

DISSERTATION

PESSIMISM AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

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ABSTRACT

PESSIMISM AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

This dissertation provides an intellectual history of critical pessimism in the twentieth century to develop a novel theory of ecopessimism sensitive to the challenges of the climate crisis. To theorize ecopessimism, I have considered pessimism alongside the critical philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. By theorizing alongside post-foundationalist philosophers and critical theory, pessimism challenges monolithic concepts, suprahistorical narratives, and technological optimism. As well, pessimism invites us to be a part of this world and to see it as it truly is—for all its sinister violence, injustice, and misery—but also to relish in the beauty of existence without specific expectations. In this manner, and drawing on Nietzsche, pessimism is a life-affirming ethos of spontaneity, which aims to will differently, while being deeply attuned to suffering and injustice. Critical ecopessimism is a form of weak theory that emphasizes contingency and historical discontinuity. Furthermore, because pessimism engages with and accepts the possibility of worst-case scenarios, it provides the intellectual and political resources necessary to deal with environmental crisis, as well as the collective grief for all we stand to lose. Ecopessimism uses critique to cut through the outmoded narrative of progress, the cruelty of technological optimism and ecological modernization, as well as the eco-authoritarianism of the overpopulation alarmists. This dissertation theorizes a critical pessimism that asks us to expect nothing specific as the present dissolves into the future; beckons us to live as though the worst were possible and to live joyfully in the face of adversity; and calls us to be sensitive to the injustice and suffering of human and more-than-human others while being critically attentive to the world we have inherited.

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DEDICATION

For my mom—
I would be nothing without you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

We make too much history.

With or without us
there will be the silence
and the rocks and the far shining.
But what we need to be
is, oh, the small talk of swallows
in evening over
dull water under willows.
To be we need to know the river
holds the salmon and the ocean
holds the whales as lightly
as the body holds the soul
in the present tense, in the present tense.

—Ursula K. LeGuin¹

The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.

—Richard Powers²

The term Anthropocene is an attempt by scientists to change the story. By the mere fact of the concept's existence, it implies a transformation in the earth's archive. The Anthropocene supplants the now penultimate epoch, the Holocene, as the reigning geological era. *Holo* means “whole,” while *-cene* means “new,” thus Holocene means “wholly new,” or “new whole.”³ This meant that at the time of naming—the Holocene referred to the new era. As the Anthropocene implies, *Anthropos*—humans—have so thoroughly altered the planet as to leave a mark on the earth's stratigraphic record. Naming this era the “Anthropocene” is an attempt to grasp how humans have

¹ Ursula K. LeGuin, “Infinite,” in “Deep in Admiration,” in eds., Anna Tsing, Hether Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2017), M15-22, M19.

² Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton Publishing, 2018), 488.

³ Robert V. Davis, “Inventing the Present: Historical Roots of the Anthropocene,” *Earth Sciences History* 30, no. 1 (2011): 63–84, 63.

altered the geologic cycle. It is also a normative framework for assigning responsibility for the geologic and atmospheric alterations caused by humans. However, *Anthropocene* is not a neutral term. Neither, for that matter, is ascribing responsibility. As Robert Davis notes in his discussion of the Anthropocene, “Naming is a form of ordering space... Names not only include, they simultaneously exclude.”⁴ The use of *Anthropos* in the naming of this epoch begs a lot of questions: *Who* is included, and *who* is excluded in the naming of the Anthropocene? *Who* are the humans responsible for altering the geologic record? Does this term refer to *all* humans, or does it refer to *specific* humans? Are individuals responsible for this transformation, or is it a collective of humans? If it is a collective, are there geopolitical explanations? What about economics? Or politics? Or history? And when did this era begin? The common explanation is the Anthropocene began during the Industrial Revolution with the first evidence of elevated carbon dioxide and methane in polar ice, and James Watt’s invention of the steam engine in 1784.⁵ Others bookmark the Agricultural Revolution,⁶ or the detonation of atomic bombs and the appearance of “artificial radionuclides”⁷ as the start of the chapter.⁸ Whenever it began, the assumption is there is a universal “Anthropos” responsible for the emergence of this new environmental era, and the subsequent ecological crisis. Mainstream discourse aside, the Anthropocene fails, conceptually, to register the violence of capitalist

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no. 23 (2002): 23.

⁶ William F. Ruddiman, “The Anthropogenic Greenhouse Era Began Thousands of Years Ago,” *Climatic Change* 61, no. 3 (December 2003): 261–93; Bruce D. Smith and Melinda A. Zeder, “The Onset of the Anthropocene,” *Anthropocene* 4 (December 2013): 8–13.

⁷ Jan Zalasiewicz* et al., “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 44, no. 7 (April 1, 2010): 2228–31, 22230.

⁸ As of April 2023, the formal adoption of the Anthropocene has not yet been approved by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (www.stratigraphy.org) but the Anthropocene Working Group intends to draft a proposal for its inclusion over 2023. Colin Waters, “Newsletter of the Anthropocene Working Group: Volume 12: Report of activities 2022,” Anthropocene Working Group, February 2023, http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AWG-2022-Newsletter_Final.pdf.

exploitation, colonization, and slavery that mark the emergence of this supposedly distinct era.⁹ To bastardize Karl Marx, “[the Anthropocene] comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”¹⁰ In the zeal to script the narrative, some vivid—and violent—details were left out of the story.

Some scientists who rely on the Anthropocene as a framing device for the catastrophic effects anticipated by climate change, support technological solutions to avert the worst-case scenarios. For instance, Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist who proposed the naming of the Anthropocene, supports geoengineering the atmosphere with stratospheric aerosol injections as a solution to the climate crisis.¹¹ Others propose different strategies for carbon capture and storage, including scrubbing CO₂ and injecting it into rocks for storage.¹² The reasoning here—embodied by the theory of ecological modernization (EM)—seems to be: if *Anthropos* created the problem, then *Anthropos* can solve it. Ecological modernization, as I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter Six, is a pragmatic framework for using technology to solve environmental problems. Ecomodernists argue that economic growth does not have to come at the expense of environmental protection, and they view technological innovation as a key to solving the climate crisis. This logic, as I will argue in Chapter Six, embodies a cruelly optimistic attachment to the Enlightenment

⁹ Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69; Jason W Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2015); Ryan Cecil Jobson, “Dead Labor: On Racial Capital and Fossil Capital,” in *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 215–30; Kyle P. Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 224–42.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling ed. Friedrich Engels (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2011 [1906]), XXXI: 834.

¹¹ Paul J. Crutzen, “Albedo Enhancement by Stratospheric Sulfur Injections,” *Climate Change* 77 (July 2006): 211–19; For a critical discussion of this topic, see: Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹² Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under a White Sky: The Nature of The Future* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2022).

narrative of progress. Cruel optimism—a concept developed by Lauren Berlant—refers to a fixation on a way of living that one believes will produce “the good life,” but in actuality is an obstacle to their flourishing.¹³ Progress is a form of magical thinking, based on the perceived linear trajectory to improvements in technology and science, that expects perpetual social and political improvement as the present transitions into the future. The cruel optimism of progress demonstrates the unreason behind the reasoning inherent to EM and geoengineering strategies: if *Anthropos* created the problem, then perhaps solutions proposed by *Anthropos* will exacerbate it. Furthermore, *Anthropos* implies a monolithic shared responsibility for the cause, when climate change is the result of fossil capitalism, Western imperialism, and the affluent carbon-intensive lifestyles enjoyed by people in the Global North. Meanwhile, the burdens of climate change—like the burdens of capitalism, resource extraction, and Western imperialism—will disproportionately affect people left out of the totalizing conception of *Anthropos*.

Why, then, given all the aforementioned flaws of the concept, use Anthropocene in the title of this dissertation? The answer is fairly simple: because the problem of climate change is due (in part) to the intersection between capitalism, the false narrative of progress, and the imperialist effects of Western hegemony—the *Anthropocene* is a worthy concept for critique, given how its failings illuminate the dangers inherent to these drivers of climate change. This dissertation gestures toward a theory of ecopessimism—for living with and struggling against the “climate wreckage” wrought by U.S. geopolitics and neoliberal capitalism—based on key interlocutors in twentieth-century critical pessimism.¹⁴

¹³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ “Climate wreckage,” refers to a concept developed by William Connolly in an (as yet) unpublished manuscript. A chapter of this manuscript—“Chapter 6: Amitav Ghosh, Michel Serres, and The Time of Climate Wreckage”—was presented during the 2023 meeting of the Environmental Political Theory Working Group at the annual meeting for the Western Political Science Association, April 2023, in San Francisco, CA.

Orienting Pessimism

Retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement.

—Theodor Adorno¹⁵

It might be a rule that dissertations pale in comparison to their original vision, or even what they aspire to realize as future manuscripts. My dissertation is no exception to this rule. However, with any hope it will come together as a legible—albeit deficient—actualization of what it could be and what I hope it will become. In this dissertation, I aim to provide a modest—though incomplete—intellectual history of pessimism in the twentieth century to develop a theory of ecopessimism sensitive to the challenges of the climate crisis. This project is modest because there remains much theorizing to do: each chapter could be a manuscript in its own right. This project is incomplete because its pages are littered with absences. Any intellectual history of twentieth-century *critical* pessimism would be incomplete without Simone Weil, Albert Camus, Hannah Arendt, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, and many others. Furthermore, any project that begins an intellectual history of pessimism with Friedrich Nietzsche and continues through Max Horkheimer—as I do—might do better to begin with Arthur Schopenhauer. Nietzsche had an emphatic and passionate obsession with Schopenhauer’s ideas—admiring him first as “the prophet” or “the Educator,” and later deriding him as “the monster” whose “strange voice” had “crept into [his] throat.”¹⁶ To grasp the lineage of pessimism between Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, or

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Radical Thinkers (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 94.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Prophet,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 155-159; Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 125-194; “The Convalescent,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 232-238, 235; Friedrich Nietzsche, “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” in *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, ed. Michael Tanner, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003 [1872]) 6, emphasis in original; “The Convalescent,” 235.

Nietzsche and Theodor Adorno, almost requires the clarification of Schopenhauer. Further, without Schopenhauer, one cannot *fully* grasp Horkheimer's turn to pessimistic materialism toward the latter part of his life. Furthermore, I would be remiss to forsake my early affinity with the melancholic metaphysician who first theorized modern pessimism. Schopenhauer has informed my intellectual curiosity and strange fixation on pessimism since I fell in love with his ideas as a cantankerous and politically radical undergraduate. While many might think it strange that I have spent so much of my life grappling with pessimism, when so much of our political and environmental contexts are negative, it feels disingenuous to ignore the negativity endemic to this historical moment. In this manner, the strangeness of pessimism is an antidote to estrangement.

Limitations aside, throughout these pages you will find an engagement with the pessimism and critical theorizing of Nietzsche, Foucault, Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Horkheimer. These thinkers are pivotal interlocutors for developing a critical approach to ecopessimism that avoids the pitfalls of eco-authoritarianism and eco-fascism pervasive throughout earlier iterations of ecopessimism. After working through the affinities between pessimism and the aforementioned thinkers, I turn toward contemporary critical theorists of hope, specifically those who theorize hope alongside the negative, whether the latter is rendered as melancholy, tragedy, or despair. Robyn Marasco, Joseph Winters, and Terry Eagleton dwell on what Winters would refer to as a "hope rendered strange."¹⁷ A strange hope is one metered by negativity, yet there is a curious synchrony among these thinkers, in that they theorize negative hope as mutually exclusive of pessimism, meanwhile drawing upon a combination of Adorno, Benjamin, and/or Nietzsche. Chapter Five lingers over their conceptualizations of hope, while remaining attentive to the moments of

¹⁷ Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

pessimism in their thinking. Once I have made a case for pessimistic hope, in the sixth chapter, I make a plea for ecopessimism.

In what remains of this introduction, I will unpack precisely what I mean when I conjure the word pessimism, as well as introduce you to the pessimists who have helped me develop and hone my understanding of pessimism. From there, I will explain what pessimism is not—neither curse, nor indicator of mental illness; further, it is neither a hermeneutics of suspicion nor a form of paranoid reading. For reasons that will become obvious in Chapter Three, I will wander deeper into the weeds of paranoia than the hermeneutics of suspicion. After I have guided you into the forest of pessimism, I will offer the topographical outline for each of the chapters in my dissertation. Pessimism may be a strange approach to theorizing in the “Anthropocene,” but I maintain that it is an antidote to estrangement.

Introducing: A Critical Orientation of Pessimism

[The] point of pessimism has always been to resist the urge of minimizing pain or grief or suffering, whether by turning our eyes to other things or by overburdening the will or by explaining suffering away as the optimists have so often done. This is why compassion and consolation are such major concerns for the pessimists.

—Mara van der Lugt¹⁸

Pessimism is an interpretive framework that offers novel insights about what it means to live, struggle, and be a political being during grim times, which is why it is uniquely poised to cope with anthropogenic climate change and ecological crisis. Nietzsche theorizes a “pessimism of strength” that is at once a life-affirming ethos of spontaneity that accepts the contingency of the future, without being deluded by grand narratives, universal meanings, or ideal moral systems. Nietzsche’s pessimism of strength challenges passive nihilism by emphasizing becoming, and in the face of adversity having the resilience to will differently. Foucault’s thinking is productive for

¹⁸ Mara van der Lugt, *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 407.

theorizing a critical form of pessimism that challenges teleological or developmentalist readings of history that offer a view of nowhere. Instead of progress, Foucault conceives of history as discontinuous; and rather than a unidirectional conception of time and progress, Foucault emphasizes how progress is a form of control. As such, Foucault's analytic of power-knowledge yields productive insights for a pessimism aware of the dangers that inhere to this moment, while locating the spaces for resistance and the possibility for freedom. While many brilliant theorists have rejected the idea of Adornian pessimism, I suggest this argument is due for a rethinking. Adorno's project emphasizes how because "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," theorizing on a negative register is essential for claiming sanctuary in damaged life.¹⁹ The critical pessimism of Adorno offers resources for refusing conceptual fixity, and the homogenizing logic implicit to capitalism. Horkheimer's theorizing is a deeply negative project that, alongside Adorno, offered a scathing critique of the Enlightenment, and the narrative of progress. Then, while working solo, Horkheimer radicalized Schopenhauer through a commitment to a non-progressive Marxism or materialism. Meanwhile, Benjamin's revolutionary pessimism challenges the movement of progressive readings of history, by demanding a dialectical standstill to locate the possibility for transformation and the utopian moment in the present. Finally, I theorize an ecopessimism that rejects the broken-down and cruelly-optimistic logic of ecological modernization, while being committed to seeing the world for what it is. As such, I argue that climate change represents a breakdown in the narrative of progress, and that we must now find our path in the world without relying on the banister of progress to guide us there. Pessimism is an interpretive framework that challenges the linear temporality of progress and conceptual fixity, while being attuned to suffering and injustice. Finally,

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, "Refuge for the Homeless," in *Minima Moralia*, 18: 38-39, 39.

pessimism is deeply committed to being in this world and accepting the reality (however broken) we have inherited—while refusing the blinders of optimism and grand historical narratives.

My dissertation is deeply indebted to the probing and brilliantly reconstructed theoretical histories of pessimism developed by Joshua Dienstag and Mara van der Lugt. Their taxonomies of pessimism adorn many pages throughout this dissertation. Dienstag’s analysis of pessimism focuses primarily on pessimists from the modern era—including Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cervantes, Rousseau, Camus, Freud, and others. Van der Lugt’s philosophical history interrogates the pessimism, optimism, and theorizations of evil (both secular and non-secular) from the eighteenth century. Her analysis of pessimism focuses on Schopenhauer, Bayle, La Mettrie, Maupertuis, Hume, and others. Throughout the remainder of this section, I will discuss Dienstag’s temporally-orientated pessimism and van der Lugt’s value-oriented pessimism.

For van der Lugt, philosophical pessimists are deeply invested in questions about suffering—their own, the suffering of others, and why suffering exists in the world—or “physical evil.” Physical evil refers to both the physical and psychological experience of suffering. Not only does suffering include questions about why humans experience pain, as well as why humans cause suffering, it questions why non-human animals experience suffering as well.²⁰ Van der Lugt’s analysis of suffering emphasizes not only external pain and sorrow, but also how individuals suffer from themselves as well.²¹ The problem of suffering signifies how we are all beings on our way to annihilation, mental and physical pain, and what this means for the possibility (and burden of happiness). While van der Lugt’s account of the early-modern philosophical relationship between pessimism and suffering is penned in beautiful prose, there is something she misses by wedding

²⁰ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6; 5; 7.

pessimism to secular and non-secular discussions of evil. While the attentive focus on the suffering of others could inform collective action/resistance, or percolate into policy, reforms, or political transformations, the relationship between philosophical pessimism, politics, and power is underdeveloped. This is unfortunate because there is such a thorough-faring and self-sustaining relationship between power, injustice, and suffering. That being said, there are many wonderful resources offered by van der Lugt's vast and thoughtful project, and one book need not attend to every problem. As van der Lugt states:

More than a philosophy, [pessimism] is also a style, a mode of thought, a sensitivity that travels with you into the margins of the books you read, the things you hear and see around you, the way you console people, and the way you wish to be consoled yourself.²²

Furthermore, as van der Lugt assures readers, pessimism is not a systematic or universal philosophy—nor does it aspire to be. Van der Lugt's pessimism is a philosophical guide sensitive to the tragic elements and dark matters of human, and more-than-human existence. It works best as an ethos of compassion and consolation in a world of suffering, and an addendum to other theoretical approaches.

Van der Lugt argues that Dienstag over-emphasizes future-oriented pessimism while leaving aside value-oriented pessimism—the project to which she attends in her book *Dark Matters*. While van der Lugt's book is among the more gorgeously written, brilliantly theorized—let alone sensitive—books I have read, I have a minor quibble with her assessment of Dienstag's analysis of pessimistic temporality. Rather than pessimists being explicitly future-oriented, Dienstag details how pessimists are burdened with time consciousness, and view the movement of history through the lens of irony. One could argue that a fixation on linear time and a critical read of the narrative of progress is demonstrative of an orientation toward the future. However, Dienstag makes it clear that

²² Ibid., 401.

one of the more problematic elements of both hope and optimism is their fixation on the future, which is bound to disappoint. I would like to suggest an amelioration to van der Lugt's taxonomy. Instead of the future-oriented pessimism she describes in her book, I propose that Dienstag details a temporally-oriented mode of pessimism, in contrast to her value-oriented pessimism.

Beyond value-oriented pessimism, I will rely heavily on the taxonomy of pessimism developed by Dienstag in his timely and brilliant analysis of pessimism. In Dienstag's assessment, the dominant concern shared among pessimist philosophers is a tragic orientation to time. In the modern era, the emergence of linear time has impressed upon humans the burden of "conscious existence within time."²³ With modernity, history is now considered a linear affair, and the narrative of progress has become a North Star for orienting ourselves in the movement of historical time. However, pessimists warn against believing in the upward-trending linear trajectory of history inherent to the myth of progress. For this reason, Dienstag suggests that pessimists have a number of shared affinities, many of which orient around the conscious experience of time. In Dienstag's taxonomy, pessimists have a mutual sense of the "burden of linear time," "the irony of history," "the absurdity of existence," and a predilection toward resignation or spontaneity.²⁴ For my purposes, given Dienstag's challenge of the narrative of progress, and emphasis on the dislocation between freedom and happiness, his theorizing will be a productive interlocutor throughout my dissertation. Given that I draw on the Frankfurt School and am critical of existentialism, my understanding of pessimism is more materialist and anticapitalist in orientation. However, Dienstag's theorizing offers productive insights for illuminating the strands of pessimism woven throughout the twentieth-century critical pessimists. Furthermore, Dienstag's intellectual history rescued

²³ Joshua Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19; 25; 32; 36.

pessimism from the trash heap of philosophy, and with his attention rendered pessimism explicitly political. For these reasons, Dienstag's temporally-orientated pessimism is an essential ballast to my conceptualization of critical pessimism.

In my dissertation, I propose to walk alongside Dienstag and van der Lugt, drawing on their resources when it makes sense, and theorizing beyond them when their analytical offerings are insufficient for considering twentieth-century critical pessimism and the ecological breakdown in which we find ourselves. The pessimism I theorize is meant as both a theoretical framework for interpreting politics in the time of climate crisis, and for providing solace to the suffering inherent to living in this "broken-down present."²⁵ If Dienstag theorizes temporally-oriented pessimism, and van der Lugt theorizes value-oriented pessimism, I will theorize a critically-oriented form of pessimism. Now that I have offered a depiction of pessimism in the affirmative, I will turn toward a discussion of what pessimism is not. In the subsequent section, I will take us on a brief detour to establish some distance between pessimism, and Eve Sedgwick's assessment of paranoid reading.

Pessimism, Not Paranoia

In the classic essay, subtitled, "You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," Sedgwick delineates between paranoid and reparative reading, thereby inaugurating an era of post-critique in queer theory. Sedgwick argues post-structuralists, post-modernists, and queer theorists are engaged in forms of ideological unmasking found within the theorizing of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, but exacerbated (in the realm of queer theory) by Foucault. To make her argument, Sedgwick builds on Melanie Klein and Silvan Tomkins' analyses of paranoia, as well as Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion," to demonstrate how queer and post-structuralist

²⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019 [2009]), 9.

thinking has fallen prey to theoretical paranoia.²⁶ In Sedgwick's estimation, there are five characteristics embodied within paranoid readings. These include an anticipatory orientation toward the future, reflexivity and mimesis, and a "faith in exposure."²⁷ As well, paranoia embodies a strong (rather than weak) theory, and it is affectively negative. While pessimism and paranoia are both affectively negative theories, and both embody forms of reflexivity, they are dissonant on each of the other registers. By contrast, pessimism is a weak form of theory that embraces discontinuity and relinquishes the desire for predictability and/or control of the future. Pessimism is aware of the dangers or risk that may arrive in the future, but accepts the contingency of the future, rather than facing the future with paranoia about the unexpected dangers that lurk around the corner. In this section, I will situate Sedgwick's theorization of paranoia, to delineate what pessimism is and is not.

Pessimism, Paranoia, and Time

Sedgwick states that paranoia suggests "a certain congenial, stony pessimism."²⁸ Yet, I maintain that philosophical pessimism remains distinct from paranoia on several accounts. Pessimism's temporality is cyclical rather than linear or definitive. Paranoid anticipatory temporalities insinuate a future-oriented fixation on what will happen *next*. The purpose here is to avoid surprises. Paranoid readings look for hidden clues and meanings to avoid being ambushed by catastrophe.

²⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See also, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37; For a discussion of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, see Chapter Two, pp. 27-31.

²⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 124. Here Sedgwick is referring to a conversation had with activist scholar Cindy Patton who expressed paranoia about the origins of the AIDS epidemic, which was the catalyst for Sedgwick's captivating analysis of paranoia.

“The first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises.*”²⁹ The desire to avoid surprises compels the paranoid reader to obsessively search for knowledge.³⁰ Paranoid readers believe that by uncovering enough hidden information they can read the tea leaves of the past, root out secret evidence, and avoid surprises. This fervent back-and-forth obsession with secret historical knowledge and future predictions is the temporal madness at the root of paranoia. The paranoid rue the “gotcha” moment when their worst suspicions come to fruition. Even if paranoia is a negative affect, the paranoid—especially conspiracy theory acolytes—seem to hope their worst predictions will come to fruition. This anticipatory gesture alludes to an unfulfilled wish to control outcomes in an uncontrollable world; a world where the future is not a riddle to be solved, but rather rife with unpredictable surprises. For this reason, anticipation insinuates future-oriented expectations.

By contrast, pessimists have an aversion to fixating on future expectations, because this is a trap, bound to cause disappointment. Pessimists emphasize the importance of considering worst-case possibilities to face the future with greater resilience. There are no secrets to unveil. There is no hidden codex that, once found, will decipher future catastrophes. Instead, pessimists are concerned with how better times are not guaranteed rather than wallowing in contempt for a future out of their control, they prepare for the worst. One should not mistake fixation or fear for preparation. The paranoid reader maintains an apprehensive expectation that all will be revealed as the present disintegrates into the future. Pessimism, however, is a present-oriented position that bears the burden of the past and the present without the expectation of improvement. While pessimists eschew linear anticipatory temporality, paranoia is an anticipatory affect that anxiously awaits revelation as the origami of time unfolds into the future.

²⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Pessimism, Paranoia, Reflexivity and Contagion

Sedgwick's paranoia is reflexive and mimetic. Paranoia craves imitation, it wants everyone in on the conspiracy. To truly understand paranoid perspectives, one must embody paranoid knowing. Paranoia embodies the bastardization of two similar colloquialisms: *[paranoia] loves company* and *it takes one to know one*. The paranoid wants to invite you in on their secret/s and to understand paranoia, one must be paranoid. As Sedgwick states, "paranoia...seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand."³¹ Pessimism, by contrast, can be understood *without being pessimistic*. If reflexivity is taken to mean that the only way to understand paranoia is by being paranoid, then pessimism is not reflexive *in this sense*. However, if reflexivity refers to self-awareness about one's situated knowledge in this world, then depending on the form of pessimism, it might entail reflexivity. As Bernard Harcourt suggests, reflexivity is one of the core requirements for critical theorizing, where reflexivity refers to questioning one's "situated and contextual, historical position and epistemological understanding."³² Given pessimism's concern for the suffering of others, and Foucault's embrace of alternative ways of knowing, Harcourt's analysis of reflexivity applies, while Sedgwick's analysis does not apply either to pessimism or Foucault.³³

Beyond reflexivity, is pessimism viral? Critics, such as the insightful Elisabetta Brighi, claim that pessimism, like other so-called "ugly feelings," is contagious. On the topic of affective contagion, Brighi writes compellingly that "The pace and intensity with which affect circulates

³¹ Ibid, 131.

³² Bernard E. Harcourt, "On Critical Genealogy: An Answer to the Question 'What Good Is Genealogy for Praxis?'" (Columbia Public Law Research Paper No. 14-706, June 27, 2022), 5.

³³ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*; Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures: Lecture One" (January 7, 1976) in Michel Foucault *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 78-92: 81.

globally today, not least thanks to social media, means that contagion effects are par for the course and that affects morph and mutate into memes at dazzling, uncontrollable speed.”³⁴ Social media, in other words, has rendered our world vulnerable to affective contagion, and social media is an incubator for the spread of negative affects. However, Brighi bases her analysis of the mimetic quality of pessimism on the basis of a mistaken definition of pessimism. For Brighi pessimism is a “dysphoric disposition” that approximates Freud’s understanding of melancholy, and shares similarities with resentment.³⁵ As I have detailed in the Introduction, the philosophical histories of Joshua Dienstag and Mara van der Lugt establish distance between pessimism and its limited capacity as a disposition or a dark mood. I suspect that most scholars who define pessimism as viral perceive it as a disposition. If pessimism is a present-oriented, negative theory, concerned with the narrative of progress, the suffering of others, and immanent critique—then it disrupts the claim of a pessimistic contagion. Regardless of how paranoia and pessimism coalesce around a shared sense of reflexivity—differently construed—pessimism is distinct, in that it does not require imitation to stand on solid ground.

Pessimism, Paranoia, and Faith in Exposure

One of the most vital elements of paranoia hinges on the belief that exposure of secret knowledge will alter the world for the better. Faith in the exposure of secrets or conspiracies, or in the process of ideological unmasking, is exemplary of “an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure”³⁶ Think here of the Q-Anon believers who combed the internet looking for evidence to support their claim that Democratic elites were

³⁴ Elisabetta Brighi, “The Global Politics of Ugly Feelings: Pessimism and Resentment in a Mimetic World,” in *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations, Possibilities, Politics*, ed. Tim Stevens and Nicholas Michelsen (Irvine, CA: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 101-117, 114.

³⁵ Brighi, “The Global Politics of Ugly Feelings,” 104.

³⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 138.

members of an underground sex-trafficking operation. They were so convinced in their secret knowledge that they stormed the U.S. Capital on January 6, 2021, in the name of a stolen election. Devotees of Q pursued an insurrection based on their paranoia and the belief that the presidency rightfully belonged to former-President Trump.³⁷ They had lost faith in the electoral process and *believed* that if they could only *expose* how it was rigged, they could save the country from the depravity of pedophilic Democrats like President-Elect, Joe Biden. They believed that their insurrection would expose fraudulent election results, and they would get what they wanted—and the world needed—which was four more years of President Trump. Sedgwick emphasizes how the paranoid place a premium on the process of “demystification,” which gestures toward a befuddling irony.³⁸ The irony is that the paranoid thoroughly trusts their knowledge and the process of exposure while simultaneously doubting everything that contradicts their hard-won knowledge.

Sedgwick argues that the need to unveil so-called “hidden violence” was no longer vital for left-progressive politics, in a world that had been thoroughly made over by the violence of neoliberalism. “Why bother exposing the ruses of power in a country where, at any given moment, 40 percent of young black men are enmeshed in the penal system?”³⁹ Violence, Sedgwick implies, has become self-evident. As an example, Sedgwick discusses how in the past, opponents of corporal punishment wanted executions “to be done in public so as to shame [the] state and spectators”; whereas in the late 1990s/early 2000s it was “death penalty cheerleaders” who advocated for public executions.⁴⁰ While the paranoid crave exposure, Sedgwick questions the utility of unveiling at all.

³⁷ Mike Rothschild, “Mike Rothschild on the Ongoing Influence of QAnon and Its Self-Made Mythologies,” *Lit-Hub*, August 22, 2022, <https://lithub.com/mike-rothschild-on-the-ongoing-influence-of-qanon-and-its-self-made-mythologies/>

³⁸ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 139, quoting Paul Ricoeur.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

Fixation on exposure is one of the dominant distinctions between paranoia and pessimism. Paranoia relies on exposure because the paranoid craves external validation and acceptance, whereas pessimism advocates for internal acceptance of intractable structural and systemic political, social, and cultural problems. The paranoid wants to alleviate suffering through exposure of secret knowledge, while pessimism recognizes the pervasiveness of suffering and the impossibility of eliminating it altogether. Our world is rife with overt and covert violence, oppression, and injustice—and while providing the tools to understand and resist the insidious qualities of contemporary life—pessimism is not driven by overcoming so-called “false consciousness.”

However, overcoming false consciousness is not a productive way to consider the role of pessimism as a form of critical inquiry. While critique and demystification are easily dismissed by Sedgwick, this practice of negatively evaluating oppressive social, political, and cultural institutions has a profound capacity to motivate political activism and expose otherwise hidden forms of violence. Sedgwick claims that exposing injustice and violence are unnecessary because neoliberalism has so thoroughly permeated and captured every aspect of the world. Yet, the state continually perpetrates novel but insidious forms of violence at every turn—e.g., the recent assaults on reproductive rights, and the push for transgender erasure (both psychically and physically)—which is a new form of “forced assimilation” (a form of genocide through assimilation originally perpetrated against Indigenous Americans in the middle twentieth century). Besides, as Harcourt argues, there is political utility in the practice of genealogical debunking or demystification. “Debunking is essentially unveiling an illusion, revealing that our commonsense understanding is detrimental, in such a way as to stimulate judgment and action, and to lead us to reject that illusion.”⁴¹ Against Sedgwick, I share Harcourt’s perspective that “The discovery of dark origins [or systemic/hidden

⁴¹ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 7.

violence] is a powerful reason to problematize a practice or institution.”⁴² Similarly, I share Robyn Marasco’s provocation that negativity serves a purpose in critical theory, and we should not expect critique to “outline an escape from the conditions it comprehends and laments.”⁴³ Pessimism as a mode of critical inquiry is unafraid to expose illusions or violence. While exposure or demystification are elements of critical inquiry—pessimism and paranoia do not share the same faith in exposure, as faith implies a future-oriented anticipatory temporality, incommensurate with pessimism.

Pessimism and Paranoia: Positive or Negative, Strong or Weak Theory?

Another clear distinction between pessimism and paranoia is that Sedgwick describes paranoia as a “strong theory” whereas pessimism is a weak theory. Strong theories share a broad reach, wide scope, intensity, a need for determinacy, and tautological logic. Sedgwick builds on Silvan Tomkins’ description of “strong affect theory” in developing her case that paranoia is an example of strong theory.⁴⁴

The powerfully ranging and reductive force of strong theory can make tautological thinking hard to identify even as it makes it compelling and near inevitable; the result is that both writers and readers can damagingly misrecognize whether and where real conceptual work is getting done, and precisely what that work might be.⁴⁵

Building on Sedgwick, Maggie Nelson characterizes strong theory as including “a new linguistic or conceptual register,” an “attempt to shepherd a wide variety of phenomena under its rubric,” as well as the “demand that others assent to its terms.”⁴⁶ Strong theory is an all-encompassing endeavor that aims to organize everything it touches under the aegis of its conceptual prowess. For instance—to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Robyn Marasco, *Highway to Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 133-136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁶ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2021), 29.

take an example Foucault critiqued—everyone in the West is sexually repressed and the only way to relinquish repression is through sexual liberation. By contrast (and despite “ridicule”), weak theory “emphasizes heterogeneity, and invites a certain epistemological uncertainty. It is undisturbed by inconclusiveness and mess.”⁴⁷ Nelson’s characterization of weak theory emphasizes the lack of homogeneity and certainty, in favor of contingency, uncertainty, and non-fixity. Van der Lugt describes pessimism in similar terms. “Pessimism... cannot do its work as a system on its own accord, but only as a *complement* to any philosophy... It has its role and value rather as a critical element, as a test for any philosophy or theory of life that paints an image of experience in which suffering is insufficiently weighted.”⁴⁸ In this sense, pessimism occupies a weaker position than paranoia, one that (happily) relinquishes reach, homogeneity, predictability, and causality, as well as control for the future.

Of the potential charge that pessimism is negative, it is guilty on all accounts. Both paranoia and pessimism are explicitly negative theories. However, I am not convinced that it is useful to consider pessimism an affectively negative theory, in the sense that paranoia is affectively negative. For Tomkins affect theories have qualitative differences on two registers. As mentioned before, theories can be weak or strong, and they can be positive or negative. In Sedgwick’s account, humans want to maximize the positive while minimizing the negative, and too much of the negative can preclude the possibility for the positive. Sedgwick draws upon Melanie Klein’s assessment of the depressive position. In turning to Klein, Sedgwick notes how the depressive position can signal “ethical possibility—in the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 406.

integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care.”⁴⁹ The ethical or reparative possibility, Sedgwick offers, is predicated on a Foucauldian “care of the self,” where a subject engages in daily acts of pleasure and care in a world that is hostile to their survival. The depressive position, while affectively negative, is how one can experience repair.

In cases where strong theory meets either positive or negative affects, Sedgwick argues, “In a world full of loss, pain, and oppression, both epistemologies are likely to be based on deep pessimism.”⁵⁰ While I find so much to love about Sedgwick’s theorizing and writing, this statement seems based on the popular mischaracterization of pessimism. Sedgwick could only make this claim, that two forms of strong theory would lead to X form of theory, if X was also a form of strong theory, or at least affectively strong. Given that pessimism is a weak theory this assessment is a dead end, as two affectively strong theories are unlikely to be demonstrative of a weak theory. It would be inconsistent with the thrust of the argument, and out of character for how (otherwise) theoretically nuanced and careful Sedgwick was.

While paranoia is an affectively negative, strong, anticipatory theory, characterized by mimesis and reflexivity, and faith in exposure—pessimism is a present-oriented, affectively negative, weak theory characterized by critical reflexivity. Suffice it to say that there is significant distance between pessimism and paranoia. They are both affectively negative, have differently construed relationships to reflexivity, and share varying degrees of commitment to exposure—but here is where the similarities end. Finally, while pessimism is aware of danger, it is not paranoid about danger. Instead, pessimism is curious (in a Foucauldian sense) about the possibility of danger, and (in a Nietzschean sense) willing to take risks regardless.

⁴⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138

Dissertation Roadmap

Now, with this topographical outline of pessimism, I will offer a brief roadmap for each of the chapters in my dissertation. To begin my assessment of twentieth-century pessimism, I start first with Nietzsche, a philosopher from the latter half of the nineteenth century. This dissertation begins with Nietzsche because his genealogical method and iconoclastic approach to modernity, morality, and idealism is a current that runs through the philosophical projects of Foucault and Adorno as well as a background source for Horkheimer. In Chapter Two, I explore how Nietzsche uses genealogies to challenge universal systems of morality, and the professionalization of history, both of which lend themselves to supra-historical or universal/grand narratives. After Nietzsche's intellectual break with Schopenhauer—whose philosophical project resulted in passive nihilism—he theorized a pessimism of strength or a Dionysian pessimism of the future. Nietzsche's pessimism was theorized as a life-affirming ethos of spontaneity, rather than the life-denying project of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return becomes a method for learning how to love one's fate, despite the persistence of suffering.

Once I have set the stage with Nietzsche, I reconstruct the critical pessimism of Foucault in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I first discuss Foucault's genealogical method, and how this informs his pessimism. Then I argue that Foucault's philosophical project more closely resembles pessimism, than the paranoia suggested by Sedgwick. Finally, in the latter half of the chapter, I analyze Foucault's theorizing for the affinities between his project and pessimism. I argue that a critical pessimism informed by Foucault is critical of a historical telos and a unidirectional orientation toward time. Furthermore, I contend that because of the diffuse nature of Foucault's analytic of power, there is minimal exit from power relations. They permeate nearly every facet of life. However, because power relation presupposes freedom, everywhere there is power, there is space for freedom and resistance. In this manner, Foucault is productive for theorizing a pessimism that is

critical of progress and modernity, but that opens space for resistance to the status quo (even if he was pessimistic about transformation).

In Chapter Four, I discuss the critical pessimism of the first generation of the Frankfurt School—namely Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Adorno. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of each of their critiques of progress—lingering first on Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History,” before attending to Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Then, I endeavor to explore the pessimism of each thinker individually. I argue (against the grain) that while Adorno may not have self-identified as a “pessimist,” when pessimism is explicitly dynamic and historically-minded, then Adorno’s thinking might be productive to theorize alongside pessimism. Pessimism, as reconstructed through Adorno’s negative dialectics is a refusal of identity thinking that happens when the logic of exchange value becomes so deeply internalized that all thinking seeks to homogenize and equivocate. Adorno warns that this is a deeply problematic way of thinking that has its roots in an authoritarian logic that would prefer to eliminate difference. Once I have made an argument for the affinities between Adorno and pessimism, I turn to a discussion of Horkheimer’s Schopenhauerian Marxism. Horkheimer demonstrates how the contemporary moment is so negative, that one cannot use ideal concepts to build a positive world—such as justice—without these concepts carrying a remainder of the negative world in which they were theorized. Even though Horkheimer remained pessimistic about the possibility for rupture or transformation, he shared with Adorno a belief that all critical theory should aim for redemption without an expectation of progress. Finally, I examine the pessimism of Benjamin. Benjamin’s theorizing beckons us to pay attention to the details of modern life—the detritus left behind by capitalism—to construct a dialectical image to bring about transformational change. While Benjamin was skeptical about this possibility, he maintained a revolutionary pessimism throughout the latter portion of his life.

In dialectical fashion, once I have discussed the critical pessimism of the aforementioned thinkers, I turn to a discussion of hope. In the Fifth Chapter, I make the case for pessimistic hope, by first doing a genealogy of hope in contemporary theory. Often, in critical theorizations of hope, theorists will conceptualize hope along with the negative—be it tragedy, melancholy, or despair—yet they foreclose the possibility of consonance with pessimism. In this chapter, I discuss the convergence and divergence between negative hope and pessimism, in the theoretical renditions of hope by Joseph Winters, Robyn Marasco, and Terry Eagleton. I focus on these three thinkers, as they each draw upon Adorno and/or Benjamin—both of whom I argue are productive interlocutors for a critical orientation of pessimism. While there are many aspects of Winters’, Marasco’s, and Eagleton’s depictions of a non-progressive hope that align with pessimism, they sustain a future-oriented temporality, that does not align with pessimism.

Finally, in the sixth substantive chapter, I discuss ecopessimism. In this chapter, I argue that climate change represents a double breakdown in the narrative of progress. Then I turn to a discussion of how progress represents cruel optimism, before discussing how ecological modernization theory embodies the cruel optimism of progress. Finally, I attend to the differences between the eco-survivalist form of ecopessimism that was once pervasive in environmental theorizing in the U.S., before exploring what a critical ecopessimism can offer to us in the Anthropocene.

Thank you for coming along for the ride. I hope you enjoy what follows.

CHAPTER TWO: PESSIMISM AND NIETZSCHE

The pessimist, who gives all things the blackest and gloomiest colors, makes use of only flames and bolts of lightning, celestial effulgence, and everything that has glaring brilliance and confuses the eye; brightness is only there for him to increase the horror and to make us sense that things are more terrifying than they really are.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁵¹

Modern pessimism is an expression of the uselessness of the *modern* world—not of the world of existence.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁵²

Theorizing alongside Friedrich Nietzsche is like trying to navigate in dense forest with only a map. A compass—or, in Nietzsche’s case, a codex—would help one get their bearings, but when the point is to get lost in the woods, why would you expect the proper tools? Nietzsche was not known for being the patron saint of philosophical transparency, and anyway he would have decried anyone who wanted to take the easy path. Nietzsche’s bombastic style, tendency toward aphoristic writing, and playfully sarcastic tone—has lent to frustration, misunderstanding, and bad faith usage of his ideas. Perhaps this is why such a bizarre and seemingly opposed array of people have drunk inspiration from his source. As Walter Kaufmann points out, Nietzsche’s love of ambiguity “is bound to lead astray hasty readers, browsers, and that rapidly growing curse of our time, the non-readers who do not realize that galloping consumption is a disease.”⁵³ Acolytes of Nietzsche come from perspectives as diametrically opposed as radical postmodern or anti-structuralist thinkers to self-help authors, libertarians, and literal Nazis. Many in the latter camp selectively used and mischaracterized his work to nauseating effect. As Bernard Williams has pointed out, “This was

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, trans. Brittain Smith, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Volume 5 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011) 278 (V, 561).

⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1968), 23 (34).

⁵³ Walter Kaufmann, “Editor’s Introduction,” 1967, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989), 6.

possible...because the deeply radical spirit of his work was combined with a lack of effective political and social ideas, leaving a blank on which many different aspirations could be projected.”⁵⁴

Among those who were imprinted by his work, Nietzsche had a profound influence on the thinking of Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno, which is one of the reasons why he was an essential interlocutor in this dissertation. He wrote passionately and systematically, but was unafraid to change his mind, occasionally doing so in the prefaces to his reissued books.⁵⁵ May we all be brave enough to change our minds and move on from ideas that no longer serve us.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche began his lifelong obsession with Arthur Schopenhauer where he moves from fan to critic in the span of a decade. The longer Nietzsche lingered with the teachings of his “prophet,” the more evident it became that Schopenhauer’s philosophy had failed to accomplish the goal it set after.⁵⁶ Nietzsche began to identify Schopenhauer’s pessimism with a life-negating, “will to nothingness.”⁵⁷ As Nietzsche says in the edited volume, *The Will to Power*, “the will to nothingness has the upper hand over the will to life-and the overall aim is, in Christian, Buddhist, Schopenhauerian terms: ‘better not to be than to be.’”⁵⁸ In the absence of Schopenhauer’s life-denying pessimism, Nietzsche endeavored to theorize a braver form of pessimism as a critique of modernity and traditional morality. A pessimism that could move beyond the “uselessness of the

⁵⁴ Bernard Williams, “Nietzsche: The Gay Science,” in Robert Pippin, ed., *Introductions to Nietzsche*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp 137-151, 141.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” pp. 3-12.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, “The Prophet,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 155-159.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Anti-Darwin,” in *The Will to Power*, 364-365, 364.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

modern world.” A “pessimism of strength” that would not abandon the goals of moving beyond morality, toward a life-affirming philosophy that embraced discontinuity, creativity, life, and death.⁵⁹

In what follows, I shall do my best to guide you through the woods of Nietzsche’s words, with or without a “vision” to lead the way. The path may be winding and laden with traps, but it also a path toward a more inspired and exciting life. As well—and more to the point—it is a path toward a more spontaneous and life-affirming approach to eco-activism and critical theory in times of climate crisis. Prior to diving into Nietzsche’s pessimism, I will take a brief detour to discuss Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion, and Nietzsche’s genealogical method, to situate his philosophical project. Nietzsche’s genealogical method—or what Foucault would later refer to as “the history of the present”—is a form of pessimism as critical inquiry that challenges supra-historical narratives, as well as traditional and metaphysical forms of morality. Throughout the first part of this chapter, I will discuss Nietzsche’s so-called “Dionysian pessimism” or “pessimism of strength.” Then I will explore Nietzsche’s relationship with temporality and suffering as analogues to the taxonomies of pessimism outlined by Joshua Dienstag and Mara van der Lugt. Finally, I will examine the resources Nietzsche can offer for a critically-oriented pessimism.

Genealogy: Suspicion, Debunking, or Pessimism?

Friedrich Nietzsche, everyone’s favorite hammer-wielding philosopher, has been simultaneously accused of being Nietzsche the destroyer and Nietzsche the builder. Which is it? There can be little doubt that Nietzsche was committed to the demolition of metaphysical and Christian values, but whether he moved beyond destruction to a constructive project is an open debate. In what follows, I will discuss how various thinkers classify Nietzsche’s philosophical approach, whether he was a “master of suspicion” (as Paul Ricoeur famously proclaimed) a

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 3.

genealogical debunker, or critical of debunking. Toward the end of these introductory comments, I will illuminate how Nietzsche's critical genealogies gestured toward a pessimism of strength, that I will discuss in the subsequent portion of the chapter.

In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Ricoeur describes interpretation as mediating between the double meanings of signs, which can then only be understood through interpretation. Interpretation, then, either uncovers meaning through recovering lost meaning or demystification, which is akin to reading between the lines. According to Ricoeur, all interpretation or hermeneutics "is an exercise of suspicion."⁶⁰ In Ricoeur's estimation, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are exemplary for being "masters...of suspicion," which is the imperative to unearth and demystify false consciousness.⁶¹ "These three masters of suspicion are not to be misunderstood, however, as three masters of skepticism. They are, assuredly, three great 'destroyers.'"⁶² They are destroyers in the sense that they aim to call into question the foundations of contemporary society—through psychoanalysis, genealogy of religion, and historical materialism. In place of this hermeneutic of destruction, Ricoeur advances a more sympathetic mode of interpretation as the "recollection of meaning," which emphasizes faith in the original text. Meanwhile, he is critical of the masters of suspicion for lacking in "the grace of imagination" and disrupting the "upsurge of the possible."⁶³

While finding their positive convergence, our three masters of suspicion [Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud] also present the most radically contrary stance to the phenomenology of the sacred and to any hermeneutics understood as the recollection of meaning and as the reminiscence of being.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 35; 36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The hermeneutics of suspicion engages in a conscious act of decipherment—“Guile will be met by double guile.”⁶⁵ As Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow elaborate, the hermeneutics of suspicion “holds that actors do not have direct access to the meaning of their discourse and practices, [and] that our everyday understandings of things [are] superficial and distorted.”⁶⁶ Meaning is gathered by reading in between the lines, to discern the hidden sub-text, to uncover “the deeper kind of intelligibility” which is normally hidden from view.⁶⁷

In response to Ricoeur’s analysis, Hans-Georg Gadamer asks “Is not every form of hermeneutics a form of overcoming an awareness of suspicion?”⁶⁸ Hermeneutics—as an interpretive endeavor—is one of dialogue and participation that seeks to avoid misunderstanding. As Gadamer states, “Hermeneutics can be defined as the attempt to overcome...distance in areas where empathy was hard and agreement not easily reached.”⁶⁹ Here Gadamer speaks to the interpretation of texts from different cultural and temporal contexts. Interpretation is one way to bridge geographic, empathetic, and temporal distance. For this reason, Gadamer argues interpretation is a fundamental part of human experience. “We are always hearing, listening to something and extracting from other things. We are interpreting in seeing, hearing, receiving.”⁷⁰ However, when one accepts the givenness in the presentation of what they are seeing, hearing, or receiving, there is no interpretation to be had. As such, Gadamer responds to Ricoeur’s provocation by arguing that there is no reconciling the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁶ Hubert L Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Second Edition. (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1983), 123.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Man and World* 17 (1984): 313–323. 313.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 315.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 318.

hermeneutics of suspicion with an interpretive endeavor to recover meaning. Gadamer makes this argument on the grounds that to engage in interpretation one begins a dialogue knowing that not every dialogue works. However, when an interpretive dialogue works, interpretation can lead to greater understanding (rather than foundational truths) that can minimize temporal and geographic distance.

While Gadamer and Ricoeur defend the role of hermeneutics and interpretation, the score is far from settled about the merits of this philosophical (and humanistic) endeavor. Three years before Ricoeur published his analysis of Freud and the masters of suspicion, Foucault published the essay “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” based on his July 1964 Royaumont colloquium.⁷¹ In Foucault’s essay, he argues that beginning in the 19th century, interpretation moved beyond the 16th century interpretive task of analyzing resemblances, to the task of interpretive unmasking—which began with Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx. The hermeneutics initiated by these three (and others) altered the spatiality and temporality of interpretation. With their touch, interpretation was rendered an infinite and incomplete endeavor.⁷² Interpretation is infinite because there is no beginning (thus infinite regress), and incomplete because it always refers back to the interpreter. For Foucault, philosophy must move beyond interpretation.

Nietzsche would have defended himself against Ricoeur’s suggestion that he engaged in an interpretive hermeneutics of suspicion. This is especially the case if one considers interpretation from a metaphysical perspective, where interpretation posits a world beyond the world, or what Susan Sontag referred to as a “shadow world of ‘meanings.’”⁷³ This does not mean that Nietzsche

⁷¹ Despite Foucault’s colloquium having been published prior to Ricoeur’s book, Foucault is not cited in the index.

⁷² Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx” (1967), in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1988*, ed. James D. Faubian, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1999).

⁷³ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001 [1961]), pp 3-14, 6-7.

was disinterested in undermining or destroying what were taken to be foundational truths. Nietzsche was, instead, interested in challenging historicity and the tendency to treat history as a science, or the “professionalization of history.”⁷⁴

Similar to debates about the utility of interpretation, debates abound as to whether Nietzsche was a subversive “debunker”⁷⁵ or whether he was after something more affirmative.⁷⁶ Ricoeur, as noted above, derided Nietzsche for inaugurating a hermeneutics of suspicion. Following a similar logic, Colin Koopman argues the Nietzschean approach to genealogy was subversive, rather than vindictory or problematizing. Koopman’s Nietzsche used genealogy “to undermine modern moral practices expressing a will to truth.”⁷⁷ Nietzsche, as Koopman notes, does not offer much by way of a definition of genealogy. However, in *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes the target of the genealogy he proposes: “a *critique* of moral values, [where] *the value of these values themselves must first be called in question.*”⁷⁸ Genealogy involves the pursuit of “a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which [moral values] grew, under which they evolved and changed.”⁷⁹ Nietzsche goes on to list all the myriad registers on which he expects to locate moral values: “morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality

⁷⁴ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 3.

⁷⁵ Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

⁷⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002 [1962]); Dienstag, *Pessimism*; Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy”; Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, Expanded Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1975]); Matthieu Queloz and Damian Cueni, “Nietzsche as a Critic of Genealogical Debunking: Making Room for Naturalism without Subversion,” *The Monist* 102, no. 3 (May 1, 2019): 277–297, 277.

⁷⁷ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 61.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 20, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, referenced also in Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 60.

as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison.”⁸⁰ Reading this, it would be difficult to imagine that Nietzsche is interested in discovering the positive or generative aspects of Christian moral values. Given this framing for his project, it would be understandable to assume that Nietzsche aimed to destroy Christian morality, and that in the absence of these values, one would surely devolve into nihilism. While I am sympathetic to these claims, I am far more compelled by Bernard Harcourt, as well as a recent essay by Matthieu Queloz and Damian Cueni, that Nietzsche’s use of critical history and genealogy was more nuanced than a facile debunking of Christian morality.

In a Keynote Address, “On Critical Genealogy,” Harcourt defends the affirmative project in Nietzsche’s work.⁸¹ For Harcourt, there are moments of vindication *and* subversion in Nietzsche’s critical histories. The key point, however, is that Nietzsche was moving “toward the concept of critical history as one way, among others, to use history to transform us—to help ‘implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature.’”⁸² To argue that Nietzsche’s negativity is characterized by the project of demystification and ideological unmasking is to dismiss the powerful critiques embedded within his critical project. As Nietzsche argued:

The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. “Everything lacks meaning” (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all interpretations of the world are false).⁸³

In other words, morality was a filter through which one interpreted the world, where one would defend a subjective valuation of the world (e.g., good versus evil) based on an uncritically accepted universal conceptions of morality. Nietzsche endeavored to move beyond this false understanding

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 20.

⁸¹ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy.”

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1, quoting Nietzsche: “On Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, 76.

⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 1.

of the world. As Bernard Harcourt notes, it is important to remember “[Nietzsche] was not debunking morality *tout court*. He was not arguing for a position beyond normative assessment, but rather a position Beyond Good and Evil.”⁸⁴ I share Harcourt’s (and other’s) assessment that Nietzsche was interested in both critical debunking—or subversion—and a project of affirmation.

In his keynote, Harcourt also responds to the emergent trend of classifying different forms of genealogies (e.g., Koopman’s genealogical taxonomy) by offering a critical provocation:

It is time to take a step back and, instead of impugning types of genealogy or typecasting critical philosophers, to ask rather the question of the value of genealogical work. The proper metric against which to evaluate genealogical work is whether it contributes to transforming ourselves, others, and society.⁸⁵

In other words, the point of the genealogical method is to provoke action “for”—in Nietzsche’s words—“the sake of life.”⁸⁶ Harcourt argues that Nietzsche “aspired to a new way of thinking historically... that would have practical effects.”⁸⁷ The point was action, whether that action was to disentangle one’s relationship to traditional morality, or to will a new “form of life,” to use Joshua Dienstag’s phrase.⁸⁸ While Nietzsche’s genealogies often focused on historical analysis for debunking—or challenging the givenness and primacy of certain principles, ideas, values, or practices—Nietzsche was also engaged in a more affirmative or creative project. One of “advocating for an ethic of life, of vitality, of action—for a philosophy of the will.” Harcourt’s Nietzsche is radical, rather than exclusively subversive, suspicious, or destructive. Nietzsche’s critiques of history and traditional morality were meant to shed light on dim spaces, while offering an alternative life-

⁸⁴ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, “On Critical Genealogy,” 17, quoting Nietzsche: “On Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 76-77.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁸ Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

affirming ethic. It is for this reason that Harcourt critiques Koopman's argument that Nietzsche's genealogies are exclusively subversive—instead, they have some vindictory elements as well.

In a similar vein, Queloz and Cueni argue that Nietzsche was not just an “archetypal genealogical debunker.”⁸⁹ Instead, Nietzsche was engaged in a project that was critical of both debunking *and* passive nihilism. Queloz and Cueni argue the *Genealogy of Morals* endeavored to take readers on a journey where they would reject both Christian morality and ascetic morality. Nietzsche warned this could result in nihilism, unless one accepted the contingency of suffering, values, and history, but chose to affirm life regardless.⁹⁰ If readers have the tenacity to endure Nietzsche's challenge, then “Once one goes far enough in accepting the Death of God, [then] the origins of one's values, formerly perceived as destabilizing, cease to be destabilizing.”⁹¹ Rather than engaging in a purely subversive project, with the goal of undermining values and encouraging nihilism, Nietzsche emphasizes how violence and suffering were at the root of many things taken as positive in the contemporary world. The structure and rhetorical force of the *Genealogy of Morals* is not intended to convert the reader into an amoral nihilist; it is intended, instead, to encourage readers to move beyond dominant value systems and develop “an outlook that enables one to know life for what it is and still say ‘yes’ to it.”⁹² In the latter half of Queloz and Cueni's essay, they argue that Nietzsche's intention was to offer instead a “pessimism of strength.”⁹³ As Nietzsche stated in an unpublished work from 1887 (which has yet to be officially translated into English) “[The pessimism of strength] is the state in which mankind [sic] fearlessly accepts contingency—in which it no longer feels the

⁸⁹ Queloz and Cueni, “Nietzsche as a Critic of Genealogical Debunking,” 277.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 279.

⁹² Ibid., 290.

⁹³ Ibid., 280.

need to rationalize the world or to deny its reality.”⁹⁴ Nietzsche’s antidote to living in a world where history, values, and meaning are contingent is pessimism of strength. Rather than being an explicitly subversive or suspicious endeavor, Queloz and Cueni argue that Nietzsche was critical of those philosophical projects which exclusively destroyed and debunked.

In this brief detour through a discussion of interpretation, suspicion, debunking, and genealogy, I have illuminated the importance of genealogies as critical inquiry, while gesturing toward an affirmative project of pessimism. Debates may remain unsettled, as to whether Nietzsche’s was an affirmative or exclusively subversive project, however, I see in Nietzsche a philosopher of an affirmative and active pessimism of strength. In what follows, I will argue that Nietzsche’s pessimism of strength, or Dionysian pessimism is a critical theoretical project that affirms life and fortifies the will in the face of suffering. As Harcourt argues, Nietzsche’s critical histories are a banister for critical genealogies “with the emphasis on the qualifier “critical” to identify only those genealogies that nourish praxis, that is the task for historically inflected critique.”⁹⁵ Critical theorizing coupled with praxis or the pessimism of strength offers the tools to accept the loss of meaning and suffering brought on by the destabilizing force of anthropogenic climate change.

Dionysian Pessimism: A Pessimism of Strength

Let us dwell a moment on...the pessimism of strength... If [one] formerly had need of a god, [they] now [take] delight in a world disorder without God, a world of chance, to whose essence belong the terrible, the ambiguous, the seductive... This pessimism of strength also ends in a theodicy, i.e., in an absolute affirmation of the world—but for the very reasons that formerly led one to deny it—and in this fashion to a conception of this world as the actually-achieved highest possible ideal.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 291, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Digital Critical Edition of the Complete Works and Letters*, ed. Paolo D’Iorio, based on the critical text by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009—) 1887, 10[21].

⁹⁵ Harcourt, “On Critical Geology,” 17.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁹⁶

Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this—to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is *amor fati*.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁹⁷

While Nietzsche's pessimist revival has been thoroughly rehearsed, it may, as yet, be a surprise that Nietzsche's pessimism was embedded in the life-affirmative concept of *amor fati*.⁹⁸ It may be a further surprise, that Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism or pessimism of strength were on the other side of nihilism—a type of compensation for moving beyond traditional (or Christian) and ascetic (German) morality. How can this be when the standard argument so effectively indicts pessimism for apathy and modern nihilism? This, I will argue, is because the popular conception of pessimism, where pessimism is a term of disavowal for a negative disposition, is akin to the Schopenhauerian pessimism of resignation that Nietzsche so ardently critiqued. On the charge that Schopenhauerian pessimism amounts to passive nihilism—or an absence of values that unfolds into “a will to negation”—it is guilty on all charges. However, a pessimism of strength—rooted in the will to power or an affirmative will to life—moves beyond the trap of passive nihilism. In what follows, I will discuss how Nietzsche moves beyond Schopenhauer—his proverbial *golden calf*—then I will unpack the Nietzschean pessimism of strength.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 527.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 536, emphasis in original.

⁹⁸ For an exemplary analysis of Nietzschean pessimism, see Dienstag, *Pessimism*. See also: Tobias Dahlkvist, *Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism: A Study of Nietzsche's Relation to the Pessimistic Tradition: Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Leopardi* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 2007); Mark P. Jenkins, “Williams, Nietzsche, and Pessimism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 316–225; Scott Jenkins, “Nietzsche's Transformation of the Problem of Pessimism in Human, All Too Human,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 50, no. 2 (2019): 272–291; Queloz and Cueni, “Nietzsche as a Critic of Genealogical Debunking.”

Schopenhauer: Prophet No More

I saw a great sadness come over mankind. The best grew weary of their works... A teaching went forth, a belief ran beside it: Everything is empty, everything is one, everything is past... Thus did Zarathustra hear a prophet speak; and his prophecy went to Zarathustra's heart and transformed him. He went about sad and weary; and he became like those of whom the prophet had spoken.

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁹⁹

It seems we know ourselves as all too brittle, perhaps even as shattered and incurable; it seems we fear this hand of life, that it must shatter us, and we flee into its appearance, into its falseness, its surface and colorful deceptiveness; it seems we are cheerful because we are tremendously sad.

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁰⁰

From the start, Schopenhauer had a profound influence on Nietzsche—first as “Educator” and later as foil.¹⁰¹ In Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he wrote a critique of Plato and Aristotle largely under the spell of Schopenhauer. Later in life, when he republished *The Birth of Tragedy*, he included “An Attempt at a Self-Criticism” in which he describes *Tragedy* as “an impossible book” that was influenced by “a *strange* voice.”¹⁰² The strange voice, was the voice of Schopenhauer, an atheist who was under the spell of an “unknown god.” As Nietzsche came to see, because he had internalized a “Schopenhauerian formulae,” the analysis in *Tragedy* bore the hue of “resignation” that Schopenhauer had originally ascribed to the tragic.¹⁰³ Schopenhauer fell prey to the same romanticism as other Germans at the time, and *Tragedy* read as a romantic treatise itself. Nietzsche describes Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Richard Wagner with the same broad strokes—claiming they all

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, “The Prophet,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 156.

¹⁰⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885-Spring 1886)*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Volume 16 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 323.

¹⁰¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, 125-194.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” 5; 6, emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 10; in second quote, Nietzsche is quoting Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation*.

traffic “an intoxicating and befogging narcotic.”¹⁰⁴ This narcotic, is that of German metaphysics, where there is a world beyond this world from which to evaluate good and evil. It is the same trap of the Platonic forms, and of Christianity. Over time, Nietzsche became concerned that Schopenhauer’s life-weary pessimism of resignation would lead to passive nihilism. However, it was only through devoting significant time to carefully reading Schopenhauer that Nietzsche began to develop his critique. Even though Nietzsche would come to renounce Schopenhauer’s theorizing, it was only through years of deep reading—forward and backward—as well as careful reflection. In this section, I will discuss *The Birth of Tragedy*, before turning to a discussion of the problematic elements of Schopenhauer’s thinking.

In *Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues the rationalistic philosophy promulgated by Socrates, Plato, and later Aristotle destroyed one of the highest artforms, the Greek tragedy. By combining Apolline and Dionysian elements, Greek tragedies gave spectators the opportunity to embrace the meaningless suffering inherent to existence, while still finding a capacity for joy. The Greek tragedies achieved this intoxicating combination by blending a static depiction of reality (Apollo) with narcotic revelry (Dionysus).¹⁰⁵ Rather than seeing value in the Greek tragedies, Plato and Aristotle derided the value of using myths for comprehending pain and cruelty.¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche argued that Plato and Aristotle

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*.

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche was similarly critical of the Epicureans, who judged as unproductive, the practice of *praemeditatio malorum* or the Stoic practice of meditating on the possibility for future ills or problems. For a discussion of this, see Michel Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

took a moralistic approach to tragedy and were guilty of “moralistic superiority” in their attitude toward suffering.¹⁰⁷

This moralistic understanding of tragedy and suffering was something Nietzsche perceived in Schopenhauer as well. Later in life, once Nietzsche had moved beyond his prophet Schopenhauer, as well as morality, he claimed (rather audaciously and in reference to *Birth of Tragedy*) “I have been the first to discover the tragic.”¹⁰⁸ Tragedy, as viewed through the lens of Dionysian art, “can turn these thoughts of repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life.”¹⁰⁹ Again, in *Will to Power*, Nietzsche criticizes Schopenhauer for falling prey to the moralization of suffering: “Even resignation is not a lesson of tragedy, but a misunderstanding of it! Yearning for nothingness is a denial of tragic wisdom, its opposite.”¹¹⁰ Nietzsche argued that because suffering is a constant condition of life, humans needed something (other than the narcotic of religion or metaphysics) beyond empirical reality—such as Dionysian art and a strong will—to cope with and redeem our pain. Rather than challenging all morality, Schopenhauer acceded to an ascetic ideal or ascetic sense of morality, which resulted in a life-denying pessimism. This is why, in *Will to Power*, Nietzsche argues that “The pessimistic condemnation of life by Schopenhauer is a moral one. Transference of herd standards into the realm of metaphysics.”¹¹¹ Rather than being rid of universal values, Schopenhauer made a moral judgment against existence, thereby transferring the logic of

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 531, emphasis in original. I am here indebted to Walter Kaufmann for his comment on note 83, where he points out that Nietzsche’s claim would sound “mad” to the uninitiated. His discussion of Nietzsche’s critique of the ancient’s relationship to tragedy was insightful and illuminative.

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 531.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 40 (7).

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 531-532.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 204.

Christian/herd morality into another moral value system.¹¹² In other words, Schopenhauer traded one moral system—or system of evaluating good and evil—for another.

Schopenhauer's error was that he judged our world based on ideal—or metaphysical—standards that do not have their foundation in our world. Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer was that he accepted that evil as a foundational element to the world, and because there is neither God nor redemption, it is better to have not existed. Schopenhauer's error meant he did not go far enough in renouncing metaphysical valuations of the world. Without renouncing "the ideal itself," or a universal moral standard, he sought an explanation for the "evil will... which reveals itself in the world of appearances."¹¹³ Without God, there is still a profound compulsion to rescue the idea of the so-called universal man who has "lost dignity" and can only be saved with a universal conception of morality or values.¹¹⁴ This is problematically teleological because it posits a Truth beyond our world as a standard by which to judge our world and behavior; this then compels earthly humans to evaluate their behavior according to this other-worldly standard. Rather than fully rejecting traditional morality and ascetic morality, Schopenhauer fell into a metaphysical trap of his own making, one which ensnared him within life-denying resignation and a form of passive nihilism. It is for this reason that Nietzsche moved beyond Schopenhauer, and his passive will to nothingness, to theorize a pessimism of strength.

The Birth of Nietzsche's Pessimism of Strength

¹¹² Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 175.

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 15; 16. As Nietzsche argues, "The most universal sign of the modern age: man [sic] has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent. For a long time the center and tragic hero of existence in general; then... like all metaphysicians who wish to cling to the dignity of man, with their faith that moral values are cardinal values. Those who have abandoned God cling that much more firmly to the faith in morality"

¹¹⁴ Debates too rich to dive into here abound as to the racist, heterosexist, colonialist, and ethnocentric conceptions of the so-called "universal man" associated to the project of "humanism." For one analysis and provocation, see Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337."

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “the Dionysiac monster called Zarathustra” laments succumbing to the metaphysical delusions of the “prophet” Schopenhauer, “[whose] prophecy went to Zarathustra’s heart and transformed him. He went about sad and weary,” denouncing all life, but with an acuity for better apprehending our existence.¹¹⁵ Zarathustra lays to rest this false prophet by sending forth “a thousand peals of laughter,” but remains saddled with a riddle; namely, how do you hold space for the pain and cruelty endemic to existence, without falling prey to the weariness and resignation of Schopenhauer?¹¹⁶ Free from the baggage of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche maintains his commitment to discovering a form of pessimism capable of affirming life, while avoiding the pitfalls of optimism and utilitarianism. This reconstituted pessimism avoids the metaphysical trap that claimed Schopenhauer, by moving toward a “pessimism ‘beyond good and evil’”—whether this moralistic evaluation of good and evil is the fault of Christian or ascetic values.¹¹⁷ The pessimism beyond good and evil is what Nietzsche refers to as Dionysian pessimism, or “a terror that liberates” through the “self-sublation of morality.”¹¹⁸

[We] immoralists, we god less ones of today, yes, even, from a certain understanding, as its heirs, as executors of its innermost will, a pessimistic will, which, as I said, is not afraid of negating its very self because it takes great pleasure in negating! Fulfilling itself in us is, in case you want a formula - the self-sublation of morality.¹¹⁹

The pessimistic will, or pessimism of strength, liberates one from filtering existence through the standards of universal moral codes. Instead, it creates the possibility to adopt a life-affirming ethos

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 12; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 156.

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 157.

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 8.

¹¹⁸ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 176; Nietzsche, *Dawn*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Dawn*, 6.

strong enough to confront the horrors of existence, while creating space to make one's own meaning (and moral evaluations).

Nietzsche believed that one should remain of this world, rather than pinning one's hope on the moral utopia of redemption in the afterlife. Instead of making a moral judgment about the world and running from its terrors, Nietzsche thought "You ought first to learn the art of *this-worldly* consolation—you should learn to *laugh*...if you are determined to remain pessimists."¹²⁰ It would never do, to shrink in the face of hardship or renounce the world as a repository of evil, because hardship abounds, and Nietzsche believed it better to view suffering as a teacher, and learn to laugh in their presence.

The Eternal Return

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

—Friedrich Nietzsche ¹²¹

I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—*not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things.

—Friedrich Nietzsche ¹²²

¹²⁰ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 11-12.

¹²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Heaviest Weight," *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 341: 194.

¹²² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 237-238.

As previously mentioned, Nietzsche's writing style and massive oeuvre present some difficulties for theorizing alongside his work. For this reason, there are countless unsettled debates about interpreting aspects of his work. One debate that appears somewhat settled, is that Nietzsche's eternal return (or eternal recurrence) refers to a life-affirming approach to existence. This thought experiment comes to embody Nietzsche's will to power, in contrast to what Nietzsche identified in Schopenhauer as a will to nothingness. Some have interpreted the eternal return as the return of a particular outcome, others view it not as a particular outcome but a general openness to the future. Some view it as a thought experiment meant to create space for agency in the inevitable passage between past and future, or the embodiment of Nietzsche's life-affirming ethos of the will to power. Here I will discuss various interpretations of the eternal return, before turning to a discussion about the relationship between pessimism and the eternal return.

Among scholars of Nietzsche there is convergence on the role eternal return plays in affirming life and creating space for agency. However, there is still debate about whether the eternal return refers to accepting the return of particular events, or a thought experiment to encourage resilience in the face of a contingent and unpredictable future. Scott Jenkins views the eternal return as an infinite return of a *particular* outcome.¹²³ Tracy Strong, however, argues this interpretation rests on a flawed understanding of the term "eternal," when Nietzsche likely used *eternal* to describe that which simply *is*—without a past or future.¹²⁴ Strong conceives of the eternal return as a tool for dealing with "time sickness" or "an effort to remove oneself from history."¹²⁵ Likewise for Dienstag, the eternal return is a mechanism for learning how to cope with the suffering inherent to an

¹²³ Scott Jenkins, "The Pessimistic Origin of Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Recurrence," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 1 (2020): 20–41.

¹²⁴ Strong, Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

existence defined by entropy.¹²⁶ Similarly, Bernard Williams regarded the eternal return as a life affirming thought experiment meant to teach us resilience and endurance when faced with the horrors of existence.¹²⁷ This interpretation sees the eternal return as a path to embracing “truthfulness.”¹²⁸ While Gilles Deleuze beckons us to consider eternal return as an active return which enables becoming rather than simply being.¹²⁹ Deleuze asserts “We misinterpret the expression ‘eternal return’ if we understand it as the ‘return of the same’”¹³⁰ It is not being that returns but rather the returning itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes” (48). For the sake of this chapter, I will draw most heavily on the readings of eternal return developed by Dienstag, Deleuze, and Strong.

For Deleuze, the eternal return emphasizes the space between the past and the future, where the present moment is simultaneously past and yet to come. This passage is the moment when an activated human has the capacity to will a different outcome as they pass into the next moment. Deleuze uses the metaphor of a dice game, where the best player is one who takes a chance on the game but does not succumb to the siren’s call of causality to make bets based on flawed probabilistic reasoning. “That the universe has no purpose, that it has no end to hope for any more than it has causes to be known - this is the certainty necessary to play well. The dicethrow fails because chance has not been affirmed enough in one throw.”¹³¹ By choosing to play the game, a person takes an affirmative risk, a risk that insinuates a willingness to embrace any outcome. One accepts they may

¹²⁶ Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

¹²⁷ Williams, “Nietzsche: The Gay Science.”

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹²⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 27, referencing Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (La Volonté de Puissance), III 465.

win or lose, but the outcomes are infinite and unknown. If there were a perfect game, there would be no reason to play because all games would be won from the outset. Likewise, if there were a perfect equilibrium to be reached in existence, there would be no striving to become, because we would all be perfect already. To accept and turn toward the future in an affirmative posture is to welcome chance, and to creatively will one's future. Rather than willing a particular outcome, the Deleuzian conception of eternal return is an affirmation that we have the capacity to will differently in our passage between the past and future. It is not just an intellectual exercise, but an affirmational ethic of creativity, an intervention to will that which is different.

Dienstag (2006) takes this analysis one step further in viewing the eternal return as an exercise in practicing detachment from outcomes, because every act of creation is an act of destruction. Eternal return teaches us to let go of our affliction and misery when the things we love most risk destroying us in their impermanence. Rather than offering solace, Nietzsche encourages us to be resilient, because the strongest among us are the ones who can endure suffering, while still creating their own meaning. “[This] is not a matter of taking a sadistic pleasure in the suffering of others. But it is a decision to be glad that ours is a world of becoming rather than being, to be glad that things are always changing and that the future is always being born and the present always passing away.”¹³² When we view the world as one of becoming, rather than being, it affirms our role as co-creators in the future, but also our responsibility for letting go of specific outcomes. Like a good pessimist, Dienstag's interpretation of the eternal return bears some resemblance to the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and the practice of nonattachment. The eternal return does not refer to the cyclical return of the past, but an acceptance of the temporary nature of all elements of existence. The eternal return is “Not the idea that we must relive the past again and again, but

¹³² Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 191.

rather that this pattern of destruction and creation is unalterable and must be born.”¹³³ The cycle of birth and death, renewal and decay, creation and destruction are bound to repeat—regardless of our attachments to particular moments in our lives or history. The eternal return offers us a way to embrace these cycles as fundamental elements of existence.

Prior to dancing around a definition of the eternal return, Strong gestures playfully to what the eternal return is not.¹³⁴ The eternal return is not a theory of the cosmos. It does not imply a cyclical return of particulars, and it does not insinuate either a cyclical or linear conception of time. Instead, the eternal return is an individual state of being for moving beyond the dilemma of being human-all-too-human. It is a life-affirming ethos which embraces change and spontaneity while being capable of overcoming traditional morality.¹³⁵ The maintenance of this worldview requires an externally hostile reality, where anyone who treats us poorly is evil so that we can define ourselves as good. This was the critical problem of modernity identified by Nietzsche and the eternal return was his proposed thought experiment for moving beyond this understanding of the world, toward a perspective rooted in truthfulness. The eternal return addresses how humans deal with the past and history, to overcome guilt and *ressentiment*. As such, Nietzsche believed the eternal return could break the trance of nihilism, by disrupting connection between an oppressive past and our contemporary moment. For humans enmeshed in a world governed by traditional morality, the eternal return

¹³³ Ibid., 192.

¹³⁴ Strong, “The Doctrine of Eternal Return,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche*, pp 260-293, *passim*.

¹³⁵ Ibid. The typical translation of the Nietzschean analysis of morality has been “slave morality,” owing to Nietzsche’s concerns about Hegel and the master/slave dialectic. However, I have chosen to use the more neutral “traditional morality,” because Nietzsche was not talking about the modern institution of slavery, and I would like to avoid muddying any understanding of his use of this concept. For Nietzsche slave/traditional morality is characterized by being *enslaved* to an intellectual system that rewards the differentiation between good and evil based on a universal system of moral judgments. Whereas (the long-lost) “master” morality was one based on instincts and the world as it is—unpolluted by universal conceptions of values or morality. It accepted some level of inequality in the world, without a compulsion to describe the human equivalent of an eagle or wolf as evil for acting in accordance with their instincts to hunt.

difficult to maintain, as one will always creep back into the pervasive state of contemporary reality. Thus, Nietzsche viewed the journey taken by the eternal return as labyrinthine, treacherous, isolating, and one that might take generations. Strong conceives of the eternal return as a flow state, a reflexive state of mind where one can act on impulse without the baggage of human history. It is not simply a state of affirmation, but also of denial; a state of being where one can play, laugh, and dance without guilt or judgment.

Dienstag's analysis of the pattern of destruction and creation in the eternal return parallels Deleuze's assessment of the passage between past and future. This passage is a threshold between what was, what is, and what shall be—rather than time trending toward a perfectible endpoint or equilibrium. There is no progress (in the Enlightenment sense of the word) toward which to strive, only becoming in the sense of the unencumbered flow state detailed by Strong. In Deleuze's interpretation, the present is always out of our reach, because it is perpetually in transit between the past and the future. The more closely you try to regard the transit between the past and future, the more difficult it becomes to pinpoint. The present becomes as indiscernible as the difference between a dog and a wolf at dusk (*entre le chien et le loup*). The more you try to hold onto the present, the more it slips out of your grasp and into the past. There is no perfect *being* in this present moment, only the reward of perpetually *becoming* and willing creatively to become different in the future. Here, the will is also the creative force that chooses to accept the unavoidable relationship between the creation and destruction inherent in existence and takes a chance on striving creatively into the future, regardless.

What if we were willed to return eternally *not* to a new or better or similar political life, where governments acted swiftly and democratically to address greenhouse gas emissions, but to this self-same political life where world leaders take decades to meaningfully respond to climate change? Where world leaders fail to respond to James Hansen's 1988 US Congressional testimony, in which

he issued an impassioned warning about anthropogenic climate change? An identical political climate, where the US avoids joining international climate agreements for over twenty years, then joins the Paris agreement only to ping-pong back and forth on the agreement in response to presidential transitions (one of which pursued a senseless and uneconomical revival of the coal industry)? An identical political and economic reality, where Exxon uncovers a link between fossil fuel emissions and climate change in the 1970s, only to hide their research findings, double down on fossil fuel extraction, and funds climate denial efforts—only to be discovered decades later? An identical political and social climate, in which climate denialism is granted equal footing to the near universal scientific consensus about the anthropogenic origins of climate change? How then shall we attend to this eternal return or what Nietzsche refers to as “the heaviest weight?”¹³⁶

Interpreted through the eternal return, the lack of meaningful political action on climate change is both prologue and reality. A present that cannot be captured, by a past that cannot be erased. The transit toward an unpredictable fate, in which greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. Eternal return is both an ethos, and an invitation to will a different political outcome in response to climate inaction, whether in the streets or otherwise. The eternal return reminds us that we have always already arrived at the present, and steels us to take a risk—roll the Deleuzian dice—and take action to pressure governments to respond to the threat of climate change.

Are Pessimism and the Eternal Return Incompatible?

In a 2020 article Scott Jenkins argues the eternal return should be understood as a rejection of pessimism—or the “view that life is not worth living.”¹³⁷ As Jenkins argues, the eternal return embodies a life affirming ethos that emerges from pessimism and later moves beyond it. However, I

¹³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 341: 194.

¹³⁷ Jenkins, “The Pessimistic Origin of Nietzsche’s Thought of Eternal Recurrence,” 20.

suggest, Jenkins' analysis presupposes the only form of pessimism is a Schopenhauerian pessimism that implies a life-denying resignation. This strawman is a common rhetorical strategy for those who wish to denude pessimism of its critical potency. As Dienstag has pointed out, it is a strategy used to reject ideas with which one disagrees or to even overlook how a theorist may self-identify as a pessimist.¹³⁸ Jenkins finds proof for his perspective in *The Gay Science*, among other texts.¹³⁹ I maintain, however, that the catalyst for this perspective comes from a narrow interpretation of pessimism.¹⁴⁰

Jenkins builds his argument based on the penultimate two passages in Book Four of *The Gay Science*: 340, “The Dying Socrates,” and 341, “The Heaviest Weight.”¹⁴¹ In the passage on Socrates' death, Nietzsche interprets the last words of Socrates—the “demon...rat-catcher of Athens”—as: “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster” as “O Crito, *life is a disease!*”¹⁴² Nietzsche laments Socrates for speaking so woefully in these final moments, and emphatically suggests that Socrates was a pessimist. In the subsequent passage, Nietzsche describes the eternal return as an opportunity to

¹³⁸ Dienstag, *Pessimism*. Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 5–6. In *Hope without Optimism*, Eagleton does something similar by denying Walter Benjamin's self-identification as a pessimist, claiming he was instead a realist.

¹³⁹ Jenkins also discusses *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (“Redemption”), for the sake of brevity, I will only address Jenkins' discussion of two passages in *The Gay Science*.

¹⁴⁰ Akin to Strong, Deleuze, and Dienstag – I disagree with Jenkins' (2020) interpretation of the eternal return, where he argues it is an eternal return of particulars. Further, he argues the life affirming ethos of the eternal return is not for everyone, but instead solely for those special geniuses who are capable of deep intellectual work. He warns we should avoid democratizing Nietzsche's thinking. While this interpretation may emulate Nietzsche's personal position (he was not a fan of democracy), this narcissistic approach seems to promote an elitist read of a theorist who *can* provide solace to anyone who is willing to do the deep work promulgated by Nietzsche. Indeed, Nietzsche does argue for the liberatory capacity of a life-affirming pessimism. The Nietzschean project of challenging myriad modalities of good vs evil has an immense capacity to release someone from the social conditioning of traditional morality.

¹⁴¹ Jenkins, “The Pessimistic Origin.”

¹⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, ed. Oscar, Lecy, trans. Thomas Common and Maude Dominica Petre (London, UK: T.N. Foulis Publishing, 1910), 107: 340; Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 340: 194. For the most part, I draw on Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro's translation of *The Gay Science* from Cambridge University Press. However, the phrase describing Socrates as a “demon...rat-catcher of Athens,” comes from Thomas Common's translation of *The Joyful Wisdom*, published in 1910, and available online <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/52124>.

ardently embrace every instant of one's life, but first one must be willing to "curse the demon that so spake."¹⁴³ In other words, to affirm one's life, one must denounce the demon Socrates who decried the sickness of life. I will grant, that Jenkins' interpretation of this section is correct. Here, Nietzsche appears to disavow any life-denying form of pessimism.

However, in Book Five—in passage 370, *What is Romanticism?*—Nietzsche discerns between two forms of pessimism or two forms of sufferers.¹⁴⁴ The life-denying pessimism Nietzsche equates to eighteenth century romanticism, while the life-affirming form is a Dionysian "pessimism of the future."¹⁴⁵ In a passage where Nietzsche describes the therapeutic power of art and philosophy, which presuppose suffering and sufferers, he argues:

there are two kinds of sufferers: on the one hand those that suffer from *overflowing vitality*, who need Dionysian art, and require a tragic view and insight into life; and on the other hand those who suffer from *reduced vitality*, who seek repose, quietness, calm seas, and deliverance from themselves through art or knowledge, or else intoxication, spasm, bewilderment and madness.¹⁴⁶

Here, as elsewhere, Nietzsche differentiates between those intrepid Dionysian pessimists who "suffer from *overflowing vitality*" and the life-denying pessimists "who suffer from *reduced vitality*." The latter pessimists, Nietzsche says "would need, if possible, a God who is specially the God of the sick, a 'Saviour.'"¹⁴⁷ Then, at the end of this passage, Nietzsche ardently avows, "there may be quite a different kind of pessimism...this presentiment and vision belongs to me, as something inseparable

¹⁴³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 341: 194.

¹⁴⁴ One thing that complicates Jenkins' interpretation of *The Gay Science*, is that he focuses solely on the concluding passages of Book Four. Nietzsche initially published only the First Four books of *The Gay Science* in 1882. However, in 1887, Nietzsche released a second edition that included the Fifth Book, which is where he develops his argument about Dionysian pessimism. The latter version is the version with which we are most familiar, and it is somewhat surprising Jenkins does not discuss passages from the Fifth Book in his article. See: Williams, "Nietzsche: The Gay Science," 137.

¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*., 370: 235.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 370: 235.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

from me, as my *proprium* and *ipsissimum*,...I call that pessimism of the future,—for it is coming! I see it coming! —Dionysian pessimism.”¹⁴⁸ Here Nietzsche self-describes as a Dionysian pessimist. While Jenkins is correct that the eternal return may require rejecting the life-negating pessimism Nietzsche ascribes to Schopenhauer and Socrates—this does not mean that Nietzsche disavows all forms of pessimism. Nietzsche began referring to this alternative formulation as the “pessimism of strength” in 1886 when he published his “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” in the preface to the third edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*.¹⁴⁹

As mentioned above, Nietzsche became critical of how Schopenhauer’s resignation amounted to a will to nothingness, which was based on metaphysical universalism, where he associated suffering with all that is evil. Despite being critical of one instantiation of pessimism, Nietzsche did not reject the project of pessimism in totality. As Dienstag notes, “[Nietzschean] pessimism remains a kind of ‘no-saying,’ a rejection of traditional morality” (180). While Jenkins correctly associates the source of the eternal return with pessimism, it is wrong to suggest Nietzsche’s life affirmative position is antithetical to pessimism. Instead, the process of affirming life entails developing one’s own sense of meaning without the baggage of traditional morality and/or ascetic ideals. A pessimism of strength is consistent with the eternal return, thus understood as a creative, life-affirming ethos that encourages one to will differently and laugh in the face of adversity.

Looking Backward, *Ressentiment*, and the Art of Forgetting

When using the eternal return to discuss governmental disregard for climate action, the focus was on the past. Nietzsche councils that overly focusing on the past is a form of psychological

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 370: 236.

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 3.

subjugation. Instead, the will is the liberator, capable of relinquishing the mental shackles of self-doubt. Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, says “To redeem the past and to transform every ‘it was’ into an ‘I wanted it thus!’—that alone do I call redemption” (rather than the eschatological redemption offered by Christianity, or even the redemption on offer in the narrative of progress).¹⁵⁰ When we direct our will to the past, we become imprisoned by our memories and afflicted with the desire for vengeance. This is because we hone our attention on past grievances, rather than sharpening our will on a future worth living.

In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche briefly mentions the French revolutionary Honoré Gabriel Riqueti—who later became the Count of Mirabeau—as an example of someone who had no need for revenge or even forgiveness, because he had the capacity to forget past harms and misdeeds.¹⁵¹ Recording and replaying memories is an unconscious activity, or compulsion, that compels people to harbor *ressentiment* (or the strong form of Christian resentment that leads to a contempt of “evil” others). By contrast, forgetting is an active and conscious act to create space for “a little quietness” in the present moment.¹⁵² Nietzsche argues “there can be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*, without forgetfulness.”¹⁵³ Forgetting is an active and relieving force. Forgetting is a tool for relinquishing the socialized value systems one has internalized, be it from traditional or ascetic moral systems.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, “Of Redemption,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 161.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay One, Section 10, 39; Nietzsche’s discussion of Mirabeau (like many things) is rather ironic (and likely, unintentionally so), because Mirabeau led a scandalous life before getting into politics. Beyond his skills as an orator, it took years to build public confidence in him as a politician. It is also fascinating that he was one of the only members of the Jacobin Club to advocate for the abolition of slavery but was not really a leftist. He was a member of the Jacobin Club in name only.

¹⁵² Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay Two, Section 1, 57.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

Forgetting is not only a tool for moving beyond universal value systems, but also a way to move beyond traditional historical narratives. However, *truly* forgetting—in the words of Joseph Winters—“threatens to murder the dead twice.”¹⁵⁴ While Nietzsche offers some compelling tools for challenging grand historical narratives and universal conceptions of values, I more closely align with post-Nietzschean thinkers like Foucault and Adorno, because the emphasis Nietzsche places on forgetting amounts to an ahistorical approach to politics. This is an abhorrent theoretical move, especially when considered alongside the intersecting oppressive legacies of white supremacy, capitalism, colonization, and imperialism. However, Nietzsche’s conception of forgetting can be radicalized, when choosing *what to forget* in the historical narrative, when it does not apply directly to narratives of resistance. In this manner, the art of forgetting *could* be a useful tool for resistance and survival moving forward.

Nietzsche and Temporally-Oriented Pessimism

Most of our hopes are bound to be disappointed, and those that are fulfilled are disfulfilled in the next moment as the objects of our hope slip into the past. All in all, time consciousness is a bad deal from the perspective of human happiness.

—Joshua Dienstag¹⁵⁵

Pessimism, according to Dienstag, is a philosophical approach—an ethos of the self—which provides the philosophical tools for coping with the burden of linear time, the absurdity of human existence, and the irony of history. Nietzsche is a Dionysian pessimist because he takes stock of the suffering inherent to contemporary reality while advocating for a life affirming approach that laughs in the face of suffering. To make any assessment about the merits of Dienstag’s argument, it is

¹⁵⁴ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race*, 14; Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 29-34. Walter Benjamin “On the Concept of History,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing, 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Michael William Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 390-391. In this quote, Winters draws on Shoshana Felman’s interpretation of Theses III-VII of Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History.”

¹⁵⁵ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 23.

necessary to evaluate his claims about Nietzschean pessimism. Here it is important to reiterate how in Nietzsche's assessment of *Tragedy*, he asks if there can be "a pessimism of *strength*?"¹⁵⁶ This question drives at the core of Nietzsche's concerns about how Schopenhauerian pessimism resulted in an indulgent will to nothingness because he was unable to move beyond a universal or metaphysical conception of morality. Instead, Nietzsche endeavored to theorize a pessimism of the future that was simultaneously life-affirming and could move beyond the trap of universal systems of morality. Differently put, Nietzsche sought a philosophical approach capable of overcoming traditional morality, time sickness, and *ressentiment*, that did not succumb to passive nihilism.

In this section, I will draw upon Dienstag's taxonomy of pessimism to explore Nietzsche's pessimism of strength, first through a discussion of the eternal return as a strategy for coping with what Dienstag refers to as "time consciousness."¹⁵⁷ Secondly, I will explore how reason imparts an understanding of linear time as well as the magical thinking inherent to the narrative of progress. Rather than the future necessarily unfolding in a progressive manner, Nietzschean pessimism offers resources for being resilient when faced with the contingency and unknowability of the future. Then, I will explore how Enlightenment reason results in the expectation that happiness and freedom are consistent endeavors, meanwhile Nietzsche illuminates how expecting happiness keeps one bound to a cycle of disappointment, *ressentiment*, and passive nihilism. Finally, I will discuss the spontaneity inherent to Nietzsche's pessimism of strength.

The Burden of Time

¹⁵⁶ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 3.

¹⁵⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 20.

Pessimists, Dienstag claims, distinguish humans from nonhuman animals in their “capacity for time-consciousness.”¹⁵⁸ While nonhuman animals are better equipped to live in the present, humans know the terror of death. Time-consciousness is a uniquely human affliction that renders humans conscious of our mortality.¹⁵⁹ For Schopenhauer time was a delusion, however for Rousseau, time consciousness is both an intellectual advancement and a burden that leads to unhappiness.¹⁶⁰ At the core of pessimist philosophy is a fixation on death, which is central to the critiques and misunderstandings of pessimists. Critics claim that a fixation on death must lead to resignation or nihilism, because focusing on death must lead to unhappiness. To the contrary, death is a parameter for existence rather than a judgment about the worthiness of life. To quote Devotchka “You already know how this will end,” but awareness of our impermanence should never dissuade one from living their life to the fullest.¹⁶¹ Instead, this impermanence is “the ultimate reminder that we do not control the conditions of our existence and are not ever likely to.”¹⁶² Everything and everyone are prone to decay and death. Just as soon as we accomplish a goal or finish a project, the meaning of it fades into the past. As Dienstag explains:

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ While I am deeply indebted to Dienstag’s analysis of temporally-oriented pessimism, I am wary of claims about human exceptionalism. There are many examples of “self-conscious” animals, such as pigeons, apes, and ravens who have passed the test for self-recognition. Non-human animals may appear to have a different relationship with time because they have not decided to subjugate themselves with capitalism. That being said, I have observed domesticated animals experiencing separation anxiety, where the anxiety seems to be exacerbated by extended durations of time without their person. Simply because humans have a greater capacity for writing and understanding our arguments about what makes us different and special, does not mean that nonhuman animals are incapable of higher-level intellectual functioning. Their intelligence or consciousness may just present in a fashion that is presently unrecognizable to humans.

¹⁶⁰ Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

¹⁶¹ Devotchka, “How it Ends,” How it Ends, Cicero Recordings Limited, 2004.

¹⁶² Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 22.

Nothing is so solid that it will not melt into air, if not in this moment, then in one soon to come...To live within the flow of time means that whatever exists now is always rushing into the nonexistence of the past.¹⁶³

The humans, creatures, and things we care about most, threaten to cause us the greatest pain in their death and absence. “Indeed, the more we care, the more we suffer.”¹⁶⁴ Pessimists embrace this impermanence, rather than ignoring it or trying to will it away with *aqua vitae*. The burden of time, as it relates to the inevitable decay and death of all, is antithetical to a guiding “principle of order,” suggesting that one would be a fool to develop grand theories or meta-narratives to justify or explain our existence.¹⁶⁵

Nietzsche’s concept of eternal return details a potential strategy for coping with the burden of time consciousness. For Strong, the eternal return—while difficult to embody for more than a moment—is a tool for relinquishing the shackles of history, while facing the present without the drag of traditional morality. Strong’s depiction of the eternal return beckons us to laugh, dance, and play, to live in the moment without attachment to traumatic or oppressive histories which keep us wedded to traditional morality. This parallels Dienstag’s assessment of the “Dionysian” element of Dionysian pessimism, which invites us to find laughter and joy despite the suffering pervasive in a chaotic existence that guarantees nothing beyond death and decay. Whereas Deleuze views eternal return as a means by which one can will differently in the passage between past and future. Each theorist, in their own manner, interprets the eternal return as a means by which contemporary humans can endure the burden of linear time. Whether by willing differently into the future, giving humans the resilience to cope with legacies of suffering (whether their own or society’s), or relinquishing the bondage of traditional morality by living in the present.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 168.

Not all theorists agree, however, about the universal applicability of Nietzsche's eternal return. Jenkins for one, views the eternal return as the exclusive purview of those genius enough to endeavor upon a Nietzschean transformation (presumably he includes himself in this elite cadre).¹⁶⁶ Jenkins warns against democratizing Nietzsche, who he (correctly) identifies as being hostile to democracy. Yet, in Strong's assessment of *Tragedy*, he muddies this common interpretation. Strong argues "It is not accidental that in his earliest considerations of tragedy, Nietzsche chooses to highlight its democratic element approvingly."¹⁶⁷ Strong goes on to affirm the civic importance of tragedy, noting how "tragedy was not an aristocratic or elitist activity."¹⁶⁸ Rather than developing a grand theory to order the world, like Socrates and Plato, pre-Socratics (Nietzsche argued) recognized the "chaotic and disordered nature of the world and only attempted to cope with it insofar as that was possible."¹⁶⁹ Further, Dienstag notes, "[the pre-Socratics] grasped...that time is an unshakable burden for human beings because it leads to the ultimate destruction of all things."¹⁷⁰ The eternal return captures some of what was lost in the death of tragedy. It is also a tool for moving beyond the traditional and ascetic morality—to overcome time-sickness, cope with the horrors of the world, and accept suffering with levity.

The Irony of History

Pessimism fortifies us, not against the effects of time itself... but against the possible dispiriting that can come from facing time and its effects on pessimism's absence. It looks toward the future, not with the expectation that better things are foreordained, but with the hope founded only on taking joy in the constant processes of transformation and destruction that mark out the human condition.

¹⁶⁶ Jenkins, "The Pessimistic Origins..."

¹⁶⁷ Strong, Friedrich Nietzsche, xviii.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 167.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 168.

—Joshua Dienstag¹⁷¹

Reason embeds in humans not only an assumption about linear time, but also an historical consciousness. The narrative of progress embodies the internalization of this faith in historical progress when there is little guarantee that things will perpetually improve. While there is little disagreement that humans have experienced some scientific and technological progress, Dienstag argues that pessimists ask at what costs do these advancements occur? Climate change is a particularly insidious example of where and how the myth of progress breaks down. While there have been massive material improvements in the lives of many humans since the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of capitalism, these improvements have borne great costs to the environment, as well as the human and non-human world. This dilemma encapsulates what Dienstag refers to as the irony of history. Just because we live in an era when human consciousness internalizes historical developments in a linear and progressive manner, does not mean we are guaranteed perpetual improvement. Deleuze's Nietzsche intervenes in this struggle by reminding us that the future is contingent and to encourage us to have the resolve to will differently as we move through time.

Rather than succumbing to traditional morality, Nietzsche wagers we must learn how to accept the chaotic and contingent nature of reality as we move between past and future. The only thing we know about the transit from the past to the future is that we are all trending toward death and decay. The future is unknowable. For this reason, an expectation of progress is bound to disappoint when the future fails to live up to our expectations, Nietzsche suggests we create meaning for ourselves in the present. This position requires detachment from future outcomes, while resisting nihilistic resignation, by affirming the life we have without attachment to outcome.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 195.

Affirming life in the present, in the absence of traditional or ascetic morality, is not the same as a will to nothingness. “Temporality is not just a limitation but also a source of potential.”¹⁷² The future is an open but uncertain horizon with limitless potential, which is both frightening and exciting. The future may bring the worst of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) predictions for global warming in the next century, but it may also bring climate crisis mitigation and a serious challenge to capitalism in the final hour. What we must relinquish is our belief that we are promised perpetual improvement on our current situation. Instead, as Dienstag argues in his analysis of Nietzschean pessimism:

The Absurdity of Existence

Dienstag argues that for the pessimists, there is a deep incompatibility between the objectives of happiness and freedom and the human capacity to attain either. Not only are freedom and happiness incompatible aims—we erroneously believe they are attainable and that they are owed to us. As such, there is an ontological misalignment between humans and the world, that invariably leads to disappointment and human unhappiness. Rather than developing a theory in pursuit of the simultaneous attainment of happiness and freedom, philosophy should begin from the premise of the incompatibility between the two aims. Furthermore, philosophy should give us the resilience to cope with the suffering inherent to existence. Pessimism condemns “the uselessness and aimlessness of such suffering—along with the deception constantly being perpetrated on us that our suffering is unnecessary, temporary or the result of individual misfortune.”¹⁷³ Suffering is an inherent element of existence and if we exist in human form, we can expect to feel pain. However, this perspective is antithetical to the pragmatism so pervasive in the West. This view suggests there must be a way to

¹⁷² Ibid., 193.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 34.

be free *and* happy—if we are only smart enough, then we can find the solution to unlock the door to liberate us from suffering. Whereas “[to] the pessimists, human existence is not a riddle waiting to be solved by philosophy; human existence merely is. Freedom and happiness do not exist as the solution to a problem.”¹⁷⁴

Reason and knowledge are antithetical to happiness, yet the more we learn, the more we cling to the hope that happiness will find us. Instead of falling for the trap of disappointment, *ressentiment*, and nihilism, Nietzsche believed we could remove ourselves from this cycle through the refusal of traditional morality. Nietzsche believed this process would be alienating and frightening—as one would have to uncover the intersecting ways in which traditional morality had infected their minds. However, through this process one could find a pathway to leading a more joyful life. One where they could laugh in the face of their own suffering and will differently in pursuit of the best life possible. Throughout much of his journey Zarathustra appears alienated from his peers and burdened with the plight of learning how to lead a life unencumbered by traditional morality and contemporary reality. As long as traditional morality prevails, the eternal return will remain an obscure and fleeting approach to grappling with human existence and time. It seems fitting the path to intellectual liberation proposed by Nietzsche would be nearly as absurd as the existence it aimed to console.

Resignation or its Opposite

On the question of how to address suffering, Dienstag discerns between two prescriptions proffered by pessimists, those who believe that existence is such a profound burden that the only recompense is resignation from the burden of life (e.g. Schopenhauer and Rousseau); and those who recognize the horrors and suffering intrinsic to existence and suggest spontaneity or futurity instead

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 35.

(e.g. Nietzsche and Camus). Schopenhauer believed that life was a relentless grind of pain and sorrow for which retreat was the only relief. However, there is also a life-affirming strand of pessimism that encourages spontaneity or futurity. Life may be painful, but life affords the possibility for incredible achievements and rich experiences that surpass the significance of pain. Through embracing the unique opportunities afforded in this life, and finding a way to laugh at our suffering, we can find a way to love life enough to cope with endless suffering, decay, and death. Life affirming “is a form of self-conduct that values the life we are given in spite of the pessimistic diagnosis of its condition...[T]his kind of pessimist—what Nietzsche called a ‘Dionysian pessimist’—does not retreat, but rather advances willingly into hostile territory, not to die gloriously but instead to “live dangerously” and to die necessarily.”¹⁷⁵

The life-affirming pessimism outlined by Dienstag speaks directly to the pessimism of strength that Nietzsche spoke of in the “Attempt at a Self-Criticism.” This form of pessimism rejects the time-sickness—or progressive read of history—that keeps one bound to the cycle of *ressentiment* and nihilism. Rather than holding on to expectations about how we are entitled to happiness or an end to suffering, Dionysian pessimism councils us to find our own meaning and to will differently as we move into the future.

Nietzsche and Value-Oriented Pessimism

Beyond Dienstag’s temporal-orientation of pessimism, Mara van der Lugt outlines a value-orientation to pessimism in her book *Dark Matters*.¹⁷⁶ Van der Lugt engages in an intellectual history of pessimism and optimism in the eighteenth century, where some of her pessimistic interlocutors are Bayle, Malebranche, Voltaire, and Schopenhauer. She argues that Dienstag erroneously over-

¹⁷⁵ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 40.

¹⁷⁶ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*.

emphasizes the role of temporality, while underplaying the role of suffering. At the core of her argument, van der Lugt conceives of pessimism as a deeply affected philosophical approach that foregrounds concern about human (and more-than-human) suffering, and the problem of *physical* evil (both internal and external—which closely approximate the experience of suffering). In what follows, I will discuss how Nietzsche thought about suffering.

Despite being deeply opposed to the idea of evil, Nietzsche maintained what Bernard Williams' refers to as "a hyper-sensitivity to suffering."¹⁷⁷ Everything that is now considered "good" was once drenched in blood, suffering, and horror. This is why Nietzsche argues "All good things were formerly bad things."¹⁷⁸ As Williams notes, this is a central precept of Nietzsche's thinking. If we trace the origin of the valorized elements of modernity, we will find they are rooted in violence, the destruction of nature, and human suffering. However, Queloz and Cueni argue—drawing on Williams—that this was not necessarily Nietzsche's evaluation of things. Instead, they interpret him to mean "all things-now evaluated-as-good were once things-now-evaluated-as-bad."¹⁷⁹ Regardless of Nietzsche's ambivalence to the badness or goodness of phenomena in the contemporary world, he remains deeply affected by suffering. In an unpublished passage, Nietzsche demonstrates how suffering can play a profound and meaningful role in the development of one's personal resilience:

A full and powerful soul not only copes with painful, even terrible losses, deprivations, robberies, insults; it emerges from such hells with a greater fullness and powerfulness; and, most essential of all, with a new increase in the blissfulness of love.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Williams, "Nietzsche: The Gay Science," 143.

¹⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, Section 9 (113).

¹⁷⁹ Queloz and Cueni, "Nietzsche as a Critic of Genealogical Debunking," 281.

¹⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 1030, 532.

Suffering is such a core element of life, that one would be a fool not to be affected by and learn from suffering. As Nietzsche says in another unpublished work, “perhaps suffering is something of what is essential to all existence.”¹⁸¹ Suffering and pain are elemental to existence, so we may as well learn from their teachings.

The existence of evil, on the other hand, is much harder to justify through Nietzsche’s work. Van der Lugt conceives of evil as the existence of those who intentionally cause suffering. While van der Lugt’s assessment of suffering lends much grace to the topic, and her analysis can accommodate such evils as injustice, violence, genocide, vivisection, animal or human cruelty, ecosystemic destruction, etc.; Nietzsche was so deeply inimical to the question of evil and external sources of suffering, that he was averse to socialism, democracy, and any economic or political system that would create the possibility for equality. Evil, as the argument goes, is a subjective valuation based on a universal morality or ideals, which cannot possibly come from this world.

Yet, economic inequality, white supremacy, misogyny, and animal cruelty are borne of value systems endemic to this world. Nietzsche would counter that feminism, socialism, and other socially egalitarian approaches to politics—are founded on ideals (that while possible in this world) are not from this world. If we take Nietzsche at face value—blaming these social and political ills on systems of oppression and attempting to upend the oppressive systems that reinforce these ills—would only perpetuate the universal/metaphysical ideals on which they are based—and would reinforce a sense of *ressentiment*. While I appreciate much of Nietzsche’s thought, there are limitations to his thinking, especially for radical politics. However, Nietzsche has much to offer political theorizing by sustaining a radically open perspective to the future—come-what-may.

Conclusion

¹⁸¹ Nietzsche, Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885-Spring 1886), 39 [15], 1183.

Nietzsche's eternal return counsels us to accept the cycle of destruction and creation inherent to life: his hammer-wielding was meant to build *and* destroy. "And [this cycle] cannot be withstood by means of faith in progress. We must learn to hope in the absence of an expectation of progress. If this sounds almost nonsensical to the modern ear, perhaps it is because we have been told for so long that progress is the rational thing to hope for."¹⁸² Hope in the absence of progress requires letting go of the delusion that the future promises an improvement on the present, while maintaining a Nietzschean curiosity about what the future will bring. The narratives of progress and redemption keep us bound to a cycle of disappointment when the future does not provide a palliative for our present suffering. Both a Schopenhauerian resignation *and* a fixation on the redemptive power of the future can lead to disappointment, despair, and ultimately *ressentiment*. Dienstag argues we must begin to see "Temporality [as] not just a limitation but also a source of potential."¹⁸³ Neither human individuals nor human society are perfectible, but because the future is an open horizon. What arrives beyond the next ridgeline has the potential to be liberatory or condemning. Future unknowability and imperfectability are both terrifying and teeming with radical possibilities. As Deleuze would say, the future is a dice throw, but through remaining present and maintaining our radical convictions, we have the capacity to will for something different and liberatory with the passage into the future.

While there is a long tradition of dismissing pessimists, there is a similarly long-standing tradition of dismissing or misunderstanding the resources offered by Nietzsche. Nietzsche's style of bombastic rhetorical power when coupled with the thrust of his subversive analytics, make him

¹⁸² Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 192

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 193.

vulnerable to accusations that he is a nihilistic destroyer of values and a master of suspicion.¹⁸⁴ Misunderstandings abound when you are talking about a radical thinkers who offers incisive criticism and a pessimistic, but life-affirming ethos, and a challenge to traditional morality and metaphysical ideals. Throughout this chapter, I have discussed Nietzsche's critical approach to genealogies, as well as the resources his pessimism may (or may not) offer a critical orientation of pessimism. In the following chapter, I will discuss how Foucault built upon and moved beyond Nietzsche's genealogical method, and how Foucault expands our understanding of the twentieth-century critical pessimism.

¹⁸⁴ Ricouer, *Freud and Philosophy*.

CHAPTER THREE: PESSIMISM AND FOUCAULT

[At] the risk of passing for a pessimist, I will say that capitalism is a great deal more than [the negative moment in the Hegelian dialectic], that it is not just a negative moment.

—Michel Foucault¹⁸⁵

If you mean my description of what can be done in the present situation [to overcome power-relations], I would say yes, I am pessimistic. But you have to be pessimistic, to make the situation look darker, to make the task appear more urgent, and the possibilities for the future livelier and brighter.

—Michel Foucault¹⁸⁶

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

—Michel Foucault¹⁸⁷

The word pessimism—especially when it is associated with a person, idea, or theoretical tradition—evokes strong responses. Calling someone a pessimist (in a serious manner) could please their foes but insult their fans. Foucault’s critics might rejoice at my argument claiming him as a pessimist, while dedicated readers of Foucault might bristle at my assertion. If we are to take the man at his word, Foucault self-described as a pessimist on (at least) a few occasions, three of which I have captured above. First, in describing how capitalism was much more insidious and more difficult to overcome than the repression hypothesis would seemingly suggest. Then, an interviewer, Jacques Chancel, accused Foucault of being a pessimist—when Foucault had said things “were not

¹⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, “Schizo-Culture: Infantile Sexuality,” presented at a Conference organized by Semiotext(e) at Columbia University (1975), in Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1989), 156.

¹⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, “Talk Show,” a radio-interview conducted by Jacques Chancel, trans. Phillis Aronov and Dan McGrawth (1975), in Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 144.

¹⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” (April 1983), in Dreyfus, and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 231-232.

becoming better”—to which Foucault agreed. Finally, in response to accusations that his analysis could lead to apathy, Foucault argued instead that it leads to passionate but pessimistic activism.

While I am perhaps only proving Foucault’s critics correct, it is not to them I write. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Foucault does not just glibly admit to pessimism when cornered, but instead that Foucault’s critical genealogies and philosophical project resonates with numerous tenets of pessimism. Foucault follows in a lineage of pessimistic thinkers from Schopenhauer through Nietzsche to Foucault. This should be no surprise, given the profound effect Nietzsche had on Foucault’s thinking, and his focus on the genealogical method in the latter half of his career. In this chapter I will first discuss Foucault’s form of genealogy as problematization, which Amy Allen describes as having subversive *and* vindicatory moments.¹⁸⁸ Then I will endeavor to establish distance between pessimism and Eve Sedgwick’s account of paranoia, before attending to the distance between Foucault’s critical inquiry and paranoid reading. Finally, I will demonstrate how Foucault’s thinking overlaps and moves beyond the temporally-oriented and value-oriented existential pessimisms outlined by Joshua Dienstag and Mara van der Lugt.

Foucauldian Critical Genealogies

To diagnose the present is to say what the present is, and how our present is absolutely different from all that is not it, that is to say, from our past. Perhaps this is the task for philosophy now.

—Michel Foucault¹⁸⁹

A genealogy is an analytical framework or critical method that seeks to provide a “history of the present” by asking how concepts, identities, norms, institutions, and political phenomena came

¹⁸⁸ Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, “Foucault Responds to Sartre,” 53.

to be the way they are today.¹⁹⁰ Genealogies are a critical mode of inquiry that problematize the social, cultural, and political phenomena that have been uncritically accepted as “natural” or taken as common sense.¹⁹¹ Colin Koopman explains that the focus of a genealogy is on “submerged problems” or the problems lurking “below the surfaces of our lives—the problems whose itches feel impenetrable, whose remedies are ever just beyond our grasp, and whose very articulations require a severe work of thought.”¹⁹² The questions genealogists ask include: what does X mean, but also, how did X come to mean what it does today? Per Bernard Harcourt, “Genealogies reveal how a contemporary institution, practice, or understanding—along all its practical and epistemological dimensions—came into existence. The difference with conventional history is patent.”¹⁹³ Phrased differently, a genealogy asks how a present social, cultural, or political arrangement became not only possible, but permissible and accepted.

This dissertation posits the argument that critical inquiry, especially when focused on interrogating the *submerged problems* that haunt contemporary politics, is a form of pessimistic critique. Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault used genealogies to interrogate how the present was conditioned by the past. Each was motivated to challenge universal historical narratives—which are detached historical analyses that examine the past from an elevated vantage point, and are attuned only to big ideas, big events, and big victories.¹⁹⁴ In describing genealogies, Foucault stated that he

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995 [1977]), 31.

¹⁹¹ John S. Ransom, *Foucault's Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁹² Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 1.

¹⁹³ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 2.

¹⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard, Donald F. and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–164.

intended to avoid “writing a history of the past in terms of the present.”¹⁹⁵ This vindicatory approach to history, as Joseph Winters remarks, “threatens to murder the dead twice” by silencing the histories of the oppressed.¹⁹⁶ While Winters was referring to Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history, there are certainly parallels between an approach to history that seeks to upend supra-historical analyses, and one that undermines the narrative of the victor. For instance, each of these philosophers of history—regardless of their divergent methods and analytical forebears—challenge the dominant approach to recording history. Further, both Benjamin and Foucault were both taking after the Marxist provocation to study history. As Foucault stated in an interview in 1975,

It is impossible at the present time to write history without using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx’s thought and situating oneself within a horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx. One might even wonder what difference there could ultimately be between being a historian and being a Marxist.¹⁹⁷

Foucault engaged with genealogies out of concern for what was taken as a given in contemporary society and politics.

Beyond the genealogical methods Foucault was concerned with the relationship between modernity and the present. For instance, through his genealogy of the “carceral archipelago” in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggested that progress, freedom, and justice in the prison system are not a given and should not be taken as such. Throughout his massive oeuvre, Foucault demonstrates how the nexus between power and knowledge (power-knowledge) altered how populations, bodies, discipline, and the state operated in contemporary society. “History, [Foucault] shows, is not the product of grand narratives with teleological movements but of diverse struggles that nonetheless

¹⁹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

¹⁹⁶ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 14. See Chapter 2, Footnote 102 for more context.

¹⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” interviewed by J. J. Brochier (1976), in Foucault *Power/Knowledge*, 37-54, 53.

become organized into coherent...patterns of domination, subjectification, and government.”¹⁹⁸

There can be little doubt that to challenge dominant practices, narratives, and norms—in the sense of Foucault—is to be regarded as *critical*; but this practice of critical inquiry carries with it the potential accusations of suspicion, paranoia, and subversion. In the following section, I will discuss how Foucauldian genealogies move beyond suspicion and interpretation toward discernment and problematization. Then, I will discuss how Foucault’s critical genealogies are more consistent with pessimism than paranoia.

Problematization not Suspicion

In the pivotal essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault elaborated on the purpose of genealogical inquiry, while establishing distance from hermeneutics and traditional forms of historical analysis. Foucault demonstrated how the infinite regress entailed by the interpretive endeavor unearthed a trove of empty concepts, indeed the very idea of “humanity” lacked universal or essential meaning. Rather than exposing false consciousness or unmasking the hidden meaning in everyday phenomena, Foucault sought to blend the genealogical method with the archeological method he had deployed in previous projects. While there is some debate as to whether Foucault’s genealogical turn constitutes an intellectual break between early and later iterations of Foucault’s analytics, I am sympathetic to Koopman’s argument that Foucault remained committed to a Kantian form of problematization throughout his career.¹⁹⁹ As Koopman states “Foucault problematized in order to conceptualize and make intelligible that which contingently conditions our present.”²⁰⁰ In

¹⁹⁸ Leslie Paul Thiele, “Reading Nietzsche and Foucault: A Hermeneutics of Suspicion?” *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 2 (June 1991): 581–92, 585.

¹⁹⁹ Among others, Dreyfus and Rabinow support the claim that there is an intellectual break between early and late Foucault.

²⁰⁰ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 12.

this manner, Foucault used genealogical inquiry to tell the history of the present without relying on grand narratives and interpretations of interpretations.

Foucault's genealogical approach *could* be read as a suspicious endeavor, especially given the profound effect Nietzsche had on Foucault's theorizing, however Foucault took pains to move beyond both hermeneutics and interpretation, as well as exclusively subversive genealogies. To avoid the infinite regress of interpretation, Foucault argues:

if interpretation can never be completed, this is quite simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs.²⁰¹

Interpretation is a never-ending, self-referential endeavor, which means interpretation only ever reflects on previous interpretations, *ad infinitum*. Foucault did not think there were hidden meanings, or deep truths to uncover, through close interpretive reading of texts.²⁰² For this reason, Foucault proposed to move beyond the "madness" of "ideological unmasking" pervasive in the hermeneutics of suspicion.²⁰³ Furthermore, Foucault viewed interpretation as a means of projecting meaning on systems of rules, and then interpreting reality based on this foundationless project. As he said, "if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning...then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations."²⁰⁴ Not only does interpretation use an arbitrary and violent 'system of rules'; what it purports to uncover lacks any essential meaning. In "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag clarifies further:

²⁰¹ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," 275.

²⁰² Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*.

²⁰³ Ibid., 278: "a hermeneutic that wraps itself in itself, enters the domain of languages which do not cease to implicate themselves, that intermediate region of **madness** and pure language. It is there that we recognize Nietzsche."; Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 6.

²⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 151-152.

[Interpretation] is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings.” It is to turn the world into this world. (“This world”! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.²⁰⁵

Foucault made strides to move beyond hermeneutics to avoid creating a *shadow world of meanings*.

In *Genealogy as Critique*, Koopman discerns three forms of genealogy, which include subversive, vindictory, and problematizing. In Koopman’s assessment, the primary example of the subversive form of genealogy is Nietzsche, while Bernard Williams is exemplary of the vindictory form. Foucault, on the other hand, offers a more “neutral...problematizational genealogy.”²⁰⁶

Bernard Harcourt, on the other hand, asks if there is a point to developing a taxonomy of genealogies only to partition thinkers into particular genealogical categories and then argue about which mode of genealogy is superior.²⁰⁷ Harcourt’s purpose—which is altogether different from Koopman’s—is to claim genealogy as a critical philosophical tool for critical theory and praxis.

While I find Koopman’s characterization of three forms of genealogy to be helpful, I am persuaded by Harcourt’s argument that the different modes of genealogy—subversive, vindictory, problematization, and possibilization—serve different genealogical purposes. I share Harcourt’s assessment, against Koopman, that Foucault’s genealogies are radical and are meant to inspire political resistance, not reform.

Finally, I contend that Foucault does not strive for neutrality, but instead discernment. In Foucault’s critique of historical grand narratives, he states, “[The historian’s] mistake is to exhibit *a total lack of taste*...The historian is insensitive to the most disgusting things; or rather, he [sic]

²⁰⁵ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001 [1961]), pp 3-14, 6-7.

²⁰⁶ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 60.

²⁰⁷ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 3-8 *passim*.

especially enjoys those things that should be repugnant to him [sic].²⁰⁸ Foucault implies that so-called objectivity from an elevated position precludes taste, and that historians (in the traditional sense) will detail historical events in a neutral tone, regardless of whether they should be repulsed or vindicated by what happened. In this manner, Foucault proposes less *neutrality* and more discernment or—to take after Amy Allen—*ambivalence* when attempting a problematizing critique.²⁰⁹ Problematizing critiques for Allen entail both subversive and vindictory moments. Some events are disturbing and catastrophic, while others are worth celebrating, the point is to practice discernment—to evaluate whether an object of analysis merits vindication or subversion. Thus, Foucault was not after ideological unmasking, but rather to use discernment to interrogate the history of the present, and to illuminate that which had been taken as a given.

Foucault, Paranoia, and Pessimism

Problematization as critique resists the temptation of a suspicious analysis; however, given my focus on pessimism one might presume my work is motivated by paranoia. This is especially the case, considering how I draw on Nietzsche and Foucault, both of whom were accused of initiating an era of paranoia in Western critical theorizing. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick builds on Melanie Klein and Silvan Tomkins' analyses of paranoia, as well as Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" to demonstrate how queer and post-structuralist thinking has fallen prey to theoretical paranoia.²¹⁰ Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and Foucault are guilty of being the harbingers of the paranoid turn, but Sedgwick is most disappointed by Foucault's role in this theoretical detour. In Sedgwick's eyes, Foucault fell from grace the longer she considered his analysis of the repressive hypothesis in

²⁰⁸ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 157, emphasis added.

²⁰⁹ Allen, *The End of Progress*.

²¹⁰ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; For a discussion of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, see Chapter Two, pp. 3-6.

the *History of Sexuality Volume One*. Sedgwick detailed five characteristics that typified a paranoid reading. The first three include an anticipatory orientation toward the future, the tendencies toward reflexivity and mimesis, and how the paranoid place their “faith in exposure.”²¹¹ Beyond these characteristics, paranoia is a strong (rather than weak) theory, and it is affectively negative. While pessimism and paranoia are both negative theories, and there is a tendency toward reflexivity in critical theorizing, this is where the similarities end. Pessimism is a weak form of theory that embraces discontinuity, contingency, and relinquishes the desire for predictability and/or control of the future. Pessimism is aware of the dangers or risk that may arrive in the future, but not paranoid about these dangers.

In Introduction to my dissertation, I discussed the differences between paranoia and pessimism. Now, I intend to wrest Foucault from the tentacular hold of Sedgwick’s paranoia. In what follows I will argue that while Sedgwick’s analysis of paranoia was brilliant, there is dissonance between Foucault’s theorizing and paranoia. As I will endeavor to show, Foucault’s critique of the repression hypothesis more closely resembles pessimism as critical inquiry, rather than paranoia. Foucault challenged the repression hypothesis because it conceived of power in negative terms, rather than grasping the positive and productive aspects of power—and because people genuinely believed they were sexually repressed, the incitement to speak about sex offered a false promise of liberation. To be repressed is to suffer, but to be offered a misleading path out of the suffering, only makes the suffering worse. As Dienstag demonstrated pessimists share the perspective that happiness is antithetical to freedom; and as van der Lugt argued, the pessimists embody deep concern for the suffering of others. Foucault’s critique of the repression hypothesis is reflective of pessimism on two registers: for one, the repression hypothesis misdiagnosed the problem and thus,

²¹¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

the possibility for liberation from repression was misleading; furthermore, by mischaracterizing the possibility for freedom through incitement to speak, this approach could lead to more suffering. To defend these claims, I will situate Sedgwick's critiques of Foucault's paranoia, before discussing how pessimism might be a more productive explanation for Foucault's negativity. To make this argument, I will discuss Foucault's treatment of the repression hypothesis and Sedgwick's assessment of Foucauldian paranoia, then I will discuss several of the prevailing counterarguments, before establishing distance between Foucault and paranoia.

When writing *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick still self-described as a "goodish Foucauldian subject" who fell under the spell of Foucault's "triumphally charismatic rhetorical force."²¹² Per Sedgwick, *Volume One* proffered "the almost delirious promise" that once Foucault had identified the repression hypothesis, he would also be able to move beyond it. Instead of succeeding in his objective, Sedgwick claimed that Foucault's critique of the repression hypothesis fell prey to the repression/liberation binary he intended to upend.²¹³ As Sedgwick underscores, "Even beyond the repressive hypothesis, *some version of prohibition* is still the most important thing to understand" about Foucault's analysis.²¹⁴ Any attempt to move beyond the repression hypothesis carries with it the remainder of prohibition, and is subject to a "a moralistic tautology that became increasingly incapable of recognizing itself as such."²¹⁵ Rather than providing an exit from the repression hypothesis, Foucault offered a reification of the status quo (as it related to the repression/liberation

²¹² Ibid., 13; 11.

²¹³ Ibid., pp 9-13.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 11; also quoted in Lynne Huffer, "Foucault and Sedgwick: The Repressive Hypothesis Revisited," *Foucault Studies*, September 14, 2012, 20-40, 28.

²¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 12

binary).²¹⁶ This, Sedgwick claimed, was evidence for how Foucault was engaged in a paranoid project of demystification.

While Sedgwick's argument is nuanced, and certainly based on a deep and thorough reading of *Volume One*, I respectfully disagree. One reason Foucault critiqued the Freudian repressive hypothesis (i.e., that sexuality was repressed and by overcoming sexual repression, individuals could be liberated), was because this perspective conceived of power only in negative or prohibitive terms, rather than viewing power as productive or capable of inducing behavior.²¹⁷ As Foucault stated:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.²¹⁸

Beyond Foucault's analysis of productive power, he demonstrated how power and freedom were in perpetual tension with one another. The exercise of power requires free subjects (as in subjects that were not imprisoned or enslaved), however Foucault maintained that no subjects are fully autonomous, or beyond the grasp of power relations.

Freedom and power are in an agonistic relationship where freedom maintains a "refusal to submit," but power disrupts the possibility of freedom.²¹⁹ This is because, "freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised."²²⁰ This agonistic interplay between power and freedom is not settled

²¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

²¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]).

²¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," an interview by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 109-133, 119.

²¹⁹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," trans. Leslie Sawyer, in Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 221.

²²⁰ Ibid., 221.

purely in the exercise of power, it instead demonstrates how power always implies a kernel of resistance. Beyond the persistent and intimate relationship between freedom and productive power, Foucault was concerned that the repression hypothesis implied the possibility for liberation, when liberation would always carry with it the baggage of whatever one sought to escape in their freedom. Furthermore, as Huffer states, for Foucault “freedom cannot be a transcendental ideal [projected into the future]: it can only be a difficult, uncertain, desubjectivating practice in the present.”²²¹ Freedom does not imply a fully autonomous subject for Foucault, but rather a subject imprinted by the social, cultural, and historical conditions in which they live. As Johanna Oksala writes, “the subject is always constituted in the power/knowledge networks of a culture, which provide its conditions of possibility.”²²² While a subject can resist conforming to dominant expectations about how their subjectivity *ought* to exist in this world, subjects can never be wholly liberated or autonomous from the relations of power and knowledge.

Foucault and the Repressive Hypothesis

Foucault’s discussion of the repression hypothesis is one path toward examining this more heterogenous form of power, but perhaps I should discuss the repressive hypothesis from Foucault’s perspective. The objective in *Volume One* is to address the following conundrum: “Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated?”²²³ In the middle of the twentieth century, the prevailing logic among the left was that it

²²¹ Huffer, “Foucault and Sedgwick,” 28.

²²² Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

²²³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, 8-9.

was subversive to speak about sex/sexuality, because sexuality was repressed. Subverting the repressive orthodoxy, was to inch closer to liberation. Relinquish repression and be liberated.

Foucault was skeptical of this equation not only because it emphasized prohibitive forms of power, but also because it overlooked the proliferation of discourses (however stifled or restrained) about sex and sexuality. Instead, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—speaking about sex was pervasive, and—in certain respects— socially acceptable, just not in the free-loving manner popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. People were compelled to speak about sex first in the confession booth, and then on the psychoanalyst’s couch. There was not less sexual discourse, but rather different discourses on sex/sexuality, and these alter-discourses eventually produced different abnormal identities in need of special treatment (e.g. the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the perverse adult, and the Malthusian couple).²²⁴ This resulted in the normalization of particular identities on the one hand, and with the emergence of abnormal identities on the other. To avoid ostracization, people were compelled to comply with normative expectations. Rather than considering sexuality on a spectrum from repressed to liberated, Foucault suggested a new way of understanding power, identities, and the incitement to speak. Liberation was not possible in Foucault’s mind, because power was not simply prohibitive. Instead, power permeated all relations and forms of knowledge, such that it would be vain to believe one could relinquish power’s hold. Rather than liberation from repressive or disciplinary power, one could resist or act beyond normative expectations and/or engage in the deep ethical practice of caring for the self (a tenuous “out” suggested by Foucault in later works).²²⁵

²²⁴ Ibid., 27; 104-107, *passim*.

²²⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume Three of The History of Sexuality*, trans, Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1986); Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Lynne Huffer notes that Sedgwick missed two key elements of *Volume One*. First, Sedgwick failed to register Foucault's ironic tone in his critique of Freud and the repression hypothesis, as well as how he moved from discussing disciplinary power to biopower in the latter half of *Volume One*.²²⁶ Huffer argues that Sedgwick couches the repressive hypothesis in a binary "no-yes logic" but fails to identify Foucault's shift to discussing the "yes-saying power of biopolitics" in the latter portion of *Volume One*.²²⁷ Rather than operating on the no-yes register of prohibition, censorship, taboo, and repression to regulate sex and sexuality—biopower entails affirmative-logic, and is a relational, heterogenous, and unstable form of power that operates on the level of norms and identities.²²⁸ Furthermore, because Foucault adopts an ironic tone that emulates the dualistic no-yes logic Sedgwick critiqued, it is understandable how "Foucault's ironic rhetorical force has left all of us both bedazzled and confused, both poised for liberation and disappointed by the volume's broken promises."²²⁹ This confusion arises, Huffer notes, because Foucault seemingly issues "ethical guidance" that would gesture toward the possibility of liberation at the end of *Volume One*: "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures."²³⁰ The twinned sense of beguilement and befuddlement—coupled with a putative repetition of the dualistic no-yes logic of the repressive hypothesis—are what compelled Sedgwick to identify paranoia in Foucault's analysis.

Foucault and Weak versus Strong Theory

²²⁶ Huffer, "Foucault and Sedgwick."

²²⁷ Huffer, "Foucault and Sedgwick," 27.

²²⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, pp. 93-95, passim.

²²⁹ Huffer, "Foucault and Sedgwick," 27.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, 157; Huffer also quotes this passage on p. 27.

As mentioned above, Sedgwick offers several attributes of paranoia that are relevant to repeat here. Namely, paranoia is an affectively negative strong theory that has a faith in exposure, an anticipatory-orientation, and is reflexive and mimetic. Maggie Nelson describes a weak theory as one that “emphasizes heterogeneity” and “is undisturbed by inconclusiveness and mess.”²³¹ Concurrently, Foucault describes biopower as heterogenous and unstable. It permeates most aspects of life but is productive, and while biopower implies resistance, it is difficult to upend. Further—as Koopman went to great pains to demonstrate—Foucault did not endeavor to develop a *theory* of power, but rather “an *analytics* of power.”²³² Power, freedom, and knowledge are the core problems around which modern political life hinges; they are woven together in a contingent and complex web of relations. Rather than developing a strong theory of power or an explicit project of liberation, Foucault offered myriad vectors of resistance and a contingent assessment of how power permeated all aspects of modern life. As such, the apparent ethical guidance Foucault gestures toward at the end of *Volume One*, does not insinuate the possibility for liberation or moving beyond the repression hypothesis, but rather a tentative gesture toward what could be possible if we think about power differently.²³³ If, as Sedgwick suggests, paranoia is an affectively strong theory, then it seems unjustified to suggest that Foucault’s analysis of the repressive hypothesis or his analytic of power are exemplary of anything but a weak theory.

Foucault and Faith in Exposure

²³¹ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2021), 29.

²³² Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 10.

²³³ See quote above, “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality...” Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume One*, 157.

Criticism needs to stop being thought of as purely a means and instead should take its place in the world as an end, as a purpose all its own.

—John Ransom²³⁴

The Foucauldian project, especially during the latter half of his career, was to provide a history of the present through genealogical problematizations, which sought to explore the relationship between knowledge, power, and freedom.²³⁵ The genealogical method, as mentioned above, is concerned with what Koopman refers to as “submerged problems.”²³⁶ Genealogies entail a lengthy amount of archival investigative work to chase the present through the historical record. This process requires both *uncovering* archival/historical materials, selecting what is relevant for analysis, and discernment for how one critiques the concepts, ideas, or events they trace through time. In this manner, one could argue that Foucault is deeply committed to a project committed to exposure, in the paranoid sense of the word.

However, I remain unconvinced that it is problematic to expose and critique—especially when we live in a world so rife with injustice and violence (both overt and covert). Here, the work of the negative can be an ally to the oppressed, downtrodden, misrepresented, and forgotten. Foucault questioned how the carceral, medical, and psychoanalytical apparatuses produced static identities that limited what people could become—whether they had been identified as a problem or were compelled to conform to avoid ostracization. He shed light on how the disciplining effects of the modern exercise of power prevented people from flourishing. To be sure, paranoia and the desire to expose unknown mechanisms of control can have disastrous effects, especially when one is deluded into believing false conspiracy theories. Here I am reminded of the adage, “just because you

²³⁴ Ransom, *Foucault's Discipline*, 3.

²³⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

²³⁶ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 1.

are not paranoid, does not mean they are not out to get you.” While Foucault emphasizes how truth and knowledge cannot set you free—because knowledge is never autonomous from power—it is empowering to bear witness to harmful, unjust, and oppressive social, political, and cultural practices and beliefs. In this sense, exposure is elemental the enterprise of critical theorizing.

Perhaps where Foucault deviated from Sedgwick’s analysis of paranoia is in the paranoid’s *faith* and conviction in exposure. Here, I would like to repeat the epigraph mentioned above and echo Foucault’s sentiment shared during an interview in the final portion of his life. “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous... If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.”²³⁷ Foucault did not have faith that exposure, unmasking, or demystification would result in a better world—but he was committed to illuminating the dangers inherent within dominant conceptions of power and knowledge.

Furthermore, Foucault was active in the leftist French activist community, and wrote *Discipline and Punish* while working alongside the Prison Information Group (GIP) as a call to action.²³⁸ As Harcourt notes, “[*Discipline and Punish*] was intended to spur action... It was the written accompaniment, the textual complement to the organizing and activism of the Groupe d’information sur les prisons (GIP).”²³⁹ Exposure of the problematic but contingent origins of the prison system inspired decades of activism and resistance within and beyond the walls of the prison. This was not a guarantee—and Foucault did not have a specific outcome in mind, when he

²³⁷ Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics.”

²³⁸ Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2018).

²³⁹ Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 3.

highlighted the dangers inherent to disciplinary and bio-power—but the effects of this demystification have been profound. Accusations of paranoia, be damned.

Knowledge does not set you free, Foucault warned, instead power relations are embedded within knowledge; and what constitutes freedom for one is another's repression. Foucault did not mean to suggest that the pursuit of understanding is meaningless, but rather drew attention to the "great eschatological myth" of the 19th and 20th centuries, that perpetuated the idea that knowledge and truth have liberatory potential.²⁴⁰ In this manner, Foucault examined the ways in which our bodies are sites of knowledge and power, to illuminate dangers in what has been taken as a given. Foucault's "histories of the present" gesture toward a deeper understanding of the contemporary political, social, and cultural milieu, to better grasp what to resist, question, and (if possible) transform. Foucault is always careful to avoid issuing specific dictates or prescriptions for the future, because "you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people."²⁴¹ As such, there is little "faith" in exposure, but rather a commitment to problematization, discernment—and in Foucault's words, perhaps—an "ethico-political" *commitment* to exposing the "main dangers" inherent to this moment.²⁴²

Foucault and Anticipatory Temporalities

There are a handful of terms that characterize Foucault's work. Among them are indefinite, indeterminate, contingent, and anti-essentialist. For Foucault there are neither explicit origins nor destinations. History is indeterminate, time is indefinite, nothing is fixed, and there are no essential truths. All we have are curiosity, the ability to ask excellent questions, and discernment with regard

²⁴⁰ Foucault, "Foucault Responds to Sartre," 52.

²⁴¹ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 231.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 232.

to how we read the present through the past. As Dreyfus and Rabinow explain, “According to Foucault, the task of the genealogist is to destroy the primacy of origins, of unchanging truths. He seeks to destroy the doctrines of development and progress.”²⁴³ Progress is problematic because it implies future redemption or a future better than the past and present. Progress is bound up in the same logic as the “great eschatological myth” of the Enlightenment—that truth will set you free.²⁴⁴ For Foucault, the present is not *necessarily* better than the past, so why would one presume the future to be better than the present? As such, knowledge of what will happen in the future does not seem to be the point of Foucault’s analysis. Curiosity, rather than certainty, is at the heart of the Foucauldian project. Of the remaining characteristics defining Sedgwick’s paranoia, the future-oriented temporal gaze is a vital element of paranoia to consider, and it is among those characteristics that are least applicable to Foucault.

The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because *there must be no bad surprises*, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known.²⁴⁵

Sedgwick describes the paranoid reader as one who fervently moves between past and future to avoid the possibility of a “bad surprise.” A paranoid reader is certain that every clue is a piece of evidence that, when knit together, points to singular outcome. They are assured in the relationship among their objects of analysis. Their unidirectional vigilance imposes an order to the chaos of social, cultural, or political life—prophecy is the goal of the paranoid’s narrative enterprise. As Sedgwick states, “the aversion to surprise seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia

²⁴³ Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 108-109.

²⁴⁴ Foucault, “Foucault Responds to Sartre,” 52.

²⁴⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

and knowledge per se, including both epistemophilia and skepticism.”²⁴⁶ While skepticism may certainly be a part of the Foucauldian approach, an aversion to surprise is not foundational to the genealogical endeavor.

Furthermore, as Foucault argues in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” “no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice.”²⁴⁷ There is no agent responsible for guiding history, nor is there a single individual responsible for events. Events are not necessarily singular occurrences, but a sequence of happenings that may or may not be read as a climax by historians. Genealogies resist the compulsion toward linear depictions of historical events and grand narratives. When transformative ideas or ruptures emerge, they are historically and politically conditioned by the forces in which they emerge. Emergence disrupts the unidirectional temporal fixation of the paranoid, by showing how events and historical movements occur, but that nothing was guaranteed to happen. In this manner, Foucault offered a critique of historicist narratives of history, be they teleological Marxism or Enlightenment expectations about progress. As Shoshana Felman notes “Historicism is thus based on a perception of history as victory...[and] a confusion between truth and power.”²⁴⁸ If there was anything fervent about Foucault’s analysis, it was his fervent dedication to chasing the historical present through the archives, while avoiding unidirectional explanations of historical emergence.

Temporality, Depression, and Repair

Through a brilliant deployment of Melanie Klein’s understanding of depression, Sedgwick offers the depressive position as a path from paranoia to repair. Ellis Hanson says it best: “Having

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 150.

²⁴⁸ Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 32.

only just recovered from Judith Butler's gender melancholia, we are launched into the tenuous positionality of Sedgwick's queer depressive."²⁴⁹ Per Klein, there is "a positional shift" from the hedonic position (or pleasure seeking) to the reparative depressed position, which escapes the paranoid/schizoid avoidance of/aversion to pain. Paranoid and depressive positions are in perpetual tension with one another. The paranoid person exists in a state of hyper-vigilance and is "marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety."²⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the depressive person forestalls anxiety through something that resembles repair. When one is able to move from paranoid horror to "anxiety-mitigating" depression, repair can substitute suspicion in reading and analysis.²⁵¹ Following Ellis Hanson, "a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake."²⁵² While paranoid readers might be invested in demystification, the reparative readers have space to envision and reconstruct alternative worlds. The key difference—this logic claims—is between destruction and creation.

The paranoid position focuses on the future—while depression is often experienced as a fixation on the past, or rumination on what could have been (had the past been different). Temporally, given how Foucault sustained attention on the past and the indeterminate present—drawing our gaze to the dangers that inhere in the contemporary—his mode of reading is more attuned to the depressive position than the paranoid position. Furthermore, Sedgwick details how the depressive position "inaugurates ethical possibility" where the depressed person can be deeply

²⁴⁹ Ellis Hanson, "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 101–119, 106.

²⁵⁰ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Hanson, "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick," 105.

affected and humbled by the suffering of others.²⁵³ To actualize this ethical possibility there is a double movement where first the depressive person empathizes with another's suffering. Then, if they want to move toward repair, they must practice what Foucault referred to as care of the self—or providing the self with “pleasure and nourishment” in a world that is otherwise ambivalent, hostile, or unnourishing.²⁵⁴

One might argue that care of the self could be perceived as future-oriented, because to truly work on oneself—through learning, meditating, mastering skills, thinking deeply, etc.—is to project a better version of oneself into the future.²⁵⁵ However, each of these “technologies of the self” refers to the daily practice of self-knowledge and education that can evolve into a thoughtful and ethical form of life in each day of one's existence. Care of the self has the future in mind but is a present-oriented endeavor. Besides, each of these practices—and each of our lives—bear the mark of finitude and decay. Caring for the self is a practice with no end and no specific goal, as there is always work to be done to be a gentler, more ethical being, or toward honing skills with the aim of self-mastery.

Up to this point, I may have been guilty of offering a paranoid reading of Sedgwick's analysis of Foucault's paranoia. A careful reader might even accuse me of emulating Sedgwick's paranoia about paranoia itself. My objective is not to indict Sedgwick's brilliant incitement to entertain reparative reading, rather my hope is to establish space between Sedgwick's paranoia, pessimism, and Foucault. Beyond this humble wish, I also want to call into question the tendency to use reparative reading as a form of post-critique, in the absence of paranoia, negativity, or critical

²⁵³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ These are just a few of the tactics Foucault refers to in *History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*.

theorizing. “Might paranoia”—to echo Naga Rotem’s provocation— “bear some promise...for democratic theory and politics?”²⁵⁶ If we accept Sedgwick’s argument that negative, suspicious theorizing is paranoid, then paranoia might be productive for critically assessing injustice, power, violence, and the vulnerability of power to resistance. However, it is not my project to rescue paranoia. For this, we will have to wait patiently for Rotem’s book. My point is to suggest that negativity, critical inquiry, and pessimism are politically productive activities that draw attention to injustice, false promises, and the dangers that inhere to modernity.

Finally, for Klein, paranoia and depression, like love and hate, are in “constant interaction” with one another.²⁵⁷ To dismiss paranoia—in favor of exclusively reparative work—would be to dream of prefigurative political visions without awareness of the dangers inherent to the contemporary political world. If we take seriously Klein’s diagnosis, hate will continue to inhere in reparative projects. Further, while I am skeptical of the need for a strong affectively negative theory—such as paranoia, I am also deeply concerned about what politics would look like in a post-critical world. Without illumination, injustice and social/political danger can fester in the darkness. There is a role for reparative projects that emphasize the creative power of post-critique, but pessimistic critique, lament, and negativity are essential interlocutors for drawing attention to what necessitates resistance. When so many of the political problems in this world are intractable, structural, and systemic—let alone unjust, violent, and self-reinforcing—the negativity of the world risks becoming colossal without negative critique, and pessimism as critical inquiry, to constrain its lifeforce and point to nodes of resistance. This negativity, Klein offers, can be a profound act of

²⁵⁶ Noga Rotem, “The World in a Geranium Pot: Female Paranoia and Love of Detail in Schor, Beauvoir and Arendt,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 49, no. 2 (February 2023): 203–217, 203.

²⁵⁷ Melanie Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation (1937),” in *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945*, The Writings of Melanie Klein, Volume 1 (New York, NY: Free Press, 2002), 306–43: 306.

love for a damaged world where (despite this love) injustice persists. Perhaps pessimism—a weak “affectively” negative theory—could attend to the need for critical theorizing while avoiding the dangers of paranoia.

As I have endeavored to demonstrate, Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis does not embody what Sedgwick referred to as paranoid reading, but gestures more toward an example of pessimism as critical inquiry. This is especially the case given Foucault’s lack of faith about exposure, embodiment of weak theory, emphasis on discontinuity rather than a unidirectional/anticipatory temporality. Finally, given Foucault’s lack of certainty, and concern for the past, his theorizing more closely embodies the depressive position than the paranoid position, but as I will argue, this more closely resembles pessimism than the depressive position. In the remainder of this chapter, I will make the case for Foucault’s pessimism while continuing to argue for the salience of pessimistic theorizing.

Pessimism and Foucault

Foucault is a page I’m still trying to translate.

—Lynne Huffer²⁵⁸

Pessimism—at least in its critical orientation—is an approach to philosophical and political inquiry that is unashamed of tending to the dark side of life and politics. Foucault, as I will argue, is an embodiment of this form of pessimism, least of which, because he identified as a pessimist himself. Beyond his tendency to problematize and destabilize the foundations of Western philosophy, history, and subjectivity, Foucault was deeply inspired by the Nietzschean imperative to de-historicize history. Throughout this section, I will explore Foucault’s ideas alongside the temporal-orientation and value-orientation of pessimism offered by Dienstag and Van der Lugt,

²⁵⁸ Lynne Huffer, *Foucault’s Strange Eros* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), xii.

respectively. This will take us along a path from Foucault's multifaceted understanding of time—be it disciplinary or evolutive—and his concern about teleological reads of history, to his analysis of power, freedom, and resistance. Then, I will conclude by discussing Foucault's attitude toward suffering.

Time and Progress

While pessimists *may* posit a decline, it is the denial of progress, not an insistence on some eventual doom, that marks out modern pessimism. Pessimism, to put it precisely, is the negation, and not the opposite, of theories of progress.

—Joshua Dienstag²⁵⁹

As discussed throughout this chapter, Foucault was wary of linear, unidirectional conceptions of time; as well, he was critical of the narrative of progress. Throughout this section I will explore how Foucault's critique of linear time emerges from his ambivalence toward the Enlightenment. In modernity disciplinary techniques emerged alongside a disciplinary conception of time, where linear time was used as punishment or a measurement of the value of someone's work. Embedded within the Enlightenment was a police or military dream of society that demonstrated how progress, rather than being a teleological movement of history toward liberation, was synonymous with control. Furthermore, Foucault argued that teleological depictions of history—such as the vindictory dialectics of Hegel or Marx—offered a view from nowhere. Rather than Enlightenment reason inaugurating a tension between ignorance and knowledge, Foucault suggested the dominant tension of the Enlightenment was between power and knowledge. Foucault's understanding of time and history was not so much that history embodied regression, but rather that the emergence of events, ideas, and transformation was discontinuous and contingent.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault demonstrates how disciplinary technologies—such as surveillance and examination—developed alongside linear time. With the internalization and utility

²⁵⁹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 18.

of linear time, there was an expectation that students, soldiers, and prisoners should mark their movement by the second, with the goals of speed and perfection. In the eighteenth century—the century that brought us the Enlightenment—linear time so thoroughly penetrated the human body that it erased the intellectual capacity for non-conformity. In prisons and among workers, time is the qualitative measure that dictates punishment or compensation. Citing Foucault from *The Punitive Society*, Stuart Elden states:

In prison— “an abstract, monotonous, rigid, punitive system” —the only graduated variable is time. There is an economic parallel here: “Everyone is given a salary for labor time, and inversely, time at liberty is taken as the price for violation [*infractio*]. *Time is the only property possessed*, it is purchased for work or it is taken for infraction.”²⁶⁰

For this reason, Elden argues that Foucault touched on what could be referred to “as the time-theory of labor and punishment.”²⁶¹ Not only did modernity catalyze the internalization of linear time as a “burden,” to use Dienstag’s phrasing, but time became the property of workers to exchange on the market. Time was not only a way to mark the hours of one’s life, but a way to measure their worth on the labor market, or something to deny as punishment.

Simultaneously the police began to signify an extension of the logic of the state or “governmental rationality,” when they had previously been tasked with the “tranquility of the city.”²⁶² In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the idea of a perfect society, in the eighteenth century, was a “military dream of society.”²⁶³ I would take this one step further and argue there were overlapping dreams of labor-time and policing that guided the development of the modern state. As

²⁶⁰ Stuart Elden, *Foucault: The Birth of Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 86, quoting Foucault, *The Punitive Society: lectures at the Collège de France 1972-1973*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2015), 71-72, 70; 72, 71.

²⁶¹ Elden, *Foucault*, 87.

²⁶² Michel Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, Power,” an interview with Paul Rabinow (1982), trans. Christian Hubert, in Michel Foucault, *Power: Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubian, trans. Robert Hurley, *The Essential Works of Foucault* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2001), 351.

²⁶³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 169.

Foucault says in a late interview with Paul Rabinow, “this idea [or dream] of... police... would manage to penetrate, to stimulate, to regulate, and to render almost automatic all the mechanisms of society.”²⁶⁴ In this dream, individuals moved like “meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine” striving for efficiency, rigor, a lack of distraction, and perfection.²⁶⁵ This dream (and actualization) of a society so thoroughly imprinted by disciplinary time, implied that every aspect of society would move according to clockwork, without deviation from the norm, unless you wanted the police to take your time away from you.

Not only did Westerners internalize linear disciplinary time, but linear time also began to dictate our understanding of history and the evolution of human development. As foreshadowed earlier, the emergence and internalization of linear time paralleled the emergence of the idea of progress, or an evolutive understanding of the movement of history.

The disciplinary methods reveal a linear time whose moments are integrated one upon another, and which is oriented towards a terminal, stable point; in short, an ‘evolutive’ time. But it must be recalled that, at the same moment, the administrative and economic techniques of control reveal a social time of a serial, orientated cumulative type: the discovery of an evolution in terms of ‘progress.’²⁶⁶

Progress represented an evolution in human efficiency and individual mastery, which was motivated by disciplinary technologies. “[T]he striving of the whole community towards salvation became the collective, permanent competition of individuals being classified in relation to one another.”²⁶⁷ From the beginning, progress carried an insidious expectation of future redemption or payoff for present-day immiseration, as well as the internalization of disciplinary forms of power.

²⁶⁴ Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, Power,” 351.

²⁶⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 169.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

Beyond the dark origins of time, Foucault regularly expressed skepticism about viewing the present as the teleological endpoint of history. As Amy Allen points out in *The End of Progress*, Foucault thought “that traditional conceptions of historical progress presuppose[d] a supra-historical, atemporal point of view that we now know to be a metaphysical illusion.”²⁶⁸ In other words, the narrative of historical progress implies a view from nowhere. Amy Allen argues that Foucault’s understanding of history and the reason of progress is a response to and rejection of the Hegelian “notion of History as the story of reason’s dialectical self-realization as it progresses toward Absolute knowing.”²⁶⁹ It is for this reason that Allen claims that Foucault’s attitude toward progress is one of “ambivalence.”²⁷⁰ In an interview in 1976, Foucault defends himself against the accusation that human societies have never progressed, but instead argues that combing the archives for historical evidence that today is the pinnacle of human achievement is a bad historical method.

I don’t say that humanity doesn’t progress. I say that it is a bad method to pose the problem as: “How is it that we have progressed?” The problem is: how do things happen? And what happens now is not necessarily better or more advanced, or better understood, than what happened in the past.²⁷¹

Rather than assuming humanity has reached the pinnacle of achievement and is standing on the summit looking for evidence to vindicate this accomplishment, Foucault (Allen argues) used the genealogical method to “transform [the idea of History] from within.”²⁷² The point is not to replace one universal and teleological understanding of history with another grand—but subversive—historical narrative. Instead, Foucault wanted to move beyond the narrative of progress or History to

²⁶⁸ Allen, *The End of Progress*, 164.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* As I understand Allen, ambivalence refers to the attitude of “problematization” where there are both subversive and vindictory elements of a critical historical inquiry.

²⁷¹ Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” interviewed by J. J. Brochier (1976), in Foucault *Power/Knowledge*, 37-54, 50.

²⁷² Allen, *The End of Progress*, 179.

“[make] room for contingent, discontinuous, and fragmented events, all of which resist being reconciled and recuperated within a dialectical conception of history as a process of rationalization.”²⁷³ When history is viewed through the lens of constant accumulation, it makes it easy to overlook the violence and horrors of the present. Progress, as well as the Hegelian dialectical read of history, would rationalize away any catastrophes as being inconsequential, when considered through the lens of the vindictory accomplishments of the present moment.

Rather than viewing the eighteenth century as the moment when Enlightenment reason illuminated the darkness, Foucault asks us to reconceptualize this era not as the interaction between “knowledge and ignorance” but as the emergence of the tension between power and knowledge.²⁷⁴ During this era, the state intervened to eliminate certain (expensive or irreducible) knowledges, normalize the knowledge it preferred, develop a hierarchy based on the most productive knowledge, and then centralized knowledge so it can be easily controlled.²⁷⁵ In this manner, Enlightenment progress did not usher in a new era of knowledge, but instead a new era of power-knowledge, where knowledge was thoroughly bound up in power relations.²⁷⁶ Individuals internalized disciplinary time and an expectation of progress, around the same time as the “rapid development of the disciplines—universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops,” which served to organize, examine, and discipline individuals.²⁷⁷ “A belief in the progress of reason was the eighteenth

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and François Ewald, trans. David Macey, 1st ed (New York: Picador, 2003), 180.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ One particularly fascinating example of this, was the *Encyclopedie*, in which the encyclopedia was not a “reflection of philosophical materialism” or for purpose of cataloguing all knowledge, but was instead a way to centralize and control the availability of particular information. The *Encyclopedie* could allow for the homogenization and normalization of technological knowledge, just as “metallurgical techniques” or “handicraft methods,” while submerging or eliminating forms of knowledge that did not serve the state. See: Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 180-181.

²⁷⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 140.

century's only awareness of this far-reaching change in the disciplinarization of knowledges."²⁷⁸

Progress, Foucault seems to suggest, is a euphemism for control.

The purpose of Foucault's critique of the Hegelian idea of History or the reason of progress was not to offer a grand narrative of regression in its place. The point was, instead, to depict the emergence of ideas, rationalities, and events as discontinuous and contingent. Foucault's analyses of history, discipline, and the Enlightenment do not paint a rosy picture of linear time and the narrative of progress. However, Foucault's theorizing suggests that politics, government, and society are more open and subject to resistance or change (though perhaps in a less targeted or vindictory manner than Marx through Hegel) in that each of these apparatuses are the contingent creations of humans. Foucault's analysis of disciplinary time is one that resonates with Dienstag's understanding of the burden of time. Linear time, in both instances, is an explicitly modern form of drudgery. Dienstag's analysis of emphasizes the existential awareness of human finitude, where all of life is a movement toward death and decay. Whereas Foucault focuses on how time becomes a way to measure, discipline, punish, and/or compensate one for their labor. In both instances, the burden of linear time is an undeniable facet of modern existence. Further, given Foucault's wariness with the narrative of progress—without suggesting a philosophy of historical regression in its absence—his philosophical project shares several nodes of connection with Dienstag's understanding of the temporal fixation of pessimists. At this point, I will discuss Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge, resistance, and freedom; before considering Foucault's concern for human suffering.

Power

Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should

²⁷⁸ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 182.

admit rather that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

—Michel Foucault²⁷⁹

While power and knowledge have been a persistent theme throughout this chapter, as they were pervasive throughout Foucault's philosophical project, it is vital to discuss Foucault's analytic of power-knowledge. It is my contention that Foucault's analysis of power—whether productive or disciplinary—represents a constraint on human freedom indicative of a pessimistic orientation. Power permeates temporal, spatial, social, political, disciplinary, discursive, and pedagogical relations. Even though power presupposes freedom, there is no *real* escape from power relations. This parallels the perspective of pessimists, where there is—as Jean Paul Sartre phrased it in the title to a play—*No Exit* from the absurdity inherent to existence. While I invoke Sartre, I am sympathetic to Marxist critiques of existentialism, in that I find power and alienation to be more productive explanations for the drudgery of existence. For this reason, I wager that the Foucauldian analytics of power and knowledge may be a productive intervention in the taxonomy of pessimism, which is one of many reasons I propose a critical-orientation in addition to the value- and temporal-orientations offered by Dienstag and Van der Lugt, which are both more sympathetic to existentialism. As I will discuss below, in contrast to repressive forms of power that were primarily prohibitive or negative, Foucault illuminated how power could be productive and could compel docility by preying on an individual's aversion to being recognized as abnormal, deviant, criminal, or crazy. With the Enlightenment, the sciences inaugurated population level analyses of individual people, such that knowledge of people became a tool for control. By defining what was normative, power-knowledge could pressure individuals to conform, rather than acting in a coercive or violent manner. As such,

²⁷⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.

knowledge became a site for control. Given the diffuse, productive, and wide-reaching grasp of power, Foucault emphasized how power stifles the possibility of freedom, while still presupposing the possibility for freedom. In what follows, I will explore Foucault's analytic of power to demonstrate how Foucault's theorizing parallels and intersects with pessimism.

As previously mentioned, Foucault identified two forms of power—disciplinary and biopolitical—that thoroughly permeated the development and dissemination of knowledge. Disciplinary power was a punitive and censorious form of power that sought to punish, but Foucault demonstrated how this negative analysis of power did not quite capture the productive capacity of power. Not only did power have the force of the legal system, police, military, and the state, it also had the power to incite behavior. As Foucault states in *Volume One*, disciplinary power works through the law, but productive—or biopolitical—power compels behavior through norms.

Law cannot help but be armed, and its arm, par excellence, is death; to those who transgress it, it replies, at least as a last resort, with that absolute menace. The law always refers to the sword. But a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms....[thus the norm].²⁸⁰

Disciplinary power uses the threat of punishment to produce docile bodies who conform to the law. Meanwhile, biopower incites conformity through encouraging individuals to behave according to normative standards. “A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life.”²⁸¹ Laws may dictate what is illegal, but the law cannot penetrate every aspect of existence. Norms percolate into every aspect of social relations, and communicate what is normatively acceptable in a society, so that individuals can avoid being identified as mad, abnormal, deviant, or criminal.

²⁸⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume One*, 144.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Throughout the first half of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault showed how modernity ushered in a new era of punishment, due to the waning primacy of the sovereign or king. Rather than the public spectacle of torture or execution, punishment became a private affair. Instead of punishment being enacted on the body, it was exacted on the soul.²⁸² Judges were absolved from feeling guilt or shame for punishing criminals, it was the criminal's fault they could not adhere to the norms and laws of society, thus they deserved to be labelled as criminals and locked away from society.²⁸³ As punishment was changing from body to soul, there was a simultaneous compulsion to understand the criminal. "[To] judge was to establish the truth of the crime... Knowledge of the offence, knowledge of the offender, knowledge of the law; these three conditions made it possible to ground a judgment in truth."²⁸⁴ In other words, the juridical system began to focus on what defects in a person's psyche or soul compelled them to commit a crime. Knowledge of the criminal's deficiencies became an object of study, for the exercise of juridical power. If the dream of the military society was efficiency and compliance, then—through examining and analyzing the criminal—knowledge could help develop better systems to deter crime and compel docility instead.

Around the same time that punishment moved from the body to the soul, the sciences emerged as loci of information about the biology, psychology, geography, criminology, sociology, etc. of humans. The development of the statistical sciences—or “political arithmetic”—allowed for population-level analyses of birth-, death-, and crime-rates, as well as the rates of pathology, etc.—all of which made it possible to manage individuals without using coercion or force.²⁸⁵ This political

²⁸² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 13-19, *passim*.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸⁵ Foucault, “The Political Technology of Individuals,” lecture at the University of Vermont (1982), in *Power*, 408; see also: Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 138-140.

arithmetic was vital for the emergence of the modern state which was tasked with the “function of administering life.”²⁸⁶ As Foucault notes, “One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of the ‘population’ as an economic and political problem.”²⁸⁷ The use of statistics could establish population-level knowledge about the “truth” of the population, to understand what was normal. Governments, prisons, hospitals, universities, and schools could then use these statistical analyses of normality as guides to bring deviations from the norm into alignment with the norms of society.²⁸⁸ As Deborah Cook stated, “Sanity, docility, industriousness, and obedience are just some of the norms on which the judgment of individuals is based in a disciplinary society.”²⁸⁹ As such, the development of knowledge was in the service of managing the population and ensuring human survival. “At the heart of [the] economic and political problem of [the] population was sex.”²⁹⁰ Rather than the sovereign administering the right to death, governments became concerned with ensuring the survival of the population, and thus reproduction and sexuality became a focus of government-level statistical analysis, or political arithmetic.²⁹¹

Psychology—as Foucault showed in *The Birth of Madness* and *History of Sexuality: Volume One*—was enlisted for the analysis of abnormality, sexual deviance, and mental illness/insanity. First pastors, and then psychoanalysts compelled people to speak about their sexuality—to examine them, gain knowledge about them, and ultimately discourage anything but heterosexual vanilla sex in the

²⁸⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 138.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸⁸ Cook, Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West, 76.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume One, 25.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 135-137, *passim*.

service of reproduction.²⁹² Curiously enough, confession—at least in this form—is *not* internalized as an extension of power, where one is *forced* to speak about sex, but rather as an incitement and excitement to speak. The dominant logic—of both the Enlightenment and the Freudian repressive hypothesis—is that truth will set you free, but because “power reduces one to silence,” which is experienced as repression, so confession can liberate one from this repressive entanglement.²⁹³ Contrary to this logic, confession becomes a modality for chronicling sexual deviance and abnormality in a manner that informs the management and control of the population, as well as the pathologizing of individuals. As Allen points out in her analysis of *The Birth of Madness*, “If [Foucault has] a lament about how the history of our modern form of rationality has played out, it is a lament about the fact that one cannot be unreasonable without being forced to be mad, and thereby pathologized, medicalized, objectified, and silenced.”²⁹⁴ By examining, measuring, analyzing, interrogating, objectifying, and pathologizing individuals in the pursuit of knowledge, power proves that it can do more than constrain.

We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth...we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of the truth: it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit.²⁹⁵

Throughout this section, I have unpacked Foucault’s analytic of power-knowledge to show how power produces knowledge—as well as identities, norms, behaviors, and the compulsion to comply. This is why Foucault was so critical of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the

²⁹² Ibid., 53-73, *passim*.

²⁹³ Ibid., 60.

²⁹⁴ Allen, *The End of Progress*, 180.

²⁹⁵ Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 93.

repressive hypothesis: speaking about sex is not the path to liberation, because there can be no knowledge without relations of power. Furthermore, whether through religion or psychoanalysis, confession was used to chronicle deviance, which then became a tool for pathologizing mental illness, abnormalities, and criminality, and finally a mechanism for control. Power is not solely repressive, for Foucault, but rather a mechanism to incite behaviors through the adoption of norms. This is why there is “no exit” from power relations, but only nodes of resistance where power’s grasp has yet to reach. In this manner, Foucault’s analytic of power constrains the possibility for freedom, which parallels the pessimist’s insight—as illuminated by Dienstag—about how happiness is antithetical to freedom. At this point, I will further explore how Foucault conceptualized freedom and resistance. While there might not be a proper exit, there are myriad nodes of resistance, to carve out space for a little freedom.

Freedom and Resistance

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.

—Michel Foucault²⁹⁶

As implied by the quote above, Foucault suggested that to conceive of knowledge as separate from power was a fool’s errand. Knowledge was not a cite for liberation, because it was thoroughly saturated with power. Power-relations, however, do not simply constrain behavior, they structure, constrain, and excite myriad relationships in our social and political lives. In other words, the truth may not set you free—in the Enlightenment sense of the phrase. As Foucault states, “All this has been described as, or symbolized by, light gradually dispelling darkness, and it is this, I think,

²⁹⁶ Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 52.

that we have to get rid of [on the contrary,] when we look at the eighteenth century.”²⁹⁷ Rather using illumination to be rid of ignorance, the Enlightenment signaled the emergence of the power-knowledge nexus, which thoroughly altered power relations and the production of knowledge. Throughout this section, I will discuss the relationship between power-knowledge, resistance, and freedom in Foucault’s oeuvre. Foucault argued that without free subjects, relations of power would be relations of domination—as such everywhere there is power, there is freedom. For this reason, toward the end of Foucault’s tragically short life, he began to explore how one could cultivate subjectivity through the care of the self, as a practice of freedom. Care of the self implies both an awareness of one’s finitude and an incitement to *amor fati*; here, as elsewhere there is a profound resonance between Foucault’s theorizing and the theory of pessimism thus constituted.

Given that power and knowledge are co-constitutive—and Foucault is critical of facile theories of liberation—critics have claimed there is little room for agency or moving beyond the pervasive grasp of biopower. However, Foucault goes to great lengths to disavow these critics. As Foucault stated in an interview, “The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me.”²⁹⁸ Foucault, instead, conceives of power relationally. Power permeates all facets of existence and all relationships, *but* the existence of power presupposes free subjects. Freedom is a necessary condition of power relations, because without freedom it would be a relationship of pure domination. Foucault takes pains to discern between liberation which is a singular act (such as wars of independence or decolonization) or liberation as the (erroneous) antidote to repression—and practices of freedom, which are ongoing

²⁹⁷ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 179.

²⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” interview by H. Becker, R. Fournet-Betancourt, A. Gomez-Miiller (January 20, 1984), trans. P. Aranov, D. McGrawth, in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1997) 281-301, 293.

practices of resistance. Of their relationship, Foucault says that in some instances, “Liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom.”²⁹⁹ To upend a “state of domination” which can constrain the possibility for practices of freedom—such as colonization, slavery, genocide, or instances of interpersonal violence—liberation might be essential for creating the possibility for practices of freedom.³⁰⁰ However, the types of upheaval implied by liberation will create the opportunity for new/unexpected power relations. This will then necessitate resistance to avoid the aforementioned state of domination. The perpetual interplay between power relations and resistance creates the space for practices of freedom.

Among pessimists there appears to be a paradox of freedom. Popular sentiment would suggest that freedom is a way to experience happiness, however the pursuit of freedom has a negative effect on happiness. This is why Dienstag claims, that “for the pessimists, the more we strive to develop our (time-) conscious capacities, the more we will increase our discomfort in the world, the struggle for freedom must always have an ironic consequence for the goal of happiness.”³⁰¹ When Dienstag discusses the tension between happiness and freedom as a facet of pessimism, it is to refer to existentialism’s fixation with the “absurdity of existence.”³⁰² I would argue the awareness and experience of suffering, injustice, oppression, or intractable political problems exerts a downward pressure on happiness without necessitating an existentialist explanation. As Foucault states:

Thinking does not provide consolation or happiness. Like a perversion, it languidly drags itself out; it repeats itself with determination upon a stage; at a stroke, it flings itself outside the dice box. At the moment when chance, the theater, and

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 283-284.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 283.

³⁰¹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 35.

³⁰² Ibid., 32.

perversions enter into resonance, when chance dictates a resonance among the three, then thought becomes a trance; and it becomes worthwhile to think.³⁰³

In other words, while thinking is a worthwhile pursuit, it does not, as a rule, offer solace or happiness. Thinking can inaugurate the space for a little freedom and resistance—or even a trance—as is the case with the Deleuzian dice-throw which Foucault references in the quote above. Further, as Sara Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, there is an insidious tendency to expect happiness from people, when their lived experience or social position may preclude the possibility of being happy subjects.³⁰⁴ Being happy, Ahmed argues, is clearly “recognizable as bourgeois,” as well as white, hetero, cis-gendered, married, and apolitical.³⁰⁵ Happiness is antithetical to awareness about the ways in which disciplinary and biopolitical power alter our subjectivities, but not in the way an existentialist might expect.

While Foucault turned toward care of the self as a form of resistance, he was critical of the totalizing force the universal subject maintained in existentialism. One of the dominant themes in Foucault’s work was the destabilization of the subject, which stood in marked contrast to the existential focus on the subject that was in vogue in France at the time. In existentialism, one presupposes a subject *a priori* and asks how knowledge came to exist, given this theory of the subject.³⁰⁶ By contrast, Foucault wanted to understand how particular subjects came to be possible, and how knowledge altered the type of subjects they became “through certain practices that were also games of truth, [and] practices of power.”³⁰⁷ As Foucault discusses in an interview, “Calling the

³⁰³ Foucault, “Theatrum Philosophicum,” (1970), in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, pp. 165-196, 192.

³⁰⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰⁶ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 290.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

subject [into] question meant that one would have to experience something leading to its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else.”³⁰⁸ Practices of freedom create the conditions wherein one could cultivate autonomy and even pleasure or joy, despite the imprint of normative expectations and power relations. Even though power relations permeate all that we do, Cook observes that “Freedom exists because power is not omnipotent.”³⁰⁹ There are always facets of the self that remain uncaptured by normative expectations, and when norms are understood, one can be deviant in response.³¹⁰ While there is space to reconfigure, intersect with, and resist power, Cook notes that “[Foucault] offers no hope of a complete escape from power.”³¹¹ When power relations endlessly reconfigure themselves in response to resistance, it seems like one might require resilience, tenacity, or love to resist new modalities of power rather than a facile happiness.

In Foucault’s later work (which was cut short by his early death), he turned toward an analysis of what he referred to as “technologies of the self” or “care of the self,” which he discussed in *Volume Three of The History of Sexuality*, myriad lectures, interviews, and a faculty seminar at the University of Vermont a year before he died.³¹² Care of the self was a concept derived from the ancients—including Socrates and Plato, as well as the Stoics—where caring for one’s self through deep reflection, allowed for a more ethical life and greater care of others. Knowledge of oneself was a necessary precursor for the possibility of freedom, “as well as to form oneself, to surpass oneself,

³⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” interviewer D. Trombadori (1978), in Foucault, *Power*, 239-297, 247.

³⁰⁹ Cook, Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West, 105.

³¹⁰ Here I am indebted to Cook for her analysis of freedom and the space for autonomy that can exist beyond normative expectations.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*.

[and] to master the appetites that threaten to overwhelm one.”³¹³ While Foucault draws his analysis of care of self and freedom from the Ancients, it bears mentioning that while freedom was intrinsically political for the Ancients, it was not universally accessible to everyone in the polis—women, political prisoners, and slaves were not worthy of freedom in Ancient Greece. Foucault extends this concept to state that freedom “also means...not being a slave to oneself and one's appetites.” Furthermore, this means practicing an ethical relationship with the self, “which establishes a certain relationship of domination, of mastery, ...power, [or] command” with the self.³¹⁴ One vital element for the cultivation of the self is the recognition and acceptance of one's finitude. While Christianity implies salvation at the end of one's life, this requires self-renunciation rather than care of the self. When one accepts that death is the end of life (rather than the beginning of eternal life) then they only have their reputation to maintain. There are no second chances. Care of the self is intimately bound to *amor fati*—“love of one's fate”—the Latin phrase used by Nietzsche to signify the eternal recurrence. If one cares for their self and life, accepts their faith and finitude, then Foucault thought they could cultivate some space for self-autonomy and more caring relationships with others.

Here is where Foucault and the pessimists drink from the same well. For pessimism—an awareness of one's finitude is embedded within their “conscious existence within time.”³¹⁵ Differently phrased, we are all beings stumbling toward death, and, for Dienstag, humans are uniquely aware of this reality.³¹⁶ “As a daughter of Decay, Death not only represents the final end of life, but also defines the *path* of life. Every moment of our lives, we are on our way to death, whether

³¹³ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 285.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 286-287.

³¹⁵ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 21.

³¹⁶ For a discussion of human exceptionalism, see Chapter Two, footnote 159.

we recognize this or not.”³¹⁷ Awareness of our finitude and the tendency toward entropy make a profound imprint on our lives and consciousness, so why not accept this, and cultivate a love of one’s fate? Foucault and the pessimists would agree this is a path toward embodying greater self-autonomy—or even joy—despite our short lives and the persistence of suffering. It would be remiss to avoid noting the mark Nietzsche left on both Dienstag’s analysis of pessimism as a form of life, and on Foucault’s understanding of the subject, history, time, and power. For this reason (and others) I argue that recognizing Foucault as a theorist of twentieth-century critical pessimism, enriches our understanding of his thinking, and creates the possibility for greater understanding and respect of pessimism as a critical philosophy, ethic, political theory, and approach to inquiry. In the remaining section, I will turn to a discussion of Foucault’s attitude toward human suffering to emphasize resonance between his theorizing and van der Lugt’s value-oriented form of pessimism.

Foucault and Suffering

Beyond Dienstag’s temporally-orientated pessimism, van der Lugt argues pessimists share a value-orientation as well. van der Lugt stakes her position on the relationship between suffering and physical evil. Physical evil moves beyond the question of the misalignment of suffering (where the wicked flourish but the righteous suffer) to question not only why the wicked or righteous suffer, but why the wicked cause suffering in the first place.³¹⁸ Furthermore, this analysis of evil suggests that we suffer not just external pain and sorrow, but we experience and cause our own internal suffering as well.³¹⁹ The common thread among pessimists is a “sense of urgency,” and an ethical

³¹⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 22, emphasis in original. Here Dienstag builds upon Giacomo Leopardi’s concept of the “daughters of Decay,” from the “Dialogue of Fashion and Death.”

³¹⁸ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6; 5; 7.

commitment “to give due weight to the suffering of others [including non-human animals].”³²⁰ I must admit, as a life-long student of Nietzsche, this discussion of evil makes me rather uncomfortable. However, van der Lugt’s analysis of suffering, as a result of evil, drives us to a vital point beyond Dienstag’s pessimism where there is a deep, ethical concern for the pervasiveness of suffering among humans and more-than-humans, without relying on the primary assumption of Buddhism, that all of life is suffering. While the Buddhists are correct, van der Lugt’s analysis lends greater nuance and compassion to this topic, without suggesting withdrawal from the material world. Throughout what remains, I will discuss Foucault’s thoughts on suffering and injustice, to make the case that Foucault is a critical pessimist whose theorizing sits at the impasse between the temporal orientation of Dienstag and the value-orientation of van der Lugt.

As Foucault repeatedly stated, the primary focus of his research was on the relationship between the subject, power, and knowledge. However, it seems abundantly clear that Foucault *chose* to study how power-knowledge effected the subjectivities of those pathologized as mad, criminal, sexually deranged, and abnormal because of his deep normative concern for the suffering of people in these categories. I stake my position, at least on this topic, against Koopman who claimed that Foucault strove for “neutrality.”³²¹ This claim neutralizes the normative thrust of Foucault’s genealogical work and threatens to undermine his normative values. As Harcourt argues,

Foucault’s genealogies... are [not] normatively neutral. The very choice of which object to study is necessarily inflected with deep normative commitments. The reason to use genealogy is to challenge or uphold practices and institutions. The success of a genealogy turns on whether it convinces the reader *normatively*.³²²

³²⁰ Ibid., 13; 9.

³²¹ Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 60.

³²² Harcourt, “On Critical Genealogy,” 9.

Foucault's approach to genealogy—which was meant to challenge teleological or heroic readings of history as progress—demonstrates how Foucault believed that, in Cook's words, history “should give a voice to those who suffer.”³²³ Beyond shedding light on the minor histories of those dismissed by dominant narratives, Foucault often spoke in interviews about the suffering of others, and how this could be alleviated. In an interview late in life, Foucault defended the right to suicide “under decent conditions” and suggested that if he had the money, “[he] would create an institute where people who would like to die would come spend a weekend, a week, or a month in pleasure, under drugs perhaps, in order to disappear afterward, as if erased.”³²⁴ Here, as elsewhere, Foucault spoke to the need to care for the suffering of oneself (as in a right to die), but also spoke tenderly of the need to address the suffering of others. If a person craves a way out of their suffering, and has a legitimate claim for an earthly and corporeal exit, then why should this right be denied? Dienstag and van der Lugt both note that pessimists are among the only philosophers to offer tenderness to the topic of suicide.³²⁵ The suffering of others permeated Foucault's work, both as an activist involved with Groupe d'information sur les prisons, as well as the normative focus of his theorizing. While Foucault often engaged in problematization—which appeared neutral in certain instances—the thrust of his work was motivated by a deep concern for subjects and subjectivities deformed by the relationship between power and knowledge.

Foucault's philosophical project embodies a deep and abiding concern for suffering, be it through giving voice to the vanquished of history, challenging the prison system through activism and writing, problematizing subjectivities to create the possibility for transformation, or discussing

³²³ Cook, Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West, 27.

³²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Risks of Security*, interview with Robert Bono (1983), in Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Power*, pp 365-381, 380.

³²⁵ For a beautiful and sensitive discussion of the risks involved with writing about the topic, see van der Lugt, “Philosophy in the Minor Chord: A Note of Caution,” in *Dark Matters*, pp. 23-27.

the right to suicide. Thus, it should be evident that the suffering of others was a foundational precept of his project and thinking, even if it was sometimes masked by problematizations. In this manner there are abundant resonances between Foucault's theorizing and the temporal- and value-orientations of suffering. For this reason, I offer that Foucault's philosophical project is best described not as a mode of paranoid reading, but as a critically-oriented form of pessimism.

Conclusion: Toward a Critical Orientation of Pessimism

As mentioned previously, given how Foucault and pessimism—in their own and sometimes inconspicuous ways—focus on suffering and care, there is some kinship between reparative and pessimistic reads. Pessimism, akin to the reparative-mode, embodies weak theory in the sense that neither approach wishes to provide absolute, definitive, or universal answers. The emphasis for both approaches is on contingency and indeterminateness despite how finitude characterizes our lives and all those beings (ideas, places, and things) we care about most. Similar to the Kleinian depressive position, pessimism embodies a negative register, and the depressive position entails a shift from the paranoid “*forestalling [of] pain*” to the reparative mode of “*seeking pleasure*.” Pessimism provides the space to accept pain, whether the suffering is our own or others. When pessimism embodies the life-affirming approach of Nietzsche's *amor fati* or the “care of self” suggested by Foucault, there is also space to seek pleasure and joy. While pessimism does provide some consolation and acceptance of the suffering endemic to an existence marked by death and decay, the pessimistic project does not end there. Pessimism—as a critical form of inquiry—seeks to unearth injustice, oppression, and violence. If paranoia provides the only path toward critiquing and demystifying power-relations and injustice, then paranoia it shall be. However, this gives too much weight to a false binary, when Klein (as previously mentioned) viewed the two in constant tension. Might pessimism as critical

inquiry provide a third path? An approach that, while negative, is present-oriented, concerned with the suffering of others, and mindful of one's position in relation to others? In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick states:

It's probably more usual for discussions of the depressive position in Klein to emphasize that that position inaugurates ethical possibility—in the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care. Such ethical possibility, however, is founded on and coextensive with the subject's movement toward what Foucault calls “care of the self,” the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them.³²⁶

This chapter has taken us on a sweeping journey: from the discussion of genealogy as the embodiment of pessimistic inquiry to the Foucauldian concern with the relationship between power, knowledge, subjectivity, and freedom. While it may be customary to conclude with a recapitulation of the chapter's contents and a gesture toward the next chapter, I wish to conclude—perhaps controversially—not by reiterating my arguments, but with a provocation.

If Sedgwick were alive today, how might she soften her understanding of Foucauldian paranoia by considering Foucault a pessimist, in the tradition of Nietzschean pessimism? A pessimist who was at once deeply moved by the suffering of others, and compelled to offer an ethics of self as an approach to alleviate some of the pain. A pessimist who constantly underscored that a difficult freedom always belied power relations, even if one had to struggle to find it. A pessimist so dedicated to the present moment—and all the intersecting and horrific ways in which power-relations altered and dismantled our subjectivity—that he dedicated himself to telling the history of the present. A pessimist at once accused of crypto-normativity, who wrote a book about the *Birth of the Prison* to inspire praxis and transformation, and was dedicated to activism against the prison system. A pessimist who interrogated the core of the repressive hypothesis, not because he

³²⁶ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137.

endeavored to disrupt the possibility of freedom, but instead because it limited our understanding of power, and thus our understanding of freedom. A pessimist who—while negative—was not paranoid in the manner detailed by Sedgwick. Perhaps if Sedgwick could have viewed Foucault through the lens of pessimism, we would have a different understanding of the relationship between paranoia, pessimism, depression, and repair. However, if we had that, then perhaps the world would languish in the absence of Sedgwick’s brilliance and all the brilliant debate she inspired in her absence.

Throughout this chapter, I have maintained that Foucault embodies a form of pessimism as critical inquiry that is vital for problematizing and resisting the politics of climate change. Genealogies—especially critical genealogies—are a form of critical inquiry that embody one approach to 20th and 21st century forms of pessimism. While Foucault may have been derided for paranoid analytics, crypto-normativity, and destabilizing the foundations of modernity without offering an exit or the possibility for agency, I maintain that he offers a critical understanding of pessimism, and an ethic of action to contend with the suffering, violence, and contingency of our planetary existence³²⁷ In the next chapter, I will turn toward Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer who offer another path toward theorizing critical pessimism.

³²⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

CHAPTER FOUR: PESSIMISM AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

As long as there are hunger and misery on earth, [anyone] who can see will have no peace.

—Max Horkheimer³²⁸

The suffering caused by a negative situation...becomes rage leveled at the person who expresses it.

—Theodor Adorno³²⁹

There are few ideas that the world today needs more than [pessimism], ideas which in the face of utter hopelessness, because they confront it, know more than any others of hope.

—Max Horkheimer³³⁰

The enduring negativity of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer—early members of the Frankfurt School—hits the palate like a spicy dish; for some it is ruinous, for others, spice—like negativity—heightens one’s experience of the present moment.³³¹ For György Lukács, the negativity of the Frankfurt School was unforgivably odious. He accused the Frankfurt School—but especially Adorno—of having sought refuge in Schopenhauer’s Grand Hotel Abyss, warning against their “daily contemplation of the abyss.”³³² Dwelling on the negative, Lukács believed, would disrupt the spirit of radical organizing and the possibility for communist revolution. Indeed, many progressives and left-intellectuals warn of the stultifying effects of pessimism, claiming it is an

³²⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” in Barrington Moore and Kurt H. Wolff, eds., *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967), 55-71, 65.

³²⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Resignation,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 289-293, 291.

³³⁰ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 71. In the original quote Horkheimer said “Schopenhauer’s” ideas are needed most, rather than pessimism. However, I maintain that using pessimism does not disturb Horkheimer’s original meaning.

³³¹ Frédéric Vandenberghe argues the Frankfurt School and critical theory do not constitute a school as such, because the Frankfurt School theorists hardly share “a unity of worldview and method, a defined orthodoxy, the constitution of dogma, and even a designated leader.” Regardless of the veracity of this claim, I will proceed by using the “Frankfurt School” to refer to a particular style of critical theory that emerged out of the First Generation of the Institute for Social Research, originally based in Frankfurt, Germany. See: Frédéric Vandenberghe, *A Philosophical History of German Sociology*, trans. Carolyn Shread, Routledge Studies in Critical Realism (London, UK: Routledge, 2009), 157.

³³² György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 9.

apolitical posture that will only lead to resignation.³³³ Unlike hot peppers, however, negativity does not mask bland food. Negativity is not a mask at all. When negativity is a form of critical inquiry that upends the dominant logic constraining the present, it can illuminate the troublesome and unjust foundations of contemporary politics and life.³³⁴ Critical inquiry can pierce through the negativity masqueraded as normality. In this way, pessimism is the opposite of spicy food—it is not a substitution for a flavorless meal, but a critical method for parsing out the harmful ingredients baked into contemporary politics. This is what the early members of the Frankfurt School can offer to a critically-oriented pessimism. As Adorno averred “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”³³⁵

In response to widespread environmental concerns, a global pandemic, and authoritarian creep there has been insufficient political will to grapple with these pervasive problems. The lack of a political response is troubling. Yet individuals are condemned as irrational, unpatriotic—or worse, conservative—if they do not maintain optimism about a better future. Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin, I will argue, each offer a form of negativity that upends dominant historical narratives, expectations of a facile positivity, and revolutionary critiques of the oppressive forces of late capitalism. The appeal to pessimism will be more straightforward with Benjamin and Horkheimer, as they both tarried explicitly with pessimism in their work. Toward the end of his career, Horkheimer radicalized Schopenhauer. The nineteenth century metaphysical curmudgeon became a pessimistic materialist with Horkheimer’s touch.³³⁶ Benjamin adopted a radical form of pessimism adopted from

³³³ Mikkel Krause Frantzen, “Against Pessimism, or, the Education of Hope,” *SubStance* 49, no. 1, 151 (2020).

³³⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, The subtitle of Adorno’s book of aphorisms is “Reflections on a Damaged Life.”

³³⁵ Adorno, “Refuge for the Homeless,” in *Minima Moralia*, 39.

³³⁶ Ryan Gunderson, “Horkheimer’s Pessimism and Compassion,” *Telos* 2012, no. 160 (2012): 165–72, 166; Marcus S. Schulz, “Horkheimer, Max,” in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 5: 2163.

the revolutionary Surrealist Pierre Naville.³³⁷ However, I will need to tend more carefully to the argument that Adorno is amenable to certain strains of pessimism.³³⁸ This is especially the case given the myriad arguments denouncing an association between pessimism and Adorno.³³⁹

Throughout what follows, I will explore the critical theorizing and critical pessimism of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin to locate affinities between these thinkers and a critical orientation of pessimism. To do so, I will first discuss the tendency of leftists to denounce pessimism and left melancholy, while cherry-picking from the same critical thinkers they would otherwise disavow. Then I will discuss Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer's searing critiques of progress, teleological depictions of history, and the Enlightenment before diving more deeply into the negativity, and/or pessimism embedded within their thinking. As I aim to demonstrate, critical pessimism—when reconstituted through the theorizing of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno—offers a unique orientation to the myth of progress, the logic of capitalism, and a radical revisioning of dialectics.

Pessimism and the Left: A Tenuous Affair

³³⁷ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso Books, [2005] 2016).

³³⁸ For a sustained discussion about Adorno's pessimism, please see my article: Mary E. Wiltacil, "The Critical Pessimism of Theodor Adorno," *New Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2022): 248–64.

³³⁹ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Radical Thinkers (London: Verso Press, 2014 [1978]); Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015); Amy Allen, "Critique as Melancholy Science," in *Critique in German Philosophy: From Kant to Critical Theory*, ed. Maria del Rosario Acosta López and J. Colin McQuillan (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020).

Pessimism is not simply an insult, a “menace,” or a warning sign for depression.³⁴⁰ As Joshua Dienstag has argued pessimism is a philosophical tradition or “sensitivity,” and an ethos of self.³⁴¹ It is also, as I have argued, a mode of critical inquiry. Pessimism is an approach for thinking through the antagonisms of contemporary existence; an approach that is equally wary of the status quo and of expecting *too much* from the future. Joshua Dienstag’s temporally-oriented version of pessimism is skeptical of the myth of historical progress and challenges a linear read of time. Meanwhile, Mara van der Lugt’s value-oriented strain of pessimism speaks to the pervasiveness of suffering and physical evil.³⁴² Through refusal, pessimism can empower one to challenge the brokenness of the contemporary moment, which is why—given the intersecting crises of climate change, income inequality, and authoritarian creep—pessimism is a vital mode of inquiry for this historical moment.

While this may appear to be a reasonable starting point, pessimism is not without its critics. Naysayers are quick to disavow any kinship with pessimism and warn against taking seriously any pessimistic concerns or commentary about social or political conditions. Wendy Brown draws on Benjamin in her discussion of how “left melancholy”—where leftists fixate on and mourn the impossibility of actualizing Marxist communism—is a politically conservative force, lacking in vision.³⁴³ Benjamin, Brown argues, saw value in sadness and mourning, but was critical of left melancholy or a dejected acceptance of the impossibility of a political vision.³⁴⁴ However, as Michael Löwy notes, Benjamin also decried the optimism of bourgeois elites, preferring instead a

³⁴⁰ Ryan Gunderson, “A Defense of the “Grand Hotel Abyss”: The Frankfurt School’s Nonideal Theory,” *Acta Sociologica* 58, no. 1 (2015): 25.

³⁴¹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, xi.

³⁴² Ibid.; van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*.

³⁴³ Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2*, 26, no. 3 (1999): 25.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

revolutionary pessimism attentive to the oppressed instead.³⁴⁵ In a review essay discussing Eugene Thacker's latest book, Mikkel Frantzen depicts a more dire outcome than Brown, arguing "Pessimism will lead us exactly nowhere, which is precisely the dream of capitalism: Maintaining the status quo (while continuing to accumulate profits)."³⁴⁶ If we accept this argument, then pessimism amounts to political indifference, nihilism, and resignation, or at the very least a maintenance of the status quo.

There is a difference between pessimisms that encourage resignation (such as the pessimism described by Brown or Frantzen) and a Nietzschean life-affirming "pessimism of strength" or a Foucauldian genealogical pessimism aimed at challenging the status quo, which I discussed in Chapters Two and Three.³⁴⁷ As Dienstag notes:

Critics have often mistaken a depiction of the world for a choice about our future, as if philosophers had rejoiced at the decline or decay they described. But this is like deriding scientists who warn of global warming because their models give apocalyptic predictions. Do we normally assume that such scientists want their predictions to come true?³⁴⁸

When critical theorists, pessimists, or climate scientists call attention to the bleak undercurrents of the social and political sphere, it is not because they *want* to live in an oppressive or entropic reality marked by an unstoppable climate crisis. Instead, they aim to speak to the suffering endemic to contemporary existence, and (depending on the pessimist) encourage political action to challenge domination and injustice. Rather than neglecting instances where so-called progress results in oppression, regression, or environmental degradation, pessimism beckons us to look upon these contradictions with naked eyes and challenge this reality without the expectation of a simple solution

³⁴⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 9.

³⁴⁶ Frantzen, "Against Pessimism," 102.

³⁴⁷ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," 3; Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 527.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

or an expectation of progress. Accordingly, pessimism does not necessarily foreclose radical politics. Neither does left melancholy amount to political apathy.

Ryan Gunderson wagers that “the menace of pessimism in critical theory...is usually criticized on grounds that it is antithetical to Marxism’s emancipatory vision and/or [that it is] implicitly conservative.”³⁴⁹ This perspective, he goes on to say, is akin to arguing that “radicalism and pessimism are antagonistic positions.”³⁵⁰ One hundred years later, the “gloomy” outlooks of the first generation Frankfurt School critical theorists remain relevant for illuminating the negative aspects of contemporary existence, while maintaining a Benjaminian “messianic hope.”³⁵¹ Messianic hope holds space for liberatory potential—or “now-time”—should the proper moment arrive.³⁵² In this sense, critical pessimism is not antithetical to hope or radical politics. While many Marxists and critical theorists shared intellectual pessimism about the missed opportunity (or possibility) for Marxist or socialist revolution, Gunderson argues that “social pessimism” can offer a clear depiction of oppression and the “ugliness” of society while reserving space for alternatives to the status quo.³⁵³

Critical Theory and Pessimism

Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light... [The] situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite.

—Theodor Adorno³⁵⁴

³⁴⁹ Gunderson, “A defense of the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss,’” 26.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 34.

³⁵² Ibid., this moment is alternatively referred to as “messianic time” by Benjamin.

³⁵³ Ibid., 28.

³⁵⁴ Adorno, “Finale,” in *Minima Moralia*, 153: 247.

The Institute for Social Research, or what later became known as the Frankfurt School, was a group of intellectuals grappling with the failures of Marx's prediction about the inevitability of capitalist collapse, alongside the emergence of fascism in Nazi German (and elsewhere). The Frankfurt School drew on sociology and philosophy to develop immanent social critiques that blended psychoanalysis with rebukes of capitalism, modernity, and historicism. Akin to Foucault, the Frankfurt School used history to understand the contradictions of the present.³⁵⁵ In an early essay where Horkheimer distinguished critical theory from traditional and scientific theory, he argued that critical theory was “not simply the theory of emancipation” but “the practice of it as well.”³⁵⁶ Early members of the Frankfurt School—but mainly Adorno, Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse—blended Marxist concepts with Freudian psychoanalysis to question the cultural and social breakdowns that created the possibility for fascism. For instance, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer asked how the Enlightenment and reason could produce such calamitous and irrational outcomes as gas chambers, gulags, and nuclear bombs.

The social, political, and historical conditions in which they lived and wrote were so negative, that only “consummate negativity” and sustained critique could hope for anything resembling freedom or “redemption.”³⁵⁷ As Amy Allen points out, Adorno's “critique...is itself a kind of practice that opens up a space of concrete freedom and glimpses a glimmer of the possibility of

³⁵⁵ This should be no surprise, as Foucault, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin had all studied Marx and all (to some extent or another) approached history as historical materialists. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Foucault said in an interview: “It is impossible at the present time to write history without using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx's thought and situating oneself within a horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx. One might even wonder what difference there could ultimately be between being a historian and being a Marxist.” See: Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 37-54, 53.

³⁵⁶ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York, NY: Continuum, 1972 [2002]), 188-243, 233.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*,

redemption.”³⁵⁸ Despite his Marxist roots and dedication to using critique in the service of freedom, Adorno believed that praxis should be secondary to theory, because praxis without theory could devolve into authoritarianism. “Many movements defame theory itself as a form of oppression, as though praxis were not much more directly related to oppression.”³⁵⁹ In many ways, Adorno was the embodiment of Marx’s invocation of “a ruthless criticism of everything existing” but the antithesis of Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach.³⁶⁰ As Susan Buck-Morss notes, “[Adorno’s] philosophy never included a theory of political action” but despite this, “he continued to insist on the necessity for revolutionary social change.”³⁶¹ Early in his career Horkheimer was more optimistic about the emancipatory possibilities of critical theory. Over time, however, he was worn down by the drudgery, violence, and failures of the twentieth century, and became skeptical that the injustices he witnessed would ever be redressed.

For all the optimism [the materialist] has about changing situations, for all that he treasures the happiness which comes from solidarity among men [sic] and work for a changed society, [the materialist] has a pessimistic streak as well. Past injustice will never be made up; the suffering of past generations receives no compensation.³⁶²

³⁵⁸ Allen, “Critique as Melancholy Science,” 336.

³⁵⁹ Adorno, “Resignation,” 290.

³⁶⁰ Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” 1843, in *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978) 12-15, 12; See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum Publishing, 2007 [1973]), 3; Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 1845, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 143-145, 145: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is the *change* it.” In response to Marx, Adorno proclaimed, “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed...after the attempt to change the world miscarried.” See *Negative Dialectics*, page 3.

³⁶¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1977), 24

³⁶² Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 10–46, 26.

Horkheimer continued to see value in solidarity in political action, even as he grew wary about the possibility for a better world. This is why toward the end of his career he returned to Schopenhauer—an early intellectual fixation—who he radicalized as a materialist pessimist.³⁶³

Despite Benjamin's close friendship with Adorno and intermittent relationship with the Frankfurt School, he was in a category of his own. Hannah Arendt described Benjamin as an "unclassifiable" critic who came into fame posthumously due to a spate of bad luck.³⁶⁴ His bad luck culminated in an unfortunate cocktail of uncommon but difficult to amalgamate genius, financial hardship, and the cruel hand of historical timing.³⁶⁵ Here, however, I will resist the temptation to rehearse Arendt's gorgeous depiction of his life and hapless relationship with fame, and will instead focus on his ideas. Benjamin believed the story of history could be illuminated by focusing on overlooked details and sundry objects. "Benjamin had a passion for small, even minute things... For him the size of an object was in an inverse ratio to its significance."³⁶⁶ His passion for discovering the concrete or archetypal meaning in objects or words, compelled him to fixate on the flotsam and detritus that would otherwise be obscured by the rapid emergence of new commodities. As Buck-Morss points out, "[A] quasi-magical cognitive attitude toward historical matter remained basic to

³⁶³ See: Max Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society (1955)," trans. Todd Cronan, *Qui Parle* 15, no. 1 (June 1, 2004): 85–96; Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer Today," (1967).

³⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin 1892-1940," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2019), vii–lxiii, xii.

³⁶⁵ Benjamin fled Nazi Germany to Paris, where he lived for several years. During the armistice between Vichy France and Nazi Germany, the French had agreed to return German refugees. As a result, Horkheimer arranged for Benjamin to join the exiled Institute for Social Research at Columbia in New York. Benjamin fled Paris to Marseille and was among the first to receive an emergency visa to the US. His departure was thwarted at the border with Spain. Rather than face the Nazi concentration camps, Benjamin died by suicide on September 26, 1940. As Arendt stated: "One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseilles would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible." Arendt, "Introduction," xxvii.

³⁶⁶ Arendt, "Introduction," xix.

Benjamin's understanding of materialism."³⁶⁷ Beyond attentive meditations on the overlooked, Benjamin believed metaphors were keys to understanding the world. As Arendt wrote, for Benjamin "Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about."³⁶⁸ Of Benjamin's fixation with language, Buck-Morss noted that Ernst Bloch once said, "Benjamin proceeded 'as if the world were language.' The objects were 'mute.' But their expressive...potential became legible to the attentive philosopher who 'named' them, translating this potential into the human language of words, and thereby bringing them to speech."³⁶⁹ Benjamin's critical theory was a novel alchemy of literary criticism, messianic Marxism, and revolutionary historical materialism. His influences ranged from Goethe, Kafka, Proust, and Baudelaire to Marx, Brecht, and Lukács.

Alongside Horkheimer, Benjamin was also a self-described pessimist. As Michael Löwy notes, "Benjamin's pessimism is in the service of the oppressed classes. His preoccupation is not with the 'decline' of the elites of the nation, but with the threats the technical and economic progress fostered by capitalism pose for humanity."³⁷⁰ It is short wonder that political pessimism laced Benjamin's thought—the fascist take-over of Germany contaminated many of his formative years as an intellectual.

There is a strange paradox at play with the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Many have noted how the political context in which Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer theorized was too incomparably negative to be directly applicable to our present context. Yet, there is a resurgence

³⁶⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 13.

³⁶⁸ Arendt, "Introduction," xxii.

³⁶⁹ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 13, quoting Ernst Bloch, "Erinnerung," *Über Walter Benjamin*, mit Beiträgen von Theodor W. Adorno et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968), 17.

³⁷⁰ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 9.

of interest in their approach to critical theorizing and negativity. Of the context in which Adorno was writing, Marasco notes,

Despair is the passionate testimony to a life witness to Auschwitz, exile, authoritarianism, the collapse of individuality and the triumph of mass conformity, and the rationalization of all forms of life according to the logic of capitalist profit. It goes without saying that Adorno's texts cannot be extracted from their historical and biographical context. But I'm not sure that more detailing of this history and life will get at the strange timeliness of the texts.³⁷¹

The era in which Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin lived and wrote signified a massive breakdown in the logic of historical progress. The Enlightenment—the era of discovery and illumination—had brought about some of the darkest political machinations the world had ever seen. Humans had rationalized the creation of civilization-ending technology and countless genocides. Meanwhile they had the technological capacity to eradicate hunger but lacked the political wherewithal to prevent people from starving to death. As Gil Scott-Heron once inveighed:

I can't pay no doctor bills
But whitey's on the moon
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still
While whitey's on the moon...
The price of food is going up...
With whitey on the moon.³⁷²

Scott-Heron released this spoken word poem in 1970 to lament the hypocrisy of exploring space when so many problems persisted on *terra firma*. In this, our political moments are not dissimilar. Inflation and homelessness are on the rise, while billionaires have joined the space race as a safeguard for the wealthy to escape problems their excesses have created here on planet earth.

Climate change is, yet another, reminder of the regression baked into the logic of progress. Scientists have been sounding the alarm about the anthropogenic origins of climate change since the

³⁷¹ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 83.

³⁷² Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (New York City: Flying Dutchman/RCA, 1970).

late 1970s, but since meaningful reductions in greenhouse gas emissions would be catastrophic to oil industry profits (and the electability of US politicians) little has been done to address this looming and massive ecological, political, and social problem.³⁷³ Western developed countries have demonstrated immense technological and economic prowess, meanwhile homelessness, drug addiction, and authoritarianism are on the rise. In response to this disturbing historical turn, Marasco argues “*the only philosophy that can be practiced responsibly in the face of despair is a philosophy that bears the face of despair.*”³⁷⁴ The critical theory of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer offers resources for facing the despair and negativity elemental to this political moment, which is marked by a looming climate crisis and intersecting social and political crises. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will examine how the negativity, despair, and pessimism of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin intersect with and move beyond the value-oriented and temporally-oriented pessimisms identified by Mara van der Lugt and Joshua Dienstag. In doing so, I will expand upon the critical orientation of pessimism offered by Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault in the previous two chapters.

Temporally-Oriented Pessimism and the Storm of Progress

With the temporally-oriented strain of pessimism identified by Dienstag, one of the dominant threads traced through the tapestry of pessimism is a shared concern about the “irony of history.”³⁷⁵ Prior to the emergence of linear time, Dienstag notes, philosophy did not concern itself

³⁷³ Neela Banerjee, Lisa Song, and David Hasemyer, “Exxon’s Own Research Confirmed Fossil Fuels’ Role in Global Warming Decades Ago,” *Inside Climate News*, September 16, 2015, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16092015/exxons-own-research-confirmed-fossil-fuels-role-in-global-warming/>.

³⁷⁴ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 85, emphasis in original.

³⁷⁵ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 25

with “progress, decline, or even an endless but linear accumulation of experience.”³⁷⁶ Instead, progress and a linear understanding of the historical narrative have been staples of the Enlightenment. Pessimism, according to this logic, is a byproduct of modernity. What distinguishes pessimism from other philosophical approaches, Dienstag argues, is whether “the application of reason to human social and political conditions will ultimately result in the melioration of these conditions.”³⁷⁷ As he continues, “Pessimism, while retaining a linear account of time and history, denies this premise...and asks us to philosophize in its absence.”³⁷⁸ Rather than assuming that humans can use reason to guarantee a brighter horizon, pessimists argue there is scant evidence that history follows a linear trajectory of continual improvement. This thread of Dienstag’s assessment of pessimism is woven throughout the philosophical projects of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno.

Given their wariness with the Enlightenment, reason, and the narrative of progress, Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer resonate with and move beyond Dienstag’s premise. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer expressed concern with how the application of reason could produce horrifically unreasonable and unjust outcomes. Similarly, Benjamin believed the catastrophes of progress were so foundational to the linear arc of history, that there was little one could do to disrupt the onslaught of wreckage. Each of these thinkers was reticent about the possibility that the future could be better than the present, but despite the grim outlook, they all believed that theory should be in service of finding the possibility for revolutionary change. Throughout this section I will discuss Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno’s analysis of the

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 18.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

irrationality of progress, as well as how it aligns with and moves beyond the temporal concerns of Dienstag's taxonomy of pessimism.

Benjamin and the Angel of History

History is in the truth; the truth is not in history.

—Theodor Adorno³⁷⁹

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin³⁸⁰

In a famous passage from Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" he describes the angel of history: "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."³⁸¹ The angel would love to fix the damage, but he is unable to resist the force of a "storm [that] drives him irresistibly into the future."³⁸² This inescapable force is the storm of progress. The angel of history wants to stop the catastrophe of progress, but the storm is so strong that it propels the angel into the future against his will. While the storm of progress delivers endless catastrophes, the myth of progress frames the historical narrative as present redemption for past grievances.

When progress implies a teleological depiction of history, it necessarily serves the interests of the victors. It is the "triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying

³⁷⁹ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, quoting Adorno, 46.

³⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," in *Illuminations*, 196-209, VII: 200.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, IX: 201. See also: Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Edmund Jephcott, et al. trans. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), IX: 392.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 201.

prostrate.”³⁸³ Perhaps this is why Adorno states, “history is in the truth; the truth is not in history.”³⁸⁴ Social and historical forces shape our contemporary understanding of the truth, but Truth cannot be found by looking to the dominant historical narrative. This is because historical narratives, as Benjamin notes, “empathize...with the victor” rather than taking seriously the perspectives of the vanquished.³⁸⁵ In response to Benjamin’s appeal (and sounding awfully similar to Foucault), Adorno suggests that knowledge also carries the imprint of the “succession of victory and defeat” and implores us to “address...the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic.”³⁸⁶ Akin to how Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault used the genealogical method to challenge rigid teleological depictions of history, Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer—as disillusioned twentieth-century Marxists—aimed (in Benjamin’s words) “to brush history against the grain.”³⁸⁷

The force of Benjamin’s storm of progress is analogous to the sustained force of the fossil fuel industry when faced with the catastrophe of climate change. Extreme weather events accumulate like so much wreckage at the angel’s feet. Meanwhile, the fossil fuel industry wields immense political power, ensuring the green light for even the most inefficient methods of extraction, until all fossil fuels have been exhausted. Perhaps this trap of rationalizing irrational behavior is what Benjamin means when he says, “a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in [the angel of history’s] wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them.”³⁸⁸ The storm of progress is too powerful for the angel of history to avoid being propelled into a future

³⁸³ Ibid., VII: 200.

³⁸⁴ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, quoting Adorno, 46.

³⁸⁵ Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” VII: 199.

³⁸⁶ Adorno, “Bequest,” in *Minima Moralia*, 98: 151.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., VII: 200.

³⁸⁸ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

laden with catastrophes. Likewise, the oil and gas industry is too powerful for political leaders to curtail production, regardless of consequences to local ecosystems, Indigenous communities, and the atmosphere. Even though the angel of history can look to the recent past and point to environmental disasters perpetuated by the extractive industry, the angel can do nothing to halt our destructive momentum into a future that looks less like progress and more like regress.

Despite this regression, we have experienced massive technical-scientific progress in the 20th and 21st centuries. Technology has advanced from horse-drawn carts to electric cars; and from 50 ton super computers to smartphones slim enough to fit in your back pocket; let alone the progress made in medicine and the biological sciences.³⁸⁹ Today, humans—at least those with sufficient economic and geographic privilege—have the potential to live longer, healthier, more convenient, and more comfortable lives than ever before. However, the West’s compulsion for sedentary lifestyles, one-click shopping, and binging Netflix have not produced greater happiness, more meaning, or deeper connection. Indeed, humans are increasingly alienated from themselves, each other, and nature. Technical-scientific progress is not commensurate with moral-political progress, nor does it override injustice or domination, in many cases it exacerbates these plights.³⁹⁰ As Amy Allen points out, “The language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people.”³⁹¹ While there have been great gains in the development of science and technology, the myth of progress breaks down when its logic justifies domination, economic exploitation, and a looming climate crisis that will only accelerate with extractive capitalism.

³⁸⁹ Alvin Powell, “Mark I, rebooted,” *Harvard Gazette*, July 23, 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/07/harvards-mark-1-finds-its-new-home/>.

³⁹⁰ Allen, *The End of Progress*, I draw on Allen’s conceptual distinctions between technical-scientific, and moral-political progress.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Benjamin's attentive reading of history in "On the Concept of History" offers a critical roadmap for navigating away from the narrative of progress. The narrative of historical progress justifies fascism, colonialism, and slavery as rungs on the ladder to Parnassus, where the ultimate end is the perfection of humanity. Benjamin artfully challenges this depiction of history, and as we will see, in its stead suggests sauntering through history like a flaneur, collecting fragments to construct a dialectical image along the way. In the meantime, I will turn to the searing critique of the Enlightenment and progress offered by Horkheimer and Adorno.

Horkheimer, Adorno, and the Unreason of the Enlightenment

Adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power, constantly renewing the degenerations which prove successful progress, not failed progress, to be its own antithesis. *The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.*

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno³⁹²

Adorno developed the foundation for what would become his life's work in the period surrounding WWII and the Holocaust. While in exile from Nazi Germany in the United States, Adorno and Horkheimer grappled with how Enlightenment rationality produced the most unreasonable outcomes. They associated the Enlightenment's compulsion to identify, categorize, and equivocate with the authoritarian principles that enabled the Holocaust. Adorno's resulting philosophical project sought to challenge the unreason of progress by disrupting conceptual fixity, both through identifying similarities among conceptually dissimilar objects, and locating heterogeneities among supposedly similar concepts. By doing so, Adorno's work aimed to uncover the profusion of contradictions embedded within contemporary society. When we mobilize certain concepts—like society, history, nature, or progress—their agreed upon definitions often mask latent meanings that undermine popular interpretations of these terms. Take, for instance, the tail-end of

³⁹² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunselin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 28, emphasis added.

the quote from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* cited above. In it, Adorno and Horkheimer argue: “the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.”³⁹³ In other words, the idea or narrative of historical progress—as tempting a narrative as it may be—entails ceaseless tragedy and catastrophe.

The same Enlightenment that brought about massive advancements in medical knowledge also brought about massive advancements in technologies used in war, genocide, and violence. To build on Adorno’s formulation, we have experienced “progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb,” let alone unmanned drones and the AR-15.³⁹⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno begin the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with an explanation of the aporia at the root of their analysis:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.³⁹⁵

With the development of reason, one might expect the elimination of suffering. Yet the age of reason has produced countless unreasonable outcomes (including nuclear weapons, genocide, climate change, biodiversity loss, and mass starvation) that all but ensure—rather than alleviate—human and more-than-human suffering.

There is a tendency in Western liberal societies to take progress—or continual moral and political improvement—as a given. If so-called progress enabled the devastation and violence caused by the Holocaust and World War II what can progress mean?³⁹⁶ To Adorno, progress is a form of magical thinking.

Progress means: to step out of the magic spell even after the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings

³⁹³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 28

³⁹⁴ Adorno, “Progress,” *Critical Models*, 153.

³⁹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

³⁹⁶ To name only two horrific events in the last 150 years.

to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that *progress occurs where it ends*.³⁹⁷

This is why Adorno put forth the idea that “progress occurs where it ends.”³⁹⁸ The totalizing and teleological concept of progress is laden with violence and wreckage. For the future to turn toward freedom or redemption in the unfolding of history, the “spell of progress” must be broken.³⁹⁹ As Adorno averred: “After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it.”⁴⁰⁰ Despite the age of reason giving humans the intellectual tools to eliminate suffering, subjective reason rationalizes irrational outcomes. We would sooner bury oil pipelines under fragile waterways on Indigenous land to encourage extreme fossil fuel extraction, than address the climate crisis that threatens the future livability of our planet.

The Enlightenment supplanted mythologies with so-called reason but lacked the awareness to realize that it had traded the myths it critiqued for the myth of modernity. In place of animism, magic, mystery, and ritual, the Enlightenment gave us linear time, calculability, utility, and facts. By reducing concepts to numerical abstractions, scientific rationality requires an abstract numerical essentialism to communicate knowledge. There is a compulsion toward instant gratification, especially as this relates to knowledge. If we can whittle facts down to precise data points and a pithy infographic, there is no need to consider the concepts underlying the data. “[The] Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape.”⁴⁰¹ The abstraction of concepts

³⁹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” in Adorno, *Critical Models*, 143-160, 150, emphasis added; I am indebted to Amy Allen’s analysis of Adorno’s theorization of progress in *The End of Progress*, in this book, she uses the final portion of this quote as an orienting epigraph at the beginning of her book.

³⁹⁸ Adorno, “Progress,” 150

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 20.

and knowledge to statistics and data, alienates humans from knowledge, each other, and their own minds.

While the Enlightenment aspired to liberate humans from the dangers of nature, it instead resulted in the domination of nature, as well as the alienation and repression of humans. This is the “price of progress” exacted by the Enlightenment.⁴⁰² As Regina Cochrane notes, “Enlightenment's liberatory moment, which released humans from domination by an enchanted, fate-dictating nature manipulated by religious and political elites, is contradicted by its moment of domination.”⁴⁰³ Moral and political progress remains a potent myth in Western liberal societies because humans have developed societies where most humans (of a particular socio-economic class) are incubated from the danger of nature. In our compulsion to master the natural world, we have eradicated the threat of “demons and their conceptual descendants.”⁴⁰⁴ However, knowledge is so thoroughly systematized and abstracted, that the world appears as a series of unquestionable facts, devoid of the imprint of human intervention. The world is reconceived “as a giant analytical judgement.”⁴⁰⁵ Scientific rationalization establishes distance from nature and asserts that the wisdom of earth-based or traditional knowledge is a form of magical thinking that belongs in the past. Humans are now more disconnected from—and know less about—the natural world, even though modern Western society has eliminated many of the threats associated with the natural world.

⁴⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, “Reason and Revelation,” in Adorno, *Critical Models*, 135-142, 137.

⁴⁰³ Regina Cochrane, “Climate Change, ‘Buen Vivir’, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment: Toward a Feminist Critical Philosophy of Climate Justice,” *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 576–98, 588, drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6-12.

⁴⁰⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

Despite the costs, Enlightenment rationality enabled human self-preservation and unprecedented levels of comfort through rapid industrialization and scientific discovery. As Cochrane demonstrates,

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the disenchantment of nature was necessary in order to free humans not only from ‘necessity and scarcity’ but also—and primarily—from premodern bondage to fate, idolatry, and a social mastery enforced via mythic legitimization of the status quo.⁴⁰⁶

Yet faith in scientific rationality perpetuates the idolization of science and technology for saving humanity from the problems it creates. The speed of technological innovation enables a parallel belief in the possibility for rapid change, resulting in a shared optimism in the speed of political change and moral progress. “Even this frantic optimism is the perversion of a motif that has seen better days: the refusal to wait. Confidence in the state of technology made people see change as imminent, a palpable possibility.”⁴⁰⁷ Political change moves at a glacial pace when it comes to actualizing socialist political dreams or addressing climate change. Meanwhile technological innovations demand rapid alterations to the political sphere and have us trained to believe in meteoric change. This is because tech firms often wield immense power and technological innovation can happen too fast to regulate.

Enlightenment rationality and the scientific method supplanted one form of mythologizing for another, when they became the only legitimate form of creating knowledge. This enabled massive environmental degradation and ultimately widespread collective guilt—which requires the palliative of yet another myth. The new myth, Adorno argues, looks to the paleontological record for hope that humans may avoid eradicating every species living on earth or that a new species could

⁴⁰⁶ Cochrane, “Climate Change, ‘Buen Vivir’, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment,” 589, referencing Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁴⁰⁷ Adorno, “Deviation,” in *Minima Moralia*, 73: 114.

overtake human hegemony.⁴⁰⁸ Scientific rationality would dissuade the alarmism inherent to such myths, instead offering the myth of techno-optimism that a *Deus ex machina* will protect the planet from cataclysmic predictions of climate crisis and the sixth extinction. However, this read of progress obscures the reality that while humans have profound impacts on the environment—preventing ecosystemic and atmospheric feedback loops may be outside of the scope of human control, especially when late capitalism reinforces these feedback loops.

The Enlightenment’s mastery of nature may have enabled self-preservation through the domination of nature, but over-confidence in science and technology occludes warnings about the consequences of geoengineering and dominating the environment to protect a business-as-usual approach to fossil fuel consumption. The magical thinking embedded within the narrative of progress has a numbing political effect, if we assume that technology will develop quickly enough to geo-engineer the climate and compensate for governmental inability to sufficiently reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This assumption overlooks the incommensurability between technical-scientific and moral-political progress, as well as the possible side-effects of carbon-capture and stratospheric aerosol injection—two geoengineering strategies proposed for mitigating global warming—which, among other consequences, could alter rainfall and whiten the sky.⁴⁰⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer help illuminate how without the guarantee of moral and political progress, one is left without the assurance of continual improvement as we move into the future, even if scientific advancements continue apace.

Pessimism and the Negativity of the Frankfurt School

⁴⁰⁸ Adorno, “Mammoth,” in *Minima Moralia*, 74: 115.

⁴⁰⁹ Barry Goldstein, Peter H. Kobos, and Patrick V. Brady, “Unintended Consequences of Atmospheric Injection of Sulphate Aerosols,” *The Sandia Report* (Albuquerque: Sandia National Laboratories, 2010); Stephen M. Gardiner, “Why geoengineering is not a ‘global public good’, and why it is ethically misleading to frame it as one,” *Climactic Change* 121 (May 2013): 513-525.

The hope for better conditions, insofar as it is not merely an illusion, is founded less on the assurance that those conditions are guaranteed, sustainable, and final than on a lack of respect for what is so firmly ensconced amid the general suffering... The light of reason... falls, even on the happiest day on its irresolvable contradiction: the calamity which reason alone cannot avert.

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno⁴¹⁰

Throughout this section I will explore the pessimism embodied within the philosophical projects of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin. In the case of Adorno, many have argued against his critics, that he was wrongly cast-aside as a pessimist. Against the grain, I will argue that the argument foreclosing Adorno's pessimism is need of a rethinking. Then, once established, I will explore Adorno's pessimism as it is woven throughout his philosophical project, but namely through his theorization of negative dialectics. In the subsequent section, I will analyze Horkheimer's Schopenhauerian materialism. Finally, in the remaining section, I will explore Benjamin's revolutionary pessimism.

The Critical Pessimism of Theodor Adorno

In *The Melancholy Science*, Gillian Rose opens her book by reassuring us that Theodor Adorno is no pessimist: “‘The melancholy science’...is not a pessimistic science.”⁴¹¹ Instead, Rose argues that Adorno's reference to the “melancholy science” is “an inversion of Nietzsche's ‘joyful science’.”⁴¹² Rose establishes distance between Adorno and pessimism because he “rejects any dichotomy such as optimistic/pessimistic” because they refer to “an inherently fixed and static view.”⁴¹³ Others, such

⁴¹⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 187.

⁴¹¹ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, ix.

⁴¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

⁴¹³ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, ix.

as Amy Allen and Robyn Marasco have agreed with Rose that Adorno is not a pessimist.⁴¹⁴ As Allen notes:

Rose is correct...to note that melancholy here does not signal pessimistic [sic], nor is it equivalent to sadness or depression (though there is no denying that both of these are typical affective responses to the text). But what the Nietzschean reading of this phrase fails to highlight is the sense in which critique is the melancholy science because it arises in response to an experience of loss.⁴¹⁵

Marasco shares Rose's argument, which was a correction to various critics' "mistaken reading of Adorno as a pessimist."⁴¹⁶ Allen, Marasco, and Rose offer brilliantly incisive readings of Adorno that have served as a North Star for my work— each have illuminated different topographical features to orient myself in Adorno's thought and have inspired me to take him in unexpected directions. However, now that we have the benefit of almost a century since the debates between Lukács and the Frankfurt School, Rose, Allen, and Marasco's contemporary claim about Adorno's non-pessimism calls for a rethinking. Besides, as Adorno reminds us, "Distance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension."⁴¹⁷ In what follows, I will mind the tensions that occupy the alleged distance between Adorno and pessimism.

First, while Allen is correct to argue that "Rose is one of Adorno's most perceptive readers" I think we need to move one step beyond Rose's (as well as Allen's, and Marasco's) assessment that Adorno is not a pessimist.⁴¹⁸ To move beyond Rose, I would argue that Adorno's negativity was both a form of melancholy and (if it is sufficiently reconstituted) a form of pessimism. I am sympathetic to Rose's desire to redeem Adorno from the critiques of his detractors who used

⁴¹⁴ Allen, "Critique as Melancholy Science."

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 347.

⁴¹⁶ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 16.

⁴¹⁷ Adorno, "Keeping one's distance," in *Minima Moralia*, 126-128, 27.

⁴¹⁸ Allen, "Critique as Melancholy Science," 347.

pessimism as an insult to his work. However, if we always succumb to viewing pessimism as a term of abuse, we risk losing out on the rich array of critical resources philosophical pessimism can offer. Furthermore, it bears mentioning that Nietzsche—who inspired Adorno’s melancholic inversion of the “gay science”—was a self-proclaimed “Dionysian pessimist.”⁴¹⁹

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism allowed for an interplay between a non-metaphysical sense of values attuned to the suffering inherent to existence, meanwhile creating space for a life-affirming ethos that laughs in the face of suffering. It is a joyful “pessimism of strength.”⁴²⁰ To be sure, Adorno was quite critical of the life-affirming ethos of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. Adorno argued that loving one’s fate was not dissimilar from Nietzsche’s critique of Christian faith in redemption, where if Nietzsche located the former in “the lunatic asylum, the origin of *amor fati* might be sought in a prison.”⁴²¹ That being said, Adorno claimed to be deeply indebted to Nietzsche, having drawn heavily on Nietzsche’s critique of morality.⁴²² Deborah Cook makes the argument that Adorno builds on Nietzsche’s perspective on conformity in his rejection of universal ideals.⁴²³ From my view, Adorno critiqued Nietzsche on the same grounds that Nietzsche critiqued Schopenhauer—in both cases, the theorist was so trapped within their own philosophical project, that they miscarried on their logic. Nietzsche could not see how belief in *amor fati* could be a universal value system, in the same way that Schopenhauer failed to grasp that one must renounce the meaninglessness of a valueless existence (and create one’s own meaning) to

⁴¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882) 370: 236.

⁴²⁰ Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 3.

⁴²¹ Adorno, “Court of Appeal,” in *Minima Moralia*, 61: 97-98, 98.

⁴²² Cook, Adorno, Foucault, and the Critique of the West, pp 8-9.

⁴²³ Ibid.

overcome passive nihilism (or a will to nothing). While Adorno would have surely rejected the static dichotomy of pessimism/optimism depicted by Rose, a static dichotomy implies the possibility for a dynamic remainder. Adorno's theorizing resists the compulsion to conformity embodied in patriotic happiness or hurrah-optimism," an embodiment of a refusal for conceptual fixity, as well as being attuned to the melancholy register noted by Rose (and Joseph Winters).⁴²⁴ Given how Adorno theorizes alongside and moves beyond Nietzsche, a critical orientation of pessimism might be a sufficiently dynamic lens through which to understand Adorno's work.

Marasco's understanding of despair is a sufficiently sensitive lens through which to view the loss implicit within Adorno's melancholy science. Conversant with pessimism as she is, Marasco moves one step further than Rose when she argues that despair overcomes the flaws she locates in Dienstag's description of pessimism. According to Marasco pessimism is not sufficiently historical or political. Despite Dienstag identifying a "distinct time-consciousness" within the tradition of pessimism, it "seems curiously separate from historical processes, social life, and political values."⁴²⁵ In other words, Dienstag's pessimism is not a form of critical theory in the Marxist or post-Marxist tradition/s. Even if the outlook for liberation is grim and Adorno argued against "the primacy of praxis," his theorizing always maintained openness about the possibility of transformation.⁴²⁶ Adorno, Nietzsche, and Dienstag share a similar attitude about the contingency and openness of the future. Where Adorno departs from Nietzsche and Dienstag, however, is that Adorno's negativity or refusal is a form of critical theorizing bent toward transformation. Nietzsche and Dienstag are

⁴²⁴ Adorno, "Deviation," in *Minima Moralia*, 73: 113-115, 114; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*. I will discuss Winters' brilliant work with more depth in Chapter 5.

⁴²⁵ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 16.

⁴²⁶ Adorno, "Resignation," 290; 292.

explicitly skeptical of the “question-answer vision” of history implicit in Hegel.⁴²⁷ Adorno shares similar concerns but radicalizes the left-Hegelian vision of the dialectic. He demonstrates how rather than a positive answer to the dialectic, history is contingent and often unfolds in a negative manner.

As Buck-Morss notes:

Adorno [never] accepted any overarching concept of the objective course of history as a totality. History formed ‘no structural whole.’ Instead, it...[unfolded] within a multiplicity of divisions of human praxis through a dialectical process which was open-ended. History did not guarantee the identity of reason and reality. Rather, history unfolded in the spaces *between* subjects and objects, men [sic] and nature, whose very nonidentity was history’s motor force.⁴²⁸

Adorno’s philosophical project emphasized how the compulsion to draw boundaries around concepts—otherwise referred to as identity thinking—was a tendency that enabled authoritarian outcomes. With Adorno’s assessment of history, progress, and the dialectic there was always a non-conceptual remainder that existed beyond conceptual boundaries. This is why, even though the Enlightenment had produced more regression than progress, there was always an opening for freedom or transformation. These were the non-conceptual remainders left behind in the wreckage of history. Even if political transformation is unlikely, and even when the future often looks more like regress than progress, Adorno remained committed to the possibility of transformation. Even where pessimism appears like a static, ahistorical ethos—the non-conceptual remainder creates the possibility for a productive version of pessimism amenable to Adorno’s theorizing.

While Dienstag does incredible work politicizing pessimism and creating the possibility for willed spontaneity, the possibility for transformation is rooted in an existentialist ethic of rebellion, rather than being a work of critical theory bent toward transformation. As I will discuss shortly, Adorno would have rejected existentialist conceptions of pessimism as static, which is likely why

⁴²⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 34.

⁴²⁸ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of the Negative Dialectic*, 47, emphasis in original, quoting Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,” 1932, *GS* 1, 325.

Marasco echoes Rose's initial critique. While a critical orientation of pessimism benefits from certain existential elements found within Dienstag and van der Lugt's conceptions of pessimism, it must be clear that Adorno would have rejected these aspects of pessimism. Marasco also notes that Dienstag's analysis of pessimism is "a deeply unhistorical ethic," which is another concern I share with Marasco.⁴²⁹ That being said, I do not think this argument terminates the possibility of recognizing fidelity between Adorno and pessimism. As we will see, there are elements of the despair Marasco theorizes through Adorno that resonates deeply with van der Lugt's assessment of suffering in value-oriented pessimism.

Finally, Marasco establishes distance between despair and pessimism because pessimism shares a static dichotomy with optimism, and because both allow for a comfortable assessment of the future.

Despair rebels against the quiet comforts of both optimism and pessimism... Quite unlike pessimism, despair sees limitations everywhere while also having the tendency to embolden thought and praxis to press against the limits of existing conditions. It registers a revolt at what is given. In this way, despair preserves the possibility of something radically different and conjures the spirit of hope that it also quiets.

However, I would like to offer the provocation that Marasco has rejected the static and comfortable dichotomy of pessimism/optimism in favor of the dynamic and dangerous despair/hope dichotomy, which—as a distinction between pessimism/optimism and despair/hope—is itself another static dichotomy that would not rest easy with Adorno. I offer this critique in the spirit of expanding Marasco's rich and nuanced assessment of despair, to consider the possibility that a critically-oriented and sufficiently historical version of pessimism might be more aligned with despair than originally considered.

⁴²⁹ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 16.

Adorno may not have self-identified as a pessimist, unlike Nietzsche—or his colleagues Horkheimer and Benjamin—however, I intend to argue that given Adorno’s negativity, concern with suffering, reticence about the future, and his critique of the Enlightenment narrative of progress—he is more aligned with pessimism than previously thought. To make this argument, it will be vital to illuminate the distance between the more existential elements of Dienstag and van der Lugt’s taxonomies of pessimism. If pessimism remains on the ontological level—where one’s being, essence, or disposition is marked by these characteristics—then Adorno is not a pessimist. Ontological pessimism invokes a static position, seen in traditions like existentialism, that—as I will demonstrate in a subsequent section—Adorno argued against vehemently.⁴³⁰ However, if pessimism can accommodate a dialectical approach that uses critique to locate openings for social and political change, then Adorno’s thought rests *comfortably* within the critical tradition of pessimism. Perhaps one should be wary of invoking the dreaded pessimism—especially within left or radical political theory—for fear of encouraging left melancholy or resignation. Yet I maintain that a certain form of critical pessimism is a productive counterweight to the trap of optimism encouraged by the myth of progress, American exceptionalism, and toxic positivity. Indeed, Adorno’s thinking provides many tools for developing a critical pessimism compatible with left politics that can evade the static dichotomy of pessimism/optimism and the pessimistic resignation discussed above. By engaging with Adorno’s negative dialectics and non-identity thinking—as well as his critiques of progress, Enlightenment rationality, and existentialism—Adorno, alongside the pessimistic critical theory of Horkheimer and Benjamin, articulates a promising critical pessimism. A pessimism relevant for this contemporary moment, where there is insufficient political wherewithal to address climate change and renewed international interest in authoritarian populism.

⁴³⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; see also Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*.

Adorno and Negative Dialectics

Where pessimism is a general proposition, where it has a totalizing view, it implies that everything is fundamentally flawed, as Schopenhauer believed. Paradoxically, this means that it tends to leap to the assistance of individual evil in the world. It does so by arguing that attempts to change the world as a whole are doomed. This is also implicit in a negative philosophy of history.

—Theodor Adorno⁴³¹

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno shows how the logic of the exchange value in capitalism becomes synonymous with a logic of equivalence, which flattens differences in objects and concepts.⁴³² This logic results in the universalization or totalization of concepts. Conceptual unity requires the elimination of dissimilar elements, which—by creating rigid barriers around concepts—enables conceptual homogeneity. Yet, Adorno shows that regardless of how thoroughly a philosophical or empirical concept may describe an object, it will always retain a nonconceptual remainder (or what is not covered by the concept). Because concepts and knowledge emerge out of particular moments and particular social contexts, it can be difficult to see beyond a well-crafted concept, to grasp what is excluded in the drawing of conceptual boundaries.

For this reason, the project of developing conceptual knowledge in philosophy is never complete because concepts always retain a non-identical remainder that cannot be captured in their definition (e.g., the exception to the rule). As Adorno argues, “[t]o think is to identify.”⁴³³ All cognition tends toward the identification of similarities or differences, and the desire to recognize the object of our intellectual gaze. However, concepts are always in flux and never complete. As a critique of the metaphysical idea that there is a difference between the world of forms and

⁴³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 8.

⁴³² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

⁴³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

appearance, Adorno argues “conceptual totality is mere appearance.”⁴³⁴ There is no ideal form of a concept where if we can only conceptualize it perfectly, then we will grasp the Truth. What appears to be captured within a concept, can never fully enclose the object of its conceptualization. Instead, as Adorno explains,

What is, is more than it is. This “more” is not imposed upon it but remains immanent to it, as that which has been pushed out of it. In that sense, the nonidentical would be the thing’s own identity against its identifications.⁴³⁵

The nonidentical “more” occupies the space beyond the concept, or what is neglected by drawing conceptual boundaries around an object. As Michael Lipscomb notes, “an irreducible dimension of non-identity persists in our ability to know the world.”⁴³⁶ Capitalism would reduce everything to exchange values, but the irreducible dimension of our world—as well as the irreconcilable remainder between concepts and their objects—resists capture by our compulsion to identify.

This conceptual irreducibility extends to our understanding of nature, history, and human society. As Timothy Luke notes, “[Adorno] opposed primacy for the social against and over the natural, knowing that markets always interlace the two” (293).⁴³⁷ Capitalism would sooner filter every feature of the natural world through reductive concepts, to translate the environment into natural resources and assign a market value for ease of exchange. Trees become lumber, cows become beef, and a livable climate becomes a distant concern when faced with profits from the fossil fuel industry. As Deborah Cook notes, “The fetish character of commodities casts such a powerful spell

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁴³⁶ Michael Lipscomb, “Adorno’s Historical and Temporal Consciousness: Towards a Critical Theoretical Environmental Imagination,” in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 278-311: 285.

⁴³⁷ Timothy W. Luke. “Reflections from a Damaged Planet: Adorno as Accompaniment to Environmentalism in the Anthropocene,” in *Anthropocene Alerts: Critical Theory of the Contemporary as Ecocritique* (Candor, NY: Telos Press Publishing, 2019), 293.

over individuals that exchange relations now appear to be both immutable and necessary.”⁴³⁸ How could we sustain production without commodifying the natural world? Rather than viewing the natural world as a stockpile for resources, non-identity thinking can encourage humans to develop “affinity” with the natural world, rather than “regarding ourselves as radically distinct from nature.”⁴³⁹ Totalizing concepts enable the domination of nature and humans to deleterious effect, but Adorno viewed non-identity-thinking as a possible escape.

Non-identity thinking requires sustained focus on conceptual remainders, to locate contradictions and openings. This is the thrust of negative dialectics. As Bradley Macdonald articulates:

the real basis of negative dialectics is the deep, antagonistic structure associated with capitalist instrumental rationality, the economic and ideological practices that turn everything to value, that register and codify the correct mode of exchange identifications for the sake of profit.⁴⁴⁰

Thus, non-identity thinking is one modality of resistance. Non-identity thinking refuses the reductive logic and antagonistic conditions of late capitalism that would translate everything into their value as commodities. Through negating the homogeneity of conceptual fixity and the logic of domination, we maintain space for intellectual agency and resistance.

In his discussion of John Holloway, Macdonald demonstrates how a politics of non-identity is the articulation of “no” in response to the rapacious and repressive spirit of capitalism.⁴⁴¹ The aim in no-saying is a negation of the conditions reinforcing human domination and the domination of nature. Non-identity thinking is a resounding “no” to capitalism's imperative to produce and

⁴³⁸ Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham, England: Acumen Publishing, 2011), 15.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴⁰ Bradley J. Macdonald, “Theodor Adorno, Alterglobalization, and Non-Identity Politics,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 3 (2012): 328.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

purchase endless plastic tchotchkes—an imperative that more deeply imbricates workers within the capitalist system, based on the cultivation of false needs. Under capitalism, real human needs—such as the needs for safety, love, and human belonging—are manipulated to sell products, thereby cementing one’s *need* to participate in capitalism. Adorno’s non-identity thinking provides tools to resist the logic of capitalism through an engagement with the antagonistic and alienating conditions of our existence. Non-identity thinking is a figurative “no-saying” to the conceptual-fixity of the logic of capitalism, as well as a literal rejection of capitalism’s desire to ensnare us within its grasp.

Without brushing pessimism against the grain, it is a static concept always in dichotomous tension with optimism—both presume the safe position that the future will be predictably bad or good, depending on one’s predilection. However, nonidentity thinking shows how pessimism as either a concept or a philosophical tradition is never fixed. Pessimism is neither static nor dynamic, neither good nor bad, neither dangerous nor comfortable. Instead, owing to pessimism’s attitude of ambivalence toward the future, wariness about the narrative of progress, and concern with suffering, it would appear to align with the negativity of non-identity thinking’s “no-saying” or refusal. Furthermore, pessimism like non-identity thinking is skeptical about the status quo and conformity. While the forms of pessimism identified by Dienstag and van der Lugt do not take an explicitly anti-capitalist stance, it does not mean that pessimism cannot be suitably reconstructed through the negativity of Adorno’s thinking to be sufficiently anti-capitalist, critical, and materialist. Adorno’s negative dialectics offer a path toward a dynamic reading of pessimism as critical inquiry, one that complements the critical form of pessimism embodied within Foucault and Nietzsche’s critical genealogies. In this manner, pessimism can be a dynamic and critical theoretical framework that overcomes the static depiction of pessimism critiqued by Marasco, Allen, and Rose.

Adorno, Existentialism, and Temporally-Oriented Pessimism

Pessimism is a fickle tradition; it means many things to many people. Dienstag's impressive analysis of modern pessimism sought to clarify some of these inconsistencies. As discussed in previous chapters, Dienstag identifies several nodes of concern shared by pessimism, including: the irony of history (i.e., how the myth of progress has failed to deliver on its promise), the burden of linear time, the absurdity of existence, and resignation or its opposite. While Adorno's analysis shares a suspicion about the narrative of progress, his critical pessimism is incompatible with the existential elements of Dienstag's typology. Given Adorno's deep and thorough critique of existentialism, to argue that he was an existentialist would be akin to arguing that grape jelly is a type of wine: they are made from similar ingredients, but they are different in process, outcome, flavor, and effect. To establish some distance between Adorno and existential pessimism, I will discuss Adorno's critique of existentialism, which succumbs to an essentialist logic that reinforces the status quo. From there, I will discuss how Adorno responded to accusations that his theorizing was vulnerable to the resignation he critiqued in existentialism, before turning to a discussion of the vital role that critique and negativity play in democratic politics. Each of these elements, I argue, gesture toward congruities between Adorno's negativity and pessimism as critical inquiry.

In *Negative Dialectics*, and elsewhere, Adorno took aim at the static, and tautological assumptions undergirding existentialism and Heidegger's ontology of Being. By over-emphasizing the *question* of the meaning of life, the existentialists failed to provide an *answer*, instead arguing the *question* matters more than the answer.⁴⁴² Being—or the subject—is given priority over everything else and is said to meet the ontological need for meaning without creating meaning or eliminating suffering. Adorno emphasizes how the reification of the subject results in a static “fatal dialectics”

⁴⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

where one's faith in subjective omnipotence "degenerates into a bondage of Being."⁴⁴³ To avoid this fatal dialectics the subject requires the object, and the non-identity between the two. Critical awareness of one's historical context is the only possibility for avoiding the "bondage of Being."⁴⁴⁴ When one thinks in service of an ahistorical subjectivity—or "nonconceptual vagaries"—this is an attempt to "fly" with the prison of Being or with one's self-obsessed subjectivity. The reification of the subject amounts to an apolitical stalemate: where an individual's identity exists without consideration for how their material existence may be conditioned by social, political, economic, or historical forces beyond their direct control. This static conception of reality trades the possibility for political change or liberation for self-obsessed navel-gazing. The elevation of the self—without context for understanding one's historical condition—is a tautological absurdity for the sake of absurdity.

This emphasis on the subject enables an increased possibility for domination because one accepts unfreedom—under the guise of absurdity—as the premise for existence. If for Sartre, the absence of universal categories was proof of the absurdity of existence, then for Adorno, it is only proof of the absurdity of classificatory systems.⁴⁴⁵ Rather than emphasizing the meaninglessness of life, which is ahistorical, Adorno emphasized the meaninglessness of the question about the purpose of existence. Instead, the existential question about the meaning of existence is a historically situated question. Existential doubt and boredom are products of the alienation perpetuated by capitalism. Without addressing the cause of alienation, the ontology of Being degenerates into a static and fatal dialectics equally as entrenched and stable as capitalism. The fixity of one parallels and reinforces the

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*.

fixity of the other. Theory degenerates into a question about why we exist, rather than, why do we exist under the conditions of late capitalism and the resulting climate crisis, and what can we do to resist these conditions? Existential ontology emphasizes essence over truth instead of challenging conceptual homogeneity and essentialism. As mentioned above, essentialism enables domination through a totalized flattening of social conditions and existence, by erasing difference among the concepts it equivocates. To take this one step further, the conception of pessimism falls silent when it is a static disposition, essence, ontology, or existential tradition.

Existential pessimism, then, collapses into resignation because it fails to interrogate the social and historical conditions that reinforce domination and necessitate negativity about political reality. Despite disdaining the status quo, existential pessimism perpetuates this logic by eschewing a dynamic read of political and contemporary reality. Through its dual emphasis on the absurdity of existence and boredom—without questioning how the logics of exchange value and late capitalism reinforce these realities—existential pessimism disdains but also accepts the status quo. “An adequate philosophical thinking is not only critical of the status quo and its reified replica in consciousness but is equally critical of itself.”⁴⁴⁶ The critical reflexivity enabled by negative dialectics resists acquiescing to the status quo through unearthing previously accepted antagonisms pervasive in late capitalism. It is a dynamic approach to challenge the authority maintained through conceptual fixity and totalizing systems of order. “The massive concentration of economic powers, and consequently of political and administrative ones as well, to a large extent reduces every individual into a mere functionary of the machinery.”⁴⁴⁷ Instead of falling silent, critical pessimism, when

⁴⁴⁶ Adorno, *Critical Models*, 133.

⁴⁴⁷ Adorno, “Reason and Revelation.” 138.

informed by negative dialectics, offers a deafening “no” to the myth of progress, the logic of false equivalence, and the alienation inherent in late capitalism.

Adorno's thinking offers a pathway toward a concrete negation of the alienation and domination perpetuated by capitalism. As Adorno points out in *Critical Models*, humans are more connected than ever before—which is truer now with social media and smartphones—yet this interconnectivity exists in a vacuum where humans are increasingly alienated and in need of social bonds.⁴⁴⁸ Adorno's theorizing provides a toolkit for critiquing the inconsistencies and antagonisms that derail our capacity to flourish. We must first understand and critique the source of our subjugation—in this case the relationship between late capitalism, the logic of exchange value, alienation, and a disrupted capacity for connection—before we can identify appropriate channels of resistance.

Critique is essential to all democracy. Not only does democracy require the freedom to criticize and need critical impulses. Democracy is nothing less than defined by critique.⁴⁴⁹

Uncritical acceptance of the status quo is antithetical to democratic politics, indeed democracy withers without critique. Yet, there seems to be a pervasive and insidious belief that positivity is essential for contemporary existence. Positivity without critique encourages an apolitical acceptance of contemporary politics, a position that requires an unwillingness to recognize injustice, or the privilege to deny that injustice matters. An Adornian critical pessimism takes seriously democracy's need for dissent and challenges toxic positivity by illuminating the relationship between domination, alienation, injustice, and late capitalism.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Adorno. “Critique,” 281.

In the final essay in *Critical Models*, Adorno addressed critics who—like Lukács—warned that his philosophy could lead to resignation because he resisted describing concrete political solutions, and maintained “distance from praxis.”⁴⁵⁰ Rather than reify praxis, Adorno cautions that praxis without theory risks reinforcing the domination it seeks to upend. As Adorno warns:

People locked in desperately want to get out. In such situations one doesn’t think anymore, or does so only under fictive premises. Within absolutized praxis only reaction is possible and therefore false. Only thinking can find an exit.⁴⁵¹

There is a desperation inherent to liberation movements. This is why revolutions are so inspiring, they offer the idea of instant gratification for the elimination of injustice, yet innumerable revolutions had violent, tyrannical outcomes without the liberation they sought to achieve.⁴⁵²

Instead, Adorno asseverates,

The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it...objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part a comportment, a form of praxis, it is more akin to transformative praxis than a comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis.⁴⁵³

Critical theory maintains space for intellectual autonomy and spontaneity by pointing beyond itself.

When thinking is fixated on actualizing a specific utopia, it becomes ossified, and subject to the totalized essentialism negative dialectics seeks to avoid. The openness sought by critical thinking is how we can maintain democracy and individual freedom, through resisting the compulsion to conform to administered thought, rather than blindly engaging with praxis. Praxis matters, of course, but one should be wary of praxis without critical thinking. Critical theorizing may create the conditions for intellectual unhappiness through recognition of oppression, but the happiness

⁴⁵⁰ Adorno, “Resignation,” 290.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² The decolonial movements of the 1960s and 1970s notwithstanding, as these revolutions often achieved their aim of ousting the imperial power. That said, many decolonial movements resulted in authoritarian regimes of a different order.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 292-293.

achieved by critical thinking extends to all of humanity, and for Adorno, this is the opposite of resignation.⁴⁵⁴

The opening enabled through immanent critique is a negation of the negative forces suppressing our subjectivity. This is a mode of thinking that can enable political action if we leave aside Adorno's disdain for activism. The perpetual antagonism encouraged by immanent critique—or the nonidentity between concept and object—is not just a philosophical abstraction. It is also the basis for a critical engagement with the contradictions of contemporary existence. The act of critical theorizing remains vital for maintaining intellectual distance from (yet immersion within) praxis, to avoid replicating the dominating and repressive forces elemental to contemporary political life. Rather than leading to political quietism, Adorno's critical approach accepts the provisional character of the future. A future without an explicit vision that does not require a deluded acceptance of the myth of progress, or a calcified conception of utopia, but instead a critical approach that does not try to control the future. It is an understanding of political reality that rejects the status quo through critical engagement with the forces of oppression. Despite maintaining intellectual autonomy, openness, and spontaneity, it does not disrupt the capacity for radical action.

While Adorno believed that praxis without theory risked collapsing into authoritarian action, he maintained a belief that all of theory was in service of redemption. As Adorno argues at the end of *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 293; For a nuanced analysis of the vital role unhappiness plays in highlighting oppression, see Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

⁴⁵⁵ Adorno, "Finale," *Minima Moralia*, 153: 247.

The purpose of philosophy in times of crisis and despair, is to locate openings to carve out a little space for freedom. In this way, Adorno created some space for directing theory toward the melioration of the human condition while sustaining a trenchant eye toward the unreason of progress. In this way, an Adornian pessimism lends depth to critical analysis through engaging with the defining antagonisms of our contemporary moment rather than taking them as a given. Adorno's suspicion of Enlightenment rationality and approach to negative dialectics gives us the tools to recognize otherwise occluded antagonisms that command intellectual conformity. An Adornian critical pessimism confronts the forces of domination by resisting the authoritarian tendencies that compel conformity through the logic of equivalence and exchange value. When informed by negative dialectics, this approach holds democracy accountable by demanding that it remain open to dissent. Adorno's critical pessimism emphasizes the role of critique as a radical political act that seeks to undermine stable contradictions, as nodes of resistance and rupture. Now that we have spent some time dwelling on the critical pessimism of Adorno, in what follows, I will explore the pessimism of his mentor and friend, Horkheimer.

Horkheimer's Pessimism

[T]he justification for repression belongs to the world that makes repression necessary.

—Max Horkheimer⁴⁵⁶

The immanent logic of social development points to a totally technicized life as its final stage. Man's domination of nature reaches such proportions that scarcity, and thus the necessity of man's dominion over man, disappears. But at the same time, the end is total disillusionment, the extinction of mind insofar as it differs from the tool that is reason. Material want was the condition of injustice, of suppression, as it was the condition of longing and imagination. The human species fulfilled its destiny by attaining to the condition of an especially skilled, sophisticated animal species. By way of science, it reached technology, automation, and finally the appropriation of precise procedures by the psychic substance, as inheritable

⁴⁵⁶ Max Horkheimer, "Schopenhauer and Society (1955)," trans. Todd Cronan, *Qui Parle* 15, no. 1 (June 1, 2004): 85–96, 88.

instincts and skills...All this is part of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, the change from truth into unconditional conformity with meaninglessness.

—Max Horkheimer⁴⁵⁷

At the beginning of his intellectual life, Max Horkheimer was an avid reader of the metaphysical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer. For a critical theorist who spent much of his career committed to critically reflexive post-Marxist philosophy and the struggle for social transformation this might seem a bit odd. However, as mentioned above, Horkheimer found a way to reconcile and radicalize Schopenhauer's thinking as a form of pessimistic materialism. This is why many refer to Horkheimer's philosophical project as "Schopenhauerian Marxism."⁴⁵⁸ As Ryan Gunderson notes, Horkheimer's thinking underwent three significant changes over his lifetime:

from an emphasis on interdisciplinary materialism and the early formation of his Critical Theory in the 1930s, to a scathing critique of instrumental reason and an administered world in the 1940s and 50s, which led to a nearly totalizing pessimism by the end of his life, in 1973.⁴⁵⁹

Horkheimer was profoundly affected by the horrors of the Holocaust and the emergence of the administered world that enabled fascism. Toward the end of his life, Horkheimer returned to Schopenhauer to make sense of "the immense amount of suffering that had occurred in the first half of the twentieth century."⁴⁶⁰ To contextualize Horkheimer's pessimistic turn, I will offer a brief biographical sketch before discussing Horkheimer's pessimism itself.

While exiled from Nazi Germany at Columbia University in New York, Max Horkheimer—then Director of the Institute for Social Research—wrote his influential essay "Traditional and

⁴⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer, "On Pessimism," *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw, A Continuum Book (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1978), 237.

⁴⁵⁸ Gunderson, "Horkheimer's Pessimism and Compassion," 166; Schulz, "Horkheimer, Max," 5: 2163.

⁴⁵⁹ Gunderson, "Horkheimer's Pessimism and Compassion," 166.

⁴⁶⁰ Critical Art Ensemble, "Schopenhauer Today," in *Aesthetics, Necropolitics, and Environmental Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2018), 55–70, 55.

Critical Theory,” which defined the terms of critical theory.⁴⁶¹ This essay established what Bernard Harcourt refers to as “a tension between two sensibilities that has plagued critical theory ever since.”⁴⁶² The tension is between critical reflexivity—especially as it relates to challenging universal historical narratives—and a commitment to scientific Marxism.⁴⁶³ The commitment to the latter was both normative—in that it referred to a commitment to liberation from domination, and epistemological—in that it remained loyal to the empirical study of society, economics, and politics to locate contradictions and points of rupture in capitalism. Horkheimer argued that positivist science had “abandoned” humanity owing to its “imaginary self-sufficiency.”⁴⁶⁴ Rather than being critically reflexive, science had chosen to ignore the social, historical, and political context out of which it emerged, as well as how scientific results could alter social and political conditions for the worse. For this reason, Horkheimer believed that empirical sociological or political research must be coupled with reflexivity and a commitment to strive for social transformation.

Horkheimer never abandoned this commitment. However, as he observed socialist revolutions become totalitarian and Communist Party politics become authoritarian, he did grow increasingly pessimistic about the possibility for social transformation. As he stated in a lecture on the hundredth anniversary of Schopenhauer’s death, “The greatest drama of the perversion of faith in humanity into an intransigent cult of the state was offered by socialism itself.”⁴⁶⁵ Akin to Adorno’s maxim, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly,” Horkheimer thought that any positive concepts that

⁴⁶¹ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory.”

⁴⁶² Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 55.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 242.

⁴⁶⁵ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 69.

emerged in a negative context, would carry the negativity of their context.⁴⁶⁶ As such, it was not possible to conceptualize melioration, freedom, or justice in a world where drudgery, injustice, and domination prevailed. This is where Schopenhauer's critique of metaphysical idealism most directly influenced Horkheimer's materialism. Universal or ideal concepts such as justice or freedom are the basis for evaluating actually existing instances of injustice or slavery, yet these ideals do not exist in a material sense and were defined to serve bourgeois interests. As Horkheimer demonstrates, the "eternal principle" of justice—as it is understood in contemporary liberal societies—was an idea developed by particular people who benefitted from privileged class positions.⁴⁶⁷ Using the concept of bourgeois justice to evaluate actually existing injustice, can only ever offer an inaccurate or partial depiction of this injustice when the original conditions of justice served the ruling class. When concepts acquire the status of universal principles in philosophy or politics, this status masks their negative origins and the role they serve in helping elites maintain power. As such, these ideas must be reexamined in their context, to avoid using principles that benefit the status quo to evaluate material instances of injustice. Metaphysicians sustained a reiterative conversation with past philosophers; meanwhile the task of materialism is determined by the historical conditions immanent to present moment. Hence the commitment in critical theory to immanent critique.

This was how Horkheimer radicalized Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer broke with the metaphysical emphasis on the ideals of "good" or "perfection." Rather than there being a metaphysical ideal of perfection to which humans strove progressively to understand and attain, existence was instead a concatenation of wills striving to survive the endless drudgery of existence. As Horkheimer states, "the basis for [Schopenhauer's] theory is the ever-flowing source of stimuli:

⁴⁶⁶ Adorno, "Refuge for the Homeless," 39.

⁴⁶⁷ Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 22.

unappeasable will.”⁴⁶⁸ There is no higher meaning or universal principle of perfection, instead each of us must learn to cope with the insatiable desire of our unappeasable will. Furthermore, and importantly, there is no progress or teleological endpoint of history to which humans strive to achieve. This last point is a critical amendment to the teleological interpretations of Marxist materialism—which Horkheimer shares—where once a certain level of material comfort has been achieved, class struggle will eventually and necessarily lead to communist revolution.⁴⁶⁹ As

Horkheimer clarifies:

The more lucid thinking is, the more will it drive towards the abolition of misery; and yet any assurance that this is the ultimate meaning of existence, the end of pre-history, the beginning of reason is nothing but an endearing illusion.⁴⁷⁰

In other words, there is no teleological endpoint at which point humans arrive at the cessation of misery, domination, and injustice.

Horkheimer was critical of the Hegelian optimism in Marx but argued that without Marx’s mistaken idealism, he would have been a pessimist. In a note published in *Dawn and Decline*, Horkheimer claimed that Marx’s mistaken idealism was based on three errors. First, Marx mistook the history of the bourgeois and progressive West as society and “history as such”; secondly, Marx believed that once humans had mastered material conditions, they would be “free” and “all misery

⁴⁶⁸ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 64.

⁴⁶⁹ The debates rage on about whether Marx’s theory of history was deterministic or depicted an explicitly progressive account of the inevitable arrival of communism. It should be clear that Horkheimer was critical of what he perceived to be a progressive Hegelian optimism in Marx’s historical materialism. However, not all Marxists or post-Marxists agree that Marx’s analysis of history was teleological. For those who underscore his determinism, the penultimate chapter of *Capital* Volume 1 (on Primitive Accumulation)—which discusses slavery and colonialism as precursors to the emergence of capitalism—is read as insinuating that capitalism (and by extension, communism) required moving through slavery, and colonialism. If communism requires capitalism, then (by this reading) slavery and colonialism are steppingstones along the progressive path toward communism, and the eradication of domination. For a recent and nuanced discussion of whether Marx can be read as offering a telos, as well as an argument that Marx was engaged in a genealogy of capitalism in *Capital* Volume 1, see: Amy Allen, “Dripping with Blood and Dirt from Head to Toe: Marx’s Genealogy of Capitalism in *Capital*, Volume 1,” *The Monist* 105, no. 4 (September 12, 2022): 470–86.

⁴⁷⁰ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” 65.

and horror along the way toward that goal must be put up with for that reason”; and finally, Marx believed that peace among classes would end the domination of nature as well.⁴⁷¹ Without these errors, Horkheimer argued that “Stripped of its idealist delusion, Marxist materialism is closer to Schopenhauer than to Democritus.” By reading Schopenhauer alongside Marx, Horkheimer radicalized Schopenhauer, but he also laid the groundwork for a pessimistic critical theory that drew on Marx’s critique of capitalism, without succumbing to the idealist trap of Marx’s progressive and optimistic Hegelianism.

Given Horkheimer’s dedication to the possibility of social transformation, but reticence about its possibility, his Schopenhauerian materialism embodies pessimism as critical inquiry. Horkheimer, through Schopenhauer, demonstrates how we must remain critical of even our best concepts such as justice, because these concepts were not created in a vacuum and carry the remainder of bourgeois ideals in their conceptualization. While Horkheimer maintained the need for a critical theory that was reflexive in the analysis of social, political, and economic conditions, his radicalization of Schopenhauer demonstrated the limitations of the earlier emancipatory aims of orthodox Marxism. In the subsequent section, I will turn to a discussion of Benjamin’s revolutionary pessimism.

Benjamin’s Revolutionary Pessimism and the Dialectical Image

[T]here is an arc reaching from sleep to awakening in the subject of the dream. Enough, then, of the representation that smiles and soothes to the point of numbness, and enough of the oneiric voyage toward the near of the future; let us substitute instead the idea, the necessity, the imperative of a difficult labor, with an uncertain outcome, in order to pull ourselves away from that state in which death prowls about, disguised behind various masks. Wakefulness, or nothingness.

—Miguel Abensour⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, 157; Gunderson, “Horkheimer’s Pessimism and Compassion,” 169.

⁴⁷² Miguel Abensour, *Utopia: From Thomas More to Walter Benjamin*, trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2017) 78.

If Walter Benjamin lingered in the collective imagination long enough to offer the future one gift, it would be the gift of attention. If ever there was a moment that could benefit more from that gift, it is now. At present, our attention is riven by the relentless grind of work, the expectation to be frantically busy (as if being busy were a badge of honor), and increasingly shallow forms of entertainment. Benjamin (along with Adorno and Horkheimer) anticipated this foreshortening of our collective attention spans in his analysis of mass-produced art during the early part of the twentieth century. In the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin says, “The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit... The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.”⁴⁷³ In art and culture—to bastardize Adorno and Horkheimer—we have experienced progress from the printing press to the DM (direct message) and the lithograph to the meme. A work of art—be it a song, a poem, a painting, or a video—that might take hours to produce (on top of years of training) is meant to be passively consumed for no longer than it takes to scroll past it on your phone. We are so distracted that we have scarcely noticed how we have lost track of time. Confoundingly, time has become truncated and distended. We never have enough of it for tasks that require focus or relationships that require depth, yet we lack the patience to be content with gaps in our schedule, so we are perpetually killing time with the mindless consumption of social media. Hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait, becomes the rhythm of our lives, where—as Miguel Abensour phrased it— “death prowls about, disguised behind various masks.”⁴⁷⁴ Meanwhile the obsession with hustle-culture and “the grind” has us frenetic and burnt-out. Each of these alterations to our attention and experience of time weaken our resistance to

⁴⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 166-195, XV: 193.

⁴⁷⁴ Abensour, *Utopia*, 78.

advertising, false information, and ultimately fascism. All of this, Benjamin would remind us, is a choice. We can choose to slow down and pay attention, or we can choose to master the art of distracted living. In what follows, I will rehearse the elements of Benjamin's theorizing that are consonant with pessimism.

Rupture—if it ever were to happen—would emerge from the dialectical standstill, the slowdown that happens when one is able to grasp the dialectical image. To pull the “emergency break” on history was to arrive at the possibility for a dialectical standstill. It was to truly see the dialectical image, or one's historical moment for all the violence and wreckage it offered. The dialectical standstill, or “now-time,” is an alarm that stirs us from the complacent slumber of capitalism. “Wakefulness or nothingness,” to quote Abensour. “Now-time” disrupts the old discourse and awakens us from capitalist sleep, in it, Benjamin says:

[the] truth is laden with time to the point of explosion. The death of intention is nothing else but this explosion, which thus coincides with the birth of historical time, the time of truth.⁴⁷⁵

Benjamin— “the sentry of dreams” —believed “mythic terror” permeated dreams and the only way to escape this terror was to wake up.⁴⁷⁶ “This is why dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening.”⁴⁷⁷ Dialectical thinking happens by accessing dreams—and all the mythic terror they carry—while awake, and stopping them in their tracks.

The dialectical standstill is a mutation of the typical dialectical construction. The Hegelian and post-Hegelian understanding of the dialectic was a dynamic process of emergence, transformation, and equilibrium. The traditional way of thinking about the dialectic is necessarily progressive. Instead, Benjamin conceived of a motionless dialectic, which Abensour argues, creates

⁴⁷⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 244, quoting Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* V, 578 (N3, 1).

⁴⁷⁶ Abensour, *Utopia*, 57; 79.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 79, quoting Benjamin, *Exposé* of 1935, *Paris*, 46.

space for utopia when we conceive of utopia as a moment at a standstill, rather than a place (or event) in the future. As Abensour notes, utopia,

instead of being a term to designate projection toward the future..., toward a better world as is commonly thought, [utopia] constitutes itself in a standstill, takes its form within an immobilization: this is the moment of the construction of tensions, the explosion of contradictions rather than the emergence of a solution *hic et nunc*, an imperative rescue, a political choice.⁴⁷⁸

The revolutionary task, then, is to construct dialectical images to create space for the utopian moment. Unlike most theorists of utopia, Abensour's Benjamin does not conceive of utopia as a projection into the future. Instead, Benjamin was skeptical about a historical telos, and thus, utopia is a space one can enter into, a pause button on the catastrophes of the present. Close readers of history and historical texts, as well as artists, have the unique ability to construct a dialectical image.

To Benjamin's mind, the Surrealists could get as at least part of (if not all) the way there. "To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most particular task."⁴⁷⁹ Hostility from the bourgeoisie pushed the Surrealists to the left, but Benjamin was concerned that their talk of revolt was most interested in the "profane illumination" of revolution as an idea, rather than dialectically considering revolution as the commitment to changing "external conditions."⁴⁸⁰ As Buck-Morss points out, "The Surrealists recognized reality as a dream" whereas Benjamin aimed "to evoke history in order to awaken [his] readers from [the dream]."⁴⁸¹ The Surrealists came close to the Communist answer of changing external circumstances, but Benjamin was concerned they would

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmond Jephcott, *New Left Review* 1, no. 108 (1978): 47–56, 55.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 34.

prefer somnambulism to constructing the dialectical image. The Surrealists' talk of revolution and freedom were poetic images that could be manipulated in service of the bourgeoisie or Social Democracy, like "A bad poem in springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors." However, if the surrealists resisted the urge to sleep, they could rise to the challenge. The choice was between changing attitudes and changing material conditions, and rather than climbing to the heights of optimism, Benjamin suggested a turn to revolutionary pessimism.⁴⁸²

For to organize pessimism means...to discover in the space of political action...image space. This image space, however, can no longer be measured out by contemplation... The long-sought image space..., the world of universal and integral actuality.⁴⁸³

The revolutionary Surrealist Pierre Naville originally coined the concept of the "organization of pessimism" which Benjamin refers to as "the call of the hour" in response to the "dilettantish optimism" of the bourgeois parties.⁴⁸⁴ Löwy disagrees somewhat with Buck-Morss, when he argues that Benjamin "discovers in pessimism the point of effective convergence between Surrealism and Communism."⁴⁸⁵ Rather than Buck-Morss—whose position is that because the Surrealists succumb to the dream of reality, they were insufficiently dialectical to awaken people from the mythic terror of capitalism—Löwy demonstrates how pessimism is the bridge between revolutionary Surrealism and communism.

[W]here are the conditions for revolution? In the changing of attitudes or of external circumstances? That is the cardinal question that determines the relation

⁴⁸² Benjamin, "Surrealism," 55-56, *passim*: "the stock imagery of these poets of the social-democratic associations? Their gradus ad parnassum? Optimism."

⁴⁸³ Walter Benjamin, "New Theses K," in "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing, 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Michael William Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 404.

⁴⁸⁴ Benjamin, "Surrealism," 55; Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 9.

⁴⁸⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 9.

of politics to morality and cannot be glossed over. Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line.⁴⁸⁶

As Benjamin suggests, Surrealism of the revolutionary variety comes close to the Communist answer, which means changing material conditions. The truth of Benjamin's position is probably somewhere between Buck-Morss' and Löwy's position on the revolutionary potential of Surrealism—but either way, Benjamin's radical political position referred to “pessimism all along the line.”⁴⁸⁷

It should be no surprise the melancholic Benjamin— “[who] came into the world under the sign of Saturn”—would radicalize the idea of pessimism.⁴⁸⁸ Susan Sontag illuminates a parallel between Benjamin's melancholy and his Saturnine character. She writes of Benjamin, “Since the Saturnine temperament is slow, prone to indecisiveness, sometimes one has to cut one's way through with a knife.”⁴⁸⁹ To return to Benjamin, “The amount of meaning is in exact proportion to the presence of death and the power of decay.”⁴⁹⁰ Decay and decline are latent with meaning, which is why one looks to the past to understand their life; why one looks to history to understand the present; and why decaying relics of the past disrupt linear understandings of time. As Sontag notes,

Only because the past is dead is one able to read it. Only because history is fetishized in physical objects can one understand it. Only because the book is a world can one enter it.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁶ Benjamin, “Surrealism, 55.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Susan Sontag, Introduction, in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street: and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund F.N. Jephcott, and Kingsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso Books, 2021), 7-28, 8, quoting Benjamin, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel.”

⁴⁸⁹ Sontag, Introduction, 13-14.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 21, quoting Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, edition unknown.

⁴⁹¹ Sontag, Introduction, 21.

To return to Benjamin's understanding of history, there is neither a progressive nor supra-historical narrative of history. Instead, history was meant to be read like a book,

If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say...that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. 'The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered.'⁴⁹²

History contains fragments to be collected, that with the lens of the present can alter the meaning of the past and the present. The past is a riddle whose solution changes with each generation. As Benjamin says, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."⁴⁹³ History changes our understanding of the present, and how we understand ourselves changes our understanding of the past. It is a fool's errand to look to history for the Truth. Instead looking to the archive can offer a refreshed understanding of the present through the past. The purpose of the past, for Benjamin, was to create dialectical images to inspire revolutionary change.

Benjamin, as I have mentioned above, believed progress to be a dangerously corrupt way to think about the historical narrative. As he said, "One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm."⁴⁹⁴ Akin to both Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin argued that a stadial reading of history was indefensible, because it justified atrocities as essential moments along the road to progress. To invoke again the angel of history, a storm has rendered them powerless to do anything about the pile of wreckage that "grows skyward"

⁴⁹² Walter Benjamin, "The Dialectical Image," in "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing, 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Michael William Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 405, quoting Monglond; N15a, 1, see note 16.

⁴⁹³ Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History*, VI: 198.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII: 200.

at their feet.⁴⁹⁵ “This storm is what we call progress.”⁴⁹⁶ The skepticism Benjamin maintained about a historical telos and linear time, is where his pessimism most closely aligns with the temporally-oriented pessimism identified by Dienstag. However, Benjamin’s pessimism serves a distinctly radical and revolutionary purpose. It is not a pessimism for pessimism’s sake, it is a counterbalance to both the dilettantish optimism and “left-wing melancholy” Benjamin perceived among bourgeois intellectuals.⁴⁹⁷ The purpose, for Benjamin, was to change history, even though the transformation he thought necessary, would be unlikely.

Critically-oriented pessimism—as I have considered it alongside Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer—is a productive approach for thinking about the contemporary political moment, and for resisting the false guarantee of historical progress. The theorizing of the Frankfurt School has the capacity to radicalize pessimism, and pessimism has an immense capacity to give context to the free-floating negativity, anxiety, and despair endemic to this moment—especially as these affects pertain to governmental inaction on climate change, increasing income inequality, and authoritarian creep. Critical theory as critical pessimism is dynamic, antiauthoritarian, and well-disposed for addressing governmental inaction to climate change, income inequality, and the toxic positivity endemic to late capitalism. The storm of progress may continue to deliver “wreckage upon wreckage” but critical pessimism lends us the strength to face these catastrophes with unblinking eyes and a steadfast commitment to challenge injustice without an expectation of progress.

Conclusion

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., IX: 201.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism 3 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 118: 304-306.

Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.

—Theodor Adorno⁴⁹⁸

When we spend enough time with prolific thinkers and writers, it is possible to learn new things about their thought. As Horkheimer once said, “The same thought, the same theory in a different historical moment is a different thought, a different theory.”⁴⁹⁹ History constrains the questions we ask of theory. Sometimes it takes a particular moment in history to ask questions that would have previously been unpalatable or even unthinkable. Pessimism is a question like this whose time has come. Where I have disagreed with the wisdom of brilliant people who have waded into these waters before me, I hope to initiate an expansion of thought, like a new meander in a stream, rather than a break with the flow. By giving myself permission to explore the critical theory of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer through the lens of pessimism—instead of looking for reasons to ward off allegations that pessimism is proof of their defect—I hope to have given some space for their pessimism to breathe.

Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer each offer insights into the problematic nature of the Enlightenment narrative of progress, and the unreasonable aspects of reason. Where their critiques and philosophical projects offer openings for transformation, is where their theorizing becomes the most negative. Negativity as a form of critique, and a sustained refusal to the horrific vagaries of the present, can illuminate contradictions and cracks in the façade of late-stage neoliberal capitalism. As Adorno reminds us, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”⁵⁰⁰ There is something so comforting to know that others—perhaps wiser and deeper than us—have noticed the disasters wrought by

⁴⁹⁸ Adorno, “Gaps,” in *Minima Moralia*, 50: 80-81, 81.

⁴⁹⁹ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer and Society,” 88.

⁵⁰⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Refuge for the Homeless,” in *Minima Moralia*, 18: 38-39, 39.

humans on this beautiful orb floating through space. The early twenty-first century is undoubtedly different than the time in which Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer were writing—we have our own mess to deal with—the world is no longer riven by a global war against fascism, and the threat of nuclear holocaust is somewhat abated. However, in certain respects their insights are timeless, and where they are not, there are sufficient parallels between our eras, that their thinking remains relevant even where it is not directly applicable. In the following chapter, I will explore contemporary critical theories of hope—which draw on Benjamin and Adorno—to make the case for pessimistic hope.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CASE FOR PESSIMISTIC HOPE

There is no
solace in rearranging language to make a different word
tell the same lie. Sometimes the moral arc of the universe

does not bend in a direction that will comfort us.
Sometimes it bends in ways we don't expect and there are
people who fall off in the process. Please, dear reader,

do not say I am hopeless, I believe there is a better future
to fight for, I simply accept the possibility that I may not
live to see it. I have grown weary of telling myself lies

that I might one day begin to believe. We are not all left
standing after the war has ended. Some of us have
become ghosts by the time the dust has settled.

—Clint Smith III⁵⁰¹

Despite their disproportionate responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, Western capitalist democracies have proven themselves ill-equipped to respond to climate change and other large-scale environmental problems. Indeed, our economic and political systems regularly threaten environmental and human health to sustain profits and power. Given this context one would expect there to be a pervasive sense of ennui, frustration, and despair—which there is.⁵⁰² Yet there is a simultaneous compulsion to remain positive about climate change and mollify the potentially catastrophic consequences of the climate crisis. This logic seems to imply that positivity, individual

⁵⁰¹ Clint Smith, “When people say, ‘we have made it through worse before,’” in *Above Ground* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2023), 12.

⁵⁰² Andreea Bratu, et. al. “The 2021 Western North American heat dome increased climate change anxiety among British Columbians: Results from a natural experiment,” *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 6 100116 (2022) 2667-2782, 2667; Caroline Hickman, Elizabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, et. al. “Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey,” *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5, Issue 12 (2021) E863-E873. Increasingly, mental health practitioners, scholars, and journalists have noted a correlation between deteriorating mental health, especially among young people in the Global North, and fears about climate change. In late 2021, the Lancet published an article where Hickman, et al. conducted a global survey of 10,000 people aged 16-25. The research team found that the majority were at least moderately worried about climate change, and at least 50% reported feelings of sadness, anxiety, helplessness, or anger about climate change. The *Journal of Climate Change and Health* published a study by Bratu et al. looking at the relationship between anxiety and the 2021 heat wave in North America.

actions, and technology can solve global environmental problems. A quick scan of virtual bookshelves reveals innumerable books discussing hope and climate change; from environmental manifestos to assurances from the billionaire class—the cottage industry of climate positivity and political hope appears to be alive, well, and thriving.⁵⁰³ Many want to unlock the secret to sustaining hope amidst crisis, or at least find a way to assuage their eco-anxieties. Whether hope has become an anthropocene buzzword *because* people are looking for how to cope with challenging times—the popularity of the topic is a testament to the human desire to placate fear and eco-anxiety, without becoming numb to the gravity of the climate crisis. What if, instead, we stopped denying the pervasive sense of despair, doom, and grief that typify life in the time of climate change? The pursuit of hope and positivity may be a survival strategy to avoid the unrelenting grip of despair but sticking one’s head in the sand while maintaining an expectation of perpetual improvement, is bound to disappoint. Besides, as Robyn Marasco suggests, despair—or as I will argue, pessimism—is a dialectical requirement for the possibility of hope.⁵⁰⁴

A delusional faith in the narrative of progress is just as cruel and unsustainable as unrestrained greenhouse gas emissions in the face of global climate crisis. Indeed, for many in the oil and gas industry, progress and the good life are synonymous with unrestrained energy consumption

⁵⁰³ Listed here is just a modest array of books using hope as a frame for the climate crisis by authors ranging from social scientists, climate scientists, and public intellectuals, to journalists, parents, and even billionaires. See: Elizabeth Berchard (2021) *Parenting in a Changing Climate: Tools for cultivating resilience, taking action, and practicing hope in the face of climate change*; Michael Bloomberg et al. (2018) *Climate of Hope: How Cities, Businesses, and Citizens Can Save the Planet*; Sophie Bond, et al. (2023) *Stopping Oil: Climate Justice and Hope*; Claire Dawson (2014) *A Climate of Hope: Church and Mission in a Warming World*; Peter Federicci, et al. (2022) *Beyond Climate Breakdown: Envisioning New Stories of Radical Hope*; Tim Flannery (2016) *Atmosphere of Hope: Searching for Solutions to the Climate Crisis*; John Foster (2022) *Realism and the Climate Crisis: Hope for Life*; Joëlle Gergis (2023) *Humanity's Moment: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope*; Katharine Hayhoe (2021) *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*; Eri Kintisch (2010) *Hack the Planet: Science's Best Hope--Or Worst Nightmare--For Averting Climate Catastrophe*; David McDermott-Hughes (2021) *Who Owns the Wind?: Climate Crisis and the Hope of Renewable Energy*; Jonathon Porritt (2021) *Hope in Hell: How We Can Confront the Climate Crisis and Save the Earth*; Mary Robinson (2019) *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future*; John Wiseman (2021) *Hope and Courage in the Climate Crisis: Wisdom and Action in the Long Emergency*. The list could go on and on.

⁵⁰⁴ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*.

and capitalist success.⁵⁰⁵ To avoid the agony of perpetual disappointment, we may need to learn how to embrace despair while actively willing social change. Or to borrow Antonio Gramsci's favorite Romain Rolland aphorism, this moment may call for "pessimism of the intelligence, [and] optimism of the will."⁵⁰⁶ This chapter argues not for an "optimism" of the will, but instead for intellectual pessimism coupled with a will to hope. Pessimistic hope does not deny melancholy, grief, and despair, but instead affirms that when one is committed to the possibility of structural change, these sensibilities are unavoidable. It is an active hope dialectically bound to the negative.

Pessimistic hope refuses a blinkered or passive hope *and* the collective expectation of happiness. The popular preference for unbridled positivity—embodied in the call to "live, laugh, love"—is an insidious social pressure aimed to quell critique and maintain the status quo. This social pressure is ever-more questionable when our moment is typified by governmental inability to address climate change, increasing income inequality, the resurgence of fascism, and recent attacks on trans rights and abortion access. To avoid the cruel clutches of optimism or toxic positivity, hope must be radically anchored in the present, and armed with pessimism. Rather than a future-oriented hope bound to the cycle of expectation and disappointment, pessimistic hope meters the desire for social change with an awareness of the intractability of the climate crisis.

⁵⁰⁵ Robert J. Brulle, "Denialism: Organized Opposition to Climate Change Action in the United States," in *Handbook of U.S. Environmental Policy*, ed. David M. Konisky (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 328-341; Robert J. Brulle, "Aggressive Think Tanks, Shouty Pundits, and a New Religious Argument," an interview by Amy Westervelt, *Drilled Podcast*, Season 1, Episode 5, Transcript, November 2016, <https://www.drilled.media/s1-the-origins-of-climate-denial/>; Robert J. Brulle, "The First Step to Influencing Policy—Setting Research Agendas," an interview by Amy Westervelt, *Drilled Podcast*, Season 1, Episode 6, November 2016, <https://www.drilled.media/s1-the-origins-of-climate-denial/>.

⁵⁰⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, trans. Lynn Lawner (London: Quartet Publishing, 1979), 160 n2; This quote, which is often attributed to Antonio Gramsci, originated with French novelist Romain Rolland, in his review of Raymond Lefebvre's novel *Le Sacrifice d'Abraham*. In this review, Rolland describes the task of the intellectual as "Pessimism of intelligence, optimism of the will." (Fisher 2003). Gramsci offered a radical revision of this aphorism when he stated, "it is necessary to direct one's attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will." See: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. Quentin Hoare (London: The Electric Book Company Ltd, 1999).395 n75.

Contemporary thinkers as diverse as Marasco, Joseph Winters, Loren Goldman, José Muñoz, Sarah Ahmed, and Terry Eagleton all grapple, to a certain extent, with the relationship between hope and the negative (or at the very least how to delimit hope from progress). Most do so while erecting borders between pessimism and their work. In whatever way theorists define pessimism, and however much their work dwells on the negative, there seems to be a consensus that pessimism is the *bête noire* of political theory and philosophy. There is a plethora of brilliant thinkers who tarry with the negative—to borrow Slavoj Žižek’s turn of phrase—blending the bright hues of hope with the darker tones of melancholy, despair, grief, mourning, and a left-rejection of positivity or happiness.⁵⁰⁷ Meanwhile they *all* avoid tempering hope with pessimism. I argue this owes to a popular (rather than philosophical) mischaracterization of pessimism, as well as the unfortunate compulsion to situate pessimism in binary opposition to optimism.⁵⁰⁸ Against this divide, I would argue pessimism and hope are not the strange bedfellows many would make them out to be, nor are they muzzled within an unresolvable antinomy. Instead, as I will argue, hope filtered through pessimism is an apt lens through which to consider this historical moment, which is marked by political stagnation to address the climate crisis, regressive political moves to deny reproductive freedoms, as well as dehumanizing trans people and refugees (among other signifiers for the re-emergence of fascism).

In this chapter I will make the case for pessimistic hope before turning to a discussion of how contemporary theories of hope—amended with pessimism—are better attuned to the political dilemmas in the early twenty-first century. To build my argument, I will engage in a brief

⁵⁰⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁵⁰⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London: Routledge, 2002). For my understanding of the Deleuzian distinction between philosophical and everyday concepts, I am indebted to Ahmed when she draws upon and references Claire Colebrook’s discussion of this distinction.

genealogical assessment of twenty-first century critical hope—as well as instances of hope in popular culture—to arrive at a more dialectical understanding of hope. Once I have made the case for pessimistic hope, I will argue that recent critical theorists who have considered hope alongside negativity would benefit from the resources offered by a critical orientation of pessimism. These critical theorists—Marasco, Eagleton, and Winters—are noteworthy for theorizing hope alongside Theodor Adorno and/or Walter Benjamin, whom, I have argued, are twenty-first century critical pessimists. Given how Chapter Four focuses primarily on the critical theory of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin, Goldman’s assessment of Bloch may seem like an odd fit; however, to offer a truly dialectical read of contemporary hope, it is vital to consider a more redemptive and less straight-forwardly negative hope. Against the popular and philosophical grain, I argue that pessimism provides unique resources for our political moment. When faced with immanent intersecting political crises like climate change, biodiversity loss, and authoritarian creep, a will to hope imbued with pessimistic critique may be the most promising philosophical outlet for this historical moment. This is because climate change not only represents a global environmental crisis, but also a breakdown in the narrative of progress. Hope—when armed with pessimism—is an egalitarian ethic that affirms life in the face of adversity and provides resources to cope with this breakdown in narrative, especially when faced with crises that disrupt certainty about the habitability of our planet and signal a potential crisis for democracy as well.

The Case for Pessimistic Hope: Hope’s Genealogy

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul.

—Emily Dickinson⁵⁰⁹

For Emily Dickinson, a reclusive poet whose talents went unacknowledged during her life, hope would appear to be waiting in the wings. Depending on whom you ask, you may be spinning in circles before you get a straight answer on how to define hope. The best contemporary thinkers writing on this subject do so critically and dialectically—hope is not a facile or even difficult optimism. In some cases, hope is even conceived as a ballast for despair or disappointment. In a dissertation about pessimism, a sustained discussion about hope could seem like a fruitless diversion. However, it is my speculation that pessimism and hope are not opposites—as commonly represented in mainstream literatures—but rather they are dialectical complements. If pessimism is a dynamic and materialist ethic, political intervention, and critical form of inquiry—as I have thus far conceived it—then there is always a non-identical remainder, beyond what is captured by the concept of pessimism. This is pessimism’s positivity. Similarly, the non-identical remainder of hope creates space for negativity. A static dichotomization of pessimism, where it is in opposition to optimism, is a philosophical dead-end. While I do not have the space to provide a thorough analysis of optimism, this tradition is often presented in a similarly anemic manner.⁵¹⁰ Perhaps because there is such a strong allure to being a hopeful political subject—whether one is an activist, environmentalist, community organizer, citizen, or political participant—hope, and by proxy optimism, has been given a more favorable shake-down than pessimism. There is something thoroughly tragic about one who has given up hope.

⁵⁰⁹ Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 314.

⁵¹⁰ For a sensitive and nuanced discussion of the relationship between optimism and pessimism see: van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*. In *Dark Matters*, optimism has a similar ethical orientation as pessimism, however optimism is much more concerned with maintaining faith that suffering can be diminished, and as such may demand too much individual responsibility in a world where suffering is fundamental to existence (where a person could be perceived as deficient for experiencing suffering).

However, as Mara van der Lugt suggests, pessimism provides something vital that is often missing in other traditions. The missing piece is “a due appreciation of the fragility of life: with a sense that sometimes we may try to the best of our abilities *and yet we may fail* to achieve happiness or even just to avoid great suffering.”⁵¹¹ This does not amount to hopelessness, but rather a willingness to engage in a “kind of dark...[or] *fragile thinking*...to open up new horizons of compassion and consolation.”⁵¹² Hope, filtered through pessimism, has the capacity to be deeply affected by and attuned to the injustice and suffering in the world. A form of thinking attuned to the fragility of life is vital for any political ethic or form of critical inquiry suitable for the climate crisis and impending collapse of biodiversity. If hope is a thing with feathers, then perhaps its wings exist for freedom rather than escape.

Throughout this section I will engage in a genealogical reading of hope, before making the case for pessimistic hope. As discussed in Chapter Two, genealogies are a form of critical inquiry that ask questions about submerged problems; they problematize political, social, and cultural phenomena taken as a given or accepted as common sense. In this genealogy, I will examine the critical conceptualizations of hope. Then I will turn to a discussion of hope’s relationship to time and suffering to explore hope’s relationship to pessimism.

What, then, is hope? There is a proliferation of debates about what *precisely* hope is and what it can do. Among theorists of hope, some maintain that hope is not an affect,⁵¹³ but instead an

⁵¹¹ Van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 26, emphasis in original.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 27, emphasis in original.

⁵¹³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*.

ethic,⁵¹⁴ an attachment,⁵¹⁵ a mode of relationality,⁵¹⁶ a principle to inspire political praxis,⁵¹⁷ or a form of desire.⁵¹⁸ However, this is not to imply the debate is settled about whether hope is a feeling. Both Ahmed and Muñoz affirm that hope is an affect after all.⁵¹⁹ Where hope is consonant with pessimism, it remains permeable to the negativity inherent to modern life, and many theorize hope alongside the negative. Marasco sees despair as nourishment for hope, where you cannot have one without the other.⁵²⁰ Meanwhile, Winters conceives of a melancholic hope that views the negative as a productive complement to hope without turning away from the terrors of this contemporary moment.⁵²¹ Similarly, Eagleton defines hope as a forward-looking “species of desire” that requires tenacity, especially when faced with the brutality of the present.⁵²² Hope, then, is a nourishment for negativity that keeps one attuned to the persistence of injustice—or what Marasco refers to as “the repetition of reinforcing relations of domination, cruelty, and inhumanity”—with the tenacity to grapple with the persistent terrors of the present moment.⁵²³ Whether hope is a structure,

⁵¹⁴ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

⁵¹⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

⁵¹⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*.

⁵¹⁷ Loren Goldman, “In Defense of Blinders: On Kant, Political Hope, and the Need for Practical Belief,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (August 2012): 497–523; Loren Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope: Progress, Action, and Democracy in Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁵¹⁸ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*.

⁵¹⁹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

⁵²⁰ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*.

⁵²¹ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 244.

⁵²² Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 55.

⁵²³ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 16.

intervention, affect, or principle, there seems to be increasing convergence around the idea that hope does not require optimism.⁵²⁴

This does not mean, however, that we have been rid of the association between hope and optimism. As the eccentric front man and songwriter for the Bad Seeds, Nick Cave recently wrote, “hope is optimism with a broken heart.”⁵²⁵ While this is a striking turn of phrase, I would like to posit instead that hope can mend the broken heart of pessimism. One might say, you can avoid the whole mess of pessimism by resisting heartbreak altogether, but heartache might be an essential prerequisite (or post-requisite, at least) to the experience of love. Without a tender heart littered with the scars of a broken heart, how can one know they have loved enough to experience grief? How can one know they have paid enough attention to their “one wild and precious life” (to borrow Mary Oliver’s expression)?⁵²⁶ To be vulnerable with another person, to make oneself permeable to their imprint, is to be open to the possibility of pain. As Dienstag writes:

To truly make contact with another human being means to be open to their touch and alteration of us, to unfreeze our self-understanding and ego-boundaries long enough to acknowledge and model the distinctive qualities of the other, a transformative experience the outcome of which cannot be known in advance.⁵²⁷

To love is to be vulnerable to unpredictable and devastating loss. Pleasure and pain are so indelibly intertwined that it may not be possible to experience pleasure without the risk of pain. Beyond the personal experience of heartbreak, there is so much needless suffering and injustice in the world, it might be impossible to avoid heartbreak, when one is attentive to the mismatch between the

⁵²⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope*; Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

⁵²⁵ Nick Cave and Seán O'Hagan, *Faith, Hope and Carnage* (New York City, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022).

⁵²⁶ Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” *House of Light* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990), 60. In this poem, Mary Oliver asks the following questions, relevant to any discussion of grief and heartbreak: “Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do, With your one wild and precious life?”

⁵²⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 189.

aspirations and actualities of politics in the “broken-down present” (to borrow Muñoz’s phrase).⁵²⁸

One may believe they are responsible for minimizing their personal suffering—in the case of van der Lugt’s analysis of optimism—however, if pain is a prerequisite for love, and love a prerequisite for life, then to live is to suffer. In its attunement to and acceptance of pain, pessimism offers a capacious acceptance of life’s intrinsic suffering. Rather than pairing hope to optimism to waltz through a broken heart, pessimism is a better partner of hope to dance through the heartache of life. In popular usage, hope and optimism may form a complementary unity, but this need not always be the case. In political theory and philosophy there seems to be increased acceptance that hope does not require optimism.⁵²⁹ Instead, without the complement of negativity, hope might be too static and shallow to rise to the occasion of this historical moment.

For many—especially in popular parlance—there is an explicit eschatological component to hope, where hope points toward an expectation of redemption, whether redemption is framed as a “faith in the future,” or an afterlife.⁵³⁰ Redemptive strains of hope are future-oriented and imply the narratives of progress or a teleological read of history. As science fiction author Liu Cixin points out:

[A]fter the Industrial Revolution, progress became a constant feature of society, and humanity’s faith in the future grew stronger... The material comforts of life improved at a rapid pace, and the trend seemed to accelerate. If one surveyed people about visions of the future, they might give different answers for how things would be in ten years, but few would doubt that in another hundred years, humanity would be living in paradise.⁵³¹

⁵²⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

⁵²⁹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope*; Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

⁵³⁰ Liu Cixin, *Death’s End*, trans. Ken Liu (New York, NY: Tor Publishing, 2016), 74.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75. It bears mentioning that this sunny depiction of progress foreshadows a catastrophic ending. Toward the end of the story, Cixin writes, “Civilization was like a mad dash that lasted five thousand years. Progress begot more progress; countless miracles gave birth to more miracles; humankind seemed to possess the power of gods; but in the end, the real power was wielded by time.” *Ibid.*, 509.

In other words, progress implies an expectation that the future will be better than the present, based on a selective reading of the historical record, where the future guarantees paradise over today. More insidiously, progress—or a faith in the future—entails a disregard of the violence and injustice of the present (and often the past). Despite a pervasive sensibility about the relationship between progress and hope, many critical theorists—who draw on Adorno, Benjamin, and/or Bloch—reject these redemptive versions of hope, pointing to the heap of wreckage delivered in the name of progress.⁵³² For Eagleton, “Hope is not always coupled with the doctrine of progress.”⁵³³ Things may improve or progress throughout history, but progress is not guaranteed, and humanity should expect neither redemption nor perfection in the future. Winters yokes melancholy to hope as a challenge to the narratives of American exceptionalism and progress, especially when these narratives presuppose racial violence and slavery. The narrative of progress is an eraser that conceals “memories of racial trauma and loss.”⁵³⁴ In other words, the narrative of progress scripts the past as a series of achievements, meanwhile denying the violence and profound failures belying those accomplishments. With the recognition that “the present moment is one of palpable crisis,” Goldman argues we need to think of hope as a form of political action distinct from the idea of progress.⁵³⁵ This is because progress is a problematic concept that implies, “a linear, unidirectional notion of history, an understanding of the future as a rupture with the past, new technological abilities and productive capacities, philosophical rationalism, and a cosmopolitan perspective enabled by Europe’s global political domination.”⁵³⁶ When hope is distinct from a developmentalist

⁵³² Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

⁵³³ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 27.

⁵³⁴ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 4.

⁵³⁵ Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope*, 2.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

reading of history, it follows a similar line of critique as Foucault, Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer—who were all skeptical of universal and progressive narratives of history. In this, there are generative affinities between non-progressive critical theories of hope and a critical orientation of pessimism.

Progressive versions of hope are undialectical in that they do not consider hope's negation or the Adornian nonidentical remainder when considering hope. Regardless of what hope is—be it a principle, interpretive framework, affect, or intervention—when hope delimits negativity, it is a prison of positivity insufficiently attuned to contemporary ecological, social, and political conditions.⁵³⁷ Blindly positive hope requires turning a blind eye to injustice (or believing injustice does not exist and is, instead, a liberal dog whistle) and/or ignoring negative alterations to one's conditions. At the risk of anthropomorphism, this is not dissimilar from the inhumanely boiled lobster who, when placed in a pot of water slowly being brought to a boil, continues to believe the water could not possibly get *too hot*, despite all the evidence demonstrating that they are being boiled alive. The delusional lobster who remains positive about their death bath is not dissimilar to people who believe the climate crisis is overblown. Here, as elsewhere, I share a certain affinity with Marasco when she asks:

What if there are no rational grounds for hope? Does this mean there is no hope?
Or does it mean instead that the proof of hope lies in the persistence of despair,
that to speak of despair is also to bespeak of hope.⁵³⁸

While I argue that it might be more productive to consider pessimism as the dialectical complement of hope, Marasco's point is salient. Hope might require the persistence of dialectical tension with

⁵³⁷ My critique of progressive forms of hope parallels Robyn Marasco's critique of pessimism, where she describes it as a "static" and "deeply unhistorical ethic." However, as I argued in Chapter 4 (pp. 138-139), she offers an insufficiently dialectical analysis of pessimism, which establishes a false (and static) dichotomy between optimism/pessimism and hope/despair. See: Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 16.

⁵³⁸ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 87.

negativity—be it despair or pessimism—to avoid the magical thinking of progress. Either way, to consider hope dialectically means to forgo the idea of a progressive version of hope.

When hope and the hopeful disavow negativity, negativity has a way of festering beneath the surface. Any worldview or political perspective that requires blinders to negativity is an inherently fragile one. The foreclosure of negativity results in a dual irony. For one, the fragility of a blindly positive worldview prevents one from witnessing the pervasive fragility in life. One must be resilient to hold space for tragedy, and all the fragile beauty and grief that come along with it. What is the point in hoping, if we cannot learn from and be deeply affected by the tragedies inherent to our earthly existence? Pain and negativity are incredible teachers, they show us what it means to be alive, and how to be more resilient moving forward. Furthermore, and perhaps more ironically, resistance to negativity makes one more vulnerable to negativity. Dashed hopes and disappointed expectations are more painful when one believes everything will go well. In this sense, hope untempered by negativity has a fragile relationship to the future. When hope's dictum assures the future will be better than the present, and the future fails to deliver on this promise, it compels one to remain trapped in a cycle of perpetually disappointed attainment. Throughout this section I have navigated a genealogy of hope as it appears in contemporary critical theory. Along the way, I have gestured toward the need for hope to maintain dialectical openness to negativity, to avoid being a static and historically insensitive intervention. In what follows, I will briefly discuss how contemporary political theory misses the mark by guarding hope from pessimism, before making an argument for pessimistic hope.

Pessimistic Hope

Pessimism is so often maligned and misunderstood that the theoretical merits of this ethic and critical intervention are regularly overlooked. Whatever pessimism actually means, there seems to be a consensus that pessimists are a total bummer. “Pessimist”—as an insult—is regularly deployed to disparage someone when their outlook or arguments are deemed too negative. It can be little surprise, then, that most theorists wish to disavow pessimism regardless of how productive pessimism can be, and whether it might overlap with their theorizing. Pessimism nourished with hope is a present-oriented political intervention and ethic that is unafraid of the laments and despair of our moment. Pessimistic hope provides the resources needed to deal with the breakdown of the narrative of progress, the perpetual ecological crisis—brought on by climate change and the collapse of biodiversity—and the anticipatory grief for the loss of this narrative and the possible loss of a livable climate. At this point in my dissertation, there should be little doubt of the political utility of pessimism. Pessimism—as I have reconstructed it through the philosophical projects of Nietzsche, Foucault, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin—is a mode of critical inquiry and a life-affirming ethos that is skeptical about supra-historical narratives and the idea of progress, as well as the possibility for using positivity as a lens to understand a world laden with much negativity. Throughout this section I will discuss the relationship between negative modalities of hope as they intersect with and move beyond pessimisms oriented around time, values, and critical theory.

In Joshua Dienstag’s pathbreaking book, he offered an intellectual history of pessimism in the modern era, focusing on a range of theorists including Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Leopardi, Cioran, Rousseau, Freud, and Camus. Dienstag argues that pessimism is not only a unique philosophical tradition, but that by jettisoning pessimism as a tradition in political theory or philosophy, many thinkers in the modern and postmodern eras have been fundamentally misunderstood. To ameliorate this misunderstanding, Dienstag details a taxonomy of pessimism that includes a shared sense of the “burden of time,” “the irony of history,” “the absurdity of existence,”

a recognition of the mismatch between freedom and happiness, as well as a predilection toward either resignation or spontaneity.⁵³⁹ Dienstag warns that while technical-scientific developments have certainly occurred, we should not mistake apparent improvements in material or social conditions as evidence of the truth of progress. Instead, history's trajectory is more ironic, some "improvements are inseparably related to a greater set of costs that often go unperceived" and besides, there is no guarantee that "these changes have really resulted in a fundamental melioration of the human condition" Theorists of a non- progressive hope resist association with pessimism, despite there being a critique of progress baked into the logic of most strains of pessimism.

Beyond Dienstag, Mara van der Lugt's gorgeous intellectual history of eighteenth-century pessimism is a helpful codex for illuminating twentieth-century critical pessimism. Van der Lugt introduces her analysis of pessimism as a value-oriented mode of pessimism, to distinguish her analysis from Dienstag's future-oriented form of pessimism. However, as I argue in the Introduction, this assessment is based on a mistaken reading of Dienstag's analysis. Instead, Dienstag's form of pessimism can be better termed temporally-oriented. Minor quibble aside, van der Lugt's analysis of pessimism begins with the question of whether existence merits suffering—or what she refers to as physical evil. For our purposes, I will offer an expansive reading of van der Lugt's assessment, where this value-oriented form of pessimism refers to the experience of oppression, injustice, and alienation, in addition to suffering.

Hope and the Foreclosure of Pessimism

Embedded within most texts on the topic of hope is a stern rebuke or rejection of pessimism. Both philosophically and personally, people aim to distance themselves from pessimism. The denunciation of pessimism seems to result from fear that one might be ostracized for being too

⁵³⁹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 19; 25; 32.

negative. Despite this resistance to pessimism, many contemporary critical theorists consider hope in conversation with tragedy, disappointment, despair, critique, and/or melancholy, all of which land on the negative end of the spectrum. It is quite puzzling that a negative hope should exclude pessimism, however I argue this has more to do with the popular versus philosophical understanding of pessimism. Throughout this section, I will unpack how Eagleton and Winters have cast aside pessimism in their discussions of hope.

For Eagleton, pessimism is “extravagantly unrealistic,” and naively teleological for expecting the worst.⁵⁴⁰ Yet, Eagleton maintains “there is more merit to be accrued in maintaining one’s hope when the outlook is dismal,” which is why he advises dwelling on dark matters to moderate one’s hopefulness.⁵⁴¹ The strongest forms of hope are tenacious in the face of catastrophe because Eagleton’s hope requires engagement with the “abyss” or worst-case-scenarios to have sufficient reasons to maintain hopefulness. Pessimism, on the other hand, is a posture of “gloom,” a form of “fatalism,” and a flawed structure of opinion that *expects* the worst.⁵⁴²

Despite Eagleton’s nuanced discussion of hope, I contend that his distinction between hope and pessimism is flawed. Notwithstanding the passive forms of pessimism that withdraw into a type of resignation, pessimism acknowledges the possibility that the worst may happen (as might the best) while sustaining a life-affirming outlook regardless. “The pessimist is...suspicious of efforts at improvement—not because they would deprive him of opportunities for jolliness, but because he believes that they are almost certain to fail.”⁵⁴³ Eagleton claims that hope is more nuanced because it can embrace the possibility of disappointment and tragedy, meanwhile pessimism expects

⁵⁴⁰ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 40.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 41, 3.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.

disappointment and tragedy to sustain a pessimistic stance. Meanwhile, most forms of pessimism grapple with and accept the suffering inherent to life, or the contingency inherent to the future. Rather than being a facile form of fatalism that expects the worst and deals poorly with disappointment, pessimism gives us the resources to avoid being perpetually disappointed. Pessimism encourages a confrontation with the worst-case possibility without expecting the best, meanwhile accepting what happens regardless.

Furthermore, while Eagleton's perspective resonates with the conventional understanding of pessimism, it reflects ignorance about the philosophy of pessimism. Indeed, there are a range of pessimists from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Horkheimer Adorno, Benjamin, and Foucault, as well as a wide range of pessimistic approaches. While Schopenhauer was the epitome of a cantankerous grouch, one need not be grumpy to be a pessimist. Pessimism and joy are not as antithetical as they seem at first blush. One can draw on pessimism to understand the world or politics while maintaining a joyful affect. Philosophical pessimism is not a pre-scripted narrative or form of fatalism that expects the worst; instead, pessimism prepares for the worst without attachment to a particular outcome. Rather than expecting anything specific—be it tragedy, farce, redemption, or disappointment—pessimism, as Dienstag notes, “expects nothing.”⁵⁴⁴

In response to the tragedy and violence of the Black American experience, Winters theorizes a non-progressive, melancholic hope. Melancholic hope is attuned to injustice and loss, as well as how humans have a profound capacity to be “moved, affected, and transformed” by the oppression we witness.⁵⁴⁵ When humans choose to remain rooted in the struggle and injustices of our time, it can be a spur to take political action. “Melancholy names one way that we are undone by the

⁵⁴⁴ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 32.

⁵⁴⁵ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 29.

sufferings and struggles of others.”⁵⁴⁶ When we refuse to look away from injustice, it is difficult to avoid being “undone” by another’s pain. It is tragic to bear witness to continued instances of injustice and violence, especially when violence and injustice are superfluous and antithetical to human and nonhuman flourishing. Winters conceives of melancholic hope as distinct from pessimism, despite there being a profound sense of tragedy embedded within melancholy. Winters may theorize tragedy as distinct from pessimism, but many theorists have emphasized the tragic character of pessimism, especially Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism or “pessimism of strength.”⁵⁴⁷ Winters may have initially rejected an affinity between hope and pessimism, but when hope is sustained by melancholy and tragedy—as Winters suggests—it resonates with philosophical pessimism more than he may have originally considered.

In *Hope Draped in Black*, Winters establishes distance from pessimism without making a direct argument against the disutility of pessimism. In subsequent articles, Winters addresses this lacuna by engaging with Afro-pessimism, ultimately advocating for an ethics of “Afro-anguish” as a complement to Afro-pessimism.⁵⁴⁸ Afro-pessimism emphasizes how slavery and being Black in the United States are forms of “social death” that amount to non-being.⁵⁴⁹ Afro-pessimists see no

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁴⁷ Daniel Ahern, “Dionysian Pessimism,” in *The Smile of Tragedy* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015) 8–33; Dienstag, *Pessimism*; Joshua Foa Dienstag, “Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche,” *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 83–101. John Duncan, “Culture, Tragedy and Pessimism in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*,” *PhaenEx* 1, no. 2 (2007): 47; Nietzsche, “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” 3.

⁵⁴⁸ Joseph Winters, “Rac(e)Ing from Death: Baldwin, Bataille, and the Anguish of the (Racialized) Human,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (June 2017): 380–405, 400; See also, Joseph R. Winters, “Afro-Pessimism,” in *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*, ed. Paul Heike, 5-12. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Joseph Winters, “Death, Spirituality, and the Matter of Blackness,” in *Race, Religion, and Black Lives Matter: Essays on a Moment and a Movement*, ed. Christopher Cameron and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Vanderbilt University Press, 2021), 149–74;

⁵⁴⁹ Harriet S. Hughes, “The Pronominal Grammar of Ontological Anti-Blackness: Institutionality and Authority in Afropessimism and The Undercommons,” *Authorship* 11, no. 1 (January 31, 2023); Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016); Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2020); Winters, “Afro-Pessimism.”

redeeming qualities to a world that denies Black being, so the only solution is liberation from the world of white supremacist “social death.”⁵⁵⁰ There is certainly a categorical similarity between pessimism and Afro-pessimism, however Afro-pessimism is a theory explicitly attuned to the Black experience and is not applicable beyond this experience. This is why I primarily discuss Winters’ non-progressive melancholic hope as it intersects with (or diverges from) the possibility for a pessimistic hope.

Eagleton and Winters agree that hope does not require the narrative of progress, but they also coalesce around the idea that hope is antithetical to pessimism. Eagleton maintains that hope requires tragedy, because tragedy and catastrophe create the conditions necessary for hoping. Meanwhile Winters advocates for a non-progressive melancholic hope. Hope without melancholy risks losing touch with the tragic character of racial injustice and violence. If we were all free from capitalist alienation, oppression, and violence, there would be no need to *hope* for something different. However, by assuming that our historical moment is the best possible moment, the narrative of progress obscures the pain and oppression lived daily by those whose lives have been untouched by so-called progress. Despite the convincing arguments connecting hope with tragedy, the catastrophic character of time, and melancholy, it seems arbitrary to reject a relationship between hope and pessimism, especially with renewed interest in contemporary critical theory to theorize non-progressive forms of hope. In what follows, I will explore what hope looks like without the lighthouse of progress to guide us to shore.

Hope Without Progress

If contemporary critical theory has struggled to find its political bearings without reliance on a teleological-progressive concept of history or a civilizational ideal of *Bildung*, perhaps this is because many of its finest practitioners have also presumed that critique today must renew its reserves of rational hope.

⁵⁵⁰ Winters, “Death, Spirituality, and the Matter of Blackness.”

—Robyn Marasco⁵⁵¹

Theorists typically consider hope, futurity, and the narrative of progress as inseparably bound together. Despite theorists like Winters, Goldman, and Eagleton who challenge this narrative, hope typically implies a forward-facing disposition or principle that assumes the future *can* and *will* be better than today.⁵⁵² Richard Rorty suggests that hope is the core of American philosophizing, which is bound to the progressive “task of replacing an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future.”⁵⁵³ This eschatological or redemptive strain of hope pairs well with the future-oriented philosophizing of the U.S., where the accumulation of scientific knowledge is presumed to herald similar social and political advances. This unending escalator toward human, societal, and political perfectibility is so deeply embedded within the zeitgeist of contemporary Western societies, that to question it is to appear a heretic to the religion of science and American exceptionalism. Progress—the idea that history has a telos or endpoint—blends Christian ideas of human perfectibility with a secular faith in reason and science, alongside a compulsion to optimistically interpret linear time.⁵⁵⁴ This narrative views historical progress as “linear, uniform, and inevitable” and presumes a logic that establishes “a continuous line between past, present, and future.”⁵⁵⁵ While hope remains tethered to the narrative of progress for some,⁵⁵⁶ there is an increasing constellation of

⁵⁵¹ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 31; *Bildung* refers to “a fundamental, social-historical project of the spirit’s self-cultivation.” Marina F. Bykova, “Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung,” in eds. Marina F. Bykova, Kenneth R. Westphal, *The Palgrave Hegel Handbook*, Palgrave Handbooks in German Idealism (Victoria: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 425–449, 425.

⁵⁵² In Loren Goldman’s 2012 article “In Defense of Blinders: On Kant, Political Hope, and the Need for Practical Belief,” he defended the association between hope and progress. Subsequently in his 2023 book, *The Principle of Political Hope*, Goldman has established distance between progress as “fact” or developmentalist readings of history.

⁵⁵³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2000), 32.

⁵⁵⁴ Allen, *The End of Progress*; Dienstag, *Pessimism*; John Gray, “An Illusion with a Future,” *Daedalus* 133, no. 3 (July 2004): 10–17.

⁵⁵⁵ Mathias Thaler, “Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares,” *Constellations* 26, no. 4 (2019): 607–22, 614; Jakob Huber, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Progress, Hope, and History,” *Constellations* 28, no. 1 (March 2021): 126–39, 126.

⁵⁵⁶ Huber, “Looking Back, Looking Forward.”

theorists who are wary about hope's need for the narrative of progress.⁵⁵⁷ In what follows, I will discuss how Winters, Eagleton, and Marasco theorize hope in the absence of progress.

Perhaps because Eagleton and Winters both draw on Benjamin and Adorno, they share a similar perspective regarding the relationship between hope and progress. When hope overemphasizes progress and the perfectibility of humanity, it is blind to atrocities in the present as well as the catastrophes of the past.⁵⁵⁸ For Eagleton, hope is forward-looking without expecting progress. Things may improve or progress throughout history, but progress is not guaranteed, and humanity should expect neither redemption nor perfection in the future.

Though justice may not flourish in the end, a life devoted to the pursuit of it remains a creditable one...Even if history were to fall into utter ruin, it would be a matter for despair only if that catastrophe were predestined; and even then it is possible, like many a tragic protagonist, to pluck value from combating the inevitable. Indeed, unless one combats the inevitable, one will never know how inevitable it was in the first place...*catastrophe is not written into the march of history, any more than hope is.* However desolate the future may prove, it might always have been different. The contingency that can make for misfortune can also make for success.⁵⁵⁹

Progress strips history of its “catastrophic character” while implying a telos that suggests there is little we can do to alter the trajectory of history.⁵⁶⁰ Divorced from progress, hope's relationship with the future entails acceptance of the contingent and open character of the movement of time and history.

Winters conceives of progress as an article of faith that history will continue along a triumphant trajectory to a better tomorrow. Narratives of progress carry “a pernicious side” that overshadows historical losses and the continuation of racial injustice, as well as social and political

⁵⁵⁷ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*; Goldman, *The Principle of Political Hope*.

⁵⁵⁸ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 132 emphasis added.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

regression.⁵⁶¹ Progress carries the narrative assumption that things are better than they were, which erases the persistence of racism and oppression.

American exceptionalism, progress, and empire form a complicated and tortuous constellation that has been both formative and destructive of black existence. American-style optimism in a future marked by greater opportunity and freedom for American citizens (and nations that endorse the nation's ideals and principles) is intertwined with the assumption that America is an exceptional nation, a 'beacon' to the rest of the world.⁵⁶²

The narrative of progress, in this instance, requires cognitive dissonance when considering present-day instances of racism, oppression, and violence against Black and brown people. Current tragedies are posited as steppingstones to future liberation, while simultaneously suggesting that nothing is as horrific as it was in the past. This narrative tendency implies that history unfolds in a linear manner, rather than moving cyclically, if at all. Progress and American exceptionalism characterize the narrative arc of American politics, when there is little momentum toward a brighter and more just future, and even when the narrative seems more like a fool's paradise than utopian redemption.

Marasco's work on despair may seem out of tune with Eagleton's and Winter's explicit theorizations of hope. However, given Marasco's theorization of despair as a disruption for progressive concepts of history, and her perceptive reading of Adorno, she is a worthy accompanist for this discussion. For one, Marasco theorizes despair as the non-identical complement to hope. Secondly, Marasco offers a perceptive and non-progressive reading of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, which is an apt accompaniment to this discussion of non-progressive forms of hope. Rather than framing the dialectic progressively as thesis, synthesis, antithesis, repeat; Marasco offers a reframed orientation of the dialectic that hinges on the passion of despair—or "the restlessness of

⁵⁶¹ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 6.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

the negative” —rather than “reconciliation or remembrance.”⁵⁶³ With respect to Hegel’s concept of “unhappy consciousness,” Marasco argues “unhappiness [is] a recurring condition of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*.”⁵⁶⁴ With Marasco’s touch, the Hegelian concept of unhappy consciousness is the product of the perpetual unfulfilled or “dystopic resolution” in the dialectic.⁵⁶⁵ Against progressive interpretations of the dialectic—where history proceeds progressively in response to demands for reconciliation, or the recognition of the previously misrecognized—Marasco creates space for the political activity of despair in this dystopic lack of resolution. In her discussion of Judith Butler, Marasco argues, “Unhappy consciousness is the portrait of ourselves after dreams have become dystopia, after liberatory projects have fallen into disrepair, after progress, meaning, and reason in history give way to complexity, contingency, and new forms of subjection and unfreedom.”⁵⁶⁶ This interpretation of Hegel offers an explicitly non-progressive reading of history without a telos that strikes a chord more sonorous with Adorno and Foucault, than with Marx.

Rather than requiring a hopeful antidote to the poison of the present, Marasco offers a non-progressive reframing of history and hope that creates space for passionate lament and despair. What is significant about Marasco’s analysis is how she creates the possibility for political activity in the service of freedom rather than resignation. “This is a variety of despair that bears no resemblance to simple resignation or retreat. Indeed, despair *is* the restlessness of the negative, or the energetic force with which consciousness keeps moving.”⁵⁶⁷ When conceived thusly, hope—as the non-identical remainder of despair—does not require positivity, happiness, or a teleological

⁵⁶³ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 50.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 52, quoting Judith Butler n82.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

reading of history/the future to sustain praxis. Here despair is the passionate fire that keeps the fight against unfreedom and oppression alive, when hope is repeatedly disappointed.

There can be little doubt the abolition of slavery and the end of Jim Crow segregation were major gains in the movement toward racial justice, but as Winters warns “when these changes are interpreted through the lens of progress, something is lost (and progress makes us unaware of this loss).”⁵⁶⁸ What is lost, by interpreting civil rights and social movement gains through the lens of progress, is a reckoning with the racial injustice pervasive in the present. The narrative of progress would rather parrot the myth of racial uplift, while ignoring the continued presence of white supremacy and racist violence against Black and brown people. Furthermore, as Winters notes, progress has a “harmonizing” effect.⁵⁶⁹ Rather than enabling a discordant cacophony of divergent voices and pleas, progress tends to elevate the agendas and voices of those in the majority while silencing the demands of those with less power. Winters’ brilliant book provides the tools to understand how the narrative of progress silences talk of “ongoing racial disparity and violence” while perpetuating the parallel narrative of racial uplift.⁵⁷⁰ Progress, instead, is best viewed ambivalently as there are countless examples of injustice that illuminate how “narratives of progress undermine themselves.”⁵⁷¹ Among countless other examples, the subjugation of Native Americans,

⁵⁶⁸ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 29.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6; For example, Nikole Hannah-Jones was initially denied tenure at UNC Chapel Hill as a result of controversy surrounding the 1619 project, largely because conservatives would prefer to eliminate any contemporary discussion of the historical instances of slavery as well as any reference to so-called “critical race theory” in pedagogy and curriculum (UNC later offered her tenure, but she decided to move to Howard University, an HBCU; here I refer to critical race theory in scare-quotes, because it has become a buzzword among right-wing pundits who believe children should be sheltered from learning about the oppression or enslavement of Black people). Meanwhile there is a moral panic on the right regarding the *existence* of trans people. From Florida to Ohio, and many places in between, right-wing politicians seem hell-bent to ban books and curriculum that discusses, slavery, social justice, and LGBTQ+ issues. For every step toward increasing awareness about racial injustice and LGBTQ+ rights there is a horrifying degree of backlash, push-back, and erasure.

⁵⁷¹ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 7.

immigrants, workers, and the LGBTQ+ communities are examples of progress undermining itself.⁵⁷² Climate change represents another example of the breakdown of this narrative. The climate crisis, backlash against the Movement for Black Lives, attacks on reproductive freedom/abortion bans, and the vilification of trans people represent how politics and movements for social justice often take a non-linear and regressive—rather than progressive—trajectory.

Temporality and Hope

The night I finished building the lighthouse, I took my boat out to the sea to look at it from a distance. And all of a sudden I had a thought: Death is the only lighthouse that is always lit. No matter where you sail, ultimately, you must turn toward it. Everything fades in the world, but Death endures.

—Liu Cixin⁵⁷³

As Adorno and Horkheimer argue in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there have been innumerable instances where the Enlightenment narrative of progress—which used knowledge and reason to liberate humans from their fear of the unknown—has gone awry and proven more regressive than progressive.⁵⁷⁴ Throughout my dissertation, I have argued the climate crisis is another example progress's undoing. How does one make sense of time—let alone history—when humanity's ship is lost at sea without the lighthouse of progress to guide us back to shore? Despite there being a growing contingent of critical theorists who wish to disavow progressive notions of hope, there remains a future-oriented dimension to hope. Hope in the absence of optimism and progress attempts to disrupt the future-oriented fixation that theorists of hope tend to advocate. That said, there is internal discord about whether hope and adjacent interventions such as optimism,

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Cixin, *Death's End*, 379.

⁵⁷⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

happiness, and utopia are future-oriented,⁵⁷⁵ and whether hope requires nourishment from the past.⁵⁷⁶ Is it even possible to theorize hope without the future? Dienstag suggests this might be an untenable proposition as hope typically implies an unhealthy fixation on the future. “Most of our hopes are bound to be disappointed, and those that are fulfilled are disfulfilled in the next moment as the objects of our hope slip into the past.”⁵⁷⁷ Eagleton, for one, expresses a similar wariness about future-oriented forms of hope, in his attempt to divest hope from this fixation. He warns that when hope succumbs to a “fetishism of the future,” it can disrupt the possibility for being present.⁵⁷⁸ Future-oriented hope cleaves our focus by pointing our attention to future gains, rather than being fully present in the current moment. When the future provides redemption from present circumstances (be they inconvenient, oppressive, or worse) the arrival of the future will disappoint, even if we receive the objects of our hoping. This is because when we believe the present to be intrinsically unfulfilling, it threatens to trap us in a cycle of constantly hoping for something different than what we have right now. In Dienstag’s understanding of pessimism, there is a strong temporal dimension that is attuned to the “burden of [linear] time.”⁵⁷⁹ As such, pessimism might be more amenable to critiques of progress, than the Herculean task of activating a future-less hope. Throughout what follows I will discuss the temporal dimension of hope as this relates to Dienstag’s temporal orientation of pessimism. As Dienstag avers:

To say that our lives are always on the way to death is not at all to say that they are pointless, but simply to set out the parameters of possibility for our existence. Pessimism may warn us to acknowledge our limitations—but it does not urge us to

⁵⁷⁵ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

⁵⁷⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*; Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

⁵⁷⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 23.

⁵⁷⁸ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 44.

⁵⁷⁹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 19.

collapse in the face of them. Death is merely the ultimate reminder that we do not control the conditions of our existence and are not ever likely to.⁵⁸⁰

In Dienstag's taxonomy of pessimism, temporality plays a pivotal role. Humans have the distinct experience of an unrelenting awareness of our "existence within time."⁵⁸¹ This may be especially the case in the youth-obsessed U.S. where there is an obsessive cultural preference for the beauty and vitality of youth. Once a person crosses the threshold past a certain age, there is a pervasive sense that one has moved beyond cultural relevance, and aesthetic appeal. Trends fade into the past, cultural references become flat, and generational antagonisms prescribe how older and younger people relate to one another—both in jest, and to combat their shrinking (or rising) relevance.⁵⁸² As Dienstag says, "Nothing is permanent, and we suffer most from the lack of permanence in the people and things that we most care about."⁵⁸³ Entropy and death are the only things we know for certain will arrive in the future, and both decay and death are largely out of our control. When one accepts the radical contingency of the future—beyond entropy and death—it can be liberating and terrifying. This is one of the reasons I share Dienstag's appreciation for Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism. As I argued in Chapter 2, Nietzsche advises that instead of willing nothing, like Schopenhauer, one must learn to love one's fate to cope with what Dienstag refers to as the "burden of time."⁵⁸⁴ As Dienstag warns, hope's fixation on the future risks disappointment as our

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 23. Dienstag argues that time consciousness is strictly the purview of humans. However, I would argue this perspective is a hold-over from antiquated ideas about nonhuman animal consciousness. Linear time is undoubtedly a construct of human creation, but this does not mean that nonhuman animals lack an awareness of their existence within time. The study of nonhuman animal intelligence is a burgeoning field, with a vast and diverse array of evidence for nonhuman animal intelligence. As such, I would like to gently push-back on the outmoded idea that humans can *know* philosophically about the consciousness of animals without looking to the emergent and expanding fields of nonhuman animal intelligence.

⁵⁸² E.g., The Gen Z Shake vs the Millennial Pause, Millennials kill everything vs Ok Boomer.

⁵⁸³ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 23.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 19.

desires are unattained or anticlimactic in their attainment. Nietzsche's life-affirming *amor fati*, provides resources for accepting the radical contingency of the future without expecting perpetual improvement.

As discussed above, Marasco argues that a dialectical read of history—whether Hegelian or Adornian—does not imply a progressive narrative arc to history. Instead, Marasco offers that “Despair is the refutation of the end of history.”⁵⁸⁵ This does not mean history is inconsequential for Marasco's analysis. Indeed, she sees despair and hope in tension, where “Despair is a misrelation to a present that concretely is, more than a past that never was or a future that ought to be.”⁵⁸⁶ Crucially, here, is how Marasco refers to the present and the future. The present is the purview of disappointed hopes. Meanwhile, the “future that ought to be” is where hope projects into the future. Despair, on this read, keeps the kite of hope tethered to the earth, when it would rather escape into the ether as Dickinson's feathered creature. Rather than the traditional reading of Hegel's dialectic, Marasco offers a non-progressive depiction of world spirit. This reading suggests the dialectic does not necessarily resolve itself with increased freedom, but instead can result in new, unforeseen dependence. To cope with this negative turn, Marasco offers instead, the “‘Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk,’ [as] the concrete experience of freedom—drenched in despair, aligned with the accidental and the nonsensical, felt as violence—[which] spoils the ‘state of repose’ that a sober philosophy of Spirit promises.”⁵⁸⁷ With this incitement, the Bacchanalian revel is to despair and hope, as Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism is to suffering. All are bound together in an earthly tangle trying to make sense of the needless violence on this planet, while still looking for a

⁵⁸⁵ Marasco, *The Highway of Despair*, 13.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, quoting Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, § 47.

way to experience a little joy in the meantime. Even with the Bacchanalian revelry to cope with the suffering that inheres in dashed expectations, Marasco's reading of time still implies a future-oriented fixation.

For Eagleton, hope faces forward while drawing on past injustices to sustain inspiration in the fight for a better world. Alongside Theodor Adorno, Eagleton avers that the meaning of the past is understood in a dialectical sense through reflection, and it can be mined as a source for inspiration and hope. As Eagleton notes:

In some obscure sense...we are responsible for the past as well as for the present and future. The dead cannot be resurrected; but there is a tragic form of hope whereby they can be invested with new meaning, interpreted otherwise, woven into a narrative which they themselves could not have foretold.⁵⁸⁸

In other words, a historical understanding of the present is an essential aspect of the non-progressive forms of hope described by Eagleton. From a political perspective, hoping despite the possibility of perpetual heartbreak, injustice, and violence requires accepting the contingency and ephemeral nature of political outcomes. Regardless of one's commitments to the struggle for social justice, equitable solutions to climate change, and liberation from capitalism, some aspects of politics are out of our control. As Eagleton advises, "That our woes are to a large extent systemic is in one sense cause for despondency, since systems can be formidably hard to change. But it is also grounds for hope...We will probably find a cure for cancer, but not for murder."⁵⁸⁹ Scientific-technological progress is much easier to imagine than moral-political progress, even though murder, tyranny, and oppression are creations of human invention. A non-progressive hope—rooted in the present—counsels us to hope regardless of the likelihood that our hopes will come to fruition. Drawing on Benjamin and channeling Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, Eagleton says, "One should try to see how

⁵⁸⁸ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 33.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

one's acts might appear from the standpoint of eternity, treating every [act] as though it were one's last, folding the future into the present rather than (as with historicism) folding the past into the present and future. In this way one can live ironically, in and out of history."⁵⁹⁰ Eagleton and I both agree that something akin to the eternal recurrence is an excellent thought experiment for practicing and honing a life-affirming attitude, despite bearing witness to the unending appearance of tragedies, cruelties, and horrors. However, if hope requires divestment from pessimism, I am not convinced that Eagleton disrupts the future-oriented fixation of hope. Similarly, where Eagleton's hope successfully renounces the "fetishism of the future" it is more similar to pessimism than he might prefer.⁵⁹¹ If Eagleton's tragic hope requires letting go of the narrative of progress, sustained consideration of the "abyss of disaster," and acceptance of the possibility of crisis, then—despite Eagleton's pains to distinguish between pessimism and hope—this hope is quite consonant with pessimism.

Winters argues that any project rooted in hope must interrogate the historical record for those who have suffered needlessly to unjust causes. Their injustices deserve mourning, so they do not suffer the indignity of dominant histories erasing their struggles. Winters' melancholic hope enables sustained attention to past injustice and a commitment to the possibility of a better world. As Winters notes, drawing on Walter Benjamin, "memory is always in danger of 'becoming a tool of the ruling classes,' a situation that threatens to 'murder the dead twice,' to erase and eliminate the dissonant quality of past suffering, injustice, struggle, and loss."⁵⁹² For hope to be dialectical and rooted in the struggle against oppression, capitalist alienation, and the commodification of the

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁹² Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 14. See Chapter 2, pp 152–53, note 154.

natural world, it must have awareness of historical struggles and injustice. For hope to be sufficiently non-progressive, it must recognize gains made in the name of racial justice without erasing the persistence of oppression and police violence against Black and brown people by using these gains to construct a narrative of racial uplift.

Rather than succumbing to the lure of the future, the non-progressive aspect of Winters' melancholic hope attempts to challenge future-oriented forms of hope, while illuminating suffering and racial injustice in the present and throughout history. The continued presence of injustice upends the magical thinking that perpetuates the narrative of progress. To shed light on injustice in the past is to disrupt the "agony of progress" or the myth that social, political, and moral betterment is a given.⁵⁹³ Building on Walter Benjamin and W.E.B DuBois, Winters illuminates how "a better future depends in part on how we remember and keep alive the cries, struggles, and missed opportunities of enslaved ancestors."⁵⁹⁴ Hope, when paired with grief or melancholy, and a steadfast commitment to fighting injustice, can "make selves more open to neglected possibilities and novel ways of being."⁵⁹⁵ Melancholic hope draws on the past while pointing to a future liberated from the broken-down present. Through sustaining focus on the catastrophes on the past, melancholic hope plumbs the memory of historical injustice to imagine a better future. Envisioning the future requires listening to the record of historical injustice. Despite Winters impassioned argument distinguishing melancholic hope from a non-progressive reading of history, his analysis still points to a future-oriented form of hope. Akin to Eagleton, where Winters' hope is most tragic and fixated on reviving lost historical narratives in service of political organizing in the present, it more closely approximates

⁵⁹³ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 7.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

pessimism. With both Winters and Eagleton, I do not view this as a corruption or deficiency in their thinking, not even close, as both offer impassioned and beautifully reasoned accounts of a non-progressive hope. Instead, I aim to offer a gentle provocation that the efforts they both exert to establish distance between hope and pessimism may not be as fruitful or necessary as they originally thought.

As I argued in Chapters 3 and 4, challenging supra-historical narratives—which typically favor history’s victors—is an essential facet of twentieth-century critical pessimism. Critical theorizing must understand the historical struggles to avoid replicating the tragedies of the past. The critical orientation of pessimism is mindful of the mounting but avoidable catastrophes of the past; while being rooted in the laments, critiques, and struggles of the present; with an eye toward the future, without expecting anything specific. Differently from the accounts of hope detailed above, pessimism considers the future as an unknowable guest that—with or without invitation—is always on their way to your house for a visit. It is a fool’s errand to resist the arrival of the future, but there is no way to know the future’s condition and how it will look when it arrives. Pessimism beckons us to live without expectation, while hope offers resources to sustain the fire of resistance, and curiosity about the future. When this is coupled with a life-affirming attitude, it compels resilience in the face of adversity. When the going gets tough, pessimists find a way to laugh and make the best of tragedy. By counseling us to expect nothing, pessimistic hope does not deny the anticipatory grief entailed by wildfires, sea-level rise, or species collapse. Rather it provides an affective framework to maintain resilience without denying the gravity of this moment or what may come in the future.

Future-oriented hope is like an antsy reader who skips ahead to the action, meanwhile missing the beautiful prose, dialogue, and narrative that provide context for the climax. I read because I love the written word and a good narrative, just as I live because I love feeling alive and am curious about what comes next. Future-oriented hope is similar to radical utopian imaginaries.

Both are riveting stories we can escape into; and they provide solace by allowing us to imagine a world without the horrific vagaries of the contemporary. While they can carve out space for pleasure in the here and now, utopian imaginaries—like the narrative of progress—imply a redemptive arc of history where the future guarantees salvation from the present. Resting our hope on the future is like reading for only the good parts: a whole lot of life will be missed in the process. Between news of mass shootings, natural disasters, hate crimes, and war—the daily arrival of heart-breaking news stories rivals train times for its regularity. It is understandable why leftists seek reprieve in utopian imaginaries. The broken-down present can be unbearable. However, fixating on the possibility for a utopian future—however queer, anti-capitalist, and wonderful—disrupts our capacity for embodied joy in the present. Besides, future-oriented hope guarantees disappointment when every week brings news of another great tragedy, catastrophic weather event, or roll-back of civil rights and liberties.

Regardless of the pains to which theorists of hope seek to establish distance between a cheery-eyed, future-oriented optimism, hope remains time-bound and fixated on the future. In its orientation to the future, hope is bound by disappointment and the possibility of failure. This attachment to the not-yet-here, keeps one stuck in a cycle of incomplete attainment unmoored from the obligatory trajectory of life toward decay, entropy, and death. Yet, hope keeps the narrative of life interesting, by rendering possible the seemingly impossible. In an often-quoted remark, Ursula K. LeGuin once said, “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”⁵⁹⁶ With hope and collective action, LeGuin implies, even the most immovable artifices of human creation can be consigned to rubble. The type of hope LeGuin refers to is a radical and political hope, fundamentally suspicious of the status quo. Hope, in this sense, requires recognition of injustice and

⁵⁹⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters,” Ursula K. Le Guin.com, November 19, 2014. <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/nbf-medal>

the willingness to upend and transform whatever maintains this injustice. Hope—as it is commonly conceived—believes things *can be* different in the future. I propose a more dialectical hope. A hope metered by a recognition of the negativity pervasive in this world, but a hope that does not reject pessimism for fear of being accused of a dismal, apolitical, or conservative disposition. A pessimistic hope mindful of the past, rooted in the present, and aware of the contingency of the future. Despite the hesitation to theorize hope with pessimism, pessimism can nourish hope. Where hope sustains praxis by maintaining the possibility for political change; pessimism teaches us to engage with worst-case possibilities and counsels us to “expect nothing.”⁵⁹⁷

Suffering and Hope

The purpose of the negativity in pessimism, on van der Lugt’s reading, is to make sense of the suffering humans and other creatures have inherited by virtue of being alive. This is the “creaturely complaint” that is the primary concern in her book—a formulation she draws from seventeenth century French philosopher Pierre Bayle.⁵⁹⁸ This creaturely complaint refers to the why of existence and suffering: “Why do I suffer, I, who did not ask to be created?”⁵⁹⁹ The physical experience of suffering refers to the Baylean conception of “physical evil” or the actual felt experience of suffering. If one does not experience poverty as suffering, then poverty is not a felt physical evil for them; however, whenever someone experiences poverty as suffering, it is an instance of physical evil. Wherever there is suffering, there is a need for consolation, but the pessimists—in van der Lugt’s estimation—recognize some pains are inconsolable. Faced with the

⁵⁹⁷ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 32.

⁵⁹⁸ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 62.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

beautiful, sensitive prose and scrupulously argued philosophy of van der Lugt, it is difficult to feel worthy of the authority to disagree with her brilliant work. However, for my purposes, her analysis of suffering—while deep and immanently useful—does not sufficiently grapple with more structural and systemic experiences of suffering, such as injustice and oppression. It is for this reason that I propose a critical orientation, in addition to Dienstag’s temporally-oriented and van der Lugt’s value-oriented pessimisms. Critical pessimism is a historical, materialist, and political approach to grappling with the breakdown in the narrative of progress, and the inexhaustible and intersecting experiences of injustice. In what follows, I will discuss how Winters, Eagleton, and Marasco grapple with suffering and injustice, to triangulate between their non-progressive forms of hope (or despair) and van der Lugt’s theorization of suffering and physical evil.

In Christian theology despair has traditionally referred to “not simply sickness, but sin,” because it meant that one had forsaken hope and the existence of God.⁶⁰⁰ Martin Luther, Marasco points out, viewed despair as “the most serious and unforgivable evil.”⁶⁰¹ To suffer without turning to God for redemption was an egregious and unforgivable error. Rather intrepidly, Marasco argues “Even staunchly secular political theory that promises escape from despair, may be said in this context, to participate in the most basic religiosity.”⁶⁰² Marasco’s formulation mirrors the argument I (and others) have made about hope’s eschatological component. There is a pervasive sense that to deny the negative—be it despair, suffering, injustice, lament—is to be productive, or less secularly, to be redeemed. Marasco’s despair resists the compulsion for redemption—be it secular or political—and dwells instead on the theorists who provide resources to lament and challenge the

⁶⁰⁰ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 8.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*

suffering inherent in “damaged life.”⁶⁰³ At the close of her book, Marasco suggests the task for critical theory moving forward:

The challenge for contemporary critical theory is to inhabit this no-man’s-land between the prevailing order of things and a more just and humane world. This position is drawn from the limits of reason and faith, from the aporias of knowledge, and from the forceful determination of our passions. What is needed is the cultivated misrelation to the present that comes with the work of the negative. That is to say, what lives in the gay science is nourished by our despair.⁶⁰⁴

Where I see a deep affinity between Marasco and van der Lugt is how lament and/or “creaturely complaints” can be productive for minimizing suffering. On the one hand, to lament or complain is to draw attention to one’s suffering. On the other, to give voice to suffering—be it physical evil or injustice—is to acknowledge the presence of pain. Where my affinities more closely align with Marasco is that she views despair—and by proxy lament—as explicitly political activities rooted in social and historical conditions. However, with Marasco’s attentive reading of the political utility of the negative, as well as her suggestion that despair can be a tool for illuminating suffering, there are parallels between her position—despite her rejection of pessimism—and the value-oriented pessimism expressed by van der Lugt.

Winters’ discussion of suffering is a bit more straightforward, as he speaks explicitly to the persistence of racial violence and the trauma of the Black experience in the U.S. As previously mentioned, in theorizing ‘melancholic hope,’ Winters speaks to the profound capacity of humans to be “figuratively wounded” and deeply affected by witnessing the suffering of others. Bearing witness to the persistence and legacy of racial violence can alter the historical narrative, with the “hope” of altering the political process as well. Winters’ theorization of melancholic hope, akin to Marasco, is explicitly political and critical. However, despite his distinction between Winters and van der Lugt—

⁶⁰³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. The subtitle of Adorno’s book of aphorisms is “Reflections on a Damaged Life.”

⁶⁰⁴ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 183.

they share a common ethical concern, which is to avoid the erasure of and false attribution of suffering. Van der Lugt raises concerns about the pervasive (and historical) tendency to assume that one should be responsible for their own happiness, which can have the insidious result of “*overburdening the will*.”⁶⁰⁵ Progress—especially where it minimizes the persistence of racial violence, oppression, injustice, or trauma—has a similar tendency toward overburdening the will. As Winters notes, “progress tends to function as a harmonizing category, it makes us less attuned and responsive to events, bodies, conditions, and losses that we cannot immediately make sense of, explain away, or integrate into a unified narrative.”⁶⁰⁶ Both the expectation that one is responsible for their happiness and the magical thinking entailed by the idea of progress, would disregard any suffering or injustice that contradicted their imperative. In defense of pessimism, van der Lugt explains:

The tendency to explain suffering away and to emphasize human self-mastery has clung to optimism from the start—and it is here that pessimism again reveals its value, by warning us that to overburden the will is to make us all the more miserable; it is to overwhelm us with a sense of failure for things that are ultimately out of our control.⁶⁰⁷

Progress, akin to overburdening of the will, operates like an eraser to present-day suffering and injustice, where the narrative of progress would “too easily reconcile historical losses with current achievements” and suggest that a person is “crying wolf” for speaking to the persistence of racial violence.⁶⁰⁸ Being attuned to suffering and eschewing the wrong forms of consolation—in this sense—deeply informs the melancholic hope and pessimism theorized by Winters and van der

⁶⁰⁵ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 402, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰⁶ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 29.

⁶⁰⁷ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 403.

⁶⁰⁸ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 6

Lugt.⁶⁰⁹ I would suggest that while Winters’ maintains that melancholic hope is distinct from pessimism, when pessimism is oriented toward the experience of suffering, there are many lines of affinity between the two.

Finally, for Eagleton, a discussion of suffering is central to his framing of a tragic, non-progressive hope. While I disagree with Eagleton’s perspective that Benjamin theorized “a universal history,” he was correct to point out that Benjamin endeavored to use historical narratives to depict “the persistent reality of suffering” as “an ironic source of hope.”⁶¹⁰ As a materialist, Eagleton draws on early Frankfurt School formulations of progress, to move toward a non-teleological form of hope. Throughout his book Eagleton circles back to discussions of suffering, resistance to injustice, and a concern about inequality. It is on this foundation that Eagleton develops his theory of tragic hope. “Tragedy does not necessarily involve a sticky end; it may simply mean that one has to be hauled through hell in order to achieve a modicum of well-being.”⁶¹¹ While one might argue that Eagleton’s conception of tragedy and revolution here could succumb to van der Lugt’s overburdening of the will, he quickly turns to a discussion of the role of individual sacrifice. “The reclamation of the dead in memory...seems a poor substitute for some more palpable act of restitution.”⁶¹² Where revolutionary hope—which theoretically alleviates much suffering—implies a redemptive arc, Eagleton asks whether “even the most resplendently emancipated future could

⁶⁰⁹ I would argue further, that van der Lugt’s interpretation of physical evil—as felt suffering—offers resources for framing the suffering experienced by the Black community when they learned the U.S. was a post-racial society after electing Obama. This was an idea that did not hold up to scrutiny but worked to erase the embodied experience of injustice and harm throughout his presidency. While it proved false repeatedly throughout Obama’s Presidency, the idea of a post-racial society was thoroughly disavowed with the election of authoritarian-wannabe Donald Trump, whose fascistic tendencies emboldened white supremacists to feel like they had a rein on power and a platform on which to speak.

⁶¹⁰ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 30 *passim*. I also disagree with Eagleton’s argument that while Benjamin described himself as a pessimist, “one might equally see [his outlook] as realism.” See: pp 5-6.

⁶¹¹ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 35.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

outweigh this saga of sorrow”⁶¹³ Here, as elsewhere, Eagleton provides a sensitive analysis of suffering and injustice—not as stepping stones to a future utopia—but as a real problem that exists in the here and now. In this, as in many other elements of his tragic hope, I would argue that Eagleton’s theorizing has much more in common with pessimism than he might prefer.

On the register of suffering and value-oriented pessimism, non-progressive critical theories of hope share a similar harmony. Most useful for our discussion here, is how the overburdening of the will is one way to be attuned to the lack of progress—but persistence of injustice—theorized in non-progressive forms of hope. Similarly, the existence of what van der Lugt refers to as “physical evil,” or the felt experience of suffering, is a generative framing for the embodiment and experience of injustice, and oppression.

Negativity and Hope

To hope without an acceptance that things might go wrong, get worse, or stay the same—is to risk the burn-out of disappointment and dashed expectations. As Marasco points out, despair and lament *nourish* hope. Without lament, critique, or engagement with the “abyss of potential disaster”—as Eagleton reminds us—hope remains tethered to progressive readings of history.⁶¹⁴ As I have argued throughout my dissertation, the crisis of climate change—let alone the regressive treatment of the trans community, roll-back of reproductive freedoms in the US, worldwide authoritarian creep, and the persistence of violence against BIPOC communities—represents a direct challenge to this narrative arc. Most theorizations of hope—even where they attempt to disrupt the association between hope and telos, remain fixated on the future. Where hope is theorized alongside the critical practice of providing what Foucault would refer to as—a “history of

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 58.

the present”—it has a profound capacity to challenge status quo instantiations of violence, oppression, and injustice that are taken as a given. However, this practice must be metered with negativity to avoid the dashed expectations and riven awareness of a future-oriented hope.⁶¹⁵ Throughout this section, I will explore the negative elements of the hope or despair theorized by Eagleton, Winters, and Marasco.

On the relationship between hope and the negative, Winters argues that “The work of the negative, to be taken seriously, must ultimately generate something affirmative, substantive, practical, and well-defined.”⁶¹⁶ I take this to mean, melancholic hope must be productive of something *in the future*. Otherwise, what is the point? To this, I would counter that the negative does not need to produce something beyond a melancholic reading of historical violence and trauma, especially when the affirmative is dialectically bound to the negative. As Winters states, “Adorno underscores how our dominant narratives and practices foster a false sense of harmony, harmony that is predicated on the denial or assimilation of difference and conflict.”⁶¹⁷ Hope filtered through melancholy allows for one to be wounded and affected by the unrelenting cruelty and pervasiveness of racial injustice, without the narratives of progress or racial uplift. As Winters eloquently argues, “A less violent and cruel world depends, in large part, on our capacity to be figuratively wounded and opened by the dissonant qualities and blue notes of life’s many soundtracks.”⁶¹⁸ The “work of the negative” hinges on this suffering to develop an affirmative project attuned to the “blue notes” of life.

However, I would like to gently disagree with Winters’ argument that the work of the negative must produce something affirmative or positive. By illuminating otherwise archived

⁶¹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

instances of historic injustice, and then gesturing toward instances when humans and society can be “figuratively wounded” through the work of the nonidentical, the work of the negative might be generative enough. In Winters’ theorization of the relationship between the productivity of the negative and the affirmative, he draws on the Adornian concept of the nonidentical. Of the nonidentical, Winters argues this “signifies possibility for Adorno.”⁶¹⁹ As such, Winters sheds light on a minor inconsistency in his logic. In other words, the negative is *inherently productive* because it illuminates openings, concepts, histories, possibilities, and identities that were previously fixed or closed. Rather than demanding that critical theory must be productive—not that this is *quite* what Winters argues—I take after Marasco’s provocation that critical theory need not “furnish answers.”⁶²⁰ Instead, “the urge to rescue philosophical critique from despair reproduces the very conditions it abhors.”⁶²¹ While I do not mean to insist that Winters’ melancholic hope suffers from a surfeit of positivity, or that it reproduces the conditions it abhors, I do mean to suggest that it is unnecessary for critical theory to be productive—of solutions, political projects, or recommendations of praxis. Here, Foucault offers helpful guidance: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.”⁶²² One of the most important roles critical theory can play is naming what is dangerous about our contemporary moment, because this points to (potentially) new instances of danger or injustice for resistance. In this, Winters’ project is successful. The work of the negative in Winters’ project, however, is work enough because it illuminates

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 8.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 10.

⁶²² Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 231-232, emphasis added.

moments in the archive that should be figuratively wounding, and new possibilities for resistance through an interrogation of the nonidentical remains.

To develop a theory of non-progressive hope, Eagleton conceives of hope alongside tragedy, rather than pessimism and despair. “Tragedy [as distinct from pessimism] is concerned with what, if anything, survives when humanity has been hacked down to almost nothing. Whatever residue then remains, whatever still refuses to give way, is what can assuredly be built upon.”⁶²³ Tragedy, for Eagleton, implies there is a residue remaining to rebuild after catastrophe strikes. Despair, for Eagleton, is similar to pessimism—in that both are antithetical to hope. However, despair, unlike pessimism, does not disrupt the possibility for desire, which is essential for hope Eagleton claims, “Despair negates hope but not desire.”⁶²⁴ In this sense, the despairing person can remain hopeful, because they desire an outcome that would negate their despair. To move beyond the relationship between hope and despair, Eagleton theorizes a tragic hope free from the salve of redemption and the teleological perspectives of optimism or pessimism. This form of hope requires the hue of tragedy and lament to avoid the rose-colored fatalism of optimism. However, this reading of tragedy foregoes the Dionysian pessimism that Nietzsche theorized in his close reading of Greek tragedies, or the revolutionary pessimism that inspired Benjamin once he finished his book on German tragedies. Both are theorists upon which Eagleton draws, but neither of their pessimisms are given space to roam in the pages of Eagleton’s book.

Eagleton conceives of pessimism as a naively teleological form of fatalism, where pessimism has specific, and negative, expectations about the future. I would argue instead that *without* the sustenance of pessimism, hope is—to use Eagleton’s description of pessimism— “extravagantly

⁶²³ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 71.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

unrealistic.”⁶²⁵ Eagleton’s understanding of an “authentic hope” requires resilience and engagement with “dark nights of the soul.”⁶²⁶ The hopeful must be steadfast in the face of tragedy, so that when faced with the possibility of catastrophe, they maintain “an irreducible residue that refuses to give way.”⁶²⁷ Eagleton’s hope requires tenacity to accept the tragic and catastrophic character of history, which is not dissimilar from the resilience—to laugh in the face of suffering—advocated by Dionysian pessimism. Hope infused with the negativity of tragedy, that drinks from the well of Benjamin, is more attuned to pessimism, and Eagleton’s theorization of hope would be heartened by a critically-oriented form of pessimism.

Adorno’s nonidentical thinking disrupts the pervasive tendency to define pessimism based on one’s disdain for negative or critical theorizing. By challenging conceptual fixity, nonidentity thinking points to the open-endedness of pessimism. While a passive Schopenhauerian-style pessimism is likely to result in apolitical resignation, lament and critical theorizing highlight what is unacceptable about our social, political, and ecological realities. Rather than projecting a utopian imaginary to escape into, critical theorizing is sufficiently productive by taking stock of the past and present atrocities and injustices saturating our era. Besides, as Marasco beckons, “What might critique accomplish once released from the expectation that it outline an escape from the conditions it comprehends and laments?”⁶²⁸ Critical theory, in other words, need not “furnish answers” or produce something explicitly affirmative to be a worthwhile endeavor.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 40

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁶²⁸ Marasco, *Highway of Despair*, 8.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

There appears to be a hesitation among most theorists—even those who deeply consider the worst injustices and horrors of our time—to fully embrace negativity, for fear that it is unproductive. When negativity approximates Schopenhauer’s passive pessimism—or what Nietzsche referred to as a “will to nothingness”—it can certainly be unproductive.⁶³⁰ However, when negativity is a lament that decries injustice, or points to contradictions constraining the possibility for human and more-than-human flourishing, it is inherently productive. It is to gaze upon the catastrophes of the present and recognize that even though humans are capable of horrifying atrocities, humans are also capable of building a world free from these atrocities. It is to recognize that atrocities are a choice. One would not call for the abolition of the prison industrial complex and policing, if one did not recognize that humans could live in a world free from incarceration and policing (however unlikely it is to be rid of these violent institutions). The “work of the negative” is to lament the failings of these institutions, while calling for new institutions in their place. When lament decries unjust and repressive systems, structures, or institutions—it creates space to name and refuse what has been accepted as common sense. This refusal is an orientation for collective resistance and a compass for imagining alternatives even when alternatives are not possible to imagine.

Conclusion

Those who hope are present and absent in a different sense, divided as they are between what is palpable but imperfect and what is absent but alluring, between the insistence of the actual and the promise of the future.

—Terry Eagleton⁶³¹

If Eagleton is correct, the temporal experience of the hopeful is riven between the present and the future, between longing for change and accepting the messiness and contingency of the contemporary. However, as both Muñoz and Dienstag have warned—albeit from different

⁶³⁰ Nietzsche, “Anti-Darwin,” in *The Will to Power*, 364-365, 364.

⁶³¹ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 87.

orientations—hoping is a disappointing endeavor.⁶³² This is ever more the case when governmental inaction on climate change could spell doom for humanity. This is why eco-anxiety and despair are on the rise, but this is also perhaps why there are a litany of books on hope. People are hungry for hopeful narratives to dispel the despair, anxiety, and doom that are so easy absorb in this moment.

Meanwhile, critical theorists of hope warn that we must be wary of toxically positive or optimistic strains of hope. Optimistic hope replicates the narrative of progress, which erases present-day injustice, at the same time that it mutes the significance of gains made in historic struggles against oppression. Progress would render the violence and wrongdoing of the past as a monochrome background to the rose-colored glory of the present. Rather than taking flight, the narrative of progress would have Walter Benjamin's angel of history emulating an ostrich with their head in the sand, ignoring the accumulation of catastrophes at their feet.⁶³³ Progress and rosy optimism would also suggest that it is one's individual responsibility to eliminate suffering, which van der Lugt argues can lead to an overburdening of the will. This is why Winters, Marasco, and Eagleton—in their own ways—theorize non-progressive forms of hope alongside melancholy, despair, or the tragic. However, despite the nuance they bring to the relationship between hope and the negative, they each draw the line at inviting pessimism into the conversation. Hope may be perched in the soul and its wings feathered with melancholy or despair, but for most theorists of hope it will not take flight with pessimism.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Marasco, Eagleton, and Winters have more in common with pessimism, than their rejection of pessimism might suggest. Given how they each theorize a non-progressive hope, alongside negativity (whether despair, tragedy, or melancholy), and

⁶³² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, Dienstag, Pessimism.

⁶³³ Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," 196-209, VII.

their concerns about injustice, there are many parallels with a “hope rendered strange” and pessimism.⁶³⁴ Furthermore, each of them draws on the critical theory of Adorno and/or Benjamin, who I argued in Chapter 4 are both theorists (in their own right) of a critically-oriented form of pessimism. One of the few divides between their negative hope and pessimism, is their orientation to the future. In each, even though they establish distance with more utopian or progressive forms of hope, they defer to a future-oriented temporality in their theorizing. Where a fixation on the future—that is out of one’s control—denies life in the present, it is perhaps incompatible with certain strains of pessimism. However, where pessimism is deeply affected by and attuned to the suffering of others, there is space for a hopeful form of consolation, and a pessimistic hope. As van der Lugt argues,

[It] is precisely through the sense of the fragility of all things that pessimism, without insisting on hope, can nevertheless leave the door open to it, so that, on the day when ‘mystic gladness’ irrupts into our lives or happiness finds us, despite everything, as a thief in the night, we can greet it with a gratitude all the richer for having been deepened by compassion.⁶³⁵

Hope keeps you turning the page, in anticipation of where the story will go; it allows you to fly from the broken-down present. Escaping from the present, however, is problematic when escape willfully shields you from bearing witness to injustice. This is why hope requires nourishment from the negative, and why the negative is amenable to pessimism. Pessimism is not a term of disavowal, but an interpretive framework that is vital for conceptualizing a present-oriented strain of hope amenable to living through the climate crisis. With each year establishing new records for being the hottest year yet, we need radical and critical theorizing. Theorizing that refuses the broken-down present, while remaining rooted in the present and committed to bearing witness to social and

⁶³⁴ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 21.

⁶³⁵ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 415.

ecological justice. Theorizing that compels radical action and is committed to continuing the narrative. Critical theorizing that expects nothing from progress and is not afraid of dwelling on injustice and the uncomfortable reality of the contemporary. It is our only hope.

CHAPTER SIX: ECOPESSIMISM

Look, we are not unspectacular things.
We've come this far, survived this much. What
would happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?
What if we stood up with our synapses and flesh and said, No.
No, to the rising tides.
Stood for the many mute mouths of the sea, of the land?
What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain
for the safety of others, for earth
if we declared a clean night, if we stopped being terrified,
if we launched our demands into the sky, made ourselves so big
people could point to us with the arrows they make in their minds.
—Ada Limón⁶³⁶

Just after Christmas, 2012, I boarded a plane headed to Santiago, Chile with one hundred pounds of gear, for a mountaineering trip in the Andes. My friends and I planned to climb the Andean peak, Tupungato. At 21,555 feet (or 6,570 meters) it is the fourteenth tallest peak in the Americas. Given Tupungato's shorter stature than its towering neighbor—Aconcagua, the tallest peak in the Americas—there is less bureaucratic red-tape and lower climbing fees. With the money we saved, we hired muleteers to schlep much of our equipment deep into the backcountry so we could establish our basecamp at 14,000 feet. Despite our best efforts and intentions, none of us summited successfully. Two of us (including me) got altitude sickness. Unexpectedly icy conditions thwarted the rest of the group—without the proper equipment, they could not surmount the hundred feet of ice guarding the summit. Semi-dejected we made the multi-day trek back to the trailhead.

⁶³⁶ Ada Limón, "Dead Stars," *The Carrying: Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2021).

At the trailhead our hearts sank, our gear was nowhere to be found. We did the only reasonable thing we could conjure and kept hiking, hoping we would catch up with the muleteers at their hut. At the mule camp, the muleteers offered us a couple warm beers and broke the bad news: a bridge was down due to a landslide and there was no way we could make it out that night. We asked the muleteers if they would carry our bags to the bridge to check it out. When they said no, we—unwilling to accept the fate handed to us—took fate into our own hands. We repacked our bags and attempted to set off with all our gear. Perhaps it was the sight of unsteady me—carrying a pack as heavy as a mastiff—that inspired the muleteers to take action. They hoisted our packs onto the mules and showed us the quickest way to get to the bridge. The unruly river had inundated multiple bridges, but the guardrail for one of the bridges was visible above the fast-moving river, so we decided to take our chances.

My friend and I were the first two across—we used the upper rail for our hands and shimmied sideways along the lower guardrail. When we got to the other side, I was so elated (in part because I thought I could soon put down my massive pack) that I let out a holler. My excitement vanished when my friend stepped off the bridge and sank into mud up to his hip. Once off the bridge I had to fight for every advance. With each step my foot sank through mud and rocks up to my thighs. To move forward, I grabbed my thigh to pull my leg out of the sludge, only to take a step and sink back into the muck. It took a hard thirty minutes until I made it to our final (much smaller) river crossing where our ride awaited us on the other side.

When I travelled to Chile, it had been to climb a mountain, but as we returned to civilization I was haunted by a question, and then later by its answer. What caused the landslide that took out our bridge and nearly stranded us in the backcountry? As best as I could tell, rapidly melting glaciers triggered a landslide and the subsequent flooding that inundated our bridge. The Andes were experiencing unseasonably warm weather; the landscape could not handle the volume of glacial run-

off, so the land heaved in response. At the time, 2012 was the tenth warmest year since records began in 1880.⁶³⁷ 2012 was also the fifth hottest La Niña year—weather patterns known for cooler global temperatures.⁶³⁸ In short, the answer—to the question that so haunted me—was climate change. I went to Chile to climb a mountain, but I left with a renewed commitment to the struggle against climate change.

Over the intervening decade, there has been no shortage of alarming climate news. Nine of the hottest years on record have occurred in the ten years since my trip to Chile, and while it did not establish any records—even 2013 was hotter than 2012.⁶³⁹ In September of 2013, a handful of months after getting back from the Andes, Colorado experienced catastrophic flooding from Colorado Springs to Fort Collins—with Boulder receiving as much precipitation over three days (17.15 inches) as it often does in one year.⁶⁴⁰ The Front Range Flood claimed the lives of nine people, and another 1000 were rescued by helicopter. The flooding destroyed 1800 homes, shut

⁶³⁷ NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, Monthly Global Climate Report for Annual 2012, January 2013: <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/global/201213>.

⁶³⁸ NOAA, “What are El Niño and La Niña?” National Ocean Service, NOAA, February 2, 2023, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ninonina.html>; National Geographic Society, “La Niña,” ed. Jeannie Evers, December 1, 2022, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/la-nina/>. The weather cycle referred to as “La Niña” refers to colder than average temperatures for the Western hemisphere, due to oscillations in trade winds in the Equatorial region of the mid-Pacific Ocean. During La Niña years warmer waters flow toward Asia, while colder waters flow toward the Americas. Typically, La Niña years deliver cooler global temperatures, but more moisture to the Pacific Northwest and the Central Andes; while conditions are dryer for the Southwest US, and the Southeastern US sees more intense hurricanes. Typically, La Niña events last for at least 5 months and sometimes as long as a couple years. At the time of writing the world is at the tail-end of a La Niña cycle that began in 2020. In the Fall of 2023, meteorologists anticipate the Pacific will head into an El Niño cycle, which is often warmer and dryer than La Niña weather events.

⁶³⁹ NOAA National Centers for Environmental information, Climate at a Glance: Global Time Series, May 2023, <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/global/time-series>.

⁶⁴⁰ Bob Henson, “Inside the Colorado Deluge: How much rain fell on the Front Range, and how historic was it?” National Center for Atmospheric Research, September 14, 2013, <https://news.ucar.edu/10250/inside-colorado-deluge>.

down 500 miles of highway, and caused an estimated \$2.9 billion in damage.⁶⁴¹ Sadly, it does not stop there.

Fire season hits the West like hurricane season hits the Southeast. Everyone braces for it, hoping it will be inconsequential enough to avoid making national headlines. Every summer, innumerable wildfires ravage the water-sapped “Mountain West,” displacing people from their homes, causing billions of dollars in damage, and choking the air with smoke. In the Fall of 2020, while the world was still reeling from the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colorado witnessed two of the largest fires in state history—the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome Fires.⁶⁴² The horrific irony being that as COVID-19 wreaked havoc on human respiratory systems, historic wildfires had rendered the air unbreathable. Then in the winter of 2021, the Front Range was hit with the doubly unthinkable Marshall Fire. Before Marshall, one might have thought winter and the plains were antithetical to fire. Marshall upended that reasoning. A wet Spring, followed by a dry Summer and Fall, meant there was ample dead grass along the plains to fuel the fire. In the end, the fire claimed 600 homes, and caused millions of dollars of damage.⁶⁴³ Anecdotes from my home region aside, there is not a place on planet earth untouched by climate change. If there is anything to learn from these devastating disasters, there is neither a season nor a landscape insulated from the imprint of climate change.

In response to a 2021 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that climate change represented a “code red for

⁶⁴¹ John Aguilar, “Colorado re-emerging from \$2.9 billion flood disaster a year later,” *The Denver Post*, September 6, 2014, <https://www.denverpost.com/2014/09/06/colorado-re-emerging-from-2-9-billion-flood-disaster-a-year-later/>.

⁶⁴² “Cameron Peak and East Troublesome Fires,” National Park Service, Updated July 9, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/romo/learn/2020fire.htm>.

⁶⁴³ Jesse Paul, Thy Vo, Olivia Prentzel, Shannon Najmabadi, “As many as 600 homes lost, 6 people injured as Marshall fire quickly spreads across Boulder County,” *The Colorado Sun*, December 30, 2021, <https://coloradosun.com/2021/12/30/boulder-grass-fire-evacuations/>.

humanity.”⁶⁴⁴ More recently, Secretary-General Guterres offered a hopeful interpretation of the March 2023 IPCC report. Guterres described the report as a “clarion call” to “defuse the [ticking] climate time-bomb.”⁶⁴⁵ Avoiding an explosion from the climate bomb necessitates keeping global average temperatures below the 1.5° Celsius threshold of warming (above pre-industrial levels)—which is *doable*, the report claims—but would require a massive international effort. The global temperature has already risen an average of 1.1° Celsius, and the IPCC report says the earth will likely reach the 1.5° threshold by the mid-2030s.⁶⁴⁶ This threshold is significant, as signatories to the Paris Climate Accord committed to doing everything in their power to avoid the 1.5° threshold, to avoid catastrophic weather events—such as heat waves, wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and flooding, which will become more difficult to manage at that threshold. Among other recommendations, Secretary Guterres urged governments in developed states to meet “net-zero” carbon emissions by 2040, and in developing states to meet this goal by 2050.⁶⁴⁷

Meanwhile, in the U.S. the Biden Administration recently approved ConocoPhillips’ controversial Willow Project—a “600-million-barrel, US\$8 billion” oil drilling project in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A).⁶⁴⁸ As critics have pointed out, the Willow Project

⁶⁴⁴ “Secretary-General’s statement on the IPCC Working Group 1 Report on the Physical Science Basis of the Sixth Assessment,” United Nations, August 9, 2021, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-generals-statement-the-ipcc-working-group-1-report-the-physical-science-basis-of-the-sixth-assessment?_gl=1*yawiz3*_ga*MTk1NDM2NTk2Ni4xNjg1Mzk5MzE3*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTY4NTQwNDg2My4yLjEuMTY4NTQwNDkwNy4wLjAuMA.

⁶⁴⁵ “Secretary-General’s video message for press conference to launch the Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” United Nations, March 20, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-03-20/secretary-generals-video-message-for-press-conference-launch-the-synthesis-report-of-the-intergovernmental-panel-climate-change>.

⁶⁴⁶ Brad Plumer, “Climate Change Is Speeding Toward Catastrophe. The Next Decade Is Crucial, U.N. Panel Says,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/20/climate/global-warming-ipcc-earth.html>.

⁶⁴⁷ “Secretary-General’s video message.”

⁶⁴⁸ Scott L. Montgomery, “3 reasons the Willow Arctic oil drilling project was approved – it’s the latest battle in a long fight over Alaska’s North Slope,” *The Conversation*, March 16, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/3-reasons-the-willow-arctic-oil-drilling-project-was-approved-its-the-latest-battle-in-a-long-fight-over-alaskas-north-slope-201935>

could produce as much as 287 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, which is equivalent to the annual emissions of 76 coal-burning power plants.⁶⁴⁹ Biden endorsed this project despite his campaign promise of “no more drilling on federal lands, period,” and his commitment to fighting climate change.⁶⁵⁰ While President Biden re-signed the Paris Climate Agreement (after former President Trump had rescinded the US’s commitment), and has committed to aggressively reduce US carbon emissions, it remains to be seen whether this pledge will live up to Biden’s promise. Whether Biden takes seriously the IPCC’s “code red for humanity” (and it seems like he does on a personal level), the US political system appears fundamentally ill-equipped to address large-scale environmental concerns—especially when these concerns require massive changes to the status quo.

Against this backdrop, there is emerging evidence that climate-related grief, despair, and anxiety are on the rise. This is especially the case among Gen Z and Millennials. In 2018, the American Psychological Association issued a report detailing the prevalence and emergence of Eco-Anxiety. Since then, there has been a surge in news articles and peer-reviewed studies that seek to make sense of eco-anxiety and how it effects young people.⁶⁵¹ In late 2021, *The Lancet* published an article where researchers conducted a global survey of 10,000 people aged 16-25.⁶⁵² The research team found the majority were at least moderately worried about climate change, and at least 50%

⁶⁴⁹ Jenny Rowland-Shea, “4 Reasons the Willow Oil Project Is Unfit for Approval,” Center for American Progress, August 9, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/4-reasons-the-willow-oil-project-is-unfit-for-approval/>.

⁶⁵⁰ Montgomery, “3 Reasons the Willow Arctic oil drilling project was approved.”

⁶⁵¹ Emanuela Barbiroglio, “Generation Z Fears Climate Change More Than Anything Else,” *Forbes*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emanuabarbiroglio/2019/12/09/generation-z-fears-climate-change-more-than-anything-else/?sh=3c7f671f501b>; Douglas Greenwood, “What to do if eco-anxiety is ruining your mental health,” *i-D*, September 27, 2019, https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/qvgze3/eco-anxiety-mental-health-self-care?utm_source=headtopics&utm_medium=news&utm_campaign=2019-09-30; Mike Pearl, “‘Climate Despair’ Is Making People Give Up on Life,” *Vice News*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/j5w374/climate-despair-is-making-people-give-up-on-life>; Laura Klivans, “Climate Change Despair Is Real. This Is How You Fight It,” *KQED*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11776098/climate-change-despair-is-real-this-is-how-you-fight-it>.

⁶⁵² Hickman, et. al. “Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change.”

reported feelings of sadness, anxiety, helplessness, or anger about climate change. In 2022 a team published the results of an experimental study that measured concern among British Columbians about climate change during the “heat dome” of 2021 in the *Journal of Climate Change and Health*. Their findings show increased concern about climate change—with 40.1% being “much more,” and 18.4% being “somewhat more” concerned—among respondents due to their experience of extreme heat.⁶⁵³ Increasingly, mental health providers, journalists, and researchers have coalesced around the idea that climate change does not just affect the health of the planet, it effects the mental health and well-being of humans as well. Political stagnation exacerbates both aspects of this problem.

Perhaps ecoanxiety is so prevalent because climate change represents a stark example of the failings of capitalism, yet the most palatable solutions treat the problem like a market failure rather than a system failure. Indeed, the dominant strategy to address the climate crisis—ecological-modernization—views environmental crisis as an economic opportunity. According to this logic, with the right innovations and technology, scientists and corporations can engineer solutions to devastating environmental problems—such as climate change, waning biological diversity, and ocean acidification—without sacrificing the capitalist growth imperative. Growth-oriented capitalists are not the only ones who endorse the idea that technology will save us. As Kohei Saito warns, there is a similar tendency among Marxists—and developmentalist readings of Marx—to endorse “the Promethean dream of realizing freedom through technical progress.”⁶⁵⁴ The idea here being that with enough technological development, automation, and “Artificial Intelligence,” communist liberation is inevitable. If technology, limitless economic growth, and political stagnation created the

⁶⁵³ Bratu, et. al. “The 2021 Western North American heat dome increased climate change anxiety among British Columbians.”

⁶⁵⁴ Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 136.

climate crisis in the first place, it is cruelly optimistic to believe that reforms or revolution that do not address the deleterious technological and developmental paradigm will solve the problem they created.

In both Promethean Marxism and ecological modernization, the solution to the climate crisis requires an optimistic attachment to the narrative of progress, and the maintenance of certain aspects of the status quo. Ecological modernization maintains an attachment to the belief that incremental reforms, technological innovations, and economic growth can solve the climate crisis without any costs. Promethean Marxism over-prioritizes structural economic and social changes, without consideration for how the climate crisis necessitates scaled back production, consumption, and development. In both cases, an over-reliance on technology and a shared faith in the narrative of progress is representative of—what Lauren Berlant would refer to as—cruel optimism. Cruel optimism is an *ambitious* attachment that happens when a person becomes attached to a fantasy or dream they recognize is out of their reach, even when a fixation on this dream or fantasy can become “an obstacle to [their] flourishing.”⁶⁵⁵ Faith in the idea of progress is a striking example of cruel optimism.

As I have reiterated throughout my dissertation, climate change represents a breakdown in the narrative of progress. It is a worldwide environmental challenge to the magical thinking of limitless growth and endless technological development on a finite planet. When faced with the climate crisis, which is a distilled instantiation of the limitations of capitalism, doubling-down on technological optimism and developmental progress is not just a form of cruel optimism, it is a form of climate denial. In this chapter, I will first make the case for why climate change represents a breakdown in the narrative of progress, before arguing that progress is a form of cruel optimism or

⁶⁵⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

magical thinking. Given how ecological modernization and Promethean Marxism maintain faith in technological progress, I will then argue that both are instances of cruel optimism that do not take the climate crisis seriously. Then in the latter half of the chapter, I will argue that pessimism—as critical inquiry—is better suited to navigating the murky waters of the climate crisis. If the previous chapter made the case for pessimistic hope, this chapter will be a plea for ecopessimism.

Climate Change and the Limits of Progress

A precarious world is a world without teleology.

—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing⁶⁵⁶

Progress, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, is an idea or narrative about the movement of time and history. Progress implies that history has a telos—or endpoint—and that along the teleological path, there is perpetual improvement in the human condition. This idea is a hold-over from Enlightenment reason and the Hegelian dialectic when a belief in the accumulation of scientific knowledge had an analogue with the continual improvement of world Spirit—or *Geist*. Pessimism as critical inquiry challenges the narrative of progress by emphasizing how progress implies that past instances of injustice were steppingstones along the path to the triumphant present, meanwhile erasing the persistence of injustice and violence. Embedded within the narrative of progress is the belief that cumulative achievements in science can be superimposed onto socio-political contexts, but also that human societies are perfectible. When progress is conceived in this manner, it implies that social and political problems can be solved through a process of experimentation without any pain.

⁶⁵⁶ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

Amy Allen elucidates two forms of progress: a backward-looking idea of progress as “fact,” and a forward-looking moral-political progress.⁶⁵⁷ The backward-looking form of progress as “fact”—or technical-scientific progress—views Western European civilizations and development standards as morally and culturally superior to non-Western civilizations and advancements. By contrast, forward-looking normative progress entails a perpetual expectation for moral-political improvements moving into the future. Backward-looking progress as fact suggests that science and technology are purely additive pursuits, which yield uninterrupted improvements for the world. This approach suggests that the scientific endeavor progressively accumulates knowledge and discovery without any detriment to humans or the natural world, which is to ignore the profoundly deleterious effects that human ingenuity and industry have had on humans and the more-than-human world.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, there have been countless examples of experimentation and industry gone awry. One would be remiss to the point of delusion to wager that scientific developments have been unambiguously good. Instead, we have countless evidence to the contrary: from nuclear war, chemical weapons, and the deadly Dow Chemical Spill in Bhopal, India; to the Church Rock nuclear disaster in New Mexico, and (most recently) the train collision and vinyl chloride explosion in East Palestine, Ohio. The 1932 Tuskegee Syphilis Study is a case-in-point. For the study, scientists recruited 600 Black American men for medical research. Of the original 600 participants, 399 of the research subjects were neither informed when they tested positive for syphilis, nor were they offered appropriate treatment for their condition. Scientific “rigor” and the accumulation of knowledge superseded the value of the human lives involved in this study. Faith in technological rationality and scientific innovation can obscure bias in science, as well as the potentially disastrous effect it can have on society, technology, or the planet. Furthermore,

⁶⁵⁷ Allen, *The End of Progress*.

this perspective mischaracterizes the twinned crises of climate change and biodiversity loss as footnotes to scientific and technological discovery.

Late capitalism depends on the perpetual translation of environmental “resources” into profits, such that any unprotected land will be converted into capital, and what does not await capitalization is threatened by climate change or development. As the argument goes, environmental sacrifice is the cost of progress. Anna Tsing describes capitalist progress as “a giant bulldozer [that] appears to flatten the earth to its specifications.”⁶⁵⁸ In her brilliant ethnography of the matsutake mushroom trade, she develops the concept of “salvage accumulation” to describe how capitalism always manages to amass profit off the work of the natural world. “‘Salvage accumulation’ is the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced.”⁶⁵⁹ Were progress to be successful, it would aim for—but never succeed at—the eventual incorporation of every aspect of planetary existence within the jurisdiction of capitalism. The flipside of salvage accumulation—David Bond would argue—scatters innumerable “haunted landscapes” in its wake.⁶⁶⁰ Salvage accumulation offers “haunted gifts” to the future in terms of abandoned mines, irradiated waste, tailings piles, oil pipeline leaks, and deforested land.⁶⁶¹ In his extensive ethnography of fossil fuels, Bond shows how the quest for the scientific accumulation of knowledge and the mastery of nature often leaves behind devastating consequences. “Oil spills distilled the image of life drowning in the muck of American excess. Prominently covered

⁶⁵⁸ Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 62.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. Tsing’s analysis here parallels Jason Moore’s idea that “The law of value in capitalism is a law of Cheap Nature.” However, Moore’s concept of “cheap nature” flattens the difference between human labor power and the resources capital claims from the earth. See, Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2015), 53.

⁶⁶⁰ David Bond, *Negative Ecologies: Fossil Fuels and the Discovery of the Environment* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 17.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 19.

on front pages and broadcast into American living rooms, oil spills provided a salient dialectical image to the negative ecology of American power.”⁶⁶² Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical image” is used to signal how the haunted gift of an oil spill could have been a revolutionary environmental moment, but instead the U.S. typically coalesces around regulatory instruments—such as Environmental Impact Assessments or toxicity thresholds—that reflect U.S. preference for tech-scientific progress, industry, and salvage accumulation.

Progress is not just a catchall concept for describing the teleological movement of history, it has also been a salient rhetorical tool for the oil industry. As sociologist Robert Brulle points out, beginning in 1946, the American Petroleum Institute (API) launched a two-million-dollar public relations campaign to educate people about the benefits of oil. Included in this campaign was a week-long educational effort referred to as “Oil Progress Week.”⁶⁶³ In an interview, Brulle goes on to note how “fossil fuel companies have actively engaged in public relations campaigns to sell the automobile and fossil fuels as the American way of life.”⁶⁶⁴ In other words, after WWII, PR firms sold the idea that driving cars was the key to living “the good life,” which is how the oil industry positioned itself as elemental to the ideas of “progress, the good life, economic gain and jobs” in the U.S. imaginary.⁶⁶⁵ The idea of progress does not just overshadow present and past instances of injustice, it signifies the goal of the fossil fuel industry to ensure that American lifestyles pivot around the idea that cars symbolize freedom and the attainment of the American Dream.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶³ Brulle, “Denialism,” 334.

⁶⁶⁴ Brulle, “Aggressive Think Tanks, Shouty Pundits, and a New Religious Argument.”

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

Even as oil companies desperately use rhetoric to position themselves as leaders in the fight against climate change, they continue to aggressively pursue fossil fuel development.⁶⁶⁶ Progress, per the fossil fuel industry, means unimpeded extraction of fossil fuels until every drop of profit has been wrung dry from the fossil record. Then, progress refers to how governments will eventually subsidize the transition to renewable industry, and the same corporations who caused the climate crisis will profit from the solution as well. Progress from the perspective of neoliberal extractive capitalism is a ravenous parasite hellbent on consuming every morsel of sustenance, until it is forced to feed on its own excrement. Climate change is a warning sign that instrumental reasoning and backward-looking progress as fact can have horrific consequences for planetary well-being. The interminable and intersecting effects of climate change—e.g., ocean acidification, coral bleaching, loss of biodiversity, desertification, melting glaciers (and loss of freshwater), sea level rise, land subsidence, disappearing coast-lines, increasingly chaotic and catastrophic weather events, etc.—should be terrifying enough to merit a swift response to avert the crisis. Yet, fossil fuel companies have so effectively disrupted the democratic process in the U.S.—the largest fossil fuel emitting country in the world—that progress looks like ushering in the new era of climactic instability. It is not so much a market failure, as an opportunity to diversify one’s portfolio. Progress was once a salient (though always problematic) narrative framework for considering the future through a rose-colored lens—based on the perpetual accumulation of past scientific and moral accomplishment. Progress is now a rhetorical tool for maintaining the status quo and adopting “business-as-usual” solutions to climate change. Progress is the promise that the fossil fuel industry can both have and eat their cake. Unfortunately, if we let them eat their cake, they will profit off their excesses while the rest of us suffer from the devastation they all but ensured.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.; Mei Li, Gregory Trencher, Jusen Asuka, “The clean energy claims of BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell: A mismatch between discourse, actions and investments,” *PLOS ONE* 17: 2 (2022).

The Cruel Optimism of Progress

Optimism is cruel when it takes shape as an affectively stunning double bind: of binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent. Cruelty is the “hard” in a hard loss.

—Lauren Berlant⁶⁶⁷

Cruel optimism—as Berlant conceives it—refers to the fraying fantasies that sustain one’s belief in the attainment of the good life, even when there is minimal evidence to support belief in these fantasies, and especially when believing in them means sacrificing present-well-being. Cruel optimism clarifies how one can become enmeshed in a cycle of disrupted fulfillment, based on the belief of the good life being attainable. For this reason, cruel optimism—and the twinned promise of the good life—is a trap where one becomes attached to an ideal life-mode that threatens their way-of-life. While optimism can be life-affirming, there is an eschatological component to optimism that convinces a person to believe their suffering will be redeemed in the future. In this way, one becomes attached to “a cluster of promises” that compel one to believe their “object of desire” is actualizable.⁶⁶⁸ It is a “condition of projected possibility” that keeps one tethered to fraying fantasies, even if there is minimal evidence in the present to sustain their attachment.⁶⁶⁹ To this, Berlant adds:

The fantasies that are fraying include...upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life is a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment.

Progress is one such promise of projected possibility that hinges on an attachment to future pay-offs despite evidence to the contrary. The “stunning double bind” of progress—whether moral-political,

⁶⁶⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 51

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

or tech-scientific—compels individuals and society to believe that because the future *will* be better than the present, regardless of the extent to which the present is violent, miserable, or unjust.

The launch point for Berlant’s book is the question about what happens when the post-World War II “social democratic promise” breaks down.⁶⁷⁰ In Berlant’s book, they offer several examples of cruel optimism, but the dominant narrative pivots around the precarity endemic to neoliberalism. With the gradual erosion of the social safety net in the United States there is little margin for individual safety especially in situations of social, medical, and/or economic precarity. Even though a majority of Americans—58% according to a 2023 CNBC survey—are living paycheck-to-paycheck, there is still widespread belief in social mobility and the possibility of the American Dream.⁶⁷¹ Even though the academic job market seems to get worse with each passing year, devotees of education and research continue to pursue PhDs and tenure-track positions in droves, despite mounting evidence of the dwindling number of tenure track jobs.⁶⁷² Beyond these examples, Berlant offers their own, discussing how hoarding money or material objects can help someone feel less poor, and can keep them attached to the belief they can escape poverty. If a person can save just enough money, or collect just enough of the right stuff, they can ignore their economic precarity (for at least a little while). As Berlant explains:

If consumption promises satisfaction in substitution and then denies it because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism...then hoarding seems like a solution to something. Hoarding controls the promise of value against expenditure, as it performs the enjoyment of an infinite present of holding pure potential.... Under capitalism,

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁷¹ Jessica Dickler, “With inflation stubbornly high, 58% of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck: CNBC survey,” *CNBC News*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/11/58percent-of-americans-are-living-paycheck-to-paycheck-cnbc-survey-reveals.html>.

⁶⁷² According to a 2022 report in *Nature*, one in eight tenure track jobs go to PhDs trained at five elite institutions. See: Anna Nowogrodzki, “Most US professors are trained at same few elite universities,” *Nature* 609, no. 7929 (2022), 887.

being in circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy.⁶⁷³

One may not have a future they can afford to look forward to, but if they can collect lovely objects, it gives the impression of control or autonomy, and having something of value. In capitalism, having something of value—be it money, wealth, status, or things—is synonymous with being valued. Why stop hoarding when it protects a person from not having enough of the right thing/s, and when it feels like the opposite of poverty? If one can collect enough nice stuff, it can function as a shield to precarity, while doing nothing to address the lived reality of one's precarity.

Cruel optimism is similarly relevant for considering the narrative of progress, as well as business-as-usual climate politics. There seems to be a pervasive subconscious attitude that we can continue driving large, gas-guzzling vehicles, buying goods manufactured across the globe, and supporting political solutions that do not meaningfully address climate change—without any serious repercussions. Meanwhile, temperatures rise, forests burn, Arctic ice melts, coastlines diminish, species vanish, and oceans acidify. Cruel optimism maintains an attachment to the wish that we could be rid of climate crisis by simply ignoring it away. Cruel optimism compels one to return to and sustain a fantasy regardless of how badly the fantasy has frayed. This fixation is often justified in the quest for the good life, whether the good life is *actually* good, and even if it is *objectively* bad. As Berlant suggests, the cruelty in cruel optimism is what compels the fixation on the bad thing in the first place. It is the condition of wanting something that is antithetical to one's flourishing. Inadequate global response to curtail greenhouse gas emissions is antithetical to mitigating global warming. Cruel optimism is the corresponding fantasy with the assumption being that consequences will either be inconsequential enough for easy adaptation, or that solutions can be geo-engineered to avert catastrophe. The fantasy is compelling, because no one wants to be forced to surrender a

⁶⁷³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 42.

comfortable or secure life, even if their comfort and safety are only an illusion. To this, Berlant asks, “who can bear to lose the world [and] what happens when the loss of what’s not working is more unbearable than the having of it?”⁶⁷⁴ Not having the world where one can amass an endless array of disposable commodities—even if this world is its own undoing—is almost too unbearable to imagine. We are in too deep. The cruel optimism of climate change suggests it is too unbearable to imagine curtailing greenhouse gas emissions, degrowing the economy, and giving up on capitalist creature comforts. Berlant argues fantasies are tools for survival, but delusions that bind us to climate related catastrophes will guarantee a complete upending of ecological, social, and political stability. These delusions will jeopardize survival—especially those already living in climate vulnerable locations. The fantasy entails believing the climate crisis will solve itself without changing production, consumption, our economic system, political response, or behavior.

As discussed earlier, progress is a structure of belief about the movement of history based on the accumulation of knowledge in science. Progress implies the past is a prologue to the present, which serves as a bridge to the future. Caring for the distant future is also irrelevant as the treadmill of progress will ensure the arrival of better things on the horizon. Progress insinuates the present is the best possible historical moment, and the future will be even better than today. There is a similar redemptive strand that runs through both the narrative of progress, and ambitious attachments implied by cruel optimism. When optimism compels people to believe there are good things on the horizon, there is little reason to take political action. This is why Terry Eagleton describes optimism as a conservative form of fatalism (whereas Eagleton views pessimism as a progressive type of fatalism), because when things are good, there is every reason to maintain the status quo.⁶⁷⁵ The

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁷⁵ Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*.

desire to maintain the status quo—especially with regard to the fossil fuel industry—is why it is particularly difficult to challenge the cruel optimism of progress.

To meaningfully confront climate change would require massive sacrifices, politically, economically, socially, collectively, and individually. It is much more comfortable to prolong the narrative of progress, because it is unnerving to accept the discontinuity and contingency of the future. As Tsing points out, “We are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival.”⁶⁷⁶ Rather than investing in collective survival, cruel optimism would keep one bound to fraying fantasies as a survival mechanism. A survival mechanism that—in the case of climate change and progress—may prove antithetical to the collective survival of the human and more-than-human communities on this planet. If we take seriously Tsing’s warning that “there might not be a collective happy ending” it asks us to reconsider the attachments of cruel optimism.⁶⁷⁷ When fraying fantasies are defanged survival mechanisms that keep humans bound to life-ways antithetical to human and more-than-human flourishing, it is time to rethink these survival strategies. A happy ending for oil executives is certainly not a happy ending for the rest of us. It disrupts the possibility for atmospheric stability, as well as social and inter-species justice. If we can judge future governmental climate action based on the past, there seems to be little political wherewithal to work toward a happy ending for the rest of us. When maintaining the status quo narrative of progress ensures the fossil fuel industry will continue to line their pockets, we need to collectively renounce the narrative, and relinquish the illusion of protection offered by fraying fantasies and the double bind of cruel optimism.

⁶⁷⁶ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 19.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

The Cruel Optimism of Ecological Modernization

Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.

—Robert Cox⁶⁷⁸

If control is the problem, then, by the logic of the Anthropocene, still more control *must* be the solution.

—Elizabeth Kolbert⁶⁷⁹

Ecological modernization (EM) is a pragmatic eco-political framework, “a normative ideal,” and an approach for inspiring eco-technological innovation.⁶⁸⁰ Proponents of ecological modernization frame climate change as an indicator of market failure that can become an economic opportunity. EM theorists argue economic growth does not have to come at the expense of environmental protection, and they view technological innovation as the key to solving the climate crisis. Ecomodernists view climate change and sustainability as a “sum-sum” or win-win approach to solving environmental problems.⁶⁸¹ One where addressing climate change and sustainability can yield economic growth and a healthier environment. Proponents of strong-EM view it as a fundamental challenge to the status quo.⁶⁸² However, all EM theory is ultimately compatible with neoliberal economics because it hinges on the idea that climate change can be resolved by the free market—through investment in the proper technological innovations—and incremental political reforms.⁶⁸³ President Joe Biden has repeatedly argued that climate change creates the opportunity for new jobs,

⁶⁷⁸ Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55, 128, emphasis in original.

⁶⁷⁹ Kolbert, *Under a White Sky*, 32, emphasis added.

⁶⁸⁰ Rosalind Warner, “Ecological Modernisation Theory: Towards a Critical Ecopolitics of Change?” *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 4 (2010): 538–56, 547.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*

which is one of the many reasons Biden included investment in infrastructure and green energy as a part of the Build Back Better Act. Throughout this section I will explore the background of EM, before discussing the strengths and weaknesses of this normative framework, Then I will conclude with a discussion of how EM falls prey to the trap of cruel optimism.

Ecological Modernization emerged in the 1970s as a response to neo-Marxism and calls for de-industrialization. This theoretical approach aimed to move beyond debates in the 1980s that prescribed the origins of environmental crisis as either economics (Marxism), or technology and development (so-called, “industrial society theory”).⁶⁸⁴ As mentioned above, EM can be simplified as a theory of “‘sum-sum’ [economic] growth and environmental protection” through eco-technological innovation.⁶⁸⁵ Central to EM theorizing, is a desire to develop a pragmatic theory that resists the structural changes recommended by more radical ecological thinkers. This perspective is based on the logic that “continued industrial development [is] the best option for escaping from the ecological crises of the developed world.”⁶⁸⁶ EM scholars Martin Jänicke and Stefan Lindemann emphasize how “green tech” is a “mega trend,” and encourage policy-makers to adopt ecologically-efficient tech incentives to address environmental problems.⁶⁸⁷ In the practice of sustainable development, EM is often conceived as the goal, where EM-focused sustainable development prioritizes economic growth over social and environmental responsibility (where rather than equally

⁶⁸⁴ Arthur P. J. Mol, Gert Spaargaren, and David A. Sonnenfeld, “Ecological Modernization Theory: Taking Stock, Moving Forward,” *Routledge International Handbook of Social and Environmental Change*, eds. Stewart Lockie, David A. Sonnenfeld, Dana R. Fisher. Routledge: Routledge Press (2013): 15–30, 18.

⁶⁸⁵ Warner, “Ecological Modernisation Theory,” 550; see also: Dana R. Fisher and William R. Freudenburg, “Ecological Modernization and Its Critics: Assessing the Past and Looking Toward the Future,” *Society & Natural Resources* 14, no. 8 (September 2001): 701–9.

⁶⁸⁶ Fisher and Freudenburg, “Ecological Modernization and Its Critics,” 702. See also: Mol, Spaargaren, and Sonnenfeld, “Ecological Modernization Theory.”

⁶⁸⁷ Martin Jänicke and Stefan Lindemann, “Governing Environmental Innovations,” *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 1 (February 2010): 127–41, 127.

prioritizing economic growth, environmental protection, and social justice, which is the theoretical foundation for sustainable development).⁶⁸⁸

While this sounds great in theory, there are limitations to EM. For one thing, eco-modernists are often overly optimistic about the capacity for certain technologies to address climate change or sustainability. EM advocates also emphasize how conservation and environmental protection can be synonymous with economic growth and progress, which leaves the problematic foundations of both unquestioned.⁶⁸⁹ Faced with a looming climate crisis, incremental political reforms may not be quick enough to curb greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the 1.5° Celsius threshold (or even the less-ambitious 2° Celsius target) above pre-Industrial levels. Warner expounds on this further:

The pace of global environmental change is out of sync with the pace of institutional reform advocated by EM. While much is still unknown, the apparent acceleration of climate change, the globalised effects of industrial pollution, the problems of invasive species, disease threats, reduced biodiversity and other complex environmental problems are occurring in ways that challenge the central argument of EM that industrial societies can be made sustainable with modest adjustments and corrections.⁶⁹⁰

EM theory is further limited because it emphasizes process over structure, incremental reforms over radical transformation (though some EM scholars argue that reforms can lead to radical transformation), and a functionalist theory of change.⁶⁹¹ The functionalist theory of change mischaracterizes the driver of political change, as the result of institutional reforms through consensual agreement (often among firms, states, and/or international organizations).⁶⁹² This theory

⁶⁸⁸ Steve Connelly, "Mapping Sustainable Development as a Contested Concept," *Local Environment* 12, no. 3 (2007): 259–78.

⁶⁸⁹ Tasos Hovardas, "Two Paradoxes with One Stone: A Critical Reading of Ecological Modernization," *Ecological Economics* 130 (October 2016): 1–7.

⁶⁹⁰ Warner, "Ecological Modernisation Theory," 553.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

of change erases the role of social movements, and other forms of contentious politics in catalyzing change. EM theorist Jänicke minimizes the force of social movements and activism by arguing that change happens in response to crisis, whereas social movements are demonstrative of crisis.⁶⁹³

Warner contends this theory of change is inherently apolitical, in that it overemphasizes institutional change without accounting for the conflictual nature of social movements and social pressure in the process of political change.

Beyond the pace of reforms and the limited inclusion of non-elites in their theorization of change, other scholars have pointed to how EM's over-reliance on technocrats, experts, and elites disrupts meaningful community engagement and reinforces resource colonialism—all of which signals how (in crisis) EM-advocates could forgo the democratic process. In their analysis of resource colonization in the Alberta Tar Sands, Emily Ray and Sean Parson point out that EM is overly optimistic about who gets a seat at the negotiation table. The assumption “that both environmental protection and economic growth can be satisfied by the same set of policies,” and that all stakeholders can participate in decision-making processes, “overlooks the reality of who gets to participate, which mechanisms for participation are available, and the reality of resource colonialism.”⁶⁹⁴ When EM advocates for sum-sum economic growth alongside environmental protection, it does not take an economist to guess which stakeholder interests these policies will prioritize.

In this manner, EM policy and theory parallels the logic of the narrative of progress, especially when fossil fuel companies use either of these rhetorical tools to justify resource

⁶⁹³ Martin Jänicke, Harald Mönch, and Manfred Binder, “Structural Change and Environmental Policy.” in *The Emergence of Ecological Modernisation: Integrating the Environment and the Economy?*, eds. Stephen C. Young (London: Routledge, 2000): 133–152.

⁶⁹⁴ Sean Parson and Emily Ray, “Sustainable Colonization: Tar Sands as Resource Colonialism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 29, no. 3 (2016): 68–86, 82.

extraction. Beyond this concern, EM is a normative theoretical approach advanced within and by Western developed countries (having originated in Germany), which begs the question of whether it can be truly democratic for this theory to be used for top-down implementation of policies in the developing world, and Indigenous communities. As Saito illuminates:

It is questionable whether elites in developed countries should be allowed to make a political decision that will nevertheless have enormous impacts upon the entire planet, while people who are more likely to experience their negative consequences are excluded from that decision-making process. Without a democratic process of decision-making, technocratic countermeasures against the ecological crisis from above are likely to reinforce existing inequalities and the social divide, leading to ‘ecofascism, or ‘technofascism.’⁶⁹⁵

In other words, top-down technocratic environmental policies to address the ecological crisis run the risk of exacerbating inequality and injustice. Further, as mentioned earlier, the pragmatic sum-sum approach to EM fails to keep pace with the intensification of the environmental crisis. The longer governments wait to address the climate crisis or become side-tracked with dead-end fossil fuel research investment, the more likely it will be that governments will rely on technocrats to create short-term solutions to extreme and/or catastrophic weather events. By relying on technocrats to solve the problems of climate change, without public deliberation or engaging the democratic process, the climate crisis runs the risk of becoming a crisis for democracy as well.

Given how EM prioritizes economic growth, green tech, and market-mechanisms for addressing the environmental crisis, it does not sufficiently attend to the deleterious relationship between capitalism and the environment. A convergence of scholars over the last two decades have emphasized how climate change signifies the inherent flaws in capitalism and the logic of limitless economic growth on a finite planet.⁶⁹⁶ While there is a shared concern about capitalism’s role in the

⁶⁹⁵ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 106, quoting Gorz, 1980, 77; and Illich 1977, 14.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.; Brett Clark and Richard York, “Carbon Metabolism: Global Capitalism, Climate Change, and the Biospheric Rift,” *Theory and Society* 34, no. 4 (2005): 391–428; John Bellamy Foster, “The Planetary Rift and the New Human Exemptionalism: A Political-Economic Critique of Ecological Modernization Theory,” *Organization & Environment* 25, no. 3 (September 2012): 211–37; Michael Löwy, *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe* (Chicago, Illinois:

ecological crisis, ecologically minded anti-capitalism is not monolithic and there are internal divisions among eco-Marxists who emphasize the metabolic rift,⁶⁹⁷ the second contradiction of capitalism,⁶⁹⁸ degrowth Marxism,⁶⁹⁹ or world ecology,⁷⁰⁰ not to mention ecosocialism,⁷⁰¹ eco-anarchism,⁷⁰² degrowth capitalism,⁷⁰³ and left anti-neoliberalism.⁷⁰⁴ Furthermore, green technology and development are not an unalloyed remedy for environmental problems. Many who are critical of EM flag the Jevons Paradox as one explanation for why green tech will not save us from the climate crisis and environmental problems.⁷⁰⁵ In their critique of EM, Demaria et al. discuss how the Jevons Paradox demonstrates why technological innovations are not a panacea for environmental problems. The Jevons Paradox refers to how technological innovation often leads to increased resource consumption, because “expansion in production typically outstrips gains in efficiency.”⁷⁰⁶ In other words, Demaria et al. explain, “eco-efficiency may lead to increased consumption or production

Haymarket Books, 2015); Andreas Malm, “The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry,” *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 1 (2013): 15–68; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; James O'Connor, “On the Two Contradictions of Capitalism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 2, no. 3 (1991): 107-109.

⁶⁹⁷ Clark and York, “Carbon Metabolism”; Foster, “The Planetary Rift and the New Human Exemptionalism”; Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*.

⁶⁹⁸ O'Connor, “On the Two Contradictions of Capitalism.”

⁶⁹⁹ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*.

⁷⁰⁰ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

⁷⁰¹ Löwy, *Ecosocialism*.

⁷⁰² Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2005).

⁷⁰³ Federico Demaria et al., “What Is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement,” *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 191–215; Giorgos Kallis, “In Defence of Degrowth,” *Ecological Economics* 70, no. 5 (2010): 873–80.

⁷⁰⁴ Naomi Klein, *The Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

⁷⁰⁵ Clark and York “Carbon Metabolism”; Demaria et al., “What is Degrowth?”; Hovardas, “Two Paradoxes with One Stone”; Malm; “The Origins of Fossil Capitalism”; Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*.

⁷⁰⁶ Clark and York, “Carbon Metabolism,” 391.

because technologies suppress limits...to production and consumption.”⁷⁰⁷ Given how tech innovation regularly intensifies consumption, as well as how the climate crisis challenges the fundamental logic of capitalism’s limitless growth imperative, ecological modernization is a woefully inadequate theoretical approach for addressing the climate crisis.

The narrative of progress saturates the logic of ecological modernization. It maintains a cruelly optimistic attachment to the belief that incremental reforms, technological innovations, and economic growth can solve the climate crisis without any consequences for the economy or the environment. As I have demonstrated, there is a theoretical lacuna within the EM literature where the deleterious effects of capitalism, limitless growth, technological innovation are insufficiently addressed. While EM reforms may positively affect the adoption of green tech—such as electric vehicles, renewable energy, and public transportation (all of which would help decrease greenhouse gas emissions)—EM advocates assume economic growth is compatible with solving global environmental crises. There is a delusional undercurrent of optimism to the EM literature, which is mal-attuned to the severity of threats to human and more-than-human communities posed by climate change, the biodiversity crisis, ocean acidification, and everything left in their wake.

While it will certainly take a diversity of tactics to combat these intersecting crises—especially in a way that does not exacerbate existing inequalities or compel eco-fascistic and technocratic solutions—there is a fundamental need for EM theorists to grapple with the limitations of a sum-sum approach to solving environmental problems. So-called green tech often requires the use of fossil fuels (if not for manufacturing, then for distribution), and can be just as environmentally damaging (let alone toxic and socially irresponsible) as existing technology.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁷ Demaria et al., “What is Degrowth?” 198.

⁷⁰⁸ For instance, fifty percent of all batteries—including those in electric vehicles—include cobalt. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has the world’s largest known cobalt deposit. Cobalt mining in the DRC is notoriously deadly, corrupt, and despite assurances to the contrary—employs a significant number of children. See: Michael Davie,

Furthermore, it is critical to note that despite the lust for eco-tech innovations, they are still constrained by what Saito describes as “objective biophysical limits of the Earth.”⁷⁰⁹ Green technological innovation may buy some time to address the climate crisis, but the materials needed for these innovations must still be drawn from and discarded on this planet. The same limits constrain technological development—green or not.⁷¹⁰

The green tech and green capitalism championed by EM suffers from the cruel optimism of progress. The cruelly optimistic fantasy sustained by EM is one where status quo green-branded reforms are sufficient for addressing the climate crisis. Further, eco-modernists are often unrealistically optimistic about the capacity for certain technologies to address climate change or sustainability. The worse the crisis becomes, I fear, the more likely it will be that governments would invoke emergency powers to deploy technological interventions—such as “whitening the sky,” and other geoengineering strategies—to avert or delay catastrophe. As Kolbert’s earlier epigraph cynically suggests, “If control is the problem, then, by the logic of the Anthropocene, still more control must be the solution.”⁷¹¹ By relying on technocrats to control nature or solve the problems of climate change without public deliberation or engaging the democratic process, the climate crisis

“Blood Cobalt: One of the poorest countries on Earth is paying a heavy price for the world’s green energy revolution.” *ABC News, Australia*, September 24, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-02-24/cobalt-mining-in-the-congo-green-energy/100802588>.

⁷⁰⁹ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 113.

⁷¹⁰ I invoke the dreaded concept of “limits” for four reasons. For one, the earth is a closed and limited system—there is a point at which the rapacious appetite of capitalism will brush up against these limits. Secondly, unlimited economic growth is absurd on a planet of limited resources. Thirdly, just because the overpopulation alarmists invoked the language of “limits” in their eco-authoritarian theorizing, does not mean “limits” should always remain a dead concept. There is a limit to the amount of greenhouse gases the atmosphere can handle before the 1.5° or 2° C thresholds are reached. There is a limit to the amount of sea-level rise the coasts can handle, before people are displaced. Finally, the use of the term “limits” must not be used as a weapon against the poor and/or communities of color. Limits can be used as a concept to understand how to develop egalitarian climate adaptation strategies that foreground climate justice, rather than a rhetorical strategy to justify population control.

⁷¹¹ Kolbert, *Under a White Sky*: 32.

runs the risk of becoming a crisis for democracy as well. To return to Saito, “Technological progress can push limits back *to some extent*, but entropy increases, available energy decreases and natural resources get exhausted.”⁷¹² At a time when bold action and bold theorizing are necessary for moving beyond the climate crisis, EM fails to live up to the challenge. The cruel optimism of EM is the attachment to the “bliss” of perpetual economic growth without consequence to the environment. While it might be unbearable to lose the world of 20th century American progress and capitalism, these life-modes are antithetical to the so-called good life, and what it would require to meaningfully and equitably confront the climate crisis (by degrowing the economy and aggressively curtailing greenhouse gas emissions).

Ecopessimism not Eco-Survivalism

Any time one conjures the term “ecopessimism” it brings to mind the dreaded (and dreadful) neo-Malthusian eco-survivalists of the 1960s and 1970s. As it should be clear by now, the critical form of ecopessimism developed throughout this dissertation relates to the eco-survivalist ecopessimists in name, negativity, and concern for ecological crisis only. By developing a theory of ecopessimism that draws from the well of critical theory, I aim to reclaim this word from the trash-heap of ill-intentioned environmental theorizing from the twentieth century. In this section, I will detail the eco-fascistic, neo-Malthusian approach of the eco-survivalists, to establish distance from their form of pessimism and theorize a critical and anti-authoritarian pessimism suitable for grappling with the climate crisis. Unfortunately, wherever environmental problems are framed as issues of overpopulation and whenever a scarcity of resources is conceived as the primary effect of environmental problems, eco-survivalism is a form of ecopessimism that threatens to return.

⁷¹² Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 113, emphasis in original.

In the 1960s and 1970s many natural scientists and ecologists in the emergent environmental movement resurrected the Malthusian over-population terrors of the previous century.⁷¹³ They believed exponential human population growth threatened to surpass ecological limits, dooming the fate of humanity and the environment. These thinkers coalesced around a shared sense of fear about human survivability on a planet where human consumption threatened natural limits. In response to this threat, “survivalists” have typically supported market mechanisms (e.g., incentives for reducing population), and external interventions (e.g., propaganda campaigns and/or increased access to birth control) to derail the path to destruction.⁷¹⁴ However, when politicians proved incompetent to address this looming crisis, proponents became desperate, suggesting illiberal and nondemocratic solutions instead.⁷¹⁵ Survivalists thought we must decrease human population growth and resource consumption to avoid the collapse of human civilization.

At the time, some thinkers coalesced around the idea that human survival and the survival of the planet were threatened by population growth, resource over-consumption, food production, and pollution. The publication of Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s *Population Bomb*, the Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth* and *The Ecologist* magazine’s *Blueprint for Survival* exploded on the environmental political landscape in the late 1960s/early 1970s.⁷¹⁶ These texts, as well as essays by Garrett Hardin, instituted a massive shift in the mid-20th century American political and environmental imaginaries.

⁷¹³ Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb: Population Control or Race to Oblivion?* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1968); Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor,” *Psychology Today*, September 1974; Donella H., Meadows, et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, NY: Universe Books, 1972).

⁷¹⁴ Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); Peter Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2002).

⁷¹⁵ Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*.

⁷¹⁶ Paul and Anne Ehrlich cowrote *The Population Bomb*, but the publisher insisted on both the title and that the book be single-author. See: Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, “The Population Bomb Revisited,” *The Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development* 1, no. 3 (2009): 63–71, 63.

Each offered an angle on how human survival and the survival of the planet were threatened by population growth, resource over-consumption, food production, and pollution.⁷¹⁷ The politics of the human overpopulation alarmists were across the spectrum—notably the Ehrlichs considered themselves liberal, and Garrett Hardin was far right—but they all shared a sense of urgency and fear about the threat of resource scarcity looming in the (not-so-distant?) future. Regardless of political differences, their advocacy for population control was appealing to the far right, as it could be used to justify nativist and ethnocentric anti-immigrant policies, as well as population control measures in the Global South, which were often funded by the Global North (but most explicitly the U.S.).

The Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* argued that exponential human population growth would soon surpass the earth's capacity to provide sufficient resources. They went so far as to argue that because human population would exceed the availability of food resources, developed countries should save themselves to avoid “mass starvation.”⁷¹⁸ “Population control” was the only way to avert the population crisis—which would either be resolved by humans of their own accord through the “birth rate solution” (e.g., birth control, sterilization) or the problem would be solved for them by the “death rate solution” (e.g., “war, famine, pestilence”).⁷¹⁹ They elaborate on this idea in the prologue to the Revised Edition: “The birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind will breed itself into oblivion. We can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth; the cancer itself must be cut out.”⁷²⁰ In other words, the Ehrlichs

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*; Meadows, *The Limits to Growth*; Graham M. Turner, “A Comparison of The Limits to Growth With 30 Years of Reality,” *Global Environmental Change* 18, no. 3 (2008): 397–411.

⁷¹⁸ Ehlich and Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*; Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*; Charles C Mann, “The Book That Incited a Worldwide Fear of Overpopulation,” *Smithsonian Magazine*. January 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/book-incited-worldwide-fear-overpopulation-180967499/>

⁷¹⁹ Ehrlich and Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, 17.

⁷²⁰ Ibid., xi.

believed humans were a cancerous blight on the earth. However, in the book—even though the Ehrlichs later corrected their position—they meant to imply the most cancerous population growth was happening in the developing world. Meanwhile, they affirmed that governments worldwide—developed, or not—would need to address the problem in their respective states.⁷²¹ Population control—for the Ehrlichs—was the biggest existential threat facing the world, and it would require a coordinated global effort to avoid catastrophe.

The same year as the Ehrlich’s proverbial bomb dropped, Garrett Hardin published his widely read essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” which argued that humans—left to their own devices—would plunder the commons to the point of ecological collapse. In Hardin’s infamous essay, he draws a parallel between cattle grazing and human breeding to argue human population had surpassed the carrying capacity of the earth, and it was time to restrict the right to reproduce to avoid damaging the earth. Hardin states, “we must now recognize...the necessity of abandoning the commons in breeding. No technical solution can rescue us from the misery of overpopulation. Freedom to breed will bring ruin to all.”⁷²² Restricting the right to breed was—to Hardin’s mind—preferable to restricting the commons, but as he stated earlier in the essay: “An alternative to the commons need not be perfectly just to be preferable.”⁷²³ In other words, justice was inconsequential to the calculus of saving the planet from the ruins of overpopulation. In a later essay, “Carrying

⁷²¹ Ibid., Ehrlich and Ehrlich, “The Population Bomb Revisited.” In the original text, the inspiration for the first chapter was a scene where the Ehrlich family was on vacation in India, and they recall the story of their “overprivileged” mortification of the “People, people, people, people.” It reads like an affluent American family traveled to an impoverished, recently decolonized country and then felt inspired to diagnose the gravest international social, political, and environmental problem as over-population. In their 2009 rejoinder, the Ehrlichs note how Paul Ehrlich wrote two articles shortly after the book was published, one in 1964 and another in 1971, to distance himself from the eugenics of William Shockley. However, their original book offered striking policy prescriptions like immigration control, and even toyed with forced sterilization. This is why it is difficult to fully absolve them, especially when their initial book (and the Revised Edition) had such a huge impact on population control measures worldwide, and offered such a tasteless depiction of a culture, people, and historical context they did not understand.

⁷²² Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243–48, 1248.

⁷²³ Ibid., 1247.

Capacity and Quality of Life,” Hardin drives the point home further, by discerning between “*maximum* number of... humans an area can support” and the “cultural carrying capacity.”⁷²⁴ Hardin deploys the concept of cultural carrying capacity to include the daily enjoyment of posh pleasures like: daily beef and wine, indoor climate control, enjoyment of aesthetic ecological beauty, “street lighting,” and private cars.⁷²⁵ In Hardin’s understanding of the intersection between the earth’s carrying capacity and human population—the only way to sustain an affluent lifestyle, with a rich diet, was to restrict reproductive rights. This, however, begs a few questions. Namely, whose reproductive rights should be restricted? And how should these restrictions be exercised? In neither of these essays, do you get a direct answer, but in Hardin’s follow-up thought experiment, you begin to get the idea.

To address the apparent population “tragedy,” Hardin proposed the adoption of lifeboat ethics. In his thought experiment, Hardin conceived of countries as lifeboats lost at sea.⁷²⁶ Rich countries had lifeboats with ample room for everyone aboard, meanwhile poor countries were so thoroughly saturated with people the boats sank, and those ejected from their boat were now stranded at sea, swimming for their lives. The poor people desperately swam to the uncrowded lifeboats of the affluent countries, thus presenting a conundrum for those aboard. Do they invite the poor people aboard and risk sinking themselves, or do they leave the poor people to drown but save themselves? Rather than sinking the ship by inviting everyone aboard, Hardin thought the only reasonable solution to the thought experiment was to protect the rich lifeboat for those lucky enough to be on board. In other words, save the rich and let the poor (people or countries) drown.

⁷²⁴ Garrett Hardin, “Carrying Capacity and Quality of Life,” *The Social Contract* (Spring 1991): 195-196, 195, emphasis in original.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics.”

In each of these three essays, Hardin presents an oversimplified distillation of reality, where humanity is faced with an ultimatum—sink or swim—based on Hardin’s beliefs about scarcity and the deplorable essence of human nature. Hardin advocated for strict immigration policies, nativist environmental protection, and against providing too many resources to poor countries. Instead, he suggested that famine and resource wars would be a natural check for over-population in less developed countries. For these reasons, the Southern Poverty Law Center hosts a webpage dedicated to enlightening people about his white supremacist and xenophobic views.⁷²⁷ To the question of whose reproductive rights *should* be restricted, it is fairly clear Hardin meant women in poor countries—and poor women in affluent countries—should be denied their reproductive freedom.

Beyond the Ehrlichs and Hardin, Robert Heilbroner wagered that because humans were naturally self-interested, greedy, and violent, the only way to solve environmental problems was through a strong “environmentally benign, centralized authoritarianism.”⁷²⁸ Similarly, William Ophuls suggested democracy was ineffective at dealing with ecological crisis, and instead recommended a blend between an eco-authoritarian and oligarchic government.⁷²⁹ When human overpopulation was at the forefront of the American political imagination, the U.S. and international organizations began to support population-control measures as requisite components of their foreign aid. This became a global problem, with mass political appeal. Population control measures

⁷²⁷ Ibid., Southern Poverty Law Center, “Garrett Hardin,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Accessed on May 31, 2023: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/garrett-hardin>.

⁷²⁸ Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*, 174; See also: Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1974); Bruce Pilbeam, “Natural Allies? Mapping the Relationship between Conservatism and Environmentalism,” *Political Studies* 51 (2003): 490–508.

⁷²⁹ Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*; Pilbeam, “Natural Allies?; See also: William Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity: A Prologue to a Political Theory of the Steady State* (San Francisco, CA: W.H. Freeman, 1977).

were pursued in unethical, coercive, and sometimes illegal fashion. In an essay for the *Smithsonian Magazine*, journalist Charles Mann notes:

Some population-control programs pressured women to use only certain officially mandated contraceptives. In Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan, health workers' salaries were, in a system that invited abuse, dictated by the number of IUDs they inserted into women. In the Philippines, birth-control pills were literally pitched out of helicopters hovering over remote villages. Millions of people were sterilized, often coercively, sometimes illegally, frequently in unsafe conditions, in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Indonesia and Bangladesh.⁷³⁰

Due to the pressure to control population growth, aid organizations and governments in developing countries began using dangerous forms of birth control “dumped” by U.S. countries. When sales for the Dalkon Shield—an intrauterine device (IUD)—dropped precipitously amidst public outcry about the dangers of the device—the manufacturer sold the IUDs to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in bulk, unsterilized, for half the normal cost.⁷³¹ USAID then delivered the IUDs to over 40 countries as part of its population control initiative. The Dalkon Shield led to innumerable deaths, emergency hysterectomies, and septic abortions. This horror story is one of many that were part and parcel of the population control directives of the middle-twentieth century. Regardless of their political persuasion—be it left or right—the eco-survivalists proffered deadly rhetoric that had a profound influence and violent effect on people in developing countries.

The eco-survivalist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s framed the dominant problem facing humans and the environment as one that had a binary solution. Either humans would need to restrict breeding or face the consequences of their inaction. Whenever a solution is presented in stark bifurcated terms—e.g., right/wrong, good/bad, moral/immoral—it flattens the nuance and complexity of the problem. The twinned threats of human overpopulation, poverty, and urban-

⁷³⁰ Mann, “The Book That Incited a Worldwide Fear of Overpopulation.”

⁷³¹ Mark Dowie, Barbara Ehrenreich, Stephen Minkin, “The Charge: Gynocide: The Accused: The U.S. Government,” *Mother Jones* (November/December 1979), <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/1979/11/charge-gynocide/>.

overcrowding, and resource scarcity are ahistorical existential threats to the well-being of affluent academics in the Global North. When the Ehrlichs visited New Delhi in 1966, mass migration from rural to urban India was underway as people moved to the city in pursuit of jobs. The country was in a dire state of poverty after a century of British colonial rule, and India was still recovering from the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War over Kashmir. The Ehrlichs developed their initial *Population Bomb* arguments based on an extrapolation from their anecdotal experience of an impoverished, recently decolonized country. Without contextualizing the intersection between poverty, colonization/decolonization, war, and a massive economic/population shift—the Ehrlichs’ discussion of the overpopulation *problem* exists in an ahistorical vacuum.

The Ehrlichs and Hardin struck a collective nerve about the threat of the impoverished “other” invading the U.S., which would surely force them to sacrifice their middle-class lifestyles and jeopardize the cultural carrying capacity they so desperately sought to preserve. When considered from the perspective of the power-knowledge nexus, there was immense power in framing the environmental crisis as an issue of over-population. It produced in the American imaginary the identity of elites under threat. While it does not take complex modeling to recognize there are natural “limits” to growth—given the finitude of the earth’s resources—they framed the environmental crisis as people versus the planet. Where individuals—rather than structures, governments, institutions, corporations, or markets—were to blame for the problem. Furthermore, without consideration for *who* the monolithic term “people” represents, their theory bears the consequence of being an anthropocentric environmental theory, without consideration for which humans constitute the *Anthropos*. Their theorizing comes across as an ecological justification for racism, xenophobia, nativism, and contempt for the poor—and where their theorizing intervenes in the political process, the results are cruel, anti-human, and fascist in implementation.

Survivalists—in true authoritarian fashion—forgo any consideration of social justice, aside from protecting the rich from the poor. Hunger and famine are considered solely from the perspective of a limitation to growth, rather than a question of equity. Instead of questioning the asymmetries baked into the uneven distribution of food (and other resources)—especially as this relates to poverty, colonization, and postcolonial relations of dependence/exploitation—the survivalists use overpopulation to justify their desire to save the environment for themselves. It takes a particularly authoritarian perspective to endorse forced sterilization and mandated vasectomies as solutions to the problem of hunger, rather than recommending the redistribution of abundant food resources from the Global North to the Global South.

As previously mentioned, eco-survivalists typically endorsed market mechanisms, tech-innovations, external interventions, and policy to control population growth.⁷³² However, in practice, governments translated these endorsements into mandated birth control, forced sterilization, and China's one-child policy (which favored boys over girls, and resulted in a population asymmetry among an entire generation of Chinese people). Given the types of solutions prioritized by eco-survivalists and population alarmists—there is some concern that when/if market mechanisms and technological solutions prove ineffective at mitigating the climate crisis – eco-modernists might support the more anti-human solutions endorsed by the survivalists. Further, given the rise of Silicone Valley doomsday preppers, there is concern that frustrated eco-modernists would migrate further to the right (e.g., Elon Musk) and resurrect the nativist and anti-immigrant environmentalism of the survivalists. Were this to be the case—fear, scarcity, and rugged individualism may coalesce to produce an anti-human environmentalist ethos that could be problematic for anyone who is not white, cis-gendered, wealthy, resourced, and living in the Global North.

⁷³² Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*; Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought*.

Despite the glaring issues with eco-survivalism, some of their ideas—like Hardin’s ideas about the overuse of the commons, or the Ehrlichs’ emphasis on the relationship between limits and population growth—are worth considering. Hardin’s ideas have been quite salient among ecologists, economists, and those concerned about climate change in an array of fields. At the time of writing, Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” essay had been cited 53,312 times, with nearly 3000 of those citations being from 2022 and 2023 alone.⁷³³ There is a recent tendency among left-environmentalists and environmental political theorists to ignore the issue of ecological limits, in large part out of fear that one might be associated with eco-fascists like Hardin. Ignoring limits, however, does a massive disservice to our ability to theorize the relationship between humans and the environment. This is one of the reasons why there was so much tension between environmentalists and everyone else on the left throughout the latter half of the 20th century. For example, in 1996, the prominent Marxist geographer, David Harvey, claimed:

it is materially impossible for us to destroy the planet earth, that the worst we can do is to engage in material transformations of our environment so as to make life less rather than more comfortable for our own species being.⁷³⁴

In other words, Harvey argued that human comfort should supersede any concerns about ecological limits, because the earth could not be destroyed. It is also why Marxists, even as recently as 2019 with Aaron Bastani’s *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, continue to theorize a tech-accelerationist Promethean Marxism without limits—where automation will liberate us from work. This approach, however, fails to consider how the equitable distribution of resources still confronts the finite supply of resources on the planet. As Saito points out,

The problem of overpopulation arises not because the world is not rich enough to feed everyone but because its wealth is quite unevenly distributed in favor of the

⁷³³ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Google Scholar, Accessed June 1, 2023: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cites=17206221222015329785&as_sdt=4005&scioldt=0.6&hl=en

⁷³⁴ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 110; See also: Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 110, quoting Harvey.

rich in the Global North...this kind of critique in no way needs to eliminate the objective biophysical limits of the earth. No matter how hard capital attempts to discover new frontiers of nature and new markets, there is no infinite space on the earth after all. Technological progress can push limits back *to some extent*, but entropy increases, available energy decreases and natural resources get exhausted.⁷³⁵

Consideration of the earth's limits does not necessarily mean that one advocates for eco-authoritarianism and population control. However, the risks of ecofascism and eco-authoritarianism are why one must be careful when they invoke the problem of "overpopulation" when considering environmental problems, because population is an imprecise rather than monolithic term. When an area is deemed to be over-populated one must ask: *who* constitutes that population?, and *why* is that particular population a threat? A population includes a cacophony of different people with different interests, cultural backgrounds, histories, and experiences of suffering and injustice. If there is anything to be learned from 20th century critical pessimism, it is to be wary of supra-historical/grand narratives, monolithic concepts, oversimplified depictions of political problems, and the intersection between power and knowledge.

The eco-survivalists are similar to ecopessimists in name (as many refer to the eco-survivalists as ecopessimists), negativity, and for a shared concern about how humans have irrevocably altered the planet. While they were not *necessarily* wrong in their diagnosis of the ecological crisis, their proposed solutions could not have been more abhorrent. The survivalists recognized that ecological crisis was afoot that called for massive social and political change. As Eckersley points out:

many of those who have been most critical of this body of so-called doomsday literature have acknowledged that the crisis is real and that far-reaching changes in both our values and institutions are required if ecological and social catastrophe is to be averted.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁵ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 113, emphasis in original.

⁷³⁶ Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, 13.

However, as I have demonstrated, the eco-survivalists depict the ecological crisis in terms of a binary problem where human overpopulation is the threat, so human population reduction is the solution—by any means necessary. There is no concern about inequity, history, or injustice—in their depiction of the problems or the solutions. Furthermore, their approach, in a manner akin to EM does not sufficiently attend to the relationship between the rapacious growth imperative of capitalism (which is really the problem hidden behind the rhetoric of overpopulation) and ecological crisis. This is why the so-called “Anthropocene” calls for critical ecopessimism.

Ecopessimism and the Anthropocene

If we can accomplish nothing at all, we can at least, as Ta-Nehisi Coates and other pessimists have said, refuse to suborn the lie of America any longer. Telling the truth even if it cannot change the outcome of history, is a kind of solace... Saying the truth out loud brings with it the relief that we are not crazy. Things really are as bad as we think.

—Jairus Grove⁷³⁷

When we dismiss the worst-case possibilities, it distorts our sense of likelier outcomes, which we then regard as extreme scenarios we needn't plan so conscientiously for.

—David Wallace-Wells⁷³⁸

It is okay to be pessimistic about climate change. It is okay to not feel okay. Negativity is not a sin. Optimism is not pious. Maintaining optimism when faced with intractable structural problems against (seemingly) unbeatable odds does not make the odds any better (it might just make you more annoying). Pessimism is not antithetical to joy, nor is it antithetical to political action. Being honest about the gravitas of climate change, even if it does not—in the words of Jairus Grove— “change the outcome of history, is a kind of solace.”⁷³⁹ It is a release. As Grove continues, “to study the

⁷³⁷ Jairus Grove, *Savage Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020) 26.

⁷³⁸ David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Random House, 2020), 9.

⁷³⁹ Grove, *Savage Ecology*, 26.

world as it is means to care for it.” We can refuse to accept what José Muñoz described as the “broken-down present” in which we find ourselves.⁷⁴⁰ Pessimism is one path toward this refusal.

Throughout this section, I will discuss how ecopessimism draws from the well of temporal-, value-, and critical-orientations of pessimism to speak to the reality we have inherited. Temporally-oriented pessimism troubles our relationship to the future—pointing to how the future guarantees nothing aside from death, decay, and entropy—while still affirming a joyous and spontaneous approach to life.⁷⁴¹ Value-oriented pessimism alters how one thinks about suffering—their own, as well as the suffering of human and more-than-human others.⁷⁴² Critically-oriented pessimism uses negativity and refusal to challenge suprahistorical narratives and monolithic concepts. Ecopessimism is a knife that uses critique to cut through the outmoded narrative of progress, the cruelty of tech-optimism (and EM), and the eco-authoritarianism of the overpopulation alarmists.

In the thirty-five years since James Hanson passionately testified before the U.S. Congress about the threat of anthropogenic climate change, there has been a forty percent increase in global carbon dioxide emissions.⁷⁴³ At a time when CO₂ emissions should have been on the decline, global CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels and cement increased by one percent in 2022.⁷⁴⁴ Shortly after the IPCC’s recent report (discussed earlier), Shell oil company analysts admitted that continued growth

⁷⁴⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

⁷⁴¹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*.

⁷⁴² van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*.

⁷⁴³ William deBuys, *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); “CO₂ Emissions.” Our World in Data. Accessed June 1, 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>.

⁷⁴⁴ Zeke Hausfather, and Pierre Friedlinkstein, “Analysis: Global CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels hit record high in 2022,” *Carbon Brief*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-global-co2-emissions-from-fossil-fuels-hit-record-high-in-2022/>

in fossil fuel production is incompatible with the 1.5° Celsius target.⁷⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Shell's Chief Executive Wael Sawan insisted "cutting oil and gas production is not healthy."⁷⁴⁶ This is not dissimilar from ExxonMobil's well-documented change of course—from being a leader in establishing the connection between fossil fuels and anthropogenic climate change, to aggressively funding a climate denial disinformation campaign.⁷⁴⁷

Ignoring climate change is good for business. Neoliberal millionaires, billionaires, and multinational corporations have hoodwinked the public into believing environmental regulations and restricting fossil fuels are anathema to the public interest. Meanwhile corporations have neutered international law and state agencies⁷⁴⁸ to maximize their bottom-line; minimize the efficacy of regulations for human health and environmental protection; protect their legal strategies from public scrutiny; and avoid repercussions when they disregard human safety or environmental health.⁷⁴⁹ As Naomi Klein argues:

We are stuck because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe—and would benefit the vast majority—are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets.⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴⁵ Josh Gabbariss, "Analysis: Shell admits 1.5C climate goal means immediate end to fossil fuel growth," *Carbon Brief*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-shell-admits-1-5c-climate-goal-means-immediate-end-to-fossil-fuel-growth/>.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Banerjee, Song, Hasemyer, "Exxon's Own Research Confirmed Fossil Fuels' Role in Global Warming."

⁷⁴⁸ Look no further than the recent SCOTUS ruling on the EPA's ability to protect wetlands in *Sackett v EPA*. See: Albert C. Lin, "The Supreme Court just narrowed protection for wetlands, leaving many valuable ecosystems at risk," *PBS News Hour*, May 27, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/the-supreme-court-just-narrowed-protection-for-wetlands-leaving-many-valuable-ecosystems-at-risk>.

⁷⁴⁹ Bond, *Negative Ecologies*; Claire Cutler, "Critical Reflections on the Westphalian Assumptions of International Law and Organization: A Crisis of Legitimacy," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 02 (2001): 133–50; Claire Cutler, "Locating 'Authority' in the Global Political Economy," *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1999): 59–81.

⁷⁵⁰ Klein, *The Changes Everything*, 18.

Lowering carbon and methane emissions is antithetical to the logic of capitalism, and now we are trapped by the greed of the few, to the detriment of so many. We all know climate change is bad for biodiversity, ecosystemic and climactic stability, as well as the health and wellbeing of human and more-than-human communities. However, when the fossil fuel industry and multinational corporations have proven their capacity to socially- and politically-engineer a business “climate” productive for record-breaking profits; one can only assume the fossil fuel companies will find a way to profit from tech-interventions, geoengineering the atmosphere, and transitioning to government-subsidized renewable energy sources.

One arrives in this world, without having chosen to be born, nor the reality they have inherited. This reality is laden with so much unkindness, injustice, and cruelty—yet so much capacity for compassion, love, and tenderness. It is a reality where bird populations in the U.S. are collapsing—yet the joyous revelry of the remaining song birds can warm even the coldest hearts.⁷⁵¹ A reality where corporations have used the natural world as a resource stockpile, nuclear test-site, and dumpster—yet the crippling beauty and wonder of the world can leave one aching and restless to spend more time in their presence. None of us chose the suffering intrinsic to human existence. Knowing how deeply painful life can be, it can be just as deeply confounding that humans would perpetrate such misery, injustice, and violence on one another and the natural world. When this is the reality we have inherited, the social pressure to be positive can feel deeply invalidating. In this sense, optimism is simultaneously cruel and unconscionable.

When this is our historical and political context, ecopessimism begins to make a little more sense. As David Wallace-Walls has pointed out, it is vital to consider “worst-case possibilities” with climate change to have the chance to mitigate the worst possible effects of climate change. More

⁷⁵¹ Gustave Axelson, “Vanishing: 1 in 4 Birds Gone,” All About Birds, September 19, 2019, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/vanishing-1-in-4-birds-gone/>.

closely to the point, as Foucault once avowed, “you have to be pessimistic, to make the situation look darker, to make the task appear more urgent, and the possibilities for the future livelier and brighter.”⁷⁵² I would like to believe pessimism about climate change can inspire a multi-pronged social, political, and economic effort to derail the most catastrophic and unjust climate futures, but I am aware of the limitations of theory. More to the point, to deny pessimism, is to deny the gravity of climate change. To recognize the free-floating ecopessimism of this moment is to recognize the possibility for a future less biodiverse, more climactically unstable, and less hospitable to human and more-than-human flourishing. It is to recognize and hold space for the loss of what this means for human existence, as well as human relationships with each other and with the natural world.

Climate change represents a double breakdown in the narrative of progress. As previously mentioned, throughout the twentieth century the fossil fuel industry used “progress” as a rhetorical tool to denote the good life and freedom afforded by the automobile.⁷⁵³ This rhetorical strategy was effective because it echoed the commodity fetishism of cars—a logic that inheres to any emergent and lusted after technology in capitalism.⁷⁵⁴ Not having a car was to be stranded in the past. Having a car meant one could drive into the future. In this way, consuming fossil fuels became synonymous with progress, and anything that derailed the fossil fuel industry was to steer the world back into the past. However, given what we now know about the relationship between greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, progress appears to come with a heavy price tag. If the term progress insinuates a redemptive narrative arc to the movement of history, then it begs the question, are the effects of climate change worth it? Progress begins to look much more like regress when it entails catastrophic

⁷⁵² Foucault, “Talk Show,” 144, emphasis added.

⁷⁵³ Brulle, “Denialism: Organized Opposition to Climate Change Action in the United States.”

⁷⁵⁴ For more on “commodity fetishism” see: Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, UK: Penguin Publishing, 1978 [1867]).

flooding, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, biodiversity collapse, desertification, uncontrollable wildfires, increasingly chaotic weather, climate migration, vanishing coastlines, more frequent and disastrous hurricanes, cyclones, and tornadoes, as well as countless other intersecting ecological and social effects. Climate change disrupts the narrative of progress as it demonstrates how fossil capitalism cannot persist in perpetuity without consequences. Furthermore, the consequences it imparts will be catastrophic for their effect on social, political, and ecological systems.

On the other hand, climate change disrupts the narrative of progress because it challenges the redemptive arc of Western imperialistic ideals about capitalist development. Not only is the Global North/imperial core primarily responsible for climate change (with the U.S. being disproportionately responsible), Indigenous communities and those who are in the Global South will suffer the greatest consequences. If progress implies a redemptive narrative arc, the narrative is cruel to suggest that achieving progress requires slavery, colonialism, and the exploitation of resources in the Global South, by the Global North. It would seem a doubly cruel irony to defend progress as a lifeboat in which climate refugees are denied the ability to relocate to more climate secure countries, out of a xenophobic fear that immigration might threaten their affluent lifestyles (especially at a moment when affluent lifestyles are contributing to climate change). From this angle, progress is antithetical to climate justice, where climate justice demands equal responsibility for the effects of climate change—meanwhile the U.S. does not appear to be slowing emissions or fossil fuel extraction, and the fossil fuel industry boasted record-breaking profits in 2022.⁷⁵⁵

Pessimism is a ballast to the cruel optimism latent in this pervasive narrative. The logic of progress is a weak binding agent baked into the core of American and Western institutions. It is a

⁷⁵⁵ Irina Ivanova, “4 oil companies had total sales of \$1 trillion last year,” *CBS News*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/exxon-chevron-shell-conocophillips-record-profits-earnings-oil-companies-most-profitable-year/>.

logic that expects the future to be better than the present, in perpetuity, meanwhile threatening to bury the angel of history under the pile of wreckage it leaves behind. The present is *not necessarily* better than the past, so it is illogical (and unproductive) to believe the future will be better than the present. Historical time and events move in a more discontinuous manner, and the future delivers contingencies rather than certainties. Pessimism asks us to expect nothing specific as the present dissolves into the future. It beckons us to live as though the worst were possible and to live joyfully in the face of adversity.

In the absence of certainty and the narrative of progress, pessimism offers normative lament as a tool for critiquing and interrogating the consequences of proposed environmental solutions. It may not alter history, but it does provide some solace, and either way being real about the gravity of the situation does—as Grove shows us—afford us a little freedom. This is vital, as the narrative of progress has typically justified fossil fuel extraction, imperialism, injustice, and the sacrifice of ecological health: all in favor of development, technology, and limitless economic growth. When problems have arisen as a result, hubris and optimism have enabled solutions that have created more problems. This is why ecopessimism is a vital interpretive framework for grappling with unprecedented anthropogenic environmental change. Pessimism, armed with refusal, challenges the narrative of progress while helping us cope with its absence.

Conclusion

In choosing to develop a theory of ecopessimism that draws on a select group of first-generation Frankfurt School critical theorists—Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer—this approach to ecopessimism is explicitly anti-authoritarian, liberatory, and critical of capitalism. In choosing to theorize alongside the critical genealogists—Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche—this approach to ecopessimism emphasizes the radical contingency and discontinuity of the future, as well as the relationships among power, knowledge, freedom, and

resistance. Beyond these thinkers, I have demonstrated how pessimism interacts with and moves beyond contemporary critical theorists of negative hope. In contrast to ecological modernization and survivalist ecopessimism, critical ecopessimism foregrounds an egalitarian ethic that centers intersectional environmental and climatic justice on a planetary scale. Rather than emphasizing anti-human and illiberal solutions to environmental problems, critical ecopessimism strongly encourages democratic engagement with an aim toward degrowth socialism. Instead of succumbing to the cycle of expectation and disappointment encouraged by cruel optimism, ecopessimism is a present-oriented political intervention and ethos that leverages lament, critique, creativity, and direct action in the fight against climate change.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

—Michel Foucault⁷⁵⁶

On a budget-airline flight back to France (where I lived at the time) from Lebanon, my plane hit a particularly rough patch of turbulence. The plane lurched back and forth, the lights flickered off, and then we started to lose altitude. Before the plane righted itself a woman screamed, and my seat neighbor bought another carton of cigarettes from the duty-free agent. The remainder of the flight back to Lyon was tense. For years after, flights were an anxiety-inducing affair. That is, until a friend—Ira Allen—offered a change in perspective. Contrary to common logic, a plane crash—he suggested—would actually be a pretty great way to die. The mechanism of death is completely out of your control, and *if* you can wrangle your terror, you might have a few moments to make peace with your imminent demise.

For most of us, death will arrive in an unexpected form and exact an unanticipated toll. Whether we have the luxury of an expedient and painless death or the injustice of a slow death, there is no escaping it. Knowing this, people do everything in their power to forestall death and sustain their youth. There is a reason the beauty and wellness industries are booming: people have not given up on the quest for an elixir of life. The wellness industry suggests that with enough money and the proper food, supplement, health, beauty, and fitness regimes, one can control their fate and avoid suffering the physical pain (and embarrassment) of sickness, injury, and even death. The idea that one could lifehack their way out of illness, cancer, or dementia, shares a similar cruelty

⁷⁵⁶ Michel Foucault and Rux Martin, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982," in Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 9–15: 9.

as the idea that “you are responsible for your own happiness.”⁷⁵⁷ Mara van der Lugt suggests there is an “overburdening of the will” implicit in this type of logic, where if one is responsible for their happiness, they must also be responsible for their suffering.⁷⁵⁸ Self-care might add to the quality and enjoyment of one’s life, but as van der Lugt points out, “nothing adds to our despair as much as being told we have called it upon ourselves.”⁷⁵⁹ Even more lamentable is the implication that one has brought upon themselves the suffering of sickness, addiction, mental illness, aging, or death. To be clear, this is not to suggest that taking care of one’s health cannot prolong the quality of one’s life. Modern medicine can do incredible things, which is why universal access to health care ought to be a human right. It is also not to say that humans lack some agency with regard to their well-being, people certainly do things to sabotage their health (e.g., refusing to wear masks during a global pandemic, quitting medication for personality disorders, or resisting treatment for addiction). Instead, I mean to suggest that chronic pain, mental illness, sickness, injury, cancer, and ultimately death is not one’s fault. Awful things happen to incredible people all the time. The lesson to be gleaned is that so much of our lives—including how it ends—are out of our control. This was the wisdom in Ira Allen’s suggestion: if we know how or even when it will end, we have some time to prepare for it.

Turbulence refers to a “violent or unsteady movement of air or water, or of some other fluid;” in politics, it refers to a “a state of confusion and lack of order.”⁷⁶⁰ Pessimism—as an interpretive framework, ethos, or political practice—is designed for turbulence. When there is

⁷⁵⁷ van der Lugt, *Dark Matters*, 401.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁷⁶⁰ “Turbulence,” Apple Dictionary, Version 2.3.0, 2020; “Turbulence,” Cambridge American Dictionary, Accessed online, June 7, 2023: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/turbulence>.

turbulence on a plane, the outcome is out of everyone's control but the pilot's (and even then, the weather and the condition of the plane are beyond their control). One can hope the pilot and plane are equipped with resources to handle turbulence smoothly, but to step onto a plane as a passenger is to relinquish your control. Life and politics, like flying, are turbulent affairs. To roll the dice of life is to accept many things are beyond one's control. There are certainly things within one's control—people do impressive (and horrific) things with their short lives—but unexpected events (and weather) can derail even the most careful planning. Pessimism is well-equipped for dealing with the lack of control implied by turbulence; it encourages us to entertain worst-case possibilities but to “expect nothing” in the transit between the present and the future.⁷⁶¹

Turbulence—or more specifically, clear-air turbulence—has been on the rise due to climate change.⁷⁶² The buildup of greenhouse gases generates greater frequency and force of shear wind in the stratosphere, which has increased the amount of invisible and difficult-to-predict turbulence. Climate change not only precipitates more turbulent flights, but it also signifies the possibility for more turbulent politics as well. The irony here is that flying and politics have exacerbated the problem of climate change, just as climate change has the capacity to exacerbate both in return.

How do we deal with the turbulence of climate change? It is clear, as discussed in Chapter 6, that climate-related anxiety and despair are increasingly afflicting young people. When wicked problems on a global scale threaten the habitability of our planet, it makes sense why individuals experience an increased sense of doom and fear: individual action does not meaningfully alter carbon emissions. There is evidence to suggest that individuals can reduce the amount of greenhouse gases they emit by choosing not to have children, reducing the amount they fly, limiting

⁷⁶¹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 32.

⁷⁶² Scott Neumann, “Airline passengers could be in for a rougher ride, thanks to climate change,” *NPR News*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/06/1166993992/turbulence-climate-change>.

the amount of energy they use, eating a plant-based diet, and buying local, durable goods.⁷⁶³ Altering individual behavior, however, does little to alter the planet's overall carbon emissions, unless there is a critical mass of individuals taking action in concert. Unless doing these things feels meaningful and productive, it risks overburdening the will in a similar manner as the assumption that one is responsible for their health or happiness.

The overburdening of the will that happens with fighting climate change can also enable a type of elitism. To assume that everyone can afford to eat a plant-based diet or buy durable goods, is to forget that capitalism thrives off the exploitation of workers in a double sense. First, workers are paid less than their labor is worth, then their money does not have as much value on the market. When a person cannot afford durable goods, organic produce, or less carbon-intensive transportation, they should not be made to feel guilty for their behavior. Likewise, people who reduce their carbon footprint are not more pious. There is an insidious moralizing implicit in this type of behavior that Nietzsche would warn against, lest it leads to a politics of resentment. Commuting by bicycle and growing your own food are worthy (and fun) endeavors in and of themselves, but the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions that result from individual action is negligible compared to the annual carbon output of the transportation, construction, and shipping industries. Reducing one's carbon footprint does not make one a better person, nor is it likely to meaningfully alter global carbon emissions.

Further, the expectation that individuals are personally responsible for climate change insulates the fossil fuel industry from their culpability for causing the climate crisis. This, however, was no accident. In 2004, British Petroleum (BP) hired a public relations (PR) firm, Ogilvy & Mather, to shift blame for the climate crisis from the oil industry to individual consumers. Alongside

⁷⁶³ "10 Ways You Can Help Fight the Climate Crisis," United Nations Environment Programme, May 4, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/10-ways-you-can-help-fight-climate-crisis>

their PR team, BP developed and popularized the “carbon footprint calculator,” which disseminated the idea that tweaks to individual behavior could meaningfully address climate change. This logic is extremely profitable for the oil industry. How we think about responsibility and who we hold accountable are products of power-knowledge relations. It is no mistake that individual consumers in the Global North believe themselves responsible. Faced with a problem with such catastrophic consequences, individual people yearn for the reassurance that they can do something (anything) to help solve the problem of climate change. The idea that one’s actions can meaningfully alter global carbon emissions preys on a latent narcissism in us all. People want to believe their individual actions extend beyond their limited corporeal sphere—and they can when individuals leverage their power as collective action. Collective action and social movements have the potential to disrupt oil industry profits, so it is more effective for “oil majors” to perpetuate the idea that individuals—as consumers rather than political agents—are the locus of power for fighting climate change.⁷⁶⁴ Preying on individual guilt with the carbon footprint calculator is in the best interest of the oil industry. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, greenhouse gas emissions and oil industry profits are on the rise, and fossil fuel extraction does not appear to be slowing any time soon. If anything, countries with oil reserves are in a mad race against climate change to glean as much profit as possible before the world transitions to less-carbon-intensive alternatives.⁷⁶⁵

Not only do individuals experience an overburdening of the will, but climate change also has the potential to overburden the collective will of countries in the Global South. Look no further than the recent offshore oil boom in Guyana. Norway once paid the impoverished South American

⁷⁶⁴ Oil majors refers to the dominant petroleum companies e.g., Exxon, BP, Shell, ConocoPhillips, etc.

⁷⁶⁵ Camila Domonoske, “Guyana is a poor country that was a green champion. Then Exxon discovered oil,” *NPR*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/07/1051892092/guyana-climate-change-exxon-co26>; Matthew Smith, “Guyana’s Offshore Drilling Bonanza Is Just Getting Started,” *Oil Price News*, November 5, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Guyanas-Offshore-Drilling-Bonanza-Is-Just-Getting-Started.html>; “Light Sweet Crude,” *Drilled Podcast*, Season 8: 2023, <https://www.drilled.media/s8-light-sweet-crude/>.

country to conserve rainforests as a carbon sink to offset their greenhouse gas emission, because Guyana once captured more carbon than it released. However, Guyana is now poised to become a leader in oil production, with Exxon having recently discovered at least eleven billion barrels of offshore oil. Guyana is faced with a damned if you do, damned if you do not, Catch-22. Sea-level rise from climate change threatens the Guyanese coastline, but profits from the recent off-shore discovery are too enticing to pass up. As former President Bharrat Jagdeo said recently, “We have a small window to get as much [oil] as possible out.”⁷⁶⁶ Jagdeo’s support for off-shore drilling signifies a point of contention about climate injustice by countries and people in the Global South. Why should Guyana sacrifice potential oil wealth, when countries like the U.S. have profited immensely from the fossil fuel industry and are disproportionately responsible for the climate crisis? While it is uncertain whether the Guyanese people will benefit from the influx of oil money—the oil contract favors Exxon—it is almost certain the long-term effects will outweigh the short-term economic benefits. The logic of extractive capitalism is not known for sacrificing profits in the short term to avoid future consequences. What is clear is that oil majors—Exxon, Shell, BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, etc.—are intent to shift the burden of responsibility for the climate crisis onto anyone who will shoulder it.

The geopolitics, justice, and consequences of climate change are likely to be a turbulent ride, regardless of who is responsible. Forest fires, catastrophic floods, increased hurricanes, mega-droughts, and heat waves are all warning signs of what is to come with business-as-usual climate politics. Yet the necessary political energy to meaningfully address climate change appears to be absent from the agenda. The horrifying thing about how climate change alters our ecological and political futures is how profoundly and unjustly the consequences and suffering of climate change

⁷⁶⁶ Domonoske, “Guyana is a poor country that was a green champion.”

will be distributed. The humans who will suffer the most from climate change (e.g., people in the Global South, and Indigenous communities worldwide) have contributed the least to global greenhouse gas emissions. If climate change makes our flights bumpier, it is about to make our lives much bumpier as well.

Pessimism offers resources for making sense of and dealing with the turbulent reality of climate change. Rather than denying how bad things are, or sugar-coating the mess we have inherited, pessimism aims to see things as they really are, grapple with the reality we have inherited, and manage the turbulence that abounds in the climate crisis.

To develop a theory of pessimism, I have considered it alongside Nietzsche, Foucault, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin. The value- and temporally-oriented pessimisms of van der Lugt and Dienstag have been productive for grasping how to move toward critical pessimism. Critical pessimism is a vital orientation for learning how to cope with the climate crisis and the grief of all we stand to lose, as well as providing an outlet for lamenting the broken-down present: with government inaction on climate change, and the persistence of climate injustice, as well as locating openings for resistance.

Final Remarks

As my mom has repeated to me throughout the process of writing this dissertation, no research project or creative endeavor is ever finished, it is only abandoned. Were I to have had all the time in this world, my dissertation would have been two separate projects: an intellectual history of twentieth-century pessimism, and the further development of my theory of critical ecopessimism. Moving forward, I would like to work on and enrich both of these projects. In terms of the first project, I have only just begun to dip my feet in the stream of twentieth-century pessimism. To honor this project, I would need to wade deeper in the waters to theorize alongside Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, and possibly Martin Heidegger (though I am loathe to

theorize alongside a Nazi). I am also very compelled by Mara van der Lugt's discussion of optimism in her book *Dark Matters*. While I would not propose to interrogate optimism, I would continue to swim in the waters of hope. To continue along these lines, I would be remiss not to include Ernst Bloch, the original theorist of twentieth-century hope. There is something salient, at this moment, to a hopeful pessimism or a pessimistic hope. It is a lens whose time has come.

On the other hand, I have begun to outline a theory of critical ecopessimism. With the proper care and attention to the project, I believe the one chapter I have drafted here could be a manuscript on its own. To honor this project, I have been thinking about a number of elements that could be chapters in said manuscript. Among the ideas I would like to explore is how tech-optimism is a form of climate denial; how there is a strain of optimism inherent to eco-survivalism; and the interplay between the pessimism and optimism of anarcho-primitivism as well. To speak to the former, if the logic of ecological modernization is one of cruel optimism and a logic similar to ecological modernization created the climate crisis, then there is a perverse sense of climate denial inherent to technological optimism. This is because one of the drivers behind climate change is the belief that humans have God-like powers over the earth, and that any problem on the planet can be solved with engineering and ingenuity. Humans then end up in an endless feedback loop of solving problems they have created with solutions that create more problems. To think that tech can save us is to believe there is not a biological, atmospheric, or geologic system on the planet that is beyond the control of engineering. If engineering can solve the problems engineers and capitalism have created, then climate change is an engineering or market failure, rather than an environmental problem. This logic is, then, a form of denial. It denies that humans are vulnerable to environmental problems and holds faith that addressing the climate crisis requires little more than a network of unregulated technocrats and scientists to manage the earth's climate. In other words, hubris begets

more hubris, to the loss of democratic decision-making and to the detriment of human and more-than-human flourishing.

To speak to the former, there is a perverse form of optimism at play with eco-survivalism. The logic inherent to this approach suggests that affluent survivalists deserve to protect their way of life for themselves, while everyone else suffers the consequences. This analysis is quite timely, as it parallels a similar compulsion among Silicon Valley preppers and wannabe Mars escapists. Finally, to do justice to a theory of ecopessimism, I would be remiss not to discuss the Salvage Marxists—a group of Marxist pessimists—and the pessimistic anarcho-primitivists.

I am honored you would be willing to spend time with my thoughts and share in this turbulent process with me. Thank you all for joining me on this bumpy ride. Sea levels are rising either way, so thank you for wading into these waters with me.

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