and training videos through Telegram.[8]   Slovak's Siege Shack, yet another far right channel that is only accessible on the desktop version of Telegram, routinely disseminates sabotage techniques, blueprints for weapons, and guides for operational security. Before right-wing appropriation of Telegram by white-nationalists, ISIS utilized Telegram to organize attacks and disseminate information.[9]

Far-right Telegram communities, known colloquially as Terrorgram, take up a war of aesthetics. The construction of aesthetically premised images is so engrained into the cultural zeitgeist of Telegram that indexes have separate sections within channels, to distinguish which places focus on the production of a narrower aesthetic. The majority of posts within eco-fascist communities tend to involve the production of imagery with the aesthetic appropriation of natural landscapes. These can range from fascist architecture and memes to images of natural landscapes with neo-Nazi symbolism in the background. As part of this, far-right activists appropriate imagery and rhetoric known to the general populace while redefining the meaning of those images. The "OK" hand signal is an example both of far-right appropriation (it was suggested that actors re-code the "Ok" hand symbol as far-right, but only to troll liberals) and was also seriously adopted as a representation of white supremacy.[10] Channels, then, focus heavily on symbolism and fidelity to a particular style. Although some Telegram users might argue aesthetic channels are a substitute for political action, shitposting seems to be a defining element of

even those who point the stick at aesthetics for the far-right's inability to achieve a neo-fascist revolution.

To understand how aesthetic appropriation is key to the rhetorical messaging of the far-right, one need only look at one of the images constantly circulated in eco-fascist communities: *The Lorax. The Lorax,* a famous children's book by Dr. Seuss, pops up in memes, imagery, and even Crusius' manifesto. Many of these discourses and texts utilize *The Lorax* to construct explicitly environmental arguments. For example, Crusius indicated the overharvesting of resources by corporations was "brilliantly portrayed in the decades-old classic 'The Lorax.'"[11] These appropriations are not new in the world of environmental activism. *The Lorax* itself became a wildly circulated meme starting in 2014. Furthermore, different environmental groups have referenced *The Lorax* to bolster their credibility or achieve resonance with audience members. [12]

Following the methodological approaches outlines by Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner in 2019, Catherine Chaput in 2010, and Scott J. Varda and Leslie A. Hahner in 2020, this chapter interrogates the appropriation of *The Lorax* in eco-fascist memes circulated across eco-fascist Telegram channels. [13] Premised upon Woods and Hahner's argument that "memes are nodal points where the various, constitutive components of networked platforms merge together," I am interested in applying Jenny Edbauer's injunction to study the "temporal, historical, and lived fluxes" of textual fragments to the appropriation of The Lorax by right-wing telegram channels.[14] Within the broader Terrorgram ecosystem, I catalogued dozens of right-wing channels with clear environmentalist tendencies (and plenty of right-wing channels that regularly circulated memes presupposing environmental aesthetics). Many of the channels are rapidly

growing. Channels such as, "🌲🌲 Eco Gang 🌲🌲" achieved over 743,000 views in 2020.[15] Other less-explicitly environmental channels such as *Slovak Siege Shack,* a reference to Neo-Nazi James Mason's book Siege, achieved 2.7M views before being banned in a similar timespan, without being available on the Apple version of the application, while regularly publicizing guides to build weapons and plan terrorist activities.[16] Within the *EcoGram* ecosystem*,* this chapter specifically highlights imagery from two channels: 🌲🌲 Eco Gang 🌲🌲 and Slovak Siege Shack. I apply Varda and Hahner's understanding of far-right paratexts to memes appropriating *The Lorax,* a famous environmental children's book, alongside those espousing an environmental vanguardist messaging. In these images, *The Lorax* circulates and produces a representational frame wherein fascism is constructed and justified through a proto-fascist understanding of the natural world. This analysis highlights how *The Lorax becomes an* argumentative *topos* that eco-fascistic messaging draws upon via enthymatic argumentation. Afterward, I argue the tactic of seed-bombing circulated inside Slovak Siege Shack ought to be understood as coterminous with eco-fascist ideology.

The Plasticity of The Lorax

Published in 1971, *The Lorax* tells a simple story of how hyper-consumerism can go devastatingly wrong when environmental destruction is naturalized for profit. Set in a dreary tree-less landscape, the story centers around the Once-ler, the some-what villain of the story whose face is never shown, telling the story of The Lorax and the loss of the Truffula Trees to a young boy. At the beginning of this retelling, the Once-ler discovers a pristine wilderness with colorful flora and fauna. The Truffula Tree, a bright colored fluffy tree, results in the Once-ler yelling, "I knew just what I'd do!" So, the Once-ler

builds a shop and cuts down the first Truffula Tree to produce a "Thneed," a multi-use product.[17] Shortly after, The Lorax enters with a "ga-Zump," exclaiming, "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees."[18] The Lorax attempts to plead for The Once-ler to stop, but the story quickly cuts to the future where- the Thneed factory has roared into industrial status.[19] Still trying to prevent the extinction of the natural world, the Lorax stresses how the production facility is polluting the landscape, leading to the migration of the Swomee-Swan and the Humming Fish. Refusing the heed the warnings of the Lorax, all of the Truffula trees are cut down, and The Lorax leaves a "small pile of rocks, with the one word...'UNLESS.'"[20] *The Lorax* ends with the Oncer-ler passing on the last Truffula Seed to the young boy and saying, "Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back."[21]

As a subject of political controversy and activism, *The Lorax* occupies a central place within environmentalism. By Theodore Geisel's own account, The Lorax "was intended to be propaganda."[22] Geisel, a political cartoonist with the penname Dr. Seuss, wrote *The Lorax* because he continually read "dull things on conservation, full of statistics and preachy."[23] Nathalie op de Beeck attests *The Lorax* is "the automatic go-to text for pro-wilderness writers on children's literature."[24] Rita Roth emphasizes, Geisel "goes beyond well-established boundaries to provide a voice of opposition and possibility—opposition to the established order and possibility for social change."[25] Writing in the context of Geisel's anti-fascist tendencies, Philip Nell highlights how "instead of asking you to help save the country from Fascism, Seuss asks you save the environment from pollution. The message has changed, but the method of delivery has not."[26] In 1971, Keep America Beautiful, a prominent environmental non-profit,

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awarded Geisel for *The Lorax.* American Forests regularly used the Lorax as a mascot. [27]

Recently, a three-judge panel wrote in a decision, "We trust the United States Forest Service to 'speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues" after the United States Forest Service, granted pipeline rights through two national forests.[28] On the other side of the spectrum, logging communities, and some schools, endeavored to ban the book to stop "our kids" from being brainwashed.[29] The National Oak Flooring Manufacturers Association even published *Truax* by Terri Birkett, a propaganda piece appropriating the structure of the Lorax.[30]

Much like every-other beloved childhood character, internet subcultures have appropriated *The Lorax* for political commentary, social capital, inside jokes, and community construction. In most cases, the Lorax, as a character, is represented through a repeatable meme template that users across different social media platforms can edit to fulfill different contexts and argumentative goals. Most variants of this meme typically take place in a two-panel image where, in the first panel a "crudely-drawn version [of] the Dr. Seuss character The Lorax says his catchphrase, 'I am the Lorax and I speak for the trees.'" The second panel follows by allowing the Lorax to vocalize what the trees are saying. [31] In this panel, the meme's creator tends to write their own words after "the trees say." Users can fill in the latter image with any words of their own choice, as well as modifying the background imagery itself.

A proto-version of this Lorax template emerged on Tumblr in June of 2014, while the first iteration of the meme appeared in October 9 of 2015.[32] Imgur user InstntNoodle posted a photoshopped image from the Who Needs Feminism campaign with the Lorax misogynistically saying, "the trees say shut the fuck up."[33] InstntNoodle received 6,100

points for said meme, but was outdone by Tumblr user ey-b0ss420 who applied the internet lingo of "smash the like" to acquire 160,000 upvotes.[34] The template for the meme itself was posted on October 1 by Tumblr user Obamyself.[35] Variations of this meme "appeared on various internet sites," applying the meme structure to the age of old debate about Italians' caucasity and even the meaning of death.[36] Interestingly enough, the first popular environmental usage of this particular meme template did not gain prominence until 2017 when "a surge of edits appeared on meme-centric subreddit /r/dankmemes."[37]

In its totality, the memetic structure of "I Am The Lorax I Speak For The Trees" provides the opportunity for a litany of ideological assumptions. As Hahner identifies, "memes can elicit argument by spreading different frames for interpretation and inviting audiences to utilize those frames to evaluate the image."[38] It is in that contestation of interpretation and framing that Varda and Hahner argue "alt-right and related far-right figures frequently engage popular culture both to expand their own audience base but also to reframe understandings of trending topics or content."[39] While most of these memes do not attempt to claim an interpretive element to the thematic coherence of *The Lorax*, the memes circulating in far-right Telegram channels espousing explicitly eco-fascist ideals rely upon the iconicity of *The Lorax* to sustain their arguments. Eco-fascist memes appropriating the Lorax range from adjacent to militant anti-capitalism to full-blown accelerationist fascism.

Memes function through enmeshment within specific discursive publics. The advent of more esoteric and abstract memes is made possible through familiarity with a particular meme template and meme culture. Enthymematic argument, or arguments

where the audience fills in a missing premise, become an important element in the

circulation and popularity of different memes.[40] This is doubly true for fascist memes,

wherein coded language provides another element for hidden meanings. In this sense, I

depart from Davi Johnson's injunction that memes are "sheer surface" with "nothing to

interpret because the meme does not mean anything, or contain anything."[41] While it can

be true in some cases, "the significance of a meme lies in its surface use, not the hidden

ideological meaning critics often strive to unearth," it also true that the "hidden

ideological meaning" is evident to those who are enmeshed within an ecosystem.[42] The

sharing and circulation of memes grant different meanings depending on where a meme

travels over its' collective half-life. Pepe the Frog, an innocuous figure from a 2005

comic by Matt Furie, cooptation reveals this clearly. Through alt-right utilization and

rebranding of Pepe alongside neo-Nazi symbolism, Woods and Hahner highlight how

"'Pepe had found renewed life as a hate symbol, energized the work of meme creators."[43]

Due to this cooptation, a Pepe meme made and circulated in 2010 would be received

differently if the same pepe meme was made in 2021.

Consider figure 4.1 and 4.2 as a set of memes most closely adjacent to the original

form of *The Lorax* meme. Figure 4.1 provides a relatively common anti-corporatist

message about the cause of emissions. This anti-corporatist messaging, when read

alongside the addition of the ski-mask and Ak47, invokes an image of militant

environmentalism, seen in movements such as the ELF. The underpinning message of

figure 4.1 implies a need to target corporations with violent direct action. While this

messaging is in line with some veins of eco-fascism, it could easily circulate inside of

leftist environmental circles. At the same time, the meme not contradictory with any eco-

fascist messaging. Eco-fascist icons such as Ted Kaczynski and eco-fascist organizations,

such as the Green Brigade, espouse anti-corporate messaging with calls for direct action.

On the other hand, figure 4.2 operates in the same meme format but gestures explicitly

towards right-wing fascism. In the case of figure 4.2, *The Lorax* dons a skull-mask —

which Iron March, a fascist web-forum that the Southern Poverty Law Center tied to over

100 hate-crime murders, described as "the face of 21st Century Fascism [44]" — while

telling the audience that "the trees say read Harassment Architecture." Harassment

Architecture, written by Mike Ma, is a neo-fascist accelerationist text that rails against

the modern world while calling to "ACCELERATE THE WORLD, DECELERATE

YOUR TRIBES!"[45] Messaging along these lines is relatively common, as Mike Ma has

achieved notoriety in the eco-fascist community. Some even credit Ma as the emergent

leader of the "Pine Tree Party," although the "Pine Tree Party" ought to be understood as

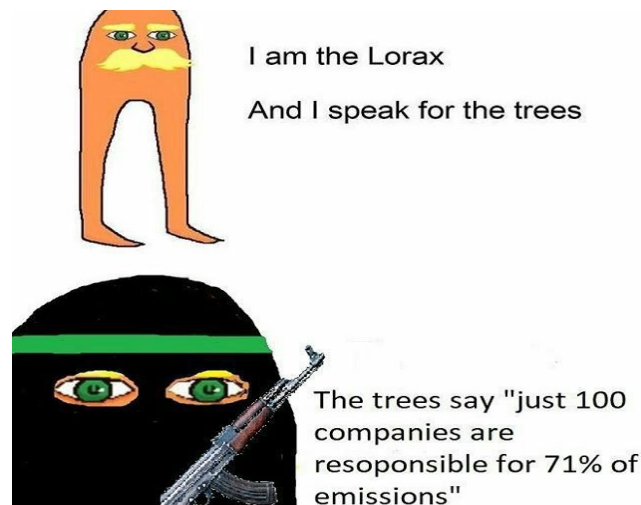a decentralized political ideology rather than a political party in a traditional sense.[46]

Figure 4.1 Image shared in Telegram Channel Ecogang, September 9th, 2019

Figure 4.2 Image shared in Telegram Channel Ecogang, April 24th, 2020

If the scope is expanded beyond the original meme format, then paratextual memes appropriating the imagery of *The Lorax* offer essential insight. Figure 4.3 and 4.4 depart from the rigid structure of the meme format but draw upon *The Lorax* to provide context. The panels are dropped, and the meme format is discarded as pretext. Even the imagery of *The Lorax* disappears from view. Images such as these have removed the direct reference to *The Lorax.* Absent context, these images could be just bio-centric claims toward environmentalism. Appropriations such as these are important precisely because they reveal the extended plasticity of *The Lorax* in terms of what Joshua Gunn describes as "iconic" topoi — the "fragments of films or other media texts that are made to signify a number of different things depending on their contextualization."[47] In this sense, *The Lorax* is deconstructed into a fragment to be appropriated for different political purposes. No longer is *The Lorax* bounded by fidelity to the text, but rather as an aesthetic and conceptual anchor-point to pull argumentation from when the need arises.

Figure 4.3 Image shared in Telegram Channel EcoGang, October 2, 2019

Figure 4.4 Image shared in Telegram Channel EcoGang, October 2, 2019

Topoi, defined as "rhetorical commonplace among discourses from which disparate and even conflicting claims and reasons can be generated about a subject," are central to argumentative construction.[48] Topoi can refer to a litany of different concepts, such as "subject-matter indicator," "Scheme of Argument,' "Ready-Made Argument," or even just "argument."[49] Applying Gunn's understanding of *Topoi to* the laughing Joe Biden meme in response to the 2012 VP debate, Susan A. Sci and David R. Dewberry highlight how "the malleability of digital data allows the topos of Joe Biden's laughter to quickly transform from more discursive memetic forms (I.E., tweets and fake Twitter accounts such as @LaughingJoeBiden) to more visual ones (I.e., image macro memes such as *Laughing Joe Biden* and Malarkey), while still addressing the same common topic but inferring conclusions and articulating claims about Biden's demeanor from a diverse range of subject positions."[50] In a sense, the democratization of argument production inaugurated by the digital age opens up discursive moments to constant reproduction. In particular, images or ideas become open to redefinition and contestation.

Based on this understanding of digital topoi, the shift towards a secondary referentiality constitutes *The Lorax* as an argumentative topos rather than an icon. Iconicity presumes a static image repeated, such as Pepe the frog, while the *The Lorax* becomes a textual referent drawn on to sustain environmental argumentation. In contrast to Dingo's claim that rhetorical critics ought "to look beyond shared common places and illuminate the various ways arguments are collected, composed, and assembled," these images provide insight into how circulation transforms imagery into a topos, a shared commonplace where arguments can be drawn from.[51] This is why circulation scholars (such as Chaput, Terranova, Woods & Hahner, Hahner & Varda, etc.), have continually

highlighted the necessity of investigating nodal points that assemble, coalesce and evacuate sphere of discourse. Commonalities produced by the affective resonance of particular nodal points explain why *The Lorax* can emerge as a point of similarity between eco-fascists, mainstream environmentalism, and non-environmental discourse.

As *The Lorax* becomes further decontextualized from the imagery of figure 4.3 and figure 4.4, the audience is left to fill in the gaps through context clues. In the case of figure 4.3 and figure 4.4, there lacks an explicit claim towards precisely what is spoken for the trees. Aristotle described this phenomenon as an enthymeme, wherein the audience is offered a partial syllogism and is implicitly asked to fill in the gaps. [52] In the context of imagery, enthymematic argument can resonate in "divergent manners" because "different readers are resonating with different layers of the culturally-induced message."[53] If, for example, these images were circulated on a different platform, then the audience would obviously derive different meanings from these images. Consider these images, then, not as decontextualized fragments circulating in the ether, but as contextualized and made meaningful through an enmeshment in a particular ecosystem, which invites users to make enthymematic connections. It is in this intersecting rhetorical commonplace, or topoi, where the enthymematic element of figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 is made meaningful, insofar as the audience is affectively primed to fill in the gaps. Through the construction and circulation of overlapping topoi, media ecologies can produce a "collaboratively crafted reality."[54]

Both Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4 draw upon *The Lorax* in relatively similar but distinct ways. The caption for both implies the actions of the people in the image vocalize the desires of natural world. Figure 4.3 portrays a masked man with a Molotov cocktail

— an image that does not necessarily signify a right-wing leaning. Figure 4.3 could easily fit within the parameters of Earth First! or any-other radical environment group. While Figure 4.4 depicts six individuals with skull-masks with an Algiz, an Elder Futhark rune symbolizing life appears, an image which is commonly appropriated in eco-fascist messaging.[55] Neon imagery, specifically in the eyes, is used to create contrast and construct an ethereal feeling, as if the stare denotes something outside the bounds of the normal, an otherworldly gaze returned.

Consider the enthymematic element of these images alongside the common association between natural law and fascism, as highlighted by Figure 4.5. Eco-fascism, as an organizing point for rhetorical discourse, ought to be understood as a decentralized ideology consisting of an eclectic group of environmentalists — namely ecological reactionaries, anti-civilization accelerationists, white-nationalist localism, totalitarian environmentalism, and some other environmental misfits — bound together through a rhetorical construction of natural law as the basis for environmental fascism. Natural law can signify many things but can be most clearly understood as "a system of right or justice held to be common to all humans and derived from nature rather than from the rules of society, or positive law."[56] Within this framework, the "only ethical system is nature," because "regardless of how thought out it is, no functional, ethical, or sustainable system can be based on unnatural precepts."[57] Heteronormativity, white-supremacy, anti-immigrant tendencies, and even anti-capitalism can all be justified through this framework. Or as the manifesto for the Green Brigade, a group of "openly accelerationist, militant environmentalist members," argues "National Socialism is the highest expression of Natural Law."[58]
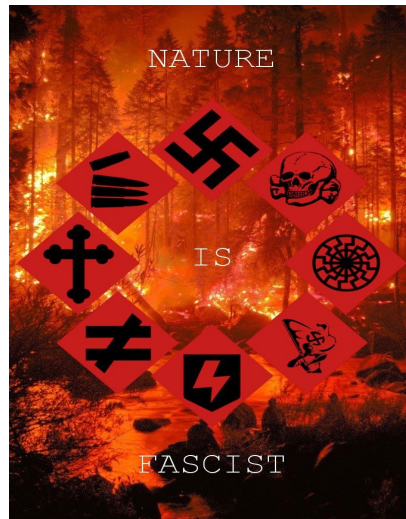
Figure 4.5. Image shared in Eco Gang. November 13. 2019

Imagery associating fascism with natural law is present throughout the Terrorgram ecosystem. Figure 4.5 highlights this association most explicitly by arguing nature is inherently fascist. A post from *EcoGang* on April 28th 2020, indicates "fascism will win" because "nature demands it."[59] Another post made on August 21st, 2019, paired the statement "RESTORE NATURAL LAW" with an image of a masked figure holding a gun and a Schwarze Sonn, a rune associated with eco-fascist communities.[60] In a slightly different sense, the Telegram channel Deep Ecology posted an image of a white women framed by a Schwarze Sonn with the phrase "you cannot denazify mother nature."[61] Through all of these images, natural law — and nature itself — is constructed as the precursor to fascism, insofar as fascism is the natural conclusion of a naturalist ethos.

Supposing that figure 4.3 and figure 4.4 are decoded with a particular understanding of fascist naturalism, then these images' enthymematic elements can be understood as informed by fascistic tendencies. The maker of these images does not need

a second panel isolating what is spoken. The skull-masks say it. The glowing eyes say it. The utilization of terror wave aesthetics says it. Imagery is political without needing to spell out the meaning. This is not to say that these images are irreducibly fascist without context, instead they are fascist through their enmeshment within an eco-fascist ecosystem. Paratexts are liminal. Paratexts are simultaneously orbiting around the original texts, its assumed meaning, and the ideological beliefs of the rhetor are moved with those travels. Depending on where the image is produced and circulated, the meaning of the image is constructed differently.

In the case of figure 4.3 and figure 4.4, the image creator can assume a set of prior-ontological claims that has already affectively primed the audience to fill in the gaps of the logic, that filling in is at least anti-immigrant, if not genocidal in orientation. The audience already knows the dog-whistles, as the whistle is music to their ears. Once entered into the Terrorgram community, audience members are constantly inundated with imagery associating skull-masks and natural law with fascism. The trees might not be speaking to the general public, but if we're listening to organizations such as the Green Brigade or the Pine Tree Party, then the trees are screaming for fascism. More specifically, the inherent fascism in the natural world affirms the validity of racial hierarchies while subscribing to hyper-masculine ideas of female subservience. Slavery, sexual assault, the holocaust, colonization, and other incarnations of a racial hierarchy have all been justified via this blood and soil logic. By invoking a racial hierarchy of who is connected with the natural world, eco-fascism provides a foil to justify beliefs as inherently natural. It is not just that environmentalism is coterminous with fascism, nor that fascism is an environmentalist ideology. Rather, the ontological and representational

structure of fascism is derived from an already existing code to the world. It is the proto-fascistic quality of nature, or interchangeably the natural order, occupying the central role in these memes.

Images such as these provide insight into the ideological undercurrents justifying the most extreme variants of eco-fascism. These images are not meant to be shared on Facebook. Nor are they meant to go viral in any meaningful sense. Images such as these are meant to be shared, circulated, and enjoyed by those who are already eco-fascists. Figures 4.3, 4.4, and 4.6 are rallying cries for the audience; these images ask the audience to construct and fill in the gaps with violent assumptions. In fact, figure 1.6 is accompanied with a question "What would they say about you? Are you the man they saw walk by to go indoors to your 9-5 job every day; or are you the man who lived among them while revering all of nature?"[62] The mobilizing force being the relationship between the audience member and the presumed fascist natural world. Any disjunction between the inherent fascism of nature and the audience functions to move the audience towards fascism.
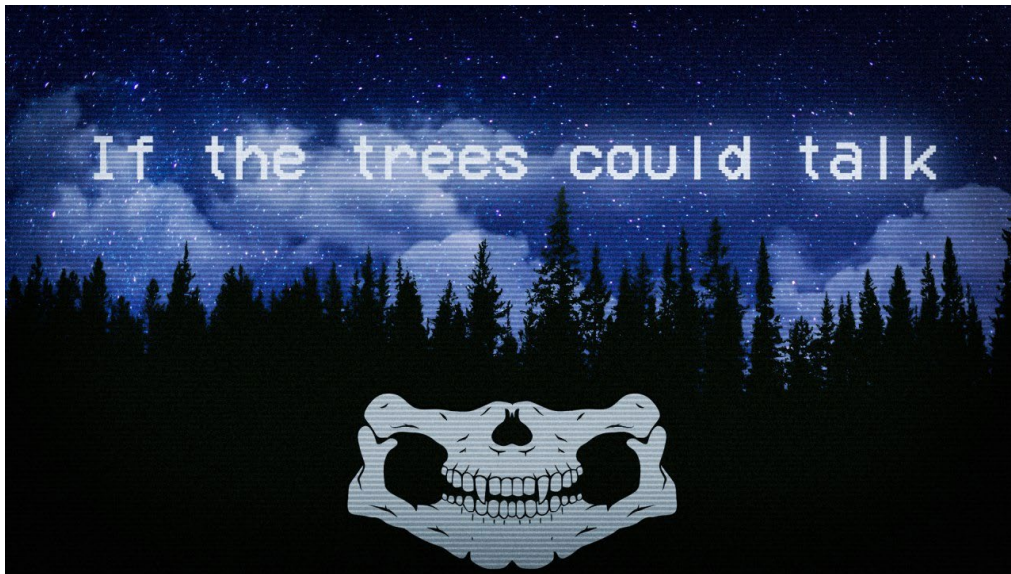
Figure 4.6. Image shared in Telegram channel EcoGang. July 23rd. 2020

In this sense, these images offer up a constitutive relationship between eco-fascistic rhetoric and the natural world. As Cox and Pezzulo argue, environmental rhetoric is foundationally constitutive as "our communication also helps us construct or compose representation of nature and environmental problems as subjects for our understanding."[63] Use of the *The Lorax* in far-right channels produces an alternative relationship to blood and soil logics by writing fascism as a proto-quality of the natural world. It is not just that white people are more naturally in touch with particular landscapes. The logic constructs the landscapes as fascist in and of themselves.

Through these images, and *Volkisch eco-fascist discourse* more broadly*,* eco-fascist rhetors strategically construct a voice for the voiceless trees. Implicitly, this argument's circulatory structure requires a constituted identity and political leaning of nature, or more specifically *the trees* to produce eco-fascists as the spokesperson for the trees. Much like 'the people' of populist rhetoric, 'the trees' are themselves a rhetorical

invention.[64] These images are not presuming a level of cognition for trees. *The Lorax* functions as propaganda. This propaganda highlights the rhetorical doubling constructed in eco-fascist ideology. No longer is there a need for the disconnected reference towards overpopulation and cultural differences found in environmental restrictionism. Saying the quiet part out loud is the goal. Accelerationists on Telegram eschew any belief in a distinction between the quiet part and the loud part.

By proxy, these images as well construct what Maurice Charland describes as the "constitution of a collective subject" and the "positing of a transhistorical subject," two of the foundational aspects of constitutive rhetoric.[65] Here, the claims become central to the use of enthymemes to position actors. In the same moment that 'the trees' are constructed as agents, 'the trees' are also only understood in terms of the eco-fascists who have become the point of contact between the supposedly fascist natural world and the human realm. Blood and soil logics construct the value of eco-fascists, while eco-fascists construct the ideological basis for blood and soil logics. This mutual construction assumes both to be true before any evidentiary basis precisely because fascism constructs a "transhistorical subject" against the decay of modernity.[66] Environmentalism informs this process by narrating landscapes and the natural world as the gateway to a transhistorical subject prior to modernity. Naturally, calls to return to nature or to restore natural law perform a constitutive function in the production of eco-fascism as a transhistorical subject, a subject that decodes enthymematic claims in keeping with violent ideology.

'The Trees' as a rhetorical invention also informs the political choices made by eco-fascists. Figure 4.7 highlights how eco-fascists have appropriated the concept of seed

bombing "for the race."[67] Mix clay, compost, water, and the seeds "of the most toxic or invasive shit," and you get a seed bomb.[68] Throw that seed bomb into "low income housing projects" or "city parks," and you're participating in "the overlap between ecofash and terrorwave."[69] Within this paradigm, exposed soil is a weakness to be exploited by eco-fascists.

Making Seed Bombs
FOR THE RACE

Listen, faggot, seed bombs are the overlap between ecofash and terrorwave. How SIEGE is that? Anyway, here's how to make them.

5 parts air dried clay
1 part compost
1 part seeds of the most toxic or invasive shit that you can get your hands on
a bit of water to form the clay - not too much, or it'll be cringe

Mix that shit thoroughly like it's a Swedish gov't-sponsored integration ad. Throw anywhere from "low income housing projects" to city parks, don't let the big globohomo players get off easy - if they have exposed soil near their establishment, fucking BOMB that shit like it's the Alfred P. Murrah building.

Remember to hydrate regularly and stay wignasty.
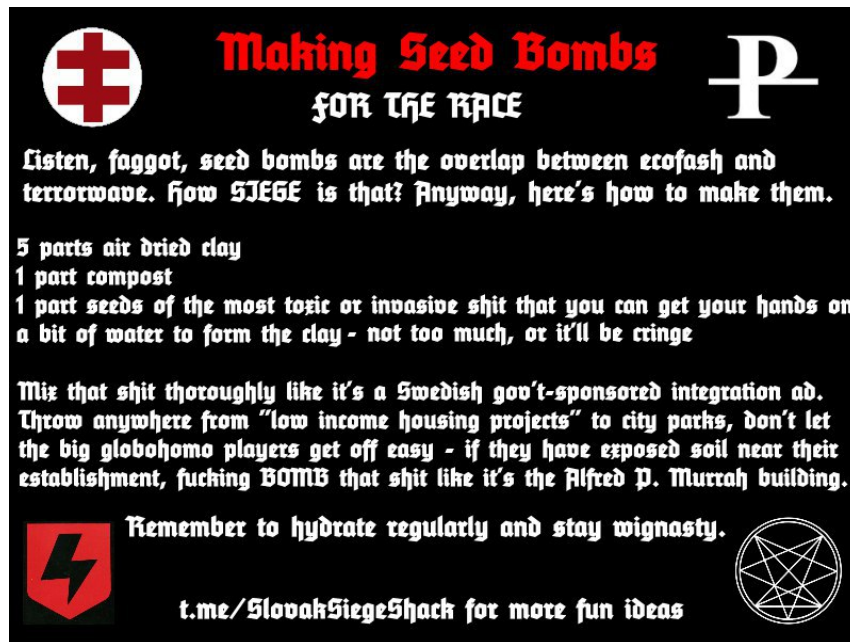
t.me/SlovakSiegeShack for more fun ideas

Figure 4.7. Image share in Telegram channel Slovak Siege Shack. September 5, 2019.

Seed bombing is not new. Since the 1970s, guerilla gardening has been a tactic of urban communities to fight against urbanization.[70] This includes things such as urban gardens and seed-bombs as an tactical event.[71] Traditionally, seed bombs were utilized to rewild landscapes against the forces of urbanization and decay. Vacant lots held for speculation were planted by throwing flower-based seed bombs over fences.[72] Seed bombs allowed for difficult to access areas to be rewilded.

When this strategy of seed-bombing is appropriated by the far-right *against* low-income housing, eco-fascists reveal another danger of hyper-naturalism collapsing into fascism. As an ideological referent and a material phenomenon, nature is a weapon to wage war for the white race. Invasive, toxic, and poisonous species are no longer things to be avoided. In a sense, the utilization of seed bombs is bioterrorism, but would not be covered as such in media outlets.[73] No law enforcement agency is going to investigate poisonous mushrooms appearing in low-income housing. The delay between seed-bombing and growth makes catching anyone participating in seed bombing almost impossible. Invasive and toxic species become a mechanism by which eco-fascism and terror-wave intersect, constructing pathways between different far-right groups. Circulated in Slovak's Siege Shack, and seen over 15,000 times before the channel was shut down, calls to make "seed bombs for the race" ought to be understood as the conclusion of a political ideology that invites fascist actions against natural ecosystems as somehow inherently natural. Eco-fascist seed bombs are a quintessential example of a rhetorical relationship manifesting through the appropriation of a traditionally left-wing activity known as guerrilla gardening.

By collapsing the distinction between fascism and the natural world, eco-fascist rhetors open the rhetorical possibilities for environmental violence. How eco-fascists construct their appeals and then mobilize those appeals into tactics provides a lot of information regarding the future of eco-fascist ideology. Increasing intersections between eco-fascist and neo-fascist ideology imply a troubling possibility of fascist naturalism become a core part of the far-right. Specifically, the appropriation of *The Lorax* and the fascist application of seed bombing represent how the intellectual vanguard of eco-

fascism rationalize and naturalize their belief in racial hierarchies. As the naturalization of fascism becomes cemented through environmentalist justifications, eco-fascists are given a blank script which they can narrate however they please. Attuning to the rhetorical processes, appropriations, and tactical choices will be necessary when studying future developments.

Conclusion

Telegram has and continues to be a space of organizing within the ecological far-right. Although specific channels have been de-platformed, countless others will replace those channels, as Terrorgram associated channels have continued to grow due to perceived censorship on platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. Members of Telegram know this and are planning around it. Moderation within Telegram will not happen without public outcry – proven by the ability for Twitter users, such as Gwen Snyder, to campaign for multiple fascists channels to be taken down.[74] While this rise in Terrorgram membership continues, there is a risk that traditional conservatives fleeing to Telegram will become inculcated in fascist, and eco-fascist, communities. These changes reproduce the potential for fascist creep seen in other right-wing communities.

Part of this eco-fascist appeal to fascist communities, and non-fascist is the appropriation of common figures thatcan be drawn upon to construct argumentative appeals. By appealing to commonly held figures within environmental activism, eco-fascists are able utilize *The Lorax* to construct a framework of fascism masquerading as hyper-naturalist imagery. Research by rhetorical scholars and other researchers of the far-right continually prove the ways paratextual reference to popular media is a central tenant

of the far-right. Paratexts are essential to the rhetorical development of the far-right, insofar as they allow fascists to rationalize their actions by drawing upon relevant topoi.

As individuals become more and more enmeshed within digital subcultures, these images begin to provide different insights and, in fact, new meanings. Through this chapter's analysis, I have called attention to the enthymematic element in the imagery appropriating *The Lorax* in eco-fascist Telegram channels. By no means is this unique to *The Lorax.* Far-right environmentalists have long connected a naturalist aesthetic to fascist sentiments in a variety of ways. Nor does this analysis mean that these channels only funnel these sentiments through *The Lorax.* Many times, eco-fascist groups on Telegram explicitly write treatises on the inherent fascism of natural law. Instead, this chapter hopes to highlight how these ideological commitments to hyper-naturalism can corrupt even our most sacred childhood books. Environmentalism has become a meta-ideology, or "a body of ideas that lays down the grounds upon which political and ideological debate can take place."[75] Within this ecological commonplace, eco-fascism strategically utilizes enthymematic argumentation towards a dangerous political ideology. This structure provides an easy pathway towards violent responses, whether seed bombing or Tarrant inspired mass-shootings. If the field continues to ignore the rising danger of eco-fascist rhetoric, then eco-fascists may be indeed become the ones who speak for the trees.

Notes

1. Brian Hughes, "'Pine-Tree' Twitter and The Shifting Ideological Foundations of Eco-Extremism," Interventionen, no. 14 (December 2019).

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CHAPTER FIVE

A Closing Note on Eco-Fascism.

Summation

The gaps, failures, and silence on eco-fascism within contemporary

environmental and communication scholarship demand research, which this thesis has

attempted to partially remedy. Eco-fascist discourse continues to exceed the boundaries

of enclaved communities to motivate and guide mainstream events. Mass-shooters are

appropriating environmental language to justify their actions. Far-right groups across the

world are quickly shifting their language towards environmentally inclusive language.

France's National Rally has shifted messaging towards an anti-immigrant platform

premised on the claim that "Borders are the environment's greatest ally" against nomadic

people who "do not care about the environment" because "they have no homeland." [1]

Lega Nord, a right-wing Italian populist party, added in the claim "environmental issues

are universal" in their 2018 manifesto while also affirming the need to clamp down on

climate migration. [2] Clearly eco-fasicm is not simply a fringe movement.

Eco-fascism, which often manifests itself in contradictory terms, challenges

commonly held associations between environmentalist sentiments and far-right activists.

If devoid of context, some of the messages circulated inside eco-fascist channels could

easily be paired with leftist messaging. This is not to say that it would be effective to

institute a coalition with fascists, but rather sub-text and context are necessary to

understand the contours of eco-fascist discourse. A higher burden on research to account for the rhetorical context and technique of eco-fascist discourse is imminently necessary.

Traditional rhetorical typologies of political ideology and sentiments for conservative and liberal parties cannot account for the proliferation of neo-fascist, alt-right, and far-right sentiments that cross party lines. Transplanting theories of paleo or neo-conservative ideologies leads scholars astray by misidentifying the political leanings of far-right movements. Neo-fascist ideology selectively attaches itself to argumentation, which might immediately seem to be a non-rightwing belief. To attend to this diffuse rhetorical ecology, in this thesis, I have forwarded an analysis of eco-fascist sentiments circulating across different platforms, which can provide insight into the political and affective sentiments circulated inside far-right communities.

In this sense, eco-fascist and eco-fascist adjacent sentiments construct associations that build icons, textual genres, and even argumentative topoi. Through the repetition of imagery, argument, and racialized affective appeals, conceptual anchors are constructed for the purpose of argument construction. For Tarrant and Crusius, social narratives constructed by conservative activists between immigration, overpopulation, environmental destruction establish the parameters for white-nationalist anxiety. Crusius' anxious belief that he spent his "whole life" preparing "for a future that currently doesn't exist" was made possible insofar as already existing connections between environmental destruction and immigration ontologized white-nationalist anxiety through a reference to so-called objective facts about the natural world. Within Telegram ecosystems, *The Lorax* was made meaningful through already existing connections between fascism and natural law.

This thesis has broken up the study of eco-fascism into three different research inquiries. One, how does eco-fascist discourse draw upon already existing argumentative infrastructure — internal to environmentalism, eco-reactionaries, and other social movements — to cohere its arguments? Two, in what ways does popular discourse surrounding eco-fascism misidentify the rhetorical strategies and origins of eco-fascism? Three, what are the enmeshed ideologies, counter-publics, and adjacent forms of discourse within eco-fascism? Each chapter takes up these questions in distinct fashions.

Chapter one navigated the relationship between eco-fascist manifestos, the circulation of Tarrant/Crusius inside of far-right ecosystems, and the argumentative infrastructure drawn upon to construct their arguments. In both the manifestos and eco-fascist discourse circulating before and after Tarrant and Crusius, eco-fascist accounts of the crisis legitimized their arguments by constructing a frame of vilification wherein eco-fascists drew upon a long history of scapegoating immigrants for a litany of social problems. As highlighted, Tarrant and Crusius were not historical aberrations, and in fact had argumentative corollaries to both eco-fascists such as Madison Grant and environmental restrictionists such as John Tanton. Although distinct in tone and political solution, the social narratives crafted by the network of non-profits and academics — FAIR, PFIR, NumbersUSA, Philip Cafaro, etc. — primed audiences to construct immigrants as zero-sum tradeoffs with a green future.

Beyond just vilifying immigrants, far-right communities have sanctified those who commit acts of racial violence. Tarrant, Crusius, Andres Brevik, Dylan Roof, Timothy McVeigh, and others have received this treatment textually and visually. Chapter one studied the original imagery of Saint Tarrant spray-painted in New Zealand,

alongside the circulation of the imagery associating white-nationalist terrorism with *Holy Terror,* and found the narrative of sainthood constructed a rhetorical frame that mobilized members for the far-right community to take up their arms. By constructing white-nationalist and eco-fascist violence as denoting a saintly disposition, these images strategically draw upon religious rhetoric to naturalize the logic of fascism.

Chapter two investigated the perceptions and misperceptions of eco-fascism within popular culture by studying the viral trend of "we're the virus" on Twitter in March 2020. Originating from a set of stories dubbed the "coronavirus nature genre" narrating the return of the natural world during the beginning of a world-wide quarantine, those espousing the sentiments behind "we're the virus" accused humanity of being the true virus and indicated coronavirus as the vaccine for the natural world. Naturally, the popularity and circulation of the coronavirus nature genre and "we're the virus" became a site of controversy, which supposedly proved the dangers of eco-fascism.

Although the accusations of eco-fascism had some merit, the blanket accusations ultimately revealed that public consciousness regarding eco-fascism was the product of a shallow view of eco-fascism, likely acquired through a passing knowledge of eco-fascism sparked by the crimes of Brenton Tarrant and Patrick Crusius. Rather than entailing the eschatological nature of fascism, these social narratives housed within the "coronavirus nature genre" were the products of a naive misanthropy. Through the replication, proliferation, and circulation of both false and real stories espousing the environmental benefits, users could compartmentalize the pandemic from the compounding environmental crisis. Misanthropy provides a framework wherein the losses of human life

are deprioritized, as sentient humans are couched as viruses, while the benefits are raised to a level of abstraction.

At the same moment 'we're the virus' resulted in eco-fascism reaching an all-time high on Google, 'we're the virus,' and similar phrasing, became an avenue for social critique and memes. Playing on the artificiality and falsity of stories of environmental renewal, these images mocked the original misanthropic sentiments by replacing the return of the natural world with artificial substitutes. These ranged from images of Lime scooters thrown into the river to a giant rubber duck floating in the Thames river accompanied with some variant of the original misanthropic tweets. By constructing a satiric frame of the original memes, memes began to function as a moment of social critique against what was perceived to be eco-fascist.

Chapter three delved into the cesspit of contemporary eco-fascism in the neo-fascist circles of Telegram. Telegram, a messaging app created for free speech by the Durov brothers, houses a distinct representation of eco-fascism due to the insular nature of the platform. The willingness of Telegram users to espouse their support of Nazism or fascism offers insight into the intellectual vanguard of eco-fascist communities. It is essential to recognize that the messaging and imagery circulated inside Telegram channels are not made for the general public; instead, messaging on Telegram is made by fascists for fascists. Nevertheless, Telegram users still rely upon popular imagery to construct their rhetorical appeals.

Specifically, this thesis studied the appropriation of *The Lorax,* a prominent environmentalist children's book, within the Telegram channel *"🌲🌲 Eco Gang 🌲🌲."* These appropriations ranged from a relatively common meme format to more abstract

references to the iconic statement 'we speak for the trees.' Chapter three found that the Lorax as a reference point allowed for eco-fascists to couch constitutive appeals to an inherent fascism in nature. By positioning the rhetor as the spokesperson for the trees, these images strategically utilized *The Lorax* to construct the basis of environmental appeals. However, rather than utilizing *The Lorax* as an icon, which assumes a repetition of an image, eco-fascist rhetors appropriated *The Lorax* as a digital topos for the construction of a wide range of arguments. The decontextualization of *The Lorax* opened up the rhetorical potential of a seemingly set-in-stone children's novel to become an avenue of eco-fascist critique.

Although these case studies are distinct in their own ways, each chapter builds upon broader rhetorical understandings of digital discourse and environmental communication. Telegram, Twitter, and 4chan are defined by their users and the platform itself, and thus produce different publics and subcultures. If the field has a shallow account of eco-fascism, then it is increasingly likely our accounts of the landscape of environmental communication will end up reproducing the condition of its' emergence. The representation, perceptions, and construction of eco-fascist argumentation are necessary to map out the potential for eco-fascism to take up presence in mainstream public discourse, and to abet fascism more generally.

Nevertheless, the limitations of this research are defined by the research parameters. First, this thesis only investigates the argumentative, textual, and digital elements of some eco-fascist communities. It would be a misnomer to believe all eco-fascist appeals necessarily are made the same when presented in a non-digital space. Due to an online focus, this thesis can only account for the textual artifacts studied rather than

a paradigmatic treatment of eco-fascist argument. Second, representation is not necessarily equivalent to belief or action. For example, Tarrant's manifesto is a mixture of shitposts and authentic argument, with the obligation on the reader to parse out the difference between the two. Scholars can also highlight the function of enthymematic argument and speculate the political implications but cannot peek inside every potential user's mind. Third, this research has chosen case studies that represent strands of eco-fascist and eco-fascist adjacent discourse. There is always an imminent danger in spectacularizing the most extreme forms of fascism while ignoring the more quotidian elements of violence by liberal and other activists. By highlighting the interconnected elements of environmental argumentation, left and right, this thesis has attempted to account for the diversity in environmental thought.

Future Research

Future research can help navigate the limitations of this thesis. Organizations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, Greenline Front, and The Green Brigade are potential windows in the organizing process of more hierarchical eco-fascist organizations. Scholars would be prudent to study the social media tactics and the organizational communication of these groups. Furthermore, research on the shift towards environmental language within main-stream far-right parties will be necessary to predict the organizational shifts towards eco-fascist and eco-fascist adjacent discourse. For example, the discursive shifts highlighted in Lega Nord, France's National Rally, and Alternative for Germany are potential avenues of research.

Both the manifestos of Tarrant and Crusius offer more insight than provided in this thesis. Scholars studying Solastalgia and melancholic relationships to environmental

loss could supply important context to eco-fascism's anxious political rhetoric. In fact, a study of these manifestos as melancholic texts could illuminate the dangers of environmental destruction sparking more eco-fascist tendencies. Beyond the melancholia of eco-fascist discourse, there is a meaningful conversation regarding the relationship between Tarrant and Crusius' manifesto and settler colonialism. For example, Crusius' manifesto begins with a response to the statement that "some people will think this statement is hypocritical because of the nearly complete ethnic and cultural destruction brought to the Native Americans by our European ancestors." Crusius follows this up with the claim this proved the need for mass-murder because "[t]he natives didn't take the invasion of Europeans seriously, and now what's left is just a shadow of what was." Tarrant's reference to the need to support other white nations, which he terms "brother nations," deserves attention from the perspective of settler colonialism.

As a platform, Telegram deserves renewed research. Alexander Urman and Stefan Katz's article "What they do in the shadows: examining the far-right networks on Telegram" is a wonderful start to this research. However, future research should navigate the rhetorical dimensions of Telegram by forwarding a discussion of how the particularities of the platform —private messaging, hidden channels, indexes, etc. — construct some of the idiosyncrasies of how fascism develops on Telegram. For instance, a study on the creation and circulation of indexical images that catalog channels within the far-right eco-system would go along way to account for the emergence of more significant far-right communities such as TerrorGram or EcoGram. Furthermore, the recent de-platforming, and subsequent recreation of the channels in the aftermath of the

Capitol Hill riots could offer insight into different possible solutions to the growth in fascist discourse on the platform.

The emergence of far-right and eco-fascist messaging is currently fledgling but is likely to grow in the coming years. Shiposts within a closed-off far-right ecosystem pale in comparison to the scale of climate denial. Eco-fascist messaging will be imminently more dangerous when the political infrastructure dedicated to pumping billions of dollars into climate denial propaganda decides to circulate anti-immigrant and neo-fascist environmental messaging. Already existing messaging have been crafted in such a way to provide a natural transition to both far-right circles and traditional conservative understandings of rugged individualism.

Although not inherently eco-fascist, there is a distinct risk that disaffected liberal and misanthropic environmentalists attach themselves to far-right and eco-fascist messaging. For instance, John Tanton's support in the Sierra Club was made possible due to Paul Watson, leader of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, Lester Brown, Worldwatch Institute leader, and Randy Hayes, Rainforest Action leader.[3] In fact, Tanton wrote "the issues we're touching on here must be broached by liberals" because "[t]he conservatives simply cannot do it without tainting the whole subject."[4] If democratic institutions continue to favor corporate lobbies, then environmental activists might be funneled towards anti-liberal and anti-democratic groups espousing an environmental alternative.

The physical materiality of environmental destruction will magnify all these sentiments and risks. Increased pollution will likely spark nationalist tendencies as far-right groups appeal to the notion of protecting the homeland. Corporate lobbying for

reduced regulations and increased off-shoring supplies in-roads to anti-cosmopolitan localism, which will likely become connected to nationalist descriptions of the environment. Renewed nationalism funneled through environmentalist language will become a dangerous political weapon. Anxiousness regarding the changing landscapes, known as solastalgia, will be weaponized against whoever is scapegoated as the object-cause of this psychological distress.

However, the risk of eco-fascist discourse is not a *fait-accompli*. Far-right activists do not have a monopoly on climate anxiety. Organizations like the Sierra Club, Extinction Rebellion, GreenPeace, Youth Climate Strike, the Sunrise Movement, and Zero Hour all have the organizing capability to circulate and spread messaging to counter the appeal to eco-fascist argumentation. There needs to be a concerted effort to produce messaging that is actively built to deal with the talking points of eco-fascism. A just-transition that prioritizes social justice questions rather than abstract commitments to emissions reduction would go along way to prevent cooptation by eco-fascist and corporations alike. Structural changes to the nature of our carbon economy as well as our lifestyles are necessary to prevent the massive impacts that climate change will reap. Beyond a non-stance on immigration, organizations need to highlight how scapegoating immigrants ultimately allows the real culprits of environmental destruction off the hook. Most importantly, we must mobilize successfully as not to let the fascists sustain the allure of pessimism.

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